

## *Introduction: Hybridity, Islamic Knowledge, and 'Being Modern' in Egypt*

In the 1970s, an Islamic revival emerged in Egypt and many other Muslim-majority countries. At the time, the strength and success of this revival surprised observers who had assumed, first, that the secular emphasis of Arab socialism and nationalism after 1952 under Gamal Abd al-Nasser would remain dominant and, second, that the move to a secular public sphere was a natural part of the modernisation processes that had swept the globe over the preceding centuries. Forty years later, it is clear that neither of these assumptions was sound. The electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia after the Arab Uprisings of 2011 are among the most visible demonstrations of the importance of Islamic thought and practice in Middle Eastern politics, culture, and society, and the prominent role that many want it to play in ordering both public and private lives. Furthermore, the resurgence of Islamic revivalism in the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond since the 1970s demonstrates the central role of religion in many societies, cultures, and nations around the world, regardless of the advancement of secularism within the Christian communities of Europe.

Explanations of Islamic revivalism that begin with the 1970s misunderstand the who, what, when, and why underlying the emergence of these movements, as well as wider histories of sociocultural and religious change in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt. It is incorrect to assume that early Islamic revivalists were iconoclasts whose activities took place outside of institutions controlled by a secular state; that Islamic revivalism was a regressive, backward movement motivated solely by pursuit of political power or socio-economic justice; that its origins lie in the 1970s or even between the first and second world wars; or that the goal of revivalism was to rid Egypt of all European influences. Viewing the political Islamists of 2011 in this light is an oversimplification that ignores the motivations of the founders of

organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-Tahrir, as well as 140 years of negotiation over the role that Islamic knowledge should play in the state and society of a rapidly changing Egypt.

Tensions surrounding religion and religious knowledge first erupted into conflict not in the 1970s but during Egypt's constitutional period (1923–52). This is widely recognised as a time of socio-economic frustration and nationalist failure. It is often referred to as a 'liberal age' or a period of 'liberal constitutionalism', a description that focuses on the role played by a nationalist elite and how their aspirations for full self-rule were thwarted by the monarch and the British.<sup>1</sup> The role of mass movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in criticising the ruling elite for their failure to achieve real independence and refusal to further socio-economic justice is noted from the 1930s onwards, but discussed separately given the marginalisation of these groups from government and the apparent lack of originality of their thought. A closer look at these mass movements and the sociocultural groups that supported them, however, reveals that they were not all the outsiders that this narrative suggests.

The unrest that erupted periodically in Egypt from the 1930s to 1952 not only stemmed from political and economic discontent, but was also the result of a 'culture war' between more and less Europhile social groups, several of whom laid claim to the mantle of eminent Islamic scholar, education reformer, and nationalist Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905). Prominent intellectuals advocated strongly for continued westernisation of culture, society, and education, while groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood argued for the revival of Islam among the self-consciously modern sections of society. Each of these groups had significant ties to the institutions of the Egyptian state, especially the civil education system that Egyptian rulers created in the early nineteenth century as a complement to long-standing religious educational institutions in the form of the elementary-level *kuttab* and higher-level *madrasa*. Therefore, if we are to understand this culture war – as well as the emergence of transnational Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-Tahrir, and the spread of a new form of religious leadership, the new religious intellectual – we must understand the history of the Egyptian education system, and

<sup>1</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*.

specifically the unusual role played by Islamic expertise within Egypt's civil schools from the late nineteenth century onwards.

The half-century surrounding the turn of the twentieth century – a period stretching from approximately 1871 to 1922 – was crucial for the emergence and development of a self-consciously modern Egyptian national culture, yet in histories and historical memory it has been almost entirely overshadowed by the tumult of 1881–2 and 1919–22,<sup>2</sup> as well as the flourishing of intellectual, political, and cultural expression between 1923 and 1952, during the largely interwar constitutional period. This extended *fin-de-siècle* period witnessed sweeping changes not only in the political, economic, and social institutions that structured the daily lives of Egyptians but also in the cultural and intellectual frameworks they used to understand themselves and their place in the world. Detailed examination of the interaction between Egyptian education, religion, and culture around the turn of the century is what enables this book to rewrite the dominant historical narrative of the constitutional period and, in so doing, to place tensions surrounding the place of religion during the early twenty-first century in historical context.

Therefore, to explain the contentious role of Islam in modern Egypt, we must recognise the active engagement of early Islamic revivalists alongside their Europhile opponents in the advancement of reform and modernisation, as well as the commonalities between them. We must consider *sociocultural* as well as socio-economic and sociopolitical dynamics, and changes in what and who was considered authoritative. We must begin our story in 1871–2, a century before the Islamic revivalism of the 1970s, fifty years before Egyptians were able to elect their own leaders, and ten years before Egypt came under British control. Finally, we must eschew the simplistic and reductive explanations for Islamic revivalism advanced in the politicised rhetoric of its modernist opponents.

