

**No Fantasy**

Lina Attalah

**No Protest**

Motaz Attalla

**with out**

Philip Rizk

**with out**

Emotional Architecture

**Fantasy**

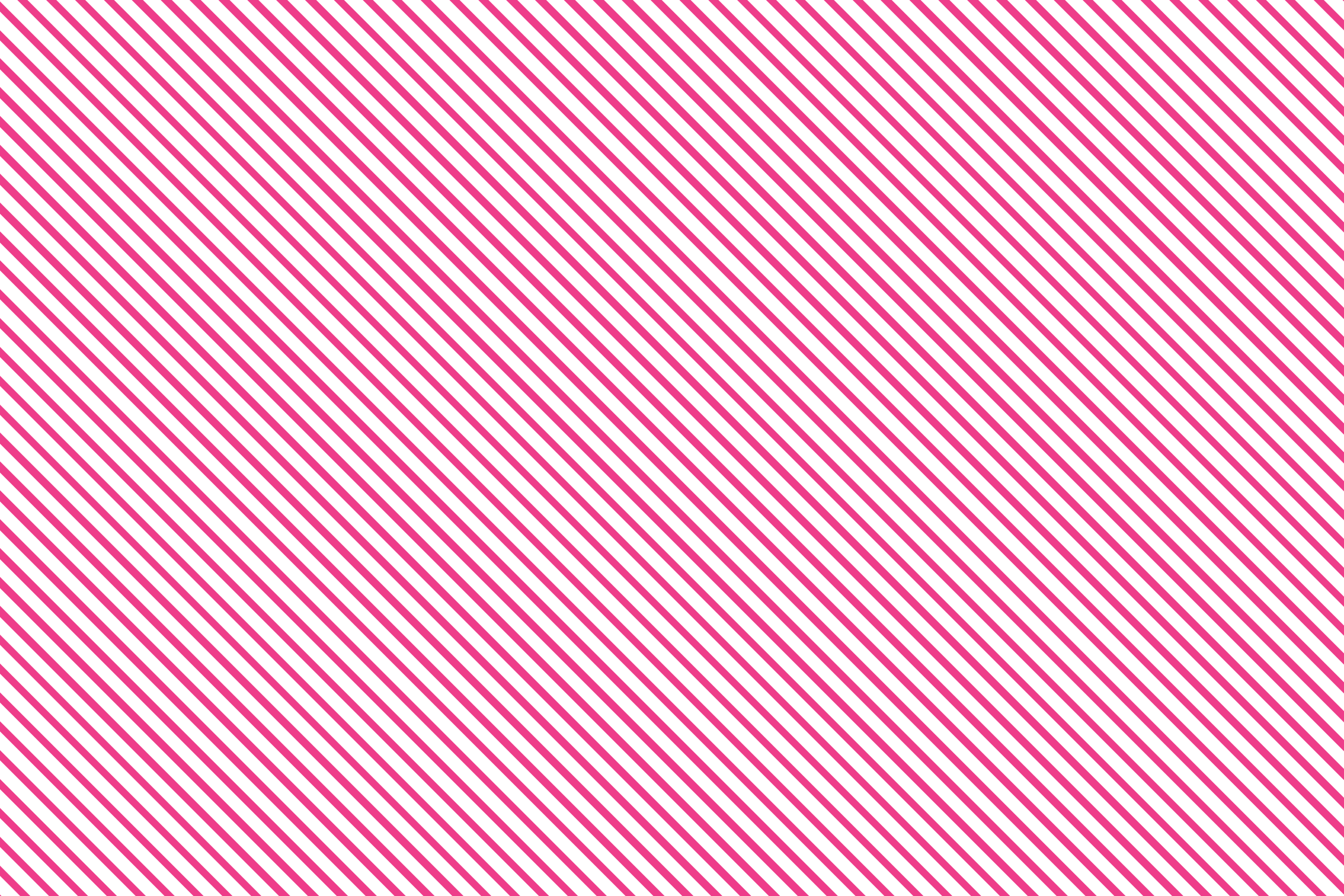
**Protest**

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*The history of all times and places,  
is nothing else but improbabilities  
and impossibilities; what we should say,  
was impossible if we did not see it  
always before our eyes.*

—William Blake

It was in the frame of a conference titled “Globalising Dissent” that the intentions of our project became easier to articulate. Sitting in Cairo with a number of people from a number of places, discussing “translation and the many languages of resistance” in the context of 2015 was important.

How do we translate events of psychological violence and lexical transgression? Can we reposition unstable desires into language without arresting them? What is it to interpret these conditions as they register on a corporeal level, at the scale of the individual, and also in relation to the fragmentation, re-configuration or dissolution of a group? Wavering ideologies and shifting allegiances meant that what was known to those who had been there then was something they were no longer bearing witness to. Our task was not just to translate words and images, but emotional and physiological transformation, changes in our interior composition. How do we transcribe the experience of “intolerable complexity” onto a textual plane? Ultimately, this is what we had found ourselves faced with.


We commissioned the essays that comprise this publication late in the summer of 2013. Earlier on that year, we had initiated a series of open-ended discussions with friends. We entered each other’s areas of knowledge and extended our own bodies of thought onto them. We measured each of us against the next and ourselves against the pulse of the moment we were living in. We started marking out an overlapping space

of affinities and this is when we sensed that we were not just more than who we are, but also less.

What we know now is that those conversations could only have transpired then. Cairo was a place in time with coordinates in flux, and we were all subject to the weather of events. Even though Emotional Architecture was not envisioned as a project for writing about what happened, and was rather committed to writing itself, the distinction between these intentions was impossible to maintain. Language was a frontier and it was closing in. Even if we did not know how to say what we wanted to say nor to what end, the compulsion to sustain a community of thought through the process of writing together was what drew us along.

Two years on these texts have been a long time coming. Were we waiting something out? For the impasse to end, and a certain meaning to emerge? We had wanted to find a location in language, to stand on ground from which the shape of yet unknown desires could manifest. But how does one record “the memory of an image of a future that will not be,” when transcription and translation turn against themselves? We knew we had to try to keep the past from slipping, to reclaim the moment even as it was being rewritten. If on the outset we were oriented towards a poetics of protest, what we came to learn was that what was at stake was much more basic: the site to occupy was that of clarity, an unbearable clarity from which fantasy can begin to exist again.

Malak Helmy and Nida Ghouse  
Cairo, September 2015

The left half of the slide is filled with a pattern of parallel, diagonal pink lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run from the top-left corner towards the bottom-right corner.

Motaz Attalla

## **People left to themselves**

It is nighttime and we are driving on the I-580 in Oakland, Northern California. It has been less than a week since my arrival from Cairo and I am in the car with my brother who lives here. On either side of the highway there extends a sea of rooftops. In the distance are the Berkeley Hills, the lights from their houses appearing smudged from the ever-present fog. The windows are down and the air smells of asphalt mixed with the distant freshness of ocean and forest. We are in the left lane and the road is curving to the left. Only the near part of the road is visible. The rest is black. My instinct is to slow down, but I'm not driving. My brother maintains his speed, like the other cars on the highway. My eyes remain fixed on the point where the road is revealing itself to us. It enters at an angle, cascading into the frame lit by our high beams. I don't trust the road, the dark, the curve. It's not natural to trust anything at this speed.

I inadvertently release my foot from the phantom passenger-side accelerator and, because this, obviously, does not make the car slow down, it feels momentarily like we're accelerating. The curving road makes our state of inertia—of zero deceleration—feel tantamount to a deviance, a transgression from a more primal, corporal locomotive code. It feels like I'm falling, getting sucked into the bend. Like when you think an elevator is going to stop at a certain floor but it doesn't and your body experiences the added weight of extra gravity—that's if you're going up, the floating lightness of diminished gravity if



you're going down—in that critical moment. Still, in the formal language of this space—the highway—there are neither signs nor markers instructing us to mind the curve or some obstacle ahead. I know that I am to trust the absence of such notice, to have faith in the rigour and relevance of the traffic code and that I needn't worry. But my mind is not yet able to. I am in this moment at the edge of something, of one way of moving through the world, and I stand before another. More precisely, I stand before the very decision I must make in order to enter it, as my brother has. I must actively recall and invoke the formal traffic code so that it, too, with time, becomes my nature.

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Our bodies inhabit the world before us. By us, I mean our minds, that faculty that is home to the rational explicit codes that frame our voluntary actions—the laws, the customs, the rules, the decorum. Before culture we are essentially no different to cats—throw us a thing and our entire being launches, transforms to meet it. Our bodies are already here, doing things smoothly, catching doors on our way out to pull them shut, kicking pedals into position as we hop on our bicycles. Our tongues rummage the gaps in our teeth not like featureless lumps of muscle but rather like veritable seeing hands, like moles intimately familiar with the earth in which they burrow. Our fingers pull and twist shoelaces in a tango informed by a deep, neuronal comprehension of shoelace mechanics, a comprehension for which the parental demonstrations in our childhood were mere points of entry. Our engagement with the world is embodied, awash in affect and fundamentally direct.

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I am driving and my brother is in the passenger seat. We approach the intersection of Market and 14<sup>th</sup> Street in West Oakland. My light is green but I slow down. My brother scolds me. He tells me that he understands that I'm trying to be careful but that this isn't the way to do so. He tells me that when I slow down I confuse other drivers. He also tells me that in general I can slow down if I need to and that I should never feel rushed, but that the way to be cautious at intersections is simply to be more vigilant while maintaining speed. He assures me that eventually I'll come to find it all to feel natural. I tell him that I understand but that I sometimes see cars approaching and they don't look like they're going to stop—that my eyes tell me these cars might not stop. He tells me that I'm right to perceive that as being what I'm seeing but that *by law*, these cars have to stop. I know this, of course, but I still need to hear it.

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I came to the US to complete the emigration process begun by my parents many years ago, not to study or take a particular job. I had been settled in Cairo, as settled, at least, as one can be there and in such times as these. I have no pressing reason for being either here or in Cairo. But with all that's happened and is still happening, here is better for now.

In the mid 2000s several of my close friends emigrated because they felt that life in Cairo was taking too much out of them and giving too little back and that they just wanted to live and work without all the hassle. They left for the Arabian Gulf, Europe and North America. I didn't have the same urge to leave. These hassles of which they complained, they didn't really bother me. Rather, I conveniently found the city's intensity enriching and fun. I experienced the utter violability

of personal space—physical and emotional—for which Cairo is infamous, more as a kind of intimacy than a form of violence. I recognised that it may just be my temperament, my curiosity about people and my facility with banter that allowed me to experience the city this way. There was also, of course, my privilege, affording me as it did such psychological balms as air conditioning and travel breaks. Still, I knew my friendship with Cairo was also an attitude I actively nurtured, a decision I took.

