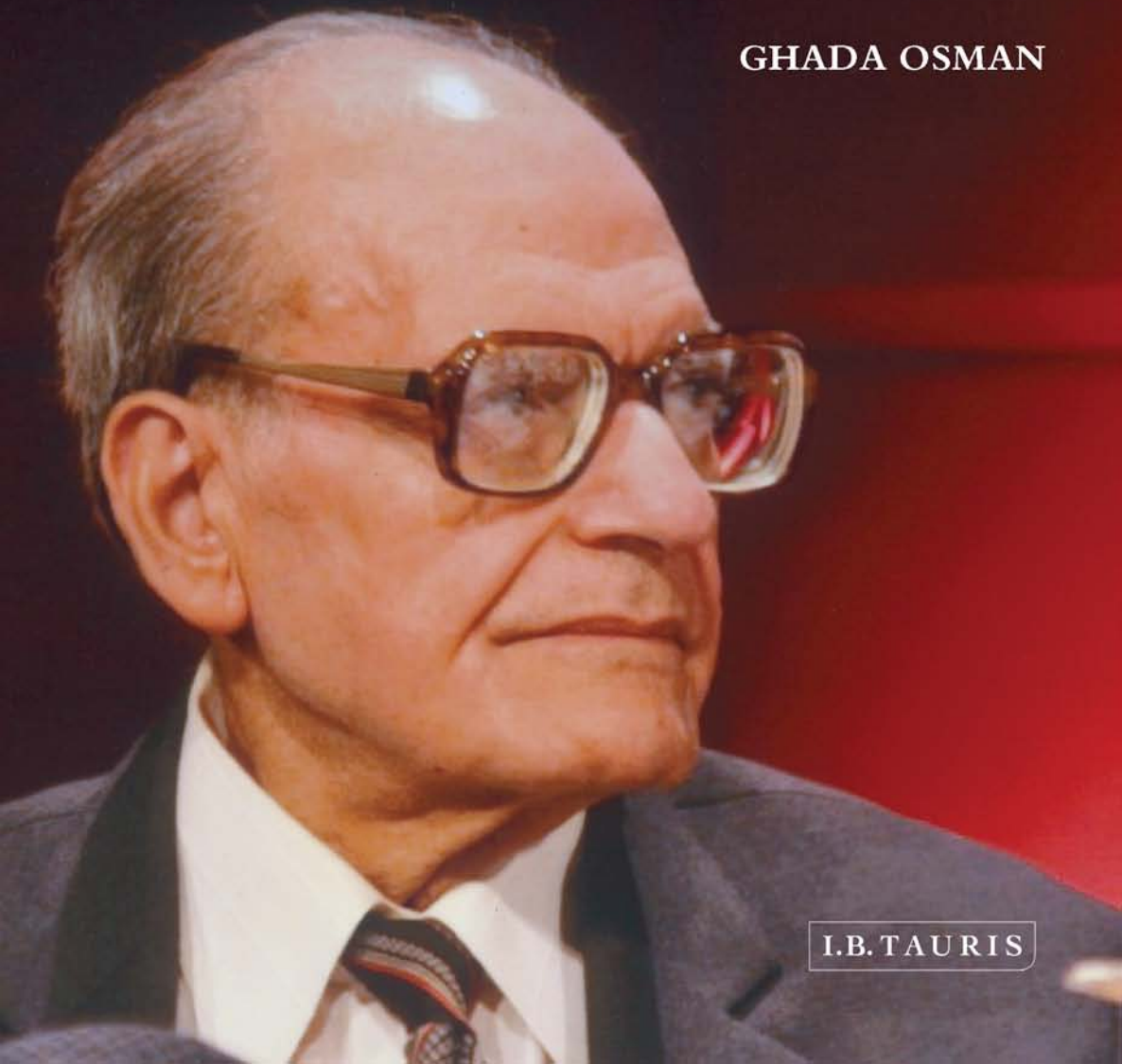


A JOURNEY *in* ISLAMIC THOUGHT

**THE LIFE OF
FATHI OSMAN**

GHADA OSMAN



I.B. TAURIS

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*In memory of my father, Mohamed Fathi Osman (1928–2010),
who passed away during the final stages of the production
of this book,*

To my mother, Aida Abdel-Rahman Osman, and

‘To all who opened before my mind... a window’.

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good five years, or without my mother's indefatigable search for family records, letters and photographs with which to further inform and nuance the story, and her close reading of the final versions with a fine-tuned eye. Your life's work is an inspiration to me, and I dedicate this book to you.

Foreword

By John Esposito

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Where are the Martin Luthers, the reformers, in Islam? Is Islam capable of change and reform? Is Islam compatible with modernization, democracy, pluralism, gender equality and human rights? What role should Islamic law play in Muslim society today? While these questions continue to be common today, few realize that the issue of modern Islamic reform is more than a century old, dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from Muhammad Abduh and Hasan al-Banna in the Middle East and Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal in the Indian subcontinent.

