



EGYPT

God and State in Egypt

MICHAEL
WAHID
HANNA

CAIRO—During a private conversation following Egypt's bitterly contested and closely fought presidential election of 2012, a Western diplomat marveled, naively, at the multitudes of veiled women who had come out to support the old regime's candidate, the avowedly anti-Islamist figure of Ahmed Shafik. It was during this campaign that strongly held anti-Islamist themes were aired widely and used to mount a campaign against the potent, often bigoted,

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Muslim Brotherhood. Many of these same views were advanced in support of the military's removal of the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, victorious candidate for the presidency and, with his electoral victory, successor to President Hosni Mubarak.

More recently, with the presidential campaign of the former military leader Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, statist and traditionalist views of Egypt have been offered as a clear distinction from the Islamist project of social engineering along religious lines. The personally pious Sisi has explicitly rejected the notion of a religious state and has chided the immoderate vein of contemporary Islamist thought. Sisi has even argued that "the religious discourse in the entire Islamic world has cost Islam its humanity," and has further added that there "must be an enlightened religious discourse to protect society from alien ideas." These declarations complement the broader backlash to rising militancy and the beginnings of a reappraisal of their underlying politics. For the first time in the recent history of Egypt, and indeed much of the modern Middle East, anti-Islamism and the struggle against political Islam is not solely confined to the state and its security establishment. Instead, nationalist populism during this chaotic period in Egypt's history has produced an organic, broad-based anti-Islamist vernacular.

Under normal circumstances, this turn might have enormous potential. At its root, political Islam argues that religion should play an ever-increasing role in public and political life, and sees this path as the only possible course to remedy the many ills of the contemporary Arab world. For Islamists, effective renewal can only happen if state and society are bound by religious strictures.

This brand of religious supremacism is inherently contradictory to an open, democratic, and pluralistic society. It is also woefully under-equipped to deal with the myriad and daunting challenges facing the Arab world. However, the critique of Islamist politics taking place in Egypt is tragically overshadowed by the country's authoritarian relapse and the fantastical nature of current Egyptian political discourse.

While much criticism of Islamism and its intentions is pointed and grounded, it is also joined by excessive amounts of hyper-nationalist hysteria, conspiracy-addled bigotry, and state violence and repression. These excesses are tragic and counterproductive in their own right, and the current moment is unlikely to produce positive and sustainable politics. This alternative discourse is also not rooted in any vision of religious liberty and freedom. Many of the traditional restrictions placed on religious expression remain. The role of the state is to limit the kinds of permissible religious expression and potential sources of immoderation.

Despite these manifest flaws in the political discourse, recent events have clarified some of the dividing lines within Egyptian society and highlighted the divergent conceptions of the role of religion in public life.

CLASHES WITH THE STATE

As a beaming President Gamal Abdel Nasser looked out over a large assembled and adoring crowd, he recounted his 1953 meeting with Hassan el-Houdaiby, the second General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood and the successor to the organization's founder, Hassan el-Banna. Within the Brotherhood, Houdaiby is perhaps best remembered for his clash with *el-jihaz el-sirri*, the secret armed

Michael Wahid Hanna is a senior fellow at The Century Foundation.

apparatus of the Brotherhood, which had previously been engaged in violence and terrorism. For the charismatic Nasser, however, his encounter with the General Guide served a rhetorical prop, to underscore both his attempts to reconcile with the Brothers and the unreasonable nature of their outlook. While the Brothers had supported Nasser's Free Officers Movement and the 1952 ouster of King Farouk, the Egyptian regime would soon turn on the Brotherhood with a vengeance. Nasser's speech, a few years after the repressive weight of the state had already crippled the organization, did not focus on allegations of violence or seditious activity, but instead on the intrusive and regressive religious views of the Brothers. According to Nasser, when given the prized opportunity to address Egypt's leading political figure at a time of crisis, Houdaiby's first demand was that veiling be made mandatory, so that "every woman who walks in the streets wears a veil."

