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Title: Conversation with Prof. Baha Bakry, professor of Urban Ecology at Cairo University about the Abu Fana paper of CIDT interns

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On Saturday, 15 August, 2009, Prof. Bakry engaged Dr. Cornelis Hulsman, Secretary-General of the Center for Arab-West Understanding (CAWU), Mr. Jielis van Baalen, director of the Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation, and Mr. Jayson Casper, international coordinator for the ZIVIC peacemaking initiative at CAWU, in conversation concerning the Arab West Report on the Abu Fana controversy. The following is a summation of his perspective.

It is the perspective of the report that the Abu Fana controversy was in essence a land dispute that was further exasperated by religion. Prof. Bakry disagreed with this conclusion, seeing it primarily as a religious dispute, evidenced by the recalcitrant attitudes of both Muslims and Christians, preventing local dialogue from an early stage. This is often a feature of village life, exhibiting a state of mind which is unwilling to address issues without immediately involving religion. Even so, Prof. Bakry submitted valuable insight into the land issues concerning both the efforts of both Muslim villagers and Christian monks to expand their territory.

Prof. Bakry stated that land has no intrinsic value, but that it derives its value only by what is in it (natural resources, agriculture) or is done with it (infrastructure, architecture). Conflicts over land happen all over Egypt, generally in the agricultural areas bordering desert land, as population centers grow and seek to expand their territory, reclaiming desert land for cultivation and residence. The land in question obtained value because it was on the periphery of the old agricultural land and in particular when in 2000 the Egyptian government declared it to be of historical and archaeological importance. At that point Muslim villagers begin expanding their territory into the restricted zone, searching for artifacts, similar to the behavior in al-Gurna near Luxor where villagers built houses on tombs and other remains.

Cornelis Hulsman added that Prof. Buschhausen from Austria, who excavated the area for the remains of a medieval Christian monastery in 1987-1993, told him there was already theft in the days he and his team worked in the area. This included both Christians and Muslims, not for any religious reasons but in the hope that they would be able to profit quickly from the sale of artifacts. This is, of course, illegal yet occurs frequently on various archaeological sites. Archaeologists seek to prevent this as much as possible, but in large areas of land such as Abu Fana, police are often absent, and as many state officials are corrupt, it is hard to prevent.

Prof. Bakry spoke also of the rectangular designation of restricted archeological land in Abu Fana. In his opinion this reflects a lack of precision on the part of the authorities, and likely contributes to the tensions between the villagers and monks. Yet for the Christian side, there is more at stake than antiquities. The Bishop in Mallawi, in whose diocese Abu Fana is located, and later also monks who started to live here derive great emotional value from the discoveries in the land, seeing a link back to the days of Christian Egypt. Yet inconsistent with the historical purpose of monasticism in isolation and contemplation, the church is using the value of Abu Fana for hope of financial gain—in pilgrim visits, foreign donations (both already taking place), and agricultural production (not yet commercially viable).

The agricultural expansion into the desert, however, has been undertaken without any known ecological or feasibility study, which would have revealed the drawbacks of the project. First, the water must be raised around forty meters from its source to reach the designated

agricultural area. Not only will this prove very expensive, but the water will then seep back underground toward the Nile, damaging the artifacts in the restricted zone (figure one).

Second, though perhaps inspired by Hasan Othman's DINA project in reclaiming desert land along the Alexandria Desert Road, his conclusions, gained after professional feasibility studies, indicated that a minimum of 10,000 feddans are necessary for a project to be profitable, and that hybrid economic activity, inclusive of business, grazing, and industry, must also be incorporated. Though hopeful of eventual economic success, the monks are not meeting this standard.

Prof. Bakry stated that while neither the villagers nor the monks have appreciation for these issues, this is reflective of the country as a whole, including government policy. Disagreeing with the rate of population growth of 1.62% mentioned in the paper (he believes it is 1.94%), he agrees with the conclusion that many of Egypt's problems are amplified by this phenomenon. Currently, Egypt is trying to manage its population growth along the Nile, as it serves as the main source of water. Planned city expansion, however, will only accommodate four million of the seventy million additional future Egyptians, expected by the mid-21st Century. Expanding these population centers and agricultural areas into the desert along the Nile will eventually deplete Egypt's water and agricultural resources, for already 85% of water use is devoted to agriculture, producing a return of only \$0.20 per cubic meter. Israel, by comparison, earns \$4.50 from its significantly less ample water supply. Prof. Bakry suggests that the future of Egypt is not along the Nile, but the coastal areas, for rainfall received in the 30 km – 70 km corridor along the Mediterranean will significantly decrease the costs associated with development (figure two).

