

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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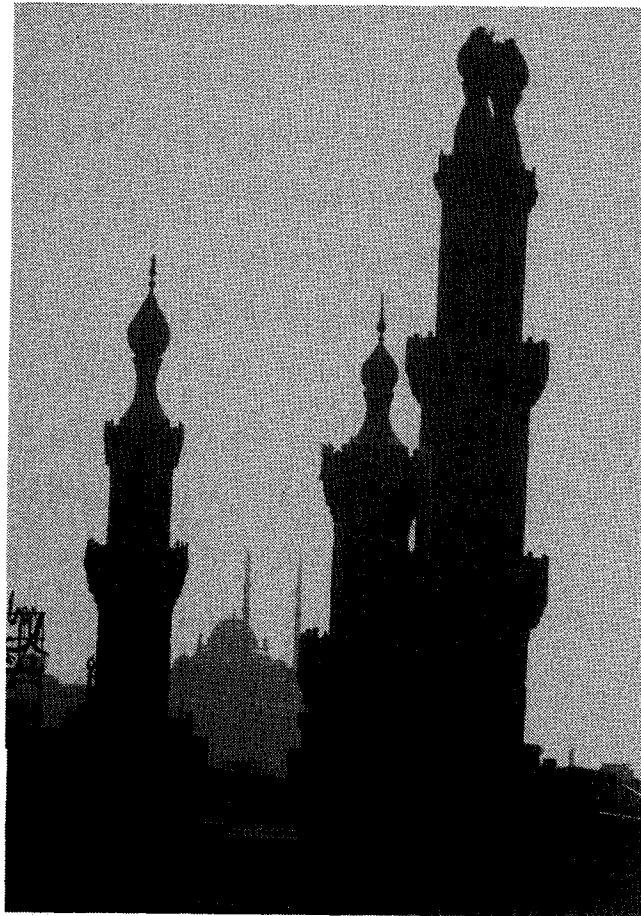
Changing Times in Cairo

The 1992 Cairo earthquake, which knocked the tops off two of the minarets of Al-Azhar mosque, one of the most widely respected institutions in Islam, and caused extensive damage throughout the densely populated Arab capital, was perceived by many Egyptians as a warning from God that Muslims should be more pious.

Nearly a year later, Cairo is looking more orthodox and outwardly Islamic than ever.

The Earthquake. Surah XCIX. The Qor'an.
 (Pickthall translation)

When earth is shaken with her earthquake and earth yieldeth up her burdens, and man saith: What aileth her? That day she will relate her chronicles because thy Lord inspireth her. That day mankind will issue forth in scattered groups to be shown their deeds. And whoso doeth good an atom's weight will see it then, and whoso doeth ill an atom's weight will see it then.



Dear Peter,

Algerians are anything but indifferent about Egypt, a country that is both hated and envied here, and whose image takes on almost mythical proportions. Most of the Arab world's best-known intellectuals and Islamic authorities are Egyptian.

Katherine Roth is a Fellow of the Institute
 writing about tradition and modernity in the Arab world.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Many of Algeria's teachers are Egyptian and most Arabic television shows and cassettes come from Egypt. Algeria's independence struggle was partly organized in Nasserist Egypt and nearly all Algerians going on the Haj to Mecca must pass through Cairo. If you're an Algerian trying to look East to the Arab world instead of North to the "land of infidels", it's almost impossible to get out from under Egypt's shadow.

When I returned to Algiers last week, after three weeks in Cairo, my Algerian friends drilled me with questions. Are there as many Islamists there as there are here? Do they have roadblocks and a curfew, like they do here? Are there as many beards and veils as here? Is there as much crime as here? What do Egyptians think about the Algerian situation?

"Cairo just ain't what it used to be", I sadly told my inquisitive Algerian friends.

The Cairo I knew over nearly three years' residence in Egypt was a city of seemingly endless jokes and surprising tolerance. It was brimming with Western tourists looking for glimpses of the Pharaonic past and Gulf Arab tourists hungry for the casinos, cabarets and other entertainment of the night for which the city is famous. It was a city in which orthodox Islam was tempered by mystical Sufist and pre-Islamic traditions, forming the colorful blend of cultures seen at the city's numerous *moulids*, or religious street festivals to commemorate Islamic "saints".

