



Sonallah Ibrahim

The flying drapes of the Kaabah

The political novelist Sonallah Ibrahim leads us through the eventful present and past of Saudi Arabia's relations to its neighbours and especially to Egypt. In his glance back, he concentrates on the history of the famous Kaabah drapes and the robbery attempted by Muhammad al-Fassi and his sister Hind.

It may have been the first time that Kamal Abdel Latif, a modest Egyptian civil servant, had ever set foot in one of Cairo's downtown, five-star hotels. It was certainly the first time that the police had received a report from a citizen that an attempt had been made to bribe him, in this case with the sum of almost two million Egyptian pounds. Accepting bribes, after all, rather than reporting them has become the norm of late, especially when the citizen concerned is a modest civil servant like Kamal Abdel Latif.

It took several months before Muhammad Shams al-Din al-Fassi, a Saudi national, and his twenty-five-year-old wife Samia Shahhadh, resident on the fifteenth floor of the Ramses Hilton Hotel, were arraigned for trial for having offered the above sum as a bribe to Kamal Abel Latif in order to obtain the two precious drapes of the sacred Kaabah in the city of Mecca, in whose direction all Muslims pray, and to have them replaced by imitations. When the accused did not appear in court they were determined to have fled the country, and the trial was postponed yet another month.

Draping the Kaabah is a pre-Islamic ritual maintained by the prophet Muhammad out of respect for its importance to the Arabs of the Peninsula. His Caliph, Omar ibn al-Khattab, after his conquest of Egypt, ordered that the drapes be made from the renowned Egyptian Coptic fabric.

However, the relationship between Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula is older than the close ties of Islam and the Arab conquests and has always been maintained at the initiative of the Arab sons of the desert. Thousands of years ago, during the time of the Pharaohs, many Arab tribes departed from the barren deserts and crossed the Sinai peninsula in the North and the Red Sea in the South to settle in the fertile Nile valley. Merchants eventually followed suit, laden with goods from the East: gum, incense, spices, silver, and silk, to return with expensive clothes, embroidery, glass, wheat and maize. This relationship created a legendary image of Egypt in the minds of the sons of the desert as a country whose main river, the Nile, "flows from Paradise".

Thus it was only natural for the Prophet Muhammad to direct his attention to Egypt once the situation had stabilized in the Northern Peninsula. In 627, accordingly, he sent to Cyrus, the despotic Roman governor of Egypt, inviting him to convert to Islam or, to put it more precisely, to succumb to its rule. The

Roman governor may have scoffed at this invitation from a poor desert Bedouin, but he sent him a gift of clothes, a glass bowl, a white mule the likes of which had never been seen in the Arabic world, and two native slave girls, Maria and Nisreen.

Muhammad was enchanted by Maria and made her his concubine. He put her up in an old house near the houses of his nine wives, where she immediately sparked the jealousy of her colleagues (as Egyptian women still do to this very day, when they come to the Peninsula to work, or in the company of their husbands). Maria did not wear a veil and made herself up in the longstanding tradition of the Pharaohs: with black kohl on her eyelashes, blue eye shadow around her eyes, and red powder on her cheeks. She wore wide circular earrings, bedecked her wrists with thick bracelets, and adorned her feet with silver anklets. She curled her hair and decorated it with colored ribbons.

The Prophet Muhammad was then fifty–eight years old and had fallen in love with an Egyptian teenager. He spent most of his days and nights with her, which angered his wives and forced him to move the slave to another house and impose the veil upon her, the sign of a free woman. Maria acquired even greater status in the eyes of the Prophet when she gave birth to his son after he had been childless for twenty years and had lost his only two male children in childhood. But his happiness was not to last, for the newborn soon fell ill and died. And four months later, the Prophet himself became ill, to die in 632. Less than four years after that, the Arab army conquered northern Egypt.

For the following three years the Egyptians watched, with caution and fear, the ongoing battles between the conquering army and the Roman rulers until the former triumphed. Besides imposing taxes on non–Muslims, land taxes, hospitality duties and harvest gifts, Amr ibn al-'Ass, commander of the Arab army, ordered that the Egyptians provide "drapes", not for the Kaabah, but for his soldiers: a robe, a cloak, a turban, and a pair of slippers, one set apiece for the entire host. The new conquerors left a marked impression on the Egyptians, as can be seen in an old Coptic manuscript: "This nation loves gold, silver, women, horses and the pleasures of life." Amr ibn al-'Ass had amassed a huge fortune, and many of his men settled in the country after having seized the most fertile agricultural land.

Over the years, Arab rule grew stronger and in 704 the Caliph ordered the Arabization of the Egyptian administration. But the Coptic language continued to resist, especially in the rural areas, during the first four centuries of the Arab conquest. The change from Coptic Christianity to Islam was easier, especially when the governor announced, in 745, the cancellation of non–Muslim taxes for every convert to Islam. Despite that, many rebellions occurred, starting in 723 and continuing for a whole century until they were completely crushed by Al–Ma'mun, the son of Harun al–Rashid, in 841. This was the beginning of the collapse of the Egypto–Coptic civilization.

