

# “The Sorrows of Egypt,” Revisited

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The sorrow of Egypt is made of entirely different material: the steady decline of its public life, the inability of an autocratic regime and of the middle class from which this regime issues to rid the country of its dependence on foreign handouts, to transmit to the vast underclass the skills needed for the economic competition of nations; to take the country beyond its endless alternations between glory and self-pity. (Fouad Ajami, “The Sorrows of Egypt”)

In his authoritative 1995 essay “The Sorrows of Egypt,”<sup>1</sup> Fouad Ajami, with the knowledge and experience of someone who had known Egypt intimately, and the spirit and pen of a poet who had come to love the place, attempted to delve deeply into what ailed the ancient land. The essay moved masterfully from the political to the social and from the religious to the economic, weaving an exquisite tapestry of a land of sorrows. This was not the first time that Ajami had approached Egypt. The country his generation had grown up knowing was the Egypt of promise and excitement, where Gamal Abdel Nasser’s towering presence and deep voice had captivated millions of Arabic speakers. Ajami had been one of those young men. He had made the pilgrimage to Damascus, watching and cheering as Nasser made his triumphant entry into the city in 1958, crowned as the idol of the Arabs by adoring masses. Years later, Ajami visited the land again, as he sought to describe the world of the Arabs in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat by Israel in his magisterial *The Arab Predicament*.<sup>2</sup> In the book, Egypt occupied the central stage of that Arabs’ drama, a mirror of their plight as he described it.

And yet, as authoritative as Ajami’s early study of Egypt had been, something remained missing in the picture. Both the Egypt of his youth and that of the 1970s and ’80s was an Egypt seen through the eyes of others: their imaginations initially and their frustrations later. No scholar of the region will rise to the level of the Sage of this Arab time, but it is this path that has continued to be followed in approaching Egypt, in studying it, in cheering it, and in cursing it in Washington by both policy makers and experts. The Egypt that could lead the Arab world to peace or to democracy, or the country that never delivered on either: the Egypt of imagination, of dreams and nightmares. But “The Sorrows of Egypt” was different. Here, Ajami removed the shackles that the Arabs’ Egypt had imposed on him, of the land approached through the eyes of strangers. Treading carefully, aware of its imposing structures and the weight of history, Ajami allowed the country to open itself up to him. Here, he finally found the land its people had come to love and hate, to worship, and to seek to leave.



Does Egypt still have a place in American grand strategy? For many pundits in Washington the answer is a resounding “no.” From every corner of the US foreign policy community, frustration with Egypt abounds. The list of complaints is long: Egypt’s failing war on terrorism, repression leading to further radicalization, dismal record on human rights, failure to transition to democracy as many had hoped, President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi’s obsession with megaprojects, and Egypt’s regional and foreign policy—from its support for the Syrian dictator to its embrace of Libyan general Khalifa Haftar and alignment with Russia. Daniel Benaim eloquently summed up the situation as “a U.S.-Egypt relationship that has been buffeted by upheaval, mired in mutual mistrust, and saddled with unmet expectations.”<sup>3</sup>

The disappointment has led President Trump, who hailed his Egyptian counterpart as a “fantastic guy,” to do what many of his predecessors had never done: reprogram and condition part of the military aid to Egypt.<sup>4</sup> For many pundits that is precisely the solution: a cut in US military aid to Egypt.

What would the impact of such a cut be? Would it make Egypt better? Would it serve US interests? The pundits’ answer to each of these questions is a resounding “yes.” But as Eric Trager warned after the Trump administration’s decision to slash aid, such steps offered no strategy.<sup>5</sup> Four years earlier, Tally Helfont had prophetically warned, “Washington must think strategically rather than emotionally about the consequences of withdrawing aid to Egypt. The severing of the American-Egyptian relationship may ease the conscience of some, but should it?”<sup>6</sup> She was on the mark here. After all, throwing a tantrum was hardly a strategy.

These frustrations are born from a deep sense of disappointment. Egypt had failed to live up to the pundits’ expectations. The passion which had driven them to make the argument for democracy promotion in the Arab world’s most populated country, the ecstasy with which they greeted the Egyptian revolution as the final proof of their arguments, was only equal to the deep sense of betrayal they felt at the country’s return to autocracy. To paraphrase a famous line, hell hath no fury like a pundit scorned. If Egypt had not lived up to their ideals, the problem was surely with Egypt and not their theories.

If, however, the United States is ever capable of understanding its troublesome ally and salvaging what remains of the American-Egyptian alliance, it must tread carefully, following Ajami’s steps, and approach the Egypt of reality, and not that of imagination. It must take a voyage to “a jaded country,” as Ajami often called Egypt, and visit the land of sorrows.

