Egypt is one of a restricted group of developing countries whose politics have assumed a special significance as test cases of opposing models of development. Egypt shares with India, China, Algeria, Yugoslavia and Cuba the analytical interest of partisan and academic observers for the light its experience may shed upon the competing theories of development and for the possibility that its history may reveal a unique and unanticipated model.


**Introduction**

Towards the end of the 1970s, as the opening up (*infitah*) toward the west and the liberalization of the economy were sharply criticized as "betrayal" of the 1952 revolution’s goals, as return of the exploitative bourgeoisie, and as abandonment of the Palestinian cause, certain observers, Egyptian and foreign, began to lay out a new "model" for the reading of contemporary Egyptian history. This model attempted to view Egypt’s various “experiments,” before and after the revolution, from a common perspective; it also made it possible to explain the “cycles” through which Egypt has ultimately failed to “modernize” and regain the place among nations that its millennia of history allows it to demand. Muhammad ‘Ali and Nasir, breaking with a past of national humiliation, both incarnated Egypt’s “will to power” by basing restoration of its regional and international role on a state economy heavily reliant on industry and the construction of a national armed force: the failure of both projects was brought about by conjunction of the “perverse” consequences of their own options and methods, and by the hostility from coalitions of external interests, alarmed by the regional role to which Egypt aspired. The successors of Muhammad ‘Ali and Nasir, Isma’il and Sadat, both betrayed or distorted their predecessors’ “developmentalist” aims and sacrificed the public good and Egypt’s independence to the
mercantile interests of a class of speculators and unscrupulous businessmen that served as a wedge for foreign penetration. The crucial point here is the repetition itself and the way these successive “cycles” may be articulated: Nasir “repeats” Muhammad ‘Ali, precisely because, under Isma’il, the work of his grandfather had been swayed from its objectives; in the same way, if Sadat “repeats” Isma’il, it is because the conditions that had led to Muhammad ‘Ali’s failure were still in force, producing the same effects, and enabling the articulation of something that may appear as a “law” pertaining to the specific history of Egypt.

By stretching the logic of this model to its most contemporary limit, one may state that if Muhammad ‘Ali and Nasir, Isma’il and Sadat seem to correspond, from one century to another, Hosni Mubarak has not yet found his destiny, nor, by the same token, have the figures who anticipated him: Ahmad Fu’ad I, the autocratic modernizer who established a number of institutions under which Egypt continues to live today; or Faruq, the tyrannical libertine and friend of unscrupulous businessmen, during whose reign the “national bourgeoisie” failed to assume its historic role, and who was ousted by a revolution. Having failed yet to acquire its own identity, Hosni Mubarak’s regime is presented as having inherited a situation characterized by the determinations – and contradictions – of the two preceding regimes – “a complex inheritance of the Nasser and Sadat eras.”

For another observer, Mubarak’s Egypt is “the hybrid result of the opening up of an economy, dominated by the state under Nasser, to the international capitalist market,” and thereby submitted to the “cumulative constraints of the eras of Nasser and Sadat.” A third view reflects uncertainties supposedly expressed by Egyptians themselves about the “real” identity and intentions of their president: “A crypto-Nasserist waiting to leap forward with a capital N on his chest” (for those who fear that Sadat’s infitah will be questioned); “a Sadatist in every way except by name” (for those who fear that the “gains” of the 1952 revolution will continue to be dismantled at the same, or an even more rapid, pace).

This “model,” the simplistic and overly mechanical nature of which has been elsewhere discerned, does not serve here simply as a rhetorical device or a straw man: one may see in it the most contemporary realization of a more general and comprehensive paradigm that aims at nothing less than Egyptian permanence, virtually from pharaonic antiquity to the present day.

Within the logic of this paradigm, “understanding Egypt” – writing its history, describing its social or political systems, and decoding present ideologies – involves highlighting long-term, quasi-ecological continuities linked to the relation between river and desert, while showing how the breaks, apparent or effective, that create the rhythm of this long history – changes in language, religion, foreign masters – recompose the meaning of continuity while confirming it.

From the vantage point of Egypt’s most contemporary history, which may be said to have begun on July 23, 1952, the question posed by this dialectic concerns the inaugural status of the Free Officers’ movement. The official writing of the Egyptian republic, as well as that of most observers, scientists and journalists, and even of its most resolute opponents, who see in this movement the cause of all the country’s present ills, all concur on this point. On the one hand, what is at question is the impact of breaks caused by the Free Officers’ movement in the underlying continuities of Egyptian society with respect to the ancien régime; on the other, a question is posed about the relation Nasir’s heirs have to this inaugural moment: do they pursue the revolution by other means or betray the hopes inspired and that it brought, as Muhammad ‘Ali had to the middle of the last century, to the beginnings of fulfillment.

Moreover, the continuity-break paradigm raises the main questions that every attempt to write Egypt’s contemporary history must pose. More than any other period, post-revolutionary Egypt has been the object of abundant literature, especially in English, renewed at each of the “breaks” – here, changes in regime – that create the rhythm of this history. Considering the three regimes that have successively taken command of Egyptian social formation since 1952 in terms of “continuities” and “breaks” consists, in most works, in answering three questions.

The question of relations between the elite and the masses is double-barreled. On the one hand, it concerns relations between the state and what is today commonly designated “civil society”; and, on the other, the way social forces may exert control on the state and transform that control into economic benefit, whether by maintaining the status quo or redividing the spoils. How has the evolution in modes of power distribution taken place? What were the conditions for exercising power, from the ancien régime to the revolution, from Nasir to Sadat and Mubarak? How have resources been distributed and mobilized, both those of scarcity (land and water, capital), and those of surplus (labor)? What are the “class bases” and interest systems that preside over the periodic reorientations of public economic, social, and educational policies?

A second question concerns the relations between internal and external constraints. Several factors tend to make the “balance” between these one of the “structuring” questions in approaches to contemporary Egyptian
history. The starting-point here is the contrast between Egypt's status as former "colony" and its determination, never denied, to act in its regional environment in the name of Egyptian "centrality," of Arab or Islamic solidarity, or of non-aligned third worldism. On the one hand, the role of exterior constraints – access to arms, foreign assistance (especially food aid) – are examined in relation to the recomposition of the Egyptian political system and/or the economic strategies applied. On the other, the question concerns internal conditions, especially the increasing difficulties faced by the authorities in satisfying the demands of a country undergoing a demographic explosion.

The third basic question observers pose deals with the relation between "identity" and "modernity." Here a "theoretical" reinterpretation of the two preceding relations is posed, whereby it is necessary to show how they are articulated and interact to outline the field of the "possible" in the framework of Egyptian continuity, an almost mandatory exercise in every attempt to enunciate the meaning of contemporary Egyptian history. According to one's point of view, the question addresses either capacity of elites to induce change in society with the imported apparatus of modernity under conditions of unequal exchange, or society's capacity for resistance or effective reappropriation in the face of authoritarian modernization. The purpose here is to evaluate the real impact of profound breaks – sociological, cultural, spiritual – brought about by reconstructions of the political system (renewal of elites, of action systems) and of economic management strategies (redistribution, reallocation of resources). Were the relations between elites and masses, between Egypt and the west, significantly transformed by political independence and the modernization of management systems? In many studies, the dialectic between "identity" and "modernity" takes the form of a constantly renewed confrontation between "Islam," as both the most demanding and the most active component of Egyptian identity, and the state, as the only possible promoter and vector of modernizing rationality. The relative failure of pan-Arabism as a possible realization of the Egyptian identity actually seems to have convinced most observers that the religious dimension of this identity – the almost exclusive source of legitimacy, mode and model for mobilization, utopia, and reality of social relations – is indeed, in the final analysis, the main "challenge" confronting those who aspire to the modernization of this society, and that its future depends on the outcome of this confrontation: continuation of an "authentic" backwardness or construction of a modernity imbued with identity.

From coup d'état to revolution

When the Free Officers took power in Cairo on July 23, 1952, under General Muhammad Najib, the conspirators' "true" identity, but also that
of the movement bringing them to power, was problematic. It has often been said that the second-rank officers forming the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) had no program, almost no ideology, and barely any “philosophy.” The military may have constituted the “armed hand” of the movement, but its militant base and its links to society were made up of two trends that could not be reconciled and that the new regime immediately repressed: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Marxist left, to both of which certain officers were linked.

In terms of how it presented itself and was received by observers, diplomats, and journalists, the Free Officers movement, approved at first by all Egyptian political parties, appeared as an expected, necessary reaction to the “anomie” of which the 1948 disaster in Palestine, the proliferation of peasant revolts, and the burning of Cairo on January 26, 1952 constituted obvious symptoms. Faruq’s forced abdication and exile on July 26, like the dissolution of political parties on January 16, 1953, could still be presented as public safety measures — “a painless lancet blow on a stinking abscess,” according to one colorful expression.5

The first agrarian reform,6 promulgated on September 9, 1952, one of the first actually “revolutionary” measures of the new government, shed very little light on its identity and its options: at the time of its promulgation, the agrarian reform could also appear as a public safety measure, and one advocated before 1952 at that by certain wealthy land owners among others. Limiting land ownership to 300 faddans per family, creating a cooperative system for the beneficiaries of redistribution, and regulating relations between land owners and renters, the law of September 1952 applied to fewer than 2,000 land owners — including the royal family, whose possessions were confiscated — and only 450,000 faddans. Those who owned excess land were authorized to sell it at a price fixed at seventy times the land tax within a time limit of a month and a half starting from the law’s promulgation, unsold land being requisitioned by the state in return for indemnities fixed at ten times the rent value of the land increased by the value of equipment and machinery, including even the price of trees. Clearly, nothing overly threatening to property rights was implied, especially in light of the fact that the new regime had not hesitated, on August 13, 1952, to order troops to open fire on workers who had occupied the textile factory of Kafr al-Dawwar, belonging to the Misr group, in order to obtain salary raises; nor had it hesitated to hang two “leaders” of the strike, who were accused of counter-revolutionary activities.

5 J. and S. Lacouture, L’Egypte en mouvement (Paris, 1956), 146.
The episode of the “tripartite aggression” of 1956, where some of the options with the heaviest consequences for the Officers’ regime were sketched out, did no more to shed light on its identity. The episode began in September 1955, with the purchase of Czech weapons by Egypt, in retaliation for the west’s refusal to arm a regime whose precise political identity remained vague and which stubbornly refused to enter into military alliances that the USA and Europe were attempting to establish in a bid to contain the “Soviet threat.” Despite the new rulers’ repeated anti-communist declarations, the role played by Egypt in the foundation of the “non-aligned” movement at the Bandung conference, in April 1955, contributed to convincing the American administration to withdraw the support it had granted the movement by announcing, on July 18, its refusal to participate as arranged in financing the construction of the Aswan high dam. The announcement on July 26, 1956 of the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the revenue from which, according to Nasir, would finance this construction, certainly had “revolutionary” consequences as a precedent and by virtue of the blow it struck against post-colonial interests; it remained, nonetheless, a “retaliation” that testified to the continued vigor of Egyptian nationalism, but without giving explicit content and identity to the regime that incarnated it. Nasir’s capacity to transform the military defeat of the Egyptian troops at Suez into a political and diplomatic victory did not force Egypt to “choose sides”: the retreat of the French, British, and Israeli troops, in fact, was imposed by the combined pressure of the USA and the USSR.

Even the first nationalizations of 1956–57, which struck French and British interests in return for the tripartite aggression, then those directed against Jewish, Armenian, or Syrian–Lebanese interests, did not in themselves constitute a break with respect to the logic of Egyptianizing the state and the economy, already begun in the 1920s with the foundation of Bank Misr: what was especially “revolutionary” about a decision to make the boards of directors and the capital of all commercial banks and insurance companies operating in Egypt Egyptian? Granted, the property seized during this first wave of nationalizations was maintained in the public domain under the control of an “economic organism” created in January 1957; confiscated wealth was not returned to the private sector. But most of the directors of the “Egyptianized” banks kept their positions, and the first five-year plan – a revolutionary innovation indeed – still reserved 79 percent of projected investments for the private sector. The constitution of this public-sector embryo, on the basis of economic assets which the tripartite invasion provided the opportunity of seizing, may appear as the outcome of

the struggle begun by the 1919 revolution, leading as it did to the decisive liquidation of the appropriation of Egypt and its resources by foreign interests after political independence.

Emergence of the Nasirist state

If there is indeed a break, one must seek it no doubt in the way that the conflict between General Najib— who fulfilled the functions of president of the Republic (proclaimed on June 18, 1953) and of prime minister—and Nasir, at the head of the RCC where the regime’s decisions were made—was settled in February–March 1954. What was at stake in this conflict was henceforth phrased in polemical terms: the “return of the military to their barracks”; the return to a parliamentary system (demanded by the elements making up the “United Front”—the representatives of the dissolved parties, but also certain “leftist” Officers) versus the return of the ancien régime and the exploitative pashas under the cover of corrupt and corrupting parties, especially the Wafd, the Officers’ bête noire and the party sure of winning any election. The support of the army and the decisive backing of the trade unions would allow Nasir to wrestle General Najib to the ground, leading to the latter’s arrest and the assumption by Nasir of the presidency and the functions of prime minister.

This stabilization of the balance of power within the military hierarchy allowed the regime to turn against the only two forces still capable of contesting the autonomy of the military apparatus-made-government after the liquidation of the Wafd: the Egyptian communists, who had broken with the Free Officers’ movement after the leaders of the strike at Kafr al-Dawwar were hanged, and the Muslim Brotherhood, guilty of having taken Najib’s side in his showdown with Nasir. The repression of these two groups could be described as “symmetrical” in that it reflected the double weakness inherent in the Free Officers’ ascendancy system. Between 1952 and 1958, the repression of the communists was sporadic: it struck trade unionists, teachers, or militant peasants whose action could endanger the revolutionary order by radicalizing the demands of the masses; simultaneously, the regime encouraged the structuring of a “legal left,” and of which the daily publication of al-Misa, established in October 1956 by Nasir himself, with Khalid Muhi al-Din as editor-in-chief, became the main rostrum. The (apparent) paradox is that the “great trial” of the Egyptian communists began the very day after the “historic” visit of the Egyptian head of state to Moscow, in April 1958, reflecting the reversal of Egypt’s alliances and its entrance into the “anti-imperialist” camp. It is precisely because Egypt was entering the Soviet orbit (for arms supplies, financing, and carrying out its industrialization, by welcoming a constantly increasing number of experts and “advisors”) that the activity of groups of a communist persuasion
became unacceptable. The refusal of the Egyptian Communist Party – created on February 28, 1958 by the fusion of different factions of this persuasion – to dissolve itself so that its members might rally individually to the National Union provided the pretext for sending hundreds of communist cadres and militants to the camps, accused of taking orders from Moscow just when the USSR and the socialist bloc had been designated as Egypt’s strategic allies. With the communists, what provoked the regime “preventively,” as it were, was the risk that professional militants, making up a vanguard and equipped with a “globalizing” ideology, would put pressure on the state by using its capacity to organize the demands of the masses. That the regime would later use “repentant” communist militants, after the self-dissolution in January 1956 of the ECP, shows that it was this “globalizing” ideology that the regime rejected while preparing itself to establish new means and methods of social and economic control directly borrowed from the political systems produced by that same ideology.

The first confrontation between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood⁹ began when the association was dissolved in January 1954, and with the revenge-assassination attempt on Nasir in Alexandria by a Brother, which provided the pretext for violent repression – the hanging of six leaders and hundreds of arrests. Officially, the society still pursued the goals that its founder ascribed to it: it was an association for mutual help and spiritual consciousness-raising and solidarity, a youth movement – anything but a political party, even if the “secret apparatus” created in the 1930s did not balk at political assassinations. It thus managed to evade the dissolution that struck others in January 1953 in this way; it leaders also aspired to impose their “guidance” on the Free Officers – indeed, to impose on all their policies, notably in matters of education, sexual morality and culture. With the communists, the regime had to deal with relatively marginal groups, “cut off from the masses” despite their pinpointed organizational capacities; the Muslim Brothers constituted, after the liquidation of the Wafd, the only structured, hierarchical political force on a national scale, disposing of an organizational culture directly rooted in its social environment. More than a party or a secret organization, the Muslim Brothers, who recruited among the effendis and the workers much more than in religious circles, tended to gather under their jurisdiction the functions of mobilization and infra-political practices, formerly the province of craft guilds, Sufi brotherhoods, and self-help associations. This was a sociological opposition, as it were, as shown by the number of Brothers the regime found it safer to detain between 1954 and the end of the 1970s, not to mention those executed after summary trials or simply eliminated in the camps. Among these was Sayyid

Qutb, the association's main ideologue, hanged on August 29, 1966, under the pretext of plotting against the state but in fact because he was the first to coin a phrase that was to have extremely serious consequences. By denouncing the "jahiliyya of the 20th century" – unbelief and those who serve it, justifying the launching of a new internal jihad – Sayyid Qutb laid down the framework of the recurring competition between the modern authoritarian state and the radical militant fringe of the Islamic trend for the control of values tied to religion. This very violence of the repression of the Brotherhood by the Nasirist regime demonstrated that this regime continued to consider these the central values of Egyptian society.

