

Reflections on Zainab al-Ghazali's *Return of the Pharaoh*

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Introduction

The empire of misconceptions and stereotypes about the status of women in Islam misleads most research about revivalist and fundamentalist groups in Islam. The very effective participation of women in many Islamist groups is mostly neglected and their leadership positions are ignored. Yet women have played a prominent socio-political role in the Islamic world since the time of early Islam, including direct involvement in the Prophet's missionary efforts. To mention a few examples: the first martyr in Islam was a woman, Sumayya. The first believer in Muhammad was Muhammad's wife Khadija, who devoted her wealth entirely to spreading the word of Islam. Early female Muslims were among the first mohajireen (immigrants to Ethiopia), and often accompanied mujahideen (holy knights of Allah) in jihad. Later, the Prophet's wife Aisha and his daughter Fatima played significant roles in shaping both the Caliphate and Imamate concepts at the core of Sunni and Shia Islam. The granddaughter of the Prophet, Zainab, played a role rivaling that of Muhammad's grandson Husain ibn Ali in ensuring survival of the memory of the Battle of Karbala.

Also, the way secular modern governments appreciate women's social and political participation is characterized by similar misconceptions. For the same lack of historical and religious knowledge, most secular and modern governments in Islamic societies try to promote women's rights by ignoring the inner potentials within Islam to advocate Women Rights. Among its other virtues, Zainab al-Ghazali's *Return of the Pharaoh: Memoir in Nasir's Prison* goes a long way toward rectifying this distorted focus. What is more, this book shows how an anti-Islamist government forgot the rule of law in dealing with Islamist groups - still a significant issue in our historical moment.

Narration

The "Pharaoh" in the book's title is Egypt's second president, Gamal Abdel Nasser (Jamal Abd al-Nasir, 1918-1970), the champion of Arab nationalism and the Founder of post-monarchic Egypt, and its primary aim is to illustrate how the despotic and totalitarian Nasser was in his manner of handling Islamic opponents, political colleagues, and, in particular, the book's author, Zainab al-Ghazali al-Jubaili (1917-2005), founder and leader of Egypt's Muslim Ladies Group (MLG). The book begins with an account of a serious car accident that Zainab was involved in, understood by later authors as a plot by Nasser to do her in; it continues with descriptions of her arrest for activism in 1965 and of the severe torture she and her allies were made to suffer in prison at the hands of the government, and ends with Zainab's release from prison in 1971. The book's main argument consists of four assertions: 1) that Nasir's government was anti-Islam; 2) that torture under his regime was brutal and severe; 3) that prisoners in Nasser's prisons, including Zainab, were not shielded by the rule of law; and 4) that Nasser's intelligence

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service was surrounded with a conspiracy theory about Islamist groups and their agendas, particularly, to assassinate Nasser.

Zainab al-Ghazali was an Islamist *Da'iya* (female participant in Islamic preaching) who was a leader in providing social services to the needy and unfortunate. It is said that her weekly lectures to women, held at the Ibn Tulun mosque in Cairo, attracted audiences of three to five thousand people. The Muslim Ladies Group that she founded and led is believed to have had a national membership of three million throughout the country by the time it was dissolved by the government in 1964. In addition to educating girls, this charitable organization rendered service to orphans, the poor, and the underprivileged.

Zainab's allegiance to Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as her efforts both to promote the Muslim Brotherhood and establish her own organization, made Zainab one of the most controversial female Muslim figures of 20th century. Some consider her a Muslim feminist, since she worked hard to give women an awareness of their rights within an Islamic context, and was dedicated to the improvement of the status of women and their social empowerment. Others argue that there was some inconsistency between her words and her practices, for her words largely define women as wives and mothers, but in practice she was very active in public and political institutions. Zainab quickly divorced her first husband because of his attempts to impede her socio-religious activities. Her firm dedication to *al-da'wah* (preaching and drawing people to Islam) led her to include the condition, in her second marriage contract, that her new husband could not prohibit her activism. If a conflict of interest were to arise between her family and her political interest in establishing an Islamic state, she would be allowed to end her marriage. This testifies not only to her commitment to the Islamist movement, but also to her belief in the personal agency of wives and of women generally. Spending five years being tortured in prison did not change Zainab. In 1965, she was sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor, but was released in 1971, whereupon she resumed work as the editor of the women's and children's section of the Muslim Brotherhood's magazine, *Al-Dawah*.

