Geopolitics of identity: Egypt’s lost peace

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ABSTRACT
This paper attempts to provide a conceptualization of Egypt’s current predicaments by process-tracing historical critical junctures and sequences of causal mechanisms that contributed to bringing about the January 2011 events. Focusing on the period between the July 1952 Revolution led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and the events of 2011, it traces the developments and changing political and strategic trajectories of the three presidents Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. The case of Egypt is examined here as ‘an instance of a class of events’ focusing on phenomena related to the tracing of causal factors or critical junctures, and mechanisms leading to a particular outcome on 25 January 2011. It further links the uprising to that country’s 1979 ‘Peace Treaty’ with Israel. This treaty ‘de-securitized’ the latter, allowing it significant regional freedom of action. This had a causal effect on challenging Egypt’s identity-motivated action, contributing, in the process, to undermining its identity structure. An increasing awareness among many Egyptians of the link between the treaty and their identity formation is one of the main reasons for summoning the legacy of Nasser’s leadership as a source of ‘ontological security’.

KEYWORDS
Critical junctures; dissonance; Egypt; geopolitics; identity; Iran; keying; Gamal Abdel Nasser; path dependency; peace treaty; process tracing; securitization; security complex; trauma; Umayyadism

Introduction

Egypt is a pivotal state. A pivotal state represents a geopolitical ‘hotspot that could not only determine the fate of its region but also affect international stability’ (Chase, Hill, and Kennedy 1996, 33). Such a designation, however, is more a reflection of that country’s potential significance even if not necessarily its actual power or role projection. One does not reflect the other as this country continues to confront social, economic and political problems as well as security threats from diverse sources. Unlike the case during President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s leadership (1954–70) when that country combined its strategic geographical position with a good measure of relative regional preponderance and international influence (Prys 2010), Egypt’s pivotal status, in many ways, diverged from its power potential. Such conditions, emanating largely from over four decades of a diminishing regional role as well as what has come to be called the ‘Arab Spring’, have rendered Egypt’s future uncertain, considerably undermining its geopolitical capacities, capabilities and prestige. Nevertheless, due to its pivotal significance past,
present and future developments in that country will continue to cast their shadow on the region.

Being an integral part of an Arab and Islamic Near East ‘security complex’ much of that country’s strategic and identity structures have been constituted by that region’s distinct attributes as related to geography, culture and history. Despite its diverse problems, Egypt continues to impact interdependently on collective security issues in ways that influence much of the regional securitization and/or desecuritization discourse. Securitization and desecuritization highlight ‘the discursive through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat …’ or as a non-threat, respectively (Buzan and Waever 2012, 491). Within this political community, Egypt and its region reflect a mutually constitutive dynamic and security complex in the context of which that country’s role has grown increasingly ambivalent.

As a ‘complex’ formation, this Arab and Near Eastern region, like other regions, fused ‘material and “virtual” elements’ with both ‘diverging’ and converging ‘social practices and discourses’ (Paasi 2009, 131). During the Nasserite leadership, Egypt has been able to project a regional power image. It capitalized rather effectively on its geopolitical position and soft power as well as on a maximum use of its rather limited material capabilities and on an active and engaged foreign policy and web of regional and international allies. These mutually enforcing efforts produced a national and regional narrative and discourse that broadened the spatial horizon of the Egyptian state and defined the region’s identity along pan-Arab, nationalistic and anti-imperialist lines, combined with values of social justice, development, independence and dignity. It was a discursive narrative that contributed to an Arab regional system, notwithstanding tensions within it, as well as to a compensatory identity structure with which many Egyptians and the broader Arab community could feel comfortable and could identify with. This narrative provided what can be called a ‘role identity’ – an ‘imaginative view of the self’ as one would like to see it and think of oneself acting as an occupant of a certain privileged, or in this case pivotal position (Burke and Stets 2009, 39). Despite the serious blow dealt to this narrative as an outcome of the 1967 battle, and subsequent attempts by Sunni so-called ‘Islamist’ currents to step into what they perceived as their window of opportunity, this narrative apparently continues to exert a significant nostalgic influence. Nasser’s inspiring leadership, sincerity, integrity, courage, sense of justice and commitment to his nation’s dignity, reflecting a humane and Islamic spirit beyond flaunting and pretensions, continue to be values that stir national imagination.

Manifestations of such nostalgia could be observed in the widespread raising of posters depicting Nasser’s image during and after the 25 January 2011 massive popular events that ousted incumbent President Hosni Mubarak, interestingly by a generation that had not seen Nasser and had only heard about him frequently through narratives that attempted to discredit him. Owing much to the figures and policies of those who came after Nasser – Sadat (1970–81), Mubarak (1981–2011) and Muhammad Mursi (2012–13) – many in that country no longer seem to find an anchor in other than some semblance of a Nasserite nationalist narrative. This was particularly, though not solely, a result of the less-than-impressive performance of the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood regime that served to undermine much of the credibility of ‘Islamist’ groups.

This is not by any means to say that the Nasserite era can be restored or reinvented. Much water has flowed under the bridge to allow for this in a very different world and
global environment. Even if some of Nasser’s policies can be reinstated, the spirit of his
time cannot be brought back. While it may not be possible to replicate or resurrect the
Nasserite historical moment, that same moment of ‘certitude’ remains nevertheless a
source of anchoring motivation, especially in confusing, cynical and self-doubting
times. In the absence of an intellectual thought dimension and a clear sense of direction,
as well as of a clear vision, as of yet, of what is to be done, much of what Egypt will need to
do and in fact can do will fall back on the past social and international capital of the Nas-
serite era. This narrative will inevitably incorporate elements of continuity and change,
past and present, old and new. Those who like it or otherwise, Nasser’s legacy is all that
remains of Egypt’s once far-reaching soft power and regional influence. Something that
his successors have all but destroyed.

**Process tracing method**

This study attempts to provide a conceptualization of Egypt’s current predicaments, focus-
ing on the period between the July 1952 Revolution, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, until the
events of January 2011. It proposes to do so by process-tracing historical critical junctures
and sequences of causal mechanisms in order to help understand what brought that
country to its current state of affairs.

Bennett and Checkel (2014) defined process tracing as ‘the analysis of evidence on pro-
cesses, sequences, conjunctures of events within a case for the purpose of either developing
or testing hypothesis about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case’ (6;
added emphasis). Causal mechanisms have been defined by George and Bennett (2005,
137) as:

ultimately unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents
with causal capacities, operate, but only in specific contexts or conditions, to transfer
energy, information, or matter to other entities. In so doing, the causal agent changes the
affected entity’s characteristics, capacities, or propensities, in ways that persist [inertia]
until subsequent causal mechanisms act upon it.

Sequences and conjunctures of events, on one hand, and causal mechanisms, agents and
entities, on the other, combine in such a way as to bring about particular outcomes. These
outcomes, which are neither inevitable nor necessary, are largely ‘dependent on the social
meanings people give to their situation and the ways in which social actions are mobilized,
along with the unintended consequences of these and the reflexive procedures that follow’
(Ray 2007, 37) – keying. Keying ‘intendedly’ leads all contained in a frame to have the
same view of ‘what it is that is going on’ and therefore is not easily discoverable
(Goffman 1974, 84). As a result, it can sustain collective action for an extended period
without being unmasked. In this respect, process tracing ‘which shares some of the
basic features of historical explanation’ (George and Bennett 2005, 208), is helpful and re-
levant in developing ‘a minimally sufficient explanation of a puzzling outcome in a specific
historical case’ (Beach and Pederson 2013, 3, emphasis added). In particular, as regards to
why have seemingly ‘different causal patterns’ or configurations led to ‘similar outcomes’
or ‘equifinality’. The latter ‘challenges and undermines the common assumption that
similar outcomes in several cases must have a common cause’ (George and Bennett
2005, 161), as sometimes they do, sometimes they do not. Where they may have a
common cause, this calls for a more nuanced ‘deductive-nomological’ explanation according to which ‘an outcome is explained’ and possibly predicted ‘if it is shown that it should have been expected under the circumstances’ (137).

Thus, when, for example, Soviet leader Mikael Gorbachev took on a discourse that ‘talked up’ the crisis in the Soviet Union, including a ‘condemning’ approach to Soviet history, a ‘legitimation crisis began to ensue’ ultimately leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union (Ray 2007, 36). In the context of the Egyptian case, Sadat’s de-Nasserization discourse and policy had undercut Egypt’s capabilities and the state in much the same fashion that Gorbachev’s discourse undermined the Soviet Union. When qualitatively similar policies and/or discourses were adopted or pursued, a causal chain of events evolved where the outcome turned out to be much the same, irrespective of whether the actor were a developing country or a superpower. Higher quality politics and discourses, in contrast, apparently did save a country such as China and arguably even Cuba. This, according to Ray (2007), ‘illustrates that crises do not necessarily emerge autonomously from systems context but are embedded in the construction and interpretation of communications’ (36–37).

The contingent initial event that triggers a reactive causal chain [of the kind], is often itself the intersection point of two or more prior sequences. Historical sociologists use the expression ‘conjuncture’ to refer to this coming together – or temporal intersection – of separately determined sequences. The point in time at which two independent sequences intersect will often not be predictable in advance. Likewise, the specific event generated by the intersection of the sequences may be outside of the resolving power of prevailing theories. Hence, conjunctures are often treated as contingent occurrences. (Mahoney 2000, 527)

A critical juncture thus, is ‘the trigger events that set processes of institutional or policy change, in motion’. Its ‘causal logic’ points to the long-term impact of decisions made during this critical juncture and to the ‘importance of the past in explaining the present’ (Hogan and Doyle 2007, 885–886). That is, choices made during a particular historical turning point ‘close off alternative options and lead to the establishment of institutions that generate self-reinforcing path-dependent processes’, and which, at the same time, may cause institutional trajectories to diverge or to be reversed (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 341, 342).

Process tracing causal factors may help provide insights into the sequence and conjunctural outcomes of the chain of events that helped shape much of Egypt’s recent history since the July 1952 Revolution onward. The case of Egypt is examined here as ‘an instance of a class of events’ (George and Bennett 2005, 17), focusing on phenomena related to the tracing of causal factors and mechanisms leading to a particular outcome in 2011. It attempts to link those factors to the 1952 Nasserite revolution, challenging claims that the January 2011 events constitute a break with that earlier period, for while much may have changed since, much still remains the same. Imperatives of history and geography after all, if they happen to change, do so very slowly and in many cases with a twist of ironic continuity. Historical reinterpretations or technological innovations may influence such imperatives, yet in many cases, even then, changes may be more apparent than real.

The main argument that follows from this is that after the death of Nasser, serious damage has been inflicted on Egypt’s national and regional identity, and from there on collective consciousness. This ultimately brought that country to where it stood on the eve of the 25 January 2011 uprising. More specifically, this paper attempts to process
trace and link what I call Egypt’s ‘lost identity’ to a critical juncture and a sequence of causal mechanisms when Sadat visited Jerusalem in November 1977, signed the Camp David accords in September 1978, and subsequently the ‘Peace Treaty’, with Israel in March 1979. The signing of this treaty de-securitized Israel as a threat and normalized it, allowing that state significant freedom of action regionally. This contributed also to undermining Egypt’s identity structure as it became confounded regarding who ‘the real other’, or the enemy, is. Succinctly put, the Peace Treaty has had a causal effect on the loss of Egypt’s identity motivated action. Subterranean and an increasing awareness among many Egyptians of the link between both is one of the main reasons for summoning the legacy of Nasser – one that clearly and credibly identified who ‘the other’ or the enemy is. In so doing, the Nasserite legacy provided many Egyptians with a good measure of ‘ontological security’.

Balancing or bandwagoning? Tracing critical junctures

Walter Lippman once noted that a ‘nation is secure to the extent to which it is not in danger of having to sacrifice core values if it wishes to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by victory in such a war’ (cited in Wolfers 2011, 6). In the same vein, Henry Kissinger pointed out that when a nation or state is ‘induced’ to change its own ‘definition of security’ (cited in Henrikson 2003, 99), and, thus, directly or indirectly, brought about to sacrifice ‘core values’ in order to avoid war at any cost, such a nation is unlikely to remain secure for long.

Thus, a country that wishes to improve and/or to consolidate its standing in the order of international hierarchy and to protect its core values needs to attain two prerequisites or necessary conditions. One is to organize or reorganize internally in order to be better able to utilize its resources effectively and efficiently to the maximum extent possible, with the purpose of increasing its capabilities vis-à-vis other actors in the international system. Secondly, it also requires, ideally speaking, a friendly external environment or at least one that is either positively inclined or controlled. This may not always be possible to bring about, as resources, however efficiently extracted, may still not suffice and the external environment in an anarchic world, or a neo-liberal one, may not be totally propitious. A state therefore may need to expand its spatial horizons through soft and/or hard power, which is one reason why states form alliances and establish or join international institutional structures and arrangements. In most cases, the purpose is to influence that environment to be able to extract additional resources competitively from it according to well-defined and envisioned national security considerations.

Much of what Nasser sought to accomplish shortly after the July 1952 Revolution and once he had assumed full power in 1954 onwards fell within this framework, or modus operandi, of securing core values and fighting for them if need be. He further sought to reorganize society in order to mobilize its human and natural resources as well as to develop them. He also sought to extend cooperative relations with most countries in order to secure a friendly international environment, jealously guarding his country’s independence as a top value, particularly having just come out of a colonial era. This defined Nasser’s approach toward the United States with which he sought cooperation within a framework of an independent definition of Egypt’s national interests and security, and based on an as-of-yet positive non-imperialistic image of that country.
This was eventually to change. As it turned out the US was seeking to inherit Great Britain’s imperial role, would not countenance independent development, and was reluctant to provide Egypt with sufficient arms to defend itself against Israel, effectively maintaining a military balance tipped in favour of the latter. Above all, the US was unwilling to support the strategic developmental project of the High Dam. In many ways, notwithstanding the Cold War situation or its end, this is what governed and continues to govern US policy parameters toward Egypt, then and now. Egypt may be allowed to achieve some measure of consumerist growth to support and sustain its rapidly increasing population and as a taste of the benefits of US dependency, but not development as a necessary infrastructure for independence and increased capability. Particularly so as the latter may alter the regional balance of power against Israel.

This was what Nasser resisted and informed much of his subsequent policies that aimed at expanding Egypt’s strategic and spatial horizons; a framework of action clearly understood by Nasser, and before him by Muhammad Ali (1805–48) in the 19th century. Both being visionary strategists, they recognized the geohistorical imperatives of Egypt’s location. True, both had ultimately to pay a price, but the fact remains that a heftier price may very well be paid for alternative choices. An Egypt falling back on itself and confined to its own borders within the Nile Valley is highly vulnerable to different kinds of pressures, varying from outright external colonization and domination, to domestic social disintegration and strategic resources scarcity in terms of its relationship with its external environment.

