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There will be Blood: Expectation and Ethics of Violence during Egypt's Stormy Season

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Abstract: *How did bloodshed emerge as a promising solution to the tensions and troubles of the revolutionary period? And how did different people who were on a particular side of the events from 2011 to 2013 react to the bewildering violence of the victorious in summer and autumn 2013? With these questions, I want to contribute to a conversation opened by engaged academics writing about Egypt, in order to try to understand the wide-scale support for killing that emerged in Egypt in the summer of 2013. My core argument is that, although the violence unleashed after June 30, 2013 evidently was the result of intentional manipulation and escalation by the most powerful players involved, many Egyptians' actual support for that violence was thoroughly moral in character, a consequence of an intensifying process of polarisation where the need to defend right against wrong was caught up in an on-going sense of tension, confusion, and anxiety. In this mood of "broken fear"--not the same as the overcoming of fear, the expectation that "there will be blood" was a promise of reaching clarity, purity and truth through a decisive battle. The incitement to bloodshed and the spiral of violence can be described as a form of ethical cultivation where a sense of purity is established through dramatic and radical confrontation. Paradoxically, during the bloody summer of 2013, moments of* irbak—*confusion, bewilderment, loss of solid ground—sometimes were more likely to open up ways out of the circle of hatred and confrontation than firm and clear principles. Wickedness and violence are akin to righteousness and purity, and there are times when weakness and confusion can be the better ethical stance. In this vein, I argue that if commentators failed to notice the inherent cultivation of violence, it was not because it wasn't there, but because we didn't want to see it. It didn't fit well into the beautiful picture of revolutionary resistance. But we cannot separate beautiful resistance from terrible bloodshed, just as we cannot isolate the flourishing of cultural life from the spread of violent street crime in and after 2011, as they belong to one and the same process.*

Key Words: Egypt; revolution; counterrevolution; coup d'ètat; violence; ethics; nationalism; militarism; leftism

In early June 2013, I wrote the last entry in a blog about everyday life and politics in Egypt in the time of a revolution. That entry told about the growing opposition against Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, on the part of the Tamarod campaign that had emerged a month earlier, and the expectation expressed by many people with whom I spoke that "there will be blood" (*hayibqa fi dam*) or even that "there's got to be blood" (*lazim yibqa fi dam*). This notion was so omnipresent that I at first thought about using it as the title of the blog entry. But optimistic as I was about the capacity of the Tamarod campaign to provide a peaceful, civil alternative, I hesitated, and instead titled the text "Seize the day." Some weeks later, the day was seized, and there was blood.

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Throughout July, a series of violent clashes and massacres evolved. Most of the people killed were supporters of the deposed president, and the most common cause of death was sniper fire. The escalation reached its peak on August 14, 2013, in the storming of the Rabea El-Adawiya and the El-Nahda Square sit-ins in Cairo, costing between 600 and 1400 lives.[1] These were followed by clashes and attacks on police stations and Christian-owned properties in several cities. Ever since, violence has continued, with people killed in demonstrations, tortured and disappearing in prisons, Jihadist bombings aimed at police and military targets, the military destroying entire villages in their fight against the Jihadists in the Sinai, and ordinary citizens getting into fights with each other.

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For different estimates of the death toll, see *Human Rights Watch* (2013); *WikiThawra* (2013a); and *WikiThawra* (2013b).

After seizing power in a *coup d'etat* supported by large demonstrations, the new regime led byAbdel Fatteh el-Sisi has established its grip on power and legalised it by means of elections and a new constitution. A lower level of confrontation continues, and so too does an asymmetry of killing. Many voices continue to call for the merciless suppression and killing of Muslim Brothers and their allies because "this is the only way to deal with these people." From their point of view, Egypt is under attack by violent and evil people, and the only way to deal with such people is either to imprison or to kill them.

I do not intend to say that this is a mood shared by all or most Egyptians—perhaps not even the majority of them. Many others were sceptical of the polarisation to start with, or have grown sceptical of it, and a large part of the population remains sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood's cause. Most Egyptians continue to live in peace with each other despite irreconcilable political differences. But it is the mood on which the current regime relied in order to seize power.

How did bloodshed emerge as a promising solution to the tensions and troubles of the revolutionary period? And how did different people who were on a particular side of the events from 2011 to 2013 react to the bewildering violence of the victorious in the summer and autumn 2013? I make no claims to speak about Egypt or Egyptians in general. The story I tell is that of people of leftist or liberal stances who in the period of 2011 to 2013 described themselves as "revolutionaries" through a double opposition toward the Hosni Mubarak regime on the one hand, and the Islamist groups, on the other hand. I tell about a group of young and some older men from a village in the Nile Delta, most of them highly educated but with limited economic means, and a circle of young women and men active in demonstrations and other actions in

Alexandria, most of them hailing from urban bourgeois and middle-income families. A different

story could be told about Muslim Brotherhood supporters, or sympathisers of other Islamist

movements, or football ultras, or regime loyalists, or the many people who did not take such firm

stances.

