A MILITARY HISTORY OF MODERN EGYPT: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Ramadan War

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CHAPTER

Introduction

This work is meant to be a military history of Egypt and attempts to examine the Egyptian element of the waves of conquest that have passed over this strategically vital land. As such it does not go into depth in examining those who may have fought on Egypt territory but had little to do with the Egyptians themselves, such as Bernard Montgomery or Erwin Rommel. The present work is instead meant to examine the history of the Egyptian fighting man (defined as serving the ruler of Egypt, regardless of ethnic origins) and the importance of the campaigns he fought in as part of the development of a national consciousness and the vehicle for the maturation of the independence movement.

In most cases I have sought to present an Egyptian view of events, but this is often hampered by a shortage of useful documents. The military archives of Cairo’s Citadel (Egypt’s military headquarters since the eleventh century) were destroyed by fire in 1820 and later suffered from looting by the British in 1882. Unlike the European armies, whose officers and soldiers produced endless numbers of autobiographies, memoirs, and campaign narratives in the period, such practices were virtually unheard of in both the Ottoman and Egyptian armed forces until the twentieth century.

In writing this work it occurred to me that I was writing not just a military history, but also a chronicle of human cruelty and suffering. By necessity a military history must give an account not just of heroic deeds, but also of endless varieties of disease, starvation, depravity, torture, and murder, with little to redeem a seemingly endless saga of pain. Yet any visit to Egypt quickly reveals the spirit, creativity, and hope that permeate Egyptian life. Love of home and love of family are perhaps the dominant forces in the Egyptian character. These qualities, alas, find little room in this short work covering nearly five centuries of military history but should, nevertheless, be kept in mind by the reader.
Geography

Egypt is almost unique in the world in having roughly the same boundaries today as in ancient times. The ancient Egyptians divided their land territory into two regions, the “Black Land” and the “Red Land.” The Black Land consisted of the rich agricultural areas along the Nile and in the vast delta where the Nile approaches the Mediterranean Sea. Until the construction of the Aswan Dam this area was replenished each year by annual flooding of the Nile, which carried fresh deposits of soil from Central Africa and the Ethiopian hills. The delta region is also known as Lower Egypt (“Lower” because the Nile flows from south to north).

Modern Cairo is roughly located at the dividing point of Lower and Upper Egypt. The latter consists of a valley bordered by stone cliffs beyond which lies the unforgiving desert. The Nile Valley becomes quite narrow in parts as it approaches the traditional southern border of Egypt at Aswan (ancient Elephantine). This region was the homeland of both the earliest dynasties, as well as the great imperial dynasties of Thebes whose rule extended deep into the Sudan and northeast through Palestine into Syria. For nearly 3,000 years after the first political unification of the country the kings of ancient Egypt preserved the dichotomy between Lower and Upper Egypt in their titles, claiming rule of “the two lands.”

The Red Land was the desert on both sides of the Nile, a vast region feared and disliked by Egyptians of all periods. In ancient times the Western Desert was thought to be the abode of the dead, a place best avoided by the living. There are several large oases in the Western Desert, including Bahriya, Farafra, Kharga, Dakhla, and Siwa. In ancient times these isolated places were used as places of exile. The Eastern Desert was better known to the Egyptians, who crossed it to reach the Red Sea or to exploit its once generous deposits of gold.

The Sinai is the only part of Egypt in the Asian continent. Mostly desert, it is best known as the ancient bridge for trade, invasions, and pilgrimages between Africa and Asia. Its strategic importance was only multiplied by the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, which created a direct connection between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean (via the Red Sea).

Peoples of Egypt
The Copts

Christianity was brought to Egypt by the disciple St. Mark. Despite the persecutions of the Romans, Egypt’s early Christians were undeterred and eventually flourished under the Byzantine kings. After the Arab
invasion there was a gradual conversion of most Copts to Islam. Today they compose 10 percent of the population (officially), though their numbers may be significantly higher. They can be found in large concentrations in Upper Egypt. The Coptic language is now used only in the liturgy.
The Arabs

The Arabs arrived in the seventh century, bringing a language, a culture, and a religion that have proven remarkably capable of assimilating subject populations everywhere they have been introduced. Many of these nomadic warriors settled in the rich agricultural lands along the Nile. A number of tribes preserved the nomadic ways of their ancestors. Known collectively as Bedouin, they may be found in the Sinai, in the Eastern Desert, and in the northern part of the Western Desert. Other Arabs settled in the lush agricultural lands along the Nile and in the Delta region. While spreading Arab culture and the Arabic language, they gradually absorbed most of the Coptic population. The resulting class of peasant farmers formed the backbone of the country and were known as the fellahin. Today the vast majority of Egyptians identify themselves as Arabs regardless of their actual ethnic origins.

The Nubians

Egypt’s small Nubian community is found at the southern reaches of the country, from slightly north of Aswan to the Aswan Dam. Many were resettled there after the small part of Lower Nubia within Egypt’s borders was submerged after the building of the dam in 1971. The bulk of Nubian territory today is found in the Sudan south of Wadi Halfa. A large number of Nubians may be found in Cairo and elsewhere in Egypt, where their honesty and resolution have made them valued employees in a number of professions. Many Egyptians, especially in Upper Egypt, are of part Nubian descent.

Berbers

The Berbers are the old native race of North Africa, controlling the Mediterranean coast, its hinterland, and much of the Sahara west of Egypt prior to the Arab invasion that began in the seventh century. In the ancient period they may be identified with the Libyans, who were known to the Egyptians as Tjenehu (or Tjemehu) and later as the Meshwesh. Today Berbers may still be found along Egypt’s western Mediterranean coast and in the Western Oases, particularly Siwa. For several centuries prior to the nineteenth century the Hawwara Berbers dominated Upper Egypt but have since been absorbed into the Arab culture.

The “Ottoman” Peoples

Egypt was also home to a politically and socially dominant Ottoman class after 1517. Using Turkish as a common language, this group
included Turks, Kurds, Circassians, Laz, Armenians, Bosnians, and other representatives of the multiethnic Ottoman Empire. Much diminished in importance by the rise of Arab nationalism in Egypt, this group has since largely been absorbed into the greater population. Greeks also formed a significant merchant class until Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser’s nationalization program. The Greek community has always been strong in Alexandria, and some of its more enterprising members followed Egyptian troops as far as South Sudan and west into Darfur.

Egypt’s wealth, lifestyle, and strategic importance have always attracted a disproportionate number of mercenaries, adventurers, and idealists. Some soldiers exploit their times, others are victims of it. The reader will encounter many of both types in the following pages.
A Land Born in Warfare: The Archaic Period: 2920–2575 B.C.

The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt appears to have been carried out by military means, with the manpower of subdued regions added to the conqueror’s army. The king probably led his men into battle, and the names of these early monarchs, such as Cobra, Scorpion, Fighter, Catfish, etc., all seem to point to martial vigor as the dominant characteristic of a successful leader.

Most of our knowledge of warfare in this early period comes from art. Scenes from this period show men fighting with knives, clubs, and maces while wearing little more than a loincloth and occasionally a headdress. Chiefs and early kings are depicted smiting their humbled enemies by holding their hair while an upraised arm holds a mace to deliver the deathblow. It is a pose meant to impress and terrify, and its representation lasted throughout ancient Egypt. Even naval warfare is depicted in one example that shows two fleets of differently constructed ships passing each other on a body of water (presumably the Nile) littered with bodies.

The Old Kingdom: 2575–2134 B.C.

In the Old Kingdom Egypt was so vastly superior in strength to its neighbors that there was little in the way of external threats. The regular army was small at first, but could be easily supplemented by levies. A fortress was built at Buhen at the Second Cataract in Lower Nubia. The fort served both as a trading post and a starting point for raids into the interior. The army was also sent on punitive expeditions against the Bedawi nomads of the Sinai Desert, who opposed Egyptian mining operations there.
The same remarkable organizational skills that enabled the construction of the Pyramids of Giza seems to have been applied to the military, as the army began mounting large-scale strikes into Palestine (Canaan) and Syria. Tomb art depicts assaults on walled cities of the region. The main weapons of the Egyptian soldiers of the time appear to be the stone-headed mace and the bow and arrow (which still used flint arrowheads). They wore little more than a short kilt.

The Nubians of this time already had a reputation as formidable archers; this skill made them both dangerous in warfare and valuable as recruits in later periods. In the Old Kingdom Nubian mercenaries hired themselves out as guards for the Egyptian caravans running south into the Sudanese interior. With the weakening of the state in the sixth (and last) dynasty of the Old Kingdom, Buhen and other Egyptian holdings in Lower Nubia were lost.

**The First Intermediate Period: 2134–2040 B.C.**

With the collapse of the Old Kingdom Egypt entered into a terrible era known rather mundanely as “The First Intermediate Period.” The Egyptian state had shattered into dozens of tiny statelets (“nomes”) ruled by warlords known as “nomarchs.” The cultural and intellectual pursuits of Egyptian civilization were set aside for a century while the Egyptians battled each other for dominance. The instability and demand for skilled soldiers created a market for mercenaries that was met by the Nubians.

The rulers of Herakleopolis (who styled themselves as the true inheritors of the Egyptian state) attempted to expand their territory within Egypt, but their attempts to spread south were met by the determined resistance of the Theban nome. Fighting raged between the rival nomes until the Theban Mentuhotpe II defeated Herakleopolis and reunited the kingdom of Egypt.

**Imperial Egypt: The Middle Kingdom: 2040–1640 B.C.**

In the Middle Kingdom Egypt returned to a policy of southward expansion. Enormous forts were built in Lower Nubia to consolidate Egyptian rule and secure trade along the Nile. One of these forts was named “Repelling the Medjay,” which suggests its purpose was to hold off the Medjay people of the Nubian Desert. Military reports indicate that the garrisons also included large numbers of Medjay, part of a traditional colonial practice of raising local troops to govern subject peoples. There is strong evidence that the Medjay may be the ancestors of the ferocious Beja warriors of east Sudan who broke a British square in the nineteenth century.
A series of fortresses known as “The Wall of the Prince” was built along the eastern frontier. A port was also built on the Red Sea coast to enable naval expeditions to ancient Punt (somewhere in the region of Eritrea or Somalia). It was the beginning of a long struggle by Egypt to make the Red Sea an “Egyptian lake.”

Depictions of Egyptian troops suggest that military drill and marching in formation existed at this time. The Egyptian soldier of this period carried a large shield of leather and wood, small breastplates held by leather straps, and a battle-ax or spear. Scenes of battle from the tombs at Beni Hassan depict hand-to-hand combat, the use of bows and arrows, and the slaughter of prisoners. Libyan mercenaries were also commonly used at this time.


As the Middle Kingdom declined an Asiatic people known as the Hyksos seized control in the Delta and moved south up the Nile as far as Thebes. It was less an invasion than a gradual infiltration—some Hyksos even appear to have been employed in the garrisons of the Wall of the Prince.

The Hyksos introduced an early version of the chariot to Egypt, though it was relatively heavy and not especially maneuverable. The Egyptians modified the vehicle for local use, making it lighter (for use in sand) and stronger through the use of metal in areas of stress. New tactics were devised for this lighter version of the chariot, which was incapable of smashing into infantry formations like the heavy Hittite model. The mobile Egyptian chariot could race around the battlefield to cover troop movements, launch quick attacks, or come up behind enemy chariot charges to cut them off. Once the enemy was defeated the fast chariots were ideal platforms for the slaughter of a fleeing enemy. In battle Egyptian chariots were usually manned by a crew of two, a driver and a weapons man armed with spears and a bow and arrow. As many as three “chariot runners” accompanied each chariot to finish off the wounded or to rescue the charioteer if necessary.

Imperial Egypt: The New Kingdom: 1550–1070 B.C.

When the Thebans embarked on a campaign to drive out the Hyksos, they employed the Medjay as an elite force of scouts and shock troops. The development of a corps of professional soldiers gained momentum as the Theban dynasties of the New Kingdom began a new period of imperial expansion. Divisions of 5,000 men were created, each named
after a major Egyptian god. Large numbers of Libyan and Nubian mercenaries reinforced the Egyptians.

In the east the Egyptian army reached the Euphrates River; in the south they penetrated as far as the Fourth Cataract. Expansion brought the Egyptians into conflict with the mighty Hittite Empire of Anatolia. The two fought to a draw at the Battle of Kadesh. In the later years of the New Kingdom vast battles were fought against the Libyans and the “Sea Peoples,” raiders from the Aegean Sea and Asia Minor. Prisoners were pressed into the Egyptian army and navy.

Libyans, Egyptians, and Nubians: The Third Intermediate Period (TIP): 1070-712 B.C.

With the collapse of the New Kingdom the Libyans finally took most of the Delta region, where they established the 22nd dynasty of Egypt. Through this period of political instability several dynasties ruled simultaneously in different parts of Egypt. Near the end of the TIP King Piye led the powerful army of the Egyptianized Kushite Empire north from Nubia into Egypt. His mission was to reunite Upper and Lower Egypt under his rule in the name of Amun, Egypt’s chief god.

The chariot began to fall out of use as a battlefield weapon at this time, due to the successful breeding of horses that could easily carry a man for long distances. Mounted soldiers proved much cheaper and far more mobile than a chariot force. For the Egyptians cavalry also allowed frontal charges into massed infantry, which the light Egyptian chariots were incapable of doing. Piye made extensive use of cavalry in his conquest of Egypt.

The Late Period: 712–332 B.C.

The Nubian kings ruled an immense empire from the Mediterranean coast deep into the Sudan. They were no match for the military machine of the Assyrian Empire, however. Assyrian invasions in 671 and 663 B.C. drove the Nubians back into the Sudan, where their African/Egyptian kingdom continued building pyramids and worshipping Amun until the fourth century A.D.

The Assyrians did not stay, allowing the Egyptian Kings of Sais to assert control. The Saïtes depended heavily on Carian, Greek, and Phoenician mercenaries to carry out military campaigns in Nubia and Asia Minor. It was the beginning of a Greek presence in Egypt that would eventually dominate the country. In the meantime the Persians invaded in 525 B.C., adding Egypt to their empire. The Egyptians forced them out for 60 years, but they returned, ending the rule of Nectanebo II in 343 B.C. Nectanebo was the last Egyptian to rule in Egypt until 1952, 2,295 years later.
The Greek and Roman Empires: 332 B.C.–395 A.D.

The Persians were ejected from Egypt with the arrival of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. When Alexander died in 323 B.C., his empire was divided among his Macedonian generals. Egypt went to General Ptolemy, who created a new royal dynasty known simply as the Ptolemies in 305 B.C. (Dynasty 31).

Despite adopting the titulary and regalia of the pharaohs, the Ptolemaic kings were very much foreign rulers. They could not speak or read Egyptian, they ruled from the new capital of Alexandria (reflecting their focus on the Mediterranean rather than on the Nile), and the armies they used to occupy the country were almost entirely Greek and Macedonian. Loyal Greek troops were given land grants creating a new land-owning elite. Small numbers of Egyptians were included in the army, but were typically excluded from the officer class. A large army was maintained with a corps of African war elephants, but this did not prevent a gradual loss of territory in Syria and the Aegean to the Ptolemies’ Seleucid rivals.

In the first century B.C. the Ptolemaic dynasty began to crumble through family rivalries and civil war. The Romans used the opportunity to strip Egypt of its foreign possessions while increasingly interfering in Ptolemaic affairs. Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Mark Antony all became deeply involved in Egypt, the latter actually trying to use Egypt as a base to seize power in Rome. After the defeat of Mark Antony and his bride Cleopatra VII (the last of the Ptolemies) by the Roman general Octavius, Egypt passed under the direct control of Rome in 30 B.C.

Christian Egypt

As Christianity grew in Egypt during the second and third centuries A.D., Christians were frequently persecuted by their Roman rulers. This age of martyrdom ended only with the conversion of the Roman Empire itself in the early fourth century. The Romans improved the defenses of the country, building great fortresses at Alexandria, Syene (Aswan), and Babylon (now within the walled town of Old Cairo, just south of modern Cairo). Roman forces under Petronius traveled up the Nile to invade the northern region of the Sudanese kingdom of Meroe. With the first expedition not having the desired effect on the Meroitic kings, Petronius attacked again, this time crossing the Nubian Desert to the Meroitic capital of Napata. More a raid than a conquest, Napata was sacked before Petronius marched back to Egypt. A Roman garrison was established atop the high cliffs of Qasr Ibrim in Lower Nubia, site of an earlier Meroitic fortress. Under later Roman and Byzantine rule, Egypt slowly became a quiet backwater of the empire. Coptic men devoted themselves to monastic rather than military pursuits, with the army composed nearly entirely
of Byzantine troops and foreign mercenaries. The Egyptian Christians took no interest in their past. The Egyptian alphabet changed from hieroglyphs to simpler Greek characters (with the addition of several new letters). While this increased literacy, it made it impossible to read the texts of the past. The great monuments of antiquity were defaced, demolished, or simply abandoned to the creeping sands.

The Arab Conquest 639–641 A.D.

The Arab conquest of Egypt began in 639 A.D. and was led by the great general ‘Amr ibn al-‘As. The fortress of Babylon was taken after a long siege and Alexandria put under siege. After the death of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius in 641 A.D., resistance in Egypt began to crumble. Alexandria surrendered through negotiation and the Christian country passed into the hands of the Sunni (orthodox) Muslim Arabs. The Arabs created an open-air camp at a place called al-Fustat on the southern boundary of modern Cairo (a city which did not yet exist). There was little pressure on Egypt’s Coptic Christians to convert to Islam for the first two centuries of Arab rule, partly because they paid the additional *dhimmi* tax applied to Christians and Jews in Islamic territories.

In the late seventh century the Ummayad caliphs (661–750 A.D.) reorganized and increased taxation in Egypt, leading to a series of revolts by the Coptic peasantry. Decades of violence ruined much of the country and convinced many Copts that the future lay in conversion to Islam and the adoption of the Arabic language.

The ‘Abbasids (750–935 A.D.) ruled Egypt as a province of a fabulous empire centered on Baghdad. The Turkish general Ahmad ibn Tulun used his post of governor to break free of the divided empire of the ‘Abbasids in 868 A.D. His descendants ruled the country until 905 A.D., when the ‘Abbasids reconquered Egypt. Baghdad’s rule was tested again 20 years later when another Turkish governor declared independence and established his own short-lived dynasty, the Ikshidids.

The Fatimids: 969–1171 A.D.

The major schism in Islam was between the Shi’a, who favored a hereditary succession to the caliphate, and the majority Sunnis, who insisted on reaching a consensus on the best man of the available leaders. Tunisia became home to a powerful Shi’ite clan, the Fatimids, who successfully invaded Egypt in 969 A.D. Though their subjects were Sunni Muslims and Coptic Christians, the Fatimid reign was a prosperous period for Egypt. They were prodigious builders, erecting mosques (including the famed al-Azhar) and founding the city of al-Qahira (Cairo). The Fatimids also began the practice of importing slave troops.
With the arrival of the Crusaders, prosperous Fatimid Egypt was under threat from both Sunni Muslim and Christian armies. The Fatimids tried unsuccessfully to play one against the other. In 1168 A.D., the Crusaders advanced into the Delta, where they announced their arrival with a number of horrific massacres. Cairo was properly walled and gated for defense, but it was feared the old Arab settlement of al-Fustat might provide a base for a Crusader siege. Al-Fustat was evacuated and burned, its site ignominiously used in later years as a rubbish tip. In the last years of Fatimid rule the army was dominated by Nubians and other Sudanese, with the sultan protected by a personal bodyguard of Nubian mercenaries.

The Ayyubids: 1171–1260 A.D.

When the last Fatimid caliph died, Salah al-Din (1171–1193 A.D.) seized power in Egypt, but pledged allegiance to the ‘Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, returning Egypt to the Sunni fold. The new ruler spent little time in Egypt, campaigning in Syria and northern Iraq before turning on the Crusader kingdom in 1187 A.D. In two years the Kurdish general established his fame by driving the Crusaders out of Jerusalem and most of their other possessions, isolating them in the fortified city of Acre. Europe responded with the Third Crusade, but after several more years of fighting, the Crusader kingdom was only partly restored. Restricted to a small strip near the coast, it no longer posed a threat to the Muslims.

