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Religion and Politics in 20th Century Egypt

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Foreword

With this book we present a revised and updated English translation of the central part of *L'Egitto agli egiziani! Cristiani, musulmani e idea nazionale (1882-1936)*, that is volume 7 of the series «Patrimonio Culturale Arabo Cristiano» published in 2003. That publication was born within the activities of the Christian Arab Research Group (GRAC) that aims to promote and spread the knowledge of the contributions that Arab Christians have given and continue to give for the cultural, social and political progress of Middle Eastern societies. Our research group, founded in 1993 thanks to the untiring efforts of Father Samir Khalil Samir and his contagious enthusiasm for the literature and the history of Arab Christians, has now published about twenty titles, including many editions of Arabic Christian texts with Italian translation in addition to some historical studies.

In the last few years we have felt the need to promote our work and to connect it with the researches made by other scholars in a wider context. Thus the initiative was born to include in the series some studies and translations in English in order to encourage a wider and international dissemination of our research works not only in academic circles but also among all those who care about the past and especially the future of Christian communities in the Arab world.

P.P.

Rome, October 2018

Introduction

Turning Points in the Middle East in the 20th Century

The coming to power of Gorbachev and the beginning of perestroika led to the creation of a new vision of Soviet policy in the Middle East[1]. The Soviet leadership reduced relations with the most radical Arab countries in an attempt to improve Israeli-Soviet relations. At the same time, it did not seek to curb American political ambitions in the Gulf in 1990-91. The Middle East remained one of the privileged scenarios for the Russians in terms of building international relations and, in 1991, Gorbachev sent the Minister of Foreign Affairs Primakov to the region to thank Egypt and other Arab countries for the support they had provided during the attempted coup d'état[2]. The USSR would collapse not long after the Madrid conference but – as Kreutz recalls – Russia continued to play a role in the Middle East, albeit a less relevant one than it played previously, although it has been more prominent in recent years. Moreover, the events in the Middle East had an impact on the Russian Federation in an increasingly significant manner. We need only consider how much Islamic extremism influenced the Chechen conflict or how the preaching of a different conception of Islam spread compared to the one traditionally diffused in the former Soviet area, such as Wahhabism.

1. See Kreutz, *Geopolitics* (2002), p. 51.
2. See Kreutz, *Geopolitics* (2002), p. 51.

Despite the Cold War coming to an end, the competition between America and Russia continued, and the Middle East remained one of the key scenarios of action. The Russians' aspiration to represent one of the countries which exercised the most significant influence on world politics found in the Middle East a privileged place in which to fulfil this desire[3]. We must reflect on the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet regime and the impact it had on the region, thus changing the relationship between political and religious power. In other words, how the Arab leaderships used religion in a new geo-political context marked by globalization and the end of ideologies. This contribution tries to highlight the kind of relationships existing between the Egyptian political leadership and religion, and how and if it changed over time from the Nasser to the Mubarak government, considering the end of the Cold War as a turning point in this process.

Some turning points have contributed in shaping contemporary history in Egypt in connection with key events at regional and international level. We need only recall that many scholars believe the emergence of modern Egypt coincides with the Napoleonic invasion of the country in 1798, even if this approach was deemed to follow a colonialist or "Orientalist" rationale by Edward Said[4]. If we consider the events which occurred in the country from an Arab regional perspective, there are specific dates that have had a tremendous effect on the history of Egypt. First of all, 1952, the year when some officers of the Egyptian army carried out a coup d'état that put an end to the Khedivial government first and the monarchical power later, which

3. See Gresh, *Russia's return* (1998).
4. See Scarcia Amoretti, *Problemi storiografici* (2000), pp. 56 ss. On the criticism of "modernization" of historiography on the Middle East, see the insightful introductory pages to Pappé, *Modern Middle East* (2014).

had been started one and a half centuries earlier by Mehmet Ali. The latter, an Ottoman officer of Albanian origin, is considered to be the one who inaugurated the history of modern Egypt after the Napoleonic troops had been driven out of the country. Since 1952, initially with Neguib and two years later with Nasser, for the first time in many centuries, an Egyptian returned to lead the country of the Nile.

The history of Republican Egypt developed within the international context of the Cold War and was marked, at regional level, by the series of Arab-Israeli Wars. 1967 was one of the most critical turning points for the country. A shock not only for Nasser's leadership but also for the conscience of many Egyptian thinkers and politicians who had sided with the ideology of Arab socialism and, after being disappointed by the defeat, had chosen to return to their Islamic identity. The defeat had a devastating effect on the conscience of Egyptians and Arabs in general[5]. Such a blow to national pride could only leave a mark on all the men of letters of the time[6].

