



**EGYPT'S REVOLUTION FORESEEN IN FICTION:  
BEFORE THE THRONE BY NAGUIB MAHFOUZ**

**By Raymond Stock**

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A rebel firebrand defends the revolution that he led against the ruler and his system—in Egypt's ancient past. Many of his words, however, could almost be heard today:

"History remembers the elite, and we were from the poor--the peasants, the artisans, and the fishermen. Part of the justice of this sacred hall is that it neglects no one. We have endured agonies beyond what any human can bear. When our ferocious anger was raised against the rottenness of oppression and darkness, our revolt was called chaos, and we were called mere thieves. Yet it was nothing but a revolution against despotism, blessed by the gods."

Change "thieves" to "foreign agents," make the revolt not one of just the poor, but of people from all classes and walks of life, replace "gods" with God, and we are in Cairo's Tahrir Square of the last few months. But the speech is delivered by a probably apocryphal persona called Abnum, the purported leader of an uprising of that may never have happened at the end of Egypt's Old Kingdom (about 2125 B.C.). And it comes not from some dry-as-dust historical annals, but from a brief but riveting novel in dialogue by Egypt's greatest modern writer, 1988 Nobel laureate in literature Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006).

There has never been a revolt in Egypt quite like the current one, which has not ended with the stunningly rapid downfall of President Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011 after more than twenty-nine years atop the nation's power pyramid. Yet Mahfouz, who did not live to see it—and who backed Mubarak in his last election, in 2005--in a way, actually foresaw it. Five years before his Swedish prize, he published a peculiar novel, *Before the Throne*—largely forgotten but for a recent translation into English--that both justifies and gives the historical background to what is happening now (though some of his other works also point toward it). In it, Mahfouz provides not only the precedents for the revolt itself, but also the arguments for maintaining one of the greatest achievements of the order just overthrown, which itself is now threatened: that is, the peace between Egypt and Israel. The only thing he didn't leave us is the ending.

**JUDGING PASHAS, PHARAOHS, PRIME MINISTERS AND PRESIDENTS**

In *Before the Throne: Dialogs with Egypt's Great From Menes to Anwar Sadat* (published as *Amam al-'arsh: hiwar ma`a rijal Misr min Mina hatta Anwar al-Sadat* in 1983), Mahfouz takes three score of Egypt's rulers, from Menes, who unified Upper and Lower Egypt in one kingdom at the start of the First Dynasty (roughly 2950 B.C.), up to Mubarak's immediate predecessor before the Osiris Court, the ancient Egyptian tribunal of the soul. There, in the gilded Hall of Justice, he has them defend their rule before a panel of the gods and of those kings and queens, viziers and wise men, rabble-rousers and

statesmen, who had been acquitted before them, and thus made Immortals. Crucially, Mahfouz uses the careers of several key figures—especially the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty kings Seti I and his son, Ramesses II—to justify the 1979 Camp David Treaty signed by Sadat.

With more than thirty novels to his credit, Mahfouz hadn't produced a piece of fiction set in ancient Egypt since 1944, and had never written one that sought to cover all of Egypt's recorded history. Two years earlier, in 1981, Sadat—Egypt's bold, flamboyant, and ultimately tragic president—was gunned down in Cairo during the parade marking the eighth anniversary of his victory over the Israelis at the Suez Canal, by Islamist extremists in the army who reviled him as “Pharaoh.”

Sadat was beloved outside of Egypt for his initially-popular, visionary peace treaty with Israel and avuncular love of pipes. But mainly due to economic policies that left the poor feeling vulnerable, he was not much mourned at home—though there has been real nostalgia for him in recent years. Soon after his death, Muslim militants in the Upper Egyptian district of Assiut rose up in a rebellion that took many days of violence to put down. Revolution was in the air.

