Cairo Under Isma'il Pasha: A Divided City

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Cairo Under Isma’il Pasha: A Divided City

Cairo, Egypt is a city often thought of as ancient, exotic, and foreign, nestled within the shadows of the great pyramids. During the late nineteenth century, Cairo underwent a series of changes that would alter the physical and cultural development of the city, resulting in a number of political changes. From 1863 to 1879 Egypt was ruled by Viceroy Isma’il Pasha. During his reign, Isma’il divided the city into ‘old Cairo’ and ‘new Cairo,’ with ‘new Cairo’ being a modern, grand, European-looking development on the western side of the city along the Nile, and ‘old Cairo,’ on the Eastern side being untouched by Isma’il in terms of architecture, leaving it crumbling and neglected. Isma’il is famously quoted as saying “my country is no longer part of Africa, for we are now a part of Europe” (“Making Cairo Medieval” 56). In the development of ‘new Cairo,’ Isma’il created an immense reliance on European and especially British businesses to fund his projects, ultimately creating a great amount of debt. The physical divide between the two areas of the city are clear with the division of east and west; new and old, and as a result of the physical divide, a cultural divide was created between the Europeanized Egyptian elite and the poor, working class people residing in ‘old Cairo.’ Isma’il created the physical divide in his intentional efforts to westernize the image of his city, which would come at the expense of his people. It was, in fact, Isma’il Pasha’s overspending in the physical and cultural ‘Europeanization’ of Cairo from 1863 to
1879 which ultimately led to the country’s dependency on British Entities, resulting in the British occupation of 1882.

Isma’il Pasha, born in Cairo in 1830, was the grandson of the great Muhammad Ali, the first Viceroy, or governing representative of the Ottoman Empire, to rule after the French occupation of Egypt from 1798 to 1801 (“Isma’il Pasha”). Isma’il’s father, Ibrahim, the son of Muhammad Ali, died after only 40 days in office in 1848, and was succeeded by Abbas I, who ruled from 1848 to 1854. Upon his death, Abbas was succeeded by Sa’id Pasha who ruled from 1854 to 1863 (“Ibrahiem Pasha”), and from 1863 to 1879, Isma’il Pasha was given the title of Viceroy, until his title changed to Khedive (another word for Viceroy, only hereditary) in 1867. Muhammad Ali, Isma’il Pasha’s grandfather, saw value in learning from the Europeans, as seen in his sponsoring of the overseas education of a select group of promising children. Before becoming Viceroy, Isma’il was sent to study at the Saint cyr Military Academy in Paris, where it is said he gained a deep appreciation for the European lifestyle, theatre, and architecture (Abu-Lughod).

From the begining of Muhammad Ali’s reign in 1805, Egypt held a sort of semiautonomous position within the Ottoman Empire as a result of earlier capitulations. From 1517, the Ottoman Empire ruled Egypt after defeating the Mamluks (high-ranking slave soldiers), but then lost power in 1798 during the French occupation, which lasted until 1801. After regaining power, the Ottomans named Muhammad Ali as Viceroy. Muhammad Ali, to assert his power, created a new administrative structure by massacuring the majority of the remaining Malmuks and eliminating the political influence of religious leaders. He then acquired a *firman*, or decree from the sultan stating that his family would obtain hereditary rule as Viceroy over Egypt (“Egypt”).
As newly appointed Viceroy in 1863, Isma’il was fortunate enough to take over during a time of prosperity. The American Civil War had created an immense demand for cotton, for which Egyptian soil could produce a great amount by relying on cheap labor to produce. In the year 1864 alone, Egyptian exports were valued at 14,416,661 British pounds, and with only 5,291,297 pounds spent in imports, created immense profit for the Egyptian Government (McCoan). Egyptian cotton was exported to British, French, Italian, and Spanish companies, but relied heavily on Britain, making up one-fifth of their cotton revenue ("The Money Market Review"). After the American Civil War’s end in 1865, Isma’il attempted to find the same success in the sugar refining industry, but the project soon failed because of dismal returns on investments (Overton).

