

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Flexible States in History: Rethinking Secularism, Violence, and Centralized Power in Modern Egypt

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Abstract

In recent decades, secularism has emerged as one of the most studied concepts in sociocultural anthropology, and Egypt a primary site of its analysis. This article considers trends in Egypt's modern and contemporary history in order to complicate the great explanatory power some anthropological works have granted to secularism. Above all else, it interrogates the manner in which the state's regulation of religion (which is the defining feature of Asadian conceptions of secularism) has unfolded in recent Egyptian history. First, I survey the different ways scholars have portrayed secularism in Egypt, focusing in particular on the insights and limitations of Asadian theories. A second section employs ethnographic data to uncover how ordinary Egyptians in the provincial capital of Beni Suef have experienced state power, religion, and secularism in their everyday lives. Contextualizing these ethnographic perspectives alongside several prominent instances of state violence between 2011 and 2013, I elucidate how, rather than typifying a secular state, Egyptian politics, above all else, have been driven by an opportunistic realpolitik. My final section brings historical and ethnographic perspectives into sustained conversation to argue that the state regulation anthropologists sometimes frame as secularism is better conceptualized as a form of state centralization. I conclude, in turn, that political developments in modern Egypt have most often been shaped by flexible national and imperial interests.

Keywords: the state; regulation; realpolitik; secularism; Egypt; violence; empire; religion; centralization

Introduction

On 9 October 2011, as Egypt was in the throes of revolution, Coptic activists marched in Cairo in protest of the destruction of a Church in Aswan. Carrying crosses, candles, flowers and singing *taranīm* (hymns), protestors weaved their way through the downtown, coming under sporadic stone attacks along the way. As darkness fell and marchers made their way around the Ramses Hilton Hotel to meet the crowd

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already protesting at the Maspero state-run radio and television building near Tahrir Square, Egyptian soldiers in the area began attacking demonstrators indiscriminately. The state television cameras hid little of the carnage, relaying images of Egyptian armored personnel carriers swerving wildly through the crowds. Some soldiers could be seen firing live ammunition at the marchers, while others beat the protesters with rocks and batons. In the end, twenty-four civilians were dead and 212 injured. The state-run news channels, however, described only deaths of “martyr” soldiers in the clashes (*zero* soldiers died in the massacre). Even more egregiously, newscasters on the state-owned channels chastised the Copts as violent and conspiratorial, calling upon Egyptian citizens to come down to Maspero in order to “protect the army from the Copts” (Gaber 2011).

In reflecting on the Maspero Massacre, one might conclude that the events centered on the actions of a nonsecular state. Indeed, the violence entailed Egyptian state executives who happened to be Muslim cynically manipulating and inciting religious divisions in the country for political gain.¹ On the surface, the massacre would also have been ameliorated somewhat, if not entirely, by political secularism (whether the separation of religion and politics, or political equality across religious lines). This article’s argument, however, is not that Egypt was or is necessarily in need of a more secular state (or that Islam was a central component of the state’s violence), because, beneath the surface, neither religious nor secular imperatives were the key element in what transpired.

The pages ahead interrogate fundamental assumptions in the anthropological literature about secularism, politics, and the function of state power. Based in the provincial Egyptian city of Beni Suef, this article specifically surveys different ethnographic and historical perspectives on the modern and contemporary Egyptian state’s regulation of religion, politics, and society. It approaches the concept of secularism from neither a secularist nor an anti-secularist position.² Nor does it aim to provide some new, perfect definition of an essentially contested concept (Starrett 2010) whose relevance is already overstated in the anthropological literature on Egypt. This article’s purpose, rather, is to draw attention to how ethnographic and historical perspectives do or do not align with the paradigmatic understandings of secularism (Fahmy 2018: 27) found in the works of scholars such as Talal Asad (2003), Hussein Ali Agrama (2012), and Saba Mahmood (2015).

At its core, Asad’s text is a work of skepticism, a deconstruction of common assumptions about the genealogy, progress, neutrality, and inevitability of secular modernity. Building on Asad’s landmark 2003 publication, Agrama and Mahmood elucidate, in different ways, the manner in which the state has maintained and

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The Maspero Massacre was, in many ways, part of the postcolonial Egyptian state’s longtime policy of divide-and-rule along sectarian lines, and a reminder to Egypt’s Coptic Christian citizens that the state would readily exploit religious differences in national politics.

² I take this neither/nor framing from Bhriyupati Singh, *Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India* (2015).

patrolled the nexus between religion, politics, and the public and private spheres in Egypt. While this article compliments these scholars' emphasis on state regulation, it complicates their connecting that regulation narrowly to secularism, as well as their broader portrayal of secularism as an agentive (Agrama 2012) and consistent (Mahmood 2015) force in modern Egyptian history.

Eschewing the Asadian focus on a single concept across space and time, the ethnographic, historical, and comparative perspectives in this article instead illuminate the significance of pragmatic *realpolitik* in the exercise of statecraft and empire. I assert that Asadian understandings of secularism (which hinge on the state's regulation of religion) are better conceptualized as centralized state power. I outline how centralized state power is able to capture the manner in which different states regulate religion (such as in the Maspero Massacre, which, as I will show, *none* of my provincial Egyptian interlocutors classified as remotely secular), while also accommodating the incredibly flexible and divergent ways that regulation has unfolded in Egypt's modern and contemporary history. At the same time, my transdisciplinary analysis highlights how political change in Egypt is most often driven by flexible, opportunistic, and pragmatic state and imperial interests.

This article is based on over four years of ethnographic research undertaken between 2011 and 2018 in Beni Suef, a provincial capital approximately 120 kilometers south of Cairo. As a result, the 2011 Egyptian uprising and the post-2013 counterrevolutionary period which followed are key analytical lenses, as is the unprecedented rise of political and sectarian violence during these years. The primary methods employed were participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I maintained an ongoing consent process with everyone involved, and pseudonyms have been used for all research participants. What results is a window into the diverse ways ordinary Egyptians have experienced and interpreted the state's regulation of religion, politics, and society in their everyday lives. In turn, this article addresses a significant gap in ongoing academic debates around secularism by contributing the much-needed perspectives of ordinary Egyptians on the peripheries of power.

In the first section of this article, I examine the different ways scholars have written about secularism in Egypt, focusing on the insights and limitations of Asadian frameworks, in particular. The second section employs ethnographic data to investigate how ordinary Egyptians in Beni Suef interpreted the Egyptian state's regulation of religion, politics, and society in their everyday lives. Uncovering how my interlocutors most often experienced the state's regulation of religion as inconsistent and opportunistic, I subsequently analyze several instances of state violence between 2011 and 2018 in order to locate their views in contemporaneous political events. The article's third and final section puts its ethnographic and contemporary historical perspectives into conversation with the historiography of modern Egypt. My concluding findings are twofold. First, I argue that Asadian framings of secularism are better conceptualized as the centralized state regulation of religion. Secondly, I assert that national *and imperial* politics in modern Egypt have most often been driven by a flexible and pragmatic *realpolitik*.

