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Dr. Amr Darrag
Testimonies and Reviews - 5



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Dr. Amr Darrag: Testimonies and Reviews -5

Introduction

In his introduction to this series of episodes, Dr. Amr Darrag said he viewed the invitation to introduce these reviews as, "a good opportunity for taking the first step to narrate and document the most important events that I have witnessed over nearly 60 years, the years of my life so far," Dr. Amr said, adding that through these testimonies, "I was reviewing my most important experiences, successes, or failures, which, shed a lot of light, in a panoramic way, on an important stage of the nation's history, through my modest narration."

In [Part 4](#) of "Testimonies and Reviews", Dr. Amr Darrag talked about his post-graduate stage late in the seventies, when he was appointed as a lecturer at the Faculty of Engineering, Cairo University. He also talked about the year that preceded the assassination of Sadat, describing it as a turbulent year, where about 2500 people of Islamists and non-Islamists were arrested, including Pope Shenouda of the Egyptian Coptic Church, in September 1981. He also talked about the assassination of President Anwar Sadat during a military parade on 6 October 1981 and Hosni Mubarak's access to power as a President following a referendum. He said that Mubarak, like many dictators, started his era with opening-up to the people and releasing detainees; although the Islamists were left in detention centers for a long period after the release of other detainees.

Dr. Amr continued his career as a lecturer at Cairo University for four years during which his religious commitment has grown, influenced by the weekly religious lessons and Friday Prayer sermons. About joining the Rotary Youth Club before 1984, Dr. Amr said he was introduced to a youth club that used to provide scholarships for studying abroad – based on sorting out young people; and he was later elected as president of the Cairo Rotary Youth Club. Dr. Amr pointed to the effect of this period on his administrative and societal experiences, influenced his personality, enhanced his openness, and strengthened his ability to deal with the other.

Fifth Episode:

In the [Fifth Episode](#) of the series of episodes that the London-based Al-Hiwar TV has broadcast (within a program titled: "Reviews"), interviewing Dr. Amr Darrag, the Egyptian Minister of Planning and International Cooperation in the government of Dr. Hisham Qandil – Dr. Amr Darrag talked about the

period during his stay in the United States, studying for his Ph.D. in engineering, which coincided with the rise of the Islamic awakening in the East. He stated that his tendency to adhere to the teachings of Islam came within a mainstream in the whole nation. So, he seemed inclined to choosing friends who were more committed to the teachings of religion, while maintaining his openness to everyone, based on the nature of his upbringing.

Dr. Amr said he was not only open to the Americans, but he was also open to expatriates from different countries, as the American society used to host expatriates from different backgrounds and cultures. He mentioned as evidence that he attended a ceremony to honor holders of the doctoral degree, most of whom were Arabs and Chinese, with a few Americans. He also participated in the activities of the International Center, an organization that used to organize activities and programs for expatriate students, which enabled him to learn about various cultures.

Dr. Amr has maintained a kind of family and social rapprochement with friends and families from Brazil, Argentina and other Latin American countries, recalling that he used to listen to their experiences of living under military rule and how to transition to democracy, which has benefited him so much, especially after the military coup in Egypt in 2013. He also had family relations with American families, where he got to know about the interrelated American society, against what he and others had previously learned about the United States through drama, regardless of the moral uncontrollability prevalent in some major cities.

He said the Islamic action was then organized through the Muslim Arab Youth Association (MAYA), recalling that Dr. Gamal Badawi visited MAYA and gave lectures. He also recalled that Professor Ismail al Faruqi, the co-founder of International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), was assassinated at that time in the United States. He also said conferences were organized for Arab students during the Christmas holidays, which were attended by Muslim students and their families from all over the United States.

The 1985 conference that was held during the Afghan Jihad against the Soviets was an important milestone on the road to Dr. Darrag's adherence to Islamic teachings, coinciding with the Afghan Jihad. He also said he attended a lecture by Sheikh Salah Abu Ismail when the latter visited the United States. He said Abu Ismail thanked the United States in his lecture for the level of freedom allowed to people, where he was able to give a lecture in the country that he used to criticize. Sheikh Salah

Abu Ismail also talked about his attempts - in vain - to heal the rift that occurred in the Muslim nation after the outbreak of the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. During his lecture, Abu Ismail wanted to simplify how his efforts went in vain and couldn't bridge the gap between Iraq and Iran or end their dispute through a quotation from a famous song by Egyptian singer Abdel Halim Hafez, "[Fog El Shok](#)", and how the audience interacted with him. Giving a delicate advice to attendees, Abu Ismail asked: do you memorize Abdel Halim's words but do not memorize Halim's (God's) words!

