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The Arab Struggle for Independence: Egypt, Iraq, and Transjordan from the Interwar Era to 1945

In the immediate aftermath of World War I, Britain's attempts to retain control of Egypt and establish a mandate in Iraq were met with widespread popular resistance. Although Britain managed to crush the revolts in the two countries, the costs were high and could not be sustained. Britain therefore formulated a system of alliance building that has been called empire by treaty. In this system, Egypt and Iraq were granted a limited form of "independence" that provided them with freedom to conduct domestic political affairs as they saw fit yet required the two states to allow the presence of British military bases on their soil and to adopt a foreign policy that was acceptable to Britain. By this means, Britain secured its essential strategic needs without incurring the expenses of directly governing the territories. But the restrictions that this system imposed on the full exercise of national sovereignty created a source of conflict between local political leaders and Great Britain and produced continuous tension throughout the period.

THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER IN EGYPT

Although Egypt was spared from becoming a battleground during World War I, its population nevertheless suffered severe hardships in the years 1914–1918. The British decision to make Egypt the launching point for both the Gallipoli and Syrian campaigns meant that the material and human resources of the

country were harnessed to the service of the Allied war effort. Farm animals and crops were requisitioned and thousands of *fellahin* conscripted into a civilian labor corps and forced to accompany the British army in its invasion of Ottoman Syria. Rural and urban dwellers alike suffered from the effects of inflation and from shortages of basic consumer goods.
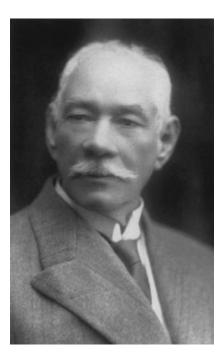
With the British declaration of a protectorate over Egypt and the imposition of martial law in 1914, domestic political activity came to a standstill. The establishment of the British protectorate terminated four centuries of Ottoman sovereignty. Egyptian rulers had long worked to distance themselves from Istanbul's authority, but they had not intended to have the sultan's control replaced by that of the British high commissioner. Nor did Egyptians welcome their forced participation in a war against another Islamic state with which they continued to have strong bonds of religious affinity.

When the war ended, the discontent it had spawned created a simmering restlessness at all levels of Egyptian society. Among the Egyptian elite, strong sentiments for self-government were spurred on by US president Woodrow Wilson's pronouncements on the virtues of self-determination. Yet because the war had shown British policymakers how vital Egypt was to the defense of British imperial interests, there was no likelihood of a voluntary British withdrawal from the country. As Lord Lloyd stated to the House of Commons in 1929, "The only place from which the Suez Canal can be economically and adequately defended is from Cairo."[1] However, the actions of a few members of the Egyptian elite ignited the existing anti-British feeling into a national uprising that caught the British by surprise and forced them to seek a negotiated agreement for their continued presence in Egypt.

The Formation of the Wafd and the Revolution of 1919

In November 1918 seven prominent Egyptians from the landed gentry and the legal profession formed a delegation, or *wafd*, that had as its express goal the complete independence of Egypt. The delegation approached the British high commissioner with a request that it be allowed to represent Egypt at the Paris Peace Conference. When the request was denied, the *wafd* organizers took their demands to the Egyptian people. Traveling throughout the country with their message of independence, they sought to rally popular support for their claim that they, and not the British-backed ruler and his ministers, represented the will of the population at large. Thus was founded one of the most widely supported political parties in modern Egyptian history.

The original Wafd Party was led by Sa'd Zaghlul (circa 1857–1927). Like many of the other party founders, Zaghlul was raised in a rural environment and then went on to acquire a European-style education, in his case a degree from the French law school in Cairo after he had studied at al-Azhar. His was

Saʿd Zaghlul, leader of the Wafd Party and the Egyptian independence movement after World War I. In 1924 Zaghlul became the first popularly elected prime minister of Egypt. (The Middle East Centre, St. Antony's College, Oxford)

a classic career of upward mobility made possible by the educational and career opportunities provided by Egypt's transformation; he gained his wealth and status through his work as a Europeanized lawyer, judge, and government administrator, but he owed much of his success as a national political leader to his familiarity with the idiom of the Egyptian countryside and al-Azhar. During the Wafd's tour of Egypt in early 1919, Zaghlul proved to be a captivating orator and demonstrated a special ability to communicate with rural Egyptians. He quickly became the focus of popular adulation and, with his colleagues, succeeded in arousing popular discontent at Britain's refusal to lift the protectorate. The British authorities responded to the Wafd's campaign by arresting Zaghlul and three other leaders and exiling them to Malta in March 1919.