Isma’il’s economic prosperity allowed him to justify his frivolous spending to make Cairo a civilized urban destination that met European expectations. Quickly after gaining power, Isma’il developed a plan to create ‘new Cairo’ along the banks of the Nile in Parisian style layout and architecture (Fig.1). The new development was designed in part by Ali Mubarak, a native Egyptian who studied Civil Engineering in France under Muhammad Ali (Abu-Lughod), and the unnamed project director for the Bois de Boulogne park in France (Nightengale 207). It was an ambitious project that was never fully realized, yet, his efforts still cost Egypt millions of British pounds in loans to European banks (McCoan).

A major factor for Isma’il wanting to create the ‘new Cairo’ was the opening of the Suez Canal. Located 134 km Northeast of Cairo, the Suez Canal project began under the rule of Ismail’s predecessor, Sa’id Pasha, and was the brainchild of a French diplomat by the name Ferdinand de Lesseps. The project aimed to shorten the distance trade ships had to travel between India and Europe (India being under British control at this time), which would make immense profits for
European trade ship companies (Crabites). The grand opening of the Suez Canal provided Isma’il with the opportunity to introduce the western world to the ‘new Cairo,’ one in which he hoped could rival the beauty of the Haussmannian architecture he saw in Paris. The Suez Canal project was ratified by the Ottoman Empire in 1866, giving Isma’il only three years to complete his ‘new Cairo’ before the Canal’s grand opening in November of 1869 (Abu-Lughod).

The massive £91,000,000 debt (Abu-Lughod) acquired by 1876 from Isma’il’s opulent spending in the preparation, celebration and completion of the Suez Canal created a need for outside consultation. Faced with these debts, the Caisse de la Dette Publique, or Commission of the Public Debt was established in 1876 with representatives from Italy, Austria, France, and England, and Egyptian finances were placed under the dual control of Britain and France. The end of Isma’il’s reign came in 1879 when, in response to European control over Egypt’s finances, he worked to rid Egypt of international control, relying on nationalist rhetoric to put his circle of wealthy Egyptians and military leaders against European control, causing concern within France and England, resulting in their pressuring of the Ottoman sultan to remove Isma’il in favor of his son, Tawfiq (“Egypt”). By 1879, Egypt’s debts amounted to around £152,000,000 (McCoan), and the nationalist rhetoric spread by Isma’il created increasing uproar within Egypt. It was the riot of June 11th 1882, in response to British naval ships arriving in Alexandria, a port city in Egypt that resulted in the British military occupation of Egypt (“Egypt”).

The Suez Canal is often thought of to be one of the greater achievements of Isma’il Pasha and his predecessor, Sa’id Pasha. Ferdinand de Lesseps, the former tutor of Sa’id Pasha and the son of a former French Consul of Egypt, is said to be the catalyst for the building of the Suez Canal (Mestyan). Having gained the trust of Sa’id in his childhood years (being Sa’id’s only
friend), de Lesseps intended to put “France in control of that strategic waterway, [and] make his country mistress of the seas” (Crabites 6), showing his political intentions that ultimately proved no match to Great Britain.

In 1869, European, and especially the British shipping business was booming with the creation of a new, innovative steam ship with screw propellers that reduced their reliance on coal and shortened travel times. With the creation of the canal, the travel time from India to England was significantly reduced, as “to reach Bombay from Liverpool required an 11,560-sea-mile trip round the Cape of Good Hope for a sailing ship; by substituting the canal route for the Cape, a steamship could save 5,777 of these nautical miles --- almost exactly half” (Fletcher 559). The geographic location of the Suez Canal made it a valuable asset to European tradesmen, as it reduced the time it took to arrive at Indian or other Asian ports, and saved them a great deal of money in coal.

