



Fear the everyday state



On the fifth anniversary of the fall of Egypt's president Mubarak, this is an account of the uprising, and the ebb and flow of the Egyptian revolution, by Wahid, an activist in Cairo.

I took some time - over two years - to reflect on what had hit us, what had happened between the start of a revolt on January 25 2011 and a coup - for lack of a better word - on July 3 2013. Now again having taken a break and looking back at this, I realize that what i left understated and is becoming ever more apparent in the juggernaut of suppression and absolute madness of torture and brutality is the fear within the system's actors. There is a reason why under the infamous Pinochet military regime thousands upon thousands disappeared, were fed to the seas and the desert: the regime feared them, every single one of them with their thoughts, their dreams and their desires. Something even the Washington Post got right recently: Sisi is no Pinochet, already a year into his rule he has proven himself to be far worse. Pinochet lasted 16 years, Sisi won't last anywhere near that long. The mechanism he is creating is gnawing at the very makeup of life in Egypt. What will come after him we have no idea, a spiral of inter fighting? the rise of an even more brutal dictator? What we do know, is that this beast has colonialism as its ancestor and, propped up by democracies everywhere, neo-colonialism as the germ that it feeds off of. As Ursula LeGuin remarked recently, we have, essentially, chosen cancer as the model of our social system. Egypt is no 'failed state', no abnormality, the Egyptian regime is the monster that has been bred, fueled by the original greed for power and resources during the era of colonialism, a mantle that was passed on and welcomed by a local elite in it its various manifestations from Nasser to Mubarak and today Sisi, fueled by the complacent elite that welcome the exploitation of the majority for their plush lives and made possible by the crushed majority, kept desperate, until the day too many said 'No' and acted on it.

A contest of fear.

I was running and hiding, then running again, in familiar spaces. They came after me, every time closer than before. I escaped but only barely. It was inevitable that the next time I would be too late, move too slowly. I started sweating profusely, my body in a state of panic. I woke up for a brief moment and tried to travel somewhere else in my sleep. They came knocking he told me, but no one was home. They came once before while I was away and asked questions. The man downstairs says our apartment is under surveillance. I feel them crawling out of the cracks.

You can't escape your encounter with the apparatus of terror if your psychic life is infiltrated. I formulated excuses to myself so as to stay away from the front lines where confrontation was most vital. I knew I had to take the risk. I dreaded walking the dark alleys, approaching lines of police in bulletproof uniforms, armed with shotguns and teargas launchers. Some of us have been snatched away in these streets. Thousands are missing. I wonder where they've gone. I wonder where the searchers are. I wonder how long they will seek.

On many occasions I joined the body of the crowd to stand against the terror of the police, and often I didn't. Despite the desire, the consequences haunted me, a constant struggle within. By placing our bodies in the line of fire, each of us risks taking the hit, a bullet to the chest, a baton to the head, cold prison cells, disappearing. Without this coming together of bodies there is no possibility of revolt.

The contest over emotions is at the heart of the violent battle called revolution. The threat of weapons is but the means to a greater end: to control desire itself. It is a battle of images, language and symbols. The function of physical violence is to wage war on desire and the strategy is to divide and rule. The state agents want nothing more than to prevent our coming together in opposition.

Each of us plays a part in this tale of terror and desire. Yet rarely do we lay bare the emotions driving our most political actions. The truth is, no one is an observer on the sidelines.

terror 1

Karim first went to the square in early 2011, to see and hear what it was all about. And in November 2012, when the crowds besieged the walls of the presidential palace, the fifteen-year-old was there. He joined his body to the bodies of others gathered to protest the Muslim Brotherhood's monopolisation of power and the police's killing and wounding of protesters they were stationed to protect. In sum: President Mohamed Morsi's emulation of ex-President Hosni Mubarak's reign. When Brotherhood supporters appeared to oppose the demonstration, the police joined their ranks, at times

coordinating attacks, at others acting as the neutral mediator between the two camps. A dirty game. During one such period, the police cornered Karim and filled his legs with buckshot. They then beat his right leg with their batons until his shin broke in two. When he finally made a call to his family, he lied and said he had been visiting his sister and was caught in the clashes on his way home. His parents had no idea he had been spending time in Tahrir Square from the early days of the revolution.

