Scholarship on women and philanthropy has generated heated debates. Recent works have focused on how philanthropy has empowered women and transformed political culture. Through the gift of time, one argument goes, women volunteers subsidized local and national governments, providing much-needed services to disadvantaged groups, particularly women, children, and the poor. Their associations worked to foster civil society, to strengthen the foundations of democratic institutions, and to lay the groundwork for welfare programs and states. At the same time, there have been critiques of the asymmetry of power between giver and recipient and efforts to explore the political, cultural, and social agendas of providers to see what they gained by giving.

Forms of female giving in Egypt shifted in the late nineteenth century from private initiatives to collective enterprises. The emergence of benevolent associations, in Egypt as elsewhere, was intimately connected to the rise of nationalism and the spread of capitalism. Elite Egyptians sought to fill the gap left by a state under British occupation that offered inadequate health, education, vocational training, and other services to the poor and to counter the activities of missionaries, diplomatic wives, and other foreign providers, whose services came at a cultural price. Elites also competed with one another, and laymen and laywomen with religious hierarchies, for leadership.

Within these associations, in the new women’s press, and elsewhere, literate Egyptians debated the contours of Egyptian society and culture. They argued that the upper classes needed to “save” impoverished and ignorant groups—the poor and women—so they could become more productive members of the nation. Elite Egyptian women saw their charitable work as a contribution to the national cause.
and used nationalism as a legitimation for their expanding roles. They came to play a prominent role in founding and administering philanthropic associations, especially as they were squeezed out of party and parliamentary politics in the interwar years. During this time, little progress was made in social and economic reform, and minimal welfare legislation existed. Meanwhile, urbanization and industrialization increased the ranks of the poor. Poverty was gendered: The bulk of the poor were women and children with few resources. Women's charitable associations generally targeted women and girls.  

This chapter focuses on the life and work of one interwar philanthropist, Labiba Ahmad (1870s–1951), whose volunteerism came in tandem with her Islamic politics. Building on projects already underway, as discussed in this volume by Mine Ener (chapter 9) and Juan Cole (chapter 11), Labiba Ahmad founded the Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening (Jam‘iyyat Nahdat al-Sayyidat al-Misriyyat) a year or so after the 1919 Egyptian Revolution. Her group aimed to provide welfare services to the poor and to propagate a blend of Islamic nationalism. Shortly after founding the association, she started the Arabic monthly al-Nahda al-Nisa‘iya (Women’s Awakening) to disseminate the views of the society. Looking at her life gives us insight into the religious motivations and expectations of a “living waqf-maker.” Yet those who founded associations differed from those who founded waqfs (endowments) in their direct involvement and their attempt to generate more profound social change than simply feeding or clothing the poor would have done. These associations were precursors to later development agencies. 

Labiba Ahmad argued that the path to women’s and national progress was through a return to Islam, not through copying Western ways. In this, she presents a distinct contrast to secular feminists in Egypt, who came from similar elite backgrounds but were oriented toward Europe. Labiba had a wide following among professional classes and struck a deep chord among those Egyptians yearning for the re-Islamicization of society. These Islamic, or proto-Islamist, currents have been ignored in the conventional historiography of Egypt. Yet Islamic nationalism did not suddenly appear from nowhere in the 1930s. It was part of Egyptian political culture from the late nineteenth century and was strengthened by activists such as Labiba Ahmad.

### A Pioneer’s Philanthropic Work

Labiba Ahmad was born in Cairo in the 1870s. Her father, Ahmad ‘Abd al-Nabi Bey, was a physician, and her two brothers followed in his footsteps. Her son and a daughter later chose the medical profession as well. 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 Murtada (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. 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 Kamal’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 Kamal and spoke at the funeral of his brother ‘Ali Fahmi Kamal, also a Watani leader. At the same time, she had close ties to Safiyya 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.