German Crusaders took the Mediterranean port of Damietta in 1218 A.D., but held it only for three years. In 1249 A.D. French Crusaders attempted to invade Egypt with the idea of linking up with the Christians of Nubia and what they imagined to be a powerful Christian kingdom in Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia). In order to deal with the repeated Crusader intrusions into Egypt, it was felt necessary to establish a highly trained professional corps of warriors. Young boys were purchased from the Turkish tribes of Central Asia and brought to Cairo to be trained as part of a military elite. Known as Mamluks, these foreign-born troops would first save Egypt, then rule it for over three centuries.

The last decade of Ayyubid rule was marked by a struggle between the Mamluks and a series of ineffectual Ayyubids for control of the country. In 1260 A.D. an enterprising Mamluk commander named Baybars al-Bunduqdari brought an end to Ayyubid rule and founded a new Mamluk kingdom that included most of Syria.

The Citadel: Headquarters of the Egyptian Army

When Salah al-Din (1176–1182 A.D.) sought to build a fortress to solidify his rule, a spur of the Moqattam Hills that overlook Cairo was a natural site to choose. Looming over the city, the guns of the Citadel were
uniquely qualified to assert the power of the Citadel’s master. To provide
an assured source of fresh water, Crusader prisoners, with great suffering
and loss of life, dug and built a vast stone-lined well shaft with a stone
staircase 290 feet to the level of the Nile. The Citadel was built on the site
of the tomb of Sidi Sarya, a holy man of whom we know nothing, but
whose memory is commemorated by a small mosque of the early Ottoman
period.

For seven centuries the Citadel functioned as the headquarters of the
ruler and his army. Today the Citadel is a walled collection of fortifica-
tions, palaces, and mosques built over the centuries, though most of the
structure is dominated by the vast clearances and rebuilding that took
place during the nineteenth-century reign of Muhammad ‘Ali. Even today
parts of the Citadel remain off-limits to visitors as it continues in its mili-
tary role, and it is home to the Egyptian Military Museum.

The Mamluk System

The lives of the Mamluks had a certain consistency; they were born as
non-Muslims (usually Christians) outside of Dar al-Islam (Islamic terri-
tory). As boys they were either sold or seized into slavery and brought
to the slave markets of Cairo. Purchased by a Mamluk head of a house-
hold, the boy was circumcised and converted to Islam, then committed
to training in all the martial arts practiced by the Mamluks. On graduation
the youth was then manumitted (released from his slave status), though
he would usually continue to serve in the household troops of his master.
At his death all his goods and wealth reverted to the Sultan, while his chil-
dren, the Awlad al-Nas (“Sons of the People”), inherited nothing. In the
period of Sultan Qalawun (1279–1290 A.D.) it became possible for the sons
of Mamluks to join the Halqa, a military corps originally composed of the
Kurds, Mongols, Turkomans, and others who joined the Mamluks as vol-
unteer cavalry. The increasing numbers of Awlad al-Nas in the Halqa corre-
sponded with a general decline in the military effectiveness of this unit
until it was little more than a poorly paid force of guardsmen unfit for
campaign duty. In the fourteenth century the more capable of the Awlad
al-Nas were allowed to serve as Mamluk amirs and even governors of
Mamluk territories.

The success of the Mamluk system relied upon the concept of Khushda-
shiyya, which entailed respect for authority, personal loyalty to one’s mas-
ter, and a general solidarity with other Mamluks. There was no solidarity
with the people they ruled. Rules against their subjects using horses or
arms preserved a Mamluk monopoly on violence. Even if the people
could equip themselves with mounts and weapons, they stood little
chance against the highly trained Mamluk warriors. The ulama, the
religious elite of the country, were effectively co-opted by Mamluk generosity for mosques, Koranic schools, and religious foundations.

The Bahri Mamluks (1260–1382 A.D.)

The Bahri Mamluks (or “River Mamluks”) were so-called because their barracks under the Ayyubids were on the island of Roda in the Nile. The Bahri period was marked by the strict discipline retained within the Mamluk system. Austerity and devotion to duty were proclaimed as essential attributes of a Mamluk. Advancement was primarily based on a combination of merit and seniority. Under the leadership of Turkish and Mongol Sultans picked from their number, the Bahri Mamluks represent the height of Mamluk effectiveness.

In the mid-thirteenth century dark and threatening clouds loomed in the east. The vast Mongol horde was heading toward Syria and Egypt, spreading terror and destruction in its wake. The horde was led by Hulagu, the Christian grandson of Genghis Khan. The Mamluk Sultan Qutuz had Hulagu’s envoys murdered, and he set out with the proud but vastly outnumbered Mamluks of Egypt. In one of history’s most important battles, the Mamluks shattered the Mongol army at ‘Ayn Galut (near Nazareth) in 1260 A.D. Over the next 43 years the Mongols tried three more times to take Syria. Despite military help from their Georgian, Armenian, and European Crusader allies, the Mongols were forced to abandon their attempted conquest of the Mamluk kingdom.

The military reforms of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad in the early fourteenth century were a turning point in the Mamluk system. Twice deposed from his throne by Mamluk intrigues, al-Nasir tried to buy off the Mamluks after he became sultan for the third time in 1310 A.D. Wealth and promotion regardless of age or experience became the norm for the Mamluks of the royal household. Discipline deteriorated to the point that al-Nasir’s palace was at one point surrounded by Mamluks angry over a pay dispute. Again the Mamluks were indulged rather than punished, establishing a precedent for dealings with the sultan. By the end of the Bahri period, the loyalty of the Mamluks had become a marketable commodity.

The Burgi (Circassian) Mamluks (1382–1517 A.D.)

By the late fourteenth century Circassians from the north Caucasus region had become the majority in the Mamluk ranks. In 1382 A.D. they emerged from their quarters in the towers (burg-s) of the Citadel to seize power for themselves. Examination of medieval Arabic histories and genealogies show that the Circassians were often regarded in Egypt as being part of the banu al-atrak, “sons of the Turks,” i.e., part of the Turkic
race. In 1400 A.D. the hordes of Asia were again led into Syria, this time by Timurlane the Conquerer. Unspeakable slaughters were conducted in Aleppo and Damascus. The Mamluks of Sultan Faraj put up a fierce struggle, but when the sultan learned of a plot to replace him in Cairo, he abandoned Syria. Only the death of Timurlane compelled his enormous army to turn back just as Egypt was ready for the taking.

During the fifteenth century factionalism in the ranks of the Circassian Mamluks began to grow out of control at the political and the economic expense of the entire country. The worst offenders were the sultan’s own royal household, the Julban, who came to dominate the entire Mamluk system in Egypt. Discipline gradually evaporated as the lesser Mamluks discovered the ease with which they could extort the amirs by selling their support for coup attempts. The resultant indulgence in the creature comforts of Egyptian life (which were considerable) did little to promote military efficiency among the Mamluks.

With extortion, treachery, and cruelty the bywords of the Burgi administration, Egypt’s economic position began to deteriorate, pushed along by recurring drought and plagues. The biggest threat, however, was the European intrusion into the waters of the Indian Ocean, from which much of the wealth of Egypt flowed.
The violence of political succession in Egypt became almost codified under these later Mamluks: the armed clash of factions, assassination, massacre, and the inevitable looting of the city by the losers, the winners, or both. The politics of treachery was too well ingrained by the sixteenth century to allow the Mamluks to mount the vigorous defense of their territory that had twice driven the Mongol hordes back to Asia. The Mamluk sultanate was doomed by its instability and its archaic reliance on the “white arms” in an age of gunpowder. Its fall was hastened along when Mamluk swagger met Ottoman power.

In 1514 the Ottoman Empire found itself faced with a serious challenge from the Shi’ite Safavid Empire. The Safavids originated as the leaders of a Sufi order in Azerbaijan, the Safawiyya. By the middle of the fifteenth century the religious order had been restructured along military lines. The Shi’ite Sufism of the Safavids had an enormous attraction for the Turkoman tribes of eastern Anatolia, creating instability in the border regions. By the end of the fifteenth century Safavid rule extended into Iraq and Persia. The Safavids of Shah Isma’il were making inroads in eastern Anatolia, the heartland of the Ottoman Empire. When Isma’il ordered all his Shi’ite followers in Anatolia to join him in Persia, the new Ottoman sultan, Sultan Salim I (“Salim the Grim”), was compelled to take the field against this dangerous rival in the East. It was a direct challenge not just to Salim’s political authority, but his position as leader of all Sunni Islam.

Though only the third son of Sultan Bayezid, Salim had come to the throne through the insistence of the Janissaries. Salim appears to have poisoned his father days after his abdication and then executed both his brothers and many of Bayezid’s old retainers. He then turned his attention to the Safavids, leading the Ottoman army east to Chaldiran where they encountered Shah Isma’il’s army on August 23, 1514. In an attempt to avoid the Ottoman artillery in the center, Isma’il attacked both Ottoman
wings with tens of thousands of cavalrymen. The Ottoman guns were wheeled around and took a terrible toll on the Persian horsemen on one wing. Isma'il was wounded and eventually fled with the rest of his army. After the battle the sultan ordered the slaughter of every Safavid prisoner.

The Ottoman and Mamluk Armies

The sultan’s army was an imperial rather than a national formation. It relied heavily on recruits from the Balkans, drawing on troops from Albania (the most valued), Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia. Moldavia and Wallachia were exempted from the imperial levy, as were Jews, Gypsies, and townsmen. Numerous viziers (the highest civil appointment in the Ottoman Empire) came from the Balkans. Many Anatolian Greeks could be found in the senior ranks of the officer corps. Italian mercenaries dominated the artillery. At the heart of the Ottoman army was the Janissary Corps, derived entirely from Christian boys who were taken from their villages and converted to Islam before entering into intensive training as the Empire’s shock troops. The Janissary was forbidden to marry until his retirement, which might happen at age 45 if he lived that long. In preparation for conflict with the Mamluks, Sultan Salim I extended the levy of troops to Anatolia for the first time.

When news of the Ottoman victory at Chaldiran reached Cairo, it alarmed some of the more astute amirs. A modern gunpowder army like that of the Ottomans could easily deal with the massed charge of armored horsemen that was the foundation of Mamluk warfare. To match the efficiency of disciplined infantry the Mamluks could offer only the chaos of the later years of the Mamluk system. Mutiny and riot were now the defining characteristics of the Mamluks. In the absence of any major external challenges to Egypt over the previous six decades, the Mamluks occupied themselves with factional warfare. The destructiveness of their street fighting exasperated the Egyptian commercial class. Mamluks on garrison duty tended to behave like conquerors, despoiling the very communities they were supposed to defend. The severing of the Red Sea trade route through Egypt by Portuguese ships in the Indian Ocean deprived the Mamluks of their major source of revenues. The horsemen now rarely received their pay, but were still responsible for providing their own mount, armor, weapons, and retainers. Any sane man could see that this highly divided force could not take on the Ottoman sultan’s new army if it turned south. At the risk of inflaming the fellahin, there was little choice except to add a new tax to pay for the raising of a corps of infantry.

By 1515 Salim turned his attention to Mamluk-ruled Syria, under the authority of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri in Cairo. Qansuh had held the throne since 1501, a remarkable achievement considering his three
immediate predecessors had reigned only for a combined two years before each was murdered. Qansuh imported hundreds of new Mamluks to serve as his personal guard, while raising taxes to unheard-of levels. The Egyptian sultan spent lavishly on both public works and his own court.

The Battle for the Spice Trade

Much of Qansuh’s reign was spent trying to deal with Portuguese intrusions on the trade routes that brought the goods of South Asia through the Red Sea into Egypt and on into Europe through Venetian traders. Portuguese sailors were among the world’s most daring at the time. Bartholomew Diaz reached the Cape of Good Hope in 1486, and by 1498 Vasco da Gama found a new gateway to the Orient by sailing round the Cape and on into the Indian Ocean. Once there, da Gama was aided by a skilled Arab navigator, Ahmad ibn Majid. Da Gama was little known at the time, but his services in the long Portuguese war against the Muslims of Morocco brought him to the attention of the king. The savagery of that ten-year war formed a type of school for atrocities, with many of its graduates heading for the Indian Ocean in the following years. Portuguese methods developed in Morocco were applied in a campaign of terror wherever the Portuguese went. Da Gama’s voyage was a terrible two-year endurance test in which da Gama lost half his ships and most of his men, but with one stroke da Gama had turned Portugal from a regional power to a world empire. For Egypt it was a calamity.

With the route established, Portuguese warships and merchantmen began to pour into the Indian Ocean, seizing ports in East Africa, the Persian Gulf, and India. For a nation intent on establishing new trade connections, the Portuguese were remarkably intolerant, approaching their encounter with the Muslim world with all the religious fervor of a late crusade. The Muslim merchant ships of the Indian Ocean typically carried no artillery and had no iron reinforcing of the hull, making them easy targets. Qansuh was forced to take the extraordinary expense of building warships capable of challenging these intruders. The development of the two-masted, rudder-guided Portuguese caravel in the mid-fifteenth century gave the Portuguese a ship that was fast, able to use available winds, and made an excellent platform for guns.

The Portuguese declared the Asian spice trade a royal monopoly and instituted the cartaz system, in which merchant ships on the Indian Ocean were obliged to pay for licenses from the Portuguese or stand the risk of having their ships plundered and destroyed. An embargo punishable by death on releasing the navigational secrets of the Cape passage and the Indian Ocean to non-Portuguese held off other Europeans for a while.
Qansuh tried one last tactic to avoid having to build a fleet and engage in an unfamiliar sea war. Monks from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem were sent as emissaries to the pope with a simple warning: if the Portuguese intrusions into the Indian Ocean did not cease, Qansuh would order the destruction of the Christian holy sites under his protection. The Portuguese reminded the pope that a significant part of Qansuh’s dwindling revenues came from pilgrimage trade in the Holy Land. The Venetians, who were no longer receiving shipments of spice, helped provide Qansuh with ships and guns, but were otherwise occupied in wars with other Italian city-states. Neither the Mamluks nor their Egyptian subjects had any seafaring knowledge, so sailors were recruited from North Africa, while 1,500 Mamluks handled the fighting. Only coercion or bribery could induce Mamluks to set foot on the ships. Qansuh was forced to turn to the Ottoman sultan for military assistance, but his request was well received and a large shipment of artillery and war material was sent to Alexandria.

Twelve Mamluk ships set out in 1507, with Amir Husayn as admiral. The fleet headed for Diu, a strategic trading port on the northwest coast of India. Situated on an island near the tip of the Kathiawar Peninsula, Diu was part of the Muslim kingdom of Gujarat. The Mamluk fleet was warmly greeted at Diu by its governor, Malik Ayyaz, a Russian Mamluk who had found favor with the king of Gujarat. Gujarat, which traded mainly through the Red Sea and Egypt, continued to resist the Portuguese for 20 years, but at this point the king did not yet appreciate the threat and left the whole matter in the hands of Malik Ayyaz. At Diu the Mamluk fleet was joined by nearly 100 smaller vessels from the Hindu-ruled trading port of Calicut (in the region of Malabar, on the south Indian coast), which had already come under Portuguese attack. These light crafts were armed with small cannons made in Calicut by two deserters from da Gama’s expedition. The combined fleet attacked and destroyed a Portuguese fleet near Bombay, killing its commander, Lourenço de Almeida, son of the Portuguese viceroy in India. Lourenço was caught in the port by a much larger force, but he refused the advice of his captains to cut and run. Hit in the thigh by a cannon ball, Lourenço had himself strapped to the mast to continue directing the fighting, but was struck fatally by another cannon ball. With their flagship sinking, the surviving Portuguese ships fled.

Afonso de Albuquerque was sent out to India in 1506 with a fleet and orders to take control of Portugal’s Indian possessions, a delicate task since they had been promised to de Almeida’s care for life. Another veteran of Portugal’s wars in Morocco, de Albuquerque had a passionate hatred of Muslims. At one point he even suggested raiding Madina and stealing the body of the Prophet Muhammad. Perhaps in no rush to confront de Almeida, de Albuquerque spent a year raiding and terrorizing
ports in the Horn of Africa and along the Arabian coastline. Cities went up in flames, treasure was extracted by torture, and jewelry was collected by cutting off the ears, noses, and fingers of Muslim women. Men who were captured by the Portuguese often suffered the loss of their left hands. Few towns had any defense against the powerful Portuguese guns. Hormuz, which controlled access to the Persian Gulf, was taken in 1506 when de Albuquerque destroyed a larger Muslim fleet. A Persian-aided revolt drove out the Portuguese a year later. De Almeida, who had no desire to be replaced, imprisoned de Albuquerque shortly after he reached India. After confirmation of his dismissal arrived, de Almeida left for home but was killed on the way by enraged villagers on the African coast after his men kidnapped a number of children.

Persian ships now joined the Mamluk fleet, but their combined forces were shattered off the Gujarati port of Diu in a bitter battle in 1509. In this pivotal battle for control of the Indian Ocean, de Almeida caught the Muslim ships at anchor and ran his own ships up and down the Muslim line, shattering their resistance with his heavy guns. Malik Ayyaz, who had been in secret communication with the Portuguese, now betrayed his master and the agreement he had made with the Mamluks by standing aloof through the entire battle, offering no assistance to the Muslim forces. When the Portuguese boarded the Mamluk flagship, they found only 22 men alive, all of whom were mortally wounded. Many of the captives were taken by ship to towns along the Indian coast where they were taken ashore to be horribly murdered and mutilated for the edification of the native population.

Shortly after the Muslim disaster at Diu, Venice suffered a total defeat in its Italian war. The Portuguese ships now sailed from port to port on the Indian coast, demanding submission, and opening up with their guns when it was not forthcoming. De Albuquerque seized Goa from the sultan of Bijapur in 1510, and Malacca in the Malay Peninsula (which controlled the eastern approach to the Indian Ocean) was captured in 1511. Timor was soon added to the rapidly growing Portuguese Empire that was now spilling out into the Pacific. Qansuh again requested the help of the Ottoman sultan in building a new fleet at Suez in 1509. By 1514 Ottoman Admiral Salman Ra’is was in Suez directing the work of 2,000 Ottoman shipbuilders. The sultan in Istanbul had nearly taken over the entire project at enormous cost, but it appears to have been judged strategically useful to have an Ottoman military presence in Egypt, as well as be involved in the direction of any Mamluk fleet.

With the Muslim navies driven from the ocean, the Portuguese systematically destroyed every Muslim merchant ship they came across, including those filled with pilgrims on their way to Mecca. In 1513 the Portuguese attempted to seal control of the bottleneck entrance to the Red Sea by seizing Kamaran Island. De Albuquerque tried but failed to
take Aden, having to satisfy himself with a bombardment. The Portuguese instituted an annual blockade of the entrance to the Red Sea during the trading season. When Qansuh’s fleet finally left Suez in May 1515, it was led by Admiral Salman Ra’is and had more Ottoman than Mamluk personnel. The expedition had some temporary success and managed to overthrow the ruler of Yemen on its way, establishing Mamluk control in this region for the first time. De Albuquerque responded by retaking Hormuz in the Persian Gulf and raiding the Muslim ports in East Africa, effectively eliminating Arab and Persian trade in the region.

The Portuguese were intent on establishing long-term control of the Indian Ocean’s trade. They knew other Europeans would follow them, so they needed to act quickly. Solid fortifications were built at every point seized (many of which can still be seen today), though their garrisons often expired from disease shortly after their completion. Viceroy de Albuquerque encouraged his men to intermarry with Indian women to create a new race of Catholic, Portuguese speakers ready to form permanent garrisons for Portugal in the East. The Inquisition was brought along to ensure orthodoxy and to persecute the “heretical” Syrian Christians resident in India’s coastal cities for centuries.

Portuguese activities in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea marked the end of Egypt as one of the world’s major nations. The fabulous wealth provided by control of the Eastern trade routes was gone. For nearly three centuries Egypt would fade into the background, a backwater barely noticed even in Istanbul. Portugal would enjoy her domination of the Indian Ocean until the seventeenth century, by which time the more powerful seafaring European nations of France, Holland, and Britain began to carve out new empires in Asia. The eastern trade route would eventually revert back to Egypt in the late nineteenth century, but instead of bringing riches it brought only ruin.

