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Alexandria: Bid for Empire

Egypt is our possession and its inhabitants are but our slaves.
Ibrahim Pasha to Muhammad Ali, 5 September 1832

ALEXANDRIA WAS NOT only capital of Egypt. It was also seat of a bid for empire. As Alexandria under Cleopatra challenged Rome, so Alexandria under Muhammad Ali challenged Constantinople, for the empire of the East. Muhammad Ali was inspired by the decay of the Ottoman Empire. He saw an opportunity to use one province of the Empire to conquer the rest.

Muhammad Ali was an exception in his time and culture. The Porte itself had paid tribute to his success and efficiency in Egypt. After he had suppressed the Wahhabi revolt in Arabia, it turned to him to suppress rebellion in Greece. On 10 July 1824 Ibrahim Pasha had set sail from Alexandria with a fleet of 163 ships (many built for his father in Marseille or Livorno) and an army of 16,000 to subdue the Peloponnese. At first he had enjoyed considerable success. Egyptian ships came and went continually between his army and Alexandria.¹ The city was on the front line. Twice, in 1825 and 1827, Greek ships attacked Egyptian ships in Alexandria's harbour. On the first occasion Muhammad Ali was so enraged that he rushed down to the harbour, commandeered a vessel, and for a week searched in vain for the attackers.

Despite the racial and religious war in Greece, and the destruction of the Egyptian fleet at Navarino, special patrols in Alexandria protected Franks and Greeks from attacks by Muslims bent on revenge. Muhammad Ali's authority and his personal guarantee ensured that, unlike Smyrna in 1770 and 1821, Alexandria remained in 'the most perfect tranquillity'.² Under government protection cosmopolitanism survived.

In 1830 Muhammad Ali subdued another rebellion for the Porte, in Crete. Then he turned to Syria. Like Egypt in 1805, it was a province ready for plucking. As early as 1812 he had included Syria in what the

British consul already called his 'ideas of conquest and independence'. In 1825 he was planning to seize Damascus, Yemen and the Arabian Gulf.³ Attack was the best means of defence. Both in 1807 and 1820 the Porte, alarmed by Muhammad Ali's ambition, had tried to remove from his authority Alexandria and the Nile ports: they had previously formed a separate province, and officials like the kadi and the port captain had been appointed directly from Constantinople, rather than from Cairo.⁴ The Porte also tried and failed to dismiss him from the governorship of Egypt itself: first in 1806, then in 1822.⁵

The fate of another independent Albanian governor, Byron's admirer Ali Pasha of Janina, was a grim warning. Like Muhammad Ali, he too, as the Ottoman Empire weakened, had created a large army, become an international merchant exporting wheat, and established close relations with foreign consuls and Greeks, and he may have aimed to establish his own monarchy. Yet he and his sons were killed on the Sultan's orders in 1822.⁶

Differing world outlooks were another source of conflict between the Porte and the Pasha. Like a later pasha from the Balkans, the founder of the Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal himself (born in Salonica in 1888), Muhammad Ali had a modernizing mentality. He shared some of the attitudes, towards the Ottoman Empire, of European travellers and diplomats now regarded as condescending racists. In 1822, in a letter to his nephew Ahmed Pasha Yeghen, Muhammad Ali denounced the Ottoman state as 'feeble and rampant with problems because of its viziers' obsession with ceremonies and tradition'. The Sultan, he wrote, was a bigot in the hands of the *ulema*, too bigoted to employ Franks in positions of authority, rather than merely as technical advisers.⁷

During the war against the Greeks, Ibrahim Pasha saw the Ottoman army and navy at first hand. 'They are so helpless and inefficient they cannot even fix the masts of their frigates,' he wrote to his father in 1825: Greek sailors who had previously manned the Ottoman navy had deserted to fight for independence, so Turkish sailors were inexperienced.

Ottomans and Muhammad Ali lived in different worlds. Just before the combined Ottoman–Egyptian fleet was blown sky high at Navarino in 1827, the Grand Vizier wrote to Ibrahim Pasha, 'Victory does not depend on the number of ships but on the strength of men's hearts.' Muhammad Ali in contrast believed that 'Wars are won not only by depending on God and trusting in Him but also by putting all possible human effort into it . . . God has ordered us in His Book not only to stand up to the enemy but also to spare no effort in confronting him.' He believed that in the art of war 'the Europeans are way ahead of us.'⁸

Muhammad Ali was the first agricultural reformer in the Middle East. He changed the landscape of Egypt, introducing pineapples, bananas, mangoes, figs, vines and orange groves. He took a personal interest in cotton, sending soldiers into the plantations to help with the harvests.⁹ In the four years after his introduction in 1820 of long-crop Jumel cotton, annual cotton production rose from 944 to 228,078 hundredweight. More than any other commodity, cotton would be the basis of Alexandria's economic future.¹⁰

New plants and crops were planted in and around Alexandria, particularly around the palaces built for the Pasha's sons and grandsons and the villas of the rich. The palace of Moharrem Bey was surrounded by palm and orange groves, figs and pomegranates. Boghos Yussuf Bey learned to create new types of orange tree.¹¹ The Sultan, on the other hand, had the richest country in the world and, in Muhammad Ali's opinion, did nothing with it.¹² Muhammad Ali and his son were like a team of modern managers taking over an antiquated subsidiary company, appalled at their predecessors' mismanagement, eager to import the latest foreign techniques and to make a bid for independence from head office – or take it over.

