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THE BAFFLING ALLIANCES IN THE ARMENIA- AZERBAIJAN CONFLICT

Mritika Senthil

The US and its allies have disagreed with Russia and Iran almost everywhere. One year after Mahsa (Jina) Amini was killed by the Islamic Republic’s “morality police” for allegedly violating the country’s mandatory hijab laws, the US has slapped sanctions on 40 Iranian officials responsible for the violence against peaceful protesters.¹ After Russia faced backlash from the US and the West for invading Ukraine, Iran rushed to Russia’s defense by supplying it with drones and promising to boost bilateral trade.²

But this dynamic fell apart in the Nagorno-Karabakh region—a mountain range spanning southwestern Russia to northern Iran, from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea—where a territorial conflict of four decades has come to a head. In September, Azerbaijan initiated a military offensive against Armenia over the disputed territory.³ Initially a de facto breakaway state officiated as the Republic of Artsakh, Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally

recognized as a part of Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, today Nagorno-Karabakh consists of over 99% ethnic Armenians. It is particularly coveted by its neighbors due to its abundant reserve of precious and semi-precious metals, like gold and copper. Tension intensified after Azerbaijan imposed a blockade over Armenia and the Republic of Artsakh—Azerbaijan’s most aggressive move in the past three decades—which has led to an ongoing humanitarian crisis that includes widespread rationing of essential goods and unemployment.⁴ Nevertheless, Azerbaijani troops continued to flank the Armenian border, a formerly demilitarized zone, until the entity of Artsakh was dissolved. A ceasefire was brokered by Russian mediators on September 20, and by early October, 80% of the territory’s population left what is now the Karabakh economic region of Azerbaijan for Armenia.

And it was during these attacks between the largely Christian Armenia and Turkic Muslim Azerbaijan that an unlikely

international order has emerged:

Supporters of Armenia:

the US, Iran, Russia

Supporters of Azerbaijan:

Israel, Turkey

How countries take a stand on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict defies our understanding of diplomatic alliances today, which are usually based on cold war blocs or formed along ideological lines. In Nagorno-Karabakh, however, old enemies have become allies as their interests converge. Consider Turkey and Israel, which do not always see eye to eye not least because of Israel’s repeated raids in Gaza. Turkey was the first country to recognize Azerbaijan as an independent state in 1991. Today, Azerbaijan is a significant foreign investor in Turkish industries while Turkey has become Azerbaijan’s principal conduit for natural gas exports.^{5,6} As for the alliance between Israel and Azerbaijan, both countries face common security threats, particularly from Iran,

the Gulf states, and Palestinian militant group Hamas (which has functioned as a proxy for the Iranian government). Israel has been supplying Azerbaijan with arms and military technologies, and in return, Azerbaijan provides the means for Israel to diversify its energy supply.⁷ With this partnership, Israel has consistently recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as an Azerbaijani territory in international forums.

In the opposing camp, Armenia and Iran have maintained cordial relations despite their ideological and religious differences. By backing Armenia, Iran curtails Turkish influence in the Caucasus and positions itself as a transit route for Armenian goods to the Persian Gulf. That Iran and Turkey would vie for influence near the Caspian Sea should surprise no one given their long-running animosity. But Russia’s security guarantee for Armenia—to the dismay of its ally, Turkey—would puzzle many observers. Indeed, Russia and have increasingly cozied up in recent years thanks to their shared political outlooks: authoritarianism, anti-westernism, and an irredentist desire to recover lost empires.⁸ But despite these similarities, Russia could not resist the security benefits

of allying with Armenia, i.e., a greater presence in the Caucasus.⁹ Both Russia and Armenia are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Established in 1992, this supranational body coordinates collective defense efforts



of Armenia, largely because the war in Ukraine has strained its resources.¹¹ Security in the Caucasus also preoccupies the US, so much so that it is willing to go against its all-weather ally, Israel, and support Armenia alongside Russia and Iran. The US worries that a potential Azerbaijani invasion of Armenia would destabilize the Middle East by spurring conflicts between Iran and Turkey.¹² Consequently, the secretary of state condemned Azerbaijan for “worsening an already dire humanitarian situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and undermining prospects for peace.”¹³ It is tempting to describe tensions in the Caucasus with divisive and reductionist rhetoric—the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is often misinterpreted as yet another example of the Christian-Muslim divide. But a close examination of the international players involved shows that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has only persisted for the sake of their geopolitical interests.

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MY LOVE:

A Name, A Journey, and a Touch of Love

Abdel Hubbi

In the tapestry of life, our names often serve as the first brushstrokes, painting the initial strokes of our identity. But for many of us, our names can be a source of curiosity, even bafflement. As a Syrian immigrant who found himself transplanted to the United States in 2003, I embarked on a journey marked by transformation and discovery, where my name—Abdel Hubbi—loomed large, a seemingly enigmatic combination of letters that had more to it than met the eye.

It all began with that cultural shift in 2003. A move from Syria to the United States brought with it a barrage of changes, not least of which was the challenge of adjusting to a new language, culture, and way of life. On my first day of school, the cultural shock

was nothing short of seismic. Language barriers rendered me virtually mute, and if that wasn't enough, my innate shyness ensured my silence took center stage.

Yet, as the years unfolded, something marvelous happened. That cocoon of silence slowly began to unravel, and I found my voice. And once I did, there was no stopping me. I dove headfirst into learning, asking questions, and exploring the wonders of the world around me. However, as I embraced my newfound voice and navigated the intricacies of American culture, there was one aspect of my identity that continued to intrigue me—my last name, “Hubbi.” In Arabic, it translated simply to “My Love.” Sounds romantic, right? But in the American context, it was, well, a

head-scratcher.

While others sported surnames like Smith, Cook, or Baker, mine was a single word, “Love.” I remember my futile attempts to decipher its meaning by scouring the depths of the internet. “H is for humble, U is for useful, B is for befriend...” were the bizarre results I encountered, leaving me more puzzled than before.

