

Archives of the last khedive

A proposal for making the most of the Abbas Hilmi II collection

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1. Introduction

First I would like to thank the trustees for their confidence in me – especially Prince Abbas, Francis Gotto, Seif El Rashidi, and Anoush Ehteshami. I was ecstatic to begin working on the Abbas Hilmi II collection, and am very excited at the prospect of developing this project further.

Of course, many of you are familiar with this archive; some of you, indeed, more so than I am. One of its particularities, however, seems to be that various individuals have studied it in great detail, and know it intimately; yet until now, there has perhaps not been sufficient opportunity for them to share their knowledge with a broader public of scholars and interested laypeople. Today, for those who are not yet acquainted with it, I will sketch out in broad outlines what it contains. I will endeavor to place it in a wider archival context, and tease out the implications of what it can offer historians. In the second part of this presentation, I will outline some of the concrete ways in which I think we will serve the collection, and ensure that it receives the recognition it deserves, thereby fulfilling one of the missions of this fellowship.

The `Abbas Hilmi II papers consist principally of the official and personal correspondence of the last Khedive of Egypt, from 1892 to 1914, when he ruled, and from the time he spent in exile, until he passed away in 1944. The collection covers a wide and at times eclectic range of topics: political, social, and economic affairs in Egypt, the British occupation, Egypt's relations with the region, the khedive's relations with the members of the ruling family and the British administrators. The papers also show `Abbas Hilmi's interest in and involvement

with the Egyptian nationalist movement. Other files contain letters from family, friends, diplomats, clerics, and others.¹

As a historian who came to academia after working in journalism and editing for over a decade, I hope I will bring a distinctive perspective to the work we plan to produce in the course of the coming few years. I would like to see the Abbas Hilmi collection come alive through research that honors its unique nature, while making it accessible to non-specialists. Although the archive's peculiarities must be honoured, I am confident we will be able convey complex information to a broad audience and produce a work that is at once erudite and compelling.

This is particularly important because of the crisis currently besetting state archives in Egypt and almost every other Arabic-speaking country. In many parts of the region, war has destroyed central archives or made them inaccessible.

Scholars in much of the region face acute, concrete problems in gaining physical access to archives. Historians working on Syria, Iraq, Libya, or Yemen face insurmountable difficulties in recovering historical documents; what artifacts have survived armed conflict often pass into private markets, which erect their own barricades against scholars – let alone the wider public. Even for historians in countries that are not being torn apart by war, research is fraught with real, immediate risks, beyond the harassment, intimidation, or stonewalling we have come to accept as the price we pay for access to information.

2. The archive in context

Since Egypt is the site where I carried out most of my primary-source research as a historian, I will try to give you a sense of the situation there now for historians wishing to access the archives. This will provide a backdrop against which the importance of the Abbas Hilmi collection may be read more clearly. At the National Archives in Egypt, where the bulk of the administrative and legal records dating from the Ottoman period are kept, it is becoming increasingly difficult for

¹ <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/57840eb2-08e3-3d8b-af1a-06438626e9e1>

researchers to obtain a permit. Since 2013, the archives have been under the growing control of the state security services, which have convened a committee of historians to vet and filter applications. No one knows the identity of the historians serving on the committee, or the standards they apply in choosing which applications to approve and which to reject. Broad and vague criteria relating to national security seem to be in force, but they do not suffice to explain why historians working on eighteenth-century agriculture or nineteenth-century educational reforms should have seen their applications refused. There are numerous anecdotes illustrating the absurdity of this process, but the end result is that it has become almost impossible to gain access to the national archives – where, at any rate, various archival series have been off limits to researchers at different times and for different reasons, ranging from “sensitive information” to “under restoration.”