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 had often spoken of their work as a contribution to the national cause. After the war, the two best-known philanthropies run by women—Mabarrat Muhammad ‘Ali (Muhammad ‘Ali Charity) and Jam’iyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida (New Woman’s Society)—focused on health care and training for the poor. Societies were a way to disseminate founders’ ideologies and win adherents to their political positions while reinforcing their social positions and the social hierarchy.

Labiba Ahmad framed her motivation for benevolent acts in both religious and nationalist terms. She 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. When parents (or fathers) of orphans were unknown, they were presumed to be the offspring of illegitimate encounters and thus carried the stigma of the crime. Labiba not only wanted to “save” the girls but to shape them, inculcating Islamic values, nationalist ideals, and proper notions of social and gender relations, thereby enhancing her own prestige. Similar programs targeted orphan girls in Turkey during this period.

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 or about the girls. Labiba headed delegations that visited schools, hosted graduation celebrations, and called on ministers. She was the driving force: administering the society’s affairs, raising funds, and taking responsibility for the girls in her care. Just as young girls in foster care provided domestic service in eighteenth-century Salonika, as Eyal Ginio discusses in this volume (chapter 8), these orphans were called on to march in nationalist demonstrations and to labor in the society’s workshop. “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. This sort of vocational training was common elsewhere in the region. Ahmad 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, and 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, continuing a charitable practice of providing health care to the needy; and an administrator at a nearby girls’ school offered to waive tuition for orphans from the society.

In 1923 in the wake of a scandal in which authorities discovered a ring of Egyptians who 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.” Although some authorities claimed that the girls in question were of age and volunteers, Labiba decided to open a public institute and workshop together to train girls so they could make an “honorable living” and would not be forced into prostitution.

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, sits among three other veiled women. The bareheaded girls appear a bit ragged, clustered together so 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. (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. The poor were to be prepared to become productive workers for the nation and devout Muslims.

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.” Labiba thanked the readers of al-Nahda al-Nisa’iya 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 on 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 to the education of the girls of the institute and the workshop.

The Society of Ladies’ Awakening not only established its own private education ventures, it also pressed for reforms in state education and sought to make a social difference. 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. It 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. Her social welfare work inspired other Islamist initiatives, which proved to be important vehicles for winning adherents.

**Disseminating the Message**

Philanthropy not only served purposes of immediate need, but also was a blueprint for society as a whole. The Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening operated an orphanage, workshop, and institute on one track: one 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 a lecture by Dr. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Bey Nizami, author of books on family health.25
Members of the society planned to convene weekly to hear lectures on scientific
and religious topics.

The society continued to meet throughout the interwar years 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.26 The so-
ciety issued a call for members in the mid-1930s with a promise of new guidelines
“propagating moral virtue.” As they prepared for “a war against innovation, immor-
ality, and corruption,” they asked other women to embark with them in this
bold step “in service of religion and humanity.”27

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, which was a lightly veiled attack on Huda Sha’rawi and her Egyp-
tian Feminist Union (EFU).28 The EFU was founded some two years after the
Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening with a secular orientation. Although Labiba,
an honorary member of the union, occasionally praised Huda, the goals of her so-
ciety and that of the EFU clearly diverged.29 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.”30
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 stipulated by Islamic law; (4) to avoid the-
taters and comedy houses; and (5) to leave behind corrupt ancient customs.31

This cluster of suggestions was hardly new: The Society for Woman’s Progress,
which had been founded in 1908, and contributors to the conservative press had
made similar calls in the first two decades of the century.32 These calls constituted
an integral part of the program of Islamic reformers (Salafis), who sought a return
to the ways of the early Muslims. The reformers opposed folk customs that devi-
ated 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 cir-
cles of Egyptians through the activities of her association and through her journal.
Despite the conservative language and the evocation of the past, her message was
modern in that it advocated progress based on science and rationalism. It was also
modern in terms of the means utilized to convey information.
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. 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, “Awaken your women, your nations will thrive,” and “Men make nations; mothers make men.” On the cover she placed a photo of Mahmud Mukhtar’s award-winning sculpture *Egypt’s Awakening*.

