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EGYPT AS SEEN BY THE ARAB COMMUNITY OF PALESTINE IN THE LATE OTTOMAN PERIOD*

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My purpose in the following pages is to examine the responses within the Arab community of Palestine to events connected with Egypt from the late eighteenth century until the end of the Ottoman period. Given the scarcity of local publications such as journalistic reports or memoirs throughout most of the period under discussion, it is difficult to reconstruct these responses systematically or to gain a precise picture of them. Moreover, Palestine at the time lacked an autonomous local government that might have expressed itself on these matters. But contemporary books and documents, chronicles, and consular and journalistic reports can help us formulate at least a general impression of popular attitudes towards Egypt as they developed over the course of the period.

It may be assumed that the inhabitants of Palestine were never without some kind of awareness of what was going on with their neighbor to the south. Egypt had

always traded with Palestine and via Palestine with more distant regions. Emigrants from Egypt had settled from time to time in Palestine, and residents of the latter frequently went to Egypt to do business, to escape periods of drought or famine, or to study. For centuries, the centers of Islamic learning in Egypt, most prominently the al-Azhar Academy, had attracted students and scholars from Palestine and from all around the Arab world. This feeling of closeness, as it were, to Egypt must have increased toward the end of the eighteenth century, owing to a wave of incursions from Egypt into Palestine and to some dramatic changes that took place within Egypt itself.

The first Egyptian incursion into Palestine in the modern period was that of the Mamluk leader Ali Bey al-Kabir, whose reign, according to Daniel Crecelius, signals the onset of a renewed Egyptian interest in Palestine.¹ It would seem that Ali Bey, backed by the power of his

centralized regime, his army, and his wealth, wished to revive the Mamluk sultanate and to expand the borders of his realm to incorporate that sultanate's historical possessions, including Palestine and Syria. He found a Palestinian ally in Dahir al-Umar, the Bedouin chieftain of the Galilee, who, of course, had some ambitions of his own for the extension of his power. Combining forces with the Egyptian army, commanded by Ali Bey's Mamluk ally, Muhammad Abu al-Dhahab, the rebels mounted a campaign of conquest that was crowned by the fall of Damascus in 1771. Apart from some isolated pockets of resistance – in Nablus, under the leadership of Mustafa Tukan, and in Jaffa – they met with no real obstacles, and these pockets, too, were later eliminated, after Ali Bey's flight from Egypt. In this instance, we are still not speaking strictly of an Egyptian invasion, since Ali Bey had a local collaborator in Dahir. Nevertheless, the resounding manifestations of



French troops besieging the walls of Acre (contemporary drawing).

Egyptian military might played a large part in their triumphs and greatly impressed the local population, especially when compared to the setbacks suffered at the same time by the Ottomans in their difficult war against the Russians. Abu al-Dhahab's subsequent victorious campaign at the head of a large Egyptian army in 1775, during which he savaged the inhabitants of Jaffa, was brought to an end only by his unexpected demise. He was ostensibly acting in the name of the Ottoman sultan, but it was the Mamluk army that forced the surrender of Dahir, once again giving proof of the relative might of Egypt.

The Napoleonic invasion of Egypt (1798) and then of Palestine (1799) differed from its predecessors in that it involved the incursion of a foreign, European force into a territory that for centuries had been an Islamic domain. One consequence was an increase in the tension between Palestine's Muslim and European populations.

Even before Napoleon's arrival in Palestine, according to a study by Adel Manna, the French invasion of Egypt had aroused the apprehensions of the governing authorities and the local Muslim leadership, which assumed that the French, like the Crusaders of yesteryear, would next set their sights on the holy places.²

Attempts by the French to enter into discussions with the local notables only increased this unease. Local inhabitants responded to the call of the Ottoman authorities to gird themselves for battle with the French, though they apparently did not take part in the actual fighting, nor did they participate later on in the defense of Acre. As Manna explains, though the Arabs did make contributions of food and money to the war effort, neither their solidarity with the inhabitants of Egypt under French occupation nor their loyalty to the sultan apparently was strong enough to induce thousands of youths to join in a battle being fought far from their homes.³ As with other populations in the region as a whole, the principal effect of the short-lived Napoleonic invasion was the shock of conquest by a European force, an event that was to have long-range implications for the relations between the inhabitants of the Islamic Orient and Europe.

