BORDERLINES

GENDERS AND IDENTITIES IN WAR AND PEACE, 1870–1930

Edited by Billie Melman

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THE POLITICS OF FEMALE NOTABLES IN POSTWAR EGYPT

BETH BARON

A week after unrest broke out in early March 1919 in Cairo, and had started to spread throughout the country, veiled elite Egyptian women "descended from their harems" onto the streets of the city, protesting the military suppression of demonstrations. The women marched down main thoroughfares of Cairo, but before they reached their final destination, they were surrounded by a cordon of British troops. Then, according to accounts, Huda Sha'rawi, a female notable who would later emerge as the leader of the feminist movement in Egypt, approached the soldiers and challenged them with the words: "We do not fear death, fire your rifle into my heart and make in Egypt a second Miss Cavell." What an irony! Here we have an Egyptian woman evoking the memory of nurse Edith Cavell—who had been executed by the Germans in occupied Belgium for spying and had become a symbol of British patriotism—in the midst of a struggle to rid Egypt of the British occupation. Rather than look to the pantheon of ancient Arab or Egyptian female heroes cited in the Arabic press, Sha'rawi drew on the British war experience. Her cultural frame of reference, like that of many Westernized Egyptian notables, was European.

Since occupying Egypt in 1882, the British governed it indirectly and relied on male notables as intermediaries. Egyptian politics were guided in those decades by the group that Albert Hourani has called "urban notables," whose actions he has described as the "politics of notables." Through their vast landholdings, the urban elite of Egypt had strong links to the countryside, but preferred life in the cities. According to Hourani, the influence of urban notables stemmed from two related factors: on the one hand, they had access to authority "to speak for society or some part of it at the ruler's court," while on the other hand they enjoyed independent "social power," which made them accepted and "natural" leaders and endowed them with an oppositional potential. Moreover, their links to the countryside enabled them to forge coalitions with rural notables toward this end.

Real authority in prewar Egypt, in any case, resided with the
British agent and consul-general, who more or less dictated to the Khedive, the representative of the Ottoman sultan (Egypt was still part of the Ottoman Empire). The notables thus played an ambiguous role, outwardly supporting the British occupation but quietly becoming the sounding boards of discontent. As the British began to rule more directly, the notables came to oppose the occupation more vocally. This position was reinforced by the declaration of a British protectorate over Egypt at the outset of World War I. At the moment of crisis after the war, the notables assumed the leadership of the rebellion against the British, and harnessed the agitation of peasants as well as the actions of workers to the nationalist cause. Fearful that popular violence might damage property and undermine the social order, they strove to contain it.\(^3\)

Female notables chose this moment to become public political actors. This essay uses records from the British and U.S. archives, as well as Egyptian memoirs and periodicals, to examine gender and nationalist politics in an imperial outpost. It argues that a “politics of female notables” emerged after the war and, in part, out of it. Female notables, like their male counterparts, derived their power from their social position, which legitimized their authority and their claims to speak on behalf of the nation. The women examined here, who entered the political arena in the wake of the war, were mostly the wives and daughters of pashas and beys, through whom they had access to circles of power. Yet they were not just related to men of means: they often had large property holdings themselves, which gave them independent resources and links to the countryside.

A mythology has grown around what came to be known as the “ladies’ demonstrations” of 1919, with participants earning such labels as “revolutionary gentlewomen.”\(^4\) The event has been elevated to an iconic national moment in Egyptian history and the national collective memory. However, the romance of revolution, and women’s role in revolution, has overshadowed analysis of the political action of this group of women during and after the 1919 demonstrations, as well as the seeds for it in Egyptians’ experiences of the war.

Gendered Experiences of the War

The Egyptian Revolution of 1919 grew out of hardships encountered during the war and frustrated expectations for greater independence after it. With the exception of a brief Senussi occupation of the Western oases, and occasional air raids on Cairo, Egyptian territory west of the Suez Canal never became an arena of war. Yet it was an im-
portant staging ground: troops from all over the British Empire (Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, and India) gathered there to prepare for the Gallipoli and Palestine campaigns. Moreover, Egyptians were forced to provide labor and supplies for those campaigns. These contributions to the war effort went unrewarded with the denial of Egyptian demands for greater independence after the war.

Much more attention has been paid to the Revolution of 1919 than to the war that preceded, and in many ways precipitated, it. As a result, the war remains something of a historiographical hole, with historians tending either to discuss it summarily or bypass it altogether. Yet some background on the war years in Egypt and gendered experiences of the war are crucial to understanding why female notables participated in the revolution that erupted in its wake. Although the war experiences of peasant women and the urban elite were widely divergent, the war, albeit in different ways, transformed the lives of both groups. It also spurred notable women to speak in the name of all Egyptian women, though mostly on behalf of their own interests.

Shortly after a state of war was declared in Egypt, the British imposed martial law: newspapers were heavily censored, gatherings of five or more persons prohibited, and prominent male nationalists interned or deported to Malta. In December of 1914, a month after the Ottomans entered the war, the British declared Egypt a protectorate, thus severing her ties with the Ottoman Empire. Khedive Abbas Hilmi II (r.1892–1914), at the time in Istanbul, was replaced by his uncle, Prince Husayn Kamil (r.1914–1917). The latter became sultan, a title previously held by the Ottoman sovereign. Other symbols of state—flag, currency, stamps—were eventually altered. British officials had debated at length what status Egypt ought to have, and had settled on a protectorate, rather than a colony, as less offensive to Egyptians at a time when the British badly needed their cooperation.