In the early days of its construction, under Sa’id Pasha in 1859, the canal was thought of as a French project, with the French Suez Canal Company holding 52% stakes in the project, and 44% ‘given’ to Sa’id. Under Isma’il, Said’s shares were transferred to him, and a new agreement was made making it an Egyptian project. He intended for this transfer of power to give the facade of Egyptian independence, but truly depended heavily on French investment (Mastyan 64). It was reported in 1876 by James McCoan, an Irish politician and journalist specializing in Egypt and Turkey, that Isma’il, in building the Suez Canal alone owed 17,427,825 British pounds in debt from his 44% share in the project. To pay off these debts, heavy taxes were imposed on native residents of Cairo, as the visiting Lady Duff Gordon of England stated:
'I cannot,’ she reports, ‘describe to you the misery here now; indeed, it is wearisome even to think of. Every day some new tax….. The taxation makes life almost impossible; 100 piastres per feddan (acre) as tax on every crop, on every animal first, and then again when it is sold in the market, and a tax on every man, on charcoal, on butter, on salt… The last regulations have stopped all money-lending, and the prisons are full of sheikhs-el-beled (head-men [scribes]), whose villages cannot pay their taxes.’ (McCoan 81)

As Duff describes, the situation of the working class native residents of ‘old Cairo’ was dim and, while Isma’il spent millions of British pounds entertaining his peers and guests with the finest amenities, the people of Cairo were left with nothing, proving a stark contrast to their lives during the cotton boom of 1863, and leaving them feeling bitter towards Isma’il. The taxes increased day by day, and were often collected months or even years in advance (McCoan). In 1868 and 1869 Isma’il utilized forced labor under the instruction of de Lesseps, in part resulting in the death of thousands of Egyptian workers in the construction of the Suez Canal (Mestyan). The utilization of forced labor and the amount of civilian deaths left the workforce in Cairo already on shaky ground prior to the heavy tax burden. One of Ismail’s successors, Abbas II, reflected on the legacy of the Suez Canal, stating,

“The gigantic work of the Suez Canal, worthy of the land which witnessed the colossal undertakings of the mightiest Pharaohs of long past ages, never fails to strike the imagination. . . . Ah ! It is true that the Canal has proven highly remunerative to the Company which exploits it ; but Egypt has never obtained the smallest advantage ; on the contrary the Canal has been the principal cause of Egypt’s miseries.” (Crabites 10)
It was Ismail’s goal for the canal to bring international fame and recognition to Egypt as a modern, independent state that would then attract European businesses to his country. In doing so, he created an immense national debt that took a toll on the people of Cairo in the form of forced labor and heavy taxes. None of this was enough, however, as it became necessary for Isma’il to sell his 44% stake in the Canal Company, selling it to the then British prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli for 4,000,000 pounds in 1875, which would later become one of the central reason for the British occupation of 1882 (“Egypt”).

One of the grander examples of Isma’il Pasha’s Europeanization efforts was the Khedivial Opera House, built in ‘new Cairo’s’ Ezbekieh Garden district in 1869. The builder, an Italian architect by the name Pietro Avoscani, took insperation from his design of the neoclassical Zizinia Theatre in Alexandria, as described by Cristina Pallini,Associate Professor of Architectural and Urban Composition at the School of Architecture, Politecnico di Milano as “A tripartite composition with a central portico supported by Ionic columns, and a loggia with arched doorways framed by terracotta decorations and decorative pilasters. With its interplay of volumes, a central loggia, and horizontal cornices, the great frontage of the Opera facing onto the Ezbekyia park visually balanced those of the new hotels” (Pallini 8). The opera house was commissioned by Isma’il Pasha to become one of the centerpieces of the Suez Canal inaugural celebrations, solidifying ‘new Cario’s’ image as a welcoming symbol of familiarity to European travelers.

Adam Mestyan, an assistant professor of history at Duke University states that the construction of the opera house was done in a matter of six months time for a total of 160,000 British pounds, and historical accounts made by James McCoan state that it was completed by way of forced labor. The architect, Avoscani, was a known favorite of Isma’il’s predecessors, and had a
history of opulent spending. After the completion of the opera house, Isma’il asked Avoscani to add an addition, “However, as one can see from [Avoscani’s] debts, he had problems with the money - he did not accomplish the work and spent all the money ”(Mestyan 76). After spending his entire budget and failing to complete the expansion, Avoscani was denied by every major business partner. In his final years, Avoscani came back to Isma’il to gain his mercy, which he granted, entrusting Avoscani with the port of Alexandria expansion project (Mestyan). In allowing Avoscani to work for him, even after his failure to complete the opera house expansion, his lack of concern for budgeting is realized.

