

Goodwill and Bad: Rethinking US–Egyptian Contacts in the Interwar Years

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American contacts with Egypt before the Second World War remain, by and large, a scholarly *terra incognita*. Though there are numerous studies of American–Egyptian relations, the vast majority begin their story at the end of the Second World War, ignoring earlier contacts.¹ John A. DeNovo's classic work *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East 1900–1939* is one of the few studies that survey, albeit briefly, American–Egyptian relations in the interwar years.² However, DeNovo's survey – like other studies that deal with that period – focuses solely on American interests, policies and activities, with the Egyptian side of the story remaining almost entirely mute. When a bilateral perspective is adopted it invariably deals with American–British, rather than American–Egyptian, relations, and sources in Arabic are rarely consulted, if at all.³ Yet in order to understand fully the story of American involvement and impact in Egypt during the interwar period one cannot afford to ignore the Egyptian side. Egypt achieved formal if partial independence as early as 1922, and from the mid-1920s direct American relations with an increasingly independent and assertive Egyptian government began to take shape.

The existing scholarship on US policy towards Egypt in the interwar period emphasizes the minor and non-political nature of American interests and activities there. The United States was 'on the sidelines'; it was no more than 'Britain's junior partner', always recognizing British primacy in Egypt and deferring to British policies and interests there.⁴ A complementary assertion regarding this period is that despite its minor role in Egypt during that period, the United States by and large enjoyed a singularly favourable reputation among the Egyptian leadership and public. Gail Meyer, in a brief prelude to her survey of post-1945 American–Egyptian relations, asserts that 'by 1945 America's contacts with Egypt had harvested a store of good will'. She adds that the United States' 'educational, missionary, and philanthropic endeavors had established an image untarnished by a history

of colonial domination', and the United States 'stood high in the esteem of the average Egyptian citizen'.⁵ This interpretation, however, is at best only partially correct, as it fails to account for the currents of disappointment and suspicion that emerged in Egyptian views of the United States during the interwar years.

This article takes up the task of exploring American–Egyptian contacts in the interwar years, contending that despite the American position 'on the sidelines' during this period, the exploration of these early contacts is significant for two reasons. First, it exposes the complexity of the American position toward the colonized peoples after the First World War, as Wilsonian ideals of self-determination collided with American interests – and American sentiments – for preserving the alliance with the colonial powers, particularly with Britain. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it illustrates how the image of the United States in Egyptian eyes was transformed during this period: first the high hopes for American support in Egypt's struggle for self-determination; then the bitter disappointment as the United States failed to apply Wilson's principles to Egypt in the manner the Egyptians had hoped. As the Egyptian sense of national identity and pride continued to develop in the interwar years, there emerged a perception of the United States as a source of cultural threats, threats embodied in the American efforts to influence Egypt's future through the activities of missionaries, and to shape Egypt's past through the practices of archaeology and Egyptology.

In examining American–Egyptian contacts during the interwar period, this study focuses on the American–Egyptian dimension, rather than the American–British one, integrating the Egyptian voice back into the narrative. It argues that the story of American–Egyptian contacts during the interwar period is more complex – and far more interesting – than current scholarship suggests. It does not, however, offer a chronological narrative of these contacts, nor does it present an exhaustive survey of all the issues they included. Rather, it focuses on three major issues that played an important role in shaping the patterns of mutual perceptions and interaction: the question of Egyptian independence in the immediate post-war years; the conflicts surrounding American archaeological interests in Egypt; and the political and diplomatic significance of the activities of American missionaries in Egypt. Thus this work endeavours to fill a lacuna in the historical literature on American–Egyptian relations, contributing historical depth and context to our understanding of American–Egyptian relations in the post-1945 period. Furthermore, it offers the American–Egyptian case as an example of the complexity of the American position towards, and contacts with, colonized peoples after the introduction of Wilsonianism on the world scene, and of the transformation of America's image as Wilsonian

rhetoric gave way to political isolationism, and as rising nationalist sentiments came up against American cultural involvement in Egypt, as elsewhere.

The interpretation that places the United States 'on the sidelines' during the interwar period, while generally correct, neglects to account for the influential, if indirect, role that it played in Egypt in the wake of the First World War. President Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, publicly articulated in January 1918, carried a promise of self-determination and freedom for all peoples, and they resonated widely within Egyptian public discourse and had an immense influence on the hopes and expectations of Egyptian nationalist leaders and the Egyptian public.⁶ As the war ended in November 1918, Egyptian nationalists led by Sa'd Zaghlul organized a delegation – known simply as the *Wafd* – to present the case for Egyptian independence before the Peace Conference in Paris. The British government, which viewed Egypt as the strategic lifeline of its empire and was determined to remain in control there, refused the delegation permission to travel. Zaghlul and his supporters responded by working to marshal domestic public opinion, as well as appealing for international support for their cause.⁷

During the tense months of early 1919 Zaghlul, striving to enlist American support for his cause, despatched a series of telegrams to President Wilson. The Egyptian leader repeatedly pleaded for an audience with Wilson in Paris, assuring the 'eminent philosopher and statesman' that

no people more than the Egyptian people has felt strongly the joyous emotion of the birth of a new era which, thanks to your virile action, is soon going to impose itself upon the universe, and to spread everywhere all the benefits of a peace whose calm and durability will no longer be troubled by the ambitions of hypocrisy or the old-fashioned policy of hegemony and furthering selfish national interests.⁸

In March 1919, after months of mounting public ferment within Egypt, the British authorities arrested Zaghlul and several of his political associates and deported them to Malta. The impact of Wilson's rhetoric on Zaghlul as he embarked on the struggle for Egypt's independence is reflected in the account of one biographer, who tells us that when the British police searched the Egyptian leader upon his arrest they found on his person a clipping of the *Daily Express* listing Wilson's Fourteen Points.⁹

