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The transmutes of the Egyptian Memesphere : navigating cultural dynamics and social changes post-2013

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SORBONNE UNIVERSITÉ

ÉCOLE DOCTORALE IV (020)

CIVILISATIONS, CULTURES, LITTÉRATURES ET SOCIÉTÉS

The Transmutes of the Egyptian Memesphere

Navigating Cultural Dynamics and Social Changes Post-2013

Fayrouz Karawya

Sous la direction du

Pr. Frédéric Lagrange

Président du jury de soutenance

Pr. Richard Jacquemond

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A Note on Transliteration

The transliteration method used in this dissertation attempts to combine accuracy with simplicity and intelligibility for the broadest sectors of readers. It is based primarily on Brill's Encyclopedia of Islam 3's system of transliteration from the Arabic language.

MSA = Modern Standard Arabic

ECA = Egyptian Colloquial Arabic

Below, I am using EI3 modified system of transliteration for Cairo Arabic:

*Consonants & semi-consonants:

ء	‘	
ب	b	
ت	t	
ث	th	ﺚ
ج	j (MSA) g (ECA)	
ح	ḥ	ﺢ i (e for ECA)
خ	kh	
د	d	ﺪ u (o for ECA)
ذ	dh	
ر	r	
ز	z	
س	s	
ش	sh	
ص	ṣ	
ظ	ḍ	
ط	ṭ	
ظ	ẓ	
ع	‘	
غ	gh	
ف	f	

ق	q
ك	k
ل	l
م	m
ن	n
ه	h
ا	ā
و	w, ū (ō)
ي	y, ī (ē)
ة	a, at
ى	ā

*Vowels: ā, ū, ī (ECA ō, ē) / a, u, I (ECA o, e)

*Final tā' marbūṭa : -a / -at

*Alif maqṣūra: -ā

*Article: al- (Modern Standard Arabic), el- (Cairo Arabic); solar and lunar letters not distinguished in MSA, distinguished in CA.

*Compound names with Allah are in general written as one word: 'Abdallah, Hibatallah, other compound names are written as two words: 'Abd al-Raḥman.

*Widely recognized Romanizations of well-known historical leaders, politicians, intellectuals, celebrities, places, and public figures are spelled according to convention (e.g., Sharia, Quran, Ulama, Tahrir, Nasser, Mubarak, Sadat, Morsi, Sisi, etc.). Other proper nouns are written in the text and footnotes using the transliteration system between brackets at the first time they are mentioned, except for those variants that are globally recognized and therefore easily searchable. In Egyptian proper nouns, /j/ is always written /g/. Transliteration of Arabic texts written in Cairo Arabic imposes to use variants listed above (g, ō, ē, o, e).

*Regarding news agencies, NGOs and research institutions, media platforms, and digital accounts and pages, names appearing in the Latin alphabet were reproduced as such, in quotes, within the text, for citation, and footnotes, in accordance with the institution or the platform's spelling.

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Introduction

Following the Egyptian popular uprising in 2011, the pervasive influence of the internet memesphere on Egypt's political, social, and cultural landscape, became remarkable. Internet memes increasingly turned to an actual and prompt commentary medium that took the topsy turvy politics, daily news and trends, historical symbols and popular culture productions to a different level. Defined as the reproduction of an already present material by the “common people,”¹ online memes could be regarded as an extemporaneous re-contextualization of old and recent cultural histories, where an intentional intervention of cultural creators and social actors materialized as an engineering process of the public opinion and the sociopolitical stances.

As identified in Richard Dawkins’s genetic vocabulary,² internet memes were crystallized as an expression vehicle (a cultural gene) serving a communicative function as units of cultural transmission. The multimodal artifacts³ created of cultural references, local and global symbols, and superimposed text, in a momentary context, migrated to get endlessly replicated and modified within the digital medium around the world. During their journey, internet memes reconstruct meanings from layers of “semiotic inflection resulting from ongoing hybridization, mutability, creolization, crossbreeding and bricolage.”⁴

It is important to delineate the specificity of the Egyptian context where memes, a generic global subcategory of popular culture, surged in the form of “digital caricatures,”⁵ in parallel to the ongoing events taking place during the unprecedented popular uprising in 2011.

¹ Iskander, Adel. “The Meme-ing of Revolution: Creativity, Folklore, and the Dislocation of Power in Egypt,” *Jadaliyya* - جديلية, 2017. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31189/The-Meme-ing-of-Revolution-Creativity,-Folklore,-and-the-Dislocation-of-Power-in-Egypt> .

² Richard Dawkins. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

³ Zenner, Eline, and Dirk Geeraerts. “One Does Not Simply Process Memes: Image Macros as Multimodal Constructions.” Chapter. In *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay Research*, 176, ed. by Esme Winter-Froemel and Verena Thaler. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.

⁴ Iskander, “The Meme-Ing of Revolution: Creativity, Folklore, and the Dislocation of Power in Egypt.”

⁵ El Khachab, Chihab. « Est-ce que ça ne vaut pas mieux que d’être comme la Syrie et l’Irak ? Les caractères nationaux

Among the most popular forms come the *kōmiks* (comics) that acquired a different connotation in Egypt than their Anglo-Saxon one. Comics represented the genre where the confluence of the local popular culture references (cadres from popular films, drama series, web archives, iconography, or theatrical pieces), the visual organization of a caricature, and other elements like written commentary or dialogue occurred. Comics and memes were granted a national context since 2011 and became a field where social debates got ignited in politics, economy, and social life. Within the political mobilization context, internet memes surpassed the global criteria of a highly diffusible and transformable digital audiovisual content to play an integral role in consolidating political camps, reinventing dominant narratives, and assisting in the war of positions between the polarized sociopolitical factions.

The political unrest taking place since 2011 was reflected in the cultural production sphere, taking different phases and transmutes in relation to the quick and successive transformations of the political regimes and different social groups' interactions. As influential as they had been during the political upheaval in January 2011, social media and internet comedy continued to convey the political, cultural, and ideological dynamics animating the Egyptian society in the years of the aftermath.

Starting from the emergence of omnipresent memes and comics during successive presidential campaigns (2011-2014) and crucial political crossroads, internet comedy kept agitating the social imaginary and disrupting the mainstream media agendas of the governing regimes and their supporters. Meanwhile, internet comedy assisted a growing critical current of patriarchy, Islamism, and political authoritarianism through deciphering the nature of cultural discourses on modern Egyptian nationalism, religious institutions and organizations, and traditional gender conceptions.

Scrutinizing the Egyptian memesphere after 2013, as a contestation tool, propagation vehicle for rising and competing populist discourses, and an interactive space for sociopolitical critique could be considered the central focus and problematic of this dissertation.

vus par la caricature numérique égyptienne sur Facebook ». In *Culture pop en Égypte. Entre mainstream commercial et contestation*, 257. Richard Jacquemond et Frédéric Lagrange dir. Paris: Riveneuve. 2020.

In 2013, President Mohamed Morsi, a member and candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood organization, was removed from office following mass popular protests in June of that year. The protests and Morsi's ousting by the Egyptian military were succeeded by a wave of disturbances and violent reactions from the Muslim Brotherhood, which included sectarian attacks and organized sit-ins throughout the Egyptian capital. These events culminated in the bloody evacuation of Rāb‘a al-‘Adawiyya Square in August 2013.⁶

In 2014, the military takeover was solidified with the election of military general Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as president of the republic. The establishment of Sisi’s regime initiated a process of autocratic restoration marked by a severe crackdown on political dissent, social mobilization, independent media platforms, and avenues of public expression.

As a researcher, artist, and cultural activist, I had a front-row seat to the sociopolitical shifts that unfolded between 2005 and 2011, a period characterized by burgeoning social movements, youth engagement, and political organization in Egypt's public sphere. This era witnessed a fusion of the digital cultural realm with social realities, as a wave of new voices (amateurs, bloggers, and political activists) emerged within the cultural underground, digital networks, blogs and journalism, and creative industries.

Over the ensuing six years, a dynamic interplay between the internet's virtual space and its impact on tangible social realities became increasingly evident. Digital cyberutopians emerged as trailblazers of a burgeoning “mediated dissidence class,” coinciding with the Egyptian regime's adoption of a neoliberal economic model bolstered by web-based services and integrated media system.⁷ The proliferation of opposition figures' online platforms ushered a wave of fresh faces into the political arena, shaping the landscape of dissent and discourse in Egypt.

Having actively participated in the 2011 uprising; I witnessed firsthand the tumultuous journey of Egyptian militant groups over the subsequent three years of unrest. Immersed in various

⁶ Al-Malky, Rania. “Rabaa Was a Massacre of Innocents Egypt Must Never Forget,” *Middle East Eye*, 2019. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/rabaa-was-massacre-innocents-egypt-must-never-forget> .

⁷ Guaaybess, Tourya. “10. Media Policy in the MENA: The Political Impact of Media Confluence.” In *The Handbook of Media and Culture in the Middle East*, 93-106, ed. by J.F. Khalil, G. Khiabany, T. Guaaybess and B. Yesil. Hoboken. New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2023.

political, cultural, and artistic circles, I engaged in intense political conversations, collective sociocultural initiatives, and demonstrations that opened my eyes to the complex dilemmas that surrounded the uprising and the diverse sociopolitical factions driving its demands and mobilizations.

The years following the collapse of political mobilization constituted a prolonged period of reflection for me and many social and political actors across Egypt and the Arab region. This period provided an opportunity to critically reassess the “Arab Spring” and its aftermath from a multitude of perspectives. The repeated setbacks and significant defeats suffered by pro-democracy forces compelled me to constantly probe beneath the surface of the overt slogans and movements that garnered widespread media attention.

Beyond mere political motivations, it became imperative to delve into the historical, social, and cultural underpinnings that jeopardized the secular political uprising and incited a reactionary religious mobilization, leading to sectarian conflicts and subsequent waves of gender and religious persecution. The long history and path of Islamism and the interplay between post-independence Egyptian regimes and religious organizations re-emerged as major obstacles confronting the mobilization for social change. The state/religion duality subsequently became part of everyday deliberations on social networks and through internet memes after the outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013.

Observing the evolution of the Egyptian memesphere post-2013 involves studying an ethnographic site where a generation influenced by global digital culture organizes various digital movements reflecting the polarization within the deeply divided Egyptian society. This analysis scrutinizes the memesphere and its participants through the lenses of generational, political, and cultural divisions, considering the local and global dynamic influences and tendencies shaping the groups of meme creators.

In the Egyptian context, creating comics had been embraced by young people interested in challenging the dominant middle-class ethos and moral discourses, fostering a "revolutionary" youth counterculture against "normies"—a term that referred, in the local context, to older middle-class generations who embraced a hegemonic national culture shaped by 20th-century Egyptian modernization movements and the significant cultural impact of Islamic revival movements since the 1970s, resulting in a deeply entrenched sociocultural ethical hybrid.

This dissertation primarily explores how the memosphere influences cultural wars and sparks social trends within the conceptual realms of nationalism, religion, and gender after 2013. From this perspective, the memosphere activity appears as a gradual development of a vital tool of contestation, deconstruction, and negotiation of the nation's relevant recent and old histories in the light of sociopolitical transformations and conflicting currents' ideologies in the era of media confluence⁸ heavily impacted by political agendas and populist propensities.

When embraced by traditionalists, government supporters, and Islamist groups, internet comics functioned as a powerful tool for reinforcing conventional values, highly conservative views infused with Salafist ideologies, state strategies, and dominant social and religious beliefs across various media platforms. Rather than being confined to political dissent and cultural innovation, internet comedy emerged as a versatile medium. In fact, the memosphere and digital media significantly bolstered established political factions and authorities, serving as a crucial element within the cultural landscape and the ongoing ideological struggles between competing currents.

My choice to examine the evolution of the Egyptian memosphere within the frameworks of nationalism, religion, and gender is motivated by the significant changes that have introduced new dynamics and the vibrant debates taking place in these particularly active realms. The reexamination of national identity, religious ideologies, and prevailing gender norms emerged as crucial areas of conflict and contention after 2013.

In investigating how internet memes serve functions beyond mere humor and precipitating laughable themes, I identified these three conceptual lenses as central to my analysis. Exploring meme wars and their associated symbols in relation to nationalism, religion, and gender has directed my research process and provided three complementary perspectives on the substantial sociocultural transformations occurring in Egypt since 2013.

⁸ “The media confluence makes it possible to reflect the progressive interweaving of the media one into the other within a complete system allowing the coexistence of several formats and several media. Digital media have their uses and modes of production, which make it possible to establish this interdependence with and between existing media.” Guaaybess. “Media Policy in the MENA,” 95.

I. The Egyptian Memesphere and a State-of-the-Art Examination

My study of the Egyptian memesphere post-2013 was, in part, motivated by a desire to contextualize the Egyptian uprising and its aftermath within broader cultural, historical, and global frameworks. Here, the logic of participation on digital platforms, social networks, and the emergent phenomena of neopopulism and neonationalism appeared as a significant influence.

The Egyptian uprising marked a pivotal moment, contributing to what I argue can be considered a tripartite division of political affiliations and cultural tendencies dominating the online sphere since 2013: *Al-thawragiyya* (the revolutionaries) representing the liberal and leftist opposition and the 2011 uprising sympathizers, *al-dawlagiyya* (the state supporters) representing the “stability alliance” who supported the military takeover and Sisi regime since the removal of Mohamed Morsi in 2013, and *al-Islāmgīyya* (the Islamists) representing the different blocs of political Islam led by the Muslim Brotherhood organization. It is noteworthy to refer to the Salafist movement that occupies a substantial position within the Islamist sphere, given that it remained politically inactive until the 2000s, however, it was immensely influential in the mainstreaming of reactionary conceptions.⁹

The mediated dissidence class that emerged since 2005 operated through social networks, capitalizing on the horizontal nature of the burgeoning conversational and contestational spirit among Arab digital youth before 2011.¹⁰ However, political alliances that preceded the uprising capitalized on a heterotopic space of communication, like the Internet, to mobilize large sectors of the population with divergent sensibilities and visions.

The clashes between divergent visions and political projects in 2011 precipitated a significant process of fragmentation that permeated the revolutionary groups, leading to diverging paths, particularly during the period marked by the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power amid opposition from within the revolutionary movements themselves. In a later stage, the intervention

⁹ Lacroix, Stéphane. “Egypt’s Pragmatic Salafis: The Politics of Hizb al-Nour.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2016. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/01/egypt-s-pragmatic-salafis-politics-of-hizb-al-nour-pub-64902> .

¹⁰ Gonzalez-Quijano, Yves. “Les origines numériques des soulèvements arabes.” In *Arabités numériques : Le printemps du web arabe*. Paris : Actes Sud/Sindbad, 2012.

of the Egyptian military, supported by a broad alliance of political and social forces opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood, reshaped the landscape, causing a shift in positions and elevating confrontation with Islamist organizations to a pivotal factor in political discourse since June 2013.

Following the authoritarian restoration in 2014 and the election of President Sisi, a new landscape began to unfold. The three politically oriented entities I distinguished (*al-thawragiyya*, *al-dawlagiyya*, and *al-Islāmgīyya*) were consolidated, molding public sentiment and societal dynamics driven by starkly contrasting perspectives on the course of the uprising. Each group became engrossed in shaping the narrative of the events spanning from 2011 to 2013, fueling a continuous discourse that influenced social and political realms in the post-2013 era. The resulting political frictions among these primary factions manifested in ongoing cultural wars, infiltrating various domains, among which I chose to analyze nationalism, religion, and gender, with the memesphere emerging as a significant influencer in this intricate tapestry of conflicts.

However, the three divisions were not steadily reflecting clear cut nuanced ideologies as they stemmed from heterotopic constituencies which resulted in a continual process of fragmentation and shifting viewpoints among their followers and supporters. The memesphere aptly mirrored the alliances and rifts cutting across these groups based on a variety of factors, including diversified political interests, social and religious stances, and gender biases acquiring increasing importance with the growing influence of a minority advocating for gender rights, adding a new layer of complexity to the evolving meme wars. Memes, in such a severely polarized context rather reflect, as an integral component in cultural wars, a “struggle over meaning, values, and ideologies.”¹¹

Building on the works of the communications professors Ryan Milner¹² and Limor Shifman,¹³ I focused on memes as social and cultural phenomena, that emerge out of social interactions, express, and help shaping shared values and cultural meanings. From that angle, I

¹¹ Zidani, Sulafa. “Not Arabi or Ajnabi: Arab Youth and Reorienting Humor.” *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020). <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/14133> .

¹² Milner, Ryan M. *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016.

¹³ Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013.

chose meme pages and groups who concentrated on the actual sociopolitical context and reacted to the cultural trends that surged amidst and after the political upheaval in 2011.

Memes, in this perspective, have gained immense popularity as a means of showcasing images, texts, and videos that traverse the internet combining cultural symbolism, hypermediacy (offering a heterogenous space that acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible),¹⁴ affective power, and humor. Their popularity can be assessed based on engagement metrics across social media platforms, including likes, shares, and the growing number of members within meme creator communities. The increasing follower count on meme pages underscores the substantial impact these online groups have in shaping public discourse and sentiments through the viral spread of highly shareable memes and comics. These common forms of online expression are crafted, altered, and disseminated by users to articulate opinions, bolster perspectives, comment on various subjects, or visually represent different ideas.¹⁵ Memes are social and cultural expressions of the internet that gradually construct digital media “postmodern folklore”¹⁶ through digital storytelling.¹⁷

Limor Shifman summarized her definition of memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.”¹⁸ She further identifies “content, form, and stance” as three dimensions that characterize internet memes. Hence, she stressed the ideas and ideologies (content), the physical structure (form), and the (stances) of meme creators who “position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers”¹⁹ as the main pillars of this cultural phenomenon. She

¹⁴ Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. “Immediacy, Hypermediacy, and Remediation.” In *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 33-34. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000.

¹⁵ Milner. *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*.

¹⁶ Shifman, Limor. “Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18/3 (2013): 362–377, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013> .

¹⁷ Burgess, Jean. “Vernacular Creativity and New Media,” PhD diss., (Queensland University of Technology, 2005). https://eprints.qut.edu.au/16378/1/Jean_Burgess_Thesis.pdf .

¹⁸ Shifman, Limor. “Defining Internet Memes.” In *Memes in Digital Culture*, 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

also studied memes as “means of repackaging”²⁰ through mimicry and remix (manipulating a digital item) which allowed meme creators to produce various genres of memes like photoshopped images, stock character macros, text and screenshots memes, and reaction GIFs.²¹

The linguists Eline Zenner and Dirk Geeraerts²² evoked the virality of memes that relies on a shared meme literacy between online communities and starts to transform networked individualism into a widely shared “ingroup code of the digitally literate”²³ connecting with a significant audience across multiple social media platforms in a relatively short amount of time. Virality, from another side, was influenced by the participatory logic of social networks and the economy of visibility on the internet, as argues Gérald Bronner in his sociological account “Apocalypse cognitive,”²⁴ where sex, fear of countless dangers, and anger are three main emotions that captivate the most attention. The virality and visibility of internet memes significantly influenced their effectiveness and reach within the tumultuous landscape of post-revolutionary Egypt.

From his side, Ryan Milner affirmed the “polyvocality of memes” allowing “multiple voices to come together through humor, political, and social commentary.”²⁵ According to Ryan Milner “the participatory media world is made—is brought into existence and sustained—through messy memetic interrelationships. It exists in the space between individual texts and broader conversations, between individual citizens and broader cultural discourses.”²⁶ Polyvocality and horizontal networking reinforced the growing conversational and contestational spirit among Arab digital youth generations before 2011, as postulated Yves Gonzalez-Quijano in his book “Arabités

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, “Meme Genres.”

²² Zenner, Eline and Geeraerts, Dirk. "One does not simply process memes: Image macros as multimodal constructions" In *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay*, 167-194, ed. by Esme Winter-Froemel and Verena Thaler. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110586374-008> .

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Bronner, Gérald. “Avant-propos subjectif : Une époque formidable.” In *Apocalypse cognitive*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2021.

²⁵ Milner, Ryan M. *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2016.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

numériques.”²⁷ The heterotopic composition of the mediated dissident class was later reflected within the Egyptian memesphere operating in an atmosphere of cyberpolarization.²⁸

Media studies professor Anastasia Denisova highlights the role of internet memes as a contemporary means of “carnavalesque resistance.”²⁹ She draws inspiration from the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin,³⁰ who conceptualizes medieval carnivals as a form of dissent that is tolerated under authoritarian regimes, facilitating the emergence of alternative discourses, diverse stylistic expressions, and an intentional polyphony (heteroglossia).³¹ She connects this idea to Ryan Milner's perspective on the polyvocality of memes.

The connection between carnivalesque public protests and the dynamic online communities that spread memes creates an environment in which memes are seen as a countercultural movement actively participating in political persuasion and engaging in mind-bombing, according to Anastasia Denisova. From this perspective, she uses the term “tactical media”³² to characterize the digital landscape that fosters relationships among like-minded individuals and facilitates the dissemination of an “insurgent consciousness.”³³

Anastasia Denisova emphasizes that digital platforms can enhance political engagement in areas where fear deters participation. Digital activism facilitates access to information and networks, educating audiences through varied ideologies and debates. These platforms empower dissenters with anonymity or a curated online identity, increasing their reach and the visibility of their political discourse. Hence, the increasing role of the Egyptian memesphere could be classified

²⁷ Gonzalez-Quijano, Yves. “Les origines numériques des soulèvements arabes.” In *Arabités numériques : Le printemps du web arabe*, 176. Paris : Actes Sud/Sindbad, 2012.

²⁸ Sunstein, Cass R. “Polarization and Cybercascades.” In *Republic.com 2.0*, 60. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.

²⁹ Denisova, Anastasia. “Many Uses of Memes: From Fast-Food Media to Political Mindbombs.” In *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts*, 47-51. New York and London: Routledge, 2019.

³⁰ Bakhtine, Mikhail, and Iswolsky, Hélène. *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

³¹ Denisova. “Many Uses of Memes: From Fast-Food Media to Political Mindbombs,” 35.

³² Denisova. “Before Memes: Tactical Media, Humor, and Affective Engagement with Politics Online,” 16.

³³ *Ibid.*

under the broad category of “tactical media” operating under repressive conditions after the autocratic restoration in 2014.

The widespread popularity of Egyptian memes and comics hinges on their ability to simplify themes, and coherently present diverse elements as “constructs” in a satirical and playful manner. These memes often draw on cultural references from popular films, theater, TV shows, and well-known songs, enhanced by the addition of text, aphorisms, and dialogues. This countercultural subcategory sees meme creators reclaiming and redefining symbols of political power while engaging in the discourse among various polarized online groups. For these purposes, meme creators deploy the power of rapidly evolving multimodal constructions of images with superimposed text (image macros), reworked cartoons, comics, memes, and photoshopped images.

The social anthropologist Chihab El Khachab categorizes Egyptian internet comics as “digital caricatures,”³⁴ drawing from their social role and the use of “intermedial references.” He connects them to traditional satirical journalism, which has existed in Egypt since the nineteenth century. Despite the temporal differences, Chihab El Khachab observes that the critique of current affairs within these comics resonates due to the familiar visual conventions they employ, allowing them to connect with a wide audience across cultural contexts.

Chihab El Khachab's discussion of “intermedial references,” as articulated by scholar Irina Rajewsky,³⁵ highlights the functional parallels between classical satirical cartoons and digital caricatures, reinforcing the enduring significance of visual satire in critiquing societal issues and power structures.

The “referential complexity”³⁶ in these digital caricatures emerges from the varied interpretations and spontaneous reinterpretations of cultural narratives and histories. The blending

³⁴ El Khachab, Chihab, “Est-ce que ça ne vaut pas mieux que d’être comme la Syrie et l’Irak ? Les caractères nationaux vus par la caricature numérique Égyptienne sur Facebook.” In *Culture pop en Égypte : Entre mainstream commercial et contestation*, 257. Richard Jacquemond et Frédéric Lagrange dir. Paris, France : Riveneuve, 2020.

³⁵ Rajewsky, Irina O. “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality.” Essay. In « *Intermédialités* » : *Histoire et Théorie Des Arts, Des Lettres et Des Techniques*, Centre de recherche sur l’intermédialité 6 (2005) : 43–64.

³⁶ Lagrange, Frédéric. “Introduction.” In *Culture pop en Égypte : Entre mainstream commercial et contestation*, 1–35. Richard Jacquemond et Frédéric Lagrange dir. Paris, France : Riveneuve, 2020.

of cultural references, the intersection of local and global influences, and the combination of archival and contemporary popular culture rely on shared experiences and a recognizable background among audiences. Additionally, the intricate meaning structures, within this multi-layered work of remixes and mashups in memes, challenge dominant cultural narratives and recode their connotations, de-confining them from their original normative meanings tied to the primary form of reception.

II. Contextualizing the Production of Egyptian Comics after 2013

Building upon the scholar of cultural anthropology Walter Armbrust's account on the Egyptian revolution³⁷ and his application of the schismogenesis concept and theory, I delved into the pervasive phenomena of fragmentation and polarization that clouded the Egyptian uprising's trajectory and outcome. By scrutinizing the postrevolutionary memesphere within the realms of nationalism, religion, and gender, I sought to establish a parallel between the integrated media system, online cultural wars, and the enduring 'schismogenetic' tendencies that came to the fore during years of political upheaval and carried on after 2013. A selected corpus of digital caricatures, navigating comic forums, and interviewing meme creators served as my key cultural compass points, illuminating, in three separate parts, the unfolding cultural conflict revolving around contested national identities, shifting religious landscapes, and the ongoing struggles over gender issues.

Walter Armbrust draws on the insights of anthropologists Gregory Bateson³⁸ and Bjørn Thomassen's notion of "schismogenesis"³⁹ to analyze the sequence of events that fractured the various elements of the Egyptian popular uprising. Bjørn Thomassen describes schismogenesis during political revolutions as a phenomenon that often unfolds during transitional phases, potentially becoming a lasting dynamic.⁴⁰ According to Walter Armbrust, schismogenesis involves forming lasting adversaries and adopting rhetoric that reflects those deemed outside the bounds of

³⁷ Armbrust, Walter. *Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019.

³⁸ "Gregory Bateson was a biologist by training (his father William Bateson invented the term 'genetics'). He understood the Iatmul village as a fragile ecology, a 'dynamic equilibrium' (a term he borrowed from chemistry and coined for anthropology). Schismogenesis was a generative principle in this cultural ecology, but, unrestrained, it would destroy it too. He delineated two forms of schismogenesis: symmetrical – where the parties reacted with equivalent intensity to each other's sallies –and complementary – where increasingly active display was met with an increasingly passive response."

Wardle, Huon Oliver Bliase. "Schismogenesis in a Belfast urinal." *Anthropology Today* 17/3 (2001): 24-25.

³⁹ Thomassen, Bjørn. "Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54/3 (2012): 679–706. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23274538>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

social acceptance.⁴¹ The political dynamics after 2013 show an operating schismogenesis rooted in the protest movement's makeup, which, as elaborated in this dissertation, existed before the Muslim Brotherhood's expulsion in 2013.

The intersection of new media activism, with its capacity for virality and horizontal participatory logic, alongside the diverse protest groups, energized political mobilization. Yet, despite a revolutionary narrative filled with positive ideals, it struggled to unify the fragmented social entities. While democratic ideals and freedom demands as thematic elements helped coalesce disparate groups, bolstering their mobility and influencing online slogans, these ideals articulated in the digital sphere in 2011 did not effectively materialize in political tactics during the uprising, its development, and subsequent negotiations.

The operational dynamics of the post-2013 political divisions in Egypt were closely intertwined with global influences, particularly the ascendant populist parties and alt-right affects from one side, and identity politics and woke activism from another side, in the United States of America and Europe. These currents heavily relied on social networks, internet memes, and digital platforms to propagate their views and discourses. The convergence of the virtual and physical worlds provided these movements with momentum and bolstered their impact on modern politics and sociocultural trends. From this viewpoint, the Egyptian memesphere, despite its distinct cultural references and the political context of its development, is closely intertwined with global cultural and political trends. The culture of online memes operates as an extensive network of cultural exchange, where local and global influences perpetually interact. The dissemination of meme symbols and the propagation of diverse sociopolitical ideologies frequently attain universal relevance, shaped by local conditions and broader hegemonic frameworks, especially the pervasive influence of American media and culture.

In 2016, “The Great Meme War” by online pro-Trump supporters on alt-right platforms such as 4chan’s /pol/ or Reddit’s r/The_Donald, was also related to the notion of metapolitics, often deployed by key alt-right figures.⁴² Inspired by Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony,

⁴¹ Armbrust. “The Disputed Grievability of Sally Zahran,” 98.

⁴² Bar-On, Tamir. “Richard B. Spencer and the Alt Right,” In *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*, ed. by Mark Sedgwick. New York: Oxford Academic, 2019.

and the French *Nouvelle Droite*, the concept of metapolitics “aims at spreading certain themes and ideas among the general public by focusing on cultural and ideological issues rather than on actual politics.”⁴³

The digital culture scholar Sulafa Zidani challenged the notion of globality in digital influences, referring to the permeation of the local memes in the Arab World by Western notions that get integrated in local memes through repackaging, mashups, and remixes with local content.⁴⁴ She argued that cultural exchange within the memesphere could be viewed from “nondominant perspectives” as a mediation practice where “creators of the arabi–ajjabi (Arab-foreign) mashups emphasize what has meaning to them, or what they and their audience consider a part of their culture.”⁴⁵

According to Sulafa Zidani, creative youth drawing on historical and cultural contexts, contrasting diverse cultures, and presenting serious themes with a playful touch, cultivate a humor that highlights their significant concerns while fostering a sense of community through subversive laughter.

John C. Meyer, professor of communication studies, identifies three primary types of humor utilized in communication: relief, incongruity, and superiority.⁴⁶ These humor styles are particularly effective in memetic texts, where they are employed to craft jokes that resonate with audiences who identify with the themes and comedic elements of the meme.

According to him, relief humor arises when people laugh due to a perceived alleviation of stress, functioning as a release of tension in difficult circumstances.⁴⁷ Incongruity humor occurs when an expected pattern is disrupted, or a notable difference is observed—one that is sufficiently non-threatening yet distinct enough to be striking. This interplay between the familiar and the

⁴³ Dafaure, Maxime. “The “Great Meme War:” the Alt-Right and its Multifarious Enemies.” *Angles: New Perspectives on the Anglophone World*, 10 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.369> .

⁴⁴ Zidani. “Not Arabi or Ajnabi: Arab Youth and Reorienting Humor.”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3214.

⁴⁶ Meyer, John C. *Understanding Humor Through Communication: Why Be Funny, Anyway?* Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

unexpected elicits humor for the audience.⁴⁸ Superiority humor describes the phenomenon where individuals laugh at others, experiencing a sense of triumph or superiority over them. This type of humor has a considerable impact on social dynamics, reinforcing hierarchies by positioning some individuals and groups as the ones who laugh (higher status) while others become the objects of the joke (lower status).⁴⁹

However, the aim of my research extends beyond merely drawing parallel lines between global phenomena and their digital extensions and the current reality in Egypt post-2013. Instead, it seeks to undertake a detailed and comprehensive cultural study of local Egyptian interactions within three interconnected yet distinct realms: nationalism, religion, and gender. By meticulously analyzing each of these areas of interest separately, utilizing a vast sample of memes spanning approximately ten years and produced by various categories of Egyptians, this research offers an unconventional perspective on popular perceptions and interactions with events and transformations within each domain, and how these interactions impact the daily lives of individuals across gender, religious, and nationalist affiliations.

Through this examination, the research also endeavors to formulate a nuanced understanding of the governance ideologies and management techniques adopted by the new authority in Egypt post-2013, which intersect with global influences, regional dynamics, and transformations in integrated media systems (social networks along with national and transnational television channels and journalism).⁵⁰

Addressing online cultural wars through the lens of internet memes allowed this research to process complex perspectives about the rise of populist ideologies and affects empowering different political currents and their respective supportive groups. Approaching phenomena like Egyptian neonationalist groups, neopopulist religious preachers, digital gender rights activism, anti-feminist neomasculinist groups, anti-Islamist tendencies, in the post-2013 era, essentially depended on revisiting discourses, cultural references and iconography, satires, and clashes within the memosphere.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁰ Guaaybess. "Media Policy in the MENA," 99-100.

Moreover, within this interdisciplinary framework, the memesphere emerges as a dynamic arena for shaping narratives surrounding the events of 2011 and their aftermath. Conflicting currents within the memesphere generate diverse perceptions and positions, reshaping discourse on politics, gender, and religion. The memesphere also serves as a tool for these antagonistic groups and divided camps that helps to increase their popularity, mobilizing their followers, or forming changing types of alliances between them.

Identity struggles, limitations on public freedoms, gender inequality, and religious restrictions are at the forefront of social deliberations and the contributions of meme creators. In tandem with global identity trends, local conflicts between Islamists and secularists, as well as between authorities and their opponents, are taking on digital forms, sparking cultural wars that highlight new qualitative movements within Egypt.

Beneath the surface of these battles, the strategies of the authority and the impact of its policies become evident, alongside the enduring effects of Islamic awakening movements since the 1970s and the emergence of resistance movements challenging prevailing values and dominant discourses. I am using the notion of “identitarian authoritarianism” to delineate the amalgam of governance strategy and ideological framework that characterized the post-independence Egyptian state and equally influenced its political adversaries.

The persistent framework of identitarian authoritarianism, capitalizing on the interplay between nationalist and Islamist currents, reproduced an “identity conflict focus” effectively obscuring the core issue of the Egyptian state's structural anomaly—its failure to attain a stable transition, according to the Egyptian historian Sharīf Yūnus.⁵¹ In an effort to mitigate this shortcoming, successive rulers upheld a state of emergency and exception, which liberated the political regime from any legal and constitutional limitations, thereby establishing a necessary condition for its operation.

This research’s conceptual approach seeks to shed light on overlooked aspects in the academic discourse surrounding the Egyptian uprising in 2011, which often neglected cultural

يونس، شريف. "البحث عن خلاص: أزمة الدولة والإسلام والحداثة في مصر". الهيئة العامة للكتاب- 2018. ⁵¹

Yūnus, Sharīf. *Searching for a Solace: The Crisis of the State, Islam and Modernity in Egypt*, 219-220. Cairo: The General Egyptian Book Organization, 2018.

backgrounds, societal historicity, and identity conflicts influencing the performance of various political currents and their relationship with their audiences. It also aims to explore new sensitivities that have emerged as a result of the political upheaval, encompassing critical examinations of the relationship between religion and the state, the role of Islamist movements within authoritarian systems, advocacy for women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights, and the evolution of forms of contemporary patriotism alongside traditional national and identity discourses in Egypt.

Relying on the cultural anthropologist Lisa Wedeen's definition of ideology as "an ensemble of practices being undertaken by people at any given time— such as speaking, listening, feeling, emoting, believing, lying about believing (and/or not believing they are lying)— sufficiently in concert and with sufficient specificity to be affixed with a label,"⁵² internet memes provide a typical arena of social deliberation where the intertwining of ideology and affect serves as a regime strategy to "flatten out the complexities"⁵³ of the present-day context. Contemplating the memes created by pro or anti regime groups gives way to a multitude of interpretations and readings into the creation of "collective affects"⁵⁴ based on social experiences.

While the Egyptian meme culture was gaining momentum during the years 2011-2012, always with an eye on the international scenery, it held a specific context of ignition and reinforcement related to the major political upheaval the country witnessed at the time. Yet the cynical sentiments enrooted in the emergence of the Egyptian memesphere cannot be only attributed to a particularity of the local context overlooking the worldly transformations taking place. Respectively, in the realms of nationalism, religion, and gender, this research project aimed at delineating genealogical links between the present events and the historical past of the post-independence Egyptian state, the local sociopolitical currents, and the global shifts in discursive power and sociality.

⁵² Wedeen, Lisa. "Introduction: 'I Know Very Well, yet Nevertheless . . .': Ideology, Interpellation, and the Politics of Disavowal," In *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgement, and Mourning in Syria*, 5-6. London: University of Chicago Press, Ltd, 2019.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁴ Illouz, Eva. "Introduction." In *Les émotions contre la démocratie*, 15. Paris : Premier Parallèle, 2022.

The social polarization that carried on bearing the energy of the political mobilization since 2011 kept operating in a highly censored and restricted public space after 2013. Through social networks, it revived conflicts between diverse groups of opposing ideologies, encompassing fundamentalist, conservative, nationalist, liberal, and identitarian currents. The mediated interventions of meme communities were trying to reconstruct a postrevolutionary narrative and process regional transformations and lent a voice to a plurality of critical groups weaponizing humor and satire.

Groups representing right-wing inclinations, anti-globalization territorial nationalists, anti-political correctness enthusiasts, and anti-feminist manosphere mimed an international reactionary spectrum in the face of the rising communities of social justice defenders of leftist inclination, and advocates of religious freedoms and gender rights. However, the sociopolitical context significantly influenced the interactions between these divergent discourses, resulting in an ongoing battleground within local networks.

Events in Egypt have been profoundly impacted by the growing conflict between the opposing ideologies of the alt-right and "wokism," the latter often subjected to ridicule and used pejoratively even when discussing moderate liberal ideas. In the conservative landscape of Egypt, alt-right convictions appear to hold more sway, allowing their slogans to dominate the discourse, whereas "wokism" is tentatively embraced by smaller communities, which are frequently disparaged as "westernized." The adaptation of these global debates into the local narrative did not always conform to strict categories; rather, it integrated variations influenced by the local social landscape, dominant discourses, and historical context. It is essential to explore the specifics of how these global concepts are translated in local discussions, which social and cultural groups benefit from reinterpreting these ideas, and how they successfully adapt and weaponize global ideas to address local issues.

III. Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

In this cultural study, I drew upon a vast array of academic literature spanning disciplines such as digital culture and communication studies, Middle East studies, contemporary media studies, modern Egyptian history and politics, gender studies, and digital sociology. Additionally, I benefited from numerous research papers and articles which enriched my perspective and aided in keeping abreast of the evolving conceptions within the academic realm regarding digital culture phenomena and online cultural wars, which continued to influence the Egyptian memesphere to this day.

The main research question is centered around the examination of the “modern” as a chief category of analysis in the ultracontemporary Egyptian context; how it has been articulated and problematized via internet memes and comics penetrating online social trends post-2013.

The modern is profusely negotiated in online cultural agents’ works that challenged gender, religion, and nationalism conceptions after the schismogenetic political events that dragged the Egyptian society into intense polarization.

Capitalizing on a diversified body of literature on popular culture, digital ethnography, media and communications studies, politics of representation, and modern history of Egypt, I aim at providing a comprehensive account on the cultural dynamicity at present in Egypt, and the ability of cultural creators to introduce new and transcending perspectives, and elaborate on the sociopolitical context across different chronological and spatial contexts, where they deploy the widely memorable/popular film, drama and music productions, local and global symbols and linguistic references and engage them in a reactive form of digital expression.

To serve this research endeavor, I also relied on the valuable academic studies on the cultural and sociopolitical influences of Islamism and post-Islamism by scholars Asef Bayat,⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Bayat, Asef. *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017.

Karin Van Nieuwkerk,⁵⁶ Charles Hirschkind,⁵⁷ Elliott Colla,⁵⁸ Stéphane Lacroix,⁵⁹ Jacques Huntzinger,⁶⁰ Samuli Schielke,⁶¹ Malika Zeghal,⁶² and Olivier Roy.⁶³ I resorted to these references to highlight the relation between the postcolonial Egyptian state and the Islamist currents and the cascade of transmutations and challenges that culminated in the major rift in 2013.

Modern history references offered a complex view of that relation and its impact on the formation of the political subjects, on the political and social arena, and on the cultural imaginary of the middle-class counterpublic⁶⁴ until 2013.

⁵⁶ Van Nieuwkerk, Karin. *Performing Piety: Singers and Actors in Egypt's Islamic Revival*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2013.

⁵⁷ Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

⁵⁸ Colla, Elliott. *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*. Durham, North Carolina : Duke University Press, 2008.

⁵⁹ Lacroix, Stéphane. *Le crépuscule des Saints-Histoire et politique du salafisme en Égypte*. Paris : CNRS Éditions. Paris, 2024.

⁶⁰ Huntzinger, Jacques. *Les printemps arabes et le religieux : La sécularisation de l'islam*. Paris : Collège des Bernardins, 2014.

⁶¹ Schielke, Samuli. "Ambivalent Commitments: Troubles of Morality, Religiosity and Aspiration among Young Egyptians." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 39/2 (2009): 158–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20696806>

⁶² Zeghal, Malika. *Gardiens de l'Islam : Les oulémas d'Al Azhar dans l'Égypte contemporaine*. Paris : Presses de Sciences Po., 1996.

⁶³ Roy, Olivier. *The Failure of the Political Islam*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994.

⁶⁴ Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

In addition, I benefited from many academic works on the cultural and social history of Egypt and Egyptian feminism by Lucie Ryzova,⁶⁵ Timothy Mitchell,⁶⁶ Sharīf Yūnus,⁶⁷ Laura Bier,⁶⁸ Beth Baron,⁶⁹ and Elliott Colla.⁷⁰

In gender studies, I benefited from the works of Abraham De Swaan,⁷¹ Hanan Hammad,⁷² Mervat F. Hatem,⁷³ R. W. Connell,⁷⁴ Michael Kimmel,⁷⁵ and Eva Illouz.⁷⁶

As previously mentioned, I capitalized on Walter Armbrust's notion of "liminal crisis" to describe the initiation of a polarization process and effective schismogenetic mechanism that profited from the digital media's operative logic of cyberpolarization. I also profited from the

⁶⁵ Ryzova, Lucie. "Egyptianizing Modernity through the 'New *Effendiya*': Social and Cultural Constructions of the Middle Class in Egypt under the Monarchy." In *Re-Envisioning Egypt 1919-1952*, ed. by Arthur Goldschmidt, and Amy J. Johnson. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005. Pp. 124–163.

⁶⁶ Mitchell, Timothy. *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2002.

⁶⁷ يونس، شريف. "البحث عن خلاص: أزمة الدولة والإسلام والحدثة في مصر". الهيئة العامة للكتاب- 2018.

Yūnus, Sharīf. *Searching for a Solace: The Crisis of the State, Islam and Modernity in Egypt*. Cairo: The General Egyptian Book Organization, 2018.

⁶⁸ Bier, Laura. *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*. California: Stanford University Press, 2011.

⁶⁹ Baron, Beth. *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2007.

⁷⁰ Colla. *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity..*

⁷¹ De Swaan, Abram. *Contre les femmes : La montée d'une haine mondiale*. Translated by Bertrand Abraham. Paris: Editions Seuil, 2021.

⁷² Hammad, Hanan. "Sexual Harassment in Egypt: An Old Plague in a New Revolutionary Order." *Budrich Journals* 9 (2017): 44–63. <https://doi.org/10.3224/gender.v9i1.04>

⁷³ Hatem, Mervat F. "Economic and Political Liberation in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism.", 233. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24/2 (1992): 231–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/164296> .

⁷⁴ Connell, R. W. and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society* 19/6 (2005): 829–59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27640853> .

⁷⁵ Kimmel, Michael. "Globalization and Its Mal(E)Contents: The Gendered Moral and Political Economy of Terrorism," *International Sociology - INT SOCIOLOG* 18 (2003): 603–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02685809030183008>

⁷⁶ Illouz, Eva. *La fin de l'amour : Enquête sur un désarroi contemporain*. Translated by Sophie Renaut. Paris : Points Essais, 2021.

perspectives of Anastasia Danisova in explaining the relation between mind-bombing memes, tactical media activity, and the sociopolitical context.

Similarly, I resorted to the analyses of the sociologists Yves Gonzalez-Quijano, Dominique Cardon, and meme theorists Limor Shifman, Ryan Milner to grasp the social function of internet memes and their substantial role in digital communication and contemporary cultural wars in the Arab region and Egypt.

Leading interdisciplinary cultural research is cornerstone to this project aiming at capturing a multi-faceted phenomenon, like internet memes and comics, in its contemporaneous historicity and sociality. It was indispensable to resort to various theoretical frameworks to become able to contextualize a cascade of endless social trends emerging within qualitatively different domains (nationalism, religion, and gender). Trying to delineate and observe common patterns that underpin the meme wars, and their social impact within three distinct domains, required an equivalently complex array of interpretative theoretical frameworks and analyses.

The realm of cultural studies has effectively integrated interdisciplinarity, ethnology, and empiricism to rigorously analyze cultural practices and materials in relation to social contexts, historical narratives, and the ongoing power struggles between dominant and dominated groups over meanings, identities, and values. The scholar Nicholas Daly⁷⁷ contends that cultural studies perceived the "popular" as a battleground of political conflict, emphasizing the need to explore the political and ideological dimensions inherent in cultural forms and artifacts. In that sense, cultural studies saw that "the realm of culture is the realm of ideology, the place where selves are shaped and where individuals are interpellated as subjects; or the realm of competition for symbolic capital; or the realm where oppositional groups create their own meanings out of the cultural flotsam and jetsam that comes their way."⁷⁸

This view emanates from the cultural theorist Stuart Hall's identification of the cultural message as a product conforming with the "dominant codes" of the producers, while its "decoding"

⁷⁷ Daly, Nicholas. "Interdisciplinarity and Cultural Studies." *Victorian Review* 33/1 (2007) : 18–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27793611> .

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

does not always take place as expected by the encoder.⁷⁹ According to Stuart Hall, an established “hegemonic dominant” is perpetually challenged when a normative understanding is recontextualized within the cultural world, which continuously alters the “codes of reference” of cultural productions.⁸⁰

In interpreting satirical memes, it becomes more difficult to identify producers within the categories of dominant fractions as both producers and encoders are entangled in an ongoing process of cultural exchange and reproducibility of cultural representations. Internet memes serve as powerful communication tools within cultural conflicts and power dynamics, continuously redefining reference codes through repackaging processes that surpass conventional boundaries of production and consumption as identified by cultural studies when looking at hierarchical power relations between cultural producers and their “mainstream” consumers. Therefore, recognizing the positionality of meme producers is vital, as the interactions between diverse creators result in multifaceted exchanges, reproductions, and interpretations.

Stuart Hall presumes that initiating a “negotiated code” or/and an “oppositional code” of reception could be attributed to a “privileged position” and a “particular logic” of the receptors of cultural productions.⁸¹ However, with virally circulating meme material, the appropriation of their symbolism by large sectors on social networks is integral to their operating logic in defining and redefining positionality under conditions of cyberpolarization. It remains important to depict social networks and their vastly stratified audiences as a particular medium of cultural exchange where the hierarchical positions and defining lines between producers and consumers pose serious challenges when trying to identify them.

From another angle, this research project pays attention to the sociological aspects of culture, beside the political and ideological ones, looking at memes and comics as a subcategory of popular culture, youth culture, and counterculture where “the social world is textually or discursively constructed.”⁸² The engagement with the social structuring practices, institutions and

⁷⁹ Lagrange. « Introduction. » 24-25.

⁸⁰ Hall, Stuart. “Codage/Décodage.” Translated by Michèle Albaret et Marie-Christine Gamberini. *Réseaux* 68 (1994) : 27–39. <https://doi.org/10.3406/reso.1994.2618> .

⁸¹ Lagrange. « Introduction, » 25.

⁸² Wolff, Janet. “Cultural Studies and the Sociology of Culture,” 500. *Contemporary Sociology* 28/5 (1999): 499–507.

social relations, remains necessary to develop wider view of organized dimensions of social differentiation and their historical changes encompassing class, status, gender, nationality.⁸³

Utilizing qualitative content analysis of memes entailed coding the gathered data and meme samples to identify recurring themes across various categories.⁸⁴ This process focused on determining criteria relevant to the research topic and the discourses expressed through these digital caricatures. Following this, critical discourse analysis⁸⁵ became vital to examine how these discourses were linked to power dynamics in society, as well as to understand how the memes either perpetuated or contested oppressive elements such as nationalist bigotry and sexist incitement.

Furthermore, this analysis underscores the voices and movements represented in the memes, including those that are marginalized,⁸⁶ and scrutinizes the tone and language that shape digital identities and communities. It also probes whether the content of these memes seeks to highlight unrecognized issues in society or narrates unchecked improvised stories amid periods of political turbulence and active revisionism.

Benefitting from the “intermedial” representation possibilities, a semantic and semiotic analysis of the content of Egyptian memes and comics could provide a deeper reading of these ultramodern constellations in the eyes of the social actors nowadays. I am paying specific attention to the middle-class producers of “internet comedy” after 2011, examining their constituencies and audiences. Most content producers in the Egyptian memesphere are usually classified as urban, youthful, educated and probably male, which also highlights a specific positioning regarding class distinction and how relevant it is to the produced content.

The Egyptian middle class could be considered as the main incubator and producer of the hegemonic social discourses, exclusively discourses on modernity and societal conservatism.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2654982> .

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Zidani, Sulafa. “How to Conduct Internet Meme Research,” ed. by Kate M. Miltner. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529609714> .

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Middle class professionals, religious preachers, and cultural agents held the responsibility of shaping the different stances vis-à-vis the “modern” in the national imaginary.⁸⁷ We could consider the hectic activity of the Egyptian youth on the internet as a social and generational challenge to the conventional middle-class virtues and moral discourses before 2011.

In my ethnographic depiction of online cultural wars pivoting around social and political themes, I tried to highlight these challenges on different levels. Since 2014, following the removal of Mohamed Morsi and the election of President Sisi, internet memes had become integrated in a broad revision of the middle-class value system. Split between the authoritarian state and Islamic revival organizations, the middle-class public grew sieged by fundamental assumptions and identity conflicts that framed its cultural imaginary. After the outlawing of the Muslim brotherhood in 2013, young generations could debate and contend these assumptions by creating satirical digital caricatures. Generational conflicts, dissidence, and cultural turbulences are publicized and mediated on a broad scale within the memesphere.

Internet memes extended far beyond their use by the intellectual elite or cyberutopians and revolutionary activists (*al-thawragiyya*) who spearheaded sociopolitical mobilization in the decade leading up to the 2011 popular uprising. The political upheaval between 2011 and 2013 reshaped the digital landscape, allowing various factions—including nativist nationalists, diverse Islamist groups, and state supporters (*al-dawlagiyya*)—to co-opt meme production for their respective agendas, smear campaigns, and the defense of their viewpoints.

In Egypt, the emergence of alt-right-inspired “manosphere” (a constellation of online communities that share anti-feminist beliefs)⁸⁸ corresponded with similar trends in the West, employing memes as tools against relatively minor factions advocating for women's rights, gender equality, and the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. Within this polarized memesphere, a dynamic interplay of daily trends and conflicts illustrated and amplified broader ideological frameworks,

⁸⁷ Abu-Lughod, Lila. “Part One: Anthropology and National Media” In *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt. Egypt*, 1- 53. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005

⁸⁸ Barcellona, Marta. “Incel Violence as a New Terrorism Threat: a Brief Investigation Between Alt-Right and Manosphere Dimensions,” *Sortuz. Oñati Journal of Emergent Socio-Legal Studies* 11/2 (2022): 170–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2023.2189970> .

transcending local and global divides while vying for dominance in a realm governed by the economic principles of visibility,⁸⁹ virality, and conflict.

Similarly, the rising populist tendencies around the world influenced the Egyptian tripartite divisions (*al-thawragiyya*, *al-dawlagiyya*, and *al-Islāngiyya*) and their war of positions after 2013.

Defining the term “populism” remains a challenging academic endeavor, as it had been persistently and uncritically used by mainstream political actors, journalists and scholars. However, its limitation to describe racist, sexist, and xenophobic politics overlooks the multifaceted nature of the neopopulist phenomenon infiltrating different ideological currents.

By associating racist, misogynistic and fear-mongering discourses, mounting within far right currents, to neopopulism, other sides of the phenomenon got obfuscated, as clarified by the sociologist Gérald Bronner who depicted “neopopulism” as a conceptually thin ideology, which places at the core of its analysis the idea of “a betrayal of the virtuous people by corrupt elites, which can only be cleansed by the direct political expression of a vengeful people, with no further institutional counterweight.”⁹⁰ This idea, in Bronner’s terms, “constitutes more of a political matrix than a program in the strict sense of the term, which is why both the far right and the far left can draw resources from it.”⁹¹

Methodologically, my research project relies on “multi- sited ethnography” as outlined by the anthropologist George Marcus⁹² in his approach to “the mediated nation” as an object of study: “Doing ethnographies of life worlds in several locations, not haphazardly, but with the intention of revealing the connections among them as the logic of larger systems within which particular lives unfold, the nation, it could be argued, is such a system.”⁹³

⁸⁹ Cardon, Dominique and Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis. “La Démocratie Internet : Entretien Avec Dominique Cardon.” *Transversalités* 123/3 (2012) : 65–73. <https://doi.org/10.3917/trans.123.0065> .

⁹⁰ Bronner, Gérald. “Les néo-populismes.” In *Apocalypse Cognitive*, 75. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France / Humensis, 2021.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Marcus, George E. “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155931> .

⁹³ Marcus, George E. *Ethnography through Thick and Thin*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998.

The research involved an extensive and meticulous process of data collection, archiving, classification, and filtration to develop a representative sample of 278 figures (including memes, screenshots, and illustrations) relevant to my research topic and suitable for critical discourse analysis.

One of the primary challenges in documenting internet memes lies in their ephemeral nature, their abundance, and the anonymity that many creators maintain for security reasons. The afterlife of internet memes often varies depending on their virality, relevance to social contexts, and overall comprehensibility. This study aspires to provide a holistic view of the current social dynamics in Egypt, utilizing internet memes as instruments of social exchange that symbolize power struggles and relationships, in three different domains. Each meme is contextualized historically and socially, analyzed on semantic and semiotic levels, and assessed for its expressive potential and relevance in a particular time and context.

My analysis zeroed in on the visual and linguistic aspects of socially relevant internet comics, directly aligning with the themes outlined in my thesis chapters. The selection criteria encompassed various elements such as popularity, contextual relevance, representation of significant social conflicts and historical milestones, diversity of formats (including image macros, photoshopped images, reimagined cartoons, and rage face comics, etc.), incorporation of cultural references, and clever wordplay or puns. Each segment of the sample emphasized the representational and communicative functions of digital caricatures as intermedial, multimodal artifacts, characterized by their mutability, genre hybridization, and social and cultural significance.

Furthermore, I conducted direct interviews with managers of meme pages, political activists, feminist activists, and meme creators to gather insights into the dynamics and influences at play within the memesphere, which ultimately impact content production.

This dissertation comes in three parts in the following order:

1. Nationalism: In this section, I explore the rise of the Egyptian memesphere within the digital realm, coinciding with the political mobilization of 2011. I examine the complex interplay of alliances and conflicts among various political

factions under the schismogenetic condition infiltrating the political domain and leading to their fragmentation into three main divisions (*al-thawragiyya*, *al-dawlagiyya*, and *al-Islāngiyya*). I also focus on the image of revolutionary activists and dissident groups as represented within the memesphere, highlighting the emergence of anti-Islamist and anti-leftist sentiments prevalent in Egyptian comics. Additionally, I address the ascent of neonationalist and pro-state online groups and their impact on meme pages and creators, situating this within the broader context of neopopulism and the global rise of the alt-right.

I also investigate the methods of autocratic restoration, and the media strategies employed by the Sisi regime, analyzing them through the lens of critical discourse analysis related to internet memes and reflecting on the historical social transformations that define post-independence Egypt. Furthermore, I scrutinize the narratives crafted within the memesphere regarding the 2011 uprising, viewed through the polarized perspectives of political factions, which lead to a reexamination of key moments in Egypt's modern political history, including the tenures of presidents Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak.

The narratives developed by meme creators and their supportive audiences, linking historical events to contemporary contexts, emerge as a crucial aspect of the post-2013 digital landscape, illustrating the shifting political and social dynamics in Egypt.

The ongoing revisionism within the memesphere, as exposed in my research, expanded to treat broader political themes like the geostrategic transformations in the Middle East, the political alliances that supported or opposed the popular uprising in 2011, the Egyptian economic situation, the Egyptian-Israeli relations, the diverse Egyptian views of Arab nationalism and the West, and the Egyptian position within the African continent amid civil war in Sudan and strategic threats to the Egyptian water resources due to the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

2. Religion: This section examines the profound transformations in Egypt's religious landscape following 2013, particularly after the expulsion of the Muslim Brotherhood from power and the rise of anti-Islamist sentiments emerging from elite cultural circles and going beyond them to become mainstreamed through the memesphere and social networks. The memesphere evolved into a battleground for fierce cultural conflicts that mirrored shifting attitudes among middle-class youth toward Islamist organizations and traditional religious institutions attempting to occupy the void left by the Muslim Brotherhood in providing moral guidance and promoting a conservative religious discourse.

Digital caricatures became an influential means to deconstruct, ridicule, and critique the moral values of the middle class, with a variety of meme pages and creators contributing to this cultural critique. Social networks transformed into platforms for revisiting the history of Islamic revival movements, motivating meme creators to engage in cultural battles against Islamist currents and their online supporters. Online sarcasm and criticism expanded to treat the wide influence of the rise of piety movements and Islamism since the 1970s, underscoring the aspects of this influence in many social fields like arts and popular culture, sports, media, everyday practices, sexuality, economy, and intersex relations.

This section also addresses the reconfiguration of the religious field under the Sisi regime, exploring this transformation from various angles, including the perspectives of different polarized factions (*al-thawragiyya*, *al-dawlagiyya*, and *al-Islāmgīyya*). These viewpoints are illustrated through internet memes and comics, providing a lens into the ongoing cultural dialogue.

Voices of dissent challenging Islamist and conservative moral paradigms are expressed through provocative memes and comics that explore issues such as atheism, sectarianism, and the interplay between state and religion. By contextualizing these cultural conflicts regarding religious

concepts and institutions, this section seeks to illuminate a major influence of the shifting cultural dynamics in Egypt since 2013.

3. Gender: In this section, I aim to illuminate the sociopolitical context in which gender rights movements and hostile manosphere groups antagonistic to them function side by side. By examining visual artifacts such as iconographic representations, digital caricatures, and internet memes, we can identify the intentional ideological frameworks that have developed since 2013 regarding gender representation and the legislative environment surrounding gender issues. The memesphere has been instrumental in questioning cultural values ingrained in popular narratives about gender equality, women's sexuality and rights, homosexuality and gender diversity, and the prevailing paradigm of hegemonic masculinity. Memes and comics, presented in this part, draw a complex image of gender discourses disseminated in popular culture productions, cinema and songs, religious sermons, TV programs and drama series, and conflicts within circles of gender activism.

In terms of gender, much like nationalism and religion, the post-revolutionary schismogenesis manifests through both individual and group dynamics, leading to polarization within personal and collective identities. Shaped by global influences and local normative ideas, these polarized gender sensibilities foster wider communal divisions centered around gender conceptions. While certain factions within online communities offer compelling critiques of deep-rooted injustices and social challenges, especially for women and LGBTQ+ individuals, they face significant pushback from authorities, state stability proponents, Islamists, and broader segments aligned with the patriarchal structure, regardless of their political affiliations.

By fostering systematic divisions between men and women, as well as between feminists and masculinists, supporters of the patriarchal system forge a strong alliance. This collective employs discursive, institutional, and digital strategies that adhere to an implicit cultural code designed to counter perceived threats to the patriarchal order and its paternalistic distribution methods—the fundamental unifying elements behind "The People" and "The Nation" as perceived by such a majoritarian collective.

Part One: Nationalism

Chapter I: The Appearance and Transformations of the Egyptian Memesphere

1. Egyptian Sarcasm Society & Asa7be Sarcasm Society: When Elite Subcommunities Lost Their Grip

Egyptian Internet memes evolved to populate the digital sphere when cultural and political expression intermingled in an exceptional historical moment – when media censorship and security attacks on dissent in Egypt reached their lowest level after the fall of the Mubarak regime. Common people engaged heavily in meme creation, circulation, modulation, and propagation; thus, they transformed memes into a symbolic negotiation of the everyday political situation between 2011- 2013. Memes rooted in political humor suggested a desire to own the narrative of mobilization and became cultural ammunition in the power struggle that paralleled distinct phases of meme transformation.

It could be argued that a mutual influence between the developing memesphere and the political moment advanced the impact of the memesphere as an assemblage of the daily productions of common people and placed memes as a form that meticulously addresses the cultural meanings entrenched within the sociopolitical transformations the country witnessed since 2011. Hence, I started this chapter on post-2013 Egyptian nationalism by mapping out developments within meme creators' circles in order to depict to what extent they were influenced by the larger political context.

The proliferation of internet memes from 2011 to 2013, during the feverish years of political upheaval in Egypt, accelerated the transition from adapting global formats to creating original content. Memes, which have the unique ability to compress scales of analysis into visual configurations that take a fraction of second to grasp, started to attract general internet users when their content began engaging with the political uprising. Thus, it is impossible to scrutinize the development of the Egyptian memesphere, from minimal subcommunities to larger internet streams, without referring to outside political influences.



*Figure 1

Top image

Father: “In the olden days, son, in 2011, we made a revolution, and we had hope that it would succeed (ha-tingah).”

Son: “And did it succeed (nakaḥit)?”

Bottom image

Father: “Of course, it succeeded (nakaḥit), to the extent that it fucked us in the head.”

In Figure 1, published between 2012 and 2013 by the Facebook page known as the Egyptian Sarcasm Society (subsequently ESS), the dialogue between the father and son is modulated to include a pun in the son's reply. This was accomplished by changing one letter in the word *nagaḥit* (succeeded) to become *nakaḥit* (fucked), simulating childish patterns of speech. The anagram epitomized a sentiment of frustration and failure that dominated the public domain amidst a wave of violent liquidation of the revolutionary movement that started in 2011. In parallel, the remarkable rise of the Islamist currents to ruling positions, during 2012-2013, waved the dwindling hope in achieving a consensual democratic transition, as the gap widened between them and their opponents from the secular currents.

In this meme, we observe the use of the famous rage-comic style⁹⁴ Yaoming Face/Bitch Please,⁹⁵ which originated in 2008 on American social networking sites like DeviantArt,⁹⁶ 4chan,⁹⁷ and Reddit.⁹⁸ These, among other meme forms (like trollface, advice animals,⁹⁹ LOLCats,¹⁰⁰ and demotivator ironic memes),¹⁰¹ circulated after the explosion of meme culture on Egyptian social networks.

Borrowing global meme faces coincided with the foundation of the ESS platform, which hosts small groups of meme creators. This occurred while the use of memes was still confined to specific sectors of internet users. Influenced by global youth culture and sociological, gender, and class parameters, meme subcommunities emerged from a young, urban, well-educated, and male-dominated social milieu. In this cultural form, a complex positioning of producers aimed at establishing an intimate rapport between a vast cultural reservoir imbued with local references and the digital caricature form. From this token, memes can neither be categorized as a manifestation of popular culture nor attributed to the ‘people.’ Rather, they inaugurate a broad cultural field where social conflicts and distinctions are reenacted and contested.

Figure 1 depicts the author’s complex feelings about the Revolution by portraying a father who describes it to his son as an event that ‘fucked us in the head.’ For the father, the prospect of

⁹⁴ “Rage Comics are a series of web comics with characters, sometimes referred to as "rage faces," that are often created with simple drawing software. The comics are typically used to tell stories about real life experiences and end with a humorous punchline. It has become increasingly popular to create the comics using web applications, which are often referred to as "rage comic generators" or "rage makers". The first amateur comics date back to 2008 on 4chan's /b/ board.”

Sav. “Rage Comics.” *Know Your Meme*, 2011. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/rage-comics>

⁹⁵ Don. “Yao Ming Face / Bitch Please.” *Know Your Meme*, 2011. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/yao-ming-face-bitch-please> .

⁹⁶ “The Largest Online Art Gallery and Community.” *DeviantArt*, n.d. <https://www.deviantart.com/> .

⁹⁷ 4chan, n.d. <https://www.4chan.org/>.

⁹⁸ Reddit, n.d. <https://www.reddit.com/>.

⁹⁹ Dubs, Jamie. “Advice Dog.” *Know Your Meme*, 2008. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/advice-dog> .

¹⁰⁰ Dubs, Jamie. “LOLCats.” *Know Your Meme*, 2008. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lolcats> .

¹⁰¹ “Laugh, Laugh at the Image.” *Know Your Meme*. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/now-laugh-laugh-at-the-image> .

social change brought on by the political uprising became an introductory step that unleashed a set of rapid and incomprehensible social transformations. Using the pun *nakaḥit* (fucked) instead of *nagaḥit* (succeeded) communicates the idea that many Egyptians were unable to rationalize the magnitude of these transformations and identifies disorganization as the opposite of the anticipated success and change.

The wide dissemination of Egyptian memes/comics relied on reductionist themes that capture a multitude of constituents and elements and portray them as ‘constructs’ in a cynical, joking tone. Memes capitalized on cultural references (popular film frames, scenes from theatrical pieces or TV series, phrases from popular songs, etc.), which were modified by superimposing text, aphorisms, and dialogue on them. Opening a new form of counterculture, meme creators reappropriated and then thematized symbols of political power and debates between different revolutionary camps. Meme creators deployed the power of rapidly evolving multimodal constructions of images with superimposed text (image macros),¹⁰² reworked cartoons, comics, memes, and photoshopped images.¹⁰³

The referential complexity¹⁰⁴ in digital caricatures emanates from the divergent potentials of interpretation and the improvised reproduction of cultural histories and parallel chronologies. The crossbreeding of cultural references, the confluence of the local and global, and the interweaved old and recent pop productions depend on a lingering relatability and a perceptible genealogy in the shared history of consumers. On a different note, a topsy-turvy construction of meaning in these multi-layered constellations deprives the ‘popular’ culture references of their hegemonic aggregative power, restricting them to their normative connotations identified in a previous moment of reception.

102 “An image with a superimposed text wherein the image is an element of fixedness featuring discursive themes and a prime locus for (multimodal) wordplay and punning. Direct cultural references and typification of graphics and stock characters, when replicated, allow for an intertwining between the conventional image and creative text.”

Geeraerts, Dirk, and Eline Zenner. “Chapter One: One Does Not Simply Process Memes: Image Macros as Multimodal Constructions.”

¹⁰³ Denisova. “Many Uses of Memes: From Fast-Food Media to Political Mindbombs.”

¹⁰⁴ Lagrange. “Introduction.”

Emanating from their social function and the deployment of “intermedial references,” the social anthropologist Chihab El Khachab classifies Egyptian internet comics under the category of digital caricature,¹⁰⁵ using the nomenclature associated with satirical journalistic cartoons known in Egypt since the nineteenth century. Despite of the time differences, El Khachab postulates that “the social caricaturization faculty seen in their critique of current affairs owing to certain visual conventions well-known to the wide audience consuming them” does not limit their function to assembling cultural references from different mediums.

El Khachab relies on the concept of “intermedial reference,” as explained by intermedial studies professor Irina Rajewsky,¹⁰⁶ to elaborate on the functional similarity between traditional satirical cartoons and digital caricatures:

“The concept of “intermedial reference” is much more specific, since it describes the way in which the media product thematizes, evokes or imitates the elements and structures of another conventionally distinct medium using the means specific to that medium. While digital cartoons primarily use the means of today’s digital culture, they also often refer to cinema, TV series, commercials, “popular” (sha’bī) or “pop” (shabābī) songs, with a marked eclecticism in terms of the scales involved. The local, the national and the global are thus intertwined.”¹⁰⁷

Kōmiks, the Egyptian generic nomenclature borrowed from the English term “comic,” is always plural, and it refers to any form of modulated image, GIF, vine, or video with a superimposed text/commentary/dialogue. In the rest of this dissertation, the Egyptian term “*kōmiks*” will be euphemized with the English term “comics.”

¹⁰⁵ El Khachab, “Est-ce que ça ne vaut pas mieux que d’être comme la Syrie et l’Irak ? Les caractères nationaux vus par la caricature numérique Égyptienne sur Facebook.”

¹⁰⁶ Rajewsky. “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality.”

¹⁰⁷ El Khachab. “Est-ce que ça ne vaut pas mieux que d’être comme la Syrie et l’Irak ? Les caractères nationaux vus par la caricature numérique Égyptienne sur Facebook,” 260.

During the years 2011-2012, two subgroups of meme creators emerged – “Egypt Sarcasm Society ESS” (3.5M followers) and “Asa7be [’Asāḥḥbī] Sarcasm Society ASS” (16M+ followers).¹⁰⁸

“The content on ESS was not original but funny though. Facebook’s algorithm system shifted to create a timeline to allow advertising, by then subcommunities lost control on their followers, ESS started to get millions of followers and participants which undermined the quality. In the beginning we had to learn from big online platforms like Know Your Meme,¹⁰⁹ Cheeseburger and 9GAG.”¹¹⁰

The story told by two different members of ESS¹¹¹ confirms that ESS was the first public network of meme creators in Egypt.¹¹² It was founded by Karīm Sāmī, an ex-physician who turned to business management and started the group in 2010.¹¹³ Sāmī dedicated his experience to establishing a graphic content forum where alternative opinions and views would find a welcoming platform. He believed in the communal need to overcome social insecurity towards innovative ideas. Sāmī identified the online ‘demonstration urge’ as an expression of the need to be accepted¹¹⁴ by the surrounding social medium – meaning that people will usually display what others need to see in order to get validation:

“This is how the social majority is created to increase consensus and achieve more stability. Hence, different ideas are marginalized and face a growing resistance. I always admire new and different ideas and pay great attention to how people treat different ideas. This always decreases my opportunity to meet people who think like me.

¹⁰⁸ “Asa7be Sarcasm Society (ASS).” Facebook, n.d. <https://www.facebook.com/asa7bess>.

¹⁰⁹ “Know Your Meme.” Know Your Meme, n.d. <https://knowyourmeme.com/>.

¹¹⁰ ‘Amr Sukkar, ex-member of Egypt Sarcasm Society ESS, scriptwriter and content creator. Direct interview with the author. Cairo. 18 February 2019.

¹¹¹ Mustafā Nadā, ex-member in Egyptian Sarcasm Society (ESS), scriptwriter, and creator of the sarcastic Facebook page “*Khanzīr*” (Pig). Direct interview with the author. Cairo. 12 February 2019.

¹¹² Asa7be Sarcasm Society ASS was founded by Shādī Sidkī and ’Aḥmad Mīdō in March 2012, two of the original directors of the equally famous Egypt’s Sarcasm Society ESS. The latter was founded in February 2009. While the emergence of the specialized comics pages preceded the 2011 revolution, their popularity exploded thereafter. Today, hundreds of pages publish between five and ten cartoons a day, sometimes with tens of thousands of ‘likes’, ‘shares’ and ‘comments’.

¹¹³ “Only a Numeric Minority: Kareem Sami at TedxCairo 2012.” YouTube, April 15, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG8LND41ISI>.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

That is why I created ESS because I noticed a common pattern between people who cherish a sophisticated sense of humour and those who accepted diverse ways of thinking. I tried to reach out for them through ESS and bet on the creativity of different people, grouped to feel less marginalized. It was important that people who realize their fringe position within their societies belong somewhere and feel safe to exchange and express their ideas. Not because we are a minority then we should remain of marginal importance.”¹¹⁵

‘Amr Sukkar, scriptwriter and ex-member of ESS, emphasizes the intellectual/normie¹¹⁶ distinction that Sāmī implies, as he objects to Facebook algorithms that capitalize on numeric growth at the expense of the quality and knowledge of content creators:

“I was amazed by discovering ESS in 2010. It was a novelty in the Egyptian online sphere to find youth who think differently and are very funny. I was happy that they made me laugh at their content like I did at western content. They were as the cliché goes, well-educated, mostly AUCians (students or graduates of the American University in Cairo), hilarious and woke.¹¹⁷ They were speaking about communism, capitalism and they posted memes with blasphemous content. All that was quite

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ “Normie is an informal and pejorative label describing someone who completely conforms to societal standards. A normie (derived from the word “normal”) is an individual who is deemed to be boringly conventional or mainstream by those who identify as nonconformists. Normies can be seen as the antitheses of “hipsters” and “special snowflakes,” both of which are derogatory terms for nonconformists. On some parts of the internet, the term normie is used to define anyone who does not fully comprehend the humor and language of certain communities. A normie is usually seen as someone who has a social life divorced from the internet and who does not know, or care, about its obscure customs. In this case, the term is as much an accusation as a label, expressing disdain toward anyone who is unaware of the growing community of ironic memes. Although normie used to refer to a person who was able to thrive in the outside world, the developing elitism within meme communities inspired internet denizens to attach negative connotations to this term. The use of this term highlighted the dichotomy between those who ‘get it’ and those who do not. However, this contempt for normies did not stop them from finding out about ironic memes; conversely, finding out about ironic memes did not rid the normies of their label.”

Rososchansky, Thomas. “The Ironic Normie.” *The Philosopher’s Meme*, December 18, 2015.

<https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2015/12/18/the-ironic-normie/> .

“Normie.” Cambridge Dictionary, n.d. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/normie> .

¹¹⁷ Woke is primarily an American slang term depicting people who are actively attentive to important societal issues (especially those of racial and social justice) and who are essentially affiliated with the rising liberal and leftist sensibilities of millennials and Gen Zers.

“Woke Definition & Meaning.” Merriam-Webster, n.d. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke>.

different than what I got in my close circles of friends and family, and on the Egyptian platforms in general.”¹¹⁸

‘Amr Sukkar and Muṣṭafā Nadā, early content creators on ESS, affirmed that they were not politically active. They asserted that early meme communities focused on sarcasm and prioritized a good laugh:

“During the time of the revolution, I used to say that it is a hassle, and I am not encouraged to get in. Being ‘intellectual’ did not mean that you must talk politics. Even if I had something to post and expected that it will change something I will not do that; being politically correct does not mean that you are funny. And this was our main interest.”¹¹⁹



*Figure 2: 'Aṣḥbī Egyptian rage comic face identified on “Know Your Meme” database.¹²⁰

The term “intellectual” took on a different meaning within the glossary of the rising alt-right currents and their mass media channels.¹²¹ They are identified as juxtaposed to the “normies” – those beholden to mainstream codes of reception, manners, and lifestyle. Sometimes normies, in their view, include those who do not accept criticism and sarcasm in general, even if they belong to oppositional currents and fall under the umbrella of dissidence. The term “intellectual dark

¹¹⁸ ‘Amr Sukkar, ex-member in Egyptian Sarcasm Society (ESS), scriptwriter, and content creator. Direct interview with the author. Cairo. 26 February 2019.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ “Asa7be Sarcasm Society (ASS).” Facebook, n.d. <https://www.facebook.com/asa7bess> .

¹²¹ Weiss, Bari, and Damon Winter. “Meet the Renegades of the Intellectual Dark Web.” *The New York Times*, May 8, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/opinion/intellectual-dark-web.html> .

web,”¹²² in the context of American cultural wars, heavily influenced the memesphere with the election of Donald Trump in 2016.¹²³ It synonymizes public figures with online communities who embrace controversial ideas, and voice criticisms of political correctness, third-wave feminism, and identity politics. They were described by the writer Bari Weiss as “a collection of iconoclastic thinkers, academic figures and media personalities who promote their ideas on podcasts, YouTube and Twitter, and in sold-out auditoriums.”¹²⁴

The set of opinions supported by the intellectuals are usually promoted under the allegation of defending freedom of speech against the self-righteous censorial attitudes of identity groups. The contrast between intellectual and normie (along with other derogatory descriptors, like “snowflake”) was usually deployed to stereotype these groups as conforming to an ethical order that embodies the currently dominant culture. By doing so, “intellectuals” could reincarnate an oppositional profile and appear as nonconformists. The hierarchy intellectual/normie played part in delineating group boundaries within the meme subculture. However, with the popularization of internet memes, the increased participation of “normies” who developed a growing meme literacy, altered, to some extent, the sharp boundaries identified by nonconformist intellectuals:

“The title ‘normie’ as the marker for a nonconformist of memes is not enough, and by that, I mean the simplistic binary of ‘meme aware’ versus ‘normie’ has now gained too many layers to remain as it is. As Ironic memes slowly crept into normie circles, one of two things happened: Either the number of normies decreased significantly as the awareness of Ironic memes grew, or (the more feasible explanation), the idea of what constitutes a normie expanded and began penetrating Ironic meme culture. The reason I state the latter is more plausible is because simply being aware of Ironic meme culture did not change the attitudes and normie-like approaches to memes, what changed was merely the content. The word ‘normie’ has obvious connotations to ‘normal’, which became paradoxical as Ironic meme culture started prevailing in normal communities and circles.”¹²⁵

¹²² “What Is the Intellectual Dark Web? | DIRECT MESSAGE | Rubin Report.” YouTube, January 30, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5HN-KT9rj0>.

¹²³ Don. “Intellectual Dark Web.” *Know Your Meme*, 2018. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/intellectual-dark-web>

¹²⁴ Weiss, Bari, and Damon Winter. “Meet the Renegades of the Intellectual Dark Web.”

¹²⁵ Rososchansky, Thomas. “The Ironic Normie.”

The permeation of the elite subcommunities of intellectuals by millions of followers during 2011-2012 changed the rules. Karīm Sāmī failed to sustain a content filtration system that bet on a specified quality with global reference. At the time, cultural categories like “anti-political correctness” and “anti-feminist” were not popular online, and the description of an intellectual was restricted to the ability to criticize fixed notions and be sarcastic and irreverent about social taboos.

The engagement of thousands of youths, who flooded Facebook with memes commenting on political events, put ESS under pressure. In addition, the invention of the first original Egyptian rage comic style face *'aṣāḥbī* (hey mate)¹²⁶ sparked large disputes between its members over ownership and copyrights during 2014. Eventually, the creator of *'aṣāḥbī* face chose to split from ESS, and he founded his own Facebook page, “Asa7be¹²⁷ Sarcasm Society” (subsequently ASS), on 25 March 2012. He asserted his ownership of the most popular rage-comic face in Egypt at the time by setting it as the profile picture of the page and by inscribing the biography and history of the meme face on the well-established American/international meme database, “Know our Meme.”¹²⁸

The word *'aṣāḥbī* bears linguistic significance, as it belongs to a larger context in which the Cairene Arabic as spoken by young, uneducated, working-class Egyptians infiltrated local popular culture productions. This is illustrated by the film-character *al-limbī*, portrayed by the

¹²⁶ The biography of *'Aṣāḥbī* according to the global meme database “Know Your Meme:” “*'Aṣāḥbī* is an Egyptian rage comic face in which is shown to express stupidity, blind imitation of anything, or low-standard guys. This character calls things using the wrong names or wrong spelling. He is annoying, he asks a lot of questions, and do a bad (but funny) behavior. He thinks he is a styled man, but the reality that he is so ugly and unconscious. Many people created Facebook pages under his name as he got famous in Egypt.”

“Asa7be Sarcasm Society (ASS).” Facebook, n.d. <https://www.facebook.com/asa7bess> .

¹²⁷ The number 7 corresponds to the letter /ḥ/ in the modulated typography of Arabic language used on the internet (Arabizi (in Levantine colloquial Arabic- combines the words *'arabi* (Arabic) and *injlizi* (English)) or Franco (in Egyptian colloquial Arabic) include a variety of Latin letters, complementary symbols, and numbers available on keyboards.

¹²⁸ “Know Your Meme.” *Know Your Meme*, n.d. <https://knowyourmeme.com/> .

actor Muḥammad Sa‘d¹²⁹ (who appeared in a wave of successful films during the 2000s) and later in the lyrics of *mahragānāt*, a type of urban music¹³⁰ that achieved striking popularity in the wake of the 2011 uprising. Pronouncing the word *yā ṣāḥbī* as *‘aṣāḥbī*, both of which appear in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (subsequently ECA), with an apheresis of the initial /y/ shifting to a mere initial /ā/, is felt in ECA as a feature of uneducated speech, or a humorous wink to this particular register.¹³¹

Since appearing as *al-limbī* in a secondary role in the film “*Al-Nāzir*” (The School Principal),¹³² Sa‘d has reintroduced the character in a set of movies that mark the incorporation of a linguistic code into mainstream cultural productions, and later into the lexicon of the Egyptian memesphere. The linguist Islam Youssef described *al-limbī*’s code as combining two main features:

“The linguistic code that materialized in the films can be perceived in one of two ways: one as an over-adaptation of correspondence rules which connect ECA (Egyptian Colloquial Arabic) with higher or lower registers of Egyptian Arabic; the other as a manifestation of the “street vernacular” spoken by the economically and socially inferior classes in inner-city slums.”¹³³

The widespread audience of these genres of cultural production and the incorporation of linguistic shifts into the performance of street vernacular transcended class boundaries and allowed these changes to become part of everyday speech. It is emblematic of the fluidity of social classes and consumeristic styles, which approximate the middle and popular classes and could be traced to the exchangeable linguistic codes marking the high and low registers of ECA. It would be logical

¹²⁹ “فيلم - اللامي - 2002 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” Al-Limbī, 2002. <https://elcinema.com/work/1010123/>.

¹³⁰ Holslin, Peter. “This Is Mahraganat, a Style of Egyptian Street Music the Government Calls ‘More Dangerous Than Coronavirus.’” *Billboard*, 2022. <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/what-is-mahraganat-music-9343924/>.

¹³¹ Youssef, Islam. “Why Are You Talking like That, Sir? Il-Limbi, Phonology and Class in Contemporary Egypt.” *Arabica* 67/2–3 (2020): 260–77. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700585-12341561>.

¹³² “فيلم - الناظر - 2000 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” Al-Nāzir (The School Principal), 2000. <https://elcinema.com/work/1001525/>.

¹³³ Youssef, “Why Are You Talking Like That, Sir? Il-Limbi, Phonology and Class in Contemporary Egypt.”

to anticipate the extension of these linguistic codes into the memes created by the generations inculcated in these speech patterns, which have turned into banal expressions used by all social classes. The intermediality in internet memes was not restricted to the different mediums of expression; instead, it extended to the adaptation of high and low linguistic registers, street vernacular, and curse words for the purposes of comedy.

The founder of ESS intended to create a hybrid cult and to conserve its style, constituency, and quality. Asa7be Sarcasm Society, on the contrary, popularized their brand in a different way. They accommodated various levels of quality, hosted creators from different backgrounds, and exploited the edgy political tone that dominated its content at the time. Following up on current trends and including a large and diverse set of content creators remained a main feature of the biggest meme community on Egyptian Facebook from 2011 to 2013 and has remained a tactic, provisionally, until the present day.

During the first eighteen days of protests that culminated in the toppling of former Egyptian president Mohamed Hosni Mubarak, the popularized comics on Facebook paired funny street slogans with images. Sarcasm, jokes, and inventive street slogans held on homespun banners represented one of the essential activities in tense and unpredictable days. With the huge media coverage of Cairo's Tahrir Square, protesters from different backgrounds got heavily engaged in a carnivalesque mood that attracted media attention and provided daily material for digital sarcasm.¹³⁴

Media studies professor Anastasia Denisova highlights internet memes as a contemporary tool of 'carnavalesque resistance.'¹³⁵ She also refers to the Russian philosopher and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin,¹³⁶ who identifies medieval carnival as a form of dissent – a 'legal' activity under repressive regimes that opens the door for the promotion of alternative discourses, a multiplicity of styles, and an intentional polyphony (heteroglossia). She traces the linkage between

¹³⁴ "الثورة الضاحكة،" BBC. فقط في مصر. The Laughing Revolution, YouTube, February 20, 2011.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WinLN2FYS8&t=26s> .

¹³⁵ Denisova, "Many Uses of Memes: From Fast-Food Media to Political Mindbombs," 35.

¹³⁶ Bakhtine, Mikhail, and Iswolsky, Hélène. *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

heteroglossia and the allegorical term of the professor of communications Ryan Milner: “The polyvocality of memes,”¹³⁷ allowing “multiple voices to come together through humor, political, and social commentary.”

The correspondence between the carnivalesque street resistance and the electrified collectives who spread memes on social networks created a context in which memes were understood as a countercultural current engaged in political persuasion and mind bombing: “The mind bomb concept means coining a symbolic message of visual strength, something that would express an idea in a nutshell and have an emotional impact.”¹³⁸

Comics flourished in the newsfeeds, where a multitude of posts encouraged people to join Tahrir protesters. These comics were abundant in moments of anticipation, uncertainty, and danger, along with the analyses, discussions, and commentaries of activists and politicians.



*Figure 3¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Milner, Ryan M. *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*.

¹³⁸ Denisova, “Many Uses of Memes: From Fast-Food Media to Political Mindbombs,” 34.

¹³⁹ Published on February 9th, 2011, two days before the deposition of Mubarak on 11 February 2011. Facebook page “The humor of the Egyptian people during protests.”

A dialogue between Hosni Mubarak (the former president of Egypt) and Ben Ali (the former president of Tunisia). On January 14, 2011, President Ben Ali and his wife, fled the country.

Tunisia ignited the wave of popular uprisings that came to be known as the Arab Spring. Ben Ali's resign on 14 January 2011 inspired the Egyptian youth and heightened their hopes. A call posted on the Khaled Said page,¹⁴⁰ for an anti-police protest all over Egypt on the 25th of January and went viral on January 18, 2011.¹⁴¹ Many analysts at the time saw glaring parallels between the two countries and suggested a similar fate for the Egyptian president. During 2011, the Tunisian and Egyptian post-revolutionary events would always be compared with each other:

- Ben Ali: "Do not be late mate, loneliness is bad."
- Mubarak: "You precede, we catch up (a common Arabic aphorism)."

¹⁴⁰ Khālīd Muḥammad Saʿīd (1982 – 2010) was a young Egyptian man whose death in police custody in Alexandria on June 6, 2010 helped incite the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Photos of his disfigured corpse spread throughout online communities and incited outrage over allegations that he had been beaten to death by Egyptian security forces. A prominent Facebook group, "We are all Khaled Said," secretly moderated by the later prominent activist Wāʿil Ghunaym, brought attention to his death, campaigned against torture and police brutality, and contributed to the growing discontent in the weeks leading up to the Revolution. Eventually, the page was disabled and removed from Facebook. Many versions of this page appeared after the military takeover in 2013, and they bore the same name with additional references to their Islamist orientation.

