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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Father Figures

On January 29, the Facebook group Ṣuwar Maṣr Zamān (“Pictures from Egypt in the Old Days”) posts a photo of Gamal Abdel Nasser (Gamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir), in the company of a young bride and a sheikh. The caption tells a moving story: The girl on the photo is an orphan. She was about to get married but did not have a father or an uncle to act as her guardian during the ceremony. Fearing the judgment of her future husband’s family, the girl wrote to Nasser in desperation, explaining her situation. The president soon showed up at her doorstep, bringing along the sheikh of al-Azhar to tie the knot. As one commentator points out, the photo is actually depicting ʿAwāṭif, the daughter of sheikh ʿAbd al-Rahmān Tāg, on her wedding day. But that does not stop the Facebook crowd from engaging in one of their typical quarrels, which often occur when the name of Abdel Nasser is mentioned. For many, the fictional story captures the essence of the former president. It shows him as a guardian, “a father to all orphans, poor and deprived Egyptian people.” Or maybe just a leader who has fulfilled his legal obligations, as one anonymous soul points out, quoting the Prophetic tradition (ḥadīth): “The sultan serves as a guardian to all those who have no guardian” [In Islam…]. To the other half, however, Nasser is synonymous with “tyranny”, “oppression”, “torture”, “defeat in The Six-Day War,” “an atheist”, “an apostate”. In the absence of debate, after 246 comments no consensus is reached on the question of who Abdel Nasser really was. It is the complex relationship with the Father Figure who represents both benevolent guidance and strict authority, which evokes admiration as well as the desire to rebel.

Occasionally both, as ʿAwāṭif ʿAbd al-Rahmān knows very well. The first part of Jīhān al-Ṭāhirī’s trilogy Egypt’s Modern Pharaohs, screened by BBC Arabic on the anniversary of the 2011 Revolution [Memorial days], shows the scholar and journalist talking about Nasser’s death:

I was chatting with my brother about Abdel Nasser and the repression. We were saying that he had no option but to be patient for at least twenty more years since Abdel Nasser was young. He was only 51. We were criticizing Abdel Nasser’s regime, the Party and its corruption and the Security State. Then I went home. Later, my brother called and his voice was very strange. I said: “What’s wrong, Mālik?” He answered: “The President is dead.” … I threw the receiver and lost it. It was horrible, horrible, horrible. Until today I don’t think I have ever mourned anyone, including my father and mother, as much as I mourned Abdel Nasser… No one has the right to orphan an entire nation.

Decades after his death, the legacy of the president is still a hot topic, and there is still an apparent need to talk about the events. ʿAbd al-Rahmān’s comments also touch on the love-hate relationship she has with Abdel Nasser and the battle between the conscious and the emotional. The Father here, with all his positives and negatives, is the one who gives direc-

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tion. Without him, Egypt has no clear path forward, is left without guidance and care, orphaned.

Yet, some go out of their way to show that the direction was actually not lost after his death. On August 27, the Facebook page al-Ra’is ‘Abd al-Fattâh al-Sisi posts a link to an article entitled “El-Sisi and Abdel Nasser: Two leaders fighting conspiracy” [Conspiracy Theories]. The Americans have a masterplan, aimed at destabilizing Egypt and depriving the country of its independence, the article argues [The Suspect Foreigner]. Under Nasser, they have refused to finance the Aswan High Dam, and have then attacked Egypt after the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Now, Obama’s new Middle East plan is again aimed at harming Egyptian sovereignty, making it dependent on aid. And this is just the first part. Once Egypt has fallen, the rest of the Middle East will follow. The only difference, the author concedes, is that in the 1960s, Nasser was only facing external conspiracies. Today, el-Sisi is battling enemies from outside and the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters from inside the country. Much like Nasser, however, el-Sisi is going to protect the country, ensuring its stability, security and independence [The Voice from Above, Security vs Chaos]. He is ready to step in his predecessor’s shoes and safely steet the country [Past vs Present, Past = Present] as long as the people and the political forces are behind him.

But el-Sisi embodies not just a continuation of Nasser’s legacy, he is an upgrade. In December 2016, the following anecdote is posted on Khayr ajnâd al-ard (“The Best Soldiers on Earth”):

Gamal Abdel Nasser built the High Dam and so he is a leader. Every day, we hear about the projects el-Sisi has completed or is going to complete, but that is normal and no one says a word. These are the words of my mother who is satisfied with you, Mr. President.

