The Wilsonian Moment and the Rise of Anticolonial Nationalism: The Case of Egypt

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This article examines the influence of Woodrow Wilson’s rhetoric of national self-determination on the Egyptian nationalist movement in 1918–20 as a case study in the impact of the Wilsonian Moment on emerging anticolonial movements. It traces the impact of Wilsonian discourse on Egyptian expectations for the postwar international order, on the way they envisioned their place within it, and on the rhetoric and actions they utilized to fulfill these expectations. It concludes that the experiences of the Wilsonian Moment radicalized Egyptian national demands, transformed the Anglo-Egyptian colonial relationship, and left a legacy of disappointment and bitterness among Egyptians towards liberal internationalism. The article ends by contextualizing the Egyptian case within the surge of anticolonial nationalism in the wake of World War I, and positing the Wilsonian Moment as a watershed in the transformation of colonial relations.

As the First World War drew to a close, the American secretary of state, Robert Lansing, was worried. Reflecting in December 1918 on the postwar world order that his president, Woodrow Wilson, had been forcefully advocating for several years, Lansing wrote:

The more I think about the President’s declaration as to the right of “self-determination,” the more convinced I am of the danger of putting such ideas into the minds of certain races. It is bound to be the basis of impossible demands on the Peace Congress, and create trouble in many lands. What effect will it have on the Irish, the Indians, the Egyptians, and the nationalists among the Boers? Will it not breed discontent, disorder and rebellion?¹

Among the many chapters of America’s relations with the world, the Wilsonian episode stands out as the subject of intense scholarly scrutiny over many decades.² It is therefore somewhat surprising that, despite Lansing’s concerned comments, the meaning and significance of Wilsonianism for the peoples of Asia and Africa – most especially its impact on their interaction with European colonialism – has
received very little sustained attention. For a brief period of time, nonetheless, Woodrow Wilson appeared to millions worldwide as the herald of an emerging new world in which all peoples will be granted the right to determine their own future. This tumultuous period in international affairs, roughly stretching from the promulgation of the Fourteen Points in January 1918 to the conclusion of the Versailles Peace Treaty in June 1919, is designated here the ‘Wilsonian Moment’ not because Wilson created it single-handedly but because it was he, more than anyone else, that symbolized its vision and promise. To the extent that the Wilsonian Moment transformed the way colonized peoples envisioned their own place in the world, it was significant not only as a turning point in American foreign relations, but also as a watershed in international relations in general, and in colonial relations in particular, influencing the subsequent shape and direction of anticolonial movements among colonized peoples. As David Steigerwald has suggested in his perceptive survey of recent scholarship on Woodrow Wilson, it is crucially important to examine how ‘the call for self-determination fired the imaginations of countless nationalists in the colonial world’.

This study probes the impact of the Wilsonian Moment on the development of anticolonial nationalism by examining in detail one case study, that of the Egyptian nationalist movement. It asks what Wilson’s rhetoric and actions meant to Egyptian nationalists, and to what extent it shaped their expectations for the postwar world and influenced their vision of their place within that world. What was the influence of Wilsonian language on the strategies Egyptians used to justify their demands when the war ended, and how did it shape the actions they took in order to realize their aspirations? And, as the Wilsonian Moment waned, how did Egyptian nationalists react to Wilson’s failure to deliver on his promises, and how did this failure reflect on the character and direction of their movement? Finally, how and to what extent did the Wilsonian Moment transform the colonial relations between the British and the Egyptians? An exploration of these questions sheds new light on the nature and significance of the Wilsonian Moment in international affairs; it also affords a novel perspective on the development of the Egyptian nationalist movement, and of anticolonial national movements in general.
Colonialism and Nationalism in Egypt to 1918

The modern ideas of Egyptian nationhood first emerged in the writings of intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century, but it took decades for these notions to become widely disseminated and politically relevant within Egyptian society. The ‘Urabi Revolt of 1882, led by disaffected native officers who demanded an expanded political role for the indigenous middle classes, was partly a reaction to the increasing control of Egyptian finances and administration by the European powers. The revolt, however, can at most be described as protonationalist, if even that. Its instigators proclaimed their allegiance to the Sultan in Istanbul and couched their demands for increased political participation in Ottoman and Islamic terms. There was little talk in 1882 of an Egyptian nation, and no demands for ‘independence’ or ‘self-determination’ were made on its behalf. In the event, the revolt, accompanied as it was by widespread public demonstrations, piqued British concerns for order and stability in Egypt and led to the occupation of the country by the queen’s troops and the establishment of de facto British rule over Egypt.6

From 1882 to 1914 Egypt, though it remained formally under Ottoman suzerainty, was administered by the British. Under Lord Cromer and his successors Egypt experienced a period of relative economic prosperity and political stability. The establishment of a legislative assembly and the existence of a reasonably free press allowed the gradual development of a lively political scene. Opposition to the British presence had existed from early on; before the war, however, it was generally limited in scope and most often couched in some combination of Islamic and Ottoman terms. Groups advocating Egyptian self-government in the name of a secular, liberal nationalism began to emerge some years before the war, but most of the prominent figures within them – including Sa‘d Zaghlul, later the popular leader of the anti-British uprising in 1919 – foresaw a gradual process of reform which would advance through negotiations with Egypt’s colonial masters rather than confrontation with them.7

The advent of the World War transformed the situation significantly. When the Ottomans joined the war on the side of the Central Powers in late 1914, the British immediately declared a protectorate over Egypt, severing it completely from Ottoman suzerainty. British wartime proclamations tended to present this move as a temporary measure, a fact which Egyptian nationalists
would later return to insistently. In any event, the newly minted protectorate did not protect Egypt from the hardships of war, as Egypt became an enormous military base and thousands of Allied troops congregated on its soil. Wartime inflation, requisitions and conscription made life increasingly difficult for the population at large. Landowners were alienated by British attempts at land reform, and the educated classes chafed under the wartime restrictions of martial law. The hardships suffered during the war turned many Egyptians against British rule, and public sentiment increasingly sought a postwar transformation of the colonial relationship.

