

Dr. Zaghloul al-Najjār in the Egyptian press; polemics and controversy

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I. Introduction

Judging from the sources on the AWR database, Dr. Zaghoul al-Najjār is widely regarded as a controversial and provocative Islamic scholar, famed for making radical statements against the Coptic Christian community. If a reader only subscribes to one newspaper in Egypt, they would most likely get a very one-sided image of al-Najjār, being either depicted as a seditious villain, or a hero defending the Qur'ān. However, the database reveals that Egyptian media has more often tended to propagate a distasteful image of al-Najjār, making him a largely misunderstood character. Thus noted, this paper endeavors to summarize al-Najjār's personal discourse while demonstrating how he has at times fallen prey to a sometimes indignant Egyptian media.

Readers will be better able to appreciate how his statements have at times been used to satisfy the media's chronic predilection for sensationalist reporting. They will observe how conclusions drawn about al-Najjār are often too wrought with fallacy to be considered valid. Readers will also see some of these provocative comments and perhaps get a taste for why al-Najjār has become so controversial. The Egyptian press has the unfortunate tendency to obstinately repudiate social critique. However, this paper affords readers the opportunity to view al-Najjār through a different and wider lens, both removed from disdainful discourse and encompassing room for free interpretation.

This paper retrieves its sources mainly from the AWR database. The presentation to follow is admittedly limited in that the available materials do not allow us the ability to analyze all aspects of al-Najjār's career. However, since the database is filled with material from the Egyptian press, the sources give credibility to our assertions regarding the media's common depiction of al-Najjār. AWR hopes to interview Dr. Zaghoul al-Najjār, a prospect that would undoubtedly aid this and any other future investigation. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to interview him prior to publication of this report in AWR due to his frequent travels.

II. A Mixed Image

A first-time browser of the AWR database will discover al-Najjār's alleged connection with the 1995 suicide bombing of the Egyptian Embassy in Islamabad and, according to military prosecutors, with Jihad leader Ayman El-Zawahri. The very same source claims that al-Najjār had indeed "*confessed to raising funds for Jihad and assigning specific activities to members of the group, in accordance with El-Zawahri's instructions*".¹ Browsers may then be surprised to realize that the accused also served briefly as a member of the AWR Board of Advisors a few years later.

At the behest of Egyptian journalist and friend of AWR, Sabah Hamamo, editor-in-chief Cornelis Hulsman invited al-Najjār to participate as a board member. Hulsman reasoned that the AWR board should reflect diversity of thought in its understanding of Muslim-Christian relations. Hulsman saw al-Najjār's participation as an important realization of AWR's founding principle "*to foster understanding for people with widely different opinions than one's own.*"² Considering it imperative that Muslims carry the peaceful message of Islam to different parts of the world, al-Najjār was praised for preaching tolerance in conformity with the Islamic tenet that '*there is no compulsion in religion.*' [Qur'an 2: 256] Despite this expression of readiness for dialogue and mutual understanding in 2003, the Egyptian media has depicted him quite differently. His membership of the advisory board, however, did not last long since the dialogue that was intended did not take place for lack of time which was due to al-Najjār's frequent travel outside Egypt.

1 AWR 1998, week 45, article 4

2 AWR 2003, week 2, article 2

Al-Najjār has most often been portrayed as a man harboring contempt for other religions. For instance, *Watani International* quoted him in 2007 saying: “*the infidels and hypocrite unbelievers are mainly those among Ahl- Al- Ketab (People of the Book, i.e. Jews and Christians) who have corrupted their religion, the vile Jews, the worst infidels throughout history and until God inherits the land*”.³ Using this as evidence, the author concludes that al-Najjār was affiliated with violent extremists.

As polemic and erroneous as the quote undoubtedly is, it does not reference any connection to violent actors. It might represent a shared tenet between al-Najjār and extremists, but it in no way reveals any cooperation and collaboration between the two. Additionally, neither does there exist any supporting evidence on the AWR database. The quote therefore lends no credibility to the article’s conclusion that al-Najjār had ties with violent actors. Devoid of any direct evidence, the accusation is rendered baseless.

