

A Personal Look Inside Modern Islam

There is a vicious cycle, rotating from Western fear and hatred of Islam to violent Islamic extremism targeting the West and around again, as a new book – reviewed by Arnold R. Isaacs – quietly explains.

Arnold R. Isaacs

For anyone seeking to better understand the recent past and present chaos in the Arab world, here's a tip: read *Generation Revolution*. To be clear, this book does not report on the broad sweep of recent history, or on the entire region. It examines that history through the experiences of a small number of young men and women navigating the last tumultuous decade in one country, Egypt.

The author, British journalist Rachel Aspden, carefully avoids generalizing. For the most part, she lets her protagonists' stories speak for themselves. But those stories, full of compelling detail, give a vivid sense of the conflicting forces that propelled upheavals not only in Egypt but across a wide swath of the Middle East.

Aspden arrived in Cairo in the summer of 2003, a 23-year-old brand-new university graduate hoping to learn Arabic and find adventure. As she came to know her Egyptian contemporaries, young men and women of her generation whose world was interconnected in ways their parents could not have imagined, she began to see the complex and contradictory currents that were shaping their lives.

As one of many examples, here's what Aspden writes about a young woman from a middle-class family who was almost exactly her own age:

"However well-off their families, Cairo's twenty-first-century twenty-somethings still inhabited a world of arranged marriages, dowries, virginity, filial obedience and religious obligation. But the old rules were only part of the story. Her generation had grown up with Internet porn, Hollywood rom-coms, women's magazines, illicit nightclubs, mobile phones and social-media flirtations. They'd also grown up with the revival of conservative Islam, the spread of headscarves and prayer bruises – marks sported by men who pressed their foreheads ostentatiously hard to the ground in worship – sexual harassment and mass unemployment. All these currents collided in the world of relationships and marriage. The confusion was driving young people crazy."

Initially, Aspden found it paradoxical that many – though not all – of the educated young people she met were drawn to conservative religious beliefs and

practice, rather than seeking greater personal freedoms. But she came to see that turning to religion was another form of rebellion, “an act of defiance against their parents’ generation and the unjust, corrupt society they had helped create.” It was also a way to a better, cleaner identity. One of her subjects, a young man she calls Ayman, explained it to her this way:

“People like us were brought up in a Westernized way, let’s say 80% Westernized.... We went to English-language schools, we watched American TV, all that stuff. And many people just continue on that path. But why should we adopt the mindset of the West? As far as I’m concerned there are three mindsets: Western, Eastern and religious. The first two are both rubbish, both bad in their own ways.... Western – do anything you want, no boundaries, make money, exploit women, consume. Eastern – oppress women, corruption, ignorant traditions, stuck in the past.”

Rather than accept either of those, Ayman went on, he chose to listen to an inner voice he knew had better answers: “God put something inside you that will guide you to the truth, if you’re seeking it sincerely.”

In describing this and many other conversations, Aspden’s reporting makes another very important point: that the Islamic revival of the last four decades has been anything but a simple story of fundamentalism vs. modernism. Instead she shows that Islamism in Egypt has taken many different forms, some fanatically reactionary and intolerant and some trying to find ways to reconcile strong religious belief with life in a modern, diverse world.

In particular it is worth pointing out that her observations completely undercut the argument of American anti-Muslim activists who portray the Muslim Brotherhood as a violent terrorist organization. The Brotherhood, Egypt’s most significant Islamist movement, is shown in these pages as repressive and theocratic but not violently extremist.

“The Brotherhood aren’t using violence, they’re using democracy, but the word is ‘using,’” a more liberal Islamist told Aspden, adding: “using is different from believing. They are using democratic actions to pursue a fundamentalist vision.” When Aspden asked what that vision was, he replied, “The dream of the supremacy of Islam.”

Whether that nonviolent character will change now that the Brotherhood is once again being suppressed is one of many critical questions that will only be answered in coming years.

Four-Year Lapse

Aspden left Cairo in 2005, then returned in 2011, the year that began with huge

anti-government protests that toppled President Hosni Mubarak and touched off a turbulent chain of events: the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power, a continuing cycle of protests and repression, and the return to military rule under Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi after a coup d'état in the summer of 2013 that led to even harsher repression including a military assault that killed as many as 1,000 pro-Brotherhood demonstrators in the streets of Cairo in the aftermath of the coup.

Again, Aspden portrays those events largely through the experiences of a small group of acquaintances, including many of the same men and women she knew from her earlier Egyptian stay. And again, those experiences are rich in telling moments that help explain a complicated history, illuminating issues and social divisions that are still far from resolved.

Narrow as its lens may be, *Generation Revolution* represents journalism at its best – an exceptional piece of reporting on a vitally important subject. This valuable book should be on the required reading list for policymakers and opinionmakers concerned with Middle East policy and violent extremism.

A conventional review would end here. This one carries a postscript, on an episode that departs from the author's main theme but touches on another important one. It occurred in an exchange with the brother of one of her principal protagonists, a few months before Aspden left Egypt for the second time.

When their conversation turned to the Islamic State, which he called by its Arabic name, Daesh, the young man told her that it has the support of many Egyptians who "believe they're fighting to protect Islam." Then he added: "We don't know that Daesh are real. There's no proof of what's really going on there, and there's a lot of manipulation by the Western media... Hollywood tricks. Those beheading videos could easily be faked in a studio."

Aspden had heard that argument before. She was "frustrated," she writes, "by the baroque conspiracy theories voiced by clever, educated people, and they in turn were disappointed by my weak-minded general belief in events reported by the BBC, *New York Times* or *Guardian*."

"What do you think is the truth, then?" she asked Mazen's brother.

"For me it's obvious," he replied. "Daesh has been created by Israel and the United States to discredit Muslims and provide the West with another excuse to invade and seize the oil."

What sounded to Aspden like "a fringe conspiracy theory," she writes, "was, in Egypt, a generally accepted truth. When I switched on my computer at home, my

friends were sharing a cartoon of an Islamic State jihadi puppet operated by the figures of a leering, hook-nosed Jew and Uncle Sam.”

At a moment when “fake news” has become a major concern, that passage teaches a chilling lesson not about Egypt but about our own public discussion. It tells us that politicians and their mouthpieces and partisan pontificators who push out false information do not just strengthen their own lies. They strengthen their enemies’ lies as well, because weakening truth weakens it for everybody.

Aspden’s Egyptian acquaintances who are sure the Islamic State is an American-Israeli hoax (and who scoff at her for trusting the BBC and the *New York Times*) – are the mirror image of Americans who believe other falsehoods – for example that “we don’t know who is coming in” as refugees, or that a vast Muslim conspiracy is infiltrating the U.S. legal system to impose sharia law – and who scoff at the identical news organizations and everyone else who reports facts they don’t like.

The more effectively one side undermines public trust in journalists or scientists or scholars who present real facts, the easier it becomes for those on the other side to distrust those sources too, and deny facts that are inconsistent with their reality. It may not be one of the lessons Aspden set out to teach in this book, but it is definitely worth thinking about.

Arnold R. Isaacs is a former reporter and foreign correspondent for the Baltimore Sun. He is the author of *From Troubled Lands: Listening to Pakistani Americans and Afghan Americans in post-9/11 America* and two books relating to the Vietnam war.