Things have changed a lot in the last few months. There are no more "Islam is the Solution" jokes and the humorous comments about various aspects of religion once standard fare in Cairo are no longer tolerated. The bellydancers for which the city is famous now don relatively conservative costumes to appease the more stringent demands of the vice police, and dance for much smaller and more sober audiences. A few movies censored for Egyptian television audiences have recently been re-censored to meet even more conservative moral standards and television movies are now interrupted to broadcast the calls to prayer.

There is no longer any tourism industry to speak of and all over town there are sales of up to 50 percent off in an attempt to attract customers whose largely tourism-dependent incomes have dwindled to a bare minimum.

The large number of Islamist-blamed bombings and assassinations have made Egyptians jumpy, and several families I know say they no longer let their children play outside because of the increasing level of violence. The assassination attempt on Egyptian Interior Minister Hassan Alfi in the downtown area several hours before my arrival in Cairo didn't make me feel any easier either.

Egyptians generally seem to have one of two reactions to the increasing level of violence in the name of Islam. Some are shocked at the violence and express serious doubts as to whether Muslims should be killing each other in the name of Islam. Others shrug their shoulders and, while they don't necessarily agree with the violence, don't seem to actively disagree with it either.

"That's what the government gets for abandoning its people and eating all the country's resources," a grocer told me as we listened to a radio report concerning the latest attack by militant Islamists.

It is impossible to tell what percentage of the Egyptian population supports militant Islamists, but the renewed sense of Islamic identity among almost all segments of society is unmistakable. One reason some Egyptians might be attracted to more extremist groups was made apparent to me during a recent taxi ride with a male Egyptian friend.

The bearded taxi driver asked my friend if I was Muslim. When my friend told him I was not, he asked whether I planned on converting to Islam.

"You can convert at Al-Azhar for free or you can convert with us and she'll be housed and given a salary. It's forbidden to stray from the path, though, and if she does you would be responsible for her," the taxi driver told my friend. [More conservative Muslims believe those who leave Islam should be put to death.] The driver did not specify which group was meant by "us", but it was clearly one of the country's increasingly popular radical Islamic groups.

It's not surprising that poor and poorly educated Egyptians would jump at the chance to be fed and housed by an organization with the added attraction of being "on the side of God".