Like all other attempted revolutions in Egypt's history, the Islamist uprising failed, as did the Islamist terror war against the regime of President Mubarak, Sadat's vice-president and successor, which targeted government officials and tourists in the 1990s. So too did the nationalist uprising led by Colonel Ahmed Urabi in 1882 (which backfired to invite seventy-four years of subsequent British occupation). Also unsuccessful, arguably, was the 1919 Revolution headed by Sa`d Pasha Zaghlul against that British presence, though it did lead to partial independence in 1922 and paved the way for much of the resistance that followed until Britain's final departure after the Suez Crisis in 1956. But even then the British, along with their French and Israeli allies, were ordered out by a foreign leader, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower (who later regretted it)—not really by the Egyptian people.

Perhaps the closest, and now nearly forgotten, precedent was actually Muhammad Ali Pasha's cleverly-packaged coup against Khurshid, the Ottoman *wali* (governor) in Cairo in 1805, in order to seize personal power (which *Before the Throne* covers in the trials of Shaykh Umar Makram, who opposed Napoleon's occupation of Egypt, and of Muhammad Ali). The Albanian adventurer “appealed to the right of the common people, the *ahl al-balad*, to depose an unjust ruler,” writes J.C.B. Richmond of the affair. Richmond also noted that it was the common people who provided Muhammad Ali with the force necessary for the move.<sup>1</sup> Just as the people in Tahrir Square arguably provided the Egyptian armed forces the cover needed to remove Mubarak, whose apparent plan to install his non-military son after him had dismayed them.

Neither was Egypt's last, and only successful, “revolution” actually born of a mass movement. Rather it was a movement of tanks around Abdin Palace on the night of July 23, 1952, the work of a small number of officer-conspirators, whose ideological (and, in some cases, genetic) descendants still control the all-powerful Egyptian military elite. True, most Egyptians were glad to see the king and his corrupt circle go. In euphoric gratitude, one of Egypt's then most-respected authors and Mahfouz's mentor, Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898?-1987) naively hailed their clique as “the Blessed Movement.” Al-Hakim and many others later cursed the regime it founded for its own corruption, lack of democracy and destruction of the economy after its charismatic great dictator, Gamal Abdel-Nasser, died a literally heartbroken has-been, though still on the throne, in 1970.

Mahfouz, who at age seven watched Egyptian nationalist demonstrators shot down in front of his comfortable middle-class home in Islamic Cairo during the 1919 revolt, grew up fiercely loyal to Sa`d Zaghlul, who died in 1927 after a brief sojourn as Prime Minister (in 1924), and his party, the Wafd. Devoted to the cause of Egyptian independence, the olive-and-honey skinned Mahfouz also detested what he regarded as the arrogant Egyptian monarchy, seen as of the same blood as the pallid Turkic aristocracy that had ruled Egypt in various guises since the fall of Salah al-Din's (Saladin's) dynasty in 1250.

Though he cheered the abolition of royal rule and the privileged titles of “pasha” and “bey,” Mahfouz was appalled by the Free Officers' cavalier killing of the limited liberal democracy that survived under the king and the British, the suppression of free expression, the expulsion of the nation's vital foreign communities and the reckless seizure and plunder of private business and property, despite his own socialist leanings. Most of all, he resented Nasser's attempt to bury the memory of 1919, a true popular uprising, and especially of its patriotic leader, Sa`d Zaghlul. And, though it cost him enormously for years through the Arab world boycott of his books and the many films made from them, he also came to reject Nasser's legacy of permanent war with Israel.

Ironically, two of the principles that Mahfouz trumpets so clearly in *Before the Throne*—the people's right to rise up against tyranny and the need to make mutually beneficial peace with one's neighbors—are most likely set to clash in the aftermath of today's Egyptian revolution, whomever it finally brings to power. This is true because all of the likely future leaders of the country, both secular and religious, want to annul or emasculate the Camp David Treaty: a recent Pew poll shows that 54% of Egyptians want to scrap it altogether—and not a single major voice speaks out for keeping it.

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<sup>1</sup> J.C.B. Richmond, *Egypt 1798-1952: Her Advance toward a Modern Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 39. Though dated, this remarkable work is a still-valuable and beautifully written reference that has sadly been forgotten.

