

ICWA LETTERS

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

TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard
Joseph Battat
Carole Beaulieu
Mary Lynne Bird
Sharon F. Doorasamy
Peter Geithner
Gary Hartshorn
Pramila Jayapal
Cheng Li
Steven Butler
Dasa Obereigner
Richard Z. Robinson
Carol Rose
John Spencer
Edmund Sutton

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

AJT-11
MIDDLE EAST

Andrew Tabler is an Institute Fellow based in Damascus and Beirut studying Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Making Peace with Egypt

By Andrew Tabler

MAY 2006

CAIRO, Egypt – A trip to Egypt should be something to look forward to. After all, millions flock every year to get a first hand look at the Pyramids, the Sphinx and the Valley of the Kings — ruins of perhaps antiquity's greatest civilization.

When I think of visiting Egypt, my shoulders get tense and I get a funny feeling in my stomach. Why? Because Egypt and I abruptly parted ways nearly five years ago. For seven years, first as a student at the American University in Cairo and later a journalist, Egypt was my home and my education in currents running through the Arab World.

Two prominent trends — Western-oriented economic development and increasingly violent Islamic fundamentalism — battled it out on a daily basis. In the early 1990s, IMF-prescribed economic-reform plans began as Islamic militants launched attacks on tourists in Upper Egypt. Imported goods then flooded the country as attacks moved to Cairo. Later, mobile phones and internet appeared as security forces rounded up and imprisoned Islamists. Reigning supreme over all was President Hosni Mubarak, who came to power following the assassination of Anwar Sadat by Islamic militants in October 1981. The primary instrument Mubarak used to maintain order was the Emergency Law, which gives the state broad powers to arrest and detain civilians without charge and prosecute cases in military courts that allow no appeal.

Interactions with everyday Egyptians followed a similar pattern. When I first



The skyscrapers of Egypt's "new economy" along the Bulaq corniche as seen from Zamalakh, Cairo's insular upscale neighborhood. Economic growth topped 7 percent in 2005, but there are questions if the lives of everyday Egyptians are getting better.

arrived in 1994, I was overwhelmed by the friendliness and generosity of Cairenes. As the battle between the state and Islamists made national headlines, and my Arabic improved, Egyptians often gave me an earful on “unfair” American foreign policy in the Middle East. They always quickly pointed out that they had nothing against the American people. When the state rounded up militants *en masse* a few years later, I found myself increasingly quizzed by Egyptians about intimate details of my personal life, including why I had not converted to Islam.

Then came the attacks of September 11, 2001. As I watched planes plow into buildings in New York and Washington, and one mysteriously crashing to the earth in my home state of Pennsylvania, the reactions of Egyptians surprised me. Some celebrated in the streets, while many more said smugly it was a natural outcome of American foreign policy. Sitting at my desk the next day at the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt, an American-funded organization staffed by Egyptians, I was shocked when not a single staff member expressed any sorrow about the attacks. So much for separating governments from people, I thought.

The following morning I flew on assignment to Syria, a country on Washington’s list of state sponsors of terrorism. To my surprise, almost every Syrian I met over the following days and weeks expressed heartfelt sympathy. Three months later I cleaned out my Cairo apartment and moved to the more secular Levant. I have held a grudge against Egypt, and political Islam, ever since.

Two U.S. invasions and an ongoing bloody Iraqi occupation later, the Islamic tide that swept Egypt in the 1990s is hitting my current home, Syria. Under intense international pressure over its implication in the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri, the secularism of Bashar al-Assad’s Ba’athist regime is giving way to Islam. And be it the Hariri investigation, or the indirect pressure of seeing scores of Iraqis die on Arabic TV news channels every day, more Syrians now seem to support a greater role for Islam in political life.

It remains to be seen what real impact such sentiments will have on Syrian politics. So an invitation to a wedding in Cairo last month seemed a good reason to revisit my old stomping grounds and put my Egyptian experience in perspective. During a weeklong stay, I found a country still struggling between modernity and religious fundamentalism, as well as over terrorism and presidential succession. While the Mubarak regime can be just as authoritarian as Assad’s, it is implementing economic reforms faster than Damascus. I also discovered how the shock of the September 11 attacks caused me (as well as many other Americans) to fail to differentiate between rising religious sentiments among Muslims and growing Islamic extremism. Making this distinction, and then finding ways to reach out to Arabs and Muslims on a more human level, could be one way to stem the tide of Islamic militancy sweeping the region

and to promote democracy in the long term.