The crucial point is that the cadres of the Brotherhood and the communists, and the officers controlling the state, encompassed the same social determining factors – education, social mobility, and reformist trends. To paraphrase Mahmoud Hussein, a faction of the petty bourgeoisie in the process of constituting itself as state power liquidates its direct competitors; yet the objectives of the Officers and those of the Brotherhood, or the way they represented society, did not differ radically, apart from the way they were phrased and systems of legitimization on which they rested.

A philosophy for the revolution?

Hence the importance for Nasir's regime to articulate a "world vision" justifying the army's retention of power, while allowing it to stand up to the competing ideologies of the Marxists and the Brotherhood by retrieving socially effective values. The two main "options" – Arabism and confrontation with Israel – upon which this world vision was constructed may be analyzed as the product of "circumstances," i.e., of political conjunctions, but they may just as well be the necessary results of history or geo-politics.

Taking a "diffused" Arabism as harking back to the Great Arab Revolt, which in any case took place in the Fertile Crescent rather than in Egypt itself, the first Arabist expressions in Egyptian discourse accompanied Nasir's efforts in 1955 to create obstacles to the signing of the Baghdad pact, whereby Great Britain attempted to counterbalance its evacuation of the Canal Zone. But the "unitarian" Arabist argument put forward to isolate the Iraqi monarchy, which was tempted to place itself under British protection, was clearly not conclusive since the Iraqi revolution that overthrew Faysal in 1958 adopted a violently anti-Egyptian position. The union Egypt concluded with Syria in February 1958, which gave birth to the United Arab Republic (UAR – the name by which Egypt was officially designated until

July 1971, when it became the Arab Republic of Egypt) seems to have been not so much the result of “conscious” Arabist aims of the Egyptian leadership as the starting-point for reelaboration of Egyptian nationalism, the “positive” ideology Nasir’s regime needed to face the liberals, Muslim Brothers, and Marxists. To support this reading, we may cite the fact that the very initiative for union came from the Syrian Ba’thists, who were anxious to consolidate their position vis-à-vis the “bourgeois parties” and who applied strong pressure on the hesitant, if not outright skeptical, Nasir. Further, it is clear that the Egyptian project in Syria was limited to attempts to organize Egypt’s grip on the “northern province” – and achieved the unanimity of the Syrian parties, headed by the Ba’th, in opposition. A military coup d’état, supported by Syrian business circles opposed to the application in Syria of “socialist measures” adopted in Egypt (see below) put an end to the union in September 1961. “Arab socialism” was thus the product, not so much of the experience of unity with Syria, but of the very failure of this experience: priority was given to defending and deepening the revolution in Egypt itself, both center and vanguard of the Arab nation, while conditions were awaited for its generalization in other Arab states, classified, according to their attitude toward the Egyptian leadership as “progressive” or “reactionary,” with King Faysal’s Arabia leading the latter.12

As for the second “option” upon which the world vision of the Nasirist leadership was based – confrontation with the “Zionist entity” – its analysis runs the risk of being anachronistic, all the more so since the subsequent evolution of the Israeli–Arab conflict has tended to confer upon it a certain fatality or ineluctability which was not necessarily acquired at the time of the 1952 revolution.13 Much more than the rapid consolidation of the Zionist state created in 1948, the main issue for Egyptian diplomacy, until the signing of the December 1954 accords on the evacuation of the last British troops, was the Sudanese question (Egypt, as a matter of tactics, had assumed that the majority of Sudanese would vote for joining Egypt in an independence referendum of 1956). The 1948 defeat obviously played an important role in the genesis of the Free Officers’ movement, but it is not equally clear that the Egyptian army’s perception of the Zionist “fait accompli” was the same as that imposed after 1956. If, in Philosophy of the Revolution, Nasir was particularly forthcoming about the humiliation felt by the Egyptian military forces, he emphasized mainly the Egyptian, internal factors of this defeat – corruption, the elites’ betrayal. In contrast, the tone adopted with respect to Israel was remarkably “neutral”: it was Great

Britain’s maneuvering, much more than the Jews’ ambition to acquire a state, that was denounced. There was still room, it seems, for negotiated cohabitation between Arabs and Jewish colonizers, if only the latter had broken with the colonial logic that had created the “Jewish homeland,” allowing Zionism and Israel itself to be depicted as “progressive elements, in contrast with the rotten Arab regimes of the Middle East.” The participation of Israel in the “tripartite aggression” of 1956 posed, not the question of Israel’s existence, but that of the Nasir regime’s capacity for regional leadership. Only at the time of the break with Syria did confrontation with the “Zionist entity” acquire its definitive status in the production, by the Egyptian regime, of the meaning of history in the making and in its management of the system of external and internal constraints to which it linked its survival. On the internal front, the role of vanguard assigned to the armed forces in the country’s preparation for the inevitable battle was confirmed; on the regional front, Arab unity, under Egyptian leadership, would guarantee victory over the Zionist enemy and the liberation of Arab land; on the international front, battling Israel was only the local facet of the struggle that set the Arabs in general, and particularly Egypt, against imperialism and its agents – “imperialism, Zionism, and Arab reaction,” in the vocabulary of the time – and through which the connection with the third world was established after the signing of its “birth certificate” in Bandung by Nasir, Chou En Lai, Tito, and Nehru.

Revolution within the revolution

The relaunching and radicalization of the agrarian reform program, in July 1961, was an implicit admission of the first phase’s failure. At the beginning of the 1960s, redistributed land accounted for around 10 percent of the total cultivated, and benefited fewer than 250,000 families. Proprietors of under five faddans may well have risen from 35 percent of landholdings to 49 percent at the end of the 1950s – notably because large land owners sold off surplus lands to the peasants who worked them – but this implied that the number of micro-proprietors, the size of whose landholdings did not allow them to wrench themselves out of misery, had grown. Further, land redistributions having benefited mainly those who owned or rented small holdings, landless peasants and seasonal laborers seem to have been those most neglected by the 1952 reform. One of the most significant consequences of this first phase of agrarian reform was the decline of absenteeism in rural areas, which tended to strengthen, between micro-holdings and what remained of the large holdings, a layer of intermediate proprietors (five

to fifty faddans: “Egyptian kulaks, which the regime [was] intent on consolidating, and which it [would] surround by an increasingly large layer of small landowners.” 16 With the “socialist measures” of July 1961, the maximum limit of ownership was reduced to 100 faddans per proprietor (against 200 previously, or 300 per family), with prohibition on renting more than 50 faddans. Almost 250,000 extra faddans were thus redistributed, to which were added, between 1962 and 1964, the lands belonging to sequestrated individuals (around 45,000 faddans), and those confiscated by the Higher Council for the Liquidation of Feudalism (HCLF), created in 1966 (see below). In total, the amount of land redistributed between 1952 and 1969 is estimated at a little under 1 million faddans, benefiting approximately 320,000 families.

The agrarian reform had been well received by industrial and banking circles; the wave of nationalizations that made up the second part of the July 1961 “socialist measures,” and the increasingly widespread recourse to sequestration and expropriation as means of political control, did as much to alienate from the revolution those designated as “national capitalists” by posing in radically different terms the question of the officers’ economic identity: “socialism” or “state capitalism” in the jargon of the time. With the promulgation of laws 117, 118, and 119 of 1961, the essential financial apparatus and non-agricultural means of production in fact passed under the state’s direct control: the entire banking sector was nationalized, as were insurance and transport; heavy or “strategic” (especially chemical and pharmaceutical) industries, textiles, sugar refineries, and the production of basic foodstuffs were nationalized; public works and construction, hotels, department stores, cinemas, theaters, newspapers, and publishing houses all underwent the same process. Around a hundred enterprises not directly affected by the nationalization law were forced to convert 50 percent of their shares to public property, while individuals holding portfolios – almost 44,000 stockholders – had to hand over to the state their shares above a ceiling of LE10,000. Income over LE10,000 per annum was subjected to a tax rate of 90 percent. “Few developing nations, other than those explicitly professing Marxism, have cut so deeply as Egypt into their private sector.” 17

In 1956 a ministry of industry had been created, headed by ‘Aziz Sidqi and guaranteeing, through an economic development organ, the management of nationalized economic and commercial establishments and the setting up of major infrastructural projects. After the creation, in 1957, of a national planning council, transformed into a ministry in its own right in

1960, the “socialist measures” of 1961 gave the signal for complete reorganization of the productive apparatus: 438 public enterprises — but also those enterprises of which 50 percent belonged to the state — were divided among thirty-nine “General Organizations” operating on a sectoral basis, placed under the supervision of relevant ministries, with activities coordinated by the plan; the main nationalized banks were also assigned specialized sectors in which to intervene; external trade was placed entirely under state control and subjected to the priorities of the plan.

Arab socialism or Arab application of socialism?
The National Action Charter (al-Mithaq), adopted by a “National Congress of Popular Forces,” in May–June 1962, asserted the meaning of the “socialist measures” and the objectives they pursued by providing them with both a doctrinal translation — “scientific socialism” and/or its “Arab application” — and a political interpretation, through the creation of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU). For all the vigorous slogans, what was tentatively elaborated through the 1962 charter appears as essentially “reactive.” In the history of the revolution’s genesis as presented by the charter, the succession of failures undergone by the national movement made military intervention necessary, and demanded the “socialist solution” since the capitalist path “could not but reinforce the political power of the class which owns and monopolizes resources.”18 The ideology crystallized in the charter was, again, “reactive” in that the notion of socialism it elaborated was primarily explained in negative terms: exclusion of communism or Marxism, presented as “symmetrical” to capitalism insofar as they imply, as it does, one class’s absolute domination in society; negation of the class struggle, not so much as reality but as a modality for resolving social conflict, which it is precisely the state’s role to arbitrate; and exclusion of even the doctrinal dimension of this socialism. Nazih Ayubi has identified its character: essentially “technical,” “instrumental” within both official and intellectual circles, which prefer to call the Egyptian doctrine “Arab socialism,” thus avoiding all suspicion of theoretical or practical connection with Marxism, while authorizing, at the same time, the introduction of spiritual, nationalist, or religious elements in the formulating of this doctrine.”19 In this logic, “socialism” could be summed up as the refusal of exploitation — “creating a sort of economic equilibrium among citizens which allows justice to be achieved” — provision of equal opportunities for all and the preservation of national unity, identified as “democratic interaction among the forces of the working population: fallahin, workers, soldiers,

intellectuals and national capital,” of which the Arab Socialist Union presented itself as the guarantor. As for the “scientific” nature of that socialism, it placed the priority of industrial development within a strategy of import substitution, centralized management of agriculture with respect to “hydraulic” imperatives, and the urgency of making the management of public affairs more rational and moral. Finally, the Officers’ regime did not succeed in controlling fully the values that a posteriori, appear as much more central and loaded than Arab socialist stances, especially those linked to religion, those actors that were not completely integrated into the official political scene – or were even hostile to the revolution – still exerting a firmer grip over these than did the revolution’s ideologues.

During debates of the National Congress of Popular Forces, held in May 1962, and preceding adoption of the Charter of National Action, a challenge came from within the regime’s ideological apparatus: Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali of al-Azhar virulently denounced the “secular” nature of the charter. The relay baton was taken up in al-Azhar’s higher echelons, through a communique demanding that “Islam, the official religion of the State, permeate the laws of the State, educational curricula, social mores, the orientation of the media, family ties, and all assistance provided by the State to society and individuals,” and that “the paragraph of the Charter relating to equality between men and women be completed by the words: within the limits of Islamic religious law.” Numerous “conservative” claims tumbled into the breach opened by the ‘ulama’, challenging especially the stand of the charter relating to “workers’” and “peasants’” representation, fixed at half the seats in all elections. Kamal al-Din Husayn, at the forefront of the Free Officers and, like Muhammad al-Ghazali, close to the Muslim Brothers, took the initiative in mediating between Nasir and challengers within the congress, by proposing that a commission be created to study possible amendments. The text of the charter put forth by Nasir was finally adopted unanimously and without amendment after the decks had been stacked with “Nasirist” delegates, but the ten-point report of the commission was to be “annexed” to the charter. One of the most significant aspects of this report was the distinction it established between “Arab socialism” and “the Arab application of socialism,” which was to fuel future discussions. It was much more than just a Byzantine debate: it revealed the problem posed by a distinction between modernity, whose principal “effects” were recognized as imported, and “identity” or “authenticity,” which some always feel are threatened. Arab socialism, i.e., the realization in Egypt and the Arab world of a universal which would allow a Hegelian-type vanguard to remodel heritage and give it access to modernity itself, was opposed to an Arab – or

\[20\] Quoted in Abdel-Malek, Egypte, 315.

\[21\] Al-Ahram, June 14, 1962, quoted in Abdel-Malek, Egypte, 324.
rather, Muslim – *application of socialism*, i.e., the borrowing system
effected in another thought form through a filter of demands of loyalty to
the Self. In the interval between these two “readings” is the nexus of the two
symmetrical imperatives of ideological construction: to show that the
socialism applied by Egypt was already anticipated or germinated in Revela-
tion, which it has simply made concrete – this, for instance, is the method
employed by Shaykh Hasan al-Bakri, former leader of the Muslim Brothers
who passed into the service of the revolution in his capacity as minister of
Waqfs, and of Mustafa al-Siba’i, the Syrian Muslim Brother who, in his
*Socialism of Islam*, published in 1959, provided the regime with one of its
rare “breviaries,” to show that none of the policies adopted by the revolu-
tion contradicted divine command by explicitly setting out the terms of their
compatibility – for example, within this logic al-Sanhuri, at the beginning of
the 1960s, set himself the task of producing a synthesis of reformed Shari’ā
inherited from Muhammad ‘Abduh and his school, and the positive legisla-
tion in force.22

It is in this context that the second wave of repression that struck the
Muslim Brothers from 1965 on may be understood. After the 1954–55
offensive, which had led to the dissolution of the Brotherhood, the regime
had placed less pressure on the Brothers and encouraged a few of them,
such as the above-mentioned Hasan al-Bakri, to rally to the National
Union. It tolerated the activities of Zaynab al-Ghazali, of the Muslim
Women’s Association who, while assisting the families of prisoners or
released members of the Brotherhood, was working to reconstitute clandes-
tine networks linking Brothers inside and outside the country, especially
those who had taken refuge in Saudi Arabia. Further, the regime authorized
the creation, in 1958, of Dar al-‘Uraba, which published the writings of the
Islamic trend’s main theoreticians, among them Muhammad al-Ghazali,
‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Awda, and Sayyid Qutb. In 1964 Nasir himself ordered that
Sayyid Qutb’s *Ma’alim fil-tariq* be published – after it had been banned by
the censors – the author himself having been released for health reasons.
Several hypotheses have been suggested to explain the Nasir regime’s
position on the Muslim Brotherhood issue, an example of which was the
trap Nasir laid for the association: the systematic discovery of Sayyid
Qutb’s “manifesto” during searches of August 1964 confirmed, in the eyes
of the authorities, the existence of a “conspiracy,” denounced by Nasir in a
speech given in Moscow on May 30, where he threw suspicion on the
Brothers’ links with the American secret service, CENTO, and reactionary
Arab regimes – to wit, the Saudi monarchy, with which Egypt’s relations
were at their lowest point within the context created by the Yemeni civil
war – giving the signal for a new wave of repression. One wonders,

however, whether the opening given the Brotherhood between 1959 and 1965, a time when the regime hoped that it had definitely pulled the organization to pieces, reflected a temptation within Nasirist circles to retrieve not so much the Brotherhood’s ideology, but their capacity to manage politically those values associated with religion, for the great benefit, it was predicted, of the regime’s internal control system and regional influence. According to this hypothesis, it was only when it became obvious that the Brotherhood was in the process of reconstituting its organization clandestinely and, further, that this reconstitution was taking place with the blessings of the Nasirist project’s greatest competitor – oil-rich Saudi Wahhabism – that the repression of this ideology again became inevitable in 1965. Hence the necessary hanging of Sayyid Qutb himself – both the most committed ideologue among the Brotherhood leaders and previously the closest to the Free Officers and Nasir, to the extent that he had occupied an office in the RCC headquarters – despite the widespread condemnation that the execution aroused throughout the Muslim world.