## WHAT IS GOOD FOR EGYPT?

The most important question asked in *Before the Throne* is clearly the one most crucial to Mahfouz's own worldview. That is, what is good for Egypt? How Mahfouz defines what is good for his country, and even who is really Egyptian, provides a fascinating glimpse not only into the author's psyche, but into the historical consciousness of Egypt herself—one that is clearly relevant today.

The Osiris Court, carved and painted in tombs, and depicted on papyrus in the *Book of the Dead*, is the most vivid and enduring image from old Egyptian beliefs regarding the fate of the individual after death. God of the netherworld and chief of the tribunal that judges the souls of the deceased, Osiris is one of ancient Egypt's oldest known deities, with roots deep in the clay of the northeastern Delta.<sup>2</sup> An ancient folk belief held that he was an actual—and prodigious—king in Predynastic times (a view still debated by Egyptologists). Yet the first known image of him dates to the Fifth Dynasty, one of many minor deities grouped around the king, “with a curled beard and divine wig in the manner of the traditional ancestral figures.”<sup>3</sup> In the Old Kingdom, he was associated with the royal dead only, mainly in the great necropolis of Abydos in Upper Egypt, though gradually his popularity, and his dominion over the afterlives of more and more Egyptians, including commoners, grew. His nemesis was Seth, who eventually became an Egyptian prototype of Satan, the Evil One. In one of pharaonic Egypt's most famous myths, Seth twice attacks Osiris, the second time cutting him into sixteen pieces and throwing them into the Nile, all but one of which recovered by his sister-wife, Isis, for burial—and resurrection.<sup>4</sup> One should note that, to the ancient Egyptians, “the dying of Osiris does not seem to be a wrong thing,” as Herman Te Velde says, “for death is ‘the night of going forth to life.’”<sup>5</sup>

Crucial to *Before the Throne* is the role Osiris plays in the passage of the dead into the next world—or into nonexistence. In the ancient myth, Osiris, in the shape of a man wrapped in mummy bandages, bearing the symbols of royal power (the elaborately plumed *atef* crown on his head, the false beard on his chin, the crook and flail in his hands crossed over his chest), presided. Meanwhile, the jackal-headed god of embalming, Anubis, weighed the heart of the deceased on a great double-scale against a feather representing *Ma`at*, the principle of divine order and justice. If the defendant had committed no grave sins on earth, the heart would balance with the feather—and the deceased would be pronounced “true of voice” (a concept that resonates strongly through all of Mahfouz's work) and given the magic spells necessary to enter the underworld, *Duat*.

But if there was no balance with the feather, the heart was fed to “the devourer,” Ammit, a terrifying female beast with the head of a crocodile, the body of a lion, and the hind legs of a hippo. As all of this transpired, the ibis-headed Thoth, god of writing and magic, supervised and recorded the judgments and reported them to Osiris. (Another representation of Thoth, a baboon, sat atop the scale.) Meanwhile, Isis (a radiantly beautiful woman with either a throne—which was her emblem—or a solar disk and horns upon her head), her son, the falcon-headed Horus (who introduced and pleaded for each defendant), and other deities looked on.<sup>6</sup>

Mahfouz seized upon this timeless and quintessentially Egyptian device as the framework for one his strangest and most explicitly ideological books. In it he dramatically presents his views on scores of Egypt's political bosses from the First Dynasty to the current military regime—the deep structure of which has survived not only Mubarak, but will probably outlive his successors as well. He does by putting words in their mouths as they defend their own days in power to the sacred court. Those whom Mahfouz sees as the greatest leaders of ancient Egyptian civilization, under the aegis of the old Egyptian lord of the dead, judge those who follow them, from the unification of the Two Lands through late antiquity and the Middle Ages, right down to his own times. This continuum of Egyptian history showcases his essentialist vision of a sort of eternal Egyptian *ka*—the living person's undying double who, in the afterlife, receives mortuary offerings for the deceased, thus ensuring their

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<sup>2</sup> Herman Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1967), 85; and David P. Silverman in his article, “Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt,” in *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths and Personal Practice*, ed. Byron E. Shafer, authors John Baines, Leonard H. Lesko and David P. Silverman (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 44. However, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Donald B. Redford (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001), Vol. 2, 615-19, places Osiris' origins in Upper Egypt, as most early images of the god depict him wearing the White Crown of the southern kingdom, though this seems a minority view.

