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0521534534 - State and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Egypt

Ehud R. Toledano

Excerpt

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## Introduction: the forgotten years

On 7 June 1841, late in the evening, a Russian steamer docked at the port of Alexandria. On board was Kâmil Efendi, emissary of the Ottoman government, bearing an historical edict (*ferman*) from Sultan Abdûlmecit to the Governor of Egypt, Mehmet Ali Paşa. Its tone was firm but conciliatory:

The act of submission which thou hast just made, the assurances of fidelity and devotion which thou hast given, and the upright and sincere intentions which thou hast manifested, as well with regard to myself as in the interest of my Sublime Porte, have come to my sovereign knowledge, and have been very agreeable to me. In consequence, and as the zeal and sagacity by which thou art characterized as likewise the experience and knowledge which thou hast acquired in the affairs of Egypt . . . I grant unto thee the Government of Egypt within its ancient boundaries . . . together with the additional privilege of hereditary succession, and with the following conditions.

Three days later, before noon, the *ferman* was read in public throughout Egypt. A salute was fired from the Citadel in Cairo, and from the coastal forts of Alexandria and the Egyptian ships at harbor.<sup>1</sup>

As the guns of many past victories bid farewell to an era, Egypt was once again restricted to the natural bounds of the Nile Valley. To fully appreciate that striking swing of the pendulum, we should go back one year. By mid 1840, the stage was set for one of the more dramatic events in nineteenth-century Ottoman history. The Governor of Egypt, Mehmet Ali, a self-made *paşa* who had governed Egypt since 1805, seemed to have overstepped his limits. Having occupied Syria since 1832 and won a decisive battle against the sultan's troops at Nezip in June 1839, his forces were now deployed in eastern Anatolia. The Powers of Europe, with the exception of France, were preparing to defend the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, which in their eyes, was being threatened by the Paşa of Egypt. A joint European–Ottoman action was in preparation, and the viceroy, as he was known in Europe, vowed to fight it to the end. Early in January 1840, the British consul-general in Egypt had yet another difficult audience with him:

Mehemet Ali here burst forth violently, that “much words were useless: I dont [*sic*] deny the powers of England nor can I tie her hands; but if they pretend to confine me within the limits (meaning I presume of Egypt) I swear that I will do anything before I submit to

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be thus sacrificed . . . I am an old man, upwards of seventy one, but I will never consent to the cession of them [the territories he occupied outside Egypt] during my life time." The Pasha confirmed this determination with a solemn oath.<sup>2</sup>

Within the following months, however, Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia would coordinate their action and, finally, on 15 July 1840, would sign a convention which, in effect, enjoined Mehmet Ali Paşa to withdraw from all territories held by his forces, in return for the hereditary governorship of Egypt and the Sudan, to be ruled as an autonomous Ottoman province within a few restrictions. "The conditions imposed are dishonourable to me and I will never submit to them," the viceroy told Count Medem, the Russian consul-general in Egypt. "After eight years of labour in Syria," he added, "I will not yield to such humiliation." On an earlier occasion, he spoke of himself as the "oppressed" party, demanding justice and placing his confidence in "Divine Providence". But the Old Paşa knew when the time was ripe to accept reality. He finally succumbed to a joint European task-force which landed in Syria and recovered the occupied territory in the last months of that year.<sup>3</sup>

After some negotiations between the Ottoman government, Mehmet Ali, the signatories to the convention, and France, who had not forcibly resisted the action of the other European Powers, the Edict of Hereditary Governorship was promulgated by the sultan on 1 June 1841. *Inter alia*, it limited the size of the Egyptian army, stipulated that all Ottoman legislation and treaties would apply to Egypt, and prohibited the conclusion of international agreements by the viceroy without prior Ottoman consent. The rapid fall of the Egyptian mini-empire was followed by a gradual, not immediate, political and economic decline. His hopes dashed, his wings clipped, for the remainder of his reign the Paşa would not be the man he had been. Less than three months later, the once-defiant and insolent man meekly responded to a new British consul-general, who inquired about his relations with the sultan: "Oh! everything is now settled, everything is finished, and we shall only have to talk upon commercial matters."<sup>4</sup> The drama ended in a whimper, attention shifted from foreign to domestic affairs, and Egypt entered a new era.

