

# INTRODUCTION

**E**ducated in France since his childhood in the schools of the Republic, including that of the Alliance Israélite, my father was naturally in favor of state secularism and the full integration of Jews in their country of citizenship, and hostile to any form of Jewish nationalism. Though an atheist or a deist—I have never known precisely—he was nevertheless faithful to Judaism’s traditions. He would celebrate the great feasts—Passover, Rosh Hashanah or the Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement—while abridging the prayers and services generously. He said nothing, apart from gently teasing me, of my teenage crisis, when I decided to attend evening courses in a synagogue to study the Holy Scriptures (including the Talmud), the prelude to a career as a rabbi (this is indeed what I believed before losing my faith). Nor was he against my choice when I joined a youth club of the Hashomer (the Young Guard), a Zionist movement with Marxist tendencies. I suspected that my father, like myself, knew precious little about Zionism and Marxism, ideologies which were apparently absent from his intellectual world. I left the club a year later, disappointed by its pretense of reconciling Jewish nationalism and Marxist internationalism.

Every five years, my father would save enough money to offer us holidays in Lebanon, where the abundance of water, the exuberance of plants, and the generosity of orchards would contrast with the dryness of Egypt, to our delight. A wobbly train from another age would take us across Sinai in a deafening roar of scrap iron. A bus would then take us to Tel Aviv, where we would visit my brother, who had emigrated to Palestine before the war, less from idealism than because of his taste for adventure. Nothing else would detain us in the Holy Land, where we

would stay only for two or three days before enjoying three months of holidays in Lebanon.

We were well integrated into Egyptian society, where Jews had a privileged position. In the center of Cairo, business neighborhoods would collapse into deep lethargy during the Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah festivals. Many important retailers, small shops, banks, and trading businesses, as well as the stock exchange, would close doors. Coffee shops, restaurants, and cinemas would slow down. One had only to take a stroll in the capital's main arteries to see the glistening names of luxury stores like Cicurel, Chemla, Gattegno, Orosdi Back, Ades, Oreco, Le Salon Vert, and La Petite Reine, all belonging to extremely wealthy Sephardic families. Only one other luxury store was comparable to them: Sednaoui, the property of immigrant Syrians of the same name.

At the community's head was Chaim Nahum Effendi, Egypt's chief rabbi from 1925 to 1960, who was at the same time a senator and a member of the Royal Academy, a position he had obtained because of his exceptional erudition. An accomplished polyglot, he could express himself equally fluently in classical Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, French, and English. Because of the diplomatic missions he had undertaken for the Ottoman sultan until 1920, at the time when he occupied the position of Chief Rabbi of the Empire, he maintained serious relationships with the European political spectrum, an asset he had placed at the disposal of Egyptian authorities and the Jewish community. A pure product of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris, where he had spent the years of his youth, he shared with most Jewish Egyptian leaders "integrationist" or assimilationist convictions, just as he agreed with their reluctance as regards emigration (*aliyah*) to Palestine. Egyptian Jewry had for a long time confused Zionism and philanthropy (believing that their donations were for Jews escaping European persecution), to the great displeasure of leaders of the Zionist movement.

Moreover, the notables of the community, with the Great Rabbi at their head, gradually became conscious that the conflict in Palestine could have annoying consequences for Jews in a country where the majority of the population could only be hostile to the plans of the Zionists. This is why they would loudly emphasize their claim to be "both Jews and Egyptian patriots." This was a declaration of faith, which resulted in both support and protection from the king's palace and from the government, and even the goodwill of Muslim elites, before the

Jewish–Palestinian conflict took a turn for the worse. Quite naturally, Egyptians would feel a special sympathy for Palestinians, neighbors who were being dispossessed of part of their territory by a minority of foreign settlers.

It is in the aftermath of this conflict, and before his assassination on 12 February 1949, that I had the occasion of interviewing Hassan al-Banna on behalf of the *Egyptian Gazette*, the English-language daily that had hired me as a journalist. The supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood had taken the lead in a campaign against the creation of a Jewish state. He had stirred in me a sense of discomfort hard to define.

Stocky, dressed in an ample red tunic he would occasionally swap for a business suit, his face framed by a black beard and scruffy hair, he would welcome his guest with a churchlike smoothness, while staring at him with a particularly piercing look. He was apparently attempting to seduce the person he was speaking to by demonstrating cheerful cunning, metaphorical language, and well-structured analyses, which he would illustrate with an apparently inexhaustible stream of quotes and anecdotes. The fact that I was Jewish apparently left him indifferent.

A brilliant and passionate speaker, his demagoguery with prophetic tones would arouse the enthusiasm of crowds. He would maintain that only Islam had the capacity to remedy all evils affecting the population. Apart from Zionism, his favorite targets were British colonialism, the “moral turpitude” of westerners, “infidels” who were destroying economic power, and the upper classes, whose selfishness and rapacity he denounced. He would irrevocably condemn socialism and communism as foreign doctrines incompatible with the Prophet’s message. He would attract admirers and followers thanks to multiple networks of social, sports, and charity associations all over the country, with clinics and free schools that he would build, thus compensating for the failings of the state while using these institutions as a screen for the conspiracies and terrorist attacks he would incite.