<sup>3</sup> Bojana Mojsov, *Osiris: Death and Afterlife of a God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 33.

<sup>4</sup> For Seth's prominence in the development of this concept in monotheistic religion, see Peter Stanford, *The Devil: A Biography* (New York, Henry Holt, 1996), 20-23. More on the sinister aspect of Seth in Marc Étienne, *Heka: magie et envoutement dans l'Égypte ancienne* (Paris: Reunions des Musées Nationaux, 2000), 22-39.

<sup>5</sup> Te Velde, *Seth*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> R.H. Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 148, describes Isis' iconography. For a harrowing account of the ordeal before the scales of *ma`at*, see Dimitri Meeks and Christine Favard-Meeks, *Daily Life of the Egyptian Gods*, translated from the French by G.M. Gosharian (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 142-50.

immortality.<sup>7</sup>

From pharaohs to pashas, and from prime ministers to presidents, only those who serve that great national *ka*—according to Mahfouz’s own strict criteria are worthy of his praise—and a seat among the Immortals. The rest are sent to Purgatory or even to Hell—not the ancient Egyptian conception of the afterlife, but a concession to Mahfouz’s modern, mainly monotheistic, readership—and perhaps his own personal beliefs as a Muslim.

Yet that he used an ancient Egyptian mode of judgment (albeit his own version of it) to hold these leaders to account, rather than a more conventional setting speaks loudly of his conviction that Egypt is different and must look to herself for wisdom—as well as offer it to the world. The final chapter even presents a sort of “Ten Commandments”<sup>8</sup> which Egypt must follow in order to fulfill her sacred mission as “a lighthouse of right guidance, and of beauty,” in the parting words of Isis. In that sixty-fourth (and final) chapter, ten of the key figures who had faced and survived trial offer their own advice to their homeland. The rebel leader Abnum, whose rousing speech in defense of the ancient revolt is quoted above, admonishes Egypt “to believe in the people and in revolution, to propel her destiny toward completion.”

Abnum initially emerges as the leader of the “rebels of the Age of Darkness that fell between the collapse of the Old Kingdom and the creation of the Middle Kingdom” (the First Intermediate Period) in the book’s fifth chapter. Introduced as “a group of people of varying shapes and sizes,” Mahfouz makes them seem disreputable as well as uncouth:

“These are the leaders of the revolution: they directed the angry people in a bloody, destructive revolt. They then ruled the country for the long period that lasted from the fall of the Old Kingdom to the start of the Middle Kingdom. Afterward, they left behind them nothing to mark their former presence but ruined temples, plundered tombs and monstrous memories.”

When asked by Osiris to choose someone from among themselves to speak for them, “they all pointed to a tall, gaunt man with a stony face.” This is Abnum, a character whom Mahfouz insisted was real, but of which I have found no trace in any of the available sources that one can be sure he consulted—or any others.

Abnum tells the court that in the chaos and lawlessness of Egypt under the aged, long-reigning King Pepi II, he urged the people to rise up, and “quickly they answered the call.” This recalls Mubarak’s own seemingly interminable rule, and the general sense of things falling apart in the final few years, as well as the underlying tension that long promised an eventual explosion. The last film by famous Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine, released in what no one knew were the waning years of the Mubarak era, was “*Heya Fawda*” (*It’s Chaos*, 2007). Despite a booming economy that could not keep pace with the burgeoning population, there was a general sense of dysfunctionality, corruption and stagnation. That is always a dangerous combination, and not entirely dissimilar to the slow, anarchic decline at the end of the Sixth Dynasty as nonagenarian Pepi II resolutely refused to “fly to his horizon,” in the ritual obituary phrase for the departed king.