The process of revival (*tajdid*) and reform (*islah*) have been integral to Islam. Both concepts involve a call for a return to the fundamentals of Islam (the Quran and Sunna). *Islah* is a Quranic term (7:170; 11:117; 28:19) used to describe the reform preached and undertaken by the Prophets when they warned their sinful communities and called on them to return to God's path by re-aligning their lives, as individuals and as a community, within the norms of the *sharia*. This Quranic mandate, epitomized in the lives and preaching of the prophets, especially of Muhammad, coupled with God's command to enjoin good and prohibit evil (3:104, 110), provides the time-honoured rationale for Islamic reformism, however diverse its manifestations in history.

Recognition of the need for renewal and reform is as old as the Islamic community itself, beginning with the Prophet Muhammad who

saw himself as a reformer, following in the footsteps of the biblical prophets and calling the citizens of Mecca and Medina and indeed humankind to return to the message and worship of the one true God (Allah), revealed to Moses, Jesus and one final time to Muhammad. Islamic revivalist movements have drawn on this long and rich tradition of revival and reform. The failures of and threats to Muslim societies have given rise to individual reformers and to reformist movements led by scholars or mystics. Islamic revival and reform involve a call for a return to the fundamentals, the Quran and Sunna, and the right to interpret (*ijtihad*, or use of independent judgement) these primary sources of Islam.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, revivalist movements stretched from Africa, Sudan (the Mahdi) and Nigeria (Fulani), to Arabia (Wahhabi), South Asia (Shah Wali Allah) and Southeast Asia (Padri). In the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, in response to the impact of European colonialism and emergence of modern nationalist organisations, two great movements, Islamic Modernism and what is popularly called Islamic Fundamentalism grew, seeking to respond to the challenge both of European colonialism and of modernization and the need for Islamic reform. In the midst of political and economic decline, Muslim reformers from North Africa to Southeast Asia called for *ijtihad* (reinterpretation) of Islam as they struggled to meet the demands of modern life. Like secular Muslims, Islamic reformers were influenced by the challenge and threat of the 'success of the West'. The West was strong; Muslims were weak and subject to Western domination.

Islamic modernists sought to restore the pride, identity and strength of their debilitated and European-dominated Islamic community by bridging the gap between their Islamic heritage and modernity. They argued that the decline of the Muslim community was not due to any flaw in Islam itself but rather to departure from the dynamic faith and practice of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community. They called for an Islamic renaissance to respond appropriately to modern Western ideas and institutions. Emphasizing the compatibility of Islam with reason, modern science and technology, they reminded Muslims of the development of Islamic civilization and its contributions to philosophy, science, medicine, mathematics and architecture.

Though they differed, all championed the need for *ijtihad*, the re-interpretation of Islamic law to meet the needs of the modern world.

Men whose names and ideas remain alive today, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–97), Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) in Egypt, and in the Indian subcontinent Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98) and Muhammad Iqbal (1876–1938), called for theological, educational and scientific development, an Islamic reformation. Thus, for example, Sayyid Ahmad Khan argued the need for a new theology: ‘Today, as in former days, we need a modern theology by which we either render futile the tenets of modern sciences or [show them to be] doubtful, or bring them into harmony with the doctrines of Islam.’ Muhammad Iqbal, a philosopher-poet who had earned a law degree in London and a doctorate in Germany, called explicitly for an Islamic reformation: ‘We need a new theology, a period similar to the Protestant Reformation; the lesson of Luther’s movement should not be lost.’ Toward that end, Iqbal wrote the still influential book, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Reformers re-interpreted Quranic verses to promote greater gender equality and women’s education, the legal restriction of polygamy and a husband’s unilateral right to divorce, political and educational reforms. However, their impact was limited by the influence of authoritarian regimes and an entrenched conservative religious establishment. Moreover, most reformers failed to understand the need for strong reform organizations. Their ideas did not quickly materialize into popular mass movements. Yet the power of their re-interpretations of Islam formed a strong foundation that many are building upon today. The legacies of Abduh, Khan and Iqbal are alive among reformers working to legitimate and Islamize modern ideas of democracy and parliamentary government, human rights and gender equality and reforms to establish educational institutions that combine ‘modern’ curricula and Islamic studies. Islamic modernist ideas and values entered into the stream of Muslim discourse, becoming part of mainstream Muslim thought.

Modern Islamic revivalist organizations (sometimes referred to as *fundamentalist* movements), the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East and *Jamaat-i-Islami* (the Islamic Society) in South Asia offered an alternative vision and agenda for change. They criticized Muslim secular elites as un-Islamic and Islamic reformers as tending to Westernize Islam. They also criticized many of the *ulema* (religious scholars and

leaders) as either co-opted by governments or too rigidly conservative and out of touch with reality. In particular, they condemned the tendency of most Muslim countries to adapt Western models of development uncritically. They did not reject modernization as modern science and technology but the notion that modernization required the Westernization and secularization of society. Islam, they insisted, offers an alternative path to Western capitalism and communism/socialism; Islam is a total, comprehensive way of life. These activist movements and their many offshoots, from mainstream social and political organizations to radical revolutionary groups, continue to be major forces in the Muslim world today.

