

Middle East Turmoil:

View from an American Girl in Cairo

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The author atop a camel as her father holds her sister by the Giza Pyramids outside Cairo, Egypt.

“If I’m going to die, I wanna have my combat boots on!”

It is March 1987, and I am standing in gym class with my fellow restless sophomores watching plumes of smoke twist through the sky just past the edges of the campus of our school, Cairo American College. Egyptian police recruits — at that time, all young Egyptian men were drafted into mandatory service — are rioting. Enraged about low pay and poor working conditions, they’re setting buildings on fire and releasing people from prisons, one of which is a few blocks from our school. As teenagers, our foremost concern, of course, is the morbid fear of being captured or set on fire dressed in lame nylon shorts and T-shirts rather than in our ultra cool ’80s punk rock/new wave/neon gear purchased in places like London and Brussels.

Turns out, we did get to change clothes. And I admit many of us were concerned for our siblings, friends and family. I fetched my kid sister from her elementary classroom and walked her to the theater building, where everyone on the K-12 campus populated by a crew of international students was gathering. Parents came to pick up their kids, rushing into cars with their heads ducked as if a bullet might land in their skulls at any moment. We were out of school for more than a week. It was mayhem, sure, but kind of like snow days in a country where having to wear a lightweight jacket meant it was “cold.” When we returned to school, work already had started on the construction of a new wall that wrapped around the campus, thick and tall.



Kristen and her high school BFFs stand in front of the massive wall built around the Cairo American College campus following police riots in 1987.

I lived in Cairo, Egypt, from 1983-1987, compliments of my father, a civilian at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. So, of course, it is with great interest that I've been following the Egyptian revolution and its aftermath that's been unfolding in the city I always will deeply love. After all, Mubarak was a newly minted president when we arrived. We actually were supposed to move to Cairo sooner, but plans were delayed after Anwar Sadat was assassinated in 1981. Mubarak is the man who took Sadat's place.

The Egyptian police recruit riots weren't the first live-action Middle Eastern upsets to which I'd had a front-row seat. Actually, the riots were like patty cake compared to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which unfolded when I was a kid living in Iran (more on that in another column). We not only were pulled out of school but had to be evacuated from the country. Now, *that* is an uprising.

The bottom line: I've been spending so much time following the unrest melting across the Middle East like butter on toast I haven't made time to finish writing about it. Naturally, I started with a precise, analytical and insightful commentary on my view about the recent events. Just. Like. Everyone. Else. Then I realized no one, including myself, cares what I think.

Instead, I'd like to tell just some of the stories that show what it was like — an American girl in the 1980s — to live in the ancient metropolis of Cairo. Because, really, it was as unfamiliar as being on a moonscape. Now, I haven't visited Cairo since 1995, when it sure had changed since my last visit nearly 10 years prior, so it may be less unkempt and raucous these days. But let me give a few examples of the way things were — those things that made it so different from the United States that it truly is remarkable — and deeply inspiring — that a revolution could bubble up from the streets and topple a long-standing, powerful, entrenched regime.



A boab wearing a traditional galabaya steers a small sailboat, called a felucca, on the Nile River.

First: the dead bodies. See, in Cairo traffic there was no such thing as “lanes.” Or even center lines. Just wide stretches of concrete, lots of dangerous traffic circles and maniac drivers with one hand on the car horn at all times. One stretch of “highway” even had large utility poles right in the middle of it. To get a driver’s license, you had your blood pressure checked. Then off you went! When accidents happened, the bodies were scooted to the side of the road and covered with newspapers. I had a summer job at the American Embassy in Cairo and rode with my dad to work. We passed a dead donkey by the side of the road and would remark on its decomposition — *Look, the dogs ate at its head!* — as banter during the commute.

Second: the people. Egyptians are a breed of easygoing mixed with impatient not often found in the United States. They’d use such words as *ma’alesh* — whatever! — and *insha’llah* — If God be willing! — 10 times in a sentence while laying on their horns, stopped in traffic that isn’t moving anywhere, anyhow, anytime soon. When we lived there, we had two drivers, a maid and even a man who came and did nothing but ironed clothes. We lived like royalty!

And these Egyptians loved us so dearly! Our drivers would invite us to their apartments — dusty, beige affairs that were the equivalent of living in a cinder block and inevitably up seven flights of stairs — for dinners. Whole generations of their families lived there and, one by one, they’d all come out to nod and say hello, shaking our hands as if we were made of tissue paper that shouldn’t be crumpled. One time, as my mom, sister and I sat on the couch waiting for dinner, a man in a galabaya, a long dress-like garment worn by men, came in with a live sheep. He ceremoniously unrolled a piece of cloth containing a machete and various knives on the table in front of us and smiled. All the Egyptians clapped. Hooray!

But not my mother. She was horrified. Apparently, the plan was to slaughter the animal there, in the living room, before us, which we then would enjoy at the dinner table not 10 feet away. It was a great honor. But not one my mother could handle taking place in front of her daughters.



This sheep is lucky all it got was a photo shoot on this night in Cairo when it was supposed to end up on the dinner table.

Third: the customs. Upper and lower class Egyptians weren't exactly buddies. My mother made the cultural faux pas one day of introducing her friend, a professor at the American University in Cairo, to our boab, the man who maintained our apartment complex, in the elevator. The boab's face flushed and he stared at his sandaled feet as the professor watched the elevator buttons light up as we ascended to the fourth floor. Safe in our apartment, she then explained to my mother it's inappropriate to introduce an Egyptian of a higher class to one of a lower stature. Who knew?

And while most women in Cairo are Westernized, they've still got a long way to go, baby. My blonde hair — severely lightened with Sun-In and peroxide in true '80s style — earned me more male attention than I've received in total during the years since. My family and I would be shopping at the bazaar and Egyptian men would offer my dad camels in trade for me. Men would randomly touch my head or even try brushing their fingers through my hair. And, *oh!*, the things I saw under some of those galabayas!

Fourth: the environment. In the summer, Cairo was a heatbox with temperatures soaring higher than 100 degrees. Much of the city went into hibernation mid-day, the parks and streets crowded starting about 11 p.m. (Try being a teenage American girl telling your strict parents you want to go dancing with your friends at a club at midnight and you'll be home at 4 a.m. Not.)

The air was so filled with dust, after being outside for 20 minutes you could scrape a finger along your jawbone and your nail would be filled with a black paste. Scores of people lived in a huge swath of Cairo called Garbage City, their homes made of cardboard and used water bottles. Others lived in a cemetery-turned-neighborhood, their living quarters situated among the tombs. Boabs on carts powered by donkeys and filled with trash would dump their loads by the side of the road. It was said drinking water from the Nile River would kill you on the spot.



A young girl stands outside the door of her home.

Today, I wonder if the things that made Cairo, Egypt, to me so exotic and beautiful and unlikely to pull off a revolution — the disorganization, chaos, unfussy way of life — no longer exist. I hope not. Regardless, I'm proud of what the Egyptians have accomplished. Is it silly to think of them as my people? I mean, they accomplished no easy task. See what they launched!

Here's the remaining bit of my commentary: It's obvious all this action in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere has been a wake-up call to the world. It should particularly be a wake-up call to Americans. Look what Middle Easterners are willing to endure (Libya, anyone?) to emulate the most revered form of government ever created: democracy. Made. In. America. It's the Middle East, of all places, showing us here in happy, shiny America that such a thing, such an idea, such a life, is worth fighting for. Shouldn't we listen more closely to the voices that forever will echo from Tahir — *Independence and liberation, baby!* — Square?