

## WOMEN WHOSE HUSBANDS RULED THE REALM

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### EGYPT'S FIRST LADIES

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1879-1919: Princess Amina Ilhami, Countess May, Sultana Melek, Princess Shuvekar Ibrahim



1919-1953: Queens Nazli, Farida and Nariman, Princess Neslishah



1955-2005: First Ladies Tahia Abdel Nasser, Jehan al-Sadat, Suzanne Mubarak

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#### **Consorts of Monogamous Egyptian Heads of State From Khedive Mohammed Tewfik To President Hosni Mubarak**

- Khedive Khedive Tewfik (r. 1879-92) + **Princess Amina Ilhami** (b. 24/05/1858) a cousin  
e Abbas Himi (r. 1892-1914 ) + **Ikbal Hanem** (b. 22/10/1876) a vassal

- (div.); + **May von Torok** (b. 15/6/1877) Hungarian countess who changed her name to Djavidan Hanem
- Sultan Hussein Kamel (r. 1914-17) + Princess Ayn al Hayat Ibrahim his cousin (div.); + **Melek Tourhan** (b. 27/10/1869) a Circassian vassal
    - King Farouk (r. 1936-52) + **Safinaz "Farida" Zulfikar** (b. King Fouad (r. 1917-36) + Princess Shuvekar Ibrahim a cousin (div.); + **Nazli Abdel Rehim Sabry** (b. 25/6/1894) French grandfather Anthelme Seve 5/9/1921) a commoner (div.); + **Nariman Sadek** (b. 21/10/1934) a commoner (div.)
  - Prince-Regent Abdel Moneim Abbas Hilmi (1952-53) + **Neslishah Osmanoglou** (b. 2/2/1921) Turkish granddaughter of last Ottoman Sultan
  - President Mohammed Naguib (r. 1953-54) + **Aicha Mohammed Labib**
    - President Anwar al-Sadat (r. 1970-1981)
  - President Gamal Abdel Nasser (r. 1954-1970) + **Tahia Kazem** (b. 1920)
    - President Iranian father Kazem Baghdadi 1970 -1981) + Ikbal Madi (div.); + **Jehan Safwat Raouf** (b. 29/8/1933) English mother Gladys Cotterill Hosni Mubarak (r. 1981 - ) + **Suzanne Saleh Sabet** (b. 28/2/1941) Welsh mother Lily May Palmer

**The last satin-and-silk Harem belonged to Khedive (Viceroy) Ismail Pasha who ruled Egypt from 1863 to 1879. Heretofore, the *Walda Pasha* (ruler's mother) was the most powerful woman in the realm. Starting with Ismail's first-born son, Mohammed Tewfik Pasha, monogamy became the rule rather than the exception for Egypt's heads of state. The role of First Lady was thus introduced in the Middle East.**

This is about 12 women who in varying degrees influenced Egypt's destiny.

### **SECURING THE DYNASTY**

In an age when motherhood gave a woman her only acknowledged career the primary role of Egypt's royal consorts was to provide an heir and spare, ensuring the perpetuity of the Mohammed Ali dynasty.

Guaranteed two sons from his first wife Amina Ilhami whom he divorced later on, Khedive Abbas Hilmi took Countess May Von Torok for his second wife. Although it was said at the time that the countess was more of an affair than a traditional union, the couple was officially married in 1910 with the Grand

Mufti and Poet Laureate Ahmed Shawky among the witnesses.  
Fifty years later King Farouk felt compelled to remarry to secure an heir to the throne, his first wife having borne him three daughters.

### **ORIGINS & BACKGROUND**

Consorts who came from within the Mohamed Ali clan were naturally highborn enjoying a gilded existence from childbirth. The same can be said for Countess May who belonged to the minor Middle-Europa aristocracy (read separate [article](#)).

Queen Nazli and Queen Farida belonged to the elitist turco-circassian ruling class. Besides being daughters and granddaughters of senior officials, they each had a prime minister for a maternal grandfather--Mohammed Cherif Pasha and Mohammed Saïd Pasha respectively. Moreover, Queen Farida was the niece of renowned artist-painter, Mahmoud Saïd.

Except for Queens Farida and Nariman all of the above consorts were of mixed or foreign ancestry.

In principal the intermarried members of the Mohammed Ali clan were of Turco-Balkan stock. Countess May on the other hand is up-and-down Hungarian. And while Queen Nazli is of French-Greek extraction through her maternal grandparents, both Iqbal Hanem and Sultana Melek were imports from the northern Ottoman provinces. Princess Neslishah meanwhile is the result of a six-century bloodline of imperial Sultans and Khans.