No subject received more attention in Labiba’s opening essays than the need for reforming education. 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. She valued the role of teachers highly, commending some by name, and called for a women’s equivalent of Dar al-’Ulum (a male-teacher-training college). In general, she rallied for more religious education: greater study of the Quran, 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. “When will the people understand that the duty of a girl is to be a mother?” Women lacked preparation for child raising, 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?” Labiba was troubled by easy divorce, the preoccupation with money in selecting spouses, and marriage to foreign women. That the domestic roles laid out for women in Labiba’s Islamic ideology upheld the ideals of a modern bourgeois family rather than some “traditional” or “authentic” Islamic ideal is further proof of the very modernity of her enterprise.

Labiba’s essays also often attacked the presence of “un-Islamic” practices and Western influences in Egypt. She vehemently opposed legalized prostitution, alcoholic consumption, narcotics use, theatergoing, 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. . . . [I]n prayer and its movements are the greatest exercise.”
Labiba Ahmad 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’iya* enjoyed regular contributions from such figures as Muhammad Farid Wajdi, a prominent Salafi writer whose wife had founded the Society of Woman’s Progress and who later edited al-Azhar’s journal *Nur al-Islam* (Light of Islam, 1930). ‘A’isha ‘Abd al-Rahman, who under the penname Bint al-Shati’ (Daughter of the Shore) later became famous for her biographies of the early women of Islam and her Quranic exegesis, also contributed.39 The names of a few of those whose articles were published in Labiba’s journal, particularly in its first decade, later appeared in the publications of the Society of 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 (Endowments) as well as the Egyptian Provincial Councils officially authorized the distribution of *al-Nahda al-Nisa’iya* 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.40 Additionally, the journal received support from royal and wealthy donors, among them the kings of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.41 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 indicated that they did not find her message threatening to the social and gender order they upheld. To the contrary, her influential supporters may have seen this Islamic journal as a good antidote to the secular feminist literature and socialist stirrings of the day. The journal 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. Labiba would not at that time have delivered a speech to a live male Egyptian audience, but as she was heard and not seen—a disembodied voice—she could speak on the radio. Radios were new to Egypt and probably existed mostly in the homes of the urban well-to-do and in coffee shops. They became a popular form of entertainment and instruction as they increasingly spread into towns and villages. Labiba’s talks resembled her monthly column, treating moral, religious, and social themes.42 Her access to the airwaves and a national radio audience suggests that the Sidqi government, which had dissolved parliament and abrogated the 1923 Constitution, thought her message might be of service. Labiba thus joined those conservative Muslim forces mobilized by Sidqi and his allies in the palace to counterbalance the secularism of the Wafd and help suppress it. She, on the other hand,
may have used the opportunity to her own advantage to advance her own moral and cultural agenda. A’isha ‘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 reference to a daughter’s death] were unable to harm her love for work or to cause in her any amount of despair or resignation.”

Holy Cities and Islamist Circles

Through her social welfare work and writings, Labiba disseminated a brand of Islamic nationalism that countered secular reform movements. But the combination of directing a complex of philanthropic operations and running a journal exhausted Labiba, who fell ill in the fall of 1924. She suspended publication of *al-Nabda al-Nisa’iyya* after the October 1924 issue and did not resume production until March 1926. After her recovery, she resolved to go on *hajj*, making her sixth pilgrimage to Mecca. Two years later, Labiba traveled 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. These trips reinforced her Islamic identity 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.” Combining official business with her spiritual quest, her pilgrimages took on a familiar pattern over the years as 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 bade her farewell at home or at the train station, and *al-Nabda al-Nisa’iyya* published her photograph in celebration of her journey. She traveled with her daughter Malak or with other family members and friends. 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. 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 consolidated his rule over Arabia in the 1920s and safeguarded the route.

