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## Interview with Dr. Faysal Kolkailah

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Dr. Faysal Kolkailah

## INTERVIEW WITH DR. FAYSAL KOLKAILAH

### “Good Morning,” Cairo: Is the Nile Swaying Westward?

Dr. Faysal Kolkailah is an Aerospace and Engineering professor at Cal Poly. A native of Egypt, he obtained his B.S. in Aero Engineering from Cairo University and his Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering from LSU in Baton Rouge. He is a regular visitor to his original homeland where some of his immediate family still resides.

*Moebius: Egypt is the most populous Arab country in the Middle East. Its mass media, music, and film permeate the region. As a native who goes back to Cairo every summer, what are some of the glaring changes you notice in popular culture?*

*FK:* Tremendous change. For instance, in songs, we went from classical Arab songs, which still withstand the test of time to pure “noise” with trivial lyrics and very short shelf life. The songs that my generation listened to could last a whole hour for each number. We loved it when the singer modulated each refrain differently and kept on singing till the wee hours. A lot of young people still love these songs. Now we have mostly tidbits in three minute formats. Fast food, fast music. People have it tough there. They have to work at two jobs to make ends meet. American junk food mentality has taken over the Egyptian’s daily life routine. I call it “the junk food philosophy.”

*Moebius: Are young Egyptians then fascinated with Western lifestyle to the detriment of diluting their cultural norms?*

*FK:* They want to copy the West blindly. The McDonaldization of Egypt is on. Inevitably with it comes questionable morality alien to our culture. I saw a scantily-clad picture of an American actress plastered on the wall of a Cairo McDonald’s. I don’t see such pictures in the local branches in America. Why in Egypt? I asked the manager about it and he said the district office told him to put it up. He refused to take it down when I asked him so. What is the purpose of this dubious picture? To entice young Egyptians through sexual innuendo? We have a saying in Arabic, “It’s all poison dissimulated in honey.”

*Moebius: You notice on Arab satellite channels the gradual encroachment of English into everyday language. Is the change noticeable in Egypt?*

*FK:* Well, yes. They say “thank you,” or “good morning.” Why? Arabic is such a richer language than English. You will not run out of new words in Arabic, while English can be redundant in some ways. But that’s not all that we are importing. Now it is very trendy for Westernized Cairenes to parade their dogs. I am not a dog hater, but this is totally

alien to our society. People don't have much to eat, while the elite saunter with their pooches.

*Moebius: In what other ways is traditional Egyptian society evolving?*

*FK:* I come originally from a village called Tanta in the Nile Delta. When I was growing up it was a challenge for me to find a radio to listen to soccer games from Cairo. Then TV came in 1965. That village was the best place in the world. People knew each other, talked to their neighbors. Now satellite dishes are on every roof bringing in unwanted moral standards from abroad. We have left the door open to those harmful messages.

*Moebius: Recently authorities started rounding up Islamists, especially members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Is this a power play between secularists who are more open to the West and more conservative Islamists?*

*FK:* First of all there is a tremendous difference between the Egyptian and American system. We really don't have a coherent system back there. We are disorganized. In the U.S. you know where your money is going. You see how your money is being put to use by the government. Not so in Egypt. There is a detached feeling. A lot of people feel it's not their country anymore. It's Mubarak's Egypt. The government doesn't really care. The political elite are in charge. Now, concerning the rounding up of Islamists, the government is aware of the loosening of moral standards and is not doing anything about it. The police would probably pick you up if you sport a beard. Look I have a beard. They would probably consider me a fanatic back there. Years ago, the head of al-Azhar, Egypt's highest Islamic authority, was chosen by his peers who were sheiks like him. Now, he is appointed by the government. The latter uses the al-Azhar to lend legitimacy to its unpopular decisions.

*Moebius: Is all hope then lost for Egypt and the relentless march of Westernization is on?*

*FK:* We can't count on the government to defend our culture from harmful Western moral values. I was surprised last summer when I saw so many young men praying in the mosques. Sure there are a lot of youth who mimic the West. But you also have an increasing number of young men and women who have decided to go back to their traditional roots. A lot of Egyptian women have gone back to wearing the *hijab* (veil). My wife used not to wear one. Now she does. She has a Ph.D. and is Western educated.

People are realizing that their true self is in their traditional, national roots. I firmly believe if the Arab World is to ever regain its dignity, strength, and pride in its values, it is going to be through Egypt. We say Egypt is the mother of all Arabs. Salvation for Arabs can only come through Egypt. 

*Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Nishan Havandjian, Winter, 2007.*