The arrest of Zaghlul was a fateful move, sparking a massive wave of demonstrations and strikes in Egypt known as the '1919 Revolution'. As

violent clashes with the British authorities proliferated in the streets, scores of telegrams, letters, reports and petitions poured into the American legation from Egyptians of various walks of life who decried British oppression and solicited urgent American assistance in resisting it.¹⁰ One such message protested at the brutal suppression of peaceful demonstrations and the unjust slaying of innocents by the British. The notables who signed the message declared their faith 'in President Wilson and in his principles of liberty and human fraternity' and in 'American disinterestedness and in American chivalry', exhorting the United States 'to realize the solidarity of humanity' by helping 'the cause of right and liberty in Egypt'. Another petition, signed by 'The Ladies of Egypt', appealed to an American sensitivity to the mistreatment of women, complaining that during a 'pacific demonstration' British troops 'leveled their weapons at us and kept us standing thus for two hours under a burning sun'. 'This fact alone without commentary of any sort', they added, 'shows clearly the persistence of the British in employing brute force even toward women, in order to stamp out our unanimous movement'.¹¹

The American administration, however, did not respond to such entreaties, since the desire to preserve good relations with its British allies effectively precluded any possibility of lending support to the Egyptian nationalist cause. In March 1919, as Egyptians protested against Zaghlul's deportation in front of the foreign legations in Cairo, the State Department specifically instructed the American Diplomatic Agent and Consul-General there, Hampson Gary, to avoid any act that could be interpreted as showing support for the nationalists.¹² At the same time, the British were working assiduously to ensure official American recognition of their protectorate over Egypt. Sir William Wiseman, a frequent liaison to the American administration, informed Colonel House, Wilson's close confidant, that the Egyptian nationalists were interpreting the President's Fourteen Points to mean that the President of the United States thought that Egypt should have her independence, and that 'they were using that to foment revolution'. Wiseman argued that 'since the President had provoked this trouble by the fourteen points' he should help to allay it by declaring that the United States would recognize the British protectorate. The menacing spectre of revolution which seemed to hover over much of Europe rendered the British appeal to the danger of revolution in Egypt all the more effective, and their request was quickly granted.¹³

On 22 April 1919 the US representative in Cairo delivered a brief official note to the British High Commissioner, informing him that the President recognized the British protectorate over Egypt. The decision was made public just as Zaghlul and his delegation, recently released, landed in Marseilles on their way to Paris to present their case before the Peace

Conference. The Egyptians were caught unprepared. According to their own accounts, they were 'shocked, their faith in the Allies was shaken, and despair began to seep into their hearts'.¹⁴ Lord Lloyd, who would be the British High Commissioner in Egypt in the mid-1920s, later remarked that with the United States' recognition of the protectorate, 'Zaghlul's last hope of effective action in Paris disappeared'.¹⁵

Since they had harboured high hopes for American support for their cause, the American decision left many Egyptian nationalists with a sense of bitter betrayal, not easily forgotten.¹⁶ Muhammad Husayn Haykal, a prominent politician and intellectual in interwar Egypt, vividly recalled that the decision fell on the Egyptians 'like a bolt of lightning':

Here is the man of the fourteen principles, among them the right to self-determination, denying the Egyptian people its right to self-determination, and recognizing the British protectorate over Egypt, and doing all that before the delegation on behalf of the Egyptian people had arrived in Paris to defend its claim, and before President Wilson had heard one word from them! Is this not the ugliest of treacheries?! Is it not the most profound repudiation of principles?!¹⁷

Such words reflect the high hopes raised among Egyptian nationalists by the proclamation of Wilsonian ideals, as well as the impact of the unexpected abandonment of these ideals by the American government on their perceptions of President Wilson and the United States.

The extent of the damage that was done to American prestige in Egypt by the recognition of British rule, however, was not appreciated by American diplomats at the time, at least inasmuch as their views are reflected in the diplomatic record. In fact, by adding to the announcement of recognition a passage stating that 'the President and the American people have every sympathy with the legitimate aspirations of the Egyptian people for a further measure of self-government', American officials hoped that they could succeed in achieving their 'dual-end' of pleasing their British allies while at the same time preserving Egyptian goodwill. Gary, the American representative in Cairo, reported that 'the announcement appears to have had a most salutary effect upon the general situation', and although he admitted that the decision, 'shattered the Egyptian Nationalist hopes and aspirations', he assured his superiors that it greatly pleased 'a very large number of responsible Egyptians'.¹⁸ The American consul in Alexandria, though reporting that the announcement of the American decision caused 'dismay among the natives' and a 'revulsion of feeling toward the United States', added that the 'better class natives' were 'glad of the American Government's declaration as it has dispelled any illusions on the part of the people that the United States were in any sense of the word "backing" them

or encouraging them to oppose the British by committing acts of violence'.¹⁹ The precise identity of such 'better class natives' was left unspecified in the despatch.

Some 'natives', however, remained unconvinced by this logic. In the weeks following the American declaration dozens of messages continued to pour into the American legation protesting at the recognition and beseeching the United States to support Egyptians in their struggle against British oppression. One such message called upon America, as the 'recognized champion of Right and Justice to the weaker members of the great family of the Human Race', to afford the Egyptian people 'real and active help to realize their legitimate national aspirations'.²⁰ Indeed, despite America's recognition of the protectorate and its unresponsiveness to their pleas, Egyptians still held on to the hope of enlisting American support for their cause. In yet another telegram sent by Zaghlul to Wilson in June 1919, the Egyptian leader acknowledged the receipt of a letter from Wilson's secretary stating that the President has no time to see him. However, he noted with satisfaction that the letter did not exclude the possibility of an interview in the future, adding:

We wish to impress upon you what would be the despair of the Egyptian people if their delegation failed to get even a hearing before the Exponent of International Right and Justice.

