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052147535X - Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945

Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski

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Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski examine the development of nationalism among the Egyptian middle class during the 1930s and 1940s, and its growing awareness of an Arab and Muslim identity. Before the 1940s, Egypt did not define itself in these terms, but adopted a territorial and isolationist outlook. It is the revolutionary transformation in Egyptian self-understanding which took place during this period that provides the focus of this study. The authors demonstrate how the growth of an urban middle class of traditionalist background, combined with Egypt's economic and political failures in the 1930s, eroded the foundations of the earlier order. Alongside domestic events, the momentum of Arabism abroad and the impact of regional events, such as the crisis in neighboring Palestine, necessitated Egyptian involvement. Egypt's present position as a major player in Arab, Muslim, and Third World affairs has its roots in the fundamental transition of Egyptian national identity at this time.

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Redefining the Egyptian nation, 1930–1945

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
 40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1995
 First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Gershoni, I.
 Redefining the Egyptian nation, 1930-1945 / Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski
 p. cm. – (Cambridge Middle East studies; 2)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 47535 X

1. Nationalism – Egypt – History – 20th century.

2. Egypt – Politics and government – 1919-1952.

I. Jankowski, James P., 1937- . II. Title. III. Series.

DT107.82.G43 1995

320.5'4'0962-dc20 94-31795 CIP

ISBN 0 521 47535 X hardback
 ISBN 0 521 52330 3 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2005

Cambridge University Press
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For
John and Ann
Michal and Nimrod

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Preface

Studies of nationalism in modern Egypt have usually focused on the political struggle against Great Britain and the British Occupation of Egypt. The topics which bulk largest in such works are the changing relationship between occupier and occupied, the history of the various political movements striving for Egyptian independence, and the successive phases of the struggle for national liberation.

This work considers Egyptian nationalism from a somewhat different perspective. Although taking account of the external political conflict with imperialism, it emphasizes the social, the intellectual, and the internal political dimensions of nationalism. Its central concern is the creation and dissemination of new Egyptian national images and frameworks of identity. In part the history of Egyptian nationalism involves the contest for political authority and the competition among rival political forces; but it also involves the larger historical process of Egyptian collective self-definition.

In what follows, we address the evolution of Egyptian national identity on both the conceptual/intellectual and the operative/political levels. In terms of the former, we attempt to isolate and reconstruct the answers Egyptians gave to such fundamental questions concerning their national identity as “Who are we?” “What do we want?” “What are we to become?” In terms of the latter, we endeavor to determine the practical answers given by Egyptians to more concrete questions like “Where does Egypt fit in the world?” “Which policies best serve the interests of the Egyptian nation?” The complex and sometimes conflicting responses given to these questions by different Egyptians at different times, and the tactics by which different groups and forces attempted to impose their answers at the expense of others, are our subject-matter. In short, our work is an attempt to trace the evolving nationalist discourse of Egyptians in the period from 1930 to 1945. It is an essay in Egyptian self-understanding.

Basic to our task is delineating the various systems of Egyptian nationalist thought and action that were first articulated in this period. Each of the major new nationalist approaches of the era receives separate and extended attention. However, we also identify an overarching trend subsuming these

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individual nationalist variants. All the new forms of nationalist imagining and policy developed between 1930 and 1945 shared the common feature of being *supra-Egyptian* in character. In contrast to the territorially defined and exclusivist form of nationalism prevailing in Egypt in the 1920s, all shared an aspiration to connect Egyptian national identity or Egyptian-ness to peoples and regions beyond the Nile Valley. As an umbrella concept, supra-Egyptianism comprehends the several new definitions of Egyptian national identity which became prominent after 1930 – “Easternism,” Islamicism, Arabism, and integral Egyptian nationalism. The first three linked Egyptian national identity to the external referents of the Islamic community, the Arab nation, and the “East”; the last expressed the conviction that Egypt had a role of leadership extending to the same peoples and regions. Both “supra” and “Egyptianism” are important; “supra-Egyptianism” denotes both the outward thrust of these approaches and their belief in a perduring Egyptian reality within the external arenas with which they saw Egypt as being affiliated.

Methodologically we have been guided particularly by Quentin Skinner’s dictum that “a knowledge of the writer’s intention in writing . . . is not merely relevant to, but is actually *equivalent* [Skinner’s emphasis] to, a knowledge of the meaning of what he writes.”¹ Recovering authorial intent demands a two-pronged, “internal” as well as “external,” strategy. An internal inquiry traces the evolution of a text within the conceptual field defined by prevailing symbolic conventions, linguistic usages, and ideological assumptions. An author intends that his text be recognizable and legitimate within the canonical parameters of communication about a given topic.² An external inquiry, on the other hand, examines the social setting of both author and text. An author is laden with the baggage of his or her environment; texts are conditioned by contexts.³ There is, of course, space between these two variables for an author to exercise his or her discretion and originality. The parallel dynamics shaped by internal textual field and external social environment, along with the author’s ability to maneuver within these frameworks, comprise the complex set of variables determining authorial intent.

