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### A DOSE OF GOSSIP A WALK AROUND CAIRO

Mr. Peter Martin  
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Dear Peter,

After the temporary lull in Egypt's political life I described in one of my previous reports, a new tide of bickering has washed over the country. It's been a busy month of unsubstantiated gossip that, according to whether one's source is the gossip's perpetrator or its victim, has been rigorously affirmed or contemptuously denied. To detail all the mudslinging and mudracking that has taken place since I last wrote would put ICWA's printing budget firmly in the red. I will rather sketch two unrelated incidents that have been brightening up normally uneventful breakfasts. Both are to some extent instructive because they touch upon underlying aspects of seemingly innocuous events in Egypt's political life.

The background to the first incident is simple. When Hosni Mubarak took over the presidency from Anwar Sadat he promised to continue the "democratic experiment" his predecessor had started in his final years. The experiment involved the emergence of opposition parties and opposition newspapers. I have hinted in several of my reports that there is more to this than meets the eye. As I pointed out in DJV-7, several mechanisms prevent opposition parties from having a real impact. It is clear that the Mubarak government is pressured into democratizing, but the political and economic realities prevent much of it. Rhetoric almost always outpaces reality.

So far the press has been the only beneficiary of the move toward democracy. With open hands (and mouths!!) the editors of the opposition papers have grabbed the opportunity thrown to them by Mubarak. The result has - not unexpectedly - been a mixed bag. The opposition newspapers have often been full of outrageous and often irresponsible charges that in any country but Egypt would have led to serious libel charges and court cases. Even Egypt's unwritten agreement that topics like the presidency and the military were above criticism has now been challenged.

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Until a few months ago the overwhelming majority of articles abided by these informal rules. Then about three months ago Al-Wafd, the paper of the New Wafd party, announced that it would no longer agree to this unofficial censorship if the government-sponsored newspapers persisted in attacking its top leadership. Al-Wafd had reasons to complain. For several years the government papers have written defamatory articles on Fuad Serag Al Din, the leader of the New Wafd party.

Then matters got out of hand. Other opposition newspapers seized the opportunity to stretch acceptable norms and plain good manners beyond their limits. A number of articles and editorials appeared, critical of Mubarak himself and demanding more public information on military matters.<sup>1</sup> A few weeks ago Mubarak unleashed a campaign against what he called "irresponsible journalism." And ever since then Al-Taliah, As-Shaab and some of the Islamic opposition papers have been challenging the government to continue its democratic experiment in the wake of their recent spate of articles. Mubarak, eager to preserve his image of democratic leadership both internally and externally, has been caught on the horns of this dilemma.

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To make matters worse, the first incident involved the Wafd party, some of its leadership, and centered on that paper's campaign to expose corruption among people close to Mubarak. The facts are straightforward. For a number of weeks Al-Wafd published a series of articles exposing illegal dealings by Abdul Rahman Al Baydani. Baydani is one of Egypt's bestknown businessmen whose close connections with the government date back to the Nasser era. His activities became frontpage news last year when a scandal erupted over the Alexandria sewage system. After spending several million dollars - some of it USAID funds - the consulting reports were found to be unworkable. That summer the Alexandria beaches were inundated

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<sup>1</sup> I had originally planned to write a separate report on the growing impact of the military on Egypt's economy. Egypt's army has increasingly been called upon to perform a number of economic tasks the public sector cannot perform. The phenomenon is now commonplace in the country. The Egyptian army originally achieved self-sufficiency in food and other necessities. Since then it has branched off into construction activities and is now spilling over into commercial ventures. It is estimated that in five years time the Egyptian military will produce half of all dairy products in the country.

There is, however, little information available on this process. No figures are released on the matter, even though whatever the army earns goes back into their own coffers, thus falling outside the regular budget procedures. Beyond the economic impact is the more basic social impact of this type of interaction. It prompted Muhamad Asfour of Al-Wafd to talk of Egypt as a "military democracy." In one of his articles he decried the fact that "they transfer to civilian society the type of behavior current in their military environment, and manage according to those criteria."

by raw sewage. With the tourist trade already down, it also polluted beaches traditionally used by most of Egypt's well-off citizens for their vacations.