The Centrality of Secularism in the Anthropological Literature

The question of secularism has been a central one for anthropologists since the 2003 publication of Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular*. Written with his characteristically rich and careful erudition, it traces the manner in which

pervasive modes of secular governance have problematized and compartmentalized religion in novel ways. Asad's work has inspired a wave of anthropological explorations of secularism. Most prominent among these are authored by two of Asad's students, Hussein Ali Agrama (2012) and Saba Mahmood (2015), and both happen to be set in Egypt. Building directly on Asad, Agrama's *Questioning Secularism* interrogates, above all else, the way in which the division between religion and politics—what Agrama terms a “problem-space”—has functioned to augment state power in Egypt. Secularism, in Agrama's depiction, is effectively an instrument of state sovereignty which empowers the state with defining and regulating ostensible interactions between religion, public order, and private practice. Beyond his invaluable insights into state regulation (a crucial concept which I will return to later in this article), Agrama also elucidates how, in the aforementioned processes of state regulation, it has been Egypt's Islamist groups that have frequently been recipients of the state's “continual normative questioning, critique, and suspicion”—even as the state demonstrates no real interest in promoting liberal values (Agrama 2012: 26). In addition to these significant contributions, Agrama's discussion of the state's opportunistic interest in preventing “religious violence” (ibid.: 223) compliments much-needed explorations into the ongoing expansion of security states around the globe (Agamben 2005; Cavanaugh 2009; 2011).

Saba Mahmood's *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, meanwhile, analyzes how the Egyptian state has employed secularism to manage and shape sectarian conflicts rather than overcome them. Similar to Agrama, Mahmood details the manner in which this regulation has only worked to further solidify the primacy of the security state—along with its select mechanisms, assumptions, and discourses—in the lives of Egypt's citizenry. The 2015 book is, in many ways, a continuation of her previous analysis of how governments employ certain concepts, policies, and worldviews (such as secularism, religious freedom, and liberalism) in highly cynical and contradictory ways (see Mahmood 2006). Most relevant to the pages ahead is Mahmood's conclusion, elsewhere, that governments' wielding of such concepts almost always hinges on matters of “national and international governance” and, ultimately, “realpolitik concerns” (2012), a view which this article's ethnographic and historical sections fully corroborate.

For all their rich insights into regulation, the state, and neocolonial flows of power, however, Agrama's and Mahmood's framing of the agency and consistency of secularism obfuscates the highly contingent, unpredictable, and pragmatic nature of imperial and state power in practice. For one, Agrama often portrays secularism as an active agent in the world. To take several examples; he contends that “secularism, supposed to separate religion from politics, hopelessly blurs them” (2012: 105). Elsewhere, Agrama claims that “*secularism itself* tends to make religion into an object of politics” (ibid.: 30, my emphasis). In another passage he asserts, “secularism is less a principle of peace than a historical practice of state sovereignty, and thus is an expression of *its* constitutive indeterminacies and anxieties” (ibid.: my emphasis). The issue with these framings is that they tend to mislead and distract from the manner in which state, corporate, and imperial actors (each with *their* indeterminacies, interests, and anxieties) act upon different contexts. In short, Agrama's resolute focus on secularism leads him to grant the concept much more agency than it deserves. Mahmood's 2015 book, on the other hand, overstates the consistency of secularism across space and time. If one sees secularism, following her, as “the modern state's sovereign power to reorganize substantive features of

religious life” (2015: 3), then one must conclude that *all* modern states are secular since they all regulate religion. What is unclear, then, is the value of a “globally shared” concept (ibid.: 2) when it manifests so differently across a diverse array of nation-states (such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Israel), each with their own unique historical, social, and political contexts.

Of course, numerous scholars have identified problems with the way in which the secular has been theorized (see Starrett 2010; Bangstad 2009; Cannell 2010; and Schielke 2015a). Veena Das draws attention to how the Begriffsgeschichte School, on which Talal Asad relies heavily in his genealogy of secularism, “has a somewhat restricted notion of context,” thereby creating “a picture of the secular as a unitary system” (2006: 101). Other anthropologists have critiqued Asadian works for promoting a binary between their vision of a unitary, modern, and secular state, on one hand, and premodern religion on the other (Hafez 2011; Schielke 2019). The dichotomous inverse of the modern and secular state, Atalia Omer notes, often takes on nostalgic properties in Asadian scholarship, which present a “utopian interpretation of tradition as the opposite of the unfavorable ideological logic of the liberal state” (2015: 39). Citing Ibn Khaldun, Omer also chronicles how premodern Muslim societies frequently contested the place of religious identities, practices, and discourses in defining and regulating their respective politics and societies (ibid.: 47–48).

The historian Khaled Fahmy reaches a similar conclusion in his analysis of Agrama’s presentation of *hisba*, a concept in Islamic Law which “refers both to market inspection and to moral censorship” (2018: 38). Employing a wealth of archival and textual sources, Fahmy outlines how Agrama provides an “idealized” view of *hisba* which downplays the coercive and regulatory nature of the concept in premodern Islamic states (ibid.: 38, 183). Elsewhere, Fahmy critiques scholars such as Talal Asad and Wael Hallaq for their “preference of the paradigmatic over the historical” (ibid.: 27), contrasting the Asadian tendency to trace transformations in Egypt genealogically with his analysis of historical changes in their “institutional, social, political, and intellectual contexts” (ibid.: 25).

Beyond Fahmy’s engagement with Asadian scholarship on secularism, a key exception to secularism’s more muted place in the historiography of the modern Middle East is Ussama Makdisi’s *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World*. This innovative book wields a diverse array of sources to remind readers of the region’s rich history of “religious diversity, equality and emancipation” (2019: 2). The case Makdisi makes is both compelling and significant, especially given the propensity of Western scholars and commentators to conceive of religion, society, and politics in the Arab World narrowly in terms of tragedy and failure (Lewis 2002). Moreover, in contrast to the more heavy-handed genealogical narratives, which, mirroring Bernard Lewis, ask the question of “what went wrong” with religious equality in the Middle East (Mahmood 2015), Makdisi traces *different and divergent* manifestations of ecumenism, secularism, and pluralism in the Arab World.³

³While the violent 2011–2013 events examined later in this article stand somewhat in contrast to the more optimistic tone of *Age of Coexistence* (2019), its emphasis on the importance of state flexibility, opportunism, and empire fully corroborates Makdisi’s view that such political cynicism and social division is in no way unique to the Middle East.

In reviewing Mahmood's 2015 book, Makdisi notes how she did not compare secularism in Egypt to politico-religious inequities in Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon, each of which has their own unique histories that greatly complicate Mahmood's conclusions (Makdisi 2016). Similarly, Zouhair Ghazzal asks why Agrama did not contrast Egypt's purported secularism to Turkey's formally secular context (2015), while Nir Shafir, in his examination of piety in the Ottoman Empire, highlights the need "to explore secularism's multiple histories in the Middle East" (2019: 622). Talal Asad makes similar acknowledgements about secularism, writing "secularization follows different paths according to different historical circumstances"; and, "It is one thing to seek essential origins, quite another to identify elements of a tradition that have been retrieved, reorganized and put to modern use in contemporary formations" (2011: 672). However, when Saba Mahmood argues that the legal grammar of political secularism cuts across West and non-West (2015: 27), it raises questions as to what the precise essence of secularism might be.

With these debates and questions in mind, Gregory Starrett's classification of the secular as an essentially contested concept (one that is internally complex but is portrayed by some anthropologists as whole) is most helpful (2010: 635). Indeed, the perspectives of ordinary Egyptians in the pages ahead elucidate the inherent contestations around meaning in different contexts, a multiplicity that mirrors the malleable character of secularism described in the works of Samuli Schielke (2019) and Max Weiss (2018). Building on this robust, interdisciplinary body of literature on secularism, the subsequent sections of this article engage ethnographic data, as well as the historiography of modern Egypt, in order to trace the particularities of contemporary Egyptian political developments across local, national, and international networks of power.