The Egyptian conquest of Palestine in 1831–2, like that of Ali Bey,



Muhammad Ali in his army's camp.

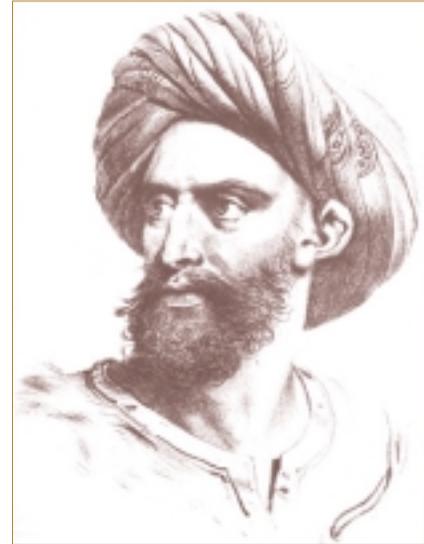
was an expression of Muhammad Ali Pasha's powerful interest in northward expansion, for both political and economic purposes. Years before the invasion, he had begun meddling in the affairs of Palestine and Syria to an extent that aroused the suspicion of the Ottoman government. Like Napoleon, Muhammad Ali tried to win the hearts of the local population, among other things by subsidizing the renovation of King David's Tomb in Jerusalem. In this he succeeded much better than Napoleon, leading many Palestinian notables to display support for this ambitious Egyptian ruler. Their endorsement was spurred in part by the harsh measures taken by the Ottoman authorities under the rule of Abdullah Pasha, the Governor of Acre, in the years leading up to the Egyptian invasion, with the intention of



Egyptian soldiers in the army of Muhammad Ali.

consolidating the various districts of Palestine into a more centralized administration. A striking example of this sympathetic local response may be seen in the actions taken by representatives of the feudal clans in the Nablus area. As'ad Bey Tukan journeyed to greet the Egyptian army near al-Arish, and four other notables, Husayn Abd al-Hadi, Kasim al-Ahmad and his son, and Abdallah al-Jarrar, arrived at the Egyptian camp in Acre to declare their fealty. Members of other clans, too, expressed their allegiance to the new regime.⁴ They hoped, under the protection of Egyptian governance, to reconstitute and perhaps even expand their traditional autonomy, so badly impaired by the Ottomans. They also had great faith in the might of the Egyptian army. According to Manna, Jerusalem's leading families, particularly those of the *'ulama*, exhibited a rather chillier response, partly because they were more integrated into the Ottoman administration and less vulnerable to its encroachments.⁵ The monk Neophitos, however, relates that members of all of Jerusalem's religious communities responded with glee to the conquest of Acre. Of course, the non-Muslims, given Muhammad Ali's tolerant attitude towards them and towards Europeans, had reasons of their own to rejoice, which they did not attempt to conceal.⁶

Egyptian rule in Palestine (and Syria) was to last for almost a decade under Muhammad Ali's



Ibrahim Pasha.

son Ibrahim Pasha, who was both the commander-in-chief and the civil governor general of the area. As it became entrenched, however, resistance to the Egyptian occupation proliferated throughout Palestine, even among many of those who initially had accepted it willingly. The grounds for this resistance included the rigidly centralized regime imposed by the Egyptians, contrary to their own promises and the expectations they had aroused. They increased the tax burden, imposed mandatory conscription, and attempted to disarm the population, measures that could only turn the local clans against them. The effectively equal status granted to non-Muslims and Europeans, and various other regulations that threatened the traditional order, served to alienate the more conservative elements in the population. An important factor was the loss in position suffered by several notable families as a result of the regime's ultimate granting of superior status to members of the Abd al-Hadi clan. It comes as no surprise that when a rebellion



Roohi Bey Abd al-Hadi, one of the notables of Nablus in the early twentieth century.

