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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FRENCH OCCUPATION OF EGYPT (1798-1801): A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON EXTERNAL FACTORS AND INTERNAL CRISES OF EGYPT

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Abstract

Egypt's internal turmoil causing political instability, economic decline and social ruin were among the factors behind foreign power entrance into Egypt. Oppression and government inefficiency as well as decline in several aspects of life gave a true depiction of the ongoing society and administrative system in Egypt. Nevertheless, external factors also played a role in causing Egypt being colonised by foreign power. This article intends to relook into French occupation of Egypt which occurred in 1798 until 1801 by analysing the external factors and internal crises which enticed the arrival of the occupying power. Based on the method of content analysis, observations were made onto primary and secondary sources. Analysed information were classified and reviewed from political, economic and social perspectives. External factors revealed that the occupation by France had links with world superpowers at that time, in particular Britain and the Ottomans in the aspect of political rivalry. Meanwhile, from the aspect of economy, the desire for control of resources and trade route competition were the main agenda behind the conquest of Egypt. From the social aspect, France was seen to yearn for avenging her defeat in the Crusades and freeing Jerusalem from Muslim rule and spreading the civilisation achieved by the West to eastern countries.

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Introduction:-

Egypt has long been a country renowned for her civilisation since ancient times involving the reigns of pharaohs, ancient Greeks, Persians and Romans. After the advent of Islam, the Islamic rule was helmed by the Rightly Guided Caliphs, followed by the Umayyads, 'Abbasids, Tulunids, Ikhshidids, Fatimids, Ayyubids, Mamluks and finally the Ottomans until it was colonised by the Europeans, namely the French and the British. Dominion over Egypt by many powers rendered it a country rich in history and events which are attractive for analysis. Moreover, her abundant economic resources and strategic location, which is in the middle of trade route between West and East, manage to allure world superpowers to conquer it. France was the first European power to occupy Egypt after weaknesses occurred in the Ottoman administration in Egypt and Egypt's own administration itself in the late 18th century. Internal problems and conflicts of Egypt were among the strongest driving factors for France to take the opportunity over the occurring weakness. However, there were other factors which triggered French desire to control Egypt. This article discusses French occupation factors over Egypt by analysing and examining Egypt's internal

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problems and conflicts which were said to prompt the arrival of French power in Egypt in 1798 until 1801 with other external factors.

French Attack onto Egypt

Briefly, French occupation occurred in 1798 until 1801, which was approximately 3 years. The expedition was participated by 38,000 soldiers including scientists and scholars who embarked upon the journey from Toulon, France on the 19th of May 1798 heading for Egypt by riding 400 ships flanked by 13 warships (ships-of-line) (Girgis1975: 51; Chandler 1966: 212; Connelly 2006: 98). They docked in Marabout which was located approximately 12 kilometres from Alexandria on the 1st of July 1798 and, on the following day, Napoleon and his army successfully conquered Alexandria. Then, they marched into Cairo, the Egyptian capital and the whole Cairo population surrendered on the 22nd of July 1798. There, Napoleon set up a government and began to govern Egypt by establishing a number of *Diwan* (Chandler 1966: 226).

On the 11th of September 1798, Sultan Salim III, The Ottoman Caliph who was the patron over Egypt at that time declared jihad on France. Consequent to that, Cairo Rebellion erupted on the 21st of October 1798 in Cairo which depicted the opposition by the Egyptian people against the French (Holt 1966: 157; Salamon 1988: 22). On the 24th of January 1800, a peace treaty, known as the Convention of El Arish was agreed between France and the Ottoman Caliphate which contained an agreement that France should retreat from Egypt ('Umar 1975: 159). In March 1801, the Ottomans, with the help of the British, acted on attacking Egypt to repel the French. The French in Cairo finally surrendered on the 18th of June 1801 and later abandoned Egypt (Holt 1966: 158). Even though French occupation over Egypt lasted roughly 3 years, their arrival raised questions as to why France chose Egypt to conquer and what factors led to their advent.

