I’m glad I’m not Jihad al-Khazin. If you read Al Hayat, the pan-Arab daily, and notice the leftmost column on the last page, fringed usually by the picture of a pretty female star, you know the journalist I mean.

The man lives under the burden of having to conjure up every day a long and wide column, a double column, in fact. I only have to fill one fourth of his space, once every few weeks. Of course, that is his only job, while writing for Barqiyya is only an iota of mine. He is a jet-setter. I’m bound to my chair and computer, as a cartoonist once had it, “sometimes I sits and thinks and sometimes I just sits,” or more accurately, I wish I just sits. So, as he trots the globe, I watch the world from my ivory tower with an abstract, more or less contented, gaze.

Al-Khazen works for an international newspaper and can pick and choose topics. Remember, journalism schools don’t teach economics or political science or literature or any of that brain-racking stuff. But, miraculously, a journalist can write about anything, with the self-assurance of a Kennedy. I once told a reporter that I would never accept for my writing to sound any less authoritative than the articles of the London Economist. Don’t worry, they pay for their dilettantism, journalists. They have to keep writing if they are to remain tenured. Society has a cunning for extracting its pound of flesh.

While the subjects al-Khazen scoops from are endless, they endlessly repeat themselves, like sad Arab songs. Israel and Palestine, Israel and Lebanon, Israel and the US, Israel and Everybody, the sanctions against Iraq, Sudan’s civil war, the incomprehensible Bashir-Turabi duels, Lockerbie.

Repetition affords both advantage and liability. Advantage, in that you know the issues like the back of your hand. A liability, because you’d be hard pressed to say anything that hasn’t been said before. Still, no sweat, as if by the blessing of dialectical logic, advantage and liability can be synthesized into something seemingly significant.
MOVING A MOUNTAIN . . .

BY HUGO WOLMARANS

Under the rule of Fatimid Caliph al-Mu’iz li-Din-illah, Muslim, Jewish and Christian religious scholars used to debate controversial religious questions in the presence of the Caliph. According to Coptic history one such debate, in the year 979AD, over the words of Jesus in Matthew 17:20 “If you have faith as a mustard seed you shall say to this mountain move from here to there and it shall move and nothing shall be impossible to you,” led to an ultimatum from the Caliph. The ultimatum was that either the Christians move the eastern part of the Moqattam Mountain, where the Caliph wanted to build his new city, or take the consequence of their invalid faith; namely, to either convert to Islam or immigrate or be smitten by the sword. After three days of fasting and prayer led by a shoemaker, Sama`an, the eastern part of the mountain miraculously moved.1 Thus the words of the Bible became a tangible reality for the Christians of those days. The miracle, a turning point in Christian – Muslim relations, became a beacon of hope for those without hope through the ages.

Today, commemorated by a magnificent church carved out of the rock of the Moqattam Mountain, the miracle and the mountain again give hope and refuge to the “lesser people” of Cairo, the Zabbalins.

The Zabbalins, garbage collectors, have been a familiar face on the streets of Cairo for many decades. Every morning before dawn scores of donkey carts and in recent years trucks descend on the streets to collect the city’s garbage. Hours later these vehicles, piled high with garbage, make their way back to one of the seven garbage collector’s settlements situated on the outskirts of Cairo, the biggest being Moqattam with 35, 000 people. Here the women and girls sort the garbage into heaps of plastic, paper and metal, to be dispatched for recycling, as well as organic material. The organic material is fed to pigs and goats and other animals, which remains one of the community’s main sources of income.

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PROFILE...

A Face in the Crowd

The youngest brother among four siblings and a native of Isna, Sayed Hasan Mohammad arrived in Cairo roughly 31 years ago, and has been employed at the AUC for the past six years. Should you be wondering who this man is, he may be found from 7:00 AM until 6:30 PM five days a week, clearing tables in the cafeteria we all have come to know as the “JC.”