Egypt: military society?

Relations between Nasir and Field-Marshal ‘Abd al-Hakim ‘Amir, frequently stormy, pose the question of the regime’s evolution, from the RCC’s collective authority to the extreme “personalization” of Nasir’s power starting from the beginning of the 1960s: schematically, Nasir, in order to rid himself of his rivals within the RCC – ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi and Khalid Muhi al-Din, advocates of more liberalism in the economy and in political life, Kamal al-Din Husayn, who was close to the Brotherhood – was forced to seek support not from the army itself, through which these rivalries ran, but from the type of control that Field-Marshal ‘Amir exerted on the armed forces. In this he provided the latter with the possibility of organizing the military as his personal fief. His behavior as commander of the “northern province,” during the union with Syria, and the way the war in Yemen was conducted, give an idea of the extent of autonomy ‘Amir’s “loyalty” to Nasir won him – an authority that Nasir tried in vain to restrict in May 1962 with the creation of a “presidential council” responsible for examining promotions to superior ranks in the army and with the field-marshals’ “promotion” to the rank of vice-president. Faced with ‘Amir’s refusal to relinquish his control over promotions, which was the cornerstone of his patronage network, Nasir had no choice but to give up his project, no doubt as much because ‘Amir’s clients would have remained loyal to him as because his eviction threatened to reinforce the networks of Nasir’s potential rivals in the inner circle of the Free Officers and the former RCC.
Within the logic of this system of relations, Nasir’s reply was to turn to the ASU, conceived as “a civilian counterpart to the military” or a structure whose vocation was to integrate, in competitive positions and within a framework allowing their control, the personal networks of the regime’s main figures. On one hand, ASU membership – almost 6 million in 1964 – and access to various positions of responsibility within it were organized on both professional and “sociological” bases: 50 percent of all ASU offices, like seats in parliament, were reserved for “peasants” and “workers,” while the rest were shared among various socio-professional categories: liberal professions, cadres, intellectuals. The stakes of the political power balance from then on became the definition of what was to be understood by “peasant” or “worker” – a power balance that tended to play itself out to the benefit of medium property owners, a’yan or “new kulaks” in the case of the former, whose posts in local ASU branches allowed them to ensure their control over cooperatives and mechanization units, and to that of union elites, in the case of the latter, encouraging what Nazih Ayubi describes as a “bureaucratisation of labour.” The ASU’s task was to control unions and professional organizations, as well as access to certain professions – especially journalism – or to certain functions – for example, those of university rectors or faculty deans.

The counterpart of the corporatist organization of ASU membership was the system of exclusions it applied to “the enemies of the people’s socialist revolution”: all those, that is, who were affected by the agrarian reforms of 1952 and 1961, the nationalization measures of 1960 and 1961, or those whose property had been sequestrated or who had been detained for corruption or abuse of power. At the beginning of the 1960s, some even suggested extending to the male relatives of former large land owners the “political isolation” that was also, in the nationalized Egypt of the 1960s, economic and social isolation – a suggestion that was in fact applied by the HCLF, created in May 1966 under Field-Marshal ‘Amir’s presidency. It is this isolation, far more than the revolution itself, that explains the emigration of an important part of the old economic elites, especially members of the Syrian-Lebanese community, who had played a major part in the establishment of the banking sector, industry, and the press.

Corporate-style integration of citizens on one hand, exclusion of the “enemies of the revolution” on the other: between the two, the ASU pursued a series of objectives, contradictory at first glance but reflecting the system of internal constraints to which the Nasirist regime was subjected – to mobilize, at the local level, through neighborhood, village, and factory

23 Waterbury, Nasser and Sadat, 216.
24 Ansari, Stalled Society, 97ff.
committees, the living forces of the nation. In other words, it set out to organize the reception and implementation of the regime's directives, while avoiding the constitution of new "feudalities" at the intermediary levels of the party and trade unions, capable of taking private benefits from its intermediary position and its connections with the "center of power"; to transform society "from above" in the name of socialist construction, and simultaneously depoliticize the class alliance on which the regime was based — "workers" and "peasants" — in order to avoid claims that could undermine "national unity."

Hence a permanent tension existed, "structural" one might say, a pendulum movement between the options and slogans of the more "radical" components (grouped around 'Ali Sabri and Sha'rawi Jum'a) and those of the more "moderate" groups (around Anwar al-Sadat and Zakariya Muhi al-Din) within the ASU. The creation in 1964 of the "political apparatus" (al-jihaz al-siyasi), also known as the "Socialist Vanguard" (al-tali'a al-ishtirakiyya), a true party within the party, dramatized the stakes of this tension. It is precisely because Nasir had given the ASU, directed by the "radical" 'Ali Sabri, the mission of controlling the government, the administration, the media, and the public sector, and, through them, society as a whole, that it was necessary to establish the means of controlling the ASU itself — the mission the Vanguard was assigned. The list of its members was kept secret, as was the scope of its prerogatives; everyone knew only that, through its main figures — 'Ali Sabri, Sha'rawi Jum'a, Sami Sharaf — it had control over the police and the main non-military information services. It also controlled the Youth Organization (munazzamat al-shabab), an important "reservoir" of militants, the ASU Committee on Ideological Questions, and the High Institute of Socialist Studies, the party's school for cadres.

The activities of the HCLF in 1967–67 illustrate, by pushing it to its paroxysm, the way this control system functioned. Created in May 1966, after the assassination of Salah Maqlad, a former Muslim Brother who had become secretary of the ASU committee in Kamshish (Minufiya), by the hitmen of a "feudal" family whose interests were threatened by his activism at the head of the peasants, the HCLF, presided over by 'Abd al-Hakim 'Amir and with members including the principal patrons of the "centers of power" (no doubt in order to implicate some of them in the repression of their own clients), was assigned by Nasir the task of uncovering all the cases in which the agrarian reform laws had been contravened by former or current "feudalists." Several hundred families were subjected to investigation throughout the country, almost 60,000 faddans were seized, and thousands of people related to the incriminated "feudalists" were divested of their functions in local administration, the party, the magistrature, and the security forces before Nasir himself, after the June 1967 defeat, admitted
that grave abuses had been committed and ordered that over 60 percent of these procedures be canceled.26

The paradoxes resulting from this control system have been studied and described elsewhere. The implementation of the most radical projects was systematically assigned to the most conservative "patrons": Husayn Shafi’i, the first secretary-general of the ASU, belonged to the right wing of the regime and was linked to the Muslim Brothers; Sadat, president of parliament, was expected to pass the most radical items of legislation; ‘Abd al-Hakim ‘Amir, placed by Nasir at the head of the HCLF, himself came from a large, land-owning family; while not a single representative of the Marxists with which the regime had concluded an alliance from 1965 onward was a member of the committee. In much the same way, the method different patrons used to manage their clients tended to encourage alliances "against nature": for instance, that of ‘Ali Sabri, the main middleman between the regime and the Soviet leaders and one of the government’s most radical elements, with ‘Abd al-Hakim ‘Amir, concerned with guaranteeing a flow of weapons, and whose conservative tendencies have been mentioned. The most paradoxical aspect remains the role played by the Marxists in the ideological and organizational orchestration of Nasirist socialism: less than six months after their release from the prison camps of the western desert, where communist militants and Muslim Brothers rubbed shoulders, and while Krushchev, visiting Aswan in May 1964 for the inauguration of the first phase of the high dam, was declaring that Egypt was indeed "building socialism," it was the Marxists (the Egyptian Communist Party was to announce its self-dissolution and the adherence of its individual members to the ASU in January 1965) who would provide Nasir with the personnel he needed to frame the radicalization of the revolution – precisely when anti-communism was on the agenda more than ever in Egypt. The ultimate paradox lies in the fact that the radicalization of the revolution as Nasir envisaged it – that is, as the way of breaking the "centers of power" that threatened his own – would contribute decisively to strengthening them. Ultimately, it aggravated the regime’s isolation from society until the collision with the "reality principle" – the repeated financial crises, starting in 1962, that reflected the regime’s inability to fund both industrialization and redistribution, and which inaugurated the difficult relations between Egypt and the IMF; and especially the disaster of June 1967, which laid bare the illusions of recaptured glory couched in the rhetoric of Arab socialism.

Return to the principle of reality

"After 1967, Egypt no longer had an economic plan or a political organization with clear objectives – Egypt’s socialist experiment in terms of economy

26 On these investigations, see Ansari, Stalled Society, 110ff.
had not lasted more than five years, and that of the socialist vanguard on political terrain, not more than two." Two contradictory hypotheses explain the political and economic failure of Nasirism and the genesis of the "counter-revolution" initiated by Sadat after his accession to power in autumn 1970.

For advocates of the internalist hypothesis, the reasons for this failure lie within the internal logic of the Nasirist project and the conditions of its authoritarian implementation, supported by the Soviet Union. While certain authors underline the remarkably favorable terms of socialist-bloc aid to the Egyptian economy – almost 600 million Egyptian pounds between 1958 and 1977, not counting arms supplies – and the decisive role played by this aid in the country's transition from an almost exclusively agricultural base to an industrial one, the sharpest criticism is directed toward the project of "industrialization through import substitution" itself, encouraged by the Soviet Union for "ideological" reasons: the creation of an industrial proletariat; priority placed on heavy industry; lack of financial realism, which made the country increasingly dependent on external sources of finance, in a context within which the regime did not intend – or could not afford – to sacrifice the improvement in the standard of living of its social base to the financial requirements of industrialization; lack of economic realism in a context within which, while funding the establishment of "outsized" industries, the socialist bloc imported only agricultural primary products (with a few exceptions); and the perverse effects of protectionist logic on labor productivity and the emergence of what Clement Moore designates as an "anomic division of labor," where middlemen received the lion's share. In other words, the "Arab socialism" implemented in Egypt in the 1960s was destined to fail from the outset, because of inherent contradictions that condemned its champions to a sort of "forward flight." The announced radicalism of policies is here seen only as the counterpart of the regime's "objective" failures in the country's economic development.

For the advocates – Nasirists and neo-Nasirists, Marxists, third worldists, and other Arab nationalists – of the externalist hypothesis, the failure of Nasirist development policies may be attributed to the explicit hostility of "imperialism, Zionism and Arab reaction," the adversaries designated by the Egyptian leadership. Within this logic, the possibility that the "Egyptian experience" would succeed, with the support of the Soviet Union, justified the "holy alliance" concluded to prevent the Nasirist regime from

27 Waterbury, Nasser and Sadat, 332.
28 For instance ibid., 391 ff.
“exporting the revolution” and achieving the unity of the Arab peoples as enshrined in the charter of the Arab League, based in Egypt since its foundation in March 1945. In another scenario, from the point of view of those less sympathetic to the Nasirist experience, the Egyptian leadership’s will to regional hegemony in the context of the cold war could only confront the imperatives of realpolitik followed by the two superpowers, concerned above all else with preventing the conflicts between their respective “clients” from escalating into direct confrontation.31

It is not our purpose here to favor one hypothesis or the other. Rather, we attempt to show how both may be articulated to reveal the stakes, both external and internal, of the options that constituted “Nasirism.” We may start with the evolution of relations between the Nasirist regime and “imperialism,” denounced as “enemy no. 1” of the Egyptian revolution. The question posed here is not so much that of whether the hostility of successive American administrations toward Nasir’s regime was real – nor, on the contrary, whether Nasir “really” stood up to the American superpower – as it is the way in which these antagonistic relations evolved and were expressed in discourse and reality. The USA’s initially favorable stance toward the Free Officers has been mentioned above: not only were the Americans the first to be notified that the coup was imminent, but, taking into account the discreet contacts made with the officers through their representatives, in July 1952 they had many reasons to think that “their men” had seized power on the banks of the Nile – an opinion shared by many of the new regime’s opponents, particularly among the left. Aid to Egypt within the framework of Point Four (the ancestor of today’s USAID) shot from less than $6 million before 1952 to $40 million only a few weeks after the coup, and Dean Acheson, the US secretary of state, asserted that Egypt could henceforth count on the USA’s “active friendship.” The withdrawal of this sympathy in 1955, when Nasir purchased weapons from Czechoslovakia after the American authorities had repeatedly refused to sell arms to Egypt as long as it was not a member of a regional military alliance under American leadership – a step that was evidently unacceptable to Egypt, so recently removed from British tutelage – has also been mentioned. The American reaction to the tripartite aggression and the terms of the ultimatum addressed to the French, the Israelis, and the British – exceptionally violent for a text involving “allies,” and which was further cosigned by the “Soviet enemy” – makes it possible to measure the stakes of this “sympathy” and the limits of the “antagonism,” brought about by the Czech arms affair, toward the new Egyptian leaders. For the USA, the main “merit” of Nasir’s regime was that it had just put a credible end to colonial rule, and America’s main “message” to its allies, in agreement with the

Soviets on this point, was that there was no question of restoring it in any form – in Egypt, but especially as far as British disengagement from the Arabian peninsula was concerned. At the very instant when the American administration was adopting measures of undisguised hostility toward Nasir’s regime – particularly the retraction of proposals to finance the high dam – it began a food aid program to Egypt that constituted significant support for the internal stability of Nasirist power: between 1954 and 1966, Egypt thus received American wheat shipments valued at $643 million, largely subsidized by the US treasury and paid for in Egyptian pounds. The shipments were not interrupted by the “socialist measures” of 1961–62, nor by the increasing penetration of Soviet cooperation in the Egyptian economy, which allowed one writer to observe that “the USSR helped Egypt industrialize while the US was helping feed its labor force.”32 The same author stresses that for the same period, and if Soviet military supplies are not taken into account, American aid to Egypt outweighed Soviet aid. One might add that it was qualitatively equally decisive – at least in that it allowed the Americans to have their say in the country’s evolution.

The reasons for which and the way that the American administration interrupted food aid to Egypt in 1965, in retaliation for the increasingly massive intervention – up to 40,000 men – in the Yemeni civil war, illustrate both the ambiguity in American perceptions of the Nasir regime and the way the internal and external stakes in the regime’s options were articulated. While the Americans had at first recognized the pro-Egyptian republican regime established in Sana’a by Brigadier-General ‘Abdallah al-Sallal in November 1962 – which leads us to think that it was not the eventual emergence of “Nasirist-type” forces they had feared – aggravation of the Egyptian–Saudi conflict, which soon appeared as the foremost aspect of the Yemeni crisis, was the factor that convinced them, almost three years after the beginning of the crisis, to suspend food aid to Egypt. The cessation of wheat shipments considerably aggravated the Egyptian financial crisis: in 1965–66 the value of wheat and flour imports was greater than that of Egyptian exports to western markets. Behind the conflict with Saudi Arabia, beyond the competition of two states vying for the leadership of the Arab world, was Nasir’s questioning of the way Arab petroleum wealth was distributed and used. The “theory of the three circles,” which made of Egypt both center and vanguard of the Arab, African, and Islamic worlds, was, as has been mentioned, significantly radicalized by the failure of the union with Syria, which the Egyptians attributed, among other causes, to Saudi maneuvering. Within the new Egyptian strategic vision, Arab unity could only be realized through the generalization of Arab socialism, which implied the

overthrow of reactionary monarchies. Hence the tone of the new Egyptian activism, which tended to oppose Nasir’s regime to America’s allies in the region.

This viewpoint is also useful in attempts to understand the evolution of the conflict between Egypt and the Arab states on one hand, and the “Zionist entity” on the other – a conflict that resulted, on June 6, 1967, in defeat of the Arab armies. If we discount the supposedly axiomatic, ineluctable character of the “battle for destiny” between Israel and its Arab neighbors, linked to the very “survival” of the Arab nation, which provided the main part of Arab war propaganda, Egypt’s management of this conflict may be seen in two contradictory yet complementary ways. By maximizing the Israeli threat and setting the stage for Egyptian preparations for the final confrontation – meant to free Jerusalem and return their land to the Palestinians – Nasir could justify his active hostility toward the Arab regimes dubbed reactionary by playing the “peoples-against-dynasties” card. Egyptian propaganda in fact aimed primarily at standing up to the ideological competition represented by Ba’thist propaganda in its Syrian and Iraqi variants. This strategy was not entirely unsuccessful both with Arab masses, among whom the Egyptian za’im was immensely popular, and on the interstate level, thanks to Egypt’s control of the Arab League. As far as Egypt’s autonomous strategy was concerned, before 1967 Nasir seems to have been mainly preoccupied with avoiding the risk of a generalized confrontation with Israel at any cost, seeing that a war could only have been extremely costly for Egypt given American support for the Jewish state and the division of Arab ranks.

