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0521560071 - All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, his Army and the Making of Modern Egypt

Khaled Fahmy

Excerpt

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Introduction

On 25 November 1826 Mehmed Ali Pasha, the Ottoman Governor of Egypt, received in his palace Mr. John Barker in order to accept his credentials as the new British Consul in Alexandria. In a sign of deference, the Pasha stood up to greet the new consul, but ignored the official papers containing his credentials that he had in his hand. After a brief discussion of Mr. Barker's predecessor who, the Pasha said, never contradicted "his will, or dispute[d] his opinions," the Pasha then embarked upon a monolog that lasted for more than half an hour in which he told his British visitor a story about his childhood in Albania.

"I was born in a village in Albania and my father had ten children besides me, who are all dead; but, while living, not one of them ever contradicted me. Although I left my native mountains before I attained to manhood, the principal people in the place never took any step in the business of the commune, without previously inquiring what was my pleasure. I came to this country an obscure adventurer, and when I was yet a *Bimbashi* (captain), it happened one day that the commissary had to give each of the Bimbashis a tent. They were all my seniors, and naturally pretended to a preference over me; but the officer said, – "Stand ye all by; this youth, Mohammed Ali, shall be served first" and I advanced step by step, as it pleased God to ordain; and now here I am" – (rising a little on his seat, [Barker comments] and looking out of the window which was at his elbow, and commanded a view of the Lake Mareotis [to the south of Alexandria]) – "and now here I am. I never had a master," – (glancing his eye on the roll containing the *Imperial firman*).¹

This was a strange introduction indeed: having received the Ottoman Sultan's approval to represent British interests in Alexandria, and going to present himself with the Sultan's firman in hand, the British Consul was surprised to be received by a story of Mehmed Ali's childhood in Albania. As strange as this reception might have appeared to the British Consul, this first encounter with the Pasha was full of political intent which was too obvious for the Consul not to notice. Besides referring to

¹ FO 78/147, Barker, 25 November 1826.

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Plate 1 "Mehemed-Aly"

Barker's predecessor as having the wisdom not to contradict the Pasha in any of his opinions "which, he observed, was very easily done, because they were always founded on reason and justice," and thus insinuating that he expected the same from him, it was clear to Barker that the Pasha had also intended to pass on to him the message that "he was as little awed by the power of the Sovereign of Great Britain as that of the Sultan."²

As much as Mehmed Ali wanted to impress upon his visitor that he was an independent ruler, technically and legally he was only a vali of an

² *Ibid.*

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Ottoman province, which meant that he had the right to receive consuls (and not ambassadors) of European countries but was denied the right to appoint political representatives to their capitals. Keen on improving his image in Europe, however, and interested in affecting public opinion there, the Pasha was left with few tools to do so. One such tool, though, was the interviews he was in the habit of giving to European visitors some of whom, he was well aware, would proceed to write and publish their accounts of their encounters with him. As such, the *coup de théâtre* that Barker was audience to in his first interview with Mehmed Ali, far from being strange or atypical, was a “very characteristic anecdote”³ and it was not entered upon accidentally or unintentionally. Rather, it constituted part of a repertoire of stories and performances that were meticulously performed to influence the views of these European visitors.

For their part, these visitors were interested in meeting the famous Pasha who had been vali of Egypt since 1805, making him one of the longest serving provincial governors in the Ottoman Empire. These tourists, who would mostly be visiting Egypt as part of a longer trip that included a visit to the Holy Land, would typically disembark in Alexandria, sail down the newly dug Maḥmūdiyya Canal linking the port city to the Nile, and from there proceed all the way to Cairo. While visiting that most colorful of cities, they would make a point to visit the Pasha himself, who already by the 1820s had become “one of the curiosities of Egypt”⁴ owing to the reforms he had introduced in Egypt and his efforts in making the country safer for tourists. From these accounts one can have a glimpse not only of how the Pasha was seen by his contemporaries, but also of how he intended to be seen.

“The old spider in his den”

In December 1836, a British nobleman, Lord Lindsay, paid the Pasha a visit in his palace in the Citadel in Cairo.

We visited the old spider in his den, the citadel [he began] . . . Ascending a broad marble passage on an inclined plane . . . and traversing a lofty ante-chamber crowded with attendants, we found ourselves in the presence-chamber, a noble saloon . . . but without an article of furniture, except a broad divan, or sofa, extending round the three sides of the room, in one corner of which

³ James Augustus St. John, *Egypt and Mohammed Ali* (London: Longman, 1834), I, p. 543.

⁴ A. A. Paton, *History of the Egyptian Revolution* (London: Trubner, 1863), II, pp. 82–3.

