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Napoleon Bonaparte's Proclamations, speeches and letters during his campaign in Egypt

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Editor: Christian August Fischer

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Translators' Introduction : In 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte led a somewhat unsuccessful military campaign into Egypt in order to seize control of Middle Eastern commerce and weaken Britain's ability to trade with India. Napoleon led several military initiatives including the successful battle of the Pyramids against the Mamluks while another unsuccessful fight, against the British, during the battle of the Nile. One aspect of Napoleon's campaign was to gain the trust of the Egyptian people and he therefore issued proclamations that stated his respect for the Islamic religion and his intention of liberating the Egyptian people from the ruling Mamluks. Napoleon and his armies were only in Egypt for a short period of time; Napoleon's official departure was on August 24th 1799. Despite Napoleon leaving, the naval campaign in Egypt continued until September 1801. The following documents are some of the many speeches, proclamations, letters, and addresses made during Napoleon's stay in Egypt.

Proclamation 9

Letter

*To the Pasha of Cairo*¹

The intention of the French Republic by occupying Egypt was to drive out the Mamluks², who were simultaneously rebels of the Porte³ and declared enemies of the French government. Today the French Republic has found themselves masters through the victory signal that its army won. Its intention is to retain for the Pasha of Great Lord, his revenues and his existence. I beg you thus, to assure the Porte that it will not experience any kind of losses and I will see to it that they

¹ Pasha was a high rank in the Ottoman Empire political system often given to governors, generals, and dignitaries. All notes are translators notes, unless otherwise noted -TR

² Slave soldiers who converted to Islam and over time became a powerful military caste. They ruled over Egypt from 1250-1517.

³ The (Sublime) Porte is a reference to the Ottoman Empire and specifically the Sultan's Palace.

continue to receive the compensation, which was formerly paid – at the Giza headquarters

Proclamation 10

Proclamation

To the French Army, September 22, 1798

Soldiers, we celebrate the first day of the seventh year of the republic. Five years ago, the independence of the French people was threatened, but you took Toulon, which was the sign of the downfall of our enemies. One year after, you defeated the Austrians at Deigo⁴. The following year, you were on the summit of the Alps. Two years ago, you fought against Mantua⁵, and you won the famous victory of Saint Georges. Last year, you were at the sources of the Drave river⁶ and the Isonzo river⁷, returning from Germany. Who would have thought then that you would be on the banks of the Nile today, at the center of the ancient continent? From the English, famous for arts and commerce, to the ugly and ferocious Bedouins, the eyes of the world are fixed on you. Soldiers! Your destiny is beautiful, because you are worthy of what you have done and of the opinions that others have of you. You will die with honor, like the heroes whose names are inscribed on this pyramid, or you will return to your country covered in laurels and with the admiration of all. For the past five months that we have been away from Europe, we have been the perpetual object of anxiety for our compatriots. On this day, 40 million citizens are thinking of you. They are all saying: we owe the general peace, the tranquility, the prosperity of commerce, and the benefits of civil liberties to your work and your blood.

Proclamation 11

Proclamation

To the inhabitants of Cairo, published two months after the revolt that occurred on October 21st 1798

Citizens of Cairo! Perverse men had led some of you astray. They perished. God ordered me to be merciful to your people. I was lenient and merciful. I was angry with you and your revolt. For two months I deprived you of your Divan⁸,

⁴ Deigo is currently an Italian province of Savona in the Liguria region.

⁵ Mantua is a city in Lombardy Italy.

⁶ The Drave river is located in central Europe. It is a tributary of the Danube.

⁷ The Isonzo (in Italian, Soca in Slovenian) is an Alpine river flows from western to north-eastern Slovenia into Italy.

⁸ The Divan is the high governing body in Islamic states.

but today I will return him to you; your conduct has erased the stain of your revolt.

Scheryfs⁹, Ulémas¹⁰, mosque speakers, teach the people who would happily declare themselves my enemies, that they will neither find refuge in this world nor the other. *Would there be a man so blind not to see that destiny itself directs all my actions?*¹¹ Would there be someone so incredulous to doubt that everything in this vast universe is subject to the empire of destiny?

Make known to the people that since the beginning of the world, it has been written that, after having destroyed the enemies of Islam, I would come from the bottom of the West to complete the task that was imposed upon me. Show the people that in more than twenty passages in the holy book of the Koran, what is happening was expected, and what will happen is equally explained. Let those, whose fear of our weapons prevent them from cursing us, change; because by making vows to heaven against us, they seek their own condemnation! Let the true believers make vows for the prosperity of our weapons. I could demand from each one of you an account of your heart's most secret sentiments, because I know everything, even what you've never told anyone. A day will come, when everyone will see that I was obviously following superior orders and that all human efforts can do nothing against me. Fortunate are those who, in good faith, are the first to join me!