Salim the Grim Conquers the Mamluks

Sultan Salim trained his army for what seemed an inevitable conflict with the disorganized but skilled Mamluk warriors. The Safavids were still a problem to Salim in the east, and the hostile Mamluk regime to the south threatened his flank. The sultan therefore decided to deal with the Mamluks first. In Cairo Qansuh had to buy off a revolt by young Mamluks, selling palace treasures and begging the amirs for donations. When Qansuh addressed the mutineers, he was met with stones and insults. Now a man in his late seventies, Qansuh suffered greatly through these humiliations. He was also assailed by debilitating pain from one of Egypt’s many diseases of the eyes, but was still renowned for his strength and continued to play polo with his Mamluks.
The Mamluks failed to negotiate in good faith, eventually moving the whole of their army (save a small garrison in Cairo) up to the north Syrian city of Aleppo. The governor of Aleppo, Kha’irbay Mulbai, had secretly gone over to the Ottoman side, but managed to conceal his treachery from Qansuh. The Ottomans brought an end to negotiations when they shaved the head and beard of the Mamluk negotiator and sent him home on a lame mule. Salim brought his army over the mountains into the Syrian plain, stopping several miles outside Aleppo in late August 1516. At Marj Dabiq the Ottoman army was brought in line against a Mamluk force that had brought the black shadow of the plague with them from Cairo. The Mamluks were doubly weakened by their own prejudices. Having finally accepted the possibility that gunpowder might be usefully employed in warfare, the Mamluk officers continued to take an active disinterest in the tactical changes that firepower introduced. That artillery could and must have some mobility on the battlefield never occurred to them; instead the guns were placed in trenches from which they could be removed only with difficulty. The Mamluks themselves still did not carry firearms. Instead they brought a corps of black African slaves and Maghribis (North Africans of Arab and Berber descent) equipped with arquebuses (matchlock-type weapons). Shortly after their formation in 1497 the African slave troops were nearly destroyed in an attack by the sultan’s own Mamluks at the Cairo Citadel. At Marj Dabiq these troops were far outnumbered by Ottoman soldiers well trained in the use of firearms.

Salim formed up his army with his Janissaries in the center, flanked by batteries of artillery. A contemporary account mentions Ottoman use of heavy guns mounted on horse-drawn wagons. Cavalry formed the wings. Qansuh and the caliph commanded the Mamluk center, with Amir Sibay on the left wing and the traitor Kha’irbay on the right. Amir Sudun al-Ajami, the Mamluk commander in chief, led a thundering charge of Mamluks. The Ottoman left flank began to collapse under the fury of the attack, threatening the rest of the army. The Mamluks now began a series of ferocious dashes against the center, almost forcing Salim to abandon the field, but the muskets of the Janissary infantry and the Ottoman artillery drove them back repeatedly. Amir Sudun and Amir Sibay were killed, and Kha’irbay suddenly led his Mamluks off the battlefield. When the Mamluk charge at last wavered, Salim ordered his men forward, where they easily captured the immobile Mamluk guns.

In the midst of this mayhem, the Mamluks’ leader Qansuh died while trying to rally his men. The exact circumstances of his death are uncertain; different sources claim he was slain by the enemy, had a stroke, suffered a fatal hernia attack, or was felled by apoplexy. Qansuh’s head was taken to the sultan as the remaining Mamluk army collapsed. The outcome of the battle was predictable—the Mamluks had not had enough time to train musket-carrying infantry or to integrate such units into Mamluk tactics.
The use of artillery remained poorly understood. When faced with a crisis the Mamluks resorted to the only tactic they had any faith in—the all-or-nothing charge of armored horsemen.

Kha’irbay closed the city gates of Aleppo against his former comrades, forcing the survivors to continue on to Damascus where they began to quarrel over the succession. Demonstrating their utter failure to grasp the changing battlefield, some Mamluks were outraged that the Ottomans had used firearms against fellow Muslims.

Salim’s army reached Damascus on October 10, but was unable to take the city until December 27, 1516. The weather had turned bad, with unusual cold and snowfall, but Salim spent only two weeks at Damascus before pressing on to Cairo. Tumanbay, Qansuh’s eventual successor as leader of the Mamluks, was highly capable and could not be allowed time to organize the feuding Mamluk lords. As their camels and horses died in the unfamiliar cold, Salim’s men were also beset by constant raids from the Bedouin, who maintained a proprietary regard for any property passing through their lands. A Mamluk force under the renegade Jan Berdy (Janbardi al-Ghazali) tried but failed to stop Salim’s approach in Gaza. Berdy returned under suspicion of having sold the victory to the sultan, but was ready to blame the defeat on the cowardice of his troops. Envoys arrived in Cairo from Salim asking for little more than nominal submission from Tumanbay (Salim’s image on the coinage and the mention of his name as sultan in the Friday prayers, a traditional acknowledgement of sovereignty in the Muslim world) in exchange for turning the Ottoman army back from Egypt. Considering the state of his own army, Tumanbay thought the terms entirely reasonable, but hotter heads in his council prevailed. The Mamluks replied to Salim’s terms with a grave insult by executing the envoys.

Now determined to eliminate the Mamluks, Salim arrived outside Cairo in only 13 days. Some Mamluks saw which way the wind was blowing and sneaked off to Salim’s camp, where they eagerly divulged the defenses of the Egyptian capital. A formidable array of stake-lined ditches covered by artillery was built at Radiniyya on the approach to Cairo. Heavy guns collected from various places in Egypt were placed behind stone walls. In what seems to have finally been some appreciation of the need for mobility on the battlefield, over 100 ox-drawn wagons were prepared to carry smaller copper guns. On the day of battle the well-informed Ottomans avoided a frontal assault on Tumanbay’s carefully prepared defenses. Part of the Ottoman army circled a mountain that formed one flank of the defenses and suddenly emerged in the Mamluk rear. With all their plans come to naught, the Mamluk cavalry attacked the wings of the Ottoman army in their traditional fashion, but without much effect against the firepower of the infantry. Tumanbay’s guns opened up on the distant Ottoman center, but the guns were old and rusty.
and began to burst when fired. Tumanbay smashed his way through the Ottoman lines with a small group of Mamluks, reaching Salim’s tent before being forced to turn back. The Italians working the Ottoman artillery began to lay down a murderous fire that sent the Mamluks reeling. The Bedouin attached to Tumanbay’s army melted into the desert while his soldiers fled to Cairo. The whole battle was over in just more than an hour.

Once back in Cairo, Tumanbay rallied his troops and began preparing the streets of the city for an Ottoman attack. Barricades were built, while the narrow streets were filled with concealed pits containing sharpened stakes. Thousands of black slaves received their freedom in exchange for helping in the city’s defense. The Janissaries began the attack by taking the Citadel, where the Circassian Mamluks were massacred. Once inside the city, Salim’s Janissaries picked their way through the streets slowly, all the time exposed to a hail of rocks and other objects hurled by women and children from the upper stories of their dwellings. Enraged by the resistance they now fell upon every house, slaughtering everyone they came across. For three days the Janissaries went wild, inflicting a terrible retribution on the Cairenes.

Tumanbay, however, was far from defeated. He rallied the dispersed Mamluks and convinced the Bedouin to join his cause. When the bulk of the Ottoman army was withdrawn from the city after three days of rioting, Tumanbay and his followers retook Cairo. They held the city for one day, just long enough to have Tumanbay’s name defiantly read out in the Friday prayers. When the mass of the Ottoman army returned, the Mamluks scattered. Tumanbay reached Giza on the west side of the Nile by crossing a bridge of boats. While Tumanbay fled south to Upper Egypt, the other Mamluks were pursued ruthlessly by the Ottoman troops. Their heads were collected by the hundreds and sent on to the Citadel. Only Jan Berdy’s submission was accepted by the sultan. This might seem to confirm Berdy’s treachery at Gaza, except that Berdy was highly visible in the thickest fighting at Radiniyya.

Tumanbay began to realize that his small group of Mamluks and Bedouin might hold Upper Egypt for a while, but would never be able to retake Cairo. He thus made approaches to the Ottomans, suggesting that he might now recognize the sovereignty of the sultan. Envoys were sent from Cairo to discuss terms, but in a senseless repetition of the act that had been their downfall the Mamluk amirs again murdered the envoys over Tumanbay’s objections. With the rage of the twice scorned, Salim now ordered the execution of 57 Mamluk amirs held in the cells of the Citadel.

Tumanbay now returned to Giza with his close ally Shadibay. The Ottomans crossed the Nile on a boat bridge and met Tumanbay’s army beneath the Pyramids. The battle was fought over two days, but in the
end Tumanbay was again defeated and on the run. He was given refuge by a Bedouin shaykh who then betrayed him to the Ottomans. Brought before Sultan Salim in chains, Tumanbay made such a spirited defense of his right to defend Egypt from foreign aggression that Salim tempered his anger toward him. As Kha’irbay and Jan Berdy pointed out, however, the unrest in Egypt was bound to continue so long as Tumanbay remained alive. Salim delayed his execution until April when he was hanged in front of the Zuwaila Gate of Cairo, his body left suspended for three days. Tumanbay’s body was eventually laid to rest in the tomb of Qansuh, which was unoccupied after Qansuh’s corpse was abandoned on the battlefield. A few Circassian Mamluks waited several years until they were once more in positions of power before taking revenge for Tumanbay’s death. The shaykh and his followers responsible for the betrayal were invited to a Mamluk drinking party where they were plied with drinks before the Circassians fell on them with knives.

Transfer of the Caliphate

Kha’irbay was rewarded for his betrayal at Aleppo by being made the new governor of Egypt, though his son was carried off to Istanbul as a hostage. Jan Berdy was made governor of Syria, but rose in revolt after he heard of Salim’s death in 1520. Within a few months the rebel lay dead on a battlefield outside Damascus, his men routed by a superior Ottoman army. After a short residence at the Citadel, Salim set out for Istanbul with all the riches he could seize on a train of 1,000 camels, including all the marble from Qansuh’s tomb and memorial madrasa. One of the most important trophies was a large black wool banner, which was believed to be the Prophet’s own. Other treasures included the robe of the Prophet, the sword of Caliph ‘Umar, and several hairs from the beard of the Prophet. The last ‘Abbasid caliph, al-Mutawakkil, was taken to Istanbul as well, but his fate after this point is uncertain. According to the version favored by the Ottomans, the caliph willingly turned his title over to the sultan. Other sources report he spent several years in prison until he agreed to relinquish his title.

The title “caliph” comes from the early caliphs, the four immediate successors of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. For many Muslims this is regarded as a model period, when Muslims lived in strict accordance with Islam as the Prophet originally gave it. Though the caliph embodied both political and spiritual authority, he was at all times the guardian of Islam rather than its interpreter. The caliph in no way performed the intercessionary role of a pope, but rather acted as the administrator of Muslim lands, establishing government, providing shari’a law and the judges and security forces to enforce it, as well as holding the
important power of declaring holy war on behalf of the Islamic community. The caliph was not a religious leader, but rather the leader of the religious community.

By the time Baghdad was destroyed by the Mongols in 1256, the institution was no longer the unifying force it had once been for Muslims. A much weakened caliphate was established in Cairo by 'Abbasid refugees. The last of these Mamluk-dominated rulers was taken to Constantinople in 1517 after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt. The Ottoman sultans took over the title, but it was greatly diminished in importance by this point. The Ottoman sultans did not meet a main requirement of the office—the caliph must be a descendant of the Quraysh, the Arabian tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. This did not prevent some enterprising genealogists from creating lineages that proved the Turkish sultan was actually a Qurayshi Arab. The institution was fairly degraded by the time of Salim's invasion of Egypt and was rarely claimed by the Ottoman sultans until their prestige began to diminish in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The Ottoman Empire was now in its ascendancy. The conquest of Egypt laid open control of the Haramayn (the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Madina) to the Ottoman sultan. The Mamluk ruler of Yemen soon transferred his allegiance to the sultan, and the Muslim lands along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa gradually fell under Ottoman control. Swept from power, the Mamluks were far from finished as an institution in Egypt. For the next three centuries they would constantly challenge the authority of the Ottoman governors of Egypt, so that by the time that Napoleon Bonaparte attempted their extermination they were once more the ruling group, with only nominal acknowledgment of Ottoman sovereignty. Even after this great setback, the institution continued in a more discreet form, providing officers for the Egyptian army from slaves purchased in the Caucasus region. Only the Russian conquest of the traditional Mamluk recruiting areas in the mid-nineteenth century brought an end to the Egyptian Mamluks.

Mamluks and Janissaries in Egypt

There were, of course, many Mamluks who had escaped the slaughter in Cairo. In the first years of Ottoman rule the remaining Mamluks were hunted down and killed without exception. This might well have been the end of the Mamluks as an institution, but help came from an unlikely source. Kha'irbay appealed personally to Salim to end the killings because they were a waste of experienced soldiers who could easily be brought into the sultan's service. His appeal was granted, and the sight of arrogant Mamluks riding armed through the streets once again greeted the Egyptian citizenry who had cheered their overthrow.
Many Mamluks still dreamed of evicting the Ottomans and resuming their unchallenged rule of Egypt. Nothing could be done under the governorship of Kha’irbay (who understood the Mamluk attitude well, being a Mamluk himself), but his death in 1522 encouraged some Mamluks to rebel. The new governor, Mustafa Pasha, was the brother-in-law of Sultan Sulayman (“the Magnificent”). The leaders of the revolt were Janim al-Sayfi and Inal, governors of Middle Egypt and the western Delta, respectively. A prominent envoy was sent to Inal with an amnesty before things got out of control, but a defiant Inal had the man beheaded. Fearing that some of his Mamluks might be tempted to join the rebels, Mustafa Pasha assembled a force solely from his Ottoman troops and destroyed the rebels and their Bedouin allies in battle, killing Janim al-Sayfi. As many as 500 Mamluks lost their life in this revolt, but Inal managed to flee to Gaza, never to be heard from again.

Revolt of Ahmad Pasha: 1523–1524

The third Ottoman governor of Egypt was a Circassian, Ahmad Pasha. Known to history as Ahmad al-Kha’in (“the Traitor”), Ahmad appears to have had a hidden agenda from the beginning of his rule in August 1823. The Istanbul-based Ahmad was unhappy with his appointment, having believed himself to be next in line for the grand viziership. It was certainly an odd choice by the sultan to send a bitter Circassian to rule over the still dangerous and rebellious Circassian Mamluks in Egypt. There may be some truth to the story that the sultan sent orders to the Janissaries in Cairo to murder Ahmad on his arrival; the plot was foiled when Ahmad intercepted the instructions en route. It was not long before Ahmad began executions of high-ranking civil and military officials. After Ahmad had collected all the muskets belonging to the Janissaries, he killed their commander. The new governor behaved as if he had been sent to rescue the Mamluks, reminding them of their common Circassian origin and pardoning their offenses.

Ahmad no doubt felt that he had little time to realize his personal ambitions before troops from Istanbul arrived to remove his head, so he moved quickly. With the support of some of the Mamluks, he proclaimed himself sultan and ordered his name to be cited in the Friday prayers and his image to be stamped on the coinage. The Janissaries shut themselves up in Cairo’s Citadel in defiance of Ahmad’s treason. They might have held out for some time, but the Mamluks either knew or heard about a secret tunnel into the Citadel. They burst in and massacred the Janissaries. Ahmad now appeared to control Egypt, but his power base of rebellious Mamluks was small and unreliable. A loyalist countercoup was mounted by two Ottoman officials and a loyal Mamluk officer. Ahmad narrowly
escaped assassination in a bathhouse by fleeing across Cairo’s rooftops to the Eastern Desert, where he took refuge with Arab allies. Resourceful, if untrustworthy, Ahmad built a new following of Bedouin and Circassians in the desert. Two thousand men and eight cannons were sent from Cairo to eliminate the rebels. With rumors of further Ottoman troops on the way, Ahmad’s Arab allies abandoned him, followed by the remaining Circassians. Now alone, the would-be sultan was captured and executed on March 6, 1524.

Reorganization of the Army

Ahmad Pasha’s rebellion and the unsettled state of the country made the need for reforms obvious in Istanbul. Sulayman Pasha’s son-in-law, the Grand Vizier Ibrahim Pasha, was sent to Egypt in 1525 to carry out a reorganization of the administration and the army. The Qanun Nama (code of law) was created, which included a detailed restructuring of the army, as well as regulations prohibiting the extortion of the Egyptian fellahin. The Mamluks were formed into military units separate (with one exception) from the Janissaries and the Sipahis (the feudal horsemen who formed the bulk of the Ottoman cavalry). The Qanun Nama explicitly prohibited the recruitment of Egyptian fellahin. When the army was reorganized, it consisted of seven distinct corps (ojak-s):

- **Mustahfizan:** Garrison Janissaries
- **Azaban:** Anatolian Infantry
- **Gönlülliyân:** Sipahi Cavalry
- **Tüfenkjiyan:** Sipahi Cavalry armed with firearms
- **Mutafarriqa:** The Viceroy’s Bodyguard (a mixed Ottoman/Mamluk unit of infantry and cavalry)
- **Chavushan:** A small group of state envoys
- **Čerakise:** Circassian Cavalry (ex-Mamluks), led by an Ottoman

The postconquest Ottoman garrison in Egypt consisted of only about 10,000 men. Egypt was under no immediate threat, so garrison life consisted largely of enforcing the governor’s rule and protecting the caravan of pilgrims on their way to Mecca. The army at this time was well funded through taxation and customs duties. It was understood in Istanbul that much of the perpetual rebelliousness of the Mamluks before the conquest of 1517 was due to unpaid wages, so a standing order was issued requiring prompt payment of all Mamluk salaries. All the costs of the occupation were raised from the Egyptians rather than sent from Istanbul. For the Ottoman troops garrison duty in Egypt was as close to paradise on earth as a soldier might ever come. The attractions of a virtually unlimited supply of women, alcohol, hashish, and young boys in a pleasant climate
made desertion a major problem whenever it was necessary to send Ottoman troops from Egypt to other parts of the Empire.

**Naval Expedition to the Indian Ocean: 1538**

The Portuguese were still busy with their efforts to control the Indian Ocean. The Muslim ruler of Gujarat, Sultan Bahadur, appealed to the Ottoman sultan for assistance after the Portuguese took the trading port of Diu. Sulayman Pasha, the Egyptian viceroy, was charged with sending a fleet to assist the Gujaratis in 1538. Sulayman was a Hungarian eunuch who was once described as “so hideous, and of so savage a disposition, as to have resembled a beast rather than a man.” The fleet stopped to seize the port of Aden in southern Yemen, denying it to the Portuguese who had long sought to control it. When he landed at Aden, Sulayman presented robes of honor to the local ruler and his entourage before having them executed. When the Egyptians reached Diu four months later, Sultan Bahadur was dead and supplies could not be obtained from his successor. A perfunctory 20-day siege of Diu was deemed enough to justify the trip and the Egyptian fleet returned home. The Portuguese would occupy Diu until 1961.

**Occupation of Nubia and the African Coast: 1517–1550**

Few military campaigns are as obscure and undocumented as the Ottoman conquest of Lower Nubia. It occurred somewhere between 1517 and 1550. The few references to the campaign in oral traditions probably telescope a long period of gradual expansion southward. Our most complete account comes from oral traditions collected in Nubia in 1813 by the explorer John Lewis Burckhardt. Like most oral histories, it comes without dates. According to Burckhardt’s account, one of two warring Arab tribes in Lower Nubia invited the intervention of the Ottoman sultan, who sent Ottoman troops into Nubia in response. Unfortunately the sultan mentioned is Sultan Salim, which would place the campaign improbably early, somewhere between 1517 and 1520. A Turkish account places the occupation of Sai Island (in the Lower Nubian Nile) in 1528–1529. Archaeological work at the ancient citadel of Qasr Ibrim has revealed Ottoman records dating as far back as the 1550s, but none earlier.

Garrisons of Bosnian and Magyar (Hungarian) troops of Eastern Europe were established at various places along the Lower Nubian Nile. Ancient Kushite and medieval Christian structures were torn down to provide building materials for new fortifications and housing. These
garrisons were never relieved, but instead became self-perpetuating through intermarriage with the local Nubians. For over 200 years these garrisons were virtually indistinguishable from their Nubian neighbors, but continued to identify themselves as “Bosnians” and “Magyars” in the service of the sultan, even as Ottoman influence in the area declined to little more than a memory.

