Redefining the Egyptian nation, 1930–1945

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1   The roots of supra-Egyptian nationalism in modern Egypt

The 1930s were a crucial decade in the evolution of modern Egypt. Many things changed in Egypt between the onset of the world depression in late 1929 and the outbreak of World War II ten years later. Not the least of these changes was a major shift in the character of Egyptian nationalism. In place of the exclusivist territorial nationalism which had marked the 1920s, the period after 1930 witnessed the development of new supra-Egyptian concepts of national identity.

Three processes laid the basis for the emergence of supra-Egyptian nationalism. One was the manifest economic and political difficulties of Egypt in the 1930s, difficulties which produced a widespread mood of disillusionment with the existing Egyptian order and which led many Egyptians to question the territorial nationalist premises upon which that order was based. A second development was the changing social composition of the articulate Egyptian public after 1930 – the physical growth and growing political importance of a larger urban and literate population which was less thoroughly Westernized than the smaller Egyptian elite of the previous generation, and correspondingly whose nationalist inclinations were toward greater identification with Egypt's Arab and Muslim neighbors. The third was the gradual growth of a variety of new institutional as well as personal contacts between Egyptians and other Arabs, contacts which over time reinforced an Egyptian identification with Arab nationalism in particular. It was the conjunction of the disillusionment and alienation of the 1930s, the emergence of a new generation different in both social composition and intellectual perspective from its predecessor, and the increasing integration of Egypt with the surrounding Arab world which together laid the foundations for supra-Egyptian nationalism

Egypt in the 1930s

After a decade of relative prosperity in the 1920s, the 1930s were a period of severe economic contraction in Egypt. The Great Depression had an almost-immediate impact upon Egypt. The world price of cotton, Egypt's

main export, dropped from $26.00/*qantar* in 1928 to $10.00 in 1931.[1] Between 1928 and 1933, the relative value of all Egyptian exports is estimated to have declined by one-third.[2] With declining trade came a significant deterioration in Egyptian living conditions. According to Bent Hansen's calculations, the rise in real per capita income and disposable income which had characterized Egypt in the 1920s was reversed in the 1930s, with both declining by about 10 percent between 1929 and 1937 and with per capita income reverting to its immediate pre-World War I level by the late 1930s.[3] The average daily wage of an Egyptian laborer could buy 8 kilograms of maize in 1929, but only 3.5 in 1933; as a result, per capita consumption of both maize and beans, two Egyptian staples, declined by over 20 percent between 1929 and 1933.[4]

The Egyptian political system also experienced major difficulties in the 1930s. Something close to a Palace-oriented dictatorship emerged in 1930, when Isma'il Sidqi was appointed prime minister and dismissed the Wafdist-controlled parliament, abrogated the Constitution of 1923, introduced a more autocratic replacement in its stead, and rigged the elections of early 1931 to obtain a pliant parliamentary majority. The years of Sidqi's premiership from 1930 through 1933 were ones of political polarization, repression, and violence.[5] A major shift in Egyptian politics occurred late in 1935, when massive student demonstrations and the formation of a united front by Egypt's political parties forced the restoration of the Constitution of 1923; in the following year, free elections returned the Wafd to office. Although the party remained in power for a longer period than at any time in the past (May 1936 to December 1937), by late 1937 internal schism, opposition from its parliamentary rivals, violence between its supporters and its opponents, and the erosion of its position due to repeated conflicts with the young and popular King Faruq all combined to weaken the Wafdist ministry to the point where the king could dismiss it from office. From the beginning of 1938 until the eve of World War II, Egypt was ruled by unstable coalition ministries headed by the Liberal leader Muhammad Mahmud. Decisive power in Egyptian political life in 1938–9 did not reside in the ministry, however; it rested in the Egyptian Palace and the coterie of conservative and/or opportunist advisors around King Faruq, men whose political ideas revolved around the use of religious and traditionalist themes to institutionalize royal autocracy in Egypt.[6]