Determined, as Nasser was, in fact, to protect Egypt’s interests and core values, his choice was to balance adversarial actors through a network of alliances, rather than bandwagoning. Aware that sacrificing core values in order to avoid war at any cost may, even in the long run, ultimately turn out to be the greatest threat to national security. As Stephen Walt put it:

Balancing should be preferred for the simple reason that no statesman can be completely sure of what another will do. Bandwagoning is dangerous because it increases the resources available to a threatening power and requires placing trust in continued forbearance. Because perceptions are unreliable and intention can change, it is easier to balance against potential threats than to rely on the hope that a state will remain benevolently disposed. (Walt 1987, 29)

Nasser’s refusal to accept purported offers, after the 1967 war, to have Sinai returned to Egypt in exchange for a separate peace with the Zionist state, reflected a clear understanding, under duress and a most difficult situation, of the strategic cost that this would entail. Cognizant that ultimate victory or being vanquished comes about not with the mere defeat or destruction of an opponent’s army or military, but when one side, through such a situation or otherwise, imposes its will on the opponent to achieve its political goals or objectives.1

Sadat cast such considerations aside and set his policy discourse based on the premise that Nasser had deliberately chosen a path of confrontation with the US, and that an alternative course of action based on appeasement was necessary. In order to justify such an outcome it was necessary for him to falsify national consciousness by adopting a fifth-column narrative.2 This narrative depicted Nasser as having sought for irrational reasons, related to his ‘own personal’ thirst for leadership, a totally unwarranted clash with the US as well as with some other Arab regimes, squandering the wealth of Egypt
on unjustified and unnecessary wars. In the process, US policies were largely exonerated, while the reasons and real values and geopolitical space that Nasser was defending were discursively obscured.

A premise that starts with a claim that Nasser sought such a conflict for no good reasons other than his own personal grandeur is very different from one in which the US sought its conflicting interests at the expense of those of Egypt. Both would lead to very different conceptualizations and conclusions and policy outcomes. One possible conclusion derived from the latter premise is that a stronger, more prosperous, developing and independent Egypt capable of converting these values into regional influence, even if by peaceful means, is not an American interest and certainly not an Israeli one. More so if both actors had an interest in redrawing the map of the region in their own image. Any Egyptian leadership willing seriously to adopt a course of action in pursuance of such values is very likely at one point of time, sooner or later, to arrive at a conflictive situation with both actors. Not necessarily out of its own volition, but by the very logic of events, realpolitik and geopolitics. This is not by any means a situation unique to Egypt. The same could also be seen happening, perhaps along different ways and tactics, but strategically consistent, in the cases of Iran, Russia and China, and possibly other countries as well. In a world perceived in (neo)realist terms, this is quite common a norm.

Giving Sadat the benefit of the doubt, it is possible to assume he actually did seek to uphold the same core values that Nasser had defended – although in a much less confrontational way – bandwagoning and aligning those values with US interests. Signing the peace treaty, he may have thought he was signing an agreement that would ‘appease’ the Americans. By dramatically making peace with Israel, Sadat conceived he may be able to change US policy parameters or at least influence them. In addition, he may have believed in the possibility of containing Israel by putting a stop to its expansionism or allowing it to divert its attention elsewhere, even if against Egypt’s Arab brethren and/or allies (Walt 1985, 7-8). It would further presumably allow him to share in the ‘spoils’ and possibly to preserve a minimum of core values and national interests even if at a much more modest threshold.

However, Sadat failed to recognize the actual nature of the problem that the US had had with his predecessor. In the context of the moment, he seemed to overlook that Nasser had in fact sought cooperation and not confrontation with the US. What transpired as ‘confrontational’ was Nasser arriving at the conclusion, out of actual experience, that reasonably balanced core values of independence would not be acceptable to the US. In other words, the problem that the US had with Egypt was not related to the latter’s leadership – whatever its nature – trying to balance or bandwagon, but with that country’s core values as any leadership should strategically have to define them. Moreover, if Israel being the regional hegemon remains an American core and paramount interest, then the very nature of Egyptian–US relations will continue to be set within this parametric framework. To Sadat’s own peril and to that of his own country and at too late a stage in his rule, he came to the very same conclusions that Nasser had earlier arrived at. It was not necessarily related to the latter’s ‘confrontational’ attitude. For when Sadat decided on bandwagoning with the US, he was at the same time bandwagoning with Israel. The outcome was an expanding rather than the containing of the latter’s strategic resources, not only at the expense of Egypt’s regional and international allies but also at the expense of Egypt’s national security and core values.
Eventually it dawned on Sadat, if in fact he had not already been aware from the outset, that he has in fact signed off Egypt’s foreign policy and national security. In this case, a peace treaty was of no avail, particularly when its inherent purpose – by separating Egypt from its regional and international space and security complex – was essentially antithetical to that country’s core values. A strategic defeat that Egypt’s Versailles Treaty à la Germany (1919) and Locarno Treaty à la France (1925) actually turned out to be. Both treaties are instructive in the Egyptian context. The Treaty of Versailles conjures up images of German defeat and humiliation. The Locarno Treaty undermined French attempts to contain Germany after the First World War, guaranteeing French borders with that country, but not those of France’s allies. It also brought a war-weary and exhausted France to adopt a ‘defensive military doctrine, which made it impossible for it to come to the aid of its allies, leaving them vulnerable to a resurging German power’ (Walt 1985, 15). France, that is, became isolated from its regional security complex, allowing Germany free rein on its eastern borders. For this, France paid a high price in the Second World War. By signing a peace treaty with Israel, Egypt in many ways set itself in a strategic position very similar to that of Germany and France. It was to remain humiliatingly poverty-stricken, though not to the extent that would invite instability, and therefore some growth in an externally controlled or vulnerable services sector may have been permitted, economically and militarily dependent, and confined to within its own borders, isolated from its vital regional space. In addition, it was to forsake all its allies that could, at some point in time, come to its aid, rendering its national security vulnerable to a more powerful Israel that can always threaten a reoccupation of Sinai. Its domestic and foreign policies were to be aligned and continue to be aligned accordingly. This served to determine Egypt’s national and political behaviour, both internally and externally, for the subsequent decades, contributing much to the January 2011 upheaval.

When it was time for Sadat to go, the peace treaty proved no guarantee for benevolence. Close to his assassination in October 1981, and in a widely publicized press conference, Sadat accused US media of undermining his regime (Ottaway 1981). Shortly thereafter an Islamist group – the harbinger of what was to come – assassinated him. The Americans and the Israelis suspected that Sadat may be trying to extricate his country from the Arab–Israeli conflict, and after doing so may seek to maintain at least a minimum of core values. Nevertheless, that was not the purpose of the treaty. Rather, its purpose had in fact been to render Egypt’s national will hostage, and consequently, as it came to be under Mubarak – who recognized very early on that some core values are taboos – frozen. Mubarak’s task was to ‘freeze’ this situation long enough for the core values of the peace treaty to sink into the Egyptian consciousness and for a new generation to emerge accustomed to peace with Israel as a normalized and an ‘inevitable’ condition.

Mubarak, that is, came to power as an effect of much more profound geopolitical causes – an arrangement that largely contributed to the longevity of his period of 30 years. Much of what happened in Egypt during his rule and the perceived regression and deterioration in the conditions and status of the country were attributed to his incompetence coupled later on with his old age. This may very well have been the case, but the matter may have also been more problematic than just sheer personal limitations. If Nasser, becoming aware of American intentions and interests early on during his rule, chose to balance and the outcome was 1967, and if Sadat became aware of them and decided to bandwagon and
the result was the carnage at the military parade on 6 October 1981, Mubarak was mindful of all this from the very beginning. He was aware that Egypt’s foreign policy and national security were to be largely determined and delineated by the US. In return an understanding could be reached in light of which he would be allowed a free hand internally, subject to the above constraints; a Finlandization of sorts *qua* peace treaty. As a matter of survival, Mubarak meticulously stuck to the script, yet even at the end, this did not help him. As things turned out, Nasser paid the price of balancing and resistance, Sadat the price of bandwagoning, and Mubarak the price of raising the ‘white flag’ with both hands. January 2011 was an expressive manifestation that something profoundly wrong was going on.

**Galvanization as critical juncture**

Cracks, fissures and divisions that surfaced in Egyptian society post January 2011, have been nurtured to a large extent, earlier on by the de-galvanizing, national traumatic juncture of the peace treaty as its consequences seeped through national cognition. If this thesis or argument stands, then this divisive crisis is unlikely to be addressed through mere *securitization* as separate from *galvanization*. While galvanization is a strategic dimension, mere securitization lends itself to revenge and can therefore be tactical-reductive – necessary, but not sufficient. Galvanization reflects the collective merging of emotional focus on a common, consensual and unifying motif capable of establishing a ‘pattern of ideas that may serve different conceptual purposes’ in differentiated social contexts (Wikipedia n.d.a) and that may help open the doors for and facilitate the necessary steps toward national reconciliation. Reconciliation does not necessarily mean compromising with volatile and unreliable militant groups many of which are constructs of states’ agencies, but rendering their messages exposed for what and who they are, irrelevant, incredulous and appropriated. While this may incorporate and call for varied steps and policies, annulling the peace treaty would be a most effective blow against those groups and a significant step toward regalvanizing the nation. A possible ‘critical junctural’ conversion that is would be a function of the galvanizing effect that such unfreezing and change may breed, both as an exercise of free will and, more importantly, as a substantive and ‘electrifying’ response to the crisis of a deeply divided society of which the limited war raging in Sinai is just one manifestation.

History may provide a couple of lessons to learn in this respect, one from the Sadat era, one from Nasser’s. In the former case, when the 1973 war, as a critical juncture, was securitized as a war of revenge, ignoring other aspects of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and revenge was presumably attained, a different socio-political dynamic ensued as other strategic imperatives melted away with much of the negative consequences harvested, even if years later (Harkavy 2000). Revenge may have been sweet (tactical), but in the process, the bigger picture was lost (strategic) as the country was ‘de-galvanized’, then demobilized, and under Sadat’s successor Mubarak, factionalized, with the following step, presumably to come under President Mursi, to be divided and eventually disintegrated.

An opposite *galvanizing* lesson may be learned from the Nasserite era. When Nasser embarked on building the High Dam, he sought support and financial assistance from both the US and the World Bank. Had he in fact received the needed support and assistance and the dam had been built with their help, it would certainly have made an
impressive structure. Together with its strategic socio-economic benefits, it would by all means have been a significant source of national pride. This, however, is different from saying that society would have been ‘galvanized’. What made the High Dam a nationally galvanizing issue was the power of symbolic effect. It was to be built in spite of great power opposition. This led to the nationalization of the Suez Canal which instigated the 1956 tripartite aggression by countries more powerful than Egypt, including the latter’s former colonizer Great Britain, France, and Israel. Fifth column detractors of Nasser, attempting to designate the fairly organized and disciplined withdrawal of the Egyptian army from the Sinai Desert in 1956, so as to avoid encirclement and in order to organize popular resistance in case of a full-scale invasion, as a military defeat – as if it should not have been withdrawn – continue to miss the point. Typically and intentionally, they confused the tactical and the strategic. Even the 1967 defeat could not serve their purposes due to Nasser’s resilience. For it was not just that which was in sight that mattered, but that which was insight – the symbolic source of meanings and values. In all cases, the leadership stood its ground and came out largely on top, and even when defeated, immediately and defiantly stood up again. Its behaviour represented acts of assertion of national will – will as being. All these events and policies galvanized the Egyptian and Arab masses and turned Nasser into a legend.

By galvanizing the nation, Nasser occupied a permanent niche in the Egyptian and Arab psyche and memory, including that of his domestic enemies and detractors, the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, though not exclusively. Rabid grudges that members of the Brotherhood organization continue to hold against Nasser has less to do with his crushing and persecuting them. Much of this perhaps had been exaggerated, and after all such an organization thrives on the false image of being persecuted for nothing other than calling for the way of Allah. Rather, it had much more to do with the fact that Nasser had pulled the rug from under their feet by being what they would have very much liked to be but knew they could never be. Through his inspiring charisma and ability to live up the nation, Nasser transcended social contradictions and mobilized the country and society behind him, defeating the Brotherhood not merely through securitization, but also through a concomitant process of galvanization. By so doing, he rendered the organization largely irrelevant and their defeat strategic rather than merely tactical. That Sadat revived the Brotherhood as part of his interrelated ‘counter-revolutionary’ and de-Nasserization policies and discourse, rapprochement with the Americans, and signing a peace treaty with Israel does not change this fact. In a post-January 2011 volatile Egyptian society, both the experiences of Nasser and Sadat, and of course of Mubarak, have something to say.

Thus, the question remains as to how much of the deterioration that Egypt had experienced at all societal and institutional levels was due to Mubarak’s abilities or rather lack of them, or due to path dependency-induced structural constraints, is a very important analytical and existential process tracing query. The Egyptian–Israeli Treaty unfroze the state of the conflict, changed its nature, then froze the change along a path-dependent trajectory. This trajectory controlled and constrained what Mubarak could or could not do apart from whether he was or was not as incompetent as he actually appeared to be. For if deterioration were a matter of the person of Mubarak, then it suffices to change that individual with someone more capable. If the problem, however, had more to do with the actual conditions and constraints that the ‘Peace Treaty’ imposed on the
country than with the person, then it is structural systemic. If the latter, then this is what current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi (2014–) or any other president, will need to extricate the country from, and stake his own leadership on.

For an unfreezing dynamic of the kind, Egypt will need a solid and serious strategic external political, economic and military alliance and cover. In particular, this calls for Egyptian–Iranian relations to be elevated to a strategic level, together with Russia and China – all four countries constituting the core elements of a strategic alliance, including as well Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and possibly eventually Jordan. The ability to be part of or a constitutive member of such a broad coalition and to achieve these goals will be testing for the Egyptian regime. Yet, if capable of doing so, this may constitute its critical juncture toward leadership and reinstating regional identity, while altering the balance of power and providing for a good measure of ontological security.

This is certainly no easy task and no attempt is made here to underestimate the difficulties and potential costs of any endeavours of the kind. Yet, ‘unfreezing’ and changing this highly intricate, extremely complex situation is a high-risk, high-stakes challenge that the current Egyptian regime will, in its opportune time, have to deal with. By ‘opportune time’ is meant that decisions made today are taken with the foresight of serving well-defined and prioritized future goal(s) or objective(s) in as soon a time as possible, whether in the short, medium or even longer-run range. This may require initial tactical retreats or a ‘step back’ that would serve a future strategic goal and allow for further steps forward. Time becomes of essence in the sense that the temporary is not to be eventually confused for the permanent. This is both a practical and ontological security (psychological) matter.

