

Restless Young Egyptians – Where Did You Come From and Where Will You Go?

Mira Tzoreff*

Name: Aḥmad Muḥammad Sayyid.

Age: 28.

Education: Degree in tourism and hotel management.

Marital Status: Single.

Occupation: driver.

Monthly Salary: 100 dollars.

Mental State: depressed.

Additional Biographical Details: Aḥmad Muḥammad Sayyid was engaged for two years. During this period he was supposed to have purchased for himself and his fiancée an apartment and furniture, and even saved up enough money to pay for the wedding party. However, his meager monthly salary was not enough, and the engagement was cancelled due to pressure from the bride's family. The young man, who is living with his mother, a 45 year old divorcee, has drawn closer to religion as his disappointments became more frequent, his dignity was lost and his frustration increased. For many months he has been isolating himself in his house. Next to his bed lie two books: a large Qur'an and a small Qur'an. He spends most of his time listening to the daily chapters of the Qur'an broadcast on the radio. "I can't find a workplace that suits my training and my skills. I do not have money, and I cannot get married. What else can I say?" Aḥmad Muḥammad Sayyid concluded his story.

The young Egyptian's story is not unusual. It is repeated among many of Egypt's young men and women. (27% of all the youth aged 15-29 who have graduated high school and university, and constitute over 25% of the population). Some of them are unemployed and some work at jobs which are considered demeaning, such as cleaning and waiting on tables, if for no other

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reason, to be able to support themselves.¹ The following lines from the essay "when" ('Indama) written by the Saudi author and political journalist, Wajīha al-Ḥuwaydar, reveal the proportions of this trend, not only in Egypt, but in all of the Arab and Islamic states: "When you have studied for five years in an elementary school, three years in middle school, an equal amount in high school and four or five years in university to work afterwards in the vegetable market, do not despair – you are in an Arab country."² Such situations require many younger people to postpone or cancel their marriage, even though this is the only institution that provides independence. Being primarily a religious duty, it is viewed as a rite of passage from youth to manhood and provides respect and a legitimate sex.

Professor Diane Singerman who teaches at the American University in Cairo (AUC) demonstrates a constant rise in marriage costs in Egypt. Thus, for example, in 1999 it cost \$6,000 to get married – 11 times the per capita annual income. Five years later in 2004, the overall cost increased by 25%. The result, of course, is a delay in marrying. The proof: a generation ago 63% of the men in the Middle East, including Egypt, married in their mid-twenties, while today the average marrying age is 31.³

Sociologists claim that the source of this "social disease" lies in the illusion that 'Abd an-Nāṣer nurtured already back in the 1950s among the younger generation when he made higher education accessible to everyone. 'Abd an-Nāṣer encouraged both the rural and urban youth to acquire an academic education, and promised a government position to every university graduate. President Ḥusnī Mubarak also expressed a similar sentiment on various occasions when he claimed that "Egypt's security, as well as the revival of any society whatsoever, begins and ends in the education of its sons and daughters."⁴ Despite the fact that it was a singular opportunity for many youths to escape ignorance, Egypt's economy, then like today, was not prepared to absorb the many graduates, and provide them with appropriate jobs, which would allow them to settle down, marry and establish families.

In addition, many of these young people have not received during their studies the necessary training to enable them to adapt to the private sector. This is argued, for example, by job market experts who claim that business administration students do not acquire the basic skills necessary to operate a computer during their studies. As a result, they stand less of a chance of finding work in the private sector in high tech occupations. University

¹ Michael Slackman, "Dreams Stifled, Egypt's Young Turn to Islamic Fervor," *The New York Times*, February 17, 2008.

² Wajīha al-Ḥuwaydar, "Ka'asher" (When), *Middle East Transparent*, February 11, 2007, (From the Hebrew translation at the "Zavit Acheret" (A Different Angle) site at: <http://zavita.co.il/archives/18>)

³ See: Michael Slackman.