At the same time, the international context in which the new dynamics of the Anglo-Egyptian relationship would be played out was evolving, as the United States and its president, Woodrow Wilson, emerged as a major force in world affairs and champion of novel ideas of an international order predicated on the principle of ‘national self-determination’. As the war progressed, Wilson’s rhetoric implied a radical transformation in international discourse, one signalling that Egypt’s dispute with the British would no longer be dealt with bilaterally, but rather raised and adjudicated within a new international order; one that would be, or so it seemed, favourable to Egyptian aspirations of self-determination.

The Emergence of the ‘Wilsonian Moment’

Even before the United States joined the war, Wilson, presenting his vision for the postwar settlement, declared that ‘no peace can last’ which ‘does not recognize and accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed’. There is little doubt that Wilson was mainly referring to Europe – he went on in that speech to give the example of Poland – but he couched his vision in a language of universal maxims that fixed an urgent, if still implicit, question mark on the legitimacy of the entire European imperial project. After the United States joined the war on the Allied side in April 1917, Wilson continued to present the Allied war aims consistently in terms of implementing universal principles of liberty and justice through institutionalized international cooperation. In a public message conveyed in May to the provisional government of Russia, Wilson declared that the United States and its allies were ‘fighting for the liberty, the self-government, and the und dictated development of all peoples’ and emphasized that the impending
peace settlement ‘no people must be forced under a sovereignty under which it does not wish to live’.9

On 8 January 1918, Wilson addressed Congress in a speech that outlined America’s war aims and his vision for the postwar world, a speech that quickly became known worldwide as Wilson’s ‘Fourteen Points’. In the Fourteen Points Wilson reiterated the same principles for the postwar settlement that he had advocated before, but this time including a more explicit reference to the issue of colonialism, declaring that the ‘adjustment of all colonial claims’ would have to take into account ‘the interests of the populations concerned’. Though the Fourteen Points Address did not explicitly cite the principle of ‘self-determination’, and though Wilson was careful to balance the interests of the colonized peoples against the ‘equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined’, this address nevertheless came to symbolize in the eyes of many a blueprint for a radically novel international order.10

Scholars have long debated the reasons for Wilson’s direct appeal to the interests of colonized peoples in the Fourteen Points and in his subsequent public proclamations, an appeal which went well beyond the recommendations of the Inquiry, the commission of experts set up by the president himself to prepare for the postwar negotiations.11 Some have argued that the peace initiative publicized in late 1917 by the triumphant Bolsheviks in Russia, which called for settlement of colonial questions through popular referenda, played a major part in Wilson’s decision to espouse explicitly the principle of national self-determination.12 Several scholars have recently noted, however, that the essential elements of the Wilsonian scheme – articulated in terms of ‘self-government’ or ‘consent of the governed’ rather than ‘self-determination’ – had been clearly present in his public rhetoric long before the Bolshevik challenge emerged, and so the latter’s role in shaping the Fourteen Points Address should not be exaggerated.13 As this article shows, regardless of Wilson’s motivations or intentions, for Egyptian nationalists, as for many others in Asia, Africa and beyond, his wartime rhetoric carried a promise of a new international order which would assure self-determination for all peoples.

If in the Fourteen Points Wilson was still careful to balance the interests of colonized peoples with those of the colonial governments, his public espousal of the principle of self-determination grew bolder and more unequivocal in the months that followed. In February 1918, in a speech before Congress that came
to be known as the Four Points Address, he declared that in the coming peace settlement ‘national aspirations must be respected; people may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent’. He added that “Self-determination” is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril’, and emphasized that ‘every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned’. At Mount Vernon on 4 July 1918 Wilson ambitiously described ‘the war objects of the associated peoples of the world’ as including the settlement of every question, whether of territory, of sovereignty, of economic arrangement, or of political relationship, upon the basis of the free acceptance of that settlement by the people immediately concerned, and not upon the basis of the material interest or advantage of any other nation or people which may desire a different settlement for the sake of its own exterior influence or mastery.

Though such words were intended primarily for publics in the United States and its wartime allies, their worldwide dissemination offered colonized peoples a discourse of legitimacy on which to base anticolonial demands, and a vision of new international order which would be hospitable to such aspirations. Wilson’s status as leader of the Allies and his apparent commitment to the principle of national self-determination further reinforced among colonized peoples expectations of achieving independence in the postwar settlement.

