

New Nonfiction by Dean Hosni: “The Cartoon War”



Egyptian military trucks cross a bridge laid over the Suez Canal on October 7, 1973, during the Yom Kippur War/October War

October 6, 1973. Los Angeles.

The stack of newspapers sat in front of me on the brown shag carpet, and next to it was a plastic bag half full of red rubber bands. I reached into the bag, took a dozen or so bands and slipped them onto my wrist. I pulled a newspaper from the stack and folded it methodically; the right third over the middle, then the left third over that. I snagged a rubber band from my wrist and slipped it over the tri-folded paper. Once done with the stack, I would load the papers into the twin green bags tied to my handlebars, straddle the bike, and start

my route, as I did every Saturday.

But this Saturday, my customers would wait late into the afternoon for their morning edition of the Herald Examiner, while I stood statue-like in front of a grainy black and white television screen. A familiar desert landscape would erupt in fire before my eyes.

As was her ritual, my younger sister watched Scooby-Doo. I did too, as I folded newspapers. I could always identify the villains, the characters behind the mask of the Ghost of Captain Cutler, The Black Night, or The Caveman. Their disguises were thin and their guilt certain. Telling my sister who the villain was just before the unmasking was satisfying in a mean-spirited way.

My sister sat open-mouthed in front of the television and watched Shaggy, Scooby, and the rest in the final chase scene. With the masked villain captured, I pointed a finger at the screen, ready to reveal his identity and ruin the ending for her. But before I could utter the words, a news anchor's face appeared.

"We interrupt our normally scheduled program to bring you a special news bulletin," he said.

Images of tanks and armored vehicles raced across the sandy terrain of the Saini Desert in Egypt, and dark-faced soldiers fired Kalashnikovs at enemy positions. The contrail of a Phantom fighter jet ended in a white plume, intercepted by a surface-to-air missile. My sister looked at me in dismay, her expression asking: Where had Scooby gone?

I knew I shouldn't wake my father. He was catching up on sleep after working a graveyard shift in a low-skill job, the only kind available to some immigrants.

I walked into the bedroom. "Dad...? Dad...? Egypt is at war."

He was up. Glassy eyed, staring at the blurry screen, adjusting rabbit ears.

On the television, artillery shells rocked the desert in an unending barrage. Egyptian and Syrian troops, in a coordinated attack, advanced on enemy positions in the Sinai Desert and the Golan Heights. On the Sinai front, tens of thousands of Egyptian infantrymen crossed the Suez Canal in inflatable boats under heavy shelling and through clouds of smoke. Key Israeli military positions throughout the Sinai were bombed by Egyptian jets, clearing the way for the advancing ground assault. The Yom Kippur War had begun.

Watching this war unfold before my eyes, I was thrown back in time to a day six years earlier. My mother was carrying my then baby sister and gripping my hand so tightly. Terror filled her eyes as she looked out the window of our Cairo apartment. The flash of bombs lit up the night sky and silhouetted darkened buildings. The air smelled of spent firecrackers. Israeli jets were bombing a nearby airport. A staccato of red tracers shot upward toward them, searching, not finding.

In June 1967, the Israeli Air Force struck airports across Egypt, targeting runways and rendering them useless, then picked off jet fighters on the ground. Egypt lost nearly its entire Air Force in a matter of hours. Then, in a haphazard retreat, the exposed Egyptian army suffered extensive losses and ultimately surrendered the Sinai Desert with hardly a fight. Victory for Israel was swift in what came to be known as the Six-Day War. For Egyptians, it was a humiliating defeat; a war lost as soon as it began.

In the few years that followed the '67 war, Israel built one of the most formidable defensive lines the world had known, the Bar Lev Line, on the eastern shore of the Suez Canal. A seemingly impenetrable seventy-foot-high wall of sand studded with anti-tank mines spanned the length of the canal. Behind

it, thirty-three heavily fortified military installations and hundreds of tanks kept watch, ready to open fire on Egyptian forces should they try to cross the canal and retake the Sinai. To Israel and the world, any such attempt by Egypt would have been suicidal. To Egyptians, the Bar Lev Line was an ever-present reminder of their defeat, a stain on their national honor.