⁴ Magdī ad-Daqqāq, "Ṣinā'at al-Thaqāfa Bi-l-Ta'lim" *Al-Hilāl*, May 2006, p. 7.

students spend on average three years searching for work. This leads to one of three results: some graduates choose to remain unemployed and not seek out blue collar work. From their point of view, working in these types of jobs is a stain upon their honor and the honor of their families. They choose instead to spend their time in cafes, smoking hookah and making idle chitchat on the Nile.⁵ This is a form of escapism, a hopeless flight intended as a salve for their troubles and frustration. It is in cafes like these where some of these young adults thirst after the words of prominent Egyptian intellectuals who they encounter. Others choose to overcome their pride and support themselves through temporary positions while hoping that the desired government position will eventually open up. This is what a young Egyptian university graduate tried to convince the journalist who interviewed him: "This is temporary work; I am waiting for a response from a government office where I applied for the position of deputy department manager.⁶ This person has been waiting for an answer for over three years. The rest of the young people choose to emigrate in order to try their luck in western countries and in the US, the land of endless opportunities. They hope that in the global cities possibilities that are not available in their native country will open up for them.

These young people are trapped between the ideal image of university graduates whose futures are wide open and the reality which prevents these young Egyptians from actualizing this image. Add to this the exposure that these young people receive of the "good life," which their western educated counterparts enjoy. The authorities cannot censor this knowledge because of the "New Media": satellite channels, internet web sites and blogs. This allows the young people to observe in real-time the daily routine of their overseas student colleagues, which only increases the feelings of frustration and being trapped. The gap between the socio-economic status of the western academic youth and his Egyptian counterpart is caused, among other things, by the western view that "young people own the world." This is a view that considers modernity a renewal when compared to the past, and the "youth" as a concrete embodiment of that renewal.⁷

This is not only a theoretical view, but is also expressed in the obsession to satisfy the young people and to fulfill their desires. The leaders in the Middle East are wasting a lot of words with declarations on the importance of the younger generation (*al-Jil al-Jadid*) to the nation's future, but are constantly

⁵ This paraphrase refers to the book written by Naguib Mahfouz, *Adrift on The Nile*, translated to Hebrew by Michal Sela (Jerusalem:1989)

⁶ Zvi Barel, "Kor'im Lo Ali, Hu Arkhitekt U-menake Batim" (His Name is Ali, and he is an architect who cleans houses), *Ha'aretz*, January 31, 2007.

⁷ Yotam Hotam, "Tsa'ir Lanetsah: Valter Binyamin Vehametafisika Shel Hane'urim" (Forever Young: Walter Benjamin and the metaphysics of youth), *Zemanim*, 102 (Spring 2008, in Hebrew), p. 46.

occupied with limiting their access to the products, trends and belief systems of the Western culture. They fear that there will be a competition with the local culture or the Islamic religious values. The result is that the establishment cooperates with the anxieties of the older generation (*al-Jīl al-Māḍī*), the parents' generation, which is naturally concerned about the infiltration of the popular, familiar Western culture, which they interpret as violence, sex in the form of movies, music and clothing styles.⁸ The only problem is that placing various censorships on the products of the western culture only improves the tactics and strategies that the young Egyptians adopt to acquire some of these commodities, in the sense of "stolen waters are sweet" (Proverbs 9:16). Conservative circles interpret such schemes, employed by young men and women, as an expression of the destructive influences of the Western culture on the younger generation. This behavior shames their pure authentic culture, rudely stomps on its dignity, the dignity of their families and the dignity of their nation.

The wrath of these young people is naturally aimed at the establishment. And, it is well reflected in the products of Egyptian popular culture. This anger is expressed in a critical play, by the Egyptian playwright Linīn ar-Ramlī, called *Sa'adūn the Madman* (*Sa'adūn al-Magnūn*). The play's protagonist is a young student who points an accusing finger at the leadership: "We the university graduates, we the university graduates, are not succeeding in finding work, nor a vacant apartment, nor a proper bride, nor a political party to which we can join and no good soccer game that we can watch. They don't want us to love and not to look at belly dancing, and they have forbidden the drinking of beer in the clubs. Do they want us to commit suicide or carry a machine gun in our hand? At least they should have the decency to lower the price of hashish."⁹ In that exact spirit, another youth laments: "I am a university graduate, unemployed, I have no apartment and I do not have the money to get married. What do I care about the politics and the wars? I want someone to tell me what I will do and how I will get along in life?"¹⁰

The Egyptian cinema, with its young directors and producers, is also reacting to this frustrating situation. For instance, the movie *Cultural Film* (*Film Thaqāfī*) tells the story of three young Egyptians who want to watch a pornographic film, but are unable to find a television set, a VCR or even a place to watch it. In the moments of frustration which they experience throughout the movie they accuse the establishment: "The problem does not lie with you, it lies with the establishment" (*A-Mushkila mish fik, hiyya fi-l-Nizām*). *Cultural film* is a voice crying out – the voice of the scriptwriter, the

⁸ Ali Akbar Mahdi (ed.), *Teen Life in the Middle East*, (Greenwood Press, 2003), p. 9.

