

Fadwa El Guindi
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) /
The Institute for Advanced Studies in Levant Culture and Civilization

Tears of Civilizational Identity: Egypt's Emergent Paradigm for Global Cultural Diplomacy

Abstract:

This article primarily concerns the idea that 'civilization' can be a key around which a national identity is woven. I argue that, as in the case of Egypt today, this civilizational identity can be deployed to rebuild a contemporary national identity woven as the basis for development. It is here proposed that an emergent model would serve as alternative to the coalitional model promoted as "Endless War" through "constructive chaos" that characterized US-led international relations since the event of 9/11 in Manhattan, New York in the United States. This analysis lays out this envisioned scenario emerging in today's turbulent world as it invokes a deep civilizational identity weaving itself into a national identity to serve as a core component of a new global cultural diplomacy, thus leading to an emergent global world paradigm for economic and political exchanges, which I label "global ring of mutual alliances".

Keywords: civilization, identity, Egypt, cultural diplomacy, global alliances

This article primarily concerns the idea that civilization which is already inherent to a people's identity, when knit and re-knit together and is continually nourished by a unified dominant worldview held over millennia, as in the case of Egypt, can become a key around which a national identity is woven and deployed to support the rebuilding of a nation's development. It can also serve as the bedrock for an innovative vision for global cultural diplomacy. It is proposed in this article that my analysis reveals an emergent paradigm of a global cultural diplomacy which would serve as alternative to the coalitional model promoted as "Endless War" through "constructive chaos" that characterized international relations since the event of 9/11 in Manhattan, New York, in the United States. This analysis invokes a deep civilizational identity weaving itself into a national identity to serve as a core component of a new global cultural diplomacy underlying economic and political exchanges, which I label "global ring of mutual alliances". It is a paradigm revealed in analysis, rather than officially formulated, that is anchored in civilization as key to a people's identity and the bedrock of a nation. This "ring" stands in contrast to the coalitional path followed by the United States (and its Anglo-Saxon axis) and is also different from the well-articulated vision by China. I will briefly point out the differences but the main focus here is on the unarticulated emergent paradigm out of Egypt seeped in a deep civilizational identity.

Civilization as Identity?

Civilizational identity and the sustainable stability of a nation are almost never discussed together. Instead civilizational topics tend to be relegated to the contexts of history, ancient art, archeology, Egyptology, and so on. In the same vein, progress is almost always envisioned and presented by thought and world leaders as a look to the future, not the past. A polarity is constructed suggesting that the only way for moving forward is not to look backward. But what if the present is intricately tied to the past in a continuous and deep way such that it seamlessly paves a path to a stable future? This is what is being proposed in this article. A systematic observation of events taking place in the past few years in the contemporary country of Egypt supports this view. I begin with a recent event held in Cairo, Egypt which vividly tells the story.

Parade of the Royal Mummies

On April 3, 2021 a remarkably choreographed parade of ancient royal mummies, referred to as the Golden Pharaohs' Parade, took place utilizing technology, art, Egyptological knowledge, and local creativity in full view of the world. The procession consisted of ancient Egypt's royal mummies of 18 kings and 3 queens organized in chronological order of their reign who were transported from the iconic Antiquities museum of Midan al-Tahrir, known locally as *al-Antiqkhana*, where they were housed in crowded and unsafe conditions, to their final resting place 3 miles across Cairo in the new National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, in which they were re-entombed, as it were, in the new Royal Hall of Mummies¹, their new and eternal "afterworld".

This spectacular event was described in the report by the BBC News in Cairo as a "dazzling parade". Indeed it was – spectacular in its choreography and dramatic in its message. But to proud Egyptians, whether living in Egypt or abroad, who watched the details of the spectacular event moment by moment, this was more than dazzle and joy, and even beyond a feeling of pride. Indeed Egyptians expressed pride in that the whole world is watching their civilizational grandeur, woven by modern technology and professional performance. But what is significant here, I contend, is something that goes beyond these sentiments and which has visibly moved Egyptians at a very deep emotional level to the point of shedding tears. Long after the dramatized spectacle had ended Egyptians were still humming its tunes, particularly that of the Isis lament, and tearing when hearing them over and over, and during their private re-streaming of the recorded event. The memory of the procession was enough to bring out emotional responses.