"Revolutionaries" is a misleading and exclusionary term, because also many others with

different stances were involved in the revolution. What did distinguish them in the period of

2011-2013, however, was the way they commonly identified with the revolution itself as their

main aim, rather than any specific utopian vision or political program. To do justice to the way

they pursued revolution as an aim in its own right, and to the fact that they were one among the

many currents of the revolution, I call them "revolutionists" in the following.[2]

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My argument is that although the violence unleashed after June 30, 2013 evidently was

the result of intentional manipulation and escalation by the most powerful players involved,

many Egyptians' actual support for that violence was thoroughly moral in character, a

consequence of an intensifying process of polarisation where the need to defend right against

wrong was caught up in an on-going sense of tension, confusion, anxiety and emboldening. In

this mood of "broken fear," the expectation that "there will be blood" was a promise of reaching

clarity, purity and truth through a decisive battle. The incitement to bloodshed and the spiral of

violence can be described as a form of ethical cultivation where a sense of purity is sought for

through dramatic and radical confrontation. Paradoxically, during the bloody summer of 2013,

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 For the concept of "revolutionists," I'm indebted to my friend H.S. who once described himself as such in idiosyncratic English.

moments of *irbak*—confusion, bewilderment, loss of solid ground—were sometimes more likely to open up ways out of the circle of hatred and confrontation than firm and clear principles. Wickedness and violence are akin to righteousness and purity, and there are times when weakness and confusion can be the better ethical stance.

A stormy season

By spring and summer 2013, the leftist revolutionists from the village had come to consider the Muslim Brotherhood a greater enemy than the old regime. For them, it was a matter of civil or secular versus religious politics – among other reasons. But the conflict line that divided Islamists from supporters of a civil and/or secular state would never have been sufficient to create the 30 June coalition. The most powerful and successful accusation against Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood was not that they were fundamentalists or that they were incompetent, but that they were traitors to the nation. The alliance against the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 was successful because it was primarily articulated in nationalist terms.

The reality of Egypt after 30 June 2013 took many Western academics and others by surprise because they did not anticipate the power of nationalism. In a time when the study of globalisation and transnational movements is in fashion, nationalism has not been a popular research topic.[3] In recent anthropology and history of the Middle East, the nation has received some valuable attention with regard to the sovereign state and the resonances and conflicts

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[3] For a rare ethnographic take on populist nationalism, see Paul Mepschen (2016) 'Everyday autochthony: Difference, discontent and the politics of home in Amsterdam', Phd dissertation,, University of Amsterdam.

between religious and nationalist movements.[4] Yet the attention on the sovereign state often is informed by a binary idea of the state as an external upside of power in opposition to society and its moral and ethical values – [a idea grounded in the liberal juxtaposition of state against individuals (in radical economic liberalism) or society (in the theory of civil society).[5] People in the Middle East often have a more ambiguous relationship with the state. They are oppressed by and at odds with some state institutions such as bureaucracies and the police. At the same time, they often express a firm love toward the nation, the army, and military struggle for national liberation. And through a highly expansive public service, a very large number of Egyptians are also government functionaries in one way or another.

Egypt is a God-fearing country where obeying and trusting God according to Muslim and Christian traditions is a key part of most people's moral and spiritual worlds. But it

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is also a militantly nationalist post-colonial country with a history of nationalist wars and uprisings. Most Egyptians (also those of Islamist leanings) express a faith in the Nation, the Army, and the Glorious October War. Patriotic values were enormously strengthened and magnified in the revolutionary uprisings across the Arab world in 2011. The national flag was a central and highly ambiguous symbol that could be used to claim patriotic unity for the sake of quite opposed aims and ideals.[6] The revolution was a process of rediscovering and strengthening

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[4] See, e.g., Hussein Agrama (2012) *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press); and Benjamin Geer (2011) 'The Priesthood of Nationalism in Egypt: Duty, Authority, Autonomy,' PhD dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

[5] See, e.g. Friedrich von Hayek (15-19

[6] Jessica Vinegar (2014) 'Ambiguous Symbols in the Egyptian Uprising', Stanford University Press Blog, 21 January, available online at:

love for the nation that until then had showed little love for its sons and daughters. In 2011, that emotion was still directed at an abstract body of the nation and "the people" in the remarkable absence of a revolutionary leader. In summer 2013, love for the nation became heavily personalised in the figure of a venerated leader: Abdelfattah El-Sisi, glorified as the saviour of the nation in songs and posters that covered homes, public spaces and businesses across the country.

Saba Mahmood has argued with regard to the Danish cartoon caricature crisis of 2006 that Western publics failed to understand the "labour of love" invested in the person of the Prophet Muhammad and which made symbolic attacks against his person a matter of grave moral injury and anger.[7] Looking at the sensitive manner in which many Egyptians have reacted to any kind of critique of the Egyptian army and nation-state (be it by foreigners or by Egyptian critics of the military leadership) since 2013, it seems that also military struggles like the October War, the army, and the unity of nation have a similar kind of labour of love invested in them – a labour of loving something that is often not easy to love. There is also an on-going cultivation of moral anger at those who act or speak in a disrespectful manner about the things into which people invest so much love. Love is not just a sweet and kind thing. It is also the ground of a jealous sense of being easily offended - and wanting to retaliate. Between 2011 and 2013, love for the nation in Egypt shifted increasingly toward a logic of threat and defence, offence and retaliation.

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http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2014/01/the-ambiguous-power-of-symbols-in-the-egyptian-uprising.html; date of access, ??

[7] Saba Mahmood (2009) 'Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?', in Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (eds.) *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Townsend Papers in Humanities, 2), pp. 64-100.

Although the uprising on January 25 initially was celebrated as a non-violent, peaceful revolution, up to 1,000 people were killed in political violence during the first 18 days that resulted in the fall of president Hosni Mubarak. The vast majority were protesters killed by the security forces. The events gave rise to a veritable cult of the martyrs of the Revolution. In the following years, violent events followed one another and new martyrs emerged, each of them associated with specific struggles, claims, and calls for bringing justice. And as violence became a regular feature of politics, political struggle became deeply linked with the experience or expectation of the other party's violent nature.

