



— Nahdet Masr and Muslim Brotherhood supporters. Nov 30,2012

Nahdet Masr or Egypt's Awakening, the rose granite monumental statue that faces University Bridge in Giza, was born out of another era. Mahmoud Mukhtar (1891-1934) sculptured Nahdet Masr to symbolize Egyptian national aspirations during the struggle for independence from British occupation that began in 1882. Mahmoud Mukhtar lived during tumultuous times not unlike what we are experiencing today. On the heels of World War I and in the wake of Egypt's 1919 Revolution, his response to the social and political changes of the day was in his art. By using his sculptures as vehicles to express the nation's awakening and national identity, he revived Egypt's old glory and raised Egyptian pride drawn from the antiquities of ancient Egypt.



- Nahdet Masr. [Cairo Street Stories Exploring the City's Statues, Squares, Bridges, Gardens, and Sidewalk Cafés](#). Cairo: AUC Press 2008. My photograph (above) is the cover for *Return of the Spirit* by Twafik el-Hakim, AUC Press 2012.



The Nahdet Masr statue is of a Sphinx and a peasant woman both representing Egypt. With her left hand she begins to unveil her face signifying Egypt's revival while her right arm stretches over the Sphinx, which recalls the greatness of Egypt's history. The sculptures pyramidal shape signifies resolve and confidence in the future. The Sphinx rises on its front paws to denote strength to intimidate its foes and enthusiasm for the future. The sculpture was first unveiled in 1928 in front of the train station in Bab al-Hadid. In 1955 it was transferred to Giza and erected facing east so that each day as the sun strikes the monument as if to awaken Egypt.

Could Mahmoud Mukhtar be turning over in his grave as the Muslim Brotherhood rally around Nahdet Masr? Can all Egyptians, no matter their ideology, look to Nahdet Masr as a representation of expressions of national aspirations and identity? Or is this exactly what Mukhtar had in mind when he unveiled his sculpture to the world? The answer might be found in Mukhtar's own words, he said, "that he wished to create a statue that combined all the dreams of Egypt and its civilization, blending the glorious past with the nation's future aspirations. This is how the idea of Nahdet Masr was born." ("[Tale of a statue: Nahdet Masr](#)", *Al Ahram Weekly*, May 24-30, 2012).



Egypt has been a crossroad for every major civilization in the world and remnants of these ancient civilizations still remain, real treasures of world heritage. These relics are touchstones to the past and give us insight into why it is in human nature to be remembered and glorified. From ancient Egyptians' use of the pyramids and obelisks that symbolized timelessness and memorialization to the Mamluk's tomb complexes to present-day street statues, the use of monuments, sculptures, and statues has always represented authority, glory and identity of societies and civilizations.

Do people really care about these symbols? Judging from the defacing graffiti and the statues, on the demonstrator's routes, used as a climbing frame for a higher vantage point, the symbolism and significance of the statues that commemorate outstanding contributions of Egyptian leaders as well as representing national identity seemingly holds little importance in the public's consciousness. At best, the statues are invisible, (which may be what protects them from destruction).

Is Egypt experiencing a democratic awakening or falling into dismal chaos? It is certain that the ousted government of Hosny Mubarak had a 30-year window to position Egypt as a developed country. It is noteworthy to remember that under Mubarak, Egyptians did live in peace for 3 decades and the country's infrastructure did improve i.e. metro system, road and bridge development. There was progress in many fields and in some sectors the economy was doing well. However, Mubarak's government also turned a blind eye to the growing demand for political diversity and ignored serious poverty, population and unemployment issues, combined with the Internet, Twitter, Facebook – all components that level the playing field – and the overwhelming pressure of the underrepresented, Egypt's so-called revolution began to play itself out again on January 25, 2011, but can it be labeled an 'awakening' or 'revival'? The road will be long to answer that question.