Between 1960 and 1965 there was a relative “detente” in relations between Egypt and Israel: the “moderates” were in power in Tel Aviv and a sort of complicity seems to have been established between Nasir and Levi Eshkol, the Israeli prime minister, similar to that before the “tripartite aggression,” between Nasir and Moshe Sharett. From 1965 on, however, Palestinian operations based in Jordan and supported by Syria, Iraq, and Algeria caused tensions to rise once again, brought about conditions favorable to the return of “hardliners” in the Israeli cabinet, and forced Egypt itself to harden its position in order to avoid being “outstripped.” While recognizing the PLO as the vanguard of “Arab revolutionary action” during the Second Palestinian National Congress in Cairo in May 1965, Nasir saw no reason why he, too, should not encourage Palestinian guerrilla actions. While attempting to find a reply to both radical Arab “provocations” and to Israeli retaliatory operations against Jordan and Syria, Nasir gave the Israelis the pretext they needed to destroy the Egyptian armed forces: on May 20, 1967 he ordered that the United Nations forces stationed in Gaza and Sinai

33 Olivier Carré, L’Orient arabe aujourd’hui (Paris, 1991), 78ff.
since 1957 be removed two days later, and decreed the closing of the Gulf of Aqaba to all Israeli ships and a blockade of the Tiran straits. Between June 5 and 10, 1967, the Israeli army destroyed most of the infrastructure of the Egyptian armed forces, especially the grounded air force, and occupied the West Bank and Gaza, the Golan Heights, and all of Sinai.

The question of who started the war remains, as posed, undecidable. If Nasir’s gesticulations appeared as a *casus belli*, the unbelievable lack of preparation of the Egyptian armed forces suffices to show that he had no intention of taking the initiative in military operations. A number of observers agree today that Nasir was relying, “thanks to a concert of Soviet and American assurances, on avoiding armed confrontation and negotiating definitively the two basic questions left hanging since 1949, the question of frontiers and that of refugees.”

In other words, 1967 may have been an anticipation of 1973, when a “substitute for war,” or rather a “substitute for victory,” finally allowed President Sadat to begin settling the Egyptian aspect of the conflict. Instead, the humiliation of 1948 was repeated, with the aggravating circumstance that the army, which held power directly, could not back down by citing the corruption and incompetence of the palace or the political parties.

Maintained in power by gigantic demonstrations through which Egypt almost unanimously refused his resignation while demanding that he shoulder his responsibilities in defeat, Nasir saw his room for maneuver drastically reduced both internally and externally. On one hand, the absolute priority placed on rebuilding the armed forces, not only justified by “external” constraints — liberating Palestine, destroying the Zionist entity — but also by occupation of national territory, was reflected in a considerable increase in military spending. Austerity measures and shortages on a daily basis were the only option for seven long years, during which the economic contraction (*inkimash*) had as its counterpart economic and military firmness (*sumud*), which meant: asking the Egyptian people to bear the enormous military expenditures necessary if capitulation to Israel was to be avoided. All measures of social and economic policy were in a way suspended, frozen; the public sector apparatus was barely kept alive, as were the government service programme and the very infrastructure of the country. In per capita percentage, if not in absolute terms, the level of production, the quantity and quality of available services, began to decline.

On the other hand, and for the same reasons, Egypt’s dependence on the Soviet Union and the latter’s direct intervention in the management of Egyptian affairs increased considerably and acquired an everyday visibility.

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34 *Ibid.*, 82.
36 Waterbury, *Nasser and Sadat*, 112. See also 407ff.
all the more difficult to bear when part of Egyptian public opinion placed the blame for the scale of defeat on the poor quality of Soviet arms: when Sadat expelled them, in 1972, there were almost 12,000 military advisors in Egypt, capable of controlling every cog of the Egyptian armed forces, and several thousand advisors criss-crossing the public sector and government apparatus.

On the internal scene, the 1967 disaster provided the opportunity for the first public demonstrations of opposition in Egypt since 1965. First, in February 1968, after extremely lenient sentences had been handed down against officers on trial, students of Cairo and Alexandria universities, joined by workers of the arms factories in Helwan, demanded that those responsible for the Six Day defeat be punished, and insisted above all on reestablishment of political freedoms. The manifesto, made public by students of the Polytechnic Faculty in Cairo, also demanded, among other measures, “that freedom of expression be re-established, as well as that of the press; the restoration of a truly representative parliament; the removal of secret police from university campuses; the promulgation of laws establishing or reinforcing political freedoms.” The regime responded first by giving in a little, in an attempt to confine student mobilization to the campuses. It announced that responsible officers would be re-tried, freedom of expression restored on campus, an independent student union allowed. When demonstrations started again in November 1968, the authorities turned to the stick, arresting hundreds of students, putting “leaders” on trial, and justifying this repression by citing the necessity of preserving the unity of the internal front in the struggle against the Zionist enemy. But the 1967 defeat had transformed the theme of struggle against Israel – or, rather, support for the Palestinian struggle – into a theme of opposition that provided students and intellectuals with one of their main calls for mobilization against the regime. The “war of attrition” launched by Nasir on the Canal front, in the last months of 1968, in an attempt to improve the Egyptian position in planned negotiations, was no doubt, in large part, a reply to internal pressures exerted by students in particular. The June 1967 defeat, followed by the inevitable retreat from economic and social objectives trumpeted by the regime, paradoxically marked the beginning of the transformation of Nasirism itself, from the “hard-core” version of the early 1960s into an opposition resource, making defense of “socialist gains” and continuation of the process of unifying the Arab nation the main arguments of the ASU’s left wing and of the intellectual left, a trend that Sadat would confront as soon as he took power.

37 Quoted by Ahmad Abdalla, The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt (London, 1985), 152.
From socialism to an open-door policy: counter-revolution or realization of the revolution’s objectives by other means?

Nasir’s death, on September 28, 1970, brought to power Anwar al-Sadat, who had been named vice-president less than a year before. Although he had accumulated a series of important functions within the Nasirist control system – secretary-general of the Liberation Rally, then of the National Union, editor-in-chief of al-Gumhuriyya, the Free Officers’ unofficial organ, president of the parliament – he appeared, to most outside observers, if not a new face at least an unknown and, to say the least, not a very significant one. Those with more insight saw his advance as a compromise or transitional solution, masking a power struggle until a new strongman could impose himself. The question here is that of the “true beginnings” of Sadat’s regime. He himself placed them on May 15, 1971, with the “corrective revolution” (thawrat al-tashih) and the liquidation of “power centers” (marakiz al-quwa) inherited from the 1960s; taking the initiative in the confrontation, Sadat had the “barons” of the Nasirist left arrested: ‘Ali Sabri, secretary-general of the ASU and vice-president of the Republic; Sha’rawi Jum’a, minister of the interior; Muhammad Fa’iq, minister of information; Sami Sharaf, minister for presidential affairs; Muhammad Fawzi, minister of war – in all almost ninety individuals who had intended to impose, as in the first days of the revolution, a collective leadership of the state and who, unable to obtain his consent regarding restriction of presidential prerogatives, had begun to plot against him. But most observers place the true beginnings of the Sadat era in October 1973, with the new legitimacy the “hero of the crossing” obtained through the “victory” over Israel of the Egyptian armed forces who recaptured the eastern bank of the Canal, occupied since 1967. This legitimacy enabled him to impose his own options and dismantle his predecessor’s policies. “Hero of the crossing, [Sadat] really became the rais: he no longer owed anything to Nasser and the October war founded his regime. Sketched out on May 15, 1970, Sadat’s Egypt took shape by breaking with the past.”


Liberalization or de-Nasirization?

The situation inherited by Nasir’s successor and the options open to the new Egyptian leadership may be summed up in three ways:

1. A political system that, we may assume, functioned relatively well with the army no longer constituting a political threat, and an ASU purged of “radical” Nasirist elements and more docile than ever with regard to the executive’s desires enjoyed absolute political hegemony except in the universities, where Marxists and Nasirists preserved solid bases. The new regime asserted a system of “sacred” goals, with respect to which unanimity was required, even if differences as to how they would be achieved were allowed: freeing the national territory occupied by the Israeli enemy and preserving the “gains” of the July revolution.

2. The system of external alliances with the Soviet bloc had shown its limits in 1967: on one hand, the poor performance of Soviet arms and the qualitative and quantitative inadequacy of weaponry delivered to Egypt were blamed in part for the Six Day disaster; on the other, the Soviets had clearly shown unwillingness to risk an open confrontation with the USA in the Near East. We may add that Moscow had no particular reason to encourage a man who had consolidated power through distancing and imprisoning the Soviet Union’s most important “friends” within the Egyptian state apparatus.

3. Sadat inherited a particularly bad financial situation, increasing budget deficits, a chronic currency shortage, and the “classic” consequences of this sort of situation: factories operating at a third of their capacity owing to a shortage of raw materials, assembly lines grinding to a halt because of lack of spare parts, neglect of equipment, and other problems.

After the tergiversations of 1972, the year announced by the new president as “decisive” in the Arab–Israeli conflict and which ended without any “decisive” developments, the October 1973 war and “psychological” victory of Egyptian troops allowed Sadat to silence his critics and escape from cyclical resource shortages. The way he had prepared for the war speaks volumes about the goals it would allow him to pursue. On the one hand, the war would have to be fought with Soviet weapons since the west had not been prepared to arm Egypt; in May 1971, just as Sadat was launching the corrective revolution, he signed a “friendship and cooperation treaty” with the Soviet Union, which would contribute to reconstruction of the Egyptian armed forces. On the other hand, the war itself had to be fought without the Soviets in order to make possible a renewal of relations with the United States; Sadat expressed a conviction that the USA held “100 percent of the cards” in the resolution of the conflict. Hence the expulsion in
July 1972 of Soviet military experts who, incidentally, had advised him against this particular adventure.40

It is conventional to consider that the October war made *infitah* possible by rupturing the main Nasirist options: alliance with the Soviet bloc; primacy of the public sector; one-party government. But the October war itself only acquired meaning from the *infitah*: it allowed the regime to transform what was, in reality, a military defeat of sorts – for the first time Israeli troops had acquired a foothold on the African bank of the Canal and the third army, surrounded at Suez, only escaped capitulation because of American pressure on Israel – into a political victory. The regime then transformed this victory into a “government program,” with objectives set down in the “October Document” presented by Sadat in March 1974: opening up to the market and to the west, which would allow association of Arab capital, western technology, and Egyptian know-how in the pacified Near East.

Law 43 on Arab and foreign investment, voted by parliament in June 1974, constituted the cornerstone of the *infitah*. It established an organism for investment and a list of activities and sectors designated as priorities, and offered considerable guarantees and privileges to foreign investors: repatriation of capital and profits, tax exemptions for five to eight years, and customs exemptions for equipment and raw materials necessary for production. Law 43 also put an end to public-sector monopoly on banking activities, by allowing intervention in Egypt of foreign banks operating in foreign currency. Above all, the law allowed that any joint venture established between foreign partners and a public-sector firm would automatically be considered as belonging to the private sector, even if the public sector held the majority shares. This was a strong incentive for managers of public enterprises to seek this type of association to guarantee substantial increases in revenue and an improvement in work conditions and to open up vistas of rationalized production, especially by allowing these enterprises to dodge the labor legislation (minimum wage, hiring of university graduates, worker representation) in force in the public sector. Anxious to please and to demonstrate that the nationalization page had been turned, Sadat himself took the initiative and had files of individuals placed under sequestration in the 1960s reopened, allowing considerable amounts of property – buildings, factories, lands – to be returned to their original owners.

We shall return later to the social consequences of *infitah* and the reallocation of available resources it brought about. Here we may stress what appears the essential aspect in the first phase of implementation of the open-door policy: the fact that it did not work – or at least not the way the regime

had hoped it would.\textsuperscript{41} Despite the incentives and guarantees offered to foreign investors, only sixty-six projects had been registered by the end of 1976 under Law 43, with a total capital amounting to LE36 million and only 3,450 employees. Far from engaging in productive activities, most of these projects were concentrated in tourism, banking, and investment companies, transforming Law 43 into a powerful drain on the remittances in hard currency of Egyptian workers who had migrated to the oil states (see below). If the October war had made \textit{infitah} possible, the policy's success still required the true economic and political participation of the west, and especially of America, in supporting a regime that constantly trumpeted its membership of the western camp. In order to obtain this support, Sadat took two closely related steps: on the economic side, negotiations with the IMF began in 1976 and were virtually uninterrupted from letter of intent to structural adjustment program; on the political side, peace with Israel, if possible general but if not then separate, which was seen as the main incentive for western powers to reinforce the stability of the Egyptian regime.

With regard to the IMF, the goal of \textquoteleft\textquoteleft Ab\textquoteleft\textquoteleft Mun'im al-Qaysuni, supreme manager of the \textit{infitah}, was to obtain the fund's support in a context where the increase of subsidies on consumer goods -- a reaction to the inflation brought on by the \textit{infitah} itself -- had led the budget deficit to explode, dragging Egypt into the spiral of short-term debt. Subsidies on consumer goods for the poor reached 33.6 percent of current spending, LE433.5 million in a budget whose deficit approached LE700 million; service on debt alone reached 40 percent of total revenue from exports. To \textquoteleft appease\textquoteleft the IMF, the authorities announced, on January 17, 1977, removal of subsidies from a certain number of basic commodities: butane, flour, rice, sugar, oil, a measure presented as a first step toward diminishing the deficit and returning to \textquoteleft real pricing.\textquoteleft Much has been written about the \textquoteleft perverse effects\textquoteright of the subsidy system, especially about the \textquoteleft unjustified\textquoteright increase in consumption that it encouraged, the waste it entailed, the black market and the fact that, designed to help the poor, it also benefited the rich.\textsuperscript{42} The fact remains that these measures, announced without the slightest preparation, could only result in yet another decline in the standard of living of the population, since they led, overnight, to increases ranging from 15 to 45 percent in the prices of the affected goods.

Revolt was immediate and spontaneous, even if the security services and Sadat himself denounced the activities of \textquoteleft communist saboteurs\textquoteright; it swept across the entire country and lasted for three days, pitting demonstrators,

\textsuperscript{41} See, among others, John Waterbury, \textit{Egypt: Burdens of the Past, Options for the Future} (Bloomington, 1978).

\textsuperscript{42} On this debate see Alain Roussillon, \textquoteleft Développement et justice sociale dans une économie sous perfusion: les enjeux des subventions en Égypte,\textquoteright \textit{Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord}, 23 (1984).
who attacked all the symbols of *infitah* (shop windows, travel agencies, nightclubs), against an impotent police force, then against the army, which rolled out the tanks several times, clamping down in Cairo and Alexandria. The result was many more dead than the hundred or so officially announced, thousands of wounded, and mass arrests. On January 20, the government backtracked suddenly, simply canceling the measures announced three days earlier and promising, while they were at it, 10 percent increases in salaries and pensions. Even if later the government was able to enact most of the price increases demanded by the IMF — doing so more tactfully and progressively, avoiding the shock effect that had done much to unleash people's anger — “hunger revolts” remain today the greatest fear of the Egyptian government, indicating the social limits beyond which “de-regulation,” “structural adjustment,” and other economic “liberalization” measures cannot go. For the first time since 1952, the army had intervened against the people, reflecting the limits of the consensus Sadat's regime had hoped for in its project to dismantle the system of redistribution set up by the Nasirist state. But the uprising of January 1977 also remains today the main “scarecrow” the Egyptian government uses to resist, with consummate agility, the more insistent “recommendations” of the IMF and Egypt's international creditors, by highlighting the potential damage to the country's stability of a too-hasty return to real pricing and market forces. Above all, the January uprising bore witness to the need for the *infitah* to keep the promises of a return to prosperity that Sadat had made after the October war: it would provide the ultimate justification for the riskiest bet placed by the Sadat regime — far more than the *infitah* itself: the signing of a separate peace with Israel, which Sadat hoped would lead to the launching of an American “Marshall Plan” to Egypt’s benefit.

Although it was by far the costliest of the Israeli–Arab wars in terms of human lives, the October 1973 war held the keys, as it were, to its own “peaceful” interpretation. Barely a month after the Egyptian offensive had been launched, diplomatic relations were restored between Cairo and Washington. A few days later, at “kilometer 101,” negotiations described as “technical,” relating to supplies for the third army blocked at Suez and the exchange of POWs, constituted the first diplomatic contact between Egyptians and Israelis. In all Arab forums, especially at the sixth summit meeting in Algiers in November 1973, Egypt pleaded the case for the Arabs’ need to take advantage of the new situation created by the October “victory” and the oil embargo to obtain a “peace of the brave.” Above all, as soon as the first agreement on withdrawal had been signed, under American auspices, Egypt threw itself into clearing the Suez Canal and rebuilding Suez, Isma'iliyya, and Port Said. On June 5, the eve of the anniversary of its closing in 1967, Sadat “reinaugurated” the waterway with full ceremonies, an irrefutable proof of Egypt’s desire that this war be
the last. Moreover, with the signing of the second withdrawal accord, in September 1975, whereby Egypt regained control of Sinai (up to the strategic passes) and the Gulf of Suez oil wells, it agreed – with American guarantees that satisfied almost every Israeli demand, especially as far as arms were concerned – to renounce force in managing the two sides’ disagreements.

