

East meets West – The Clash between French and Oriental Society during Napoleon's Campaign in Egypt. Mordechai Gichon

Napoleon's first planning in true grand strategy was his genial plan to apply the indirect approach on an intercontinental scale. Since he found it unfeasible to invade Britain, he conceived the threat of attack on Britain's vital commerce and colonial interests by occupying Egypt and Palestine, and commence sundry initiatives both southwards towards India and northwards towards the soft underbelly of the anti-French European powers. The idea of conquering Egypt had been proposed before¹, but it fell to Napoleon to carry it out.

This, his Oriental Campaign of 1798-99, provides most interesting and meaningful information for the clash of two totally alien-to-each other cultures - in our case the one of western Europe represented by France and the other of the Moslem Orient, represented by Egypt and Palestine under nominal Ottoman sovereignty. The complexity of the situation was that one side, the French, was de facto an occupation force, additionally stained by its Christian faith (even if the latter

had been officially suspended), that had conquered a region inhabited by orthodox believers of a different, and in their own eyes, superior faith.

For reasons of security, the decision for the conquest of the Levant was not made public, until the anchors of the invasion forces gathered in Toulon were lifted on the 19th of May 1798,. Their official name remained "L'Armée d'Angleterre". Keeping the secret, especially from the higher ranks, proved however a "mission impossible".

One example must suffice, pars pro toto: In early spring of 1798, Lieutenant Chalbrand received a letter written by a good friend, a medical officer, that included the following passage: "Je suis parvenu, à l'aide de renseignements positifs, à acquérir la certitude que notre expédition est destinée pour l'Orient et probablement pour l'Égypte".² Among the reasons that that officer, Dr. Marchand, gives, was the order to assemble all



¹ Ch. Roux, *Les Origines de l'Expédition en Égypte et en Syrie*, (Paris 1910)

² Based on reliable information, I have come to the certain conclusion that our expedition is destined for the Orient and probably for Egypt... J.J. Roy, *Les Français en Égypte – Souvenir du Colonel Chalbrand*, (Tours 1865), 11.

physicians with experience and knowledge of work in the East and especially in Egypt, the embarkation of the Arab printing press of the Imprimerie Nationale and the attachment of Arab interpreters to the General Staff. Dr. Marchand adds: "J'espère que vous apprendrez cette nouvelle avec plaisir, et que vous serez enchanté de venir avec nous visiter la vieille terre de Pharaon et de Ptolomée".³

Chalbrand writes in his memories how indeed great was his excitement and that he rushed to prepare himself for the expedition by reading-up all the ancient sources, such as Homer, Herodotus, Strabo and Plinius, and very much so, the Bible and then the mediaeval writers.

Chalbrand is a good example for the enchantment with the Orient, because of its past glories, of many of the better educated Frenchmen of that period. These sentiments were shared by most officers of the "Armée d'Angleterre".

This idyllic view of the Orient, and Egypt in particular, was very much bolstered up by the assertion voiced by sundry statesmen, and widely proclaimed by interested parties, especially merchants and traders, who pointed out the abundant opulence of Egypt and the immense riches to be gained by its occupation.

The learned and much esteemed traveler Volney declared in 1785 in his 'Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie':

³ I hope that you are receiving this news with pleasure and that you will be much delighted to visit together with us the ancient realm of Pharaoh and of Ptolemy. (ibid.).

"L'Égypte est le sol le plus fécond de la terre, le plus facile à cultiver, le plus certain dans ses récoltes...elle réussit toutes les productions de l'Europe et de l'Asie..."⁴ Volney voices many earlier writers - the Baron de Tott, to mention only one. All of them underline Egypt's incomparable commercial capacities. Thus did Magalon, the French consul at Cairo, on the eve of the oriental campaign. In his letter to the French Chargé d'Affaires in Constantinople, he concludes his proposal to make France conquer Egypt, since the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire was taken by him and many others all over Europe for granted, with the following words: "Je te prie, citoyen, de donner l'Égypte à la France...le peuple Français trouverait dans cette acquisition des ressources immenses".⁵