The current president does not receive enough praise for his achievements, his accomplishments are merely reported, without elevating el-Sisi to the high status that the ordinary citizen thinks he deserves, as the story suggests, emphasizing on the president’s popular appeal. However, it is not just Nasser’s legacy that he surpasses. On March 9, the Facebook group Maṣr lil-gamī’ wa-bil-gamī’ (“Egypt for and through Everybody”) changes its status:

We have a president whose greatness and glory are equal to that of Ahmed ‘Urabi, whose courage equals that of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who is intelligent like Sadat and who has true Muslim morals. His name is Mr. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

Next to the text is a photo of the president, looking shyly away from the camera. The post is pointing out the virtues of the leader, presenting him as an embodiment of the best qualities of many of the paternal figures from the recent past—the ultimate Father Figure.

Mere admiration is not enough, however. The Father also requires obedience and faith in Him. He promises stability and security—on the condition that His authority is respected. In April, the announcement that the two Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir will be transferred to Saudi Arabia immediately prompts a wave of protests [Red Sea Islands]. But some Facebook users react in a very different way (#al-Sisi-sâyîn-ar-doh [#el-Sisi_protects_his_land], #ad’âm-qarârât-al-Sisi [#I_support_el-Sisi’s_decisions], #athiq_fi_al-ra’îs_al-Sisi [#I_trust_in_President_el-Sisi]). And the proclamation of trust goes beyond the usage of the folk taxonomy mark-up. On April 23, the Facebook group Maṣr
“lil-gami’ wa-bil-gami’” illustrates the hashtag #al-Sisi šāyin ardoh (“#el-Sisi protects his land”) with an image, presumably showing scenes from the 2011 Revolution—a building and a truck in flames—with a caption reading: “They [i.e., “the revolutionaries”] want this Egypt” [Downtown]. Immediately below, another picture shows a recently renovated motorway and a photo of a newly built residential block in New Ismailia City [Ashwā’iyāt], subtly branded with “And we, who are with president el-Sisi, are building this Egypt.” The message is clear: stick with the Father who will guide Egypt to greatness and prosperity… or follow “them” on the path to disaster and destruction [Security vs Chaos]. Yet, the president is not just a guardian and a leader. He is also caring and compassionate. “How can anyone believe that these eyes can sell the land?” asks a Facebook post from April 2016 rhetorically, showing two mirroring images of el-Sisi in tears, separated by a large red heart. Trust el-Sisi by supporting the hashtag, in recognition of the fact that he has sacrificed his life and peace of mind to protect the country! In the comment section, emotions run high. “I love you, Mr. President. Your tears are precious to us,” “We love you because you are an officer, we love you because you are a president, we love you because you are tough, we love you because you are merciful…”

An officer, a president, an army man. He could never betray his country. After all, the army is there to protect the land, not sell it. El-Sisi knows best, The Father has a plan for the future of Egypt, he just needs a bit of trust and support from the Egyptian people and everything will be good again. He is a man of the people, a man of the army, and he has never forgotten his duties to Egypt, suggests a post shared on the Facebook page Kullunā rijāl al-shurṭa al-miṣrīyya and the comments below it. Proudly carrying the hashtag #ad‘am-qarārāt-al-Sisi (“#I-support-el-Sisi’s-decisions”), the post also features a remarkable display of affection. To the right there is a photo of el-Sisi in a full military uniform and sunglasses staring at the horizon, a faint smile on his lips. To the left: a heavily armed group of soldiers, posing in front of the Egyptian flag. The president, in civilian clothes, standing in the middle, embraces the soldier kneeling in from of him. One word, written in large Latin characters, floats over the two images: Bbara (i.e., Arabic bābā ‘dad’). A sign of respect and affection, the epithet hints at the president’s fatherly appeal, but it also points to another function of his. He is to be obeyed and loved, his authority unquestioned, his fatherly advice always followed [The State = The People].

As the paternal advice often comes in large quantities, that is not always an easy task.

“What’s this rubbish song you put on?,” “Don’t you have any other clothes?,” “Sweat away now, as you did nothing at school,” “You are praying five times a day and when I was your age, I was praying seven times a day”, “You are now 20. When I was your age, I was more like 22.” “Your mom back in the day. Oh, how she chased me” [Young vs Settled].

