

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Peaceful Wars and Unlikely Unions: The Azhar Strike of 1909 and the Politics of Comparison in Egypt

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## Abstract

In January 1909, the students of the Azhar, the Islamic world's most prestigious university, went on strike. Protesting recent curricular and administrative changes introduced by the Egyptian Khedive, they demanded increased material support and asserted the university's right to govern itself. After several weeks of demonstrations that drew thousands of supporters into the streets of Cairo, the Khedive suspended the reforms that first caused the Azharis to walk out. Oddly, this remarkable mobilization has nearly vanished into obscurity. Drawing on reporting from the Egyptian press and intelligence memoranda from the Egyptian Ministry of Interior, this article argues that the apparent incongruity of Azharis on strike was no mistake. Their willful rejection of ascribed categories helps to explain both why this movement of unionized seminarians speaking a language of self-government proved so striking for contemporary supporters and critics alike and why this event has slipped through the cracks of a historiography still framed by those very categories. Long forgotten in histories of both nationalism and organized labor, the Azhar strike represented a pivotal moment in the emergence of mass politics in Egypt. In invoking "union," the Azharis engaged in multiple, overlapping acts of comparison. Inspired by the modular repertoires of militant labor, they simultaneously hailed the constitutional revolution of the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress as a model for political transformation. Rooted in a self-conscious critique of colonial comparativism, their struggle thereby furnished new materials with which to elaborate a telescopic series of anti-colonial solidarities that were themselves fundamentally comparative.

**Keywords:** Egypt; al-Azhar; modularity; union; labor history; strikes; comparison; mass mobilization; contentious politics; nationalism

In 1909, the students of al-Azhar, the Islamic world's most prestigious institution of higher learning, went on strike. On 21 January, roughly 1,400 students marched through Cairo to the Gezira gardens on an island in the middle of the Nile. There they made plans to stop all lessons until the government altered several major curricular

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and organizational changes introduced the previous autumn.<sup>1</sup> Rumors that the university administration was contemplating punitive measures only strengthened their resolve. Two days later, an even larger crowd once again set out from the Azhar. When the procession reached the Gezira gardens, their numbers had swelled to several thousand people.<sup>2</sup>

That afternoon, a series of speakers rose to address the assembled multitude. The first, Shaykh Mas'ūd Farāj, "set about urging union [*ittiḥād*] upon his brothers so that they might be like the Japanese."<sup>3</sup> The next extolled "the duty of union" and "whipped the audience up with a poem he recited against the Westerners [*al-gharbīyīn*] who had settled in Egypt to sap its resources and deprive the people of them. 'And indeed,' [he exclaimed], 'what is the Western intrusion into Egypt except a ruse they plotted on the pretext of the Egyptians' need for education, when the truth is quite the opposite.'" He noted the support the strikers had already received from many of the country's newspapers and led the crowd in cheers of "Long live the National Party." After several more speeches, the Azharis formed orderly rows and processed through downtown Cairo. Before dispersing, they passed by the offices of the National Party's official organ, *al-Liwā'*, where they chanted for the paper, its founder Muṣṭafā Kāmil, its new editor 'Abd al-'Azīz Jāwīsh, and Kāmil's successor as party president, Muḥammad Farīd.<sup>4</sup>

Over the following weeks, with the assistance of Egypt's two major nationalist parties—*al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī* (the National Party) and *Ḥizb al-Ummah* (the People's Party)—the Azharis continued to press their case. They established an official body, the Azhar Union Society (*jam'iyat ittiḥād al-Azhar*), to represent their collective interests and elected a committee of ten delegates to negotiate with the government and the university administration.<sup>5</sup> They published their demands in the papers.<sup>6</sup> And thanks in part to the government's draconian reaction, they attracted a groundswell of public support. By late February, Khedive 'Abbās Ḥilmī II (r. 1892–1914) had conceded defeat and suspended the reforms that first motivated the Azharis to strike.

In January of 1909, it was by no means obvious that the strike was an acceptable mode of protest for Muslim seminarians to employ. By adopting the language of "union" and the practices of labor militancy, the Azharis suggested that their situation was in some way comparable to that of the working-class groups that had recently employed similar tactics. Because that choice at first seemed so incongruous, the strike raised a whole series of questions about how multiple frames of comparison served to organize and delimit the political field in Egypt. Most obviously, the Azharis' unlikely union pointed up the norms and expectations that attached to

<sup>1</sup>"Muzāhirat ṭalabat al-Azhar," *al-Jarīdah*, 23 Jan. 1909.

<sup>2</sup>Durham University Library (DUR), Abbas Hilmi II Collection (HIL) 52, 171, 24 Jan. 1909. This Ministry of Interior "Memorandum" estimated the crowd size at 2,500. *Al-Muqaṭṭam* put it at eight thousand: "Ṭalabat al-Azhar al-sharīf: i'tiṣāb ulūf minhum muzāhirātuhum wa-maṭālibuhum," *al-Muqaṭṭam*, 25 Jan. 1909. All subsequent references to sources from DUR 52 and DUR 6 are political intelligence memoranda compiled from reporting by the Ministry of Interior's informants and signed by Minister of Interior Muḥammad Sa'īd.

<sup>3</sup>On the allure of Japan, see Michael Laffan, "Mustafa and the Mikado: A Francophile Egyptian's Turn to Meiji Japan," *Japanese Studies* 19, 3 (1999): 269–86.

<sup>4</sup>DUR, HIL 52, 171.

<sup>5</sup>"I'tiṣāb al-Azharīyūn: al-Azharīyūn yaqsimūna 'alā al-Qur'an bi-l-ittiḥād," *Miṣr al-Fatāh*, 26 Jan. 1909; "Ittiḥād al-Azharīyūn," *Miṣr al-Fatāh*, 28 Jan. 1909.

<sup>6</sup>"Al-Azharīyūn wa-maṭālibuhum," *al-Mu'ayyad*, 25 Jan. 1909; "Al-Azharīyūn al-mu'taṣībūn," *al-Jarīdah*, 25 Jan. 1909; "Ṭalabat al-Azhar al-sharīf," *al-Muqaṭṭam*, 25 Jan. 1909.

established social categories—whether of age, class, profession, nationality, or religion—and revealed how such distinctions could fragment the public and obscure latent commonalities. But as their very earliest speeches indicate, the Azharis also invoked a range of other, broader comparisons that linked their movement to developments well beyond the courtyards of the famed mosque-university. First, the institutional reforms at issue were introduced by a khedive—the Ottoman vice-regent—increasingly accepting of British rule. For that reason, what started as claims to self-governance within the Azhar were easily refigured as contributions to a broader struggle over the right of Egyptians to rule themselves. Second, in justifying the country's long tutelage under de facto colonial occupation, British officials often resorted to metaphors of adolescence to situate Egypt within a global developmental hierarchy. Because most of the strikers were themselves young people, their actions elicited extensive critical reflection on this and other comparative frames that assigned much of the world to conditions of perpetual subordination to Europe. Third, in the aftermath of the Young Turks' revolt of July 1908, the Azharis' invocations of "union" referred simultaneously to a circulating form of worker struggle and to an organization—the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP)—that had forced the Sultan to restore the Ottoman constitution. Together, these multiple valences of "union" raised the possibility that the protest repertoires of labor militancy could transpose collective ambitions onto an altogether larger scale.

Oddly, despite having blanketed the pages of the Egyptian press for weeks, these events have practically disappeared from history. This article therefore has two objectives. First, through a detailed account of the strike, I aim to establish the importance of this largely forgotten movement as a major catalyst to the emergence of mass mobilization in Egypt in the early 1900s. The pace of strikes and demonstrations was already quickening before the Azharis staged their first rallies. But both the magnitude and the form of their protests played a significant role in inspiring the subsequent surge of popular political action and in broadening the appeal of organized opposition to British rule. Second, the ensuing analysis of the strike engages and extends a rich body of postcolonial critique concerned with the politics of comparison. Comparison, this work has shown, was indispensable to the operations of empire. The production of a comparative knowledge that treated some peoples and places as commensurable and others not provided the "underlying grammar of political work" that enabled imperial formations to manage the irreducible diversity of the populations they sought to govern.<sup>7</sup> In many cases, however, this critical insight about colonial comparison has led toward a "hermeneutic suspicion" of comparison as such.<sup>8</sup> In this respect, the archive of commentary bequeathed by the Azhar strike points toward an overlooked history of the countervailing comparisons that nourished anti-colonial political thought. The living subjects who experienced the violence of colonial rule were no less capable than practicing historians today of discerning what was at stake in the politics of comparison. Anticipating many of the signature insights of postcolonial critique, these historical actors recognized the multiple forms of comparison that structured arrangements of social power in their

<sup>7</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, "Keynote Address: Concept-work at the Limits of Comparison," Imperial Comparison Conference, All Souls College, Oxford, 8 July 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Manu Goswami, "'Provincializing' Sociology: The Case of a Premature Postcolonial Sociologist," *Political Power and Social Theory* 24 (2013): 145–76, 146.

own present.<sup>9</sup> But they were willing and even eager to pursue their own critical reflections down avenues of political possibility that recent scholarship has sometimes been reluctant to address. For many, the practical work of building a viable anti-colonial movement necessarily required alternative comparative frameworks that might sustain new kinds of solidarity. It was just this sort of insurgent comparison that the Azhar strike inspired among its protagonists and supporters.

When the strike began in January 1909, many observers deemed it almost unthinkable. As one report put it, no one had anticipated that “the Azharis—whom history has seen as a group that would never think to demonstrate or countenance disobeying the orders of their superiors—should one day throng together in demonstrations unlike any Egypt has seen.”<sup>10</sup> In time, this apparent incongruity would figure into two significant, if largely unremarked, transformations to the character and constitution of popular politics in Egypt. First and most simply, it had a radicalizing effect on the strikers themselves; from 1909 onwards, Azhar students would become fixtures at organizing events for other working groups, meetings of political associations, and mass demonstrations against British rule. That activism would culminate in their conspicuous role in the high drama of Egypt’s 1919 Revolution. Second, the transgressive character of the Azharis’ actions helped to elevate the strike itself as a generalized repertoire of protest. Existing studies have correctly described the early 1900s as a key moment of convergence between Egypt’s formerly elite and elitist nationalist parties on the one hand and a growing labor movement on the other. Those works have explored the rapprochement in terms of a mutually recognized convergence of interests: the nationalist parties were able to mobilize broader popular coalitions while working groups gained organizational and journalistic support to leverage their demands. They have also noted that this popular turn in the nationalist movement entailed a rethinking of “the people [*al-sha‘b*]” as a collective category encompassing what had once been seen as discrete social groups.<sup>11</sup> But important as they were, none of these changes on their own explain how the concept of “union” and the practice of the strike became the taken-for-granted idioms of support for the nationalist cause or how, by extension, the capital-labor relation became the implicit frame of reference for construing many other forms of inequality and domination, including those at an imperial or global scale. The unlikely character of the Azhar strike and the telescopic array of comparisons it engendered played a crucial role in bringing about that now largely forgotten shift.

