WOMEN, PHILANTHROPY, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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Notes on Contributors
Islamism has generally been presented as a male movement, with women only recently becoming adherents. Observers point to the proliferation of head scarves and attempts to offer new readings of religious texts as evidence of women’s growing commitment to the Islamist cause. Some have even identified a trend of “Islamic feminism,” although it clearly has roots much earlier in the century. Since Hasan al-Banna (1906–49) founded the Muslim Brothers in 1928, most Islamist writers and speakers have been men. Yet one of the central figures in the movement in its infancy—from the early 1920s until the Second World War—was an elite woman. Senior to al-Banna in years and sometimes his associate, Labiba Ahmad (1870s–1951) played a critical role in nurturing the younger generation that made the transformation from Islamic reform (Salafiyya) to Islamic radicalism (Islamism). The former was mostly a literary movement that claimed to be seeking a return to the practices of the early Muslims and had a limited circle of followers; the latter became a political movement with broad appeal.

Philanthropist, writer, traveller, and speaker, Labiba Ahmad used a variety of strategies to further the Islamic revival at the local, national, and international levels. She founded the Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening a year or so after the 1919 Egyptian Revolution to provide welfare services to the poor and to propagate a blend of Islam and nationalism or Islamic nationalism. Shortly thereafter, she started the Arabic monthly al-Nahda al-Nisa’iya (the Women’s Awakening) to disseminate the views of the society. She made the pilgrimage to Mecca many times to build a network of contacts.

Labiba argued that the path to women’s and national progress was through a return to Islam, not (as many argued) through copying West-
ern ways. In this, she presents a distinct contrast to secular feminists in Egypt, who came from similar elite backgrounds but were oriented toward Paris and not Mecca. Hers would seem the minority voice with few echoes at the time. Yet Labiba had a wide following among professional classes; she struck a deep chord among male and female Egyptians identifying with Islam rather than the West and yearning for the re-Islamicization of society. This article examines her philanthropy, literary output, travels, and Islamist connections. Her story shows that women were not just objects of the Islamist discourse, but thinkers and activists in their own right, and critical participants during the formative years of the movement.

A PIONEER AND HER PHILANTHROPIC WORK

Labiba Ahmad was born in Cairo in the 1870s. Her father, Ahmad ‘Abd al-Nabi Bey, was a doctor, and her two brothers followed in his footsteps. Her son and a daughter later chose the medical profession as well. Yet the profession was closed to elite women in her lifetime. In the late nineteenth century, a well-to-do doctor may have had an al-Azhar shaykh tutor his children at home. Labiba had an excellent command of Arabic and a good knowledge of Islamic subjects; she also learned to play the piano. Her husband, ‘Uthman Pasha Murtadi (d. 1935), rose through the judiciary to the post of judge in the Mixed Court of Appeals in Alexandria and for a short time became master of ceremonies for Khedive ‘Abbas Hilmi II (r. 1892–1914), to whom he was closely tied. Labiba had a son and five daughters. Her son, Dr. Isma’il Bey, occasionally contributed pieces to her journal or was featured there. One daughter married ‘Abd al-Sattar Bey al-Basil, a tribal shaykh from al-Fayyum (and husband of the late writer Malak Hifni Nasif). This unnamed daughter died in the “spring of youth” in 1929, much to her mother’s grief, and her orphaned children were subsequently raised alongside those of Labiba’s second daughter, Hayat Murtadi. A third daughter, Malak, was noted for her Sufi attributes: nighttime praying and daytime fasts. The last two daughters, Zaynab and Qamar, were the twin “babies” of the family. They probably both attended the Saniya Girls’ School, a state institution popular with nationalists because its curriculum included Arabic and Islamic instruction. Together they joined a group of female students who in 1925 were sent by the Egyptian government to England. After three years of study, Zaynab was awarded a teacher-artist certificate by the Royal Drawing Society. While Zaynab “nurtured the spirit,” Qamar “taught the body” and studied medicine. (Teaching and medicine were among those professions that Labiba ap-
proved for women.) By the time she founded her society and launched its journal, Labiba Ahmad had already passed through the childbearing and rearing years. In pictures published in the 1920s, she appears to be in her forties or so. She wears glasses and has a serious, intellectual demeanor, a look enhanced by her black head covering and the dark robe she wears over her clothes. She has the air of a woman of strong commitment and determination.

In the period before the First World War, Labiba had participated in women’s associations, given speeches, and written in newspapers and journals. A strong nationalist, she supported Mustafa Kamil’s Watani (Nationalist) Party, founded in 1907 to work for the liberation of Egypt from de facto British control. In 1919 she marched in the “ladies’ demonstrations” and affixed her signature to the petitions submitted to foreign legations protesting British actions. In the next few years, she worked to mobilize women and girls from working-class neighborhoods against the British occupation. She presided over memorial services for Mustafa Kamil and spoke at the funeral of his brother, ‘Ali Fahmi Kamil, also a Watani leader. At the same time, she had close ties to Safiya Zaghlul (“Mother of the Egyptians”) and Sa’d Zaghlul, head of the Wafd (Delegation) founded in 1918 to negotiate with the British for Egypt’s independence.