The Red Sea and Yemen: 1538–1636

A Portuguese fleet entered the Red Sea in 1540–1541. The Circassian governor of Yemen, Özdemir Pasha, was given the task of occupying the ports of Suakin and Massawa to prevent their permanent occupation by the Portuguese. Özdemir succeeded, taking not only the ports but a whole strip of the African Red Sea littoral. The Portuguese were repelled from this strategic region, which would remain under Muslim control until the late nineteenth century.

After Sulayman Pasha’s expedition of 1538, control of Yemen passed into the hands of the Ottomans and a series of Ottoman and Mamluk governors. The city of San’a in the mountains of North Yemen became the provincial capital in 1545, but the Ottomans were unable to hold territory beyond it, nor were they able to collect taxes in the interior. This did not prevent Ottoman governors from extorting the Yemenis for their personal enrichment. Troops from all seven corps of the Egyptian Ottoman/Mamluk army were used in the occupation. The Ottomans were nearly forced out of Yemen by the native Zaydi Shi’ites in 1567. The Zaydis were masters of the difficult terrain and were well equipped with firearms and even some artillery. Mamluk and Ottoman columns marched into the mountains never to be seen again. Desertion became common and the situation seemed on the verge of collapse. Sultan Salim II called on the Egyptian viceroy, Admiral Koca Sinan Pasha, to reestablish Ottoman rule in 1569. Sinan formed an expeditionary corps from the seven Egyptian corps, Ottoman reinforcements, and Bedouin irregulars from Egypt. Leading the troops himself, Sinan Pasha succeeded in retaking south Yemen, but had no success north of San’a.

When rebellion broke out again in 1630, the Ottoman government in Istanbul was too preoccupied with local concerns to give it much attention. The governor, Qansuh Pasha, brought an army of 8,000 soldiers and Bedouin from Egypt, but desertion, disease, and combat soon diminished their numbers. Qansuh was eventually forced to seek safe passage from the Zaydis for himself and the remainder of his army to depart for Mecca. The garrison at Mocha held out until 1636, but without reinforcements from Egypt they were finally compelled to pull out.
Revolt of the Sipahis

The Sipahis were mostly located in rural Egypt, where they were entrusted with tax collection. In the late 1580s their wages fell into arrears, followed by deep cuts in pay. The Ottoman governor then introduced a system of tax farming (the iltizam), which eliminated the Sipahis’ usefulness as tax collectors. Unsurprisingly, the Sipahis assassinated the administrator of the iltizam and began raising their own tax (the tulba). Under a succession of weak governors, the Sipahis were given the run of the countryside. In 1604 a new governor, Ibrahim Pasha, was assassinated by a group of Sipahis angered by the governor’s attempt to eliminate the tulba.

A more formidable governor, Muhammad Pasha Qul Qiran, managed to punish the conspirators and eliminate the tulba, but provoked an open rebellion by the Sipahis. Muhammad Pasha rallied the rest of the army and a considerable number of Bedouin to his banner and smashed the Sipahi revolt. Some 4,000 prisoners were sent as expendables to the Yemen occupation army. Muhammad Pasha went on to greatness as admiral of the Ottoman fleet, grand vizier, and son-in-law of the sultan. Some practices are too insidious for one man to eliminate, however, and it was not long before the tulba returned to stay for several centuries.

Mamluk Factions

In the mid-seventeenth century the Egyptian military split into two factions, the Faqaris, who identified themselves with Ottoman interests, and the Qasimi, who represented the Egyptian Mamluk tradition. When in formation the factions distinguished themselves with different heraldic devices. Though the origins of this rivalry are surrounded by legend and later embellishments, it seems rooted in two historical figures, the Mamluk amirs Qasim Bey (who distinguished himself by crushing a revolt in the Hijaz in 1631–1632) and his contemporary, Dhu’l-Faqir (of whom little is known). An antagonistic relationship between the two groups dominated Egyptian politics from 1640 to 1730.

A genealogy commissioned by the Mamluk Ridvan Bey Abu’l-Shawarib in the seventeenth century suggests that the Circassians actually had a distinguished Arab origin from the Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. According to this text a chief of the Banu ‘Amir (a subsection of the Quraysh tribe) fled to a land east of Constantinople during the caliphate of ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (634–644), where he was given his own territory by the Byzantine emperor. Living in the Caucasus Mountains east of the Black Sea, his people became known as the “Sarakisa” (Circassians, from the Arabic sara kisa, “Kisa fled”). After centuries in the Caucasus, the Circassians “returned” to Egypt, and the line is traced through Barquq (1382–1399), the first of the Circassian Mamluk sultans. This particular genealogy seems
designed to promote Ridvan Bey’s aspirations to the lucrative position of Amir al-Hajj (the guardian of the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina), but draws on a common belief of Circassian descent from the Quraysh and the Ghassanid Arabs of Yemen.

Through most of the eighteenth century Mamluks and Ottomans alike settled their differences through assassination. Of course one murder always led to a retaliatory killing by the dead man’s comrades. It was a return to the ways of the pre-1517 Circassian Mamluks. It is a measure of the declining power of the Ottoman governors that they too conspired in assassination plots rather than arresting their opponents and taking them off to the Citadel.

**The Mamluk Revolt of ‘Ali Bey al-Kabir: 1760–1762**

An attempt was made in 1760 to end Ottoman rule in Egypt and restore the Mamluk sultanate. The revolt was led by ‘Ali Bey al-Kabir, also known as Bulut Kapan, “The Cloud Catcher.” Taken from his native Abkhazia on the shores of the Black Sea, ‘Ali Bey became renowned for the defeats he inflicted on the Bedouin. By 1760 he was named chief of the Mamluks and began assembling his own household of Mamluks, including a young man who later became his son-in-law, the Circassian Muhammad Abu al-Dhahab. ‘Ali Bey’s economic advisors were all Christian Greeks, Armenians, and Copts, while the head of his administration was a Piedmontese Mamluk named Vicenzo Taberna.

‘Ali Bey brought about the military rejuvenation of the Mamluks, expanding the army to 25,000 men by the inclusion of mercenaries, Bedouin, and local auxiliaries. Expeditions were sent to Arabia, Syria, and Palestine where ‘Ali Bey contested Ottoman authority. ‘Ali Bey did not share in the Mamluks’ arrogant belief that they had nothing to learn from outsiders in the field of military science. European military advisors were hired for the first time to improve the handling of the artillery, and Egyptian ports were opened to European commerce. The Russian/Ottoman War of 1768–1773 brought hundreds of Russian prisoners to Egypt where they were converted, circumcised, and incorporated into the Mamluk ranks.

With the aid of Venetian mercenaries and the Knights of Malta, Abu al-Dhahab mounted a successful campaign against the Ottomans in Syria in 1771, taking Damascus, but fell out with ‘Ali Bey when he abandoned Damascus after only ten days. ‘Ali Bey’s grip on the other Beys was weakening, and Abu al-Dhahab forced him to leave Cairo and take refuge in Syria. The Cloud Catcher was wounded and captured while fighting al-Dhahab’s forces in 1773 and died a week later in captivity. In 1775 Abu al-Dhahab led another Mamluk expedition to Palestine and Syria.
The artillery was placed in the hands of two Englishmen named Robinson and Harvey, and a handful of other Europeans. Muhammad Bey Abu al-Dahab died while campaigning in Syria that same year, and his men immediately left for Egypt.

**War with Ghazi Hassan Pasha: 1786–1787**

The Ottoman sultan had not forgotten the tribute payments missed during the rule of ‘Ali Bey and Abu al-Dhahab and in 1786 sent Admiral Ghazi Hassan Pasha with a fleet to Alexandria to collect. A large part of Ghazi Hassan’s army was composed of Muslim Albanians, who would become an important element in Egyptian politics for the next three decades. The two leading Mamluk Beys, Murad and Ibrahim, attempted to resist the admiral’s army, but were defeated at al-Rahmaniya in the Delta. Ghazi Hassan then undertook a number of administrative reforms, weakening the Mamluks, as well as reimposing social restrictions on the Christians and Jews that had loosened during the rule of ‘Ali Bey. Ghazi Hassan also closed the slave markets of Istanbul to the Mamluk agents, forcing the Mamluks to look elsewhere for replenishments. The Russian presence in the Caucasus was beginning to make its impact felt by greatly reducing the number of slaves available from this region.

Operating from their strongholds in Upper Egypt, Murad and Ibrahim made numerous unsuccessful attempts to drive the admiral out of Egypt. An Ottoman expedition cleared the country of Mamluks as far south as Aswan, but the Beys merely fell back into Nubia and waited for the Ottoman army to return to Cairo. Needed back in Istanbul for the ongoing war with Russia, Ghazi Hassan left control of Egypt in the hands of Isma’il Bey on his departure in 1787. When the latter died in 1791 Murad and Ibrahim resumed control of Egypt.
The arrival of Napoleon in 1798 was a turning point in Egyptian history. It was the introduction of Western culture, the beginning of the end for the Mamluk system, and the reemergence of Egypt as a place of strategic importance all rolled into one event.

Napoleon Bonaparte had quickly become one of the star generals of the French revolutionary government, the Directory. The French Revolution had not brought an end to the Anglo-French wars, but only introduced a new phase. The Directory was searching for a way to humble Britain and was therefore willing to listen to a rash proposal from its young general. Bonaparte suggested seizing Egypt, creating a French-ruled corridor through the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, cutting off all British communications to India except by the lengthy and dangerous Cape route round Africa. That such a plan would also entail a general conflict with the Ottoman Empire, still the sovereign power in Egypt, seemed to cause little concern for the French. Bonaparte also had a personal motivation, a romantic urge to emulate Alexander the Great’s march of conquest into the Orient.

On his way to Egypt, Bonaparte stopped for a week at Malta, where he deposed the ruling Knights of Malta and seized their immense treasury after a short fight. The knights were formed as a holy order during the Crusades, committed to the “liberation” of the Holy Land. By the end of the eighteenth century, they had filled their vaults with treasure through centuries of preying upon Muslim commerce with their Malta-based fleet. The knights no longer did much fighting; all the work and the rowing of the galleys was performed by 2,000 Turkish and North African slaves, and their vows of celibacy were eased by an array of mistresses whose beauty was renowned throughout Europe. At least half of the knights were French, and some even sympathized with the Revolution in France. The German grand master was bought off with a never-fulfilled promise
of an estate in Germany while the confiscated riches assured the financial future of the French expedition. Napoleon persuaded about 40 knights to join his expedition, together with 500 men of the Regiment of Malta and an assortment of cavalry and marines. Once in Egypt this force was reorganized into the Legion Maltaise under the command of one of the “Wild Geese,” Bernard MacSheehy.¹

When the French landed near Alexandria on July 1, 1798, the Porte was still under the impression that the French navy was chasing pirates in the Mediterranean. The British were undeceived, however, and Admiral Nelson chased the French fleet across the Mediterranean. The once great city of Alexander was in near ruins and barely defended. Its population had dwindled to only 6,000 people as Rosetta and Damietta had replaced it in importance as ports to the Mediterranean. The powerful fortifications had been neglected, its garrison unpaid, and its cannon and powder removed. The Mamluks regarded the defense of the city as an unnecessary expenditure that could be better applied in the aggrandizement of the leading Mamluk households. Nevertheless, the Alexandrian militia and civilians offered resistance. Civilian sniping resulted in massacres of men, women, and children as retaliation and a reminder that civilians were not to participate in hostilities. Even as the city had supposedly been subdued, an Egyptian sniper nearly changed history by narrowly missing Napoleon, hitting him in the boot instead. The sniper and his wife were both executed. In Cairo a general massacre of all Christians was only narrowly averted by the opposition of Ibrahim Bey.

Once established in Alexandria, Napoleon had a proclamation issued in Arabic, Turkish, and French, emphasizing the tyranny of the Mamluks and his respect for Islam and the Koran. As proof he cited the French Republican overthrow of Pope Pius VI and his defeat of the Knights of Malta, “who fancied that God wanted them to make war on the Muslims.” Most interestingly, it appealed to a barely existent Egyptian nationalism by reminding the Egyptians of the “Georgian and Circassian” origins of the Mamluk lords. It was the first of many statements in this vein, none of which proved as persuasive as their author hoped.

**State of the Mamluks**

When Napoleon arrived, Murad and Ibrahim Bey were still vying for control of Egypt. A series of plagues hit Cairo hard in the 1780s and 1790s, severely depleting the number of trained Mamluks. Their numbers would never be the same after this disaster, followed so closely by the invasions of the French, the Ottomans, and the British. The need for new Mamluks led to shortcuts in their religious and even military training. New fields for Mamluk recruitment were found in the Balkans and Black
Africa, as well as a growing number of Central European and Italian renegades who abandoned their Christian religion for the attractions of Mamluk life. The Black Mamluks were rarely raised to positions of power as their numbers increased in the late eighteenth century. Even Jews and Armenians began to find their way into the Mamluk ranks. Mamluks now tended to be older when brought to Egypt, and it was common for them to remain in touch with their families, sending money home and sometimes even bringing their relatives to Egypt to share in their success. The adoption of Islam became more of a formality than it had once been.

Mamluks of this period typically carried all their wealth with them into battle, either sewn into some part of their garments or displayed in the form of weaponry encrusted with jewels and plated with precious metals.
As the Mamluk could not bequeath any part of his wealth, there seemed little need to alter this practice.

One of the Mamluk admirals, the Greek Nicholas Papas-Oglou (Niqua Re’is), went over to the French side soon after their landing. Murad Bey had commissioned Papas-Oglou to build and command a Nile fleet of gunboats manned almost entirely by Greeks. After his defection he formed two battalions of the pro-French “Greek Legion” in which he served as colonel. There were a number of French Mamluks in the household troops of Murad and Ibrahim Bey, and they may have provided useful information on French tactics. Over the course of the war many French deserted to the Mamluks or were captured and impressed into Mamluk service. So many French deserted to the Mamluks in the first year of the occupation that a general pardon was offered to those who wished to return.

The Battle of al-Rahmaniya: July 13, 1798

By July 11, 1798, the French army had finished a grueling three-week march to the town of al-Rahmaniya. Unquenched thirst, hunger, and constant nerve-shattering attacks by Bedouin drove hundreds to suicide along the way. News of the approach of Murad Bey and an impending battle raised morale, though nearly the entire army had diarrhea. On the morning of July 13, at nearby Shubra Khit, the French got their first look at the Mamluks, a line of 3,000 glittering horsemen, all superbly mounted on Arabian horses and armed to the teeth. They arrived with 10,000 infantry and servants to carry and tend to their equipment; the French had almost no horses and even the cavalry fought on foot. The Mamluks must have been astonished at this dirty, smelly horde of foot soldiers who carried their own gear like mules.

The Mamluks felt assured of victory, but were perplexed by the strange formations the French adopted on the battlefield. The square was a standard and effective defensive formation used against cavalry attacks in Europe. In Egypt it was a complete innovation. Each of the five divisions at Shubra Khit formed its own square, with artillery at the corners. The Mamluks spent three hours sniffing out these novel configurations before finally launching their attack. The organized fire of infantry six ranks deep easily repulsed the horsemen, and they moved from one square to another, fruitlessly searching for some weakness. On the river adjacent to the battlefield a small French flotilla was losing its battle with a larger group of Mamluk gunboats until a lucky shot hit the powder magazine on the Mamluk flagship. The immense explosion shattered the confidence of the Mamluks, and they withdrew from Shubra Khit, defeated but ready to fight again.
The Battle of the Pyramids: July 21, 1798

Bonaparte was determined to destroy the Mamluks as quickly as possible and, instead of following the Nile to Cairo, he marched his army over a desert shortcut. Again the agonies of the march to al-Rahmaniya were repeated and short-tempered men massacred any villagers who hesitated at meeting their demands for food and water. Finally news came that Murad Bey had assembled his army at Imbaba, a small town on the west bank of the Nile, northwest of Cairo. Ibrahim Bey’s army remained on the east bank of the river, ready to defend the road to Cairo. In the city itself the *fellahin* were hastily armed with clubs and organized into a militia of last resort.

In his belief that his men could carry out any command, Bonaparte ordered the army to march 12 hours to Imbaba, where they arrived at 2 P.M., in the sinister heat of a July afternoon. The march and the sun had exhausted the French, but their 25,000 men still outnumbered the Mamluks, who, with their forces divided, could not have numbered much more than 3,000 horsemen, accompanied by at least 6,000 retainers on foot and possibly as many as 10,000 Albanian (Ottoman) infantry. A French officer described the scene:

The Mameluks, entrenched at the village of Embabeh, on the bank of the Nile opposite Cairo, were drawn up behind their formidable gun emplacements. The rays of the sun, shimmering on their accoutrements and weapons, dazzled us. There they sat on their Arab horses, each armed with a London pistol and a shining carbine, making their superb damascene scimitars flash before our eyes. This impressive sight would have been enough to frighten any but a French soldier.

This time the Mamluk attack was not long in coming, and the French barely had time to form squares before the first wave of armored horsemen smashed into their lines. Murad Bey learned nothing from the Battle of al-Rahmaniya and appears to have decided that more aggressive cavalry attacks were the key to victory over the French squares. The French held their fire until the last moment, so that their flaming musket wads set the billowing drapery of the Mamluks alight as the concentrated musket fire and grapeshot ripped through their ranks. Displaying incredible courage but no tactical sense, the Mamluks bore down on the squares for a full hour, the most ferocious of their numbers smashing their way through the deep ranks of Frenchmen only to find themselves trapped and bayoneted or beaten to death by troops inside the square (firing within a square was not recommended). If a Mamluk made it through the hail of shot to the French lines, the French soldiers were careful to bayonet the Mamluk’s horse in the head, causing it to rear up and throw off its rider. Jabbing it in the chest would usually result in the horse smashing its tormenters with its hooves, allowing the rider to break through the lines.
As the Mamluk attack faded, two French divisions moved off to storm the Mamluk fortifications. With Murad Bey already heading south to Giza with the remains of his cavalry, the Albanian infantry broke. A mad dash for the Nile was joined by Mamluks cut off from the main force. Though many of the French were already stopping to loot the dead, the Mamluks drowned by the hundreds as they sought to reach the other side of the Nile. Though accounts differ, Ibrahim Bey seems to have made no effort to cross the Nile in aid of his rival, Murad. With the defeat now obvious, Ibrahim also left for the south. Some Mamluks were seen riding two or three to a horse, while others went on foot leading their women on a string of horses. The Mamluks set their river gunboats afire, and the tall flames of the roaring blaze convinced many that the French had set fire to the city. In Cairo all was chaos as the population tried to flee, falling prey to rape, robbery, and murder from the waiting Bedouin and the fellahin militia. The French troops enriched themselves by looting the Mamluk dead, going so far as to fish their bodies out of the Nile.

The battle at Imbaba was not the greatest of Napoleon’s victories, but it was one of the most important. In time it became known as the “Battle of the Pyramids” after a speech Napoleon was alleged to have made before the battle, pointing to the pyramids and reminding his troops that “forty centuries of history look down upon you.” The story is cited only in Napoleon’s own memoirs. Though every depiction of the battle displays the pyramids looming in the background, the pyramids were actually ten miles away and the dust raised by two armies would have obscured such views. Bonaparte’s voice would also have to be as great as his ambition, as his five divisions were spread over several square kilometers.

Darfur’s sultan, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, sent his congratulations to Napoleon for his victory over the Mamluks. The French general, in reply, attempted to place an order for 2,000 male slaves as reinforcements for his army. Unfortunately for Napoleon, some French functionaries interfered with an incoming caravan from Darfur, and his relations with the sultan suddenly grew cold.

On August 1, 1798, Lord Nelson finally caught the French fleet in Abukir Bay. In an epic sea battle the French fleet was completely destroyed and nearly 4,000 French sailors killed or wounded. Until the ships could be replaced, Bonaparte’s army was trapped in Egypt.