Fathi Osman's development and thought occurred throughout this critical period in twentieth-century Islam. His life experiences spanned the spectrum from an early secular family background and education in Egypt and later at Princeton University, from Muslim Brotherhood intellectual-activist and to post-Brotherhood prominent internationally-recognized Muslim scholar, from living and working in the Arab world (Egypt, Algeria and Saudi Arabia) to Britain and finally America. The result has been a remarkable life as a bridge between the Muslim world and the West. A major scholar, who has been a pioneer and leader in contemporary Islamic thought, Fathi Osman's ideas have been disseminated in the Muslim world, from North Africa to Southeast Asia, and in the West for decades through his writings, editorship of *Arabia* magazine, which for years was a platform for discussion and debate, and teaching. He has addressed many of the major issues in Islamic reform and in Muslim societies today: religious pluralism, Muslim-Christian relations, gender equality, Islamic governance, the meaning of jihad, and dangers of religious extremism. Fathi has argued persuasively that Muslims are not simply to respect others but also have a Quranic obligation to guarantee freedom of faith and opinion (2:256) and freedom of expression for all people (2:282). Moreover, recognition and acceptance of all humanity, all the children of Adam, provides the basis for development of universal relations and a global ethic. *A Journey in Islamic Thought* portrays the struggle of Muslims from European colonialism to the present as seen through the journey and remarkable contributions of a modest, unassuming and tireless *mujadid*, reviver and reformer of Islam.

Prologue

The first time I spoke about my father to a public audience was in October of 1998. He was being honoured with an American Muslim Achievement Award by the Los Angeles-based Islamic Center of Southern California, ‘for his exemplary contribution to Islamic Studies’. I flew in from Boston especially for the occasion. Preparing for the speech was daunting: I had only 20 minutes in which to talk about Fathi Osman as a scholar, a thinker and, perhaps most importantly for me, as a father. I found the appropriate anecdotes and reminiscences for the presentation, but became determined at that point to chronicle my father’s life, to narrate the thousands of additional incidents that I yearned for others to know. My father subsequently received many awards, as he was lauded, as one plaque notes, for his ‘Vision, Missions, and Achievement for Serving Islam as a Scholar, Thinker, Reformer and Educator’. Each time I was asked to talk about him, sifting through the history and the memories, my resolve to write his story strengthened.

Finally, in 2006, the chance to write the volume came. I had just received tenure, and was feeling the relief from academia’s ‘publish or perish’ phenomenon. Casually, in the preceding years, I had interviewed my father about various portions of his life, and I had taped the interviews. Initially, my father proved to be a most difficult interviewee. Adamant that his life was an uninteresting one, he would wave me off with the disclaimer, ‘I’m a boring old man. Why don’t you interview so-and-so?’ naming a person with whom he had shared an early history of membership in the Society of Muslim Brothers. But I insisted on interviewing him and, as my interviews became increasingly structured now that I was able to focus exclusively on them, he began to open up more

and more. In time, he came to provide me with detailed stories, completely unsolicited.

The bulk of the material in this book is from my interviews with him. The rich information with which he provided me (and the related material from family documents) is presented without footnotes, in order to allow my father's story, in his own words, to remain as the centre of the narrative. Inevitably, hindsight affects a narrative, but I was as scrupulous as possible in its identification during my interviews and my subsequent writing. The substance of the interviews is augmented by information obtained through painstaking archival work, and all this is endnoted. It was mainly because of the use of these outside sources – crucial for the contextualization and enrichment of the narrative, I felt – that I chose to narrate the story in the third person, rather than in the style of a first-person memoir.

The majority of the events in this book take place before my birth, and almost all of them take place before my adulthood. As a result, my place in this volume is as author, rather than as a co-subject, a choice that may be expected from a daughter's history of her father. My presence in the book is only in this prologue, the epilogue, and in a few instances in the final two chapters; it was important for this to be the story of Fathi Osman only. However, since it is a daughter's story of her father, the subject is referred to more intimately as 'Fathi', rather than by his last name.

The fact that the subject of this book is someone to whom I am closely related is, of course, highly significant. While, on the one hand, it presents a challenge of authorial distance and emotional investment, on the other hand it also gives me the kind of access that others would be hard pressed to gain. Furthermore, my own training and research as a scholar of Middle Eastern Studies has provided me with the essential tools to contextualize and analyse Fathi Osman's works and contributions within the field of liberal Islamic thought, as well as Islamic Studies and Egyptian history as a whole.

