

August 20, 2006

SHIFTING SANDS

And Now, Islamism Trumps Arabism

By [MICHAEL SLACKMAN](#)

CAIRO

SHE grew up in Cairo with the privileges that go to the daughter of a military officer, attended a university and landed a job in marketing. He grew up in a poor village of dusty unpaved roads, where young men work long hours in a brick factory while dreaming of getting a government job that would pay \$90 a month.

But Jihan Mahmoud, 24, from the middle-class neighborhood of Heliopolis, and Madah Ali Muhammad, 23, from a village in the Nile Delta, have come to the exact same conclusion about what they and their country need: a strong Islamic political movement.

“I have more faith in Islam than in my state; I have more faith in Allah than in [Hosni Mubarak](#),” Ms. Mahmoud said, referring to the president of Egypt. “That is why I am proud to be a Muslim.”

The war in Lebanon, and the widespread conviction among Arabs that [Hezbollah](#) won that war by bloodying Israel, has fostered and validated those kinds of feelings across Egypt and the region. In interviews on streets and in newspaper commentaries circulated around the Middle East, the prevailing view is that where Arab nations failed to stand up to Israel and the United States, an Islamic movement succeeded.

“The victory that Hezbollah achieved in Lebanon will have earthshaking regional consequences that will have an impact much beyond the borders of Lebanon itself,” Yasser Abuhilalah of Al Ghad, a Jordanian daily, wrote in Tuesday’s issue.

“The resistance celebrates the victory,” read the front-page headline in Al Wafd, an opposition daily in Egypt.

Hezbollah’s perceived triumph has propelled, and been propelled by, a wave already washing over the region. Political Islam was widely seen as the antidote to the failures of Arab nationalism, Communism, socialism and, most recently, what is seen as the false promise of American-style democracy. It was that wave that helped the banned but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood win 88 seats in Egypt’s Parliament last December despite the government’s violent efforts to stop voters from getting to the polls. It was that wave that swept [Hamas](#) into power in the Palestinian government in January, shocking Hamas itself.

“We need an umbrella,” said Mona Mahmoud, 40, Jihan’s older sister. “In the 60’s, Arabism was the

umbrella. We had a cause. Now we lack an umbrella. We feel lost in space. We need to be affiliated to something. Usually in our part of the world, because of what religion means to us, we immediately resort to it.”

The lesson learned by many Arabs from the war in Lebanon is that an Islamic movement, in this case Hezbollah, restored dignity and honor to a bruised and battered identity. People in Egypt still talk painfully about the loss to Israel in 1967, a loss that was the beginning of the end of pan-Arabism as an ideology to unite the region and define its people.

Hezbollah’s perceived victory has highlighted, and to many people here validated, the rise of another unifying ideology, a kind of Arab-Islamic nationalism. On the street it has even seemed to erase divisions between Islamic sects, like Sunni and Shiite. At the moment, the Hezbollah leader, Sheik [Hassan Nasrallah](#), is widely viewed as a pan-Arab Islamic hero.

“The losers are going to be the Arab regimes, U.S.A. and Israel,” said Dr. Fares Braizat of the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. “The secular resistance movements are gone. Now there are the Islamists coming in. So the new nationalism is going to be religious nationalism, and one of the main reasons is dignity. People want their dignity back.”

The terms Islamic nationalism and pan-Islamism have a negative connotation in the West, where they are associated with fundamentalism and terrorism. But that is increasingly not the case in Egypt. Under the dual pressures of foreign military attacks in the region and a government widely viewed as corrupt and illegitimate, Islamic groups are seen by many people as incorruptible, disciplined, efficient and caring. A victory for Hezbollah in Lebanon is by extension a victory for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

“People will say Hezbollah achieved a very good thing, so why should we mistrust the Muslim Brotherhood,” said Hassan Naffa, a professor of political science at Cairo University.

There is a wide diversity of views and agendas under the pan-Islamic-Arab umbrella. But as is often the case in politically aligned movements, those differences are easily papered over when that movement is in the opposition.

“Hezbollah is a resistance movement that has given us a solution,” said Yomana Samaha, a radio talk-show host in Cairo who identified herself as secular and a supporter of separating religion and government. But when asked if she would vote for a Muslim Brotherhood candidate in Egypt, she said “Yeah, why not?”

It was an answer she seemed reluctant — but relieved — to state.

“If they have a solution,” she repeated, “why not?”

A solution to what?

“Loss of dignity,” said Mona Mahmoud, who is her friend.

Concepts of individual and collective identity are fluid here. During the British occupation of Egypt, a rise in Egyptian nationalism helped lead to independence in the early 1900's. After the revolution of 1952, Gamal Abdel Nasser led the country and the region to seek unity under the banner of Arabism. That was a theme trumpeted by leaders from Col. [Muammar el-Qaddafi](#) in Libya to [Hafez al-Assad](#) in Syria to [Saddam Hussein](#) in Iraq.

But according to many political scientists and intellectuals, the glue of pan-Arabism began to weaken in Egypt after defeat in the Arab-Israel War of 1967, a decline that quickened through the 1970's and into the 1980's.

"People think that this defeat was a punishment from God because we drifted far from the teachings of Islam," said Gamal Badawi, an Egyptian historian.

Since then there has been a steady and visible change in many Egyptians' relationship to political Islam. It is not that Egyptians are suddenly more religious, political analysts said. This has always been a religious country. It is that they are more apt to define themselves by their faith. On the streets, that is most evident in the number of women — an overwhelming majority — who cover their heads with Islamic headscarves, a sign not just of individual conviction but also of peer pressure.

"The failure of pan-Arabism, the lack of democracy, and corruption — this drives people to an extent of despair where they start to find the solution in religion," said Gamal el-Ghitany, editor of *Akhbar al-Adab*, a literary magazine distributed in Egypt.

Echoing that view, Daa Rashwan, an expert in Islamic movements and analyst with the government-financed Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, said, "People have come to identify themselves more as Muslims during the last five years in response to the U.S.-led 'war on terrorism' which Egyptians frequently feel is a discriminatory campaign targeting Muslims and Islam worldwide."

But it is not just outside pressures that have pressed so many people of this nation, and this region, toward that view. The events that helped shape Mr. Muhammad's world view from his Delta village illustrate the way the government of Egypt also plays a role.

Last December Mr. Muhammad's uncle, Mustafa Abdel Salam, 61, was shot in the head and killed by the Egyptian police as he was going to pray at a mosque, according to witnesses, including Mr. Muhammad and other villagers. The killing occurred on the last day of voting in Egypt's parliamentary elections, a months-long process that was marred by police officers who were ordered to block voters from getting to the polls in many districts. The government grew concerned after candidates affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood began winning in record numbers. While the brotherhood is banned, candidates affiliated with the organization ran as independents.

The government says that the police did not fire live ammunition at citizens, but many people were killed and doctors and witnesses — including Western diplomats — said that the police did fire live rounds into people trying to vote. After the election was over and Mr. Abdel Salam was buried, the

brotherhood-affiliated candidate visited the family to offer his condolences and help. The winning candidate, from the governing National [Democratic Party](#), did not visit.

Mr. Muhammad said that the whole experience strengthened his conviction that “Islam is the solution” — a phrase that is the slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood. “Our voice is not heard,” said Mr. Muhammad. “It is only the authorities who have a say. The smallest thing, like we go to vote, and we get beaten. So I will hold on to my religion, and that’s it.”

Mona el-Naggat contributed reporting from Egypt for this article, and Souad Mekhennet from Amman, Jordan.

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