We do not believe you wish Egypt to be condemned unheard. And we do not feel that you can form a judgement on the Egyptian situation without giving a hearing to the Egyptians themselves.

We believe you purposely left open the possibility of a future audience with us, and we respectfully request that this be granted us as soon as possible, in order that history may reflect honour on you in this affair, as in all others connected with the Conference.²¹

Although he continued to petition President Wilson, Zaghlul now also pinned his hopes on the US Congress. In June 1919, for example, he announced in the Egyptian press that the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate had decided that Egypt was 'self-governed'. The British High Commissioner immediately asked Gary to issue a denial, and one was indeed put out within a few days. Gary again reported with characteristic optimism that the denial 'was of striking utility in calming down the local situation and exerted a most sobering influence upon the native population, buoyed by false hopes of American support', adding that the denial would 'discourage any further attempts at misrepresentation of the attitude of the United States by Nationalist agents ... with a view to exciting Egyptian public opinion'.²² But far from bringing calm, the American *démenti* ignited a furore of discussions and interpretations in the

Egyptian press. Many opined that the denial should not be believed and stressed the importance of the Senate committee decision. One Egyptian paper described the committee's decision as proof that 'Americans have come to realize that there are inhabitants in Egypt who are not barbarians or negroes or red-skinned, but are rather the heirs of an ancient civilization who are demanding to occupy their due place under the sun'.²³ As such language suggests, Egyptians found it hard to believe that they, as an ancient and civilized people, could be denied the right to self-determination then being bestowed on many other nations as part of the postwar settlement.

However, the faith of Egyptian nationalists in the United States was by now gradually diminishing. In November 1919 Zaghul, still in Paris attempting to get a hearing for his case, sent Wilson a telegram imploring the President 'not to leave Egypt alone in her fight against England the implacable'. But the same message also hinted of his waning faith in Wilson as he wrote to Wilson that '[t]he Egyptian people hailed you more than any other people as the Chief of a new doctrine which was to have assured peace and prosperity to the world'. Wilson, however, had let Egyptians down, and '[f]or having had faith in your principles [they] see themselves today suffering under the most barbarous treatment of [*sic*] the part of the British authorities'.²⁴

In November 1919 a delegation of Egyptian nationalist leaders arrived in the United States for one final effort to press their case, obtaining visas despite early inclinations within the State Department to deny entry on the grounds that allowing the delegation in might damage Anglo-American relations.²⁵ The Egyptians presented their case before Congress and to the Secretary of State, contending that despite the American recognition of the protectorate, it was clearly not the intention of the United States government to allow the British to rob Egypt of its independence. They emphasized Egypt's contribution to the war effort and, alluding to Wilson's principles, concluded: 'Is Egypt to continue to be ruled by might, or are we really in the dawn of a new day when justice and right shall reign?'²⁶ But this new day was not to be. Although the Egyptians did manage to garner some support in Congress and within liberal circles in the United States, they failed to obtain any concrete assistance for their cause from the American government.²⁷

Yet by this time, with or without American support, Egyptian nationalists led by Zaghul were firmly committed to the goal of immediate and full independence. Lord Lloyd, in fact, blamed the Egyptians' 'bitterness and irreconcilability' toward British rule squarely on 'the incursion of America into world politics':

When the principle of self-determination crossed the Atlantic in all the panoply of crusade ... in Europe, in Asia, and in Africa it was enthusiastically agreed that America was coming to take charge of the Peace Conference, and that under the mighty guidance of America that Conference would arrange for every race and tribe and caste to be free from all interference ... Egyptians, at least, could not doubt that the great principle would be applied to them. They saw independence granted to the Arabs, whom they regarded as vastly inferior to themselves ... [W]ho could doubt that he [the Egyptian] would secure the sympathy of America, and consequently the delightful freedom which America was so generously promising to the world at large.²⁸

By the early 1920s it had become clear to Egyptians that the American policy was one of acquiescence to British domination over Egypt. In December 1924, when the assassination by an Egyptian of the British commander of the Egyptian army, Sir Lee Stack, led to the imposition of harsh punitive measures by the British, Egyptian leaders voiced their protest to American representatives and called for American support against the measures. This time, however, it was largely a perfunctory gesture, reflecting little hope of obtaining any tangible American assistance.²⁹ Indeed, the State Department did not see fit to deviate from its quiescent policy. When Senator Albert Cummins informed the department about telegrams he received from Egyptian parliamentarians protesting British actions, the Secretary of State, Charles Hughes, replied: 'in my opinion, no action or acknowledgement is required'.³⁰

Despite the official American quiescence, Egyptian nationalists, who continued to campaign energetically against the British in the 1920s, found a staunch ally in the American minister to Cairo from 1921 to 1927, J. Morton Howell. Howell, a retired physician from Ohio who got the post as an old friend of President Harding, had nothing but disdain for two things: alcohol – he was a steadfast supporter of Prohibition – and British rule over Egypt. Dr Howell delighted Egyptian nationalists with his scathing public criticisms of British policies. He accused Britain of aggression and perfidy toward Egypt, of condoning child labour and peddling opium and alcohol, and asserted that the 'imperialistic and unjust attitude of the British could not but continue to breed the most intense hatred among the people of Egypt and those who share with them the belief that Egypt should have her independence'.³¹ He reserved special scorn for the British High Commissioner, Lord Lloyd, whom he described as 'a constant thorn in the sides of the Egyptian people'.³² Howell did not shy from suggesting that in order to extricate themselves from the vice in which they were being held, the people of Egypt needed 'sympathetic help by the powers', and the United States first and foremost.³³

