

THE DEMANDS OF MUHAMMAD ALI PASHA

The Egypt Elayet was administered as a primary division of the Ottoman Empire as a result of the conquest of Mamluk Egypt by the Ottomans in 1517 until 1867. When Muhammad Ali came to power in 1805, Egypt remained nominally an Ottoman province. While some still regarded him as just another Mamluk ruler, others considered him the founder of modern Egypt because of the scope of his reforms, which slowly detached Egypt from the traditional Ottoman rule, posing a potential threat to the integrity of the Empire. He is sometimes referred to as the founder of modern Egypt, because of the depth and durability of his reforms. Through his various public projects – the opening of schools, the building of hospitals, the restructuring of the economy or the building of a modern army – he is not merely seen as having enhanced the efficiency of the Egypt Elayet, but as having laid the basis for independence from Ottoman control through the modernization of Egyptian society.¹

MUHAMMAD ALI PASHA: RISE TO POWER OF THE LAST MAMLUK OF EGYPT

Muhammad Ali Pasha came to power after a situation of great instability in the Ottoman Empire. The recent occupation by the French (1798-1801), had seriously weakened the power of the Mamluks in a manner that led to a power vacuum after the departure of the Napoleonic army. With the French gone, the situation was considered opportune for the Ottoman Sultan to fill the vacuum, reestablish effective control in Egypt and deal decisively with the remaining Mamluk menace. However, this revealed further the weakness in administration, created by the distance between Cairo

¹ Henry Dodwell, *The Founder of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: the University Press, 1931)

and Istanbul.² In this decisive period, the attempts to establish Ottoman governors in the Egypt Elayet proved disastrous, bringing about years of instability, violence, over-taxation and injustice.³ It was at this time that Muhammad Ali emerged first as governor-designate of the Hijaz, entrusted with the dangerous mission of crushing the Wahhabi movement, and then as governor of Egypt in 1805, thanks to a coalition of leading ulama, merchants and notables of Cairo who were unhappy with the Mamluks in power. They even helped in overthrowing the previous Ottoman governor, Khurship Ahmad Pasha.⁴ The context in which Ali emerged as a political leader, therefore, shows how the political and military situation in Egypt enabled him to conduct an increasingly independent form of rule, ultimately providing him with the tools to simultaneously overcome local politics and reveal the weaknesses of Istanbul.

CONSOLIDATION AND POLITICAL MANEUVERINGS

Muhammad Ali found himself at the age of thirty-five in control of Egypt, one of the wealthiest provinces of the Ottoman Empire. He knew however, how precarious his position was. For one thing, his appointment had been forced on Sultan Salim, and he was wary that the sultan might try to depose him at the first opportunity. This concern haunted Muhammad Ali throughout his long career,

and Egypt's history in the first half of the nineteenth century was considerably shaped by his attempt to make his tenure more secure and permanent.⁵ Second, the Mamluks remained a serious threat to

² Khaled Fahmy, "The era of Muhammad Ali Pasha, 1805-1848" in *The Cambridge History of Egypt, vol.2*, ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 142

³ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 67

⁴ Ibid, 67

⁵ Khaled Fahmy, "The era of Muhammad Ali Pasha, 1805-1848" in *The Cambridge History of Egypt, vol.2*, ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 144

public security in the countryside and to Muhammad Ali's safety. Lastly, he controlled little more than Cairo itself, which had witnessed a revolutionary moment as a result of the coalition of ulama, artisans and *ashraf* that had brought him to power and forced the Sultan to bend, but which could prove dangerous if it were not defused quickly.⁶

GOVERNMENT

INCREASING DECENTRALIZATION OF POWER

The Ottoman Empire was characterized by a highly fragmented cultural make-up; it controlled areas with a variety of ethnicities and cultures, from the largely Arab Levant, North African and Arabian peninsula territories, to the highly diverse Balkans, which are home to Christians, Catholics and Muslims alike. The **Sublime Porte** co-opted local elites whenever decentralized power in more distant regions had to be maintained. Egypt is an example of a region (**Elayet**) where local power

structures were partially maintained to preserve the Empire's economic interests and political stability. Like previous conquerors, the Ottomans first reorganized the administration of Egypt by imposing upon the country a system of government in which power was exercised by a viceroy (**Vali**).

