The Early 1970s Egyptian Student Movement – An Oral Narrative Based Perspective

Note: This paper was written as the final project for the "History of Modern Education in Egypt (HIST 3288)" course at The American University in Cairo under the supervision of Dr. Farida Makar. The paper is based on an interview I conducted.

The student movement back in the 1970s was very active mainly due to political life stagnation, lack of progress regarding the national question (Israeli occupation of Sinai), and generally worries of the public after the 1967 defeat. Here I explore the experience of one of the students of that critical period, Dr. Sameh, an engineer who attended university in Egypt as an undergraduate student during the 1970s pre-war period.

Sameh was born in Cairo to a middle class family. Growing up he was educated in public schools like most of the children of that time. He feels nostalgic about how good the schools are compared to now. He played gymnastics during his school life, becoming a national champion in gymnastics. He had a very hard time balancing athletics and academics, but still he managed to be ranked one of the top students in Thanaweyya Amma.

He then studied Engineering at Cairo University from 1968 and graduating in 1973, earning a Bachelor's degree, some months before the October War. Again, he was always top ranked and earning distinction grades, but he could not continue gymnastics due to lack of time. As many of the youth of that time he participated in the war, being deployed in the later phases of the war. He later continued his studies in Cairo University earning a Master's degree in the same field. He worked as a graduate teacher assistant in Cairo University while he studied for the Master's.

During the student movement sit-ins and demonstrations, Sameh did not care about it. He concentrated on his studies and attended all the lectures and exams. He remembers that all the lectures resumed normally during the disruptions except a few times when the lectures got canceled.

Afterwards, he left academia and started his business career. Working at a multinational for over two decades, only to leave it a few years ago to pursue a Doctorate in Engineering from the USA. This marked his return to academia at an age over fifty. After obtaining the Doctorate, he left academia almost immediately, returned to Egypt and continued his business career. I did not obtain information about why he went back to academia only to leave it again.

Regarding the student movement, I will focus on three aspects, the future's effect on the narration, the university life and interactions back then, and a comparison to some events that happened recently.

First, the future's effect is very important to consider. Sameh narrates in 2016 but I am asking him about his feelings and ideas at the early 1970s. It is an impossible task to do. A person cannot recall his feelings and thoughts from over 40 years ago as if he just experienced them. In other words, Sameh is more likely being influenced by the future, by all what happened in the 40 years after the period I am investigating. The influence is both personal from events and thoughts that happened to him directly or influence on a national or global scale. A person constantly reevaluates his thoughts and ideas. While I do not say that

Sameh have completely changed but I will never be able to know his thoughts from back then. I will always just be able to know his 2016 reflection on the 1970s student movement.

For example, Sameh narrates that the youth were impatient and Sadat was readying up the Army anyway. He believes Sadat was never going to leave Sinai behind and failure in the 1971 decisive year was an act of strategic deception. As well as the many actions that is well mentioned in Egyptian general public knowledge about Sadat starting the war at 2 PM to Sadat laying off some army units as a trick to make Israel think we gave up.

My point is all these thoughts are primarily affected by the actual fact that we entered a war in 1973 and could manage to retrieve back Sinai from Israeli occupation. I would never be able to know Sameh's thoughts before the war and this is a huge drawback to this kind of primary source.

I want to know how people thought back then but I cannot because those same people I am asking have been affected by the future and all its decisions. Here comes the role of media recorded in the past. They help historians look at a "dump" of thoughts from a specific period, unaffected by the future.

Moreover, a weak point in Sameh's argument is that the student movement has happened and have had its national effect on society and culture. Of course, it is not appropriate at all to assume a direct causation between the growth in student activity in the 1970s and the Army engaging in a year afterwards. It is not appropriate because history cannot be looked at linearly as a set of events happening after each other. The first event directly causes a consequence that is a prerequisite for another event and so on. But, instead, many parameters

and events happened together than allowed us to enter a war in 1973. I think that the student movement is one them.

What is even more illogical is assuming the truth of the converse statement of an implication. What could have happened if there was no student movement? It is an impossible question. Even if we assume the existence of an active student movement at that time was one of the causes of the war in 1973. We cannot simply imply the opposite. If there was no student movement, well anything could've happened.

