



Islam and the Culture of Modern Egypt

Telling a new story of modern Egypt, Mohammad Salama uses literary and cinematic sources to construct a clear and accessible narrative of the dynamics of Islam and culture in the first half of the twentieth century. The conflict between tradition and secular values in modern Egypt is shown in a stimulating and challenging new light as Salama bridges analysis of nationalism and its connection to Islamism and outlines the effects of secular education versus traditional Islamic teaching on varied elements of Egyptian society. These include cultural production, politics, identity, and gender relations. All of this helps to discern the harbingers that led to Egypt's social transition from the monarchy to the republic, and opens the possibility of Islam as an inspiring and inspirational force. This illuminating, provocative, and informative study will be of inestimable value to anyone interested in the period, whether general readers, students, or researchers.

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Mohammad Salama
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From the Monarchy to the Republic

MOHAMMAD SALAMA
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*To my children, Salma, Malachi, Aliya, Noah; my siblings,
Nasser, Ahmad, Kareem, Amani; my parents, Aziza and
Ramadan; and in memory of John McGuire – what I have
learned from John cannot be quantified.*

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A Note on Transliteration and Translation

This book follows a specialized diacritical system for Arabic for all scholarly purposes. I use the standard Western spelling of terms that have entered the English language like “Arab,” “Islam,” and country names. I use the standard Library of Congress transliteration system for all other Arabic terms, with a few exceptions. In Arabic words such as ‘Ā’isha, the (‘) symbolizes the Arabic letter (ع) [‘ayn], while the (ʿ) symbolizes the glottal Arabic (ء | ؤ | إ) [hamza]. An accented (á) symbolizes the alif maqṣūra (ى) at the end of an Arabic word, as in (على) ‘alá.

The definitive (ال) is fully transcribed as (Al-/al-) regardless of whether the following letters are ḥurūf shamsiyya or ḥurūf qamar-iyya. In genitive iḍāfa constructions, the pronounced (ð) is transcribed as a -t- between two nouns, or as part of the full word, as in Jumhūriyya-t- Faraḥāt or Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt. Full case endings are added to Qur’ānic and poetic quotations only. When a full case ending is necessary, in cases of tanwīn تَنْوِين or nunation, the sign (-un) indicating the nominative case, (-an) indicating the accusative case, and (-in) indicating the genitive case are all superscripted.

Dagger alif (أَلِفٌ خَنْجَرِيَّةٌ) [alif khanjarīyya], which is also known as symbolic alif, small alif, superscript alif, or historical alif, and which appears in Arabic script as a short vertical stroke on top of a consonant, is symbolized as a long /ā/ sound. For example: (هَدَاهَا) [hādhā] or (رَحْمَانٌ) [raḥmān]. The (h) at the end of a transcribed Arabic word like the possessive pronoun in كتابه [his book] refers to Arabic words ending in an (h) (ه) and not with a (ð), as commonly practiced. The final (ð) is not transcribed, as in كتابة [kitāba].

Unless otherwise noted in the text or notes, all translations from Arabic and French are my own.

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Preface

During the Second World War, in the summer of 1943 to be exact, a young orphan migrated north from *Ḥawḍ ‘Ashara* (District 10) in the Upper Egyptian city of *Qinā* to settle in the metropolis known among Egyptians as *‘Rūs al-Baḥr al-Mutwassit* (The Bride of the Mediterranean Sea). At this time, Alexandria was the most popular destination for Upper Egyptians seeking cooler weather and a more prosperous livelihood in northern Egypt. This particular man’s elder brother had established himself five years earlier as a caretaker for a well-to-do family in the area of Rushdie Pasha. Fortunately, the landowning wealthy family was now seeking a nighttime guard for the house, with full board and a small stipend. They hired the younger brother for the position. To an illiterate Upper Egyptian peasant in the Farūq years, this was a golden opportunity for economic self-improvement. Soon enough, the young man moved into the small two-bedroom apartment located in the lower eastern corner of the villa’s basement. To supplement his income, he was also able to find a part-time commuting job as a machine operator at the Sibahi Spinning and Weaving Company on the outskirts of Alexandria. That young man was my future father.

