

[Home](#) » [World](#) » Article

The power of the pen, and the sword of Islam

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A MIDDLE-AGED Californian woman emerges briefly from her kitchen carrying a tray weighed down with a pot of coffee and a plate of fresh croissants and doughnuts.

Moments later she is back, this time brandishing a vast slice of pumpkin pie. "I'm sorry," says Nonie Darwish, with a half-apologetic smile. "You are my guest. I can't help my upbringing."

With her sense of hospitality and her accent, Darwish, 57, still carries much of the Middle East about her. In the front room of her Los Angeles home, she is caught between the old world and the new.

On the coffee table there is a model of the Statue of Liberty next to a replica of Anubis, the ancient Egyptian jackal god of the dead, and a copy of the American edition of Melanie Phillips' *Londonistan* rests on a gold-embossed Bible.

In her native Egypt, she is the daughter of a hero, a soldier killed while fighting the hated Israelis. In America, she is a hero, a Muslim-born woman who stands up for the Jews and Israel, and speaks out against the oppression by Islam against her sex.

Her website, the provocatively titled *Arabs for Israel*, promotes Muslim support for the Jewish state. These are controversial messages that have seen her banned from the campus of at least one Ivy League university. Her email inbox bulges with insults. "Sometimes they say things like 'Jihad is our pride' or 'You are a pig and an ape like the pigs and apes you defend'."

She reflects a moment. "But I don't think I've ever really had a serious death threat," she says.

This does not mean that it is safe to print the name of the Los Angeles suburb in which she lives. Outside the front door of the large, mock Tudor house, three little concrete pigs hold up a welcome message, but in the flower bed the security sign warns intruders of "armed response".

It is 50 years since the moment that has defined most of her life. In July 1956 a parcel bomb from Israeli intelligence killed her father. Colonel Mustafa Hafez was a Feyadeen commander, an Egyptian intelligence officer who organised lethal raids from Gaza, which killed hundreds of Jews, including many civilians.

The bomb was Israel striking back against a man many saw as the de facto ruler of the territory.

At the time, Gaza was under Egyptian military control. Overnight, Colonel Hafez was



For women, Sharia law is the problem, says Nonie Darwish.

transformed into a shahid, a martyr to the Arab cause.

After a state funeral, Darwish, along with her brother who was also injured in the blast, and her three sisters, was summoned to a meeting with President Nasser and senior officials.

"We were asked, 'Which one of you will avenge your father's blood by killing Jews?' And we all looked at each other, my siblings and I, wondering which one of us will say 'me'."

Darwish was eight years old and destined for a life as the dutiful daughter of an Arab national hero. Yet remarkably, she rebelled.

"In Gaza elementary school the indoctrination was incredible," she says. "It's worse now, of course, but I remember in the playground we used to sing songs with words like: 'The Arabs are our friends, the Jews are our dogs'."

Her father had been killed by Jews. But the anger the young girl felt left her confused. She was surrounded by people urging her down the path of jihad. "It made me feel that, if I really loved my father, I'd have to avenge his death. But the knowledge that I didn't want to kill anybody ... it made me think: 'Am I being loyal?'"

"I loved my father. How come I don't want to kill anybody, even though they killed him? They filled our hearts with the fear of Jews. And when you do that to a child, hatred becomes very easy and terrorism becomes a virtue. It becomes acceptable."

She confesses to many years of resentment. "I hated Israel. Oh, God, how I hated the Jews. But now I can look at it more as a historical event. The pain and the anger have subsided, and now I really understand why Israel wanted to kill my father."

As she grew up, Darwish began observing the world around her with a more critical eye. She noticed the humiliations heaped on her mother as a woman without a husband.

"It really brought home the impossible situation that society — Arab society, Muslim society — puts on women who are by themselves.

"Even buying a car as a woman was fraught. In the 1950s very few Egyptian women drove cars. Everybody said, 'What kind of widow is this? Only loose women would do something like that.' My mother really suffered from criticism like that. She would say, 'Isn't it enough that we lose our husbands? Now we can't handle our own lives?' "

After leaving school, Darwish enrolled at the American University in Cairo. At the same time, the family hired a new maid.

"She was about 18, and I was about the same age. My mother noticed her stomach was a little heavier than normal. She thought she was just fat at first and then she realised.

"This was horrific news. I had never heard of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy."

The maid had been raped by a previous employer. She was later sent to have the child at a government hospice for unmarried women.

Later, Darwish discovered that the girl had vanished. Darwish's family was told by the agency that recruited the girl that her family had taken care of her "disgrace". She had been murdered

in an "honour" killing.