The separation between the Arabs and the Egyptians (that is, the Copts) was maintained for over three centuries. It was a kind of social segregation, marked by neither assimilation nor domination of one group over the other. Meanwhile, Damascus, followed by Baghdad, monopolized the honor of preparing the drapes of the Kaabah and sending them, along with gifts of money and goods, the designated tributes to the heads of the various tribes, to the Peninsula. The privilege of providing the drapes quickly became the source of strife and an occasion for the expression of power. During the Mamluk period, which lasted for nearly three centuries and ended at the hands of the

invading Turks in 1517, Egypt regained the honor.

On the day following the invasion, the Turkish ruler displayed the drapes of the Kaabah at the Citadel in a ceremonial procession that cut through the heart of Cairo to the Suez harbor and was to become a yearly celebration at the beginning of the season of pilgrimage. No doubt this was an attempt to appease the Egyptians and to convince them that the new invaders were as Muslim as the Mamluk Sultans. The same attempt was made by Napoleon Bonaparte when he occupied Egypt in 1798. Declaring himself a Muslim, he ordered the preparation of the drapes with a change of inscription: the name of the Ottoman Sultan was replaced with a reference to "The French Chieftain".

When Muhammad Ali came to power in 1805, the Wahhabite fundamentalist movement, ally of the House of Saud, declared that the drapes, together with the accompanying procession, contradicted the true teachings of Islam. Egypt consequently suspended its provision of the drapes for six years, during which time the Ottoman Sultan sought Muhammad Ali's help to curb the Wahhabite rebellion, eventually nominating him governor of Mecca and Medina. Muhammad Ali resumed the tradition of sending the drapes, made of silk brocade and embroidered with gold, to the Peninsula during the season of pilgrimage, along with other supplies and clothing.

The Wahhabite contestation of the Egyptian drapes recurred when Abdul Aziz ibn Saud declared himself King of the Hijaz in 1926. The Egyptian monarchy discontinued sending the drapes for ten years, during which period a silent conflict settled in between the two royal houses, taking a new turn during the fifties and sixties. One year before the death of King Abdul Aziz in 1953, the Egyptian monarchy collapsed and a republican regime was declared. All Arab monarchies were shaken when the officers who seized power in Egypt revealed the Arab dimension of their revolution. The Egyptian officers supported anti-colonial, anti-monarchic revolutionary movements from Algeria to Iraq and Yemen, and proceeded to a social revolutionary stage through the notorious nationalization decisions implemented by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1961. During that same year, the sending of the drapes and accompanying gifts came to a final halt. Saudi Arabia decided to manufacture the drapes locally, with the help of Egyptian artists experienced in design, decoration, and dying techniques.

The Saudi throne felt even more endangered when the monarchy collapsed in Yemen in 1962. That same year, four sons of the Saudi King Abdul Aziz, led by the young prince Talal, demanded a constitution and a legislative council. They took refuge in Cairo, relinquished their princely titles, and demanded a republican regime.

The Egyptian-Saudi conflict escalated from intelligence warfare to an open confrontation in the mountains of Yemen between Saudi-backed tribes and the Egyptian Armed Forces sent by Abdel Nasser in support of the Yemeni Revolution. This confrontation lasted for more than five years. It was halted only by the crushing Israeli aggression of 1967, which changed the balance of power in the entire region.

The Egyptian army was forced to withdraw from Yemen. The Saudi era began, bolstered by the Kingdom's enormous oil revenues. Saudi ideology was exported to Egypt and Saudi influence infiltrated every milieu. Egypt's night clubs along the Pyramids road swarmed with Saudi tourists bearing thousands of pounds to hurl at the feet of belly dancers. Middlemen roamed poor villages

to select young wives for the old men of Mecca and Medina. Al-Azhar received donations in the millions to combat Communism. Thousands crowded in front of the gates of the Saudi Embassy and headhunter offices in search of a work contract in a country that possessed two blessings: the Kaabah, and oil. They were to return some years later with long beards, white robes, luxury cars, and copies of the Yuran, to champion the fundamentalist hoax they had been exposed to in the desert. Midhat Warda, the basketball champion, wore his basketball shorts knee-length. Television soap operas excised scenes between a man and a woman, or love scenes between actors who were not married in reality. Private sauna clubs and shopping centers for veiled women sprouted up. Actresses were forced to retire, having "seen the light" at the hands of Sheikh Metwalli al-Shaarawi, who became a TV star upon his return from a period of work in Saudi Arabia. The Sheikh declared that a woman must be veiled to ascertain a man's lineage, that her participation in the work force was demeaning to men, and that listening to Beethoven at bedtime was blasphemous.

Sheikh Shaarawi also embraced the novelty of Islamic banks and investment companies that paid investors an annual "return" of 24 percent of the profits, rather than "usurious" interest rates. This phenomenon spread like fire and a host of alleged investment projects, all operating under the new principle, succeeded in siphoning off billions of pounds in savings from Egyptians working in the Gulf countries. The companies involved eventually collapsed, revealing the false nature of their projects and their exploitation of their clients' investments for speculation on the international gold and silver markets and the frittering away of 1.5 billion dollars.

