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In this seminar, we discussed some of the differing and at times conflicting ways that nineteenth and twentieth century Egyptians perceived their collective identities. Use the assigned readings to trace the changes in Egyptian national identities from the 1880s until today. In your opinion, how might Egyptians perceive their national identity in the future?

To try to define one single Egyptian national identity – to try to reduce the complexity and diversity of Egyptian society to one stable and cohesive category – would prove entirely futile.

Egypt as a territorial entity finds itself at the cross-roads of a number of different regions, ranging from North Africa, to the Mediterranean and Western Europe, to Eastern Africa and the Middle East. As a result of this central geographic location, the country has become in many ways a point of cultural contact and interaction. Widely recognized as one of the leading cultural centers of the Arab world, Egypt is nonetheless a place of great social instability. As competing influences never cease to arrive from the Maghreb, Western Europe, and the Middle East, incoming cultures are just as likely to fuse together as they are to collide violently and repel each other.

Unfortunately, beginning in the late XIXth and early XXth centuries, the rise of nationalist political movements has not only led to vast political transformations in the country – it has also deeply affected the country's social fabric and contributed to a re-definition of the country's national identities. As competing nationalist (and supra-nationalist) groups have struggled to develop strong ideological platforms and impose their very own notion of what Egypt should be on the rest of the population, a country that was once recognized for its cultural wealth and religious plurality has increasingly veered toward radicalization and homogenization in both of these social sectors. Egypt's once rich Jewish population is not in-existent, and the remaining Coptic minority is threatened by antagonizing Islamic forces.

Indeed, throughout this semester, our academic immersion into Egyptian society has revealed a deeply troubled and fractured sense of national identity. Our readings have fluctuated mainly between three driving factors, namely politics, religion and social movements – all three of which are closely intertwined in Egypt.

Since 1883 and the beginning of the occupation of Egypt by British forces, one could say that conflicts between Eastern and Western influences, as well as between Islamification and secularization, have dominated the Egyptian socio-political arena. While the two distinct conflicts often coagulate into one, as Western concepts of secularism and 'government of the people, by the people' (democracy) clash with Eastern concepts of a religious society governed by God's law, *shari'a*, it remains crucial to differentiate between the two.

From 1883 all the way to 1956, the Egyptian struggle against British occupation, largely symbolic of the country's more general quest for sovereignty and independence from colonial influence after years of Ottoman domination, would act as a crucial catalyst for the formation of Egypt's various concepts of national identity.

In the early 1900's, Mustafa Kamil, and to a lesser extent Khedive Abbas, led the first wave of Egyptian nationalists up till the creation of the first Egyptian political parties in 1907, one of the first concretizations of nationalist movements. Nevertheless, it was World War I, during which different social classes struggled together in an environment of shared misery under British martial law, that promoted the national solidarity that would coalesce into the Revolution of 1919. From this popular uprising would emerge two crucial figures in Egyptian history, Sa'd Zaghlul and the Wafd. More than any other aspects of Egyptian society, Sa'd Zaghlul and the Wafd would come to symbolize Egypt's gradual emancipation from Britain as it entered a decade of democratization and optimism.

From a more general point of view, the events following World War I marked a very important step forward in the establishment of a collective consciousness within the Egyptian population. Beyond symbols such as national hero Zaghlul and the 'people's political party' Wafd, society also embraced stories about demonstrations of patriotism, such as the Ladies' Demonstrations of 1919. Moreover, this period also saw a rising prominence of nationalist iconography in the arts (statues such as Mukhtar's *The Awakening of Egypt*) and the media (political cartoons) as an instrument to "reaffirm the unity of the collective and give the concept of nationhood greater immediacy."¹

¹ *Nationalist Iconography: Egypt as woman*

Following the 1923 Constitution, in which Egypt won partial independence from Britain and made the transition from a protectorate monarchy to a nominally sovereign parliamentary democracy, the country faced close to thirty years of political and social turbulence.

First of all, with the country itself still far from agreeing on a national identity, political leaders struggled to find a proper balance between the West, secularism, modernism and economic development on the one hand, and religion and traditional Middle Eastern and Islamic values and loyalties on the other. Furthermore, Egypt's democratic system fell prey to vast problems of corruption.

Within a decade of the parliament's creation, the oppressive and intractable presence of corruption in the realm of Egyptian politics was already having drastic implications on society - as real power fell back into the greedy hands of Egypt's wealthy elite, big portions of the population rapidly lost faith in the quality and reliability of the Western concept of democracy. As argued and explored by, the passage from the 1920's to the 1930's marked a crucial transition for social trends of Egyptian nationalism². Starting in the 1930's, Egyptian society made a transition that its' representative government would take many more years to accomplish - the Egyptian population gradually began to associate itself with the Arab identity and to embrace the Arab cause and as a result the once predominantly Western-styled, secular and territorial type of nationalism gave way to one intrinsically more Eastern, culturally Arabic and religiously Islamic.

Many aspects of the 1930's and 1940's would have lasting implications for concepts of Egyptian identity. Demographically, consistently strong population growth was causing high rates of urbanization, while politically an increasingly corrupt, self-indulged and inefficient political system was reinforcing an already problematic economic disparity between social classes. The combination of these demographic and political factors gradually fueled a deep popular dissatisfaction that translated socially into the rise of Islamic movements and politically with the 'Free Officer's' revolution of 1952.