These are just a few of the memes featuring in a Youm7 article. The sarcastic lines imitate the manner in which fathers often talk to their sons, while also mocking their know-it-all attitude and tendency to exaggerate. Regardless of time and place, Egyptian fathers have a certain way of talking to their children, which inevitably shows their affinity to overstate the virtues of the past, comparing its style, music and education to that of today. From all memes the same face is staring back: a portrait of a slightly sceptically looking Ḥusnī Muḥārak. The political and the biological paternal figure hand in hand. Is he an embodiment of
all Egyptian fathers or a person whose authority was ultimately rejected? It is perhaps a bit of both, with the ousted president representing all members of the Mubarak generation and their complicated, yet standard, relationship with their offspring [Past vs Present, Past = Present].

And complicated this relationship is. The Atlantic celebrates the fifth anniversary of the January Revolution with an article bearing the rather gloomy title “A Revolution Devours Its Children,” which follows the life of five Egyptian families who have close relatives detained on political charges [Disappearances]. Heavily appropriated for a foreign audience, the piece delves into the stories of the five families, all trying to cope with the absence of their loved ones. Most of it revolves around the daily struggles: the long queues at the prison, the weekly 20-minutes-long visitations, the pain of (not) knowing what the future holds [Prison]. Inevitably, some of the conversations move towards the reason for the detention, revealing a generational clash. “This generation wants to live their life, in their own style,” “Nurhan started to feel that she and Ahmad belong to one team, and that we belong to a different team,” “His father told him then that the country’s youth were foolish, that the ‘deep state’ would prevail,” recalls the mother of the detained activist Ahmed Dawma. The past few years has put a rift between the family members who disagree on what the right path for Egypt is, especially after Ahmed’s father publicly supported his son’s arrest by the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012. Despite now sharing a common enemy, the family remains divided by a deep sense of mistrust. However, not just politics but also the absence of it could create a gap between family members. Two years ago, in April 2014, 21-year-old Muhammad Imam, according to his friends a member of the April 6 Youth Movement, had been arrested following a protest at the University of Alexandria. His father, a retired military officer, now has a different story to tell. “We are not allowed to get involved in politics,” “Me, I don’t have any opinions on all that.” He has not visited his son in prison yet. “Nothing is wrong with Egypt,” Muhammad’s mother adds, “We’re not a politically interested family, we don’t like politics, we don’t even know what April 6 is.” The guidelines for the family’s political and social conduct are set. Having failed to follow the advice to respect the authority of the paternal figure, the sons have been punished by both the actual and the figurative fathers. [True vs False, Voice vs Silence, Past = Present]

Not that the relationship is any simpler at the other end:

When you meet a male friend while you’re with your parents somewhere and you guys make that awkward eye contact that means DO NOT DO CHEEK KISSES, DO NOT DO HUGS; only stiff handshakes are allowed. In fact, if you can limit touching altogether, all the better. Baba is watching,

states number three on the list of “Fifteen Egyptian girl problems,” posted on CairoScene. Between having to ask the father’s permission to go away for the weekend and having to justify that in front of foreign friends, the life of the Egyptian girl is tough. Questions about marriage, comments about cooking skills, and constant monitoring of their whereabouts are just part of the things girls have to endure from their parents. All coupled with having to pretend to abide by rules with which they clearly disagree. “The fuck do I care what the bawwall thinks? … Apparently everybody’s primary concern in life is to scrutinise yours”, bellows the author defiantly [Voice vs Silence, Young vs Settled]. A showcase of the
double lives children often live because of their parents, torn between compliance and rebellion, both respecting and challenging the authority of the Father Figure and the social system it represents [Dual identities / Masking. True vs False].