Twenty-two years earlier, a similar story took place when a man from the same *ṣa’id* (Upper Egyptian) neighborhood in *Qinā* migrated to Alexandria to work for the British-owned Shell Oil Company. He soon married a young woman from Damanhūr and had three children with her before she died at a young age. The youngest of the three orphaned siblings was my mother, who married my father through the *Khātiba* (matchmaker) tradition of conservative *ṣa’idī* families living in Alexandria. My mother and father were thus brought together by the ambitions of migrant working classes who elbowed their way through the economics and politics of a fading British Empire, a feeble monarchy, and a rising nationalism. It was in the summer of 1965 that

my parents got married and my mother moved to live with my father in his caretaker apartment in the Rushdie villa.

Such an encounter could have happened in Alexandria or elsewhere in Metropolitan Egypt. There is, however, an important rationale for beginning my book with this glance backwards into my own prehistory. We all strive to make sense of the past as a generalized record of history open to everyone's reflections and analyses, but any such record will inevitably be colored by personal recollections. And just as with Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's autobiography, *al-Ayyām (The Days)*, my recollections of the past stretch back beyond the point where my own childhood memories begin. For me, born as I was in the shadow of European dominion in Egypt, to a father and a mother who were toddlers in the aftermath of Ḥasan al-Bannā's establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood and adolescents when the Free Officers carried out their coup on July 23, 1952, the regime of Nasser, with which I conclude this study, falls within my own extended familial autobiography. As such, my account of this regime bears the marks of my parents' experience of the culture of modern Egypt at a period that preceded my birth, the outset of the twentieth century. And just as it reflects my preconscious experience of the Nasser years, it reflects, as well, the marks of my direct exposure to the years that have followed.

Nasser died on September 28, 1970, leaving behind him a gap and a memory. The Arabic word for memory is *dhikrā*, which derives from the three-letter root *dh. k. r.* In addition to its connection to memory and remembering, *dh. k. r.* also means to "mention." The root connects the word memory, *dhikrā*, to an enunciation in the present (the now), thus making memory an act of the present. I carry those memories with me wherever I go, as a stamp of my identity, as I strive to make sense of the past and seek solace in a somewhat blurred narrative that has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that I call my life. Yet, I am equally aware that remembering, an arduous task of keeping one's own identity intact, will never be fully achieved in the present, but will always remain a unique and unverifiable work in progress.

As an act of *dhikrā*, this book is a memory, not only of the past and of my own interactions with, and readings of, all those narratives on Islam and the culture of modern Egypt; it is also a memory of the future, rooted in the past, yet signaling what is yet to come of Egypt, a memory that has been expressed by many authors in this study,

from Haykal's romantic love to Idrīs's satirical utopia, from Mahfouz's nihilism to Chahine's nationalism, from Qutb and Bākāthīr's Islamism to al-Ḥakīm and Ḥusayn's humanism. Memory is not just about failed revolutions, the years of deprivation, the ugly reality of village medicine, or the oppression of religious institutions, although all these are important. Memory is life, embodied in the fears and aspirations of individuals in living societies, subject to the dialectic of utopia and despair, of dreams and reality, of remembering and forgetting. Memory, as the Arabic origin denotes, is a bond between the past and the present, an invocation of a lived past that thrives on vague reminiscences and hazy impressions; its rootedness in the concrete, an image, a landscape, a sweet voice, a flavor, a gesture, an object, a photo, a materiality beaten by time, hazily recorded and locked up in a mental safe, allowing us to situate the personal in a sacred assertion of, or search for, our own identities. Amidst all this haziness, Nasser occupies a similarly nebulous place in the collective memory of my generation.

Many recollections of Nasser have been eclectic and dismissive. Many historical works dwell on the famous events in Nasser's regime. Events such as the 1952 coup, the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the Agrarian Reform Law, and the wars with Europe and Israel, as well as the relationship with the Arab world and Russia, all become the focus of those histories concerned with taking these events apart to show how they functioned and how they came about. But most of those writings raise many questions about biases and interpretations, and sometimes even give profundity to a past devoid of it. Take, for example, Bernard Lewis's perspective on Nasser in his book, *The Middle East and the West*. In 1955, Bernard Lewis speaks of the "mood and wish that united many if not most Arabs" in their desire to "spite and humiliate the West." According to Lewis, the "most dramatic and satisfying expression" of this attitude was found in "Nasser's Russian arms deal in Egypt in September 1955. In the twilight world of popular myths and images, the West is the source of all evil."¹ The Nasser of Bernard Lewis's twilight zone is the antagonist of a monolithic West.