⁹ Lenin El-Ramli, *Saadon the Madman*, translated from Arabic: Avraham Hakim and Gabriel Rozenbaum, (Tel Aviv: Gamir, 1998), p. 125.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 113.

producer and the young actors who serve as mouths for the thousands of silent young Egyptian men and women.

'*Urfi* or *Misyār* weddings are another trend that is a direct result of the inability to marry. These are the Sunni version of the Shiite *Mut'ah* weddings: pleasure marriages which allow young men and women to realize their love – or more precisely, their desire – without any commitment towards one another. These weddings have the oral consent of the partners for a period which can range from one hour to 99 years. One of the more absurd expression's of these types of marriages is weekend nuptials, which take place without any official documentation. Among religious parties, there is a dispute whether these weddings carry any weight from a religious point of view. Thus, for example, Sayyid 'Abd al-Futūh, a professor for Islamic studies at the 'Ayn Shams university, believes that for a marriage to be valid four conditions need to be fulfilled: the marriage must be based on the mutual consent of the partners; the marriage contract needs to be signed by two witnesses (male), or one male witness and two female witnesses whose testimony is considered the equivalent of one male witness; the man must pay the woman her dowry; and, the marriage has to be public. '*Urfi* or *Misyār* weddings, on the other hand, take place in private without the knowledge of the couple's parents; therefore, it is unlikely that witnesses, whether male or female, will be involved in the process. This is what completely undermines the validity of these marriages.¹¹

A survey which was released by the Central Bureau of Statistics in Egypt indicates that 37% of all young Egyptians are bachelors. However, the most significant data in this poll relates to the number of bachelors and bachelorettes older than 35. According to the survey, there are over nine million young people who have passed that age, which include 3,773,000 young women and roughly 6.5 million young men.¹² In spite of the aforementioned problems, in the beginning of June 2007 the *Al-Azhar* Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs confirmed the validity of *Misyār* and '*Urfi* weddings as a solution for the hardships which the young people face. This came about as a result of the dramatic rise in the marriage age, which now stands at 42 for men and 35 for women.¹³

Yet, even though there are those who viewed this step as a display of flexibility and the council's adopting a pragmatic view of reality, the legitimacy granted by the religious establishment to these marriages should not be viewed as a solution to the problem, but rather as a means of

¹¹ Gihan Shahine, "The Double Blind," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, (№ 397), 1-7 October, 1998.

¹² Fā'iza Hindāwī, "Al-Mahr Yaktum Anfās al-Zaghārid al-Miṣriyya" ("Dowries Stifle Egyptian Trills of Joy"), *Al-Jarīda* (350), July 7, 2008.

¹³ From Manisha's blog (launched in February 2007). See the following link:
<http://living-in-egypt-manisha.blogspot.com/2007/06/azar-sanctions-urfi-marriages.html>

bypassing it - these weddings only provide a specific temporary solution. The women are liberated by these marriages from their late bachelorhood. The men get a taste of married life, but mainly experience sex, despite their financial difficulties that prevent them from purchasing an apartment, finding work, and marrying properly. "I was a relatively new student in the university when one of my female friends offered to marry me in an 'Urfi wedding," says Aḥmad, a student at the University of Cairo. "She suggested that we do it in secret, without any legal proceeding or financial commitment on my part. I was naive at the time and thought she was kidding, but soon it became very clear to me that she was serious because such a marriage was the only way for her to escape bachelorhood."¹⁴

Aḥmad's story is one of many since this trend is particularly widespread among male and female students, and middleclass high school students. The extent of this trend can be determined from the authorities' reports, which in 1998 revealed 3,000 'Urfi weddings in Egypt; however, these marriages are constantly increasing. "I believe that these young people, who choose to marry in this manner, are nothing but victims of the widening gulf between the high costs of living and the constantly increasing demands of the bride's parents that make these weddings the only option for them," Sihām Hāshem, a professor in psychology from the 'Ayn Shams University, states determinedly.

