Clash

... in Egypt*

By ELENA CHITI

Al-‘adāla lil-jamī‘ (“Justice for all”) runs the slogan of a huge banner in a cartoon drawn by Andeel (ANDEEL). However, the Egyptians rallied under it seem to have different views of what “all” should include. Everyone has his or her own exception to the rule. “Except women,” an old man says. “Except my stepdad,” says a veiled girl. “Except child molesters,” a weeping child begs. And the exclusion goes on: “except rich people,” “except taxi drivers.” On the left, a policeman in uniform adds: “except the terrorist sons of a whore,” while stealing a glance at a bearded man wearing a *gallābiyya*. “Except the infidels,” replies the latter. The black uniform and the white *gallābiyya*, placed next to one another, attract attention as if pointing to a clash within the clash: while the rest of the society seems to engage in a chaotic battle of everyone against everyone, the policeman and the Islamist fight against each other. [[♂Male vs. Female](#); [♂Affluence vs. Destitution](#); [♂Security vs. Fear](#); [♂Security = Fear \(Police State\)](#); [♂In Islam, ...](#)]

In the English translation of the cartoon’s captions, the policeman is called a “policeman,” while the bearded man is labelled an “extremist.” “Extremism (*taṭarruf*) can only be fought through culture,” repeatedly say the organizers of the 47th edition of the Cairo Book-Fair (CHITI JanFeb). Its slogan this year is *al-Thaqāfa fī l-muwājahā* (“Culture on the frontline”) (*Shurūq News*), where culture stands for the state’s secularism and the frontline for the war against extremism (*Akhbār al-Adab*). The meaning is constantly explained during the panel discussions hosted by the Book-Fair. “Culture is the key to democracy,” states Nabīl ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ, author of essays on Islamism and former co-director of al-Ahrām Centre for Political and Strategic Studies: “And democracy has to flourish in spite of the people who are convinced that a religious expertise provides the key to hold the truth.” The audience applauds. “Culture is the conviction that there is no such thing as absolute truth,” confirms Sa‘īd Tawfīq, professor at Cairo University and former Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Culture: “Truth is always relative. That is why the Muslim Brotherhood had to be defeated” (CHITI *Round Table*). [[♂In Islam, ...](#); [♂Inferiority vs. Superiority](#)]

All the Egyptians recall the summer of 2013 when the Muslim Brotherhood was defeated, after massive demonstrations that led to the removal of president Morsi by the army of general Sisi on July 3. Yet, the recollection does not awaken in everyone the same feeling. While institutional voices celebrate it as a victory of democracy and culture, the members of the defeated party see it as an unjust takeover. That summer, they organized a huge sit-in protest in Rabaa al-Adawiya (Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya) Square, in northeastern Cairo, which was violently dispersed by the police on August 14, with at least 817 people killed. “On this day three years ago, my 21-year-old sister was murdered in cold blood. I knew then that I no longer belong here,” reads a post by a 28-year-old man (AMIN).

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Blogger and activist Alaa Abdel Fattah (‘Alā’ ‘Abd al-Fattāh) also recalls 2013, saying it was the beginning of “a poisonous polarisation between a rabidly militarised pseudo- secular statism and a viciously sectarian-paranoid form of Islamism” (*The Guardian*). [↗[The Policeman Criminal](#)]

