

Beyond the Media Lens: Discourse on the Egyptian Streets

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SINCE THE ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, Americans have been asking, “Why do they hate us?” As an Egyptian-American, I was interested in circumventing the media lens and in interacting, listening, and thinking with fellow Egyptians about their perceptions of the most pressing issues of the post-9/11 world. I conducted interviews with over forty Egyptians, from the rundown towns outside of Cairo and Alexandria to high society’s cosmopolitan, ritzy neighborhoods. I spoke to diverse segments of Egyptian society, from high-ranking government officials to students at the American University of Cairo (AUC), from devout and secular Christians and Muslims to artists and unemployed men and women. Many of the responses that I received may be frustrating to polemical groups or individuals that wish to oversimplify and generalize an otherwise complex public opinion landscape. The reality is that the perspectives I encountered transcended traditional societal divisions and demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the United States and a willingness to work towards bridging the divide.

DEMOCRACY, IDENTITY, RELIGION

Egypt is tentatively moving forward with its democratic reforms. Egyptians strongly desire a truly democratic state, but know that it will come slowly. A prevailing attitude is that “there is no point to even register to vote, because it won’t count and won’t make a difference.” This explains the low voter turnout in the 2005 Parliamentary and Presidential elections. Sandra, a young anthropologist working on her masters at AUC, said, “The people who ran in the ‘multi-party’ presidential elections were not qualified [to be president], but maybe now people will focus on the opportunity to become president, because it can be an option.” Sami, the regional manager of MAN Automotives sitting in an outside café at the Hilton of Mohandaseen, noted

that this would not be easy. “Mubarek wants to maintain his power and will do anything to keep his chair.” A female make-up artist from Heliopolis said, “There is no need for me to go and vote, because I don’t need him [Mubarek] to change. He has done good things.” Some interviewees agreed, noting that President Mubarek is successfully handling Egypt’s delicate position in the region’s politics without alienating the central players.

Eman, an excited and talkative female teacher from Heliopolis, sees things differently, “Mubarek cannot be friends with everyone. We must have principles and stick to them. Sooner or later America will do what they want no matter what, so we might as well have our dignity.” Although the attitudes about Egyptian democracy do not easily divide along class lines, many of the educated elite I spoke with considered the elections a farce. Others such as Hani, a Coptic dentist from Heliopolis, expressed frustration and anger with fellow Egyptians for not taking the time to vote. He knew the elections were not as transparent and fair as they should be, however, he believes society should commit itself to the process. Throughout the interview, Hani waived the voter registration forms in the air, which he passed out to all of his clients. He pleaded with them to actively participate to encourage Mubarek to follow through with his declared reforms.

The politicians who ran in the elections show different levels of commitment to a reform agenda. Dr. Mustafa El-Feki, vice president of the newly established Arab Parliament and currently the chairman of Foreign Affairs in the Parliament, won his seat in the town of Dominhour, traditionally a stronghold for the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood put up a tough campaign, holding him personally accountable for the National Democratic Party’s anti-Brotherhood policies. Dr. El-Feki, however, argued that the NDP is tolerant of diverse views and ideas.

Dr. Amir Bassam was one of the Muslim Brotherhood candidates who won a seat in the election but was later denied his place in parliament by President Mubarek. Dr. Bassam was outraged by the decision. He said he became disillusioned with the democratic reforms of the President. Nonetheless, he begrudgingly admitted that these elections were a crucial first step, and their momentum will be hard to reverse. In the end, everyone knows, at least in the back of his or her mind, that democracy is just not going to happen with the snap of a finger.

IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE DANGERS OF DEMOCRACY

While sitting in the loud, crowded, smoky Harris Café in Heliopolis, Sandra posed a question common among interviewees, “What kind of

democratic institution is the US trying to implement in the Middle East?” Egyptians do not dislike democracy but believe that in its development, the demographic and cultural makeup of different societies needs to be taken into consideration. Some Egyptians fear that allowing religious-based parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to run for parliament could lead to the kind of societal fragmentation that brought Lebanon to its knees. The dormant division between Egypt’s Muslim and Coptic Christian communities could be brought to the fore, leading to unsavory developments. When I interviewed a group of five Coptic and Muslim men from Upper Egypt, sitting together at their Cairo fruit stand, they all agreed with one man who said, “We are all Egyptian brothers and sisters no matter if we are Christian or Muslim.” However, some third and fourth year AUC students intimated that US support of the Christian community, coupled with its reluctance to open dialogue with Islamist parties, further exacerbates divisions between Christians and Muslims in Egypt.

