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The Egyptian Colonial Path to Harar

Expansion to Coastal Cities

Many studies have analyzed the sovereignty of the dynasty of Mehmet 'Alī Pasha in Sudan, which began in the 1820s. Some have dealt with the Egyptian and Sudanese historiography that analyzed Egyptian Sudan and the state of Mahadiya (1881–98). Some have dealt with the regional connections among Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia in the Nile valley and along the coasts of the Red Sea.¹

In his vision, Mehmet 'Alī Pasha's grandson, Khedive Isma'īl, saw Sudan as the political impetus and anchor for Egypt's control over Africa.² The crux of this vision was the aspiration to control the Nile route. Isma'īl wanted to ensure the regular flow of the river's water, and this was one of the main reasons for the reinstatement of Egyptian control in Sudan.³ According to the modern national Egyptian perception, the idea of the United Nile Valley, which defined Sudan as an integral part of Egypt, was to become the main element in the unique self-definition that derived from attempts to expand through the river valley, the coast of the Red Sea, and other parts of Africa.⁴

The renewal of Egyptian expansion to east Sudan and the coast of the Red Sea began with gaining control over the coastal cities of Massawa and Sawakin in 1865. Isma'īl's ambition to rule over the Sudanese coastal cities was not in itself an innovation. The Pharaohs, Fatimids, Mamluks, and Egyptian rulers in the early days of the Ottomans had already invaded these expanses, and from 1811 onward, so did Mehmet 'Alī Pasha.

In 1865, the Egyptians returned to Sawakin and Massawa and abolished the position of *nā'ib* of Hergigo (deputy of Hergigo), the traditional

Ottoman position in the regions of Sawakin and Massawa.⁵ In its place, they reinstated a new municipal and political order according to a European administrative scheme. They also joined the battle, together with the Europeans, against slave trade around the Red Sea.⁶

Gaining control over Massawa and Sawakin had implications on the khedive's continued expansion enterprise. It fortified his independent status against Istanbul and increased his aspiration for hegemony on the coast of the Red Sea. Isma'īl's Egypt had now become a real threat, both to the Ottoman *valī* (the governor-general) of Jeddah in the east and to Christian Ethiopia in the south. The khedive and his men regarded this enterprise as the flagship of culture and modernity throughout the Nile Valley and the Red Sea.⁷ According to their testimonies, flying flags of Egypt and the khedive in these coastal cities intensified the sense of Egypt's strengthened sovereignty and the awareness among the conquerors of its position as leader of a "cultural revolution" in Africa. They showered gifts upon the local dignitaries and promised to include them in the new government. Nevertheless, the varied local African populations did not regard the Egyptians as bearers of good news, but rather as people with modern arms—scheming, evil, and brutal.⁸

Sawakin and Massawa, which remained under Egyptian control until 1885, became a model of the progress that the Egyptians aspired to apply to their imperialist region throughout Africa. The establishment of an administration, based on organized registration of tax collection, development of telegraph lines and a postal system, study of the city and cartographic registration, and attempts to involve the locals in the governmental systems and to establish a modern legal system in the city and its tribal environs—all these became the foundations of the Egyptian administration in Sawakin and Massawa, and a model for continued expansion plans.⁹

The combination of "dispensing culture" and "civilizing mission" in Africa, eradicating slavery and gaining control over economic resources, strengthened the khedive's territorial aspirations.¹⁰ After establishing Egyptian control over Sawakin and Massawa, the khedive aspired to expand his control over Sudan and become wealthy from its natural quarries.¹¹ Nevertheless, the route from the coastal towns to the heart of Sudan

passed through northern Ethiopia, and the clash between Egypt and the Christian empire of Ethiopia was inevitable.