Islam and the French Military Occupation

Bonaparte took a just-finished palace belonging to Muhammad al-Alfi Bey as his Cairo headquarters. The French officers helped themselves to the Mamluks’ women (mainly Georgians, Circassians, and Armenians), as well as their houses. For French in the Delta, danger lurked everywhere. Roughly armed fellahin watched for stragglers or small parties of
soldiers, while the Bedouin could appear in a flash, slaughtering the unsuspecting before flying away on their horses. In retaliation villages were torched, peasants massacred, and rebels publicly beheaded in Cairo. Napoleon deluded himself into believing that he had brought stability and progress to a grateful people.

The French never profited from Egypt’s strategic position as most trade from Asia was diverted to a secondary route through the Arabian Gulf, Iraq, and the Syrian desert to the Mediterranean. The leading men of all the different communities in Egypt found themselves forced to make repeated large loans to the French administration. Food, animals, and other supplies were requisitioned in return for a worthless chit. Taxes were applied on every aspect of commerce, and heavy fines were levied for every sign of resistance to French rule. Of course it was the fellahin majority who ultimately bore the cost of French colonization, creating a simmering anger that would eventually erupt in fury against the French army. Even the French soldiers were shortchanged in the end; none ever received the six acres of land they had been promised at the start of the campaign.

From the beginning Bonaparte never had enough men to police the country he wished to occupy. The solution presented itself by the formation of the Janissaires, a paramilitary police force. Identified by the wearing of a French tricolour cockade in their turbans, the men were mostly Turks, Albanians, and Maghrabis captured from the Ottoman army. In Cairo Orthodox Greeks were prominent in the police, including their formidable chief, Barthelmy Serra. Prior to going over to the French, Barthelmy was Alfi Bey’s chief of artillery. An enormous man made larger by his rich and voluminous costume, Barthelmy was Cairo’s leading street fighter and was often seen wading into combat accompanied by his wife, also a fearsome warrior. Torture and execution were the methods of his craft, and he measured his success by the number of heads collected.

Napoleon always insisted that he had entered Egypt on the request of the Ottoman sultan and was only restoring order after Mamluk rule, all in the sultan’s name. Few, if any, in Egypt believed this. In fact, the sultan had declared war on France and word of this began to reach Egypt in the summer of 1798. The only person who seemed unaware of the true state of events was Bonaparte, who maintained his public disbelief in the declaration of war for months. French morale suffered greatly from the beginning; there was little alcohol to be found in the country, and the English blockade meant no shipments of wine or letters from home for the duration. Venereal disease ran through the army, leading Napoleon to authorize his Janissaires to eliminate 400 prostitutes, who were beheaded, sewn into sacks, and thrown into the Nile.

Napoleon (known in Egypt as al-Sultan al-Kabir) also attempted to ingratiate himself with the shaykhs of al-Azhar University, Cairo’s ancient
center of Islamic studies. He would meet with them regularly and discuss the fine points of the Koran and profess his greatest admiration for Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. These half-hearted measures did not impress, and the inevitable question arose: Why did not the Sultan al-Kabir and his army convert to Islam? Bonaparte stalled the discussion by citing the addiction of his troops to wine and their natural aversion to circumcision. The general admitted privately, however, that his Islamic policy was designed to “lull fanaticism to sleep before we uproot it.”

**French Operations in Upper Egypt**

After learning of the destruction of his fleet at Abukir, Bonaparte tried a more conciliatory approach to the Mamluks, now that losses in his army could not be replaced. Ibrahim Bey, waiting for his chance in Syria, did not reply to Napoleon’s letter. Murad Bey was offered the governorship of Upper Egypt, but counteroffered with a promise of 10,000 purses of gold if Bonaparte would pack up his army and leave. Bonaparte now entrusted the destruction of Murad Bey and his Mamluks to Major-General Louis Desaix, an outstanding soldier who had tied his fortunes to Bonaparte.

Desaix set out in late August 1798 with his 15-year-old Abyssinian slave girl, 5,000 infantry and cavalry, and several batteries of artillery. The expedition was to march deep into Upper Egypt, a largely unknown land almost entirely forgotten in Europe. On October 7, 1798, the French defeated a force of Mamluks and Bedouin over twice as large as their own in a savage battle at al-Lahun. The obvious inefficiency of Mamluk tactics in fighting the French caused most of the Bedouin to desert after the battle. Reinforcements, including half a dozen ships, were sent to Desaix as he marched through Middle Egypt, but Murad Bey was always elusive and could not be brought to battle, apparently having finally learned that bold cavalry charges would do nothing to drive the French from Egypt. Volatile and unpredictable, he led Desaix on a merry chase through Egypt that ended where it began, at the pyramids of Giza.

Murad Bey collected taxes from the *fellahin* as he went, with Desaix collecting them a second time when he passed through. Ironically, both collected their taxes in the name of the Ottoman sultan, which must have bewildered the villagers. At the general’s right hand was Moallem Ya’qub, a Coptic tax collector with a battery of talents including military skills. Most Egyptians believed that Moallem Ya’qub was the actual leader of the expedition. The belief seems to have emboldened some of the Coptic towns of Upper Egypt, which put up bitter struggles when called upon to pay their taxes by the Mamluks. The latter retaliated by looting and burning Coptic monasteries.
It was only a few weeks before the French army was in a deplorable condition. Their shoes wore away with the constant marching, dysentery raged, and eye diseases spread through the ranks, leaving hundreds of men nearly blind. It was march or die, however, for any who fell behind were left to the tender mercies of the Mamluks. Under these conditions the French officers condoned rape of Egyptian women as a means of raising morale. By December Desaix’s troops were faced with a new threat; uprisings by the overtaxed fellahin. In January Arab fighters from the Hijaz began to arrive in response to Murad’s invitation. They were under the impression the French were each loaded with gold and silver.

On January 20, 1799, Murad Bey finally met the French army of 4,000 men in open battle at Samhud. Murad commanded 14,000 Mamluks, Arabs, and Meccans. Mamluk charges on the French squares were ineffectual as usual, as were the mad attacks of the Meccan infantry. Desaix pursued Murad Bey as far as Aswan, but he remained just out of reach. Raping, looting, and killing their way through Egypt, the French soldiers nevertheless displayed a fascinated appreciation of the remarkable monuments of Egypt’s ancient civilization. As they marched and counter-marched they eventually ran out of nearly every commodity. Bonaparte sent nothing, not even their pay, using all his resources for his own invasion of Syria. Greek merchants followed the army, supplying at least some of their needs, including strong drink.

The French spent March and April battling the Meccan Hijazis while the Mamluks harbored their deteriorating strength. The fellahin were massacred in several places and a small group of French enriched themselves by seizing one of the sultan of Darfur’s caravans in the desert. In June the French took the Red Sea port of al-Qusair, the arrival point for the Hijazis. The fighting in the Nile Valley subsided, and by July Murad Bey was back at his home in Giza.

Rebellion in Cairo: October 1798

Bonaparte’s endless reforms created great distress in Egyptian society. In the Friday sermons at the mosque the preachers assured the Muslims that the French occupation was only temporary, that Sultan Salim was sending a great Ottoman army and fleet to drive the infidels out.

On the morning of October 21, 1798, the inevitable rebellion began with the assassination of General Martin Dupuy. Mobs took to the streets, besieging all French installations and ravaging the Greek quarter. The rallying point for the mobs was the Mosque of al-Azhar. Napoleon ordered his guns to open fire on its revered precincts, killing many of the assembled rebels. Three battalions were sent to clear al-Azhar, led by the imposing figure of General Thomas-Alexandre Dumas, father of
the famed writer. Hundreds of prisoners were taken, and the mosque was
desecrated in nearly as many ways. The ringleaders and all those found in
arms were hustled off to the Citadel, where they were quietly executed
and their headless bodies thrown in the Nile. The leading shaykhs were
forgiven their complicity in a public ceremony; they were still needed by
Bonaparte. The Egyptians realized it would take more than an angry
mob to expel the French.

French Expedition to Syria

Though French rule in Egypt was far from consolidated, Napoleon was
already planning his next triumph. In December 1798 a French army was
assembled to begin the great invasion of Syria that would give Napoleon
control of the Holy Land and the main trade routes passing through
the Middle East. The expedition became one of the biggest disasters of
Napoleon’s career.

Napoleon’s expeditionary force consisted of 13,000 men with a large
number of Egyptian Arabs as a labor force. Large numbers of slave wom-
en seized from the Mamluks were also taken along. In the difficult march
across the Sinai Desert, a number of soldiers shot themselves in the head
rather than endure another day of suffering. It was not heat and thirst that
tormented the army, but cold, rain, and mud.

In early March 1799 the French took the city of Jaffa, where they
unleashed a full day of terror, massacring Muslim troops attempting to
surrender as well as putting as many of the civilian population of the
town to the bayonet as could be found. Some 3,000 Ottoman troops holding
out in the citadel surrendered with the promise that their lives would
be spared. After several days without food or shelter, they were led to the
beach and massacred by bayonet, the whole process taking several days.
As if by divine retribution, plague simultaneously struck the French army.

Napoleon’s next target was Acre, the headquarters of Ahmad Pasha al-
Jazzar (“The Butcher”), ruler of Syria. A Bosnian, Ahmad had sold himself
into slavery as a youth and eventually found himself in Cairo, where he
was trained as a Mamluk and served his master as an assassin. Now in
his sixties, al-Jazzar had a reputation for cruelty and ruthlessness (though
it was sometimes exaggerated to monstrous proportions). Bonaparte
spent months fruitlessly besieging the fortress of Acre. Unusually, it was
the besiegers who grew short of men and war materials, while the
besieged still had access to the sea, from which they received supplies
and reinforcements, including 800 British marines. Bonaparte wasted
hundreds of lives in trying to storm the fortress before his siege artillery
arrived. After two wasted months, Bonaparte was ready to retreat to
Egypt and prepared his arrival by sending reports of the “great victory” he had achieved at Acre.

The retreat was a terrible procession of ragged troops, wounded, maimed, and plague stricken, illuminated by the ghastly light of burning fields and villages. As men fell to the side of the road, they were robbed and then abandoned by their comrades. Out of spite for the British commander, Sir Sidney Smith, Bonaparte refused all his offers to transport the sick by ship to Alexandria. At Jaffa he ordered 50 plague victims to be poisoned. Bonaparte reentered Cairo in a triumphal procession with the remaining two-thirds of his expeditionary force.

While the commander and the bulk of the army were away in Syria, the remaining French garrisons put down one insurrection after another, killing thousands of *fellahin* and torching scores of villages in the process. Most serious was a rebellion in the Delta region led by a Maghrabi who claimed to be the Mahdi, a successor to the Prophet Muhammad as prophesied in certain strains of nonorthodox Islam. This Mahdi succeeded in raising a large army of Bedouin, Mamluks, and *fellahin*, with which he succeeded in capturing Damanhur and several other places. The French eventually went on the offensive, taking Damanhur and slaying every person there before putting it to the torch.

### The Ottoman Invasion: 1799

The Ottoman sultan was now cooperating with Britain against their mutual enemy, Napoleon. A plan was devised calling for an Ottoman army to cross into Egypt from the east, meeting up with another army to be landed on the Mediterranean coast at Abukir, and a Mamluk force under Murad Bey. An English fleet under Sir Sidney Smith accompanied the Turkish invasion force to Abukir. The Turks under Mustafa Pasha landed on July 14, 1799, taking the French-manned fortress three days later. They now paused while Napoleon gathered his troops to throw them back into the sea. The Ottoman army in the east was held up by French troops and Murad Bey had turned back. The French attacked on July 25, easily taking the first line of earthen ramparts. An assault on the second line of defenses was pushed back when the guns of the Ottoman and British fleet opened up on the attackers and the Turks swarmed onto the battlefield to loot the French dead. Napoleon seized this unexpected gift and ordered General Murat’s cavalry to the attack. The disorganized Turks were slaughtered and thousands more drowned trying to swim back to their ships. Murat captured Mustafa Pasha himself, but not before taking a shot to the jaw from Mustafa’s pistols. Over 2,000 survivors took shelter in the small and waterless fortress and refused to surrender, knowing Napoleon’s reputation for violating offers of safe passage. Over
1,000 men died of hunger and thirst, many after drinking seawater. When the remainder finally surrendered on August 2, 1799, hundreds more died from consuming more food than their shrunken bellies could handle. Sir Sidney Smith considered the French loss of some 220 men to be a victory of sorts, as they could not be replaced.

A second landing of Turkish troops at Damietta on November 1 was again tossed back into the sea at bayonet point. Under pressure from the powerful Janissary Corps, the Ottoman sultan failed to use some of his best troops in the failed invasion. By 1799 the European-style *Nizam-i Çedid* could have easily fielded 10,000 men familiar with European tactics to battle the French. Opposition from powerful elements of the traditional army not only prevented their deployment, but resulted in the disbanding of the entire corps in 1808 without a chance to prove themselves in battle.

As for Napoleon, he had already decided to leave Egypt for France, but not before berating the Muslim leaders of Cairo for doubting his sincerity as a Muslim and his deep commitment to Egypt. Shortly after his victory at Abukir he was gone, secretly embarking on a ship to France on August 22, 1799. His abandoned army was left in the capable hands of General Kleber, who negotiated a French withdrawal with the Ottoman grand vizier at al-Arish on January 24, 1800. Though both parties were pleased with the deal, it depended upon the availability of British ships to transport the French army back to France. British refusal to participate doomed the deal, and the war resumed with a rude demand for unconditional surrender from the British.

**Battle of Heliopolis, March 20, 1800**

Kleber was enraged by the British attitude and circulated their demands to all his troops. He had done his best to extricate his men from a campaign he never believed in, knowing that a single mistake might doom his men to massacre. The Ottoman grand vizier had used the armistice to bring an army four times the size of Kleber’s to the suburbs of Cairo. A great fighting general, Kleber smashed the Ottoman advance at Heliopolis, north of Cairo, and pursued the remnants of the grand vizier’s command through Lower Egypt. Unfortunately for the French, the grand vizier’s son had managed to go round the French and entered a nearly defenseless Cairo with a small body of troops.

**Rebellion in Cairo: March–April 1800**

Once in Cairo the Ottomans announced the utter defeat of the French, unleashing the Cairenes hatred of the French. The small groups of French in the Citadel and the smaller forts were immediately besieged by mobs. This second uprising in Cairo was no mere riot. The French detected a degree of preparation and organization in this new revolt:
The rebels displayed an energy that, in this country, could only be inspired by religion. Twenty cannon, long buried, were dug up; they set up powder factories, they contrived to fabricate bullets with iron from the mosques and with the hammers and workmen’s tools that were hurriedly brought to them. Stores of food were collected from the always considerable stores of private individuals; only those who were under arms, or working on the entrenchments were entitled to a share of the rations. The people collected our bullets and such of our bombs as had failed to explode in order to fire them back at us, and as these projectiles were not suitable for the caliber of their guns, they began to cast mortars and cannon; it was an extraordinary amount of energy to be found in this country, and they were successful.

Vicious attacks were made on the quarters of the Greek, Coptic, and Syrian Christians, where entire families fell victim to the rage of the mob, now aided by the Ottoman troops. The Copts quickly organized and fought back, no doubt surprising their Muslim assailants, who were accustomed to periodically taking out their frustrations on the usually helpless Copts with little or no resistance.

Kleber returned on March 27, 1800, and immediately threw a cordon round Cairo, preventing food supplies from entering. He offered terms to the rebels, but his emissaries were murdered. Murad Bey now unexpectedly threw in his lot with the French, signing a pact with Kleber on April 5, 1800. For weeks the city starved while the French fought from house to house and rained shells down on the rebellious quarters. There was no refuge for the civilians, many of whom perished in raging fires. Kleber launched a major offensive on April 14, 1800. In the midst of a violent (and highly unusual) thunderstorm, roaring flames illuminated a scene from hell. The long-suffering French troops had been unleashed to do their worst. The greater the resistance the more terrible their revenge. By April 22, 1800, the French had broken the will of the rebels. The Turks, who had lost control of the situation and been prevented by the mob from surrendering, now accepted an offer of safe passage to the coast.

Victorious, Kleber now enacted a policy he described as “squeezing the lemon.” An offer of pardon was extended to the rebels, who were also expected to pay massive fines to support the upkeep of the army. Torture was used to extract payment when necessary. The general had no interest in ruling Egypt, but was prepared to use any means to keep his men alive until they could be evacuated.

The Coptic Legion

The French were always looking for new sources of manpower, and the effectiveness of Coptic street fighters in the Cairo uprising suggested there was no reason to perpetuate their exemption from military service. Moallem Ya’qub was charged with raising two battalions of Copts for
service in the French army and appears to have paid for their entire equip-
ment himself. The Copts were equipped in European style, with a green
uniform and black bicorne hat. Considering their lack of military experi-
ence, the Copts performed surprisingly well, garnering accolades from
the French generals for their work around Alexandria in 1800.

**General Menou and the Last Days of French Egypt**

General Desaix had returned to France in March 1800 to rejoin Bonap-
parte. He brought along his own personal Mamluk, Isma’il, and a black
slave boy. Three months later Desaix was on the battlefield with Napo-
leon at Marengo fighting the Austro-Hungarians. He was killed leading a bold
charge to win a battle that already seemed lost. The same day General
Kleber was stabbed to death by a young Syrian while walking down the
street without an escort. A few days later his grand funeral procession
stopped to witness the executions of the assassin, Sulayman, and three
men Sulayman had told his intentions to in advance. Barthelmy decapi-
tated the latter three and then burned off Sulayman’s hand in a brazier
before impaling him on a stake for a lingering death (the French justified
the sentence on the grounds of “Muslim tradition”).

Kleber’s successor was General Jacques-‘Abdallah Menou, a convert to
Islam. Menou had little in the way of a military reputation, was difficult to
deal with, and was capable of enormous self-deception. In addition, he
was the subject of much rough humor in the army regarding his conver-
sion and subsequent marriage to the low-born daughter of a Rosetta bath-
house keeper. Many French troops made a nominal conversion to Islam
(usually with an exemption for circumcision) in order to take Egyptian
wives, but none of so high a rank. Menou was doubly unusual for being
perhaps the only man in Egypt to fully believe in Napoleon’s propaganda
about French-Muslim unity and integration. By embracing permanent
occupation of Egypt, Menou made himself widely disliked in the army,
which yearned only to go home.

**The British Invasion: March 1801**

A British army stormed ashore at Abukir Bay on March 8, 1801. They
suffered hundreds of dead on the beach before taking the undermanned
French positions (Menou had done little to prepare for an invasion he
knew was coming a month in advance). Menou attacked a larger force of
British troops at Canopus two weeks later, losing nearly a third of his
army in the process. Menou walled himself up in Alexandria, which was
soon surrounded as Ottoman Jannisaries and British reinforcements con-
tinued landing. Another Ottoman army led by the grand vizier streamed
down from Syria, so that British and Ottoman troops were soon heading
down to Cairo on both banks of the Nile. Simultaneous with the invasion
was a popular uprising against the French, led by Sayyid 'Umar Makram,
one of the leaders of the earlier uprising in Cairo. Murad Bey died of the
plague raging through most of the country, and his successor took
1,500 Mamluks over to the British. The plague eventually spread to the
French garrison in the Citadel.

The French in Cairo surrendered on June 18, 1801. Menou held out in
Alexandria in hope of reinforcements from France, but the timidity of
Napoleon’s admiral resulted in the French fleet leaving for Egypt three
times and returning three times without having delivered a single soldier.
Alexandria capitulated on September 3, 1801, as the Greek soldiers of the
French army began deserting en masse. By the terms of an evacuation
agreement, the French marched to the coast still in arms to be shipped
back to France in British ships. The soldiers took with them the body of
their hero, Kleber, who had attempted to arrange just such an evacuation.
In a childish fit of spite, Napoleon ordered Kleber’s body to remain in an
island prison off Marseilles, just short of the French mainland.

A large number of the Egyptian collaborators, Copts, Turks, Greeks,
Black Africans, and Mamluks, chose to accompany the French army back
to France rather than stay in Egypt and suffer retribution. Barthelmy,
Papas-Oglou, and Moallem Ya’qub were among them, but the latter died
aboard ship on the voyage to Marseilles. Once in France they were offered
opportunities in special foreign units of the French army, such as the Chas-
seurs d’Afrique and the Mamelouks. Of course there were also French who
remained behind in Egypt, finding various types of military employment.
Some 80 French deserters went to work as artillerymen with the Mamluks
in Upper Egypt.

