

# Remaking Muslim Politics

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PLURALISM, CONTESTATION,  
DEMOCRATIZATION

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## Chapter 6

# THWARTED POLITICS: THE CASE OF EGYPT'S HIZB AL-WASAT

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ISLAMISTS go against the grain, and declare their commitment to pluralism and their acceptance, if not endorsement, of secular political principles? This is a study of exactly such a party, the Hizb al-Wasat, or Center Party, a remarkable attempt by a group of moderately oriented Islamists to play by democratic rules of the game in Egypt. The initiative was not the product of Western-designed projects of reform; to the contrary, it grew from debates within the Islamic *tayyar*, or current. This is a case in point for the reflexivity in ideology that one encounters routinely in Egypt and in the broader Muslim world.<sup>1</sup> The impediments that are routinely placed in the path of nonviolent oppositional voices are also illuminated. Finally, while the purpose of the study is not primarily prescriptive, the realms for potential reformation become obvious as the story unfolds.

Despite its failure to gain legal status, Hizb al-Wasat is noteworthy for its embrace of religious toleration and its rejection of a privileged interpretation of religion. Hizb al-Wasat was not only opposed staunchly by the Egyptian government, but the official suppression of the fledgling party was emphatically endorsed by Egypt's venerable Islamist organization, the Ikhwan al-Muslimun (the Muslim Brethren). The Ikhwan's own efforts to lawfully participate in politics have been frequently sabotaged over the past two decades by the same government apparatus. Many of the proponents of the fledgling party had roots in the Ikhwan, but, quoting a cofounder, the party was an attempt "to go beyond the slogan 'Islam is the solution'" (Murphy 2002). The motives of the Ikhwan in joining in the suppression of the party prove quite mundane—namely, to eliminate a potential political competitor. Thus, this is a spectacle of a new generation attempting to play by new rules but being held at bay by an old guard that will only retire in the grave.

In encounters with the middle-aged professionals in Egypt, it is common to hear complaints about the domination of the political system by septuagenarians and even octogenarians. The legal opposition parties,



the Wafd and Tagammu, are obvious examples. In both cases, the emerging younger elites are in their seventies. Hizb al-Wasat illustrates a quest of thirty- and forty-somethings for a hand in the game, and as one supporter said, "[I]t's about time that this middle generation carries the flag and does its duty for the nation." He is not alone. A leading regime intellectual recalled a metaphor used by Mustafa Fikhi to observe that he was part of the "mezzanine generation," sitting just above the ground floor filled with surging young people intent on a place in the system, but closed out of the cohort that wields power on the floors above (author's interview with 'Usama al-Ghazali Harb, November 7, 1999). Mustafa Bakri, the editor of *al-'Usbu'*, an independent weekly, remarked somewhat wistfully in 1998, "I think it is natural that any political party demanding that the president of the republic shouldn't be allowed more than two terms in office should also do the same in its own party" (Schemm and Apiku 1998).

The plan of this chapter is to offer an overview of Egyptian politics that addresses patterns of control that the state has used to regulate dissent in recent years, followed by a discussion of the attempt to register Hizb al-Wasat as a lawful party. Then the reader is introduced to a collection of Egyptian personalities who either played key roles in the Hizb al-Wasat episode or offer uncommonly valuable insights on the case. These personalities include a former chief justice of Egypt's Constitutional Court, an Islamist engineer and cofounder of the party, a Christian intellectual and cofounder of the party, the Ikhwan's Supreme Guide, and a key political adviser and one of the most powerful men in Egypt. These materials are based on interviews conducted by the author in Egypt from 1995 to 2003. Concluding comments highlight the implications of this case study and suggest a few broader lessons that may be relevant in a period when major attention has been focused upon the challenge of political reform in the Middle East.

## BACKGROUND

Since 1928, the quintessential Islamist movement in Egypt has been the Ikhwan al-Muslimun. After a period of phenomenal growth in the 1930s and 1940s, the Muslim Brethren seemed to be on the threshold of seizing power from the decrepit Egyptian monarchy. Indeed, embassy reports in the late 1940s anticipated the end of the monarchy and the emergence of the Ikhwan as the dominant political force in Egypt. In contrast to the army, the Ikhwan distinguished itself in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948–49. Indeed, years earlier the army had been described as "a decrepit thing" by none other than the Commander of the Army. As a group of unlikely

young officers (led by the son of a village postmaster, Gamal Abdel Nasser) plotted to topple the monarchy, they worked hand-in-glove with the Ikhwan. Anwar Sadat, the future president, was the Free Officers' liaison to the Ikhwan, with whom he enjoyed amiable relations (Sadat 1957). Sayyid Qutb, later to pen arguably the most accessible and most influential Islamist polemic, collaborated closely with the officers and emerged as a functionary in the new regime in 1952.

Within two years of the coup the erstwhile allies flew apart. It is striking that many educated Egyptians pointedly refer to the 1952 event as an *inqilab* (coup), not a *thawrah* (revolution). Even President Husni Mubarak's closest political adviser emphasizes the former terminology (author's interview with Osama al-Baz, November 11, 1999). Lieutenant Colonel Nasser remained in the shadows, deferring to General Muhammad Naguib, who was recruited to serve as nominal head of the revolutionary government. Naguib was gradually nudged aside, and then placed quietly under house arrest as Nasser emerged from the shadows to lead Egypt (Neguib 1955). Meanwhile, the Ikhwan felt its claim to power slipping away and attempted to assassinate Nasser in 1954, during a visit to Alexandria. Sadat's friend and Ikhwan-member Abdul Monein Abdul Raouf was implicated, and the Ikhwan was outlawed.

Until Nasser's death in 1970, the Ikhwan remained a constant target for state repression. Nasser's conception of the state was organic-corporatist and modernist, and the Ikhwan posed a threat to the state's hegemony. As a result, the record of the 1950s and 1960s, the Nasser years, is a disgraceful chronicle of horrendous prison camps where the Ikhwan honed their opposition to the state. The full history of this period remains to be written, but one legacy of the period is the work of Sayyid Qutb (hanged 1964), especially the lucid and polemical *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Milestones; Qutb 1988). *Jahiliyyah*, the core concept of Qutb's prison-written tract, lies at the very heart of the ideological construction of 'Usama bin Laden. (Cf. *Du'aa La Qadat* or "Preachers not judges" by Hassan al-Hodeibi, the Ikhwan's contemporaneous rejoinder to Qutb). Muhammad Qutb, the brother of the hanged writer, later taught 'Usama bin Laden. If bin Laden later used the notion of *jahiliyyah* to refer to Western powers, and especially the United States, this was certainly not Qutb's primary intent. Though Qutb was contemptuous of the United States (he was disillusioned by his exposure to the United States in the late 1940s, not least because of racial discrimination and sexual permissiveness), he very much had contemporary Egypt in mind when he honed the concept, which he borrowed from the work of Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, the Muslim thinker and founder of Pakistan's Jama'at-I Islami.

Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, calculated that he needed a counterweight to the Arab socialist and nationalist bedrock that extolled the late



president and abhorred Sadat. His fateful decision was to build his legitimacy formula on the right, reflecting his own ties to the Ikhwān in the 1940s. The outrageous repression of the Ikhwān ended, and the Islamists moved from the shadows to the open spaces of the university and the public arena. In particular, the 1970s witnessed a rapid growth in Islamic groups (*jama'at*) on the university campuses, and the *jama'at* were the seedbed for the generation of Islamists that sought to create al-Wasat. Eventually, Sadat grew apprehensive of the growing criticism of his power and attempted to reverse the mobilization of dissent. However, it was too late to stem the tide, and in 1981 Sadat died in a hail of bullets provoked in significant measure by the repression born of his second thoughts.

