

Napoleon's Bicentenary

Stephane Cohen

In 2021, events, expositions, ceremonies, and books commemorated 200 years since the death of Napoleon Bonaparte. Bonaparte himself spent one year in Egypt and what was then the Syrian *vilayet* (province) of the Ottoman Empire, winning remarkable victories on the battlefield, but failing in the end to achieve his goals and eventually returning to France.

In the Arab world, Napoleon is still a controversial figure, and the bicentenary of his death was met with mixed feelings as well as indifference. Napoleon's legacy in the Middle East remains caught between those who see him as a military conqueror and those who recognize that he left an important cultural mark, signaling the beginning of an "Arab Renaissance." Indeed, Napoleon's commemoration revived the historical debate in the Arab world. His place in Arab history is still trapped in a Manichean perception that portrays him as either a hero or a villain.¹ Egyptian writer Mohamed Salmawy claimed that Napoleon's plan was a mix of "fire and light": It was a military campaign and Egyptians resisted the French forces, but it was also the start of an era of intellectual engagement with the West. Rashad al-Madani, a retired Gazan history lecturer, would remind his students of Napoleon's massacre in Jaffa, adding that "the French occupation was worse than that of Israel."² For Al-Hussein Hassan Hammad, an historian at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, Napoleon's forces were on an imperial mission to exploit Egypt's wealth.³

Mohamed Sarhan refers to the devastating effects of the French invasion led by Napoleon in Egypt and the Levant. For Sarhan, ignoring what the French had done in

¹ Hussein Majduby, "[Napoleon the hero. Napoleon the villain](#) [Arabic]," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 17, 2021.

² "[Split vision marks Mideast perception of Napoleon's legacy](#)," *The Arab Weekly*, May 8, 2021.

³ "[Two centuries on: Napoleon's campaign in Palestine, Egypt still contentious](#)," *Ynet (AFP)*, May 2, 2021.

Egypt was not possible: killing, looting, and storming Al-Azhar with horses. Sarhan, omitting the role of Great Britain, claims that the Islamic world at that time was the center of the resistance to the French. Sarhan expressed shock that some Arab writers and historians persist in romanticizing Napoleon's campaign, depicting it as the beginning of an enlightenment in the region, despite the "massive crimes" committed by the French during their three-year (1798-1801) conquest of Egypt.⁴

Prior to Napoleon's rise to power, the Enlightenment in Europe renewed a debate on the social realities in the Middle East, particularly with reference to the "lethargy of the Ottoman empire." Philosophers such as Montesquieu, Turgot, Vergennes, and Volney discussed despotism and the ills of the Middle East region, linking it to cultural and social circumstances, climate determinism, and moral forces. Savary (*Lettres sur l'Égypte*, 1785-1786) and Volney (*Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 1787) provided two different descriptions of Ottoman Egypt: Savary had a Rousseau-influenced vision of the Nile Delta, where the local population still practiced the hospitality of ancient peoples, while Volney saw the Turks as pure oppressors of Egypt, to whom he attributed responsibility for all evils, real or imagined.⁵

Emerging from the Enlightenment era, Napoleon shocked the Middle East with his military expeditions in Egypt and Syria. For many it was Napoleon who was responsible for awakening Egyptian nationalism, with his military campaign and explorations of the region's history, which the Ottomans had tried to erase.

In December 1797, while Napoleon returned triumphant from his campaign in Italy, England remained France's main challenge. The Directory – the French Revolutionary government – intended to declare war on England and "march on London," but did not have the resources to achieve that bold objective. Instead, the young Napoleon, only 29 years old, was sent by the Directory to challenge the British Empire elsewhere, to cut its communication lines to India and impair its trade route eastward. France could not fight the British in England, so it decided to fight them in Egypt. Moreover, from 1798, an expedition was planned against the regencies of Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis, with the desire to make the Mediterranean a "French lake" to prevent England from setting foot on those shores.⁶

⁴ "[Two Centuries after Napoleon...How does France choose a history free of slavery and colonialism?](#) [Arabic]," *al-Hadhad*, May 5, 2021.

⁵ Sarga Moussa, "[Le voyage en Orient](#)," *Essentiels Littérature, Gallica*.

⁶ Augustin Barbara, "[L'espion de Napoléon](#)," *Le Monde*, July 3, 1982.

Napoleon's military engagements are well known – Waterloo, Eylau, Austerlitz – but much less known are some of the key battles Napoleon's forces fought in the Middle East during the three years of the French campaign in Egypt and Syria.

Indeed, Napoleon's campaign in Egypt was marked by key events like the Battle of the Pyramids, but Napoleon's forces also battled in Jaffa and Acre, and fought and defeated superior Ottoman forces in the Galilee, in battles near Mount Tabor, near Nazareth and on the Jordan River. Napoleon's battles in the Galilee in the spring of 1799 led to clear French victories, and yet, Acre continued to resist the French siege and assaults. On May 17, 1799, after the defenders had received help from the British and the eighth attack on Acre's walls by French forces proved inconclusive, Napoleon realized he couldn't succeed.