This work is by no means intended to be a full biography. Rather than presenting a complete description of my father's life, the book chronicles the highlights of his ideological trajectory, locating him in the larger context of the twentieth-century Egyptian milieu and the modern Muslim religious experience. Fathi Osman's life can be seen in

two stages: the first encompasses his membership and subsequent ideological role in the Society of Muslim Brothers, while the second details his taking the helm as a formulator of an ideology rooted in the basics of Islam, but daring and radical in its reformist goals. A study of the early part of his life (1928–54) helps the reader comprehend the lure of Islamic movements, the experiences of those within the movements, and how the movements themselves come to develop, reorganize their priorities, and shift focus according to the changing circumstances. An examination of the second part of his life (1954–2010) brings the reader into the heart of the debate over the reformulation of Islam and its sources, examining questions such as ‘What sort of interaction exists between the static elements of religious texts, and the dynamic social circumstances of day-to-day life?’ and ‘Does Islamic thought really have the capacity to develop, and what are the elements in its religious texts that encourage such a development?’

In the strange way that these things can sometimes happen, my father passed away during the final stages of the production of this book. He died on 11 September 2010, thereby shifting the implication of that date in my mind from an association with a narrow-minded, hateful interpretation of Islam solely, to a connection with an open, loving, progressive one as well. It’s easy to be sad at the timing of his passing, that he did not get to see the book in its final form. Yet he knew that it was about to come out and in a way I see the book as the continuation of his voice, through another medium and perspective.

While well known to Islamist reformist ‘insiders’, Fathi Osman’s work merits wider circulation. His ideas and example warrant broader reach in a world in which the subject that preoccupied him throughout his entire career has burst to the forefront of political debate in Egypt, the rest of the Muslim world, and the West. My hope is that the contemporary narrative offered here – to borrow Pierre Cachia’s words in the prologue to his mother-son Egypt-centred memoir *Landlocked Islands* – ‘may therefore be of interest to the general reader and may also be raw material for the social historian’.

Chapter 1

Early Years in Tumultuous Times, 1928–41

In the apartment that came to be inhabited by his older sister Karima stood a large photograph of Fathi Osman as a little boy. In the photo, he is about six years old. Sitting on a stool, he is dressed in a starched grey shorts suit. On his head is the red felt fez worn by most urban males of the time. Under it, Fathi's hair is cut in a bob framing his round face and accentuating his dark brown, sensitive eyes with their definitive eyebrows. While his attire is unusually formal for a six-year-old, it is the boy's expression that draws the eye. Solemn and sombre, it is the look of an old soul, a child who is far more mature than his years. 'Ah,' says everyone who sees the picture. 'He looked like a thinker, even then.'

Fathi remembers the photographer who took the picture, an Armenian named Bughos, one of the best-known photographers in town. Bughos's studio was close to the café that Fathi's father frequented, and Fathi and his family went to have their pictures taken there every few years. A pleasant humorous man, Bughos had made the young Fathi laugh. But at the moment when he had snapped the photograph, Fathi's natural seriousness had inevitably crept to the surface, immortalized. It was the solemnity of an intellectual in the making, an individual who would become a passionate speaker, an avant-garde writer and a religious reformer, his name renowned around the Muslim world.

Mohamed Fathi Osman was born on 17 March 1928, in the central Egyptian town of Minya, about 150 miles south of Cairo, known as the 'Bride of Upper Egypt'. While 150 miles in industrialized nations of the twenty-first century is not considered a lengthy distance, at the time a trip from Minya to Cairo was something to be undertaken only under the most pressing circumstances.

At the time of Fathi's birth, his home province had a population of almost 45,000.¹ The town was divided into a wealthier north side, where most of the government offices were situated, and an older and poorer south side, which was home to the central police station, the main hospital and the schools. The walk between north and south was half an hour, and the ride by horse-drawn buggy – Minya's equivalent of a taxi until even recently – was about ten minutes.

Like other towns in the region, Minya's population was almost homogeneous ethnically. Non-Egyptians such as the Armenian Bughos were an anomaly; the largest minority in the province, the Greek population, was not even 1 per cent of the population.² The population was more diverse with regard to religious affiliation. While the Jewish population numbered only 88 in Minya, almost 20 per cent of the population of the province was Christian, with over 99 per cent of these being Copts.³ The Christian population of Minya was in general more visible than the numbers suggested, since its members were wealthier and more educated than the average population. Christians held most government and teaching jobs; only the Arabic teachers, a large portion of whose curriculum involved Islamic texts, tended to be Muslims. Years later, when asked about his open stance towards non-Muslims, Fathi would shrug and say, 'I grew up in Upper Egypt. How could I not have such an attitude towards non-Muslims, when they were many of my neighbours and most of my teachers?'

Much of the wealth in Minya was in the hands of big landowners, and agriculture remained by far the most prevalent method of livelihood in 1920s Egypt. Only 5 per cent of all men living in the province of Minya were employed in industry, transportation and business combined.⁴ Fathi's father Muhammad was among this tiny minority. He was a civil engineer who designed roads, waterways and bridges on contract, and he and his family lived on the north side of town.