Karim's family lives in Bani Mohamed, a crumbling side of Imbaba, where he works for a construction contractor for EGP90 a week. His father is an electrician who can't find work. Since the protests began, jobs have become scarcer and families focus their spending on essentials. Electrical work is seen as an avoidable cost. So with the exception of an odd favour, Karim's father spends his days with his cousin at a coffee shop down the street. Karim's mother is pregnant with her seventh child and worries about the bathroom ceiling collapsing. They pay EGP60 rent. The landlord, who has been trying to evict them to find better-paying tenants, doubled the rent in the beginning of the year.

When Karim's family eventually found him in a downtown hospital, the police had handcuffed him to his bed and he had two metal screws holding his right leg in place. They couldn't afford the transport costs to the hospital, so Karim spent most days alone. During one visit, the officer guarding his room told his thirteen-year-old sister he would punish Karim if she didn't give in to his sexual demands. After months of protests and court cases in which human rights lawyers advocated on behalf of those arrested at the palace, Karim was released and his case suspended. One of the NGOs that had intervened covered his medical bills and Karim, still limping, started work for the contractor again. His mother constantly worries that the authorities will come looking for him.

For many months after Mubarak fell, Karim's family didn't see the police. Instead, بلطجية, baltageya—plainclothes thugs hired by the police—roamed the streets. Everyone knew they were there because the police were not. The absence of the police was intended to fabricate a longing for a missing element in the usual landscape. During an anti-regime protest in Bani Mohamed, the body of a slain protester disappeared. Karim's mother was not sure whether it was the police who took it away, or whether some thugs planning to sell the organs in the black market stole it. Every baltagy may be a criminal, or a police criminal. In either case, he acts to infiltrate desire. Better the known terror of the uniformed police than the unknown terror of its unidentifiable thugs.

In 1952, the Free Officers took power in Egypt and announced the dissolution of the imperial police, to much popular celebration. Over time, these officers replaced the old ones, and three entities came into being, all in the image of their occupiers: they were trained by CIA agents, former German Secret Service officers and Soviet intelligence.

Al-Mabahith al-'Aama, or the General Investigation Department, is the real power inside every police station, with a file on every citizen considered suspicious. Amn al-Dawla, or State Security, is made up of non-uniformed operatives that forcefully recruit citizens—bus and taxi drivers, kiosk and coffee shop owners, and building guards—to be their eyes on the ground. Al-Mukhabarat al-'Aama, or the General Intelligence Service, is modeled on the CIA to collect economic and political intelligence with a particular focus on foreign threats. These are the foundations of a police state. In 1969, then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser's generals added to this structure and formed Amn al-Markazi, or the Central Security Forces, to avoid the image of men in military uniforms repressing local rebellions. For the first few years the new Central Security conscripts trained under the army.

When Nasser's popularity started to wane in the months after he took over from King Farouk, security operatives set off six bombs in downtown Cairo to frighten the population and silence opposition. The explosions had an immediate effect. Even people who had been wary of the Free Officers due to their rise to power suddenly felt they were necessary for protection against an unidentifiable enemy. Military trials of dissidents became justifiable to fend off internal attacks, and military rule appeased popular desires for a strong nation.

According to some historians, the idea of policing came into being in the transition between two forms of social structure. In Europe, the landless gained independence after the end of feudalism, no longer reliant on overlords for food and protection. Policing communities emerged in urban centres to maintain the notion of good order and prevent disorder. Soldiers in friendly uniform took over the role of religious authorities to protect the towns' inhabitants from each other. Policing was at the core of the formations through which individuals came to relate to the world around them. It's like Leviathan, a mortal god in the image of the immortal, who people accept with dread in exchange for protection. In Egypt, after the coup, Nasser set up a committee to abolish feudalism, which allowed the police to extend a net of control across the countryside. State terror was the requisite of a popular aspiration: bringing about the conditions for modern nationhood. A police state necessary for the very existence of the state.

terror 2

Mohamed was born with a scar across his face. All his ID photographs are photoshopped to soften his appearance. Days after the removal of Mubarak, Mohamed was returning from work after the military-imposed curfew when members of a residents' committee dragged him out of a minibus, beat him up and handed him over to the soldiers at a checkpoint. Citizen's arrests became common during the 2011 revolution, and the rulebook for them was quite arbitrary. Men in positions of authority often succeeded in exploiting this fluidity for their own ends. Mohamed's arrest was an example of the random application of tyranny that stands in contrast, and makes more palatable, the more organised tyranny of the police. Mohamed's scar made him a thug out past curfew. The military locked him up without recourse to legal representation or a call to his family.