Finally, on 4 November 1831, after factories in Egypt had been working overtime for months, the attack on Syria began. Ibrahim sailed from Alexandria to Jaffa with a fleet of thirty ships, some of them built in the Alexandria arsenal, bearing his staff, cannon and supplies. The army advanced overland. The coast ports, including Jaffa and Sidon, surrendered that month. After a seven-month siege, on 27 May 1832 the great fortress city of Acre, which had withstood Bonaparte's army in 1799, was stormed by troops led by Ibrahim Pasha in person; Damascus fell a month later. Ibrahim continued his advance north, taking Adana on 31 July.¹³ At the Battle of Konya on 21 December 1832, 15,000 Egyptians defeated an Ottoman army of 50,000. The Grand Vizier himself was taken prisoner. On 1 February the Egyptian army reached Kutahya, en route for the Bosphorus.¹⁴ Ibrahim Pasha's victories were due to his own leadership, his excellent second-in-command Suleyman Pasha, the devotion he inspired among his officers – who were better paid than in the Ottoman army – and his well disciplined modern army. Rivalries in the Ottoman high command, and its fatal habit of following the advice of religious leaders, also helped.¹⁵

From all corners of the Empire, people turned to the victors. Anatolia was more sympathetic to Muhammad Ali than Syria, which some diplomats attributed to its ingrained tolerance. In Anatolia, Turks, Greeks and

Armenians (whom Turks then called ‘a people of camels’, since they were docile and hard-working) lived easily together, compared to the fanaticism of Syria. The Karaosmanoglu dynasty and Smyrna itself briefly paid homage to Ibrahim Pasha, until the foreign consuls – still the key power-brokers – persuaded the city to revert to its imperial allegiance; the consuls acted for the Ottoman Empire, following their governments’ orders, although they believed it was about to disintegrate.¹⁶ The Sultan suspended Muhammad Ali from his governorships; the Sherif of Mecca, head of the Hashemite dynasty, which considered itself the oldest in the world, declared the Sultan the enemy of Islam.¹⁷

Even the Ottoman Empire in Europe, Muhammad Ali boasted, was waiting for him, and he had many supporters in Constantinople itself. He halted his son’s advance only to spare bloodshed and consult the powers of Europe. The arrival of Russian troops on the Bosphorus, to protect the tottering Sultan, was a more compelling reason to hesitate.¹⁸ The Levant was again ‘the world’s debate’ – not between Christians and Muslims, but between rival Muslim dynasties, and the rival European powers supporting them.

In May 1833 a truce signed at Kutahya, brokered by French and Russian diplomats, restored Muhammad Ali to the governorships of Egypt, Crete and the Hejaz and appointed Ibrahim governor of Damascus, Aleppo, Tripoli and Acre and to a financial post in Adana – to enable the Egyptian navy to use wood from the Cilician mountains.¹⁹ Never before had one family controlled so much of the Ottoman Empire.

Ibrahim Pasha introduced the first orderly government Syria had enjoyed since the eighteenth century. He had more incentive than pashas whose terms of office had been limited to a few years. In accordance with his father’s policy, he built barracks and hospitals, raised the status of Christians and Jews, and let them serve with Muslims on consultative councils.²⁰

His chief local ally was the emir Bashir II Shihab, ruler of the area east of the ports of Beirut and Tripoli, known as Mount Lebanon. His dynasty had been in power since 1697, in the double capacity of Ottoman tax collectors and leaders of the Druze (a heretical sect, following a secret version of Islam, which had lived in Mount Lebanon since the eleventh century), and is still active in Lebanese politics today. In the second half of the eighteenth century, perhaps under the influence of a Christian doctor, his branch had converted to Christianity, although he continued to profess Islam in public, to please his Ottoman suzerain. Emir Bashir, whose manners and bearing impressed visitors even more than Muhammad Ali’s,

from 1804 to 1840 ran a mini-state with a population of 213,000, where he may have hoped, like Muhammad Ali and Ali Pasha, to establish his dynasty on a firm territorial base: 130,000 were Maronite (practising a local form of Christianity which had acknowledged the authority of the Pope since the crusades), 65,000 Druze, and a few Muslims.²¹

The conflict between Muhammad Ali and the Sublime Porte operated on three levels. The crux was the Pasha's desire to start a dynasty – his dynastic ambition would be one of the foundations of Egypt's independence. Sometimes he liked to present himself as the Empire's best servant. In February 1832 he declared of the Sultan, 'I have nothing against his dynasty which is the only legitimate one . . . I do not desire the Sultan's throne,' though he claimed all were calling for him. However, in August 1832, elated by victory, and referring to his seizure of power in 1805, he declared, 'I conquered Egypt by the sword and it is the sword which will take it from me. The Arabs are all for me and they are worth more than the Turks. I am waiting for anything, I am ready for anything.'²² At times he urged a fatwa to depose the Sultan, who would be replaced by his son Abdulmecid.²³ He even considered making a 'religious *coup d'état*', bringing the Sherif of Mecca to Cairo, proclaiming him caliph, and kissing the hem of his robe. He said Arabs needed a religious revolution to regenerate them.²⁴

