

Chapter One

EGYPT AT THE TIME OF NAPOLEON'S INVASION.

Since ancient times, Egypt has maintained a prominent place in the history of civilization in the Middle East. She acted, on the one hand, as a connecting link between the countries of the East and the West; on the other, as refuge for civilization whenever it faced danger.(1)

Egypt in the middle ages linked the Islamic civilization with the European countries on the Mediterranean littoral, at the same time it became the very home of this Islamic civilization and preserved it from peril when other Islamic

(1) Dr. Shawakī Daif: al-Adab al-‘Arabi al-Mu‘asir, p.20

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countries collapsed before the Mongol invasions and the Ottoman spread their power over the Islamic lands of the Middle East.

Geographically a part of Africa, Egypt has been throughout the ages historically and culturally a part of Western Asia. With greater Syria and Iraq it forms one Arab block.

The most populous and one of the most important countries of the modern Middle East, Egypt was one of the first to come under direct European influence. Egypt was the first country in the Middle East to fall under foreign domination (1882) and one of the last to regain its complete sovereignty (1954).

In 1798, at the time of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, the population of Egypt consisted of about 2,500,000, (1) divided into four classes. Two of these i.e. Copts and Turks, did not number more than 200,000 each, the majority of the population was the Arabs. They numbered more than 2,000,000.

(1) 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Rafī'ī: Tārīkh al-Harakat al-Qawmiyya, p.43, Vol.1

(a) Geographical and Physical Condition of Egypt:

Egypt is situated at the junction of Africa and Asia. Superficially, Egypt covers a large territory, 386,198 square miles, (1) almost as large an area as Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan combined. But the real Egypt, the land upon which the Egyptians live and work, is only a tiny part of the whole, less than 4 per cent. Most Egyptians are directly or indirectly dependant upon agriculture. (2) As the Nile rises the flood water is admitted to the basins to a depth of up to 6 feet via canals leading from the river, and the water lies on the land for a period up to two months. Fertile silt is deposited by the flood and the ground is thoroughly soaked before the water is allowed to drain back to the river when the level of the flood is falling (3). Egypt has attracted the great state-builders and conquerers of the past. Egypt's strategic significance was immensely increased with the

(1) Lucile Carlson: Africa's lands and Nations, p.116

(2) In Egypt cotton alone provides about 80 per cent of agricultural income and 16 per cent of the total national income.

(3) H.R.Jarrett: Africa, p.147

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construction in 1869 of the Suez Canal. (1)
The canal was opened in 1869, internationally owned by a French Company in which Great Britain was the major shareholder, it was to allow passage to ships of all nations. The Suez canal was one of the most remarkable changes that man has imposed upon geography.

(b) Political condition:

The first quarter of the sixteenth century saw the fall of the Arab World within the orbit of Ottoman rule and influence while Europe was disengaging itself from the spiritual hold of Rome and embarking upon the hazardous yet challenging road of freedom, the Arab world was being isolated and insulated against almost all outside influences and changes. The process of isolation and insulation continued unabated for almost three centuries coming to an abrupt end at the time of the Napoleon expedition against Egypt in 1798.

George Baldwin, (2) describing the political

(1) Dr. Shawqī Daif: al-Adab al-‘Arabi al-Mu‘asir, p.15

(2) He was the Consul-General of His Majesty George III, and attached to the Commander-in-Chief during the campaign.

structure of Egypt at that time relates: "I am puzzled to define its governments. Who has ever defined it? It is neither a dependent nor independent state; yet, it is nominally subject to the Ottoman Porte, and virtually independent."

(1)

Egypt, consisting of some five thousand Janissaries, (2) was under a viceroy, entitled Pasha, but it had twelve districts which were administered by Mamluk governors. No radical changes were introduced into the administration then or later. Even the Mamluk governor or Bey, to use his title, had his own troops and slaves but acknowledged Turkish suzerainty by payment of annual tribute.

Powerful Pashas among them made puppets of the Ottoman viceroys and defied Constantinople by failing to remit what was due. (3) Though

(1) George Baldwin: Political Recollections Relative to Egypt. p. 43

(2) also Janizary, one of the body of Turkish infantry forming Sultan's guard (It was abolished in 1826).