A military tribunal short-circuits the law's bureaucracy in an attempt to re-impose its shaken authority. Military trials are part of the war on emotions, a battle with fear that increases the incalculability of a declared threat: the possibility of a passer-by detonating a bomb or any upright citizen being the judge over the course of your future.

A fellow inmate's visitor eventually called Mohamed's sisters and told them what had happened. They were angry, they knew the army had no cause to hold him. "We don't want to live in fear, we want freedom," his older sister screamed. Their brother's capture did not match the ruling generals' celebrated promises of returning order to the streets and bettering people's futures. Mohamed's sentence was a message for the family and neighbourhood to lead a life of submission and raise the coming generations accordingly. His siblings live in Mansheyet Nasser, where many of the city's garbage collectors reside, just south of the City of the Dead, where families live in a sprawling cemetery. The area is known for drug and organ trafficking: Cairo's underworld where the concept of rights has no meaning and people live only by the strength of their backs.

From prison, Mohamed wrote his sisters a letter on paper salvaged from cigarette packets, which his brother read out to me. "Many of the families of the detainees that are here with me don't even know they are here. Quickly, reach them before it's too late and they get five years or ten in prison." This letter and others included lists of names and phone numbers. Despite the smuggled letters, Mohamed got a five-year sentence, like tens of thousands of others.

On 6 June 2010, plainclothes police officers Mahmoud Salah and Awad Ismail beat a young man to death in broad daylight in the entrance of a building in Alexandria. Khaled Saeed had refused a random ID check at an internet cafe. The police claimed he had choked on a bag of marijuana he was trying to hide while in custody.

Days later, a mother yelled in a march, “So what if he smoked hashish, why did you kill him?” On this occasion, the courage to shout out went viral as the image of this man's battered face sparked another battle in the war of emotions. The evidence dug into consciences and bypassed the self-censorship of a population that too often chose to suppress its rage out of self-protection.

Against social and religious norms, the family allowed their murdered son's body to be exhumed and re-examined. The physical evidence disproved the claims made by the state, but in vain. On 24 November 2013, the interim government banned demonstrations without police permit. Still, on 2 December of that year people gathered to protest the killers’ possible acquittal. In five minutes the police cleared the protest, arresting four people and issuing a warrant for three others for organising it.

A month later, the Alexandria Criminal Court sentenced Saeed's killers to ten years in prison for torture, not murder. These two officers’ sentences were an exception: since 25 January 2011, hundreds of police accused of crimes against the public have been allowed to go free. The law has a very small range of manoeuvre within the public perception that grants it legitimacy. Saeed's case had become emblematic of the Mubarak era, which each new regime tried to distance itself from, and so after years of uncertainty the courts made a public performance of foregoing the usual police immunity by sentencing two low-ranking officers. Weeks later, the same court convicted the seven protesters arrested for an illegal gathering to two years in prison. The aim of punishment is not revenge but terror, wrote Thomas Hobbes almost 400 years ago.

In January 2015, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi amended the Police Authority Law: the police would no longer be tried in civilian courts, but only before a military prosecutor.

terror 3

Nasser’s smile permeated a room. The first time I went to visit him, he was waiting in his red Fiat outside the metro station, smiling. During conversations over meals his wife Nahla prepared, and the time we tried to enter the factory, that smile rarely faded. That was January 2012. By September he lay on his deathbed, cancer eating at him. I barely recognised him. There was not a hair on his head, his cheeks had caved in, his entire body withered. Between jerking pains, he motioned at Nahla to give me something to drink, and then ever so briefly the smile appeared.

In 2004, Prime Minister Atef Ebeid supervised the privatisation of the Egyptian Starch and Glucose Company (ESGC). He sold it to a Kuwaiti mogul and the nephew of a former Egyptian interior minister, who was also the prime minister’s son-in-law. Ebeid sold the public company far below its value, as was the global practice of the day: government

officials closed hundreds of public enterprises, accepting hefty bribes with each transaction, while hundreds of thousands lost their jobs. The IMF and World Bank made loans to countries like Egypt conditional on such economic policies of privatisation, and the USAID office consulted on the process of tenders and sales as a form of development aid. For investors, this meant that large plots of land could be acquired at cheap rates and relationships could be solidified with those in power.

ESGC's new owners appointed a former minister of industry to head the board to help smooth the process. He hired a private security company called أمن Aman, which means security, owned by a retired State Security general, to help coerce the workers to resign. The law in Egypt prohibits firing workers following privatisation, so a security company with a special mandate was a necessary component of the process.

