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Caryle Murphy, *Passion for Islam (Shaping the Modern Middle East: The Egyptian Experience)*, New York: Scribner, 2002. viii + 359 pp. including index. Hardcover. ISBN 0-7432-3578-9

Reviewed by Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad

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Pulitzer Prize winner Caryle Murphy is one of the most perceptive observers of contemporary Islam in journalism. Having been the *Washington Post's* Cairo bureau chief for five years (1989-94), she is well placed here to write this book on how the resurgent enthusiasm for Islam is molding the Middle East. Her analysis grows from her discovery there that the religious extremism typified by the "Islamist rebellion" is but a small "part of a much bigger movement sweeping" Egypt [p. 7], and indeed the Muslim world. Murphy sees the interaction of three historical forces, the turbulent reawakening of an Islamic consciousness, the persistence of authoritarian governments throughout the Muslim world, "and the failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," as the sources of the environment in which developments in the Middle East must be understood [p. 7].

Murphy is not only an outstanding journalist and analyst; she has a pleasing prose style. Consider this example, her description of politics in Egypt at the turn of the century as "boxed inside a square of failure. An Islamist insurgency had blistered the gentle land like a raging sandstorm, inspiring the disillusioned and destitute but alienating many more with its illiberal, violent version of Islam. Moderate, nonviolent Islamists had made impressive political gains in trade unions but were still striving to show that their religion-based politics could accommodate democracy when they were dispatched to kangaroo courts and prison. A feckless secular opposition flitted about the political stage like fleas on a camel. And a repressive, uninspiring, and unaccountable government ruled on" [p. 163].

Murphy distinguishes four different aspects of Islam today: Pious Islam, Political Islam, Cultural Islam, and Thinking Islam [pp. 7-8]. The resurgence of personal piety is not the explanation of the political violence that has emerged in Egypt, but the backdrop against which it has arisen. Similarly, those among the Islamists who have "taken up arms to spread a puritanical, xenophobic, and intolerant version of Islam" do not constitute the sum total of a broader, variegated, and mainly non-violent political movement [p. 8]. Beyond purely political considerations regarding gaining and administering power, there is the phenomenon of the identification with Islam as a means of resistance to a cultural invasion. The return to Islamic roots is seen "as a protective armor against a humiliating loss of identity" [p. 8]. Finally there is a new

intellectual movement aimed at “reexamining Islam’s sacred scriptures ... in order to make [the] religion more relevant to the realities of modern life” [pp. 8-9].

Murphy’s familiarity with the nuances of the Islamic resurgence can be seen in the fact that while she explains that the term Islamist is controversial, she adopts it as a neutral term, which she reasonably defines as a term describing “those Muslims who take Islam and its corollary, *shari`a*, or Islamic law, as their principal reference points, and seek to restore them to the center of Muslim life through social, political, economic, or educational activities” [p. 11].

Murphy paints a vivid picture of the Egyptians’ exasperation with official corruption, which they now refer to as *kossa*, or zucchini, perhaps because it grows as quickly as the vegetable [p. 18]. Most Egyptians “feel that the state, which [Gamal Abdel] Nasser promised would be the *wasta* [“connection”] of the poor, has become instead a partner to the rich” [p. 20]. In the words of “a shoe-box office” attorney, Egyptians “love Egypt. But they hate the government.” [p.20] That people turn to Islam should be unsurprising since it is not only familiar, but it insists “on justice as the gold standard if society” [p. 20].

While Murphy recognizes the role of 1967 war in the Islamic rebirth, she also realizes that the turn to religion was gradual and unnoticed. A retired Egyptian ambassador abruptly realized what was going on when, attending a dinner at Cairo’s Diplomatic Club, he realized that more than two-thirds of the gathered diplomats responded to the call to prayer heard from the surrounding minarets. “Thirty five years ago,” he could not have named “a single diplomat who prayed or fasted.” [p. 27].