The world didn't seem to care about the lost pride of a defeated Egypt. Not as long as Arab oil was flowing, not with the Israeli military appearing, by all accounts, invincible, and not with the Arab nation lacking the military capability to change the reality on the ground. Egyptians, it seemed, were expected to simply live with their June '67 defeat and accept the occupation of their cherished Sinai by their enemy. Egypt's prized Suez Canal, a source of international prestige and badly needed money, would have to sit idle with Israeli soldiers on its eastern shore, taunting and humiliating. Nothing to be done about it, the world thought.

Six years later, I stood by my father in front of the television in our Los Angeles apartment, neither of us able to speak. A surge of patriotism rushed through me, and I felt my heart race as I watched columns of Egyptian tanks and infantrymen pour into the Sinai Desert to reclaim our occupied land.

I wished I was back in Egypt. I belonged in Cairo streets, among the crowds in Tahrir Square, all of us proudly waving our flag with the golden eagle. Had I been older than my twelve years, they might have let me donate blood. A little older yet, and maybe they would have given me a post where, ever-vigilant, I would stand with my finger on a trigger.

Why had my family ever left Egypt? I remember asking myself. And when the answer came to me, I felt ashamed. We left a defeated, virtually bankrupt nation for the American promise of economic prosperity. We left for the possibility of buying

our own home, a car, and a television for every room. Things that seemed so trivial as I considered them in that moment.

I pulled myself away from the television, took another newspaper from the stack, pounded each fold flat, and stretched a rubber band around it. The rubber band snapped in my hand. I felt the burn on my fingers and in my soul.

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The Yom Kippur War coincided with the month of Ramadan. I had always cherished the joyful celebration of this holy time in Egypt. I remembered the children carrying colorful, candle-lit holiday lanterns and prancing on the sidewalks in the early evening. I had watched their blue, red, and yellow lights dance on the sides of buildings as they sang, skipped, and twirled. But this Ramadan would be different, I knew. Lights in Egyptian cities would be extinguished, even the lanterns, to deprive enemy bombers of easy targets during their nighttime air raids.

That year, in America, Ramadan would be stranger yet.

In a time before call waiting, telephone lines were constantly busy. Our receiver sat on the hook only moments before the phone rang again. Instead of offering the customary Ramadan greetings, callers asked, "Are you watching this?" Shock and disbelief robbed the color from my parents' faces even as they tried to reassure acquaintances who feared for relatives at home, for Egypt. The calls often ended with "Alhamdulillah," an expression of gratitude and praise to God for the early military successes we were witnessing.

The day after the war began, Sunday, the downtown Los Angeles mosque was filled to capacity. Emotions in the grand room peaked with pride and hope. The fiery sermon the Imam gave rendered his voice raw. All in the mosque raised their hands to God. We prayed for victory, and more than that, we prayed for redemption. Let it not be like the last time. Let it not

be another Six-Day war—another humiliation. At the end, the Imam gave many of the worshipers, including me, a firm handshake. He told me to be brave, to be proud. I nodded and told him that I would. But this, I later learned, would not be easy.

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Monday afternoon, I sat in my seventh-grade classroom waiting for an instructor to arrive and begin teaching a subject I was hardly interested in. I wanted to be home, to pull a newspaper from the stack and thumb through it, looking for a headline with the word “...Egypt.” How many miles would it say we had taken back from our occupied land? How many enemy jets had our SAM-6 missiles shot down? And would it answer the big question: Were we still winning?

I fanned through pages of pencil sketches in my notebook, talentless drawings of tanks and jets in desert combat. I was startled by a voice close to my ear. “Your country attacked my country,” said the taller of two boys standing over me, a known bully.