(3) Hitti: The Near East in History, p.430

a caste by themselves, replenished by the importation of fresh slaves from the Caucasus, the beys had some advantages over the Pashas who were temporarily appointed, remote from the base, and ignorant of the language and customs of the people governed. At best a Pasha's tenure of office, which he had very likely bought, was of short duration. His chief concern was often how to replenish his own resources. During the two hundred and eighty years ending with the conquest of Napoleon and the rise of Muhammad ^{Ali} not less than a hundred pashas succeeded one after another.

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of its subject as the welfare of the state was personafied in the sultan-caliph. He was more interested in his welfare than that of his peoples.

After Sulaimān, one Sultan succeeded the other, and as one brief reign gave place to another, the decadence of the ruling race became more and more obvious. Anarchy reigned in the capital and corruption became common from Constantinople to the remotest corners of the empire. It was felt everywhere that the Turks were no longer invincible at sea.

Marriot, giving the causes of the decadence of the Ottoman Empire states: "The most palpable symptom of Ottoman decadence is afforded by the deterioration in the personal character of the Sultans. Excluding Muṣṭafā no less than thirteen sovereigns occupied the throne between 1566-1718. Not one led any army to victory; most of them devoted all the time they could spare from the neglect of their duties to the pleasure of the harem." (1)

(1) J.A.R.Marriot: "Eastern Question", p.107

Another historian Sharabi writes: "Throughout the nineteenth century revolutions shook the Balkan possessions of the Caliph, and by 1878 they are reduced to a small area west of Constantinople. Only British intervention and the repeated promises of reforms saved the empire from total collapse before the turn of the twentieth century. (1)

It was long before the Ottoman pasha sent to Egypt and Syria from the Constantinople ceased to exercise real control over local affairs. His ignorance of the colloquial language and of the local scene was a decided handicap. His tenure of office was at best of short duration. The frequent change in the personnel weakened the hold over the army which tended to become unruly and undisciplined. Beginning with the seventeenth century, mutinies became common. Conflicts between pashas and beys became a recurring theme in the political history of the land, with the pashas getting his chance when mutual jealousies and the struggle for supremacy among the beys themselves reached an acute stage. As the central authority in Constantinople weakened, respect for its viceroys decreased throughout

(1) Sharabi: Governments and Politics of the Middle East, pp.22-23

the empire.

As the centuries passed, Ottoman power crumbled and the Sultan's control from Constantinople became more and more nominal, until by the end of the eighteenth century all real power had passed once again into the hands of the Mamluks to whom the Sultan had surrendered the responsibility of local government under the nominal control of his viceroy or pasha.

The rising Mamluk power reached its zenith in 1769 when 'Alī Bey, reportedly a son of a Christian priest from the Caucasus who acquired enough strength to expel the Ottoman pasha, declared himself independent of the Porte. (1)

The fight among the leading Mamluks for the government of Egypt continued until, unexpectedly and as if from no where, Napoleon Bonaparte, a mighty invader landed in Alexandria (July 1798). His outward purpose was to punish the Mamluk. But his real aim was to strike a fatal blow at the

(1) After declaring himself independent, 'Alī Bey struck coins in his name, had it mentioned in the Friday noon sermon, and launched a double-attack on Arabic Syria. He was murdered in 1873.

British Empire by intercepting her communication with the East and thus make a bid for world domination. The destruction of the French fleet at Abouqir Bay (1st August, 1798), the check of the ill-fated expedition of Acre ('Akka, 1799), and defeat in the battle of Alexandria (21st March 1801), defeated Napoleon's designs in the East and forced the evacuation of the French troops from Egypt. The land hitherto playing a minor role in world events, as source of tribute for Turkey and a base of operation for maintaining the Ottoman dominion over Syria and Arabia, was suddenly drawn into the vortex of international politics as the gateway to India and the lands further east. The Napoleonic expedition turned Europe's eyes to somewhat forgotten land route to India and set in motion a chain of reaction which made the Middle East the storm centre of European intrigue and diplomacy.

(c) Economic condition:

At the time of Napoleonic expedition, Egypt's economy was at a low ebb. Its system was so rigid that it could not meet successfully the rising power of Europe, the commercial

activities of Europeans, and the potential effect of the new maritime empires that began to appear at that time. Ottoman ruler, neglected irrigation and related agricultural developments thus causing a deterioration in the country's economic conditions. Similarly, trade and industry, arts and crafts suffered as a result of the general political conditions in the country.

