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Editorial

Problems on hold

Tiran and Sanafir: the history and geography

Youssef Sidhom

In April 2016, Egypt and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement on the demarcation of the maritime border between them. Only last week, however, did the Egyptian government forward the agreement to the House of Representatives for approval. The delay served to place the agreement in the crossfire of variant political and public currents in Egypt. Some accepted that the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir in the Tiran Strait at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba were Saudi land as in the agreement, and that as such they are being returned to their rightful owner after decades of Egyptian administration. Others, however, saw them as belonging to Egypt, and that the Egyptian administration was handing Egyptian soil to Saudi Arabia on a plate of gold in return for economic advantages. The dispute between the two sides took on hysterical proportions; those who insisted the islands were Egyptian took their case to court on grounds that the agreement was not an act of sovereignty as stipulated by the Constitution. But this was merely a dispute over 'form' not 'content'. Now it is some 14 months during which the islands issue has seared on the political and public fields; the case is with the Supreme Constitutional Court, and the agreement has been referred to the House of Representatives for study and approval, as per constitutional provision.

I had tackled the topic of the Tiran and Sanafir islands in an editorial titled 'The islands of Tiran and Sanafir: When the media hijacks history on 24 April 2016 [http://en.wataninet.com/opinion/editorial/the-islands-of-tiran-and-sanafir-when-the-media-hijacks-history/16188/]. At the time, I wrote: "I alarmingly note that the issue of the two islands has turned into a squabble between two camps, with each camp claiming that it solely holds the monopoly on truth and patriotism... The matter can be resolved only through documents and historical and geographical facts, not through shows of emotional so-called patriotism to defend land which no one could conclusively claim belongs to us. Instead of the chaotic hysteria, should not all the possibilities have been studied? If the documents and evidence prove that the two islands are Saudi but have been under Egyptian administration for a long time for military and security reasons, should not Egypt have sufficient civilisational national integrity to return what was placed in her custody to its rightful owners once they demand it?"

On 10 June 2017, the eve of discussing the islands issue in parliament, the Cairo daily *al-Ahram* published an article titled "Geology confirms that Tiran and Sanafir are part of the Arabian Peninsula". Oh, I thought, so it's not only a matter of history but is also a geographical, geological issue. This means that even if historical documents may come in for controversy—major among these documents are those of the 1950 request by Saudi Arabia of Egypt to occupy the islands to protect them against any possible Israeli aggression—the geological facts cannot be discounted.

The *al-Ahram* article reports that Egyptian American space scientist Dr Farouk al-Baz addressed a message to the Speaker of the House of Representatives Ali Abdel-Aal regarding the islands of Tiran and Sanafir. Dr al-Baz's letter confirms that space images and topographic and bathymetric maps show that Tiran and Sanafir islands are part of the Arabian continental shelf.

Dr al-Baz explains that some 60 million years ago, the Great East Africa Rift started to be open. The Red Sea, which includes the Gulf of Aqaba as its northern extension, is part of the Great East Africa Rift and was formed by the divergence of the two tectonic plates: the African Plate and the Arabian Plate. The rift is expanding at a rate of 16 millimeters per year, according to the theory of plate tectonics. However, the spreading is asymmetric, faster on the northern side than on the southern side. Since the Gulf of Aqaba is located east of the Sinai Peninsula and west of the Arabian Peninsula, the islands of Tiran and Sanafir have been very gradually moving closer to the Arabian Peninsula proving that, geologically, they are part of it.

I consider the above information decisive in the issue of the islands, especially that it comes from a scientist who is an authority in his field, and is a man far beyond any suspicion where his patriotism is concerned. I am sure it will be very useful for the House of Representatives to decide on the Egyptian Saudi agreement.

As Egyptians, we love Egypt and feel that every particle of her soil is sacred. We would gladly lay our lives for her. But there is a very fine line between holding on to every bit of our land, and seizing land which geographically lies outside our borders and, historically, was entrusted to us for specific reasons, but must now be returned to its owners. Only when we live up to the confidence placed in us and to our national integrity can we really be proud of our patriotism, honour, and nobility.

On 20 June 2013, Archdeacon Habib Girgis who worked profound reforms in the Coptic Orthodox Church's education sector, was canonised. *Watani* marks the date by ...

Celebrating Bishop Suriel's book on St Habib Girgis

Saad Michael Saad On 22 April 2017, St Vladimir's Seminary Press (SVS Press) in New York held a special event to celebrate the release of His Grace Bishop Suriel's book, *Habib Girgis: Coptic Orthodox Educator and a Light in the Darkness*.