The context of this period, however, is an empire in decline, long considered to be the sick man of Europe, characterized by the loss of centralized power. Throughout the centuries, the weakening of central authority has allowed powerful men to emerge and take power for themselves. In the eighteenth century, leadership roles were assumed by military men called Mamluks, who gained support and legitimacy through the establishment of ties with leading groups in Egyptian society.⁷

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ Hunter, Robert F. *Egypt under the Khedives: 1805-1879: From Household Government to Modern Bureaucracy*. The American University in Cairo Press: Cairo. 1999: 11

The Mamluks used their influence to obtain positions in the Ottoman administration, which enabled them to build up even more strength; by the mid-eighteenth century, they had replaced the Vali and the Ottoman military corps as the real authority in Egypt. In fact, the title of “Pasha” was expanded to allow local Arabs to rise to high offices previously reserved for the servile elites recruited through the **devshirme** system.⁸ Ultimately, Ottoman rule was forced to adapt to local politics.⁹

Nonetheless, the Ottoman government, despite having been severely weakened by corruption and the resultant questions of its legitimacy, has always perceived Egypt’s local governors as a threat to the integrity of the central power. When the French departed from Egypt in 1801 after three years of occupation, they left a power vacuum that inevitably weakened the power of the Mamluks.¹⁰ Napoleon initiated a campaign to exclude Mamluks from the government of the diwaas, small provinces formed to help rule the country, to which he appointed only members of the **ulama**. When the French left, the Ottomans “never faced a better opportunity to reassert their authority over the rebellious province of Egypt.”¹¹ The emergence of Muhammad Ali Pasha eventually resulted in the elimination of the Mamluk aristocracy, and by extension Mamluk control over socio-economic and political affairs in Egypt. He slowly excluded them from political life, before ordering that the bulk of the Mamluk aristocracy be gunned down in a bloody massacre in the Cairo citadel in 1811. In doing so, Muhammad Ali was relentlessly carrying out the will of the Sultan, who for years had viewed the Mamluks as the ultimate threat to Ottoman authority in Egypt; and yet, the fact that the Sultan was forced to rely on Ali serves as further indication of the Ottomans’ crumbling authority over the

⁸ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 43

⁹ *Ibid*, 38

¹⁰ Khaled Fahmy, “The era of Muhammad Ali Pasha, 1805-1848” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol.2 , ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 140

¹¹ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 65

provinces, and the rise of a new threat to the central power: the independent and revolutionary Pasha.

LEADERSHIP AND LOYALTY TO THE PASHA

To secure his position further in Egypt, Muhammad Ali invited his family and friends to Egypt to take up residence. First to arrive were the members of his family, who were given posts as governors or military commanders of his first expeditions. His son Ibrahim, then only sixteen years old, was immediately made governor of the Citadel in Cairo.¹² He then sent his son Tussan Pasha to lead the military operations against the Wahhabis,¹³ after Tussan's death in battle, his eldest son Ibrahim took over the campaign, emerging as Muhammad Ali's generalissimo during his brilliant military career.¹⁴ This set a trend that was soon characteristic of the Pasha's long reign: members of his immediate family, relatives from his home town of Kavalla, and close trusted friends were given important positions in the administration that he started to build, especially since Egypt was going through a revolutionary phase and loyalties were continuously shifting. For instance, when the British were evacuated from Alexandria in 1807, Ali replaced the Ottoman governor with a friend, Boghus Yusufian, who would later become the Pasha's adviser on foreign and commercial affairs.¹⁵

Ali later re-organized a new bureaucratic structure to secure his role as a strong leader without interference in his administration. He created councils of officials, convened to deliberate on

¹² Khaled Fahmy, "The era of Muhammad Ali Pasha, 1805-1848" in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol.2 , ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 145

¹³ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 68

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 70

¹⁵ Khaled Fahmy, "The era of Muhammad Ali Pasha, 1805-1848" in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol.2 , ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 146

public business and administrative departments (**divans**), similar to modern ministries of government.¹⁶ He then established a highly centralized system whose nucleus resided in Cairo and proceeded through the provincial governors to the local headmen. Moreover, he introduced ethnic and linguistic duality in his civilian bureaucracy, reserving senior positions for Turkish speakers, while Arabic speakers, whose ethnicity and language guaranteed that they remained in subordinate

positions, filled the lower ranks. This system accomplished several things. First, it attracted men from all over the Ottoman world to serve the new sovereign; through these positions and others in the rapidly expanding civilian bureaucracy, “a loyal elite was forming around the Pasha and his family.”¹⁷

Second, it prevented Arabic-speaking masses from challenging the Pasha’s rule, as they now played a role in his bureaucracy, and therefore benefited to some degree from his success. All these measures were taken to establish a highly controlled chain of officers loyal to the Pasha, in which firm control had replaced the anarchy of the previous Ottoman regime.