Egypt Becoming An Attraction for France

The idea of conquering Egypt had long been in existence in the history of France since the Fifth Crusade in the 13th century (Mu'nis 1938: 73). The crusade which took place in 1217-1221 saw the Siege of Damietta, a port city in Egypt, by the Crusaders in November 1219. They later advanced to Cairo to occupy it, but due to a huge deluge from the Nile and an opposition from the Mamluk army, they had to surrender and retreat from Egypt. The idea to conquer Egypt was later mooted toward the end of the 18th century, when France was going through an age of revolution requiring her to expand her empire driven by certain factors in addition to Egypt's internal problems themselves. In discussing this, the internal and external factors of Egypt, in particular the conflicts which occurred towards the end of the 18th century, are more comprehensively deliberated based on the political, economic and social aspects.

a. Political Factor

From the political aspect, rivalry and enmity between France and Britain were among the factors which drove France to conquer Egypt. The rivalry became more serious after France suffered a defeat in the Seven Years' War or the French and Indian War 1756-1763 which resulted in France losing Canada to the British in 1763. This was followed by the American Revolution which occurred in 1775-1783 which witnessed France suffering a huge loss for extending aid to the revolution pioneers in America in order to gain independence from British occupation (Goldschmidt 1990: 14). Hence, by conquering Egypt which is located closer to India it was hoped that it would disturb and pose a threat to British political and economic situation in India. At the same time, France also kept a hope of recapturing India from Britain since losing her in 1763 (Vatikiotis 1969: 35).

Another factor which drove the conquest of Egypt was Napoleon Bonaparte's dream himself of expanding the French empire to the East as once done by Alexander the Great, a Macedonian-Greek figure in the golden age of Greece. Napoleon who was victorious in a series of battles involving France against surrounding enemies began to have a high ambition to build an eastern empire and thus hoped to obstruct the relation between Britain and India. Besides, control over Egypt could also further his intention to expand power over Palestine, Iran and Afghanistan towards India and reconquer it since France lost her in 1763 (Goldschmidt 1983: 147).

France had been observing for a long time the rise and decline of the Ottoman empire since the previous three centuries circa the 16th century until the 18th century. The decline of the Ottoman empire was made a stepping stone and a bright opportunity for France to control other Ottoman territories, especially Egypt. Moreover, while the caliphate declined, France embarked upon building an empire and her own civilisation as well as attempting to wrest control of territories under Islamic rule. This fact can be observed in a letter of Napoleon to the Directory which

stated: "In 24 hours one crosses from here to Macedonia... Ancona will give us great influence over the Ottoman Empire and make us masters of the Adriatic" (Silvera 1974: 24). Besides, when he urged the Directory to make preparation to attack Ionian Island as an expansion exercise of French power in August 1797, he also mentioned the possibility of Egypt being conquered. Egypt was seen as a more precious territory compared to American territories as she would give more benefits and levies due to her high potentials in terms of politics and the economy (Dykstra 1998: 116). The decline of the Ottoman Caliphate also enticed Russian advancement to dominate her territories and this drove France to renew and strengthen her naval fleet around the Mediterranean and expand her dominion to the Levant. The French intended to further their conquest to the Eastern world and fortify French position in the Levant to compete with Russia and Austria (Shaw 1964: 13).

It was reported that De Choiseul, the French Foreign Minister once presented his plan to conquer Egypt in 1769 and take control of the shortcut to India through the Suez which was then under the control of the Ottomans. He intended to do a treaty and diplomacy in order to gain Egypt with the Ottoman Sultan whom he knew was losing political power over his territories during that time. De Choiseul assumed that obtaining Egypt was a replacement for France which lost her territory in India and Canada in the Seven Years War. As an initial step, he himself renewed the French army and navy, sending them to expeditions to Tunis and Bizerte and captured Corsica in their effort to make France the strongest power in the Mediterranean and Levant. Nevertheless, the aim to seize Egypt was unsuccessful because he died in 1770. The plan was postponed for a long while until it was re-presented and realised by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798 (Girgis 1975: 47). Therefore, political factors specifically rivalries between other Western powers became a driving factor for France to tread a path of building her own empire and dominate world politics at that time.