Some historians have claimed that independence was merely a manoeuvre to increase his bargaining power with the Sublime Porte. However, from his correspondence with Ibrahim preserved in the Egyptian National Archives in the Cairo citadel and published by Khaled Fahmy, as well as from innumerable conversations reported by foreign consuls, Muhammad Ali and Ibrahim clearly often considered independence. In 1832 Ibrahim urged his father to mint his own coins, have the Friday sermon read in his name in mosques, and declare 'Egypt's independence' – as one ruler of Egypt, Ali Bey, had done in 1772.²⁵ In 1833 Ibrahim called independence 'a vital question which takes precedence of all the others'. Without it 'all our efforts would be vain and we would remain under the yoke of this perfidious power which does not stop oppressing us with its ridiculous demands and its requests for money.'²⁶ To his soldiers he once declared, 'What have I or any of you benefited by the Sultan? . . . Have we not all eaten of the bread of Mohammed Ali . . . Egypt is his and he won it by the sword; we know no sovereign but Mohammed Ali.'²⁷

The clash also reflected a struggle of personalities within the Ottoman governing class, between Muhammad Ali Pasha and his personal enemy Husrev Pasha. Both had competed to be governor of Egypt in 1801–5.

On 20 August 1825, when Husrev, as Kaptan Pasha, visited Muhammad Ali at Ras el-Tin while the Ottoman fleet was refitting in the port of Alexandria, Henry Salt saw them competing 'with gentle violence' to make the other take the best seat, to be first to blow flies from the other's face with their fly-whisk. He was not deceived. He commented that their rivalry 'has contributed materially and must contribute to its [the Empire's] ruin.' During the Greek War of Independence, Husrev Pasha was said by Muhammad Ali himself, in letters to the Porte, to have sabotaged Ibrahim's victories by 'neglect and inaction'. Muhammad Ali called Husrev, in a circular to other pashas, 'the sole author of all the woes which have successively befallen the Empire, a person swollen with venom'.²⁸

Race tensions, the hidden wiring of Ottoman history, also contributed to their rivalry. Husrev was an Abkhazian from the Caucasus, said to loathe Albanians like Muhammad Ali.²⁹ Yet race might also keep Muhammad Ali loyal to the Ottoman Empire. Muhammad Ali considered himself a Turk. The definition of a Turk was, then as now, political, cultural and religious as well as ethnic – it could include Circassians, Albanians, Bosnians or Kurds, if they thought of themselves as Turks, spoke Turkish, followed Islam, served the Ottoman Empire, and were not Arab.³⁰ As Khaled Fahmy has shown, a sense of racial superiority pervades Muhammad Ali's correspondence: 'The Turks are members of our race and . . . must remain close to us all the time,' he wrote in 1822, when explaining why he could not use them as soldiers but had to conscript Egyptians. He compared Egyptians to 'wild beasts'.³¹

Turkish hatred for Arabs is ancient and enduring. The Ottomans had a proverb that they would forgo all the sweets of Damascus if they could avoid seeing the face of an Arab. Many converted Slavs, Greeks and Albanians became viziers and pashas. Almost no Arabs (unless they also had non-Arab blood) did.³² In Egypt, 'the last Turk considers he has the right to dictate orders and knows how to make himself obeyed. There reigns a deep hatred and animosity between those two races,' wrote a Russian diplomat in 1837.³³ Egyptians in their turn disliked 'the Turks', whom al-Jabarti considered an alien group.³⁴

Muhammad Ali's regime was based on race. His officers were Turks, as Turks were 'entitled to rule.' No Egyptian was allowed to rise above the rank of captain in the army or the navy. Again showing his imperialist sympathies, he compared Egyptians' role to that of Indian soldiers under British officers in India. Turkish prisoners of war were recruited as officers into Muhammad Ali's army in preference to Egyptians. He paid better

than the Sultan. A colonel in the Ottoman army was paid sixty times more than a soldier; a colonel in the Egyptian army 500 times more.³⁵

The army was called the Jihadiye army of Egypt – although its only ‘jihad’ was against Muslims. Muhammad Ali made no appeal to Egyptian nationalism. It did not yet exist – although it may have been festering in the army, where Egyptian soldiers were discriminated against and humiliated by Turkish-speaking officers.³⁶

With his ‘Turkish’ power structure and mentality, regarding Constantinople as the centre of the world, Muhammad Ali may have considered his role as a servant of the Ottoman sultan – and access to recruitment in Ottoman lands and to Ottoman honours – more advantageous to his dynasty than independence. Despite his outbursts of contempt, he may also, as he frequently stated, have felt a degree of loyalty to the empire from which he came.

Moreover, as European empires advanced on Egypt, the Ottoman Empire offered a form of protection from their ambitions. Muhammad Ali was alarmed by what he called the ‘misery’ and ‘decline’ of Muslims.³⁷ The Bey of Tunis, he felt, had become ‘the slave of France’.³⁸ Ibrahim too feared ‘the ruin of our family’ and ‘the partition of Islamic lands’.³⁹ The fate of Algiers – once known as al-Mahroussa, ‘The Fortunate’, the stronghold of jihad – was a warning. Throughout the 1830s the French government was extending its control, settling European colonists on Muslims’ land, destroying mosques and schools. A new European city, built on a grid plan, with a large open square on which French soldiers drilled, appeared beside the kasbah or old Arab city. Soon the church of Notre Dame d’Afrique dominated the skyline. Popular songs lamented:

O tears for Algiers and its houses,
The Christians inhabit them, their state has changed!
They have degraded everything, spoiled all, the impure ones!
Scattered the bones of our fathers, tied their horses in mosques.⁴⁰

On the other side of Egypt, forestalling Muhammad Ali’s ambitions in the area, British ships bombarded Aden in 1839 and seized it from the Sultan of Lahej. The first Arab possession of the British Empire, it was to remain one of the busiest ports on the Indian Ocean until the departure of British troops in 1967.

