Arrays of Egyptian and Tunisian Everyday Worlds

An update on the project

*In 2016—How it felt to live in the Arab World five years after the “Arab Spring”*

edited by

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Conversions

On August 4, Muhammad Higazi, an Egyptian in his early thirties, appears in a video uploaded to YouTube looking pale but composed. In a well-rehearsed statement, he publicly blesses the Prophet Muhammad as “the foremost among Allah’s creation” and also spells out the shahada, the Islamic proclamation of faith. With this, Higazi—until then Egypt’s ‘best-known convert from Islam’ who had become Christian and taken the name Bishoy—reverts to Islam. The video ends a nine-year-long struggle with courts and other authorities to be legally recognized as a Christian. (Back in 2007, he had filed a lawsuit to try to change his religious identity as shown on his ID card from “Muslim” to “Christian”). In the video, Higazi apologizes to his family and says he will never again speak to the media:

I want nothing from this video. I have no desires. I will not appear again in the media. I will not appear again publicly. […] I say this out of my complete free will. I am under no pressures from anyone. I am not being held by any agency, nor am I under any pressure of any kind. And that’s it.1

Religious conversion is a multi-faceted phenomenon with personal, cultural, social, and religious implications. Muhammad Higazi’s story highlights some of the more quotidian aspects of conversions, namely how the Egyptian state inserts itself into religious life. Changing one’s religion in official identity papers is not so straightforward in practice and in law. While the state recognizes conversion to Islam from another religion, conversion from Islam to another religion is not officially recognized. While his public reversion to Islam in August is not covered extensively in Egyptian newspapers, echoes of the controversy sparked by his act of requesting legal recognition for conversion to Christianity continue to reverberate. In 2008, a court had dismissed his claim and ruled that Higazi, born a Muslim, could not have his conversion recognized because this would amount to “apostasy” (irtidâd) and therefore contradict public order and morals. In a program aired during Ramadan,2 shaykh al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyib elaborates, defining the boundaries of Islam, that apostates should not be punished by death. As noted by the head of al-Azhar’s Committee in an interview to al-Sabâh on April 12:

God acknowledges the freedom of humans to choose a religion or belief without coercion (…). Apostasy (ridda), however, is a major sin (min al-khabir) as it signals disbelief in God and his Holy Book.3

This definition of Islam has the effect of authorizing intervention in the domain of belief. Due to social stigma and legal obstacles associated with conversion from Islam to other religions, the number of individuals who seek official recognition of such conversions is very small. Some, such as Muhammad Higazi, live in fear for their lives. Possibilities of tricking the system through forgery of ID documents exposes people to the risk of prosecution.
But how to convert to Islam? In principle, it suffices to pronounce the shahāda. In practice, however, things are not so straightforward. An investigative article titled “Want to convert? Meet me later” offers an account of this process. The female journalist begins her adventure into the labyrinth of Egyptian bureaucracy by recounting how she enters the premises of al-Azhar. Mashyakhat al-Azhar is housed in a bulky concrete building located next to a busy intersection. Inside the building, she reaches an office on the ground floor carrying the sign “Announcement of Islam for Egyptians” (Izhār al-ʾIslām liʾl-Misriyyīn). There she encounters five employees, four men and one woman, all in their early twenties, with a mandate to oversee the registration of converts to Islam. In this connection, they seek to ascertain whether potential converts indeed believe in God and his Prophet and freely consent to convert. According to the young employees, the following documents are required in support of changing one’s religion:

1. A certificate of approval granted by the Mufti of Egypt to ensure his acceptance of her entrance into Islam, that she is not underage, and the presence of two Muslim witnesses
2. A written approval from the Ministry of Interior