In fact, I even daydreamed about adopting a more conventional, less perplexing name like “Abdel Smith.” But the reality was far from ordinary, as I would soon discover.

It only occurred to me recently that my relationship with my last name is tied to the relationship I have with my father. After all, it was his family's name. Growing up, I was raised mostly by my mom in her parents' house. I loved my



dad dearly, but our relationship consisted of silent moments, small talks, and long periods of distance. As typical of Middle Eastern culture, my mother never adopted my father's surname.

So while it had never before occurred to my young self to simply ask my dad about the origin of the name he gave me, a few days ago I decided to do so. After all, he would know better than my mom who I'd constantly annoy with questions about a name that was just as alien to her as it was to me.

His response prompted a chuckle:

“Because they loved each other.”

“Who?”

The twist in this narrative arrived unexpectedly as my father shared a striking revelation. It turned out that “Hubbi” wasn't just a random collection of letters; it was a profound testament to love and unity.

“Them. The people who made the name. They were carpenters I think, they were all such a great family and they decided to make a name for themselves.”

A family of carpenters, bound by their affection for each other, decided to forge this unique name for themselves. It was not merely a moniker; it was a symbol of love that transcended generations and bound a family together in their shared story.

“So they just... made it?”

“Yup.”

In the end, my name isn't just a word; it's a symbol of love and unity. It serves as a reminder that identity is a blend of culture, history, and, most importantly, love. It's an unusual name, but it's mine, and I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

My full name is *عبد حبيب حزيق* — Abdel Aziz, my love.



Worthy and Worthless Victims through the Lens of Palestine Writes

Arabic words filled the air and everywhere I turned I recognized the distinct black and white pattern of khuffeyhs. Laying on the floor was a massive map of Palestine and those surrounding it pointed at cities describing their family history. Laughs, hugs, and great conversation surrounded me and for the first time on Penn's Campus I felt at home.

The Palestine Writes Literature Festival, which was held at the University of Pennsylvania in late September, was truly the first of its kind.¹ Speakers and performers such as Dana Dajani and Darin Sallam came to represent both the culture of Palestinians and other indigenous communities at

large. "There were not just Arabs at the event; there were so many different communities: indigenous people from around the world, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Jewish people," a second-year student who attended the festival told me.

But despite the unprecedented turnout and overwhelmingly positive commentary by those who attended the event,² Palestine Writes had attracted a concerted effort by those eager to disperse any form of Palestinian gathering. The opposition campaign began at the university level. Two weeks prior to the festival, Penn officials, including President Elizabeth Magill, released a statement which struck a patronizing

anonymously submitted

tone: "We unequivocally—and emphatically—condemn antisemitism as antithetical to our institutional values. As a university, we also fiercely support the free exchange of ideas as central to our educational mission. This includes the expression of views that are controversial and even those that are incompatible with our institutional values."³ Implicit in their message was a vicious insinuation: that the celebration of Palestinian culture is something that Penn must grudgingly accommodate—or even a necessary evil that Penn must allow—to defend the higher value of free speech, rather than something that deserves institutional support as any other cultural activities on

campus do.

Even worse, by calling activists denouncing the Israeli government "antisemitic" and viewing the mere existence of Palestinian culture as a threat to the Jewish people, Penn officials dangerously conflated anti-zionism with antisemitism and absolved the Israeli government of its responsibility for 75 years of settler-colonialism. Zionism—the modern political movement that advocated for a Jewish state to be established in Palestine—popularized the infamous slogan, "A land without a people for a people without a land", which dismissed the Arab natives who have inhabited Palestine for centuries as politically illegitimate.^{4,5} Zionism was responsible for the Nakba ("catastrophe"), which expelled over half of Palestinians from their homelands in 1948.⁶ Zionism is what has caused more than five million Palestinian refugees to be scattered across the Middle East.⁷

By contrast, Judaism is a religion that transcends governments and ideologies and counts among its adherers many who are critical of the Israeli state. Jack Starobin, a fourth-year student involved in Penn Chavurah, a progressive Jewish group, worries that the conflation of criticism of the Israeli state with racism against the Jewish people is self-defeating. "When you claim that anything that is critical of Israel is antisemitic, it makes it very hard to talk about the real threats to Jewish safety with the gravity they deserve," Starobin explained. He noted that practicing Judaism is a way for him to stay connected with the



people who have passed this faith down generations, including his great-grandmother who fled from anti-semitism in Eastern Europe.

Lamentably, the Israeli government has taken advantage of Jewish people's past sufferings to justify the Israeli state's present abuses. Specifically, the Israeli government has weaponized the Holocaust to justify violence against Palestinians, whom it called the "new Nazis."⁸ This is a sinister rhetorical trick, as it reduced hapless Palestinians into an inhuman force of evil and legitimized the Israeli army's extrajudicial killing. Consequently, the Israeli government has been acting freely without accountability. It got away from committing war crimes, including but not limited to collective punishment in Gaza, which has led to the death of 10,000 Palestinians and counting.⁹ It has been denying Palestinians' right to return, which is against international law.¹⁰ Even when an Israeli parliament member stated the intention of "erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the earth,"¹¹ people

shrugged it off because they likened Israel's war on civilians to "fighting Nazis." This ridiculous rationale for collective punishment, which violates the Geneva Convention, is no different from Russia's claim that its war on Ukrainian civilians is a "denazification" campaign.