Yet Labiba consciously chose not to join other female notables who after the 1919 Revolution formed the Women’s Wafd Central Committee, an auxiliary of the Wafd Party. Instead, she committed herself to philanthropy and education through the Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening. Organizations with similar names had been established in previous decades, and members often spoke of their work as a contribution to the national cause. These associations, in turn, opened new outlets for the talents of affluent women. After the war, the two best known philanthropies run by women — Mabarrat Muhammad ‘Ali (the Muhammad ‘Ali Charity) and Jam’iiyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida (the New Woman’s Society) — focused on health care and training for the poor.

Labiba wrote that in founding her society she had been “inspired by God” and motivated by the “desire to help the nation.” Her philanthropic work and Islamic nationalist impulse were clearly linked. The goal of the society was “to raise girls and to teach them the commandments of their religion.” She had a broad mission of inculcating young girls with Islamic values and a specific project for the society: she gathered together 170 girls who had been orphaned or abandoned by their parents and vowed to raise, protect, and provide for them. Labiba presided over the society; other officers included a deputy, a secretary, and a secretary’s assistant. Little is known about the officers or about
the composition or size of the group. Labiba headed delegations that visited schools, hosted graduation celebrations, and called on ministers. She proved to be the driving force behind the group: administering its affairs, raising funds, and taking responsibility for the girls in her care.

“The [Society of] Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening saw that uplifting nations is by uplifting the mothers in it,” Labiba wrote when announcing the founding of a workshop in July 1921 in which poor girls would be taught sewing and other skills so that they might later support themselves. She emphasized that the large workshop was in a healthy, well-lit, and airy space. The doors were opened to other girls to come to learn household management, embroidery, and handiwork; the society set a sliding fee scale. Labiba appealed for donations of clothes and money for the girls she had promised to raise, twenty of whom were shown in a photograph appearing in the journal. The office of the workshop stood ready, she wrote, to accept volunteers willing to render “holy national service” by lecturing on morality and teaching the principles of housekeeping and handiwork. Support came in different forms: physicians (among them Labiba’s son) examined poor women and children connected to the society free of charge; an administrator at a nearby girls’ school offered to waive tuition for orphans from the society.

In 1923 in the wake of the discovery of an Egyptian gang that apparently “debauched” young native girls — kidnapping, raping, and locking them in brothels in Cairo — Labiba resolved to broaden her educational program. “We all felt sorrow in our souls, a wound in our hearts, and pain in our core from that distressing affair,” wrote Labiba. “It made an impression on me as it made an impression on many others. I resolved to dedicate what remained of my life in service to Egypt, and to sacrifice every valuable and dear thing for the sake of rescuing the Egyptian girl from the hands of those devils who abuse her.” She decided to open a public institute and workshop together to train girls so that they could make an honorable living. After searching for an appropriate site for the institute, Labiba reported that “God gave us success.” The Society rented the palace of the late ‘Abd al-Qadir Pasha Hilmi in the working-class neighborhood of Sayyida Zaynab and had it outfitted with the necessary equipment. Labiba prepared to receive up to one hundred girls from the age of nine. A picture taken on opening day in late 1923 shows approximately forty-two students gathered around the bench where Labiba, the director of the institute, sat in the midst of three other veiled women. The bareheaded girls appear a bit ragged, clustered together so that the faces of some do not even show. A photo taken a few months later in the same setting shows the girls arranged in straight rows, dressed in
white uniforms, and now wearing white head scarves. (Similar white head scarves would become a symbol of the Islamist movement.) A new sign was painted for the occasion: The Institute and Workshop of the Women’s Awakening.22

Labiba’s actions won the praise of observers. “She does not limit herself to literary activity alone,” noted Rose Haddad, a fellow journalist, announcing the opening of the institute, “but she also endeavors to promote social welfare in the country.”23 Labiba thanked the readers of al-Nahda al-Nisa’iyya profusely for supporting her effort to educate young girls. Earlier she had made an emotional appeal to “the sons of my country” to support the school in whatever way possible. To raise funds for the workshop, she offered a book for sale—a collection of pieces of wisdom, religious exhortation, and extracts from history as well as practical advice in health, housekeeping, and sport—which school inspectors helped her to distribute. Other students visited her school, a poet wrote a new song for the girls, and owners of businesses gave generously. In addition, the new Wafdist interior minister announced that his ministry would donate the proceeds of a special lottery toward the education of the girls of the institute and the workshop.24

The Society of Ladies’ Awakening not only established its own private education ventures; it pressed for reforms in state education as well. Labiba headed a delegation that met with the minister of education to demand that religious education be made compulsory and that fees for girls be equivalent to those for boys. The society reiterated its call after the 1924 elections, pressuring the new Wafdist minister to comply. The latter decided to place the new primary school proposed by the governing body of the Institute and Workshop of the Women’s Awakening under the supervision of his ministry. Labiba pressed for greater attention to religious education in state schools, emphasizing memorization of the Quran and the teaching of morality.25 Her social welfare work inspired other Islamist initiatives, which proved to be important vehicles for winning adherents as well as supplying essential services.

DISSEMINATING THE MESSAGE

The Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening operated the orphanage, workshop, and institute on one track, a track of philanthropic enterprises dedicated to poor women and children. On a second track, the society sought to encourage Islamic revival in other layers of society. In the fall of 1921, Labiba approached the administrators of Cairo University for permission to hold meetings on their campus. They turned her down, but officials at the American University in Cairo offered her space. A
large assembly of women gathered in the main hall for the first session in late November 1921. Readings from religious texts opened the meeting, followed by remarks by the founder-president, piano playing, poetry, and finally a lecture by Dr. ‘Abd al-'Aziz Bey Nizami, author of many books on family health. Members of the society planned to convene weekly to hear in-depth lectures on scientific and religious topics.