Other state-controlled archives in Egypt are equally difficult to study; for example, even the contents of the archives of the financial administration, preserved in Dar al-Mahfuzat, are not public knowledge. There is no official catalogue or index and even entering the building where these records are kept requires a lengthy and complex application process. This is because, as one researcher put it, “*Dar al-Mahfuzat* retains archival functions but it is not an archive per se. It is a functioning governmental office with the responsibility of safeguarding highly sensitive information related to state and private income. Not surprisingly, security is tight ... It is also possible that the revolutionary atmosphere in 2011 made state institutions more defensive.”²

This is not entirely new: twenty years ago, for example, when I needed to obtain a permit from the Egyptian Ministry of Endowments (*awqaf*) to carry out research for my doctoral dissertation, I underwent an interview with a member of state security, in which my complexion, religion, accent, and style of dress were all topics of discussion. The conversation concluded on a jovial note, as the interviewer sighed and asked me rhetorically: “If all parents in Egypt brought up

² <http://hazine.info/daralmahfuzat/>

their children the way yours brought you up, what would happen to our national identity?" I agreed that this would indeed be a potential tragedy and, satisfied that I was sufficiently chastened, he granted me the authorization.

The current atmosphere of xenophobia, furthermore, has expanded the definition of 'foreignness' to include anyone that 'loyal citizens' identify as somehow suspicious. In Egypt today, the struggle over ownership of national identity has reached a turning point, and forces of exclusion are gaining the upper hand. This "security mindset," which Khaled Fahmy identified as pervading the Egyptian academic and scientific landscape in the aftermath of 2011, has only intensified since 2013. It gained vigour in 2016-17, after the government's decision to grant sovereignty over the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir; the opposition produced maps and documents demonstrating that the islands had been under Egyptian authority, and, although the regime went ahead with the transfer, the idea that history poses a threat to government claims had been confirmed.

In other words, various archives have different levels of gatekeepers, who follow orders or take their own initiative in preserving what they define as the national interest, in particular against questions perceived as potentially threatening but also against outsiders broadly defined. Apart from these issues related to the transformation of the Egyptian state, and the extension of its prerogatives, furthermore, those conducting research in and on modern Egyptian history must also contend with privatization and the channeling of historical records into circuits of commercial exchange. As Lucie Ryzova points out with regard to photographs of early twentieth-century Egypt, "Historical photographs are an important part of Cairo's vibrant private market for vintage objects, one fully integrated into the global market. Here they are considered unique and valued commodities, widely sought after by both local and international collectors."³

Thus, historians studying Egypt in the late Ottoman period and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries face specific obstacles when searching for archival evidence,

³ Ryzova, "Mourning the Archive," p. 1028.

at precisely the moment when that type of evidence is the main source of scholarly legitimacy – so much so that historians now accuse each other of archival fetishism.

3. Making the most of the collection

This overview should provide a context for the importance of the Abbas Hilmi collection, which has a crucial place in the larger archival picture. This would be so even if only because it is among the few accessible resources on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of course, it is much more than that; and of course, there are others: for example, the records produced by the colonial administration of British-occupied Egypt, now kept at the British National Archives. These comprise many important documents historians are only beginning to discover, such as the reports on Egyptian peasants drafted into the British Labour Corps and sent off to aid in the war effort.

Like any archive, too, the Abbas Hilmi II collection is subject to the specific logic that presided over its constitution; and, as in the case of any archive, we must take into account the conditions of its production if we are to avoid a naïve positivistic approach that assumes we are coming face to face with a limpid and unvarnished version of “what really happened” in a specific time and place. This is, however, perhaps the greatest opportunity that the collection offers: not only can we study its contents, and the specific (perhaps unique) combination of public and private records they represent; we can also understand the conditions in which they were created and preserved, by speaking to one of the individuals who were instrumental in that process.

The excellent online catalogue tells us that “Abbas Hilmi II, the great-great-grandson of Mohamed Ali, was born on 14th July 1874 and succeeded his father, Muhammad Tawfiq Pasha, as Khedive in 1892. The papers cover the period of `Abbas Hilmi II's Khedivate 1892-1914 and extend after his deposition in December 1914 until his death on 21st December 1944 at Geneva.” The catalogue is organized into six broad categories:

- A. Official, political and diplomatic;
- B. Estates, business interests, finances and property;
- C. Personal;
- D. Photographs;
- E. Objects;
- F. Letters of Misirli Ibrahim Pasha to Menlikli Ahmed Pasha.