In addition, whenever new land is developed, it comes with great cost to the government in extending public utilities, such as roads, water, electricity, and communications. In fact, only 40% of developed land eventually can be sold, and for every one square meter of tenancy, two square meters are required for utilities. The traditional administrative designations of *ezbet*, village, mother village and *markaz* are already lagging behind in supply of services in proportion to population growth. This includes, for example, the Egyptian police, traditionally stationed in mother villages and larger administrative units. An *ezbet* is a unit of perhaps 50 houses but many of these *ezbets* have grown to the extent that they now should be administered as villages. Similarly, villages have grown into towns yet are still designated villages. These administrative units have grown in size but the services supplied are often as they were some 80 years ago.

The role of government has also contributed directly to the case of Abu Fana. The governor of Minya is considered less powerful than the head of security, for if the governor fails to keep the peace in the region it is feared that he will lose his post. Consequently, this creates an attitude more concerned for stability than for justice and reconciliation. The current governor has stated that the conflict could have been avoided had all applicable laws been applied. Distancing himself from his predecessor, he reveals a tendency for governors to concern themselves primarily with their four year term, neglecting long term sustainability as well as continuity with previous administrations. Prof. Bakry mentioned the current governor of al-Wadi al-Gadid, who reversed the policy of the four previous governors concerning the cultivation of rice, yielding to "the will of the people" despite the exorbitant water resources involved.

The government also tolerates the attitude of Bedouins concerning land development. Considering themselves "owners" of the land, Prof. Bakry discovered upon purchasing his own land, that the Bedouins still insist on being "protectors" of the land, dictating that it be used in concurrence with their interests. Failing to deal with this situation, the government—the true

owner of the land—reveals itself to be soft, and certain politicians, such as Dr. Fawzia Abd al-Sattar, deliberately write laws that contain loopholes to be exploited. Concurrent with the claims of the paper, Prof. Bakry agrees that confusion concerning land ownership is a contributing problem to Abu Fana, and in Egypt in general.

Of course, the aims and actions of the monks is one of the primary factors in the controversy. Their desire to build a large cathedral, though perhaps expressive of their historical and continuing identity, is of great offense to local Muslim sensibilities. Prof. Bakri asks, is their desire to create conflict or to live in peace? Is such a large structure necessary to express identity? He cites the example of a village assisted through the Shuruq project, which dedicated a mosque and a church on the same day, creating good will and a joint sense of community. Muslims are not innocent, either, of course, for many actors, local and otherwise, seek to inflame conflict between religions. Yet the Qur'an declares that Christians are the closest of all people to Muslims, and Muhammad was rebuked by God for his intense desire to see the conversion of his uncle. Why then do Muslims not live at peace with Christian neighbors?