Defeats in Ethiopia

After the conquest of Sawakin and Massawa in 1865 and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the khedive and his advisors aspired to create territorial continuity between the areas under Egyptian control. The conquest of the city of Keren, in the Bogus-Sanhit region of modern Eritrea on 25 June 1872, initiated the onset of the dispute between Egypt and Christian Ethiopia.¹²

Werner Munzinger, a Swiss mercenary of the khedive and one of his military officers, was the driving spirit behind the Egyptian conquest of the area.¹³ He claimed that Keren was “a good base for all attacks on northern Ethiopia.”¹⁴ His confidence in his military strength was one of the main reasons for the decline into war with Ethiopia in 1876. He rejected accepted means of diplomacy and claimed that “peace between Yohannes IV Emperor of Ethiopia and Egypt would be established over my dead body.”¹⁵

Munzinger’s involvement in Ethiopian matters had already begun in the second half of the 1860s. His simultaneous serving as the khedive’s mercenary and consul of France in the Kassala region enabled him to initiate moves in Ethiopian politics in the Hamasen region of Tigray, the chief district of northern Ethiopia.¹⁶ His hostility toward Ethiopia increased after he received complaints from the Lazarist monks about the Ethiopians’ abuse of their monasteries in the Bogos and Hamasen regions.¹⁷

Following Munzinger’s appointment as governor of Massawa in 1871, he began to take control over the areas of Bogos and Hamasen, which he regarded as “the key to Ethiopia.” (These regions were known to the Ethiopians as Marab Mellash; i.e., the areas over the Marab River.¹⁸) The winds of war that were fanned by Munzinger from Keren were received sympathetically in Cairo, and the khedive was trapped by his own enthusiasm. Cairo was now acting to represent Yohannes to the Europeans as a slave trader who must be stopped, and the khedive as someone fighting for modernity and culture.¹⁹

Practically, the conquest of Ethiopia, or at least parts of it, was perceived by Egypt as vital for realizing the dream of uniting Sudan with the Red Sea, while strengthening the telegraph and railway infrastructure throughout the Hamasen region. Gaining control over politically and economically important cities, such as Adwa, Qallabat, and Harar, was a main goal in the khedive's policy of expansion.²⁰ At a later stage, Munzinger emphasized the importance of conquering the coasts of Somalia, as this would ensure Egyptian control over Ethiopia's salt mines and be a source of economic profit.²¹

The growing Egyptian interest in conquering Ethiopia can also be understood in light of the global interests and the "scramble for the Horn of Africa," especially between the European forces eager to gain positions of power at the Red Sea. The khedive wished to buy himself a position equal to that of Britain, France, and Italy. Britain controlled Aden, France controlled Djibouti, and in 1869 Italy fortified its economic control in the port town of Assab, quickly accompanied by military conquest.²²

In 1873, one year after the occupation of Keren, Munzinger annexed the region to Egypt, in the name of the khedive. The failure of diplomatic efforts to bring peace between Egypt and Ethiopia led to two battles in which the Egyptian army was defeated: the Battle of Gundet in November 1875 and the Battle of Gura during January–March 1876.²³

The Battle of Gura abolished any practical opportunity for Egypt to gain control over Ethiopia. The heavy Egyptian losses (almost 14,000 men died in three months), the economic damage to the Egyptian economy and, above all, the Egyptian depiction of the Ethiopian warriors as having a demonic character, prevented any future Egyptian invasion of Ethiopia.²⁴ Even so, despite their defeat, the Egyptians continued to maintain control over Keren and its surroundings until 1885.²⁵

Failures on the Somali Coast

The Egyptian strategy was intended to encircle Ethiopia from all sides. In 1875, four officers, three of whom were European mercenaries serving the khedive and one who was a native Egyptian, were given the responsibility

of capturing the Somali coast and Harar. They were Henry McKillop Pasha, Munzinger, Søren Arendrup Bey, and Muhammad Ra'uf Pasha.²⁶

McKillop Pasha, an admiral in the khedive's service, gave supreme importance to control over the Somali coast up to the city of Kismayu.²⁷ The city controlling the Juba River was, as far as he was concerned, the southern "gate" to Egyptian Sudan and an important trading zone spanning the trade routes of ivory, rubber, and various types of wood. With the slave trade continuing in the area, the khedive, "who fought against slavery together with the European forces," could justify to Britain his intention to rule in the area.²⁸