Prior to the war, the most popular strain of Egyptian nationalism had emphasized Egypt’s Islamic ties with the Ottoman Empire. Fearing that an attack on Egypt’s eastern flank would stimulate an Egyptian uprising—as the Ottomans and Germans expected—the British selected the Suez Canal as the best position from which to repel an attack, and withdrew their troops from the Sinai Peninsula. Ottoman forces made two unsuccessful attempts to cross the Suez Canal, in February of 1915 and August of 1916. Moreover, the threatened uprising never materialized. Although some Egyptian army units even took part in the early defense of the canal, in May of 1917, well after the Ottoman threat had receded, Egyptians were disarmed.
As the British pressed the campaign into Palestine in the spring of 1917, they increased their demands on Egyptians for labor and supplies. Camels and mules were requisitioned by the tens of thousands, along with fodder and grain to feed them. The heaviest burden came with the recruiting of Egyptians for the Labour Corps, the Camel Transport Corps, and similar units. When volunteers were not forthcoming, the government adapted the tactic of "administrative pressure." This was essentially conscription, though it was not labeled as such. It effectively reintroduced the *corvée*, a widely loathed system of collective forced labor that had been used for centuries in Egypt to dig and maintain irrigation canals (including the Suez Canal) and had been eliminated only a generation earlier. In his memoirs, writer Salama Musa records seeing men in wartime "Bound with thick ropes around their waists and put in a long row with their fellow victims, and marched like that to the village office, where they were confined in the room for the accused, to be consequently deported to Palestine." When village women came to him, weeping that men who worked his land had been detained, he obtained their release through a bribe. Yet later releases were rejected as he himself was threatened with conscription.

From recruiting camps in Suhaj and Ruda Island, male Egyptians were sent, two thousand at a time, to base depots in the Canal Zone, where they were disinfected, clothed, equipped, and organized into gangs of fifty and companies of six hundred laborers. Most were sent to Palestine, but many also went to Mesopotamia, France, Italy, Salonika, and the Dardanelles to perform a number of labor-intensive tasks, including railway construction, bridge building, road making, laying pipelines, quarrying stone, draining malarial areas, loading ships, and digging trenches. From a pool of 3.2 million adult males in the Egyptian countryside, some 500,000 (according to British sources) to one or one and a half million (according to Egyptian historians) served in these corps. Although these were not frontline soldiers, they also suffered casualties from injury, disease, and death.

The war also took its toll on women in the countryside. Fearing that *fellahin*, who had been unable to sell their cotton at the beginning of the war, would default on their taxes, government officials opened offices to accept women's gold jewelry—their chief investment—in lieu of banknotes. In the following years, when the government conscripted men for the war effort, some of the women who were left behind complained to British officials of their lack of financial support. The government apparently allotted a lump sum of only three Egyptian pounds to care for families of recruits in the labor corps.
During the war, women took to the fields in record numbers to tend to family crops. Although Egyptian censuses prove problematic for a number of reasons, including a tendency to undercount women, they do show important trends. The 1907 census listed a total of 2,258,005 male and 57,144 female agriculturalists. By 1917, 1,897,103 men and 495,964 women were listed in the fields: a significant drop in the number of men and a nearly ninefold increase in the number of women. Ten years later, the number of men had surpassed earlier levels while the number of women listed had dipped only slightly. The enormous increase in the number of women from 1907 to 1917 can be partially explained by greater efforts to document women’s work and by natural population growth. But it mostly reflects the impact on female labor of the conscription of male peasants. The number of women engaged in labor in the fields surged and remained high through the twenties. Once in the fields, they seemed to stay there, and remained visible to census takers.

In contrast to rural women, urban elite women faced greater confinement in the home during the war. The preceding decades had been active ones for middle- and upper-class women who had explored a new range of educational, journalistic, and associational activities, which often had a nationalist tinge: women either legitimized their activities by linking them with the need for social reform on a national scale, or strove to disseminate nationalist ideas, adopting a new rhetoric in which they referred to themselves as “Mothers of the Nation.” The war forced a cutback in these new activities. Foreign travel was curtailed, and women who were abroad when war broke out in the summer of 1914 made their way home. A number of intellectual and educational societies initiated immediately before the war were disbanded. Some schools were taken over as hospitals or centers for refugees; few new initiatives in education were undertaken; and a number of women’s journals folded due to the higher costs of production. Moreover, late in the war, one of the central figures in the fledgling women’s movement, Malik Hifni Nasif (1886–1918), died in her early thirties. She was eulogized by Hudá Shârawi, who strove to pick up her mantle. This is not to say that women’s associational activities ground to a complete halt during the war—new organizations such as Jam’iyyat al-Nahda al-Nisa’iyya (the Society for Women’s Awakening) were founded, and women learned nursing and practiced other skills to support the war effort; yet the pace of activities had slowed. Urban elite women did not necessarily suffer during the war, but they faced inconveniences, shortages, and higher prices. Moreover, the war provided them with new lessons in colonial pol-
itics and further familiarized them with the language of national determination.¹⁴

A great contrast exists between the war experiences of female peasants and that of notables. Yet both experienced increasing hostility toward the British occupation, which would find different expressions after the war, in peasant violence and notable protest. Eventually, female notables would step forward and, drawing on their social standing, would claim to speak on behalf of all Egyptians.

FROM WAR TO REVOLUTION

Egyptsis regarded the protectorate as a temporary arrangement, and expected to gain independence after the war. However, British officials denied the Egyptian Wad (Delegation) the opportunity to present their case in London. In March of 1919, when Wad members were arrested and exiled, protests broke out in Cairo and then spread rapidly throughout the country. Egypt’s movement for independence, which had stalled during the war, had resumed with vigor.