(known as the “Peasant Revolt”) finally broke out in 1834, it was the families that felt they had been harmed most by the Egyptian regime who took the lead. That rebellion swept through broad areas of Palestine and included not only peasants but also many city-dwellers, in Jerusalem and elsewhere. It was firmly quashed by Ibrahim’s army, which enjoyed clear military superiority.

The Egyptian occupation was brought to an end by the Ottomans and the European powers, but the decade of its existence would not soon be forgotten by the inhabitants of Palestine. The conquering Egyptian army was the largest that had been seen in Palestine for centuries. The might of this modern military force, which, unlike Napoleon’s army, succeeded in taking Acre and routing the Ottomans in several battles, left an indelible impression. The order

and security that characterized Ibrahim’s regime also left their mark. Philippe Baldensperger, a Frenchman who lived in Palestine during the second half of the nineteenth century, wrote that the peasants continued long after the end of the occupation to refer to Ibrahim as “the hero” or “the great man.”⁷ Ironically, even though the resistance displayed toward the Egyptians was elicited, at least partly, by several of the reforms enacted by the regime, the country’s inhabitants remembered them as expressions of progress and even began to acknowledge the basically just, egalitarian approach that characterized the Egyptian administration. The British consul James Finn cites an adage that they invoked in this regard, to the effect that “tyranny with equality is righteousness to its subjects.” As he saw it, the population preferred this approach to the malicious neglect and malevolent cruelty of

the old Ottoman era.⁸ This was especially true of the two decades immediately following the end of the Egyptian regime, which were a time of widespread anarchy in Palestine’s hilly regions. The Ottoman government tried to impose its authority and apply the Tanzimat reforms, but it was largely unsuccessful. Finn relates that he heard rumors from Arab notables in 1854 – during the particularly difficult period of the Crimean War – that 20,000 Egyptian soldiers were on their way to Palestine in order to restore security there.⁹ These rumors, vigorously denied by the authorities, perhaps reflected the secret wishes of the populace, expressing their faith in the power of the Egyptians to impose order and security where the Ottomans had failed. According to an 1858 report cited by Ale Carmel, the local inhabitants viewed the reign of Ibrahim Pasha as one that had brought them calm, order, and



Nablus, a center of the 1834 rebellion.

security.¹⁰ It could be that the damage caused by the Egyptian regime to the power of several of the more powerful clans was now seen in a different light. The Egyptian government had actually placated some of them in its final years, while the Ottoman government later inflicted upon them some harsh strictures of its own.

These attitudes persisted in the years to come, after the Ottomans had finally succeeded in imposing their centralized regime upon Palestine and restoring law and order. From another report cited by Carmel, this one from 1874, it would appear that the populace continued to attribute any extraordinary occurrence – even rainfall after a drought – to Ibrahim’s government, again demonstrating the profound mark left by the Egyptian regime.¹¹ According to consular reports, there was a good deal of dissatisfaction with the Ottoman regime for its being, among other things, heavy-handed, negligent, unable to maintain order, and slow to allow the participation of local people in the administrative bodies. All this led many to pine for the Egyptian regime, which, notwithstanding the many harsh memories it had left in its wake, was viewed with respect and admiration, to no small extent because of the reforms it had instituted. The British consul in Beirut reported in 1878 that many people in Syria hoped for their country’s annexation to Egypt, a hope encouraged by Egyptian agents.¹²

The events surrounding the Urabi rebellion in Egypt and its suppression by the European powers caused a considerable stir in Palestine. Agitation peaked in the summer of 1882 with the outbreak of riots in Alexandria, which led to



