

Transforming Egypt

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Raouf Abbas¹ assesses Mohamed Ali Pasha's ambitious political project

Mohamed Ali was perhaps that contemporary of Western aggression (as epitomised by the French expedition) who best grasped its importance for the Ottoman Empire. He realised that the weakness of the Islamic state stemmed from its military underdevelopment and that it would only be able to withstand the encroaching threat from the West if it acquired the means and capacities of deterrent might. He further understood that the thorough overhaul of the military arm of the state that this required entailed closing the civilisational gap between the countries of the Ottoman Empire and the West.

[Muhammad Ali \(1805-2005\)](#) is a special series published fortnightly by Al-Ahram Weekly in anticipation of the international symposium commemorating the bicentennial of Muhammad Ali Pasha's ascendancy to power, to be held in Egypt on 10 November. Contributions, proposals and letters on the subject should be addressed to the series editor Amina Elbendary
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Mohamed Ali was a simple Albanian soldier whom circumstances had catapulted to the governorship of Egypt. As no more than the viceroy of an Ottoman province, he was not in a position to reform the entire Ottoman state. He could, however, try to put his ideas into effect in that small quarter of the empire over which he ruled. While he was at it why not take advantage of the empire's general weakness and decay to expand his sphere of influence, giving him the opportunity to realise his vision on a grander scale? What had he to lose by trying, especially as his record of achievements so far demonstrated that nothing was impossible for him? Had he not, after all, altered the course of his life, having succeeded in raising himself from an unknown non-commissioned officer to a pasha in charge of the affairs of one of the most important provinces of the empire?

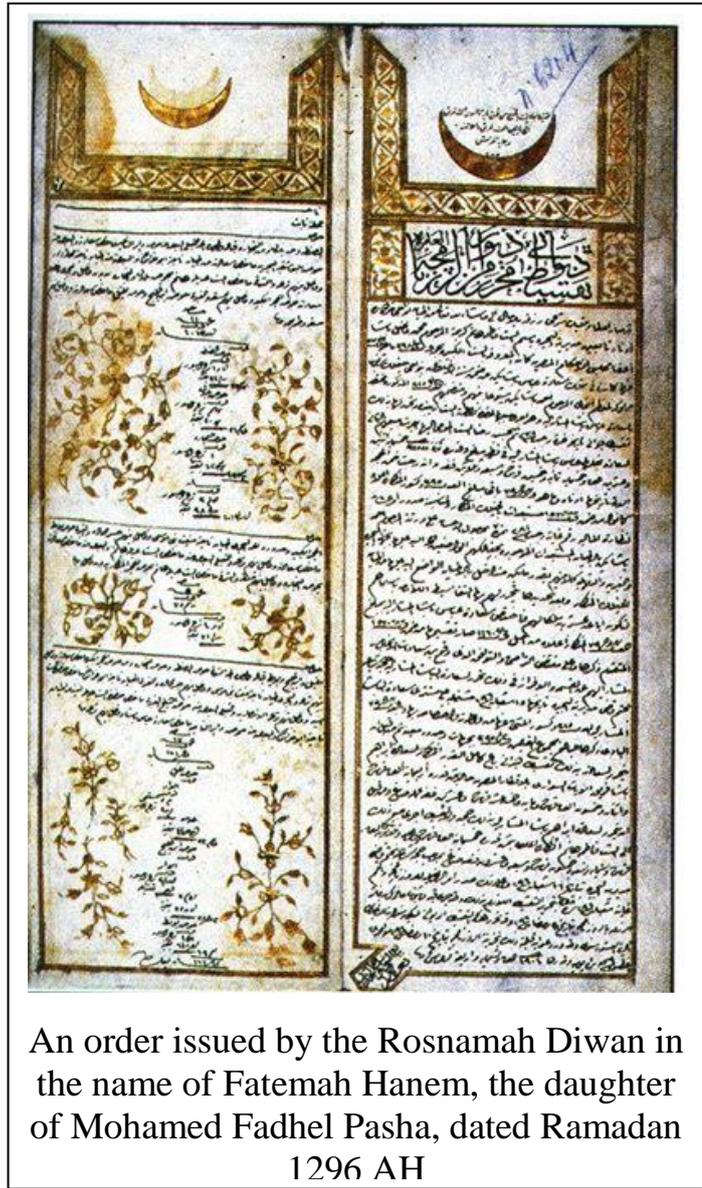
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Mohamed Ali thus threw himself into the business of transforming Egypt into a modern state, which model could then be applied elsewhere in Ottoman lands with the ultimate objective of building a powerful Islamic state. That the Pasha chose Egypt as his platform for this political project is indicative of his farsightedness. Unlettered he may have been, but he was amply endowed with all the qualities of statesmanship that enabled him to grasp historical trends and capitalise on existing circumstances.

