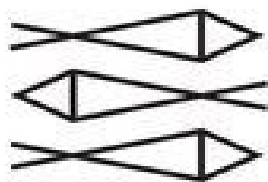


# A PORTRAIT OF EGYPT

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE WORLD  
OF MILITANT ISLAM

MARY ANNE WEAVER



A PORTRAIT  
OF EGYPT



*A Journey Through the  
World of Militant Islam*

M A R Y   A N N E   W E A V E R

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*For Daddy and Mother and, as always, for Dean*

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## PRELUDE

I FIRST ARRIVED IN EGYPT MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS ago, my curiosity my only companion and guide. A cub reporter for UPI and a stringer for *The Washington Post*, I was about to enroll at the American University of Cairo as a graduate student in Arab affairs. I carried no erudition with me, no Middle Eastern ancestry, no preconceptions, not even a muse.

It was June 1977, an insufferably hot early night, when, along with my husband, Dean Brelis, the newly appointed Middle Eastern bureau chief of *Time* magazine, I struggled out of the cabin of the TWA plane to be enveloped at once by a blinding Saharan sandstorm that obscured all outlines and forms. Twinkling lights in the distance spoke of the Cairo airport terminal beyond. We walked slowly toward it, buffeted by sand and dust. Against the flat emptiness of the desert, the terminal building as they came into hazy focus, suggested a gathering of giant dinosaurs. Feet shuffling around us were the only sounds. Then, from somewhere in the far distance, I heard the mournful chants of a mullah summoning the faithful to evening prayers from atop a mosque. The sun was just beginning to set, and the sky turned a dusty violet-pink. All around us, the silent desert stretched endlessly.

There was something about that moment, at once elusive, then filled with magic, then with wrath that would return to haunt me over the next three years. For it was a moment, I would later learn, that was not unlike Egypt itself: strangely fascinating, enigmatic, and contradictory, filled with evasion and surprise.

Looking back on those early years, which lasted until the end of 1979, I find it nearly impossible to recall anything—beyond the most tiresome domestic details—that was predictable. I began to wonder whether anomalies weren't the rule. I covered food riots, in which the rioters took breaks for lunch and prayers. I dined in elegant splendor in turn-of-the-century mansions with large sprawling lawns as incongruous as a sudden burst of color in the desert as they loomed from the midst of dismal slums. I found mirth and laughter in the City of the Dead among the hundreds of thousands of Cairenes who lived within the medieval mausoleums and tombs, performing their rites of passage with the same rhythmic precision that a Pharaonic priestess might have done. Even poverty in Egypt has a splendid kind of opulence.

I met bank clerks and civil servants—in one case, even an agronomist—who were cautious, often tedious men: gray, one-dimensional figures, almost smaller than life. Then, one Friday evening, I went to a neighborhood mosque and noticed some of their faces in the crowd. Dressed in the long, flowing robes and the white crocheted prayer caps of Islam, they each, in turn—impassioned and charismatic—addressed the crowd on the revolution that was yet to come.

It was the unexpected paradoxes of Egypt that beguiled me the most.

There were shouts, screams, and pandemonium coexisting, almost as though by design, with the ageless grace of feluccas gliding effortlessly down the Nile, their lateen sails reaching for heaven, as they have done since Cleopatra's time. There were monumental astonishments and monumental confusions, contention, anarchy, and change, as forty million Egyptians grappled with modern time and with one another, in their ancient land. Their colonial past and the worlds that it embraced were being vanquished as their Pharaonic tombs and monuments were being preserved. In between, there was a disquieting lack of equilibrium where Egypt occupied the Middle Ages and the twentieth century at once: it has research institutions for space rockets and for bullock carts. One of my most abiding images from those early days was of a SAM-7 missile being ferried to a military parade atop

donkey cart.

This book grew out of those early years and my curiosity about all the paradoxical forces that shaped Egyptian life. I was determined then, as I was in later years, to get through to the Egyptians and to tell them as they see themselves—to tell their stories in their own voices and through their own eyes. It also grew out of that distant Friday evening twenty years ago when I first visited my neighborhood mosque and began my own personal journey through the world of militant Islam. It was a strange, always human, sometimes violent, unpredictable road that I traveled for more than ten years from Egypt to Israel, the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, and then to Pakistan and Afghanistan. But it was to Egypt that I always returned in an attempt to trap the spirit of place that had haunted me while I was there.

I also kept returning, most intensely over the last five years, in order to understand the dynamics of a movement to which I was introduced during my student days but which had, since then, assumed so many different faces and forms. Was it possible, I wondered, that Egypt—now with over sixty million people, one-third of the Arab world—could lose its struggle against militant Islam? And, in the event that that occurred in the Arab world's most populous and most important state, what would it mean for Sunni Islam in general, and in particular for American foreign policy in the Middle East?

We all had a tendency—journalists, diplomats, government officials, Egyptians, Israelis, Americans alike—to paint the 1970s in Egypt and the Middle East upon a monumental tapestry of bold color and design. There were remembrances of grand battles fought and grand illusions shattered during the 1973 October War. There were massive projects, such as the Aswan High Dam, and the arrival in Egypt of nearly twenty thousand Soviets, who arrived as quickly as they would later disappear. There was extraordinary wealth and undreamed-of profits that accompanied OPEC's rise. And there were the events of 1979: Egypt and Israel signed their peace treaty; the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan; and the Iranian revolution occurred. Visionaries and showmen pranced across the world's stage; terrorists, nihilists, anarchists, rogues, and mystics came and went, accommodated by the season, as whimsical as the sandstorms blown by the Sahara's wind. President Anwar Sadat presided over Egypt and his life consumed our nights and days, for the years we lived in Cairo were the years of the first Arab-Israeli peace.

Six months after our arrival, to the astonishment of many and the sheer incredulity of most, Sadat traveled to Jerusalem on his "sacred mission" to speak directly to the people of Israel about Middle Eastern peace. Never before had an Arab leader visited the Jewish state—it was one of the most improbable moments in modern Arab-Israeli history. One year later, he retreated to Camp David, in the Maryland hills, with President Jimmy Carter and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin for the often painful, sometimes furious, secret talks that would ultimately lead to transforming his intentions into reality.

As Sadat flew out of Cairo on Egyptian Air Force One, student union elections were being held at Alexandria University, elections that would prove to be a turning point. Islamist associations swept the boards, taking control of the prestigious faculties of medicine, engineering, pharmacy, and law where they immediately began to impose their will: forcibly preventing the teaching of Darwin and forbidding the celebration of secular national holidays. (Mother's Day was deemed to be an "atheistical feast.") It was the first time that Egypt's Islamist movement, in its present form, had expressed itself so forcefully in the north. Previously, it appeared to have been confined to the villages and towns of Upper and Middle Egypt, especially in and around the University of Asyut, where for a number of years the Islamists, with growing vigor, had been gaining valued ground as they intensified their activities against the Middle East peace process in general and, in particular, against Sadat's secular regime. Their campaign was being led by a blind cleric, then little known outside Upper Egypt. His name was Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman.

But despite the Islamists' cries of protest—protests that began to sweep across the Islamic world—in March 1979, on the White House lawn, the Camp David peace treaty between Egypt and Israel became a reality.

By that time I had completed my graduate studies at the American University of Cairo and returned to journalism full-time. I spent endless hours in those same government offices which I had earlier and assiduously, shunned, having preferred instead the university's wonderfully rich libraries and its well-manicured lawns, and the coffeehouses favored by students, strung like lanterns along the Nile. It was a rarefied life of academe. During that time my only "political" contacts were, in the vaguest way, with one little-known government official—who was, in fact, Hosni Mubarak, the then little-known Vice President, whose wife, Suzanne, was a classmate of mine—and with a handful of fellow students who became my friends: wealthy, sophisticated, chic Cairenes who, for reasons that I was then unable to fully comprehend, spent their summers in military training in remote desert camps.