This first salvo from Nasser elicited audible and incredulous laughter from the crowd. Having primed them, he continued, noting his philosophical objection to such state behavior: instead of compulsion, "everyone in their own home is responsible for implementing such things." With this important rejoinder, meant to illuminate the proper balance between religion and state, Nasser noted Houdaiby's admonition that "you, as the leader, are responsible." Having perfectly unspooled his anecdote, Nasser was ready to now proceed to his punch lines. "You, sir, have a daughter in medical school. She's not wearing a veil or anything. Why didn't you make her wear the veil?" At this point the crowd broke out in extended laughter and applause. Nasser then finished his story, repressing his own urge to join in the laughter. "If you can't make one girl, that is your daughter, wear the veil, you want me to go out and force 10 million veils by myself?"

The speech offers a window into the bygone social mores of mid-20th century Egypt, and stands as a testament to the rightward turn that would soon grip a disillusioned Arab world in the midst of a religious revival. While compulsory veiling was so far from the ideological mainstream as to be the source of a joke in the Nasser era, the ideas ridiculed by Nasser would soon form the basis of a regressive social and political movement that would fundamentally alter the social fabric of the Middle East. Far from Nasser's understanding of private religiosity separate and apart from state authority, these nascent forms of secular thought in the Arab world would wither along with the unrealized dreams of mid-century Arab nationalism. In the search for alternatives, more intrusive and all-encompassing understandings of religion would become the touchstone for much of the region's social and political thought. The role of religion in public life would change dramatically in the second half of the 20th century based on both evolving social views and the attempts of the authoritarian Arab political order to insulate itself from the political challenges posed by Islamism.

With the series of uprisings that would come to be known as the Arab Spring, it appeared that this evident erosion of the boundaries between political and religious life would necessarily herald the ultimate triumph of political Islam. In some important respects, political Islam has already triumphed. The terms of reference of Arab political and social life have

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been altered in many of the ways Islamists have long sought. In many instances they have succeeded in narrowing the boundaries of permissible public discourse. These incremental triumphs have kept pace with the increasing religiosity of public life and show no signs of receding.

But these trends do not necessarily herald the political triumph of Islamists. Religion and piety will remain central features of public and political life, and Islamist political actors represent a key and enduring political grouping with a deeply rooted constituency. However, we should be skeptical of arguments about the inevitable ascendancy of Islamist political actors who reject this status quo and espouse a broader Islamist project, often seeking to bend the state to religious aims as opposed to using religion to further the aims of the state. This critical, albeit amorphous, distinction—between a conservative, religiously influenced public sphere where Islamic ethics inform political life and a theocratically inclined politics defined by religious stricture—represents an enduring fault line within the region. In the Arab world of today, piety and religiously infused politics are hardly synonymous with Islamism, despite the lack of secular alternatives and the eclipse of secular thought.

These trends are perhaps most evident in Egypt, which encapsulates many of these post-1967 political trends and offers important signals as to the direction of the region's politics. The broad sweep of contemporary Arab history and Egypt's present circumstances suggest the intermingling of religion and political life is now firmly rooted, but has potentially plateaued.

AN ISLAMIZING PUBLIC SQUARE

The June 1967 Six-Day War and the crushing defeat of the Arab armies by Israel was,

according to Beirut-born scholar, the late Professor Malcolm Kerr, “a bolt of lightning that transformed the whole atmosphere of inter-Arab politics....There could hardly be a competition for prestige when there was no prestige remaining.” More than lost prestige, the defeat was a remarkable humiliation that upended the established order and exposed its threadbare legacy.

In the revisionist rush to re-examine the Arab predicament, those calling for religious revival were given a boost by the serial failures of the region's post-colonial and ostensibly secular leaders. With the death of Nasser in 1970 and the reorientation of the Egyptian state under his successor, Anwar el-Sadat, events evolved in a fashion that continued to bolster the fortunes of Islamists while also altering the nature of Arab society. Of course, the most salient feature of authoritarian politics in the Arab world was the forcible repression of alternative and dissenting thoughts, ideologies, institutions, and organizations. This was an authoritarian system with no room for mobilization, pluralism, or the political parties through which varied sentiments could be conveyed and contested. This destruction of organized political life created huge opportunities for Islamists and organizational advantages that have, in certain circumstances, endured to the present day. There could be no clearer testament to that historical reality than the chaos, fractiousness, and incoherence that typified the trajectory of post-Mubarak liberal political parties.

