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Living and dying with the state: The Netherlands according to Egyptians in Amsterdam

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Epilogue

Bahaa, or the desire to live, and live on

In the fall of 2018, Bahaa felt a nagging pain in his stomach. His doctor initially told him to take some rest and to try not to smoke, or at least smoke a bit less for few a days. But, the pain did not subside, and when he returned to the doctor, he was prescribed antibiotics and painkillers. After a week of suffering, he was further examined by a specialist, who found that the pain in his stomach was caused by an abscess that would have to be surgically removed on short notice. Bahaa was transferred to a hospital, to be monitored until his surgery. In his usual fashion, Bahaa went live on Facebook from the ambulance, updating his many followers on the upcoming surgery (in Arabic), while also taking the opportunity to discuss the Dutch healthcare system with the nurse on duty (in Dutch), which they agreed was excellent but used to be better and should improve again.

In the days before his surgery, the hospital waiting room turned into a reunion of Egyptians in the Netherlands, some of whom had not seen or spoken to each other in years. Bahaa was in pain and bedridden for most of the time, but the fact that so many people showed up seemed to cheer him up. They remembered me, he told me gleefully during one of my visits, looking happier than I had seen him since his ex-wife and fourteen-year-old daughter Amal had moved to Egypt.

The hospital personnel were less happy about the many visitors. Many people, including me, visited outside visiting hours and the number of visitors inside Bahaa's room almost permanently exceeded the maximum of two that the hospital regulations allowed. Gamal, one of Bahaa's closest friends, took it upon himself to negotiate between the hospital personnel and the crowd of visitors, asking personnel for their understanding and urging the visitors to comply with the directions of personnel. He also made sure that there was at least one person in the waiting room at all times, to receive visitors and to be available for Bahaa and hospital personnel. Gamal's wife, Um Yassin, brought home-cooked meals for Bahaa and whoever else was around.

After a week of relative joy, Bahaa underwent surgery. According to his doctors, the surgery

was successful, but Bahaa did not feel well. A day later, he called me, speaking so softly that I struggled to hear him well. He had a favor to ask me, he said. When I entered Bahaa's room half an hour later, Gamal and half a dozen of men were gathered around his bed, talking quietly. Bahaa was hooked to machines, with one cable running up his nose, one into his arm, and one underneath his blanket. His face was grey, his eyes were closed. I stood in the door until Gamal told me to come forward. I kneeled beside the bed and took Bahaa's hand. He opened his eyes and attempted a smile. He pulled my arm a little, so I bent over to kiss him hello. He waved at Gamal, who took the hint, and ordered everyone to leave. One by one, the men kissed Bahaa goodbye.

After everyone had left, Bahaa quietly handed me a letter from the school attendance office. The letter was short and to the point. It stated that, according to the available information, Bahaa's daughter Amal was not enrolled in any school, asked her parents/caregivers to provide proof of enrollment, and reminded them that keeping her from school was a criminal offense. As I finished reading, Bahaa explained that Amal was still registered at his address in the Netherlands so that the Dutch state would continue to cover her healthcare costs, as it does for all citizens below the age of eighteen, provided that they reside in the Netherlands. The school attendance office had been inquiring about Amal for two years now, but so far, he had convinced them — and perhaps himself — that Amal was only temporarily attending school in Egypt. However, Bahaa knew that, per policy, after two years or more, a stay abroad is no longer temporary, and he worried that Amal would be deregistered as a resident if he would tell the school attendance officer that she was still abroad. This would mean that she would lose access to the Dutch healthcare system, and that she would be considered a 'newcomer' in the Dutch education system if she would return. This deeply worried Bahaa, who softly asked me to help him find a way out.

That afternoon, I called the school attendance office. I explained that Amal's father was hospitalized and suggested that Amal and her mother might travel to the Netherlands to visit him and make further plans. After hesitating a little, the lady on the other end of the phone kindly extended the deadline to provide further information to a few weeks later. I was excited for what I considered a small and unexpected win, but when I called Bahaa, he was in a bad way, and did not really understand me.

