

ROUNDTABLE

## Decentering Egyptian History: The View from the Libyan Borderland

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On the morning of 5 October 1904, two bedouin swam out from the shore of Sollum—a tiny Mediterranean outpost located along what is today’s border between Egypt and Libya—to a steamship belonging to the Egyptian Coast Guard Administration (Maslahat Khafr al-Sawahil). They were received by a Coast Guard officer named Shalabi Mustafa. Suspicious of the bedouin’s motives, Mustafa went ashore to investigate. Speaking directly to the Ottoman commanding officer at Sollum, he ascertained that the two bedouin were actually Ottoman spies who had been sent to search for evidence of whether the Egyptian Coast Guard intended to build a new military base by the Sollum harbor—something that the Ottomans were under strict orders to prevent from happening. At the same time, Shalabi Mustafa was alarmed to see that the Ottoman military had managed to construct a sizable garrison (*karakolhane*) of their own at Sollum—one that could quarter around a hundred men and would include a customs house and Ottoman “port office.”<sup>1</sup>

This seemingly trivial episode—taking place at the westernmost reaches of Egyptian sovereignty, hundreds of miles away from Cairo—had surprising political implications. The alarming results of Shalabi Mustafa’s fact-finding mission in Sollum slowly made their way up the chain of command. Mustafa’s superior in the Coast Guard, a German named Andre von Dumreicher, feared that the Ottomans’ renewed claim to territory around Marsa Matruh (a port town some 140 miles east along the Mediterranean coastline from Sollum) would disrupt the stream of revenue the Egyptian government had been collecting from sponge-fishing licenses, while also having a negative impact “on the minds of Bedouins” in the region. He made a strong recommendation to the acting director-general of the Egyptian Coast Guard Administration, a British subject named George Purvis Bey, that a survey commission be assembled to delimit the boundary at once. Purvis, in turn, forwarded the pertinent information about Shalabi Mustafa’s voyage to the British governor-general of Egypt, Lord Cromer, who then directed Britain’s ambassador in Istanbul to file a formal complaint with the Sublime Porte.<sup>2</sup> Such were the events that set in motion a protracted period of international conflict over Egypt’s western border, which would persist until an official boundary demarcation treaty was signed in 1925 between Egypt and Italy (Libya’s colonial occupier beginning in 1911).<sup>3</sup>

This anecdote exemplifies the project of “decentering Egyptian history” in a few different respects. The most obvious is geographical: it draws the historian’s attention far away from Cairo, focusing instead on events in one of Egypt’s borderlands—which have typically been overlooked in prevailing scholarship. It is understandable that Egypt’s storied capital city has loomed so large in Egyptian historiography, especially as the field has sought to emphasize Egypt’s encounter with European imperialism. After all, Cairo was the center of the colonial state, where British power was at its height, as well as the primary stage for the evolution of anti-colonial nationalism in the decades prior to World War I. Yet this focus has had the unintended effect of obscuring much Egyptian history beyond the capital. Only in recent years have scholars begun to challenge Cairo-centric histories of modern Egypt; my work on Egypt’s western borderland and the scholarship of the other participants in this roundtable (among other scholars) offer several

<sup>1</sup>National Archives, Kew (hereafter NA): Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 78/5490 (Shalabi Mustafa report, 6 October 1904).

<sup>2</sup>NA: FO 78/5490 (Dumreicher to Purvis, 7 October 1904; Purvis memo, 11 October 1904).

<sup>3</sup>The emergence of this protracted “border conflict” is the subject of the sixth chapter of my book, *Desert Borderland: The Making of Modern Egypt and Libya* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

clear models for decentering Egyptian history simply by expanding its geographical scope and seeking methods through which to tell stories *in* from the margins, rather than *out* from the center.<sup>4</sup>

But I would like to focus in this short essay on some other, perhaps less obvious valences of the opening Sollum episode that I believe also do the work of “decentering” Egyptian history. First, the story hints at new ways to think about Egyptian governance across its far-flung domains by introducing an entirely new institution—the Egyptian Coast Guard Administration. As I argue in my book, *Desert Borderland*, the Egyptian Coast Guard—although absent from all modern Egyptian historiography I had ever encountered—actually played an important role in shoring up Egyptian territorial sovereignty in the country’s western domains in the decade and a half prior to World War I.