The tone of the articles that followed was generally caustic and with little regard for the minimum of decorum journalists usually abide by. One of the blander ones I read was entitled "Why Does the Dinosaur [i.e. Baydani] Escape Punishment?" On October 10, a few weeks after the beginning of its renewed anti-Baydani campaign, Al Wafd's Assistant Editor and two other employees were arrested on a charge of attempting to extract 100,000 pounds from Baydani in return for a promise not to write further exposes. One of the three defendants was Farouk Akl, the son-in-law of the New Wafd Party leader Fuad Serag Al Din. As I mentioned above, it was attacks against the New Wafd leader that had started the campaign of openly attacking the government.

Said Abdel Khaleq is the author of a daily "Birdie" section in which the government and public figures are repeatedly exposed. My initial reaction was that the whole affair had been carefully orchestrated by the government intelligence services to embarrass the New Wafd and to intimidate other editors against similar critical exposures. All the evidence seemingly corroborated my initial judgment. The government released pictures taken in Assistant Editor Said Abdel Khalek's office, showing him with a briefcase full of money on his desk. Would anyone be so foolish as to arrange a pay-off in the busy offices of his own newspaper? A video tape also materialized, purportedly showing the whole transaction taking place. But when the tape was leaked to the press its sound track was not synchronized! Fuad Serag Al Din himself responded that the government's action was only meant to divert attention away from the Wafd's criticism of the Shura elections (see DJV-7).

I had expected both the New Wafd and the other opposition papers to raise a huge outcry against the whole matter. But to my surprise not a single one - not even Al Wafd - came directly to Khalek's defense. Al Wafd instead carefully pointed out that Farouk Akl, one of the other defendants, was no longer Fuad Serag Al-Din's son-in-law. The silence of the other opposition papers was perhaps more easily understandable. They would not take a position on something that might prove embarrassing if the three men were indeed proven guilty. But I suspect that there is also a large amount of indifference involved. Egypt's opposition press only unites for certain selected issues when communal interests are being seriously threatened. Although the Baydani case could in the long run set a precedent for more drastic actions against the press, none of the people I talked to interpreted it that way. Some even expressed a rather short-sighted delight in the fact that Al-Wafd now had its own corruption charge to contend with. As one more responsible veteran opposition reporter told me, this attempt to sow disunity among the opposition press may well have been one of original reasons for the government's alleged frame-up of Khalek.

As I'm finishing this report, things look as murky as ever. I have started to waver from my initial conviction that Khalek was the unsuspecting victim of a government plot. Al-Wafd's refusal to come to his defense and its misguided attempt to protect Fuad Serag Al Din at all costs leaves me uncomfortable. But perhaps the most invidious effect of the

recent government-opposition newspaper battle has been to reinforce a feeling among many observers like myself that Egypt is indeed riddled with corruption. If even a small fraction of all the alleged corruption charges as detailed in the papers are true, it still raises a number of serious questions about Mubarak's ability to control the corruption he so courageously tackled when he assumed the presidency. So the Baydani affair leaves the government with an uneasy dilemma. If the corruption charges against Al-Wafd's employess are true, it only heightens or confirms the suspicion that graft still constitutes a routine procedure in Egypt. If the charge is a trumped-up one it shows the Mubarak government less than committed to the democratic experiment it espouses.

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The second incident is perhaps even more illustrative of the constraints the Egyptian government labors under in these times of economic hardship and attempted political liberalization. It involves Al Rayyan, a Muslim fundamentalist businessman. For a few years Al Rayyan had been carving a niche for himself in the Egyptian economy, recycling much of the foreign exchange expatriate Egyptians brought back to the country. The reason was quite obvious. He offers a rate that is substantially above the legally imposed limit government banks have to live by. Rather than getting 1.35 pounds for a dollar earned in the Persian Gulf or North Africa, Al Rayyan's company attempted to match what the free market (read: the black market in the Egyptian case) would pay for dollars or other convertible currencies.

Within a few years Al Rayyan became a multimillionaire and started to diversify his operations. His holding companies inside Egypt increasingly attracted savings inside the country also, in large part because he could promise very large returns on money deposited. In some cases investors earned up to 24% annually. To make matters worse for the government, Al Rayyan termed his business practices in alignment with Islamic practices. The 24% earned annually, for example, was never referred to as interest since Muslims consider this a form of usury.