Sameh goes on to talk about the "bigger picture". He mentions it a lot regarding how the students that participated in the movement lacked it. They didn't have a "good vision". Sadat had that vision. Sameh had that vision, but the some of the other students did not. Again using the future to justify some mystical divination. Because if you think about it, imagine your land has occupied for four years now since 1967 and your leader broke his promise to enter a war. You ought to worry. Well, not that you must worry. But that "good vision" that Sameh is talking about cannot be that simple or understandable.

Although Sameh gave credit that everyone in the society was patriotic but he saw the demonstrations as something negative in itself. He speaks about the recent days too, which I will mention later. Sameh says he kept "giving advice" to his colleagues to stop protesting and be productive instead.

So what does Sameh remember from the student's demands? He does not remember much but mainly their demands for an immediate war. Although when reading Ahmed Abdulla's account, which was written in 1985 we find that this is just the simplified

propaganda the government spread about the movement. Abdulla was one of the student leaders back then. Abdulla claims that the student movement also called for better political representation in Egypt and more discussion of government politics and economic policies. Also, a call that austerity measures in preparation of war does not focus on cutting spending on the poor but instead on the rich, who started to once again gain a great deal of power after some readjusting post 1952 Revolution.

Maybe back then all the student's demands were known and appreciated by the general public but it seems that only repeated knowledge is the knowledge that remain the longest in the public's conscious mind. The government kept framing the student movement this same way year after year. Again talking to Sameh now will never uncover his real thoughts back then.

The idea of the future reminds me when we talked several times during our course discussions about an author using the wrong lenses to judge some topic. We saw this regarding Dunne's view on modernity or Mitchell's view on order and state control. When you delve into a certain view you will misinterpret some events. Dunne lacked to see that modernity is a futuristic idea that cannot be always used to look at the past. Mitchell lacked to see the human agency aspect in all the state-public interactions. Here we see that the knowledge of the future pollutes the narration of the past.

Moving on to the next aspect, Sameh was a strong believer in Sadat's " الطالب طالب علم بس". The famous quote Sadat gave regarding the involvement of students in politics. Of course people like Sameh existed as well people like Abdulla. Sameh blames the students for concerning themselves with minute details and not being productive, by studying. "Being

productive" was the correct thing to do. Well to the students in the movement being concerned with the political and economic policies of their government was "productive" in their view, as Abdulla thinks. Whatever way you define it, it seems it was a debated idea. Moreover, it seems that "What is it to be a student?" at that time was a question on many minds. Sameh says there were many different opinions about it. He acknowledges all his ideas about the student movement are just opinions and he may be wrong. Reading Abdulla's account he describes many groups within the movement that shared the same vision but had different opinions on some aspects, from the left wing to the right wing. Sameh doesn't remember any specific group but he explains that it is normal within larger groups to have conflicts.

So how did all this affect Sameh's university life? Well nothing, as mentioned before, he narrates that that he continued to attend lectures normally not caring about the disturbances but occasionally telling his colleagues that this is not the correct thing to do.

On the other hand, Abdulla's account saw more "action" even within the university campus. Therefore I guess a student back then may have not only had different opinions but also different university lives as well, even when everyone share the same campus.

For the third and final aspect, Sameh made several comparisons to the recent days. For example, he believes local and foreign political funding was involved to some extent back then and recently too. He believes that in 1970s the students' equipment, microphones, posters, and banners needed a lot of money. He does not think only the students and their parents could have financed the movement to that scale. Moreover, one of the phrases he liked to call the movement was "ناس ثوريين بزيادة زي دلوقتي", meaning that the youth was

extremely enthusiastic for revolutionary ideas like now. These two claims are widespread these days post 2011. So it seems this idea is age resistant in Egypt.

Sameh says there was no need for demonstrations in a state of war because it would shake the country's readiness for war. Instead Abdulla thought it showed the Israeli enemy that there exists patriotic youth ready to die to free their land from occupation. The idea about the state of war has been used again these days to describe a war on terrorism in Egypt. While the phrase is the same the situation is different from a foreign military occupation to a local politically-motivated armed conflict of these days. One of the things I expected to hear was stability. People love stability as Sameh says regarding why many people did not fully support the students. Stability is still mentioned today. For its credit though, loss of stability is an undeniable fear driving personal and group decisions since the existence of humanity.