The approach to Islamists under Sadat, who lacked an institutional or ideological base of support, softened as the new president sought to use Islamist political actors as a bulwark against his Nasserist foes and other enemies to the left. While Sadat's shift had a large impact on the revival of the Muslim Brotherhood, he also enacted

a variety of policies that sought both to capitalize on evolving religious views and further distance his regime from that of his predecessor. Most notable among these changes was the introduction of Article 2 in the Egyptian constitution, which mandated that “the principles of the Islamic Shariah are a chief source of legislation.”

The change was a marked shift for Egypt. The nation had modernized its legal and judicial systems in the late 19th century to minimize the role of Islamic law, which at the time controlled only matters of personal status, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

This shift could be seen in how the state itself began reviewing and revising Egyptian laws to comply with newly-tightened religious strictures. Article 2 was further narrowed as the word “a” in the article was amended to “the,” making Shariah the ultimate constitutional benchmark.

While the full impact of these changes would only be seen in later years, they reflected the erosion of the boundaries between state authority and religious life, creating a new status quo. It should come as no surprise that during this period, sectarian tensions, long an undercurrent in Egyptian society, deteriorated further and resulted in notable instances of conflict and violence.

Of course, these developments took place in the context of a rapidly-changing Arab world where newfound oil wealth stood in stark contrast to the decaying Arab republics. The cumulative effect of these changes further strengthened the region’s religious revivalism and increasingly austere interpretations of religious belief. One direct outgrowth of the oil boom, which produced what the World Bank has termed a “two-track growth path” comprised of nations that export oil and gas, and those that either import or produce small quantities,

was the increasing financial commitment of certain Gulf countries to promote rigid interpretations of Islam throughout the Middle East. These more prominent efforts at *da’wa*, the proselytizing of Islam, were also buttressed by the rise of worker migration to the affluent Gulf, where Egyptians and others were often steeped in the more austere versions of Islam that held sway there, then subsequently returned home with this newly acquired consciousness.

Outside the Arab world, the shock of the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the outwardly theocratic Islamic Republic further energized the Islamist movement, despite the region’s Sunni-Shi’a divide. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the rise of the *mujahideen*, anti-Soviet guerilla fighters, spawned the Muslim foreign fighter phenomenon as Arab jihadists joined the fight against the Soviet occupation and its Afghan proxies. These much-heralded experiences pushed forward transnational and militant thinking and helped to crystallize important Islamist trends.

At the heart of the region, the intractable Arab-Israeli conflict and the entrenched nature of Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands further fueled radical and militant impulses. The notion of heroic Islamist resistance was carried forward by Arab militant groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. All the while, the Arab authoritarian order continued its repression, brutality, corruption, and incompetence—undermining its legitimacy while displaying outward signs

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FACEOFF: KERRY VS. SISI

U.S. STATE DEPT.

of stability. As a result, political dissent was increasingly cast in starkly Islamist terms. Islamism was for many the last remaining viable vehicle for political opposition. And Islamists also were diligent and successful in channeling grievance and dissent into organization and mobilization that created the infrastructure of social movements.

As political Islam gained further coherence, Egypt was undergoing a social upheaval that would redefine public morality. At street level, this could be seen in the social mores surrounding the appearance of women and the meteoric rise of the *hijab*, or veil, as the standard expression of feminine modesty and piety. Public displays of piety became ubiquitous, and Egyptian

men could often be seen with the outward mark of piety on their foreheads, the *zib-eeba*, literally meaning “raisin,” a signifier of religiosity cultivated deliberately through extended and frequent prayer—indicative of the ways public space and religious belief had come to be redefined.

These shifts were often abetted by authoritarian regimes, such as Mubarak’s Egypt, where co-optation of Islamizing trends served as feeble attempts to inoculate the regime against the potency of Islamist criticism and opposition. The steady Islamization of society and public life had tangible outcomes ranging from the rising vehemence and ubiquity of sectarian hatred and polarization to the increasingly nar-

row bounds of intellectual discourse to the policing of blasphemous thought and Islamization of the legal system. On this last point, the infamous legal case against the academic, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, whose scholarship focused on Quranic exegesis, is emblematic of many of these disturbing trends. The case was presented by a third party and was an accusation of apostasy, a practice that proliferated during the 1990s. In 1996, Egypt's Court of Cassation affirmed the ruling of apostasy based on his scholarly writings and nullified his marriage as a result, forcing him and his wife to flee the country and settle abroad.