**Egypt and the critical junctures of path dependency**

Ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency (Mitzen 2006, 342) and certitude. This by no means implies unidimensionality, but rather the wholeness and richness that a multidimensional identity may comprise – an Egypt that is Arab, Muslim, Afro-Asian, non-aligned, independent and anti-imperialist. In the life of nations, path-dependent critical junctures play an important role in bringing about such security or undermining it.

One critical juncture of the kind was the 1973 war. It provided Sadat with an opportunity to start a diversing process, which later during the same decade led to a total split from the Nasserite trajectory along a very different path-dependent dynamic. His attempts at capitalizing on the aftermath of that war produced historical sequences that set in motion reinforcing institutional patterns and event chains that had deterministic properties on the fate of that country for decades to come. This dynamic has proven very difficult to reverse or extricate from. The war as Sadat had conducted it aimed not at liberation but at ‘moderation’, as Kissinger mildly put it. The term basically meant ‘laying the basis for negotiations with Israel’ and relying on the US as an instrument of its policy along lines similar to Reza Pahlavi’s Iran; a ‘regional stabilizer or rock of stability’ as both Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter used to designate the latter regime (Gardner 2011, 114). Thus, in November 1977, Sadat made a momentous decision to visit Israel, Egypt’s arch enemy, and to address its Knesset in Jerusalem. It was a ‘fateful’ choice that effected a
strategic transition from one state of affairs to another, leading that country along a path-dependent trajectory of outcomes, in the frame of which, according to Paul A. David, ‘one damn thing follow[ed] another’ (cited in Collier and Collier 1991, 27). The visit was a ‘conscious political action’ that altered the definition and identity of the region (Prys 2010, 485), and a ‘watershed’ in regional and international geopolitical dynamics along an unpredictable causal chain. It set in motion a dynamic of path-dependent sequences marked by relatively deterministic causal patterns or ‘inertia’, in the framework of which ‘once processes are set into motion and begin tracking a particular outcome, these processes tend to stay in motion and continue to track this outcome’ (Mahoney 2000, 511). Within such a framework, Sadat’s visit to occupied Jerusalem set a condition and dynamic of path-dependent entrapment or inertia – ‘self-reinforcing’ mechanisms that breed relatively deterministic properties, reproducing idiosyncratic, intricate and difficult-to-reverse, institutional patterns over time (Mahoney 2000). It involved aspects of ‘noncontingency, irrevocability, and vulnerability’ – a combination of elements that rendered Sadat and his country exposed to exploitation and manipulation (Larson 1997, 30). Their outcome inescapably ordained Egypt effectively to end up being Israel’s national security guarantor against opposing Arab or Muslim forces or currents, particularly the Palestinians, Lebanese resistance (Hezbollah), Syria and revolutionary Iran. Israel’s enemies, that is, became inevitably Egypt’s adversaries, as the latter’s foreign policy was transformed into a totally new direction that foreclosed other options and both reshaped its politics and hollowed its identity for generations and decades to come (Collier and Collier 1991).

Two antecedent events with ironically two opposite implications pertaining to regime legitimacy and survival served to bring Sadat to this critical juncture. Together they constituted the initial contingent events or intersection point of two or more prior sequences that triggered a reactive causal chain (Mahoney 2000). One was the 1973 war during which both Egypt and Syria launched a military offensive against Israel in order to liberate their occupied lands. Although the war ended inconclusively, the fact that Egypt was able to cross the Suez Canal water barrier and overwhelm the Israeli’s heavily fortified Bar Lev line gave its leadership enough scope to declare it a victory of sorts. The war allowed Sadat an opportunity to step out of Nasser’s towering shadow and stake his own legitimacy on such an outcome. The second antecedent event came in January 1977 when the government lifted food subsidies and increased prices leading to mass rioting that necessitated calling the army to intervene and quell it. The riots forced the government to go back on its decision, but also manifested the fragility of Sadat’s regime legitimacy compared with that of his predecessor. An ironic situation in which Nasser had lost the 1967 battle yet his legitimacy was never questioned remained intact and even outlived him. Despite all that could be said about the 1973 war, Sadat who had presumably inflicted a military blow against Israel could never in fact enjoy such legitimacy. This was a source of personal bitterness that the latter never seemed able to overcome.

Sadat’s bitterness reflected a ‘thought process’ (Voss 1998, 8) that sought to do much of everything opposite to what Nasser did. Arriving at peace with Israel and detaching Egypt from its regional security complex as well as identity ontological security were means to do so, and governed much of Sadat’s attitude. By undermining the wholeness of this identity, he created a deep form of uncertainty in society, subtly yet steadily damaging any stable
cognitive environment, the prerequisite for ‘agency’. Over time and followed by his incapable successor, Mubarak, this translated into a situation that culminated in the loss of many constitutive aspects of Egypt’s geopolitical role. Society members at large started developing a condition of uncertainty about where they actually belong, who they really are and to what ends they were heading. Since ‘ends are constitutive of identity’, loss of direction entailed a loss of identity (Mitzen 2006, 342), leading prominent Egyptian writer and intellectual Galal Amin at one point to pose the bewildered question: ‘Whatever happened to the Egyptians?’ (Amin 2001).

Whatever happened to the Egyptians?

Part of addressing this question is related to the fact that Sadat could not come to grips with the point that states and societies do pursue certain policies and actions in order ‘to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence’ (Steele 2008, 2). States and societies, that is, ‘might actually come to prefer their ongoing, certain conflict to the unsettling condition of deep uncertainty as to the other’s and one’s own identity’ (Mitzen 2006, 342). This explains much of the tremendous popular pressure on Sadat to go to a war that there are indications he never really wanted to engage in. In fact, in 1971 he proposed negotiations for a peace treaty. In his memoirs, ironically titled In Search of Identity, he pointed out that had the US or Israel responded positively to his proposal, he would have engaged immediately in negotiations and that ‘the October war would not have taken place and the process of peace would have started in February or March 1971’ (Sadat 1977, 229). This thought process was crucial in shaping his rather simplified understanding of the nature of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the interests, goals and motives of that state, as well as the reasons behind its creation in Palestine, right in the heartland of the Arab and Muslim world. Being a function of his beliefs, emotions, knowledge and perceptions, Sadat’s thought process developed and constructed a ‘problem representation’ or contextual model of the conflict based upon which he acted and made rather ‘simplified’ but fateful decisions (Voss 1998, 8).

Sadat’s conceptualizations led him to a number of conclusions. One was that 99% of the solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict, or ‘the cards’ of the game, as he used to put it, was in the hands of the United States. Another was that commitment to Arab causes was superfluous. Thirdly, that if Egypt would ‘ally’ itself with the US, the latter may be prone to look less at Israel as an essential ally, or failing that, he would bandwagon with the ‘winning’ side. Subsequent events have proven this to be a simplified vision of denial – ‘seeing but not seeing’ (Booth 2007, 19), and a traumatic self-extraction from the realities of power and geopolitics. As Lloyd C. Gardner pointed out, Sadat was determined to be part of a ‘Middle East Pax Americana’, a fact that is ‘key to understanding all that followed’ (Gardner 2011, 118). Sadat essentially had made political decisions that fragmented national and regional identity, the consequences of which can be observed in current regional states’ and societal disintegration. His presumed search for identity, ironically, was an identity lost.

By stating that 99% of ‘the cards’ of the game were in the hands of the United States, Sadat effectively was delivering Egypt’s foreign policy and national security into US hands – essentially a colonial condition. Carl Schmitt articulated the implications of such an attitude very clearly, when he stated:
As long as a people exist in the political sphere this people must, even if only in the most extreme case … determine by itself the distinction of friend and enemy. Therein resides the essence of its political existence. When it no longer possesses the capacity or the will to make this distinction, it ceases to exist politically. If it permits this decision to be made by another, then it is no longer a politically free people and is absorbed into another political system. (Schmitt 1976, 49)

In order to render this palatable to a Nasserite-inspired nationalist society, the identity of that society was subjected to a process of plasticity or, as Clayton Crockett put it, ‘the destructive annihilation of personality by means of a wounding trauma’ (cited in Malabou 2012b, xv, xxiii). Egyptian identity in fact was ‘remodeled’ and ‘remolded’ along paths that unravelled it in profound and, one might add, pathological ways. Part of this remoulding process involved creating a new elite structure of businessmen. The purpose behind this socially engineered business class, seemingly, was not to bring about the full potential of private initiative in the service of the nation and society. Rather it was to construct a strategic policy framework that aimed at creating an apolitical middle class unwilling to incur any sacrificial costs for any particular cause or ‘radical ideology’ such as, for example, nationalism (Segal 1998). Through trade, mostly in ‘non-strategic goods’, business leaders were to be empowered in order to create alternative centres of power to the state. That is, the aim was to weaken the state by entrenching the influence of a capitalist business class, or what Segal called ‘capitalism’s secret weapon’ (Segal 1998, 2). This class was the antidote to sacrifice, or what Segal designated as ‘radical ideology’. The function of this business class was to ‘sell not just a brand name or social sign, but an identity … based on the principle that having is being’ (Asad 2003, 152; added emphasis), where the sense of ‘worth’ is refocused from sacrifice as a value to ‘having is being’ as price. ‘Having as being’, that is, does not refer to the acquisitive disposition of human beings that is part of human nature, but to the collapse of ethical values and scruples, as individuals and societies seek to ‘be’ by having – that is, to the irrelevance of ethics in the process of acquisition (consumerist economism). Having as being reverses the ‘ethics as being’ means-ends order in which acquisition or having becomes an end in and of itself.4

Whereas values of sacrifice created a solid identity, the value of ‘having is being’ helped demolish it. As a good measure of essentialism or identity continuity would have continued to allow for national mobilization, the Egyptian societal identity structure had to be undermined. For that purpose, a constructivist approach was deployed (Smith 2001) in order to hollow that structure. Constructivism, or social engineering, with the connivance of exogenous and external power formations, became the mechanism by which ‘having-is-being’ identities were constituted. The outcome was most apparent in the contrasting popular mood of defiance after the traumatic event of 1967, as opposed to the politico-military and popular collapse after the 1973 war. Despite all claims about the 1973 victory, Sadat’s regime in alliance with this domestically engineered class of capitalist businessmen, as well as an informally sanctioned Muslim Brotherhood, maintained an inherent interest in keeping the 1967 traumatic defeat vivid in the psyche of the Egyptian people. Such memory was necessary in order to sustain a popular acquiescence to the humiliating transformations that were to follow as Egypt’s elites were being socialized into a ‘fifth-column’ structure whose function was not only to change Egypt’s identity but also to undermine it. It was a paradoxical situation in which a discourse of victory
was constructed in order to diffuse a ‘culture of defeat’ (Schivelbusch 2003) based on a continued reminding of a traumatic military setback in the context of which national independence and national will could be forfeited.

On a national scale such trauma manipulation served to ‘unravel the self in profound ways’ and created a ‘deep cut in the biography’ of the Egyptians, ‘an ontological violence’ that gave rise to an ambivalent ‘identity’ that had little in common with its preceding form (Malabou 2012a, 17; added emphasis). This condition reflected what Catherine Malabou had called ‘the “dark side” of plasticity’, the ‘ability to annihilate form as well as to give it’ (Malabou 2012b, xxiii; Smith 2012) or as she put it:

In the usual order of things, lives run their course like rivers [and] … eventually one becomes who one is. … Bodily and psychic transformations do nothing but reinforce the permanence of identity, caricaturing or fixing it, but never contradicting it. … As a result of serious trauma, … [a subject’s history] splits and a new, unprecedented persona comes to live with the former person. An unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past and whose future harbors nothing to come, an … existential improvisation. A form born of the accident … by accident. (Malabou 2012a, 1–2)

While Malabou may have been focusing on individual cases, the same applies to national collectives. Crucially, she emphasized the permanence of identity as a source of ontological security, rather than it merely being a malleable object of social construction. While identity may, nevertheless, change as a process of learning and development, the idea is that nations, as much as individuals, value their ‘sense of … continuity because it underwrites their capacity for agency’ (Mitzen 2006, 344). If the latter is lost, so will identity fare. Individuals and societies, that is, do or ought to reflect a perpetual process of continuity and change or rather continuity guided change. This identity framework is very important as it challenges the constructivist–essentialist dichotomy. In contrast, an identity split from its original form is caused by or causes a traumatic condition of ontological violence. An accident or trauma takes place at, or brings about, a critical juncture and institutionalizes it along a different path-dependent trajectory which breaks from an earlier course. Trauma, that is, becomes part of the outcome of the condition that history does not matter. The traumatic identity crisis caused by this and by the so-called ‘Peace Treaty’ in Egyptian society was articulated by political activist Latifa Zayyat’s commenting on Sadat’s foreign policy: ‘enemies became friends, friends, enemies. … [W]e were obliged not only to deny our present but also to deny our past’ (cited in Dwyer 1991, 64–65). ‘Devoid of a coherent conceptual structure’ individuals and society cannot sufficiently organize the world so as ‘to act effectively within it’ (Powell 2003, 17), as dissonance prevails.

The logical sequence of this violent process had major implications on national and regional identity, or rather loss of identity. The first implication was perceptual–psychological when Sadat, ignoring the multidimensional aspects of the Arab–Israeli conflict, reduced these dimensions to a mere ‘psychological barrier’ (Kissinger 2002, 168). What logically followed was that Palestine was no longer a serious Egyptian concern. Egypt would detach itself from its regional identity structure and ultimately cede to Israel the role of regional power and freedom of action, military or otherwise. With a stroke of a pen Sadat also conceded that the so-called Peace Treaty had priority over other prior regional treaties including the Arab collective defence treaty. Notwithstanding also the
demilitarization of Sinai and the stationing of an international American-dominated military observation force that cannot be withdrawn except by unanimous agreement by the United Nations Security Council. Despite all denials by Sadat and his regime that he was not forsaking the Arab cause, in fact Sadat had made pledges to Kissinger that the 1973 war would be the last war with Israel, and that Egypt would not fight or stand up for any Arab cause be it in Syria or Palestine. In turn, both agreed that ‘Washington would overlook Egyptian rhetoric in the United Nations and other places, because it was just that – rhetoric – not to be confused with policy’ (Gardner 2011, 138). It was an ironic situation in which Egypt was to give up on much of its sovereignty, making territorial and political concessions to the occupier while its territories were still seized, forfeiting in the process its political will and capitulating, while declaring ‘victory’ in war. In short, Egypt was effectively consenting to lay down its arms, dissolve its security complex and depart from the Arab–Israeli conflict (Wallensteen 2015).

