

Let me begin by thanking the sponsors of this event, the US-Egyptian Friendship Society, the American Research Center of Egypt and the Egyptian American Friendship Association for offering me the opportunity to introduce to you my memoir which was recently published by the AUC Press. Today happens to be my 85th birthday, an important day in my life for I never thought that anyone born in Cairo, Egypt, in the year 1920 would be living that long. After all life expectancy in Egypt in the year of my birth was a measly 36 years. During the eighty-five years of my life I was witness to momentous events that changed the world many times over. I was born when Egypt had a population of 12 million people. Now it has six times that many. When I reached the age of 19 the world was gripped by a war that lasted for more than five long bloody years, took the lives of tens of millions of people and caused distress, agony and devastation to many more millions. I was lucky that I was born in a country that did not recruit its youth as fodder for this war even though it was part of its battleground. Had I been born anywhere in Europe I most likely would not be standing before you today as most European men of my generation were killed in that war. When I came to the United States to pursue my graduate studies some fifty-seven years ago, the country was totally different in looks and attitudes. America was without shopping malls, fast food joints or television; landmarks that characterize its present day landscape and without which it would be difficult for a young American to recognize it.

This memoir narrates some of the events and experiences of my life, my reaction to them and the impressions they left on me. I wrote these from memory without resort to any written diary, since I never kept one. I first wrote this memoir in Arabic in the year 2000 when I reached the age of eighty. In writing this memoir at that ripe age, I felt free to describe and interpret the events that I have lived through as candidly as I could. I left no pertinent subject untouched, including those that referred to the problems that plagued Egyptian society and that tradition and custom had rendered taboo and off limits. At this age I can afford to handle these problems with less discretion, for I have no longer any interests to protect or ambitions to aspire to. Despite the fact that these are issues that affect the lives of everyone, their very existence is denied and discussing them is considered inappropriate and in bad taste. In going against this tradition I feel that I have not only made this autobiography as candid as I could but also have brought to the fore some of the problems that need to be subject of public debate. This may explain why this autobiography was met with great enthusiasm when it first appeared in Arabic. It attracted the attention of many commentators, was reviewed extensively in the press and was the subject of three extensive television programs that were aired many times. In 2003 the Arabic version of this autobiography was chosen by the Egyptian Book Authority to be reprinted in paperback edition.

I lived in Egypt most of my mature life, and moved to the United States to make it my home late in life and under circumstances that were not of my own making. I love Egypt and have lived all my life dreaming of seeing it occupy a position that is worthy of its glorious history and befitting its unique human and natural potential. In reading this memoir you will become aware of some of the hurdles that prevent Egypt from reaching this goal.

Apart from the chapters that deal with my roots and formative years, the bulk of this autobiography deals with my work in Egypt in the fields of science and politics. This is the work to which I have made my most important contributions and for which I will most likely be remembered. Despite the fact that I have spent well over a quarter of my life as a private citizen in the United States, my ties to Egypt continue. After a few years of my stay in the United States, during which I was fully engaged in my own private work as an international consultant, I came back to direct the bulk of my work to Egypt and the Middle East region. This last chapter of the autobiography deals with this stage of my life and includes my observations on the status of the Egyptian American community and the complex Egyptian American relationships.

My ventures in science and politics in Egypt took place during the three and half decades that followed the end of World War II in 1945. These were the years of the Cold War that raged between the two superpowers that emerged after the end of the war. They were years of great tension but also of relative peace that was maintained by the fear of annihilation that the two superpowers harbored should the weapons of mass destruction that they had developed and amassed during and immediately after the war be used. During these years there was room for third world countries to maneuver and to work in a somewhat independent or “non aligned” way. During the thirty year period that followed the end of World War II Egypt made use of this situation and chose the path of non-alignment. It was able to change its landscape and embark on an ambitious program of development; it built the Aswan High Dam that regulated the waters of the Nile and thereby converted Egypt into a modern nation that no longer had to live with the vagaries of the river, fearing the high floods that could inundate its land or the low floods that could cause scarcity in its water supply. It also embarked on an industrialization program that allowed Egypt to have a diversified economy and to create a cadre of entrepreneurs, managers, engineers, and scientists to manage it. My association with this program enabled me to do things that only my generation can boast of having had the chance to do. In addition to having had the opportunity of building up a new school of scientific research in the university and reorganizing a scientific institute of research, I planned and supervised the opening of new mines, the laying down of railway lines, the building of a new harbor on the Red Sea, the construction of housing projects and many other undertakings. This episode of Egypt’s history of non-alignment suffered a blow with the defeat of the Arab armies in the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six Day war. It was terminated altogether after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war, when the new leadership of Egypt decided to shift course and part from the non-alignment policy. The shift was undertaken in a way that did not benefit Egypt. The 1970’s saw the neglect and final dissolution of the industrialization program that Egypt had embarked upon, and the rise of a new class of corrupt beneficiaries. The shift was also marked by the government’s adoption of a policy that led to the introduction of religion in politics. My impressions of this phase of Egypt’s history are quite negative, as you will find out in the course of reading the book. These impressions may be quite different from those that many Americans have been led to believe.