III Profile

Al-Najjār has taught at several different universities in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Kingdom and the United States. He is a member of the board of directors of the Islamic Academy of Sciences, and a founding member of the Board of Directors of the International Committee on Scientific Signs in the Holy Qur’ān and Sunnah as well as a founding member of the Dubai Islamic Bank. He is also a member of a large number of academic and media organizations in the Arab World and the West.⁴

Al-Najjār was imprisoned under former Egyptian President Abd al-Nasser because of his political activism and beliefs. He was associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and made efforts to revitalize Islam and was therefore seen by the government as an ideological threat. Al-Najjār left the country in the early 1960s only to return in 1970 immediately after Nasser’s death.⁵

He began to make his fame 2002 during an interview with Hamamo of al-Ahram in which he recounted his writings of the scientific signs in the Qur’ān. He has since written his weekly columns for the newspaper. Shortly afterwards, he made his first appearance on a television show hosted by Ahmad Farrāj called Nour 'ala Nour (Light upon Light), which further sparked his fame.⁶ Al-Najjār’s television debut was well received, and the show was broadcast several times later by popular demand.⁷

Finally, it is worth mentioning that al-Najjār participated in a government-sponsored effort to send Islamic caravans to tour world capitals in order to correct the mistaken image of Islam.⁸ His inclusion in the government activity suggests that at this time he was profiting from a favorable status with government officials.⁹

3 AWR 2007, week 4, article 16

4 AWR 2003, week 16, article 2

5 Al-Ahram: 17 - 23 November 2005 Issue No. 769

⁶ Usama Ghazuly AWR commentating journalist: His show launched the genre of Islamic telepreaching in the 1960s.

7 Interview per phone with Sabah Hamamo. Oct. 28th 2010

8 AWR 2004, week 23, article 32

9 AWR Editor-in-chief Drs. Cornelis Hulsman: Hamdi Zaqqouq is known to be a moderate Islamic figure, someone who authored books on intercultural dialogue and lectured about this.

IV. Claims and attitudes by Al-Najjār since 2000

IV.1. The Qur'ān and Science

"Have not those who disbelieve known that the heavens and the earth were of one piece, then We parted them, and We made every living thing of water? Will they not then believe?" [Qur'ān 21:30].

This verse is according Al-Najjār a reference to the Big Bang theory about the creation of the earth proving Prophet Muhammad's divine knowledge.¹⁰

The relation between modern scientific thought and the Qur'ān has probably received the most academic commentary from Al-Najjār. Al-Najjār affirms that no scientific truth mentioned in the Qur'ān has been proven false, asserting the common belief that the Qur'ān was revealed with specific terminology that makes it understandable in different ways in any era. He also claims that the different meanings of the Qur'ān are always broad enough to contain human knowledge and they neither change nor are ever proven false. He argues that these scientific signs of the Qur'ān can improve the image of Islam and Muslims by emphasizing that the Qur'ān contains scientific facts that scientists discovered only recently.

He claims that the Qur'ān is the only unaltered revelation sent to solve issues that humans cannot solve themselves, and accordingly there are fourteen verses in the Qur'ān that talk about cosmic phenomena and miracles that prove that God is the Maker of the universe.¹¹ Reportedly has he also argued that the Qur'ān can only be understood in light of scientific knowledge, and that he was the first to introduce the presence of scientific phenomena in the Hadith.¹²

IV.2. Backwardness of Islamic Society

Unfortunately, the AWR database included only one source describing al-Najjār's views on the state of the Islamic community. However, it is clear that Al-Najjār is convinced that Muslims are currently living in a state of backwardness due to a lack of political freedoms and authoritarian regimes' unfaithfulness to Islamic practices. In support of this, al-Najjār alleges that most ministers do not perform the five daily prayers as Islam requires. Al-Najjar asserts that this Islamic Ummah (community) is dominated by scientific, technical, political, economic, media and military backwardness. Al-Najjār affirms, however, that adherence to the religion of Islam does not imply underdevelopment and isolation. In this, he echoes a reoccurring theme in modernist Islamic discourse championed most notably by the iconic Seyyed al-Din al-Afghani.