There is a core of quiet anger that runs through Darwish like a pulse. Thirty years later, she has children of her own, including two daughters. It is a life she has never taken for granted, for herself or her children. As a young woman in Cairo, Darwish became a journalist with the Middle East News Agency, and fell in love with a Coptic Christian, a member of a religious group long persecuted in the Arab world. Her husband-to-be had to convert to Islam before the wedding could take place: "Otherwise I would have been rejected by my family."

Darwish was 30 when her in-laws emigrated en masse to the US, and she and her husband decided to follow them to California.

The couple later divorced, and Darwish had to support her family by going to work. She has since remarried, to an American man with whom she has a daughter.

It is an unremarkable story for a divorced woman by Western standards, yet one that would have been impossible in the world she left behind.

Her experiences are the ammunition for a powerful and sustained attack on the values of the Islamic world, both on the lecture circuit and through her book *Now They Call Me Infidel*, a bestseller in America. With its subtitle, *Why I Renounced Jihad for America, Israel and the War on Terror*, it has made Darwish one of the heroines of the conservative right.

What raises her above the usual rhetoric of debate is the fact that she knows of what she speaks.

On the subject of honour killings, she explains: "It doesn't make sense in the West, but I can understand it. The honour of the man in the Middle East is so linked to the sexual purity of their wives and daughters.

"Society will shame you to death. This pressure does not exist in the West."

Last year she was banned from the campus of Brown University, in Rhode Island, one of America's most important academic institutions.

A speaking invitation came jointly from a Jewish student group and the women's studies department, but was abruptly withdrawn, allegedly after pressure from Brown's Muslim chaplain, who claimed that Darwish had made anti-Islamic remarks and that her presence would be provocative.

The university's female Christian chaplain backed the ban, although it was pointed out that she had promoted an earlier Palestinian solidarity week. The inevitable row catapulted the affair — and the book — into the headlines. Alarmed at the suggestion that they were gagging free speech, the authorities at Brown issued a fresh invitation.

Darwish was allowed to return in February. Her message remained the same. Nonie Darwish has no time for Western liberal notions of moral equivalence when dealing with the constraints Islamic society places on women.

"I come from a culture that's very sensitive to criticism," she says. "We were never brought up to look at what we had done to cause a particular problem.

"It's always about blaming others, saying, maybe it's the next-door neighbour who did it, or, no, it's the next town, or another country, or other religions.

"It's never, 'What have we done?' or, 'What is our part in this tragedy?' And if you do admit, 'We've made a mistake and we are sorry for it', you become the bearer of the sin and everything will be thrown at you."

Her mother still lives in Cairo, but he is now too frail to travel to America, and although very little publicity has been given to her activism in Egypt, Darwish is no longer sure that it would be safe to visit. She recently turned down an interview request from Dubai satellite channel al-Arabiya: "I didn't want my family in Egypt to be upset and I didn't want a fatwa against me."

It has been more than five years since mother and daughter last saw each other, when Darwish took her children to Egypt for the first time. "I was amazed at how radical it had become.

"When I was at university women were wearing miniskirts. Nobody was covered from head to toe like they are now."

Returning to Los Angeles, the family spent much of the flight home discussing what they had just seen.

"I was very depressed. Every foreign man in Egypt is viewed as the CIA, every blonde woman a Zionist spy. There is always this conspiracy. All this anger."

They arrived home on the evening of September 10, 2001. "I woke up the next morning, turned on the television and — lo and behold. Immediately, I knew that this was the anger we had left behind."

To Darwish, Sharia law is the problem that any woman in the Middle East must face. "You can't live alone — as a woman you must live with your husband or your parents. If you have sex out of wedlock you could go to prison. If you want to convert — become a Buddhist, for example, — you can go to jail for it. When push comes to shove, Sharia law does not protect women. It's the stumbling block, it's what's making Islam impossible to change."

Finding her voice has, she says, been "a gradual process", marked by pivotal moments, such as the time her brother — injured when her father was killed — had a stroke. His life was saved by doctors at an Israeli hospital. She still remembers the respect and compassion the medical staff showed to all their patients, regardless of faith.

Darwish converted to Christianity 10 years ago. Some of her supporters have argued that she would be a more effective voice if she had remained a Muslim.

"But I needed a spiritual life, I needed to be among a religious community that wants me to be a better person.

"I was flipping channels on a Sunday morning and I saw this preacher who touched me. He was praying for the whole world, for humanity, for love and friendship. Your neighbour could be Japanese, or a Jew, or a Muslim. You should still love them. This is not a message I heard in mosques."

But principles come at a cost. She misses the hospitality of ordinary Egyptians and a family she

may never see again.

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