After February 11, the revolutionary coalition soon broke up, as some groups were more successful than others in wrestling for a share of power, while others were too weak to do that and instead opted for principal resistance. Starting from early March 2011, a split emerged between major, well-organised, and initially successful Islamist movements and various other leftist, liberal, and less prominent Islamist groups. The latter were too weak and disorganised to seize power but strong enough to spearhead a series of new protests and crises. In the course of 2011 they came to be called "the revolutionaries." In the following two years, this split developed into an antagonism between the revolutionists and the Muslim

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Brotherhood, the first increasingly viewing the latter as traitors to the cause, and the latter trying to either co-opt or marginalise the first.

A turning point in this polarisation was the Muslim Brotherhood's rise in power through the 2012 presidential elections. This resulted in old regime loyalists as well as leftist and liberal revolutionists finding themselves on the same side in a realignment of government and

opposition. Meanwhile, revolutionary Islamist groups like the Hazemoon became allies of the new Brotherhood-led government.[8] Supporters of the revolutionists' current appropriated the rhetoric of the Mubarak and Nasser regimes against the Muslim Brotherhood, while people who until then had thought [OK] very little of revolution and protests appropriated revolutionary slogans and tactics. The anger of those who saw their privileges threatened by the emerging rule of the Muslim Brotherhood came together with the anger of those who saw the revolution stolen and betrayed by the Muslim Brotherhood. At this point a narrative emerged depicting the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign, treacherous, sectarian movement that did not—could not— represent the Egyptian people. According to this narrative, the Muslim Brothers were enemies of the nation who needed to be stopped before they took over the entire country. A number of satellite television channels close to the old regime put great effort into creating and spreading this narrative,[9] and most likely also parts of the security apparatus assisted this work. This narrative made it possible to channel oppositional anger (that until then was channelled against "the system") against one specific group in the political scene. On the other side of the conflict line, supporters and allies of the Brotherhood produced a different narrative of polarisation, claiming that those who opposed Morsi were either Christians, godless liberals, or corrupt old regime elites—thus, once again, not the true Muslim Egyptian people.

Violence and polarisation were linked to a wider mood that marked the three or four year-long stormy season of revolution ("spring" is a very misleading seasonal metaphor for what

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[8] The picture became more complicated again in early 2013 when the Salafi Nour Party, formerly the Muslim Brotherhood's most important ally, changed sides and joined the opposition. Since 2013, the Nour Party (which is dominated by preachers who have a history of loyalism for the Mubarak regime) has stood on the side of El-Sisi, which is a good reminder that the conflict between religious and secular politics is just one of the important conflict lines.

[9] Walter Armbrust (2013) The Trickster in Egypt's January 25th Revolution, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55(4), pp. 834-864.

happened). That mood often has been described as a "breaking of the fear." Authoritarian regimes like those of Mubarak, Ben Ali, and Asad relied strongly on fear as the driving force that compelled citizens to avoid head-on confrontation and to be complicit with the system even if they hated it. After the subdued mood of the Mubarak era, the mood of life became more radical and outspoken. The examples commonly cited sound rather sympathetic: a flourishing artistic and cultural life, couples more likely to show their affection publicly, a plurality of different visions of life and points of view, and an on-going series of protests and strikes aiming to right wrongs instead of enduring them. But the same sense of emboldening also meant an increase in street crime, sexual harassment taking more violent forms, people settling their private conflicts with guns in the streets, an aggressive and impolite tone of interaction, and the idea that the best way to deal with one's political opponents is to eradicate them from the face of earth.

The novelist Mukhtar Shehata, with whom I work on a research project about writers' lives in Alexandria, argues that the breaking of fear has been mistaken for a disappearance of fear. Instead, he says in an essay written in spring 2013 that we need to ask what has come in place of the fear that marked the Mubarak era:

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The truth is that neither has fear been broken, nor have any other emotions been removed. Rather, these are new emotions born out of the preceding chaos of emotions. ... Thus the emotion of natural, immediate fear is replaced by an entirely new emotion which we do not know but we call it 'the broken fear.'[10]

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[10] Mukhtar Saad Shehata (2013) Al-'atifa wa al-siyasa, *al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin* 18 June , available online at: http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=364672; date of access ??

In other words, broken fear is a positively existing sentiment: It is fear, but it is broken, reconfigured in a seemingly chaotic way. It can be described as an affective complex in its own right that involves anxiety, excitement, terror, courage, unrest, hope, and an attitude of assertively sticking to one's own point of view. Broken fear as the emotional tone of the revolutionary stormy season does not allow us to neatly distinguish between positive and negative effects of the revolution. They belong to the same process, the same sentiment.

As time passed, the destructive side of that process became more and more evident in the shape of nervous tension, aggression, confusion, and anxiety. In the traumatising "chaos of emotions" the path of assertive, aggressive action appeared as a way out.
When the Tamarod Campaign began to collect signatures for a popular impeachment of Morsi in the spring of 2013, it presented itself as a legal and non-violent movement to make the people's voice heard. But when I was in Egypt in May and June 2013, I constantly heard people speaking about the upcoming bloodshed they expected. The expectation was that the Brotherhood would not go voluntarily. They would fight back fiercely. They would need to be forced.