His country? He wasn’t Israeli. There was nothing foreign about him. I was the immigrant, the one with the strange name. The one who stuttered trying to decipher English words in a textbook while other kids snickered. I did not respond.

With his finger poking my thin chest, punctuating each word, he said: “Are you happy about it?” Again, I didn’t answer. He rested a fist on my desk, his face close to mine. His friend stood behind him, helping make the point. I looked for the teacher, who still hadn’t entered the classroom. I scanned the room for anyone who might help, anyone who would be on my side. Kids chatted and clowned about. None of them had taken notice, nor would they help if they had.

Looking up at my adversaries, I cowered. This was their classroom, their school. I was an immigrant, tolerated in

their country. I was alone. I flinched at the boy's feigned punches. I endured his provoking slaps, barely blocking them, never getting up from my seat. I did nothing to stop him. Finally, the teacher walked into the room and told my assailant to take his seat. The insult of that day lingered, as did the shame of having not stood up for my country's honor.

In the days that followed, one question played on my mind. The American boy had said that Egypt attacked his country. Was Egypt fighting Israel or America? Or were they one and the same in this? How could America someday be my country, my home, if it gave aid and comfort to my enemy?

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Ten days into the war, America's Department of Defense delivered on a promise: an airlift so massive it reconstituted the Israeli army, which had been heavily compromised on the Egyptian front. Now, with even more advanced weapons in Israeli hands, the tide of the war would turn, and not in Egypt's favor. I pulled the knife's edge through the string holding my daily stack of newspapers. I took the top copy, and without looking at it, I began folding; the right third over the middle, and the left third over that.

The phone stopped ringing. Conversations about the goings-on of the war were less frequent, more subdued. I heard adults around me grumble about Egypt having to make do with outdated and inferior weapons from the Soviets. No bombers, no long-range missiles, only defensive weapons for Russia's Arab client. In the eyes of many, this reflected the Soviet's long-standing strategy: to help Egypt survive, but never win a war. A victorious Egypt might need Russia less. And if Russia lost its largest client in the region, its influence over the oil-rich Middle East would diminish. Frustrated by the limited access to needed weapons, Egypt's then President Anwar El-Sadat had expelled 15,000 Russian military advisors a year

before the start of the Yom Kippur War. While Israel had the full might of American power behind it, Egypt's backer seemed less committed.

As a child, watching the politics play out with Egypt and America on opposite sides, I was torn. Where should my allegiance lie, with my native Egypt or my adopted U.S.? I feared what Americans would do to me, to my family, if they knew of my questionable loyalty.

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A couple months passed, and the war was over. And mine, it seemed, was the last shaky voice crying out: "Egypt won. We did it." But my truth was cast aside as fables of super-human feats by Israeli soldiers in the battlefield took center stage. Then came the pictures, splashed across magazines. Handsome Israeli soldiers with lovely light-eyed girls posing next to American tanks. Rockstars selling victory, democracy, freedom, and sex; a marketing campaign for a Western audience. And in time, I began to doubt my own truth. Perhaps our victory, the one talked about in Egyptian media, was exaggerated, even fabricated.

My heroes, once again, became cartoonish villains, unsophisticated and unrefined. Hopeless in their fight against a foe superior in every way. They were faceless in a grainy sepia-toned picture, a sandy landscape. Draw your best dark-faced bad guy here.

For the rest of that school year, my classmates largely ignored me. I was that kid who held on to a fantasy, a crazy story about a victorious Egypt, a version of events neither believed nor cared about. The world had moved on. In a noise-filled classroom, I sat alone.

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A year later, in eighth grade homeroom, a boy with an accent

introduced himself to me.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Egypt.”

“Oh... I’m from Israel.”

I tensed up, saying nothing.

He leaned over. “Here, in America... no war. Okay?”

Before I knew it, before I decided whether it was something I wanted to do, I extended my hand. We shook.