Two days later, at two in the morning, Gamal called to inform me that Bahaa had unexpectedly slipped into a coma. While his doctors were still running tests, they had indicated that he might not make it through the night, and Gamal wanted people to come over so that Bahaa would not be alone if he would indeed pass away. I quickly got dressed and hurried to the hos-

pital. In the morning, a scan revealed that one of the internal stitches had torn. After an emergency surgery that took a couple of hours, his doctors announced that Bahaa would not wake up and had only a few days to live. News about Bahaa's impending passing quickly spread, and throughout the day, more and more people came to pay their respects and pray for him, including many people who were no longer on speaking terms with him due to personal or political conflicts. Bahaa's estranged brother, Malek, who also lived in the Netherlands, came to spend the last days of his life with him. And even Fatma and Amal travelled to the Netherlands and sat beside his bed for several hours. When Bahaa passed away, over fifty people had gathered in the hospital, praying and mourning together.

Bahaa's sudden and unexpected death came as a shock, but there was too much to arrange to contemplate it at that moment. It went without question that Bahaa would have to be buried in accordance with Islamic law. However, Gamal and some other friends felt that he should be buried in the Netherlands, rather than Egypt, a country he could not visit during the last years of his life due to his political activities. His brother Malek instead felt that Bahaa should be buried in their family grave in Egypt. To complicate things, there were competing ideas about who was authorized to take decisions. According to Dutch law, Amal was Bahaa's only lawful heir, and if she had been above eighteen, she would have been in charge of the funeral, and inherit all his Dutch belongings. However, since she was not, she would be represented by her legal custodian, in this case her mother, with whom Bahaa was fighting until the very end, and who had refused to come to the Netherlands when he was still conscious. This was hard to accept for Malek, and especially for Gamal and his other close friends, who had stood by Bahaa throughout the divorce as well as the painful years of depression afterwards. Meanwhile, according to the Egyptian version of Islamic family law, Malek and his two remaining sisters were also lawful heirs, meaning they would inherit from Bahaa's Egyptian properties, and should have a say in the funeral. Amal, and her mother/legal custodian could not ignore this, but they did not completely trust Malek either. Finally, while respecting the role of Bahaa's direct family members, Gamal and some other close friends felt that they should take the lead on the funeral, since they had been like family to him for many years. Fatma and Malek generally agreed, but feared that Gamal and others would get involved in the inheritance too, and began to accuse them of stealing money.

I continued to be involved, in part because Bahaa had involved me in the project of safeguarding his daughter's legal status, and in part because both Gamal and Malek continued to solicit my services. However, I felt more distance from the people with whom I was working with than I had at any other point in the year and a half that I had known them. At the time,

I told myself that I felt like I was not allowed to mourn in the way that they were mourning, but in hindsight, I realize that they did give me the space, but that I just could not connect to the way in which they were mourning, and did not have anyone else to mourn Bahaa with in a way that would have soothed me. I attended the *salaat al-janaazah*, the Islamic funeral prayer, but it did not resonate with me, and I felt out of place accepting condolences from the congregation along with his family members and other close friends. Afterwards, we all went to the burial site, and after that, we had a dinner in the neighborhood center where Ali usually hosted his neighborhood restaurant, but I could not relate to the conversation, and I left as soon as I could. At home I cried.

It is tempting for me to stay away from these emotions, and instead use Bahaa's untimely death to analyze dying as another instance of the mirror-dance between the effort to manage immigrants on the one hand, and people's efforts to manage their own life on the other. In fact, this epilogue started as the final chapter to this dissertation in which I would just do that. I brought it back down to this epilogue, not because I thought that my analysis was not going anywhere, but rather, because I felt it was necessary for me, and for this dissertation, to end with the eruption of emotion in the weeks and months after Bahaa left this earth.

The thing is, until today, I cry when I talk or write about Bahaa, not necessarily because I miss him, but rather because what happened to him makes me feel so utterly powerless. This world is organized to make life hard for people like Bahaa, and although his death cannot be attributed to the harm inflicted upon him, it certainly did not help. Either way, the way he died is symbolic for the way he lived: in good spirit, and always looking for ways to improve his, or else his daughter's, life. In other words, it represents that he would not be crushed by the world as it was. And my emotions show that, no matter all that is in place to keep people like Bahaa and myself disconnected, and no matter how deeply we disagreed on almost everything that mattered to us, we all have the ability to connect to one another on the basis of a shared humanity.

I wish Bahaa went to someplace better after all, as he believed he would. And I wish those of us who are still on this earth, and those of us who will come after us, will take it upon us to change the world for the better.

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