A better approach is to recognize that even the formerly oppressed can turn into oppressors themselves, and that lessons learned about oppression in one place have been conveniently forgotten in another. From within the Palestinian border to college campuses in the US, people who associate themselves with the Palestinian cause are confronting a powerful and coercive establishment. For example, after several law firms rescinded offers from students who signed open letters that criticized the Israeli government,¹² students fear that their career would be jeopardized if they were to reveal their sympathy for the Palestinians. A second-year student involved in pro-Palestinian activism told me that she had to suspend her LinkedIn account and set her other social media profiles

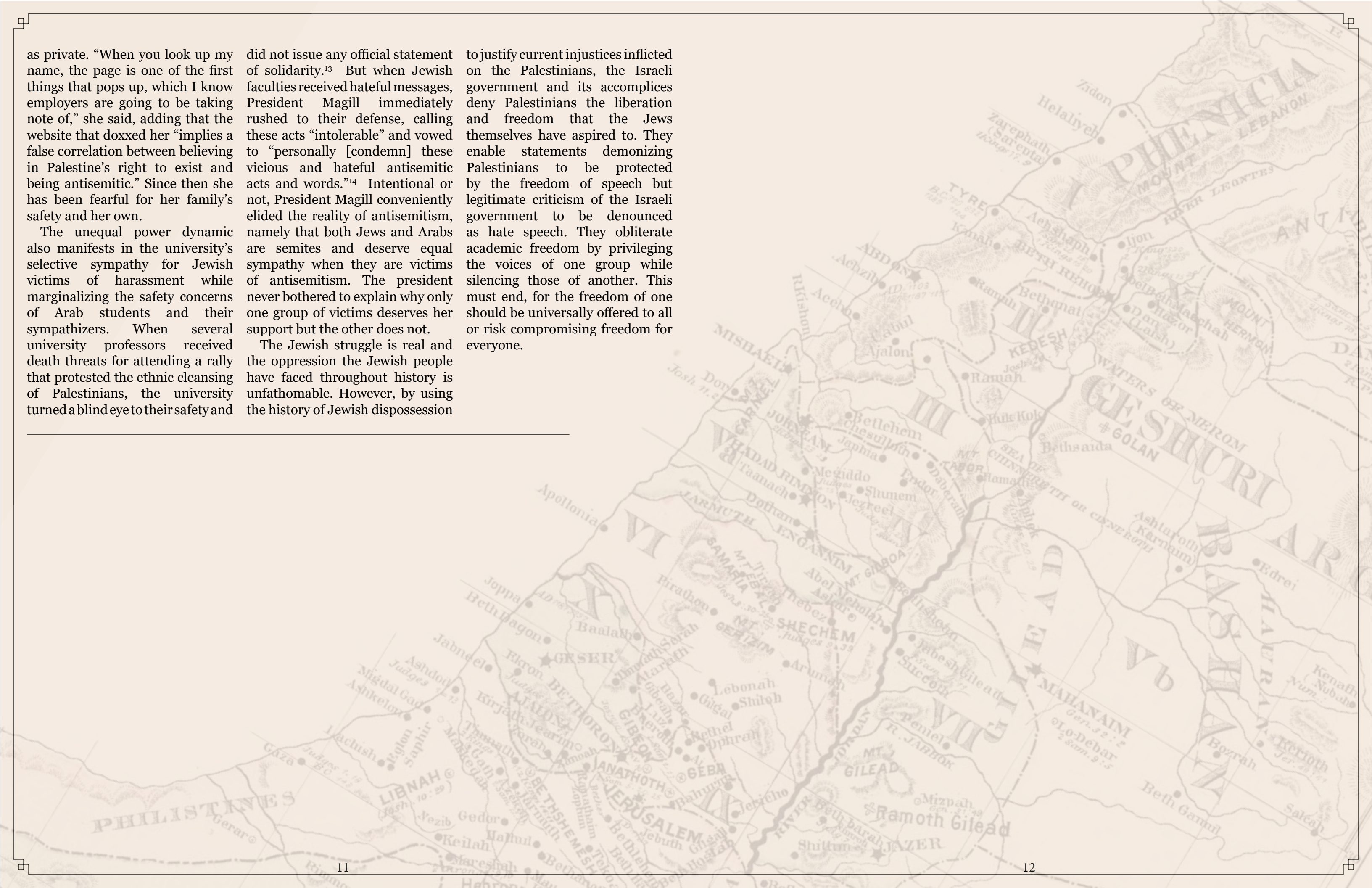
as private. “When you look up my name, the page is one of the first things that pops up, which I know employers are going to be taking note of,” she said, adding that the website that doxxed her “implies a false correlation between believing in Palestine’s right to exist and being antisemitic.” Since then she has been fearful for her family’s safety and her own.

The unequal power dynamic also manifests in the university’s selective sympathy for Jewish victims of harassment while marginalizing the safety concerns of Arab students and their sympathizers. When several university professors received death threats for attending a rally that protested the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, the university turned a blind eye to their safety and

did not issue any official statement of solidarity.¹³ But when Jewish faculties received hateful messages, President Magill immediately rushed to their defense, calling these acts “intolerable” and vowed to “personally [condemn] these vicious and hateful antisemitic acts and words.”¹⁴ Intentional or not, President Magill conveniently elided the reality of antisemitism, namely that both Jews and Arabs are semites and deserve equal sympathy when they are victims of antisemitism. The president never bothered to explain why only one group of victims deserves her support but the other does not.