Dr. Amr said the most important conference to him was the one that was held in December 1987, where Dr. Abdullah Azzam gave a lecture about the Afghan jihad. Azzam had a view that the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union was the main cause of the nation, despite the fact that he was Palestinian, which seemed strange to Dr. Darrag at this time. Azzam called on young people to focus on the Afghan issue although the conference coincided with the emergence of Hamas and the stone uprising in the Palestinian occupied territories.

However, the youth greatly interacted with the Palestinian cause, where they performed a play about Palestine at the end of the conference, including a song that later became famous about heroism in Islam, '[Labaika Islam al Botoulah](#)' (Here we are at your service, Islam, religion of heroism, played to the tune of the an old Arab anthem titled: '[Labaika Ya Alamal Oroubah](#)' (Here we are at your service, flag of Arabism) – which increased enthusiasm for the cause, and encouraged people to donate in favor of the people of Palestine.

The conference was also attended by senior Muslim Brotherhood (MB) leaders, including Counselor Mamoun Al-Hudaibi and Dr. Mohamed Habib, who talked about the legitimacy of MB engagement in parliamentary elections on the lists of the Labor Party, refuting arguments raised by Salafists and jihadists at the time, claiming that running for elections is 'haram' and not allowed according to Shari'a, while the Brotherhood saw that participation in elections was the closest way to achieving change through peaceful civil constitutional means. Sheikh Salah Abu Ismail, a former MB member, was a member of parliament for a long time and contributed to the reformulation of the Islamic Shari'a laws at the People's Assembly (parliament). "These dialogues and arguments were a milestone for me and one of the reasons for getting closer to the Brotherhood intellectually and emotionally," said Dr. Darrag.

Dr. Amr Darrag added that before attending such conferences he almost had no time for much reading, being pre-occupied with his Ph.D. study in addition to working as a pizza deliverer due to some financial difficulties, where he delivered pizza to undergraduate students to increase his income although he and his wife belong to a relatively high social class. After obtaining his Ph.D., Dr. Darrag worked for a year and a half at a company in Orlando, Florida, to boost his work experience and increase his income.

Dr. Darrag says that the time he spent in Orlando allowed him to devote much time for reading, which then focused on the Brotherhood. He read "Days of My Life" by Zainab Ghazali, one of the books that addressed the ordeal experienced by the MB in the prisons of Gamal Abdel Nasser. In the same context, Dr. Amr also read books written by non-MB authors, such as Mostafa Amin's book "First Year in Prison" and others. The prominent question that came to Dr. Darrag's mind at the time was around the principles that made such people endure all this torture. He said that after that he became more inclined to the Brotherhood thought rather than the Salafist thought which influenced him in his early days of commitment to the teachings of Islam. He remembers that he had been convinced according to Salafist thought that music, which he used to like so much was "haram", which pushed him to get rid of all the CDs of classical music he had collected before.

Dr. Darrag said he became more acquainted with the Brotherhood thought without guidance from anyone. This began with reading a book by Imam Hassan al-Banna, titled, "Memoirs of the Call and the Caller", which included features of his dream, his project and the story of his upbringing. "This book introduces an example of a man who wrote about his dream in an essay he wrote in his university graduation exam and then moved to carry it out until it became a reality on the ground. I invite young people to read it," Dr. Darrag said.

Al-Banna's activity in calling for Islam came as a reaction to efforts exerted to keep the nation away from Islam. The most severe attack on Islam was in Turkey, and Egypt was also targeted, according to Dr. Darrag. To explain how ideas and cultures can be inculcated through drama, Dr. Amr cited a dialogue in an old movie titled: "[Bint al-Akaber](#)" (Daughter of the Nobility), a movie produced in 1953; with Laila Mourad, Zaki Rustum, Zinat Sidqi, Anwar Wagdi; and directed by Anwar Wagdi. The dialogue was between an old grandfather who was going to travel for performing pilgrimage and his younger brother who was assigned to take care of their niece Laila while the old man was abroad.

When Laila's grandfather asked his younger brother to prevent her from meeting strangers or even going out of home while he was away, his brother told him that he was belonging to an ancient time and adopting worn out traditions, adding, "Pasha, you are now living in the age of the "airplane" and the "bikini" underwear". Dr. Darrag says in that way, drama was used to Westernize and secularize the Egyptian society and drive it away from the Islamic teachings. Dr. Amr's follow-up of such cultural and civilizational conflict moved the level of his thinking from personal commitment and personal agenda to thinking of and preoccupation with the concerns of the whole Muslim nation.

Dr. Amr Darrag says he met with Dr. Mohamed Habib, a former MB leader, after that conference, and asked him how to join the Muslim Brotherhood after his return to Egypt, who in turn told him to meet Dr. Essam Hashish, a professor at Cairo University's Faculty of Engineering. After returning to Cairo, Dr. Amr met Dr. Hashish and started to engage in the activities of University Teaching Staff Club. The idea that the Brotherhood was an open group with a good reputation was behind attracting anyone who sought public Islamic action in society without closure or hardline thought.