I am sure Nasser is remembered differently by his family, children, and grandchildren. Even in my own family, my father would have

¹ Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East and the West* (London: HarperCollins College Division, 1968), 20.

begged to differ with Bernard Lewis. The word “Nasser” was very important to him. Nasser is the name he chose to give to my elder brother, his first son, after which my father was always called *Abū Nāṣir* (father of Nasser) and my mother *Umm Nāṣir* (mother of Nasser). To have such popular *kunya* (a teknonymy or a practice of referring to parents by the names of their first born) as the same name of an Upper Egyptian Alexandria-born President is a glory that speaks for itself. My siblings and I grew up singing nationalist songs and listening to tapes by popular singers like Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, Um Kulthūm, and ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ. Ours was a radio household in a radio republic. Nationalism was fed to us, both consciously and unconsciously, by the speeches that our father would make us sit down and listen to, even if we did not understand a word or cared to, and by the rampant drums of militarism that penetrated our ears on a daily basis, as we went to school, while we lunched on the delicious falafel sandwiches of *Abū Rabī‘* at Isis (Izīs/Buklā/Bolkoley) Tram Station, or when we went for a swim at Rushdie and Stanley Beaches.

I recall one of the earliest childhood memories of a photo of my father in his youth in front of his machine in the Sibahi Spinning and Weaving Factory in Kafr al-Dawwār, a suburb of Alexandria. It was a black and white shot, with my father smiling in the middle left corner of the frame, though not looking directly at the camera, while keeping busy with his hands on that huge machine that engulfed the remaining two-thirds of the photo. He looked so happy, yet too young, I later thought, to be operating such an enormous machine. I grew up with this photo magnifying my father’s heroism in my eyes, though I often wondered why it would take him so long to go to work and come back, and how, with little or no education, he was able to do his daily *wardiyya* (shift) on this colossal nonstopping leviathan. It was much later, and after he got a more stable job at the Alexandria Transportation Company, that I came to learn that precoup textile managements intentionally located their factories far from major urban centers to better control their workforces, and that they intentionally and selectively recruited illiterate, unskilled Egyptians with no prior experience of industrial life so that they might not ask for salary increases or work-related accident compensation, or organize to improve their working conditions.

My father was lucky; he worked at the Sibahi Spinning and Weaving Company at the right time in Egypt’s modern history, when

Nasser's regime cleverly restored the dignity of Egyptian peasants and factory workers while simultaneously dismantling all labor unions and labeling union organizers as communist ideologues punishable by the law. Nasser's regime thus managed to orient the workers' movements towards nationalist issues and to dissolve them in the newly forming Egyptian collective. Nationally, the regime's support for the working class was a very successful move. This, of course, was consolidated by Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal and the regime's emphasis on expanding modern industry. In turn, the working class grew in size and gained political legitimacy and status, but lost their unions, and with them the right to justice and legal representation. My father's employment as *'āmil mākīna* (a machine operator) in a spinning and weaving factory owned by a *mutamaṣṣir* (Egyptianized) redefined Egyptian nationalism. An Egyptian peasant in a cotton-related business, his status as a symbol of the new, hard-working, Egyptian native was somehow linked to the historical meta-narrative of Egypt's anti-colonial struggle, and to the fact that from 1882 to 1952, Egypt was subject to British colonial domination. During those times, nearly all of the large-scale employers were foreigners enjoying economic power that was enhanced and safeguarded by the monarchy, which in turn protected Britain's interests in Egypt. My father's status was perceived as part of the country's fight for self-determination and he, as a worker, was perceived as the dispossessed, native peasant coming back to reclaim his usurped rights.