As I saw it, the only way to cope with the harshness—of driving especially—was to leverage it for some benefit. If approached correctly, the road rage, the traffic jams and just the general unpleasantness and danger make driving in Cairo a master-class in patience and forgiveness. I mentioned this to a young taxi driver once. We were on the 6<sup>th</sup> October Bridge, crossing the Nile into downtown. I remember it was summer and the cool air from the river rushing in through the windows was making a mess of the cab's interior. The driver shook his head in concurrence and, still looking ahead, said, "That's exactly it." He then turned to me, expressionless, possibly realising, as I was, that he and I were connected through what was likely the most virtuous thing in ourselves. For a moment, I felt extremely close to him.

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It is late in the afternoon and I am driving down Foothill Boulevard, near Lake Merritt. As I get to the intersection with 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, I see a green Subaru Forrester coming toward the stop sign from the right. It slows down but not completely and I wonder if the driver knows there's a stop sign and if he can see me approaching. I have the right of way but I slow down anyway. He eventually does stop, but past the line and with

the front of his car barely outside of my lane. I turn to look at the driver, and our eyes meet. He has endangered me but I feel nothing towards him. I'm not sure what to make of his behaviour; I can't tell whether it's that he doesn't care about the rules or if he's unaware, or maybe he's in a rush. I am searching his face for clues—an apology, a scowl, a look of confusion. I take note of his age, how he's dressed, his ethnicity, his car, any possible indicator of who he is, as I try to make sense of his behaviour.

It has been months since I interacted with another driver in this way, like I would constantly do when driving in Cairo. There, everything feels personal. I take offence when another driver does something that endangers or inconveniences me, as though there is implicit in their actions an animosity or disrespect directed towards me. Similarly, there I feel responsible for the safety and convenience of other drivers. I court their courtesy and am grateful when they give me right of way, when they let me squeeze in to a busy road. Here in California, I find myself somehow absent from these encounters. Absent in that I don't feel personally targeted in the mistakes of other drivers. I experience them instead as encounters between these other drivers and the law, this proxy through which I coexist with others, protected from them and them protected from me. There is a saying in Egypt, a phrase that two parties in conflict will invoke when all negotiations have broken down: "Let the law decide between us." Maybe deep down I consider the rule of law to be, in essence, the failure of friendship.

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I have only been sworn at by another driver in Oakland once. He was a young, long-haired man driving a white van and I had inadvertently cut him off while changing lanes on 12<sup>th</sup> Street,

near Chinatown. He gave me the finger and sped off. I was angry with him but also secretly thrilled to have been engaged in this way. I caught up with him at a red light, not yet knowing whether to apologise or return the insult. To my relief, he wouldn't look at me, so I didn't need to figure out what to do. All the other times I have made a mistake here while driving and bothered someone, their reaction has been to shake their heads in disappointment, as though I'd let them down, *again*. When I am walking on foot and a car stops for me at a pedestrian crossing I always raise my hand in gratitude. I'll smile at the driver and nod an acknowledgement, hopping forward in a gesture of haste, as though reciprocating the courtesy. It always feels like they are doing me a favour. I know, however, that this is just the rule, and when I myself am driving I stop for pedestrians because I am required to, by law. Still, I can't but resent it when people just walk right across, looking straight ahead, not acknowledging my having stopped for them, not respecting the possibility that I could just as easily not stop at all.

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As I adapt to driving in California, I experience this unease, the breaking in of this new corporeality, at traffic intersections and on curves in the freeway, in my body. But even as the visceral jolt starts to fade, there remains a subtle, moral charge. Something is at stake for me in this transformation I must undergo. On the surface, there is the feeling of danger, the fear that in trusting the system and other drivers first and my instinct second, I am letting my guard down. Because my instinct does not yet have reason to trust that other cars will not stop for me. But the issue is even bigger. I understand that this is how traffic systems work and that this is actually better than everyone relying on just their senses and on each other.

But deep down, I know that what I am losing is my very agency as an embodied being and I already know the implications of this compromise, this overriding of the sensory, the immediate and the affective. It is totalitarianism. The inverse of this, the confining of oneself, or of a people, to the sensory and the immediate is barbarity. Between them there is a spectrum. In times of revolution there is a shuttling back and forth between these extremes and there are moments, exceptional as they may be, when it feels—when I felt—that a perfect balance had been struck.

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It is my nature to manage my encounter with the world via codes that are once—or many times—removed from what is immediate, hence the very need for the symbolic systems underpinning language, money, culture and civilisation itself. Indeed, in the simple act of naming, I am introducing an intermediary that replaces my pre-verbal—that is, embodied—engagement with the world. By articulating a realm that extends beyond the immediate, like a set of traffic conventions, for example, we furnish scaffolds for maintaining particular permutations of the immediate, which, in the case of traffic, would correspond to a safe and orderly experience of driving on the road. The tools that we develop in order to extend our control of the world beyond the immediate coalesce to form myths—the discursive webs in which culture and civilisation reside: order, virtue, the law. While this realm is rooted in the lived world, it is also, by definition, separate from it. So as we inhabit this realm—the modern road with its rules—we too somehow stand apart from the sensory world.

Similarly, institutionality is the construction of scaffolds to produce and to maintain a given order. At its root is the act of

articulating life's elements into mechanisms by which we leverage what lies within our immediate reach, so to speak, such that our agency may extend beyond our immediate means. A hammer is more effective for banging nails than is a hand. It is also more effective than a stone in hand or a stick in hand. The utility of a hammer is more than the sum utility of a hand, a stone and a stick while still being comprised of only them. It is in the particular combining of these elements, of articulating them into a certain form—in this case a hammer—that they can extend beyond themselves, amplifying their utility. (I am referring here to hammers not in the Heideggerian sense of contrasting their usefulness with their mere materiality but rather as expressions of our fundamentally mediated encounter with the world.) It then follows that tools become machines by which man is able to extend further and further beyond his own reach. There is, in this sense, a continuum from the hammer—and from the mere act of walking, really, as it is itself the arranging of matter and energy into upright limbs built to utilise the rules of leverage—all the way to the modern nation state, itself ultimately a means of preserving and nurturing human existence, or at least a given national expression of it.

But then tools and machines and cars and roads and institutions and nation states all come with their own codes, their own rules of engagement. We first encounter these fields with our primal cat comportment—our immediate, embodied sensibility—and there is a dialogue, a negotiating of codes. Our cat minds are malleable and can internalise new and artificial ways of moving and being in the world, but this takes time. Here I am, driving on these California roads not yet having acclimated, my gut clenched from this civic charade, this exercise in trust for which I am having to suppress my instinct, my better sense. This conflict, this dissonance, is not just an artefact

of some cross-cultural encounter: a Cairo driver on Californian roads. Nor is it that I know better. If order were a shoe and our cat minds the bare feet, this dissonance is merely the breaking in of said shoe. Some shoes are softer, better made and need less breaking in than others. And there are shoes that never quite get broken in and it is the feet, rather, that blister and bleed. Driving in Cairo has required of me that I learn to manoeuvre and wield my car creatively and with precision. There is no snap-to-grid; movement is analogue, continuous. To drive here I must unlearn my sense of my car as an extension of my body and the road as mere open space, thinking instead of myself as a unit among other units, moving through the grid.

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Reda Macarona is a popular restaurant in downtown Cairo, famous for its bowls of pasta with a spicy tomato and liver sauce—essentially a rustic liver bolognese. I used to eat there often many years ago. On one visit, the man behind the counter slid my order across to me, along with an EGP<sub>1</sub> note in change. The note felt more humid than usual, almost wet. I looked at it and saw the beige colossi of Abu Simbel smeared red with sauce from the man's hands. In my mind I saw the image of a picket fence and the word *fence*, itself. Food getting on money meant that money—and all of Cairo—was getting in food. I wasn't upset with the man, nor was I too disgusted to eat. Rather, I had an ominous sense that it was precisely because of these porous borders, this not keeping separate that which must be kept separate, that daily life in Cairo felt so difficult.

Boundaries are the building blocks of order. Disorder isn't the absence of boundaries, but the pretence of working within them. By pretence I don't mean the gestures or claims of compliance, I mean that certain acts, like driving cars, are

already automatically assuming a certain order. Because cars are much heavier, can move faster and are less agile than human bodies, they carry a higher potential for causing death and therefore require a set of rules to compensate. We develop agreements, to keep at bay the monster—the threat of death—as we enjoy the convenience. It is the same convenience of any form of institutionalisation. As I make this leap into constructed orders, I am leaping outside of myself and reaching beyond my means. I no longer have immediate control and the implications and consequences of this should be unbearable. A taxi driver in Egypt once said to me, as a means of explaining his self-imposed 120-kilometre-per-hour speed limit, “Never forget that you’re riding on air.” He meant that which is in the tires.

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When fruit is frozen, the walls of its cells rupture from the shards formed by the crystallising cytoplasm inside, as though its organs shatter into panes of broken glass. This changes the fruit fundamentally. When the fruit thaws, its shape may be that of a fruit but its colour is dull and its firmness gone. There remains only the name: strawberry, banana, apple; a familiar shell, inside of which there is only debris, and the taste of a freezer. My memories now, not just of Cairo but, to some extent, of Egypt as a whole are so much of a state, a national macro-institutional mode, that is just like thawed frozen fruit. Police without security, hospitals without health, education without learning, and so on.

And while thawed fruit tastes of freezer the dysfunctions of a state reek ultimately of death. Is death somehow the hidden cost of statehood? Genocides of the twentieth century certainly suggest this to be the case. But even on a less sinister

level, the state is the ultimate expression of collectivity and this—the lethality of its dysfunction, its inefficacy and incompetence—is the cost of its having overextended itself, now overexerted and awash in a sort of civilisational lactic acid.

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We are on El Embarcadero at the northeast corner of Lake Merritt and we’re waiting to turn onto Grand Avenue. Our light goes green and we advance but then my brother slows to a halt right in the middle of the intersection. I don’t understand what he is doing. I look left and right and there are no cars approaching. I ask him what he’s doing and he points ahead and to our left. There is a man walking on the crosswalk, about ten metres in front of us. My brother is waiting for him to cross.

One is always in dialogue with one’s surroundings, like animals that navigate with sonar, collecting whole scans of the world around them as they move through it. We do the same with our eyes. When I drive in Cairo I find this dialogue to have a primacy that it doesn’t in countries where formal traffic regulations are more functional. When I drive, my eyes are constantly scanning the area around me to make sure I can get around things that come in my way. It is a simple language of seeing space and filling it. My friend Hazem, who was born a great driver, once told me—when we were too young, I would think, to have any genuine wisdom related to driving—that as one matures in one’s driving one begins to look further and further out into the road. The beginner, he told me, is fixated on the perimeter of his car but as he increases in experiences he looks further and further out to better pre-empt what might come his way. I have retained this as a rule of thumb, but I know that even as I look out into the distance, I am consciously engaging elements of the road that are not yet in my domain,

not yet within speaking distance, as it were. This perimeter inside of which I begin to acknowledge other bodies, be they cars, bicycles or pedestrians, is not set in stone. It is malleable. It is part of the language of our cat nature. It is similar to the question of personal space in different cultures. In some places you can't step too close to people and in others you can literally lean on them and not even need to acknowledge it. At the traffic light, my brother was in dialogue with the man crossing the street before us. In America, maybe in Northern California, this was conversational distance, whereas in Cairo this could only be shouting distance.