Al Rayyan's operations quickly became an irritation to the government. His savings schemes not only diverted badly needed money from government coffers. They also exposed the inadequacies of Egypt's financial system. To cloak all of this in some type of Islamic garb was an ever greater challenge to the government. For decades it has attempted to resist any religious intrusion on its financial practices.

In the course of my own inquiries about "Islamic banking" most insiders I talked to agreed that sooner or later the government would have to step in. The Minister of Finance had already mentioned several times that companies like Al Rayyan's were not subjected to government scrutiny. According to government sources they offered no guarantees to the investors in case of bankruptcy or other financial calamities. As far as I could ascertain the government's argument was sound. Egypt's partly unregulated system in some ways resembles the US' prior to the Great Depression. The country could ill afford the kind of collapse the US experienced. It almost certainly would have led to major unrest or - to avoid it - massive

government intervention. And this the Egyptian government could also not handle.

In the weeks leading up to the confrontation small rumors about Al Rayyan began to circulate. One of his companies was rumored to have lost almost \$200 million on gold speculation in overseas markets. It was only a matter of time before the question about his companies' ability to pay back investors was raised. The effect was sudden and powerful. Company offices were besieged by Egyptians demanding millions of pounds worth of their deposits. Ultimately Al Rayyan was forced to let the government step in to bail out his operations.

It is widely anticipated that this incident will lead to some drastic reforms. Undoubtedly the government will gain a substantial amount of power in regulating the market while also capturing a larger share of personal savings. So far so good. But there remain some disturbing questions unanswered. Was the campaign to discredit Al Rayyan deliberately started by the government? If so, why was he singled out? Finally, does it tell us anything more about Mubarak's government?

Unfortunately it looks as if the matter will not be resolved while I am still in Egypt. But I managed to get at least a partial answer by talking to people in close contact with Al Rayyan and to some government officials. According to Al Rayyan supporters the whole affair was carefully engineered by the government. They said it had asked the company for a \$500 million loan from Al Rayyan. He refused on the grounds that the government was only willing to pay back the money at the official 1.35 rate and not the much higher free market rate. In the wake of this refusal the government started a campaign against the company, sparking the investors' run on the bank.

Government officials of course deny any such interference and claim their innocence. But a spate of earlier articles in Al-Ahram al-Iqtisadi and in Al-Musawwar - both usually reflecting government opinions - belie their arguments somewhat. It seems clear that the government had at least a motive to move against Al Rayyan. To move beyond this observation seems spurious at this time. But since my task here is not that of a neutral academic observer, I would dare to venture that the government had some hand in the whole affair. It fits in with some tactics the Mubarak government has used in the past five years, allowing it to maintain at least a public image of continuing the democratic experiment while gaining ground in achieving some of its own goals. Furthermore, anyone familiar with Egyptian politics would have been astonished if the government had not taken the opportunity offered.

But why then at this point in time and not earlier? To this question I can only offer some speculations. The government's need to capture more personal savings has become more acute since the economic downturn started in 1980. The need for capital has reached a critical stage as the IMF and the major international lenders seem poised to extract painful concessions from Egypt. In some ways the whole Al Rayyan affair may just have been one of a number of measures in recent months designed to avert attention from what the IMF measures will mean. The Islamic aspect also cannot be ignored. Discrediting Al Rayyan meant putting some of his advocated policies into disrepute.

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As President Reagan's present predicament over the Iran weapons matter clearly shows, the ends and means to achieve certain policies often become confused and lead to unexpected results. This confusion as much as any of the reasons I cited above seem to explain the recent debacle in Egypt. In terms of its nature and the blundering that took place it falls in nicely with what governments do the world over. But the flavor, the accusations and the way it is being handled are uniquely Egyptian. It holds promises for staving off those uneventful breakfasts for some more weeks. And nothing draws my attention away from a ful sandwich these days, except for some more mudracking and the marvelous cartoons that accompany the articles.