The movie *Ishtibāk* (*Eshtebak* / Clash), too, is set in the summer of 2013, within a police truck where pro-Morsi and anti-Morsi demonstrators are put together after being arrested [↗[Prison](#)]. The camera never leaves the truck, which comes to contain a sample of the Egyptian population: men and women of different generations, social classes and political affiliations, who usually oppose each other in daily life. Mutual understanding is only possible within the narrow space of the truck, thanks to the intimacy they are forced to. The director, Mohamed Diab (Muḥammad Diyāb), says *Clash* is a call for mutual understanding, beyond the internal divide of the Egyptian society: “I want people to watch my movie without asking what side I belong to” (*al-Ahrām*). He claims to be neither with the Muslim Brotherhood nor with the army, but with the people who stand against polarisation. He explains how difficult it was to take this stand in Egypt: he could hardly find Egyptian investors, afraid of a political subject, and had to turn to European co-producers (SOTINEL). Europe warmly welcomes *Clash*, the only Egyptian film screened at Festival de Cannes. There, on the red carpet, Egyptian Muslim preacher and TV star Moez Masoud (Mu‘izz Masūd) poses with the cast, revealing through a tweet his financial participation in the production. His followers thank him, talking about a Muslim commitment for the sake of Egypt. “This is the right path (*il-tarīq il-saḥḥ*)!” a lady writes, echoing the title of a successful TV show in which Masoud teaches how to deal with life in the Islamic way (MASOUD) [↗[In Islam, ...](#); ↗[Self-help](#)]. On the other side, Egyptian institutional voices manifest their indignation. The TV show *Anā Maṣrī* (“I am Egyptian”), on state-owned Nile TV channel, depicts Diab as follows: “Mohamed Diab is a young man who graduated from a faculty of commerce and worked for foreign banks and, in this period, he presented himself as a political activist (...). In 2005, he suddenly switched to cinema studies at New York Academy,” and in 2010, with his movie on sexual harassment, he started “giving a distorted picture (*ṣūra mushawwaha*)” of Egypt (*Anā Maṣrī*).

In Egypt, many cinemas refuse to screen the movie and a Facebook campaign—*Id‘am ḥaqqak innak tshūf Ishtibāk* (“Support your right to watch *Clash*”)—is launched in response. Mohamed Diab publishes on his Facebook page the photo of a letter of solidarity, signed by Hollywood star Tom Hanks: “Few Americans see Egypt as being anything more than terrorists and pyramids. Your film CLASH will go great lengths to enlighten many.” And he adds in Arabic: “Daniel Craig, hero of James Bond’s movies, also sent me a similar letter, which means the opposite of staining the reputation of Egypt” (*Scoop Empire*). The extent of his contacts with foreign institutions is emphasized to make him look like a suspicious individual who favours anti-Egyptian interests. [↗[The Suspect Foreigner](#), ↗[Social Media](#)]. When the movie finally is screened, the Egyptian audience discovers it contains an initial warning that closely recalls institutional propaganda: “After the June 30th revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood provoked bloody clashes to prevent the peaceful transition of power” [↗[The Voice from Above](#)]. The responsibility for violence is shifted onto the Muslim Brotherhood, while the other side is associated with peace.

An article titled “Mā lā yaʿrifu-hu Tom Hanks” (What Tom Hanks ignores) states that the positive depiction of the policemen, throughout the movie, is a deliberate distortion of reality. It can be mistaken for real by Hollywood, not by an Egyptian eye that saw the police in action (MIDHAT).

Another article provocatively asks: “Maʿa man nashtabik idhan?” (With whom do we clash then?) It also criticizes the positive representation of the police, exemplified by the officer kindly advising a lady not to join the demonstrations: “Does such a police officer not exist in reality? Of course he does, but when you release a work in which everything becomes a symbol, the presence of a similar model naturally turns into a propagandistic attempt of cleaning up the image of the whole category. Before a cancerous body, do not ask me to notice the whiteness of the teeth!” (FARAJ). For the author of the article there is no such thing as a call to overcome polarisation in the movie, only the recommendation to stop protesting and choose the stability granted by the police: “What does distinguish the narrative of this movie from the narrative of the propaganda?” he ends up asking. And the clash over *Clash* goes on, revealing not only the divide between supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and supporters of the state, but also between the latter and the people who, considering it a police state, would not chant (anymore) the slogan “The police and the people hand in hand.” [↗**The Policeman Criminal**; ↗**True vs. False**; ↗**Security = Fear (Police State)**; ↗**“The System” vs. “The People”**].

Related Entries

ARRAYS – In Islam, ... ♦ The Policeman Criminal ♦ Prison ♦ Self-help ♦ Social Media ♦ The Suspect Foreigner ♦ The Voice from Above

CODES – Affluence vs. Destitution ♦ Inferiority vs. Superiority ♦ Male vs. Female ♦ Security vs. Fear ♦ “The System” vs. “The People” ♦ True vs. False

CODES COLLAPSED – Security = Fear (Police State)

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... in Tunisia

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Desideratum

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