ECONOMY

THE TRADITIONAL AGRARIAN ECONOMY

Despite being the largest sector of the economy, most Egyptian agriculture was subsistent. This meant that farmers did not make profits, but generated enough wealth to ensure their own survival and ability to pay taxes. This was not the result of poor farmland; in fact, sitting along the Nile floodplains, Egyptian soil was highly productive due to naturally-replenishing fertilizers. Instead, Egyptian agriculture remained unintensified for centuries because there was generally no market for

¹⁶ Britannica

¹⁷ Khaled Fahmy, “The era of Muhammad Ali Pasha, 1805-1848” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol.2 , ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155

the goods it produced, so a surplus was unnecessary. The exception to this was the cultivation of cotton, which was done at a relatively small level, but proved profitable thanks to trade with European powers and their insatiable textile mills. Trade with Europe thus proved an important part of the Egyptian economy, though the balance of trade tended to benefit European powers with the ability to mass produce cheap garments, thus undercutting the Egyptian textiles industry.

Another reason for economic stagnation was that most of Egypt's agricultural land was owned by either the local Mamluk aristocrats or the sheiks, who were therefore responsible for tax collection. There was little land that could be effectively taxed by the central government due to the corrupt and ineffective nature of the **Itizam** tax system, which allowed tax collectors to horde surpluses, landlords to bribe the collectors, and religious figures to claim tax exemptions. For the **Sublime Porte**, Egypt's economic importance had always been two-fold; it was one of the major food suppliers in the empire (the others are the Levantine **Elayets**) and it's large tax base was a valuable source of revenue.¹⁸

MUHAMMAD ALI PASHA'S ECONOMIC REFORMS

Muhammad Ali's economic reforms transformed Egypt from an agrarian province into a newly-industrialized proto-state. His land and tax reforms provided the capital he needed for infrastructure projects to support his industries. One fifth of all taxable lands in Egypt were tax exempt **Waqfs**, and the other four fifths belonged to Mamluk landlords, who often bribed tax collectors to avoid paying higher taxes. The result was a reduction in the potential tax revenue for Ali's government in Cairo.

¹⁸ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 82

Ali began by rescinding the tax exemptions extended to the **Waqfs** and implemented a new tax collection system, in which the state determined how much tax collectors should be taking. These reforms simultaneously eliminated the loss of potential revenues to corrupt tax collectors and undermined the financial welfare of the Mamluk aristocracy. Ali also established a government monopoly that was responsible for the commercial distribution of all agricultural goods; farmers were forced to sell their produce only to the state, which then resold these goods back to the people at a profit. Furthermore, Ali's government mandated what farmers were able to grow; rather than engage in subsistence agriculture, farmers were forced to maximize on Egypt's agricultural potential by sowing labor-intensive cash crops like cotton, which the state could then export to European countries at a profit.¹⁹

The influx of revenues and centralization of the economy allowed Ali to proceed onwards to more ambitious projects, like the expansion of canal and irrigation systems and diversification of trading partners. Ali's infrastructural investment laid the groundwork for industrialization and the development of modern factories; he protected these fledgling industries by placing high tariffs on foreign manufactured goods. Simultaneously, by strengthening trade relations with European states such as France, Ali reduced Egypt's economic reliance on territories controlled by the Sultan.

In addition to enlisting European assistance in establishing new industries, Ali recognized the importance of an academic culture in the workforce. He invited European experts to supervise state-owned enterprises, and to establish colleges both for the managerial class, who would run the factories, and the working class, who would need practical skills to increase their efficiency in the workplace. These steps towards industrialization yielded an indigenous arms industry, capable of supplying small arms and cannons to land forces, and a shipyard that allowed for the construction of

¹⁹ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 83

large military vessels and transport ships. However, thus far the industry has not been able to keep up with the rapid growth of Egypt's conscript army.²⁰

MILITARY

CONSCRIPTION AND THE NATIONAL ARMY

Muhammad Ali Pasha's Albanian troops played a pivotal role in his rise to power. They provided him with an independent source of coercion and were considered effective fighters, well known for "their independence and insubordination." Initially, they formed the core of the Pasha's army, but they grew unruly and unreliable over time, putting their loyalty in doubt.²¹ Since the Ottomans had placed an embargo on military slaves from the Caucasus to Egypt in 1810 to contain the ambitions of Muhammad Ali,²² he attempted to introduce new methods of recruitment, and was forced to rely on his own population. Moreover, his original Albanian forces had been nearly destroyed by the wars in Arabia and Sudan, forcing the new leader to face severe constraints due to the shortage of soldiers in his personal army. The introduction of a "National Army," a conscript force that drew its ranks from the workers and peasants of the country, was a novel idea to the Ottoman world, in which soldiers were traditionally considered to belong to a separate "martial caste" taken from slave ranks.²³