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squatted his highness Mohammed Ali. Six wax-candles . . . stood in the center, yet gave but little light.⁵

This excerpt is typical of descriptions given by foreign visitors to the Pasha in his palace. The themes of light and darkness, of shadows and hypnotic gazes, figure prominently in their accounts of the encounter with the enigmatic Pasha. Two years after this visit, for example, another British traveler on visiting Mehmed Ali's palace commented on "a score of yellowish-brown candles [that were hung from the chandelier] . . . by their light we could only indistinctly see to the extremity of the apartment."⁶ When 'Abdallah Pasha of Sidon, whom Mehmed Ali's forces had besieged for more than six months in his formidable fortress of Acre, finally gave in, he was brought on board an Egyptian vessel to Alexandria where he was received magnanimously by the Egyptian Pasha. Here is the contemporary newspaper account of the encounter of these two bitter enemies.

People had gathered in masses to see [‘Abdallah Pasha] and a larger number of statesmen [*arbāb al-dawla*] were waiting on shore to receive him. On disembarking . . . he was escorted to the palace . . . and when he entered the audience chamber he found among those waiting for him His Highness, Mehmed Ali Pasha, *and the place was badly lit*. Smilingly, the Pasha stood up to receive him and to calm him down. ‘Abdallah Pasha lowered his head and threw himself at His Highness's feet kissing his cloak and asking for forgiveness.⁷

Besides light and shadows, it was the Pasha's eyes that provided the other theme that visitors regularly commented on. Mr. Ramsay, Lord Lindsay's friend who accompanied him on his trip to Egypt, had the following to say about the Pasha's eyes.

He did not address any of his subjects, but I observed his sharp cunning eyes fixing itself on every one. The light was not strong enough to remark minutely, but I can agree with former travellers as to the vivid expression of his eye, and, for the rest . . . it is absurd to talk of, or have any idea of his face.⁸

At around the same time that this account was written another British traveler, a certain Dr. Wilde who was attending a "gentleman [making] a voyage for the benefit of his health"⁹ made a point of visiting the Pasha's other palace in Shubra, in the outskirts of Cairo.

⁵ A. W. C. Lindsay, Lord, *Letters on Egypt, Edom, and the Holy Land* (London: Henry Colborn, 1938), I, p. 34.

⁶ Anon., "Interviews with Mehmed Ali," *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 5 (1838), p. 696.

⁷ Haidar al-Shihābī, *al-Ghurar al-Hisān fī Akhbār Abnā' al-Zāmān*, ed., Asad Rustum and Fouad al-Bustānī (Beirut: The Catholic Press, 1933), pp. 860–1. The newspaper, which is not named, is dated 5 June 1832. Emphasis added.

⁸ Mr Ramsay's Journal, quoted in Lord Lindsay, I, p. 35n.

⁹ W. R. Wilde, *Narrative of a Voyage to Madeira, Teneriffe and Along the Shores of the Mediterranean Including a visit to Algiers, Egypt, Palestine, etc.* (Dublin: William Curry, 1844), p. v.

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Seeing a company of Franks [in his garden, the Pasha slackened his] pace to salute us; thus affording us a view of this extraordinary character. He is a fine-looking old man, now [September 1837] upwards of seventy (1769 was, I believe, the birth year of Napoleon, Wellington and M. Alee [sic]) with a very long silver beard . . . Slight as was our view of him, it did not pass without making us feel the power of an eye of more brilliancy and penetration than I ever beheld.¹⁰

Another traveler who had visited Egypt fifteen years earlier was surprised by how the Pasha, in spite of his old age, still managed to mesmerize his audience by his looks. "[T]he energy of his mind, the vivacity of his features, and the piercing lightning of his glance have undergone no change since I first saw him in the year 1825, nearly 15 years ago."¹¹ Still another traveler was disconcerted by the Pasha's "piercing eye [which was] incessantly rolling about."¹² These descriptions were valid not only for the old-aged Pasha: as early as 1823 it was noted that although "the Pasha has a vulgar low-born face, [he has] a commanding intelligent eye."¹³