The actual conquest of Egypt was taken by all to be an easy enterprise: "Elle est mal défendue, facile à conquérir et à conserver".⁶ Talleyrand, foreign minister at the turn of 1796, accepts in his rapport au Directoire Exécutif of the 14th February 1797, the above current view: "Je puis garantir d'après les assertions des hommes qui connaissent le mieux l'Égypte, que sa conquête ne coûterait presque de sang français".⁷

⁴ Egypt has the most fertile soil of the earth, the easiest to cultivate, the most certain of its harvests....she succeeds in all [agricultural] products of Europe and of Asia. Ch. Roux, *Les Origines de l'Expédition en Égypte et en Syrie*, (Paris 1910), 212.

⁵ I ask you, citizen, to offer Egypt to France...the French nation will gain by that acquisition immense resources (ibid., 272-273).

⁶ Ibid. p.212.

⁷ I am able to guarantee, according to the affirmations of people who know Egypt thoroughly, that its conquest will cost nearly

None of the experts or pseudo-experts did attempt to mention that the physical state of Egypt at their time of writing was very far from what it was in classic and mediaeval times, nor that, basically, the immense riches of that country were a potential, to be turned in the future into reality, and that beyond the treasures of the ruling Mameluks and a local no more than sufficient harvest, Egypt was a poor, retarded, neglected country.⁸

One more, false assumption was fostered by all writers, including, though difficult to understand, by the local experts, such as Magalon. The conception was that the local, non-Mameluk population would receive the French as liberators, much like the progressive circles conquered by the Republic during the wars of the first coalition (1792-1797), that decisively influenced public opinion in France's neighboring countries.

Talleyrand mirrors this prevailing conception: "Les habitants de l'Égypte sont tous ennemis des Beys (Mameluks) qui les oppriment...ainsi nulle résistance à craindre".⁹

One must assume that the general euphoria did communicate itself to the other ranks. Miot, a commissaire de guerre, writes that Napoleon's exuberant remarks on the goal of the expedition prior to the embarkation at Toulon were one of the reasons.

no French blood. C. De La Jonquière, *L'Expédition d'Égypte*, (Paris 1899) I, 163.

⁸ Ch. Issawi, *Egypt at Mid-Century*, (London, 1954), 18ff

⁹ The Inhabitants of Egypt are all enemies of the [Mameluk] Beys, who are oppressing them...Therefore, there is no opposition to be expected. (De La Jonquière, 162)

Besides, each soldier was promised six arpends of land on the return from the expedition, which added to the general optimism.

The traumatic disillusion from the rosy expectations is variously attested, but can probably be best demonstrated by the British publication of the 'Lettres Originales de l'Armée Française en Égypte'. This publication, aimed at arousing the public opinion in France against the republican government, contained the letters sent home by the French soldiers, some time after their occupation of the Delta. They were sent by sea and intercepted by Nelson's fleet.



"Nous sommes enfin arrivés, mon ami, au pays tant désiré!" writes general Damas on the 9th of Thermidor (27th July) to Kleber, still in Alexandria, "qu'il est loin de ce que l'imagination même la plus raisonnable se l'était

représenté. L'horrible village de Caire est peuplé d'une canaille paresseuse, accroupie tout le jour devant leurs huttes infâmes, fumant, prenant le café..., etc., On peut se perdre très aisément...dans les rues puantes de cette fameuse capitale."¹⁰

Between the lines one reads his bitter disappointment of a reality which has cruelly shattered the very positive mental picture.



One more citation: Two days later, General Dupuis, newly appointed commandant de place, governor of Cairo, writes to his friend Carlo: "Cette ville est abominable, les rues y

¹⁰ (Damas to Kleber, July 27th): At last we have arrived, dear friend, to the so ardently desired country. How far it is different from what even the most reasonable imagination did conceive! The horrible village of Cairo is inhabited by a vulgar mob, squatting all day long in front of their miserable huts, smoking, drinking coffee...One can easily lose oneself in the putrid smelling streets of that famous capital. Anonymous, *Lettres Originales de l'Armée Française en Égypte*, (London 1799), letter no.XI, 50)

respirent la peste par leurs immondices, le peuple est affreux et abruti..."¹¹

The growing animosity towards the Egyptian population was the outcome of the assumption expressed also in the orders issued, that implied that the latter would receive the French as liberators or at least peacefully. The truth is expressed in the following anonymous letter, dated the 9th of Thermidor: "Nous trouvons partout beaucoup de resistance et plus encore de trahison. Il est impossible à un François de s'écarter seul de quelques portées de fusil de l'endroit habité, sans courir le risque d'être assassiné..."¹²