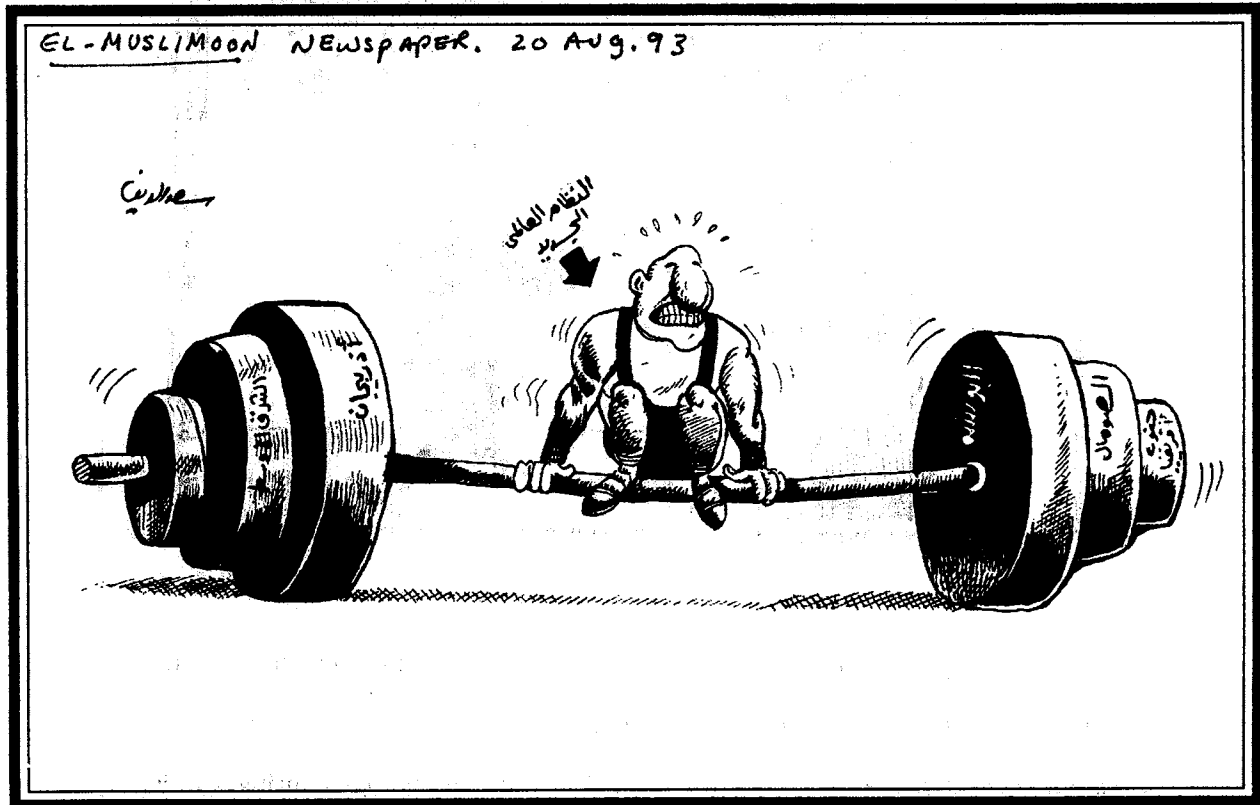
Adding to Egyptians' general sense of frustration and renewed allegiance to Islamic systems is the apparent inability of the United Nations and Western powers to handle the increasing number of world crises involving Muslims. People speak of Bosnia, Somalia and Azerbaijan and shake their heads in disgust. The sense that Muslims must fortify their ranks and stick together under the banner of Islam in the face of the growing number of Muslim-related world crises was reflected in a conversation I had a couple weeks ago with the renowned Egyptian Sheikh Kishk.

Video and audio tapes of Kishk sermons are listened to in taxis, cafes and apartments everywhere from New York to Casablanca to Yemen and Indonesia. A close friend of mine in Algiers stopped listening to music after Kishk proclaimed Julio Inglesias, previously my friend's favorite singer, "forbidden". Whereas the *ulema*, the Muslim religious establishment, is widely seen as having "sold out" to the government, Kishk remains perhaps the most popular *imam* in the Arab world because he is outspoken and has remained independent of both the *ulema* class and violent Islamic groups.

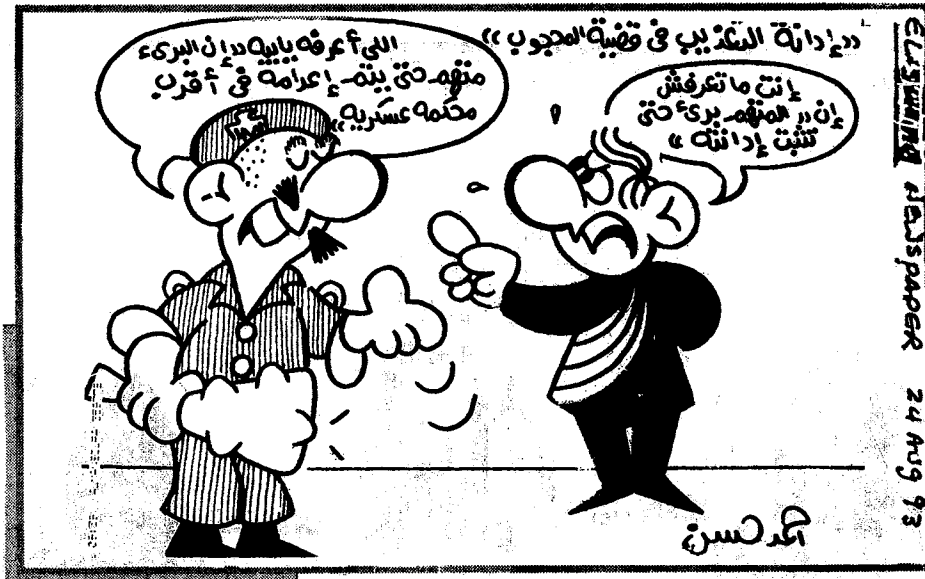
"We need to form an international council of respected Islamic thinkers to solve the world's crises, most of which concern Muslim populations. The powerful nations are targeting Muslim communities and stirring them up directly and indirectly," he said. "We need to join together as Muslims to defend ourselves against these forces." He spoke approvingly of Muslim troops being sent to Bosnia to defend their co-religionists and, while he condemned terrorism, he cited a Qor'anic verse saying that Muslims should raise their swords against those who raise their swords against them.