Zainab's prison memoir, *Ayyām min ḥayātī* ("Days from my life"), written to inspire fellow Muslims in their resistance against government wrong-doing, was first published in Arabic in 1989. This English translation by Mokrane Guezzou, published by the Islamic Foundation in 2006, consists of seven chapters. Also, the English version of the book is introduced by the translator, a Research Fellow at the Islamic Foundation, UK, with many translations of Islamic thought and Sufism. Also, in the introduction of the translator, the reader can find a concise account of the Muslim brotherhood and its evolution up to Zainab's time. Following al-Banni, the introduction, describes eight essential characteristics of the Muslim Brotherhood: (a) the Salafi message; (b) the Sunni path; (c) Sufi reality; (d) political organization; (e) its organization as a sporting group; (f) as a scientific and cultural league; (g) as an economic enterprise; and (h) its social endeavor. These features represent Islam in its entirety, they believed. These keywords give the reader a concise understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood and where to look at in order to comprehend the organization's originality and complexity.

The book has recently attracted fresh attention from scholars because of new interests and initiatives to study Islamists. The first two chapters of the book discuss the background to Zainab's arrest, the relationship between MLG and the Muslim Brotherhood, and Zainab's pledge of allegiance to al-Banna and her contact with the Islamist poet and activist Sayyid Qutb (pp. 5-42). The remainder of the book describes in detail her time in Egyptian military prison and in the all-women's prison of al-Qanatir on charges of sedition and conspiring to assassinate President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Zainab recounts in detail her terrible treatment on prison, which included being locked up in a room filled with water or with dogs in a cell, being whipped thousands of times, being hung up by the hands, and being kept hungry and thirsty, as well as rape attempts meant to get her to confess an assassination attempt on President Nasser. She was also tempted with positive incentives to confess to wrongdoing: becoming a member of Nasser's cabinet, or minister of the Social Affairs; receiving a monthly salary and funding for her magazine and organization.

Reflections

This volume is one of the rare books presenting a first-hand description of an Islamist leader who dealt with the hardships of persecution and prison. It is unique in having been written by a female activist who was directly involved in political action and who was accused of political assassination. It also provides the reader with a detailed picture of what went on in Nasser's nationalist government in the name of modern values. Gamal Abdel Nasser took a personal interest in her case. Many times and at various moments several people in the prison introduced themselves as representatives of Nasser empowered to negotiate with Zainab. Once, the interrogations even happened in front of Nasser himself. The author offers details about the prosecuting attorneys and how they tried to put words in her mouth, how she was not allowed to choose her attorney, and how the legal system was corrupt.

The significant gap between the religious language of Zainab and the political language of the interrogators is highlighted very clearly. Many times, the answers do not match the questions. For example, the prosecutors are looking for a particular answer, concrete replies, and clear statements: for example, about whether Zainab considered Nasser *Kafir* (an unbeliever). Zainab's answers are very universal and fit meta-doctrines which can be interpreted in a different way. Indeed, the difference between an ideological approach and bureaucratic attitude is explicit. On one side is a regular political agent and on the other side an idealist religious activist.

One very appealing aspect of this book is that the author shares her spiritual achievements, characteristics and states as well as her political engagements and daily travails. She confesses not only that her Islamic ideology and beliefs helped her to remain resistant and steadfast throughout her periods of hardship, but also that many dreams and visions came to her during this time. Many of these happened at especially difficult junctures: when for example her second husband was forced to divorce her, she had a vision of the Prophet. These visions provided comfort to Zainab and helped to remain faithful. She had many verses of the Quran memorized and often quoted them in her replies to interrogators. These visions, memorized Quranic verses, and multiple

Du'a (humble prayer supplications) encouraged her spiritually and showed her how spiritual energy can produce miracles at the right time.

Moreover, this volume describes the spiritual and intellectual resources of the Muslim brotherhood and their link with various schools of Islam. It reveals which resources and references from Islamic tradition are studied and used by the Muslim Brotherhood and what notions and terminologies are utilized by them to develop and justify their ideology. Hence, an authorized source to examine the intellectual development of the Muslim Brotherhood. Also, there are some materials to differentiate the Muslim Brotherhood from opposing Islamic schools like Sufism and Classical Islam. The book often uses terms like *jahiliyyah*, *jihad*, *rukhas*, *azimah*, and *taqiyyah*, which helps the reader to capture their true and dynamic meaning and implications in context. I was amazed when I learned that the Egyptian army used the Dari word *Shafakhana* (hospital) and the Turkish title *Pasha*. This suggests the possible value of a cross-cultural study of terminology common to multiple countries in the Middle East, and of how such words, as well as the ideas and the institutions they inform, circulate in the region.