The opera house can be seen as a symbol of the new city, but still holds elements of traditional Egyptian ideals and values. The building itself is undeniably Italian in design, but within the theatre, Mestyan describes, “The interior was beautified with gold and fine woodwork and had royal boxes, separately for the ladies of the harem with thin lattice work” (Mestyan 75). In having a designated box for the women of the harem (A women’s quarters in a traditional muslim household, kept separated from the men), Isma’il reveals his desire to integrate his traditional values with European ones, blending Egyptian culture with European aesthetics (Mestyan).

In correlation with the building of the Khedivial Opera House, Isma’il asked famed opera composer Giuseppe Verdi to write a hymn to premiere at the opera for 150,000 francs only a few months in advance. The opera known as Aida, is described by Mestyan as being

“About an Ethiopian princess (Aida) who is captured by the Egyptian Empire, but the leader of the Egyptian army (Radames) falls in love with her and is finally accused with being a traitor because they are being unveiled by the daughter of the pharaoh who is also in love with Radames.
Finally Radames is sent to his death, digging him alive in the rocks and Aida dies with him.” (Mestyan 84)

It is believed that Aida’s plot was Isma’il Pasha’s idea for a ‘nationalist’ play, representing Egypt as great, ancient, and independent. Aida premiered in the Khedivial Opera House in 1871, pushed back only by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, delaying props and costumes from arriving before the opening of the opera house in 1869 (Mestyan).

Isma’il saw the power in media, both locally and globally. The Arabic journal Wadi al-Nil, had a regular seat in the opera house paid for by Isma’il. In turn, the paper would encourage the Egyptian elite to ‘accept’ the opera as a social norm. Of the eight-hundred seats in the opera house for the premiere of Aida, there were three-hundred booklets printed in Arabic and four-hundred printed in Turkish. Of the one hundred or so Europeans in the audience, Isma’il invited two of the most famous opera critics, a Mr. Filippo and Mr. Reyer, who “gave accounts [of] Egypt, its society and the opera itself” (Mestyan 89) to relay back to their European audiences. The Khedivial Opera house created a social center for the Egyptian elite and European visitors. Isma’il intended to paint the picture of Cairo as independent from the Ottoman empire, and as ‘worthy’ of being a European city. The push by Isma’il to integrate the Egyptian elite into European circles and culture further divided them from the working class people of Cairo upon whom they forced labor and heavy taxes to create their impressive European architecture.

In the creation and preparation for the opening of the Suez Canal, Isma’il created a heavy national debt and needed to find sources of revenue outside of cotton, sugar, or taxes. In 1869, the tourism company based out of Britain, Thomas Cook & Son completed its first trip to Egypt. Already having the infrastructure for the tourism industry, such as hotels, the canal, parks, and
restaurants, Cairo, or more specifically, ‘new Cairo’ was ideal. In 1877, Thomas Cook & Son bought grand hotels such as the Luxor, Winter palace, and Cataract Hotel, and was appointed to run the Nile Passenger Service in 1870. Along with the hotels and passenger service, Cook & Son also ran the government’s postal service along the Nile, which lead to the company’s later success and political influence within Egypt (Hunter).

The first Thomas Cook & Son tour to pass through Egypt happened to align with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the festivities to follow. Upon this knowledge, Isma’il ordered the making of guide books for European tourists, in which they describe the city’s beauty as able to “rival with Nice and Monaco” (Mestyan 66). During the festivities, Isma’il spared no expense for his guests during their stay. After the opening ceremony, he hosted music, fireworks, gala sails on the lake, feasts, and a grand ball to celebrate. The total cost of these events alone added up to 1,300,000 British pounds (McCoan).