Both the economic difficulties produced by the depression and the factionalized, repressive, and often violent course of Egyptian public life through the 1930s had enormous repercussions for the mental outlook of Egyptians. In place of the optimism which had prevailed in the 1920s after the attainment of independence as a result of the Revolution of 1919,[7] a widespread mood of disillusionment set in in Egypt in the 1930s. The

operational impotence of the Wafd *vis-à-vis* the Palace and the British; the inability of the electoral system to reflect popular wishes; the elite-dominated and self-serving nature of parliament; the factionalism and corruption of the country's political parties; the manifest inequalities of the socio-economic order – all these indicated the failure of the new Egyptian state to achieve its proclaimed goals of independence, modernity, and progress. The utopian expectations that the Revolution of 1919 had heralded the inauguration of a new era of freedom, prosperity, and national revival came crashing down under the dual impact of depression and repression.

Many of the specific discontents of Egyptians with the shape of their country in the 1930s were raised in a letter written by the young Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir in 1935.[8] As the future president of Egypt viewed the condition of his country in the mid-1930s, "the situation today is critical; Egypt is in a precarious state." The parliamentary regime was permeated by "corruption and bribery"; the constitution had been abrogated; "patriotism" and "dignity" were dead; another British protectorate threatened the country. "A life of despair and despair with life" now characterized the attitude of patriotic Egyptians. Most telling was Nasir's lament for the lost spirit of commitment and sacrifice which had inspired Egyptians during the Revolution of 1919: "Where is the patriotism which in 1919 ignited a fire in breasts? Where are those who by their words and the thoughts of their hearts defended the ramparts of this blessed, sacred nation, sacrificing their lives for the sake of independence?"[9]

In Egyptian critiques of the political order in the 1930s, two specific institutions came under greatest attack. The first was parliament, which increasingly came to be viewed as a corrupt, unrepresentative, and self-serving body concerned only with promoting the interests of its members and the class which they represented. Tawfiq al-Hakim is perhaps the outstanding example of a former enthusiast of the post-1919 Egyptian national order who by the 1930s was pointing out fundamental flaws in the parliamentary system. Hakim presented the Egyptian parliament as an instrument of one social formation – the large landowners of Egypt. Representatives of the class of large landowners had taken control of parliament, deprived it of any real democratic quality, and through the use of populist rhetoric had mobilized the country's resources for their own benefit.[10] The process through which the landed elite established its control of parliament was the electoral system. For Hakim, Egyptian elections were only "election shows" in which the established elite perpetuated its position through the use of a combination of money, power, and fraud.[11] His description of the electoral procedure followed by a rural official captures Hakim's contempt

for the Egyptian electoral process: "This is what I always have done in elections. Total freedom. I let people vote for whomever they prefer until the voting is over. Afterwards I simply take the ballot box and throw it into the canal. In its place I put our box which we rig at our leisure."[12]

Other Egyptian intellectuals and publicists also denounced the corruption of the parliamentary system. For Muhammad 'Awad Muhammad, Egypt had a system of "parliamentary rule without real democracy"; the laws passed by parliament served to "guard the material interests of the upper classes only."[13] In the view of Ramsis Shahata, the promises so freely made in parliament were never kept; they were just "empty pretense whose only purpose was to blind the masses and to exploit them most shamefully and vilely."[14] After the rigged parliamentary elections of March 1938, Young Egypt's leader Ahmad Husayn was asserting that the electoral process as practiced in Egypt was driven solely by "lust for office" and "desire for personal gain"; as such, electoral results "cannot be considered as an expression of the will of the people."[15] Husayn's colleague Fathi Radwan was even more strident: "We despise the parliamentary system which prevents and hinders work, which turns the country into a stage for oratory and theatrics. The people are starving, yet the deputies wax eloquent; the country is threatened with danger from within and without, yet the minutes of the sessions contain only idle debates which delay more than they expedite affairs."[16]