### Incomplete Modularity and the Social Specificities of the Strike

In the strike’s early days, many critics described the Azharis’ decision to employ the language and tactics of “union” as a kind of category error rooted in a dubious

<sup>9</sup>On the relationship between anticolonial political thought and postcolonial theory, see also Hussein Omar, “Arabic Thought in a Liberal Cage,” in Faisal Devji and Zaheer Kazmi, eds., *Beyond Muslim Liberalism* (London: Hurst, 2016); The Rule of Strangers: Empire, Islam and the Invention of “Politics,” 1867–1914, PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2016.

<sup>10</sup>“Talabat al-Azhar al-sharīf,” *al-Muqattam*, 25 Jan. 1909.

<sup>11</sup>John Chalcraft, *The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and other Stories: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863–1914* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 183–87; Zachary Lockman, “The Social Roots of Nationalism: Workers and the National Movement in Egypt, 1908–19,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 24, 4 (1988): 445–59; “Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899–1914,” *Poetics Today* 15, 2 (1994): 157–90.

conflation of their own situation with that of Egypt's working classes. That such commentaries were commonplace is testament to the fact that the strike still appeared to contemporaries as a mode of action appropriate only to specific social groups making specific sorts of demands. It may also help to explain the marginal status of this incident in subsequent accounts of the period. Strong claims for the importance of little-known events beg the obvious question of their obscurity. The strike's particular location in histories of modern Egypt, in that sense, provides the beginning of an answer. Within social histories of workers and labor militancy in Egypt, the Azharis are all but invisible.<sup>12</sup> The strike does appear in studies of educational reform within the mosque-university, but there, it mainly functions as evidence for the conservative resistance of the 'ulama to modern science.<sup>13</sup> The one recent study that rebuts that much-rehearsed allegation through a careful reading of the strikers' actual demands goes on to suggest that their movement "degenerated" once they were "drawn into the larger arena of the 1908–1909 political protests."<sup>14</sup> In brief, the limited treatment of the strike has tracked with the very sorts of categorical distinctions that the Azharis were acting to undo.

Rather than a mere oversight or error, however, this way of hiving off the Azhar strike from histories of labor organizing and Egyptian nationalism might actually provide a useful point of departure from which to reconsider some longstanding methodological issues around the colonial politics of comparison. Ever since the publication of Benedict Anderson's study *Imagined Communities* four decades ago, the concept of "modularity" has remained a regular flashpoint for debates about the colonial genealogies of mainstream social-scientific comparativism. As Anderson first introduced the argument, after a formative period of emergence in Europe and the Americas, nationalism "became 'modular,' capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations."<sup>15</sup> Numerous critics have noted that Anderson's rendering of

<sup>12</sup>See, for example, Joel Beinin, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Chalcraft, *Striking Cabbies: Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Lockman, "Social Roots of Nationalism." Zachary Lockman's biographical sketch of 'Abd al-'Azīz Jāwīsh does reference his involvement in "controversies over government plans to restructure al-Azhar," but stops short of mentioning the strike: "Exploring the Field: Lost Voices and Emerging Practices in Egypt, 1882–1914," in Israel Gershoni, Hakan Erdem, and Ursula Woköck, eds., *Histories of the Modern Middle East: New Directions* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 142.

<sup>13</sup>Exemplifying this position, the historian Daniel Crecelius claimed that reforms to the Azhar "had to be forced in the teeth of hostile and vociferous opposition," in "The Ulama and the State in Modern Egypt" (PhD. diss., Princeton University, 1967), 202. See also, 'Abd al-Mut'āl al-Ša'īdi, *Tārīkh al-išlāh fī al-Azhar* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-i'timād, 1965); Daniel Crecelius, "Nonideological Responses of the Egyptian Ulama to Modernization," in Nikki R. Keddie, ed., *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Bayard Dodge, *Al-Azhar: A Millennium of Muslim Learning* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 1961); A. Chris Eccel, *Egypt, Islam and Social Change: Al-Azhar in Conflict and Accommodation* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1984).

<sup>14</sup>Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 198.

<sup>15</sup>Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 4.

“modularity,” by treating Euro-America as the dynamic site of creative production and the rest of the world as “perpetual consumers of modernity,” exemplifies the pitfalls of diffusionist global history.<sup>16</sup> But if, within the vast field of nationalism studies, “modularity” has long been an object of critical scrutiny, the concept has enjoyed a rather different career among theorists of social movements and contentious politics.

In a now-classic contribution to Social Movement Theory, Sidney Tarrow adapted Anderson’s terminology to name a significant transformation in modes of collective protest. Whereas “traditional” repertoires of contention were “attached to the identity of the challengers and of those they challenged,” beginning in the eighteenth century, a wide range of social groups began to employ new “modular” forms of collective action. Unlike the traditional repertoires, Tarrow explains, “the strike is *modular*; it can be employed in a variety of settings by a variety of actors against a variety of opponents.”<sup>17</sup> For present purposes, two features of Tarrow’s rendition of modularity are notable. First, it is explicitly Eurocentric; his account describes “the more general changes in collective action that heralded the rise of the social movement all over the West” and the subsequent circulation of those “modular” forms into the rest of the world.<sup>18</sup> Second, the distinguishing characteristic of the modular repertoire, in Tarrow’s rendition, is its availability as a form independent of either the content of the action or the social identity of the actors.

By describing the modular repertoire in this way, as a globally circulating, universalizable practice of European provenance, Tarrow’s account at once raises and elides a crucial historical tension. Even as such modular forms—whether of political identification in Anderson’s case or contentious action in Tarrow’s—assumed an increasingly generalized character, they nevertheless retained some residual associations in the minds of contemporary actors with particular histories, geographies, and social strata. It is in just this sense that the Azhar strike’s historiographical obscurity is instructive; conceptions of the strike as a practice specific to certain kinds of actors (i.e., workers) making certain kinds of demands have proven sufficiently durable to render some events far more likely to appear in histories of popular politics than others. It was, moreover, this same incomplete modularity of the strike as a globally available form that made the Azharis’ movement such an important case for challenging the colonial regime’s operative logics of comparison at the time.

### Colony by Comparison

Though they employed different terminologies, the European empires of the nineteenth century approached the project of foreign rule as a fundamentally modular

<sup>16</sup>Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5. In a brilliant, critical reconstruction of Anderson’s argument, Manu Goswami has observed that the ideal-typical, rather than socio-historical, conception of modularity in Anderson’s study has invited responses that “focus on the particularistic content of specific nationalist movements” rather than the contradictory character of nationalisms as always both particular and universal: “Rethinking the Modular Nation Form: Toward a Sociohistorical Conception of Nationalism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, 4 (2002): 770–90, 779.

<sup>17</sup>Sidney Tarrow, “Modular Collective Action and the Rise of the Social Movement: Why the French Revolution Was Not Enough,” *Politics & Society* 21, 1 (1993): 63–90, 76–77.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 83. See also, Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 3d ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 37–56.

undertaking. The achievement of “moral and material progress,” so understood, entailed the judicious implementation of so many modular forms, whether of technology, law, politics, education, or market exchange. As a long tradition of postcolonial critique has demonstrated, the notion that components of European modernity represented adaptable parts to be exported and reassembled abroad located colonial societies within complex fields of global comparisons. On the one hand, what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called a “hyperreal Europe” became the comparative standard against which all other societies would be judged. Colonial rule, accordingly, operated by promising to replicate Europe’s own history of development and then judging that process endlessly unfulfilled.<sup>19</sup> On the other, the obsessively taxonomic qualities of colonial discourse rendered manageable the otherwise overwhelming diversity of human life across the planet. Comparative epistemologies, in this sense, became a ubiquitous technology of colonial rule. By compressing the actual variety of concrete life-worlds into abstract categories of commensurability, such comparisons made the colonies themselves into second-order sources of modularity. As Ann Stoler has noted, “Colonial bureaucracies were therefore invested in selective comparison with other polities.... Category making produced cross-colonial equivalencies that allowed for international conferences and convinced their participants—doctors, lawyers, policy makers, and reformers—that they were in the same conversation, if not always talking about the same thing.”<sup>20</sup>

Though it was never officially colonized, Egypt was the colony of comparison par excellence. The transformations that culminated in de facto British rule inscribed the country within a field of overlaid and multiplying comparisons. In the early nineteenth century, Egypt’s ambitious Ottoman governor Mehmed Ali Pasha launched a self-styled project of modernization that rested upon an eclectic bricolage of modular forms. To finance a war machine inspired by Britain’s conscript army in India,<sup>21</sup> the Pasha borrowed American technologies and expertise and remade the Nile Delta into a gigantic cotton plantation.<sup>22</sup> As the complexity of this state-building enterprise increased, Mehmed ‘Ali looked to Europe for new institutions of order and discipline. Cairo would become a Paris on the Nile. In this regard, the process of “colonizing Egypt” began long before the advent of the British occupation itself.<sup>23</sup>

The financial burdens of this state-building project mushroomed until by 1876 Egypt was bankrupt. When the austerity measures imposed by European creditors provoked a national-popular uprising, British forces invaded, promising to restore order and financial stability. British officials now alleged that the Khedives had copied European modernity in travestied form. The ensuing occupation would therefore serve the educative function of managing the process of replication. The first

<sup>19</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>20</sup>Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” *Journal of American History* 88, 3 (2001): 829–65, 863. See also Micol Siegel, “Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn,” *Radical History Review* 91 (2006): 62–90.