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For a while Peter has been asking me to write more impresionistically about my experiences in Egypt. In my last two reports therefore I would like to include a couple of stories culled from more than 200 pages of a personal "diary" diskette I kept while in this country. The one recounted below describes one of my walks through part of Islamic Cairo, interrupted - as customary - with events bearing little connection to my avowed purpose of visiting Islamic monuments.

Yesterday was a Friday and I spent part of the afternoon around the Bab al-Zuwayla gate taking a number of pictures. I was taking some from the porch of the Muayyad mosque when a small man with closely cropped hair and dressed in a neat leather jacket approached me. He looked a little out of style in a popular area where most of the men and women wear galabayas and black milayas. His eyes were also alive, not the kind of dull questioning look most hawkers have when they approach tourists on the street.

For a moment I thought it was a security man who wanted to know why I was taking pictures in the area. Muhammad - another Muhammad!! - introduced himself as a carpet maker. We chatted for a while while I reloaded the cameras. He had been in France for a while and spoke a few words of badly pronounced french. Most of the time I waited until he translated it into english before answering his questions. From the platform at the mosque a steady procession of merchants with goods piled on donkeys, Japanese pickup trucks and small handcarts could be observed. Built into the face of the mosque itself was a small electricity repair shop where an old man, his head wrapped in a dirty wool cap, was bent over the innards of some old radio sets. A horse cart passed by loaded down with at least twenty women and children, its frame newly repainted in geometric patterns of red, green and blue. All were dressed in black as if returning from a funeral. But their mood was gay, the children were bantering and we exchanged the normal pleasantries as they drove on toward Al Azhar street where the driver's voice was lost in the cacaphony of sounds that mark Arab streetlife. Earsplitting horns stilled any conversation in the narrow street, built several hundred years ago to accommodate horse and carriage traffic.



Entry to the Muayyid Mosque, with vendor.



Alley near Bab al-Zuwayla and the Muayyad mosque.



Merchant in the alley of the tentmakers



Selling fowl in front of the Muayyad Mosque.