Watching the event live on the Internet was a special delight for me as the publication of this book marks a major success for the field of Coptic Studies at large and the broader recognition of the beloved saint and reformer. St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary is the premier Orthodox institution of higher education in America, and SVS Press has truly become a publishing venue sought out by the Orthodox world.

In March 2014, His Grace Bishop Suriel of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Melbourne received his PhD degree from Fordham University (New York City), where he wrote his 890-page dissertation on the life and legacy of the widely influential Saint Archdeacon Habib Girgis (canonised on 20 June 2013). This dissertation formed the basis of the condensed and newly released 296-page book. For more on this monumental occasion, see S.M. Saad, "Bishop Suriel Receives Ph.D. for Dissertation on Saint Archdeacon Habib Girgis," *Watani International*, 29 March 2014, URL: <http://en.wataninet.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/copyology/bishop-suriel-receives-ph-d-for-dissertation-on-saint-archdeacon/312/>

Since then, in addition to his ecclesiastical responsibilities, His Grace Bishop Suriel has expanded his role as an academic and scholar of Coptic Studies and now serves as Chancellor and Dean for St Athanasius College in Melbourne (<http://sac.edu.au/>), which is the only accredited Coptic theological school (or seminary) in the world.

"Let there be light"

At the SVS Press celebration of the 2017 publication, His Grace presented a lecture aptly entitled "The Role of St Archdeacon Habib Girgis in the Renaissance of the Alexandrian Coptic Church". The event had also an extensive exhibition of rare and in some cases never before released photographs related to the archdeacon. Bishop Suriel's book also included previously unpublished documents from the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchal Archives in Cairo. Video of the event is available online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmb7zbb9COg>

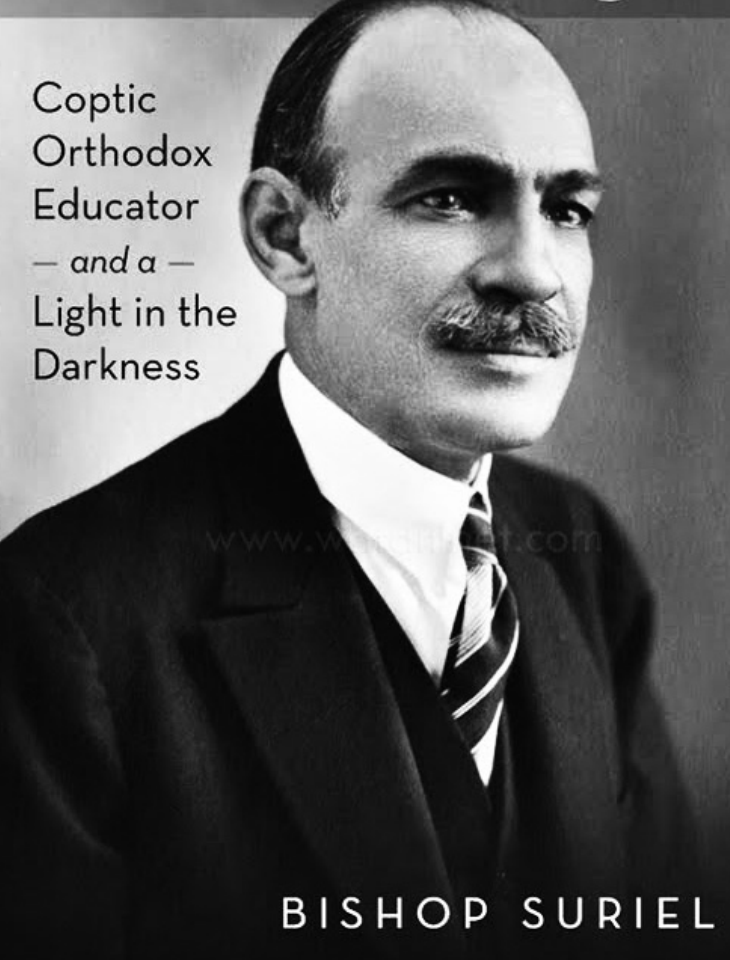
At the start of his lecture, His Grace recalled a quote from His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, himself a disciple of Saint Girgis, about the famous Coptic educator. Pope Shenouda said:

"The earth was without form, and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep," as the Book of Genesis describes. "Then, God said, Let there be light, and there was light." And the light was Habib Girgis... Habib Girgis will remain across our modern history as the pioneer of religious education in our land. He was not only a teacher, but a school, even a university."

His Grace proceeded to provide an illuminating and inspiring lecture about Saint Archdeacon Habib Girgis's six decades of services to the Coptic Orthodox Church which spanned educational reforms, leadership of a theological college, leadership of the Sunday School Movement in Egypt, and a vision for Coptic identity and participation of Coptic laity that influenced generations to come.