<sup>21</sup>Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha’s Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army, and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American University Press, 2002), 246.

<sup>22</sup>George R. Gliddon, *A Memoir on the Cotton of Egypt* (London: James Madden, 1841), 42; Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

<sup>23</sup>Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

generation of British “advisors,” including the Consul-General Lord Cromer himself, were recruited mainly from the British Raj. They approached the country as an instance of something they had already encountered elsewhere in “the Orient.”<sup>24</sup> To become more like Europe, Egypt would need to look more like India.

By January 1909, this “veiled protectorate” faced a range of serious challenges. Since the early 1890s, a fledgling opposition organized loosely around the young Khedive ‘Abbās Ḥilmī II had assailed the British occupation on the pages of a thriving Arabic press. Arguing sometimes on behalf of an old order threatened by European vice and at others in the name of a universal modernity withheld by foreign interests, these early critics sought to puncture the occupation’s narrative of rapid improvement.<sup>25</sup> British officials responded by casting Egypt’s self-proclaimed nationalists as a marginal coterie of urban, middle-class upstarts whose professed patriotism ignored the fabulous prosperity that British rule had bestowed upon the long-oppressed peasant majority.

Two major developments in the early 1900s, however, shifted the terms of debate over the occupation. The first was the so-called Dinshawai Incident. In June of 1906, a group of British soldiers hunting pigeons in the village of Dinshawai became embroiled in an altercation that resulted in the wounding of one and the death, by heat stroke, of another. The occupation reacted by summoning a special tribunal, under British supervision, to try fifty-two villagers for a premeditated conspiracy; the tribunal sentenced four of the villagers to death and over a dozen others to public floggings and imprisonment. Condemned as a perversion of justice, Dinshawai lent new credibility to arguments that Egyptians, whether in villages or cities, constituted a singular national public united in its outrage against colonial violence.<sup>26</sup> The second development was the massive financial crisis in 1907 that brought Egypt’s much-vaunted economic boom to a close. The crisis soon precipitated tens of thousands of farmer bankruptcies, and critics of British rule found new grounds to assert that the occupation was failing even by its own economic criteria.<sup>27</sup> In this moment of “hegemonic contraction,” a growing number of political parties vied to diagnose the ailments of the colonial present and propose visions for a sovereign national future.<sup>28</sup> Their aspirations only intensified with the CUP’s victory in the summer of 1908. This was the charged context in which the Azharis took to the streets.

<sup>24</sup>Aaron Jakes, “Boom, Bugs, Bust: Egypt’s Ecology of Interest, 1882–1914,” *Antipode* 49, 4 (2017): 1035–59; Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Edward Roger John Owen, “The Influence of Lord Cromer’s Indian Experience on British Policy in Egypt 1883–1907,” *Middle Eastern Affairs* 4, St. Antony’s Papers no. 17 (1965): 109–39; Robert L. Tignor, “The ‘Indianization’ of Egyptian Administration under British Rule,” *American Historical Review* 68, 3 (1963): 636–61; Jennifer Derr, *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>25</sup>Aaron Jakes, “The Scales of Public Utility: Agricultural Roads and State Space in the Era of the British Occupation,” in Marilyn Booth and Anthony Gorman, eds., *The Long 1890s in Egypt: Colonial Quiescence, Subterranean Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); and *Egypt’s Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>26</sup>Jakes, *Egypt’s Occupation*, 128–40.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 141–66.

<sup>28</sup>On the relationship between “hegemonic contraction” and contentious mobilization, see Chalcraft, *Popular Politics*, 32–39.



## Reforming the Azhar

From their first demonstrations, the Azharis drew multiple connections between their own situation and the eventfulness of the global moment they were witnessing. But even if the strikers were quick to locate their struggle within these wider frames, their protests first emerged from a longstanding conflict over the organization and curriculum of the Azhar itself. At issue was the venerable mosque-university's place in a society in flux. For centuries since its establishment in the late tenth century CE, the Azhar had trained and educated the learned classes who not only managed the affairs of local mosques and *kuttabs* but also performed the vital functions of government as judges and bureaucrats. The notion that the Azhar was an institution of "religious education" was itself a controversial effect of the transformations of the nineteenth century. When Mehmed Ali launched his state-building project, he relied initially on foreign expertise. But he quickly recognized that new institutions founded on imported models would require Egyptian personnel to run them. The Ottoman *wālī* thus began to send students on educational missions to Europe where they could acquire training in a range of new subjects including military science, engineering, medicine, irrigation, and printing.<sup>29</sup> As the literati of the country at the time, it was mainly Azharis who first traveled abroad and subsequently enrolled in the new schools that Mehmed Ali's regime soon began to establish. Azhari 'ulama likewise collaborated with their European counterparts to translate key works of science, medicine, and philosophy into Arabic.<sup>30</sup>

If the Azhar played a pivotal role in mediating the introduction of new knowledge and new types of education, however, these changes posed several significant threats to the mosque-university's preeminent status. First, in restructuring the state's fiscal apparatus, Mehmed Ali began to seize the *waqfs* (pious endowments) that funded the Azhar. This centralization of state revenue resulted in both a reduction in the Azhar's institutional autonomy and a diminution in material support. Second, the proliferation of specialized institutions—whether for medicine, engineering, warfare, music, or translation—circumscribed the Azhar's role in new ways. Increasingly, the mosque-university would be seen not as the central locus of higher knowledge in general but of particular kinds of specifically religious or Islamic knowledge. Third, the more pronounced and extensive this new division of labor grew, the more restricted the employment prospects of the Azharis became.

The long struggle over Azhar reform unfolded in response to these mounting pressures. Advocates of reform argued that its curriculum and methods of instruction were badly antiquated. Whereas the country's new schools employed European procedures for assessing and graduating their students, it was often unclear what Azhar-trained 'ulama had studied and to what level. Beginning in 1872, the Azhar therefore adopted a system of examinations for those seeking qualification to teach at the university.<sup>31</sup> If this early move toward standardization sought to credential the faculty, many subsequent changes aimed at clarifying who was or was not an Azhari student. Learning at the mosque-university was one of the few pursuits that conferred

<sup>29</sup>Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 20.

<sup>30</sup>Khaled Fahmy, *In Quest of Justice: Islamic Law and Forensic Medicine in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 70–79.

<sup>31</sup>al-Ša'īdi, *Tārīkh al-islāh*, 34–36; Dodge, *Al-Azhar*, 116–17; Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 53.

exemption from military service and *corvée* labor. As the state's demands upon their bodies and labor time increased in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, growing numbers of young men from the countryside thus sought refuge at the Azhar by claiming to study there. Beginning in 1885, the government therefore took steps to introduce a registration code, but the bureaucratic complexity of monitoring thousands of students delayed its implementation.<sup>32</sup> The impetus to enact stricter regulations finally arrived in 1896 when a cholera outbreak in Cairo took a severe toll on the overcrowded Azhar. The Organization Code of 1896 introduced a system of entrance requirements, imposed new curricular guidelines, and centralized the management and finances under the Rector of the Azhar and his Administrative Council.<sup>33</sup>

Over time, these efforts to render the organization of learning and the granting of degrees more akin to the procedures of Egypt's Westernized schools had the effect of demarcating both the students and faculty of the Azhar as a distinct social group. Although this tendency toward professionalization found some support as a possible strategy for protecting the Azharis' prerogatives and employment prospects, it was, from the beginning, bound up with another issue that proved far more controversial. In short, the question of "reform" concerned not just who could study and teach at the Azhar and how to assess mastery, but what sorts of subjects the curriculum should cover. For this reason, proposals for reforming the Azhar figured prominently in wider debates about the place of Islam in the modern world. According to a line of critique developed most famously by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and his disciple Muḥammad 'Abdūh, the embattled condition of Muslims around the globe was due, in no small measure, to the ossification of Islamic thought at institutions like the Azhar. Arguing that those responsible for guiding the faithful ought to cultivate the individual's capacities to reason and promote the advancement of new knowledge, this modernist camp pushed for the introduction of new subjects and pedagogical techniques imported from abroad.

In his published writings, his role as editor for several important journals, and his work as the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Muḥammad 'Abdūh was a tireless advocate for overhauling the Azhar curriculum. At his death in 1905, however, those efforts had amounted to little. Many histories have cast 'Abdūh as a courageous advocate for progress whose agenda was thwarted by conservative 'ulama.<sup>34</sup> The most common interpretation of the Azhar strike of 1909 treats it as yet another manifestation of this same reactionary position. But as the historian Indira Falk Gesink has shown in an important reassessment, the obstacles 'Abdūh encountered may have had more to do with the strategies he pursued than with the substance of the changes he advocated. 'Abdūh himself often disparaged the Azhari 'ulama as the stubborn enemies of modernity, and his public criticism of these perceived adversaries unsurprisingly left them disinclined to endorse his plans. The aura of suspicion was only augmented by 'Abdūh's cordial relations with prominent members of the British community, including Lord Cromer. Eager to wield control over the country's Islamic institutions,

<sup>32</sup>Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 113–15.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 154–62; Dodge, *Al-Azhar*, 134–37; al-Ṣa'īdi, *Tārīkh al-iṣlāh*, 49–65.

<sup>34</sup>See, for example, Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 154–55.

Khedive ‘Abbās Ḥilmī II, moreover, saw ‘Abdūh’s efforts as a direct challenge to his authority and therefore obstructed them.<sup>35</sup>

A mere two years after ‘Abdūh’s death, however, the Khedive’s position on Azhar reform had changed. Like his earlier opposition, the reversal was closely bound up with his political calculations. In 1907, after nearly a quarter century as the personification of British rule in Egypt, Lord Cromer announced that he would be stepping down. Whereas Cromer had butted heads with the young Khedive since the latter’s accession in 1892, the new Consul-General Sir Eldon Gorst had developed a cordial relationship with the viceregent while serving as Adviser to the Ministry of Finance in the 1890s. Upon his return to Cairo, Gorst had advocated “a serious effort on the part of the Government to meet the desire which exists among certain sections of the population for a larger participation in public affairs.”<sup>36</sup> Privately, he acknowledged that these adjustments aimed not at hastening Egyptian independence but at “taking the sting out of the local Anglophobia, and at the same time, from the House of Commons point of view, ... pushing the Egyptian question well into the background.”<sup>37</sup> Though the Khedive had once sought to position himself as the patron and leader of a patriotic resistance to British rule, Gorst recognized that he regarded the increasingly popular and horizontalist character of the nationalist movement with jealous unease. What the new Consul-General sometimes called his “policy of conciliation” thus entailed granting the Khedive more autonomy and thereby cultivating the Palace as a potential counterweight to the growing constituencies of al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī and Ḥizb al-Ummah.