Equally vehement criticism was directed at the organizations which had turned parliament into such a travesty of what it should have been, namely the established political parties of Egypt. The term which came to encapsulate the various accusations levelled at Egypt's political parties from the 1930s onwards was *hizbiyya* – "partyism" or "factionalism." *Hizbiyya* embodied the transformation of Egyptian politics into an arena for personal and factional power struggles devoid of any higher purpose. It came to be viewed as an incurable sickness in the body politic, "the sickness of factionalism [*marad al-hizbiyya*]" spreading through the body of the nation.[17] *Hizbiyya* had been rarely used in the 1920s; by the 1930s it was becoming a widely accepted term in the Egyptian political lexicon, a symbol of the bankruptcy of Egyptian public life.[18]

In the view of Tawfiq al-Hakim, Egypt's political parties had no economic, social, or even political program.[19] Their social concepts were limited to the idea of charity and the traditional *noblesse oblige* often manifested by elites; paternalism had taken the place of systematic economic and social policy.[20] Indeed, Egyptian parties were not really "parties" in the generally accepted sense of the term:

In Egypt there is no party [*hizb*] in the true sense of the word, a party as the word is understood and used in genuine democratic regimes. Rather, in Egypt there are

separatist factions [*firaq*] called parties. None of these factions has a goal other than dividing up the seats in parliament, obtaining government office, and managing election campaigns through passing out ballots. But as for any program, none of them even thinks about it![21]

Hakim was not alone in his characterization of Egyptian politics as personalized, programless factionalism. A similar critique of the Egyptian political process as being nothing more than "a series of factional struggles which are won by individuals, not by principles, outlooks, or systems, as if politics were a boxing or soccer match," was expressed by Ibrahim al-Misri.[22] Spokesmen for the new anti-parliamentary movements of the 1930s were utterly convinced of the shortcomings of Egypt's political parties. Ahmad Husayn of Young Egypt assailed the Wafd as "not having any clearly defined program" other than that of attaining independence for Egypt.[23] The same was true of the parties which had split off from the Wafd and now competed with it. These parties "have no program and no defined aim except fighting with the Wafd and collaborating with the British as a means of gaining power; they have no interest, internally or externally, save awarding posts in office."[24]

The negative effects of *hizbiyya* reached beyond politics *per se*. In the view of 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Bishri, incessant partisan struggle and the rapid alternation of ministries which resulted from it had done enormous harm to the Egyptian administrative system. In effect, Egyptian bureaucrats had to respond to two masters; the incumbent minister as well as the minister whom they expected to replace him tomorrow. Bureaucratic success was dependent on duplicity; in this fashion, throughout the entire governmental system "morals are completely undermined and the character of men is utterly destroyed."[25] Both Salama Musa and Tawfiq al-Hakim saw repression as the natural result of partisanship. For the former, the bitter party struggles which characterized Egyptian politics meant that all respect for one's opposition was lost. With respect went restraint. Egyptian politicians had lost any sense of the rights of the opposition. Political *hizbiyya* in turn spawned cultural and moral *hizbiyya*; the stifling of freedom of expression of political opponents also resulted in the stifling of cultural expression and creativity.[26] Like Musa, Hakim saw factionalism and the quest for power as aggravating party rivalries and personal animosities to the point where the political opposition became delegitimized. The logical consequences were repression, the denial of freedom of expression to the opposition, and "waging war with every available weapon" by one faction against another.[27] "Our country is drowning in the blood of factionalist war [*al-harb al-hizbiyya*]," he lamented at one point.[28]

For Hakim, the evil effects of *hizbiyya* extended from politics to all areas of Egyptian life. From parliament and the parties, the twin vices of "oppor-

tunism [*wusuliyya*]" and "materialism [*maddiyya*]" had spread to the bulk of Egyptians, corrupting the entire social fabric.[29] Physicians do not treat the sick except for exorbitant fees; in their verdicts judges show partiality and pervert justice; teachers do not devote themselves to educating their students; materialism has infected religious functionaries.[30] Even the family had not escaped the taint of *hizbiyya*. As Egyptians "learned from the politicians" to concern themselves only with their own interests, "the family bond has dissolved and chaos has set in. Fathers have lost control over sons; youth have come to lead adults at home and in politics!"[31]