The society continued to meet throughout the interwar years in order to spread its message about morality. Labiba held that the state should take the lead in curbing vices such as drinking, narcotics, and dancing. When the head of the Cairo City Police issued regulations limiting dancing and preventing dancers from sitting with the crowds in large halls, the group sent him a letter of commendation. The Society issued a call for new members in the mid-1930s with a promise of new guidelines “propagating moral virtue.” As they prepared for “a war against innovation, immorality, and corruption,” they asked other women to embark with them in this bold step “in service of religion and humanity.”

The society won accolades from observers, even those who condemned other women’s groups in Egypt for pursuing Egyptian women’s interests abroad rather than at home (a lightly veiled attack on Huda Sha‘rawi and her Egyptian Feminist Union). The EFU was founded some two years after the Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening and had a secular orientation. Although Labiba, an honorary member of the union, occasionally praised Huda, her goals and that of the EFU clearly diverged. The society’s oath emphasized its moral values: “I swear that modesty will be my crown, and virtue my light, and I will live purely: a useful and devout wife, whose hand in childraising is superior. I will fulfill my rightful and correct duty, toward God, the homeland, the family....” According to the society, every Egyptian girl and woman had to follow a special code of behavior: (1) to strive for the happiness of her household; (2) to maintain proper modesty in the street; (3) to wear traditional Egyptian dress and to cover her face, hands, and other body parts as stipulated by Islamic law; (4) to avoid theaters and comedy houses; and (5) to leave behind corrupt ancient customs.

This cluster of suggestions was hardly new. The Society for Women’s Progress, founded in 1908, and contributors to the conservative press had issued similar calls in the first two decades of the century. These calls constituted an integral part of the program of Islamic reformers (Salafis), who ostensibly sought a return to the ways of the early Muslims while modernizing Islam. The reformers opposed folk customs that deviated from Islamic injunctions as well as the infiltration of Western practices into Egyptian society. But Labiba Ahmad injected a new element into this battle. She balanced words with actions, organizing and spreading
the message to wider circles of Egyptians through the activities of her association and through her journal.

Labiba published the first issue of *al-Nahda al-Nisa‘iyya* in July 1921. A monthly founded to publicize the society’s positions, it ran for nearly two decades, the first journal founded by an Egyptian Muslim woman to enjoy such longevity. This record alone presents strong evidence of its positive reception. For the title, Labiba chose the phrase “the Women’s Awakening,” which had come to stand for the sense of dramatic transformation in Egyptian women’s lives.34 The mottos that appeared on the front page summarized her political philosophy that women’s awakening and national revival went hand-in-hand: “A people will not die so long as both sexes work together energetically toward a goal.” And on the top and sides, in smaller type, the sayings, “If your women awaken, then your homelands will thrive”; and, “Men make nations; women make men.”

No subject received more attention in Labiba’s opening essays than that of education and the need for reform. As higher education for Egyptian women expanded during the interwar years, Labiba argued that women should enter fields such as medicine and teaching rather than law or literature. “When will the people understand that the duty of a girl is to be a mother?”35 She valued the role of teachers highly, commending some by name, and called for the opening of a school like Dar al-‘Ulum (a male teacher-training college) for women. In general, she rallied for more religious education: studying of the Quran more deeply, strengthening Arabic instruction, and boycotting foreign schools. She also appealed for more schools for the poor. Yet she critiqued a curriculum that trained boys and girls identically, preparing them for the same exams, when she saw them destined for different roles in life. Women lacked preparation for childraising, their true vocation, and needed greater religious instruction to guide the family. She referred to the “influence of the virtuous in shaping the nation — and what is the nation if not a collection of families?”36

Labiba’s essays also often attacked the presence of “un-Islamic” practices and Western influences in Egypt. She vehemently opposed legalized prostitution, alcohol consumption, narcotics use, theater going, and gambling in Egypt. That the British occupation made it difficult or impossible to eliminate some of these practices only strengthened her nationalist convictions. She also condemned recreational activities such as mixed bathing at the beach and called on “morals police” to enforce separate swimming hours for men and women. In opposition to the building of a sports complex for girls, she asked, “Isn’t the woman capable of exercising while she is at home... for in prayer and its movements are the greatest exercise.”37
Labiba opened the pages of the journal to male and female authors, providing an outlet for others to express their views on Islamic revival at a time when few such forums existed. *Al-Nahda al-Nisa‘iyya* enjoyed regular contributions from such figures as Muhammad Farid Wajdi, a prominent Salafi writer whose wife had earlier founded the Society of Women’s Progress and who later edited al-Azhar’s journal *Nur al-Islam* (Light of Islam, 1930), and ‘Aisha ‘Abd al-Rahman, who under the pen-name Bint al-Shati’ (Daughter of the Coast) later became famous for her biographies of the early women of Islam and her Quranic exegesis. The names of quite a few of those whose articles were published in Labiba’s journal, particularly in the first decade, later appeared in the context of the Islamist movement and in particular in connection with the Muslim Brothers.