It was in this context that ‘Abbās Ḥilmī II and his Palace Secretary Aḥmad Shafīq Pasha, took up the mantle of Azhar reform as a means of burnishing the Khedive’s reputation. In December 1907, Aḥmad Shafīq began working with the Council of Ministers on a new law governing the university. This legislation, commonly referred to as the “New Order,” was ratified the following March. The regulations would entail the expulsion of non-enrolled students from the grounds of the Azhar, the progression of students year-by-year through a systematized curriculum, the implementation of standardized annual examinations, and the introduction of “modern” subjects—composition, history, natural science, cosmography, and physiology.<sup>38</sup> The reorganization also established a new “Higher Council” headed by the Rector of the Azhar and comprising the Mufti of Egypt, the Shaykhs of the Mālikī, Shāfā’ī, and Ḥanbalī madhāhib, and two government employees (both hand-picked by the Khedive). It would thereafter control the budgets and curricula of the Azhar and the other major religious institutes in Alexandria and Tanta.

In Aḥmad Shafīq’s self-congratulatory account, the New Order fulfilled a years-long campaign to implement “a system of instruction that should accord with the spirit of the age.”<sup>39</sup> Noting that “the late Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abdūh did not succeed

<sup>35</sup>Gesink, *Islamic Reform, 189–90*. See also, Junaid Quadri, *Transformations of Tradition: Islamic Law in Colonial Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>36</sup>Egypt. No. 1 (1909), *Reports by His Majesty’s Agent and Consul-General on the Finances, Administration, and Condition of Egypt and the Soudan in 1908* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1909), 6.

<sup>37</sup>Oxford Middle East Centre, Eldon Gorst Papers, GB165-0122, box 10, no. 3, “Gorst Autobiography,” 126.

<sup>38</sup>Aḥmad Shafīq, *Mudhakkirātī fī nisf qarn*, 4 vols. (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-‘Āmmah li-l-Kitab, 1998), vol. 3, 137–40.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 137.

in his endeavors at reform,” the Khedive’s confidant attributed his achievement to having treated the ‘ulama with great care and respect.<sup>40</sup> But during the drafting process many within the Azhar complained that they had not been consulted, and the establishment of the Higher Council roused concerns that the Khedive aimed to usurp the Azhar’s autonomy for his own ends.<sup>41</sup>

By October 1908, when the regulations went into effect, those localized objections had begun to resonate with a more generalized critique of Egypt’s political condition. ‘Abbās Ḥilmī II had spent the summer of 1908 in Istanbul and experienced firsthand the drama of the Young Turks’ movement. Alarmed by what he witnessed, the Khedive had resolved to stop the momentum of revolution from spreading to Egypt. What greeted him in September hardly allayed his anxiety. Within hours of his arrival in Alexandria, the National Party started bombarding the Khedive with telegrams from across the country. These coordinated messages congratulated the sovereign on his safe return and demanded an Egyptian constitution straightaway.<sup>42</sup> According to the British chargé d’affaires Ronald Graham, the Khedive immediately reached out for British support in forestalling that eventuality.<sup>43</sup> Over the following months, critics in the nationalist dailies decried the rapprochement between the Palace and the British consulate as antithetical to the principles of popular self-government that seemed to be gaining traction across more and more of the globe. It took no great leap of imagination to see the Khedive’s power grab within the Azhar as a potential violation of those same principles.

### Challenging the New Order

Although its protagonists were quick to link their struggle to these larger issues, the Azhar strike first coalesced around specific objections to the New Order. Following the demonstration on 21 January 1909, local papers began to publish the students’ demands.<sup>44</sup> The strikers carefully emphasized their support for institutional reform and the introduction of modern subjects. Their grievances mainly concerned how the New Order affected the distribution of power and material resources within and beyond the walls of the Azhar. The earliest published lists focused on protections against job competition from the graduates of Egypt’s many new educational institutions, support for the rising costs of education, and more gradual introduction of new course material. As conditions for resuming their classes, the students initially demanded the following: First, that Azharis be given priority over graduates of the new School for Jurisprudence (*madrasat al-qaḍā’*) in matters of judicial employment. Second, that the government equalize compensation between the Azhar and the country’s other higher institutes of religious learning, where pay for students and faculty was generally much better. Third, that the Azhar cover the costs of the books

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>41</sup>Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 213–14.

<sup>42</sup>Dār al-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah, Wathā’iq ‘Abdīn, 0069-012272: “Talaghrafāt wa-iltimāsāt ‘ilá khidwī Miṣr li-l-muṭālibah bi-l- dustūr”; Jakes, *Egypt’s Occupation*, 167–71.

<sup>43</sup>TNA, FO 371/452, Ronald Graham to Edward Grey, 18 Sept. 1908.

<sup>44</sup>See, for example, “‘Itīṣāb tullāb al-Azhar wa-ṭalabātuhum,” *al-Jarīdah*, 24 Jan. 1909; “Mas’alat al-Azhar: ‘Uyub al-niẓām al-jadīd,” *al-Liwa’*, 24 Jan. 1909; “Al-Azharīyūn wa-maṭālibuhum,” *al-Mu’ayyad*, 25 Jan. 1909; “The Al Azhar Strike: Demands of the Students,” *Egyptian Gazette*, 27 Jan. 1909; “Maṭālib al-Azharīyīn,” *al-Ahrām*, 28 Jan. 1909.

and scientific instruments required for the curriculum's new subjects. Fourth, that the university hire sufficient instructors qualified to teach those subjects. Fifth, that concessions ensuring basic employment be granted such that primary degrees would confer employment in waqf-funded schools and secondary degrees would guarantee jobs as clerks in the *sharī'ah* courts and in the management of *waqfs*. Sixth, that the new curriculum be introduced in a gradual and reasonable fashion. Seventh, that final examinations in this first year of the New Order only cover topics that students had actually studied. And finally, that candidates for the higher degree not be examined on arithmetic and algebra, as had been true the prior year. Together, these three last demands addressed what the students regarded as a grave injustice. As originally implemented, the New Order applied to all grades at once, so advanced students would be examined on subjects they had never studied.<sup>45</sup>

A revised list, published the following day, added several more demands concerning governance and university finance. The new list began by insisting that the new Higher Council should be chosen not by the Khedive but by secret ballot of the university 'ulama and that the Council should elect the Rector of the Azhar. This elected Council would, moreover, manage the Azhar's budget with the assistance of the High Judge of the *sharī'ah* courts. The Council's meeting times and proceedings would be published in the papers. When added to the demand for faculty pay equity, these strong claims for institutional autonomy made clear that the strike now encompassed both students and faculty. Because the New Order had emanated from the Palace and arrogated new powers to the Khedive, the demands regarding governance represented at least a potential challenge to his authority.

By January 1909, such challenges seemed to multiply daily. When he succeeded his father Tawfiq in 1892, Khedive 'Abbās Hilmī II had quickly earned the rancor of British officials for his energetic defiance. Guided by an inner circle of Palace advisors and seasoned bureaucrats, the young Khedive provided material support for the fledgling National Party and for Shaykh 'Alī Yūsuf's paper *al-Mu'ayyad*, which had earned a reputation as the central organ of patriotic opposition to British rule.<sup>46</sup> But much had changed since then. In the realignment that ensued from Gorst's "policy of conciliation," 'Alī Yūsuf's paper continued to endorse and amplify the position of its royal patron. When the strike began, *al-Mu'ayyad* thus became the focal point for popular animus that many hesitated to direct toward the Palace itself. For its part, the paper quickly seized upon those demands pertaining to faculty as grounds to discredit the strike as a whole. *al-Mu'ayyad* acknowledged the legitimacy of some complaints about the "New Order" but cautioned that "[the students] have now mixed their demands with those of their shaykhs and added to them, all of which demonstrates that some of the 'ulama have a hand in the matter." Distinguishing the worthy content of the students' demonstrations from their inappropriate form, *al-Mu'ayyad* urged patience on what it depicted as a collection of well-intentioned, if misguided, youngsters. The enlightened Khedive and his advisors would consider the students' legitimate grievances as they worked to amend the New Order.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup>"T'iṣāb tullāb al-Azhar wa-ṭalabātuhum," *al-Jarīdah*, 24 Jan. 1909.

<sup>46</sup>Arthur Goldschmidt, "The Egyptian Nationalist Party, 1892–1919," in P. M. Holt, ed., *Political and Social Change in Modern Egypt: Historical Studies from the Ottoman Conquest to the United Arab Republic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Jakes, *Egypt's Occupation*, ch. 2.

<sup>47</sup>"Al-Azharīyūn wa-maṭālibuhum," *al-Mu'ayyad*, 25 Jan. 1909. In her narration of the strike, Gesink relies exclusively on *al-Mu'ayyad* without accounting for the paper's peculiar status in this changing political field.