This book is about our shared journey: theirs, Mubarak's, Sheikh Omar's, and mine, and that of the people I met along the way—intellectuals and slum dwellers; Marxists and sheikhs; belly dancers and drummers; mothers whose sons have disappeared, on both sides, in an increasingly vengeful war between Mubarak's security forces and Sheikh Omar's Islamic militants. It is not meant to be an academic or a definitive account. It is simply one woman's journey through the world of militant Islam.

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# ONE

## THE BEGINNING

THE STREETS OF CAIRO ARE LIKE NO OTHER STREETS IN THE world. Every corner, every crevice, every alleyway seems to be inhabited. Crowds of pedestrians and traffic jostle for space, and noise is everywhere—a pervasive din of car horns tooting, street vendors hawking their wares, and muezzins, their voices shrilly amplified, calling the faithful to prayers. I imagine that there was a time when the streets of every great city resounded with hawkers' cries, but now they are to be found only in cities such as this. Here in Cairo, in the centuries-old Khan el-Khalili Bazaar, there are still itinerant sellers of roasted nuts, of discarded metal, of baskets and paraffin, of shawls, of trinkets, and of ornaments. The calls that have vanished from other great cities still echo here. This is one of my most vivid impressions of that first day, a bright June morning in 1977, when I first ventured into Cairo's alleyways. In dark basements, old men were ironing old clothes. In dark alleys, young men dressed in Islamic robes were selling cassettes of sermons delivered at "popular"—as opposed to official government—mosques. Yet it is perhaps a shy little boy from that first day in Cairo whom I remember the most.

I met him by chance in a corner coffeehouse, inside a covered market at the edge of the bazaar. It was, in fact, a rather strange coffeehouse, as I remember it now, with photographs of the Ayatollah Khomeini (who was still in exile near Paris) and PLO chairman Yasir Arafat competing for attention on its greasy walls. The smells were of freshly ground coffee, garlic, and dung; the loudest sound coming through an open window, was the chant of a mullah—or interpreter of Islamic religious law—amplified by a loudspeaker attached to a nearby mosque. As I got up to leave, the little boy attached himself to me and offered to show me around. He wore a flat woolen cap of a style favored by Afghanistan's Pashtun tribe, and a black-and-white Palestinian kaffiyeh hung from his small shoulders like a shawl: it looked as though he were attempting to blend all the world's militant Islamic movements into one.

As we began walking through the narrow alleys, shambolic with their stalls, shallow recesses, and small dark shops, the colors were of yellow, gray, and ocher—the colors of dust. Cairo's alleys, along with its temples, its mosques and pyramids, continue to awe, as they have awed adventurers from Caesar to Napoleon, and have been immortalized by Flaubert and Melville, Florence Nightingale and Naguib Mahfouz. Various different pasts intruded into our present as we walked: Roman aqueducts, medieval mosques, and the famed al-Fishawi's, a Napoleonic-era coffeehouse. Fragments of old buildings poked out of the rubble, and we peered at them: wooden-latticed balconies, arabesque inscriptions, and gingerbread grilles. Cairo, more than any other capital city I have ever known, is overwhelmingly linked to its past.

It is difficult to be neutral about Cairo; at least, it has always been difficult for me. It is so old, so steeped in history, so diversified that when we lived there I always thought of it as four or five different places at once—a great, infuriating, ramshackle, remarkable city, set superbly on the Nile. For centuries, it had been the citadel of Islamic learning and thought—enlightened, civilized, y



secular and chic. It is also violent, vigorous, and vivid. It assaults you every day.

Egyptians love to talk about Egypt, and they confess that they often find it baffling themselves. It is a place where the Eastern, as well as the Western, mind frequently has to adjust. The paradoxes are palpable, like the poverty, the indifference and squalor, and the grotesque displays of wealth; the impression of a country with a civilization going back five thousand years but inchoate, formless, built insecurely upon the ruins of its past. Yet there is something immutable about it which is difficult to trap—that spirit of place which haunted me while I was there. I often asked Egyptian friends how they would explain that elusive yet seductive appeal which overshadows broken pavements, air filled with dust, poverty as debilitating as Calcutta's. It announced its presence in abundant form; its definition, however, proved far more inscrutable. Various answers have been attached to my questions over the years, none particularly edifying, but then, Egypt has always been a place that provoked more questions than answers. That is part of its appeal.

I often wonder if anyone has ever been fully able to comprehend the enigmatic smiles of the Pharaonic sculptures, the colossal effigies of the tombs of Upper Egypt, which have always filled me with a sense of foreboding and unease. Or the spirit that is somehow entrapped in the feluccas, as they glide serenely down the Nile, as flirtatious as a courtesan in Cleopatra's time? How does one explain the magic of those moments that confront you in the desert, always at one's elbow here, as the sun is just beginning to rise or just beginning to set, or in the hundreds of villages and towns that stand in muted form, encased in a patina carried by the desert's wind?

Modern Cairo was built in the early twentieth century to house three million people; by 1977 it was bursting with more than five million exuberant Cairenes. Brightly painted carts of garbage collectors and herds of goats and sheep competed with the city's 250,000 private cars. Even then Cairo—the Islamic world's largest city—was one of the most congested in the Middle East, perhaps in the world. I was told that it was a difficult, if not impossible, place in which to live. There were recurrent power failures; food shortages were sometimes acute. I could often find imported cheese and caviar in the market, but not flour or local soap. It was often impossible to telephone an apartment downstairs. Cairo specializes in a state of total pandemonium.

Yet on the tony island of Zamalek, where we lived, there was a sense of the world that came before—old Edwardian mansions, now mostly in disrepair, and large, untended lawns shaded by cypresses and eucalyptus; broad avenues spoke of being traversed by carriage and horse. Life remained gracious on this side of the Nile. There were hostesses and soirees, afternoon teas, poetry readings. The conversation was often of politics, of Voltaire and Kant. There was the feeling that Egypt was drifting—no one knew where.

I remember those early evenings, when we sat on well-appointed terraces overhanging the Nile, and looked across the water at the slum of Imbaba; we speculated on *its* lifestyle. Its population density was 105,000 people per 2.2 square miles; an average of 3.7 people lived in every room. On our side of the Nile, the level of literacy was among the highest in the world; in Imbaba, the average income was thirty dollars a month. Here, four languages were normally spoken at dinner parties, served by candlelight; rooms were filled with books. There, hidden away in the alleys, far from our understanding or view, sheep, goats, and children drank from open sewers, and, after dark, some neighborhoods yielded to packs of wild dogs. I remember one evening in particular as I watched with friends the flickering lights of a funeral procession passing through Imbaba. The next morning, we read in the newspaper that two children had been eaten alive by rats.

What I had only begun to glimpse during those early years was that the real Egypt was two Egypts—at least two. There was our world in Zamalek and theirs in Imbaba, separated by the serpentine Nile. There was Upper Egypt and the Nile Delta hugging the Mediterranean Sea. There was the present and there was the past, but the future was indefinite and ill defined.

In much of the Middle East, the future has been buried by the past. Today's Egypt is a monument and also a hostage to its ancient past. It gave the world the Pharaonic dynasties, the Gezira Sporting Club, and the Pyramids, those most magnificent of all monuments. But it has a darker side as well, which not only does its present battle its past but secularists battle Islamists, and Islamists battle Christian Copts; astonishing poverty coalesces uneasily with astonishing wealth. Egyptians—unlike Westerners, who sometimes romanticize their ancient land—are their own fiercest critics, railing against their repression and corruption, their apartheid, their lack of democracy, their prisons filled with forgotten men, and their barriers between their own people as unrelenting as India's system of caste.

Every morning, just after nine o'clock, Miss Pennypecker used to take her morning walk. She began rather slowly and a bit stiffly because of arthritis in her leg, but by the time she reached the Nile her gait had hastened and her dignity had swelled, since she had survived, miraculously, I always thought of the school buses that rattled down the narrow streets and the speeding cars, the hucksters selling fruit and vegetables, exotic essences of perfumes, hot cereals and cheeses and flat *baladi* bread. She clearly relished the high-speed game of defying the oncoming buses and cars and, at the same time, springing free of the morning merchants, dark-eyed women and men dressed in long, flowing galabiyas, who stood cross-legged on the sidewalks or squatted on the curbs. They fused with the traffic on both sides of the road.