In a development that virtually guaranteed the financial security of the journal, Labiba received the backing of various Arab governments. The Egyptian and Sudanese Ministries of Education and Awqaf (Trusts) as well as the Egyptian Provincial Councils officially authorized the distribution of *al-Nahda al-Nisa‘iyya* in their schools; the Iraqi Ministry of Education assigned the journal as a text; the Syrian government purchased block subscriptions; and the Saudis subscribed to a “large number” at the instructions of King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn Sa‘ud. Additionally, the journal received support from royal and wealthy donors, among them the kings of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Such support was unprecedented for an Egyptian women’s journal and, indeed, rare for any periodical. It showed that Labiba had the backing of powerful personalities and politicians in high places. Yet it also showed that they did not find her message in any way threatening. To the contrary, her influential supporters may have seen this Islamic journal as a good antidote to the secular feminist literature of the day. The journal also had a circle of loyal readers who sent in letters of support.

Labiba Ahmad’s activism took a new form when in the summer of 1933 she took to the airwaves. Once a week she went to the recording studio to deliver a regularly scheduled address on Royal Egyptian Radio. Readers, “who loved her and showered her with their affection and their encouragement,” could tune in to listen. Radios were new to Egypt and probably existed mostly in the homes of the urban well-to-do and in coffee shops. Yet as they increasingly spread into towns and villages, they became a popular form of entertainment and instruction. Labiba’s talks resembled her monthly column, treating moral, religious, and social themes. ‘Aisha ‘Abd al-Rahman described Labiba during this period: “She barely stops or rests! She is all movement and activity and sanctifies work, dedicating her life to it. She does not understand the
meaning of living if it is not for the sake of work. These long years that have passed with sorrow and suffering [a daughter had died in 1929] were unable to harm her love for work or to cause in her any amount of despair or resignation."⁴²

VISITING HOLY CITIES

Through her social welfare work and writings, Labiba disseminated a brand of Islamic nationalism that countered the secular variety. But the combination of directing a complex of philanthropic operations and running a journal apparently exhausted Labiba, who fell ill in the fall of 1924. She suspended publication of *al-Nahda al-Nisa’iyya* after the October 1924 issue and did not resume production until March 1926.⁴³ After her recovery, she resolved to go on *hajj* making her sixth pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. Two years later, Labiba travelled to the Hijaz on a seventh *hajj* and thereafter went almost every year. By 1938, she had made sixteen pilgrimages, equaling the number of years she had published her journal.⁴⁴ These trips reinforced her Islamic outlook and enhanced her international reputation.

A journey incumbent upon Muslims once in their lifetime became an annual ritual for Labiba, who was drawn repeatedly to Arabia, she wrote, in an "attempt to satisfy the spirit."⁴⁵ Combining official business with her spiritual quest, her pilgrimages took on a familiar pattern over the years as the readers of her journal and her supporters vicariously undertook the journey with her. Prior to her departure, she announced her intention to travel and called on others to share the experience. Friends bid her farewell at home or at the train station, and *al-Nahda al-Nisa’iyya* published her photograph in celebration of her trip. She travelled with her daughter Malak or with other family members and friends.⁴⁶ After completing her duties in Mecca, she proceeded to Medina to visit the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, and then took the opportunity to enjoy a summer or two in the mountain resort of Ta’if.⁴⁷ The Egyptian press reported her successful completion of the *hajj* upon her return, and Labiba received telegrams and letters congratulating her from numerous friends in Egypt, Syria, the Hijaz, Iraq, and as far away as Singapore. She thanked those who had assisted her during her travels — consuls, doctors, boat captains, engineers, and especially King Ibn Sa’ud, who had solidified his rule over Arabia in the 1920s and safeguarded the route.⁴⁸

Labiba’s pilgrimages gave her an opportunity to expand her circle of contacts. She nurtured ties with the Saudi King, who extended his hospitality to her and gave her journal a generous subvention. She met with shaykhs, government officials, professionals, and other pilgrims
in a search for religious knowledge and political information. Others sought her out, giving receptions in her honor. She mingled with Muslims from different countries as she solicited essays and advertisers for her journal. She accomplished this in spite of the fact that Egypt had no official state relations with Saudi Arabia until 1936, when after the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, they concluded a much celebrated agreement.\(^{49}\)

Labiba’s annual *hajj* enhanced her prestige, as Egyptians praised “al-Hajja” in poems and letters. But at the same time, they urged her “to return to your homeland to shine your light on the Nile Valley, which awaits your guiding hand, and to your children, who await your sympathy and affection.”\(^{50}\) While abroad or after returning, she wrote essays on the trip, sent her new acquaintances copies of the journal, and received letters and essays in return. She had a wide circle of correspondents that spread beyond the Arab world to India and East Asia.

Labiba also made a visitation to the third sacred city of Islam — Jerusalem — in the fall of 1930 in the company of al-Hajja Maryam al-Kabiyya, whom Labiba saw as the model of a determined mother and patriot and praised for her “strength of purpose.” Maryam had apparently arrived in Egypt from her sub-Saharan home five years earlier so that her sons could be educated at al-Azhar. After they had completed their studies and before they returned home, their mother decided to take them on the *hajj* to Mecca and a visit to Jerusalem. A camera captured the group — Labiba, Maryam, and her three sons in ceremonial dress standing alongside two guards — at the Mosque of ‘Umar (Dome of the Rock) in Jerusalem. Labiba also met such religious dignitaries as al-Sayyid Muhammad Amin al-Ansari, custodian of the Mosques of ‘Umar and al-Aqsa, as well as the director of the Khalidiyya Library. After her return, the journal printed on its cover a picture of al-Sayyid Amin al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem and president of the Supreme Muslim Council, who had recently visited Cairo.\(^{51}\) Throughout the 1930s, and in particular in the midst of the Arab Revolt of 1936, the journal showed sympathy to the cause of the Arabs of Palestine.