The failure of the Egyptian parliamentary system to function as a genuine democracy, the crassness of the Egyptian political establishment, and the sterile and destructive factionalism of the parties produced a contempt for politics among many Egyptians by the 1930s. Rather than being the forum for constructive national action, as had been the case in the 1920s, "politics [*al-siyasa*]" acquired a negative image as nothing more than an arena of personalized power struggles. Egyptian politics came to be viewed as lacking any meaningful content; they were a "politics of words" devoid of any real substance for Hakim as well as for Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat, a politics of "silly talk" for Ramsis Shahata.[32] Politics became a term of abuse for disillusioned Egyptians by the 1930s. A similar discrediting of representative government occurred in Europe as well in the 1930s, where it also had the effect of spawning anti-parliamentary attitudes and movements. But in Egypt, this revulsion with "politics" had the additional effect of reverberating negatively upon the Western-inspired form of territorial nationalism which had taken hold in Egypt in conjunction with the parliamentary order.

The mood of discontent and frustration extended beyond politics. The terms often used by intellectuals to characterize Egypt in the 1930s were those denoting a country in "crisis [*azma*]," an Egypt experiencing social "confusion [*idtirab*]," intellectual "perplexity [*haira*]," emotional "anxiety [*qalaq*]," and moral "chaos [*fawda*]." A frequently expressed theme was that of the fragmentation of Egyptian worldviews and values into contradictory schools of thought. For Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat, this cultural confusion manifested itself particularly among the younger generation of Egyptians who were torn between their native Egyptian traditions and the alien values of the West. The new Egyptian intelligentsia found itself living in "an oscillating culture [*thaqafa mudhabdhaba*]," an artificial and unsuccessful patchwork of European cultural values imposed upon an Eastern social structure.[33] Similarly Sayyid Qutb saw contemporary Egyptian culture as being in a state of "confusion [*idtirab*]" in which the values of the "materialist European civilization" spreading in Egypt did not fit with the country's beliefs and customs; the result was bound to be a prolonged

period of "perplexity [*haira*]" and "anxiety [*qalaq*]."[34] As Amin al-Khuli put it, the differing outlooks coexisting but clashing in contemporary Egypt had produced a general condition of "intellectual confusion [*idtirab fikri*]."[35] For Fikri Abaza, the war between "tradition [*taqalid*]" and "imitation [*taqlid*]" presently being fought in Egypt was bringing "a social revolution that begins with chaos [*fawda*] and ends in dissolution [*inhilal*]."[36]

A central theme of these pessimistic representations was the perception that Egypt was losing its internal harmony and solidarity. Cultural division inevitably led to social schism. Thus the "intellectual confusion" which Amin al-Khuli perceived as prevalent in Egypt was also leading to "the severing of the bonds of conviviality and spiritual union, a severing that prevents the social cooperation that the homeland urgently demands of this generation."[37] 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Bishri found social disharmony in the wildly differing dress styles of Egypt; the diverse styles of dress found in contemporary Egypt reflected "life in a tower of Babel."[38] Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahid Khalaf saw the differences and conflicts between the old and new generations as an additional expression of the loss of Egyptian social harmony. The differences between these two generations – in life style, mentality, thought and behavior patterns, political philosophy, cultural and aesthetic taste – were so substantial as to divide Egypt into "two camps struggling with each other."[39] For Zaki Mubarak, Egypt was "suffering from a crisis the likes of which she has never known."[40] At the heart of the crisis were the social divisions which now prevailed in Egypt, the existence of "several publics" who viewed each other with mutual "anxiety and resentment."[41] A passage from Najib Mahfuz's later novel *Mirrors* sums up the sense of despair which had come to prevail among many Egyptians by the 1930s: "There was a crisis [*azma*] in which values sunk to the depths. The self-respect of many people was demolished . . . [It was] an age of earthquakes and erupting volcanos, an age of frustrated dreams and the rise of the two devils of opportunism and crime, an age of martyrs from all classes."[42]

The "new effendiyya" of the 1930s and 1940s

The archetypal Egyptian of the parliamentary era was Misri Effendi. As caricatured in the popular press, Misri Effendi was a short, stout, bespectacled, somewhat disheveled figure. With Western trousers and jacket, half-Western fez, and Eastern prayer beads, Misri Effendi contrasted visually with the even more portly, more elegantly Western-dressed pashas of the upper class as well as with the peasantry in their traditional galabiyyas. His function in the political journalism of the period was that of observer and/or interlocutor; a wry commentator on the follies of rich and poor alike.