Miss Pennypecker, in a sense, was my introduction to Cairo. Before I saw her, I heard her voice on an otherwise uneventful morning shortly after dawn. It was a high-pitched voice, not entirely on key yet not altogether off, that was rising and falling to "God Save the King" outside our bedroom door. I stumbled out of bed and to the door and there she was, ironing linens in the narrow hallway of Saint Miriam's. It was a small Coptic monastery set in the heart of Zamalek, which rented out four or five rooms—a sober yet tasteful place, with high lofted ceilings, a flagstone courtyard, and windows framed by arabesque tiles. We lived there for a week or so after our arrival while our apartment was being prepared; Miss Pennypecker lived there because she had nowhere else to go.

She had spent fifty-three of her seventy-five years in Egypt, having "come out," as she said, as a missionary on a tramp steamer from England in 1924. She was tall and lanky and always reminded me a bit of a stork. She had sharp, well-chiseled features, a prominent beaklike nose, and spindly legs. Tufts of frizzy gray hair framed her aquiline face, and rimless spectacles balanced precariously on her nose. She was a no-nonsense woman who was governed by a few simple rules: a morning walk to assist her constitution; common sense to confront the unsettling changes in her life; and, above all, an abiding loyalty to the Crown. She believed that the British had behaved abominably when they quit Egypt and left another part of the Empire behind, including her.

But she was neither self-pitying nor self-indulgent about her fate. Miss Pennypecker was nothing but matter-of-fact.

One morning as she loped alongside the Nile and I struggled behind, I asked her what the high point of her years in Egypt had been.

"The Revolution of 1919," she replied.

"But you weren't yet here."

She then taught me a lesson that I would not forget.

Imagination, she told me, was demanded here.

She went on to say that the "Revolution"—not a stunning revolution, as revolutions go—was, in one way, still going on. For although the original might have been ambivalent and highly flawed—and consisted largely of a series of anti-British demonstrations, which were provoked by Britain's refusal to negotiate Egypt's independence after World War I—it had ushered in the Liberal Age, as it is

called. "So, you see," she said with emphatic dismissal, "it was a revolution, after all."

After spending nearly ten years coming to and going from Egypt, I would eventually agree. The however, I was not at all convinced, and I persisted with Miss Pennypecker, with as much persistence as good manners would permit.

She looked at me with exasperation, as I remember a favored grammar-school teacher once had done, and finally replied, "It was a revolution because, for the first time in two thousand three hundred years, the Egyptians finally said, 'We want to rule ourselves.'"

I was startled but, as always, Miss Pennypecker was right. For 2,284 years, to be precise—from the arrival of Alexander the Great, in 332 B.C., until the abdication of King Farouk, in 1952—Egyptian in spite of their deep-seated sense of nationhood, had been ruled, without interruption, by foreigners.

"What was it like when the British left?" I asked Miss Pennypecker as we settled into wicker chairs at an elevated tea shop that overhung the Nile. Before responding, she pulled out a set of diaries which she had squirreled away in the recesses of a large straw handbag, a product, like Miss Pennypecker, of an earlier age.

"Ignominious," she answered, and her voice trailed off as she seemed to be studying life on the Nile. Boats skirted across the water: speedboats; paddleboats; boats filled with produce, straining under its weight; boats filled with tourists, some bikini-clad. And, as always, the feluccas were there. Just beyond them, on the other side of the Nile, downtown Cairo continued to define itself: a hazy skyline of five-star hotels, soaring apartment buildings, squat mustard-colored villas and other forgotten nineteenth-century forms; bridges and flyovers; sulfurous smog, and the towering domes and minarets of a dozen or so mosques.

Miss Pennypecker finally turned back to me and said, "But the departure of the English was long overdue. Such innocents abroad we were: clumsy, noisy, waving the Union Jack. If I were a gambler, I would wager to say that not more than a handful of our colonial officials even spoke Arabic." Miss Pennypecker, needless to say, spoke it flawlessly.

Nostalgia seemed to guide her as she leafed through a diary, now yellowed with age, until she found the entry from June 1956. She had taken the train from Upper Egypt to Port Said to attend the final Trooping of the Colors, when the last of the Empire's eighty thousand troops, who had been guarding the Suez Canal zone, left. She was wearing—as she was wearing now—a wide-brimmed straw hat and a long cotton dress. She also wore the silver cross that always hung from her neck. Inside her picnic hamper, a touch romantic, she said, among the bottles of water, bread, and cheese, she had packed a small Union Jack. The two-day train trip had been arduous: sweltering hot, the second-class compartment was rancid with cigarette smoke, and grit, and squalls of dust. But it would be worth it in the end, so Miss Pennypecker endured, frequently wetting a lace handkerchief and holding it to her head. She arrived in Port Said around lunchtime, she recalled, and immediately went in search of the honor guard, the bagpipes and brass bands. She anticipated that moment in history when, after seventy-four years, the red, white, and black colors of Egypt would replace the Union Jack.

It was the first time she had felt betrayed by Empire and Crown. For there would be no Trooping of the Colors, no bagpipes or brass bands. The Second Battalion of the Grenadier Guards and the Squadron of the Life Guards had departed quietly before dawn. No confetti, no streamers, nothing was left behind.

Standing alone on the empty dock, Miss Pennypecker called out, "Where are the English?"

"They left early," an old man who now approached her replied. "They didn't want an Egyptian brass band seeing them off."

Miss Pennypecker took her Union Jack out of her picnic hamper and dropped it into the sea. As she watched it float away, she realized how much she didn't understand.

I wondered how much the British understood, or the Americans now, who had begun to arrive in Cairo in early 1979, scores and scores of them, like an army of ants. They had come to shore up Anwar Sadat and his authoritarian regime, a reward of sorts for Sadat's bold initiative in securing Middle Eastern—or at least an Egyptian-Israeli—peace. By the time of our arrival, Egypt was assuming immense strategic importance to U.S. interests in the Middle East; by the time of our departure, at the end of 1979, it had been transformed into the hub of Washington's Middle Eastern policy. The United States has an enormous stake in its Army-backed regime.

Our looming presence is perhaps best symbolized by the U.S. Embassy, or “Fortress America,” as it is referred to derisively by many Cairenes. I've always thought of it as a battleship of vast iron plate soaring off a central square: a tower surrounded by a block-long wall. Its very architecture seems to express the fear of what might happen next in Egypt; and here, unlike Tehran and Beirut, Washington was determined to be prepared. U.S. Ambassador Hermann Eilts, it was often said, had argued against making our presence too big or too obvious; but little heed was paid to his cautionary words. The embassy continued to grow, and by the time we left Cairo, it was Washington's largest diplomatic mission in the world—and the largest in U.S. history after Vietnam.

But the Americans—apart from a handful of Arabists—always seemed to me to be not unlike Miss Pennypecker's subalterns: part of the chattering classes, rarely venturing outside their fortress walls, tourists, all noise and adolescence; innocents abroad. I puzzled over what they'd read and wondered if Herodotus was on their list. He had written some twenty-five hundred years ago that Egypt was the “gift of the river” Nile. As I traveled around the country, I realized that it still is.

Looked at on a map, Egypt is large: 386,900 square miles, about the size of Spain and France combined. But if you look again, it's a very different image when you distinguish between the desert and the arable land. Viewed from a plane, flying south to north, the real Egypt—the land on which man can live—is small and lotus-shaped. A thin, two-to-eighteen-mile-wide strip of green, the flower's stem, follows the Nile north from Egypt's border with Sudan; then, near Cairo and on to the Mediterranean Sea, comes the Nile Delta, the blossom, as the river flows unhurriedly down to the sea. In that narrow strip of 13,800 square miles, about the size of Taiwan, over sixty million people now live. Ninety-five percent of Egypt's population lives on less than 5 percent of its land. The rest of the country is desert, brutal and unchanged, scarcely touched since Pharaonic times.