Doubtlessly, the Egyptians saw in these tactics the only means to combat the foreign invaders, but to the French soldier, fearing behind every often inoffensive Egyptian a potential mortal assailant, the stress was most severe.

Matters became worse when French soldiers decided, against explicit orders, to retaliate in kind. Take the incident of the ambush set up by, then lieutenant François and his men, to apprehend and shoot the Bedouins who were notorious for killing French soldiers off their guard. Their success is recorded with glee satisfaction and,

¹¹ (Dupuis to Carlo, July 19th): This town is abominable, the streets breathe the plague by their foul dirt. The people are horrid and stupid. (*Lettres Originales*, letter no. XXIII, 119-120)

¹² (Anonymous, July 28th): We are encountering much resistance everywhere, and, even more so, treason. It is impossible for a Frenchman to distance himself alone a few musket-shots from the inhabited places without running the risk of being murdered.

human nature being what it is, without qualms.

After the landing, Sultan Selim (the third if this name) declared the "Holy War" (Jihad) against the French and his clandestine emissaries stirred up constant acts of violence. These clashed with the basically well meant French efforts to reorganize life in Egypt on lines more or less similar to the French republican ones.



On the 29th of July, Napoleon instituted in each of the Egyptian provinces a divan - an autonomous council and law court, as well as an Egyptian intendant to collect the taxes. This official was adjoined to the French governor, who was responsible for the external security and also for the internal one whenever the police force to be recruited by the divan would not suffice.

In Cairo, a great Divan was set up and also a second one to be dealing with all matters concerning taxation and commerce.

These and other reforms, such as compulsory street lightening and cleaning, were all too short-lived to bring about perceivable, not to mention lasting improvement, to the existing, accepted by all and at times hallowed conditions. Their intended beneficiary effects were too severely impeded by the existing corruption in the native administration and, deplorably, by the arbitrary dealing of French officials or their unfamiliarity with the local scene. Another negative factor were the many Copts, appointed by Napoleon to sundry administrative tasks, who took an overbearing and at times worse attitude towards the great Moslem majority in reaction to the short shrift they had been accorded under the former rule.

We must now say something about Napoleon himself. Indeed, he was not less disillusioned than his subordinates. In the letter to his brother Joseph, written on the 18th Messidor (July 6th), found among the intercepted letters, he revealed his own disillusionment: Speaking about the Bedouins, thought to be savage nobles, he calls them "voleurs", "sauvages horribles" that were averse to any progress, and he continues:..."Oh, Jean Jacques [meaning of course Rousseau], que ne peut-il voir ces hommes, qu'il appelle 'les hommes de la nature'. Il frémirait de honte et de surprise d'avoir pu les admirer".¹³

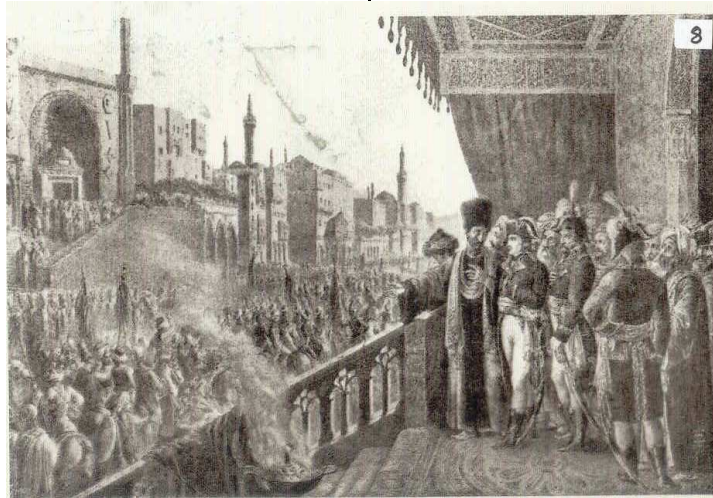
¹³ (Bonaparte to Joseph, July 6th): Thieves, horrible savages... Oh Jean-Jacques, if he could but see these people whom he named [reverently] 'the uncontaminated people of nature'. He would be shaken by shame and surprise for having been able to admire them. (Lettres Originales, letter no. I, 6)

In fact Napoleon had tried to prepare the army for the confrontation with the Orientals.