The psychological experience of mass protest is wonderfully described by the novelist Naguib Mahfouz in Bayn al-Qasrayn (Palace Walk), the first novel in a trilogy depicting the life of a middle-class Cairene family from 1917 to 1944. Mahfouz suggests what it may have felt like to be a young protestor in the streets of Cairo in 1919, and repeatedly uses the metaphor of water to describe the national collective: On the first day of the demonstrations, Fahmy, the middle son of the family and a law student, joined other students “surg- ing” in a “formidable ocean.” On the second day of protests, “Fahmy threw himself into the swarms of people with intoxicating happiness and enthusiasm; like a displaced person rediscovering his family after a long separation.” The protests and Fahmy’s participation continued. “Driven by his enthusiasm, he reached far-flung horizons of lofty sentiment. . . .”¹⁵

Much less interested in the political developments taking place, Fahmy’s older brother Yasin, a government clerk, nonetheless later got caught up in celebrations of the release of the arrested head of the Wad, Sa’d Zaghlul, and was “swept along by its swelling current and carried by its strong waves like a tiny, weightless leaf, fluttering everywhere.” As he explained to his brother, “A man forgets himself in the strangest way when he’s with so many people. He almost seems to become a new person.” He remembers finding himself in “a swirling sea of people. There was an electric atmosphere of enthusiasm. Before I knew it, I forgot myself and merged with the
stream. . . .” Indeed, that was one of the central meanings of the drama of nationalist protest: the participant submerged himself in the mass; experienced symbolic death and rebirth, and emerged with a new identity—a loyal Egyptian, a nationalist. Collective action thus gave rise to a new collective identity.

Collective action also often draws new groups into politics, making new “political publics.” Demonstrations reveal a great deal about how these groups are constituted, what their agendas are, and what messages they are attempting to convey to the broader public. In an innovative article on aspects of the 1920 Revolt in Syria, James Gelvin suggests how demonstrations can be analyzed as collective ceremonies that are used by certain groups in their attempts to define political community. He argues that “the ceremonies not only contain symbols, but the ceremony itself, in its entirety, acts as a symbol.” Borrowing from Clifford Geertz and others, he elaborates a methodology by which ceremonies might be a “model of” reality and a “model for” reality at the same time, though components of the two are rarely equally balanced. This approach seems an apt one for analyzing the women’s demonstrations of March 1919.

Symbols

The basic outlines of the story of the 1919 women’s demonstrations in Egypt are well known, having been reconstructed from a limited number of British and Arabic sources. The first demonstration occurred on the morning of Sunday, March 16, and was followed by another a few days later. However, since the sources are rife with contradictions; making it almost impossible to produce a definitive detailed chronology, and because the symbolic components are more or less the same in any case, I will not make a great effort to distinguish between the protests, and instead will treat them almost as one.

The demonstrations of 1919 are often depicted as being spontaneous. The marches of elite women, however, were planned in advance and well orchestrated. The circle around Huda Sha’rawi, a lead organizer, sent a delegation to the authorities to obtain permission for a protest. They returned empty handed, but later read in the daily al-Muqattam that permission had been granted. They only went ahead with their plan when they thought the action had been approved by colonial authorities. They then telephoned their friends (at the time, no doubt, telephones were limited to a small circle) to spread the word of the planned protest. Other advance preparations included the painting of banners, the penning of letters, and the sign-
ing of petitions. Although the Wafd-reviewed at least one of these letters to give its stamp of approval, there is no evidence that the demonstrations themselves were planned by any group other than the participants.

On the morning of the march, women met at the home of Atiya Abu Asbu’a, which was located in Garden City near the central square of Midân-Isma’iliyya (later renamed Midan al-Tahrir). Many government offices and foreign legations were located nearby, and affluent Cairenes lived in the area. The women discussed the route to be followed. The participants formed ranks or rows and marched in an orderly procession, as photographic evidence shows, with banners to the front. Some male students formed protective columns around the female protesters. The women walked on foot in these first marches, which was crucial to their effect. In later protests they often rode through the city in a procession of cars (driven by male chauffeurs).

The women wore the distinctive urban street dress of the elite: long black head scarves, white face veils, and black robes. This was a march of veiled women and thus had a certain aura of sanctity. Still, they shouted slogans and, on later occasions women from this cohort delivered speeches, sometimes veiled, at other times not veiled. The lists of names on the petitions signed by protestors reveal that these women indeed came from the highest strata of Egyptian society and were often the wives and daughters of pashas and beys, which is how they signed their names (the wife of . . ., the daughter of . . .). The lists also show that women often protested in the company of family members.

About two-thirds of the women who signed these petitions were married, although some married women, like Hidya Barakat (who later headed the charitable organization Mabarrat Muhammad ‘Ali), were still in their teens or early twenties. At least one, we are told, was a nursing mother. Others were students. Some participants were still alive on the fiftieth anniversary of the event and thus must have been relatively young in 1919. Huda Sha’rawi was about forty in 1919 and no doubt enjoyed a certain authority over more youthful demonstrators. Estimates of the number of participants ranged from 150 to 530, but three hundred is taken as a median figure. This was not a “surging sea,” but a peaceful and ordered procession of limited size.