Mohamed Ali's political project was nothing less than a vision for national renaissance. It aimed to construct a modern political and military base that would be instrumental in warding off Western aggression from the eastern Arab world, not through confrontation but by developing the power that would

create a form of military parity with the West and compel it to treat the Ottoman authority as a respected peer. Initially, circumstances seemed propitious. The wars in which he engaged in the Arabian Peninsula and Greece at the behest of the sultan meshed perfectly with his strategic vision. Even his conquest of Sudan and his campaigns against the sultan himself in the Levant were ultimately intended to serve his goal of rehabilitating the military power of the state as the cornerstone of political reform. That this was his greater objective is corroborated by the fact that one day he confided in a close friend that he hoped to reach Istanbul with his forces. He would then depose the sultan, place the sultan's young son on the throne and establish himself as regent, which would furnish him with the opportunity to reform the empire.

However, Mohamed Ali's regional project required enormous financial resources. These were far from available in the Egyptian treasury whose revenues at the time were derived from a handful of customs duties and land



taxes. Nor was he about to turn to outside sources for funding, for he recoiled at the idea of loans and the restrictions this would impose on the autonomy of his political will. His only choice, therefore, was to capitalise on the potential Egypt had to offer, and this could only be achieved if government extended its control over all the nation's resources so that it could manage and develop them in a way that would generate the revenues necessary for building a modern military, as well as the autonomous manufacturing and service industries needed to sustain that power. He thus proceeded to gradually implement those policies that would centralise the economy and restructure government administration accordingly, which, in turn, necessitated the development of an educational system equipped to furnish that administration with the necessary skilled cadres, which, in turn, stimulated the cultural revival of the country.

Mohamed Ali also tailored his foreign policy towards the ultimate realization of his regional project. Although he was viceroy of an important province in the Ottoman Empire, this empire was crumbling and European powers were hovering for the kill, with dozens of plans already drawn up for partitioning its territory after the empire's demise. Mohamed Ali knew that if he was not to be dragged down with the rest of the empire, he had to build for himself and his descendants a powerful state entity and eventually expand the realm of this entity as much as possible. He also realised that the softening centre of the empire gave him the opening he needed. The Supreme Porte needed his services, and these he readily provided, for his early campaigns in the Hijaz, in Crete and in Greece, gave him the ready pretext for building up his armed forces and, more importantly, the first modern Egyptian navy.

The Morea War, in particular, was the first theatre in which he put his new army to the test and gave it important experience in the field. That war also proved a major testing ground for his new navy, constructed with the aid of European experts as was the new arsenal in Alexandria. In the bargain, the deployment of his forces was his way of proclaiming that there was a new maritime power on the rise in the eastern Mediterranean.

The weakness of the Ottoman state also enticed Mohamed Ali into expanding the physical boundaries of his rule, enabling him to become governor of the most important Arabic-speaking Ottoman provinces. His purpose in doing so was two-fold. Territorial expansion would put him astride of the Middle East's ancient trade routes. It would also enable him to mold Egypt, Sudan, the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant into a small closely integrated self-sufficient empire with a far greater amount and diversity of resources at its disposal.

However, Mohamed Ali was acutely aware that the perpetuity of his reforms and other accomplishments and of his personal rule and that of his successors was contingent upon the will of the sultan. His sole guarantee for the future,

therefore, was to secure from the sultan a special status for Egypt within the Ottoman Empire, which would give him that extra room for manoeuvre he needed at the regional and international levels. He had contemplated forging his own path independently. He could have for example seceded from the empire freeing himself from the encumbrances of subordination to the foundering empire. In so doing, he might have continued his economic, administrative and military reforms without having to defer to directives from Istanbul and without having to pay the annual tribute required by the rights of allegiance.

As international circumstances were not ripe for that sort of independence, however, Mohamed Ali resolved to carve out a special preserve of his own within the empire. Although this meant continued recognition of Ottoman hegemony, he would ensure that this hegemony was purely nominal, by securing for himself and his family dynastic rights to the throne of Egypt and the highest possible degree of autonomy.

At the same time, he realised that for Egypt to remain within the general framework of the Ottoman Empire was not without advantages. The reason the empire had managed to remain intact until then was primarily due to the fact that since the European powers could not come to an agreement over how to partition the empire they resolved instead to guarantee its territorial integrity. Egypt, as part of this territory, could benefit from this guarantee.