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At the heart of Egyptian life there lies a terrible sense of disappointment. The pride of modern Egypt has been far greater than its accomplishments. The dismal results are all around: the poverty of the underclass, the bleak political landscape that allows an ordinary officer to monopolize political power and diminish all would-be rivals in civil

society, the sinking of the country into sectarian strife between Muslim and Copt, the dreary state of its cultural and educational life. (Ajami, "The Sorrows of Egypt")

On July 21, 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte's army stood confronting the armies of the Mamluk Beys who had ruled Egypt, in name and reality, for over six centuries, in a battle that came to be known as the Battle of the Pyramids. In a pseudo-historical account of the battle, he is quoted as saying, "Soldiers, from the summit of yonder pyramids, forty centuries look down upon you." Accurate accounts of the battle contradict such claims, as the pyramids were not visible from the field.

It is hard to see the pyramids in most of Cairo today. The City Victorious, as its name translates into English, has grown considerably over the past decades. Like everything in Egypt, there is much dispute and little accurate information on how many people reside in the city, though a figure of twenty million is close enough. But it is not just the size of the city that makes the pyramids distant. Cairo is one of the world's most polluted cities. A tourist visiting the city would be quickly disappointed: the poverty of the people, the dirtiness of the streets, all are a world away from the pharaohs' times. But as one slowly, through the legendary traffic, makes his way to Giza, the tip of the Grand Pyramid appears, the last surviving of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Visible or not, the pyramids are impossible to ignore from the time of Napoleon until today. It is tough to grow up with the pyramids in your land. Millions of tourists flock to the country each year for a glimpse into the legendary land of the pyramids, of Moses and the pharaohs. Egypt is not a land of nowhere. It is a land kids learn about in schools around the world. The pyramids are Egypt's greatest symbol, the source of its eternal pride, and yet, paradoxically, also its heaviest burden. As strong, tall, and imposing as the pyramids stand, so minute and weak does modern Egypt appear.

Grandiosity had always been central to Egypt's view of itself. Om El Donia (Mother of the World), the land is fondly called by its people. Gamal Hamdan's *The Personality of Egypt: A Study in the Genius of the Place*, made the argument best: Egypt is central to the world. The pharaohs had built their civilization there, Rome had made it the breadbasket of its empire, and early Christians had found refuge and built a pillar. It was in Egypt that Islam would build a civilization; Damascus and Baghdad were not more than provisional cities in his account. Next to Egypt, all were dwarfs.

But there is little to celebrate in modern Egypt's history. A joke from former president Hosni Mubarak's time was that the only achievement since the 1973 victory was Egypt qualifying for the World Cup in 1990. The joke was, of course, on the people here, for 1973's attack on Israel had hardly been the victory they were led to believe and their soccer team's performance in 1990 was mediocre at best, with two draws and one loss. Egypt's failures are impossible to overlook. Poverty abounds. The country has survived thanks to handouts



from what it has always considered its smaller and less advanced neighbors in the Persian Gulf. Egypt's contribution to scientific progress is negligible and its industrial production limited. Nothing captures the decline more than its dwindling cultural output. Once upon a time, when Arabs read or heard or watched, they did so through Egyptian literature, music, and cinema. A country that produced the likes of Taha Hussein, Tawfik Al Hakim, Naguib Mahfouz, Salama Moussa, and Lewis Awad is today devoid of serious intellectuals.

But if there is little to celebrate in modern Egypt's history, it is not for lack of trying. "From the time Napoleon Bonaparte's armada turned up off the coast of Alexandria in the summer of 1798," Ajami wrote, "Egypt's history has in the main been its Sisyphean quest for modernity and national power."<sup>7</sup> The country had tried it all. "Dreams of national power and deliverance have visited Egypt no less than four times in its recent history, and they all ended in frustration," he argued. The efforts included copying European technologies under Mohamed Ali, dreaming of becoming part of Europe under his grandson Ismail, Egypt's attempt at liberalism following the 1919 revolution, and Nasser's dreams of modernization and Arab unity. More would be added afterward, including former president Anwar Sadat's bet on America for deliverance, the 2011 revolution and its hopes, and the Islamist dream of the Muslim Brotherhood. To this long list belongs El-Sisi's current quest.

Only Mubarak, "a civil servant with the rank of President," as Ajami famously described him, escaped the temptation.<sup>8</sup> There is much to fault the man for, but one thing is certain: unique among Egypt's modern rulers, he lacked the imagination of grandiosity. Early on in one of his first interviews, he was asked what it felt like sitting in the chair of Nasser and Sadat, each a giant in his own right. Oblivious of the meaning, Mubarak offered the chair to the interviewer. Decades later, as Mubarak was nearing the end of his rule, a prominent intellectual urged him to grant Egypt a democratic constitution to "enter history," as he put it. Although older, Mubarak was still the same man. "I am not into history or geography," he replied.