**Prelude to the middle years**

Mehmet Ali's expansionism was not unique in the rich annals of Egypt. Rather, it was yet another attempt – and a fairly successful one – in a long series of similar moves by past and future Egyptian rulers to achieve regional hegemony. Indeed, the swinging of the pendulum between the status of a province in an external empire and that of an imperial center dominating the region is a familiar motif in Egyptian historiography. The very occupation of Egypt by Sultan Selim I in 1517 altered the position of Cairo as the capital of the Mamluk sultanate,

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reducing her to the center of an Ottoman province ruled from Istanbul. Between 1250 and 1517, the country was governed by an elite of emancipated military slaves – the mamluks and their households – which was being constantly replenished by new recruits imported from central and western parts of Asia. The Mamluks, who dominated the region from Cairo, variously controlled the Nile Valley, Syria and Palestine, the Hijaz, and areas along the Red Sea.<sup>5</sup>

The history of Egypt as an Ottoman province is largely the story of the scramble between the central Ottoman government and the Egyptian elite for political power and access to the considerable economic wealth of the province. Through most of the period leading to the nineteenth century, the Porte – or the Sublime Porte, as the central government was referred to in Western sources – was mainly concerned to appropriate that wealth and reallocate it within the Empire. Egypt was administratively and economically incorporated into the Ottoman sphere and, at least during the sixteenth century, was effectively governed from Istanbul. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed a changing relationship between the center and Cairo. For nearly two hundred years, the various local forces in Egypt assumed a dominant role *vis-à-vis* the



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Porte. At the same time, the Istanbul government engaged in a subtle power play involving its official representatives in the province, mamluk warlords, and officers of the imperial regiments – most notably the Janissaries – that had become localized over the years.

The political history of Egypt during those two centuries has been dominated by the internal strife among the major factions mentioned above. Until relatively recently the picture was confused, consisting of an endless inventory of battles among little-known mamluk *beys*, obscure commanders of Janissary units, and unfamiliar Ottoman *paşas*. Battles, massacres, exiles followed each other in a series that seemed unpromising to many historians. The important works of P. M. Holt and André Raymond have changed that historiographic chaos and given much meaning to a period that had been generally deemed stagnant and dull. Holt was mainly concerned with the political story, while Raymond explored the economic and social aspects of life. As often happens, the cultural and intellectual sides remain to be studied, although some beginnings have already been made.<sup>6</sup>

During much of the seventeenth century, the mamluk *beys* appear to have held effective political power in Egypt. In the last third of the century and the first third of the eighteenth century, power shifted to the regiments, especially to the senior Janissary officers. The rest of the century saw what Raymond termed “la domination des beys”; that is, the mamluk households, the Ottoman regiments, and the Ottoman administrative apparatus had merged into a single system controlled by men holding the rank of *bey*. It has been recently suggested that the process might be described as consisting of two general phenomena. In terms of structure, the Ottoman administration assimilated all other structures into its ranks. At the same time, the mamluk pattern of recruitment and socialization predominated within the Ottoman structure. It became a major mechanism of social reproduction for the ruling elite. In other words, the mamluk household was being replicated also in essentially non-mamluk structures, such as the regiments and the provincial administration.<sup>7</sup>

Raymond estimates that the elite, which he calls “la caste dominante/dirigeante,” numbered about 10,000 men and women, while the population of Egypt in the eighteenth century was about 3.5 million. The overwhelming majority consisted of peasants, better known as the *fallāḥīn*, with an urban “proletariat” of artisans, craftsmen, and shopkeepers. The merchants, especially those engaged in long-distance, lucrative trade (Arabic, *tujjār*), and the upper stratum of the religious–judicial–educational hierarchy (Arabic, *‘ulamā*) formed the local notability. A complex and shifting relationship existed between the military-administrative elite and that notability; its purpose was to ensure the appropriation of the surplus and its unequal distribution among the partners.