The sticking-point of Sadat’s position was that every concession deepened the gulf between Egypt and its Arab allies, was accompanied by a hardening of Israeli positions, and increased the intransigence of Syria and the Palestinians. In the Israeli elections of May 1977, while the Egyptian government was beginning to take stock of the January uprising, Menachem Begin’s Likud was borne to power on a program that entailed nothing less than the creation of a “Greater Israel” and brushed aside negotiations for the evacuation of Gaza and the West Bank. Sadat’s famous “bluff” – his announcement in November 1977 that he was ready to go anywhere, including the Knesset, to advance the peace process – was aimed at making the west realize the literally dramatic nature, for Egypt, of the situation in Geneva where talks, begun in December 1974, were deadlocked owing to Israeli and Arab intransigence. The next step was predictable, despite Sadat’s denial in his speech to the Knesset that Egypt could sign a separate peace. Israeli refusal to budge and American pressure on the one hand, the Arab front created at a summit in Tripoli in December 1977 which had decided to freeze relations with Egypt, on the other, left Sadat nowhere to go but forward: on September 17, 1978 two frameworks for a treaty were sketched out at Camp David, after twelve days of negotiations, one concerning Israel’s evacuation of the Sinai over a three-year period and the other the future of negotiations on other occupied territories, especially the West Bank and Gaza. A peace treaty was signed on March 26, 1979, by Sadat and Begin, in the presence of President Carter, who was its principal craftsman. The result was Egypt’s expulsion from all Arab organizations, including the League itself, on March 31, 1979, and termination of diplomatic relations between Cairo and the other Arab capitals (except Khartoum and Musqat).

We shall return to the stakes of the separate peace with regard to the Egyptian political scene. What were the consequences of peace for implementation of the open-door policy? There is no doubt that the peace treaty opened the dikes of American aid to a country that had become crucial to its “national interest”: from 1979 on, Egypt received annually between $1 billion and $1.5 billion in civilian aid from the USA, virtually the same as Israel, and considerable military credit, handed out all the more generously since Sadat, in order to compensate for Egypt’s “neutralization” on the Arab scene, posed as the new “policeman” of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, confronting the Soviet and Cuban menace from Ethiopia and the gesticula-
tions of the "Libyan madman." Sadat conceded important naval facilities to the American fleet and participated in the maneuvers of the "Rapid Deployment Force" created by Carter after the Tehran hostage crisis. Nor is there any doubt that this aid, managed by a permanent USAID mission in Cairo with a plethora of experts and advisors, directly and massively contributed to setting up the country's basic infrastructure — telephones, transport, energy — which had barely been maintained since the late 1960s. In the early 1980s, American wheat shipments to Egypt made up 27 percent of the country's annual consumption, and this percentage increased thereafter. But at the same time, the breach created by the Camp David agreement in relations between Egypt and the Arab states defeated the purpose of the infitah itself: there was no longer any question of massive injections of surplus petrodollars that the October war had helped to create; if western or Japanese technology was brought into Egypt, it was not in the form of equipment that would develop the country's productive capacities, but as electronic gadgets to satisfy long-repressed consumer desires. The Egyptian labor force, whose education, low wages, and docility were intended to facilitate the "marriage" of Arab capital and western technology — to the great benefit of employment rates in Egypt — migrated to the Gulf in increasing numbers to seek work and social promotion. In other words, what was intended to be the first of its kind in North-South cooperation models increasingly appeared as a new form of Egyptian dependence, no longer on the eastern bloc but this time on the economies of the industrialized west.

Liberalization vs. democratization?

By appropriating the power conferred upon him by election to the presidency of the Republic on October 7, 1970 and confirmed by referendum on October 10 (90.1 percent voted yes) and by getting rid of rivals within the ASU Sadat justified strong-arm tactics — dubbed "corrective revolution" and celebrated every year with at least as much pomp and circumstance as the revolution itself — by a need to restore or establish the "state of institutions" (dawlat al-mu'assasat), as he put it, and the effective rule of law. Until the October war, this commitment was limited to a few cosmetic measures: questioning the most visible repressive aspects of Nasirism; reversal of sequestration measures and relieving the political "isolation" in which certain individuals with the reputation of right wingers were living. The "permanent" constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt (no longer the United Arab Republic), solemnly promulgated in September 1971, was new

43 This was how Sadat referred to Colonel Gaddafi after Libya broke diplomatic relations following the first Egypt-Israel disengagement in November 1973.
only in terms of its “permanence”; Sadat amended it as often as he deemed necessary, resorting to plebiscites on topics as varied as the confirmation of Egypt’s democratic socialist identity; its membership of the Arab nation; the 50 percent “quota” of electoral positions reserved for workers and peasants and the social gains of the revolution; whether or not Islam was the state religion – Shari’a being at the time one of the main sources of the law; and confirmation of the president’s designation by the people’s assembly. The ASU itself was reined in and handed over to Sayyid Mar’i, for support he had given the president during the “corrective revolution,” and the state of emergency was maintained under the pretext that lifting it could appear as a sign of weakness in the confrontation with Israel. The most revealing indicator of the regime’s evolution on the ideological level was the progressive release of the Muslim Brothers, whose supporters on university campuses were allowed to create *jama’at islamiyya* (Islamic associations), whereby the regime hoped they would be able to get rid of the Nasirist and Marxist left.

Adopted by referendum on May 15, 1974, the “October document” that fired the starter’s gun for economic opening up of the country and political liberalization was doubly linked to the 1973 “victory”: Sadat was no longer only the country’s “legal” president but also the “hero of the crossing.” The legitimacy acquired during the October war allowed Sadat to take the risk of weakening his legal hold on the system. Meanwhile, radical transformation of the regional and international situations allowed the regime to hope that a fruitful collaboration could be undertaken with the west and the Arab “moderates” and demanded an ideological *aggiornamento* that itself rendered necessary the transformation of the political framework. The ASU was invited to consider possible means of introducing pluralism in political structures that would not threaten the “gains” of the July revolution, whose main merit, despite the errors made, was to have opened the path for “peaceful social and political transformations sparing the country violent class conflicts, if not a civil war.” In fact, the way in which the ASU was dismantled and replaced by a pluralist political structure between 1974 and 1979 allowed the president to maintain, and even strengthen, his grip on the main tools of control, while deploying these tools in other institutions.

The first episode in this process of political liberalization “from above” concerned the constitution of “platforms” (*manabir*) within the ASU, after extremely heated debates about the country’s political future, to which were invited all “organic” components of the Egyptian nation: workers and peasants, intellectuals, businessmen and unions, students, women. At the end of these debates, almost 140 projects for creating such “platforms” were registered with the general secretariat of the ASU. It accepted only four – right, center, left, and Nasirist – which Sadat reduced to the first three, under the pretext that no organization could claim the sole right to represent...
the Nasirist heritage (nor, for that matter, Islam – which was the common property of all Egyptians). This argument was used to oppose attempts to create a Nasirist party until one was finally authorized after recourse to legal channels in April 1991. The legislative elections of October 1976, in which candidates of each platform were authorized to participate, were characterized by two main features. The overwhelming and predictable victory of the “central platform,” that of the president and henceforth designated as the “Egyptian Arab Socialist Organization” or, more simply, as the “Egypt party” – 280 seats against 12 for the right and 2 for the left – was in a sense tainted by the surprising success of “independent” candidates of every persuasion, who took 48 seats and whose presence proved that true opposition took place outside the system. These independents participated so vigorously that some were expelled from parliament for having “insulted the head of state.” The second feature of these first pluralist elections was the low level of popular participation: less than half of the electorate – 3.8 million voters out of 9.5 million – took part in the exercise, thus establishing a constant characteristic of Egyptian political life.

The May 1977 law that transformed the three platforms into political parties in the full sense of the word and dissolved all the organizations of the ASU – except for its secretariat and the Women’s Union – and the constitutional reform submitted to referendum on May 21, 1979 completed the new “formal” political scene. The law stipulated that no party could be authorized if its principles and objectives were not clearly distinct from those of existing parties; it forbade creation of any party on religious, ethnic, or class bases, which would threaten the principle of national unity. A committee made up of the secretary-general of the ASU – henceforth his only function – the ministers of justice and the interior, the president of the state council, and two magistrates appointed by the president was given the task of determining how “original” proposed parties were as well as the compatibility of their programs with the 1962 charter, the 1971 constitution, and, last but not least, the October Document, promoted to the status of an intangible national consensus. The committee followed an extremely restrictive interpretation of these clauses: out of twelve active parties at the end of 1992, seven had obtained their status through judicial means after the committee itself had refused their applications.

A consultative council (majlis al-shura) conceived to represent all categories in the population, and which reaffirmed the principles of reserving electoral positions for workers and peasants and protecting national unity, was created through the constitutional reform of May 1979. The ideal of complete social representation, previously attributed to what was only a political organization – the ASU – was now inscribed in the very heart of the constitution, which authorized the president to appoint to parliament and the consultative council members of categories “underrepresented” by...
universal suffrage – mostly Copts, women, and leaders of political parties who had failed to win parliamentary representation by election; he was also authorized to reject as illegitimate any political expression from outside the system. In fact, the political institutions set up by Sadat tended to organize perpetuation of a power balance between a majority, “by definition” in a sense, and an opposition also “by definition”; this was a case of the president choosing his majority rather than the majority choosing the president, thus determining both his “centrality” on the political scene and the fact that the president’s party could be only “from the center.” A significant illustration of this phenomenon was the restructuring of the majority in September 1978, when Sadat created the National Democratic Party (NDP) to “orchestrate” a new ideology – “democratic socialism” – and to improve the performance and credibility of his parliamentary base. The program of the new presidential party was, in essence, the constitution itself: building a modern state founded on science and faith; affirming that Shari‘a was one of the main sources of legislation; preserving national unity and social peace; reconciling individual and collective interests. Attempts of “right” and “left” to reach power – or even to share it – and their confinement in the role of “constructive,” “respectful” opposition to the opinion of the majority as embodied by the president were branded as illegitimate. For instance, the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, adopted by referendum in April 1977 (99 percent voting “yes”) stood no more chance of being opposed than did the principle of the infitah itself, inscribed in the October Document.

The reconstitution of the Wafd Party in February 1978, and the creation of the Socialist Labor Party in the same year, illustrate the “opposition problem” that immediately faced Sadat’s regime. The Wafd was external to the system in two ways: it did not emerge from the defunct ASU, which constituted the common matrix of existing parties; and it claimed legitimacy inherited directly from Sa‘d Zaghlul and the anti-colonial struggle and denounced the betrayal of the Free Officers’ “putsch.” Having succeeded in “leading astray” the twenty deputies required to form a party from among the “independents” or from within the government party, the Wafd, to the president’s great displeasure, was allowed to relaunch itself and, most importantly, to publish a newspaper that rapidly became a podium for virulent opposition, notably with regard to negotiations with Israel – a podium where not only liberals, but also many left-wing writers, found an opportunity to express themselves. Now came proof that opposition from outside the system was unacceptable; Sadat dedicated himself to eliminating the Wafd from the political scene: by referendum (98.29 percent voted “yes”) he had a series of measures adopted on May 21, 1978 regarding “the protection of the internal front and social peace” which barred from political activity all those – former ministers, party leaders – who had contributed to
“corrupting political life” before the revolution. Some 200 individuals were expelled by the parliament from political parties, the administration, and the press. The measure was clearly aimed at Fu‘ad Siraj al-Din, president of the new Wafd, who had been the party’s last secretary-general before Nasir ordered it to be dissolved in 1953. At the beginning of June 1978, the Wafd announced the freezing of its activities, which began again only after 1981, when Sadat himself was dead.

Creation of the Socialist Labor party presents a sort of reverse image of the way the opposition problem was posed. Sadat himself took the initiative in suggesting to Ibrahim Shukri, minister of agrarian reform and former leader of Young Egypt – the only party, with the National Party, not to have been dissolved in 1953 – the creation of a new party to constitute the “opposition wing” of his own NDP. The government went so far as to provide the new party with the deputies it needed to obtain authorization, including the president’s own brother-in-law, Mahmud Abu Wafiya. In principle, no ideological differences were supposed to mar relations between the two wings, both of which claimed to honor the July revolution while affirming the need to correct its excesses and errors. But “the policies effectively implemented by Sadat put him on the right of his party’s official line, while, behind the smoke-screen of official conformity, the conceptions of a number of Labour party leaders were on the left of the official program.”44 In practice this meant: yes to a just peace with Israel, no to the separate peace of Camp David; yes to opening up the west, no to a privileged alliance with America; yes to free enterprise, no to corruption. The opposition went so far as to challenge the prime minister, Mustafa Khalil, accused in the party press of having accepted bribes.

In May 1980 Sadat had a series of measures adopted by referendum to control both the democratic process and the opposition’s activities. The constitutional limit on the number of consecutive terms the president could serve was abrogated. While this might have revealed Sadat’s wish to maintain himself in power indefinitely, the main aim of the measure was probably to sacralize the exercise of supreme power: if the president could be reelected indefinitely – Sadat resisted the suggestion of some supporters that the “hero of the crossing” be named president for life – then opposition to his person was illegitimate and could only be perceived in terms of insult, morally unacceptable, and politically insignificant. Several deputies, expelled from parliament for having dared to attack the president personally, understood this. The second part of this policy was adoption by parliament on April 29, 1980 of an “ethics law,” called the “law of shame” by its opponents, and creation of a “tribunal of values,” made up exclusively of magistrates and public figures appointed by the president and charged with

the mission of punishing any action, opinion, or stand opposed to “society’s superior values.” The first to be threatened were exiled Egyptian intellectuals who dared to criticize the regime in the Arab press, especially for having signed the treaty of resignation with Israel and having aligned itself with America. A third aspect of this system of control became clear after the referendum of May 1980, when the Shari’a was no longer noted as one of the principal sources of legislation, but as the principal source. This measure has usually been seen as one of numerous concessions made by Sadat to the most conservative trends in Egyptian society, and it certainly was. But again the consequences of this measure, and the double edge it came to reveal may be seen elsewhere, in the illegitimacy it imputed to the act of opposing a state and a power founded on the Shari’a: negation of the idea that there could be a legitimate alternative on which to base critiques of the regime. By presuming to base his exercise of power on the Shari’a and on it alone, without taking into account all of its dispositions, Sadat ran the risk of being accused of hypocrisy, if not of impiety. In this way he himself staked out the territory from which the most radical opposition to his regime would spring.

Islam vs. secularism?

There is no doubt that Sadat’s policies, and those of his successor, allowed the Islamic trend in all its manifestations to rebound from the marginality to which it had been reduced under Nasir to occupy the central position that most observers grant by the mid 1990s. The Muslim Brothers retained their influence, thanks in no small part to their connections in Saudi Arabia and Germany, but their increasing freedom from 1971 onwards, and the authorization of their publications al-Da’wa and al-’Itisam – although the Brotherhood itself remained illegal – could be seen as a calculated risk. Sadat himself might well have thought that he had created the jama’at islamiyya, part and parcel, that had been unleashed on the left and the Nasirists in the universities. This is, incidentally, precisely the accusation that they leveled at him: the first “Islamic youth camps” were organized under university auspices, and the “apparatus” provided the Islamist militants with resources for their propaganda; many facilities were provided for the jama’at to take over the student unions in March 1976, against a left identified by the regime as its main adversary. The first “warnings” may well have been cause for worry as symptoms of underground processes, but they tended to confirm marginality: the attack on the military academy in May 1974, by a group led by a Palestinian, Salih Sirriya, was more adventurism than anything else, and the plot was subverted with minimum effort; the kidnapping and assassination, in July 1977, of Shaykh al-Dhahabi, former minister of waqfs, by the group dubbed al-Takfir wa’l-Hijra by the police and the media, was carried out by people who felt targeted and had placed
themselves on the margin of society. Above all, there was as yet no “complicity” between the Azharite religious establishment and traditionalist opinion, on the one hand, and the jama‘at, which were in a process of radicalization, on the other, in a context where the Islamic nature of society was not yet posed as a problem. Only “morality” was at issue and ‘Umar al-Tilmisani, Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brothers, could still state that Egyptian legislation was “95 percent in conformity” with Shari‘a.45

Last but not least, the state itself took the initiative in launching the Islamization debate, in order to please its new fundamentalist allies, and face the “atheist” left, at the risk of inciting opposition from the Coptic community, led since 1971 by the very energetic Pope Shenouda III. Meanwhile the law of apostasy, which stipulates that renouncing Islam is punishable by death, was adopted in 1977 – a measure especially threatening to Christians who had converted to Islam in order to marry Muslim women, and who sought to return to their original faith after divorcing or finding themselves widowers. A program aiming to Islamize legislation in general was set up by Sufi Abu Talib, speaker of the people’s assembly. During this period the media, especially television, began to air various religious programs and censor “illicit” scenes – kisses, alcohol, adulterous situations, and to interrupt programs for the call to prayer; “Islamic garb” – head-veil and flowing garments – became widespread among women, and men began to grow longer beards.