العلم نور

(وزير المعارف) : مبسوط منى دلوقت ؟ ... زى ما انت شايف كل يوم بازور مدرسة أو دار للتعليم ...

(المصري افندى) : طيب اياك على الله تتعلم لك حاجة ...

'Knowledge is light' (*Ruz al-Yusuf*, 27 November 1933)

MINISTER OF EDUCATION: Are you satisfied with me now? As you see, every day I visit a school or teachers' college . . .

MISRI EFFENDI: Well, I hope you will learn something . . .

'Of course!' (*Ruz al-Yusuf*, 7 March 1932)

MISRI EFFENDI: What's the story?! Every time an MP presents a question to you, you run after him until he finally retracts it?

THE MINISTERS: Of course! We are too high and exalted, vain and high-ranking for suspicions to be levelled at us.

'Best way to ease the pressure!' (*Ruz al-Yusuf*, 16 October 1933)
(The government declared it has designated a sum of E£1,000,000 to ease the pressure off the fellahs and will look for the best means to this purpose.)

MISRI EFFENDI: The fellah appointed me to tell you not to bother looking. If you really want to ease the pressure on him, get off his back and let him rest, and keep the million pounds!

Behind the caricature lay a complex social reality. "Effendi" (lit. *afandi*) was the term used in Egypt in the early twentieth century to refer to the urban, educated middle class of native Egyptians. In the Egyptian hierarchy of wealth and status the effendi on the one hand stood below both the indigenous political elite (many of Ottoman background, and for whom the Ottoman term *basha/bashawiyya* was employed) and the often European *haute bourgeoisie* who dominated much of the Egyptian economy; on the other side, the effendis of Egypt definitely stood above the country's urban working classes (the *'ummal*) and the masses of its rural peasantry (the *fallahin*).

In positive terms, to be an effendi meant several things. The visual hallmark of the effendi was European-style clothing; trousers, jacket, and fez (Eg. *tarbush*) were the customary uniform of an effendi. Central to the status of effendi was formal education. Egyptians educated in the newly developed, Westernized educational system were the quintessential effendis of early twentieth-century Egypt. Occupationally the term "effendi" spanned many groups: students in the Western-style secondary schools, higher institutes and the Egyptian University who were in the process of becoming effendis; perhaps most typically, civil servants in the bureaucracy and teachers in the modern educational system; clerks in the expanding commercial economy; depending on their dress and education, some of the merchants and employees in the more traditional sectors of the economy; and even a segment of the industrial workforce such as technical school graduates who perceived their education as distinguishing them from other workers.[43] Precise lines are impossible to draw with a term as broad and multifaceted as "effendi"; but its range covered "the bulk of the urban middle class and the petty bourgeoisie."[44] The effendi cohort was the embodiment of modern Egypt; those social formations thrown up by the massive changes of the recent past, and correspondingly most representative of what the nation was in the process of becoming.

What is the relevance of the effendi for Egyptian nationalism? In brief, our argument is that the processes of urbanization, educational expansion, and the formation of new occupational groups which occurred in Egypt under the parliamentary monarchy eventually resulted in the creation of a significantly different effendi population from that found in the early decades of the century. Larger in size as well as more traditional in outlook than the smaller, more Westernized educated upper and middle class of the previous generation who had been the authors and audience of the Egypt-ianist approach dominant in Egypt prior to 1930, this "new effendiyya" population was the most important social group responsible for the move-ment of Egyptian nationalist thought and action away from its earlier territorial nationalist perspective and toward the supra-Egyptianist outlook which emerged in the post-1930 period.

