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Title: Review of the ZIVIC Peacemaking Paper by Amin Makram Ebeid

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Amin Makram Ebeid descends from a prominent Coptic family with deep roots in Egyptian history. His uncle, Makram Ebeid, joined with Sa'd Pasha Zaghlool during the struggle for independence from Great Britain, and his grandfather, Naguib Mahfouz, was the founder of the academic and clinical disciplines of gynecology and obstetrics in Egypt.¹ He himself is a medical doctor, and in his retirement years has become an Egyptian author and intellectual. His book, "Towards a Culture of Progress", critiques the reasons for the decline of Egypt and the Arab world compared to Europe, centering his discourse on the role of science and philosophy, embraced by Europe but shunned by the Arab world after the demise of Ibn Rushd. Though there is nothing inherent in Islam or the Arab world to prevent reacquisition of this spirit, it does require a separation between the sacred and the secular, for the benefit of both material progress and true spirituality. This is the challenge in the Arab world today.

On February 23 we had opportunity to sit with Amin Makram Ebeid in his beautiful home in Dokki, with a spectacular view along the Nile. He was kind enough to provide us with an interview in which we could discuss the ZIVIC Peacemaking Paper, the product of our explorations in how to contribute to the task of social reconciliation following what appear to be increasing incidents of conflict in Egypt, many of which occur along religious lines. Amin was pleased to help by reviewing the paper, as is fitting with his historic concern for Coptic and Egyptian issues. The conversation which followed was both professionally interesting and personally enjoyable. Amin has been a friend of the Center for Arab West Understanding for many years, and we have benefited from his insight and hospitality.

Amin began with his assessment of great overall approval of the paper. He believed that though it included many religious themes and consideration of religious dialogue, it was constructed as a civil society initiative independent of any religious leaning which would threaten its neutrality. Consistent with his belief in separating the sacred and secular, our paper wishes to engage people on the basis of common humanity, though it gives great respect and importance to the religious foundation of both Muslims and Christians. By esteeming the role of religious leadership but placing emphasis on local leaders' efforts to reconcile a community we avoid the temptation, common among many, to seek solutions of commonality for sectarian issues. These, he has noticed, tend to lead toward frustration, no matter how important dialogue is in its own right. For building peace in civil society, however, it is not the correct tool.

While an emphasis on civil society is the right and proper foundation for peacemaking, entry into this field sometimes leads one to promote an equality of responsibility that does not exist. This was Amin's chief criticism of our paper: The shared implication of responsibility in use of the word 'Conflict'. The subtitle of our report, in fact – "Pre- and Post-Conflict in the Egyptian Setting" – suggests that Muslims and Christians are equally guilty for the instances of violent conflict which have so troubled many Egyptians in recent years. Amin admitted that in many cases the origins of some of these conflicts

were non-religious, but only took on that character in later escalations. Nevertheless, in many other conflicts the Copts have been simply victims. This is not to imply they have been saints. Copts could have established better rapport with their Muslim neighbors and used more diplomacy and wisdom. Yet almost in its entirety have the instances of violence been initiated from the Muslim side against the Copts. Use of the word 'conflict' implies that two sides have been involved. If this were Lebanon it would be a proper word, where Christians are armed and have formed militias. In Egypt, however, the Copts have been the recipients of aggression, and do not deserve to be further injured by lump sum inclusion in a word like 'conflict'. The constant use in our paper of this word and the mentality which informs it may be understood as an effort to appeal to both sides, especially the Muslim, to look at a common problem. Though the motivation may be commendable, the Copt may rightly feel slighted.

This is seen especially in the central case study of our paper, the church building issue of Izbet Bushra. From a Muslim view point the Christians erred in their attempts to construct a church in their village. Nevertheless, why should this prompt opposition from Muslim neighbors? A great deal has been made in recent years about the necessity of a unified law for building houses of worship. While Amin welcomes this law, he that Egypt has already committed itself to equality in terms of freedom of assembly and worship by signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While the Copts of Izbet Bushra could have displayed more consideration toward the community – Amin praised Bishop Athanasius, now deceased, for his skill in relationship and community building – they are not in the wrong. The government bears fault for pushing them into such duplicitous means to worship freely, and for failing to instill the values of religious liberty and equality into Muslim villagers such as found in Izbet Bushra, and wherever else there has been violence against Christians for their acts of worship. Our paper does not significantly address this larger issue of the unbalanced relationship between Muslims and Copts. Peace, however, can only be built on the foundation of truth. By coloring this relationship through use of the word 'conflict' we do a disservice also to Muslims and to Egypt in general. Though Amin is by no means an advocate of Coptic extremism, progress in Egypt depends on honesty. Neither Islam nor Christianity benefit if sectarian issues are left unaddressed through seeking to gain a hearing or promote a viewpoint, no matter how noble.

Returning to the broad strokes of our paper, then, Amin believes it to be noble, worthy for eventual composition into a book. It is useful especially in its section on 'therapy', in which we propose a process for building good community relations in order to prevent violent conflict, and then suggest a method for social reconciliation to restore harmony after its outbreak. We were glad to hear of his approval, but wished to challenge it at the same time. Given that certain Muslims lack this foundation of equality in their estimation of their Christian neighbors, is our plan realistic? If a proper mediator can be found would he be able to lead both sides toward resolution?