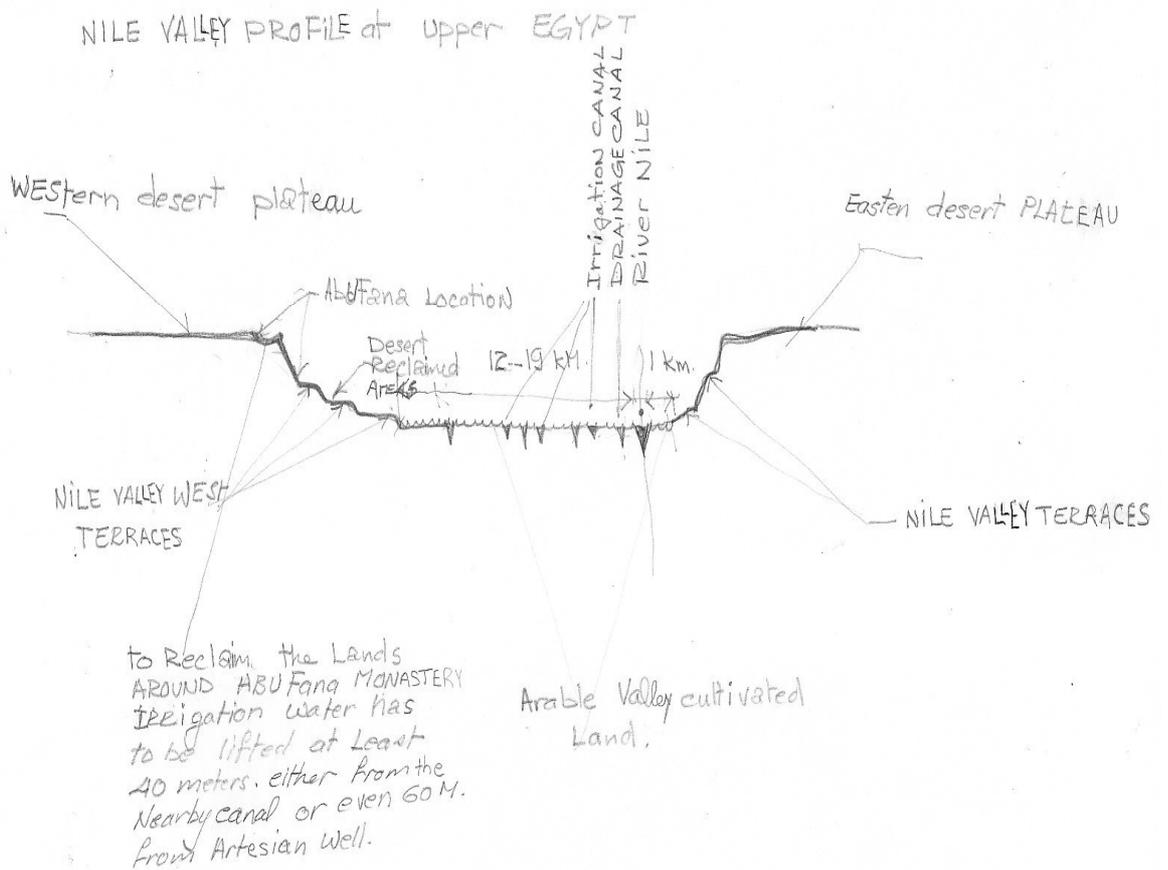
In conclusion, Prof. Bakry offered his views on potential efforts to seek reconciliation. He believed that the paper of Abu Fana was valuable and should be translated into Arabic, for much of its data is not available in that language. Furthermore, the paper could be expanded to include additional research reflected in his comments above, and this would be of great service in the efforts at building peace. If reconciliation can be achieved in Abu Fana, it could replicate itself elsewhere, since the controversy there is so well known.

As for specific steps toward peace, Prof. Bakry suggested that a study should be made of all local civic organizations already working in the area, especially those with membership across religious lines. These will have perspective on the issues at stake, and have already invested in the area, perhaps winning local respect. Even more vital, however, though more difficult, would be to convince the two communities—Muslim villagers and Christian monks, perhaps in addition to the local Christian villagers of Qasr Hur—to select from among themselves men of wisdom and reputation, to meet together and address the issues at stake. These, then, would be empowered to solve problems and lead the communities forward, in communication with one another.

Finally, in conjunction with this group, a project could be developed to bring economic development to the area. Prof. Bakry cited the example of the Mustafa Mahmoud Association, which has given cows to local families, then splitting the profits of future reproduction, as one such initiative. Cornelis Hulsman suggested that up to five or ten thousand euro perhaps could be raised abroad. Prof. Bakry added that in his experience, directly involving local government employees, even to the payroll, significantly aids the success of a project. Government officials are often very willing to promise help, but cannot be counted upon to deliver in a timely fashion. Including the local administrators from the beginning will help ensure the success of any potential project.

To summarize, though the land issues involved in Abu Fana are substantial, and of great ecological consequence, the root causes of the controversy are religious, with significant bureaucratic hindrances. The best way to address local conflicts, therefore, is on a community/project basis, rather than seeking a religious solution. It is hoped that the report on Abu Fana will contribute to the understanding of the intricacies of the situation, that through better understanding local actors can be engaged to come together to seek peace and reconciliation.

Figure one



PROF B.H. BARRY

Figure two



Prof.
B. H. BAKRY