Ordinary Experiences of the Centralized Egyptian State

The city of Beni Suef lies at the northern edges of Upper Egypt, 120 kilometers south of Cairo. The provincial capital of three hundred thousand people was historically an agricultural area, though industry has increasingly colored the city in recent decades.⁴ Beni Suef's governorate is often ranked among the poorest in the country, with many residents continuing to live in rural-style houses composed of straw, Nile silt, and cow dung. That said, the city is diverse enough across social class lines, and today is home to the large, state-funded Beni Suef University, the private Nahda University, as well as the burgeoning suburban areas on the east side of the Nile. Typical of the Nile Valley, Beni Suef's social life tends to center amidst the cafes, clubs, and corniche that hug the river's West bank. I first moved to the city in early 2011, and ultimately spent over four years living and researching there between 2011 and 2018. Engaging with interlocutors across a blur of revolution, counterrevolution, inflation, and repression, my fieldwork primarily hinged on how Beni Suef residents understood shifts in religion, society, and politics in their contemporary state. In all, I conducted semi-formal interviews (about religion and politics in Egypt) with over eighty Beni Suef adult individuals and couples.

⁴In 2013, Samsung chose Beni Suef as the site of its first factory in the Middle East and Africa, while the German conglomerate Siemens completed construction of a massive, combined cycle power plant outside the city in 2018.

Of course, the provincial context of Beni Suef is an uncommon one from which to derive understandings of history, politics, and empire in Egypt. The vast majority of scholarly, journalistic, and political commentary on the country focuses exclusively on Cairo, hinting at the need, following Abu-Lughod (2012), to explore how national and international political developments are experienced and interpreted in local contexts beyond the metropole. For one, different contexts, even within a single state's borders, often reveal drastically different patterns of power and hegemony (Schielke 2015b: 91–92). Overall, this significance of contingency and context is most apparent in the stark discrepancy between how secularism is portrayed by Asadian scholars in the Western academy and how my interlocutors talked about it in Beni Suef.⁵

Given how much anthropologists have used the Egyptian political and legal context to theorize about the secular, I frequently broached the subject of secularism with interlocutors. Most often, I began by simply asking the question “*maṣr balad ‘almānī* (is Egypt a secular country)?” People tended to respond by pressing me on what exactly I meant by ‘*almānī*’ (secular). Intent on directing my interlocutors’ words and thoughts as little as possible, I replied that it was whatever they considered it to be. My inquiries, of course, never occurred in a vacuum. That is, I constantly observed conversations about religion, politics, and the state during my fieldwork. For example, people often told me Beni Suef was, for better or worse, *balad ikhwānī* (brotherhood country). The governorate provided the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi with one of his highest rates of support in the 2012 presidential election, and even after the fall of Morsi’s government in 2013, people occasionally diagnosed problems in the country as hinging on some misalignment between religion, society, and the state. What is most significant about these views, for the purposes of this article, is that they were always diverse and multifaceted, even in cases where interlocutors were in general agreement with each other.

Most frequently, my interlocutors began speaking about religion and secularism in Egypt at the societal (rather than state) level. “No, Egypt is not at all secular,” a bright faced young woman in a black *higab* told me when I asked her about her country’s identity in 2017. “It is so far away from this. People—Muslims and Christians—care so, so much.” After a pause, she added: “I believe this is one of the good things in Egypt, though. Religion is the thing that stops us from doing bad stuff. We know we can’t do things because it is *ḥarām* (forbidden).” As it happened, the woman, whose name was Aya, held a small Quran in her hand, which she explained she liked to read when riding the microbus to and from her studies at Beni Suef University’s veterinary college.⁶ A Coptic woman, named Rania, articulated a similar position, though in a much more negative light, when I asked her if Egypt was secular: “No! Secularism is ‘*ayb* (wrong) in Egypt. It is like being a *mulḥid* (atheist). Egypt is very close-minded when it comes to religion. There is no neutrality.”

The scholar of comparative law and religion, Mona Oraby, argues that religious difference is made and maintained in Egyptian law (2018). None of my Beni Suef

⁵In his incisive review of *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, Ussama Makdisi critiques Mahmood for presenting Egyptians “less as people shaping a debate that has its own dense history, than as native informants whose principal role is to elucidate a theoretical debate of others” (2016: 79).

⁶The Muslim Brotherhood’s current Supreme Guide, Muhammad Badie, long taught in Beni Suef University’s veterinary school, though not since he was imprisoned in August 2013 over events surrounding the Rāb’a Massacre, discussed below.

interlocutors, however, regarded this regulation (such as the printing of an individual's religion on their government ID cards) as evidence of secularism. Nor did they cite secularism in expounding why Christians in Egypt are able to convert to Islam with relative ease, whereas Muslim conversion to Christianity occurs sparingly, informally, and always a source of massive scandal. The case of Mohammed Hegazy is illustrative of this. In 2007, Hegazy became the first Egyptian Muslim to seek Egyptian government recognition of conversion from Islam to Christianity. He was subjected to numerous death threats (according to a 2013 Pew Poll, 86 percent of Egyptian Muslims supported the death penalty for anyone leaving Islam), including from his own father (Lugo et al. 2013). In the end, the presiding judge rejected Hegazy's conversion request, citing Article 2 of the Egyptian constitution that *shari'a* was the primary source of legislation, and therefore apostasy was disallowed (Ibrahim 2010). My Coptic interlocutors were acutely aware of these apparent inequities, and frequently discussed instances of Christians being coerced or manipulated into converting to Islam. And because of these dynamics, my Beni Suef interlocutors, both Muslim and Christian, were almost unanimous that Egyptian society was not secular, agreeing with Starrett's conclusion (1998) that Islam's power in Egypt's public sphere has grown rather than declined in the modern period.

As for the state, the labeling of the Sisi regime as secular, at first glance, holds some credence. It was Sisi, after all, who led the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood president, thereby curbing the ostensible rise of religious politics in Egypt. The co-imbrication of religious and secular politics (Hafez 2011), however, has hardly dissipated under a new regime that has repeatedly catered to religious conservatives in the country. To take one example, Egyptian police launched a massive crackdown on LGBT Egyptians in January 2018 with no obvious political purpose other than to demonstrate its conservative guardianship over society (Ghoshal 2018). Then, in January of 2019, the Egyptian president came under fire in the mainstream American press due to a *60 Minutes* interview which shone light on the plight of human rights activists and political prisoners in Egypt. The day after the television interview aired, Sisi visited the gigantic new Coptic cathedral in Egypt's New Administrative Capital in what was, at least in part, another production in a long line of political performances for Western empire. Cosmetics aside, most of my Beni Suef interlocutors criticized Sisi's continued embrace of the Coptic church due to the fact that it was the regime's violent authoritarian policies that helped generate the 2016–2018 violence against Copts in the first place.⁷ In turn, many of my interlocutors, Muslim and Christian, claimed that the line between religion and politics in Egypt was utterly inconsistent, and that the Egyptian regime was ultimately *maṣlahgī* (self-interested).