The struggle between the Pasha and the Porte was also an international struggle. Both sides asked for foreign help, and used foreign diplomats as messengers and negotiators. The period of foreign domination, from which the Middle East has not yet recovered, was caused not only

by foreign empires' expansion, but also by rulers' repeated requests for foreign support, and notables' regular demands for foreign diplomatic protection.⁴¹ Without it they felt they had little security of life and property, without foreign education little hope of meeting the challenges of their time.⁴²

Dissatisfied with the growing power of Russia, Prussia and Austria in Europe, France supported Muhammad Ali, whom some Frenchmen regarded as the successor and avenger of Bonaparte. Moreover, France was beginning to trade more with Egypt than with the rest of the Ottoman Empire. A steamer service between Marseille and Alexandria began in 1835. In conversations with French diplomats, Muhammad Ali presented himself as a hero keen to secure his place in history, a new Bonaparte who would do what the French government decided. His pride in what he called his 'Muhammad Ali-ness' was shown by the fact that the only words embroidered on his troops' red flags were 'Muhammad Ali'.⁴³ As he had told Henry Salt, 'Mehemet Ali is no Pasha – has no title – is plain Mehemet Ali. I have never put any other inscription on my seal than – Mehemet Ali.'⁴⁴

For Britain, Prussia, and Austria, however, the Ottoman Empire was indispensable for the system of Europe, preferable to the alternatives of chaos or partition. The European consuls in Alexandria, the European ambassadors in Constantinople, and the special envoys sent directly from London, Vienna and St Petersburg to Alexandria constantly supported Ottoman power.⁴⁵ In 1829, when Britain and France – not for the last time – were about to send fleets to protect Constantinople from an approaching Russian army, the Duke of Wellington stated, 'The Ottoman Empire exists not for the benefit of the Turks but for the benefit of Christian Europe.' The French foreign minister General Horace Sébastiani, a former ambassador in Constantinople, wrote in 1832 that the dissolution of the Empire would be dangerous for the peace of Europe.⁴⁶

Britain in particular feared that the expansion of Muhammad Ali's power would drive the Ottoman Empire into alliance with Russia – as indeed happened in 1833: as a safeguard against Ibrahim Pasha's advance, 5,000 Russian troops camped at Buyukdere on the Bosphorus. The British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, wrote to Colonel Campbell in Alexandria of 'the importance which His Majesty's Government attaches to the maintenance of the integrity of the Turkish empire as an object of European interest'.⁴⁷ Moreover, the *laissez-faire* economic attitudes of the Ottoman Empire, enshrined in the Convention of Baltaliman of 1838, were considered more favourable to British trade than the interventionist

policies of Muhammad Ali – although the British merchants of Alexandria constantly praised him to their government.⁴⁸

Finally, on 25 May 1838, Muhammad Ali, complaining that he had been the most obedient vassal in history, told the French consul-general Monsieur Cochelet, and later the others, that he wanted independence: 'I am old, I want to be assured before I die of the future of my family. I want the power I have founded to pass into its hands.' He also mentioned the future of his factories, his schools and his fleet. He was prepared to pay £3 million to the Porte for independence.⁴⁹ To Michel Tossizza he said that he did not want 'to leave after his death to the discretion of the Sultan his great political and natural family which the Sultan would want to exterminate with him'.⁵⁰ He was proud of his reforms. But his priority was not Egypt, nor the Arabs, nor the Ottoman Empire, nor Islam, but what he and Ibrahim called 'our Sublime Family', 'my dynasty' – 'to carve a place for my family and my dynasty's families in history that will be remembered in four or five centuries' time'.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Ibrahim Pasha's introduction of conscription, on the Egyptian model, had led to revolts in Syria. Many Muslims detested him. He was less traditional in his habits than his father. He sat 'à la franque' on a chair, rather than 'à la turque' on a divan, ate with a spoon and fork, and drank large quantities of wine in public: his father drank only in the secrecy of the harem.⁵² In Beirut, Sheikh Fadlullah denounced the introduction of quarantine as 'contrary to the teachings of Islam . . . there is no power nor might except in God the exalted and Great'.⁵³

War with the Sultan began again. On 24 June 1839 at Nezib, east of Aleppo, the Ottoman army engaged Ibrahim Pasha's forces. Nezib was a Levantine prequel to the Franco-Prussian war. Prussian officers, including Helmuth von Moltke, the architect of victory in 1870, tried to advise the Ottoman army, French officers the Egyptian. Fighting against the Sultan's orders and Moltke's advice, the Ottoman commander Hafiz Pasha was routed, losing his cannon and his baggage.⁵⁴

The victory was followed by another Ottoman catastrophe. At the funeral of Mahmud II on 2 June 1839, Muhammad Ali's enemy Husrev Pasha had seized the grand vizier's seal of office. The Kaptan Pasha was another of Husrev's enemies.⁵⁵ He sailed with the Ottoman fleet from Constantinople and, instead of engaging the Egyptian fleet, proceeded to Alexandria. On 14 July 1839, saluted by many cannon, he landed, rode to Ras el-Tin on Muhammad Ali's horse between files of troops, and knelt to kiss the hem of the Pasha's robe. Muhammad Ali raised him, kissed him, and said, 'Welcome, my brother.' They then went arm in

arm to drink coffee and smoke pipes, sitting on the divan in the reception room, from which they could see the combined Ottoman and Egyptian fleets, now under Muhammad Ali's orders, in Alexandria harbour.⁵⁶ Yet Muhammad Ali again shelved his plans for independence. On 16 July 1839 he made a speech before the officers of the two fleets, reaffirming his Ottoman loyalties: 'My children, we are all one and the same nation. From now on no one should say "I am Egyptian, I am from Constantinople"; we all have only one and the same faith and only one sovereign. We must show union to restore its force and grandeur to the empire. It is to this end that all our efforts should tend. Our Sultan is a beautiful unblemished diamond.'