But, Mohamed Ali knew that that guarantee alone would be meaningless unless he backed it up with the military strength capable of shielding his preserve against foreign ambitions. He had read the writing on the walls of his times. The European powers were lusting after possessions in the Near and Far East and only a few years before he came to power the French had invaded Egypt and the Ottoman suzerains were only able to expel them by calling on the assistance of the British. Several decades down the line, it would be the British knocking on Egypt's doors preparatory to occupying it. Meanwhile, to the east, Russian pressures were mounting on Muslim lands south of the Caspian and the remnants of the Islamic empires in India were falling before British colonisation, while to the west the French had seized Algeria, which until then had also been an Ottoman province.

The French expedition in Egypt had riveted European attention towards this part of the world. Although European powers had no direct economic or cultural interests in Egypt, the short-lived French presence here threw into relief Egypt's strategic location at the crossroads to the East where the British in particular were intensifying their colonial drive. It was little wonder therefore that the European ideas of linking their continent to the East by land or sea routes passing through Egypt began to take concrete form in the last two decades of Mohamed Ali's rule. Perhaps Mohamed Ali's reconstruction of the Nile and

overland route linking Suez to Alexandria via Cairo was an attempt to curtail European designs to extend their political influence over Egypt in the pursuit of their strategic interests.

In all events, Mohamed Ali hoped to win European support for his drive for independence. His argument was that if a ruler could accomplish as much as he had already achieved, imagine how much more he would be able to accomplish if freed from the restrictions of Ottoman suzerainty. It required little more than a glance to realise that under the first decades of his rule, Egypt had far outstripped Istanbul in its level of progress. Of course, such success could not be attributed to the individual will of a leader alone; the land itself also had to have the potential in terms of manpower and resources to be molded into a modern state of the first order.

Mohamed Ali applied his unique drive and intelligence to getting the most out of this potential. He restored peace and security throughout the land; he founded factories and established a new school system; he brought over European experts to oversee his projects and man his new ministries; he paved the land routes to serve European trade; and he began to shape the people of the country into a modern productive force. In all this, Europe would have no cause to fear for the sultan, for Egypt's strength only added to Istanbul's strength, to which Egypt's service on behalf of the sultan in the Arabian Peninsula and Greece furnished eloquent testimony. Mohamed Ali had given the sultan everything -- money and armies, even losing his fleet in the process -- obtaining nothing from the sultan in return.

The Europeans therefore had a choice to make. Either they could agree to allow Mohamed Ali to secede from the Ottoman Empire and make Egypt an independent sovereign nation or they could approve to the alternative, which was for Egypt to remain within the Ottoman fold, but on the condition that it was granted a special status in accordance with which its ruler and his descendants would enjoy a broad range of prerogatives.

The first option -- Egypt's full independence -- would require European powers to abandon their commitment to the non-partitioning of the Ottoman state and to adopt a new approach to the corner of the Near East that sat astride the trade routes and that had a military force to be reckoned with and a strong and ambitious ruler. That scenario did not accord with European designs. What did was for the region to remain under a weak Ottoman authority that posed no threat to speak of to European interests. In addition, France and Britain had no intention of allowing Mohamed Ali's challenge to the sultan lure Russia into invading Turkey from the north and establishing a foothold on the Bosphorus, thereby upsetting the international balance of power.

Nor was Europe thoroughly convinced of the value of the reforms of which Mohamed Ali boasted. The British in particular objected that Mohamed Ali's state monopolies deprived the Egyptian peasant of the fruits of his labour and subjected him to a form of corvee labour. The more moderate critics in Europe felt that while Mohamed Ali had made enormous inroads in developing Egypt, everything depended upon his person, as a result of which all that progress would crumble as soon as his rule came to an end. At the same time, European powers did not regard Mohamed Ali's drive to throw off the yoke of the Sultan as a form of "national revolution," such as that which took place in Greece and would subsequently occur in the Balkans and other Ottoman European possessions. Mohamed Ali, they held, was not Egyptian and his government in Egypt did not rest on the will of the people or even reflect a popular nationalist aspiration, for the people in Arab lands were motivated by religious not national allegiances.

Aware of European motives and attitudes, Mohamed Ali throughout his rule carefully avoided clashing with European policy and with any European force. He knew that any future arrangement between Egypt and the Ottoman authorities stood a better chance of success if it had the approval of the European powers, for only this would ultimately be the surest safeguard against future Ottoman intervention as well as European ambitions.

Mohamed Ali greatly aspired to gain the friendship of the British, whose formidable naval power was palpably present in the Mediterranean and in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The Pasha of Egypt had won the admiration of the British in the wake of the Fraser campaign of 1807, when he returned their prisoners of war and undertook the treatment of British sick and wounded. Three years later, he struck an agreement with the East India Company in accordance with which he pledged to protect British trade caravans passing through Egypt and to waive customs tariffs on the personal belongings of British travellers. He also vowed to protect British subjects and property in the event of a war between Britain and the Ottoman state. During the Morea War Mohamed Ali demonstrated the value he attached to British friendship. By withdrawing from that campaign he hoped to win British respect and allay any apprehensions they might have over his eastward expansion.