However, many interviewees said it is necessary for the Brotherhood to be recognized as a legal organization for two reasons. First, as one young man said, banning them and having them hidden from society “is creating fire, by putting gas next to a flame. Having them hidden is more dangerous.” If they are integrated into society, then their activities will have to become more transparent. Second, Sandra argued that if Egypt seeks to have a legitimate, thriving, multiparty democracy, “everyone should be represented and have a voice.” However, some say that a party based on personal beliefs meant to be between God and the individual, instead of political ideals and realities is exclusive and inherently anti-democratic. Dr. El-Feki is sensitive to the contradictory pulls of Egypt’s democratic reforms. If the government stands against the Brotherhood and religious trends then they are accused, by the Americans, of closing the door on democracy. Dr. El-Feki goes on to say, “But if we give them [the Brotherhood] the chance to pass with Islamic trends, then we are criticized again for allowing a trend that is against non-Muslims and foreigners.”

A former Egyptian diplomat notes two important consequences of the recent Parliamentary elections. First, Mubarek’s hesitant opening to the Muslim Brotherhood served as a caution to the ambitious US objective of spreading democracy to the Middle East. Mubarek knew the Brotherhood would win a formidable share of seats, and that this would send the right message, “[if] you want democracy in the Middle East, well this is the kind you will get, even from a moderate state.” Second, many interviewees said that the elections opened the eyes of other parties to the need to reconnect with the masses and to harness state revenue towards the social services the Muslim Brotherhood had a virtual monopoly on.

MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND RELIGION

The two members of the Muslim Brotherhood that I interviewed strongly refuted the argument that the Brotherhood was exclusionary and radical. Citing the *Qur'an*, they both stressed that “God created variations for people to know each other and not to fight.” Dr. Mahmoud Ezzat, Secretary General of the Brotherhood, has been accused several times of plotting to overthrow the government and has served multiple jail terms. The most recent charge came in March 2005. Dr. Ezzat, his colleague Dr. Bassam, and their large following insist that the charges are false and that Ezzat’s activities fall well within the purview of legitimate political activism. As Dr. Bassam said, “We don’t hate any other nations or civilizations. Islam came at a time to spread compassion and not hating.” Dr. Ezzat argues that Egypt’s desire for freedom, justice, and democracy is compatible with Islam and its teachings.

Drs. Ezzat and Bassam both called for an open dialogue about the role of Islam in politics. They took great pains to distinguish legitimate political Islam from the image, prevalent in the West, of ignorance and extremism that rejects the compatibility of Islam with liberal democracy. In the United States, Islam is often associated with ignorance and the breeding of hatred towards other religions, particularly against liberal democracies. While this may be an accurate picture of some extremist groups, this image could not be further from the truth. The two members of the Muslim Brotherhood emphasized the compassion of the religion of Islam. Dr. Bassam went into great detail about the origins of the revelation of Islam. He argued it was brought to spread tolerance at a time when there was none, emphasizing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as coming from the same book. Both Brotherhood members, along with many other interviewees, quoted a verse from the *Qur'an*, “*Lakoom deenokom walee a-deen*,” which is translated as, “You have your religion [or way] and I have mine.” Dr. Ezzat says, “You can’t obligate someone to be Muslim or even force them to be a good Muslim.” Dr. Bassam criticized Al-Qaeda and their ilk, “People need to separate the people who say they are Muslims and practice the true word of Islam and what the Book actually says. We refuse this behavior [suicide bombing and killing innocent civilians] because our religion refuses this behavior and we, as the Brotherhood, are against violent jihad. The advances in technology that have made the world a smaller place, need to be used to its full advantage in spreading understanding of Islam.” The jihadists use technology and the peoples’ general ignorance of Islam to rally feelings of injustice, which move them towards extremist causes. Dr. Bazzat said the tragedy is that the media coverage of these groups lends them undeserved credibility and potency.

Buiding and maintaining a democracy involves more than just elections. Movements such as Shayfeen and, to a lesser extent, Kifaya are part of a growing civil society capitalizing on the opening of political debate. *Shayfeen*, meaning “we can see you,” is a movement that was initially started by a group of women who were deeply concerned for the future of Egypt. They were determined to make the recent elections as transparent and clean as possible by overseeing fifty-seven voting booths in Cairo and the surrounding governates. They keep track of every step the government takes, forward and backward, towards democracy. They ensure public integrity by documenting and sharing their findings on their Arabic website and in the international media. *Kifaya* means “enough” in Arabic. Known alternatively as the “Movement for Change,” it gets wide press coverage internationally, but has made little actual impact locally. When some of their protesters were interviewed as to why they were protesting, many of them answered they did

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not know why. Someone had just shoved a poster in their hand and told them to shout. A disenchanted fourth year art student at AUC, Essam, speculates that Kifaya was deceptively propagated by the Egyptian government to illustrate to the international arena that Egyptians have freedom. Despite the growth of these organizations and the steps Egypt has taken towards open debate, the fear of repercussions from speaking too freely remains. Politicians and fruit sellers alike

were careful in their word choice; some used metaphors so as not to be too blunt. Many interviewees asked to remain anonymous. A shopkeeper in Alexandria accused me of being a spy partway through the interview.