It is easy to understand why the Nile has molded Egypt's character as well as its geography. Men needed to organize to cope with its fickle ebbs and floods; thus civilization emerged. They required means of surveying their tiny plots of irrigated land; thus geometry emerged. Protected in their green river valley by the barriers the desert imposed, the ancient Egyptians constructed enduring institutions, like the Pyramids and the effigies of Upper Egypt—cocoon to their immortality. With scarcely an interruption, Pharaoh succeeded Pharaoh and dynasty followed dynasty for nearly three thousand years before Christ, a continuity of government unmatched by any in the world.

Both history and the river have set Egypt apart.

The Persians broke the Pharaonic line and, for nearly twenty-three hundred years, Egypt was little more than a province of foreign conquerors: Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Mamluks, Turks, and French, and finally the British, until Egypt, forty-six years ago, reclaimed its past. Yet, through the centuries the Nile flowed on, and the Egyptian determined his life by the rise and fall of its waters, rather than by a foreign master's whims.

The Arabs arrived with Koran and sword in the seventh century, and their conquest of Egypt made the Egyptians Muslim; whether it made them Arab, however, is far more debatable. The early Arab dynasties did impose their language, which replaced the widely spoken Greek and the old Pharaonic tongue; but after three hundred years of Arab rule Egypt fell, first to the Fatimids (who founded Cairo and al-Azhar, the oldest university in the world), then to the Ayyubids, the Mamluks, and the

Ottomans—all of them Islamic but none of them Arab. History, like the river, again set Egypt apart.

~~A Hamitic strain prevails in the blood of its river people; by contrast, the desert Arabs are Semite~~  
An Egyptian's physiognomy is different; his Arabic is different, peppered with odd words, some Pharaonic, others borrowed from European conquerors. His customs are different from those of the desert Arabs: his tombs; his veneration of saints; and his elaborate burials. His poetry is different, and so is his literature. And although Arab by definition now, Egyptians—by emotion and inclination—still consider themselves Egyptians first.

I once met a man at a dinner party, a small, sparrowlike man, who told me that he had spent two days inside the Mugamma—the headquarters of Egypt's nightmarish bureaucracy—in order to get a much-needed stamp affixed to a document. He was slightly claustrophobic and hated crowds, he said. Inside the Mugamma, he had been terrified. One of the cardinal rules of Egyptian life is that you do not queue. Rather, you are somehow swept along by the sheer gravity of a crowd. And that is precisely what happened to this tiny, bespectacled man. "No left turns were permitted," he recalled of those two days, during which he was engulfed by "miles of people," he said, shuffling, pushing, and shoving. They moved, in disorderly cadence, from room to room. At each stop, they each secured yet another form. Finally, the sparrowlike man reached the coveted door of the only bureaucrat who possessed the stamp for which he had come in search. He was totally devastated when he was told that the bureaucrat had died two weeks before. No successor had yet been named. And the stamp? It was probably secreted away in a locked drawer, along with the personal papers of the dead man.

I was duly impressed with his apocryphal tale, and not at all prepared for the little man's bemusement or pride when he made his final point: Egypt's bureaucracy was the oldest in the world and had spun red tape for at least three thousand years before the Arabs arrive.

This was Egypt, with all of its curious juxtapositions and charms. The unexpected was always there, just around a corner or down an alleyway, and, even during those early years, it had begun to announce itself in our upper-class neighborhood of Zamalek, where, tucked away from public view, there were a growing number of unofficial, or storefront, mosques. I remarked on them to Miss Pennypecker as we passed one on a morning walk. "They do no harm," she said. "They're merely another way of worshipping—we all worship the same God."

Over the years I've often wondered whether or not Miss Pennypecker had lived long enough to see the rise of militant Islam. In the late 1970s, it had begun to express itself only in a tentative way—apart from the Iranian revolution, but that was Shi'ite (a minority branch of Islam), and it didn't occur until 1979. Yet it was easy to find it in Egypt in any of the thirty thousand or so unofficial, or "popular," mosques, as they are called, which are often little more than a room in an apartment building, or above a garage, or behind a grocery shop. They are recognizable by the pro-Islamic slogans scrawled defiantly across their walls.

The first one I visited, with a classmate named Nadine, a not at all conventional upper-class Cairene, was in an unpaved alley just off one of Zamalek's fashionable shopping streets, on the ground floor of a dun-colored apartment building, with latticed windows and chocolate doors. Tattered streamers of yellow, red, and green flew above the doors, somehow defiant, yet faded and torn. As we waited for permission to enter the mosque, I watched a group of men transform a small adjacent empty square, spreading out straw mats for Friday evening prayers. The few women in evidence were shrouded in black abayas, covered from head to toe; anonymous forms, they glided in and out of storefront shops. The sounds, from amplified systems or from radios, were those of the Koran. The smells were of open sewers, wet wool, and mud.

A friend of Nadine's appeared and led us into the women's section of the mosque. I covered my head, as I had been instructed to do, and removed my shoes, before entering a damp, bare, and drafty room. In a far corner—which was difficult to see, since in the women's section we were hidden from

the main prayer area by an improvised white sheet that fell from the ceiling beams—I was able to glimpse a high-backed wooden chair, which had been elevated slightly on a cluster of cement blocks. A single bare lightbulb was the only source of light except for tiny shafts that filtered through the room's dirty windows and its open doors. It seemed an unlikely setting for a powerful spiritual voice.

There was a stir as the “popular” Sheikh of Zamalek entered the room, wearing traditional Islamic dress—a long white robe and a tiny white crocheted prayer cap. He was a fiery speaker, whose views carried great weight, Nadine said. There was utter silence while he climbed into the high-backed wooden chair. I peeked out from behind the sheeting and was astonished by what I saw. For the “popular” Sheikh of Zamalek was a man whom I recognized at once: a polite and rather boring—or I had thought—lecturer at the university. An agronomist! Yet when he began to speak, he was transformed. In amazement, I watched his flailing arms and heard his voice begin to rise as he admonished the crowd: “Islam is the solution!” He had begun to shout.

I glanced around our area, hidden behind the sheet, where all the women wore head scarves, *hijabs*; a few wore veils. Some of them held their children by the hand. No one in our area appeared to be poor. The women stood and listened to the sheikh in silence, in crisply aligned rows.

A muezzin began chanting, his melancholy voice piped by a loudspeaker to the overflow crowd outside. The men in the prayer room began to chant, “*Allahu akbar!*”—“God is most great!” Behind the sheeting, the women did the same.

Seemingly on cue, the “popular” Sheikh of Zamalek became vehement, and his voice rose to an even higher pitch.

“Dictators will go to hell!” he shouted. “Power goes to their heads!” He then spoke elliptically of chaos and betrayal. He never mentioned President Sadat by name, but everyone knew whom he meant.

I was struck by the realization, as I listened to the powerful voice of the sheikh—whom I had known before, albeit somewhat vaguely, as a timid professor dressed in button-down shirts and outrageous, outdated ties—that so much of Egypt wore a mask, including Zamalek itself. And the deeper into its alleys I went, the more they became an expression of Islam.

Nadine was the one who taught me that. We met at the American University of Cairo (or AUC) in 1978. She was a graduate student in sociology, I in Arab affairs, and it was Nadine who introduced me to the tumultuous world of campus politics. We were mostly removed from it at AUC, which was a rarefied kind of place, whose students were largely drawn from Egypt's upper class. Yet even there she was becoming increasingly conspicuous in my jeans and Western dress.