For a while, Egyptians were content with the man that fate and Khaled Islambouli, Sadat's assassin, had given them. Better the mediocre officer than Omar Abdul Rahman, the Blind Sheikh, many reasoned. But the country grew tired of the man. The lesson would not be lost on his successor. Egypt demanded more than mediocrity. It found its peace in quests for grandiosity, even quixotic ones, as el-Sisi's certainly is. "To rule Egypt is to rule against the background of these expectations and disappointments," Ajami warned.

Today el-Sisi is testing these assumptions. He has managed to do what Mubarak never could: tap into Egypt's sense of greatness. Mubarak ruled the country for thirty years, but as Ajami said, "He had done it without bonding with the country." El-Sisi, by contrast, speaks the language Egyptians long for, even if some have doubts of its applicability. He talks of making Egypt great again: "Egypt is the Mother of the world and will be as great as the world." Like the pharaohs of old and the giants of modern Egyptian history—Mohamed Ali, Ismail, Nasser, and Sadat—he is obsessed with grandiose projects, real and imagined: in

a new Suez Canal to equal Ismail, or in a fanciful design to build a new capital. Egyptians are tempting fate again in their eternal pursuit of greatness. The disappointment that will surely follow will be greater than ever.

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The country feels trapped, cheated, and shortchanged in the battle between an inept, authoritarian state and a theocratic fringe. (Ajami, "The Sorrows of Egypt")

The Egyptians whom Ajami encountered as he delved deeply into the country were hardly satisfied. Rumblings of discontent could be heard as the mediocre officer elected himself to a third term in 1993, but few alternatives presented themselves on the horizon. There was the Wafd, Egypt's historical national party. It had returned twice to political life after Nasser had buried it, but each time was less spectacular than the last. In 1978, something stirred in the ancient land as the pasha of old, Fouad Sergeddin, spoke to an audience estimated at a quarter million in Alexandria. But Sadat quickly made his move and crushed the moment of enthusiasm. In 1984, it was the courts that returned the Wafd to political competition, but the times and the Wafd had changed. The party forged an unlikely alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood and lost what remained of the luster of old in the process. Those who claimed the liberal mantle in 2011 would repeat this history.

Nasserites there were aplenty. For a man who lacked a coherent ideology beyond his sense of pride and grandiosity, Nasser had nonetheless managed to create millions of die-hard worshippers. But the mantle of Nasserism, attractive as it was, found none to fill the vacuum the giant had left. It was not for lack of trying. Egyptians and foreign leaders from Libya's Muammar Gaddafi to Iraq's Saddam Hussein sought the role, but few could perform the act as well as the ultimate actor himself. The regime could be attacked from the left on every domestic and foreign issue, from its slow liberalization of the economy and abandonment of the Nasserite central economy to peace with Israel and increasing dependency on America, but no alternatives rose to seriously challenge it. Hamdeen Sabahy, the last of the actors seeking the role, would find a moment of sunshine following the revolution, but few could take the man seriously in his quest to fill Nasser's shoes.

There remained only the Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood had been crushed by Nasser, but it found a welcome surprise upon the emergence of its remaining leaders from prison: an Islamist revival in the universities. Absent this revival, it was likely the Brotherhood would have died an uneventful death. The Brotherhood was lucky, quickly utilizing the opportunity to rebuild. But with opportunity came a challenge. It no longer was the only Islamist force in the country. Many of the Islamist university leaders found a different path, from the more theologically grounded Salafi Call to the more militant Gama'a Islamiya. That divide within the world of Islamism would continue to baffle the group and would help bring about its downfall in 2013.



It was Gama'a Islamiya which posed the greatest challenge to the regime in the '90s. A fierce battle ensued, and the state was at times under severe stress, but ultimately it won. The opponent never had a chance, As Ajami had predicted, the state was too strong. But if the state defeated the insurgency by 1998, the victory came at a steep price on two fronts. One was immediately obvious, as Ajami noted, in "a discernible retreat on the part of the regime from secular politics and culture." In truth, the regime could only be blamed in part. Times had changed. Egyptian society was on the path of Islamization. Saudi financial support for Islamists certainly helped, and so did the migration and return of millions of Egyptians from the Gulf. But something else was at play here. With the defeat of Nasserism, Islamism was the only remaining ideology competing for the hearts and minds of Egyptians. Islamists liked to chant at the time that Egypt had tried East (Nasser) and West (Sadat), and each had failed to deliver. Why not give Islam a chance?