Amin told a story of a Muslim *sheikh* who was a neighbor on the border of his land. One day Amin was called by the farmer responsible for his land, informing him that one of his neighbors, the *sheikh* of a small mosque had taken an axe and cut down nine trees on his land. Amin then recalled an opposite experience when he was residing in the US. A hurricane uprooted one of his trees outside his house in Texas, and due to the absence

of running water and electricity he went to stay with one of his friends. Upon his return home he was pleasantly surprised to discover that one of his neighbors had replanted his tree. This became the beginning of a wonderful friendship with his neighbor. Back in Egypt, Amin went to this *sheikh* and asked him, why did you do this? Have I done anything to offend you? He then told him the story of the tree in America.

The *sheikh* stated that he was upset since he had asked Amin's workers to plant trees in that location, on Amin's land, and they had refused. The *sheikh* had taken offense and when Amin later planted them he expressed his offense by cutting them down. Amin did not label this a religious problem though he wondered if there were aspects of it, but chose instead to calmly discuss the matter with him. In the end the *sheikh* offered to replant the trees, and the matter passed.

In the same manner the Christians involved in a reconciliation attempt with Muslims must through the proper mediator ask why they have been acted against. It is a powerful question: Have we done anything to offend you? In the case of Izbet Bushra; Muslims would have cause to answer in the affirmative; through discussion it would reveal to both the shortcomings of their communal relationships. A proper mediator, in this and in most cases a Muslim, would then be able to explain to Muslims that there is nothing in their religion to forbid the building of churches, and in fact the Prophet left each community free to practice its religion as it saw fit. "There is no compulsion in religion," and "To you your religion, and to me, mine," are foundational ideas in Islam which are neglected when Muslims oppose legitimate church building proposals. While a Christian could not express this idea to a Muslim community, a respected Muslim mediator could. In such a manner our peacemaking proposal could succeed.

I protested slightly, however, as this was not our proposal. The mediator he described would be acting as an advocate for the Christians, not as an impartial facilitator. It is true that such a religious argument could be made, and likely should be made, but is the mediator the proper one to do it? Perhaps there is room for this, but the manner in which Amin spoke gave me pause to suspect the mediator was to be a tool for accomplishment of the Christian opinion. In our proposal, though, he is to be a neutral medium seeking only to stimulate dialogue between the two sides which have become estranged. Amin agreed that a mediator should not be pro-Christian, as this would disqualify him/her. The mediator should rather defend truth, but if that truth is favorable to the Christian side, such as in the right to assemble and worship, a Muslim mediator would be far more effective in defending the Coptic position to Muslims. In this case and others, Amin emphasized a very important section of our report focused on the qualifications of the mediator. Selection of such a person is fraught with difficulties, but so much depends on this role.

Our conversation continued and branched into several other topics, including numerous Muslims who espouse similar views to Amin, such as Tarek Heggy, Amr Adeeb, and Makram Mohamed Ahmed. Further discussions were separate from our paper, each one enjoyable and sparking new insights and lines of thought. Yet as the evening closed I remembered the conclusion of Amin's story about the tree: Despite the healthy exchange and ownership of fault, the *sheikh* never replanted the trees. For Amin the amount of money needed to replant the trees was negligible, and he did not pursue his

right. Yet for the Christians in communities torn by conflict, using this word if only by habit, rights are vital, and the costs are not negligible. I wondered if this was a fitting conclusion for a review provided by a man both hopeful of and striving for reconciliation between Muslims and Christians of his beloved country Egypt, for it reveals lingering doubts about ultimate success. May we always be honest with the doubts we possess, but may we also in faith press forward in their dissipation, seeking the ideal for the good of all.

Editor: Cornelis Hulsman concurs in much of the opinion of Amin Makram Ebeid, but wishes to state that Christians too often point to the wrongdoings of others, which is definitely there, but without sufficiently recognizing that Christian behavior sometimes initiated this. Then, following excessive Muslim response, many Christians prefer to forget that the initial start of tensions could have been avoided. At other times Christians responded to tensions in a way that simply added more fuel to the fire. Muslims and the Egyptian government should realize that excessive violent responses harm their image and the image of Islam and Egypt in general. Muslims should denounce the acts of fellow Muslims in excessive and aggressive behavior, as remaining silent keeps the stain on Islam. The government should punishing wrongdoers and bringing justice to all. These are the necessary activities to counter excessive violent behavior.

Meanwhile, Christians should look at what they can do to avoid tensions. It is obvious from many reports, also in AWR, that Christians have been involved in inflammatory behavior. There are times, as seen for example in the protests of Wafaa Constantine, where Christians chanted virulently anti-Muslim slogans, when their behavior leads to the increase of tensions, which can lead to the increase of conflict. While these demonstrating Christians, led by certain local priests, succeeded in attracting media attention to their cause, they damaged domestic relations between Muslims and Christians, acting in a very un-Christian manner. It is not necessary for Christians to give up their rights in order to craft good relations with Muslims; Bishop Athanasius and William Qilada are good examples of this. Christians, though suffering injustice which is not their responsibility, would do well to return to their model.

ⁱNaguib Mahfouz the famous Muslim author and Nobel Prize laureate was named after the obstetrician by his mother in gratitude for having saved her life and that of her son during a difficult delivery in which both could have died.