Mohamed Ali also gave a clear message to the British at the time when the French were soliciting his help to conquer Algeria (1830). In the course of his negotiations with the French, he signaled to Britain that he was willing to help them halt the spread of Russian influence into Turkey and Persia. London, however, could not forget that it was Mohamed Ali's challenge to the Supreme Porte that lured the Russians towards Istanbul to begin with. It therefore preferred to remedy the Russian threat by using its own navy to strengthen its hold on the trade routes to India, which passed through the Red Sea and the

Euphrates. For this it did not need an alliance with an ambitious ruler such as Mohamed Ali whose fate was in the balance.

This stance almost led to a clash between the British and Mohamed Ali, who at one point succeeded in occupying a position on the Euphrates and extending his sway across to the shores of the Persian Gulf and the entrance to the Red Sea. Al- Hasa, Al-Qatif, Asir and even Aden for a short time one after the other submitted to his rule. When he began to make overtures to the Shah of Persia, British qualms peaked and London resolved to put an end to Mohamed Ali's expansion in the areas it deemed vital to its interests. These factors, as well as the fear that Russian expansionism might threaten European peace, compelled Britain to adhere to its policy of preserving the integrity of the Ottoman state. This, in turn, meant that Mohamed Ali would ultimately have to withdraw his forces behind Egyptian borders.

France had an entirely different approach to the Ottoman Empire. We recall that France occupied Egypt in 1798 and Algeria in 1830. The French then dispatched a minister plenipotentiary to Alexandria to offer Mohamed Ali a military detachment and French financiers backed this up with an offer of a sizeable loan. The Egyptian Pasha reciprocated the kindness, engaging French experts in his government, guaranteeing French expatriates the most favourable treatment, adopting French systems in the development of Egypt's educational system and armed forces, and sending most Egyptian study missions to France. However, France still wavered in its eastern policy. Like Britain, it feared that Mohamed Ali's expansionist drive would ultimately threaten European peace by furnishing Russia with the pretext to invade the Ottoman Empire from the north. Paris therefore was keen for a diplomatic settlement to the dispute between Mohamed Ali and the Sultan.

Although there was nothing to prevent the two sides from negotiating directly and presenting their agreement to European powers as a *fait accompli*, the European powers had too many interests vested in the region to allow this. Nevertheless, Britain had no intention of allowing the French to mediate on their own, insisting that the Cairo-Istanbul relationship was a matter that concerned the whole of Europe. France eventually came around to this principle, for like Britain it hoped to check the spread of Russian influence, although unlike Britain it also sought to advance Mohamed Ali's interests. Russia then joined the European powers in their drive to prevent a settlement between Mohamed Ali and the Sultan.

Because of France's weakened international position at the time, Britain maneuvered itself into the lead of the negotiating process and was, therefore, the primary architect of the agreement that was struck in 1840. The London Treaty of 1840 upheld the preservation of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman

Empire. In addition, although it conferred upon Egypt a status far less than that Mohamed Ali had aspired for, it elevated Egypt above other Ottoman provinces. Mohamed Ali and his descendants were granted dynastic rights over Egypt. The London Treaty also granted him rule over southern Syria (Palestine) for the rest of his life. This provision came with the caveat that if he did not accept the terms of this agreement within ten days his Levantine possessions would be taken away from him and if he persisted in his refusal for another 10 days Egypt would be taken away from him as well.

Mohamed Ali initially rejected this ultimatum, in the hope that the European alliance would fall apart and that King Louis Philippe of France would come to his support. His hope was misplaced. Fearful of the prospect of war, the French king refused to deviate from the European consensus. Soon, the Egyptian coasts were surrounded, Egyptian rule in the Levant collapsed and Mohamed Ali caved in. In June 1841, the sultan issued an amended firman based on the Treaty of London.

The final settlement affirmed Egypt's status as part of the Ottoman Empire, subject to all its laws and international treaties. It also stipulated that the Egyptian army was part of the Ottoman armed forces and that henceforward the Egyptian viceroy would not be allowed to construct warships without the approval of the Supreme Porte. Simultaneously, the agreement conferred the Mohamed Ali family's right to dynastic rule over Egypt. In sum, Mohamed Ali was left with the right to dispose of the resources of the country as he saw fit, after paying the required tribute to the Ottoman capital.

Although the Khedive Ismail succeeded in broadening the prerogatives of the Egyptian rule, the agreement remained in effect until 18 December 1914, when the British declaration of a protectorate over Egypt effectively brought an end to Ottoman suzerainty. Legally it came to an end when Turkey officially relinquished its sovereignty over Egypt in the Conference of Lausanne in 1922.