No one disputes the fact that young women who marry in 'Urfi or Misyār weddings pay a heavier price than the men because the loss of virginity will make it more difficult for them to remarry (although, even this can be solved through surgeries for restoring the hymen, which have become more common nowadays). In addition, the woman cannot sue her husband for a divorce if he chooses to deny this marriage which is undocumented and unauthorized, and will have to remain "chained", forbidden from remarrying out of fear that she will be guilty of bigamy. Also, if a young woman were to get pregnant during such a marriage and her husband were to abandon her, she could end up penniless and be forced to raise her children as a single mother. The department of justice in Egypt has indeed reported 12,000 paternity lawsuits, with 70-90 percent of them being from women who were abandoned by their spouses after having been married in an 'Urfi wedding.¹⁵

The most famous case was that of the 27 year old interior designer Hind al-Ḥināwī, who, with her father's support, sued the famous 24 year old television actor, Aḥmad al-Fishāwī for paternity. She had married him in an 'Urfi wedding, gotten pregnant and gave birth to their joint child. Al-Fishāwī abandoned her the moment she refused to have an abortion, and denied that

¹⁴ See: Gihan Shahine.

¹⁵ See: Gihan Shahine.

he was the father of the unborn child she was carrying in her womb.¹⁶ The case created a fiery public discussion not only because it involved celebrities, but also because the judge forced al-Fishāwī to have his DNA tested. This created a new precedent because the accepted religious interpretation was that DNA tests are only used to prove paternity in cases of adultery, and even then the father needs the wife's consent before he can make such a demand. However, in this case, it was the woman who was demanding the genetic test to determine the father's culpability, and the judge granted her request. After two years of legal struggles and public exposure the court ruled that al-Fishāwī was the father of the baby girl, and as such was obligated to pay child support for her.¹⁷

The trend displays, also in this context, a wealth of cultural products whose purpose is to shout out the cries of these young women and to extensively criticize this phenomenon. It can be seen in the two part television drama written by the reporter, publicist and author, Iqbāl Baraka, which reflects the problems the victims of 'Urḥī weddings encounter. The show focuses on the experiences of two female students who married two young men in such a ceremony. One of the women became pregnant and was abandoned by her husband. She is left with no legal evidence of her marriage and chooses to kill herself. The other woman chooses to stay married to her spouse against her will since her husband refuses to grant her a divorce – a form of death in the shape of a life sentence. This television drama, says Baraka, should be taken as a warning sign for families, young women and the legislators who frequently ignore women's rights in the frameworks of these marriages. The young Egyptians are using this ploy to gain love, partnership and sex, but are choosing a semi-legal method to bypass the economic barrier to a proper marriage.

However, this is not the only means which young Egyptian men and women employ to bypass the limits which the authorities place on them – the social and religious norms. Optimizing the use of the New Media, they wander the various dating sites on the internet to find a spouse, and thus work around as well as challenge the "salon marriages" ("Zawāg Ṣālūnāt"). In this wedding framework, the family locates a potential groom for their daughter via close friends and relatives, investigates and interrogates about him, and if the candidate meets their expectations they invite him and his parents to their home. If the meeting between both sets of parents goes well, the couple will get married. This is how most matchmaking is done with the extended family or among the family's social circle. It is no wonder that in the modern and post-modern age these types of arranged weddings, "salon

¹⁶ Yasmine Fathi, "Patrimony Blues," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, № 747, (16-22 June, 2005). See the following link: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/747/fe1.htm>.

¹⁷ The details of this case can be found at the *Omsiyat* forum: <http://www.omsiyat.com/naas/showthread.php?t=6906>.

marriages" in the Egyptian version, are viewed by the younger generation as old fashioned, and relegated to the past.