The event inverted the conventional gendered order, for here veiled women marched while men watched. Even more strikingly, women took center stage on major thoroughfares, commanding public space. Yet the procession remained segregated, with women mov-
ing in one space and male supporters in another. In contrast, some female students mixed with men in the protests of 1919, while working-class and peasant women also occasionally engaged in the general unrest. The female “martyrs” came from these latter groups. Nonségrégated women, such as actresses, who were already accustomed to working with men, also joined men in their marches, but elite women hardly ever did. Although on a few occasions veiled women addressed crowds composed of male protestors, this did not necessarily involve their mixing with men, for most photographs taken on those occasions show the woman standing in a car or platform clearly above the crowd.

The closest they came to joining men occurred in a demonstration organized upon the release of Sa’d Zaghlul and other Wafd members from arrest in Malta on April 8, 1919. The order of march was fixed by profession or rank: with cabinet members and legislators in the lead followed by ’ulama (religious leaders), judges, lawyers, doctors, government workers, army officers, workers, and students: Women brought up the rear: elite women rode in cars and women of lesser means sat on donkey carts. The organizers no doubt intended to present a show of national unity to the foreign powers, but the ceremony also reflected and reinforced social divisions in Egyptian society.

In the demonstrations of late March and subsequent protests, elite women remained apart from men of their own classes as well as women of other classes. Women of different backgrounds had their own specific grievances and engaged in separate public action. In the countryside, peasant women used different tactics: they helped cut railroad lines, destroy telegraphs, and apparently participated in the murder of British officials trapped in railroad cars in the early hours of the unrest. In the cities, prostitutes marched as well. “The ladies of the Wazza [an area where prostitutes lived in Cairo] paraded on carts in their gauds and their chemises, with music and the khan-khan,” wrote one Australian soldier in his memoirs. The “ladies’ demonstrations” were not intended to be a show of unity across class and moral boundaries. They were more a “model of” than a “model for” society. This did not discount cooperation among Coptic and Muslim women from the same strata, and in March of 1919 as well as in January of 1920, when the Women’s Wafd was formed, Coptic and Muslim women of similar backgrounds worked together.

The women marching at the head of the procession in March carried Arabic and French placards with words in white on a black background. The banners read: “Long live supporters of justice, and freedom,” “Down with oppressive tyrants and the occupation,” “We
protest the shedding of the blood of the innocent and the unarmed," "We demand complete independence," and so on. As they walked, they shouted slogans similar to those on their placards: "Long live freedom and independence!" and "Down with the protectorate!" Male Egyptians apparently responded enthusiastically to the demonstration, applauding and calling out their support, and the procession drew a large crowd, according to most accounts, with some women watching and ululating from windows.

The procession moved along Qasr al-Aini Street, the planned route, toward the foreign legations where the organizers had originally intended to deliver written protests. But those in front diverted the march in the direction of Sa‘d Zaghlul’s home, the focal point for Wafd meetings and political speeches, which became a symbolic site for the "national family" in the course of the revolution, acquiring the name Bayt al-Umma [House of the Nation]. It is here that the main drama of the day unfolded. After declaring the demonstration illegal, British troops surrounded the marchers and Huda Sha‘rawi spoke her words: "We do not fear death...." The words, spoken in English (or, according to one source, in French), became a critical part of the memory of the event. The denouement came as a comarcher, who feared that any harm to Huda would inspire the unarmed students to advance and thereby spark a bloodbath, restrained her. The ladies then stood or sat on curbstones for two to three hours as the "sun-beat down" and the standoff dragged on. The confrontation ended in one of two ways, depending on the version and the day: either Sir Thomas Russell Pasha, British commander of the Cairo City Police, returned to call the women’s carriages and allowed them to go; or the American consul-general intervened to the same end. As they returned home or shortly thereafter, the women presented their petitions to foreign legations.

The women’s marches of 1919 quickly entered into the nationalist mythology, in part because they seemed so dramatic. In the eyes of observers, women had been catapulted from the private to the public sphere, from the harem to the street, virtually overnight. Yet women’s actions should have come as less of a shock, for, as we have seen, elite women’s lives had changed significantly in the previous three decades. Many of the participants had been educated, either at home by tutors or in state and foreign girls’ schools. Literate Egyptian women formed the reading public of Arabic women’s journals and other Egyptian and European periodicals. While the women’s journals were primarily concerned with inculcating a cult of domesticity, they unwittingly helped to create a community of readers within national boundaries. Print culture was, no doubt, one factor
in increasing their sense of national identity. In the press, in schools, and in societies, these women discussed the “woman question” and debated women’s rights in the national context. They linked the issues of national liberation and women’s advancement and expressed their growing national consciousness in a variety of cultural activities: teaching, writing, and volunteering.

The societies formed by these women—charitable, cultural, intellectual, and social—often augmented their sense of national community, for most espoused the goal of Egyptian reform of one sort or another. In their new societies, they also honed the organizational skills acquired in managing large households. Running meetings, giving speeches, and holding elections became familiar exercises. After that, organizing a demonstration seemed simple. The demonstrators also left written records, in the form of petitions and pamphlets, that document their demands and give insights into the politics of female notables. It is to these that we now turn.

**Texts**

When the British challenged the Wafd’s authority to speak on behalf of all Egyptians, the Wafd began a drive to gain signatures on petitions (tawkilat) delegating it as the official representative of the nation. Although women were not approached to sign the tawkilat, elite women nevertheless adopted the tactic of the petition to express their political views. Delivering a petition to a foreign legation also became a central part of the ceremony of protest marches.

