

Mohamed Hasseinein Heikel: The wise man of the Middle East

Robert Fisk has an audience with the great Egyptian writer

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The cigar. I can never imagine Egypt's greatest journalist - indeed, the Middle East's most famous scribe - without the haze of blue smoke from his Havana moving past his lean, powerful, mischievous face.

The adviser of Gamal Abdul Nasser, once editor of Al-Ahram - in the days when it was a great Arab newspaper, rather than the government mouthpiece it has become - Mohamed Hasseinein Heikel is the author of some of the most stylishly written historical works on Middle East history, as well as the archivist of the private papers of Nasser himself. "Acerbic" is how Heikel's friends like to call his bitter criticism of the present Egyptian regime. Devastating might be a better word. I can almost see The Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak - who reads The Independent - sighing as he reads the next paragraph.

"Our President Mubarak lives in a world of fantasy at Sharm el-Sheikh," Heikel says. "Let us face it, that man was never adjusted to politics. He started to be a politician at the age of 55 when Sadat made him vice president before he was assassinated. Yes, Mubarak was a very good pilot" - he was commander of the Egyptian air force - "but to start off as a politician at the age of 55, that takes a lot of work. His original dream was to have been an ambassador, to be among the "excellencies". Now it's been 25 years he's been president - he's nearly 80 - and he still can't take the burdens of state." I remind Heikel that, shortly before he was assassinated at a military parade in Cairo, Sadat locked him up as a danger to the state and that when the new President Mubarak released him, Heikel was unstoppable in his praise of the man he now condemns. I had found Heikel after his release from prison, closeted with his family in a bedroom of the Meridien Hotel, thin and wasted, his clothes hanging from him after weeks in darkened cells, held alongside Islamists (who impressed him) and thieves. Mubarak had been a shining light to him then, the symbol of a new Egypt, the man who had freed him from captivity. "At that time, I thought he [Mubarak] had learnt a lesson," Heikel says. "I thought that because he had been beside Sadat when he was assassinated, he would have appreciated something. But more than anything else, it taught him 'security'."

Indeed it did. Just round the corner from Heikel's Nileside apartment - the carpets, the prints on the wall, the brocaded furniture, the carefully arranged flowers and the photographs of Heikel with Khrushchev and a host of other world alumni, suggest that history has not been unkind to Heikel - there is a street demonstration by two dozen Egyptians. They are members of the Kefaya (Enough!) movement - who are demanding an end to the state of emergency in Egypt and the president's rule and Mubarak's apparent desire to hand power,

Caliph-like, to his own son Gamal, and new electoral laws which will deprive the Muslim Brothers of parliamentary protection - and they are outnumbered by at least 300 black-uniformed security police.

While President George Bush continues to believe that Egypt is becoming more democratic, the new legislation approved by less than a third of the electorate is in effect transferring the "state of emergency" (a condition beloved of all Arab dictators) into ordinary and unalterable law. Egypt is not a happy place.

"There is a state of polarisation," Heikel continues. "Between the rich and the poor, between revolutionaries and conservatives, between the government and the people. This thing is tearing through the Arab world. When the boys in the universities learn to use computers, they will end at the mosque.

"There is a sea between the authorities and the people - this is the wide sea which has opened. There is no wind now - but when the wind starts ..."

Heikel takes another puff on his Havana - I've always wanted to puff that blue smoke across his living room. For thirty years, I've been waiting for the author of *Sphinx and Commissar*; *Cutting the Lion's Tale: Suez Through Egyptian Eyes*; *The Road to Ramadan and Autumn of Fury* (about Sadat's assassination), to be offered one. Nikita Khrushchev was enraged by Heikel's cigars. "Are you a capitalist?" the Soviet leader once demanded when he saw the Egyptian journalist lighting up. "Why are you smoking a cigar?" "Because I like cigars," Heikel replied. So Khrushchev seized the wretched thing and crushed it out in an ashtray, snarling that "a cigar is a capitalist object." The next time Heikel interviewed Khrushchev, in 1958, he left his cigar outside. Khrushchev asked where it was. "I want to crush it again," he said.

You can see why Sadat wanted to crush Heikel. He is famous enough - with enough friends around the world - to be able to tweak the tale of the president often lampooned as *la vache qui rit* (the laughing cow) without expecting the security police to knock on the door of his elegant apartment. But like every other Egyptian, Heikel is both enraged and frustrated by the bureaucracy of dictatorship. He is starting a foundation for young journalists and duly sought to register his new institution with the Egyptian government.

"My lawyer said we could register under a 2002 law - we sent the authorities a copy of the minutes of the first meeting of our board of trustees. But the Ministry of Social Affairs sent me a very strange letter saying, yes all right, we have permission - this permission was published in the official decrees - but that 'according to instructions from security' I must give details of what our students are doing, where they have come from. They said that 'this is the procedure' but I am not going to do that. The minister then said that 'this is merely a convenience'. But the law I will obey. 'Instructions' I am not going to obey. We are talking to our journalists about freedom - and then I'm supposed to tell them when they arrive that I have to ask 'security' for permission to have them?"