Already in 1899 Qāsem Amīn wrote his book *The Liberation of the Woman* (*Tahrīr al-Mar'ah*) against these marriage deals. In a cynicism which colored his writing he repeatedly raised the question: "How can a man and a woman of a sound mind commit to this marriage framework for their entire lives without being given the chance to know each other first? Most people refuse to purchase a sheep or a donkey before they have seen them with their own eyes, checked them thoroughly and received for them securities and guarantees, even more so when it is about the communication between a man and a woman for their entire lives."¹⁸ Unlike these archaic marriage contracts, the exposure and the visits to these dating websites allow the young Egyptians to choose for themselves the one that is most suited for them from a list of candidates. Indeed, these dating sites position themselves as a more appropriate alternative to the "salon marriages." Thus, for example we have the site "Ḥabībi-Ḥabībti), which addresses the visitors: "Your mother fails to find you a proper match. It is time to take matters into your own hands! Thousands of candidates are available to you according to different and varied criteria: national, religious, ethnic and even eating preferences." The motto which the site adopted is "Do it yourself." This is a form of challenge to the parents who confiscate from their children the basic right of choosing a spouse as they see fit.¹⁹

There are additional dating sites intended primarily for young Moslems. *Qirān* ("marriage contract or coupling") is the largest of them. The website has existed for roughly three years, contains an estimated two million profiles and reports 100-120 couples getting married each week as a result of their meeting on the site. Another website is *Bint al-Ḥalāl* ("a daughter [born] legitimately") that contains 600,000 registered users. *Mr. Egypt* has 50,000 registered users and reports 80-100 weddings per month online. *Naṣīb* (destiny), which registers 26,500 visits, is unique in that it does not define itself as a dating site for the purpose of marriage, but rather "a way of bringing people together for different purposes such as marriage, friendship, socializing and a way of getting closer to the Muslim community."²⁰ The site has a chatroom called "nassenger" which greets visitors with "*As-Salāmu 'Alaykum*" (welcome), and there are 12,000 new users who join each month. Another important detail is that the site charges 120 Egyptian liras in payment. Dr. Madiḥa aṣ-Ṣaftī, affiliate professor of sociology at the AUC, states that the dating sites advance the institution of marriage since the

¹⁸ Quasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women - A Document in the History of Egyptian Feminism*, (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 1992), p. 77.

¹⁹ Ethar El-Katatney, "True-Love.com," *Egypt Today*, July 2007. See following link: <http://www.egypttoday.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=7553>.

²⁰ See: Ethar El-Katatney.

couples not only meet directly without any mediation, they have the opportunity to do so before they actually meet by using the web. According to aṣ-Ṣaftī, this is undoubtedly a means for getting to know and choose the right person.²¹

An attempt to come up with a profile of the average young Egyptian who uses dating websites would indicate that the dominant age groups range from 23-35. However, beyond this statistic, lies a wide stretch of users; this trend crosses demographic borders, professional classes and education levels. In most of the websites only the men are required to pay. 'Abd al-Futūḥ, an agent for a number of websites, lists the arguments in favor of this practice, and claims that the only real reason for this behavior is commercial – there are more men on these sites than women. Thus, for example 71% of all the visitors at *Qiran* are men, while the women either do not work, and as a result cannot pay for access to websites, or their salary is too low to afford internet usage. The other reason, according to al-Futūḥ, lies in human nature: men are quicker and more natural at initiating connections than women.

What is interesting is that these dating sites have also received religious approval. Amazingly, the approval was granted through one of the New Media devices: the young men with a religious background use their cell phones to contact *Dār al-Iftā'*, the institute responsible for issuing religious rulings at the *Al-Azhar* College. They send a question, and within 12 hours a short clear ruling (*Fatwa*) arrives in their voicemail. Thus, for example the institute received the question: "Is it possible to make use of the religious dating sites on the web?." The answer received was: "It is permissible to exchange information via these sites, but not to get married through them." In other words, it is permissible for people to meet on the internet (*ḥalāl*), but marriage through the web (currently) is forbidden.

The ruling which *Dār al-Iftā'* issued was able to help Nasama al-Maliḡī, a 21 year old AUC graduate who met her husband online. She wasn't actually visiting dating sites at the time, but met him on *Yahoo!*, at the forum for community charity acts to which she belonged. As someone who comes from a religious family and defines herself as a religious person she is fighting for her decision to marry her husband despite the fatwa that forbids such marriages. She claims that while the relationship between herself and her husband did indeed start online it continued according to all the traditional norms and codes. "Usually I only meet people online; however, when I first met him my stepfather accompanied me. It was a decent meeting. My parents treated him as a man who came to ask for my hand. They investigated about him; the mothers discussed between themselves our joint future; and finally, they told us to meet. We met and talked in the accepted traditional Egyptian manner." Nasama's father, a gifted successful insurance agent sees nothing

²¹ Ibid.

wrong with the way she met her spouse: "These young people have the necessary maturity, both in the way they think and in the choices they make; there is no problem as far as I am concerned in being introduced through the internet so long as the continuation of this introduction suits the culture and tradition and is conducted according to permissible limits," the father concluded.