Janet Abu-Lughod, former professor at the American School in Cairo and Northwestern University specializing in the Middle East and world systems describes the Irony of Isma’il’s efforts to Europeanize Cairo and the European obsession with Ancient Egypt, stating “the guests at Ismail’s grand reception at the Qasr al-Nil Palace [being] treated to a chamber concert and a performance of the Comedie Francaise; [when] they had looked forward to an evening with Scheherezade [character in Arabian Nights]” (Abu-Lughod 449). European fascination with Cairo as an ancient and exotic city stems from many different sources, however one of the more influential being Edward William Lane’s book recounting his time in Egypt in 1836, Modern Egyptians. Within Modern Egyptians, Lane mentions the stories of the Arabian Nights, which are mythical stories set in ancient ‘oriental’ settings, and compares the Cairo he experienced with the
Cairo seen in *Arabian Nights*. Nezar AlSayyad, professor of Architecture and urban design at UC Berkeley, Irene A. Bierman, Professor of Art History at UCLA, and Nasser Rabbat, architecture professor at MIT together describe Lane’s depiction of Cairo as a ‘performance,’ staging Cairo as “corporeal, fantastic and seductive -- whose spaces are continuously and elaborately performed” (“Making Cairo Medieval” 75). Quickly selling out in both Europe and America, *Modern Egyptians* became the unofficial ‘handbook’ for many western tourists, shaping their expectations for a ‘performed,’ exotic Cairo (“Making Cairo Medieval”).

Thomas Cook & Son built their Cairo tours off of the ‘enclave model’ of tourism, in which “social and cultural interaction with the indigenous society is restricted, as tourists are not required to navigate independently within local communities. As a result, the social impacts of enclave tourism will be limited and tourists can easily be steered through “exotic” territories and societies” (“The East as an Exhibit” 13). Thomas Cook & Son created an ‘exhibit’ out of ‘old Cairo’ for western tourists. Tourists saw, as Traveler Florence Nightingale states “Egypt as all but uninhabited” (“The East as an Exhibit” 18), with the native people of Cairo being all but insignificant to the experience of the European tourists on a Thomas Cook & Son packaged enclave tour, save for the few dragoman,’place-myth’ makers, and government officials. Cook understood this fascination with the ancient and ‘exotic’ Egypt and capitalized on this in the form of their advertising (Fig. 2) (“The East as an Exhibit” 21). It was Thomas Cook & Son that profited on the ‘exotification’ of Egypt, not Isma’il, and it was Cook who benefited most from the creation of ‘new Cairo’ in the end, as he was able to expand and grow his ‘enclaved’ tours. The British government also had an interest in Thomas Cook & Son’s success. Seeing as Cook had major political influence in Egypt through their control over the passenger and postal services, the British
government sought to later use Cook as political leverage for the occupation (“The East as an Exhibit”). By establishing Thomas Cook & Son into Cairo’s political sphere, Isma’il was able to gain temporary relief from his debts. However, it was his continual opulent spending and reliance on British entities, such as Thomas Cook & Son, for vital services that lead to the occupation of Egypt by the British Empire in 1882.

The legacy of Isma’il Pasha can be seen through two differing lenses; the first being through European and/or the Egyptian elite’s eyes, and the second being through the eyes of the working class residents of Cairo. Depending on which lens one chooses to observe Cairo in the nineteenth century, one would either see Cairo as a grand, modernized city with a rich, ancient history, or as a crumbling and tax-burdened slum, filled with Isma’il’s new projects built utilizing forced labor. Isma’il’s three year rush of urban development in ‘new Cairo’ for the arrival of international elites and celebration of the Suez Canal thrust the city into a series of physical, political, and cultural changes. In his quest to Europeanize Egypt, or more specifically Cairo, he opened the door for British entities to control Egypt’s finances and infrastructure, a favored strategy of British imperialism. As a prime economic opportunity for England, Egypt became a target of Britain’s effort to control and police a large part of the world for their economic and political gain. The British occupation of Egypt in 1882 is the result of Isma’il’s exuberant spending and reliance on British entities, which in turn subjected his country to the British’s imperialist agenda.
**Fig. 2.** Cover of Thomas Cook & Son’s “Egypt and the Nile” tour brochure from: “The East as an Exhibit: Thomas Cook & Son and the Origins of the International Tourism Economy in Egypt.” *Academia*, edited by Philip Scranton and Janet F. Davidson, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007,

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Moehling 15

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