The Egyptian retreat from the Somali coast began in the late 1860s. The Egyptian steam boats had flown the khedival flag from 1867 in the coastal cities of Kismaayo, Bulhar, and Berbera. In 1870, Muhammad Bey Jamal sailed to Bulhar and Berbera twice, flying the Egyptian flag. In 1872, the khedive considered capturing these cities militarily to strengthen the Egyptian presence in the Gulf of Aden.²⁹

The transformation of Egypt into an active and domineering player on the Somali coast in 1870 alarmed Sultan Sa'id Barghash, the ruler of Zanzibar. The sultanate, a center of intercontinental slave trade until 1873, rushed to improve its relationship with Britain, in light of the Egyptian expansion. In order to appease London, Sa'id forbade all slave trade in 1873.³⁰ The British, for their part, regarded the Egyptian expansion to the Somali coast as less alarming than the French or Italian gain of control in the region.³¹ At this stage, the British did not regard Egyptian movement in the region as a threat to their presence in Aden.³²

This was the context of McKillop Pasha's journey to conquer Moga-dishu and Kismayo in early October 1875, and turn them into a "bridge-head" in advance of future Egyptian conquests over the Juba River. The Egyptian army captured these cities without much resistance, but faulty planning for the long supply lines and a lack of food and fuel forced McKillop Pasha to request help from the enemy, Sultan Zanzibar. The British rushed to intervene and sent a naval force to compel the Egyptians to retreat from their loose hold on the region. The journey to capture Somalia that began with a blast of trumpets ended with very weak opposition at

the end of December 1875, when the British ordered McKillop Pasha to “pack his bags and return to Egypt.”³³ The failure of McKillop Pasha’s journey hailed a change in the British attitude to the Egyptian plans. They expressed contempt for the Egyptian attempt, which they considered an unnecessary and unrealistic adventure.³⁴

From the khedival government’s point of view, the journey to conquer the salt mines in the Awasa region was even more forsaken and bitter. Munzinger, the main propagandist of the Egyptian expansion policy, ascribed to this conquest great economic and political benefit and thought that it would put an end to France’s plans for expansion in the region.³⁵

Another Egyptian consideration was connected to Menilek, *negus* (Ethiopian title equal to king) of Shewa, in 1875. The khedive wanted to form a temporary alliance with Menilek, Emperor Yohannes IV’s internal rival.³⁶ In order to intensify the rift between them, the Egyptians considered sending Menilek a bishop of his own. Until that time Egypt had sent Ethiopia only one bishop who had served since the fourth century AD as head of the Ethiopian church in the diocese of the Egyptian Coptic church. Therefore, the proposal to Menilek of an alliance, which Munzinger offered, encompassed an opportunity to separate the Shewa kingdom from Yohannes’s regime in terms of Christian legitimacy as well.³⁷

Imbued with self-confidence, Munzinger led an Egyptian force in early 1875 from the port of Tadjoura westward toward Awassa with the intention of joining forces with Menilek. But the topographical conditions and harsh climate exhausted his men.³⁸ On the night of 14 November, warriors of the Somali Issa tribe attacked the force.³⁹ Munzinger, his wife, and most of the Egyptian military command were massacred, and the few survivors escaped to Tadjoura.⁴⁰ The defeat put an end to the dream of expansion at the expense of the Christian empire.⁴¹

The Somali Coastal Cities

Despite these two failures, the Egyptians succeeded in gaining control over the Somali coastal cities of Zeila and Berbera. Their sovereignty there was recognized by the British in an agreement signed between the British government and the khedival government on 7 September 1877. This

recognition included the territory from Zeila through Berbera, Tadjoura, Bulhar, and as far as Cape Guardafui. In return, Khedive Isma'īl pledged that the ports of Bulhar and Berbera would remain open to all types of trade with all countries, excluding slave trade, and that these ports would not have any European military presence. It was also agreed that the customs rate to be charged by the khedival government at all ports would not exceed 5 percent of the value of the merchandise exported through those ports, and that the British would be entitled to open consular representation in those places.⁴²

This agreement was honored by the British until April–May 1884, when the Egyptian government resolved, under British pressure, to evacuate the Somali coast and Harar. The question regarding the future of these places occupied the British, as well as the French, the Italians, and Menilek, king of Shewa.