Homecoming

As soon as I disembarked the Syrian Arab Airways jet in Cairo, I noticed progress. The buses taking us to the arrivals gate were new, the “Old Terminal” at Cairo Airport — similar in design to the pitiful Damascus International Airport — was renovated, and moneychangers from Egypt’s four state-owned banks hustled for customers. A far cry from five years ago, when you had to rap your keys on the counter window to wake bank attendants snoring in a dark and dingy booth.

Somewhat strangely for a country attracting millions of tourists a year, only six immigration officers were on hand to process around 200 arriving passengers. To avoid the queue, I walked over to the “V.I.P.” counter and caught the attention of a service attendant. Ten minutes, and ten Egyptian pounds (\$2) later, I had my visa and was through customs. “Baksheesh” (tipping) still made things happen in Egypt, as it does most anywhere.

After another five minutes I was in a car streaming down the autostrade toward the center of town. My host, Sanna Negus, an old friend and correspondent for Finnish Radio in Cairo, picked me up curbside. As she filled me in on the latest gossip, I was surprised to see the illuminated shell of the new Cairo Airport, which is due to open this month. The project was still very much just talk when I left Egypt.

Cairenes are still horrible drivers, but are now behind the wheel of more late-model cars. Happily, traffic moved faster than I remembered. The signs overhead diverted motorists toward the new Azhar Tunnel, a multi-million



dollar thoroughfare dug under Islamic Cairo that ushers cars to the center of town in minutes. As we were headed for Zamalak, the upscale Cairo neighborhood on an island in the Nile, we chose the tried and true 6 October Flyover. A mere 15 minutes later, we were standing on Sanna's riverside terrace. I couldn't believe it. Had I really just passed through one of the world's most congested cities?

A quick look around Sanna's apartment told me that she had done well over the years. While Cairo might be hectic, it is open to foreigners. An annual residency permit for correspondents can be had in a few days after presenting a letter of accreditation and paying 15 Egyptian pounds (under \$3). This allows expat journalists to rent apartments long-term, to receive local rates on domestic flights, and most importantly, to plan their lives. After five years of living in Damascus more often than not, the best I can do is a three-month multiple entry visa that can be revoked at any moment. I have lived in rather expensive short-lease furnished apartments for so long I only own a coffee pot, a collapsible wooden table, and a bed (which I keep in Beirut).

Sanna's worries were normal for anyone in their early thirties: relationships, wanting a baby, her upcoming job-transfer to Jerusalem. It was when I started to talk about my problems that I realized I lived on another planet. I have been on edge because of the lingering political uncertainty in Syria. Making matters worse, I had just been told that an emotionally-troubled foreign colleague in Damascus was informing on journalists to the authorities. Big Brother in Syria doesn't just tap your cell phone — he even comes over for drinks. Such worries make planning for the future secondary to short-term survival.

Estranged Kinship

Another planet indeed. On the surface, Egypt and Syria, as many Arabs say, are brothers. Each is home to ancient civilizations and has majority Sunni populations. In something akin to sibling rivalry, each claims to be the center of the Arab World. Both countries border Israel and have fought bloody wars to "liberate Palestine", have made solving the "Palestinian problem" a pillar of foreign policy, and utilize life-term presidential political systems. For a brief three years (1958-1961), Egypt and Syria even united to form one country — the United Arab Republic (UAR). Each country's flag is a variant of the red, white and black Arab tri-color revolutionary banner. In fact, the two green stars that still adorn the middle white band of the Syrian flag represent Syria and Egypt — perhaps the last remaining symbol of a marriage Damascus could not bear, but hoped would workout someday.

Dig a little deeper, however, and fraternity gives way
INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS



Egypt's openness to the outside world allows foreigners to reside easily in Cairo and build lives and careers. My friend Sanna's tastefully-decorated living room.

to pronounced differences. Egypt's 71 million people are concentrated along the Nile River and its delta — the only arable land (2.9 percent of total) in the country. Around 30 percent of Egyptians are still engaged in agriculture, 17 percent in industry, and 51 percent in services. The capital Cairo boasts some 17 million inhabitants and is one of the world's most densely populated cities. Around 90 percent of Egyptians are Sunni Muslim and 10 percent Christian. Ethnically, 98 percent of Egyptians are Arab, rounded out by Berbers, Armenians, Nubians, Greeks, and Bedouins. Egypt is a "majority political system" — the ruling and military class is Sunni Muslim Arab, the religious and ethnic group of the majority.