The case was an ugly marker and showed a society that had gradually absorbed a narrow, bigoted, and rigid understanding of religion and an assertive sense of how such religious views should be employed by the state. This was the case despite the superficially secular views of rulers, such as Egypt's Mubarak, who sought to insulate their authoritarianism from international criticism by portraying themselves as bulwarks against the rising tide of Islamism.

THE DEATH OF SECULAR POLITICS

These decades-long trends formed the backdrop to the uprisings that began in December 2010 in Tunisia. The initial optimism of the heady early days of the uprisings, typified by the moving and telegenic scenes of Tahrir Square, has largely been forgotten and eclipsed by the turmoil and violence that has come to be associated with the aftermath of the uprisings. Much of the early exuberance surrounding these social upheavals was a function of both their real promise and the identity of many of those involved in initiating protest and mass mobilization. But while more secular-leaning youth played an outsized role in the beginnings of the protest movement that brought down the

Mubarak regime, they were acting in a society and political culture that had absorbed and implemented many of the core goals espoused by Islamists. The number of actual liberal political actors, as opposed to simply non-Islamists, was vanishingly small, and even among this cohort it was understood that the public espousal of liberal political ideas was to be avoided at all costs.

Nowhere was this clearer than on the issue of Islam's role in a new constitution. In numerous conversations with Egyptian liberals during the uprising and immediately after the fall of Mubarak, activists and emerging political leaders understood clearly the limits of public discourse, particularly with respect to Article 2 of the constitution. Islamists, who were agitating for a more rigid application of Shariah, focused a series of scurrilous attacks on non-Islamist political forces, successfully wielding the epithet "secular" as a pejorative. Even prior to these public campaigns, numerous liberals confided bluntly that the time was not right for a fight over Article 2 and the issue of Shariah. One prominent liberal activist literally threw his hands up in the air following my inquiry and feebly replied, "what else can we do?" In fact, the terms of the discussion assumed that preservation of the existing Article 2 represented a floor with respect to possible demands, and liberals espoused constitutional continuity as a defensive measure against more sweeping renditions.

Viewed in isolation, these initial responses to the emerging political vacuum are understandable. However, when judged against the responses of other regional Islamists, the responses are all the more striking. When Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Egypt in September 2011, he flummoxed his Islamist audience when he proclaimed the virtues of secularism, urging them to "not be wary of secularism," and

adding that he hoped that “there will be a secular state in Egypt.” At the time, many in Egypt and elsewhere saw Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party as a potential model for the region’s emerging Islamist politics. When Erdogan told his listeners that “secularism does not mean that people are secular. For example, I am not secular, but I am the prime minister of a secular state,” his views were roundly rejected by Egypt’s Islamists. The ultimate irony, of course, is that Erdogan’s public views on secularism

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and his rejection of incorporating Shariah represented a more liberal stance than that offered publicly by Egypt’s liberals.

A similar and unflattering comparison can be seen in the approach and attitude of Tunisia’s el-Nahda party, an avowedly Islamist group that emerged ascendant after the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. While operating in a more balanced political environment with more tangible restraints on their ambitions, most el-Nahda leaders were

consistent regarding a more limited approach to the role of religion in the Tunisian constitution. In the constitution adopted by popular referendum in February 2014, the text makes no mention of Islamic law, and only stipulates that Islam is the religion of the state. While other articles contain ambiguous and potentially problematic language, the document, adopted with a broad

degree of consensus among Islamists, non-Islamists, and liberals, represents an outcome more liberal even than the defensive position advocated publicly by Egypt’s liberal class.