The Ottoman officers then asked permission to wear Egyptian uniform. Muhammad Ali said they were free to do so, but not obliged to. He explained that, whereas in Constantinople people had adopted Frank dress but kept Turkish heads, he had kept Turkish dress but acted with a Frank head.⁵⁷ Clearly he was playing with his variety of identities and loyalties – imperial, religious and national – in a way characteristic of the Levant. While fighting the Sultan, he remained attached to the Ottoman Empire. For the next year and a half the politics of Europe centred on the Levant.

While Muhammad Ali hesitated, Britain, as the Pasha had foreseen as long ago as 1830, was the main impediment to his success: 'Wherever I turn she is there to baffle me.'⁵⁸ Palmerston and the British ambassador in Constantinople, Lord Ponsonby, had become the Pasha's personal enemies: they found his naval ambitions and his friendship with France intolerable. In 1840 revolts began to break out in Lebanon, encouraged by a British agent called Richard Wood, sent from Constantinople by Ponsonby. Alexandria was in the eye of the storm. Muhammad Ali began to fortify the city. A national guard was formed and began to drill on the Place des Consuls.

Muhammad Ali claimed he was fighting Lord Palmerston, not the British. He boasted to the truculent new British consul-general, Mr Hodges, who had replaced Campbell (considered too favourable to the Pasha), that he could make all Ottoman provinces revolt. Hodges replied that he would be pulverized. Rival French and British naval squadrons cruised among the islands of the Aegean.⁵⁹

On 22 August 1840 the French consul announced publicly at Ras el-Tin that there would soon be war in Europe.⁶⁰ From Paris, Adolphe Thiers, the nationalist *Président du Conseil*, advised Muhammad Ali not to abandon Syria. He even wrote that 'the honour of France' depended on it. Normally lucid and moderate, like many leaders dealing with the

Middle East Thiers lost touch with reality. He advised Muhammad Ali to work day and night on fortifying Alexandria, and wait for spring. France would then have 600,000 men under arms.⁶¹

In August an Ottoman envoy called Rifaat Bey arrived in Alexandria by steamboat from Constantinople. Muhammad Ali refused to accept his terms to withdraw from Syria and return the Ottoman fleet. He was again dismissed as governor. On 23 September, to Muhammad Ali's fury, since he had refused to accept the Ottomans' improved offer of Egypt as a hereditary province, and southern Syria for life, all foreign consuls except the French left Alexandria. A British naval squadron, which had wintered near Smyrna, was stationed outside Alexandria, harassing arriving and departing ships. Muhammad Ali's fleet proved an expensive illusion. Cochelet advised against it sailing out of Alexandria harbour, fearing it would be destroyed by the British squadron. When Muhammad Ali asked for a French admiral to be sent to command it, and 8,000 soldiers and sailors, the French government refused.⁶² The French government merely sent an engineer named Commandant Gallice (called Colonel, to please the Pasha), to direct the fortifications of Alexandria and all the military engineers of Egypt. Working at the same time for the Pasha and the French government, Gallice Bey was soon convinced that, with the 400 cannon in position on the existing forts, the city could be defended.⁶³ Thiers's special envoy Count Walewski, however, considered that Alexandria could not resist a British attack unless defended by 800 French artillerymen under a French general. They never came.⁶⁴

In September 1840 Syria became the focus of a joint Ottoman–British–Austrian attack on Muhammad Ali's forces: a now forgotten conflict which at the time nearly became a world war. While Ottoman troops approached from the north, British and Austrian ships hovered off the shore. A proclamation by the British admiral Charles Napier was translated into Arabic by Richard Wood: 'Syrians! Great Britain, Austria, Russia and Prussia in conjunction with the Sultan have decided that the rule of Mehmet Ali shall cease in Syria. Charles Napier.' Soliman Pasha, the commander of the Egyptian troops (formerly Colonel Sève of the French army), replied, 'Beirut shall fall into your power only when reduced to cinders.'⁶⁵ Seeing which way the wind was blowing, Emir Bashir, ruler of Mount Lebanon, switched sides from Muhammad Ali back to the Ottomans, as readily as, a few years earlier, he had switched faiths, from Islam to Christianity.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, war fever swept France and Germany. There was talk of a 'fatal divorce' between the two. Heine wrote that Thiers had awoken Germany from its lethargic sleep. From this crisis date the famous

nationalist songs 'Die Wacht am Rhein' and 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles'. Paris crowds cried, 'Guerre aux Anglais, ils ont pris notre Beyrouth!' Newspapers called for war not only to support Muhammad Ali but also to reconquer the left bank of the Rhine, which France had lost after the fall of Napoleon in 1814.⁶⁷ However, in a sign that France would not fight, on 10 October the French fleet withdrew to the safety of French waters.⁶⁸ The Royal Navy was too strong. Moreover Louis-Philippe was too intelligent to link, as he said, the fate of France to the authority of the Pasha of Egypt.