The financial system of Egypt was disruptive. Although initially the Sultan considered all lands in Egypt his property, ownership gradually passed to the various beys. The peasant cultivator was at the mercy of the tax-farmer, who, in turn, was at the mercy of the Beys.

(d) Social condition:

Before Napoleon's invasion, the native masses of both Egypt and Syria were in the grip of poverty and misery. (1) Poor sanitary conditions and low human vitality made of the area a playground for famine and pestilence.

(1) Umar al-Dasuqī: Fī Adab al-Hadīth, p.17 Vol.1

Deprived of the daily means of sustenance, beaten and oppressed by overlords, villagers deserted their farms and turned to a life of brigandage on waste lands between the settlements. Thus was the valley of the Nile, once a granary of Rome and supporter of a ten million people, barely able to support two and half million people by the mid-eighteenth century. (1)

The Ottoman Empire was forced to withdraw to within her own narrow boundaries. Her people were reduced to a life of misery and fear. Injustice disturbed not only individuals and groups but the nation as a whole.

The cultivator of the soil was relentlessly exploited by Pasha and Mamluk and driven into a state of a abjectness unparalleled except perhaps in the preceding era. Corruption and bribery prevailed. Insecurity, famine and plague added their quota of misery. One pestilence, i.e., that of 1619, is said to have carried away

(1) Hitti: The Near East in History, p.430

more than a third of a million people, another, that of 1643, left two hundred and thirty villages desolate. A contemporary chronicler al-Ishāqī states that while the 1619 plague raged, most of the shops of Cairo were closed, with the exception of those which dealt in shrouds and which remained open day and night. The population of the land, which under the Romans had reached some eight millions, had by the end of the eighteenth century dwindled into the one-third of its former size.

The early success of the French expedition was, in a large measure, due to the fact that Egypt had been torn by internal troubles brought about by the Mamluk misrule. (1)

In an age when mechanical industry was profoundly affecting most European countries, consolidating and democratizing their governments and enabling them to strengthen their arguments, the Ottoman Empire remained exceptionally backward in her economic development. (2)

(1) Mustafā al-Hafnāvī: Brief Survey of Egyptian Problem, p.1

(2) Dr. Shawqī Daif: al-Adab al-ʿArabī al-Muʿāṣir fī Miṣr, p.19

The Ottoman Empire was utterly unable to furnish the financial resources necessary to have political and military progress of the industrial nations.

In the Middle East, the social awakening began only at the end of the nineteenth century or late; in the Yemen and other remote regions it has yet to come. The riches and power of urban landowners and merchants stand in marked contrast to poverty and political feebleness in the countryside and, although a professional middle class was growing, it was much too small to provide adequate administrative and technical skill or to bridge the gulf between the wealthy and the very poor.

The natural resources of the Middle East had been scanty and there was inadequate rainfall over much of the area. Equally important was the shortage of industrial raw materials.

The Mongol, late Mamluk, and Ottoman Governments did not provide the strongly centralized administration necessary for agricultural developments. Under such conditions the irrigation system broke down, settled peasants were forced to leave their farms and trade was

hampered. A decisive development took place in the sixteenth century when the Cape route to India replaced the Middle Eastern route. From then till the nineteenth century, the Middle East remained backward in the world's trade while the greater powers of the West were developing their industrial and commercial power. During these centuries of comparative stagnation, the Middle East peoples lost economic power they possessed to develop their own resources and fell still further behind when the West became industrialized. The most significant attempt to make up this lost ground was made by Muhammad 'Alī at the beginning of the last century in Egypt. He laid the foundations of a modern administrative system. The countries of the Middle East have in the past not developed economically on independent lines, but largely in relation to the economies of the countries which assisted them.

Social conditions in the Middle East reflect the backwardness of the region. The standard of living was on the whole very poor. Economic development had not kept pace with the increase in population.

The great majority of the Middle East population were peasants. The rural standard of living was generally low and most of the peasants were subsistence farmers living on their produce.