To remedy these social maladies, al-Najjār proposes two solutions. First, society must bring the educational curriculum in line with Islam and reduce the roles of foreign universities, especially western institutions. Second, he suggests that Islamic society must reduce its dependence on the West for food.¹³ Al-Najjar asserts that political, economic, educational, administrative and other kinds of reform are needed for the sake of progress. He tasks media with the responsibility of promoting such reform.

10 AWR 2005, week 39, article 6

11 AWR 2004, week 45, article 11

12 AWR 2004, week 46, article 8

13 AWR 2008, week 46, article 8

IV.3. Religious Tolerance

Al-Najjār has stressed that “*Islam calls for the unity of mankind and human brotherhood*”.¹⁴ However, he has not commented heavily on how to achieve this unity. In one sense, he could simply be promoting these ideals as Islamic values that ought to foster a spirit of benevolent tolerance amongst Muslims and non-Muslims. But his opponents appear to interpret it as a claim to subvert the Christian presence in Egypt – unity thus implying a homogeneous, Muslim population.

By way of the media, these same opponents turn to Al-Najjār’s written assertion that “*the Qur’ān is the word of God and the Bible is not*” as proof that he promotes the subversion of Christianity. AWR editor-in-chief, Cornelis Hulsman, responded with the following:

This statement was made in the period that he was asked to become a member of the board of advisors. I did not see this then as a problem. He does not believe the Bible is the word of God and Christians do not believe the Qur’ān is the word of God. Christians disagree with his beliefs. The difference, however, was that he expressed this publicly while others would avoid to do so publicly. We should learn to live with such differences. That is possible as long as we want to listen to each other and al-Najjār in 2003 clearly expressed a readiness to do so.”¹⁵

Hulsman makes a point that Christian and Islamic theology simply disagree on the point of scriptural authenticity. In light of this, the rebukes hurled by the media seem misplaced, especially considering al-Najjār’s then recently expressed willingness for dialogue.

The media again attacked al-Najjār in 2007 after he reportedly claimed that the Coptic Orthodox Church forced young Muslims to convert to Christianity after priests showed them falsified pornographic tapes of Muslim Shaykhs. He later theorized the existence “*of secret evangelizing networks that target Muslim youth, baptizing them and then sending them abroad*”¹⁶ and accused the Coptic Orthodox Church of instigating sedition. He cautioned that “*Christians must come to their senses and coexist with Muslims. No power on Earth would make Egypt a Christian country.*”¹⁷ Al-Najjār has also accused the Church of falsification, asserting that it has presented a distorted version of the Bible. In the midst of these allegations he maintained, however, that “*he was merely offering Christians advice since, he insisted, the present Bible was a misquotation of an original one*”.¹⁸

As one can imagine, these statements have been received with great disdain. But in order to properly appreciate the significance of these events and the passionate debate they sparked, one must view it as part of an escalation of tension in connection with the highly publicized and riotous controversy of Wafā’ Qustantīn’s attempted conversion to Islam in 2003. The incidents in 2007 dealt with serious allegations of Christian acts of subversion through forced conversion and aggressive evangelism, sedition, and dishonesty. The issues evoked bitter memories of the recent past, involving similar themes. Thus, the sparring in 2007 can be seen as a spillover from the ferocity conceived four years previously.

14 AWR 2003, week 28, article 12

15 Email correspondance: AWR Editor-in-chief Drs. Cornelis Hulsman Oct. 26th 2010

16 AWR Editor-in-chief Drs. Cornelis Hulsman: This was in response to reports on Christian missionary activities in Egypt. These also exist, primarily Evangelical and with support from people and organizations in the US. Al-Najjar picked up these reports and agitates against such activities. (AWR, 2004, week 51, art 13].