When the author says that she has difficulties procuring the necessary documents (especially the validation from the Ministry of Interior), she is advised to pay a visit to al-Azhar’s Fatwa committee which is situated to the right of the entrance to Azhar mosque. On the wall is a sign saying that pronouncement of fatwas is not conditioned by payment of a fee. In a Kafkaesque twist, an employee at al-Azhar’s Fatwa Council gives her the address of a small mosque in the semi-rural area of Shubrā al-Khayma for the sake of speeding up conversion procedures. At the mosque she is welcomed by a husband and wife who volunteer to teach prospective converts about the rituals and obligations of Islam. The wife assures her that they receive no profit for doing this. The author of the article subsequently visits the couple at their home where she is initiated into the Islamic way of life, the characteristics of the Prophet and the angels, along with the ritual of prayer. The initiation ceremony takes place inside a small living room decorated with Quranic verses and is accompanied by low Quranic music playing on the radio. In the bestselling novel Fī qalbī unthā ʿibriyya (difficult to render, but tentatively “The Jewish Girl in my Soul”) by the Tunisian author Khūla Hamḍī, An episode of conversion is used to make the reader experience the true spirit of Islam. Situated against the backdrop of multi-confessional South-Lebanon, the book offers a glance at relations between Christians, Jews, and Muslims during moments of personal and political upheaval. In 1994 ʿAḥmad, a member of anti-Israeli resistance, gets injured during a military mission behind the border close to Qānā, South-Lebanon. Nadā, a Lebanese Jew, accommodates him and his companion and treats their wounds. ʿAḥmad and Nadā fall in love and subsequently ʿAḥmad proposes to Nadā and they get engaged despite the objection of Nadā’s mother who is an orthodox Jew. During their engagement period, Nadā attempts to convert ʿAḥmad to Judaism, but instead develops an interest in Islam after ʿAḥmad argues for the rationality of his religion. Khūla Hamḍī’s book depicts different stages in the conversion process. These include opening oneself to new options; meeting a person who embodies the religious vision (ʿAḥmad); finding a home (in Islam, depicted as a home for the homeless, likened to warm tea); and committing oneself to an Islamic way of life, embodied in Nadā’s donning of the hijab [In Islam...]. The process is compelling
and transformative, but hardly smooth and seamless. Nada is disowned by her orthodox Jewish mother due to her wearing the headscarf. Suffering on account of her conversion to Islam, Nada is portrayed as a “martyr of true belief”. While the novel on the surface seeks to advance a vision of religious tolerance, it is marked by power hierarchy. In line with the apologetic stance adopted by much literature on the Islamic way to self-help ["In Islam, Self-help"], the novel is consistent in portraying Islam as superior compared to other religions, embodied in the adoption of Islamic identity and mode of dress by a young Jewish woman ["Superiority vs Inferiority"].

Khula Hamdi’s idealized portrayal of Islamic tolerance stands in contrast to the accounts of inter-religious conflict found in newspapers. The investigative journalist from al-Sabah sheds further light on the dynamics of conversion when, on another day, she visits a Coptic church in Shubra al-Khayma. She tells the security guard that she is a Muslim woman who wishes to change her religion to Christianity. After the sermon, she is granted a meeting with the priest after talking with the security guard. Patiently, the priest tells her that

Only God cares what stirs in people’s hearts. You do not have to be a Christian on paper to be one of us. Our church is open to you in case wish to come here and worship. But I can’t help you with more than that. ["Dual Identities / Masking"]

The investigative journalist also tries her luck with the head of the Jewish community. After broaching the subject of her prospective conversion from Islam to Judaism, the journalist is met with the following reply: “You are going to bring about a disaster on me (inti ha-iwaddini fi dāhya)!”, whereupon the phone is closed. The brusque response has to be seen against the background of the precarious status of the Jewish community in Egypt. Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, many Egyptian Jews were expelled or compelled in other ways to leave the country. Once a thriving community, the Jews in Egypt have been reduced to six elderly women, reports Egypt Independent in July.

While historically, conversions to Islam were welcomed, there are indications that they nowadays are increasingly deemed a threat to national security as they tend to be associated with sectarian tension and conflict ["Security vs Fear"]. On January 29, Nujum misriyya reports that the Tura prison administration had to separate Muslim Brotherhood supporters after they forced three Christian prisoners to convert. The stories that attract most media attention, however, revolve around female converts to Islam. On May 7, Ilaf (Elaph) newspaper uses the term “sectarian crisis” (azma tawiyya) to describe a series of incidents in which Coptic girls in Upper Egypt have allegedly converted to Islam. In June, an eighteen-year-old Coptic girl disappears from a village in Upper Egypt after reportedly converting to Islam. In another village a rumour spreads that a Christian woman has eloped with a young man named “Islam”. Demonstrations erupt outside the local police station where male members of the local Coptic community demand that the girl be returned to her family. On the other side, the local Muslim population accuses the police of colluding with the Coptic Church to prevent such conversions. Subsequently some men are arrested while others are dispersed. In response to these emotional demonstrations, the head of the local security directorate issues a statement that the woman in question is not held in police custody, but is on a train to Cairo to announce her conversion to Islam at al-Azhar. The eighteen-year-old girl appears in a videoclip on YouTube ["Social media"].