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I am with my brother. We step out of his apartment building and we're about to cross the street. It's a one-way street and the cars are coming from the left, so I look left but I also look right. I notice my brother also looking to the right, from where nothing is approaching and there is only a bicycle fading into the distance. Later in the day I ask him why he looked right while we were crossing. He knows why I'm asking. He tells me that it's a sense he's trying to preserve, an awareness he wants to keep alive. Indeed, I'm reminded, what can I trust more than my eyes?

In the months following the 25 January uprising in 2011, the absence of traffic police meant that drivers were taking more liberties than usual with traffic regulations. In May of that year, a young charity worker called Moustafa Abu El Kassem was struck by a car while crossing El Kasr El Aini Street in Cairo. The car was driving the wrong way down the one-way street and Moustafa lay in a coma for just over a week before dying.

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Revolutions suspend generalisations. By generalisations I mean categories of order, like citizenship. There can follow a suspension—artificial and circumstantial though it may have been—of many markers of social identity. There is not so much a forgetting of difference but simply the absence of context, of the normalcy that such difference requires in order for it to have meaning. In Egypt, the generalisations crumbled with the decimation of the police force, which should tell us something. In this kind of lawlessness, identity can feel less relevant before the sheer facticity of face-to-faceness. Suddenly there are people, rather than a polity. It is an experience of Egyptianess that feels coincidental; the cultural substrate that remains once people shed the Faustian indignity of having their togetherness subsumed under a nationalist project. What emerges from this is a vision of order, of a society rooted in affect and perhaps in compassion. Imagine days of conversing, drinking tea and worrying only about death. Sometimes when police stations are burned down, people are, for a moment, left to themselves.



Philip Rizk

## **Fear the everyday state**

I was running and hiding, then running again, in familiar spaces. They came after me, every time closer than before. I escaped but only barely. It was inevitable that the next time I would be too late, move too slowly. I started sweating profusely, my body in a state of panic. I woke up for a brief moment and tried to travel somewhere else in my sleep. They came knocking he told me, but no one was home. They came once before while I was away and asked questions. The man downstairs says our apartment is under surveillance. I feel them crawling out of the cracks.

You can't escape your encounter with the apparatus of terror if your psychic life is infiltrated. I formulated excuses to myself so as to stay away from the front lines where confrontation was most vital. I knew I had to take the risk. I dreaded walking the dark alleys, approaching lines of police in bulletproof uniforms, armed with shotguns and teargas launchers. Some of us have been snatched away in these streets. Thousands are missing. I wonder where they've gone. I wonder where the searchers are. I wonder how long they will seek.

On many occasions I joined the body of the crowd to stand against the terror of the police, and often I didn't. Despite the desire, the consequences haunted me, a constant struggle within. By placing our bodies in the line of fire, each of us risks taking the hit, a bullet to the chest, a baton to the head, cold prison cells, disappearing. Without this coming together



of bodies there is no possibility of revolt.

The contest over emotions is at the heart of the violent battle called revolution. The threat of weapons is but the means to a greater end: to control desire itself. It is a battle of images, language and symbols. The function of physical violence is to wage war on desire and the strategy is to divide and rule. The state agents want nothing more than to prevent our coming together in opposition.

Each of us plays a part in this tale of terror and desire. Yet rarely do we lay bare the emotions driving our most political actions. The truth is, no one is an observer on the sidelines.

#### terror 1

Karim first went to the square in early 2011, to see and hear what it was all about. And in November 2012, when the crowds besieged the walls of the presidential palace, the fifteen-year-old was there. He joined his body to the bodies of others gathered to protest the Muslim Brotherhood's monopolisation of power and the police's killing and wounding of protesters they were stationed to protect. In sum: President Mohamed Morsi's emulation of ex-President Hosni Mubarak's reign. When Brotherhood supporters appeared to oppose the demonstration, the police joined their ranks, at times coordinating attacks, at others acting as the neutral mediator between the two camps. A dirty game. During one such period, the police cornered Karim and filled his legs with buckshot. They then beat his right leg with their batons until his shin broke in two. When he finally made a call to his family, he lied and said he had been visiting his sister and was caught in the clashes on his way home. His parents had no idea he had been spending

time in Tahrir Square from the early days of the revolution.

Karim's family lives in Bani Mohamed, a crumbling side of Imbaba, where he works for a construction contractor for EGP90 a week. His father is an electrician who can't find work. Since the protests began, jobs have become scarcer and families focus their spending on essentials. Electrical work is seen as an avoidable cost. So with the exception of an odd favour, Karim's father spends his days with his cousin at a coffee shop down the street. Karim's mother is pregnant with her seventh child and worries about the bathroom ceiling collapsing. They pay EGP60 rent. The landlord, who has been trying to evict them to find better-paying tenants, doubled the rent in the beginning of the year.

When Karim's family eventually found him in a downtown hospital, the police had handcuffed him to his bed and he had two metal screws holding his right leg in place. They couldn't afford the transport costs to the hospital, so Karim spent most days alone. During one visit, the officer guarding his room told his thirteen-year-old sister he would punish Karim if she didn't give in to his sexual demands. After months of protests and court cases in which human rights lawyers advocated on behalf of those arrested at the palace, Karim was released and his case suspended. One of the NGOs that had intervened covered his medical bills and Karim, still limping, started work for the contractor again. His mother constantly worries that the authorities will come looking for him.

For many months after Mubarak fell, Karim's family didn't see the police. Instead, *balṭageya* بلطجية—plainclothes thugs hired by the police—roamed the streets. Everyone knew they were there because the police were not. The absence of the police was intended to fabricate a longing for a missing element in

the usual landscape. During an anti-regime protest in Bani Mohamed, the body of a slain protester disappeared. Karim's mother was not sure whether it was the police who took it away, or whether some thugs planning to sell the organs in the black market stole it. Every *baltagy* may be a criminal, or a police criminal. In either case, he acts to infiltrate desire. Better the known terror of the uniformed police than the unknown terror of its unidentifiable thugs.

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In 1952, the Free Officers took power in Egypt and announced the dissolution of the imperial police, to much popular celebration. Over time, these officers replaced the old ones, and three entities came into being, all in the image of their occupiers: they were trained by CIA agents, former German Secret Service officers and Soviet intelligence. Al-Mabahith al-'Aama, or the General Investigation Department, is the real power inside every police station, with a file on every citizen considered suspicious. Amn al-Dawla, or State Security, is made up of non-uniformed operatives that forcefully recruit citizens—bus and taxi drivers, kiosk and coffee shop owners, and building guards—to be their eyes on the ground. Al-Mukhabarat al-'Aama, or the General Intelligence Service, is modelled on the CIA to collect economic and political intelligence with a particular focus on foreign threats. These are the foundations of a police state. In 1969, then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser's generals added to this structure and formed Amn al-Markazi, or the Central Security Forces, to avoid the image of men in military uniforms repressing local rebellions. For the first few years the new Central Security conscripts trained under the army.

When Nasser's popularity started to wane in the months after he took over from King Farouk, security operatives set

off six bombs in downtown Cairo to frighten the population and silence opposition. The explosions had an immediate effect. Even people who had been wary of the Free Officers due to their rise to power suddenly felt they were necessary for protection against an unidentifiable enemy. Military trials of dissidents became justifiable to fend off internal attacks, and military rule appeased popular desires for a strong nation.

According to some historians, the idea of policing came into being in the transition between two forms of social structure. In Europe, the landless gained independence after the end of feudalism, no longer reliant on overlords for food and protection. Policing communities emerged in urban centres to maintain the notion of good order and prevent disorder. Soldiers in friendly uniform took over the role of religious authorities to protect the towns' inhabitants from each other. Policing was at the core of the formations through which individuals came to relate to the world around them. It's like Leviathan, a mortal god in the image of the immortal, who people accept with dread in exchange for protection. In Egypt, after the coup, Nasser set up a committee to abolish feudalism, which allowed the police to extend a net of control across the countryside. State terror was the requisite of a popular aspiration: bringing about the conditions for modern nationhood. A police state necessary for the very existence of the state.

## terror 2

Mohamed was born with a scar across his face. All his ID photographs are photoshopped to soften his appearance. Days after the removal of Mubarak, Mohamed was returning from work after the military-imposed curfew when members of a residents' committee dragged him out of a minibus, beat him up

and handed him over to the soldiers at a checkpoint. Citizen's arrests became common during the 2011 revolution, and the rulebook for them was quite arbitrary. Men in positions of authority often succeeded in exploiting this fluidity for their own ends. Mohamed's arrest was an example of the random application of tyranny that stands in contrast, and makes more palatable, the more organised tyranny of the police. Mohamed's scar made him a thug out past curfew. The military locked him up without recourse to legal representation or a call to his family.

A military tribunal short-circuits the law's bureaucracy in an attempt to re-impose its shaken authority. Military trials are part of the war on emotions, a battle with fear that increases the incalculability of a declared threat: the possibility of a passer-by detonating a bomb or any upright citizen being the judge over the course of your future.

A fellow inmate's visitor eventually called Mohamed's sisters and told them what had happened. They were angry, they knew the army had no cause to hold him. "We don't want to live in fear, we want freedom," his older sister screamed. Their brother's capture did not match the ruling generals' celebrated promises of returning order to the streets and bettering people's futures. Mohamed's sentence was a message for the family and neighbourhood to lead a life of submission and raise the coming generations accordingly. His siblings live in Mansheyet Nasser, where many of the city's garbage collectors reside, just south of the City of the Dead, where families live in a sprawling cemetery. The area is known for drug and organ trafficking: Cairo's underworld where the concept of rights has no meaning and people live only by the strength of their backs.

From prison, Mohamed wrote his sisters a letter on paper salvaged from cigarette packets, which his brother read out to

me. "Many of the families of the detainees that are here with me don't even know they are here. Quickly, reach them before it's too late and they get five years or ten in prison." This letter and others included lists of names and phone numbers. Despite the smuggled letters, Mohamed got a five-year sentence, like tens of thousands of others.

On 6 June 2010, plainclothes police officers Mahmoud Salah and Awad Ismail beat a young man to death in broad daylight in the entrance of a building in Alexandria. Khaled Saeed had refused a random ID check at an internet cafe. The police claimed he had choked on a bag of marijuana he was trying to hide while in custody.

Days later, a mother yelled in a march, "So what if he smoked hashish, why did you kill him?" On this occasion, the courage to shout out went viral as the image of this man's battered face sparked another battle in the war of emotions. The evidence dug into consciences and bypassed the self-censorship of a population that too often chose to suppress its rage out of self-protection.