The second price of the state's victory would only become clear over time. With the end of the Islamist threat, there was little reason for Egyptians to tolerate their mediocre ruler. It would take thirteen years, but the seeds of Mubarak's eventual doom started the day the choice was no longer between him and the Blind Sheikh.

Ajami brilliantly captured the tension in Egypt's self-consciousness, "between Sadat's world, and its temptations and its window on modernity, and Islambuli's world, with its rigors and its furious determination to keep the West at bay . . . There is no resolution in sight for this dilemma."<sup>9</sup> Little has happened since to ease this tension. The revolutionary moment, the Brotherhood's short stint in power, and its violent removal have all reinforced this tension and widened the gap in Egyptian society. The Brotherhood had claimed a resolution to this tension. The failure at modernity and the temptation of Islam as the basis of identity and politics found an imagined resolution in the fantasy of an Islamist modernity. The idea was, of course, hardly new. Jamal al Din al Afghani and Mohamed Abduh had laid the groundwork for the project, and the Brotherhood claimed the mantle, but the project was a travesty at best.

The Muslim Brotherhood had miscalculated. It believed its own rhetoric that Islam and the group were synonymous, mistaking the country's religious conservatism for support for its project. It misjudged the mood in the country. Few Egyptians would shed a tear for Mubarak, but that hardly meant welcoming a truly revolutionary moment that never seemed to end. Most important, and remarkably, the Brotherhood had failed to understand Egyptians. Many were happy to cheer the previous underdog as the safe alternative in a revolutionary moment, but few would tolerate that same underdog acting like their new masters. In the end, it was the Brotherhood's smugness that proved its undoing.

In 1995, Ajami accurately wrote that "it is no consolation to Egyptians that they have been spared the terror visited on less fortunate places like Syria or Iraq or the Sudan." More than two decades later, such confidence is misplaced. Egyptians have tried the revolutionary



dream and found it wanting. As they look around them, across the region there is nothing but misery. A common phrase heard in Egypt for the past few years captures the changed mentality: “Isn’t it better than being like Syria and Iraq?” Such is the reality of Egypt today. Reality after all can turn the most committed lovers of clouds into lovers of prostitutes, to paraphrase Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski.

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Egypt was the last to proclaim the pan-Arab idea, the first to desert it. (Ajami, “Sorrows of Egypt”)

For a country that had “given Arab nationalism the concrete reality it came to possess,” as Ajami wrote in his book, *In This Arab Time*, Egypt’s relationship to the pan-Arab idea could not be weaker, nor its relationship with Arab countries more complicated.<sup>10</sup> True, Egypt—whether under the pharaohs, independent Islamic dynasties that emerged in the country, or even its modernizing ruler, Mohamed Ali—had gazed on the lands to its east, but such adventures were those of empire and glory played in strange lands, milked for their resources.

By the time the winds of nationalism had touched the Arabic-speaking lands to its east, the country had already tasted them decades earlier, formulating an independent Egyptian nationalism. Content with its sense of identity, aspiring for a place among the advanced nations of Europe, Egypt had little interest in the stirrings of Arab nationalism. Saad Zaghloul, the leader of Egypt’s nationalist movement in 1919, had famously replied to a suggestion of an Arab union with “zero plus zero equals what?”

Even when the idea of Egypt’s involvement in the affairs of the troublesome east was suggested, such involvement was not driven by any sense of national solidarity but rather by hard-core national interests. A cynical observer of Nasser’s Arab nationalism would not be entirely mistaken in seeing it as another Egyptian attempt at hegemony. The cynic would find affirmation in Egypt’s colonizing governance of Syria, dubbed as a union between the two countries in 1958.

Egypt’s adventure in the east had given it nothing but pain. In the hot sands of Sinai, it had learned the lesson well. It is customary today to talk of Egypt’s declining position in the Arab world as the result of decades of stagnation under Mubarak, but in reality the man who had waved the white flag was Nasser himself. In the famous Khartoum Summit, he had given three no’s to Israel, but a yes to Saudi Arabia’s King Faisal. His successor would only follow suit. Egypt was done with the Arab world’s troubles. The Lebanese were the first to discover the new reality in their civil war; the Palestinians would follow them quickly. The Egypt of the 1930s and ’40s, despite being occupied by the British, could engage in dreams of hegemony. The Egypt of close to a hundred million people, struggling to feed them, could not afford such luxuries. Ajami sensed the winds early on: “Egypt’s primacy in Arab politics is a thing of the past.”<sup>11</sup>



