

## The honourable citizen

*An array of Egyptian lifeworlds in 2016*

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*Published in:*  
Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.5617/jais.9508](https://doi.org/10.5617/jais.9508)

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*Publication date:*  
2021

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Awad, S. H. (2021). The honourable citizen: An array of Egyptian lifeworlds in 2016. *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 21(3), 147-151. <https://doi.org/10.5617/jais.9508>

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## The Honourable Citizen

By SARAH AWAD

A group of Egyptian journalists protest in front of the journalists' union building in May. Their protest comes as a response to a recent raid by security forces on their building and the arrest of two journalists. They chant "journalists are not terrorists." Another group of people show up at the protest location and start attacking the protestors while cheering "Viva/long live Egypt" (*tahya Miṣr*) (ASSOCIATED PRESS; ḤUSAYN; al-ASHWAL). They continue to attack journalists and pedestrians passing by, then later attack the delegation of the Egyptian National Council for Human Rights that has just arrived to the location (BADRAWY).

Ironically, the group of attackers is typically labelled "honourable citizens" (*muwāṭinūn shurafā'*). An "honourable citizen" (*muwāṭin sharīf*) identifies him/herself as one who is loving and loyal to his/her country and its leader. Honourable citizens glorify the image of the leader and proudly display it in their businesses, homes, and in protests of support. They are generally obedient to authority, defend all government decisions, and have ready justifications for government violations that usually echo the official media narrative [↗[The Voice from Above](#)]. An honourable citizen does not only practice imposed social norms but also ensures others adherence to those norms. Honourable citizens do not only act and speak as the government would want them to, but also appoint themselves as the government's watchful eye reporting any 'disloyal' citizen, thus acting as guardians of the nation against anyone who poses a threat, whether on the political stability or the public social norms.

Honourable citizens see themselves as the loyal ones to the nation, putting "Egypt above all" (*il-waṭan fō? il-gamī'*). They think they are well aware of the threat facing Egypt and the conspirers against its prosperity and would do all they can for its protection. In a news report, a loyal citizen is working at a print shop, producing posters and banners for pro-government protests. All prints hold a large portrait of president al-Sīsī with his government's slogan "Viva/Long live Egypt" (*tahya Miṣr*) and the signature of the loyal person or group in the bottom [↗[Father Figures](#)]. He expresses in the report how he would confront any person or protest that says a word against al-Sīsī because "this is not a suitable time for opposition" (GAMĀL AL-DĪN).

Critics of the current regime have a rather different view. For them, an "honourable citizen" is an ironic term to label thugs paid by the government to attack opposition protests, such as those who appear at Egypt's journalists' union protest in May (FĀḌIL; *Youtube*, "Ashhar al-muwāṭinīn al-shurafā' fi Miṣr"). As 'honourable citizens' usually do, this group too shows up at anti-government protests, and starts collectively attacking and insulting the protestors. Online posts [↗[Social Media](#)] following the journalists' union incident use the hashtag *al-Muwāṭinīn al-shurafā'* to mock those 'honourable' citizens and to highlight why they must be paid thugs [↗[Inferiority = Superiority \(Satire\)](#)] who are an integral part of the government's strategy against freedom of expression. In this understanding honourable citizens are not agents with their own ideologies and opinions, but rather ignorant crowds swayed by some leaders, whether government-related or not. Creators of these crowds of 'honourable citizens' use their poverty, ignorance, and obedience to convince them that those

who they are attacking are the enemies of the nation (*Associated Press*; ḤUSAYN; al-ASHWAL). A self-identified thug in Beni Suef city explains the different networks and roles of thugs. He believes he has a central role in his neighbourhood in fixing problems and family disputes and protecting the youth of the neighbourhood. This, he explains, is quite different from ‘honourable citizen’ thugs, who for 50 Egyptian pounds or a meal, would be asked to attack a protest or disrupt an election. These thug networks are built often from previous criminals who have become informants for the police and executors of their order, and thus operate as a tool for social monitoring and control in politics as well as economic and sociocultural life (al-RAJJĀL).

The government on the other hand uses the term to refer to patriotic and vigilant citizens. The interior minister is proud of “honourable citizens” and confirms his trust in their awareness and that they would not follow any calls that promote chaos and threatens security (*al-Usbūʿ*). A spokesperson of the Ministry of Interior also appears on a talk show after the disappearance and murder of Italian Cambridge researcher Giulio Regeni in Cairo [↗**Disappearances**], calling onto honourable citizens to report any suspicious activity in their villages and neighbourhoods. Honourable citizens are encouraged to keep an eye on potential enemies of the nation, such as foreign researchers [↗**The Suspect Foreigner**] (ABDEL SALAM; al-ANSARY). This leads in fact to several incidents of Egyptian citizens reporting and attacking foreign researchers (‘ABBĀS & AL-ĠĀRIHĪ).