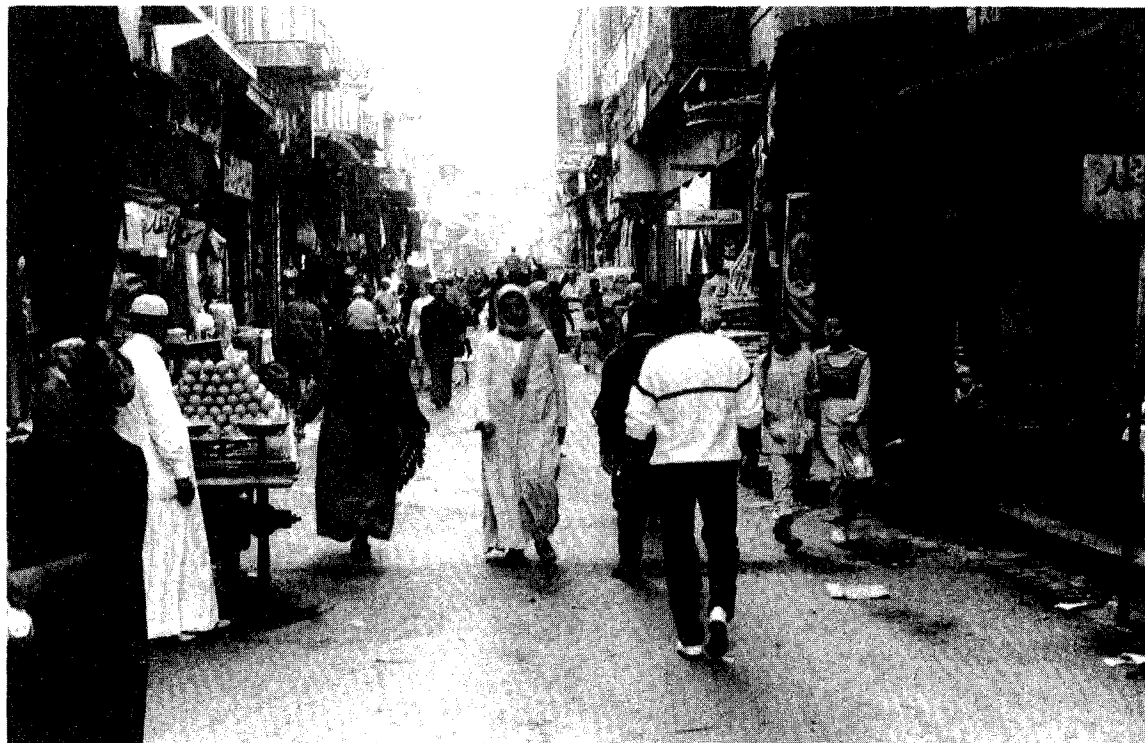


Slightly ahead and far above soared the twin minarets of the Muayyad mosque, built on top of Bab al-Zuwayla, the old entry into medieval Cairo. I climbed them on several occasions after having wandered through the mosque itself. The Muayyad mosque itself is a splendid affair, an almost square building that dates from the beginning of the fifteenth century. With a little imagination I reconstructed what the area must have looked like at the time. Mamluk buildings, with their soaring minarets and massive portals, dominated a landscape that consisted essentially of two and three story buildings. The minarets punctuated an urban landscape, serving as orientation points and timekeepers, the day divided into several periods announced by the muadhin from the top of the minaret.

The entry steps into the mosque are worn down, polished by innumerable worshippers' feet into a shiny patina that reflects the light outside. I have visited the mosque so often that I know the entrykeeper, a tall vigorous man who not only mans the gate but also watches over a number of children who are taking religious lessons in a high ceilinged room just off the entry. After I put my shoes in a rickety rack beside the massive door we normally chat for a few minutes. In the back of the entry hall a few earthen jugs filled with water are available to the congregation and I am always offered a drink before proceeding into the building and onto the minaret. My normal bakshish for this special treatment is one pound. It is money well spent as I discovered one afternoon when I found myself at the entry among a number of German tourists who self-righteously demanded access to the mosque - "It says in the guide that we can visit this mosque!" - at prayer time. I was asked to translate that no one was allowed for at least one hour. The Germans left in a huff, muttering among themselves about the arrogance of Arabs and the unpredictability of this whole society. Barely had they rounded the corner when the doorkeeper rushed forward, greeted me effusively and invited me to visit the mosque once again. I inquired about prayers. He smiled maliciously. "I don't want too many tourists in this mosque. And Germans give no bakshish."

As I climbed the minaret that afternoon I heard the muadhin announcing the afternoon prayers below. "Allahu Akbar, allahu Akbar, Ashada la Allahu illallah" - God is great, God is great, I testify that there is no god but God. Soon the noise and bustle of the city receded. I stayed on top until the next prayers, watching the sunlight turn golden. Behind the dome of the Muhammad Ali mosque the sky turned lightblue with streaks of amber and brown. The muadhin's voice, amplified by the modern convenience of a powerful loudspeaker floated up to my perch at the tip of the minaret.

The Muayyad mosque's muadhin is first rate. His voice is strong and powerful. To the uninitiated there is little difference between muadhins' voices. Westerners often dismiss it as mere noise. I must admit that on one of my first trips to Tunisia I once did so in a rather cavalier fashion, to the astonishment of an enraged friend. After a while one starts to discover nuances. Soon you can follow the intonation, the different ways in which each muadhin elongates certain syllables, the different interpretations of how a sura should sound. The tone of voice seems almost harsh, always nasal, and full of glottal stops that catch the listener unexpectedly. Just as you think you know how a sura should be chanted the muadhin will slightly reinterpret the sentence or elaborate on



Alley near Al-Azhar mosque

it. The words never change for the Koran is divinely inspired. But the unexpected twists and the slight rephrasing of the melody allow for creativity.

That evening when I descended into the mosque it was already dark. The street activity had slowed down but not completely stopped. Outside the Bab al-Zuwayla gate fruitsellers and sellers of assorted knicknacks had lit powerful kerosene lamps, casting a rich light on their assorted wares. The policeman who normally guards the gate took off on his horse along the Darb al-Ahmar road. Across the street a couple of coffeeshops were lit up and the men from the neighborhood started to gather. A young boy was running back and forth trying to keep the guttering and bubbling shishas (waterpipes) supplied with honey-laced tobacco.

