

## EGYPT: OSAMA'S STAR IS RISING

*Nivien Saleh*

*Ms. Saleh is a doctoral candidate at American University in Washington, DC. She recently spent five months in Cairo doing research.*

**T**he U.S. "War on Terrorism" may be doing Osama bin Laden more good than harm. As American troops were shelling Al Qaeda hideouts in Afghanistan, his star was rising in the Middle East. Arab citizens have become increasingly disaffected with the U.S. approach to the Middle East, and the more they resent the United States, the more they sympathize with Bin Laden, America's nemesis.

Egypt is a case in point. Traditionally critical of U.S. Middle East policy and the tendency of Washington to side with Israel, popular opinion has lately been accusing President Bush of injustice and of indiscriminately targeting Arabs and Muslims. When asked for their opinion, members of Cairo's middle class openly say: "Bush is utterly bad." In April, the American embassy in Cairo received a bogus bomb threat. In his weekly TV show, political commentator Hamdy Qandeel had to urge Egyptians not to destroy American property, but rather boycott its commercial interests by not buying at McDonald's.

What did the Bush administration do to evoke such a strong response by the "street"? It combined a failure to understand Arab sensitivities with the absence of a strategy. Exposure to graphic depictions of Palestinian suffering in the occupied

territories left the impression with Egyptians that President Bush is supporting the slaughtering of Palestinians and – by extension – Arabs.

Most important, the administration failed to understand two basic beliefs that underpin Egyptian sentiment towards Israel. First, while Egyptians distrust Israeli leaders in general, they are particularly averse to the person of Ariel Sharon, whom they accuse of being a war criminal. His involvement in the 1982 massacre at the refugee camps Sabra and Shatila has neither been forgotten nor forgiven. That over the last fourteen months Sharon was invited five times to Washington while Arafat has not been received a single time showed whom the Bush administration favored. That President Bush, following accusations of yet another mass murder in Jenin, referred to Sharon as a "man of peace" deeply upset Egyptians. In fact, this statement could not have come at a worse time. It provided ample material for polemic because it so succinctly captured the double standard of U.S. policy, which seeks justice for the killing of American civilians but ignores a crime when it is committed against Arabs.

The second belief the administration ignored was that, to Egyptians, the Palestinians are conducting a liberation struggle.

The commonly held view is that as long as Palestinians are under occupation, they have the right to do whatever helps end this condition. The range of permissible activities includes suicide attacks. The U.S. government has made it clear that it does not consider attacks against Israeli civilians a legitimate form of resistance. However, in doing so it has conflated the concepts "Palestinians" and "terrorists." The administration has thus denied not only the admissibility of suicide attacks, but also the legitimacy of Palestinian grievances. Someone who is a terrorist does not have rights.

With more sensitivity, both mistakes could have been avoided. Instead, the U.S. government compounded its blunders by failing to act when action was necessary. Two days after the Arab League adopted the Saudi peace proposal, Ariel Sharon invaded Ramallah and told the Palestinian leader to leave the territories for good. When this happened, the Bush administration kept silent, trying to let the Europeans do the mediating. It took several days and much international pressure to get the U.S. government to react. Even at that point, it sent out mixed messages. Bush demanded Israeli withdrawal from the invaded areas. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice told a different audience that withdrawal might not have to be done all at once but in stages. Secretary of State Colin Powell said that Bush's demand for troop withdrawal was not an ultimatum, but just a request. To Western observers this looked like the absence of a strategy. In Egypt, the impression arose that Bush was endorsing the invasion, veiling his approval with superficial demands to disengage. It was this hesitation in response to Ramallah that prompted

Egyptian TV anchors to refer to "the open U.S. support for the Israeli aggression." The popular response was a surge in anti-American emotions.