¹⁴¹ Herrera. "Memes and the War of Ideas." In *Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet*, 112–122.



*Figure 4¹⁴²

Hosni Mubarak, former president of Egypt, shaking hands with Barack Obama, former American president. During eleven days of protest, while crowds gathered in Tahrir Square and different city squares across Egypt, comics recycled global anti-dictator jokes to portray Mubarak obstinately clinging to power. Day after day, these comics undermined the president's public image.

- Obama: "I think you should write a farewell message to the Egyptian people."
- Mubarak: "Why? Where are they going?"

For the primary eighteen days, internet memes focused on satirical portrayals of Mubarak, particularly his obstinate desire to both continue his term and to ignore the escalating demands of protesters asking him to leave. In parallel to the idolized harmonious protest scene portrayed by the international media, comics reflected the unanimity of the revolutionary crowd and the persistence of support for the popular uprising. Political polarization and unspoken antagonism were dissimulated by the carnivalesque mood that prevailed in the squares, especially after the Egyptian Armed Forces announced their support for the 'revolution of the people.' The protection

¹⁴² "The Humor of the Egyptian People During Protests." Facebook, February 5, 2011.

<https://www.facebook.com/egyjoy/photos/a.149960315062583/150145491710732/?type=3&theater> .

provided by military soldiers to the protesters in public squares reduced organized attacks from Mubarak supporters.

The introduction of the presidential portrait into a sarcastic context started with street banners and transgressed a long-standing Egyptian tradition of sparing high authority symbols, like the president and military leaders, from publicly propagated sarcasm. Street banners, followed by internet comics, familiarized the public with the act of mocking the presidents. It was as if this wave of internet comedy was mediating a new façade of youth counterculture as described by the media scholar Adel Iskandar: ‘a Janus-faced dissidence of a generation with disenchanting cynicism and a utopian imaginary.’¹⁴³

It was the intentional intervention of social actors belonging to the revolutionary camp that primarily inaugurated comics as one of many digital expressions of identity acquired by Egyptian youth since 2011. The individual and collective will to undermine the chief authority figure through an omnipresent online/offline satire marked a new era of social contestation in Egypt. In that sense, the momentary victory of toppling Mubarak symbolically affirmed the new authority over the digital media domain, especially its interactive and contestational functions, claimed by younger Egyptians.

The abundance of common archival cultural material among generations of Egyptians facilitated the continuous reappropriation of popular culture references in online comics. The shared popular culture archive is one of the crucial factors that reinforced the integration of local elements in the flare of meme reproduction in lieu of global memes and symbols. Egyptian memes heavily capitalized on a shared conceptual map¹⁴⁴ and corresponding signs that keep being remixed

¹⁴³ Iskandar. “The Meme-Ing of Revolution: Creativity, Folklore, and the Dislocation of Power in Egypt.”

¹⁴⁴ Conceptual maps are one of the systems of representations identified by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall. They signify the mental representations of the world we carry around in our minds and the complex relationships between concepts. Hence, they are a learned system of classification in a certain culture. Hall defines the human subject by learning the shared map of meanings in a culture: “to become a human subject is precisely somehow to learn or internalize the shared maps of meaning with other people in your culture.”

Media-Studies.com. “Stuart Hall and Representation.” *Media Studies*, August 27, 2022. <https://media->

and re-contextualized in an ongoing hybridization of cultural references. The established stereotypes of popular culture were challenged, modulated, mocked, verified, and re-enacted in different social contexts. Meme creators revisited this shared cultural history from many angles in purpose of this deconstruction and recontextualization. In the form of GIFs, snaps, vines, and comics, producers of internet memes adapted the outlines of global memes and satirical content to the local context and cultural references.

The first Egyptian television programs were broadcasted on 21st of July 1960. On 13 August 1970, a new decree established the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) and created four distinct sectors: Radio, Television, Engineering, and Finance.¹⁴⁵ The Egyptian state monopolized TV, radio broadcasting, and most cultural productions. The Egyptian national TV, and later the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), produced all TV programs. They sponsored the production of TV drama series for decades. TV serials formulated a familial ritual, with fixed airing hours per day, in addition to contributions from the cinema, theatre, and musicals. In 2001, the first Egyptian satellite channel, “Dream TV,” was licensed and commenced programming.¹⁴⁶ However, private media remained unofficially under governmental censorship, which was somewhat loosened in the mid-2000s.

Hence, older generations of Egyptians along with millennials born in the 1980s and 1990s share a common referential body of artistic works and dominant codes of reception. The reproducible content of Egyptian comics capitalizes on the recognition and intelligibility of references/meanings/representations implied in films, TV programs, songs, and theatrical spectacles, familiar to most Egyptian users on the internet. In addition to the new productions that achieve wide popularity and virality among young audiences, this older repertoire constitutes an

[studies.com/stuart-hall-representation/](https://www.studies.com/stuart-hall-representation/) .

Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications & Open University, 1997.

¹⁴⁵ Abdulla, Rasha A. “Navigating the Boundaries Between State Television and Public Broadcasting in Pre- and Post-Revolution Egypt.” *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016) : 4219–38.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

integral part of the content of comics. This further engages meme creators in the deconstruction and scrutinization of previous periods of Egyptian history within streams of daily trends:

“Digital caricature could be seen as a visual extension of a common practice among young Egyptians, who incorporate movie or TV series gags (*Ēfēhāt*, Arabization of French "effet") into their daily conversations, creating a self-referential universe of gags drawn from a fraction of the national cultural production. This auto-referential limit is, among other things, sociological, in the sense that it delineates the contours of creators and consumers from identifiable online groups, but it is also extensible to the extent of the intermediate references made between cinema, television, international acuity and ordinary conversation by these groups.”¹⁴⁷

Adel Iskandar depicts the moment when a local film frame featuring the famous singer/actor Shādya morphed into the famous satiric meme of “the man behind ‘Umar Sulaymān.”

On 11 February 2011, ‘Umar Sulaymān (vice president at the time) announced Mubarak’s resignation in a brief official statement. Iskandar stated that: “online circles had noticed the peculiar placement of a frowning man directly behind the stoic and stone-faced ‘Umar Sulaymān.”¹⁴⁸ Unable to identify this person, who appeared to trespass into the background of the video in a hilarious example of “photobombing,” online audience simply labelled him as “the man behind ‘Umar Sulaymān.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ El Khachab. « Est-ce que ça ne vaut pas mieux que d’être comme la Syrie et l’Irak ? Les Caractères Nationaux Vus Par La Caricature Numérique Égyptienne Sur Facebook, » 299.

¹⁴⁸ “Hosni Mubarak Has Stepped Down: Announcement by Egyptian Vice President Suleiman.” YouTube, February 11, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxGpgi-cKBc> .

¹⁴⁹ Iskandar. “The Meme-Ing of Revolution: Creativity, Folklore, and the Dislocation of Power in Egypt.”



*Figure 5

A frame from the Egyptian classical film “A Taste of Fear” (*Shay’ min al-khawf*) 1969. The heroine singer/actor Shādya played Fu’āda, a dignified peasant who left her husband, the village’s despotic governor (*al-’umda*), to join her compatriots protesting his orders. “The man behind ‘Umar Sulaymān” is transposed into the frame behind her in the scene where Fu’āda opens the central water tap to irrigate the lands against *al-’umda*’s orders.

Recalling the film and the deployment of Shādya’s famous character held a cross-reference in the moment of resignation of Mubarak. The film was produced after the devastating Egyptian defeat in 1967, which marred the Nasserite police state’s image and formed associations between the authoritarian rule of President Gamal Abd al-Nasser, military defeat, and popular contempt. *Fū’āda* (played by Shādya) embodied the nation’s resistance to defeat and, in other interpretations, the people’s revolt against authoritarian rule. From another angle, placing *Fū’āda* in the position of ‘Umar Sulaymān (as the man behind ‘Umar Sulaymān appears behind her), symbolically substitutes the grim face of the vice president, who defended the Mubarak regime until his last breath, with the smiling face of a courageous peasant woman, signaling optimism for the future and a desire to shake off the yoke of authoritarianism.

The monopoly of small communities of meme creators and their specialized forums like ESS has vanished since 2012. Profiting from the liberated public debate, political satire and comics flooded digital networks, mostly anonymous and not reserved to well-known comic pages. The

growing popularity and viewership of “Asa7be Sarcasm Society” encouraged the emergence of hundreds of pages with implicit or explicit political agendas.

In parallel to the turbulent political theatre, a symbolic cultural arena was exploding on the internet. The creation of comics became central to the social and political battles that characterized the crucial period between 2012-2013, both during and after the rule of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi.

The distinction between popular light comics and social comics aiming at developing a minority cult (anti-normie¹⁵⁰ dank memes)¹⁵¹ became important as creators within the memesphere continued to create multiple fringe communities. The centrality of ASS as a commercial model remained an exception. In the following years, an increasing and diverse range of comic pages and meme creators focused on particular social issues and coherent stylistic lines. The talented satirical creators gained viewership as they penetrated various domains of influence and discourse, like stand-up comedy performances, scriptwriting, and comic creation.

¹⁵⁰ “Anti-Normie.” Urban Dictionary, October 15, 2019. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Anti-normie> .

¹⁵¹ “Memes that use the phrase dank memes tend to be deliberately unusual, self-referential, and brimming with in-jokes that poke fun at meme creators who think they are offering fresh takes on memes but have, in fact, fallen behind the internet’s fast-changing times and tastes. Calling something a dank meme thus suggests a broader critique of the meteoric rise and fall of viral content. In other words, ‘This meme was funny and cool until it got so popular.’ As Ryan Milner observed in his 2016 book, *The World Made Meme*, the phrase has been hoisted by its own petard: ‘The insult [dank meme] is every bit as memetic as the target it is applied to. ‘Memes are dead’ is thus a well-worn meme itself.”

Tudury, Leila. “Dank Meme Meaning & Origin.” Dictionary.com, January 19, 2021. <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/dank-meme/> .

2. Alliances and Rifts in the Mirror of the Memesphere

During 2011-2012, Islamist figures and partisans launched violent media crusades as they relished an unprecedented opportunity to appear on talk shows and newspaper interviews. After years of censorship, the extremist fringes of Islamist currents (like *al-Gamā'a al-Islāmiyya*)¹⁵² were allowed free movement, speech, and organization after a long history of bloody confrontations with the Egyptian state. Orthodox Salafis became political figures who blatantly evoked and called for an Islamic state ruled by Islamic law (Sharia) in Egypt.¹⁵³

Among the prominent newcomers to the political sphere was Ḥāzim Ṣalāḥ 'Abū - 'Ismā'īl¹⁵⁴; an Egyptian lawyer and Salafi preacher, who engaged in the protests and several media

¹⁵² Formed in the 1970s, *al-Gamā'a al-Islāmiyya* was once Egypt's largest terrorist organization. They participated in the assassination of President Sadat.

“Throughout the 1990s, they conducted armed attacks against Egyptian security forces, government officials, and Coptic Christians, and they claimed responsibility for the June 1995 attempted assassination of President Mubarak in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The group also launched attacks on tourists in Egypt, most notably the 1997 Luxor attack. The group was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on October 8, 1997. In 1999, a segment of the group publicly renounced violence.”

“In 2011, *al-Gamā'a al-Islāmiyya* formed the “Building and Development” party, which competed in the 2011 parliamentary elections and won 13 seats. The external wing, composed mainly of members living in exile, maintained that its primary goal was to replace the Egyptian government with an Islamist state.”

“*Al-Gamā'a al-Islāmiyya*'s spiritual” leader, Omar Abd al-Rahman, also known as the “blind Sheikh,” served a life sentence in an American prison for his involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and died in prison in February 2017.”

“Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 - Foreign Terrorist Organizations: *Gama'a al-Islamiyya*.” *Refworld, United States Department of State*, 2018. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcf1f4ba.html> .

¹⁵³ Abou-El-Fadl, Reem. “Sectarianism and Counter-Revolution in Egypt: Not a Family Affair.” *Jadaliyya*, 2017. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28906> .

¹⁵⁴ “Born in Giza in 1961, Ḥāzim Ṣalāḥ 'Abū - 'Ismā'īl is the son of the Muslim Brotherhood's influential preacher and parliamentary member in the eighties Ṣalāḥ 'Abū - 'Ismā'īl. He was nominated by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1995 and 2005 for the parliamentary elections and lost both times, though it is likely that his loss was due to extensive vote rigging by the regime. Before the revolution, Abu Ismail was a regular face on Salafi TV channels, though it was evident that he lacked the scholarly knowledge of Salafi Sheikhs. Following Mubarak's resignation, he took a strong anti-military position throughout the transitional period and led several protests. His activities, however, were marked

appearances after Mubarak's fall. 'Abū -'Ismā'īl, who adopted a radical critical stance against the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), the interim government of Egypt at the time,¹⁵⁵ announced that he would run for the upcoming presidential elections in 2012. Later, Egypt's election commission revealed that his mother was an American citizen, which effectively disqualified him from the race according to the Egyptian law.

However, his short-lived presidential campaign revealed that there was a wide base of supporters who identified with his sectarian and radical discourse. There was a tangible admiration for his statements calling for social reform by reviving the traditions of the 'glorious past' of Islamic civilization. 'Abū -'Ismā'īl's electoral slogan: "*Sanahyā Kirāman* (We will live dignified)" lured in the social imaginary by reproducing common Salafī slogans evoking themes of reconquest and restoration of the Islamic past. His campaign started with a country-wide distribution of posters, flyers, and street banners. A flow of photoshopped images and reworked cartoons on social networks paralleled the campaign, satirizing the excess and abundance of 'Abū -'Ismā'īl's expensive publicity. These comics (Figure 6) were also among the first productions to incorporate local cultural references and images from everyday Egyptian life.

from their beginning with a lack of plan and a preference for theatrics and fiery slogans. In reality, 'Abū -'Ismā'īl was more a symbol than an actual entity. His charisma allowed him to become a phenomenon that would take Egyptian politics by storm. His appeal was enormous because of his indisputable endorsement of the revolution, his opposition to the military, and his support for street clashes with the military and police. 'Abū -'Ismā'īl endorsed those clashes and used them to form his current and distinguish himself from other Islamists. He was thus able to form a discourse that mixed Salafism with revolutionary action under a strong anti-Americanism and anti-Israel umbrella. His candidacy to presidential elections was one of the main reasons the Brotherhood backtracked on its promise not to nominate a presidential candidate and instead offered first Khayrat al-Shāṭir and then Mohamed Morsi for the post." Tadros, Samuel. *Mapping Egyptian Islamism*, 60-61. Washington, DC: Hudson Institute, 2014. <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/mapping-egyptian-islamism> .

¹⁵⁵ The Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) was a governing body of between 20 and 25 senior Egyptian military officers. After Mubarak's resignation in February 2011, SCAF assumed power to govern Egypt during the transitional period until the restoration of democratic institutions, including parliamentary and presidential elections and a new constitution. The SCAF relinquished power on 30 June 2012 upon the start of Mohamed Morsi's term as president.



*Figure 6

An assemblage of comics that appeared online in parallel to Ḥāzim Ṣalāḥ 'Abū-'Ismā'īl's electoral campaign. 'Abū-'Ismā'īl's banners, seen in the images, hung from water faucets, accompanied divers to the bottom of the Red Sea, covered Nile buses, and were draped in the background of official speeches given by then-interim ruler and minister of defense of Egypt, General Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭaṭāwī.

From March 2011 onward, the Egyptian memesphere started to reflect the early divisions within the political camps engaged in the revolutionary movement. Islamist/non-Islamist divisions constituted the first in a set of transformations that jeopardized the nascent political subjectivity under the overarching domination of the military (the interim ruling power). During 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood joined the SCAF in propagating pejorative discourse aimed at discrediting what they described as 'the disruptive revolutionary movements' fueling street protests. Calls for stabilizing the country and succumbing to the electoral road map's results were cooperatively

disseminated by the interim and prospective governors, feeding a growing popular aversion towards the liberal, secular, and revolutionary groups' attitudes and mobilizations.

“Ever since the toppling of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, conservative political elites in Egypt have cooperated both in the open and behind closed doors. Through a rushed transitional period and disputed electoral process, they have sought to defuse widespread demands for structural change. For the first eighteen months of a post-Mubarak reality, the primary power brokers were the generals of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Beginning last year on 30 June, the Muslim Brotherhood, under the presidency of Mohamed Morsi, quickly joined the fray. SCAF and the Brotherhood both used a normative discourse built on varying degrees of religiously infused legitimacy to confront revolutionary demands. This discourse has fluctuated between overtly conservative Sunni political Islam under Morsi, and a more insidious form under SCAF, in which state and private media privileged voices from the Brotherhood and Salafist Islamist camp. Meanwhile, liberal and leftist members of 25 January's revolutionary coalitions were regularly—and sometimes violently—silenced. In both cases, the authorities used the classic strategy of divide and rule to open fissures in the revolutionary camp. As this rapidly shifting discourse gained ground, sectarianism emerged as one of its most damaging manifestations.”¹⁵⁶

The gap between electoral and street politics and the poor performance of liberal leaders in political negotiations contributed to the gradual marginalization of the middle-class prodemocracy sectors, who started to notice their poor organizational capacity. By November 2011, the clashes between street protesters and the ruling force reached a peak, and the evacuation of the streets took on its most violent form. After bloody confrontations, the SCAF gradually succeeded in eliminating street protesters and their supportive digital armies from the political scene. Both SCAF and the Brotherhood were in favor of a speedy transition to parliamentary and presidential elections.

Militant activity on the internet was influenced by mounting violence against rebellious bodies, including gang rapes and sexual assaults perpetrated by criminals who “hailed from the security apparatus of the state, the thugs loyal to the Mubarak regime, and the Muslim Brotherhood.”¹⁵⁷ The administrators of Facebook pages were being kidnapped, tortured, and

¹⁵⁶ Abou-El-Fadl, “Sectarianism and Counter-Revolution in Egypt: Not a Family Affair.”

¹⁵⁷ Herrera. “Memes and the War of Ideas.” In *Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular*

killed¹⁵⁸ amid other attacks against protesters and civil activists. The social anthropologist Linda Herrera describes the atmosphere and the sequence of events that led to the recession of the revolutionary activity:

“The two warring sides—the Islamists and the military—waged fierce battles for control over the minds and hearts of the Facebook youth. Facebook turned into a rumour mill, a platform for misinformation. Rumour memes (virtual memes) entered the space like virtual bombs exploding in the squares of social media. Facebook turned into a discredited space of lies and fake news. In this period of clashes between State Security and the Brotherhood, the “We Are All Khaled Said” page went mute. For the activists involved in the January 25 Revolution, and for the more democratically inclined revolutionaries, this moment became a time of reflection, silence, and confusion.”¹⁵⁹

The comic community ESS imploded upon severe disputes among its members during Morsi’s presidency. Its Facebook page became dominated by Muslim Brotherhood supporters during the presidential elections and continued to mobilize under the organization’s slogan after the bloody evacuation of Rābe‘a al-‘Adawiyya Square in August 2013:

“ESS community had followers from all categories which intensified the debates on politics. We started to feel more restricted by Islamist followers. We had all the spectrum from Salafis, *Ikhwān* (MB supporter/member), to supporters of Ḥāzem Ṣalāh ‘Abū ‘Ismā‘īl. It became impossible to post a meme on ‘the absurdity of religion’ without igniting endless disagreements among the followers. It was ok to mock Aḥmad Shafīq, the old regime presidential candidate, but not to touch on Islamist sensitivities. The group helped me to overcome my ideological hypersensitivities before, and I learned to accept other opinions. But at this time, as the following grew, every joke provoked the anger of a group of people.”¹⁶⁰

The polarization of Islamists/non-Islamists exhibited itself in the dispute over comic pages. In Figure 7, the meme depicts the undercover Islamist management of satiric pages using a concealed digital identity. The Muslim Brotherhood deployed a huge digital media machine, thus

Insurrection and the Internet, 112–122.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ ‘Amr Sukkar, ex-member in Egyptian Sarcasm Society (ESS), scriptwriter, and content creator. Direct interview with the author. Cairo, 26 February 2019.

forming e-militias that mobilized against their opponents during 2012. Islamist constituencies accumulated followers on pages created with different themes (artist fans, social trends, fashion, sports, etc..) but then changed the name of the page and its content to Islamic themes and topics. The mechanism that started in 2011 was further exposed as the rift between Islamists/non-Islamists deepened. Other popular Facebook pages declared their Islamist identity and participated in the mobilization for Mohamed Morsi during the presidential elections in 2012, then against Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi [ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī] and the military takeover since June 2013.



*Figure 7¹⁶¹

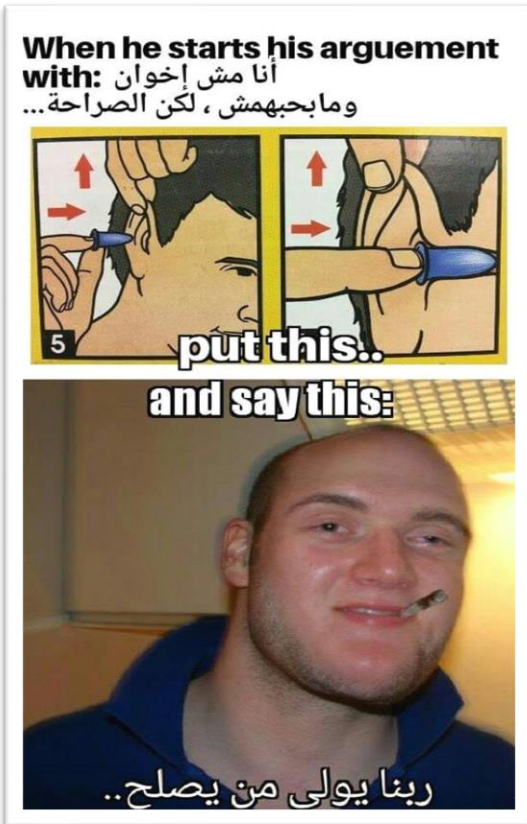
This comic uses four images portraying Homer Simpson, the main protagonist of the American animated sitcom “The Simpsons.” It elaborates on the Muslim Brotherhood’s organizational mechanism of expanding their digital presence and followship.

Image 1: “A page supporting a football team.”

Image 4: “A page supporting *al-Ikhwān* (the Brotherhood).”

¹⁶¹ “Memes that do not submit to political correctness” (*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*). Facebook, February 21, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063469189596> .

The page was founded in 2013 and hacked in 2021. The page administrator created an alternative page on 4 January 2021.



*Figure 8

The upper section uses the common phrase “I do not belong to the Muslim Brotherhood, and I do not like them but...” that became widely reiterated by Islamist e-militias dissimulated under different digital identities during 2012-2013.

Top text: “When he starts his argument with: ‘I do not belong to the Muslim Brotherhood, and I do not like them but honestly’...”

Middle text: “Put this (ear plug) ... and say this.”

Bottom text: “May God provide for those who bring reforms.”

Figure 8 illustrates a sample of sarcastic reactions towards the work of the Brotherhood’s e-militias to recalibrate the revolutionary vocabulary,¹⁶² and their reactions that started to emerge once the online presence became more visible during the presidential elections in 2012. Political Islamist groups expanded their online penetrability to campaign for Mohamed Morsi through a set of mediation tools:

“The Brotherhood worked literally around the clock to influence public opinion, both through its twenty-four-hour television channel, Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr, and by mobilizing its e-militias to spread its message online. Brotherhood members and supporters acted as the group’s virtual foot soldiers. They spread pro-Brotherhood memes deep within the arteries of social media. The Brotherhood leadership distributed a document, “Accusations and Answers” (*Shubuhāt wa Rudūd*), to provide members with talking points about how to address critics of Morsi and the MB in social media spaces. The e-militias prefaced their talking points with

¹⁶² “The MB e-militia pages tried to appropriate and redefine the political vocabulary of the revolution to confuse and manipulate people’s cognitive frames. The e-militias took words with symbolic power, like “democracy,” “old regime” (*fulūl al-nizām*), and “revolution,” and attempted to strip them of any emancipatory meaning, recalibrating them to mean an unquestioning and uncritical support of Muslim Brotherhood rule.”

Herrera. “Memes and the War of Ideas,” 110.

phrases like, “I’m not Muslim Brotherhood but I respect them,” “I hate the Muslim Brotherhood but I have to support Morsi to get rid of Shafik,” (the ex-minister in Mubarak regime and the presidential candidate against Morsi) “I know they’re looking out for their own interests, but they were my companions in Tahrir square,” “Don’t let your hate for the MB blind you,” “The MB are selfish but they are not criminal,” and so on. The more the e-militias spread their scripted talking points, the more they exposed themselves and their strategies on social media.”¹⁶³

The ‘brotherized’ pages had varying agendas and tactics that changed with the socio-political transformations. During the presidential elections, they worked to attract enthusiast revolutionaries and portrayed religious/Islamist figures in comics as the major forces of opposition. By criticizing the comeback of officials from Mubarak’s former regime, they worked effectively to link the Muslim Brotherhood’s candidate to revolutionary themes. However, this strategy did not impede the double standard policy that the Muslim Brotherhood adopted, which was to mobilize the revolutionaries while supporting the SCAF’s strategy of aborting street protests and pushing towards succumbing to the electoral road map.

In Figure 9, the internet memes represent a sample of the prevalent discourses on Brotherhood-managed Facebook pages at the time of the presidential elections in 2012. The competition between Morsi and Mubarak’s former minister Ahmad Shafiq intensified as they became the only two candidates in the re-election round. This turned the electoral scene into a serious polarization between those who supported restoring previous conditions and who were enemies of the Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand, and those who supported the Islamists on the other. The meme elaborates on the Brotherhood’s multi-layered strategy, which mixed awareness of the mobilization power of the Mubarak regime allies from one side with convincing the revolutionary bloc to cast their votes for Morsi, in spite of political antagonism, from the other. As the Islamist organization proceeded to marginalize calls for protest and mobilize for the presidential candidate under slogans of ‘restoring stability against disruption,’ it had to garner the support of revolutionaries to win over swing votes. For that purpose, their publicity had to deliver contradicting messages to different parties – the audience aching for stability and struggling with

¹⁶³ Herrera. “Memes and the War of Ideas,” 108.

the precarious economic conditions, the state supporters grouped behind military authority and with an ambivalent position towards the toppled regime, and the revolutionaries clinging to hope for change despite overwhelming feelings of frustration with how they were forced to choose between bad and worse.



*Figure 9

In the photoshopped image, the upper section shows the popular Sheikh Muḥammad Mitwallī al-Sha‘rāwī¹⁶⁴ reiterating the first half of one of his famous sayings: “The true revolutionary (*al-thā’ir al-ḥaqq*) makes a revolution to wipe out corruption.”

164 Muḥammad Mitwallī al-Sha‘rāwī (15 April 1911 – 17 June 1998) was an Islamic scholar, a former Egyptian Minister of Endowments, and a Muslim preacher. He has been called one of Egypt's most popular Islamic preachers and was active from the 1970s to the 1990s. In 1966, he traveled to Algeria as the head of Al-'Azhar Mission and remained there for seven years. During his stay in Algeria, the 1967 war with Israel occurred, during which Egypt suffered tremendously. Al-Sha‘rāwī 'praised' the defeat, saying that "Egypt did not gain victory while the hands of communism surround them, and their religion remains uncorrupted." In 1970, he was appointed to the position of visiting professor at King Abdelaziz University in Mecca and then became President of the Department of Graduate Studies at that same university in 1972. At the time, Saudi Arabia was empowering fanatic Wahabi currents and mujahideen who joined the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (1979 – 1989) which precipitated the rise of al-Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist organizations throughout the Middle East. He combined sympathy toward political Islam with respect toward the Egyptian political system. In the 1970s, during the rise of political Islam in Egypt, backed by Sadat, he was appointed Minister of Endowments until October 1978. During this time, al-Sha‘rāwī issued a law that helped establish the first Islamic bank in Egypt in 1979. Later, during Mubarak’s reign, he advocated for and helped promote one of the biggest frauds in contemporary Egyptian history, known as the “money-placement companies.” Al- Sha‘rāwī was guaranteed fixed weekly airtime after Friday prayers on Egyptian national TV for two continuous decades in the 1980s and 1990s, during which time he presented accessible interpretations of the Quran in

In 2011, the SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood allied together for the purpose of initiating a counterrevolutionary campaign, which it attempted to halt street mobilization in the aftermath of Mubarak's resignation. It was in this environment that the original Sha'rāwī sermon spread throughout Egyptian media. In the original sermon, which likely dates to the 1980s, Sha'rāwī examined the concepts of revolution through the lens of Islam and the lives of the prophets. He stated that "revolutions are the revolution of the sky against the methods of the earth when tyranny is intolerable." Then Sha'rāwī defined the "true revolutionary" (*al-thā'ir al-ḥaqq*) as the one who "makes a revolution to wipe out corruption, then calms down to build glories."¹⁶⁵ His old video was recalled in 2011 and was constantly aired by the official media and massively diffused on digital platforms.

In Figure 9, Sha'rāwī's sermon was modified to comment on the presidential candidates in the 2012 elections. In the lower section of the meme, the second half of Sha'rāwī's statement were modified to include sarcastic Yaoming face, who says "Then calms down to rebuild corruption son of a bitch" to mock the candidacy of an official from the old regime. Photos of both candidates could be seen on the corner of the bottom image of the meme. This sarcastic reply expresses the frustration of revolutionary sectors faced with the potential comeback of an old regime figures; these revolutionary groups thus affixed the phrase "rebuild corruption" to the second candidate, Shafīq. The substitution of Sha'rāwī by the laughing Yaoming face can be read as mocking the deployment of the Sheikh's words to support the candidacy of Shafīq, as if the wisdom was emptied from its meaning. This impression is affirmed by the use of the vulgar moniker 'son of a bitch' by the sarcastic voice (Yaoming).

After being elected president, Mohamed Morsi issued a constitutional decree that granted him sweeping legislative and executive powers, igniting a series of legal disputes against the supreme court's decisions and the military council officers. Morsi acquired full hegemony upon

the Egyptian dialect. His facile interpretations, simple rural attitude, and eloquent performance captured hearts and minds and ensured the propagation of a retroactive fundamentalist discourse among millions of Egyptians across generations.

¹⁶⁵ Sheikh Sha'rāwī. "الثائر الحق للشيوخ الشعراوي" YouTube, March 5, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGGzQsIni4I>.

forming the drafting committee of Egypt's new constitution. In parallel, the digital media crusades against Morsi's secular opponents continued and intensified, as shown in Figure 10.



*Figure 10

The poster of the Indian action comedy “Bol Bachchan”¹⁶⁶ has been remodeled by Morsi supporters to portray the president hanging his ‘secular’ opponents, Mohamed al-Baradei and Hamdīn Şabbahī, upside down.¹⁶⁷

The top text in Arabic reads: “Since there is no politeness, we should get behaved.” This is a quote from the 2006 light comedy film “*Ga‘alatnī mugriman*” (She turned me into a criminal), which stars the famous comedian Aḥmad Ḥilmī.¹⁶⁸

The quote from the film was reiterated in a situation where the protagonist was defending the female vedette (played by the actress Ghāda ‘Ādil) from a group of athlete men harassing her. The protagonist, who has a slight, frail physique, addresses the men recklessly with the phrase “since there is no politeness, we should get behaved,” whereupon they begin hitting him. In the

¹⁶⁶ “Bol Bachchan (2012) ★ 5.6 | Action, Comedy,” IMDb, July 6, 2012, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1728986/> .

¹⁶⁷ At the time, Mohamed al-Baradei and Hamdīn Şabbahī were leading the National Salvation Front (*Gabhat al-‘inqādh*). This coalition was formed on 22 November 2012 in protest against the constitutional decree issued by Morsi. It combined 35 political parties and movements that spanned various leftist and liberal ideologies. The Front called for new parliamentary elections, a new representative constitutional assembly, and an impartial general prosecutor.

¹⁶⁸ “تصدق شاييف البحر من هنا” YouTube, June 26, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkfcSO4jWvo> .

meme, the phrase is used in the adverse sense, as the president was portrayed speaking from a position of strength, unlike the comedian in the film, as he holds his opponents upside down.

On 12 August 2012, Morsi asked General Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭaṭṭāwī, head of the country's armed forces, and Sāmī 'Anān, the army chief of staff, to resign. He named Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, serving as chief of military intelligence at the time, as Egypt's new defense minister, which was one of several replacements in the membership of the SCAF. Labor strikes and civil protests erupted against the president's constitutional decree and the release of security officers who committed criminal and political offenses during 2011,¹⁶⁹ which paved the way for future turbulence.

In parallel, the Islamist coalition started waving dangerous signs. Radical Salafists demonstrated against showing a movie about the Prophet Muhammad in the American embassy, raising the black ensign of the Islamic State (IS).¹⁷⁰ President Morsi honored the memory of the 6th of October War in the Cairo stadium. He invited the leaders of *al-Gamā'a al-Islāmiyya*, who were involved in the assassination of former president Mohamed Anwar al-Sadat [Muḥammad 'Anwar al-Sādāt], who led the October war. Among Egyptian nationalists and different sectors of the population, Sadat is known for his alliance with Islamists at the beginning of his rule, a relationship that soured after Sadat's 1978 peace treaty with Israel. His assassination stands out in the recent Egyptian history as an example of the violence tied into the discourse and frameworks

¹⁶⁹ "Even though Egyptian law protects the prosecutor general from being ousted by the president, on 11 October 2012 President Morsi ordered Egypt's prosecutor general 'Abd al-Magīd Maḥmūd to vacate his position in an attempt to defuse public anger over the acquittals in the Battle of the Camels case. Maḥmūd, however, refused to step down and instead became Egypt's ambassador to the Vatican City.

On 12 October 2012, critics and supporters of President Morsi clashed in Cairo's Tahrir Square in a small but potent rally, as liberal and secular activists erupted with anger and accused the Muslim Brotherhood of trying to take over the country. The rally highlighted political tensions within Egypt and the current government's failure to bring loyalists of the former government to justice for their actions during the Battle of the Camels."

Hussein, Abdel-Rahman. "Egypt Erupts as Muslim Brotherhood Supporters Clash with Protesters." *The Guardian*, December 6, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/05/egypt-clashes-protesters-muslim-supporters> .

¹⁷⁰ "Mysterious Anti-Muslim Movie Prompts Protest in Egypt." *The New York Times*, September 11, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/12/world/middleeast/movie-stirs-protest-at-us-embassy-in-cairo.html> .

of Islamist organizations. In the same occasion, Morsi saluted Syria's Islamist resistance in his speech, and he announced that the Egyptian state and its youth would back jihad in Syria.

“Indeed, the relationship between the Brotherhood and the main Salafist parties itself is productive of some of the most exclusionary and violent outcomes of the last two years. There has been both bitter rivalry and pragmatic cooperation between the parties since 2011. According to this tacit pact, the Salafists provide the Brotherhood with support to push through their policies, “resisting external pressure or calls for genuine democratic reforms.” In return, the Brotherhood recognizes the Salafists’ aspirations, to found a religious state for example and gives them a greater say in influencing outcomes. This bargain buoyed Morsi through the massive protests against his unilateral “constitutional declaration” of November 2012, and against the unpopular constitution itself.”¹⁷¹

Morsi's power struggles with the military, the eruption of terrorist attacks in the Sinai Peninsula, and the disintegration of the prodemocracy alliance that backed Morsi before the elections all indicated a polarization between the Brotherhood and its opponents (military leadership, secular groups, and prodemocracy forces). In November 2012, liberal political constituencies formed “The National Salvation Front Coalition” (*Gabhat al-'inqādh*),¹⁷² which called for new parliamentary elections, a new representative constitutional assembly, and an impartial general prosecutor. In 2013, the nation-wide *Tamarrud* (Rebel) campaign appeared and began collecting signatures on a petition demanding early presidential elections. The threat of violent Islamism ignited fears about the transforming of the nature of the state, which further pushed the boundaries of contestation in internet memes:

“The new government carried on endless debates about women's clothing, alcohol, bathing suits, relations between the sexes, and women's roles, all topics which further marginalized women and non-Muslim minorities. It is no wonder that phase three of meme wars was fueled by a disdain for religious institutions and icons.”¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Abou-El-Fadl. “Sectarianism and Counter-Revolution in Egypt: Not a Family Affair.”

¹⁷² The National Salvation Front coalition (*Gabhat al-'inqādh*) was formed on 22 November 2012 in protest against the constitutional decree issued by President Morsi. The political front constituted of 35 political parties and movements, with leftist and liberal ideologies. They called for a new law for parliamentary elections, new representative constitutional assembly, and an impartial general prosecutor. The front led by Muhammed al-Baradei was one of the mobilizers of the popular uprising on 30 June 2013.

¹⁷³ Herrera. “Memes and the War of Ideas,” 110.

Linda Herrera remarked that, during the presidential elections in 2012, there emerged homegrown virtual warriors who continued to stir debate during Morsi's presidency, a time when online culture wars were reaching new heights.¹⁷⁴ Their critique and cultural expression involved the notion of political Islam, the piety project of Islamic revivalists, and its social penetrability through the mainstream media as a powerful tool of shaping social discourse in the last decades. During 2012-2013, it became obvious that 'secular' and 'liberal' activists and cultural creators acquired a growing clout within the online sphere. They started to claim their views and debate the influence of religious institutions and organizations in controversial posts, sarcastic memes, and YouTube videos. Islamists engaged in political alliances and cultural debates to defend the president and the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. In their media activities, they classified all forms of opposition to the president as an attack on Islam, emphasizing the so-called 'threat of secular and atheist currents.'

The resurrection of street demonstrations against the rule of Mohamed Morsi initiated waves of political violence against non-Islamist protesters:

"During the Brotherhood's rule, torture was no longer confined to police cells and military detention places but was carried out by Muslim Brother vigilantes in public spaces including mosques and street corners. This 'normalization' of torture contributed to multiple levels of trauma through the shattering of expectations of safety and security in the social and political public sphere... the Brotherhood actively excluded other political actors from the public sphere and issued laws which sought to impose a particular Islamist vision of identity without regard for internal Egyptian differences. After Morsi issued a presidential decree in which he granted himself immunity from any legal challenge – thus closing the last avenue for public accountability – and called for a referendum on what many perceived to be an overly Islamist draft of a new constitution, the presidential palace clashes broke out which lasted for 2 days (5–6 December 2012) and resulted in 10 deaths and injuries to at least 748 people. For respondents, these clashes deepened their experience of social and political traumatization since civilians were no longer just fighting state security forces but each other as violence took on sectarian forms."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Herrera. "Memes and the War of Ideas," 112.

¹⁷⁵ Matthies-Boon, Vivienne, and Naomi Head. "Trauma as Counterrevolutionary Colonization: Narratives from Postrevolutionary Egypt." *Journal of International Political Theory* 14/3 (2017): 258–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1755088217748970> .

The physical clashes did not spare digital militants and veme (virtual meme) makers who preserved a virtual space of commentary and digital activism. They started to transform parts of their protest into satirical activism that targeted popular Islamist icons. They forged a contestational space to construct a “bricolage of facts, arguments and justifications,”¹⁷⁶ wherein digital caricatures and other representations became part of a continuous process of ‘return and repetition’¹⁷⁷ to revisit a traumatic past. As the cultural anthropologist Walter Armbrust expresses, in his account on the Egyptian revolution, “Martyrs and Tricksters,” these “mass mediated images substituted for direct experience as the polarization of the political field hardened.”¹⁷⁸

Heated debates and clashes did not impede the escalation of radical criticism that transgressed many religious taboos (which will be discussed with more detail in the second chapter of this dissertation). Increasingly, digital activists and public influencers who identified as secular, non-religious, or atheists started to speak fearlessly about the secularization of state institutions. Reviewing and criticizing the history of Islamic revival movement from the 1970s and traditions of Islamic jurisprudence became a new flashpoint for mobilization and online contestation.

The powerful machine of political Islam kept itself immune from criticism and attacks for decades, deploying an army of preachers, lawyers, and media platforms calling for censorship and accusing critics, artists, and liberal intellectuals of blasphemy and apostasy. Sarcasm and digital caricature played a crucial role in exposing the contradictions of political Islamist discourse and ridiculing its deployment of fears, myths, and religious manipulation. Using comics to undermine the fundamentals of Islamist discourse and its influential symbols was a theme that appeared in endless social media trends that prevailed during Morsi’s presidency.

Figures 11 and 12 elaborate on reactions to the metaphors used in Islamist discourse against political opponents and the negative public opinion forming against the Islamist alliance in power.

¹⁷⁶ Armbrust, Walter. “8. Scripting a Massacre.” In *Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution*, 158.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Deploying accusations of moral decay and depravity, usually described in hyperbolic sexualized metaphors, is the traditional strategy Islamist factions use to dismiss any form of opposition.



*Figure 11¹⁷⁹

Top text: The concise history of Arab countries in modern Islamic thought.

Image captions:

“The Islamic Caliphate (on the paved road).”

“After the fall of the Islamic Caliphate (on the sandy road part).”

In their battles against opponents, the Muslim Brotherhood’s digital media warriors fully embraced the radical Salafist language distinguishing modern Egyptian society from an idolized Muslim society. The distinction could be attributed to the Quṭbī factions of Islamist organizations, deeply influenced by the discursive contributions of Sayid Quṭb, activist and cultural critic, who would become the grand ideologue of modern-day Islamic radicalism.

Imprisoned and tortured in President Nasser’s prisons, after the foundering of a shaky alliance between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military body who led the coup in 1952, Quṭb’s writings took a radical turn.

“In his founding documents for the jihadists of next generations, the prison in which the Brothers are tortured was the perfect symbol of a hated Arab nationalism. He identified it with *Jāhiliyya*, the age of ignorance or barbarity that the Scriptures say prevailed in Arabia before the Prophet revealed the Qor’ān, and which he then stamped out with Islam. Quṭb calls for a similar destruction of the *Jāhiliyya* of the twentieth century embodied by Nasserism. By excommunicating the Nasser regime and declaring it

¹⁷⁹ Published on the Facebook page: “Memes that do not submit to political correctness” (*Memes lā takhda’ lel ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*).

impious (*Takfīr*), Signposts summoned up religious legitimacy to justify the holy war against the nationalist state. This master stroke—which not everyone in the Muslim Brotherhood agreed with—would give rise to the radical current in the organization. It would later undergo immense development, from Afghanistan to al-Qaeda.”¹⁸⁰

The viability of Qutb’s influence is not restricted to the Muslim Brotherhood and the later Jihadist movements. It emanates from deploying his literary and critical capacities to engender an allegorical reading of Quran that affects the Muslim communities at large. Depicting Jahiliya (*al-Jāhiliyya*) as a holistic description of modern societies and a perpetual status englobing contemporary Muslims obeying to modern ‘human’ laws and abiding to the nation-state paradigm, opened wide doors for ‘societal Islamism.’ The notion of societal Islamism infiltrated the thought of interpreters and preachers outside and inside the traditional religious institution, and consequently millions of their followers.



*Figure 12¹⁸¹

Top text: “Then Egyptians were brotherized and became well brotherized”¹⁸²

“Egypt on 22 March 1928: The foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood.”

“Egypt on 21 March 1928: The day before the foundation of the MB.”

¹⁸⁰ Kepel, Gilles. “One: The Islamization of the Political Order.” In *Away from Chaos: The Middle East and the Challenge to the West*, 13–14. Trans. Henry Randolph. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

¹⁸¹ Published on the Facebook page: “Memes that do not submit to political correctness.”

“ميمز لا تخضع للصوابية السياسية/الصفحة الجديدة.” Facebook, n.d. <https://cutt.ly/JcNEUHK> .

¹⁸² The phrase follows the rhyme of a *ḥadīth* that starts with the sentence: "If a person embraces Islam sincerely" (*Idhā 'aslam al-mar' wa ḥasun Islāmuh*).

The top text follows the rhyme of a hadith¹⁸³ for the Prophet of Islam that starts with the sentence: “*Idhā ’aslam al-mar’ wa ḥasun Islāmuh*” (If a person embraces Islam sincerely). In the caption Islamic belief is replaced with brotherization – “Then Egyptians were brotherized and became well brotherized” instead of “embraced Islam sincerely and became good Muslim/believer (s)” in the original hadith.

Figures 11 and 12 stressed these distinctions (before and after the Islamic Caliphate/before and after the foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood) in order to caricaturize the resurrection of Jahiliya implied in the Islamists’ attacks against their opponents. The nudity in the image highlights the Muslim Brotherhood’s allegations about the glorified past of the Islamic Caliphate and the magnified role they attribute to their organization in rectifying the moral decay of a society living in decadence. The deployment of the hadith rhyme and the substitution of Islam with brotherization mocks the sanctity that the Brotherhood worked to confer onto their system of religious regimentation. The moralistic tone and accusations of *Takfīr* (impiety) deployed to muffle oppositional voices became particularly obnoxious when their reiterators echoed government stances and addressed huge societal sectors.

“*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*” (Memes that do not submit to political correctness), the Facebook page where the memes in Figures 11 and 12 were published, was one of the most prominent pages that emerged during Morsi’s rule and continued to play a critical role throughout the coming political transformations. Emanating from an anti-PC (political

The complete Ḥadīth is as follows:

Allah’s Messenger (ﷺ) said, “If a person embraces Islam sincerely, then Allah shall forgive all his past sins, and after that starts the settlement of accounts, the reward of his good deeds will be ten times to seven hundred times for each good deed and one evil deed will be recorded as it is unless Allah forgives it.”

“Chapter: (What Is Said Regarding the Superiority of) a Person Who Embraces Islam Sincerely.” Sahih al-Bukhari 41 - belief - الإيمان - كتاب - *sunnah.com* - sayings and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه و سلم), n.d. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:41> .

¹⁸³ ḥadīth (A): narrative, talk; al-ḥadīth is used for Tradition, being an account of what the Prophet said or did, or of his tacit approval of something said or done in his presence.

“Ḥadīth,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Glossary and Index of Terms, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei2glos_sim_gi_01408 .

correctness) position, the administrator of the page appeared as a frontline defender of a confrontational discourse, usually mediated through digital caricatures, against the rule of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The page was founded by an Egyptian medical doctor in his late thirties who grew up in one of the Gulf countries, then returned to Egypt to complete his high school and university studies. He participated in the Egyptian uprising in 2011 and later returned to work in a Gulf country.¹⁸⁴ According to him, the failure of the revolutionary movement and his frustration with leftist currents at the time of political mobilization encouraged him to create the page and present the sociopolitical scene with a right-wing point of view:

“There is a popular saying in the West that: Left cannot meme, which is, in fact, the opposite of what exists in the Middle East, as most widespread memes’ pages belong to leftist thought or to that hybrid mixture spread all over our ‘happy’ region (a little of leftism, a little revolutionary, and a lot of religious background). The meme pages belonging to the statist thought or to the right-wing in general lie at the bottom of the viewership indices due to their lack of wittiness on one hand, or the bad quality of their content on the other hand. For this reason, the page is only trying to prove that: Also, the right can meme, if the page could be considered closer to the right, and that creativity does not require ‘sniffing glue’ to evoke it.”¹⁸⁵

An increasing number of people on Egyptian social networks began employing the pejorative nomenclature “glue sniffers”¹⁸⁶ (*kollagiyya*) to describe the activists and militants, mocked on American platforms under the nomenclature ‘social justice warriors (SJWs),’¹⁸⁷ who insisted on romanticizing the failure of the revolutionary movement and ignoring the drawbacks of political organization. According to their ‘intellectual’ critics, *al-kollagiyya* kept advancing socially progressive ideas detached from the social reality. In the view of their opponents, *al-*

¹⁸⁴ The founder of the Facebook page “*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al- ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*” (Memes that do not submit to political correctness). Online interview with the author. 11 November 2019. He requested anonymity and the omission of details about his country of residency.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ “Glue Sniffer.” *Urban Dictionary*, May 19, 2019. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=glue+sniffer>

¹⁸⁷ Social justice warrior (SJW): an insulting way of referring to someone who regularly comments on things that they consider are sexist, racist, unfair, etc., especially on the internet or in the media.

Cambridge dictionary. 15 June 2023. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sjw>

kollagiyya stiffly defended the idea of political correctness, globally promoted by identity groups, in an exclusionary way to protect themselves from critique.

Shammāmīn kolla (glue sniffers), *kollagiyya*, or *shammāmīn* (sniffers)¹⁸⁸ appeared as digital identifiers for the amalgam of cyberutopians, revolutionaries, and woke activists on the internet. *Al-thawragiyya* (a synonym for revolutionaries), *al-shammāmīn*, and *al-kollagiyya* were juxtaposed to *al-dawlagiyya* (the state supporters), a term that generally encompassed nationalists, supporters of the ruling regime, and those with anti-PC (Anti-political correctness) sensitivities. The two categories epitomized multiple subcategories where the social and the political intermingled to redefine the conflicting parties in online cultural wars according to contextual characteristics.

The attachment of the suffix *-gī* in the words *thawragī* or *dawlagī*, in their singular form, originates from the Turkish suffix *-ci*, which has infiltrated different Arabic vernaculars, during the Ottoman period, to become *-gī* (in ECA). In Turkish, the suffix *-ci*, when attached to a noun, denotes a person involved with what is named by the noun (ex: *balıkçı* means "fishmonger," while *balık* means "fish"). Hence, the occupational reference in *thawragī* or *dawlagī* (in plural: *thawragiyya* and *dawlagiyya*) distinguishes the common characteristics of this group and the cultural signs of communication that it uses.

Whether these groups identified themselves by these names (*al-thawragiyya* or *al-dawlagiyya*) in order to create a new digital identity, or whether they were identified using these terms by others for the purpose of condemnation or marginalization, the formulae were adopted as digital identities of the conflicting political groups. Eventually, these monikers found their way into cultural representations within the memesphere.

¹⁸⁸ Sniffing glue constitutes a type of substance abuse with potentially severe health repercussions. It is a widespread practice in Egypt as it represents a cheap form of drug abuse that provides a quick high. Hence, the term "glue sniffers" is used pejoratively to identify marginal populations and delinquents within poor communities. The terms *kollagiyya/shammāmīn* spread online as a satiric nomenclature identifying the groups influenced by the revolutionary bloc, implying that they are unrealistic, dreamy, and lacking in coherence and vigilance.

After 2013, secular activists diverged according to their left and right-wing tendencies. However, the period of 2012-2013, under the rule of an Islamist president and an Islamist parliamentary majority, witnessed the emergence of unanimous sentiments of threat and exclusion on the part liberal currents and their middle-class audience. The unrest, which was escalating to threats of civil war, casted its shadow on the digital landscape, which became the host of three main conflicting divisions: the Brotherhood e-militias, the military supporters who call on the army to intervene against the Brotherhood, and the prodemocracy cybermilitants who pursued an ambiguous notion of the ‘civil state’ (*al-dawla al-madaniyya*).

In the summer of 2013, Facebook became an arena of near-warfare, and the tripartition of three divisions was established, exhibiting the main poles that would shape the digital landscape after June 2013, with the state supporters under the name *al-dawlagiyya*, the Islamists under the name *al-Islamgiyya*, and the revolutionaries (who placed themselves outside both groups under the legacy of January 2011) under the name *al-thawragiyya*. The three nicknames, with correspondent derivatives, circulated as labels of digital identity, mostly appropriated by each group to describe the other two, pejoratively in most cases.



*Figure 13

In the photoshopped image, the creator recalls the speech of the famous Sheikh Muḥammad Mitwallī al-Shaʿrāwī before President Mubarak, who had recently survived an assassination attempt in the Ethiopian capital in June 1995. There was widespread state media coverage after this event. Many Egyptian intellectuals, public figures, and well-known preachers were gathered in a ceremony to celebrate the president’s survival of this attack.

During the ceremony, Shaʿrāwī concluded his long monologue of praise for the president with the phrase: “If you were our fated president, may God grant you success. And if we were your fated people,

may God lend you his help to endure.”¹⁸⁹ At the time, the phrase was understood as part of the expected hypocritical rhetoric publicized during Mubarak’s presidency. In the photoshopped image, Mubarak is replaced by Morsi. The phrase is modified to become: “If you were our fated president, then may God take you. And if we were your fated people, then may God take you.”

The portrayal of Morsi in the place of the toppled president Mubarak alludes to the meager differences between the president ousted by popular revolution and the president, elected by an oppositional current, who failed the ambitions of a growing population. It also demonstrates increasing popular anger with the economic difficulties that surged during Morsi’s rule, including high fuel prices, frequent electricity cuts, and the depreciation of Egyptian currency. These and other memes signaled the readiness of Egyptians to accept Morsi’s replacement with any other alternative. This materialized in the countrywide protests that erupted 30 June 2013 calling for Morsi’s overthrow and paving the way for a military coup and new presidential elections that brought Sisi to power with unprecedented support.



*Figure 14

The top text is a statement by the Egyptian actress Ilhām Shāhīn: “I swear by my honor, Morsi will not return.”

¹⁸⁹ Sheikh al-Sha’rāwī. “كلمة الشيخ الشعراوي للرئيس مبارك بعد حادث اديس ابابا.” YouTube, January 7, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9luCMh4dvY>.

The cheerful picture of Morsi in the comments section suggests that his return is more likely now that a presumably “honorless”¹⁹⁰ actress has sworn by her honor.

The reworked image (with Ilhām Shāhīn’s statement and the comment with Morsi’s picture) was published under the logo of the ‘brotherized’ Egyptian Sarcasm Society (ESS) page shortly after Morsi’s removal.

Shāhīn was one of the actresses who were outspoken in their opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists during 2013. In her interviews, she declared that the future of her career and that of Egyptian artistic professionals was menaced by the Brotherhood position of power. She participated the street demonstrations against Morsi’s dictatorial presidential decree,¹⁹¹ and she later announced her full support for the military takeover and Sisi’s regime. Because of her stances, she was subjected to an organized misogynist campaign on Islamists’ media by Salafī preachers.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ The word “honor” in Egyptian Arabic is loaded with sexual connotations. In conservative and Islamist discourses, describing women and female artists as “lacking in honor” is an insult implying promiscuity and sexual immorality.

¹⁹¹ Beaumont, Peter. “Protests Erupt across Egypt after Presidential Decree.” *The Guardian*, November 23, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/23/protests-egypt-presidential-decree> .

¹⁹² “Sheikh Abdullah Badr Arrested for Insulting Egyptian Actress.” *Ahram Online*, May 1, 2013. <https://cutt.ly/WbjB8oN> .



*Figure 15

(From right to left)

At Morsi time (black-highlighted top title)

“*Hāgg*,¹⁹³ what is your opinion about the electricity cuts?”

“It is a motherfucking thing, Morsi, the son of a dirty bitch, delivers the fuel to Gaza strip.”

At Sisi time (black-highlighted middle title)

“*Hāgg*, what is your opinion about the electricity cuts?”

“We should rationalize consumption. The state is struggling economically these days.”

Bottom images

Right side

“*Hāgg*, you are *mi'arraş* (a pimp).”

“Come here, son of bitch (the *hāg* is going after him).”

After Morsi’s imprisonment in 2013, the “brotherized” ESS page initiated a concerted attack condemning the military takeover and continued to set a distinctive tone for Islamist pages afterwards. In general, comics in Islamist pages focused on attacking state figures, secular political factions, popular artists, intellectuals, journalists, and writers who publicly backed the protests against Morsi. Those sectors who were labeled with pejorative term *mi'arraşin* (hypocrites/pimps) in Islamist media were undermined by memes that attributed all their opinions and actions exclusively to their subordination to the Sisi regime. These sectors were also grouped under labels like “the seculars,” “the feminists,” and “the atheists” in the lingo of Islamist memes. In the coming

¹⁹³ A nickname in ECA, sometimes used socially to address old men, for a Muslim man who has completed the hajj.

chapters, I will elaborate in more details on the incorporation of religion and gender aspects in the cultural wars ignited after Morsi's removal.

Linking these categories to the Sisi regime was meant to reinforce the idea that Islamists, the true believers, were being persecuted by 'secular' regimes. It also legitimized the rest of the misogyny, homophobia, and accusations of impiety, which were constantly deployed in online comics to discredit the opponents of Islamist currents and label them as immoral and hypocritical nonbelievers lacking in political integrity.

From another angle, the generalization aimed at isolating the opposition groups who participated in the June 30th protests after they lost faith in a possible democratic transformation under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. Portraying these sectors as hypocrites who favored a military coup over a democratic process, with all the simplification it implies, gave the Islamists media campaigners a higher moral ground during turbulent times. This work of continuous shaming helped build and consolidate their online base of supporters after 2013, as the cyberpolarization process carried on.

In *al-Islāmgīyya*'s comics, another line of criticism focused on comparing the angry reactions to Morsi's shortcomings, publicly expressed during his presidency, versus the lack of criticism aimed at the Sisi regime, particularly when it comes to the deterioration of public services like electricity, healthcare, and public transport. Alluding to a conspiracy against the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist comics enforced a generalized condemnation of the societal sectors that rejected Morsi's rule in favor of an autocratic restoration under Sisi. By advancing this critique, they shifted responsibility for governmental shortcomings away from the Brotherhood toward Sisi and the military, who they accused of betraying the democratic cause, failing the revolution, and detaining increasing numbers of political prisoners.



*Figure 16

“1- A dirty country.”

“2- Cheap blood”

“3- Atheism”

“4- Eggs (a vernacular metonym of bad humor)”

“5- A people who likes to get fucked.”

Immigration is the solution.

The Islamist campaigns and comics focused on labeling public protest against Morsi as an instinctual insubordination to his power and adversarial conspiracies, denying any sort of self-critique and reflection on the two years leading up to his removal. The phrase “*sha‘b yehibb yetrikib*” (A people who likes to get fucked) in Figure [16] is a commonly used vernacular synonym of a sexual position where a man ‘mounts’ a woman, regarded as a symbol of subordinating her. Consequently, any man could similarly be insulted and emasculated using the term *yetrikib*. The set of accusations in this meme (atheism, cheapness, dirtiness, bad humor, subordination) are designed to denigrate the ‘people’ and delegitimize their mobilization against Morsi.



*Figure 17

The comic mimes a scene from the Egyptian film “*Sahar al-Layālī*” (Sleepless Nights) 2003,¹⁹⁴ which depicts a session of psychoanalysis wherein the female character, struggling with sexual frustration with her husband, narrates one of her sexual fantasies to her therapist.

Image 1: “Sisi restored security. Electricity cuts that prevailed under *al-Ikhwān* (the Brotherhood) decreased. And he kept his promise not to run for presidential elections and transferred power to the elected president.”

Image 2: (Therapist) “Is that what happened or what you wished for?” (A phrase from the dialogue in the original scene).

In Figure 17, sexualized metaphors continue to inspire the choice of picture and language in the Islamist post-coup memes. In the original scene, the suffering wife played by the actress Jihān Fādīl imagines, in front of her psychiatrist, imagines a passionate sexual scene between her and her husband, where the husband overcomes his difficulties and seduces his wife. The psychiatrist’s reply, “Is that what happened or what you wished for?” refers to the husband in the film scene, and to Sisi in the meme. Portraying the ruler in the place of a presumably impotent or sexually undesirable husband alludes to a set of sexual expectations tied to a patriarchal imaginary of a ruler. The metonym of sexual impotence, in the meme, was chosen to undermine the new ruler’s capacities.

¹⁹⁴ “فيلم - سهر الليلي - 2003 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض”، elCinema.com, 2003. <https://elcinema.com/work/1010155/>.

Figures 16 and 17 suggest that an all-mighty powerful ruler, backed by a military coup, could rape his people from a higher sexual position. The people, in turn, are portrayed as a rape victim who ‘asked for it,’ as the traditional misogynist rape apologists claim. However, according to the same patriarchal model, a ruler’s efficiency could be undermined by comparing his performance to a man who struggles to perform sexually.

The distinctive lines of *al-Islāngiyya* comics converged with their mediated discourse on TV channels like al-Jazeera and the Brotherhood satellite channels hosted in Turkey after the group’s excommunication in 2013. As shown in Figures 15, 16, 17, the accusation of hypocrisy (*ta’rīṣ*/pimping) became a common insult that circulated in Islamists’ comics and circles. Later, mutual accusations of ‘selling out’ became generalized and were exchanged between the different polarized camps. Revolutionaries (*al-thawragiyya*), channelling their feelings of betrayal and trauma, launched concerted online dissing attacks, using the word *ta’rīṣ* as a common insult against public figures who supported Sisi and criticizing regime supporters (*al-dawlagiyya*) for giving up on political mobilization in support of a new dictator.

Chapter II: Meming Identity Currents After 2013

1. Introduction: The Rise and Demise of Mediated Dissidence in Egypt

During the time of protests in 2011, expressing doubt as to the uprising's expected outcome in a social media post or daring to question the credibility of its political constituencies and active factions would subject the author to a thread of offensive attacks by prorevolutionary commentators. In a fateful time of national division, questioning the purity of the 'revolutionaries' was understood as support for Mubarak and conspiracy theorists, who were themselves undermined by online sarcasm. In contrast to the city squares dominated by vocal revolutionaries, social networks offered a meager margin for the silent majority, which was mocked for its negativity and submission to the official media's defamation campaign against the uprising and its militant activists. Expressing concerns, in a social media post or journal article, that the revolutionary movement risked being hijacked by radical Islamists, was also taken as a sign of collusion with supporters of the Mubarak regime. Such a commentary would probably incite insulting attacks from pro-revolutionary sympathizers.

The increasingly absolutist tone of the revolutionary camp, as displayed by online posts, fostered more violent tones of expression on social networks. Sectorial polarizations began shaping the chaos online, dividing the old and the young, the conventional and the creative, the normies and the intellectuals, and the revolutionaries and those in the sofa party (*ḥizb al-kanaba* – the pejorative term used to depict the silent majority reluctant to show a clear political bias). "Trolling"¹⁹⁵ became an established online practice and took a political turn as anonymous and

¹⁹⁵ "Trolling is when someone posts or comments online to 'bait' people, which means deliberately provoking an argument or emotional reaction. In some cases, they say things they do not even believe, just to cause drama. In other cases, they may not agree with the views of another person or group online, so they try to discredit, humiliate, or punish them. This may include online hate – personal attacks that target someone because of their race, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. The troll may also encourage mob mentality, urging others to join in the attack so it becomes a pile on. Trolls often post under a fake name or anonymously, so they can say things without being held responsible. This can make them feel more powerful and less cautious than they would be if they were talking to someone 'IRL' or in person. This makes it difficult to identify who actually left the post or comment.

Trolls also often try to downplay the impact of their behavior, claiming anyone who is upset by their posts or comments

fake accounts proliferated and launched systematic attacks on public figures and opinion posts from different political camps.

As a consequence, the cascade of political events that led to the recession of the revolutionary flame deeply affected the ‘intellectual’ revolutionaries, who had once achieved a memorable victory against the authority of ‘normies.’ By the end of 2011, mind-bombing political memes gradually disappeared as political mobilization became more costly on physical and social levels. The rising polarization between secular and Islamist fronts in parallel with the shift to electoral politics attenuated street mobilizations. The frustration of the revolutionary collectives started to show in comic productions, which were imbued with self-mockery and implicit remorse, as shown in Figures 18 and 19.



*Figure 18¹⁹⁶

A constellation of four images and top text: “OMG I almost fell for these illusions.”

The fourth image reads:

“A civilian Egyptian president (i.e., not a military leader).”

The meme conveys the remorseful self-mockery that dominated comics after 2013.

The military/civilian division preoccupied the social domain as the military regained its public visibility from 2011 onwards. After the military takeover in 2013, which was followed by Sisi’s election in 2014, the online presence of organized nationalist groups publicly backing military governance became more tangible. This new line of polarization broke social taboos in a manner that equaled or surpassed the scandal of openly mocking the country’s president. The

is overreacting. They may say it was just a joke, or the person who they targeted needs to toughen up.”

¹⁹⁶ Mined during data collection in 2018 from “Comic Corner,” the archive of memes uploaded to Twitter.

Comic Corner. “‘I Have an Illusion’ -Mlk Jr.” Twitter, November 17, 2017. <https://twitter.com/comiccornerv/status/931568146808475648>.

military enjoyed an exceptional degree of secrecy surrounding its budget and expenses, a scarcity of public media coverage, and membership in the governmental body. The enduring popularity and untouchable status of the armed forces was established by the Free Officers Revolt in 1952, a coup led by a group of military officers, which brought down the monarch, King Farouk, and ended British colonialism in Egypt.¹⁹⁷ Thus, for the generations that grew under Mubarak's rule, it was unthinkable for them to witness public debates about the role of the army in governance and civilian rule as a step towards a desired democracy.

As shocking as the idea was, one of the exceptional variables was the emergence of demonstrations during 2011, sometimes in large numbers, using slogans to reject what was termed *ḥukm al-ʿaskar* (military rule). Demonstrations and sit-ins during this year were in protest of the offenses and violations committed by the military, which often escaped accountability or were said to be subject to 'internal accountability' within the military domain.¹⁹⁸ However, in any case, the year 2011 witnessed frequent media appearance by leaders of the armed forces, who discussed current events and expressed political opinions. While their appearance came in the context of

¹⁹⁷ "The first military president, the charismatic and popular Gamal Abd al-Nasser (1954-1970), who formed an Arab socialist regime in which military officers occupied the most important administrative and economic positions. Two other military presidents succeeded Nasser: Anwar Sadat (1970-1981) and Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011). Sadat attempted to "demilitarize" the Egyptian state by significantly reducing the number of army officers in government positions, making the army focus more on affairs of war. Mubarak brought back the military influence on Egyptian society allowing its leaders to create economic enterprises and occupy high-level administrative positions in the government. The militarized state that evolved under Mubarak in the course of thirty years, passed through three different phases. In the 1980s, after Egypt signed the Camp David peace treaty of 1979 with Israel, the military switched its attention to economic activities. The Ministry of Defense created an economic arm called the "National Service Products Organization" (NSPO), which contributed to public infrastructure projects and produced cheap civil goods for the middle and lower classes. The second phase was in the 1990s. Mubarak applied a full-fledged economic liberalization plan in accordance with the IMF and World Bank's requirements, and the military expanded their production of civil goods and services."

Abul-Magd, Zeinab. "The Egyptian Military in Politics and the Economy: Recent History and Current Transition Status." *Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI)*, 2013. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/4935-the-egyptian-military-in-politics-and-the-economy.pdf> .

¹⁹⁸ "Egypt: Brutality Unpunished and Unchecked: Egypt's Military Kill and Torture Protesters with Impunity." *Amnesty International*, 2012. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/017/2012/en/> .

their temporary administration of the country after the fall of the president, the path that opened since 2011 allowed for controversy over the issue of their return to power according to the established trajectory of Egyptian presidents since 1952, all of whom emerged from the military establishment.

The use of optical illusions in Figure 18 highlights the taboo of criticizing military governance while simultaneously criticizing what happened during 2011. And despite the reference to “an Egyptian civilian president” as a fourth illusion, the meme, in an antithetical mechanism, re-centers the military/civilian division as core theme.



*Figure 19

The template (image macro) shows the actor Nūr al-Sharīf and actress 'Abla Kāmil in a scene from the popular 1996 drama series “Lan 'a'īsh fī gilbāb 'abī” (I will not live in the shadow of my father).

The text mimes a passionate dialogue wherein the main character (‘Abd al-Ghafūr al-Bura'ī) gently tells his wife how beautiful she is.¹⁹⁹

The top text in the meme reads: “Do you remember, Fāṭna (a popular Egyptian pet name for Fāṭima), when our major disputes were: constitution first or elections first?”

References to scenes and frames from the popular drama “*Lan 'a'īsh fī gilbāb 'abī*,” produced in the 1990s, become abundant in the memes produced after 2013 in a perfect example of the deployment of a shared popular culture archive in a contemporary meme subculture. In this dissertation, many comics focus on “*Lan 'a'īsh fī gilbāb 'abī*.” The series depicted the success story of a typical Egyptian worker who became a wealthy businessman. A substantial part of the series centered around al-Bura'ī's familial drama,

¹⁹⁹ “عبد الغفور البرعي وفاطمة - لن اعيش في جلباب ابي” YouTube, April 1, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fObj4yMBUrc> .

humorously spun, involving his wife and four children and everyday stories that engaged with different aspects of their social lives. The series succeeded in providing a narrative for the Egyptian lower to middle classes across decades of their social evolution, which encompassed evolving socioeconomic conditions, class distinctions, and value systems.

The renewed familiarity of the couple al-Bura‘ī and Fāṭima within the Egyptian memosphere based itself on reimagining their digital identities as two mocking and witty popular characters. Their appearance in memes commenting on public and political incidents usually combined self-mockery and social critique. In Figure [19], the choice of al-Bura‘ī and Fāṭima also took their age and status as an older couple into consideration – as if the debate over “constitution first or elections first?” that erupted after the toppling of Mubarak were a distant memory. In that choice, we can observe the identification of the meme creator as an old man or woman, which probably did not match reality, who remembered the olden days, while self-caricaturizing his/her youthful naivety. Distancing oneself from recent events and disguising oneself behind older characters suggests that melancholia underlies the sarcasm and self-reprimand.

During this exchange of opinions and disputes, the first incarnations of acute polarizations inside the revolutionary camp were exposed. The debate over “constitution first or elections first?” was the first of many incidents that divided the revolutionary bloc and pushed it towards fragmentation. The Muslim Brotherhood rejected the idea of writing a constitution before parliamentary and presidential elections, under the allegation that this step would be undemocratic. The liberal bloc, on the contrary, supported “constitution first,” as their newly formed political constituencies, unlike the Brotherhood, needed time to prepare for the electoral marathon. A constitutional referendum was held in March 2011, organized by the SCAF, and resulted in the continuation of work on the 1971 constitution. The 1971 constitution was suspended by the SCAF on 13 February 2011, two days after the resignation of Mubarak. It then organized a committee of jurists to draft amendments to pave the way for new parliamentary and presidential elections. Had the referendum resulted in a "no" vote, the 1971 constitution would have been nullified and a new one drawn up before elections.

In the absence of organized political leadership, the revolutionary crowd gradually shifted from praising the “leaderless revolution” to struggling with a fragmented body drowning in internal disputes. The heterogenous constituency of the revolutionary camp remained one of the major weaknesses that characterized the biggest popular uprising in decades and rendered predictable its tragic end, as describes the Egyptian historian Sharīf Yūnus:

“These groups who took the initiative did not have a vision for an alternative state but emanated from a youthful imagination about a new world and a new state founded on efficiency, integrity, and freedom opposed to a regime, in their view, stigmatized by failure, corruption and dictatorship. Yet, this imagination was shared by different ideological camps; liberal, leftist, nationalist, and Islamist. A lot of them held deep-seated equivocations implying authoritarian dimensions and democratic quests, among other variations.”²⁰⁰

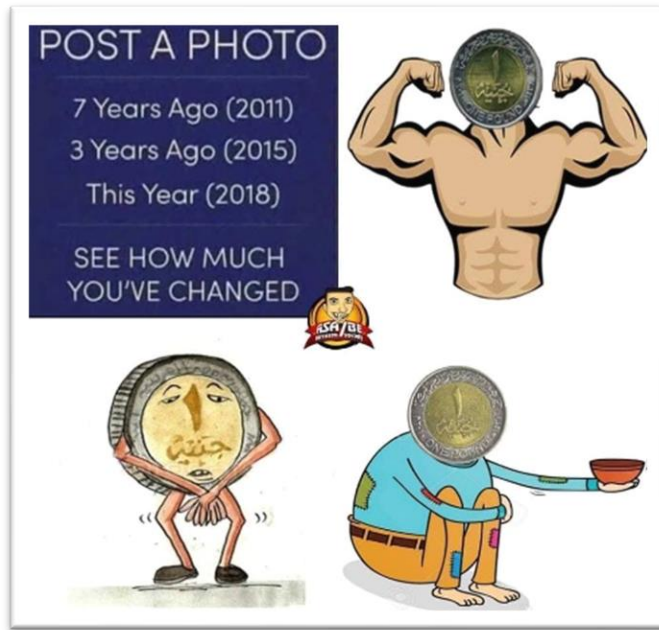
The newly introduced satirical content on the internet, in the form of memes and comics, exposed this heterogeneity and tried to bridge its deficiencies. This was attempted through a process of symbolization, bricolage and reproduction, as clarified by Gitlin: “Frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse.”²⁰¹

Surprisingly early, the assumed self-conscious vanguard dissolved in in the face of the organized powers of the Muslim Brotherhood and the military leadership, who interfered to lead and direct the revolution. The generational configuration of the leaderless digital revolution proved farfetched and rapidly lost its appeal. Internet nerds and new-millennium rebels failed to become a unifying and effective political force. On the contrary, they appeared fascinated by ‘polyvocality,’ which they introduced to the theatre of social deliberation.

²⁰⁰ يونس، شريف. البحث عن خلاص: أزمة الدولة والإسلام والحدائثة في مصر. 305-304

Yūnus, Sharīf. Searching for a Solace: The Crisis of the State, Islam and Modernity in Egypt, 304-305.

²⁰¹ Gitlin, Todd. *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, 7. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.



*Figure 20

A reworked cartoon published on 11 September 2018 on ASS mocking the steep hike of prices after the devaluation of the Egyptian currency in 2016, in response to the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) demand, in order to secure a \$12 billion loan to Egypt over three years to overhaul its suffering economy.

The trajectories of the biggest meme communities after 2013 revealed some of the transformations that affected players on the sociocultural scene who were struggling with a severely repressive backlash. Asa7be Sarcasm Society (ASS) archive from 2012 to 2016 disappeared from the internet. Political commentary took a lighter dissident tone as the public space was increasingly restricted under President Sisi’s newly issued laws censoring and reorganizing digital platforms.²⁰² The political commentary and internet social memes witnessed a serious decline as some social media content creators were jailed under new laws regulating digital crime and fighting terrorism.²⁰³

As demonstrated by Figure 20, the sarcastic tone on ASS, the biggest Egyptian meme community, shifted away from directly caricaturizing political figures, especially the president. Critique of governmental decisions reverted to safer boundaries, like focusing on the results of economic policies (the devaluation of the currency) without directly referring to politicians.

²⁰² Miller, Elissa. “Egypt Leads the Pack in Internet Censorship across the Middle East.” *Atlantic Council*, 2018. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/egypt-leads-the-pack-in-internet-censorship-across-the-middle-east/>.

²⁰³ “After Journalists, Egypt Arrests Bloggers.” *Reporters Without Borders (RSF)*, *IFEX*, May 11, 2018. <https://ifex.org/after-journalists-egypt-arrests-bloggers/>.

The new Egyptian regime's economic policies, including joining International Monetary Fund (IMF) programs, would become the theme that inspired a harsher dissident tone in comics, as I will show later. Currency devaluation and deeper economic crises also coincided with a series of huge infrastructure projects, which the Sisi regime relied on the military to implement. Channeling major economic resources through governmental and military bodies forms an essential pillar of Sisi's orientation toward restoring the role of the state in controlling economic activities, which was reflected in sociopolitical discourse and the memesphere. Beyond the confiscation of a substantial portion of the economy, the regime intends to depoliticize platforms of contestation and suffocate the public discourse that developed since the first decade of the century.

Through the boiling years 2005-2011, a new form of youth participation and organization in the public sphere became visible and self-aware. A coupling between the digital cultural world and social reality started to materialize as new amateurs, bloggers and activists joined the cultural underground scene of publishing, journalism, and creative industries. Youth political movements like the "Youth of 6th April" and the "Youth for Change" were founded. In parallel, the escalating political outrage against Mubarak's regime led to the rise of the "*Kifāya*" (Enough)²⁰⁴ alliance, which combined secular opposition, mostly of nationalist and leftist affiliations, and the Muslim Brotherhood. These political bodies endorsed a scheme for democratic transition and focused on the imminent inheritance of Egypt's rule by Gamāl Mubārak, the son of the president, and deputy secretary-general of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) at the time.

The course of actions through six years was characterized by the proliferation of arenas for digital activism, and their direct impact on social reality. Egyptian cyberutopians represented a rising vanguard heralding a new structure for young protest movements operating through digital networks. They were also an expansion of the rising global middle-class networks of activism, as the Egyptian regime was catching up with a neoliberal economic model deeply dependent on web

²⁰⁴ Shorbagy, Manar. "Understanding Kefaya: The New Politics in Egypt." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 29/1 (2007): 39–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41859016>.

services. The proliferation of the opposition figures' internet accounts incorporated fresh young faces into the political scene.

Preceded by decades of alienating Egyptian youth from political institutions, channeling social debate into organized public arenas of political activity was an inaccessible premise. Web forums, chat rooms, and personal blogs were substitutes for civil society until the beginning of the twenty first century. The depoliticized youth could engage in a process of politicization through self-identification and alignment. In their online engagement, they were gradually integrated into global culture, partly interested by schisms of identity politics forming around the world. On a parallel note, they could discuss local quandaries in a safer atmosphere of connectedness.

Egypt witnessed the rise of its own “keyboard warriors” a few years before the emergence of a huge protest movement in 2011. Their campaigns of online mobilization succeeded, within six years, in perpetuating a continuous status of political congestion that infiltrated young sectors of the population. Marching in civil protests become banal, and the country was ripe for a bigger protest starting from 2010. In the same year, political forces including the Muslim Brotherhood welcomed Mohamed al-Baradei, former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency IAEA and Nobel Prize laureate, to add weight to their escalating pressures against Mubarak and his ambitious son.²⁰⁵

Herrera traces the roots of the heterotopic composition of the political mob in the “cultural,” influenced by the ‘wired’ generations born after the 1970s in Egypt. In her account “Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet,”²⁰⁶ she highlights the common ground between the diversified young movements of the January uprising and the cultural codes reinforced on the internet – propagating ethics and views of a new world order. The broad lines promoted by internet cyberdissidence held in question the ‘old order’ of autocratic repression in Egypt and questioned the capacity of the government vis a vis the

²⁰⁵ Shenker, Jack. “Supporters Give Mohamed ElBaradei Hero’s Welcome at Cairo Airport.” *The Guardian*, February 19, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/19/mohamed-elbaradei-egypt-heavy-security> .

²⁰⁶ Herrera. *Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet*. London: Verso Books, 2014.

growing contempt of ‘the under-thirty-fives’ who make up to 75% of the population in the MENA region.

“Particularly the wired among them, exhibit distinguishing features common to growing up in the virtual age. For instance, they display more fluid notions about privacy and value horizontal learning and sharing. They seem to consider it normal and acceptable to speak back to power, to interact across lines of difference, and to cultivate fictitious and anonymous public personas. As a collectivity, this generation has also shown itself to be assertive and ungovernable, characteristics that have developed as larger proportions of them have participated in the growing opposition culture, both online and offline.”²⁰⁷

The incorporation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Egypt started in the 1990s with satellite channels, cable, videogames, mobile phones,²⁰⁸ and the internet. The cultural impact of the newly adopted technology accompanied the exponential growth in numbers of users from younger generations. They were able to render the dissemination and penetration of tech novelties possible by cheaper means, whether communitarian and participatory or illegal. This penetration posed a heavy challenge to the model of surveillance and control that prevailed in Egyptian modern history after the Free Officers Revolt in 1952.

Introducing satellite Arab news channels²⁰⁹ amidst ominous political upheaval in the region that began with the war on Iraq 2003 ended the monopoly of state TV dominated by the authorities’ dictated guidelines. Opening a large window on world cultures and societies encouraged feverish debates that took place in chat rooms and blogs, with the majority happening under anonymous profiles before the age of web 2.0. The debates and opinions on political, religious, and social

²⁰⁷ Herrera. “Wired Youth Rise,” 15.

²⁰⁸ “In 1997 Egyptian business mogul Naguib Sawiris founded Mobinil, the first mobile communications company in Egypt. A year later, Vodafone came onto the market and price competition began. At the beginning of the millennium, mobile phones were considered a luxury product. By 2007, with the founding of the third company, Etisalat Misr, phones became a basic necessity for Egyptians across all layers of society. With over 56.5 million phones in circulation in 2010 (a 72 percent penetration rate), the vast majority of Egyptians carried a mobile phone.”

Herrera. “Wired Youth Rise,” 21.

²⁰⁹ With the launch of Al-Jazeera in 1996, Al-Arabiya in 2003, BBC Arabic in 2008, and Al-Hurra (funded by the American congress) in 2004, news has become an integral component of the Arabic media consumption habits.

issues allowed for a form of connectedness that manifested itself in the continuous exchange of Arabic slang terms, symbols, and vocabulary written in an Arabic-for-internet language (Arabizi/Franco-Arabic).²¹⁰ Internet languages were confined to the boundaries of the virtual world and serving its emerging youth culture. Together, Arabizi and the incorporation of the vernacular Arabic spoken by the lower-class urban youth, popularized in cultural productions, influenced deliberation on social networks and the lingo deployed in comics.

In his book “*Arabités Numériques*,” Yves Gonzalez-Quijano explores the horizontal nature of the growing conversational and contestational spirit among Arab digital youth generations before 2011. Despite emphasizing the historicity of each Arab society and replacing the monolithic concept of 'Arabism' with 'Arabi-ties' (*Arabités*), Gonzalez-Quijano underscores that the cultural dimension of the Arab Spring existed both before and beyond its political setbacks and ensuing frustrations:

“The new digital technologies inform a new Arab world that is not reduced to political affirmation alone. In the negative, we could say that it is a substitute homeland, just like the criticisms made of a youth that locks itself into its social networks to escape the impasses of its present. In the affirmative, it will be said that the uprisings in the Arab world have shown, despite electoral defeats and the difficulties of establishing a new political order, the hope that these new digital ‘arabities’ bring with them. Indeed, the plural is inescapable, first because these are phenomena in gestation, which are coming together within the same regional dynamic, but in a variety of evidential forms. But also, because these ‘arabities’ do not fit into a single type established as a norm; in place of the “vertical” model that carried political Arabism a century earlier, today we observe a mass of “horizontal” circulations, in waves of multiple propositions that are exchanged within the “society in conversation”.²¹¹

²¹⁰ “Arabic chat alphabets, including Arabizi (عَرَبِيّزِي, Arabīzī), Franco-Arabic (franco-arabe), Arabish, and Mu'arrab (مُعَرَّب), refers to informal Arabic dialects in which Arabic script is transcribed into a combination of Latin script and numbers. Arabizi also established the use of dialectal Arabic, the familiar language of communication par excellence, in the written form. Written Arabic was, until then, largely reserved for so-called literary or classical Arabic; dialectal Arabic was considered a minor and vulgar language, even if some artists already used it in theater, poetry, and music.” Barkoudah, Joumana. “Qu’est-Ce Que l’easy Arabic Ou Arabizi ?” Vous avez dit arabe ? *Un Webdoc de l’Institut du Monde Arabe*, n.d. <https://vous-avez-dit-arabe.webdoc.imarabe.org/langue-ecriture/l-evolution-de-la-langue-arabe/easy-arabic-ou-arabizi> .

²¹¹ Gonzalez-Quijano. “Les origines numériques des soulèvements arabes.” In *Arabités numériques : Le printemps du web arabe*, 176.

Anastasia Denisova points out the latent capacity²¹² of the digital medium to enhance political mobilization in places where people refrain from politics out of fear of persecution. Digital activism that provides information and connections sensitizes a broader population in an implicit political education through networks of contacts, newsfeeds, exposure to different political ideologies, and observation of political and social debates. Digital platforms empower mediated dissidence with the cover of anonymity or a curated digital identity that adds to their penetrability and to the visibility of political deliberation online. Even depoliticized strata can achieve a minimal political awareness that prepares them to engage in political mobilization when the situation allows for a “political opportunity”²¹³ or when the political intersects with issues of personal interest.

A political opportunity is defined by the limitations of its political environment and by a moment of vulnerability that challenges the current political system. In the mid-2000s, relative political pluralism and divisions between Mubarak-regime elites allowed for forms of mind-bombing activism through internet culture. Denisova uses the term “tactical media” to refer to this digital window that permits for the cultivation of relationships among like-minded networks²¹⁴ and for the propagation of an “insurgent consciousness:”

“Tactical media activists interrupt the mainstream discourse, borrow elements of mass culture and traditional media and reconstruct them in a new meaningful form to criticize the dominant political and social order.²¹⁵ Tactical media aim to combine many channels to create a personalised media network and guarantee wide media presence of the alternative ideas.”²¹⁶

Yves Gonzalez-Quijano further identifies the mechanism by which new web 2.0 technologies offer ‘liberating’ dissident activism a space to operate in three domains: mobilization,

²¹² Denisova, “Before Memes: Tactical Media, Humor, and Affective Engagement with Politics Online,” 16.

²¹³ Kitschelt, HP. “Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies.” *British Journal of Political Science* 16/1 (1986):57-85.

²¹⁴ Lievrouw, Leah A. *Alternative and Activist New Media: Digital Media and Society*. Cambridge,: Polity Press, 2011.

²¹⁵ “Garcia & Lovink, ABC of Tactical Media,” n.d., http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors2/garcia-lovinktext.html .

²¹⁶ Denisova, “Before Memes: Tactical Media, Humor, and Affective Engagement with Politics Online,” 18.

coordination, and documentation. The interoperability between social media applications facilitates organization through anonymous accounts. Anonymity eases the call for collective action and its live coverage.²¹⁷ Creating a space for expression and gathering could be easily followed by coordinating collective activities. In the case of repressive measures, live coverage delivers a narrative that spreads across local and international media, which in turn renders repression and violence a Janus-faced weapon for political regimes – costly and sometimes suggestive of the early success of collective protests.

New media activism and its broad thematization approach succeeded temporarily in concealing the antagonisms between the cacophonous constituencies of the protest movement. Young middle-class generations, empowered by the new media’s networking potential, marketed a globalized version of activism that claimed a sort of autonomy and self-distinction from traditional social and political camps. However, the essentialist identitarian conflicts that formulated and determined social dynamics in the modern history of the country after 1952 manifested themselves as deeper and core influences that shaped the uprising, its fate, and its later consequences. Shortly after Mubarak’s resignation, notions of secularism, the role of religion in governance, and nationalist identification became more conflicting.