Husni Mubarak (1981– ) has long surpassed Nasser (1954–70) as the longest-serving president in the history of the Egyptian republic. Following the assassination of President Sadat in 1981, Mubarak conceded political space to the Islamists and experimented with the controlled inclusion of mainstream Islamist opposition forces in parliament. Although the Ikhwān have had no legal standing in Egypt for the past half century, Islamist candidates were permitted to use secular parties as ships of convenience in 1984 and in 1987, thereby winning an impressive number of seats in parliament.

By the early 1990s, the experiment had run its course, much to the regret of many members of the intellectual elite in Egypt, who argued that the experiment was succeeding. As one respected insider noted in a 1995 interview, "political pluralism can exist without changing the basic power structure" (author's interview with 'Ali al-Din Hillaal Dessouki, July 9, 1995). The government was intent to maintain the upper hand, and even in the elections of 1984 and 1987, which were relatively free, there was never any doubt that the progovernment candidates would maintain a dominant voice in the People's Assembly (the lower house of the parliament; the upper house, or Shura Council, is composed of 140 appointed members). Thus, in the May 1984 balloting, the regime's National Democratic Party won 72.9 percent of vote and 87 percent of the seats (389 out of 448 seats). In a distant second place, the resurrected Wafd Party, running in alliance with the Ikhwān, captured 15 percent of votes and 13 percent of seats (59 seats, of which 8 were Ikhwānis) (Ayubi 1991).

In the April 1987 elections, the high point for the opposition parties in parliament, 30 percent of the voters cast their vote for the opposition candidates, and 17 percent of all votes went to the tripartite alliance of the Liberal (al-Ahrar) and Labor Parties with the Ikhwān. The coalition won 60 seats, including 36 Ikhwān and 4 Islamist independents. The Wafd captured slightly fewer than 11 percent of all votes, or thirty-five seats. Considering the extensive scope for electoral manipulation by the

government, and the extremely low participation rates in middle-class urban districts where cynicism about elections runs deep, the opposition success offered a stunning riposte to one-party rule in Egypt (Ayubi 1991).

The parliamentary elections of 1990 were the beginning of the end to Mubarak's experiment in inclusionary electoral politics. The 1990 elections were mandated by Egypt's high court, which ruled that the 1986 electoral law discriminated against independent candidates and thus violated the constitution (Auda 1991). Although the Egyptian judiciary remains a bastion of independent thinking, it obviously lacks the power to implement its mandate. Heavy gerrymandering and the state's refusal to accept judicial oversight of the elections prompted the major opposition parties, including the Islamic Alliance and the New Wafd party, to conclude that despite major changes of the election law the electoral system still grossly disadvantaged the opposition. As a result, the major opposition parties boycotted the election. When the elections were conducted, there were customary cases of fraud and intimidation, but the balloting was also marked by an unprecedented level of violence, leading to opposition claims that the 1990 election was "the worst in Egyptian history" (Farag 1991).

The dominant position of the NDP in the parliament should not be allowed to mask an essential weakness of the party, its fundamental lack of grassroots support. As one close observer noted, the ruling party is fictitious. It is a façade. Its structure is weak. The government has not succeeded in creating a strong party. This is one reason that the government is afraid of elections. Only with a strong progovernment party can the government permit a strong opposition (author's interview with 'Ali al-Din Hillaal Dessouki, July 9, 1995).

If there was any hope that 1990 was an aberration in a process of democratization, the hope was dashed in the November 1995 elections, when the opposition parties won only 14 seats in all. Opposition poll watchers were routinely harassed and detained; candidates, especially Islamists, were arrested; and ballot boxes were crammed filled to overflowing with bogus ballots. Although the government was able to engineer a sweeping electoral victory, it did not succeed in masking its extensive manipulation of the results. Though ominous attempts were made to dissuade them, three prominent secular activists, Said al-Naggar, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, and Milad Hanna, still succeeded in mounting a major monitoring effort to report on the widespread irregularities in the election. Their unofficial report highlighted electoral irregularities that discredited the government's "victory" and led to yet another judicial overturning of an election.

At no time during Mubarak's presidency was there any doubt that the ruling party would maintain control of parliament capable of passing



virtually any law that it wished. What appeared in the 1980s to be an effective process of controlled inclusion later became an engine for cynicism and contempt as the regime became increasingly intolerant of dissent, reflecting what many Egyptians refer to as its sclerosis. In the 2000 elections, the Ikhwan managed to gain 17 seats compared to NDP's 388, making it the largest opposition block in parliament. Notably, the Ikhwan was careful to calibrate the candidacies of its members to avoid posing too wide a challenge to the regime.

#### THE BATTLE FOR THE SYNDICATES

More impressive than the limited electoral success of Islamist candidates were the inroads that they made in the professional syndicates (*niqabat*), which have been mainstays of the regime since the Nasser period. As the syndicates fell to Islamist control, Mubarak and company sensed that the hegemony of the regime was being challenged.

In Nasserite Egypt the syndicates were expected to be obedient appendages to the state. In contrast, the syndicates in recent years have been an arena for political debates. Unlike the associations and groups that fell under the heavy hand of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the stringent dictates of infamous Law 32 (the law of associations), the syndicates usually enjoyed considerable freedom of action and have been less subject to manipulation by the government than political parties and other overtly political organizations.

There are twenty-one professional syndicates, encompassing about 2.5 million members (Zaki 1995). The largest are the teachers and graduates of faculties of commerce, both of which tend to be supportive of government policy. The signal success was in the Medical Association, where in 1986 Islamists secured a majority of seats on the executive board of the association. In 1988 they built on their success to win in a landslide, capturing all seats except the chair, which was preserved for the NDP candidate—a calculated sop to the government. The same pattern persisted in the 1990 elections. Even in the Pharmacists' syndicate the Islamists captured all but three executive board seats, as well as the chair, despite the fact that the majority of the syndicate's members are Coptic Christians.

The Muslim Brotherhood was concurrently building a strong base in the Engineers' syndicate and among university professors, but the development that reportedly stunned Mubarak was the result of the 1992 executive board elections in the venerable Bar Association. The Islamists captured 75 percent of the seats in an election in which only 10 percent of the association membership participated.

The Islamists successes reflect the changing sociology of the syndicates, their relative autonomy of the government, and the voting behavior of

their members. Perhaps most important, the youthful profile of the syndicates implies that rank-and-file members are deeply affected by the arduous economic struggle that confronts most Egyptians. In contrast to the older and established syndicate members who often benefit significantly from their connections to the state, the younger members must eke out their own economic solutions. Reliable observers estimate that about 35 percent of the members are less than thirty-five years of age. Since little was done by established syndicate members to assist their younger colleagues, there was a considerable resentment, which was exploited by the Muslim Brotherhood (Ibrahim 1996).

At the same time, only a small number of syndicate members participated in syndicate affairs, including elections. Thus, fewer than one-quarter of all members participated in the four Medical Association elections from 1980 to 1990, and, as noted above, only 10 percent of the Bar Association membership voted in the fateful 1992 elections. Islamist members of the syndicates were able to capitalize on the low turnout by mobilizing their members, some of whom were unemployed and were able to join their occupational syndicate only with financial help from the Ikhwan. Where the turnout was higher, as in the Journalists' Syndicate and the Union of Social Professions, the Islamists did not fare nearly as well.