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* (leaders), 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 despite the fact that Egypt had no official state relations with Saudi Arabia until 1936, when they concluded a much-celebrated agreement after the signing of the Anglo–Egyptian Treaty.50

Labiba's annual hajj enhanced her prestige as Egyptians praised “al-Hajja” in poems and letters. But at the same time, they urged her, as one wrote, 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.”51 While abroad or after returning, she wrote essays about 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 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 another hajja (pilgrim) and her sons. A camera captured the group at al-Aqsa Mosque. Labiba also met such religious dignitaries as al-Sayyid Muhammad Amin al-Ansari, custodian of the mosques of ‘Umar and al-Aqsa and the director of the Khalidiyya Library. After her return, the journal printed a picture on its cover of al-Sayyid Amin al-Husayni, the mufti of Jerusalem and president of the Supreme Muslim Council, who had recently visited Cairo.52 Throughout the 1930s, and in particular in the midst of the Arab Revolt of 1936, the journal supported the cause of the Arabs of Palestine.

During her travels and at home, Labiba forged personal contacts with the other leading Islamic personalities of the day. Labiba had reached that stage in her life when she could hold discussions with unrelated men. She had particularly close ties to the leadership of the Young Men's Muslim Association, an organization founded in 1927. That Salafi group strove to teach Islamic morality, to disseminate knowledge adapted to modernity, to unify Muslims; and to adopt the best of Eastern and Western cultures.53 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” and who 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 the journal covered a congress on education held in their hall in 1936 that was attended by more than 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.54

In the 1930s, Islamic organizations, such as Fatima Amin’s Society for Memorizing the Noble Quran, flourished. 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 claimed a direct role in the blossoming of Islamic organizations in the late 1920s and 1930s and saw the rise of these societies—Islamic Guidance, Noble Islamic Characteristics, and Memorizing the Noble Quran, as well as the YMMA—as the “results of our cries on the pages (of al-Nahda).”

Labiba forged links with Hasan al-Banna’ (1906–1949), the founder of the Society of Muslim Brothers, whose speeches in Cairo in the early 1930s were covered in her journal. Her role in the Muslim Sisters, which was composed mostly of female relatives of the Muslim Brothers, remains unclear. When the first branches were founded in the 1930s, she was probably a woman in her late fifties or early sixties. Her apparent presidency of the Cairo branch may have been an honorary position in acknowledgment 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, who 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.

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’iya, 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; 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 more than two decades of activism.

The last issue of al-Nahda al-Nisa’iya appeared in 1939. Two other long-running Arabic women’s journals—al-Ma’a al-Misriyya and Fatat al-Sharq—also
folded on the eve of the Second World War, signaling the end of an era in the Egyptian women’s press. By then Labiba, who had recently undergone surgery, was ready to retire. In her final years she withdrew into ritual and prayer. Labiba died in 1951 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 a place for them in the funeral procession, a mixing in public that Labiba would probably have condemned.

**Conclusion**

Labiba Ahmad started her interwar activism by building an orphanage and workshop for girls in the working-class Cairene quarters. The early photographic documentation of Labiba’s philanthropic enterprises shows, as Natalie Davis suggests in her conclusion to this volume, the performance of charity. For elite women like Labiba, charity was a religious and nationalist duty that was fully legitimized. At a time when women lacked the right to vote, her philanthropic endeavors and journalistic activity gave her a political outlet and autonomy. In short, philanthropy clearly empowered Labiba and similarly engaged elite women of her generation, providing a motive for volunteerism. These institutions were part of a larger network of philanthropies founded and run by Islamic-minded and secularly minded women who influenced later Egyptian welfare legislation. The link between women’s advocacy for the poor with legal debates over social reform needs further exploration. Collectively these associations strengthened civil society—the cushion between the state and the population—but civil society itself was not sufficiently strong to withstand the aftershocks of the 1952 revolution. In the wake of the revolution, most of the private clinics, workshops, and schools run by female activists were taken over by the state.