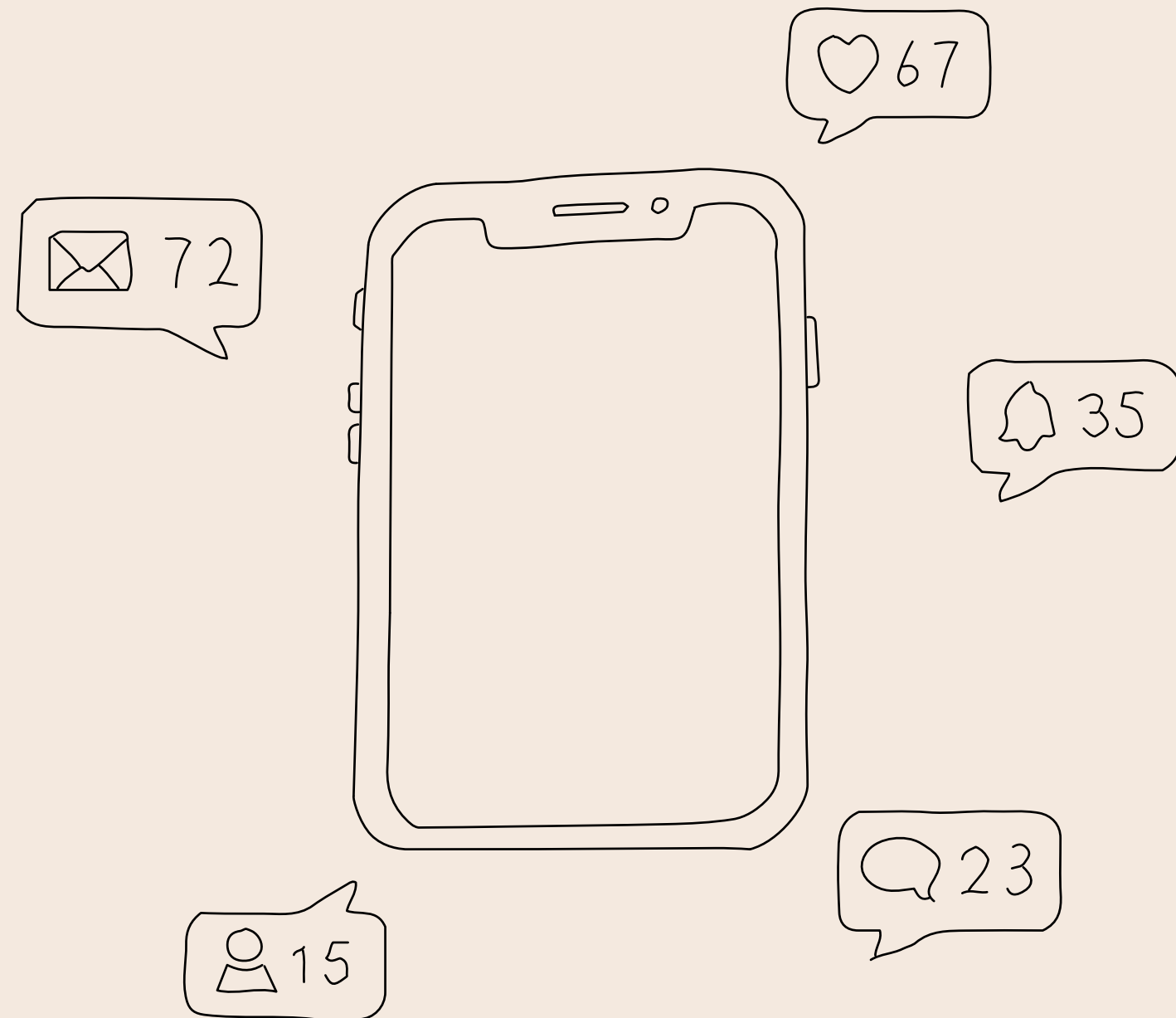
The Jewish struggle is real and the oppression the Jewish people have faced throughout history is unfathomable. However, by using the history of Jewish dispossession

to justify current injustices inflicted on the Palestinians, the Israeli government and its accomplices deny Palestinians the liberation and freedom that the Jews themselves have aspired to. They enable statements demonizing Palestinians to be protected by the freedom of speech but legitimate criticism of the Israeli government to be denounced as hate speech. They obliterate academic freedom by privileging the voices of one group while silencing those of another. This must end, for the freedom of one should be universally offered to all or risk compromising freedom for everyone.



How did Egyptian social media seal the fate of the Saad Lamjarred rape case?

Amira Ahmed Gamil, The American University in Cairo



Saad Lamjarred is a 32-year-old Moroccan singer who has been a shining sensation in the Arab music industry for more than a decade. He first entered the public eye after earning second place in the Lebanese talent-show “Superstar” in 2007. More recently, he has been in the global spotlight after his hit single, “Lm3allem”, earned a Guinness World Record in 2015 for being the first music video to have over 1 billion views within 3 months of its release. Ever since then, he has toured all over the MENA region and beyond, with concerts in Dubai, Riyadh, and most importantly to this case-study, Cairo.

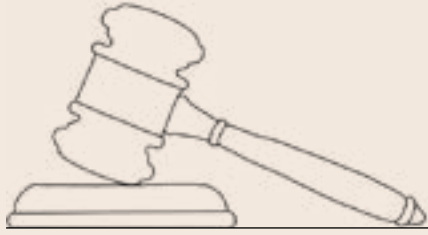
However, all of Lamjarred’s glamour was put to a halt when Laura Prioul, a 21-year-old French woman, accused him of raping her in a Parisian hotel in 2016.¹ The victim was allegedly approached by the Moroccan star in a nightclub, where after speaking for a while, he suggested going back to his hotel room on the Champs-Élysées. Prioul initially consented to being kissed by Lamjarred; however, Lamjarred ignored her subsequent request to stop being more intimate, which is when the rape occurred. Lamjarred got arrested for 6 months and eventually paid the bail to get out of prison under electronic monitoring. This was the Moroccan singer’s third involvement in a case regarding harassment, rape or sexual abuse

in a third country (the first two occurred in the US and Morocco, respectively).

It is tempting to play down Lamjarred as yet another male public-figure falling from grace due to charges of rape and harassment. In fact, Lamjarred’s case was exactly what the Arab world needed to discover whether rape apologists are still dominating the sociocultural scene, especially after Egypt’s Me-Too movement came in full swing in 2020. The Egyptian Me-Too movement saw various advancements in women’s rights after similar incidents of rape, sexual abuse and harassment triggered public outcry. Women’s rights and their experiences with discrimination became the most talked-about issue across different Egyptian media at the time. In our particular case, social media platforms channeled and amplified people’s sympathy for Prioul, which increased the public’s awareness of harassment.