Based on this assumption, it is possible to trace an analogy between the new media that harbored the budding youth protests and the conflictual nature of interaction between the groups involved within the revolutionary movement. In his book “Martyrs and Tricksters”, the cultural studies academic Walter Armbrust²¹⁸ depicted the revolution as a “spatialized formulation of liminality.”²¹⁹ Within this space, revolutionary factions and mediated dissident discourses capitalized on reinforcing collective (thematized) narratives on resistance to an autocratic regime, and operated through “performative idioms” and “frames of revolution” in a “liminal space,” as

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹⁸ Armbrust. *Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution*.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

postulated Armbrust:²²⁰ “The liminal space within the frames is where actors are free to improvise; yet the space itself is also heterotopic like the stage or the screen.”²²¹

Armbrust deploys the studies of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson²²² and the social scientist Bjørn Thomassen’s conception of “schismogenesis”²²³ to analyze the cascade of events leading to the fragmentation of the different elements of the popular uprising. Schismogenesis in times of political revolution, as explained by Thomassen, “is a process that is particularly prone to unfold in liminal moments, and that it can, under given circumstances, establish itself as a lasting form.”²²⁴

Armbrust evokes the term as he delineates the cultural contact between groups engaged in the liminal space of the revolution since 2011 until the defining moment of the excommunication of the Muslim Brotherhood after the violent evacuation of Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya square sit-in.

²²⁰ Armbrust. “Revolution as a Liminal Crisis,” 1.

²²¹ Armbrust. “Revolution as a Liminal Crisis,” 54-55.

²²² “The concept of schismogenesis was developed by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson in the 1930s, to account for certain forms of social behavior between groups among the Iatmul people of the Sepik River. Bateson first published the concept in 1935 but elaborated on schismogenesis in his classic 1936 ethnography *Naven: A Survey of the Problems suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe drawn from Three Points of View*, reissued with a new Epilogue in 1958.”

“Schismogenesis.” In *Encyclopedia.Pub*, 2022. <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/37346> .

²²³ “Gregory Bateson was a biologist by training (his father William Bateson invented the term ‘genetics’). He understood the Iatmul village as a fragile ecology, a ‘dynamic equilibrium’ (a term he borrowed from chemistry and coined for anthropology). Schismogenesis was a generative principle in this cultural ecology, but, unrestrained, it would destroy it too. He delineated two forms of schismogenesis: symmetrical – where the parties reacted with equivalent intensity to each other’s sallies –and complementary – where increasingly active display was met with an increasingly passive response.”

Wardle, Huon Oliver Bliase. “Schismogenesis in a Belfast urinal.” *Anthropology Today* 17/3 (2001): 24-25.

²²⁴ Thomassen, Bjørn. “Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54/3 (2012): 679–706. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23274538> .

Armbrust denotes that “it would take an act of schismogenesis- the normalizing of what had previously been considered unthinkable- to bring violence past a point of no return.”²²⁵ He further describes the counterinsurgency strategies deployed against the Brotherhood “through defining a permanent opponent who can never *defeat us*”²²⁶ as a schismogenetic mechanism to systematize violence “that might in “normal” conditions be seen as monstrous or simply impossible.”²²⁷

The acts of schismogenesis, according to Armbrust, involve constructing permanent opponents and producing “a rhetoric neatly mirrored by those who have been labeled as outside the scope of social recognition.”²²⁸ The political postrevolutionary dynamics convey, to a large extent, an enduring schismogenesis that was inherent in the constituency of the protest movement and predated, in my opinion, the excommunication of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013.

The overlap between new media activism, with its spreadability and participatory logic, and the protests of heterogenous elements, energized the political mobilization. The revolutionary discourse imbued with themes of reverie could not overcome the fragmented constituencies of social players. Thematization contributed to the assemblage of scattered groups, empowered their mobility, and shaped their online revolutionary slogans. However, concepts of democracy, justice and freedom, which were forged into themes in the online sphere, hardly materialized in political strategies during the mob uprising, its trajectory, and its political negotiations.

Clashes between conflicting groups culminated in a positive feedback dynamic operating by symmetrical mechanisms, a form of schismogenesis described by Bateson:

“We shall see that there is a likelihood, if boasting is the reply to boasting, that each group will drive the other into excessive emphasis of the pattern, a process which if not re-strained can only lead to more and more extreme rivalry and ultimately to hostility and the breakdown of the whole system.”²²⁹

²²⁵ Armbrust. “The Disputed Grievability of Sally Zahran,” 98.

²²⁶ Armbrust. “A New Normal? The Iron Fist and the False Promise,” 224.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ Bateson, Gregory. “199. Culture Contact and Schismogenesis.” *Man* 35 (1935): 178–83.

Armbrust, from his side, implied that enshrining violence in a new and more virulent way after security forces' intervention against the opponents, then under the Sisi regime, gradually produced the complementary form of schismogenesis:

“The relationship between the state’s violence and those who might want to oppose it became increasingly complementary (the alternative form of schismogenesis in Bateson’s original formation), in which the state’s active prosecution of violence has been met by a passive response. This schismogenesis, unless it is restrained, leads to a progressive unilateral distortion of personalities of the members of both groups, which results in mutual hostility between them and must [also] end in the breakdown of the system. (Bateson 1935, 181).”²³⁰

Positive feedback loops progressively amplified violent actions, disorder, and entropy. The collapse of the fragile assembly of oppositional forces meant that political mobilization failed to break free of entrenched polarization. Yet, it rendered more urgent the identification of social divisions, the construction of an alternative scheme of social and political tendencies, and deemphasizing homogeneity. Asserting differences and social distinctions became features of the new phase of cultural contestation that followed the collapse of a unified connectedness after 2013. Rewriting the postrevolutionary narrative through comics became part of processing the disintegration of political camps during this time of political upheaval.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2789408> .

²³⁰ Armbrust. “A New Normal? The Iron Fist and the False Promise,” 225.

2. The Anti-Leftist Trend

“There was no real possibility or a serious revolutionary thought, within the top of the state apparatus or the civil society, to destroy the ruling class. No relevant party in the political field called for a civil war. Reform, middle solution between the revolution and the counterrevolution, was the horizon of all the conflicts; whether the victories of the revolutionary squares (like pushing for Mubarak’s trial) or their defeats (like moving on to elections before a process of transitional justice and fight against corruption). Inaugurating a new system based on electoral legitimacy was the middle solution. In the light of the organizational polarization of both camps, and their ideological fragmentation, this result does not seem unexpected.”²³¹

As in offline societies, people online prefer to associate with like-minded individuals, with those of a similar class, race, gender, and status, instead of seeking alternative views and communities outside of their conventional world. Echo chambers are prevalent in social life – and the digital extension of social practice makes little difference, as explains the legal scholar Cass Sunstein.²³²

“We can sharpen our understanding here if we attend to the phenomenon of group polarization. This phenomenon raises serious questions about any system in which individuals and groups make diverse choices, and many people end up in echo chambers of their own design. On the Internet, polarization is a real phenomenon; we might even call it cyberpolarization.”²³³

The online culture of contestation that preceded the uprising in 2011 formulated the heterogenous consistency of an active cultural world wherein a diversity of opinions is broadly tolerated. Yet, this contestational culture became a source of serious conflict during politically challenging times. This contradiction, the cultural versus the political, was shockingly obvious during years of successive cataclysms after Mubarak’s fall.

²³¹ Yūnus. “The Legacy of Delegation,” 306.

يونس. " ملحق 1 : شرعية التفويض". البحث عن خلاص: أزمة الدولة والإسلام والحدائثة في مصر.

²³² Sunstein, Cass R. *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.

²³³ Sunstein. “Polarization and Cybercascades.” In *Republic.com 2.0*, 60.

Meanwhile, the advancing “liminal void”²³⁴ was populated by the fragmented components of the revolutionary or counter-revolutionary camps. The continuous dynamic of contestation and disruption that shaped the cultural world on social media, infusing it with the courage to transgress social taboos and to question the de-facto social contract, was an impediment to political progress during the revolutionary mayhem. The horizontal, leaderless, and youthful social movements, which were based on individual affirmation, aimed at engaging with the public but failed to support a consensual constituency in different phases of political negotiations.

The sociologist Dominique Cardon further highlights the paradox of “sociological/cultural versus political” as he reflects on the cyberutopians’ encounter with the “realistic” and the “pragmatic.” In his view, while sociocultural engagement online affirms individual autonomy, it dismisses the representational value of the collective:

“The spirit of the Internet joins two visions: valuing the autonomy of individuals and rejecting collective constraints and anything that could hinder freedom and individual interests. It also implies a strong desire for individual self-organization (hence the mistrust towards institutions and the State, and towards representation) and a concern for sharing and the collective. The originality of Google (or, to a lesser extent, Facebook) is that it has been able to combine these two ideological roots: it has been able to take advantage of the creativity shown by Internet users by weaving links on the web and, in return, it has been able to provide them with a tool they cannot do without, while at the same time generating huge profits on its side.”²³⁵

The youth protest movements combined the opposing features that Cardon elaborates on – the mistrust towards institutions and old political parties/activists and the preference for horizontal and “leaderless” models of communication. In the Egyptian context, the virtual medium that established horizontal connections among young audiences precipitated the sense of effectivity and impact that further isolated these groups from grassroots knowledge and contacts. The horizontal and leaderless mobilizations “demonstrated that their desire to differentiate themselves from older generations of activists – notably due to their inaction – played a fundamental role in

²³⁴ Armbrust. “Scripting a Massacre,” 158.

²³⁵ Cardon, Dominique, and Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis. “La Démocratie Internet : Entretien Avec Dominique Cardon.” *Transversalités* 123/3 (2012): 65–73. <https://doi.org/10.3917/trans.123.0065> .

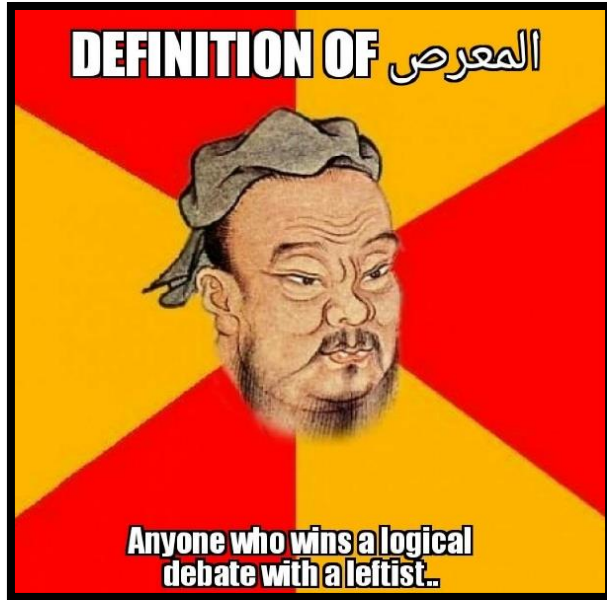
the genesis and crystallization of the young activist generation.”²³⁶ The obsession with crafting an unprecedented model to overcome the stagnation, repression, and inactivity dominating the Egyptian political domain ended up overwhelming youth movements.

The social polarization did not stop at the initial division between supporters of the current trajectory/regime and the opposing “prodemocracy” camp tied to the revolution and its principles. Left-right debates engendered new subcommunities that took on broad revisions of chapters of Egyptian history. Patriarchy, Islamism, secularism, nationalism, and gender were the main themes that preoccupied daily trends and tactical media activity, including in the memesphere. Amidst the postrevolutionary clashes, different political camps went on an endless cycle of denying blame for the revolution’s failure and exchanging accusations of endangering the stability of the country. The common statements of different camps were typified in internet memes as part of the online cultural wars that infiltrated social networks.

Al-thawragiyya became the name for cyberutopian militants, their networks of partisans and followers (probably of leftist affiliations), and the defeated supporters of the revolution. Their absolutist and self-righteous attitude became a theme of mockery in internet comics after the rising alt-right subculture invaded Egyptian internet communities after 2013 and enjoyed increasing influence post-2016 upon the election of American president Donald Trump.

As shown in Figures 21 and 22, the deployment of accusations of *al-ta’rīṣ* (the hypocrisy and pimping) increased as schismogenetic dynamics infiltrated the revolutionary bloc and initiated the fragmentation of its constituent groups. Revisiting the near past, and especially the collaboration of some revolutionary factions with the Muslim Brotherhood in the preparatory phase before 2011, destabilized these groups and changed their calculations.

²³⁶ Hassabo, Chaymaa. « La stabilité du régime de Moubarak à l’épreuve d’une situation de succession prolongée : les limites de la consolidation autoritaire. » Ph.D diss, (Grenoble, France : Institut d’études politiques, 2012).



*Figure 21²³⁷

The comic uses the meme template macro known as “Wise Confucius²³⁸ (also known as ‘Confucius Says’).” It is an advice image macro series of meme templates that feature what, at first glance, appears to be a sage piece of advice in the top text, while the bottom text reveals that it was the set-up for a pun.

Top text: “Definition of *al-mi`arraṣ* (the hypocrite/the pimp)”

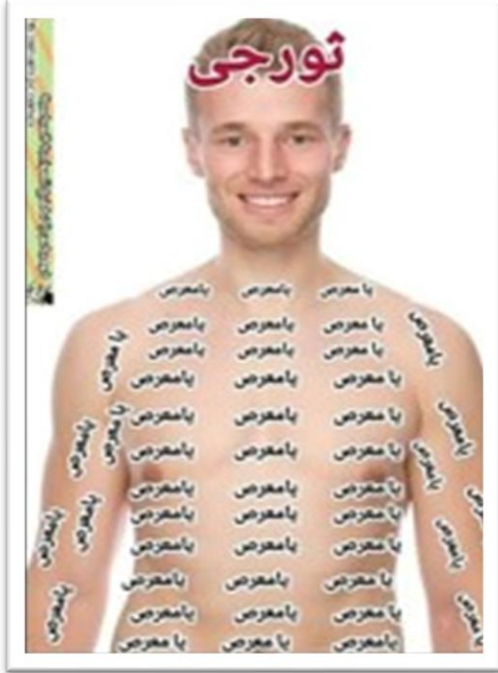
Bottom text: “Anyone who wins a logical debate with a leftist...”

This revisionist perspective of the revolution morphed into self-flagellation for some groups and into a fetishistic narrative of victimhood for others. The narrative of victimhood later became a justification for launching digital attacks against critics of the revolution and its aftermath, especially after the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and their betrayal of previous promises. The accusation of *al-ta`rīṣ* became prevalent among groups that defended a revolutionary purity and helped normalize the moral assassination of their critics through electronic campaigns during the years 2013-2014.

The association of the revolutionary camp with leftist culture could be expected due to the fact that, for decades, Egyptian leftist currents have made up the major protest base in Egypt. For the average Egyptian citizen, organizing demonstrations and going out to protest in the streets was traditionally a leftist activity. In the eyes of those that began perceiving the revolutionaries as a disruptive force, the ideals of *al-thawragiyya* and those of the leftists were two sides of the same coin. At the same time, these groups, who opposed revolutionary chaos, increased their demands for stability after the election of Sisi.

²³⁷ “ميمز لا تخضع للصوابية السياسية/الصفحة الجديدة” Facebook, n.d. Published on Facebook page : “*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*” on 5 March 2019. Founded in 2013 and hacked in 2021. The page administrator created an alternative page on 4 January 2021. <https://cutt.ly/JcNEUHK> .

²³⁸ Wernette, Brian. “Wise Confucius.” *Know Your Meme*, April 30, 2010. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wise-confucius> .



*Figure 22

Top text: *Thawragī* (a revolutionary guy).

“*Ya m’araṣ*” (you pimp) is written all over the body. This term was frequently used by *al-thawragiyya* against their critics during the online controversies that dogged the 30th of June Protests against Morsi in 2013 and Sisi’s election in 2014.

The meme in Figure 22 was published on the Facebook page, “Memes that do not submit to political correctness” (*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*), along with many other comics that referred to the exclusionary approach adopted by revolutionary groups post-2011. The page founder explains his change of position and the reasons behind his critique:

“I consider myself a son of the January revolution. I participated in the demonstrations in Cairo on January 25 and 28, and I kept believing in it until my enthusiasm began to cool down with the Muslim Brotherhood’s assumption of power. Although this was the decisive point, I realized that my efforts to make the revolution a success overshadowed my wishes for the whole country to succeed. But this moment had several premises, the most important of which was the quasi-fascist tone that dominated the leaders of the revolution’s speech, which allowed them to practice what they had previously criticized, such as terrorizing the opponents and throwing accusations of treason and hypocrisy at them, and the state of continuous ‘revolutionary adolescence’ they dwelled in, in addition to their complete detachment from the people.”²³⁹

²³⁹ The founder of the Facebook page “*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*” (Memes that do not submit to political correctness). Online interview with the author. 11 November 2019. He requested anonymity and the omission of details about his country of residency.

The “secular” opposition was redefined into left- and right-wing groups that delineated, amid their disputes, new identifiers drawing distinctions among them. The sarcastic portrayal of leftists as the main constituency of the revolutionary body allowed right-leaning communities and state supporters to direct their blame against a distinct political enemy. Additionally, these mocking depictions created a social “affect” that fears and attacks revolutionaries as elements of disruption and destabilization. In her book “*Les Émotions Contre La Démocratie*,” the sociologist Eva Illouz elaborates on the creation of collective affects based on social experiences:

“Emotions can turn into affects, less conscious ways of feeling. Affects are not only based on position or social experiences. They also permeate the spaces, images, and stories that circulate and connect society, generating public atmospheres, climates, so to speak, to which we react more or less consciously by assimilating the emotional associations created by words, events, stories, or symbols. An affect is a non-cognitive or precognitive level of experience. It is “deposited,” so to speak, in public and collective objects or events - public speeches, national holidays, military parades, state symbols and policies. It can also be designed from scratch. This symbolic and emotional material is the joint result of the conscious manipulations of powerful political actors and a kind of raw energy that circulates in civil society through social networks, personal interactions, and non-state organizations.”²⁴⁰



*Figure 23

Top image

A man labelled as “leftist” shoots the man labelled as “the people,” saying: “A dirty country, and its people are enslaved to *al-biyāda* (combat boots of army soldiers).”

Bottom image

The “leftist” says: “Capitalists deride poor people, and we should free ‘the people’ from them.”

²⁴⁰ Illouz, Eva. “Introduction.” In *Les émotions contre la démocratie*, 15..

The meme template is gathered under the theme “Give peace a chance”²⁴¹ in the meme-sharing platform “Imgflip.” The common theme between the meme templates is rejecting contradictory views, whether by neglecting others or by using violence to silence them.

The reiteration of the denigratory description of “the people” by *al-thawragiyya* as being “enslaved to combat boots” (signifying military rule) after 2013 is reminiscent of the Muslim Brotherhood’s description of “people who likes to be fucked” (Figure 16). In both cases, the critique focuses on the contradictory positions of political forces who claim to represent “the people” and then turn against “the people” when political outcomes contradict expectations. Despite the fact that it originates in the counterrevolutionary camp, the critique points out the populist propensities inherent in the foundation of these political currents.



*Figure 24

In the image, the mother playing with her child is labelled as “the Egyptian left.” Her spoiled child represents what the text describes as: “Government subsidies go to lazy unproductive public employees with wide buttocks.” On the other side, the little boy who is about to sink in the pool is labelled as “the national budget.”

The bottom text reads: “The public employee comes with his sustenance.”

Leftist currents also criticized the formation of online communities that supported capitalism and that argued that capitalist thought is an absent element from the Egyptian political equation. These pro-capitalist groups argued that the influence of leftism on public culture and the framework of oppositional currents impeded the

²⁴¹ Pontanal, Karl. “‘Give Peace a Chance’ Memes & Gifs.” Imgflip, n.d. <https://imgflip.com/tag/give+peace+a+chance> .

development of an advanced capitalist structure. In their view, leftist currents encouraged reliance on state capitalism under socialist slogans, an economic system that began during the era of Egyptian president Nasser (1956-1970). It should be noted that the structure of government subsidies has witnessed significant transformations since then, especially with the program of economic reform adopted by Mubarak during the 1990s.

And in spite of the capitalists' support for the existing government, they object to Sisi's delegation of major development projects to state or military companies. They insist that obstructing free economics deepens Egypt's economic predicament.

The content published on Facebook page "*Memes lā takhḍa' li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*" gave voice to these groups of anti-leftists. They can be considered a branch from *al-dawlagiyya* that preserved a critical approach towards economic policies and prioritized liberal economic policies over liberal political demands. Under the bleak political atmosphere that prevailed after Sisi implemented severe repressive measures, their position combined economic critique with acceptance of the new authoritarian order.

From their point of view, a free economic system is the step that should precede the demand for political and democratic freedoms. Liberal freedoms, in their perspective, come in response to the needs of various economic forces, which in turn arise with the development of a capitalist system.

The leftist and revolutionary currents usually responded to these critiques by drawing attention to the reluctance of these groups to discuss political prisoners and Sisi's harsh crackdown on public freedoms. The leftist criticism of this pro-capitalist/anti-leftist trend extends to accusations of hypocrisy and cowardice, highlighting the fact that these groups are afraid of criticizing authority and tend to divert criticism away from the regime to the weaker pro-revolutionary party, which is facing persecution.



*Figure 25

Top image

-Actor Aḥmad Ḥilmī (to the right) is labelled as “The working class.”

- Actor Muḥammad Sa’d (al-*limbī*) (middle) is labelled as “The Egyptian communists.”

- Actor ‘Alā’ Waliy al-Dīn (to the left) is labelled as “The petit bourgeois.”

Bottom Image

“Egyptian communists” push the “working class” away, saying: "You only exist on the program; we are organizations of intellectuals."

The film frames are taken from the film *Al-Nāzir* (The School

Principal/The Beholder, 2000),²⁴² starring the late comedian ‘Alā’ Waliy al-Dīn. The film featured the character of *al-imbī* (performed by the actor Muḥammad Sa’d), who was established as a comic prototype of poor slum dwellers in Cairo. *Al-imbī*’s character appeared in cinematic blockbusters in 2002 and 2003, a historic success that crystallized this character in the imaginary of the young generations of the first decade of the new millennium. In the scene in Figure 25,²⁴³ *al-imbī*’s naïve middle-class friends attend his wedding. The first is Ṣalāḥ (played by the comedian ‘Alā’ Waliy al-Dīn), a school principal’s son who inherits a private school after his father passed away, and the second is ‘Āṭif (played by the comedian Aḥmad Ḥilmī), Ṣalāḥ’s friend and assistant. The two men are subordinate to the leadership of the slum’s strongman, who is supposed to teach them how to remain tough and macho in the face of the crises they face while running the school

²⁴² “فيلم - الناظر - 2000 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” eCinema.com, 2000. <https://elcinema.com/work/1001525/>.

²⁴³ Rotana Cinema. “مشهد فرح اللمبي من فيلم الناظر ضحك متواصل من علاء ولي الدين لا يفوتك” YouTube, May 9, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAzv4QHHeA8>.

business. The power relations between the strongman, the school owner, and his assistant are reflected respectively in the relations in the meme between the “Egyptian communists” (the leader), “the petit bourgeois” (the owner), and the “working class” (the worker).

The accusation of elitism at the expense of the working classes was originally a classic leftist critique leveled against center-left or right-wing governments. However, in the meme-recycling culture, it is difficult to trace the afterlife of a produced meme, as it might circulate out of the realm of its referential origin. Diverging from its primary connotation, this meme could be shared on right-leaning pages to signify the hypocrisy of leftist currents and the gap between their declared slogans and their real-life performance. Comics, in that case, serve as puzzle pieces, gathered from different origins and mixed to produce a new hybrid.

Critics of the revolutionary bloc gradually increased with the change of the political ecosystem after 2013 and the conflict over the postrevolutionary narrative. In the aftermath of the revolution, politically engaged Egyptians began deconstructing the concept of mediated dissidence and reevaluating the political effectiveness of protest movements. This process acquired a central place in post-revolutionary narratives, especially with the rise of online communities of state supporters.

The cultural wars that dominated the social networks were hugely influenced by the changes introduced to the sociopolitical and media spheres after Sisi’s election. The resurgence of the nationalist and populist rhetoric under Sisi was preceded by a prolonged period of confusion, wherein precarity and disorientation dominated over hope. Multiple factors sensitized large sectors of the population against political protests – the fragmentation of social actors and political groups, the ascension of Islamists and their failed leadership as an intermediate force between the revolutionaries and the old regime, the political implosion of neighboring Arab countries, and Egypt’s economic deterioration. These transformations paved the way for a counterrevolutionary discourse that welcomed the stabilizing power of the state as represented by a military leader:

“Whether or not the rise of al-Sisi regime really marked the end of the revolution remained a matter of debate for some time. This is not because opposition to his regime continued (though it did among some Islamists and, less openly, in various non-Islamist sectors of society), but because



in some ways al-Sisi himself remained in a liminal position, halfway between SCAF and the civilian state.”²⁴⁴

Figures 26 and 27, published on Facebook page “*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya,*” represent the administrator’s attitude in the first years of Sisi’s rule. The themes addressed in both comics had an aggregative power that consolidated the state supporters’ current or “the stability alliance,” that ran in parallel to hard core nationalist subcommunities adopting more extreme positions.

*Figure 26

A reworked cartoon using the template of the “Alice in Wonderland joke,”²⁴⁵ a famous meme trend inspired by the absurdist webcomic “poorly drawn lines.”²⁴⁶

In a sequence of four parts, the comic starts with Alice (representing Egyptians at large) tricked by the White Rabbit (representing Egyptian communists) into the bear’s den (representing the Muslim Brotherhood).

The fourth image usually reveals that the so-called “Wonderland” is a trap.

In the Egyptian version, “Wonderland” is replaced by “Freedom,” which represents a false dream used to lure Egyptians into political repression. The bear hands a dollar to the White Rabbit as a sign of the covert deal between both parties.

In the Egyptian reproduction, the White Rabbit symbolized the leftist revolutionary camp, who called on Alice, symbolizing the Egyptian people, in 2011, to follow him through the tunnel leading to freedom. The meme exemplified the vision of the surging *al-dawlagiyya* groups after

²⁴⁴ Armbrust. “Revolution as Liminal Crisis,” 11.

²⁴⁵ DeadWhale. “Alice in Wonderland Comics.” / Funny pictures & best jokes: comics, images, video, humor, gif animation - i lol’d, January 30, 2013. <http://joyreactor.com/post/642543> .

²⁴⁶ Farazmand, Reza. Poorly Drawn Lines, n.d. <https://poorlydrawnlines.com/> .

2013. According to the narrative propagated in official media, the revolutionary leftists were misguided by the Muslim Brotherhood, which deployed pro-freedom slogans and manipulated leftist activists (usually portrayed as imbecilic sheep) into campaigning in their favor. In the postrevolutionary cultural wars, the coordination between the leftist currents and the Muslim Brotherhood became a common belief, even among the generations that witnessed the revolution firsthand.²⁴⁷



*Figure 27

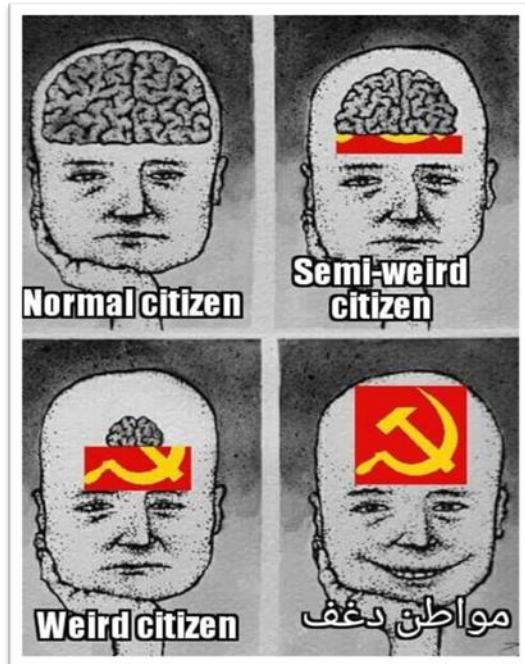
A photoshopped image shows the actress Marlene Dietrich passionately kissing an American soldier as he arrives home from World War II. It was first published in “Life” Magazine with the caption: “While soldiers hold her up by her famous legs, Marlene Dietrich is kissed by a home-coming GI.”²⁴⁸

The Egyptian comic creator pasted the communist and the Egyptian flags on the soldiers (communists) holding the actress’s legs (Egypt), as if the left activists (referenced by the communist flag) were uplifting the ‘country’ to kiss the soldier (the Muslim Brotherhood), who is in turn propped up by another soldier (the Turkish state). The distributed symbols portrayed, in the view of the meme creator, how the leftist movements helped the Muslim Brotherhood mobilize for the ‘January Revolution’ (*thawrat yanāyir*, written in Arabic script), which served the common interests of Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ “ميمز لا تخضع للصوابية السياسية/الصفحة الجديدة” Facebook, December 31, 2018.

²⁴⁸ “Actress Marlene Dietrich Kisses a Soldier Returning Home from War, 1945.” Rare Historical Photos, November 25, 2021. <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/marlene-dietrich-kissing-soldier-1945/>.

²⁴⁹ “ميمز لا تخضع للصوابية السياسية/الصفحة الجديدة” Facebook, January 28, 2019.



*Figure 28

The meme shows a “normal citizen” gradually falling under the complete influence of leftist discourse (symbolized by the communist flag). In the bottom right image, the term “*muwāṭin dughuff*” (“a useful idiot”)²⁵⁰ suggests that the citizen is being controlled by leftist ideology, which is portrayed as a type of brainwashing that transforms a “normal citizen” into a “weird citizen” and then into a “useful idiot.”

Al-muwāṭin al-dughuff (“the useful idiot”) is one of the terms that the Facebook page “*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*” publicized on a broad scale after providing an Egyptian colloquial Arabic translation of the English term.

The groups attacking January activists (*al-thawragiyya*) employed the critiques and meme themes adopted by the rising alt-right groups in the USA. They also borrowed elements from the critics of the alliances between Islamist organizations and leftist political parties in some European countries (coined under the nomenclature Islamo-leftism in right-wing media).

The prototype “useful idiot” was borrowed from international meme culture. It synonymized the person serving, even in good faith, purposes that contradict his/her own aspirations. A “useful idiot” is only useful, in the end, to his adversaries. A contemporary example of a similar idea is “the Western left-wing intellectual manipulated by the Soviet regime to praise

²⁵⁰ “Useful idiot (pejorative): A person, often perceived as naive, who, whether or not they are aware of it, serves the interests of a political faction, influential group, hostile government, terrorist movement, etc., by promoting and disseminating their ideas or propaganda at the expense of one's own interests.”

“LLF La Langue Française.” La langue française, n.d.

<https://www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition/idiot-utile> .

its merits (or at least to silence its crimes).”²⁵¹ Recently, this concept has resurged in memes on alt-right platforms to describe those serving the leftist/liberal political factions’ economic and political interests.²⁵²

The founder of the Facebook page “Memes that do not submit to political correctness” (*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*) clarifies his position towards what he perceives as a continuous alliance between Islamists and leftist currents in modern history of Egypt:

“The main idea of the page was to create a hole, even a small one, in the thick wall of our society’s awareness against these virtue signalling politically correct trends and their symbols, and try to demonstrate the extent of their recklessness dissimulated by constantly blackmailing people’s feelings, and always making them feel morally short (“inevitably they are better than me because they do not say nigger, inevitably they are better than me because they respect women, inevitably they are better than me because they do not slaughter animals....etc.”). And although this incoherence may seem clear to everyone (including those who are convinced of these ideas themselves), everyone’s silence on the growth of this phenomenon is what prompted the page to appear, in addition to the impact of this direct trend on our miserable region with crude leniency with terrorism and considering it a point of view that may prove right or wrong, and may even be supported sometimes.”²⁵³

He further defines where he stands between *al-kollagiyya* and *al-dawlagiyya* as fashioned by the Sisi regime:

“*Al-Kullagī* is a general description of that person who opposes for no goal other than opposition, evading any rational discussion with impenetrable recycled slogans and arguments, and deploying preserved clichés to blackmail any holder of a different opinion. There is a common ploy used by the left, which is attributing popularly reprehensible actions to smaller leftist factions to displace the blame away from the mother movement. Just as the Muslim Brotherhood does with ISIS, the left does with *al-’ishtirākiyyūn al-thawriyyūn* (the Egyptian movement of Revolutionary

²⁵¹ Montvalon, Jean-Baptiste de. “La seconde jeunesse des idiots utiles.” *Le Monde.fr*, May 15, 2019. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/05/15/la-seconde-jeunesse-des-idiots-utiles_5462233_3232.html

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ The founder of the Facebook page “*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al- ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*” (Memes that do not submit to political correctness). Online interview with the author. 11 November 2019.

Socialists) movement, used as a peg on which leftists hang their alliance with the Islamists.”²⁵⁴



*Figure 29

The meme shows the four options offered by the soda machine:

“Successful previous experiences.”

“The capitalist solution.”

“The leftist solution.”

“The Islamist solution.”

In the comic, *muwāṭin dughuff* (a useful idiot) chooses a mix of the leftist solution and the Islamist solution. The bottom text reads: “In-kind contributions for all, taxes only for rich people, confiscation of private property, governmental support of unproductive labor, forbidding birth control, preserving a bureaucracy of six million public employees, increasing salaries as inflation rises.”

The meme published on the page “*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*” details the point of view of the page moderator and highlights features of conventional economic policies in Egypt. The Islamist and leftist hegemonic mixture appropriated by the state administration, in his view, influences citizens’ preferences and perpetuates a cycle of economic failure. The meme assumes that the oppositional currents’ propositions match the state policies to a large extent. In this interpretation, the dominant hybrid is integrated within both the governmental and oppositional logic.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Part Two: Religion

Chapter I: The Middle-Class Counterpublic: The Split between Religiosity and Nationalism

“There is nothing called a religious leadership, because, supposedly, the president of a state is responsible for everything therein, even its religion. Even its religion. That is why when I spoke in the very beginning, when I was presenting myself to the people I said: Check who I am, and know who I am, because you are going to choose. I am responsible for the values, principles, morals, and religion.”²⁵⁵

General Sisi, presidential candidate, 11 May 2014.

1. Introduction

The contestation of religious symbols emerged as a digital media phenomenon under President Mohamed Morsi’s rule (30 June 2012 to 3 July 2013), in reaction to the enlarging divide between the secular/modernist and Islamist camps that had emerged even before his election. First, this contestation focused on the hypocrisy of the Brotherhood and Salafists, *Rifāq al-Mīdān* (Companions in Tahrir square, *Maydān al-Taḥrīr*, referred to in colloquial Arabic as *Mīdān*), who, in the seculars’ terms, betrayed the democratic ambitions and forged a toxic alliance to hijack the revolution (the militant tone deployed by the secular camps is evident in the term ‘betrayal’).²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ “بصراحة.. مع عبد الفتاح السيسي الجزء الأول”. سكاى نيوز عربية 2014، 11 مايو. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29PNbUbJzII&t=2283s> . (38.00).

²⁵⁶ “Politically, the Brotherhood misread the situation. It moved toward political domination too quickly, making a series of tactical mistakes in the process. It failed to either appease or successfully confront institutional power bases, and, believing its electoral victory to be an irreversible popular mandate, it was reluctant to make the concessions necessary to avoid alienating crucial secular elites. The Brotherhood waged an unwinnable battle, driven more by ideological zeal and delusions of grandeur than by a realistic assessment of the political environment.

Ideologically, the Brotherhood was shallow and opportunistic. It proved too willing to sacrifice elements of its ideology for short-term political victories. Furthermore, fundamentally antidemocratic components of Brotherhood dogma and the disconnect between the group’s professed ideology and the policy positions it assumed highlighted its incompatibility with modern democratic politics.”

El-Sherif, Ashraf. “The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s Failures,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, n.d., 2014. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/07/01/egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-s-failures-pub-56046> .

Later, particularly when Morsi came to office, part of the blame fell on the naivety of the revolutionaries who trusted that the Islamists would engage in a democratic transition process and afford a margin of compromise to prioritize coexistence and social cohesion. This critique started to transform after June 2013 into ferocious accusations of complicity with Islamists leveled against certain revolutionary activists, secular, and leftist parties. The unfolding of regional alliances and the spread of narratives on the pre-revolution scenarios, highlighting the Turkish-Qatari-Brotherhood axis, redefined political positions and so affected social stances. The Muslim Brotherhood organization (referred to in Arabic as *al-Ikhwān*) was re-framed in the post-revolutionary narrative, via state-monopolized media and social networks, as a transnational project with regional and international extensions. The territorial nationalist proponents of Sisi brought the historical tensions between the Brotherhood and the successive ruling regimes to the forefront of online debates. The Sisi regime assigned its war against Muslim Brotherhood as a strategic priority and designated political Islam as an enemy of the state and an outgroup intent on disrupting national communal values.



*Figure 1

In the reworked cartoon, the slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood is symbolized as the fruit of the tree of “freedom of expression” (*ḥoriyyat al-ta‘bīr*) irrigated by the leftists (symbolized by the communist flag).²⁵⁷

The pejorative thematization of an imbalanced alliance between leftist currents and the Brotherhood became more prevalent after 2013. State media mobilization and the fragmentation

²⁵⁷ Published on the Facebook page: “Memes that do not submit to political correctness” (*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-seyāsiyya*). <https://cutt.ly/JcNEUHK>.

of secular camps created an antagonistic feeling towards the revolutionary uprising and serious divisions between support and opposition to Sisi's settlement after the excommunication of Muslim Brotherhood. The military takeover gained further affirmation as the move, backed by a huge popular mobilization, stopped a supposed Islamic revolution in the make.

The contribution of secular revolutionaries, leftist partisans, and activists to the rise of the Brotherhood to leadership of the protest movement became a dominant narrative. The multipartite social movements formed since 2005 against Mubarak were reviewed in the light of the revolution's outcome. The discriminatory and exclusionist performance of the Brotherhood, disclosed after 2011, become additional proof of credulity and collusion of the secular currents involved in these movements.

The rising neonationalism consolidated Sisi's symbolic power by capitalizing on the creation of a political enemy and by portraying the state and the army as entities independent of and uninvolved in political and class conflicts:

“Armed with this mandate, al-Sisi was able to position himself outside the socio-political conflict, styling himself not as a political actor like the other parties, but as a representative of the state in its war for survival against its enemies and the enemies of society—namely, the Muslim Brotherhood. This does not mean that the state and military actually stood outside the conflict, but rather that al-Sisi was able to successfully harness the symbolic power of this image and that of the military as the guardian and arbiter of competing parties. In fact, this conception of the army as the protector of democracy and the final arbiter of conflict would find a place in the Egyptian constitution with the amendments of 2019.”²⁵⁸

The internet memes spreading online (Figures 2 and 3) embodied this narrative and signaled the emergence of an active bloc of supporters of the state direction and discourse, embodied in its leader, who later acquired the nomenclature *al-dawlagiyya* (from the word *dawla* = state). Consolidating the rising regime's vision, and outlining its enemies, through digital warfare

²⁵⁸ Tonsy, Sara and Aly el-Raggal. “How Did Sisi Reproduce Authoritarianism in Egypt?” *Rowaq Arabi* 26/1 (2021): 47-63. <https://doi.org/10.53833/XLFM9551> .

shifted the function of internet memes from sarcastic caricaturization to taking sides. Many comics pages represented the battling political factions in the tripartite division that will insinuate itself in the heart of the social dialogue for the coming years – between *al-dawlagiyya*, *al-thawragiyya* (revolutionaries) and *al-Islāngiyya* (Islamists).

The allusion to the Iranian Revolution was repeatedly evoked before and after 2013, reflecting justified concerns amidst years of political upheaval. Fear about the fate of the revolution and suspicions towards the sectarian and exclusivist behavior of Islamist forces started early during the referendum on constitutional amendments in March 2011. In Iran, Islamists had the upper hand over the secular opposition thanks to their access to a vast network of mosques and religious institutions across the country and to the international mobilization platform granted to Khomeini. Unlike the secular groups forced underground by the Shah, the organized structures of the clergy enabled Khomeini and his followers to control the revolutionary narrative and coopt the revolution through a combination of insurgency and bloodshed.

And despite the fact that the two mobilizations had many different features, the relationship between Islamists and secular opposition was retained in the Egyptian counterrevolutionary narrative, in the version of *al-dawlagiyya*, as expressed the ironic meme in Figure 2, where the meme creator criticized the dominance of the leading Brotherhood figures on the “revolutionary forces’ decisions.”



*Figure 2

Top text: “When revolutionary forces make a successful revolution and start choosing someone to rule the country.”

Names on the cartoon figures:

“Khayrat al-Shāṭir”²⁵⁹

“Muḥammad Badī”

“Muḥammad Mursī”

Bottom text: “Allow us to introduce ourselves.”

The reformulation of the post-revolutionary narrative operated in continuation with the schismogenetic dynamics that dominated the revolutionary trajectory. Polarization and fragmentation of political camps, the authoritarian restoration, and the mediation of alternative narratives all contributed to a status of cognitive dissonance where conflating discourses promoted by various actors took iconographic forms.

Three successive years of political upheaval effectively undermined the mainstream media gatekeepers. Instead, a continuous reinvention of new positions started in the virtual medium, where traumatism and mutual rivalries surged within the constricted space of sociopolitical expression after 2013. In Figure 3, the meme portrayed the joined leftist and Islamist forces before the revolutionary movement as mere exploitation and political trickery deployed by the Brotherhood, that translated into a real loss of the leftist camp after 2011.

²⁵⁹ Khayrat al-Shāṭir is a well-known businessman with influence over the political and financial decisions of the Muslim Brotherhood. Muḥammad Badī occupies the highest position in and is the elected Supreme Guide of the organization (*al-murshid al-‘āmm*).



*Figure 3²⁶⁰

The popularization of the critique of Islamist-leftist alliance, and its thematization, created points of consensus and cohesion within the revisionist postrevolutionary camps, including the self-claimed *al-dawlagiyya*, who led a critical wave of retrospection. Later, some of these collectives became sympathizers with the rising alt-right subcultures online, especially after Donald Trump’s election in 2016. The revisionists drew on the commonalities between their views and the rising discourse on leftist- Islamist alliances, extending to Europe, to deepen the critique of liberal leftist views on Islamism.

After the failure of the Arab Spring uprisings, supporters of the authoritarian regimes and some independent critical intellectuals shared a negative view of Western anti-imperialist left’s accommodation of Islamist factions, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, as a viable democratic alternative for autocratic regimes. In their view, the Western anti-imperialistic left failed to acknowledge the intricacies and specificities of the regional conflicts and societies, as clarifies the Syrian intellectual Yāsīn Al-ḥāj Ṣālīḥ:

“Connecting our struggle to a great global conflict, the only real conflict in the world, which denies any autonomy to any of the social and political struggles taking place anywhere, and the anti-imperialists, especially those residing in the supposed imperialist centers, are best qualified to tell the truth about the struggles taking place anywhere. Those directly involved

²⁶⁰ Published on the Facebook page: “Memes that do not submit to political correctness” (*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-seyāsiyya*). <https://cutt.ly/JcNEUHK>.

in the conflict only know what is really going on with a barely partial and ‘unscientific’ knowledge.”²⁶¹

Re-fashioning the Muslim Brotherhood as an outgroup allowed styling the president and the army as sole guarantors of the stability of a state facing imminent collapse. These efforts helped Sisi to instrumentalize the state apparatus and manipulate nationalist sentiment, deploying an extensive anti-Brotherhood discourse:

“This nationalist discourse reinforced the resentment and demonization of al-Ikhwan, which was portrayed as an entity alien and hostile to the national fabric, seeking to dismantle the historical sense of Egyptian nationhood. The private and state-run media machine worked assiduously to demonize and de-Egyptianize the Brotherhood, further dehumanizing the group with a discourse that branded them as Kherfan (sheep).^{262,263}

However, the current social polarization and the resurgence of the nationalist wave in reaction to fears of precarity and state disintegration should be read along the recent history of Islamism in Egypt. Sisi inherited a middle-class counterpublic deeply influenced by the Islamist schools of *wasatiyya* (literally ‘middleness’) that dominated for successive decades before 2011. In other descriptions, *wasatiyya* is subordinated to the larger nomenclature “post-Islamism”

الحاج صالح، ياسين. “سورية واليسار الأنتي امبريالي الغربي”. الجمهورية. نت. 2017. ²⁶¹

Al-hāj Ṣāliḥ, Yāsīn. “Syria and the Western Anti-Imperialist Left.” *Aljumhuriya.net*. 2017.

<https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2017/02/24/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/> .

²⁶² *Kherfan* [*khīrfān*, plural of *kharūf*, sheep] has a double meaning. It both rhymes with *al-Ikhwān* (The Brotherhood) and alludes to its hierarchical principle of “Listening and Obedience.” This ethos preserves a secret and rigorous system of socialization and indoctrination into the ideology of the movement that was initially based on the writings and speeches of the founder Hassan El-Banna but expanded gradually to include the writings of Sayyid Qutb and Salafi references. The term *kherfan* was used against Ikhwan supporters during the street conflicts sparked by the presidential elections of 2012 to accuse them of blind obedience to any and all orders no matter how contradictory to the interests of the revolutionary movement.

²⁶³ Tonsy, el-Raggal. “How Did Sisi Reproduce Authoritarianism in Egypt?”

depicting the rise of broad currents of preachers, influencers and celebrities who targeted the youthful middle class as a potential audience and lever of societal change. The relationship between the Islamist political organizations (led by the Muslim Brotherhood) and post-Islamic currents shaped the Egyptian social sphere and its youngest strata since the 1990s.

In his account on the impact of Islamic cassette sermons publicized in Egypt during the 1970s,²⁶⁴ the anthropologist Charles Hirschkind identifies the notion of a counterpublic as embracing both the categories of political deliberation and ethical discipline at once:

“Although shaped in various ways by the structures and techniques of modern publicity, the form of Islamic public I discuss here exhibits a conceptual architecture that cuts across the modern distinctions between state and society and between public and private that are central to the public sphere as a normative institution of modern democratic polities. In their objects, styles of reasoning, and modes of historicity, the entwined deliberative and disciplinary practices that constitute this arena reflect the way Islamic notions of moral duty and practices of ethical cultivation have been mapped onto a national civic arena by Muslim reformists over the course of the last century. As mosques in Egypt over the last fifty years became the site for new kinds of social and political organization and expression, everyday practices of pious sociability gradually came to inhabit a new political terrain, one shaped both by the discourses of national citizenship and by emerging transnational forms of religious association.”²⁶⁵

From 2011 to 2013, the Egyptian middle-class audience of post-Islamism went through a deep turmoil, questioning and revisiting twenty years of infatuation with post-Islamist currents. To understand the different groups’ reactions after 2013, in the religious domain, we should begin by analyzing the social structure of this counterpublic, split and fragmented, during the political conflict.

²⁶⁴ Hirschkind. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

2. *Wasafiyya* and Post-Islamism: The Construct of the Pious Middle-Class

The term post-Islamism was first introduced by the sociologist Asef Bayat in 1996, as he described “the articulation of the remarkable social trends, political perspectives, and religious thought that post-Khomeini Iran had begun to witness.”²⁶⁶ However, the broader uptake of the term, for empirical and analytical purposes of the transformations of Islamism and militant Islamic movements, outside the Iranian context, resulted in its “poor conceptualization and misperception,”²⁶⁷ according to Bayat. In his book “Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn,”²⁶⁸ Bayat provided, in view of the different academic reactions to the term, his own definition:

“In my formulation, post-Islamism represents both a condition and a project, which may be embodied in a master (or multidimensional) movement. In the first place, it refers to political and social conditions where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism are exhausted, even among its once-ardent supporters. Islamists become aware of their system’s anomalies and inadequacies as they attempt to normalize and institutionalize their rule. Continuous trial and error makes the system susceptible to questions and criticisms. Eventually, pragmatic attempts to maintain the system reinforce abandoning its underlying principles. Islamism becomes compelled, both by its own internal contradictions and by societal pressure, to reinvent itself, but it does so at the cost of a qualitative shift. The tremendous transformation in religious and political discourse in Iran during the 1990s exemplifies this tendency.”²⁶⁹

The ethical model of Egyptian Islamism should be analyzed in light of how identity politics at the dawn of the twentieth century contributed to conflict within Egyptian nationalist movements. The eclectic doctrine carved by the Muslim Brotherhood was the fruit of conservative currents opposing the early modernist Nahda movement²⁷⁰ at the turn of the century. This philosophy was

²⁶⁶ Bayat, Asef. “1. Islam and Democracy: The Perverse Charm of an Irrelevant Question.” In “*Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*,” 10.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ Hill, Peter. “Revisiting the Intellectual Space of the Nahda (Eighteenth-Twentieth Centuries).” *Les Carnets De L’Ifpo*, n.d., <https://doi.org/10.58079/pvvn> .

similar to that of the “National Party” led by Turkish nationalist leader Muṣṭafā Kāmil and that of conservative Islamic reformists like Sheikhs Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida and Gamal al-Din al-Afghani, who formed an original offshoot of nascent Egyptian nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century. However, it was Hasan al-Banna [Ḥasan al-Bannā] who, in reaction to the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate and the predominance of the Wafd Party’s modernist bourgeoisie, established the organization of MB and directed its insinuation into the political domain. This constituted a more serious division between the “national” and the “religious,” culminating in conflicts over political power after 1952.

Since the reintegration of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian political system by President Sadat during the 1970s, Islamism as imagined by al-Banna and then Sayyid Qutb²⁷¹ heavily influenced the Egyptian middle-class ethos by emphasizing this national-religious divide.

²⁷¹ Sayed Qutb [Sayyid Qutb] (1906-1966) became the grand ideologue of modern-day Islamic radicalism after he spent years studying in the United States, which transformed his understanding of the Nahda modernity project that he had been attached to.

“In places like Stanford University, he conceived of the depth of the West’s misunderstanding of Islam and Arab culture, along with its different moral attitudes toward gender and sexuality. Qutb began to reflect on the extent to which the Nahda model of modernity was based on Western norms, especially models like Pharaonism that pervaded secular modernist currents. He reiterated that these models were not just foreign to Egypt’s autochthonous culture but were effectively a repudiation of Muslim values. Upon his return to Egypt, Qutb was greeted by young Muslim Brothers and quickly joined the organization. Later, he described the experience as one of rebirth. The loss of the assassinated Hasan al-Banna had deeply affected the Brotherhood, and Qutb was quickly promoted through the ranks to fill this power vacuum.

In 1952, Qutb was elected to the Brotherhood’s leadership council, became head of the organization’s public outreach mission, and was appointed editor in chief of the society’s newspaper “*Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn*.” He supported Nasser’s liquidation of secular political forces and labor movements, which Qutb considered to be Jahiliyya-based and Western-imported. He called for restoring the Islamic project of the state. When a member of the Brotherhood attempted to assassinate Nasser in Alexandria in 1954, the state pounced on the organization – its newspaper was closed, and Qutb, along with hundreds of others, was arrested, tortured, and sentenced to a lengthy prison term. Qutb would not emerge from Nasser’s prisons until 1964, during which time he had written five books, including his monumental exegesis of the Quran, “*Fī- ṣhād al-Qur’ān*” (In the Shade of the Qur’an), and another, more polemical book, *Ma’ālim fī al-ṭarīq* (Signposts Along the Road).”

Colla. “Pharaonism after Pharaonism: Mahfouz and Qutb.” In *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*, 260–61.

By that time, the state embraced the Brotherhood project to maximize its social control and then tolerated societal Islamization as part of its strategy of counterbalancing the Nasserite and secular political opposition. Under President Mubarak, nonviolent Islamism penetrated professional syndicates and civil institutions, capitalizing on piety discourses mediated through new technologies and an expanding network of autodidactic preachers and *wasatiyya* intellectuals.

The term *wasatiyya*, translated into English as “moderate,” referred to a new version of Islamist discourse and mobilization that gained momentum after 1995. By the end of the 1990s, the Brotherhood invested in the privatization of welfare through charity, including it within electoral and clientelist strategies in the formula known as “market Islam.”²⁷² A lexical conflation of *wasatiyya*, post-Islamism, new religiosity, and lite Islam dominated sociopolitical and cultural analyses of the reformulation of Islamism discourses twenty years before the Arab revolutions. The impact of the new religiosity backed by *wasatiyya* theology influenced Muslim societies locally and internationally, explains the scholar in contemporary Islam Karin Van Nieuwkerk, quoting the sociologist Asef Bayat:

“Bayat describes post-Islamism as a condition and a project. Among the social and political conditions that gave rise to post-Islamism was a period of trial and error that induced Islamists to reformulate their views. As a project, it aims to reconcile “religiosity and rights, faith and freedom.” Post-Islamism movements acknowledge “ambiguity, inclusion, and compromise in principles and practice.”²⁷³

By the end of the 1990s, the Islamic movement, with the Muslim Brotherhood at its heart, had to accommodate the ambitions of a new middle-class youth under conditions of growing fragmentation, accelerated by economic and cultural globalization.²⁷⁴ These conditions differentiate the path of Egyptian Islamism from Iranian Islamism in the implications of the post-Islamist deviation, as Bayat affirms. This attempted moderation had to take place inside a colossal organizational body, one with a base consisting mostly of those in favor of the fundamentalist

²⁷² Bayat, Jean-François. “Retour Sur Les Printemps Arabes.” *Mediapart*, October 31, 2013.

<https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jean-francois-bayat/blog/311013/retour-sur-les-printemps-arabes> .

²⁷³ Van Nieuwkerk. “Part Three. The New Millennium: Performing Piety.” Chapter. In *Performing Piety: Singers and Actors in Egypt’s Islamic Revival*, 204.

²⁷⁴ Bayat. *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamism Turn*.

Brotherhood indoctrination method. The group was looking forward to adapting to an age where internet websites, chat rooms, blogs, and satellite channels have opened virtual public spaces for horizontal networking and transnational dialogue.

The Muslim Brotherhood promoted *wasāṭiyya* thought through the contributions of its members, young preachers, and scholars sympathetic with the Islamist project. A youthful version of preaching, that acquired its own momentum and tactics of mobilization within the globalized arena of media and the internet, created a broad piety project that included members of and sympathizers to the mother organization and its political projects.

Therefore, it is important to differentiate piety movements, which seek to refashion a counterpublic from the Egyptian depoliticized middle and upper classes, from the political structures governing the Brotherhood ideology and ambitions. Post-Islamism has transcended the Brotherhood framework, expanding into the religious markets of charity, culture, the arts, and moral reformism. It included the wave of *al-du‘āh al-gudud*, or New Preachers, of the ‘Amr Khālid²⁷⁵ (subsequently Amr Khaled) model or other rising preachers during the 1990s,²⁷⁶ who advocate for a system of piety and conservative religiosity enmeshed in a framework of personal salvation, self-actualization, wealth accumulation, and consumerism.

The Market Islam model, as promoted by preachers targeting average members of the middle class, broke with traditional codes of Islamic Ulama working for the official religious institutions. The New Preachers appeared without beards or *zebība*,²⁷⁷ and adapted new fashions of Islamic veil for women and girls, and had a presentation of the self and the body indicating lighter attachment to extremist models of religiosity. In parallel, the Muslim Brotherhood maintained its thriving political project while allowing post-Islamism in a sociocultural milieu that

²⁷⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Amr Khaled | Egyptian Televangelist, Motivational Speaker & Author,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, September 1, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Amr-Khaled> .

²⁷⁶ Moll, Yasmin. “Television Is Not Radio: Theologies of Mediation in the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” *Cultural Anthropology* 33/2 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.2.07>

²⁷⁷ A darkened mark on the forehead signaling the commitment to prayers in some popular understandings.

generated new market forces and cultural sensitivities, which promoted societal Islamization and the formation of a counterpublic more lenient to the idea of state Islamization.

Post-Islamism was presented as aspiring to become the chief heir of an extremist version of political Islam. In contrast, piety movements helped create a parallel religious censorship playing in harmony with the authoritarian grip of the “secularreligious” state, as per Bayat’s description.²⁷⁸ Bayat used this term to depict the duel over piety in the mid-1990s between Islamists pressured by the state and an Egyptian state presenting as pious and leading an “Islamization without an Islamic state.”²⁷⁹

The conflict between the Brotherhood’s bet on piety to sensitize a depoliticized audience to their Islamic project from one side, and its ideological stiffness guarding cohesion and membership on the other, placed the Brotherhood in an ambiguous position between the ruling authority and its opposition. As the Brotherhood consolidated its middle-class bourgeoisie base and supported the ethical model of *wasāṭiyya*, it settled for embracing the main features of the authoritarian Egyptian regime (elitism, moral guardianship, and structural violence) and inculcated its followers with a religious logos and strict moral code. The replacement of the old state, for the Brotherhood, would occur after the organization internalized a theocratic model of authoritarianism, one featuring a completely religious version of old nationalist authoritarianism:

“The movement deemed control over the old state necessary to enact its broader political vision. Brotherhood leaders believed that all they needed was a process of elite turnover to gain control of the existing state institutions, which they could Islamize once they had consolidated power. They aimed to position themselves in the long run to be able to capitalize on such an opportunity. The thirty years of Mubarak’s rule gradually witnessed the full integration of the Brotherhood into Egyptian politics. Over time, the group developed into a massive political movement that crowded out social alternatives but lacked the flexibility to challenge the status quo.”²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Bayat. “Revolution without Movement, Movement without Revolution: Islamist Activism in Iran and Egypt, 1960s–1980s,” 48.

²⁷⁹ Bayat. “Egypt’s ‘Passive Revolution’,” 147.

²⁸⁰ El-Sherif. “The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s Failures.”

Bayat connects the popularity of the Islamist project within its middle-class audience mainly to the radical shift in the global neoliberal order since the 1990s and to the disillusionment of young swathes of the population with the failed capitalist modernization and socialist utopia projects of the post-Cold War era. The rise of Islamism as a “formidable force to lead the mounting dissent against autocratic Arab rule, Zionist dominance, and Western imperialism, while championing revival of cultural authenticity and indigenous values”²⁸¹ inspired a middle class in search of an alternative social and political order. However, Islamism was not immune from neoliberal metamorphoses or collaborations with imperial projects against secular and liberatory movements in the region.

In addition, the ideological pillars of the Islamic project, centered on culturalism and building an Islamic order, did not seek to provide alternative economic or political models. Post Islamism tried to establish a new model that, in contrast to Salafist neofundamentalism,²⁸² approaches democratic pluralism within a nation-state framework, instead of the Islamic state promoted by traditionalists. The Egyptian post-Islamist version profited from a dominant civil society and network NGOs promoting an Islamic version of identity politics. However, it preserved the conventional framework of Islamism by focusing on conservative religiosity, an exclusive social order, and a patriarchal disposition. For the Brotherhood’s political organization, its common grounds with post-Islamist sensitivities offered an opportunity for its further integration into global identity discourses to address the democratic/left-leaning circles ready to overlook their misogynistic stance and meager commitment to political/human rights on the grounds of “cultural relativism”.²⁸³

“The resilience of Islamism- despite its failures, transmutation, and post-Islamization- lies primarily in its serving as an identity marker in a global time deeply invested in the politics of “who we are,” identity politics... Islamism offers an ideological package filled with seemingly consistent components, clear responses, and simple remedies, thus automatically rejecting philosophical doubts, intellectual ambiguities, or skeptical probing.”²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Bayat. “Not a Theology of Liberation.” Chapter. In *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, 69.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

The Brotherhood's political project, exposed after 2011, did not translate into a break from authoritarianism or an economic model challenging the previous one. Instead, it resulted in the Brotherhood's failure to split from its Salafist base, the deployment of supporters in a 'moralistic' critique of secular opponents, and an unleashing of political violence – thus proving the “insolubility” of Islamist movements within the nation-state, as explains the scholar in contemporary religion and politics Jean-François Bayart:

“There is nothing cosmetic about this "market Islam." Its political expression is based on profound transformations of the religious field, which has been commodified since the 1990s, as much in the fields of banking or finance and industry or commerce as in those of teaching, preaching and pilgrimage, not without being inspired by the evolution of North American Christianity.”²⁸⁵

The problematic counterpublic shaped by the Brotherhood reflected many aspects of the longstanding crisis of Islamism and its identitarian political project. The Brotherhood joined Islamic parties of the region in the “conjunction of the national idea and capitalist globalization, under the guise of Islam,” which matched their ambitions to expand their audience into an upper middle class naturally disinterested in inciting political unrest for revolutionary causes. However, the younger members of society, who started to feel uneasy with the rigidity of the Islamic revival currents, were not beholden to the ideals of self-sacrifice and heroism common to the *Qutbi*²⁸⁶ sectors of the Brotherhood.²⁸⁷

“The Brotherhood's famous charity networks helped it to develop a following but did not promote popular mobilization or awareness. People were not invited to action except as voters on election days. Little attention was paid to the role of civil society and communal self-empowerment except as a supplement to the Brotherhood's real goal of taking over the existing political order.”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵ Bayart. “Retour sur les printemps arabes.”

²⁸⁶ In reference to Sayyid Qutb, the grand ideologue of modern radical Islam.

²⁸⁷ Muḥammad Mursī and Maḥmūd ‘Izzat, members of the “Guidance Office” of the Brotherhood in Egypt, the highest leadership council of the organization, asserted their belief in the ideas of Sayed Qutb in 2011.

“أبو مالك / د. / محمود عزت ود / محمد مرسي يدافعان عن أفكار سيد قطب 3 / 6 “ . YouTube, August 14, 2009.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGZZgkCp210> .

²⁸⁸ El-Sherif. “The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Failures.”

The radicalization of the Brotherhood grew with time in what Ḥusām Tammām, researcher in contemporary Islamist movements, described as the “salafization of the Muslim Brotherhood.”²⁸⁹ The leading group is mistakenly taken for an ideology, despite its fragile theological basis, one that favors societal re-structuring and political action as part of its anti-modernist vision. Expanding its social base into the largest possible number of supporters and surpassing disagreements between Islamic doctrines were the priorities of the populist religious movement inspired by fascist indoctrination methods and slogans: “A Salafi *da’wa*, a Sunni order, a Sufi truth, a political body, a sports group, a scientific cultural association, an economic company and a social idea.”²⁹⁰

In its foundation, the Muslim Brotherhood reflected the multiplicity of the Islamic revivalist thought and methods and yet liberated itself from adopting monolithic theological interpretations. However, the populist influence and the massive growth of Salafi groups in Egypt left no choice for the Brotherhood but to radicalize. The difference between the Brotherhood and *al-Da’wah al-Salafiyya* is between an Islamist party and an Islamic mobilization movement. The largest Salafi movement, which birthed al-Nūr party after 2011 guaranteed the continuity of their movement after 2013, as it maintained a cohesive doctrinal body at the expense of political expansion. Al-Nūr party remained a political arm of a religious movement within the postrevolutionary political matrix, surviving its internal divisions by distancing itself from the Brotherhood’s political clashes and by joining its opposition in January 2013:

“The Muslim Brotherhood is the archetype of an Islamist movement. Its final aim is to seize power to implement its Islamic political vision. Yet, it does not care much about theological disputes within Islam: it preaches a conservative message, but one that allows for some plurality of interpretation. In contrast, the *Salafi Da’wa*- in line with other Salafi movements elsewhere- was established to restore the theological purity of Islam and preach that purity to fellow Muslims. Politics were always peripheral to that vision.”²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Tadros. *Mapping Egyptian Islamism*, 89.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 92. From a letter written by Ḥasan al-Bannā that was sent to the Brotherhood’s fifth conference.

²⁹¹ Lacroix, Stéphane. “Egypt’s Pragmatic Salafis: The Politics of Hizb al-Nour.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 1, 2016. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/01/egypt-s-pragmatic-salafis-politics-of-hizb-al-nour-pub-64902> .

Some scholars argue that the poor theological foundation of the Brotherhood's discourse demonstrates its pragmatism and flexible political direction. But jumping over details is also an inherent characteristic of populist movements, with, in the case of the Brotherhood, an added dimension of frank protofascist intent to cultivate a reactionary anti-modern theocratic ethic. The Brotherhood's Islamism distanced itself from any alliance with global movements, humanitarian approaches, or economic developmentalist models. At its core, the organization promoted an exclusionary and oppressive patriarchal model based on an imagined Muslim supremacy:

“We are, however, an idea and a creed, a system and a syllabus, which is why we are not bounded by a place or a group of people and can never be until the Day of Judgment, because we are the system of Allah and the way of His Prophet. We are the followers of the Companions of the Messenger of Allah, and the raisers of his flag as they raised it and like them, popularizers of his way and the memorizers of the Quran as they memorized it and the preachers of his da'wah as they preached it, which is why we are a mercy for mankind.”²⁹²

The turning point in 2011 and the prominence of the “digital media class” split *al-Ikhwān*'s middle-class counterpublic and favored its alliance with Salafists, scattered extremist, and ex-jihadists. Reviving the common philosophy that political power derives from Sharia and that the state has a religious role to play, the Islamists' monopoly on the political expression of Islam was recentered as the pathway to political dominance. A significant amount of internet comics portrayed the Islamist alliance before 2013 as a unified front that ‘othered’ its opponents on a radical and exclusionary religious basis. In these comics, dissident revolutionary components eventually bear the title “infidels” or “atheists” in opposition to the Islamist alliance that claimed a full authority on deciding the future directions of the revolution. This was together with half-hearted and unstable support from al-Nūr party, which succeeded in maintaining a marginal political position after the elimination of the Brotherhood in 2013.

²⁹² From a letter written by Ḥasan al-Bannā that was sent to the Brotherhood's fifth conference.

Tadros. *Mapping Egyptian Islamism*, 92.



*Figure 4²⁹³

Top image

Before the revolution: “Girl, let’s make a revolution against the corrupt regime.”

Bottom image

After the revolution: “You atheists, sons of dirty bitch.”

The Brotherhood’s social consistency and political project reproduced a fundamental paradox: sociopolitical expansion, solubility in the nation-state framework, and adaptation to democratic political practice on the one side, with the threat of the dissolution of a sectarian foundation preserving its internal cohesion and indoctrination machine on the other. The Brotherhood’s youthful counterpublic was more prone to experience emotional perplexity and to change their mind during and after the revolution, leading some of them to detach from Islamist collectives or join anti-Islamist groups after witnessing the political behavior of the Islamist alliance and going through different phases of self-exploration and social interactions.

The political behavior of the Islamist alliance incited more divisions and fragmentation of the pious counterpublic as it failed to overcome its ideological hollowness and provide answers to the longstanding issues of state-religion relations, society-religion relations, the place of Islamic law and jurisprudence, and the organization’s ambivalence towards notions of democracy, pluralism, and personal freedoms:

“The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, by contrast, remained tied to an eclectic combination of the old dogma of its founder Hassan al-Banna and former leading ideologue Sayyid Quṭb and an instrumentalist mind-set that

²⁹³ Published on the Facebook page: “Memes that do not submit to political correctness” (*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-seyāsiyya*).

“ميمز لا تخضع للصوابية السياسية/الصفحة الجديدة.” Facebook, 2017-2019. <https://cutt.ly/JcNEUHK>.

limited the organization to superficial adaptation to new circumstances. While some analysts have argued that the Brotherhood's conservative, closed-minded worldview was the result of a process of "ruralization" in which leaders from rural backgrounds influenced the group's ideological development, in reality the Brotherhood's ideological deficiencies were more fundamental. At the root of these deficiencies was the puritanical dream of an "Islamic state" that would resuscitate the Islamic caliphate and lead members of the Brotherhood toward the realization of their Islamic identity, salvation, and empowerment."²⁹⁴

Presenting the Muslim Brotherhood as a moderate political force that embraces modern democratic values served a local and an international political purpose. Considering the manifold existence of the organization in Europe, the United States, and Muslim countries all over the world, moderate Islam discourse provided a culturally open ground that gathered support for its political project from international circles that started to conceive the group as a viable alternative for the autocratic regimes in the Arab region. It also provided youthful supporters with an ideological tool that profited from discourses framing cultural appropriation as an authoritarian practice that harkens back to a colonial past. Islamism retrieved new grounds in common with leftist political correctness and woke social movements redefining the disenfranchised collectives on gender, race, and religious basis.

The contradictions of the new Islamist intellectual, as described by Olivier Roy,²⁹⁵ between the unifying totality of religion and the dialectical nature of knowledge acquisition, developed through *wasāṭiyya* discourse into a cultural sign, one that preserves Islamic "culture" and asserts that all people in the Arab-speaking region have a single, representative identity, which differentiates Muslims yet does not impede their integration into a global culture.

Secular and liberal collectives contesting the patterns of religiosity after the revolutionary upheaval focused on illuminating the ties and antagonisms between political Islam and post-Islamism. The political affiliation of apparently independent preachers to the economic and cultural networks of the Muslim Brotherhood were revealed. The extended liaisons between the

²⁹⁴ El-Sherif. "The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Failures."

²⁹⁵ Roy. "The Islamist New Intellectuals." In *The Failure of Political Islam*.

Brotherhood, Salafi factions, and the Mubarak regime, which continued under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) after 2011, were exposed.

The articulation of an undisguised radical discourse that resembles that of the 1980s and 1990s by Islamist forces in alliance undermined the magnitude and depth of post-Islamism’s influence. Revisionism was particularly prevalent in the examination of the political ramifications of *wasatīyya*, eclipsed by proliferative literature on post-Islamism’s capacity for moderation. Retrospectively, we see that the subject of *wasatīyya* dominated internet comics as more youthful sectors of society distanced themselves from the notion as synonymous with direct affiliation to Islamist groups.



*Figure 5²⁹⁶

Top image

“An Egyptian *wasatī* citizen” riding his bicycle in a “modern civil state.”

Middle image

“Refraining from abiding to the law.”

“Not accepting other opinions.”

“Discriminating against other religions.”

“Not respecting personal freedoms.”

“Conflicted loyalty to the state.”

“Discrimination against women”.

“Racism toward others.”

“Favoring religious institutions to the state.”

“Implicit encouragement of extremism.”

Bottom image

“A fragmented society”- “God, when are we going to be like people abroad and have democratic rulers!!”

²⁹⁶ Reworked cartoon published on the new page of the Facebook group: “Memes that do not submit to political correctness” (*Memes lā takhḍa’ li al-ṣawābiyya al-seyāsiyya*). Facebook, January 7, 2021. <https://cutt.ly/KnzprMs>.

The meme creator concluded the comic, where he depicted the values promoted by *wasāṭiyya* by formulating a contradiction between the actual societal environment and the ideal slogans on the democratic rule, promoted by the same *wasāṭī* factions, in the context of political protest. The comic tried to detail the democratic values and practices that should be entrenched in political discourses, in opposition to the instrumental electoral perspective that prevailed on Islamist's discourse on the rule of the majority.

Clusters of internet comics focused on the moral contradictions that imbued *wasāṭiyya* discourses, referring to the conservative religiosity and patriarchal dispositions implied in its apparently tolerant tone.

Picking the character of 'Abd al-Wahhāb, from the well-known drama series "*Lan 'a 'īsh fī gilbāb 'abī*" (I will not Live in the Shadow of my Father) 1996,²⁹⁷ to represent a prototype of *wasāṭiyya* ethos (Figures 6 and 7) reflects the revisionist standpoint of the generations who grew under Mubarak's regime, and also the subversive power comics possess to ridicule a prototype reflecting a constellation of ideas just by resurrecting it to the online mainstream, and reiterating the same ideas in a different time.

The series is based on the novel by the famous Egyptian novelist Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs, who wrote many novels addressing middle-class ethical dilemmas and the relationship between patriarchy and rebellion during times of social transformations in the 1950s and 1960s. The series, updated to the 1990s time, normalizes patriarchal models introduced within the convivial familial context, represented by the head of the family 'Abd al-Ghafūr al-Bura'ī's character (played by the actor Nūr al- Sharīf).

²⁹⁷ "مسلسل - لن أعيش في جلباب أبي - 1996 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض"، elCinema.com, n.d., <https://elcinema.com/work/1010312/>.



*Figure 6

Caption

“Rozalin: Al-salāmu ‘alaykum”

“‘Abd al-Wahhāb (superimposed text on image): How lovely is the civilized European Islamic mentality.”

‘Abd al-Wahhāb is the son of the self-made millionaire ‘Abd al-Ghafūr al-Bura‘ī in the popular social drama “*Lan ’a ’īsh fī gilbāb ’abī*” (I will not Live in the Shadow of my Father) 1996. He grows under the pressures of his father’s successful model who combines capitalist success values and patriarchal overarching presence. The son, in search of his personhood and independence, ventures into a long journey of self-discovery. However, he was portrayed in the original novel and the series written by the scriptwriter Mustāfa Muḥarram, as a fake rebel who resorts eventually to joining his father’s business; what his father hoped for from the beginning. The novel (published in 1982) treats the notion of patriarchy and rebellion between the brackets of the obsession with moderated liberation, the notion that prevails in ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s literary projects focusing on middle-class morality since the 1960s. The writer describes an impossible liberation under rigid patriarchal normativity, as he attributes the son’s hollow spirit to the

omnipresence and strictness of the father, and his lack of perception of the preconditions of his independence.

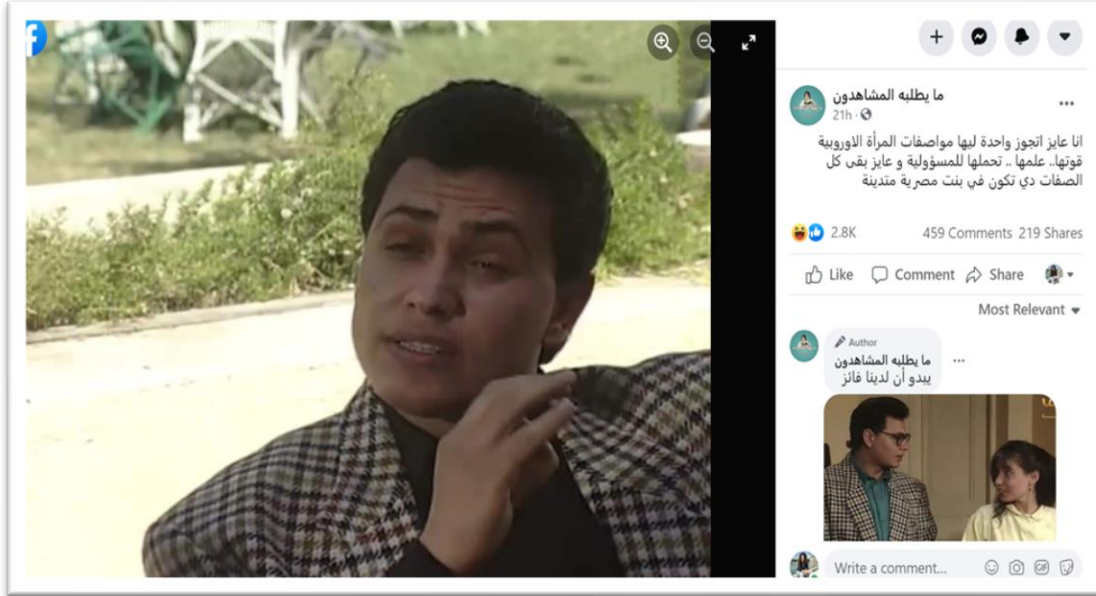
The series denounces the failed rebel yet glorifies moderation from both sides, father and son. Presenting the father's character as a visionary prudent laborer who challenges the social hierarchy and succeeds in his ambitious social ascension, the drama does not ignore focusing on his tolerant side to his son's floundering. The illiterate millionaire who insists on educating all his daughters and only son, is also flexible enough to understand that he cannot force his son to join his business unless he voluntarily asks for it. The son from his side seeks moderation after many failed experiences in education, marriage, and business. His only proven success comes when he works in the same field as his father, competing against him, and showing a witty character just like his. Surrendering to the inherited character and social norms, the son resorts to moderation compromise with a tolerant and patient patriarchy.

'Abd al-Wahhāb's path delineated in the series captures the notion of moderation (*I'tidāl*) reinforced in the Egyptian middle-class ethics. In defense of moderation, the conservative father rejects the overly religious deviation of his son in one of the phases of his rebellion. In that phase of religiosity, the son striving for meaning and social prestige grows his beard, joins an Islamist group, and gets married to an American woman (Rozalin) who turns to be a crook. The woman wins his heart when she converts to Islam to marry him, granting his Islamist turn the admiration of a "Western eye" against the rejection of his family.

The context of 'Abd al-Wahhāb's character was recalled in an image macro that signaled the meanings implied in the "moderate" attitude and kept circulating in various digital reproductions for months in 2020. Moderation is the magical formula under which fusing contradictions and gathering a European/Islamist thought had always been possible, the same way as patriarchy/liberation negotiations happened between father and son. However, the referentiality of 'Abd al-Wahhāb and Rozalin (her hypocrite conversion to Islam mirroring his turn to Islamism

in search of self-realization) added an inflection pointing to the hollowness and self-deceit underlying the value system of cherry-pick contrived moderation.

*Figure 7



‘Abd al-Wahhāb in a scene from “*Lan 'a 'īsh fī gilbāb 'abī*” (I Will Not Live in the Shadow of My Father) (1996).

In a conversation with a friend, he describes the criteria of his dream wife: “I want to marry a woman that holds European woman values; her strength, her knowledge and her responsibility taking. And I want all these qualities gathered in a pious Egyptian girl.”²⁹⁸

By the end of the series ‘Abd al-Wahhāb marries his cousin, the niece of his mother. Conforming to the family ideal and choosing the bride that his mother preferred to the American woman, towards whom she always held aversion and suspicions.

The political version of *wasatiyya* was aided by the interpretations of the prominent theologian Sheikh Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī,²⁹⁹ who graduated from al-Azhar, joined the Muslim

²⁹⁸ Originally posted on the Facebook page *Mā yaṭlubuhu al-mushāhidūn* (Whatever Viewers Request) – page dedicated to art and entertainment, which identifies itself as an “artistic page for the most famous scenes of cinema and drama.” As of September 3, 2023, the page has 1.6 million followers.

ما يطلبه المشاهدون. Facebook, June 5, 2021.

<https://www.facebook.com/metwalia/photos/a.104136917814637/352450856316574/> .

²⁹⁹ Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī (Arabic: يوسف القرضاوي) born 9 September 1926) is an Egyptian Islamic theologian based in Doha. He attended al-Azhar University and received his B.A. in 1953 at the top of his class. He received his PhD from

Brotherhood,³⁰⁰ and left Egypt for Qatar in 1961. In his set of definition of Islamic *wasatiyya*, al-Qaradāwī placed a “moderate Muslim” (*wasatī*) between two binaries: extremism vs. indulgence/permissiveness/laxity. Through this perspective, he defined extremism as the act of “carrying weapons” to change the society, meaning the radical path to social or political change as identified by militant jihadist. He refused to condemn singing and movies, stated that Muslims can sell pork and alcohol in the West, and allowed Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men if not living in a Muslim country.³⁰¹ And he asserted that Islam supports democracy and the right to popular voting.

al-Azhar University in 1973. Al-Qaradāwī joined the Muslim Brotherhood as a young man and was arrested several times for his Islamist activism, in 1949 by the monarchy and in January and November 1954 by Nasser, spending 20 months in prison after his last arrest. In 1961, he left Egypt for Qatar to work as a preacher. Al-Qaradāwī’s rise to fame across the Muslim world was a result of his regular appearances on Al Jazeera. He is the founder and president of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, which the Emirati government designated as a terrorist organization in November 2014. He is also the president of the European Council for Fatwa and Research. He founded IslamOnline and is a shareholder in Bank Al Taqwa. A prolific writer with 170 books and articles to his name, al-Qaradāwī is a leading Islamist thinker in non-Salafi circles. However, his fatwas and religious views have come under severe attack from Salafis, some of whom label him as ignorant and devoid of religious knowledge. Al-Qaradāwī has endorsed the death penalty for apostasy and has praised suicide bombers in Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon. He is also an anti-Semite and has famously called for a new Holocaust, saying: “Throughout history, Allah has imposed upon the Jews people who would punish them for their corruption ... The last punishment was carried out by Hitler. By means of all the things he did to them – even though they exaggerated this issue – he managed to put them in their place. This was divine punishment for them.... Allah willing, the next time will be at the hand of the believers.”

Aaron Rock-Singer, “Scholarly Authority and Lay Mobilization: Yusuf al-Qaradawi’s Vision of Da‘wa, 1976-1984,” *Muslim World* 106/3 (2016): 588–604. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12135> .

Tadros, *Mapping Egyptian Islamism*.

³⁰⁰ Van Nieuwkerk. “Part Two. The 1990’s: Debating Religion, Gender, and the Performing Arts in the Public Sphere,” 162.

³⁰¹ “Qaradawi, for instance, promulgated a decision permitting a European woman to remain married to her non-Muslim husband aft she converted to Islam. A second example is about taking mortgages on houses and business. For western Muslims, mortgages to buy houses or invest in business are permitted, but these were forbidden in traditional interpretations of Islamic law. For European Muslims, Qaradawi has developed various interpretations from Islamic jurisprudence called *Fiqh al-aqalliyyat* that apply legal theory to a Muslim minority that lives in the West. But he continues to use the binary position between *dar-ul Islam* and *dar-ul harb*, which means, in his thinking, that the needs of Muslims living in a non-Muslim country, as well as their conditions and circumstances, may differ from those in other countries where Muslims live as a majority. But in the case of Muslims living in the West, the rules can be

“Yusuf al-Qaradawi looks for a possible restoration of Islamic formulations on contemporary problems that face Muslims. Promoting a moderate Islamic view arguing for the limitation of the expansion of militant Islamists is one of the ideas that one obtains from this new discourse and from this change of authority (Bayat 2007, 2010). A quick outline of this new authority, which is based on both the traditional and modern role of Islamic intellectuals, seems to support a non-state-oriented Islam (Yılmaz 2005). It is not a product of official Islam under strict control of the state but is becoming a transborder and transnational phenomenon. In the last century, the media, the Internet and communication technologies have played a significant role in the production and expansion of Islamic knowledge. The nature of the traditional mode of Islamic knowledge adapted to these new technologies – blogs, web pages, Facebook, YouTube forums – have become new channels and mediums in the spreading of Islamic idioms, narratives and information. Mass media and education also influence the fragmentation of Islamic knowledge.”³⁰²

However, al-Qaradāwī preserved the structure of the Brotherhood proselytization: Replacing the *Umma* with the Sharia (Islamic law) as the supreme authority and source of legitimacy. The most dangerous aspect of this dogma, from the liberal perspective, is that Sharia is taken away, and the power passes from the hands of the *Umma* into the hands of those with political power. Centering his vision around a victorious Islamic *Umma* conquering the world as the rebirth of the Islamic caliphate, he held anti-Semitic convictions and praised suicide bombing and attacks against civilians in Iraq as heroic martyrdom operations against colonial powers, endorsed death penalty for apostasy, and justified political assassinations as an act of jihad inspired by the Wahhabi notion of *al-tā'ifa al-mu'mina or al-firqa al-nādjīya*³⁰³ (The believing sect).³⁰⁴

adjusted in accordance with the rule of their country. And that makes him again different from some more traditionalist thinkers.”

“Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism: Dynamics in the West and in the Middle East,” ed. by Erkan Toguslu (Leuven University Press, n.d.), 45. https://doi.org/10.11116/MITA_CII .

³⁰² Toguslu, ed. “Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism: Dynamics in the West and in the Middle East.”

³⁰³ “*Firka* (A): sect. The ~ *nādjīya* is the sect that alone will be saved out of the 73 into which the community will be divided, according to a Tradition.

al-Šālihiyya; al-Wāqidi. “*firka*”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Glossary and Index of Terms, Edited by: P.J. Bearman, Th. Banquis, C.E. Bowworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs Bowworth. Consulted online on 23 September 2023 http://dx.doi.org.accesdistant.sorbonne-universite.fr/10.1163/1573-3912_ei2glos_SIM_gi_01235.

³⁰⁴ “The practice of declaring other Muslims infidel (*takfir*) due to insufficient piety is widely practiced by Salafists and Wahhabis and used by jihadists to justify the use of violence against other Muslims. Jihadists frequently point to

On the other side, indulgence in his definition allowed a spacious horizon to indict and denounce practices and beliefs that integrate Muslims into a modern society of equality and citizenship. He promoted a violent misogynistic stance towards women's rights and supported domestic violence and female genital mutilation.³⁰⁵ He condemned working in local tourism and the right to rethink and revisit Islamic *Fiqh* and interpretations.³⁰⁶

a saying attributed to Muhammad: 'This community will be split up into seventy-three sects, seventy-two of them will go to Hell, and one will go to Paradise, and it is the majority group.⁶⁹ They, along with Muslim fundamentalists, believe they are that "Saved Sect" (*at-Ta'ifa alMansura*), the only group possessing the correct Islamic beliefs. The concept of takfir, propounded by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (founder of the Wahhabist movement), includes the command that anyone who does not show sufficient levels of *wala* (allegiance to his view of true Muslim belief) and adequate *bara* (rejection of non-Muslims, including the wrong kind of Muslims) is at risk of committing apostasy."

Bukay, David. "Islam's Hatred of the Non-Muslim," *Middle East Forum*, June 1, 2013, <https://www.meforum.org/3545/islam-hatred-non-muslim> .

"Yusuf Al-Qaradawi." The Investigative Project on Terrorism, n.d. <https://www.investigativeproject.org/profile/167/yusuf-al-qaradawi> .

³⁰⁵"Islamic Ruling on Female Circumcision," *IslamOnline*, September 18, 2021, <https://fiqh.islamonline.net/en/islamic-ruling-on-female-circumcision/> .

³⁰⁶ البري، خالد. "الوسطية الأخوانية... ذنب ليلي". دقائق.نت. 2018

Al-Birrī, Khālid. "The Brotherhood's *wasāṭiyya*... Little Red Riding Hood." *Daqaeq.net*. 2018. <https://cutt.ly/Xxhueal> .