That the tone of such commentary echoed the statements of British officials was hardly accidental. In his correspondence with the British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, Gorst explained, "Privately, I have advised them to take the attitude of looking into the grievances of the students (some of which I believe are well founded), but at the same time to insist upon the maintenance of discipline pending a settlement."<sup>48</sup> This strategy cast the strike as the expression of particularistic concerns amenable to technical redress. But the resonance between *al-Mu'ayyad's* statements about the youthful impertinence of the students and a more generalized discourse about Egypt's political adolescence was not lost on those it aimed to silence. Almost immediately, supporters described the strike as a contribution to the struggle for political representation in general. Even as *al-Mu'ayyad's* position hardened, the official organ of the People's Party, *al-Jarīdah*, began to develop this more expansive interpretation:

It is not typical of our Egyptian character that we should like to offend against our teachers or to disobey the orders of our leaders. But we have happily come to regard with joy and exultation each act that reveals the desire to replace the will of the individual with consultation in every department and every institution. So it is that the Azharis desire that their administrative council should be elected by the 'ulama and that those who supervise them should be [selected by] the will of the whole body of the 'ulama.<sup>49</sup>

What *al-Jarīdah* described as a progression toward the adoption of electoral principles, the more openly oppositional papers affiliated with the National Party took as grounds to confront the narrative of political immaturity head on. Denouncing the "saboteurs" who portrayed the students as hapless marks of a few scheming 'ulama, *al-Liwā'* identified two main sources for their discontent. The first was the university's "loss of its administrative independence." The second was that "the doors to a future livelihood are closed in the faces of those students." As to the allegation that they "wish to remain stuck in their ways," the paper countered that they were "the people most loving of reform and the most welcoming toward the modern sciences."<sup>50</sup> Marveling that for eight consecutive days, twelve thousand young men remained united and orderly, another paper aligned with the National Party, *Miṣr al-Fatāh*, praised the strikers for "that notion, constitutional in its character, democratic in its nature, that inspired the Azharis to demand their rights."<sup>51</sup>

When the strike started, the students had set up thirty-seven distinct committees to manage the varied tasks of their movement. Modeling the form of political representation to which they aspired, they held elections. On 28 January they established the Azhar Union Society (*jam'īyat ittihād al-Azhar*), which would thereafter negotiate on the strikers' behalf with the government and the university administration. *Miṣr al-Fatāh* went on to herald the students' youth as a political

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Her comments on the strike's "degeneration" may be read as a reflection of this particular source base. Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 275–77.

<sup>48</sup>TNA, FO 800/47, Gorst to Grey, 31 Jan. 1909.

<sup>49</sup>"Al-Azharīyūn al-mu'taṣībūn," *al-Jarīdah*, 25 Jan. 1909.

<sup>50</sup>"Mas'alat al-Azhar al-sharīf," *al-Liwā'*, 26 Jan. 1909.

<sup>51</sup>"Ittihād al-Azharīyūn," *Miṣr al-Fatah*, 28 Jan. 1909.

virtue. "If you were to ask the learned shaykhs in which of life's phases the power of union is to be found," the paper explained, "they would respond that it appears in its purest manifestation in the phase of youth, the phase of power and action."<sup>52</sup>

Like the strikers themselves, by invoking "union" these papers linked together what might otherwise seem like distinct political traditions. In the heady aftermath of the Young Turks' Revolt, the line that *Miṣr al-Fatāh* drew between the Azharis' "union" and a "notion, constitutional in its character, democratic in its nature" was far from incidental. The leaders of the Ottoman CUP themselves exhibited at best an instrumental commitment to that "notion." Strong adherents of scientific positivism, many advocated the restoration of the Ottoman constitution of 1876 less out of attachment to democratic ideals than as a necessary component of Ottoman modernization and self-strengthening, a project that Sultan Abdülhamid II's tyranny had hampered. In this version, "union" was in fact a substitution for "order" in Auguste Comte's motto "*Ordre et Progrès*," a name for the organic coherence that a rightly governed society might achieve.<sup>53</sup> For the CUP, "Representative government (parliament) was a necessary evil in order to challenge the negative power of the state, but even then the representatives were considered 'agents of the state' rather than 'representatives of the people.'"<sup>54</sup>

The revolt, however, inspired popular aspirations that were far more diverse than the narrow instrumentalism of its organizers. Across the empire, the CUP's triumph occasioned widespread celebration and speculation about the practical entailments of abstract principles like freedom, liberty, and representation.<sup>55</sup> In Egypt, demands for a constitution, for more powerful representative institutions, and ultimately for self-rule had been building since the Dinshawai Incident of 1906.<sup>56</sup> And while the CUP's secularist tendencies and their manifest challenge to Abdülhamid's authority proved somewhat controversial in Egypt, where the National Party and its supporters had once looked to the Sultan as a counterweight to Britain's imperial ambitions, the reinstatement of the constitution itself inspired tremendous excitement. In the pages of *al-Liwā'*, its editor 'Abd al-'Azīz Jāwīsh expressed a prescient concern for the contradictions between the high-handed elitism of the CUP and the remarkable advancement of "representative, constitutional government."<sup>57</sup> Ever vigilant against the stale assertions of colonial discourse, he moreover proclaimed of the revolution, "Lord Cromer has today forgotten what he wrote yesterday. And what has caused him to forget except that extraordinary deed which the Turks accomplished, for they shocked the Western world and thereby invalidated and annihilated a large portion of

<sup>52</sup> "Taḍamun al-ṭalabah al-Miṣrīyah," *Miṣr al-Fatāh*, 28 Jan. 1909.

<sup>53</sup> M. Sukru Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 74.

<sup>54</sup> Michelle Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 55.

<sup>55</sup> On popular interpretations of the Young Turk Revolution and the constitution that it reinstated, see Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*; Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Jakes, *Egypt's Occupation*, 128–37.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Sālim 'Abd al-Nabī Qunaybir, *Al-Ittijāhāt al-siyāsīyah wa-al-fikrīyah wa-al-ijtimā'īyah fī al-adab al-'Arabī al-mu'āṣir: 'Abd al-'Azīz Jāwīsh 1872–1929* (Benghazi: Dār Maktabat al-Andalus, 1968), 163.

his book [i.e., *Modern Egypt*].”<sup>58</sup> In what might easily be read as a pointed critique of Orientalist discourse and the ways it functioned to structure expectations, Jāwīsh here extolled the potential of concerted action to “annihilate” the aura of facticity that the statements of colonial officials too often enjoyed.

Beyond the celebrations and critical reflections that it inspired, the Ottoman revolution also gave new weight to a second, more commonplace meaning of “union,” not as a principle of social cohesion but rather as a scalable strategy for upending steep asymmetries of power. As histories of labor movements in the Arab world have noted, *ittihād* (union) was not used in this period to designate workers’ organizations; *niqābah* (syndicate) and *jam‘īyah* (society) were most common for that purpose.<sup>59</sup> But “union” did already name both the principle and the practice that such organizations employed to achieve their objectives. However the CUP leadership may have interpreted the term, the success of a movement comprising Ottoman subjects massed together against the Sultan’s paranoid authoritarianism ignited the hopes of disadvantaged groups across the empire. Most notably, the Sultan’s capitulation precipitated a swift intensification of labor militancy. The occurrence of strikes and the establishment of formal bodies to represent the interests of working groups accelerated rapidly after July 1908.<sup>60</sup> The famed strike by Cairo’s tramway workers that October marked a continuation of this empire-wide trend.<sup>61</sup>

From the beginning, the Azharis’ calls for “union” thus braided together what were elsewhere often separate strands of meaning. In the name they chose for their organization, the repertoire of contention they adopted, and the basic material concerns that motivated their walkout, the strikers asserted that their own situation was meaningfully comparable to those of the many other groups that had recently employed the union and the strike. But because their struggle concerned the university’s right to self-governance and entailed a direct confrontation with the Egyptian state itself, their particular demands resonated immediately with calls for both an Egyptian constitution and an end to British rule. These multiple significations were only augmented by the way their sudden activism stood at odds with prevailing assumptions about the Azharis as a social category. It was this apparent incongruity that led both detractors and supporters of the Azharis’ movement to comment on the uneven and incomplete modularity of strikes and constitutional self-government alike.

In a bitingly dismissive articulation of the British occupation’s developmentalist mode of comparison, the Anglophone *Egyptian Gazette* adduced the strike as the latest evidence that Egyptians were as yet unprepared to employ the modular forms of

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 172. In the opening section of his landmark essay, Edward Said treat’s Lord Cromer’s *Modern Egypt* as a paradigmatic example of Orientalist discourse. See Lord Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 2 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994[1978]), 31–46.

<sup>59</sup>Beinin and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 55, 68.

<sup>60</sup>On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 177; Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, “Levantine Trajectories: The Formulation and Dissemination of Radical Ideas in and between Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria, 1860–1914,” PhD diss., Harvard University, 2003, 284–85; Beinin, *Workers and Peasants*, 78–80; Yavuz Selim Karakışla, “The 1908 Strike Wave in the Ottoman Empire,” *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 16, 2 (1992): 153–77; Donald Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881–1908: Reactions to European Economic Penetration* (New York: New York University Press, 1983).

<sup>61</sup>“Umāl al-tarāmway,” *al-Ahrām*, 15 Oct. 1908.



modern politics. If the strikers described their struggle as both analogous and directly related to the wider movement for self-rule, the main organ of the local Anglophone community drew just the same connection. “The Nationalist parties of Egypt,” opined a column from 1 February 1909, “are constantly trying to impress upon the rest of the world that this country is ready for self-Government, and that the present generation is absolutely capable of directing its own affairs.” Egypt’s political life, however, was unfolding in reverse. The Azhar strike was only the latest demonstration “that the country is not yet ready for self-Government and that the rising generation will probably be even less ready than their fathers.” The resulting “wave of discontent and wanton idiocy” might soon “bid fair to engulf the country in a kindergarten revolution.”<sup>62</sup>

For the *Gazette*, the unlikely phenomena that the paper referred to in scare quotes as youthful “manifestations” were a dangerously shoddy imitation of a European original. But among its advocates, the strike’s surprising character had revealed a transformative possibility. Precisely because striking had not previously seemed an appropriate mode of collective action for seminarians, the choice to adopt this “modular” repertoire became a way of rendering visible and transgressing the categorical distinctions that served to restrict political participation under Egypt’s current regime. Making explicit this internal relation between form and content, *al-Liwā’* observed, “It was long understood that the Azharis were predisposed toward apathy, that they were unconcerned with their own affairs, and that they did not give a hoot about their future or their rights.... But as soon as the strike commenced, ... people began to ask, ‘How is it that those we considered the sector least likely to act, have ... dared to hold the authorities to account and to square off against them, confident in themselves and certain of their victory.’”<sup>63</sup>

In a similar vein, *Miṣr al-Fatāh* identified the Azharis’ movement as a signal departure in both the uses of the strike and the broader potentialities of “union.” In a front-page story entitled “Strikes in Egypt: Egyptians Have Agreed to Agree,” a journalist named Sayyid ‘Alī identified the strike as an abstract, global form: “The strike [*al-i’tiṣāb*] is a peaceful force to which organized, unified associations resort in order to address an injustice by which an overweening oppressor has harmed them or to reclaim a right that has been seized by a coercive tyrant with no sense of justice.” In this account, the strike had an identifiable point of origin “among the working classes of Europe.” Because of that prior history, this “peaceful force” first appeared in Egypt among the working classes as well. For that reason, “the other classes of the Egyptian nation used to regard the strike with disdain, alleging that it was inappropriate to their social rank and standing.”<sup>64</sup> But those perceptions had begun to change in recent years, most notably when Cairo’s law students had gone on strike in 1906 to protest changes to their own curriculum and school regulations.<sup>65</sup> While acknowledging that precedent, however, Sayyid ‘Alī suggested that the Azhar strike, in its magnitude, its duration, and its broad appeal for the Egyptian public, was doing more than extending the possible uses of the strike. Rather, the Azharis had performed “a greater and more lofty service by removing from the face of their nation the stigma with which their enemies and the pessimists among them had besmirched them, the

<sup>62</sup>“The Azhar Strike,” *Egyptian Gazette*, 1 Feb. 1909.