In sharp contrast, the population of Cairo equals that of all Syria. Syria is a net agricultural exporter, utilizing its relative abundance of arable land (25 percent of the total) to produce some of the Arab World's best crops of wheat and tomatoes. An equal percentage of Syrians are engaged in agriculture and industry (24 percent), and the remainder in services (52 percent). An estimated 74 percent of Syrians are Sunni Muslim, 16 percent are Alawite, Druze, Ismaili, or Shia Muslim, and 10 percent are Christian. Ninety percent of Syrians are Arab, rounded out by communities of Kurds, Armenians and Circassians. Syria's rulers and military elite are Alawites, making Syria a "minority political system".

All the above can be found via a quick glance through a statistical abstract. The story such figures cannot tell, but in many ways hint at, is the two leaderships' different approaches to dealing with regional problems and the international community. Both Egypt and Syria signed disengagement agreements with Israel following the October War of 1973. In the years that followed, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat pursued an agreement to solve the Palestinian problem known as the Camp David Accords.

Part of Camp David — The Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty of 1979 — survives to this day.

The months following the treaty were full of optimism in Egypt. The Emergency Law, in place since the Six-Day War of June 1967, was lifted. Debate among Egypt's handful of political parties, created out of a split of the ruling Arab Socialist Union in 1976, intensified. Hope for deeper democratic reforms flourished in an environment of decreased military threat.

Egyptian-Israeli negotiations never achieved a settlement on the Palestinian issue. When talks foundered in 1981, Sadat came under intense domestic criticism for being duped into signing a peace agreement before first clinching a firm deal on the Palestinians. Sadat responded with a wave of arrests of intellectuals and dissidents. At a military parade commemorating the "victory" of the October War, Sadat was assassinated by the militant group Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, immediately reinstated the Emergency Law, which has been renewed every three years since. Democratic development was severely curtailed in the name of confronting Islamic extremism. Despite early fears that Mubarak might abrogate the Egyptian-Israeli Treaty due to popular anger over the continued plight of the Palestinians, the Egyptian president announced that respecting the treaty was a "strategic choice". In return, Egypt has received billions of dollars in Western development assistance. It also receives billions in U.S. military aid as well.

In the 1980s, the regime weathered a number of economic crises born out of its inability to reform public-sector industries, which remain a tremendous burden on the state treasury. Western assistance, particularly American, focused on building up a functioning private sector. The domestic political scene was rather static. Arrests of members of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, the most organized opposition to the regime, continued. But Egypt's "freezing" of relations with Israel after the Palestinian talks broke down gave the regime some legitimacy among Egyptians opposing the treaty.

This situation changed dramatically following the Gulf War of 1990-91. In return for supporting the American-led coalition to oust Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait, Western and Arab Gulf countries forgave \$20 billion in Egyptian debt in return for Egypt agreeing to enter into an IMF/World Bank-supported Structural Adjustment Program. Exchange and interest rates were stabilized and state industries were slated for sale. This led many to predict Egypt would soon be the "Tiger on the Nile" — a rapidly developing, East-Asian-like economy utilizing export-led growth strategies.

Progress on the Palestinian issue raised hopes as well. In September 1993, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo

Accords — an agreement on Palestinian autonomy in selected areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Egypt's support for the deal as a "peace partner" brought Cairo into a closer Western political orbit. Economic reform accelerated and state industries were sold off.

Such progress coincided with a sharp increase in Islamic militant attacks on foreign tourists. Beginning with a few raids in 1992 on tour groups in Upper Egypt, the attacks spread to Cairo in the autumn of 1993 as news of the Oslo Accords made international headlines. The following year, twelve incidents involving foreign tourists were reported throughout the country. Claiming responsibility was *Gamm'a al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Group), an offshoot of Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

Security forces then arrested thousands of "Islamists" — including members of the Muslim Brotherhood — under the Emergency Law and tried them in security courts. Egypt's jails nearly burst at the seams in the late 1990s, as regional newspapers ran political cartoons of Mubarak cleaning up Islamic extremists with a vacuum.

Syria, in contrast, did not pursue the path to "peace." When Sadat flew to Damascus in 1977 to tell then-Syrian President Hafez al-Assad that the Egyptian president would go to Jerusalem to address the Israeli Knesset, Assad responded that Israel only wanted a peace treaty with Arab countries so to allow Israeli annexation of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. When the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was signed, most Arab countries cut diplomatic relations with Cairo. Sadat's failure to conclude a deal with Israel on the Palestinians lent Assad tremendous regional support for his "rejectionist" stance.