The following cartoon, taken from the Saudi-financed *El-Muslimoon* newspaper, published in London and widely read throughout the Muslim world, reflects Kishk's

perception of the New World's inability to cope with the crises in Bosnia, Somalia, the Near East, Azerbaijan and South Africa.



The feelings of anger and injustice implied in the above cartoon are widely felt with regard to the country's internal power structure as well as with regard to the West. In the streets of Cairo, many Egyptians are disturbed by the high number of death sentences carried out by Egyptian authorities and the rapidity with which those accused of Islamist violence are condemned to death. In the following cartoon, published in the Muslim Brotherhood's *The People* newspaper, a judge says to a military officer: "Don't you know the accused is innocent until proven guilty." The officer answers: "What I know, sir, is that the innocent is accused until he's sentenced to death by the nearest military court."



This circling of the wagons of Islam against perceived internal and external enemies, typified by a return to orthodox Islam, and accompanying sense of anger and desperation, was further evident in a few incidents and observations during my visit to Egypt.

The most striking was the *Moulid Al-Nabi* (Prophet's birthday). For Cairenes the Prophet's birthday is traditionally the biggest street festival of the year. The festival, which can last for up to a week, is held in shadow of the enormous mosques of Al-Azhar (see first page) and Al-Husseini. Its bright tents, whirling dirvishes, amusement games and traditional sweets and sugar dolls attract thousands of Egyptians, many from villages on the outskirts of the capital. The evening of the Prophet's birthday whole families stroll around the plaza at the base of Al-Husseini mosque and take tea together in the many traditional-style cafes in Khan El-Khalili, the bazaar adjacent to Hussein mosque. After sunset, the holiday becomes a more predominantly male affair as mobs of Muslim men of various religious sects, gather and work themselves into the religious frenzy that marks the peak of the festival.

This year's *Moulid Al-Nabi* was different. The turnout was lower than I had ever seen it before and the dervishes associated with the mystical Sufi orders condemned by more orthodox Muslims were strangely absent, as were their colorful tents and rhythmic music, typical of the festival as celebrated in Cairo. Whereas the festival is usually a sea of lights and gaudy decorations, this year only Hussein mosque was decorated.

Another sign of the times is Cairo's increased crime rate, which I experienced first-hand on my way home from the *moulid*. As I was climbing the stairs to the building where I was staying in the chic suburb of Heliopolis two men pulled up outside the building on a motorcycle. One of the men rushed into the building, punched me, knocked me over, grabbed my camera bag, and, after a brief struggle, raced away with the bag and his accomplice into the night. The technique is a new one in Cairo, where bag snatchers usually strike as they drive by in a car, never leaving their vehicle, and more professional burglars generally rob flats during the day while their tenants are away at work.

The technique has, however, become the trademark of Islamist attacks. The Egyptian speaker of Parliament, Rifaat Mahgoub, was attacked by two men riding by on a motorcycle, as was Interior Minister El-Alfi. It is impossible to know whether I was targeted as one of a very few foreigners now roaming the streets of Cairo or whether I was targeted as a writer [one official told me seven journalists had had their credentials stolen within the preceding ten days]. Whatever the meaning behind the crime, the incident illustrates a change in criminal tactics and increased desperation, be it political or economic.