Broken fear was the condition of the possibility of turning such expectations of bloodshed into actual bloodshed. It did not overcome nested forms of systemic violence that continued to prevail in Egypt and the region. Rather, it provided a mediated spectrum of new, additional models of and for violent action (such as burning police stations and party offices). Importantly, it also affected many taboos and inhibitions that were about maintaining social peace.

Peace is not obvious. It needs to be maintained. Often it is maintained at a cost. In situations where people live in close proximity and mutual dependency while they may deeply dislike each others, peace can be much more important than justice. Rural customary law (*'urf*) councils, for example, often are aimed primarily at reaching a compromise and restoring peace rather than establishing truth or delivering justice. But in the mood of assertive, anxious emboldening, the mechanisms of keeping peace became increasingly hard to uphold, and a terrible, decisive battle became an increasingly attractive and likely option. The idea of a decisive battle is based on the promise that it will establish how things are, show who is the boss, and replace the uncertainty and ambivalence of peace by the certainty and clarity of struggle.[11]

Live and Let Die

The short era of Morsi's presidency was accompanied by a series of violent events in which former revolutionary allies came to face each other as enemies, and where supporters of different sides regularly accused the other side of bloodshed. A spiral of mutual accusations emerged where an exchange of opinions beyond angry shouting became almost impossible, and where each side saw the other as violent. For example, M, a university graduate in his early twenties, belongs to a circle of leftists from a village in the Nile Delta.

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[11] Oskar Verkaaik (2004) *Migrants and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p.140.

He lives in Alexandria, considers himself a socialist, and is firmly opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements. On 28 June 2013, he participated in one of the street battles in Sidi Gaber in Alexandria that evolved both before and after 30 June.[12] These clashes took place largely in the absence of the police, and a small number of firearms were used. As usual, both sides claimed that the other side was responsible for the violence and using firearms. This is how M. experienced the clashes on 28 June:

> The thugs of the Brotherhood attacked us on the 28[t] when we went to protest in Sidi Gaber, and that brought one to the point that you have to..., you reached a level where you frightened them, and they are now coming to terrorise you, or to shake you up a bit. And the people who were hit in front of our eyes.... There was an old man inside the Sidi Gaber tunnel, I took him out of there, he had been hit by a bullet in his shoulder. In his arm, the bone... it wasn't clear, but there seemed to be no bone left, his arm was smashed. We brought him to the field hospital. There the doctor said: That's a dumdum bullet. That's the same kind of bullet that killed the martyr Al-Husseini Abu Deif.[13] It made you feel... You reached a point where, if you had had any doubt previously that those people [the Muslim Brothers] might have done so to defend a cause, now they were defending the position of power they had. They would repeat what they did before, they wouldn't be afraid at all to repeat it with you or others. […] After that, you continue [i.e. join the 30

June demonstrations], while at the same time you object to there being people in the demonstration with you who chant 'Join us El-Sisi!' (*inzil ya Sisi*). But there are also people with you in Sidi Gaber, not at the Northern Military Headquarters,[14] people who love to chant for the martyrs and who hold their pictures, who are not in the demonstration to support a certain person.[15]

M. told me how the experience of violence came together with a political history of struggle and created a moment of truth and decision in spite of the doubts he continued to have. This is one of the most attractive and terrifying aspects of engaging in a violent confrontation.

Then came 30 June 2013. Supported by massive demonstrations, the army deposed Morsi on 3 July and instated a nominally civilian government. Morsi and the Brotherhood leadership were arrested, and his supporters took to the streets. The dynamic of polarisation and violence took a different turn. After 3 July, the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies followed a strategy of mass protests and martyrdom, at times intentionally provoking the military. They turned every massacre against protesters—and there were many massacres—into a moral claim for the righteousness of their cause of "legitimacy."[16] The new, de facto military government and the 30 June alliance on their side declared that they were "fighting terrorism" —even before terrorist attacks had begun. "Fighting terrorism" means declaring your

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[14] The Northern Military Headquarters and Sidi Gaber Station are less than one kilometre apart. The headquarters were a focal point of anti-military protests in 2011 and 2012, and of pro-military sentiment on 30 June 2013.

[15] Author Interview ?, date ? October 2013?

[16] "Legitimacy" refers to the electoral mandate of Morsi's presidency.

enemy to be outside the realms of law, negotiation, and fair treatment. A "terrorist," regardless of whether he or she actually commits any acts of terrorism, is by definition a person who can and must be caught or killed *before* he or she can act.

The different sides of the confrontation in Egypt staged a series of powerful symbolic actions in June and July 2013 that left the other party with a choice between humiliating capitulation and an escalation of the confrontation. The Rabea el-Adawiya sit-in was the most tragic of these confrontations. The supporters of Morsi, who had declared they were steadfast for their cause up to and including martyrdom, could not retreat. The military and its allies, having declared their enemies terrorists who must be destroyed so that the nation can live, could not let them be. Long before the massacre, everybody knew that the stand-off was going to result in a massacre. Every symbolic gesture in the name of the nation, religion, the people, revolution, or the martyrs made it more difficult to retreat.

Although both sides continued to see the other as the primary perpetrator of violence, "the war against terrorism" brought a different logic of violence: a violence of supremacy that no longer fit into the moral logic of defensive struggle and martyrdom. Such violence of supremacy no longer abided by the logic of relative equity of response. Even in the absence of actual violence, the mere fact that the other side would act in a provocative manner became an existential threat that legitimised a call to eradicate them. The more the pro-military party demonised its enemies, the more demonic did it become.