With his army suffering from disease, Napoleon decided to lift the siege on Acre and return to Egypt with a demoralized army, having suffered 1,200 killed in action, 1,800 wounded and 600 dead from the plague. Napoleon's losses from the plague certainly contributed to the French defeat at Acre. From the moment Napoleon set foot in Egypt until the spring of 1799, his armies were victorious in battle. This reality changed when Napoleon surrounded and imposed a siege on Acre. The siege was indeed a failure, seen by many as the decisive turning point of the French campaign in the region.

In June 1799, Napoleon was once again in Egypt and Cairo. His forces confronted the sea-borne Ottoman force at the battle of Aboukir on July 25, from which Napoleon emerged victorious but left the British and Ottomans entrenched in the eastern Mediterranean. With his dream of conquest in the Middle East denied, Napoleon chose to return to Paris and left Egypt on August 22.

For Dominique de Villepin, a former French Prime Minister, Napoleon was the successor to either Caesar or Alexander. Even if the purpose of Napoleon's expedition was primarily strategic – to drive the English out of the Middle East and weaken their trade route to India – the military campaign had undisputable scientific and cultural aspects too, as Napoleon saw himself as the capstone of the Enlightenment.⁷ Indeed, Napoleon commissioned a delegation of 167 scholars to join the French army to Egypt, initially to help his soldiers conquer the country and study everything about Egyptian history, culture, society, flora, fauna, and more. Caffarelli du Falga, who died during the siege of Acre, commanded this delegation. Interestingly, Napoleon also brought some 2,000 bottles of Burgundy wine with him and tasked his private

⁷ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (London, Penguin, 2014), p. 45.

secretary Bourienne to put together a traveling library, including books on science, arts, and poetry among others.⁸

Napoleon's campaigns in Egypt and Syria are recognized as the beginning of the modern period in Middle Eastern history. His conquest of Egypt gave birth to Egyptology, modern mapping, and other modern disciplines such as military medicine. The bandages used to treat the many wounded French soldiers came from a woven Gaza fabric – and to this day are called “gauze pads.”⁹

Napoleon's occupation did not modernize Egyptian society. French revolutionary principles were perceived as too radical and foreign and were met with determined local resistance. Napoleon's military campaign created a political vacuum in Egypt. Following the French withdrawal, Muhammad Ali Pasha soon filled the vacuum and began laying the foundations for modern Egypt that later would play such an essential role in the history of the Middle East. Furthermore, it led Britain to secure dominions to protect its Indian possessions against any possible attacks by land. Catalyzed by Napoleon's campaign, the “awakening” movement, known as the *Nahda* (“the Renaissance”),¹⁰ an Arab cultural and intellectual movement that flourished in many parts of the Middle East throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with Cairo, Istanbul, Beirut, and Tunis as focal points of this renaissance.¹¹

Nevertheless, two hundred years after his death, it seems that Napoleon's legacy in the Arab world has been met with apathy. Napoleon's occupation of Egypt and his campaign in the Syrian province were short lived, and yet still perceived as a humiliation for many. There is also another perspective, which argues that Egypt conquered Europe by stimulating its imagination and animating its cities, museums, and salons. Volnay's publications on his travels in Syria and Egypt in the decade before Napoleon's invasion brought the Middle East to Europe and fed Napoleon's interest in Egypt.¹²

Robert Solé, a French novelist of Egyptian origin, claims that Napoleon's campaign was a violent imperialist military operation. Prior to the 1952 military coup that overthrew the Egyptian monarchy and brought Abd al-Nasir to power, it was often

⁸ Adam Zamoyski, *Napoleon* (London, Haper Collins, 2018), p. 175.

⁹ Moshe Gilad, “[Waterloo?! The Middle East Is Where Napoleon Really Surrendered](#),” *Haaretz*, April 4, 2017.

¹⁰ Ursula Lindsey, “[A Nuanced Account of the Arab Nahda](#),” *al-Fanar Media*, November 2, 2018.

¹¹ N. Tomiche, “Nahḍa,” in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds., P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs.

¹² Leyla Dakhli, “[Napoléon a-t-il réveillé le monde arabe?](#),” in *The Epoch of Universalism 1769–1989* (Boston, De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 43-54.

argued that Napoleon had catalyzed Egypt's transition into modernity. But since the 1952 coup, the emphasis has been on Napoleon's campaign as a foreign occupation, the main effect of which was the awakening of Egyptian nationalism. The French military expedition has largely been ignored and is hardly taught in Egypt anymore.¹³ And while Napoleon's campaign was not the answer to the perceived ills of the region, and nor was it intended to be, its history remains an essential turning point that marks the beginning of the modern period in our region.

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¹³ [“How Napoléon’s invasion ‘revealed Egypt to the world – and to itself,’”](#) *France 24*, May 5, 2021.