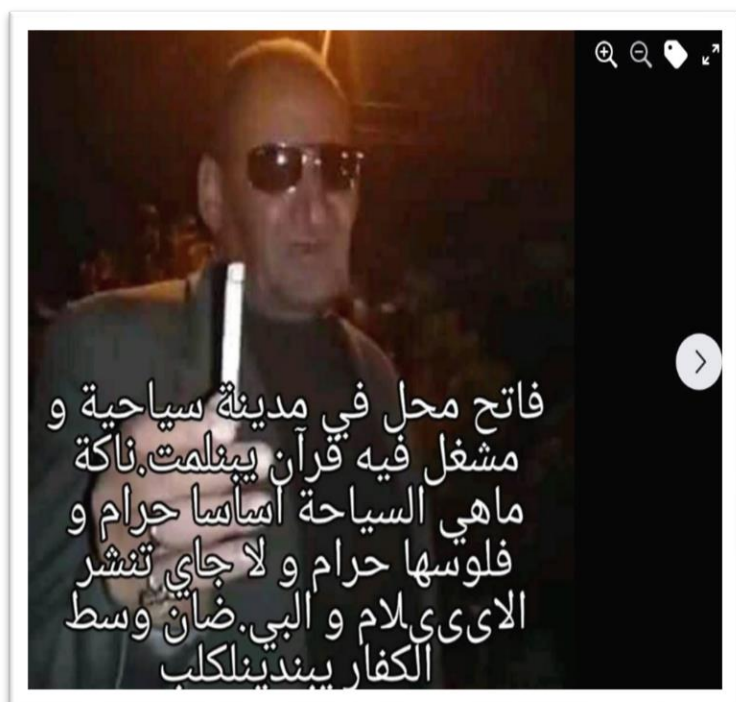


Figure 8³⁰⁷

Text: “So, you are playing Quran in your bazar in a touristic city, motherfucker. Tourism is essentially *ḥarām* (religiously prohibited), its profit is *ḥarām*, or you are proselytizing for Islam among the *kuffār* (infidels) son of dog’s religion.”

The meme features a man who appeared in live streams on social networks like YouTube and Instagram. Livestreaming has been popular among amateurs and younger groups of meme creators since 2019.

Wasatīyya, as conceived by al-Qaraḍāwī, was a problem-solving mechanism to empower Muslims, one that predicated on perpetual maladaptation and cultural clashes in the West. Politically, it made the Brotherhood more attractive among the young middle-class sectors. Based on the “*Fiqh* of priorities”³⁰⁸ which he himself created, al-Qaraḍāwī laid out a theological framework to take young Muslim generations over in charity and educational institutions and to rebrand the social image of political Islam. His pragmatic fatwas encouraged moderate veiling

³⁰⁷ Posted by Mario Caesar on Facebook. URL: <https://cutt.ly/Ic1kkV2> .

³⁰⁸ “This term did not exist in the Islamic vocabulary until the 1970s. Invented by the Brotherhood theoretician Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī in his famous book by the same name, it gradually leaked into religious discourse, and preachers compiled books deploying it for various purposes. It became part of the traditional jurisprudential debate, minimized or marginalized disagreement between Islamic groups (Ikhwan, Salafists, and jihadists), and postponed discussions on differences. It helped bridge the gap between the contradictory local and international discourses of the Brotherhood by introducing ‘The jurisprudence of priorities’ wherein political interests come first.”

. عمارة، هاني.” أفخاخ الإسلاميين في دقائق: ٢- فقه الأولويات“. دقائق.نت. 2018

‘Imāra, Hānī. “Islamists’ Traps in Minutes: The Jurisprudence of Priorities.” *Daqaeq.net*. 2018. <https://cutt.ly/xc1k8TG>.

practices (veil/hijab vs. *niqāb/burqa*) and other tolerant practices without threatening the core of Islamic fundamentalism or issues of religious freedoms, especially those in local Muslim societies.

Al-Qaradāwī utilized religious interpretation to aid in the expansion of the Brotherhood,³⁰⁹ a group that he portrayed as the rightful leader of the *Umma* and as responsible for the preservation of its Islamic identity, both locally and internationally: “the Muslim Brotherhood should play the role of the missing leadership of the Muslim nation, especially in the West- ‘Try to have your society within the larger society- otherwise you will melt in it like salt in water.’”³¹⁰

In general, al-Qaradāwī formulated an Islamic discourse that accommodates the age and spirit of neoliberal globalization and sees no clash between faith and fortune. He characterized Islamism as an anti-imperialist identity-oriented movement devoid of the Marxist tendencies that framed the Islamism of the 1970s as a resistance project of the dispossessed (à la Ali Shariati). He restored Islamism to the fundamental clash with secular and materialistic dimensions of Marxist and socialist projects³¹¹ and reinforced the capitalist and authoritarian core of the Islamic *da‘wa*. In this sense, he opened the door to “pious neoliberalism” operating on principles of economic rationality, productivity, and privatization.³¹²

³⁰⁹ “Politically, Qaradawi has a classical Islamist tendency stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood background. He divides the world between Muslims and non-Muslims and takes his position along this formulation. In his book, *Sharia and Life*, he continues to follow this mainstream interpretation in Islam. This political stand is significantly manifested in several Muslim campaigns, such as the calling for a boycott of Danish products after the cartoons affair published by the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper. As Husam Tammam argues, Qaradawi has positioned himself not only as an activist of Egyptian Muslim Brothers, but also as a mentor of the political language of Muslims (Tammam, 2009). One may describe Qaradawi as a ‘religiopolitical activist’. The term is used by Muhammad Qasim Zaman to identify the political reference intermingled with religious discourse. He employs the language of *Fiqh* to address the modern political questions.”

Erkan Toguslu, ed., *Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism: Dynamics in the West and in the Middle East* (Leuven University Press, n.d.), 46. https://doi.org/10.11116/MITA_CII.

³¹⁰ Al-Ameri, Alaa. “We Must Refuse to Play the Islamists Game.” *Spiked*, October 29, 2020. <https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/10/29/we-must-refuse-to-play-the-islamists-game/>.

³¹¹ Bayat. “Not a Theology of Liberation.” Chapter. In *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, 80-88.

³¹² Atia, Mona. “Pious Neoliberalism.” *Project on Middle East Political Science*, September 23, 2014.

The expanding Islamic markets helped integrate the lower middle-class and poor “into the circuits of financial capital through microenterprise initiatives,” stated Bayat. The model carved by al-Qaraḏāwī and the Brotherhood delineated the difference between Islamic *da‘wa* as the path for “gradualist and legalist Islamists” and Islamic *da‘wa* as the path for militant jihadists. However, this did not obliterate their broad convergence on the “idea of a closed social order, a polity based on Sharia, and adherence to cultural nativism.”³¹³

A wave of young preachers was inspired by *wasatīyya* as a nomenclature that characterizes the epoch of market Islam and the rising generations of polished Islamists unbounded from the bloody image of the near past in the 1990s, when bearded terrorists and Quṭbī Brotherhood traditionalists dominated the media culture and representation. Innumerable preachers from a variety of backgrounds appeared after Amr Khaled pioneered the invasion of media culture by *al-du‘āh al-gudud* and popularized a version of societal Islamism:

“Al-du‘āh al-gudud, or New Preachers, so named because their television preaching styles are unprecedented within the country’s forty-year Islamic Revival. Between 2010 and 2013, I conducted fieldwork with Hosny and his media team in the Cairo studios and offices of Iqraa, a transnational Islamic satellite channel. Established in 1998 by a Saudi media mogul, Iqraa promotes a “centrist Islam” (islam wasati) as a bulwark against both secular Westernization and religious dogmatism. For Iqraa producers, the channel’s moderation is evidenced by its broadcast of preachers from different, at times mutually antagonistic, Islamic trends, whether Sufism, Salafism, or political Islamism. Despite this on-screen diversity, within Egypt Iqraa is best known for launching the careers of the country’s most prominent New Preachers, the trio of Amr Khaled, Moez Masoud, and Mustafa Hosny, all of whom attract youth who would not normally tune into an Islamic program.

As their Cairo viewers explained to me, these preachers matter to them both because of what and how they preach. The New Preachers appropriate genres from dramatic serials to music videos to American televangelism to create novel forms of religious media at once edifying and entertaining. In doing so, the New Preachers and their producers straddle distinct standards of moral probity, commercial success, and sensuous pleasure as their programs expand what counts as “Islamic media.” It is precisely this innovation in *da‘wa*—and its underlying theological claims and associated moral sensibilities—that has earned the

<https://pomeps.org/pious-neoliberalism> .

³¹³ Bayat. “Not a Theology of Liberation,” 80-88.

New Preachers much criticism from their equally popular Salafi-Wahabi counterparts in the piety movement.”³¹⁴

In her book, *The Perils of Nonviolent Islamism*,³¹⁵ Elham Manea traces the liaison between the radical armed forms of extremism and the nonviolent forms of autodidact preachers who preserve the dogmatic core and read the Quranic text anachronistically. She postulates that developments in Muslim societies are linked to their extension into non-Muslim societies that accept Muslim immigrants. She delineates how nonviolent Islamism, via *wasatiyya* propaganda, condones violence under righteous entitlement according to the modulated anachronistic readings of the scripture.

The piety movements’ enormous audience is essentially indoctrinated in isolation from political engagement. However, the Islamist monolith infiltrated the public debate and targeted the depoliticized youth to initiate a religious re-imagining of morality and to reinforce their participation in charity. A huge sector of the Egyptian middle-class youth seems to have migrated towards the point of view that social reform is synonymous to performative piety and the self-development model that belongs to the neoliberal ethos.

Significant sectors of the middle-class strata involved in the revolutionary mobilization were alarmed by the Brotherhood’s exclusionist political behavior. The violent antagonisms with the secular parties and activists further incited many digital activists to lead a revisionist movement directed to the last twenty years of *wasatiyya* discourse:

“It is clear that the surprise of 2011, then the disarray of 2012, in relation to the outbreak and evolution of the Arab springs, have revealed the extent to which the traditional conceptions of the Arab-Islamic world were ineffective. Nobody or almost nobody has referred to the to the complex and specific relationship established in the world of Mediterranean Islam between a secularization in progress and a deep religious itself in transformation. Indeed, if the religious was absolutely not present at the beginning of these revolutions, of profoundly secular nature, by their actors and by their watchwords, the revolutions will be caught up by the

³¹⁴ Moll. “Television Is Not Radio: Theologies of Mediation in the Egyptian Islamic Revival.”

³¹⁵ Manea, Elham. *The Perils of Nonviolent Islamism*. New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2021.

religious along the way. If the springs had nothing to do with religion at the beginning, very quickly, the Arab revolutions will meet the religious.”³¹⁶

³¹⁶ Huntzinger. *Les printemps arabes et le religieux : La sécularisation de l’islam*.

3. Against Mass-Mediated Islamism

Emerging anti-Islamist collectives should not be reduced to pro-regime nationalists and state propaganda. During the moment of revolutionary enthusiasm, digital media provided a new avenue by which to express religiosity, refuting the *de facto* hegemony of Islamist discourse in the sociocultural domain. Opening the public debate and pushing the boundaries of permitted conversations challenged mainstream discourse, which had been dominated by the Islamic revival for decades via the microphones of the mosques and the infiltration of media industries.³¹⁷

“In addition to the Islamist presence in the socioeconomic field, Islamist voices also became important in the media. They debated “true Islam” and “the good Muslim woman” and formulated a conservative Islamist counter-discourse that challenged the state-supported national secular discourse. They disseminated their ideas through religious schools and mosque lessons, cassettes, radios and TV programs, and the growing Islamist publishing industry.”³¹⁸

Despite being deprived of political legitimacy, the Brotherhood’s economic influence expanded rapidly. Islamic investment companies (40% of which were owned by the Muslim Brothers or supporters of their ideals) and Islamic banks received around 8 billion Egyptian pounds between 1983-1986, withdrawn from public banks. In addition, the self-supported Brotherhood capitalized on monthly subscription fees (5 percent of their income paid by the members) and voluntary donations from well-to-do entrepreneurs working in the Gulf.³¹⁹ The Brotherhood

³¹⁷ “The circulation of *Liwa’ al-Islam*, the successor of the popular Brotherhood journal *al-Da’wah*, grew from 35.000 in 1987 to about 95.000 in 1991. Over half of the copies were sold in Egypt. In 1994, over one-quarter of all books published were religious, a 25 percent rise since 1985. An estimated 85 percent of books sold during the 1995 book fair in Cairo were Islamic. The tapes of religious preachers such as Sheikh Kishk, numbering over a thousand, sold in millions. Hours allocated by the state to religious programs on national television and radio increased, reaching 14.500 hours annually, compared with the 8000 for entertainment programs.”

Van Nieuwkerk. “Part Two. The 1990’s: Debating Religion, Gender, and the Performing Arts in the Public Sphere,” 114-115.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

utilized this economic expansion to institutionalize its social authority, which was manifested in full power in the electoral arena after 2011.

In concordance with sociopolitical transformations, and negotiations with the ruling regime, Islamic revival movements' social discourse was continuously adjusted to satisfy new generations while safeguarding traditional ideologies. Mass-media platforms were influential domains by which political Islam achieved a "cultural pervasiveness" that influenced the social, political, and cultural contexts while capitalizing on celebrity culture:³²⁰

"Graeme Turner elaborates on the "celebritisation of politics,"³²¹ where the role of celebrities is centralized in political activities, fund- raising and welfare. He foresees the transgression of celebrities to engage in ethical discussions and negotiations, transcending their confined roles within the popular culture as stars. From this token, Van Nieuwkerk depicts the shifted mediated discourse of political Islam under Mubarak characterized by a heavy engagement of 'repentant' actresses in mass media channels as promoters of the veil and new pious role models in a phenomenon that she called the "celebritisation of piety."³²²

Elaborating on the "celebritisation of piety," Karin Van Nieuwkerk explains how the economic reach of the culture and entertainment industries reinforces dominant ideologies and helps legitimize them via mass consumption and commodification (take, for instance, the veil as a virtue-signaling commodity).³²³ Turner describes it as a convivial relationship where "productive consumers" engage with the star image: "star representations are mass-mediated and transformed. The audience also actively engages in consuming and selecting images and preferable lifestyle models."³²⁴

In parallel lines, the Egyptian journalist Wā'il Luṭfī traces the ascension of the televangelist Amr Khaled³²⁵ at the end of the 1990s, aided by the engagement of Sāliḥ Kāmil, Saudi

³²⁰ Van Nieuwkerk. "Part One. The 1980's: Celebrating Piety," 13.

³²¹ Turner, Graeme. *Understanding Celebrity*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013.

³²² Van Nieuwkerk. "Part One. The 1980's: Celebrating Piety," 14.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 15.

³²⁴ Turner. *Understanding Celebrity*.

³²⁵ Amr Khaled: Egypt's Once Hip Preacher Turned Symbol of the Past." *Fanack.com*. 23 August 2017. <https://fanack.com/faces/features-insights/amr-khaled~89445/> .

businessman and owner of Arab Radio and Television network (ART). In 2002, Kāmil empowered the influential preacher and elevated the visibility of his discourse when he asked Khaled to become his personal religious consultant and to join his religious channel *Iqra'*.³²⁶

In response to the economic transformation triggered by neoliberal policies in Egypt, New Preachers offered an interpretation that promoted market Islam. This model appealed to young members of the middle-class who missed out on the government welfare project and who followed a business-oriented ideology praising the accumulation of wealth coupled with the preservation of piety.³²⁷ Simultaneously marketing religious values and endorsing the pursuit of happiness, the accumulation of wealth, and the acquisition of power comforted younger generations. Eventually, market Islam replaced the Salafi ideal of a good Muslim, creating a more tolerant model that both accommodates human desires and preserves religion as the “exclusive source of normative practice.”³²⁸

Since 2012, many digital activists and public influencers interested in social debates created a digital media forum that provides a space for contesting representations and support of Islamism. Within few years, sympathizers of Islamism could sense collectives forming to combat the moral authority that consolidated their visible and symbolic censorship of social life. Islamic revival discourse bearers started to reorganize to restore and defend the sanctity of fundamentalist interpretations in their theological or populist forms.

The methods deployed by New Preachers in the last decade of Mubarak’s regime came under criticism within the memosphere. Symbols of this wave of ideologues, like the preachers Amr Khaled (Figure 9) and Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī (Figures 10 and 11), were portrayed sarcastically in internet comics. In this critical meming, they appeared partly as swindlers manipulating their

³²⁶ لطفي، وائل. "دعاة السوبر ماركت: الجذور الأمريكية للدعاة الجدد". القاهرة: دار العين للنشر. 2019.

Luṭfī, Wā'il. *The Supermarket Preachers: The American Roots of New Preachers*. Cairo: Al-Ain Publishing House, 2019.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

³²⁸ Schielke, Samuli. “Ambivalent Commitments: Troubles of Morality, Religiosity and Aspiration among Young Egyptians.” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 39/2 (2009): 158–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20696806> .

audience by tinkering, patching, and twisting religious interpretations and citations to fit the *wasatiyya* framework while guarding its patriarchal standpoints. The sermons of the two preachers attracted young middle-class sectors because they delved into the sphere of personal freedoms, relations between sexes, and character building according to a model of personal development. Their proximity to issues pertinent to the public and personal discourse, together with their adoption of modern attire and language, helped them craft a system of moral indoctrination within a framework of religiosity.

Retrospectively, New Preachers were regarded as representatives of an epoch, who influenced two generations by promoting a lifestyle and a view of personhood focusing on societal conservatism regardless of any underlying hypocritical and discriminatory patterns of behavior. New Preachers established a quantitative parameter of piety based on the continuous calculation of the godly rewards (*thawāb*) granted to those abiding to a set of personal guidance schemes, like a point system, iterated in TV programs and cassette sermons series. Examples of this include stopping the shaking of hands between men and women, promoting early marriage to immunize youth against moral decay, encouraging the veiling of young girls who dress in a modern style, avoiding mixed-sex schools, and sending children to Islamic schools.

The new schemes of piety, however, were marketed in a forgiving and tolerant tone by cheerful men in elegant modern outfits. These preachers did not threaten with severe punishments and an eternity in hell for minor sins, like Salafī preachers and traditional sheikhs. Instead, they used a point system to allow endless balances in which rewards compensate for sins. Simultaneously, they employed apologetic religious justifications for systemic and individual injustices that trump free thought, subjectivity, reasoning, and mindful collective responsibility.



*Figure 9³²⁹

A photoshopped image showing four photos of the Islamic preacher Amr Khaled.

Upper right image: “You can spend the eve of Eid taking drugs and hash.”

Upper left image: “In the morning, go perform abulition and pray.”

Lower right image: “Stand between the hands of God and say: ‘God, I have sinned, forgive me.’”

Lower left image: “You will get relief, and the next day you will take drugs while secure and serene.”

Seen as crucial agents in perpetuating the dominance of Islamist factions in the sociopolitical life of the country, New Preachers’ discourse was deconstructed on many levels – especially given their role in deflecting attention from major political and economic problems. New Preachers, as an extension of societal Islamism, guaranteed the stagnation of personal freedoms and women’s rights legislations. The opened public debate after 2011, in addition to the direct confrontation between the state apparatus and Islamist groups, was an eye opener for broad swathes of society. Significant sectors began revisiting recent experiences and started to comprehend the way in which New Preachers operated within a complicated ideological and social engineering machine.

³²⁹ Televangelist Amr Khaled lost a huge number of his Islamist fans during his political transformation from 2011 to 2013. Voting for Sisi and not supporting the Brotherhood after 2013 led some to accuse him of hypocrisy, especially since he was on the side of the Islamists during his peak popularity in the 2000s. He was portrayed by many critics as one of the principal figures popularizing youth mobilizations for Islamism, encouraging the mass veiling of young girls, and mediating *wasatiyya* school under the slogan of “moderate” Islam, which was popularized as part of the package of market Islam during these years.

Amr Khaled: Egypt’s Once Hip Preacher Turned Symbol of the Past.” *Fanack.com*. 23 August 2017. <https://fanack.com/faces/features-insights/amr-khaled~89445/> .



*Figure 10³³⁰

To the right

(Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)): “When you argue with a male atheist.”

To the left

(Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī, a young preacher who emerged after 2000): “When you argue with a female atheist.”

The contrast mocks the way in which New Preachers have essentially refashioned the Islamist piety project to suit a growing female audience. The photoshopped image implies discursive convergence between *da’wa* and militant jihadism by highlighting the triviality of the formalistic and decorative differences that are used by Islamists to target younger, middle-class, and female audiences.

Historically, major contestations of national identity have focused on the arts, gender, and religion. At the turn of the twentieth century, Egyptian culture was a battlefield between modernist and fundamentalist groups, fraught with power relations and identity conflicts. Art as a stronghold for modernist projects, kept being used and monopolized by the successive political regimes to confer the cultural meanings of nationhood, as asserts the anthropologist Lila Abu Lughod,³³¹ with particular emphasis on the Nasserite state. The disparity between the two visions (modernist/fundamentalist) is particularly evident in the centrality of women’s place in society as symbols of the nation from the 1920s onward:

³³⁰ Published on Facebook page “*Iz’āg ‘Ilmī*” (Scientific Nuisance). 2 March 2019.

³³¹ Abu Lughod. *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005.

“From the 1920s onward, coinciding with the lifting of the veil among urban women and the grown public visibility of women, the ‘new woman’ became exemplary. The image of the ‘new woman’ was based on educated, young elite woman who unveiled. Unveiling became a metaphor for national independence, a metaphor that was contested.³³² In debating the issue of the veil, contestants of both sides had come to see veiled women as symbols of the nation, either of its backwardness or its purity. Religious nationalists supported veiling as a sign of moral virtue, and women became markers of cultural purity. The more secular-oriented nationalists preferred the ‘new woman’ and adopted the veil as a sign of backwardness”³³³



*Figure 11

Top image

Preacher Muṣṭafā Ḥusnī from a famous video³³⁴ in which he explains via demonstration various incorrect ways to wear the hijab. He also denounces tight tops and trousers, details the seductive parts of women’s bodies, and calls on women to avoid highlighting these areas in order to conform to his interpretation of modesty, as described in the Quranic scripture.

Bottom image

Caption: “He convinces you to cover your hair then he goes to

improve his looks with a hair transplant.”

³³² Baron. *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, 57-82.

³³³ Van Nieuwkerk. “Part Two. The 1990’s: Debating Religion, Gender, and the Performing Arts in the Public Sphere,” 91.

³³⁴ umjoriy. “مصطفى حسنى بيتكلم عن الحجاب وليس البنات.” Keshow.Flv.” YouTube, October 15, 2010.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3mGmheEdck> .



*Figure 12³³⁵

The comic features Sheikh Hāzim Shūmān³³⁶ during a televised 2011 sermon in which he hysterically addressed Muhammed al-Baradei³³⁷ as a leader of the liberals: “What is liberalism Baradei?” He replied, “*liberāliyya* means that your mother removes her hijab.” His sermon gained him instant notoriety. Non-Islamists widely ridiculed him, and he became a source of embarrassment to the Salafis.³³⁸ In the comic, Shūmān’s statement is modified to: “What is liberalism? It means that your mother eats cupcakes with ‘dicks’ on top.”

The comic refers to the debate that ignited after leaked pictures of a group of members of Al-Jazīra Sports Club, an old aristocratic institution in the highbrow Zamālek neighborhood in Cairo, sparked anger on social media.³³⁹ The leaked

³³⁵ Abd Elaziz, Eslam. Facebook, January 19, 2021. <https://cutt.ly/DvibmHY>.

³³⁶ “Hazem Shouman is a Mansoura-based preacher. Before the revolution, he regularly appeared on Salafist TV channels like Al Nas and Al Rahma. He rose to fame following the revolution with his inflammatory attacks on non-Islamists.”

Tadros. *Mapping Egyptian Islamism*, 31.

³³⁷ Muhammed el-Baradei [Muḥammad Muṣṭafa al-Barādī] is an Egyptian legal scholar and diplomat. He was the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). He and the IAEA were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 "for their efforts to prevent nuclear energy from being used for military purposes and to ensure that nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is used in the safest possible way." In 2010, he returned to Egypt to contribute to the political mobilization that preceded the revolution in 2011. Afterwards, he participated in the postrevolutionary scene as a liberal leader of a newly formed political party and as a potential presidential candidate. He was interim vice president of Egypt from 14 July 2013 until his resignation on 14 August 2013 after the bloody dispersal of the Brotherhood sit-ins.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Mohamed ElBaradei | Biography & Facts,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, January 29, 2008, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohamed-ElBaradei>.

³³⁸ Elmasry, Moustafa. “الداعية حازم شومان يهاجم البرادعي ويقول له دولة مدنية يعني أمك ما تلبس حجاب يا أيها الليبرالي اللي بنتك متجوزه.” Youtube, March 28, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f29AmlTFc0w>.

³³⁹ “تتلفه هأول،” #نادي_الجزيرة#تورنة_نادي_الجزيرة#مصر فضيحة تورنة نادي الجزيرة بنكهة الاعضاء التناسلية January 18, 2021,

pictures; deployed in creating many videos and footage online, show a celebration where a group of middle-age and old women, most if all non-veiled, sitting around boxes of cakes and pies shaped in the form of sexual organs of men and women. Joyously, the group of club members, of higher social status, seemed unaware of the potential leaking of their photos, while eating the cakes in a small-scale private celebration.

The social debates permeating the digital web routinely entail moral issues and judgments. On a weekly basis, phenomena of a moralistic nature preoccupy social networks. A huge division in opinions appears between conservative religious users³⁴⁰ and those who defend plurality, tolerance, and social freedom. Usually, the second party, much smaller, includes critical voices and meme creators who ridicule the conservative morals of the Egyptian middle-class and Islamists. The comic in Figure 12 reflects the views of the Islamist camp by applying Ḥāzīm Shūmān's perspective to the new situation, as part of the ongoing battle against the liberals.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr4LGBhtcU0> .

³⁴⁰ “Shame and Haram... The Case of the Women of Al-Jazira Club Excites Ahmed Moussa.” *Egy24 News*, January 18, 2021. <https://cutt.ly/MviYWlv> .



*Figure
13

Remarkably, the relative loudness of liberal collectives (which form when like-minded individuals consolidate into in-groups and attract others with the same cultural affinity) contributed to the consolidation of a defensive reactionary cult. Islamists and their supporters began expressing worry and anger against the collectives popularly known as “liberals, atheists and seculars.” In Figure 13, the same image macro of Ḥāzīm Shūmān was posted by the digital platform *Al-tarīq ilā llāh* (The Way to God) with the superimposed text: “What does liberalism mean Baradei.” The caption by Yūsif ’Ayman, a physician of Islamist inclination, reads as follows: “After full nine years, I feel that I owe Sheikh Ḥāzīm Shūmān an apology for every time I participated in mocking him after this absurdly comic scene. It is now obvious that he perfectly understood from the very beginning the meanings of liberalism and secularism as they are in the heads of Egyptian liberals and seculars.”³⁴¹

In Figures 12 and 13, the backlash against notions of liberal freedoms and secularism appears harshly intolerant and hostile. In both cases, it reflects an absolutist mindset nurtured by longstanding repression and a stagnant cultural imagination that has been, for decades, reluctant to examine dominant social values and governing normative discourses. In Shūmān’s 2011 sermon, he described liberalism as a doctrine that abolishes differences between Islam and other

³⁴¹ El-Ayman, Yousef Ahmed. “بعد تسع سنين كاملين، حاسس اني مدين باعتذار ل(حازم شومان) على كل تريقة شاركت وشاركت الميديا فيها!” Facebook, August 17, 2020. <https://cutt.ly/4viSMBi> .

beliefs, deprives Muslims of their supremacy, forbids nothing to women, and allows all forms of debauchery and moral depravity. Thus, as a reaction to other groups challenging the boundaries traced by hegemonic Islamist discourse, he paints a picture of total social collapse.

The offensive counterattack, in memes and comics that emerged after 2013, to criticize the hegemonic discourse on Islamic superiority equally borrows its sexualized metaphors. Ridiculing the phantasmagoric misogynistic imaginary of the Islamists, speaking from an authoritative moralistic position, influences the sarcastic views in these comics.

The Salafi narratives imbuing the social discourses of the 1970s emphasized the sexual power of old Muslim ancestors and the Prophet, portrayed the rape of war hostages as entitled to Muslim warriors, and glorified polygamy and female slavery. Scornfulness towards and objectification of women was disseminated in cassettes, TV shows, and mosques' sermons. In fact, fueling an obsession with the compartment of women was the cornerstone of efforts to mobilize and engage with the revivalists' audience. Offensive expressions in anti-Islamist digital caricatures reacted to decades of silence, in Egypt and the Arab region, when raising doubts about the Islamists' narratives or contesting the value system they reinforced, was met by horrendous attacks, death threats to public figures, and accusations of apostasy and blasphemy.³⁴²

Deploying profanity and sexualized metaphors is equally present in Islamist and anti-Islamist comics, especially when they criticize each other's views on personal freedoms. It is a form of breaking the Islamists' monopoly on judging morals and using sexualized insults to discredit their opponents.

³⁴² "جرائم السلطة الاجتماعية في حارتنا". دقائق.نت. 2018.

"The Crimes of the Social Authority in Our Alley." *Daqaeq.net*. 2018.

<https://daqaeq.net/%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85->

[/D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A9-](https://daqaeq.net/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A9-)

[/D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9/](https://daqaeq.net/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9/).



*Figure 14³⁴³

Top text: “When an atheist finds his mother in a consensual sexual relationship with the doorman.”

The photoshopped image integrated the meme face “Trying to hold a fart next to a cute girl in class” in the place of the atheist.³⁴⁴

Under the original post, many comments mock the obedience to the “atheism rules” that oblige *talhūd* (a sarcastic nomenclature given to “atheist (*mulhid*)” on Islamists’ pages) to accept consensual relationships and respect others’ choices. Islamist memes usually focus on misogynistic metaphors and frankly demeaning language that lacks humorous twists and word puns. A moralistic tone is highlighted in the criticism of the opposing camp’s political or social stances. Constantly, accusations of diminished or feminized masculinity are deployed against political opponents, secular, and liberal partisans. Islamists acting online have focused on women’s morality and comportment and attacked feminist voices and collectives emerging on digital platforms as a chief category of their political enemies.

The new feature of this anti-Islamist sensation is that it is joined by a broader base of common people and creators, not limited to the elite intellectual or political circles. Digital caricatures and shocking multimodal images mocking the male-gazed reading of Islamic history provided wider spaces for criticism on religious matters in general. As criticism expanded, more voices could speak fearlessly and different versions of interpretation of that history infiltrated the public debate.

³⁴³ “ميمز إسلامية مسروقة من صفحات ميمز إسلامية.” تلحد: الأديان صناعة بشرية والعلم يكفي Facebook, May 12, 2020.

<https://cutt.ly/vnznPgh>

³⁴⁴ Sn0wCh1ld. “Trying to Hold a Fart Next to a Cute Girl in Class.” *Know Your Meme*, December 29, 2015.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/trying-to-hold-a-fart-next-to-a-cute-girl-in-class> .

The middle-class morality system was shaken after witnessing young people outside of the intellectual elite criticizing religion. Anti-Islamist camps combined activists and creators with different political affiliations: with or against the political regime, right or left wing, anti-revolutionary or revolutionary. Their synergistic efforts, criticism, and sarcasm created a new reality whereby religious preachers lost full control over public discourse and media. Despite their different opinions and backgrounds, an implicit agreement was articulated on social networks in favor of defending a minor secular rationalized space of debate that defied Islamists' established censorship authority.

Portraying the grand sheikhs in internet jokes and recontextualizing their *fatwas* (religious advisory opinion from official institutions or random sheikhs or preachers) in cultural representations, however, stirred angry accusations of breaching sanctity and crossing red lines, which summoned large sectors to the battle ground. Reporting satirical content and deploying social bots to spam critical posts, gradually established a new ecosystem where digital warfare grew clashing audiences and redefined social camps.

Egyptian neofundamentalist currents reorganized their digital landscape on Facebook³⁴⁵ and twitter to approach younger generations and provide argumentation catalogues, mediated in memes, critical posts, and YouTube channels. Younger generations of *da'wa*, mostly based in Qatar³⁴⁶ and Turkey, beside Egyptian Salafi preachers, inaugurated a multitude of platforms to

345 *Ṭaḥālib* (algae) طحالب is a social media page on Facebook (2.2M followers) and YouTube (1.07M subscribers) that was founded in December 2018. This page addresses the concerns of younger generations from an Islamic point of view, focusing on topics such as sexuality, feminism, science, art, and culture. *Ṭaḥālib* employs post-Islamist methods of tinkering with Western references, popular science propositions, ideological textbooks, self-development brochures, and religious scripture.

@Tahalip. “طحالب.” YouTube, n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/c/Tahalip/videos> .

طحالب “طحالب.” Facebook, n.d. <https://www.facebook.com/Tahalip> .

³⁴⁶ ‘Abdullah al-Sharīf is an Islamist influencer and Egyptian Youtuber who achieved fame after being introduced by al-Jazeera channels as a poet and blogger. Al- Sharif airs a weekly YouTube show from Doha wherein he leads hostile campaigns against the Egyptian regime, incites violence against security forces, and defends anti-secular and anti-regime Brotherhood narratives. His YouTube program (4.64M subscribers) uses classic Islamist, Salafist, misogynistic, and exclusionary language to discuss art, politics, and other intellectual topics.

combat the rising wave of declared atheism, feminist collectives and secularists. Some of these platforms faced campaigns of reporting for ‘promoting hate speech and terrorist messages,’ yet their alternative pages still garner big following in hundreds of thousands.³⁴⁷



*Figure 15

Muḥammad Mitwallī al-Sha‘rāwī holding a book by Karl Marx: “The son of a whore says that religion is the opium of the people; this means I am a drug dealer LOL.”

Al-Sha‘rāwī is the iconic sheikh who garnered an unprecedented semi-divine status through a lengthy career in Islamic preaching, especially when he played a major mediatic role during Sadat time on national TV. He continued preaching under Mubarak on a weekly timeslot after Friday prayers throughout the 1980s and 1990s, where he offered the most accessible and popularized interpretation of the Quran in the Egyptian dialect.

His facile interpretation, simple rural attitude, and eloquent performance captured hearts and minds and ensured the propagation of a reactionary fundamentalist discourse among millions of Egyptians across generations. And even though he did not belong to political Islamic circles and was considered a loyal adherent to official religious and political institutions, his influence surpassed all his contemporaries in disseminating the Islamic revival ethos, except for its political

@abdullahelsharif. “عبدالله الشريف Abdullah Elsharif.” YouTube, n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/c/abdullahelsharif/about> .

³⁴⁷ *Quṭūf min al-’Ask* (337K followers) is a Facebook page founded in 2016. It was eventually removed after having reached two million followers, at which point the account administrator created an alternative page. This account focuses on responding to and battling so called “destructive” liberal and secularist thought with particular attention to ethical rectification, anti-feminist messages, and gender discriminatory discourse.

URL: <https://www.facebook.com/Quotooff>

dimension. Even today, his posters are commonly found hanging on the façade of minibuses, houses, and popular sugar cane juice shops (Figure 16).

Daring to meme the taboo that al-Sha‘rāwī embodies and criticize his archived sermons reveals the magnitude of the subversive tide that energized numerous groups and individuals. Especially that these groups do not belong to the typical secular or intellectuals’ circles who, themselves, faced huge resistance when they criticized al-Sha‘rāwī while alive.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁸ The famous Egyptian writer Yūsuf ‘Idrīs publicly apologized in the Egyptian newspaper ‘Akhbār Al-Yūm to al-Sha‘rāwī for describing him in 1982 as the “Muslim Rasputin who dominates the simple-minded people.” In his apology, ‘Idrīs wrote that “al- Sha‘rāwī is the most important Islamic phenomena since the four Imams (founders of Islamic *Fiqh*).” Similar incidents occurred with different journalists and writers in the 1980s and 1990s, and, until our day, celebrities avoid attacking al- Sha‘rāwī due to his persistent popularity.

سعيد الشحات يكتب: ذات يوم... 8 فبراير 1986. يوسف إدريس: «الشيخ الشعراوي أهم ظاهرة دينية إسلامية ظهرت منذ أيام الأئمة الأربعة الكبار» - اليوم السابع، February 8, 2022.

Sa‘īd Al-Shahhāt writes: One day... February 8, 1986. Yūsuf Idrīs: “Sheikh Al-Shaarawy is the most important Islamic religious phenomenon that appeared since the days of the four great imams, Abu Ḥanīfa, Al-Shāfi‘ī, Mālik, and Ibn Ḥanbal, may God be pleased with them.”

<https://www.youm7.com/story/2022/2/8/%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8-%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85-8-%D9%81%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1-1986-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%81-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B3/5647735>



*Figure 16

The image features al-Sha‘rāwī with the bottom text reading: “So you want to live freely between us, and do stuff that we would die to do but we cannot... Why? Do you think we are *dawāwīth*?!”

Dawāwīth is the plural of *dayyūth*, a pejorative classical Arabic word meaning “pimp” or “cuck”. A *dayyūth* is a man who is indifferent to (or does not feel ashamed of) his wife’s infidelity and who is reluctant to censor the comportment of women within his household.

For decades, the term “*dawāwīth*” has been regularly employed by Salafī preachers in sermons in which they call on men to impose the veil on the women of their family, to regulate their behaviors and clothing, to ban them from communicating with other men, and more. The implication is that, if a man does not do so, he is a *dayyūth* who will be expelled from God’s kingdom (according to a Ḥadīth attributed to the Prophet).³⁴⁹ Lately, however, new words with

³⁴⁹ “It was narrated from Salim bin ‘Abdullah that his father said: ‘The Messenger of Allah said: “There are three at whom Allah will not look on the Day of Resurrection: The one who disobeys his parents, the woman who imitates men in her outward appearance, and the cuckold. And there are three who will not enter Paradise: The one who disobeys his parents, the drunkard, and the one who reminds people of what he has given them.””

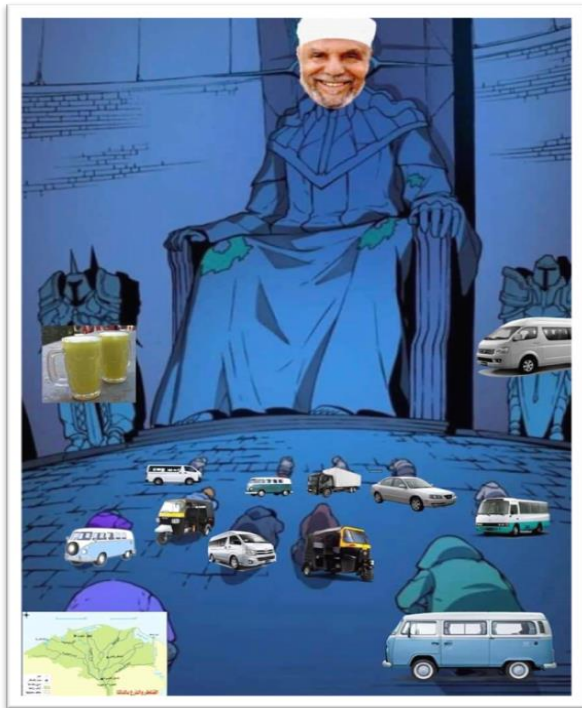
Reference : Sunan an-Nasa’i 2562 (“a collection of hadith compiled by Imam Ahmad an-Nasa’i (rahimahullah). His collection is unanimously considered to be one of the six canonical collections of hadith (Kutub as-Sittah) of the Sunnah of the Prophet”). “About - Sunan An-Nasa’i - Sunnah.Com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه و سلم),” n.d., <https://sunnah.com/nasai/about> .

In-book reference : Book 23, Hadith 128

English translation : Vol. 3, Book 23, Hadith 2563

“Sunan An-Nasa’i 2562 - The Book of Zakah - كتاب الزكاة - Sunnah.Com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه و سلم),” n.d., <https://sunnah.com/nasai:2562> .

similar misogynistic and anti-feminist connotations (like “soy boy,” “low-T” (low testosterone), and “nu-male”)) have permeated American slang and the memesphere, which boosted the use of equivalent vocabulary in Arabic, like *dayyūth*, by digital neofundamentalist preachers.



*Figure 17

Illustration of Sheikh al-Sha'rāwī using the world famous meme template “Shin-Sang/Statue of God.” According to the meme database “Know Your Meme,” this meme originates from the image of people bowing down to the hidden boss Shin-sang in the Korean “Manhwa” (comic) “Solo Levelin.” The image became an object-labeling template and initially gained wide popularity among the Indonesian community. Then, the meme achieved international fame when it appeared on the Facebook page “Leo Legend Messi” on July 14th, 2020, where it showed many soccer players bowing down to Lionel Messi.³⁵⁰

The more popularized that comics related to religious personalities become, the more Islamists and hardline conservatives are provoked to respond. And despite the sweeping dominance of Islamic media in the Arab digital scene, Islamist influencers put on the top of their priorities framing a new enemy of non-conformist digital activists and groups.

By integrating popular culture icons into their work, as elaborated in the figures below, and focusing on local social trends, different comics pages addressed religious censorship and delivered critical stances to a broader audience. In parallel to the mounting attacks on “seculars and atheists” religious hypocrisy and bigotry became targets of digital caricature. This move increased the appeal of these caricatures to online groups forming against the obvious attempts of the regime to restrict free expression, which gained new momentum and put restrictive standards

³⁵⁰ JustOrdinaryMan. “Shin-Sang/Statue of God.” *Know Your Meme*, February 18, 2021.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/shin-sang-statue-of-god> .

on the type of speech tolerated on social networks. It was obvious that, despite detentions and courts sentencing young activists of secular and atheist inclinations,³⁵¹ the governmental judicial directions were being met with increasing ridicule and contempt.

³⁵¹ According to Ishāq Ibrāhīm, an officer with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), in August 2013 more than 60 people received sentences based on accusations of “contempt of religion.” In 2012, the 27-year-old blogger Albert Šābir received a three-year sentence on charges of blasphemy for creating a webpage called “Egyptian Atheists.” In 2013, a Coptic Christian lawyer, Rumān Murād Sa‘d, was sentenced in absentia for “ridiculing” the Quran. Until 2015, many secular activists were arrested based on accusations of blasphemy and contempt of religion. Karīm al-Bannā, a 21-year-old student, was sentenced to three years in prison in January 2015 for saying on Facebook that he was an atheist. In September 2020, Egyptian security services arrested 3 suspects in the Sharkia governorate who were accused of reviving the “Quranic” movement.

Jo Schiatti, “Egypt Author given 3-Year Jail Term for ‘insulting Religion’ amid Legal Row.” *Middle East Eye*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-author-given-3-year-jail-term-insulting-religion-amid-legal-row> .



*Figure 18

A scene from the film *al-Nāzir* (The School Principal/The Beholder) (2000), starring the late comedian ‘Alā’ Waliy al-Dīn. The scene depicts a naïve school principal on his first day addressing the students:

Al-Nāzir: “Why doesn’t God respond when I pray to him? Why doesn’t he listen to me?”

Students’ reactions:

- “Block you atheist.”
- “God responds in the right time.”
- “I will get you son of a bitch.”
- “You infidel bastard... etc.”

The comic emulates the reactions to

al-nāzir’s speech in the original film,³⁵² which incited wide-spread chaos in the school playground and highlights the way that this corresponds to reactions on social media against comments on religious matters.

Recalling ‘Alā’ Waliy al-Dīn’s character in this particular scene is meant to recontextualize the original script’s subtext. The film narrates the story of the school principal’s son who inherits the private school after his father (the owner and principal) passed away. The son is brought up under the severe control and censorship of his cruel despotic father, who runs the school in a similar method. The son matures in a closed environment, isolated under the pretext of “protection,” and prohibited from practicing the activities of a young man freed from his father’s tutelage. The schoolchildren also live in a climate of fear and terror, surveilled and oppressed by constant

³⁵² “أبو عبدالله المدني,” مدرسة عاشور 352, April 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=neC8EAYITDs>.

threatening and yelling from *al-nāzir* (a double entendre in Arabic hinting at the beholder or the supervisor).

After *al-nāzir*'s death, we discover that the school was performing every function but education. When students were temporarily liberated from his power, pupils rushed out of their classrooms, started beating their teachers, spent their time playing violent games, and fled school. The son discovered that he had no social life, no experience, and no friends. He had never flirted with girls and did not know how to integrate into his own generation. In the meantime, Ṣalāḥ, the new *nāzir*, had to take his father's place and face the chaotic situation in the school without any previous experience.

Meming the scene captures a set of resemblances with the liberated contestations on religious matters and the suffocating oppression by authority figures and societal forces. It portrays the battle between confident holders of prejudices and pejorative judgments, who revel in chaos, and those who dare, innocently, like the new *nāzir*, to try new methods and contest prevalent discourses.

‘Ādil Imām, who could be described as the most popular Egyptian comedian in modern history, is one of the biggest meme-generating figures. Due to the familiarity of his grimaces and the popularity of his comedies, Imām's images pervade the memesphere, accompanying various social trends. One of the image macros³⁵³ that is heavily mediated in digital caricatures came from his family comedy “*Murgān Aḥmad Murgān*,”³⁵⁴ where he plays the role of an extraordinarily rich businessman. His sons and single daughter criticize his lack of education, so he decides to study at university and earn a higher education degree. The film bases its morale on the common middle-class wisdom that “money cannot buy everything” and, using light comedy, highlights the

³⁵³ “Image Macro is a broad term used to describe captioned images that typically consist of a picture and a witty message or catchphrase. On discussion forums and imageboards, image macros can be also used to convey feelings or reactions towards another member of the community, similar to its predecessor, emoticons. It is one of the most common forms of internet memes.”

gi97ol. “Image Macros.” *Know Your Meme*, February 29, 2012. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/image-macros> .

³⁵⁴ “Morgan Ahmed Morgan.” IMDb, July 4, 2007. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1423961/> .

unethical behavior of the nouveaux rich, who acquire their wealth depending on corruption, business contacts with high-level authorities, and favoritism. Imām's character (Murgān) combines vulgar manners and an unfounded sense entitlement, which prompts him to establish a business network within the university, by funding investment projects, heading the football team and drama club, and bribing university staff, all to establish popularity within the students.

Imām was always famous for his frank critique of Islamism, whether in his movies or in real life. His stances sharply confronted fanatic incitement against artists and intellectuals and a hatred towards the arts and actors by Islamist voices. He was accused of blasphemy and contempt of religion many times along his career and was the target of many lawsuits by Islamist lawyers. He even received a three-month jail sentence for insulting Islam in his films and theatre plays in 2012, after Islamists won a sweeping majority in the parliamentary elections.³⁵⁵

During the 1990s, Imām starred in a series of films where the scriptwriter Waḥīd Ḥāmid analyzed and dissected Islamism. He effectively supported the Egyptian security forces in their confrontation against terrorist groups by presenting his film *al-'Irhābī* (The Terrorist) by the author Lenin al-Ramlī in 1994. In these films, Imām was keen to sarcastically portray Islamists and caricaturize their propositions. Showing Islamist characters (whether in his leading role or roles ascribed to other actors) that assemble a blend of extremism, religious hypocrisy, and imbecility incited fury within Islamist communities. His name topped the lists of public figures that were targeted during the wave of assassinations of politicians, intellectual and cultural celebrities in the 1990s.

In his attempts to mingle with the university students and gain popularity, Murgān joins the meeting of students' religious club "*Nūr al-Ḥaqq*" (The Light of Truth). In the scene between Murgān and Maḥmūd (the head of the club),³⁵⁶ they speak about the decadent morality of youth

³⁵⁵ Reuters Staff. "Egyptian Film Star Sentenced for Insulting Islam." *Reuters*, February 2, 2012.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-actor-jail-idUSTRE8111AJ20120202> .

³⁵⁶ The original scene from "Morgan Ahmed Morgan" posted on YouTube.

F.M Production. "🤔 ومعانا الاخ مرجان عضو جديد في اسرة نور الحق _ السلام عليكم يا حوده' اضحك من قلبك مع مرجان وحوده"" . YouTube, February 22, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3KABufE5Tg> .

generations, mourning the lost piety and moral commitment. Murgān says that he is shocked discovering that his daughter and son have love relationships with colleagues at the university, while Maḥmūd views that unofficial customary marriage (*zawāj urfī*) is the religious resolution to protect the youth from moral degeneracy.

Under the Egyptian laws, customary marriage means a marriage which is not officially registered. When a valid contract is made by the woman's guardian in the presence of two witnesses, the contract is sound according to the Sharia. The recording of the contract by the marriage official (*ma'dhūn*- responsible for performing and registering marriages) is not a precondition for the validity of the contract according to Sharia. However, the failure to formally register marriage prevents courts from hearing cases involving matrimonial disputes arising from such marriages, which often results in many catastrophic consequences in cases of divorce, pregnancy, and the effective loss of women's rights in official marriages.³⁵⁷

The image of both characters (Murgān and Maḥmūd) became the template for a viral meme symbolizing the double standards of Islamist leaders (like Maḥmūd) who capitalize on piety performance and deploy religious arguments, arbitrarily, to their own interest.

The intertwining of creativity and fixedness in image macros (Figures 19 to 22) reveals the power of multimodal constructs relying on fixed elements within changing texts, and the effect of combining conventional and recognizable (prototypical) connotations with peripheral transformative elements. The “syntactic schematicity”³⁵⁸ providing fixed syntactic slots/punchlines like *We Ma'ānā* (I introduce) or *brother Murgān* (calling each other brother is common among Islamists) standardizes a vocabulary and direction (e.g. criticism to religious hypocrites). Modified texts and interchangeable topics remain framed within the initial prototyping of a well-known multimodal construct.

³⁵⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. “Egypt: Customary Marriage (Zawaj Urfi; Zawj Orfy; Zawha ORFI; Gawaz Urfi; Various Other Spellings) Particularly with Respect to Interfaith Marriages.” *Refworld*, May 1, 1999. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ab8910.html> .

³⁵⁸ Zenner, Eline, and Dirk Geeraerts. “One Does Not Simply Process Memes: Image Macros as Multimodal Constructions.” In *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay Research*.



*Figure 19

Top image

Maḥmūd: “I introduce our brother Murgān, a party boy who never prays and spends the night watching xxxxn (referring to a porn site).”

Bottom image

Murgān: “In need for Mekka, its odor and its spirituality.”³⁵⁹



*Figure 20

Top image

Maḥmūd: “I introduce brother Murgān, the conqueror of atheists.”

Bottom image

Murgān: “If evolutionary theory is true, why haven’t monkeys evolved yet?”³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ “‘Iz ‘āg ‘Ilmī’ (Scientific Nuisance).” Facebook, August 18, 2018.

³⁶⁰ “‘Iz ‘āg ‘Ilmī’ (Scientific Nuisance).” Facebook, October 26, 2018.



*Figure 21

Top image

Maḥmūd: “I introduce brother Murgān. He just watched the video of an earthquake in Japan.”

Bottom image

Murgān: “It’s God’s punishment for wrongdoers. God keep Muslim countries safe.”³⁶¹



*Figure 22

Top image

Maḥmūd: “I introduce the sheikh of Islam Ibn Taymiyya.”³⁶²

Bottom image

Ibn Taymiyya: “He should repent and then be killed.”

³⁶¹ “‘Iz ‘āg ‘Ilmī’ (Scientific Nuisance).” Facebook, December 22, 2018.

³⁶² “Takī al-dīn Aḥmad Ībn Taymiyya (born in Ḥarrān on 10 *rabī’ I* 661/22 January 1263, died in Damascus on 20 *dhū l-ka`da* 728/26 September 1328), theologian and jurisconsult, belonging to Ḥanbalism. He came from a family that had already given this school two well-known men, his uncle Faḥr al-dīn (d. 622/1225) and his paternal grandfather Maḥdī al-dīn (d. 653/1255) Even today, Ibn Taymiyya remains, along with al-Gḥazālī (d. 505/1111) and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), one of the authors who have made the strongest impact on contemporary Islam, especially in Sunni circles.”

Laoust, H., “Ibn Taymiyya”, in: *Encyclopédie de l’Islam*. Consulted online on 25 September 2023. <https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.accesdistant.sorbonne-universite.fr/entries/encyclopedie-de-l-islam/ibn->

In Figure 22, Murgān is replaced by an imagined picture of Ibn Taymiyya, the Islamic jurist and theologian associated, in the contemporary readings, with Wahhabism and jihadism.³⁶³ His fatwas were frequently popularized in contemporary religious sermons by Salafist preachers as the legal Islamic punishment for apostates and skeptics of the faith.³⁶⁴ The *ḥanbalī* (belonging to Ḥanbalism) 14th century theologian is usually quoted as a reference by wahhābī jurists and ultimately jihādī activists, and therefore assimilated in the common Arab liberal discourse, and in Western academic or journalistic accounts of jihādism as a Godfather of extremist currents.³⁶⁵

The phrase “he must be killed after he repents” came in one of Ibn Taymiyya’s contested fatwas where he states: “Whoever delays the prayer for industry, hunting, or serving a professor (...) until the sun sets, he must be punished. Rather, he must be killed according to the majority of scholars after he repents (or ‘unless’ he repents).”³⁶⁶

[taymiyya-SIM_3388?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopedie-de-l-islam&s.q=Ibn%2BTaymiyya](#)

³⁶³ “Ibn Taymiyya, for his part, is a leading figure in the history of Islamic civilization, not just medieval civilization. The places of reception of his thought that are today most often mentioned are the Wahhabi experience, Salafist thought and the ideology of certain contemporary radical groups that rely on Ibn Taymiyya to formulate a radical critique of the governments of their countries. The most cited example is the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981, where the text that inspired the perpetrators referred extensively to the fatwa against the Mongols traditionally attributed to Ibn Taymiyya. Although the name of Ibn Taymiyya is on many lips today, it is no less true that, as one well-known scholar recently stated, it is still missing a systematic study and an update on the richness of his reflections and the different ways in which it has been received until the present day.”

Bori, Caterina. “Théologie Politique et Islam à Propos d’Ibn Taymiyya (m. 728/1328) et Du Sultanat Mamelouk,” *Revue De L’histoire Des Religions*, January 1, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.4000/rhr.5225> .

³⁶⁴ This comic was published by *al-‘Almangiyya* (The Seculars), a Facebook page (25.2k followers) identifying itself as “against all forms of religious, nationalistic and revolutionary dogmas.” <https://www.facebook.com/secularism> .

³⁶⁵ The political scientist Gilles Kepel deploys Ibn Taymiyya’s re-integration, as a respected jurist, by the contemporary radical wahhābī movements in the 1970s and 1980s to justify President Sadat’s assassination in the 1980s and to condemn the Saudi regime and calling for its overthrow.

Kepel, Gilles. *Jihad: The trail of political Islam*, 72. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.

³⁶⁶ “عبد العالی زینون. ”ابن تیمیة.. مفتی، ینستاب وإلا قتل” *Irfaasawtak*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.irfaasawtak.com/articles/2018/05/07/%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A5%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84> .

Chapter II: Reorganizing the Religious Field: In Search of an Imagined Centrim

1. True Islam as a Contested Category

*Figure 23

[1] Ahmed Helmy: “I want to go to heaven.”

[2] Advice God:³⁶⁷ “We need a religion so you can go to heaven.”

[3] Advice God: “You must choose between 4200 religions.”

[4] Advice God: “You chose Abrahamic religions? Then, start looking for the true religion among them.”

[5] Advice God: “You chose Islam? Now kid, start looking for *al-firqa al-nādjīya* (the saved sect).”³⁶⁸



³⁶⁷ The image of the elderly man is Michelangelo's artistic rendition of God in his piece, *The Creation of the Sun and Moon*. Since 2010, this image has been regularly used in advice image macro series, usually captioned with text denouncing religion (often Christianity) by pointing out apparent biblical contradictions and attributing mischievous behaviors to God. In the Egyptian version, this image was integrated into scenes from popular film and appeared in comics representing God speaking to Muslims.

Imasillypiggy. “Advice God.” Know Your Meme, December 28, 2010. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/advice-god>.

³⁶⁸ Mentioned in ḥadīth, the term *al-firqa al-nādjīya* ("surviving group" or "saved sect") was used by the Prophet to describe those who hold on to their beliefs in the face of challenge and hardship. This term has been used in the literature of many sectarian/religious groups, usually accompanied by the claim that this group alone has access to the ultimate truth. Theologians in different historical periods have referenced this concept to inspire orthodox religious movements and radical fundamentalist groups, including Salafists and Jihadists. In doing so, they take after the ideologue Sayed Qutb, who reaffirmed the centrality of *al-‘uṣba al-mu‘mina* (the believing league) or *al-tā’ifa al-mu‘mina* (the believing sect) in his paradigm. The term has been used in discourses accusing liberal Muslims and others of distorting religious belief (sometimes leading to the killing of “infidels” and nonconformists for disagreement over opinion/belief). This idea has been used to consolidate the monopoly of an Islamic priesthood on interpreting

The comic imitates a scene in “‘*Asal 'Aswad* (Molasses)-2010,”³⁶⁹ a film starring the famous comedian Aḥmad Ḥilmī. In the original scene, a civil registry officer demands a bribe from the protagonist before finishing his papers. In the film, Ḥilmī performs the role of an American of Egyptian origins who decides to visit Egypt to explore his roots and strengthen his relationship with his motherland. In this scene, he tries to obtain an Egyptian passport, but he had to go through typical Egyptian bureaucratic obstacles.³⁷⁰ In the meme, the image of advice God replaces the government officer, and the difficult bureaucratic process is parodied by deploying Islamist vocabulary to mimic the endless search for the contested “good Muslim.”

In Sayyid Quṭb’s resurrective framework of the Prophet’s Sunna, the path to a true Islam, according to Sunni Islamist orthodoxy, starts with the creation of *al-ṭā’ifa al-mu’mina* (the community of the believers). The notion is elusively used by all categories of Islamist movements and institutions. It is also the most popular alibi of “moderate” Islamic Ulama who insist on tracing distinctions between their theological schools (*madrasa*) and those of political Islam groups. Only Salafist currents rhetorically crystallize a conception of true Islam:



“In their sermons, they preached “Sunni orthodoxy” against the beliefs and practices of Sufis, Shia, Christians, and liberal Muslims; they called for ultraconservative social practices inspired by the Prophet’s Sunna (tradition), producing fatwas and books prohibiting *ikhtilaṭ* (gender-mixing) and men shaking hands with women or encouraging Muslim men to grow beards but they largely avoided discussing hot political topics, and when they did discuss issues of governance, they stuck to theoretical statements. For instance, they considered democracy, and all kinds of political systems claiming their legitimacy from the people and not from God, to be contrary to Islam, but they avoided publicly denouncing the Egyptian regime. They also refused to participate in elections, arguing that change would only come from below by spreading their message to create *al-ṭā’ifa al-mu’mina* (the community of the believers).”³⁷¹

scripture.

Bukay, David. “Islam’s Hatred of the Non-Muslim,” *Middle East Forum*, June 1, 2013, <https://www.meforum.org/3545/islam-hatred-non-muslim> .

³⁶⁹ “فيلم - غسل إسود - 2010 مشاهدة اونلاين، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” elCinema.com, n.d., <https://elcinema.com/work/1313173/> .

³⁷⁰ The original scene from *‘Asal Aswad* (Molace) showing the visit to the civil registry office.

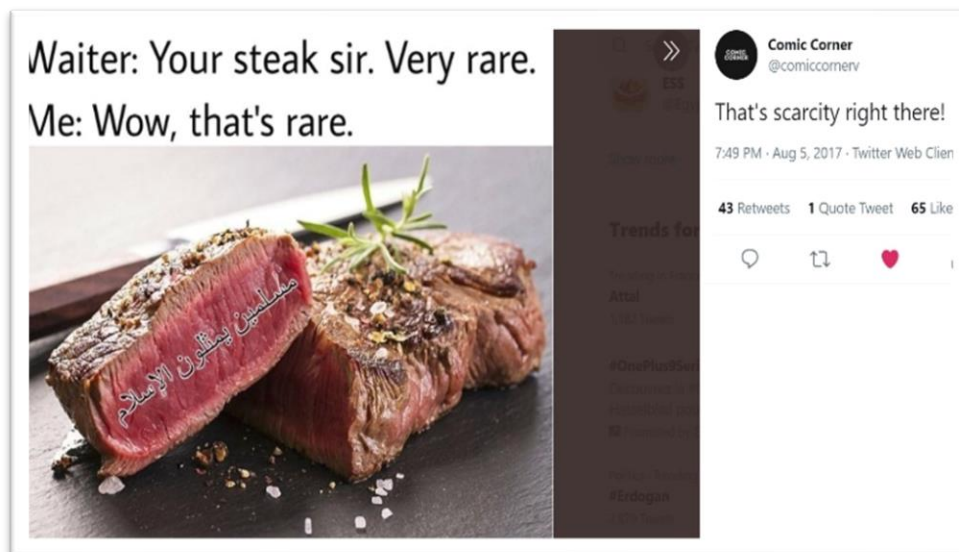
Rotana Cinema. “لما تروح مصلحة حكومية تخلص ورق مهم”  . YouTube, November 3, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oIy5JAvyflg> .

³⁷¹ Lacroix, Stéphane, “Egypt’s Pragmatic Salafis: The Politics of Hizb al-Nour.”

The term “true Islam” is a contested category, which some interpret as legitimizing of violence and death. It is often deployed when nonviolent fundamentalists deny the relationship between Islam and Muslims who commit acts of terrorism or take extremist positions. “Does not represent the true Islam” is a commonly used phrase by sheikhs, preachers, and Islamist apologists in reaction to those who argue that religious interpretation endorses and justifies extremism and terrorist assaults.

The phrase was caricatured in internet comics to undermine individuals who are reluctant to acknowledge the ties between religious discourses and actual consequences. The notion of “true Islam,” as utilized by entrenched religious institutions, is commonly used to distance terrorist groups and archaic fatwas from an imagined pure core of Islam. Thus, it allows defending the institutional tradition, and reinforces its monopoly over religious interpretation, without engaging in substantial reforms.



*Figure 24³⁷²
Text in Arabic:
“Muslims
representing Islam.”

³⁷² Comic Corner. “That’s Scarcity Right There!” Twitter, August 5, 2017.

<https://twitter.com/comiccornerv/status/893891708475387904> .



*Figure 25³⁷³

Actor Aḥmad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, hero of 1990s Egyptian drama series, and traditionally known for his melodramatic style:

“None of them represents true Islam, man.”

Sheikh al-Azhar Aḥmad al- Ṭayyib incorporated this phrase into his statements during a heated campaign against the French president’s utterances before and after the assassination of Professor Samuel Paty in 2020. After his meeting with the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, who arrived in Cairo after the exacerbation of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons crisis and the subsequent calls to boycott French products, al- Ṭayyib asserted his position describing the cartoons as insulting to Islam and Muslims as opposed to an expression of free speech. He stated: “Al-Azhar represents the voice of nearly two billion Muslims, terrorists do not represent us, and we are not responsible for their actions,” stressing that he stated that in many international forums.

The Charlie Hebdo cartoon crisis and anti-French boycott campaigns throughout Muslim countries stimulated diversified, partly unconventional, reactions on social networks. On the background of the widening rift between Islamists and non-Islamists, social media debates included voices that expressed support of French state protection of republican values against what they viewed as Islamic bigotry. These sectors viewed the official positions taken by the religious institution as an implicit sympathy with terrorist acts dissimulated by the defensive discourses expressing anger and calling for boycott.

³⁷³ Abd Elaziz, Eslam. Facebook, October 27, 2020. <https://cutt.ly/Ac3qvzb> .

Away from the intricacies of local French politics and the complex dimensions the regard of Islam, political Islam, and Islamophobia in France takes, the Egyptian debate on social networks focused on aspects of this controversy pertinent to local identitarian conflicts. The crisis and mobilization against this Western portrayal of the Prophet in sarcastic cartoons was viewed in light of regional conflicts that involved Islamists.

The social dialogue invited debates over the politicization of the crisis by regional governments (like the Turkish and Pakistani governments) and the contradictory positions taken by religious groups and institutions in reaction to violence and terrorism. The elevated tone of Sheikh al-Azhar against the French position (the French president's designation of Islamic terrorism and the support of cartoons as forms of cultural expression) looked very different when compared to his stance during the series of terrorist attacks that targeted Charlie Hebdo journalists, among other victims, in 2015.

In 2015, Ahmad al-Ṭayyib called on Muslims to ignore the Charlie Hebdo cartoons portraying the Prophet Muhammad. In his official statement, al-Ṭayyib declared:

“Al-Azhar denounces this sick imagination, and calls on Muslims to ignore this hateful absurdity, because the position of the Prophet of mercy and humanity is greater and higher than it can be subjected to charges that are free from all moral restrictions and civilized controls.”³⁷⁴

Other critical voices focused on Islamists' investment in the rising trend of self-serving purposes and highlighted their bigoted statements against the French president and the West as a form of counter racism that matched their oppressive attitudes at home. This interest in the relationship between local and international Islamist currents emerged as the result of the exposure of broader sectors of the public to regional politics and alliances in recent years. These debates, which focused on the Muslim Brotherhood's confrontation with the Egyptian state and alliances with or against Brotherhood expansion, influenced local audiences and stimulated online debates from polarized camps.

³⁷⁴ أحمد البحيري “Al-Azhar to Muslims: Ignore the Insult of Charlie Hebdo to the Prophet.” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, January 14, 2015. <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/629649> .

A sector of Egyptian secularists fueled debates that distinguished Islamophobic sentiments under the guise of free speech, in the French society, from the impossibility to limit freedom of speech and anticlericalism and mockery of religion as part of the country's DNA. The intercross of these Egyptian and French debates could be seen as the fruit of the deeper integration within the globalized web deliberations, and the growing understanding of the inseparability of the local context's dilemmas from the international frameworks that influence the Egyptian society and politics for centuries. The growth of Muslim communities in the West and the discourses around their religiosity, in the last decades, were resituated as part of the local debate on political Islam and the critique to its expanded networks of influence, as exemplified in the French and other European countries' cases.

Islamic comics and photoshopped images/posters played a role in the anti-French online mobilization. Also, a digital-warfare machine of fake news and misinformation shifted the attention away from the decapitation through the portrayal of France and the West as places where Muslims struggle with extreme forms of racism, discrimination, and Islamophobia. Islamist activists and sympathizers recalled French colonization of Muslim countries in Facebook and twitter posts and capitalized on historical circumstances to mobilize an online campaign of hatred, all under the guise of supporting the hundreds of thousands of disenfranchised Muslims living in Europe.

Some of the images and videos revived slogans of jihad and referenced conquering the West. This included openly racist statements against Western culture, which reiterated conventional Islamist epithets referencing a Western conspiracy and the West's perceived irreligiosity and immorality. The interplay of superiority and inferiority complexes towards an imagined Western excellence resonated with broad sectors of middle-class pious Egyptians who expressed different degrees of sympathy with Islamist campaigns.



*Figure 26

YouTube video titled “Macron’s wife (in a photoshopped image wearing the veil) surprises everybody as she converts to Islam, wears the veil, and demands a divorce.”³⁷⁵

Top text: “Macron’s wife converts to Islam.”

Superimposed text (in green): “Divorce me, infidel. *Allah 'Akbar.*”

The video was published on the YouTube news channel *Waqt al-Khabar* (News Time), of unknown political inclination, as a serious news piece, not an intended joke.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁵ “...!!” *زوجة ماكرون تفاجى الجميع بإعتناقها الإسلام وترتدي الحجاب امام ماكرون وتطلب الطلاق منه*. وقت الخبر ³⁷⁵ YouTube, October 31, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IamQUEIbjfc> .

³⁷⁶ In the video description on YouTube, *Waqt al-Khabar* channel identifies itself as follows: “*Waqt al-Khabar* is an Arab electronic news channel that seeks to provide purposeful content and various artistic, sports and political news from reliable sources.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IamQUEIbjfc> .



*Figure 27

The photoshopped image shows the Eiffel Tower topped by the jihadist flag. A knight on his horse wearing the traditional Arabic *ghutra* is facing the tower.

Superimposed text: “One day, their Paris will be our Paris.”



*Figure 28

Al-Yūm Al-Sābi‘ (the Seventh Day), one of the most popular news platforms in Egypt, widely followed on social networks, publishes fake news on the apology of Emmanuel Macron:

“I am sorry (in yellow bold font). Macron apologizes for the insulting cartoons for the first time, in reply to Al-Yūm Al-Sābi‘.”

The new dimensions of an otherwise classical debate came from a newly formed online space accommodating unconventional opinions and expressions that did not fall into line with the Islamist formulation of the boycott campaign slogans. A non-elitist conversation focused on more practical and realistic considerations of the local context and the conflicts that engage the polarized online camps.

Pro-regime and nationalist currents focused on the good relationship between Sisi and Macron that should not be jeopardized in favor of a sensationalist battle related to the French-Turkish conflict in the first place. The mobilization against the Turkish pro-Islamist regime formed an important pillar in the nationalist campaign that took over Egyptian state-sponsored media and Gulf-funded media platforms in the previous years (except for Qatari-funded media). The escalating tension between Egypt and Turkey, in that period, the support previously offered by the Turkish president to the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Turkish intervention in Syria and Iraq, contributed to the accumulated enmity built after 2013.

During the heated debates, a small margin of meme creators used their sarcastic talents to parody the sweeping online Islamist campaigns. One of the parody meme sequels used a very famous video of the popular Salafī preacher Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ya‘qūb,³⁷⁷ known for his improvisational comedian abilities, where he warns his audience against trivializing small mistakes that represent enormous guilts, giving examples that include falling prey to sin while in love. In the video, Ya‘qūb equates love to *zinā* (adultery) stating that “a woman wearing Islamic

³⁷⁷ Born in 1956, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ya‘qūb’s connection to Saudi Arabia’s religious establishment had been strengthened by his frequent and extended visits to the country since 1981. He is on friendly terms with the Salafī Call and its iconic preachers. Though he was interested in Ḥadīth scholarship at an early age, his books and sermons mostly focus on social problems such as smoking, lack of prayer, youth issues, women’s *Fiqh* and ethics, and repenting. He is known for screaming during his passionate sermons. Before the emergence of Salafī TV channels, Ya‘qūb was a favorite among taxi and microbus drivers, who often played his cassette tapes. During the revolution, he urged protestors to leave Tahrir Square. On February 13, 2011, he warned that anyone who dared touch Article Two of the Egyptian constitution would have to do so over his dead body. He helped mobilize Salafīs for the March 2011 referendum and celebrated the victory with a sermon in which he described the victory as *Ghazwat El Ṣanādīq* (the Invasion of the Boxes). The boxes, he declared, have said yes to religion, and he told those unhappy with the results that they could emigrate to Canada. The sermon became an instant hit among Islamists and was attacked by non-Islamists, leading Ya‘qūb to minimize his public statements for a time. Upon Bin Laden’s death, Ya‘qūb praised him as the “greatest man in the world.” He supported Ḥāzīm Ṣalāḥ ‘Abū - ‘Ismā‘īl’s candidacy for presidency. He criticized the Muslim Brotherhood for nominating Khayrat al-Shāṭir against him, though he endorsed Morsi in the second round. During Morsi’s rule, he attacked him for failing to implement Sharia. After the military coup, Ya‘qūb visited the Rabi’a sit-in to show his support for the protestors, and as news of the August 14 massacre spread, he joined Islamist protestors in Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd Square. He was recently summoned to appear before the Egyptian judiciary as a witness in a case related to an ISIS cell that was discovered in the Imbāba neighborhood of Cairo.

Tadros. *Mapping Egyptian Islamism*, 13-14.

veil, who loves a colleague in the university, who did not touch her or spoke to her or sent her a message, who does not even look at her, he just loves her because she is *muntaqiba* (wearing face veil- *niqāb*)... *Zinā* (adultery).”³⁷⁸

The video circulated on social networks and became a famous internet joke, memed in videos and comics.³⁷⁹ Ya‘qūb’s photo in the famous video turned to a meme template, and many creators emulated his rhythm in the original sermon by splitting the top text from the punchline in the bottom panel, which took the place of the word “*zinā*,” or they used the word “*zinā*” itself as the punchline. Caricaturizing the anti-French Islamist campaigns, a meme sequel (Figures 29 to 32) playing with the changing top text and punchlines, recontextualized Ya‘qūb’s meme template. The memes played on turning the sheikh’s warning sermon to a comedy and deploying projections from the Egyptian cultural references tweaked to mock the French boycott campaign slogans.

³⁷⁸ “*Zinā* (a.), unlawful sexual intercourse, whether a relationship between a man and a woman, neither married to each other nor in a state of legal concubinage based on ownership (relationship between a master and a woman who is his slave). The Qur’ān disapproved of the sexual promiscuity prevalent in Arabia at that time and forbade, e.g., a master from prostituting women who were his slaves (XXIV, 33). Several verses refer to illegal sexual relations. Some state that it is a sin (*fāḥiṣha*) and will be punished in the Hereafter (XVII, 32, XXV, 68-9). But most of the verses deal with the legal aspects. Making *zinā* a condemnable offense was a means of enforcing the uniform system of marriage introduced by Muḥammad. In IV, 15-16, it is stipulated that both parties must be punished, and it is required that the offence be proved by four witnesses. The punishment incurred in IV, 15 by women guilty of *zinā*, namely confinement in their homes, is commonly regarded as abrogated by XXIV, 2, a verse which stipulates that fornicators are to be punished with a hundred lashes. XXIV, 3 (“The fornicator (*zānī*) shall marry only a fornicator or a polytheist, and the fornicator (*zāniya*) shall be married only to a fornicator or a polytheist”) was considered problematic by some later commentators. They generally believe that this verse was abrogated by later verses.”

Peters, R., “*Zinā* ou *Zinā*”, in: *Encyclopédie de l’Islam*. Consulted online on 09 October 2023 http://dx.doi.org/accesdistant.sorbonne-universite.fr/10.1163/9789004206106_eifo_SIM_8168

³⁷⁹ Amr Mostafa. “الحب زنا ... فيديو قديم متداول للشيخ محمد حسين يعقوب وذلك في إطار تفسيره -هو- لحدِيث رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم “الذي نصه ما رأيتُ شيئاً أشنَّه” Facebook, June 18, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=238498994381028> .



*Figure 29

Top Image: “A Muslim woman.”

Middle Image: “But she has a French stature.”³⁸⁰

Bottom Image: “Zinā.”



*Figure 30

Top image: “You kiss your wife.”

Middle image: “French.” (i.e., French kiss)

Bottom image: “You earned your place in hell.”

³⁸⁰ In Egyptian popular culture, “French stature” [*ūd faransāwī*] refers to thinness and body symmetry and has been commonly used in Egyptian cultural productions (colloquial poetry, theater, and cinema) since the early 1900s. This phrase stereotypes often-thin French actresses and models, and it is usually used to contrast against the local [*baladī*] Egyptian women’s curvy stature, which tends toward chubbiness.



*Figure 31

Top image

“A committed (pious) sister.”

Middle image

“She got in the faculty of arts, French Department.”

Bottom image

“Imprudence and lewdness.”

*Figure 32

Top image

“Your girlfriend is *munaqaba* (face- veiled).”

Middle image

“She has a French stature.”

Bottom image

“Bring her to me.”

In local digital caricatures and social language, commentators felt relatively liberated from the apologetic tone and racialized sensibilities of liberal or left-leaning Western media in the USA or Europe. The dialogue about true Islam was gradually revealing the interconnections between

institutional rigidity, the official grip on religious freedom, and the hostility against innovative interpretations. The relationship between the past and its figurative anachronistic interpretation in the present, in the curricula of the religious institutions and Islamic revival discourses, become accused of perpetuating the crises of Muslim societies, according to these contestations. The contribution of the religious institutions to breeding thousands of rejectionists and terrorists and colluding with Islamist discourses become a topic of discussions and debates on different digital platforms.

Debates from a reflexive position bear more entitlement to self-critique, hence, transcend many psychological barriers and empower some interlocutors to tackle topics perceived as sensitive, such as evoking the extensive conversations praising the Islamic invasions in the past under the notion of Jihad and their glorification in the present Islamic thought and educational curricula, as a form of that anachronistic reading predicament.



*Figure 33³⁸¹

Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS):

“I am Muslim, Islam is a complete religion, but I am an incomplete person. If I made a mistake, blame me not Islam, because the texts I follow, I bring them from my mother’s pussy.”

The representations of Sheikh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ya‘qūb in Figures 29 to 32, and Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī in Figure 33, deploy profane language to highlight the arbitrary authority guaranteed to public preachers and Islamic leaders in their interpretations of the holy texts. The

³⁸¹ Creator: Mario Caesar. 6 February 2021. Facebook. <https://cutt.ly/Ec1m0Cl>

improvised language in the comics' captions de-sanctify those figures to expose the underlying thinking methods of these figures and tarnish their supposed purity. That could be summed up in revealing their totalitarian approach, their patriarchal standpoints, and their exploitation of an exceptional position granted by their “religious” status.

Ya‘qūb who prohibits the simplest gestures and practices of affection to Muslim youth, is portrayed as an insatiable patriarch in Figure 32, while the caption put on the tongue of al-Baghdādī problematizes the incongruity enrooted in political Islam discourses, where the Quranic scripture’s interpretations are constantly revisited, tweaked, and recontextualized according to political purposes.



*Figure 34

Top image

The French president Emmanuel Macron’s statement during a 2019 visit to Cairo after meeting the Sheikh of al-Azhar: “We need al-Azhar to confront extremist currents in France.”

Bottom image

’Ādil ’Imām, with a punchline from a scene in his classical theater piece Shāhid Mā Shāfsh Hāga (A Witness Who Saw Nothing): “Take it.”

The reorganization of the religious field by Sisi’s regime was prioritized after his election in 2014. The regime was aware of the void and trauma left behind by the excommunication of an organization with such deep-rooted social origins, one which has historically been protected from oversight by its religious character and widespread popularity accumulated over the decades. The regime also realized that the liquidation of the Rabi‘a and al-Nahḍa sit-ins would remain pivotal events, not only because of the amount of bloodshed and number of victims, but also because of the religious symbolism that they carried, which opponents of the regime evoked in their continuous war over legitimacy.

The crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins in Cairo during July and August of 2013, during which the police and armed forces open fired on thousands of people and killed hundreds of Morsi supporters, under the pretext that these supporters were harboring weapons, consequently left the new regime in need of “religious credentials of its own:”

“The Sisi brand of Islam has often been described as “moderate” but “militantly mainstream” might be a better term. Theologically speaking it was middle-of-the-road and relatively bland, but it was also illiberal and authoritarian in character. The result of this was a kind of enforced centrism. While allowing some scope for tolerance — of other monotheistic religions, for example — it set limits on discourse about religion in order to confine it to the middle ground. The main intention, obviously, was to place Islamist theology beyond the bounds of acceptability but at the other end of the spectrum it also meant that atheism, skepticism, and liberal interpretations of Islam became forms of extremism.”³⁸²

The new constitution drafted in 2014 retained Islam as the religion of the state and “the principles of Islamic Sharia” as “the main source of legislation.” The constitution also stated that “the family is the nucleus of society, and is founded on religion, morality, and patriotism.” Other sections of the constitution misleadingly stated that there should be no discrimination based on religion or belief. Freedom of belief was described as “absolute,” though the practice of Abrahamic religions was to be regulated by law (with no mention of non-Abrahamic religions), and the document stated that everyone would “have the right to express his/her opinion verbally, in writing, through imagery, or by any other means of expression and publication.”³⁸³

Regulating the religious field affirmed the overlapping strategies between the new regime and its political enemy, the Islamists. The governmental attack on the “phenomena of atheism” hitting Egypt, as labelled by official state media, directly started after 2013. Opinions and statements made on social media were used to track self-declared atheists who achieved some popularity and appeared in the media.³⁸⁴ The regime also regularly persecuted weakened religious

³⁸² Whitaker, Brian. “Arabs Without God: Chapter 11 - Brian Whitaker - Medium,” *Medium*, February 19, 2018. <https://brian-whit.medium.com/arabs-without-god-chapter-11-82219fd56049> .

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁴ Eltahawy, Mona. “Egypt’s War on Atheism.” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2015.

and sexual minorities, who were often scapegoated for broad social issues. However, identifying Islamism as a “danger threatening the national unity” by the political regime necessitated a reformulation of the religious battleground, one occurring in parallel to the ongoing suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Besides relying on the consistency of doctrinal Salafists and allowing them political representation in Al-Nūr Party, official religious institutions responded to Sisi’s call for renewed religious discourse against terrorism and religious extremism. The Ministry of Religious Endowment and al-Azhar were the main entities, addressed by Sisi, who took on the responsibility of “correcting the image of Islam by shaking the dust off the Islamic heritage in line with the modern age.”³⁸⁵

This reorganization of the religious field spurred attacks on atheism but went forward in parallel to governmental efforts to regulate mosque sermons and tighten the restrictions on obtaining a preacher’s license. This monopoly on religious activities expanded into a larger strategy of controlling the field of public expression and subordinating the channels of social mobility to regime control. This strategy involved satellite media channels, journalism, charity institutions (including those run by Islamist organizations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood prior 2013), and non-governmental organizations.

The formalistic transformations and state-run media attacks did not impede resistance to both morality policing and the integration of religious institutions into the social dialogue and everyday digital scene. The coverage of the governmental crusade on homosexuals, atheists, and religious minorities was met by satire and harsh critique by the developing collectivities of vocal seculars. Structuring society on the basis of religion, wherein state-sanctioned religiosity dominated all aspects of social practice, was rejected by the memesphere despite all efforts to constrict public expression. Online satire echoed serious discussions about religious freedom and the deployment of religion by the state to control the social landscape. Official institutions, as well

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/28/opinion/mona-elthawwy-egypts-war-on-atheism.html> .

³⁸⁵ "السياسي: يجب إعادة قراءة التراث ليناسب العصر". المصري اليوم November 20, 2018.

<https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1344471> .

as Islamist media collectives, fell under counterattack by revisionists, who continued questioning the use of religion as a tool of social and political control.

Sisi's discourse highlighting the necessity of religious reform was seized upon by anti-Islamist forces, who interpreted this dialogue as a promise of reform that the state should be held accountable for. They particularly wanted reforms related to legislation, religious freedoms, and justice for religious minorities. Sisi's confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood, backed by a broad media campaign targeting the organization's school of thought, raised expectations for these anticipated reforms.

The attacks on the Brotherhood and Islamist preachers, carrying on since 2012, established digital caricatures as an active element in religious debates. Under Sisi, comic pages' reactions to reclaiming the monopoly of official institutions on the social landscape provided an alternative narrative to the growing influence of al-Azhar and the Ministry of Endowments on social and political life. In this narrative, a third party, formed of satirists, commentators, and their audience in the digital landscape, worked on trivializing the serious comeback of a totalitarian authority trying to reconsolidate its religious armory.

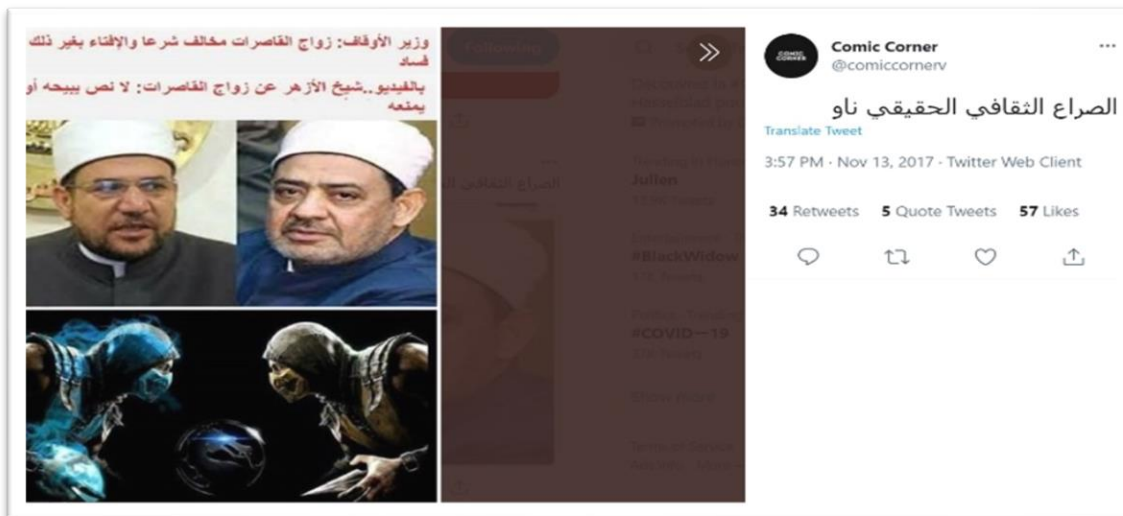
In this context, it is important to refer to the changing direction of al-Azhar clerics beginning at the end of the 1960s, as described by Malika Zeghal,³⁸⁶ professor of contemporary Islamic thought, towards sharing the market of religiously based political contestation with Islamists in the fields of preaching, censorship, education, and law.

According to Zeghal, the clerics actively participated in what they defined as a voluntary re-Islamization of Egyptian society. In contrary to the old stereotype of al-Azhar Ulama under the Nasserite state, which functionalized them and imposed upon them the teaching of "modern" subjects, Zeghal's dissertation challenges the opposition commonly drawn, for the entire Arab and

³⁸⁶ Zeghal, Malika. *Gardiens de l'Islam : Les oulémas d'Al Azhar dans l'Egypte contemporaine*. Paris : Presses de Sciences Po., 1996.

Muslim world, between Islamist militants and traditional scholars, hinting at the emergence of new forms of scholars inside the large institution:

“The Free Officers’ regime needed the Azhari religious authority because it was unable to impose itself on a religious level. It had authority on the secular level through Nasser’s charisma and nationalist ideology, but also through state violence, which was exercised by the ‘Ulama, to whom the state gave exclusive religious authority. During the 1970s, the development of Islamism, which was the product of a deregulated religious sphere, was expressed via the newly emerged religious authorities, which were no longer necessarily under state supervision. Yet, by taking this new competition seriously, the sheikhs of al-Azhar transformed their institution and restored its authority from the 1980s onwards.”³⁸⁷



*Figure 35³⁸⁸

Top text shows headlines from the Egyptian journal Al-Yūm Al-Sabi’:

The Minister of Religious Endowments (left): “Underage marriage does not match with Sharia. Giving fatwas other than this is a corrupted statement.”