“How *can* you not see what's happening?” Nadine used to rail, and her eyes would flash. She was one of the most spirited women that I have ever met. Tall and elegant, with large, luminous, kohl-rimmed dark eyes and a swanlike neck, she had once worn blue jeans, studied American literature, and painted her nails. But on a late October morning in 1978, she had stood, along with three other young women, before the faculty of Cairo University's medical school, hooded and shrouded, in a faceless Iranian-style black chador. She had joined the others, all medical students, including a sister of hers, as a member of a national university council, which had been elected that spring, in elections in which the Islamists had captured more than 60 percent of the seats. She invited me to come along that morning, and I did. Standing outside the classroom, I watched a group of professors pass. As they glimpsed the young women through the open door, they were clearly aghast. Melodic in their chanting, praising Allah, graceful in their flowing robes, the women were nevertheless didactic in their demands: they refused to dissect male corpses; to be integrated academically with men; and they demanded that a dual curriculum be established, as well as university centers for prayer.

Nadine was then in her early twenties, a daughter of Zamalek's immensely wealthy upper class. And if it was a paradox for the daughter of a patrician family to be preaching Islamist politics, the

she failed to grasp it. It was just one of the anomalies of her life. She was an Eastern fatalist by birth, Western liberal by education, a feminist who donned Islamic robes and maintained an abiding fascination with designer clothes.

I asked her later that afternoon, while we lolled on the grass of AUC—where, in deference to university regulations, she had abandoned her austere chador and was dressed instead in a long white robe—whether her recently acquired Islamic attire was a sign of protest, as it was increasingly becoming for young coeds in Iran. “It’s more a matter of identity than of protest,” she replied. “If you dress and behave Western, then you are compelled to *be* Western. Islam gives you yourself.”

I glanced around the campus, and even here, it seemed to me, a growing number of women had begun to cover their heads in the Islamic fashion, and a growing number of men now sported full Islamic beards.

Students came and went as we continued to chat, and, in retrospect, our conversations seem to have always been the same: eyewitness accounts of clashes in Upper Egypt between Islamists and Christian Copts; vicious underground fights, often with knives flashing, both in Upper Egypt and at northern universities. Figures were not being officially released, but scores had been wounded. People had died. Egypt’s 360-member rubber-stamp parliament had begun to debate a return to Shariah, or Islamic law. A rampant consumerism, bred in large part by the peace policies of President Sadat, had drawn a poignant distinction between Cairo’s haves and have-nots. Certainly Egypt was becoming increasingly tied to Washington as a result of the Camp David Accords. It stood dangerously isolated in the Arab world.

That summer, much to the distress of her mother, and to the astonishment of some of her friends, Nadine left Cairo for military training, in a remote Islamist desert camp. She gave me a hug when we said our goodbyes. Then, hidden behind her enveloping black chador, she boarded the train for Upper Egypt, and was gone.

As I left the train station and walked through Cairo’s fashionable streets with their handsome stocked shops, I first sensed that growing tension between Western values and the currents of Islam.

The Islamic revival movement at Egypt’s thirteen universities had clearly baffled university authorities. Hundreds of young women less committed than Nadine were “taking the veil,” as it was called; others were demanding classes separate from men. Still others were covering themselves in robes from head to foot—to the dismay of most of their mothers, who had fought for the freedom to unveil their faces and to wear short skirts. What was perhaps even more unsettling, however, was the fact that the Islamists had begun to infiltrate university faculties and had set up clandestine campus cells. They were demanding the abrogation of all Western influence in the schools and had begun publishing a large number of newspapers and tracts. Their funding came largely from the conservative, oil-rich kingdoms and sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf—most significantly from Saudi Arabia, with the encouragement of Anwar Sadat.

With strongholds at Alexandria University, the University of Asyut, Cairo University’s medical and scientific schools, and the Technical Military Academy, the Islamists had backgrounds as eclectic as their accents were diverse. Some were of peasant stock, from the villages of Upper Egypt; others were the sons and daughters of the merchant or the civil-servant class; still others, like Nadine, were the children of Egypt’s most privileged class. Their common denominator was discontent. They bonded on their strict adherence to Islam and on their intellect. They were generally high achievers, scholastically, and they were largely drawn from Egypt’s most demanding university faculties. They defied stereotyping, I quickly learned, and could not be called reactionary, as some were very progressive in thought; others wanted a return to a seventh-century caliphate, and to Shariah law; still others propagated violence, as a means of “expurgating sin.” They were a fusion of all Egyptian trends.

Nadine had told me (and I later confirmed) that the activists among them probably numbered more than twenty thousand, but that they could draw on the support of a million or so sympathizers, perhaps more. Western diplomats worried that, after the military, they were Egypt's best-organized social force.

One morning shortly after Nadine had left, I went in search of Dr. Sa'ad el-Din Ibrahim, a professor of sociology at AUC who had studied the Islamist movement more than many at the time, and found him at his desk, which was covered with piles of paper and with half-finished cups of tea. He told me that the reappearance of the movement was predictable in the context of the history of the Arab world—a history in which revival movements have appeared in the aftermath of what was perceived to be a great failure of existing regimes. The present cycle began in 1974 and 1975, he said, when disillusionment replaced the early euphoria of Arab victories in the 1973 October War. “Students looked with alarm at the apparent rapprochement with Israel, and generally with the West. They disdained the emphasis on a consumer society, and the corruption that it was seen to breed. There was also the socioeconomic dislocation of society,” he went on, “the frustrations of the lower and middle class. In the January 1977 riots, we saw a massive symbol of floating discontent.”

I remember what it had been like then.

For forty-eight hours, hundreds of thousands of outraged workers and students, slum dwellers, and government bureaucrats poured into Cairo's streets, rioted, burned, and looted when food subsidies—which benefit all Egyptians—were cut. Thousands more cheered them on from rooftops. The shadow of revolution seemed to loom over Egypt during those two days. And what the mobs attacked was as revealing as what they did not. They tried to burn government buildings (and sometimes succeeded) they gutted buses and trams and ripped up railroad tracks, a protest against the appalling system of public transport. But they directed most of their anger toward symbols of luxury and wealth. (They did not attack foreigners or embassies, nor did they paint anti-American slogans, although that was considered quite fashionable at the time.)

On the second morning of the riots, I watched a group of mullahs surging through the streets—bearded men, in large turbans, brandishing Korans. They were visible only sporadically, engulfed by the swelling crowd. Yet later that afternoon, as I looked down at the demonstrators from a balcony on Pyramid Road—a strip of sometimes stylish, often seedy, nightclubs and bars—they seemed a sea of flowing white prayer robes and caps as they flailed bamboo clubs, iron pipes, and machetes in the air. The Venus Club, where visiting Saudi Arabian businessmen drank twenty-five-dollar bottles of whiskey, was sacked and burned. Mercedeses and other imported cars were gleefully smashed. Chanting of “Sadat, O Sadat, you dress in the latest fashion, while we sleep twelve to a room” reverberated through the crowd and were picked up by its supporters on the rooftops.

Stunned by the depth of the rioters' passion—and by the 120 buses and hundreds of buildings that had been burned in Cairo alone—the government reversed its earlier decree that would have increased the cost of such basic necessities as bread, rice, and bottled gas by between 12 and 45 percent. The increases had shown a barely credible governmental insensitivity to a population where a worker's monthly pay was three times less than a bottle of imported French wine.

By the evening of the second day a reluctant Army was patrolling Cairo's streets. Camouflaged army trucks, their occupants in battle dress, guarded its bridges. Along the Nile, steel-helmeted troops manned barricades, which had been assembled hastily, mile after mile. Flames licked at overturned buses and cars, and in central Tahrir Square the loudest sound was the pop-pop-pop of exploding tear gas. The weight of the military had driven the mobs back to their dark streets. At least 160 people had died. Over a thousand were wounded; another two thousand were arrested, as a consequence of which the government announced, with an astonishing lack of reticence, was a “major Communist plot.” Few Cairenes—including some within the government—took the allegations seriously. Yet even though



the riots were generally considered to be a spontaneous outburst of rage, there certainly was some organization in some parts of town, where men could be seen directing the crowds and telling them which way to march.

I thought of all the flowing white prayer robes and caps I had seen on Pyramid Road. And I remembered what someone had told me earlier. Islam is the world's only major faith that can truly be defined as political.