After having promised to meet with him on several occasions, Hiba Agha and I finally had the opportunity to sit and chat with Sayed Hasan last Tuesday. Dressed in a white shirt and black pants, Sayed greeted us with a humble smile as we seated ourselves at a table inside the café. Sayed kept his hands firmly at his side throughout the duration of our conversation, possibly in attempt to conceal his nervousness. We began our discussion by asking him to give us a brief overview of his duties in the café. He began by explaining that he is the manager here at the restaurant. "I am the manager here at the restaurant. For this he answered, “I am the manager here at the restaurant. I am responsible for overseeing the general affairs of the café and ensuring that the coffee and tea machines are functioning, as well as prepare karkadee.”

A father of three boys ranging from ages 18-22, Said spoke with great pride about his sons’ education, an education we would come to learn that he himself was deprived of. Ahmed, his eldest son, is a graduate of Ain Shams School of Law, while the youngest, whose name he did not mention, is enrolled in a private school, at a cost of five hundred pounds per year.

Continued on page 4...
Petra: A place to return to

Diary... March 2001

Ever since I saw an exhibit on Petra at the Institute du Monde Arabe in Paris, I have wanted to visit this historic marvel. The images of Petra's intricately carved temples in dramatic rock cliffs remained inscribed in my mind years after seeing the exhibit. What I had forgotten, or not seen in the exhibit, was the incredible multicolored rock. The rock looks like marbleized paper that makes up the cliffs and decaying structures of this once forgotten place.

Petra, a city carved and built by the Nabatean Arabs, and known in the Bible as Mount Seir and Edom, flourished at the time of Jesus. Some scholars believe that the wise men carrying frankincense and myrrh must have been from this trading city. After the Roman conquest, the city gradually fell apart as one of the major trading centers between Egypt, India, China and the Mediterranean. It became a lost city, known perhaps only to the local Bedouin population until an adventurer, Johann Ludwig Burckhardt “discovered” it in 1812 and aroused interest in it in the West.

We spent three full days here and still only covered the major sites. One hikes up to the top of mountains to see magnificent temples that rise up to the sky, or scrambles over rock and in and out of caves looking at ceremonial niches and the ochres, reds and purples that streak the rock carving. These structures look like ghosts, melted images worn down by wind and rain evoking a past that barely reveals its full presence. ten city.

When I first arrived, I kept noticing carvings above me that were actually just the natural cliff. After a while, I realized that the ancient Nabateans must have designed an architecture inspired by the natural carving of nature that surrounds these mountains.

To enter the city, you go through 3 kms of canyon finally arriving at the famous image of the Treasury--first seen only as a glimpse through the narrow gorge. The contrast of highly skilled sculptured pink rock architecture with the darkness of the canyon rough rock is unforgettable. It made me admire and wonder about a civilization that could merge nature and poetry so dramatically in the ver structure of its city. And this is just the beginning of discoveries for the tourist. Fortunately for me, many tourists just walked away from here to the main part of town to see

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<td>Most days in Cairo are just magnificent. Life feels like it is bursting all around me and I wouldn’t be in another place on earth. However, some days aren’t quite like that. They are more like...well, more like no fun what so ever.</td>
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One day, on my way to the University, I was sitting in a taxi, cursing myself for not having taken the Metro. The taxi driver was of the unimaginative sort, not understanding a shred of my gender- and number- dislocated verbs, (for which I couldn’t really blame him) and the wind blowing through the window was like getting a hair dryer directed at my face.

After 40 minutes of exhaust and crazy motorbikes on suicide missions we finally approached Midan Tahrir, which was crowded as usual. I was in my lousiest mood ever, finding the day rather oppressive and unpromising.

Suddenly, out of the blue came a lightening of curly blond hair, blue shorts and tanned slender legs on a pair of roller-blades. Defiantly and with the speed and elegance of a gazelle, he danced through the square, tangoing the taxis and flirting with the trucks, before he disappeared behind the Mugammaa.

I was left flabbergasted in the back of my taxi. Somehow, he had changed my day. Cairo Victorious, which until that moment had been the oppressor, defeating my mind and my spirit, had been challenged and diversity had prevailed and was proven possible. It was a God-sent reminder that life is what you make of it... at least in my already privileged position.