The French Mamelouks

The Mamelouks had their origin in General Menou’s reorganization of a
company of Egyptian cavalry (led by Barthelmy) and two companies of
Syrian “Janissaries” (mostly Turkish prisoners of war who had joined
the French) into a “Regiment of Mamluks” in October 1800. The unit
was short-lived, but was revived in France after the repatriation of the
French army. Colonel Rapp, a veteran of the Egyptian campaign, was
placed in charge of this new light cavalry unit. Barthelmy, the unit’s pre-
vious leader, was dropped from French service at this time; while his
methods had been useful in Egypt, his apparently psychopathic affinity
to brutality was probably judged unacceptable in Europe. The 150 men
of the Mamluk squadron consisted of Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Syrians,
Circassians, and Coptic Egyptians, with a handful of French officers. They
were attached to the Consular Guard (later the Imperial Guard) and equipped in traditional style at great expense. In Mamluk fashion the men and their mounts were covered in mediaeval-style weapons, including sabres, maces, knives, and battle-axes, as well as carbines and the traditional pair of pistols. Many of these “Mamluks” were no doubt unfamiliar with the use of these weapons or the traditional training exercises. Their magnificent uniforms made them the showpiece of an already gaudy army, but they were so expensive that the government deducted part of the cost from the Mamluks’ pay.

For over a decade the Mamelouks accompanied Napoleon on nearly every one of his campaigns. As a unit of the Guard it was typically held in reserve, but twice demonstrated the fury of a traditional Mamluk charge to Europe at the battles of Eylau and Austerlitz (1805). Their victorious assault against the cavalry of the Russian Imperial Guard at Austerlitz was rewarded by the issue of regimental colors with an imperial eagle.

The Mamluks were used extensively in the Peninsular War in Spain. Perhaps unwisely, they were sent to the center of Madrid to restore order during the uprising of May 2, 1808. To the rebellious Spanish the Mamluks resembled the hated Moors who had occupied Spain for centuries, and, instead of fleeing from the horsemen, they fell on them with a furious hatred.

Most of the original squadron appears to have perished in the retreat of Napoleon’s Grande Armée from Russia. Of course it was impossible to replace losses from the squadron’s original source of manpower, so it became customary to admit French and other Europeans as the need required. By 1813 Europeans formed the majority in the ranks and the unit began to lose some of its character, particularly as it began to adopt the style and tactics of conventional European light cavalry. When Napoleon was sent into exile in 1814, the returning Bourbon Royalists eliminated the squadron as an irredeemable Bonapartist formation. A Royalist mob entered the quarter of Marseilles where many of the original Mamluks had established homes in their retirement and massacred the men and their families. The collaborationist Mamluks had only postponed the fate they had feared in Egypt 13 years before. It was a brutal end for a military formation whose flamboyance and exoticism were celebrated by Goya, Gérard, Gros, Girodet, and other great artists of the day.

A young Armenian Mamluk named Rustam Raza found himself in Napoleon’s personal service after being given as a gift by the shaykh who employed him for both sexual and military use. When Napoleon left his army in Egypt he took Rustam with him. As bodyguard and personal servant, Rustam was never far from the French emperor through all his European campaigns until the latter’s abdication, when Rustam abandoned him to marry a French woman and enjoy the wealth he had accumulated through a career of influence peddling.
Conclusion

The French invasion revealed the simmering ethnic and religious tensions in Egyptian society. The Ottoman sultan’s light grasp on Egypt was also plain. Most importantly, the Mamluks had been exposed as a military relic of another age in tactics, training, and weaponry. The musket and the bayonet had no appreciation of individual displays of courage, nor did their deployment in battle require years of training or the existence of a specialized caste of warriors. The rebellious civilians of Cairo and Upper Egypt caused the French army as much trouble as the Mamluks. In the end homesickness, disease, and the intervention of Ottoman and British troops all had as much to do with the eventual capitulation of the French as did Mamluk resistance. In his last days in exile on St. Helena, Napoleon still mused about what might have happened had he held Egypt and marched from there, like Alexander, through the Middle East into India.
The Rise to Power

Regarded today as the founder of modern Egypt, Muhammad ‘Ali was born in Macedonia and went to Egypt as part of the contingent of Albanian irregulars. Displaying courage and leadership throughout the campaign against the French, Muhammad ‘Ali rose rapidly through the ranks. It is difficult to determine when he decided to rule Egypt, but he was always ready to expand his influence and seize any opportunity that presented itself. Armed with a battery of cunning, diplomacy, and ruthlessness, Muhammad ‘Ali was more than a match for most of his rivals.

When the British withdrew from Egypt in March 1803, the political future of Egypt was still far from certain. A large number of Albanian troops remained in the country who were reluctant to accept any authority other than their commander’s, Tahir Pasha. Tahir was appointed military governor, but was soon assassinated over a pay dispute, making his deputy Muhammad ‘Ali the new military governor. The Ottoman viceroy, Khusrav Pasha (originally a slave from Georgia), had orders to reduce the power of the Mamluk Beys who were now operating out of Upper Egypt. Finding himself short of local troops, Khusrav Pasha bought a large number of black slaves and hired 24 French deserters to provide them with military training. Allying himself with the Mamluk ‘Uthman al-Bardisi, Muhammad ‘Ali besieged Khusrav Pasha in Damietta in 1803. Khusrav was captured, deposed, and returned to Istanbul. From this point on, the equally ambitious Khusrav would be a powerful enemy to Muhammad ‘Ali.

Al-Bardisi and his Mamluks were no longer welcome in Cairo, where street demonstrations protested high taxes. With al-Bardisi’s usefulness over, Muhammad ‘Ali allied himself with the protestors and sent his
men to drive al-Bardisi’s Mamluks from Cairo (al-Bardisi was poisoned in 1806, likely on the orders of Muhammad ‘Ali).

Making and breaking alliances with Mamluks, Ottomans, and Cairo’s religious leaders alike, Muhammad ‘Ali controlled most of the country by 1805. In January he began a two-month siege of the Middle Egyptian city of Minya that ended in a total defeat for the Mamluks. Pressured by the Albanians the sultan’s viceroy Khurshid Pasha sent for 3,000 Kurdish troops from Syria to bolster his rule. The Kurds took little interest in his plight and spent most of their time raping, kidnapping, and plundering the Egyptians. By June Khurshid was cornered in the Citadel. The besiegers were his own subjects, angered by his misrule and loudly demanding the installation of Muhammad ‘Ali as viceroy. The Ottoman sultan faced reality and made the appointment. It was a decision that the sultan and his successors would have many opportunities to regret over the next four decades.

British Invasion: 1807

With the resumption of war in Europe between France and Russia, Britain became concerned with the possibility of another French invasion of Egypt. British intelligence reported that the Turks, Albanians, and Mamluks of Egypt were incapable of fighting European troops and a small force of 4,000 to 5,000 British troops could simply march to Cairo with little opposition. The British military continued to support the Mamluk option for governance in Egypt and landed a force of 5,300 men at Alexandria in March 1807. The expedition had been hastily assembled in Sicily and included battalions from the Sussex and Dorsetshire Infantry Regiments, a battalion of the 78th Highlanders, the 20th Light Dragoons, the Chasseurs Britanniques, the Swiss Germans and the Alsatians of the De Roll Regiment, and the Royal Sicilian Regiment (which appears to have done little fighting). The Chasseurs Britanniques were an odd unit, created after the French Revolution from Royalist exiles (the officers) and French deserters and prisoners of war (the rank and file). They usually deserted at the first opportunity despite the strict discipline imposed by the Royalist French officers. The De Roll Regiment was named for its founder, Baron De Roll, and was first raised in 1794 in Switzerland. Both the Chasseurs Britannique and the De Roll Regiment had taken part in the 1801 campaign in Egypt. The fleet was commanded by Sir John Duckworth, and the troops by General Alexander MacKenzie-Fraser. After a four-day battle the Egyptian governor of Alexandria surrendered, but most of the garrison escaped.

The British sought to create an alliance with Mamluk Bey Muhammad al-Alfi, who had visited London as a Mamluk representative in 1803. They discovered that al-Alfi Bey was already dead, but invited other Mamluks
to join them instead. The viceroy was busy fighting Mamluks in Upper Egypt at the time, but managed to negotiate a truce in this campaign to apply his full attention to the British invaders. MacKenzie-Fraser’s attempts to occupy the Delta region were repulsed several times with heavy British losses. On the first attempt to take the port of Rosetta, a British force led by Major-General Wauchope occupied an apparently empty town. When they split up to explore the narrow streets, the garrison threw open the wooden lattice windows of the buildings’ upper stories and opened up a terrible fire on the British. Nearly 200 British lives were lost, including the man who led them into the trap, General Wauchope.

Muhammad ‘Ali realized that it would be impossible to drive the British out of Alexandria by force, so in return for British recognition he offered the London government everything it could have hoped to gain from the Mamluks: grain for the British army, favorable trading rights, and secure lines of communication to India. The pro-Mamluk faction in the British military prevailed, however, and the war resumed with further British losses at the hands of the viceroy’s Turkish and Albanian troops.
A much larger force of 2,500 men was now sent to take Rosetta. Once at Rosetta a general bombardment was opened up, but the British artillery had little effect on the ancient town walls. The garrison responded with their own artillery and frequent damaging cavalry sorties. At nearby al-Hamad De Roll’s Regiment of Swiss Germans was nearly destroyed in an Egyptian attack. Lt. Col. MacLeod rushed to the scene with two companies of the 35th Regiment and one company of the 78th Highlanders. In the early morning mist of April 21, 1807, a huge flotilla of boats descended on the British position, unleashing thousands of Turkish and Albanian fighters. The British deployments were uncoordinated in the confusion, and the men were soon overwhelmed in brutal hand-to-hand fighting. When the British and their German allies had spent the last of their ammunition, the Turks and Albanians broke the square and began a massacre, though many of the men sold their lives dearly.

When the extent of this disaster became clear to the British command, it was decided to lift the siege of Rosetta and withdraw to Alexandria. The siege guns so laboriously dragged to Rosetta by British sailors over rough terrain were now spiked and buried in the sand. When the British began to withdraw in a square the tables turned, and now the besieged poured out of Rosetta to launch repeated attacks on the British. After 12 hours of constant assaults, the Egyptian garrison finally broke off.

After this second British defeat 120 prisoners were taken to Cairo together with the heads of over 100 British soldiers. The viceroy led a victory march of his men and prisoners between rows of British heads stuck on pikes, but the public display was meant only to demonstrate his power to the people of Cairo. The ever-calculating viceroy was eager to reach a settlement with the British (whose ability to send fresh armies he fully realized), so he ensured that his prisoners were treated well above the standards of the time.

Following a negotiated peace treaty between France and Russia, the British pulled their troops out in September 1807 leaving Alexandria once again in the viceroy’s hands. Prisoners were exchanged, but as many as 50 of the British troops were not included and left behind to begin a new life as slaves. The precise reason is unknown; some may have died in captivity, but it has also been suggested that the British did not desire the return of men who had converted to Islam. Among them was Private Thomas Keith of Edinburgh, who was sold into the household Mamluks of Tussun, a son of Muhammad ‘Ali. Converting to Islam, Keith took the name Ibrahim Agha and quickly rose to the position of commander of Tussun’s cavalry. The only other known to us was a Perthshire drummer boy named William Thomson, a remarkable individual who made the best of his situation. Given the name Osman, he became well-known for his fighting talents, his medical skills, and his mastery of Arabic and Turkish. As a Cairo gentleman he assembled a harem, dealt in real estate and
slaves, and worked as a Mamluk guard and translator for the British Embassy.

The Mamluks were not prepared to relinquish their claims to power and rose in rebellion against the viceroy in 1810. Muhammad ‘Ali inflicted a heavy defeat on the rebels at the battle of the Bridge of al-Lahun, followed by attempts at reconciliation. The viceroy’s bribes and appointments failed to prevent the Mamluks from continuing to conspire against him. In Muhammad Ali’s mind the Mamluks were already a dead institution—it remained only to make this a reality.

The Wahhabi Threat to the Holy Cities

In the mid-eighteenth century a new threat to the Ottoman Empire was growing in the deserts of Arabia. In the centuries since the Prophet Muhammad had introduced Islam to the Arabian people, the religion had spread to new peoples often far from its Arabian homeland. In doing so, it had often absorbed local customs and rites so that its practice varied widely. A purification movement was inevitable, and that it arose in the Arabian heartland of Islam is unsurprising.

The puritan Wahhabi movement was founded by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1787). The movement rejected Shi‘ism and all innovations to the creed of Islam, including the worship of saints and religious leaders, including the Prophet Muhammad. When ‘Abd al-Wahhab secured the support of the ruler of the Najd region, Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud, the future of his movement was assured. In the alliance they formed ibn Sa‘ud and his descendants would represent the political arm of an Islamic state spiritually regulated by the Wahhabists. It is an arrangement that survives to this day in the only state named for its ruling family, Sa‘udi Arabia.

By the 1790s Wahhabist rule extended over most of the Arabian Peninsula. The Sa‘udi-led tribes displayed their growing confidence by attacking Iraq, Syria, and the Hijaz. In 1802 the Wahhabis sacked the Shi‘ite holy city of Karbala in Iraq, destroying the holy places and massacring the men. By 1805 their leader, Sa‘ud ibn ‘Abd al-Aziz, controlled both the Holy Cities of Mecca and Madina (where the Wahhabis vandalized the Tomb of the Prophet), a humiliating situation for the Ottoman sultan, who styled himself the protector of these places. Counteroffensives by the Ottoman governor of the Hijaz and the Georgian Mamluks of Iraq were unsuccessful in curbing the Sa‘udis, who began to interfere with the annual pilgrimage to the Holy Cities. Unwilling to offer either temporal or spiritual allegiance to the sultan and caliph in Istanbul, the Wahhabis forced the sultan to turn to the ruler of Egypt, who was traditionally responsible for security in the Hijaz.
Unhappy about the expense of a campaign in Arabia, Muhammad ‘Ali nevertheless realized that he now had an opportunity to rid himself of the offensive Albanians. It was made clear to his commanders that the Albanians sent to Arabia were utterly expendable. By sending them piecemeal to their deaths in the desert, the pasha was able to gradually replace their ranks with disciplined Egyptians of the new army.

Muhammad ‘Ali also saw an opportunity to consolidate control of both sides of the Red Sea. Though most of the Arabian coast was under the Ottoman sultan’s control, the Ottoman presence in the area had been in decline for decades. For the Arabian campaign it was clear that the viceroy would require a navy, a notable innovation in a country with no seafaring tradition, or even any wood suitable to build one. The viceroy still required the sultan’s permission to build his navy, and this was given reluctantly.

Egypt’s only Red Sea port was Suez, at the north end of the Red Sea. Unfortunately this area was entirely devoid of the materials and infrastructure necessary for the creation of a shipyard. Most of the required materials were bought in the Mediterranean region, but the Suez Canal had not yet been cut, leaving camel caravan as the only means of delivering the needed goods to Suez. There were only two alternatives: sail the completed ships around Africa to Suez or disassemble the completed ships for caravan transport to Suez. Taking an inexperienced fleet through the treacherous waters off the west coast of Africa and around the Cape was out of the question. In the viceroy’s first attempt to order a ship to make the passage, the crew simply refused. The caravan method was within Egyptian means and might have proceeded smoothly but for the raiding Bedouin, who were extremely pleased to find so much firewood being transported through their wild and treeless domain. Despite the losses, the bulk of the fleet was eventually transported and reassembled in this laborious fashion.

A more concerted attempt to circumnavigate the continent was made in 1810, when Captain Isma’il Gibraltar was given command of a purpose-built corvette named *Africa*. The 50-year-old captain had dwelt in Europe, spoke French and Italian, and was open to European innovations, making him a valuable asset to the viceroy. The captain headed first to London, where English agents had convinced him supplies and an experienced pilot would be waiting. By the time of his arrival, however, the British no longer had any interest (if they ever did) in aiding this prestige-building exercise for the Egyptian Navy. The *Africa* returned to Alexandria.

For the design of his fleet the viceroy relied on Greeks and Italians, while Turks and Egyptians provided most of the workforce. Most of the ships were of two types, the corvette and the “brick” (brig). The 200-ton corvettes carried 50 cannons. Alternatively, the corvette could be
converted into a mobile platform for mortars, capable of shelling the interior of a coastal fort. The brick was half the size of the corvette and carried 20 cannons. Among the disassembled ships arriving at Suez were a handful of antique galleys donated by the pasha of Tripoli (modern Libya). Smaller and more maneuverable in the waters of the Red Sea than the brick, these ships were powered by hundreds of galley slaves. The fleet was augmented with commercial dhows seized in Egyptian-controlled ports. Before Muhammad ‘Ali could commit his army to a foreign campaign, however, he still needed to deal with the Mamluks.

Destruction of the Mamluks: 1811

Muhammad ‘Ali was not a native of Egypt. He inherited no ingrained respect for the proud Mamluks—he was well aware that their power had been forever broken on French bayonets at the Battle of the Pyramids. The Mamluks were now more of a political nuisance than a military threat, as they had learned nothing about the necessity of unity from their defeat by the French. Muhammad ‘Ali had no intention of serving as viceroy at the will of the Mamluks. Their incessant braying for privileges and money had no place in the new Egypt the pasha was beginning to envision. It was time to break the Mamluks and consign them to history once and for all.

The viceroy now hatched a scheme to destroy the Mamluks. All the Mamluk leaders were invited to bring their household troops to take part in a magnificent procession and feast at the Citadel on March 1, 1811. The occasion was the announcement of the pasha’s son Tussun as commander of the Arabian expedition. Assembled in their finest, the nearly 500 Mamluks wound down the narrow roadway that leads from the Citadel to the Bab al-‘Azab, the western gate of the Citadel. The Ottoman troops that preceded the Mamluks passed through the gate and then slammed it shut. Albanians sprung up from positions atop the high walls that flanked the roadway and began a methodical fire into the trapped mass of dying horses and Mamluks that continued until every last one was dead. Proving the Mamluks were slow to learn, the whole massacre was similar to one the pasha had conducted against the Mamluks in the narrow streets of Cairo in 1805.

Those Mamluks wise enough to avoid the ceremony were quickly rounded up and decapitated. Others outside the capital headed south for the safety of Nubia, still out of reach for the pasha. A smaller number of Mamluks reached safety in Libya where they abandoned ideas of a return to Egypt and founded the prosperous settlement of Misrata.

The events of 1811 did not bring a complete end to the Mamluk system in Egypt. Even under Muhammad ‘Ali and his nineteenth century
successors, slaves continued to be shipped from the Caucasus to Egypt for military training and absorption into the royal household. Their numbers were smaller and the institution less prominent, but the practice perpetuated a ruling foreign elite that excluded native Egyptian representation.

The Arabian Expedition: 1811–1812

When his ships were ready, Muhammad ‘Ali sent 15,000 infantry to the Arabian port of Yanbu under the command of his 17-year-old son, Tussun. Despite his years, Tussun was already a veteran of fighting against the Mamluks. Second in command was Ahmad Agha “Bonaparte,” an Albanian as notorious for his depravity as his fierceness in battle. Theologians from al-Azhar University accompanied the Albanian soldiers across the Red Sea to the port of Yanbu to deliver correct interpretations of Islam to the renegade Wahhabis. Two thousand Turkish horsemen followed by the land route along the Arabian Red Sea coast.

Soon after his arrival the inexperienced Tussun led his army into a disastrous ambush at Wadi Safra while marching to Madina. Two days from Yanbu the army entered a series of mountain passes dominated by the Harb tribe. The Harb skirmishers engaged the Egyptian army several times before falling back. Tussun pursued them into a narrow ravine. Suddenly 10,000 Wahhabis filled the crests of the canyon before falling on their prey. Tussun’s troops scrambled to return to the entrance of the canyon as the Arabs poured fire into them. Instead of protecting their rear the cavalry raced the infantry for the exit. Over and over Tussun and his Mamluk Thomas Keith plunged with sabre and horse into the advancing Arabs, but neither example nor appeals could lure the troops back to the fight. Only the vast loot left behind by the retreating troops prevented the Arabs from pursuing and destroying the column. Men half crazed from thirst straggled into Yanbu for days, while their less fortunate companions lay strewn across the sandy wastes.