Under Nasser, Egypt enjoyed a fairly stable and secure identity and self-understanding. ‘A crucial requirement of a stable self-understanding is that one’s actions … sustain it over time’ (Mitzen 2006, 344). This involved maintaining a clear designation of friend and enemy – the ‘high points of politics’ when ‘the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy’ (Schmitt 1976, 67). Nasser, in fact, used to state clearly that ‘we befriend who befriends us and are hostile toward those hostile to us’ in order to make this point, recognizing its significance for identity stability. One crucial element of such ‘binary opposition’ is credibility. When Nasser declared Israel the arch-enemy, there was no lack of credibility, no uncertainty, and hence ontological security and a strong stable national identity based on an overwhelming measure of national consensus and unity. Ontological security provided Egyptians and their Arab brethren with knowledge about how to act and how to be oneself, providing for stable identity-motivated action. National identity was supported by state practice and reflected a ‘dynamic process from which action flow [ed] and in turn sustain[ed] identity’ (Mitzen 2006, 344–345).

Ontological security, which Nasser had succeeded in providing the masses with, sustained his memory in Egyptian and the broader Arab consciousness as a tragic hero and a mirror image of his nation’s own historical tragic heroism; not even the 1967 war nor the 1973 war could change this despite their different outcomes. This is not mere rhetoric but specifically means he has touched on something very deep in their psyche that had less to do with the body and more with the ‘self’. ‘The subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice’ (Mitzen 2006, 344). This helps explain the resilience with which Egypt and its leadership made an almost immediate comeback after the 1967 war, manifesting itself in terms of military engagement with the Israeli enemy, sinking the Israeli Eilat destroyer in October 1967, and launching what came to be called the ‘war of attrition’ not long after till August 1970. Interestingly, this was a war that ‘hawkish’ deputy Chief of Staff Ezer Weizman had ‘proclaimed … a defeat for Israel’ (Creveld 2004, 36), yet about which very little is being said or mentioned in the Egyptian context. Egypt was also able to rebuild a standing army in a relatively short period (six years) capable of launching a full-scale frontal attack against a well-entrenched defensive line. Above all, it had consolidated its political will, translated at the Khartoum Arab summit in August 1967 in terms of the resolution not to make peace with Israel, not to recognize it and not to negotiate with it. This trial of political will is crucial for
understanding and reading the real implications of the aftermaths of the 1967 and 1973 wars as well as the relationship between politics, war and identity.

In the 1960s, Elie Kedourie, a British citizen of Iraqi Jewish background and an avowed Zionist, sought to build a case for a particular political and strategic order in the Arab East. This order envisaged major Western powers establishing close ties or alliances with local states, which represent minorities in the region, better so if they were non-Arabs (e.g., Pahlavi Iran). At the same time, differences between ‘the Arabic-speaking group’ were to be emphasized by treating Egypt as well as Iraq ‘as individual nation-states’ whose connection with other Arabic-speaking neighbours was merely ‘sentimental rather than actual’. Both were then to become part of a Western-sponsored alliance that included Turkey and ‘an expanded Jewish State in Palestine’ (Kedourie 2004, 393).

Interestingly, the same goal seemed to be consistently envisioned into the second decade of the 21st century. Robert Kaplan (Kaplan 2012) called for bringing Iran into the Western orbit, after changing its regime, with the prospect of forming some kind of an alliance between it and Israel that would engage in ‘downsizing’ Arab countries. The problem Israel is facing is that the Islamic regime is doctrinally hostile to Israel. This is what the latter is working hard at changing either by possibly undermining the Islamic regime’s policies, its nature or both. Former American national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski also suggested the US should adopt a policy that ‘could help bring Iran back into its traditional role of strategic cooperation with the United States in stabilizing the Gulf region. Eventually, Iran could even return to its long-standing and geopolitically natural pre-1979 policy of cooperative relations with Israel’ (Brzezinski and Odom 2008). This does not necessarily mean that Iran will positively respond to such overtures, as its highly capable leadership is keenly aware of the pitfalls. Rather it means that it would be wise policy for Arab countries in general, and Egypt in particular, to forge a counter-strategic alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran. After all, even Brzezinski and Odom had to admit in reference to Iran that ‘a heavy-handed “sticks” and “carrots” policy may work with donkeys but not with serious countries’ (Brzezinski and Odom 2008; added emphasis). This is not too far from what unrivalled Egyptian journalist and political analyst Mohammed H. Heikal – commenting on the historical pattern of US–Arab relations – had observed, that this ‘game’ between the ‘swindler and the buffoons’ has gone on way too long (Heikal 2007).

This was much of what Nasser vehemently opposed and what Sadat wholeheartedly embraced. Nasser’s policies of opposition to Western-sponsored alliances reflected a clear insight into the implications of the above and of what was at stake, as later and current events were to show. His opposition to the Baghdad Pact, which included Turkey and Pahlavi’s Iran, his pan-Arab ideology, and in many ways his reasons for coming to blows with the Muslim Brotherhood, had much to do with what Kedourie was suggesting. Arab nationalism sought to emphasize common identity of the ‘Arab-speaking group’. Nasser’s crushing of the Brotherhood was necessitated not only as a matter of power struggle but also in order to forestall any subsequent intra-Islamic madhabi conflicts in which external forces would manipulate such rivalries to fragment the region and the states in it. In fact, the Brotherhood’s anti-nationalist ideology, separating identity from territory, could have very well disintegrated the entire issue of Palestine as a territorial cause. Furthermore, Nasser’s anti-imperialist stance aimed at bringing about a unified regional popular front that brought
minorities and majorities together, notwithstanding regional state differences and rivalries. Egypt was also to remain an integrated part of the regional system and not an ‘individual nation-state’. Above all, Nasser strategically linked Egypt’s national security with the Palestinian cause, as both were being threatened by a colonial, militarized and aggressive Zionist state. Egypt’s connection to Palestine that was actual and not merely a matter of sympathy. Thus, in much of what Nasser did, the enemy always remained clear, identity was preserved and the adversary could not impose its political will, disarm or compel Egypt’s leadership. This ultimately rendered the 1967 war, despite its heavy psychological, emotional and material toll, a tactical military defeat.

Whatever happened to the Egyptians? Locking in strategic defeat

War, as Carl von Clausewitz pointed out, is an act of violence intended to compel an enemy or opponent to submit to the political goal or objective of a counter will (Von Clausewitz 1832 [1982]). This is why Von Clausewitz always reminds us that ‘war is politics by other means’, waged to serve politico-strategic purposes of one state against another.

With Sadat and his successor, Mubarak, Egypt was compelled to submit to a counterwill, basically along the same lines that Kedourie had suggested. This was the logical outcome of a ‘rudderless’ leadership with no ‘coherent, well-informed and consolidated personal and political identity’ (Renshon 2003, 37). Such qualitative failure in leadership and policy caused a major drift in that country’s strategic orientation (Renshon 2003). Arab nationalism as an idea and a policy thrust was undermined. To achieve that goal religious Islamist groups, consciously or otherwise, were encouraged by the regime. Rather than bringing about a synthesis of nationalism and Islamic values, which could have been these groups’ greatest theoretical, intellectual and praxis contribution, they engaged instead in the futile exercise of bringing both ideas into an unending, leading-to-nowhere conflict, fuelled in many cases by self-destructive, personal interests and grudges. What could have happened to the course of events had these groups capitalized on the Nasserite charismatic moment, became his supporters and with some modesty, had moulded their thoughts and ideas within a ‘progressive’ pan-Arab–Islamist framework are questions to contemplate. Rather, a historical opportunity was lost where instead of a synergetic relationship developing that would serve both, what transpired served neither. What could have been a great accomplishment turned out, typically, as a grand failure as current regressive manifestations of these groups show and as no lessons are learned. Sectarian divisions as well were nourished particularly after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran in order to stymie its potential expansion and support. Prior to that revolution, Sadat had consolidated relations with Muhammad Reza Pahlavi as an American ally, as well as with Turkey, a NATO member. Palestinians as well as Arab countries that opposed his policies were demonized while at the same time going soft on Israel. Egypt would continue to declare its sympathy with the Palestinian cause as a matter of rhetoric not policy or actuality. Since then, Egypt simply played the role of an in-between broker between Israel and the Palestinians particularly in Gaza. Instead of Palestine being a matter of cause, commitment and high security, it was to devolve simply to just being a humanitarian issue, as Israel in fact had always wanted to depict it. Egypt was essentially
assuming the very values and identity of the enemy, consciously or otherwise, irrespective of any negative emotions that may be harboured toward it.

A discursive myth was further constructed which developed the theme that Egypt had been fighting Israel just for the sake of Palestine all along. The implication being that it had no stake in the matter and that Israel was not a strategic threat that had to be confronted for Egypt’s own national security and identity structure. This was a ‘reconstructive’ process of ‘changing the identities of two previously hostile [parties] such that the welfare of one’s former enemy becomes part of how the self is defined’ (Booth and Wheeler 2008, 93; Wendt 1999). Thus, Egyptian chauvinism was encouraged as a means of emphasizing differences with other Arab countries and societies challenging the notion that there was a common identity. The country was also to be an ‘individual nation-state’ separated from its regional security complex. Such being the case, nothing stood in the way of signing a ‘Peace Treaty’ with Israel once Sinai had presumably been ‘liberated’. Desecuritizing Israel depoliticized and desecuritized the entire Arab–Israeli conflict with the Palestinian cause at its core. Consequently, Israel gained most if not all of what it had wanted from Egypt, yielding only what was not its own in the first place – Sinai – and even then returning it accompanied with debilitating political and strategic constraints. The idea was that as long as the entire ‘Egyptian space’ or ‘milieu’ (Nye 2013) had been taken over, territorial possession and its associated costs were not necessary, at least not at a current stage.

This helps shed light on why Sadat had maintained a secret channel with the Americans, Kissinger in particular, informing the latter about Egypt’s intentions and war plans even when the war was underway, with the distinct possibility that Kissinger would convey such information to Israel. Such advantage allowed the latter to concentrate a good part of its forces on the Syrian front. What was performed as a two-front war against Israel was in reality a one-front war, which allowed for the initiative to tilt in favour of the Israeli side toward the end of the armed conflict. In order to justify such an outcome, Sadat ‘keyed in’ a (de)securitizing fifth-column discourse. This discourse served to provide a ‘dominant’ identity reframing ‘judgment’ that acted as ‘a barrier to seriously considering alternative frameworks’ of policy action and to acknowledging that ‘complex situations can be addressed in numerous ways’ (Renshon 2003, 30, 37). A major part of this desecuritizing ‘speech act’ was that Egypt had no choice but to pursue such a course of action. Through the critical juncture of the 1973 war, Sadat could manipulate that event to set such a path. Mubarak having neither the opportunity nor the personal capacity to create his own critical juncture simply followed the same path by inertia for 30 years and took events to their logical conclusion. Securitized as extraordinary and necessary, and contextualized within a framework of a discursive determinism that there were no other options, both Sadat’s and Mubarak’s regimes ‘feigned’ Egypt had ‘liberated’ its occupied land. Something that Syria, which had opposed such a policy reorientation, did not.

In many ways, this discourse remained logically incoherent, for if Egypt had won the war why did it not have a choice? Furthermore, it aimed at obscuring that strictly speaking Sinai was not liberated but that the whole of Egyptian national will has been rendered hostage to an effectively occupied Sinai, liberated as part of a ‘virtual’ world. To use Erving Goffman’s terms, a liberation ‘performed’ not ‘realized’ (Goffman 1974); a condition that Syria’s successive leaderships could make a much sounder judgment about.
Syria faced all that Egypt had gone through, and even more so. However, it never chose to go the latter’s way. What this basically means is that Egypt had succumbed largely as a matter of choice not as a matter of lack of one. Late Syrian President Hafez Asad made this point clear. During the step-by-step regional negotiations with Kissinger after the 1973 war, he voiced that Israel seemed interested in taking the whole of Syria in order to ‘return’ the Syrian Heights. This is something he was unwilling to concede to, even after the collapse of Syria’s main backer, the Soviet Union, to a good measure as an outcome of a Sadat/Mubarak-type Soviet leadership (Gorbachev/Yeltsin). Subsequent events proved Asad’s foresight correct. Political will buckled, Egypt embarked on a transition from being partially occupied to being colonized. The Peace Treaty and the discourse of a ‘restored’ Sinai became symbols of that country’s lost identity, and national will held hostage, rendering the aftermath of the 1973 war a strategic defeat.

Consolidating path dependency: keying, dissonance and trauma

**Morale collapse: cognitive dissonance and the diffusion of a culture of defeat**

Egypt’s strategic defeat has remained one of its most cherished open secrets. It was open because after the 1973 war Egypt’s leadership acted visibly defeated. It was a secret because all ‘speech acts’ or discourses were about victory. The circular logic inherent in this representation trapped Egyptian national identity in a vicious tautological logic: the ‘Peace Treaty’, essentially capitulation, was declared the outcome of ‘victory’ and since victorious why the need to change anything, let alone capitulation defined as the ‘Peace Treaty’ (framing–keying). Underlying this logic were subtle and reinforcing processes associated with the interrelated concepts of dissonance, keying and trauma. Together they made possible the redefining of the entire national and regional identity structure in terms of a concomitant and sustained culture of defeat. This culture, diffused by a domestically entrenched and externally supported fifth-column discourse, penetrated and was disseminated through all levels of society for close to 40 years – more than an entire generation. As the whole structure of taboos collapsed, self-identification became illusive.

The scope and extent of identity damage or loss that such collapse caused can only be imagined as Egyptian society became largely ‘identity-less’. With no frame of reference, no longer was it possible to address the question of ‘who they are’ nor, worse yet, who ‘they are not’, the two poles of identification and of ‘self-disidentification’ (Burke and Stets 2009). Both are necessary for ‘self-verification’. Identity, like a thermostat, controls the meanings it perceives, and alters outputs in order to get input perceptions to correspond with the meanings that it sets as a standard (Burke and Stets 2009). In other words, identities act to ‘change the situation to bring situationally relevant meanings into alignment with the meanings in the identity, thus verifying and supporting the existing self-meanings’ (176). If this process fails identities are ‘disconfirmed’ (44) and are liable to suffer from cognitive dissonance. One reason why many Egyptians continue to stick tenaciously to the myth that in all the policies that Egypt pursues or had pursued the country had Palestinian interests at heart as a matter of commitment. The fact that in light of the ‘Peace Treaty’ such claims cannot be sustained did not matter. What mattered was that this discourse or myth be repeated *ad nauseam* in order to prevent or minimize, to the extent possible, a state of cognitive dissonance or collapse. Especially if added to this
was the realization that Egypt’s proclaimed military victory had in fact been a strategic defeat. One reason why identities resist change or change very slowly in order to maintain their stability.