While the hypocritical surface piety often adopted by manipulative politician is well known and often discussed, Murphy goes more deeply into the culture to note a “designer piety” throughout the society typified by unmarried couples in Islamic dress in intimate contact with each other by the Nile [p. 37]. The increased practice of veiling is more than a mere “political statement,” as its critics often contend. Murphy observes that it is motivated by various reasons “from mere convenience (fewer trips to the hairdresser) to fashion consciousness to family pressure” or even to enhance marriage prospects, yet behind all this superficial explanations is an underlying “heightened consciousness of religion that has modified perceptions of female modesty.” [p. 28]

It is widely understood that Islam is behind the expanding networks of charity whose members flatly profess, “We get no help from the government and from the government we don’t request anything” [p. 29]. Yet, beyond “ritual and charity” are intellectual journeys from materialism to Islam. In 1956 Mustafa Mahmoud gained attention with his religious skepticism in his book *God and Man*. “By 1988, he was converted to a worldview whose keystone was Islam” [p. 30] and the former physician now “has a television program called ‘Science and Faith’ on which he discusses how, in his belief, the Qur’an forecast many of modern science’s discoveries.” [p. 29].

Not all of the driving force for these developments came from within Egypt. Saudi petrodollars infused a “more conservative, rigid, and puritanical” interpretation of Islam [p.32], that other Arabs occasionally called “Petrol Islam” [p. 32]. Funding made its way into the construction of satellite campuses of Al-Azhar University creating an opening for the influence of the curriculum of that great university and, through its graduating teachers, a means for the spread of a “conservative and intolerant” trend.

This book would make an excellent text for introducing college students to Islamic world today. Murphy traces clearly how Muhammad Abduh’s anticipation of the dangers of adopting western ideologies unadapted to the Islamic worldview [pp. 47-48] is followed by Hassan al-Banna’s less flexible [p. 51] Muslim Brotherhood. Despite al-Banna’s commitment to Egypt’s freedom from colonialism, both political and cultural, he operated in a totalitarian fashion [p. 51], secretive and intolerant of dissent. Murphy perceptively argues that it is this inflexible austerity that lies behind the perception of “righteous arrogance” with which the Muslim Brotherhood continues to be perceived.

The curious claim made by opponents of Islamic politics that Islam has been used to justify various kinds of political systems is based not on religious scholars’ political claims but on attempts by Muslim politicians like Nasser to legitimize their political agendas [p. 55]. The Islamists like al-Banna never asserted that Islam defined a particular political system, only that to be Islamic any political system must incorporate Islamic concepts like *shurah* (popular participation) and *adl* (justice). Rather than respond to this concern, Nasser co-opted al-Azhar to justify his own authoritarian policies [p. 56]. The death of Sayyid Qutb was the fork in the road resulting in two competing paths in “modern Islamist dissent ... one reformist and nonviolent, the other revolutionary and violent.” [p. 59]

Anwar Sadat tried to mobilize the Islamist movement as a counterweight to the secular socialist opposition to his economic reforms by cosmetic changes like using his first name (Muhammad) and changing the Egyptian constitution from identifying *shari`a* as *one* of the sources of law to the *principal* source of law [p. 59]. He also released the Muslim Brotherhood’s aging leadership from prison in exchange for a promise they would shun violence [p. 59]. Student groups called “Islamic Associations” further spread the Islamist circle, but they made reactionary demands calling for segregated classes and a banning of the teaching of Darwinian evolution, and resorted to harassment of scarfless women and violence against “student recreational outings, film shows and theater productions” [p. 60] In Southern Egypt they provoked “sectarian hostility by verbally attacking Christians” [p. 60].

After Sadat signed his peace treaty with Israel, he was attacked by secular leftists and Islamists. Fragmented militant bands arose seeing themselves as Qutb’s “vanguard of the *umma*,” but “[n]one had the disciplined unity of the Brotherhood or the intellectual depth of Abduh” [p. 61]. In crackdown on Sept. 3, 1981 Sadat “arrested 1536 people, including prominent journalists, opposition politicians,” ... and even “the Coptic Pope ... was confined to a monastery” [p. 62]. (The Pope had earned Sadat’s wrath for refusing to lift his ban on Copts visiting Jerusalem [p. 245].) Sadat declared, “There is no religion in

politics and no politics in religion.” It was a younger brother of one of the arrestees who assassinated Sadat the following month.