**ISLAMIST CIRCLES**

During her travels and at home, Labiba forged personal contacts with the other leading Islamic personalities of the day. She had reached that stage in her life in which she could hold discussions with unrelated men without raising eyebrows. She had particularly close ties to the leadership of the Society of Muslim Youth, founded in 1927 “to teach Islamic morals and ethics; to spread that knowledge best suited to the modern
way of life; to discourage dissensions and abuses amongst the Muslims; and to make use of the best of Eastern and Western cultures and to reject all that is bad in them." Many members were "alumni" of the Watani Party, to which Labiba was linked. These included Dr. 'Abd al-Hamid Bey Sa'id (first president), Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz Shawish (vice president), and the Syrian émigré Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib (secretary-general), whom Labiba called "my son" (he later edited al-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya and periodicals of the Muslim Brothers). Labiba reported on speeches given at the club, sometimes to female audiences, and covered a congress on education held in their hall in 1936 that was attended by over four thousand participants. When Labiba was invited to speak, she picked a male delegate to deliver her address. She also published the communiqué drafted by the assembled Islamic groups calling on the government to institute various reforms.

By the 1930s, more of these Islamic organizations were open to men and women. Fatima Amin guided one such group, the Society for Memorizing the Noble Quran. At the opening of a charity bazaar to raise funds for their school for orphans and the poor, Fatima thanked journalists, especially "al-Hajja Labiba Ahmad," for supporting religious associations. Labiba had a direct role in the blossoming of Islamic organizations in the late 1920s and 1930s, and she herself saw the rise of societies — Islamic Guidance, Noble Islamic Characteristics, and Memorizing the Noble Quran, as well as the Society of Muslim Youth — as the "results of our cries on the pages (of al-Nahda)." In her journal, she had encouraged a new generation of religious thinkers and activists. She also had various links with different organizations and was instrumental in starting a few. In the mid-1930s, she founded the League of Islamic Awakening (Rabbitat al-Nahda al-Islamiyya), inviting men and women to join in a venture that strove for moral revival. Notices in the press announced that the league gathered every Friday evening to hear lectures on a variety of topics. A delegation from the league met with Hasan al-Banna, who spoke at the opening session. There he delivered Labiba Ahmad's recommendations, urging listeners to develop noble traits of character, virtuous actions, and devotion to the true religion, Islam.

Al-Banna is credited with launching the Islamist movement, yet it is often presumed that this was done on his own and against great odds. Placed in a line of earlier reformers like Labiba Ahmad, he can better be seen as adding youthful vigor and energy to a revival already underway. He was only sixteen when he moved in 1923 from a small town in the Delta to Cairo to commence a three-year course of study at Dar al-'Ulum. Increasingly concerned about the gap between Muslims and their faith, he sought the councils of elders. These included Labiba's as-
sociates Muhammad Farid Wajdi, whose house was a center for Muslim scholars and intellectuals, and Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib, director of the Salafiyya book store that al-Banna frequented. He also met with another Syrian, Rashid Rida (editor of al-Manar), although the latter probably had cool relations with Labiba due to his earlier fight with the Egyptian nationalist Mustafa Kamil.

Al-Banna took up a teaching post in the Suez Canal town of Isma‘iliyya in 1927 and in March of the following year founded the Society of the Muslim Brothers. The Salafi thinkers he so admired were of an older generation and had focused on disseminating their views principally through their writings. Al-Banna preferred direct contact and preached to groups of Muslims in a variety of venues, including coffee shops, homes, mosques, and the streets. Fueled by young men who were motivated like al-Banna, the new organization aimed to counter the secularizing trends dominating Egyptian society and to spread Islamic teaching in their stead. In this it shared goals with the Society for Ladies’ Awakening and the Society of Muslim Youth. Yet the Muslim Brothers quickly became distinguished from other Islamic groups by its ability to recruit large numbers of followers. Hasan al-Banna built a base in Isma‘iliyya and branches in other provincial towns and cities. Transferred to Cairo in 1932, he merged his group with one started by a younger brother and continued to organize from the capital.

In May 1932, a small photo of a young man wearing a fez, suit, and tie (the proper attire of an Egyptian school teacher) appeared in the upper right-hand corner of the picture of the sculpture “Egypt’s Awakening” that regularly appeared on the cover of al-Nahda al-Nisa‘iyya. The man is bearded, a sign of Islamic piety, and his eyes have the piercing look of a man with a mission. The likeness, which appeared several times thereafter, is very possibly than that of Hasan al-Banna, who at the time was only twenty-six. Earlier, a speech of al-Banna’s before the Society of Muslim Youth had been reprinted in the journal. The appearance of al-Banna’s picture on the cover may suggest that Labiba saw him as a figure capable of guiding Egypt’s religious revival and may signal her involvement in his organization. In time, the Muslim Brothers came to rival the Wafd Party in popularity. Their success was due to the combination of al-Banna’s magnetism, rhetorical skills, and organizational abilities, as well as the readiness of young, urban Egyptians to respond to such a message.