An identity, nevertheless, can be made to change rather rapidly by unfreezing a situational meaning through mechanisms such as ‘brainwashing’, ‘kidnapping’, ‘epiphany’ (Burke and Stets 2009, 176), keying, fear and/or trauma. All were mechanisms used to get the Egyptian collective to ‘unfreeze’ (Schein 1995, 2), or overthrow its identity. The irony was that no alternative identity could take over since through a process of denial, ‘nothing’ had been overthrown in the first place, as actuality and performance were fused together. This was the means by which to minimize or eliminate dissonance associated with a situation and acts of forced compliance disguised as a victor’s free choice. At the same time, never allowed to be forgotten or transcended was the traumatic defeat of 1967 as an underlying reason behind choices the ‘victor’ makes. The idea, as Deborah W. Larson put it, is that:

The amount of dissonance experienced in a forced-compliance situation (i.e. defeat) is in inverse relation to the justification for complying. In other words, the more important the reasons for behaving contrary to one’s convictions, the less dissonance is created. This means that when people are induced to engage in counterattitudinal behavior, a change in their beliefs is most probable when they perceive that their action was freely chosen and when there was insufficient external reward or punishment (i.e. returns or costs) to force them to conform. (Larson 1985, 31)

All this was consistent with a general approach that falls back on Kurt Lewin’s theory of change. The theory stressed that it was more important to remove the factors or forces ‘restraining’ or resisting change than to support opposing ‘driving’ forces in a particular direction. This presumably was the case even though change from an earlier equilibrium was possible only when the latter were more powerful than the former (Schein 1995). In other words, by reducing restraints imposed by values of sacrifice, driving forces of ‘having as being’ gain in momentum. By so doing ‘compliance’ and ‘counter-attitudinal behavior’ become easier as less dissonance is created even while, or in fact as a result of, undermining the ‘old structure of taboo[s]’ (Heikal 1996, 554). This process of disidentification is comprised of three steps: (1) unfreeze (create a felt need for change away from a previous path-dependent trajectory; disconfirm); (2) change (attitudinal or behavioural modification or conversion; drive); and (3) freeze (institutionalizing and reinforcing an alternative path-dependent change in behaviour; lock-in) (Mathews 2009; Schein 1995).

Sadat’s disconfirming or unfreezing phase took place under ‘complex psychological’ (agent) as well as structural conditions (Schein 1995). In order to overcome ‘natural defense mechanisms’ (structure of taboos) and/or opposing ‘mental set’ (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 1998, 142), a discourse of detachment that Egypt had done its fair share fighting Israel, and that peace-driven prosperity was at hand, was engineered. The purpose was to bring about a fundamental alteration in popular perceptions of the situation based on cost–benefit calculations and a ‘having is being’ mindset, in order to introduce ‘implicit’ as well as ‘explicit’ consciousness altering modifications (Anderson, Klein, and Stuart 2000; Mathews 2009). By creating a situation of ‘survival anxiety’ (Schein 1995), a conversion was to be brought about away from earlier objectives toward different ends. Change was made possible because of an ecological shift or drive embedded in the critical junctures of the 1973 war and the subsequent ‘dramatic’ visit to Jerusalem. This also
involved confronting both the society and other regional actors with different sets of issues and problems, causing them to reconceptualize the entire institutional culture or strategic situation in favour of substantive behavioural change (Thelen 2003) – locking-in. More significantly, the national security doctrine of the vital institution of the army was altered as the US ‘put more responsibility on, and constructed a symbiotic relationship with, an Egyptian military regarded as fully trustworthy on all the big issues’ (Gardner 2011, 111). The army became totally dependent on US military and economic assistance and thus under no circumstance was it to be capable of confronting, deterring or firing a shot against Israel. For over 40 years, the army was practically an accomplice in the total exposure of Egypt’s national security.

In a profound insight into the consequences of such and similar situations, Carl Schmitt observed:

> It would be a mistake to believe that a nation could eliminate the distinction of friend and enemy by declaring its friendship for the entire world or by voluntarily disarming itself. The world will not thereby become depoliticized, and it will not be transplanted into a condition of pure morality, pure justice, or pure economics. If a people is afraid of the trials and risks implied by existing in the sphere of politics, then another people will appear which will assume these trials by protecting it against foreign enemies and thereby taking over political rule. The protector then decides who the enemy is by virtue of the eternal relation of protection and obedience. (Schmitt 1976, 51–52)

To render such a situation palatable, the identity of the Egyptian army had to be concomitantly changed. Since identities ‘are defined by the meanings held in the identity standard’, identity change implied that meanings held in the standard must change as well (Burke and Stets 2009, 175). Within this framework, the essence and real substance of Kissinger’s indirect step-by-step diplomacy was to ‘key’ in performed tactical Egyptian gains, actually realized as an American–Israeli strategic accomplishment. Essentially disarming itself, Egypt’s national security merged with that of Israel’s at the same time when its entire regional and international matrix of alliances collapsed and with it the country’s strategic spatial horizon.6 Sadat and subsequently Mubarak, as well as the army, accepted the deliverance of the country’s national security into the hands of the US, and by extension Israel, hiding and shirking national responsibility behind the presumed security provided by a piece of paper called the ‘Peace Treaty’. Losing its identity as part of the loss of the ‘other’, Egypt and its society decayed at the same time when the Zionist state could continue to consolidate its identity despite its peace with Egypt by maintaining the ‘Arabs’ as the other.

The ensuing behavioural change, as a most effective way of converting the entire organizational and institutional culture, or the mental programming of the mind (Hofstede 2001) and therefore identity, was followed by and commensurately associated with a process of ‘reeducation’: the ‘unlearning’ of well-established ‘patterns of thinking and acting operating at the level of norms and values expressed in action’ (Coghlan and Jacob 2005, 446). The idea was to elicit perceptual conversion, true or false, projecting a current path as no longer tenable or desired. Through American control of the military and of the economic lifeline to the Egyptian army, that army’s doctrine inevitably changed from fighting Israel to coexisting, if not frequently in de facto alliance, with it. Consequently, the Egyptian army’s identity had to change from one in which the ‘other’ or sworn enemy was Israel (i.e., standard), to one in which any actor or event
that may cause any confrontation with that enemy would constitute a direct threat to Egyptian national security (i.e., meanings in the standard). Arab states that refused, at least initially, to become part of this process were practically condemned as being the cause of what ensued in terms of a failure to ‘restore’ Palestinian and Arab rights and lands. In the process, Arabs became their own other. Where a semblance of Arab unity was required for the sake of appearances or cross-cutting interests, it was the ‘Muslim’ (e.g., Islamic Iran) who was to become his own other instead. In no case was Israel to figure in the picture. Again, here a situation is created in which the welfare of one’s former enemy becomes part of how the self is defined (Booth and Wheeler 2008; Wendt 1999). It was a breakdown in politico-military will that led inevitably to a concomitant collapse in collective (national) morale.

**Values collapse: the corruption of identity**

Collapse in collective and national morale was a first step toward unfreezing national and socio-political taboos, breaking the door wide open for a drastic and profound change in values and identity structures. In the process, an overlapping and subsequent (neo)liberal discourse and speech act was introduced and diffused in society in order to freeze the consequential condition of collapse in collective (national) values. At the core of this freezing discourse was the notion of ‘having is being’. Both were subtly and in many cases crudely introduced into the fabric of society in deceptive ways such that the conception or notion of price overwhelmed constraints imposed by values considerations. This was done along path dependence self-reinforcing sequences characterized by the formation and long-term reproduction of a given institutional pattern. Such sequences were to construct a perception of ‘increasing returns’ so as to facilitate adopting them as an institutional pattern. With increasing returns:

> an institutional pattern – once adopted – delivers increasing benefits with its continued adoption, and thus over time it becomes more and more difficult to transform the pattern or select previously available options, even if these alternative options would have been more efficient’. (Mahoney 2000, 508)

The process of deconstruction, social engineering and reconstruction of Egypt’s socio-political landscape strove to alter that country’s understanding of ‘self’ and ‘other’. It sought to do so in ways that unwarrantedly ‘invalidated’ prior ‘knowledge’ of the Israeli enemy and the Arab–Israeli conflict from being an existential contradiction (‘inherent bad faith’ model) simply to being a matter of psychological barriers and mere border disputes (Booth and Wheeler 2008). This was accomplished along a path-dependent trajectory that pursued and manipulated ‘functional’, ‘power’ and ‘legitimation’, ‘reproductive’ and cooperative mechanisms (Mahoney 2000, 508–509). Through a (neo)liberal discourse these mechanisms were brought together in a common interactive and integrated framework that remoulded collective values in a fashion desired by an external or adversarial actor. Egyptian societal and political values were subjected to a profound shock causing an environmental shift that involved moving to a new ‘equilibrium’ through some form of ‘institutional conversion’ (Thelen 2003, 228) and ‘reeducation’ (Coghlan and Jacob 2005). The purpose was to move those values and alter collective identity away from earlier objectives toward other ends by imposing different sets of issues and problems.
The desired outcome was a fundamental reconceptualization of the entire institutional culture in favour of a behavioural change (Thelen 2003) in which ‘having is being’. This was accomplished and made possible along the ‘sequential transmissions’ (Rogers 1971, 13) or conjunctures of, trauma → framing (keying and fabrication) → culture of defeat → diffusion → freezing. Understanding and process tracing these sequential causal mechanisms ‘is of crucial importance because alternative mechanisms suggest different ways in which patterns marked by path dependence might be reversed’ (Mahoney 2000, 508–509).

Manipulating a collective sense of national trauma allowed for both a fifth column and/or a neoliberal discourse to be ‘keyed’ in through various ‘strips’ of activities (Goffman 1974). Keying refers to a situation in which ‘participants’ in an activity, conflict or war were ‘meant to know and to openly acknowledge that a systematic alteration is involved, one that will radically reconstitute what it is for them that is going on’ (Goffman 1974, 45). In other words, keying transforms by amplifying virtuality, in the sense that the ordinary function of a particular act or activity, even when performed, is not actually realized. And while ‘the systematic transformation that a particular keying introduces may alter only slightly the activity [e.g., war] thus transformed … it utterly changes what it is the participant[s] would say was going on’ (41, 45). A ‘strip’ refers to ‘any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity, including here sequences of happenings, real or fictive [virtual], as seen from the perspective of those subjectively involved in sustaining an interest in them’. It refers to ‘any raw batch of occurrences (of whatever status in reality) that one wants to draw attention to as a starting point for analysis’ (10). Those capable of successfully doing so ‘define the situation’ for others, i.e., frame them.

Keying was used by the US to manipulate Sadat to transform the nature and identity of the Arab–Israeli conflict, who in turn manipulated his nation by amplifying the 1973 crossing of the Suez Canal (a strip) as an Egyptian war victory; a victory performed even if not actually realized. This was most effective in bringing about, in the sequence of events, a (neo)liberal discourse, not far behind in waiting, to ‘fabricate’ a new reality. Fabrication is about the deliberate endeavour of an actor ‘to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on’. Its objective is to design ‘a falsification of some part of the world’ so that the targeted party is ‘contained’ and consequently, with the help of keying, becomes framed (Goffman 1974, 83). The purpose of this kind of fabricated deception is not mainly to remain unexposed, as it is very likely to be eventually uncovered, but to be kept long enough to achieve its purpose, after which being exposed would not matter much (Daniel and Herbig 1982). Its logic in the context of the Egyptian case was simple, straightforward – even if not particularly new – effective and fifth-column ‘typical’. It went roughly as follows: The enemy is at the gates, is too powerful, cannot be resisted and, therefore, resistance is foolish, nonsensical and self-destructive. One need only look at those who chose to resist; what good has it done them? It is a hopeless situation, and the best and only thing to do is to raise the white flag, open the gates, put trust in the enemy’s magnanimity by delivering on what they demand, and consequently safety will be ensured and the land will flow with milk and honey. Free markets in economics and democracy in politics were presented by members of the fifth column (change agents) in a ‘deterministic’ fashion as a panacea, promising prosperity and freedom, even as both were to be only performed not realized. ‘Change agents’, in other words, using a combination of sticks
and/or carrots, may seek ‘only to persuade their clients to be willing (and perhaps able) to adopt [change] without actually doing so’ (Rogers 1971, 21), i.e., an act of performance not of realization.

Inherent in the purpose of such framing was the political dissemination of a fatalistic discourse in order to diffuse a culture of defeat, or what may be termed ‘annihilationist psychology’ (Schivelbusch 2003, 5). Diffusion is ‘the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of the social system’. It is a ‘special type of communication in which the messages are about a new idea’ related in ways that create a good measure of ‘uncertainty’ through lack of ‘predictability’, of ‘structure’ and of ‘information’. Uncertainty serves to unfreeze a situation, to allow for ‘a kind of social change’ or ‘the process by which alterations occur in the structure and function of a social system’ (Rogers 2003, 5–6).

The ultimate goal of such cultural diffusion, essentially (neo)liberal, and beyond being simply an economic philosophy, was subsequently to freeze a ‘value-less’ condition in Egyptian society through an insidious process of deconstruction and social engineering imposed externally by the US and Israel, and implemented internally by a ‘fifth column’. The latter through an elaborate speech-act designated the external enemy as an actual ally in the internal fight against a status quo or a system to be changed. Defeat by this enemy is to be internalized as an interest and a ‘dreamland’ during which ‘the wildest delusions about the postwar order [are] maintained’ (Schivelbusch 2003, 301) and where ‘all blame is transferred’ to and personified in, say, a ‘dictator’ figure so that ‘the losing nation feels catharically cleansed, freed of any responsibility or guilt’ (Schivelbusch 2003, 13). In all these conceptions, typical among collectives that seek to reduce an acute state of cognitive dissonance as much as possible:

The nation [is] represented as the mother who, having been duped, deceived, even defiled by the father-tyrant, was now, with the help of her sons, about to regain her freedom, innocence, and sovereignty. In turn, the former adversary was expected to honor this act of self-purification, since to revenge himself upon and punish a nation that was deceived by its leaders would be to commit an injustice on a par with that of the leaders themselves. (13)

In post-1973 ‘dreamland’ Egypt, turning against Nasser’s legacy was meant to reflect an act of cleansing and exoneration. A strategic defeat was thus justified as a ‘victory’ through ‘keying’ in a make-belief virtuality that the ‘nation laid down its arms of its own free will, in a kind of gentleman’s agreement that placed trust in the chivalry of the enemy’ (14). According to this logic, Nasser’s cardinal sin was fighting Israel and, therefore, peace with it was to be an act of ‘redemption’. Claims of the final dawning of prosperity and freedom were concomitantly introduced as fabrications and keying strips used by external actors and by domestic liberals/Wafdist to justify delivering Egypt to the US and Israel. While ‘liberals’ may frequently proclaim ‘reservations’ about state policies, many of which were an outcome of the ‘Peace Treaty’, this has more to do with a dislike for officers or army influence, not what actually had taken place with Israel. What Sadat had done in fact was to offer them the best of all worlds: the country was to be delivered to the US and Israel while at the same time (neo)liberals can blame the army, and by extension the 1952 Nasserite revolution, for all the negative outcomes of the ‘peace’ policy, exonerating themselves from culpability.
The problem, unforeseen by Sadat and his domestic (neo)liberal allies, is that given the nature of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the victor ‘seeks to humiliate the vanquished enemy as much as possible in his own eyes so that he, henceforth, lacks any confidence whatsoever’ (Schivelbusch 2003, 6; original emphasis). If this did not take place through the actual war, this reflected a tactical ‘step back’ that was supposed to allow for a subsequent strategic advancement, given the perspective that ‘wars that mobilize the nation to a high degree but end too abruptly for the losing side to adapt emotionally result in true levées en masse’ (10). This was what happened after the 1967 setback when levées en masse or national mobilization was a crucial ‘psychological’ mechanism according to which the equilibrium between the collapsed frontline, and a civilian society ‘as yet untouched by the consequences of war’ was restored. The exhausted morale of the troops was replaced with ‘the still vital spirit of the nation itself’, imbued with an instinct of revenge that sustained the energetic continuation of war and conflict. In the words of Von Clausewitz, ‘the morale of troops is never higher than when it comes to repaying that kind of debt’ (cited in Schivelbusch 2003, 8, 9, 10).