This motif of the dispossessed peasant – whatever ideology it serves – is at the center of Egypt's colonial and postcolonial self-definition. It is easy to see it as a common thread throughout this book, passing from Ḥaqqī's *Virgin of Denshawai* (1906), to Haykal's *Zaynab* (1914), to Ḥusayn's *The Days* (1927), to Bākāthīr's *The Red Revolutionary* (1949), and to other works not addressed in this study, all the way up to Chahine's *Gamīla* (1958). I do not take credit for noting this: there is a peasant in every Egyptian story. However, it took me decades to connect the dots and to see the multi-gowned peasant clothed, by turn, in injustice, inequity, negligence, enslavement, fundamentalism, Islamism, nationalism, and Egyptianism as the decades went by. My father, the migrant peasant of Upper Egypt, unequipped with any kind of certificate or skill other than farming, or for that matter with anything that would make for a decent life in Metropolitan Egypt, found opportunity once he made the decision to

leave the neglected south and board *wabūr al-sā ‘a ithnā ‘ashar* (the twelve o'clock locomotive), the overnight train that runs between Aswān and Alexandria.

My father's Islam has its beginning in Upper Egypt, Sufism of a deeply stoic nature, occasional *dhikr* nights (focused collective prayers in praise of God), daily prayers, Friday *khutba* (sermon), *zakā* (charity), fasting in the month of Ramadan, listening to *Idhā ‘a-t-al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* (a national radio station broadcasting the Holy Qur’ān), and praying for a miracle to be able to afford *Hajj* (pilgrimage). Speaking of miracles, when I first read Ḥusayn’s autobiography, *The Days*, in high school, I was struck by a familiar parental attitude towards the idea of Providence. The young boy’s father asked him to recite the Yāsīn chapter repeatedly with the expectation or hope that God would not turn down the appeals of a blind lad reciting the Qur’ān. My father, too, prayed insistently and continually appealed for economic improvement in the form of a financial gift from God, literally a “bag of money.” My father promised God, in his earnest yet simple prayers, that if He were to grant him a gift, he would use the money to build a mosque nearby for people to pray in. Anyone who has been to Alexandria or other parts of Egypt, even briefly, will not fail to see that our neighborhood, in fact the whole of Egypt, did not need any more mosques. But that was my father’s pledge, a contractual hope for an act of divine generosity to be reciprocated with an act of human gratitude.

This culture of appeal and supplication is indeed the ethos of many Egyptian Muslims, including appeals for career advancement, marriage, safety, success at school, and cure from illnesses. Egypt’s arch-enemies are poverty and disease. These have not changed, no matter the place, the cultural formations, the religious affiliations, or the political leanings. Of course, every generation is shaped by different cultural forces. I got onto the train of postcolonial Egypt at a different stop than my father did. I had my own expectations of what the destination would be, having missed the rough transition from monarchy to republic, which for my parents and their generation must have been the most crucial cultural turn in Egypt’s modern history.

That is what I mean in this book by the *relationship* between Islam and the culture of modern Egypt. Islam in modern Egypt is a multitude – in other words, not exactly the fundamentalist hardline of the Muslim Brotherhood or even the more militant *al-Jamā*

'a *al-Islāmiyya*, whose members assassinated President Sadat in 1980, but rather the varied forms of cultural practices at home, greeting people, stepping into the mosque with the right foot, TV *adhān* reminders (calls for prayers), Friday exhortations, and the two Eids. The practice of Islam is more like a sanctuary from the mundane, a reminder that God will reward the good and punish evil. God is the poverty antidote, the spiritual recharge to cope with life in a police state of class privileges. My father knew very well that there are different ways of understanding Islam and the world. Shrouding Egypt and the whole world in a Quṭbian cloak of Islamism was simply detestable and unthinkable for him. Understandably enough, his 'basic' perspective on and practice of Islam seemed to be well-suited for Nasser's Egypt, which was intolerant of religious fundamentalism, less concerned with intellectual or social movements, and definitely dismissive of any principles of shared governance.

It took me decades to be able to discern how the ebbs and flows of the labor movement in Nasser's Egypt coincided with the successive upsurges of the nationalist movement. The participation of the working class in the nationalist cause, which my father represented, infused the movement for full independence and evacuation of British military forces with a radical social consciousness. Workers' strikes and demonstrations, including that of the Muslim Brotherhood – which, ironically enough, started *as* a social union – were usually directed against foreign enterprises. The labor movement was often considered to be one component in a larger nationalist movement. After 1956, Nasser's foreign policy shifted towards *al-Ḥiyād al-Ījābī* (Positive Neutralism) and *al-Tasalluḥ ʿDidd al-Isti'mār* (Militant Anti-imperialism). The tripartite attack of 1956 served to confirm for a nationalistically indoctrinated Egyptian public that the main political question of the day was still the struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism, now augmented by the Muslim Brotherhood's failed plot to take over Egypt in 1954 and Israel's external threats after 1948 and beyond.