These constitutional debates offer important insight into the ways certain Islamist ideals have become the starting place for political discussion in Egypt and a litmus test that even liberal political actors and parties cannot defy. Such views are broadly reflective of public attitudes and the status quo. Crucially, however, they are not necessarily synonymous with the broader Islamist project. This disconnect offers an important entry into the turbulent politics of Egypt and is, potentially, a harbinger of regional trends where firmer lines are being drawn at a popular level with respect to the maximalist outlook of Islamism.

CHRISTIAN REVIVALISM

The increasing Islamization of Egyptian public life has had a major negative impact on the political participation of Christians in Egypt and has provoked a corresponding religious revival at the social level. As Christians gradually withdrew from the less hospitable confines of public life, many sought refuge in the communal experience. This retreat, despite the apparent opening created by the Egyptian uprising, has yet to be reversed.

Sectarianism, which is a core ideological precept of the religious supremacism advocated by the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, accelerated under the rule of President Morsi and his Brotherhood-led government. While sectarianism is deeply rooted in Egyptian society and long predated Morsi, the unhappy experience of Copts in the post-Mubarak period has heightened Christian fears and suspicions over the ultimate intentions of the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups. Paradoxically, however, it has not created a clearer

sense among Coptic church hierarchy and lay leaders as to the necessity of separating the religious realm from the political world. It is here that the hierarchy of the Coptic Church has continued to undermine the distinction between the sacred and the profane world of politics.

During the Mubarak era, as Copts vacated the public square, the Church, particularly its Patriarch, emerged as the Ottoman-style communal representative of its minority population. Despite a stated desire to break with past practices, these trends have continued and have been accentuated by Egypt's polarized post-coup environment. The Church's prominent support for the ouster of Morsi and the military-led transition has heightened already inflamed sectarian sentiment among Egypt's Islamists and spurred the proliferation of a rapidly expanding series of venomous conspiracies. Additionally, the continued high-profile political role of the leadership of the Coptic church, often acting as the intermediary between the state and the Christian community, has served to reinforce a style of politics that co-mingles religion and state. These interventions are aimed at reinforcing "moderate" trends in Egyptian society, hence capturing neatly the way religion has come to play a preponderant role in public life.

ISLAM, PIETY, AND ISLAMISM

Throughout Egypt's ill-fated and truncated attempt to transition away from its dictatorial legacy, much confusion has surrounded the labelling of the various non-Islamist political forces, which have often been incorrectly lumped into the category of "liberals." As recent events make clear, this categorization is hugely overbroad and presents a distorted picture of the country's politics quite out of sync with Egypt's intricate history. It also misunderstands the ways conservatism

and piety, on the one hand, and nationalist statism, on the other, differ from organized Islamism. The vast majority of Egyptians are neither liberal nor secular and continue to believe in the important role of religion in the public square and the predominant role of the state. Egypt is lacking in genuine calls for pluralism, liberty, and equality. But these are not tantamount to an endorsement of Islamism as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and other variants of political Islam.

Nevertheless, the Islamist current represents a resilient, sizeable, and rooted constituency within Egypt and the broader Arab world. Islamism is not simply going to disappear in the face of current setbacks. If given the opportunity to compete freely in future elections, the Muslim Brotherhood will be a formidable force due to the group's organizational prowess and zealous mobilization. Such advantages will fade over time and are less salient at the level of presidential elections. Still, the Brotherhood has much ground to recapture if it hopes to contend in the future. The manner in which Islamists respond to this current period of wholesale and often violent repression will also shape their future role. It is very likely that we will see bifurcated responses within this sphere, with the current moment both radicalizing and moderating various segments of the Islamist movement in Egypt and throughout the region.

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Soft support for Islamism has eroded in Egypt and in other pockets of the Arab world. While many non-aligned and non-ideological Egyptians were willing to afford Islamists an opportunity, as the country begins its transition, such sentiments were quickly reversed as the Brotherhood-led government floundered and squandered much of this goodwill. In particular, pious, traditional, conservative non-Islamists often expressed offense at the notion that the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamist allies had a monopoly on faith and were somehow representative of an enlightened vanguard. This could be keenly felt in the reactions of ordinary people, outraged at the idea that the Brotherhood was going to teach them and all of society how to be good Muslims. In an important sense, the power-focused and opportunistic factionalism of the Brothers undermined their ostensible religious credentials. Moreover, the Brotherhood's single-minded focus on factional gain and power all but ignored the crushing economic burdens that Egyptian society was forced to bear every day and which the government seemed both unwilling and unable to address. In parallel, the infrastructure for a future religious authoritarianism was being erected, particularly in the form of Egypt's 2012 constitution, which was later voided after the ouster of Morsi.