In October 1812 Tussun was ready to try again. He led his men through the same passes, this time without incident, and put Wahhabi-held Madina to siege. After several weeks a mine brought down part of the city walls and Thomas Keith led the Egyptian troops through the breach. Those Arabs who were unable to reach the safety of the citadel were slaughtered in the streets, followed by a thorough looting of the city. The 1,500 defenders were promised 300 camels and safe passage to return to the Najd, but few of the camels materialized and the Turks and Albanians pursued the disarmed Arabs into the desert. Only a few managed to escape.

By January 1812 Mecca (a mere shadow of itself after ten years of Wahhabi occupation) was taken without resistance. The pilgrimage, which
had been suspended by the Wahhabis, resumed in November. Scattered fighting continued in the Hijaz, which was still unsettled when Muhammad ‘Ali arrived in September 1813 with fresh troops and camels. Supply of the latter became a major problem as the pasha’s Albanian and Turkish troops knew nothing of the beast and the offered wages were too meager to entice experienced Bedouin to take on their handling.

In 1813 the Egyptians made two unsuccessful expeditions to take the city of Taraba, headquarters of the Baqum Arabs. The Baqum were led by a formidable woman named Ghaliyah, the widow of their former chief. After her first victory rumors began to spread in the Egyptian army that she was a sorceress who slept with all the Wahhabi leaders, making them invincible. After the second expedition (led by Tussun) failed to take the city on the first attack, the men refused to fight anymore in a cause doomed by the occult powers wielded by Ghaliyah. Again Tussun found his men lacking in comparison to the courage he himself displayed. A retreat from Taraba became a rout when the Baqum Bedouin launched lightning strikes against the column’s flanks and rear. Equipment and provisions were abandoned as 700 of Tussun’s 2,000 men perished in a disorderly dash through waterless and hostile territory.

A seaborne expedition to the Hijaz port of Qunfidah met with a similar disaster, losing most of its troops, guns, horses, camels, and baggage to a Wahhabi attack. The commander, Saym Oghlu, was in such a rush to leave that he ordered the ships to sail while his men were still swimming to them. In late 1814 an expedition of Albanian troops led by their commander ‘Abdin Bey was caught sleeping in their camp by a Wahhabi attack. Again they fled without their guns and goods, losing most of their strength to death and desertion on the way. By this point Muhammad ‘Ali may have been thinking of how to replace this undisciplined rabble with a more modern and reliable force. The losses of men and equipment were becoming an intolerable drain on the treasury.

The Arabian Campaign of 1815

In January 1815 Muhammad ‘Ali decided to lead his men personally into the interior to deal with the Wahhabis. The expedition, reinforced by Libyan cavalry (Egypt was running low on troops) set off from Mecca, but had difficulty engaging the Wahhabi tribesmen, who preferred the quick strikes and flight of guerrilla warfare. These tactics were very effective against the slow-moving column, and soon deserters began to return to Mecca spreading rumors of defeat. Not far from Ta’if the viceroy shelled the fortified town of Biselah, a stronghold of the Wahhabis. The Egyptian army then retired in apparent confusion, enticing the Wahhabis to leave Biselah in pursuit of an easy victory and the rich loot that would
fall into their hands. The retreat was a trap, however, designed to lure the Arabs into the plain beneath the mountains. The viceroy’s cavalry turned about with Muhammad ‘Ali himself in the lead and shattered the disorganized Arabs. With the enemy on the run Muhammad ‘Ali offered six dollars² for every Wahhabi head, and his ferocious soldiers eventually deposited 5,000 heads in front of his tent.

In the following days the viceroy’s men took the town of Taraba from the “sorceress” Ghaliyah (who escaped) and the port of Qunfidah. The region was cleared of Wahhabi opposition, but the campaign was taking a terrible toll of men and animals. Muhammad ‘Ali turned back to Mecca with 300 Wahhabi prisoners and only 1,500 of the original 4,000 men of the column. In celebration of his victory the viceroy had 50 of his prisoners (who had been promised quarter) impaled outside the gates of Mecca. The remaining prisoners were similarly impaled in smaller groups at every coffeehouse and resting place on the road to Jiddah. No one was allowed to touch the bodies, which were left to be devoured by wild animals.

Tussun was now governor of the holy city of Madina, but was beginning to show unwelcome signs of independence from his father, going so far as beheading the viceroy’s agent in Madina. When Muhammad ‘Ali arrived in Madina in April 1815 he found Tussun gone to campaign against the Wahhabis in Qasim, leaving Thomas Keith behind as acting governor of Madina. The viceroy sent Keith with 250 Turkish cavalry to join Tussun, but they were ambushed on the way by a vastly larger force of Wahhabis. Keith slew four men before falling under the onslaught; his death was regretted even by the Wahhabi leader ibn Sa’ud, who admired his bravery.

Tussun and ibn Sa’ud chose to negotiate rather than fight, as neither side saw a chance for a clear victory. The Wahhabis renounced their claims to Mecca and Madina, agreed to give safe passage to caravans crossing their territory, and promised to recognize the authority of the Ottoman sultan. Tussun relinquished control of the Qasim region and recognized Wahhabi control of the northern tribes of Arabia. Unaware of Tussun’s actions, Muhammad ‘Ali returned to Cairo to deal with the uncertain political situation following Napoleon’s final defeat in Europe.

Ibrahim’s Destruction of the Wahhabis

In the coming months both Muhammad ‘Ali and ‘Abdullah ibn Sa’ud showed little interest in establishing peaceful relations. The viceroy refused to ratify the treaty Tussun had concluded with the Wahhabis and made a new demand for the rich province of Hasa on the Persian
Gulf. Ibn Sa’ud gave no sign of allegiance to the Ottoman sultan and severely punished anyone he believed was collaborating with the “Turks.” Relations deteriorated and news of a revolt in the Hijaz gave sufficient cause for a new expedition to Arabia. Tussun returned to Cairo and a cold reception from his father in November 1815 and died of plague at Rosetta in September of the following year. Muhammad ‘Ali gave command of the new expedition to another son, Ibrahim, who a few years earlier had pursued the Mamluks into the Sudan. The expeditionary force consisted of nearly 8,000 men, including Turks, Circassians, Albanians, North Africans, and Bedouin irregulars. There were also two French staff officers. The decision to give Ibrahim the command is the focus of a famous (but likely apocryphal) story that reveals something of Ibrahim’s reputation for cunning. The viceroy was said to have called all his commanders together around a carpet with an apple set in the center. The apple represented the Wahhabi capital of Dar‘iya and the carpet the desert. Their task was to pluck the apple without setting foot on the carpet. All failed until Ibrahim offered to try. Taking hold of the edge, Ibrahim rolled the carpet up until he reached the center and easily grabbed the apple. “Rolling up the tribes” was the method he proposed to use in reaching Dar‘iya.

Ibrahim landed his army in the Hijaz in September 1816. Threats, bribery, and violence managed to bring a number of tribes into the Egyptian camp, and from these Ibrahim recruited 6,000 mounted infantry. On the advance into the desert interior these local recruits were placed at the head of the army to do all the fighting alongside the Bedouin irregulars while Ibrahim kept his expeditionary force in reserve. The expedition’s three guns were carried slung between pairs of camels. Refusal to cooperate was unacceptable to Ibrahim; when members of the ‘Ataybah tribe attempted to flee with all their animals, Ibrahim pursued them and dealt the first sword blow in the massacre himself.

In the scorching heat of a July day in 1817 a column of the army under Auzun ‘Ali met 10,000 camel-mounted tribesmen under ‘Abdullah ibn Sa’ud’s command at the wells of Mawiyah. The Egyptian guns did terrible work among the massed Arabs, and the battle turned into a slaughter with the Egyptian cavalry sweeping the tribesmen from the field. Ibrahim arrived just as Auzun ‘Ali’s men were collecting ears from the dead and dying. Ibrahim’s next target was the walled town of Rass, which guarded the approach to the Wahhabi heartland in Najd. In a siege of over three months Ibrahim lost 900 dead and 1,000 wounded in fruitless attempts to storm the earthen walls of Rass. At one point a breach was made in the walls and Ibrahim’s men poured into the outer ditch below. They were unable, however, to scale the other side of the ditch into the gap and began to take heavy casualties from Arab fire. When the men attempted to retreat, Ibrahim moved up with several of his personal Mamluks and
opened fire on his own soldiers. Iron discipline and Ibrahim’s will alone were not capable of taking Rass, and eventually Ibrahim was forced to abandon his siege in return for the town’s neutrality in the conflict.

‘Abdullah retired to Dar’iya while Ibrahim marched on steadily, winning small victories and always consolidating his gains before moving on. When towns were taken, they were opened up to plunder and slaughter by Ibrahim’s troops. In this fashion Ibrahim did not reach the walls of Dar’iya until April 1818. Dar’iya was well fortified by a determined force of Wahhabis. Ibrahim had accumulated a formidable collection of mortars, howitzers, and field guns and began a ten-day bombardment of the defenses. An accidental ignition of the ammunition dump postponed the attack for two months until new shells could be brought up by camel.

Reduced to only half of his original force by September, ‘Abdullah held only the town’s citadel. A final assault drove ‘Abdullah and 200 followers deep into the citadel where they endured a three-day bombardment before surrendering. ‘Abdullah ibn Sa’ud was dispatched to Istanbul rather than Cairo for execution, a gesture of the viceroy’s submission to the sultan. Unwilling to repent of his interpretation of Islam, ‘Abdullah’s head was crushed in a mortar and his body hung for public display. After its leaders were subjected to all manner of creative tortures and methods of execution, Dar’iya was reduced to rubble, its date trees cut down, and the town and its hinterland entirely depopulated. The once prosperous and impressive town was never rebuilt.

Expedition to the Siwa Oasis: 1819

Siwa was the last of the five oases of the Western Desert to come under Egyptian control. Famously xenophobic, Siwa was occupied by people of Berber descent speaking a unique Berber dialect. By the Late Period of Ancient Egypt (747–525 B.C.) the Oasis was home to the Oracle of Amun, which became famous throughout the ancient world. Amun was the chief god of Egypt, and his cult would eventually spread into Greece. In 331 B.C., Alexander the Great visited Siwa, where the Oracle allegedly declared him the “Son of Amun.” When Persian King Cambyses conquered Egypt in 525 B.C., he sent an army to destroy the Oracle. Somewhere between Kharga Oasis and Siwa the entire expedition disappeared without trace. It is commonly believed that one of the great sandstorms of the Western Desert buried the entire force.

In 1819 Muhammad ‘Ali decided to bring Siwa Oasis under his control and dispatched an army of 1,000 to 2,000 men under the command of Hassan Bey Shamashurghi. Aside from a small group of artillerymen, most of the expedition was composed of Bashi-Bazouk irregulars and Bedouin. Hassan Bey’s artillery proved decisive in a three-hour battle that ended
the independence of the Siwans. A score of shaykhs were executed and another score exiled. A tribute was imposed, which the Siwans paid reluctantly and sporadically. A second expedition was required in 1829 that treated the Siwans ruthlessly, seizing nearly anything of value for back payment of tribute and the soldiers’ own personal enrichment. Relations continued to be restive between the Siwans and Cairo and several punitive expeditions were sent out in the coming years.
Muhammad ‘Ali was not deceived by the victories of his army in Arabia. The example of the French army in Egypt and the pasha’s own experience in fighting alongside British troops left an indelible impression. Modernization of his army along the European pattern was clearly the only choice if he was to solidify his rule. In 1815 Muhammad ‘Ali made his first attempt at forming a new model army, but his choice of Albanian troops as the raw material was unwise. The Albanians were gathered at the Citadel for their training, but when it leaked out that the pasha intended to introduce French drill and tight European-style uniforms, the Albanians began to plot the pasha’s death. Though their attempt was foiled, the Albanians burst into the streets of Cairo, looting and destroying as they went. The experiment had lasted two days. The indiscipline of the Albanians tormented the pasha, who was still reliant on them to enforce his rule in Egypt. Too many of the Albanians regarded themselves as equals to the pasha for his liking and were prone to violent street riots whenever some group desired its back pay or a return to Albania.

The Flight of the Mamluks

After the massacre at the Citadel most of the surviving Mamluks fled to Lower Nubia, including the Mamluk leader Ibrahim Bey. From there many were forced by Muhammad ‘Ali forces into the Eastern Desert, where they were separated from their goods by the ‘Ababda Arabs. Most struggled to reach the perceived safety of the Sudan, beyond the reach of Muhammad ‘Ali. Even a distant exile in the Sudan, however, was insufficient for Muhammad ‘Ali, who was determined to stamp out the Mamluk challenge to his rule. His son, Ibrahim, was charged with their destruction. In the first command of his long military career Ibrahim caught a
large party of Mamluks at Wadi Kostamneh, south of Aswan. Ibrahim’s attack broke the surviving Mamluks into two groups. Continuing south, the Mamluks reunited at the Third Cataract. By this time the force amounted to no more than 300 Mamluks with slave retainers.

Isolated in a strange and hostile country with no possibility of return, the Mamluks now fell back on their considerable skills in treachery and deception. They inserted themselves into every local conflict, making and breaking alliances, all the while plundering the countryside. Eventually the Mamluks made their headquarters in a small village at the north end of the Dongola region. A small Mamluk state was established in territory carved from the dominions of the Sha’iqiya Arabs. The “fever” that claimed many of their numbers was undoubtedly the malaria endemic to the farmlands of Dongola. Among the dead was Ibrahim Bey. Unused to the crippling heat of a Nubian summer, the Mamluks spent the summer days on fixed rafts in the river.

The Sha’iqiya warriors gave the intruders no peace. The Mamluks decided on decisive action, forming a war party to strike into the Sha’iqiya homeland. Once the Mamluks were on their way, the Sha’iqiya raided New Dongola and its tiny garrison of Mamluks. The Mamluk expedition was forced to send half of its strength back to New Dongola. The remainder met the Sha’iqiya in battle at Jabal Tamaka where their diminished numbers were unable to seize a complete victory, but inflicted enough damage to dissuade further Sha’iqiya attacks.

The Egyptian Expeditionary Force

The army assembled by Muhammad ‘Ali had no Egyptian component, save for the contingent of Arab Bedouin of the Eastern Desert, who in any case did not consider themselves “Egyptians.” Entrusted to the command of the viceroy’s 22-year-old son Isma’il, the expeditionary force consisted of some 4,000 men. Second in command was a trusted Albanian, ‘Abdin Bey. Turkish infantry and cavalry formed the core, joined by Arab irregulars from Upper Egypt, Maghrabi volunteers, Bosnian infantry, and the usual collection of Ottoman bashi-bazouks, loosely disciplined irregulars from a variety of sources, in this case mostly Albanians, Kurds, Slavs, and Circassians. Seven hundred ‘Ababda Arabs joined the expedition at Aswan to provide the camel transport. Long the masters of the desert trade routes between Egypt and the Sudan, the ‘Ababda parlayed this service into a role as a desert police force in return for a 10 percent tax on Sudanese exports to Egypt passing through their lands.

A battery of 12 guns was under the command of a Massachusetts American, George Bethune English. A colorful if not well-liked character, English was a Harvard graduate and member of the bar before turning his
attention to theology. His studies led to disenchantment with Christianity, leading to the expression of his doubts in a book entitled *The Grounds of Christianity Examined* (Boston, 1813). His restless nature led to enlistment as a lieutenant in the U.S. Marines. The Marines sent him to the Mediterranean, where he resigned his commission, turned Muslim, and joined the army of Muhammad ‘Ali under the name Muhammad Effendi.
Among his innovations were the use of camels to pull artillery and an attempt to reintroduce the ancient scythe-armed war chariot. English was accompanied on the expedition by another American convert to Islam, W. S. Bradish, who went by the name Khalil Agha.

The viceroy’s intelligence accurately reported that the various tribes and feudal chiefs of the Nile region would not unite even in the face of an Egyptian invasion, but seems to have overestimated the wealth and importance of the Blue Nile kingdom of Sinnar, which was already in its last stages of disintegration.

Muhammad ‘Ali had several aims in his Sudanese campaign aside from the elimination of the Mamluks. Thousands of black slaves were required for his effort to build a new army with no other allegiance than to himself. Gold was another objective of the campaign. The viceroy had been convinced by European prospectors that the Sudan had vast reserves of the precious metal. The acquisition of slaves remained the first priority, even over the procurement of gold or taxes.

The End of the Mamluks

News of the approach of Isma’il’s army alarmed the remaining 80 Mamluks in Dongola. It was time to move even farther into the African interior. The Mamluks intended to strike across the ancient shortcut across the Bayuda Desert from Kurti. The Sha’iqiya were not content to let this troublesome group leave their lands without retribution and prepared an ambush. Though small in number, the Mamluks were not yet a spent force. They took the Sha’iqiya by surprise, taking many prisoners who were promptly beheaded. When they regained the Nile, the Mamluks sought refuge with the mek of Shendi, about 100 miles north of modern Khartoum. When the mek ordered them out of his territory, there was disagreement over what to do next. The small group broke up, most heading off to the east or west, many destined never to be heard from again. A few had seen enough of this harsh and inhospitable land and tried to return surreptitiously to Egypt through the Nubian Desert. They were intercepted by the Bishariyin Arabs who slaughtered them to a man. Others wound up in Kordofan, where they appealed unsuccessfully to the Fur Sultan for help.

The Sha’iqiya

Among the Arab tribes that swept into the Sudan between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries was the Sha’iqiya, part of the great Ja’ali group of tribes. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the Sha’iqiya had gained their independence from the Kingdom of Sinnar, making most
of the Dongola region their own. Their constant raiding and pillaging drove much of the population into Kordofan and Darfur. As their power expanded in Nubia, the Sha’iqiya built castles atop the rocky cliffs bordering the Nile where they nearly destroyed the river-borne trade through extortion and plunder. Nubians were forced to do the agricultural labor and provide the infantry for the Sha’iqiya armies. The Sha’iqiya recognized no single king, but were divided into two greater and two lesser kingdoms. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the Sha’iqiya were pressing south at the expense of the King of Shendi, Mek Nimr.

The Egyptian army passed through Lower Nubia without opposition until it reached the northern boundaries of Sha’iqiya territory. Born and bred as cavalrymen, the Sha’iqiya refused Isma’il’s demand that they make their submission by turning over their arms and horses. Isma’il further ordered them to abandon warfare and cultivate the land like their Nubian servants. The Sha’iqiya rallied under the leadership of Malik Sha’us and outnumbered Isma’il’s force four to one. Their earlier experience with the Mamluks gave them no fear of the northerners. The Sha’iqiya attitude to war was described by a traveler who accompanied the expedition:

They (the Sha’iqiya) are singularly fearless in attack, and ride up to the very faces of their enemy with levity and gaiety of heart as to a festival, or with joy as if to meet friends from whom they had been long separated; they then give the “Salam Aleikum!” “Peace be with you!”—the peace of death, which is to attend the lance that instantly follows the salutation: mortal thrusts are given and received, with the words of love upon the lips. This contempt of life, this mockery of what is most fearful, is peculiar to themselves—the only people to whom arms are playthings and war a sport; who among their enemies seek nothing but amusement, and in death fear nothing but repose.1

The typical Sha’iqiya horseman fought with two lances, a crusader-style straight sword, and a hippopotamus hide shield. The amirs wore armor and often carried antique handguns, more as a badge of rank than a weapon. Unlike the Mamluks, however, Isma’il’s force did not rely on the “white arms” alone. The Sha’iqiya were about to have a cruel introduction to the power of gunpowder.