Thus, during the ascendancy of the Janissary corps, its membership formed

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close ties, of the exploitation/protection type, with the urban population. The leading officers colluded with the wealthy merchants and, to a lesser extent, the top *‘ulamā*, while rank-and-file Janissaries cooperated with artisans and shopkeepers in a mutually beneficial symbiosis. When the mamluk *beys* held effective political power, their allies and conduits to the producing population were mostly the *‘ulamā*, but also, as the political system merged, members of the regiments and their urban artisanal and commercial associates. Generally speaking, the mamluk *beys* derived most of their revenue from rural tax-farms, whereas the Janissaries relied on urban sources of income. The surplus was appropriated through various mechanisms, the most common of which were the urban *muqāṭa‘as* and the rural *iltizāms*. Essentially, these were contracts which delegated to their holders the right to collect taxes for the government in return for the difference between what they managed to exact and the amount owed to the treasury.

The upper echelon of the merchant community owed its wealth to trade in coffee and spices. The better-off *‘ulamā* thrived on the management of public and private endowments (Arabic, *waqfs*), and their less-fortunate brethren engaged in small-scale commercial activities or lived on low income from religious–judicial–educational services which they rendered. Inter-marriage along horizontal lines was common; it strengthened the ties within the elite and forged alliances among the lower ranks of the urban and rural population. Raymond observes, however, that because they relied much more on rural revenue and support, the mamluk *beys* were less integrated into the urban fabric than the Janissaries and the other regiments, who better understood the utilitarian limit of exploitation. Hence, the mamluks’ ascendancy over the Janissary coalition during the last three decades of the eighteenth century resulted in unmitigated oppression of the urban population. The French occupation (1798–1801) dealt a major blow to the power of the *beys*, which Mehmet Ali Paşa terminated a decade later.

In socio-political terms, Egypt was not much different from other Ottoman provinces during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Throughout the empire, the balance between center and periphery was shifting, and a concomitant integration of imperial forces into provincial society was taking place. Istanbul adjusted her policy accordingly, playing her hand with due flexibility in order to retain as much revenue as was possible in the new circumstances.<sup>8</sup> However, relations between the central government and the provinces were to assume a closer, more direct nature in the nineteenth century. Under the governorship of Mehmet Ali, Egypt was a striking exception to that rule. The viceroy increased his autonomy and carved out a mini-empire inside the Ottoman state. Operating within the political culture and playing by its rules of conduct, he took over the state, strengthened it, and reshaped in many ways the nature of its relation to society.

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During the first decade of his reign, Mehmet Ali Paşa gradually eliminated his rivals, actual and potential, concentrating all political and economic power in his own hands. Moreover, at the same time he recaptured for the sultan the important Ottoman possessions in Arabia – lost to the Wahhābīs – thereby acquiring recognition as the major regional power. From that enviable but dangerous position, Mehmet Ali launched the most ambitious, bold, costly, and painful program of reforms implemented in the Ottoman lands until then. His reforms were inspired by the Western model and guided by European experts. They centered around the army, but also induced economic, social, and cultural changes mainly on the upper echelons of Egyptian society that won for the Paşa the debatable title – “Founder of Modern Egypt.”<sup>9</sup>

However, Mehmet Ali was no benign reformer, nor was his “revolution from above” a white one. Rather, he was an ambitious political and military leader who dragged Egypt into a series of bloody regional wars. By the end of the 1830s, his rule had spread from the Sudan in the south to Eastern Anatolia in the north, with an offshoot in the Isle of Crete. The Egyptian army and navy were stronger than any other Middle Eastern military configuration, and the Paşa seemed virtually unstoppable. His network of independent contacts took his emissaries to the Yemen and to Muscat and the Persian Gulf. His pressing demand for a considerable measure of independence from the Porte was a challenge to his Ottoman sovereign that could no longer be contained. Thus, in the final reckoning, we must take account of the enormous human and material cost of his unrelenting desire to extend his power and dominions.