To be sure, such resentment cannot solely be blamed on U.S. policy. The Egyptian media are contributing their part by adopting a closed-minded approach to the events of September 11. Critiquing Sharon's moves ad nauseam, the government-controlled TV stations have failed to analyze the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The press enjoys somewhat more freedom in its reporting, which it uses to prove that the U.S. government's version of events is wrong. Its alternative account is that the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad was responsible for the attacks. On March 5, for example, the daily newspaper *Al-Akhbar* published a front page story "The Largest Israeli Spy Network in the United States Has Been Broken Up: The Spies Lived in the Same Cities as Those Involved in the Events of September." The article is a summary of a March 4 report by Agence France Presse (AFP), which in turn is based on information from Intelligence Online ([www.intelligenceonline.com](http://www.intelligenceonline.com)). AFP reported that U.S. authorities had broken up an Israeli spy ring that sought access to the defense and justice departments. According to AFP, there were indications that some of the spies had been stationed in the same cities as those suspected of planning September 11. However, it asked readers not to jump to conclusions:

[Editor-in-chief of Intelligence Online] Dasqui stressed, however, that the 'troubling' coincidence was still only one theory being looked into and that there was not enough information to determine whether Israel's Mossad

secret service had been aware of the preparations for the September attacks.

*Al-Akhbar* failed to mention these words of caution, suggesting that the Mossad was involved in the preparations for the attack. Aisha, a secondary school teacher in her late forties, tried to convince me that Israel was responsible for September 11. To make her point she showed me the story, saying: "See? They did it."

This kind of pseudo and non-analysis, which is geared towards making Egyptians feel good about themselves, makes Osama bin Laden appear as the innocent victim of a Zionist-American campaign designed to denigrate Arabs and Muslims. As a result, many Egyptians do not believe that Bin Laden was behind

September 11 to begin with. They are convinced that Arabs are both too good and too simpleminded to come up with such a sinister and elaborate scheme. Popular discourse ruminates on spurious evidence affirming the innocence of Arabs. The

most popular argument is that on September 11, 4,000 Jews did not show up to work at the Twin Towers, having received a warning that an attack was imminent. During my five-month stay in Cairo, I heard various university graduates make that argument. None of them questioned how such an allegation could possibly be proven, with all the towers' attendance records buried meters under the ground.

The implication is that the "U.S. campaign against terrorism" has even less

legitimacy than it would have if Bin Laden were assumed to be the culprit. With Bin Laden in the role of Mossad's whipping boy, the U.S. war in Afghanistan boils down to a quest for the country's natural resources and the effort to weaken Muslims.

By the time Ramallah was invaded, Egyptians had spent months watching graphic depictions of violence in the territories. These images of destroyed homes, blood-stained walls and lifeless bodies have filled people with impotent anger. Confronted with a one-sided and insensitive U.S. policy and entangled in a web of conspiracy theories, they feel that the United States is out to get Arabs and Muslims, and they do not hesitate to vent their fury in front of non-Americans.

Especially after Ramallah and Jenin, the situation in Egypt grew tense. Patriotic songs about Jerusalem filled busy Cairo streets, reminding Egyptians that their destiny as Muslims is closely tied to the fate of the Palestinians. University

demonstrations that spilled into the streets left several students dead.

This tense popular mood might prove dangerous for America in the long run. With virtually the entire Egyptian population outraged at the United States, there will be many potential recruits for Al Qaeda or similar organizations. A dialogue that I had with Saad, a 23-year-old commerce graduate from one of Cairo's state universities, exemplifies the frame of mind of many young men:

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Q: Do you believe Osama bin Laden will go to Paradise or to Hell?

A: He will go to Paradise.

Q: You say that after all he did on September 11 and all the consequences it had for the Middle East?

A: No, I don't believe he attacked the World Trade Center. I believe he is innocent.

Q: Let us assume he is guilty. Would he go to Paradise or to Hell?

A: He would go to Paradise.

Q: Why?

A: It is the revenge for the Arabs.

Q: Why do you say that? Isn't he the cause for all that the U.S. is doing to the Middle East?

A: I think the U.S. would attack Arab countries anyway. First Sudan, then Afghanistan, then Iraq. Why does the U.S. want to attack Iraq? What does Iraq have to do with September 11? What have the Iraqi people done to the United States?