Of all the processes increasing the numbers of politically aware Egyptians under the parliamentary monarchy, urbanization and educational expansion were the most important. Cairo's estimated population of 790,939 in 1917 had increased to 1,312,096 by 1937; comparable figures for Alexandria in 1917 and 1937 are 444,617 and 675,736.[45] Over the same two decades, Egypt's twenty largest towns together increased their population by 54 percent.[46] By 1947, Cairo had a population of over 2 million (2,090,654), while Alexandria was approaching a million (919,024).[47]

The cumulative effects of urbanization had major consequences for Egyptian nationalism. As an (urban) observer noted in 1938, Egypt's rural majority did "not really participate in the national life of the country"; the rural masses were "dead as regards healthy nationalistic life."[48] As more and more Egyptians came to live in an urban setting where they were now exposed to educational opportunities, social pressures, and political stimuli which were absent or attenuated in the village setting, urbanization was an indispensable prerequisite for the enlargement of the nationally involved population of Egypt.

Education is central to the definition of the effendiyya category. The growth of the number of students enrolled in the state educational system from the 1920s to the 1940s was impressive:[49]

Year	Primary	Secondary	Higher
1925/6	210,123	16,979	3,368
1935/6	706,228	45,203	7,515
1945/6	1,039,177	75,096	13,927

Due to educational expansion, the percentage of literate Egyptians reported in the censuses taken in the period of the parliamentary monarchy increased from 13.8 percent in 1927 through 18.6 percent in 1937 to 22.8 percent in 1947.[50]

Increased urbanization and expanded education produced a new human geography in Egypt. One of the most important groups in Egyptian political life in the post-1930 era was the country's growing student population. Whereas in 1925–6 only 15 of every 1,000 Egyptians were enrolled in school, by 1940/1 the ratio had increased to 69/1,000.[51] Of greatest relevance for politics was the rapid increase in the secondary school and university population. Between 1925–6 and 1935–6, enrollment in state secondary schools nearly tripled and enrollment at the Egyptian University more than doubled; by 1945–6, there were more than four times the number of

secondary and university students as there had been twenty years earlier. If secondary school and university students increasingly played a larger role in the public life of their country, one basic reason is that there were more of them to do so.

By the interwar period, the state educational system had eclipsed the parallel religious educational system centered on al-Azhar in both social and political importance. Al-Azhar experienced only minimal growth under the parliamentary monarchy (from 15,826 students in 1918–19 to 18,582 in 1948–9).[52] Smaller in numbers and concerned primarily with occupational issues, the students and graduates of al-Azhar were a declining force in Egyptian public life in the period under discussion, both in the political parties of the older generation and in the movements of the new effendiyya.[53]

The rapid expansion of secondary and higher education under the parliamentary monarchy eventually generated an appreciable Egyptian professional class. The number of doctors and engineers in Egypt each more than doubled from 1927 to 1947, while the number of lawyers nearly doubled.[54] Posts in the government bureaucracy grew by 61 percent over the period from 1940–1 to 1953–4, and grew particularly in the number of educated employees required (from 47,000 to 170,000).[55] Overall, in the decade from 1937 to 1947 the size of occupational groups of a primarily effendi character (government clerks; teachers; medical and legal specialists; engineers; "writers and journalists") is estimated to have increased by almost 40 percent (from 155,500 to 216,500).[56]

The metaphor of the marketplace is heuristically useful for understanding what these processes meant for Egyptian nationalism. Urbanization, educational growth, and occupational shifts combined to generate an ever-increasing number of "consumers" of modern, literate culture. In turn, the growth of the number of consumers of literate culture had major effects on the character of Egyptian cultural production. Quantitatively, the growth of a new and different body of consumers generated a growing volume of cultural production. If any statistic symbolizes the change in the size of Egypt's cultural arena by the 1940s, it is the massive growth reported in the number of "writers and journalists" from 1937 to 1947 (1,200 to 8,200).[57]

This new and larger body of consumers also influenced the content of Egyptian cultural production in the 1930s and 1940s. At the same time as the consumers of ideas are in part shaped through what is available for consumption, they also influence the market through the choices they make in the appropriation of some products and the rejection of others. On the one hand, this growing body of consumers soon generated its own producers of ideas, representatives of the new social groups in the process of formation who expressed ideas congruent with the outlook of the social strata from