Howell's convictions were not shared by the cautious, pragmatic career diplomats in the State Department, who rivalled the British as prime objects of Dr Howell's disdain. Howell held that many career diplomats were 'absolutely unfit, morally or intellectually', to represent the United States, and the sentiment was mutual: State Department officials ridiculed Howell in internal correspondence, and they advised Americans resident in Egypt to avoid him as much as possible. On at least one occasion, Howell was also severely rebuked by the department for making representations against British policy without waiting for Washington's approval.³⁴

One might be tempted to dismiss Howell as nothing more than a tactless diplomat who failed to reflect the positions of the US government – an exemplar, perhaps, of the amateurishness of much of the US diplomatic corps at the time. But Howell served no less than six years in the post of American minister in Cairo. He was the official representative of the United States in Egypt and for Egyptians, his statements reflected the American position regardless of the disapproval they may have met in the State Department. Egyptian nationalists, in fact, used Howell's frequent public critiques of British policy in Egypt to bolster their own case.³⁵ The Egyptians appreciated Howell's support, and when the time came for him to leave Egypt in July 1927 he received a hearty sendoff from a group of Egyptian dignitaries who expressed 'gratitude for his manifold marks of sympathy toward the Egyptians'. The ceremony ended with cheers for the United States and President Coolidge.³⁶ Despite the postwar disappointment with the United States, then, men like Howell allowed Egyptians, at least to some extent, to continue to see the United States as a possible ally against the British.

The British, obviously, were far less impressed with Howell. After he publicly accused them of imperialism which 'deserves the worst censure both by God and man', the British organ in Cairo published an editorial entitled 'Malapropism and Myopia', which lambasted Howell for handling delicate issues 'with the non-chalance of a clodhopper and the fervor of a Mormon missionary'.³⁷ In 1929 Howell published a book severely criticizing British policies in Egypt; the British authorities in Cairo attempted to prevent copies of the book from entering Egypt,³⁸ and when the British High Commissioner complained to Howell's successor about American hostility towards British policies and aims in Egypt, he repeatedly invoked Howell's statements as examples.³⁹ Howell's words and deeds, then, left a mark on Egyptian and British perceptions of the United States' position regarding Egypt, and his difficult relationship with the State Department reflects the contradictions inherent in American attitudes towards the question of Egyptian independence, and of self-determination in general, during the interwar period. Howell's convictions, and the

positions he took as the American representative in Egypt, reflected the tension within American political elites between genuine sentiments against European imperialism and the pragmatic impulse to avoid foreign entanglements outside the Western hemisphere and preserve the alliance with the European powers by acquiescing in their colonial projects. Although it was this latter impulse that generally defined US policy in the interwar years, the former sentiments, as the Howell episode shows, left their mark as well.

Howell's tenure in Egypt during the 1920s, though largely uneventful in terms of US–Egyptian political relations, did see significant developments in the realm of cultural contacts, as monumental discoveries in the field of archaeology brought Egypt to a new level of visibility in American popular discourse. The unearthing of the tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamon by a team led by an Englishman, Howard Carter, in the spring of 1922 ignited widespread fascination with things Egyptian within the American public, and as the popular press responded to the public appetite archaeology became 'editorially rated second only to murder and sex'.⁴⁰ Yet Egypt's unfolding past was much more than popular entertainment; archaeology was a field where Egyptian national pride and politics often collided head-on with the expectations and desires of the foreign archaeologists and their institutional backers. The American institutions involved in archaeological excavations in Egypt in the early 1920s expected to be rewarded according to a 1912 arrangement that decreed that the finds should be evenly split between the Egyptian authorities and the foreign excavators. But after the British declared the formal, if limited, independence of Egypt in 1922, rising national sentiments found Egyptians beginning to claim greater control over their past. Among other things, they launched a protracted legal struggle over the tomb of Tutankhamon and its treasures against the estate of the recently deceased Lord Carnarvon, the British aristocrat who had obtained the concession under which the excavation took place. One of the mediators between the feuding sides was a prominent University of Chicago Egyptologist, James Henry Breasted, who had been working in Egypt for years.

According to Breasted's son and biographer Charles, James Breasted quickly grew exasperated by the 'arrogant, self-conscious, sweepingly victorious Nationalists' who were at the time 'in unchallenged control of the Egyptian government'.⁴¹ To Egyptians, he believed, 'the significance of Tutankhamon's tomb was entirely political and financial' in that 'it offered a superlative excuse for another burst of crowing over their newly acquired independence', and, most important of all, 'it contained golden treasure and attracted great crowds of tourists to be bled their cash'. To Egyptians, Charles continued, 'the proper salvaging of the objects in the tomb, the solicitude of the entire scientific world, and the legal rights of the discoverer

and his late patron were wholly academic matters which they neither comprehended nor cared about'.⁴² From this point of view, then, the picture was clear: the Egyptians were excitable and greedy while the Western scientists were objective and selfless. It is hardly surprising, however, that a completely different perspective on the Tutankhamon affair emerged from the contemporary Egyptian press. The nationalist *al-Balagh*, referring to Carter's padlocking of the tomb during the dispute, declared: 'Egypt has suffered enough from the foreigner, who, under the nose of the Egyptian public and of a high official of the Government, closes the tomb of Pharaoh as though it was the tomb of his own father'.⁴³