Indeed, Saint Girgis was head of the Coptic Seminary in Cairo (1918-1951) and founder of the Sunday School Movement in the Cop-

Habib Girgis



tic Church in 1900. He was a layman who rose to the rank of Archdeacon and throughout his career in Egypt revolutionized theological education. He was also a prolific writer, authoring more than 30 books, and he composed over 100 songs inspired by the theology and hymnology of the Coptic Orthodox Church. On 20 June 2013 Girgis was canonised by the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Coptic identity

With respect to the point of maintaining Coptic identity, His Grace remarked in his lecture that Saint Girgis was a "man who came to bring light to a bleak situation of ignorance and apathy concerning religious and theological education. It was an age where Coptic identity was seriously threatened. That was due to many factors that tore at this very identity.... There is no doubt that Girgis was successful in making Copts think seriously about reform and

that he instigated a reform process. Thanks to his work in the fields of education, publishing, and preaching, many people were inspired by his vision." As such, Saint Girgis hoped to inspire the next generation to carry on his legacy, which has already shown in the fruits and successes of the Sunday School Movement in and outside Egypt since the second half of the 20th century.

In addition, "Girgis's desire," Bishop Suriel elaborated with respect to seminary education, "was that the Coptic Orthodox Seminary not only graduate priests, preachers, and teachers, but also reformers in every sense of the word." In evaluating Saint Girgis' legacy, His Grace then observed that the seminary Girgis led continues to operate under the leadership of His Holiness Pope Tawadros II at the patriarchate in Cairo and is open to men and women seeking a theological education.

But, as Bishop Suriel noted near the end of his lecture: "Girgis's dream that the seminary reach the highest academic standard still has not been fulfilled. And although the seminary does train aspiring priests, a theological education is not yet a compulsory pre-requisite for ordination, and we really need to go and study this legacy of Habib Girgis, and if we don't realise this it will be to our detriment."

High praise

The Coptic community is thankful beyond words for the leadership and scholarship of Bishop Suriel on this important 20th century saint-reformer in the life and identity of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which is relevant for Copts both in Egypt and in the growing Coptic Diaspora. The academic and ecclesiastical community is indebted to His Grace for publication of *Habib Girgis: Coptic Orthodox Educator and a Light in the Darkness*, which is suitable for personal study, book clubs, and donation to your local academic or ecclesiastical library.

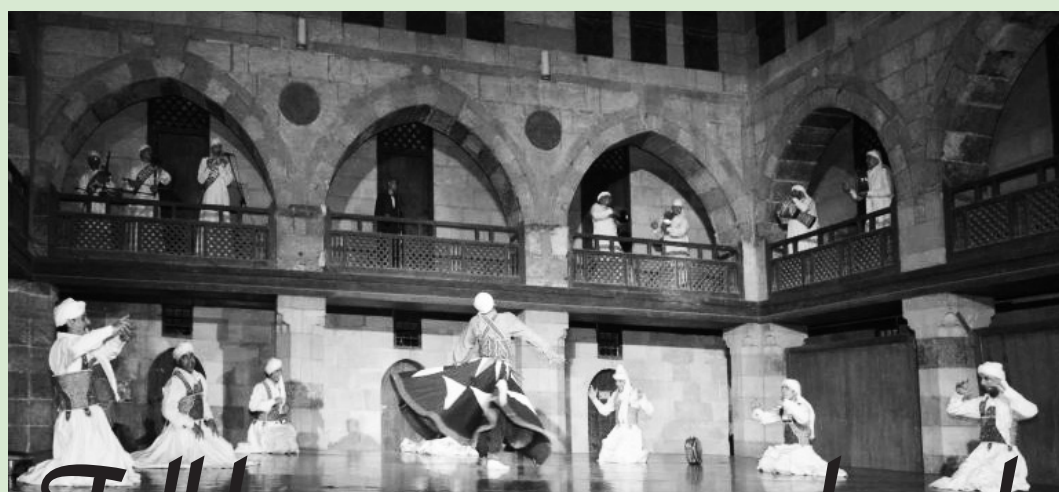
The book has already received high praise from fellow academics of Coptic Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and Diaspora Studies. Within the book Professor Maged S.A. Mikhail of California State University in Fullerton writes that "This is a groundbreaking study that adds considerable depth and complexity to our understanding of Habib Girgis's long career and the Coptic Church's educational reforms over the first half of the twentieth century."

Echoing this sentiment is Professor Nelly van Doorn-Harder of Wake Forest University in North Carolina, who notes that "This book presents the first comprehensive study that places Habib Girgis's life, work, and strategies within their historical, religious, and educational context."

