

The Fundamentalists in Egypt

Western media started to talk about fundamentalists after a *fatwa*, condemning to death among others, the world-famous writer Salman Rushdi and terrorist acts such as the 11th of September 2001 against the US followed by others in Spain, London, Egypt... Fundamentalism isn't any more referred to as extreme Islam such as the one in Saudi Arabia, but it's now a question of terror and violence perpetuated essentially against the West and our democratic values, but mostly against other Muslims.

Mona Karashy that I met in my grandparents' old apartment in Garden City in Cairo gave me her essay on 'fundamentalism, Islam and women'. According to her, the word 'fundamentalism' stems originally from the United States and a group of Christians that had retired from society to live in autarky as during Jesus Christ's times. Then the word was transferred into Arabic and is now used to name groups that want to live as they imagined that the first Muslims did. The Islamic fundamentalists refuse any modern interpretation of the Koran. They mix religion and ancient traditions and politics. They don't balk at violence and don't hesitate to use it to attain their goals. Their aim is to have us all governed by Islamic laws; they are opposed to our modern society and to women's emancipation. There exists different fundamentalist movements, some more inclined towards violence than others. But they all have in common a very traditional interpretation of the Koran where social, financial and political development is denied while still taking advantage of the most modern techniques. They want a static society when life is just the opposite.

In Egypt, Islamic fundamentalism started with the **Muslim Brotherhood (MB)**, a movement that was created in 1928 by Hassan el-Bannah (1906-1949) who wanted to give Egypt an Islamic identity. The party grew and in 1949 it counted millions of adherents divided into two thousand different cells. They operated in schools, syndicates and in different charity organisations. Their ideology can be summed up as four central concepts:

- 1) The organisation: belonging to that organisation is a religious duty for all Muslims. Members sworn in become the property of the organisation and are bound to dedicate their time, money and even lives to it.
- 2) Secrecy: is a fundamental cornerstone of the MB org. It did not arise in response to persecutions or as security measures. That's why there are so many "sleeping cells" ready to "wake" up at any time. The MB are to "adapt a façade of stupidity in its dealing with its allies and enemies, so as to learn their plans while pretending ignorance. The movement should place some of its men in the ranks of the enemy".
- 3) Pretence: meaning "temporarily accommodating the exigencies of the present in order to attain an ulterior goal later on" thus giving promises it intends to break and makes commitments it never intends to fulfil. An example being the Fairmont Hotel agreement made before the final round of the presidential elections in 2012 between the still rather unknown Mohammed Morsi and Ahmed Shafiq. Morsi and MB officials then vowed to meet the demands of liberals and revolutionary forces if they backed him in the polls. Once in power Morsi and the MB didn't keep their promises. Pretence means that deliberate lies and deception is okay as long as it serves their ideology.
- 4) Force: MB literature confirms that violence and force is an authorized instrument. Terror is a tactic that's encouraged to make a regime fall. Arms and terror training is part of its organisation.

In 1954, President Nasser banned the Muslim Brotherhood from the country. That same year, he just escaped an attack on his life. After that, many of the fundamentalists' party's adherents were arrested, tortured, deported or eliminated. The movement was silenced, but not entirely. In the 1970s, President Sadat encouraged the Islamists, fearing his communist opponents more. That triggered the beginning of a new movement: el Jamaa.

Despite President Mubarak's improvements accomplished during the 1980s, the situation was worsening for a vast majority of people, amongst whom the university students that Nasser had promised work to in an already overloaded Civil Service. There is housing shortage and the shantytowns are developing. Even the young people's sexual life is hindered because marriages become more and more costly and young couples can't find lodging. An increasing number of youngsters thus find themselves, against their will, single. Their role models aren't any more academics or politicians, but citizens coming back with their pockets full of money from work in the Gulf countries, their women veiled. In Saudi Arabia, even a Western woman cannot walk outdoors without the black sheet, *chador* that covers her from head to toe. Women are forbidden to drive a car; those who work do so with other women, serving women; few girls are sent to school; their lives are dominated by men. Egyptian workers are influenced by these ultra-conservative ideas in this country that 'God has rewarded by oil in abundance'.

The young generation is disappointed by nationalism and socialism. Their answer is Islam. It should be mentioned that Egypt is soaked in religious beliefs, you cannot express any wish without adding *insh'Allah*, God's willing.