These petitions and similar texts produced in April by women in Alexandria reveal that their authors conceptualized Egyptian women as a collective and claimed, by virtue of their notable status, to speak for the whole group, for the female half of the political community. They would open with the phrase “In the name of the women of Egypt” and end with such signatures as “The Ladies of Egypt” and “The Egyptian Women.” Indeed, with their education and fluency in foreign languages, female notables were well positioned to act as spokeswomen. Moreover, as women of means they felt they were deserving of a certain respect, even as they protested. In an addendum to their original letter to the American diplomatic agency and consulate-general, they described how their demonstration had been thwarted: “Such is the treatment inflicted by the British troops occupying this country upon the ladies. This . . . shows clearly the persistence of the British in employing brute force even towards women.” As women, and women of the upper classes, they did not expect such “brute” treatment, and hoped the
Americans would agree that it was an outrage. Force, however, was relative: live ammunition was used on Egyptian crowds that included working-class women, some of whom died.

Early women’s advocates carved out a special role for women as socializers and educators, calling themselves “Mothers of the Nation,” while both male and female nationalists frequently invoked the metaphor of the nation-as-family as a device to build a sense of national community. Women demonstrating in 1919 strengthened this metaphor by presenting themselves as the “female relations in this metaphoric family: They were ‘the mothers, sisters and wives of the victims massacred for the satisfaction of British ambitions.’”

The language of protest was both political and familial as the women constantly referred to themselves as “Egyptian mothers” and addressed others in family terms. The nation was thus a family writ large. It is significant, however, that despite their use of a feminine voice in these and other petitions, female demonstrators at this time refrained from raising particular feminist concerns or demands.

Their petitions presented the case for Egyptian independence and protested the British military authorities’ suppression of their public demonstrations. They objected, as they wrote, to the force used against Egyptian demonstrators, “who have done nothing more than claim the liberty and independence of their country, in conformity with the principles proclaimed by Dr. [President] Wilson and accepted by all belligerent and neutral nations.” In particular, they condemned the “shooting down with machine guns [of] women and children, all absolutely unarmed; and this only because they had indulged in simple, pacific demonstrations of protest.” Here as elsewhere, appeals to the international community were based on Allied declarations made during the war. “We beg you to send our message to America and to President Wilson personally. Let them hear our call. We believe they will not suffer Liberty to be crushed in Egypt, that human Liberty for which you[r] brave and noble sons have died.”

Not to be outdone by women in Cairo, elite women in Alexandria produced a pamphlet of protest in April of 1919. The crescents and stars of the Egyptian flag (the Ottoman flag had only one star and crescent; the new Egyptian flag had three crescents and three stars) adorned the cover of the pamphlet sent to the American consul in that coastal city. The authors spoke of the drama unfolding in Egypt. They began by invoking the past war, drawing on the language of self-determination propagated by the Allies during the war. “Impregnated with the principles of liberty and of justice that the Allied victory had assured,” which included the “right to life and to inde-
pendence," a peaceful but powerful movement made of all classes, groups, religions, and races was working for the realization of a national ideal. "Millions of human lives were sacrificed for the cause of this right and the defense of oppressed people... . Were these sacrifices in vain and have these agreements no further value?"32

The Alexandrian women argued that Egypt had denied Egypt her right to exist: "Students, women, children and unarmed men were massacred because they reclaimed the liberty of their country." They spoke on behalf of those imprisoned, deported, and killed— their brothers. "If we raise our voice today it is not to cry but to appeal to the hearts [s] of the women of Europe and of America, that all these injustices committed by England in Egypt are under the eyes of the civilized world."33 Sixteen pages of signatures followed, often inscribed both in Arabic and Latin letters [the text was in French]. A few women gave their husband's profession (e.g., engineer, judge, lawyer, doctor, general, prosecutor, chief of finances, head of the postal service) and title, which ranged from effendi to pasha. One woman gave her own profession as school director. Many were obviously from the same families, and there were Christians as well as Muslims.34

The petitions and pamphlets of female notables reveal a keen sense of political argumentation and politicization. The writers recalled the meaning of the past war and promises of self-determination to legitimize Egypt's right to independence, but they did not dwell on the direct burden of war in Egypt or the peasants' experiences of it. They spoke in familial terms as mothers, wives, and sisters, and of brothers and sons. They occasionally appealed to their female counterparts in Europe and America and claimed to speak on behalf of all Egyptian women. Yet they put forth no special claims for women. Rather, they critiqued British rule in a special voice.

Using a new language of protest, female notables thus carved out an autonomous political space. They claimed a legitimacy to speak for society—or at least the female half of it—because of their elite background and access to authority. The response to their marches and presentation of petitions shows that they indeed enjoyed a unique social power, which they duly capitalized on by organizing more formally.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

In 1919, students, peasants, and workers, who all had their own, disparate grievances; united behind the Wafd. Initially, the Wafd was a delegation of a few men deputized "by the nation" to speak on its
behalf: These few men invited a few more to join, and the ranks of
the inner circle grew. It was the exile of the core of the Wafd (Sa’d
Zaghlul and others) that had sparked the 1919 Revolution. There
were repeated exiles in the early 1920s for the British preferred to ne-
gotiate with a more malleable leadership, yet the Wafd was the only
one with broad national support.

The Wafd remained an all-male organization; but in early January
of 1920, a group of female notables gathered to form the Women’s
Wafd: Over a thousand women met at St. Mark’s Church in Cairo to
elect fifteen members to the Women’s Wafd Central Committee.
Huda Sha’rawi, whose husband was a founding member of the Wafd
(but was among those who had quarreled with Zaghlul and left the
Wafd), was named president even though she was not present at this
meeting. The Central Committee included Copts (vice-president
Fahmi Bey Wissa and treasurer Habib Bey Khayyat) and mirrored the
organization of the male Wafd in its show of national unity.