What brought the Islamist movement from the margins in the regime’s concerns, and in public opinion, was the fact that Islamic elements – Muslim Brothers, university jama‘at – with which Sadat had sought to ally himself, or at least to curry favor, began to oppose the regime. The break between Sadat and the Islamist trend was played out by rejection of the Camp David accords, which the Islamists stressed far more effectively than did the left, in the name of the need to liberate Jerusalem. The regime’s attitude to the Islamic revolution in Iran, and the warm welcome given the deposed shah in Egypt, represented in their eyes a direct provocation. Renewed repression encouraged reiteration of Sayyid Qutb’s analysis of the regime’s jahiliyya among the movement’s more radical elements. The counterpart was the systematic, specifically Islamist demand that Shari‘a be immediately and completely implemented, a demand that came to structure the Islamist trend into “radical” and “moderate” camps, a distinction that had more to do with the means than with the end itself. When “Jihan’s law”46 was promulgated in 1971, tension between the regime and the Islamist trend as a whole, including the Azharite apparatus, reached its peak.

45 On the early manifestations of these groups, see H. Dekmejian, Islam in Revolution (Syracuse, 1985); John Esposito, Voices of Resurgent Islam (Oxford, 1983).
46 Reform of the personal status law (al-ahwal al-shakhsiya), actively promoted by President Sadat’s wife, would have allowed the wife the right to ask for divorce if her
The “re-Islamization” project launched by the regime itself threatened to turn against it: “In 1965, they put up scaffolds for those who said ‘there is no god but God’,” thundered Shaykh Kishk in April 1981. “Then, we got rid of personal status altogether; now, we are submitting Shari’a to the People’s Assembly. Will you be satisfied, Assembly of the People, or will you reject it? Here we are submitting God’s Shari’a to a handful of his faithful, that they may approve or reject God! What is this farce?”

By passing over to the opposition, the Islamists – whether “radical” or “moderate” – ceased to be marginal: those impressed by their mobilization skills emphasized the services they provided in neighborhoods and villages, the photocopying services they provided to underprivileged students, the buses for female students wanting to escape the promiscuity of public transport, or the Islamic health-care centers they set up around the mosques; those worried by their potential as a threat stressed the threat of “confessional violence” they presented to the country, pointing out the drastic increase in confrontations between Muslims and Christians in Upper Egypt, culminating in the riots of al-Zawiya al-Hamra in Cairo itself that gave Sadat the pretext for putting an end to his liberalization schemes.

The way Sadat went about trying to tame an increasingly “chaotic” political and social situation has most often been analyzed in terms of “crisis of authority,” the president’s “loss of control” over his own nerves as well as of a process he himself had started. Over a thousand people representing all the supposed opposition forces in the country – right and left wing, radicals and moderates, civilians and religious figures, politicians and intellectuals – were thrown in jail on September 5, 1981, accused by Sadat of plotting to overthrow him. The communists along with the Muslim extremists were accused of incitement, aided and abetted by the Soviet ambassador, who was expelled a week later. This wave of repression, it has been said, was a sort of attack of madness, a diagnosis that would explain the indifference, if not the visible relief, of Egyptian public opinion following the “podium event.” One may wonder whether a direct causal link exists between these arrests and Sadat’s assassination: on one hand, numerous Islamists – Muslim Brothers and jama’at members – were on the lists of those arrested, including the brother of one of the main suspects; on the other, Sadat’s decision to imprison the main representatives of the movement that he himself had set up appeared to most observers as the clearest sign

husband took a second wife without her consent, and to stay in the familial home until the children came of age.

48 See, for instance, Bruno Etienne, L’islamisme radical (Paris, 1987).
49 For example, Emmanuel Sivan, Radical Islam, Medieval Theology and Modern Politics (New Haven and London, 1985).
that it had fulfilled its historic “mission” and should now leave things to him – which it clearly did not intend to do. The pivotal issue here is the army’s attitude: as even if “these assassins [were] religious extremists, their attack was clearly a military operation,” 50 which begs the question of high-level conspiracy within the armed forces, a question still open today. Whatever the case may be, the sequence of events that began with the September 1981 arrests and ended with “Pharaoh’s” assassination presents a paradoxical illustration of how stable the Egyptian system was, and how well it functioned, as well as the limits of the steps taken toward liberalization. While the head of state had just been assassinated, just as he was celebrating that which provided the basis of his personal legitimacy – the October 1973 victory – the transition of power was carried out almost automatically: the fact that Hosni Mubarak is himself a military man had much to do with his entirely constitutional accession to power, but it is that accession, under the circumstances, that should appear noteworthy. At the same time, when the people’s assembly, and then a referendum on October 13 (98.4 percent voted “yes”), confirmed his accession to power, the click could be heard as the political system locked.

Mubarak’s synthesis or a fragmented political order? 51

Hosni Mubarak began his third presidential mandate on October 4, 1994 (approved by 96.28 percent of voters) and it is therefore impossible to reach definite conclusions about his regime. At most we may attempt to determine how his regime has dealt with the internal and external constraints that pose the conditions for its stability, and whether his options conform to, or diverge from, those of his predecessors.

Deregulation of the infitah: debt as the motor of reform

Ensuring the stability of the regime has amounted to maintaining the open door, which implies the pursuit of western, especially American, aid and guaranteeing the loyalty of those sectors of the political and economic establishment for which channels of communication with the west are the main source of accumulation of wealth and influence. The military is a case in point; a forced march was undertaken to reequip the Egyptian army with American supplies, thanks to the generous credit lines opened up by the Reagan administration: five years after the Camp David agreements had been signed, Egyptian military debt skyrocketed to $4.5 billion, as opposed

50 Mirel, L’Egypte des ruptures, 237.
51 Title borrowed from Robert Springborg, Mubarak’s Egypt: Fragmentation of the Political Order.
to $2 billion borrowed from the Soviet Union over two decades, during which Egypt had gone to war three times. That infitah, though, had to be “rationalized” and “justified” Mubarak was careful to note in one of his first speeches: rationalized in that the last years of the Sadat era, marked by shady dealings, speculation and consumerism had to give way to a “productive infitah”; justified in that a few scapegoats from among the late president’s entourage, notably his brother ‘Ismat, would be brought before the ethics tribunal for illicit gains.

Ensuring stability has meant maintaining the state’s redistributive role, especially through subsidies on consumer goods and government employment, in order to avoid a too-brutal degradation in the standard of living of those who had benefited least from the infitah – notably salaried employees, who had been struck by an inflation rate of about 20 percent throughout the 1980s. From 1974/75 to 1985/86 direct and indirect subsidies on essential goods, electricity, and petrol rose from LE661 million to LE2.2 billion, or 7 percent of GNP and 28 percent of the state’s current expenditures in a budget that itself ran a deficit of 22 percent of GNP. Almost 60 percent of these subsidies maintained the price of the flour and bread that constitutes, with beans – also heavily subsidized – the staple diet of the vast majority of Egyptians. Efforts made with respect to public-sector employment were as great, as expensive, and no more productive: between 1977 and 1981, the volume of manpower employed by the state rose by 29.6 percent, four times the population growth rate. In other words state recruitment was accelerating at precisely the time that the state was attempting to “disinvest” in the public sector, when the capital injected into the state economy reached its lowest level, and when the regime decided to stake its future on the private sector and foreign investment.

The accumulation of budget deficits (15–20 percent on average throughout the 1980s), which was rendered more acute by collapse of petrol prices in 1986 and by regional developments (the Lebanese war, the Iran-Iraq war) and “convulsions” of the internal scene (rebellion of the internal security forces in 1986, Islamist agitation), was mechanically reflected in a geometric progression of Egyptian indebtedness. This resembled Khedive Isma’il’s situation, in the 1870s, with the role of the caisse de la dette now played by the International Monetary Fund; the total debt reached $10 billion in 1976, $17 billion in 1981, $40 billion in 1987, and over $53 billion by the end of the decade. This massive accumulation of debt appeared, paradoxically, as the motor accelerating the process of economic “liberalization.” In 1987 the IMF granted Egypt drawing rights of $325 million, but with conditions similar to those of 1977 – elimination of

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subsidies, liberalization of agricultural prices, increase in the prices of electricity and petroleum-derived products, a rise in interest rates. Reforms announced in the "letter of intent" signed by the Egyptian leadership were not implemented; the budget deficit and debt yawned ever wider. Between 1987 and 1991 relations between Egypt and the IMF were marked by Egyptian government dodging and stalling and by the IMF's intransigence, but conclusion of any new agreement – a necessary condition for rescheduling the debt – depended on implementation of IMF recommendations. In this respect, 1989 appeared as a watershed. Unable to pay an installment of $600 million due on the military debt to the USA, Egypt was slapped back with the Brooke Amendment, which stipulates the suspension of all civilian aid to defaulters on payment for American weapons. Unable to obtain new credit, Egypt had to pay for food imports in cash. The debt hit $50 billion, on which annual service alone was more than $2 billion, and arrears approached $5 billion.

At the moment when the Egyptian government was resigned to submitting to the IMF, having devalued the pound yet again, freed prices of most agricultural products, and announced a list of public-sector firms subject to privatization, the Gulf war exploded following Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in August 1990. The government's support for the UN and its capacity to mobilize a "club of friends" devoted to the country's stability were reflected in cancellation of a substantial tranche of the Egyptian debt after the signing of a new letter of intent and the conclusion, in May 1991, of a new stand-by agreement with the IMF. This does not imply that the IMF had lowered its expectations; the government was encouraged to implement the measures it had agreed to – reduction of the budgetary deficit to less than 5 percent, reduction of tariffs and liberalization of foreign trade, unification of the exchange rate, "price reality" – conditions for canceling a second 20 percent tranche and rescheduling the remaining 50 percent. Implementation of these measures, after more procrastination excused by Islamist agitation and the earthquake of October 1992, led to the signing, in September 1993, of a third accord with the IMF, and the opening up of increased credit facilities ($596 million) and reduction of external debt to around $20 billion, as against more than $50 billion before the Gulf crisis. The paradoxical result was the appearance, after 1991, of a comfortable margin in current accounts ($4 billion in 1993) and accumulation of

53 Expression taken from Waterbury, Nasser and Sadat, 407.
considerable hard currency reserves ($14 billion in the same year), while the economy’s growth rate stagnated at under 0.5 percent, in large part because of reduction in public investment, a drop in imports, and a collapse in tourist revenue owing to Islamist agitation.

The reforms to which the government committed itself in this last agreement with the IMF – especially fiscal reform and privatization of public firms – was the more difficult since such measures exacerbate conflicts between interests involved in “deregulating” the Egyptian economy. External pressures were the main impetus for implementation, and opposition in the people’s assembly came ironically from members of the governing NDP. By the mid-1990s Egypt remained poor and indebted, but some Egyptians were very rich; private funds abroad were rumored at $40 billion to $50 billion. It became increasingly difficult for the Egyptian authorities to convince those most affected by unemployment (over 25 percent of the active population), and those who watched already-meager purchasing power halve because of price increases and the reduction of subsidies, that their impoverishment was not the counterpart of the extreme affluence of a few: those able to turn the logic of “deregulation” to their immense benefit, and whose ostentatious behavior made acute inequality ever more visible.

What were the sources of, and paths to, accumulation of wealth in Egypt throughout the 1980s, and how did structural adjustment programs shape them? Two processes allow us to characterize the way distribution and mobilization of resources operated during this period: the transformation of Egypt into a rentier economy and the reorientation of activities induced by the injection of massive external financial resources.

Rent itself is not a new element in the Egyptian economy. The use of revenues from the Canal, American wheat shipments, and even Soviet economic assistance allowed Nasir to finance simultaneously – albeit insufficiently – industrialization through import substitution and the social progress made during the “socialist” decade. From the mid-1970s and especially in the 1980s both the origin and composition of this rent changed, as did the terms of the contest to appropriate it. A considerable portion remained under direct control of the state bourgeoisie-bureaucracy: the Suez Canal and oil revenues are the main cases in point. The Canal’s annual revenue fluctuated, after its reopening in 1975, between $800 million and $1.2 billion, while petrol revenue shot from $187 million in 1977, when Egypt retrieved its wells in the Gulf of Suez, to $3.3 billion in 1981–82, at the time of the second petroleum shock. The bulk of revenues from petrol and the Canal was poured into the state budget to finance the ever-growing

burden of subsidies on consumer goods and to serve the debt. Another fraction of the rent, no less considerable, tended increasingly to escape state control and serve a flourishing black market and finance the imports. The impact of tourism, from which revenues fluctuated between $1 billion and $2 billion a year after 1970, and the remittances of millions of migrant laborers in the oil states in the 1980s, are difficult to evaluate since these were outside the control of official banking. In 1986, the ministry of emigration estimated remittances at about $10 billion: $2 billion through official routes, the rest through informal networks. It is estimated that, in 1980–81, a quarter of global investment in Egypt, and 81 percent of private-sector investment, had been made possible by these remittances. Establishment in 1974 of the system known as “import without cash transfer” allowed “informal” appropriation of rent through the currency black market, fed by remittances of migrant workers and currency changed by tourists and foreign residents. Importers were no longer required to obtain currency through official banking channels. In the late 1970s, imports through this system may have represented a quarter to a third of total imports, and consumer goods only a sixth.58 We have noted that under Law 43 every joint venture made up of a public-sector firm and a foreign or Egyptian private-sector enterprise would be considered to belong to the private sector, even if the former held the majority of shares. Even if this formula was neglected by foreign investors, it paved the way for “public–private symbiosis,” one of the most influential processes operating in the recomposition of the infitah economy. The “state bourgeoisie,” which occupied the higher echelons of the administration and public sector, managed to benefit from the comparative advantage offered by their mastery of administrative codes and procedures and their access to the “informal” decision-making networks within ministries and government-service sectors. In a context where almost everything was subject to authorization, license, or exemption, where obtaining these involved a veritable obstacle course, and where administrative and fiscal controls did not simply verify that an activity conformed to legal norms, the presence of former ministers, governors, or retired officers on the boards of private-sector firms had something in common with the role played by the military in the 1960s. The difference was that with privatization the logic of intervention was reversed: instead of representing, almost personally, the Nahirist leadership in the cogs of the economy and guaranteeing the application of its directives, their role by the mid-1990s was to protect their private patrons from the administrative or fiscal services’ excess of zeal. A public–private symbiosis also meant “recapitalizing” public property for the benefit of private interests: land, equipment, raw materials, public finances, the state having partially or totally given up

58 Ibid., 171ff.
the dividends of these resources in order to “encourage” the private sector to exploit them and increase their value on a basis dubbed more “rational” than state management. This was indeed the logic of the choice of tourism as the first sector opened to privatization: with tourism – including major hotels and air transport – public property was not handed over to weak private interests, but to one of the most dynamic sectors of the Egyptian economy, one which, furthermore, controlled one of the country’s main sources of hard currency. The same was true of the large public enterprises that manufactured foodstuffs for local consumption, which were among the most profitable businesses in the public sector, were designated as early candidates for privatization, and – taking account of the high prices of imported foodstuffs – seemed likely to hold on to their share of the market. In attacking the very logic of privatization, its enemies used the theme of insufficient evaluation of privatized assets and denounced the fact that public-sector firms were sold off for next to nothing, a policy that threatened to place the country at the mercy of foreign capital. Keeping in mind the very low rates of household savings in the Egyptian economy and the salary levels in force in public sector, the announcement that employees would be allowed to purchase shares in public-sector companies undergoing privatization did not reassure detractors of this policy.