Even those visitors who saw the Pasha as "undignified and ridiculous" could not help but comment on the "glance of his bright and restless eye," noting that "as his unquiet eyes glided incessantly from one to the other of the party around him, or glanced stealthily at the door beyond, [they] could trace, in their workings, the restless and ever-watchful spirit of Mehemet Ali."¹⁴ Shortly after his death A. Paton, one of the shrewdest observers of mid-century Egypt, admitted that the Pasha's "features were remarkable neither for beauty nor the reverse; but, [he hastened to add] if ever a man had an eye that denoted genius, Mohammed Ali was that person. Never dead nor quiescent, it was fascinating like that of a gazelle; or in the hour of storm, fierce as the eagle's."¹⁵ Charles Murray, the last British Consul-General during the Pasha's long reign, summed it up well when he said

his eyes were of that peculiar grey which seems especially to belong to remarkable men; they were bright and set deep in the head. A strange wild fire gleamed in them at times, and they shot forth ireful glances, which few could withstand; but when in a mirthful mood they twinkled with a droll, malicious fun. Sometimes anger and humour were so quaintly blended in their expression that it was difficult to know which predominated.¹⁶

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹¹ Richard R. Madden, *Egypt and Mohammed Ali* (London: Hamilton, 1841), p. 11.

¹² H. P. Measor, *A Tour in Egypt, Arabia Petræa and the Holy Land in the Years 1841–2* (London: Francis and John Rivington, 1844), p. 119.

¹³ Sir Frederick Heniker, *Notes During a Visit to Egypt, the Oases, Mount Sinai and Jerusalem* (London: Murray, 1823), p. 63.

¹⁴ "Interviews with Mehemet Ali," p. 697. ¹⁵ Paton, *History*, II, pp. 165–6.

¹⁶ Charles A. Murray, *A Short Memoir of Mohammed Ali* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1898), p. 58.

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Staging the gaze

At first sight, these stories woven around the person and gaze of Mehmed Ali appear anecdotal and marginal in the writings of contemporary European travelers, intending to add flavour to their accounts of what was already an exotic, unfamiliar and fascinating oriental tour. On the other hand, one can already detect some common themes and even expressions in this rich repertoire of stories concerning the great Pasha, suggesting perhaps that these European travelers were aware of each others' writings and that they had come to Egypt having read each others' work. The "I-was-born-in-a-village-in-Albania" story, for example, besides being told twice by Barker in his dispatches to London,¹⁷ was reproduced in St. John's published book.¹⁸ Furthermore, one occasionally comes across an allusion to the effect that what is being watched had already been seen before: "I can agree with former travelers . . ."¹⁹

Alternatively, the remarkable common features in these accounts might suggest that what these European travelers were audience to constituted part of a scene/act that was well rehearsed and carefully produced. It is perhaps no accident that nearly all visitors start their accounts by describing the busy, loud and ornamented antechamber full of officials and members of the public coming mostly to present petitions to the Pasha. Then they give an account of the "presence-room", a grand hall "belle dans sa nudité"²⁰ and bare of everything but a sofa in a corner of which sat a figure shrouded in shadows. During the ensuing conversation they were surprised to discover that the mysterious figure was none but the great Pasha himself, but since they could not see his face nor "detect the expression of his countenance," they were left literally in the dark. This feeling of mystery and suspense was amplified by the impression that the source of light had on them: the chandeliers that were brought in, oddly enough, "gave but little light."

During the conversation with the Pasha a climactic point was usually reached when he suddenly leaned forward or pushed back his turban from above his eyebrows to allow the light to fall on his eyes. This final act of haunting theatricality was brought about by

a peculiarity in his mode of wearing the turban – close down over his eyes – [which] takes off much from the fine character of his countenance, concealing

¹⁷ FO 78/147, Barker, 25 November 1826, and FO 78/170, Barker, 19 January 1828.

¹⁸ St. John, *Egypt*, I, pp. 543–4. It was also published in the book that Barker's son edited from his father's letters, John Barker, *Syria and Egypt Under the Last Five Sultans of Turkey* (London: Samuel Tinsley, 1876), II, p. 48–49.

¹⁹ See note 8 above.

²⁰ Nubar Pasha, *Mémoires de Nubar Pasha*, ed. Mirrit Botros Ghali (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1983), p. 5.

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his handsome forehead, compressing the eyebrows, throwing the eyes into shade, and giving them a sinister expression.²¹

But having seen the final act in this staged encounter, the visitor discovered that what he visibly saw did not “illuminate” him to the extent of understanding this enigmatic character. In fact, listening to his laugh and seeing his gaze, he felt a chill of terror pass through his body and, failing to demystify it, ended up alluding to previous descriptions of the Pasha (“an expression I have read somewhere . . . came suddenly into my head”)²² thus reinforcing the “textual” approach to the person of Mehmed Ali, and perpetuating the awesome, enigmatic side of his character.