At the first meeting of the Central Committee, the women com-
piled a letter to Lord Milner, head of a Commission of Inquiry sent
by the British government to Egypt to assess the political situation.
In this letter they invoked the past war, in which millions of lives
had been lost in defense of certain principles (“defending right and
liberating the human race”) but which England had of late com-
promised. They then took to the streets, demonstrating in an orderly
fashion and following a route that included Shepherd’s Hotel (an in-
national gathering spot), the Savoy Hotel, Opera Square, and the
Palace. This was the Cairo of the elite. The women carried Egyptian
flags and confronted, as in the past, British soldiers.

The Women’s Wafd proved instrumental in initiating and sus-
taining the boycott of British goods and merchants, launched in Jan-
uary of 1922. They went round shops in Cairo; urging shopkeepers to
boycott British goods, organized women’s committees in other cities
and in the provinces, and convened meetings where women vowed to
continue the boycott. As consumers of considerable means, no-
table women had economic clout and could shame others into boy-
cotting British businesses. During the few months until Egypt was
unilaterally declared an independent kingdom, the boycott proved
effective. Subsequently, public support for the boycott seemed to di-
minish, though the women continued their vigilance against patrons
of British stores. Another group later tried to expand the boycott,
urging the Egyptian government to participate.

In early February of 1922, the Women’s Wafd Central Committee
met to discuss the appointment of a new prime minister and the for-
mation of a new cabinet. In a prepared statement, they wrote that
they wanted to publicize their decision "to oppose the formation of any Ministry before the return [from exile] of the venerable Leader [Sa‘d Zaghlul] and his friends; the release of all political prisoners and the removal of the Martial Law; the abolition of the Press Censorship and the acknowledgement of the complete independence of Egypt and her Sudan." However, British censors prevented publication of the Committee's statement; a step that was approved by the acting High Commissioner, indicating that the British regarded the Women's Wafd Central Committee as wielding some influence. In March, the women again took to the streets, or rather their chauffeur-driven cars, to protest against the ministry that had eventually been formed, martial law, and the continuing exile of Zaghlul. In a demonstration that lasted two hours, the women went from consul-general to consul-general to deliver letters of protest. The Women's Wafd, like its male counterpart, claimed to be the voice of the Egyptian nation—especially in the absence of exiled male leaders—and Ihsan Ahmed, the secretary of the Women's Wafd, wrote to High Commissioner Allenby on the nation's behalf. She noted "the urgency of taking quick steps in releasing the political prisoners, returning the exiles and allowing full freedom in the country."

To what extent did urban female notables cooperate with women of other backgrounds, or strive to organize them? There is some evidence that they had ties with rural elites. Grace Thompson Seton, an American traveler, describes two "rich peasant" women she met in the early 1920s in the drawing room of Zaghlul's wife, Safiya Zaghlul, who was known as "Mother of the Nation." In contrast to the urban notable women, who dressed in Western style and spoke French, the rural women wore more traditional clothing and spoke only Arabic. One wore "astonishing quantities" of gold ornaments and had come to "offer her money and her heart to Egypt's cause." The other, who was also "weighted" with gold and had a very sizable income from her land, had come to support the circle of female nationalists around Safiya Zaghlul. Female notables organized working-class women, who learned sewing and other skills in the schools their charities sponsored. At a meeting convened by the Women's Wafd Central Committee to promote the boycott of British goods, girls from the workshop of Jam‘iyat al-Mar‘a al-Jadida [the New Woman Society] sang nationalist songs. In Alexandria, Jam‘iyat Ummahat al-Mustaqbal [the Society of the Mothers of the Future] took inspiration from the Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal and hoped that Egypt would be equally as successful in pursuing independence. The Society's president,
Anisa al-Rashidi, sent a circular that called on Allah "to restore to Egypt 'her leader, Zaghloul Pacha,' to set at liberty Egyptian prisoners detained for political offences, and to save Egypt and the Sudan from oppression," and sent resolutions of the Society to the consuls of France, the U.S., and Italy. The Society's secretary, Zaynab Abd al-Hamid, later invited representatives from those same delegations, as well as other influential persons, to a ceremony to inaugurate the Society's school, which was under the patronage of the Egyptian Wafd.

Women's organizations in provincial towns also proved active at this time. Because of their distance from the capital, members could not personally deliver pamphlets and petitions to foreign legations. They could, however, telegraph them. Women's organizations in the Delta (Tanta) and in Upper Egypt (Assyut) sent protests against British policy to various British newspapers as well as to British members of Parliament, the prime minister, and the speaker of the House of Commons. A women's committee in Minya, another town in Upper Egypt, joined the provincial activists and sent a message of support to Sa'id Zaghlul, then in-exile in Seychelles. The activism of provincial women's organizations in the early 1920s points to the spread of nationalist sentiment among female elites as well as to the links between Cairo and provincial centers. One should not forget that many female notables or their families owned land (Huda Sha'rawi's family owned large tracts of land in Minya) and often maintained residences close to their landholdings.

The British declared Egypt independent in 1922, reserving several points for negotiation. Then followed the drafting of a constitution and elections. The Wafd, which in the meantime had transformed itself into a political party, won an overwhelming majority of seats in the new Parliament due to its mass popular appeal. It governed for a few years but was blocked from power later in the decade amidst repeated Palace coups against parliamentary life and the Constitution. In telegrams to Great Britain, the Women's Wafd appealed in 1928 "to the sympathy of foreign public opinion to bear witness to the aggressive measures of the present anti-constitutional ministry [of Muhammad Mahmud]..." and protested against the decision of the British government to negotiate agreements with it, particularly over the distribution of Nile water, as an "unprecedented act of international injustice."