Of Egypt's four post-monarchy First Ladies, Tahia Abdel Nasser is the daughter of a humble clerk of Iranian origin. The story goes that when cadet-officer Gamal Abdel Nasser asked for her hand in marriage in 1944, her father, Kazem Baghdadi, sought the blessing of his employer and benefactor Kazrouni Bey, the then-honorary head of Egypt's small Persian community.

On the other hand First Ladies Jehan Raouf and Suzanne Sabet came from educated middle class backgrounds. In fact both sets of parents were carbon copies of each other. Both paternal grandfathers came from Upper Egypt where Ahmed Raouf was a Public Health Department director and Mustafa Saleh owned property. Both fathers, then in their twenties, pursued medical studies in the United Kingdom. They both returned to Egypt with British brides. As though by coincidence both these brides were born in 1904 and their respective fathers were called Charles Henry!



On 2 September 1924, at Ecclesall Bierlow in the county of Derby (UK), Safwat Raouf, a 25 year-old medical student at Sheffield University, married music teacher Gladys Cotterill, the daughter of Charles Henry Cotterill, a

Sheffield City police superintendent. Later that year their son Magdi was born in Liverpool.

Eight years later in Cairo, Gladys gave birth to Jehan.

Ditto the Sabets. At Islington, London on 16 March 1934, Saleh Sabet, a 29 year old medical student at Cardiff University, marries the 29 year old Lily May Palmer, a trained nurse working at The Infirmary on Camden Road, Islington. The daughter of colliery manager Charles Henry Palmer, Lily May grew up in Pontypridd, Glamorgan in Wales, hence the Welsh connection. Products of this marriage are a son (Mounir) and a daughter (Suzanne) born in the provinces of Quena and Menya (Upper Egypt) respectively.

In Egypt the Raoufs and the Sabets raised their offspring in non-traditional style giving their respective daughters the benefits of a first rate western education.

Whereas the age difference between their respective mothers and fathers was almost insignificant both future First Ladies married military men more than 10 years their senior.

In a country historically known for its religious diversity where Christians make up approximately 12% of the population we note that aside from Countess May, Anglo-Egyptians Jehan Raouf and Suzanne Sabet have one Christian-born parent each.

### **EDUCATION & TRAINING**

From Khediva Amina Ilhami to Sultan Melek, Egypt's consorts were educated at home their worldly knowledge limited to what they learned from their benign nannies and stalwart European governess'. The overall curriculum was limited to languages (French, English, German, Turkish and Arabic), basic history and rudimentary arithmetic. There was also piano, painting and sewing.

Not members of the Mohammed Ali clan, Queens Nazli, Farida and Nariman attended elementary and primary schools. Nazli Abdel Rehim Sabry first went to the Mere de Dieu School in Cairo and later to the Dame de Sion in Alexandria. Farida, whose father was a High Court judge in that city, went to the Dame de Sion. French nuns supervised both these boarding schools.

It was different with First Ladies Jehan al-Sadat and Suzanne Mubarak. The former grew up on the Island of Roda attending the nearby Church Missionary Society School run by an English headmistress.

And since Suzanne's family lived at No. 15 Abdel Moneim (Garnata) Street in Heliopolis, it was normal that she enroll at St. Claire's. This was a strict girls-only Heliopolis prep school operated by Mother Mary Cecilia and a band of Franciscan sisters, where neglecting to wear straw hat and pom-poms was virtually a punishable offense.

After guaranteeing a first class education for their respective children, both First Ladies sought and obtained university degrees. At 46 Jehan received a

much-publicized degree in Arabic Literature from Cairo University where she eventually lectured. At about the same period Suzanne Mubarak enrolled at the American University in Cairo where she obtained a BA in Political Science (class of '77) supplementing it with a Masters in 1982.

Unlike previous consorts, Suzanne Mubarak and Jehan al-Sadat benefited from several years of priming as wives of incumbent Vice Presidents. In their position as Second Ladies they had enough time to envisage their future roles, the advantage of-course is that Suzanne had Jehan for an intimate mentor.

### **ROLES & ACTIVITIES**

All of the above consorts were teenage brides married off between the ages of 15-18 the two exceptions being Countess May and Queen Nazli.

Except for Jehan al-Sadat and Countess May, all of the above marriages were arranged with the alleged consent of the teenage brides.

Whereas Amina Ilhami and Ikbal Hanem had no public role, the former was directly involved with the creation of the landmark Mohammed Ali Foundation in the early 1900s. A spin-off of this foundation was the Mohammed Ali Hospice or "Mubarra" as it was better known.