Yet the book does not preach revolution alone. Many of its heroes are pharaohs who believe in their divine right to rule, and who view popular movements against authority as an obscene threat to justice (i.e., order) as well as peace. For example, in the trial of six nearly forgotten kings who each ruled briefly and ineffectually in the period before the great Hyksos invasion at the end of the Middle Kingdom, Abnum laments the lack of a popular uprising against their incompetence. But a fellow member of the tribunal, the Twelfth Dynasty monarch Amenemhat I, himself murdered in a harem intrigue, rebukes him:

“All you think about is revolution,” Amenemhat I upbraided him. “When I was governor of a nome [province], I found the country drowning in chaos. I did not therefore call for greater disorder, but trained my own men and took over the throne, saving the land and the people, without violating our sacred custom, and without giving up either lives or honor.”

Yet again and again, Abnum the revolutionary raises his voice in praise of the people’s right to rebel, and puts a premium on making heads roll, to boot. Addressing Gamal Abdel-Nasser in the book’s penultimate trial, Abnum opens with admiration but closes with a chilling admonition:

“Permit me to hail you in my capacity as the first revolutionary among Egypt’s poor,” began Abnum. “I want

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<sup>7</sup> The description of the *ka* is largely in the words of David P. Silverman, Eckley Brinton Coxe, Jr., Professor and Curator of Egyptology at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

<sup>8</sup> This comparison belongs to the late Akef Ramzy Abadir, Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures, New York University (1989), *Najib Mahfuz: Allegory and Symbolism as a means of social, political and cultural criticism*, 1936-1985 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International), 166-7. For a brilliant overall analysis of *Before the Throne*, see Menahem Milson, *Najib Mahfuz: The Novelist-Philosopher of Cairo* (New York and Jerusalem: St. Martin's Press and The Magnes Press, 1998), Chapter 9, “In the Courtroom of History.”

to testify that the wretched did not enjoy such security in any age—after my own—as they did in yours. I can only fault you for one thing: for insisting that your revolution be stainless, when in fact the blood should have run in rivers!”

This arouses the ire of King Khufu (Cheops), for whom the Great Pyramid was built. “What is that butcher raving about now?” Khufu exclaims. This outburst gets him only a tongue-lashing from an indignant Osiris, who demands that he apologize for being so rude to a fellow member of the panel.

## EGYPTIAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Of course, the Lotus Revolution (the flower itself a symbol of Egypt from ancient times), despite pitched battles (mainly with stones, though many died of gunfire) at Tahrir Square, seemed to follow in the (initially) bloodless footsteps of the 1952 coup—especially in those euphoric days around Mubarak’s fall. Yet there were soon calls that the deposed president, members of his family and his corrupt insider entourage should be put on trial, some—including Mubarak—for their lives. In the case of Mubarak himself, that reportedly will soon happen, an event which, whatever the now-helpless old man’s transgressions, will only sully the nobility to which the movement at first aspired, and the glory that it could, for a brief moment, claim so credibly. Meanwhile, on Facebook and elsewhere, those who express doubts about the direction in which the country is now headed are often insulted, sometimes even called “scaremongers” or even traitors or enemies of the revolution, as well. This, despite the once easily-dismissed rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies, the Salafis, and the army’s own alarming brutality toward both demonstrators and Christians on occasion becomes harder and harder to deny.

Nonetheless, that Egypt’s current revolution has set a unique example to all nations is already part of its rapidly evolving mythology. Its roots lie in the same deeply ingrained view of Egypt as “*Umm al-Dunya*”—“Mother of the World”—common among the Egyptians, and fiercely held by Mahfouz. As a nation, Egypt long ago may have invented the very idea of “exceptionalism.”

Wherever Egypt’s 2011 revolution—or was it really an army coup assisted by an exceptionally enlightened mob?—ultimately leads, be it to a democratic, harmonious civil society or a bloody civil conflict, it might well lead to war. Yet *Before the Throne*, while trumpeting Egypt’s imperial past (both ancient and modern, as in Mohamed Ali’s adventures in Arabia, Greece, the Levant and the Sudan) most of all preaches against going to war.