Such dynamics had to be avoided for tactical purposes in order for a post-1973 strategic defeat, or regional Pax Zionist, and more broadly Pax Americana, to be constructed. A culture of defeat thus was seeped through the collective consciousness in a less-than-abrupt way in order to allow the nation to adapt emotionally, striking in the process, at the nation’s centre of gravity or its ‘vital spirit’. This was where and how (neo)liberals, the fifth column and change agents’ discourses proved most effective, communicating a logic that all sacrifices and costs suffered by the nation were useless, unnecessary, foolish, in vain and adopting the enemy’s very discourse against one’s own nation, even wrong and deservedly self-inflicted.

Hence, the framing of a manipulative discourse that attempted to explain the 1967 setback, away from its real causes, as being due to the lack of democracy and/or (free market/commercial) religiosity. For example, Muhammed Metwally Al-Shaarawi (1911–98), an Egyptian cleric, stated that he had prostrated to Allah in gratitude for the 1967 defeat, claiming that Egypt would otherwise have become a communist state (Al-Shaarawi n.d.). This was the same logic used previously to justify the American–British-instigated coup against Muhammad Mussadaq in Iran (1953). Yet Nasser (or Mussadaq for that matter) was no communist, but a pan-Arab nationalist, and had he won the 1967 war, or even just a political victory, this would have likely strengthened his non-aligned foreign policy thrust, keeping him at an additional ‘non-aligned’ distance from the Soviet Union. Furthermore, at a time when Egyptian forces were fighting in Yemen (1960s), Nasser’s victory would have very likely turned the military balance in his country’s favour. Nasser’s brinkmanship was based on his vision of Israel and Saudi Arabia as two fronts in the same war theatre where a change in the balance of power in one front would alter the balance in the other. This is one of the main reasons why Saudi Arabia and the US, directly or indirectly, collaborated in the launching of that war. In the same vein, another cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, in an interview with the Saudi National Guard Magazine, expressed the opinion that seeking the help of foreigners (Americans) to liberate Kuwait is permissible (Haddad 1991). He seemed to ignore the distinct possibility that the US may have had a significant role in setting the stage for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as a pretext for justifying its own intervention. Qaradawi was willing to accept an American colonial hegemony over the abode of Islam, but not an Iraqi takeover of
Kuwait. As for the ‘liberal’ contentions about the case of democracy, it is relevant to mention that it was communist and totalitarian Vietnam with its bare-footed peasant army that had defeated ‘democratic’ France and America. All were basically communicating and diffusing the discourses of the Saudi, American and, by extension, Israeli trinity. These are examples of many of the types of mentalities Nasser had to deal with and of how people’s consciousness was being falsified by ‘masking’ the original messenger or source of a ‘truth statement’ (Dearth 2002, 5).

Diffusion of these discourses not only sought to spread a different or new message to members of the Egyptian socio-political system, but also more importantly to bring about an ‘overt behavior change’ rather than just changes in ‘knowledge’ or ‘attitudes’. The idea being that an overt change in behaviour, or restructuring ‘conduct’ (Powell 1970, 9) is a more effective and substantive way in bringing about a change in values, rather than the other way round. As Everett Rogers pointed out, ‘the emphasis upon behavior change in diffusion research is rather important, because we know that knowledge change and persuasion do not always lead directly and immediately to behavior change’ (Rogers 1971, 12–13). Accordingly, Kissinger pursued an interpersonal diplomacy with Sadat. An indirect step-by-step approach by the source message/change agent (Kissinger) was conducted as an effective way in bringing about overt change in the behaviour of a receiver/opinion ‘leadership’ (Sadat regime). As a change agent, Kissinger influenced ‘innovation-decisions’ in a desired direction, using ‘opinion leaders’ (Sadat regime) ‘within a given social system as lieutenants in their campaign of planned change’ (35–36); what Ikenberry and Kupchan termed elites ‘socialization’ (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, 293) or keying. An interesting observation in diffusion studies, however, is that ‘opinion leaders can be “worn out” by change agents who overuse them’ and who consequently lose credibility with their followers who see them as being nothing but ‘clients’ (Rogers 1971, 35–36). Both were conditions that Sadat had suffered from by the time he was killed while attending an army parade. His successor’s role – Mubarak – yet unworn, was to freeze the change agent’s ‘innovation’ (strategic defeat/peace) until such a time when the ‘late majority’ and/or ‘laggards’ in the socio-political system also embraced the ‘novelty’ (Rogers 1971, 27). This required a period of one or two generations or so, approximately congruent with Mubarak’s 30 years of rule.

At the same time, a concomitant embedded (neo)liberal discourse constructed cost–benefit (having is being) utilitarian mechanisms (Mahoney 2000). It diffused a discourse of deceptive ‘conversational exchange’ in the frame of which the quantity, quality, manner and relevance of information were violated. The violation was in such a way so as to make it possible to exploit any or all of these elements by manipulating the information that they possess so as to mislead and alter public perceptions (McCornack 1992), i.e., keying. This took place along a ‘continuum of covert to overt misrepresentations of information’ that omitted and managed information, disseminated ‘untruths’ or ‘half-truths’, lies, ‘exaggerations’ and ‘diversionary responses’ (Wikipedia n.d.b). The purpose was to confound basic and essential values, confusing the public, shaking its self-confidence, and worst of all, undermining hope and trust – the ‘social capital’ or ‘glue’ that holds society together (Ray 2007). Through such a dynamic of psychological ‘de-regulation’ the social fabric of the Egyptian nation unravelled. Society became, what Durkheim would call, ‘a disorganized dust of individuals’ reflecting a condition of collective national anomie – ‘lawlessness’ or loss of meaning and purpose (Powell 1970, ix). Undermined, ‘individuals
experience[d] ontological insecurity and a sense of insecurity with regard to their social reality’ (Ray 2007, 9). The outcome was a path-dependent manipulative framework within which the collapse of national morale became a most effective way of bringing about a commensurate collapse in collective societal values as a means of diffusing a culture of defeat.

**Cognitive collapse: an ‘Islamic’ apostasy discourse**

Ikenberry and Kupchan observed that ‘the exercise of power – and hence the mechanism through which compliance is achieved – involves the projection by the hegemon of a set of norms and their embrace by leaders in other nations’ (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, 293). Through ‘nuanced’ and ‘careful reading’ of Islamic historical materials, and efforts to infer beliefs from statements and behaviour, it would be possible to determine which mechanisms are at work when shaping and moulding norms and socializing elites in ‘secondary’ states (294). The logic being that ‘there is … a more subtle component of hegemonic power, one that works at the level of substantive beliefs [Islam] rather than material payoffs [neoliberalism]’ (283).10

Standards, that is, were to be deconstructed in order to be reconstructed and reconstituted in the hegemon’s own image. Thus, the collective collapse of national morale was a first step toward the breakdown of identity moral structure and, from thereon, the entire matrix of collective values (Rogers 1971). In order to bring about and to freeze a condition of cognitive collapse rather than mere cognitive dissonance, takfiri (apostasy) groups, in the guise of Islam, were keyed in as an additional factor in the path-dependent, ‘step-by-step’ framework. Raising of the banner of apostasy and the way it has come to be manipulated and used by a number of change agents, regimes and self-proclaimed Islamist groups reflected a Muslim umma regressing into its historical pathologies in an act of collective anomie.

Takfirism, or apostatizing as discourse, reflected a ‘noncognitive’ mechanism that served to undermine not only nationalist but also Islamic standards. The idea was to strike two or more birds with one stone. Through such a discourse, takfiri groups come falsely to feel ‘empowered’. Through proclaimed non-territorialism, they could help bring about state fragmentation and, thus, prohibit possible reversion to any ‘nationalist’ policies in the name of a ‘caliphate’. By adopting Kharajite thought, largely anarchist, the very notion of a unified caliphate becomes, in fact, a mere chimera. By ‘excommunicating’ everybody who disagrees with them, especially the Shi’ites, ‘within’ conflict becomes chronic and endemic. When some ‘Islamist’ groups such as the Brotherhood or others claim they may be seeking a caliphate and/or an ‘Islamic democracy’ and the United States shows ‘understanding’, this is not a matter of the latter actually believing what they say or having sympathy for them. Rather, the US is more interested in the very contradictions that those groups were ‘socializing’ themselves into, or were being socialized into, more so than having them necessarily following its dictates in detail. Contradictions portend future crises, through which the American hegemon links ‘space’ to ‘geography’ to ‘culture’ to ‘psychology’ to ‘economism’ through ‘an ensemble of technologies of power’ concerned with the ‘production’ and ‘management’ of territorial and/or non-territorial space (Tuathail 1996, 7). The US, that is, seeks to manage these ‘spatial’ crises dynamics that, as an imperial power, it believes it excels in. The inherent contradictions of the entire
Sunni ‘Islamist’ project actually constituted the internalization of the very norms of the hegemon. Consciously or otherwise, these groups ‘pursue[d] policies consistent with the hegemon’s notion of international order’ (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, 293).

As Egyptian/Arab nationalism and a peace treaty with a Zionist state constitute binary opposites, the former had to be totally undermined, even if by encouraging Islamist groups as the best exploitable ‘antidote to Arab nationalism’ (Gerolymatos 2010, 105). It was a condition that created an acute state of imbalance which eventually opened the floodgates for extreme and twisted forms of fabricated ‘Islamist’ manifestations. This framework of non-cognitive forces, in which Sunnis, in general, and Salafis and Wahhabis, in particular, play a principal role, could then be manipulated to help dissolve the entire Palestinian cause. One conceivable scenario would be quite simple and could follow from the above in a few steps:

- Get ‘to destroy the enemy from within, to conquer himself through himself’ (Liddell Hart 2003, 225) through the creation of a balance of aggressive forces based on Wahhabi–Salafi groups possessed with an irrational apostasy discourse that cannot be reasoned with, targeting not only Shi’i Muslims but also other Muslims.
- In the process, combined with an irrational deterriorialized anti-nationalist vision, the whole issue of Palestine as a territorial cause would be rendered irrelevant or postponed indefinitely into the future until some apocalyptic times.
- Commensurately, Israel would allow for the divisive issue of whether, in the meantime, Muslims may or may not visit Al-Aqsa mosque, which is another source of Muslim contention as it possibly makes concessions toward the sovereign status of the sacred site of Al-Aqsa mosque as a religious issue.
- The latter would, as a by-product, develop into a religio-touristic bonanza for the Israeli economy, with geo-economic and geopolitical consequences. Arabs and Muslims, that is, end up conquering themselves through themselves.

This entire framework, within which Arab and Middle East regional religio- and geopolitics could very well evolve, threatens a condition, and possibly a perpetual source, of collective cognitive failure and, ultimately, collapse.

Such constitutes the real and insidiously substantive threat that these offshoots and their thought and actions pose. Perhaps more so than any actual violence they are prone to engage in. For the mechanism of apostasy, as a reconstructed and manipulated discourse of despair in the guise of power, has become a means of tearing the Muslim community’s fabric apart. In American officials’ parlance, it is ‘creative chaos’, or the re-creating of inherent contradictions in the very structure of that community’s body politic. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the fact that this very idea of apostasy has become instrumental in the current confluence of three major pathological manifestations in Muslim history: The Kharijites exemplified by modern-day Salafis/Wahhabis; the Nizari Ismaili Assassins (al-hashashin) exemplified by the suicidal tactics adopted by these groups and which killed more Muslims than non-Muslims; and al-Mulk al-Adud (tyrannical or corrupt kingship) as exemplified by the Saud regime and other Gulf sheikhdoms. Added to this are farcical clerics in the service of kingships and a more modern insidious phenomenon of a pseudo-masonic type ‘Muslim’ Brotherhood. All, in their different ways, have become the constituent elements of the modern apostasy discourse – a
discourse of nihilism. Claiming to bring back some sense and order into a meaningless vacuum, those ‘Islamists’ proved less a reaction against, and more, as events were to show, an outcome of a pathological situation they lack the capacity to fill or rectify, much due to structural and ideational factors. As long as this structure is intact and remains in place, it will keep on producing more of the same, if not worse. Past and current manifestations of Sunni Islamist groups, that is, are the effects of something much deeper.

The fundamental question that needs to be raised and addressed, therefore, is whether the entire Sunni historical thought structure as it stands requires full reconsideration in many of its aspects, if not its entire foundations, before it can become a viable and adequate medium of revival, if in fact it ever could be. This should not come as a surprise if it turns out that Sunnism is largely nothing but subversive ‘Umayyadism’. Umayyadism here does not simply refer to the Umayyad dynasty (661–750 AD) that destroyed the ‘Guided’ Caliphate, but to an entire autonomous methodology and historical dynamic that confused both for Islamic ‘truth’ – keying. It is the ‘counter-Islamic’ historical ‘coup’ that ‘keyed in’ political corruption (muhdathah adj./ihdath v.) – the fount of all other forms of corruption – into the understanding and interpretation of the faith, and from thereon of the entire Islamic history. In contemporary parlance, it is a false consciousness.

Umayyadism ruined the ‘Caliphate’, summoned its memory, appropriated it, then falsely raised its banner as a religious/doctrinal ‘ideal’ to strike with against the ‘Imamite’. Umayyadism, that is, is the continuous and seething interest in the concomitant destruction of the Imamite (Āl Al Bayt; The Prophet’s household; Islamic Iran) as part and parcel of ‘completing’ the ongoing project of ‘closing the circle’ of corrupt power (mulk adud, literally ‘biting kingship’ as Prophet Muhammad termed it), i.e., muhdataha. All while expressing pious denial of this underlying purpose, along a strategy akin to Liddell Hart’s modern formulation of the indirect approach and of destroying the ‘enemy’ from within (Liddell Hart 2003). Bearing the cloak of Sunnism, its raison d’être was, and remains, to divide the Muslim umma and to falsify its consciousness in order to conquer it, exacting at the same time historical revenge against Banu Hashem (The Prophet’s clan and family), and indirectly against the Prophet himself. In the process, it keyed in and fabricated half-truths and half-lies that permeated Sunni thought, history and politics, consolidating a type of false consciousness – a bid’a in Islamic parlance. Such conceivably is a real meaning of the latter term, or the ideal type process of falsifying consciousness, masked over space, time and the ages, as a manifestation of cognitive collapse; hiding in ‘plain sight’, so to speak (Whaley 1982).