The proclamation made on board the convoy sailing to Alexandria specifies: "Les peuples avec lesquels

nous allons vivre sont des Mahométans. Leur premier article de foi est celui-ci: 'Il n'y a pas d'autre Dieu que Dieu, et Mahomet est son prophète'. Ne les contredisez pas, agissez avec eux comme nous avons agi avec les juifs, les Italiens, ayez des égards pour leur muftis et leurs imams, comme vous en avez eu pour les rabbins et les évêques... Vous trouverez ici des usages différents de ceux de l'Europe, il faut vous y accoutumer. Les peuples, chez lesquels nous allons, traitent leurs femmes différemment que nous, mais dans tous les pays, celui qui viole est un monstre...."¹⁴

¹⁴ (Proclamation of Bonaparte, June 22nd): ...The people with whom we are going to stay are Muslims. Their first article of faith is the following: 'there is no other God but God and Mohamed is his prophet'. Do not contradict them, but treat them as we have treated the Jews, the Italians. Have regard for their muftis and imams, as you have had for the rabbis and the bishops... You will find here customs different from those in Europe, you have to get used to them. The people among whom we shall be treat their wives differently from us, but in every country that one who rapes is a monster...(De La Jonquière II, 22).



However, he had not reckoned with their total disapproval and opposition.

Yet, he did not abandon hope and took steps to make the Egyptians perceive the advantages offered by western administration, technology and science, apart from the administrative reforms mentioned above.

Tough measures were adopted to prevent offensive behavior of the troops and at times even precipitate judgment was passed according to false accusations by the local population. An extreme example is the summary execution of the two grenadiers, convicted for rape, which was later proven beyond doubt to have been committed by Egyptians.

But neither these nor Napoleon's personal attention and manifest honoring of the Egyptian religious leaders, members of the Divan and other notables did basically alleviate the acerb antagonism. It was too rude an awakening from the persistent dream of oriental-Islamic supremacy in all matters over the considered uncouth Christian Europe.

This confidence in their own superior values and proficiencies in war and peace is no better demonstrated than by the reaction of one of Egypt's twin rulers, Murad Bey, to the news of the

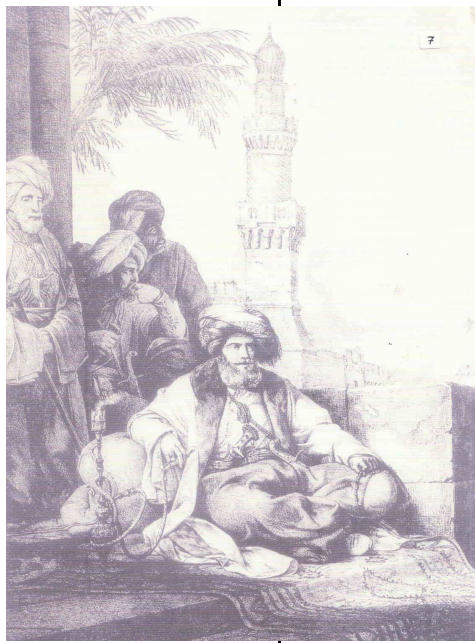
French landing in Alexandria on July 1st, 1798" "How many horses have they?" he demanded. When being answered: "several hundred", he laughed and declared: "no need to call out all the [Mameluk] army, I shall thrash them with my household troops. We shall cut their heads 'comme des patiches' - like melons". The evident self-esteem was in no way broken, even after the proven Mameluk inferiority on the field of battle, which was practically ignored.