**Egyptian Nationalism at the Wilsonian Moment**

The Egyptian reaction to Wilsonian rhetoric is a case in point. Indeed, when the armistice was signed in November 1918, Egyptian nationalists were thrilled as they expected the emerging postwar order to reflect Wilson’s wartime rhetoric. Muhammad Husayn Haykal, a prominent Egyptian writer and politician, recounted in his memoirs that when news of the armistice in Europe arrived, a friend exclaimed: ‘This is it! We have the right to self-determination, and therefore the English will leave Egypt’. The United States, the friend reasoned, ‘is the one who won the war. She is not an imperialist country. She truly wants that there will not be another war. Therefore, she will enforce the right to self-determination and
enforce the withdrawal’. This belief was hardly unusual among the Egyptian public at the time. ‘The principles that were announced by Dr. Wilson’, one Egyptian historian has written, ‘exerted a great influence on everyone without exception.’ Another Egyptian historian has explained that Wilson’s principles had such ‘a quick and decisive influence on Egyptian public opinion’ because they reflected ‘the feelings that filled the hearts of the educated class in Egypt’.

Egyptian nationalists moved quickly to partake in the emerging new order. On 13 November, only two days after the conclusion of the armistice, a group of Egyptian leaders visited the British high commissioner, Sir Reginald Wingate, to declare their desire for political independence. Their urgency reflected the swelling sense of anticipation within Egypt – Wilson’s Fourteen Points had apparently caused ‘a great stir ... even in the remotest villages’ – as well as the new international atmosphere of Wilsonian sensibility that seemed to have taken the world by storm. This development was noted, for example, by Sir Mark Sykes, himself a wartime architect of old-fashioned imperialist agreements, who noted in the spring of 1918 that ‘President Wilson’s voice is now the important one, and the ideas that do not fit in with his speeches won’t have much influence on the peace conference’. Egyptian nationalists, like many of their contemporaries the world over, heartily concurred. From all corners of the colonized world aspiring nationalists were setting out to Paris in pursuit of their right to self-determination. On 1 November, for example, an Anglo-French declaration promised self-determination to the Arabs under the Sharif Hussein of Mecca, and Egyptians believed they deserved no less. Thus, if before the war many Egyptian leaders had campaigned for no more than a greater measure of self-government and a larger share for Egyptians in the administration of the country, the new international context of the Wilsonian Moment transformed Egyptian attitudes, and the aim now shifted to full national self-determination.

The group that approached High Commissioner Wingate – dubbed the wafd, or ‘delegation’ – was led by Sa‘d Zaghlul, who would become venerated by Egyptians as the ‘Father of the Nation’. Zaghlul had begun his public career several decades earlier as a reform-minded administrator, and had served as a government minister between 1906 and 1913. He was a liberal by inclination, and as a minister he had advocated constitutional reforms to devolve power from the khedive – the Egyptian monarch – to elected
representatives of the people. The British, for whom concentrated khedival power was a useful tool of control, resisted such reforms, and Zaghlul resigned his government post in protest in 1913. He was soon elected to the Legislative Assembly, and by 1918 he had become vice-president of the Assembly and the leader of its opposition faction. Zaghlul campaigned for greater Egyptian representation and participation in government, but until the war ended he was a firm supporter of progress through peaceful negotiations. Far from a wide-eyed young revolutionary, Zaghlul was in his 60s at the time, a veteran of Egyptian politics who had for decades worked within the British-controlled system. Wingate himself, reporting on his 13 November 1918 meeting with Zaghlul and his colleagues, described them as ‘politicians of advanced views’.

Their views, however, had now advanced further, and they demanded complete independence for Egypt based on the principle of self-determination. Such appeals to Wilsonian rhetoric had become commonplace among the Egyptian ruling class in the wake of the war – already in October 1918 Sultan Fu’ad himself told the high commissioner of his desire for ‘Home Rule for Egypt along the lines of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points’, and Prince ‘Umar Tusun, a prominent nobleman, claimed that the idea of challenging the protectorate ‘occurred to him after the publication of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points’.20 The British authorities, for their part, were not well prepared for this transformation in the position of Zaghlul and other national leaders. Upon meeting with the delegation, Wingate, possessing no clear-cut instructions from his government, simply asked them to exercise patience and defer to the ‘many important preoccupations of His Majesty’s Government’.21 The British had long considered Egypt, and particularly the Suez Canal, an essential strategic lifeline within their imperial edifice, and the experiences of the war strengthened this conviction even more. Determined to remain the sole arbiter of Egyptian affairs, the British were loath to have Egypt’s case come before Wilson’s ‘tribunal of opinion’ being assembled in Paris. Thus, despite the widespread support for Zaghlul’s demands in both official and popular circles in Egypt, the men in Whitehall adamantly refused to recognize the delegation he headed or to allow it to travel to Europe.22

As it became clear to Egyptian nationalists that other small nations would be allowed the opportunity to present their case before the convening peace conference, they redoubled their efforts to gain a
voice there. In the various manifestos and petitions composed and distributed during this period, the nationalists justified their demands on Wilsonian grounds: independence was 'a natural right of nations', they argued, and since the principle of self-determination prohibited the imposition of foreign rule on a people against its will, Britain had no legal ground for its presence in Egypt. Nationalist activists, headed by Zaghlul, worked to marshal public support for their demands within Egypt, convening mass rallies, circulating petitions and launching press campaigns to propagate and advance their cause.\(^{23}\) At the same time they appealed for support to the international community, especially, naturally enough, to President Wilson himself. In a dramatic telegram sent to Wilson in December, Zaghlul assured the president that