Despite his middle-class background, Fathi's father was a simple man. Stout, dark, and of average height, he sported round glasses and a small moustache. While he wore the garb of professionals of his generation, dapper Western-style suits paired with an Eastern-style fez, and owned many of the accessories typical of those of his class and educational background, such as elegant ivory canes and fly-swatters

(*minashshas*) of the type often carried by men of stature, he never embraced this paraphernalia.

What Muhammad did make a show of was his love for his children. Unusual for a man of his generation, he was particularly demonstrative towards them, showering them with affection and praise. Whether he was discussing household finances with his oldest daughter Fatima; comparing drawings of potential architecture projects with his second-eldest artist daughter Hekmat; teasing his third-eldest daughter, the drama-queen Zaynab; or comforting his fourth daughter, the sensitive Karima, Muhammad was happiest when in the presence of his children.

Fathi, as the youngest of Muhammad's five children and the only boy, was in many ways the apple of Muhammad's eye. Upon his son's birth, Fathi's parents decided to give him not his father's simple name Muhammad, but rather a compound name of Muhammad, followed by another name that would be his everyday one, Fathi. Fathi, from the Arabic three-letter root f-t-h, signifying 'opening', 'introduction', 'success' and 'achievement'. A root from which derives the word '*tafat-tuh*', literally meaning spiritual and mental openness and receptivity, but used in everyday language to connote open-mindedness.

Fathi's mother, the tall, slim Naffusa, was a no-nonsense woman who was strict with all her children, particularly with regard to their education. Yet like most women of her time, she had never gone to a government school herself, instead having spent several years at the *kuttab*, or religious school, memorizing portions of the Quran. Also in the tradition of women of her time, her social life was contained inside the home, and revolved around visits with neighbours, the wives of her husband's co-workers, and, occasionally, other friends. When the family members went to have their photographs taken at Bughos's studio, Naffusa did not accompany them. It would have been inappropriate and unbecoming for a woman of her age and class to pose for pictures in such an open manner.

Fathi's sisters were considerably older than he was. At the time of his birth, Fatima was around 15, and in many ways behaved like a second mother to him. Hekmat was 11, Naima (who for a reason that nobody could quite remember was called Zaynab by everyone) was nine, and Karima was seven years old. Fathi's sisters all went to school, and were thus among the 1.7 per cent of girls (and the 8.5 per cent of

the total population) in the entire province of Minya that were literate.⁵ The three oldest sisters graduated from the teachers' college, a secondary institution that was the only in-town option available to girls at the time. By Karima's time, the teachers' college had closed down and a regular girls' secondary school had opened in its place. While this provided a more rigorous education with diverse subjects including English language learning, its lack of vocational emphasis meant that Karima was unprepared to work if need be. There were no college-level options for continuing education in Minya, and it would have been inconceivable at the time to send a girl elsewhere by herself to study. It would always sadden Fathi that Karima, with her sharp mind and keen intellect, was thus prevented from furthering her studies.

The age gap between Fathi and his sisters – coupled with the fact that most of his extended family lived in nearby Samalut, from which his parents originally hailed, and not in Minya – meant that the serious young boy had no close family members to play with. Occasionally his mother and sisters played cards with him. But in general, his sisters found that running around with their little brother was far beneath their dignity. Of the four, Fathi was closest to Karima; she was a little nearer his age, and the two had a similar, more reserved temperament. Thus, solitude became almost second-nature to the little boy. At first a necessary evil, later he cherished time alone as he became an avid reader.

The dearth of young relatives and Fathi's subsequent solitude had significant effects on his personality. With no close cohort, Fathi was not as affected by peer pressure as most children are from an early age. As a result, he developed his own manner of thinking and reasoning, frequently stubbornly adhering to his perspective, regardless of what others tried to tell him; this was a characteristic that would be key in his development as an adult. When towards the end of his elementary years Fathi's school merged with another run by the province, most students at the original school were extremely displeased at the lower socio-economic level of the new partner institution. While students, parents and staff formed coalitions based on these attitudes, Fathi found this distasteful, and he distanced himself from the constant grumbles of the other students with whom he rode to school every day in the horse-drawn buggy. Although he understood that he was supposed to respect

his teachers, he could not figure out why there was such opposition to all the students being together.

As a boy, Fathi's entire focus was on his education. While his first report card as a kindergartener sternly reprimanded the four-year-old's tendency to be 'inclined towards play during class', in time Fathi grew into a serious student, usually at the top of his class, despite the fact that he was a full year younger than his classmates. He took school seriously, and studied diligently, afraid of being disciplined. In his day, if a student misbehaved, the principal would lift him up and hit him with a cane in front of everyone in the school during the morning assembly, a show of humiliation that Fathi was eager to avoid at all costs. Reserved to the core and unused to large groups, Fathi never enjoyed being the centre of attention for positive achievements, let alone for such punishments.