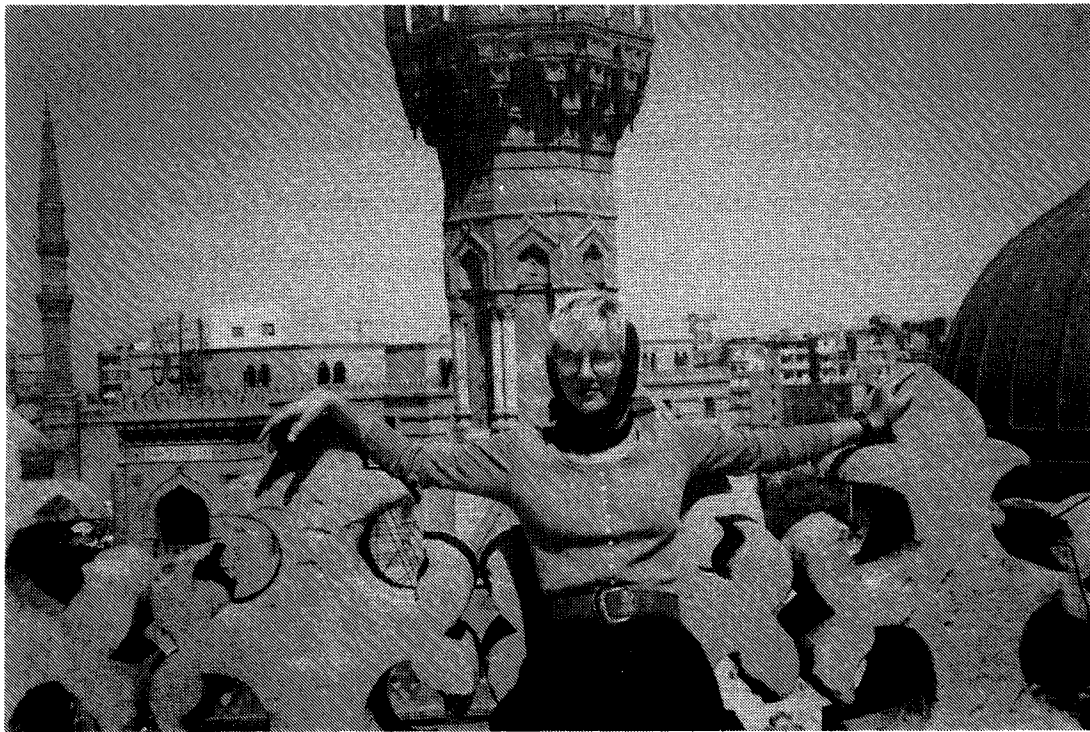
The following day an Egyptian political analyst friend of mine compiling a data base on recent events in Egypt had his computer stolen from the institute where he works. Money and other office equipment was left untouched. Again, it is impossible to tell whether the incident was politically or economically motivated, but it does make me wonder what has become of the Cairo I once called home.

In answer to Algerian queries about the current state of the city fondly known as *Um Al-Dunia*, the Mother of the World, all I can say with certainty is that times are changing. Whatever forces are winning or losing, the reality is an increasingly Islamic external image, and a seemingly increased level of frustration and violence.

As I climbed onto my Air Algerie flight from Cairo back to Algiers, along with a plane-load of Egyptian teachers returning to Algeria in time for the start of a new school year, I couldn't help but consider the interconnectedness of the changes underway in Egypt and elsewhere in the region.

After a long hot summer in Cairo, what lessons will these Egyptian teachers have to teach their eager Algerian students? When these same teachers return home next June, what stories and lessons will they bring home from Algeria?

I returned to Algiers with more questions than answers, and with the sincere hope that somehow these changing times will result in something positive for a people who have had more than their share of turmoil since last year's earthquake.



Roth atop Al-Azhar mosque about a week before last year's Cairo earthquake.