"The regime uses secularism when it needs it," a chemical engineer named Sharif told me. It uses religion when it needs it. They use Muslims and Christians when it suits them. So we can say that it is neither purely religious or secular." Likewise, in reference to sporadic incidents of sectarian violence in the country, which reached unprecedented levels in 2017, a middle-aged teacher told me, "They choose when to clamp down and they choose when to allow clashes to happen." Before the 2013 coup,

⁷Three large bombings of Coptic churches in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tanta occurred between December 2016 and April 2017, killing seventy-six people. Then, in May 2017, gunmen murdered twenty-nine Coptic pilgrims returning home from a Monastery in Minya.

some interlocutors pointed to the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi as proof of Egypt's Islamist character. After 2013, many Copts complained to me about how Sisi, in search of a counterweight to the Islamist appeal of the Brotherhood, enabled the Salafis. "We are actually angry at the president," a Coptic father of four young children explained to me in 2017, "He is not doing his job to protect people. He is stopping moderate Muslims like Ibrahim Eissa and Islam Bahiri while aligning with Salafi sheikhs who defend the craziest hadiths in *al-Bukhārī*."⁸

"It is all *maṣāliḥ* (interests)," an elementary school teacher named Mariam opined. "They will work with al-Azhar, or the Coptic pope, or the Salafis. They will imprison and kill liberals. So long it is in their interests. They will not hesitate to use religion ever!" Indeed, many Copts I interviewed quickly expressed frustration at the idea that Egypt was dictated by secularism. "Egypt secular? No, not at all," a Coptic man, named Murqus, told me as we talked over plastic cups of tea at a local Coptic retreat center. "*Hiyya balad Islāmiyya 'asāsan* (Egypt is an Islamic country to the core). Can a Christian be President? Do you see any Christians in the upper echelons of power?" Then, after a pause, Murqus added, "They say they are secular or democratic, and open and neutral, but this is *kalām aw shakl bas* (talk or appearance only)."

Of course, all the emphasis on appearances or *ḥibr 'ala waraq*, literally "ink on paper," a common Arabic idiom meaning "devoid of consistency or longevity"—did not occur in a vacuum. Marshall Sahlins observes that "history is culturally ordered" and "cultural schemes are historically ordered" (1985: vii). In Egyptian cultural and political schemes, colonial history is difficult to overstate. One interesting trend I noted during my fieldwork was that people often denied that Egypt was a secular country, but in the same breath claimed ruling elites *were* secular. The disruptive role of Western empire, so apparent in the decline of Muhammad Ali's and Gamal Abdul Nasser's polities (analyzed below) came up often in my conversations with Egyptians. When I asked a young pharmacist named Usra in 2018 whether Egypt was secular, the Muslim woman looked down at her lap in thought for a few seconds before replying: "Our leaders want to show this. They're trying to."

"Trying to for whom?" I continued.

"For the West. For America ... because of *shakl* (appearance). But Egyptians are stubborn. They don't change very quickly for cultural things, or they only change in certain ways. The elites—I don't know if they are more secular, but they are more Western ... that is for sure."

Similarly, when I queried two young men about the colonial legacies in Egyptian politics, one named Wesam responded right away with an anecdote from the revolutionary period. "The power of the West was very clear when Morsi was president. People like Ibrahim Eissa, Alaa Al-aswany, and Mohamed ElBaradei—they acted as pawns of the West.⁹ I remember ElBaradei criticized the Brotherhood for denying the Holocaust." Wesam inhaled deeply on his Marlboro-brand cigarette and laughed, "No, that denial is not good ... but who cares?!" he asked rhetorically, throwing his hands up in the air. "What did ElBaradei's criticism have to do with anything? This country has so, so many problems, and he's talking about the

⁸*ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* is one of the six major hadith collections (*al-kutub al-sitta*) and was written in the ninth century by the Sunni hadith collector Muhammad al-Bukhari.

⁹Ibrahim Eissa, Alaa Al-aswany, and Mohamed ElBaradei are three of Egypt's leading liberal intellectuals.

Holocaust? That is Europe's history!" Stopping again to puff his cigarette, he added, "Of course, this was all for a Western audience. Because they are the ones who have the *sulṭa* (authority)." ¹⁰ It is precisely these sorts of ties to Western or imperial assumptions around secularism, liberalism, and religious equality which have understandably driven so much anthropological critique of the concepts (Mahmood 2006; see also Shafir 2019: 622; Schielke 2015b).

This section has highlighted, however, how my Beni Suef interlocutors experienced the Egyptian state's wielding of different concepts as utterly inconsistent and opportunistic, and this view is ultimately corroborated by the historical record. In the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, Gamal Abdul Nasser promised Egyptians representation, democracy, and freedom from discrimination on religious, sex, racial, or linguistic grounds. However, threats to the "political unity" of the nation, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Egyptians of European descent, were dealt with harshly. ¹¹ In effect, any talk of democracy or secularism was ink on paper. All this calls to mind Murqus' framing of Egyptian politics as being driven by "*kalām aw shakl bas* (talk or appearance only)." The ostensibly secular Nasser also forged a close partnership between the Coptic Church and the state. Consolidated after Kyrillos assumed the papacy in 1959, the novel arrangement entailed the state granting the Coptic Church greater and greater internal autonomy and recognizing the Pope as *the* representative of "the Copts" (Shenoda 2010: 72). In return, the Coptic Church provided the Nasser regime with "unyielding support" in the political realm (Sedra 2014: 507). Through this cooperation, Nasser and Kyrillos had arguably recreated the deeply nonsecular Ottoman millet system (Sedra 2014)—an alliance reminiscent of the post-2013 pact between church and state which most of my Beni Suef interlocutors regarded as diametrically opposed to secularism.

Gregory Starrett (2010) shows how at the same time the state brought the Coptic Church under its umbrella it also took greater control of Islamic institutions. For example, Al-Azhar University, one of the foremost centers of Islamic learning in the entire world, was reorganized by government decree in 1961. Four new nonreligious faculties were added to the university's curriculum, as well as an Islamic women's faculty. In the midst of these reforms, Islam remained central to state symbols and discourses. The state publicized the *adhan* (call to prayer) rather than muted it, dictating Friday mosque sermons and arranging for prominent '*ulamā*' to issue decrees confirming Islam's compatibility with state policies (Starrett 1998). Reflecting on these reforms, Starrett asks, "Was Nasser's nationalization of Al-Azhar university a bold secularizing move ... or was it, instead, an infusion of the governing structure with religious concern, responsibility and resources" (2010: 644)? Starrett's point is that neither explanation is entirely satisfactory, and that scholars' rigid distinctions between religious and secular enterprises reflect normative stances on the question of secularism rather than analytical ones. This normativity, in turn, clouds scholars' understanding of the complex and diverse realities on the ground at any one particular place and time.

¹⁰Wesam's story corroborates Saba Mahmood's argument (2006) about the way the American Empire sometimes shapes liberal discourses around the world.

¹¹This mirrors the way in which Turkish nationalists employed "centralized power against Armenians, Greeks, and, to a lesser extent, Kurds" (Makdisi 2019: 84) and how the nascent states of Iraq and Syria (along with Egypt, of course) "denied political significance to the ethnic and religious diversity of their citizens" (ibid.: 129).

Normativity aside, this section has shown how the vast majority of my interlocutors in Beni Suef narrated secularism in Egypt as a highly variable, inconsistent, and multivalent force, calling to mind Schielke's discussion (2019) of the different forms of secularism in quotidian Egyptian life. Indeed, the diversity in ways that religion, state, and society intersected engendered constant analysis and discussion amongst my interlocutors. And to be sure, the views surveyed in this section were not simply a matter of my interlocutors accepting "secularism's own criteria," as Agrama suggests (2010: 498), but rather their asserting *their own* criteria and understandings based on their lived experiences. On the state level, meanwhile, they perceived a relationality between secularism and Islam in Egypt, where the postcolonial Egyptian state, much like its Turkish contemporary (Navaro-Yashin 2002), has cultivated *both* secular and Islamist faces—or what Asef Bayat terms a "seculareligious state" (Bayat 2009; see also El Sharakawy 2013).