The encounter with the Pasha, thus, besides being a tourist stop in the itinerary of European visitors, was a highly theatrical one: in it the Pasha comes across clearly as being aware that he is being seen, reflects this awareness and catches us, the readers of accounts of these encounters, unawares. Few visitors managed to escape the effect of that spell that Mehmed Ali would cast on his audience; most of them felt that the Pasha was in control of not only Egypt but even the encounter that they were part of. They were consciously aware of the Pasha's piercing gaze seeing through them, and they often quoted the Pasha saying, “The only books I ever read . . . are men's faces, and I seldom read them amiss.”²³ As such, they, too, come across as accomplices in this haunting theatricality, and by transcribing their encounter into their published memoirs they made sure that the Pasha's powerful, enigmatic aura would perpetually live on.

One visitor, though, came very close to avoiding that piercing look of the Pasha; he was James Augustus St. John, who visited Egypt in the early 1830s and met the Pasha on 21 November 1832. His description of the encounter with the Pasha starts off as most other accounts do:

arriving at the entrance [of the palace, we] found a number of janissaries, and other attendants, in their costly and gorgeous uniforms, lounging about the grand flight of steps which leads to the divan. Having ascended these stairs, we crossed several spacious halls . . . and, making our way through crowds of courtiers of all nations, arrived at the audience-chamber . . . [There the Pasha had] placed himself as usual [!] in a corner of the room; where, his whole body being involved in shadow, it was extremely difficult to detect the expression of his countenance, or the uneasy rapid motion of his eyes.²⁴

Yet, in the discussion that ensued St. John soon realized that he was

²¹ C. R. Scott, *Rambles in Egypt and Candia* (London: Henry Colborn, 1837), I, pp. 178–79.

²² See note 8 above. ²³ Murray, *Short Memoir*, p. 4.

²⁴ St. John, *Egypt*, I, pp. 49–50.

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involved in a game of gazes and manipulations, and that the Pasha, knowing that his British visitor was about to write a book on His “Highness’s government, and the present state of the country,” was clearly trying to impress him. Rather than give in to Mehmed Ali’s manipulation, the shrewd visitor set out to demystify the mysterious Pasha and instead of starting his account with a description of the Pasha’s physical features, he ends with it:

Mohammed Ali is a man of middling stature . . . His features . . . are plain, if not coarse; but they are lighted up with so much intelligence, and his dark eyes beam so brightly, that I should not be surprised if I found persons familiar with his countenance thought him handsome. In dress he differs but little, if at all, from any other Turkish gentleman; he has, however, a certain dignity in his manners which . . . borders upon majesty. But this dignity seems almost inseparable from the possession of power: the man who can do much good or harm, whatever may be his stature, form or features will always appear to exhibit it; as the scorpion, in size no larger than a snail, is viewed with awe, because he is supposed to carry death in his sting.²⁵

In other words, instead of proceeding to give an account of the Pasha’s rule in Egypt that would border on being a dictated autobiography (the way most other accounts were), St. John realized that the Pasha’s mesmerizing presence is ultimately connected with the power he holds; and that this power is essentially an effect not of the Pasha’s inherent genius, but of the elaborate mystique of his court ceremonials that attempt to impress the spectator into thinking that what goes on there is “not merely important but in some odd fashion connected with the way the world is built.”²⁶

Taking its lead from St. John, this book attempts to see if it is possible to write the history of Egypt in the first half of the nineteenth century without being stung by the Pasha or hypnotized by his gaze. The reason it opened with an account of his body and his gaze is to introduce a theme, or more precisely a technique, that runs throughout this book: each of the chapters that follows, with the exception of chapter 5, opens with a spectacle that is intended to be evocative and mesmerizing, but which, it is argued, is still possible to see through and deconstruct. In one sense, then, this is a book about spectacles of power: how they are staged and watched. It deals with numerous such spectacles mostly staged by a man who, as we have seen and as we shall see further, was a

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

²⁶ Clifford Geertz, “Centers, kings, and charisma: Reflections on the symbolics of power,” in Sean Wilentz, ed., *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual and Politics Since the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p. 15.

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The army, the economy and society

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master of the art of staging spectacles and of influencing audiences. Another reason for opening with a glimpse of the Pasha in his palaces is to warn the reader about the Pasha's gaze and to stress the fact that while attempting to avoid it, this book is still written with the knowledge that his controlling gaze continues to exert its influence.