The stricken conscience of the rapid defeat of June 1967 was redeemed by the Kippur-Ramadan War in October 1973, another symbolic date in Egyptian national history. The political regime exploited its linguistic, literary, cultural and iconic ability to the full in order to turn the partial Egyptian military victory – Egyptian military gains were soon lost to Israel's counterattack – into the myth of Egyptian redemption[7]. On the wave of the great emotion aroused by the enthusiasm for the triumph over Israel, the following year saw Sadat implement a new policy of *infitāḥ*, opening. The new path embarked on by Sadat led the country, on the one hand, to build peace with Israel in 1978 – another

5. See Laroui, *Crise* (1974).
6. See Badawī, *Arabic Drama* (1987), p. 229.
7. See Menshawy, *State* (2017), pp. 28-29.

symbolic date in Egyptian history – and, on the other, to undertake a series of laissez-faire economic reforms.

Three years later, Sadat would pay with his life for the choices he imposed on Egyptian politics; he was murdered on the very day of the anniversary of the onset of the Kippur-Ramadan War – 6th October 1981 – by a militant of the Islamist group *al-Jihad*.

All the turning points considered so far lie within the regional context marked by the Arab-Israeli conflict and, more in general, within the international perspective of the Cold War.

Nasser had used the image of the three circles to represent his vision of Egypt: the Arab circle, the Mediterranean circle and the African circle. But Nasser's representation of Egypt went far beyond Pan-Arabism and Mediterranean relations, thus finding a place in the broader circle of the non-aligned countries. Nasser opened up a decisive phase in the decolonization process with the decision to nationalize the Suez Canal in 1956. The previous year, in Bandung, Nasser, Nehru, Tito and other leaders had laid the basis of the doctrine of neutralism and the condemnation of colonialism[8]. This event accelerated the process towards independence by other countries at a global level.

A similar phenomenon occurred with the liberal experience of Egypt in the 19th century. At the time, the country was experiencing significant economic, political and cultural development, thus acting as a point of convergence for the entire Arab world. With Nasser and Sadat, Egypt – though in very different ways – became a driving and attracting force in the regional and international context in which it found itself.

The collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991

8. See Di Nolfo, *Imperi militari* (2007), p. 265.

occurred ten years after Mubarak had assumed the leadership in Egypt following the murder of Sadat. The vice president was left a difficult legacy by Sadat; an unprecedented economic crisis along with a weakened political position, which was undermined on several fronts, from the Islamist to the liberal and socialist ones[9]. In a country like Egypt, whose international equilibrium was designed in the context of bipolar relations, the collapse of the Soviet system had a considerable impact. Sadat's choice in 1974 of a laissez-faire economic position (*infitāḥ*) which was closer to the American sphere, had become a constant in Egypt's international relations, confirmed – or even reinforced – by Mubarak.

During the first decade of the regime, the successor of Sadat successfully consolidated his authority in the country and resumed international relations by being re-admitted to the Arab League and by obtaining slightly greater independence from American foreign policy in the Middle East. In 1991, with the end of the Cold War following the collapse of the Communist regimes, Mubarak started wielding greater authoritarian power. Civil liberties were reduced while, as far back as the mid-1990s, organizations for human rights protection and against torture were complaining that torture was systematically used by security forces[10]. This coincided – not by chance – with the signing of an agreement on *stabilization* and structural adjustment programmes with the International Monetary Fund[11]. Kienle demonstrated how economic reforms during the Mubarak era were partial and selective and produced no major democratization of the political system in the country[12].

9. See Amin, *Egypt* (2011), pp. 3-4.
10. See Gómez Isa, de Feyter, *International Human Rights* (2009), p. 433.
11. See Amin, *Egypt* (2011), p. 17.
12. See Kienle, *Grand Delusion* (2001).

Essentially this is the summary of the temporal references that characterized the history of Egypt in the second half of the 20th century. The turning point in 1989, considered in terms of the context of the Middle East and Egypt in particular, was the perfect moment for Mubarak's regime to consolidate power. If Nasser and Sadat had a vision of the future of Egypt with an attractive and evocative force – for better or worse – Mubarak's personality, some say, appeared to be dull: he pursued Sadat's political line in terms of economic opening and peace-building with Israel with no creativity at all[13]. The severe judgement of the Egyptian economist and historian Galal Amin is that Mubarak's regime was just an authoritative and somewhat bland one that lasted for thirty years, unable to express a vision or a mission for Egypt, dull like its ministers and bureaucrats – corrupt and with no initiative; a regime that during its last stage, was not even able to name a dauphin or a successor apart from Mubarak's son.

13. See Amin, *Egypt* (2011), pp. 16-17.

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