These issues, rather than the economy and internal class struggle, dominated Nasser's politics. There was no interest in addressing Egypt's most immediate and urgent challenges: poverty, disease, illiteracy, and dictatorship. Nor was there concern with the question of the degree to which republicanism (Egyptian republicanism that is, which Idrīs ridicules in *Farāḥāt's Republic*) and democracy can be

reconciled, and with the question of whether new structures of governance can be created through legal-bureaucratic means. If the question of Egypt's democracy began with Nasser, it also ended there, and my memory of it during Sadat and Mubarak's regimes became a memory of a distant and uncertain future.

From the very beginning, the nationalist state was too narrow a framework to adequately guarantee successful economic policies and to protect Egypt against external factors – against the imperatives of the world market and the growing economic control of the United States. The development of a nation-state culture has arrived at an impasse, a horrifying realization that, of all the works discussed in this study, only Idris's novella is able to articulate, as early as 1956. Much was not known of Nasser's regime except through what the media granted Egyptians access to. During the Sadat years, Nasser was still referred to as *al-Rayyis* (the Leader), *Baṭal al-Thawra* (The Hero of the Revolution), but Sadat soon came to assume his new position as *baṭal al-Ḥarb wa al-Salām* (The Hero of War and Peace) and also *al-Rayyis* (the Leader). Mubarak, too, got the label of heroism, *al-Baṭal al-Qā'id* (The Leading Hero). Every new "hero" diminishes the others; in the Mubarak years, Sadat was reduced to *ṣāhib qarār al-ḥarb* (the one who made the decision to go to war [against Israel]), while Nasser was only left his bare name, sans privileges, *Nasser* – a name often uttered among Egypt's working class fellows with a sad, nostalgic sigh.

One must give credit where credit is due. Nasser's regime provided free education for all Egyptians. My mother was able to send me to public school because of Nasser. Without Nasser, I would not have been able to afford an education. Nasser's advent was thus populist as much as it was anti-monarchic and anti-Islamist, a major shift in Egypt's modern political and cultural history. It gave hope for at least the idea of a new Egypt. And this new Egypt, this particular revolutionary Egypt, would represent the only political culture that would resist the monarchy; that is, resist the royal and imperially planted rule of a sole dynasty, and take a stand in the face of subordination and authoritarianism.

There are two main reasons why the promise of the welfare republic could not hold. The first lies in the understanding of what democracy means, a question that risks disrupting the legacy and the promise of the word "democracy" from Nasser to el-Sisi. The second

reason is that this democracy, or the memory of Nasser's promise of democracy, inherited by Sadat, Mubarak, Morsi (the short-tenured and currently imprisoned Islamist President), and now el-Sisi, became the refrain of presidential speeches, the speech of utopia, the irony of all ironies, uttered and celebrated by dictatorial leaders violating it and ridiculing its very meaning.

All that was needed, the Egyptian intelligentsia agreed, was stability – good, persistent stability – because our country could not afford to continue to live in poverty and constant revolutions and wars. The intelligentsia had conflicting visions of the Egyptian *fallāḥ* (peasant) and which path was the best to follow to achieve this stability. Would Egypt be better off with a return to the premodern stability of Islam? Had this stability ever existed, or had it always been only a utopia of things past? Or was it yet to be found in a modern form of Islam? If so, what would that be? Or should Egypt be secular, European, trans-Islamic? The irony is that all, including Nasser, Qūṭb, Ḥusayn, and Bākāthīr, wanted an Egypt that could address the central need for welfare and stability, post-colonization, and post-Revolution. But that crucial need for *istiqrār* (stability), has in the process of realizing itself, destroyed itself, precisely by getting carried away with itself, leaving behind it a history, or rather a memory, of a series of thwarted revolutions and of straw-man heroes who squandered the aspirations for democracy on the long path toward it.

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