Sheikh al-Azhar Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib on underage marriage (right): “No text allows it, and no text bans it.”

³⁸⁷ Gaborieau, Marc, and Malika Zeghal. “Autorités religieuses en Islam.” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 125 (2004) : 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.2883> .

³⁸⁸ Comic Corner. “الصراع الثقافي الحقيقي ناو.” Twitter, November 13, 2017.

<https://twitter.com/comiccornerv/status/930087129933340672/photo/1> .

Comic Corner caption: “The real cultural conflict now.”

Sisi addressed Sheikh al-Azhar and its scholars in many occasions, demanding a review of the curricula, educational programs, and the preparation of religious preachers so as to assert the tolerant face of “our religion.”³⁸⁹ In the official celebration of the birth of the Prophet in January 2015, Sisi stated that “we need a religious revolution” to reinvigorate religious discourse and modify its approaches to match recent transformations in culture, science and modern technology. He deployed religious vocabulary to affirm the responsibility of al-Azhar: “You and the preachers are responsible before God for renewing the religious discourse and correcting the image of Islam, and I will argue with you before God.”

The tension between Sisi and Sheikh al-Azhar kept growing as al-Ṭayyib spoke and wrote about the idea of religious reform denouncing touching on the holy Quran texts or the Prophet’s Sunna. Rumors suggested that the president tried to restrict the role of al-Azhar against the backdrop of al- Ṭayyib's televised announcement proclaiming his innocence in the massacres committed against supporters of Egypt's first elected president, Muhammad Morsi, during Rabi‘a and Al- Nahḍa square sit-ins on 14 August 2013.³⁹⁰

The conflict escalated as Sheikh al-Azhar received support from his pious supporters and was portrayed on the Brotherhood media as a hero who confronted the president and defended the religion. Issues of conflict included Sisi’s demands for the regulation of oral (non-registered) divorce, the reform of religious discourse, the excommunication of Dā‘ish, imposing unified Friday sermons in mosques, modifying the curricula and laws of al-Azhar, and forbidding the marriage of minors. Mukhtār Gum‘a, Minister of Religious Endowment, was encouraged to play a reformist role by making media appearances in support of the president’s call.³⁹¹

³⁸⁹ Al Hayah TV Network. “الحياة اليوم - " الرئيس السيسي لشيخ الازهر : تجديد الخطاب الدينى مسئوليتكم أمام الله.” YouTube, January 1, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vgOS3_ettQ .

³⁹⁰ “Egypt: Al-Sisi Cracks down on al-Azhar Grand Imam.” *Middle East Monitor*, December 1, 2018. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181201-egypt-al-sisi-cracks-down-on-al-azhar-grand-imam/> .

³⁹¹ “The endowments ministry has become the gatekeeper of advocacy and social work inside mosques, especially those previously falling under the control of religious groups of a political nature, such as the Muslim Brotherhood

Under pressure, religious institutions tried adjusting their positions by taking variable stances between preserving a liminal autonomy and complying to the demands of moderation. However, al-Azhar appeared to be the institution most capable of maintaining a margin of control by virtue of its special position in the Egyptian constitution, its global influence, and its human and material extensions inside and outside of Egypt.

After the January 25 revolution, the growing role of religious currents led to increased demands for al-Azhar to have a greater political and media role and to act as the arbiter of religious authority in the public sphere. The state supported this role, as did a section of intellectuals and the secular elite, some of whom signed the documents that al-Azhar released after the revolution—particularly four documents under the title “The Future of Egypt.”

In the first article of the document, Al-Azhar asserted the fundamental role of Islamic Sharia as the basic source of legislation,³⁹² while affirming the institution’s position:

and the Salafist Da’wa, or affiliated with Salafist religious associations, such as *Ansar al-Sunna al-Mohamedeya* Association and *Al Jama’a Al Shar’eya*.”

Ibrahim, Ishak. “Obstacles to Renewing Religious Discourse in Egypt: Reasons and Results.” *The Tahrir Institute for Middle*

East Policy, October 31, 2019. <https://timep.org/2019/10/31/obstacles-to-renewing-religious-discourse-in-egypt-reasons-and-results/>.

³⁹² Article 1 of the document states that : “Supporting the establishment of the modern democratic constitutional national state, which relies on a constitution acceptable to the nation, which separates the state’s powers from its governing legal institutions, defines the framework of governance, and guarantees the rights and duties of all its members on an equal footing, so that the authority to legislate in it is vested in the representatives of the people; In accordance with the correct Islamic concept, Islam did not know in its legislation, civilization, or history what is known in other cultures as the priestly religious state that dominated the people, and humanity suffered from it in some stages of history. Rather, it left the people to manage their societies and choose the mechanisms and institutions that achieve their interests.; provided that the comprehensive principles of Islamic law are the basic source of legislation, ensuring that followers of other monotheistic religions resort to their religious laws in personal status issues.”

“2022 ”مصر. مستقبل بشأن الأزهر وثيقة. Sis.gov.eg. 2022.

<https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/50510/%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86->

“Al-Azhar is the competent body to which one can refer in the affairs of Islam, its sciences, its heritage, and the jurisprudence of Islamic thought, while not confiscating the right of everyone to express an opinion, provided that the necessary scientific conditions are met, and on the condition of adhering to the etiquette of dialogue, and respecting what the nation’s scholars have agreed upon” (Article 11 of the document “The Future of Egypt”).³⁹³

In 2017, al-Azhar announced “The Citizenship and Coexistence Declaration” following a conference held at the end of February and early March of the same year under the title: "Freedom and Citizenship... Diversity and Integration." The declaration stated that Muslims and Christians are brothers in humanity, partners in the homeland, and all are equal citizens in rights and duties, and clarified that cohesion and the strengthening of common will is guaranteed in the constitutional national state based on the principles of citizenship, equality and the rule of law.

The statement excludes the concept of religious pluralism (*al-ta‘adudiyya al-dīniyya*) by asserting the supremacy of the divine Abrahamic religions,³⁹⁴ and the talk about coexistence (*ta‘āyush*) between Muslims and Christians. The absence of the concept of religious pluralism in favor of the concept of coexistence reveals the limitations traced by the institution to religious freedoms. The term coexistence, as defined by its proponents, falls in line with fundamentalist demands to implement Islamic law through the legal and administrative system. However, it allows a small margin of compromises, exclusively for divine religions’ followers, in the “constitutional

<https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/50510/%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-?lang=ar> .

³⁹³ وثيقة الأزهر بشأن مستقبل مصر. 2022. Sis.gov.eg. 2022.

<https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/50510/%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-?lang=ar> .

³⁹⁴ The text of the declaration referring to the principle of pluralism came as follows: “Commitment to the system of basic freedoms of thought and opinion, with full respect for human, women, and children’s rights, emphasizing the principle of pluralism, respect for divine religions (*al-adyān al-samāwiyya*), and considering citizenship as the basis of responsibility in society.”

Ali, Muhammad. 2021. “من الذممة إلى المواطنة المنقوصة: تناقضات الخطاب الأزهرى.” *Almanassa.com*. September 29, 2021.

<https://almanassa.com/stories/5323> .

national state based on the principles of equality.” (the statement does not explicitly mention equal citizenship rights).

Al-Azhar managed to translate his reconciliatory role into institutional gains. Article 4 of the 2012 constitution, and subsequently Article 7 of the 2013 constitution, provided the institution and its Imam with constitutional cover for its independence from Egypt’s political authority. Al-Azhar became the entity tasked with interpreting religion, and Sheikh al-Azhar was granted immunity from being ousted. The Council of Senior Scholars elects him, and the institution receives government funding (an item in the state’s general budget).

These constitutional privileges gave al-Azhar institutional power in its relationship with the political authority in an environment characterized by strong divisions. In light of these institutional gains, Sisi exerted more pressure on al-Azhar. However, al-Azhar refused to fully adopt the government’s vision on these issues.³⁹⁵ Sisi’s repeated calls remained rhetorical. With time, Sheikh al-Azhar regained a popular reputation as a conserver of religion, in addition to being one of the few public figures that Sisi did not succeed in ousting or subjugating. Similarly, with other camps, Sisi took care to appear keen on reforms that preserve the tolerant face of religion and protect society from the spread of extremism. Moreover, Sisi seemed like a moderately pious ruler open to religious freedom, as well as a proponent of modern social and intellectual development. In contrast, the religious establishment was perceived as an obstacle to progress.³⁹⁶

In 2015, Sisi gave a speech at the military college, where he expressed dissatisfaction with the media discourse on religious reform. Taking a step back, he added that: “What I heard in the media does not serve the “interest of the cause,” and the religious discourse will not be reformed in a day or a night, but rather needs the effort of distinguished, enlightened scholars.”³⁹⁷

³⁹⁵ Abdallah, Belal. “Al-Azhar and Sisi’s Regime: Structural Roots of Disagreement.” *Atlantic Council*, April 7, 2017. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/al-azhar-and-sisi-s-regime-structural-roots-of-disagreement/> .

³⁹⁶ عمرو عباس. “قلبه انتقطع .. يخربيت كدة” By عمرو. Facebook, August 4, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/amr.donia.77/videos/1997099063758722> .

³⁹⁷ بالفديو: السيسي من ‘عايزين ثورة دينية’ إلى ‘مش في يوم وليلة.’ ” زحمة، April 29, 2015. <https://cutt.ly/KxKJxrq> .

During 2017-2018, state efforts to reorganize the official religious discourse failed to concretize a firm grip on the digital movement of contestation, which took uncontrollable and diversified forms. Independent youtube influencers, vloggers, few digital platforms, researchers, and activists' initiatives managed to carve a narrow, yet solid, secular space for exchange and debate. A collective dissidence against substituting Brotherhood control for an institutional one, represented by the official religious bodies, found its way to a broader base through social networks.

Religious high authorities and popular preachers were not immune from critique. In parallel to the increasing number of social media pages posting on politics and social matters, digital caricatures on pages like "Comic Corner" broke the silence as they put the role of religious authorities in public life under check.

Statements by leading religious authorities created abundant material for satirists, who stressed the demagogues outdated approach to social reality and modern culture. Ridiculing the archaic utterances attributed to the religious interpretations of the Quran and Sunna (the Prophet's sayings concluded in *Hadīth*) broadcasted to the public that religious discourse was struggling with a stubborn ahistorical understanding of these texts and their significance in modern times. Confronting the pious audience with old sermons by famous preachers and fatwas that reinforced medieval norms like underage marriage, sexual harassment, violations of personal freedoms, and scornfulness to women, opened the eyes of younger generations to the documented heritage of Islamic revival and the history of its build up.

However, religious institutions obstinately reaffirmed their traditional positions in many situations and proved to have an extremely limited capacity to accept critique or show flexibility. The success of al-Azhar in negotiating the presidential demands and navigating the postrevolutionary transition consolidated its traditional position since the 1950s, as "the principal instrument for the 'nationalisation' of Islam,"³⁹⁸ and an important pillar of political regime's legitimacy.

³⁹⁸ Paola Caridi, "Consensus-Building in Al-Sisi's Egypt," *Insight Egypt*, no. 7 (February 2015). PDF:

The lines of critique to religious preachers in anti-Islamist memes included portraying them in a vulgar image, using obscene language to express sectarian and discriminatory discourses. In Figure 36, Sheikh Muḥammad Mitwallī al-Sha‘rāwī’s phrase is modified to the rural pronunciation *gaḥba* of the word *aḥba* (bitch) in ECA. Describing the religious clergy as “rural” was a classical tradition deployed by the urban and secular elites, especially after the advancement of civil education institutions during the early 20th century. The broad network of religious education, mostly under al-Azhar umbrella, predated the expansion of public schools and public education in the Egyptian urban centers, and produced the first generations of “educated” Egyptians across the country for centuries.³⁹⁹

Until our days, al-Azhar institution supervises a parallel religious education system that encompasses primary and secondary schools, in addition to a higher education system that receives students from all over the Muslim world. In al-Azhar’s educational institutions, “there are separate schools for girls and boys. Al Azhar education system is supervised by the Supreme Council of the Al-Azhar Institution. The Azhar Institution itself is nominally independent from the Ministry of Education but is ultimately under supervision by the Egyptian Prime Minister. All schools in all stages teach religious subjects and non-religious subjects.”⁴⁰⁰

https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/inegypt_07.pdf .

³⁹⁹ “As far back as the tenth century, children in the Muslim world attended primary schools called *kuttābs/ maktabas* which were usually attached to mosques. The children were taught by resident scholars and imams and subjects taught included Qur’an recitation and memorisation, Hadith, basic Arabic reading and writing, arithmetic, and Islamic law. After completing the curriculum of the *maktabas*, the children could find occupations, or move on to higher education in a *madrasa* (school) –usually attached to larger mosques. Here, they would be educated further in religious sciences, Arabic, and secular studies such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, history, and geography, among other subjects. When a student completed his/her course of study, he/she would be granted an *Ijaza*, a license certifying that he/she has completed that program and is qualified to teach it as well.”

Fattah, Mohamed. 2019. “Higher Islamic Education and the Development of Intellectualism in Egypt: Case Study of Al-Azhar Education System.” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education*, (2019): 150. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363296201_Higher_Islamic_Education_and_the_Development_of_Intellectualism_in_Egypt_Case_study_of_Al-Azhar_Education_System .

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

Thus, the distinction between religious and public education started to represent a line of demarcation between the rising urban bourgeoisie (*effendeya*) and the clergy within the polarized nationalist independence currents in the 20th century. Rurality became a cultural marker deployed in the modernist/ traditionalist conflicts against the backdrop of the large religious education network. With the rise of the Islamic revival since the 1970s, preachers of rural origins, like Sheikh ‘Abd Al- Ḥamīd Kishk,⁴⁰¹ who achieved huge popularity and supported militant Islamism, represented a new generation of preachers. Their discourses populated through cassettes and television (in the case of al-Sha‘rāwī and others), in rural accents, gathered an unprecedented following and appeal.

Meme creators in the anti-Islamist camp profited from the Islamist preachers’ archive to highlight the old distinction urban/ rural, and re-establish the connection between sectarian incitement, obscenity, and Islamic preaching.



*Figure 36

Muḥammad Mitwallī al-Sha‘rāwī:
“Go fetch the *djizya*⁴⁰² then speak son of a bitch.”

⁴⁰¹ Kupferschmidt, Uri M. “Reformist and Militant Islam in Urban and Rural Egypt.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 23/4 (1987): 403–18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4283202> .

⁴⁰² *Djizya* is “the capitation tax which, in traditional Muslim law, is levied on non-Muslims in Muslim states. The history of the origins of the *djizya* is extremely complex, for three orders of reasons: firstly, the authors who, in the ‘*abbāsīde* period, tried to assemble the available material on the regime of the *djizya* and the *kharādj* found themselves faced with texts in which these words are used in various senses, sometimes broad, sometimes technical and therefore variable, which, in order to arrive at a rational picture, they have tended to interpret according to the now common

The obscene insult *ibnilgaḥba* (son of a bitch), written in the Arabic caption, is masked by the concatenation of two words in one. The meme acquires a complex referentiality with the deployment of the letter *g* (signifying the rural accent) and the concatenation (referring to the obscenity of an allegedly devout preacher that the meme creator is obliged to dissimulate behind a coded language form). Thus, the insult, directed to a non-Muslim and ordering them to pay the *djizya* before being allowed to speak, gained more discursive power, in the comic, that summed the bigot position of the sheikh from a critical position.



*Figure 37

Caption: “Man, evolution is a myth. And I only believe our Ulama ...His Ulama:”

Image showing *Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiyya*'s main associated sheikhs: Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ya'qūb, Abū Ishāq al-Ḥuwaynī and Muḥammad Ḥassān.

and more precise meaning of their time; secondly, it is a fact insufficiently taken into consideration that the regime resulting from the Arab conquest was not uniform, but was the result of a series of specific and non-identical agreements or decisions.”

Cahen, Cl., İnalcık, Halil and Hardy, P., “*Djizya*”, in: *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*. Consulted online on 27 September 2023 http://dx.doi.org.accesdistant.sorbonne-universite.fr/10.1163/9789004206106_eifo_COM_0192

From the same token, the deployment of the word Ulama in Figure 37 refers to its double meaning in classical Arabic, as it could be translated to the word “scientists” as well as “clerics.” The Salafist preachers in the meme are known for their anti-evolution stance, yet they hold the title Ulama against the backdrop of their religious affiliation. The meme uses the wordplay to undermine the religious preachers’ opinions in scientific matters and questions their aptitude to become a source of knowledge to their audience.

In July 2017, al-Azhar’s Islamic Research Academy started the initiative of “Fatwa Kiosks”⁴⁰³ to combat extremist ideas by constructing accessible fatwa centers in metro stations. Starting by *al-Shuhadā’* (The Martyrs) station in Tahrir square, the academy built its first booth, which was met by a wave of sarcasm in digital caricatures and posts as the pictures appeared in news platforms (Figures 38 and 39).

The spokesperson of Cairo Metro Council announced the removal of the fatwa booths of the Islamic Research Academy, established in cooperation with the Metro Company, referring to the "theoreticians" attack:⁴⁰⁴

"We were attacked because of the fatwa booths, which received tens or even hundreds of questions from metro goers to the fatwa Imams inside the stall, which was operating from 9 am to 9 pm. They considered their existence contrary to the law and the constitution."

The metro spokesman denied the possibility of operating these kiosks again, adding: "It is over, and whoever wants any fatwa must go to the Egyptian *Dār al-’Iftā’*."

⁴⁰³ "كشك الفتوى" في مترو أنفاق مصر، *BBC News* عربي، July 20, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-40675394>

⁴⁰⁴ مترو الأنفاق يكشف سبب إزالة أكشاك الفتوى من المحطات. "بوابة اخبار اليوم"، December 19, 2019. <https://cutt.ly/rxKOEY7> .



*Figure 38

Fatwa Kiosk by Comic Corner.⁴⁰⁵

In Figure 38, the meme creator borrows Marlboro trademark which is frequently put as an advertising banner on street kiosks in Cairo, among other brands. While in Figure 39, the kiosks are likened to places for “confession” in Catholicism. The place of “confession” in Catholicism is usually a point of usual criticism of Christianity, based on the impossibility of *shafā’a* (intercession) except by the Prophet in learned / official Sunni Islam. However, the meme creators seem unaware, or careless about, theological distinctions in favor of highlighting the authoritative and moral policing aspect of the Fatwa Kiosks (extracting “confessions” could also bear a security-related connotation in the context of police oppression in Egypt).

⁴⁰⁵ Comic Corner. Twitter, July 21, 2017. <https://twitter.com/comiccornerv/status/888372232057126914> .

Alternatively, the comic maybe tries to expose the contradiction between theory and practice. The religious institution in Sunni Islam does not substitute priesthood in Christianity, hence, the impossibility of intercession, however, the clerics in kiosks, in the view of the satirist could be granted a form of moral guardianship, manifested in their official representation in the public space.



*Figure 39⁴⁰⁶

Comment: “Official confession hours from 8 am to 8 pm. Every day except Thursdays and Fridays until 5 pm.”

Bringing official institutions to the forefront of the religious scene revealed the tiny difference between the discourses they carry and what the Islamic revivalists had promoted over decades. As social pressure kept augmenting and accusing official institutions of legitimizing social violence, the subordination of and violence toward women, and the coercion of religious minorities, it incited fears in conservative religious camps threatened by high waves of contestation. The divisions among the middle class encouraged some segments to embrace more pluralistic attitudes and to refrain from offering inexorable defense of rigid establishment positions.

⁴⁰⁶ Comic Corner. “مواعيد الاعترافات الرسمية من 8 صباحًا حتى 8 مساءً كل يوم ما عدا الخميس والجمعة حتى 5 مساءً.” Twitter, July 21, 2017. <https://twitter.com/comiccornerv/status/888372232057126914>.

Offensive critique allowed for more divergence of views and skepticism regarding the qualifications of fatwa providers to judge contemporary contexts. Rethinking the crisis of religiosity, especially in its popular forms, became an inevitable topic of social controversy as comics acquired more popularity and jumped from their early marginal position to the heart of digital culture. Pushing the boundaries of speech and expression in the religious domain liberated many voices⁴⁰⁷ that contested the roles and structures of religious institutions in politics, the legal system, and social life.⁴⁰⁸ Besides writers and experts, the everyday dialogue embraced the humanization of religious symbols as the magnitude of digital content grew to banalize critical language and deconstruct the hegemonic narratives of religion.

⁴⁰⁷ Ahmed Saad Zayed YouTube channel (160K subscribers). He is a researcher of Islam who presents a weekly online program on his channel that has gained increasing popularity in the last few years. In the description, Zayed wrote: “A channel concerned with intellectual and cultural enlightenment, which is an attempt to think objectively and rationally together.”

Zayed, Ahmed. “Ahmed Zayed.” YouTube, n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/c/AhmedZayedChannel/about> .

⁴⁰⁸ 3almanyon (secularists) YouTube channel (26.2K subscribers). 3almanyon is a movement that was initiated in December 2011 with the organization of regular open talks with writers, researchers and diversified public figures in midtown Cairo. The channel publishes the videos of these public meetings. In the description is written: “It is an intellectual advocacy movement that aims to spread secular thought and form a popular secular Egyptian current. A real, non-elitist secular current emerges from the womb of the Egyptian street, imbued with enlightened secular thought and the Egyptian spirit. We do not want anything but Egypt, we have no goal but Egypt, and we have no choice but Egypt. Egypt is secular, civil, and democratic a goal we will not deviate from.”

@3almanyon. “3almanyon.” YouTube, n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/c/3almanyon/featured> .

Chapter Three: Gender

Chapter I: Battling for the Feminine: Questioning the Sexual Order after 2013

1. Sexual Harassment: The Tip of the Iceberg

In her article “Sexual Harassment in Egypt: An Old Plague in a New Revolutionary Order,”⁴⁰⁹ the social historian Hanan Hammad traces the deep historical roots of sexual harassment phenomena in Egypt. While referring to a persistent social malady, Hammad clarifies that Egyptian penal codes “were devoid of articles that explicitly came out in favor of punishing harassment”⁴¹⁰ until the 1990s. Sexual harassment, in Hammad’s view, comes in reaction to the “women’s access to the expanding public spaces”⁴¹¹ in the first half of the 20th century with the increasing numbers of girls and women allowed to go to schools and workplaces. From this standpoint, sexual harassment is viewed as a manifestation of “gender and class tensions,” serving to reinforce male dominance rather than simply expressing sexual desires. It is essentially a form of sexual violence rooted in coercion, cognizant of its opposition to a facet of contemporary social transformations that empower women to assert agency.

However, through decades, the phenomena witnessed different transmutations, linked to successive social and economic transformations. According to Hammad, the interweaving of the patriarchal buildup of the Egyptian society and state, and the persistence of the authoritarian rule system, reinforced a “continuum of violence”⁴¹² where the normalization of sexual harassment in the public space reached alarming levels, with gang sexual assaults emerging as a striking manifestation since 2005.⁴¹³ By the term “continuum of violence,” Hanan Hammad tried to situate the endemic sexual harassment phenomena within its political and economic context, observing the impact of the neoliberal shift of state policies since the 1970s, and the state control of political dissidence:

“When a regime violently monopolizes masculine superiority through the tactics of fear against a cultural backdrop that celebrates masculinity and

⁴⁰⁹ Hammad. “Sexual Harassment in Egypt: An Old Plague in a New Revolutionary Order,” 44–63.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

degrades femininity, men find in women a target for their violence. Under political regimes that made physical torture and raping males in detention centers and police stations gruelingly fearsome, men pick up the shattered pieces of their sense of manhood at the expense of women. Taking a gender perspective on the successive moments in the lux of political repression in ordinary everyday governance reveals features of internal societal and state-society conflicts, which I label a continuum of violence. Crowded public spaces with no substantial services to make them safe for all citizens are perfect for men to apply their masculine dominance to the extreme hyper-masculine aggression. Yet, harassers, rapists, and sexual assailants may and may not represent one end of a quasi-social continuum of male sexual aggression. The concept of the continuum of sexual violence draws attention to a wider range of forms of abuse and assault that men and women experience and that are committed by different actors, from the state to the individuals. Thus, the continuum of violence might illustrate the links between everyday abuse by the state and male abuse. An inefficient and corrupt state feeds into an abusive gender order.”⁴¹⁴

However, the neoliberal shift, as a chief category, is not sufficient to interpret the expansion of sexual harassment in the public and domestic spaces in Egypt. The distorted nature of the neoliberal shift, and the accompanying cultural conceptions and particular societal dynamics are as important factors to contextualize the phenomena.

In a society that prides itself on socially conservative principles and boasts adherence to its religious values, the escalating levels of sexual violence cast doubt on the cohesion of its members and the integrity of its devout beliefs. Sheikhs and preachers in Egypt incessantly extol the honor bestowed upon women in Islamic teachings, wherein men are designated as their guardians, entrusted with overseeing their affairs and well-being, including safeguarding their safety—a duty inseparable from the role of guardianship. It is presumed that women in this conservative society should be shielded from financial dependency and shielded by their guardians from assaults perpetrated by strangers. Rooted in Egyptian social consciousness, patriarchal values further emphasize that the protection of women within the family ranks among the fundamental tenets of masculinity and may even be regarded as a crucial rite of passage.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

Changes in the conservative moral framework of Egyptian society can be linked to the distorted shift toward free-market and open-door economic policies following the Nasser era. During Nasser's tenure, the state regulated women's gradual integration into the workforce by facilitating employment in bureaucratic and industrial sectors and safeguarding female workers in urban settings through formal labor laws.⁴¹⁵ However, the economic downturn that began in the 1960s paved the way for private sector expansion and economic liberalization under President Sadat. This private sector comprised a few major investors operating under state oversight, alongside a larger contingent of small investors, traders, and artisans who turned to the informal labor market, which the state struggled to regulate or integrate into the formal economy for decades. By 2018, the informal sector's contribution to the gross domestic product had grown to nearly 40%.⁴¹⁶

The work experience of most women in informal sectors, outside the scope of official protection, under the pressure of their families' economic needs, was the beginning of the confrontation with male-dominated work relations without legal support or class immunity. It also waved the insufficiency of the conservative system under the threat of cutting off the additional income that women achieve, in a society whose public services of education, health, and transportation kept declining while the need to finance new alternatives, provided by private enterprises, increased.

Governmental failure to regulate the informal economy did not only mean ignoring compliance with labor laws or taxation, but also, for women and their conservative families, it became equivalent to exchanging work opportunities for accepting sexual violations by the most powerful, in the absence of official oversight bodies. Moreover, working women had to accept unequal pay with men, the threatening possibility of dismissal from work in the case of marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth, in addition to the absence of care systems to help them perform home

⁴¹⁵ Bier. "2. Between Home and Workplace: Fashioning the "Working Woman" In *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*, 65-66.

⁴¹⁶ Abo Shady, Radwa S. "Echoing the Passive Voice: Women in the Informal Small Business Sector: Challenges and Solutions." *The Public Policy Hub*. The American University in Cairo, 2018. <https://documents.aucegypt.edu/Docs/GAPP/Public%20Policy%20Hub%20Webpage/3-%20Women%20in%20the%20informal%20small%20business%20sector%20Policy%20Paper.pdf> .

care tasks beside their work outside the home, which doubled their burden. According to a report on the care economy in Egypt, married women spent seven times the period on housework as married men, while single women spent six times the period on housework as unmarried men.⁴¹⁷

Accepting the humiliating conditions of women in the labor market has become more common, with the deterioration of the social structure and the state's inability to reduce population growth and govern economic activity, which impeded the ability of conservative families and their men to perform the protective function in the face of unchecked forces. Over the past decades, Egypt witnessed increasing proportions of educated women, at the high education and post-university levels, without equivalent opportunities for work or investment. Unemployment rates among females in Egypt remained much higher than those for males, and higher than the global average for female unemployment,⁴¹⁸ while data from the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics in 2018 showed that approximately 34% of Egyptian families depended on women to provide daily living expenses, and this percentage reached 88% among families in poor areas and neighborhoods.⁴¹⁹

These indicators mean that women's work, despite the humiliating and unfair conditions, represents a priority for their families, and justifies disregarding conservative standards, such as confronting a manager or a co-worker who harasses a daughter or a wife, for fear of losing her job, while work opportunities for women remain scarce compared to men. Hence, female labor conditions become a renewed source of remorse for conservative men, who are unable to provide enough protection for women, which nurtures their feelings of inferiority.

⁴¹⁷ Selwanes, Irene and Iman Helm.

“اقتصاد الرعاية في مصر: الطريق نحو الاعتراف بأعمال الرعاية غير مدفوعة الأجر والحد منها وإعادة توزيعها”.

UN Women, 2020.
https://egypt.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Egypt/Attachments/Publications/2020/12/arabic_unw_erf_policybriefs_egypt.pdf

⁴¹⁸ Nazīr, Ḥanān.

n.d., “حلول للسياسات البديلة | المرأة في سوق العمل مدفوع الأجر في مصر: المشكلة والسبب والعلاج”
<https://aps.aucegypt.edu/ar/articles/78/womens-access-to-paid-work-in-egypt-the-paradox-the-why-and-the-cure> .

⁴¹⁹ Abo Shady. “*Echoing the Passive Voice: Women in the Informal Small Business Sector: Challenges and Solutions*,” 13-14.

The dilemma women faced, caught between economic necessity and the responsibilities of social care on one hand, and the threat of violation and lack of social protection on the other, fostered a growing sense among them. This sentiment suggested that the conservative system was no longer providing its purported benefits and was failing to fulfill its obligations, yet it persisted with its constraints and restrictions. Logically, this situation would have prompted women to rebel entirely against the conservative patriarchal moral system. However, an ideological factor emerged in the 1970s that provided the system with a lifeline, extending its lifespan for many decades: "Islamic revival currents."

During Sadat era, the collusion between the state and Islamists thrived within a legislative framework that provided robust assurances to bolster social conservatism and male dominance. Islamist actors invaded the economic and social spheres, to afford a religious cover that reassured conservatives terrified by the deterioration of their capacities of social control. Islamists' investments in diverse fields of economic activity accommodated large numbers of workers, and the employment of women within the Islamist economy achieved faster growth in paid care sectors (education, health, social work).⁴²⁰ The mandatory wearing of the hijab by women in the Islamic economy served as a reassuring gesture to a conservative society apprehensive about women's mobility in unsafe public spaces and challenging work environments. The hijab helped women navigate workplaces and interact with male colleagues, while preserving the veneer of a modest Islamic appearance. This initial gesture, mandatory hijab, was just the beginning, as Islamists subsequently positioned themselves as defenders of male-dominated social norms, tightening control over women as an alternative to traditional moral discourse that had become less effective.

Covering women with the veil and loose clothing represented a new compromise embraced by conservatives, as they became increasingly dependent on women's income. Concurrently, legislation and fatwas increasingly provided men with the upper hand in all articles of the personal status law and the penal code. The sweeping spread of the veil over heads served as a moralistic shield for troubled consciences, giving way to a rising trend of "Islamized hypermasculinity." Beyond the veil, the power of large segments of men was magnified to control women's mobility, subject them to behavioral surveillance, and use fatwas to undermine their capital and weaken their

⁴²⁰ Hatem, Mervat F. "Economic and Political Liberation in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism.", 233. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24/2 (1992): 231–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/164296> .

ability to access the job market or accumulate wealth. Questioning the right of women to work, Islamic revivalists and preachers evoked “heated public debates on the desirability of women in the work force,”⁴²¹ in parallel to mounting numbers of women unemployment during the 1970s and 1980s.

“For many women since the late 1970s turning to the hijab represented a compromise between moving forward into education and work on the one hand and preserving a sense of privacy and protection on the other. Women coated their hijab practice in religiosity and authenticity, and social expectations of fending off the unwelcome male gaze and verbal and touch abuses. Put simply, anti-women discourses have burdened women with the false notion that leaving their homes to engage in work or education is a privilege and that being in public is wrong. Women had to compromise; they covered more of their bodies and ignored harassment lest they face the question of “Why are you outside the home?”⁴²²

The phenomena of sexual harassment and violence evolved into social sanctions, not criminalized by law and reinforced by the Islamists, as a continual threat against non-conformists. By legitimizing harassment and violence and providing religious justifications for harassing behaviors, the widespread adoption of the hijab occurred alongside a pervasive atmosphere of social hypocrisy, affecting both women and men across various societal strata.⁴²³

“At its inception, the Islamic mode of dress accommodated the individual's need for comfort and thriftiness. It implied the religious devotion of the woman who was wearing it and thus deterred the young men who habitually engaged in the sexual harassment of women in the streets and in public transportation. These men treated the harassment of a devout woman differently from the harassment of one who was not. Whereas the former was a sin that would be punished by God, the latter was permissible because it was directed against a sinner, who was not following the Islamic dress code.”⁴²⁴

Alongside the increasing vocal expressions of outrage sparked by the rise of Islamist factions to power, the memosphere emerged as a powerful symbolic tool showcasing the growing advocacy for women's rights and amplifying their voices, even after the removal of Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴²² Hammad. “Sexual Harassment in Egypt: An Old Plague in a New Revolutionary Order,” 51.

⁴²³ Mohamed Elrayes, “هل الشعراوى يبيح التحرش بغير المحجبات” YouTube. August 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUfPwGukjn4>.

⁴²⁴ Hatem. “Economic and Political Liberation in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism.”, 234.



*Figure 1

The quick meme published on the Facebook page “Egypt girls’ diaries”⁴²⁵ uses the hybrid of the “socially awesome penguin” and the “socially awkward penguin” to demonstrate the contradictions implied in the common masculine discourses.

Upper section

“Women are overdependent and lazy and want men to fully support them financially.”

Lower section

“Women want to work and compete with us for job opportunities.”



*Figure 2

Upper section

“Do you see how active and self-dependent western women are?”

Lower section

“You want to have your freedom like the women of the faithless West, you faithless lot?”

A growing attention to create memes about women’ social problems and grievances paralleled the increasing number of online pages of the budding women rights movements after

⁴²⁵ “Egypt girls’ diaries” is a Facebook page founded in January 2018. In its biography it defines its mission as “a page specialized in everything that concerns Egyptian women and their political rights.” Their posts vary between creating sarcastic memes, debating different social trends of concern to Egyptian women and commenting the various forms of women persecutions and rights violations that occur on daily basis. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/egygirlsdiaary>

2013. Figures 1 and 2, published on “Egypt girls’ diaries,” represented one of the primary forms of memes emerging from a Facebook page specialized in advocacy and launching awareness campaigns on women’s rights. Referring to the societal discursive contradictions, the memes put focus on the forms of discrimination against women against the backdrop of the hegemonic patriarchal and religious norms.

The proliferation of feminist and women rights’ groups after 2013 was primarily fostered by the series of assaults against women during the political mayhem from 2011 to 2013. Sexual violence was constantly deployed against female protesters by the destabilized Egyptian regimes after Mubarak’s removal. The practice started during Mubarak’s rule against female protesters in 2005, when dozens of the *Kifāya* (Enough) movement, the opposition coalition, demonstrated in front of the Journalists' Syndicate building in protest of the constitutional amendments that Mubarak regime was about to pass, alleged to help the inheritance of Mubarak’s rule by his son Gamāl. Many international and private Egyptian media outlets, as well as internet blogs, reported that some thugs led by members of the National Democratic Party (the ruling party at the time), attacked a number of female journalists and political activists, hit them, tore their clothes, and sexually harassed them. Female journalists came forward as victims of the attack that was labeled at the time “Black Wednesday.” A report was sent to the Public Prosecutor to investigate what they had been exposed to, but the Public Prosecutor issued his decision to dismiss investigations into the incident under the pretext of not finding the perpetrators.⁴²⁶

The political instrumentalization of sexual violence waved the start of series of gang sexual assaults against women in the public space, where many accidents happened during celebrations’ holidays and big gatherings, and were described by TV talk shows and the press as a form of *su ‘ār ginsī* (sexual rabies or sexual frenzy).⁴²⁷ The accidents of sexual harassment and aggression against

⁴²⁶ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badr.

n.d., “في ذكرى رحيل نوال علي.. تفاصيل ما حدث يوم «الأربعاء الأسود».. وقلاش: تحية لروحها ظلت تسعى حتى آخر لحظة لتأخذ حقها – درب”
<https://daaarb.com/%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B0%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%89-%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%AB-%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85/> .

⁴²⁷ “The blogger and activist Wael Abbas posted clips of gang assaults against women on three important occasions: in downtown Cairo during the Eid holidays (the religious holiday that follows the end of Ramadan), during the African

women came in a row since 2011, starting by the attack against the journalist Laura Logan by a mob of more than 40 men,⁴²⁸ while she was reporting from Tahrir Square on the day Mubarak was deposed. In March 2011, a total of 17 female protesters were detained from Tahrir Square, subjected to physical abuse, and coerced into undergoing degrading vaginal examinations. Major General Sisi, at the time, said that “‘virginity tests’ had been carried out on female detainees in March to ‘protect’ the army against possible allegations of rape, but that such forced tests would not be carried out again.”⁴²⁹

However, sexual violence against female protesters and political activists continued during the rule of the SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood under Mohamed Morsi as confirmed by many women rights’ foundations’ reports:

“During the subsequent 16-month rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), women protesters were repeatedly targeted by security and armed forces. Women were beaten in the streets and subjected to sexual and gender-based violence in detention, including forced “virginity tests” and threats of rape.

Under Mohamed Morsi’s presidency, women in the vicinity of Tahrir were attacked during demonstrations by unidentified men. There were over 250 documented cases during the period from November 2012 to July 2013 of women being targeted by mobs of men and boys, many carrying weapons. According to survivors and witnesses, these attacks tend to form a clear pattern. Attacks are perpetrated by groups of men who single out one or two women and separate them from the crowd by forming a circle around them. The men are mainly in their twenties and thirties. The survivors are groped by the mob and dragged violently to different locations. Sometimes their clothes are removed. Many survivors report members of the group saying, “Do not be afraid, I’m protecting you”, while they are being attacked. Attacks last from a few minutes to more than an hour. Several

Cup in Cairo Stadium in 2006, and in Fayum Province during the *Shamm al-Nasīm* holiday (the ancient Egyptian celebration of spring) in April 2007. Independent TV talk shows and the press discussed what was termed su‘arr jinsi, sexual rabies or sexual frenzy. Security personnel denied the incidents, while sociologists and media commentators cautiously acknowledged that it had happened, claiming it was a recent phenomenon and doubting that it was widespread. Over the last few years, mob sexual assault has become a repeated pattern in crowded streets, particularly during public holidays and political protests.”

Hammad. “Sexual Harassment in Egypt: An Old Plague in a New Revolutionary Order,” 51.

⁴²⁸ Brian Stelter, “CBS Reporter Recounts a ‘Merciless’ Assault.” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2011, sec. Business. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/29/business/media/29logan.html> .

⁴²⁹ “Egypt: Military Pledges to Stop Forced ‘Virginity Tests.’” 2011. *Amnesty International*. June 27, 2011. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2011/06/egypt-military-pledges-stop-forced-virginity-tests/> .

cases of rape have been reported and some survivors have required urgent medical treatment.”⁴³⁰

Meme creators who focused on women’s issues kept pace with the critical revisionist movement of the phenomenon of Islamic revival, which was associated with a noticeable decline in women's conditions and social standing. They also capitalized on the postrevolutionary critique of the Islamist forces’ role until the removal of Morsi, and the shifting attitudes within sectors aligned with the post-Islamist counterpublic. Becoming part of the anti-Islamist factions after 2013, part of these sectors began to reassess their prior experiences and perspectives predating 2011.



*Figure 3

In the meme appears the comedian Muhammad Sa’d, in khaliji costume, in a scene from his film “*Bushkāsh*” (from the name of the Hungarian footballer Ferenc Puskás).⁴³¹

The superimposed text on the images reads: “Islam is founded on five pillars: The hijab, and the hijab, and the hijab, and also the hijab, not only this, and the hijab.”

The five pillars of faith in Islam constitute obligatory practices agreed on by Muslims globally, irrespective of ethnic, regional or sectarian differences.⁴³² These pillars are the confession of faith (*al-shahāda*), worship or prayer (*al-ṣalāt*),

⁴³⁰ “Egypt Keeping Women out: Sexual Violence against Women in the Public Sphere.”, 11. *FIDH, Nazra for Feminist Studies, New Women Foundation and Uprising of Women in the Arab World*. 2014. https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt_women_final_english.pdf .

⁴³¹ “فيلم - بوشكاش - 2008 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” eICinema.com, n.d., <https://elcinema.com/work/1010600/> .

⁴³² “In religious and legal usage. In Islamic legal-religious terminology, the word is regularly found in the expression *arkān al-dīn*, or *arkān al-‘ibāda*, designating the “pillars”, or “foundations” of religion and religious practice. What are

almsgiving (*al-zakāt*), fasting (*al-ṣawm*) and pilgrimage (*al-ḥajj*). The meme criticizes the focus on the hijab in the sermons of Islamic preachers since the 1970s, and the obsession with regimenting women's comportment as if it is equal in importance to the five consensual pillars of faith.

Gender relations and perspectives represented a substantial part of the revolutionary experience as female protesters voiced their objection to attempts at their marginalization within the political entities that emerged in parallel to the revolutionary mobilization. However, the early ascension of the Islamist forces and their threatening tone, enhanced a new polarization within the revolutionary camps. The clashes started between conservatives influenced by the Islamists' propaganda about the priority of removing the old regime remnants over social rights and personal freedoms on the one hand, and those who sensed danger about what was coming if the Islamists achieved the parliamentary majority or won the presidency of the republic after elections.

The outbreak of sexual violence against revolution squares, however, shifted the discourse giving the priority to protecting female protesters by forming networks and organized groups that included young men and women such as "Harassmap," "Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment," "Tahrir Bodyguard," and "Imprint."⁴³³ Deploying social media to provide an unprecedented coverage of gang assaults and sexual violence against protesters⁴³⁴ helped breaking the silence in order to catalyze a shift in societal perspectives towards sexual harassment in the broader society.⁴³⁵

known as the "pillars of Islam" normally include (1) the confession of faith (*shahāda*); (2) the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*); (3) worship, or Prayer (*ṣalāt*); fasting (*ṣawm*); (5) almsgiving (*zakāt*, *ṣadaqa*). To these five obligations must be added a sixth, the permanent holy war against the infidels (*djihad*)."

Réd, and S. Nomanul Haq. "Rukn". In P. Bearman (ed.), *Encyclopédie de l'Islam en ligne (EI-2 French)*, (Brill, 2010). https://doi-org.accesdistant.sorbonne-universite.fr/10.1163/9789004206106_eifo_COM_0938 .

⁴³³ Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Contesting Patriarchy-As-Governance: Lessons from Youth-Led Activism," *OpenDemocracy*. March 7, 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/contesting-patriarchy-as-governance-lessons-from-youth-led-activism/> .

⁴³⁴ HarassMapEgypt, "ياسمين تكسر حاجز الصمت فى وقائع الاعتداء الجماعى - مش ساكتة 4" March 10, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMoeChmrCyY> .

⁴³⁵ Hammad. "Sexual Harassment in Egypt: An Old Plague in a New Revolutionary Order.", 58.

The meme in Figure 4 was published on the Facebook page “‘*Anā Māmā Yalā*” (I am mama, boy) that appeared by the end of 2020. The memes’ page, moderated by female administrators, presented a light-hearted feminist critique within a digital landscape imbued with public testimonies of women violated in different ways which invited the collective focus on gender-based violence (subsequently GBV) as an endemic phenomenon. Many budding feminist groups, organizations, and activists rose after 2014, igniting a digitally mediated movement to expose the scale and frequency of sexual violations within the public and domestic spheres across the country. Moreover, these groups regularly launched awareness campaigns, succeeded in making their voices heard to growing social sectors, and exerted significant pressure on the authorities.



*Figure 4: An image from the famous cartoon “*Tom and Jerry*,” where Tom grabs a gun and places it inside Jerry's burrow, but Jerry turns its muzzle in a u-shape form, so it becomes aimed at Tom’s head. The Arabic word written on the gun’s muzzle is “logic.”

Caption: “Not all men harass all women. A small minority harasses all Egypt, and we are letting them do.”

In a direct interview, the moderators of " 'Anā Māmā Yalā" explained their perspectives, the motivations behind launching the page, and their stance in relation to the post-revolutionary context:

“We participated in the January 25 uprising, but we do not belong to any organization, movement, or initiative. January 25 could be credited with the current feminist movement because it greatly disappointed most of the women who joined the mobilization, as they were marginalized, and their issues were disregarded. With the growing expectations from the revolution regarding adopting women’s demands, the disappointment was also great, and this was the drive behind what we do today. Classifications like *al-dawlagiyya* or *al-kullagiyya* are not important for us now, what is more important is the consistency of these groups with their principles. This means that it is not possible for someone who claims to be secular to accept the rules of inheritance that grant him the double of his female counterparts (the rules of inheritance in Islam), or, for example, someone who says that he supports women’s rights but condones the culture of harassment.”⁴³⁶

The name of the page imitates the comic line “*anā bābā yalā*” (I am papa, boy) that was first reiterated by the actor Khālīd Šālīḥ in the film “*Titū*” 2004,⁴³⁷ where he played the role of the head of a criminal gang. The term synonymizes bossiness and being in control, especially when it is directed to younger/subjugated persons or defeated enemies. In 2014, the actress ‘An‘ām Sālūsa recycled it,⁴³⁸ in the feminine form “*anā māmā yalā*,” in the film “*Al- Ḥarb al-‘Ālamiyya al-Thālitha*” (The Third World War) 2014.⁴³⁹

For the page administrators, comedy created by women is lacking within the digital media, and holds positive potentials to help popularizing feminist thought:

⁴³⁶ The moderators of the Facebook comics page “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” (I am mama, boy), known for its feminist direction. Direct interview with the author in December 2022. The interview was done through email, as the group refused to do a direct personal conversation. They insisted that the answers represent a group of moderators not a single person and requested anonymity. “Facebook,” n.d., <https://www.facebook.com/mamyallaa> .

⁴³⁷ “فيلم - تيتو - 2004 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” elCinema.com, n.d., <https://elcinema.com/work/1010146/> .

⁴³⁸ “أنا ماما يالا” YouTube. July 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4BQYzIN9cg>

⁴³⁹ “فيلم - الحرب العالمية الثالثة - 2014 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” elCinema.com, n.d., <https://elcinema.com/work/2019799/> .

“We were previous acquaintances, and what brought us together was our interest in creating memes. We have never worked with feminist NGOs or belonged to any form of organized public work. We defined ourselves as feminists, but we have never been active until the latest wave. The Arabic content on internet needed comedic element developed by women. Misogynistic jokes represented 70% of adolescents’ content on comics pages. Women have not developed tools to respond to this hatred. Men controlling the content industry constantly reiterated that women lacked the sense of humor and could not make jokes, which always frustrated talents hoping to delve into this field. In the summer of 2020, all women were psychologically exhausted by the number of testimonies on sexual violence and the tense atmosphere on social media, so it was necessary to create an outlet for this pressure through laughter. Our effort stemmed also from our conviction that no change would happen unless feminist thought was mainstreamed within pop culture, and we believed that there was nothing better to foster that than memes as a digital tool.”⁴⁴⁰



*Figure 5

The meme was published on Facebook page “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” in March 2021.⁴⁴¹

Upper section

“Come, we will talk about sexual harassment against women.”

Lower section

“But we will not say a word about men.”

The meme in Figure 5 is one of a series that tries to debunk the cultural pillars that enable sexual abuse and violence, in practice and social communication. The extraordinary privileges

⁴⁴⁰ Interview with the moderators of the Facebook comics page “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” (I am mama, boy), in December 2022.

⁴⁴¹ “*Anā Māmā Yalā*,” Facebook n.d., <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=125374556264217&set=pb.100063750188661.-2207520000&type=3> .

granted to men in Egypt encompass the strong denial and normalization of male sexual violence through a multitude of religious and cultural justifications. Women rights’ activists worked since 2014 on highlighting the cultural and legal mechanisms through which male perpetrators of violence are enjoying high degrees of impunity. Digital media played an important part in disseminating a challenging discourse that exposed the normalized ‘rape culture’⁴⁴² in the Egyptian society, thanks to legal insufficiency and social endorsement.



*Figure 6: The meme published on Facebook page “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” in March 2021⁴⁴³ portrays a scene from the film “*‘Asal ‘Aswad*” (Molasses) 2010,” starring the famous comedian Aḥmad Ḥilmī.

Title/caption: “Please do not get me wrong.”

Upper section: “It is true that I do not commit rape.”

Lower section: “But I do not mind that someone else rapes them.”

⁴⁴² “Rape culture is the social environment that allows sexual violence to be normalized and justified, fueled by the persistent gender inequalities and attitudes about gender and sexuality.”

“16 Ways You Can Stand Against Rape Culture,” UN Women – Headquarters, November 18, 2019, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/11/compilation-ways-you-can-stand-against-rape-culture#:~:text=Rape%20culture%20is%20the%20social,attitudes%20about%20gender%20and%20sexuality> .

⁴⁴³ “Facebook,” n.d., <https://www.facebook.com/mamyallaa/photos/pb.100063750188661.-2207520000/185769883309270/?type=3> .



*Figure 7

Upper section

“When he asks you what your proof on sexual harassment is.”

Lower section

“And then you remember that you forgot to attach the camera to your chest.”

The extensive social polarization that ensued after the January 2011 mobilization subjected the discourses of Islamic revival to thorough scrutiny by numerous sectors profoundly impacted by it over the decades. Since 2014, the surge in feminist activism and the increasing public testimonies laying bare the pervasive nature of routine sexual assaults have underscored the depth of women's frustration. The rebellion against oppression has brought to light countless narratives detailing women's economic and physical exhaustion, fueled by direct male interests and a legislative framework that has largely lost touch with reality and evolving societal norms. These longstanding injustices have made it increasingly challenging to uphold a conservative discourse that hinges on unchecked male dominance without corresponding responsibilities such as protection from violence, financial support, and security—functions that both conservative men and the state have failed to fulfill.

Unlike his predecessors, President Sisi was forced to start the first day of his first term in 2014 by paying a hospital visit to a victim of mass harassment in Tahrir Square, who was celebrating his presidential victory.⁴⁴⁴ Despite the president's announcement on the same day about

⁴⁴⁴ David D. Kirkpatrick, “Egyptian Leader Apologizes to Victim of Sexual Assault in Tahrir Square,” *The New York*

the state's intention to eliminate sexual harassment, accidents of GBV continued to dominate the news and social debates as more shocking episodes gradually unfolded.

The state and official religious institutions were unable to offer alternative discourses to combat GBV as young male sectors remained skeptical about the religious bureaucracy and its sheikhs, robbed of all legitimacy in their eyes, as the Islamist preachers mobilized against them for decades calling them “the jurists of the Sultan.” In addition, the state's religious institutions went far in outbidding the Islamists in promoting religious extremism during Mubarak's era. Although these institutions sought to fill the void left by the Muslim Brotherhood, they were unable to convince a significant female constituency, as they focused on appeasing their male followers, who had fallen out of the direct control of the Islamist forces after 2013. Religious institutions could not help but reproduce the domineering patriarchal discourse, in their own religious vocabulary, and fueled more feminine anger. As a result, increasing sectors concluded that the religious discourse, developed since the 1970s, was unable to provide any reform initiative for women’s conditions, and could not be relied upon to produce a balanced formula in a changing reality.

In a direct interview, the feminist activist ‘Āya Munīr, founder and administrator of “Superwomen” platform, discussed how her personal experiences shaped her involvement in "Superwomen" and shared her perspectives on the involvement of the religious clergy in women's issues:

“The evolution of my religious beliefs is linked to my personal experience because I was exploited under a religious guise during my marriage. In my first divorce meeting held by the family, I kept being told that in Hadith my rights after divorce should be forfeited because I am *nāshiz* (disobedient to her husband),⁴⁴⁵ because I mentioned that my husband is a

Times, June 11, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/world/middleeast/president-sisi-of-egypt-apologizes-to-victim-of-mass-sexual-assaults.html> .

⁴⁴⁵ “The legal and exegetical works are almost united in understanding *nushūz* in Q. 4:34 as wifely disobedience, and in particular referring to wives not making themselves sexually available to their husbands. This is an unsurprising interpretation of *nushūz* given the mufassirs’ reading of the earlier parts of the verse, which, for them, placed the man at the head of the household, and demanded that the wife be obedient to him. Understanding *nushūz* as wifely disobedience of some sort thus rendered the verse coherent for them, as this final part of the verse was, in their reading, prescribing the consequences of the wife not abiding by the idealized relationship in the earlier part of the verse.”

sick man who harms me, imprisons me, and prevents me from visiting my family. He was very frankly repeating: "I am a man; would you dare to disagree with God?!" A man, for him, means that God loves him more than me. There is no other explanation. In closed rooms, I say to my colleagues I am for a secular state, without a religious covering for the ruling system, and without religious authority, but the conflict now is that the prevailing discourse propagated by religious people is mere contempt for women. Take the example of ‘Abdullah Rushdī and his enthusiastic audience to whatever he says. The religious *sarsaga* [explained later] that prevails, even when they talk about sex, is very derogatory; as if they are doing something to women, and this is a speech that is very rooted in Sharia. A marriage contract, in their view, treats her as a possession, with utmost contempt. We are trying to stir up debates using these statements, and demand legal amendments that do not emanate from Sharia law. Take a statement like that of Sheikh of Al-Azhar two years ago when he said explicitly: “beating a wife aims at breaking her pride.”⁴⁴⁶ This year, he came as an angel, rebranding his reputation and said: “I want to live until there is a law that protects women,” and people would still believe it. I have no problem at all with getting into these quarrels with these clerics. In Quran, a frank verse permits and establishes hitting women.⁴⁴⁷ First, I used to interpret it with evasive explanations, that the text means abandon them not beat them, turn away from them, but the text describes a reality in those eras, and women used to be hit. When I discuss that with a conservative or religious person I try to go down to his level and explain that the situation has changed now. But my personal conviction is that I want to marginalize this whole religious bloc from decision-making. I started criticizing al-Sha‘rāwī long time ago, when his old vile videos reappeared on the internet, and I used to attack and insult him harshly. Now, if I shared any criticism of the sort, it is acceptable, I receive no insults like before. When you demolish one idol after another, like when ‘Abdullah Rushdī says something provocative and we start highlighting why it is problematic, it is true that we receive increasing aggression in

Hussain, Saqib. “The Bitter Lot of the Rebellious Wife: Hierarchy, Obedience, and Punishment in Q. 4:34,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 23/2 (2021): 66–111. <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2021.0466> .

⁴⁴⁶ «شيخ الأزهر: «الضرب مباح لكسر كبرياء الزوجة الناشز»» *Watan*, February 3, 2022, <https://alwatannews.net/Life-Style/article/988425/%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B6%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B3%D8%B1-%D9%83%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%B2> .

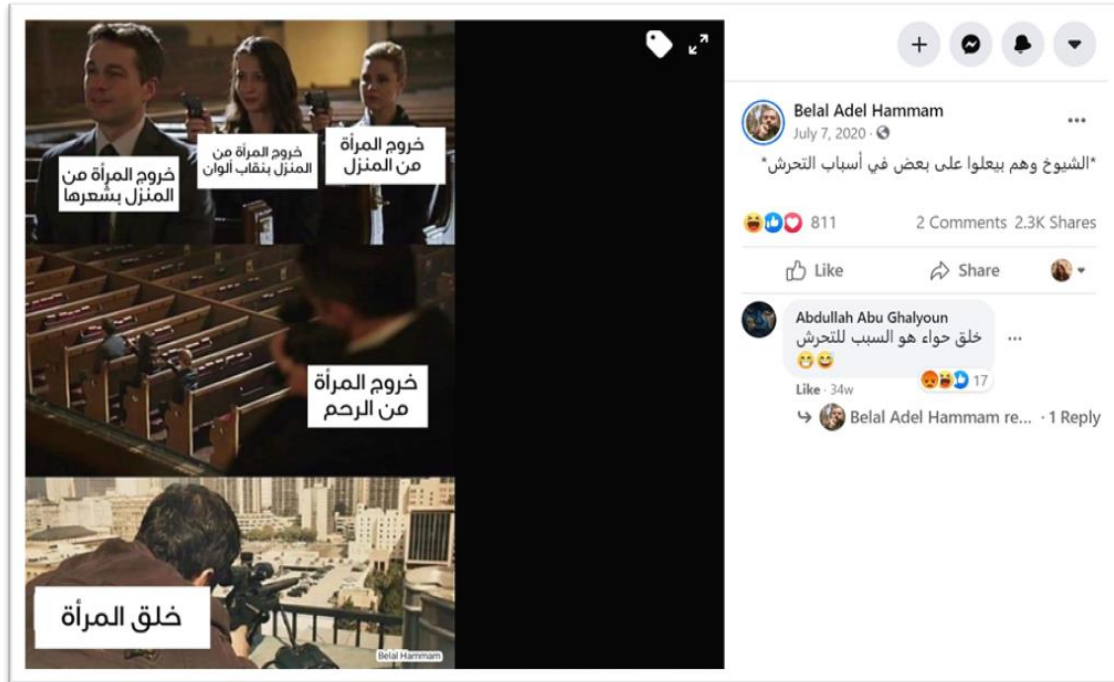
⁴⁴⁷ “Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God's guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them; God is All-high, All-great.” Surah al-Nisā’, verse 34.

Arberry, A. J. “IV. The Women.” In *The Koran Interpreted*, 60. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

return, but the public starts questioning this discourse, and think that he is really saying dangerous things. If we raised people' suspicions about his credibility, it would affect the way people receive his opinions.”⁴⁴⁸

Revealing the societal complicity in the phenomena of sexual violence represented an organic element in internet comedy and memes. Meme creators established links between male superiority discourses, religious traditions, preserving a sexual hierarchy where women do not have control on their bodies and sexuality, and guarding the legislative structure that perpetuated gender discrimination. Defying arguments that tied sexual harassment historically to women's presence in the public space, their costume and comportments, helped debunking a main pillar of rape culture: victim-blaming. Comedy, besides active awareness raising, empowered girls and women on discursive and mental levels to perceive the deep-seated elements of the normalized male violence.

⁴⁴⁸ ‘Āya Munīr, feminist activist and founder and administrator of “Superwomen” platform. Direct interview with the author. Cairo, December 2022. Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Superwomenstory> .



*Figure 8

Title/ caption: “Sheikhs outbidding each other in the reasons for sexual harassment.”

Upper section: “Women leaving the house- women leaving the house with colored face veil- women leaving the house unveiled.”

Middle section: “Women leaving the womb.”

Lower section: “The creation of women.”

Sexual harassment accidents continuously occupied social media trends provoking different sectors and alarming the authorities that started to take legal measures and amend the penal code since 2020⁴⁴⁹ to include penalties for sexual harassment, while police forces devoted a special department to deal with cyberviolence crimes like cyber-harassment, cyberstalking, defamation, non-consensual pornography, and public shaming that fell under the “Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes” law ratified in 2018.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁹ Nabila El-Gaafary, “Egypt Toughens Penalty for Sexual Harassment and Bullying,” *The New Arab*, n.d., <https://www.newarab.com/news/egypt-toughens-penalty-sexual-harassment-and-bullying> .

⁴⁵⁰ “Egypt: President Ratifies Anti-Cybercrime Law,” *The Library of Congress*, October 5, 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2018-10-05/egypt-president-ratifies-anti-cybercrime-law/> .

In Egypt, women emerge as particularly susceptible to cyberviolence due to the prevalent social stigmas surrounding their personal lives. These entrenched stigmas create a barrier, preventing many women from reporting incidents of sexual violence or filing official complaints. Consequently, the harm inflicted by cyberviolence is heightened. Many victims hesitate to go public due to concerns about reputational damage, thereby fostering an atmosphere of intimidation and self-censorship.

However, encouraged by a continuously changing discourse, women have harnessed digital platforms to reclaim control over matters affecting them, such as GBV. Despite the drawbacks of anonymity on platforms like Instagram and X (previously Twitter), they still provided safer spaces for women to engage in digital advocacy. These platforms empowered women to raise awareness about issues like sexual and GBV.⁴⁵¹

Social media platforms like Assault Police,⁴⁵² Qawem,⁴⁵³ and Speak Up⁴⁵⁴ documented and covered many sexual assault accidents which helped and pressured the authorities to track down the perpetrators and open official investigations through the Public Prosecution in many sensitive cases that sparked widespread controversy, especially because they crossed social classes⁴⁵⁵ from the richest⁴⁵⁶ to the poorest.⁴⁵⁷

The rising tide against sexual violence in Egypt was aided by the global MeToo trends that inspired militants and activists who adapted the international campaigning styles to the local

⁴⁵¹ Abdelaal, Habiba. "Cyber Violence and Women in Egypt," *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*. March 31, 2022, <https://timep.org/2022/03/31/cyber-violence-and-women-in-egypt/> .

⁴⁵² Assault Police. "Instagram," n.d., <https://www.instagram.com/assaultpolice/?hl=en> .

⁴⁵³ Qawem. "Facebook," n.d., <https://www.facebook.com/qawem.community> .

⁴⁵⁴ Speak Up. "Facebook," n.d., <https://www.facebook.com/SpeakUp00> .

⁴⁵⁵ "Ahmed Bassem Zaki: Egypt Jails Harassing Student Who Sparked MeToo Campaign," *BBC News*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55471028> .

⁴⁵⁶ "Egypt Hotel Gang Rape Allegations Ignite New #MeToo Wave," *France 24*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200730-egypt-hotel-gang-rape-allegations-ignite-new-metoo-wave> .

⁴⁵⁷ El-Sayed Gamal El-Din. "Egypt's Prosecution Refers Doctor and Wife to Court for Kidnapping and Sexually Assaulting Six Girls - Politics - Egypt." *Ahram Online*. April 13, 2021. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/409165/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-Prosecution-refers-doctor-and-wife-to-court.aspx> .

context. However, feminist and political activist 'Ilhām 'Aydārūs recontextualized the interweaving local and global movements while elaborating on the emergence of trends like digital feminist advocacy and anonymous public testimonies:

“Publishing anonymous public testimonies about sexual violence was not only about the emergence of MeToo and parallels of it. It was a common condition that appeared in the whole world at a similar time, an expression of a phenomenon. Egypt had a hashtag that appeared in 2016 and 2017, before MeToo, called #FirstTimeIwasHarassed. This was an authentic local Egyptian hashtag.⁴⁵⁸ The hashtag monitored harassment in childhood, usually a family and domestic phenomenon. There are testimonies that even appeared before that. The writer Muḥammad Khayr published an anonymous testimony for Yāsmīn al-Birmāwī in 2012, with an initial signature Y. B. before she decided to go public on TV.⁴⁵⁹ The public appearance of Yāsmīn was linked to the context of the gang assaults during the revolutionary mayhem in 2011 and 2012. Before MeToo, there was similar movements in Yemen, the Arab Gulf, and Kenya. The report made by Harassmap⁴⁶⁰ depicted similarities to the hashtag idea, while MeToo created a global trend and gave momentum in multiple forms. It is an expression of a collective situation, where a problem of justice prevailed in cases of sexual violence.

The overwhelming majority of sexual violence cases in the entire world do not reach justice mechanisms, whether judicial, customary, or institutional. The judiciary is one form, not the only form. Personally, I am a woman who had never filed a report of sexual harassment. Most women do not report, and those who do report do not get justice. Justice is expensive and individual violations are not easily resolvable. Public testimonies, whether anonymous or not, are a form of dealing with the crisis and an expression of a real deficiency of justice mechanisms. That is why I sympathize with them. One of their benefits is that they break the silence and allow people to express themselves. I wrote the article “From Disclosure to Fairness”⁴⁶¹ asking whether disclosure is sufficient as a form

⁴⁵⁸ Wael, Reem. “#FirstTimeIwasHarassed: Hashtag Testimonies of Child-Sexual Violence.” *HarassMap*. April 2018. <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/harassmap/media/HarassMap%20Egypt/final-report-2compressed.pdf>.

⁴⁵⁹ Magdy Fahim, “ياسمين البرماوي تروي واقعة التحرش بها في التحريير,” YouTube, February 8, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZVNosY-2DA>.

⁴⁶⁰ Wael, Reem. “#FirstTimeIwasHarassed: Hashtag Testimonies of Child-Sexual Violence.”

⁴⁶¹ 'Aydārūs, 'Ilhām. 2020 “مدى مصر، ”مدى مصر“، *Mada Masr*. June 14, 2022. <https://www.madamasr.com/ar/2022/06/14/opinion/u/%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AD-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%95%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B2%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%81%D9%8A/>.

of justice, or must it be complemented by justice mechanisms so that fairness could be achieved. This is my opinion.”⁴⁶²



*Figure 9

(Images from top to bottom).

- 1-“Three things are important to the society.”
- 2-“The reputation of the harasser.”
- 3-“The psychological well-being of the harasser.”
- 4-“The future of the harasser.”

In Figure 9, the meme highlights a critical aspect of rape culture: the condoning of sexual harassment by trivializing the crime compared to the punishment of the harasser and his moral condemnation. The "reputation" and "future" of the harasser are frequently emphasized in online discussions about any sexual harassment incident. Sexual violence is deeply trivialized within dominant patriarchal cultural norms. Within this rooted culture, male guardianship over women is almost entirely justified, meaning that transgressions or errors, such as sexual violence, are often tolerated within the broader context of men's societal role in maintaining public morality and ensuring its continuity and dominance. This is especially true regarding women's morality and men's control over women's bodies, even if no familial or personal ties exist between them. In the eyes of the dominant

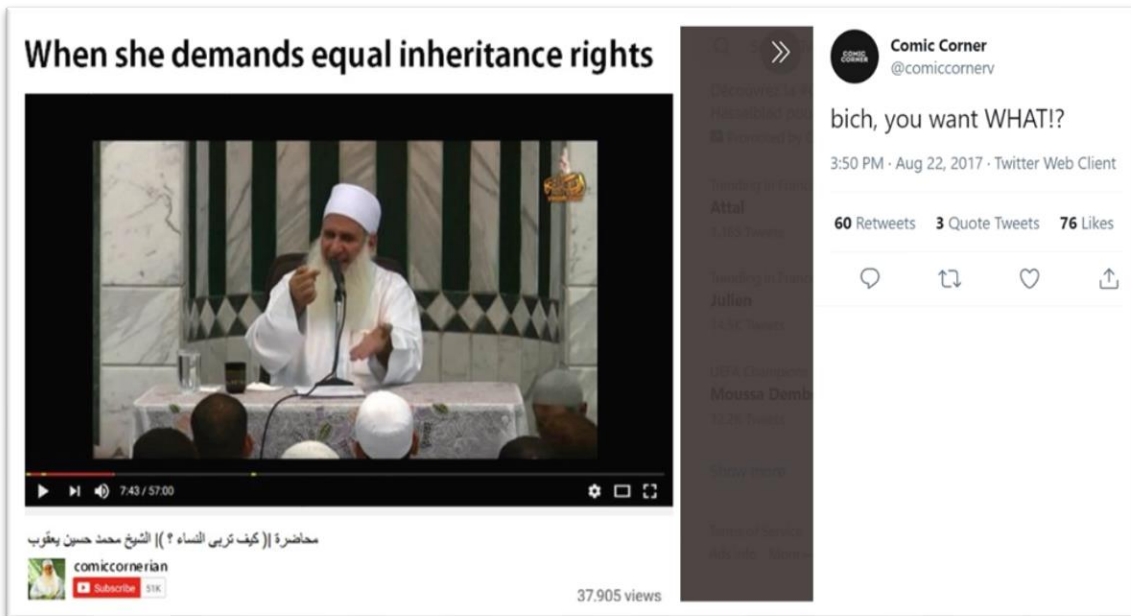
⁴⁶²Ilhām ‘Aydārūs, feminist and political activist. Direct interview with the author, Cairo, January 2023.

majority, men's roles remain “public,” while women are relegated to the “private” sphere. This dynamic justifies the high value placed on the future and fate of men, who are seen as playing a quasi-security role, compared to the violence or abuse experienced by women.

The fight against sexual violence attracted support from across the political spectrum, forming a virtual alliance that transcended the three main political factions: *al-dawlagiyya*, *al-thawragiyya*, and *al-Islāngiyya*. However, these polarized political groups often interacted with the anti-sexual harassment movement from their own positions, sometimes showing conflicting reactions to feminist currents. This highlighted the realization among emerging communities that the epidemic of sexual violence served as a point of convergence, where the dominant patriarchal and sexual norms exerted their influence and shaped public attitudes, regardless of political affiliations or slogans.

Questioning the dominant notion of male superiority and impunity opened the Pandora box raising fundamental questions that touched on the deeply ingrained convictions within political, social, and religious institutions. The lines of polarization between the three political camps, subsequently influenced the activists and audience interested in the gender relations' question. The state position for *al-dawlagiyya*, the religious stances for *al-Islāngiyya*, and the purified image of the revolution/ the revolutionaries for *al-thawragiyya*, were fundamental elements that the battle against GBV threatened and contested. The more the disclosure of sexual assaults that crossed social classes deepened, the more its threat to the political camps' capital and representations relayed a serious tension portrayed in the social media debates as well as the memesphere.

2. Debunking the Religious Myths Behind a Sanctified Hypermasculinity



*Figure 10: The meme by “Comic Corner” comments a screenshot from YouTube showing a video for sheikh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ya‘qūb titled “Lecture | How to bring up women?| Sheikh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ya‘qūb.”⁴⁶³

Raising a public debate on the laws of inheritance in Islam, incorporated in the Egyptian personal status laws, could be considered a taboo-breaking act.⁴⁶⁴ Online feminist groups

⁴⁶³ Published on “Comic Corner” on Twitter (currently X) on 22 August 2017. <https://twitter.com/comiccornerv/status/899992297923903488/photo/1> .

⁴⁶⁴ “Very soon after the battle of Uḥud, when numerous Muslims had fallen, we have—as a result of it—the final Qur’ānic ordinance of IV, 7-14: “To the men belongs a share of what their parents and kindred leave, and to the women belongs a share of what their parents and kindred leave—whether it be little or much—as a determined share. If the next of kin (not entitled to inherit), the orphans and the poor are present at the division, give them some of it and speak kindly to them (verses 9-10 go on to deal with the treatment of orphans). Allāh ordains for you, concerning your children, (as follows): for the male the like of the portion of two females; but if there are (only) females (and) more than two, two-thirds of the estate belongs to them and if there is (but) one (female) to her belongs the half.”

Schacht, J. and Layish, A., “*Mīrāth*”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, ed. by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 21 November 2023 http://dx.doi.org/accesdistant.sorbonne-universite.fr/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0747

questioned the discrimination between male and female members of the same family, on religious basis, arguing that favoring the male members by doubling their inheritance shares, belonged to ages when female members did not work or share economic responsibilities.⁴⁶⁵ Arguing against the religious ruling used different approaches like highlighting the denial of females' inheritance in rural and Upper Egypt, and referring to the modern life transformations that changed the social status of women and men so that male family members became no more responsible to support their sisters, mothers, and female relatives financially after the death of the breadwinners or wealth owners, as the inheritance rulings presupposed.

The criticism to inheritance rulings escalated in parallel to the initiative of the Tunisian president Beji Caid Essebsi in 2017 on the occasion of the celebration of Women's Day in Tunisia. The president announced that his country “is moving towards complete equality between men and women in all areas, including equality in inheritance.”⁴⁶⁶ Essebsi announced the formation of a committee concerned with discussing ways to implement the initiative and mentioned that he intended to allow Tunisian women to marry foreigners without necessarily converting to Islam.⁴⁶⁷

The calls for equality in inheritance between men and women is an old demand for women liberation movements in Egypt and the Arab world since the 1980s. These movements, with few exceptions of Islamist women organizations, were traditionally led by secular feminists since the foundation of the Egyptian Feminist Union after the 1919's popular revolution as the first nationwide feminist movement. The union was incorporated within state institutions after the 1952 revolt inaugurating the age of “state feminism” under President Nasser and to a lesser extent President Sadat. Under President Mubarak's rule, foreign-funded feminist NGOs acquired a relative clout within the institutions of women rights beside the National Council for Women, a state specialized council founded in 2000.⁴⁶⁸ Calls for equal inheritance remained within elitist

⁴⁶⁵ “أزمة المساواة بين المرأة والرجل في الميراث مستمرة غادة الشريف وأحمد البحيري” *almasryalyoum.com*, 2017, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1180563> .

⁴⁶⁶ “من طارق عمارة,” *Reuters*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/tunisia-women-equality-mn5-idARAKCN1AW2E1/>

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁸ “The National Council for Women was established by Presidential Decree No. (90) of 2000 as an independent national mechanism reporting to the President of the Republic that proposes general policies for society and its constitutional institutions for the advancement of women, activating their role and empowering them socially,

circles of younger generations of feminists since the 1980s and 1990s, against the backdrop of full domination of Islamist currents on social debates concerning women issues. Resurging in the public debate in 2017, equal inheritance demands provoked angry reactions and prompted Sheikh al-Azhar Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib to issue an official statement to implicitly denounce the Tunisian president's initiative, describing the verses on inheritance as "texts that are both definitive in proof and significance," stressing that verses concerning family rulings cannot be approached by "the general public or non-specialists."⁴⁶⁹ The Sheikh described the initiative as a "wild idea, or a thesis that was not supported by the rules of sound *ilm* (theology), clashed with definitive rules and texts, provoked the Muslim masses who adhere to their religion, and opened the door to destabilize Muslim societies."⁴⁷⁰

In 2021, two feminist platforms (Superwomen and *Barāh 'Āmin* (a safe space)) launched two joint online campaigns against the denial of women's inheritance, promoted by the hashtags *#riḍwa*⁴⁷¹ and *#mirāth_al-sitāt_fēn*⁴⁷² (where is women's inheritance?). *Riḍwa* is the familiar term

culturally, economically and politically, and proposing legislation and policies that support their rights. The Council was reconstituted by Military Council Resolution No. 77 of 2012, which continued until the issuance of Presidential Resolution No. 19 of 2016 to reconstitute the National Council for Women, which included for the first time among the members of the National Council for Women young men and rural women, along with female and male experts in women's affairs and development."

خلفية تاريخية, المجلس القومي للمرأة", n.d., <http://ncw.gov.eg/Page/11/%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE%D9%8A%D8%A9/>.

⁴⁶⁹ "من محمود رضا مراد, "شيخ الأزهر يندد بدعاوى المساواة في الميراث ويصفها بأنها 'فكرة جامحة'" *Reuters*, August 20, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/azhar-imam-ea2-idARAKCN1B00R7/>

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷¹ "Facebook." n.d., [https://business.facebook.com/Superwomenstory/posts/pfbid0z4sUFjL9kVdb3LH1teU2wNA9dUgzKFnwwrV5Fq1cNGzZcBfYjSnwQzQDM5BsAbqPl?_xts__\[0\]=68.ARDKhZhfR6d1jXg-YovKQr8fs8C4xI0NUoijN7j8fq4x58_126i4RUJpH9d1W3jFIwxNYNDxkMo1FXNXTodypquCVIbstZWEYj-iyb_TgbA4N4AVB18Rcs4X70H_FECML979IYIMQNQbYcb0Qox1E7MVeAs-BAVFICgEIMSFSd2DU9va7LYX021t1qJarV5fvy_11zA4vihuwH_l36VrEHIW_hl2m0sVsE5ZCCkxdo8Co_CdD50R0GQ03_kjQo3wRldiBb5q5kw4npeneppgvnhioB3AWbEOkej1Xcc-AkEEg7hC0VAdphF3FG4z1OQ-Vrr9rDMebLPhaY_LA](https://business.facebook.com/Superwomenstory/posts/pfbid0z4sUFjL9kVdb3LH1teU2wNA9dUgzKFnwwrV5Fq1cNGzZcBfYjSnwQzQDM5BsAbqPl?_xts__[0]=68.ARDKhZhfR6d1jXg-YovKQr8fs8C4xI0NUoijN7j8fq4x58_126i4RUJpH9d1W3jFIwxNYNDxkMo1FXNXTodypquCVIbstZWEYj-iyb_TgbA4N4AVB18Rcs4X70H_FECML979IYIMQNQbYcb0Qox1E7MVeAs-BAVFICgEIMSFSd2DU9va7LYX021t1qJarV5fvy_11zA4vihuwH_l36VrEHIW_hl2m0sVsE5ZCCkxdo8Co_CdD50R0GQ03_kjQo3wRldiBb5q5kw4npeneppgvnhioB3AWbEOkej1Xcc-AkEEg7hC0VAdphF3FG4z1OQ-Vrr9rDMebLPhaY_LA).

⁴⁷² "Facebook" "Log in or Sign up to View," n.d., [https://business.facebook.com/barahaamen/photos/a.386709204863319/1803698943164331/?type=3&_xts__\[0\]=6](https://business.facebook.com/barahaamen/photos/a.386709204863319/1803698943164331/?type=3&_xts__[0]=6)

in rural and Upper Egypt for a small amount of money, given by male family members to women, to assuage them “in lieu of their legal inheritance shares so they won't end up owning land and property.”⁴⁷³

The Facebook page “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” supported the debate of equality in inheritance and continued to evoke critical themes for sensitive religious taboos in their memes. Attacking the hypermasculine stereotype represented an important line of critique in the page’s comics. Irony in clusters of memes of the page emanated from portraying a stereotypical man, spoiled and privileged, unapologetically reiterating his comments and expressing his attitudes towards women, without being able to perceive the facts of privilege or discrimination. Framing the normative social standards, from the point of view of the stereotypical man, indirectly mirrored the societal blindness to the reality of inequality precipitated through a longstanding hybrid of religious, customary, cultural, and legal discourses:

“Comedy is an important type of expression lacking in the feminist movement. First, because it is a source of venting accumulated anger after successive frustrations, and second, because comics and memes generate discussions in sectors that are not interested in reading an article in a periodical that talks about the future of feminism in Egypt or the Arab world. A joke is generally a provocative act that you can never ignore. As long as there is a huge shortage of female comedic content creators on the Internet, and females are restricted to the roles of advertising models or fashionistas, this will favor masculine thought that dominates writing and culture in general.

Over time, we felt that we needed a vital discourse accessible to all social groups, with our voice, ideas, biases, and without compromise. However, memes helped crystallizing ideas, sometimes with misleading simplification, but they kept the arguments and responses fresh in our mind. Also, memes in general, and male memes in particular, were immune to criticism under the pretext that they were a joke and criticizing them reflected a party pooper spirit and killed the sense of humor. This

[8.ARC8H5rIHwoFmdbn_Ois57qF4dfnjhXOH7WLSWAuQ1zu-cww2P4A3nlSs2JTIj4Og0rh6sfSrG5UPf9Kfv2RzuYGcQP5pgE1k7bQGhCOK7y0krU5Cek_dlzJ7zDWCznppIPio0kO311DXiUgHXs0SP3U8FXcs1q2olQaZ0HRI7r5WjLPBTvDjDoKTM0YhocPRgij-7G1RC-oWXrkgB4nA-LDt4gAc5D5UXhV-KnGOzjKUOb-Invn25T8McSAImU1vTHrnSHrAkOUD_mg6bMGBFeQzJr4OK-BseuRUsbebyVQHvj5kwQzQbmYpw2cS5CpnbMBXjK4pIRsDTkp5A .](https://www.newarab.com/features/egyptian-campaign-combats-womens-inheritance-denial)

⁴⁷³ Enas Kamal, “Egyptian Campaign Combats Women's Inheritance Denial,” *The New Arab*, n.d., 18 November, 2021. <https://www.newarab.com/features/egyptian-campaign-combats-womens-inheritance-denial> .

disgusting accusation was always directed at women, so let us face joke with joke!”⁴⁷⁴



*Figure 11

In the meme, an interviewer hosts the famous Egyptian billionaire Nagīb Sāwiris. The superimposed texts are invented by the meme creators of “*Anā Māmā Yalā*.” Sāwiris’s richness is deployed, in the background, to accentuate the meme’s purpose in satirizing the stereotypical man’s normative reiterations.

Top image

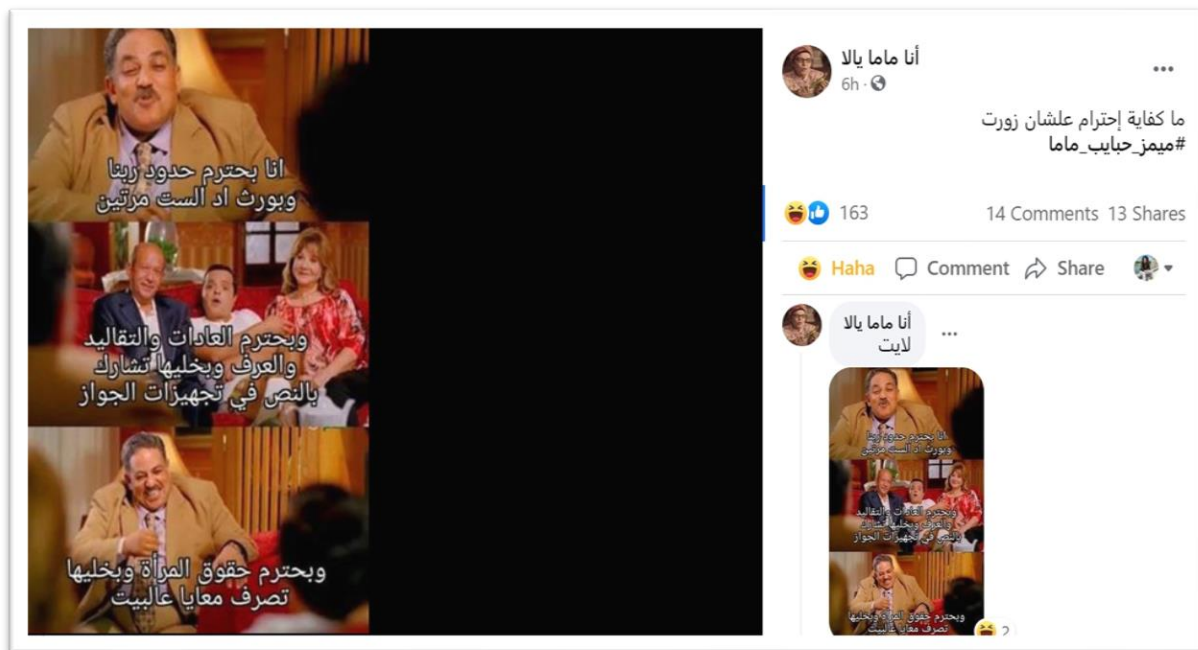
“What would you say to materialistic women who speak about inheritance, dowry, and household furnishing [in preparation for marriage]?”

Bottom image

“I never cared about money, I inherit the double [of the correspondent female family member], and I make her contribute to the costs equally too.”

The meme’s irony is further heightened by the fact that Nagīb Sāwiris is a Christian and thus not bound by Islamic inheritance laws. Nonetheless, the focus in the meme shifts towards his perceived masculinity rather than his religious background. His portrayal emphasizes the commonality of the traditional notions of masculinity, implying that his mindset aligns more closely with the conventional male stereotype, irrespective of his religious affiliation.

⁴⁷⁴ Moderators of the Facebook comics page “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” (I am mama, boy). Direct interview through email with the author. 15 December 2022.



*Figure 12

Upper image: “I respect God’s *ḥudūd* (limits) and I inherit the double of a woman.

Middle image: “And I respect the habits, traditions, and customs, I make her contribute to marriage preparations with half of the costs.”

Bottom image: “And I respect women’s rights and I make her share with me the household expenses.”

The title/ caption put for the meme by the page “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” is: “Enough respect, because I choked. #memes_of_mama_beloveds.” Emphasizing that women in Islamic tradition and societies are treated with respect and that “Islam honored women” is a constant cliché deployed by religious preachers and institutions, and similarly by big numbers of men in reply to any criticism.

The feminist memesphere focused on different types of hypermasculine aggression extending beyond sexual violence in domestic and public spheres. The sociologist Hanan Hammad presumed that a continuum of violence linked state abuse with male abuse, as “an inefficient and

corrupt state feeds into an abusive gender order.”⁴⁷⁵ However, local movements of young women after 2013 adopted a discourse that delved deeper into the cultural and religious convictions that supported a despising look at women, and were not restricted to the analytical perspective that centered state violence as a sole factor affecting the reality of discrimination and violence.

Focusing on the pillars of discrimination against women, enrooted in the religious texts and interpretations, became one of the most provocative themes of the feminist discourses, especially when it gained more popularity and went beyond elitist circles. Watching sectors from the young generations liking or sharing memes that included direct religious criticism, made from a feminine perspective, waved a different generational perspective, less threatened by the Islamist domination on public discussions. The surge in critical memes and the growing engagement of young women and men, amidst the revisionist anti-Islamist movement, elicited strong reactions from religious institutions and conservative sectors. Many individuals began to share excerpts from ancient Islamic history and theology texts to underscore the subordinate position of women and criticize the stagnant and literal interpretations that persist to this day.

In Figures 11, 12, and 13, the strategic use of religious language within the satirical framework of internet memes is evident in its role in pushing the boundaries of the discourse on gender equality, irrespective of explicit religious directives. The rigid discriminatory inheritance laws in Islam are directly challenged through clear objections presented in a comedic style, leveraging popular culture symbols to banalize the act of questioning established beliefs (like the billionaire Nagīb Sāwirīs in Figure 11 and the comedian ’Ādil ’Imām in Figure 13). Figure 12 employs the mention of God's *ḥudūd* (limits) to play down conventional masculine discourse surrounding inheritance, whereas Figure 13 discusses the stagnation of religious texts on polygamy and slavery in light of evolving societal dynamics, suggesting a need to move beyond a strict reliance on Quranic scripture as the primary authority in legal and social contexts.