The detainees formed “an extended jailhouse seminar on Islamist revolution” [p. 66]. They broke into two factions, one (Islamic Jihad) headed by Abud Zamour and including Ayman Zawahiri who later became bin Ladin’s senior deputy. The other (the Islamic Group) around Shaikh Omar Abdel Rahman included Talaat Mohammad Yassin Hammam, “the Ghost” [p. 67].

Murphy argues that neither the government nor the Islamic Group understood the average Egyptians. She provides numerous examples of the of counter-productiveness of a crackdown on peaceful dissent [pp. 86ff.].

Islamist attorney and activist Moukhtar Nouh is quoted in support of the proposition that it is only torture that gives birth to terrorism [p. 99]. The role of torture in breeding terrorism is important, but this monistic explanation is an overstatement. The United States was troubled with acts of terrorism by the Jewish Defense League and Puerto Rican groups as far back as the 1970s even though it has no policy of domestic torture. Even the Oklahoma City bombing was the response to the government’s brutality at Waco and Ruby Ridge rather than to the torture of prisoners. It would be more accurate to say that brutal oppression, including torture, gives rise to terrorism. This fact Murphy adequately illustrates in her meticulously researched expose of attempts by Abdel Harith Madani (a lawyer and Islamist sympathizer) to broker a cease-fire between the Islamists and the government. Madani’s three demands of the government were a “halt [to the] torture, release of detainees ordered freed by the courts, and” an end to the government’s practice of seizing militant’s relatives as hostages. In exchange the Islamic Group would “issue a general order to stop acts of revenge and violence inside Egypt” and report to the police any “attacks planned by rebels beyond their control” [p. 107]. Madani’s offer was conveyed to a top aid of President Husni Mubarak, but before the aid could get back to Madani’s intermediary, Madani had been seized by the secret police and died in custody [p. 107] evidently under torture [pp. 99, 110, 112] although the government, which went to great lengths to prevent an autopsy [p. 110], for months insisted he died from an asthma attack [p. 111]. Two years after his death the government completed an investigation into the death, but has refused to publish its findings [p. 113].

Madani’s intermediary, the late attorney and Parliamentarian Kamal Khalid explained the role of terrorism in propagating terrorism: When the police go looking for two terrorists, they arrest and torture 200 people. “This means that two terrorists becomes four hundred.” [108]

Cultural Islam is a defense of identity. It appeals even to secular Egyptians [pp. 170, 175]. When the extremists want to use force, whether their own or the state’s to impose their cultural values, the secularists resist, branding them “cultural terrosits.” [p. 178]. A constructive discussion of whether or not secularity is a violation of tawhid is impeded by the fact that secularism is the choice of the empowered elite [p. 182]. Yet, as Murphy notes, both Islamist and Westernized culture in Egypt is “imitative” [p. 184].

Extremism defeats the power of Islam's appeal to Egyptian cultural identity by turning into a divisive force. Murphy illustrates this with the story of a convert to extremism who left when, after being caught perpetrating a bomb threat hoax, he realized that his cohorts "bickered endlessly over minor theological points, refused to pray or eat together, and called each other *kafir*" [p. 185]. Accordingly, Murphy believes that the intellectual bombshells being set off by the new Islamic intellectuals are "a far more important enterprise for Islam's future than the headline-grabbing events of Political Islam" [p. 191].

If Muslims engage in *takfir* (intolerant accusations of disbelief against one another), what hope have they of showing due courtesy to the People of the Book? Murphy makes distinction between problems of dhimmitude and the more recent problem of abandonment of People of the Book status of Jews and Christians [p. 241]. This goes to the extreme of mocking Christianity [p. 245] even though the Qur'an (6:108) prohibits mocking even the idols. Murphy reports that Shaikh Omar Abdel Rahman sanctioned robbing Christian jewelers for supporting a church inimical to Islam [p. 242]. Yet the Qur'an (3:75) calls of those who claim exemption from the duties of trust on grounds of religious differences liars.

