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The Men Who Swallowed the Sun

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First published in 2022 by
Hoopoe
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt
One Rockefeller Plaza, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10020
www.hoopoefiction.com

Hoopoe is an imprint of The American University in Cairo Press
www.aucpress.com

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First published in Arabic in 2018 as *Qiyam wa inhiyar al-sad shin* by Dar Merit li-l-Nashr
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ISBN 978 1 649 03094 8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Abū Julayyil, Ḥamdī, author. | Davies, Humphrey T. (Humphrey Taman), translator.

Title: The men who swallowed the sun / Hamdi Abu Golayyel ; translated by Humphrey Davies.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021043210 | ISBN 9781649031990 (hardback) | ISBN 9781649030948 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Bedouins--Egypt--Fiction. | Immigrants--Egypt--Fiction. | Emigration and immigration--Fiction. | Marginality, Social--Fiction. | LCGFT: Fiction.

Classification: LCC PJ7808,J85 Q5913 2021 | DDC 892.7/37--dc23/eng/20211104

1 2 3 4 5 26 25 24 23 22

Designed by Adam el-Sehemy
Printed in the United States of America

For my friend Suleiman el-Fahd,
the great Kuwaiti writer and historian,
who believed in this novel the most
and urged me to write it.

The Great Leader Himself a Saad-Shin!

USAMA ENDS HIS NOVEL *Mr Doddery Dog, My Darling Dog* with an appendix. He finished the novel, bethought himself of a new chapter, which he called “a sort of appendix,” and stuck it on the end. So I’m going to begin my novel with a fact that may, or may not (I really have no idea), belong here. And that is that the Leader, who invented the Saad-Shin, was a Saad-Shin himself!

Of course, people disagree, as they do with every leader, over the date and place of his birth. One story says he was a Jew, his mother a Jewess from Tel Aviv. Another claims he was of French extraction, his father a pilot who fell from the skies of the Second World War onto the tent of a bunch of Libyan Bedouin roaming around in the desert, and that he married their daughter, who bore him the Leader. Both stories, though, contain ideological elements, justifying the suspicion they were planted by the Leader’s historical enemies, the first most likely by the Islamists, who thought he was an infidel, the second by the Leftists, who thought he was a traitor. And talking of the sky from which the Leader’s French (supposedly, of course) father fell, it should be noted that the heavens were indeed the Leader’s natural element and daily stomping ground: first, because his gaze was fixed upon them and them alone by force of nature, as it were, his neck having an upward curve to it that tilted his face directly toward them (or, as the singer has it, “his head gazing upwards from a desert,

ne'er bending but to pray—a horseman who holds horses dear, and camel mares, and sitting grounds where Bedouin of yesteryear hold court”); second, because, when American planes bombed the Leader's house with him inside, he was saved by a miracle that circulated, or was caused to circulate, among our Libyan brothers to the effect that divine intervention had indeed been involved and that a ghostly hand had descended from of the sky to protect him; and third, and most important, because of the Leader's habit of demanding of the highest heavens, in public and in front of everyone, what was he supposed to do with this people of his with whom he had been saddled and against the unbreakable rock of whose appalling, centuries-old pigheadedness all the Leader's theories on good governance, socialism, and equality (as recorded in his *Green Book*) smashed themselves to smithereens? Sometimes he'd forget about the heavens and address the people directly, saying, “Swear to God I don't know what to do with you! You deserve to have the colonists come back and colonize you all over again!”

But forget these two patently planted stories about the Leader's birth. The Leader, my dear friend, was born in the Fayoum, to a family sent running to Egypt, along with so many others, by the Italians, but not, they say, by the Italians as occupiers but by the Italians as fighters defeated in the Second World War, though others say they date back earlier than that and that the family belongs to Egypt's ancient Murabetin tribe of Bedouin. He was born in his maternal uncles' house in the settlement of el-Baraasa in the southern Fayoum, and his mother brought him back as a child to Sirte, from where he moved to Sabha—to the first spark, to the mighty 1st of September Revolution!

Don't think, though, that the reason the Leader invented the Saad-Shin was because he was a Saad-Shin himself. The Leader invented the Saad-Shin because he held such a poor opinion of his own people. They fell short of his ambitions

and Third World theories, and he thought that Egypt—Egypt above all—deserved his leadership more. No one believed more than the Leader in the idea of Egypt as Mother of the World. His other thought was that there just weren't enough Libyans. "What's two million on a land area of two million? And if only they were trained! Or educated! Or even just fit for work!"

Anyway, what is sure is that the Leader trusted the Saad-Shin more than the Libyans and chose them for his special operations inside and outside Libya precisely because he had faith in their performance. And it was they who liberated the village of Aouzou and raised over it, for the first time in history, the Libyan flag!



The Wellspring of the Saad-Shin

THE SAAD-SHIN WERE DRAWN from the Bedouin of Egypt or, more accurately, from the Bedouin of all the tribes, including those of Libya. Ethnically speaking, there are two kinds of Bedouin in Egypt—the Bedouin of the east and the Bedouin of the west, and they differ from one another in dialect, dress, traditions, and original homeland. The eastern Bedouin came in waves of emigration from the deserts of the Levant and the northern Arabian peninsula, and share the culture and language of those places. The western Bedouin came in waves from all over the western Sahara, from Morocco to Libya, and share the culture and language of those places.

Geographically speaking, the Bedouin of western Egypt are also of two kinds—the Bedouin of the margins, or of the desert and its borders, and the Bedouin of the sown (or, to be more precise, semi-sown) valley, namely the valley that snakes through the heart of Egypt, through the middle of the desert, from Alexandria to Aswan (note that the inhabited lands of Egypt form no more than three percent of its territory and that the cultivated parts form no more than one percent of its one million square kilometers).

The Bedouin of the margins, whether east or west of the valley, have lain outside the sphere of interest of modern Egypt's central government in Cairo ever since it was founded, following a history of successive occupations of the country, by Muhammad Ali, and they remain so. And not just