



**Arrays
of
Egyptian and Tunisian
Everyday Worlds**
 An update on the project
*In 2016—How it felt to live in the Arab
World five years after the “Arab Spring”*

edited by

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Baby Milk

On September 2, the hashtag #*laban_al-ʿaskūr* explodes on social media [**↗Social Media**]. It is tempting to translate this as #cop_milk to reflect the wordplay, in Arabic, on *laban al-ʿaṣfūr* ‘crop milk’, an Egyptian expression denoting the unimaginable and impossible. Birds are not mammals, after all. Most people are surprised to learn that ‘bird’s milk’ (the literal rendering of *laban al-ʿaṣfūr*) really does exist—both *al-Ahrām* and *Wikipedia* attest to this unheard-of natural phenomenon. And ordinary citizens are just as stunned to learn of the ‘armY milk’ (another attempt to translate *laban al-ʿaskūr*) that the Egyptian military is ready to provide in order to defuse citizens’ anger when subsidised infant formula suddenly turns all but out of reach for average Egyptian families. The army has 30 million canisters of toddler milk stored in their barracks? Why? What for? Apparently, the nation’s foremost institution really does want to make sure it can steer its subjects from the cradle to the grave. And “20 years from now,” one of the first tweets predicts, they will yell at you, “you dare insult the army that taught you and suckled you? #Badr_International_School #*laban_al-ʿaskūr*”. This tweet combines reference to the toddler milk affair with a stab at the school the military established a year ago to attract well-paying youngsters (20,000 EGP for a kindergarten place) away from private international schools, and to provide them “the weapons of education necessary for their future endeavors.” Badr School is facing a backlash as it embarks on its second year, with people objecting to the military’s engagement in yet another socioeconomic sector. While critical voices question both the motives and the ability of the military to manage what should be civilian affairs, others take less issue with that. “The military is running all of Egypt, why would I be concerned about it running a school?” says a mother of two kids there. Many do believe that the products and services the military delivers really are better than what others have to offer. Yet this belief becomes the object of derision as well. “They say that Badr School is whiter than white,” *Abla Fāhītā*, the wildly popular Egyptian muppet character, tweets on Aug. 29. Why? “They constantly sweep the floor there with the General” detergent. Can anyone object to using General (“Max Clean, Max Fresh”) to secure, as the commercial promises, an “Ultimate clean house”? [**↗Satire**] It is not easy to ascertain who at any one moment has the upper hand in this war of words. For many—teachers and parents at Badr School, drivers filling gas at the *Waṭaniyya* patriotic petrol stations, consumers buying fruit and eggs, noodles and refrigerators produced in military-owned farms and factories, the sick placing their hopes on drugs and medical equipment imported by the military, and for countless others—the military represents a force serving the nation rather than individual private interests. Protests against the military’s role are therefore often regarded as being the result of a conspiracy directed from abroad, and thus Badr’s school principal reveals in an interview with *MadaMasr* that

There’s a fortune teller in America whose prophecies all come true. He predicted that in one of the Arab countries there will be a president who pretends to represent

Islam, though he is far from it [a reference to deposed president Mursī] and that the president who comes next would unite the Arab region and destroy the American economy. That president will have a name made up of two repeated syllables [he means Sisi]. [↗**Conspiracy Theories**, ↗**Superiority vs Inferiority**, ↗**Suspect Foreigner**]