My spirit remained high the rest of the day. Cairo is a worthy enemy, but a better friend. I will try to remember that in the future.
How long the Moqattam Mountain will continue to be a refuge for the Zabbalin remains to be seen. Although the Zabbalin constitute the backbone of Cairo’s garbage removal system and have gained international recognition for their efforts in waste management, the settlement at Moqattam is under threat. The threat of eviction is nothing new to this embattled community. They had been evicted, or to be more politically correct ‘relocated,’ several times before. The latest ouster was from Imbaba, where they got the boot in the 1970s. Moved to Moqattam they found a place they could call their own. With the advent of the World Bank and Cairo Governorate upgrading program in the 1980s, they were promised title to land in Moqattam. They invested their life saving in building houses and shops. Recently, however, they discovered they did not have written titles to the land (although the extension of electricity and other municipal services is an implicit recognition of the legality of the settlement) and would have to move once more to a new site, Tora, 30km outside the city. Arguments that are being used to justify their eviction are mainly environmental. Yet, one is left wondering about the social, political and economic driving forces behind the debate.

Why “relocation”? Well you know as well as I do what makes the world go round. It might take on the guise of environmental protection, pollution control and such lofty-sounding terms, but at its core it remains the same. Whether the Zabbalin will succumb to the mounting pressure is now in the balance. The reality indicates that in all probability they will be at the losing end. Sama’an the Tanner was an ordinary man with a simple faith, strong in its essence and pure in heart. Therefore, he was used in one of the greatest miracles, the moving of Moqattam Mountain. Ordinary people can be used to do extra-ordinary things, and maybe, just maybe, the present dwellers of the mountain will be the agents of a new miracle.

1 El-Masri, I. The Story of the Coptic Church, Part 3, p 27 in The Biography of Saint Samaan the Shoemaker “the Tanner” authored by The Church of Saint Samaan the Tanner in Moqattam. Cairo Egypt 1994 p 50

A fresh breeze also blows occasionally and breaks the monotony, Clinton and that woman, Monica; utopian kids battle the World Trade Organization and World Bank; Davos biggies promise the billions of little (wo)men rose gardens, if they only sip from the nectar of patience; the mad cow and mouth-and-foot diseases take the urbane idea of the global village seriously; Taliban axes the enlightened Buddha.

In contrast, my menu is thankfully short, if you know what I mean: a change of members of the Crew, beginning and end of semester, an event sponsored by the program or the university. Of course, if I down a couple of glasses of white Zahleh arak and light the cigarette from the butt of the preceding one--as I imagine the Lebanese al-Khazin doing-- I could relate even such puny matters to globalization, Arab history, Zionist lobby and other hefty phenomena. I don’t, though, wagering happily that the heavy traffic on the information highways clogs the narrow synapses of my readers’ memories, and they forget what they read instantly anyway.

The columnist of Al-Hayat, must have a “marathonic” stamina, insatiable appetite, a father with a whip in the subconscious, the scorn of an Arab leader for stepping down from the throne, and a certain genius. He has no thought unpublished, although to sell the paper in the Arab capitals, he must surely suppress a few jewels. Ah! to vent your musings about this chunk of the world every morning and get others to lend you their ears. That is nothing less than a healthy catharsis, emptying out the brine, a surer medicine for longevity than the latest diet and exercise.

Teaching two courses and running the MES, on the other hand, I hardly have had any thoughts published recently, except for such meager opinions as is possible within the brevity and infrequency of Barqiyya! But you know the academic dictum, publish or perish. In order not to perish prematurely, I do a lot of walking, shun the anise-tasting arak for the soothing anise tea, and deplore smugly smoking and mobile phones. Oops! What did I say at the outset, I’m happy I’m not Jihad al-Khazin?

The views expressed here are those of their authors and not necessarily those of Barqiyya, editorial board, or Middle East Studies Program.