M. remembers the discussions of those days that increasingly circled around the desire to put a clear end point to the confrontation regardless of the cost, to live and let die:

Then it reached a point where every day you say that these farces and theatres that were going on in the sit-ins of Rabea and el-Nahda, and the massacres that happened with them in Isaaf Square or in Ramses, or at the Presidential Guard... all the incidents that happened made one say: 'This farce must have an end'. But how to end it? People tell you: 'Just storm it, man! Finish it!' The thing one heard the most was: 'What's the problem if we finish them off?' With the same logic of Morsi: 'So what if one dies so that the others can live?' No! No matter how much the people wanted it to end, and no matter how much you see that those are your enemies and they don't deserve to live, it's not OK that you get to the point of exterminating them so that you can get rid of them altogether, or so that you can live and take their place.'[17]

But as M.'s strong misgivings show, this was not a smooth process, and not everybody bought into it. A.S., a man in his mid-twenties from a bourgeois family in Alexandria, had participated in protests ever since 25 January 2011. He was on the streets in January and February 2011, during the Mohamed Mahmood Street uprising in November and December 2011, and on many other occasions. He was injured twice and experienced some narrow escapes from death. Those were the most beautiful days of his life. He also participated in the 30 June movement, and on 5 July 2013, he was among a large group of demonstrators facing a large group of Morsi supporters in Sidi Gaber in Alexandria. The clashes that evolved cost 12 lives, most of them supporters of Morsi. The night after the clashes, he wrote on his Facebook page:

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[17] Author Interview, DATE

What happened today in Alexandria wasn't a victory for us because we pushed the

Muslim Brothers to the sea and caught and killed many of them, and neither was it a

victory for the Muslim Brothers because they shot us with birdshot and killed

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many of us. What happened today was a human tragedy. The people on both sides no

longer felt what they were doing. They just lost their humanity, and were left with their

wickedness and love for blood and burning and killing. They began to enjoy when they

killed more, and boast that they killed somebody with a knife in his head, or burned his

car. That is, when the Muslim Brothers throw one down from the roof and when he dies

they shout 'God is great', celebrating the blood... And when the revolutionaries catch one

of the Muslim Brothers, and he tries to escape, and they gather around him, 100 of them,

like hungry animals who found a piece of meat and everybody wants a bit of it, happy as

hell that they killed him and finished off the agent and traitor. What stopped me in the

middle of all that happened, was when I saw the Salafi man wounded in front of me, the

blood flooding the street, and his eyes frightened. At that moment, I imagined that my

brother who is a Salafi could be in the place of that man. At that moment, I couldn't stay

the master of my nerves, and I could no longer understand anything anymore. For me,

this has nothing to do with either religion or revolution, or with citizenship/patriotism

(*muwatana*).[18]

The shock and confusion experienced by A.S. was born from witnessing the ugly and wicked

reality of decisive battles. But the vast majority of Egyptians only experienced those events

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[18] Insert link to facebook page

through the media—heavily filtered at best, fabricated and twisted at worst. For those following

the events on their television screens and on social media, neither the frenzy and joy of killing

nor the shattering and confusing experience of being part of it, were part of their experience of

the escalation. Instead, they received a much more convenient vision about right and wrong, a

vision where their enemies were acting in wicked bloodthirsty frenzy while their own side was

taking measured, necessary steps to defend the nation against an existential threat. When the

fantasy of bloodshed became real, it needed to be heavily filtered to make it feel necessary and

appropriate, to prevent moments of shock and confusion like the one A.S. experienced. The

illusion of acting in a necessary and limited fashion against inhumanely wicked enemies helped

people to oscillate between two seemingly incompatible stances: A call to kill one's enemies, and

the insistence that it was one's enemies who were being violent. It is one thing to call for a

massacre, and another thing to admit having participated in one. It is much easier to lose one's

humanity in front of a television screen.

No tears for Rabea

This is the moment when what once had been the revolutionist current in the village fell apart.

They did not disagree about 30 June, nor did they disagree about their enmity toward the Muslim

Brotherhood (in this regard they were different from some of the circles I know in Alexandria,

where a number of revolutionists did not join the 30 June movement because they resented the

prominent role played by Mubarak loyalists in it). But they did split over violence and the role of

the military leadership. In the Nile Delta village from where M. comes, the decisive event was

El-Sisi's call to Egyptians to give him a popular mandate (*tafwid*) to fight terrorism. The popular

mandate, which was followed by a massacre against Morsi's supporters the next morning,[19]

provided the key legitimation for the storming of Rabea and el-Nahda less than three weeks later.

Those who joined the large-scale demonstrations of

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the popular mandate considered those who didn't to be cowards and traitors. Those who did not

join the popular mandate (fewer in numbers) thought those who did had sold out the principles of

the revolution.

Those opposed to the popular mandate made recourse to a counter-discourse against

polarisation and killing that had formed in June 2013, making use of the humanist notion of

humanity/humaneness (*insaniya*) and the Islamic notion of sanctity of blood (*hurmat al-dam*),

the prohibition of shedding the blood of one's own. Among M's leftist friends in the village, this

stance was made most explicit by a middle-aged, one-time member of the Communist Party who

emphasised that his stance was not a political but a moral one. "If we ask about those who got

killed in Rabea: 'What were they doing there anyway?' (*eh illi waddahum hinak?*), then what

were those killed on 25 January doing there anyway, and what were those killed in Mohamed

Mahmoud doing there anyway, and what were they all doing there anyway?"[20]

It would be a mistake to claim that those who refused the popular mandate were acting in

a moral way while those who joined it were not. In a moment of immediate confrontation, the

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[19] Protesters from the Rabea sit-in tried to expand the area of the sit-in toward the monument of the unknown soldier and nearly one hundred people were killed when they were dispersed with live ammunition in the early morning hours of 27 July 2013.