In the Royal Navy's attack on the great fort of Acre on 3 November, technology triumphed over humanity. The cannon of the Royal Navy, 'vomiting forth huge volumes of flame', were so deadly that, Commodore Smith reported to Palmerston, 'every living creature within the area of 60,000 square yards ceased to exist.' When they hit an ammunition magazine, it erupted like Mount Vesuvius. On 5 November Acre surrendered.⁶⁹

The peace of Europe depended on decisions taken in Alexandria. On 22 November 1840 Commodore Charles Napier moored his ship *HMS Powerful* in the harbour. On 26 November he had an audience with Muhammad Ali. When asked for his credentials, he replied that 'the double-shotted guns of the *Powerful*, with the squadron under his command to back him, his honour as an Englishman, and the knowledge he had of the desire of the four Great Powers for peace, were all the credentials he possessed.' He advised the Pasha to accept the terms offered by the Porte. If he did not give up Syria and the Ottoman fleet, he might lose everything: 'Egypt is not invulnerable; he may rely upon it, Alexandria itself may be made to share the fate of Acre and His Highness, who has now the opportunity of founding a dynasty, may sink into a simple Pasha.'⁷⁰

Boghos Yussuf Bey meekly replied for his master that, although 'convinced that Syria in his hands might still furnish great resources for the Ottoman Empire', 'in no case has His Highness intended to place himself in opposition to the will of the great powers of Europe.' On 27 November a convention was concluded for the immediate evacuation of Egyptian troops from Syria. The Ottoman fleet would be returned when Muhammad Ali received a guarantee of dynastic heredity in Egypt. Ponsonby and his official superiors complained of Napier's independent actions, but in the end they backed him up. Once Ibrahim Pasha had been master of Syria. As he retreated back to Egypt, no one bothered to salute him.⁷¹

On 29 October Louis-Philippe had dismissed Thiers. In the Chamber of Deputies, the French poet and politician Lamartine called the French

humiliation in the Levant ‘the Waterloo of French diplomacy’. In one month, Louis-Philippe had lost his popularity and Muhammad Ali had lost Syria. Because of his pacific policy in 1840, until the revolution of 1848 (to which it contributed) Louis-Philippe no longer dared review the Paris National Guard, for fear of hostile demonstrations.⁷²

During the ensuing negotiations the Ottoman and Egyptian governments, and the European powers, were in continuous consultation. All admired Muhammad Ali’s dignity in adversity and lack of *amour propre*. Forgetting previous outbursts of fury, and oaths that he would ‘never’ leave Syria, he proclaimed that he was ‘always disposed to sacrifice what I possess and even my life in order to conciliate the good graces of His Highness’.⁷³ In February 1841 the Ottoman navy returned to Constantinople, to the joy of its sailors – and of Alexandrians alienated by their lawless behaviour.⁷⁴

Finally, after much renegotiation, a *Hatt i-sherif* or imperial proclamation dated 1 June 1841 arrived in Alexandria on a Russian boat from Constantinople. It stated that, in gratitude for ‘the loyalty and servitude you have demonstrated to me and the interests of my empire’, and ‘the zeal and sagacity by which you are characterized as well as the knowledge and experience which you have acquired in the affairs of Egypt’, the governorship of Egypt would be made hereditary. In accordance with the system prevailing since 1617 in the Ottoman dynasty, it would be inherited by the eldest male among Muhammad Ali’s descendants – not by primogeniture. The governorship of the Sudan was not to be hereditary. Muhammad Ali’s status and independence were reduced. The Ottoman Empire and Egypt would henceforth share the same flag, coinage and uniforms, and follow the same internal laws and international agreements. The Pasha of Egypt would enjoy no special titles or ceremonial status, and would appoint officers only to the rank of colonel. His army was to be limited to 18,000, and no ships of the line were to be built without Ottoman permission. In other words, he would no longer have the means to invade other Ottoman provinces. A quarter of gross government revenue was to be paid by the Pasha of Egypt to the Porte.⁷⁵

On 7 June a 100-gun salute from the Pasha’s cannon announced the ceremonial proclamation by the Pasha’s secretary Ismail Bey of the new *Hatt i-sherif* in Ras el-Tin. Decorations were handed out. Muhammad Ali’s son Said sailed for Constantinople with presents for the imperial family and the ministers of the Porte.⁷⁶

Muhammad Ali’s bid for Syria had failed – though he said it was the loss of Crete which he regretted most. Once his pride and joy, his navy

was left to rot in Alexandria's harbour.⁷⁷ However, he had expanded the territory of Egypt to include the Sudan, and had established not only a new dynasty – one which would last longer on its throne than the other new nineteenth-century dynasty, the Bonapartes – but a new state.