And they are questioning the rationale behind the various rules of civility. Blogging for Madā Maṣr, Hiba ’Affī gives her take on the issue. Soon it will be Ramadan again, the month of soap-watching marathons and endless awkward social events that are impossible to avoid, Iffār meals, for instance, accompanied by painfully long forced conversations with people with whom you have nothing in common. And it is not just Ramadan that brings out the worst of social obligations. Being forced to attend weddings and funerals of distant relatives and acquaintances whom you barely know also creates this feeling of unnecessary intrusion in people’s personal space [Freedom vs Constraint. Individuality vs Collectivity]. The case, of course, is not against all social gatherings. Rather, the problem is with social obligations that only serve the purpose of maintaining appearances and upholding archaic social rules. Isn’t it time to stop clinging to a lifestyle that contradicts its original intention of creating deep and meaningful relationships? Or, to paraphrase the words of Cairo rock band Cairoke:

There are traditions that become defects and need to be changed. Freedom means change, how to express yourself is your choice and not somebody else’s. Things are not going well. The old man is trying to bring the past back, while controlling the present [Past = Present]. The whole society is united against change, but they can’t take away the voice of the people.

An unruly cry against all those who try to restrict freedom and impose their own ideas on the rest [al-Muwātīn al-sharīf]. All those who control life, all old men, all Father Figures.

“Long live Egypt… Long live Egypt… Long live Egypt,” explodes the conference hall as el-Sisi prepares to give the concluding speech of the First National Youth Conference. “I am very happy to be among my sons and daughters, the youth of Egypt,” begins the president. The last few days have demonstrated, he continues/elaborates, that the young people of Egypt are capable and enthusiastic and that through receiving proper training, advice and guidance they can become a driving force of Egypt of tomorrow. The country is young, and the youth represents national wealth, which should be developed and invested in. The government will work towards reviewing the status of the detained young people (applause!), developing training programmes, discussing amendments in the Protest Law and ensuring the continuation of Egypt’s cultural and historical identity. The youth population, el-Sisi goes on, has been somewhat neglected and marginalised. But Egypt belongs to everyone and only those who want to do harm have no place here. He, the President, will work with all young people because a father loves all his children and he hopes that one day one of the young Egyptians will take his place. “Long live Egypt… Long live Egypt… Long live Egypt,” concludes the protector, provider and supporter, the father of the youth of Egypt.

El-Sisi will work with all young people? But where is this youth he is talking about?, Egyptians ask themselves on Twitter, after the hashtag Where is the youth? explodes yet again on the platform. “Behind bars or buried in their graves,” the answer comes. “If el-Sisi held his conference in prison, there would have been a larger attendance,” jokes one Egyptian, as many others share pictures of the young people detained, sentenced or killed since
2013 [Disappearances, Prison, Young vs Settled]. “I have a message for you…”, says a drawing of an overweight Egyptian official, as he pokes his head through the barred door of a prison cell, with the words “Egyptian youth” next to it, “You are the hope and the future of Egypt” [Satire]. The Egyptian youth needs actions, not words, it is time for real change, not empty promises. The young Egyptians are fed up with the “Father” discourse and the words that fail to deliver in practice. Acting like an almighty figure of authority is no longer enough, the role of the father-leader is becoming obsolete.

“The Egyptian youth are children only to their parents,” rails ‘Umar al-Hâdî from the virtual pages of al-Maṣrî al-Yawm. Again, this critiques the notion of the “Father-President” which has been harming Egypt for decades. The young are not the president’s children, they are citizens with rights and obligations. They demand freedom and dignity and el-Sisi addressing them as his sons and daughters is just an insult. Treating them as children who need presidential advice is not going to solve the youth crisis. The country’s restraint towards the people has been great during the last few years, states el-Sisi, to avoid the current state of tension. How come? Is he forgetting that the state is the state of the people? Is he forgetting that the great self-restraint people had to impose on themselves when dealing with the actions of the regime? [Baby milk, Dollar crisis]. The angry monologue continues: The people have not wrecked the Egyptian economy, they have not ignored the problems in the security services until the crimes committed by policemen occupy half of the incident page in al-Ahrâm, they did not transfer the two islands to Saudi Arabia [The Police(man) criminal, Red Sea Islands, Tricked by the system]. The people did not kill Giulio Regeni and they did not imprison Aḥmad Nâğî for his comics and Islam Behery (İslâm Buḥâyîrî) for his ideas [Prison]. Egypt needs a state that respects the constitution and the rights and the freedom of its people. The Egyptians want a president of a modern secular state and not a father, a leader or a caliph. Al-Hâdî’s final remark brings the tirade to an abrupt stop, leaving the reader suddenly aware of the emotional charge of the words and the power of the silence that follows. It is not just a rejection of el-Sisi but of the entire notion of the Father Figure, in all its complexity, and the social and political system built around it.

Related Entries

References


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