These were some of my thoughts about certain aspects in my interview that grabbed my attention. I faced several difficulties and challenges throughout the experience. In fact, this was my first time to engage with such primary source.

First, starting with the most obvious difficulty, was finding, arranging and meeting Sameh. I needed to search for an older person that went to university at that time. First I asked one of my professors but he refused. I asked another that accepted but told me to wait till after the spring break. Then I came to know Sameh through other connections. Later while arranging with Sameh, we postponed the meeting twice because of random reasons. Finally meeting him felt like an achievement unlocked.

Second, when I started the interview I had a draft plan of the questions or how will the conversation go in general. All that went to trash once the interview actually started. I never imagined how hard it is to actually keep the interview going, especially when Sameh's responses are unexciting but I still wanted to listen to more.

Now looking at some challenges. While analyzing the interview, there are two "effects" that I noticed.

First the "memory effect", more than often Sameh would not remember anything about some events stating that this was more than 50 years old now. I was also expecting this to happen. I think this is one of the most unavoidable problems with such primary sources that heavily depend on human memory. Probably this would also explain one of the reasons why human civilization moved from being oral beings to written beings. I believe written records help in such cases where human memory begin to fail. Moreover, Sameh would be much less accurate while narrating. This is an obvious byproduct of the memory effect because human brains try to fill in for their gaps. This would not be intentional but Sameh is more likely to narrate things he thinks have happened based on what little his memory can offer and based on his more recent experiences.

The other effect that I didn't not manage well was the "recorder effect." Sameh did not know while arranging the meeting that I will be recording him. Of course I asked him and took his permission before I began the interview, assuring him I will delete the recording once we are done. But, his behavior seemed that he was slightly antagonized from the recorder. But the main problem with the recorder effect is self-censoring. This is the act of censoring your thoughts and words in fear of being questioned later by a powerful entity like

authorities or simply because you act differently depending on the audience. This does not allow the interviewer to obtain the honest information. This is avoided in surveys by the idea of anonymous surveys but I guess not every human expression can be observed from a survey and sometimes an interview gives that lacking information.

Moreover, when reporting this type of primary source I am the one writing about the interview and analyzing it. My reporting of what was said in the interview or about my observations about Sameh are all subjective and biased. This is the disadvantage of reading this report and not experiencing the primary source hands-on. But on the other hand it would be impractical for everyone to interview Sameh! Moreover, if we hope to discuss and analyze the source we will resort to reports, papers, and reflections, all of which are secondary sources. The most accurate description of history then would be referring to researchers of all backgrounds and biases.

I would also like to talk about some of my mistakes. Being this is my first interview some of these mistakes may actually be naïve.

First, the act I regret the most would be filling in for Sameh. When I started to understand Sameh's general thoughts I more than often would say what Sameh wants to hear. This means I was making Sameh comfortable but this costed me original replies. Sameh would just nod or say a simple affirmative sentence to what I have just said, requiring me to either request him to comment more or to just continue discussion on something else. Both options of which I would not like. But, even now I cannot judge would it always be best to never acknowledge Sameh's earlier responses in later discussion. Would that make Sameh less comfortable as he would think I did not keep up with his thoughts?

Second, I failed to turn the interview into a discussion. The interview was either a narration by Sameh or a reply to a question I asked. I think this did not make me enjoy the interview. Moreover, if I had to "measure" how well I connected with Sameh, I think I did not do a very good job at that. Why? I do not know for sure. Maybe Sameh's response style intimidated me and was not welcoming discussion.

Finally, the obviously inevitable "I wish I had talked/asked about that". After the interview, I realized I wanted to discuss some topics even further.

To conclude, this was a different experience for me. It was interesting but I wished I had interviewed a more enthusiastic person. I learnt that I can never reach a person's real thoughts in the past. I learnt about other things too as I mentioned. However, the most important to me was how difficult it is for historians to depend on oral narratives like this.

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