Domestically, the Syrian regime used the Palestinian issue to legitimize its rule. The reasoning for the Emergency Law, which was declared by the Ba'ath Party upon seizing power in 1963 in the name of ending domestic political instability, was re-spun as a "national emergency" in confronting the Israeli threat. This policy, combined with the brutal crackdown on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in 1982, essentially ended organized political opposition to the regime. Even secular dissidents went into hiding. A political order free of Islamic extremism was enforced from above as national energies were focused on confronting Israel.

Like Egypt, Syria joined the American coalition against Saddam Hussein in 1990. Instead of receiving a juicy aid deal, Syria was allowed to use its forces in Lebanon to implement the Ta'if Accord — a Saudi Arabian-sponsored and American-backed plan for ending the Lebanese Civil War.

With Saddam Hussein now in the crosshairs of the international community and the Lebanese issue in hand, many in Syria speculated that Assad would launch a political and economic reform campaign commensurate with decreased regional tensions. After all, Syria sat face-to-

face with Israel at the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference.

Such hopes came to nothing, however. The regime allowed only members of secular opposition parties to return home without fear of arrest and activists imprisoned in the 1980s were slowly released. Instead, the regime issued new investment legislation. Law 10 of 1991, which remains Syria's only legal structure for foreign investment. It relaxed the country's currency exchange restrictions to allow for Arab Gulf money to flow in. Hundreds of millions of dollars poured into Syria to create a variety of industries producing for the local market.

When President Assad fell ill in the late 1990s, most state institutions ground to a halt. The Syrian economy followed suit, contracting around 7 percent between 1997 and 2000. When Assad died that June, Parliament amended the minimum-age requirement for president to allow Assad's son, Bashar, to come to power. A "reform process" began. But unlike Egypt, which had extensive foreign support for its economic-reform program, Syria relied on only a few bilateral-assistance programs with Japan, the European Union and the United Nations. The rest of the world, most notably the United States, was held at arms length. The regime strictly controlled information about Syria, and for me, getting a visa as an American journalist (who are often regarded as "spies") was like pulling teeth. While things have changed, that system and mindset still exist. And that is why three years after filing the paperwork, I still do not have a residency permit.

Terrorism and Presidential Succession

The afternoon following my arrival, Sanna and I put on our best clothes and took a cab to the Swiss Club, located in a walled compound within the Cairo-neighborhood slum, Imbaba. Unlike Syria, Egypt has a number of vestiges of colonialism that are good venues for celebrations. As I strolled into the club's salon, wedding present in hand, I saw a number of familiar faces from my Cairo days. Most were now journalists, analysts and academics. While I was glad to see them, I wondered how they'd stuck it out in Egypt so long.

The main topic of conversation at the wedding was terrorism. Five bombs exploded in two days in Sinai that week, killing 20. The targets were foreign tourists in the resort of Dahab and multinational peacekeepers. Claiming responsibility was *Tawhid wa Jihad* (Monotheism and Struggle), reportedly an offshoot of Al-Qaeda. Many of my friends said, given Sinai's close proximity to Saudi Arabia — where it is believed Al-Qaeda has strong support — a new front in the "War on Terror" could be opening. More careful observers, most notably an old friend and colleague, Joshua Stacher, related the attacks

to Egypt's internal political situation. Mubarak needs the Emergency Law, which was up for another three-year renewal at the end of the month, to use against his political opponents. The President's position is strong — he was proclaimed the "first democratically elected president of Egypt" after taking 88.6 percent of the vote in the country's first multiparty presidential election in September 2005 (previously, a presidential nominee was chosen by the National Democratic Party (NDP)-controlled Parliament and its decision approved in a referendum). The role of his son Gamal — who is being groomed to succeed his 78-year old father — remains uncertain, however.

Questions over presidential succession flared even before I left Cairo. Mubarak has yet to name a vice-president after nearly 25 years in office. In mid-June 2000, civil-society activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim published an article in the London-based *Majalat Saudia*, entitled "The Arab World's Contribution to Political Science." It dealt with presidential succession in the Syrian Arab Republic, where President Hafez al-Assad had just died and was succeeded by his son. Ibrahim related the Syrian example to other "jumhuriyat" (republics) in the Arab World, including



As my old friend Paul Schemm (left) danced the night away with his bride Helen (second from right) at the wedding party, terrorism and presidential succession dominated talk around the dinner table.