<sup>63</sup>“Mas’alat al-Azhar,” *al-Liwā’*, 7 Feb. 1909.

<sup>64</sup>Sayyid ‘Alī, “al-I’tiṣāb fī Miṣr: ittafaq al-Miṣrīyūn ‘alā ann yattaḥaqqū,” *Miṣr al-Fatāh*, 9 Feb. 1909.

<sup>65</sup>On the law school strike, see Jakes, *Egypt’s Occupation*, 176–77.

stigma of perpetual disagreement, strife, and feuding.” That is, by demonstrating how the modularity of the strike might be stretched and extended to new segments of Egyptian society, they had shown that such forms of union might encompass the nation as a whole.<sup>66</sup>

Such expansive interpretations of the strike only gained credibility as the Khedive and his supporters dug in their heels. At the outset, ‘Abbās Ḥilmī II had called upon the students to resume their studies while his committee investigated their demands.<sup>67</sup> When they refused, the university administration warned that any who failed to return by 30 January would lose the stipends upon which most Azharis relied to feed themselves. The Council of Ministers moreover threatened to strip the strikers of their customary exemption from military conscription.<sup>68</sup> When the Azhar Union Society did not balk, the Khedive delivered on his threats. On 1 February, he expelled all students above the first and second years and revoked their stipends and bread rations.<sup>69</sup> Cowed into submission, several thousand of the youngest students returned to their classes on 6 February, but the rest maintained their demonstrations outside the university gates.<sup>70</sup> As the Union Society urged its members to persevere, *al-Mu’ayyad* alleged once again that the pliant students were being manipulated by a few trouble-making shaykhs and nationalist conspirators.<sup>71</sup>

Hoping to resolve the impasse, the Rector of the Azhar, Shaykh Ḥassūnah al-Nawwāwī, met with the strikers’ representatives and promised to negotiate a full pardon if, in return, they would end the demonstrations.<sup>72</sup> The government, however, rejected his proposal, announcing instead that the committee would continue its deliberations. Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, editor-in-chief of Ḥizb al-Ummah’s official organ *al-Jarīdah*, read the government’s choice to forego an amicable resolution as yet another manifestation of “the policy of conciliation [*siyāsāt al-wifāq*]” and an inclination to “substitute methods of compulsion for principles of tolerance.”<sup>73</sup> Even *al-Liwā’* expressed confidence in the Rector’s commitment to his students and hope that the committee’s deliberations might still reach a positive outcome.<sup>74</sup> They did not. Rather than issue a full pardon, the Higher Council announced that they would readmit only those students who signed a special form begging the Khedive’s forgiveness and disavowing any support for the strike.<sup>75</sup>

At an emergency meeting of its entire membership on 14 February, the president of the Union Society, Shaykh Fahīm Qandīl, rose to “warn you against taking part in a matter laid as a trap for your cause.” The architect of this dangerous plot, he continued, was “this treacherous, hypocritical, reprehensible, vile man, this viper, this spider, this dog, and all of you know who he is. He is ‘Alī Bin Yūsuf the schemer, the spy, may discord rain down upon him!” Shaykh Qandīl explained that the reviled

<sup>66</sup>Sayyid ‘Alī, “al-I’tisāb fī Miṣr.”

<sup>67</sup>“Iḷān min mashaykhāt al-Azhar,” *al-Mu’ayyad*, 28 Jan. 1909.

<sup>68</sup>“Al-Azharīyūn wa-maṭālibuhum,” *al-Mu’ayyad*, 30 Jan. 1909; “Mas’alat al-Azhar al-sharīf,” *al-Liwā’*, 30 Jan. 1909.

<sup>69</sup>Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 222.

<sup>70</sup>“Al-Azharīyūn bayna shaqqay al-raḥī,” *al-Mimbar*, 2 Feb. 1909.

<sup>71</sup>“Mi’ah wa-‘ashrūn darsan fī al-Azhar al-sharīf,” *al-Mu’ayyad*, 6 Feb. 1909.

<sup>72</sup>“Mas’alat al-Azhar,” *al-Liwā’*, 7 Feb. 1909.

<sup>73</sup>Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, “Al-Ḥukūma wa-l-Azharīyīn,” *al-Jarīdah*, 9 Feb. 1909.

<sup>74</sup>“Mas’alat al-Azhar,” *al-Liwā’*, 10 Feb. 1909.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 15 Feb. 1909.

publisher of *al-Mu'ayyad* had “counseled a number of hypocritical ‘ulama to write up and sign a petition to His Highness the Khedive that they are not in agreement with the actions of the Union Society.” He urged the assembled crowd to “tear it up and strike anyone who carries it with your sandal.”<sup>76</sup>

Undeterred by the Khedive’s coercive maneuvers, the thousands of Azharis who remained on strike readied themselves for a confrontation. In a last-ditch effort, Shaykh Ḥassūnah al-Nawāwī offered the Higher Council an ultimatum: either pardon all of the students and allow them to return or accept his resignation.<sup>77</sup> The Council was unphased, and on 16 February, the Rector kept his word and resigned.<sup>78</sup>

The following day, the Higher Council deputized the Director of Religious Endowments, Khalīl Ḥamādah Pasha, to oversee the return of the penitent students. Only those bearing signed copies of the official petition could enter the Azhar. Having judged the entire procedure as a plot to divide their membership, a large crowd from the Union Society continued to mass outside the university. When eventually a contingent attempted to force their way past the university guards, Ḥamādah Pasha summoned the police. In the ensuing melee, witnesses claimed to have seen him beating several students with a club.<sup>79</sup>

Public outcry was swift and furious. In the flood of columns condemning Ḥamādah Pasha’s tactics, many identified his violence as “terrorism [*irhāb*].” At the time, the word often connoted the state’s own use of force to intimidate and to quash dissent. This had been the term the Arabic press employed in 1906 when it denounced the brutality of the occupation’s special tribunal at Dinshawai.<sup>80</sup> By 1909, the Dinshawai Incident had already gained its reputation as the outrage that launched a new phase in the nationalist movement’s campaign to end British rule. With evident unease, the *Egyptian Gazette* reported that the Arabic paper *al-Dustūr* “exclaims that a new Denishwai [*sic*] has appeared in the Al Azhar.”<sup>81</sup> Deploying a protest technique they had pioneered in the aftermath of the Dinshawai executions, al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī coordinated a campaign of telegrams from points around the country to the Prime Minister Buṭrūs Ghālī Pasha conveying their “indignation” at Ḥamādah Pasha’s misdeeds.<sup>82</sup> Within weeks of the scandal, Ḥassan Mar’ī, who had written one of the first theatrical representations of the Dinshawai Incident, published a new “political play” entitled, “The Story of the Azhar and the Case of Ḥamādah Pasha.”<sup>83</sup>

While these allusions to Dinshawai refigured the strikers’ physical suffering as a microcosm of Egypt’s political condition, Ḥamādah Pasha’s involvement also established a more direct connection with events in Istanbul. In a fiery piece entitled, “For that Reason We Demand a Constitution,” Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid argued that such abuse by the sovereign’s chosen deputy smacked of “the spirit of that tired old maxim

<sup>76</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 31, 14 Feb. 1909.

<sup>77</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 34, 17 Feb. 1909.

<sup>78a</sup>Al-Azhar Strike,” *Egyptian Gazette*, 18 Feb. 1909.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.; TNA, FO 800/47, Gorst to Grey, 21 Feb. 1909. Gorst notes, “It is privately alleged that he [Ḥamādah Pasha] was carrying out the Khedive’s orders.”

<sup>80</sup>See, for example, “Ba’da Dinshawai mādhā?” *al-Mu’ayyad*, 1 July 1906.

<sup>81a</sup>“Al-Azhar Strike: Flogging the Theologians,” *Egyptian Gazette*, 18 Feb. 1909.

<sup>82</sup>Hoover Institution Archives, Boutros Boutros-Ghali Papers, box 252, folder 7, file B/25, “Al Azhar, 1907–1909,” petitions to Buṭrūs Ghālī Pasha, 20 Feb. 1909.

<sup>83</sup>Ḥassan Mar’ī, *Riwāyat al-Azhar wa-qaḍiyat Ḥamādah Pasha* (Cairo: n.p., Mar. 1909).

that ‘We are *fallāhīn* [peasants] whose only remedy is the whip.’<sup>84</sup> In his plaintive conclusion, he declared:

If we do not demand a constitution because it is the only reasonable form of government. If we do not demand a constitution because it is our sole guarantee that our money will be spent for our own interests. If we do not demand a constitution so that our children might learn as we desire. If we do not demand a constitution so that the nation may know that it holds the highest power and ranks above all others. If we do not demand a constitution for the sake of any of those objectives, then the very least that may come from a constitution is that it should serve as a barrier between Ḥamādah Pasha’s cane and the bodies of our sons. For that reason, we demand a constitution.<sup>85</sup>

*Miṣr al-Fatāh* put matters even more bluntly with its headline “God Spare the Weak: The Constitutional Director of Awqaf Establishes an Arbitrary Government [*ḥukūmah ‘urfīyah*] in the Largest Islamic Institute in the World.”<sup>86</sup> Before his recent return to Cairo, Ḥamādah Pasha had served as one of Sultan Abdülhamid’s appointees to the upper chamber of the Ottoman Parliament. His involvement thus dramatized the contrast between the inspiring revival of constitutionalism across the empire and the persistence within Egypt of a tyrannical regime over-determined by colonial racism and khedivial intransigence.