b. Economic Factor

The economic aspect is viewed as a factor which drove the rivalry between France and Britain. France was further under pressure when the British controlled sea route to the East via Cape of Good Hope and managed to occupy it in effort to launch trades with India and the Eastern world. This British success posed a threat to France in her trade relation with India (Silvera 1974: 21). Besides, in 1770, Warren Hastings who was the Governor of the British East India Company headquartered in the Bengal had sent an expedition to the Suez with the aim of creating a landing terminal port for British trade merchandise meant for the Mediterranean. The British East India Company was established in the early 17th century with the aim of expanding trades to the East. By 1700, the British East India Company became formidable equipped with warships to defend and launch its trades in the Indian Ocean ('Umar 1975: 78). To ensure that British relation with its colony in India was secure through the Middle East, the European power also forged a relation with the Mamluks who ruled over Egypt in 1798 which directly managed to control the trade route in the Red Sea (Armajani & Ricks 1970: 210).

Following that, the French Directory placed an important emphasis on opening a new, shorter and safer route to India which is through the Isthmus of Suez which subsequently enabled them to wrest control of the source of wealth of the British in the East. In short, its aim was to destroy British trade interests in the Red Sea and to open a canal through the Isthmus of Suez to secure a safe and exclusive route for the French in the Red Sea (Silvera 1974: 21). On top of that, Napoleon also intended to destroy British economic interests in other places. He discovered that one of the means to achieve his intention was to block British trade route to India and the simplest way to achieve that was to conquer Egypt (Silvera 1974: 21; Dykstra 1998: 116). India's location which is relatively not far from Egypt led France to assume that, by occupying Egypt, British trade in India would severely be affected. Egypt was to be made a terminal to cut off communication between Britain and her trade centres in India and the East.

Egypt's location which is strategic in various aspects, the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the Red Sea to its west, makes the shortest sea route between Europe and countries in the East is through Egypt. Control over the two seas is essential to dominate trades between East and West. Hence, if France were able to control Egypt which is located in the middle, then she would control all trades which used both sea routes (Bey 1976: 1). Moreover, France was a strong naval power in the Mediterranean where her ships sailed far and wide for trading purposes. With dominance over the Mediterranean Sea, France indirectly overcame the strength of British fleet which disrupted her trade in the Levant and Persia as well as India (Marsot 1984: 18-19; Connelly 2006: 97).

Besides, Egypt was proven to possess raw materials which could be used in manufacturing industry needs and a long-term goal of France was to exploit as much as possible the wealth of the land. Napoleon realised Egypt's wealth potential in grain production which could be a food source for France and in obtaining other raw materials.

According to a trader named Julliany, “The purpose of Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt was because of trade as much as its political purpose. He gave an attention to trades and agriculture in the rich land (Egypt)”. With such statement, it can be said that French occupation of Egypt was driven by economic factors, in addition to a drop in French agricultural produce and grain necessities in the 1780’s. Subsequently, France intended to turn Egypt into her important source of food production (Aronian & Mitchell 1991:76). Other than getting raw materials and food sources, Egypt was also a potential location to market finished goods produced by French industries (Holt 1966: 156; Marsot 1984: 2). Hence, the conquest of Egypt was, while France was in a state of facing competition in world trade and requirement for raw materials as well as food source, of utmost significance and the plan for the conquest should be achieved in spite of facing other risks.

c. Social Factor

The plan to conquer Egypt had existed in the history of France since the middle of the 13th century in the Fifth Crusade when France was ruled by Louis IX (1214-1270). Attempts to conquer the land failed because she was defeated by the Mamluk ruler in a battle near the Nile. Loss in the Crusade could still be felt by France and that was also a factor why the French wanted to conquer Egypt. The idea of conquest was once again raised during the reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715) whereby the motive was to reactivate the trade route between the Levant and India and to defend France’s political dominion in the region (Girgis 1975: 45; Silvera 1974: 22).