⁴⁷⁵ Hammad. “Sexual Harassment in Egypt: An Old Plague in a New Revolutionary Order,” 55.



*Figure 13

The meme, published by the Facebook page “*Lā li Ta‘addud al-Zawgāt* (No to Polygamy),” portrays a scene from the superstar ‘Ādel ‘Imām’s theatre piece “*al-Wād Sayyid al-Shaghāl*.” Like many memes, it profits from the familiarity of ‘Imām’s relatable comedic grimaces of surprise and awe on behalf of a woman listening to a man’s arguments.

Top image

2020: “But the Prophet and all his companions were all polygamists, you want to say that they were unfair to women?”

Bottom image

1877: “But the Prophet and all his companions had slaves and slave-women, you want to say that they were unfair to the people?”

In this internet meme that critiques unjust practices justified by religious texts, humor arises from incongruity.⁴⁷⁶ By violating accepted patterns and revealing their inconsistencies, a situation governed by a societal norm or religious decree is transformed into comedic commentary. Introducing unexpected elements, such as the comparison between the years 2020 and 1877 in Figure 13, underscores the glaring disparity between historical texts and contemporary social realities. This dissonance highlights a longstanding issue where outdated beliefs hinder progressive social reforms aligned with modern contexts and societal needs.

On 8 July 2022, al-Azhar’s Facebook page named “Al-Azhar’s International Electronic Fatwa Center”⁴⁷⁷ posted a list of prohibitions at the eve of Eid al-Fitr. Among other prohibitions,

⁴⁷⁶ Meyer. “Functions of Humor in Communication,” 37.

⁴⁷⁷ “Al-Azhar’s International Electronic Fatwa Center,” Facebook, consulted on 22 April 2024, n.d.,

the post included consumption of forbidden substances (i.e. alcoholic drinks) at the eve of Eid al-Fitr, young girls and boys going out to parks and promenades without committing to Islam's regulations, women going out adorned and not wearing the hijab, and women and men praying side by side in Eid al-Fitr's prayer.

However, after receiving thousands of angry reactions from people who shared the post on their profiles and wrote angry and sarcastic comments on al-Azhar's page, the post was deleted and reposted without the hijab sentence. Screenshots of the deleted post resurfaced online, from people who considered al-Azhar's move a hypocritical gesture that did not reflect the true stances of the institution. Later, the hashtag *#yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-Azhar* (down, down, with al-Azhar's rule) appeared on social networks and garnered numerous comments and contributions from al-Azhar's critics and its supporters. The hashtag rhymes with the famous acclaims of the revolutionary time deployed against the SCAF in 2011 *#yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-askar* (down, down, with the military rule) and against Morsi and the Brotherhood in 2013 *#yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-murshid* (down, down, with the rule of the Supreme Guide of the MB).

In the following section, I am using screenshots from the online contributions of Egyptians using the hashtag on X to underscore a sample of the opinions shared around its topic. From the name tags of the users' profiles, we could observe some participants putting the Egyptian flags, who usually associate themselves with *al-dawlagiyya* after 2013, while other profiles are for women who speak from their special position as subjects for exclusive religious fatwas.



*Figure 14

Al-Azhar’s post “Eid prohibitions” at the eve of Eid al-Fitr, on 8 July 2022, before its removal and replacement.



*Figure 15: The hashtag #yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-Azhar coming third in the Twitter Trends (currently named X) in Egypt with around 10K tweet volume. Consulted on 12 February 2024.



*Figure 16

Hashtag in Arabic:

#ياسقط_ياسقط_حكم_الازهر



*Figure 17

#yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-Azhar

“Get the high education back to the Ministry of High Education and Scientific Research and get the pre-university education back to the Ministry of Education and focus only on religious education. Enough, the graduates of your colleges⁴⁷⁸ are mostly *dawā’ish* of thought and lone wolves against our homeland

(*dawā’ish* is a current Arabic neologism that draws a similarity between extremist Islamists and the affiliates of Daesh).”

Al-Azhar that received an increasing funding during Sisi’s rule (mounting to 20 billion EGP from the state budget)⁴⁷⁹ succeeded in expanding its network of pedagogical institutions across Egypt⁴⁸⁰ profiting

⁴⁷⁸ In 1961, Al-Azhar underwent an official re-establishment as a university during the administration of President, Nasser that issued the “Azhar Laws” to integrate the institution within the state structures. This shift towards formal education marked the introduction of structured curricula and the establishment of various schools and colleges within the institution. Al-Azhar adopted a mixed learning method that combines theological courses with other sciences such as astronomy, arithmetic, medicine, architecture, geology, history and social sciences within its university. Al-Azhar university (beside schools) funded an expanding network of educational institutions all over Egypt offering undergraduate and postgraduate study programs through 81 faculties, 9 Institutes, 359 academic Departments, 42 centers, 6 university hospitals and 27 General administration units.

QS International, “Al-Azhar University,” *Top Universities*, n.d., [https://www.topuniversities.com/universities/al-azhar-](https://www.topuniversities.com/universities/al-azhar-university#:~:text=About%20Al%20Azhar%20University&text=The%20university%20was%20founded%20in,sur)

[university#:~:text=About%20Al%20Azhar%20University&text=The%20university%20was%20founded%20in,sur](https://www.topuniversities.com/universities/al-azhar-university#:~:text=About%20Al%20Azhar%20University&text=The%20university%20was%20founded%20in,sur)
[vive%20as%20a%20modern%20university](https://www.topuniversities.com/universities/al-azhar-university#:~:text=About%20Al%20Azhar%20University&text=The%20university%20was%20founded%20in,sur) .

479 محمد يوسف, “تنشر موازنة المؤسسات الدينية للعام المالي الجديد: 20 مليار جنيه للأزهر,” *الوطن*, May 1, 2021, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/5471209#:~:text=%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%BA%20%D8%A5%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B9%D8%A9%20%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%87%D8%B1,678%20%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81%20%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%87%20%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9%2010.9%25> .

⁴⁸⁰ “علي, لؤي,” *حصاد التعليم الأزهرى عام 2023 ..اعتماد 271 معهدا جديدا*, December 28, 2023.

from state subsidization to accommodate around two million students in the pre-university stage, starting from kindergarten age.



*Figure 18

“I do not need someone to tell me which leg to use to enter to the bathroom, or someone to tell me with which hand I should eat, or someone to tell me how to make my relation to my husband or my family, or someone to tell me how to dress. You are not our guardians, you are humans like us.

#yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-Azhar.”

In her name tag, Walaa adds the Arabic nickname 'Umm Hurayra (the mother of Hurayra). It is a feminization of the kunya (teknonym in an Arabic name, the name of an adult derived from their eldest son) of the famous Hadith narrator 'Abū Hurayra (literally: The father of Hurayra), a Prophet companion who “presumably did tell many stories about Muḥammad, but the authentic ones may be only a small amount of the huge number of traditions traced to him.”⁴⁸¹

<https://www.youm7.com/story/2023/12/28/%D8%AD%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%89-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-2023-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF-271-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7/6429427> .

⁴⁸¹ Robson, J., “Abū Hurayra”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 07 December 2023 http://dx.doi.org/accesdistant.sorbonne-universite.fr/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_0204

In the upcoming screenshots, we could observe that some name tags carry ancient Egyptian symbols to associate their holders with the neonationalist camp, while others define themselves as seculars.



*Figure 19

“#yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-Azhar.

The end of the sheikhs of al-Azhar will be at the hands of women. And you will see. It just takes gathering some Egyptian women in a million-woman protest.

#no_to_hijab_the_symbol_of_authoritaianism.”

The name tag in Figure 19 is “Abū Nadīm the Supreme Guide of Seculars (a title imitating the Muslim Brotherhood’s title *al-murshid al-‘āmm* granted to the highest authority in the organization).”



*Figure 20: With a name tag using ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, the post writer comments on the photos as follows: “Egypt in the 1950s and before the Wahhabi invasion and al-Azhar’s implementation of their agenda. #yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-Azhar.”



*Figure 21

In the quoted tweet the writer recalls al-Azhar’s objection to Khedive Ismail’s⁴⁸² decision to abolish slavery in Egypt.

The comment of Rawan Taman: “They say that the participants on the hashtag support homosexuals or women wearing sleeveless blouses, I wear the hijab and I say #yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-Azhar.”

⁴⁸² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Ismā‘īl Pasha | Ottoman Viceroy of Egypt, Khedive of Sudan,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, July 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ismail-Pasha> .



*Figure 22

“#yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-Azhar. Through its history, Al-Azhar had always been capable of being unpredictable and concealing its beliefs for survival reasons (*taqiyya*).⁴⁸³ When extremists are prosecuted it disowns them despite that in fact it approves their convictions and teaches them in its curricula. And when extremists back down and their flame fades, al-Azhar takes their place to perform the role of radicalism, extremism, and stagnation.”

However, in the tweets of al-Azhar supporters, some name tags carried the Egyptian flag and the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, which points out the heterogenous nature of the “stability alliance” gathering seculars, neonationalists, and religious conservatives.

⁴⁸³ Matt Stefon, “Taqiyyah | Islamic Doctrine & Practices,” Encyclopedia Britannica, July 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/taqiyyah> .



*Figure 23

“I came to see who are the participants on this hashtag and found them as follows: “*Labāwī* (lionesses),⁴⁸⁴ *dayyūthīn* (cuckolds), Islamophobia” and all those people, thanks God, represent 0.01% of the population, and they are hit by shoes everyday (i.e. humiliated and

persecuted). #yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-Azhar.”



*Figure 24: “I swear to God, after all what I see I insist more on educating my daughter in al-Azhar, maybe I could protect her. We are in an intellectual swamp. And the problem is that those who drown us in it call themselves people of culture, taste, and modernism. Allah is my suffice, and the best deputy. #yasqut_yasqut_hukm_al-Azhar.”

⁴⁸⁴ *Labāwī* (lionesses) in colloquial Egyptian Arabic bears a shaming sexual connotation for women, meaning sluts or bitches.

By dismantling the religious foundations of "masculine exceptionalism," feminist activists and women across various sectors began to view the direct regulation of female bodies and sexuality as a deliberate objective of dominant religious institutions. The perpetuation of male dominance in the Egyptian context was consistently reinforced through religious, legal, and authoritative mechanisms and narratives. While the hypothesis emphasizing the continuum of violence often placed state accountability at the forefront, post-2013 local activism did not shy away from examining the religious, social, and nuanced aspects that explored the repercussions of male superiority on women's social interactions and autonomy.

Through advocacy efforts that delved into the diverse layers of discourse and tools of control shaping the prevalent landscape of coercion, women's movements diversified their approaches. This diversity transformed their quest for change into an inclusive platform that embraced varied allies and adversaries alike, fostering an open battleground for advancing their cause.

In March 2021, the Egyptian parliament started to discuss a governmental proposal to amend the definitions and penalties of the crime of female genital mutilation (FGM). FGM was recognized for the first time as a crime in the Children's Law issued in 2008. In 2016, a number of penalties were imposed against those who committed it in amendments to the Penal Code approved by the House of Representatives.⁴⁸⁵

The amendments proposed by the government aimed to increase the punishment for those who attempt to circumcise females falling under their legal jurisdiction, expand the scope of

⁴⁸⁵ "Article 242 of the current Egyptian Penal Code stipulates that 'anyone who performs female circumcision- the familiar Egyptian term for FGM- by partially or completely removing any of the external genital organs or inflicts injuries on those organs without medical justification shall be punished with imprisonment for a period of not less than five years and not exceeding seven years. Aggravated imprisonment would be the penalty if this act results in permanent disability or leads to death. Likewise, Article 242 bis-A of the same law stipulates that 'anyone who requests female circumcision and has her circumcised upon his request' shall be punished with imprisonment for a period not less than one year and not exceeding three years."

صفاء عصام الدين, "يوميات صحفية برلمانية| من أسباب رفض 'تعليظ عقوبة الختان': عضو المرأة ليس مهمًا.. وكيف نواجه الناخبين", المنصة, n.d., <https://www.manassa.news/stories/5005> .

accusation to include other officials responsible for making that decision, impose special penalties on medical doctors doing FGM, and define the elements of the crime more clearly.⁴⁸⁶

FGM, a very old Egyptian and African customary practice, was never criminalized before 2008, which contributed to its normalization and impeded all the efforts to fight its prevalence among successive generations, which put Egypt among the top five countries where FGM is performed for young girls in Africa, the Islamic, and Arab world. FGM has been gradually medicalized, so that Egypt became the first country in the world where FGM was performed by medical doctors.⁴⁸⁷ Also, FGM became a controversial topic for clerics and preachers during the 1990s and the 2000s in parallel to the social hegemony of the Islamic revival thought.⁴⁸⁸ Traditionally, discourses against FGM highlighted its nonappearance in the religious texts and regulations, as the Prophet did not perform the operation to his daughters and the practice was absent in the majority of Muslim non-African countries.

A group of parliament members rejected the governmental amendments in 2021, including the salafist bloc and the representatives from rural and Upper Egypt, who justified their position

⁴⁸⁶ “The proposed amendment to Article 242 of the law stipulated that “anyone who performs circumcision on a female by removing any part of her genital organs, mutilates, or injures those organs shall be punished with imprisonment for a period of no less than five years. If that act results in a permanent disability the penalty shall be aggravated imprisonment for a period of not less than seven years, but if the act leads to death, the penalty shall be aggravated imprisonment for a period of no less than ten years. The amendments specifically punish doctors involved in the crime with “aggravated imprisonment if the person who performed the circumcision is a doctor, or a practitioner of the nursing profession. If his crime results in a permanent disability, the penalty shall be aggravated imprisonment for a period of not less than ten years. However, if the act leads to death, the penalty shall be aggravated imprisonment for a period of not less than fifteen years and not more than twenty years.”

n.d., صفاء عصام الدين, “يوميات صحفية برلمانية| من أسباب رفض ‘تغليظ عقوبة الختان’: عضو المرأة ليس مهمًا.. وكيف نواجه الناخبين”, المنصة <https://www.manassa.news/stories/5005> .

⁴⁸⁷ فريدة أحمد, “مصر الأولى عالميا في ‘تطبيب الختان’.. فتيات يفقدن أرواحهن تحت غطاء طبي”, الجزيرة نت, June 20, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.net/women/2020/6/20/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86>

⁴⁸⁸ “أحمد البحيري”, Almasry Alyoum, June 30, 2007, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2132270> .

by statements like: “The amendments collide with the established customs of society,” or “the governmental project strays from “*ṣaḥīḥ al-dīn* (the core of religion),” or “How will we face the people in our villages in Upper Egypt?” or “it is not a permanent disability because it does not extend to a vital part of her body, such as a hand or a foot.”⁴⁸⁹

While the deep seated popular belief about FGM was that it tames female’s sexual desire, hence its importance to discipline young girls and protect their “honour” until they get married, the debates about law amendment in the parliament provoked a parallel debate on social networks that involved the memesphere. The comments and memes mocked the dominant masculine beliefs about female sexuality, emphasizing the marginalization of their sexual organs and pleasure.

صفاة عصام الدين, “يوميات صحفية برلمانية | من أسباب رفض ‘تغليظ عقوبة الختان’: عضو المرأة ليس مهمًا.. وكيف نواجه الناخبين”, المنصة⁴⁸⁹, n.d., <https://www.manassa.news/stories/5005> .



*Figure 25

Top image

“The chronicles of a parliamentary reporter | One of the reasons of refusing “the increase of FGM punishment:” Women’s genital organ (clitoris) is not important.. and how to face our electoral constituency.”⁴⁹⁰

Middle image

“Not what dear?”

Bottom image

“Sorry, I do not know how to find it.”

The meme portrays a scene⁴⁹¹ in the Egyptian film “*Banāt al-‘Amm* (The Girl Cousins)-2012.”⁴⁹² The plot of the film is about three young women, bound by cousinhood, who reside with their grandmother in a grand palace. Seeking to sell their ancestral home, they approach a potential buyer. Despite the grandmother's efforts to dissuade them, cautioning them about a curse that befell their ancestors when they tried to sell the palace. Ignoring her warnings, the girls press on, only to fall victim to the curse, with their grandmother, and undergo a

⁴⁹⁰ The quote is taken from the journal article titled “The chronicles of a parliamentary reporter.”

n.d., صفاء عصام الدين, “يوميات صحفية برلمانية | من أسباب رفض تغليظ عقوبة الختان: عضو المرأة ليس مهمًا.. وكيف نواجه الناخبين,” المنصة, <https://www.manassa.news/stories/5005> .

⁴⁹¹ Rotana Cinema, “لما تكون مش متعود انك راجل 🤔🤔 مشهد كوميدي من فيلم بنات العم,” September 15, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjmT_zJp1U .

⁴⁹² “فيلم - بنات العم - 2012 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض,” elCinema.com, n.d., <https://elcinema.com/work/1173494/> .

transformation into men. As events unfold, the transformed individuals embark on a quest to reclaim the palace and break the curse that has befallen them. In the scene portrayed in Figure 25, the transformed girls visit their transformed grandmother at the hospital, and speak to her doctor as if they are asking about their grandfather. In the original dialogue, the irony emanates from many slips of the tongue as the actors (hiding their female identity) talk in the feminine pronouns, and express their surprise when the doctor tells them that their “grandfather” suffers from a prostatic inflammation. The scene ends with the doctor, confused by their pronouns’ shifts, starting to speak in feminine pronouns.

The imagined dialogue in the meme builds on the original film plot, in a same-sex masquerade, by borrowing the male power position to question the male-gaze undermining women’s organ, hence her sexuality. In the question: “Not what dear?” in a threatening tone, the importance of the clitoris is emphasized by a male interlocutor with a female identity.



*Figure 26

The meme template from the famous Disney cartoon “*Tom and Jerry*,” where the Arabic word written on the gun’s muzzle is “logic.” (look up Figure 4).

Caption: “Female circumcision is important because women have an immense desire that will exhaust me and I am weak. But I am a stud (a hunk of a man) and I have to cheat on her because she is frigid.”

The memes in Figures 25 and 26, published by “*Anā Māmā Yalā*,” focus on the contradictions underlying the persistence of the FGM practice that impacts young girls’ body integrity and sexual satisfaction and consequently sexual and marital relationships. While many men use the conditions of reduced sexual desire and reduced sexual satisfaction,⁴⁹³ resulting from

⁴⁹³ Yassin, Khalid *et al.* “Characteristics of Female Sexual Dysfunctions and Obstetric Complications Related to

FGM, to justify their desire for satisfactory relationships, the continuation of this practice is sustained through denial. Denial involves disconnecting its perceived “disciplinary” purpose from the profound and perpetual psychological and physical damages it inflicts.

The frank reference to the masculine fear from women’s sexual desire in the memes of “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” is a frequent theme. The metaphor also exposes an unspoken problem, which is the prevalence of erectile dysfunction among married men in Egypt as a cause for a percentage of failed marriages and divorces.⁴⁹⁴



Figure 27: The meme template is a photo from a scene⁴⁹⁵ in the anthology series “‘Āyza ‘Atgawwiz* (I Want to Get Married)-2010.”⁴⁹⁶ The episodes of the series unfold in a comedic fashion, centering around a middle-class pharmacist, ‘Ulā (played by the actress Hind Ṣabrī), who is determined to tie the knot before reaching the age of thirty. Amidst familial pressure to accept the first suitor who comes knocking, she finds

Female Genital Mutilation in Omdurman Maternity Hospital, Sudan,” *Reproductive Health* 15/1 (2018).
<https://reproductive-health-journal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12978-017-0442-y>

⁴⁹⁴ Seyam, R., Albakry, A., Ghobish, A. *et al.* “Prevalence of Erectile Dysfunction and Its Correlates in Egypt: A Community-Based Study.” *International Journal of Impotence Research* 15/4 (2003): 237–45,
<https://www.nature.com/articles/3901000>

⁴⁹⁵ TVision, “مسلسل عايزة اتجوز - الحلقة 10 | هند صبري - زوجة ضابط مهم,” February 25, 2018.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdvDmcSMvkM&t=1834s> (30:30)

⁴⁹⁶ “مسلسل - عايزة أتجوز - 2010 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض,” elCinema.com, n.d.,
<https://elcinema.com/work/1191098/>.

herself entangled in various amusing situations. Throughout the series, she humorously shares her experiences and challenges dealing with the men who propose to her.

Caption on the right (the man side): “When I speak about the importance of the clitoris.”

Caption on the left (the woman side- yowling and slapping her cheeks): “My husband.”

The photo is taken from the episode “*Zawgat Dābit Muhim*” (The wife of an important officer) where the man proposing to ‘Ulā is a police officer who has the standard characteristics of a macho man and boasts of his superior ability to control and track down criminals and humiliate them. We also see his belittling look at ‘Ulā, whom he does not listen to no matter how hard she tries to speak, filled with his desire to impress and see the fascination with signs of virility and strength in her eyes. The situation suddenly changes as the officer takes ‘Ulā to watch his work in one of the road ambushes, when one of the cars exceeds the permissible speed. The officer launches into a chase after the car, after he forces ‘Ulā to get into the car with him, while he was in the midst of an outburst of anger and excited screaming. Therefore, she appears in the picture wailing under the car seat without any ability to stop the officer who was driving at high speed in a fit of hormonal rage.

In the meme, a switch of positions and characters puts the woman in the place of the macho police officer, speaking about the importance of her sexual organ, while her husband is replacing the frightened ‘Ulā. The husband in the meme, threatened by his wife’s open sexual talk, metaphorically borrows ‘Ulā’s position, feeling incapacitated to stop a speedy car heading towards an unknown fate. The wife, on the other side, positions herself in the shoes of a controlling police officer while owning her sexual desire and speaking with entitlement.



*Figure 28

The meme template from the famous Disney cartoon “Tom and Jerry,” where the Arabic word written on the gun’s muzzle is “logic.”

Caption: “My wife helps me in household expenses and furnishing the house because I want halal sex but I am *qawwām* (a guardian/ a caretaker) with my dick.”

The term *qawwām* comes from the Quranic verse in *Surat al-Nisā’* (verse 34): “Men are the managers of the affairs (*qawwāmūn*) of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God's guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them; God is All-high, All-great.”⁴⁹⁷

This verse is one of the most commonly deployed Quranic texts in gender debates, as it provides the most indisputable proof, by the sacred scripture, on the regulations of the male-female relation in Islam. Besides the frank reinforcement of male guardianship and superiority, the verse introduces beating wives as a form of disciplining and punishment. And despite that many interpretations try to lighten the meaning of beating in the text, or give other possibilities to understand it, most preachers and religious institutions acknowledge beating as a form of disciplining women by men.

⁴⁹⁷ Surat al-Nisā’, verse 34.

Arberry. “IV. The Women.” In *The Koran Interpreted*, 60.

Popularly, the text is widespread in support of sexual violence and absolute male authority in familial and marital relationships. The word *qawwām* remains a major distinction between men and women, despite of the huge social transformations that changed their respective positions. In the meme, “I am *qawwām* with my dick” refers to the hollowness of the term, deployed despite of the absence of its context, in total neglect of the present economic balance. It also reveals the mere physiological essence of discrimination, in the current social condition, when other pillars of male superiority (like education and economic advantages) are gradually vanishing.

The meme also refers to marriage as a form of “halal sex” devoid of other elements of compassion, cooperation, and romanticism. Reducing the social institution to satisfying sexual needs puts focus on the deteriorating social regard to its multi-faceted roles and commitments in the eyes of younger generations. While the country recently witnesses increasing divorce rates,⁴⁹⁸ the intersex interactions and relations keep being influenced by the rising online misogynistic movements against the backdrop of a cumulative heritage of patriarchal culture being recycled and gaining momentum through digital platforms.

⁴⁹⁸ “Two New Marriages Every Minute; One Divorce Every Two in Egypt in 2022: Report - Society - Egypt,” *Ahram Online*, n.d., <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/506604.aspx> .

3. Against the Family: The Attack against Digitized Femininity

On 27 July 2020, the criminal court in Cairo issued a ruling punishing Ḥanīn Ḥusām, Mawadda al-'Adham, and three other girls, with two years' imprisonment and a fine of 300.000 Egyptian pounds each, for convicting them of "assaulting family values and principles." In the judicial case known in the media by "TikTok Girls' Case," accused girls were brought to trial on charges of assaulting the values and principles of the Egyptian family and society, publishing indecent videos, incitement to immorality, exploiting children to achieve financial profits, and human trafficking.⁴⁹⁹ Their alleged actions included enticing girls and exploiting them through live broadcasts, and attempting to evade justice by concealing and encrypting their phones and social media accounts.⁵⁰⁰ The accusation of "assaulting family principles and values in Egyptian society appeared in article 25 of Law No. 175 of 2018 under the law of "Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes" issued in 2018. It stated that:

"Anyone who assaults any of the family principles or values in Egyptian society shall be punished by imprisonment for a period of not less than six months, and a fine of not less than fifty thousand pounds and not exceeding one hundred thousand pounds, or by one of these two penalties."⁵⁰¹

The law includes a multitude of 'moralistic' articles bearing ambiguous meanings and open possibilities of interpretation, such as "incitement to immorality or assaulting family principles and values in Egyptian society." The convicted girls were active on short-video creation and

⁴⁹⁹ "The investigations included that the girls appear through TikTok application in a live video broadcast available to all participants in the application, and create friendship relationships and chat with its followers, taking advantage of the period of lockdown during the first wave of Coronavirus epidemic in the country, and citizens staying in their homes. In exchange for their promise to receive higher wages from the managing company as their followers expand." احذر من مصير حنين حسام.. اتهامات قادت فتاة التيك توك إلى خلف القضبان - اليوم السابع, "اليوم السابع", February 20, 2023, <https://www.youm7.com/story/2023/2/20/%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%B0%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%AA-%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%83-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%83/6089775>

⁵⁰⁰ مبادئ وقيم الاسرة المصرية: قيد جديد على حرية التعبير, "مركز دعم التحول الديمقراطي وحقوق الانسان", Daam, July 22, 2022, <https://daamdh.org/archives/11527> .

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

sharing applications that gained wide popularity during the Covid epidemic (ex: Likee and TikTok). After what is thought to be a “systematic security and media campaign,”⁵⁰² Ḥanīn Ḥusām, a student at Cairo University, was arrested on the grounds that she posted a video in which she invited her followers to start using Likee application in exchange for money according to documented reports:

“Ḥusām was also referred to Legal Affairs at the Faculty of Archeology, Cairo University, where she is studying, for the purpose of investigation. The university stated in an official statement that it “referred the girl to legal affairs to investigate her for engaging in behaviors that are inconsistent with public morals and university values and traditions.” Mawadda al-’Adham was also arrested on charges of attacking family principles and values in Egyptian society, and of creating, managing, and using private websites and accounts through social networking applications on the international information network, with the aim of committing and facilitating the commission of this crime. The General Administration for the Protection of Morals at the Ministry of Interior was able to arrest Mawadda al-’Adham, in implementation of the Public Prosecution’s order to arrest and bring her.”⁵⁰³

The cases of arresting “TikTok girls” raised a growing controversy through two years, being part of the state attempt to reinforce its “centrist” approach to control the limits of personal

⁵⁰² “For example, a journalist argued in his television program that Ḥanīn Ḥusām “calls for the slave trade, legalized prostitution, and pimping,” based on the video clip referred to. Instead of the prosecution investigating the defamation and societal stigma campaigns that targeted the girls, and the crime of leaking private photos of Mawadda al-’Adham, the prosecution decided to arrest and bring the content creators as defendants. In furtherance of the torture, the investigator demanded that al-’Adham’s virginity be revealed, in a clear insistence on the part of the authorities to violate her right to privacy and bodily integrity.”

منظمات حقوقية: نطالب بإلغاء الحكم على حنين حسام ومودة الأدهم وندعو النيابة للوفاء بالتزامها في حماية الناجيات من الاغتصاب | المبادرة المصرية “للحقوق الشخصية” n.d., <https://eipr.org/press/2021/06/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%A5%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AD%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AF%D9%87%D9%85-%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%88%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%A1> .

⁵⁰³ “مبادئ وقيم الاسرة المصرية: قيد جديد على حرية التعبير.”

freedoms and online social deliberations. In addition to cases of arrest for religious and political reasons, the attack on female digital influencers represented a third aspect of that approach, supported in most cases by the conservative sectors of neonationalist and Islamist camps. The meme in Figure 29 captured the nature of the conservative alliance between opponents (*al-Ikhwān* and *al-dawlagiyya*) under the slogan of “Egyptian family values.”



*Figure 29: Under the caption “National unity,” the meme portrays the “Law of assaulting the values of the Egyptian family” as a big trash bin, held from both sides by the arms of *al-dawlagiyya* and *al-Ikhwān* (the Brotherhood).

The insinuation of the notion of the Egyptian family values, introduced to the penal code and the law battling information technology crimes, affirmed the political intent to expand the security raids aiming at curbing any form of social mobilization within the personal and gender spheres. The Egyptian legislation was historically imbued with articles that punish and monitor personal compartments in the public spaces under the pretext of violating the “public morals,” or “incitement to immorality and debauchery.” The amendments to the penal code against the backdrop of technological evolution and cybercrimes extended this conservative regard to the digital medium. The new legal articles criminalized “the publication of indecent photos and videos,” “the invitation to prostitution on social networking sites,” “creating and managing an account on the Internet to incite debauchery,” and left a wide margin for law enforcers to arbitrarily judge the published material. Protecting family values, by the Article 25 of Law no. 175 of 2018,

gave the state control over social media a generic title and a pertinent cause of action, in the view of large sectors.

Absorbing the tension of the gender-related battles, starting from publicly disclosing sexual violence cases down to campaigning for women and LGBTQ rights, became an important topic on the political agenda. And despite that gender-related battles emerged as the least censored venue for public deliberation after 2013, compared to political dissent spheres, it gradually started to pose a threat to the anxious conservatives and the political administration. The threat came from the unexpected scale of attacks on the idolized moral model, marketed by the state and the conservative masculine culture, and supported by the hegemonic political actors and religious institutions. The coverage and commentary on the social networking sites for the sexual violence accidents, femicides, sexual harassment cases that involved celebrities and public figures, and gang rape accidents, painted a bleak picture and scandalized a society that continuously portrayed its self-image within brackets of social conservatism and piety slogans.

The wide scale of sexual violence against women undermines the conservative assumptions about the pious male guardians, and categorically questions the effectuality of the dominant moral frameworks. Rates of sexual violence against women in Egypt are one of the highest in the world; from sexual harassment to beating and physical assault, femicides, down to cybercrimes.⁵⁰⁴ These crimes, if not committed by males within the close circles to the female victims (in cases of domestic and spousal violence), are committed in a state of societal permissiveness and reluctance to provide any form of protection, allowing a state of chaotic male violence. Exposing the crimes in parallel to mobilizing against the dominant patriarchal perspectives poses a serious threat to a hegemonic structure of control on social and political levels.

The counterattack on “family values” within the memesphere highlighted the political instrumentalization of the notion for the purpose of tightening the authoritarian grip on the social movement, and reintroduced it, negatively, as a system of beliefs that deepened inequalities within the dominant family structure, and further empowered the masculine family members. In addition,

⁵⁰⁴ “Egypt: ‘Circles of Hell’ Domestic, Public and State Violence Against Women in Egypt.” *Amnesty International*, May 31, 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/004/2015/en/> .

meme creators focused on juxtaposing the alleged values to their real implications in the contemporary context of gender relations.



*Figure 30⁵⁰⁵

Top text: “When you find that all his information about women come from Pornhub (a porn site).”

Bottom text (reiterated by the actor 'Ādil 'Imām): “I am speaking about rotten sex that lasts a lifetime.”

In a post of four memes, the Facebook page “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” published four different comics based on a meme template from the film “*Arīs Min Giha 'Amniyya*” (A groom from a security agency) starred by 'Ādil 'Imām in 2004.⁵⁰⁶

The comedic story of the film revolves around an overprotective businessman who loves his daughter very much and tries in every way to prevent her from marrying and staying away from him, but a state security officer proposes to her and she marries him after a set of attempts from the father to hinder their marriage. The meme template is taken from a scene in the film⁵⁰⁷ where the father meets the security officer and his mother to finalize the details of the marriage.

⁵⁰⁵ Figures 30 to 33 were published in one post, complementary to each other, on the Facebook page of “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” in March 2021. “Facebook,” n.d., <https://www.facebook.com/mamyallaa/posts/pfbid0tLza6QbswaYaJKPHt7ojEvmRmGR137pfhQCVLXuJcN1w6ZBnkbMbpWFdJWhiMLKbl> .

⁵⁰⁶ “فيلم - عريس من جهة أمنية - 2004 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” elCinema.com, n.d., <https://elcinema.com/work/1001090/> .

⁵⁰⁷ Essam Emam Productions, “| ذات مومنت لما تبقى قاعد مع اصحابك وبتتفقوا على خروجه وانت مش طايقهم - | عريس من جهة أمنية” YouTube, December 26, 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gd2ha3TxGYU> .

In a last attempt to set impossible conditions for the groom, that might spoil the marriage, the father insisted that the pieces of furniture for the house of his daughter should be bought from different countries abroad, which angered the mother of the groom. In reply to the mother's objection, the father (ʿĀdil ʿImām) said: “I swear to God, I am talking about something [a furniture] that lasts for a lifetime.”

The punchline “I am talking about (something) that lasts for a lifetime” by ʿImām was deployed in different clusters of comics, with the word “something” replaced by the subject/ theme of the meme, hence its deployment in the four comics created by “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” to describe four socially supported foundational pillars of male superiority: Male-oriented sexual knowledge, economic discrimination, neglect of female sexual pleasure, and a culture of impunity when addressing cases of sexual assault.



*Figure 31

Top text: “When he explains to you the wisdom behind the male privilege in inheritance.”

Bottom text: “I am speaking about a male economic superiority that lasts for a lifetime.”



*Figure 32

Top text: “When he tells you forget about orgasm.. do not be cheeky.”

Bottom text: “I am spreading sexual repression that lasts for a lifetime.”



*Figure 33

Top text: “When you find that covering up (*al-satr*), the Quran, and the Bible appear when a harasser is caught.”

Bottom text (with the word “the society” written on ’Ādil ’Imām’s forehead): “I swear to God, I am precipitating a sewer drain (*bakāburt*)⁵⁰⁸ (i.e. I am legitimizing a filthiness) that lasts a lifetime.

The comic in Figure 33 commented a harassment accident that

stirred a big debate on social media when a woman took a video with her mobile phone for a man who was trying to harass a young girl inside a building in Ma’ādī suburb in Cairo and reported his crime to the authorities. The video that went viral on social networks in March 2021.⁵⁰⁹ And despite the obvious and intended harassment case in the video, there was widespread debate on social

⁵⁰⁸ *Bakāburt* is an Egyptian colloquial word derived from the English word “backup port” used for safe rescue exits, but the word in ECA is transformed in meaning to point to the street sewer drain. Metaphorically, a *bakāburt* is a polysemous word signifying vulgarity, bad taste, filthiness, terrible conditions, and deterioration.

⁵⁰⁹ “متحرش المعادي: غضب عارم في مصر بعد انتشار فيديو يوثق تحرش رجل بطفلة” *BBC News* عربي, March 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-56336592>.

media about the concept of *al-satr* (covering up), as some groups who defended the man believed that although what happened was shocking, the harasser's name should not be circulated nor should he be defamed, because he is a family man who deserved another chance.

Al-satr (an ECA version of the MSA word *al-sitr*) is a social and religious notion that implies covering up the flaws, sins, and mistakes of Muslims to preserve social cohesion and avoid disgracing scandals.⁵¹⁰ However, the deployment of the notion and recalling it, is usually in favor of men, while contrarily, surveying and scandalizing women for their sexual comportment could be considered a morally rectifying act, as it warns and informs her male and family guardians who would punish her.



*Figure 34

Title: Family values

(Photos from the right)

“So, you help harassers escape.”

“And you release the rapists after prosecution.”

And you deny women their inheritance and afterwards you throw them of the window.”

So, where are the values, you keep them in the buffet/sideboard (*al-nīsh*)?

⁵¹⁰ “(3) CHAPTER. A Muslim should not oppress another Muslim, nor should he hand him over to an oppressor. 2442. Narrated 'Abduilah bin 'Umar: L4L: Allah's Messenger said, "A Muslim is a brother of another Muslim, so he should not oppress him, nor should he hand him over to an oppressor. Whoever fulfilled the needs of his brother, Allah will fulfill his needs; whoever brought his (Muslim) brother out of a discomfort, Allah will bring him out of the discomforts of the Day of Resurrection, and whoever screened a Muslim, Allah will screen him on the Day of Resurrection.”

Khan, Muhammad Muhsin. *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhâri (Arabic-English-Volume 3)*, 361. Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997

In figure 34, condemning the passive attitudes towards sexual violence accidents, whether from the state or the society, became sarcastically attributed to the family values mantra, relating these values to supporting clear cases of injustice and inequality. The comic published in March 2021⁵¹¹ coincided with the horrible accident of a woman found dead on the public road in al-Salām neighborhood in Cairo, after trying to flee three perpetrators who assaulted her inside her residence, probably because they knew that a man accompanied her in her apartment at the time of the assault, which made her rush to the balcony and threw herself from it.⁵¹²



*Figure 35

Title: Sharia guardians

Top image

“I build families on the foundation of lying.”

Bottom image

“But thanks God, I fast, pray, and make the pilgrimage.”

In Figures 34 to 36 the family values and utterances are intentionally conflated with religious hypocrisy, patriarchal model of masculinity, unfairness to women, and tolerance for rape

⁵¹¹ Facebook page “*Anā Māmā Yalā.*” “Facebook” n.d., <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=123369386464734&set=pb.100063750188661.-2207520000&type=3> .

⁵¹² حبس المتهمين بواقعة سيدة السلام.. وجارتها: ألقت بنفسها بعد إرهابها - اليوم السابع, March 14, 2021, <https://www.youm7.com/story/2021/3/14/%D8%AD%D8%A8%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B3%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A5%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7/5243844> .

culture. The Egyptian family is regarded in these memes as an incubator of the negative value system that reinforces a set of anti-modern and immoral practices and structures of dominance and coercion. Thus, the memes refer to the family structure as one of the hegemonic institutions that reflects, in its values and beliefs, the paternalistic system of rule underpinning the political authoritarianism.

Memes as social and cultural vehicles do not stop at following up already active debates, but also they serve as cultural shapers that help transforming cultural codes and validate a rising collective identity,⁵¹³ especially in the case of small social groups like women rights and LGBT rights' groups. Contesting the superior position of the patriarchal family as guardian of societal values is a continuous process led by small groups of meme creators and succeeding in some cases in changing the significance and connotations of dominant clichés like “Egyptian family values.”

⁵¹³ Gal, Noam, Limor Shifman, and Zohar Kampf. “‘It Gets Better’: Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity,” *New Media & Society* 18/8 (2016): 1698–1714.



*Figure 36

The meme template portrays a couple consulting a doctor tagged as “the Egyptian family.” The advices in the images are understood as given by the doctor/the Egyptian family to the couple.

Top image (speaking to the man)

“You should rape her and break her bones.”

Middle image (speaking to the woman)

“And you put a shoe [in your mouth] while he is destroying your body.”

Bottom image

“But if both of you enjoy together, this is called *diyāsa* (from *dayyūth* i.e. cuckold).

It is noticeable in Figure 36 that the emphatic (pharyngealized) consonant (ṣ) is substituted with its sibilant consonant’s counterpart (s) in the word *taghtaṣibhā* (rape her) that became *taghtasibhā*. The substitution suggests that the interlocutor is a woman (a mother in the family!) or coming from a maleducated urban background. Inversely, the consonant (th) in the word *diyātha* is replaced by (s), which refers to a malpronunciation of the letter as it is in classical Arabic, common among ECA speakers, and maybe signalling the maleducated urban background, especially that the term *diyātha* comes from the religious lexicon written in MSA/*fuṣḥā*.



*Figure 37

The meme template from the series “‘Āyza 'Atgawwiz,” the episode “Zawgat Ḍābit Muḥim” (The wife of an important officer), where the actors Hind Ṣabrī and Aḥmad al-Saqqā switched their positions and characters to put the woman in the place of the macho police officer, as explained in Figure 27.

Right side (the police officer side): A civil personal status law.

Left side: Fragile men (represented by Hind Ṣabrī yowling under the car seat).

In February 2021, the Egyptian Council of Ministers forwarded to the Egyptian parliament a comprehensive proposal concerning the Personal Status Law. The leakage of the draft legislation to the media incited a significant backlash due to its perceived undermining of women's rights. Consequently, the draft law was retracted, and the President pledged to ensure that the forthcoming law would uphold a balanced approach.⁵¹⁴ Issuing a new personal status law in Egypt has been on the governmental agenda as the Sisi regime dedicated sincere efforts to treat enduring family and women problems:

“Sisi’s genuine keenness on family issues produced a lengthy agenda supported by legislation which includes the amendments to personal status law.⁵¹⁵ Sisi clashed with the Sheikh Al-Azhar when he called for legislation that annuls verbal divorces in an attempt to lower Egypt’s

⁵¹⁴ Ahmed, Nouran. “The Regime Between Stability and Stumbling: Family Law in Egypt,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (blog)*, August 3, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85081> .

⁵¹⁵ “السيسي يكلف «الإصلاح التشريعي» بسرعة تعديل قوانين الاستثمار والأحوال الشخصية والنقابات - بوابة الشروق” n.d., <https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=09102014&id=643988c7-6d0a-4629-ab5a-5d5469545b1d>

divorce rate.⁵¹⁶ Sisi's regime continues to move toward austerity and envisions a more disciplined society with limited potential for dissent. According to the regime, divorce jeopardizes the state's control over the family, contributes to social crises, and adds undue burdens to society such as child homelessness, youth involvement in extremist organizations, and nihilism among Egypt's youth and adolescents."⁵¹⁷

For many analysts, the focus on family and women issues could be attributed to the regime's need for an achievement that helps improving the conditions of wide sectors, away from the complicated political freedoms' file in Sisi's era. This interest is partially rooted in the perceived threat posed by the ascent of the Muslim Brotherhood to power and the emergence of Salafist movements within the public sphere since 2011, which pushed women's fears to become one of the defining lines that express what Islamists' rule represented when compared to traditional Arab authoritarian regimes. As a result, female voices were at the forefront of the uprising movements in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013.

This movement went beyond elite women's organizations to middle-class women in all their diversity, to impose on the new official authority obligations that take them into account. For the authorities, this concern with women's issues could be interpreted as a way to market its relative advantage over its enemies, or a way to accommodate the pressure of feminist groups that have made their voices heard through social media networks, or an effort to push a large social bloc to front its reform strategy (as appears in the Egyptian President's speeches on a regular basis).⁵¹⁸ This trend adds to the symbolic value of the authority as the sole guarantor of the "civil state" (*al-dawla al-madaniyya*), a slogan that dominated the discourse of political forces at the height of post-2011 polarization.

The descriptions "civil" (*madaniyya*) and "civic" (*madanī*) in Figure 37 serve distinguishing the factions adhering to them from the military personnel and the Islamist

⁵¹⁶ hagar hoss. "بالفيديو.. السيسي يطالب بإلغاء الطلاق الشفهي: عايزين نحافظ على أمتنا" YouTube, January 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaJgeyuDrbA>

⁵¹⁷ Ahmed, Nouran. "The Regime Between Stability and Stumbling: Family Law in Egypt," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (blog)*, August 3, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85081> .

⁵¹⁸ TeN TV, "السيسي: لن أوقع على قانون غير منصف للمرأة وأقول للرجال كونوا رجالاً," YouTube. December 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-pJiBaVPY> .

organizations at once. The invention of the term “civil state” (*al-dawla al-madaniyya*) and its abundant use, since 2012, substituted the implicit meaning behind it (a secular state) to avoid alienating the religious sectors who are disaffected by the Islamic movements and need a reassuring area, especially that the term “secularism” (*‘almāniyya*) has been greatly distorted by Islamists over the course of decades, and its connotation in the minds of the majority of popular sectors actually refers to hostility to religion and religiosity.

In Figure 37, the meme published in the height of the social controversy about the governmental proposal of personal status law in 2021, reiterated the demands for a law devoid of the intervention of religious institutions. The proposed draft of the legislation bore a clear jurisprudential tone and language to the extent that it “spelled out the condition of the patriarch’s approval for women’s marriage”⁵¹⁹ which angered broad sectors. The use of the term “civil law” in the meme was borrowed from feminist campaigns led by NGOs and independent online groups to declare an unprecedented inclination against the intervention of the official religious institutions, especially al-Azhar, as some published news indicated its extensive intervention in drafting the legal draft before it was withdrawn:

“The scope for change and change in the personal status file is limited due to the burden of religion and the inability to overcome it. Hence, the tendency towards comprehensiveness and detail in regulating family rules necessitated a return to the basic reference, which is Islamic jurisprudence, to cover the required details. The draft law was loaded with many jurisprudential details, which made the draft closer to the jurisprudential content than to the form of modern law, so that the draft law became a break with the tradition of legislation and the method of Egyptian legal combination and integration at the level of content and wording.”⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁹ “The draft legislation spelled out the condition of the patriarch’s approval for women’s marriage. This stipulation is currently implemented in marriage contracts in Egypt, even though it was never written in laws to avoid criticism. The rationale for this decision was to leave disputes to be solved informally or to be subject to the discretion of the judges. This rule represents the most moderate legal opinion, but the codification of this rule is still striking as it addresses rare cases. This article serves multiple interests of the conservative coalition who drafted the proposal. Among those goals is reinforcing the idea that marriage contracts are a religious matter and empowering families to defend their social status, in case of dispute, by protesting against cross-class marriage.”

Ahmed, “The Regime Between Stability and Stumbling: Family Law in Egypt.”

⁵²⁰ سيد أحمد، "النظام المصري يتخبط في قانون الأحوال الشخصية." نوران، *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (blog)*, August 2, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85065>.



*Figure 38

The meme uses a scene⁵²¹ from the film “Al-Nāzir (The School Principal)”- 2000.⁵²²

In the scene, the protagonist, portrayed by the actor 'Alā' Waliy al-Dīn, is tasked by his cranky uncle with plugging in a repaired desk lamp. Despite completing the repair, the uncle cautions his nephew that the lamp might explode upon being connected to electricity. Preparing for the potential explosion, the uncle preemptively covers his ears with his fingers in anticipation of the blast.

Top image: “Tell them we want a civil personal status law not posts by ‘Abdullah Rushdī.”

⁵²¹ YouTube, “حكايات و ذكريات,“ حصرياً مقطع من فيلم | الناظر | الجزء 3 | بطولة علاء ولي الدين و حسن حسني و احمد حلمي و محمد سعد May 29, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZ7p2KcnUJE> .

⁵²² Al-Nāzir (The School Principal), 2000. “فيلم - الناظر - 2000 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض,“ <https://elcinema.com/work/1001525/> .



*Figure 39

Caption: Is that true or real?

Top text: “Feminism wants to destroy the Egyptian family values.”

Bottom text: “That is true, but I will deny it.”

The meme, published by the Facebook page “*Anā Māmā*

Yalā” in January 2021, portrays a scene from the film “*Al-Kīt Kāt* (a popular neighborhood in Giza governorate)-1991.”⁵²³ The actor Nagāḥ al-Mūgī plays the role of *al-Haram*, a drug dealer. In the scene,⁵²⁴ he is sitting with his friend and his wife, telling them about his claim, which he made to police officers in the area, that he had stopped trafficking in drugs. Then he recounts that one day an officer arrested him for investigation and asked him: “You work in retail drug trade. Is it true or will you deny it?” He replied: “That's right, but I will deny it.”

The meme frankly opposes feminism, and consequently feminist groups and organizations, to the propagated “family values” as presented in the media and legislation. Borrowing the reply of the famous film personality, a drug dealer and thug, epitomizes the page’s sarcastic line that keeps appropriating the commonly masculine language and attitudes to unapologetically confront social hypocrisy and moralizing discourses directed exclusively against women. The meme sets the confrontation between feminism and

⁵²³ “فيلم - الكيت كات - 1991 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” elCinema.com, n.d., <https://elcinema.com/work/1007370/> .

⁵²⁴ Rotana Cinema, “بص هو صح بس هنكر! مشهد لا ينسى للرائع نجاح الموجي من فيلم الكيت كات,” May 5, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uglV4CAJ4M8> .

family in a context of complete antagonism where the cunning of the criminalized party (in this case feminism) could be deployed to mask their real actions and intentions.

Portraying feminist demands regarding civil personal status law as a looming threat in Figure 38 and characterizing feminism as a potential subversive force challenging family values in Figure 39 illustrates the internet memes' ability to convey intricate cultural nuances through textual and symbolic elements. Both memes suggest that the rejection of religious institutions' interference in personal status laws symbolizes a drastic rupture akin to an explosion. The depiction of populist preachers opposing civil personal status laws in Figure 38 underscores the stark divide between these secular demands and the prevailing sexist rhetoric championed by 'Abdullah Rushdī under religious banners (see *infra*).

To contextualize the cultural significance of these internet memes caricaturing the central role of the patriarchal family structure in Egyptian laws and national identity, historical insights are essential. Identity-driven conflicts have significantly influenced the demands of feminist movements and the status of women within the political landscape, spanning from the colonial era to the post-independence period. Subsequent discussions will delve into the intricate interplay among family dynamics, gender perceptions, nationalist ethos, and feminist activism since the early twentieth century. These insights aim to shed light on the radical undertones present in these memes regarding personal status laws and conceptualizations of feminism, contrasting them with the enduring nationalist and religious narratives woven into modern Egyptian history.

The insinuation of the family and gender notions within the national political rhetoric could be attributed to the early formation of the liberal-nationalist bourgeois structure after the 1919 revolution, in the period of Egyptian quasi-independence from the British colonial rule in 1922, as contends the sociologist Laura Bier.⁵²⁵

“The order and structure of the modern bourgeois household, defined by the presence of enlightened mothers and responsible fathers, became enshrined within the political iconography of the nation and national struggle. The home of Zaghlul, the Wafd Party’s founder, was christened the *bayt al-umma*, or “house of the nation,” and his wife, Safiyya Zaghlul, was designated *Umm al-Misriyyin*, “mother of the Egyptians.” Political cartoons featuring mother Egypt nurturing *al-sha‘b al-misri* (the Egyptian people) to independence, as well as images of male nationalist leaders in

⁵²⁵ Bier. “1. Egyptian Women in Question: The Historical Roots of State Feminism,” 29.

nurturing, mothering roles, demonstrate the extent to which family, home, and gender had become a part of Egyptian nationalism. Domestic images helped to cement the relationship between the privileged elites who ran the country and the masses by incorporating both into the metaphorical family.”⁵²⁶

Laura Bier presumed that the gender regime of the liberal-nationalist political order, described as “paternalistic,” linked the symbolic representation of the country as a woman/mother surrounded by its strong male guardians, the elite liberal-nationalist constructions of authority, and the structure of the state itself.⁵²⁷ According to the historian Elizabeth Thompson, paternalism is defined as a power structure characterized by the control of benefits rather than the acknowledgment of entitlements. It denotes a framework of “negotiated relations and hierarchies,” wherein elite men consistently reshape their dominance over both women and subaltern men. Unlike patriarchy, paternalism is marked by its fluidity. While patriarchy implies the structural subordination of women to men, paternalism represents a system of power where males inherently hold authority over females and possess the ability to discipline less powerful men.⁵²⁸

According to Laura Bier, “the politics of the family and the politics of the Egyptian nation were seen very consciously to be constitutive to each other,” as appeared in the political iconography, the familial symbols, and the gendered imagery of *effendi* nationalism after 1922:

“Not only because the very notion of nation and narratives of nationhood are explicitly built upon “imagined” ties of kinship between the nation’s members, but because the domestic practices of Egyptian families were so central to colonial claims that Egyptians could not govern themselves. As the founding fathers of the liberal-nationalist order, Wafdist politicians very self-consciously authorized their claims to rule on the basis that they were members of *al-sha’b* (the people), legitimate sons of mother Egypt, and paternal guardians of the national family and its interests.”⁵²⁹

This gendering of the nation gradually led to the marginalization of the liberal-nationalist elite women from political enfranchisement, while they “carved out a space of authority and

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵²⁸ Thompson, Elizabeth. *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

⁵²⁹ Bier. *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser’s Egypt*, 31.

autonomy through their involvement with social service provision,” according to Laura Bier.⁵³⁰ Starting from the mid-1930s, the paternalism of the liberal-nationalist elite was challenged by the welfare discourses calling for social reform on institutional basis which consequently challenged the dominant form of “maternal citizenship”⁵³¹ where elite women leaders monopolize social services as a form of motherly “nurturing of the nation.” Under the influence of “middle-class women in public activism,” a new era started for women movements, transferring the “feminized social ‘caretaking’ to the masculine realm of state-building, planning and governance.”⁵³²

The duality domestic/public, resulting from the gendered nationalist discourse, displaced elite women groups out of the state-building sphere, and limited their efforts in social services’ provision and empowering women as political subjects (women suffrage movements and political rights’ demands by the Egyptian Feminist Union EFU).⁵³³ In parallel, the conflict between “modern Muslims” and “traditional Muslims,” according to the scholar Marilyn Booth,⁵³⁴ created another duality that affected the Egyptian women question, by affirming the dichotomy between authenticity and modernization.

Since the early twentieth century, the currents of Arab feminism, intertwined with the concurrent national movements, have manifested in a trifold division between liberal, progressive (leftist), and Islamic feminism. Invariably, the defining axes of these movements mirrored the broader struggles within national movements, engaging the same fault lines that shaped the interactions among their various factions. The quest for women's liberation swiftly assumed a pivotal role in these conflicts, undertaking expansive identity and cultural significance, and positioning feminists amidst intense struggles for influence. Examining the Egyptian feminist movements, their emergence paralleled the preoccupations of the Egyptian elite, split between

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵³³ afikra Design, “The Egyptian Women’s Rights Movement — Afikra | عفكرة,” Afikra | عفكرة, November 15, 2023, <https://www.afikra.com/blog/egyptian-womens-rights-movement#:~:text=Huda%20Sha'arawi,-A%20trailblazing%20Egyptian&text=In%201923%2C%20she%20founded%20the,women's%20suffrage%20conference%20in%20Rome> .

⁵³⁴ Booth, Marilyn. “‘May Her Likes Be Multiplied: ‘Famous Women’ Biography and Gendered Prescription in Egypt, 1892-1935.” *Signs* 22/4 (1997): 827–90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175222> .

modern Muslims and traditional Muslims advocating for an "autochthonic" culture. This elite grappled with defining positions, from one side, vis-à-vis the "national," viewed as a unifying foundation for the state, and drawing inspiration from European nationalism for governance, and, from another side, vis-à-vis the "religious," which represented cultural heritage, identity, and a platform for official-level legislation and litigation.

Modernist currents positioned women's liberation as a focal point within their modernization discourse, considering it a key element in realizing the capacity of local nationalists to self-govern. This perspective aimed to counteract the colonial perception of the local societies as backward and primitive. Simultaneously, the modernization efforts grappled with fending off fundamentalists' accusations claiming that "Egyptian feminism (or particular articulations of it) are somehow culturally 'inauthentic' to Muslim societies or merely derivative of Western feminist projects."⁵³⁵ This dilemma elevated the issue of harmonizing reforms in women's conditions with religious teachings, Sharia, customs, and culture to the forefront of concerns for feminist figures like Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif, Nabawiyya Mūsā, Hudā Sha' rāwī, and Duriyya Shafiq, who titled her doctoral thesis from Sorbonne University in Paris as "Women's Rights in Islam."⁵³⁶ Notably in that context, the choice between unveiling (removing the face veil at the time) and keeping the face-veil emerged as an initial catalyst sparking significant social polarization on the women's question and marking the inception of the first wave of feminist movements in Egypt.⁵³⁷

On the opposing side, traditionalists, and later Islamist currents, viewed women as symbolic bearers of identity, reflective of their society's commitment to an "original" culture. In their slogans and discourse, they insisted that embracing modernization did not equate to succumbing to Westernization or blindly following Western cultural trends and social norms. Authenticity, a cornerstone in their political mobilization mottos, held that women played a pivotal role in reinforcing this value within their families, in its religious and social meanings. They saw

⁵³⁵ Bier. "Introduction." 9.

⁵³⁶ Nelson, Cynthia. *Doria Shafik Egyptian Feminist: A Woman Apart*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1996.

⁵³⁷ Baron, Beth. "Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt: Practical and Symbolic Considerations." *Middle Eastern Studies* 25/3 (1989): 370–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4283318>.

women as key agents responsible for upholding the continuity of their society's social structure, while epitomizing its cultural essence through their appearance and behavior.

In Nasser's era, the dualities domestic/public and authentic/modern continued to shape the regard to women's emancipation as part of the state project of modernization. As Nasser's regime took serious steps in advancing women's political rights and their inclusion in education institutions and work force, the issue of gender inequality remained an attribute of the "premodern Islamic and tribal values and structures that govern the private space of the family and that recognize men and women, not as equal individuals but as essentially different, unequal beings." After the nationalization of the pre-1952 women organizations, Nasser capitalized on "state feminism" defined by Laura Bier as follows:

"I understand state feminism not just as a policy or a series of policies, but as a constellation of normalizing discourses, practices, and legal measures, and state-building programs aimed at making women into modern political subjects."⁵³⁸

Since the dissolution of women's organizations and associations and the state's nationalization of their newspapers and magazines (1952-1954), the mainstream feminist movement has come under the direct auspices of the state, which many feminists did not object to, but rather saw in it a greater opportunity to achieve closer and faster progress.⁵³⁹ However, the nexus between state feminism and the state became evident in the nature of the gains accorded to women, that were shaped by the alignment of their representatives with the state's evolving agenda across different eras. This connection exhibited two predominant characteristics: firstly, the persistent dominance of state feminism as the exclusive avenue for negotiating women's empowerment and enhancing their legal and social standing. Secondly, it underscored the continued disparity between advancements in the educational and professional realms and those concerning personal and familial domains.

This bargaining constituted the tacit prerequisite imposed by public patriarchy for successful negotiations on issues such as equal wages, women's quotas in the parliament, women's candidacy for public office, and the ebb and flow of feminist activities contingent on the state's

⁵³⁸ Bier. "Introduction," 7.

⁵³⁹ Hatem, Mervat F. "Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization: Do Secularist and Islamist Views Really Differ?" *Middle East Journal* 48/4 (1994): 661-76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4328746>.

political stance towards Islamist movements. Despite the adherence to this condition, a substantial gender gap endured in the realms of education and labor market integration between women and their male counterparts. This divide was salient in indicators like spanning illiteracy rates, school dropout rates, early marriages, and unemployment figures.

The division between a professional identity for women, acknowledging their economic role in serving both family and state, and a personal/sexual/domestic identity remains pronounced in the official and social realms. Nowhere is this duality more evident than in the stagnant status of women within personal status laws, which have seen minimal amendments over decades. Legislatively, women are relegated to a secondary status, subjected to the rigid dictates of Sharia litigation in matters pertaining to marriage, divorce, granting citizenship to husbands, freedom of movement and residence in hotels, definitions and punishments of rape crimes, the guardianship of custodial women over their children's affairs, honor crimes' lenient sentences for perpetrators from family members, exclusive adultery (*zinā*) sentences for women, and inheritance laws.

Chapter II: Weaponizing Patriarchy: An Egyptian Manosphere in Action

1. Roots and Issues of the Egyptian Manosphere

According to the specialist in digital crimes Marta Barcellona, the digital manosphere is “a constellation of online communities that share anti-feminist beliefs,”⁵⁴⁰ emanating from the strong identity politics adopted by the rising alt-right currents, favoring a patriarchal society and portraying women in a “particular antagonistic sense.”⁵⁴¹ The intertwining of the alt-right ideologies with the manosphere is based on the common threat of immigration and mixed couples, both parties envision from a white supremacist position:

“Since they deem the destiny of the white Western civilization being under threat, Alt-Right members share a general hostile attitude towards immigration, which sometimes shifts into those conspiracy theories that claim that the white “race” would be slowly heading to its complete substitution with other – inferior – “races”. Accordingly, they criticize low birth rates and mixed couples, which would contribute to the decline of the white “race.” Linked to these concerns, the Alt-Right also questions the role of women in society. In this regard, it has been noted that the Alt-Right would promote the so-called sex realism, according to which “men and women have biological differences that make them suited to different social roles.” Moreover, while within far-right movements we would often find a mix of hostile and benevolent sexism, the alt-right would display a prevalent component of the latter, in this way considering women more as a threat than as in need of protection.”⁵⁴²

The emergence of the manosphere in postrevolutionary Egypt is linked to the dissemination of the alt-right sensibilities coinciding with the authoritarian restoration, the substitution of the Muslim Brotherhood’s discursive control by scattered extremist groups, and the momentum gained by the new gender movements after the excommunication of the Brotherhood.

⁵⁴⁰ Barcellona. “Incel Violence as a New Terrorism Threat: a Brief Investigation Between Alt-Right and Manosphere Dimensions.”

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 171- 172.

The social discourses of the Brotherhood were abandoned by adopting a tinkering mechanism that selectively extracted from religious texts and Salafist sermons what could be linked to the discourses of the manosphere movements, which rose to the forefront of social networking sites since the beginning of the millennium in confrontation with the feminist movements. Many in Egypt tend to call this fabrication mechanism “*al-sarsaga*,” (i.e. vagabondism) a word whose connotation has changed from describing the behaviors of *al-sarsagiyya*,⁵⁴³ who are mostly poor slum dwellers and a social misfit within the traditional class hierarchy (due to their low educational attainment, and their involvement in the informal economy or its corrupt and criminal sectors), to describe the behaviors and populist speeches of groups and individuals on social networking sites.

The preacher ‘Abdullah Rushdī could be one of the most prominent examples of the new *sarsagiyya*. His extremist religious discourse, infused with all the terminology borrowed from the alt-right subcultures, tries to create a sustained conditioned arousal for his followers, using keywords to consolidate his following base thriving on hatred against imagined enemies. When Rushdī uses words like *dayyūth* (cuckold), *zinā* (adultery), *‘almānī* (secular), or feminists, he is fully aware of how these keywords are translated in the minds of a broad audience of young males. Frequently resurrecting archaic vocabulary from Islamic references (like *dayyūth*), Rushdī provides a terminological framework that relies on heritage to legitimize his call for reactionary sexual politics. The preacher seeks to gain popularity through already existing neomasculinist networks and bets on soliciting their attention and constantly provoking their anger in the face of the new feminist consciousness, to generate a polarization between two camps, centered most of the time around men’s view of women.

¹²⁴ The plural noun “*al-sarsagiyya*” (singular noun: “*al-sarsagī*”) is a Turkism commonly encountered in the dialects spoken in Egypt and certain regions of the Middle East, including Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. These areas, known as Arabophone regions, have historically and culturally been most influenced by Ottoman-Turkish occupation. The term originates from the words “*sarsari*” (meaning adventurer, vagabond in Armenian) and “*serserī*” (meaning vagabond, rascal) in Turkish.

Source: Rocchi, Luciano. “Ottoman-Turkish Loanwords in Egyptian and Syro-Lebanese-Palestinian Arabic – Part 4,” *Studia Linguistica Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis*, 139 (2022): 347.

The manosphere besought an already prepared audience that showed increased worries about the feminist sex positive tone; tying the battle against GBV (gender-based violence) to the male female equality question and the restricted sexual freedoms. The manosphere, in that sense, hosted Islamist and non-Islamist reactionary sectors perplexed by the attacks on the moral order that shaped the gender hierarchy and practices in the legal, religious, and cultural domains. Formulating discourses to criticize the normative gender socialization by prominent gender activists and meme creators was considered a subversive movement that challenged an established order, outside the elitist circles of traditional feminist institutions and civil society workers.

The populization of the conservative discourses, social or religious, followed the pattern and priorities of the “stability alliance” forming after 2013, under populist slogans fashioned to serve the conservative political and social agendas. Surprisingly, and despite being political enemies, some staunch neonationalists, and some revolutionaries, irritated by the gender debates, converged on adopting an anti-feminist position masked by a non-religious conservative rhetoric. Schismogenesis operated within the tripartite division (*al-dawlagiyya*, *al-thawragiyya*, *al-Islāngiyya*) in reaction to the disclosure of sexual assaults on public platforms, the rising popularity of memes criticizing the Egyptian hypermasculine stereotypes, opening the debate about the LGBTQ+ communities’ rights, and the increasing demands of gender equality.

In his book “*Contre les femmes: La montée d’une haine mondiale*,”⁵⁴⁴ the sociologist Abram De Swaan traced a linkage between the terrorist wave led by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) in the first decade of the century and the correspondent rise of the extreme right wing in the West during the same decade. De Swaan assumed that a crosspollination benefited both entities in consolidating a base of supporters, and considered that the anti-feminist sentiment and hostile sexist manospheres gaining popularity are a structural component of both parties’ legacy. He pointed out two major references that inspired big reactionary thought currents that directed their attacks to the increasing emancipation of women: “The Management of Savagery” probably authored by Abū Bakr Najī,⁵⁴⁵ an intellectual who was inspired by the “murderous practices” of

⁵⁴⁴ De Swaan. *Contre les femmes : La montée d’une haine mondiale*.

⁵⁴⁵ Leslibraires.fr, “Abu Bakr Naji,” n.d., <https://www.leslibraires.fr/personne/abu-bakr-naji/1203107/>.

al-Qaeda and ISIS, and “A European Declaration of Independence”⁵⁴⁶ by Anders Breivik,⁵⁴⁷ published on the internet in 2010.

In Abram De Swaan’s view, the two currents, adopting an identitarian and populist view of two separate universes, in the West and the Islamic Umma, despite presented as enemies in theory, yet, they remained allies:

“Radical Islamists of the Abu Bakr Naji school and right-wing extremists of the Breivik ilk can therefore, all in all, coexist perfectly. What's more, the objectives of one serve the interests of the other, and vice versa. Every jihadist attack in Europe or America reinforces the hatred of Muslims in the West. And every right-wing outrage against Islam and Muslims in the West fuels the fanaticism of Islamic groups. Sworn enemies of each other, and by the same token, allies. They know it, and are taking advantage of the situation. At first glance, neither Breivik nor Abu Bakr Naji are concerned with women's issues. They have far more complex problems on their minds. The former intends to preserve and regenerate the Nordic People. The latter is working to build a new global caliphate governed by Sharia law. It goes without saying that concerns such as the education of girls or contraception are, in their eyes, meaningless nonsense. But on a deeper level, on which they prefer to remain silent, they are well and truly united. They fight side by side, on the same front. And both are fighting against the rise of women, whom they want to return to their former state of subjugation to men. Their slogans, which exalt "The People" and "The Umma", serve, first and foremost, to re-establish male supremacy.”⁵⁴⁸

Abram De Swaan resorts to the study of the psychiatrist Günter Hole referring to “absolutization” as the “essence of every fanaticism.”⁵⁴⁹ Günter Hole states that this form of “modern absolutism,” led by reactionary right-wing and religious fundamentalists, gains its sense of certainty and righteousness by evoking their authorization by God or the People.⁵⁵⁰ The populist ethic resurrected in these dispersed online neomasculinist movements is described by Abram De

⁵⁴⁶“Breivik Manifesto’ Details Chilling Attack Preparation,” *BBC News*, July 24, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-14267007> .

⁵⁴⁷ “Breivik killed eight people with a car bomb in Oslo in July 2011, before shooting dead 69 people at a summer youth camp. He was jailed for a maximum 21 years but applied for parole last month. Although he said he had renounced violence, he gave Nazi salutes on the opening day of the hearing.”

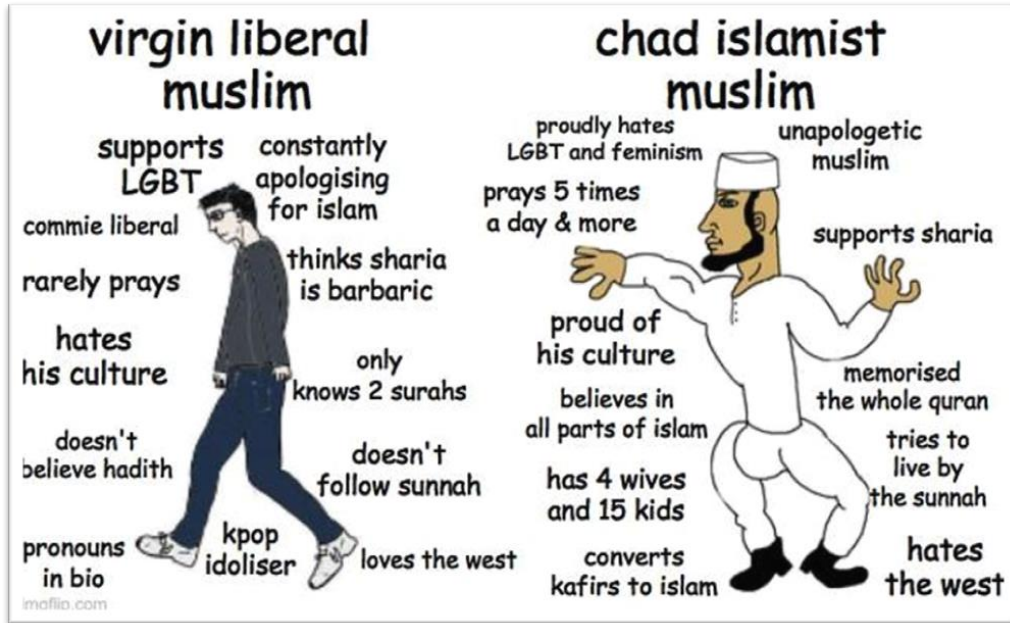
BBC News, “Norway Mass Killer Anders Breivik Ordered to Stay in Jail,” *BBC News*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60219876>

⁵⁴⁸ De Swaan. “Guerre contre les femmes : Djihadistes, droites dures et extrémistes de droite,” 203.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Swaan as monomaniac: “This principle then becomes a totalitarian reading grid. The true fanatic politicizes or "religiosizes" any aspect, fact or detail of his existence.”⁵⁵¹



*Figure 40: The virgin vs. chad⁵⁵² meme template is deployed to reflect the polarization inside the Muslim masculine communities, influenced by the terminology and affect of the alt-right communities. As the meme uses the English language, it probably speaks to Muslims outside the Arabophone Middle East. The lines of polarization, as stressed in the meme, focus on the regard to Islam from one hand, and the stances towards the woke culture’s main pillars, particularly gender-related themes. Because the liberal Muslim embraces a critical view about sunnah, hadith, and sharia, as the meme assumes, he is caricaturized as a virgin, lacking true manhood, as he supports LGBT movements and approves on the pronouns’

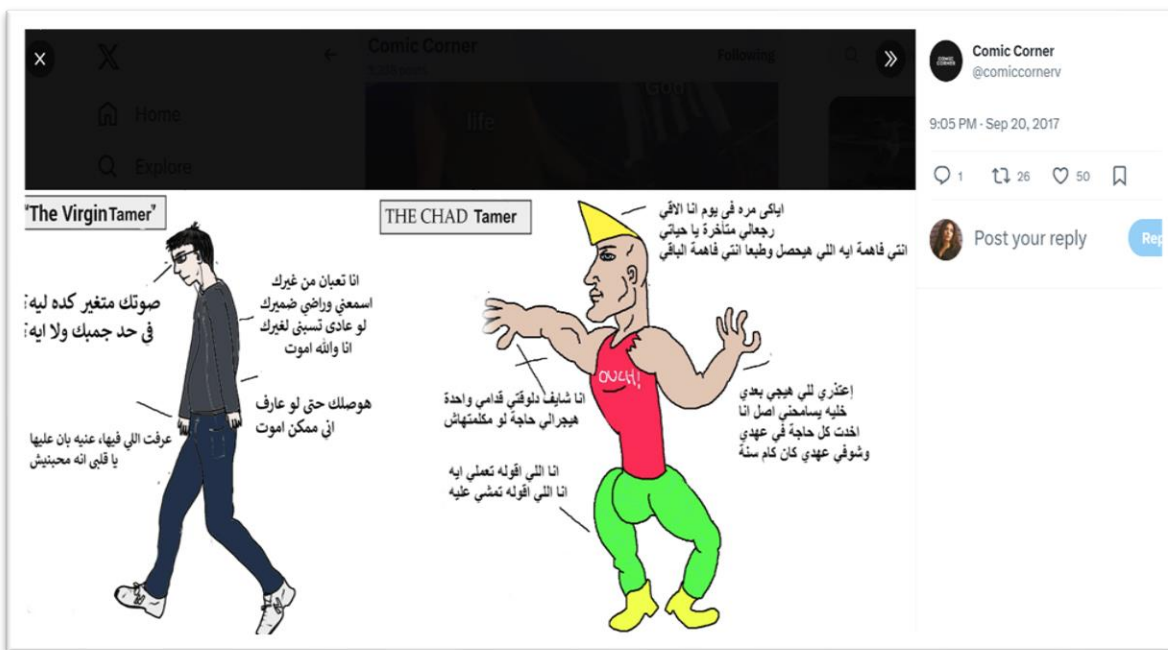
⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵² The term chad is a frequently used slang within alt-right subculture and manosphere communities to describe a man who is sexually successful, charismatic, handsome, and clever: “the “ultimate alpha” – the ultra-masculine, virile, powerful and sexually attractive man to whom Stacy’s (a hyper-attractive, sexually desirable, promiscuous but vapid woman. She is ultimately unobtainable, especially to men who are not Chads) and other women flock.”

Lawson, Robert. “A Dictionary of the Manosphere: Five Terms to Understand the Language of Online Male Supremacists,” *The Conversation*, n.d., <https://theconversation.com/a-dictionary-of-the-manosphere-five-terms-to-understand-the-language-of-online-male-supremacists-200206>.

acknowledgment on his social media accounts.⁵⁵³ On the other side, a chad Muslim gathers all the features of true manhood as imagined by the meme creator, fusing polygamy, proselytizing for Islam, and hatred to the West, as identitarian features, with being an unapologetic observant, proud of his culture.

The meme profited from the longstanding view imposed by the fundamentalist currents accusing the liberal currents of disavowal of the autochthonic cultural identity in favor of imported western values that turn them into foreigners within their society. The accusation of foreignness has become a weapon in the hands of fundamentalists, who ascribed to themselves the status of original/organic, no matter how ramified and complex their relationship with the West evolved. The relation to the West has always been instrumentalized in this internal local conflict.



*Figure 41: The meme published on the Twitter (X) account of “Comic Corner” in 2017 opposes the virgin Tamer to the chad Tamer. The meme borrows the descriptions, ascribed to the virgin and the chad, from the songs’ lyrics of the famous Egyptian popstar Tāmir Ḥusnī known for his controversial hits, in the first years of his career, that addressed gender themes and approached women in a provocative sensual style, and were

⁵⁵³ Pronouns in bio refers to acknowledging an individual's pronouns in the biography section of social media profiles which has emerged as a recent practice embraced by proponents of woke culture ideology. By including gender identity markers such as he/him, she/her, they/them in their online bios, users establish a framework for communication with their virtual circle—encompassing friends and followers—based on their self-defined gender identity and sexual preferences.

retrospectively portrayed as condoning sexual harassment. In other hits, Ḥusnī stressed the different gender roles of men and women, the necessity of taking control over women by a true man, and the regulations that a man should put for his partner's comportment and dress code. Conveying hypersensual, romantic, and quasi-misogynistic messages in his songs, Ḥusnī's lyrics fitted into both the virgin and chad characterization by the meme creators.

The Virgin Tamer

- "I am suffering without you, listen to me and soothe your mind, if it is normal to leave me for another, I swear by God I would die."
- "I will reach for you even if I know that I would die."
- "Your voice is changed, anyone sitting beside you?"
- "I knew what it is all about, it shows in his/her eyes, my heart, he/she did not love me." (It is common in Arabic love songs to refer to the beloved female in masculine pronouns).

The CHAD Tamer

- "Mind you I find out someday, you came home late my darling, you know what will happen and of course you understand the rest."
- "Apologize to the guy who will come after me, make him forgive me, because I took everything in my era, see how many years were my era."
- "Now I see a woman in front of me, something will happen to me if I did not talk to her."
- "It is me who tells you what to do, whatever I say you got to obey."

The phrases "mind you I find out someday, you came home late my darling, you know what will happen and of course you understand the rest" and "It is me who tells you what to do, whatever I say you got to obey" come from Ḥusnī's hit "Sī al-Sayyid" named after a famous character in Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy, later adapted into three films, portraying a traditional Egyptian overcontrolling patriarch in the beginnings of the twentieth century. And despite the focus of Mahfouz on Sī al-Sayyid's obsession with controlling the comportment of his wife and daughters, and banning them from leaving the house unless for exceptional reasons, Ḥusnī's music video for the song is preceded by a description of the character as

“An Arabic term referred to an old movie character that likes to control everything in his life.”⁵⁵⁴ In the first verse of the song, the lyrics stress that a woman is not allowed to dream of eliminating the differences between her and a man, and that the insistence of a woman to compare herself to a man makes her lose her femininity in the man’s eyes.

In another song titled “*E’tazirī*”⁵⁵⁵ (Apologize), Ḥusnī threw another misogynistic metaphor saying: “Apologize to the guy who will come after me, make him forgive me, because I took everything in my era, see how many years were my era.” “I took everything” was interpreted according to the dominant codes of sexual behaviour and women’s honor viewing a non-virgin woman, who had a previous relationship, as morally corrupt, so another man should not accept a relationship with her. Hence, the phrase meant to ridicule or shame a woman who ended her relationship with the song protagonist.

The tense reception dynamics for references included in popular culture productions increased as the social networks accommodated rising gender activist groups who led numerous debates retrospectively reviewing the sexist utterances and perspectives along the history of the Egyptian cinema, literature, and music. In January 2020, the media influencer and creative director working for a famous advertisement agency Tamīm Yūnus released his first song “Salmonella” which later became famous under the title “*Ashan tib’ī t’ūlī la’* (So that you dare to say no).”⁵⁵⁶ The song portrays a man threatening a woman who refused to give him her phone number in a sarcastic way. However, the song stirred big controversy as its debut came one day after the emergence of a video footage depicting a woman being groped by a crowd during the New Year’s Eve festivities in Mansoura governorate.⁵⁵⁷ Some feminist campaigns requested “cancelling” the song and attacked Yūnus as they highlighted the critical situation in Egypt with prevalent sexual violence phenomena. Yūnus’ appearance in the music video was provocative with “blood splattered around his mouth,” and his choice of the phrase “So you dare to say no” as the song’s

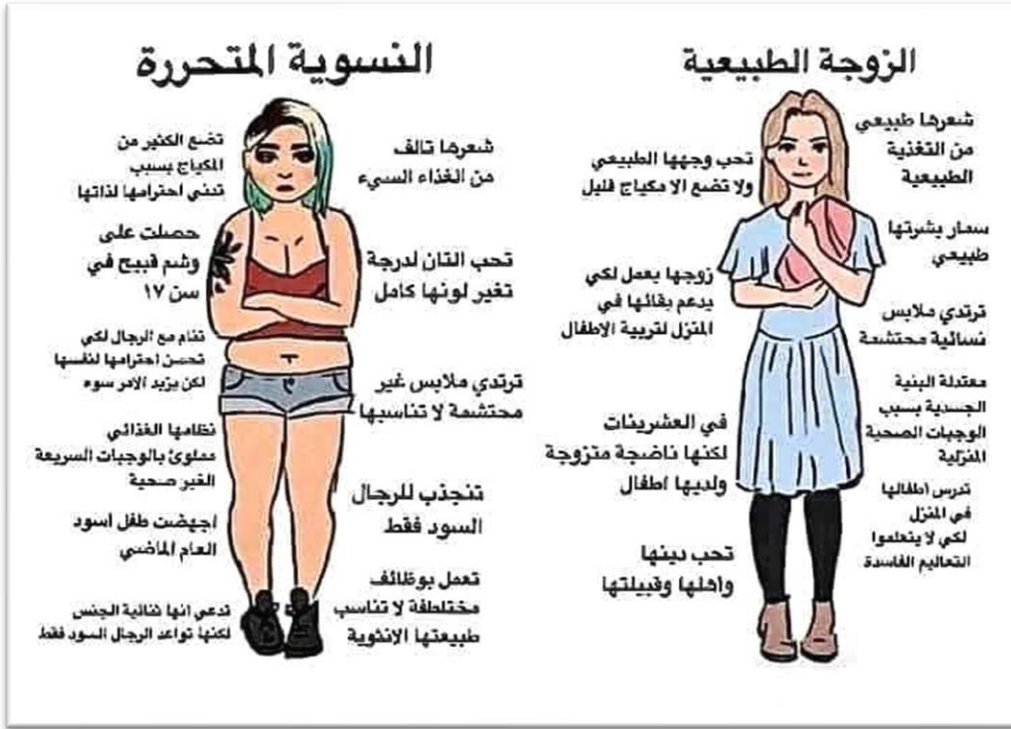
⁵⁵⁴ Tamer Hosny, “Si Al Sayed - Tamer Hosny Ft Snoop Dogg / تامر حسني و سنوب دوج,” YouTube, October 3, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Urjas5Nt0I>.

⁵⁵⁵ Free Music “Nasr Mahrous,” “Tamer Hosny - E3tezry | اعتذري - تامر حسنى,” YouTube, January 5, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTfjuvR_qv8

⁵⁵⁶ rmediaproduction, “Tameem Youness - Salmonella (لا عشان تبقي تقولي لا) - سالمونيللا (Official Music Video),” YouTube, January 25, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUm_jY0bYos

⁵⁵⁷ Menna Farouk, “Making Fun of Men or Emboldening Sex Pests? Egyptian Song Spurs Debate,” *Reuters.com*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idAFL8N29C3FY/>.

main hook. The song's main themes, however, turned more relevant as many femicides started to take place successively in the public space in the last few years.⁵⁵⁸



*Figure 42: The meme compares between “the normal wife” and “the liberated feminist.” The descriptions ascribed to both women reveal that the meme is propable literally translated from an American meme without noticing pertinent cultural differences.

The normal wife

- Has natural hair because of her organic nutrition.
- Her skin tone is natural.
- Likes her natural face and wears little make-up.
- Wears modest women clothes.
- Her husband works to support her staying home to raise the kids.
- Has a fit body because of healthy home-made meals.
- In her twenties, but she is mature and married and has kids.

⁵⁵⁸ Yousra Samir Imran, “Egyptian Women Fear the Growing Normalisation of Femicide,” *The New Arab*, n.d., <https://www.newarab.com/features/egyptian-women-fear-growing-normalisation-femicide> .

- She homeschools her children so they do not learn the “corrupt teachings.” (homeschooling is an unusual practice in the Egyptian or Arab context, but in an American conservative context it is meant to shield the children from sex education or evolution theory lessons and avoid young people’s “indoctrination,” probably translated into “corrupt teachings”).
- Loves her religion, family, and “tribe.” (the word tribe (*qabīla*) is probably a bad translation for “clan” in the original American conservative context).

The liberated feminist

- Her hair is damaged because of bad nutrition.
- Likes skin tan to the extent that she changes her skin color completely (This metaphor is challenging to apply to the Egyptian context since the majority of women in Egypt typically have brown skin).
- Wears heavy make-up because of her low self-esteem.
- Wears indecent clothes that do not suit her.
- Got an ugly tattoo by the age of 17.
- Sleeps with men to improve her self-esteem but things get worse.
- Her diet includes lot of unhealthy fast food.
- Works in mixed professions that do not suit her feminine nature.
- Is only attracted to black men.
- She miscarried a black baby last year.
- She claims to be bisexual but she only dates black men.

The racist incitement against black people, in the last three sentences (attracted to black men-miscarried a black baby-dates black men) seems also out of context in the usual Egyptian or Arab anti-feminist comments, and a literal translation of a white supremacist discourse, given the dominant majority of brown and black men in Egypt and the Arab world.

The restoration of the traditional gender roles is a point of convergence between the extremist Islamists and extreme right-wing groups: “Everywhere, even among the jihadists' worst enemies, American right-wing extremists, this lament is being heard again: A man must become man again. Then, women will become women again.”⁵⁵⁹ Centering feminism as a common enemy of both currents is crucial to preserve the situation of “aggrieved entitlement”⁵⁶⁰ that fuels the anger

⁵⁵⁹ De Swaan. “Guerre contre les femmes: Djihadistes, droites dures et extrémistes de droite,” 240.

⁵⁶⁰ Kimmel, Michael. *Healing From Hate: How Young Men Get Into -and Out of- Violent Extremism*. Oakland:

of frustrated young male groups forming the main body of these fundamentalist movements. From this token, the cultural war against feminism plays a major role in consolidating these factions' perspective on manhood and masculinity and defending it against what they perceive as a serious threat, explains Abram De Swaan:

“Other clans, for whom the issues of race and national identity are of lesser importance, are agitating on social networks. They are categorically opposed to women's emancipation and, of course, to the organized vanguard of the women's movement, feminism. The battle between the sexes is, in this case, waged with personal attacks on all women who dare to defend in public the rights of the other half of humanity. This is the virtual world of the "manosphere," of websites in which the "real man" is glorified: the "alpha male", who continues to dominate ads for cigarettes, sports cars and watches... This alpha male only has eyes for "real women." On the net, there are two kinds: the "sluts", to whom it is "allowed", who like it and are there for it, and the mothers, for whom it's a "duty" to marry and have children with a man. Despite the zeal deployed on websites to radiate sexual vigor and power, everything there seems to shrivel under a matrix of rancid mediocrity. Parents' and grandparents' fixed prejudices about men's "right" and women's "duty" keep making their comeback on these sites, rebranded as so many supposedly radical and new ideas. The manosphere is feminism in a distorting mirror, its reflection reversed to the point of ridiculousness.”⁵⁶¹

However, the emergence of reactionary masculinist online movements in postrevolutionary Egypt was not restricted to the Islamist groups. Since 2017, the expanding manosphere hosted organized groups of “secular” belongings, or groups that did not deploy a frankly religious tone while criticizing the active sectors of feminists. These Egyptian manosphere's discourses were divided between hostile anti-feminist campaigners and aggressive misogynists, Islamists and non-Islamists.