17 AWR 2007, week 49, article 24

18 AWR 2007, week 52, article 22

In Egypt a conversion to Islam takes place according to a three-step procedure. The convert must first file a report to the police declaring their intent. Next, one has to perform the Islamic statement of faith at al-Azhar, or another recognized institute by the government. Lastly, the convert has to go to the registration office to make a change in the registration of religion for one's personal identity card.¹⁹

Wafā' Qustantīn, the wife of a Coptic priest, filed a report with the police, stating she wanted to convert to Islam, the first step in a procedure of conversion to Islam. Immediately following, the Church intervened, invoking their legal right to have her first interact with a religious counseling committee. A few days after counseling, Qustantīn stated that she wanted to remain Christian. Conservative Muslims considered the filed report sufficient for her conversion, expressing earnest intent, whereas Christians argued that she never completed all steps and thus could not legally be considered Muslim.

The Coptic Orthodox Church was met with severe criticism because of its refusal to allow anyone to meet with the woman, regardless of faith, claiming concern for Qustantīn's protection.²⁰ In response, al-Najjār allegedly claimed that Wafā' Qustantīn was murdered.²¹ This suspicion was prevalent throughout the Muslim community. Regardless of the theory's popularity, Hamamo observed that *"he [al-Najjār] never stated publicly that the Church killed her, but he dedicated a book to her as Martyr when he got information that she was killed."*²² This allegation was vehemently denied with Girgis Salih, secretary-general of the Middle-East Council of Churches, who told Hulsman in the summer of 2010 he had seen her only recently.²³ Regardless of the degree to which al-Najjār spoke, as a public personality he gave credence to unfounded rumors. The Qustantīn case provides evidence upon which his critics base their accusations, but also possibly help explain how a man presumably committed to dialogue might come to such frustration with those he looked to engage.

IV.4. The West and Islam

Al-Najjār sees Islam as having been misinterpreted by non-Muslims and poorly presented to the West. Consequently, Westerners unfortunately lack a proper understanding of Islamic thought. Al-Najjār identifies this ignorance as the seed of fear and hate. He also argues that historically the West once thought that it had the majority of Islamic governments under its control and that Muslims were weak and separated. However, the rapid growth of Islam throughout the West has challenged this assumption and provoked fear.²⁴

Al-Najjār believes that Islam ought to be presented with the cultural rhetoric of its intended audience: *"No wise man in the world would reject Islam if presented to him in his language and that they would gain a great respect for it."*²⁵ He maintains that Islam should be judged by its principles and fundamentals, not by the behavior of its followers. In these respects, al-Najjār advocates increased studies of comparative religion as a means to correct the image of Islam.²⁶

While promoting a peaceful image of Islam, al-Najjār has no tolerance for hostile acts against

19 AWR, 2004, week 51, art 13

20 AWR, 2004, week 51, art 13 & Email correspondence: AWR Editor-in-chief Drs. Cornelis Hulsman Oct. 26th 2010

21 AWR 2008, week 38, article 1

22 Interview per phone with Sabah Hamamo, Oct. 28th 2010

23 Email correspondence: AWR Editor-in-chief Drs. Cornelis Hulsman Oct. 26th 2010

24 AWR 2007, week 34, article 24

25 AWR 2007, week 24, article 8

26 AWR 2006, week 42, article 7

Muslims and the Islamic faith. He regards them as acts of belligerence.²⁷ On the diplomatic front, for example, al-Najjar has proposed “*severing diplomatic relations with Denmark and Switzerland, and the creating of new channels of dialogue with the other European countries.*”²⁸ Al-Najjar is one of many Muslims who consider Israel as a nation hostile overtly towards Islam. As an act of war against Islam, al-Najjar holds that “*Muslims should fight in all ways to destroy Israel*”

V. Opponents

Al-Najjār is not only criticized by Christians, who perceive him as antagonizing their faith, but is also accused by Muslims for contradicting orthodox theology. Many Egyptians collectively criticize him as harmful to the integrity of Egyptian society.