Finally, this section has shown how deeply distrustful my Beni Suef interlocutors were of the state. For instance, some people I interviewed had a deep-seated belief that the Egyptian state was deliberately passive in instances of extremist violence and sectarian strife. On the other hand, I observed several instances of sectarian violence (such as the Maspero Massacre in the opening scene of this article) where my interlocutors believed the state was directly responsible and, indeed, these events offer further evidence of the state's opportunistic and flexible regulation of religion, politics, and society in Egypt.

State Violence and Realities of Realpolitik

The morning after the October 2011 Maspero Massacre, I left my apartment in Beni Suef expecting the night's bloody events to be casting a pall over society, but to my surprise I found things to be completely normal. The many Muslims I interviewed, almost without exception, blamed either the Copts for the Maspero violence or claimed that some "foreign hand" had caused the massacre in order to divide the country. It was only when I talked to Coptic Egyptians in private that I heard a different take. For them, the attack was yet another exhibit of their precarious political status in Egypt and a devastating reminder that the authoritarian state could manipulate religious difference as it wanted. Few Egyptian figures, the then-popular Muslim Brotherhood included, spoke up.

In addition to the Maspero Massacre, the bombing of an Alexandria Church stands out as plain evidence of the state's flexible and cynical regulation of religion which none of my interlocutors regarded as secular. On 1 January 2011, nine months prior to the Maspero Massacre, scores of Coptic worshipers were killed while leaving a New Year's service at *kinīsat il-qiddīsīn* (The Church of the Saints) in downtown Alexandria. The bombing left twenty-three dead and ninety-seven injured, almost all of them Copts. While the Egyptian government quickly identified the group behind the attack as *gaysh il-Islam* (Army of Islam), a very different account emerged from British intelligence reports and confidential state security files seized by Egyptian protesters in February 2011.

According to the documents, the former Egyptian Interior Minister Habib el-Adly established a black ops unit composed of twenty-two security officers in 2004. These officers were directed to coordinate networks of criminals and would-be Islamist militants to carry out the Mubarak regime's dirtiest work. When popular protests

broke out in Tunisia in December 2010, el-Adly turned to the black ops unit to safeguard the regime's interests.¹² Immediately after the New Year's bombing, two men, Mohammed Abdelhadi and Mohamed Khaled, were arrested as patsies by the same Interior Ministry that had commissioned them. As fate would have it, the 25 January uprising broke out weeks later, and amidst the revolutionary chaos the two were able to escape from prison. Fearing for their lives, they fled straight to the British Embassy in Cairo's Garden City. There, they sat down with British embassy employees and recounted how they were recruited and directed by the Interior Ministry to carry out the attack.¹³

The significance of the 2011 Alexandria bombing is largely lost in contemporary history. The event is overshadowed, in part, by the earthshaking political events that succeeded it. But the bombing is also deeply scandalous for the Egyptian state, and for that reason credible information about it has become harder and harder to come by since the deep state struck back in 2013 (most major Arabic and English-language news services, such as the BBC, have removed their stories on it entirely). My most trusted and informed sources in Egypt, however, assured me that the above account of the bombing is true, and the Supreme State Security Prosecution's 2011 investigation into the incident speaks to the compelling evidence of the state's involvement.¹⁴ While casting a damning light on the Mubarak regime, the nature of the bombing also calls for a reconsideration of scholarly understandings of secularism. For one, events at Maspero and Alexandria explicate the pitfalls of conceptualizing such state regulation as "secularism itself" making religion into an object of politics (Agrama 2012: 30). It would be a mistake to conclude, however, that the 2011 Alexandria and Maspero attacks were simply the result of a lack of secularism in Egypt, or that the attacks were primarily driven by ideology (religious or secular). Two additional instances of revolutionary-era state violence illuminate why.

On 1 February 2012, less than four months after the Maspero Massacre, dozens of al-Ahly Ultras (fans of al-Ahly football club) were massacred by armed thugs during a match at Port Said Stadium. In total, seventy-two unarmed football fans, most of them *shabāb* (young men), were punched, kicked, stabbed, and bludgeoned to death (Rommel 2021: 112). Evidence and eyewitness accounts of the event demonstrate that the massacre could not have been committed without the complicity of Egyptian security forces present. It soon became a widely shared view among Egyptians—and, in light of the evidence, plausible and likely—that the murders were retribution for the so-called *muta'assib* (fanatical) Ultras' past involvement in the 25 January uprising, and a warning against potential future disturbances or provocations of the police (ibid.: 106–7, 114). Unlike the 2011 Alexandria bombing or the Maspero Massacre, the Port Said Massacre, even on the surface, had little to do with religion or secularism. This is because Ultra membership had long been composed of young men

¹²The state's aim in bombing the Alexandria church was possibly twofold: it might have desired an incident that reinforced the regime's supposed counterterrorist *raison d'être*, and it may have wanted to compel Copts to stay in line if political unrest spread.

¹³"Ex-minister Suspected Behind Alex Church Bombing," *Al Arabiya News*, 7 Feb. 2011, <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011%2F02%2F07%2F136723>.

¹⁴"State Security Prosecution Probes El-Adly's Involvement in Alex Church Bombing," *Daily News Egypt*, 17 Aug. 2011, <https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2011/08/17/state-security-prosecution-probes-el-adlys-involvement-in-alex-church-bombing/>.

from across Egypt's secular-Islamist political fault lines, and thus the group's location on the purported Islamist-secular spectrum was of little demonstrable relevance to the massacre.¹⁵

Nor was secularism the primary agent in the 14 August 2013 Rāb'a Massacre of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Cairo, which transpired when security forces raided a pro-Muslim Brotherhood sit-in at Rāb'a Square with guns, teargas, and tanks (killing a thousand peaceful protesters in the process). In this case, people were demonstrating in opposition to the 3 July 2013 coup d'état which overthrew Mohamed Morsi, and the massacre marked a decisive end to the opportunistic rapprochement the Muslim Brotherhood and Egyptian state security forces had first developed in early 2011. On one hand, the stark division between secular nationalists and Islamists throughout that fateful summer (and the states' absolute resolve to crush the latter group) corroborates Agrama's argument about the marked hostility Islamist movements can face in Egypt's political sphere. On the other, the Egyptian state's maneuvers in 2013 also clearly centered on the interests and acquiescence of a diverse set of domestic and foreign actors. Crucial among these were regional and imperial powers (such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States—see Hamid 2023) whose historical commitment to democracy, liberalism, and secularism has always waxed and waned according to strategic interests. And, as detailed in the previous section, many of my provincial interlocutors questioned how much the coup actually transformed the state's inconsistent regulation of religion in Egypt.