Following the clashes, both the National Party and the People’s Party organized meetings and demonstrations in support of the Azharis. On 18 February, a group of lawyers and notables held a rally at the headquarters of *al-Liwā’* to condemn Ḥamādah Pasha’s handling of the strike. A delegation of lawyers launched their own investigation of the previous day’s events.<sup>87</sup> A procession of ‘ulama also marched to the Qubbah Palace, where they implored the Khedive to pardon the students and suspend the New Order.<sup>88</sup> The next day, another crowd marched from the offices of *al-Jarīdah* to the ‘Abdīn Palace to deliver a petition begging for the Khedive’s intercession. Later that afternoon, the Council of Ministers recommended a blanket pardon for all of the students. The following morning, ‘Abbās Ḥilmī II announced that he would readmit all of the students and restore their stipends. The university would suspend the New Order reforms while the government deliberated over amendments. In the meantime, the Azhar would revert to its old curriculum and administrative arrangements.<sup>89</sup>

## A Singular Revolt

Unsurprisingly, this decisive victory occasioned an outpouring of commentary about the wider implications of the strike. The *Egyptian Gazette* lamented, “At the present

<sup>84</sup> Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, “Min ajl dhalik naṭlub al-dustūr,” *al-Jarīdah*, 18 Feb. 1909.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> “Ittaqū Allah fī al-ḍu’afā’: mudīr al-awqāf al-dustūrī yuqīm ḥukūmah ‘urfīyah fī akbar ma’had Islāmī fī al-‘ālam,” *Miṣr al-Fatāh*, 18 Feb. 1909.

<sup>87</sup> “Al-ummah bi-usrihā mustā’ah min ḥālat al-Azhar,” *al-Jarīdah*, 18 Feb. 1909.

<sup>88</sup> “Ḥizb al-iṣlāḥ al-dustūrī,” *al-Mu’ayyad*, 20 Feb. 1909.

<sup>89</sup> The full text of the decree announcing the resolution was published in *al-Mu’ayyad*, 22 Feb. 1909. See also, “‘Afū al-Janāb al-‘Āfī al-Khidīwī,” *Miṣr al-Fatāh*, 20 Feb. 1909.

moment the policy of leniency is the policy which is adopted by every person in authority in Egypt, and it is questionable whether it will not spell disaster in the future.”<sup>90</sup> Well aware of such concerns among the local British community, Gorst acknowledged to Edward Grey, “The whole business has been another example of the wave of insubordination to constituted authority which is passing over the whole of the East.” Undeterred, he resolved to “pay no attention to the absurd criticism which follows almost every act of the Government.”<sup>91</sup>

Having insisted from the beginning that the strike was about more than the condition of the Azhar, the country’s leading political ideologists saw greater meaning in the unexpected triumph. Throughout the month-long confrontation, both the National Party and the People’s Party had remained steadfast in their support for the strikers. That they appeared to be acting together is amply attested by the cheers for both parties with which the Azharis regularly concluded their rallies.<sup>92</sup> This blurring of distinctions between the Ummah Party and the Watanists gives the lie to conventional narratives that posit a sharp ideological cleavage between two opposing forms of nationalism, the former moderate, liberal, secular, and Westernizing, the latter extremist, populist, religious, and xenophobic.<sup>93</sup> Nor was this rapprochement between the parties simply a matter of popular perceptions. Writing to the Khedive in April 1909, Minister of the Interior Muḥammad Sa’īd detailed an agreement between the two parties to “collect the money necessary to cover the expenses of sending delegations to the European capitals with the aim of broadcasting their complaint against the Egyptian government with regard to the restriction of press freedom and the refusal to grant the nation a constitution.”<sup>94</sup>

If they shared an opposition to “the policy of conciliation” and an appeal to the promise of constitutionalism, though, the foremost voices of the two parties did offer distinct interpretations of the strike. For both Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Jāwīsh, these events stood as powerful rejoinders to the occupation’s discourse of colonial adolescence and the politics of deferral that it served to justify. But they drew different conclusions from what they had witnessed. Rather than treat them as articulations of opposing party platforms, we might better understand their commentaries as moments within an evolving debate around the normative and strategic contours of a self-confidently anti-colonial comparativism.

In an essay entitled “Public Opinion,” published on 22 February, Luṭfī al-Sayyid opened with an explicit comparison: “The newspapers in countries other than ours may limit their concern to the promotion of the practical political objectives that they hope to achieve in service to the homeland,” he explained, “but politics in our country—in my opinion—has more of a theoretical than a purely practical meaning.” Journalists in Europe might judge events against “principles rooted in the heart of

<sup>90</sup>“Al Azhar. Students Pardoned. The Policy of Leniency.” *Egyptian Gazette*, 22 Feb. 1909.

<sup>91</sup>TNA, FO 800/47: Gorst to Grey, 21 Feb. 1909.

<sup>92</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 36, 23 Feb. 1909.

<sup>93</sup>See, for example, Panayiotis J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Modern Egypt: From Muhammad Ali to Mubarak*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 225; Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6–9; Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 199–209; Goldschmidt, “Egyptian Nationalist Party”; Walid Kazziha, “The Jarīdah-Ummah Group and Egyptian Politics,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 13, 3 (1977): 373–85.

<sup>94</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 62, 17 Apr. 1909.

public opinion,” but in Egypt, the “cherished goal” of writers like Luṭfī al-Sayyid was the “cohesion of public opinion itself.” Yet the Azharis had demonstrated that “only a short distance remains until the fragments of public opinion form a solidary whole.” At first, the strike had been “nothing more than a school affair,” but as the confrontation intensified, “the nation arose as one to demonstrate its discontent and demand respect for the law.” Far from an expression of “mere religious idealism,” Luṭfī al-Sayyid insisted that “public feeling in this matter was marked by the stamp of nationalism and motivated by love of respect for freedom and law,” a fact amply attested by the support that many Coptic Christians had offered to the Azharis.<sup>95</sup>

On first glance, Luṭfī al-Sayyid’s essay seems to rehearse the logics of a Eurocentric historicism internalized by an aspiring nationalist elite. The piece presents the Azharis’ confrontation with the Khedive’s government in the abstract terms of a struggle for freedom, nation, and rule of law. It gestures at a comparative developmental hierarchy within which Egypt occupies a different rank than Europe. Yet even as he described this transparently stagist vision, Luṭfī al-Sayyid repudiated the Eurocentrism of colonial appeals to those same liberal categories. He concluded the column by insisting that “the coalescence of public opinion around the demand for a constitution arises wholly from the genuine conviction of the people as to its necessity and not from some faddish imitation that will pass with the times.”<sup>96</sup> Here the Ummah Party’s leading ideologue articulated a kind of deep universalism anchored not in the example of Europe’s particular history but in the rational contemplation of human experience everywhere. Elsewhere, Luṭfī al-Sayyid emphasized that the political ideals he championed had no special European provenance. The claim that they did was a pernicious ruse concocted to defend a colonial regime that was hindering, rather than encouraging, a natural process of human development.<sup>97</sup>

For Jāwīsh, the Azharis’ accomplishments offered a different lesson. His lengthy exposition on “The Noble Azhar,” published on 21 February, began by emphasizing a dimension of “union” that had gone largely unremarked in prior accounts of the strike. The Azharis “adorned themselves with the oneness [*tawḥīd*] that is the foundation of their true religion. They were one before their God, one in their language, one in their hearts, one in the nobility of their goals.” Jāwīsh here interpreted “union” as a logical, earthly realization of divine unity (*tawḥīd*). Leading author and political strategist for the Egyptian National Party though he may have been, the itinerant Maghrebi Jāwīsh’s nationalism here rubbed up against his vision of an expansive Pan-Islamic *umma* from two sides. On the one, his Pan-Islamism could and did at times shade into a divisive sectarianism. On the other, his writings suggest an ambivalence about the ideal political form that a resurgent and unified community might assume. But Jāwīsh was amply aware of both concerns, and his comments on the strike exemplify the complexity and breadth of his political vision.

On the first count, he addressed the closing paragraphs of his column directly to Būṭrus Ghālī Pasha to praise him for pressuring the Khedive to meet the strikers’ demands. Jāwīsh extended to the Coptic Prime Minister the thanks of “an *umma* ... that knows no fanaticism [*ta’aṣṣub*] except on behalf of what is right and no battle

<sup>95</sup> Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, “al-Ra’ī al-‘āmm,” *al-Jarīdah*, 22 Feb. 1909.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> For more on Luṭfī al-Sayyid’s anti-colonial universalism, see Omar, “Arabic Thought.”

except against what is wrong.” Tackling head on the British occupation’s constant allegations of Egyptian fanaticism, Jāwīsh thus identified these labels with attempts to discredit struggles that Christians and Muslims shared together. On the latter count, Jāwīsh’s commentary about an Islamic ideal of unity was about far more than an unresolved tension between national and supra-national identities. The oneness that the Azharis had displayed, “such that there was between them not even the space of a needle’s eye into which discord might slip,” was itself an instance of something else. Having “armed themselves with patience and resolve,” he explained, “they vanquished what no armored fleets or cannons or weapons could.” The strikers’ victory was therefore significant in several respects at once.<sup>98</sup>

Within Egypt, the Azharis’ actions had caused their ministers to “feel the ground tremble beneath their feet” such that they “stood before the people for the first time in their history as helpers of the weak and champions of what is right [*ansār li-l-haqq*].” Mass action, in other words, had brought about a seismic shift in Egypt’s political topography, forcing ministers to respond to the demands of “the people.” Within this reading of events, Egyptians already possessed a fully formed concept of right (*al-haqq*). Unlike Luṭfī al-Sayyid, Jāwīsh suggested that a shift in the balance of forces, rather than the pedagogic constitution of public opinion, had proven decisive. That practical achievement of union marked a signal departure in Egypt’s recent political history.<sup>99</sup>