Against social and religious norms, the family allowed their murdered son's body to be exhumed and re-examined. The physical evidence disproved the claims made by the state, but in vain. On 24 November 2013, the interim government banned demonstrations without police permit. Still, on 2 December of that year people gathered to protest the killers' possible acquittal. In five minutes the police cleared the protest, arresting four people and issuing a warrant for three others for organising it.

A month later, the Alexandria Criminal Court sentenced Saeed's killers to ten years in prison for torture, not murder. These

two officers' sentences were an exception: since 25 January 2011, hundreds of police accused of crimes against the public have been allowed to go free. The law has a very small range of manoeuvre within the public perception that grants it legitimacy. Saeed's case had become emblematic of the Mubarak era, which each new regime tried to distance itself from, and so after years of uncertainty the courts made a public performance of foregoing the usual police immunity by sentencing two low-ranking officers. Weeks later, the same court convicted the seven protesters arrested for an illegal gathering to two years in prison. The aim of punishment is not revenge but terror, wrote Thomas Hobbes over 500 years ago.

In January 2015, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi amended the Police Authority Law: the police would no longer be tried in civilian courts, but only before a military prosecutor.

### terror 3

Nasser's smile permeated a room. The first time I went to visit him, he was waiting in his red Fiat outside the metro station, smiling. During conversations over meals his wife Nahla prepared, and the time we tried to enter the factory, that smile rarely faded. That was January 2012. By September he lay on his deathbed, cancer eating at him. I barely recognised him. There was not a hair on his head, his cheeks had caved in, his entire body withered. Between jerking pains, he motioned at Nahla to give me something to drink, and then ever so briefly the smile appeared.

In 2004, Prime Minister Atef Ebeid supervised the privatisation of the Egyptian Starch and Glucose Company (ESGC). He sold it to a Kuwaiti mogul and the nephew of a former Egyptian

interior minister, who was also the prime minister's son-in-law. Ebeid sold the public company far below its value, as was the global practice of the day: government officials closed hundreds of public enterprises, accepting hefty bribes with each transaction, while hundreds of thousands lost their jobs. The IMF and World Bank made loans to countries like Egypt conditional on such economic policies of privatisation, and the USAID office consulted on the process of tenders and sales as a form of development aid. For investors, this meant that large plots of land could be acquired at cheap rates and relationships could be solidified with those in power.

ESGC's new owners appointed a former minister of industry to head the board to help smooth the process. He hired a private security company called *أمان Aman*, which means security, owned by a retired State Security general, to help coerce the workers to resign. The law in Egypt prohibits firing workers following privatisation, so a security company with a special mandate was a necessary component of the process.

The newly opened Technical Support office cut all workers' bonuses and moved Nasser from his accountant job to the sales office, where he was forbidden to carry out any of his usual tasks. When he inquired about this change, the man at Technical Support responded, "If you don't like what you're doing, leave." When Nasser complained, Technical Support moved him to a job in Industrial Security, where former Investigations Department General Essam al-Deen Hafez watched his every move, looking for any fault to report. "We're going to be after you this way until you either kill yourself or leave the factory," he told Nasser.

In 2005, the workers had organised a sit-in to protest the new working conditions under the private owners. Their strike

quickly ended when State Security forces arrived, kidnapped the head of the union, tortured him and then released him a few days later. The ESGC workers didn't protest again until February 2011. Meanwhile, while forcing the workers out one by one, the new owners sold off the machinery piece by piece. Their aim was to sell the costly Nile-side land on which the factory stood.

After three years of harassment, Nasser gave in. He was worried about the threats of the police operatives, despite their private uniforms. He was also afraid he would end up getting even less than what the company was then offering him. On 1 October 2007, he begrudgingly signed his resignation papers, and its approval arrived by fax within an hour. He left the company for a life stripped of all guarantees, without income, health care, bonuses, paid vacations or the community of his colleagues. Nasser had a wife, an ex-wife and a son to support.

The company left him with a monthly pension of EGP400 and an end-of-service payment package. He bought the used red Fiat and started work as a private driver. Then, in April 2010, a doctor told him that the stomach pain he had had all those years had not been an infection, but cancer. The company's doctors had always just prescribed painkillers—he had only been a low-level employee after all, and had not been granted the same attention higher-ranking colleagues received. He wondered if they had suspected it was cancer and withheld this from him, or if they had simply been careless. By the summer of 2012, the constant pain had turned into a debilitating throb and he could barely leave home. Suddenly the pain increased, making it difficult to swallow, then even to breathe. He sold the car to cover his medical bills. Then the cancer spread to one side of his brain. He could no longer close his right eye. His body became frail.

In early February 2011, Nasser had gone to Tahrir Square for a few nights. "Those were some of the best days of my life. People were different. People looked out for each other, worked together." On Friday 15 November 2013, Nasser died. I loved him.

In April 2014, the Interim Cabinet passed a new Investment Law whereby third parties are not permitted to interfere in business between government and foreign investors. All the cases Nasser and his colleagues had filed were annulled.

Nasser was no exception in a system where space for people was disappearing. The state of emergency is the everyday reality. The stability the state speaks of is the routine terror that killed Nasser without hesitation.

The roots of his death take us back to January 1977. A reduction of subsidies was part of then-President Anwar al-Sadat's new economic policies and the required conditions of a World Bank grant. Because wages were so low, people had to get by on subsidised food. On 17 January 1977, people took to the streets, clashing with the police and attacking state institutions, hotels and upper-class villas. The protesters took revenge against the police who had suppressed them for years while guarding the property of the rich. The police were the most visible proponents of the increasing stratification between the poor majority and the wealthy elite. One story goes that as local residents marched on his private residence in Upper Egypt, Sadat escaped by police helicopter to the airport, with a contingency plan to flee to Iran where the shah was waiting to welcome him. Only after Sadat rescinded the price hikes did the generals deploy military to aid the faltering Central Security Forces. Some say they had been concerned that the soldiers might join the protesters, as the price hikes also affected them and their

families. Even after subsidies were reinstated, riots continued in some neighbourhoods.

In the following months, detained middle-class activists were quickly released, but the courts tried hundreds of lower-class Egyptians for acts of vandalism. The president did impose many of the planned subsidy cuts, but gradually.

#### terror 4

One moment Vivian was holding his hand, and the next, the tank crushed her fiancé Michael, split seconds after he pushed her out of the path of death. In the midst of the horror of October 9th 2011, protesters moved the injured and dead to the Coptic hospital on Ramses Street, trying to safeguard them from the attacks. The hospital became a citadel no stranger could access.

The march had started as many other marches did: people gathered in a square prepared to move. There was reason to be angry. Seven months after the ouster of Mubarak, the military junta, which held de facto power, had done nothing to protect the Coptic minority. This time men had destroyed part of a church property, and members of the Christian community had started a sit-in at Maspero—the national television building—to protest this discrimination. The night before the march, plainclothes thugs had attacked and dispersed the sit-in. Before the marchers could reach Maspero, snipers started shooting. Some protesters were gunned down, and others lost their lives when the military appeared in armoured vehicles and started driving maniacally through the crowd, injuring and squashing them.

The TV presenter fixed her hair. The sound technician adjusted her microphone slightly to make sure her voice would carry clearly. She began by referencing 6 October 1973, a founding myth of the modern Egyptian nation-state.

“In these days, we should be celebrating this glorious victory, remembering the battle and how the Egyptian people stood shoulder to shoulder in solidarity in these blessed days. But what happened and continues to this moment in front of the television building will cause everything to change. What is happening to Egypt? To whose benefit are these events?”

The image cut from the presenter to hazy shots of a dark street, in startling juxtaposition to the clarity of the words spoken.

“How could one have the heart to do this to our nation?”

She hesitated. Her voice fluttered.

“Up until now, three martyrs and twenty injured, and all from the ranks of the army. And by whom? Not at the hand of the Israelis or of an enemy, but at the hands of a group of the children of the nation. This army that is undergoing this now stood by the revolution and refused to fire one single bullet on any child of the Egyptian people. And today we find that there are those who fire bullets at the sons of the army. No matter what their demands are, whether they be legitimate or not, do they have the right to burn an entire nation? Where are the wise ones of the nation now, so that we would hear the voice of reason, have mercy on Egypt, for God’s sake! We have borne a lot, and we should now also learn to bear more and sacrifice on behalf of Egypt.”

A fixed shot from a single camera angle ran for nearly the entire

speech. It seemed to suggest that the dark street could be the aftermath of a massacre. The lies of propaganda impregnated an otherwise common scene.

Political war is a war of rhetoric, of the mind, of the will, of illusion versus illusion, imagination against imagination. The voice that speaks to us identifies an enemy and gives comfort. The voice has the power to fabricate consent for terror. Death, sugar-coated. It lays myth upon myth: “the military on behalf of the people returned victorious against the foreign occupier of Sinai in 1973,” and “the military stood by the people in the principle moment of revolt today.” No mention of their routing by the enemy army only days later, no mention of the bodies littering the streets riddled by military ammunition. Territorial, religious and ethnic lines are vital to feed the myth of the collective identity of nationalism.

#### **terror 5**

When I met M, I found out that he had only left his apartment because he didn't want to decline my invitation. He had no residency permit in Egypt. He had tried everything, gone as far as inquiring into how to bribe the officer in charge. But even that was not possible. His brother, who had been living with him, fled to Jordan trying to escape the confines of Cairo. But M wanted to keep trying to find a way to reach a safer haven. After two and a half years in the country, he spoke the Egyptian dialect well enough to hide his Syrian accent.

M is from Daraa, where he participated in the early days of the Syrian uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In April 2011, he was filming the siege on his city when a soldier shot him. The bullet went through the right side of his face and

smashed his jaw. Any closer to his spine, he would have been dead on the spot. For months he could not eat and was barely able to drink. Hospitals in Syria that opposed the regime were poorly stocked and understaffed. Three weeks later, despite the pain and the risk, M travelled to Egypt to seek treatment. Through a friend he managed to reach a doctor and began his recovery process.

This was the summer of 2011, when most Egyptians identified with the struggle in Syria. This was before the Syrian revolt was almost completely transformed into a playing field for the battles of external powers. In Egypt, friends of friends had taken M in, doctors and nurses were offering support to Syrians, often for free. Two years later things had changed drastically.

In the weeks leading up to 30 June 2013, anti-Muslim Brotherhood media outlets underlined every possible failure of the unwanted government. While the Brotherhood simply maintained the brutal and exploitative state mechanisms it inherited, private media outlets actually carried out their task of reporting the authorities' tyranny effectively unlike ever before. Every power outage, water cut and petrol shortage, as well as all footage of Brotherhood supporters' violence against anti-government protesters, was used to fuel the growing anti-Brotherhood propaganda. TV presenters who had condemned the 25 January demonstrators now called on people to join the 30 June protests against President Mohamed Morsi.