Ahmed Urabi

the city’s bombardment and the occupation of Egypt by Britain. By various ways and means, reports of these events reached Palestine quickly. Their most direct effect – echoing to some extent the period of the Napoleonic invasion – was to bring about a rise in tension between Muslims and non-Muslims and to strike fear into the hearts of the Christian and foreign communities. Intercommunal relations had been rather strained throughout the nineteenth century, on account, among other things, of the intervention of the Christian powers in the country’s affairs and the new rights granted to non-Muslims under the Tanzimat reforms. Particularly difficult times ensued when the Ottoman Empire had to fight off Christian enemies from without. The conscription of local men into the army – while non-Muslims remained exempt – contributed to the increased hostility. With the outbreak of the Urabi rebellion, violent incidents occurred in several places, particularly in the cities that had mixed populations; threats and insults were bandied (especially against Protestants); anti-Christian speeches

were made; and there were even outbreaks of local fighting. Reports and rumors of what was going on in Egypt had a great deal of impact upon the situation. Reports of British victories encouraged the Christians, while reports of Egyptian victories intensified their fears. The authorities, which, true to form, were aware of the dangers that might follow from attacks upon non-Muslims, gave orders to stifle any incidents of violence before they could spread and acted firmly to preserve order and calm. Censorship was imposed upon reports coming in from abroad, the army was sent into sensitive areas, and there were pre-emptive arrests.¹³ An Egyptian emissary in Jaffa was arrested by the governor for disseminating reports of Egyptian victories, though demands by local inhabitants led to his release.¹⁴ Actually, the non-Muslim population came to no serious harm. Not only were the preventive steps taken by the authorities generally effective, but the Muslim population’s own awareness of the potential consequences of intercommunal strife also helped preserve law and order, thus sparing Palestine the kind of grave deterioration in inter-communal relations which occurred elsewhere.

The following years brought no recurrence of the type of dramatic events that had occurred during the period of the Urabi rebellion and the British occupation of Egypt. The Mahdi rebellion in Sudan did elicit some excitement in Palestine. Here, too, was a revolt against foreign influence, in which Muslims could point to victories in the struggle against the non-believers. However, despite the sympathy displayed by the local population towards the rebels,

the effect of these events was limited in comparison to that of the earlier ones. The Mahdi seems not to have aroused the kind of outburst of enthusiasm that Urabi did, and some viewed him as no more than a wonder worker or an adventurer.¹⁵ We should also recall that Egypt itself participated in the fight against him, so that it could hardly be seen purely as a battle between Muslims and foreigners.

Egypt, meanwhile, continued to enjoy a positive reputation, which actually grew stronger with time. One reason for this seems to have been its economic development. The British consul in Jerusalem noted in 1897 that the local population viewed Egypt's economic prosperity as a model to be admired.¹⁶ Egypt was also respected for its relatively efficacious government and the degree of autonomy it enjoyed even under British rule. Furthermore, there was a fair amount of political freedom in Egypt during this period, and it became the center of a reasonably free Arabic press, unthinkable in regions that were subject to Sultan Abdulhamid II's autocratic rule. Egyptian newspapers did reach Palestine, but their entry was often blocked by the sultan's censors, which provoked much resentment. The contrast between the sultan's authoritarian, centralized regime and the relative freedom of expression prevailing in Egypt could not be overlooked by the inhabitants of Palestine.

Finally, Egypt's reputation in Palestine may well have been enhanced by the special interest displayed by Khedive Abbas Hilmi II, who assumed office in 1892, in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. His involvement

in Syrian and Palestinian affairs included sending agents into these provinces to promote Egypt's interests (and his own).¹⁷ The khedive had certain designs on the caliphate, which, according to Sylvia Haim, may have been connected with the ideas disseminated from the end of the nineteenth century by Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi about an Arab caliphate. Haim cites an extremely interesting passage from a book published by Marmaduke Pickthall in 1914:

In the years 1894–1896, I was in Syria “living native,” as the English call it. I can remember hearing Muslim Arabs talking more than once of what would happen on the down fall of the Turks. They looked to Egypt, remembering the conquests of Mehmet Ali, and the gospel of an Arab empire under the Lord of Egypt which Ibrahim Pasha preached in Palestine and Syria. That gospel, I gathered, was still

being preached in secret by missionaries from Egypt.¹⁸

It would appear, then, that growing disillusion with the Ottoman government, coupled, perhaps, with a presentiment of its approaching end, augmented separatist ambitions in Palestine, though these remained subterranean. They were also accompanied by a growing orientation towards Egypt as a possible source of salvation. The Ottoman government, of course, was aware of what was going on and took countermeasures, including stepped-up censorship and restrictions on travel to Egypt and on the activities of Egyptian companies in Palestine. Ali Ekrem Bey, governor of Jerusalem at the end of the Hamidian period (1906–1908), reported at length to his superiors on Egyptian visitors in Palestine and his surveillance of them. Some Egyptian operations were exposed when he pressed for an investigation into the activities of the



The first offices of the *Al-Ahram* newspaper in Cairo.



Khedive Abbas Hilmi II

accountant of the Jerusalem *wakf* (religious foundation), whom he suspended from his post. It turned out that this accountant had helped the khedive, among his other doings, to acquire land in Palestine, install light fixtures in the Dome of the Rock, and send laborers to refurbish King David's Tomb – all without the authorization of the Sultan. The governor saw these Egyptian activities, which recalled those of Muhammad Ali so many decades before, as a premeditated attempt to gain control of the Muslim holy places.¹⁹ From the point of view of this study, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the accountant's aid to the khedive went beyond mere corruption and was an expression of local support for Egypt and of a desire to increase Egyptian influence in the country.

In the period of the Young Turks, Arab opposition to the Ottoman regime swelled tremendously, and with it the desire to find an alternative. This seems to

have further bolstered Egypt's status in Palestine and throughout the Arab provinces of the Empire. Though many Arab thinkers in this period still did not relate to Egypt as part of the Arab world, it became, in practice, one of the most important centers of the Arab national movement and the seat of one of the most active Arab nationalist parties, Hizb al-Lamarkaziyya (The Decentralization Party).²⁰ Moreover, the idea of annexation to Egypt – which, as we have seen, was not new – gained currency in Syria on the eve of World War I. It also transpired that a group of Syrian Muslims addressed an explicit request to Lord Kitchener, the British Consul General in Egypt, for Britain to annex Syria to Egypt and grant it autonomy. Eliezer Tauber notes that annexation to Egypt was the ambition of a number of "Syrian" nationalists, though this notion stemmed more from the desire for liberation from the Ottomans than from identification with Egypt.²¹ The same attitude was also widely held in Palestine. In 1912, the French Consul General in Jerusalem wrote that there were those who still looked back fondly upon Abdulhamid's regime, but others were willing to entertain the idea of a foreign or Arab government.²² He also reports on the Mufti of Gaza, Ahmad Arif, who was exiled to Ankara because of his expressed wish for the annexation of Gaza to Egypt.²³ The British Consul, too, wrote early in 1913 that "all are united in their desire for annexation to Egypt."²⁴ It would appear that of the possibilities for liberation from the Ottoman yoke that stood before the populace of Syria-Palestine, annexation to Egypt held out some significant

attractions, even at the price of a British protectorate.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I and the establishment of the British mandate in Palestine were to change the whole pattern of relationships in the area and lead the Arab community in Palestine in a quite different direction. As future events and developments would show, however, high regard for Egypt and its achievements remained strong among Palestinian Arabs. This must have rested in no small measure upon the many years of contact and experience that led them to see Egypt as a strong, progressive neighbor, a brother upon whom they could rely, and a model to be emulated.

* This article is based on a lecture delivered at a workshop in memory of Prof. David Ayalon, held at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Jerusalem. The papers presented there are to be published in Hebrew by the Israel Academy.

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