Mahfouz is justly lauded in the West for his early backing of Arab-Israeli peace—a position he began to edge toward as early as winter 1973, when he asked Mu`ammar al-Qaddafi--then meeting with the writers at *al-Ahram*--if the Arabs could beat Israel? When the otherwise irrational Libyan dictator answered, “No,” Mahfouz declared that the Arabs must therefore negotiate with Israel for peace. This opinion led to much abuse at the time, and later to boycotts of his books and films. It was largely in response to the huge split that the 1979 treaty with Israel caused among Egypt’s intellectuals (most of them opposing it, Mahfouz and a few others endorsing it) that he wrote two key chapters about ancient Egypt, as well as the two final trials—those of Nasser and Sadat—in *Before the Throne*.

Curiously, Mahfouz’s view of international relations seems to be based on ancient Egyptian logic. Though he praises his hero Sa`d Zaghlul as well as several pharaohs, such as the doomed Seqenenra (who fell resisting the invading Hyksos) and Psamtek III (executed by the vanquishing Persians), and others for bravely fighting foreign occupation, Mahfouz paradoxically loves Egypt as an empire, lauding such conquerors as Amenhotep I and Thutmose III, even the 18<sup>th</sup> century rogue Mamluk ruler Ali Bey al-Kabir (the Great). Here Mahfouz demonstrates the divide between what the ancient Egyptians saw as *ma`at* and its opposite, *isfet* (chaos, hence injustice). In their conception, foreigners were always inferior to Egyptians (though an Egyptianized foreigner would be accepted among them). Thus Egypt’s control and even seizure of neighboring lands in the Near East and Nubia were considered a fulfillment of *ma`at*, while an alien power invading Egypt was the triumph of evil over the proper cosmic order.<sup>9</sup> Hence Mahfouz bars all but a few non-native rulers who had either become Egyptian or otherwise acted in Egypt’s best interest from the right to trial and thus the chance for immortality in *Before the Throne*. Indeed, the work as a whole seems but an expression of Mahfouz’s own personal version of *ma`at* as embodied in his nation’s history.

This paradoxical attitude toward empire and occupation is remarkably similar to that of “the Pharaonists,” a group of intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s whose ideas Mahfouz admired. Led by such luminaries as Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872-1963), first rector of the Egyptian university, Taha Husayn (1889-1973), the great blind Egyptian *belles-lettriste* and novelist, and Mahfouz’s “spiritual father,” the Coptic thinker and publisher Salama Musa (1887-1958)—the Pharaonists held that Egypt was both much older and much closer to Europe and the Mediterranean in culture than her Arab and African neighbors.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> David O’Connor, “Egypt’s View of Others,” in *Never Had the Like Occurred: Egypt’s View of its Past*, ed. John Tait (London: UCL Press, Institute of Archaeology, University of London, 2003), 155-85.

<sup>10</sup> For the Pharaonists’ views of Egypt as an empire, see Charles Wendell, *The Evolution of the Egyptian National Image, from its Origins to Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1972), 236-7. For the

A sensitive and problematic issue is the treatment of Jews (who are mentioned only three times as a group, none in the trials of figures from later than the 18<sup>th</sup> century), as well as Egypt's often rocky relations with both ancient and modern Israel. Mahfouz, who as an adolescent grew up in a largely Jewish area of suburban Abbasiya, once told me (and visiting Israeli expert on Egyptian Jewry, Yoram Meital), "I really miss" the Jews of Egypt, all but a very few of whom were dispersed from the country in the 1950s and 60s.

Though the king (Merneptah, son of Ramesses II) most often theorized to be the pharaoh of the Exodus—a story found in similar form in both the Testament and the Qu'ran—is given his own trial in *Before the Throne*, the tale itself is neither told nor even mentioned. Israel by name appears only twice (both in the trial of Pharaoh Apries), briefly (and fatally) aligned with Egypt against the Babylonians—while Judah is captured by Egypt in the trial of Pharaoh Nekau II.