It is worth exploring how the use of social media has catalyzed social changes such as feminist movements in the MENA region. In order to properly analyze this case, we first need to understand the sociological scene in Egypt at the time. According to a 2013 UN Women study, 99.3% of Egyptian women experienced a form of harassment at least once, leading to a buildup of rage from gender-equality activists and

victims of harassment.² In 2020, due to COVID-19 restrictions and quarantine requirements, social media platforms were the main outlets for the Egyptian youth and ignited Egypt’s first modern feminist wave. It all started when Sabah Khodir, a poet and women’s rights Activist, decided to dedicate her personal account to exposing a college student accused of harassing and blackmailing hundreds of women.³ This was followed by the creation of Assault Police, an online platform dedicated to exposing Egyptian men accused of harassment. This encouraged more and more women to come forward with their stories of sexual harassment and sexual abuse. It provided resources for reporting cases of harassment, legal actions women can take, and other necessary tools to combat harassment. Soon enough, Sabah Khodir was joined by Zeina Amr, founder of CatCallsofCairo, an online platform raising awareness against sexual harassment in Egypt, as well as activist Malak Boghdadi, who constantly posted updates on harassment cases on her personal account, which have garnered over 300,000 followers on Instagram. SpeakUp, a non-governmental feminist organization that supports victims of all sorts of abuse, became a key player in such campaigns as well.⁴ They provided female victims with free legal and psychological



support and assisted them with assembling evidence that would verify their claims.

Their call for women's rights National Council of Women, and numerous public figures ranging from celebrities to media personalities. After successfully pushing for the imprisonment of the college student, feminist activists exposed another mass gang rape that allegedly occurred back in 2014. This case specifically became the steppingstone that strengthened the credibility of the above-mentioned feminism activists, as it led to changes in the Egyptian Parliament's criminal procedure law and a nine-month investigation by Interpol.⁵ Together, these outspoken women succeeded in changing the narrative and destroyed the taboo regarding discussing sexual harassment in Egypt, even when it implicates public figures and socialites. By 2020, Saad Lamjarred has become one of the most well-known public-figures to be exposed by online campaigns.

Netizens have lambasted Lamjarred as soon as the allegations came out. However, it wasn't until 2020 that the anti-Lamjarred campaign clearly came to life. After the allegations, Cairo Show theater faced online backlash after announcing that Lamjarred will be performing there in December; people voiced their disapproval with a hashtag titled "We Don't Want Saad Lamjarred in

Egypt". The hashtag started being heavily circulated on Instagram and Twitter and trended in Egypt for multiple weeks. Shortly after the online campaign, Cairo Show theater removed all Lamjarred-related announcements posted on their social media, and the tickets could no longer be found on Egypt's ticket sales platform.⁶ Social media's role didn't end there, as it played an important role again in 2021. Triggered by an announcement that Lamjarred will be hosted by actor Amir Karara on ONTV channel, people took to Instagram and Twitter using the same hashtag to stop the episode from being aired.⁷ Once again, the hosting channel did not post any announcements that the episode is cancelled. Instead, they simply removed the earlier announcement from their social media accounts and said that it is postponed until further notice.⁸ The trending-hashtag made a return once more in 2022, when Taj Mahal Sharm, a nightclub in Egypt's Sharm El Sheikh, announced that Lamjarred will be performing there in a few days. Speak Up and Egyptian feminists not only made the hashtag trending again, but they also gave the club low ratings on Google Reviews, used the hashtag in the club's comments and spammed their inbox asking for the show to be cancelled. Despite the campaigns launched by such feminists, Egypt's Union for Music Professions issued a permit to allow

Lamjarred to perform in Sharm El Sheikh, and the performance took place normally.

Whether or not such campaigns succeeded in drawing Lamjarred away from Egypt, it is worth exploring how the evolution of the internet and social networking websites has allowed people to unite and break down societal barriers like never before. Despite the existence of different media channels and communication platforms, social media is arguably the most efficient when it comes to catalyzing societal change in Egypt. Thanks to social media's anonymity, victims of rape and harassment were able to speak up and come forward with their experiences, which helped feminist campaigns to gain traction. For example, according to Statista, 49% of Asian Pacific anonymous social media users go anonymous in order to exercise their freedom of speech. This allowed women who, once felt restricted by Egyptian social norms, to now openly share their experiences without feeling ashamed. Moreover, the anonymity feature of social media has inspired amendments to Egyptian laws, where the Egyptian Parliament now emphasizes confidentiality of the names and any data of victims of harassment who report such incidents.⁹ Following this new legal amendment, the National Council for Women encouraged victims to reach out to them in

complete anonymity, which has led to over 400 women submitting complains regarding harassment, rape, and sexual abuse.

The activism of key opinion leaders also contributed to the campaign, as these feminist leaders managed to put such a controversial topic in the spotlight and encourage everyone to protest Lamjarred's presence in Egypt. Their achievement is explained by the two-step-flow theory of mass communication, where in this case, feminist activists were opinion leaders who delivered an important message to the public, and the public immediately followed their message, due to the high regard they held these activists with. In other words, the public did not passively consume content on social media; instead, they were selective of whom they followed and paid particular attention to established activists. That the campaign against Lamjarred has abided by the most powerful mass communication theories is further proof of how strong the message is, as it fits the criteria that is needed for a message to be widely communicated to an audience as large as the Egyptian population.

To conclude, social media's role in the Egyptian Me Too movement will leave an indelible mark in the history of social change and women's rights. It remains an unparalleled campaign that exposed a multinational artist and spokeupaboutfemaleharassments,



a topic on which Egypt has remained silent for decades. The changes it brought about shows that the power of social media transcends the digital world and can facilitate changes in the real world. It is also solid proof of the importance of social activists who could galvanize their constituents unite everyone under the same cause. Social media became an archive of important moments in history such as this one, where features such as hashtags, reposts and comments became integral

aspects that can lead to change on legal and sociological levels. Given the increasing digitalization of our society, it is all the more important to acknowledge the power of social media in aiding social movements like Me Too, both in Egypt and beyond.