Sayyed Qutb (1906-66) is the Sunnite movement's primordial reference. He was an intellectual Egyptian that had solid university studies possessing a good level of English. He was first pro-Western and then turned his back on those values to embrace radical ones instead. In 1953, Qutb became a member of the Muslim Brotherhood after having read the Pakistani Abdul Ala Mawdudi's political literature. The following year he was arrested and sentenced to fifteen years behind bars. In prison, he became even more radical and preached the return to the 'sources'. The followers of the fundamentalist movement, el Jamaa el Islameyya, read his book 'In the shadow of the Koran'. Qutb didn't have the time to put his ideas in practice though. He was released from prison in 1964 just to be put back there again one year later along with hundreds of other members of radical movements. Nasser ordered him hanged. His brother, Mohammed Qutb, escaped to Saudi Arabia, where he taught amongst others, Osama bin Laden, at university. We are hence suffering under Qutb's influence today through el-Qaida's deeds.

Khaled el-Berry is an Egyptian Muslim coming from a well-integrated and educated social background. Despite that he was recruited by el-Jihad. He relates in his book '*La Terre est plus belle que le Paradis*' – Earth is more beautiful than Paradise – how through mental manipulation he became increasingly militant within the fundamental movement, el Jamaa el-Islamayya. Another interesting testimony to a similar recruitment, but in England, is the book written by Ed Husain: 'The Islamist, why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left' (Penguin Books, 2007). Khaled repented and returned to a normal life after some time in prison. His testimony, and Ed Husain's, resembles that of any cult adherent. The manipulation, the lies, the fanaticism, the isolation, it's all there.

Khaled thought, as all cult members do, that he was one of God's 'chosen'. He had, along with his 'brothers', decided to combat Western 'consumer society' and create the 'true road to Islam' instead. Their mission was to combat for an Islamic state running from Palestine to Andalusia delivering the countries deprived of Islam and establish the Islamic model

everywhere in the world. Khaled's task was to recruit university students. As in most cults, he had to give up his own ideas and identity to dress differently, talk and walk in a special way, let his beard grow and trim it in a special way etc. All manipulative and totalitarian groups isolate thus their members from the rest of society so that they lose their own identity in favour of the cult identity and its ideology instilled by the leader. In the beginning, it seems easy just to follow orders and not to have to think, but in the long run, the identity loss becomes increasingly difficult to manage. The constant pressure never to be good enough, to always have to obey, never be allowed any spontaneity or laughter (fanatics are seldom any fun...) and always to be on guard, becomes eventually such a burden that cult members often develop psychological disorders.

As in other cults, Khaled wasn't allowed to meet 'non-believers' even among his own family. There were many different rules to follow and respect; such as to eat without cutlery, using the right hand and three fingers; to cross legs in a certain manner and not in another while sitting on the floor; to walk into the mosque with the right foot first and walk out with the left foot first; to walk into the lavatory with the left foot and out with the right foot; the *galabeyya*, or robe, (they dress traditionally and not Western), had to be shorter than normal not to look to ostentatious; to walk slowly; to brush their teeth with a special toothpaste; never whistle... In a cult every detail is regulated in order to keep the mind busy on trivialities as a thought-stopping method to avoid reflection and ultimately doubting about the doctrine. The thoughts being thus controlled, the members repeat incessantly the group's ideology. Khaled's world was divided into two: the believers and the non-believers. The Afghan believers had won the war against the Russians because 'the angels had fought with them' as he had been taught by the videos shown to him and to the other members. The cyclones hitting the United States shores were in fact: 'God's anger'; each earthquake was 'God's threat'; Aids, droughts etc are but 'God's revenge'. In that respect, Jamaa el-Islameyya, also resembles most cults that refer to natural catastrophes as 'divine punishments'.

The fundamentalists' retro conception of women in Egypt has hindered the women's emancipation movements. According to the fundamentalists, looking at women 'is sinful' that's why women cover up to protect themselves and the men from temptations. Women belong to Satan. They aren't allowed to wear make-up, to put on perfume, to go out alone or to talk to men; if a women gets raped it's her own fault. Even the Imam that I talked to in the Stockholm mosque was affirming those degrading ideas about women while his salary is paid by Swedish taxpayers!