In the last years of Muhammad Ali's life Alexandria continued to expand. An English journalist called Bayle St John, who arrived there in 1846, found 'a perfect rage for building in Alexandria'. Entire quarters had been added 'as if by magic ... Everywhere else almost the bricklayers and masons are at work.'⁷⁸ The population had risen from 60,000 in 1840 (of whom about 12,000 were soldiers and 8,000 sailors) to 104,189 in 1848, the first year that a proper census was conducted. Some 22.5 per cent were from Alexandria itself, the rest being Egyptians from Cairo and the Delta. Around 5 per cent were Europeans; the remaining 7 per cent came from other provinces of the Empire.⁷⁹ Alexandria had grown faster than any city in the Empire. In comparison the population of Alexandria's rivals was stagnant: Cairo had around 230,000 people, Damietta and Rosetta around 25,000 and 15,000 respectively.⁸⁰

Like St Petersburg and Odessa, Alexandria attracted foreigners, fostered trade, and spread modernization and education. Muhammad Ali had made the city a machine for transforming Egypt. He compared it to Paris. It had become a city with a future.⁸¹ Ali Mubarak hoped it would become the greatest commercial centre on earth. Who holds Alexandria, it was believed, holds Egypt.⁸²

However, the key to Egypt might be its downfall. Success and accessibility can be as fatal to a city as decline. Thanks to the personal authority of Muhammad Ali, Alexandria had so far mixed races and religions with remarkable ease. But, just as Smyrna, by attracting massive Greek immigration, also imported Greek nationalism, so Alexandria, by encouraging European immigration, might attract foreign armies like those which had conquered Algiers and Aden. Both Smyrna and Alexandria were potential time bombs. Even in 1785, when foreigners in Alexandria were being harassed by Mamelukes, they had threatened the Ottoman government: if it did not resolve the situation, their own governments would do so. An Ottoman expedition arrived to restore order a year later.⁸³

Alexandria was easy prey. France had seized it in 1798, Britain in 1807. Palmerston threatened Muhammad Ali with a bombardment or blockade of the city in 1833, 1838 and 1840.⁸⁴ During his visit in 1850, Flaubert wrote that he considered it impossible that, with British troops already in

Aden, Britain would not shortly become mistress of Egypt: 'Remember my prediction.'⁸⁵

Muhammad Ali was popular with Europeans. All admired his ability to enforce law and order. Even in 1840, when the Royal Navy was threatening Alexandria, and bombarding Egyptian troops in Syria, the British overland mail service through Egypt to India continued uninterrupted. When the British consul-general fled to the safety of a gunboat, Muhammad Ali told the British residents he would be their consul and protector – and kept his word.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, and despite the small number of Europeans living in the city, European consuls began to challenge his authority.

The years 1800–1830 saw a hardening of British imperial attitudes in India, caused by growing wealth and power, and the rapid expansion of British territory. Relationships between British men and Indian women, once common, became unacceptable. It was the take-off moment for Britain's imperial century. A similar process began to take place a few years later in the Levant. In 1843 the consuls threatened that, if Muhammad Ali did not dig a Suez canal (already suggested during the French occupation in 1799), one might be dug without his consent.⁸⁷

In January 1847, despite Muhammad Ali's protests, six drunken British sailors, wanted for murder by the Egyptian authorities, were removed from Alexandria on a British ship. Against the letter of the capitulations, on their own initiative rather than their governments', European consuls and residents were claiming total extraterritoriality, and freedom from the jurisdiction of local courts.⁸⁸ Travellers sometimes complained of European Alexandrians' 'love of ostentation' and 'presumptuous judgments', perhaps heightened by their pride in their city's past. This ostentation and presumption were also the basis of their politics.⁸⁹

If Alexandria was an ambiguous legacy, both strengthening and threatening, Muhammad Ali was an ambiguous ruler. On the one hand were his achievements in dragging Egypt into the nineteenth century. He diminished fanaticism, encouraged education, transformed agriculture. On the other hand, he often oppressed Egyptians while favouring foreigners. His rush to industrialize, like his bid for empire, was often wasteful and counterproductive as well as inhuman. Taxes and prices rose precipitously. 'All classes of the inhabitants of Egypt', wrote the French consul, were reduced to 'extreme poverty', worse than any previously seen there.⁹⁰ Al-Jabarti wrote with distaste that 'the Pasha', as he called Muhammad Ali, had made himself 'absolute master of Egypt', and tried to raise money 'by all methods ... The Pasha does not like to be crossed on any matter.

He wants his slightest desires to be executed without any comment.⁹¹ Opposition to his orders was considered 'dangerous in the extreme'.⁹²

While praising Muhammad Ali's energy in reconstructing, embellishing and fortifying Alexandria, the final judgement made by al-Jabarti was that 'if with the energy, generosity of character and qualities of direction and organization with which God had endowed him, he had possessed the sentiment of justice, this man would have been unique in his time and the wonder of his age.'⁹³ It is possible that al-Jabarti experienced Muhammad Ali's injustice for himself: by one account, after spending the evening with the Pasha, and annoying him by the freedom of his comments, the greatest modern Egyptian historian was strangled and his body tied to the feet of an ass.⁹⁴

Nevertheless, when they heard the news of the Pasha's death in Alexandria on 2 August 1849, Egyptians' displays of grief surprised many observers. The British consul-general wrote, 'The attachment and the veneration of all classes in Egypt for the name of Mohammed Ali are prouder obsequies than any which it was in the power of his successor to confer.' He heard many say that 'if Allah would permit me, gladly would I give ten years of my life to add them to that of our old pasha.' 'The old inhabitants remember and talk of the chaos and anarchy from which he rescued this country; the younger compare his energetic rule with the capricious vacillating government of his successor; and all classes, whether Turks or Arabs, not only feel but hesitate not to say openly that the prosperity of Egypt has died with Mohammed Ali. In truth, my Lord, it cannot be denied that Mohammed Ali notwithstanding all his faults was a great man.'⁹⁵