The newly opened Technical Support office cut all workers' bonuses and moved Nasser from his accountant job to the sales office, where he was forbidden to carry out any of his usual tasks. When he inquired about this change, the man at Technical Support responded, "If you don't like what you're doing, leave." When Nasser complained, Technical Support moved him to a job in Industrial Security, where former Investigations Department General Essam al-Deen Hafez watched his every move, looking for any fault to report. "We're going to be after you this way until you either kill yourself or leave the factory," he told Nasser.

In 2005, the workers had organised a sit-in to protest the new working conditions under the private owners. Their strike quickly ended when State Security forces arrived, kidnapped the head of the union, tortured him and then released him a few days later. The ESGC workers didn't protest again until February 2011. Meanwhile, while forcing the workers out one by one, the new owners sold off the machinery piece by piece. Their aim was to sell the costly Nile-side land on which the factory stood.

After three years of harassment, Nasser gave in. He was worried about the threats of the police operatives, despite their private uniforms. He was also afraid he would end up getting even less than what the company was then offering him. On 1 October 2007, he begrudgingly signed his resignation papers, and its approval arrived by fax within an hour. He left the company for a life stripped of all guarantees, without income, health care, bonuses, paid vacations or the community of his colleagues. Nasser had a wife, an ex-wife and a son to support.

The company left him with a monthly pension of EGP400 and an end-of-service payment package. He bought the used red Fiat and started work as a private driver. Then, in April 2010, a doctor told him that the stomach pain he had had all those years had not been

an infection, but cancer. The company's doctors had always just prescribed painkillers—he had only been a low-level employee after all, and had not been granted the same attention higher-ranking colleagues received. He wondered if they had suspected it was cancer and withheld this from him, or if they had simply been careless. By the summer of 2012, the constant pain had turned into a debilitating throb and he could barely leave home. Suddenly the pain increased, making it difficult to swallow, then even to breathe. He sold the car to cover his medical bills. Then the cancer spread to one side of his brain. He could no longer close his right eye. His body became frail.

In early February 2011, Nasser had gone to Tahrir Square for a few nights. “Those were some of the best days of my life. People were different. People looked out for each other, worked together.” On Friday 15 November 2013, Nasser died. I loved him.

In April 2014, the Interim Cabinet passed a new Investment Law whereby third parties are not permitted to interfere in business between government and foreign investors. All the cases Nasser and his colleagues had filed were annulled.

Nasser was no exception in a system where space for people was disappearing. The state of emergency is the everyday reality. The stability the state speaks of is the routine terror that killed Nasser without hesitation.

The roots of his death take us back to January 1977. A reduction of subsidies was part of then-President Anwar al-Sadat's new economic policies and the required conditions of a World Bank grant. Because wages were so low, people had to get by on subsidised food. On 17 January 1977, people took to the streets, clashing with the police and attacking state institutions, hotels and upper-class villas. The protesters took revenge against the police who had suppressed them for years while guarding the property of the rich. The police were the most visible proponents of the increasing stratification between the poor majority and the wealthy elite. One story goes that as local residents marched on his private residence in Upper Egypt, Sadat escaped by police helicopter to the airport, with a contingency plan to flee to Iran where the shah was waiting to welcome him. Only after Sadat rescinded the price hikes did the generals deploy military to aid the faltering Central Security Forces. Some say they had been concerned that the soldiers might join the protesters, as the price hikes also affected them and their families. Even after subsidies were reinstated, riots continued in some neighbourhoods.

In the following months, detained middle-class activists were quickly released, but the courts tried hundreds of lower-class Egyptians for acts of vandalism. The president did impose many of the planned subsidy cuts, but gradually.

terror 4

One moment Vivian was holding his hand, and the next, the tank crushed her fiancé Michael, split seconds after he pushed her out of the path of death. In the midst of the horror of 9 October 2011, protesters moved the injured and dead to the Coptic hospital on Ramses Street, trying to safeguard them from the attacks. The hospital became a citadel no stranger could access.

The march had started as many other marches did: people gathered in a square prepared to move. There was reason to be angry. Seven months after the ouster of Mubarak, the military junta, which held de facto power, had done nothing to protect the Coptic minority. This time men had destroyed part of a church property, and members of the Christian community had started a sit-in at Maspero—the national television building—to protest this discrimination. The night before the march, plainclothes thugs had attacked and dispersed the sit-in. Before the marchers could reach Maspero, snipers started shooting. Some protesters were gunned down, and others lost their lives when the military appeared in armoured vehicles and started driving maniacally through the crowd, injuring and squashing them.