At times, the cherished solitude of Fathi's childhood was interrupted by something that he treasured even more: outings with his father. As an entrepreneur of considerable reputation, Muhammad had a flourishing business, and thus worked unusually long hours, often from five in the morning to eight or nine in the evening. In his rare free time, Muhammad would meet with his friends at the nearby café close to the shop of Bughos the photographer, and he would take his son with him. Inside the café, a crowd gathered around that exciting new contraption that was the craze of the era: the radio. Outside, on the large terrace, Fathi sat with his father as Muhammad played chess or backgammon with friends, like most middle-aged Egyptian men of his generation and today.

As he sat with his father and his father's friends, Fathi would try to follow their endless discussions about political events, most of which had happened before his birth. In 1922, the British, who had maintained a military presence in Egypt since 1882 and protectorate status of it since 1914, had granted the country *de jure* independence. But Britain still had a large degree of jurisdiction over Egypt: it had reserved the right to defend the country from foreign powers, to protect foreign nationals in Egypt, and to control Egypt's southern neighbour, the Sudan. Muhammad and his friends, like most Egyptians, believed that this meant that Egypt was still, for all intents and purposes, under the control of the British.

Egypt's post-1922 government was a constitutional monarchy. The constitution defined the King's executive powers and established a bicameral legislature, enabling only a two thirds parliament vote to override the monarch's veto on any legislation. But it also granted the King extensive powers by giving him the right to dissolve parliament and rule by decree in the event of a disagreement. Fu'ad I became Egypt's first King, with real power continuing to rest with the British High Commissioner, the government official placed in charge of protectorates not fully under the sovereignty of the British Crown. Then, in January 1924, the newly-formed anti-British nationalist Wafd Party won an overwhelming majority of seats in the lower house of parliament, to become a substantial player in the arena of Egyptian politics. But by 1928, the year of Fathi's birth, the Wafd, which had been attempting from time to time to negotiate with the British for complete independence of Egypt, had lost power to the wealthier Liberal Constitutionalists.

Anti-colonialism efforts within Egypt represented part of an overall movement for reform that had gripped the country as a whole. The three-year French occupation of the country from 1798 to 1801 had highlighted to Egyptians their country's backwardness in terms of technology, driving it (and many other parts of the Muslim world) to explore various modes of ideological reform. The incentive to do this was strengthened by the 1882 advent of the British. Now, Muhammad, his friends, and other Egyptians were desperate to feel equal to their occupiers. But what exactly did being equal entail, and how should the efforts of the West in Egypt be evaluated? Was the real danger the military power of the West, or the ideals of Westernization as a whole? And what would be the most effective governing structure that would guarantee both technological advancement and political independence?

Minya had played a small part in the history of Egypt's fight against the British. At the end of World War I, residents had rushed to the streets in a bloodless confrontation with local British authorities. One of the members of a delegation arguing for the demand of the end of the British Protectorate, 'Ali Sha'rawi, had been from Minya, and from the same family had come the renowned Huda Sha'rawi, seen by most Egyptians as the pioneer of the nation's feminist movement.⁶

Now, Minyans such as Muhammad debated the future of the country, believing that the time for true independence had come.

It was the time spent in the company of these older men that planted in Fathi a deep-seated fascination with the politics of his time. Although many of the intricacies of the discussion between Muhammad and his friends were naturally lost upon the school-age Fathi, as he grew older he would try to follow closely, to draw himself into his father's world. Shy in nature and raised at a time when children were meant to be seen and not heard, Fathi would have never dared to do anything but listen with earnest attention.

In addition to exposing him to the key political issues of the era at a young age, Fathi's time with his father also brought him into contact with stories of contemporary Egyptian struggles and of historical events of eras past. Sometimes, when a representative of the Yusuf Wahbi visiting theatre troupe made the rounds of offices to sell tickets for an upcoming show at Minya's Palace Theatre, Muhammad bought a couple for himself and his son. The theatre also doubled as a cinema and when films were shown Muhammad would reserve a set of box seats for his entire family. Two of the first films that the young Fathi watched were the popular musicals by the prolific composer and national sensation Muhammad Abd al-Wahab: the 1933 *The White Rose* (*al-Warda al-Bayda*), and the 1935 *Tears of Love* (*Dumu' al-Hubb*). A few years later, the family was introduced to a different type of musical: the 1936 *Widad*, which went on to become the first Egyptian entry in an international film festival in London, and the 1940 *Dananir*. Both starred the already well-known and later to become legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum in the title roles, and both were historical pieces, revolving around the lives of slave girls in the thirteenth and eighth centuries respectively. Fathi, eight years old when *Widad* was released, was enthralled by the tales, a window to another time and place that was so different from his own.