My new friend asked me if I had seen any fighting when I lived in Egypt. I thought of the night when I stood alongside my mother and watched the airport burn.

“No. I didn’t see any fighting.” I lied.

“I did,” he said. “Egyptian jets attacked my town. For a while, it was maybe once a week.”

I felt a jolt of pride run through me, though I kept it hidden from my friend. His words affirmed my belief. Egyptians had fought back. They had punished the enemy for its sins. That evening, done with my paper route, I held my bike on top of a hill. The empty green bags hung from the handlebars. Traffic had died, and the street was empty. I straddled the now light and agile bike, unburdened by the weight of newspapers. I rocked the Schwinn forward, then back, then forward again. I kicked off. Peddling, harder, faster. I raced down the hill, the cold air making my eyes water. The empty bags fluttered at my sides, their straps pulling. Could they tear away? I peddled faster still. A jitter, then a high-speed wobble tested me, but I held on. The fluttering sound grew louder in my ears, a make-believe engine, roaring—an Egyptian jet fighter. My front wheel lifted. I soared into the night sky.

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Decades later, more was revealed about the Yom Kippur War—declassified top-secret reports, clandestine tape recordings, and never-before-seen newsreels. First came the picture of the Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, her hand holding up her forehead, distraught at the calamity of a war she never saw coming. Then, a video of the Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, shaken, looking small in his military uniform, broadcasting to a frantic Israel on October 10, 1973; his words offering no relief. I pointed at the computer screen: There it is. Proof, we beat them. From their own mouths. Then, as the video stopped playing and the screen went black, I saw my own reflection. Sitting alone, no one by me to co-witness.

More recordings came: soldiers' recollections, nightmares, acts of heroism and of humanity. One such recording still lives in my mind. A transmission by an Israeli soldier, a hold-out in an underground Bar Lev Line fortification. His frantic calls for reinforcements—tanks, airstrikes—go unheeded on a static-filled radio channel. He pleads for his life as the structure collapses around him. His voice strains, calling for God as artillery shells fall. "They're coming... breaking in... I'm burning." About to meet his end, he curses the ones who would leave him to his fate: "God will not forgive you..." Then, his final words, to his mother.

I had not prepared myself for this; a voice reaching through the decades and gripping my chest.

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When she was in the ninth grade, my daughter's class was given an assignment. "We're going to have a town meeting about the Arab-Israeli conflict," she said. "Each of us will talk, like...you know...like we live there. Like Arabs or Israelis."

"Easy A," I said. "I got you covered, kid. Your dad knows

everything about the Arab-Israeli conflict.”

“I’m supposed to give the perspective of someone my age. A boy. His name is Shlomo.”

“Shlomo? What kind of an Arabic name is Shlomo?”

“It’s not Arabic, Dad. It’s an Israeli name.”

“Wait. Does your teacher know you’re Egyptian?”

“Yes.”

I was impressed. It was a lesson in empathy.

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Through the years, I had watched one fictionalized Mossad movie after another. Miraculous ventures projecting Israeli superiority. The same story, repeating, image-building, propagandizing.

But in 2013, I came across “the postmortem.” That was what the senior CIA analysts and directors called their video-recorded discussion held at the Richard Nixon Library. It was the intelligence community’s examination of what had gone wrong, how the CIA and the Israeli Mossad failed to see the Yom Kippur War coming. As the experts spoke, I leaned in. I watched, rewound, and watched again.

They said it plainly. Egypt’s President Sadat launched a war of deception that took advantage of inflexible American and Israeli mindsets. No one believed Sadat would start a war with his country in such a weak military position. Israel, still high on its victory in the Six-Day War, believed no Arab nation, least of all Egypt, had the will to fight. With every Sadat promise of an attack that didn’t come to be, with every mobilization of his military forces that he later recalled, Israel and the West became more certain that war would come no time soon. They grew to disregard what appeared to be Arab

bravado, saber-rattling, amounting to nothing.

