



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Problem of Egyptian Identity: A View from Within

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,465, March 2, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Having toppled the Egyptian monarchy in the July 1952 coup d'état, the country's new military rulers reshaped its identity. The Kingdom of Egypt became the Arab Republic of Egypt, moving farther toward pan-Arabism. This embrace of pan-Arab identity had far-reaching adverse consequences that stalled Egyptian progress while drastically affecting the way Egyptians see themselves, their neighbors, and the world.

I am an Egyptian, and I have some inconvenient questions.

How did Egypt descend from the status of a great civilization that once fascinated the world to a position of insignificance bordering on irrelevance? What principles and values do Egyptians stand for? What defines us as a nation? What shaped our beliefs and convictions? Why do we view Palestinians as friends and Israelis as foes? Why do we have a strategic partnership with the US though the average Egyptian believes, as do most Arabs, that the US is a vile state that conspires with Israel against them? We have a peace treaty with Israel, but to so much as contemplate visiting that country is considered an act of treason. Why do we say one thing and do another?

Egypt is in the state it is in because the Egyptian people embraced an identity that was imposed on them—an unnatural and unhealthy state of affairs. We maintain a strong attachment to the same people who almost completely obliterated our way of life, resulting in an Egypt that is a shadow of its former self.

If Egyptians are to regain the world's respect and lay the foundations of a healthy, just community, we must reinvent our country. This will entail rethinking our alliances. We must abandon the pan-Arab identity imposed on

us by our military rulers. We must moreover reject the convictions and beliefs that were foisted upon us during the many years of Arab occupation.

Scots don't call themselves English. West Africans whose countries were once occupied by France don't call themselves French, though, like us, they speak the language of their colonizer. Why do Egyptians identify as Arab despite factual evidence to the contrary, including recent DNA analysis that shows that we are no more than 20% Arab?

The history, context, and effects of the Arab Islamic conquest and occupation of Egypt around the year 640 CE presents enough material for multiple PhDs across many fields of study. However, the damage to Egypt caused by its forced embrace of an Arab identity can be broken down into just a few factors.

1. A persistent belief in conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories are rife across the Arab world. Though the phenomenon is not confined exclusively to that world, nowhere is it more pervasive. Recent research shows that people are more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories when they feel helpless and under threat—a state of mind that is integral to pan-Arabism, which enforces the dual notion that the West and Israel are perpetually conspiring against Arabs and that, owing to the West's perceived support for Israel, there's not much that can be done about it.

This state of pre-determinism does Egyptians a great disservice. The conviction that the country's future is out of our control, and that state policies are merely a reaction to an existential external threat (supported by an Egyptian "fifth column"), is nothing more than a convenient excuse for our own failure to achieve anything worthwhile since the "July 1952 Revolution." Consider, for example, the widespread belief among Egyptians in the antisemitic slander the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Instead of working to establish a democratic, healthy community, Egyptians content themselves with the belief that they are hapless victims of a group of sinister "others" who held secret meetings to decide their future along with that of the entire world. Why try to shape our country's future ourselves? The dark powers arrayed against us are too great. All we can do is pray and hope it won't turn out too badly. Such is the will of Allah.

2. Double standards

Arabs apply different standards to different situations as it suits them. The Islamic colonization of Egypt is referred to by Muslims and Egyptians as the *Fatah*, or the "opening," implying there was no conquest by force but rather a peaceful, miraculous embrace of Islam. They categorically refuse to

acknowledge that the Islamization of many countries, including Egypt and all its North African neighbors, was the result of the threat or enacting of violence. In the next breath, the same people accuse Israel and the Jews of attempting to “Judaize” the region, even before the establishment of the state of Israel.

The pan-Arab icon most skilled at applying such double standards was President Gamal Abdel Nasser. He gave brilliant fiery speeches railing against the West and its alleged conspiracies to destroy Egypt—while issuing presidential decrees to dismantle ancient Egyptian temples and monuments and give them to the US, Britain, and other Western states. He lectured the Egyptian people on the need to sacrifice everything one holds dear for liberty and independence while imprisoning thousands who were only guilty of disagreeing with him (and executing many of them).

3. A history of failure

A European defense professional once told me he always found it mystifying that the EU and NATO are more capable of working together smoothly than the Arab states. Unlike the Arabs, these organizations’ member states don’t share a common language, and they have a recent history of devastating wars—yet they somehow manage to collaborate successfully.

The Egyptian youth of today understand this, and openly acknowledge that pan-Arabism is a failure. Though it is in the Arabs’ interest to work together productively and there is great potential inherent in such cooperation, they have proven incapable of succeeding at it for an abundance of reasons.

Perhaps chief among them is that the main figures who advocated a united Arab front (from Nasser, to Hafez Assad, to Saddam Hussein, to Muammar Qaddafi) were ruthless, self-serving dictators whose leaderships skills were greatly exaggerated. Nasser is now widely ridiculed on social media and described by many young people as a “gun firing blanks.” He made a lot of noise, but lost every war or significant military campaign in which he was involved.

There is also the problem that Egyptians don’t want to be overshadowed by any other Arab entity. Some Egyptian scholars argue that the United Arab Republic (UAR), as the short-lived Egyptian-Syrian union (1958-61) was known, meant that, for the first time since the establishment of ancient Egypt around 3150-3100 BCE, the country ceased to exist. Egyptian passports issued during that period made no reference to Egypt. While some glorify those times, arguing that they were the good old days of unity unlike the frustrating modern era of division and conflict, most people—particularly millennials—are either indifferent to this unity or entirely unaware of it. And in any event,

the argument that the UAR represented successful Arab collaboration is easily disproved by the fact that not only was the union short-lived, but it was marred by internal disputes and attempts by each country to dominate it. Far from proving the great potential of pan-Arab unity, the UAR is evidence that pan-Arabism is a failed project.

As Egypt gradually gives up its pan-Arabism, a substitute will be sought to fill the vacuum. The timing is perfect for Israel and the Western nations to design a strategy that enables Egyptians to communicate with their Jewish neighbor and the West without fear of reprisal from the country's unforgiving security apparatus. As Egyptians learn about the world around them, they will come to appreciate values that safeguard human rights and dignity. This, in turn, will make them much more inclined to associate with countries like Israel, whose citizens are generally happier and safer and whose rights are protected by the rule of law.

Luqman El-Masry is the pseudonym of an Egyptian intelligence and political analyst who specializes in the Arab-Israeli conflict. He has been involved in peace-building processes and initiatives and worked with prominent politicians across the region.