In this perspective, it shouldn't be forgotten that Egypt is a country where belly-dancing, a very erotic dance, is one of the major attractions. Om Khalsoum, referred to simply as *el-Sitt*, the Woman, in Egypt, is legendary. She was the Egyptians' favourite singer. The Egyptians love to sing and dance; they are a joyful people. Om Khalsoum was appreciated all over the Arab world. During thirty-seven years, the entire Arab-World was listening to her on Thursday evenings at the radio. From the Qasr el-Nil cinema she gave marathon concerts that sometimes went on for six hours in a row and were always full. Her fans would cover her with gifts. After the 1967 war she amassed millions of pounds to reconstruct the army. From her hospital bed, the Syrian radio kept the line opened to be able to quickly alert the people of her state. Her funeral in 1975 was even more important than Nasser's had been. More than two million people marched in the streets of Cairo. They still listen to her records and there are numerous Internet sites about her.

But the fundamentalists banned her. Khaled and his 'brothers' made sure that there weren't any contacts at the university between both sexes. They were just as strict regarding

homosexuals and regarding anything that was sex-related. To oppress their sexual frustrations, the members would fast a lot.

According to the fundamentalists women have to wear black robes with as sole decoration some Mickey Mouse looking gloves to hide all human flesh. In the most extreme cases, women wear dark glasses on top of their veil. An increasing health problem among Egyptian women has become a vitamin D deficiency due to the lack of exposure to sunrays. Even Swedish doctors are getting worried about that problem among our immigrants. Too little exposure to the sun hinders the body's calcium production. The skeleton is weakened and bone-cracks difficult to discern even on X-rays as a result. On children, especially young veiled girls, the skeleton can be deformed for life.

The less extreme women can opt for the 'nun-fashion' with a veil that surrounds the face and falls down on their shoulders, just like the Christian nuns. There is also the version 'scarf-matching' the clothes, be they joggings, school uniforms or jeans. To the chemists' benefit, most scarves are made of nylon or of polyester, thus getting wealthy on anti-allergic drugs. The women within the groups (or living in neighbourhoods where they are in majority) who divert from this fashion risk being mocked or badly treated.

The Copts are another group that the fundamentalists try to intimidate. El Jamaa pursues and attacks them. In Upper Egypt, el Jamaa introduced, for its own benefit, a religious tax, *el jizia*. Its adherents terrorise the Copts by thefts, rapes and even murders. Regularly they organise murders perpetuated against Copts; it happens every two or three years since 1979, which contribute to their emigration.

President Sadat was assassinated by another group of Islamists, el Jihad, which leader is the brother of Mohammed Istambouli, el Jamaa's then imprisoned leader. He became one of Ben Laden's lieutenants in Afghanistan. In 1982, el Jamaa took control over the universities and the poorer districts. Murders of liberals and Copts continued with thousands of members fighting for the Islamic cause, regularly putting Coptic churches on fire.

The sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, el Jamaa's spiritual leader, escaped to the United States in the 1990s, after several years behind bars in Egypt. El Jamaa allied itself with other similar movements inside the country and in other countries (Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, Yemen, Algeria and Pakistan) and created antennas or ramifications in Europe and in the United States. Ayman el Zawahiri, one of el-Qaida's leaders, became the link to Afghanistan. After Rifaat el-Mahgoub's – the Egyptian Parliament's President – murder, 25 000 of el-Jamaa's adherents were imprisoned. That marked the beginning of an open war and several murders and attacks followed suit.

Intellectuals, such as the writer Farag Foda, as well as other official personalities paid with their lives. Professor Nasr Abu-Zayd of the Cairo University was condemned to divorce his Muslim wife. His 'fault' was to suggest that some parts of the Koran were to be interpreted as metaphors rather than literally. All his books were as a result removed from the bookshops. As he had no intention of divorcing and that he feared for his life, he and his wife immigrated to Europe.

In 1993, Sheikh Omar Rahman ordered his first attack on the World Trade Centre. Two years later, he was condemned in the United States to life imprisonment. Next year, the murders and the attacks accelerated in Egypt. They even attempted to assassinate President Mubarak in 1995. In 1997, dozens of tourists were killed in Luxor. Thousands of el-Jamaa's adherents were arrested as a result. From their prison-cells, the leaders accepted a truce. But another

leader, Abu Yassir Rifai-Taha, a refugee in Afghanistan, joined Osama ben Laden's *jihād* against the Christians and the Jews. In the year 2000, Taha threatened the United States. The more militant el-Jamaa's members left to join terrorist groups all over the Middle East or Ben Laden's group in Afghanistan.