A campaign called Tamarod, which means rebellion, had begun to create a momentum on the street calling for the overthrow of the Brotherhood's government and for new elections. Tamarod's utility quickly came to the attention of the heads of various policing apparatuses, who quietly co-opted the

movement by simply not impeding its activities. The crowds of 30 June gave the generals the legitimacy for the coup that followed on 3 July 2013.

In an interview in a local newspaper on 5 July, a veteran of the 6 October battle said the spirit of 6 October had returned to Egypt for the first time through the 30 June revolution. The words sought to create new national landmarks by which to cast 25 January into the shadows of history.

On 9 July 2013, an army spokesperson appeared on state television accusing Syrian and Palestinian militants of opening fire on the army to defend a Brotherhood supporters' sit-in, which ended in the death of fifty-one civilians. TV hosts started referring to Syrians and Palestinians as Brotherhood affiliates opposing Egypt's army. That same day, the Egyptian authorities sent back two planes of passengers fleeing from Syria, starting a new era of closed borders between the two countries. On 16 July, the popular TV presenter Tawfiq Okasha—seen in some circles to be a mouthpiece of Egyptian security apparatuses—yelled that in every neighbourhood we would chase Syrians and Palestinians out of their homes. What followed was an onslaught on refugees across the country. Many Syrians identified at police checkpoints were arrested and kept in prison until they could provide payment for a one-way ticket home. With a single utterance by this man in military uniform, Syrians were transformed from fellow revolutionaries into villains.

The suspicion did not fall only on foreigners. The police set up a hotline to which citizens could report anyone they deemed unpatriotic, anyone carrying out unusual activities, anyone the caller thought curious. All that was needed was a call from a concerned neighbour and the police would turn a private

home into a crime scene. Trusted coffee shop owners handed in familiar customers said to have joined in protests in the past, preachers told listeners to snitch on their unpatriotic husbands or wives, a mother called in to report on her son's political activity. The enemy was within, and everyone needed to stop them for the nation's sake. Countless participants in the 25 January revolt joined in the patriotic act of calling for every Brotherhood member to be punished or locked up. This environment of suspicion gave the police permission to arrest whomever they saw fit, especially those identified to have participated in protests, and to detain journalists or passers-by at their whim.

In a televised speech on 24 July, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi made his first reference to terrorism.

“I ask you to go to the streets to show the world the extent of the power of your will and desire that in the event that violence and terrorism are reverted to, you mandate your army and police to take the necessary measures to confront this violence and this terrorism.”

Sisi was a member of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, one of the generals who had ruled the country between Mubarak's toppling and Morsi's presidency. During Morsi's term, he was appointed to liaise between the military generals and the Brotherhood leadership. Through the coordinated crowds of 30 June, he became the most powerful man in Egypt.

On 26 July 2013, throngs of people joyfully filled the squares to mandate Sisi's soldiers and police to exert any extent of violence to protect them. On 14 August, the soldiers killed over 1000 pro-Brotherhood demonstrators, injured even more, and arrested anyone near the protest site. We don't know



the actual numbers. Bodies lined the inside of mosques. The crowds played their role, volunteered, watched, reported on neighbours, and in this fascist moment, military-appointed liberal ministers and intellectual figureheads became the handmaids of terror, flowers on the soldiers' lapels.

On 6 October that year, a group of Syrians took to the sea off the northern coast of Egypt to escape that reality. The Egyptian navy hunted them down in a mission to protect Fortress Europe against undesired visitors. As the vessel began to sink, the cameras and cell phones of the sea police captured the last breaths of the dying. Silence followed this incident's reporting, a silent celebration of the death of these threats to the nation. Some of the youngest among them were seven and nine, eleven and fourteen years old.

In the early hours of Christmas Day 2013, a bomb exploded at the police headquarters of Egypt's third-largest city, Mansura. In yet another speech in a soothing colloquial dialect, Sisi spoke:

"You demanded to have a free will and to live in safety in a truly stable country, and this does not come easily. Don't dare think that what you are seeing now can ever shake Egypt. The Egyptian people were afraid when the Egyptian army was not with them. Before anyone touches you, we would die on your behalf. The Egyptian army is the sacrifice of Egypt. Pay attention: we are never afraid except of God. We are never afraid. There is no anxiety or fear. And those that touch you, we will not leave them on the face of the earth. Don't ever be anxious or afraid, in the beginning and the end God is with us. Egypt will remain, always. Terrorism must fall, always."

That day, with media outlets filled with images of destruction and bloodshed, the courts ruled the Muslim Brotherhood a

terrorist entity—a legal formalisation of the war on terrorism, a legitimisation of a state of emergency. Though no tie was ever made between the perpetrators of the Mansura bombing and the group, the said act of terrorism was the required abstraction to legalise the crackdown on any opposition, and to re-entrench an all-powerful state—a condition world powers were happy to see reappear to maintain the status quo of coloniality. The Brotherhood returned to its traditional role in Egyptian politics, playing the scapegoat deflecting widespread discontent from the state project.

\* \* \*

On 30 June 2013, on the one-year anniversary of President Morsi's reign, I joined a small march that chanted against both the Muslim Brotherhood and the military generals. The crowds attacked us for criticising the military. The TV stations had announced the pro-military and police chants to be used, and we were pushed to the margins by the cacophony. The following days, I worked frantically on a video that tried to explain the position of that little group, which in hindsight was merely wishful thinking. The more the military's popularity exploded, the more our position in popular consciousness faded.

The discourse of terrorism has an effect of divide and rule. In the following months, I was not deemed the enemy per se, but by not siding with the conqueror I was a dissident, and therefore a target. The final blow came in November, when the self-appointed authorities outlawed any form of coming together in protest, to tear each one of us out of the crowd of revolt.

On the streets, hope was crushed, and in its place were promises of power and victory. The image of a great Egyptian state captured the desire of so many, whether poor or rich. They

all shared the lowest common denominator: anxiety that life would get unbearable. People became thirsty for some kind of excitement with which to oppose the disappointment. The fervour of nationalism required a counter-image. In 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood and their foreign fighters fulfilled this role, a role that the Bolshevik enemy and their Jewish operatives had occupied in 1925.

In the same way that the ideology of 1914 National Socialism sought to oppose the revolutionary ideas of 1789 France, the orchestrated celebration on 30 June 2013 was an attempt to oppose the radical spirit of 2011 Egypt. In the month that followed, a popular mandate sanctioned one man to use whatever means to conquer the fantastical enemy. This is the unspeakable magic that allows crowds to chant the police back into power three years after they had chanted them out of it. This is statecraft: the art of making people forget what they had been fighting for.

Following a deep moment of crisis, when the very structure of the state is under threat, its proponents need to fabricate a widespread lust among the masses to maintain the idea of the state itself. Benito Mussolini put it this way: “The foundation of Fascism is the conception of the State, its character, its duty, and its aim. Fascism conceives of the State as an absolute, in comparison with which all individuals or groups are relative, only to be conceived of in their relation to the State.”

At 6:45 am on 24 January 2014, I woke up to the sound of a blast. Gripped by anxiety, without a way of knowing where this vibration of the earth originated. Familiar TV and radio presenters soon announced that the first attack had been on the downtown Cairo police headquarters, where the smoke rose ominously; the second bomb had been placed at a police

station across the river. The explosions were heard in all corners of the sprawling city.

The next morning, the third anniversary of the revolution, an unfamiliar chant rose out of the square:

الشعب يريد إثبات النظام — *The people want the affirmation of the system*

\* \* \*

General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi introduced the terminology of terrorism into public discourse only after the coup, and after the pro-military media projected the Muslim Brotherhood’s bewildered supporters as armed and their leaders as Al-Qaida affiliates. The language of terrorism took the category of enemy to its extreme: it defined the military and the police as legal state agents against the Brotherhood as an illegal non-state actor. By deeming the Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, the general was imitating the linguistic-legal games of his American patron, in turn inspired by the Zionist occupiers of Palestine—tactics that are variations of the semantic distortions that shroud colonial violence everywhere. Sisi’s stance was legible to governments globally. While some state representatives uttered a critique of the violence used against the Brotherhood, continuing diplomatic and trade relations with Egypt revealed their duplicity.

The projected threat that the discourse of terrorism created was a force so powerful that it awed a population and obscured the real terrors of soaring food prices, police brutality and a system of law that exists for the longevity of its own domination. A looming foreign danger in our midst replaced the desire for betterment with the desire for preservation, through the

celebration of nationalism and patriotism. The dualism of good and evil, terror and security confirm a familiar world and give comfort in the face of an unpredictable reality.

There was the urgency to find such a culprit of terror following the momentum that grew out of 28 January 2011, where the angry people lay their sights on the very institutions of the state itself. A politics of mass pauperisation had helped lead to a popular rejection of the police state, and a community was emerging around the desire for a better life. It was in our coming together that the desire around this community crystallised, and so our coming together had to be diverted. Fear-mongering tried to turn each of us into a single unit within an imagined nation. Underneath the state's violence, there's a simple equation: the self-perpetuation of the state. Its disciplinary institutions do not teach these signs; the protesting crowd learned them on their bodies in the process of revolt.

### on violence

On the morning of 25 January 2011, small groups marched through Imbaba—not towards Tahrir Square, but through the neighbourhood's garbage-filled streets—to announce the marches planned for 28 January, the Friday of Rage. Their chants breathed courage into the hearts of those who heard them, into the mundane privacy of coffee shops, through cracked windows into kitchens and living rooms. The bodies on the street allowed for personal battles with fear to turn into a collective one.

الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام — *The people want the fall of the system*

To oppose the state's denial of brutality within its structures, its reality had to be forcefully confronted with our own. Batons, bullets and gas canisters were opposed with chants, stones and Molotov cocktails. Only when imagining is transformed into bodily movement is fear resisted. The revolting crowd's most powerful weapon lies in numbers. The collective makes resistance possible. Facing brutality with violence cracks the facade of criminal-legal structures of power.

January 2011 brought with it a moment of clarity, allowing for the collective gathering of courage to face the state's routine daily terror. الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام. A roar in the street consumed the numbing nausea that is a defence mechanism against the oppression. الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام. Consumed by desire in this crowd, imagination ran wild. الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام. A community fomented not by fleeting ties to ethnicity, faith-system or land, but a shared desire to have away with this system. A deep emotional contest was sparked. الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام

On 30 January 2011, I filmed a man in Tahrir Square. "I swear I used to walk here scared. Today, look, I am walking in my country, I can sit, sleep, walk. I am walking freely. I feel safe. Should I feel safe in these days, or are these supposed to be days of fear? The Ministry of Interior's men deal with us as if we were criminals."

Two days earlier that sentiment had translated into action: burning over ninety police stations, opening prisons, lighting the ruling party's headquarters on fire.