The Middle East has been in a process of swift but uneven economic change, agricultural and industrial development and income from natural resources and trade were unevenly distributed. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the strength of the Ottoman rule decayed, security declined, and nomads began to operate into the settled land, rural production diminished and many peasants left their villages. But the great cities still flourished, and the semi-autonomous life of the mountains went on. Even when Ottoman rule had been strong, it had scarcely extended to Lebanon, whose local ruling families controlled the mountain community, subject to the collection of taxes for the Ottoman Government, and to some control by the governors of Tripoli.

The Turks themselves were and remained a dominant minority group in their vast domain and

and made no attempt at colonization in the Arab lands. But they kept their blood fresh by marrying non-Muslim women and by admitting to full citizenship any subject who accepted Islam, adopted the Turkish language and joined their court. The regular levy of boys, as long as it lasted, enabled them to press into military and civil service and to assimilate the flower of the male youth of the non-muslim subject. Some of the best talent of the conquered peoples was sucked and funnelled into the capital, there to be Islamized, Turkished and utilized to the glory and advancement of the imperial state.

(e) Intellectual condition:

Before Napoleon's invasion of Egypt the area of the Arabic speaking countries had been continuously becoming smaller. By the end of the eighteenth century, only Iraq, Arabia, Syria, Egypt, the Sudan and al-Maghr**ib** remained on the map of the Middle East. And even in these countries Arabic language was passing through its lamentable stage.

Even schools established for training the slaves of the Sultan's house hold surpassed madrasas

in the richness of the curriculum and the quality of teaching. They included instruction in Arabic and Persian and offered courses in calligraphy, music, architecture, painting and sculpture.

Throughout the then Muslim world, elementary education was carried out in mosques and was restricted to the study of language, the Qur'ān in Arabic, and the sciences related to it. Advanced work was done largely in private homes of learned men who offered courses in theology, linguistics, and mathematical sciences. Then there were madrasas initiated by Sunni rulers to combat Shi'a propaganda, which became specially strong under the Fatimids.

At the time when contemporary Europe was making its basic advances in science, technology, and industry, the Middle East insisted to remain under the shadow of its traditional misgivings. The imports of printed books were banned. A french advisor to the Portg in the late eighteenth century reports that the ministers were so ignorant of European geography as to suppose that Russian ships could not enter the Mediterranean

from the West. (1)

In the past the foreign missionary schools played the largest part in raising the level of culture, and they are still of great importance, particularly in Lebanon where mostly the higher education is still in their hands.

In the early stages of the spread of arabisation, a divergence had appeared in the Arabic language itself, one (simple in construction and unburdened with literary niceties) spoken in rural or tribal districts and the other full of more grammatical idioms used by the literate classes in the town. With the passage of the centuries, the cleavage had become more marked and had led to the growth of a set of spoken idioms showing considerable deviations from the standard forms. This process was a natural one and harmless enough so long as Arabic culture remained active and flourishing and the traditions of the classical age alive. But with the decay of Arab power and civilization, which received their death-blow with the Ottoman conquest of Egypt and Syria, these traditions were lost.

(1) Hitti: The Near East in History, p.359

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, damage wrought to the literary Arabic had taken such proportions, particularly in Syria, as to cause a serious degeneracy in the Arabic language commonly used by Christians. The genius of the literary expression was lost as if not to return and the spiritual influence of a great culture once dominating over the region vanished for ever and, however, missionaries might exert themselves to teach, minds remained starved and ideas stagnant on account of decay in the Arabic culture.

Napoleon describing the intellectual condition of the Middle East at the time of his invasion says in his Memoirs:

"The arts and sciences in Egypt are in their infancy. At Jemil Azar (University of Azhar) they teach Philosophy of Aristotle, the rules of the Arabian language, writing, and a little arithmetic, the different chapters of the Koran are explained and discussed; and that part of the Koran are explained and discussed; and that part of the history of the caliphs which is necessary for understanding and judging of the different Mahometan sects is taught. But the Arabs are completely ignorant of the antiquities of their country, and their notions on geography and the spheres are very superficial and erroneous. There were a few astronomers at Cairo, whose knowledge went no further than to enable them to make out the almanak." (1)

(1) Napoleon's Memoirs, edited by Somerset de Chair, p.324