The third consort, Countess May, appeared in public functions disguised as a man and often played hostess to the Khedive's guests. She also visited Alexandria's hospitals during WW1 bringing solace to wounded soldiers. Countess May took a keen interest in the construction and design of certain royal palaces. More liberated than her Egyptian counterparts she received mixed company at her residence in Mostorod outside Cairo.



With the arrival of Sultana Melek, we read in the social pages that she attended performances at the opera albeit seated in a loge separated from the rest of the audience by a *musharabeya*.

Confined to the palace through most of King Fouad's reign, Queen Nazli was nonetheless allowed to attend opera performances, flower shows and other ladies-only cultural events. She also accompanied the King during part of his four-month tour of Europe in 1927 and was much feted in France in view of her French origins. With the introduction of parliament in 1924 the queen was among the royal attendees at parliament's opening ceremony seated in a special section of the guest gallery.





Queen Farida at photo exhibit with senate president Mohammed Mahmoud Khalil Bey to her left; Princess Nesishah at sports tournament with Regent and son



Despite three pregnancies during her 10 years as queen of Egypt, Farida Zulfikar went public in the sense that she accepted the honorary chair of the Red Crescent Society as well as several noted charities and educational organizations where she appeared at

fundraisers and commemorations. She was also honorary president of the Feminist Union and the New Woman Alliance, two organizations aimed at improving the status of women in Egypt. Under her patronage the Egyptian Girl Guide Company played an important role in community affairs. Farida was also present at art exhibitions and presided at receptions for foreign dignitaries.

King Farouk's second consort was similarly active despite the fact she was pregnant for the short time she was queen.

In view of the ambiguous situation as to who was in control of Egypt's destiny, the few official appearances by Princess Neslishah, in her capacity as consort of co-Prince-Regent Abdel Moneim, were strictly related to charity work. Like her immediate predecessors she was seen at sporting events including polo matches, the races and the international tennis tournament final. The Regency lasted ten months in all.

There are no records on hand evidencing public appearances of the first republican First Lady, Aziza M. Labib, the invisible wife of General Mohammed Naguib.

And if by virtue of the longevity of Nasser's administration her successor, Tahia Kazem, was seen now and then, it was always in the shadows of her larger than life husband. Her rare, self-conscious cameo appearances were either as the mother of five children or as the dutiful wife, walking five steps behind *al rais*. The few times she appeared at official functions she did so as the fumbling hostess to wives of foreign dignitaries. The otherwise withdrawn Tahia never gave a speech and was never seen presiding at a public event.

Deciding to "reign" as First Lady, Jehan Raouf quickly broke off with the dutiful stay-at-home persona of her predecessor. She retained a full time press secretary, accepted numerous public engagements and gave willing interviews to the local and foreign media.

Such was the overload that a mistake was made one day when one of her interviews inadvertently appeared in a cult magazine!

The arrival of bilingual Jehan al-Sadat on the local scene coincided with the coming of global television. Exploited by the Western media she was portrayed as the full partner of Anwar al-Sadat in his political, social and economic endeavors. "Anwar Sadat's only rival for popularity among Egyptians these days is a safe and sure ally: his wife Jehan Sadat," wrote Time magazine in 1974 under the title 'Egypt's Liberating First Lady'.

It was almost as if the American media had created the post of 'Egyptian First Lady'. Jehan became an overnight celebrity abroad and nothing appeared to have delighted the President more than to hear the international community sing her praise.

Aside from championing her husband's political views, Jehan al-Sadat took a pro-active stance regarding family planning and the emancipation of women in Egypt. To her credit Jehan spearheaded legislative bills (nicknamed Jehan's Laws by her detractors) for women's rights, which invariably set off controversies in a country swinging precariously between accelerated westernization and Islamic militancy.

During state visits abroad Jehan got her share of the limelight whether at the White House or Tehran's Gulistan palace. With the arrival of satellite television her biggest statement yet for women empowerment came during a short transit in Saudi Arabia. President Sadat and his consort descended from the presidential plane and proceeded to shake hands with a dumbfounded House of Saud welcome committee, a first in an ultra-conservative Wahabi kingdom where women are relegated to the dark ages. By that

unprecedented act Jehan propelled herself onto center stage as far as Gulf women were concerned.

Notwithstanding her attempts at bettering the plight of women in Egypt and the Middle East, no good deed goes unpunished. Her conservative-minded enemies within the Arab

World often described Jehan al-Sadat as a ruthless Marie Antoinette who was the real power behind the President. True or false, history will regard her as the most influential Egyptian First Lady in the 20th century.