Take, for example, the case of Marsa Matruh. What is now the most sizable town on the Egyptian Mediterranean coastline west of Alexandria actually originated as a Coast Guard stronghold. A 1903 khevdivial decree, which functioned as a sort of town charter for Marsa Matruh, granted the nascent Coast Guard Administration a great deal of governmental authority—indeed, stipulating that its governor (*muhāfiẓ*) also would be the local senior officer of the Coast Guard. Shalabi Mustafa, in fact, had been appointed governor of Marsa Matruh shortly before the bedouin spy episode in Sollum. Moreover, the Coast Guard’s institutional capacity expanded in tandem with the development of Marsa Matruh. From its humble roots as a branch of the Egyptian Customs Administration, based in Alexandria, the Coast Guard grew rapidly in the first decade of the 20th century, taking over responsibility for the port police in all of the country’s harbors. Additionally, members of the Coast Guard were instrumental in establishing much of the new administrative infrastructure in Marsa Matruh’s burgeoning town center, including a police station, prison, school, post office, and hospital.<sup>5</sup>

In the decade before World War I—the period that witnessed the emergence of Egypt’s western border conflict—the Egyptian Coast Guard evolved to become the paramount arm of the Egyptian government throughout the northwest coast and Western Desert, thereby integrating this wide swath of territory more firmly into the machinery of Egypt’s expansive state. And in its capacity as the main governing body in the borderland, it was the Coast Guard that was interfacing most regularly with the Ottomans—dealing with the Sublime Porte’s own political designs in the region, of which the establishment of a military garrison at Sollum was a central component. By tracing the political work of this overlooked government institution, then, we are led to another dimension of the work that decentering Egyptian history from the vantage point of the western borderland can illuminate: Egypt’s position as a site of interimperial competition in a broader Eastern Saharan context, in which the Ottoman state—usually written out of Egyptian history after the British occupation in 1882—was still a major player.

The complex interplay between the Ottomans and the Egyptian government, represented locally by the Coast Guard administration, was thrown into high relief in the wake of a series of violent bedouin disputes that erupted throughout the borderland in 1904. In January 1905, as the conflict between the Shihabat, ‘Awaqir, and Awlad ‘Ali tribes reached a fever pitch, Shalabi Mustafa arrived in the small Mediterranean outpost of Sidi Barrani in an effort to defuse the situation. During his stay in town, he received petitions from two separate groups of Awlad ‘Ali tribesmen, imploring him—as a representative of “our Government”—to compel the Egyptians to represent their tribe’s interests to the Ottoman authorities in Benghazi.<sup>6</sup>

Shalabi Mustafa’s actions in response to the bedouin unrest constituted a robust new approach toward local governance in the western borderland. Capitalizing on the reluctance of the Ottomans to intervene, Mustafa stepped into the fray and promoted the idea that the Coast Guard—the local administrative arm of the Egyptian government—would be a staunch ally for those “Bedouins belonging to us.”<sup>7</sup> In turn, the Awlad ‘Ali and their neighbors were keen to consider themselves Egyptian subjects, at least temporarily

<sup>4</sup>Zeinab Abul-Magd, *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Ellis, *Desert Borderland*; Jennifer Derr, *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Lucia Carminati, *Seeking Bread and Fortune in Port Said, 1859–1906* (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup>Dar al-Watha’iq al-Qawmiyya, Majlis al-Nuzzar wa-l-Wuzara’ 0075-003226, n.d., and 0075-058015 (doc. 2), n.d.; Andre von Dumreicher, *Trackers and Smugglers in the Deserts of Egypt* (London: Methuen, 1931), 8–9, 13.

<sup>6</sup>NA: FO 78/5490 (petition from “Kateefa group” of Awlad ‘Ali bedouin to Shalabi Mustafa, enclosed with Cromer memo, 28 February 1905).

<sup>7</sup>NA: FO 78/5490 (Shalabi Mustafa memo, 28 February 1905).