What is noteworthy is that Saad is not a fundamentalist, but a mainstream young Egyptian. Unlike fundamentalists, he is convinced that Egypt is a democracy and that President Mubarak is doing his best to develop the country. During our conversation, his 17-year-old sister stood by, agreeing with everything he said. In a slightly unusual manner for Muslim girls her age, she refuses to wear the head scarf. This indicates rising support for Bin Laden among Egypt's youth, not on the basis of his religious fundamentals, but because he symbolizes resistance to U.S. hegemony. If the U.S. government has not succeeded in entirely destroying the organizational infrastructure of Al Qaeda, its campaign against terrorism may very well have backfired, because it created a massive pool of potential new recruits. Assuming

that the sentiment prevalent among Egyptians is shared by Arabs in other countries, Al Qaeda will be able to draw on a decentralized network of supporters spanning the Middle East and, potentially, North Africa.

This turns plans for a military offensive against Iraq into a dangerous gamble. While the American audience would see it as an attack against the person of Saddam Hussein, Egyptians would view it as a war against the Iraqi people. Saddam is considered just another Middle Eastern autocrat. He is not well liked, but he is also not despised, just a necessary evil. When I presented Dalia, a 45-year-old Cairo housewife of the lower middle class, with the reasons Saddam poses a danger, particularly to Israel, she replied:

Okay, Iraq has chemical weapons. But so what? Israel has chemical weapons as well, and the United States does not attack Israel for that. Israel also has the atomic bomb, which none of the Arab countries has.

This view reflects popular opinion, and it is based on longstanding Egyptian efforts to move Israel to dismantle its nuclear arsenal.

In a May 13 interview in the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, Defense Policy Board member Richard Perle suggested that moderate Arab governments such as that in Egypt might not openly support an attack against Iraq but secretly be grateful. The comments of Dalia and other Cairo residents suggest that he is wrong. The Egyptian government cannot be interested in an attack against Iraq, because augmenting the current subdued popular anger, such an attack might spark unrest. Suffering from a massive decline in foreign-direct-investment and tourism revenue, as

well as strong currency depreciation and the introduction of the general sales tax, the Egyptian economy is ailing and slowly grinding to a halt. If an attack against Iraq coincides with a drastic worsening in Egypt's economic conditions, regime stability might well be in danger. Needless to say, such an attack would increase resentment against the United States even further, possibly leading to attacks against U.S. installations.

Even with all its military power, the United States cannot afford to turn 200 million Arab citizens against it and thus deliver thousands of potential recruits to terrorist organizations. Hegemony always causes resistance. If those who feel threatened cannot afford F16 fighter jets, they use alternative means, such as suicide bombings, hijackings or kidnappings. Thus far, the Bush administration has failed to see that, focusing its persuasive efforts on Middle Eastern governments and ignoring the street. It might be useful to develop an understanding of how its actions and words are perceived by people in the Middle East, who have a different history, live in a different political context, and have different values. Time to learn is running out. As things stand, the administration has thoroughly discredited itself among Arabs. The longer it waits before changing course, the harder it will be to convince Arab citizens that they are not its target.

The current situation in the Middle East also demonstrates the importance of press freedom. In an environment where journalists have to fear libel suits if they are too critical of the government, only those views get published that make citizens feel at ease with their identity as Egyptians and Arabs. This helps the government avoid uncomfortable debates about regime legitimacy. At the same time, however, it forestalls a debate as to why an Egyptian participated in the attacks of September 11 and the soul-searching that Americans are looking for from Middle Eastern countries.

There seems to exist a situation in which two governments are playing to populist emotions in a way that secures government survival: In the United States, a tough stance on terrorism based on oversimplification of the Middle Eastern political context may help the Republican party win the next elections. In Egypt, satisfying citizens' egos helps keep their view of Egyptian society untarnished and forestalls criticism of the regime. Curiously, these strategies which secure short-run stability domestically may very well have put the two societies on a collision course. Another wave of attacks would be devastating for the United States and the international community, and it would give leverage to the supporters of Samuel Huntington's thesis that, after all, Islam is incompatible with modernity.