First Lady Suzanne Mubarak took up where Jehan al-Sadat left off. At first she limited herself to charity work preferring not to attract the same kind of harsh criticism leveled at her predecessor. With time her timid appearances multiplied and soon enough the public re-accustomed itself to Egypt's First Lady becoming a daily staple in the printed and electronic media.

Whereas Jehan Raouf confined her activities within Egypt, Suzanne Sabet, in addition to local activities, participated in international forums and UN sponsored conferences particularly those dealing with women and children. Later would come several well-intended initiatives such as Reading for All, a program meant to curtail widespread illiteracy while encouraging children to learn and produce, the National Council for Women, and Women for Peace, an international initiative that "seeks to enhance the active participation of women in the decision and peace making processes."

Suzanne Sabet has been most influential on issues that concern her deeply such as the causes of terminal disease and cancer detection. Commentators have given her high marks for the care and energy with which she pursues issues like education and preservation of Egypt's national heritage. There is also that lingering impression that she is *the* privileged advisor to the president, a task implicitly recognized in postscripts adopted by the April 1923 constitution regarding the role of the then-queen of Egypt.

#### **DYNASTIC LEGACY**

From the above consorts only the sons of Ikbal Hanem and Queen Nazli reigned over Egypt (Abbas Hilmi and King Farouk respectively).

Except for Suzanne Sabet's son, Gamal Mubarak (b. 27/12/1963), none of the other consorts' male progeny pursued political careers.

Princess Ayn al-Hayat's only son from Sultan Hussein abdicated his rights to the throne preferring instead to become a Sufi mystic. Queen Nariman's

son Ahmed-Fouad dabbed briefly in sinecures before succumbing to an emotional trauma. He now leads a retired life in Switzerland. Princess

Neslishah's only son is an international banker. Tahia Kazem's three sons reportedly went the route of fat commissions and mega contracts,

occasionally bailed out by their father's Libyan disciple. Jehan Raouf's only son Gamal al-Sadat is a part time businessman of sorts.



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#### NOTES:

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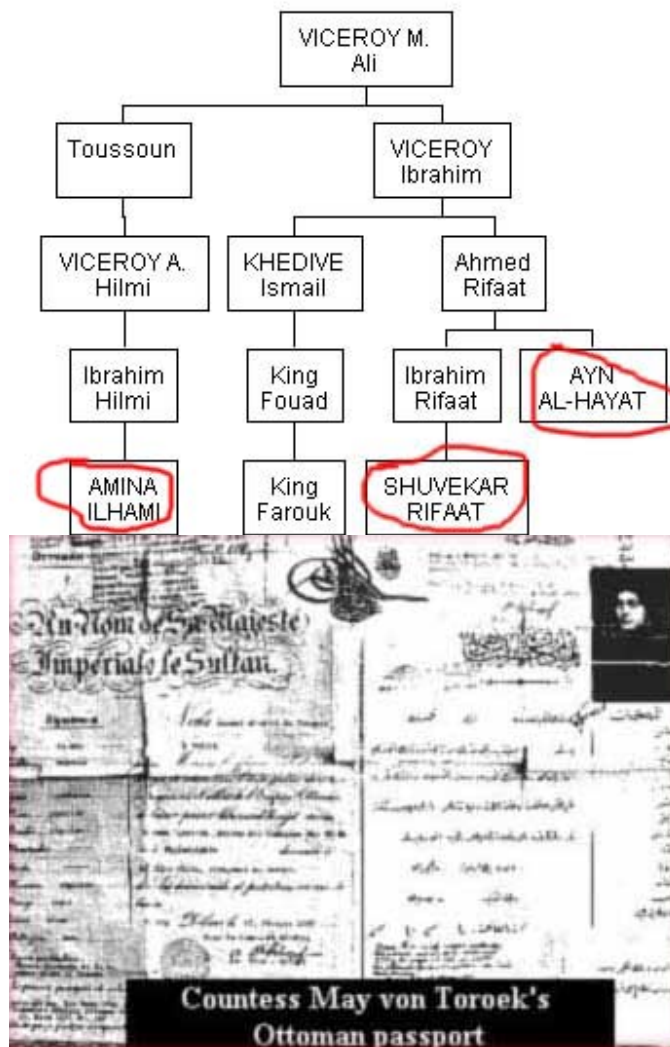
- From among the wives of Egyptian heads of state between 1879 and 2005 one remains curiously anonymous. Besides being a housewife and the mother of General Mohamed Naguib's children, Aicha Mohamed Labib made no public



appearances during her husband's short administration. She is therefore not mentioned in this brief study.