The TV presenter fixed her hair. The sound technician adjusted her microphone slightly to make sure her voice would carry clearly. She began by referencing 6 October 1973, a founding myth of the modern Egyptian nation-state.

“In these days, we should be celebrating this glorious victory, remembering the battle and how the Egyptian people stood shoulder to shoulder in solidarity in these blessed days. But what happened and continues to this moment in front of the television building will cause everything to change. What is happening to Egypt? To whose benefit are these events?”

The image cut from the presenter to hazy shots of a dark street, in startling juxtaposition to the clarity of the words spoken.

“How could one have the heart to do this to our nation?”

She hesitated. Her voice fluttered.

“Up until now, three martyrs and twenty injured, and all from the ranks of the army. And by whom? Not at the hand of the Israelis or of an enemy, but at the hands of a group of the children of the nation. This army that is undergoing this now stood by the revolution and refused to fire one single bullet on any child of the Egyptian people. And today we find that there are those who fire bullets at the sons of the army. No matter what their demands are, whether they be legitimate or not, do they have the right to burn an entire

nation? Where are the wise ones of the nation now, so that we would hear the voice of reason, have mercy on Egypt, for God's sake! We have borne a lot, and we should now also learn to bear more and sacrifice on behalf of Egypt.”

A fixed shot from a single camera angle ran for nearly the entire speech. It seemed to suggest that the dark street could be the aftermath of a massacre. The lies of propaganda impregnated an otherwise common scene.

Political war is a war of rhetoric, of the mind, of the will, of illusion versus illusion, imagination against imagination. The voice that speaks to us identifies an enemy and gives comfort. The voice has the power to fabricate consent for terror. Death, sugar-coated. It lays myth upon myth: “the military on behalf of the people returned victorious against the foreign occupier of Sinai in 1973,” and “the military stood by the people in the principle moment of revolt today.” No mention of their routing by the enemy army only days later, no mention of the bodies littering the streets riddled by military ammunition. Territorial, religious and ethnic lines are vital to feed the myth of the collective identity of nationalism.

terror 5

When I met M, I found out that he had only left his apartment because he didn't want to decline my invitation. He had no residency permit in Egypt. He had tried everything, gone as far as inquiring into how to bribe the officer in charge. But even that was not possible. His brother, who had been living with him, fled to Jordan trying to escape the confines of Cairo. But M wanted to keep trying to find a way to reach a safer haven. After two and a half years in the country, he spoke the Egyptian dialect well enough to hide his Syrian accent.

M is from Daraa, where he participated in the early days of the Syrian uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In April 2011, he was filming the siege on his city when a soldier shot him. The bullet went through the right side of his face and smashed his jaw. Any closer to his spine, he would have been dead on the spot. For months he could not eat and was barely able to drink. Hospitals in Syria that opposed the regime were poorly stocked and understaffed. Three weeks later, despite the pain and the risk, M travelled to Egypt to seek treatment. Through a friend he managed to reach a doctor and began his recovery process.

This was the summer of 2011, when most Egyptians identified with the struggle in Syria. This was before the Syrian revolt was almost completely transformed into a playing field for the battles of external powers. In Egypt, friends of friends had taken M in, doctors and nurses were offering support to Syrians, often for free. Two years later things had

changed drastically.

In the weeks leading up to 30 June 2013, anti-Muslim Brotherhood media outlets underlined every possible failure of the unwanted government. While the Brotherhood simply maintained the brutal and exploitative state mechanisms it inherited, private media outlets actually carried out their task of reporting the authorities' tyranny effectively unlike ever before. Every power outage, water cut and petrol shortage, as well as all footage of Brotherhood supporters' violence against anti-government protesters, was used to fuel the growing anti-Brotherhood propaganda. TV presenters who had condemned the 25 January demonstrators now called on people to join the 30 June protests against President Mohamed Morsi.

A campaign called Tamarod, which means rebellion, had begun to create a momentum on the street calling for the overthrow of the Brotherhood's government and for new elections. Tamarod's utility quickly came to the attention of the heads of various policing apparatuses, who quietly co-opted the movement by simply not impeding its activities. The crowds of 30 June gave the generals the legitimacy for the coup that followed on 3 July 2013.

In an interview in a local newspaper on 5 July, a veteran of the 6 October battle said the spirit of 6 October had returned to Egypt for the first time through the 30 June revolution. The words sought to create new national landmarks by which to cast 25 January into the shadows of history.