Reflecting on the Rāb'a Massacre and all the other state violence during the revolutionary years, an exiled Muslim Brotherhood official spoke regretfully to me in a 2017 interview about his party's muted response to the Maspero Massacre, in particular. The man, who worked as a doctor in New York, explained that Maspero turned out to be a test run for the much larger conflagration at Rāb'a. Indeed, the two incidents share many parallels, from the way the centralized state marketed the violence for public consumption, to the manner in which most prominent Egyptian figures, regardless of affiliation, toed and supported the state's line. At the end of the day, all these instances of state violence, much like my Beni Suef-based ethnography, show that the centralized Egyptian state has wielded secularism and religion opportunistically, and without consistent ideological affinity. In Alexandria and Maspero, the state turned sectarian to pursue its political aims, while at Port Said (and Mohammed Mahmoud Street, among many other revolutionary protests), the state killed without foregrounding religious or secular imperatives. When the time of the 2013 Rāb'a Massacre came, the flexible state embraced neocolonial tropes about Islamic extremism, and has often done so since.

The state's opportunistic regulation of interests, ideologies, and traditions in Egypt is best captured in one final ethnographic scene: a conversation I had with two young men affiliated with a Beni Suef-based civil society club (referred to colloquially as the *munazama* [organization]). Both, Mena and Mahmoud, were regulars during my fieldwork at the *munazama* between 2011 and 2015. However, in early 2017, Mahmoud was nowhere to be seen. Then, suddenly in April of that year, there he

¹⁵Carl Rommel claims that it was the Ultras' inability and/or refusal to take a strong stance regarding the country's national (religious or secular) identity that led to its precipitous decline as a political force after 2013 (2021: 146–47).

was, sliding in, characteristically late, to a *munazama* event at a Coptic retreat center on the East Bank of the Nile. I immediately recognized the trademark grin on his face, though the thick beard I remembered was absent. The meeting that day centered on the topic of rights, equality, and non-discrimination. When the seminar ended, I made my way across the room to greet Mahmoud and Mena. Shaking Mahmoud's hand first, I asked: "*Wishak wala al-'amar* (Is that your face or is it the moon—an idiomatic greeting to someone one has not seen in a while)?"

"Mr. Izaak!" Mahmoud responded enthusiastically, "I was in the army. Do you see my face? Maybe it was like the moon before, but not now!" he quipped, pointing to his darkened skin. "I was stationed in the Western desert for the past year. They call our cohort the 'slave cohort' because everyone looks black at the end of their service."¹⁶

As the three of us made our way out of the meeting center, Mahmoud suggested I walk back to Beni Suef with them. I assented happily. Skirting past the heavy army and police detail that had been stationed at the center's entrance since the December 2016 Botroseya church bombing,¹⁷ we turned right out of the center and walked south along the winding country road.

"So how was the army?" I asked Mahmoud as a pickup truck stacked high with red onions swerved past us with two friendly honks. At first, he just shook his head and let out a heavy sigh. Then, without even a hint of levity, he muttered "I hate them so, so much." "Who?" I asked. "The Army, the officers. I never thought I would meet someone worse than our president, but some of them are so, so close-minded," Mahmoud said with exasperation. "I mean, really, these people do not even think." He sharply rapped his forehead with his fingertips as he finished speaking. Mena simply offered a sad, knowing laugh.

As we arrived at a section of the road bracketed by rows of banana trees, Mena told a story about army corruption. "When I was in the army, I was stationed in Alexandria," he began. "The army had built a new hotel there, and my job was to help set everything up. The officers I worked under were totally unqualified to do this, but they were there because they had *kūsa* [idiomatic for "connections"; literally "zucchini"]. Of course, on the surface this is already very corrupt. *Why is the army building a hotel?* Or a gas station, or grocery store, or food production, like they do in our country?"¹⁸ He fell silent as we passed by a small fruit stand in front of an orange grove. A ragged, brown donkey brayed next to the dusty display.

Anyways, the general in charge decided to create a *kahk* (biscuit) bakery in the hotel basement in order to make extra money. I did the inventory for this equipment since I was almost the only soldier who could read or write. What I noticed was that the forms listed all the machinery as German-made, but what we were setting up was all Chinese. When I asked the supervising officer about this, he said to enter everything as German. Overall, I'd say they budgeted for

¹⁶Mahmoud's understanding that dark skin color was related to slavery might have been rooted in Arab and American conceptions and presentations of the African slave trade, or, perhaps more likely, a remnant of Egyptian colonial and nationalist stereotypes of the Sudanese as slaves that peaked in the late nineteenth century (see Troutt Powell 2003).

¹⁷The aforementioned 11 December bombing killed twenty-nine people at a church adjacent to the main Coptic Cathedral in downtown Cairo.

¹⁸The Egyptian military has long controlled a sizable portion of Egypt's economy, estimated at up to 40 percent (see Abul-Magd 2017; and Springborg 1989).

five million pounds of German equipment, but only spent five hundred thousand on Chinese. They pocketed this money, and then the *kahk* business made them even more.

“And others in army leadership have no idea this is going on” I asked.

“That is the funny thing!” Mena answered, “Other generals did find out. But then they just wanted a piece. So, it just carries on. And this is just what I saw personally. Just think how vast the corruption is at the top.”

As we turned onto the final section of the country road before Beni Suef bridge, Mahmoud, who seemed to already know Mena’s story, spoke up. “Since the coup, this army corruption has only gotten worse. Sisi needs the army as his power base. We have thousands of retired generals, lieutenants, and officers, and they retire young; maybe forty or forty-five. Their pension is not as high as they would like. So, what do they do? They appoint them to all the civilian positions—electricity, water, waste management ... everything. This is the real inequality,” he finished, motioning back to the retreat center where the *munazama*’s discussion on inequality had taken place.

“But you would not say any of this now at the *munazama*?” I asked. “No, of course not,” Mahmoud replied. “Everyone there knows not to know. But I bet most people at the *munazama* do not like the army or the president.” With my own research in mind, I could not resist a follow-up question: “Some people at the *munazama* support secularism. Is the army *‘almānī* (secular)?” “*‘almānī ay ya ‘am?! (what secular, uncle?!),*” Mena blurted as Mahmoud started to laugh loudly. “You think the army is committed to any idea or ideology? No. It is about *maṣālah* (interests). *Maṣāliḥ wa sulṭa* (interests and authority).”

After a moment of walking in silence, Mena added “And the army is hardly secular. Was Maspero secular?” he asked rhetorically, referring back to the 2011 massacre. “And how many Christians are in the army’s leadership? There are many other areas and positions in this country where I cannot enter simply because I am Christian.” Mahmoud nodded in agreement. “And of course, the root of this is not Islam either,” Mena continued, “It’s the soldier mindset. Show me one country where army dictatorship is good. They are all failures. No one thinks and no one has a voice. It is all following orders.”

We arrived at the base of the bustling Nile bridge as Mena finished speaking. A dozen or so women sat selling *bulṭī* (Nile tilapia) out of large metal containers which emitted an offensive fishy odor. On the major road beside us, a steady line of taxis, cars, minibuses, and motorcycles zoomed by. After walking a while up the bridge sidewalk, I seized upon the last thing Mena had said: “If everyone is following orders, who is at the top of the pyramid?” “Sisi of course,” Mahmoud replied quickly, before elaborating: “And the other generals and business elites. But they really just belong to *amrika, wa Isrā’īl, wa is-sa’ūdiyya* (America, Israel, and Saudi Arabia). That is who controls this country now and this region. And they all just care about their own interests, not ours. This is what we tried to change,” he said, referring back to the 2011 uprising, his voice trailing off.