In the novel, the current state of Israel does not exist at all except as the formidable but unnamed enemy whose presence dominates much of the proceedings in the final two trials (62 and 63). These are of Gamal Abdel-Nasser, champion of the Arab masses who led them into the catastrophic defeat of 1967. But these chapters would lose their force if not for the arguments advanced in the trials of two seemingly totally dissimilar monarchs, the iconic 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty father and son duo, Seti I and his son, Ramesses II.

These twin approving portraits of pharaonic potency—and peace-making sagacity—begin with the following classic lines:

Next Horus called out, "King Seti the First!"

In came a man tall of stature and powerfully built. He walked, wrapped in his winding sheet, until he stood before the throne.

Then Thoth, Scribe of the Gods, read aloud, "He assumed the throne upon the death of his father. He subdued Nubia, returned Palestine to Egypt, then focused his energies on building and construction."

During his opening speech in self-defense, Seti I explains that he took "Palestine" (a term, like Nubia and even Egypt, not used in his time) back from the Hittites who had seized it, a victory "sealed with a pact of peace."

But when asked by his mighty predecessor, Thutmose III, why he had not continued the war anyway, Seti I replies, "I felt my army was exhausted," adding, "while at the same time the Hittites as a nation are extremely tough in battle." Challenged that there is no glory in not pressing on the fight, Seti I answers, "A treaty of peace is preferable to a war without glory."

His son, Ramesses II, after his overblown triumph of Qadesh—in which he barely beat off a massively superior Hittite force that had tricked him into crossing the Orontes ahead of most of his troops—he too got down to making peace with the same enemy nation to the northeast. Some years after withdrawing back to Egypt, leaving the enemy in his original objective, Qadesh, but with no further encroachments on Egyptian buffer states or territory, he signed a peace pact with the Hittite king—whose daughter he also married in an imperial celebration.

Again, Thutmose II takes up a prosecutorial tone. When Ramesses vainly asks him, "What do say about my routing the enemy's army," his much more martially talented remote predecessor skewers him:

"I say that you won a battle but lost a war, while your enemy lost a battle but won the war. He enticed you to make peace in order to reorganize his ranks. He welcomed your relationship by marriage in order to fix your friendly attitude before making good his losses. He was content to keep Qadesh as a place from which to threaten any point in your empire in future."

"During all of my long reign, the security of my homeland was not disturbed for even one hour," Ramesses II responded. "Nor was there a single violent rebellion anywhere in our vast empire, while no enemy dared cast an aggressive glance at our borders."

#### NASSER, SADAT, AND ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE

An entirely different pair of rulers—though again, one succeeds the other in power—faces the tribunal in trials of Nasser and Sadat, the last two in the book. Nasser is attacked not only for wasting Egypt's limited resources on efforts to win every war of liberation around (while spectacularly failing to defend his own territory in 1967), but also for destroying any traces of democracy left by the *ancient regime*. Mustafa al-Nahhas, Zaghlul's successor as head of the Wafd Party, thus the chief initial target of Nasserist repression, berates Nasser for what he has done to Egyptian democracy:

“You were heedless of liberty and human rights,” al-Nahhas resumed his attack. “While I don’t deny that you kept faith with the poor, you were a curse upon political writers and intellectuals, who are the vanguard of the nation’s children. You cracked down on them with arrest and imprisonment, with hanging and killing, until you had eradicated their optimism and smashed the formation of their personalities—and only God knows when their proper formation shall return. Those who launched the 1919 Revolution were people of initiative and innovation in the various fields of politics, economics and culture. How your high-handedness spoiled your most pristine depths! See how education was vitiated, how the public sector grew depraved? How your defiance of the world’s powers led you to horrendous losses and shameful defeats! You never sought the benefit of another person’s opinion, nor learned from the lessons of Muhammad Ali’s experience. And what was the result? Clamor and cacophony, and an empty mythology—all heaped on a pile of rubble.”