The green and white lights strung along the minarets had been lit. Between them three single lightbulbs had been strung, one above the other. With no light inside the minaret the descend was rather slow. It was pitchdark inside, except for when passing the small doorways that lead to the balconies. The safest way to come down is to lean against the outside wall, feeling your way along the steps. Luckily the steps in the Muayyad minarets are evenly cut and the descend was more or less predictable. Once - I believe it was at Barquq's mausoleum in the City of the Dead - I was lulled into a false sense of security by the regularity of the steps. Suddenly a deeper one appeared, and I almost found myself pitched forward into the dark shaft.

I emerged at the ground level covered with fine yellow dust from the minaret's wall. I carefully skirted the praying men who had lined up and now faced the direction of Mecca. The imam was leading the prayers, talking into the microphone the muadhin had used a few minutes earlier. Dusting myself off in the courtyard, I sat down for a few minutes. The Muayyad mosque is completely surrounded by a high wall. I was now away from the prayer area in the courtyard. Around the ornate ablution fountain several men were still preparing for prayer. Seated on marble blocks before faucets they carefully cleaned their feet, hands, face and mouth in a ritual that dates back to the beginning of Islam. The fountain itself is set at one side of a large, now largely neglected garden. A soft wind was rustling the fronds of the palm trees. As on the minaret the feeling was one almost of solitude. The heavy walls of the building were keeping the remaining noise out. From the darkness of the garden I could observe the men bending and kneeling in the harsh light of strong electric lights. Before the prayer ended I quietly slipped out. The doorkeeper was performing his prayers in the entry hall. I stepped quietly behind him, rustling the money in my pocket. He continued with his prayers, but his eyes were following me and motioned toward the top of the shoerack. I got the message and left the pound note under a pile of old Korans.

Muhammad proposed to show me part of the Bab al-Khala and the Darb al-Ahmar area, a densely populated warren of lower-class artisans. As much of medieval Cairo it is a maze of narrow streets, many not even wide enough for a car to pass through. As soon as we had left the Darb al-Ahmar street I lost all sense of direction as we walked into a succession of alleys and narrow streets. In vain I tried to locate on my map some of the mosques and sabils (fountains) we walked past. Soon I lost all sense of direction as we dodged past children playing soccer in the dusty alleys or riding their bicycles at high speed.

The area contains a marvelous collection of houses with elaborate mashrabeyya (scrolled woodwork) screens. No longer forced to watch streetlife through the screens women now freely gaze down at the passerby below. For a few seconds the gossip shared with a woman across the alley comes to a halt. A couple of sentences are dedicated to the appearance of a khawaga (foreigner) into the neighborhood and then the gossip continues. As all over Cairo the street functions as an extension of overcrowded homes. Furniture makers assemble elaborate benches with inlaid decorations, now and again pulling them to the side to let a donkeycart pass. Women are washing clothes in tubs that spill over from houses into the streets.

One of the neighborhood's specialties, Muhammad tells me, is inlaid work. Most tourists who visit Cairo end up with some of the small boxes, plates and even little tables at prices that seem by western standards quite reasonable. Muhammad led me down an alley where my outstretched hands could easily have touched the houses on either side. Almost at the end, past another pile of furniture and more copper work, he ushered me into a narrow courtyard. Muhammad was one of a score of middleman who scour the streets in search of tourists. They make a living by earning a commission on what these tourists buy at the shops they have contracts

with. I smiled at my own mistake. I should have known better than to be baited by Muhammad's offer to see the monuments in Darb al-Ahmar. Very few Cairenes know the history of their city well, and even fewer have a rudimentary knowledge of Islamic monuments.

I felt a certain admiration for the cleverness in which he had cloaked our professed shared interest. And here we were now, ready for another display of salesmanship in a ritual as predictable as the performing of the prayers in a mosque. The courtyard was crammed full with half-finished benches and tables. Beside the staircase that led into the house, a number of women had squatted down and were preparing the evening's meal. Muhammad introduced me to the owner of the house, a man "famous for his mother-of-pearl boxes." We exchanged some pleasantries and I was invited to sit on one of the three couches that lined the small reception room. Since space is at a premium in these populated quarters, most rooms serve many functions. The reception room contained the stove as well and undoubtedly functioned as a bedroom in the evening. The women outside cleaned and washed the vegetables which were then prepared on the little stove in the corner where a young girl now brewed tea for the visitor. It was a cold afternoon and all of them wore vests or heavy sweaters over their milayas.