The Yemeni Civil War: A Geopolitical Playground

Maya Makhoul

Since 1962, Yemen has been plagued by a series of internal conflicts that attracted interventions from its power-hungry neighbors. These external actors have used Yemen as a political battleground for power politics against their adversaries. As a result, the internal conflict in Yemen—both present and past—have far-reaching geopolitical consequences, even garnering attention from large powers such as the United States. Foreign involvement in Yemen's civil wars is not a new phenomenon, and it has shaped the country in profound ways while always producing one loser: Yemeni civilians.

The roots of the current Yemeni Civil War lie in the power struggle between the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and the Saudi- and UAE-backed anti-Houthi factions, with the rebels seeking to topple the government and seize control of the Yemeni capital, Sanaa. The Houthis took over Sanaa in 2014 before kickstarting their quest for control over the entire country. This power shift sparked a Saudi-led coalition intervention in 2015, including the UAE, which aimed to restore the internationally recognized government of President Hadi.

The dynamics of this conflict

are complicated, as it is both a religious conflict and a geopolitical one. It is at once about maintaining the regional balance of power, ensuring peace and stability in the Arab states, and preventing the spread of one branch of Islam over the other. Specifically, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are indirectly curbing Iran's military presence in the Middle East by opposing the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. In addition to security challenges, the Houthi rebels—an offshoot of Shia Islam—represent an ideological opposition to the Sunni Yemeni government, which means that the Yemeni Civil War has become a battleground for the broader religious rivalry between majority-Sunni Saudi Arabia and majority-Shia Iran.

Foreign policy objectives aside, the monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also fighting for their own survival by propping up a foreign regime. A revolutionary overthrow of the Yemeni government in their own backyard could inspire similar uprisings domestically. Not surprisingly, both Saudi Arabia and UAE are eager to nip any revolutionary movement in the bud.

This threat of destabilization, however, is not new. In 1963, Saudi Arabia also played a pivotal role in supporting the royalist regime in the North Yemen Civil War as part of a proxy war against Nasser's Egypt for fear of revolutionary contagions. In particular, Nasser's support for the republican government as part of his Pan-Arabist vision, at odds with the royalist regime, threatened to undermine Saudi Arabia's monarchy: if the monarchy in Yemen could be overthrown, then why couldn't the same happen in Saudi Arabia? By supporting royalist forces, Saudi Arabia aimed to safeguard its own political system and the legitimacy of the monarchy. Its goal remains the same today; only it is now joined by the UAE, which has a similar political system it seeks to protect.

However, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE are united in their reasoning for intervention in Yemen, their divergence on the method of intervention has soured their relationship, especially as Riyadh asserts itself as the region's financial hub.¹ Although both countries have been fighting against the Houthis since 2015, they backed different anti-Houthi factions. On the one hand, the UAE backs the Southern Transitional Council, which wants greater autonomy and potentially the restoration of an independent state, for Southern Yemen. Saudi Arabia on the other hand supports the inter-

nationally recognized Yemen government.² This has further complicated the political alliances, with rifts between the Gulf states on top of their divisions with the Iranians.

The ongoing conflict has had a devastating impact on Yemeni society and infrastructure, resulting in one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with 21.6 million people requiring some form of humanitarian assistance as 80 percent of the country struggles to put food on the table and access basic services.³ The humanitarian crisis has significantly expanded the international dimension of the conflict, with organizations such as the United Nations providing humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people and pressing the warring factions to cease hostilities and engage in peace talks.

Today, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are looking to scale back their involvement in Yemen for a number of reasons, not least due to pressure from the international community. However, retrenchment has only created more conflicts between the two Gulf states. Although the UAE withdrew troops from Yemen in 2019, it has continued to support their allies in Yemen, as it believes that regardless of any deal struck with the Houthis, the conflict is going to return. This is in contrast with the Saudis who are now more eager to get out of Yemen, as they feel they can negotiate the relationship

they want with the Houthis. Moreover, by disengaging from Yemen the Saudis hope to sweet-talk skeptical members of US Congress (who objected to Saudi bombing in Yemen) into ratifying a defense treaty between the US and Saudi Arabia.^{4a}

Today, the future for Yemen remains unclear. Saudi Arabia's incentive to please US congress by withdrawing from Yemen may no longer remain, as plans to normalize relations with Israel—together with the prospect of a defense pact with the US—are off the table following the October 7 Hamas attacks and ensuing Israeli retaliation. Still, the economic costs of the war may still encourage a slow withdrawal from Yemen. The Yemeni Civil War stands as a striking example of how a complex web of geopolitical and regional dynamics can turn a nation's internal strife into a battleground for international powers. The conflict has not only created devastating humanitarian consequences, but it has also strained relations among regional actors once united by common goals. As Saudi Arabia and the UAE reassess their involvement in the Yemeni conflict amid international pressure and their own shifting priorities, the path forward remains uncertain; the only thing certain is that the Yemeni civilians have paid a heavy price for the power politics in the region.

A Debate on the Paths to Religious Truth: al-Ghazali and Ibn Tufayl

Terra Zhang

Al-Ghazali and Ibn Tufayl are two of the most interesting medieval Islamic thinkers who debated the relationship between reason and revelation in one's attainment of truths about God. Their intellectual programs have two commonalities. First, both engaged with and critiqued the Farabian and Avicennan program of Aristotelian philosophy. Second, both wrote in response to Sufi literature. Al-Ghazali studied under a Sufi during his early education in Tus and eventually became a Sufi himself.¹ Ibn Tufayl longed for the distant and arguably mystical "oriental philosophy" of Avicenna,² and wrote in direct response to al-Ghazali's Sufi texts.

Integrating rationalistic and mystical thought, both al-Ghazali's autobiography *Deliverance from Error* and Ibn Tufayl's philosophical novel *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* investigate the paths to truth. In *Deliverance*, al-Ghazali recounts his earlier philosophy teaching in Baghdad, and his crisis upon realizing his attachment to worldly fame and alienation from God.