While these are very useful, each category featuring a detailed description of the documents contained in the relevant section, the chapter outline I have drafted is more specific and requires that the fellowship recipients cut across categories in conducting their research.

Here, then, is the chapter outline I have drafted:

Introduction: Making the Archive, an Oral History (interview with Prince Abbas)

This chapter would give an overview of the archive's history. I would like the book to situate the archive in its historical setting, and take advantage of Prince Abbas's central role and extraordinary memory, as well as his gift for enthralling storytelling, to convey the living context in which the collection was constituted. I think that – with his permission – Prince Abbas should provide an oral history of the archive's formation. This will allow us to examine two interrelated, fundamental questions:

1. What does the archive as it was initially constituted tell us (this relates to Abbas Hilmi II, the overlap between a personal or family archive and a state archive, the period of the occupation, the monarchy, Egyptian society, the ruling class...); and
2. What does the process whereby Prince Abbas preserved it show (the afterlife of the dynasty, the place of the royal family in Egypt after 1952, the ways in which it continues to shape some aspects of public life...).

Chapter 1: Regional Matters: Crises, Wars, and Uprisings through the Archive (some given more attention than others, for reasons to be analyzed in this chapter)

Some parts of the archive, for example, mention the Urabi uprising, but without providing exhaustive coverage of this event; others are devoted to the question of Sudan and its administration. HIL/70, titled Yusuf Sakakini Bey in the catalog, contains correspondence concerning the political situation in Istanbul and the Assyrian uprising. The 1908 coup in Istanbul was clearly of concern to the rulers in Egypt; echoes of World War I may also be heard through the pages of the collection. Although these crises are not all directly related to each other, they all had an effect on the Egyptian ruling class, whether through the political and military involvement of the British or through their economic impact on the Egyptian population (I am thinking for example of the men requisitioned to serve in the British Labour Corps during World War I, or the animals and crops requisitioned for the war effort).

Chapter 2: Regional Relations: the central Ottoman lands, the Hijaz and the Fertile Crescent (the pilgrimage; correspondence with Shakib Arslan⁴...)

For example, HIL69 (Tekieh, Hijaz), contains reports from Muhammad Sanad, who was in charge of the Tekiyyah in Medina, and related papers about Egyptian pilgrims and others in the Hijaz. Political reports from Istanbul are scattered throughout the collection as well. Of particular interest are the papers titled Hasan Khalid Pasha Abul-Huda al-Sayyadi, after the son of the religious adviser who exercised such authority over Sultan Abdul-Hamid II in Istanbul. Hasan Khalid Pasha was chief adviser to the Transjordan government, and his career trajectory will certainly shed light on regional networks of influence. This section contains references to relations between the Khedive and the rulers of the Hijaz in the 1930s (HIL/2/125, 130-131, 137), as illustrated for example in the Khedive's letter to the British High Commissioner in Transjordan, objecting to a loan to be given to the rulers of the Hijaz. There are also numerous documents concerning

⁴ https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/arслан_shakib_amir/

the Sublime Porte (in the files titled “Turkey”) and including official and semi-official correspondence with `Abbas Hilmi before and after he was deposed.