But authors do not act in isolation in the generation of ideas. Authors or “producers” of ideas write (or at least publish) for audiences or “consumers” of ideas. Consumers do not always consume everything presented to them; some ideas are rejected. Nor is the consumption of texts by consumers a passive exercise. In the course of appropriating ideas, consumers engage in a conscious act of interpretation and sometimes even reproduction. The publics receiving ideas reconstruct meanings in terms that suit their norms and values and that complement their modes of feeling

and expression. Such reconstruction can also reverberate back on the producers of texts. The manner in which ideas are received and reconstructed by audiences can in time create a feedback loop in which authors adapt their production to meet the demands of their consumers.⁴

Our study places special emphasis on the mechanism of the feedback loop between authors and audience, producers and consumers of ideas, in the generation of supra-Egyptian nationalism. In our view, the consumers of ideas played a crucial role in shaping the content of Egyptian nationalist thought and policy in the period under discussion. To a considerable degree the new supra-Egyptian nationalism of the era was sculpted from below, as both intellectual and political elites adapted themselves to the values and desires of a new Egyptian public emerging over the interwar period.

This feedback model which takes consumer influence into account in large part explains the eventual ascendancy of supra-Egyptian nationalist imaginings over the earlier territorial and Western-influenced nationalism embedded in Egypt's Pharaonic heritage which had been dominant in Egypt before 1930.⁵ Egyptian territorial nationalism developed before the revolution in Egyptian literacy which brought larger and previously marginal social strata into active involvement in Egyptian public life. These strata were more deeply rooted in Arab-Islamic modes of expression than the smaller and more Westernized elite of the previous generation. As they entered nationalist dialogue, they naturally propounded a nationalist outlook in line with their values and background. They also influenced established opinion-makers. Upon their arrival in the public arena as a new audience with whom Egyptian intellectuals and politicians had to deal, the elite producers of nationalist concepts and policies found the inclinations of their audience reflected back upon them. In an ongoing negotiation, Egyptian nationalist ideologues and politicians alike adjusted their message to match the propensities of a changing audience.

Thus a major object of our inquiry is a consideration of precisely who these new consumers of Egyptian nationalism were, what criteria they used in selecting among the cultural and political options available to them, and what effect their outlook had on both the producers of Egyptian nationalist concepts and the formulators of Egyptian national policy. We also examine the crucial mediational role played by Egypt's secondary intellectuals – teachers, journalists, editorialists, organizational spokesmen – who, while not the most prominent articulators of new nationalist ideas or the primary shapers of new national policies, nonetheless were pivotal in transmitting concepts from the top down as well as relaying consumer reaction from the bottom up. Many of these secondary intellectuals themselves derived from newly participatory strata, and thus tended to imbue nationalist discourse with a more Arab-Islamic hue.

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The emergence of a new audience of Egyptian nationalist consumers along with the feedback effects of their selective consumption of nationalist ideas and policies together played a central role in the gradual ascent of a more supra-Egyptian nationalist outlook. The capacity of newly literate and newly politicized Egyptians of a more Arab and Islamic background to assimilate nationalist concepts as their own depended on the redirection of those concepts into more Arab-Islamic channels. The entry of these middle strata into the negotiation over national identity was the decisive event shaping the evolution of Egyptian nationalism; it in large part accounts for its relentless Islamicization, Arabization, and “Easternization” on the one hand, its de-Westernization and “de-Pharaonicization” on the other.

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Acknowledgments

We have incurred debts to many institutions and individuals in the process of working on this study. Financial and logistical assistance was provided at various points of time by the Fund for Basic Research of Tel Aviv University; by the Department of History and the Council on Research and Creative Work of the University of Colorado; and by the American Philosophical Society.

We wish to thank the staff of the Egyptian National Library (Cairo) and the Public Record Office (London) for their assistance on several research trips to those institutions. Much of the writing of the work was completed at the Middle East Centre of St. Antony's College, Oxford. We are indebted to the Warden and Fellows of the College, to the Director of the Centre Dr. Derek Hopwood and its Fellows Drs. Roger Owen, M. M. Badawi, and Celia Kerslake, and its staff members Elizabeth Anderson, Diane Ring, and Angela Mills, for making our stay in Oxford a pleasant as well as a productive one.