Throughout my mature years living in Egypt, the system of government was repressive in the main. It was unfortunate that the system did not develop into a more open form of

government to respond to the aspirations of the vibrant new middle class that arose as a result of the industrialization program that the country had undertaken. The system clung to its old methods of holding the reins of power and not allowing any participation on the part of the public in running its own affairs. It did not allow the people to decide who should occupy any of the public posts that affected their lives. All these posts, from the mayor of the village to the prime minister, were not decided by popular vote, all were appointed by a government decree through a process that was not transparent. The appointed functionaries were accountable only to those who had appointed them and owed nothing to the people. This led to the rise of an inefficient system of government that was run for the benefit of a few. Under such a system, the management of a business was extremely difficult. It was almost impossible to bring any business to fruition without resorting to corrupt practices or using some one in power for mediation.

Among other restrictions that the government enforced and that were contrary to the aspirations of the rising middle class was the denial of the right of the people to assemble freely. This stifled the development of institutions of civil society, in the absence of which people reverted to congregate around their religious institutions, submitting to the leadership of the clergy. This situation, which holds great danger for the future of Egypt, has never been the subject of public debate. Its discussion is avoided and feared although it is of the utmost importance in determining the path of Egypt in future years.

One topic which I have returned to in the pages of the book, is the position of the Coptic minority within the context of the nation state. As a member of this minority this issue had haunted me since my return from my mission of study abroad in 1951. Before that time, it represented no issue at all. In these early years, and as a result of the national revolution of 1919, the national unity was a goal that every member of society regardless of religious affiliation. had worked for. The Copts were totally integrated within the nation state. It was only in the years following the defeat and humiliation of the 1948 debacle and the loss of Palestine that the question of the rights and the position of the Copts within the nation state started to surface, admittedly low keyed at the beginning. However, the Coptic problem was totally ignored and intentionally avoided or assumed to be non-existent until it flared up in incidents of violence resulting in the loss of lives and property. These incidents tarnished the image of Egypt and cast doubt on the ability of the government to abide by the norms of civilized society. The Coptic problem is a national problem that concerns every Egyptian. Its ultimate solution lies in the revival of the principles of tolerance that Egypt had lived by throughout its modern history and in the reform of its educational system that has been hijacked by ignorant zealots. The big crack in national unity is only one result of that educational system, other consequences include the graduation of inept generations of professionals who will not be able to run the daily affairs of the country with any efficiency.

The time of my birth was an exciting time; it coincided with the emergence of Egypt as a secular nation state which arose from a legacy of more than thousand and four hundred years of medieval history when it formed part of an Islamic Empire. I consider myself fortunate for having grown up during these formational years of the nation state, which was built and led by an enlightened elite who laid its foundations on a liberal and

democratic base. Unfortunately these foundations were never allowed to take root. They have been under continuous onslaught from many forces. Foremost among these were the king who did not want his powers to be curtailed, the British colonial power, which did not want to heed the calls to evacuate Egypt, and the religious right, which feared losing its sway should the progressive and democratic movement build momentum. It is clear that the secularist liberal ideas that Egypt had espoused during the early years of my life and which had empowered Egyptians to choose their own government were unable to withstand the momentous events that befell Egypt in the years that followed World War II. The most consequential of these events was the 1948 war that resulted in the establishment of the State of Israel. The loss of that war effectively wiped out all hope in the existing regimes and in the liberal secularist ideas that they had embraced. It inflamed the spirit of revolution that finally erupted in 1952 when a small group of army officers under the leadership of Gamal Abd al-Nasser took control.

I lived my mature years with the 1952 revolution and its tumultuous events, in many of which I participated. During those years I had hoped that the revolution would restore the principles of the liberal movement that had been established by our fathers, now that all the forces that had fought against them had disappeared from the scene. I had hoped to see the revolution adopting these principles and starting to build a viable and proper democratic system of government. Unfortunately the many monumental challenges that the revolution had to face from outside and inside frustrated that hope and gave rise instead to ideas that justified the undemocratic measures that it had to take to secure its own safety as well as the safety of the country itself. The great accomplishments of the revolution were marred by the manner in which they were executed beyond the bounds of the formal institutions of society without accountability or impartial surveillance. This not only enfeebled the existing formal institutions, but it curtailed the development of a civil society, halted initiative, and dealt a blow to the merit system. It took a great deal of maneuvering to achieve any constructive work in this difficult and daunting atmosphere.