Islam's militant revivalist movement was born in Egypt seventy years ago, when a schoolteacher named Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood—or al-Ikhwari al-Muslimun—to protest against Britain's colonial rule over Egypt following the First World War. A bit of a mystic and an adherent of the Sufi'i school of Islam, al-Banna was inspired in part by Rashid Rida, an Islamic modernist and reformer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and his movement quickly spread—from fewer than a hundred adherents in 1929 to more than half a million in 1949. It was Islam's Reformation, in a sense.

Spiritually, it was grounded on the Five Pillars of Islam, the world's youngest and—with over a billion adherents—second-largest universal faith. Seven words in Arabic perhaps best summarize its central belief: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” Five times a day across the Muslim world, this Shahadah (or profession of faith) is recited by the devout as muezzins summon them to worship God. To give charitably is another spiritual duty of Islam, as is fasting during the daylight hours of the lunar month of Ramadan. The fifth, and last, pillar is to make the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest city of Islam, at least once, provided that you are financially and physically able to do so.

Politically, Hassan al-Banna's doctrine provoked considerably more debate. It recognized no separation between church and state, and, as a consequence, it rejected secularism, as well as Westernization, and any colonial influences perceived to exacerbate economic and social ills. Calling for the abolition of Egypt's Napoleonic legal code, it was based instead on a return to the principles of Shariah law—a code of honor, a system of jurisprudence, and an all-encompassing way of life. Yet in any discussion of Shariah law one has to ask: Which school of jurisprudence? Which body of law? For, over the centuries, the Muslim world has been consumed by an intense and often angry debate over the use and abuse of Islamic law.

The Koran itself does not provide a legal code per se, and includes only eighty verses that can be thought of as “laws.” Thus four major schools of Islamic thought—the Hanafite, the Malikite, the Shafi'ite, and the Hanbalite—had evolved by the ninth century. Their various interpretations of the Koran, and of Islam's other holy texts—the Hadith and the Sunnah, the sayings and the deeds of the Prophet Muhammad—have produced both rationalist theologians and rigid ideologues.

Over the years, I've asked several Islamic scholars, “Is polygamy sanctioned by Islam? Should the hand of a thief be severed?” I have received as many responses as there are schools of Islamic thought. Islam does allow a man to take four wives but, according to the Koran, he must treat them equally. When I asked one recently divorced, and formerly polygamous, sheikh if this was possible, he responded: “Absolutely not!”

As to the harsh punishment of having a hand cut off, according to all four schools of classic Islamic thought, a thief should be forgiven if he has stolen out of need; amputation for theft, according to many modern Islamic thinkers, is justified only in a totally egalitarian society.

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam has continued to evolve over the centuries.

When I visited the offices of the Muslim Brotherhood in the early months of 1998, Mamoun Hudaibi, the movement's deputy leader, told me that today's harsh practices of, for example, Afghanistan's ruling Taliban—which have forced women out of the workplace, closed girls' schools,

banned music and television, and stoned adulterers to death—were an egregious distortion of Islam. They were as much anathema to him as they would have been, I'm sure, to Hassan al-Banna and the other founders of the Muslim Brotherhood.

For it was not only al-Banna's personal magnetism and his charisma that commanded fierce loyalty; it was his doctrine of reclaiming Islam's manifest destiny: an empire, founded in the seventh century that reached from Spain to Indonesia and whose accomplishments—in philosophical thought, linguistics, algebra, early medicine, and chemistry—would shine for a thousand years. The Muslim Brotherhood's doctrine aimed at recapturing this.

During the Second World War, the movement turned militant. A secret organization within the Brotherhood called the Special Order was formed. Its recruits swore allegiance to Islam on a revolver and a Koran.

Among the many drawn to the Brotherhood during these early years were Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat, obscure young officers at the time, who met with members of underground Brotherhood cells to plan attacks against British installations and troops. When Hassan al-Banna was imprisoned by the British during the Second World War for making contact with agents of Nazi Germany, another "radical" also caught up in the roundup was Anwar Sadat.

When the war ended, the Brotherhood stepped up its campaign, attacking British billets and blowing up cinemas showing Western films. When the first Arab-Israeli war occurred in Palestine in 1948, it—unlike most Arab governments—sent a company of well-armed commandos to fight on the Palestinian side. By the following year, however, as the Brotherhood's strength and influence continued to grow, the monarchy in Cairo grew alarmed. King Farouk and his government cracked down. Hassan al-Banna was shot to death in the streets of Cairo, and thousands of his followers were rounded up and deported to the Western Desert, where they languished in harsh concentration camps.

But by 1952 the Brothers were back on the streets, aiding and abetting the anti-government efforts of the Free Officers group, which was led by a colonel whom the Brotherhood knew well: Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was assisted by Captain Anwar Sadat. When the Free Officers seized power in July 1952—forcing Britain's final departure and the abdication of King Farouk—a honeymoon ensued between the new Army-backed government and the Muslim Brotherhood. But the Brotherhood continued to agitate for an Islamic government, and the honeymoon was short-lived. In 1954, having been held responsible for an attempt on Nasser's life, the Brotherhood was suppressed: its leaders were executed or tortured, the organization was banned, and it went underground. Over four thousand of its members were returned to the concentration camps—a pattern that would be repeated in 1960 and 1966, with more executions and more arrests, when the Brotherhood was accused of conspiracy in an ill-defined plot against Nasser's regime. After Nasser's death in September 1970, however, the Brotherhood received yet another new lease on life.

On coming to power, Anwar Sadat almost immediately began to reverse many of Nasser's policies. Nasserites and Communists were officially branded as enemies of the regime; thousands of Brothers still in prison were hastily released. Since Sadat had no power base of his own other than the Army, the decision was made to cultivate the political right—particularly the religious right. Thus, in 1971, with Sadat's encouragement, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia—in what amounted to a unique treaty between a state and a foreign religious institution—offered the rector of al-Azhar (which is considered to be the Oxford of Islamic learning and thought) \$100 million for a campaign against Communism and atheism, and for the triumph of Islam. Among the campaign's most zealous supporters were members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Yet on university campuses, after Nasser's death, another organization began to dominate the Islamic trend—the Gama'a al-Islamiya, or Islamic Group, generally known as Gama'a. Its spiritual mentor was Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman. With the encouragement of Sadat, who was far more fearful

of leftists than of Islamists, other groups—increasingly militant—expanded or sprang up. Among these was al-Jihad, whose military wing later organized the assassination of Sadat.

Huge sums of money, from both home and abroad, transformed the Islamist groups, whose influence began to spread outside the universities, into the “popular” neighborhoods, as the inner city and the slum areas are called, and into some of Cairo’s largest and most influential mosques. According to the Egyptian writer Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, not only was money being funneled to the Islamists by the state but Sadat encouraged contributions from some of his closest friends, including a millionaire contractor named Osman Ahmed Osman, who supported several of the groups by providing them with uniforms, money, and arms.

Today’s militant Islamic movement consists of essentially these same groups (now some forty-four in all), which came of age on university campuses during the 1970s—encouraged, armed, and trained by Anwar Sadat himself.

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## TWO

### PEACE

LATE ONE EVENING IN 1978, HASAN TUHAMY STOOD ALONE in the corridor of the Abdin presidential palace, saluting the darkened halls. When interrupted by a group of passing Egyptian officials and asked what he had seen, the Deputy Prime Minister whispered that a ghost was passing—that of the legendary twelfth-century military hero Salah al-Din. Mystic and clairvoyant (or so it was believed) and the interpreter of presidential dreams, Tuhamy was the symbol and, some concerned Egyptians believed, the Rasputin-like source of an often inexplicable side of President Mohammed Anwar al-Sadat.

Sadat was a loner who was deeply religious, unpredictable, and withdrawn. He predicated his years in power on showing an extraordinary flair for finding the right moment and seizing the initiative. He so changed events and circumstances that he was largely exonerated from the past. His advisers applauded his purpose and vision; his critics charged that he was a showman, so dazzled by immediate success that he deemed it unnecessary to consider the consequences, paying little heed to what came next. He was undoubtedly a man of exceptional courage who had taken immeasurable risks. But when he gambled heavily in the international arena, Sadat evinced little interest in Egypt's domestic affairs.