In the convergence of people lies the possibility of deeply wounding the rule of myth formulated through a system of discipline of home, school, mosque, church, university and workplace. In convergence, the discipline dissipates and we

prepare for a contest, a clashing of solidarities. In the crowd, a different solidarity emerges: a combining of forces and spirits, a confrontation with the powers that hold us down, a violent solidarity formulated for battle against the disciplining authority. A new subconscious momentum emerges in moments when the bubble of normality is punctured. It is the body that produces thought, and in the amalgamation of bodies, the protesting crowd, the root of revolt crystallises: if the state upholds this brutality, it has to be rejected. A body of people seeks a community of a different type, unknown but far from what it lives now. For now, the community is formulated, ever so frailly, by desire itself.

#### **terror x**

In March 2013, the police abducted Karim as he exited the metro to visit his sister. Some in uniform, some not, they chased him through an alley and caught him. From the corner of his eye Karim noticed a friend across the street—one who knew where he was being taken. In a station at the end of the street, the police left him shivering all night after threats and beatings. The next day, they tied his hands to the ceiling and raped him with a stick. They suspected him of possessing a weapon taken from a police vehicle during clashes with security forces the night before. Three days later, they released him. For weeks the muscles in his left leg were nearly frozen, as if in a cast. Many of those who undergo the worst forms of torture leave as agents, like Karim's old friend standing on the other side.

The constant turn to brutality, no matter the government, reveals that the state apparatus is not only defending a party in power, but power itself. State agents aspire to maintain the state, like the authorities before them. Even today, Karim was


tortured in a police station surrounded by Victorian architecture. A revolt against the Egyptian elite is an affront to global power structures, of which the Egyptian state plays only a small part in a much greater whole.

\* \* \*

The significance of these tales lies in identifying the untold front lines of the battle over life itself. The maintenance of the rule of the few, and the submission of the rest, is the role of the state as the agent of colonial logic. When coloniality is no longer just a pattern of power but part of our makeup, then it is present in our very being, in the realm of desire, where the deepest contest with power takes place.

Revolt questions the myth and its maker, and through the physical act imagines that a different world is possible. It's a phantasmic hope. Words lie bare, their threads unravelled as the soldiers beat down on us, and with their tools of terror stitch over a raw wound that will only fester and spread. The construction of yet more prisons, the imposition of new laws that make gathering illegal and the dissemination of fascist ideas while drowning us in austerity—all this raises the stakes, intensifying the coming contest. Our coming together, which caused the teetering of the system, was only a start. It is a battle to see a world outside the confines of the colonised imagination. The year 2011 was the painful beginning of a community's identifying with each other's desire to shatter the familiar. The physicality of this fight has taken lives and left debilitations, scars and mourning. Despite the place of weakness we have reached, the desires that opened in the imagination remain.

سيسقط النظام — This system will fall

The left side of the page is filled with a pattern of parallel, diagonal pink lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run from the top-left corner towards the bottom-right corner, creating a strong sense of movement and texture.

Lina Attalah

## **Like an island**

**Next to the State**  
**North Sinai – Fall 2010**

As darkness comes to reside in the peninsula, I arrive at a place in the desert near Mahdiya village. There is no landmark to indicate my meeting point with Youssef and Ali, neither of whom I know. All I'm told is that we are a few kilometres from the Israeli border, that the border lies eastward, and that over on the other side, there is the parallel desert of Beer al-Sabaa. But none of these words manage to rupture the invisible expanse into discernable zones for the unversed eye of an outsider.

Youssef and Ali arrive in a pickup truck driven by a Bedouin man. Once the headlights are off, we are back to black. I don't see them when they jump out of the car and settle on the ground right in front of me, and I don't know whether to blame that on my impoverished vision or on the darkness of the desert. There is only a dim layer of light seeping through the cloudy sky. We can barely see each other. I struggle to interview them.

Youssef and Ali fled their hometowns in Ethiopia to search for work in East Sudan. There, a group of smugglers met them at a kiosk where they stopped to have tea. The smugglers told them of a company in Sinai that hires employees for US\$100 a day. It took no time for them to decide to continue their voyage northwards, to Egypt. A few weeks later, and here they were.

They knew they were travelling illegally and that their road would be paved with risk. In one fragment of their journey, they hid under piles of potatoes in a truck being driven across the Suez Canal. Later, a smuggler told them that their attempt to hide could have been futile, because trucks loaded with vegetables and fruits were regularly stopped at checkpoints. The police suspect those goods to be on the way to Gaza, smuggled through the underground tunnels of Rafah in North Sinai. The trafficking of humans, they were told, matters less.

In Sinai, the promised company was no more than a warehouse run by kidnappers. Youssef and Ali were tortured there on a daily basis. This was to continue until their families paid exorbitant ransoms.

Eventually, the two managed to escape. They were running through the desert when a tribesman found them. He offered to keep them in hiding until they had a plan for exiting the peninsula.

Their plan was to try to go elsewhere, possibly somewhere, *anywhere*, in Europe, but not to return home. Of how this plan would manifest, they knew very little. Their resolute and rudimentary desire to keep going without looking back amplifies the inaudible rhythm that moves through Sinai, of which we know very little.

Somewhere around the same area, but on this occasion with the indicator of a tree, I sit with a smuggler called Walid, who rests his back against its trunk. He is all of 17 years old, and is often found hiding under a big cap. In his pocket he juggles two Egyptian cell phone chips and an Israeli one. I am told his name is not Walid. But Walid, perhaps like many other names, befits him.

Walid tells me that he doesn't condone the kind of smuggling that holds African migrants hostage as a means of extorting money. In the framework of his operation, 'expert' knowledge of the desert is a skill he possesses and a service he can provide. He uses it to guide migrants to the border of Egypt so they can cross over into Israel. For a fee of around US\$300, he helps migrants escape. Many of these migrants have seen Cairo turn into an enclosure over the last ten years. Israel, for them, is a desired, legitimate elsewhere—Europe of the Middle East—but the way to it is illegitimate. Walid, the agile boy of the desert, makes this illegitimacy surmountable. To ensure his own safety, he sleeps in a different location every night.

Moussa, the wise old man of Mahdiya, lives in a posh villa that has somehow made its way into the desert. His capital also lies in a deft knowledge of a desert region that, through a series of circumstances, has become the frontier of several states. His primary trade involves smuggling goods to Gaza, but he has enough knowledge to map the trajectories of different smuggling operations out for me. As the sheikh of a tribal society he enjoys the privilege of information, and can narrate the ecosystem of its alternative economy. For example, he reflects on how new types of smuggling, like that of migrants, have introduced new levels of wealth and capital to the desert communities, affecting the pricing schemes of other passages, such as those of food, gas, drugs and arms. He also reflects on the shifting value systems of his society, and its vilification. When humans are the smuggled matter, he explains, a number of routes emerge. There are the more benign trajectories, like those of Walid, in which migrants are taken to the border to cross into Israel for a small fee. But as with every economy there is also a malign trajectory, such as the trafficking business, in which kidnappings, torture and ransom are common practices.

Sitting with Youssef and Ali in a semicircle in the parched desert, far from any landmark, struggling to see them in the dark, I think of how my piece of writing won't translate their intrinsic invisibility. In meeting them, I become cognisant of the many others like them who I don't and won't see. While we talk, they recount the multiple times they were hidden by their kidnapers from the state, and I think of the many times they are hidden by the state from us. The moment overwhelms the possibility of journalism. And so it stays where I leave it in the desert.

I go back to Arish, the closest city, sit by the sea and against a deadline to write my story. In it, I describe the whole scheme—the smuggler, the client, the kidnapped—that forms the ecosystem. I also feature the state's response, which consists of officials comfortably and consistently denying that the practice even exists. When the story goes live it turns viral, while other possibilities of narration continue to write themselves out in my head. I did not describe the dynamic of the village of Mahdiya thoroughly. I did not account for the desert that surrounds it as a place where the state stops being itself. I did not dwell on this separation between the desert and the state caused by the fact that one simply isn't able to accommodate the other. I failed to mention anything about other such transnational points of passage tread by those who have to move through the peripheries of states. I did not write a word about how human beings, moving alongside other goods, can be both client and product in the economies of non-states, how their unsanctioned desires intersect with unsanctioned activities.

I park my computer, stare at the sea, and ponder over all the other possibilities of the desert that writing cannot embody.

## **Underneath the State North Sinai – Winter 2008**

On a cold winter dawn I hit the road to North Sinai from Cairo. I sleep through the ride, waking up intermittently to radio updates about the names of new places bombed and the number of casualties. At one point there is an announcement of a raid on the border town of Rafah, from which we are approximately 20 kilometres away. I open my eyes wide in an effort to drag my mind into wakefulness, feeling like I have arrived prematurely.

We are at the crossing into Gaza, from which I was sent back three years ago. Unlike then, there are no insouciant officers or shekel sellers. There are only medics, ambulances and medical supplies lined up at the gate awaiting new batches of Palestinians. There are also journalists interviewing medics to pass time until there's something else to report on.

Next to the crossing, a man from the border tribes has opened a makeshift coffeehouse. He has placed plastic chairs under the shade of a tree, and with a kettle and hot plate he makes tea and coffee. He also sells bottled water and bags of chips. We sit and chat, journalists and medics, overlooking the crossing from what looks like an open-air pub.

The chatter is interrupted a few times by the sound of a nearby raid or the arrival of a group of wounded Palestinians. We disperse: medics to the rescue, journalists to report. Eventually we return and continue stories we started earlier.

About three hours later, we hear that Israeli choppers have just dropped leaflets over the border area housing buildings on both Egypt's side and Gaza's. Written in Arabic, they ask residents to leave their houses ahead of an imminent raid. This is



the second day of Operation Cast Lead. Israel has hit a number of targets in Gaza, with the aim of rendering Hamas' leadership impotent by attacking sites that make everyday life possible, and retaliating against the acts of resistance that continue to emerge from the strip. The underground border infrastructure is a target.

The line that splits Rafah into Egyptian and Palestinian land bears a number of two-storey houses, underneath which are tunnels that enable the movement of humans and goods. Palestinians, in collaboration with the tribesmen on Egypt's side, invested in their construction in reaction to the Israeli blockade regime in the Gaza Strip. The blockade regime that followed Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005 is a variation on its settler occupation model, and it is generating new modes of resistance. As Egypt is in partnership with Israel's blockade regime, and its tribesmen are economically and politically disenfranchised, the tunnels and the associated underground economy constitute a triumphant temporary autonomous zone for both Egyptians and Palestinians. Urban thinkers often celebrate the infrastructure as an underground insurgent movement, while social theorists revel in the resistance enshrined in this informal arrangement.

Thousands of tunnels of different shapes and sizes have existed along the border. From Egypt, I would sometimes see the tiny holes dug to transfer sacks of building materials across. I would fantasise about cement moving through the tunnels as if by its own force and sneaking out to fill Gaza with buildings, which would be made of a ghostly matter that came out of nowhere. From Gaza, I saw larger elaborate tunnels put on exhibit by their owners to impress visiting journalists, researchers or solidarity activists. Through one, a car would drive from Egypt and come out, a big smile on the driver's face as though

he had been in an amusement park. I moved through another in an elevator with a friend and her child. In our descent and ascent, as well, carnivalesque laughter awkwardly interrupted the tunnel's allure of resistance and survival.