[20] Author Interview (?), date ??

loss of moral inhibitions and the outbreak of hysterical anger can be an uncontrollable, explosive situation where people just freak out. But maintaining a mood of righteous anger for weeks and months requires a more conscious work of cultivation.

Morality's location is where spontaneous and cultivated emotions meet, where intuitive gut reactions and reflection come together. Compassion, love, anger, fear, emboldening, friendship and enmity can all be spontaneous affects and carefully cultivated moral stances at once, and they can be extended or restricted to more or less people. Maintaining uncompromising anger can be just as moral as insisting on the sanctity of blood. In fact, those revolutionists who in summer 2013 stood on the side of uncompromising anger were very affirmative that their stance was the morally right one.

M.S. moved in the same circles of revolutionist leftists as M. in the village. He belonged to those who joined the popular mandate, and for several months he was not on good talking terms with those who rejected it. In July 2013, he wrote to me, very angry about what in my view was my opposition to summary killings, but in his view was my support for the fascist Muslim Brotherhood. In remarkably internationalist terms, he criticised me for failing to support the anti-fascist struggle that should be the shared cause of the left worldwide. When I finally met him on my next visit in Egypt in October 2013, our tempers had calmed enough that he could explain to me his point of view.

Yes, he had been calling "down with military rule" during the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in 2011/12, but now the situation was different, he said. As a leftist and secularist, he was facing a fundamentally violent fascist movement, and that movement had to be defeated. As an intellectual, he explained, he could not successfully fight them in the

streets. To do that, the muscle and the organisation of the army were necessary. For M.S., this was not just a strategic choice. It was a matter of principle. As a Nasserist and nationalist, he sees the army and the nation as united—however, he sees the role of the army as the protector, not as the leader of the nation. For M.S., who is an active supporter of the Nasserist politician Hamdeen Sabbahi, El-Sisi did the right thing in summer 2013, but he should

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not have become president. Even months later, when increasing scepticism spread in the former revolutionist circles who found it hard to deny the reality of a full-scale re-consolidation of the old regime, he made his stance clear on his Facebook account: "So you may call me a *mutabbalati* ("percussionist", propagandist for the regime) and old regime loyalist; but the Muslim Brothers are not Egyptians just like us, and not all blood is *haram*."[21]

Support for the violence of supremacy did not necessarily go hand in hand with support or respect for the military's role. R., a woman from Alexandria active in the revolutionist movement, invested no hope in the military, but she also would shed no tears for those killed in Rabea. When I met her in spring 2014 and we sorted out our different points of view, she insisted that what was happening was "two armed gangs finishing each other off." The Rabea sit-in was armed, she told me. There were only perpetrators, no victims.[22] She and many others put much effort in discursively establishing a symmetry of violence that would allow one to claim the position of a righteous outsider and not to ask certain uncomfortable questions. Be it in the exposed militancy of M.S., or in the way R. took distance from the events by placing equal blame on the parties involved, these stances required reflection, consideration about right and

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[21] Link to Facebook page?

[22]
 Author Interview, Date?

wrong, means and ends. They and others were involved in what contemporary anthropology calls ethics:[23] the reflection about the relationship of values and actions, and the cultivation of those values as attitudes.

"Ethics" sounds sympathetic because it is associated with being good, consistent, responsible, and learning to do the right thing. But when people argue that the good, right and responsible thing to do is to kill their enemies, then ethics reveals a darker side of human wickedness that needs to be taken seriously.

In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt argues that the most terrifying part about Eichmann was that he was *not* the fanatical monster that the prosecution tried to depict him to be. Yet, in some passages of her account, Eichmann also emerges as more than that "nothing" who organised a genocide without thinking about what he was doing. According to Arendt, Eichmann saw himself as a law-abiding citizen who had read Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* but later replaced the Kantian idea of abstract duty by the Nazi idea of duty toward the Führer.[24] For Arendt, Eichmann's reflection about duty remained criminally shallow, and it is hard to disagree with her. But in the terms of contemporary anthropology, Eichmann was engaged in a reflection about the relation and form of norms and acts. The fact that his reflection was limited to maintaining his absolute duty to the Führer and to overcoming the temptation not to kill, is appalling and criminal, but not unusual. Ethics is always particular and

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[23] Michael Jackson (1982) *Allegories of the Wilderness: Ethics and Ambiguity in Kuranko Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press); James Laidlaw (2013) *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Michael Lambek (ed.) (2010) *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action* (New York: Fordham University Press); and and Saba Mahmood, 'Religious Reason,' where published?

[24] Hannah Arendt (2006[1963]) *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin), pp.136-137.

partial, and usually grounded in a combination of specific traditions, values and aims. In that sense, Arendt was perhaps too optimistic in her analysis about the shallowness and banality of evil. There are many cases of mass murders, which have been committed by people who worked hard to do the right thing and not to give in to the temptations that might have held them back from their work.