Letter 12

To the Scheryff from Mecca

I am letting you know of my arrival in Cairo at the head of the French army. You will see from the letters that the Divan and the lead merchants in Cairo wrote to you that I named Emir Hadjy, Moustafa – Bey, Kyaya de Seyd, Abou-Bekir, Pasha, Governor of Egypt. He will escort the caravan with forces that will protect them from the Arab attacks. Make known to all the merchants, the faithful, the scheryfs and all those who use their time and their means to instruct the people and to spread the maxims from the holy book, that the Muslims have no better friends than us and no protectors more zealous. Assure all the merchants that not only does commerce have nothing to fear, but that it will be

⁹ Scheryff (also spelled sherif, cherif, and scherif) is an Arab nobleman or prince.

¹⁰ Uléma is the educated class of Muslim legal scholars and theologians.

¹¹ The italics in the original text are retained in the translation.

specially protected. I will always watch the interests of the sacred kaaba¹², of which I am proud to be the protector. I ask you to believe the sentiments of esteem and the considerations that I have for you.

Proclamation 13

Proclamation

At the entrance of Napoleon in Syria

In the name of the all powerful, eternal, infinite and supremely intelligent God, who was not created, who does not create, who does not have any sons, etc. Inhabitants of Syria! We prepared our course with justice and truth; we strongly persisted in our resolution to protect the free and the slaves; we appeared with our victorious armies, to rescue the oppressed and let them forever enjoy rest and peace. Cairo-the-great, Alexandria-the-powerful, Cyprus and Jerusalem, Ptolemais¹³ and Damascus, the countryside and the ancient monuments that surround these cities, saw the entry of our armies, whose power is infinite and incomprehensible, even to the most intelligent. We will protect every city that will surrender to us. As for those who refuse our kindness, misfortune to them and their inhabitants! This is to announce that truth to Syria; that we made this immutable proclamation. If you surrender to us you will not be abandoned, otherwise the edge of the sword will fall on your heads.

Learn this and salutations,

Signed, Buonaparte

Proclamation 14

Proclamation

Published in May 1799 after the end of the siege of S. Jean of Acre

Soldiers, you have crossed the desert that separates Africa from Asia more rapidly than any Arab army. The army that was marching to invade Egypt was destroyed; you took their general, their field crew, their gear, their wineskins, and their camels. You have taken all the fortifications that defend the desert wells. You scattered, on the battlefields of Mount Tabor, the hoards of men rushing at us from all parts of Asia, in hopes of looting Egypt. The thirty ships that you saw arrive in Acre¹⁴, twelve days ago, carried the army, that was to besiege Alexandria, but having had to rush up to Acre, they ended their days

¹² Kaaba is a building located in Mecca that is the most sacred site in Islam.

¹³ Ptolemais is the ancient name of a Hellenistic city and port located in Galilee.

¹⁴ Acre or Akko is the name of a city located in western Galilee in Northern Israel.

there. Part of their flags will adorn your entry into Egypt. Finally, after having, with a handful of men, fueled the war for three months, in the heart of Syria, taking forty pieces of countryside, fifty flags, six thousand prisoners, destroying the fortifications of Gaza, Jaffa, Caiffa, Acre, we are going to withdraw to Egypt.

The season for landings calls me back to France. A few more days, and you could have had the hope to take the Pasha in the middle of his palace; but at this time, taking the Acre Castle is not worth the loss of a few days; moreover the brave that I would lose there, are today necessary for more essential operations. Soldiers! We have a dangerous and exhausting career to lead. After having prevented the East from acting against us and this campaign, we may have to push back some of the attacks from other Western nations. You will find a new opportunity for glory; and if in the middle of many battles, each day is marked by the death of a brave man, it is necessary that new courageous soldiers are trained and take their rank in turn among this small number of brave soldiers, who give others motivation in the face of danger and who are masters of victory.

Proclamation 15

Proclamation

To the French army, published after the departure of Bonaparte for France, August 24th 1799

The news from Europe made me decide to leave for France. I am leaving the control of the army to General *Kleber*. The army will hear from me soon; I cannot say more. It pains me to leave the soldiers to whom I am the most attached; it will only be temporary, and the general that I am leaving them with has the trust of the government and my own.

Proclamation 16

Address

To the Divan of Cairo, published after the departure of Bonaparte

Having been informed that my fleet was ready and that a formidable army was already aboard; I have decided to go take my place at the head of the fleet. I am convinced, like I have told you many times, that as long as I do not strike a blow that crushes all my enemies in one sweep, I will not be able to tranquilly and peacefully enjoy Egypt, the most beautiful part of the world. I am leaving the command during my absence to General *Kleber*, a man of distinguished merit, and to whom I recommended to have the same amity as I do for the *Ulémas* and

the Cheykh¹⁵. Do your utmost, so that the Egyptian people have the same confidence in him as they do in me, and that upon my return, which will be two or three months from now, I will be happy with the Egyptian people and I will have nothing but praise and reward to give to the Cheykh.

¹⁵ Cheykh were preachers in the mosques.