and instrumentally. This was a key turning point in how the bedouin related to the local Egyptian administration: as a result of Shalabi Mustafa's bold and innovative decision-making on the spot, the Egyptian authorities managed to bolster their sovereign reach and legitimacy in the borderland, at the expense of the Ottomans. This shift in governmental approach reverberated back to the highest echelons of government. The British Residency, ignorant of developments in the western borderland until Mustafa's reports arrived in Cairo, had no choice but to follow the Coast Guard officer's lead and adopt the language he used to identify the region's tribes. Cromer would now speak openly, for the first time, about exercising control over "our Bedawin" or "Egyptian Bedouins." Henceforth he also would frame political developments in the west as if there was one overarching border conflict between the Egyptian and Ottoman governments.<sup>8</sup> This was entirely new. In sum, the Coast Guard was responsible for shaping Egypt's policy toward the nascent border conflict in the west; political directives originated from the local men on the spot, such as Shalabi Mustafa, and not from the center. Cromer and his fellow Residency officials were at the mercy of this local governing institution, which, at the same time, was capitalizing on the western bedouin conflict to flex new muscles as a bedrock of Egyptian state authority in the Eastern Sahara, vis-à-vis Egypt's Ottoman suzerain.

In the years that followed, the Egyptian Coast Guard would continue to expand its operations as it jockeyed for regional power with the Ottoman authorities stationed in the borderland. As time wore on, the Ottoman authorities grew increasingly frustrated by the newfound authority and sovereign legitimacy that the Coast Guard was managing to garner at the expense of the Ottoman state. This was clearly illustrated by the impassioned response of a local Ottoman official—the *kaymakam* of Darna (a town in what is now eastern Libya)—to a failed bedouin summit that was scheduled to take place in Sollum in 1909. The Ottomans had promised the Egyptian government that a number of notable 'Awaqir shaykhs would be present at the summit, but in fact they could not impel the shaykhs to turn up. Moreover, as the *kaymakam* complained indignantly in a retrospective report on this summit that never materialized, the event turned into something of a public relations debacle for the Ottoman state. While he and other Ottoman officials had been made to look like the poor relations, waiting in vain for an entire week, the Egyptian delegation—"being governed according to the British rules of punctuality" (*İngiliz usûlunce dakikası dakikasına idare edilmekte*)—arrived precisely "on time at the right place." In addition, whereas the Ottoman delegation had traveled to Sollum on foot, the Egyptian delegation, "not wasting a moment," had been outfitted with an impressive Coast Guard ship.<sup>9</sup> The stakes of all this were perceived to be extremely high. As the Ottoman *kaymakam* sat idly in Sollum for a week, humiliated by his government's inability to keep up their end of the diplomatic bargain they had made with the Egyptians, he had a front-row view of his empire's ebbing sovereign grip over Egypt—an erstwhile "autonomous province" (*eyalet-i mümtaze*) now beginning to assert itself as a nascent independent nation-state.

Adopting the perspective from the western borderland thus highlights certain key political dynamics in the story of the making of the Egyptian nation-state that are entirely eclipsed when the gaze of historians remains fixed upon Cairo and the Nile Valley. If border formation is a fundamental facet of modern nation-state territoriality, as Charles Maier (among others) has emphasized, then we must pay attention to local state actors and embrace the role that cross-border political and social patterns played in propelling this process forward.<sup>10</sup> I have chosen to dwell at length on the Egyptian Coast Guard particularly for its crucial role in interfacing with the resurgent Ottoman state based locally in Sollum and Benghazi, and in bolstering Egyptian sovereign authority in the western borderland.

But the interimperial contestation that was so central to borderland formation in the pre-WWI years was not limited to Egypt's family rivalry with the Ottomans. The view from the margins also enables scholars to glimpse additional layers of international and imperial involvement in Egyptian history. For instance, the Italian state, in the long run-up to its occupation of the Ottoman Libyan provinces in 1911, had been paying extremely close attention to developments in western Egypt. Take, for example, its reaction to the aforementioned conversion of Marsa Matruh into an Egyptian *markaz* (district

<sup>8</sup>NA: FO 78/5490 (memos from Cromer to Lansdowne, 28 February 1905).

<sup>9</sup>Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri: Y.EE 128/93 (memo from 27 April 1909).

<sup>10</sup>Charles Maier, *Once within Borders: Territories of Power, Wealth, and Belonging since 1500* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016).

headquarters) and Coast Guard town: the Italians were closely monitoring this development, which they viewed with a great deal of suspicion. One official, lamenting that the Egyptian government's "project to create a new Governorate in Marsa Matruh" was now a "fait accompli" (*fatto compiuto*), warned that the Egyptians might undertake "colonization projects along the littoral from Alexandria to the Tripoli border"—something that needed to be prevented at all costs.<sup>11</sup> The Italians also were trying to insert themselves into Ottoman–Egyptian diplomacy. As the aforementioned border conflict between the Egyptian and Ottoman governments intensified, the Italians were never too far out of the loop. In fact, fearful of political developments that might undercut their colonial designs in the Ottoman Libyan provinces, they frequently tried to press their case in diplomatic circles by advocating for a formal boundary demarcation. Doing so, in their estimation, was the only way to ensure a territorially maximalist interpretation of the Libyan prize they sought—one that would ensure that all of the key nodes along major caravan routes (some of which cut through what today is Egyptian soil) would be incorporated "into Cyrenaican territory."<sup>12</sup>