In the 1920s, the Wafd split, and the Women's Wafd also witnessed the departure of several prominent members. Huda Sha'rawi left the Women's Wafd Central Committee in 1924. A year earlier, she had formed al-Ittihad al-Nisa'i al-Misri (the Egyptian Feminist
Union), and she continued to protest in the name of "Egyptian women" to American and other officials in an effort to address world public opinion. In the early 1930s, female notables unified once again to oppose the increasingly dictatorial Sadqi regime. Women were driven in their cars through Cairo on several occasions, waving flags and shouting for the restoration of the Constitution and the resignation of the government. They presented themselves at the Ministry of the Interior, where they were turned away, and they held a demonstration in a garden adjacent to a home where the prime minister was being entertained. The British high commissioner denied that force had been used to break up some of the women's demonstrations, yet women sent notes protesting the use of British officers and constables to detain them. The letter was signed by sixty-five women, whose husbands or fathers, as indicated, were often doctors, beys, and pashas.

If the British response to demonstrations by female notables was much the same as it had been twelve years earlier—fairly cautious because of their social status—the reaction of some Egyptians to women's demonstrations had changed in the interim. In the wake of the 1919 Revolution, poets and pamphleteers had praised them. By the early 1930s female notables such as Safiya Zaghlul and Huda Sha'rawi were no longer immune to being satirized in the cartoons of such weeklies as al-Kashkul. Perhaps this was a sign of their political arrival. Or perhaps it was a sign that female notables had lost their special aura.

Conclusions

Before the war, women's nationalist activities had taken a cultural form as they channeled energy into enterprises intended both to reform women and to help the nation. These enterprises strengthened their sense of national community and prepared them for political action. Although the war subdued most activities, and female notables, like other nationalists, were quiescent, it also generated greater political awareness and higher expectations. After the war, women's nationalist expression acquired new political forms as women's public protests became a not uncommon sight. Female notables could not stand by as other groups actively protested. To have done so would have been to renounce any special claim to leadership.

Elite women took to the streets in 1919, a week into the unrest, becoming a new "political public." They wore the garb of privileged secluded women who worked neither in fields nor factories, nor in other people's homes. They communicated over the phone to plan
their march, arrived to protest in cars (not on carts or on foot) and left in the same way. They marched toward symbols of power—foreign legations and Sa’d Zaghlul’s home—speaking as much to the foreign community in English and French as to other Egyptians. They staged planned and orderly demonstrations in an effort to unseat the British colonial authority and to shore up the power of their own class. They did not march to popular quarters to walk hand-in-hand with working-class women in the hope of creating a new classless society; nor did they link arms with men to break gender boundaries and radically alter male-female relations. Their politics complemented the politics of the male elite and contrasted with the emerging mass politics of peasants and workers. It was, in short, notable politics with a feminine twist.

The “lady demonstrators” thus reinforced a hierarchical and segregated “model of” society. Yet they also presented a new “model for” society by carving out a public space for themselves. Herein lay the revolutionary potential of their demonstrations, for in spite of the plans and the order, there was a certain spontaneity to the marches, a liberation in taking to the streets, an exhilaration in shouting. These were women who earlier had not been able to walk in the streets without being harassed. Now they won admiration and respect when they marched for the nation. These were women who had never had the opportunity to engage in collective public action such as funeral marches or other public ceremonies. Now they gladly submerged themselves in the collective, and occasionally “lost their senses.” They emerged with a greater sense of solidarity and community, and with new identities: recollections of those heady days of March of 1919 would remain with them.

After 1919, female notables formed their own societies in the capital and in other cities and that comprised women from similar social backgrounds. They demonstrated separately, and penned their own petitions, pamphlets, telegrams, and letters. They also helped to orchestrate boycotts and other actions that drew on their skills and contacts. Theirs was a political revolt to unseat the British and to buttress the power of Egyptian notables. Yet, as the myth of women’s role in the Revolution of 1919 grew stronger, the power of female notables weakened. With the declaration of Egypt’s independence, the game changed, and Egyptian politicians struggled amongst themselves as well as with the British. Although segregation began to break down in the 1920s, the space for female notable politics narrowed. A few female notables (such as Safiya Zaghlul) wielded great influence, but most were excluded from party and parliamentary politics and got pushed to the sidelines, for they had no
official capacity; no voting rights, and no right to run for office. They mostly turned their attention to creating a network of social services and agitating for women's rights. But those are other stories.

NOTES

1. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rafi'i, Thawrat 1919 (Cairo, 1949; 3rd ed. 1968), 1:127; Huda Shara'i, Mudhakkirat (Cairo, 1981), 190. The texts of this lifespan vary, for they are translated from English (or French) into Arabic and back, and remembered differently.

2. The concept of "urban notables" has been most broadly used to describe politics in the Fertile Crescent region. Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot, an Egyptian historian who was a student of Hourani, referred to the top echelons of urban society in Egypt as the dhawat, bashawat, or elite, and hesitated to call them notables, a term she explains was usually reserved for the rural group known as the ayan. I am using the term more generally. See Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," in The Emergence of the Modern Middle East (London, 1981), 36–66, reprinted in Albert Hourani et al., eds., The Modern Middle East: A Reader (Berkeley, 1993), 83–109, quote from p. 87; Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot, Egypt's Liberal Experiment: 1922–1936 (Berkeley, 1977), 40–41.

3. Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," 98, 88; Nathan J. Brown, Peasant Politics in Modern Egypt (New Haven, 1990), 212; Joel Beinin and Zachary Lochman, Workers on the Nile (Princeton, 1987), 89.


5. On Egypt during the war, see Latifa Muhammad Salim, Mistr fu al-Harb al-`Alimiyya al-Ula (Cairo, 1984); P. G. Elgood, Egypt and the Army (London, 1924); `Abd al-Azim Ramadan, Tatawwur al-Haraka al-Wataniyya al-Misriyya min Sanat 1918 ila Sanat 1936 (Cairo, n.d.), 66–82.


7. Salama Musa, Tarbiyat Salama Muṣa (Cairo, 1947), 131; trans. L. O. Schuman as The Education of Salama Musa (Leiden, 1961), 92.


9. Elgood, Egypt and the Army, 58.


19. Gender rules were not suspended, as Badran has claimed. See her Feminists, Islam, and Nation, 74.
20. See Ahmad Shafiq, Hawliyat Misk al-Siyasiyya [Cairo, 1926], 1:314–16; Badran; Feminists, Islam, and Nation 77; for a photo of working-class women riding on a donkey cart in a protest, see M. Sabry, La Révolution Egyptienne [Paris, 1919], 67.
21. Valentine Chirol, The Egyptian Problem [London, 1921], 168. Brown states that Chirol is alone in mentioning the extensive participation of rural women in the unrest [Brown, Peasant Politics; 249 n.33].
23. Baron; Women’s Awakening, chap. 8.
24. SD 883.00/130, Enclosure: The Egyptian Women to the American Diplomatic Agent and Consul-General, Cairo, Mar. 18, 1919; SD 883.00/135, Enclosure: Petition dated Mar. 20, 1919; SD 883.00/135, Enclosure: To the American Diplomatic Agent in Egypt, Cairo, Mar. 24, 1919.
26. Baron, “Mothers, Morality, and Nationalism.”
27. SD 883.00/130, Enclosure: The Egyptian Women to the American Minister, Cairo, Mar. 18, 1919.
28. In later periods, Palestinian and other women participating in national movements would debate whether it was appropriate to raise the
issue of women’s rights in the midst of a struggle, and some Algerian
women would regret that they had not done so. See, for example, Marie-
Aimée Helie-Lucas, “Women, Nationalism and Religion in the Algerian
Liberation Struggle,” in Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds.; Opening

29. SD 883.00/130, Enclosure: The Egyptian Women to the American
Diplomatic Agent and Consul-Generál, Cairo, Mar. 18, 1919.

30. SD 883.00/135, Enclosure: To the American Diplomatic Agent in
Egypt, Cairo, Mar. 24, 1919.

31. Like the flag of the Ottoman Empire, the flag of the protectorate was
red. Independent Egypt adopted a green flag with one white crescent and
three white stars in 1923. SD 883.015, Hampson to Secretary of State, Cairo,
Apr. 30, 1919; SD 883.015/4, Ives to Secretary of State, Alexandria, Sept. 1,
1924; SD 883.015/12, Patterson to Secretary of State, Cairo, Dec. 18, 1948.

32. SD 883.00/165, Protestation des Dames Egyptiennes d’Alexandrie à
Monsieur le Consul d’Amérique, Apr. 1919.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Marius Deeb, Party Politics in Egypt: the Wafd and Its Rivals


37. Egyptian Gazette, Jan. 20, 1920, quoted in ibid., 147.

38. Ibid., 147.

39. Grace Thompson Seton, A Woman Tenderfoot in Egypt [New York,
1923], 29–31, 35; Deeb, Party Politics, 68; Marsot, “Revolutionary Gentle-
women,” 271–72; Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation, 83–84.

40. FO 141/511/14083, “Resolutions Agreed upon by Egyptian Ladies,”
Cairo, Oct. 30, 1924.

41. FO 141/511/14083/3, Ihsan Ahmed, “Decision of the Women’s Cen-
tral Committee of the Delegation,” Cairo, Feb. 1922.

42. FO 141/511/14083/4, Oriental Secretary to Monteith Smith, Cairo,
Feb. 7, 1922.

43. Seton, A Woman Tenderfoot, 31.

44. FO 141/511/14083/13a, Ahmed to High Commissioner, Cairo, Apr.
20, 1923.


46. Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation, 83.

47. SD 883.00/427, Annisa al-Rashidi, “The Future-mothers’ salutation
to the Kemalist troops” [translation from Arabic], enclosure in letter from
Maynard to Secretary of State, Alexandria, Sept. 19, 1922.

48. SD 883.00/429, Zaynab Abd al-Hamid, “The Egyptian Delegation at
Alexandria,” Alexandria, Sept. 29, 1922.

49. FO 141/511/14083/5, 6, and 10, Telegrams dated Feb. 9, 1922, Feb.
21, 1922, and May 23, 1922.

50. FO 141/511/14083/28, Women’s Executive Committee, Cairo, Aug.
14, 1928; FO 141/511/14083/29, Ihsan Fahmy to Minister of Great Britain,
Cairo, Aug. 14, 1928.
51. FO 141/511/14083, Esther Fahmy Weisa to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Cairo, May 8, 1929.
52. SD 883.00/510, Hoda Charaoui [sic] to Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Cairo, Nov. 28, 1924.
53. FO 371/15405/1611, Stevenson to Henderson, Cairo, May 8, 1931; FO 371/15405/1673, Loraine to Henderson, Cairo, May 12, 1931.
54. See, for example, *al-Kashkul*, May 22, 1931, 16.