The criticism from Muslims stems mainly from al-Najjār’s schooling in natural sciences. As such, Muslims sometimes regard him as out of touch with religious society and unqualified to provide religious commentary. Dr. Ra’fit Othman, for example, stated that the Qur’ān is not a science book aiming to teach scientific knowledge. Even as he maintains that the Qur’ān also includes scientific knowledge, Dr. Othman maintains that it cannot be explained through scientific theory. Dr. Othman rejects al-Najjār's approach as it might lead one to question the validity of the Qur’ān.²⁹ However, this tenet has been debated since the inception of Islamic modernism. Egypt’s own Muhammad ‘Abdu, for example, famously made a case for the scientific nature of the Qur’ān and Islamic philosophy in his iconic *Risalat al-Tawhīd*. Al-Najjār therefore does not stand alone in his views which have constituted a critical point of debate for generations.

Dr. Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi, the late head of al-Azhar, argued that specialization has become necessary to more properly engage in contemporary discourse. He therefore warned that it is inappropriate for al-Najjār to discuss what is halal (religiously permissible) or haram (religiously forbidden). Dr. Tantawi also took issue with al-Najjār’s sources of information³⁰ Similarly, Sayyid Wild Abāh has pointed out that his opinions are drawn from outdated sources and therefore possesses only a limited understanding of religion. Accordingly, Abāh claims that al-Najjār is fundamentally misguided, committing two very specific errors: “*The epistemological one is considering the scientific theories as certainties. The religious one is reasoning the basics of faith and convictions with theories whose only value is their contemporary existence.*”³¹

Dr. Ibrāhīm al-Sāyh made the claim in 2008 that al-Najjār's behavior is a result of him failing to convince people of the scientific nature of the Qur’ān. As a result, he asserts that al-Najjār became desperate to attract Muslims to his line of thinking and therefore turned his attention towards Christian evangelism in an effort to preserve the population of Muslims. Dr. al-Sāyh thus disapprovingly concludes that al-Najjār has become more interested in the quantity of Muslims rather than the quality of their religion.³²

Al-Najjār reportedly described the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean as an act of an angry God, calling it “*a punishment for transgressors and a test for those who survived*”.³³ He later went on to describe the devastating earthquake in Pakistan as divine wrath.³⁴ Al-Najjār seems to generally argue that natural disasters are inflicted upon those not living according to Islamic law.

27 AWR 2008, week 5, article 27

28 AWR 2008, week 20, article 6

29 AWR 2001, week 9, article 3

30 AWR 2001, week 28, article 3

31 AWR 2005, week 18, article 17

32 AWR 2008, week 1, article 2

33 AWR 2005, week 2, article 7

34 AWR 2005, week 42, article 18

In response, journalist Ma'mūn al-Basyūnī wondered “*what Dr. al-Najjār would say about the recent flood in Pakistan, which is an Islamic country, the earthquake in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and all the disasters that have afflicted the Arab World. Were all these incidents also a punishment from God?*”³⁵ Furthermore, Dr. ‘Abd al-Mu’tī Bayyūmī considered it inappropriate and contradicting that al-Najjār described the tsunami as the act of an angry God, while he simultaneously explained the event in scientific terms.³⁶ Finally, Khālid Muntasir wrote an article demanding why an earthquake would hit Pakistan during the holy month of Ramadan, and how al-Najjār would explain the earthquakes and floods that have afflicted holy sites like Mecca including the Ka'ba. He ends his article stating “*that such interpretations of natural disastrous and epidemics seem to rejoice at the misfortune of others.*”³⁷

It could be said that many Christians in Egypt consider themselves the main target of al-Najjār, whom they view as a wanton critic of Christian theology and actively promoting the subversion and exclusion of Christians within society.