In the Arab world, the Islamists are hindering all modern development. The United Nations, in an alarming report in 2002, 'the Arab human development report', warned that the Arab countries are handicapped in their development because of a lack of political freedom, censorship and women's oppression. Financially, several among those countries have moved forwards thanks to the oil revenues. But culturally most Arab countries have stagnated. Internet usage is ephemeral; film productions decrease; few new books are written and even fewer are translated from other languages into Arabic. The entire Arab world translates around 330 books yearly, which correspond to a fifth of Greece's translations. During the past millennium, the Arabs have translated the same amount of books, as does Spain during one year! It's essentially religious books that are written and published in the Arab world.

According to Laila Abou-Saif, an Egyptian writer and theatre director, the Islamists are one of the factors in the explanation of the cultural downward trend in Egypt. Egypt used to be an artistic and scientific centre, but Laila had to close down her theatre in Cairo in 1979 after having produced a satiric play about polygamy, an indication of the fundamentalists' pressure exercised on the government. Fouad Ajami, a professor of Middle Eastern studies at the John Hopkins University, said that the Arabs are oppressed both by religion and by the State. The lower middle class is increasing. It's a literate group but not a well educated one. That group of people, according to Ajami, distrusts intellectuals, liberals or just people with different opinions.

From the United Nations, Khalaf Hunaidi, a former Jordanian vice-first minister, who headed the report, said that it showed the link between censorship and scientific development. The renowned American historian, Bernard Lewis, asked himself in his book 'What went wrong' what didn't work out in the Arab countries' development. The Islamic civilisation dominated in all areas 600-700 years ago, when Europe lived in misery and ignorance. For this experienced historian, the answer to that question lies in the lack of freedom in the Middle East: lack of freedom of the press, of financial freedom, of women's freedom and of free elections. Even homosexuality is forbidden by law.

The world's worry about Islam is however based on a misunderstanding. Fundamentalism isn't the same as Islam. To mix up the two concepts, credits the fundamentalists that want us to believe that Islam is a retrograde religion, unable to adapt to modernity. Many scholars try to give us a more honest image of its content. One interesting book on the subject is the dialogue between Laila Babès, a professor in sociology of religion, and Tareq Oubrou, an Imam in Bordeaux, France. In their book: 'Allah's law, men's law, freedom, equality and women in Islam', most questions concerning women's emancipation and justice are raised and enlightened according to the Koran. Both authors are believers in their own way, with different values, but based on Islam. Laila represents the modern Muslim woman that works and refuses to veil. Tareq has a more restricted view of women. The simple fact that they are capable of holding a discussion shows that there are different ways of interpreting the Koran.

Islam is a tolerant religion. Islam isn't against the Human Rights, but the fundamentalists are. They possess too much power today and as long as they continue to do so, the Arab world will regress. We can make the comparison with a fundamental evangelical movement taking

power in the West, women's and children's rights would regress, minorities and homosexuals would have to go into hiding again. It's the fundamentalists' dream coming true in many Arab countries.

Magnus Norell, a Swedish researcher working for the Swedish Defence and research Centre (FOI), concentrates his studies on the Middle East and terrorism. He wrote an essay for the Foreign Ministry, entitled 'Terror in the Name of God'. According to Norell, the terrorist act that we witnessed on the 11th of September was just the beginning of a wave of violence. At the bottom of this Islamic militancy lies a conviction of fighting 'the evil' represented by our modern, Western society. The fundamentalists see no way of compromise or trust. The movement blames others for its own failure, instead of trying to reform Islam from the inside. Norell also draws parallels between this form of Islam and other cultic or totalitarian groups where the individual is eclipsed in favour of the community and the ideology. They are submitted to an irrational and fanatical language that makes murders in the name of Allah possible because the Islamists don't want to be 'contaminated' by "atheist" thoughts. That's why they isolate themselves from society.

The Egyptians love their belly dancers and their jokes. They were fooled to vote for the Muslim Brotherhood in June 2012 and it took them one year of economic disaster (the MB are extremely liberal in their view of economics and thus not to the poor people's advantage) and societal chaos to overthrow Morsi during a massive demonstration with 33 million people in the streets (eventually backed by the army). I shudder at the thought of what Egypt would have become otherwise.

Anne Edelstam

An extract from a chapter of her book "Three Ladies in Cairo" (Amazon.com)