Besides expanding his son's political and historical understanding through such experiences, Muhammad also gifted him with the opportunity to see a little more of his immediate world. Occasionally, Muhammad would take Fathi on his work rounds, showing him the bridges and dams that he had been commissioned to build in and around Minya. Through such trips, Fathi saw for himself his father's

fingerprint, his own mark on the world. But perhaps Fathi's favourite times with his father were during their outings to local restaurants, something that the boy anticipated with much glee, thrilled to have a chance to spend time alone with his father and sample foods such as kebabs that were more exciting than the okra and other mundane dishes served up at home.

By the time he was at the end of his primary school education, Fathi had grown into a tall boy. He now wore glasses all the time, a result of his avid reading and debate club activity preparation. It was as a member of that club that Fathi's talent for writing and speaking began to emerge; he spent hours poring over books to write essays and deliver speeches that were strikingly well-researched, well-developed and well-delivered for a boy of his age. Titbits from his reading, the conversations of his father and his friends, and even the historical films in which he had indulged all came to serve him. Somehow, when he was speaking about ideas and facts, Fathi's bashfulness disappeared, replaced with a remarkable vigour and eloquence.

As he grew in height, Fathi also gained a great deal of weight. Later, as an adult, he would remind English speakers of his first name by pointing out that he had always been 'both Fat and Hi(gh)'. As a boy, like many children, Fathi did not have a penchant for fruits or vegetables; rather, he craved rice, noodles, cakes and chocolate. Furthermore, during childhood, Fathi had suffered from typhoid, diphtheria and measles, the common cure for all of which at the time involved the intake of large amounts of fluids and chocolate, which was believed to be easy to digest. Perhaps it was these early treatments that helped to make sweets and starches Fathi's passion, so much so that he was able to single-handedly win – not once, but twice – a competition instigated by the Swiss chocolate company Nestlé, which awarded a brand new camera to the collector of an inordinate number of chocolate wrappers.

Naturally possessed of mental but not physical prowess, Fathi's weight gain added to his intense dislike of one lesson in particular: Physical Education. To make matters worse, his Physical Education teachers were usually retired military men. Instead of playing games with the children, such teachers, like the good sergeants that they were, drilled the students, making them run laps around the play area. They kept order

during class by yelling and hitting the students who they thought were not keeping up, reserving a particularly harsh tone and recurrent canings for the slower children. Fathi, with his physical awkwardness, became one of the frequently tormented and intimidated students.

While Fathi did his best to disengage from physical exercise, he was becoming more involved mentally and intellectually in the world around him. Although the role of religion had not ingrained itself in people's everyday lives during the time of Fathi's childhood in the 1920s and '30s, modern Egypt's political and social growing pains were, little by little, ushering religiosity into the foreground. Like the overwhelming majority of Egyptians at the time, Fathi's family was generally non-religious; this did not mean that they were avowedly secular or anti-religion in any way, but rather that they were believers in the message of Islam, but not particularly ardent in the practice of it. Abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan was one of the few religious obligations they practised regularly, but Muhammad, for example, only prayed on special religious holidays, not the five times a day mandated by Islam. The increase in religiosity in Egypt was a gradual process, with religious activism becoming a little more visible with each passing decade. In the late 1930s, as Egyptians such as Muhammad and his friends discussed at length the future of Egypt, so did thousands of others, exploring the various ways that their country could close the political, social and technological power gap between it and the West. While many Egyptians were firm believers in Westernization, arguing that it was only through adopting the ways of the West that Egypt – and the Muslim world as a whole – could advance not only technologically but also socially, others were exploring the potential active role of religion in such progress.

The latter group believed that progress would come from locally-developed agendas, rather than any sort of inspiration from the West. They pointed to the scientific and social advances of the Muslim world during the heyday of Muslim Empires such as the Abbassids in the eighth to thirteenth centuries, or even the early Ottomans up until the sixteenth century. It was such Empires, holders of this view emphasized, that had birthed key advances in chemistry, mathematics and medicine. Therefore, it was to Islam that one must adhere to reach such a

pinnacle of development again, they believed. Would the West have ever known about algebra, algorithms or almanacs, had it not been for the Muslim scientists who had developed and transmitted such discoveries during the Middle Ages?

It was the question of reform and modernization that came to shape the intellectual history of the modern Middle East and the Muslim world as a whole, and to bring about the genesis of modern Islamic movements in the early twentieth century and define their trajectory during subsequent decades. Local nationalisms and Islamic movements developed side by side, frequently sharing the goal – if not the means – of ridding Muslim countries of European occupation. Most prominent among Muslim reformers was the philosopher and politician Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897). Born in Asadabad, al-Afghani promoted the concept of unity of all Muslims against British rule in particular, and against global Western interests in general. With a ‘revolutionary message of religious revival and pan-Islamic political activism’,⁷ al-Afghani directed his call to Egyptians above all others, emphasizing that just as they had toiled to build the pyramids so should they struggle to destroy British occupation. Al-Afghani emphasized Egypt’s role as home of al-Azhar, the tenth-century institute of religious learning that was world-renowned for its position as a centre of Islamic scholarship and education, and thus the country’s mandate to serve as the beacon for religious reform.