“Islamic savings societies” turned finances upside down in the 1980s by directly addressing Egyptians, especially migrant workers, and proposing to put their savings to work in any one of a host of projects – commercial, industrial, agricultural. The so-called Islamic contract model whereby lender and borrower share in the profits and losses incurred by these projects, illustrated in truly emblematic fashion “rent” and “informality.” Justifying their call for the public’s savings in the name of Islam’s rejection of the interest rates imposed by banks – termed “usurious” – and by promising 20 to 25 percent return on savings (as against a maximum of 13 percent, below the inflation rate, on the official circuits), these societies managed to attract from $10 billion to $35 billion from hundreds of thousands of small nest-eggs in less than five years. At first, creation of these companies appeared as the reaction of certain currency black marketeers to the attack by the minister of the economy, Mustafa al-Sa‘id, an attack that resulted in the creation, in 1987, of the currency “free market,” in a context where the devaluation of the pound made it particularly urgent for large parts of the population to find channels for preserving their savings. In 1986–87, the peak of activity for Islamic savings societies, the authorities noticed a 45

59 Significatively enough the very first firms to be nationalized were the local representatives of Coca-Cola and Pepsi Cola.
60 On these companies, see A. Roussillon, Sociétés islamiques de placements de fonds et “ouverture économique”: les voies islamiques du néolibéralisme en Egypte, Dossiers du CEDEJ, 3 (1988).
percent decrease in savings in pounds deposited in banks, a decrease which reached 65 percent of foreign currency savings. But large investment projects intended to provide revenue with which these companies were meant to pay depositors back, and in the name of which they went so far as to tout themselves as the “Islamic alternative” to the public sector, were most often mere facades: in the best of cases, real estate activities or contracts for importing electrical appliances or vehicles, more often playing against the Egyptian pound on the international money market or the stock exchange; in the worst, simple thuggery, with the savings of new depositors going to pay off their predecessors. These companies continued to operate, however, for almost eight years in the case of the longest-running examples, on the margins of, if not in direct contradiction with, the law. They technically retained a familial or individual character – meaning that they avoided all control, whether of the minister of economy over stockholders’ companies or of the Central Bank over banking activities. When the government took the offensive in spring 1988 to limit the competition that these companies represented to official banks most of them were forced to submit their accounts for inspection and thousands of small depositors lost their savings. There is little chance that the lawsuits that continue to this day will allow them to retrieve their property.

Democratization or new political division of labor?

Since Muhammad Najib had been superseded by Nasir, an unwritten rule of Egyptian politics seemed to stipulate that claims to supreme power were illegitimate and that access to the head of state’s functions could not be the object of competition, however “democratic.” In other words, his designation constituted a sort of necessity, characterized essentially by relations between the regime and the army and “managed” in practice by the president through his designation – optional according to the constitution – of a vice-president, both as eventual successor and appointed heir. But at the same time, a second unwritten rule, the constitutional legitimacy of the head of state, derived from the modalities of his designation, seemed to require a personal, charismatic legitimacy, which allowed him not only to take control of the political system – of which he formed the axis – but also to impose his own options. Nasir with the nationalization of the Suez Canal and his victory against the tripartite aggression, Sadat with the October war, each knew, in his day, how to acquire that personal legitimacy, “supra-constitutional” one might say, that Hosni Mubarak faced. For want of this trait, his “popularity,” more than his legitimacy and the margin for maneuver available to him, depended on the consensus that different aspects of his policy might create. The fact that Hosni Mubarak did not have this “additional” legitimacy made possible an irrefutable “pluralization” of the
Egyptian political scene and a considerable extension of the field of public freedoms. At the same time, the absence of this "additional" legitimacy designated a "normal" mode for the Egyptian political system and the limits of its liberalization.

At the very time Hosni Mubarak’s third mandate began, and while several components of the "legal" opposition had refused the renewal of their "pledge of allegiance" (mubaya‘a) to the president, the Egyptian regime was once more involved in a violent confrontation with the so-called "radical" wing of the Islamist trend, while "moderate" groups within this movement were still denied the right to form autonomous political organizations. If Hosni Mubarak never questioned the pluralism established by his predecessor, and if he considerably enlarged the scope of freedom of expression, the majority of the population seemed less interested than ever in "formal" political participation – whether by exercising their right to vote or by adhering to political parties. The very process of return to a multiparty system, in fact, manifested both the limits and the problems of the "democratization" begun by Sadat and pursued by his successor: the problem of delegating and exercising political power and the problem of the political division of labor among various actors.

Taking into account the role of the deputies in designating the president and renewing his mandate, the political system demanded a parliament that was simply an extension of the ruling party, whose members were united principally by allegiance to the president. As was the case within the late Arab Socialist Union, the president’s control of the political system passed first through that of his own party which, more than an instrument of power, constituted the closed arena where the struggle for power and the resources it generates took place between different factions. After Hosni Mubarak came to power, it was through the electoral law itself that the ruling party’s deputies were controlled. A system introduced in 1984 guaranteed the possibility for the ruling party to “punish” deputies who did not demonstrate sufficient respect for the party line or voting orders; a rule setting a limit of 8 percent of total votes beneath which a party was not represented allowed the regime to reduce to its simplest expression the presence of an opposition in parliament. Another condition for the system to function properly was that the prime minister should not be a “politician” and that he should not appear as the “head of the majority” but as a simple executive. Hence there was recourse more and more systematically to technocrats or university figures such as ‘Ali Lutfi or ‘Atif Sidqi, whose main merit was lack of connections with the effective networks of influence within the political establishment.

The modalities for the third consecutive renewal of Hosni Mubarak’s mandate, in July 1993, hinted at the integration by the Egyptian opposition of the unwritten rule prohibiting any struggle over access to power: even if
the presidential candidate was unbeatable once he decided to run, no party leader or public figure ever declared himself to be a candidate, even "in principle," for succession. The limits of the system were reached when the main opposition parties – Wafd, Labor (Islamist), Tagammu', Nasirists – refused to renew their "allegiance" (mubaya'a) to Hosni Mubarak without putting forth alternatives to his reelection by presenting their own candidates and program. The question here is that of the political parties' "status" – including that of the government party – and that of the very nature of the role they played in a system where power was not likely to be an object for competition, or more precisely in a system where "formal" political competition was not likely to threaten the control of state and government in any way.

Another question concerns the widening of the party scene after the legalization, in April 1990, of the Green Party, the Arab and Socialist Egypt Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, and Young Egypt, and in April 1991 of the Nasirist Party. While the proliferation of parties tended to fragment the opposition, the Egyptian regime constantly opposed creation of new parties through restrictive interpretation of the law. Paradox lies in the fact that the Nasirist Party, although the regime had been particularly keen to prevent its legalization, was able to organize its activities openly. With the exception of the Nasirists, none of these parties engaged in any serious activity, to the extent that one wonders about the meaning of their very creation. The most common hypothesis, applied to the Umma Party as well as to the Liberals, holds that these are clientist, even family-type, structures, created to guarantee the "visibility" of leaders with charismatic aspirations while managing local interest groups. Approaches that focus on the patronage or the extent of representation of these parties, however, seem to obscure the very terms of the political division of labor as it was reconstituted after the dissolution of the ASU and the way in which certain trends were excluded from the "formal" political scene. The hypothesis is that the main "functions" of political life – to represent different components of opinion, to organize and mobilize various sectors of society – formerly carried out by the ASU have been farmed out among organizations of varying status, competence, and legitimacy: political parties; unions; and what could be called social groupings at the local levels – clubs, mutual assistance associations, and so forth. The object was to detach the masses from political parties by making the exercise of politics a professional prerogative. A peasant party or a Muslim party could not exist any more than could one gathering engineers, women, or the inhabitants of Upper Egypt. In return, professional organizations, unions, and other corporate groups could legitimately take charge of defending and promoting their members' professional and material interests, but it would be illegitimate for them to express an opinion regarding questions of major national
importance, even if they were called upon to express solidarity. One of the main mistakes made by the leaders of the new Wafd, at the time of the first attempt to reconstitute the party in 1978, was to let it be understood that it had “specific” client networks: jurists, the liberal professions, even the Copts. Along the same lines, Egyptian political humor suggests that the regime only allowed the creation of a Nasirist party when the destruction of the public sector had gone so far that the party could not hope to find a clientele therein. One can form an idea of the regime’s “tolerance” for Muslim Brother candidates on the Wafd Party lists, in 1984, then on those of the Labor Party in 1987: by running under these banners, the Brotherhood was accepting the new political division of labor dissociating their political existence as deputies from their aspiration to encircle society at the base – an aspiration the regime could tolerate only if it did not take on an explicitly political dimension. With the help of the state of emergency, which prohibited demonstrations and public gatherings at any other time than during elections, any attempt at contact between the opposition parties and the masses was slapped down by a true structural prohibition. This was the case in 1987 during the railway workers’ strikes, to which the Tagammu* party tried to contribute organizational assistance, and to which the regime immediately responded by arresting the activists on the ground and a number of national leaders, accused of subversive agitation. Under these conditions, party activity tended to be restricted to the publication of a newspaper. Relations between opposition parties and their “sympathizers” were not necessarily translated into electoral terms in a system where the logic of election was often summed up, as far as the low proportion of voters is concerned, in choosing an intermediary between the local community and central power.

Given political parties structurally “isolated from the masses,” the non-governmental arena may appear as the true locus of political life in Egypt, but of a political life that may be designated as “informal.” Unions, professional associations, charity or service-type organizations all define the field where the “objective” material interests of various sectors of society interact with state management, and through which considerable resources pass.61 Trade unions and professional associations in Egypt are in fact far more than simple organizations defending members’ interests; among the services they offer are retirement funds, credit, mutual assistance; they play an important role in access to housing, health services, leisure activities, and offer loans to young couples, and even a place in a cemetery to members after death. In the same way, belonging to a sporting or leisure club or membership of various associations plays an important role in social

strategies and provides privileged ground for contact with the regime or those who hold power. Associations, particularly professional ones – doctors, engineers, lawyers or pharmacists, the journalists' syndicate – are, far more than parliament, an arena of interaction and power sharing between the ruling party and the opposition, on the one hand, and among the latter's various components, on the other: elected on a proportional basis, the administrative councils of these organizations are de facto the only concrete manifestation of political pluralism. Above all, the syndicates have provided the field where the principal actors excluded from the "formal" political scene could be reinserted starting from the early 1980s, with the Islamist trend conquering the administrative council of the most prestigious syndicates, mainly in competition with the Nasirists: the doctors' syndicate, that of the engineers – formerly under Nasirist control – and, since 1992, the lawyers' syndicate, formerly the bastion of the liberal trend.

An informal political scene? One can use this term first because the terminology of these groupings is more corporatist than political, or, more precisely, because within them political discourse is converted into one of corporatist tendencies: when Sadat dissolved the lawyers' syndicate council in June 1981, it had posed a grave challenge to his policies, especially the peace accords with Israel; but on one hand, the lawyers' criticism was formulated in "legal" terms – constitutionality of the treaties, human rights – and Sadat condemned them for having stepped outside the bounds of strictly corporatist logic and delving into politics. The syndicate scene is informal also because the stakes are not the conquest of power but social reform from the perspective of each profession's "specialty." This is the case with the doctors' syndicate, the first to have been taken over by the Islamist trend as early as 1984: the Islamization of medicine as preached by this trend is presented as its members' specific contribution to the moral reform of society, within the perspective of health, hygiene, prevention. It should be emphasized that the few "digressions" that the Islamist leaders of the syndicate allowed themselves outside the medical field have mainly focused on overarching "humanitarian" causes, not on the Egyptian scene: supporting the Afghan jihad against the communist occupation, solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada, calling for mobilization in support of the Muslims in Bosnia. These professional organizations, furthermore, especially those controlled by the Islamists, are not necessarily foci of opposition, as is generally thought; it might even be suggested that the unions controlled by the Islamist trend – doctors, engineers, pharmacists – are those that in past years enjoyed the most "relaxed" relations with power, as opposed to those

of the influence of "legal" opposition parties – the Tagammu' in the journalists' syndicate, the Wafd among the lawyers until 1992 – which may be explained by the prudence this trend has employed in managing its relations with the state. In the syndicates that they control, the Islamists have thus taken over all the strategic posts: general secretariat, treasury, management of the professional publications, while leaving leadership to personalities most likely to guarantee, through their connections and experience, contact between the profession and the authorities: 'Uthman Ahmad 'Uthman, president of Arab Contractors, Hasab Allah al-Kafrawi, minister of housing in the engineers' syndicate, Mamduh Jabr, former minister of health, in the doctors' syndicate, Ahmad al-Khawaja, prominent lawyer, in that of the lawyers.

Most observers attribute the success of the Islamist trend in the professional unions to their members' indifference toward union-type activities. Participation in the election of their administrative councils has rarely risen beyond 20 percent of registered voters, a phenomenon that the Islamists – clearly the most organized and motivated among the actors on the scene – have skillfully exploited. This also seems to have been the opinion of the Egyptian government which, in the context of open confrontation, attempted to reduce Islamist influence in these organizations by reforming the law governing the election of the administrative councils in September 1993, setting the minimum rate of participation at 50 percent of those registered in the first round, 30 percent in the second. If these conditions were not met, the union was placed under the tutelage of a provisional administrative council made up of magistrates until the necessary quorum was met. These measures entailed the risk of bringing the Islamist trend and the totality of Egyptian opposition forces together in their common refusal of the state's intrusion in the affairs of the professional syndicates. The promulgation of this law was met with such an outcry that its implementation remained doubtful. One can nevertheless wonder as to the meaning of this supposed indifference: how was it that the pharmacists' syndicate, for instance, 60 percent of which was Coptic, accepted unflinchingly the Islamist takeover? Again, how was it that the engineers' syndicate, where military engineers weighed heavily in the balance, was one of the first to have an Islamist-dominated administrative council? Surely the indifference of the various professions' members did not go so far as to allow union management to go against their corporatist interests; the "tolerance" accorded to the Islamists by most non-voters must signify, at the very least, that their management was compatible with these interests, or again just as efficient as any other. One is then led to question the central position of the Islamist trend on the Egyptian political and social scene as a whole.
Centralization of the Islamic question

Between 1970 and 1981, the Islamists ceased to be marginal, but the “Islamic question” had not yet become central, as the assassination of Sadat, and the conditions under which power was transmitted to his successor, paradoxically demonstrated. The Islamists had proved their capacity to penetrate the army: Khalid al-Islambuli and ‘Abbud al-Zumur, Sadat’s assassins, were no marginals, excluded by society, but high-ranking officers who both belonged to families of notables. But al-Jihad, the organization to which they belonged, remained a tiny grouping which the security services easily dismantled – at least temporarily: twenty-four were found guilty, five death sentences pronounced. As for the Asyut uprising, even if it succeeded at first in upsetting the local garrison, it remained localized, did not spread to other parts of the country, and was easily strangled by the army albeit at the cost of many dead and hundreds of arrests: 302 were prosecuted.

What seemed to make up the crux of the Islamic question was not so much the threat the militant Islamists posed to the regime and its stability, nor the influence they may have had in society, especially among young people – both of which were indisputable – but, rather, the way in which this threat and this influence were dealt with by the regime. It was precisely the trials of Sadat’s assassins and the Asyut rebels that marked the turning-point in the regime’s approach. These trials provided the opportunity for the regime to send a clear message of appeasement to the Islamists, of both “radical” and “moderate” persuasion: the death sentences of Sadat’s direct assassins were carried out, but ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman, the defendants’ spiritual guide, suspected of having pronounced the fatwa that made the president’s blood “legitimate,” was acquitted for lack of evidence. In the Asyut rebels’ trial, 299 death sentences were requested out of 302 suspects, yet the verdict was clemency: no death sentence was pronounced, 16 were imprisoned for life, 176 were acquitted.