The government responded to the Islamist foothold in the syndicates by quickly pushing a new law through the parliament in February 1993. Elections within professional syndicates would now require a quorum of 50 percent of all registered members for the first ballot, and a quorum of 30 percent of all registered members for a subsequent election to be held two weeks after the first ballot. If no quorum could be produced, then the syndicate was to be run by an appointed council of senior members, chaired by a judge. As though the government's intention was to thwart the achievement of a quorum, elections were banned on weekends or official holidays (Ibn Khaldun Center 1993; al-Sayyid 1995).

As the authoritarian state attempted to loosen the influence of the Ikhwan in the syndicates, the Islamists continued to build support on Egypt's campuses. By the early 1990s many university faculty clubs were under Islamist domination, and the Ikhwan appeared poised to extend its influence to the leadership of major universities. The state responded on May 30, 1994, with an amendment to the Universities Law that provided for an end to the practice of electing deans, despite the loud clamor of dissent from the professorate.

If the controlled opening of the 1980s offered some hope that the state would grant more political space, the evidence of the 1990s offered a different lesson. The response of Egyptians was mixed. On the one hand, resentment of the arrogant exercise of power by the state was rampant. On the other hand, extremist Islamist groups (Jihad and the Gam'at Islamiya) embarked on a campaign of violence and terrorism, designed, in part, to



interdict the tourist trade and weaken the state financially. Many Egyptians found these tactics opprobrious and supported a vicious state response. While the curtailment of the experiments in controlled inclusion and the government's autocratic riposte to the Islamists' successes in the syndicates did not seem to augur well for a new experiment in peaceful participation, this is precisely what a number of younger Islamists were pondering in the mid-1990s, both within and on the periphery of the Ikhwan.

#### HIZB AL-WASAT

In April 1995, the Ikhwan signaled a major departure from the teachings of its founder, Hasan al-Banna (assassinated 1949) when it declared its acceptance of a multiparty politics.<sup>2</sup> The Imam, as al-Banna is often called, railed against *hizbiyya* ("partyism") with the argument that political parties breed divisiveness (Commins 1994). (In this sense, al-Banna's perspective is consistent with the organic-corporatist bias of today's regime, which refuses to countenance a serious challenge to effective monopolization of politics by the ruling party.) Nonetheless, his successors in the Ikhwan leadership issued an important document in April 1995, which embraced parties as instruments of *shura* (consultation), while reiterating that power may not be taken by the sword (al-Hudeibi 2000). The statement was intended to be a clear signal of the Ikhwan's willingness to play by democratic rules, but the rejoinder from the regime was studied silence. The political climate of the mid-1990s was one in which a number of efforts were underway to find entrée into the political system, especially since the regime was moving aggressively to tighten its control of the political system.

Liberal reformers, such as the respected economist Dr. Said al-Naggar, president of the Civic Forum, worked energetically to promote a "civic compact" (*mithaq madani*) in 1995. The compact emphasized many of the values embraced the following year by the Hizb al-Wasat, including freedom of belief, democratic participation, and women's rights. This writer (along with Farhad Kazemi) happened to be meeting with the late 'Adil Hussein (died 2001), a leading figure in the Labor Party, an ally of the Ikhwan, on July 11, 1995, when al-Naggar visited party headquarters on Port Said Street to seek Labor's endorsement of the compact.<sup>3</sup> The Labor Party, now suppressed by the government, has veered from left to right, and by the 1990s enjoyed an Islamist ambience, yet faded signs from the 1970s testified that these were the offices of the *Socialist* Labor Party. Hussein excused himself to join the negotiations, and upon return revealed that he wanted to sign the civil compact along with other mem-

bers of his party. His view was that the Ikhwan "would lose, if they did not sign it." In the end, the Ikhwan refused to sign because the document did not declare that the *shari'ah* was the sole basis of law.

This was also a period of calibrated government persecution aimed precisely at the Ikhwan, the most potent opposition group. In 1995, the middle-level leadership was savaged by arrests. In all, fifty-four were arrested and sentenced to three-to-five year terms, including many of the rising young *'amirs* ("princes"), such as 'Issam al-'Iryan. Among other motives, the government sought to eliminate many of the most credible candidates for parliament, thereby sabotaging any attempt by the Ikhwan to repeat their electoral successes of the 1980s. Intimidation at balloting sites was widespread as well.

Among younger members of the Ikhwan, many of whom were actively involved in public and professional life, especially in the syndicates of doctors, engineers, and other professions, these discussions were a culmination of many dialogues (Wickham 1996). These dialogues were part of a centrist trend that is sometimes referred to as *al-wasatiyya* (Baker 1997) or *'jil al-sab'inaat* (the seventies generation), as reflected in recent debates within the Ikhwan (Hamzawy 2003). It is also common to hear references to the renewal trend (*al-tayyar al-tajdid*).

Against this backdrop of repression, political foment and debate, a large group broke away from the Ikhwan to form Hizb al-Wasat in late 1995. The name serves a dual purpose. Not only does it emphasize the role the party seeks to place as a mediatory element in society, but it is instantly recognizable to many Muslims because it invokes Qur'anic injunction to be an *'umma wasat* (a justly balanced community). "Thus have We made of you a justly balanced community. That ye might be witnesses over the nations" (Qur'an 2:143). The name implies the project of mediation by a younger generation intent to emphasize a connection to society and to Islam in a modern civilizational context. Of the seventy-four original founding members of al-Wasat, sixty-two came from the ranks of the Brotherhood (Stacher 2002). Many of the founding members had been active in the professional syndicates where they honed political skills and developed a taste for political struggle. By January 1996, they presented an application for legal party status to the governmental Political Parties Committee.

Mustafa Mashur (1919–2002), then newly ascended to the post of Supreme Guide (*murshid*) of the Ikhwan, and his associates reacted swiftly and furiously to al-Wasat's display of independence. Mashur, by profession a meteorologist at Egypt's National Weather Forecasting Center, joined the Ikhwan in 1938. Like many of his colleagues, Mashur had paid his dues—in his instance, eighteen years in prison. In an April 1996 interview, he simply observed that al-Wasat did not display a "pure



image of Islam" (Murphy 2002). Behind the scenes, the Ikhwan moved quickly to quell the rebellion in its ranks.

Many members of the founding cohort left the new party under threat and returned to the Ikhwan's fold. In May, the government committee rejected the party's petition on the procedural grounds that they lacked the requisite fifty members to constitute a party (under the terms of Law 40/1977). For its part, the government believed that the party initiative was a scheme by the Ikhwan to find a side door into legitimate party status. Three founding members along with nine others were then arrested for attempting to reorganize the Ikhwan and for plotting against the government; the al-Wasat members were released three months later without being tried or even charged.