The goods travelling through the passages range from building materials and food items to drugs and arms. They add a measure of diversity to Gaza's market shelves and stands, which would otherwise solely contain commodities sanctioned by Egypt and Israel. Humans casually go in and out of tunnels to run errands on the other side—shopping, seeing a doctor, meeting a relative. Some tunnels act as hangout spots as their mud-covered insides provide a fresher alternative to outdoor summer heat. They also serve as nightly hideouts for young people seeking to escape the great density of the Strip's cities and towns. The actual movement of goods through the tunnels mostly takes place at sunset, but a vibrant economy of trade and transportation exists alongside that, and all day.

An hour after the leaflets are dropped, we hear an explosion. Clouds of dark smoke spiral around us. They envelop us and shatter the pub's strange emerging intimacy. There are people running, others screaming. More ambulances arrive, with their sirens on. The space is no longer the frontier of a war, but the war itself. The time is no longer that of waiting.

I stand perplexed by the chaos, in a temporary paralysis over what notes to take. I fail to find words as my mind travels away from the scene to the history that has just become of the tunnels. These tunnels were made in the face of a state circumventing movement on the ground, but in their erosion, no victorious state emerges. There is only rubble, and a reminder that under the ground, there is no state at all.

**After the State**  
**North Sinai – Winter 2009**

I arrive at the port area of Arish to meet the activists of the freedom flotilla. When their boats approached territorial waters, the Egyptian authorities had prevented them from moving eastward towards Gaza. The flotilla had been sailing to Gaza in both an act of solidarity, and an attempt to challenge the siege imposed by Israel since Hamas came to rule in 2007. The activists stopped at the port in Arish and spent time negotiating with the Egyptian authorities about crossing to Gaza via Egyptian waters.

Israel has outsourced its siege policy to several allies around the region, and Egypt is amongst them. Egypt has traditionally fulfilled its alliance with Israel by limiting access to Gaza by land. The sea is the other threshold that connects Egypt to Gaza, and Egypt has also set out to barricade it. For the activists, the seaway is a fluid connecting space they can venture to cross despite the blockade; it is not as fixed as the land border crossing is.

The port's entrance is fenced with metal bars. Egyptian guards tell me I am not allowed in. The state has traditionally operated ports as fortresses because they house international trade transactions, and accordingly are sites of national security. They are often paranoid zones with a palpable sense of the state's obsession with its outside enemies. State control over the port also responds to the fluid nature of a sea border and the unexpected encounters that its fluidity brings. The port ascribes to the sea a new physicality with the properties of a solid, grounded being. By turning the sea into *territorial waters*, the possibility of the sea is denied.

The state blocks the port—filled with angry activists who failed to sail to Gaza—to outsiders from the land. From the fence, I see crowds of activists of different nationalities with tents and all sorts of goods. I start my reporting by talking to some of them through the port's fences. Some manage to put on a performance of militancy despite the inconvenience of talking through a fence. Others more genuinely express boredom, knowing they won't be allowed to sail onward. Between the edge and the iron fence, they seem to be prisoners of the sea.

Tired of the limbo, after being stuck for days on this small territory, the activists gather for action. They raise Palestinian flags and chant slogans against Egypt for supporting the siege on Gaza. Once they become a stronghold of a couple of hundred people, they suddenly begin to push through the port's gate, breaking it open.

Outside the port the activists sit in a circle, in the middle of which they take turns giving speeches and leading chants. The tone of the speeches and chants becomes more combative and their sense of defiance rises. It's nighttime. It isn't quite clear when the Egyptian security forces arrive in their trucks, but suddenly a sea of soldiers running with shields and batons storms the circle. The activists retreat to the port's gate and start extracting stones from the pavement to hurl in their defence. After being on the periphery of the event, I am suddenly caught in the middle of the fighting. I walk helplessly in the midst of the crowd under a barrage of stones and rubber bullets, intermittently distracted by horrified and bleeding faces.

I get possessed and disoriented by a moment of panic. But my subconscious is telling me that this event is fictional. I reach for a small flip camera I had carried with me, turn it on and start filming frantically. I focus my sight on the tiny camera

screen, as though everything was happening there and not around it. The panic passes, and the event is no longer real. There are only images of a moment I refused to see directly.

The battle eventually subsides and the two sides retreat. I pack up my flip camera and look around to check the state of the port. Everyone is back inside, but the gate remains broken. I slowly walk towards it, sceptically hoping to get into the port and from it to the coastline.

I cross cautiously and try to hide in the midst of the retreating activists, always expecting an officer to stop and turn me back. Inside, I find multiple makeshift hospitals, injured activists weeping from pain and others giving angry interviews about what had just happened.

I come back to a reality I had dissociated from since I started filming, a return loaded with the sight of the port that had been hidden from view through the commotion and by the authorities barring access to it. I walk past the tents, the weeping activists and the entire event, coming close to the water in the pitch darkness of the night. I look deeply into the sea's blackness and smile at the thought that here, the state has just ended.

### **No State South Sinai – Winter 2011**

It is November 2011. We meet in the port city of Fethiye in the south of Turkey. We don't know each other. The instruction is to find one another in one of the few coffeehouses in the area. We eventually manage to assemble and spend our time waiting for permission to sail.

We kill time. We get to know each other better. We spend hours in coffeehouses, at times bored, other times excited. After two days we head to the port, not informing the port authority that the destination is international waters. During the first few hours, I observe the land as it gets further and further away, until it is no longer visible and I no longer think about it.

Four days on, dawn strikes over the Eastern Mediterranean. I lie flat on the deck, facing the sky. It is prescribed as the best posture to fight seasickness. Co-passengers speak of how close we are to our destination: 50 nautical miles. But the sea is borderless and immeasurable, and so we have to imagine we are approaching land before reaching it. In the midst of the water, land has become the periphery; it no longer occupies its usual status as a constant at the centre of our consciousness. And in its liquid materiality, the sea resists the solidity of land and state control over it.

Shortly after, however, this possibility is interrupted.

Towards midday, Israeli military ships break the endlessness of the maritime horizon and our visualisation of reaching Gaza's shore. First there is one ship. Then three. Then six. Then too many to count. Then our boat starts going in circles. Then there are zodiacs, at a closer proximity, filled with masked soldiers pointing their guns at us. Through radios, the officers on the Israeli ships ask us our destination. A co-passenger responds through our radio: "Towards the betterment of mankind." The poetry is inaudible—they ask again. We tell them Gaza. They ask us to surrender. They direct water hoses at us.

I see co-passengers running around on the slippery floor of the boat, now starting to flood. Two hold a sign saying "This is Piracy" in the midst of the frenzy. Another looks hesitantly

at his iPhone before throwing it overboard. Another does the same with his laptop. It is safer in these waters than in Israeli hands. I see the archive of our trip making a new home in the sea, alongside other lost, forgotten and unknown memories

Eventually, the soldiers board our boat and occupy it. They ask us to kneel and put our hands over our heads. They cluster us on one end of the boat and guard us with guns as they steer it toward the Israeli port city of Ashdod. Worried about making the wrong move, I resign myself to stillness, a deep calm that leads me into sleep for the remainder of the journey. I wake to city lights and the image of soldiers sprawled across the boat that had been our home for four days. I sneak a glimpse at one who's using my sleeping bag as a pillow, and quickly look away.

As we disembark, one after the other, we are met with the flashes of military photographers documenting the denouement of IDF Operation Sea Breeze/Sky Winds.

After in-depth inspections, interrogations and waiting, I am finally in a car on the road to Egypt. The nausea does not want to leave me. I haven't seen any land yet save for the detention facility of Ashdod, a poetic prison directly overlooking the Mediterranean.

As the car starts toward Eilat, which borders the Egyptian town of Taba, the thought of being in Palestine travels through my body and mind. I look around, searching for signs of it on the road, studying a mental image of its map.

I ask one of my escorts where Ramallah is in relation to us, as I summon my desire to venture into Palestine. I wanted to know how close or far the people I know who live here are. The escort turns around and points in some direction. I look and there is

nothing to see. I remember Haya in Gaza, when I was at its gate six years ago, unable to reach her. Haya has relocated to Ramallah and I happen to be at her gate again, unable to reach her. "Try next time when I am not around," she later jokes on chat. But there's no next time anytime soon.

In return for my release, I had signed a paper Israeli cops gave me saying I am banned from entering the Promised Land for ten years. I'd thought of resisting that piece of paper, but that was only for a brief moment.

The Israeli deportation road scorns the romanticisation of Palestine my solidarity has always been associated with. It is a road made to expunge that scorn. In the past fifteen years, I have travelled the contours of the occupied territories, standing on every possible surrounding border: Lebanon's Fatemah's Gate, Jordan's Mount Nebo, Egypt's Rafah and Taba. The forbidden land has always been captivating, in part because it's forbidden, and in part because it formulated our political consciousness as Arabs in our early 20s. Today, it has become more forbidden. I come to terms with this.

Our trip ends in Eilat, another city in inconspicuous attire in a landscape loaded with conflict and complexity. I get out of the car and go through a round of bureaucratic procedures at the Israeli border crossing. My chest compresses as I see an Israeli stamp next to my passport. If it goes in there, my travel document is doomed: several Arab countries don't accept holders of passports with Israeli stamps—a procedural relic of a decaying pan-Arabism. But the passport control officer stamps a small square piece of paper and slips it inside the passport while sending a sarcastic smile into the atmosphere. His smile resonates with the paradox of this reality: there is power in existing as a state, but also some power in its existence being

denied by others. I smile back, planning to add the stamped square to my archive of impossible voyages to Palestine.

The officer hands me my passport and says I am free to go. I look around, not sure where the way out is. I am not even sure whether the distance left to exit Israel is walking distance. Cued by my disorientation, the officer points to the gate to Egypt.

I walk towards Egypt in a deeply unspectacular moment. On the border, Egyptian policemen sit at a run-down wooden checkpoint, sipping tea. They smile at me and remind me of the soldiers' nonchalance, north of the peninsula.

I spend the night in a hotel room near the border. I lie on my bed, facing a lustrously garnished ceiling. As I close my eyes, I fight the erasure of that moment when nothing could be seen beyond water, when in this absence the sea was a sea of possibility. I overcome my nausea and lose my consciousness, enter into sleep. Of that, nothing remains but a faint written account. I have returned to the land again.

## **State**

### **North Sinai – Summer 2005**

I arrive at the Rafah border crossing in the early hours of the day. My taxi has to drop me about a kilometre from Egypt's exit gate because no cars are allowed in the area. I gather my backpack and handbag, and thank the driver for the trip. As I get out of the car I feel a pang in my heart at the thought of continuing the journey on my own. I look back at him, and catch his compassionate gaze.

There are boys scattered along my short trip to the gate and

their presence quickly storms my solitude. They sell shekels and tobacco, signatures of departure. I avoid them.