It is in such a climate that the baby milk crisis erupts. When women on August 31 suddenly and without prior warning find they no longer can buy infant formula at the subsidised price of 5-17 EGP but are being referred to the open market where the cost of a canister quickly rises to 60-70 EGP, they are shocked and pour their anger into street demonstrations catching media attention. The women and their families find themselves confronted with a fait accompli as no one has prepared them for the Health Ministry's decree tightening the criteria for being able to obtain subsidised milk [↗**"The System" vs "The People"**]. The Ministry, for its part, is merely trying to help "stem the subsidy haemorrhage," to contribute to the overall fiscal consolidation that the IMF requires to approve its biggest ever Middle East loan (12bn USD over 3 years, 4 times as much as Sisi's predecessors dared to ask for) [↗**Dollar Crisis**]. This grander order of things is lost, however, on countless women who complain that they now no longer know how to feed their babies [↗**Affluence vs Destitution**]. At this point, the army is there to save them. To counter what it describes as "monopolistic practices by pharmaceutical companies" (and without mentioning that the main company involved is the state-owned Egyptian Pharmaceutical Trading), the Armed Forces promise to deliver 30 million canisters of baby milk—half of Egypt's annual demand—to be sold at pharmacies for "no more than 30 EGP" [↗**The Voice from Above**]. A few observers point out that this is twice the expense incurred for importing the milk, meaning a net profit of 450 million EGP "for a tiny crisis created in just one day" (coincidentally, this corresponds exactly to the amount, c. 51 million USD, that the Ministry of Health claims it uses per year for supplying infant formula) [↗**Tricked by the System**]. But such nit-picking cannot deter the authorities. Soon, fleets of trucks bearing the message "Don't pay more than 30 pounds!" appear on streets and newspaper pages, and "France Lait" canisters labelled "Long live Egypt... with regards, The Armed Forces" hit the shelves. A pernickety tweep notes that these army-branded milk canisters bear a production date going back a month before the outbreak of the shortage [↗**True vs False**], but further speculations on who created the emergency are drowned by social media outrage at another scandalous aspect of the issue. For the Ministry of Health follows the army in the attempt to defuse the crisis, softening its decree to give access to the subsidised substitute not only in cases where the mother is completely unable to breastfeed, but also where she does not produce enough mother's milk of her own. To prevent abuse of the system, women now have to undergo a breast examination before being handed out the subsidised formula. While the banned Muslim Brotherhood tries to exploit the issue in their broadcasts from abroad, claiming that the regime is forcing women to undergo breast examinations in public—a claim strongly denied by the authorities—other commentators draw parallels to the army's earlier practice of carrying out 'virginity tests' on female demonstrators. As if to confirm that a patriarchal mindset dominated by a view of woman primarily as reproductive sexual bodies that need to be contained and controlled, still runs deep, a member of parliament publicly declares, the same day the baby milk affair breaks,

his opposition to a legislative amendment harshening the punishment for performing female genital mutilation. Egypt's "men suffer from sexual weakness," he explains. "For the sake of equality between men and women, women should therefore be circumcised to reduce their sexual desire." [↗**Male vs Female**]

Such an 'extreme' formulation is no longer a matter of consensus in Egypt (even though it can still frequently be encountered on social media); neither is the same parliamentarian's call to introduce virginity tests for girls wanting to enter university. Nevertheless: sexual harassment and gendered violence remain rampant and constitute an important framework for how women are treated and have to comport themselves. Just how important is indicated by the way the affair is framed when it becomes a buzz issue on social media, to the extent that it is picked up by the Arabic *HuffPost* under the headline "Medical Examination of the Mothers of Egypt on the Street". Criticism of the political economy of things is drowned out by moral outrage; and this moral outrage is less about the *state* subjecting its citizens' bodies to humiliation, but over the allegedly *public* breast examinations, i.e. the public exposure of women's bodies that are supposed to remain hidden from view [↗**Mother of the Hero**]. Small wonder that the 'shame' of breastfeeding in public is one of the main reasons for why 60% of Egyptian women rely on infant formula in the first place.

Related Entries

Arrays: Conspiracy Theories; Dollar Crisis; Male vs Female; Mother of the Hero; Satire; Social Media; The Suspect Foreigner; The Voice from Above; Tricked by the System ♦
Codes: Affluence vs Destitution; Superiority vs Inferiority; "The System" vs "The People"; True vs False

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