Mena and Mahmoud’s description of politics, secularism, and power in Egypt, along with my survey of several instances of state violence, help capture just how inconsistent and opportunistic the contemporary Egyptian state’s application of different ideologies and principles has been. These views fundamentally complicate Asadian theorizations of secularism being a consistent and agentive force in Egyptian politics and society. Far from placing Egypt into neat binaries

(of premodern religion versus secular modernity), these quotidian perspectives mirror Samuli Schielke's argument (2019) about the "schizophrenic" nature of secularism in Egypt. Moreover, this multivalence, I have shown, is not just the purview of the messiness and informality of everyday life, but also appears in the very highest echelons of statecraft, demonstrating, following Omer, "the enduring elasticity of the interrelation between religion and nationalism" (2015: 46).

The final section of this article locates these contemporary and ethnographic perspectives in several broader historical contexts. In turn, it clarifies the flexible, pragmatic, and opportunistic nature of different principles and ideologies (such as secularism) down *and up* hierarchies of power.

Discussion: Centralized States and Flexible Empires in History

The ethnographic data and analysis in the previous section show the Egyptian state's regulation of religion to have been anything but uniform. At its core, this variance is a reflection of the manner in which contemporary Egyptian elites (and their Western competitors and/or backers) have opportunistically adapted to an array of different historical, political, and social contexts. At the same time, it is extremely difficult to identify what, precisely, motivates powerful political actors amidst a blur of political pressures and circumstances—some, no doubt, more visible than others. That said, certain patterns emerge in the historical literature.

The Egyptian state and military—the latter of which both Mena and Mahmoud were so critical—are in many respects descended from the 1805–1848 rule of Muhammad Ali. The Pasha's emergent polity rapidly created modern industries, bureaucracies, and initiated a host of new social, political, and economic rules and reforms. Despite Ali's establishment of such a penetrating and regulating state, historians demonstrate that the leader did not conceive of himself as a nationalist or a secularist, and his primary cultural identity was an Ottoman one (Fahmy 1997; Marsot 1984). Rather, Ali saw Egypt as his *mulk* (an Ottoman term for private land) he had won by the sword (Marsot 1984: 100), and from the very beginning of his ascension, the ambitious Ali was interested in attaining one thing: power. The Pasha recognized, furthermore, that real political power—power that would allow him to compete with the European and Ottoman empires—could be best maintained through a regulating, centralized authority. This new authority manifested in the state's increased regulation of agriculture, industry, trade, religious institutions, demographics, policing, and health in the Nile Valley (Fahmy 1997; 2018).

Like the contemporary perspectives examined in this article, Ali's crescendoing control over Egyptian politics and society is most relevant to anthropological debates about secularism. This is because the most prominent theorizations of the concept hinge on the state's *regulation* of religion in politics and society.¹⁹ Indeed, Asadian theory necessitates that all modern states are secular because they all, at least to some extent, regulate religion. This broad framing, however, poses serious questions about the utility of a "globally shared" concept (Mahmood 2015: 2) when it manifests so differently across a diverse array of nation-states, each with their own unique historical, social, and political contexts. It would be more fruitful, I argue, to

¹⁹Mahmood writes: "Following Talal Asad, I conceptualize political secularism as the modern state's sovereign power to reorganize substantive features of religious life" (2015: 3).

categorize what the Asadian school terms to be secularism as a form of *centralized state power*. Contrasting with most of the decentralized empires that ruled before the advent of modernity, the modern state's defining feature is centralized power (and the thickening and diffusion of that power into people's everyday lives).

Within the category of centralized state power, however, I have shown there to be immense variability.²⁰ Thus, while one can draw a line from Ali's nascent polity to the Egyptian military and state which so profoundly shapes political developments in Egypt today, the mechanisms and manifestations of that centralized state power have shifted dramatically according to particular historical circumstances. Under Gamal Abdul Nasser, for instance, the country embraced socialism, Arab nationalism, and pushed back against Western empire and its regional allies. Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, meanwhile, adopted neoliberal economic policies and firmly entrenched Egypt in the American Empire's financial, corporate, and geopolitical orbit, all the while courting political Islam as a counterweight to Nasser's old base (the political left and organized labor). Sadat released most Muslim Brotherhood members from prison, encouraged Islamic discourses and symbols in the public sphere, and marketed himself as *il-raʿīs il-muʿmin*—the believer president (Tignor 2016; Kandil 2012; Abul-Magd 2017). The fluctuations and contradictions in Egyptian domestic and foreign policy over this crucial postcolonial period clearly reflect and contextualize my Beni Suef interlocutors' insistence on the opportunistic and pragmatic nature of the Egyptian state. This flexibility (and use and abuse of religious discourse, institutions, and politics) continued under Mubarak, corroborating Pakinam El Sharakawy's conclusion, "Securing its survival remains the top priority of the Egyptian governing regime, and it is the main criterion in deciding which face of the two: secular or Islamic will be raised in specific issue and time" (2013: 38).

At the same time, the anthropological and historical literatures hint at certain principles and ideologies, beyond cynical interests in profit and power, that have variably motivated Egypt's state at certain points in history. Groups such as the Coptic Church and Sufi organizations, for instance, have actively worked with the state against the Muslim Brotherhood (and other Islamist movements) for reasons that seemingly go beyond pure pragmatism. Amira Mittermaier details the frequent tension between Sufis and Muslim Brothers, as well as "the close association some Sufi circles have historically had with the Egyptian regime" (2019: 53, 202–4). Likewise, and as argued by Asadian scholars (as well as my interlocutors, Wesam and Usra), Egyptian elites and activists have also been motivated by Western, secular, or liberal ideologies and discourses (see also Barak 2013; Mitchell 1988; El-Shakry 2007). The bottom line is that principles, ideologies, and even moral and spiritual commitments variably factor into political policies and maneuvers, and the Egyptian state undoubtedly shares at least some of the principles, sensibilities, and commitments that compose Egyptian society. Rather than undermining my emphasis on cynical interests, this variability and complexity points to the need for scholars to locate and specify particular manifestations of flexible states, concepts, and ideologies in history.

²⁰Hence, rather than portraying centralized state power as perfectly organized, bureaucratic, and hierarchical, my use of the concept emphasizes the contingent, unpredictable, and chaotic manner in which centralized power can manifest in practice.

In order to elucidate the concept of flexible states further, it is worth reflecting briefly on Michel De Certeau's foundational concepts of strategies and tactics. According to him, powerful institutions and political orders employ strategies to produce structures of domination. In response, De Certeau claims, ordinary people pursue their own interests by use of opportunistic tactics (1984). Building on and inverting his framework, this article shows how powerful states *also* frequently adapt and employ tactics to pursue their own interests (such as embracing different political rhetorics, policies, or alignments). Powerful entities are often highly flexible and pragmatic. Hence, when Saba Mahmood argues (2013) that secularism strives for coherence and regulation in the face of its own instability, her point is well taken. Secularism, however, is hardly unique in this regard. This is because history shows that all forms of power and regulation are "contingently produced" (ibid.: 146–47), and therefore pragmatically employ different tactics in different contexts.

This plasticity, moreover, is neither a narrowly modern phenomenon nor a postcolonial one. There is ample evidence of pragmatic institutions, states, and traditions across the history of the Muslim World. Historians such as Khaled Fahmy (2018), Yossef Rapoport (2012), Knut Vikør (2006), and Christian Lange and Songül Mecit (2012), to name a few, provide rich accounts of shifting relations between the state, the courts, the *'ulamā'*, and wider society across the Umayyad, Abbasid, Seljuq, Mamluk, Ottoman, and modern eras. These studies make clear how even Islamic categories such as the *shari'a*, the state, *hisba*, *mazālim*, and *siyāsa* were transformed according to circumstances specific to time and place. They also show how the intertwined components of state, society, and tradition variably acted as sources of stability and change.