In February 1949, two years after our interview, Hassan al-Banna was shot by agents of the government. They were avenging the murder of their prime minister, Mahmoud al-Nukrashi Pasha, by a Muslim Brotherhood member. The head of the Egyptian government had paid the ultimate price for his decision on 8 December 1948 to ban the Muslim Brothers. Two months later, it was the turn of the Brotherhood’s leader Hassan al-Banna to be murdered.

In the years that followed the Second World War, the national movement's priority was not to fight Zionism, but to resist British occupation. To that end, Wafdists (the militants of the left-wing Wafd Party) and communists were organizing public meetings, sit-ins, and other demonstrations. I participated in one of them in February 1946. It was the most massive one ever organized by the Central Committee of Workers and Students. The result was a bloodbath. Confronted with a compact and rough human wave overwhelming Ismailiya Square (which would become Tahrir Square in the aftermath of Nasser's revolution, and where British military quarters were then located), the police opened fire on the crowd, killing some twenty people and wounding hundreds. A bullet instantly killed a young student who was marching by my side. This scene of massacre was to stay graven in my memory. The head of government, Ismail Sidki Pasha, who was also one of the most powerful businessmen and managers of the country, arrested hundreds of Wafdist and communist party members, and outlawed clubs and publications they controlled. However, this event had the effect of giving momentum to the national movement, which would lead six years later to the collapse of the monarchy, a prelude to the evacuation of British bases from the Suez Canal area.

The political climate deteriorated beginning in November 1947, when the United Nations General Assembly decreed the partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and the other Palestinian Arab. This decision stoked the flames of Egyptian anger and heralded the beginning of an anti-Jewish campaign. The press, which until then had displayed moderation, began attacking the Jews, accusing them of being simultaneously "Zionists" and "communists." The creation of the State of Israel marked a divorce between Jews and their fellow citizens in the entire Arab world. Zionist leaders saw in this the confirmation of their idea that non-Muslim minorities had no future in Islamic countries: emigration to Israel resumed and increased. And yet my family, like many others, decided not to leave Egypt, still hoping for normalization.

King Faruq's government took advantage of the situation to discredit Marxists, whom they described as "Zionists in disguise." Apart from the Jewish background of many communist leaders, their decision to support the partition of Palestine into two states made them eminently suspect: in the government's eyes, they also implicitly endorsed the Zionist movement's aims, which they had for years considered "reactionary" and "racist." In

fact, Egyptian communists, like most of their comrades in the Arab world, were abiding by the Soviet Union's decision to vote in favor of Palestine's partition at the UN General Assembly, and thus in favor of the creation of a Jewish state. This unquestioning conformity was to cost them dearly for many years, while the Egyptian authorities remained profoundly hostile to Zionist ideology. For instance, the anti-Zionist Jewish League—a movement originating in one of the communist organizations—was dissolved by the Egyptian authorities and its leaders arrested.

The reaction of the authorities was even more brutal during Israel's invasion by Arab armies. On 15 May 1948, hundreds of people suspected of being communists or Zionists were interned in two different camps near Cairo. Many communist party members, both Egyptian citizens and foreigners, were expelled from the country. They were luckier than their Iraqi counterparts: three of the latter were hanged in Baghdad under the pretext that they were favorable to the partition of Palestine. I myself was detained, subjected to intense questioning on my political opinions, and released on bail a month later, while the inquiry for my trial was continuing. Taking into account the martial law then applicable, my internment could have lasted indefinitely.

Threatened by accusations of being both a Zionist and a communist, unemployed and without financial means, I decided to leave Egypt. The police did not oppose my departure, and consented to give me a one-way visa with no right of return. In December 1951, I embarked with mixed feelings: the sadness of becoming an exile, and the joy of traveling to France, my father's favorite country, where another life would await me, a life which would prove to be in many respects full of surprises. A few months later, on 23 July 1952, the Free Officers led by Gamal Abd al-Nasser seized power and established the republic.

Some sixty years later, I am now a witness of the "spring" inundating the Arab world. No one would have bet that the region would be shaken by popular uprisings, until then almost unheard of in the area. Nor would anyone have predicted that heads would roll; that the Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali would flee; that Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian head of state, would be tried for high treason; that the Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh would be obliged to give up his post; and that Bashar al-Assad would provoke a bloodbath in his attempt to preserve his stranglehold over Syria. A new era is now opening, with no way for us to ascertain what the outcome will be. Free elections in Tunisia and Egypt

have brought in the Islamists, who have made a commitment to respect scrupulously the principles of democracy. Why not, since they in fact hold a majority of seats in elected assemblies?

If the pages that follow do not explicitly announce the birth of an Arab Spring, they are at the same time its prelude and its justification.