Other than being linked to the factor of rivalry between the British and the French, another motive of Egypt conquest was also to capture Ottoman territories besides liberating Jerusalem from Muslim rule. The conquest of Egypt would facilitate a path to controlling Palestine which could indeed enable them to capture Jerusalem. Dominance over Palestine was reportedly part of Napoleon Bonaparte’s agreement with the Jews in forming the state of Israel over there. The complot between France’s Jewish residents with Napoleon took place in Paris in secrecy before occupation of Egypt took place. In the agreement, Jewish sides agreed to assist Napoleon in terms of military expenditures and they also agreed to divide war spoils resulting from the occupation. Rewards for the Jews was that they could establish the state of Israel in Palestine. To summarise, conquest of Egypt and Palestine would avenge French agony over their defeat in the previous Crusade. It was not surprising that, after conquering Egypt, Napoleon and his army departed to Syria to defeat his enemies who threatened him and simultaneously capture Palestine. He was however defeated in Akka (Acre) and was forced to retreat back to Cairo consequent to the pressure and blockades by the Ottoman army (Jarrar 1990: 19-20).

The conquest of Egypt was also to spread a civilisation achieved from the revolution which took place in France from 1789 until 1799. Because of that, the expedition to Egypt led by Napoleon was participated by 150 French intellectuals comprising scientists, geographers, architects, chemists, engineers, and historians as well as mathematicians to study all aspects of life in Egypt in ancient times until the contemporary age. The expedition also brought with them two printing machines in addition to making plans to build a canal which would cross the Isthmus of Suez which was aimed at facilitating trades with India (Holt 1966: 155-156; Vatikiotis 1969: 37). All proceeds of the studies would be implemented throughout French rule in Egypt towards changing Egyptian traditions besides realising Western civilisation in Egypt in politics and governance, military, science and technology, education and other fields.

Apart from proliferating the civilisation achieved by France, their arrival was reportedly to regenerate civilisational glories of ancient Egypt and her previous ages besides plundering its remnants. Napoleon realised that Egypt once had a golden age and was highly civilised. This can be seen in his speech in his declaration which mentioned that the land of Egypt, once upon a time, was host to famous cities, good canals and advanced trades. What destroyed it, if not the greedy, unjust and oppressive Mamluks? (Cherfils 1999: 6). Dissatisfaction over Mamluk governance and the treatment towards French merchants in Egypt became a stepping stone for France to abolish Mamluk reign in Egypt. Therefore, it is not surprising to say that Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt was recorded as the first Western power which succeeded in occupying an Islamic territory and attempting to spread Western culture as well as implementing modernisation in Egypt other than being driven by a prevalent dissatisfaction toward Egypt administration during that time.

Internal Crises and Problems of Egypt

Egypt’s political instability instigated France to take opportunity of controlling it following the grave state of ruling and administration in Egypt under Mamluk beys who were adversaries to one another. The position of the faction became powerful in Egypt in the 18th century following the inability of the Ottoman Caliphate to pay good attention

to Egypt due to its involvement in continuous war with Austria and Russia. Pashas who were appointed by the Ottomans to govern Egypt were incapable of carrying out their duties well and had to compete with the other Mamluk beys. The Mamluk beys were the most influential group in Egypt towards the 18th century and possessed their own regions of governance.

The people of Egypt at that time were not only burdened with a high tax rate by the central Ottoman government administration, but also had to face with the oppression and injustice done by Mamluk leaders such as Murad Bey and Ibrahim Bey. The chaotic administration was made opportune by the French to conquer Egypt under the excuse of safeguarding French merchants in Egypt from the inefficient local authority and appalling treatment to French traders as well as returning Egypt to the Ottoman administration under French control (Umar 1975: 92; Silvera 1974, 18: 21; Shaw 1964:12-13).