Although most newspapers, such as *Al-Ahram*, are still government-owned and censored by the Syndicate of Journalists, opposition newspapers such as *Al-Dostoor* and *Al-Ghad* are on the rise. Ahmed, a third year AUC student of political science criticized the papers in Egypt, “Often times it is empty criticism focusing on minute unimportant details, instead of things such as actual policies.” Essam said that some people are still afraid to read the opposition papers. Abdul Naby, a local Belbeis journalist who lives in a small two-bedroom apartment with his five kids and wife, said that he writes for *Al-Ahram* so he can make money, but also writes for one of the locally

owned opposition papers so he can express his real opinion. Journalists face serious professional repercussions and possible arrest if the government believes their writing will incite unrest. Ayman Nour, of the Ghad Party, and Saad El-Din Ibrahim, leader of the opposition to Mubarek, were imprisoned for their activities and writings. In 2000, their Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies was shut down by the government.

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE UNITED STATES

To direct the discussion to the topic of the US, I asked interviewees, “What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word ‘America’?” The responses varied widely across and within socioeconomic classes. Surprisingly, those from the lower class were often more articulate about international, domestic, and American politics than their wealthy and more educated counterparts. One example was a high school educated twenty year old who was snipping roses at a flower shop in a side street of Nasr City, Cairo. He humbly told me, “There are so many better people you could talk to around here other than me,” when in fact he gave me one of the most detailed, articulate responses among those I heard in my interviews. Most of the interviewees associated ‘America’ with strength, power, and global hegemony. They also pointed out the obvious material supremacy of the United States in terms of technology, education, and opportunities. Often, interviewees spoke of the US and Israel as one and the same. However, respondents were quick to mention Egypt’s advantageous strategic relationship with America, which manifests itself in a significant amount of American aid.

The opinions of Egyptians I interviewed were shaped by history, domestic and international media, friends and family who are abroad, personal interactions with Americans, and sometimes their personal experiences in the United States. They were able and willing to discuss their perceptions of Americans, US global hegemony, the war in Iraq, and the United States’ relationship with Israel. Many interviewees expressed concern over the perceived contradictions in America’s foreign policy in the Arab and Muslim world. However, on the whole, people in Egypt do not fear liberalism and democracy, but rather the imposition of America’s particular brand of democracy.

The interviewees voiced concerns that the United States’ great strength has led to arrogance. Eman said, “Once you think you are strong enough that you don’t need anyone, it is the beginning of the end. Bush thinks he doesn’t need anyone in the international community.” Many interviewees

saw this unilateral position and arrogance reflected in the Iraq War and the heavy-handed rhetoric in Bush's warnings to Syria and Iran. The former diplomat to the United States agreed, saying Bush is acting irresponsibly in the region. Egyptians from all realms of society said that instead of creating freedom and security, the US forces are destroying Iraq. Lobnaa, woman who volunteers at an orphanage and cancer hospital, comments, "The Iraq War is putting them back to BC time. They [US soldiers] have turned them [Iraqis] into animals who now act by survival instinct. Is this modernization?"

Egyptians are, for the most part, skeptical of the United States' mission of bringing democracy to Iraq. They question the legitimacy of the claims of the invasion, commenting on the arbitrary ties between Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, Iraq's accumulation of weapons of mass destruction, and the freeing of the Iraqi people from the tyranny of the regime. The boy from the flower shop asks, "What about [other dictators such as] Qadafi or the Al-Saud family? Why haven't they [US] done anything to North Korea when they say they have [nuclear weapons]?"

Egyptians hear the horror stories of the torture and humiliation of Abu Ghraib prisoners. A young high-ranking Egyptian air force pilot saw Iraq as another place in which the problems of identity politics were being exacerbated by American intervention. In the eyes of many interviewees, Iraq is moving further away from having a true functioning democracy.

In Egypt, the public attitude towards the US is also tainted by its perceived role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Interviewees were bewildered by America's blind support of Israeli policies. The air force pilot told me that "the wall," Israel's separation barrier, imprisons the Palestinians like animals in a zoo. Most interviewees felt that the US is the only power that has the influence necessary to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The boy from the fruit stand said, "America lets Israel do whatever they want. If America said to Israel to stop, they would stop, but they only make them stronger." Lobna said, "They [Israel] can criticize Islam and Arabs, but if we say anything, we are called anti-Semitic, even though we are Semitic ourselves."