Early on Hasan al-Banna recognized the centrality of women to his movement. In Isma‘iliyya he created a school to teach girls — future mothers who would shape their children’s characters — about religion. The “Institute for Mothers of the Believers” developed around 1932 into
the first branch of the Muslim Sisters, which was composed mostly of female relatives of Brothers.61 A larger branch with the same name was subsequently founded in Cairo, and headed, according to some accounts, by Labiba Ahmad.62 It was possibly in this context that Labiba printed Hasan al-Banna’s photograph on the cover of her journal.

The recruitment of women and building of a women’s section, however, met with resistance by male members of the Muslim Brothers in spite of support from the highest quarters. Women continued, therefore, to form separate organizations, which were announced on the pages of *al-Nahda al-Nisa’iyya*. One such organization was the Muslim Ladies’ Association founded in 1937 by Zaynab al-Ghazali (b. 1917), a young woman who had recently resigned from the Egyptian Feminist Union. Membership lists of the group reveal a preponderance of younger women, such as Widad Sadiq ‘Anbar, the group’s secretary and a contributor to *al-Nahda al-Nisa’iyya*, and Na’ima Murtadi, Labiba’s granddaughter.63 These women were thus figuratively and sometimes quite literally the descendants of Labiba Ahmad, and the group followed the line she had set. The members sought to familiarize Muslim women with their religion, through which they would find emancipation. Their goal was to “purify society in general and Muslim women in particular from the filth shaking their convictions and to fight passion and disgraceful abominations….”64 Like Labiba’s Society of Ladies’ Awakening, the group maintained an orphanage and helped poor families in an effort to disseminate its call.

Zaynab al-Ghazali later became the most important and best-known female Islamist figure in Egypt, but her debt to Labiba Ahmad has rarely been recognized. Some time after Zaynab founded her Muslim Ladies’ Association, Hasan al-Banna urged her to fold her association into his, arguing that Muslims must be unified and differences of opinion eradicated. He suggested that she head the centralized women’s section of the Muslim Brothers that he was creating. Her group turned down his offer, and she opted for a looser cooperation instead. She changed her mind only in 1948 when the Muslim Brothers came under attack, and she pledged allegiance to al-Banna; at that time, however, he asked her to keep her group separate for strategic reasons.65 She subsequently became an active member of the Muslim Brothers and was among those arrested in 1965 in the wake of an apparent Islamist conspiracy to assassinate Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir. After her release in 1971, she composed the prison memoir *Ayyam min Hayati* (Days of My Life, 1977), which has been reprinted more than ten times in Arabic and has been translated into English, Persian, and Turkish.66

The Muslim Sisters (the group inside the Muslim Brothers) only took
off in 1944 when a group of women determined to organize anew. They formed a central leadership made up of twelve members renewed annually and under the directorship of Hasan al-Banna, who named a liaison between his office and the women, and they established a headquarters in Cairo. The Muslim Sisters adopted as their sign a white head scarf like that worn by students in Labiba Ahmad’s schools, instead of the black one that had often been associated with grief and mourning. Members taught at special schools for “mothers of the believers,” worked in medical facilities, and propagated their message wherever they could. To these Sisters, true emancipation for women would come only with a knowledge of their religion. Branches quickly spread throughout Egypt and within four years they numbered fifty as membership reached five thousand.67 The Muslim Sisters helped the society develop their ideas about women and the family and played a crucial role in sustaining the families of those Brothers imprisoned from 1948 to 1950 when the society was banned.68

The number of female members paled in comparison to the approximately one-half million men enlisted in the Muslim Brothers in 1948, leading one knowledgeable observer of the organization to claim that it failed to capture the imagination of young Egyptian women. A male member suggested that women resisted the call to Islam, for they associated it with a “return to the harim” rather than the path to “true female emancipation.”69 Yet considering that the fifty branches and five thousand members reflected less than four years of organizing, and that women simply did not mobilize in mass for any party or organization in the 1940s, the numbers prove significant. Moreover, they should be compared with female membership in secular organizations rather than just male membership in the Muslim Brothers. Adding the number of Muslim Sisters to members of the Muslim Ladies’ Association (which Zaynab al-Ghazali claimed had 118 or 119 branches), points to the success of Islamist organizations in mobilizing women in this period.70 The Egyptian Feminist Union never claimed close to even a thousand members. Indeed, its aging leadership and lack of a general following pushed younger women such as Doria Shafik to found their own feminist associations. Younger women were also attracted to communist organizations in the 1940s, but again not nearly on the scale of those attracted to the Islamist groups.71

Labiba Ahmad’s own role in the Muslim Sisters remains unclear. When the first branches were founded in the 1930s, she was probably a woman in her late fifties or early sixties. Her presidency of the Cairo branch may have been an honorary position in acknowledgement of her pioneering work throughout the years, her commitment to the Islamic
cause, and her seniority. When the Muslim Sisters became more active in the 1940s, she would have been in her seventies. By then, the keeper of the flame, who had stoked the fire in a period when it had grown faint, had passed the torch to a new generation. This new generation of Islamists, which could have been her children or grandchildren, pushed the movement in a more militant direction. They spoke increasingly not only of an Islamic society, but of an Islamic state and the restoration of Islamic law.