At this point, it is worth pausing over the question of which archives allow for the more expansive, decentered approach to Egyptian history that this essay has attempted to sketch. As the footnotes for this essay bear out, certainly British sources are key to this story, as they have been for much Egyptian historiography of the colonial period. At the same time, if we adopt the view from the western borderland, the British actually appear more marginal than they do in most studies of late 19th-century Egypt. In light of the multiplicity of state and non-state actors who drove the story of borderland territorialization in the west of Egypt, the edifice of British colonial power recedes somewhat into the background. Accordingly, other collections of primary sources beyond the British and Egyptian governmental archives serve to fill in crucial gaps. The official state archives of the Ottoman Empire (*Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri*) as well as the Historical Diplomatic Archive of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri*) are particularly revealing for the insights they provide into Egypt's fluid and dynamic relationship with Ottoman Libya in the first decades of the 20th century (including, of course, Egypt's role in the anti-Italian resistance in Cyrenaica, which is how the Italians referred to the Benghazi and Jabal al-Akhdar region). Indeed, the Italian archives are an underutilized source for Egyptian history writ large—not just for the western domains of the country—and are worthy of additional attention by scholars of the colonial period.

Yet of all the archives I consulted for my book research, the one that went perhaps the furthest in decentering my understanding of Egypt's political history in the decades before World War I was, paradoxically, one that ostensibly represents the very seat of Egyptian power: the personal archive of the khedive 'Abbas Hilmi II (r. 1892–1914), which is held at Durham University Library in the United Kingdom. The holdings in this archive are voluminous, shedding light on many aspects of the khedive's more-than-two-decades rule. Taken together, they seem to demonstrate the existence of a sort of "state within a state" controlled by the khedive—an accumulation of private properties, financial circuits, and networks of loyal informants and spies—that extended to the far reaches of Egyptian territory and in fact often competed with the British-controlled governmental bureaucracy (centralized through the renaissance Interior Ministry in the mid-1890s). My research in particular focused on the khedive's dealings in the western borderland, where the khedive owned a wide array of properties and made great inroads tapping into local political structures to garner personal sovereign legitimacy—particularly in the oasis of Siwa and on the northwest Mediterranean coastline. Throughout the first decade of the 20th century, the khedive also spearheaded a major development project—the Maryut Railway—which stretched from the outskirts of Alexandria almost all the way out to Marsa Matruh, linking a lot of coastal towns, giving a huge boost to their local market economies, and employing a great number of local bedouin as railway workers in the process.

What the Durham archives ultimately reveal is that the khedive—technically the "sovereign" of Egypt—was in fact attempting throughout his rule to exercise power and garner legitimacy *outside* the main

<sup>11</sup>Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome (hereafter MAE): Archivio Storico Ex-Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, vol. 2, Libia, 1859–1945 (hereafter ASMAI), 101/2/24 (letter to minister of foreign affairs from Cairo, 3 July 1904).

<sup>12</sup>MAE: ASMAI, 101/2/33-4 (consul-general of Tripoli to MAE, n.d.). Cyrenaica was how the Italian authorities consistently referred to the Ottoman province of Benghazi (eastern Libya).

channels of Egyptian government. As the papers documenting his private landholdings, agricultural experiments, and spy networks show clearly, the khedive was deeply engaged in a project of cultivating his own sovereign domains *within* Egyptian territory. In the particular case of the west of Egypt, the khedive consistently emphasized his own unique role in ushering in economic progress and prosperity throughout the region, striving to be seen as the literal embodiment of Egyptian territorial sovereignty as it emanated from the capital. He sought to ensure that he, and not the British-controlled Egyptian government, would represent “Cairo” in the eyes of the local population.

The project of decentering Egyptian history, then, amounts to more than merely expanding the geographical scope of the narratives and experiences we emphasize. As the example of the khedivial archives suggests, it also entails a careful reexamination of what we mean by “the center” in the first place.