James Breasted's involvement in the Tutankhamon controversy was that of a private citizen, but the US State Department was soon also dragged into the fray. In January 1923, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, one of the several American institutions involved in excavations in Egypt, turned to the department for assistance, threatening to cease its financial support for excavations in Egypt if the 1912 arrangement were abrogated.⁴⁴ The department, however, sensitive to America's reputation in Egypt, was wary of direct involvement in this delicate issue. It instructed Minister Howell to broach the issue with the Egyptian government only if the other 'interested powers' intended to do the same, and then only in an 'appropriate and tactful manner'. Soon afterwards the department grew even more cautious, deciding that the intensity of the emotions surrounding the Tutankhamon controversy made it unwise to broach the issue at all. But when a nationalist government headed by Sa'd Zaghul assumed power in 1924 and vowed to move forward with the plan to nationalize Egypt's buried treasures, the Met assessed the situation as 'critical' and exhorted the State Department to take 'immediate action'.⁴⁵

When Howell finally approached the Egyptian government about the matter, the reply he received couched the Egyptian plan firmly in the terminology of scientific reasoning, stating that the government merely wished 'to establish easily and in conformity with general scientific interests, complete and logical series of documents representing the continuity of Egyptian civilisation'. The government further noted tartly that 'this change may, in fact, embarrass some scientific institutions from a financial point of view', but that this 'should not permit the sacrifice of scientific interests'.⁴⁶ A comparison of the language of this statement with the one by Charles Breasted cited above reveals that both sides of the dispute – Egyptian officials and foreign excavators – employed the rhetoric of 'scientific interests' to bolster their own claims and used insinuations of greed to taint those of the other side. This diplomatic exchange on archaeology continued, with proposals and counter-proposals proliferating, until 1926, when in the face of an unrelenting Egyptian position the foreign

institutions finally agreed to settle for the Egyptian government's assurance that henceforth it would give them the finds that it would not require for national or local collections.⁴⁷ Howell's self-congratulatory remarks on 'the winning of this contest by us' and the Met's expressions of heartfelt gratitude to the State Department for 'these results which your splendid efforts have gained for us' cannot obfuscate the fact that by 1926 the foreign powers, and the United States among them, acquiesced in what amounted to full Egyptian control over the relics Egypt's own past.⁴⁸

As the controversy over the rights of foreign archaeologists in Egypt unfolded, yet another episode reflected the increasingly prominent role of archaeology as an arena in which science, philanthropy, national pride and imperial interests all came together in a contest for influence. In December 1925 John D. Rockefeller Jr., at James Breasted's behest, offered the Egyptian government a gift of ten million dollars intended for the construction and maintenance of a new archaeological museum in Cairo. Although the offer was made by private interests with no direct involvement of the American government, Secretary of State Frank Kellogg nevertheless felt that since 'the realization of the Project would have a beneficial effect upon our relations with Egypt' it deserved 'informal support and encouragement'.⁴⁹ Though presented as a gift to science, Rockefeller's offer came with strings attached – the museum was to be controlled for a period of thirty years by an eight-member board, six of which would be foreigners: two Americans, two British and two French.⁵⁰

When the offer was first presented to King Fuad of Egypt he was dismissive, remarking casually that Egypt was a rich country and required no gifts from foreigners. Although the king added that the decision in the matter lay with the executive, the government at the time, which faced Zaghlul's nationalist Wafd party in the opposition, could hardly afford to be seen as selling Egypt's treasured relics to foreigners, and the offer was finally rejected in April 1926.⁵¹ The nationalist *al-Ittihad* summed up the issue: 'It is impossible, from the national view point, to place the Egyptian antiquities in the hands of the committee proposed to be formed according to these terms, for it ought [*sic*] to be composed mostly of foreigners. Every Egyptian feels proud of the honorable attitude taken by the Egyptian Government in a question like this connected with our inheritance from our glorious ancestors'.⁵² What American philanthropists and archaeologists, and their supporters in the State Department, perceived as an opportunity to assist Egypt and advance the cause of science was interpreted by the Egyptians themselves as an unacceptable attempt to seize control over Egypt's past.

If conflicts over archaeology engendered friction between Egyptians and Americans in the interwar years, the activities of American missionaries in

Egypt afforded an even more poignant illustration of the complexities inherent in the American involvement there during that period. American missionaries first arrived in Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century, and by 1920 they operated schools, hospitals, orphanages, and two institutions of higher education: the Assiut College in the south and the newly-established crown jewel – the American University in Cairo. They had come to Egypt to spread the gospel, but also to promote Western education and science, and generally to integrate Egypt into a ‘safe and progressive world order’.⁵³ The missionaries and their supporters back home firmly believed that their good works enhanced American reputation in Egypt and promoted goodwill toward the United States – a view also shared by some subsequent historians.⁵⁴ Yet the effect of missionary work on the image of the United States in Egypt was often exactly opposite, as many Egyptian Muslims felt that their faith, their traditions and their very social order were being gravely undermined by Christian proselytizing. Upon reading missionary promotional literature, intended to advertise their achievements to audiences back home, one Egyptian Muslim bitterly remarked: ‘We thought you were serving us disinterestedly, and, lo, we find you nailing our spiritual scalps as trophies upon the walls of your home churches; you glory in the breakdown of our culture and social fabric and time-hallowed traditions’.⁵⁵