Clearly, the message to the world was the re-affirmation of Egypt's civilizational heritage. To Egyptians, however, the message embodied much more. Their heritage is never lost on them, as they at minimum can see the pyramids on their way to work! The deeper message was to let Egyptians see a continuity of their heritage to this day. It enabled them to situate their modern Egypt, and particularly the one that is now being dramatically overhauled, in a long, homogeneous coherent historical route. It was more about the 'continuity' in Egyptian civilizational identity which has been subjected to doubt in the face of hegemonic episodes and colonialist reformulations. Often it was an interrupted heritage, a

¹ Hussein, 2021.

discontinuous historical line, a fragmented identity. For there was once ancient Egypt, then nothing!²

Observing the response of Egyptians who were proudly and tearfully glued to their television sets, through personal and social media comments, I saw more than a re-affirmation of an identity. I saw what was an unquestionable re-affirmation of the “*continuity* of Egyptian identity”, hence removing any doubt built into how Egyptian history has been portrayed or manipulated in western sources, as a fragmented series in which there was a glorious ancient Egypt and then nothing. Such a dramatized public display in full view of the whole world, and the Egyptian people’s response to it was about a de-fragmentation of imposed identity formulations.

True, historical, political, and intellectual narratives competed over the years as to which is Egypt’s true identity – Arab or Mediterranean or European or African or Islamic or Christian, or one of an ancient past. In general, the Egyptian people themselves, however, did not feel such tensions posed by historians, intellectuals, or politicians. They wove it all seamlessly together. The Parade brought out that coherent self-identity which was un-fragmented and inclusive. To the Egyptian people, it was more of a single fabric of integrated elements and colors and faiths which coherently and consistently make up *their* Egypt, which Egyptians refer to as Um al-Dunya (Mother of the World). They are disturbed when such coherence is violated. The tears shed by viewing Egyptians, I argue, are an expression of a passionately felt civilizational identity, whole, un-fragmented, seamless and continuous, that was being dramatically re-affirmed. Those tears I refer to in the title of this article as the ‘tears of civilizational identity’.

² My favorite encounter was during my first year in the United States as a graduate student to obtain a doctorate in anthropology. At Christmas time, I was invited by American acquaintances who had lived in Egypt, to what was a typical Christmas dinner in Boston. It was 1965. A school boy of about ten gathered the courage to ask me directly as the event was ending, but breathlessly, whether I was truly Egyptian. Unaware of the implications, I said yes of course. Completely breathless by then he stuttered: “Where did they find you?” I was more confused than bemused. It took me a few seconds to realize what Americans are taught in school about Egypt, that ‘there once was, but no more’. Combining this kind of teaching with Hollywood fantasy, the young boy must have thought I was a talking mummy!

A Worldview of Balance

In an earlier publication I discussed in some detail the worldview characterizing Egypt in ancient times, describing it as one “that integrates morality-justice-truth (the feather), with governance (the scepter), with nature-culture-gender-cosmology-animal life (*ankh* = life), in order to attain balance in the human order”³. This Egyptian worldview was consistently, albeit with some variation, represented in the form of the goddess *Maat*, meaning stability, and depicted holding the feather, the scepter, and the *ankh*. In this worldview, the opposite of *Maat* (stability) would be chaos. Egypt with its deep historical formation reveals a trajectory in the formation of its national identity since the time that the north and the south were unified into one state structure, a unity clearly symbolized in the monarch’s crown and defining Egyptian identity to this day.