CONCLUSION

When Labiba returned from the hajj in 1937, she went through her papers and began to prepare her memoirs. "Life is made of memory and hope: memory of the past and hope for the future," she wrote in the introduction. "It was among my greatest hopes to serve my homeland (watani), my community (ummati), and the daughters of my sex by producing the journal al-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya, which I founded sixteen years ago and persisted in publishing all this time without interruption, praise God." As a result of working on the journal, she explained, she had corresponded with kings, ministers, politicians, and clerics; and she arranged this correspondence chronologically and by region in her memoirs. The earliest letters had come from King Ibn Sa'ud, and with these she placed other correspondence from the Hijaz. Next followed a letter from Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Turkey's nationalist hero and first president (whom she had watched closely before he abolished the caliphate in 1924); notes and telegrams from the staff of the Egyptian royal family; and letters from Sa'd Zaghlul and other Egyptian politicians. Finally, she ended with letters from "the dear ones and people of virtue," religious scholars and thinkers. With her typical modesty, she presented the collection as a testimony of the sympathy of those mentioned for her "small service." She placed and dated the memoirs Cairo 1356, and identified herself as she had throughout the years — as the founder of the Society for Ladies' Awakening. In this way, she created a testament to decades of activism.72

The last issue of al-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya appeared in 1939.73 Two other long-running Arabic women's journals (al-Mar'a al-Misriyya and Fatat al-Sharq) also folded on the eve of the Second World War, signalling the end of an era in the Egyptian women's press. By then Labiba, who had recently undergone surgery, was ready to retire.74 In her final years she withdrew into ritual and prayer. Perhaps she heard about the detention of Islamists during the war and the troubles of the Muslim Brothers after it: the assassination of Prime Minister Mahmud al-Nuqrashi by a
member of the Society in 1948, the subsequent banning of the Brothers, the murder of Hasan al-Banna in 1949 by government agents, and the imprisonment of numerous members. She may even have heard that the Muslim Brothers expected a lifting of the ban after the Wafd swept elections in early January 1951. Labiba died later that month at the age of about eighty. She left behind four children, six grandchildren, and numerous nieces and nephews. The obituary notices in the daily press specified that there would be no public mourning for women or place for them in the funeral procession, practices that Labiba had probably condemned.75

Labiba Ahmad’s life parallels that of the Islamist Zaynab al-Ghażali in many ways: both founded Muslim women’s associations, both started journals, both went on the *hajj* numerous times, and both envisioned women’s progress in Islamic terms. Yet their lives also differed in important ways, reflecting their situations, their dispositions, and the times in which they lived. Labiba started her activism after having raised six children, a second career of sorts. Zaynab, who was forty or so years younger, married twice but never had children (considering this “a great blessing”76) and became an activist in her youth. Labiba dedicated herself to social welfare and moral reform; Zaynab asserted that she was political “by nature” and her goal was the realization of an Islamic state. Labiba fused religious revivalism with nationalism, struggling against British colonialism and the infiltration of Western practices into Egyptian society; Zaynab rejected territorial nationalism, aligned herself with the Islamic *ummah*, and fought the post-1952 military regime in Egypt.77 Labiba may have disapproved of the militant direction taken by Zaynab and her associates; for Labiba’s politics were the politics of female notables, of gentlewomen and a gentler time, when different rules prevailed.

Labiba Ahmad came out of the same context as contemporary female activists of the interwar years, having participated in the women’s associations of the prewar years and the 1919 Revolution. Her circles were similar as she had contacts with nationalist leaders, ministers, and kings. Moreover, she shared with other female notables conceptions about her role in society as the daughter of a bey and the wife of a pasha: her right to speak on behalf of Egyptians and her obligation to help improve society. Yet Labiba’s vision of society differed from that of many of her contemporaries. Unlike those who eyed Europe for answers, Labiba looked to Islam for solutions to society’s ills. She propagated her message widely in Egypt and abroad by founding associations, publishing in Arabic, travelling throughout the region, and speaking on the radio and in front of gatherings. She combined literary activity with philanthropy,
bringing her message to the poor through the institutions she sponsored in the working-class quarters of Sayyida Zaynab and elsewhere.

Islamism in Egypt sprang from fertile soil, and Islamic activists such as Labiba Ahmad played an important role in preparing the ground by forming a bridge from Islamic reform to radicalism. Perhaps it is not so surprising that at the roots of Islamism one finds a woman advocating a religious path to women’s and national progress. Labiba sought a way that had resonance and meaning in her society. And gender issues — family relations, male-female segregation, sexuality — lay at the heart of Islamist ideology and practice.

NOTES


3. *Al-Nahda al-Nisa‘iyya* (henceforth NN) 1, no. 6 (January 1922): 159.


5. NN 8, no. 89 (May 1930): 145–46.


7. NN 14, no. 3 (March 1936): 83–85, 96; NN 14, no. 4 (April 1936): 111; NN 14, no. 9 (September 1936): 390.

8. NN 4, no. 42 (May 1926): 187; NN 6, no. 62 (February 1928): 56; NN 6, no. 9 (September 1928): 308; NN 6, no. 11 (November 1928): 390; NN 7, no. 78 (June 1929): 181–83; NN 16, no. 2 (February 1938): 55.


10. NN 3, no. 11 (June 1924): 386.


12. U.S. National Archives, State Department (SD) 883.00/135, Ladies of Egypt to the Diplomatik Agent and Consul-General of the U.S., Cairo, March 20, 1919.