But if Egypt's Arab adventure came to an end, its complex relationship with its surroundings cannot be escaped. Writing in *The Arab Predicament*, Ajami brilliantly captured this tension: "Egypt is both the Arab world's most accomplished state and one of its poorest—a tough combination, difficult on Egypt's pride and on those states in the Arab world that have to deal with Egypt." Nothing exemplifies the tension more than Egypt's relationship with the Gulf in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. A country for which the past is forever present cannot help but remember old days and remain fixated on them, days when the cover of the Kaaba in Mecca was supplied every year by Egypt, when the Egyptian convoy would provide for the deprived tribes of the Arabian peninsula, or when Egyptian doctors, engineers, and judges built these newly independent countries. A glorious past, a miserable present of surviving by Gulf handouts . . . Egypt's relationship with the Gulf is shaped by a deep superiority/inferiority complex that has no resolution.

It is with this complicated history that el-Sisi has to grapple. While many have pointed out that his foreign policy is a mere continuation of his domestic one—from fighting Islamists to supporting order—something else is at play. El-Sisi recognizes the changed dynamics in the region. Ajami warned that "Egypt can no longer render services that are no longer in demand."<sup>12</sup> Nor for that matter can it offer services it no longer is capable of providing.

So while el-Sisi has paid lip service to notions of Arab solidarity and has promised Egyptian military support in case the Gulf's security is threatened, when the moment of truth came in Yemen, he backtracked, offering only minimal support for the Saudi coalition. Egyptians had not forgotten what their Yemen adventure cost them in the 1960s, and no offer of Gulf financial support can change that. Nor does the country have a role to play in countering Iran. Those dreaming of a Sunni alliance in which Egypt takes part are bound to be disappointed. Far from the sectarian divides of the Levant and the Gulf, the whole Sunni-Shiite competition is alien to a people who, while Sunni, plead for miracles at the mosques of Al Hussein and Sayeda Zainab in Cairo.

It is in Libya, however, that el-Sisi's realism appears in full. Those who assume his support for Haftar is driven by some design for stabilizing Libya could hardly be more mistaken. Egypt is incapable of stabilizing Libya. That, as Ajami wrote of confronting Iran, "is an assignment for an imperial power." The best el-Sisi can hope for is for the Libyan menace to be played out away from the Egyptian borders. As long as Haftar controls the border areas, the Libyans can kill each other till kingdom come, as far as Egypt is concerned. Ajami feared that "a pan-Arab wind, a pan-Arab temptation, has lately emerged in Egypt. It is the return of an old consolation that brought Egypt failure and bitterness." El-Sisi, to his credit, has been immune to the pan-Arab temptation.<sup>13</sup>

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For much of its history, Egypt's geographical location in Africa meant little for its people or rulers. The pharaohs had expanded a bit south, but there was little of interest there, beyond the plunder of some resources. Notice, for example, the strong reaction of Egyptians whenever black Africans claim the pharaohs as their own. Racism, a deep vice in Egypt that is never acknowledged, certainly plays a role in the modern Egyptian attitude and indifference to Africa, but something deeper is at play. The Mediterranean and the Levant are where Egypt's gaze has always been. Invasions and inventions, ideas and religions—those were the exclusive products of Egypt's north and east.

Not so with the river Nile. Herodotus called Egypt “the gift of the Nile,” and he was not mistaken. Around its banks, ancient Egyptians built their civilization. Concern for the river's flow has never been far from its people's and rulers' minds. Down there, beyond anywhere the ancient Egyptian army under the pharaohs had reached, lay a powerful kingdom: Ethiopia.

The connection with the country from which the river came would only deepen throughout the centuries. It was the Copts who brought Christianity to the country, supplying its bishop for more than fifteen centuries. Islam had known Ethiopia, its early followers escaping there from the persecution of the unbelievers in Mecca before they built their state in Medina. For centuries, Egypt's relationship with Ethiopia revolved around those two pillars: religion and the river. Throughout those centuries, Coptic popes played center stage in both: as the religious authority for Ethiopia and as mediators to ensure the Nile flow was not affected.

Mohamed Ali's invasion of Sudan put the two countries in direct sight of each other, but his gaze was, like all rulers of Egypt, to the north and east: to the source of modern weapons and technology and the lands ripe for empire. It would fall upon his grandson, Ismail, to bring the two countries to war. Aware that all great European countries had empires in Africa, and obsessed with becoming one, he plunged his military into two wars with Ethiopia that brought Egypt defeat twice. In a little known chapter of history, his adventure was led by American officers, both Confederate and Union, unemployed after the Civil War. The travesty of the enterprise would be supplied by Ismail himself, who upon sending his army south commented, “My country is now in Europe, it is no longer in Africa.”