Building upon al-Afghani’s teachings, his Egyptian student, the religious figure and judge Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), propagated the role of teaching and education in modernizing Islam and bringing it into line with rational principles. A graduate of al-Azhar, Abduh began his career as a judge in the ‘native courts’, charged with applying secular, non-Islamic rules. He became the Grand Mufti, a principal interpreter of Islamic law, a position in which ‘he was responsible for supervision of the system of religious courts – into which he managed to introduce some reforms – as well as giving formal advisory opinions to the Government on matters involving Islamic law’.⁸ Due to his central belief that political protest was futile without change from within, Abduh even sought limited cooperation from the British to bring about social reforms, an approach that tarnished his reputation in the eyes of many later adherents of Islamic movements. In time,

however, he would become the inspiration for many of Fathi's ideas and actions.

Al-Afghani and Abduh's ideas set the tone for a re-examination of and commitment to an Islamist agenda. Until this time, the average person saw Islam as mainly a set of beliefs and practices, and it was up to the state to promote aspects of the Islamic legal system, or *sharia*. Now Islamism, a term used to denote a set of political ideologies affirming the role of Islam not only as a religion but also a political system, became dominant. Instead of relying on the state to apply Islamic legal codes, Islamists argued that it was up to individual citizens of a Muslim country to actively call for the return of Islam into everyday political and social life. By the 1920s, about a dozen small Islamic groups had begun to emerge around the country. With such titles as the Association for God-consciousness, the Association for Islamic Guidance, the Association for Reviving Muhammad's Sunna, the Association for the Working Muslim,⁹ and the Young Men's Muslim Association, these organizations were modest in their goals and means, mainly focused on charity and education of the public. The groups often had their Headquarters in the bustling capital of Cairo, with branches in provincial capitals such as Minya.

More significantly, March 1928, coincidentally the month of Fathi's birth, marked the inception of yet another Islamic group, the Society of Muslim Brothers, called in Arabic *Jamaat al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*, or *Ikhwan* for short. It was apparent from its beginnings that the Society was a much grander enterprise than its predecessors of the 1920s, comprising a far more comprehensive programme, and it quickly became the first renowned Islamist grass-roots organization of the modern era. Its founder, a schoolteacher named Hasan al-Banna living in the Suez Canal town of Isma'iliyya, had developed an ideology and structural framework that could in some ways be positioned somewhere between those of al-Afghani and Abduh. While the latter believed that education should be especially emphasized among the young and upwardly mobile, and the former espoused a mass movement that targeted all segments of the society, al-Banna highlighted the importance of education for the understanding of Islam and its place in society, within a mass movement but with different emphases and roles for each segment of the population.

Such teaching, al-Banna stressed, should be in a dose that would be 'enough for man to learn to understand the basic principles of religion and earn his livelihood. After this, he should devote his full time to meditation, prayer and good deeds.'¹⁰ But al-Banna's was hardly a passive agenda. Rather than simply encouraging Muslims to be righteous, to pray five times a day and to fast during Ramadan, al-Banna promoted an ingredient of Islam that at the time rarely appeared in everyday religious discourse: the element of jihad. Al-Banna explained that the word jihad, literally meaning struggle, referred to any type of struggle for betterment; for example, pursuit of education would qualify as a jihad. But he also underscored the importance of jihad in order to improve the political and social lot of Muslims as a whole. In the Egypt of the 1920s and '30s, when almost any politicized individual believed that the first step to political and social improvement was ridding the country of its British presence, al-Banna and his followers began to describe the struggle against the British government in Egypt as a kind of jihad.¹¹

In the present era, with its abundance of politically-oriented Islamist agendas and movements, it is hard to conceive of a time when such an emphasis on the ubiquitous role of Islam in daily life was a novelty. It is particularly difficult to imagine an era in which the use of the word 'jihad' to mean a struggle for personal and social betterment was an unfamiliar concept. Yet popular Islamic movements were born in the Egypt of the 1920s, and it was from then that their call for Islamism, the re-adoption of Islam in the public and private spheres, began to spread. By the 1930s, the Headquarters of the Society of Muslim Brothers had moved from the smaller town of Isma'iliyya to the capital of Cairo, and the organization boasted 50 branches across the nation. In time, more and more families had one or two members who were drawn to the new ideology and the hope that it represented for their country, and even in Fathi's largely non-religious family one cousin joined the Society.

The growth of Islamist thinking coincided with the 1936 death of King Fu'ad I, the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, and the events leading to the outbreak of World War II. After a brief regency period, Fu'ad I was succeeded by his young son Farouk, often seen as the first true Egyptian monarch. As opposed to Fu'ad with his stiff Turkish upbringing,