While insisting on the novelty of the Azharis’ accomplishment, Jāwīsh made no recourse to the developmentalism that informed even Luṭfī al-Sayyid’s analysis. Nor did he retreat into a defense of Islamic particularism. Instead, his language anticipated arguments that he would develop more explicitly in the months and years to come. Ultimately, for him the Azharis’ movement was an exemplar of the transformative potential that union could confer upon “the weak [*al-du‘afā*]” even when they confronted the armed violence of the powerful. In place of the binary geography of East and West that organized Orientalist thought, Jāwīsh offered his own basic comparative categories—the weak and the strong—as the starting point for a manifestly radical analysis of unequal power relations on multiple geographic scales. From this perspective, the Azharis were not moving Egypt through a stage that Europe had completed at some time in the past. Rather, their strike represented just one moment in an unfolding global present of intensifying struggles waged by the weak against the strong.<sup>100</sup>

### Conclusion: Peaceful Wars

During the months that followed, Jāwīsh would find ample reason to assert that those struggles were gaining momentum. The Azharis would strike several more times as they pressured the government to amend the New Order reforms to meet their demands.<sup>101</sup> When, two years later, the government finalized what came to be known as the 1911 Reform Plan, the revised regulations included several major concessions to the strikers. Unlike the ill-conceived original modification to the curriculum, this

<sup>98</sup> Abd al-Azīz Jāwīsh, “Al-Azhar al-Sharīf,” *al-Liwā’*, 21 Feb. 1909.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 225–27.

version would introduce the new subjects gradually. While the ‘ulama did not gain the right to elect the Higher Council, its outside members would now be appointed by the Council of Ministers rather than the Khedive. Further, in order to preserve a greater degree of prestige and autonomy for the ‘ulama, the Reform Plan established a new Corps of the Great Scholars (*hay’at kibār al-‘ulamā*) comprised of thirty senior shaykhs who would deliver three weekly lectures on traditional subjects for enrolled students and the general public alike.<sup>102</sup>

But it was not only in service of their own immediate interests that the Azharis retained their activist role. As recorded by the government’s burgeoning network of spies and informants, whose findings the Minister of Interior reported to an uneasy Khedive, they became a ubiquitous presence in the varied activities that characterized what Zachary Lockman has called the nationalist movement’s “turn toward the masses.”<sup>103</sup> In this sense, they drew in practice on the very sorts of connections that commentators like Jāwīsh and Luṭfī al-Sayyid had attributed to their movement. They delivered speeches and recited poems at the meetings of new political societies and associations with names like “The Society of Fraternal Solidarity,” “The Union Society,” “The Society for Strong Eastern Union,” “The Egyptian Union Society,” and “The Society for Youth Progress.”<sup>104</sup> They volunteered at the People’s Night Schools that the National Party opened for the urban poor in Cairo, and they participated in efforts to unionize other working groups.<sup>105</sup> They organized rural lecture tours, teaching literacy and love of the nation (*ḥubb al-waṭan*) to the peasants in their home districts.<sup>106</sup> And they faced off against the batons and fire hoses of the police in protests denouncing the occupation’s renewed efforts to suppress the nationalist movement through press censorship and targeted arrests.<sup>107</sup>

Jāwīsh himself described this burst of popular activism in the spring of 1910 as exemplifying the “peaceful wars” whereby self-conscious groups of “the weak”—among whom he included “the peasant, the servant, the cook, the worker”—were challenging “the powerful” and reclaiming their rights across the planet.<sup>108</sup> For Jāwīsh, these loose terms indexing social power provided a way to think across existing social categories and strengthen “the bond of union.” Through a telescopic series of comparisons that linked everyday class struggles within countries to anti-colonial struggles on a global scale, Jāwīsh suggested that Egyptians could find both cause for optimism and grounds for solidarity in combatting their own oppressors. Though the firebrand journalist drew these connections with particular clarity, he certainly was not alone. At their meetings and rallies, the members of Egypt’s many new political associations, too, conjured comparisons with the constitutional revolutions in Iran and the Ottoman Empire, the recent Swadeshi movement in India, and the exploited condition of other colonies like Ireland.<sup>109</sup> Working to counteract an official discourse of British rule that had, for decades, posited a sharp and

<sup>102</sup>Dodge, *Al-Azhar*, 140–43; Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 225–27.

<sup>103</sup>Lockman, “Social Roots of Nationalism.”

<sup>104</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 38–39, 8 Mar. 1909; FO 371/1114, “Report Respecting Secret Societies,” 22 June 1911.

<sup>105</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 50, 31 Mar. 1909.

<sup>106</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 103, 10 May 1909; HIL 6, 58, 13 Apr. 1909.

<sup>107</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 53, 31 Mar. 1909; “Muẓāhirat al-ams al-kubrā fī sabīl ḥurrīyat al-ṣiḥāfah,” *Miṣr al-Fatāh*, 1 Apr. 1909.

<sup>108</sup>Abd al-‘Azīz Jāwīsh, “al-Ḥurūb al-silmīyah,” *al-‘Alam*, 26 May 1910; Jakes, *Egypt’s Occupation*, 224–28.

<sup>109</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 159, 4 Aug. 1909, 6, 185, 28 Aug. 1909; 6, 315, 19 Nov. 1909.



unbridgeable divide between a docile, narrowly materialist peasantry and a vocal but demographically insignificant opposition in the cities, activist Azharis seized upon their geographically diverse origins to begin mobilizing support for the nationalists across the countryside.<sup>110</sup> By the summer of 1909, several of the most militant groups were speculating that the recent global wave of revolutions might soon arrive in Egypt as well.<sup>111</sup>

The electric potential of this moment would ultimately fail to generate the grand transformations that both its most enthusiastic protagonists and its most alarmist detractors envisioned. The assassination of Premier Būṭrus Ghālī Pasha in February 1910 gave the occupation a new pretext for the coercive turn its critics labeled *irhāb*.<sup>112</sup> While the crime conjured new fears about political violence, it also provided Consul-General Gorst with yet another reason to claim “that the country is not yet ripe for a further development of existing institutions, that any attempt to introduce self-government prematurely would endanger the progress made under the British occupation and could not therefore be allowed, and that recent events have tended to confirm ... that it is not desirable at present to extend the powers of either the Legislative Council or the General Assembly.”<sup>113</sup> Judging his own experiment in local self-government a failure, Gorst received London’s blessing to escalate his crackdown against the nationalists and their leadership, Jāwīsh foremost among them.<sup>114</sup>

For the time being, the repressive policies worked. But when the forces of popular protest surged again into what would become the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, the Azharis were among the very first constituencies that took to Cairo’s streets. In January 1909, the notion that Muslim seminarians should assume a vanguard role seemed almost unthinkable. A decade later, their ties to both Egyptian nationalism and the labor movement were so well established as to elicit little comment from the British authorities who documented the uprising.<sup>115</sup> If the strike of 1909 was largely responsible for that shift, it also prepared the ground for the events of 1919 in a broader sense. Because the strike was “modular” but not equally available to all, the choice to employ this particular repertoire thereafter became an increasingly common way of rejecting ascribed social categories and asserting alternative frames of comparison. So it was in the spring of 1919 that each new social group to join the movement asserting that Egypt’s situation was comparable to those of other nations claiming the right to self-determination announced that intention through the mechanism of the strike.

In identifying comparison as necessary to the operations of empire, many post-colonial critics have come close to asserting that comparison is necessarily an imperial mode of thought. They suggest, accordingly, that the appropriate counterweight to the imperial politics of comparison is an avowed anti-comparativism. But to those who a century ago denounced the steep asymmetries of wealth and power that imperialism sustained, this was not the only or even the most appealing response.

<sup>110</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 312, 28 Nov. 1909; TNA, FO 371/892, Graham to Gorst, 3 May 1910.

<sup>111</sup>DUR, HIL 6, 185, 28 Aug. 1909.

<sup>112</sup>Malak Badrawi, *Political Violence in Egypt 1910–1924: Secret Societies, Plots and Assassinations* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), ch. 2; Noor-Aiman Khan, *Egyptian-Indian Nationalist Collaboration and the British Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), ch. 2.

<sup>113</sup>TNA, FO 800/47, Gorst to Grey, 23 Apr. 1910.

<sup>114</sup>TNA, FO 800/47, Gorst to Grey, 30 Apr. 1910.

<sup>115</sup>TNA, FO 371/3714, Milne Cheetham to Lord Curzon, 11 Mar. 1919.

For some, the repudiation of colonial comparative frameworks could and did point toward a rejection of comparison as such and a strong invocation of uniqueness and particularism. But beyond the comparativism still implicit in such claims, even that nativist variant of anti-colonial critique entailed a practical embrace of comparison at the moment it inspired a political project. Solidarity, on whatever scale, always rests on some assertion of commensurability. There may be no empire without comparison, but there can be no politics either. For others, that fact provided grounds not to negate comparisons but to subvert and augment them. The equivalences that colonial categories forced upon prior worlds of difference created repositories of common experience that could be mobilized against colonial rule itself.<sup>116</sup> Precisely because its protagonists so dramatically violated the roles colonial categories assigned them—as youth, as Oriental subjects, as religious students—the Azhar strike unleashed a cascade of such hopeful comparisons conjuring other possible futures.

**Acknowledgments.** Over the course of its long journey to print, this article has benefited immensely from the comments, advice, and criticism of a great many friends and colleagues. The detailed reviews by the anonymous *CSSH* readers provided some much-needed guidance about how best to frame the central arguments, and David Akin was extraordinarily helpful and patient in ushering the piece through the publication process. I would also like to thank Hussein Omar, Matthew Shutzer, Zachary Lockman, Emma Park, Ahmad Shokr, John Chalcraft, Matthew Ellis, Omar Cheta, Marilyn Booth, Esmat Elhalaby, Shana Minkin, Sherene Seikaly, Angela Zimmerman, Charles Anderson, Peter Hill, Benoit Challand, Abram Smith, Adam Mestyan, Oz Frankel, Julia Ott, Claire Potter, Jeremy Varon, Federico Finchelstein, Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, Elaine Abelson, Eli Zaretsky, and Will Milberg.

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<sup>116</sup>On this same possibility within a different but contemporaneous field of imperial comparisons, see Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 14.

**Cite this article:** Jakes, Aaron G. 2023. “Peaceful Wars and Unlikely Unions: The Azhar Strike of 1909 and the Politics of Comparison in Egypt.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 65: 141–166. doi:10.1017/S0010417522000366