Egypt. Instead of a republic, Ibrahim said such systems should be called a "jumlakiyya" — a hybrid of the Arabic word for republic and monarchy (*malakiyya*).

Ten days after the article's publication, Ibrahim was arrested, along with most of his center's staff, for "tarnishing the state's image" and accepting European-Union funding to observe the 2000 parliamentary elections. Ibrahim's mug-shot appeared on the front page of state newspapers, and the center's staff members who were not arrested fled the country (including the Coptic Christian girlfriend of my then-roommate).

Ibrahim was eventually acquitted under American pressure (he is married to an American and is a U.S. citi-



Posters supporting President Hosni Mubarak, the first “democratically elected president of Egypt”, in front of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) offices in Giza. Mubarak’s son, Gamal, was just named assistant secretary-general of the party and is widely expected to succeed his father.

zen) and the issue eventually faded away. The succession issue did not, however. Egyptians watched as Mubarak’s son, Gamal, was first named to the ruling NDP’s general secretariat in 2000, then appointed Secretary of the party’s “Policies’ Secretariat” and finally last January as one of three party Assistant Secretary-Generals. He has since cultivated good personal ties in Washington, and is active in the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt (Amcham) — the offices I sat in without solace on September 12, 2001.

While some groups in Washington might want Gamal to come to power, the issue is already running against the Bush Administration’s “democracy agenda” in the region. U.S. pressure reportedly played a large role in Mubarak’s decision to allow multiparty presidential elections in Egypt last September. Washington also pressed Mubarak to allow for “free and fair” parliamentary elections the following November and December. For the first time in the country’s history, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, strictly outlawed in Syria but tolerated in Egypt, were allowed to openly run for office. The Brotherhood won 88 of 444 seats, up from 15 independent-but-Brotherhood-aligned MPs in the previous parliament.

Nearly everyone at the wedding believed the polls were subject to considerable rigging by the NDP. Some

judicial observers of the poll agreed, and launched a campaign to investigate voting irregularities. Suddenly, they were brought up on disciplinary charges for allegedly leaking the details to the press. The government recently postponed local council elections for two years for fear that the Brotherhood could get enough support to field a presidential candidate in 2011. The U.S. might be pressuring for democracy in Egypt, but Mubarak’s people are masters at manipulating the rules to get their way. The Bush Administration slammed the decision, but it remains to be seen if the democratic change Washington is pushing in Egypt will be real or cosmetic.

Into the Streets

A bit hung-over but in good spirits, the next morning I jumped into a Cairo taxi and headed downtown in search of some *foul* (fava beans) — my

favorite breakfast in Cairo. I speak Damascene Arabic dialect now, so I struggled to inject Egyptian words and phrases I knew but now seldom use when I chatted with the driver.

I then had a flashback. Not of Cairo, but to Damascus a few days before. As usual, I waited until the last minute to buy a wedding present, so I headed down to the treasure trove of the Damascus Old City gift bazaar a few



Black and white taxicabs dominate thoroughfares in downtown Cairo. Prying questions from taxi drivers about religion and personal affairs teed me, and a lot of other foreigners, off in the 1990s.

hours before departure. All shops were closed, however. Defeated, I piled into a taxi and asked the driver to take me home as fast as possible.

“Where are you from?” the driver asked me.

“I am American,” I replied.

“American Muslim?” he asked.

I was taken aback. During five years in secular Syria, this was the first time a taxi driver dared enquire about my religious beliefs. It used to happen all the time in Egypt, however. Prying questions by total strangers about personal matters, and sometimes disdain of my answers, was but one of many reasons I became disenchanted with Cairo.

“No, I’m Protestant,” I replied.

“What’s that?” the driver asked.

I explained Christianity’s denominations, and related them to the differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Unlike many Egyptian drivers who’d grilled me, he seemed to understand diversity of thought and belief. Like many Egyptian cabbies, he wore a *galabiyya* (a loose-fitting, full-body white cotton suit), a long beard, and sandals. He was poor, and I guessed illiterate. His toenails were yellow and twisted with fungus rot.