What followed was extraordinary. The Hizb al-Wasat filed an appeal, and in 1997 the Ikhwan openly opposed the application during formal hearings (Shadid 2001). Abu al-'Ala Madi, a founder member of al-Wasat, complained to a newspaper:

This small group of people waged a war on us that we did not expect. We expected them to say we disagree with you or we have nothing to do with this project. But waging a comprehensive war against us on all levels was a big shock that took some time to absorb. . . . Their attack was even worse than what the government did with us. (Murphy 2002)

The following May, the Political Parties Tribunal rejected the application on familiar grounds. Under the terms of Law 40/1977, a new party must fulfill a legitimate purpose not met by an existing party. Since the ruling National Democratic Party claimed to do all and more that Egypt requires, the standard is virtually impossible to fulfill. The al-Wasat is one of at least thirty-two parties that have failed to meet the standard.<sup>4</sup>

Among leading independent Muslim thinkers, the Ikhwan's riposte to al-Wasat was described as heavy-handed and unfortunate. For instance, Shaikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the leading reformist thinkers, argued that al-Wasat was a way to break the isolation that the government imposed on the Islamic movement. "I fear that the Islamic movement constrains the liberal thinkers among its children and closes windows of renewal (*tajdid*), interpretation (*ijtihad*), and stands on one side of ideas and thought while not accepting the other point of view or those holding different opinions about objectives or the means to accomplish them." Others, such as Tawfiq al-Shawi, endorsed al-Qaradawi's criticism and urged that rather than stifling dissent, initiatives like al-Wasat should be encouraged.<sup>5</sup> There is an intellectual link joining both al-Shawi and al-Qaradawi to Sheikh Hassan al-Ashmawi, who died in 1972 in Kuwait. Al-Ashmawi had been the Ikhwan's major link to the Free Officers, but

he is remembered as an influential reformist thinker who rejected in principle the idea of religious government.

Following its first failure, the aspiring party was reorganized as the Hizb al-Wasat al-Masri (i.e., the Egyptian Center Party). Over ninety members were listed in the "new" party's petition, of which only twenty-four were former members of the Ikhwan. The founding men and women include a number of younger professionals, teachers, students, and tradesmen. There were nineteen women listed, and a total of three Christians ('Abd al-Karim 1998). In September 1998, this attempt to register also failed on the grounds that the new party did not contribute anything new. By June 1999, the second round of appeals ran their course.

Two years earlier, the party had filed an application with the Ministry of Culture to start a newspaper, *al-Mustaqbal* (The future), but the application simply disappeared into the bowels of the ministry. There has been no response whatsoever to the application.

The al-Wasat program has been published in two versions.<sup>6</sup> The first was authored by a leading Protestant intellectual (Habib 1996a) and the second by a former Brother and professor of aeronautical engineering at Cairo University ('Abd al-Karim 1998). Both versions of the program are strikingly free of jargon. The program urges a modernist interpretation of Islamic law and argues that the *shari'ah* should be interpreted and applied in a way that does not hinder progress. Indeed, *shari'ah* is conceived as a valuable collection of flexible principles, whereas the implementation of those principles requires the crafting of laws by people. There are several novel elements of the published program. While secularism (*al-'imaniyya*) is rejected on principle, the thrust of the program is decidedly complementary to toleration, diversity, and pluralism (*ta'addudiyya*). In particular, pluralism is understood to correspond to a society in which religion remains a fundamental component, but religious practice as well as political orientation vary as a matter of course. "National unity and religion as one unit are of extreme importance whereby each Muslim and Christian, through their own religion, would comprise this national unity. Religion is one of the strongest sources of moral commitment" (Habib 1996a, 32):

Islamic scholarship affirms that too much religion on its own does not insure justice and not enough religion does not prevent acquiring what is just. Invoking what is just in the political arena or exercising authority on behalf of a particular religious faction in a religious pluralistic country is a claim that has no judicial base. The 'ulama emphasize that the objective of life and political participation does not come about by having too much religion but through the proper and civil behavior in order to achieve the goals and interests of the nation. With that, we emphasize that the Copts enjoy the



rights of citizenship and nationality. This is an issue that is both legally and functionally decided and agreed upon without a disagreement among the nation in that regard.

The unity of religion and state is a dogmatic truth for many Islamic movements, but reformist thinkers increasingly shift from the concept of *din wa dawla* and emphasize that Islam is marked by *din wa 'ummah* (religion and community). This is very much the focus of the al-Wasat program. In this sense, the usual Salafi focus on the period of al-Rashidun as an exemplar for contemporary Muslim societies is rejected. Thinkers such as the octogenarian Gamal al-Banna, the younger brother of the late Hasan al-Banna, are part of the *tayyar*. Al-Banna argues that the unity of *din wa dawla* was unique to the Golden Era in Islam and may not be recreated. Instead, the appropriate focus is to foster the promotion of religion and community (al-Banna 2002). What then becomes problematic is the definition of community. In the instance of al-Wasat, the community is defined inclusively so as to encompass Muslims and Christians. While secular reformers such as al-Naggar judged the party to be a significant initiative, at least a point of departure for discussion, concern remains that rather than embracing an Islamic ethos, the *shari'ah* remains central in the party's ideology (Stacher's interview with Said al-Naggar, December 19, 1999, in Stacher 2001).

The second version of the program by 'Abd al-Karim adds material on pluralism and representation. While substantial sections of the first program are rewritten or condensed (some general comments on freedom and human rights are omitted), the substance of the two documents is consistent. Both versions deal with widely discussed questions such as corruption and violence and both urge adherence to the constitution, free elections, and an effective parliament, concerns that link al-Wasat to a variety of opposition groups across the political spectrum. There is equal, if not greater emphasis on social justice and reducing economic inequality (during a period when the gap is actually widening). "One of the worst problems associated with unemployment is the feeling of injustice and lack of opportunity that cause depression, resentment, anger, hatred, lack of loyalty or belonging. The extravagant life lived by a certain class provokes the negative feelings of the poor and the unemployed" ('Abd al-Karim 1998). This signals a need to encourage charity (*zakat*) as a means of reducing the disparity, as well as a normative commitment to social justice that contrasts with the indifference of the government.

It is noteworthy that the role of women in society receives significant attention, and the idea that women may fill any role in the political system is remarkable by Egyptian standards. "The party emphasized the women's equal right and equal commitment in civil and political matters.

It is therefore her right to hold any position, to vote or get elected or become a member of the parliament and to perform all public and professional functions. She is also required to commit to her participation the work force" (Habib 1996a, 58; 'Abd al-Karim 1998, 29).

In April 2000, the government tacitly defined the boundaries of permissible opposition by permitting the establishment of an NGO (nongovernmental organization) in which many of the al-Wasat organizers were key participants. Under the terms of Law 153, since overturned, an NGO would be deemed licensed in sixty days absent an explicit disapproval by the Ministry of Social Affairs. Hence, the government permitted Misr: Lil-Thiqafa wa Hiwar (Egypt: For culture and dialogue) to emerge. A deal with the government was widely suspected, and there is certainly no reason to take seriously Muhammad Salim al-'Awa's claims that there is no connection between Wasat and the creation of the NGO. The new society aims to "support the culture of dialogue in a society in which violence prevails" (Cairo Times 2000). The major participants are a who's who of respected independents, including liberals such as Atif al-Banna, editor of *al-Ahram Center Strategic Report*; Wahid 'Abd al-Majid from *al-Ahram*; and Amani Qandil, a sui generis NGO guru and also a woman. Other members of the society include Engineers' Syndicate member Salah 'Abd al-Karim; author of the first al-Wasat program, Rafiq Habib; attorney Issam Sultan (and, initially, chairman of the NGO); publisher Muhammad Abd al-Latif; and Abu al-'Ala Madi. Muhammad Salim al-'Awa, a constant intellectual presence in al-Wasat, was elected chair of the new NGO's board at the first annual conference in May 2001 (al-'Awa's wife Fatima, herself a lawyer, was a founding member of al-Wasat).