Ibrahim Bey also reportedly cooperated with the British in 1794 to suppress French traders to an extent that caused one of them to report the affair to the French government urging it to conquer Egypt (Aronian & Mitchell 1991: 79). The French Ambassador to Egypt, Charles Magallon who was initially a trader, who had been living in Egypt for more than 30 years, had reported the political state in Egypt which he found to be in such a worsening condition due to the enmity among Mamluk rulers and Ottoman failure in tackling it (Umar 1975: 89). His duty as a welfare supervisor of French traders in Cairo also reported the weak condition of Egyptian defence system in aspects of military and weaponry, especially while Egypt was under the authority of Ibrahim Bey and Murad Bey. Magallon opined that via military action on Egypt, France would be able to turn the country into a strategic port for French trades. The report was conveyed to Talleyrand who was the Foreign Minister of France in Paris in 1793 (Silvera 1974: 21; Umar 1975: 92).

French traders also claimed that the Mamluks breached the Capitulation Treaty which had long ago been signed between the Ottoman Caliphate and the Kingdom of France. Capitulation was an agreement between the Ottoman empire with the then Kingdom of France whereby the French were given special rights known as 'Capitulation'. Among them was the freedom to trade and use the sea route, custom excise duties reduction up to 5%, exemption from Ottoman laws and guaranteed religious freedom (Lenczowski 1980: 28). However, Mamluk rulers in the 15th century onward had imposed a high tax on traders including French traders to Egypt and who used the Red Sea as a route (Umar 1975: 74-84). Therefore, France harboured the intention of topple Mamluk power in Egypt in the hope that their special privileges were restored as found in the agreement.

The turmoil which occurred in Egypt on the verge of the French arrival which was instigated by the Mamluk beys such as 'Ali Bey al-Kabir, Murad Bey and Ibrahim Bey between 1760 until the advent of the French put Egypt's defence system into a fragile mode on the whole, on top of the suffering of her people who did not receive due attention from the rulers. During the reign of 'Ali Bey al-Kabir, who was *Shaykh al-Balad* (Mayor of the city of Cairo) from 1760 until 1773, Egypt's relation with Istanbul was quite distant because the Ottomans were pre-occupied with wars which took place at that time. 'Ali Bey al-Kabir later on declared Egypt's independence and refused to pay the annual tributary payment to in 1769. He also deported the Ottoman Governor in Egypt, printed own currency and launched attacks in the Arabian Peninsula. However, he was defeated by Muhammad Abu Dhahab returning Egyptian rule back under the Ottoman rulership. After the death of Muhammad Abu Dhahab in 1775, a power struggle occurred between Murad Bey -Ibrahim Bey duo and Isma'il Bey. Eventually, Murad Bey (*Emir al-Hajj*) and Ibrahim Bey (*Shaykh al-Balad*) succeeded in controlling Egypt by expelling Isma'il Bey (Holt 1968 : 89; Vatikiotis 1969: 34).

During the reign of Murad Bey and Ibrahim Bey, the people of Egypt suffered life hardship due to high rate of taxation besides other oppression imposed onto them. In addition, they refused to pay taxes to the Ottomans and when that matter reached the knowledge of the Ottoman Sultan, namely Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II, he acted upon despatching an expedition to Egypt led by Hasan Pasha in order to deal with the problem in 1786. The Ottoman expedition was welcomed by the Egyptians resulting in Murad Bey and Ibrahim Bey fleeing to the north of Egypt. However, the Ottoman army was forced to abandon Egypt before they could capture the two of them because they had to encounter with a war against Russia in October 1787. With the evacuation of the army, Murad Bey and Ibrahim Bey returned to Cairo and ruled over Egypt until the arrival of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798 (Aronian & Mitchell 1991: 78-79).