- During its long history Egypt has had several iconoclast consorts and several ruling God-Queens. If Nefertiti is best remembered from the first category, of the second, Queens Hatchepsut, Cleopatra and Shagaret al-Durr are excellent examples.
- Egyptians who were First Ladies abroad: Princess Fawzia of Egypt became Empress of Persia, Malak Faizi married Abd al-Allah Ali Ibn al-Hussein Regent of Irak and Fathia Rizk married President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

*Descendants of VICEROY Mohammed Ali*



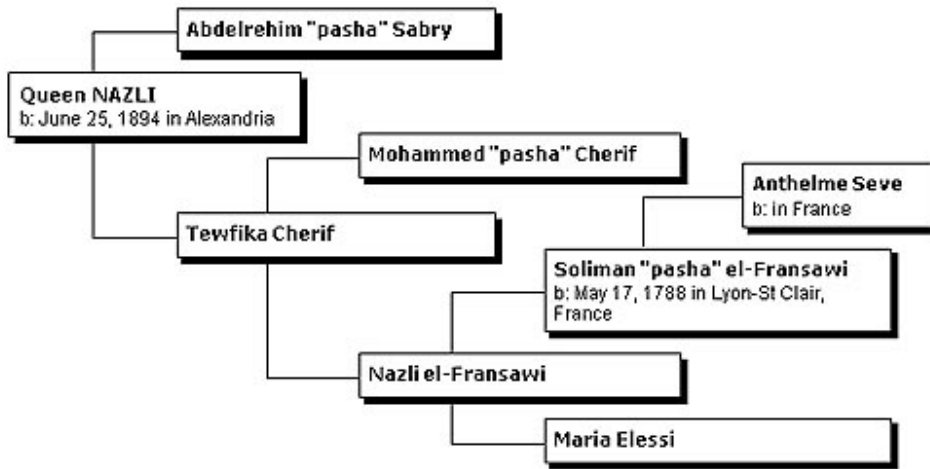
Countess May's Ottoman passport; below: wedding certificate evidencing her Moslem name Djavidan Hanem

اعضا سندن و علمای علامه در فضیلتها الشیخ بکری عاشورا در  
افندی حضرت بکری و خدیوینت جهیده و زینت و آری غزوات احمد بدیع  
ابو اسماعیل حضرت لرزنده عقد مجلس شرح عالی مذکورده مقبوله و زانی  
مهاضرات سرما الیهما الشیخ بکری عاشورا افندی و احمد بدیع نورانی  
سفره و بالف عاقد در سینه اولون فی المیزان عقد عقد و با و ذی  
خانم افندی حضرت بکری مجلس مقبوله مذکورده خدیوینت دستور  
زینت و علم و انجم فی مقبوله و لعلها سر جمعی با اسرار الله ما برید  
و بنا حضرت بکری مجلس مقبوله مذکورده سرما الیهما السینه لیسند  
اق ایام و تقویم کلیم ایروب بنی ما الیه عباس جمعی با  
حضرت بکری بر مدت اول عقد فی حضرت سر و عقد اول حضرت زنده  
اجرا اول نشیدی لکن عقد مذکور علی اصول سند سی به ربط  
ار لتمامه اول لرزنده و عقد اول ملک سند سی به ربط و کتب  
به و زید محمد محمد الیه عباس جمعی با حضرت بکری طالبه و انجم  
اول لرزنده به ما الیه حضرت بکری بنیزده مر سبیل مقبوله  
و مقبوله و مر مقبول مقبوله می آید ابو مجلس شرحه در ما الیه  
الشیخ بکری عاشورا الصدق افندی و احمد بدیع اسماعیل حضور لرزنده  
نفس ما الیه عباس جمعی با حضرت بکری عقد و زید جمعی الیه  
و زید محمد محمد الیه عباس جمعی با حضرت بکری زینت ابو مجلس  
شرحه بر وجه سر زید و قبول الیه و بدیده ما الیه  
حضرت بکری و غیر مقبوله ما الیه ما و ان خانم افندی حضرت بکری  
بنیزده مقبوله مر سبیل مقبوله و زید جمعی می آید بر وجه سر  
تر زید و قبول الیه مر سبیل مقبوله ما و فی باب الیه کتب اولدی فی الیه  
النامه عشره صفرا الخیرة ثمان و عشرين و ثمان و الف و ک  
الحکام (مجلس مقبوله مذکورده) الوضوح علی الشرطت بالیه  
النامه المقبوله لعلیه کتب الخیرة لعلیه المقبوله لعلیه کتب الخیرة

در اسناد سرای عالی صحیح  
محمد علی



### Ancestors of Queen NAZLI





Ancestral trees of Queens Farida and Nariman (from Mussawar and Image magazines)