    The exile of Zaghlul unleashed the pent-up emotions of the Egyptian population and created a wave of support for the Wafd. Riots and demonstrations in favor of independence first broke out in the urban areas. When the British attempted to contain them by force, the intensity of the demonstrations increased, eventually exploding into a nationwide upheaval known as the revolution of 1919. In Cairo, student demonstrators from the law school and al-Azhar were joined by tram workers and veiled women in demanding the return of their leader and the independence of their country; lawyers and government workers went on strike, shutting down the courts and the bureaucracy. In the countryside, angry peasants

tore up train tracks, burned railcars, and killed British soldiers. The British met the civilian demonstrators with armed force, and by the end of 1919, more than 800 Egyptians had been killed and 1,400 wounded. The situation was eventually defused with the decision of the new British high commissioner, General Allenby, to allow Zaghlul and his companions to appear before the Paris Peace Conference. The Egyptian people, through their sacrifice, had elevated the Wafd, a group of private citizens, to the role of national representatives.

The Egyptian delegation did not receive a sympathetic hearing in Paris, but the British decided to include Zaghlul in discussions on the future of the Anglo-Egyptian relationship. The negotiations dragged on for two years, largely because the Wafd demanded full and complete independence, whereas the British insisted on imposing conditions that would restrict Egyptian sovereignty. The deadlock was finally broken not by agreement between the two parties but by the unilateral declaration of independence Britain issued in 1922. The declaration abolished the protectorate, proclaimed Egypt independent, and elevated the status of the Egyptian ruler to king. However, the declaration also contained four reserved points that made a mockery of the term *independence*. By these points, the British government remained responsible for the security of imperial communications in Egypt, the defense of Egypt against foreign aggression or interference, the protection of foreign interests and foreign minorities in Egypt, and the Sudan and its future status. The British military presence in Egypt was thus ensured, the Capitulations continued to be enforced, and Egypt still did not control its own foreign policy. The British had imposed their version of independence on Egypt against the will of the Wafd and its popular leader, thereby setting the stage for the confrontations that would define interwar political life in Egypt.

Egypt's Liberal Experiment, 1924–1936

In the minds of the Wafdist politicians, the ideas of independence and constitutional government were closely linked. These wealthy, European-oriented Egyptians assumed that the very existence of a constitution and a parliament would somehow resolve Egypt's domestic problems and hasten British recognition of unfettered independence. Britain supported the constitutional ideal, if not the concept of true independence, and in 1923 a constitution was proclaimed. Elections for the first parliament were held in January 1924. The Wafd Party demonstrated its popularity by winning 90 percent of the seats and providing Sa'd Zaghlul with the opportunity to become Egypt's first elected prime minister. Thus began Egypt's troubled and short-lived experiment with parliamentary democracy, the only time in the country's modern history that a genuine attempt to establish parliamentary institutions along European lines was made.

Among the many factors that militated against the efficient functioning of Egypt's democracy, four may be singled out as particularly debilitating. The first was the nature of the constitution. It awarded extensive powers to the king, including the right to appoint the prime minister and dissolve parliament, and so created an institutionally weak legislature. King Fuad (1917–1936) was determined to protect his royal prerogatives and did not hesitate to dismiss governments whenever it suited his purpose. Second, the British continued to interfere in Egyptian politics, thus undermining the integrity of the parliamentary system. Third, neither the Wafd nor any of the smaller parties adopted the principles of compromise and respect for the opposition that are essential for the proper conduct of parliamentary government. Zaghlul was every bit as authoritarian as the king; he regarded the opposition members of parliament with contempt and stacked the bureaucracy with Wafdist supporters regardless of their qualifications. And finally, the question of Egypt's independence and the existence of the four reserved points caused political life to revolve around a continuous struggle for power among the Wafd, the monarchy, and the British. The Wafd demanded complete independence and more power for parliament at the expense of the king. King Fuad, in turn, sought to preserve his powers by catering to the British, who tended to support him against the Wafd. The British also supported civilian politicians who were prepared to undertake negotiations on the basis of the four reserved points, something the Wafd would not do.

These factors combined to create short-lived governments interspersed with periods of royal rule. Politics was reduced to a power struggle among competing factions of the elite, and the serious domestic issues facing Egyptian society at large were not addressed. The consuming desire for independence was partially fulfilled in 1936, when Britain, alarmed by Italian expansionism in Ethiopia, agreed to renegotiate the 1922 declaration. The result was an Anglo-Egyptian treaty of alliance that recognized Egypt's independence, though it also provided for a British military presence in the Suez Canal zone and reaffirmed Britain's right to defend Egypt in case of attack. Britain, then, retained the advantages of the 1922 declaration. The difference was that the 1936 treaty was signed by an elected Wafdist government, thus giving formal Egyptian consent to the continued deployment of British troops on Egyptian soil. As a corollary to Egypt's new independence, the European states signed the Montreux Convention (1937), which at long last abolished the Capitulations and provided for the phasing out of the Mixed Courts by 1949.