The moral imperative of protecting the nation is emphasized by president al-Sīsī in his talk at the Egyptian Youth Day celebration in January, where he warns citizens to beware of “the people of evilness” (*ahl al-sharr*) [↗**True vs. False**] who do not know how to build a nation, they only know how to kill and destruct, unlike the ‘rest of Egyptian citizens’ who want to build and prosper. He further emphasizes the threat by positioning it as “an existential battle” [↗**Security vs. Fear**] that the nation is facing, that needs a strong will to fight back (*Youtube*, “Ashhar al-muwāṭinīn al-shurafāʾ fi Miṣr”; DARWISH).

The honourable citizens are the next to be blamed—after the government—by some of those targeted as the threat. Hisham Geneina, the former head of the central auditing organization, is fired in March and put on trial in July for his statements about the magnitude of corruption in Egypt. Geneina believes that intelligence saw his anti-corruption work as a national security threat, and therefore mobilized “al-muwāṭinīn al-shurafāʾ” to file complaints against him with the public prosecutor (ABDEL SALAM). Also, Shady Hussain who is arrested for handing balloons, later on revealed to be inflated condoms, to the policemen guarding the square on 25<sup>th</sup> January, the fifth anniversary of the revolution [↗**Commemoration / Memorial Days**]. Shady denounces how “al-muwāṭinīn al-shurafāʾ” are quick to condemn his act as disrespectful insult to the police, while they would not see the danger or act against the threats communicated through the official facebook page of the Egyptian police stating that they would seek legal action against him, and if he is not criminalized, then they will seek “other ways.” Here Shady expresses how the police forces whose job is to protect citizens, is the one threatening retaliation [↗**Security vs. Fear**] (SHARAKI).

Honourable citizens’ reporting also extends beyond political and foreign threats when a 65-year-old man files a case against the author Ahmed Naji (Aḥmad Nāḡī) claiming that his novel *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh* (Using Life) contains explicit sexual content that he claims “threatened his sense of morality” (SAID). Consequently, the writer is brought to court

[↗**Court Trials**] and receives a two-year sentence for “violating public modesty” (MICHAELSON). Here the suspect enemy of the state is an internal enemy that could be anywhere, an average person, who looks like me and you, but through his actions could threaten the public norms and family values. The honourable citizen detecting the ‘enemy’ could be also anywhere watching over your actions. It could be your honourable neighbour or colleague hearing you use the word “military coup,” and reporting you to one of the police hotline numbers that have been promoted on TV night shows for that purpose (ASPDEN). It could be also the taxi driver or the person sitting next to you in a metro: an online article titled ‘your phone could be a reason for your conviction’ warns against using your phone in the metro, where -if you are unlucky- there could be an ‘honourable citizen’ sitting next to you, intrusively looking into what you are reading, and decides to report you to metro police on the grounds of content they did not approve of on your phone (*Akhbarak*).

Honourable citizens not only demonstrate their unquestionable loyalty to the government but also take upon themselves—with the encouragement of the government—the detective role, and the task to censor and report others. In a way they internalize the surveillance state and act on its behalf as the gatekeepers of public morality [↗**Security = Fear (Police State)**]<sup>1</sup>—they are the authorities’ *bawwāb*. The honourable citizens are the watchful eye of the public morals, whether in relation to religion or to political affiliation to the ruling regime. Though social monitoring and interference in other people’s morals and loyalty is not a new phenomenon to Egyptian culture—the “gatekeeper”, *bawwāb*, who, as enforcer of the landlord’s moral code of conduct, keeps an eye on what is going on in a building, is an old tradition—, yet the ‘honourable citizen’ becomes a popular statement of pride or shaming this year. .

While social class defines the role and position of *bawwāb*, it is not as clear in relation to the honourable citizen. The honourable citizen could be the business owner who seeks the government’s protection, the upper class family person whose privilege keeps them at a distance from government oppression, or the thug who struggles economically and finds a financial and protection opportunity in playing the role of the ‘honourable citizen’ attacking a protest. One journalist from the journalists’ union protests in May comments on how some of the ‘honourable citizens’ attacking them in the protests are the same people the journalist has previously helped to voice their struggles: “... so this woman decides to come in front of the syndicate to insult the same journalists who have voiced her opinion, some people must have promised her some cash to come here or promised her not to demolish her home... poverty and ignorance can do more than that” (al-ASHWAL). While the honourable citizen gatekeeper role is dependent—at first glance—on political affiliations, it is also for a significant segment of honourable citizens engaging in thug activities dependent on class struggles and oppressive regimes, where they are offered in return government protection and financial rewards (FĀDIL).

### Related Entries

**ARRAYS** – Commemoration / Memorial Days ♦ Court Trials ♦ Disappearances ♦ Father Figures ♦ Social Media ♦ The Suspect Foreigner ♦ The Voice from Above

**CODES** – Security vs. Fear ♦ True vs. False

**CODES COLLAPSED** – Inferiority = Superiority (Satire) ♦ Normality = Heroism (Surviving) ♦ Security = Fear (Police State)

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