Defence system in Egypt was reported to be at a weak level, be it in terms of the military or weaponry. The Egyptian historian, Al-Jabarti stated that there was a significant disparity between European war machinery and that of the Egyptian Mamluk. The Mamluk army themselves were astonished with the war equipment carried by the French such as rifles and canons. Mamluk soldiers were still using weapons which were used in the Middle Ages such as swords and spears (al-Jabarti 1978, 2:180; al-Wafi 1984: 77). Based on that fact, it was clear that the state of Egypt's defence system at the onset of the French arrival was rather weak following the political turmoil which occurred in the two preceding decades before the arrival of the external power.

Egypt's internal political turmoil also caused dire economic crises. Apart from the devaluing of its currency in the global market, sky-rocketing inflation and increasing price of goods worsened the economy of the state further. In addition, high taxation imposed on traders resulted in Egyptian-made goods such as coffee and textiles being less competitive in the international market, consequently adversely affecting income of the traders. On top of that, the condition became more difficult when food supplies dwindled as a result of floods which devastated the Nile in 1784 and cholera outbreaks in 1785 and 1791 which claimed huge number of lives of the population (Marsot 1984: 15).

Other than crises of food supply, diseases and increasing price of goods, Egyptians were further burdened by the high taxation rate imposed by *Multazim* (tax collector), positions majority of whom were held by the Mamluks. Not only did they impose additional duties onto the people who were constrained with poverty, but they also refused to pay tributaries in the supposed amount to the central government in Istanbul. Only a small amount of the collected duties was sent, while the rest of the collection was used for their own interests such as increasing the size of the army under their control and others. Moreover, the ruling Mamluks were involved in the monopoly of produce such as grains and this spurred rivalries among themselves and caused wealth to circulate around certain people only (Vatikiotis 1969: 31).

Towards the 18th century, Egypt did not only suffer political and economic problems, but also faced a decline in social aspects. The excellence of knowledge and intellectuals in the country were glooming with a decrease in scholarly contributions in this aspect. A number of Egyptians were reportedly involved in Sufism while some of them became deviant believing in superstitions which brought about a decline of the mind and rejection of innovation and progress. The French traveller Pulniah who visited Egypt in the 18th century portrayed Egypt in that century as backwards in aspects of science, skills, arts, and medicine et cetra (El-Shayyal 1968: 119). This depicted a reduction in the intellectual values of Egyptians in that century. Nevertheless, expert scholars were not at all non-existent during the time, but they were very few in numbers as compared to previous ages and such a situation caused a retreat in various aspects of life. In the same time, majority of Egyptians were poor in addition to being burdened with various problems including high taxes as well as oppression and injustice of the authority squeezing their livelihood.

Political chaos, economic decline and social backwardness which devastated Egypt in the 18th century, coupled with the inability of the central government of the Ottomans to address those issues invited a more perilous danger, namely French occupation in 1798. France which at that moment was fresh out of an age of revolution quickly acted to expand her imperial power besides competing with other Western powers, particularly Britain. Incapacity of the Egyptian people and army in defending their country from falling into the hands of the French clearly indicates the actual level of their position and signifies the primitive state of country's defence system.

Conclusion:-

The advent of French power surprised many, not only the Egyptians, but also the Ottomans and the British who were France's closest rivals at that time. Based on external factors, specifically French desire to expand her imperial power besides other economy- and social-related factors, Egypt's internal problems cannot be lightly-regarded in this case. This is because, due to political turmoil, administrative inefficiency, oppression and injustice as well as decline in various aspects of life indirectly allured foreign powers to interfere to secure all their interests. Even though French occupation of Egypt lasted for only 3 years, the affair however gave rise to a new momentum in the history of the Egyptians and the Islamic world in general. Egyptians became aware of their underdevelopment as compared to the West's achievements at that time. Egypt and Muslims could no longer be proud of the advancement once attained in the past, in particular in the Islamic golden age, but should wake up and rebuild the excellence. As a conclusion, internal turmoil within a nation, if not handled well by the rulers and the people alike, can invite foreign powers to take the opportunity of the existing weakness. Therefore, awareness by all sides in developing a nation

and creating stability as well as driving growth in all aspects can defend the nation from attacks and occupation by external powers.

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