

Arabic 401: Arab Cultural Identity  
Spring 2008

Final Exam Essay: An understanding of the sources of terrorism through works by Sonallah Ibrahim, Galal Amin and Marwan Harmed.

This essay will explore some possible sources of the social expression of terrorism through several contemporary works: a novel, collection of essays and a film, all produced by Egyptians.<sup>1</sup> This exploration is germane to a deeper understanding of Arab culture for two reasons. First, because all humans today, even those who don't possess cellular phones, live in a global matrix. Modern Arabs, many of whom have cell phones, are members of this matrix who can't legitimately be set apart. And second, perhaps possible because Arabs are imaged as some strange and exotic breed with mysterious Klingon-trype<sup>2</sup> habits and motivations, dominant cultural channels are enabled to conflate "Arab", "Islamic" and "terrorism" into a poisonous fiction that serves no one.<sup>3</sup>

To defang this narrative is to understand the international context of the so-called "War on Terror" and to be liberated from dithering away the central opportunity of our generation. This opportunity is that of re-focusing responsibility upon citizenry as engaged participants in the global community which must deal locally and equably with the use of Earth's resources or face extinction. Nationalisms, tribalism, denominational and exclusionary behaviors are misdirections embedded in the "War on Terror" narrative. They can readily be recognized as old-fashioned delaying tactics deployed by leadership addicted to extraction economies. A common feature of maintenance of the rationale for

extraction-based power structures is the need for an enemy, preferably one with strange customs, an incomprehensible language and marked visual characteristics to facilitate demonization. While compassionate freedom-loving people won't stand for mistreatment of other human beings we don't mind so much when our government blows up neighborhoods of demons, particularly if it purports to make neighborhoods we do recognize safer.

This "other-mongering" is not a new tactic.<sup>4</sup> History shows that the old extraction-economy junkies who deploy it won't give up the xenophobic stories that afford them such a power differential easily, but the rest of us don't have to go along for the ride. Art and introspection are an effective anti-venom; they can cause xenophobia to slither back out of control over public life and into its more proper domain, the reptilian cortex, allowing the higher powers of human intelligence to join forces and restore civilization to a sustainable path.

These three works, though none are classic literature, realigning philosophy or groundbreaking cinematic efforts are important as part of a larger context that works against the demonization of Arab peoples by the humanity in their expressions. Consideration of them affords a view of Arab people in multiple dimensions which works to disarm destructive mythology.

The "Yacoubian Building" locates the post-colonial Egyptian class structure in a formerly grand European-style apartment building. Social elements are personified by Taha, the janitor's son who aspires to be a police officer, Behayn, his sweetheart who lives with destitute mother and sister on the roof in an

apartment subdivided from the storerooms of the formerly wealthy apartments below. She resists both the veil and the expectation that she be a "clever girl" and use sexual favors to get ahead professionally. The upper class apartments are owned by a closeted gay newspaper editor, a former shoeshine turned car salesman and a philandering Pasha, the aging son of an old and powerful family. Significantly each of these male characters is paralleled with female counterparts. The homosexual editor is accompanied by his dead Francophile mother, the businessman with his mistress or second wife who he keeps on the condition that she give up her child and always stay inside and the Pasha with his vindictive, demanding sister. The only woman who is a free agent is Christine the French chanteuse and club owner. The story sees her as imperious and unrealized. Mostly, the men are corrupted and the women are maddened by a vestigial, suffocating class system. Although the characterizations are well-drawn, I found the homophobia in the film disturbing and implausible, trivializing Taha's resort to terrorist acts as a response to being raped in prison rather than the constraints of class which would prevent him from ever being other than a janitor. Redemption through romance and punishment of deviants are central themes, not revolutionary, still, it was a captivating picture.

Paradoxically, social analysis can sometimes be more penetrating through the montage of film than in a more direct medium such as essays. "Whatever Happened to the Egyptians" is accessible but constrained by the author's obvious preoccupation with deconstructing economic policy. Amin writes critically of

Egyptian lack of participation in scholarship regarding "the economy" during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This seems a bit off-base since The Economy as an abstract social construct didn't arise anywhere before WWII [Mitchell, 2002]. Also Amin's treatment of the evolution of female experience was unconscious of its male perspective. Both of these issues can have serious outcomes. However, the use of cartoons gave a sense that perhaps the author doesn't take himself so seriously. This levity was probably the book's best contribution, again emphasizing a human common denominator. Certainly, western essayists can have difficulty with allowing women to speak for themselves and there is almost no sphere that engenders more controversy than The Economy.

Ibrahim's book, *Zaat* as a novel can take its time to convey subtleties that the other works considered here cannot. The narrative design is probably the most interesting aspect of the work which explores the nature of communication, "transmissions", through a traditional narrative punctuated by journalistic clips. Ibrahim is also exploring Egyptian culture through a female perspective and personifying Egypt as a middle class woman ("Zaat" means essence or identity). Homeland is often mythologized in the feminine but idealized as goddess or saint so in that sense "Zaat" takes a novel tack. From the perspective of demystifying the sources of terrorism though, the most apropos characterizations are in Ibrahim's men. Zaat's husband and his friends are rather like husbands in fictional households everywhere, Everymen, sexually preoccupied, somewhat clueless, awkward but certainly not the Evil Arab Terrorist. A point of connection

between "Whatever" and "Zaat" occurred in the characterization in both of the political irony of increased capitalist opportunities under socialist government and more socialism during capitalist regime. This somewhat Taoist perspective found in both works, that things turn into their opposites, reaffirmed the common humanity expressed through them.