The real hope for the Islamic resurgence lies in the complex phenomenon of "Thinking Islam." The practitioners of the rebirth of *ijtihad* are very diverse. Some follow classical methodologies to new conclusions, some demand adhere only to the foundations of the jurisprudence while critiquing the narrowness of the methodologies of the past, while still others seem to challenge the foundations of the faith in their zeal to make room for Western *morés* in their articulation of the *shari`a*.

Passion for Islam provides us with a comprehensible discussion of the persecution of Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid. Murphy objectively reports the case of the maverick intellectual whose marriage was voided in retaliation for his questionable Qur'anic analysis. We can clearly see the various factors that played a role in the course of the case: the material interest of his chief persecutor, Abdel Sabour Shanine [p. 203]; the government's cynical resurrection of a previously abandoned legal concept [*hisba*, p. 204]; the fact that a paper published by Mubarak's putatively secular party called for Abu Zaid's firing and "added that 'execution' was a fitting penalty if he did not repent" [p. 204]; and Islamic jihad calls for Abu Zaid's death [p. 208]. An Islamist attorney, a petitioner in the case, admitted "that the petitioners had no desire to separate Abu Zaid from his wife" but had seized on the suit as the means to establish "that he is an atheist and to stop him from teaching apostasy to the youth."

The sordid story makes clear that Abu Zaid and his marriage were turned into a football for different players to score some point or another. The university that originally refused to promote Abu Zaid to full professor [p. 203, to make the point that they disapproved of what he said?] later reversed itself [p. 209, to make they point that they defended his right to say it?]. Most disgraceful was the government that resurrected the *hisba* law to appease the Islamists then restricted its application to cases in which the

public prosecutor approves, thus using the incident to yet further increase state power. With karmic irony, the new law subsequently was used to prosecute Shahine [p. 321].

A Muslim Brotherhood breakaway group called Al Wasat offers a more promising path to progress “saying that civil society should take precedence over the state when it comes to political authority and responsibility” [p. 218]. Political scientist Heba Raouf Ezzat suggests that the flaw in “the Islamic state paradigm was not the Islamic bit but the state bit” [p. 218].

The book is remarkably free from major errors. Such errors as exist seem to stem from issues of translation from Arabic. Murphy says that Palestinians refer to the Six Day War as “Al Nakba” (the catastrophe) [31], when they actually call it the *second* nakba, reserving THE Nakba for the establishment of Israel on Palestinian land in 1948. Why does she prefer “pagan” as the translation of Sayyid Qutb’s use of the word *jahiliyyah* rather than the actual “ignorant” or even her own second choice of “barbarian?” [p. 74], or why does she translate *fitna* as dissent, when dissension would be more apt?

There is, however, one troubling omission. When stating that the 1967 war broke out between Israel and its neighbors” [p. 30] Murphy makes no mention of the fact that the war began with Israel’s attack on Egypt. Her silence on this point is remarkable since she is surely aware that most people have forgotten this fact and are under the false impression that Egypt attacked Israel. Setting the record straight on this point would have provided additional support for her argument for the role of the war in advancing the Islamic revival.

Notwithstanding this omission, Caryle Murphy has made a major contribution to literature on the current status of the Islamic resurgence. Not only has she accurately assessed the status quo, she has identified the issue that will dominate the immediate future. One of her examples of the new thinking Islam, Hassan Hanafi, articulates the inadequacy of the two competing discourses to date: “The ... fundamentalist discourse ... knows exactly how to speak to the people,” but is without content. The secular discourse “knows very well what to speak about: freedom, social justice, progress, science, [etc., ... but] people don’t know who is John Stuart Mills [sic] or who is Marx. And they wonder, ‘Are these new Companions of the Prophet?’” [p. 231]. The challenge is to create a modern Islamic discourse in which relevant content can be expressed in a meaningful framework. The need, as Murphy notes, is “for Muslims who are unafraid of critical thinking” [p. 232].

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