Chapter 3: Regional Relations: Sudan

The archive affords a unique view into the ways in which the Egyptian ruling class related to the British occupation authorities over such questions as how to manage the condominium and which resources to devote to its management. HIL/64 and 65 offer a rich source for a historian to mine, on public works, the budget, communications, and transport. But we also find richly textured anecdotes: HIL/16/170 (dated 18 April 1896) recounts an anecdote about a man who managed to get his son enrolled for the Sudan campaign and went to give him advice and exhort him to be brave in battle, citing the example of Khalid b. al-Walid. The son listened then replied: but we are going to Sudan, “*alladhina hum minna*” and we are doing so for the interests of the occupiers and not for the purposes and benefit of our lands (*biladina*) or to preserve our wealth and souls ... Your advice will result in the death of a *kafir* because I am going to fight Muslims of my race (“*jinsi*”) and my country (“*biladi*”) and I believe that those of them who die are martyrs, because they are protecting their nation (“*watan*”) and their honor and supporting their religion; whereas we will die as apostates because we are attacking them so as to deliver them to the English and put them in their hands, as we are; and so that rules and laws other than the Shari`a will apply to them ...”

Chapter 4: Ruling Egypt: The Mohamed Ali Dynasty in the time of the British Occupation

Perhaps the most interesting figure in the archive is, of course, `Abbas Hilmi himself. Perhaps due to his support of the nationalist movement, and his resistance to British rule, he seems to have been an extremely popular ruler, at a time when mass politics was developing in ways that have been perhaps insufficiently documented. Seif told me about two fascinating items that should perhaps be mentioned here. One is, I believe, contained in the archive – a narrative of the khedive’s travels through Egypt, stopping in the smallest villages, and the welcome he received there, as well as an anecdote about him meeting two Egyptian students in Europe and not only recognizing the village they were from

but also remembering the omda's name. The other is a collection of amulets used in zars ("exorcism" ceremonies) and engraved with the khedive's likeness. There are also reports of the chant "Allah 7ayy `Abbas gayy" being used in demonstrations. Aside from the khedive, the archive contains much of interest regarding his relatives and the dynamics of relations within the dynasty.

Chapter 5: Managing Property: the Daira Khassa and other transactions

Files relating to the khedive's estates contain information on his assets and business investments as well as the attempts he made after he was deposed to recover his sequestered property. One of the most interesting aspects of the Abbas Hilmi II archive is the glimpse it offers into the ruling family's property, and the ways in which, during this historical period, the private wealth of the ruler and the public wealth or assets of the state overlapped. It was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that the state underwent a transformation that would make it into the only possible guardian of the "public interest," but this process was entangled with efforts to define just what that interest was. Many of the documents in the collection were produced in the course of conflicts between various stakeholders to assets like land or pious endowments, and the ways in which these conflicts played out determined legal developments as well as social and economic relations until 1952 and perhaps beyond. In this regard, it might be particularly interesting to trace Abbas Hilmi's efforts to recover his property after he was deposed, and the kinds of legal disputes that took place with the British over what was his and what was the property of the state. The process of the archive's constitution also provides insight into this discussion, as it contains documents we could regard as pertaining to matters of state as well as private papers, defined from a contemporary perspective. In addition, the story of the khedive's *awqaf* (endowments) would merit a chapter in its own right.

Chapter 6: Ruling Class Women (women of the royal family; charitable and educational activism; public health campaigns; numerous photographs and portraits)

Chapter 7: A New Urban Geography (mentions of Cairo and / or Alexandria in connection with opposition activities, demonstrations, etc.): this chapter would map out a geography of resistance, for instance by following the route of demonstrations that began in Azbakiya Gardens and surged through the wide-open boulevards of the city, designed in the nineteenth century, to express public opposition to state policies, protest the occupation, or demand educational reform.

Chapter 8: Under Surveillance (many dossiers of informers' reports, increased ability of the state to police and observe, what these tell us of irrepressible political activity and how the ruling class perceived it as necessary but potentially threatening – i.e. changing understanding of legitimacy and birth of mass politics; students' and workers' movements).