In looking at humans through the lenses of arts and letters the only true universality available lies in that though we are challenged by many flaws, corruptible and weak, pure evil is quite rare. More commonly we execute on our aspirations imperfectly and fall prey to vanity and fear. For this reason power is rarely given up willingly though it takes a toll on those who exercise it as well as those who are victims of it. The human condition.

Even so, one collection of contemporary essays, a novel and a film are not going to be exhaustive of the variety and complexity of Arab culture, rather indicative that there is a big world out there beyond your television.<sup>5</sup> Since these works are all Egyptian and all translated (captioned) into English from Arabic a dialect ought be recognized, not detractive but specific to the perspectives nonetheless. This specificity is fundamental to an exploration of culture, where understanding is going to unfold and can't be finite.

There is noteworthy commonality among these works. They are all "situated in a set of coercive relations that include poverty, malnutrition and a desperate need for work" [Mitchell, 2002] that form the post-colonial class system of Egypt. "Yacoubian Building" provides a particularly vivid exposition in

characters who live close to each other physically but occupy very different worlds in terms of what they can expect of their lives. "Zaat" investigates Egyptian identity personified in the contradictions of the protagonist who is a passive, middle class copy editor living a life of quiet, unrealized desperation. "Whatever Happened to the Egyptians" is occupied with the effects of laissez-faire economic policy [al-infitah] upon various aspects of Egyptian culture. They each contribute a flavoring to my sense of Arab culture, not altogether unfamiliar to any person who has grown up in the southwestern United States with the pronounced Mexican > Spanish > Arab influences there. Of the three, I found "Yacoubian Building" most insightful, with the clearest narrative design and (most) plausible character development, although puzzling in its emphasis upon homophobia as a motivation for terrorist acts. In contrast, Zaat's treatment of characters has a humorous or perhaps ironic cast. They seemed flatter and while the narrative structure is inventive, revolving around "transmissions" of information in the newspaper and between people I wasn't transported into Ibrahim's construct. I became impatient with the author's glib treatment of his characters, almost condescending to them. Amin's book is connected conceptually to "Zaat" but I found it interesting primarily because it seems factually wrong or off-base in some important areas, particularly deficit in the survey of the development of Egyptian economic scholarship.

Though I was hungry for more depth all these works provided food for thought. They share a critical view of government practice and policy. They each

are cognizant of the atmosphere in which violence thrives and offer useful insight into possible sources of terrorist acts. None of them apologize for nor condone it.

## **Conclusion**

Economic violence can clearly be identified as a primary impetus for the criminal activity called terrorism by governments who find it more expedient to wage war than to fight crime. Desperate acts undertaken by disenfranchised people as an expression of frustration is hardly a new phenomenon. Almost any democracy, as well as many autocracies that can be thought of, have been born from actions branded as seditious, criminal, even monstrous by the targeted power structures. But even though the acts themselves are clearly crimes in that innocent people were harmed, most governments, including the most famous democracy today, treat these acts as criminal principally because *they* are being attacked.

Mayn't the crime be worse when committed by those who have all the power? Unsure, I am inclined to equate the criminality of a demagogue who exploits the naiveté and desperation of acolytes to incite criminal behavior in acts of terrorism with the wealthy government that could eradicate the desire for redemptive violence by creating rewards and incentives for cooperation versus selling arms to both sides of a conflict. This is behavior different only in scale from the corrupt local official who permits saturation of low-income American neighborhoods with handguns and profits from it. A person who would do either is obviously neither devout cleric nor a statesperson; a politician, yes probably.

The hypocrisy inherent in the War on Terror as it is waged today is that the famous democracy is itself guilty both directly and through its agents of state-sponsored terrorism; though not remotely redeemable based on reaction to a state of powerlessness. On a human scale, responses to powerlessness, hypocrisy and corruption are the most fundamental sources of acts of terror.

Consideration of these works in the context of understanding Arab culture convinces me that arts and letters can take on these sources and the snake oil salesmen who attempt to disguise them and wage a more effective War on Terror.

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<sup>1</sup> Context of essay: Assignment

<sup>2</sup> #3- Acknowledging the social and political actualities of terrorism in Egypt, Sonallah Ibrahim proposes a clear and direct response to radical Islamism in an interview with Tahar Ben Jelloun (Le Monde, May 20, 1994):

“Dialogue is possible with certain Islamists, even if it is limited. Corruption is the basis of their anger. The governments rob the people. That is what the Islamists to emerge. We must have a democratic government in which all the tendencies are represented, including the non-violent Islamists. It is also necessary to reform the International Monetary Fund, which abuses the people and does not affect the fortunes of the well-off classes.”

In light of this insightful statement, discuss the rise of terrorism in Egypt based on your readings of Galal Amin’s *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians* and your viewing of *The Yacoubian Building*. “

<sup>2</sup> Star Trek characters

<sup>3</sup> Except perhaps the war profiteer.

<sup>4</sup> In truth, as long as “they” are “not-us” all life on earth beyond the microbial is at risk. Often destruction *starts* in an ecosystem with subvisible life and is communicated throughout the food chains dependent upon it. [ ]

<sup>5</sup> Given the centrality of intellectual life in Arab culture and the plenitude of writing and film its significant that western audiences have so little access to it.



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## Works Cited

Amin, Galal, " Whatever Happened to the Egyptians? ", American University in Cairo Press, 2000

Harmed, Marwan, "Yacoubian Building", film, 2006

Mitchell, Timothy, 'Rule of Experts", University of California Press, 2002

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