History

Isam al-Din Hifni Nasif (1899-1969) belongs to one of the most important early socialist thinkers and activists in Egypt. He was born into a prominent family which played an important role in Egyptian politics and culture. His father, for instance, participated in the Urabi revolution against the British occupation in 1882.

Hifni Nasif became at an early age involved in the nationalist struggle for independence, first as a sympathiser of the Nationalist Party, and later as participant in the 1919 revolution, which was led by the Wafd. During the upheavals of the 1919 revolution he left for Berlin to pursue his studies in agronomy. There he continued his revolutionary activity as one of the main organisers of the Egyptian student movement in Europe. At the same time, he was strongly influenced by the socialist revolt in Germany and the social and political upheavals which followed the First World War. He became convinced that social reform was a precondition for the success of the struggle for national independence. Inevitably, Hifni Nasef’s radicalisation led to a confrontation and an eventual break with the more moderate nationalist movement of the Wafd.

Hifni Nasif’s embrace of socialism was enhanced by his keen interest in science, especially natural evolution. In this regard he followed his older contemporaries in Egypt, Shibli Shumayyal and Salama Musa (1887-1958). His main inspiration he found, however, in German socialist thought and Marxism, although he never was a pure Marxist. He rejected, for instance, the idea of the working class as the leading revolutionary class that formed the vanguard of history. Instead, he put his faith in the reformist potential of independent intellectuals and the middle classes. They formed, according to him, the social categories which would lead Egypt towards independence and development.

Hifni Nasif’s fame rests partly on his courage and outspokenness at a time when this was a rare phenomenon in Egypt. Apart from the rejection of colonialism, he criticised the myopic selfishness of large landowners, the adverse influence of foreign monopolies, the deplorable situation of the workers and the peasants, as well as the exclusive character of national education that was limited to the rich.

Hifni Nasif’s activism led to a continuous confrontation with the authorities, who arrested him in 1919, 1921, 1924, 1931, 1933, 1936 and 1946, and occasionally put him on trial, occasions which became for Egyptian freethinkers rallying points for the defence of free speech. Two incidents became especially famous. In 1921 Hifni Nasif was not allowed to disembark from a German ship in Alexandria on account of an article in which he had offended the king, and in 1931 he was persecuted for his work al-Tajdid al-Ijtima’i (Social Renewal). In effect, this trial was a means to prevent Hifni Nasif from establishing a socialist party in Egypt.

Hifni Nasif’s first attempts to establish a socialist party date from 1927. In that year he organised a founding committee with friends. When this attempt failed, he established in 1930 a magazine called Ruh al-’Asr (The Spirit of the Age) as a means to mobilise support for a socialist party. This initiative turned out to be a success and in the same year the Peasants’ and Workers’ Party (Hizb al-’Ummal wa al-Fallahin) was founded. Its theoretical underpinnings were published by
Hifni Nasif in his treatise of 1931 ‘al-Tajdid al-Ijtima’i, Abhath fi Shu’un al-Ummal wa al-Fallahin’ (Social Innovation, Studies on the Situation of the Workers and the Peasants). The party was immediately suppressed and its founders arrested. Another attempt to establish a socialist party, in 1932, led again to Hifni Nasif’s arrest. Despite these failed efforts, he never decided to form an underground political movement. For a short while he established relations with Abbas Halim, the aristocratic labour leader.

Hifni Nasif’s ideas on socialism are expounded in his work *al-Mabadi al-Ishtirakiyya (The Principles of Socialism)* published in 1933. During the same year Hifni Nasif made two translations of German socialist thinkers. Apart from his theoretical and political works on reform and socialism, Hifni Nasif wrote a famous social realist novel in 1939 which dealt with the social problem in Egypt, *Asifa Fawq Misr (Storm over Egypt)*.

**The collection**

The collection of Isam al-Din Hifni Nasif was given to the IISH by Dr. Rif’at al-Sa’id. It consists mainly of newspaper clippings of articles written by Hifni Nasif himself, as well as articles written in response to his essays and works. Nearly all of them are in Arabic. Hifni Nasif’s own articles deal with a variety of topics, ranging from socialism in Europe to Egyptian culture and values. Other documents mostly deal with the trials of 1924, 1933 and 1948. Finally, the collection contains hand written notes of Hifni Nasif. Its size is 0.12 m.

**Consultation**

Access of the documents is free.

**LIST**

**Socialism in general**


3. Reviews by Hifni Nasif of foreign books in typescript. N.d.
Socialism in Egypt

5. Articles on workers, the trade union movement, peasants, and the establishment of the Egyptian Workers’ and Peasants’ Party in: Majallat Sanduq al-Dunya, Shubra and al-Wadi. 1932, 1937 and n.d.
6. Articles in Majallat al-Tatawwur. 1940.

Situation in Egypt

8. Articles and essays on values and culture, women, the family, prostitution and cremation, in: Kawkab al-Sharq, al-Tali’a, al-Hayat al-Jadida and other periodicals. 1938 and n.d.
11. Typewritten articles and essays on fascism and corrupt society. N.d.
   NB. Probably made for research purposes. [1960s].

Foreign affairs

Isam al-Din Hifni Nasif and the Hifni Nasif family

15-17. Clippings of newspaper articles concerning Hifni Nasif, including announcements of and reactions to his works, reviews of his books, as well as newspaper articles concerning other members of the Hifni Nasif family. 1926, 1932, 1933, 1935, 1936, 1938, 1944. 3 folders.


17. Articles on the Hifni Nasif family.
NB. Contains pictures of Isam al-Din Hifni Nasif, his father and his sister.

Trials of Isam al-Din Hifni Nasif


21. Collection of English brochures collected by Hifni Nasif, etc. N.d.