It is important to note that the emergence of activist groups advocating for gender rights in Egypt does not yet constitute an entrenched or widespread movement. This development must be considered in the context of the disparity between vocal online communities and the tangible impact and following they have on the ground. The tendency to overstate the influence of feminist

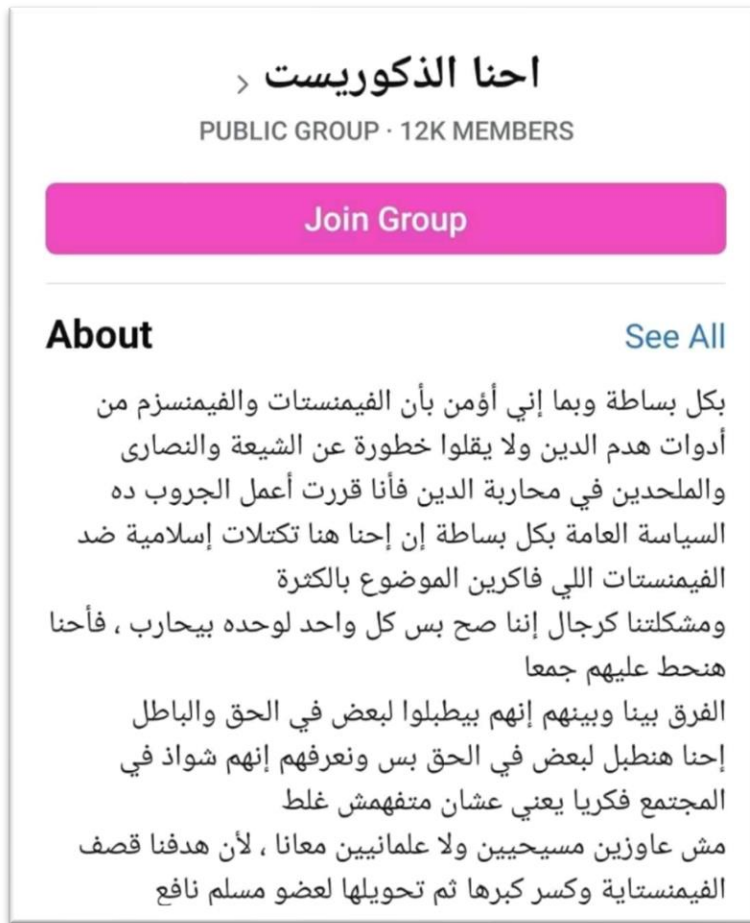
University of California Press, 2018.

⁵⁶¹ De Swaan. *Contre les femmes: La montée d'une haine mondiale*, 260-261.

discourses and the sheer number of self-proclaimed feminist activists can be attributed to an unidentified patriarchal inclination, which seeks to amplify the influence of these nascent groups by framing them as a formidable threat.

This inclination gives rise to a large coalition of conservatives, Islamists, and non-religious masculinist factions, fostering an anti-women rhetoric that legitimizes and bolsters a disproportionately hostile manosphere.

For clarification purposes, the coming sections may include, besides memes and illustrations, some screenshots of some introductory posts explaining the “manifesto”, or the general frameworks identified by these masculinist groups.



*Figure 43

“We the masculinists (*'Ihnā al-zukurist*)” is a public Facebook group that appeared in 2017 before disappearing later, probably because of being reported to Facebook administration for incitement of violence and propagating hate speech.

In the biography section the group founder wrote: “Simply, and because I believe that feminists and feminism are part of the tools used to demolish the religion and are no less dangerous than Shiites and Christians and atheists in their fight against religion, I decided to create this group. The general policy, simply, is that we are here Islamic clumps against the feminists who think that big numbers are the essence. Our problem, as men, is that we are right

but each one of us fights alone, so we will one up them all. The difference between us and them is that they blindly support each other for true and false reasons. We will applaud each other only for the truth and let them know that they are aberrant (*shawādh*) in the society, on intellectual level so no one gets me wrong. We do not need Christians or seculars with us, because our target is to bomb the feminist and break her pride then turn her to a useful Muslim member of society.”



*Figure 44

The meme published on the group “*Ihnā al-zukurist*” shows a picture from the Disney film “Peter Pan” 1953,⁵⁶² with Peter Pan on the bed and Wendy on the floor, while he extends one of his legs.

Caption: “The first night after I visit the women slave market to buy a feminist.”

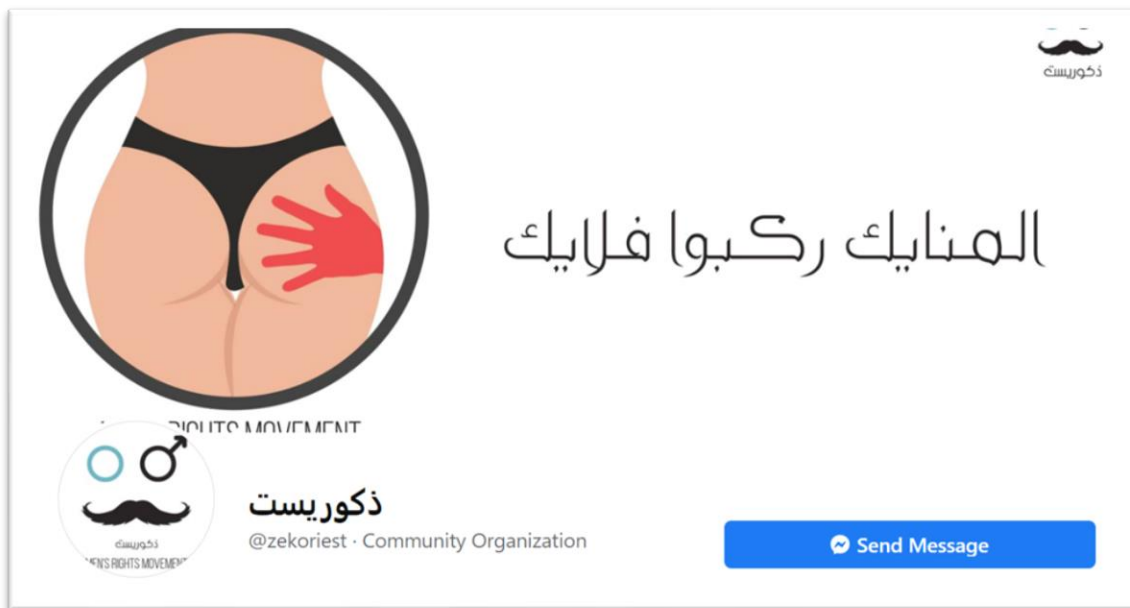
Superimposed text: “Rub my feet, *yamarā*.”

Yamarā is a concatenation of two words: *Ya*, an address or invocation, and *marā*, which is a colloquial cognate of MSA word *imra’a* or *mar’a* (a woman). In ECA, *marā* has a belittling and insulting connotation.

⁵⁶² “Peter Pan (1953) ★ 7.3 | Animation, Adventure, Family,” IMDb, February 5, 1953, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046183/>.



*Figure 45: Logo of the Facebook page “Zukurist (masculinist)- Men’s Rights Movement,” showing the symbol of masculinity and a male moustache.



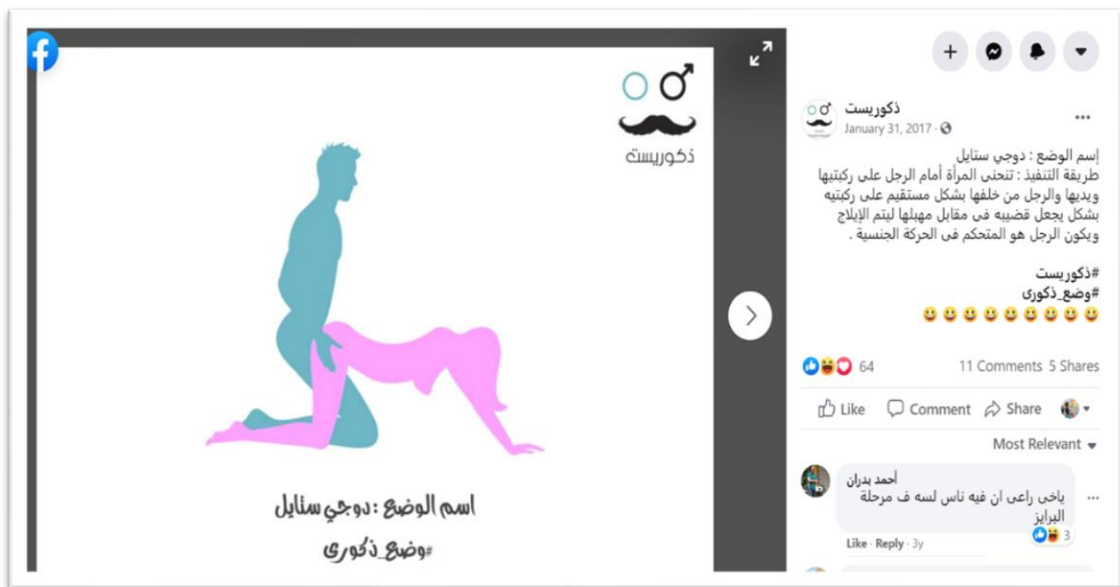
*Figure 46: The cover photo of the Facebook page “Zukurist (masculinist)” using an illustration of a hand groping a woman’s buttock. The text reads: “Bitches/assholes rode feluccas.” It is a common slangy wisdom referring to the wrong people people who got empowered, rich, or in control. In this context, the slogan probably means feminists or women in general by bitches.



*Figure 47

Caption of “Zukurist (masculinist)”: Man up... do not suck up to her baby. #zukurist

Superimposed text: Man up.. Do not suck up to her.



*Figure 48

Caption of “Zukurist (masculinist)” :

The name of the sexual position: Doggy style.

Implementation method: The woman bends on her knees and hands in front of the man who is standing straight behind her on his knees in such a way that his penis is facing her vagina for penetration, and the man is in control of the sexual process.

Superimposed text: “The name of the sexual position: Doggy style. A masculinist position.”

In a direct interview with the author, feminist activist ‘Āya Munīr elaborated on the criminal activities instigated by masculinist groups, providing insight into their ideological underpinnings and reactionary mindset:

“The masculinist groups have escalated their attacks, resorting to what they call “the jihad of laugh emoji” against my posts. However, their tactics have recently shifted towards targeting girls who engage with our content. These groups have started taking screenshots of girls' comments and forwarding them to their families. The anti-feminist movement singles out girls who they perceive as vulnerable and easy targets—those who may struggle to respond effectively to the harassment. Their measure of success lies in exposing these girls' private interactions by sending the screenshots to their partners, possibly putting them at risk of harm or abandonment.

Among their reprehensible actions, some boys within these groups have engaged with girls, solicited explicit photos from them, and proceeded to sell these images to Twitter accounts that disseminate them alongside the girls' personal details. Despite efforts to shut down offending accounts, the issue persists. External entities outside Egypt have assisted in taking down some of these pages. These perpetrators operate with a high degree of organization, utilizing specific tools and Telegram groups from locations beyond Egypt using VPNs to evade local security measures. They often remain anonymous or create convincing fake accounts that do not truly represent their identities.

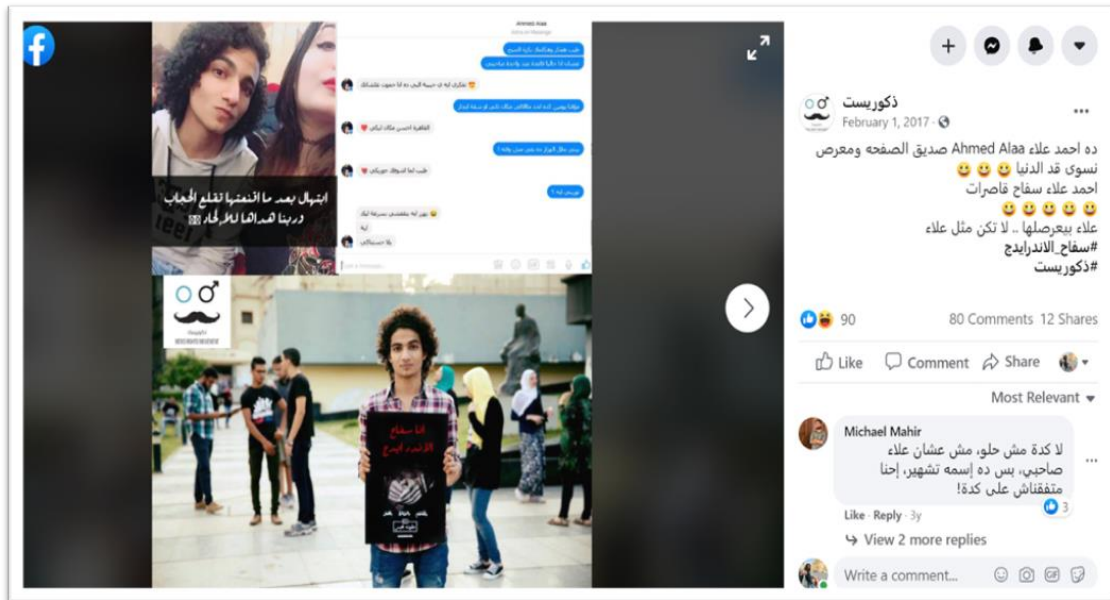
The situation is deeply unsettling, with these groups instilling fear and eroding the sense of safety within the community. Many of them align themselves with Islamist beliefs and manipulate impressionable minors, much like the perpetrator of Nayyira's tragic death.⁵⁶³ During his trial, his statements—such as “She let her hair down [does not wear the veil]”—expose the extremist ideologies behind his actions. Investigating further, one would likely discover his membership in these masculinist groups.

⁵⁶³ The murder of Nayyira Ashraf (June 2022), a young woman from the Mansoura governorate, who was brutally slain on a public street in broad daylight by her university acquaintance, stands out as one of the initial femicides rooted in extremist masculinist ideology. The perpetrator justified this horrific act as retribution for Nayyira's refusal to engage in a romantic relationship with him. Following Ashraf's murder, subsequent femicides have unfolded in a similar manner, perpetuating the tragic pattern of violence against women.

and Mee Staff, “Egypt: Court Upholds Death Sentence of Nayyira Ashraf Killer,” *Middle East Eye*, February 9, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-nayyira-ashraf-killer-death-sentence-court-upholds> .

The killer displayed relentless determination and a twisted sense of heroism during the heinous act, traits indicative of an extremist mindset. Sadly, many affected girls are hesitant to report such incidents out of fear of family repercussions, exacerbating the issue. Internet security entities often struggle to take action without sufficient evidence; once a threatening account is removed, proof of the threats may cease to exist. This chaos on social media poses a significant risk and portends a potential disaster if left unaddressed.

Meanwhile, there is a palpable sense of frustration among young men cutting across various factors. This could stem from the increasing visibility of feminist voices, economic hardships, or the political turbulence that has left many disillusioned. As a result, this pent-up energy and resentment are increasingly directed towards women, further complicating an already fraught situation.⁵⁶⁴



*Figure 49: The post by the Facebook page “Zukurist (masculinist)” shows multiple screenshots taken from the personal Facebook account of Ahmad ‘Alā’, one of the young people in the audience that attended a concert in Cairo in 2017 of the Lebanese band Mashrou’ Leila, whose lead singer is openly gay. ‘Alā’ participated in waving a rainbow flag during the concert, which led to seven arrests, ‘Alā’ was among them, after the public prosecutor ordered an investigation in the incident.⁵⁶⁵ The screenshots show personal inbox

⁵⁶⁴ Interview with the feminist activist ‘Āya Munīr, founder and administrator of “Superwomen” platform. Cairo, December 2022. Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Superwomenstory> .

⁵⁶⁵ “Egyptian Officials Systemically Abuse, Torture Gays, Rights Group Says,” *NBC News*, October 26, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/egyptian-officials-systemically-abuse-torture-gays-rights-group-says-n1244755>

messages and photos of ‘Alā’ and the caption reads: “This is Aḥmad ‘Alā’, a friend of our page, and a very big feminist sucker. Aḥmad ‘Alā’ is an under-age slaughterer, ‘Alā’ is sucking up to her, do not be like ‘Alā’ #under_age_slaughterer #zukurist.”



*Figure 50: After publishing the post about Aḥmad ‘Alā’, the second day, “Zukurist (masculinist)” published another post reading: “After ‘Alā’ some people accused us of libel. Indeed, it is libel, for whom who use feminist slogans and suck up to them and twist concepts to fuck women. And he is one of many. And do not think that we will set anyone free, anyway, your turn will come.”

At the time the post was published, ‘Alā’ was openly gay. He announced his homosexuality after being released from prison. Later, he sought asylum to Canada where he currently lives.⁵⁶⁶

The deep insecurities reflected in the criminal behaviors within the manosphere could be attributed to the Darwinian idea of beta and alpha males developed on “The Red Pill” subforum on the American Reddit network (currently quarantined and inaccessible) that immensely contributed to the online resurgence of the anti-feminist politics as it gained big popularity, as clarifies the writer Angela Nagle:⁵⁶⁷

“At the same time as these anti-feminists were using the term [red pill] to describe their awakening from the blissful mind prison of liberalism into

566 BuzzFeedVideo, “How the Rainbow Flag Put Me in Jail,” July 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CW2wNfwaCM> .

567 Nagle, Angela. “Chapter Six: Entering the manosphere” In *Kill All Normies. Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, 87-88. London: Zero Books, 2017.

the unplugged reality of societal misandry, the hard alt-right was embracing the term to describe their equivalent racial awakening. On AlternativeRight.com ‘the red pill’ and ‘being red pill’ was one of the central metaphors and favorite expressions. On Reddit’s Red Pill forum, men discussed false rape accusations, female-on-male violence, cultural misandry, avoidance of ‘pedestalling pussy’ and ‘game’ – meaning a style of ‘pick up artist’ dating advice that began with Neil Strauss’s 2005 book “The Game.”⁵⁶⁸ Looking back today, Strauss’s book seems pretty mild and inoffensive, certainly compared to today’s online pickup artistry forums,⁵⁶⁹ which tend to read like a sinister Darwinian guide to tricking the loathed female prey into surrender. Discussions on these issues on various Reddit forums and other forums within the antifeminist manosphere are a pretty relentless flow of sexual frustration, anxiety about evolutionary rank and foaming-at-the-mouth misogyny full of descriptions of women as ‘worthless cunts’, ‘attention whores’, ‘riding the cock carousel’, and so on. One of the dominant and consistent preoccupations running through the forum culture of the manosphere is the idea of beta and alpha males. They discuss how women prefer alpha males and either cynically use or completely ignore beta males, by which they mean low-ranking males in the stark and vicious social hierarchy through which they interpret all human interaction.”⁵⁷⁰

It is notable that Egyptian masculinist groups draw heavily from the prevalent vocabulary of the American manosphere. The proficiency in the English language and the adaptation of anti-feminist rhetoric into Arabic social networks reflects the predominantly middle-class background of many online page administrators. While some groups tailor their ideological messaging to resonate with an educated middle-class audience, this discourse is disseminated in various forms to reach wider segments of society. The propagation of antagonistic sentiments towards gender equality, coupled with the portrayal of “overly entitled” women as a looming threat to male dominance through social media activism, transcends mere middle-class misogyny.

⁵⁶⁸ “The Game by Neil Strauss: Summary and Notes” *Dan Silvestre*, October 31, 2023, <https://dansilvestre.com/summaries/the-game-book/>.

⁵⁶⁹ “Advice seeking in anti-feminist and pickup artist (PUA) forums often comes from self-identifying ‘nice guys’, whose commentary on women suggests their sense of self may be a little lacking in honest reflection. There are also PUA-hate forums, for those who are critical of pickup artistry as a scam that places too much of the responsibility on men to change their own behavior through bodybuilding and learning ‘game’ just to impress ‘stupid sluts’, by which they simultaneously always seem to mean women who they’re angry at because they won’t put out.”

Nagle. *Kill All Normies. Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, 91.

⁵⁷⁰ Nagle. *Kill All Normies. Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, 87-88.

This narrative divergence highlights the evolution of linguistic registers from translated manosphere terminology—often employed by educated middle-class individuals seeking to cloak their misogyny within an internationally recognized framework—to a blend of colloquial sexist language and religious Salafist references, accessible to lower socioeconomic strata. An exemplar of this shift can be found in the followers of ‘Abdullah Rushdī.

Beyond the exclusive groups dedicated to the incitement against feminists within the Egyptian manosphere, their violent tone enabled a broader sector of men whom explicit sexist utterances provided an abundant material for memes and angry reactions by women. After a very short period in 2014-2015 that witnessed the rise of women’s voices against GBV (gender-based violence) and the appearance of young feminist groups, the masculine reaction was prompt and disproportionate reflecting a deep sense of insecurity despite of the salient imbalance between sexes in terms of power relations, legislation, and economic empowerment.



*Figure 51: The meme published on the Facebook page “*Anā Māmā Yalā*” including a screenshot from a male doctor’s comment on Facebook. The photo is taken from the film “*Higrat al-Rasūl* (The Migration of the Prophet) 1964.”⁵⁷¹ The photo shows the actors playing the roles of “the infidels,” from the Quraysh tribe of Mecca⁵⁷² in the Hijaz, who fought the Prophet’s call at its beginning. In many Egyptian religious films

⁵⁷¹ “فيلم - هجرة الرسول - 1964 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” elCinema.com, n.d., <https://elcinema.com/work/1002331/>.

⁵⁷² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Quraysh | Arabic Tribe, Arabian Peninsula, Prophet Muhammad,”

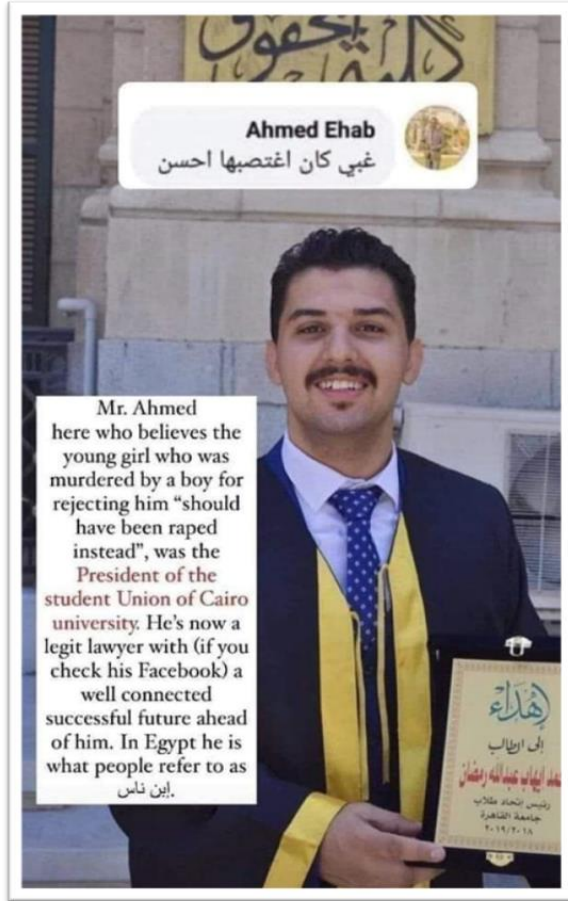
and series, non-believers are depicted with exaggeratedly grotesque makeup, portraying them as inherently evil and immoral individuals deeply engaged in debauchery. Additionally, historical narratives concerning Islamic conflicts often lack credibility, with historical events being subordinated to the official narrative endorsed by the political regime and the religious institution responsible for overseeing scripts in compliance with Egyptian censorship laws, namely Al-Azhar.

Caption: “Kill her passion.”

The text in the screenshot (the comment of a male doctor talking to a colleague who got married to a female doctor): “Make her specialize in dermatology, and do not make her progress at all in her work, and after your first baby make her close her clinic. If she loved you, she would accept it, so you manage to never make her outsmart you at work. If she did, you would suffer psychologically, because if she became better than you at work, she will make you feel that she was the breadwinner. Kill her passion and make her understand that your appreciation for her has nothing to do with her work, it is another thing, and that taking care of her children is better.”

The superimposed text on the photo: *'Aḥḥā* (i.e. ‘what the fuck’).

As the comment in the screenshot elaborates a full conspiracy scenario sent from the doctor to his colleague, the choice of the infidels’ image showing their surprise and awe becomes significant. It suggests that the doctor's advice surpassed the capabilities of even the most nefarious group of people.



*Figure 52

The comment, in English, was added to add some background about a lawyer who made a Facebook comment after a femicide committed against a young girl for rejecting a young man who wanted her to get engaged to him.⁵⁷³ The lawyer's comment, in the screenshot in Arabic, was: "He should have raped her instead, stupid."

At the end of the comment in English, the term written in Arabic is "*ibn nās*" (a polysemous term referring to a person who belongs to the middle or upper middle class, well raised, financially secure, has a good education, behaves in bourgeois manners, and is professionally successful). After elaborating the background and professional path of the lawyer, the explanation of the social positioning of the lawyer highlights the scale of influence of the mansphere imaginary on different sectors of middle-class men.

⁵⁷³ "قتل جزاء الرفض" في مصر.. كيف تنتهي مأساة "نيرة أشرف" المتكررة؟، "جدة بوست" September 29, 2023, <https://jeddahpost.com/news/%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%B6-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D9%86/>



*Figure 53: The photo⁵⁷⁴ is captured from the film “*Film Thaqafti* (A Porn Movie) 2000.”⁵⁷⁵ The superimposed hashtag on the photo reads #*khallihā_tī’annis* (#let_her_become_a_spinster).

“*Film Thaqafti*” is a black comedy of rare nature in the Egyptian cinema history as it tackles the issue of sexual deprivation in the Egyptian society. The plot follows the journey of three male friends, all grappling with sexual frustration, as they embark on a quest to watch a pornographic video. Hindered by a lack of privacy, VCR, and television, their journey spirals into a series of comedic misfortunes as their group grows, attracting more sexually frustrated young men along the way. Each obstacle they face reflects the societal restrictions that fuel their adventure.

The hashtag #*khallihā_tī’annis* appeared on social networks in 2019 in response to the continuous critiques by feminists and their followers to the regulations and agreements of marriage in Egypt, elaborating on the financial rights of the Egyptian wife after divorce and the organization of the financial commitments between men and women before and during the marriage. The comments of the participants on the hashtag combined sexist grousches against the feminists who

⁵⁷⁴ “الافلام ايجي بست,” YouTube, August 8, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVsEI9qfOG0> .

⁵⁷⁵ “فيلم - فيلم ثقافي - 2000 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” elCinema.com, n.d., <https://elcinema.com/work/1005882/> .

became responsible for provoking women against men, and raising their expectations and demands regardless of the severe economic distresses.

The demands to rectify the personal status laws to guarantee better conditions for married and divorced women and fill the legislative gaps that allow men to escape paying after-divorce alimony, are meant to help avoiding the exaggerated pre-marriage conditions from girls' families. However, men from their side, find these conditions (aiming at guaranteeing a safe future for women in case of divorce) financially exhaustive and unreasonable.

In the largest Facebook group named *#khalīhā_tī'annis*, the admins wrote in the biography:

“Welcome to *#khalīhā_tī'annis*. We created this group because of what we see from parents and girls, and what they do to young people, and the exaggeration in demands; dowry, owning an apartment, curtains, and chandeliers. We must stand together to convey the message that the economic situation in the country does not allow for all of this, and that the issue is not that we do not want to afford these demands, but that we are not able to. This does not deny the fact that there is a small percentage of the girls' families who stand by young men and help them, but this is a very small percentage. Moreover, divorce rates are increasing, so the problem is getting increasingly difficult. This, of course, goes besides the girls' arrogance and the way they deal with us. This is where the idea of the group came from. If you, boy or girl, agree and are convinced with what we say, we would be honored by your presence with us.”⁵⁷⁶

The meme in Figure 53 despite mocking men's campaign *#khalīhā_tī'annis* by referring to their sexual frustration and inability to afford the economic necessities for marriage, points out the mutual aggressiveness that characterizes the intersex relations. In addition to economic challenges, sexual deprivation, particularly among young people due to religious restrictions on pre-marital sex, the absence of sexual freedoms, and non-mixed schools and social activities, represent unaddressed taboos affecting exchanges and prejudices among both sexes, particularly among middle-class youth with devout upbringings. The reinforcement of patriarchy/masculinity's social structure around female honor, symbolized by the preservation of women's virginity until

⁵⁷⁶ Facebook “Log in or Sign up to View,” n.d., <https://www.facebook.com/groups/leave.her.single/>

marriage, has led to prolonged sexual deprivation and a skewed approach to equal rights in sexual relations and pleasure.

Sexual deprivation, particularly among men, has often led to the cultivation of fantastical representations about sexual encounters for large sectors, fueled by Islamist teachings about paradise, where the fulfillment of countless pleasures with promised 'nymphs' served as the ultimate reward for devout Muslims. A class-based dynamic further compounded matters, as the stringent religious laws disproportionately affected those unable to afford private accommodations or shield themselves from potential security surveillance of their sexual activities. While sermons promoted polygamy as an option for wealthy individuals, less affluent men found themselves targeted by teachings focused on regulating women's behavior and attire, with the promise of heavenly rewards for those who adhered to rigid masculine norms as a form of societal policing:

“This erotic phantasmagoria is strongly linked to the sexual misery of the Arab world. Over the last half-century, morality has become increasingly puritanical. Many young Muslim men are in need. Many young women are also left wanting. It's a reality that's largely been kept quiet. Even if women are locked up in the family home and bundled up from head to toe when they leave it, both men and women are prey to obsessions and erotic desires. Worried that others might have such shameful fantasies, they can't help but dwell on them. Extreme sexual deprivation in this life is inextricably linked to the promise of equally extreme fulfillment of erotic urges in the next. A promise that can lead to a perverse fascination with sex and death.”⁵⁷⁷

The principal drift, accentuated by the manosphere discourse, combines legitimizing verbal and physical violence under the pretext of religious and social rectification towards what is assumed to be a universal “human nature.” Restituting men and women’s traditional roles and sexual hierarchy lies at the core of the neomasculinist discourses. Hence, leading collective movements calling for boycotting relations with inaccessible women, under new conditions put by “feminists,” gave rise to the “incel (involuntary celibacy) culture” resurrected from its historical past. The sociologist Eva Illouz evokes the origin of the term “incel” used on the internet by a girl

⁵⁷⁷ De Swaan. *Contre les femmes : La montée d'une haine mondiale*, 250.

called Alana to group of persons who, like her, are unable to have passionate or sexual relationships.⁵⁷⁸

However, the term was taken and diverted by “the misogynist incels, who divide the world in two clans of "attractive" people: the "Chads", men who are successful with women, and the "Stacys", women who have sex with the Chads.”⁵⁷⁹



*Figure 54

The screenshot shows an account of an anti-feminist group on Telegram application called “The Egyptian feminists, the spinsters of the present and the disobedient(s) of the future- We Fuck Egyptian Feminists.”

The group is one of many similar groups who lead cyberattacks against feminist influencers and their followers. The members of the group are active in publishing personal data of girls and women to incite violence against them. Also, the members use these data, photos, and screenshots online, and send them to the relatives or partners for blackmailing or libel purposes.⁵⁸⁰

In her book "Kill All Normies,"⁵⁸¹ the academic and writer Angela Nagle delves into the phenomenon of "reactionary sexual politics" as observed in online incel subforums. Nagle posits that misogynistic incels are fueled by a palpable resentment towards the repercussions of the

sexual revolution, which empowered women's choices while subjecting men to what they perceive as "cruel natural hierarchies." According to Nagle, the proliferation of incel subforums serves as a psychological coping mechanism in response to the erosion of traditional societal structures, such

⁵⁷⁸ Illouz, Eva. « Les relations négatives et la politiques de l'effet papillon » In *La fin de l'amour : Enquête sur un désarroi contemporain*, 399. Translated by Sophie Renaut. Paris : Points – Essais, Seuil, 2021.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁰ Ismail, Zeinab. “نساء تحت وطأة العنف الإلكتروني في مصر” SMEX, SMEX, January 16, 2024, <https://smex.org/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1/>

⁵⁸¹ Nagle. *Kill All Normies*.

as lifelong marriages and the decline of monogamy, which have resulted in increased privileges for a select group of men while leaving a significant portion of the male population at the lower end of the social hierarchy susceptible to celibacy. Nagle suggests that the interplay between the manosphere and the alt-right is pivotal to the latter's rise, positing it as a significant factor contributing to its growth and influence:

“Celibate and romantically rejected young men fill spaces like Reddit’s incel subforum for the involuntarily celibate, where they go to seek advice and express their sexual frustration. At the time of writing, the latest post on the /r/incel reads: ‘I spent 4 hours just staring at the wall in my room. What normies call an existential crisis, for the incel is simply... life.’ It has been from this celibate milieu that the racial hierarchical politics of the alt-right has drawn, not exclusively, of course, but its recurrence as a theme is telling. These frustrated young men are first exposed to social-Darwinian thinking about attracting a mate in the name of ‘game’, then to the misogynist rhetoric about women’s evil narcissistic nature when the gaming doesn’t work. Look at the comment section of any of the vast and ever-growing genres of anti-feminist YouTube videos and you’ll quickly find rhetoric about women being worthless, sluts, stupid, fat, lazy, shallow, hysterical, untrustworthy and justly deserving of violent retribution. Because of the level of crosspollination between the manosphere and the alt-right, it would be impossible at this point for them not to be exposed to those ideas eventually. Certainly, their anger at their low-ranking position in the sexual pecking order can occasionally burst forth in extreme ways.”⁵⁸²

In a country that never witnessed a sexual revolution, where sexual liberation had always been a taboo or, at best, an elitist discourse, the violent manosphere could be regarded as a façade that disclosed the reactions of the fully entitled holders of enrooted patriarchal norms when they sensed the slightest threat. Synthesizing a common discourse and demands for sexual freedoms, that would encompass men and women, appeared daunting, as women are predominantly focused on safeguarding their safety and closing the legislative and economic disparities between genders. They contended with masculine nuisances and the indifference of security and governmental bodies, who failed to adequately address the risks women face due to their unabating struggles

⁵⁸² Nagle. “Chapter Six: Entering the manosphere,” 95-96.

against pervasive societal complicity, as explains the feminist activist ‘Āya Munīr in a direct interview:

“In The National Council for Women we tried to talk about the issue of anti-feminist groups, because I have always been obsessed with these groups and I was sure of their connection to a crime of femicide like Nayyira ‘Ashraf’s, and I was sure that this boy got the push or the audacity from these groups. The method of killing appears very much like ISIS style, I was sure that the issue has a terrorist aspect, and I think that we need to deal with this issue differently. Dr. Māyā Mursī (head of The National Council for Women) said: “Any girl who informs you that she is being threatened or blackmailed, call us and bring her to the prosecution and we will do what is necessary.” We informed them many times and no one did anything. They did not come back to us, and if they did, they brought the worst types of lawyers.

I told Māyā Mursī that we need to build trust between the young feminists’ initiatives and the council. She answered me that it is your groups that raise suspicions about the role of the council and give people “the wrong picture.” This reply could give you an impression about how the state handles this file; as a show. Even their quarrel with Al-Azhar about the personal status law is a very conservative one, without any agenda. I mean, what do we want Al-Azhar to change?”⁵⁸³

⁵⁸³ ‘Āya Munīr, feminist activist, founder and administrator of “Superwomen” platform. Direct Interview with the author. Cairo, 24 December 2022.

2. The Tripartite Consensus Against Feminism



*Figure 55

Title: An Arab feminist

Top image: “Look, from religion I will take my right to alimony, inheritance, *ghadd al-başar* (Islamic principle commanding men to avoid gazing at women) and leave the rest of obligations and duties I should observe.

Middle image: “From freedoms I will take the freedom of abortion and nudity, and the freedom to rebel against “the masculinist society,” I love this word very much, and if it is possible, I would make men give birth instead of me.”

Bottom image: “Or should I make him breastfeed [breastfeed babies]?”

The critics of the feminist groups developed more complex arguments as the internal contradictions of the movement surfaced in parallel to the appearance of accusations of sexual harassment to some public figures since 2018. The Facebook page “*Daftar Hikāyāt* (The Notebook of Stories),”⁵⁸⁴ that appeared in 2020, allowed publishing anonymous testimonies of women recounting stories about their exposure to sexual violence, harassment, and rape that involved, in some cases, well-known men mentioned by their initials. And despite that almost all these cases proved to be true (as the testimonies encouraged other women to testify against the same men in public and others to submit reports to the Public Prosecution), the realization that anonymous testimonies could go beyond the limits provoked influential sectors to engage in support of the attacks against the feminist move.

From another aspect, gender activists and their online activism was considered a powerful wing of the leftist and woke currents and was consequently met with suspicions from *al-dawlagiyya*, *al-Islāmgīyya*, and the numerous critics of both currents. The criticism borrowed many arguments from the international platforms, as the critics of woke activism equally proliferated in the West and elsewhere, regardless of the contextual differences. Objections increased with the ascension of the call out trends⁵⁸⁵ and cancelling campaigns⁵⁸⁶ against artistic works or real individuals. In parallel, militants started to deploy an increasingly absolutist tone, to call for using politically correct descriptions and terms when discussing gender issues. Gender activism, from this angle, became enmeshed within the cyberpolarization dynamic as an identity

⁵⁸⁴ Facebook. “Log in or Sign up to View,” n.d., https://www.facebook.com/daftarhekayat?locale=ar_AR .

⁵⁸⁵ “A version of call-out culture has been functioning for centuries as a tool for the marginalized and their allies to reveal injustice and the need for reform. The practice of directly addressing inequality underpins countless social justice movements, from civil rights to Standing Rock. The contemporary idea of a “call-out”, however, generally refers to interpersonal confrontations occurring between individuals on social media. In theory, call-outs should be very simple – someone does something wrong, people tell them, and they avoid doing it again in the future. Yet you only need to spend a short amount of time on the internet to know that call-out culture is in fact extremely divisive.” Adrienne Matei. “Call-out culture: how to get it right (and wrong).” *The Guardian*, n.d., <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/01/call-out-culture-obama-social-media> .

⁵⁸⁶ Cancel culture is “the phenomenon or practice of publicly rejecting, boycotting, or ending support for particular people or groups because of their socially or morally unacceptable views or actions.”

“Dictionary.com | Meanings & Definitions of English Words.” Dictionary.Com, June 17, 2021. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/cancel-culture> .

movement that created its cultural codes, memes, lingo, and formed alliances with the postcolonial currents (focusing on fighting racism, reviewing and contesting dominant readings of the colonial history), human rights defenders, and NGOs. In the Egyptian context, a mixture of slogans and propositions of the global woke currents penetrated online deliberations, carried by gender activists and voices affiliated with *al-thawragiyya*. Woke statements and arguments infiltrated the mediated dissidence class of Egyptians who worked on popularizing the anti-colonial and gender diversity ideologies through digital platforms.

In Figure 55, the meme criticizes the cherry-picking/bricolage fashion that woke identity currents adopt when faced with logical contradictions between the local context regulations and the universal liberal values that underpin their calls for equality and freedom.

At the core of the dilemma lies the identitarian approach, which emphasizes the notion of "cultural particularity" and "cultural authenticity" in opposition to the perceived impositions of "universal values" stemming from Western colonialism. By adopting an absolutist puritanical stance against colonial practices accused of appropriating "indigenous people's cultures and heritage," anti-colonial woke activists grow increasingly skeptical of the foundational principles of liberal democracy notions that emerged in the aftermath of World War II.

These liberal democratic values have come under increasing scrutiny, by identity currents, regarding their universality, their ability to achieve equality (particularly in addressing implicit and systematic forms of discrimination within institutional frameworks), and their cultural acceptance outside the Western world. Non-Western societies, in their view, kept voicing resistance to what they perceive as an assault on their cultural identity by the prevailing liberal framework.

Consequently, a shift has occurred in the perspective of a liberal society. Skepticism has arisen regarding the ideals of emancipation and equality that once inspired old-school feminists, as identity currents advocated for a society where concepts of equality, secularism, and gender relations were shaped in accordance with the sensitivities of the "original cultures," encompassing sexual, religious, and racial identities. This perspective upheld liberalism as an abstract concept synonymous with freedom, while the rights-based approach was seen as a foundation for entitlement. However, the polarization between gender activists and their adversaries began to take on an essentialist turn, rooted in primary identities. Rights and freedoms became tied to essentialist

assumptions about sexual, racial, or cultural identities. Those deemed "entitled" sectors rarely welcomed open criticism and shied away from genuine self-reflection.

In this way, the so-called liberal circles in the Arab region mirrored the behavior of the post-independence Arab regimes they opposed by embracing essentialist cultural tendencies under the guise of human rights advocacy. Arab regimes historically invoked slogans of "cultural particularity" when confronted by human rights organizations advocating for legislative reforms, such as those pertaining to women's rights. Similarly, they espoused slogans of "resisting imperialism and upholding original national/religious identity" to discredit dissenting voices often accused of Westernization. Strikingly, these same slogans were employed by the regimes' opponents of woke positions. For example, in response to the film “*Amīra*” (2021) addressing the Palestinian issue, perceived as conveying a negative image of Palestinian society, the objections and online campaigns of “liberal” activists resulted in banning the film from being shown.⁵⁸⁷

Calls to ban the song “*Ashan tib 'ī t'ūlī la'* (So that you dare to say no)” by Tamīm Yūnus (see supra p. 519), deemed "offensive," relied heavily on a symbolic interpretation of the artistic work through the lens of political correctness. This approach reduced a song to a matter of quasi-legal judgment rather than a piece of art open to interpretation. Despite the song's cancellation demands, few recognized its satirical role as a harbinger, rather than merely an incitement to crime, especially in light of subsequent femicides following rejection of male perpetrators.

Woke activists found, through social media, a way to transform the academic content, built up over previous decades, into a form of mass culture, in times when everyone acquired their equal rights to comment, like, and share social media posts according to their preferences. Through

⁵⁸⁷ الحرة - دبي بعد انتقادات فلسطينية.. قرار من صناع فيلم 'أميرة' December 9, 2021. <https://www.alhurra.com/varieties/2021/12/09/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B5%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9#:~:text=%D9%88%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%85%20%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9%20%D9%87%D9%88%20%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC%20%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83,%22%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9%22%20%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1%20%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%B6%D9%87> .

influencers, whose statements and publications gained traction, according to their respective weights within the “economy of visibility,”⁵⁸⁸ mainstreaming gender concepts and woke arguments became feasible. These disseminated arguments surpassed scrutiny from academia and media gatekeepers, reaching a vast audience on social networks. However, as the rights to free speech and expression were exercised more freely, they began to fuel relentless waves of public condemnation on platforms prone to polarization and conflictuality. Consequently, distinguishing between insulting or obscene speech and racist or hatred-inciting speech, carrying legal consequences, became increasingly challenging for many. Moreover, many sectors started to lose their ability to discern criticism directed at abstract doctrines (whether nationalistic, religious, or ideological) from incitement and hate speech aimed at specific social groups and individuals.

Some feminists may advocate for cancel culture, which employs public condemnation to hold individuals accountable for their words and deeds, as they ground their stance in an essentialist understanding of gender. However, such feelings of entitlement have led the discourse on women to veer toward a "minoritarian" trajectory, although women constitute half of the populations within their societies in terms of numbers. The term "minoritarian" carries deeply rooted connotations in liberal thought, emphasizing the responsibility of the dominant majority to safeguard the rights of minority groups as a fundamental value and legal standard. The underlying assumption here is the potential of the societal majority to exert power, oppression, and

⁵⁸⁸ “... This has been analyzed as a shift from social networks, platforms to communicate with existing contacts, to social media, platforms that intermediate consumption of media content from all kinds of sources. A necessary element of this shift is an ever-greater emphasis on personalized algorithmic recommendations, which sort through enormous volumes of available content to predict what will be interesting for a given user. Algorithmic recommendation systems thus increasingly structure not only individual media diets and interpersonal communication, but also political discourse and ‘platformized’ media industries, from news to music and gaming.

Such systems could never be value neutral. Deciding what – and who – is interesting or important is inescapably political. Importantly, these political choices not only shape distribution and consumption of media content, but also its production. Users learn norms about what to post from the content they see. Those seeking online visibility (for professional, political or other reasons) also respond strategically to recommendations, seeking to become ‘algorithmically recognizable’.”

Griffin, Rachel. “The Law and Political Economy of Online Visibility. Market Justice in the Digital Services Act,” *Technology and Regulation* (2023): 69–79, <https://doi.org/10.26116/techreg.2023.007> .

suppression over minority groups without recourse. Consequently, the grievances of a marginalized minority within society, and their status as victims, necessitate action, with both political authorities and the societal majority bearing responsibility for addressing these issues.

However, this assumption does not uniformly apply to women, unless they are categorized based on differing identities, such as sexual orientation, ethnic background, or religious beliefs. This identitarian stratification, fashioned for multicultural communities and societies of migrants, introduces a new dynamic where the traditional attributes of Arab feminism lose their relevance, as they no longer foster polarization along axes encompassing political and social contexts that give rise to subdivisions like leftist, liberal, and Islamic feminism. Instead, within this strand of identitarian feminism, there is a shift towards segmentary divisions that encompass multiple identities of women living in the same society/nation-state.

In identitarian feminism, the defense of freedoms and entitlements often leads to the adoption of liberal and human rights frameworks in broad terms, while simultaneously retaining the right to question the justice system or universal values they produce. This questioning arises frequently on the grounds that such values are associated with political and cultural imperialism. Consequently, a problem of standardization emerges, and becomes particularly evident on social networks through a "cherry-picking" mechanism, wherein different standards are applied to each case based on the conditions that best suit its context.

In the Egyptian society, where racialized identities do not form a solid base for stratification, religious affiliations and the patriarchal religious perceptions remained an identitarian conflict-zone, between anti-feminists and local feminists with woke affinities. Local feminists who are perceived as defending religion-based privileges, such as alimony, alongside advocating for universal/liberal sexual freedoms, are often criticized for appearing conflicted between two contrasting worlds and ideologies. However, within the constrained sociopolitical context governed by entrenched political and religious institutions, they have little room to maneuver in negotiating their rights and freedoms. Critics of this bricolage mechanism, which attempts to reconcile tradition with values of emancipation, tend to overlook the contextual constraints. They employ exaggerated metaphors, such as referencing "the rights to abortion and nudity," to demonize feminists and stir up opposition against them within a conservative society.

On another note, the ongoing oscillation between traditional and liberal values may be perceived as constraining the potential of identitarian feminism to develop into a robust political and emancipatory movement capable of transcending interim demands. Adherence to notions of "cultural imperialism" versus "cultural authenticity" complicates the stance of local feminists who grapple with formulating an approach suited to the local context. Confronting fundamentalist and sexist forms of resistance domestically using a liberal and rights-based approach often leads to accusations against these feminists of promoting Western (rather than universal) values. Conversely, maintaining alignment with an anti-colonial woke current frequently results in accusations, made by other essentialists, of being "white-washed" or reproducing assumptions of "white feminism" lacking in the "structural intersectionality" of gender and race.⁵⁸⁹

Playing on these contradictions within identitarian feminism, a serious backlash emanated from the manosphere after the accusations of sexual harassment have begun to target public figures belonging to different camps like *al-thawragiyya* and *al-dawlagiyya*.



*Figure 56

Text in the center: "Harassers that anti-harassment groups defend."

The name written on the right: Yusri Fuda.

The name written on the left: Khalid 'Ali.

In October 2017, an anonymous woman circulated an email to several activists and civil society workers, detailing allegations

⁵⁸⁹ Borah, P., Ghosh, S., Suk, J., Mini, D. S., and Sun, L. "Feminism Not for All? The Discourse Around White Feminism Across Five Social Media Platforms." *Social Media + Society* 9/3 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231186862>.

regarding incidents dating back to 2015. The woman, a former employee at the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), accused Khālid ‘Alī, prominent human rights lawyer and opposition’s intended presidential candidate at the time, of attempting to initiate a sexual relationship with her in his downtown Cairo office. The email resulted in ‘Alī’s formal resignation from the Bread and Freedom Party, and from his position as a lawyer for ECESR. In his resignation announcement, ‘Alī denied the allegations, however, he apologized to the woman, stating that “just her thinking about me in this way and her writing an email of this nature means that I must offer an apology for the pain she experienced. Regardless of the results of the investigation, I bear part of the responsibility, which has prompted me to offer this apology.”⁵⁹⁰

The leftist Bread and Freedom Party, to which ‘Alī belonged, decided to open an internal investigation, before his resignation, through an appointed committee of members from outside the party, all of them were women and feminist activists. However, many feminist activists attacked the committee and discredited the results of the investigation. In a direct interview with the author, ‘Ilhām ‘Aydārūs, feminist activist and founding member of The Bread and Freedom Party further explained the situation:

“In part, the email crisis was generational. I chose ‘Āmāl ‘Abd al-Hādī⁵⁹¹ to be the main investigator in the committee. I thought that no one would doubt her integrity, neither the leftist men nor the feminists. I wanted a woman whom men would not be hostile against, and whom women would trust. But what I did not think about was that for the girl who sent the email, her friends, and her generation, who is ‘Āmāl to begin with? They want you to choose an activist from their generation. So, the reputation of “*Al-Mar’a al-Gadīda*” (The New Woman) has worsened amid the feminist movement. This generation looked at the investigation committee as a corrupt and discriminatory committee. Institutions like *Nazra* played a negative role in the incitement against the investigation committee from the beginning. The issue of the email was important and was a turning point in the left’s relation with gender issues and the internal justice system.”⁵⁹²

⁵⁹⁰ Conor, Ailie. “Amid Allegations of Sexual Misconduct, Khaled Ali Resigns From Party and ECESR.” *Mada Masr*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/02/20/news/u/amid-allegations-of-sexual-misconduct-khaled-ali-resigns-from-party-and-ecesr/>.

⁵⁹¹ Founder of the feminist foundation “*Al-Mar’a al-Gadīda*” (The New Woman), medical doctor and leftist feminist activist and researcher.

⁵⁹² Interview with the feminist and political activist ‘Ilhām ‘Aydārūs, feminist activist and founding member of The Bread and Freedom Party, Cairo, January 2023.

In 2018, local Egyptian media announced that the renowned Egyptian TV presenter Yusrī Fūda, working for the German state television network Deutsche Welle (DW), faces accusations of sexual harassment (subsequently SH) from three female colleagues in DW.⁵⁹³ Fūda had led a long media career and achieved big fame as a presenter in al-Jazeera network before joining the Egyptian channel On TV after the Egyptian revolution. For three years, Fūda’s TV program backed the revolutionary movement, and Fūda became one of its glamorous media figures and a harsh critic of its opponents, including the SCAF, Mubarak’s old regime members, and the President Sisi. In 2016, Fūda left Egypt to join DW, which was understood as part of multiple steps to restrict private media channels and remove media figures known for their supportive positions of the January revolution in preparation to the complete takeover of the media field and its reformulation. In a quick comment on the SH allegations, Fūda claimed in a Facebook post that this was a smear campaign and that no legal action had been taken against him, stating that: “This is a war that was imposed on me. I know its source, I know how it started, how it developed, and I know its goals. But like you, I am gradually discovering its chapters.”⁵⁹⁴ However, few days later, a female activist publicly accused Fūda of leveraging his status and workplace to exploit, assault, and harm women. She recounted an incident from September 2016, during which Fūda invited her to Berlin for a potential employment opportunity. However, upon her arrival, instead of arranging accommodation at a hotel as initially promised, he insisted that she stay at his residence. She alleged that Fūda then subjected her to persistent unwanted sexual advances.⁵⁹⁵ Fūda received great

⁵⁹³ "فضيحة الإعلامي «يسري فودة».. يتحرش بزميلاته في قناة أوروبية شهيرة." بوابة اخبار اليوم <https://akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/2721726/1/%D9%81%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B4-%D8%A8%D8%B2%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%B1> .

⁵⁹⁴ Facebook. "Facebook," n.d., https://www.facebook.com/yosri.fouda1/posts/10156347090465733?ref=embed_post .

⁵⁹⁵ "German Press Agency: Deutsche Welle Fired Employee After ‘Credible’ Sexual Harassment Allegations." *Mada*

support from the revolutionary camp, as its prominent figures wrote hundreds of posts confirming that the allegations published by government-owned news outlets came in the context of a campaign to distort the honorable opposition figures and take revenge on the faces affiliated with the revolutionary movement. However, in September 2018, in an internal statement, DW announced that “it had conducted an investigation and taken necessary measures after finding that the sexual harassment allegations made against one of its employees appeared to be credible.”⁵⁹⁶ The statement clarified that the person in question (not named in the statement) has been fired from the institution.⁵⁹⁷

Fūda’s condemnation led to his disappearance from the media scene since 2018 and opened the door for other allegations coming from women from *al-thawragiyya* camp who insisted to break the silence about incidents of sexual violence within the revolutionary community.

Despite the differences between the incidents and the outcome in the cases of Yusrī Fūda (proven to be an aggressor, in repeated incidents) and Khālid ‘Alī (proven to have committed a “misconduct” in a single incident), the blame fell equally on both men in the meme in Figure 56. Being affiliates of the revolutionary camp, the support that both men received, during the investigation periods, from the same camp (initially from its men) was perceived by its opponents as a sort of reluctance and complicity. The opportunity was seized by the opponents from the neonationalists and *al-dawlagiyya* to point out a collusion between the budding feminist groups and the leftist revolutionary camp.

Such conception of the collusion between feminism and leftism finds its roots in the alt-right rhetoric and its manosphere. The alt-right initiated its identitarian counter cultural war against feminists by situating them as “the puppets of cultural Marxism” as explains Abraham De Swaan:⁵⁹⁸

“The Marxists who failed to bring down Western societies with their "class struggle" are now trying to do so by waging a cultural war; female emancipation is on the march, aimed at undermining men's resilience and

Masr, September 15, 2018, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/09/14/news/u/german-press-agency-deutsche-welle-fired-employee-after-credible-sexual-harassment-allegations/> .

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁸ De Swaan. *Contre les femmes : La montée d'une haine mondiale*, 313.

women's solicitude. In this way, European and Western society - in short, white society - is gradually shaking on its foundations. Without even resorting to violence becomes necessary. Perverse propaganda is enough to break its resistance. White supremacists fight against this delusion with counterpropaganda if possible, and brute force if necessary.”⁵⁹⁹



*Figure 57

The international meme template features the Puerto Rican professional baseball utility player known as Kike, alongside podcast host Kelli Tennant. The photo gained viral popularity a year after its initial appearance, becoming misinterpreted as an allegory for "fragile masculinity."⁶⁰⁰ In the meme, the player is seen standing on a bucket during a postgame interview, falsely perceived to be attempting to appear taller than the interviewer, despite this being contrary to the actual circumstances.⁶⁰¹ In the symbolism of the meme, the bucket serves as a metaphorical excuse that a man seeking romantic or sexual contact uses to start a conversation with a woman. In Figure 57, the woman is labelled as “a feminist girl sitting in

downtown,” and the metaphorical excuse (the bucket) is “Marxism.”

Cairo downtown has long been revered as the epicenter of cultural gatherings and a public arena where intellectual and cultural luminaries convene in historic cafés dating back to the

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁰ Jack Mac, “Bad News, Guys: Fragile Masculinity Has Been Exposed Thanks to Twitter.com User With Cat Profile Picture,” *Barstool Sports*, July 10, 2018. <https://www.barstoolsports.com/blog/1033572/bad-news-guys-fragile-masculinity-has-been-exposed-thanks-to-twitter-com-user-with-cat-profile-picture> .

⁶⁰¹ Jim Alexander. “Kelli Tennant on the Uproar Over the Photo of Kiké Hernández and a Bucket,” *San Bernardino Sun*, August 18, 2018. <https://www.sbsun.com/2018/08/18/kelli-tennant-on-the-uproar-over-the-photo-of-kike-hernandez-and-a-bucket/> .

previous century. For rebellious activists, political dissidents, and countercultural artists, downtown represented a liberated zone, fostering relatively flexible social norms compared to residential neighborhoods and the generally conservative atmosphere prevalent in Egyptian public spaces. Until 2013, downtown Cairo served as the primary hub for political protests seeking visibility and media coverage, regardless of their scale. Tahrir Square witnessed numerous protests throughout Egypt's modern history, notably in 2011 and 2013, symbolizing the nation's key aspirations and demands.

Given this background, it is common to encounter metaphors such as "downtown youth," "downtown activists," and "downtown feminists" on social networks, referring to culturally elitist groups, political activists, or individuals from the non-traditional art scene. In Figure 57, the meme portrays a prevailing viewpoint among neonationalists and adherents of the state's post-2013 alliance. This viewpoint suggests that the groups pivotal to the revolution and its political mobilization adhere to the flexible values associated with "downtown." However, when their significant moral flaws are exposed, they are reluctant to uphold fair and transparent standards and adopt a defensive stance akin to that of the state or its supporters, whom they vehemently criticize.

The revelation of incidents of sexual violence within *al-thawragiyya* community put focus on the moral integrity questions within the group and allowed other factions to criticize the exaggerated idolization of its renowned figures. For many observers the question was to what extent they diverge from the broader society governed by patriarchal norms and sexist perceptions. Attitudes towards instances of sexual violence became a new point of contention within progressive, leftist, and revolutionary circles.⁶⁰² In addition to facing external attacks from supporters of the state, internal polarization manifested in various ways: discrepancies between the responses of men and women to acts of sexual violence committed by individuals they knew, and differences across a wide spectrum between conservatives and more liberal members in embracing new gender concepts advocated by feminists and LGBTQ activists.

⁶⁰² "The 'E-mail Girl' Who Split Civil Society Apart," *EgyptToday*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/43542/The-%E2%80%98e-mail-girl%E2%80%99-who-split-civil-society-apart> .

The proliferation of publicly disclosed cases of sexual assaults that include public figures and upper classes' individuals created a big circle where political interests, power relations, and using sexual scandals for purposes of revenge and defamation, intersect. In September 2018, the journalist Mayy al-Shāmī “was targeted by an online smear campaign, which included accusations that she is a member of the banned Muslim Brotherhood” after she dared to file a sexual harassment complaint against her boss in the famous Egyptian media platform “Al-Yūm Al-Sābi’.”⁶⁰³ While al-Shāmī struggled with threats and cyberattacks, she remained under the control of her boss who remained in his job and was never submitted to security investigation.⁶⁰⁴ The government sentenced human rights activist 'Amal Faṭḥī to two years in jail for sharing a 12-minutes Facebook video where she recounted her experiences of sexual harassment at a bank and criticized the government's failure to safeguard women. Authorities claimed Fathy “was spreading false news” to tarnish the country's reputation and only suspended her sentence upon payment of a substantial fine. However, after her release, she faced another trial after the government accused her of belonging to a prohibited "outlaw group.”⁶⁰⁵

In 2019, the famous cinema director Khālīd Yūsuf was the subject of a sexual scandal when videos that contained scenes of sexual relations between a man (whose face was not shown) and two young actresses were leaked. However, the videos were spread with a title bearing the name of Yūsuf and the names of the two actresses who were immediately arrested, and admitted appearing in the leaked videos, while Yūsuf announced two days later that he was outside the country on a visit to his family residing in Paris.

Yūsuf is also known for his political career, besides his artistic one, as a Nasserist who supported the military takeover in 2013 and “enjoyed proximity to authorities that granted him

⁶⁰³ Sudarsan Raghavan and Heba Farouk Mahfouz, “In Egypt, a #MeToo Complaint Can Land a Woman in Jail.” *Washington Post*, January 22, 2024. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-egypt-a-metoo-complaint-can-land-a-woman-in-jail/2018/10/24/3a2fe5a0-d6db-11e8-a10f-b51546b10756_story.html .

⁶⁰⁴ رصيف, 22 “اليوم السابع; " رصيف, “بعد اتهامها رئيس التحرير بالتحرش بها... منع الصحافية مي الشامي من دخول 2, 2018, <https://raseef22.net/article/165292-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B4-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7> .

⁶⁰⁵ Sudarsan Raghavan and Heba Farouk Mahfouz, “In Egypt, a #MeToo Complaint Can Land a Woman in Jail.”

permission to use a plane to film mass protests against the Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013.”⁶⁰⁶ Yūsuf joined the oppositional June 30 parliamentary coalition and participated in disputing the government's move to relinquish sovereignty over the islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia, and condemning the arrest of demonstrators who protested against the decision, then he also opposed the 2019 constitutional amendments.⁶⁰⁷

Yūsuf stayed in Paris for almost two years after the sexual scandal and did not return to Egypt after announcing he was in a family visit. Unlike the fate of the actresses, who were accused of “incitement to immorality and debauchery and the spread of vice” and imprisoned,⁶⁰⁸ Yūsuf faced no official accusations, and was not even summoned by the Public Prosecution or any of the state institutions in any of the complaints filed against him, and he remained a member of the Egyptian Parliament, enjoying immunity from arrest until the end of the parliamentary cycle. In 2021, he returned to Egypt to start an artistic collaboration with the Egyptian Media Group (EMG), notoriously affiliated with state intelligence services, in a TV series and a film.⁶⁰⁹

606 “Q&a | Director Khaled Youssef on the National Political Dialogue: We Must Take Full Advantage of This Opportunity, Even if Our Chances Are Slim.” *Mada Masr.* May 19, 2022, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2022/05/19/feature/politics/qa-director-khaled-youssef-on-the-national-political-dialogue-we-must-take-full-advantage-of-this-opportunity-even-if-our-chances-are-slim/>.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁸ “هيثم البرعي وجيهان عبد العزيز، “تعرف على عقوبة منى فاروق وشيما بسبب الفيديو الإباحي” *الوطن*, February 7, 2019. <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/3980863#:~:text=%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%20%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1%20%D9%85%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%8C%20%D8%A5%D9%86%D9%87%20%D9%81%D9%8A,%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85%20%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85%20%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B6>.

⁶⁰⁹ *صحيفة العرب*, “انتقادات إلكترونية لخالد يوسف لتحويله فضيحة إلى أزمة سياسية” March 16, 2024. <https://alarab.co.uk/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%81-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%81%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9>.

In 2020, "*Daftar Hikāyāt*" launched a platform where women and queer individuals could anonymously share their experiences of sexual violence. Participants could choose to share their stories as a form of personal healing or as a step towards potential escalation by submitting complaints and official reports against the perpetrators. However, criticism arose regarding the gray area between anonymously publishing allegations of sexual violence and being prepared to pursue official investigations with supporting evidence.

From the outset, "*Daftar Hikāyāt*" stated that it would not compel storytellers to provide evidence, disclose their identities against their will, or engage with the Public Prosecution. The platform was intended solely to provide a space for individuals who struggled with traumatic experiences they could not share at the time of their occurrence. Testimonies came mostly from women who lacked trust in security institutions' investigations, or simply women who sought support from empathetic listeners. Consequently, "*Daftar Hikāyāt*" adopted the slogan "*nuṣaddiq al-nāgiyāt*" (we believe survivors), echoing the slogan of the global MeToo movement. However, opponents of the platform also used this slogan to undermine its credibility using memes.



*Figure 58

Top image

Top text: “The office of the female lawyer A. S.”

Bottom text: “We received a testimony full of contradictions, but we are ready to launch a defamation campaign that will overshadow any kind of logical questions.”

Bottom image

Top text: “*Daftar Hikāyāt*.”

Bottom text: “I swear by God, it is fine.”



*Figure 59

Title: "The feminist pudding."

Image on the right side:

"We take revenge for the survivor, and we need no evidence."

Image on the left side:

"We destroyed the reputation and life of another girl, and we need no evidence."

In 2021, an anonymous testimony appeared on *Daftar Hikāyāt* accusing a young man of assaulting a girl who was involved with him in a relationship. The testimony mentioned the name of another girl that the testimony writer said she saw at the man's house while trying to find him. The man denied all the allegations and insisted with a group of friends to retaliate and take his revenge from the girl who tarnished his reputation as well as the platform that supported the publication of her narrative. A Facebook page was created under the title "Anti-Femi- Terrorism" and used memes (like Figures 57 and 58) as tools to expose what the group considered "unethical mechanisms" of condemnation.



*Figure 59: A post published on the Facebook page "Anti-Femi-Terrorism:"

Text: “We would like to confirm that we are not against feminism, and we do not undermine the importance of civil society playing its role in defending rights and addressing societal issues, including women's issues. However, we are terrified about the growing current associated with feminism that adopts mechanisms that may pose risks to societal security. We will not delve into why this current endorses such mechanisms, but it is no secret that having unidentified platforms capable of destroying individuals on social, professional, and psychological levels by leveling charges, punishable by law, and in parallel, this current propagates the principle of “believing the claimants” akin to religious beliefs; it is something that sparkles in the eyes of those in charge of it. The weapons of anonymity, judgement, and terrorizing the audience by systematized campaigns does not benefit women’s issues. These are weapons that could be used against just causes in a similar style, ultimately having a negative impact that will disappoint feminists.”



*Figure 61

Title: “The feminist double standards.”

Top image

In blue: “When the accused is M.A.”

In yellow: “Believing the survivors is a feminist duty.”

Bottom image

In blue: “When the accused is A.M.”

In yellow: “Girls, the accused is innocent until proven otherwise.”



*Figure 61: The meme published by “Anti-Femi-Terrorism” is titled “Operations room to support men involved in relationships with insane feminists.”

The text on the speech bubble: “If he does not come back to me, I will say he raped me.”

The populization of an anti-feminist discourse employed tactics reminiscent of the attacks on *al-thawragiyya* following 2013, including generalization, questioning moral integrity, scrutinizing support networks, and accusations of inauthenticity and Westernization. However, unlike the accusations of collaboration between leftists and Islamists that were common in attacks on *al-thawragiyya*, such claims could not be applied to feminism. In fact, certain figures within *al-thawragiyya* openly criticized feminists. They perceived the space gained by feminist movements as a façade, enabling the state to project an image of allowing free expression and mobilization for social change and women's rights, while political repression and detentions of dissidents persisted:

“Why are we insulted by activists who say that we are affiliated with the state? Frankly, they want to put us in a quarrel that is not ours. I am a non-political person, and my political activity throughout my life has been very light. I only joined the revolution when I was in university, and maybe this is one of the reasons why I am not under the spotlight right now. I do not understand politics and it is not my issue. Why do you want me to enter a fight that is not mine? I feel that these activists think about it from a masculine standpoint: Like, mama, come, rinse me after toilet, like, come and fight for me. I also think that the topic of feminism is in vogue, the

person who talks about it on the Internet becomes famous, and there is a kind of jealousy. The issue is complex. The state leaves a space for us to speak up so they can say that there are people who could voice critiques and we do not do anything to them. At the same time, the state is trying to negotiate with Al-Azhar, regardless of our interests that do not matter so much to them.”⁶¹⁰

Daftar Hikāyāt ceased publishing new testimonies in 2022 following an anonymous accusation against cinema director Islām al-‘Azzāzī in 2020, which alleged assault against six women. Subsequently, al-‘Azzāzī filed a lawsuit against the prominent political activist Rashā ‘Azab for her supportive tweets toward the women alleging assault by the director.⁶¹¹

Surprisingly, the Public Prosecution opted to investigate the lawsuit as a defamation case, prompting criticism from activists and lawyers who viewed this move as an abuse of defamation laws to silence and retaliate against survivors of sexual violence and their supporters. Such actions were feared to deter individuals from coming forward and grant impunity to perpetrators.⁶¹²

This approach to the lawsuit against ‘Azab paralleled the suspension of legal proceedings in the highly publicized Fairmont rape case due to insufficient evidence.

The Fairmont rape case, involving a violent gang rape at the Cairene Fairmont Nile City Hotel in 2014, gained traction on social media in the summer of 2020. The involvement of suspects from influential businessmen's families sparked significant controversy. However, amid the investigations, authorities targeted three witnesses, campaigners, and a bystander, all of whom were detained by the Public Prosecution. Three others were released on bail of LE100,000 each, while another witness was released without bail.⁶¹³

⁶¹⁰ ‘Āya Munīr, feminist activist, founder and administrator of “Superwomen” platform. Direct Interview with the author. Cairo, 24 December 2022.

⁶¹¹ Maya Oppenheim, “Charges Against Egyptian Activist Show Law Is ‘Weaponised’ to Gag Sexual Violence Victims,” *The Independent*, April 22, 2022. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/rasha-azab-islam-azazi-egypt-b2063628.html> .

⁶¹² *Ibid.*

⁶¹³ “Witnesses Arrested and Intimidated: How the Fairmont Rape Case Fell Apart.” *Mada Masr*, October 14, 2021. <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2021/09/02/feature/politics/witnesses-arrested-and-intimidated-how-the-fairmont-rape-case-fell-apart/>

“I do not believe that adopting a victim mentality and scandalization, akin to trends in the West, would be advantageous for us. Unlike in societies with protected freedom of expression, we face significant constraints due to the presence of a monster called the state. One can easily fall prey to accusations of "spreading false news," as seen in the case of the director Islām al-‘Azzāzī, or even be charged with inciting debauchery. There are limits to excessively investing in this approach, and many groups have learned from their experience that internal investigation mechanisms within institutions can be developed.

Our experience in The Bread and Freedom Party when we formed the investigation committee in the case of Khālid ‘Alī has been retrospectively viewed positively by many, while Khālid Yūsif's situation went largely unnoticed, and he faced no official investigations or condemnation from his party. It is important to recognize that the rules are fluid, and social media trends play a significant role in shaping perceptions.”⁶¹⁴

In this section, it becomes evident that internet memes can be wielded as weapons by opposing factions to bolster their stances in cultural conflicts. The utilization of memes within the anti-feminist manosphere aids in disseminating a range of neomasculinist terms and concepts to broader audiences, while also reshaping men's roles by positioning them as victims of an exaggerated feminist movement. Moreover, memes play a crucial role in amplifying divisive emotions like victimization and retaliation within manosphere circles, aligning with the agendas of various political factions. Anti-feminist memes reinterpret entrenched patriarchal ideologies in response to the growing demands for equality and the increasing defiance exhibited by young activists towards the foundational pillars of entrenched patriarchal nationalism and religiously sanctioned gender disparities.

⁶¹⁴ ‘Ilhām ‘Aydārūs, feminist and political activist. Direct interview with the author. Cairo, 12 January 2023.

Conclusion

Studying the Egyptian memesphere within specific conceptual domains illuminates both the potential and the constraints of internet memes as potent cultural tools for contestation. This dissertation has revealed a range of instances where internet memes have effectively navigated the landscape of cultural reappropriation and repackaging, either by fostering a “negotiated code” or an “oppositional code” of reception, or conversely, by solidifying the “dominant code” and enhancing its communicative impact among younger audiences.

The involvement of Egyptian manosphere groups, morally conservatives and Islamists, and neonationalists with internet memes production, as elaborated in my research, has shown the varied ways in which these cultural forms can be interpreted and employed. In light of the global proliferation of internet meme communities, it is vital to recognize their original context of emergence, with affiliates that span from emerging American alt-right movements to those opposing "woke culture," a framework often criticized by these factions for restricting “free speech” and intensifying identity conflicts.

Within this context, memes symbolized a rising youth culture dedicated to challenging what these groups perceived as “dominant ideologies” promoted by mainstream media and liberal political institutions in the Western world. Through consequence-free humor and referential complexity in multimodal artifacts, these groups, often aligning with anti-woke populist right-wing rhetoric, sought to disrupt prevailing narratives and reframe cultural meanings and symbols.

This might appear as a dim overall picture. However, the development of the Egyptian memesphere presents a contrasting narrative, emerging within a climate of collective popular dissent where digital communication was predominantly shaped, at its birth, by voices of liberal/leftist opposition and countercultural cyber-militants, particularly from educated middle-class individuals. Initially utilized by left-leaning segments of the Egyptian opposition in 2011, the memesphere landscape transformed rapidly in the ensuing years, welcoming a notable influx of meme creators from conservative, right-leaning, and Islamist backgrounds amidst political upheaval.

The anthropologist Lisa Wadeen described comedy in the context of the Syrian civil war as “expressing a struggle between desires for political reform and attachments to everyday conventions, as prefiguring solidarities in acts of disruption that are themselves ambiguous—and politically relevant for being so.”⁶¹⁵ This perspective offers valuable insight into the role of internet memes, suggesting a neutral approach to analyzing their influence through identifying and discerning their multifaceted functions that may perpetuate an autocratic ideology while providing openings for an oppositional consciousness.

Such an impartial approach (to the extent that impartiality is achievable) in analyzing internet memes shifts the emphasis toward the functional, contextual, positional, and sociocultural factors influencing both meme creators and their audiences. In my dissertation, I have been continually concerned by the processes of cultural reappropriation of global debates within the local context within local meme conflicts. My extensive study of the semiotic subtleties inherent in memes was an attempt to highlight the critical importance of tracking the ongoing transformations that shape these processes of cultural exchange, translation, and communication.

Following the disillusionment caused by the "Arab Spring," there has been a notable shift in how questions surrounding identity conflicts, the interplay between state and religion, the dominant moral system, citizenship, and gender norms are addressed within the regional context and its historical framework. This research process has revealed the emergence of minority groups that utilize deconstructive approaches to challenge the foundational tenets of the dominant "identitarian authoritarianism." As a result, these groups have begun to explore a different array of social issues that diverge from those imposed by prevailing institutions, including those traditionally regarded as oppositional.

Internet memes have served as a significant visual medium, encapsulating and reconfiguring layered aspects of broader cultural revisionist movements. These movements critically examine notions of political subjectivity and social membership, manifesting in a variety of cultural forms, including online podcasts, YouTube videos, and innumerable digital conversations, cultural wars, and pedagogical seminars. By revisiting both historical accounts and

⁶¹⁵ Wadeen. “Introduction: “I Know Very Well, yet Nevertheless . . . Ideology, Interpellation, and the Politics of Disavowal,” 13.

contemporary narratives, examining ideological frameworks, and exploring digitized archives, the digital medium that emerged post-2013 has created opportunities for previously marginalized voices to present alternative perspectives. This shift has facilitated a critical reassessment of conventional narratives and interpretations classically surrounding modern Egyptian history, particularly in the realms of nationalism, religion, and gender, as explored in this research.

This form of grassroots cultural mobilization, sparked by the shortcomings of political efforts and enabled by the global digital network, initially emerged in response to the failings of political mobilization after the presidential election of 2014 and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's landslide victory, giving him *carte blanche* to enforce a counter-revolutionary agenda. However, it expanded the discourse on the failure of the revolution and the definitive closure of the 2011-2014 parenthesis into new dimensions, bringing these critical questions back to the forefront of what is necessary for political engagement. In my perspective, the inquiries emerging in the aftermath of the "Arab Spring" highlighted distinct and complex issues that resist easy translation within the frameworks of global postcolonial and anti-imperialist discourses.

Specifically, many local cultural collectives in Egypt and other Arab nations that have experienced similar uprisings and subsequent harsh repercussions feel alienated from the generalized narratives that reduce Middle Eastern problems to the shortcomings of authoritarian regimes, often personified by a singular dictator figure and their security apparatus.

By moving beyond the slogans associated with the "Arab Spring," discussions surrounding foundational questions of national, religious, and gender identities shift the focus away from a narrow debate on democracy as a mere governance concept. Instead, they delve into the cultural elements and social structures that obstruct its essential requirements, such as legislation, economic systems, dominant artistic expressions, moral and religious convictions, and social organization.

Through my research journey, I could sense the rise of Egyptian and regional globalized elites who feel hindered by their dependence on translating and borrowing from dominant liberal Western discourses, which prevents them from effectively engaging with the critical issues facing their local societies, which in turn struggle within a space that has long been captive to identity conflicts sponsored by authoritarian regimes and their most powerful and widespread opponents, the various currents labeled as Islamist.

In the context of hegemonic global identity politics, which emphasize concepts like "decolonialization of social practices" and "cultural particularity," it becomes increasingly difficult to accurately characterize local conditions as "regressive" or to identify the social systems that reinforce and perpetuate patriarchal and backward conditions, such as religious and gender structures. Consequently, I have felt that this creates a state of denial among global liberal pro-democracy advocates, who struggle to recognize the complex power dynamics within local communities, the intricacies of religious politics imposed by the state, and the considerable influence wielded by politicized religious groups on the possibilities for social change.

In this context, it is essential to explore the complex power dynamics and cultural conflicts that exist across various social domains. Investigating the distinct memespheres within specific fields such as sports, media, advertising, cuisine, fashion, celebrities, music, dance and apparently apolitical superficial light humor (*qalsh*) can offer researchers valuable insights into the evolving social structures, adaptive practices, and changing sociocultural trends. This targeted methodology avoids sweeping generalizations about local and global interactions and refrains from reinforcing exaggerated populist narratives and projections. Instead, it enhances our comprehension of the developing digital communities that permeate social networks and elucidates the intricate nature of power relationships among them.

On a different note, examining domain-specific memespheres can reveal more intricate aspects of the Egyptian tripartite divisions (*al-thawragiyya*, *al-dawlagiyya*, and *al-Islāngiyya*) generically identified in this research. Understanding the ongoing operation of schismogenesis and the outcomes of entrenched cyberpolarization requires a rigorous scrutinization of endless permutations and combinations permeating social networks and changing social actors' positions. It is crucial to stratify and track the current strategies employed by liberal and leftist opposition groups, their differing or unifying approaches, their active social organizations that extend beyond the political sphere, and their various responses to the political regime in the context of President Sisi's era of repression.

Similarly, studying the transformations within Islamist groups and their audiences after 2013 would benefit from an exploration of Islamic memespheres in both open and closed online environments. Islamist meme creators consistently evolve their content to engage a diverse and increasingly critical audience in the digital landscape. Despite a decline in their on-the-ground

influence since 2013, the political discourse and sociocultural implications of the Muslim Brotherhood continue to resonate with a considerable following online, including through covert meme pages that infiltrate nearly every aspect of social life. Additionally, a focused study on meme creators affiliated with Salafist groups in Egypt is essential, as they have cultivated a substantial presence in alignment with the political regime post-2013. Egyptian Salafists constitute a noteworthy sociocultural force, wielding considerable influence and enjoying widespread popularity within the Egyptian community.

I recommend expanding the examination of the Egyptian memesphere to include themes not addressed in this research, such as Egyptian foreign relations and the evolving views on the Palestinian cause and the Arab Israeli conflict in the aftermath of 2011. Furthermore, investigating the role of internet memes in advertising campaigns for artistic and cultural productions, along with their influence within popular music genres like hip hop, *shaabi*, and rap, would significantly enhance future meme studies on youth cultures and rising propensities. By integrating critical discourse analysis with quantitative methods, researchers can reveal hidden complexities and nuances of the post-2013 transformations, thereby providing unique sociocultural insights.

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SORBONNE UNIVERSITÉ

ÉCOLE DOCTORALE IV (020)

CIVILISATIONS, CULTURES, LITTÉRATURES ET SOCIÉTÉS

« Les transmutations de la mémosphère égyptienne :

Naviguer dans les dynamiques culturelles et les changements sociaux après 2013. »

Résumé en langue Française

I. Introduction

Après le soulèvement populaire égyptien de 2011, l'influence omniprésente de la mémosphère Internet sur le paysage politique, social et culturel de l'Égypte est devenue remarquable. Les mêmes Internet se sont de plus en plus transformés en un moyen de commentaire réel et rapide qui a porté à un niveau différent la politique, les nouvelles et les tendances quotidiennes, les symboles historiques et les productions de la culture populaire.

Définis comme la reproduction d'un matériau déjà présent par les « gens ordinaires »,⁶¹⁶ les mêmes en ligne peuvent être considérés comme une recontextualisation extemporanée d'histoires culturelles anciennes et récentes, où l'intervention intentionnelle des créateurs culturels et des acteurs sociaux se matérialise par un processus d'ingénierie de l'opinion publique et des positions sociopolitiques.

Comme l'indique le vocabulaire génétique de Richard Dawkins,⁶¹⁷ les mêmes Internet ont été cristallisés en tant que véhicule d'expression (un gène culturel) servant une fonction de communication en tant qu'unités de transmission culturelle. Les artefacts multimodaux créés à partir de références culturelles, de symboles locaux et mondiaux et de textes superposés, dans un contexte momentané, ont migré pour être répliqués et modifiés à l'infini sur le support numérique dans le monde entier. Au cours de leur voyage, les mêmes Internet reconstruisent des significations à partir de couches d' « inflexion sémiotique résultant d'une hybridation, d'une mutabilité, d'une créolisation, d'un métissage et d'un bricolage continu ». ⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁶ Iskander, Adel. "The Meme-ing of Revolution: Creativity, Folklore, and the Dislocation of Power in Egypt," *Jadaliyya* - جدلية, 2017. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31189/The-Meme-ing-of-Revolution-Creativity,-Folklore,-and-the-Dislocation-of-Power-in-Egypt> .

⁶¹⁷ Richard Dawkins. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁶¹⁸ Iskander, "The Meme-Ing of Revolution: Creativity, Folklore, and the Dislocation of Power in Egypt."

Il est important de souligner la spécificité du contexte égyptien où les mèmes, une sous-catégorie générique globale de la culture populaire, ont surgi sous la forme de « caricatures numériques »,⁶¹⁹ parallèlement aux événements en cours lors du soulèvement populaire sans précédent de 2011.

Parmi les formes les plus populaires figurent les *kōmiks* (comics), qui ont acquis en Égypte une connotation différente de la connotation anglo-saxonne. Les bandes dessinées représentent le genre où se rencontrent les références de la culture populaire locale (cadres de films populaires, séries dramatiques, archives web, iconographie ou pièces de théâtre), l'organisation visuelle d'une caricature et d'autres éléments tels que des commentaires écrits ou des dialogues. Les « comics » et les mèmes ont acquis un contexte national depuis 2011 et sont devenus un champ où les débats sociaux se sont enflammés dans les domaines de la politique, de l'économie et de la vie sociale. Dans le contexte de la mobilisation politique, les mèmes Internet ont dépassé les critères globaux d'un contenu audiovisuel numérique hautement diffusable et transformable pour jouer un rôle intégral dans la consolidation des camps politiques, la réinvention des récits dominants et la guerre des positions entre les factions sociopolitiques polarisées.

L'agitation politique qui a lieu depuis 2011 s'est reflétée dans la sphère de la production culturelle, prenant différentes phases et transmutations en relation avec les transformations rapides et successives des régimes politiques et des interactions des différents groupes sociaux. Aussi influents qu'aient été les médias sociaux et les comédies sur internet pendant les bouleversements politiques de janvier 2011, ils ont continué à véhiculer les dynamiques politiques, culturelles et idéologiques qui ont animé la société égyptienne dans les années qui ont suivi.

Depuis l'émergence de mèmes omniprésents pendant les campagnes présidentielles successives (2011-2014) et les carrefours politiques cruciaux, l'humour sur internet a continué à agiter l'imaginaire social et à perturber les programmes des médias grand public des régimes au pouvoir et de leurs partisans. Pendant ce temps, la comédie sur internet a soutenu un courant critique croissant du patriarcat, de l'islamisme et de l'autoritarisme politique en décryptant la nature des discours culturels sur le nationalisme égyptien moderne, les institutions et les organisations religieuses, et les conceptions traditionnelles du genre.

L'examen de la mémosphère égyptienne après 2013, en tant qu'outil de contestation, véhicule de propagation des discours populistes émergents et concurrents, et espace interactif de critique sociopolitique, pourrait être considéré comme l'axe central et la problématique de cette thèse.

⁶¹⁹ El Khachab, Chihab. « Est-ce que ça ne vaut pas mieux que d'être comme la Syrie et l'Irak ? Les caractères nationaux vus par la caricature numérique égyptienne sur Facebook ». In *Culture pop en Égypte. Entre mainstream commercial et contestation*, 257. Richard Jacquemond et Frédéric Lagrange dir. Paris: Riveneuve, 2020.

En 2013, le président Mohamed Morsi, membre et candidat de l'organisation des Frères Musulmans, a été démis de ses fonctions à la suite de manifestations populaires massives en juin de cette année-là. Les manifestations et l'éviction de Morsi par l'armée égyptienne ont été suivies d'une vague de troubles et de réactions violentes de la part des Frères Musulmans, notamment des attaques sectaires et des sit-in organisés dans toute la capitale égyptienne. Ces événements ont culminé avec l'évacuation sanglante de la place Rāb'a al-'Adawiyya en août 2013.⁶²⁰

En 2014, la prise de contrôle militaire a été renforcée par l'élection d' Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi à la présidence de la république. L'instauration du régime de Sisi a lancé un processus de restauration autocratique marqué par une répression sévère de la dissidence politique, de la mobilisation sociale, des plateformes médiatiques indépendantes et des moyens d'expression publique.

En tant que chercheur, artiste et activiste culturel, j'ai été aux premières loges des changements sociopolitiques qui se sont produits entre 2005 et 2011, une période caractérisée par l'essor des mouvements sociaux, de l'engagement des jeunes et de l'organisation politique dans la sphère publique égyptienne. Cette époque a vu la fusion du domaine culturel numérique avec les réalités sociales, alors qu'une vague de nouvelles voix émergeait au sein de l'underground culturel, des réseaux numériques, des blogs et du journalisme, et des industries créatives.

Au cours des six années qui ont suivi, une interaction dynamique entre l'espace virtuel de l'internet et son impact sur les réalités sociales tangibles est devenue de plus en plus évidente. Les cyber utopistes numériques sont apparus comme les pionniers d'une « classe dissidente médiatisée » en plein essor, coïncidant avec l'adoption par le régime égyptien d'un modèle économique néolibéral soutenu par des services basés sur le web et un système médiatique intégré.⁶²¹ La prolifération des plateformes en ligne des personnalités de l'opposition a fait entrer une vague de nouveaux visages dans l'arène politique, façonnant le paysage de la dissidence et du discours en Égypte.

Ayant participé activement au soulèvement de 2011, j'ai été le témoin direct du parcours tumultueux des groupes militants égyptiens au cours des trois années de troubles qui ont suivi. Immérgée dans divers cercles politiques, culturels et artistiques, j'ai participé à d'intenses conversations politiques, à des initiatives socioculturelles collectives et à des manifestations qui m'ont ouvert les yeux sur les dilemmes complexes qui ont entouré le soulèvement et les diverses factions sociopolitiques à l'origine de ses revendications et de ses mobilisations.