The ideology of Labiba Ahmad and her Islamist colleagues had helped to shore up the bourgeoisie. Unlike socialists, who looked for radical solutions to Egypt’s poverty and recognized class conflict, interwar Islamists sought social harmony. They respected private property and capitalist relations, and saw charity as one of the main vehicles to combat poverty. Redistribution of wealth was in part a tool with which to ease their own class anxieties. At the same time, in supplying the poor with health care, child care, and other services, Islamists won adherents and broadened their base of support.

Labiba Ahmad used her benevolent institutions to disseminate an Islamic nationalist message. She played a critical role in nurturing the younger generation that made the transformation from Islamic reform (Salafiyya) to Islamic radicalism (Islamism). In helping to invigorate Islamic discourse and inject it into political
debates, she contributed to a transformation of Egyptian political culture that outlasted the revolution. Of course, the irony here is that although her philanthropic and other endeavors may have empowered her, and she supported interpretations of Islam that favored women, she could not control the direction of the Islamist movement. Future Islamists, more doctrinaire than her contemporaries, would push for limiting the power and opportunities of Egyptian women.

Notes


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


9. U.S. National Archives, State Department (hereafter SD) 883.00/135, Ladies of Egypt to the Diplomatic Agent and Consul-General of the United States, Cairo, 20 March 1919.
10. Ijlal Khalifa, *al-Haraka al-Nisa'iyya al-Haditha* (Cairo, 1974), 60. Khalifa interviewed Labiba Ahmad’s daughter Zaynab ‘Abduh as well as some Cairene housewives and students from that period.


15. See contribution by Kathryn Libal in this volume (chapter 13).

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

17. See contribution by Nadir Özbek in this volume (chapter 10).


19. *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.


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


23. *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.

24. *NN* 3, no. 5 (December 1923): 156; *NN* 3, no. 11 (June 1924): 395; *NN* 4, no. 39 (October 1924): 103; *NN* 2, no. 10 (May 1923): 253–254.

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


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

28. See, for example, *NN* 4, no. 48 (November 1926): 399–401.


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

33. See ibid.
35. *NN* 12, no. 10 (October 1934): 326.
40. *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.
41. *NN* 6, no. 10 (October 1928): 346; *NN* 8, no. 86 (February 1930): 62; *NN* 8, no. 86 (February 1930): 63; *NN* 12, no. 3 (March 1934): 101; *NN* 16, no. 1 (January 1938): 2.
42. *NN* 11, no. 8–9 (August 1933): 310.
43. *NN* 11, no. 3 (March 1933): 95.
45. *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.
46. *NN* 16, no. 2 (February 1938): 65.
47. *NN* 8, no. 89 (May 1930): 146.
48. *NN* 12, no. 5 (May 1934): back page; *NN* 12, no. 7 (July 1934): 237; *NN* 14, no. 5 (May 1936): 175.
49. *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): 283–284; *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.

55. *NN* 11, nos. 8, 9 (August 1933): 302; *NN* 14, no. 7 (July 1936): 250; *NN* 16, no. 9 (September 1938): 291.


58. Amal al-Subki, *al-Haraka al-nisa’iyya fi Misr, 1919–1952* (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Misriyah al-‘Ammah lil-Kitab, 1986), 118. Al-Subki’s notes seem to have been misnumbered. She may have found evidence that Labiba Ahmad headed the Cairo branch in the legal files compiled to try the assassins of Mahmud al-Nuqrashi dated 28 December 1948, which are stored at the High Court (p. 135, n. 36). Ghada Hashem Talhami draws on al-Subki for her account of Labiba Ahmad’s activities in her *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt* (Gainsville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 46–49.

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

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