That image snapped me out of it. I watched the driver as he steered the taxi along the Nile corniche. He wore a *galabiyya*, listened to the Koran on the car’s stereo system, and seemed a pious Muslim. I then wondered if Egyptians were really becoming zealots, or if the shock of the September 11 attacks caused me to accumulate a number of bad incidents over the years and then to make a broad generalization.

Perhaps Egyptians are now simply too busy making money to talk. The state claims the Egyptian economy is marching ahead, with 7 percent GDP growth in 2005. The government of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif, who was Egypt’s first Information Communications Technology (ICT) minister when I left Cairo, is overseeing a swath of reforms aimed at spurring economic growth. Reforms in public-sector banks, insurance and capital markets are miles ahead of Syria, but the same major issues dogging the Syrian economy — an overstuffed bureaucracy and corruption — also overshadow Nazif’s plans.

I asked nearly everyone I met if the lives of everyday Egyptians were improving. Most said yes, and pointed to the proliferation of the internet and mobile telephones. A program called “Free Internet,” launched by Nazif in 2001, has brought web access for a small per-minute fee to the home of anyone with a fixed telephone line. In 2004, Egypt Telecom introduced high-speed ADSL internet service for as little as 120 Egyptian pounds (\$22) per

month. In upscale neighborhoods in Cairo, nearly every café has free high-speed wireless internet access. And in buildings housing foreigners like Sanna’s, you can tap into a number of wireless networks sailing as innocently through the living room as if you were in Manhattan.

While the number of fixed telephone lines necessary for internet access increased around 15 percent over the last five years, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) estimates only 6 percent of Egyptians use the web, up from 1 percent in 2001. The “information superhighway” might be making inroads throughout the world, but it still has a long way to go in Egypt. In Syria, internet penetration rates are only a little over 3 percent.

The same thing goes for mobile phones. A line can be had for as little as 60 Egyptian pounds (\$10), with various pre-paid packages to fit what would seem most budgets. In 2004, Egypt had 7.4 million mobile lines, a combined annual growth rate of 74 percent since 1999. Around 45 percent of all Egyptian telephone lines are mobiles, spurring a “telecommunications revolution” along the Nile. Still, only around 14 percent of Egyptians now own a mobile telephone, with the majority still using phone booths or the overcrowded neighborhood “*centrale*” telephone exchange.

Taken together with massive outdoor advertising campaigns for Western wares that now dominate the Cairo landscape, “modern” goods seem to be within reach of an increasing number of wealthy and upper-middle class Egyptians. As in Syria, opportunities for Egypt’s shrinking middle class — the social stratum that spawned 9/11 ringleader Mohammed Atta — are hard to see. The country’s massive “informal sector” — including small-scale manufacturing, handicrafts, personal services, retailing and other ill-defined activities — helps mitigate unemployment (which hovers officially around 10 percent) and disguises unemployment in the public sector. Government subsidies of bread and many other basic commodities remain in place to keep the peace among the poor. My driver that day looked probably about as well off as he did in September 2001. But he minded his own business. And to my surprise, during my visit to Cairo, not a single taxi driver asked me my religion or any personal details other than my nationality and occupation.

Struggle for Hearts and Minds

The rest of my week in Cairo was uneventful. I went to Gold’s Gym on a riverboat in Giza every morning, walked the streets during the day and had lunch or dinner with old pals in the evenings. I made a point of spending time with Abeer Allam, a former girlfriend who’s a journalist with the *New York Times* bureau in Cairo.

Talking with Abeer is like being plugged into an Egypt few Westerners understand. She grew up in a middle-class family in Ismailia on the Suez Canal, her father having served as a supply officer in the Egyptian



Abeer Allam, journalist for the New York Times Cairo Bureau and one of my favorite people in the world. Abeer battled her family and society when she moved to Cairo, lived alone as a single woman, and focused on building her career.

Army for 35 years. With high marks in school, Abeer moved to Cairo in 1991 and joined the elite Kulayat Al-sun (Faculty of Tongues) at Ain Shams University. After graduating with a degree in English and Spanish, Abeer fought her family to live in Cairo alone and forge a career there. Independence had a price in lack of family financial support, however. Abeer's first few jobs paid so little that after covering rent in a shared flat with six other girls, she would sit evenings talking with friends on Cairo's main Tahrir Square with as little as five Egyptian pounds (then a little less than \$2) in her pocket.