As he was catapulted onto the international stage—at the age of fifty-four—as the Arab who showed that Israel was not invincible during the 1973 October War, the rate of population growth in Egypt climbed to 2½ percent. Four years later, as he journeyed to the Israeli Knesset in November 1977 on his “sacred mission” for peace, he carried memories of the food riots in January of that year, the greatest challenge to his presidency. And as he signed the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in March 1979 on the White House lawn, the Islamist groups in Egypt, which he had largely spawned, seemed to be veering dangerously beyond his control.

He should not have been surprised. All the signs were there, as early as April 1974.

The day was not a particularly eventful one, Egyptians now recall, until midafternoon, when a young Palestinian doctor of philosophy named Saleh Sarrieh led a small group of men—mostly students who were members of the Islamic Liberation Organization's military wing, Muhammad Youth—in an abortive mutiny at the Technical Military Academy, which was a stronghold of the Islamists even then. There Sarrieh collected arms and volunteers and proceeded to march to the headquarters of the governing Arab Socialist Union with the intent of assassinating its leadership, including Sadat. It was a hopeless venture, quickly crushed. But eleven people died. Saleh Sarrieh was later hanged. Yet Sadat appeared to regard the affair as little more than an isolated incident—as he would regard a series of attacks later that year against Islamic shrines and mosques by a strange extremist Muslim sect whose white-robed, bearded, desert-dwelling teenagers and young men believed in retreat from the evils of the modern world and repentance for sin. They had vowed to redress Egypt's “godless” society. They called themselves the Society for Repentance and Retreat—the Gama'a al-Takfir wal-Hijra—and they seemed to blend the terrorist tactics of West Germany's Baader-Meinhof gang with something akin to the actions of Charles Manson and his acolytes.

Three years later, in July 1977, while Sadat was planning his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, al-Takfir kidnapped and killed Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Dhahabi, a distinguished Islamic scholar and Egypt's former Minister of Religious Endowments. Dhahabi was tortured, strangled, and shot through the eye for alleged apostasy. The real reason for his execution, however, was that Sadat refused to pay a \$300,000 ransom or to release sixty al-Takfir members from jail. Al-Takfir's self-styled Commander of the Faithful, a wild-eyed thirty-four-year-old agronomist named Shukri Ahmed Mustafa, and four of his lieutenants were hanged. But once again Sadat and his advisers preferred to regard the affair as just another isolated incident.

As I wandered around Cairo on the day that Sadat's peace treaty with Israel was signed—talking to old men in favored colonial-era coffeehouses in the Khan el-Khalili Bazaar; watching young men and women, largely civil servants, labor furiously to plant shrubs and flowers (even trees) along the route from the airport that Sadat's motorcade would pass; meeting friends at Cairo University, where thousands of students sat on the grass and glowered out at the street, patrolled by truckloads of uniformed police—I found few discernible signs of jubilation at what was happening in Washington, half a world away.

Yet, two days later, when Sadat returned, a crowd estimated by the Egyptian police to number two million lined the route of his motorcade from the airport to one of his official residences, fifteen miles away. All over Cairo there were white doves of peace: doves on billboards; doves on floats; stuffed doves and live doves, soaring and dipping and dropping their droppings over the crowds. Pictures of Sadat—in full face and in profile; smiling and brooding; as a young man and as an older one; as a stern leader of the revolution, in full military dress; as the benevolent father of the nation, in a dark business suit; as a son of the soil of the Nile Delta, in an open-necked safari suit—were all over town. Various bands in the procession and along the route played a new national anthem extolling peace, written by a well-known composer, Mohammed Abdel-Wahab, on whom the President had conferred the rank of honorary general somewhat inexplicably.

But for all of the thousands—or perhaps a million—references to peace we saw as we followed the motorcade, there was one conspicuous absence. Nowhere did I see a reference to peace with whom. There was not one mention of Israel.

Yet in the months and the years ahead, Israel and the war effort could no longer be blamed for Egypt's food shortages, or its hundreds of thousands of unemployed; martial law could no longer explain away political restrictions and the lack of democracy.

Looking back on that late March afternoon, I remember one billboard in particular along Sadat's route. It stood across from the Sheraton Hotel, only a few hundred yards from Sadat's favored official residence, and I imagine that he could have seen it from his drawing room. In bold green lettering the billboard asked: "Why Peace?" And then the reply: "Well, What Has War Done for Us?" I wondered then if Sadat would continue to gamble. He did.

In hindsight, his approach to domestic issues seems fairly simplistic: any voice not firmly behind him was judged to be a foe. Any potential challenge, any potential threat—except for the Islamists—was neutralized before it developed, as Sadat consolidated his own position in advance. For despite his early opening to democracy—his dismantling of Nasser's police apparatus and his closing of the concentration camps; his permitting Egyptians to travel; and his giving limited freedom to political parties and the press—Sadat, having doled out certain freedoms, began reining them in.

Four times during the years we lived in Cairo, he reverted to "popular referendums" to override his own Constitution and laws; each time he received a barely credible mandate of support of more than 98 percent. His referendums sanctioned life imprisonment for anyone organizing demonstrations or strikes. They precluded any public discussion of the peace treaty with Israel, and they barred nearly the entire political spectrum from parliamentary life.

By the time I finished my studies, in early 1979, Egypt's officially sanctioned political parties bo

little resemblance to the country's political trends. Some fifty underground groups had begun operating, from the extreme right to the extreme left, and a growing number of Islamist students spent their summer vacations in military training at remote desert camps.

Yet Sadat remained seemingly unconcerned by the potential Islamist threat to his regime, and during those years he proved to be a quintessential survivalist.

Sadat is a difficult man to describe. Each time I saw him he looked markedly different, depending upon whom he was seeing, where he was, and the mood in which he had dressed that day. One of his ministers told me, "He's a chameleon. He can be anything." Twice imprisoned by the British—first for his flirtation with Nazi agents during the Second World War, then for his role in the assassination of one of King Farouk's ministers—Sadat had developed a lifelong antipathy for colonial rule; yet he nevertheless appeared at times to be fashioning himself, if not on the Pharaohs, on Britain's royal vassal King Farouk. Although austere in his personal habits—he ate only one meal a day and fasted assiduously during religious holidays—he relished his opulent life, helicoptering between one another of King Farouk's ten palaces, many of which he had reopened for the first time since 1952 when the Free Officers deposed Farouk. The palaces, the cabinet meetings, and Sadat's summer home all embraced the atmosphere of a royal court. And, like the King, Sadat deified himself on billboards and marquees, and he thrived on his exposure abroad. He truly seemed to believe that he was the only man who could rule Egypt, and he amassed nearly total power in his hands.

Rising from the ranks of the Army out of poverty, Sadat had entered the prestigious Military Academy in 1936, when its doors were opened to all Egyptians for the first time. He was one of one hundred fifty-two commoners to be admitted to the school; another was Gamal Abdel Nasser, whom Sadat later served as a rather lackluster aide. Nasser had considered him a pliable, self-effacing choice when he elevated him to Vice President in 1969—a pattern that Sadat would repeat in 1975 when he chose the rather lackluster Hosni Mubarak, his pliable and self-effacing (or so he thought) commander of the Egyptian Air Force to be his Vice President. But, unlike Nasser, who relegated scant power to Sadat, Sadat would mold Mubarak in his own image over the years, for the stocky, taciturn Air Force man—who, at forty-seven, was a decade younger than Sadat—fulfilled two of Sadat's chief hopes: to see his policies continued and, one day, to bequeath power to a member of the "October Generation," the men in uniform who helped regain Egypt's self-esteem by their initial victories in the 1973 October War.

For years Mubarak sat in obscurity at Sadat's side, quietly taking notes. Henry Kissinger once assumed he was a junior aide, only to learn later that he was Egypt's Vice President.

