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QUOTE OF THE DAY

WE'RE BORN ALONE, WE LIVE ALONE, WE DIE ALONE. ONLY THROUGH OUR LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP CAN WE CREATE THE ILLUSION FOR THE MOMENT THAT WE'RE NOT ALONE.
ORSON WELLES

Woodrow Wilson and 'the ugliest of treacheries'

After World War I, America was supposed to lead the fight against colonialism. What happened?

EREZ MANELA

In November 1918, when news of the armistice in Europe arrived in Cairo, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, a prominent Egyptian intellectual, was approached by a friend. "This is it!" Haykal's friend exclaimed. "We have the right to self-determination, and therefore the English will leave Egypt." The United States, the friend explained when asked about this outburst, "is the one who won the war. She is not an imperialist country." Therefore," he reasoned, "she will enforce the right to self-determination and enforce the withdrawal."

The end of the World War I was a time of great expectations, and the American president, Woodrow Wilson, stood at its center. For a brief span of time, Wilson appeared to millions worldwide as the herald of an emerging world in which all peoples would be granted the right to determine their own future. I have called this period, stretching roughly from Wilson's Fourteen Points Address in January 1918 to the conclusion of the Versailles Peace Treaty in June 1919, the "Wilsonian Moment" — because he, more than anyone, came to symbolise its promise.

In Egypt, the Wilsonian moment was especially poignant. When World War I began in 1914, Britain declared that Egypt, hitherto an Ottoman possession, was now a protectorate of the British Empire. This formalised British de facto dominance in Egypt, in place since the early 1880s, but it was presented as a temporary wartime measure, a fact that Egyptian nationalists would later emphasise. But the protectorate did nothing to protect Egyptians from the hardships of war; Egypt became an enormous military base and thousands of Allied troops congregated on its soil. Wartime inflation, requisitions and conscription made life hard.

At the same time, the United States and its president emerged as a champion of new ideas about the sort of international order that might follow an Allied victory. Wilson's wartime rhetoric, and especially his increasingly strong promotion of the principle of "self-determination," convinced many in Egypt and elsewhere that the rules of the game were about to change.

Even before the United States joined the war in April 1917, Wilson declared that the peace must "accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed." After the American entry, Wilson was even more emphatic. The United States and its allies, he said in May 1917, were "fighting for the liberty, the self-government, and the undictated development of all peoples."

On Jan 8, 1918, Wilson addressed Congress to outline America's vision for the postwar world, a speech that quickly became known worldwide as the "Fourteen Points."

Though this speech did not explicitly include the term "self-determination," Wilson did use that term the next month, when he called it an "imperative principle of action" and intoned that "every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned."

It is no surprise, then, that when the war ended in November 1918, Egyptians expected the postwar order to reflect Wilson's wartime rhetoric or that they moved quickly to take part in the emerging new order. On Nov 13, only two days after the conclusion of the armistice, a group of Egyptian leaders called on the British high commissioner, Sir Reginald Wingate, to declare their desire for political independence. They also demanded permission to travel to Paris to present Egypt's case for self-determination before the peace conference gathering there.

The group that approached Wingate was led by Saad Zaghlul, who would become known in Egypt as the "Father of the Nation." Zaghlul was a career public servant, and had served as a government minister between 1906 and 1913. A liberal, he came to resent British support for the autocratic Egyptian monarchy and resigned his cabinet post in protest. Elected to the Legislative Assembly, by 1918 he had become the leader of the opposition.

Playing for time, Wingate asked his visitors to be patient, as "His Majesty's Government" was occupied with more pressing things. The British had long considered Egypt, and particularly the Suez Canal, a strategic lifeline for their empire. Determined to retain power, the last thing they wanted was for Egyptian demands to become a negotiating point at the Versailles peace conference. So, soon after, London denied Zaghlul and his delegation permission to travel.

In response, Zaghlul and his allies moved to mobilise public support, convening rallies, circulating petitions, and starting a press campaign. At the same time, they appealed to Wilson directly. In a dramatic telegram, Zaghlul assured Wilson that Egyptians "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." This new era, he added, would "no longer be troubled by the ambitions of hypocrisy or the old-fashioned policy of hegemony and furthering selfish national interests." Egyptians must be allowed their day in Paris. This was no more than their "natural and sacred right."

Woodrew Wilson

As the peace conference got underway in January 1919 and Egyptians rallied behind Zaghlul, the British authorities, increasingly anxious, decided to move against him. Under the rules of martial law, which had remained in effect since the war, Zaghlul and several of his supporters were arrested and, on March 9, 1919, sent to be interned on the Mediterranean island of Malta. According to Zaghlul's biographer, one item found on his person when he was arrested was a newspaper clipping that listed Wilson's Fourteen Points.

The arrest sparked a wave of strikes and demonstrations across Egypt and launched 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, workers, professionals, peasants. Leaders of the country's Christian and Jewish communities expressed support for the movement. Women took to the streets in an unprecedented display. The British forces countered with a strict enforcement of martial law. Over the next several months, some 800 Egyptians were killed and many more wounded, along with 60 British soldiers and civilians.