The army, the economy and society

Only after warning the reader by introducing the “old spider in his den” and seeing him manipulating his audience can one feel safe in stepping back to narrate Mehmed Ali's story and to place him in a wider historical context. This narration will not start at the beginning, as he would have liked, with his childhood in Albania or with his arrival in Egypt, or at the end, as some nationalist historians would have preferred, highlighting his showdown with Great Britain, but in the middle of his long career as governor of Egypt, and precisely in the year AH 1236/AD 1820–1. This is the year that Mehmed Ali started to found a modern army in Egypt, an army which was based on conscription and which relied on the institutions of the modern state that he founded mainly to serve that army. It is this army, rather than Mehmed Ali's character or his person, that is the subject of this book, and it is this central institution that is studied below in order to analyze the nature of Egyptian society in the first half of the nineteenth century.

By the time Mehmed Ali started to found this army in 1820 he had already been occupying the prestigious and lucrative post of governor of Egypt on behalf of the Ottoman Sultan for fifteen years. During this long period he had managed to tighten Cairo's control over the provinces by fighting corruption in the local bureaucracy,²⁷ by conducting a cadastral survey (1813–14) that was crucial in abolishing the tax farming system (*iltizām*) and in the cancellation of the immunities on agricultural land belonging to mosques and pious foundations (*awqāf*),²⁸ and, most importantly, by getting rid in the infamous Massacre of the Citadel (1811) of the power of the military landlords, the Mamluks, who had been in effective control of the province for

²⁷ For the founding of the new bureaucracy and its characteristic “household” nature, see Robert Hunter, *Egypt Under the Khedives, 1805–79* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984).

²⁸ On Mehmed Ali's agricultural policy, see Helen Anne Rivlin, *The Agricultural Policy of Muḥammad 'Alī in Egypt* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961); 'Alī Barakāt, *Tatawwur al-Milkiyya al-Zirā'iyya fī Miṣr, 1813–1914 wa Atharūhu 'ala al-Haraka al-Siyāsiyya* [Development of Agricultural Property in Egypt, 1813–1914 and its Effects on the Political Movement] (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfa al-Jadīda, 1977); and Kenneth M. Cuno, *The Pasha's Peasants: Land, Society and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740–1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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centuries in spite of Ottoman legal suzerainty.²⁹ Centralization of political and administrative control was also enhanced by a rapid increase in agricultural productivity based on an expansion of the cultivated area and an increase in the area of perennial irrigation. Having done away with the power of middle-men in the shape of former *multazims*, religious men who were managing the *awqāf*, or the Mamluks, more and more revenue was funneled to Cairo and into the Pasha's coffers. In addition, the Pasha introduced a wide-ranging policy of monopolies whereby staple goods as well as cash crops were to be sold only to government warehouses and at prices fixed by the Pasha. As a result of these measures annual revenue increased from 8 million francs in 1805 to 50 million francs in 1821,³⁰ allowing the Pasha to undertake projects that were not even conceivable in the long period of Ottoman rule.

The digging of the Maḥmūdiyya canal offers a graphic example of the degree to which the Pasha had managed to secure his control over the province of Egypt and is a testimony to his ability to undertake huge infrastructural projects that none of the Ottoman governors before him had managed to undertake. Started in April 1817, the project lasted for three years and was aimed at linking Alexandria to the western branch of the Nile. The ambitious project involved coercing thousands of men and women from all the provinces of Lower Egypt to work on it. During the month of March 1819 the number of laborers working on the project was said to have been as high as 300,000. After its completion the canal was 72 kilometers long and had cost 35,000 purses (around 7.5 million francs).³¹ Although contemporary reports stress the appallingly high rate of casualties (estimates range from 12,000 to 100,000) and the highly improvised manner in which the canal was excavated,³² still, the sheer size of the labor force involved as well as the cost and duration of the project testify to the ability of the Pasha's administration in Cairo to tap and control the human and material resources of his province.

By the early 1820s, then, the Pasha had managed to undertake what every Ottoman governor before him for the previous three centuries had tried but failed to do, namely, to organize the economy of the province

²⁹ The standard account of the massacre is in 'Abdel-Rahmān al-Jabartī, *ʿAjāʾib al-Āthār fi'l-Tarājim wa'l-Akhhbār* (Cairo: Būlāq, AH 1297/AD 1880), IV, pp. 127–32.

³⁰ Georges Douin, ed., *La Mission du Baron de Boislecomte, L'Égypte et la Syrie en 1833* (Cairo: Royal Egyptian Geographical Society, 1927), p. 126.

³¹ Rivlin, *Agricultural Policy*, pp. 216–21.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 221, 353 n. 15, and al-Jabartī, *ʿAjāʾib al-Āthār*, IV, pp. 301–304. On al-Jabartī's figures, which form the basis of Rivlin's assessment, see Cuno's cautionary remarks; Cuno, *The Pasha's Peasants*, pp. 121–22.