This helps explain Wahhabi and Salafi staunch opposition to hermeneutical ‘reasoning’ or ‘ta’weel (Āl Al Bayt) and/or ijtihad, or to any re-reading of Islamic history, as this would contribute to exposing their real nature as a muhdatha and bid’a in their own right. Their rabid hostility toward Shi’ism and Islamic Iran is much due to the fear that the latter would expose this order and ‘power’ of things. Ironically both continue, implicitly or otherwise, to defend ‘Umayyadism’, possibly the grandest bid’a in Islamic history, while expressing pretentious and pious condemnation of anything that insinuates one. In this sense one can perhaps understand the Prophetic traditions to the effect that ‘every muhdatha (strip keying) is a bid’a (false consciousness), and every bid’a (false consciousness) is a dhalalah (a way astray; deception), and every dhalalah (a way astray;
deception) is in hell'; and that ‘the best of centuries is my own, then the following, then the following’ (inertia? dynamic?). So understood, the first tradition links keying to consciousness falsification, to deception, as a methodological framework. The second refers to an ongoing historical dynamic. This may help in gauging why all attempts at reform from within this framework are destined to end in failure if not regression, and why it calls for ‘unpacking’ this entire edifice of falsification. For as long as Wahhabi ideas, sustained by oil money, continue to degrade human resources in Arab societies, so will such Salafi groups and others of their kind flourish. One is the ideational as well as financial lifeline for the other, tapping into feelings of grievance, legitimate or otherwise, and greed, doctrinally justified, in order to garner willing recruits for political conflict under the guise of madhābi pretensions.15

The Umayyad bid’ā, that is, will remain a condition that does not allow for resolving the crisis of cognitive dissonance, collapse or disorder that much of the Arab and Muslim nation suffers from, when it largely is its source and origin. As a result, what was claimed by ‘Islamist’ groups to be performed in terms of an Islamic emancipating dynamic capable of reintegrating society and filling a meaningless vacuum turned out differently from what was actually realized. For by ‘unfreezing’ Islam by disconfirming its universal nature, then changing it by reducing the faith to ‘Sunnism/Umayyadism’ or groups à la Muslim Brotherhood, Wahhabis, Daesh and others, then freezing the newly reconfigured ‘Islam’ by depicting such groups as its representatives, Islam could then be demonized not only to non-Muslims but also to Muslims themselves. In the process, belief in Islam’s practicability would be shaken, leading Muslims, consequently, in whichever direction or way, being the subsequent stage, with serious religio-political implications.

Owing to the self-destructive role that these groups have come to play in different Arab countries such as Iraq, Libya and Syria, as well as Egypt, even if on a smaller scale, as well as to their manipulability, Sunni Islamism, as a viable alternative, has discredited itself across the board. However, to point out that Sunni Islamism has discredited itself is very different from emphasizing the role that Islam has and must play in moral, ethical as well as political life. Rather, this refers to the different organizations and currents, ranging from Salafism to Wahhabism to the Brotherhood to other offshoots (pl. nihl) that reduce Islam to their own parochial and egoistic constituency. Apart from these groups and concomitant ‘madhābi’ interests or sectarian considerations and futile rivalries and jealousies, an all-inclusive Islam must always remain one of Egypt’s core values, national security matrix and soft power projection capability. An all-inclusive Islamic model is a multidimensional approach that does not simply call for a madhābi dialogue or rapprochement, but much more so for a serious and bona fide ‘non-madhāhabed’ (i.e., not for public consumption or television talk shows), or what some might call a ‘post-madhābi’ institutionalized dialogue between and among the mutually constituent elements of the umma, even non-Muslim representatives (e.g., Christians) within should be included, giving them a stake in Islam without necessarily feeling threatened by the spectre of conversion or prejudicial pressures. After all, example not intimidation is the best call for Islam. This may contribute to providing a soft power model toward unity and integration, and also toward substantive thought-related reforms distinct from the above groups and currents and their historically and contextually driven ‘sectarian’ closures.
Geopolitics of a counter-dynamic: the case of Egypt and Iran

For many of the above reasons, a strategic alliance between Egypt and Iran is crucial as the basis of any possible ‘counter-dynamic’. Egypt is a pivotal state, and so is Iran, perhaps even more so. The coming together of two regionally influential, strategically located and pivotal Muslim countries harbouring a rich civilizational heritage, with more or less equally sized populations, could set the foundations for much needed, even if seemingly contradictory, objectives of regional stability and concomitant change in regional balance of power. Iran has been able to affect the regional balance in its favour, armed with religious idealism, revolutionary zeal, an iron will and hard work, served with an abundance of natural endowments effectively used and managed for the development of the country’s human, scientific and material capabilities. However, in order to alter significantly the balance of power vis-à-vis Israel, to which the Iranian leadership is doctrinally opposed, it needs Egypt and, of course, vice versa. The latter unfortunately lacks much of these resources and capabilities. It will have to work hard at rebuilding and replenishing them after having forfeited much of what it had accomplished during the 1950s and 1960s as, owing in no small measure to the Egyptian–Israeli Treaty, independent development became a dirty word. In order to make up on this, that country will need to redevelop a solid allied structure that could assist in providing a deterring support matrix as it tries strategically to reposition itself and replenish its capacities.

Geopolitically, both countries occupy strategically complementary positions. A capable Egypt can exert a ‘pull’ effect on North and Sub-Saharan Africa, on the Gulf and on the Levant, as well as play a balancing role toward a relatively more equitable relationship with the European Union across the Mediterranean. A powerful Iran can exert a similar dynamic in Eurasia, as far as China, Russia, Central Asia, the Gulf and the Levant as well as Europe. In fact, Robert Kaplan emphasized that Iran is ‘the Middle East’s very own universal joint’ where everything about its past and present is of high quality (Kaplan 2012, 269). On another complementary level, both Egypt and Iran had and have a lot to learn from each other’s experiences. Nasser learned much from the outcome of the US–UK aborted revolution of democratically elected Muhammad Musadad in the early 1950s, when he later successfully embarked on nationalizing the Suez Canal in 1956. In this sense, the 1952 Revolution both benefitted and was a progression beyond Musadad’s experience. By the same token, the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 learned and drew vital lessons from the 1952 Revolution and its experience with the US, the 1967 war, and the counter-revolution after Nasser’s death and, thus, benefitted from and remains an advancement over and beyond the 1952 Revolution.

Pointing out these connections and sequences one cannot but sense history’s irony. Just when Nasser was arriving on the national scene, Musadad was leaving, and from thereon had to deal antagonistically with the pro-American, pro-Israeli shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. Nine years after Nasser’s passing away in 1970, the Islamic revolution triumphed in Iran, yet in an ironic exchange of roles, it had to deal antagonistically with the pro-American regime of Sadat who had made peace with Israel, and then later on with his successor, Mubarak. Such twists of fate lead one to ponder curiously what the outcome might have been had Musadad and Nasser or, Nasser and Grand Ayatollah (Imam) Khomeini, been present at the same time. One indication could be the famous fatwa by Egyptian Grand Shaikh of al-Azhar Mahmoud Shaltut (1958–63), during the time of Nasser,
declaring Shi’ism and Sunnism as two equally legitimate madhab. Irrespective of stirs the fatwa may have created, Egypt (Suni), despite its depleted human resources, and Iran (Shi’i) remain the most qualified centres of learning capable of conducting efforts toward madhabi reconciliation and from thereon, reform, and where ideas can meet and interact. To put it differently, only serious reconciliation and mutual opening of the kind will allow for real madhabi reform, particularly of Sunnism.

Coming to recognize this and to acknowledge it is important not only as an issue of religious thought that needs to be profoundly and substantively re-examined, but also as a matter of strategic importance and a determining factor in policy choices with respect to the nature of relations with other countries. Gulf sheikhdoms, for instance, including Saudi Arabia, provide Egypt with much needed money and labour markets, but this comes with two caveats. First, with Saudi money funneled in comes not simply political sway but, more problematically, Wahhabi–Salafi influence. Second, by sending an inadequately educated and cognizant labour force to that country, whether skilled or unskilled, much of that force is heavily overtaken, if and when they return, by Wahhabi indoctrination confused for ‘real’ Islam. As a result, a continuous flow of Wahhabi capital and Wahhabi-influenced population is funnelled into Egypt. A continuous flow of the kind is likely to be, and in fact has been, very destructive of the already degraded human capacities of that country, of society, as recent experiences have shown, and consequently national security and the faith itself.

The problem is that Wahhabism is not simply a set of ‘madhabi’ ideas adopting a false yet intimidating ‘holier than thou’ discourse that resonates even in Al-Azhar (strip-keying).16 More so, it is a ritualistic sect, or offshoot (sgl. Nihla – a form of ihdath), based on the undermining if not the negation of reason, intellect and culture, the very substances necessary for developing human capital, resources and society at large. In contradistinction, an Iranian influence, Shi’i or otherwise, or better yet, a cross-fertilization of Sunni (e.g., Hanafi and Shafi’i) and Twelver Shi’i perspectives, is likely to be the opposite – pro-reason, pro-culture and pro-intellect. In this respect, some form of an enlightened Sufism can perhaps play an initial bridging role between both schools of thought.

Politically, this does not necessarily mean sour relations with Gulf sheikhdoms. Rather, in terms of the nature of the relations between Egypt, on the one hand, and Gulf sheikhdoms and Iran, on the other, this is not to be determined from a narrow madhabi and/or Arab perspective. Instead, it is to be determined from the broader perspectives of longer-term strategic choices and constraints that can ultimately serve both (the Arab and Islamic circles in Nasser’s strategic vision). Particularly so as the fate of the Gulf sheikhdoms is being sealed in one way or the other, and their wealth is unlikely to continue to buy them security for much longer.

From this follows further common religio-strategic implications for Egypt and Iran. In the early 1990s, former US President Richard Nixon pointed out that liberative Muslim forces cannot be confronted by mere secular ideas but needed religious ideas as well to be able to do so. He suggested that the US should garner the necessary combination of ideas to confront such a phenomenon. As he put it:

in the clash of civilizations, the fact that we are the strongest and richest nation in history is not enough. What will be decisive is the power of the great ideas, religious and secular, that made us a great nation. (Nixon 1994, 155)
George Bush Jr was a latter-day expression of such ideas. However, the crusading overtone that he adopted proved counterproductive, especially concerning US relations with the Muslim world at large, and internally, regarding pseudo-fundamentalist Christian ideas perceived as possibly threatening to American liberal and democratic values. The old–new suggested response, from the time of Kedourie in the 1960s to Kaplan in the 2000s, was not much different. A ‘balance of aggressive forces’ (Cooper 2002) was to be created that would:

encourage a more equal, fluid balance of power between Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East: Something which would help keep the region nervously preoccupied with itself and on its own internal and regional power dynamic much more than on America and Israel.

(Kaplan 2012, 283)

Confronting this calls for a solid Islamic front based on the pivotal countries of Sunni Egypt and Shi'i Iran, as its nucleus, not merely as an issue of religion, but of high politics and vital security interests, i.e., of geopolitics. Furthermore, this is no longer simply a matter of ‘tolerance’, or ‘broad-mindedness’, but in light of what has and is taking place in much of the Arab World and what in fact is likely to transpire, a religio-strategic imperative. The alternative will continue to be a vicious circle and a spectacle of mental and madhabi closures at a time when Muslims do not have the luxury of ignoring the issue, or pursuing a business-as-usual attitude. The formation of this front also demands serious thought convergence in order to be able to stem the tide of Wahhabism and Salafism. Scaremongering apprehensions about Egypt becoming Shi’i reflects more the insecurities of that country and society after decades of self-esteem and self-confidence deprivations, as the humiliations of the Peace Treaty seeped through a defeated Egyptian consciousness. After all, by history and geography, Egypt has always been and will continue to be subjected to the flow of all kinds of ideas and influences, including Shi’ism. The irony is that Shi’ism may be Sunnism’s only and last hope for reformation beyond ritualistic issues of bid’a and ‘menstruation’ à la Wahhabism, while Wahhabism, Salafism, Brotherhoods and other groups of their ilk may be Sunnism’s next-to-assured graveyard.

Conclusions

Karl Marx once insightfully observed that history repeats itself ‘once as tragedy, and again as farce’ (Marx 2004, 3). The purpose of the above analysis, thus, is not the restoration of a cherished past nor its replication. Rather, it is to try to process-trace, conceptualize and gain insights into what has happened and, above all, to attempt to understand what brought that country – Egypt – to its current state of affairs and what options it may have.

Egypt’s modern history has been quite difficult and eventful as it emerged from a long and traumatic colonial experience (1882–1952), and sought to protect its hard-won national independence by all means. After a period of high hopes, or perhaps because of them, the country was subjected to another trying experience in the form of a military defeat in a battle with Israel in 1967. While a debacle by all measures, it could still have been put into perspective. Yet, for varied reasons, it was blown out of proportion. This was to an extent of some voices, both internal and external, designating it a ‘civilizational’ defeat if not ‘divine punishment’, and from thereon seeking to rile it into the national
psyche, ‘rubbing salt’ into the wound all along.\textsuperscript{17} Not even the 1973 war seemed to change this despite its presumably different outcome.

Many countries have experienced more serious challenges, defeats, destruction and even debacles than anything Egypt had faced in the 1967 war, or since. Yet in an equivalent period of 40 years or fewer were able to make significant comebacks; but apparently not Egypt. The difficult, complex and seemingly unresolved question is why? The January 2011 events and their aftermath provide for an opening to reconsider such a question and to reflect on the varied aspects of the causal factors behind much of Egypt’s current predicaments.

Much of the causes of Egypt’s instability and privations are, by all means, tangible material, related to adverse economic and social conditions. Yet, this may not suffice as an explanation for its predicaments for, as Leon Trotsky once observed, ‘if privations were enough to cause an insurrection the masses would be always in revolt’ (cited in Snow et al. 1986, 466n.). As importantly, if not more so, they are related to a series of causal events related to and resulting in the breakdown of non-tangible values. Failure in the latter dimensions turned a tactical military loss in 1967 into a strategic defeat post-1973. Particularly as sequential causal mechanisms, or what may be termed a ‘step-by-step’ approach by external-change agents and internal fifth columns, had brought about the combined overlapping effects of collective collapse in morale, values and cognition; or the entire identity structure of the nation.