All of this raises the question as to why secularism's history in the Middle East would not be granted at least a degree of such complexity, ambiguity, or diversity (on this diversity, see Makdisi 2019). Ultimately, a comparative lens exposes how any particular manifestation of Middle Eastern politics or states must be understood to have been formed by flexibility and pragmatism, a fact made plain by the contemporary Egyptian state's violent maneuvers between 2011 and 2013 (as well as from the politics of Muhammad Ali to President al-Sisi's policies today). My basic point is that there is fluidity, pragmatism, and flexibility down *and up* hierarchies of power, and this is why the Egyptian state's regulation of religion, politics, and society has unfolded in such flexible and unpredictable ways.

A crucial factor, which adds to the inherent complexity and unpredictability of Egyptian statecraft, is the undeniable political influence of powerful actors beyond Egypt's borders. I refer here to empire (and the disparate and often transnational corporate, financial, and economic interests that compose it). Far from asserting a narrowly methodological nationalist view of state-based change (or the paramount significance of state centralization), therefore, this article suggests that more is almost always going on. In addition to portraying the Egyptian state as an omnipotent and omnipresent force, the ethnographic and historical perspectives in this article consistently paint the Egyptian state as a weak and manipulated one, too (calling to mind Sherine Hamdy's 2008 discussion of Egypt as an exploitative and exploited state). My interlocutors routinely claimed that Egypt had to act according to the requirements of foreign actors—an imperial dynamic with a long history in the Middle East. It was namely the British, for instance, who crushed Muhammad Ali's nascent military industrial power and incorporated Egypt into a rapidly globalizing and Western-dominated global economy in a decidedly subordinate position (Fahmy

1997; Marsot 1984).²¹ Egypt eventually became drowned in debt to Western creditors, leading to Britain's formal occupation of the country (which clearly centered, above all else, on material interests; see Tignor 1966).

While Gamal Abdul Nasser eventually forced the British out, it is revealing that, from the beginning, he had to make assurances to the new regional superpower that he “would not harm American interests” (Kandil 2012: 24), and there is no doubt that the United States, Great Britain, and Israel each played substantial roles in the eventual downfall of both his nationalist and Arab Nationalist projects (Yaqub 2004). Anwar Sadat, for his part, deduced that his government was better off simply submitting to American interests. Ever since, the profound agency of the American Empire in Egypt has been most visible in the billions upon billions of dollars in loans and military aid Egypt has received from Washington. And as Egypt has devolved into a heavily indebted “beggar state” (Springborg 2022), American support, training, and directives remain as pivotal as ever. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Sisi was educated, like so many other Egyptian military officials, at the U.S. Army War College (Abul-Magd 2017: 9). All this lends credence to the view, articulated by many of my interlocutors, that Egypt has had to conform, at least to some degree, to the requirements of regional and global powers, a reality that complicates narrowly state-based explanations of political, social, and economic change.

Ironically, the Asadian critique of secularism appears aimed at the very imperialism summarized in the above paragraphs, and for good reason. For centuries, Western powers have intervened in Muslim empires and states under the pretext of protecting non-Muslim minorities. The propensity of Asadian scholars to isolate and emphasize secularism in historical and contemporary machinations of Western empire, however, obfuscates the way such imperialism has often unfolded in practice. That is, Western empires have only shown concern for the supposed excesses of political Islam or plight of the Muslim world's minorities when it has suited their political or economic agendas. It is this *realpolitik* that explains why the United States and Great Britain have demonstrated so little concern for religious freedom, equality, and secularism in Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, all states highly repressive of certain religious groups. Ultimately, my emphasis on *realpolitik* speaks to the flexible nature of state and imperial policy—pragmatic tactics that are hardly unique to the Egypt of Muhammad Ali, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, or the Middle East generally. Indeed, throughout modern world history, the ideologies marketed by empires and states have often been the result of cold and cutthroat political calculation, and a veneer for the naked pursuit of profit and power.

Conclusion: Regulation and *Realpolitik* Historicized

The ethnographic, historical, and comparative perspectives in this article together elucidate the flexible and pragmatic nature of the Egyptian state's regulation of

²¹Egypt's routing of the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II's armies in the spring of 1839 convinced the British that Ali's state had become too powerful, and they sent forces to Beirut to defeat him in 1840. With the 1841 Treaty of London, Ali was forced to withdraw from Syria and Crete, and Egypt's army, which had once numbered 130,000 soldiers, was capped at eighteen thousand. Egypt's defeat also enabled the Europeans to demand a favorable tariff rate for European traders and an end to Egyptian protectionism and monopolies (Fahmy 1997).

politics and society in modern and contemporary history. The starting point for this analysis was my Beni Suef interlocutors' presentation of complex and differing views on how they have experienced religion, secularism, and state regulation in their everyday lives. This diversity and disagreement of opinion at a provincial societal level, in turn, supports Starrett's framing (2010) of secularism as an essentially contested concept. As for the state level, my interlocutors were largely adamant that the malleability of secularism has been a direct result of the Egyptian state's flexible, pragmatic, and opportunistic approach to governance in a neocolonial context.

The basic flexibility of that state's politics is most plain to see in comparing recent instances of state violence. The Maspero Massacre, discussed in the opening section of this article and elsewhere, is a most salient example of how little Asadian theorizations of secularism correspond to my provincial Egyptian interlocutors' understandings and lived experiences. While the influence of the state is obvious at Maspero, Alexandria, and other violent events discussed, the purported agency of secularism is much less clear. My tracing of the inconsistent and contradictory ways the state has intervened, often quite violently, in Egyptian society clarifies how the Asadian definition of secularism—"the modern state's sovereign power to reorganize substantive features of religious life" (Mahmood 2015: 3)—is simply too broad. This article's exploration of modern and contemporary Egyptian history elucidates how the Asadian conceptualization of secularism is better understood as one of many forms of centralized state power. Centralized state power can explain the state's inconsistent regulation of religion in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other states around the world. Unlike political secularism, the concept of state centralization is able accommodate the vastly divergent ways religion has been regulated within different states.

At the same time, this article has warned against narrowly state-based explanations of political agency and change. Overall, my provincial interlocutors were convinced that the Egyptian state was subject to intense pressures and controls by foreign powers—an imperial dynamic with significant precedent in modern Middle Eastern history. Thus, this article has also pointed to how American, British, Israeli, and other geopolitical interests (along with the transnational financial and corporate ones that are part and parcel to empire today) have variably shaped the machinations of state power in Egypt. On a political level, my emphasis on imperial interests ultimately seeks to contribute to Asadian scholars' significant exposition of the still-insidious power of Western empire in the twenty-first-century Middle East.

The ethnographic and historical sections in this article, however, demonstrate how secularism and imperialism are not synonymous, and that violent state, colonial, and corporate power can take many different forms. At the end of the day, the flexible and fickle nature of humanity and human institutions, as well as the complexity and diversity of historical contexts, mean that empires and states tend to apply formal concepts, ideologies, and policies in unpredictable ways. As I have shown throughout this article, the political variable that can be theorized most safely across space and time is power. Power is flexible, and power is pragmatic. States, politics, and empires, therefore, tend to be flexible and pragmatic as well. What most drives national politics, economics, and foreign relations, consequently, has less to do with religious or secular ideologies and institutions, and much more to do with the political and economic expediencies that compose and inform centralized power.

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