Having given the matter some more thought, this should actually be divided into two separate chapters, one on changing modes of political activity and the other on new methods of policing and surveillance. One of the most interesting dossiers in the archive, to my mind, contains the Dinshwai petitions, which came in from all over the country in the aftermath of the 1906 incident and the terrible sentences handed down by the court that tried the peasants; looking through the many signatures on these petitions -- many of which are printed and were clearly prepared and distributed by an organized political movement -- one could retrace the geographical and socio-economic development of political consciousness, with Dinshwai operating in some ways like the Dreyfus trial did in France, to galvanize public opinion. Another pivotal incident in the development of the political opposition, of course, is the assassination of Prime Minister Butrus Ghali by Ibrahim Nassif al-Wardani; the "Interior" file contains reports on Wardani (HIL/6/452, 466), including a report on a condolence ceremony in his house (HIL/6/469-471) and Ahmad Lutfi's defence of him at his trial (HIL/6/423).

As for the question of policing and surveillance, the files consisting of reports filed by Shimi Bey and his "collaborators" offer fascinating insight into the use of informants to monitor not only the "dangerous classes" but also those members

of the ruling class whose behavior might draw opprobrium upon the royal family. Some of these reports mention high-ranking individuals whose disorderly conduct had to be controlled, or accounts of the comings and goings of individuals who had been targeted for observation.

With regard to the Ministry of Interior files (HIL/6), they contain many reports by police and informers on various kinds of topics, ranging from demonstrations organized by Azhar students to the activities of `Abd al-Aziz Jawish, the popularity of the Nationalist Party, and the creation of workers' associations.

Chapter 9: The Ulama, Inside and Outside al-Azhar (themes of reform, corruption and nepotism, unrest; Muhammad Abduh; the Bakriya; al-Azhar as a melting pot where students from various Islamic lands met and honed their scholarship, rhetorical abilities, and political activism). The collection includes many documents pertaining to the ulama as a group, and offers scholars a great deal of material that can serve to shift existing paradigms on the involvement of the ulama in political matters, the activism of students, the efforts to reform religious education (and the nature of that education), the conflicting interests and links between students in the "traditional" system and those in the "new" law school and other state-sponsored institutions...

There are also documents hinting at intrigues and rivalries, such as those in the file titled Muhammad Tawfiq al-Bakri, which touch on "personal matters, including letters from Muhammad Tawfiq asking the Khedive for protection against Shaykh `Ali Yusuf (HIL/1/2); promising to pay to Ibrahim Bey al-Muwilhi £1000 within one year (HIL/1/3); seeking the Khedive's forgiveness (HIL/1/4); ... letter to the Khedive from a member of the al-Bakri family, requesting his assistance in obtaining his share of the endowments (Awqaf) of his father Muhammad Effendi al-Bakri and his brother `Ali al-Bakri (HIL/1/9); ... asking the Khedive to appoint Muhammad Bakhit as *Shaikh* of al-Azhar mosque instead of Muhammad `Abduh (HIL/1/21); discussing women (HIL/1/35-39); criticizing Abu'l Huda's treatment of the Khedive and assuring the Khedive of his own devotion (HIL/1/40); ... Also anonymous correspondence to the Khedive with

regard to al-Bakri's visits to Europe and Turkey, referring to corrupt activities in which al-Bakri has allegedly been involved (HIL/1/24-33)." (catalogue)

Chapter 10-11: In Pictures (e.g. the Holy Cities). Finally, the archive also contains many photographs – from family portraits to pictures taken by Prince Muhammad Abd al-Mun`im during a desert expedition to Jabal `Uwaynat with László Almásy, pictures of Mecca during the pilgrimage, horses belonging to the khedivial court, as well as “historic sites, gardens, buildings and wildlife of Egypt, and scenes of industrial activity” (from the catalogue).

With regard to the format of the fellowship, I have discussed with several of the advisers the possibility of increasing the number of fellows. This could be done if fellows consult digital copies of the archive in locations other than Durham, which would make it possible to fund a larger number of scholars. Of course, although I have proposed a thematic structure here, the final chapter outline of the book will depend on the skills and fields of specialization of the candidates who respond to the call for applications. Thus, we should be flexible in defining the scope and specific topic of each chapter, as well as the total number of chapters. What is certain is that the fellowship recipients are privileged to be working on a unique archive at a critical time, and we can hope for an exceptional volume as the result of our collective labour.