For close to 40 years, Egypt kept wandering in the wilderness, living in a virtual identity-less world of its own making. When eventually reality sunk in that this was not simply a matter of a lack of choice or running out of options, and that ‘peace’ was not what it really meant, it was no longer possible to continue living in such a world. The January 2011 eruption was not just a matter of domestic political, social and/or economic privations, even when there were good reasons for them. Rather, it was the nation having to face up to the reality of the actual and substantive implications of ‘Peace’. This condition played a crucial role in bringing about much of the instabilities that had simmered over time, and the concomitant breakdown in social capital (trust and hope). Awaiting a precipitating factor, the extent of popular anger in many ways reflected an instinctive, even if not an articulated, breakdown and reaction to such a situation as keying and fabrication were being unmasked.

Not surprisingly, many attempts to assign blame for such ‘breakdowns’ were consequently made. Some have attributed the outcomes to Nasser’s and/or Sadat’s policies or to the subsequent inabilities of Mubarak (individual level). The nature of the regimes, all set in one common framework despite substantive differences, were also cited as a major causal factor (national level). A good number of vociferous voices cited the structure of the international system, but with special blame focused on the Soviet Union as not being sufficiently supportive; the hint being that the US makes for a better benefactor (structural level). In a highly factionalized socio-political national landscape, much was lost in the accompanied ‘noise’.

Yet, when Nasser’s Egypt lost the battle of 1967, what continued to sustain the country, his legitimacy, his leadership and from there on his legacy, was his own as well as a general awareness that under no circumstances should national morale be allowed to collapse, self-esteem to be crushed or Egypt’s identity structure to be undermined. A reflection of political will during which ‘self-understanding’ provided for emotional and psychological
stability and, hence, a secure sense of identity under duress. This allowed the Egyptian leadership and nation to continue to engage the Israeli enemy militarily and to accomplish within a period of six years the feat of rebuilding a new army capable of crossing the Suez Canal barrier. It was a manifestation of resilience that was crucial in delimiting the 1967 loss within the confines of a tactical military defeat. Had it been a strategic defeat, as members of the fifth column had tried to depict it, nothing like the 1973 war could have been possible as all the prerequisites for it would not and could not have been there.

This further helps to explain why, despite ensuing decades of organized official attempts by Nasser’s successors and by opposing social groups and international actors to discredit him, his legacy continues to live on. It also tells why decades after his passing away in 1970 his ‘resurrected’ figure borders on assuming legendary stature. Nasser’s exceptional charisma and defiance, his discourse of pan-Arab and Islamic identity, social justice, independence and national dignity, have proven to be a legacy inextricably intertwined with Egyptian and Arab consciousness – always there even when not seen, felt or even when denied. Ultimately, he came to represent a symbol and an embodiment of meaning and values – an antidote of dissonance – and not just a person. For better or for worse, Sadat, Mubarak or Mursi may be part of Egypt’s history. Nasser, however, remains part of the Egyptian and Arab consciousness, and for that matter even of that of his enemies’. Any leadership, friend or foe, secular or religionist, who ignores this will do so at their own peril, as the fate of Nasser’s successive presidents amply shows.

Sadat’s and Mubarak’s failures may have not been in the realm of the military/tactical but were on a higher plain – the strategic. Both ignored the crucial significance of the values that Nasser so vehemently sought to defend, turning against their predecessor, derailing much of what had been accomplished instead of pushing beyond, and in fact failing to deliver on a viable alternative. These values strongly intertwined with the development of national capabilities and national will, irrespective of sacrifices and despite both Israel and the US perceiving such as a game changer and a balance-altering dynamic. As much of these ends withered with the passing away of Nasser, so did much of the spirit of the nation.

When Sadat’s foreign and domestic policy thrust insidiously constructed a defeatist discourse, depicting earlier sacrifices, incurred facing the Israeli enemy, as useless, unnecessary and futile, this constituted a speech act of ontological violence. It led to an acute case of cognitive dissonance and demoralization – a collapse of conceptualization and will, leading to a sense of collective anomie. Egypt’s subsequent predicaments, despite decades of relative peace, were the natural and logical outcome of capitulation – the ultimate sacrifice of core values, simply reflecting the logical price that a loser pays. Keying in or claiming a false victory – performed not realized – was one of the many factors that served to manage and manipulate national perceptions toward such defeatist objectives. Consequently, it took a relatively long time for a critical mass of Egyptians to become aware of the discrepancy between what actually happened and what they thought to be. The tragic irony was that when Sadat had signed the peace treaty with the Zionist state in 1979, he was at the same time signing a treaty of war; a war of Egypt with and against itself, against its Arab and Muslim nation, and against its entire allied matrix. A hostage and/or captured national and political will of the kind eventually, if not inevitably, lent itself to producing a collective ‘state’ of unconsolidated eruptive nature in order to
minimize national and/or cognitive dissonance. The restoration of identity as part of the restoration of national self-consciousness, self-respect and a sense of meaning, thus, is, to a large extent, incumbent upon the deconstruction of the ‘culture-of-defeat’ discourse and the recompensing of the national and psychological humiliations associated with or caused by it; the re-securitization of the Zionist state, the scrapping of the associated ‘peace treaty’, and the reversal of all its implications, as a critical juncture and an act of independent will.

From the above, there are lessons to learn. The challenge is always to draw relevant conclusions based on a clear conceptualization of a situation, not in order to ‘blame’ but, hopefully, to inspire better-informed collective action toward the future. Hence, the attempt in this study to process-trace aspects of what had happened since the 1952 Revolution until more recent developments in Egypt. A reasonably accurate diagnosis is one necessary step toward prognosis, and toward drawing lessons for future pursuits. Perhaps from thereon a vision for the future may gradually emerge to inform decision-making and institutional consolidation processes, irrespective of who is at the helm, toward purposeful long-term strategic action concerning what is to be done. Within this context, it may be relevant to recall what Friedrich Nietzsche had once eloquently stated: ‘Our will requires an aim. It would sooner have the void for its purpose than to be void of purpose’ (cited in Powell 2003, 3).

Notes

1. During the Vietnam War, for instance, the US military won virtually all the battles of that war against the Vietnamese over a period of close to 15 years or so of involvement. Nevertheless, when North Vietnam accomplished its political and strategic goal of unification with the South, the United States was seen as the defeated party (Manwaring 2001).

2. What Hans Morgenthau had stated is highly relevant in this context and is worth quoting in some detail:

What we suggest calling cultural imperialism is the most subtle and, if it were ever to succeed by itself alone, the most successful of imperialistic policies. It aims not at the conquest of territory or at the control of economic life, but at the conquest and control of the minds of men as an instrument for changing the power relations between two nations. If one could imagine the culture and, more particularly, the political ideology, with all its concrete imperialistic objectives, of State A conquering the minds of all citizens determining the policies of State B, State A would have won a more complete victory and would have founded its supremacy on more stable grounds than any military conqueror or economic master. State A would not need to threaten or employ military force or use economic pressure in order to achieve its ends; for that end, the subservience of State B to its will would have already been realized by the persuasiveness of a superior culture and a more attractive political philosophy. This is, however, a hypothetical case. Cultural imperialism generally falls short of a victory so complete as to make other methods of imperialism superfluous. The typical role cultural imperialism plays in modern times is subsidiary to other methods. It softens up the enemy, it prepares the ground for military conquest or economic penetration. Its typical modern manifestation is the fifth column. … While the technique of cultural imperialism has been perfected by the totalitarian and has been forged into the effective political weapon of the fifth column, the use of cultural sympathy and political affinities as weapons of imperialism is almost as old as imperialism itself. (Morgenthau 1993, 72–73)
3. The term ‘regime’ is not used here in any negative sense or in order to make a value judgment. Rather, it is to underscore the distinction between the broader expectations from ‘leadership’ as opposed to the more limited anticipation from a regime functioning within an overall status quo framework, whether domestic or external.

4. This is the essence of the ethical dilemma of neo-liberalism, especially in a world of increasing demands and diminishing resources which frequently manifests itself in the form of corruption. Taken to its limits, neo-liberalism may very well become an ethical graveyard. On a more practical policy level, this problem or dilemma does not refer to wealth generation or wealth acquisition, but, for example, to the difference between a self-motivated socially and nationally conscious private sector and one that is not. For a brief discussion of additional serious problems inherent in the very structure of neoliberalism, see Sabet (2010) and the interesting and insightful article by Massad (2015).

5. A good part of these two paragraphs is borrowed from Sabet (2010).

6. It helps here to recall Iran during the shah’s time when the United States allowed for an unrestricted flow of arms to that country. When the Islamic revolution erupted and Saddam Hussein attacked Iran in 1980, the Iranian army’s stock of weaponry was rapidly depleted and shortly thereafter during much of the war revolutionary Iran had to fight largely with waves of raw human flesh.

7. It was by no means coincidental that, right in the middle of the 1973 war and immediately after, Sadat turned with a vengeance against the very capable general and Chief of Staff Saad Al-Shazli, widely considered to be the chief architect of the Suez Canal crossing. Sadat’s vindictiveness was more than simply an attempt to claim full credit for the war or to scapegoat someone for its errors, but seemed to portend later policies that aimed at discrediting Nasser and sidelining many other officers as well. Sadat’s (as well as Mubarak’s) vehement attempts to discredit Shazli at any cost seemed more so to have been a signal or a ‘coded’ message sent to the ‘other’ side that in future Israel would face no such enemies.

8. In many ways this is quite similar to what is referred to in Arabic and in Islamic parlance in particular, as ‘Muhdatha’ (see also note 14 below).

9. Steven A. McCormack pointed out that:

   Information Manipulation Theory suggests that deceptive messages function deceptively because they covertly violate the principles that govern conversational exchanges. Given that conversational interactants possess assumptions regarding the quantity, quality, manner, and relevance of information that should be presented, it is possible for speakers to exploit any or all of these assumptions by manipulating the information that they possess so as to mislead listeners. (McCornack 1992, 1)

   In order to persuade or deceive, one of the following four conversational maxims of exchange are deliberately broken: (1) quantity: information given will be full (as per expected by the listener) and without omission; (2) quality: information given will be truthful and correct; (3) relation: information will be relevant to the subject matter of the conversation in hand; and (4) manner: things will be presented in a way that enables others to understand and with aligned non-verbal language (see http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/information_manipulation.htm).

10. It is interesting to note that Sayyed Hassan Nasrullah in one of his speeches during the office of George Bush Jr stated that Hizbollah was aware that the US administration was collecting apocalyptic prophecies and traditions related to the end of times. Having done their homework, the Americans seem able to lead the Salafis on toward believing they are ‘doing the work of Allah’ by realizing such prophecies. In the process killing Muslim ‘apostates’ while making peace, in this case not with Israel but with the ‘Jews’, until the apocalyptic event of the return of Jesus Christ comes to pass. In this way a manipulated apocalyptic discourse is constructed for the Salafis, getting ‘to destroy the enemy from within, to conquer himself through himself’, through a ‘Back into the Future’ scenario (ManarTV, www.manartv.com.lb).
11. This part is borrowed from a book review by Sabet (2013).
12. Interestingly, despite the Prophet’s reference to kingship, Umayyad rulers and their successors are, nevertheless, referred to in Islamic historical texts and discourses as ‘Caliphs’. One instance as to how consciousness may be falsified – bid’a.
13. According to manipulability theory (http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/pbartha/p550w02/p550wk4. pdf), the basic idea is ‘A causes B if bringing about A is an effective way to bring about B.’ According to agency theory, ‘A causes B if bringing about A would be an effective means by which an agent could bring about B’ (Manipulability Theories; added emphasis). This is very similar to British Strategist Basil Liddell Hart’s ‘indirect approach’ (Liddell Hart 2003).
14. Bid’a is frequently translated in English as ‘innovation’. This is contested here. Instead, it is understood as a false consciousness (which is nevertheless a form of ‘negative innovation’). Innovation better explains ‘muhdatha’, which comes from the Arabic root h-d-th, and designates a happening, an occurrence or an event of significance implying a deviation from a ‘pattern’ or original norm. It is understood and translated here as ‘keying’, which is a form or special kind of (strip) innovation, not just any innovation – e.g., ‘partial truths/lies’, which frequently turn out to be the most pernicious types of lies. Examples of the most serious muhdathat (pl.) in Islamic history are the Kharijite and Ummayyad turning against Imam Ali, and the massacre of Āl Al Bayt at Karbala’, Iraq. Bid’a, in turn, comes from the root b-d-a’ designating a creation/fabrication/making up. In a dialectical fashion, both lead to deception (dhalalah). As understood from the prophetic tradition, there is a strong causal and dialectical relationship between all three: muhdatha ← bid’a ↔ dhalalah, which in turn leads to or becomes a muhdatha ↔ bid’a ↔ dhalalah etc. Hence, the prophetic tradition ‘the best of centuries is my own, then the following, then the following’.
15. Within this framework one can possibly understand the Qur’anic verse (trs.) chastising the Children of Israel: ‘ … Then is it only a part of the Book that ye believe in [keying in], and do ye reject the rest [covering up]? …’ (Qur’an 2:85). In the former case a strip of truth is keyed in (ihdath (v)/muhdatha) in order to cover up a whole truth, leading to error, or false consciousness (bid’a). In the words of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, ‘a word of truth where error is sought’ – an interesting dialectical dynamic in which a strip-keyed in ‘truth’ becomes in fact a source of a greater ‘error’ (false consciousness). Together, both mechanisms of ihdath and bid’a frame a falsified consciousness, leading to dhalalah (deception most subtle confused for righteousness) – Umayyadism/Sunnism in the Islamic historical context. This is why keying is very difficult to uncover or expose as it becomes ‘don-keys’ all the way down. This, however, is quite a broad and complex issue beyond the scope of this paper. For a detailed even if preliminary approach to this matter, see Sabet (2008).
17. This is much in line with what Muslim Socio-Historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 CE) had observed:

The vanquished always seek to imitate their victors in their dress, insignia, belief, and other customs and usages. This is because men are always inclined to attribute perfection to those that have defeated and subjugated them. Men do this either because the reverence they feel for their conquerors makes them see perfection in them or because they refuse to admit that their defeat could have been brought about by ordinary causes, and hence they suppose that it is due to the perfection of the conquerors. Should this belief persist long, it will change into a profound conviction and will lead to the adoption of all the tenets of the victors and the imitation of all their characteristics. This imitation may come about either unconsciously or because of a mistaken belief that the victory of the conquerors was due not to their superior solidarity (hegemony) and strength but to the (inferiority of) the customs and beliefs of the conquered. Hence, the further belief arises that such an imitation will remove the causes of defeat. (Issawi 1958, 53)
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References