Marqus ‘Azīz Khalīl has accused al-Najjār of misquoting the Bible to prove his point. Al-Najjār puts forward the accusation that the Biblical term ‘Comforter’, referring to the Holy Spirit, reflects a later falsification of the original Greek word. Khalīl retorts “*Do you [al-Najjār] accuse the Bible of being falsified and then make it up! God forgive you!*”³⁸ In an editorial piece, it was written that “*It has become a norm now that Zaghoul Al-Najjār attacks the Bible*”, and it concluded its response: “*Write as much as you can to promote your scientific frauds and wrong claims but do not ever touch upon that which is holy to us. You know that Al-Ahram institution which publishes your articles is a racist institution and will not accept our comment on yours.*”³⁹ The following week, protesters accused the government of causing sectarian tensions through television. The protest was complimented by the head of the US Copts Association decrying government support of extremist TV stars, including al-Najjār. The protesters complained of a double-standard that while the government allows Muslims to defame Christianity, Christian expressions of discontent are not tolerated by the security forces.⁴⁰ Al-Najjār has also been accused of receiving support from Saudi dissidents.⁴¹

A few years later, Imād Samīr ‘Awad compared al-Najjār's attitude towards Christianity with the cartoons of the Danish caricaturist who portrayed the Prophet Muhammad. He described how “*the Danish caricaturist has committed his silly mistake of mocking at the Prophet Muhammad only once. On the other hand, al-Najjār enjoys repeating his ferocious attacks at Christians and Christianity.*” He also points out that the Danish caricaturist did not attempt to interpret the Qur'ān, while the “*so-called Islamic scientist fakes knowledge of the Bible and interprets its verses at his discretion.*”⁴² He continued by claiming that whereas Western publications at least consider other points of view, al-Najjār rejects any kind of critique. The same year Father Marqus warned the Egyptian media of inciting Muslims against Christians by airing viewpoints as al-Najjār's: “*What do you expect from a people filled with the idea that the Copts are atheists?!*”⁴³

Sāmih Fawzī has alleged that al-Najjār is an outlet the government uses to attack Christianity threatening the national unity of Egypt. He further claims that al-Najjār is a member of the Muslim

35 AWR 2005, week 8, article 19

36 AWR 2005, week 2, article 7

37 AWR 2005, week 42, article 18

38 AWR 2001, week 24, article 6

39 AWR 2003, week 28, article 19

40 AWR 2001, week 25, article 15

41 AWR 2004, week 44, article 9

42 AWR 2006, week 10, article 46 and AWR 2006, week 10, article 49

43 AWR 2006, week 17, article 48

Brotherhood. Fawzī also maintains that al-Najjār believes Copts intend to take Muslims away from the true path of Islam.⁴⁴ In another article Fawzī reportedly questions the stance of the Muslim Brotherhood toward their Christian countrymen. He finds it contradictory that they call on Copts to join them against the political establishment, while letting al-Najjār attack Christianity.⁴⁵

Other sources of criticism appear more secular in nature, appealing to concerns dealing with nationalism and scientific rationale. Wā'il al-Ibrāshī, for instance, mentioned al-Najjār in what he describes as the "*abuse of holyfied people*". He states that he does not have a problem with al-Najjār's popular appeal, but is instead concerned with the depiction "*making him seem holy and infallible.*"⁴⁶

In a more nationalistic appeal, Hānī Labīb appears concerned with the inter-religious attacks "*harming culture of citizenship*". Accordingly, Labīb accuses al-Najjār of deepening the divisions within Egyptian society. The criticism is directed at both Islamic and Coptic thinkers and literature. He advocates a rejection of "*all forms of benefiting from religious favoritism.*"⁴⁷ In a similar vein, the Rose al-Yūsuf magazine states that al-Najjār and preachers like him "*just exploit Islam to get spiritual control over God's worshippers and to reach the seats of authority...*"⁴⁸

VI. Conclusion

The articles in the AWR database allow us to speculate reasons for al-Najjār's controversial claims. It is obvious al-Najjār has gradually grown frustrated with the behavior of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which has resulted in accusations that could be offending Copts in general. This could in turn develop from religious disagreements into an escalating circle of mutual and reckless accusations and denials, where the actors' perceptions of other religions become both more monolithic and one-sided.