There are, however, important exceptions to these general attitudes towards the United States in Egypt. In Alexandria, we met with a Coptic man named Rezk, who owned a fabric store. When the store's salesman, Hesham, introduced us to Rezk, he snickered and asked, "Have you met anyone so far [in Egypt] who loves America?" In turn, I responded, "Well, no one that loves the US government." He continued, "Well then I will be your first, because I think President Bush is a God-sent prophet from heaven." Although the majority of interviewees were opposed to the Iraq War and US policies in the Middle East, there were some like Rezk, who fully support

the American effort. He said the surrounding Arab governments would not feel obligated to answer to local calls for democracy, if they were not afraid of what they see happening in Iraq. Unlike most of his Egyptian counterparts, he believed that the US has to fight in order to protect its own freedom, interests, and democracy. He predicted that democracy, would soon be installed in Iraq. "People have to die for a good cause, like [they did in] Germany and Japan." He is not surprised that the Sunni insurgency is causing so much disruption, since the power was ripped from their hands and given to the Shiite majority.

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The only way democracy will come to the Arab world, he argued, is if leaders fear a military invasion and the strong will of the Americans. This is just one example of the complexities and diversity of opinion in Egyptian society.

While there are opinions that strongly favor the US, for most Egyptians, the influence the US exerts in the region feels suffocating. Many Egyptians protest the American tendency to ignore Egyptian culture

and history. An unshaven group of young men in the Sinai town of Dahab, simply stated, "We just want to live. They [US government] have it out for the Arabs." Like others, these men believe that by trying to force freedom, democracy, and prosperity on Arabs and Muslims, the US is creating more problems in the region than it solves.

Citing "flip-flop" US foreign policy, several of my interviewees expressed their deep concern about an invasion by America. They noted the American government's initial alliance with Hussein in Iraq and the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan during the Cold War and the abandonment of these allies when US calculations changed. In December 2005, a political comedy film called *Laylat Sqoot Baghdad* or *The Night Baghdad Fell*, debuted in Egypt and quickly became a national hit. The movie represents the discussions that took place on the Egyptian street after the fall of Baghdad. The underlying message is that because the possibility of a US invasion of any Middle Eastern country cannot be completely disregarded, Egypt needs to have a viable defense system. The main characters in the movie have nightmares of Abu Ghraib and other media driven images of torture and death at the hands of American soldiers. Without offering an explanation, the Egyptian government banned the movie.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

Egyptians have started to realize that true development goes beyond the proliferation of multinational companies, Hollywood movies, and the ability to choose between McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken. No one seems to have a problem with the overwhelming surge of popular culture when it puts Egyptian society in the circle of developed countries. But what is clear is that true development—proper education, alleviating unemployment, promoting democracy, civil liberties, and freedom—is farther away. Egyptians look to America admiringly, dreaming of the chance to come to the US for a better education and more employment opportunities. Mohamed, a young man from Belbeis who works three jobs and still lives with his parents because he cannot afford his own home, said, "In Egypt if you are not part of a certain rank in society, then you do not have the opportunity to work your way up like you would in America." The young man admires his uncle's success at living the American dream. His uncle came to America in the late 1970s with no money but now owns three successful businesses and is a prominent member of his community in the US. Idly waiting for customers, one man who works in a clothing store in Alexandria said, "We [Egyptians] are not on the road to democracy. On a superficial level yes, because that's what seems to show, but it's not true." He is not only referring to democracy, but also the concealment of the poverty and despair felt throughout Egypt by the artificial glamour of development.

In recent years, though, the American Dream has lost some of its appeal in Egypt. Reports from family members and friends in the US, as well as images from the media, largely contributed to this decline. The air force pilot spoke to me about hate crimes and discrimination in the US that he had heard about after September 11th 2001. "We hear things such as the Indian guy who was killed or others who were hurt, because they thought he was Muslim or Arab, but we still don't hate the American people." Many other interviewees had heard personal stories from their families and friends who had experienced discrimination and racism because of their Arab or Muslim background. Egyptians were shocked by these stories, since America is traditionally seen as a place where people go to seek tolerance and opportunity. However, the increasing grievances of those in America do not yet outweigh the stories of success. People still see freedom and opportunity in the West. This produces an internal struggle for many Egyptians. No matter what they hear or feel, there is still a desire to come to America.

CONCLUSION

It is impossible to de-link the disparate threads that make up these discourses on the Egyptian street. One cannot discuss domestic politics and democracy promotion without ultimately debating the role of the US in Iraq, the Israeli-Arab arena, terrorism, and Islam. It is these complex linkages and networks that make the debate at once sophisticated and confused. The majority of the Egyptians I interviewed suggested that to bridge the divide, they would have to engage in constructive external dialogue and critical self-reflection. It is in the latter that most Egyptians see a great deal of promise. The recent democratic progress in Egypt, even if incremental, has encouraged the kind of organic energy that is imperative for meaningful growth and development. If the United States can create regional conditions that encourage such developments, as opposed to thwarting them, the region might be heading towards a brighter future.