The Chaos of ‘Endless War’

The view that progress is achieved by looking to the future, and not to the past dominates US policy. Another aspect is the view of international relations based on military coalitions. NATO with Europe, and AUKUS with the Anglo-Saxon axis are cornerstones. The verbalized suggestion by former President Trump addressed to Saudi Arabia that the US would like to see an “Arab NATO” blew off without impact. The Abrahamic Accords are the last attempt by the US to find room for Israel in the Arab world – normalization efforts so far have remained cold and only at the official level.

Egypt is not interested in military coalitions. It has seen the devastations of the scenario of ‘Endless or Infinite War’ which embodied a principle of ‘Constructive Chaos’ of destabilizing nations, forcing regime change, assassinations of Arab leaders, imposing sanctions, arming proxy militias beginning with the invasion of Afghanistan, then Iraq, then Syria violating the sovereignty of nations. There was nothing constructive about the resulting chaos. Its recent chaotic exit from Afghanistan was explained as a change of regional focus, not the coalitionary approach to the world. This is despite recognition that the previously pursued scenario envisioned for the Middle East had failed.

³ El Guindi, 2019.

The ‘Endless War’ paradigm has now fallen out of favor in global politics. With NATO in Europe and AUKUS in the Anglo-Saxon region, the US is shifting focus to China. The relation between the US and Australia is not new. Australians have fought alongside Americans in every major US military action of the last century, including World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Arabian-Persian Gulf, Somalia, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq. The two countries maintain robust bilateral arrangements⁴. This military coalitionary landscape, encompassing NATO and AUKUS, is set to confront the biggest perceived threat to US power, China.

China and ‘Common Destiny’

I had invoked the article “Xi’s Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies” by Liza Tobin in an earlier work to summarize China’s vision⁵. China builds its primary development project referred to as the “New Silk Road”, but which China calls “Belt and Road Initiative” as fully anchored in an explicitly articulated gradually building and rebuilding of a vision. The initiative is conceptualized as an international development project of a trade network that encompasses three continents, Asia, Africa, and Europe, and more than 70 countries. The phrase “community of common destiny”, was used by Xi’s predecessor Hu Jintao with central features in place, but was reaffirmed in 2018 in a book by President Xi (translated in English as ‘community of shared future for mankind’) which placed it in the center to a future international order and key to his diplomacy. Tobin points out how such aspirations were expressed by Chinese leaders since the early days of the People’s Republic and that in 1954, Premier Zhou Enlai proposed “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and cooperation, and peaceful coexistence. This represented a shift from the security concept

⁴ Today, Australia and the US maintain a unique bilateral partnership. While there are many cultural similarities and underlying values, there are also strong formal structures of co-operation across government, particularly in foreign policy, defense and security, intelligence, development, energy, environment, education, law, trade and investment. Central to the relationship are the ANZUS Alliance and the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement (AUSFTA). US, Australia and UK unveil new security partnership as China is viewed as expanding its military and economic influence.

⁵ Tobin, 2018, in El Guindi, 2019.

of military alliances to a vision which centers global trade in the context of international relations. Russia figures strong in the picture as a renewed pact demonstrates⁶.

The importance of Russia to China was strongly voiced in the recently published article in the *Counterpunch*: “It should matter little to the Chinese that American diplomats and a handful of their western allies will not be attending the Beijing Winter Olympics in February. What truly matters is that the Russians are coming”⁷. The article states that according to a survey conducted by China’s *Global Times* newspaper, the majority of the Chinese people value their country’s relations with Russia more than that of the EU and certainly more than that of the United States. According to the co-authors the Chinese people support greater integration with Russia – political, economic and geostrategic.