In the past couple of decades, Western anthropologists have become reasonably good at overcoming their sense of "repugnancy"[25] and recognising the ethics involved in Islamist piety

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movements even while the ends and aims of these movements can be radically at odds with what most anthropologists believe in. Anthropologists have been less good, however, at giving the same benefit of doubt to paranoid nationalism. One can speculate about the reasons. My hunch is that this is because anthropologists in their own societies are often politically and ideologically in open conflict with supporters of populist and paranoid nationalism. We can speak with more ease about people who are not our immediate enemies. But this is not an excuse. If we can give militant piety the benefit of doubt about its ethical nature, then we must be able to give the same benefit of doubt to militarist nationalism. I do not mean to say that we should become relativists who agree that whatever people claim to be right is right for them. Morality is about living with others. It is about contact, communication, and conflict. There are no relativistic cultural islands. M.S.'s recourse to the leftist internationalist discourse of anti-fascism is a case in point. What I mean is that we must take seriously the fact that human evil and wickedness are partly rooted in the desire to defend the good. There is no safe realm of ultimate goodness.

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[25] Susan Harding (1991) Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other, in *Social Research*, 58(2), pp.373-393.

A plea for confusion and weakness

To have a consistent moral stance, one needs to engage in reflection—alone or, more typically, with others—about what is right, what is important, and what is to be done. One needs to cultivate it in acts and attitudes. But moral reflection also requires moral oblivion. To have faith in something, it helps to be sceptical about things that might trouble that faith. Even better, one should not think about such things at all. One may develop sensibilities and attitudes that make one sarcastic, condescending, or angry about acts and claims that could constitute a competing sense of right and good. One may use double standards without noticing that one is doing so. In short, one may make oneself immune toward views and ways of living that would trouble the sense of right and good which one has worked hard to make one's own. A case in point is the kind of academic leftism that is strong among anthropologists in the West. Anthropologists can be highly critical about global power inequalities while not paying much attention to the way in which their own careers are rooted in a class society.

At no other time is moral oblivion as crucial as in the time of a righteous struggle. This, if any, is the moment of clear, firm stances, a moment of action, a moment of purity. It is a moment when it is necessary *not* to see things from your enemy's point of view, and *not* to question one's own position, but instead to go with the flow of righteous anger. Remembering that the bearded man lying on the street could be one's own brother destabilises the consistency of the struggle and contaminates its oblivious purity. Purity is a very dirty business. Such ethics of purity and struggle came to dominate the scene in Egypt in the summer of 2013, preceded and made

possible by two and a half years of "broken fear." Among those who sided with el-Sisi's "war on terrorism", an excitement of anger and disbelief toward those who stood on the other side—liars, terrorists, not Egyptians like all of us—combined with a convenient oblivion about the real shape and extent of the killing and torture that was being committed by one's own side, worked toward a sense of certainty that centred on the positive value of the nation and a sense of urgency that centred on the threat of terrorism. This made the bloodshed that followed not only possible, but also justified, appropriate, and necessary from the point of view of those who sided with the "war on terrorism".

If terrible crimes can be committed in the name of lofty values, if *any* stance and *any* action can be ethical with the help of some hard work of cultivation, reflection, and oblivion, if

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anger and fury are such a successful way to prevent potential doubt—then what hope can there be? Can there be a moral stance that may not, in the right circumstances, join the campaign for the mass killing of those whose stance is wrong?

Consistency and reflexivity do not provide a way out. A refusal of political violence in the name of "humanity" and the "sanctity of blood" can be as consistent and well-thought as the call for a relentless "war against terror" for the sake of a strong nation. The same applies to the commitment to martyrdom and confrontation for the sake of "Islamic Law and electoral legitimacy" (*el-shari'a wa-l-shar'iya*), or to a Jihadist bombing campaign of "martyrdom attacks." Each stance relies on some things problematised and others taken for granted, some questions asked and others not, some instinctive gut reactions cultivated and others suppressed.

Of course, humans are seldom consistent. Consistency requires struggle—both in the sense that one sometimes must struggle to maintain an "illusion of consistency"[26], as well as in the sense that meaningful struggle is the most powerful way to maintain that illusion. Peace, in comparison, is a messy and hypocritical affair of compromises, concessions, and questionable deals.

Yet, struggle creates not only moments of clarity but also moments of confusion, moments when the cultivation of certainty and oblivion fails. One such moment was A.S.'s shock when the beauty of struggle transformed into the joy of killing. Another such moment is described by M., remembering his own initial reactions to the storming of the Rabea el-Adawiya sit-in:

> We were happy when the storming of Rabea began. In the beginning, when the storming began, we were sitting together and watching [on television]. We thought: 'Beautiful! They are evicting them without hurting them. Just shooting some tear gas at them...' And all the stuff that was told on TV at first and all the images that were broadcast on ONTV or the other channels that were covering it.[27] […] We were all... or never mind 'we', let me just speak for myself. I was sitting and watching, and I was happy that it was over, and that it was just tear gas without excessive violence, and I said: 'Now you really are doing something. You are decreasing the tension inside the people against the Muslim Brothers. You put an end to it, and relieve people of the violence that was accumulating inside those in the Rabea and el-Nahda sit-ins.' And then, when the numbers became

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[26] Catherine Ewing (1990) 'The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self, and the Experience of Inconsistency, *Ethos*, 18, pp. 251–278.

[27] M. and his friends would not watch *Al-Jazeera* which they distrusted because of its pro-Muslim Brotherhood bias.

known, and the aggression and violence that happened, and the horrible way they dealt

with the people inside the Rabea sit-in... And graver than the numbers of people who got

killed was how the people who previously were angry about violent treatment against

anybody were no longer angry when the violence was against others and far from them...

