

11. “Berlin has that same inescapable magnetic energy of Cairo!”

Julia Gerlach with Mahmoud Salem

Julia Gerlach: First, let me ask you a very simple question. Who are you? Could you introduce yourself to people who don't know you?

Mahmoud Salem: That's an impossible question to answer currently because a big part of any answer will be a reflection on someone I once was. The past and the future are two things I'm trying to separate currently. History comes with a lot of loss. And the only way to manage that kind of loss is to move forward, killing off the parts of you that no longer have a place in your future. So it becomes very hard to say who you are, based on who you were, and even more so if you were long a known entity to many people.

Let me put it this way: I'm an early adopter of social media when it was called the Blogosphere. A blogger who started blogging when blogging was not cool. Someone who became accidentally famous for all kinds of views that I probably would not subscribe to anymore. Today, I guess, I became part of the “cosmopolitan professional class” that is nomadic due the fact that the world is going to shit. Occasionally I write, I do creative direction, I work in cybersecurity, I write movie concepts – and that's it, basically. And I jump between countries, trying to find a new home. I'm currently working on starting a non-profit foundation for a project I'm not at liberty to discuss.

J.G.: The last time I met you, you were still Sandmonkey. Is there any Sandmonkey left in you?

M.S.: That depends on where. Do I still occasionally topple the government and brag about being the voice of dissent? Why should I do any of those things? I am tired.

J.G.: Tired of politics?

M.S.: Well, it's slightly worse than just political fatigue. Believing in human rights and democracy and all that good stuff, this is how I grew up. It became interesting

and disheartening to notice that – when push comes to shove – it is all more or less Western propaganda. Western countries don't really believe in what they wanted to teach us. You've seen these values crumble before your eyes for the past six or seven years.

J.G.: So, did they crumble here or there?

M.S.: Here. And elsewhere. And we started seeing the reality of it, especially regarding their relationship with Sisi's Egypt. So there is extreme disappointment in the so-called "White Saviourship" – in the disciples of democracy. The whole thing we grew up on was based on nothing more than empty gestures, you know? By talking about democracy and human rights, we are maintaining a façade, but the world has lost interest in it. The Egyptian revolution was a test: does democracy work in the Middle East? The answer for them was: no. Now they say it wouldn't work, and they do not want to support it if it does.

J.G.: You mentioned your new project but with little detail. As I understand it, it is a foundation that will work on misinformation. Sounds interesting. What are you planning?

M.S.: I can't really tell you much about the project itself, but I can tell you about its *raison d'être*. Misinformation – nothing more than propaganda using algorithms – is the big problem of our time, especially given how distrustful we have become of the media. Whom do you trust in terms of media reporting? Looking at Egypt, the state now controls everything. I'm not saying we didn't have misinformation and disinformation back in 2012–2014. But we still had some people left, some independent channels. They have all been bought up or co-opted. So who is there to stop misinformation? We are dealing with either state-run campaigns against us, transnational movements and campaigns against us, or foreign state campaigns against us. And of course, as you can imagine, lots of Russian propaganda goes through the Middle East first.

Who is going to tell you the truth then? Social media, like in the days of 2011? Look at the new generation. It's mostly TikTok. There is nothing against TikTok, but we need to have some institution, some compass, to help people differentiate between what is real and what is fake. That's what we are planning.

J.G.: And this foundation is going to be based in Berlin?

M.S.: Yes. What better place? But I am only the person bringing it all together. I will not even be president. We are a team of people from everywhere, I mean, all of them

are from the Middle East. It's mostly about Arab fusion media. We will hopefully have foundations supporting us financially. Fingers crossed.

J.G.: So, this is your project for the future. What was your project in the past couple of years?

M.S.: I worked as a senior Middle East cyber intelligence analyst with the German cybersecurity organization. I left there last year and spent the year revenge traveling because of COVID-19. Being locked down in 2020 in Germany was not good for my mental health, unlike most friends in other countries where lockdowns were more suggestions than law. I went to many of those places last year. What can I say? I thrive in murky environments.

J.G.: But how do you survive in Berlin then?

M.S.: What do you mean? There is a lot to do here!

J.G.: I mean, it's pretty organized and...

M.S.: Wait, are we under the impression that the Germans are efficient? I'm not. No, no, no. Berlin is a chaotic place with constant survival crises. I think maybe that's why Berlin kind of works for me. Do you know the old First World, Second World, Third World thing? I would say Berlin is kind of Second World. That's why we – from Third World countries – feel comfortable in this city. Berlin feels more and more like downtown Cairo every day. Everybody is here now. As a Palestinian friend told me once, if you want to go and see your friends from Egypt, you go to Berlin.

J.G.: Berlin was an Arab City until this spring. Now it's all about the Ukrainians.