No one saw Sadat's gamble for what it was: a limited war, not to conquer an enemy, but to reanimate a dead peace process.

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Heroes achieve what in the moment seems unimaginable. In the first two hours of the war, Egyptian forces had overrun the formidable Bar Lev Line. They advanced into the Sinai and retook the Suez Canal, along with seven-hundred square miles of enemy occupied land. In so doing, they ripped away Israel's mask of invincibility.

As the war progressed, Israel gained momentum. Israeli forces moved into the western side of the Suez Canal and encircled the Egyptian Third Army, cutting off its supply lines. But, as a condition of the ceasefire agreement that ultimately ended the war, Israel retreated from those gains. Pundits took turns spinning the outcome of the war, each claiming victory for their side. As, I presume, they forever will.

Having achieved his objectives in the Yom Kippur War and created a path for diplomacy, President Sadat walked into the Israeli Knesset and began the work of peacemaking. This time, Israel was less eager to let slip such an opportunity. It would no longer reject out of hand peace efforts that required it to surrender occupied Egyptian land.

I still remember Sadat putting a match to his smoking pipe and saying: "No one will capitulate here. I am not ready to capitulate. [We will not give up] an inch of land or a grain of sand from our land."

In signing the 1978 Camp David Peace Accord with Israel, Egypt gave up its privilege to use its military against Israel in support of its Arab neighbors. But after twenty-five years of war, this was a privilege it no longer wanted. Within this Agreement, Egypt endorsed a framework for peace negotiations

between Israel and its other Arab neighbors. This framework was used as a foundation for the Oslo Peace Accord signed by Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in the early eighties.

I knew the Camp David Peace Agreement was an admirable achievement. But at the time of its signing, my teenage heart had not yet learned to appreciate the virtue in peace-making. It still sought vengeance. I wanted the chance to stand before a classroom and bask in the light of undisputed victory. I searched for evidence of victory on the battlefield through books and news articles. What I found was this: No longer would Egypt stand in the shadow of its defeat in the Six-Day War. No longer could its enemy claim invincibility, not without a note in the margins, not without a question mark. That was what mattered to sixteen-year-old me.

On October 6th, 1981, the eighth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, Sadat was assassinated. It was then that many began to speak of the man's achievements and sacrifices, to contemplate his legacy. Anwar El-Sadat; the great strategist on the world stage. The hero who did more than win a military objective, who did more than win back the Sinai for Egypt. Here was the man who successfully executed a war to win peace.

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I recently turned on a Scooby-Doo episode for my grandson. It was The Funland Robot episode. One of my favorites, I told him. At the end, after the unmasking, I said: "You know, in real life, it's not so easy to tell good guys from bad, winners from losers. Sometimes, you have to look hard to find the truth. It's not like in cartoons."

My grandson looked at me and said: "That show was boring, Grampa." He reached for his game controller, ready for combat. Enemy soldiers scurried, shooting. He returned fire.

My daughter entered the room. "Time to go home, baby," she

said, as blood splattered the inside of the television screen.

“One more minute, mom.” He answered, ditching his AR-15 for a pump-action shotgun.

“Are you good with him playing these games?” I asked. “I mean, they desensitize.” She gave me that I-can-raise-my-child-on-my-own-thank-you-very-much look.

“Now, young man!” she said to my grandson. He obediently clicked off the game.

Teasing, I said: “Next time you come here, boy, you leave that game controller at home. We’ll play checkers.” I wanted to see them roll their eyes in exasperation at Grampa. They did, and I laughed.

Violent as my grandson’s game was, it fostered no hatred in him. I knew he saw no evil in his cartoon-like adversaries. I hoped that things would always remain this way, that he would never know a real enemy.

As I watched my grandson leave, I thought about another boy—on his bike, tossing newspapers. I thought about that boy seeking retribution. I thought about the rage in his voice, unheard. I thought about him growing up, so long unable to see the glory in the fight for peace.