Bankruptcy soon followed and, in its wake, occupation. Egypt would forget Ethiopia, but the reality of the river remained and, with its flow, the tension: the two rivals at the river's source and at its final resting place in the Mediterranean, far and yet constantly present. This deep history of tension and mistrust received its suitable historical examination at the hands of Haggai Erlich, an Israeli historian, in his superb book *The Cross and the River*.<sup>14</sup> In the preface he wrote, “As a student of both countries' history, I was aware of their historic interdependence, of their mutual strategic, cultural, and religious relations. I was also aware of their failure, through many centuries of meaningful relations; to cope together with the challenge of the great river . . . a common, long-term, multifaceted history continues to send double messages, blurring an aggravating issue.”



No issue occupies Egypt today more than the Ethiopian question. Egyptian journalist Mohamed Hassanein Heikal dramatically proclaimed that only two issues were matters of life and death for Egypt: national unity between Copts and Muslims and the flow of the Nile. He was being dramatic with the first—national unity was an illusion invented to hide continued discrimination against Copts—but he was not mistaken with the second. Ethiopia, long viewed from Cairo as a backward country, is modernizing and, more important, is witnessing a demographic explosion, having surpassed Egypt in population. With the demographic pressure comes the need for water and electricity, both tied to the river. The agreement governing the river was arranged by the British, who favored Egypt for its cotton industry supplying the mills of Lancashire. Ethiopia, however, will no longer accept the injustice.

The dam being built in Ethiopia presents a threat to Egypt's national interest and survival. A war once again with Ethiopia is not unimaginable. Egypt's recent purchases of arms have often confused observers. Why would a country facing a growing insurgency in Sinai buy all these heavy and advanced weapons? A conflict with Ethiopia cannot be far from Egyptian decision makers' minds. There in the south, on the Nile's banks, and not in Sinai or Libya, will be el-Sisi's greatest challenge. There he will have to make his move.

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The film *The Visit of the President* is set in an Egyptian village in 1974. A rumor spreads among the inhabitants that the American president will be visiting the village with his Egyptian counterpart. Few are untouched by the fervor. Dreams of promotions, improvements, and economic prosperity are unleashed. A forgotten place, by a miracle of an American visit, will be transformed, putting the village on world maps. But the president must not see the reality of the villagers' conditions, and to prepare for the visit the inhabitants need to change their ways. For an hour, we follow the changes in behavior and attire: new haircuts, cowboy hats, jeans, American flags flying everywhere, and the orchestra rehearsing. The climax of the movie is in the last scenes. The villagers gather around the train station wearing Western clothes. They are well prepared, the orchestra is ready to play, but the train passes by. It never stops in the village. Its windows are never opened even for a glimpse of the great preparations. All that it leaves behind is dust.

The film was produced in 1994. Its authors were hardly fans of the United States or excited by Egypt's growing dependency on America. Instead it was meant to ridicule, to mock those who had dreamed of an American prosperity and deliverance for the country. But the film captured a true moment of enthusiasm that has been long forgotten in Washington: Nixon's 1974 visit to Egypt.

For more than two decades, Egypt's relationship with America had been fraught with tension. One was a country removing the shackles of occupation and exploring its surroundings in search for a role, the other was a superpower inheriting a world the

British had formed, equally in search of opportunities. Both were discovering a new world. For a moment, Eisenhower had placed his bet on a young Egyptian officer, Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Americans helped with his negotiations with the British and provided some assistance, but relations quickly soured. Nasser's worldview had no room for the new Western power. The two countries butted heads in the Baghdad Pact, on building the High Dam, and during the unity with Syria as American troops were deployed to Lebanon to protect the fragile country from being swallowed by Nasser. Kennedy would try once more, providing wheat shipments and attempting to engage Nasser. Johnson would recognize the futility of such efforts. Nasser had to be contained and defeated, not engaged.

Next to his visit to China, Nixon's Egyptian adventure appears minute, but that should not blind us to its significance. Like China, Egypt was an ancient land, a land where men in the mold of Alexander and Napoleon had dreamed. Ajami brilliantly captured the excitement in *The Arab Predicament*: "Ancient civilizations stir the imagination: They have a kind of malleability that enables others to read into them what they want; they could be hotbeds of revolution or fragile entities ready to be courted and redeemed. They invite those who have a sense of destiny." For Nixon, who had long lived in the shadow of Eisenhower, there must have been something sweet in the fact that it was he and not Eisenhower who finally managed to solve the riddle.