The video shows
her wearing a black hijab and giving a furtive smile while announcing her belief in Islam. Her declaration is less rehearsed than that of Muḥammad Ḥīḍāḍī: in the background, the voice of a man can be heard reciting the *shahāda*, which she repeats after him. Shrouded in mystery, this episode, as others like it, gives ample room for speculation: did the woman in question convert willingly or was she in fact kidnapped and forced to adopt Islam? [\textit{True vs False}] The fact that women’s conversion elicits such anxiety can probably be explained by common assumptions about women’s relations with men who are neither their husbands nor belong to their families and religious communities, particularly in the governorates of Upper Egypt. Expressing fear and anxiety over this and other similar incidents, some Copts try to create an association aimed at handling what they view as the growing phenomenon of forced disappearances and kidnapping, but they fail to obtain the official permit required [\textit{Disappearances}]. Returning to the article in *al-Ṣabāb*, an approval from the Ministry of Interior validating the conversion and change of name in ID card is noteworthy among the documents required for conversion to Islam. This signals that a closer monitoring of the boundaries between religious identities has come to be viewed as necessary step to prevent further sectarian tension and agonism, as reflected in a statement by the head of al-Azhar’s Fatwa Committee:

According to God, the believer is free to believe and the disbeliever to disbelieve. However, in cases where conversion leads to *fitna* on account of social disapproval, the issue is referred to national security agencies and the judiciary for the sake of protecting the individual and nation.\(^3\)

Conversions may put society at risk of *fitna*, “trial, temptation, sedition, civil strife”—the word reminds of the big schism in early Islamic history that led to the Sunni-Shia split and has become almost synonymous with civil war ever since. In light of this and other barriers facing converts attempting to change religious membership religion in ID cards, the author of the article wonders whether the principle of freedom of religion that is found in the 2014 constitution is not just “ink on paper” (*hibr ‘alā waraq*), as the popular Egyptian proverb says [\textit{Idea vs Practice}].

Related Entries

\textbf{Arrays}: Disappearances; Dual Identities / Masking; In Islam...; Self-help; Social media; Tricking the system

\textbf{Codes}: Idea vs Practice; Private vs Public; Security vs Fear; State vs People; Superiority vs Inferiority; True vs False

References


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Notes

Introduction: From “Issues” to “Arrays” (S. Guth & A. Hofheinz)


4 Much of the material was collected in a shared researcher’s notebook, using Evernote (https://evernote.com).

5 The “special dossier” Living 2016: Cultural Codes and Arrays in Arab Everyday Worlds Five Years After the “Arab Spring,” edited by Stephan Guth and Elena Chiti, appeared as pages 221-388 of JAIS, 16 (2016), and is accessible both at JAIS’s previous website (http://www.hf.uio.no/jais/volume/vol16/v16_09_living2016.pdf) and at the new pool of open-access journals hosted by the University of Oslo, see <https://www.journals.uio.no/index.php/JAIS/article/view/4761>.

6 The list, processed from the data collected in our researcher’s notebook as well as from the studies contained in the Living 2016 dossier (see previous note), is given on pp. 229-33 of Stephan Guth, “Introduction: Living 2016 and the In 2016 project,” JAIS 16 (2016): 224-33.

7 Gumbrecht 1997: 434.

8 Ibid. (our emphasis, S.G./A.H.).

9 Ibid. (dto.).

10 Ibid. (dto.).

11 Ibid. (dto.).

ʿĀmmiyya (E. M. Håland)

1 My translation – E.M.H.

Clash (E. Chiti)


2 Fieldwork notes, January-February 2016.


Fieldwork notes, Round Table Al-thaqāfa fīl-muwājaha, Cairo Book-Fair, Main Hall, January 29, 2016.


“I was terribly wrong”—writers look back at the Arab spring five years on,” The Guardian, January 23, 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/23/arab-spring-five-years-on-writers-look-back>.


<https://twitter.com/moezmasoud/status/730910281442971649>.

TV show Anā Masrī, ḥalqat “Film Muḥammad Dīyāb Ishībāk, bi-nakha siyāsiyya wa-thawriyya,” May 15, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwQxmiP5WQ>; see also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImutjDCBAs>.


Conversions (M. Lindbekk)


4. Ibid.


8. Ibid.

Dual Identities / Masking (S. Guth)

1 English mask is from Middle French masque ‘covering to hide or guard the face’ (16c.), from Italian maschera, from Medieval Latin masca ‘mask, specter, nightmare,’ which is perhaps from Arabic maskharah ‘buffoon, mockery,’ from sakhira ‘be mocked, ridiculed’ – <etymonline.com> (as of 09Dec2017).


3 Khadijah is a traditional Islamic name in reverence for the Prophet’s first wife.

Satire (on YouTube Channels) (M. Mohamed)

1 ṣīdallish, on the other hand, is the common term among Egyptian youth for all kinds of verbal practices that stimulate laughter, like puns, parody, and irony.