Les années qui ont suivi l'effondrement de la mobilisation politique ont constitué une longue période de réflexion pour moi et pour de nombreux acteurs sociaux et politiques à travers l'Égypte

⁶²⁰ Rania Al-Malky, "Rabaa Was a Massacre of Innocents Egypt Must Never Forget," *Middle East Eye*, February 7, 2019. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/rabaa-was-massacre-innocents-egypt-must-never-forget>.

⁶²¹ Guaaybess, Tourya. "10. Media Policy in the MENA: The Political Impact of Media Confluence." In *The Handbook of Media and Culture in the Middle East*, 93-106, ed. by J.F. Khalil, G. Khiabany, T. Guaaybess and B. Yesil. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2023.

et la région arabe. Cette période a été l'occasion de réévaluer de manière critique le « printemps arabe » et ses conséquences sous une multitude de perspectives. Les revers répétés et les défaites significatives subis par les forces pro-démocratiques m'ont contraint à sonder constamment la surface des slogans et des mouvements manifestes qui ont attiré l'attention des médias.

Au-delà des simples motivations politiques, il est devenu impératif d'examiner les fondements historiques, sociaux et culturels qui ont mis en péril le soulèvement politique séculaire et suscité une mobilisation religieuse réactionnaire, conduisant à des conflits sectaires et à des vagues ultérieures de persécutions sexistes et religieuses.

La longue histoire et la trajectoire de l'islamisme, ainsi que l'interaction entre les régimes égyptiens de l'après-indépendance et les organisations religieuses, sont réapparus comme des obstacles majeurs à la mobilisation pour le changement social. La dualité État/religion est ensuite devenue partie intégrante des délibérations quotidiennes sur les réseaux sociaux et à travers les mêmes Internet après la mise hors la loi des Frères Musulmans en 2013.

L'observation de l'évolution de la mésosphère égyptienne après 2013 implique l'étude d'un site ethnographique où une génération influencée par la culture numérique mondiale organise divers mouvements numériques reflétant la polarisation au sein de la société égyptienne profondément divisée. Cette analyse examine la mésosphère et ses participants sous l'angle des divisions générationnelles, politiques et culturelles, en tenant compte des influences et des tendances dynamiques locales et mondiales qui façonnent les groupes de créateurs de mêmes.

Dans le contexte égyptien, la création des « comics » a été adoptée par des jeunes désireux de remettre en question l'éthique et les discours moraux de la classe moyenne dominante, encourageant une contre-culture « révolutionnaire » de la jeunesse contre les « normes » - un terme qui fait référence, dans le contexte local, aux générations plus âgées de la classe moyenne qui ont adopté une culture nationale hégémonique façonnée par les mouvements de modernisation égyptiens du 20^{ème} siècle et l'impact culturel significatif des mouvements de renouveau islamique depuis les années 1970, résultant en un hybride éthique socioculturel profondément enraciné.

Cette thèse explore principalement la manière dont la mésosphère influence les guerres culturelles et déclenche des tendances sociales dans les domaines conceptuels du nationalisme, de la religion et du genre après 2013. De ce point de vue, l'activité de la mésosphère apparaît comme le développement progressif d'un outil vital de contestation, de déconstruction et de négociation des histoires récentes et anciennes de la nation à la lumière des transformations sociopolitiques et des idéologies de courants conflictuels à l'ère de la confluence des médias⁶²² fortement influencée par les agendas politiques et les propensions populistes.

Lorsqu'elles sont adoptées par les traditionalistes, les partisans du gouvernement et les groupes islamistes, les « comics » sur internet constituent un outil puissant pour renforcer les valeurs

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 95.

conventionnelles, les points de vue très conservateurs imprégnés d'idéologies salafistes, les stratégies de l'État et les croyances sociales et religieuses dominantes sur les différentes plateformes médiatiques. Plutôt que de se limiter à la dissidence politique et à l'innovation culturelle, les mêmes Internet sont devenus un média polyvalent. En fait, la mémosphère et les médias numériques ont considérablement renforcé les factions et les autorités politiques établies, servant d'élément crucial dans le paysage culturel et les luttes idéologiques en cours entre les courants concurrents.

Mon choix d'examiner l'évolution de la mémosphère égyptienne dans les cadres du nationalisme, de la religion et du genre est motivé par les changements significatifs qui ont introduit de nouvelles dynamiques et les débats animés qui se déroulent dans ces domaines particulièrement actifs.

Le réexamen de l'identité nationale, des idéologies religieuses et des normes de genre dominantes sont apparus comme des domaines cruciaux de conflit et de contestation après 2013.

En étudiant la manière dont les mêmes Internet remplissent des fonctions allant au-delà du simple humour et de la précipitation de thèmes risibles, j'ai identifié ces trois lentilles conceptuelles comme étant au cœur de mon analyse. L'exploration des guerres de mêmes et de leurs symboles associés en relation avec le nationalisme, la religion et le genre a orienté mon processus de recherche et fourni trois perspectives complémentaires sur les transformations socioculturelles substantielles qui se produisent en Égypte depuis 2013.

II. La mémosphère égyptienne : Examen de l'état de l'art

Mon étude de la mémosphère égyptienne après 2013 a été en partie motivée par le désir de contextualiser le soulèvement égyptien et ses conséquences dans des cadres culturels, historiques et mondiaux plus larges. La logique de participation sur les plateformes numériques, les réseaux sociaux et les phénomènes émergents du néo populisme et du néonationalisme sont apparus comme une influence significative.

Le soulèvement égyptien a marqué un tournant, contribuant à ce que je considère comme une division tripartite des affiliations politiques et des tendances culturelles qui dominent la sphère en ligne depuis 2013 : *Al-thawragiyya* (les révolutionnaires) représentant l'opposition libérale et de gauche et les sympathisants du soulèvement de 2011, *al-dawlagiyya* (les partisans de l'État) représentant l'« alliance de stabilité » qui a soutenu la prise de pouvoir militaire et le régime de Sisi depuis la destitution de Mohamed Morsi en 2013, et *al-Islāngiyya* (les islamistes) représentant les différents blocs de l'islam politique menés par l'organisation des Frères musulmans. Il convient de mentionner le mouvement salafiste qui occupe une place importante dans la sphère islamiste,

étant donné qu'il est resté politiquement inactif jusqu'aux années 2000, bien qu'il ait exercé une influence considérable sur l'intégration des conceptions réactionnaires.⁶²³

La classe dissidente médiatisée qui a émergé depuis 2005 opérait à travers les réseaux sociaux, capitalisant sur la nature horizontale de l'esprit de conversation et de contestation en plein essor parmi la jeunesse arabe numérique avant 2011.⁶²⁴ Cependant, les alliances politiques qui ont précédé le soulèvement ont capitalisé sur un espace de communication hétérotopique, comme l'Internet, pour mobiliser de larges secteurs de la population avec des sensibilités et des visions divergentes.

Les affrontements entre des visions et des projets politiques divergents en 2011 ont précipité un important processus de fragmentation qui a imprégné les groupes révolutionnaires, conduisant à des voies divergentes, en particulier au cours de la période marquée par l'ascension des Frères Musulmans au pouvoir en dépit de l'opposition au sein même des mouvements révolutionnaires. Par la suite, l'intervention de l'armée égyptienne, soutenue par une large alliance de forces politiques et sociales opposées aux Frères Musulmans, a remodelé le paysage, provoquant un changement de positions et élevant la confrontation avec les organisations islamistes au rang de facteur central du discours politique depuis juin 2013.

Après la restauration autoritaire de 2014 et l'élection du président Sisi, un nouveau paysage a commencé à se dessiner.

Les trois entités politiquement orientées que j'ai distinguées (*al-thawragiyya*, *al-dawlagiyya* et *al-Islāmgīyya*) ont été consolidées, modelant le sentiment public et la dynamique sociétale alimentée par des perspectives fortement contrastées sur le déroulement du soulèvement. Chaque groupe s'est attaché à façonner le récit des événements qui se sont déroulés entre 2011 et 2013, alimentant un discours continu qui a influencé les domaines sociaux et politiques dans l'ère post-2013. Les frictions politiques qui en ont résulté entre ces factions principales se sont manifestées par des guerres culturelles permanentes, infiltrant divers domaines, parmi lesquels j'ai choisi d'analyser le nationalisme, la religion et le genre, la mémosphère apparaissant comme un facteur d'influence important dans cette tapisserie complexe de conflits.

Toutefois, les trois divisions ne reflétaient pas constamment des idéologies claires et nuancées, car elles provenaient de groupes hétéroclites, ce qui a entraîné un processus continu de fragmentation et de changement de points de vue parmi leurs partisans et leurs sympathisants.

⁶²³ Lacroix, Stéphane. "Egypt's Pragmatic Salafis: The Politics of Hizb al-Nour." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. 2016. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/01/egypt-s-pragmatic-salafis-politics-of-hizb-al-nour-pub-64902> .

⁶²⁴ Gonzalez-Quijano, Yves. "Les origines numériques des soulèvements arabes." In *Arabités numériques : Le printemps du web arabe*. Paris : Actes Sud/Sindbad, 2012.

La mémosphère reflétait bien les alliances et les dissensions qui traversaient ces groupes sur la base de divers facteurs, notamment des intérêts politiques diversifiés, des positions sociales et religieuses, et des préjugés sexistes qui prenaient de plus en plus d'importance avec l'influence croissante d'une minorité défendant les droits des femmes, ajoutant ainsi une nouvelle couche de complexité à l'évolution de la guerre des mèmes. Les mèmes, dans un contexte aussi fortement polarisé, reflètent plutôt, en tant que composante à part entière des guerres culturelles, une « lutte pour le sens, les valeurs et les idéologies ». ⁶²⁵

En m'appuyant sur les travaux des professeurs de communication Ryan Milner⁶²⁶ et Limor Shifman,⁶²⁷ je me suis concentrée sur les mèmes en tant que phénomènes sociaux et culturels, qui émergent des interactions sociales, expriment et contribuent à façonner des valeurs partagées et des significations culturelles. De ce point de vue, j'ai choisi des pages et des groupes de mèmes qui se sont concentrés sur le contexte sociopolitique actuel et ont réagi aux tendances culturelles qui ont surgi au milieu et après les bouleversements politiques de 2011.

Dans cette perspective, les mèmes ont acquis une immense popularité en tant que moyen de présenter des images, des textes et des vidéos qui traversent l'internet en combinant le symbolisme culturel, l'hypermédiatisation (offrant un espace hétérogène qui reconnaît de multiples actes de représentation et les rend visibles), ⁶²⁸ le pouvoir affectif et l'humour.

Leur popularité peut être évaluée sur la base de mesures d'engagement sur les plateformes de médias sociaux, notamment les likes, les partages et le nombre croissant de membres au sein des communautés de créateurs de mèmes. Le nombre croissant d'adeptes des pages de mèmes souligne l'impact substantiel de ces groupes en ligne sur le discours et les sentiments du public grâce à la diffusion virale de mèmes et de « comics » très faciles à partager. Ces formes courantes d'expression en ligne sont élaborées, modifiées et diffusées par les utilisateurs pour exprimer des opinions, soutenir des points de vue, commenter divers sujets ou représenter visuellement différentes idées. ⁶²⁹ Les mèmes sont des expressions sociales et culturelles de l'internet qui

⁶²⁵ Zidani, Sulafa. "Not Arabi or Ajnabi: Arab Youth and Reorienting Humor," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020). <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/14133> .

⁶²⁶ Milner, Ryan M. *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016.

⁶²⁷ Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013.

⁶²⁸ Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. "Immediacy, Hypermediacy, and Remediation." In *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 33-34. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000.

⁶²⁹ Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*.

construisent progressivement un « folklore postmoderne »⁶³⁰ des médias numériques par le biais de la narration numérique.⁶³¹

Limor Shifman a résumé sa définition des mèmes comme « (a) un groupe d'éléments numériques partageant des caractéristiques communes de contenu, de forme et/ou de position, qui (b) ont été créés en ayant conscience les uns des autres, et (c) ont été diffusés, imités et/ou transformés via l'Internet par de nombreux utilisateurs ».⁶³² Elle identifie en outre « le contenu, la forme et la position » comme les trois dimensions qui caractérisent les mèmes Internet. Elle souligne ainsi les idées et les idéologies (contenu), la structure physique (forme) et les (positions) des créateurs de mèmes qui « se positionnent par rapport au texte, à ses codes linguistiques, aux destinataires et à d'autres locuteurs potentiels »⁶³³ comme les principaux piliers de ce phénomène culturel. Elle a également étudié les mèmes en tant que « moyens de reconditionnement »⁶³⁴ par le biais du mimétisme et du remix (manipulation d'un élément numérique), ce qui a permis aux créateurs de mèmes de produire différents genres de mèmes tels que des images photoshopées, des mèmes de texte et de captures d'écran, et des GIF de réaction.⁶³⁵

Les linguistes Eline Zenner et Dirk Geeraerts⁶³⁶ ont évoqué la viralité des mèmes qui s'appuie sur une connaissance partagée des mèmes entre les communautés en ligne et commence à transformer l'individualisme en réseau en un « code de l'intergroupe de ceux qui maîtrisent le numérique »⁶³⁷ largement partagé, en se connectant à un public important sur plusieurs plateformes de médias sociaux dans un laps de temps relativement court. D'un autre côté, la viralité a été influencée par la logique participative des réseaux sociaux et l'économie de la visibilité sur l'internet, comme l'affirme Gérald Bronner dans son récit sociologique « Apocalypse cognitive »,⁶³⁸ où le sexe, la peur d'innombrables dangers et la colère sont les trois émotions principales qui captent le plus

⁶³⁰ Shifman, Limor. "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18/3, (2013): 362–377. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013> .

⁶³¹ Burgess, Jean. "Vernacular Creativity and New Media," PhD diss., (Queensland University of Technology, 2005). https://eprints.qut.edu.au/16378/1/Jean_Burgess_Thesis.pdf .

⁶³² Shifman. "Defining Internet Memes," 41.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67

⁶³⁶ Geeraerts, Dirk, and Eline Zenner. "Chapter One: One Does Not Simply Process Memes: Image Macros as Multimodal Constructions." In *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay Research*, 172. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁸ Bronner, Gérald. "Avant-propos subjectif : Une époque formidable." In *Apocalypse cognitive*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2021.

d'attention. La viralité et la visibilité des mèmes Internet ont considérablement influencé leur efficacité et leur portée dans le paysage tumultueux de l'Égypte postrévolutionnaire.

De son côté, Ryan Milner a affirmé la « poly vocalité des mèmes », qui permet à « de multiples voix de s'unir par l'humour et le commentaire politique et social ». ⁶³⁹ Selon Ryan Milner, « le monde des médias participatifs est créé - il existe et se maintient - par le biais d'interrelations mémétiques désordonnées. Il existe dans l'espace entre les textes individuels et les conversations plus larges, entre les citoyens individuels et les discours culturels plus larges ». ⁶⁴⁰

La poly vocalité et la mise en réseau horizontale ont renforcé l'esprit conversationnel et contestataire croissant parmi les générations de jeunes arabes numériques avant 2011, comme l'a postulé Yves Gonzalez-Quijano dans son livre « Arabités numériques ». ⁶⁴¹ La composition hétérotopique de la classe dissidente médiatisée s'est ensuite reflétée dans la mémosphère égyptienne fonctionnant dans une atmosphère de cyber polarisation. ⁶⁴²

Anastasia Denisova, professeur d'études des médias, souligne le rôle des mèmes Internet en tant que moyen contemporain de « résistance carnavalesque ». ⁶⁴³ Elle s'inspire du philosophe russe Mikhaïl Bakhtine, ⁶⁴⁴ qui conçoit les carnivals médiévaux comme une forme de dissidence tolérée par les régimes autoritaires, facilitant l'émergence de discours alternatifs, d'expressions stylistiques diverses et d'une polyphonie intentionnelle (hétéroglossie). ⁶⁴⁵ Elle relie cette idée à la perspective de Ryan Milner sur la poly vocalité des mèmes.

Selon Anastasia Denisova, le lien entre les manifestations publiques carnavalesques et les communautés dynamiques en ligne qui diffusent les mèmes crée un environnement dans lequel les mèmes sont considérés comme un mouvement contre-culture participant activement à la persuasion politique et s'engageant dans le *mind-bombing* (bombardement de l'esprit). Dans cette perspective, elle utilise le terme de « médias tactiques » ⁶⁴⁶ pour caractériser le paysage numérique

⁶³⁹ Milner, Ryan M. *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁴¹ Gonzalez-Quijano, Yves. "Les origines numériques des soulèvements arabes." In *Arabités numériques : Le printemps du web arabe*, 176. Paris : Actes Sud/Sindbad, 2012.

⁶⁴² Sunstein, Cass R. "Polarization and Cybercascades." In *Republic.com 2.0*, 60. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁶⁴³ Denisova, Anastasia. "Many Uses of Memes: From Fast-Food Media to Political Mindbombs." In *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts*, 47-51. New York and London: Routledge, 2019.

⁶⁴⁴ Bakhtine, Mikhail, and Iswolsky, Hélène. *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

⁶⁴⁵ Denisova, "Many Uses of Memes: From Fast-Food Media to Political Mindbombs," 35.

⁶⁴⁶ Denisova, "Before Memes: Tactical Media, Humor, and Affective Engagement with Politics Online," 16.

qui favorise les relations entre individus partageant les mêmes idées et facilite la diffusion d'une « conscience insurrectionnelle. »⁶⁴⁷

Anastasia Denisova souligne que les plateformes numériques peuvent renforcer l'engagement politique dans les régions où la peur décourage la participation. L'activisme numérique facilite l'accès à l'information et aux réseaux, éduquant le public par le biais d'idéologies et de débats variés. Ces plateformes permettent aux dissidents de bénéficier de l'anonymat ou d'une identité en ligne bien définie, augmentant ainsi leur portée et la visibilité de leur discours politique. Ainsi, le rôle croissant de la mémosphère égyptienne pourrait être classé dans la vaste catégorie des « médias tactiques » opérant dans des conditions répressives après la restauration autocratique de 2014.

La grande popularité des mèmes et des bandes dessinées égyptiennes repose sur leur capacité à simplifier les thèmes et à présenter de manière cohérente divers éléments comme des « constructions » de manière satirique et ludique.

Ces mèmes s'inspirent souvent de références culturelles tirées de films populaires, de pièces de théâtre, d'émissions de télévision et de chansons connues, auxquelles s'ajoutent des textes, des aphorismes et des dialogues.

Dans cette sous-catégorie contre-culturelle, les créateurs de mèmes se réapproprient et redéfinissent les symboles du pouvoir politique tout en s'engageant dans le discours de divers groupes polarisés en ligne.

À ces fins, les créateurs de mèmes déploient le pouvoir de constructions multimodales en évolution rapide d'images avec du texte superposé (images macros), de dessins animés retravaillés, de mèmes et d'images photoshopées.

L'anthropologue social Chihab El Khachab classe les « comics » égyptiennes sur l'internet dans la catégorie des « caricatures numériques »,⁶⁴⁸ en raison de leur rôle social et de l'utilisation de « références intermédiaires ». Il les rapproche du journalisme satirique traditionnel, qui existait en Égypte depuis le 19^{ème} siècle. Malgré les différences temporelles, Chihab El Khachab observe que la critique de l'actualité dans ces « comics » résonne en raison des conventions visuelles familières qu'elles emploient, ce qui leur permet de toucher un large public dans tous les contextes culturels.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁸ El Khachab, Chihab, «Est-ce que ça ne vaut pas mieux que d'être comme la Syrie et l'Irak ? Les caractères nationaux vus par la caricature numérique Égyptienne sur Facebook.» In *Culture pop en Égypte : Entre mainstream commercial et contestation*, 257. Richard Jacquemond et Frédéric Lagrange dir. Paris : Riveneuve, 2020.

La discussion de Chihab El Khachab sur les « références intermédiales », telle qu'articulée par l'universitaire Irina Rajewsky,⁶⁴⁹ met en évidence les parallèles fonctionnels entre les dessins animés satiriques classiques et les caricatures numériques, renforçant l'importance durable de la satire visuelle dans la critique des questions sociétales et des structures de pouvoir.

La « complexité référentielle »⁶⁵⁰ de ces caricatures numériques émerge des diverses interprétations et réinterprétations spontanées des récits et histoires culturels. Le mélange de références culturelles, le croisement d'influences locales et mondiales et la combinaison d'archives et de culture populaire contemporaine s'appuient sur des expériences partagées et un contexte reconnaissable par le public. En outre, les structures de sens complexes, dans ce travail multicouche de remix et de mashups dans les mèmes, remettent en question les récits culturels dominants et recodent leurs connotations, en les détournant de leurs significations normatives originales liées à la forme primaire de réception.

III. Contextualiser la production des mèmes égyptiens après 2013

L'évolution des mèmes égyptiens sur Internet au cours d'une période historique significative d'expression culturelle et politique, après la chute du régime de Moubarak, a marqué une intersection unique où la censure des médias a diminué, permettant une augmentation de la création et de la circulation des mèmes parmi le grand public. Les mèmes sont devenus un outil symbolique de négociation des situations politiques entre 2011 et 2013, reflétant le désir de façonner le récit de la mobilisation et servant de munitions culturelles dans les luttes de pouvoir. Les influences croisées entre mémosphère et contexte politique ont renforcé l'impact des mèmes en tant que reflet des transformations sociétales depuis 2011.

Au cours des bouleversements politiques survenus en Égypte entre 2011 et 2013, les mèmes Internet sont passés de l'adaptation de formats globaux à la création de contenus originaux, attirant un public plus large en s'imbriquant dans les événements politiques. Le développement des mèmes égyptiens a impliqué l'emprunt de visages de mèmes globaux et la création de plateformes telles que l'ESS (*Egyptian Sarcasm Society*), attirant des créateurs de mèmes issus de secteurs spécifiques d'utilisateurs d'Internet.

⁶⁴⁹ Rajewsky, Irina O. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality." Essay. In *"Intermédialités": Histoire et Théorie Des Arts, Des Lettres et Des Techniques, Centre de recherche sur l'intermédialité* 6 (2005) : 43–64.

⁶⁵⁰ Lagrange, Frédéric. "Introduction." In *Culture pop en Égypte : Entre mainstream commercial et contestation*, 1–35. Richard Jacquemond et Frédéric Lagrange dir. Paris : Riveneuve, 2020.

Les mèmes s'appuient sur des références culturelles, modifiées par du texte et des dialogues, pour créer des récits contre-culturels et se réapproprier les symboles du pouvoir politique. La prolifération des mèmes égyptiens s'est appuyée sur des thèmes réductionnistes, dépeignant divers éléments sur un ton cynique et humoristique, en utilisant des références culturelles issues des médias populaires. La « complexité référentielle »⁶⁵¹ des caricatures numériques dans les mèmes découle de diverses interprétations et de l'imbrication des histoires culturelles, reflétant un mélange d'influences locales et mondiales.

D'importants sous-groupes de créateurs de mèmes sont apparus en 2011-2012, ESS étant le premier réseau public de créateurs de mèmes en Égypte. Les fondateurs avaient pour objectif de fournir une plateforme pour les opinions alternatives et les idées novatrices, en mettant l'accent sur le besoin commun d'acceptation et de validation. La distinction entre les créateurs intellectuels⁶⁵² et *normie* (grand-public)⁶⁵³ mettait l'accent sur la qualité et la connaissance du contenu, les *normies* se conformant aux normes dominantes et les créateurs intellectuels remettant en question les normes sociétales. La montée des courants de l'*alt-right* et du dark web intellectuel a influencé la culture locale des mèmes, en mettant l'accent sur les idées controversées et les critiques des récits dominants. La mèmosphère a reflété ces changements culturels, en particulier en réponse à des événements politiques tels que l'élection de Donald Trump en 2016.

L'invention du premier visage original de style "*rage comic*" égyptienne '*aṣāḥbī* (hé, mec) a suscité d'importantes disputes sur la propriété et les droits d'auteur au cours de l'année 2014. Finalement, le créateur de « '*aṣāḥbī* face » a fondé sa propre page Facebook, « Asa7be Sarcasm Society » ASS.⁶⁵⁴ Il a affirmé sa propriété sur le visage comique le plus populaire en Égypte à l'époque en en faisant la photo de profil de la page et en inscrivant la biographie et l'histoire du visage même sur la base de données de mèmes américaine/internationale bien établie, « Know Your Meme. »

Le mot '*aṣāḥbī* a des connotations parlantes dépassant sa simple valeur dénotative : il appartient à un contexte plus large dans lequel l'arabe cairote, tel qu'il est parlé par les jeunes Égyptiens de la classe ouvrière sans éducation, a infiltré les productions de la culture populaire locale. Cela est

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵² Weiss, Bari, and Damon Winter. "Meet the Renegades of the Intellectual Dark Web." *The New York Times*, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/opinion/intellectual-dark-web.html> .

⁶⁵³ « Normie est une étiquette informelle et péjorative qui décrit une personne qui se conforme complètement aux normes sociétales. Un normie (dérivé du mot « normal ») est un individu qui est considéré comme ennuyeux et conventionnel ou mainstream par ceux qui s'identifient comme non-conformistes. Les normies peuvent être considérés comme les antithèses des « hipsters » et des « flocons de neige spéciaux », deux termes péjoratifs pour les non-conformistes. »

Rosochansky, Thomas. "The Ironic Normie." *The Philosopher's Meme*, 2015. <https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2015/12/18/the-ironic-normie/> .

⁶⁵⁴ "Asa7be Sarcasm Society (ASS)." Facebook, n.d. <https://www.facebook.com/asa7bess> .

également illustré par le personnage de film *al-Limbi*⁶⁵⁵ largement utilisé dans les mêmes, et plus tard dans les paroles de *mahragānāt*,⁶⁵⁶ un type de musique urbaine qui a atteint une popularité frappante dans le sillage du soulèvement de 2011. Prononcer le mot *yā ṣāḥbī* (particule vocative + mon ami) comme *'aṣāḥbī*, avec aphérèse du /y/ initial, passant à un simple /ā/ initial, est ressenti dans la langue parlée comme une caractéristique du discours non éduqué, ou un clin d'œil humoristique à ce registre particulier.

La large audience de ces genres de production culturelle et l'incorporation de changements linguistiques dans la performance de la langue vernaculaire de la rue ont transcendé les frontières de classe et ont permis à ces changements de faire partie du langage quotidien.⁶⁵⁷ Cela est emblématique de la fluidité des codes culturels propres aux diverses classes sociales et des styles consuméristes, qui rapprochent les classes moyennes et populaires et qui pourraient être liés aux codes linguistiques échangeables marquant les registres haut et bas de l'arabe dialectal égyptien. Il serait logique d'anticiper l'extension de ces codes linguistiques dans les mêmes créés par les jeunes générations intéressés par ces modèles de discours, qui sont devenus des expressions banales utilisées par toutes les classes sociales. L'emploi des références « intermédiaires » (empruntant à différents médias) dans les mêmes Internet ne s'est pas limité aux différents moyens d'expression ; il s'est étendu à l'adaptation des registres linguistiques haut et bas, du langage de la rue et des jurons à des fins comiques.

Au cours des 18 premiers jours de manifestations qui ont conduit à l'éviction de l'ancien président égyptien Mohamed Hosni Mubarak, les slogans humoristiques de rue associés à des images sont devenus populaires sur Facebook. Les sarcasmes, les blagues et les bannières de rue créatives sont devenus une activité clé en ces temps tendus et imprévisibles. L'atmosphère animée de la place Tahrir au Caire a attiré l'attention des médias, car des manifestants d'origines diverses se sont engagés dans une ambiance carnavalesque, fournissant quotidiennement de la matière pour le sarcasme numérique.⁶⁵⁸

L'introduction de la satire présidentielle par le biais de banderoles dans les rues a rompu une longue tradition égyptienne qui consistait à éviter de se moquer en public des figures de haute autorité. Cette vague d'humour sur Internet a introduit une nouvelle facette de la contre-culture des jeunes, en remettant en question l'autorité du président par le biais de la satire en ligne. La victoire du

⁶⁵⁵ “فيلم - اللمبي - 2002 طاقم العمل، فيديو، الإعلان، صور، النقد الفني، مواعيد العرض” *Al-Limbi*, 2002. <https://elcinema.com/work/1010123/>.

⁶⁵⁶ Holslin, Peter. “This Is Mahraganat, a Style of Egyptian Street Music the Government Calls ‘More Dangerous Than Coronavirus.’” *Billboard*, 2022. <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/what-is-mahraganat-music-9343924/>

⁶⁵⁷ Youssef, Islam. “Why Are You Talking like That, Sir? Il-Limbi, Phonology and Class in Contemporary Egypt.” *Arabica* 67/ 2–3 (2020): 260–77. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700585-12341561>

⁶⁵⁸ Iskandar. “The Meme-Ing of Revolution: Creativity, Folklore, and the Dislocation of Power in Egypt.”

renversement de Moubarak a symbolisé le passage de l'autorité sur les médias numériques aux mains des jeunes générations en Egypte. Les archives culturelles partagées par des générations d'Égyptiens ont facilité la réappropriation continue des références à la culture populaire dans les mêmes en ligne. Les mêmes égyptiens intègrent des éléments locaux et des références culturelles, les remixent et les recontextualisent dans une hybridation de symboles culturels. Les créateurs de mêmes ont déconstruit et recontextualisé l'histoire culturelle partagée par le biais de GIF, de snaps, de vines et de caricatures digitales, en adaptant les mêmes mondiaux aux contextes locaux.

À partir de mars 2011, la communauté égyptienne en ligne a commencé à refléter les premières divisions au sein des groupes politiques impliqués dans le soulèvement populaire. Le clivage entre « islamistes » et « non-islamistes »⁶⁵⁹ a été le premier des nombreux changements qui ont remis en question l'identité politique émergente sous le régime intérimaire du Conseil Suprême des Forces Armées (CSFA). En 2012, les Frères Musulmans et l'armée égyptienne ont travaillé ensemble pour discréditer les mouvements révolutionnaires « perturbateurs » et promouvoir la stabilité par le biais de processus électoraux. Cela a conduit à une aversion croissante pour les groupes libéraux, séculaires, et révolutionnaires. Le fossé entre la politique électorale et la politique de la rue, associé à l'inefficacité des figures de proue libéraux, a marginalisé les secteurs pro-démocratiques de la classe moyenne. La polarisation entre islamistes et non-islamistes s'est manifestée dans le conflit sur les pages de mêmes Internet.

Les Frères Musulmans et les groupes islamistes ont déployé une énorme machine médiatique numérique, formant ainsi des e-milices qui se sont mobilisées contre leurs adversaires en 2012. Les circonscriptions islamistes ont accumulé des adeptes sur des pages créées sur différents thèmes (fans d'artistes, tendances sociales, mode, sports, etc.), mais ont ensuite changé le nom de la page et son contenu pour des thèmes et sujets islamiques. Le mécanisme mis en place en 2011 s'est révélé au fur et à mesure que le fossé entre islamistes et non-islamistes s'est creusé. D'autres pages Facebook jouissant d'une grande popularité ont déclaré leur identité islamiste et ont participé à la mobilisation pour Mohamed Morsi lors des élections présidentielles de 2012, puis contre Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi et la prise du pouvoir par l'armée depuis juin 2013.

Après avoir été élu président, Mohamed Morsi a promulgué un décret constitutionnel lui accordant des pouvoirs législatifs et exécutifs considérables, ce qui a déclenché une série de litiges juridiques contre les décisions de la Cour Suprême et les officiers du conseil militaire. Morsi a acquis une hégémonie totale en formant le comité de rédaction de la nouvelle constitution égyptienne.

⁶⁵⁹ Les termes « islamistes » et « non-islamistes » (tels qu'ils sont utilisés dans ma thèse) représentent des catégories générales qui peuvent simplifier à l'excès le paysage sociopolitique complexe en faveur d'une signification culturelle plus large et ne rendent pas compte des distinctions nuancées présentes parmi les diverses sous-catégories au sein de ces divisions.

Parallèlement, les croisades des médias numériques contre les opposants séculaires de Morsi se sont poursuivies et intensifiées.⁶⁶⁰

Les luttes de pouvoir entre Morsi et l'armée, l'éruption d'attaques terroristes dans la péninsule du Sinaï et la désintégration de l'alliance prodémocratie qui soutenait Morsi avant les élections ont toutes indiqué une polarisation entre la confrérie et ses opposants (direction militaire, groupes séculaires et forces prodémocratie).

En novembre 2012, des groupes politiques libéraux ont formé la « Coalition du Front de Salvation Nationale » (*Gabhat al-'inqādh*),⁶⁶¹ qui a appelé à de nouvelles élections parlementaires, à une nouvelle assemblée constitutionnelle représentative et à un procureur général impartial. En 2013, la campagne nationale *Tamarrud* (Révolte) est apparue et a commencé à recueillir des signatures pour une pétition demandant des élections présidentielles précoces. La menace d'un islamisme violent a suscité des craintes quant à la transformation de la nature de l'État, ce qui a encore repoussé les limites de la contestation dans les mêmes Internet.

La sociologue Linda Herrera a fait remarquer que, lors des élections présidentielles de 2012, des combattants virtuels locaux ont émergé et ont continué à susciter le débat pendant la présidence de Morsi, à une époque où les guerres culturelles en ligne atteignaient de nouveaux sommets.⁶⁶² Leur critique et leur expression culturelle impliquent la notion d'islam politique, le projet de piété des revivalistes islamiques depuis les années 1970, et sa pénétration sociale à travers les médias grand public en tant qu'outil puissant pour façonner le discours social au cours des dernières décennies. En 2012-2013, il est devenu évident que les militants et les créateurs culturels « laïques » et « libéraux » ont acquis un poids croissant dans la sphère en ligne. Ils ont commencé à revendiquer leurs opinions et à débattre de l'influence des institutions et des organisations religieuses dans des publications controversés en ligne, des mêmes sarcastiques et des vidéos YouTube.

Les débats houleux et les affrontements n'ont pas empêché l'escalade d'une critique radicale qui a transgressé de nombreux tabous religieux. De plus en plus d'activistes numériques et d'influenceurs publics s'identifiant comme séculaires, non-religieux ou athées ont commencé à parler sans crainte de la sécularisation des institutions de l'État. L'examen et la critique de l'histoire du mouvement

⁶⁶⁰ Abou-El-Fadl, Reem. "Sectarianism and Counter-Revolution in Egypt: Not a Family Affair." *Jadaliyya*, 2017. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28906>.

⁶⁶¹ La coalition du Front du salut national (*Gabhat al-'inqādh*) a été créée le 22 novembre 2012 en signe de protestation contre le décret constitutionnel promulgué par le président Morsi. Ce front politique est constitué de 35 partis et mouvements politiques, aux idéologies de gauche et libérales. Ils réclament une nouvelle loi pour les élections parlementaires, une nouvelle assemblée constitutionnelle représentative et un procureur général impartial. Le front dirigé par Muhammed al-Baradei a été l'un des mobilisateurs du soulèvement populaire du 30 juin 2013.

⁶⁶² Herrera, Linda. "Memes and the War of Ideas." In *Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet*, 112–122. London: Verso Books, 2014.

de renouveau islamique des années 1970 et des traditions de la jurisprudence islamique sont devenus un nouveau point d'ignition pour la mobilisation et la contestation en ligne.

Pendant la présidence Morsi, « *Memes lā takhḍa' li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya* » (Des mèmes qui ne se soumettent pas au politiquement correct)⁶⁶³ a émergé comme une page proéminente, connue pour son discours contestataire à travers des caricatures numériques contre Mohamed Morsi et les Frères Musulmans. Fondée par un médecin égyptien d'une trentaine d'années, qui a grandi dans le Golfe, la page présente un point de vue conservateur et droitier en réponse à l'échec du mouvement révolutionnaire.⁶⁶⁴ Selon le fondateur de la page, l'échec du mouvement révolutionnaire et sa frustration à l'égard des courants de gauche au moment de la mobilisation politique l'ont encouragé à créer la page et à présenter la scène sociopolitique d'un point de vue de droite.

Un nombre croissant de personnes sur les réseaux sociaux égyptiens ont commencé à employer la nomenclature péjorative « *kollagiyya* » (sniffeurs de colle- *glue sniffers*)⁶⁶⁵ pour décrire les activistes et les militants, moqués sur les plateformes américaines sous la nomenclature « social justice warriors (SJWs) »,⁶⁶⁶ qui s'obstinaient à romantiser l'échec du mouvement révolutionnaire et à ignorer les inconvénients de l'organisation politique. Selon leurs détracteurs, *al-kollagiyya* n'ont cessé d'avancer des idées présentées comme socialement progressistes détachées de la réalité sociale.

La suffixation du morphème *-gī* dans les mots *kollagī* ou *dawlagī*, dans leur forme singulière, provient du suffixe turc *-ci*, qui s'est infiltré dans différentes langues vernaculaires arabes, pendant la période ottomane, pour devenir *-gī*.⁶⁶⁷ En turc, le suffixe *-ci*, lorsqu'il est attaché à un nom, désigne une personne impliquée dans ce qui est nommé par le nom. Par conséquent, la référence occupationnelle dans *thawragī* ou *dawlagī* distingue les caractéristiques communes de ce groupe et les signes culturels de communication qu'il utilise. Ces formules ont été adoptées comme identités numériques des groupes politiques en conflit. Finalement, ces surnoms se sont retrouvés dans les représentations culturelles de la mèmosphère.

Au cours de l'été 2013, Facebook est devenu une arène de quasi-guerre numérique, et la tripartition en trois divisions politico-culturelles a été établie, montrant les principaux pôles qui allaient façonner le paysage numérique après juin 2013 : les partisans de l'État sous le nom d'*al-dawlagiyya*, les islamistes sous le nom d'*al-Islāmgiyya*, et les révolutionnaires (qui se sont placés

⁶⁶³ Page Facebook « *Memes lā takhḍa' li al-ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya*, » “Facebook,” n.d., <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063469189596> .

⁶⁶⁴ Le fondateur de la page Facebook « *Memes lā takhḍa' li al- ṣawābiyya al-siyāsiyya* » (Les mèmes qui ne se soumettent pas au politiquement correct). Entretien en ligne avec l’auteur. 11 novembre 2019.

⁶⁶⁵ “Glue Sniffer.” Urban Dictionary, 2019. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=glue+sniffer>

⁶⁶⁶ Social justice warrior (SJW). Cambridge dictionary, 2023. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sjw>

⁶⁶⁷ Rocchi, Luciano. “Ottoman-Turkish Loanwords in Egyptian and Syro-Lebanese-Palestinian Arabic – Part 4.” *Studia Linguistica Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis*, 139/4 (2022): 333-381.

en dehors des deux groupes en vertu de l'héritage de janvier 2011) sous le nom d'*al-thawragiyya*. Les trois surnoms, avec les dérivés correspondants, ont circulé comme des étiquettes d'identité numérique, principalement appropriées par chaque groupe pour décrire les deux autres, de manière péjorative dans la plupart des cas. Ces étiquettes sont donc émiques dans le sens où elles sont créées et circulent dans la mèmosphère égyptienne, mais ne sont jamais une définition de soi pour les groupes qu'ils qualifient : ils sont la façon dont l'autre vous dénonce.

Après l'emprisonnement de Morsi en 2013, les pages islamistes en ligne ont commencé à attaquer la prise de pouvoir par les militaires et ont continué à cibler les personnalités de l'État, les groupes laïques, les artistes et les écrivains qui s'opposaient à Morsi. Ils ont qualifié ces groupes de marionnettes du régime de Sisi, en utilisant le terme péjoratif *mi'arraṣīn* (hypocrites/souteneurs) dans des mèmes. Ce récit visait à dépeindre les islamistes comme des victimes de persécutions « laïques/laïcardes », ce qui a conduit à l'utilisation de la misogynie et de l'homophobie pour discréditer leurs opposants. Ces secteurs laïques ont également été regroupés sous des étiquettes telles que « les laïques », « les féministes » et « les athées » dans le jargon des mèmes islamistes.

Les lignes distinctives des *Islāmgīyya* ont convergé avec leur discours médiatisé sur des chaînes de télévision comme al-Jazeera et les chaînes satellites de la confrérie hébergées en Turquie après que les Frères Musulmans aient été déclarés groupe illégal en 2013. Les accusations d'hypocrisie (*ta'rīṣ/proxénétisme*) sont devenues une insulte commune qui circulait dans les mèmes et les cercles d'islamistes. Plus tard, les accusations mutuelles de « vente » se sont généralisées et ont été échangées entre les différents camps polarisés.

En m'appuyant sur le récit de Walter Armbrust, spécialiste de l'anthropologie culturelle, sur la révolution égyptienne⁶⁶⁸ et sur son application du concept et de la théorie de la « schismogénèse », je me suis penchée sur les phénomènes omniprésents de fragmentation et de polarisation qui ont assombri la trajectoire et l'issue du soulèvement égyptien. En examinant la mèmosphère postrévolutionnaire dans les domaines du nationalisme, de la religion et du genre, j'ai cherché à établir un parallèle entre le système médiatique intégré, les guerres culturelles en ligne et les tendances « schismogénétiques » durables qui sont apparues au cours des années de bouleversements politiques et qui se sont poursuivies après 2013. Un corpus sélectionné de caricatures numériques, la navigation dans des forums de « comics » et des entretiens avec des créateurs de mèmes ont servi de points de repère culturels clés, éclairant, en trois parties distinctes, le conflit culturel en cours qui tourne autour des identités nationales contestées, des paysages religieux changeants et des luttes en cours sur les questions controversées de genre.

⁶⁶⁸ Armbrust, Walter. *Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Walter Armbrust s'appuie sur les idées de l'anthropologue Gregory Bateson⁶⁶⁹ et sur la notion de « schismogénèse »⁶⁷⁰ de Bjørn Thomassen pour analyser la séquence d'événements qui a fracturé les différents éléments du soulèvement populaire égyptien.

Bjørn Thomassen décrit la schismogénèse au cours des révolutions politiques comme un phénomène qui se développe souvent pendant les phases de transition et qui peut devenir une dynamique durable.⁶⁷¹ Selon Walter Armbrust, la schismogénèse implique la formation d'adversaires durables et l'adoption d'une rhétorique qui reflète ceux qui sont considérés comme en dehors des limites de l'acceptation sociale.⁶⁷² La dynamique politique après 2013 montre une schismogénèse opérationnelle enracinée dans la composition du mouvement de protestation, qui, comme l'explique cette thèse, existait avant l'expulsion des Frères Musulmans en 2013.

L'intersection de l'activisme des nouveaux médias, avec sa capacité de viralité et sa logique participative horizontale, avec les divers groupes de protestation, a dynamisé la mobilisation politique. Cependant, malgré un récit révolutionnaire rempli d'idéaux positifs, il n'a pas réussi à unifier les entités sociales fragmentées. Alors que les idéaux démocratiques et les demandes de liberté en tant qu'éléments thématiques ont aidé à coaliser des groupes disparates, en renforçant leur mobilité et en influençant les slogans en ligne. Ces idéaux articulés dans la sphère numérique en 2011 ne se sont pas matérialisés efficacement dans les tactiques politiques au cours du soulèvement, de son développement et des négociations qui ont suivi.

La dynamique opérationnelle des divisions politiques post-2013 en Égypte était étroitement liée aux influences mondiales, en particulier à la montée des partis populistes et des affects de l'alt-right d'une part, et à la politique identitaire et à l'activisme « woke » d'autre part, aux États-Unis d'Amérique et en Europe.

Ces courants s'appuient fortement sur les réseaux sociaux, les mêmes Internet et les plateformes numériques pour propager leurs points de vue et leurs discours. La convergence des mondes

⁶⁶⁹ “Gregory Bateson était biologiste de formation (son père William Bateson a inventé le terme « génétique »). Il considérait le village Iatmul comme une écologie fragile, un 'équilibre dynamique' (terme qu'il a emprunté à la chimie et qu'il a inventé pour l'anthropologie). La schismogénèse est un principe générateur dans cette écologie culturelle, mais, sans retenue, elle la détruirait aussi. Il a défini deux formes de schismogénèse : symétrique - où les parties réagissent avec une intensité équivalente aux incursions de l'autre - et complémentaire - où une manifestation de plus en plus active rencontre une réponse de plus en plus passive ».

Wardle, Huon Oliver Bliase. “Schismogenesis in a Belfast urinal.” *Anthropology Today*, 17/3. (2001): 24-25.

⁶⁷⁰ Thomassen, Bjørn. “Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54/3 (2012): 679–706. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23274538> .

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷² Armbrust, “The Disputed Grievability of Sally Zahran,” 98.

virtuels et physiques a donné de l'élan à ces mouvements et a renforcé leur impact sur la politique moderne et les tendances socioculturelles.

De ce point de vue, la mémosphère égyptienne, malgré ses références culturelles distinctes et le contexte politique de son développement, est étroitement liée aux tendances culturelles et politiques mondiales. La culture des mèmes en ligne fonctionne comme un vaste réseau d'échanges culturels, où les influences locales et mondiales interagissent perpétuellement. La diffusion des symboles des mèmes et la propagation de diverses idéologies sociopolitiques atteignent souvent une pertinence universelle, façonnée par les conditions locales et des cadres hégémoniques plus larges, en particulier l'influence omniprésente des médias et de la culture américaine.

En 2016, la « Grande guerre des mèmes » (*The Great Meme War*) menée par les partisans de Donald Trump en ligne sur les plateformes de l'alt-right telles que /pol/ sur 4chan ou r/The_Donald sur le forum digital Reddit, était également liée à la notion de "métapolitique," souvent déployée par des figures clés de l'alt-right.⁶⁷³ Inspiré de la théorie de l'hégémonie culturelle d'Antonio Gramsci et de la Nouvelle Droite française, le concept de métapolitique « vise à répandre certains thèmes et idées parmi le grand public en se concentrant sur des questions culturelles et idéologiques plutôt que sur la politique proprement dite ».⁶⁷⁴

Sulafa Zidani, spécialiste de la culture numérique, a remis en question la notion de globalité dans les influences numériques, en évoquant l'imprégnation des mèmes locaux dans le monde arabe par des notions occidentales qui s'intègrent dans les mèmes locaux par le biais de reconditionnements, de mashups et de remixes avec des contenus locaux.⁶⁷⁵ Selon elle, les échanges culturels au sein de la mémosphère peuvent être regardés d'un "perspective non dominant" comme une pratique de médiation où "les créateurs des mashups *arabi-ajjabi* (arabe-étranger) mettent l'accent sur ce qui a du sens pour eux, ou sur ce qu'eux et leur public considèrent comme faisant partie de leur culture".⁶⁷⁶

Selon Sulafa Zidani, les jeunes créatifs qui s'appuient sur des contextes historiques et culturels, contrastent diverses cultures et présentent des thèmes sérieux avec une touche ludique, cultivent un humour qui met en lumière leurs préoccupations importantes tout en favorisant un sens de la communauté par le biais d'un rire subversif.

⁶⁷³ Bar-On, Tamir. "Richard B. Spencer and the Alt Right," In *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*, ed. by Mark Sedgwick. New York: Oxford Academic, 2019.

⁶⁷⁴ Dafaure, Maxime. "The "Great Meme War:" the Alt-Right and its Multifarious Enemies." *Angles: New Perspectives on the Anglophone World*, 10 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.369> .

⁶⁷⁵ Zidani, "Not Arabi or Ajnabi: Arab Youth and Reorienting Humor."

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 3214.

John C. Meyer, professeur d'études en communication, identifie trois principaux types d'humour utilisés dans la communication : le soulagement, l'incongruité et la supériorité.⁶⁷⁷ Ces styles d'humour sont particulièrement efficaces dans les textes mimétiques, où ils sont utilisés pour créer des blagues qui trouvent un écho auprès des publics qui s'identifient aux thèmes et aux éléments comiques du même.

Selon lui, l'humour de soulagement survient lorsque les gens rient en raison d'un soulagement perçu du stress, fonctionnant comme un relâchement de la tension dans des circonstances difficiles.⁶⁷⁸ L'humour d'incongruité survient lorsqu'un modèle attendu est perturbé ou qu'une différence notable est observée - suffisamment non menaçante mais assez distincte pour être frappante. Cette interaction entre le familier et l'inattendu suscite l'humour chez le public.⁶⁷⁹ L'humour de supériorité décrit le phénomène par lequel les individus se moquent des autres, éprouvant un sentiment de triomphe ou de supériorité par rapport à eux. Ce type d'humour a un impact considérable sur la dynamique sociale, renforçant les hiérarchies en positionnant certains individus et groupes comme ceux qui rient (statut supérieur) tandis que d'autres deviennent les objets de la plaisanterie (statut inférieur).⁶⁸⁰

Cependant, l'objectif de ma recherche ne se limite pas à tracer des lignes parallèles entre les phénomènes mondiaux et leurs extensions numériques et la réalité actuelle de l'Égypte d'après 2013. Il s'agit plutôt d'entreprendre une étude culturelle détaillée et complète des interactions égyptiennes locales dans trois domaines interconnectés mais distincts : le nationalisme, la religion et le genre. En analysant méticuleusement chacun de ces domaines d'intérêt séparément, à l'aide d'un vaste échantillon de mêmes couvrant environ dix ans et produits par diverses catégories d'Égyptiens, cette recherche offre une perspective non conventionnelle sur les perceptions populaires et les interactions avec les événements et les transformations dans chaque domaine, et sur la manière dont ces interactions ont un impact sur la vie quotidienne des individus, quels que soient leur sexe, leur religion et leur appartenance nationaliste.

Grâce à cet examen, la recherche s'efforce également de formuler une compréhension nuancée des idéologies de gouvernance et des techniques de gestion adoptées par la nouvelle autorité en Égypte après 2013, qui se croisent avec les influences mondiales, les dynamiques régionales et les transformations des systèmes médiatiques intégrés (réseaux sociaux, chaînes de télévision nationales et transnationales et journalisme).⁶⁸¹

⁶⁷⁷ Meyer, John C. *Understanding Humor Through Communication: Why Be Funny, Anyway?* Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁸¹ Guaaybess. "Media Policy in the MENA," 99-100.

Aborder les guerres culturelles en ligne sous l'angle des mèmes Internet a permis à cette recherche de traiter des perspectives complexes sur la montée des idéologies populistes et les effets qui renforcent les différents courants politiques et leurs groupes de soutien respectifs. L'approche de phénomènes tels que les groupes néonationalistes égyptiens, les prédicateurs religieux néopopulistes, l'activisme numérique en faveur des droits des femmes, les groupes néomasculinistes antiféministes, les tendances anti-islamistes, dans l'ère post-2013, dépendait essentiellement de la révision des discours, des références culturelles et de l'iconographie, des satires et des affrontements au sein de la mémosphère.

De plus, dans ce cadre interdisciplinaire, la mémosphère apparaît comme une arène dynamique qui façonne les récits entourant les événements de 2011 et leurs conséquences.

Les courants conflictuels au sein de la mémosphère génèrent des perceptions et des positions diverses, remodelant le discours sur la politique, le genre et la religion. La mémosphère sert également d'outil à ces groupes antagonistes et à ces camps divisés, contribuant à accroître leur popularité, à mobiliser leurs partisans ou à former entre eux des alliances d'un type nouveau.

Les luttes identitaires, les limitations des libertés publiques, les inégalités entre les sexes et les restrictions religieuses sont au premier plan des délibérations sociales et des contributions des créateurs de mèmes. Parallèlement aux tendances identitaires mondiales, les conflits locaux entre islamistes et laïcs, ainsi qu'entre les autorités et leurs opposants, prennent des formes numériques, déclenchant des guerres culturelles qui mettent en lumière de nouveaux mouvements qualitatifs en Égypte.

Sous la surface de ces batailles, les stratégies de l'autorité et l'impact de ses politiques deviennent évidents, de même que les effets durables des mouvements d'éveil islamique depuis les années 1970 et l'émergence de mouvements de résistance remettant en question les valeurs et les discours dominants. J'utilise la notion d'« autoritarisme identitaire » pour définir l'amalgame de stratégie de gouvernance et de cadre idéologique qui a caractérisé l'État égyptien après l'indépendance et qui a également influencé ses adversaires politiques.

Le cadre persistant de l'autoritarisme identitaire, capitalisant sur l'interaction entre les courants nationalistes et islamistes, a reproduit une « focalisation sur le conflit identitaire » occultant effectivement la question centrale de l'anomalie structurelle de l'État égyptien - son incapacité à atteindre une transition stable, selon l'historien égyptien Sharīf Yūnus.⁶⁸² Pour tenter de pallier cette lacune, les dirigeants successifs ont maintenu l'état d'urgence et d'exception, qui a libéré le

يونس، شريف. "البحث عن خلاص: أزمة الدولة والإسلام والحداثة في مصر". الهيئة العامة للكتاب 682

Yūnus, Sharīf. *À la recherche d'un réconfort : La crise de l'État, de l'islam et de la modernité en Égypte*. Le Caire: L'Organisation générale du livre égyptien, 2018.

régime politique de beaucoup de limitations légales et constitutionnelles, établissant ainsi une condition nécessaire à son fonctionnement.

L'approche conceptuelle de cette recherche vise à mettre en lumière des aspects sous-estimés dans le discours académique entourant le soulèvement égyptien de 2011, qui a souvent négligé les contextes culturels, l'historicité sociétale et les conflits identitaires influençant la performance des différents courants politiques et leur relation avec leur public. Il vise également à explorer les nouvelles sensibilités qui ont émergé à la suite du bouleversement politique, englobant des examens critiques de la relation entre la religion et l'État, le rôle des mouvements islamistes dans les systèmes autoritaires, la défense des droits des femmes et des droits LGBTQ+, et l'évolution des formes de patriotisme contemporain à côté des discours nationaux et identitaires traditionnels en Égypte.

S'appuyant sur la définition de l'idéologie de l'anthropologue culturelle Lisa Wedeen, à savoir « un ensemble de pratiques entreprises par des personnes à un moment donné - telles que parler, écouter, sentir, émouvoir, croire, mentir sur le fait de croire (et/ou ne pas croire qu'elles mentent) - suffisamment de concert et avec suffisamment de spécificité pour être affublées d'une étiquette », ⁶⁸³ les mêmes Internet constituent une arène typique de délibération sociale où l'entrelacement de l'idéologie et de l'affect sert de stratégie au régime pour « aplanir les complexités » ⁶⁸⁴ du contexte actuel.

La contemplation des mêmes créés par les groupes pro ou anti régime donne lieu à une multitude d'interprétations et de lectures sur la création d' « affects collectifs » ⁶⁸⁵ basés sur des expériences sociales.

Alors que la culture des mêmes égyptiens prenait de l'ampleur au cours des années 2011-2012, toujours avec un œil sur la scène internationale, elle s'inscrivait dans un contexte spécifique d'allumage et de renforcement lié au bouleversement politique majeur que connaissait le pays à cette époque. Cependant, les sentiments cyniques enracinés dans l'émergence de la mémosphère égyptienne ne peuvent pas être seulement attribués à une particularité du contexte local qui néglige les transformations mondiales en cours. Dans les domaines du nationalisme, de la religion et du genre, ce projet de recherche visait à définir les liens généalogiques entre les événements actuels et le passé historique de l'État égyptien post-indépendance, les courants sociopolitiques locaux et les changements mondiaux dans le pouvoir discursif et la socialité.

⁶⁸³ Wedeen, Lisa. "Introduction: 'I Know Very Well, yet Nevertheless . . .': Ideology, Interpellation, and the Politics of Disavowal," In *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgement, and Mourning in Syria*, 5-6. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2019.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁸⁵ Illouz, Eva. "Introduction." In *Les émotions contre la démocratie*, 15. Paris : Premier Parallèle, 2022.

La polarisation sociale qui a continué à porter l'énergie de la mobilisation politique depuis 2011 a continué à fonctionner dans un espace public hautement censuré et restreint après 2013. À travers les réseaux sociaux, elle a ravivé les conflits entre divers groupes d'idéologies opposées, englobant les courants fondamentalistes, conservateurs, nationalistes, libéraux et identitaires. Les interventions médiatisées des communautés de mêmes tentaient de reconstruire un récit postrévolutionnaire et de traiter les transformations régionales, et donnaient la parole à une pluralité de groupes critiques utilisant l'humour et la satire comme armes.

Des groupes représentant des tendances de droite, des nationalistes territoriaux antimondialisation, des adeptes du "politiquement correct" et une manosphère antiféministe ont imité un spectre réactionnaire international face aux communautés montantes de défenseurs de la justice sociale de tendance gauchiste et de défenseurs des libertés religieuses et des droits de l'homme et de la femme. Toutefois, le contexte sociopolitique a considérablement influencé les interactions entre ces discours divergents, ce qui a donné lieu à un champ de bataille permanent au sein des réseaux locaux.

Les événements en Égypte ont été profondément marqués par le conflit croissant entre les idéologies opposées de l'alt-right et du « wokisme », ce dernier étant souvent ridiculisé et utilisé de manière péjorative, même lorsqu'il s'agit d'idées libérales modérées. Dans le paysage conservateur de l'Égypte, les convictions de l'alt-right semblent avoir plus de poids, permettant à leurs slogans de dominer le discours, tandis que le « wokisme » est timidement adopté par les petites communautés, qui sont fréquemment dénigrées comme étant « occidentalisées ». L'adaptation de ces débats mondiaux au récit local ne s'est pas toujours faite selon des catégories strictes ; elle a plutôt intégré des variations influencées par le paysage social local, les discours dominants et le contexte historique. Il est essentiel d'explorer les spécificités de la traduction de ces concepts globaux dans les discussions locales, les groupes sociaux et culturels qui bénéficient de la réinterprétation de ces idées et la manière dont ils adaptent avec succès et utilisent les idées globales pour traiter les problèmes locaux.

IV. Cadres théoriques et méthodologie

Dans cette étude culturelle, j'ai puisé dans une vaste littérature académique couvrant des disciplines telles que la culture numérique et les études sur la communication, les études sur le Moyen-Orient, les études sur les médias contemporains, l'histoire et la politique de l'Égypte moderne, les études sur le genre et la sociologie numérique. En outre, j'ai bénéficié de nombreux documents de recherche et articles qui ont enrichi ma perspective et m'ont aidée à me tenir au courant de l'évolution des conceptions dans le domaine académique concernant les phénomènes de culture numérique et les guerres culturelles en ligne, qui ont continué d'influencer la mémosphère égyptienne jusqu'à aujourd'hui.

La question principale de recherche est centrée sur l'examen du « moderne » en tant que principale catégorie d'analyse dans le contexte égyptien ultracontemporain ; comment il a été articulé et problématisé via les mêmes Internet et les comics pénétrant les tendances sociales en ligne après 2013.

Le moderne est abondamment négocié dans les œuvres des agents culturels en ligne qui ont remis en question les conceptions du genre, de la religion et du nationalisme après les événements politiques schismogénétiques qui ont entraîné la société égyptienne dans une polarisation intense.

En capitalisant sur un corpus diversifié de littérature sur la culture populaire, l'ethnographie numérique, les études sur les médias et les communications, la politique de représentation et l'histoire moderne de l'Égypte, je vise à fournir un compte rendu complet de la dynamique culturelle actuelle en Égypte et de la capacité des créateurs culturels à introduire des perspectives nouvelles et transcendantes, et à élaborer sur le contexte sociopolitique à travers différents contextes chronologiques et spatiaux, où ils déploient des productions cinématographiques, théâtrales et musicales largement mémorables/populaires, des symboles locaux et mondiaux et des références linguistiques et les engagent dans une forme réactive d'expression numérique.

Pour servir cette entreprise de recherche, je me suis également appuyé sur les précieuses études académiques sur les influences culturelles et sociopolitiques de l'islamisme et du post-islamisme réalisées par les chercheurs Asef Bayat,⁶⁸⁶ Karin Van Nieuwkerk,⁶⁸⁷ Charles Hirschkind,⁶⁸⁸ Elliott Colla,⁶⁸⁹ Stéphane Lacroix,⁶⁹⁰ Jacques Huntzinger,⁶⁹¹ Samuli Schielke,⁶⁹² Malika Zeghal,⁶⁹³ et

⁶⁸⁶ Bayat, Asef. *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017.

⁶⁸⁷ Nieuwkerk, Karin Van. *Performing Piety: Singers and Actors in Egypt's Islamic Revival*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2013.

⁶⁸⁸ Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York City, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

⁶⁸⁹ Colla, Elliott. *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008.

⁶⁹⁰ Lacroix, Stéphane. *Le crépuscule des Saints-Histoire et politique du salafisme en Égypte*. Paris : CNRS Éditions, 2024.

⁶⁹¹ Huntzinger, Jacques. *Les printemps arabes et le religieux : La sécularisation de l'islam*. Paris : Collège des Bernardins, 2014.

⁶⁹² Schielke, Samuli. "Ambivalent Commitments: Troubles of Morality, Religiosity and Aspiration among Young Egyptians." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 39/2 (2009): 158–85. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20696806> .

⁶⁹³ Zeghal, Malika. *Gardiens de l'Islam : Les oulémas d'Al Azhar dans l'Égypte contemporaine*. Paris : Presses de Sciences Po., 1996.

Olivier Roy.⁶⁹⁴ J'ai eu recours à ces références pour mettre en lumière la relation entre l'État égyptien postcolonial et les courants islamistes, ainsi que la cascade de transmutations et de remises en question qui ont abouti à la rupture majeure de 2013.

Les références à l'histoire moderne ont offert une vision complexe de cette relation et de son impact sur la formation des sujets politiques, sur l'arène politique et sociale, et sur l'imaginaire culturel du contre-public⁶⁹⁵ de la classe moyenne jusqu'en 2013.

En outre, j'ai bénéficié de nombreux travaux académiques sur l'histoire culturelle et sociale de l'Égypte et le féminisme égyptien de Lucie Ryzova, Timothy Mitchell, Sharīf Yūnus, Laura Bier, Beth Baron et Eliott Colla.

Dans le domaine des études de genre, j'ai bénéficié des travaux d'Abraham De Swaan, Hanan Hammad, Mervat F. Hatem, R. W. Connell, Michael Kimmel et Eva Illouz.

Comme mentionné précédemment, j'ai capitalisé sur la notion de « crise liminale » de Walter Armbrust pour décrire l'initiation d'un processus de polarisation et d'un mécanisme schismogénétique efficace qui a profité de la logique opérationnelle de cyberpolarisation des médias numériques. J'ai également profité des perspectives d'Anstasia Danisova pour expliquer la relation entre les mèmes de bombardement mental, l'activité tactique des médias et le contexte sociopolitique.

De même, j'ai eu recours aux analyses des sociologues Yves Gonzalez-Quijano et Dominique Cardon, et des théoriciens des mèmes Limor Shifman et Ryan Milner pour saisir la fonction sociale des mèmes Internet et leur rôle substantiel dans la communication numérique et les guerres culturelles contemporaines dans la région arabe et en Égypte.

La recherche culturelle interdisciplinaire est la pierre angulaire de ce projet qui vise à saisir un phénomène à multiples facettes, comme les mèmes Internet et les "comics", dans leurs historicité et socialité contemporaines. Il était indispensable de recourir à divers cadres théoriques pour pouvoir contextualiser une cascade de tendances sociales sans fin émergeant dans des domaines qualitativement différents (nationalisme, religion et genre). Tenter de délimiter et d'observer les modèles communs qui sous-tendent les guerres des mèmes et leur impact social dans trois domaines distincts a nécessité un ensemble tout aussi complexe de cadres théoriques interprétatifs et d'analyses.

Le domaine des études culturelles a effectivement intégré l'interdisciplinarité, l'ethnologie et l'empirisme pour analyser rigoureusement les pratiques et les matériaux culturels en relation avec

⁶⁹⁴ Roy, Olivier. *The Failure of the Political Islam*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994.

⁶⁹⁵ Hirschkind. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*.

les contextes sociaux, les récits historiques et les luttes de pouvoir en cours entre les groupes dominants et dominés pour les significations, les identités et les valeurs. Le professeur Nicholas Daly⁶⁹⁶ soutient que les études culturelles ont perçu le « populaire » comme un champ de bataille de conflits politiques, soulignant la nécessité d'explorer les dimensions politiques et idéologiques inhérentes aux formes et aux artefacts culturels. En ce sens, les études culturelles considèrent que « le domaine de la culture est le domaine de l'idéologie, le lieu où le moi est façonné et où les individus sont interpellés en tant que sujets ; ou le domaine de la concurrence pour le capital symbolique ; ou le domaine où les groupes d'opposition créent leurs propres significations à partir des déchets culturels qui leur parviennent. »⁶⁹⁷

Ce point de vue découle de l'identification par le théoricien culturel Stuart Hall du message culturel comme un produit conforme aux « codes dominants » des producteurs, alors que son « décodage » ne se déroule pas toujours comme prévu par l'encodeur.⁶⁹⁸

Selon Stuart Hall, une « dominante hégémonique » établie est perpétuellement remise en question lorsqu'une compréhension normative est recontextualisée dans le monde culturel, ce qui modifie continuellement les « codes de référence » des productions culturelles.⁶⁹⁹

En interprétant les mèmes satiriques, il devient plus difficile d'identifier les producteurs dans les catégories des fractions dominantes, car tant les producteurs que les codeurs sont impliqués dans un processus continu d'échange culturel et de reproductibilité des représentations culturelles. Les mèmes Internet servent d'outils de communication puissants dans les conflits culturels et les dynamiques de pouvoir, redéfinissant continuellement les codes de référence par des processus de reconditionnement qui dépassent les frontières conventionnelles de la production et de la consommation telles qu'elles sont identifiées par les études culturelles lorsqu'elles examinent les relations de pouvoir hiérarchiques entre les producteurs culturels et leurs consommateurs « grand public ».

Il est donc essentiel de reconnaître la position des producteurs de mèmes, car les interactions entre les divers créateurs donnent lieu à des échanges, des reproductions et des interprétations à multiples facettes.

Stuart Hall suppose que l'initiation d'un « code négocié » et/ou d'un « code oppositionnel » de réception pourrait être attribuée à une « position privilégiée » et à une « logique particulière » des

⁶⁹⁶ Daly, Nicholas. "Interdisciplinarity and Cultural Studies." *Victorian Review* 33/1 (2007): 18–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27793611> .

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁸ Lagrange. « Introduction, » 24-25.

⁶⁹⁹ Hall, Stuart. "Codage/Décodage." Traduit par Michèle Albaret et Marie-Christine Gamberini. *Réseaux* 68 (1994): 27–39. <https://doi.org/10.3406/reso.1994.2618> .

récepteurs de productions culturelles.⁷⁰⁰ Cependant, dans le cas des mèmes qui circulent de manière virale, l'appropriation de leur symbolisme par de larges secteurs sur les réseaux sociaux fait partie intégrante de leur logique de fonctionnement en définissant et en redéfinissant la positionnalité dans des conditions de cyberpolarisation. Il reste important de dépeindre les réseaux sociaux et leurs publics largement stratifiés comme un moyen particulier d'échange culturel où les positions hiérarchiques et les lignes de démarcation entre les producteurs et les consommateurs posent de sérieux défis lorsqu'on essaie de les identifier.

D'un autre point de vue, ce projet de recherche s'intéresse aux aspects sociologiques de la culture, en plus des aspects politiques et idéologiques, en considérant les mèmes et les "comics" comme une sous-catégorie de la culture populaire, de la culture des jeunes et de la contre-culture, où « le monde social est construit de manière textuelle ou discursive ». ⁷⁰¹ L'engagement dans les pratiques sociales structurantes, les institutions et les relations sociales, reste nécessaire pour développer une vision plus large des dimensions organisées de la différenciation sociale et de les changements historiques englobant la classe, le statut, le genre, la nationalité. ⁷⁰²

L'analyse qualitative du contenu des mèmes a consisté à coder les données recueillies et les échantillons de mèmes afin d'identifier les thèmes récurrents dans diverses catégories. ⁷⁰³ Ce processus s'est concentré sur la détermination de critères pertinents pour le sujet de recherche et les discours exprimés à travers ces caricatures numériques. Ensuite, l'analyse critique du discours ⁷⁰⁴ est devenue essentielle pour examiner comment ces discours étaient liés à la dynamique du pouvoir dans la société, ainsi que pour comprendre comment les mèmes perpétuaient ou contestaient des éléments oppressifs tels que le sectarisme nationaliste et l'incitation au sexisme.

En outre, cette analyse souligne les voix et les mouvements représentés dans les mèmes, y compris ceux qui sont marginalisés, et examine minutieusement le ton et le langage qui façonnent les identités et les communautés numériques. Elle cherche également à déterminer si le contenu de ces mèmes cherche à mettre en évidence des problèmes non reconnus dans la société ou s'il raconte des histoires improvisées non contrôlées dans des périodes de turbulences politiques et de révisionnisme actif. Bénéficiant des possibilités de représentation « intermédiaire », une analyse sémantique et sémiotique du contenu des mèmes et des "comics" égyptiens pourrait permettre une

⁷⁰⁰ Lagrange. « Introduction, » 25.

⁷⁰¹ Wolff, Janet. "Cultural Studies and the Sociology of Culture." *Contemporary Sociology* 28/5 (1999): 500. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2654982> .

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*

⁷⁰³ Zidani, Sulafa. "How to Conduct Internet Meme Research," ed. By Kate M. Miltner. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529609714> .

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

lecture plus approfondie de ces constellations ultramodernes aux yeux des acteurs sociaux d'aujourd'hui.

J'accorde une attention particulière aux producteurs de « comédie sur internet » issus de la classe moyenne après 2011, en examinant leurs groupes d'intérêt et leurs publics. La plupart des producteurs de contenu dans la mémosphère égyptienne sont généralement classés comme urbains, jeunes, éduqués et probablement masculins, ce qui met également en évidence un positionnement spécifique concernant la distinction de classe et sa pertinence pour le contenu produit.

La classe moyenne égyptienne peut être considérée comme le principal incubateur et producteur des discours sociaux hégémoniques, exclusivement des discours sur la modernité et le conservatisme sociétal. Les professionnels de la classe moyenne, les prédicateurs religieux et les agents culturels avaient la responsabilité de façonner les différentes positions vis-à-vis du « moderne » dans l'imaginaire national. Nous pourrions considérer l'activité trépidante de la jeunesse égyptienne sur Internet comme un défi social et générationnel aux vertus conventionnelles de la classe moyenne et aux discours moraux d'avant 2011.

En outre, cette analyse souligne les voix et les mouvements représentés dans les mèmes, y compris ceux qui sont marginalisés,⁷⁰⁵ et examine minutieusement le ton et le langage qui façonnent les identités et les communautés numériques. Elle cherche également à déterminer si le contenu de ces mèmes cherche à mettre en évidence des problèmes non reconnus dans la société ou s'il raconte des histoires improvisées non contrôlées dans des périodes de turbulences politiques et de révisionnisme actif.

Bénéficiant des possibilités de représentation « intermédiaire », une analyse sémantique et sémiotique du contenu des mèmes et des "comics" égyptiennes pourrait fournir une lecture plus approfondie de ces constellations ultramodernes aux yeux des acteurs sociaux d'aujourd'hui.

J'accorde une attention particulière aux producteurs de « comédie sur internet » issus de la classe moyenne après 2011, en examinant leurs groupes d'intérêt et leurs publics. La plupart des producteurs de contenu dans la mémosphère égyptienne sont généralement classés comme urbains, jeunes, éduqués et probablement masculins, ce qui met également en évidence un positionnement spécifique concernant la distinction de classe et sa pertinence pour le contenu produit.

La classe moyenne égyptienne peut être considérée comme le principal incubateur et producteur des discours sociaux hégémoniques, exclusivement des discours sur le moderne et le conservatisme sociétal. Les professionnels de la classe moyenne, les prédicateurs religieux et les agents culturels avaient la responsabilité de façonner les différentes positions vis-à-vis du «

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

moderne » dans l'imaginaire national.⁷⁰⁶ Nous pourrions considérer l'activité trépidante de la jeunesse égyptienne sur Internet comme un défi social et générationnel aux vertus conventionnelles de la classe moyenne et aux discours moraux d'avant 2011.

Dans ma description ethnographique des guerres culturelles en ligne qui tournent autour de thèmes sociaux et politiques, j'ai essayé de mettre en évidence ces défis à différents niveaux.

Depuis 2014, après la destitution de Mohamed Morsi et l'élection du président Sisi, les mêmes Internet ont été intégrés dans une vaste révision du système de valeurs de la classe moyenne. Divisé entre l'État autoritaire et les organisations de renouveau islamique, le public de la classe moyenne a été assiégé par des hypothèses fondamentales et des conflits identitaires qui ont encadré son imaginaire culturel. Après l'interdiction de la confrérie musulmane en 2013, les jeunes générations ont pu débattre et contester ces hypothèses en créant des caricatures numériques satiriques. Les conflits générationnels, la dissidence et les turbulences culturelles sont rendus publics et médiatisés à grande échelle dans la mémosphère.

Les mêmes Internet vont bien au-delà de leur utilisation par l'élite intellectuelle ou les cyberutopistes et les activistes révolutionnaires (*al-thawragiyya*) qui ont été le fer de lance de la mobilisation sociopolitique au cours de la décennie qui a précédé le soulèvement populaire de 2011. Les bouleversements politiques survenus entre 2011 et 2013 ont remodelé le paysage numérique, permettant à diverses factions - y compris les nationalistes nativistes, divers groupes islamistes et les partisans de l'État (*al-dawlagiyya*) - de coopter la production de mêmes pour leurs programmes respectifs, leurs campagnes de diffamation et la défense de leurs points de vue.

En Égypte, l'émergence de la « manosphère » inspirée par l'alt-right (une constellation de communautés en ligne qui partagent des croyances antiféministes)⁷⁰⁷ a correspondu à des tendances similaires en Occident, utilisant des mêmes comme outils contre des factions relativement mineures qui défendent les droits des femmes, l'égalité des sexes et les droits des personnes LGBTQ+. Au sein de cette mémosphère polarisée, une interaction dynamique de tendances et de conflits quotidiens a illustré et amplifié des cadres idéologiques plus larges, transcendant les clivages locaux et mondiaux tout en rivalisant pour la domination dans un domaine régi par les principes économiques de la visibilité,⁷⁰⁸ de la viralité et du conflit.

⁷⁰⁶ Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Part One: Anthropology and National Media." In *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Egypt. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005. Pp. 1- 53.

⁷⁰⁷ Barcellona, Marta. "Incel Violence as a New Terrorism Threat: a Brief Investigation Between Alt-Right and Manosphere Dimensions." *Sortuz. Oñati Journal of Emergent Socio-Legal Studies* 11/2 (2022): 170–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2023.2189970> .

⁷⁰⁸ Cardon, Dominique, et Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis. "La Démocratie Internet : Entretien Avec Dominique Cardon." *Transversalités* 123/3 (2012) : 65–73. <https://doi.org/10.3917/trans.123.0065> .

De même, la montée des tendances populistes dans le monde a influencé les divisions tripartites égyptiennes (*al-thawragiyya*, *al-dawlagiyya* et *al-Islāmgīyya*) et leur guerre de positions après 2013.

Définir le terme « populisme » reste une entreprise académique difficile, car il a été utilisé de manière persistante et non critique par les acteurs politiques, les journalistes et les universitaires. Cependant, sa limitation à la description des politiques racistes, sexistes et xénophobes néglige la nature multiforme du phénomène néopopuliste qui s'infiltré dans différents courants idéologiques.

En associant au néopopulisme les discours racistes, misogynes et alarmistes qui se développent au sein des courants d'extrême droite, on a occulté d'autres aspects du phénomène, comme l'a clarifié le sociologue Gérard Bronner, qui a décrit le « néopopulisme » comme une idéologie conceptuellement mince, qui place au cœur de son analyse l'idée d'une « trahison du peuple vertueux par des élites corrompues, qui ne peut être nettoyée que par l'expression politique directe d'un peuple vengeur, sans autre contrepois institutionnel ». ⁷⁰⁹ Cette idée, selon les termes de Bronner, « constitue plus une matrice politique qu'un programme au sens strict du terme, ce qui explique que l'extrême droite comme l'extrême gauche puissent y puiser des ressources. » ⁷¹⁰

D'un point de vue méthodologique, mon projet de recherche s'appuie sur une « ethnographie multi-située » telle que décrite par l'anthropologue George Marcus ⁷¹¹ dans son approche de la « nation médiatisée » en tant qu'objet d'étude : « Faire des ethnographies de mondes de vie dans plusieurs endroits, non pas au hasard, mais avec l'intention de révéler les connexions entre eux comme la logique de systèmes plus larges dans lesquels des vies particulières se déroulent, la nation, pourrait-on dire, est un tel système. » ⁷¹²

La recherche a impliqué un processus extensif et méticuleux de collecte, d'archivage, de classification et de filtrage des données afin de développer un échantillon représentatif de 278 figures (y compris des memes, des captures d'écran et des illustrations) pertinentes pour mon sujet de recherche et adaptées à l'analyse critique du discours.

⁷⁰⁹ Bronner, Gérard. “Les néo-populismes.” In *Apocalypse Cognitive*, 75. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France/Humensis, 2021.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹¹ Marcus, George E. “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155931> .

⁷¹² Marcus, George E. *Ethnography through Thick and Thin*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1j666sm> .

L'un des principaux défis de la documentation des mèmes Internet réside dans leur nature éphémère, leur abondance et l'anonymat que de nombreux créateurs conservent pour des raisons de sécurité. La postérité des mèmes Internet varie souvent en fonction de leur viralité, de leur pertinence dans les contextes sociaux et de leur compréhensibilité.

Cette étude vise à fournir une vision holistique de la dynamique sociale actuelle en Égypte, en utilisant les mèmes Internet comme instruments d'échange social symbolisant les luttes de pouvoir et les relations, dans trois domaines différents. Chaque mème est contextualisé historiquement et socialement, analysé aux niveaux sémantique et sémiotique, et évalué pour son potentiel expressif et sa pertinence à une époque et dans un contexte particulier.

Mon analyse s'est concentrée sur les aspects visuels et linguistiques des mèmes Internet socialement pertinentes, s'alignant directement sur les thèmes décrits dans les chapitres de ma thèse. Les critères de sélection comprenaient divers éléments tels que la popularité, la pertinence contextuelle, la représentation de conflits sociaux importants et de jalons historiques, la diversité des formats (y compris les images macros, les images photoshopées, les comics réimaginées et les mèmes sur les visages enragés (*rage face comics*) etc.), l'incorporation de références culturelles, et des jeux de mots ou des calembours intelligents. Chaque segment de l'échantillon a mis l'accent sur les fonctions de représentation et de communication des caricatures numériques en tant qu'artefacts intermédiaires et multimodaux, caractérisés par leur mutabilité, l'hybridation des genres et leur signification sociale et culturelle.

En outre, j'ai mené des entretiens directs avec des gestionnaires de pages de mèmes, des activistes politiques, des activistes féministes et des créateurs de mèmes afin de recueillir des informations sur les dynamiques et les influences en jeu au sein de la mémosphère, qui ont en fin de compte un impact sur la production de contenu.

Cette thèse se divise en trois parties, dans l'ordre suivant :

1. Nationalisme : dans cette section, j'explore la montée de la mémosphère égyptienne dans le domaine numérique, coïncidant avec la mobilisation politique de 2011. J'examine l'interaction complexe des alliances et des conflits entre les différentes factions politiques sous la condition schismogénétique infiltrant le domaine politique et conduisant à leur fragmentation en trois divisions principales (*al-thawragiyya*, *al-dawlagiyya*, et *al-Islāngiyya*). Je me concentre également sur l'image des activistes révolutionnaires et des groupes dissidents telle qu'elle est représentée dans la mémosphère, en soulignant l'émergence de sentiments anti-islamistes et anti-gauchistes répandus dans les comics égyptiens. En outre, j'aborde l'ascension des groupes en ligne néonationalistes et pro-étatiques et leur impact sur les pages de mèmes et les créateurs,

en situant cela dans le contexte plus large du néopopulisme et de la montée mondiale de l'alt-right.

J'étudie également les méthodes de restauration autocratique et les stratégies médiatiques employées par le régime de Sisi, en les analysant sous l'angle de l'analyse critique du discours liée aux mêmes Internet et en réfléchissant aux transformations sociales historiques qui définissent l'Égypte post-indépendance. En outre, je passe au crible les récits élaborés dans la mémosphère concernant le soulèvement de 2011, vu à travers les perspectives polarisées des factions politiques, qui conduisent à un réexamen des moments clés de l'histoire politique moderne de l'Égypte, y compris les mandats des présidents Nasser, Sadate et Moubarak.

Les récits élaborés par les créateurs de mèmes et leur public, qui relient les événements historiques aux contextes contemporains, apparaissent comme un aspect crucial du paysage numérique de l'après-2013, illustrant l'évolution de la dynamique politique et sociale en Égypte.

Le révisionnisme en cours dans la mémosphère, tel qu'il a été exposé dans ma recherche, s'est étendu pour traiter des thèmes politiques plus larges tels que les transformations géostratégiques au Moyen-Orient, les alliances politiques qui ont soutenu ou se sont opposées au soulèvement populaire en 2011, la situation économique égyptienne, les relations égypto-israéliennes, les diverses opinions égyptiennes sur le nationalisme arabe et l'Occident, et la position égyptienne sur le continent africain dans un contexte de guerre civile au Soudan et de menaces stratégiques sur les ressources en eau de l'Égypte en raison de la construction du barrage de la Grande renaissance éthiopienne.

2. La religion : Cette section examine les profondes transformations du paysage religieux égyptien après 2013, en particulier après l'expulsion des Frères Musulmans du pouvoir et la montée des sentiments anti-islamistes émergeant des cercles culturels de l'élite et les dépassant pour se généraliser à travers la mémosphère et les réseaux sociaux. La mémosphère s'est transformée en un champ de bataille pour des conflits culturels féroces qui reflètent l'évolution des attitudes des jeunes de la classe moyenne à l'égard des organisations islamistes et des institutions religieuses traditionnelles qui tentent d'occuper le vide laissé par les Frères Musulmans en fournissant des conseils moraux et en promouvant un discours religieux conservateur.

Les caricatures numériques sont devenues un moyen influent de déconstruire, de ridiculiser et de critiquer les valeurs morales de la classe moyenne, avec une variété de pages de mèmes et de créateurs contribuant à cette critique culturelle. Les réseaux sociaux se sont transformés en plateformes pour revisiter l'histoire des mouvements de renouveau islamique, motivant les créateurs de mèmes à s'engager dans des batailles culturelles contre les courants islamistes et leurs partisans en ligne. Le sarcasme et la critique en ligne se sont étendus pour traiter de la vaste

influence de la montée des mouvements de piété et de l'islamisme depuis les années 1970, soulignant les aspects de cette influence dans de nombreux domaines sociaux tels que les arts et la culture populaire, le sport, les médias, les pratiques quotidiennes, la sexualité, l'économie et les relations intersexes.

Cette section aborde également la reconfiguration du champ religieux sous le régime de Sisi, en explorant cette transformation sous divers angles, y compris les perspectives de différentes factions polarisées (*al-thawragiyya*, *al-dawlagiyya*, et *al-Islāmgīyya*). Ces points de vue sont illustrés par des memes Internet et des comics, ce qui permet d'appréhender le dialogue culturel en cours.

Les voix dissidentes qui remettent en question les paradigmes moraux islamistes et conservateurs s'expriment à travers des memes provocateurs qui explorent des questions telles que l'athéisme, le sectarisme et l'interaction entre l'État et la religion.

En contextualisant ces conflits culturels concernant les concepts et les institutions religieuses, cette section cherche à mettre en lumière une influence majeure de la dynamique culturelle changeante en Égypte depuis 2013.

3. Le genre : Dans cette section, je cherche à éclairer le contexte sociopolitique dans lequel les mouvements de défense des droits des femmes et les groupes hostiles de la mansphère qui leur sont opposés fonctionnent côte à côte. En examinant les artefacts visuels tels que les représentations iconographiques, les caricatures numériques et les memes Internet, nous pouvons identifier les cadres idéologiques intentionnels qui se sont développés depuis 2013 concernant la représentation du genre et l'environnement législatif entourant les questions de genre.

La mémosphère a contribué à remettre en question les valeurs culturelles ancrées dans les récits populaires sur l'égalité des sexes, la sexualité et les droits des femmes, l'homosexualité et la diversité des genres, ainsi que le paradigme dominant de la masculinité hégémonique. Les memes et les comics, présentés dans cette partie, dessinent une image complexe des discours sur le genre diffusés dans les productions de la culture populaire, le cinéma et les chansons, les sermons religieux, les programmes télévisés et les séries dramatiques, ainsi que les conflits au sein des cercles d'activisme sur le genre.

En ce qui concerne le genre, à l'instar du nationalisme et de la religion, la schismogenèse post-révolutionnaire se manifeste à travers des dynamiques individuelles et en groupes, conduisant à une polarisation au sein des identités personnelles et collectives. Façonnées par des influences mondiales et des idées normatives locales, ces sensibilités polarisées sur le genre favorisent des divisions communautaires plus larges centrées sur les conceptions du genre. Alors que certaines factions des communautés en ligne émettent des critiques convaincantes sur des injustices et des

problèmes sociaux profondément enracinés, en particulier pour les femmes et les personnes LGBTQ+, elles se heurtent à une forte résistance de la part des autorités, des partisans de la stabilité de l'État, des islamistes et des segments plus larges alignés sur la structure patriarcale, quelle que soit leur affiliation politique.

En encourageant les divisions systématiques entre les hommes et les femmes, ainsi qu'entre les féministes et les masculinistes, les partisans du système patriarcal forment une alliance solide. Ce collectif utilise des stratégies discursives, institutionnelles et numériques qui adhèrent à un code culturel implicite conçu pour contrer les menaces perçues contre l'ordre patriarcal et ses méthodes de distribution paternalistes - les éléments unificateurs fondamentaux derrière « Le Peuple » et « La Nation » tels qu'ils sont perçus par un tel collectif majoritaire.