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\text{no people more than the Egyptian people has felt strongly the joyous emotion of the birth of a new era which, thanks to your virile action, is soon going to impose itself upon the universe, and to spread everywhere all the benefits of a peace whose calm and durability will no longer be troubled by the ambitions of hypocrisy or the old-fashioned policy of hegemony and furthering selfish national interests.}\(^{24}\)
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Zaghlul went on to beseech the president to exercise his influence so that the British would allow the Egyptian nationalists their day in Paris. This, he pointed out, was no more than their 'natural and sacred right'.\(^{25}\)

In January 1919, upon Wilson's arrival in Europe to participate in the peace conference, members of the Egyptian Legislative Assembly sent a message of welcome to the president. It illustrates vividly their perception of the American leader and the hopes they pinned on him, and is therefore worth quoting here at some length:

To the great and venerated President who led the people of the United States in their disinterested participation in the European conflict to save humanity and to preserve the world in the future from the horrors of war, we send our affectionate greetings.

To the eminent philosopher and statesman who occupies today a preponderant place among the leaders of peoples, and whose high ideals are imposing themselves upon statesmen of all nations, we offer our homage and admiration.
To the chief of the great American democracy, who left his country in order to bring about a durable peace based upon equal justice for all and guaranteed by the Society of Nations, we submit the cause of Egypt, which is subjugated to a foreign domination that Egypt unanimously rejects.

Long live the United States! Long live President Wilson!^26

The elaborate prose notwithstanding, there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of the sentiments expressed.

The Outbreak of the ‘1919 Revolution’

By early 1919, as the peace conference got under way, the sense of urgency among Zaghlul and his colleagues, who were still being prevented by the British from leaving Egypt, increased. Delegations from various colonized lands were arriving in Paris to present their case; self-determination seemed to be the order of the day, and Egypt was being left out. The public mood in Egypt had become so strongly supportive of the demands of Zaghlul and his group that they virtually came to dominate the political arena in the country, and the British authorities, increasingly anxious about the growing public furore in Egypt, decided to move forcefully against them. Under the authority of martial law, which had remained in effect since the war, Zaghlul and several of his confederates were arrested on 9 March 1919 and interned in Malta. According to at least one biographer, the only item found on Zaghlul’s person when he was arrested and searched was a clipping from the Daily Express listing Wilson’s Fourteen Points.^27

The arrest was a fateful move. It sparked a massive wave of strikes and demonstrations all over Egypt and precipitated a period of violent clashes known in Egyptian history as the ‘1919 Revolution’. Egyptians from all walks of life took part in the upheaval: students, urban workers, professionals and peasants. Members of religious and ethnic minorities expressed their solidarity, and even women took to the streets, an unprecedented development in Egypt. As violent clashes with British troops proliferated and railway and telegraph lines were sabotaged, the British countered with a strict enforcement of martial law. Over the next several months some 800 Egyptians were killed and many more wounded, while 60 British soldiers and civilians also died. The 1919 Revolution was a major watershed in
the development of the Egyptian national struggle; one which, according to a prominent Egyptian historian, 'forms the basis for all the developments that followed'. The violence unleashed during this period and the harshness of the British response sharply escalated Anglo-Egyptian tensions, heightening mutual fear and mistrust, hardening attitudes and positions on both sides, and casting a long shadow over all subsequent attempts at negotiation.

As the 1919 Revolution unfolded in the streets, a stream of telegrams, letters and petitions poured into the American diplomatic agency in Cairo. These were sent by members of various organizations, professions and walks of life within Egyptian society, as well as by Egyptians living abroad. Many of the messages protested the arrest of Zaghlul and his associates, and all decried British oppression in Egypt and solicited urgent American assistance against it. In one such message, several Egyptian dignitaries protested the violent British suppression of peaceful demonstrations. They declared their faith in President Wilson and exhorted the United States to 'help the cause of right and liberty in Egypt'. Another message, signed by 'The Ladies of Egypt', complained of the 'persistence of the British in employing brute force even toward women'. A pamphlet documenting British brutality displayed photographs of Egyptian men with whip marks on their exposed torsos. The name and social standing of each man – peasant, student, religious scholar, notable – were noted below the photographs, providing readers of the pamphlet not only with evidence of British cruelty, but also of the inclusive nature of the Egyptian movement and the wide support it commanded among the various social classes.

The State Department, however, remained unmoved in the face of such repeated Egyptian pleas for support. The Anglophile secretary of state, Robert Lansing, thought that Great Britain should 'have the sovereignty of Egypt', and though it would take several months for President Wilson to officially recognize the protectorate, the attitude of the Department never strayed from Lansing's point of view. In February 1919, when Egyptian nationalists, citing Wilson's principles, appealed yet again for the admission of Egyptian representatives to the peace conference, Allen Dulles, then at the Division of Near Eastern Affairs, opined that the appeal 'should not even be acknowledged', and George Beer, the Inquiry expert on Africa, agreed that 'such a step would serve no good purpose'. As the
popular protests in Egypt unfolded, the State Department instructed its representatives in Egypt to avoid carefully any act that could be construed as supportive of the nationalists.³²