Professor Heather J. Sharkey of the University of Pennsylvania extolled the Bishop's "sensitive yet rigorous treatment of a great 20th-century educator who, in the words of Bishop Suriel, helped Egyptians 'to give meaning to their own struggles... [and] to look within to understand their lives and to think of what lay beyond'".

Bishop Suriel's seminal book is available for purchase from SVS Press: <https://www.svspress.com/habib-girgis-coptic-orthodox-educator-and-a-light-in-the-darkness/>

Dr Saad Michael Saad (Los Angeles) hosts the LogosTV program Coptic Civilization and is a frequent contributor to *Watani* and other periodicals: <https://chicago.academia.edu/MichaelSaad>



Folklore vs terrorist thought

A *Tanoura* folk dance show was held earlier this month at Wekalet al-Ghouri, a magnificent 16th-century inn that is today used as an arts centre. The show was held by the Tanoura Heritage Group, and was attended by Egypt's Culture Minister, Helmy al-Nannam; State Minister for Immigration and Egyptians' affairs, Nabila Makram; and a visiting delegation of the Middle Eastern Apostolic Churches in Australia and New Zealand. The delegation included Bishop Robert Rabbat. When the show came to an end, the Bishop delegation awarded Mr Nannam their shield of honour. The slogan inscribed on the shield reads: "Misery is a nation where numerous devotions and creeds exist, but no real faith".

Tanoura, literal for skirt, is folk dance that has Sufi roots. It goes back to the dervish twirling that emulates the circle with no point of beginning or end, symbolising the eternal God.

Grand night

Under the slogan "Creativity versus terrorism", performances of the Egyptian operetta *al-Leila al-Kebira* (*The Grand Night*) were last week held at the Talaat Harb Cultural Centre in the Sayeda Zeinab district in Old Cairo. The operetta is a marionette musical that depicts a typical Egyptian *mulid* with all the crowds that gather around the mosque to celebrate a local holy man or saint. The mosque minaret is lit in



decorating streamers, and the song-and-dance, street vending, acrobatic shows, jugglers and clowns, and popular food stalls are all featured in catchy folk songs and rhythms.

Al-Leila al-Kebira was written in the 1960s by the brilliant vernacular poet Salah Jahin (1930 - 1986) who was also a lyricist, playwright and cartoonist. The music was by Sayed

Mekawy (1927 - 1997), an Egyptian singer and composer whose works derived heavily from Egyptian folk music.

As a creative work of expressive art that is thoroughly, authentically Egyptian, *Al-Leila al-Kebira* is generally seen as a work that glorifies a culture intrinsically opposed to extremist religious thought. Hence the slogan: Creativity vs terrorism.

The current performance was organised by the State-affiliated Cultural Development Fund (CDF) in cooperation with Cairo's Hosapeer Theatre, and the National Puppet Theatre. It comes as part of the State-sponsored events held during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, commonly a month of fasting and feasting.

On the sideline of the musical show, children are invited to take part in a number of art workshops: painting, handicrafts, *khayamiya* (art of tent making), and jewellery making, at the Talaat Harb Cultural Centre.

Ekhlass Atallah & Mervat Ayad

The Leaning tower of Alexandria



Nevine Kameel

A 14-storey building in the Alexandria district of Lazarita gave way at the early hours of Thursday 1 June, and leaned forward resting on another tall building opposite it on the street. The extraordinary sight of the 'leaning tower' horrified residents of the neighbourhood as all Egypt.

Local authorities succeeded in safely evacuating the building and all nearby buildings, and provided the owners or tenants of their flats with emergency housing units in al-Amriya, south of Alexandria. Alexandria Governor Muhammad Sultan ordered a committee formed of structural engineering professors at Alexandria University to decide on how best to pull down the building in a controlled manner without damaging other buildings in the vicinity. An adjacent four-storey building collapsed three days later, but all the residents had been already evacuated.

Security forces blocked off the area, and the overground tram service was temporarily stopped to avoid perturbances that could cause the building to fall apart and cause further damage.

The Armed Forces' Construction Department joined the Arab Contractors Company to pull down the building. They emptied the flats of furniture, appliances, and personal belongings as they went along, and handed them to the owners.

As *Watani* went to press, demolition of the leaning building was near-complete. None of the adjacent or opposite buildings was in any way damaged.

It was found that the owner of the leaning building possessed a permit issued in the early 2000s to build only a ground floor and two upper floors, but built the other 12 floors without licence.

The structural engineers from Alexandria University had issued a report which said that a recent leakage of underground water had seeped underneath the building, and the already structurally-impaired building gave way and could not withstand the leaking water.

Those responsible for the building's hazardous condition are being prosecuted. There are strong suspicions that corruption among the local building authority officials is to blame for inaction vis-à-vis a building with such flagrant structural violations.