It makes your realise that before, you weren't against violence just because you are

against violence. People were against violence because it targeted them. When it turned

away from them and targeted those they hate, it became good. Now they want it, prefer it,

and they demand that it be used against those people, and they tell you that that's the only

way to deal with those people.[28]

M. did not try to depict his decisions and choices as consistent, because he experienced a

confusion that he could not, or would not, rationalise and explain away. Unlike M.S., who was

firm in his stance of a righteous struggle by all means necessary, M. could not experience

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joy from seeing his enemy defeated once he realised what that meant in practice. He could not

resist the temptation to see his enemies as fellow human beings.

In an inspiring attempt to understand Egypt's bloody 2013, Talal Asad focusses on the

concept of traditions.[29] Traditions and the work of learning to live by them, Asad argues, help us

to understand the current stand-off better– and may also offer a way to overcome it. I have not

focussed on traditions in this essay, but it might be useful indeed to elaborate the political and

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[28] Author Interview with M, DATE, place.

[29] Talal Asad (2014) Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today, *Critical Inquiry* http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/thinking_about_tradition_religion_and_politics_in_egypt_today/

ethical traditions involved in the current situation – such as socialism and anti-colonial nationalism. Unlike liberalism (Asad's main theoretical adversary), they have a long-standing record of openly supporting violence for the right cause[30] and have long cultivated a binary worldview of the imperialist vs. the anti-imperialist – a binary which for many Egyptian leftists provided a blueprint for their support of El-Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood. It might also be helpful to look into the coming together of different ethical traditions in a shared stance in the discourses of "humanity" and "sanctity of blood."

Asad identifies the sovereign state as a key cause of violence and cruelty in the contemporary world. I wonder if this is true regarding all kinds of states, but with regard to the specific history of the awe and authority of the executive in Egypt[31] it clearly is true. The more interesting part of Asad's intervention, however, is his search for alternatives to sovereignty. In a better world after sovereignty, Asad suggests, "the tradition of *amr bi-l-ma`ruf* [commanding the right] could form an orientation of mutual care of the self, based on the principle of friendship (and therefore on responsibility to and between friends) not on the legal principle of citizenship."[32]

Asad clearly does not mean any of the actually existing alternatives to sovereignty, such as global capitalism that already has greatly eroded the sovereignty of most states; or post-sovereign political entities such as Lebanon where communitarian groups grounded in ethical traditions hold political power. The first, for Asad, is a destructive power; the second he does not

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[30] This is not to say that liberals (in the European sense of supporters of political liberalism) would not be supportive of violence. They often are, but liberal support of violence needs more silences and denials than a socialist revolutionary one.

[31] Ellis Goldberg and Hind Ahmed Zaki (2012) After the Revolution: Sovereign Respect and the Rule of Law in Egypt, *Yearbook of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law*, 16, pp.17-32.

[32] Asad, "Thinking About Tradition".

mention. Asad's world after sovereignty is a utopian vision of a world grounded in ethics, and imagining it requires a leap of fantasy not less radical than imagining a world without monotheistic faith. I appreciate Asad's proposal precisely because of its daring, utopian nature.

However, I would be more sceptical about the capacity of ethics and traditions to provide a constructive alternative. When M.S. criticised me for failing to stand by anti-fascist solidarity in fighting the Muslim Brotherhood, he was engaged in precisely the kind of the mutual moral engagement that *amr bi-l-ma`ruf* is about in Asad's reading. He sought and found the language of a tradition we both shared and recognised: leftist internationalism. He called me to return to the path of solidarity and struggle laid out by that tradition. Last but not least, his ethical critique was grounded in friendship. Afterwards, he put much effort in restoring our friendship after the rupture that had resulted from our irreconcilable political and moral

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disagreement. But if his ethical act of "mutual care of the self" would have been successful, I might now be writing an article to justify the use of all necessary means to defend Egypt against fascism and terrorism.

Ethics are part of the problem *and* a part of the solution. The question, then, is what kind of ethics, what kind of mutual engagement may be helpful to restore and maintain peace between humans and perhaps even prevent the military, economical and ecological self-destruction our species is about to face. I cannot offer a utopian vision like Asad could, but I have a suggestion: It can take a lot of moral strength and integrity to immunize oneself against escalating polarisation and incitement to moral anger, to maintain one's humanity and to respect the sanctity

of blood, as those who were against escalation and bloodshed in summer 2013 put it.[33] But in a time when so much emotional and ethical work is invested in creating and maintaining enmity and purity, weakness also may become a virtue. Being a coward can rescue one from the destructive stand-off of fearless confrontation.[34] The sense of *irbak*—bewilderment, confusion, and loss of solid ground— which many people told me about in 2013, can become an antithesis to fiercely cultivated determination and oblivion. Of course, there is cowardice that is negative, and confusion that is destructive. But in a world that is crowded by mutually exclusive ideas of purity, confusion can be the ground of that specific kind of reflection that Eichmann lacked in Arendt's reading: a confusion that results from the failure to maintain lines of purity and enmity, that forces one to look into the eyes of one's enemy and see oneself. It is not a confusion that results in a happy idealist recognition of "them" to be sympathetic, nice people just like "us." Such recognition probably would be a misrecognition of both parties anyway. To reach peace, one must recognise the fact of enmity. Rather, as in M.'s account of his reactions to the Rabea al-Adawiya massacre, it may be grounded in the realisation that "we" are just as wicked and violent as "them", and that it should not stay that way.

Acknowledgements

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