Although Madi periodically declares that al-Wasat will once again apply for legal recognition, his energies and those of his colleagues appear to be largely focused on holding seminars on themes such as Islam and the West, the Islamic movement and education, or, perhaps most revealingly, "Professor al-Banna: Fifty Years after His Martyrdom What Remains of His Call?"

The unsuccessful attempt by Madi and his collaborators to break new political ground with al-Wasat is further unpacked in the interview vignettes that follow, each revealing a different perspective on the episode.

### THE JUDGE

Now retired, this distinguished attorney was the chief justice of the Constitutional Court, one of two bulwarks against arbitrary rule by the state. The other is the Court of Cassation. On two recent occasions, in 1987 and 1995, the Constitutional Court ended the tenure of the parliament



due to electoral irregularities or unconstitutional electoral procedures and mandated new elections.

The comments here are a composite of two interviews lasting more than four hours, one conducted in September 1999 and the other in February 2003. The judge is a contemplative and humble man. His office has none of the trappings of accumulated adulation that people of accomplishment tend to collect. His broad desk is piled high with reference works, an Egyptian text on civil society, a book on the U.S. Constitution, titles in French on free speech and assembly. He is reading a book on U.S. constitutional law, specifically First Amendment law and the right of assembly. This man loves the dignity of the law fairly administered, and he does not hide his contempt of "rubbish judges" who seek only to toe the government's line.

One topic among many we discuss is the legal standard for the creation of political parties in Egypt. The judge's reasoning is lucid and to the point. The people are permitted under the constitution to form associations. A political party is an association, and there is no language in the constitution that can be construed to authorize or require resort to a Political Parties Committee or Tribunal. In other words, the process that al-Wasat has had to navigate is questionable on constitutional grounds.

As for the requirement that an aspiring party must meet a legitimate need unfulfilled by extant political parties, the judge reflects, "If a marketplace of ideas is a right, then what is the logic for this restriction? Plus, there are many different ways to reach the same aims." To his regret, the Constitutional Court has considered this requirement to be valid. As a result, "political life is paralyzed." Although the judge notes his conviction that the constitution protects the right of assembly, in practice the law allows any party to be barred from forming. The state imposes "undue restrictions" on political life by restricting the formation of new parties.

Legally speaking, people may gather together for political purposes even if they are not constituted in a legal party. The right to form political associations derives from the right of assembly, the judge emphasizes. Nonetheless, this is an issue that has been adjudicated on appeal by the Supreme Administrative Court in the case of Hizb al-Wasat, yet the court refused to see the clear logic of the constitution.

Before I can fully articulate the question, he anticipates it. "Why doesn't the government open up?" "Sometimes people are haunted by fear not by hopes." He argues that Mubarak is popular and would win a competitive election, but he is afraid of something. Mubarak believes that the answer is to be in control, to control everything. The government restricts political activity out of insecurity. "Measures are taken to tame the tiger, even though there is no tiger in Egypt." As result, Egypt loses the opportunity to strengthen its power through democracy. "If democracy and civil society were stronger in the Middle East, the governments would be more

powerful to face the USA." This from the lips of a man who knows America well, has traveled to Washington as a VIP guest of the U.S. government, but who is pained by America's then looming invasion of Iraq. His prime despair is reserved for his own government, which he both fears and despises. "I don't know why some people feel safe, and we do not have that simple right. I don't feel safe talking to you. I do not know what to do."

## THE ENGINEER

Al-Qasr al-Aini is a long, bustling Cairo avenue with one menagerie after another of shops, peddlers, offices, government agencies, and apartments. This is commercial Cairo, perfumed less by the scent of food and the stink of urban waste than the acrid scent of automobile exhausts. The engineer's office is nearby a well-known pharmacy, in an apartment building that has been converted to office space. The suite is labeled "*al-markaz al-dawli lildarausat*" (the International Center for Studies) and the bustle of half a dozen clerks and assistants greets the visitor in February 2003. His is the generic office of the middle class professional. A pair of facing overstuffed chairs and a low table for water and coffee are placed in front of a desk large enough to signal that this is a man with a title, in this case, *muhandis*—engineer. We sit, exchange greetings, and efficiently elide into the familiar ritual of interview.

Abu al-'Ala Madi was a university student in the 1970s in Minya, one of the upper Egyptian towns that has been a seedbed for Islamist recruitment. Like other students at Minya University, he participated in a campus Islamist group, one of many that owed their existence to Sadat's flirtation with the Islamic right. He joined the Ikhwan in 1979, and as the Ikhwan moved into the syndicates in the 1980s, he became one of the leaders of the Engineers' Syndicate, rising to assistant secretary general.

In one interview, Madi bluntly emphasized that his connection to the Ikhwan followed his engagement in campus politics, which had little to do with the Ikhwan either operationally or ideologically:

In order to describe the correct situation you have to know that we had an Islamic vision before we entered the Muslim Brotherhood. And this point is very important. Before we were silent about this, out of courtesy and respect to the Brotherhood. We remained silent when some claimed that the Brotherhood were the ones who established the Islamic students' movement in the 70s, we were silent out of respect because we later became members of the Brotherhood. And the truth was that the Brotherhood was completely far away and distant from this student movement. And after the Islamic factions [*kawaa'idir*] joined the Brotherhood, a blending of thought took place.



And we accepted some of those ideas inside the brotherhood and rejected others. And this reaction persisted in a quiet manner but those leaderships were faced with a severe shock when we discovered the real condition of the brotherhood where we found out that the big picture we imagined the brotherhood to be was not true. And this shock kept reacting until we left the brotherhood (Madi ca. 1999)

As for the Ikhwan, there is a reform current, but the conservatives still hold sway in the leadership. While Madi claims to have very good relations with the middle leadership, where he has "secret support," relations between him and the old guard are bad. He was taken aback by the counterattack of the old guard, which he argues is out of step with changing times. He has, of course, quit the Ikhwan.

Madi distinguishes between Hasan al-Banna's two legacies: the school and the organization: "As for the organization, it is in its worst shape due to the change in the behavioral understanding and moralities established by al-Banna. Due to the absence of freedom of expression and a freeze in the movement's intellect at the time when individual thinking and the concept of hear and obey without questioning hindered us from changing some of the teachings of al-Banna to suit our time" (Labib 1998).

He emphasizes his own links to a variety of non-Islamist intellectuals, including the lawyer 'Atif al-Banna, and several independent Muslim intellectuals, especially Muhammad Salim al-'Awa, whose wife was a founding member of the party, and Hasan Hanafi, who like al-'Awa is a respected professor at Cairo University. For the aged generation of *tajidi* intellectuals, men like Gamal al-Banna, al-'Awa's name evokes enthusiasm. ("He is one of the best ones," al-Banna remarked in February 2003.) Hanafi enjoys a worldwide reputation for his prolific writings and his modernist orientation in the tradition of Muhammad 'Abduh, but his influence on al-Wasat was immanent, not strategic. In contrast, al-'Awa has lent a strong hand to the party. The party platforms are certainly consistent with his own ideas, and it is easy to imagine that he played a role in drafting al-Wasat's programmatic documents. Al-'Awa's perspective is nicely summarized in the following comment: "the problem of government resides upon two primary, complementary tenets: the belief in Divine existence and faith in individual freedom. Individual freedom must assert itself before the challenges of both the metaphysical and tangible worlds" (al-'Awa 1999).