²⁰ Ibid, 72

²¹ Khaled Fahmy, "The era of Muhammad Ali Pasha, 1805-1848" in *The Cambridge History of Egypt, vol.2*, ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 144

²² Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 70

²³ Ibid, 72

Muhammad Ali used the Napoleonic army, the French *levee en masse* (citizens' mass army), as a model for arming and conscripting his recruits. He used Prussian and French officers to introduce modern, European methods of warfare, and the new training and tactical regimens better prepared Ali's troops for the realities of 19th century warfare.²⁴ These reforms yielded both officers who were acquainted with the European style of war, as well as enlisted personnel who were well-drilled; all of these troops wore a brand new uniform made in Egyptian factories, symbolizing the legitimacy and independence of the Pasha's armed forces.

Another military innovation that Muhammad Ali brought was the ethnic divisions within his army. While Arabic-speaking peasants formed the bulk of the army, their commanders were Turkish speaking. Arabs were prevented from rising above the rank of *yuzbashi* (captain).²⁵ This ethnic and linguistic duality, characteristic of his reign, was already seen in the positions reserved for the civilian bureaucracy. This system granted him strict control over the peasant class, creating a body of disciplined, reliable troops subject to harsh military training, which he used to extend Cairo's control over the entire province of Egypt and, subsequently, establish a more permanent presence in Arabia. The creation of this army represented a threat for the sultan Mahmud, who had his own hands tied by the **Janissaries**, the Ottoman vanguard military caste that held significant political influence in the **Sublime Porte**. At the dawn of the Greek Revolt, the Janissaries proved to be in a backward state; ineffective on the battlefield and increasingly corrupt, they stood against European general staff who were immersed in a professional military culture.

²⁴ Ibid, 73

²⁵ Khaled Fahmy, "The era of Muhammad Ali Pasha, 1805-1848" in *The Cambridge History of Egypt, vol.2*, ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155

WHERE WE ARE NOW: GREECE

This committee begins in March 1821. A nationalist uprising in the Greek provinces of the Empire has been initiated by the Filiki Etairia, or “Society of Friends”—an organization promoting Greek independence.²⁶ The Greek community is distinct, and united by a shared language, faith and history. Thus, the incident exemplifies the danger of nationalism, a growing phenomenon in the Ottoman Empire and Europe: it can inspire “a whole population to rise up against their...rulers.”²⁷ Though the uprising began on the Southern Peloponnesian Peninsula, it is rapidly spreading to central Greece, Macedonia, the Aegean Islands, and Crete, resulting in a war on several fronts. The uprising has drawn the attention of European powers, who are torn between popular support of the Greeks as the remnants of a classical civilization, and the pragmatic need to maintain the Balance of Power by supporting the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire.²⁸ The Ottomans have requested the aid of Muhammad Ali Pasha in suppressing the Greeks. Though he has consented, it remains to be seen whether this non-conforming governor will indeed obey the commands of his Sultan and the Imperial Council, and for how long he can be kept within the fold.

²⁶ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 73

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. To what extent should Egypt continue to follow the demands of the Sultan? What can be done to ensure adequate compensation for Egypt's continued loyalty?
2. Is the economic growth that Muhammad Ali started sustainable? How can it be continued without causing over-extraction and backlash?
3. What should Egypt's relationship with European powers look like? What should Egypt's role be in global affairs?



GLOSSARY

Devshirme: “boy levy,” system of slave recruitment in which young Christian boys were taken from their villages in an annual conscription, converted to Islam and trained to serve the Ottoman empire²⁹

Janissaries: military caste distinct from peasants, with great political and social power; ostensibly an elite infantry force, though in recent years they have declined in military power³⁰

Ulama: Islamic scholars; specifically, those who had attended higher religious education in the Ottoman Empire and were considered part of the educated class

Itizam: an agricultural tax collected by the state; allowed tax collectors, who set the tax rates at their own initiative, to keep any surpluses collected beyond the amount mandated by the government



²⁹ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 26

³⁰ Ibid, 27

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