He went into ten years of isolation to practice the ecstatic union with God,³ a beatific state that surpasses any true intellectual knowledge about the divine. Hayy ibn Yaqzan pursued a different path. Growing up alone on an island under the care of a gazelle, Hayy could not even speak, but he intensely observed nature until he reasoned his way towards the existence of God. Hayy also strived for the mystical union with God, shutting himself in a cave where he contemplated nothing but God.

Apparently, Hayy's story challenges al-Ghazali's process of attaining truth by obviating the need for scripture, authority, or rituals. Hayy does not need a language to communicate with other believers; independent reasoning alone is sufficient. However, this broad generalization needs to be problematized upon a more careful examination of what the al-Ghazali and Hayy understand by religious truth – their shared aim of learning and religious experience. Al-Ghazali and Hayy both pursued two dimensions of

religious truth, the cognitive and the experiential. For al-Ghazali, the cognitive dimension, "knowledge," is an "ascertainment by apodeictic proof," but even more true than that is a "fruitful experience" or "tasting" of God.⁴ Hayy's story, too, is an allegory for the pursuit of religious truth, "first by thought and theory," then through the "brief state of the actual experience."⁵ With this two-part working definition of religious truth, I argue that while al-Ghazali and Hayy disagree about the extent to which independent reasoning gives one access to the cognitive truth, they have much more in common in their pursuit of experiential truth. I conclude with a final evaluation of al-Ghazali's and Hayy's position by placing these arguments into the overall set-up of their stories, suggesting that their disagreements boil down to the tension between the private and communal natures of belief and religious experience.

The cognitive truth

In the process of acquiring true propositions about God's attributes and the ethical standards that His subjects should follow, al-Ghazali's method involves an authority that is absent in Hayy's world. When an authority is present, one could enjoy the convenience of bypassing independent reasoning, trusting that the authority has done the reasoning before telling her what to believe or do. However, trusting an authority also risks accepting conventions that are established not on reason, but on that authority's facade of reputability.

Al-Ghazali was well aware of the dangers of the uncritical acceptance of authority (taqlid), an epistemic attitude marked by knowing truth by men instead of knowing men by truth.⁶ Al-Ghazali distanced himself from the theologians (mutakallimun) who upheld orthodoxy without inquiring into its nature and truth.⁷ He also criticized the Banites, who staunchly believed in the infallibility of Imams and opposed anyone who formed their own opinions.^{8,9} As an absurd implication of the Banites' taqlid, a Muslim has to forgo his duty of prayer: when the time of prayer comes, he would not figure out the qibla by himself, but insist on obtaining instructions from a faraway Imam who would only be available when the time of prayer has passed.¹⁰

But what about independent reasoning, or literally an "effortful exertion (ijtihad),"¹¹ which al-Ghazali subscribes to? Al-Ghazali discusses how problematic ijtihad is in philosophy. Math and logic provide the tools for independent reasoning and the demonstration of propositions, which lead to knowledge.¹² However, these two branches of philosophy also breed vanity and contempt for religion,¹³ and they could even be hijacked by unbelievers to serve their agenda.¹⁴ Metaphysics is more problematic, as one risks believing in blasphemous propositions such as the world's eternity.¹⁵ These errors could be a result of independent reasoning going astray: in his *Incoherence of Philosophers*, al-Ghazali was able to lay bare the steps of reasoning where Avicenna stumbled. Metaphysical errors could also be attributed to the following of wrong authorities—in this case, the transmitters of Aristotelianism, al-Farabi and Avicenna.

Here al-Ghazali faces a dilemma. If both taqlid and ijtihad could lead to error or unbelief, and even accomplished philosophers could err in their independent reasoning or their choice of authority, where should one land on the spectrum between taqlid and ijtihad? Hayy provides a radical solution by eliminating taqlid altogether. Hayy's innate capacity to reason landed him on the truths that completely agree with Islam. Hayy started out as an empiricist interacting with

the physical world, finding out that an animal's life principle is incorporeal by dissecting his mother gazelle's heart.¹⁶ Hayy subsequently categorized his surrounding objects into species and genera,¹⁷ and abstracted the incorporeal forms that endow corporeal things with being.¹⁸ He left the sensory world further and further behind, until he finally reasoned that there must be one single incorporeal Being that begets all the individual forms—and that Being is God.¹⁹

Hayy's success in independent reasoning challenged the role of any authority. He even did better than those who had access to authority: without the interference of taqlid, Hayy sidestepped the eternity of the world error that al-Ghazali had criticized, since Hayy himself could figure out the absurd infinite regression that was to ensue had there been no first cause in time.²⁰ In fact, al-Ghazali also inquired into what the world would be like without authority or external influences on one's belief. He briefly considered fitra, the original disposition of a child without the corrupting influence of his non-Muslim parents.²¹ If part of fitra is the capacity for independent reason, al-Ghazali has never approved an unrestrained use of it. Al-Ghazali was still grappling with the impossible balance between authority and independent reason, but Hayy's experience gives a beautiful illustration of what that fitra could accomplish intellectually.



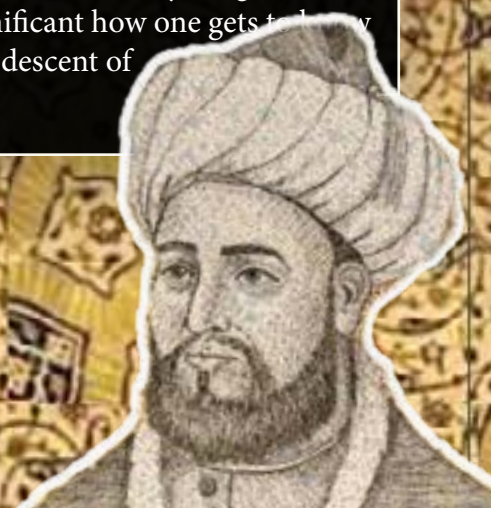
The experiential truth

Are we to say that Hayy is superior to al-Ghazali in the attainment of religious truth? In fact, when we look at the experiential religious truth, they share a significant common ground. Hayy and al-Ghazali both experienced the mystical union with God, an ineffable ecstasy of losing all their minds and selves to God alone.²² This epistemic mode is entirely different from either independent reasoning or dutiful consultation with the right authority. To al-Ghazali, the difference between knowledge and the beatific union with God is like that between knowing what it means to be drunk and being drunk.²³ The blissful mystical state transcends the grasp of the intellect,²⁴ and transports a believer to an absolute certainty that neither sense perception nor rational data could ever attain.²⁵ Similarly, Hayy found mystical union to be incommensurable with reason and thought, and trying to describe that ecstasy with words is like “wanting to taste colors.”²⁶

