

MUHAMMAD AL-MUHDI

Muslim scholar, born as a Copt about 1737 and died a Muslim in 1815. Muhdi became one of the [leading](#) Egyptian '*ulama*' (Muslim scholars) of his time. As a child of Coptic parents, he was originally named Hibat-Allah. About 1750 his father, Abu Fanyus (Epiphanius) Fadlallah, became intendant- comptroller under [Sulayman](#) al-Kashif, who employed the young Copt on condition of conversion to Islam. Eventually, he enrolled him for study at al-Azhar.

When he left his family as a young boy of barely thirteen years and adopted Islam by the new name Muhammad al-Muhdi, the famous *shaykh* al-Hifni became his tutor and foster father. After his education by the [leading](#) teachers of al- Azhar, he received the qualification to teach in 1776, and two years later he occupied a vacant chair at this mosque school. He was a proponent of the Shafi'ite school of law.

Earlier in his career, [besides](#) being a Muslim scholar, he undertook administrative tasks in the government. Because of his good contact with [Sulayman](#) al-Kashif, he got a post as secretary in the Diwan al-'Umumi, the [council](#) of the supreme dignitaries in Ottoman-Mamluk Egypt, in 1763. In 1766 'Ali Bey appointed him secretary general in his office, a position that he lost upon the overthrow of 'Ali Bey (1772); he regained it after the death of Muhammad Bey (1775). During the following period he maintained good relations with the beys dominant at the time, especially Isma'il Bey (1786-1791), who also gave him duties in the mint, the slaughterhouse, as well as the administration of the pensions.

Muhdi made use of his insight into the methods of the dominant caste to accumulate an enormous fortune for himself through his administrative activities. In the course of the political crisis and the plague of the year 1791, he was able to procure numerous leases of tax farms and management of foundations. He also participated in trading companies. When Bonaparte conquered Egypt in 1798, he was, with his private

businesses and the pensions he obtained from the Ottoman state, one of the wealthiest *'ulama'* in the country.

Muhammad al-Muhdi immediately began to collaborate with the French and was appointed in the post of secretary general in the newly formed general council. He soon became an important, if not the most important, support of the French rule in Egypt. He edited the Arabic proclamations of the commanding generals in cooperation with the French interpreters and Orientalists. He willingly placed his experience in governmental administration at the disposal of the French generals and administrators, and he made many personal friendships with them.

Muhdi used his position of confidence in many critical situations to moderate the policy of the French against the Muslim population. His reputation and his influence on his fellow believers often allowed him to calm the overheated mood and to subdue attempts at rebellion at the very beginning. Even after the failure of the French [military](#) venture, he remained in written contact with some of the French, especially with Jean [Joseph](#) Marcel, the former director of the "Imprimerie Nationale" at Cairo. Later Marcel published a translation of Muhdi's works. Among them there are some poems that reflect a view of religious toleration unusual for a Muslim scholar of the eighteenth century, possibly caused partly by his contact with the French.

In spite of his collaboration with the French, the return of Egypt to Ottoman sovereignty did not cause him any difficulties. He succeeded quickly in making himself liked and indispensable, thereby saving his posts and benefices. In the following years of internal struggle for power between the Mamluk beys and the Ottoman pashas, he behaved as neutrally as he could, but he justified, along with other leading *'ulama'*, the seizure of power by MUHAMMAD 'ALI in July 1805. After this event, he withdrew a little from politics and devoted himself to the administration of his tax farms and his businesses.

He gave lectures at al-[Azhar](#) and occupied himself privately with scientific-technical experiments. When in 1809 the leader of the Ashrif sect, 'Umar Makram, fell into disgrace with Muhammad 'Ali, Muhdi made use of the situation at the expense of the exiled Makram to secure again more political influence and more profitable offices.

After the death of the *shaykh* al-[Azhar](#) al-Sharqawi in 1812, Muhammad al-Muhdi was elected as his successor in the office of the director of al-Azhar and head of all scholars in Egypt. For somewhat mysterious reasons, however, Muhammad 'Ali substituted him shortly afterward by another person. He died in January 1815.

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