Abeer fasts during Ramadan and shuns pork, but her outlook on life is distinctly secular. During Egypt's wars with Israel in 1967 and 1973, Abeer's family fled the fighting along the Suez Canal and moved in with relatives in the Nile Delta. When they returned after peace talks began in 1977, Abeer was drawn toward the American programs Sadat had ordered broadcast on state-run TV. She even named her pet rabbit Steve Austin — after the Six Million Dollar Man.

Intelligent and tenacious, Abeer soon took a decent-paying job as a reporter with the Japan's Kyodo News, and then worked another shift with its rival, Sankei Shimbun. Opportunity knocked in 1998 when she became a reporter for the *New York Times*. Reporting is often a thankless job, particularly when the bureau chief calls you at all hours in search of the best quote for his or her story. While they get the byline, reporters are the silent heroes and heroines who bring everyday life in

the Arab World to the American public.

Abeer decided early on that she wanted to become a correspondent for Western media. Amid the chaos of ringing phones, being beaten physically while covering the 2000 Egyptian parliamentary elections, and reporting first-hand the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abeer tried her hand at writing stories. And while the going was a bit rough at first, each time she got better. First she wrote for local English-language publications, and later the *Times'* business section.

Realizing that her writing needed work, Abeer applied in 2004 to Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. To her surprise (but not mine), Abeer was accepted and awarded one of only two new full scholarships for young international journalists. After a year at Columbia and an internship at the *Times* in New York, Abeer is now back at the Cairo bureau writing stories and planning her future in a rapidly changing, and increasingly violent, part of the world.

For my final afternoon in Egypt, we decided to visit Azhar Park, the new \$30 million project sponsored by the Agha Khan Development Network near Islamic Cairo. The Agha Khan is the leader of Shia Islam's Ismaili sect, one of Syria's families of religious minorities. I had heard so much about the park from Syrians that I had to have a look for myself.

Constructed atop a 74-acre former garbage dump below the Cairo citadel (the stench was so bad that I used to hold my nose when driving past), Azhar Park is amazing. For a mere five Egyptian pounds (less than \$1), visitors can enjoy the best-landscaped and lushest gardens in the Middle East. Its theme is Islamic, but its management calls on the best of Western tradition. A drawing card for the park is an excavated wall from the Ayyubid Dynasty. It was ruled by Saladin, the charismatic and reportedly merciful commander who expelled the crusaders from the Levant in the 12th Century after building his power base in Damascus.

Strolling through the park, Abeer and I got into a deep discussion about recent events and how Egyptians have reacted to them.

"There are economic opportunities for middle-class people, but if you want to work for an Egyptian company, wages are low," Abeer said. "A friend a year ahead of me in university works for Vodaphone [a mobile phone provider] customer service. Our grades were the same, but she still only makes 2,000 Egyptian Pounds [less than \$400] per month. She has no career path and cannot develop herself — let alone buy an apartment."

For Abeer, the best way to avoid this track is to seek out foreign companies.

"If you want to work in foreign media or for a mul-



An artificial lake at Azhar Park, a newly opened green space overlooking Islamic Cairo built atop a former garbage dump. The park is the handiwork of the Agha Khan Development Network.

tional, there are chances for advancement, but you have to work very, very hard," Abeer said. "At least you are judged on your merit, not on who you are related to. Nepotism doesn't just happen in the public sector; it is pervasive in the private sector as well. It's a hard nut to crack in Arab culture."

Such reports are common throughout the Arab World. For young men, the financial burden is even more so, as they are expected to buy an apartment before marriage, which allows them to have an open sex life and a family. Young women entering the workforce are not only paid less, but are often victims of sexual harassment. Abeer says this system is a major reason why many middle-class Egyptians are choosing Islamic fundamentalism instead.

"The middle class in Egypt used to be in the middle — not secular or very religious. We fast during Ramadan, but we have open minds," Abeer said. "Now these people are becoming lower-middle class. Arab Gulf money is flooding into Egypt, and those working with them are becoming middle class. They are not intellectual at all, and cannot make any change. They only buy villas."

Throughout my stay in Egypt, I wondered a lot whether the West can stem the tide of Islamic extremism in the Arab World. In Abeer's eyes, the military approach

adopted by Washington in Iraq did more to cause radicalism and terrorism than to solve it.

"I reported the invasion first hand. The U.S. messed up because it didn't listen to anyone," Abeer said. "They would pull into a town and be greeted with rice and rose water. The mayor would meet the American commander and take him to the local weapons cache to secure it. The commander would reply he had no orders to secure the weapons and would walk away. The chaos started then, not later. These were stupid mistakes, and the Iraqis could see it. I still can't understand why the American's couldn't see it. Americans I have worked with are normally so careful."