The ineffability and elusiveness of the mystic union with God seem to put this state beyond the reach of conscious control. As al-Ghazali notes, his state of absolute intimacy with God was achieved not by his own effort in reasoning and demonstration, but by the descent of a light which “God Most High cast into my breast.”²⁷ Yet, both al-Ghazali and Hayy consider right belief, or the cognitive dimension of religious truth, as the foundation for any possible mystic experience. Before embarking on his ten-year contemplation of God, al-Ghazali had already acquired from rational

and revealed knowledge a “sure and certain faith in God Most High,” as well as a belief in the truth of prophecy and the Last Day²⁸. Similarly, Hayy’s desire to embrace and unite with God was also based on his genuine understanding of God’s absolute goodness and perfection.²⁹

Difficult as it is to attain through cognitive means, the insuperable mystical union with God does not take away the need for a believer’s striving. Al-Ghazali delineates his gradual self-purification to get close to God: he distributed his wealth³⁰, shut himself in the Dome of the Rock,³¹ and never ceased practicing and aspiring to that state.³² Hayy’s striving towards God was rooted in his cosmological knowledge about God’s creations. He devised for himself a tripartite “ladder” towards God, in which he would first imitate the non-human animals, then the celestial bodies, and finally God.³³ He first suppressed his bodily desires by eating the bare minimum to survive, thus moving himself one step away from his corporeal nature.³⁴ He then took care of plants and animals just like how the heavenly bodies nourish them with light, and imitated the spinning of stars so that he might lose his senses somewhat.³⁵ The final part of his ascent to God is even further removed from the sensory world: he secluded himself just like al-Ghazali did, and tried to get rid of his physical self—motion included—to devote all his being towards God.³⁶ At this point, when Hayy and al-Ghazali had “attained His identity”³⁷ to the point that everything else vanished, when both are truly being that very state of ecstasy, it becomes insignificant how one gets to know God. Reason, revelation, and authority are all humbled and dwarfed by the descent of divine power.



After attaining truth

How do we make sense of the divergences and parallels in al-Ghazali’s and Hayy’s attainment of the truth, both cognitively and experientially? Do the brief moments of mystical union that they share make them more similar than different?

After becoming a mystic, al-Ghazali went back to teaching. Al-Ghazali sees himself as the solution to the impossible balance between taqlid and ijihad. When one must either reason correctly or choose the right authority—both very high expectations for the masses, he, a Sufi, was the right authority to follow. Hayy eventually befriended Absal, a solitude-loving Muslim who was astounded by the purity of Hayy’s devotion to God. Absal invited Hayy to enlighten the most intelligent Muslims back in his home country, but Hayy found it difficult to change the minds steeped in prejudice,³⁸ so he went back to solitude. Once again, Hayy had good reason to reject authority: authoritative indoctrination had closed the minds of the so-called intelligent men, who upheld a kind of taqlid similar to that of the Banites.

Besides his consistent rejection of authority, Hayy’s more fundamental departure from al-Ghazali also comes to the fore. Hayy views belief and religious experience as a private matter, preferring to contemplate in solitude and practice the intimate union with God. Al-Ghazali views belief and religious experience as communal. He brought his elevated insights of mysticism back to teaching, hoping to revitalize the faith of those who had not experienced mystical ecstasy and needed some handholding to lead a faithful life. Al-Ghazali defines faith as “favorable acceptance of it [fruitful experience] based on hearsay and experience of others.”³⁹ Religious belief is a communal matter, with the Sufi authorities setting the standard for all to follow.

For al-Ghazali, consensus, convention, and authority are required not just of belief. They also apply to the non-cognitive religious experiences, such as the observance of religious laws and rituals. Al-Ghazali is, after all, part of the communal institution of religion. Of religion’s institutional character Hayy was critical. Hayy doubted whether rituals are only trappings of Islam or if they actually improve the believers’ character, since these rituals cannot even check the believers’ intemperance and cupidity.⁴⁰ Hayy even questioned whether languages were a hindrance or a help: why use languages as symbols that veil the divine truth, instead of letting everyone access the truth directly? In fact, when the revealed truths are stipulated in a language, interpreters could not even agree on whether to read them exoterically or esoterically.⁴¹ In sum, Hayy’s success in arriving at religious truths without the institution raises a question: are rituals and languages just unnecessary crutches on one’s way to true belief? By this line of reasoning, Hayy could even criticize al-Ghazali’s decision to return to teaching. Al-Ghazali thought that only Sufis like himself could guide those who were unable to identify the right authority to follow, and this intellectually elitist attitude is unnecessary and unjustified given the power of human’s independent reason.

However valid Hayy’s criticisms may be, his vacuum-like environment for improving reason and purifying character should be remembered as an allegory and a thought experiment. Insofar as religion exists as a communal institution, the disciplining of belief and practice is inevitable. So is maintenance of an intellectual hierarchy—sometimes by veiling the truth—by the gatekeepers of truth that al-Ghazali envisions himself to be. Are we to maintain the institutional expectations and authoritative checks on religious truths, or should we set individuals free to understand and strive for God in their own ways? The tension among reason, revelation, and authority is never resolved by the debate between al-Ghazali and Hayy. And so is tension between the private and the communal nature of belief.

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**“You have something in this world,
so stand for it.”**

Ghassan Kanafani



fenjan