The American Decision to Recognize the Protectorate

In the meantime, the British were working behind the scenes to ensure official American recognition of their protectorate over Egypt. In a confidential memorandum dated 17 April 1919, the British foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, described the situation in Egypt as ‘daily becoming more serious’. He added that the ‘extreme nationalists’, whom he implausibly described as ‘chiefly paid agents of the revolutionary party in Turkey and Bolshevists’, claim that ‘President Wilson is definitely supporting’ them ‘in their attempts to stir up a Holy War against the Infidels’. Having thus invoked all of the spectres of revolution, Bolshevism, and Islamic fanaticism in one fell swoop, Balfour concluded that it was of the utmost importance that the United States recognize the protectorate and help ‘remove from Egyptian politics the dangerous religious and Bolshevist appeal which is now gaining force’.³³ The foreign secretary had Sir William Wiseman, a frequent liaison between the British and American leaders, transmit this memo to Edward House, Wilson’s close aide and confidant, and ask that the president recognize the protectorate in Egypt without delay.³⁴

The British assessment of the situation in Egypt was shared by American officials as well. Already in March, Lansing, citing ‘the gravity of the situation’ in Egypt, gave Wilson a somewhat frantic telegram from Hampson Gary, the American diplomatic agent in Cairo. Gary reported that the disturbances in Egypt are ‘rapidly developing into Bolshevism’ and exhibiting ‘an animus against all foreigners and their property’. Even the nationalist leaders, Gary wrote, had become alarmed, and were ‘trying to help the British restore order’. He also reported that the British acting high commissioner in Egypt, Milne Cheetham, had called upon him to help restore order, since, Gary explained, ‘the warm relationship that all Egyptians feel for the United States’ guaranteed that ‘an announcement by the American representative here would have great influence’.³⁵

House brought Balfour’s request to Wilson immediately, and to judge by the few lines that House devoted to this matter in his diary, the decision to accept it did not take long. Among the plethora of
pressing issues that stood before the president at the time the Egyptian question had low priority, and so when presented with the British request Wilson quickly ‘agreed to do it with certain limitations’. What explains this apparent ease of decision? As N. Gordon Levin has observed, though Wilson was probably ‘sincerely committed to bringing about the eventual attainment of universal self-determination for all peoples’, he also believed strongly that such a result should only ‘be obtained slowly through legal processes, and not by means of violent nationalist revolution’ such as the one the Egyptians seemed to be undertaking.\(^{16}\) If one adds to this the positions of Wilson’s advisers and experts, the British pressure, and the crisis atmosphere that hung over the peace conference around that time, the speed and nature of Wilson’s decision on the Egyptian issue are not difficult to fathom.\(^{17}\) The very next day, 19 April, House replied to Balfour that the president would recognize the British Protectorate over Egypt, adding that the president had no objection to this decision being made public ‘as he understands that it may help to the restoration of order and the cessation of further bloodshed in Egypt’. So quickly, in fact, did Balfour have the reply he desired that Wiseman reportedly commented with some satisfaction that the issue was raised at breakfast and sealed by lunchtime.\(^{18}\)

Still, the phrasing of the recognition itself suggested that the position of the United States towards the Egyptian situation was somewhat more complex. In the note informing the new British high commissioner, Lord Allenby, of the president’s decision to recognize the protectorate, the American agent in Cairo, Hampson Gary, added the refrain that ‘the President and the American people have every sympathy with the legitimate aspirations of the Egyptian people for a further measure of self-government but that they view with regret any effort to obtain the realization thereof by a resort to violence’. This paragraph was so phrased, elaborated Gary, in order to give ‘the opportunity for a slightly diverse interpretation by the European and Arabic press’ and attain a ‘dual end, whereby the British policy in Egypt is vindicated and the Egyptian Nationalist supporters rebuked for their excesses, while spared an immoderate discomfiture which might have entailed considerable bitter feeling directed against the United States’.\(^{19}\) The US government would not help the Egyptians in their struggle for independence, but it did hope, to the extent possible, to retain their good will and preserve its own image as a supporter of liberty everywhere.
Disillusionment and Its Aftermath

Just as Wilson's decision to recognize the British protectorate over Egypt was being made public, the Egyptian delegation, headed by Zaghlul, was sailing across the Mediterranean on its way to Paris, its leaders having been released only a few days earlier by the British authorities. As the delegation landed in Marseilles on its way to present its case before President Wilson and the peace conference, the news arrived of the American recognition of the protectorate. According to the memoirs of several members of the delegation, they were 'shocked' by the news and 'despair began to seep into their hearts'. They had pinned their hopes on American support for their cause, and the American decision to recognize the protectorate abruptly squashed those hopes, leaving them with a bitter and lingering sense of betrayal. In his memoirs, writer and politician Muhammad Haykal recalled that the decision fell 'like a bolt of lightening':

Here was the man of the Fourteen Points, among them the right to self-determination, denying the Egyptian people its right to self-determination and recognizing the British protectorate over Egypt. And doing all that before the delegation on behalf of the Egyptian people had arrived in Paris to defend its claim, and before President Wilson had heard one word from them! Is this not the ugliest of treacheries?! Is it not the most profound repudiation of principles?!

'No one thought', recalled another nationalist leader, 'that this decision could come from President Wilson, who had entered the war to destroy colonialism, to abolish the authority of the strong over the weak, and who proclaimed before the armistice the principles of liberty and justice. As the president's failure to uphold and implement his own principles was quickly becoming apparent, Egyptians' faith in Wilson, in the United States, and in the new liberal international order that Wilson had championed, began to crumble.