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In 1872, following the success of a lecture series the year before, reformers employed by the Egyptian state integrated Islamic knowledge into the state-run European-style civil education system by founding Egypt's first teacher training school. This school, Dar

<sup>2</sup> As argued for the 1890s here: Booth and Gorman, 'Introduction', pp. 2–3.

al-'Ulum, taught the Arabic and Islamic disciplines found in religious schools within the framework of a civil school to students from top religious schools. It did this to improve the quality of Arabic and primary school instruction that would be provided by these students – who held the title *shaykh* on graduation – within Egyptian civil schools. Dar al-'Ulum was Egypt's most influential teacher training school, and operated for seventy-four years as a higher – that is, post-secondary – school until its integration into Egypt's main university in 1946. In 1907, it was joined by another hybrid school teaching *shaykhs*, the School of Shari'a Judges (Madrasat al-Qada' al-Shar'i), which taught Islamic legal subjects within the structure of a civil school until the 1920s, after which it was folded into Egypt's top religious institution, al-Azhar. Dar al-'Ulum's foundation formalised the pathway for becoming a *reform-minded shaykh*, that is an individual with religious education who was interested in the European-influenced reform programmes that transformed Egypt in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Graduates of Dar al-'Ulum, known collectively as the 'Sons of Dar al-'Ulum' (*abna' Dar al-'Ulum*) or the less formal *dar'amiyya*, had mixed civil-religious expertise that enabled *fin-de-siècle* nationalists to create a national culture that was modern and authentically Egyptian by including courses on Arabic, Islam, and Egyptian history in the school curriculum.

The mixed background of the *dar'amiyya* presented challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, it meant that many of them found it difficult to progress into the higher ranks of either civil or religious bureaucracies in Egypt. Instead, they played important roles within the lower and middle levels of the education system, serving as primary school teachers, authors of textbooks, teacher trainers, and school inspectors. This apparent disadvantage is behind their omission from mainstream historical narratives, which have allowed the content of reams of school policies and regulations as well as intellectual treatises issued by politicians, high-level officials, and prolific scholars to eclipse how and by whom ideas from the top were put into practice. For much of the twentieth century, the *dar'amiyya* dominated the bureaucratic strata where high-level education policies were put into more concrete forms and, as a result, exercised significant collective influence over state-led efforts to change Egyptian society and culture at the grass-roots level.

On the other hand, a mixed background presented the potential for *dar 'amiyya* to exercise authority beyond that normally associated with state employment. Prominent *dar 'amiyya* were able to influence the cultural and religious beliefs and practices of Egyptians who felt alienated by the emphasis that intellectual and political elites placed on foreign bodies of knowledge. Many of these Egyptians preferred to rely on leaders who could claim mastery of both religious and civil knowledge or who, in other words, could present themselves as both modern and religious. Prominent *dar 'amiyya* such as Hasan al-Banna (1906–49) and Sayyid Qutb (1906–66) of the Muslim Brotherhood and Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani (1909–77) of Hizb al-Tahrir backed their calls for the revival of Islamic practice among self-consciously modern Muslims with this combination of bureaucratic power and cultural authority. As a result, it was the hybrid civil-religious background provided by Dar al-'Ulum that was behind the emergence and consolidation of a new type of religious leader, the new religious intellectual.

The impact of the *dar 'amiyya* as a whole on the development of an Egypt that was modern *and* authentic is significant enough that their claim to the mantle of Islamic modernist Muhammad 'Abduh needs to be taken seriously. Their mixed background not only enabled this impact, however, but also explains why this claim has been obscured. Histories of Egypt to date have not only focused primarily on ideas and discourses, but also tend to take the discourse of Egypt's political and intellectual elite at face value, instead of viewing it as one side of a highly politicised culture war.

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This investigation into the role of Islamic knowledge in the formation of a modern Egyptian nation state, and the connection between each to the emergence of new types of Islamic organisation and leadership, is possible because of a new approach to modernisation, nation-building, and sociocultural change. This approach uses the social theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), Fredrik Barth (1928–2016), and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) to do two things: first, to connect institutions with individuals, social groups, and conceptions of the nation; and, second, to locate all of these entities in physical and sociocultural landscapes. Using this approach to explore the activities of a largely unrecognised group, the *dar 'amiyya*, provides significant insight into how and why ideas, practices, and individuals become influential and

authoritative at particular places and times. This book demonstrates the importance of hybridity and mixing in sociocultural change, as well as how global flows of ideas, practices, and technologies are reshaped to fit local needs, including a desire for cultural authenticity. As a result, it demonstrates the salience of localised paths to modernity and nationhood in non-western contexts.