The owner returned with a big cardboard box full of plates and little jewelrycases made with his famous mother-of-pearl work. To prove the authenticity of the product he produced a couple of shells with which he said these boxes were made. It was a decent ruse but I had been too long in Cairo not to know better. I nevertheless pretended to admire them. When I had walked in I had noticed a large pile of identical boxes stacked against the back wall of the courtyard, not yet cut or varnished. If the mother-of-pearl had been real the owner would have needed piles of shells, many more than the two solitary ones he had produced to convince me of the authenticity of his product. Still, to make sure, I looked closely around the lid of one of those Muhammad had handed me. I dug my thumbnail into the area where the hinge had been fastened. It felt soft, almost like putty. It was not even a particularly good imitation.

Muhammad of course declared that he had no interest in whether or not I bought anything. I was his friend, he told me, and he could not accept a commission on something purchased by a friend. I smiled appreciatively and asked how much the box was that I had just dismissed as a cheap imitation. "Thirteen pounds" he replied. The copy was not only bad, it was expensive as well! A couple of weeks earlier I had purchased two similar ones for a friend. When I addressed the salesman in arabic he had not tried to convince me that his also were mother-of-pearl and I had purchased both for ten pounds each.

I told him so. He said it would be better to buy rugs anyway - who wants mother-of-pearl boxes? Now he would show me to his rug factory he said just as I put my empty glass down. I was reluctant to join him since it was late afternoon, a time when the light softens and picture taking is at its best. "Just around the corner," Muhammad reassured, "you don't have to buy anything." I soon found myself face to face with more alleys, more children and bicycles and more furniture piled against the walls. "Around the corner" turned out to be a brisk ten minute walk. The carpet factory was an airy but cramped first floor room of a dingy two story building with

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a large number of cats snoozing in the courtyard.

"My specialty is pharaonic rugs," Muhammad's business partner said as he waved me into the room. Against the far wall an antique wooden weaving loom was manned by a young woman. Taped against the frame was a stylized picture of Tutanchamon's deathmask, always popular with tourists. On the loom two small complete copies had been knotted in pink and green day-glow colors. They were some of the kitchiest souvenirs I had yet seen during my entire stay in Cairo. Judging from the pile that were stacked on a table in the middle of the room a large demand for these artifacts seemingly exists.

The young woman asked me how I liked her work. I didn't dare tell her that I preferred more classical designs, for that would undoubtedly have led to another walk with Muhammad. So I told her they were quite nice, "if you don't mind those shocking colors." She agreed, saying that only tourists like them!! A man sitting at the table smiled with tobacco stained teeth and continued to cut errant strings of the garrishly colored wool from finished rugs. As I got up to leave the young woman threw a few more rugs in front of me. Fantastic scenes in which queen Nefertiti or Tutanchamon figured prominently lay at my feet, all in unimaginable colors.

I left the little house, followed by Muhammad and by "a thousand thanks" from the man cutting the carpet threads who was seemingly unaware that I had not purchased anything. It was almost dark as we walked back in silence toward Bab al-Zuwayla. Light spilled into the alleys from bare bulbs hanging in doorways. The air smelled of cooked rice and beans, stewed mutton, varnish and leather, roasting kebab and turmeric. Half finished furniture was covered with a dropcloth for the evening's meal. As we reached the archway at Bab al-Zuwayla, from where musicians once announced the sultan's entry into the city and where the last Mamluk ruler suffered the indignity of having to walk the scaffold thrice for the rope kept breaking, Muhammad shook my hand. "Goodbye, my friend, we will meet again. Maybe you will buy something then, In sha Allah - God willing." Within seconds he had disappeared in one of the alleys. The doorkeeper at the Muayyad mosque waved from across the street and beckoned me to go talk to him. I walked past, however, waved at him and headed for the bus on Al Azhar street. I was still thinking of those Tutanchamon rugs when it reached Midan Tahrir.

All the best,

*Stansburne*

Received in Hanover 2/2/87