The delicate and potentially explosive nature of this issue was well exemplified by an incident that occurred in April 1928 and became known in State Department correspondence as the ‘Zwemer Incident’. The bare facts of the incident were quite simple – Dr Samuel Zwemer, an American missionary and prolific writer on Islam and the Middle East who was living in Egypt, visited the campus of al-Azhar University in Cairo and during the visit distributed some missionary pamphlets to several students. This act, recounted a student representative, ‘caused a great deal of annoyance and excitement among all the teachers and the students’,⁵⁶ and a violent outburst was just barely averted. For a while, reported the American Legation, ‘the situation looked threatening, if not dangerous’.⁵⁷

The next several days saw an outcry in the Egyptian press denouncing Zwemer’s behaviour as dangerous, provocative and inflammatory. The students of al-Azhar themselves published a fiery public letter in which they warned of the grave consequences of such acts: ‘Yes, the al-Azharists were able, yesterday, to control their excitement and feelings’, they wrote, ‘but is it possible for any person to always control his excited feelings.’⁵⁸ In the Egyptian Parliament deputies sharply attacked the government for its laxity toward Christian proselytizing. The Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs urgently called on the American Chargé, who hastened to express his ‘sincere regret for the said unfortunate incident.’⁵⁹ Still, a year later, R.M.

Graves, the British acting director of the Egyptian ministry of the Interior, received information to the effect that Dr Zwemer had once again been observed distributing pamphlets in cafés in Alexandria. Graves, mindful of the British interest in public order, promptly suggested that 'the indefatigable Dr Zwemer should be invited to abstain from this kind of propaganda in the future'. The reports turned out to be exaggerated and a second Zwemer Incident was thus averted.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, rhetorical attacks on the Christian missionaries grew more frequent and vehement in Egypt in the early 1930s, with Americans often seen as the main culprits.⁶¹ Muhammad Haykal reported in his memoirs that during that period

the activity of the Christian missionaries suddenly emerged in a very frightening light. The newspapers reported at the time that the American University in Cairo is the source of these missionary activities, and that it houses the war councils that organize these activities. ... The newspapers told of the methods used by the missionaries to tempt the simpleminded to embrace Christianity, and to convert the innocent children of the poor Muslims.⁶²

Haykal himself testified that his deep concern over missionary activity in Egypt played a major role in his own intellectual transformation in the 1930s from liberal secularism to a greater emphasis on Islamic tradition. His well-known 1935 book on the life of the prophet Muhammad was written, as he explained in the book's introduction, 'to counter the invective of the Christians.' This need to resist Christian proselytizing and to defend Islamic traditions indeed played a major role in 'the return of Islam to a primary position in Egyptian intellectual discourse and public life' in the 1930s.⁶³

The official policy of the State Department towards American missionaries in Egypt vacillated between the need to protect their interests and activities in Egypt and the desire to avoid antagonizing Egyptians, with the latter consideration increasingly winning out as Egyptians grew more assertive. Missionaries repeatedly prodded the State Department to ensure the safeguarding of 'religious liberties' in Egypt,⁶⁴ but the American government, like the British authorities, was well aware of the delicate nature of this issue and reluctant to show support for the missionaries. Already in 1930 the State Department instructed the American minister in Cairo to inform the missionaries 'that the United States Government expects them to refrain from such activities as might give rise to anti-American feelings'.⁶⁵ In the course of the 1930s it became clear that although the Egyptian Constitution guaranteed 'religious liberty', the official Egyptian interpretation of that phrase differed crucially from the American one. For the Egyptian authorities it meant liberty to practice

freely the religion into which one was born, but not the liberty for a born Muslim to convert to Christianity.⁶⁶ The State Department, despite going through the motions of heeding the missionaries' pleas, did not in the end afford them any effective assistance. When the Egyptian government finally outlawed all missionary activities in 1941, the United States, after having several tepid protests rebuffed, decided to acquiesce.⁶⁷

Although the United States was indeed 'on the sidelines' in Egypt during the interwar years, American-Egyptian contacts in this period were in fact more diverse and significant than that phrase suggests. American involvement in Egypt in the interwar years did often strive to cultivate Egyptian goodwill, sometimes with some success, as the story of Dr Howell suggests. However, the perception of the United States in Egypt as a benevolent power was severely challenged as early as 1919 by the American refusal to aid the Egyptian Revolution despite Woodrow Wilson's ringing declarations on self-determination. Later, in the 1920s and 1930s, the American image in Egypt was further marred by growing friction over cultural issues such as archaeology and, far more acutely, Christian proselytizing, activities which Egyptians often perceived as grave threats to their autonomy and traditions, to their sense of identity and way of life. The American quest for goodwill left, so it seems, some bitter feelings in its wake.

NOTES

1. See for example Matthew F. Holland, *America and Egypt: from Roosevelt to Eisenhower* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996); Peter Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945-1956: Strategy and Diplomacy in the Early Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Geoffrey Aronson, *From Sideshow to Center Stage: US Policy Toward Egypt, 1946-1956* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1986). Interestingly, Egyptians historians have also adopted this historically foreshortened perspective – one study of American-Egyptian relations devotes only a few pages to the pre-1939 period. See 'Abd al-Ra'uf Ahmad 'Amr, *Ta'rikh al-'Alaqa al-Misriyyah al-Amrikiyyah* ('The History of Egyptian-American Relations') (Cairo: al-Hai'ah al-Misriyyah al-'Ammah lil-Kitab, 1991).
2. John A. DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East 1900-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963). DeNovo devotes 15 pages to American policies and interests in Egypt in the interwar years, the most comprehensive coverage to date of the relationship during that period.
3. A partial exception is Holland, *America and Egypt*, which gives the Egyptian perspective in some detail, though using only English language sources.
4. See John A. DeNovo, 'On the Sidelines: The United States and the Middle East Between the Wars, 1919-1939', and Barry Rubin, 'America as Junior Partner: Anglo-American Relations in the Middle East, 1919-1939', both in Uriel Dann (ed.), *The Great Powers in the Middle East 1919-1939* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), pp.225-51.
5. Gail E. Meyer, *Egypt and the United States: The Formative Years* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980), p.37.
6. See 'Abd al-Khaliq Lashin, *Sa'd Zaghul wa-Dawruhu fi al-Siyasah al-Misriyyah* 'Sa'd