On 9 July 2013, an army spokesperson appeared on state television accusing Syrian and Palestinian militants of opening fire on the army to defend a Brotherhood supporters' sit-in, which ended in the death of fifty-one civilians. TV hosts started referring to Syrians and Palestinians as Brotherhood affiliates opposing Egypt's army. That same day, the Egyptian authorities sent back two planes of passengers fleeing from Syria, starting a new era of closed borders between the two countries. On 16 July, the popular TV presenter Tawfiq Okasha—seen in some circles to be a mouthpiece of Egyptian security apparatuses—yelled that in every neighbourhood we would chase Syrians and Palestinians out of their homes. What followed was an onslaught on refugees across the country. Many Syrians identified at police checkpoints were arrested and kept in prison until they could provide payment for a one-way ticket home. With a single utterance by this man in military uniform, Syrians were transformed from fellow revolutionaries into villains.

The suspicion did not fall only on foreigners. The police set up a hotline to which citizens could report anyone they deemed unpatriotic, anyone carrying out unusual activities,

anyone the caller thought curious. All that was needed was a call from a concerned neighbour and the police would turn a private home into a crime scene. Trusted coffee shop owners handed in familiar customers said to have joined in protests in the past, preachers told listeners to snitch on their unpatriotic husbands or wives, a mother called in to report on her son's political activity. The enemy was within, and everyone needed to stop them for the nation's sake. Countless participants in the 25 January revolt joined in the patriotic act of calling for every Brotherhood member to be punished or locked up. This environment of suspicion gave the police permission to arrest whomever they saw fit, especially those identified to have participated in protests, and to detain journalists or passers-by at their whim.

In a televised speech on 24 July, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi made his first reference to terrorism.

"I ask you to go to the streets to show the world the extent of the power of your will and desire that in the event that violence and terrorism are reverted to, you mandate your army and police to take the necessary measures to confront this violence and this terrorism."

Sisi was a member of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, one of the generals who had ruled the country between Mubarak's toppling and Morsi's presidency. During Morsi's term, he was appointed to liaise between the military generals and the Brotherhood leadership. Through the coordinated crowds of 30 June, he became the most powerful man in Egypt.

On 26 July 2013, throngs of people joyfully filled the squares to mandate Sisi's soldiers and police to exert any extent of violence to protect them. On 14 August, the soldiers killed over 1000 pro-Brotherhood demonstrators, injured even more, and arrested anyone near the protest site. We don't know the actual numbers. Bodies lined the inside of mosques. The crowds played their role, volunteered, watched, reported on neighbours, and in this fascist moment, military-appointed liberal ministers and intellectual figureheads became the handmaids of terror, flowers on the soldiers' lapels.

On 6 October that year, a group of Syrians took to the sea off the northern coast of Egypt to escape that reality. The Egyptian navy hunted them down in a mission to protect Fortress Europe against undesired visitors. As the vessel began to sink, the cameras and cell phones of the sea police captured the last breaths of the dying. Silence followed this incident's reporting, a silent celebration of the death of these threats to the nation. Some of the youngest among them were seven and nine, eleven and fourteen years old.

In the early hours of Christmas Day 2013, a bomb exploded at the police headquarters of

Egypt's third-largest city, Mansura. In yet another speech in a soothing colloquial dialect, Sisi spoke:

“You demanded to have a free will and to live in safety in a truly stable country, and this does not come easily. Don't dare think that what you are seeing now can ever shake Egypt. The Egyptian people were afraid when the Egyptian army was not with them. Before anyone touches you, we would die on your behalf. The Egyptian army is the sacrifice of Egypt. Pay attention: we are never afraid except of God. We are never afraid. There is no anxiety or fear. And those that touch you, we will not leave them on the face of the earth. Don't ever be anxious or afraid, in the beginning and the end God is with us. Egypt will remain, always. Terrorism must fall, always.”

That day, with media outlets filled with images of destruction and bloodshed, the courts ruled the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist entity—a legal formalisation of the war on terrorism, a legitimisation of a state of emergency. Though no tie was ever made between the perpetrators of the Mansura bombing and the group, the said act of terrorism was the required abstraction to legalise the crackdown on any opposition, and to re-entrench an all-powerful state—a condition world powers were happy to see reappear to maintain the status quo of coloniality. The Brotherhood returned to its traditional role in Egyptian politics, playing the scapegoat deflecting widespread discontent from the state project.