Meanwhile, the ritual of the Kaabah drapes and the accompanying celebrations disappeared, only to be revived by Muhammad al-Fassi's attempt to steal the old drapes.

Little is known of Muhammad's father, Sheikh Shams al-Din al-Fassi, except that he claimed roots in the Moroccan town of Fez and had settled in Egypt at the beginning of the nineteen-sixties. He married Fayza Hilmi, who lived in a room in the basement of an old Cairo house. He took her to Saudi Arabia where he rented a tobacco store and founded a Sufi order known as "Al-Shadhi-liyya al-Fassiyya", to which he succeeded in attracting several princes and other wealthy members of the community.

When he surfaced in Cairo suddenly in the mid-eighties, he had conferred upon himself the title of "prince"; his son, Muhammad, was to appear on Iraqi television during the Gulf War in glaring opposition to the Saudi regime, with a vow to provide eight million Muslims from among his and his father's followers to support Saddam.

Sheikh Shams al-Din al-Fassi died in 1996, to be succeeded by Muhammad as head of the Sufi order, with the self-conferred titles "Vice President of the International Sufi Council", "Deputy Head of the International Syndicate of Ashraf (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad)" and "Vice President of the International Islamic Union", all of them imaginary organizations. He decorated his chest with the titles of Master, Sharif, Lieutenant, Captain, Ambassador, Professor, Doctor, Imam, Caliph, and Royal International leader, most of which were actual titles acquired in various places, from Mexico to Uruguay to the Bahamas, in exchange for huge donations. But all these titles could not shield him from his cousins, who tried to seize control of the Order and its wealth. This conflict may explain his attempt to secure a piece of the

Kaabah drapes, revered by Muslims the world over as the most precious thing one could possibly own. But this does not explain why the Egyptian authorities have not arrested him, considering that he continues to reside in the same hotel.

Actually, he has changed his place of residence, if only ever so slightly. He moved from the fifteenth floor (which continues to be registered in his name) and joined his sister, Hind, who resides on three floors (with a total of 120 rooms) of the same hotel. One of the floors is reserved for no fewer than forty bodyguards of a variety of different nationalities.

Since Hind's arrival at the hotel in 1996, Egyptian newspapers have been reporting her news. During the spring of 1995, her son assaulted three students and destroyed the nightclub at the Gezira Sheraton hotel. In the fall of that same year, her bodyguards attacked an Egyptian who tried to pass her convoy in his car, and, armed with short steel rods that transform into swords, assaulted a resident of the hotel. In 1998 a police officer, Emad Abaza, became the object of her bodyguards' wrath when he blocked her way into the hotel. On February 15, 2000, she was sentenced to a year in prison for having unlawfully seized eight million Egyptian pounds from an Egyptian national: the sentence was never executed. On July 2000, a taxi driver waiting in front of the hotel was struck on the head by an empty mineral water bottle containing a plea for help from twelve Lebanese workers being detained by Hind in their quarters. During the first week of March, 2001, accused of having stolen jewelry worth five-and-a-half million Egyptian pounds which she had received and not paid for, Hind was sentenced to three years in prison.

Despite all these incidents and the two prison sentences (not to mention a third one-year sentence imposed on Hind and her brother Muhammad, for falsification of her father's inheritance documents to disinherit his sons from a previous wife), Hind left the hotel at midnight on December 1, 2001 in a procession from the Ramses Hilton to the Royal Meridian, situated on a small island on the Nile, five hundred meters down the road. She was in her Rolls Royce with her daughter, Samahir, and her private hairdresser. The occasion was her daughter's birthday party, an event attended by 1,500 guests and costing five million pounds (paid in cash, at the hotel administration's insistence), which lasted until the afternoon of the next day, at which point Hind returned to her residence at the Hilton.

It remains to be said that Hind is the wife of Prince Turki ibn Abdul Aziz (born in 1932), the fourth in line to the Saudi throne and one of the seven Sidiris, the sons of King Abdul Aziz by his favorite wife, Hissa al-Sidiri. These seven men represent the most powerful branch of the Saudi royal family and occupy key positions in the monarchy (their number includes King Fahd and his second deputy, Sultan). Prince Turki was one of the four princes who, during the early sixties, had renounced their royal titles, taken refuge in Cairo, and demanded a republican regime. In the seventies, the four princes returned to Saudi Arabia, reinstated their royal titles, and plunged into the business world. It was there that Turki met Hind, a secretary in one of the companies. He married her in 1975 when he was deputy minister of defense in 1978, having been dismissed from his post, he returned to Cairo with his family. All of which may explain the extraordinary immunity enjoyed by Hind and her brother in Cairo, as well as the attempted theft of the sacred drapes.

As expected, the accused did not appear in court on October 8, 2002. This time, the defense maintained that Muhammad and his wife were out of the

country "to receive medical treatment". The case was once again postponed, to December 10, 2002. And there was once more surprise this time around: the actual figure of the attempted bribe was revealed as four million Egyptian pounds, or a little less than one million dollars.

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