Egyptian nationalists, however, did not yet give up completely the hope of gaining American support for their cause. During the next several months, as conflicts unfolded in the streets of Egypt and in the halls of Versailles, Zaghlul and his associates continued to strive to enlist such support. Zaghlul himself remained in Paris for several months, sending Wilson a series of emphatic messages and repeatedly requesting an audience with the president. The only replies he ever
got, however, were terse notes from Wilson’s personal secretary, acknowledging receipt of his messages but citing the president’s preoccupation with other matters. Moreover, in the weeks following the recognition of the protectorate, dozens of messages from Egyptians of all sorts poured into the American agency in Cairo protesting the decision and beseeching the United States to reverse it and aid Egyptians in their struggle against the British. One such message, signed by 72 Egyptian physicians, was among the many that noted the disjunction that had emerged between Wilson’s rhetoric and his recent decision, calling upon America to give Egyptians not only ‘Platonic sympathy’ but ‘real and active help to realize their legitimate national aspirations’.

Quite a few of the messages were marked by a conviction that President Wilson, the prophet of self-determination, could not have willingly betrayed the Egyptian cause, and must therefore have been duped by the wily British – a view that, given Balfour’s self-serving characterization of the forces behind Egyptian nationalism, was not completely without basis. A lengthy memorandum presented by a group of Egyptian students described the American decision as ‘a thunderbolt from a clear summer sky’, but emphasized that they did not doubt the president’s ‘fidelity to his principles’, and assumed generously that his decision stemmed from his ill acquaintance with the Egyptian movement. Seeking to correct the president’s misapprehensions, the students assured him that the Egyptian national movement was ‘neither religious, nor xenophobe’ and ‘far from being bolshevist in any sense’. They expressed confidence that upon gaining a correct understanding of the nature of Egyptian nationalism, the president and people of the United States would not for long ‘withhold their moral weight and political influence from the side of Right in the present test between Might and Right’.

By the summer of 1919 Zaghlul, unable to get a hearing with Wilson, pinned some of his hopes on the support of the US Congress. In June he announced dramatically in the Egyptian press that the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate had ruled that Egypt was ‘neither under Turkish authority nor Great Britain’ but rather ‘self-governed’. The news, though quickly denied by the American representative, nevertheless ignited a furore of discussion and interpretation in the Egyptian press, with various commentators stressing the importance of the Senate committee’s decision. One Egyptian paper, somewhat optimistically, described the decision as
'proof that the Egyptian Question has attracted the attention of the New World, and that Egypt has won the sympathy of the supporters of liberty'. Another declared that the news of the committee's decision 'produced profound emotion in Egypt' and 'filled Egyptians with joy'.

The Egyptian case did come before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in August, as part of the hearings on the Treaty of Versailles. Egypt was represented before the committee by Joseph W. Folk, an international lawyer and a former governor of Missouri. Citing the Egyptians' faith in Wilsonian principles, Folk argued that Egyptians had fought in the war on the Allied side in order 'to make, as they believed, the world safe for democracy, and for the right of national self-determination'. When the war ended, Folk added, 'the Egyptians rejoiced ... because they thought it meant the independence of Egypt' and 'did not doubt that they would have the right of self-determination'. Now that Britain was intent on denying Egypt that right, the Egyptians were asking the United States to recognize their right to independence, or at the very least to rescind its recognition of the British protectorate so that the Egyptian claim could be brought to international arbitration before the League of Nations. In November, a delegation of Egyptian nationalists arrived in the United States to argue their case in person, but a treaty reservation in the Senate calling for Egyptian independence from Britain was defeated by a vote that same month.

By the end of 1919, the hopes of Egyptian nationalists of attaining US support were clearly on the wane. In November, Zaghlul, still in Europe doggedly attempting to get a hearing for his case, sent Wilson a telegram imploring the president 'not to leave Egypt alone in her fight against England the implacable'. But in the same message he also revealed his bitter disappointment and disillusionment with Wilson:

The Egyptian people [he wrote] hailed you more than any other people as the Chief of a new doctrine which was to have assured peace and prosperity to the world. This era which your principles promised would indeed have given satisfaction to all, to the great as well as the small, the strong as well as the feeble, and the powerful as well as the oppressed. For having had faith in your principles ... the Egyptian people ... see themselves today suffering under the most barbarous treatment of [sic] the part of the British authorities.
Despite the failure to gain American support, Egyptian leaders, solidly backed by Egyptian public opinion, had by the end of 1919 become firmly committed to stiff resistance to British rule, and refused to make any significant compromises on their demands for complete independence. Though nationalist expectations for vigorous American action on behalf of Egyptian independence were disappointed and their attempts to enlist American support against the British failed, those expectations had nevertheless been important in shaping Egyptian attitudes and actions in the crucial period from the end of the war in November 1918 to the American recognition of the protectorate in April 1919. During this intense and formative period, such expectations played a role in precipitating a crucial chain of events in Egyptian history, as a group of nationalist leaders, headed by Zaghlul and drawing inspiration from Wilsonian rhetoric, mobilized wide support for the demand of self-determination for Egypt. Their resolve was bolstered by the perception that numerous other ‘small nations’ were poised to capitalize on the new international atmosphere and achieve self-determination. British attempts to suppress these demands led to bloody clashes, which further radicalized the nationalists’ position and widened their popular base of support.