An Undeclared Vision of Stability of Mutual Alliances

Navigating between ‘NATO’ and ‘AUKUS’ at one end, and China’s ambitious vision of a ‘Common Global Destiny’ (now in ‘alliance’ with Russia) at the other, Egypt has been trying to carve a modest but strong space for itself. Amid the bi-polar global power landscape Egypt is re-emerging with a different perspective as a country young in its youthful population, exceeding 100 million, and millennia-old civilization. Although no vision is explicitly articulated, to this author seeds for core principles are revealed through small-scale initiatives and giant national development projects. An emergent paradigm is in formation.

Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that Egypt of today had just come out of being thrust into a violent confrontation in Sinai since 2013 against militias. Acting as a longstanding nation with a strong state Egypt confronted the terror within its border or which threatened its national security. This is at a time when it was recovering from a revolution in two phases that ousted two presidents. Eighteen years after my op-ed had appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*⁸, in which I critiqued former president Mubarak’s rule of Egypt, the Egyptian people led a revolution in two phases (2011–13), shouting *irhal* (Arabic for “depart” or “leave”) from the streets as “millions of Egyptians revolted until they removed first Mubarak, the author of “amoral business,” and a year later Morsi, the author of

⁶ Wright, 2022.

⁷ Baroud & Rubeo, 2022.

⁸ El Guindi, 1993.

“amoral religion” weaponized to destabilize”⁹.

Using the principle of *tafwid*, the people directly called on Abdul Fattah El-Sisi to become their president, thus authorizing authority for governance from the street. The Arabic term *tafwid* was deployed to describe the direct authorization by the people from the street to select their leadership; the word ranges in etymological meanings from “to authorize”, “to empower”, “to delegate”, “to invest with authority”, “to entrust”, all leading to direct investiture with authority by the people¹⁰. With the leadership of their choice in place, Egyptians saw an Egypt that is vigorously moving forward.

An implicit vision was developing in this process countering the global “War on Terror” and strongly protecting the security of the nation from encroaching terror. Central to this position is a strong nation-state which protects the lives of a people who hold strong national identity. Interestingly, the view emerging by Egypt shares with China its Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, namely, mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and cooperation, and peaceful coexistence. A manifesto was formulated that became the basis of the action taken by the Quartet, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the Emirates, isolating Qatar for its role (which Qatar denied) in supporting interference in their internal affairs. This regional move undermined the Gulf Cooperation Council but re-affirmed the right to security of Arab States. Egypt confronted the brunt of proxy militias on its territory and its borders.

An alternative paradigm was emerging from outside the ‘two opposing poles of China and the United States’ that is of different scale and character. I contend that an undeclared vision began to emerge in Egypt consisting of a three-pronged approach of protecting its national security, rebuilding its state institutions and economy, and engaging partnerships around the world on the basis of a “strategic cooperation.” This was being anchored in a strong state and a strong nation.¹¹

In this case a strong nation is linked to a strong national identity by its population. This way, one core element in this paradigm was the reaffirmation of the Egyptian identity, firmly anchoring it in ancient Egyptian history and values, while recognizing the broader sides of Egypt’s identity formed out of its geopolitical centrality. Anchored in its

⁹ El Guindi, 2022. See also El Guindi, 2022, 149-150.

¹⁰ See also El Guindi, 2018.

¹¹ See also El Guindi, 2022, 150.

Egyptian heritage, Egypt had a Mediterranean, African, Arab, Islamic, and Christian multifaceted identity.

No room was left for intolerant ideologies of exclusion which fed the proxy militias of terror trying to de-stabilize Egypt. The feeling of unbroken attachment by Egyptians to Egypt is remarkable. Governance of Egypt can succeed only if it builds on this fact. The Sisi leadership is constantly evoking “Tahya Masr” (Long Live Egypt) in its message.

A question worth pondering is: Can a State build a nation by governance alone? Qatar presents a comparative case worth a brief consideration.