Many colleagues and friends provided advice and stimulation. The late Professor Albert Hourani was a source of wisdom and insight about the modern Middle East. The works and views on nationalism of the late Professor Elie Kedourie repeatedly stimulated our own thinking about the subject. Professor Emmanuel Sivan demonstrated concern and offered important counsel, Professor Itamar Even-Zohar was the source of invaluable theoretical insights, and Professor Avi Shlaim offered indispensable assistance in the process of publication. We also wish to thank Sa'id al-'Ashmawi, Haggai Erlich, the late Husayn Fawzi, Boyd Hill, Robert Hohlfelder, Robert Jancu, Philip Kennedy, Hafiz Mahmud, Ralph Mandel, Charles Middleton, Gabi Piterberg, Robert Schulzinger, Yaacov Shavit, Kenneth Stein, Ehud Toledano, and Ursula Wokoek, all of whom provided information, advice, and/or support as our work progressed. The views and judgments found in the study are of course our responsibility, not theirs.

We are enormously grateful to the readers and staff of Cambridge University Press for their assistance in the process of evaluation, revision, and publication. The anonymous readers of the manuscript provided numerous

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valuable suggestions for refining the contents of the study. Marigold Acland has been a gracious and most helpful editor; her guidance has improved the work immensely. Margaret Deith did a meticulous job of copy-editing.

Our greatest debt is to our families, who put up with innumerable alterations and disruptions of their own lives and plans in order to facilitate our collaboration. Our work could never have been completed without the patience, encouragement, and support provided by Shoshi and Mary Ann. The demands imposed by the research and writing of this study have also shaped the lives of Michal and Nimrod, John and Ann (we hope for the better). Thank you all.

Abbreviations of Arabic periodicals

<i>AA</i>	<i>al-'Alam al-'Arabi</i>	<i>MĴ</i>	<i>al-Majalla al-Ĵadida</i>
<i>AD</i>	<i>al-Adib</i>	<i>MK</i>	<i>al-Makshuf</i>
<i>AH</i>	<i>al-Ahram</i>	<i>MQ</i>	<i>al-Muqtataf</i>
<i>AN</i>	<i>al-Ansar</i>	<i>MR</i>	<i>al-Manar</i>
<i>AR</i>	<i>al-'Arab (Jerusalem)</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>Mir'at al-Sharq</i>
<i>ARB</i>	<i>al-'Arab (Cairo)</i>	<i>MSR</i>	<i>al-Musawwar</i>
<i>BL</i>	<i>al-Balagh</i>	<i>MSU</i>	<i>Mulhaq al-Siyasa</i>
<i>BU</i>	<i>al-Balagh al-Usbu'i</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>Majallati</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>al-Dustur</i>	<i>MU</i>	<i>al-Muqattam</i>
<i>FH</i>	<i>al-Fath</i>	<i>ND</i>	<i>al-Nadhir</i>
<i>FI</i>	<i>Filastin</i>	<i>NF</i>	<i>al-Nahda al-Fikriyya</i>
<i>HD</i>	<i>al-Hidaya al-Islamiyya</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>Nur al-Islam</i>
<i>HI</i>	<i>al-Hilal</i>	<i>RA</i>	<i>al-Rabita al-'Arabiyya</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>al-Hadith</i>	<i>RI</i>	<i>al-Risala</i>
<i>IM</i>	<i>al-Ikhwān al-Muslimun</i>	<i>RS</i>	<i>al-Rabita al-Sharqiyya</i>
<i>ĴA</i>	<i>al-Ĵami'a al-'Arabiyya</i>	<i>RY</i>	<i>Ruz al-Yusuf</i>
<i>ĴH</i>	<i>al-Ĵihad</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>al-Sarkha</i>
<i>ĴI</i>	<i>al-Ĵami'a al-Islamiyya</i>	<i>SB</i>	<i>al-Shabab</i>
<i>ĴĴ</i>	<i>al-Ĵil al-Ĵadid</i>	<i>SH</i>	<i>al-Sha'b</i>
<i>KI</i>	<i>al-Kitab</i>	<i>SI</i>	<i>al-Siyasa</i>
<i>KL</i>	<i>al-Khulud</i>	<i>SĴ</i>	<i>al-Sharq al-Ĵadid</i>
<i>KM</i>	<i>al-Katib al-Misri</i>	<i>SM</i>	<i>al-Shubban al-Muslimun</i>
<i>KS</i>	<i>Kawkab al-Sharq</i>	<i>SQ</i>	<i>al-Sirat al-Mustaqim</i>
<i>KW</i>	<i>al-Kutla al-Wafdiyya</i>	<i>SU</i>	<i>al-Siyasa al-Usbu'iyya</i>
<i>LI</i>	<i>Liwa' al-Islam</i>	<i>TH</i>	<i>al-Thughr</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>al-Ma'rifa</i>	<i>TQ</i>	<i>al-Thaqafa</i>
<i>MF</i>	<i>Misr al-Fatah</i>	<i>WM</i>	<i>al-Wafd al-Misri</i>
<i>MGQ</i>	<i>Majallat Ghurfat al-Qahira</i>	<i>WN</i>	<i>Wadi al-Nil</i>
<i>MI</i>	<i>al-Misri</i>	<i>ZA</i>	<i>al-Zahra'</i>