Religious trends

Because religious customs and values are so pervasive in Egyptian society, it is important for us to follow the role that they have played socially and politically throughout the twentieth century.

First and foremost, Islam plays a central role in practically every Egyptian's daily life, starting at birth. Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage* gave us a very intimate insight into the way Islam shapes a child's cultural formation in Egypt's Muslim environment. In light of everything else we were learning about the religion, this autobiographical novel reminded us that Islam is above all a religion that preaches love and tolerance, ethics and morals.

Starting in the 1930's, the Egyptian collective identity experienced a resurgence in religious awareness. While the obedient, state-affiliated *ulama* remained quiet, Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Young Men's Muslim Association (YMMA) became extremely popular by relentlessly promoting political change and by operating on a platform that was simultaneously deeply Islamic and keenly aware of social needs.

Muslim Brotherhood founder and socio-political leader Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) embodied this new social trend, calling for a return to an Islamic state founded on *shari'a* and a religious value system. The Muslim Brotherhood has undeniably been one of XXth century Egypt's most influential movements, fluctuating between its status as a radical militant group breeding extremism, and that of a more moderate, social welfare network supporting the country's lower classes. After years of radicalism and often violence up till the Sadat regime, by the 1980's the Muslim Brotherhood had adopted a more moderate voice, continuing to harness the dissatisfaction of an under-privileged population for political gains as it attempted to enter mainstream politics³. Today, by placing independent candidates in Parliament, the Muslim Brotherhood has successfully infiltrated the government and, while it still faces great obstacles to power from a deeply entrenched Mubarak regime, the movement's religious, anti-governmental message and social welfare programs maintain a great appeal in society.

Islamic activism has also expressed itself through a trend of more violent religious groups. In the 1960's, a very repressive Nasser regime imprisoned and tortured thousands of political opponents and religious radicals. Out of this dark era for Islamic movements came the work of Sayyid Qutb. Preaching the importance of jihad, a struggle against the non-Islamic government and the corrupted secular society, *jahiliyyah*, Qutb laid down the ideological foundations for decades of Islamic extremism. This form of

² Gershoni, I. & Jankowski, J., *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 2002

³ William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East (Third Edition)*, 2004

religious expression was best exemplified by the *al-Jihad* group and its main ideologue, 'Abd al-Salam Faraj, who stressed that participating in the political process was unacceptable and that it was imperative for every proper Muslim to lead a violent jihad against the established un-Islamic power system.⁴ Such rhetoric incited the assassination of Sadat in 1981.

Arab identity

Initially embraced primarily by Egyptian society, Arab nationalism would gradually rise up and take over Egyptian politics under the form of Pan-Arabism with Nasser in the 1950's. Part of the group of 'Free Officers' that overthrew King Faruq in 1952, Jamal 'Abd al-Nasser went on to take control of the country until 1969. Nasser is responsible for transforming Egypt's collective sense of identity. With adoption of Nasserism, national ideology shifted from the narrow form of domestic, anti-British nationalism, to one revolving around the idea of an Egyptian-led Pan-Arabic struggle against global imperialist super-powers. The 1955 Czech arms deal, the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, and the proclamation of the United Arab Republic in 1958 all catapulted Egypt onto the global stage and concretized the nation's position of leadership among Middle Eastern Arab states⁵. Nasserism both institutionalized the Arab facet of the Egyptian national identity, "the 1956 constitution stated that Egypt was an Arab country and part of the Arab nation,"⁶ and reinforced Egypt's political and cultural influence over the Arab world.

Culturally, the famous singer Umm Kulthum was at the peak of her career and was spreading 'the voice of Egypt' as she performed to packed audiences across the Arab world. Umm Kulthum's work tells us a lot about Egypt's perceptions of self - often dedicated to themes of Egyptianness, her songs evoke romanticized images of the rural Egypt peasant lifestyle. This romantic desire to return to the simplicity of the past once again reflects widespread sentiments of dissatisfaction and despair in Egyptian society.

Beyond Nasserism, the actual transition in political system (Egypt has been under quasi-dictatorship ever since Nasser) did not really affect the collective consciousness from a more long-term social point of view. Whether it be under a corrupt parliamentary democracy or under an authoritarian despot, dissatisfaction with the political cast has remained relatively constant and the end result has remained the same: an unhappy population vulnerable to promises of regime change and better living conditions from Islamic socio-political movements.

Overall, this evaluation unfortunately paints a dark, and inevitably incomplete, picture of the Egyptian national identity. But it can nonetheless help us to identify some brief trends from the past century and guide us in making some tentative predictions for Egyptian perceptions of self in the near future. It lies beyond a doubt that Egypt as a country will continue to be deeply influenced by the Islamic religion. Whether it be socially or politically, Islamic values and political convictions play a very important role in contemporary Egypt and religion continues to be the predominant channel of expression for society's chronic malaise. It seems as if much of Egyptian society has come to accept and internalize the economic hardships and political corruption that have characterized the country for more than a century. While some fight for regime change and a better distribution of wealth, most try to make it to the next day,

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⁴ Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt*, 2003

⁵ Goldschmidt, *A Concise History of the Middle East*

⁶ William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East (Third Edition)*, 2004, p313