17. NN 1, no. 1 (July 1921): 3; NN 1, no. 12 (July 1922): 378.

18. NN 1, no. 5 (December 1921): 129.


20. NN 1, no. 1 (July 1921): 17; NN 1, no. 2 (September 1921): 32, 56; NN 1, no. 3 (October 1921): facing p. 68; NN 1, no. 5 (December 1921): 129; NN 5, no. 50 (February 1927): 67.


22. NN 3, no. 5 (December 1923); NN 3, no. 7 (February 1924): 252; NN 3, no. 9 (April 1924): 316.


24. NN 3, no. 11 (June 1924): 387; NN 3, no. 10 (May 1924): 343; NN 3, no. 12 (July 1924): 427; NN 3, no. 12 (July 1924): 419.


26. NN 1, no. 2 (September 1921): 55; NN 1, no. 5 (December 1921): 135; NN 1, no. 6 (January 1922): 159.

27. NN 11, no. 12 (December 1933): 386.

28. NN 12, no. 2 (February 1934): back page; no. 4 (April 1934): back page.

29. See NN 4, no. 48 (November 1926): 399–401.

30. Badran, Feminists, 96.

31. NN 1, no. 1 (July 1921): 3.

32. NN 1, no. 2 (September 1921): 35.

33. Baron, Women’s Awakening, 28–29, 32–34, 176–79.

34. See Baron, Women’s Awakening.

35. NN 12, no. 10 (October 1934): 326.

36. NN 1, no. 10 (May 1922): 260.

37. NN 9, no. 77 (August 1931): 255.


39. NN 2, no. 5 (December 1922): 136; NN 3, no. 2 (September 1923): back page; NN 8, no. 92 (August 1930): back page; NN 11, no. 8–9 (August 1933): 277; NN 12, no. 5 (May 1934): back page.

40. NN 6, no. 10 (October 1928): 346; NN 8, no. 86 (February 1930): 62; NN 8,
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no. 86 (February 1930): 63; NN 12, no. 3 (March 1934): 101; NN 16, no. 1 (January 1938): 2.
41. NN 11, no. 8–9 (August 1933): 310.
42. NN 11, no. 3 (March 1933): 95.
43. NN 4, no. 40 (March 1926): 136.
44. NN 4, no. 43 (June 1926): 227; NN 6, no. 6 (June 1928): 202; NN 8, no. 89 (May 1930): cover; NN 10, no. 85 (April 1932): 127; NN 11, no. 3 (March 1933): cover; NN 12, no. 2 (February 1934): back page; NN 12, no. 5 (May 1934): back page; NN 14, no. 3 (March 1936): 86.
45. NN 16, no. 2 (February 1938): 65.
46. NN 8, no. 89 (May 1930): 146.
47. NN 12, no. 5 (May 1934): back page; NN 12, no. 7 (July 1934): 237; NN 14, no. 5 (May 1936): 175.
48. NN 6, no. 5 (May 1928): 176; NN 6, no. 8 (August 1928): 278; NN 6, no. 9 (September 1928): 315; NN 6, no. 10 (October 1928): 357; NN 8, no. 88 (April 1930): 142; NN 8, no. 91 (July 1930): cover; NN 8, no. 92 (August 1930): 283–84; NN 10, no. 84 (March 1932): 102; NN 10, no. 84 (March 1932): 107; NN 10, no. 12 (December 1932): 429; NN 14, no. 4 (April 1936): 135.
50. NN 8, no. 92 (August 1930): 283–84.
51. NN 8, no. 94 (October 1930): 353; NN 8, no. 95 (November 1930): cover, 361–62, photo, 372, 386.
54. NN 11, no. 8, 9 (August 1933): 302; NN 14, no. 7 (July 1936): 250; NN 16, no. 9 (September 1938): 291.
55. NN 10, no. 12 (December 1932): 398.
56. NN 12, no. 3 (March 1934): 92, 98; no. 4 (April 1934): 114.
59. Mitchell, Muslim Brothers, 9–11.
62. Amal al-Subki, al-Haraka al-Nisa'iyya fi Misr, 1919–1952 (Cairo, 1986), 118. Subki's notes seem to have been misnumbered. If this is the case, another note may be more instructive: she may have found evidence that Labiba Ahmad
headed the Cairo branch in the legal files compiled for the trial of the assassins of Mahmud al-Nuqrashy dated December 28, 1948. These are stored at the High Court (p. 135, n. 36). Talhami draws almost exclusively on al-Subki for her account of Labiba Ahmad’s activities in Ghada Hashem Talhami, The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 46–49.


64. Al-Ghazali, Da’iya, 196–97; NN 16, no. 9 (September 1938): 317.


68. Mitchell, Muslim Brothers, 175.

69. Mitchell, Muslim Brothers, quote p. 175, 328.

70. Al-Ghazali, al-Da’iya, 18.


72. NN 16, no. 2 (February 1938): 65. The mémoirs, which I have not seen, are described as a collection of correspondence rather than an autobiography.

73. I have not seen issues of NN from that year. In 1938 the Ministry of Education instructed school supervisors that it would no longer purchase blocks of subscriptions and that they should subscribe themselves. This no doubt hurt the circulation of journals that had been used in schools. (NN 16, no. 1 (January 1938): notice in front of issue).

74. NN 16, no. 11 (November 1938): 361–62.


77. Al-Ghazali, al-Da’iya, 19.