As the years went on, Sadat became increasingly isolated and bizarre. He tolerated corruption among his closest advisers and friends, and he surrounded himself largely with sycophants. A Western ambassador told me one morning, when I called on him, that Sadat was creating "a highly dangerous state of mind." He then went on to explain that at a ministerial dinner he had attended a few nights before, some of Sadat's closest advisers spent much of the night openly discussing the best black market rate. The ambassador was startled, and appalled. He warned me, "This is a serious element of instability, which will come back to haunt them one day."

I thought of what he'd said as I spent a morning sifting through old files. One that I found was a 1976 study by the Egyptian Ministry of Planning, according to which, 321 families in Egypt had incomes the equivalent of more than \$1.5 million a year; 4.5 million families had incomes of less than \$180 a year. A hundred thousand private cars then served some two hundred thousand Cairenes; twelve hundred buses served three million Cairenes.

Sadat continued to gamble, even while the stakes grew considerably higher and the problems more acute. At a time of domestic economic chaos, he had isolated Egypt from its traditional patrons in the oil-rich Arab world.

Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, according to his account, had what was probably Egypt's most difficult job. As Minister of State for Foreign Affairs from 1977 to 1991, he was charged with damage control in easing Egypt's relations with the European Community and the nonaligned world following the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord. In his memoir *Egypt's Road to Jerusalem*, the aristocratic Copt (who would later serve as Secretary General of the UN) recalls his appointment only three weeks before Sadat made his "sacred pilgrimage" to Jerusalem—an appointment that was the direct result of the resignations of both his predecessor and Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs, two highly skilled and respected diplomats, who had refused to countenance Sadat's Jerusalem trip. (The second Egyptian foreign minister would resign at Camp David itself, moments before the official treaty signing on the White House lawn, adding to the collective bewilderment of the world's press, none of us being able, from one moment to the next, to fully comprehend who, in fact, was managing Egypt's foreign affairs.)

Two years later, in September 1979, a stressed Boutros-Ghali was summoned by Sadat to one of his presidential retreats, in Ismailia, overlooking the Suez Canal. The Minister of State had just returned to Egypt after having had a most unpleasant time touring Europe and the nonaligned world. Arab kings and sultans, Arab socialists and sheikhs had been making the same diplomatic rounds, and they possessed the "oil weapon," as they had already clearly shown when they threatened to hold the world hostage to an oil embargo after the October War. Boutros-Ghali fretted to Sadat: The Egyptian-Israeli treaty was considered little more than a separate peace; Egypt was dangerously isolated; the peace treaty was doomed.

"I want you to move your chair," Sadat told his minister, who quickly complied, although he was not at all certain what was on the President's mind.

"Now," said Sadat—looking out through a bay window no longer obstructed by his minister's slouching frame, and with a clear view of the Suez Canal and the Sinai Desert, which he was about to reclaim—"I do not wish to underestimate the magnitude of the problems and worries that Egyptian diplomacy is facing [now], but all these problems and worries pale in comparison with this land we have regained. They [the Arabs] are not worth one square meter of this land, which we have regained without spilling the blood of my children ... I am not afraid of condemnations. I am not afraid of countries severing diplomatic relations with us. And I am not afraid of the provocation and trivia of the Arab world."<sup>1</sup>

Egypt was to regret that erroneous assumption for nearly a decade.

There was a special vanity about Sadat, and to a great extent he personalized his quarrel with the Arab world, constantly taunting, constantly irritating its leadership. It was as though this always frustrating, bewildering man—part cunning peasant, part statesman, part thespian and charlatan—had once again reinvented himself.

"It is simply impossible for Egypt to isolate itself from the Arab world," the former foreign minister Ismail Fahmy, one of those who resigned to protest Sadat's Jerusalem trip, told me one morning in 1979 when I called on him. He had submitted his resignation primarily because Sadat had not consulted other Arab leaders about the trip, nor had the President consulted him. "We never had a chance to oppose him," Fahmy said. "He dramatized events to make it seem that there was a black-and-white choice between peace and war. It was peace by circus—a separate peace which has done little to alleviate the problems of the Middle East."

For, despite the fact that after four wars in thirty years, the guns had fallen silent along the Egyptian-Israeli frontier, effectively reducing—if not eliminating—the possibility of any combination of Arab power being able to threaten war against the Jewish state, the belligerency between Egypt and Israel had never been the core of the conflict in the Middle East. The fulcrum of that conflict had always been Israel's seizure and occupation of Palestinian land. And an appendage to the Camp David

treaty, calling for Palestinian autonomy talks—an appendage negotiated almost as an afterthought—was not really taken seriously by anyone at the time, not by Sadat, not by the United States, and most certainly not by the nearly four million Palestinians. Protests swept through the Palestinian refugee camps, and across the Arab and the Islamic world. But Sadat appeared inured to the Palestinian outcry even though he was ostensibly negotiating in the Palestinians' name.

“Yasir Arafat has never been in control,” Sadat told one interviewer in discussing the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). “He can't make decisions; he has no authority.”

“The psychology of the Palestinian diaspora and of the Arab-Israeli conflict never interested Sadat. Mohamed Sid-Ahmed, a seminal columnist and writer, told me at the time. One of Egypt's leading political thinkers, who is loosely aligned with the Nasserites and leftists who dominate the country's intellectual life, Sid-Ahmed had in 1975 published a breakthrough book, *When the Guns Fall Silent*, advocating detente with Israel. After the Camp David peace treaty, he quickly changed his mind. Sitting in his book-lined study, he complained bitterly to me of the hazards of Sadat's “separate peace,” which not only did nothing to address Palestinian concerns but was, in his view, little more than a “Pax Americana”—a view that Sid-Ahmed continues to hold. He also worried, as did most Egyptian intellectuals of both the right and the left, along with much of the country's educated middle class, about Sadat's constant irritation of the Arab world at a time when Egypt's economic statistics ran on an ascending scale, in the words of one American diplomat, “from worthless to bad.”

The country's gross national product was roughly \$14 billion, a substantial amount of which came in one form or another, from its patrons in the oil-rich Arab states. It was always an uneasy relationship between provider and ward. The providers, mainly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait during those years, resented cosmopolitan Cairo's interpretation of the world, and its leadership over their more insular and puritanical world. The proud Egyptians, for their part, inhabited the region's so-called exception to an artificial nation-state; they had a history going back thousands of years; and they weren't *really* Arabs. Their present nomenclature, in their minds, was merely an accident of geography. They were galled, and they were embarrassed, to have to wait, like beggars on their own streets, for handouts from the desert sheikhs. But despite their history, the reality was that Egypt in the late 1970s was a supplicant, technically bankrupt.

It was kept alive only by massive handouts and loans from abroad. Its largest single source of foreign currency—a billion and a half dollars a year—came in remittances from the roughly million and a half Egyptians working in the Persian Gulf. Tourism, which included a substantial number of Arab visitors, came next and accounted for some \$686 million a year. Economic aid from Saudi Arabia alone totaled another \$5 billion annually—\$2 billion in direct bilateral payments, \$2 billion into the coffers of regional organizations for Egypt's development, and \$1 billion paid externally against Egypt's massive foreign debt. By cutting all aid after the peace treaty was signed, Saudi Arabia's feudal, pro-Western monarchy placed the burden of Egypt's economic survival squarely on the shoulders of the United States.

It was certainly one of the most astonishing by-products of peace.

“One thing that Sadat did not take into account was that the Saudi monarchy would risk antagonizing Washington,” one Arab League official told me at the time. “But Saudi priorities have clearly changed. What is happening now between Egypt and the Kingdom is secondary to what is really at stake—and that is a redefinition of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Until that is reconciled to Riyadh's satisfaction, Sadat, I'm afraid, will become more isolated every day. The Saudis have looked with alarm at the political upheaval in Iran, and are angered by Washington's failure to assist the Shah; they are obsessed with what they perceive to be American indecision and weakness in the region in containing the Soviet threat. Until these matters are resolved, Sadat will continue to be a scapegoat in a sense.”



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