As I walk I look at the peach fields on both sides of the road. A concrete wall that interrupts them announces the end of Egypt. The next visible sign of urbanity is from the Gaza Strip. I catch myself amused at the thought that the buildings I am looking at are not actually in the country I'm seeing them from. I move with my eyes from buildings to streets to buildings, and I smirk at what seems like a temporary cinematic experience.

This is the first time I've seen the physical end of my country. More importantly, the first time I would have seen it, without realizing, that what lies beyond the end of somewhere is not necessarily the beginning of somewhere else.

I reach the gate not knowing that exiting Egypt doesn't automatically mean entering Gaza. Between Egypt's Rafah and Palestine's Rafah lies the bare land. This bare land's width is walked in thirty minutes or driven in ten. There is none of the intensity of the border crossing that I encountered on the Egyptian side. There is no army, no police and no bureaucracy. Save for the ongoing passage of vehicles bustling with voyagers, there are only a few trees standing in a line, giving a mild sense of life. The vehicles, loaded with history and circumstance, occasionally interrupt this peaceful irrelevance.

I join dozens of families riding a bus from one end to the mirror other: Palestine's border crossing. The bus is overcrowded—bodies on top of bodies, luggage on top of luggage. Seating arguments emerge. Mothers scream. Kids cry. The heat is unbearable.

As the bus starts moving, a gentle wind from the land flows in. The cacophony retreats. It is replaced by the sound of the

prayers passengers mutter to themselves for peaceful entry into the homeland. They echo each other.

This brief space and time might be the most autonomous for these families, for the short passage through this land is one instance where their collective physical presence is free from the territorial control of the state(s).

At the Egyptian border crossing, a mix of state bureaucracy and official nonchalance had produced an atmosphere that was enough to cause anxiety. But over here, Israel puts on exhibit its young and beautiful men and women. They are heavily clad with guns and backed up by surveillance cameras and guard dogs. The conscripts set off on a spree of robotic screams in broken Arabic. Each passenger goes through a variation of humiliation. An old woman raises her galabeya above her knees on request. A middle-aged man nods helplessly at the incomprehensibility of a soldier's hundred questions. A kid watches his father being shunned by another soldier in bewilderment.

I wait my turn and comfort myself with the false notion that I am an outsider to all that I am seeing. But then my time comes. Two male Israeli conscripts ask me for the reason of my visit.

"I am on assignment to cover Israel's disengagement from Gaza."

"Stay there."

One points me to a bench in the corner. I feel singled out and nervous. Within minutes another shift of conscripts comes to ask the reason for my visit.

"I am a journalist and I am on assignment by my newspaper to cover the events in Gaza these days."

I become uncomfortable with the sudden attention.

A barrage of questions follows: "Who will you talk to?" "What's your newspaper?" "Do you have a letter of assignment?" "Where will you stay?" "What equipment do you have to do your job?" "Do you have family in Gaza?" "Friends?"

I bank on the veracity of my account and confidently put my press card, letter of assignment, notebooks, big old audio tape recorder and camera on exhibit. They don't work. They are not sufficient reasons to believe I am a journalist.

I think of calling everyone I know in Gaza to tell the conscripts I'm a real journalist. But phone signals end slightly before border crossings begin.

Hours later, with a fourth round of conscripts, the communication of my identity hits a wall. Hope of getting in is fading and with it the desire for adventure. I am left with a curiosity about Gaza made impossible to satisfy, though it has occupied my consciousness for years.

Beyond the walls, Israel is in the process of unilaterally disengaging from Gaza, after a thirty-eight-year presence that began with the 1967 Six Day War. In the course of those years, Gaza has developed into a repugnant piece of land administered through direct settler colonialism. A handover of power to the Palestinian Authority following the Oslo Accords of the 1990s promised less Israeli administration, but a strong contingent of settlers remained, ensuring the army's continued presence.

It is the settlers' departure, I learn later from the news, which renders the disengagement plan unruly and violent. But one sees nothing of that reported chaos in here—only the confident presence of gun-clad conscripts surrounded by cameras and dogs. The border crossing is the entry point to Gaza's Rafah, and today it also masks its unruliness.

Around 6 pm and many hours later, the verdict is final. I am no journalist to the eight or so soldiers who have interrogated me so far, and the fourth round of conscripts, transitioning to a jovial, end-of-afternoon-shift mood, triumphantly asks me to leave.

The Egyptian border crossing closes by sunset and there is no place to return to. The conscripts show me the way out to the piece of land between the two states. They ask me to wait there until Egypt opens again.

I walk out tired and hesitant, loaded with the bitterness of my thwarted desire and wondering what to do with my time. I sit with the silence of the space of no state. I ponder over what status one's left with when sitting in land only known to those who make this voyage: A tourist? A refugee? A transient citizen? A body in passage? What does the body become in the space of no state?

I travel away from Egypt, Palestine and Israel, away from the impossibility of knowing that other space I almost encountered, away from the faces of two states: bureaucratic nonchalance and military ferocity. I gaze into the wilderness and drop my cumbersome thoughts about the need to return to life or discover the unknown. I leave myself, mind and body, and am drawn into the emptiness of statelessness. The emptiness becomes an image, and matter for a fantasy. I am moved by that which exists outside the state, beyond what we see.

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ABOUT EMOTIONAL  
ARCHITECTURE

Conceived as an exercise in addressing the social, intellectual and psychic legacies of entering and leaving collaborations, Emotional Architecture is a project by Malak Helmy and Nida Ghouse. It was initiated in Cairo in 2012.

In thinking through a range of situations—from minor artist collectives, and temporary social movements, to grand historical narratives—we began by asking: what happens to knowledge that was borne in collaboration when collaborations break up? (which often they do). We talked together with friends about how certain dynamics of power become apparent—like a ghost, say of an underlying governing structure—but only in moments of emotional involvement and heightened awareness in which a threshold has been reached. We wanted to articulate what it is that comes to be known in these encounters with one's own ideological and/or physiological limits, specifically in relation to collective contexts in which the soul is at work. We tried to contain these events in language and we commissioned our collaborators to write, as much as possible, from the edges of their (inter) disciplines—journalism, activism, filmmaking, education, comedy, philosophy, anthropology and art history. What we found instead was that meaning breaks down and that it grows harder to speak with conviction when we no longer inhabit those conditions, and can no longer see the apparition. Our engagement with these concerns (happened to have) developed at a particular political disjunction, during which the ground of our analysis kept moving and the rules no longer applied.

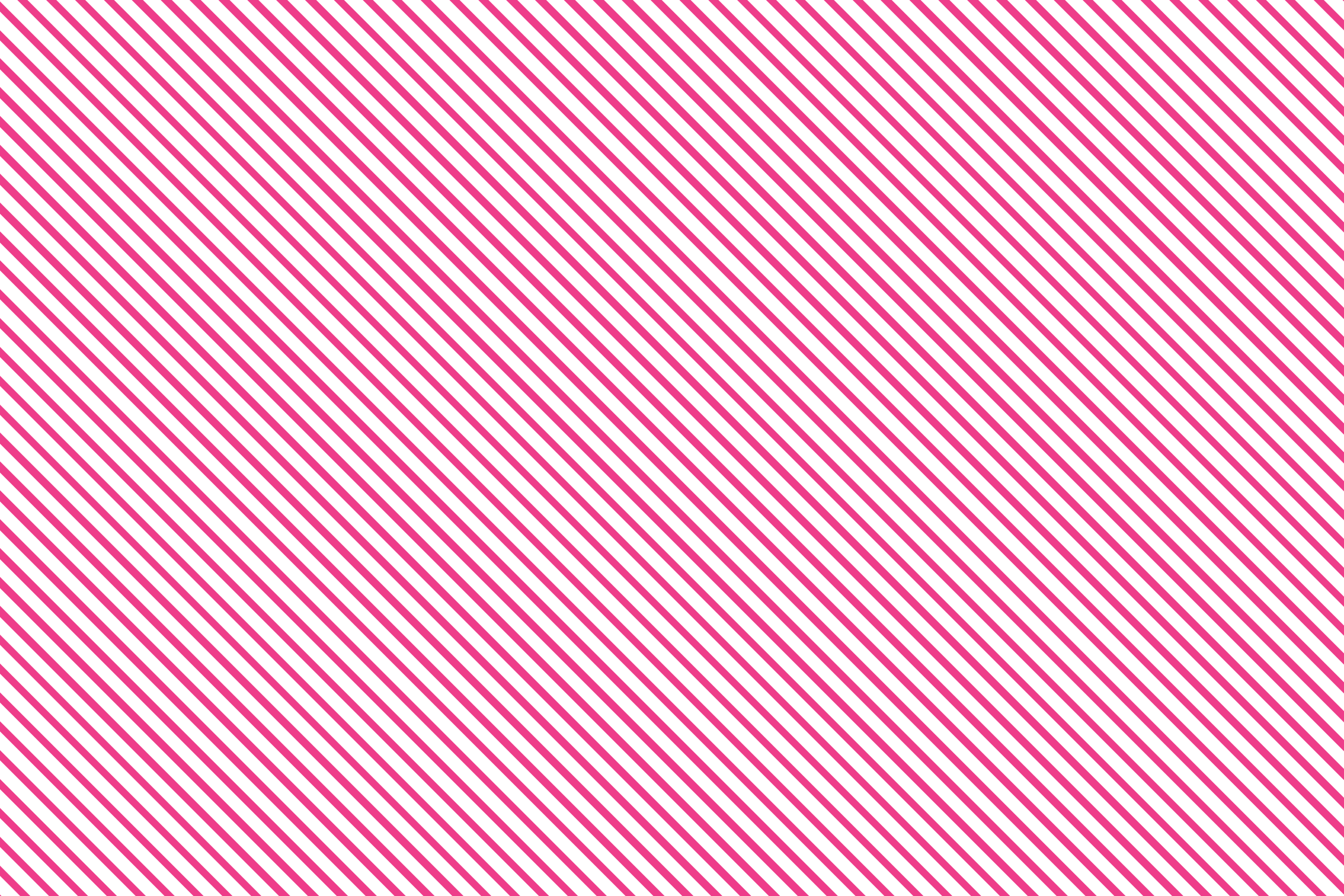
A series of publications came out of this process. The first is titled *We started by calling it the summer of two fires and a landslide*. Concerned with notions of spontaneous combustion and material refusal, specifically in relation to the incineration of significant buildings in Cairo at various points in its history, it includes text and image based contributions by Haig Aivazian, Clare Davies, Nida Ghouse and Malak Helmy. It was printed in October 2014. The second in the series is *No Fantasy without Protest*. It comprises texts by Lina Attalah, Motaz Attalla and Philip Rizk.

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**Fantasy**

**No**

**out**

**with**

**Protest**

**No Fantasy**

Lina Attalah

**No Protest**

Motaz Attalla

**with out**

Philip Rizk

**with out**

Emotional Architecture

**Fantasy**

**Protest**