This framework is introduced here and applied to a case study of the *dar 'amiyya*, while the subsequent four chapters apply it to a study of Egyptian hybrid schooling and its impact between 1872 and 1952. The book as a whole is based on an examination of Egyptian and British records related to civil schools and education, publications by Egyptian education experts, and memoirs and travelogues providing first-hand accounts of religious, hybrid, and civil schools. Journals consulted include *The Garden of Egyptian Schools (Rawdat al-madaris al-Misriyya)*, a publication run by Ministry of Education officials in the 1870s; *Journal of the Dar al-'Ulum Club (Sahifat Nadi Dar al-'Ulum)* and *Journal of Dar al-'Ulum (Sahifat Dar al-'Ulum)*, published by the association of Dar al-'Ulum alumni before the First World War and from 1934 to 1948, respectively; and *The Journal of Teachers (Sahifat al-Mu'allimin)*, published by the association for graduates of higher schools in the mid-1920s.

An especially important source is the 900-page *Dar al-'Ulum Almanac (Taqwim Dar al-'Ulum)*, a yearbook-cum-institutional history of Dar al-'Ulum compiled by alumnus Muhammad 'Abd al-Jawad and published in 1952. It has long been treated as the definitive set of historical documentation related to the school and is seen by many associated with the school as making up for the paucity of archival records held by Egyptian National Archives and Dar al-'Ulum itself. I have chosen to read it critically, in part as a compendium of basic facts about the institution and its graduates, and in part as a work of history whose content and arguments reveal much about cultural and political dynamics of the time in which it was written, the latter half of the constitutional period. These sources enable us to ask when, how, and why the current fight about the place of religion in Egypt began.

The remainder of the introduction provides, first, an overview of my approach to the study of modernity that introduces the most important groups involved in advancing modernisation in Egypt between 1811 and 1952. This section provides a brief chronology of relevant events

and individuals for the benefit of readers who are not familiar with the recent history of Egypt. The second section of the chapter applies the social theories of Bourdieu, Barth, and Bakhtin to understand the role played by hybridity in sociocultural change, and then presents a case study of the *dar 'amiyya* to demonstrate their relevance.

### Modernisation and Its Supporters

The challenge represented by the spread of European influence in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was significant, ranging from tangible threats such as military occupation, economic dominance, or political interference via religious minorities to the more abstract threat of ostensibly superior European ideas and practices to society, culture, and state. These threats led many local leaders – including those in Tunis, Istanbul, Cairo, and Tokyo – to launch European-inspired reform programmes while independent of colonial rule.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the ideas, practices, and technologies of a rapidly modernising Europe were both the largest threat to and the best hope for maintaining independent local rule.

In nineteenth-century Egypt, Muhammad 'Ali (r. 1805–48) and his successors initiated European-influenced programmes of military, administrative, and agricultural reform that enabled them to rule Egypt as an increasingly independent province of the Ottoman Empire. The Tunisian Regency, under reformer Ahmad Bey (r. 1837–55), reorganised the Tunisian military along European lines and developed new institutions to train and supply it. Military defeat and inter-religious conflict led Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–39) to begin a reform process that evolved into the Tanzimat programme pursued by his sons Abdülmecid (r. 1839–61) and Abdülaziz (r. 1861–76). Tanzimat reforms included introducing European-style military units and declaring Muslims and non-Muslims equal, which further destabilised communal relations that had been strained by European interference. In Japan, the threat of European interference and invasion, along with internal factors, led notables to seize power in the 1868 Meiji Revolution; centralise control of the country; and introduce a social,

<sup>3</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs*, pp. 85–108, esp. 89–90, 98–103; Sims, *Japanese Political History*, pp. 1–2, 6–12.

economic, political, and educational reform programme showing significant European influence.

At the close of the First World War, only Japan had escaped colonial rule. In Egypt, imminent bankruptcy had led European powers to seize control of Egyptian finances in 1876 and then to replace Egypt's ruler, Muhammad 'Ali's grandson Isma'il (r. 1863–79), with his son Muhammad Tawfiq (r. 1879–92). The 'Urabi rebellion of 1881, in which a range of Egyptian-born notables protested against European interference and the rule of the new khedive, provided Britain with a reason to invade in 1882. France obtained the approval of other world powers for the colonisation of Tunisia at the 1878 Congress of Berlin, but lacked a pretext to invade until 1881, after a few hundred mountain tribesmen retreated into Tunisia after a raid on the French territory of Algeria. The Ottoman Empire remained independent of European control longer, but defeat in the First World War led to the creation of what were effectively colonies in most of its territory.