The achievement of a greater degree of internal sovereignty did not bring about a substantial change in the pattern of Egyptian politics. King Fuad died in 1936 and was succeeded by his son Faruq, a young monarch whose early popularity was gradually eroded by his personal indulgences. The politicians, with their preference for secular political institutions and their self-serving

devotion to their own needs, became increasingly isolated from the urban and rural masses. The imported parliamentary system inspired little loyalty from the population, especially as the wealthy professional and landowning politicians who operated it were unwilling to direct their attention to the social legislation that Egypt so desperately needed. Nor was there a single national leader capable of inspiring popular confidence. Following Zaghlul's death in 1927, the Wafd, under the leadership of Mustafa al-Nahhas, became factionalized and corrupt. Although it continued to attract a large popular following, it had lost its former élan.

The political leaders were further distanced from the population by their whole-hearted acceptance of European values and their attempts to impose them on Egyptian society. One observer has labeled this dimension of the liberal experiment "the attack upon tradition."[2] It was represented by the diminution of religious values and religious institutions in the regulation of legal affairs and personal relationships. Egyptian society underwent a severe dislocation as liberal leaders endorsed the belief that European civilization, with its supposedly rational foundations, was superior to the divinely ordained Islamic order. Ideas of European origin, ranging from Darwinism to socialism, from feminism to Freudianism, received widespread circulation in the lively periodical press of the era.

For some of the interwar intellectuals and politicians, Egypt's new path toward modernity required a reshaping of its cultural identity. In their eagerness to portray Egypt's cultural legacy as deriving from the liberal traditions of Europe, writers like Taha Husayn (1889–1973), who held an advanced degree from the Sorbonne, downplayed the country's Arab and Islamic heritage in favor of symbols culled from its Greek and pharaonic past. Thus the doctrine of pharaonism glorified the Nile River, the major symbol of Egyptian territorial nationalism, and the rich pre-Islamic civilization to which it had given birth. In his book *Mustaqbal al-Thaqafah fi Misr* (The Future of Culture in Egypt), published in 1938, Taha Husayn stressed Egypt's Mediterranean heritage and asserted that Egypt had shared in, and contributed to, the same Greek civilization to which Western Europe owed much of its political and intellectual strength. Such deliberate omission of Islam further alienated the population from the parliamentary regime and the politicians and intellectuals who claimed to speak for the people but ignored their economic grievances and insulted their Islamic sensibilities.

The attack upon tradition was also evident in the emergence of an Egyptian feminist movement. Originating among women from Cairo's upper classes, Egyptian feminism coalesced around the leadership of Huda Shaʿrawi (1879–1947) and the Egyptian Feminist Union she founded in 1923. The union initially focused on such issues as women's suffrage, equal access to edu-

cational opportunities, and the reform of marriage laws. The union supported complete independence from Britain but, like the upper-class male leaders of the Wafd Party, promoted European social values and had an essentially secular orientation. The objectives of the feminist movement were symbolized by the well-publicized gesture of social freedom made by Sha'rawi and her associate, Saiza Nabrawi, who removed their veils as they stepped off a train at Cairo's main railway station in 1923. Some of the Egyptian Feminist Union's educational demands were met: In 1925 the government made primary education compulsory for girls as well as boys, and later in the decade women were admitted to the national university for the first time. The union's campaign for the reform of family law, however, was unsuccessful.

The attack upon tradition was led primarily by educated members of the middle and upper classes who were not representative of the vast majority of Egyptians. Beginning in the late 1920s, disaffected elements of the population began to seek practical solutions to their economic problems and sustenance for their spiritual needs by joining organizations that operated outside the structured party system. This popular reaction against the foreign-inspired parliamentary regime was also a reaction against the secularism it represented. Many of the voluntary organizations that sprang up in the 1930s were associated with one form or another of Islamic activism. By far the most significant of them—and one of the most significant organizations in recent Egyptian history—was the Muslim Brotherhood.

Founded in Isma'iliyya in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, a layman educated at the Teachers' Training College, the brotherhood grew dramatically during the 1930s, and by the end of the decade it had 500 branches throughout Egypt and a membership numbering tens of thousands. The program of the brotherhood was a mixture of the traditional and the innovative. It was traditional in that al-Banna believed that the social and political regeneration of Egypt was intimately tied to the restoration of Islam as a guiding force in national life. To this end, he called for the reimplementation of the *shari'ah*, arguing that the ills from which Egypt suffered could be traced to the replacement of Quranic principles by secular legal and political institutions. However, al-Banna's insistence on the restoration of the *shari'ah* did not imply a simplistic resurrection of the past. As Muhammad Abduh had done earlier, al-Banna sought to find a way for Muslims to take advantage of the technological advances of the twentieth century without feeling that they were compromising their commitment to Islamic values. He argued, much as Abduh had, that the *shari'ah* was originally formulated to meet a specific set of historical circumstances and was thus a product of informed human reasoning. In al-Banna's view the restored *shari'ah* would be subject to interpretation and would hence be fully compatible with the needs of a modern society. The lack of specificity in al-Banna's political proposals should

not detract from the power of his vision; he called forth not so much an Islamic state as an Islamic order that—precisely because of its Islamic basis—would ensure social justice, economic well-being, and political harmony.