Both Nixon and Sadat were invested in the visit. In preparation for Nixon's visit, the US Agency for International Development donated new ambulances to Egypt. The sight of them remained with Egyptians, who were accustomed to Soviet-style vehicles, for a long time. Wheat packages were distributed across the country, all carrying the logo and name of USAID. Sadat's decision to abandon the Soviet camp and place his bet on America was driven by his desire for a settlement with Israel and the return of occupied Egyptian territory, but the economy was also on his mind. He had seen America and been to the Soviet Union, and the contrast left its mark on him. America could offer peace but it also held the promise of economic prosperity. Egypt would be rewarded for its new orientation and would soon be showered with economic aid.

It was inevitable that Egypt would be disappointed. The Americans generously provided aid, but it was never enough. By the eve of Saddam's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the country was close to bankruptcy. The price paid for the alliance with America was equally heavy. The Arab League should never be taken for a serious institution. But Egypt being kicked out of the organization, an Algerian elected as its secretary general instead of an Egyptian, and the headquarters moving from Cairo carried enough symbolism for a country that had little to celebrate but symbolism. The Arab boycott, Egypt's loss of leadership in the region—the humiliation was too much to bear. It was inevitable that a country incapable of facing its own failures and taking responsibility for them would blame America. Egypt had placed a bet on America and America had failed it.



As large as the level of enthusiasm was the depth of the ensuing disappointment and backlash. It was apparent to Ajami in 1995 that “for all the vast aid the United States has poured into Egypt over the last two decades, there is in the air as well a curious free-floating hostility to American ideals and interests, a conviction that the United States wishes Egypt permanent dependency and helplessness.”<sup>15</sup> There was little that America could do to change that new reality.

Today, many in Washington are disappointed with Egypt. Those arguing that the fracturing of the alliance is el-Sisi’s fault are, however, mistaken. Egypt was always a problematic ally. The historical record is long: Mubarak lying during the Achille Lauro incident and Egypt’s attempt to smuggle missile components from the United States for its secret missile program during Reagan’s tenure; Egypt’s flamboyant foreign minister, Amre Moussa, leading the charge against economic cooperation with Israel across the region for fear of Israeli economic dominance; Mubarak encouraging Arafat not to compromise during the Camp David Summit, leading Thomas Friedman to pen an open letter to Mubarak wondering “what exactly we are getting from our relationship with Egypt” during Clinton’s tenure; and Mubarak’s refusal to reform that shaped his uneasy relationship with George W. Bush.

The problem with the current argument is not just the fact that it is hardly new. The problem is that it fails to take note of the other side—of its own disappointments with America. The history is equally long here: the peace dividend never materialized, the aid declined over the decades in both amount and value. The association with America was never popular with Egyptians: the Americans never seemed to understand or value the price the regime was paying for the association locally and regionally, and the weapons were never as advanced as those delivered to Israel. To make matters worse, Washington was now pressuring the regime on democratization and pushing for change locally through its support for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Mistrust is a two-way street and the Egyptian regime had its reasons to rethink its relationship with Washington.

El-Sisi’s pivot to Moscow is often understood in those terms. Russia has become a source for weapons the Americans have denied Egypt, and for the first time in decades the Russian military has been given access to Egypt with joint military exercises and exchanges. But it would be a mistake to read the warming of relations as a mere attempt to balance Washington or play the two superpowers—a term Russia is no longer entitled to anyway—against each other. Russia can offer things America can’t. Three million Russians visited Egypt in 2010 at the height of its tourism success before the revolution, representing over 20 percent of all tourists. The return of Russian tourism to Egypt after the 2015 Metrojet bombing is a priority for any ruler of Egypt. But more important, el-Sisi sees his future and his country’s in Putin’s Russia. A great country, falling in despair, threatened by failure, a man rising from its “deep state” to save it, a revival of Russian power locally and abroad—el-Sisi cannot but hope that he would follow in Putin’s path, taking him as a role model.

An earlier generation of Egyptian military officers developed deep ties to the Soviets under Nasser, but the relationship brought them disappointment. The Soviets acted as colonizers, insulting the ancient country's sense of pride. Sadat was not alone in concluding that the relationship had brought Egypt misery. The current generation of Egyptian military officers, trained by the United States, has not learned that lesson. That, perhaps more than anything else, is the ultimate failure of the relationship. It would be a travesty for them to repeat the story again with Russia, but then again, repeating history in hope of a better result is certainly an Egyptian specialty.