This trend definitely indicates a challenge issued by the young Egyptians against the traditional institution of marriage that prevents them from choosing their spouse and falling in love independently. Currently, the dating websites are contributing to the slow reduction in "salon marriages." It is not that farfetched to hypothesize that the more accessible the internet becomes to the general public, particularly the young people, and the more the supply grows on the dating websites, then the more the number of those who seek out those sites will increase. This will occur primarily among young people who are prevented from socially coming into contact with members of the other sex because their communities view such closeness as a deviation from the accepted traditional norms. Therefore, the virtual meetings online can serve as an answer to these traditional limitations.

However, more importantly these sites greatly serve the state's interests in Egypt, which is looking for ways to handle the issue of late bachelorhood among young Egyptian men and women. They are postponing their marriages due to the high costs and choosing either 'Urfi or Misyār weddings. The result is a struggle for internet presence between the liberal streams and the conservative ones who seek to provide a proper answer for the needs and troubles of the younger generation. This forces the religious establishment to cooperate with the state interests and to "go" with the modern technical trends, and sometimes even adopt it – if you can't beat them, join them. According to Ibrāhīm Nagm, speaker for the Grand Mufti of Egypt, "the Mufti's large fatwa website receives 3,000 requests per day. Most of the questions addressed to him relate to family law." It is possible to view these serial fatwas that appear online as a form of *Ijtihād*, a process that helps keep Islamic law relevant in the modern and post-modern age, and the speaker's words seem to strengthen this assessment. According to Nagm: "The Islamic establishments have adopted the internet as well as other technologies as a means for demonstrating that Islamic law still provides pragmatic solutions to current issues."²²

The satellite television channels are also contributing to increasing the public awareness of the marriage issues. For example, the reality show "Perfect Bride" called *Qisma wa-Naṣīb* (fate and luck), which was broadcast for ten straight weeks on the LBC channel, addresses young men (*ash-Shabāb*), young women (*Ṣabāyā*) and mothers (*Ummahāt*). The show's protagonists –

²² Ellen Knickmeyer, "A New Text in Islamic Law," *Washington Post*, January 19, 2008.

young men, young women and mothers from all the Arab states – reflect a reality which these young people encounter when they reach a marriageable age. The show's focus is the human interest stories which take place in these societies and highlight the barriers young people encounter which influence the choices they make and especially fateful decisions, such as marriage. The dilemmas which are raised in the show include: Will a young woman agree to convince a young man to marry her? Will the mother encourage her son to stick to his decision, or will she try to dissuade him from it? Will all three manage to come to a consensus or will they end up disagreeing with each other? Will other factors enter the picture and ruin the decision? In all the scenarios it appears as though there is no option but to allow the young woman to choose for herself her partner for life, and the same applies to the young man – it is best if he makes his own decisions. In the show the woman is always portrayed as the one who takes responsibility for her own destiny and that of her family while maintaining her status and her interests. On the other hand, the man is shown as taking full responsibility for the members of his household. The show takes into account all the relevant social, family, and mental issues. It is another way of presenting a live alternative in real time to the old traditional model of the marriage framework.

Except it is the Islamic movements who fill the void left by the leadership that does nothing to correct the situation. They operate organizations whose goal is to extricate these young people from the dead end in which they are stuck. For example, Ḥamdi Ṭaha, a professor of communications at *Al-Azhār* University, runs a government-aligned charity which stages mass weddings for older low-income couples who cannot afford to pay for a private wedding ceremony. "This situation, which our young people are forced into, may contain lots of psychological repercussions. The lack of options, the frustration and the despair could lead them into terrorism because if they cannot get anything from this world maybe the next world will offer more?!",²³ which is how professor Ṭaha explains the basic idea behind the organization's activity.