As the 1919 Revolution unfolded in the streets, a stream of telegrams, letters and petitions poured into the American consulate in Cairo, professing faith in Wilson and calling on the United States to support "the cause of right and liberty" in Egypt. One message, signed "The Ladies of Egypt," complained that the British employed "brute force even towards 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 each photograph. Egyptians of all stripes, the message was, supported the uprising.

Despite the failure to gain American support, by the end of the year nationalist leaders, backed by Egyptian public opinion, had become firmly committed to resisting British control.

The State Department, however, remained unmoved. Allen Dulles, then a young diplomat at the Division of Near Eastern Affairs and later the head of the Central Intelligence Agency, opined that the Egyptian appeals "should not even be acknowledged," and others agreed. When the British foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, wrote in April that "extreme nationalists" in Egypt, whom he implausibly described as "paid agents of the revolutionary party in Turkey and Bolshevists," were using Wilson's words to "stir up a Holy War against the Infidels," Wilson quickly agreed to recognise British control over Egypt.

The news of Wilson's decision to recognize the protectorate broke just as Zaghlul and his delegation, having been released from Malta, were crossing the Mediterranean on their way to Paris. Learning of the decision as they docked in Marseilles, the Egyptians were shocked. Haykal later recalled that the decision hit "like a bolt of lightning." How could Wilson deny Egyptians their right to self-determination even before they had arrived in Paris? This was, he wrote, "the ugliest of treacheries," "the most profound repudiation of principles."

Zaghlul remained in Paris for several months trying to make headway for his cause, sending Wilson a series of emphatic messages and requesting repeatedly an audience with the president. In reply, all he got were terse notes from Wilson's secretary, acknowledging receipt of his messages but citing the president's preoccupation with other matters. Still, the stream of Egyptian petitions continued for some months, many marked by a conviction that Wilson could not have willingly betrayed the Egyptian cause and must therefore have been duped by the wily British. One message, from a group of Egyptian students, sought to correct the president's misapprehensions and assured him that the Egyptian movement was "neither religious, nor xenophobe" and "far from being Bolshevist in any sense."

By the summer of 1919, Zaghlul, unable to get a hearing with Wilson, hoped to find some support in the American Congress instead. In June, he told the Egyptian press that the Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations had found that Egypt was neither under Turkish nor British authority, but rather was "self-governed." This finding ignited a furore of discussion in the Egyptian news media — but nothing else.

In November 1919, Zaghlul, still in Europe, sent Wilson yet another telegram imploring him to support Egyptian demands. But the same message also revealed his growing disappointment. The Egyptian people, he wrote the president, hailed him "as the Chief of a new doctrine which was to have assured peace and prosperity to the world." Now, "for having had faith in your principles," they were "suffering under the most barbarous treatment" at the hands of the British.

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The Egyptian experience i the Wilsonian moment, more over, was not unique. As th peace conference convened, n tionalist claimants from man parts of the world — Chines and Koreans, Arabs and Jew Armenians and Kurds, and mar others — rushed, invited or ot erwise, to stake their claims i the emerging world order. T these representatives of nation aspirations, Wilson often serve as a symbol of the coming era self-determination for all. The adopted his rhetoric in formula ing and justifying their goals an they counted on the president support in attaining them.

Most of these aspirations, how ever, were met with disappoin ment. As the 1919 Revolutio engulfed Egypt, similar ma protest movements broke out i China, India and Korea. In Pa is, Nguyen Tat Thanh, a youn man from the French coloni territory of Indochina, submi ted a petition demanding mo freedom for his homeland. H hoped to meet with Wilson t present the petition to him, b the meeting never materialise and the petition was round ignored. Soon after Nguyen, wh would later adopt the nom-d guerre Ho Chi Minh, would tur to communism as the path t liberate his people.

In Egypt, the square in down town Cairo that was at the hea of the protests in 1919 came to b known as Tahrir Square — Li eration Square, in Arabic. Near a century later, in 2011, Tahr Square again became the foc point of mass protests, this tim against the homegrown oppre sion of the regime of Preside Hosni Mubarak. The events the 1919 Revolution could n but echo loudly in what quick became known as the Egyptia Revolution of 2011. Much ha changed in Egypt, and in th world, in the intervening de ades. The desire for real self-d termination, one that is base on the consent of the govern remained the same.

(Erez Manela is a professor of histo at Harvard and the author of "T Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determin tion and the International Origins Anticolonial Nationalism," from whi this essay is adapted

Hon. Chairman **Najeb Yacob Alhamer** | Editor-in-Chief **Mahmood AI Mahmood** | Deputy Editor-in-Chief **Ahdeya Ahmed** | Chairman & Managing Director **P U**

Subscription & circulation: Tel: 38444698/17579877 | Email:subscription@newsofbahra