Secularly oriented skeptics, as well as leading government officials, argue that Madi and his colleagues are simply masking their real views, namely their aim to seize power and establish a system of Islamist rule ('Abd al-Karim 1998; Abdel-Latif 1999). "We are not using *tajidi*," Madi insists. "We are not seeking to establish a religious party per se. We are talking about a civil party with an Islamic frame of reference. . . . We

know that the hardest choice is moderation, and the easiest choice is extremism. . . . We form part of Egypt's political landscape in the coming century."

While Nasser horribly repressed the Ikhwan, Madi, like many of his generation, reveals a wistful nostalgia for the equalitarian elements of Nasser's programs. "The positive aspects of the Nasser era cannot be denied. Social reforms, free education and medical care allowed a new elite to emerge, one rooted in the humblest social classes" (Labidi 2002).

Simultaneously, Madi has a nuanced appreciation of the West, and like many Muslim intellectuals he was deeply impressed by the antiwar demonstrations that preceded America's invasion of Iraq. The antiwar demonstrations in 2003 prompted him to reflect that the West is not America, and the U.S. public is not the U.S. government. He reasons that this means there must be dialogue at all levels. Madi underlines that Egypt's relations with the United States discourage reforms, because reform would contradict U.S. interests, yet serious efforts by the United States to broker reform would be well received, he argues.

#### THE PARTY INTELLECTUAL

The son of a revered Protestant minister, the late Samuel Habib, Rafiq is one of the intellectual architects of Hizb al-Wasat, one of a handful of Christians who became founding members. His books are well known in Egypt and he has written on faith and politics, history's legacies in Egypt, and democracy (Habib 1996b, 1996c, 1998). His office is in the headquarters of the Coptic Evangelical Organization, in al-Nuzha al-Jadida, an obscure suburb of Cairo where this interview took place on November 9, 1999. After a few moments of shared reminiscences about Reverend Habib, we launch directly into the substance of the interview.

The political problem lies with the administrative and military origins of the state. Over time there has been a decrease in the quality of political figures in the system. The country is led by a military administrator, and there is no site for real politics. The army is the source of the problem. Mubarak's only fear is that the army is not with him. He does not understand the language of reform. Habib reflects that the problem is like trying to talk about engineering to someone who only knows administration. Technical issues are reduced to management problems, which means that you never get to the root of the problem at hand:

So Egypt is left with a political system without real politics. Political space is depoliticized. After 1992 [when the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front won a sweeping electoral victory and stood on the threshold of power only to be



denied by a coup], Mubarak became afraid of everything. There is no serious political thought and the government has had no real success against the opposition. Mubarak's attitude is that the Islamic parties are a threat, just as in Algeria. Thus, the Islamic movement has been suppressed and political life is frozen.

Since 1995, no new parties have been allowed, though many parties effectively exist. In fact, Islamic thinking is in flux. Hizb al-Wasat has new ideas; so does the Ikhwan. But the Ikhwan cannot deal with the emergence of the Wasat movement, so things have slowed down. In time, the fear will decline (and the old men will die) and an optimistic vision of the future would see the "silent *ummah*" take power from the government in a context of passive resistance. Habib argues that the successful Ikhwan businessmen, who have large constituencies, will lend their hefty weight to politics. The mentality of business is practical and the liberal wing of the business community wants a political party. Others, who are linked to the state sector, will not be enthusiastic, but an optimistic vision would point to more influence for the chambers of commerce and the power of private capital.

As for "the system," all the eggs have been put in one—reform—basket, namely, reform only within the context of state control. Habib is alluding to the discussions about Hizb al-Mustaqbal, a failed initiative to create a new party under the leadership of Gamal Mubarak, the president's son. Mubarak closed the door on this venture in 1999, perhaps after he sensed negative views emanating from the army. (Since then, Gamal Mubarak has been ensconced as chair of the NDP policy committee, and he has been warmly received on three official visits to Washington, D.C., as though he is the anointed successor to his father.)

On his role forming the Hizb al-Wasat, Habib notes that he was isolated by the move among Copts, whereas he expected to be joined by others. They need to reach more people, he notes. He observes that the first rejection noted that the party was not different from other extant parties. As for the second effort to gain recognition, which culminated in an appeal ruling on June 5, 1999, Habib argues this was handled illegally by the government. There were new ideas. Al-Wasat proposed a different government system, including two councils—one for politics, another for constitutional matters. The representatives in the council would be agents of the *'ummah* not representative of the people. The government said these were old ideas, derived from outside Egypt. They even asserted, inexplicably, that the ideas stemmed from "*iqta*" (feudalism).

In one of his books, *al-Muqadas wa-al-Hurriyah* (The sacred and freedom), Habib argues that the nation is defined by its sacred consciousness (*al-muqadas*) and its fixed principles (*al-thawabet*). The problem arises

when the *sulta* (or authority, by which he means the government) seeks to impose beliefs (namely, secularism) by force and law. In doing so, the people's freedom is taken away in the interests of foreign values. This leads to a situation in which groups become convinced that the only way to preserve *al-muqadasat* and *al-thawabet* is to acquire power. While people are free not to believe, not to accept the sacred truths, they may not destroy the nation and its beliefs. What is needed, he argues, is a re-discovery of the sacred and the renewal of the principles that underlie the nation. This must be done peacefully, as through parties like al-Wasat, because if it is done violently, the nation will only be weakened and will only be more vulnerable to Western interference. Egypt is a conservative society and Habib's argument resonates with many Egyptians, whether Christian or Muslim (Habib 1998).

### THE GUIDE

Islamic circles (*nadwas*) in Cairo intersect and intertwine. The interlocutor was a venerable independent thinker in Cairo, a man known for his criticism of the Ikhwan; but, knowing that an appointment with the Supreme Guide was desired, he set it up in a few hours' time. His assistant 'Adil, described warmly as a man "with one foot inside the Ikhwan and another outside it," serves as a friendly escort. The meeting is with Muhammad Ma'amoun Hudeibi, an eighty-one-year-old former judge. He has been the Ikhwan's *murshid* (Guide) for less than a year, though his rise to this post has been a foregone conclusion for a decade. The session is in a shabby apartment building in al-Manya, a very ordinary Cairo neighborhood. There is no doorman or policeman in sight, just a peasant woman who looks on beseechingly as we pass. Then I recall an interlude in Upper Egypt, years before in an Assiut police station, where a cast of informants, a profile of everyday Egypt, sat on narrow benches waiting to be paid. A policeman opened a desk drawer to reveal a fat pile of bank notes. Then again, this may just be an old woman.

One removes his shoes on entering the headquarters, not out of piety but respect for the premises, a common practice in old Cairo. We are ushered in to see Hudeibi almost immediately. The *murshid* has the physique of a snowman and the friendly smile of a grandfather.

The Guide begins by noting that Islam is belief and ritual plus *shari'ah*. "My religion orders me to insist that I be governed by *shari'ah*." But Hudeibi is intent to note that while personal status matters (such as inheritance) are fixed, and while relations between men and women are defined clearly, there are many areas where there are differences (*ikhtilaf*) within the Qur'an and the Sunna.



We have to be creative. "There is a difference between two hundred years ago and today." He notes that at the time of the founding of the Ikhwan only 7 percent of men were literate, and even fewer women:

Hasan al-Banna was only forty-two years old when he was martyred and he did not see his daughters grow up. We believe that women have a right to work, and to education, but they may not be forced to work. When they are married, this is an issue that is settled within the family. We recommend that children have the attention of their parents but, in fact, many women work.