If the historical Edict of 1841 marked the limit of Mehmet Ali’s political accomplishments, it also created the first dynastic rule in a major, Muslim, Asian territory of the Ottoman crown, though Egypt still remained under Ottoman sovereignty. Whereas sovereignty and power are related, the former is a legal concept, the latter is practical and has to be measured by capability. Ultimately, Mehmet Ali’s power could win for him no more than political autonomy, the governorship of Egypt for life, and a promise of hereditary rule. The long-term degree of political autonomy and the consolidation of hereditary rule remained to be thrashed out between his heirs and the Ottoman government. Although against the letter and the spirit of the edict, symbols of statehood were gradually being adopted by Egyptian rulers. Full sovereignty, however, would still elude them for many decades to come.

**Themes of mid-nineteenth-century Egyptian history**

Mehmet Ali cast a giant shadow over the fortunes of his successors. His image loomed larger than life, dwarfing his grandson Abbas (ruled 1848–1854), his son Sait (1854–1863), and, to a certain extent, even his grandson Ismail (1863–1879); only Ibrahim (1848), survived by his father, seemed to have escaped a

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similar fate. The model that the Paşa had set for reform and glory was rejected by Abbas, who tried to proceed along a different path. To him fell the difficult task of entrenching a dynastic order in Egypt and making hereditary government a permanent reality. To him, too, was left the struggle with the central government over the degree of autonomy which Egypt would continue to enjoy. And, finally, it was he who had to steer the wheel of reform in a realistic direction, adjusting it to the needs and capabilities of the people.

If the first years of the middle decades were marked by the declining powers of Mehmet Ali Paşa, the rest of the period belonged to the reigns of Abbas and Sait. Before we attempt to characterize the social and political realities of the time, a word about the careers of the two men in order. The following are only brief sketches of two little-known figures, whose lives were lost somewhere between the heroism of Mehmet Ali and the extravagance of Ismail. Indeed, the substance of the present work as a whole is the flesh of these skeleton biographies. It also attempts to show that, contrary to received wisdom, the reign of Abbas was of pivotal importance in the middle years of the nineteenth century, much more so than the longer and favorably viewed reign of Sait.

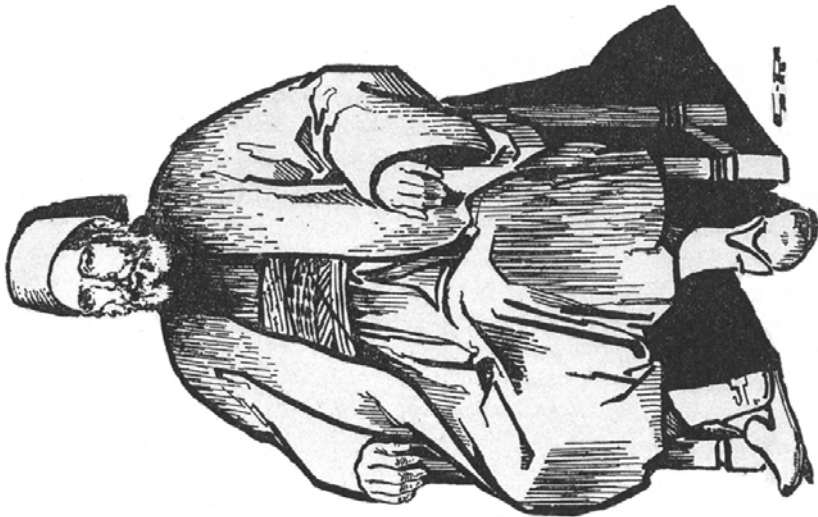
Born in Alexandria on 1 July 1812, Abbas was the son of Tusun Paşa. Tusun, Mehmet Ali's second son, who successfully led the Egyptian expedition to the Hijaz between 1811 and 1814, died in his twenties. The Old Paşa prepared his grandson for a career in government, and, from an early age, appointed him to various military and administrative posts, both in the provinces and in the capital. Abbas was trained at the military *lycée* of al-Khanqāh and served as general in the Egyptian army under the command of his uncle, Ibrahim Paşa, during the first Syrian war in 1831. When Mehmet Ali went to the Sudan in 1839, he appointed Abbas as governor-general of Egypt *ad interim*. On 12 November 1849 Abbas assumed supreme power in Egypt until his mysterious death at Binha on 16 July 1854. Most textbooks of Egyptian history tell us that under his rule the first railway in Egypt was constructed between Alexandria and Cairo from 1852 to 1854, that roads were paved and improved, notably the one from Cairo to Suez, that he built the military-administrative complex of ʿAbbāsiyya, now a suburb of Cairo, and established the famous mosque of as-Sayyida Zaynab in Cairo.