Add to our understanding of the Egyptian thinking, Abd al Rahman al Jabarti's "Tarih" (chronicle) of the French in Egypt from a.H. 1213 (1798) to 1216 (1801), which is an almost daily account of the happenings.

French endeavors are always belittled and not infrequently maliciously misinterpreted, such as, for example, the French decree to cease burying in cemeteries within town limits because of the medical authorities' opinion that the burials, which included those of the sick and plague-stricken, contaminated the soil and local water sources. In answer to this French assumption to know better and what is best, Al Jabarti was not loath to declare: "As for the French, it is their custom not to bury their dead but to toss them on garbage heaps like the

corpses of dogs and beasts or to throw them into the sea".¹⁵

Evidently, this venerated senior scholar was unable to accept the traumatic truth of the loss of the famous Muslim supremacy in matters of medicine and public hygiene. This refusal to acknowledge and accept any of the western advance annulled Napoleon's attempts to impress the Egyptians with the western achievements and to induce them to participate.



One of the aims of the "Egyptian Institute", created already on August 22nd 1798, was indeed to familiarize the Egyptian elite with western science and arts. This institute was formed by Napoleon from the cream of the 167 scholars, technicians and artists of the "Commission Scientifique", which were drawn from France's foremost

representatives in these fields and formed an integral part of Napoleon's army.

The Egyptian scholars did not show any signs of impression at the weekly sessions of lectures and demonstrations given by members of the Institute for their benefit. Berthollet, the renown chemist, relates the following occurrence, which we would take for a farce, were it not so

¹⁵ *Al Jabarti's Chronicle of the first seven months of the French occupation of Egypt*, ed. et trad. S..Morels, (Leiden 1975), 82

serious: After attending a session of experiments, one of the Sheikhs of the El Azhar University asked him whether he could produce chemical means to create a double personality, so as to have the same person at one and the same time in Cairo and, for example, in Fez in Morocco. When Berthollet denied his ability to do so, the answer

was: "If so, what is the usefulness of all your exhibitions".¹⁶

We should not take this as a sign of ignorance, but as a pathetic endeavor to preserve the belief in the ascendancy of his culture.

A similar explanation must be given to the general exhibition of lack of curiosity and interest at the flying of the Mongolfieres (the captive balloons) during the Bastille-day festivities in Cairo. When asked, the answer was: We do not make fuss about our kites, which are, by the way, better than yours, they do not loosen themselves from cables like yours and disappear into the desert. To wit – this did actually happen to one of the balloons.

On all festive occasions, the Egyptians participated sparsely, and resisted all emoluments to induce them to demonstrate their adherence to the

principles of the *République Française*, such as wearing the tricolor cocarde. Even the members of the Divan did so only under pressure and then solely when in session with Napoleon.



All said and done, all positive efforts of the French and a few well-meaning Egyptians were either drowned in French or Egyptian blood, such

as the rather unavoidable draconic suppressing of the uprising in Cairo of the 21st/22nd October 1798, or not given the chance to succeed because of the short period of Napoleon's stay in Egypt – less than 14 months (1st of July 1798 to 18th of August 1799) and the gradual cession of all endeavors by the army left behind after his leaving for France.

Nevertheless, most scholars agree that all modernization and opening-up of the present-day Near East to western civilization began with Napoleon's expedition to the Levant.¹⁷

In the case of Egypt, much of the European culture and mores, purposely adopted by Mohammed Ali and his heirs only a few years later, were distinctively French. It included the calling-in of French experts by the

¹⁶ Chr. Herold, *Bonaparte in Egypt*, (London 1962), 167

¹⁷ See S.K. Akgün, "The Impact of the French Expedition to Egypt on early 19th century Ottoman Reforms", in *Napoleon and the French in Egypt and the Holy Land*, Shmuelelevitz ed., (Istanbul 2002), pp.25-34

now practically independent Egypt and employing them in most public influence of the impact of the French army and savants in the country as short as their stay was.

Paraphrasing the well-known Latin saying "Graecia capta victorem ferocem vincit", we may conclude with declaring "Gallia victa Aegyptum liberatam docet" – "The defeated France was the [first] teacher of liberated Egypt".

spheres, including matters naval and military. It was a retarded yet direct