"I find that eighty percent of Ikhwan are married to women who have finished their education." Citing his own family, Hudeibi noted he had four children, all of whom are doctors. In one case, the daughter (married to an engineer) is still practicing medicine. In the other, the daughter has given up her professional work (her husband is also a doctor). "This is a family choice," he comments.

Hudeibi notes that the husband is the head (*ra'is*) of the family, but when I question him on this, noting that the man might be nominal head while the wife has extensive influence, he responds with what he calls a pre-Islamic proverb from Arabia: "*'awana ammat lahu yakun 'abdan laki*" (if you are a slave for him, he will be a slave for you).

With regard to elections, "we encourage women to vote and we depend on their votes." He stresses that "women have the right to run for election." Hudeibi complains that were it not for the manipulation of the government in Alexandria during the 2000 elections, a sister named Jihan Khalifawi would have won a seat.

As for contemporary questions of governance for society, he emphasizes the import of *shura* and *'ijma*, and recalls that the first *khalifa*, Abu Bakr, did not force himself upon the community but was widely accepted as head of state. Applied to modern times, when literacy is much more widespread, representation requires free elections. Thus, people have the right to select the government. Principles and values determine how people vote. In contrast to questions of family law, which are more or less fixed, *ijtihad* suggests elections. As far back as 1936, Hassan al-Banna approved representation, but "we live in different times," Hudeibi declares. Not only was the public less well educated, but al-Banna's time was marked by occupation and monarchy.

The position that Hudeibi describes is an important departure from the fixed positions that prevailed for half a century until the 1980s. Hudeibi declares that "one party means dictatorship." The hard-won lesson of the Ikhwan is that there must be a multiparty system with a turnover of representatives ("three or four year terms") and "the will of the majority must be respected, including the peaceful transfer of power."

The discussion then shifts to the case of al-Wasat. He listens calmly as I outline the events, more or less as summarized in this chapter. Then he responds directly: "[A]ll of the information that you have is wrong in terms of the role of the Muslim Brethren."

The decision to form the [al-Wasat] party was not approved beforehand. As long ago as 1986 we decided to have a party. We felt that all leadership in the party should be known. We know that giving a license for a party is the will of one person [President Mubarak]. All procedures leading up to the president's decision are just for the sake of appearance.

We knew that the president would not allow a party to be formed. Mubarak has said, "even if the Constitutional Court allows a party, I will not allow it." We would not try to form a party because the decision would seem to be rational and fair, whereas it is the decision of one man. It leaves the deceptive impression that it is possible to form a party.

We are a political party in reality. We have our structures, we have announced policies and we are the largest party in parliament. . . . No one said we were unethical. Hence, the issue is just applying the law to reality.

Hudeibi observes that it is natural that others will oppose the Ikhwan. "We want Muslims to have the right to practice *shari'ah*." Hudeibi recalls the parliamentary elections of 1995, when 165 Ikhwanis ran for election and not a single one won. "This event shook our confidence." In the same year, the government was arresting brothers and sentencing them to jail terms. "People were astonished. They did not know what to do."

"The people in al-Wasat were accused by the government of representing the Ikhwan. Some people decided to embarrass the government by claiming a party was being formed." At the same time, he acknowledges that "within the ranks of the Ikhwan, a number of people started to ask to create a party." He notes that there was a modified program being developed, one that kept the core values of Islam. "Always, when we see people who are enthusiastic, why not? They are our sons."

Unfortunately, when they wrote the program we did not approve it. They took an unethical position. They communicated with other members and told people that they were acting on behalf of the Ikhwan. The *murshid* asked for the al-Wasat people to appear. They refused to come to the office. They went to the home of the *murshid* and told him that they had already written the program and submitted it to the Political Parties Committee, which [we knew] would then transmit it to intelligence. We sought to avoid guile. The *murshid* was shocked that seventy-five Muslim Brothers were aligned with al-Wasat. When the issue came up, especially the participation of Ikhwan, I was shocked. If you really work in politics, if you really are a politician then you have to be more professional, not amateurish. It was



only by coincidence that I found out about it just before the program was submitted. If reporters had come, I would know nothing. [Hudeibi handled press relations at that time.] I took a decision to put an end to this embarrassing decision, to announce that this is a group outside the Ikhwān.

As for the al-Wasat people, Hudeibi told them:

You, if you are asked, your answer will be limited to your program, and you are not from the Ikhwān. Of course, I knew there would be talk about internal divisions. We did not want to have media looking at divisions. Unfortunately, they did talk about the Ikhwān in the press. After that, most brothers who had supported it returned to the Ikhwān when they discovered the leadership did not approve.

Reliable reports indicate that serious pressure was applied to convince al-Wasat supporters to return to the Ikhwān. "They objected to the use of their names and refused further participation. They said we are ready to do whatever you wish. We then decided to go to the Political Party Tribunal and say that the Muslim Brothers do not approve of any party. In any case, we were one hundred percent sure that the party would not be approved." Hudeibi urged al-Wasat not to pursue an appeal. In front of the world, it would be the court that would vote against the party, whereas, in reality, it was Mubarak who vetoed the party. After the initial application was disapproved, "we were surprised to find that they had filed an appeal with the tribunal."

"Since the people who had given names now refused, their lawyer should have said that he is representing five people." Instead, "the lawyer said that he was representing all of the people on the list. Therefore, other people [viz, the Ikhwān] had to present their own papers."

"We did not stand with the government. We just objected that seventy people would have their names used. We are not against any party. They were unethical."

#### THE ADVISER

Dr. Osama al-Baz is a thin man with a somewhat nasal voice and great power. In November 1999, I am meeting him for the third time. The interview begins punctually in the Foreign Ministry building. The spacious corner office befits one of the two or three most powerful men in Egypt. The opening comments focus on modernist trends in Islam and al-Baz volunteers that he read *al-Kitaab wa al-Qur'an* (The book and the Qu'ran) by the Syrian engineer Muhammad Shahrour, which he notes was excellent. Shahrour's rationalism appeals to established educated profession-

als, but few of the Islamists seem to have read Shahrour. They prefer work that is more focused on the problematics of contemporary society and politics than Shahrour's tedious but modernist *tafsir*.

The conversation turns to Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis. Al-Baz likes Huntington's book. He especially appreciates "the acceptance of diversity," the idea that globalization is not going to erase cultural dissimilarities. He has not read the original article it seems, only the more nuanced book.

After the interruption of a phone call, marked by the use of short generic phrases intended to signal the caller that a visitor may be listening, the discussion continues and turns to Egypt. He talks about widespread complaints about deepening government corruption, even from people who are not shrill critics of the regime. He picks up on the question of decorum, not corruption. "Yes, this is very important. People must be respectable." Even as we are speaking the government is pursuing the persecution of several figures in the Islamist-aligned Labor Party, including Magdi Hussein, the editor of *al-Sha'b*, the party newspaper that has been doggedly attacking the then Minister of Agriculture Yusuf Wali for corruption, malfeasance, and contacts with Israel. (The Labor Party has since been dismantled by the government.)

People were looking for new faces in government, but the government announced following Mubarak's reelection in September 1999 is packed with familiar faces. Al-Baz acknowledges that people feel frustrated, but he says the problem is that they themselves raised unreasonable expectations. "They were making lists of all the people they expected to see removed from the cabinet. Of course, this did not occur." What they do not realize is that some of the people they condemned were constrained in the last government. People don't realize that the ministers were often blocked. In any case, "just wait for three months," he says. "There will be very important improvement."