For Sadat, the Islamization of legislation was mere gesturing, the means of quelling the left and the Islamists, and, or so he hoped, of confirming his own legitimacy; what changed at the beginning of the 1980s was the fact that Islamizing the framework of Egyptians’ daily lives was perceived by Hosni Mubarak’s regime as the means of quelling Islamism itself – that is, its most radical exigencies: the establishment of an Islamic republic, renewal of the confrontation with Israel, implementation of the hudud (punishments laid down in the Qur’an), forced veiling of women, reestablishment of the status of dhimmis for Copts. One of the first results of this change in attitude was the implementation of the process of informal integration of “moderate” Islamists into the formal political scene through parties and the professional organizations mentioned above. The “deal” struck between the
regime and these “moderates,” especially the Muslim Brothers, may be summed up in the statement that they were allowed to exert pressure from within the system itself, no longer on its margins only, for the realization of their objectives – essentially, the application of Shari’a and the Islamization of the social framework – against which they would take responsibility for bringing “radicals” back to the legal fold.63

The legislative elections of 1984 appeared to be the first “test,” into which the Muslim Brothers ventured with only a few candidates on the Wafd party lists, without their own slogans; in the 1987 elections, the government ignored what was tantamount to a public takeover bid launched by the Brotherhood against the Labor Party, made possible by the alliance with the fraction of this party that descended from the pre-revolutionary Young Egypt Party. The takeover provided them with an organization and, especially, through the weekly *al-Sha’b*, with a publication that allowed them to have some of their most visible leaders elected to the people’s assembly: Ma’amun al-Hudaybi, official spokesman for an organization that remained illegal and the nephew of Hasan al-Banna”s successor to its leadership; and Sayf al-Islam Hasan al-Banna’, son of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. This time they could declaim their own “program”: “Islam is the solution.” Another aspect of this change in attitude in dealing with the Islamists was the tolerance shown by the government toward the activities of the so-called Islamic investment companies, also mentioned above. This tolerance acquired full meaning in the context of a strategy opening up spaces for “Islamic resocializing,” organized mainly around the numerous mosques over which the Islamists managed to acquire control, and which the regime hoped would satisfy their aspirations toward conformity with the divine will. While the implementation of this strategy did not imply the government’s official permission for the Islamists to constitute “explicit” political parties, as has been said, under the pretext that the authorization of a Muslim party would justify the symmetrical authorization of a Coptic party, it nevertheless required that a *modus vivendi* be established between the Islamists and some official personalities, among them governors, university deans, intermediate cadres in the government party, high-level functionaries. Asyut and Middle Egypt provided the “laboratory” where this *modus vivendi* was tested: *de facto* prohibition of the distribution and consumption of alcohol in the governorate, starting in April 1986 with the cancelation of all distribution licenses, although Asyut had one of the highest percentages of Copts in the country; *de facto* sexual segregation in university halls; Islamist takeover of sporting and youth clubs. This very logic led to the recruitment of numerous Islamists on university

campuses and especially in the ministry of education's primary and secondary schools, or, as social workers, by the ministry of social affairs. This wave of recruitment put them in direct contact with a public to which they could deliver their message under optimal circumstances.

While this strategy was aimed at relieving tension by clearing out a space in society for the Islamists – the “moderates” among them and, it was hoped, the “radicals” as well – the terms of a new confrontation were in fact being put in place: on the one hand, the absence of any significant steps in the application of Shari’a tended to compromise the “participatory” stance of the “moderate” Islamists, placing the Muslim Brotherhood in the front line of more “radical” criticism; on the other, through tension-creating strategies, the state was challenged to accomplish its commitments to the Islamization of society. When repression was renewed, it became possible to demonstrate the leaders’ “hypocrisy” and the futility of any attempt at compromise with the regime. In this respect, the “green march” which Shaykh Hafiz Salama intended to organize in June 1985, during the month of Ramadan, may be seen as a crucial turning-point. On his own initiative, Shaykh Salama, imam of al-Nur mosque, close to the jama‘at, and the leader, in 1973, of the Suez resistance when the city was briefly occupied by the Israelis, made himself the spokesman for Muslims exasperated with the government. The march was to take peaceful demonstrators, armed only with their Qur’ans, from al-Nur mosque to ‘Abdin square, the official headquarters of the presidency, and they were to occupy the square until the government decided to accept the immediate and integral application of the Shari’a. The march was, of course, banned, and Shaykh Salama briefly imprisoned, but the event’s significance was derived first and foremost from the reactions it received from the opponents of the Islamist trend.

By calling for creation of a “patriotic front” (jabha wataniyya) to confront Islamism, designated as the main threat to Egyptian society, the novelist ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi made a decisive and paradoxical contribution to the “centralization” of the Islamist question in Egyptian political life: through the debates it sparked and the realignments it signaled, the front – which, like the march, never saw the light – contributed to establishing two “camps,” “Islamists” and “secularists” (‘ilmaniyin, the contours of which cut across the usual dichotomies of the political scene, “left” and “right,” “opposition” and “government,” “progressive” and “reactionary”). The question could then be explicitly debated within the opposition, especially the Wafd and the Tagammu’, but also among the Nasirists, whose newspaper called for historic reconciliation between Nasirists and Muslim Brothers.

Since the “green march” was banned, the Mubarak regime had to face different sorts of action through which the “radical” Islamists successfully attempted to drag it into a spiral of violence which repression never
managed to break. In 1986–87 a group dubbed “those saved from hell” (al-najun min al-nar) by the media attempted to assassinate former ministers of the interior responsible for anti-Islamist repression under Sadat; during the same period, repeated attacks were made on video clubs, places where alcohol was served, and theaters, as an application of the principle of “commanding the good and forbidding the evil” (al-'amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa'l-nabi 'an al-munkar). Above all, religious strife proliferated, especially in Upper Egypt. Copts tended to be the first victims of the escalating confrontation between state and Islamists: to attack the Coptic community, within the logic of the Islamist strategy, was tantamount to a “metaphoric” designation of the regime’s illegitimacy without a direct attack on the government itself. Copts could all the more easily be represented as the symbolic incarnation of infidel power in that their social status tended to be more elevated. Hence the legitimization by certain groups of their attacks on Copt-owned stores, the booty from which was meant to finance the pursuit of jihad. Hence, also, the proliferation of attacks on the symbols of Christian superiority, doctors or pharmacists whose establishments were often the Islamists’ prime targets.

The assassination on June 8, 1992 of Faraj Fuda, one of the principal spokesmen of the secularist trend and a virulent opponent of Islamist fanaticism, cast doubts on the way the regime was managing the Islamist question, while it dramatized the stakes of the confrontation. On one hand, the government launched a large-scale offensive during the summer of 1992 against the “radical” Islamists in an explicit attempt to put an end to “extremism” (tatarruf) and “terrorism” (irhab) once and for all. The confrontation was especially violent since the Islamists responded with a series of attacks on tourist sites and on the security forces themselves, while the explosion of several bombs in Cairo, attributed by the regime to the Islamists although no proof was adduced, caused tension to rise further. The death sentences passed by military tribunals – the most numerous since 1954, and immediately carried out – confirmed, if any doubts remained, the regime’s determination to put an end to the “radicals’” activities. Simultaneously, the regime sent a barrage of messages to the “moderates,” who were commanded to renounce any solidarity with the “terrorists”: Ibrahim Shukri, head of the Labor Party, and ‘Adil Husayn, editor-in-chief of its newspaper, were brought before the prosecutor after Husayn published an article in which he wondered whether tourism was licit (halal) or illicit.

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(haram)\textsuperscript{65} – a way of suggesting that they could be designated as “instigators” of attacks on tourists. At the same time, the authorities launched a series of “skirmishes” aiming at second-rank Brotherhood leaders accused of cooperating with forces outside the country – Iran, the Sudan, and the Afghan Hizb-i Islami – and of working to reconstitute the association and even, in the case of a computer firm named Salsabil, close to the Brotherhood, of plotting to overthrow the regime.

One of the first results of confrontation was the renewed solidarity with the regime of the secular opposition front, still reeling from Faraj Fuda’s assassination: from the Wafd to the Tagammu’, the opposition fell in step with the government on the issue of putting an end to terrorism, ending criticism of repression, and the maintenance of the state of emergency, with only a few reservations expressed regarding the fact that the accused were tried in military courts. The regime’s capacity to separate the “radical” and “moderate” components of the Islamist trend, on the other hand, was far more problematic, and a few indices tend to confirm that both “radical” strategies and the repression launched against them resulted in the radicalization of the Islamist trend as a whole. Al-Azhar was first on the list: invited in April 1993 by the people’s assembly to participate in a debate on violence, Shaykh Gad al-Haqq, the rector of the al-Azhar, was obliged to refrain from intervening, revealing divergences among the ‘ulama’ themselves regarding the “definition” of events: anti-terrorist campaign or war on Muslim youth? The statement made by Shaykh al-Ghazali, the eminent Azharite theologian close to the Muslim Brothers, cited by the defense at the trial of Faraj Fuda’s assassins, in June 1993, gives an interesting indication as to the state of mind of certain “moderate” Islamists: questioned about the status of the Muslim who calls for the Shari’a not to be applied, the shaykh defined him unhesitatingly as an apostate against whom a death sentence must be pronounced; questioned about the status of the individual who, following the state’s abstention from passing this sentence, takes the initiative of executing the apostate himself, the shaykh declared that he would only be transgressing his prerogatives as an individual, an attitude Islam does not sanction. The attempt to mediate between the government and rebellious Islamist militants, suggested to the minister of interior in April 1993 by a “clerical committee for reform,” presided over by the celebrated Shaykh al-Sha’rawi, the most popular preacher in Egypt, grouping all the trends of “moderate” Islamism and presented as the “third force” between the protagonists, is even more significant: “Dear brothers in God,” we read in the letter addressed by the committee to the “prison leadership,” “may His peace and compassion be with you. We pray to God that He delivers you from your torment and puts an end to the suffering of Muslims throughout

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
the world. Our country is today in the throes of a wave of violence which has caused people fear and affliction, fearing for themselves and for their property, which has allowed the enemies of Islam to raise their heads everywhere to calumniate our religion and cause it to appear as a creed of violence and terror, while it is in fact a religion of compassion and tolerance.” In the “working programme” annexed to this letter, the ‘ulama’ lay out their analysis of the situation and what seem to be the stakes of the confrontation:

We are living today at a time of utmost disorder (fitna ma ba’daha fitna) ... A believer who may choose to grow his beard, thus conforming with the orders of the Prophet, is accused of being a hooligan, a madman or a terrorist ... Every believer who decides to wear the head veil (hijab) or the full veil (niqab) becomes the symbol of reaction and backwardness ... A merciless campaign has targeted Shari’a and its implementation while an equally merciless war is being waged against Islam, which fails to distinguish between the faithful ‘ulama’, who follow the path of the Book of God and the Sunna of his Prophet, and those who have let themselves be led astray by the Devil, who has paralyzed their capacity to choose.

‘Abd al-Halim Musa, the minister of interior, appointed in 1986, was condemned because he had seemed to be on the verge of accepting mediation formulated along the same lines, officially on his own initiative and without having consulted the president and the government. The fact remains that, in the ‘ulama’’s terms, although they distanced themselves from the “few individuals led astray by the Devil,” they explicitly affirmed their solidarity with the Muslims persecuted for having tried to live in conformity with divine rule.

But the almost cyclical evolution of relations between the state and the various components of Islamist movement, throughout the past half-century, begs the immediate question of the modalities for relaying and exercising political power in Egypt. The remarks accumulated throughout the present chapter suggest the hypothesis that the stability and proper functioning of the system are played out at the level of articulation between the central state – government, central administration, planning and control bodies – as the locus of political decision making and global management, and the urban and rural “peripheries” as the locus of effective social control and regulation of objective interests. In brief, the Egyptian state, despite the heavy, all-powerful “hydraulic” apparatus and the multitude of its agents, controls only the “main axes” of the country – the avenues and squares in the towns, the checkpoints between governorates and the course of the river; as to the Egypt of the villages, harat and urban quarters, and still more that of the “spontaneous communities,” ‘ashwa’iyat, mushrooming on the urban peripheries, it lives largely under a regime of self-management, within a logic
that could be called that of the micro-community, where human groupings with very strong local “sub-identities” – to live in this area, to be from that village—collectively set about promoting their interests, that is to say limiting the incursions and control of the state and capturing, for the benefit of the group, part of the resources distributed by the state, such as dealing with the (unequal) distribution of wealth. The Egyptian state’s recurrent problem as a centralized state is that of identifying the intermediaries through which it may preserve global control over these collectivities, maintain public order and impose the social items regarding which the regime refuses to negotiate. Under the old regime, the role of intermediary between central power and the local level was played, in the countryside, by the owners of latifundiae enjoying absolute authority over their villages and peasants, through an army of foremen, managers, lenders, right-hand men, and, in the city, by the notability system and the futuwwa network. In revolutionary Egypt, the Nassirist regime “coopted” the stratum of “new kulaks” in the countryside which the agrarian reform had helped to put in place, and, in the city, was supported by the new workers’ elite. Both categories were carefully encompassed, as has been seen, by the organizations of the Arab Socialist Union. Under Sadat, and more clearly still under Mubarak until the end of the 1980s, the regime attempted to coopt the Islamist trend for this role; the failure of this attempt is what constitutes the framework of confrontation while it determines the differentiation between “moderates” and “radicals” within this trend. The point is to know to what extent this redistribution of roles, beyond the divergences in policy through which it operates and the differences in ideological “climates” it determines, will transform fundamentally the ways in which effective power is exercised in Egypt: paternalism as a way of exercising authority, clientelism as a register for expressing loyalties and partisan positions; further, neo-patrimonialism as the logical framework for the management and distribution of available resources; all seem to function equally well within a “dirigist” and a “liberal” context. From this perspective, the arrival of the Islamists, if not directly in power, then at least in the position of intermediaries between the regime and “real” society, would only strengthen the logic of the system itself by achieving Durkheim’s ideal of sacralization of social norms.

At a second level, the pursuit of the liberalization of the Egyptian economy, in the context marked by renewed confrontation between the regime and the Islamists, poses the question of the modes of mobilization and distribution of available resources. The centralization and appropriation of the major part of available surplus resources, whether at the hands of a “feudal” oligarchy, self-proclaimedly “socialist” state bourgeoisie, or the “parasitic” new bourgeoisie spawned by infitah, counterposes another problem: the modalities of a necessary redistribution, at least to enable the simple reproduction of the labor force and to ensure the minimal conditions
of a stable social order, if not to allow the cause of social justice to advance. Because it could not understand this, by refusing to limit the concentration of agricultural land, reducing larger and larger sectors of the peasantry and the poorer inhabitants of the cities to despair, the old regime’s landed oligarchy had to make way for the military technocracy. In turn, the latter forced through the considerable levies carried out in the name of “socialism,” especially in the rural areas, but only by setting up channels for social mobility with egalitarian pretensions – schools, the army, government service, one party – and by improving considerably the Egyptian people’s “basic” conditions of life – education, health, infrastructure. In the same way, the subsidies on consumer goods and the expenditures lowering the cost of necessary services, which exploded at the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s, appeared as the counterpart of a system where inflation and the existence of a dual market and a dual pricing system constituted the main mechanism of quick gain for certain sectors of the new bourgeoisie. One of the seemingly most characteristic traits of the composition of Egyptian social elites is their “cumulativity,” in the sense that successive newcomers do not replace the already constituted strata but add to them, not without imposing new rules to the game, which allows them to arrive in positions of socio-economic dominance. The point is, again, to know to what extent the conquest of power by the Islamists or the further “Islamization” of the Egyptian economic scene would modify significantly the conditions for distribution and utilization of available resources. Yet again, the emergence of a self-proclaimed Islamic economic sector or economic actors does not constitute a break with the logic of infitah, the opening up to the west, but could on the contrary reflect the strengthening and deepening of this logic to the extent that they contribute to legitimizing with the seal of Islamic authenticity the modes of consumption, exchange, or investment that objectively participate in the “globalization” process of world economies.

Finally, at a third level, the question is that of the stakes in the reemergence of a form of Islamic activism and its confrontation with the state from the perspective of Egypt’s insertion in regional geo-politics. On one hand, the general Islamization of political and social idioms (in which the role of the state, even before that of the Islamists, has been shown) constitutes one of the modalities for Egypt’s redefinition of its regional role after the Camp David peace, and especially after the end of its quarantine and reintegration into Arab ranks in the context of the Iran–Iraq war. The Egyptian regime’s reliance on an Islamic identification allowed the terms of a “cold peace” with the Zionist state, which continues to occupy the holy places of Jerusalem, to be outlined. The same identification allowed the regime to distance itself from Arabist stances and to highlight Egypt’s renunciation of Nasirist projects of hegemony over the Arab nation. On the
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Arab scene itself, the implementation of the Islamic referential is instrumental in Egypt's alignment with the petro-monarchies against the last advocates of Arab progressivism: a confrontation that was dramatized further in the crisis opened up by Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. Last but not least, the promotion of Egypt's Muslim identity was particularly adapted to the expansion of migrant labor in the markets of the peninsula; in return, these emigrants were one of the main vectors for the "Wahhabization" of Egyptian society. But on the other hand, by refusing the denomination of "Islamic state" and by choosing the option of confrontation with the Egyptian Islamist trend, Mubarak's regime has taken the side of conservatism in the confrontation – presented as axial – that is working its way through the Arab, and in general the Muslim, world; a confrontation that opposes not "secular" and "religious" camps, but the partisans of preserving the social status quo – as legitimized by the Islamic referential, if need be – and those who have become convinced that the overthrow of the existing regimes, and the construction of just societies, constitute the only hope for a place in the sun.