- Zaghlul and his Role in the Politics of Egypt' (Beirut: Dar al-'Awdah, 1975), pp.126-7; The American University at Cairo, *Special News Bulletin*, 1 July 1919, p.1.
7. The complex considerations that drove British policy in Egypt at the time are masterfully detailed in the classic study by Elie Kedourie, 'Sa'd Zaghlul and the British', in *The Chatham House Version and other Middle-Eastern Studies* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), pp.82-159. Also useful is John Darwin, *Britain, Egypt and the Middle East: Imperial Policy in the Aftermath of War, 1918-1922* (London: Macmillan, 1981).
 8. The Zaghlul telegrams are reproduced in George E. Noble, 'The Voice of Egypt', *The Nation*, 3 Jan. 1920, pp.861-4.
 9. Lashin, *Sa'd Zaghlul*, pp.127-9.
 10. A representative batch of four such telegrams sent by Egyptians is enclosed in: Gary to the Secretary of State, 24 March 1919, in Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives, College Park, Maryland (henceforth cited here as RG59), 883.00/128; Gary to the Secretary of State, 20 April 1919, RG59, 883.00/166. The State Department specifically instructed that such telegrams and reports be transmitted to Washington.
 11. Enclosed in Gary to the Secretary of State, 26 March 1919, RG59, 883.00/135.
 12. Gary to the secretary of state, 17 April 1919, RG59, 883.00/118. Since Egypt was not an independent country at the time – it had formally been under Ottoman suzerainty before the war, and its postwar formal status had not yet been determined – the American diplomatic representative in Cairo bore the title of 'diplomatic agent and consul-general'.
 13. From the testimony of William C. Bullitt, former member of the American delegation to the Peace Conference, before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on 12 Sept. 1919. Cited in Noble, 'The Voice of Egypt', p.864. Upon hearing that the decision to recognize the protectorate 'took only a few minutes', Senator Philander Knox, himself a former Secretary of State, remarked: 'We never chewed them up that fast'.
 14. Lashin, *Sa'd Zaghlul*, p.236, quotes on this point the unpublished memoirs of Egyptian delegation members 'Abd al-Rahman Fahmi and Muhammad 'Alawiyyah.
 15. Lord Lloyd, *Egypt since Cromer* (London: Macmillan, 1933), Vol.1, p.342.
 16. On Zaghlul's own faith in Wilson's principles and his surprise at the United States' recognition of the protectorate see Husayn Fawzi Najjar, *Sa'd Zaghlul: al-Za'im wal-Za'amah* ('Sa'd Zaghlul: The Leader and the Leadership') (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1987), pp.66-7.
 17. Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *Mudhakkirat fi al-Siyasa al-Misriyya* ('Memoirs in Egyptian Politics') (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1977), Vol.1, p.81.
 18. Gary to the Secretary of State, 26 April 1919, RG59, 883.00/162. About the general context and repercussions of the American decision see also P.J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Modern Egypt*, 4th Edn. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p.268.
 19. Tuck to the Secretary of State, 28 April 1919, RG59, 883.00/151.
 20. Enclosed in Vice Consul in charge to the Secretary of State, 29 April 1919, RG59, 883.00/179.
 21. Zaghlul to Wilson, 18 June 1919, in Arthur Link *et al.* (eds.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-93), Vol.61, p.8.
 22. Gary to the Secretary of State, 24 Nov. 1919, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (henceforth *FRUS*), 1919, 2:206; for the British perspective on this incident see *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print* (henceforth *B DFA*), Part II, Series G, Vol.1, pp.321-2; also see Lashin, *Sa'd Zaghlul*, p.238.
 23. *Al-Ahali*, 10 Sept. 1919, enclosed in Gary to the Secretary of State, 24 Nov. 1919, RG59, 883.00/234.
 24. Cablegram from Zaghlul to Wilson, 23 Nov. 1919, RG59, 883.00/212.
 25. Davis to the Secretary of State, 26 Nov. 1919, RG59, 883.00/213.
 26. Mahmoud to the Secretary of State, 26 Nov. 1919, RG59, 883.00/214.
 27. Haykal, *Mudhakkirat*, 1:83; 'Amr, *Ta'rikh*, p.30. On Congressional support for Egyptian independence see exchange between Senator Owen and Secretary of State Lansing, *FRUS*, 1919, 2:207-9; also *B DFA*, Part II, Series G, Vol.1, pp.320-21. On support of the Egyptian cause in liberal circles, see Noble, 'The Voice of Egypt', pp.861-4.