On the other hand, it can not be denied that his claims and observations have accorded him fame. Al-Najjār has been able to promote himself by fusing his religious knowledge with a scientific thought that only a few Egyptians would be able to challenge. However, the Egyptian media plays the unfortunate role in generating controversy, usually supporting one side in the debate at the expense of proper and holistic analysis. This intolerance has done al-Najjār injustice. As accusations become numerous one might develop a habit of ignoring them. This seems to be the case with al-Najjār who, at least according to the AWR database, seems to have thus far refrained from making any sort of rebuttal. This has made him an easy target for his critics, leaving them room to further speculate and propagating an image based on their own preconceptions.

Readers of this text have seen the sorts of provocative claims which have partially earned for al-Najjār his reputation. They have also seen how some statements have sometimes been misconstrued, removed from their proper contexts, and placed within poor analysis. Although some claims merit critique and admonishment, al-Najjār, like most figures in the media, cannot be understood as having been portrayed objectively. He, like many Muslims, believes his faith to be perfected over and above the distortions that have occurred in Christianity and Judaism. Whereas earlier in his career he believed that this difference could be addressed through dialogue, his growing frustrations led him to issue public statements that have not been judicious. As such, within the media, neither his supporters nor detractors have depicted him correctly. The media being what it is, though, it is the negative picture which has predominated.

44 AWR 2007, week 28, article 37

45 AWR 2007, week 29, article 10

46 AWR 2001, week 9, article 5

47 AWR 2008, week 1, article 11

48 AWR 2001, week 35, article 1

In light of this, we hope to construct a more direct image of al-Najjār after a personal interview and future investigation. Further research will help determine the real character of al-Najjār, as well as speculate about the best methods for society in general, and Christians in particular, to receive his testimony. As for the time being, the jury is still out on the matter until further evidence presents itself.

Review of Dr. Zaghoul al-Najjār in the Egyptian press; polemics and controversy
Author: Cornelis Hulsman
January 15, 2011

I have been pleased to work with Mai Magdy , Egyptian and Muslim, and Esben Justesen, Danish and agnostic on this paper on Dr. Zaghoul al-Najjār. This was initially difficult with Mai making primarily use of Egyptian Muslim sources which provide a very different image of Dr. Zaghoul al-Najjār then which is presented in many Egyptian media. Both students have demonstrated well that al-Najjār is a controversial person and as such he has his followers, people who adore his thoughts and people who strongly oppose him. The comments to al-Najjār show the strongly polarized climate we are witnessing in Egypt. I would wish it would be possible to simply state agreement or disagreement without resorting to the strongly polemic language we see now. al-Najjār's own statements have contributed to these polemics.

I have met with al-Najjār on several occasions, never agreeing with most of his thoughts but always able to discuss this with him in a friendly atmosphere. This experience shows polemics are not unavoidable and disagreements can be formulated in much less harsh language as we see today.

Al-Najjār is certainly an Islamist. Some say he is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. This I do not know but his thoughts are certainly not far from those of members of the Brotherhood. Islamists in general, al-Najjār is no exception, are angry about two major events:

- 1) Strong indications of pressure of Pope Shenouda on Wafaa Costantin not completing her conversion procedure to Islam followed by Wafaa Costantin disappearing from the media making it thus impossible to hear her own voice in this controversy.
- 2) Pope Benedict XVI's lecture in Germany in 2006.

Both incidents were seen as caused by major Christian leaders which has sadly triggered distrust in Christian positions. Islamists also generalize by ignoring voices that disagree with both leaders. These and other generalizations add to polemics instead of promoting a healthy discussion in which of course differences may be voiced.

It was our intention to interview Dr. al-Najjār for this paper. Unfortunately this has not been possible due to al-Najjār's frequent travels outside Egypt. I would wish to see other interns interview him at a later stage and add this in the AWR database.

Mai Magdy and Esben Justesen have done a great job in showing the different opinions that exist around al-Najjār. They are to be complemented for this.

Cornelis Hulsman,
Editor-in-chief Arab-West Report