The Case of Qatar

This question was on my mind throughout my immersive stay in Qatar, living and working for close to a decade¹². Living in Qatar, a prosperous country with a small local population and immense reserves of oil and gas, allowed me to observe first hand its struggle to create a unified national identity among its citizens who enjoyed a life of prosperity. Its small population consists of 3 ethnic groups: Arabians who are organized tribally by kinship gradually settled in urbanized environment, Iranians and Indians who settled early on and established businesses. The tribally organized Arabians belong to tribes who crossed Arabian borders from Kuwait, to Bahrain, to Saudi Arabia, to the Emirates. Primary loyalty was to their tribes. As citizens, they served the state of Qatar. Qatar housed them in urban setting divided by tribe. On Qatar’s newly established National Day influential tribes celebrated in their own tribal tents financed by the State. A national parade of military and security forces was held on the Corniche in the presence of the Emir. The State was challenged to create a bond that brings together all the tribes as a nation. The stronger the kinship ties among tribal members the bigger challenge for the State to enfold them. Slogans of origin and poetic oratory were deployed on billboards and state media in an effort to build a shared identity. Can tribe and state become a unitary formation adequate for governance of a modern state? A strong affiliation with and loyalty to one’s original kinship group whose roots and branches extend beyond the

¹² In 2006, I was invited by Qatar University to join the faculty as Distinguished Professor and later as Head of Department, with the purpose of building a modern Social Science department around a project of Sustainability in the Social Sciences. This was part of an overall reform project undertaken by the university. I lived in Qatar from 2006 until 2015.

Qatari border, often is in friction with a national identity bounded by border and sovereignty¹³. I had described in an earlier publication how such friction can turn into a confrontation in stressful situations¹⁴.

Efforts toward building a national identity pose a challenge of a particular kind in this case. The world is divided today into nation-states, and a global institution such as the United Nations is formed of nation-states as its members. Despite overarching globalization processes, as the global pandemic has clearly demonstrated vital health and medical information, coordination of services and outreach to local populations can only be effective through centralized nation-states. The more such States are unified the more effective the reach. The decentralized sharing of authority and governance among States in the United States was ineffective and divisive. During the peak of the pandemic it was most confusing and resulted in much damage. Any new world order cannot ignore the sovereignty and value of nations.

As pointed out in my recent publication there was “the rise of terror groups like ISIS, secured by proxy and mercenary threats, brought about violence and an influx of “refugees” escaping war and poverty and seeking livelihoods in Europe and the United States. The world saw growing global instability and human insecurity”¹⁵. I contended that “the nation-state reemerged as the most effective mode for reaching local communities, protecting human security, and providing safety from terror and the spread of the pandemic infection. It was the channel through which measures proposed by the WHO of the United Nations were carried out on the ground.”¹⁶ Nations have been searching for ways to integrate competing structures, such as tribal groups, within their state structures. Arabian tribes are kinship, not ethnic, groups. Qatar is facing such a challenge. Egypt presents a different model.

Civilizational Identity as National Identity

Unifying these aspects of identity, already integral to the Egyptian deep historical/cultural formation, reaffirms how Egyptians already view themselves – more as one fabric than in quantified terms as

¹³ On tribal life in Qatar as it gradually develops into a State, see Ferdinand, 1993.

¹⁴ El Guindi, 2021. See the report *Gulf News Report*, 2017 with the headline “Qatari tribe accuses authorities of systematic repression”, in which Al Ghofran lineage of the al-Murra tribe urged the UN rights body to urgently intervene.

¹⁵ El Guindi, 2022, p. 150.

¹⁶ El Guindi, 2022, p. 150.

majority/minority, for example. This in turn worked to catalyze their response to the state's emergency management of the pandemic crisis¹⁷.

Contrary to the approach that separates past from present and future, or military coalitions Egypt has in fact integrated its civilizational identity into a national identity, and has given us a new paradigm of leadership/governance building a “global ring of mutual alliances”, exchanging services of mutual benefit, rather than serving its self-interest, as the path for moving forward into a sustainable future.

¹⁷ El Guindi, 2022, p. 151.

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