Several points seem however worthy of critique. As empathetic as the author may be with her colleagues in the MLG and the Muslim brotherhood, she is biased against the governmental agencies. For instance, it goes beyond the question of tension between ideologues and politicians that she does not consider her opponents true Muslims, or even quite human. The German philosopher Nietzsche once advised that when one is fighting against a monster, one should be careful that one does not change into a monster oneself. Though Zainab al-Ghazali remained strong in many difficult situations, she could be somewhat monstrous at certain junctures, coming at times to resemble her enemies in some respects. For instance, she uses the same impolite language as the investigators: to those who insult her by calling her a bitch, she replies by calling them butchers. The author illustrates the battle between darkness, oppression, and being misled, and another side full of light, justice, and a clear way of life; there is no grey zone between white and black extremes. There is little chance of any switch in allegiance between the two camps. For example, among hundreds of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, only two people left their party and others remained steadfast, faithful, and loyal: the people of true Islam remain faithful. Similarly, the people of fake Islam, in the camp of Nasser's regime, do not change. All the hardships tolerated by Zainab could bring change to only one or two people of the opposite camp. Most of them were unmoved: Zainab's sincere faith and steadfast struggle did not impact them. I cannot emphasize enough how great and unbridgeable the gap between true Muslims and fake Muslims is, in this view. Zainab's book, either intentionally or unintentionally, makes the argument that that true Islam is what the Muslim brotherhood believes in; other forms of Islam are false, no matter where they come from. The Quran states when an individual confesses that s/he is a Muslim one has to treat or her as Muslim (4:94). Several times many of Nasser's people are represented as saying that they are Muslims and are shown reciting the *shahadah* (Islamic words of confession). Some scholars of al-Azhar support the regime; still, the author believes that they are not true Muslims. Reader could ask: is not Zainab influenced by conspiracy theory when fighting against the Pharaoh? Zainab accused Nasser of being influenced by a conspiracy theory about Islamist groups, while she herself is thinking that non-Islamist Muslims are claiming to be Muslims only in order to mislead and confuse the true

Muslims about their false identity. Is this assertion not a polarizing ideology that hardly fits the reality of social life? Surely, Zainab, like other Muslim Brotherhood theorists was a puritan meaning searching for an uninterrupted Islam with non-Islamic cultures and traditions throughout the Islamic history. Puritanism looks for direct connection to the Holy. I think that when religious puritanism attempts to reform the personal relationship of a person of faith with the Holy, it can be a cure, but when it works to evaluate and criticize society, particularly the political, it can cause a great deal of pain. At least with regard to social affairs and problems of power, puritanism can cause confusion and ambiguity. Not only Nasser's regime was confused by Islamists like Zainab, but they also confuse everybody because of their unclear language and passionate puritanism. I first read Zainab al-Ghazali's memoir two decades ago in a Persian translation. I found it very impressive then, and I still do. But still huge questions remain, such as: How to combine Wahabism with Sufism (p. 105)? Why is it that the Muslim Brotherhood focused on educating generation after generation, as Zainab claims, as the only path to revive Islamic glory, while still being involved in establishing an Islamic state? How could they focus on gaining political power while claiming that political power was not central to their ideology? The passion of purism throws away analytical thought, while welcoming ambiguities that feed passion and religious zealotry.

Conclusion

Return of the Pharaoh: Memoir in Nasir's Prison is an excellent mirror reflecting many complex realities of Egyptian history: the clash of the Muslim Brotherhood with Nasser's regime, the workings of the nationalist movement, and Zainab al-Ghazali's spiritual experiences during her years in prison. It is an autobiographical and historic document by an active witness to one of the most volatile periods of Egypt's contemporary history. Anyone who would like an inside account of the Muslim Brotherhood in general and Zainab al-Ghazali in particular and of how they endure severe torture for their beliefs should read this book, as should activists in search of inspiration. Both those who love Islamic revolutionaries and those who hate them should read this volume. It also provides us with a great source for comparing Egyptian with other Islamic revivalist movements, particularly the Iranian revolution and the Afghan Mujahideen. Moreover, it is a great asset for those who study the Islamization of politics, culture, and society in the Middle East. It will also familiarize readers with the language and terminology of political Islamists, and it is a great resource for learning about jihadists who put an emphasis on *takfir* (the act of declaring another Muslim an unbeliever) and *hijra* (leaving your own hometown and moving to new place), even if the meanings of these concepts have lately changed somewhat. Many inspiring intellectual and spiritual sources for the Islamists and also motivations are referred to in this book. Last but not least, this work asks us to ponder how the Nasser regime's policies fed extremism in the activist movements that arose to resist them, and how a despotic and secular regime can lay a foundation for militant religious extremism.