Even his many Western critics admit that Abbas relaxed, though did not abolish, economic control through state monopolies and, in 1851–2, successfully resisted Ottoman attempts to curtail his power within Egypt. In 1853, the viceroy dispatched a contingency of 20,000 men, with naval support, to assist the sultan in the Crimean War. He is widely considered to have been a closer and more loyal subject of his Ottoman sovereign than both his grandfather and his uncle. At the expense of France and her interests in Egypt, Abbas's foreign policy was overtly pro-British. His reign was generally peaceful, the roads were safe, the economy prosperous, and the impositions on the lower classes seem to

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3 Abbas Pasha (ruled 1848–54)



2 Ibrahim Pasha (held effective power for less than eight months in 1848)

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5 Ismail Paşa (ruled 1863–79)



4 Saïd Paşa (ruled 1854–63)

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have been somewhat lighter. In the area of reforms, his approach, based on utility and cost, was clearly conservative.

At an early stage in his reign, Abbas alienated most members of the ruling family, who strongly opposed him at home and in Istanbul. With the active support of European observers, they portrayed him in Ottoman elite circles and in Europe as reactionary, fanatic, cruel, indolent, and incompetent. There was little relation between the performance of Abbas as ruler of Egypt and the “demon-image” he thus acquired, a topic that will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6 below. By sharp contrast, Sait Paşa enjoyed the support of his family and the European Powers. Consequently, he acquired the reputation of an enlightened, progressive ruler and the public image of a friendly and jovial man. Atmosphere aside, however, Sait’s reign brought little positive change to Egypt. As an administrator, he was not as capable and thrifty as Abbas was, for which the country paid dearly.

Sait, one of Mehmet Ali’s younger sons, was born on 17 March 1822. He was brought up by French tutors and trained for a career in the navy. Under his father, his brother Ibrahim, and his nephew Abbas, Sait served as commander-in-chief of the Egyptian navy. During the reign of Abbas, Sait was the unofficial leader of the opposition to the viceroy. He was recognized as the legitimate and desirable heir to the throne by all members of the ruling family who wished to have Abbas deposed. Although Sait was accused of plotting to overthrow Abbas, the latter still allowed him to retain his position as chief of a neglected and neutralized navy. When Abbas died in July 1854, Sait succeeded him to rule Egypt until his own death in 1863. With his reign ended also the pace and mood of the middle decades, giving way to the energetic, eventful, exciting, and painful years of Ismail.

Nineteenth-century accounts and modern historiography are generally favorable to Sait Paşa. He is remembered mostly for allowing the launch of the Suez Canal project, after Abbas had resisted it for years. The Land Law which he promulgated in 1858 is widely considered as an important step towards the formation of *de jure* private land ownership in Egypt. Sait is also credited with the final phasing out of the monopolies, and with improving conscription policies, the irrigation network, and the transport and communications system. All these were begun under Abbas, but the maligned viceroy received no kind words for his contribution. In the reign of Sait, Egypt’s gates were thrown open to European immigration, foreign loans were contracted on a large scale, and the influence of the foreign consuls in economic matters and domestic affairs greatly increased. All these crippled the Paşa’s ability to act as he saw fit.

During the middle years of the nineteenth century, Egypt was still part of the Ottoman Empire, but the sultan’s actual power over his Nile Valley dominions