Abeer says the problem now is that Washington's Iraq project has gone so badly that the promised democratic payoff in countries like Egypt and Syria seems no more now than a flash in the pan.

"As soon as Hamas won the Palestinian elections, everything stopped," Abeer said. "Now we fear we will pay for the Iraq disaster because there are signs the U.S. is going back to supporting the same authoritarian regimes as before. What Washington was doing before with Egypt and Saudi Arabia was perfect. They said to both regimes 'you have to change or else.' Egyptians then had more freedoms, and there were free elections. Now all of a sud-

den Washington needs Egypt in Iraq, to confront Iran, and to control Hamas. The regime feels confident the heat is off, and they've started arresting, threatening and beating people again."

With the Iraq-model for democratic change now on the rocks, the question remains: What can the United States now do to help promote liberal reforms in countries like Egypt? For Abeer, the answer is not top-down, but bottom-up.

"Egyptians don't know what USAID does in this country," Abeer said. "They replaced the sewage system in Cairo, but this is claimed as an accomplishment for Mubarak's plans. The term used in Arabic for U.S. assistance — *Ma'ona al-Amerikaniya* — translates as "American relief." This term is insulting. Arabic is a rich language; why would anyone choose this word? So Mubarak claims the victory, and the Egyptian people feel like they are begging."

Painting and Peacemaking

As we strolled down a paved walkway toward an artificial lake at the park's south end, I asked Abeer if Egyptians like Azhar Park because of its historical reference to Saladin pushing out the Western crusaders — an image held out by Al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremist groups.

"They like it because it's beautiful!" Abeer said. "Egyptians don't talk about it in a religious way. They feel proud of it, and they haven't seen anything to be proud of in a long time. They feel they are being taken care of and respected. The Agha Khan is a foreigner and is from an Islamic sect that Sunni fundamentalists all over the region call apostates. How many projects could the United States do like this, with the billions they spent on Iraq?"

Near the park's exit, a group of children sitting on the grass seemed to be reading newspapers. As we got closer, I realized they were painting (and that I had been reading newspapers far too long). A few older children and adults helped each child find the right color for

pyramids, airplanes, hearts, and balloons — the same images American children paint at their age.

I was tempted to ask the children about their lives and religious beliefs, as well as their feelings about Iraq, the Palestinians and U.S. pressures for democracy in Egypt. But then I remembered how prying questions from total strangers had once put me off Egypt. So I just minded my own business, respected their playtime, and snapped a few photos for my memories.

One of my favorite films, Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic*, then popped into my mind. A desperate but enlightened anti-narcotics czar struggles on screen to halt the flow of cocaine across the Mexican-U.S. frontier. A clever and good-natured Mexican narcotics agent named Javier turns evidence against a Mexican security general working with violent but ubiquitous drug traffickers. In return for participating in the sting operation, Javier asks the U.S. government to build a baseball park on the Mexican side of the border so that local children can play instead of getting sucked into the drug trade. It gives Javier (who becomes the Mexican anti-narcotics czar) immense moral capital in his community. For Washington, the project was but one solution to a problem that billions of dollars, and thousands of lives, had not solved. For Mexico, it was a small step in the right direction.



Children painting during a lazy afternoon in Azhar Park. Construction of green spaces for recreation and the arts in Egypt is but one way Americans could reach out to Egyptians on a different level as regional conflict seems set to continue.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Current Fellows and their Activities

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • INDIA

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO

An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for Somerville This Week, in Somerville, MA.

Cristina Merrill (June 2004-2006) • ROMANIA

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Nicholas Schmidle (October 2005-2007) • PAKISTAN

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the Economist Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

Author: Tabler, Andrew J.

Title: ICWA Letters (Middle East/ North Africa)

ISSN: 1083-4281

Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial

Language: English

Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: East Asia; South Asia, The Americas; Europe/ Russia; Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4281) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548

Fax: (603) 643-9599

E-Mail: icwa@valley.net

Web address: www.icwa.org

Executive Director:
Steven Butler

Program Assistant:
Brent Jacobson

Administrative and Publications
Manager:
Ellen Kozak

©2006 Institute of Current World Affairs,
The Crane-Rogers Foundation.

The Information contained in this publication may not be reprinted or republished without the express written consent of the Institute of Current World Affairs.