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On 30 June 2013, on the one-year anniversary of President Morsi's reign, I joined a small march that chanted against both the Muslim Brotherhood and the military generals. The crowds attacked us for criticising the military. The TV stations had announced the pro-military and police chants to be used, and we were pushed to the margins by the cacophony. The following days, I worked frantically on a video that tried to explain the position of that little group, which in hindsight was merely wishful thinking. The more the military's popularity exploded, the more our position in popular consciousness faded.

The discourse of terrorism has an effect of divide and rule. In the following months, I was not deemed the enemy per se, but by not siding with the conqueror I was a dissident, and therefore a target. The final blow came in November, when the self-appointed authorities outlawed any form of coming together in protest, to tear each one of us out of the crowd of revolt.

On the streets, hope was crushed, and in its place were promises of power and victory. The image of a great Egyptian state captured the desire of so many, whether poor or

rich. They all shared the lowest common denominator: anxiety that life would get unbearable. People became thirsty for some kind of excitement with which to oppose the disappointment. The fervour of nationalism required a counter-image. In 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood and their foreign fighters fulfilled this role, a role that the Bolshevik enemy and their Jewish operatives had occupied in 1925.

In the same way that the ideology of 1914 National Socialism sought to oppose the revolutionary ideas of 1789 France, the orchestrated celebration on 30 June 2013 was an attempt to oppose the radical spirit of 2011 Egypt. In the month that followed, a popular mandate sanctioned one man to use whatever means to conquer the fantastical enemy. This is the unspeakable magic that allows crowds to chant the police back into power three years after they had chanted them out of it. This is statecraft: the art of making people forget what they had been fighting for.

Following a deep moment of crisis, when the very structure of the state is under threat, its proponents need to fabricate a widespread lust among the masses to maintain the idea of the state itself. Benito Mussolini put it this way: "The foundation of Fascism is the conception of the State, its character, its duty, and its aim. Fascism conceives of the State as an absolute, in comparison with which all individuals or groups are relative, only to be conceived of in their relation to the State."

At 6:45 am on 24 January 2014, I woke up to the sound of a blast. Gripped by anxiety, without a way of knowing where this vibration of the earth originated. Familiar TV and radio presenters soon announced that the first attack had been on the downtown Cairo police headquarters, where the smoke rose ominously; the second bomb had been placed at a police station across the river. The explosions were heard in all corners of the sprawling city.

The next morning, the third anniversary of the revolution, an unfamiliar chant rose out of the square:

الشعب يريد إنبات النظام - The people want the affirmation of the system

General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi introduced the terminology of terrorism into public discourse only after the coup, and after the pro-military media projected the Muslim Brotherhood's bewildered supporters as armed and their leaders as Al-Qaida affiliates. The language of terrorism took the category of enemy to its extreme: it defined the military and the police as legal state agents against the Brotherhood as an illegal non-state actor. By deeming the Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, the general was imitating the linguistic-legal games of his American patron, in turn inspired by the Zionist

occupiers of Palestine—tactics that are variations of the semantic distortions that shroud colonial violence everywhere. Sisi's stance was legible to governments globally. While some state representatives uttered a critique of the violence used against the Brotherhood, continuing diplomatic and trade relations with Egypt revealed their duplicity.

The projected threat that the discourse of terrorism created was a force so powerful that it awed a population and obscured the real terrors of soaring food prices, police brutality and a system of law that exists for the longevity of its own domination. A looming foreign danger in our midst replaced the desire for betterment with the desire for preservation, through the celebration of nationalism and patriotism. The dualism of good and evil, terror and security confirm a familiar world and give comfort in the face of an unpredictable reality.


There was the urgency to find such a culprit of terror following the momentum that grew out of 28 January 2011, where the angry people lay their sights on the very institutions of the state itself. A politics of mass pauperisation had helped lead to a popular rejection of the police state, and a community was emerging around the desire for a better life. It was in our coming together that the desire around this community crystallised, and so our coming together had to be diverted. Fear-mongering tried to turn each of us into a single unit within an imagined nation. Underneath the state's violence, there's a simple equation: the self-perpetuation of the state. Its disciplinary institutions do not teach these signs; the protesting crowd learned them on their bodies in the process of revolt.

on violence

On the morning of 25 January 2011, small groups marched through Imbaba—not towards Tahrir Square, but through the neighbourhood's garbage-filled streets—to announce the marches planned for 28 January, the Friday of Rage. Their chants breathed courage into the hearts of those who heard them, into the mundane privacy of coffee shops, through cracked windows into kitchens and living rooms. The bodies on the street allowed for personal battles with fear to turn into a collective one.

الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام - The people want the downfall of the system

To oppose the state's denial of brutality within its structures, its reality had to be forcefully confronted with our own. Batons, bullets and gas canisters were opposed with chants, stones and Molotov cocktails. Only when imagining is transformed into bodily movement is fear resisted. The revolting crowd's most powerful weapon lies in numbers. The collective makes resistance possible. Facing brutality with violence cracks the facade of criminal-legal structures of power.

January 2011 brought with it a moment of clarity, allowing for the collective gathering of courage to face the state's routine daily terror.  الشعب يريد إسقاط النظم

A roar in the street consumed the numbing nausea that is a defence mechanism against the oppression. الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام. Consumed by desire in this crowd, imagination ran wild. الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام. A community fomented not by fleeting ties to ethnicity, faith-system or land, but a shared desire to have away with this system. A deep emotional contest was sparked. الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام

On 30 January 2011, I filmed a man in Tahrir Square. "I swear I used to walk here scared. Today, look, I am walking in my country, I can sit, sleep, walk. I am walking freely. I feel safe. Should I feel safe in these days, or are these supposed to be days of fear? The Ministry of Interior's men deal with us as if we were criminals."

Two days earlier that sentiment had translated into action: burning over ninety police stations, opening prisons, lighting the ruling party's headquarters on fire.

In the convergence of people lies the possibility of deeply wounding the rule of myth formulated through a system of discipline of home, school, mosque, church, university and workplace. In convergence, the discipline dissipates and we prepare for a contest, a clashing of solidarities. In the crowd, a different solidarity emerges: a combining of forces and spirits, a confrontation with the powers that hold us down, a violent solidarity formulated for battle against the disciplining authority. A new subconscious momentum emerges in moments when the bubble of normality is punctured. It is the body that produces thought, and in the amalgamation of bodies, the protesting crowd, the root of revolt crystallises: if the state upholds this brutality, it has to be rejected. A body of people seeks a community of a different type, unknown but far from what it lives now. For now, the community is formulated, ever so frailly, by desire itself.

terror x

In March 2013, the police abducted Karim as he exited the metro to visit his sister. Some in uniform, some not, they chased him through an alley and caught him. From the corner of his eye Karim noticed a friend across the street—one who knew where he was being taken. In a station at the end of the street, the police left him shivering all night after threats and beatings. The next day, they tied his hands to the ceiling and raped him with a stick. They suspected him of possessing a weapon taken from a police vehicle during clashes with security forces the night before. Three days later, they released him. For weeks the muscles in his left leg were nearly frozen, as if in a cast. Many of those who undergo the worst forms of torture leave as agents, like Karim's old friend standing on the other side.

The constant turn to brutality, no matter the government, indicates that the state apparatus is not only defending a party in power, but power itself. The extent of the state's actors' use of violence reveals the system's weakness, with every inhumane blow of the tortured, searing of the skin, fear within the torturer too proliferates. In this state of panic, the soldiers aspire to maintain the state, like the colonial authorities before them. Even today, Karim was tortured in a police station surrounded by Victorian architecture. A revolt against the Egyptian elite is an affront to global power structures, of which the Egyptian state plays only a small part in a much greater whole.

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The significance of these tales lies in identifying the untold front lines of the battle over life itself. The maintenance of the rule of the few, and the submission of the rest, is the role of the state as the agent of colonial logic. When coloniality is no longer just a pattern of power but part of our makeup, then it is present in our very being, in the realm of desire, where the deepest contest with power takes place.

Revolt questions the myth and its maker, and through the physical act imagines that a different world is possible. It's a phantasmic hope. Words lie bare, their threads unravelled as the soldiers beat down on us, and with their tools of terror stitch over a raw wound that will only fester and spread. The construction of yet more prisons, the imposition of new laws that make gathering illegal and the dissemination of fascist ideas while drowning us in austerity—all this raises the stakes, intensifying the coming contest. Our coming together, which caused the teetering of the system, was only a start. It is a battle to see a world outside the confines of the colonised imagination. The year 2011 was the painful beginning of a community's identifying with each other's desire to shatter the familiar. The physicality of this fight has taken lives and left debilitations, scars and mourning. Despite the place of weakness we have reached, the desires that opened in the imagination remain.

سيستط النظام - This system will fall

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