This transformation of the Egyptian mood was epitomized by the reaction to the Milner Mission, sent to Egypt by the British government in December 1919 to study the crisis there and suggest possible remedies. Headed by the British colonial secretary, Lord Alfred Milner, the mission was to devise an arrangement that would promote peace and prosperity in Egypt ‘under the Protectorate’. Predicated on the well-worn British assumption that colonial disturbances could be dealt with by combining a firm hand with negotiations with collaborative natives, the mission was ill-prepared to deal with the transformation wrought by the Wilsonian Moment. Gone was the prewar willingness of Egyptian leaders to move towards home rule in a gradual process of reform, and the nationalists were now demanding complete independence based on the ‘liberal democratic principles’ of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points. Zaghlul’s hold on Egyptian public opinion guaranteed that the mission would be efficiently boycotted; even those officials who were privately inclined to negotiate could not now be seen as cooperating with it.50

Zaghlul’s explanation of the Egyptian rejection of the Milner Mission in a letter to the British foreign secretary, Lord Curzon,
exemplifies the impact of the Wilsonian Moment. Denouncing the protectorate as violating ‘the spirit of the age’ which dictated that ‘every people shall have the right to self-determination’, he argued that it was nothing but annexation, ‘which is now condemned, and has given way to the right of nationality’. Mocking the British claim that their interests in Egypt justified their policy, he asked: ‘Pray let us know when it has been considered that the interests of the strong justify the humiliation and subjugation of the weak?’ Finally, quoting directly from Wilson’s Fourteen Points speech, Zaghlul proclaimed that ‘the recent magnificent development in the outlook of mankind towards right, justice, “political independence and territorial integrity of great and small states alike” is now so overwhelming that such a thinly-veiled annexation bearing the name of “protectorate” can no longer deceive anybody’. Zaghlul’s language revealed his conviction that a radical transformation has come about in the international discourse, one that transformed previous relationships between colonizer and colonized and rendered old justifications for colonialism obsolete. This conviction bolstered the consistently uncompromising positions of Egyptian nationalists toward British imperialism in subsequent years, positions which compelled the British to grant Egypt partial independence unilaterally, with no agreement, in 1922, while retaining control of areas such as external security. Only in 1936, in the face of a mounting world crisis, did an Egyptian government agree to sign a bilateral treaty with Britain.\footnote{Zaghlul’s language revealed his} \footnote{Zaghlul’s language revealed his}

**Conclusion: A Comparative Perspective**

How, then, did Wilson’s rhetoric and actions influence the transformation of Egyptian nationalism in the wake of the war? First, Wilson played a central role in creating and sustaining a novel international discourse based on the recognition of a universal right to self-determination, a discursive framework that helped define and undergird the nationalists’ demands. Second, Wilson championed the creation of an international forum – the League of Nations – that would allow demands for self-determination to be heard and adjudicated by a tribunal of enlightened world opinion, shifting decisionmaking about colonial relations from the hands of the colonial power to the international arena. This development, amplified by a ‘bandwagon effect’ created as numerous representatives of ‘small nations’ rushed to present their case at the
Peace Conference, as well as by the apparent British reluctance to accept 'the spirit of the age', pushed Egyptian nationalists to adopt more radical positions towards British rule, whose authority seemed on the verge of being superseded by 'world opinion'. Though the Wilsonian promise failed to materialize, and the mandate system effectively allowed the colonial powers a free hand after the US Senate's rejection of the League of Nations, the arrival of Wilsonian internationalism on the world stage nevertheless empowered and radicalized anticolonial nationalist movements, not least because it gave nationalism, through the basic principle of 'national self-determination', a legitimizing, even constitutive role, in the new international order it conjured. Wilson's internationalism, then, ironically stimulated the emergence of a new nationalism in Egypt; and even as internationalism receded in the interwar years, nationalism came to dominate relations between colonized and colonizer.

The Egyptian experience in the Wilsonian Moment, moreover, was far from unique; it was part of a wider wave that swept through much of the colonized world in the wake of the war. As already noted, Zaghlul and his delegation were hardly the only ones anxious to present their case in Paris. As the peace conference convened, nationalists from all corners of the world – Chinese and Vietnamese, Arabs and Zionists, Armenians and Africans, and many others – rushed, invited or uninvited, to stake their claims in the emerging world order. To these representatives of national aspirations Wilson was often a symbol and a saviour, committed to the establishment of a new international order, which would augur an era of self-determination for all. They adopted Wilsonian rhetoric in formulating and justifying their goals, and they counted on the president's support in attaining them. Most of these aspirations, however, were quickly met with bitter disappointment. The treaty signed at Versailles not only left the colonial system intact, it expanded its scope to unprecedented proportions. As the nature of the emerging peace settlement became clear in the spring of 1919, frustrated expectations and deep disillusionment fuelled a series of popular and often violent upheavals across the colonized world. As the 1919 Revolution engulfed Egypt, the May Fourth protest movement unfolded in China, Gandhi's passive resistance movement was launched in India, and the March First movement erupted against Japanese rule in Korea. Anticolonial national movements
were coalescing in places as far apart as Tunisia and the Dutch East Indies. Despite the numerous differences between these cases, the experiences and reactions of colonized peoples during the Wilsonian Moment exhibit striking similarities.