28. Lloyd, *Egypt since Cromer*, Vol.1, pp.283–4.
29. Low Egyptian expectations for American support following Stack's assassination are reflected in the paucity of Egyptian protests in State Department files from 1924, as compared with the deluge of petitions during the Egyptian upheavals of spring, 1919. See also Howell to the Secretary of State, 30 Dec. 1924, RG59, 883.00/540.
30. Hughes to Cummins, 5 Dec. 1924, RG59, 883.00/511.
31. J. Morton Howell, *Egypt's Past, Present and Future* (Dayton, OH: Herbein Press, 1929), p.218; for further samples of Howell's vitriol against the British see also pp.25, 128, 139, 143–4, 168, 173, 178–9, 268, 296. Howell's book was published in 1929, two years after he left Egypt, but he had also criticized British conduct frequently and publicly during his term as minister, from 1921 to 1927. See, for example, Howell to the Secretary of State, 30 Dec. 1924, RG59, 883.00/540. For the effects of an anti-British interview he gave to the Egyptian press see Winship to the Secretary of State, 26 July 1927, RG59, 883.00/616.
32. Howell, *Egypt's Past*, p.12.
33. *Ibid.*, p.327.
34. *Ibid.*, pp.4–5; DeNovo, *American Interests*, p.369 and n.97 there; Charles Breasted, *Pioneer to the Past: The Story of James Henry Breasted, Archeologist* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1943), p.388; Secretary of State to Howell, 8 June 1926, *FRUS*, 1927, 2:558–9.
35. For an example of such use by feminist and nationalist activist Huda Sha'rawi see Winship to the Secretary of State, 26 July 1927, RG59, 883.00/616.
36. *New York Times*, 7 July 1927, p.6.
37. *New York Times*, 3 July 1927, p.4.
38. Wadsworth to the Secretary of State, 5 Sept. 1929, RG59, 683.11241/11; *New York Times*, 12 Sept. 1929, p.11; DeNovo, *American Interests*, p.370.
39. Gunther to the Secretary of State, 10 May 1929, *FRUS*, 1929, 2:952–3.
40. Breasted, *Pioneer to the Past*, p.348.
41. *Ibid.*, p.367.
42. *Ibid.*, p.369. See also Donald Reid, 'Nationalizing the Pharaonic Past: Egyptology, Imperialism, and Egyptian Nationalism, 1922–1952', in James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (eds.), *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p.133.
43. Quoted in the *Egyptian Gazette*, 'The Deadlock at Luxor', 18 Feb. 1924. See Reid, 'Nationalizing the Pharaonic Past', p.135.
44. President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Secretary of State, 15 Jan. 1923, *FRUS*, 1924, 1:714–15.
45. Secretary of State to Howell, 29 Jan. 1923, *FRUS*, 1924, 1: 715–16; Secretary of State to Howell, 23 Feb. 1924, *FRUS*, 1924, 1:718; director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Secretary of State, 20 May 1924, *FRUS*, 1924, 1:719–20.
46. Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the American legation, 27 May 1924, *FRUS*, 1924, 1:722–3.
47. Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the American legation, 26 May 1926, *FRUS*, 1926, 2:75.
48. Howell to the Secretary of State, 26 May 1926, *FRUS*, 1926, 2:73; President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Secretary of State, 26 July 1926, *FRUS*, 1926, 2:76. See also Breasted, *Pioneer to the Past*, pp.370–73.
49. Kellogg to American legation in Cairo, 3 March 1926, RG59, 883.4061/1a.
50. The terms of the offer are laid out in Belknap to Dulles, 31 March 1926, RG59, 883.4061/5. Also see the *New York Times*, 6 and 7 April 1926.
51. Report by American Chargé d'Affaires George Wadsworth, 9 March 1926, RG59, 883.4061/8; Breasted, *Pioneer to the Past*, pp.388–90. Another source of opposition to the project was the French director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, Pierre Lacau, for whom it represented a malicious scheme to oust him and bring Egypt antiquities under American control. See Reid, 'Nationalizing the Pharaonic Past', p.135.
52. As quoted in the *Egyptian Gazette*, 10 April 1926, enclosed in Howell to the Secretary of State, 8 April 1926 [sic], RG59, 883.4061/12.
53. The American University at Cairo, *Special News Bulletin*, 1 July 1919, p.1.

54. Gail Meyer, for example, credits American 'educational, missionary, and philanthropic endeavors' for the United States' high standing 'in the esteem of the average Egyptian citizen'. Meyer, *Egypt and the United States*, p.37.
55. DeNovo, *American Interests*, p.375.
56. Abd al-Qadir Yusuf, for the students of al-Azhar, in a letter to the newspaper *Kawkab al-Sharq*, enclosed in the legation report to the Secretary of State, 20 April 1928, RG59, 883.404/8.
57. Wadsworth to the Secretary of State, 20 April 1928, RG59, 883.404/8.
58. Yusuf, in letter to *Kawkab al-Sharq*.
59. Wadsworth to the Secretary of State, 20 April 1928, RG59, 883.404/8.
60. Wadsworth to the Secretary of State, 28 Aug. 1929, RG59, 883.404/12.
61. Gunther to the Secretary of State, 16 June 1930, *FRUS*, 1930, 2:762-3 reports of 'fanatical attacks' against the mission. See also 'Anti-Missionary Fire Sweeps Egypt', The American University at Cairo, *Special News Bulletin*, 28 Dec. 1933, p.1; DeNovo, *American Interests*, pp.374-5.
62. Haykal, *Mudhakkirat*, 1:271-2.
63. Ibid.; Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.54 and 66. For a detailed account and analysis of Haykal's intellectual shift to Islam and the role of the Christian mission in the 'return of Islam' in Egypt in the 1930s, see Gershoni and Jankowski, Ch.3; also Nadav Safran, *Egypt in Search of Political Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp.169-75.
64. Acting Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Great Britain, 21 April 1930, *FRUS*, 1930, 2:758-9; Fish to the Secretary of State, 10 March 1936, *FRUS*, 1936, 3:20-24.
65. Stimson to Gunther, 12 May 1930, *FRUS*, 1930, 2:761.
66. The Minister in Egypt to the Secretary of State, 10 March 1936, *FRUS*, 1936, 3:20-24.
67. See series of exchanges on this issue in *FRUS*, 1941, 3:320-31.