Although he does not mention the name of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the activist think-tank head who created a tempest of debate by writing about discrimination against Coptic Christians, it is clear that he has Ibrahim in mind when he complains about people making broad charges of systemic discrimination. The Copts did suffer discrimination, al-Baz acknowledges, "especially in the first years following the 1952 revolution. These injustices should and must be corrected." As for NGOs, the answer is not to engage in sweeping accusations. In his eyes, the problem lies largely with foreign-funded human rights organizations. If there are problems, he complains, these groups should identify them and they will be dealt with. Given Egypt's dependence on U.S. assistance (\$2 billion annually), it is easy to imagine that questions about Christian mistreatment would jeopardize Egypt's standing on Capitol Hill. There is little question,



based on al-Baz's comments, that he would like to see Egyptian NGOs brought to heel. The following year, in fact, the government closed Saad Eddin Ibrahim's Ibn Khaldun Center, and jailed Ibrahim and a score of his associates. The crackdown followed months of character assassination in the press, including accusations that Ibrahim was a spy. Only in early 2003 was Ibrahim freed from jail, after his case was overturned on appeal to the Constitutional Court, where the appeal was argued by Dr. 'Awad al-Murr, a former president of the court.

As for the Islamists, "they want power. That is their goal." Al-Baz recalls the earthquake of October 1992. (The earthquake killed more than 550 Cairenes.) He was in Turkey when it happened. "When there was a small earthquake here, the Islamists responded very quickly, but the government agencies were slow to react. Not surprisingly, the people said, 'fuck the government.' They did not do this out of the goodness of their hearts; they did it to convince people to support them so they can seek power. That is their goal." He cites the case of Iran where the mullahs were only one of the groups that toppled the Shah, but they took over. "They want to take over." In short, this is a zero-sum game.

As for the idea that the Islamists can form a legal party, "No way. . . . I will speak to them as individuals, as I will speak to anyone, but we will not recognize them as an organization." He gives the example of a recent funeral where he was approached by several of them, and he was willing to talk to them as individuals. On the specific case of the Hizb al-Wasat, al-Baz responds that this is just a front for the Ikhwan.

Only months before we met, there was discussion of a new party, the Hizb al-Mustaqbal, or the party of the future. Gamal Mubarak was mentioned as prospective head and al-Baz a leading member, but the possibility was squashed by no less than the president. Al-Baz dismisses these reports as rumors and emphasizes that he had nothing to do with the party. He goes on to argue that the president needs a constituency, and any new party would weaken his constituency. If President Mubarak is weakened, "what will his base be?" "I will tell you," and he points at his shoulders, and crosses his fingers as though tracing the crossed rifles of officers' military insignia. Even now, a half century after Lieutenant Colonel Nasser and the Free Officers rose to power, the power of the army retains a trump card. This leaves little real room for maneuver. The result is that no opposition political parties can be allowed to evolve, Islamist or otherwise.

#### BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

On the face of it, Hizb al-Wasat is a case study in failure that illustrates that arduous path that any aspiring opposition group must confront in Egypt, or in many of the other authoritarian states in the Middle East.

The zero-sum mentality that often informs ruling circles permits little scope for other than decorative and tame opposition groups with narrow political bases. What is missing, alas, is reflexivity in the regime. Though some bright regime intellectuals would dearly like to see change, few new ideas bubble to the upper reaches of the regime. When new ideas do surface they are merely melded into regime rhetoric, as in 1999 when Mubarak's embrace of "institutions" spawned momentary hope of serious reform but was quickly forgotten.

Nor is zero-sum thinking unique to those in power, as the example of the Ikhwan's reaction to al-Wasat illustrated. In an important sense, reform needs to begin at home—namely, within the long-entrenched opposition elites who fear the dissipation of their authority and privileges.

Certainly, there has been little external pressure on the Egyptian government to embrace reform. One is left to wonder whether a well-placed nudge in 1996 might have eased the path for al-Wasat, but the focus in Western capitals at that time, and certainly in Washington, embraced static stability, not reform (Indyk 2002). Now the mood seems to have changed dramatically, spurred significantly by the horrific events of September 2001. In November 2003, President George Bush eloquently embraced the project of democratic reform in the Middle East and pointedly rejected the longstanding penchant of the U.S. government for supporting stable autocracies:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. (Bush 2003)

One wonders whether the embrace of democracy extends to self-consciously Islamic groups such as al-Wasat. Important policy statements by Bush and others seem to envisage a secular model of political parties that might not only exclude the Ikhwan, but even parties like al-Wasat emphasizing the *shari'ah* as a collection of principles (Powell 2002). In high profile presentations U.S. officials note warily that democratic elections will bring greater power to "parties with an Islamic character" (Haass 2003). Yet, the al-Wasat example illustrates that "parties with an Islamic character" may well invoke creative political ideas and pragmatic principles. These are parties that deserve to be embraced and encouraged, not marginalized and feared.

Al-Wasat was not a shot out of the blue, but a culmination of tajdidi trends that have been developing dramatically since the 1980s (al-Mawla 2000; Norton 2002). It is a modern manifestation of liberal Islam, but its commitment to interpret *shari'ah* flexibly flows also naturally from the modernism of Muhammad 'Abduh, almost a century ago. When he



created the Ikhwān in 1928, Hassan al-Banna was more comfortable with Rashid Rida's conservative Salafism than with 'Abduh's modernism. Now the paths are recrossing, as reflected even in the comments by the Supreme Guide. The emergence of al-Wasat does not mark a new azimuth as much as a new context and a new era in Islamist politics. In this sense, it is an instructive sample of modern political parties that will appear with increasing regularity throughout the Muslim world.

## NOTES

1. These trends are described in a lecture broadcast on WBUR (Norton 2002a), and the contending perspectives on these trends in Islamic thinking are the subject of a Ford Foundation-funded project on *Tajdid* (or renewal) that the author cochaired with Bahman Bakhtiari in 2001. The project will resume in 2004.
2. Four authors provide informative accounts of Hizb al-Wasat. Joshua Stacher (2001, 2002) has done yeoman service by putting together a valuable collection of factual material, as well as offering his own insights. Caryle Murphy (2002) reflects on her contemporaneous reportage of the Hizb al-Wasat and contextualizes the party in the broader Islamic debate over reform. Anthony Shadid (2001) offers crisp and thoughtful reportage, and Sa'ud al-Mawla (2000) successfully analyzes the case (in Arabic) in the broader historical context of the Ikhwān.
3. Professor Fathad Kazemi and I collaborated on several research projects during this period, notably the Civil Society in the Middle East project at New York University, which we directed together. My conclusions from the mid-1990s reflect fieldwork that Kazemi and I conducted together, and I could not have developed some of these ideas without his inspiration.
4. Three years after al-Wasat filed its first application, two more Islamist parties were proposed, but they had a very different pedigree from al-Wasat's. The two, respectively, were drawn from the Gama'at Islamiyya and al-Jihad, both notorious for antigovernment violence and acts of terrorism. Kamal Habib's Reform Party (al-Islah) and the Islamic Law Party (Hizb al-shari'ah) were both denied legal status in 1999 (Murphy 2002).
5. See Islam on Line (in Arabic): <http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/contemporary/politic/2000/article30S.shtml>. The author is indebted to Maha 'Eid, who located some of these materials.
6. Amani Abu-Shakra's assistance in translating the program was indispensable, especially in those sections that stymied my ability in Arabic.

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