Another example is Layla 'Ashūr, a volunteer for one of the Islamic organizations who also operates a clinic that provides medical services to poor people in Zagazig (an hour's drive north of Cairo). 'Ashūr admits that in actuality the clinic aids couples who do not have the means to get married and reasonably establish their lives together by providing them with furniture, electronic appliances, basic kitchen necessities etc. She is 22 years old and a university graduate in communications who in the recent past used to cover her hair with a scarf, but did not hesitate to wear jeans and flirt with young men in the street. Her dream was to be a television producer. At the time she met Muṣṭafa, and was engaged to him for a two year period.

²³ See: Michael Slackman.

However, his father did not have enough money to purchase for the couple a suitable apartment with furniture. She on her part tried to help her fiancé's father, but all her attempts to find work failed. At that stage her mother demanded that she cancel the engagement and 'Ashūr had no choice but to comply. She found solace in religion, and today she wears a heavy black 'Abāya, covers her head with a *Hijāb* and her face with a *Niqāb* so that only her eyes remain exposed. When she goes outside, she makes sure that she is wearing black gloves as well. "I realized that people don't help you, it is only God that helps you," 'Ashūr explains the reason she returned to religion.²⁴

Indeed, Islam is becoming the solution for a significant amount of these young people, and a worthy political alternative to the current regime and leadership. "Nobody cares about us; the regime (*an-Niṭām*) is holding us back. Therefore, we are aspiring for Islam to take a more central role in our politics. We believe that the Islamists are better than the fake curtain the current regime is presenting us." This sentiment has statistical reinforcement: If in 1986 there was a mosque in Egypt for every 6031 residents, from 2005 onwards there is a mosque for every 745 residents, a period in which the Egyptian population doubled.²⁵

It should not be forgotten that this trend is not a result of the recent decades. The Young Egyptians experienced a similar crisis during the 1920s and 1930s, a time when the global economic crisis left thousands of Egyptian academics unemployed and penniless. The situation left them disappointed in the liberal-parliamentary period of the newly independent state, which failed to help them realize their hopes. Even then most of these young people came from the lower middle class. They had academic degrees in the natural sciences, engineering and medicine. During the crisis, they were mostly urban residents, but came from rural villages. The transition they made from the village to the city added another layer of alienation, loss of identity and anonymity. These young people became a unique byproduct of modernity; educated people who were estranged from education because of the shattered illusion of social mobility. They lived in the city, but did not feel as part of the city. Their village had lost its rural intimacy, and in the big city they had yet to feel the individualism promised by the urban expanse. The loss of values had yet to be replaced by alternative ideologies. In such a situation the political-Islamic utopia promised by Ḥasan al-Banā, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, appeared stable, pure, and more justified than ever. Historians named this the "crisis of the Efendiyya" or the "Crisis of the scholars" (*Azmat Al-Muta'allimīn*), and even then poets and intellectuals lamented about the languishing young people. One of them was the Iraqi

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

poet Nāzek Al-Malā'ika, who expressed her pain in the poem "the sorrows of youth" (*Aḥzān ash-Shabāb*):

The youth, do you want to end, oh Sadness!
How has youth sinned, what is their crime?
Our childhood to crush you want, oh Sadness,
Is it not enough with what we have already tasted?

...

The passing time plunders our youth,
And the dream is extinguished and lost.
Bitter, black old age
Our dream will kill, here the spring is already moving on
Let us dip in it now, swear an oath,
And we will forget what tomorrow bears,
Lest you should know a wish
And darkness consumes an oppressed youth

...

Wherever I turn, sadness lies in wait for me,
Loneliness, everything is mute.

...

Destruction surrounding,
As far as the eye I can see it,
In the roaring of the wind, the song of the bird,
And in the darkness of the sad evening...²⁶

The young Egyptians are rebelling in their own way and channeling their frustrations to expected and unexpected paths. They are Egypt's hope and future, since a nation's hope and future lies in its young men and women. A state that ignores the younger generation and does not heed its troubles and frustrations by doing so undermines the very basis of its existence.

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²⁶ The poem "The Sorrows of Youth" (*Aḥzān ash-Shabāb*) in: Nāzek al-Malā'ika, *Ma'sāt al-Hayāt wa-Ughniyat al-Insān* (Beirut: Dār al-'Awda, 1970), pp. 209-224. Translation based on the Hebrew translation by Isaac Schneebaum.