The Chinese experience, for example, echoed that of Egypt. According to the American minister to China at the time, Paul Reinsch, the Chinese ‘trusted the frequent declarations of principle uttered by President Wilson, whose words had reached China in its remotest parts’. Like their Egyptian counterparts, Chinese nationalists came to be bitterly disappointed with the United States and with Wilson. The news from Paris that Wilson had agreed to hand the former German concessions in Shandong to Japan was received in China with utter shock, and precipitated the eruption of the May Fourth protests and the disillusionment of many educated Chinese with the West in general and with Wilson’s liberal internationalism in particular. Many turned elsewhere in search of fulfilment for their national aspirations. Until the spring of 1919, it was Wilson, not Lenin, who seemed to be the prophet of a new international order that would restore China’s dignity; after Wilson’s ‘betrayal’ of China at Versailles, a burgeoning interest in alternatives such as Marxism spread rapidly among Chinese nationalists. A similar experience also affected a young patriot from French Indochina, who had been inspired by Wilson and his principles to submit a petition to the peace conference presenting the ‘Claims of the Annamite People’. This man, who would later become known to the world as Ho Chi Minh, had reportedly hoped to meet with Wilson to present the petition to him personally. The meeting never materialized, the petition was roundly ignored, and within a year the young man was converted to Marxism-Leninism. A few years later, a journal in Hanoi published an article that warned that ‘if the Wilsonian strategy does not succeed, then Leninism will spread throughout the world’.

In light of the subsequent history of China and Vietnam, as well as many other colonized and postcolonial lands, these words acquire a prophetic resonance. Wilsonian rhetoric transformed the discourse of international relations in the wake of the First World War, bringing the idea of national self-determination to the fore and fuelling the widespread upsurge of anticolonial nationalism that followed the war. The collapse of the Wilsonian promise of self-determination for colonized peoples, however, did much to discredit Western liberalism
in the eyes of the very same nationalists that Wilsonian principles had inspired and energized; it thus contributed to the adoption of distinctly non-Wilsonian means, of which Marxism-Leninism was but one example, in order to achieve the Wilsonian ends of national self-determination and national dignity within the international arena. This experience — high expectations for independence, followed soon afterward by bitter disillusionment with Wilson, the West and liberal internationalism — was common to many colonized peoples in the wake of war, and often led to the entrenchment of a hostile, uncompromising attitude toward the Western-dominated international system. Wilson, however inadvertently, thus played a role in galvanizing what Geoffrey Barraclough has called 'the revolt against the West.' If we seek to understand the relations of the United States, and of the West in general, with the postcolonial world in the twentieth century, we would do well to keep the experiences and lessons of the Wilsonian Moment clearly in focus.

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NOTES

4. Besides the obvious fact that the war itself created the requisite context for the advent of Wilsonianism, the vision of an international order based on self-determination was articulated during the war by other world leaders as well, most prominent among them British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Soviet leader VI. Lenin. See Max Beloff, Imperial Sunset, Vol. 1: Britain's Liberal Empire, 1897-1921 (New York, 1970), pp.265-6; Arno Mayer, Wilson vs. Lenin: Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917-1918 (New York, 1967), pp.245-66.
5. Steigerwald, 'Reclamation', p.98.
9. Address to the Senate, 22 Jan. 1917, in Arthur Link et al. (eds.), The Papers of
29. Enclosed in Gary to the secretary of state, 26 March 1919, Decimal File 883.00/135, General Records of the Department of State (Record Group 59), National Archives, College Park, Maryland [henceforth RG 59]. Also see Close to Kadi, 20 March 1919, PWW, vol.56, p.122.
30. Enclosed in Gary to the secretary of state, 20 April 1919, RG 59, 883.00/166. Also see Gary to the secretary of state, 24 March 1919, RG 59, 883.00/128.
31. Lansing, Peace Negotiations, p.196. Lansing’s position was also supported by the Inquiry experts. See Lawrence E. Gelfand, The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917–1919 (New Haven, 1963), pp.238, 255.
32. Ferid to the Chief of the American Delegation at Paris, 5 Feb. 1919, and Beer to Dulles, 8 Feb. 1919, Decimal File 883.00/20-21, in the General Records of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace (Record Group 256), National Archives, College Park, Maryland [henceforth RG 256]; Gary to the secretary of state, 17 April 1919, RG 59, 883.00/118.

33. Balfour to Wiseman, 17 April 1919, Wiseman MSS, Yale University Library, series I, box 9, fol. 204.

34. Wiseman to House, 18 April 1919, House MSS, Yale University Library, series I, box 123, fol. 4331.

35. Lansing to Wilson, 21 March 1919, PWW, vol.56, pp.154–5. Wingate, who was perceived in Whitehall as too accommodating towards the nationalists, left Egypt in January 1919 and was later replaced by General Allenby. See Daly, Sirdar, pp.289–99.


39. Gary to the secretary of state, 26 April 1919, RG 59, 883.00/162; also Vatikiotis, Modern Egypt, p.268.


43. Close to Zaghlul, on 24 April and 9 June 1919, in Noble, 'Voice of Egypt', pp.8634.

44. Enclosed in vice consul in charge to the secretary of state, 29 April 1919, RG 59, 883.00/179.

45. Enclosed in Gary to the secretary of state, 5 May 1919, RG 59, 883.00/181.


47. Al-Abali, 10 Sept. 1919; al-Misr, 13 Sept. 1919; al-Misr, n.d.; all enclosed in Gary to the secretary of state, 24 Nov. 1919, RG 59, 883.00/234.


49. Cablegram from Zaghlul to Wilson, 23 Nov. 1919, RG 59, 883.00/212.


54. China, though of course not formally a colony of any one power, was seen by many of its people at the time as a victim of colonialism as such, and is thus counted here among the 'colonized peoples'.


58. Barraclough, Contemporary History, chapter VI.