The brotherhood's direct appeal to Islamic-based social reform and social responsibility constituted part of its attraction. While the politicians bickered, the brotherhood acted and made its presence felt across a broad spectrum of Egyptian society. Al-Banna advocated such economic reforms as land redistribution, the introduction of social welfare programs, and the replacement of foreign capital by local investment. The brotherhood forged close ties with Egypt's emergent labor movement and defended workers' demands for union protection and unemployment benefits. It also established enterprises of its own, most notably in the fields of weaving, transportation, and construction, and granted workers shareholding rights in these companies. In an effort to bridge the gap that split Egyptian society into secular and religious spheres, al-Banna's followers founded primary schools that tried to combine religious instruction with training in scientific and technical subjects. The organization also provided material assistance to society's underprivileged by establishing free medical clinics and setting up soup kitchens to feed the urban poor during the height of the depression. In this extensive range of activities, the Muslim Brotherhood manifested al-Banna's belief that social justice was more than a matter of legislation; it was in effect part of a social ethos that could be realized only by a return to Islamic values.

The appeal of the Muslim Brotherhood was widespread and cut across class lines. It became the focus for those who were marginalized by Egypt's disruptive transformation. To the urban poor, and especially to the large number of them who were recent migrants from the countryside, the organization offered material assistance, communal associations, and spiritual comfort. The brotherhood also attracted a large following among university students, who faced the prospect of low-paying civil service jobs and a lifetime of frustrated expectations. The young were drawn as well by the brotherhood's intransigent stand on complete independence and its denunciation of the Treaty of 1936 and all the compromises associated with that agreement. And to all who felt adrift in a world of changing values and increasingly complex relationships, the brotherhood represented the stability of Islamic values and offered the hope that they could be incorporated into the uncertain future. This powerful combination of appeals allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to emerge from World War II as a potent force in Egyptian politics.

Despite the outward trappings of secularism that were so much in evidence during the years of the liberal experiment, Egyptian society as a whole remained firmly committed to its Islamic roots. And despite the symbolic recognition of the country's sovereignty in the Treaty of 1936 and its admission to

the League of Nations in 1937, the presence of British troops in the canal zone suggested that in times of crisis for the British Empire, London, not Cairo, would chart Egypt's course. World War II was to present such a crisis.

AN OVERVIEW OF WORLD WAR II

In this chapter and the two that follow, we examine the impact of World War II on the individual Arab countries. In order to place the conflict in its Middle Eastern context and illustrate the crucial role that the region assumed in the Allied conduct of the war, we consider at this point a brief overview of the chronology of the Second World War.

During the month of June 1940, France fell and German forces occupied most of Western Europe. The main theater of war then shifted to the skies above Britain, where, during summer and fall 1940, the Battle of Britain raged between the German Luftwaffe and the Royal Air Force. The British pilots prevailed, and for the moment Britain seemed secure from invasion. However, the overseas communication routes and oil fields that were vital to continued British participation in the war remained vulnerable and were drawn into the arena of battle.

During the two years following the Battle of Britain, a giant Axis pincer movement gradually closed on the British positions in the Middle East. By 1942, the pincer seemed ready to squeeze shut. In the north the Wehrmacht, already in occupation of the Balkans up to the Turkish border, had Stalingrad under siege and was penetrating through the Caucasian oil fields toward the Caspian Sea. In the south the seesaw Western Desert campaign appeared to have swung in favor of the Axis forces. During summer 1942, General Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps penetrated into Egypt, driving the British forces back to al-Alamain, only 70 miles (112 km) from Alexandria and within striking distance of the Suez Canal.

Then, in October 1942, the British launched a counteroffensive at al-Alamain that swept Rommel's forces out of Egypt and across Libya to Tunisia, finally defeating them in spring 1943. At the same time—the winter of 1942–1943—the Germans suffered a catastrophic defeat in the Battle of Stalingrad; it marked the start of their long retreat from the Soviet Union. The Allies followed up their triumph in North Africa with the invasion of Italy in 1943 and with the massive seaborne landing at Normandy in June 1944. On May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered. The war in the Pacific came to an end in September, hastened by the US decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Axis pincer had not clamped shut on the Middle East after all. During the troubled years from 1940 to 1942, however, the Allied victory was by no