M.S.: You mean that many people believe that now, nobody cares about us Arabs or Muslims anymore? Personally, I don't see it as a competition, to be honest. I am not crying over our lost victimhood status. But what has changed is the perception of who is the enemy. It turns out we were just a rebound enemy after the Cold War was over, and now the white people went back to their old enemy: each other. They always hated the Russians more than us. We were like the partner you get during a trial separation from your significant other, only to be dumped when they decide they want you back.

J.G.: Not being the focus of attention and not being the enemy also has lots of advantages. Like, you can do whatever you want without anybody watching.

M.S.: Yes and no. You're still getting lots of attention, just not from the German side. Berlin is still a hotspot for Arab intelligence. If you look at academics who end up being stopped in Egypt when visiting or returning, 99% are from European universities. It's impossible to monitor the US. It's much easier here. There are only 5 or 6 universities here versus 300 in the US. The truth is that Berlin is a city of spies. If the Germans are not watching you, the other states are. There is no more freedom if you define freedom as nobody watching you. It just means we just lose our protection and our priority. Who cares about what Sisi is doing to our people in Egypt or Bashar to Syrians when Russia is literally next door?

J.G.: Some people say that Berlin is the cultural capital of the Middle East now. Would you agree?

M.S.: No, London is definitely the first choice for such a dubious claim! I don't mean this to be offensive to Berlin, I hate London. I hate it so much that I was for Brexit; the harder, the better. But regarding established artists or financial opportunities, it's more like the choice between the UAE and Qatar for professionals: Whoever goes to Qatar couldn't make it in the UAE, or they got a really, really good job offer. The same goes for Berlin. You go to Berlin because you can't make it in London or get a really, really good job offer.

J.G.: You mean it's not about Berlin being a cool city? I thought that's why it's attractive to come here.

M.S.: No. It's attractive because it's easier. It's easier to immigrate to Berlin. What comes afterward is much harder: Integrating is much more difficult. There is the language and the bureaucracy. The same applies to artists: It's easy to start here; if you want visibility; if you want a place to showcase. Everybody can be an artist here. It's not so much about quality. On the other hand, money and stardom are not to be found here. You can be an artist and hit the stage, but you will not earn much.

So, yes, you have the freedom, sure. But everything else is harder. Berlin makes you get used to living poor. A lot depends on the connections you have. It's all very cliquy. I'm going to focus on something much simpler.

J.G.: And this simpler thing is your foundation?

M.S.: When I was still working in cybersecurity, I started noticing how big the topic of misinformation had become. Egypt is such a test bed for misinformation. Many of the tactics we have seen in practice were created and tested in 2011 and 2015.

J.G.: So, you feel stranded in Berlin?

M.S.: First of all, we all feel stranded when we're forced to leave our homes. It doesn't matter. Does it become home eventually, though? You spend four years in a place, and whether you like it or not, it becomes home.

J.G.: Yeah, and I think it's a bit like Cairo, you either love it in the first two days, or you will always hate it.

M.S.: No. No matter who you are, you will hate Berlin in your first six months. Because that's when you are dealing with your *Anmeldung*, getting your rental, and sorting out the apartment. And, mind you, I went through that in 2019.

J.G.: When it was still very easy to find an apartment.

M.S.: Yes, but it was very difficult to do anything else. You couldn't even pay for the gym with your credit card back then; you had to have a German IBAN. If it hadn't been for COVID-19 and the need to digitalize payments, we would still be in the early 2000s here.

So I don't feel stranded in Berlin. It comes from the nature of the city itself. Every city has anxiety. In Cairo, the energy is there, and it's not the relaxing kind. It was always, like, who am I going to fight, who's going to f*ck with me? It comes from what happens to us all on the city streets. Inside your house, you're fine. But if you have to go from point A to point B in Cairo, it is endlessly stressful. New York's anxiety is different. There it's The Machine that will grind you and spew you out, even if you are just sitting at home. You always have to be doing something, you always have to be earning money.

Berlin's anxiety is knowing that it's where everything is supposed to work, but it doesn't: The heaven that's so imperfect that it's actually hell. Everything is imprecise. You're always running around, solving some bureaucratic BS, and you will never ever truly save money. Because Germany is a scam when it comes to salary. They have somehow managed to convince their people that it's cool to be poor. Many white Germans will never question living on 1,800 euros a month in a country this rich. And many will live and die without making much more.

J.G.: Ok, well, you're destroying the Berlin dream. Deconstructing the "poor but sexy" mentality.

M.S.: Yes, but have you seen the rents lately? Poor it is not. But there is something I want to say. I might be very critical, but you know what? That's only because I am adapting. Everybody here constantly complains about the weather, legality, and lack of opportunities. But at the end of the day, I am not sure any of us are serious about moving anywhere else. Berlin seems to have the same inescapable magnetic energy

Cairo has – that thing that keeps people in places where they are not necessarily happy and that they think about leaving all the time. Berlin has replaced Cairo as the place we wish to escape from, but for some reason, we don't do anything about it. After all, we may not all be refugees here in the legal sense, but we are in every other way that counts.