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In civilizational and psychohistorical terms, Egypt's crisis was a trauma to other Arabs. If Egypt was faltering and its society was falling apart, what then was to become of the Arab world? (Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament*)

Travel across the Arabic-speaking world and a common theme emerges. It is encountered in the pitiful eye of strangers and in the questioning eye of the academic: what has happened to Egypt and the Egyptians? Egypt's decline throughout the past decades could hardly be ignored, but a certain allure of that land has remained in the collective memory of the peoples living around it. Size, demography, history—the reasons were varied, but something of the greatness of Egypt has been retained in the Arab consciousness. Egypt may have been spared the fate of Syria or Libya, of Yemen or Iraq, but neither the country's view of itself nor the regard its neighbors have for it would allow this to be a consolation.

Many observers would happily point to the country's president as the reason for Egypt's dismal state. Arabic speakers used to the stirring speeches of Nasser are confused by the incoherent ramblings of el-Sisi. His speeches have become legendary: from describing himself as the “doctor of philosophers,” to claiming to have had nothing but a bottle of water in his refrigerator for ten years, to insisting he would sell himself if that would help the country (a line that quickly resulted in Egyptians offering him for sale on eBay). More confusing for outsiders is the fact that he still enjoys widespread support. It is not simple resignation to the only available alternative that is at play here, nor is it mere toleration of a better condition than others, but rather genuine enthusiasm and support. For all his flaws, he has managed to strike a chord in his nation's heart.

El-Sisi is not the cause of Egypt's sorrows, merely its inevitable product. The man who rules Egypt today is a mere reflection of the country's state: his weaknesses shared, his illusions common, and his flaws its own.

Writing in 1995, Ajami could confidently proclaim, “Contempt for the government there is aplenty in Egypt today, but the political and cultural continuity of the place has not ruptured.” The statement, true at the time, has increasingly become obsolete. A country that



proudly thinks of itself as the only true and natural nation-state in the region—think of Tahseen Bashir’s famous line about “tribes with flags”—finds itself torn apart. Many, writing of the state of Egypt today, are fond of proclaiming a return to the previous order: a military general replaced by another. Such imaginary descriptions fail to notice the difference between el-Sisi and Mubarak. More important, they fail to register the enormous upheaval the revolution represented. That the revolutionary tsunami failed in imprinting its dreams on the country should not be mistaken for a failure to affect and destroy.

Egypt is a torn country, its social fabric in tatters. There is no reason to think of Egypt today as above the disarray and state collapse that we have witnessed elsewhere all across the region. Such assumptions have long held sway as Egypt’s image of a modern country above the sectarian and ethnic divides of its surroundings has been taken for granted. In reality, Egyptian nationalism was never as solid as imagined, its social fabric never as strong as portrayed, and its divides much deeper than acknowledged. At every level, Egypt is today a torn country: between the Brotherhood and its enemies, between Islamists and non-Islamists, and between Copts and Muslims. No resolution appears in sight for the divisions.

Egypt’s quest for a place under the sun has taken its toll on the country. “Egypt has thrashed about in every direction, flirted with ideologies of all kinds—liberal ways, Marxism, fascist movements, Islamic utopias—but the urge for national progress, and the grief of being so near and yet so far, have defined the Egyptian experience in the modern world,” Ajami wrote.<sup>16</sup> Every new quest has been met with enthusiasm and each has ended in failure. Each failure has in turn only increased the enthusiasm for the next endeavor for deliverance, for a land that has known few true moments of happiness of late. At a certain point, the burden of failure is bound to break the country’s back. Few young Egyptians would choose to remain in the country if given a chance to emigrate. It is a tough combination. “To rule Egypt today is to rule a burdened state on the banks of the Nile and to rule it without the great consolations and escapes of the past,” Ajami brilliantly argued.<sup>17</sup>

Writing in 1995, he warned that “the danger here is not that of sudden, cataclysmic upheaval, but of the steady descent into deeper levels of pauperization, of the lapse of the country’s best into apathy and despair, of Egypt falling yet again through the trap door of its history of disappointment.” Today that danger is a reality. He did hold out hope for the country. “Egyptians who know their country so well have a way of reciting its troubles, then insisting that the old resilient country shall prevail. As an outside observer who has followed the twists of the country’s history and who approaches the place with nothing but awe for its civility amid great troubles, I suspect they are right.” Today no such hope is possible. Egypt’s decline is irreversible, its misery by now deeply rooted and its sorrows profound. The picture is not pretty. It is bleak. But it is real. It is this picture, the reality of failure, the sorrows of the land, the potential collapse, the weight of history and demography, that the United States has to grapple with.



Does Egypt deserve better than its current state? Perhaps. Is it capable of better? Probably not. Many years from now, Mubarak may be fondly remembered as the best ruler Egypt has had in its modern history—not because he was great, but precisely because he never tried to be. Such is the plight of Egypt, such is its burden.

## NOTES

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