104. Bayle St John, p. 17.
105. Philipp, *The Syrians in Egypt*, p. 63n.
106. Durand-Viel, II, 140.
107. Ilbert, I, 167.
108. Dodwell, p. 194, dispatch of Murray, 8 July 1847.
109. See Comte Joseph d'Estourmel, *Journal d'un voyage en Orient*, 2 vols. (1844), II, 495–7.
110. Philip Sadgrove, 'Travellers' rendezvous and cultural institutions in Mohammed Ali's Egypt', in Paul Starkey and Janet Starkey, eds., *Interpreting the Orient: Travellers in Egypt and the Near East* (Reading, 2001), p. 259.
111. James Augustus St John, II, 358; Ilbert, I, 134.
112. Minutoli, pp. 154–7; A. Clot, *Aperçu général sur L'Egypte*, II, 156–7.
113. Scott, I, 46–7; Manley and Ree, p. 254; Wilkinson, p. 101.
114. Philip Sadgrove, *The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century 1799–1882* (Reading, 1996), pp. 35, 39, 40.
115. Cf. Baron de Kusel Bey, *An Englishman's Reminiscences of Egypt* (1915), p. 38: 'Alexandria and its European suburb Ramleh are hard to beat for open-handed and open-hearted hospitality.'
116. Raguse, III, 216n, 218.
117. Bayle St John, p. 131.
118. H. R. Ross, *Letters from the East* (1902), p. 199n.
119. Florence Nightingale, *Letters from Egypt* (1998 edn), p. 24.
120. David Millard, *Journal of Travels in Egypt, Arabia Petraea and the Holy Land during 1841–2* (Rochester, NY, 1843), pp. 30, 34.
121. James Augustus St John, II, 358, 376.
122. Ed. de Cadalvène and J. de Breuvery, *L'Egypte et la Turquie de 1829 à 1836*, 2 vols. (1836), I, 27; Hogg, I, 145; cf. for a similar account A. B. Clot Bey, *Mémoires* (Cairo, 1949), p. 38.
123. Wilkinson, p. 72; Nassau William Senior, *A Journal Kept in Turkey and Greece in the Autumn of 1857 and the Beginning of 1858* (1859), p. 18, 19 Nov. 1855.

Chapter 5: Alexandria: Bid for Empire

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2. Durand-Viel, I, 314, 316, 367; Cattau, I, 150, dispatch of 13 Dec. 1827; Manley and Ree, pp. 238, 266, 273.
3. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, pp. 38, 48; Sabry, p. 44, dispatch of 7 July 1813.
4. Durand-Viel, I, 163.
5. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, p. 52.
6. Kate Fleet, *The Muslim Bonaparte: Diplomacy and Orientalism in Ali Pasha's Greece* (Princeton, 1999), pp. 23–4, 31, 51, 79, 105–7, 116.
7. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, pp. 53–5, letter of 23 Jan. 1822. In 1832 he complained that the Ottomans had been tyrannical and treacherous for five hundred years: *ibid.*, p. 71.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 56–9, letters of 24 Dec. 1825, 28 Oct. 1827.

9. Cattau, II, 11, 21, 45, Lavison to Bouteneff, 24 Apr., 26 May 1836.
10. Landes, p. 331.
11. James Augustus St John, II, 363; Bromfield, p. 20, letter of 22 Oct. 1850; Wiet, p. 249.
12. Douin, *Boisecomte*, pp. 85, 98, report of 29 June 1833.
13. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, pp. 61–6; Cattau, I, 448, Lavison to Bouteneff, 11 Nov. 1831.
14. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, pp. 67, 161.
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16. Douin, *Boisecomte*, pp. 286, 287, 292, report of 19 Sept. 1833; Kontente, p. 457.
17. Kutluoglu, p. 73.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 91; Douin, *Boisecomte*, pp. xxvii, xxxiv to Admiral Roussin, 8 Sept. 1832.
19. Kutluoglu, pp. 98–104.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 113; Sabry, pp. 377, 379, report of Campbell, 1836.
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22. Cattau, I, 463, 532, 542, dispatches of 1 Feb. and 12, 31 Aug. 1832.
23. Sabry, p. 182.
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25. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, p. 71, to Ibrahim, 3 June 1832.
26. Sabry, pp. 219, 227, letters of 28 Dec. 1832, 3 Feb. 1833.
27. E. B. Barker, II, 118, letter of John Barker to James Calvert, 1 Apr. 1830.
28. Manley and Ree, p. 239; Dodwell, p. 86; Driault, p. 209, circular of 13 Cemna al-Awal 1255.
29. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, pp. 285–9.
30. Ehud R. Toledano, *State and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge, 2003 edn), pp. 158–60.
31. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, pp. 89, 282, letters of 1822, 30 June 1833.
32. Byron, who travelled in the Ottoman Empire in 1809–11, wrote that 'The Turks abhor the Arabs (who return the compliment a hundred fold) even more than they hate the Christians.'
33. Cattau, II, ii, 352, Duhamel to Nesselrode, 6 July 1837.
34. Jabarti, VIII, 204, IX, 53, 153.
35. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, pp. 91, 245–6, 252–4, 269.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 253, 256, 245, 5 Sept. 1832.
37. Sabry, p. 153, letter of 12 Dec. 1827.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 550.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 473, Ibrahim to Muhammad Ali, 4 Sept. 1839.
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42. Toledano, p. 98.
43. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, p. 283.
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45. Kutluoglu, pp. 119–20.

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