However, in all three polities the *projects of modernity* initiated by local governments during the nineteenth century marked the start of a radical reshaping of state, society, economy, and culture that incorporated both European and local bodies of knowledge and continues through to the present day. These projects of modernity were advanced not only by modernising rulers, but also by a diverse range of actors with varying degrees of independence from these increasingly centralised states.

### *Projects of Modernity*

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Middle East have often been referred to as an age of 'modernity', and individuals, ideas, and practices emerging in this period are described as 'modern'. The concept of modernity is especially salient when viewed as an array of context-specific projects initiated by state and non-state actors in particular times and places. Along these lines, Talal Asad emphasises examination of 'why modernity has become hegemonic as a political goal' alongside the supporting structures behind this development and its result.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 12–13.



Taken collectively, these projects of modernity span the globe, having become dominant and omnipresent. They are at the root of radical shifts in sociocultural, political, and economic structures around the world, leading to a faster-paced life dominated by cities, increased mobility, and industrial and social reorganisation. New ways of thinking about the world and its inhabitants spread on a global level, including Enlightenment-influenced ‘scientific’ perspectives and a perception of a distinct rupture with the past.<sup>5</sup> Change was not only accepted but expected, with the concept of progress over time shifting how people saw not only their present and future, but also their past.<sup>6</sup> Yet, at the same time, the parameters and end points of these often interconnected projects varied widely across space and time.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the sociocultural changes commonly glossed as modernisation are best conceptualised as a complex, multidirectional process of challenge and contestation involving a wide range of actors, including local governments, foreign powers, non-governmental associations, and individual citizens. The agency exercised by these actors means that local projects of modernity diverged from the European model *by design and not by accident*, incorporating aspects of local culture such as Islam. Finally, ‘modernity’ and its supposed opposite ‘tradition’ are not absolute terms that remain unchanged across space and time, but instead are context-specific discursive constructions that reveal not continuity but change.

I use these terms cautiously, in recognition of their inherent flaws as well as the impossibility of writing them completely out of the narrative. ‘Modern’ and ‘modernity’ appear in the text as markers referring to the period in time in which modernity-as-a-project emerged and expanded in the Middle East. As much as possible, the book eschews these labels and instead focuses on describing the often changing orientations of a wide variety of institutions and individuals towards reform proposals, revealing divergence between state and non-state actors, as well as the wide range of Egyptians working within the umbrella of state institutions. This approach to modernity as a plurality of complex and interrelated projects enables this book to

<sup>5</sup> On scientific and social-scientific thought in Egypt, see: El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*; Elshakry, ‘Darwin’s Legacy’.

<sup>6</sup> On historicism in Egypt, see: Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past*, pp. 3–11.

<sup>7</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 12–14; Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, pp. 17–18.

provide significant new evidence of the importance of local elements – including religion – and non-state actors within non-western nationalisms and projects of modernity.

This conceptualisation of the relationship between separate projects of modernity, and especially the connection between Europe – the first area of the world to modernise – and projects of modernity elsewhere in the globe, falls under the umbrella of Eisenstadt's 'multiple modernities' approach,<sup>8</sup> and presents a sharp contrast with prominent post-colonial approaches to Egyptian modernity. Postcolonial scholarship transformed colonial history by demonstrating that colonial dominance was not only physical but intellectual, and that the colonial subjects advancing non-western projects of modernity were colonised not only in body but also in mind.<sup>9</sup> This colonisation of minds could precede direct European rule when local rulers internalised European claims of superiority, creating a *semicolonial* context.<sup>10</sup> This history of Egypt, along with many others, owes a major debt to these pioneering observations about the intellectual and cultural power of Europe.

That said, my approach to modernity diverges significantly from the largely homogenous and stable category presented by the most prominent postcolonial historian of Egypt, Timothy Mitchell. Mitchell's conviction that modernity is an essentially unified and, by implication, European phenomenon and his assertion that divergence from European models of modernity occurred only by accident, instead of by design, are particularly damaging.<sup>11</sup> This is because conceptions of modernity that focus so heavily on European and elite hegemony mask the agency exercised by the people acted upon by these projects of modernity – inside and outside of Europe – as well as the importance of local ideas and practices in many non-western projects of modernity. By design or accident, projects of modernity involve creating self-consciously modern subjects and subjectivities which, once created, take on lives of their own. Ignoring the ways in which non-western actors created projects of modernity that diverged *deliberately* from European models oversimplifies processes of modernisation in non-western contexts.

<sup>8</sup> See the special issue of *Daedalus* dedicated to 'Multiple Modernities'.

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p. 95.

<sup>10</sup> El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, 'Introduction', pp. xii–xiv; Mitchell, 'The Stage of Modernity', pp. 23–4.