This is the same old Heikel that tweaked the tale of Sadat. Yet he is almost 83 - a little older than Mubarak - and those infamous intimations of mortality closed in on Heikel when he travelled to America to be treated for cancer of both prostate and kidneys. "My doctor, Dr Novik, asked me if I wanted to know what he was going to do. I said 'no'. I told him that when you pass 75, you reach the corner of the 'dark room' and inside there are beasts waiting for us; they are asking: 'Which one is next?'"

Heikel picks up a copy of Sawt al-Umma, which means voice of the nation though one hopes profoundly that it is not. It's a gossip sheet for the very rich. "Here is a wedding that cost \$2m," he says, blowing cigar smoke over the report. "Two thousand people were present - the 'stars of society,' the paper calls them - and the singer was paid \$50,000!"

"There is something serious happening in Egypt. The pressure of the economy, political pressure - we never had it so bad for the poor. I go to the village behind my farm in the Nile Delta and try to help the people there. But some people have never had it so good. They have fabulous palaces. It's amazing - in front of every rich quarter there is a slum. One of our friends, a doctor, was saying that one day each slum will march on its palace. No wonder that last Christmas the government instructed newspapers not to publish the prices of parties and weddings."

Heikel's regular appearances on Al-Jazeera have earned him a new and unprecedented following, especially among the young, bringing him around 50,000 emails and letters a week. When he was editor of Al-Ahram he was lucky to receive 25 letters a week. It's not difficult to see how his followers adore his freedom to say things which presidents would never utter.

"The Americans have done great damage to this area. They've got Egypt out of the equation, made Saudi Arabia run after them. The Americans have failed in Iraq but our losses are much greater than theirs. I was dining with an American the other day and he was telling me about the democracy his country wanted to bring to the region. I asked: 'If you want to start an experiment in democracy, why Iraq? And why do you push this Sunni-Shia thing?' Iraq is collapsing under the Americans and this so-called 'surge' is just to buy time. Kissinger was always keen on what he called the 'magic gap'. He knew the Vietnam war was failing but he wanted a 'gap'. Now the Americans need a 'gap' in Iraq to gain time. They want to build a bridge to get out. Normally a bridge has two sides. But now the Americans are on a suspended bridge - it's just half a bridge. They are waiting for the second part of the bridge. But it's not there."

Lebanon occupies Heikel's mind, though he prefers not to visit Beirut now. "Lebanon is a necessity for us, a very necessary Arab invention. We need it as a meeting place, a listening post, as a facade looking across the Mediterranean. You know, I never came across a country - and I'm talking about Lebanon when Rafik Hariri was the prime minister - where the prime minister says to me: 'I am not Lebanese, I am Saudi.' "

This is a quotation that Hariri, who was born in Lebanon but held a Saudi passport, has no chance of denying - he was murdered in Beirut just over two years ago. "He was money asking for respectability and respectability asking for money. He told me one day: 'The premiership of Lebanon - the cost of it is in billions of dollars.'

"I don't go to Lebanon now. All my personal friends are on one side. All my political sympathies would be on the other side. I would have dinner with Ghassan Tuani [the newspaper publisher who supports Fouad Siniora's government and whose editor son Jibrán was killed by a car bomb] but then I would go to see [the Hizbollah leader] Nasrallah.

"Siniora is a very nice man, a solid man, he's kept his position. I think he's now bigger than Hariri. He created a sympathy for Lebanon during last summer's war when he cried. He played the sufferer. You were unfair to him, Robert. You said that Winston Churchill didn't cry when he was at war in 1940. Siniora is not Churchill - but didn't Churchill say all he had to offer the British were 'blood sweat and tears?'" Heikel asks.

And the future? The Arabs, he says, believe that the Americans are their enemies. "The US was once a promise to them. I sit with young people and try to differentiate between American policies and Americans. But the enemies of the Americans are not only the Taliban, Hamas, Hizbollah, but a wide sea of ordinary people who hate them because the Americans created the polarisations in their lives. They are between impotence and despair. This is a catastrophe."

Yet there is still optimism in Heikel. "I think there is something very interesting going on in Egypt, moving under the pressures of society. What is amazing about our students is not the standards of education - it's their eagerness to acquire knowledge. The effect of mobiles, computers, satellites - there is a generation coming that is outside the traditional controls. Normally, generations recreate themselves. But something else is happening. The police are unable to prevent the political demonstrations. These are not very large - but by using phones, mobiles, the internet, SMS, they are starting a political form of guerrilla warfare in a new medium. Do you know that never before in our history in Egypt was the budget of our army less than the budget of our police? Now it is. What does that tell you?"

Lessons from the great man. And, yes, that cigar. Without any hint, Heikel offers me one. At last, I can blow that blue smoke across his living room. I carefully place the brown and yellow band - Havana Trinidad, it says - inside the pages of my notebook. Just in case Khrushchev's ghost is still hovering at the edge of the dark room.