During his trial, Sadat has a prolonged verbal duel with Nasser, much of which is worth quoting here:

Then Gamal Abdel-Nasser asked Sadat, “How could it have been so easy for you to distort my memory so treacherously?”

“I was forced take the position that I did, for the essence of my policy was to correct the mistakes I inherited from your rule,” rebutted Sadat.

“Yet didn’t I delegate power to you in order to satisfy you, encourage you, and treat you as a friend?”

“How tyrannical to judge a human being for a stand taken in a time of black terror, when fathers fear their sons and brothers fear each other?” shot back Sadat.

“And what was the victory that you won but the fruit of my long preparations for it!” bellowed Abdel-Nasser.

“A defeated man like you did not score such a triumph,” retorted Sadat. “Rather, I returned to the people their freedom and their dignity, then led them to an undeniable victory.”

“And you gave away everything for the sake of an ignominious peace,” bristled Abdel-Nasser, “dealing Arab unity a fatal thrust, condemning Egypt to exclusion and isolation.”

“From you I inherited a nation tottering on the abyss of annihilation,” countered Sadat. “The Arabs would neither offer a friendly hand in aid, nor did they wish us to die, nor to be strong. Rather, they wanted us to remain on our knees at their mercy. And so I did not hesitate to take my decision.”

“You exchanged a giant that always stood by us for one who had always opposed us!” Abdel-Nasser upbraided him.

“I went to the giant who held the solution in his hand,” pointed out Sadat. “Since, then, events have confirmed that my thoughts were correct.”

One may wonder if, given the way the Barack Obama administration so quickly encouraged Mubarak’s fall, and then spoke warmly of cooperating with the Muslim Brotherhood (which, in Arabic if not in English, has always said—and recently reaffirmed—that it would terminate the treaty with Israel), that Mahfouz would still write such dialogue now. At any rate, in the end, the tribunal apparently feels that Sadat has won the debate. Osiris invites Sadat to sit with the Immortals—though he had only *permitted* Nasser to do so. The presiding deity had sent Nasser (who had incensed the court by declaring, “Egyptian history really began on July 23, 1952”) on to the final judgment with but what he termed an “appropriate” (“*munasiba*”) recommendation. Sadat’s testimonial, however, was qualified as “*musharrifa*,” or “conferring honor.”

Mahfouz’s defense of Arab-Israeli peace would cost him a great deal, including boycotts of his books and films for many years in the Arab world. And it may have contributed, at least symbolically, to the attempt on his life by Islamist militants on October 14, 1994, roughly the sixth anniversary of the announcement of his Nobel. Though it is believed the attack was in punishment for his allegedly blasphemous novel, *Children of the Alley* (*Awlad haratina*, 1959), it fell on the same day that Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Rabin were revealed to have won the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo.<sup>11</sup> Then, and even now, accused by some of selling out to Israel (which has no discernible influence over the Swedish Academy) for the sake of his prize—devoting most of his Nobel lecture, cited above, to a defense of Palestinian rights, and even endorsing Palestinian suicide bombings during the (much-misreported) 2002 Jenin incursion—he nonetheless never renounced his support for Camp David. Nor did he give up the dream of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace accord someday.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Stock, “How Islamist Militants Put Egypt on Trial,” *The Financial Times*, Weekend FT, March 4/5, 1995, III, on the military trial of sixteen defendants charged in the stabbing of Naguib Mahfouz.

**Yet the question remains, how will this history really end? How would Mahfouz try Mubarak, who will probably be facing judgment both on earth and in the hereafter soon? After five millennia of mainly authoritarian rule, will the new Egyptian democracy be a real one—or at least the sort of secular liberal version that was the heady, widely touted goal of the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution? Will it go back to war with that other, more established democracy watching nervously from across the oft-bloodied sands of Sinai? Of course, we cannot answer for Mahfouz (or anyone) with certainty now how all this will turn out. Yet, to be sure, more than just Egypt’s fate alone shall turn on it.**

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