Egyptians overwhelmingly support the current status quo with respect to the role of religion in public life. Yet broad swaths of society differ from the stated and deeply held views of the Islamist political parties, which believe the task of Islamizing society remains largely unfinished. For many ordinary Egyptians, this amounts to an accusation that they are less than fully Muslim and need guidance from the more committed among society. There is also a further implication that the state is at the service of religion, and that boundaries between re-

ligious and political life should be blurred or erased altogether. This upending of the status quo toward a more consciously theocratic model aroused intense resistance in key constituencies within Egyptian society, including the military, the business community, and the intellectual class, as well as among everyday citizens. Such distinctions were often lost on those who assumed the indefinite ascendance of Islamism as the region's new and enduring political ideology.

COMPETENCE & SUCCESS

Despite the reassertion of nationalist trends, the region's politics are still fluid. The outcome of the current struggle over identity and ideology will only be resolved through competence and success, features that have been in short supply during today's unsettled and unsettling interregnum. Despite Egypt's bleak near-term outlook and its diminished role on the regional stage, developments there will continue to have outsized impact in the Arab world by dint of its size, history, and influence of its institutions and media. Based on Egypt's present, this is a somewhat alarming prospect for regional stability.

Egypt's full-blown authoritarian relapse is unlikely to be reversed in short order. The genuine support for the military and Sisi, combined with the fragmentation of opposition forces and the exhaustion of Egyptian society, means that the country's revolutionary opening has come and gone. The transformational opportunity presented by the fall of Mubarak was squandered and diverted into a procedural transition shorn of meaningful substantive reform.

However, Egypt is not simply returning to the status quo ante. At one level, the military-backed regime currently being constructed is not a facsimile of the Mubarak era. A new hierarchy is being

put in place, and the regime now seeks legitimation and support in new ways and from new sources. Much more importantly, Egyptian society has changed fundamentally. This central fact is obscured by the hysteria and absurdity of much current political discourse and the considerable public support for the regime's repressive crackdown. But in key pockets of society, particularly when seen in generational terms, old ways of thinking have been eclipsed.

The openings created by the 2011 uprising and its aftermath have forged new organizations, new ideas, and new expectations. This period has also witnessed the expansion of discourse and the erasure of numerous taboos. The generation shaped by the crucible of protest and uprising is unlikely to accept the meager returns that quiescence would enable.

This process will take time, but both authoritarian nationalism and Islamism are insufficient grounds to successfully rule and govern Egypt. It is in this predictable failure that serious alternatives will necessarily emerge.

For the international community and the United States, managing relations with Egypt will be a particular challenge. Based on the likely negative trajectory of events, the U.S.-Egyptian bilateral relationship is unlikely to be restored to its past shape and will likely revolve around issues of counterterrorism and border se-

curity. The reputational costs of the aid relationship might prove even this reduced level of engagement untenable over time if no appreciable course corrections are made.

Even if the strategic relationship is fundamentally reassessed, U.S. actions will not directly produce political outcomes in Egypt. Regardless, the United States and its allies should continue to push Egypt to undertake a genuine transition to democracy and a fundamental orientation of its politics. Such pressure and support can have some impact at the margins. Here, however, the dramatic events of 2011 point to a key lesson, namely, that the West, and especially the United States alone, cannot outpace the native, organic sources of change within Egyptian society.

But those agents of change already exist and will again, over time, re-emerge to challenge the status quo. If liberals are to provide a genuine alternative to that status quo, then they will now have to turn, earnestly and patiently, to the mundane work of political party life as the Brotherhood has done so effectively for decades. They will also have to grapple with Egypt's intractable set of problems and offer practical steps that can tangibly impact the lives of Egyptians. Lastly, they will have to bravely advocate and defend an open vision of society that is capable of assimilating Egypt's diversity. In this, there are no short cuts. ●