Passing Old Dongola (where Isma’il was nearly killed in a sudden attack) the army reached the town of Kurti on November 4, 1820, where a Bedouin reconnaissance party of 100 men was almost entirely wiped out. The two armies now faced each other across open ground, a fine field for cavalry charges, but also perfect for field artillery. At the head of the Sha’iqiya army was a young girl on a richly decorated camel. It was she who gave the signal to attack, a tradition that may have been rooted in the exploits of a late seventeenth century Sha’iqiya woman named ‘Azila, legendary for her martial skills and presence in the thick of every fight.
The sign given, the Sha’iqiya began a magnificent charge, thundering down on the North African and Bedouin advance ranks with a determination to make swift work of these impetuous northerners. The Egyptian front ranks began to disintegrate under the force of the charge, and only a series of counter charges by the cavalry of ‘Abdin Bey kept the Sha’iqiya from breaking through. Isma’il’s army regrouped and began to pour volleys into the close ranks of attacking Arab cavalry and Nubian infantry. Many of the Nubians appeared to be drunk, some even carrying bottles of liquor as they charged. The Sha’iqiya attack broke, leaving some 50 Sha’iqiya and 600 to 800 Nubians dead on the field. Isma’il’s artillery played no part in the battle, as the guns, shot, and charges following the army by boat did not reach the battle in time. The artillery’s American commander, George English, was stricken with ophthalmia at Wadi Halfa and did not rejoin the army until after the battles with the Sha’iqiya were over.

Isma’il’s victory was sullied by the disgraceful aftermath of the battle. Eager to please his father, Isma’il had promised 50 piastres for every pair of ears collected from the enemy. Once the dead had been mutilated his troops set upon the living, spreading out through the neighboring villages to collect the ears of fleeing Sha’iqiya warriors, women and children alike. Many of their victims were slain, and as the ears piled up before him Isma’il realized the import of his orders. Even Isma’il’s Greek doctor applied his skills in the bloody work. The viceroy’s son was unable to control his troops, but did manage to gather 600 earless women and send them to an island in the Nile where they could be safe from the further torments of his soldiers. Villages were set alight and everything of value seized by the victors. When the viceroy received the sacks of unwanted ears in Cairo, he upbraided his son, comparing his actions unfavorably to the conduct of modern armies like that of the French and British and reminding him that “one cannot achieve one’s goal without winning the hearts of the people.”

Jabal Daiqa: December 2, 1820

Fired by a burning resentment of Egyptian brutality, the Sha’iqiya did not make their submission, but gathered anew at Jabal Daiqa on the other side of the Nile. By now though, Isma’il’s 150 boats had caught up with the army, bringing the artillery with them. The boats were used to take the army across the river where the Sha’iqiya awaited on the slopes of the jabal. Malik Sha’us had lost most of his infantry at Kurti and was forced to arm untrained peasants. Unused to battle, these recruits were given courage by fikis, rural holy men specializing in spells and magic potions. Before the battle the fikis covered the infantry with sacred dust
that would render them invulnerable to the weapons of the Egyptians. As they advanced against their enemy, the Egyptian guns opened up, their shells ripping through the closely packed peasant infantry. Against all odds the infantry and the Sha‘iqiya cavalry reached the artillery several times, striking down some of the gunners before being blown apart at point-blank range. Under the terrible fire of the Egyptians, the Sha‘iqiya realized their blessing was ineffective and eventually turned round to save themselves. The Egyptian cavalry now entered the battle, creating mayhem among the hapless foot soldiers. After the battle many of the cavalrymen were astonished at both the strength of the hippopotamus hide shields and the fortitude of the infantrymen who refused to fall until they had been shot several times. Malik Sha‘us led the remainder of his cavalry away to fight another day. Massacres again followed the victory.

The army began collecting camels for the next stage of the campaign, a march across the Bayuda Desert to Berber. Reinforcements were sent from Cairo, and the army set out in late February 1821. When he reached the Nile again Isma‘il began taking the submissions of the local rulers, most of whom had been informed of Egyptian firepower by Malik Sha‘us and his men, now taking refuge in the Shendi region. Isma‘il remained here for two months, despite constant entreaties from his father to hurry to Sinnar and finish the campaign. The viceroy even threatened to recall him and consign him to a hovel. When Mek Nimr of Shendi arrived to tender his submission, young Isma‘il barely acknowledged the existence of this 60-year-old king, offering him neither tea nor tobacco. In a region defined by its rigid code of hospitality, it was a significant humiliation.

Malik Sha‘us realized that he and his followers could not continue the resistance alone and made the dreaded submission on May 15, 1821. Sha‘us begged Isma‘il to allow the Sha‘iqiya to keep their arms and enter into Isma‘il’s service rather than be forced to till the soil. The request was granted, and from this point the Sha‘iqiya provided a reliable corps of irregular cavalry for the Turko-Egyptian administration. Malik Sha‘us was even invited to Cairo as the guest of Muhammad ‘Ali in 1827.

Conquest of the Funj Empire of Sinnar

In late May Isma‘il’s army reached the junction of the White and Blue Niles, the future site of the cities of Khartoum and Omdurman. The army was ferried across the White Nile in order to follow the Blue Nile south into the kingdom of Sinnar. Reaching the capital they found no armies but only a young King Badi VI ready to make his submission. Sinnar itself was in an advanced state of decay, a collection of abandoned buildings and grass huts. The Great Mosque, once the pride of Sinnar, was still in a tolerable state but was used mainly as a stable for animals. After all
the trials and difficulties of the march, it was a miserable triumph. With the arrival of the summer rainy season Isma’il now paid for his leisurely progress up the Nile. The rains turned everything to mud, and the troops became afflicted with unfamiliar diseases. In the unbearable heat even the dead went unburied. Venereal disease ran rampant through the ranks. The army’s Greek and Piedmontese medical team was barely competent to begin with, but since all its equipment and drugs were sold in Cairo to settle the debts of Isma’il’s personal doctor, there was little the team could do to treat any kind of wound or illness. Isma’il tried to keep his men busy by eliminating the local chiefs and princes and pursuing the collection of slaves for his father’s new army. One such party captured three recalcitrant relations of King Badi and hauled them back to Sinnar where they were barbarously impaled by Isma’il. The bodies were left on their stakes for three days, just long enough for the Sudanese witnesses to question their allegiance to a savage master. The young man who had recoiled from the ears piled before him at Kurti had lost his unease with the use of brutality.

By June the viceroy’s patience with his son had vanished. Muhammad ‘Ali’s third son, the reliable Ibrahim Pasha, was sent out from Cairo on June 10 to take command of the expedition. He arrived in late August with new instructions received along the way. War had broken out in Greece and the viceroy required as many male slaves as possible for his planned army. Ibrahim turned his considerable energy to this matter, setting up a string of boats along the navigable portions of the Nile to deliver as many male slaves to Egypt as possible. Their wives and children were shipped to the slave markets of the Hijaz to pay for the provisioning of Ibrahim’s army. The army undertook slave raids far south into the country of the Dinkas, a formidable but poorly armed tribe of Nilotic warriors. A census was taken in the fertile Jazira Region, and a permanent system of taxation and collection was installed. Before he could complete his work, Ibrahim was forced by illness to return to Cairo, his small party almost perishing of thirst in an attempt to cut across the Nubian Desert.

**Campaign of the Daftardar in Kordofan**

The expedition to take Kordofan and Darfur was entrusted to Muhammad Bey Khusraw, the viceroy’s son-in-law and treasurer (Daftardar). The campaign would begin only once Isma’il had secured Sinnar, which was one of the main reasons for Muhammad ‘Ali’s impatience with his son’s leisurely progress. A Turk in his early forties, Khusraw was described by the French travelers de Cadalvene and de Breuvery as “a tiger in human form.” The Daftardar led his army of 3,000 men and 13 guns to Dongola, where they awaited word from Sinnar. Emissaries were sent to the capital.
of Kordofan, al-‘Ubayd, to demand the submission of the governor Musallim al-Maqdum. Kordofan was at the time a province of Sultan Muhammad al-Fadl of Darfur, having been added to the Fur Empire in the second half of the eighteenth century. Musallim reminded the Daftardar of this fact as he rejected his ultimatum with an invitation to come and take what he could.

In early August 1821 the Daftardar led his army out of the town of Debba (just south of Old Dongola) and into the scorched plains of Kordofan. The army headed for Jabal al-Haraza first, but water ran low and the Daftardar was one of many who took ill from thirst and fatigue. Horses fared worse than the men, hundreds of their bodies marking the course of the Egyptian column. The shaykh of al-Haraza sent several messages to Musallim to hurry and destroy the ramshackle Egyptian force, but he refused to budge from al-‘Ubayd, giving the Daftardar and his army nearly a week to recover.

The Battle of Bara: 1821

Musallim finally brought his medieval-style army out to confront the Daftardar at Bara. In some ways the battle was similar to the action against the Sha‘iqiya at Jabal Daiqa. Unfamiliar with cannons, the sultan’s warriors rushed them with no regard for injury, slashing at them with spear and sword. Years later the Austrian mineralogist J. von Russegger was allowed to inspect the guns, where he noted the marks of sword blades. Despite displays of incredible courage, the Fur warriors were shattered before the Egyptian guns.

Like Isma’il, the Daftardar offered his soldiers a reward for every pair of ears collected. On receipt of sacks of ears, the viceroy reminded the Daftardar that such gruesome trophies were unwanted in Cairo. Among the 1,500 dead of the Fur army were 17 meks, with most of the surviving 22 being executed for their failure by the Fur sultan on their return to Darfur. Maqdum Musallim’s body was found on the field and beheaded for a prize. The Egyptians now took al-‘Ubayd and imposed severe fines on its merchants while seizing all the slaves. The Fur sultan prepared a massive military response, but treachery among his meks forced its recall to Darfur before it engaged the Daftardar’s army.

For the 350 Mamluks still in Kordofan the Daftardar’s victory meant it was time to move on. Thus began an odyssey through African lands unfamiliar to any Egyptian. They marched west to Darfur, but were pushed along like a plague to the Fur sultan’s western enemy, the Sultanate of Wadai (eastern Chad). Unwanted here as well, they were forced to sell their horses for food. They began to march northward into the Tibesti Region where their remaining arms and armor made them targets for
murder by the fierce Tebu nomads. The English explorers Denham and Clapperton encountered them in the Fezzan (Libya) in October 1822, where the survivors were attempting to make Tripoli. From this point they disappear into history.

As Muhammad ‘Ali began to gain some appreciation for the scope of his campaigns in the Sudan, he entrusted Ibrahim to make the final decision on the spot whether to continue the conquest into Darfur. Though the Frenchman Frédéric Caillaud enticed Ibrahim with promises of untold riches in an expedition through Darfur to Bornu and Niger, new demands were presenting themselves in Greece as the Ottoman sultan appealed for military assistance in subduing the Greek Revolution. The invasion of Darfur was postponed and various units withdrawn for use in the invasion of Greece. The viceroy urged the Daftardar to intensify his efforts to collect slaves by raiding the Nuba Hills of Kordofan. A dangerous region for ill-willed intruders, the Nuba Hills resisted occupation until the 1920s, but through constant raiding suffered the loss of tens of thousands of people to the slave markets of Egypt.

The Sudanese Strike Back

By October 1821 Isma’il had only 500 effectives left in his command. Most of his men adjusted poorly to the change in their diet to the local sorghum staple known as dura. The preparation of dura required hours of pounding, a task assigned when possible to female slaves. Healthy troops were occupied with implementing a new and onerous taxation system created by the Coptic official Hanna al-Tawil. Unwilling or unable to pay, the Sudanese began to flee beyond the reach of the tax collectors, leaving the best agricultural land untilled.

Near the end of 1821 Isma’il marched his men 200 miles south along the Blue Nile to Fazughli. The local mek submitted to Isma’il, turning over thousands of slaves. Isma’il now enslaved the men of Fazughli to work on fruitless gold excavations while their women and children were dragged away by the soldiers. Locals now began to pick off isolated Egyptian soldiers as anger slowly brewed into rebellion. Isma’il withdrew slightly north as similar attacks erupted up and down the Nile Valley. The able Kurdish governor of Berber Province prevented the revolt from going out of control, but it was now clear that the taxation regime could not be applied even by force. The creator of the tax scheme, Hanna al-Tawil, made a break for Egypt but was captured en route and returned to Sinnar to correct his mistakes. One of the reforms called for accepting male slaves as a means of payment. Isma’il’s father reminded him that healthy male slaves were “more valuable than jewels.”
Through 1822 the administrative skills of ‘Abdin Bey and Mahu Bey brought some effectiveness to the viceroy’s rule in the Sudan. Rebellion had been reduced to a whisper, and taxes were now flowing to Cairo. Isma’il received permission to retire to the provinces of the north Sudan and arrived by boat in Shendi in November 1822, two days ahead of his cavalry escort. Indeed, there seemed little to fear, as Shendi was well pacified and the local Ja’aili Arab mek, Nimr Muhammad, had even been part of Isma’il’s expedition to Sinnar. At Shendi Isma’il received Nimr Muhammad and made an unexpected and outrageous demand for 6,000 slaves and $30,000$² to be paid within two days. Isma’il, whose own efforts at slave raiding had been a disappointment to his father, might have irrationally seized what seemed a last chance to send large numbers of slaves to Cairo. Nimr Muhammad protested this arbitrary demand and reminded Isma’il that the Ja’aliyin were not slaves like the Egyptian fellahin. Isma’il flew into a rage and cursed Mek Nimr with every vile epithet he could imagine, bringing his fury to a climax by breaking his pipe across Nimr’s face.

Nimr restrained himself but began plotting his revenge as soon as he was out of Isma’il’s presence. Within hours bundles of dry dura stalks and brushwood began arriving outside Isma’il’s residence. When the workers started to stack these piles against the walls, Isma’il accepted the explanation that they were collected by Mek Nimr for the use of Isma’il’s men. Perhaps this explanation appealed to Isma’il, who may have imagined a trembling Nimr trying to placate his master. The truth of the situation was revealed that night, when Nimr set the forage ablaze, trapping Isma’il and his staff inside their burning house. Ja’aili tribesmen killed every Egyptian ashore before attacking the boats tied along the Nile. The tribesmen fell upon Isma’il’s cavalry escort when it arrived two days later, still unaware of the massacre. Nearly all were killed. Isma’il’s Greek doctor was recognized by some tribesmen who recalled the doctor’s glee in collecting the ears of young women two years earlier. The doctor’s teeth were pried out by spearpoint before suffering the impalement introduced by his master.

The Daftardar’s Revenge

News of the murder sparked renewed revolt along the Nile. Many garrisons fell while others withdrew to concentrate on Wad Medani. The Kurd Mahu Bey was surrounded at Berber, but repelled attacks by thousands of Arab fighters. The Sha’iqiya already formed an essential part of the Egyptian army and their defection might have brought a quick end to Egyptian occupation, but Malik Sha’us and his followers remained loyal to their pledge. The Daftardar was in danger of having his army cut off
from communications with Egypt. Matters were complicated by an unrela-
ted uprising by *fellahin* in Upper Egypt. The *Daftardar* recognized at
once that immediate action was necessary to save the situation. His army
needed reinforcements, so the *Daftardar* hired 500 Fur soldiers who would
number among his best troops in the coming campaign. The *Daftardar*
gathered his army and marched straight to the Nile with the intent of
relieving Berber and Wad Medani.

When the *Daftardar* reached Metemma (across the river from Shendi,
the epicenter of the revolt), he attended a dinner meant to introduce loyal-
est elements of the region. It was there that a nearly fatal attempt was
made on the life of the *Daftardar*. Whether on his own initiative or as an
agent of Nimr, a black slave grabbed a soldier’s spear and thrust it into
the *Daftardar* just below his shoulder, breaking off the shaft. No attempt
was made to ascertain the meaning or responsibility for the attack as the
*Daftardar*’s bodyguards focused on slowly slicing off pieces of the slave’s
body. Every local present at the dinner was slain, followed by all the
inhabitants of Metemma and then Shendi. In a nightmarish scene of hor-
ror, men were impaled, families burned alive in their homes, and children
branded and sent off to Cairo as slaves.

Berber and Wad Medani were relieved before the *Daftardar* pursued
Nimr and his people to the Abyssinian borderland. The Ja’ailiyin were
defeated several times, but Nimr escaped the *Daftardar* and settled near
the Abyssinian foothills, where he wisely remained for more than two de-
cades until his death. The Sha’iqiya were richly rewarded with lands from
the despoiled rebels. The *Daftardar* returned to Egypt where Muhammad
‘Ali eventually judged his predilection for cruelty to be a serious character
flaw. In 1833 the *Daftardar*’s career came to an abrupt end when the vice-
roy sent his son-in-law a bowl of poison, an indeclinable invitation to quit
this world.

**The Enslavement of the Sudan**

The slaves intended to fill the ranks of Muhammad ‘Ali’s army died in
their thousands on the cruel march to Egypt. The survivors were sent to a
new military school near Aswan run by the viceroy’s loyal deputy,
Muhammad Bey Lazughlu. The rest were sent on to the slave markets of
Cairo. Once in Egypt the slaves continued to die in large numbers,
prompting the viceroy to attempt to enlist American doctors who had
experience in treating slaves. With so many Turks, Circassians, and Alba-
nians eager to escape the Sudan where disease was taking its steady toll,
many of the trained Sudanese slaves had to be returned to the Sudan as
replacement troops. The apparently simple plan to enslave and train an
army of Sudanese blacks was going seriously awry. The meager returns
of men required the commitment of a disproportionate part of the pasha’s army. The inability of his commanders to transport sufficient numbers of slaves forced the pasha to buy his recruits from the Darfur slave caravans, drastically increasing the cost of the entire enterprise. As a short-term solution Muhammad ‘Ali authorized the raising of 4,000 fellahin, the Arab-speaking peasantry of Egypt. After training, these men would be sent to the Sudan for the duration of their three-year enlistment. This was the first attempt to turn the fellahin into regular soldiers and began the long scourge of conscription in the villages along the Nile.

At the same time two military schools were opened in the Aswan area to develop a new officer corps for the regular army from young Mamluks in the service of the Muhammad ‘Ali and his son Ibrahim, the latter reporting as a recruit to receive the new training. Once the prohibition on arming the fellahin had been broached, conscription was expanded to raise 30,000 more men by the next year.

The New Army

At first the job of training the officer corps was entrusted to French and Italian veterans of the Napoleonic wars. By 1825 they were joined by an official French military mission. The boldest part of the pasha’s military plan was to build the rank and file of the army from the vast and untapped reserves of Egyptian peasant manpower. Prior to this, training in arms was neither given to nor desired by the fellahin. During Ottoman rule a fellah carrying arms could be punished by death. To be torn from his village was the worst nightmare of most peasant farmers along the Nile, so it was clear from the start that conscription by force was the only means of recruitment. The timing was poor, as the pasha had only just finished implementing a series of unpopular agricultural reforms designed to enrich the pasha through various monopolies. There was some precedent for conscription, as the pasha already relied heavily on forced labor for projects such as the digging of the Mahmudiyya Canal, which connected Alexandria to the Nile.

To an outside observer, the recruitment campaigns for the new army would appear to differ little from slave raids in the Sudan. Peaceful villages were surrounded by armed men who then seized all the young men, dragging them away in a column of chained and yoked captives. As the women wailed and the elders pleaded with the officers the most reluctant of the young men would be winkled out of their hiding places at the point of a bayonet. These manpower raids swept up the healthy, the lame, and the unsound alike, with no medical examinations before the recruits reached Cairo. The population of the country was only 5 million people at the time, having been held in check by recurring epidemics
of plague, smallpox, and other diseases for centuries. With the lush Nile Valley and Delta regions underpopulated, the sons of a farmer could all expect to establish their own plots. Egypt did not have the excess population of young men, with no chance of land inheritance, that European armies relied upon for manpower. At first the pasha believed that conscription could be achieved without force by appealing to the religious sentiments of villagers. Muhammad ‘Ali encouraged his agents to remind the Muslim conscripts of the Copts’ willingness to serve under the Christian French and thereby embarrass them into similarly serving Islam.

This line of reasoning quickly proved to be the fantasy it was. The government recruiters had no rules or regulations governing their work, so they simply seized all the men of a village, regardless of their condition, to fill their quotas. The pleas of the villagers went unheard, as the Turkish-speaking recruiting agents rarely knew any Arabic. Some villages simply took to their heels when they heard the recruiters were coming. The result was a severe reduction in the total amount of farmland being worked, with consequences for both the population and the government treasury. The Bedouin auxiliaries (who were not yet subject to conscription) were used to hunt down fugitives from the conscription gangs.

In order to apply conscription to a universally unwilling population, the government was impelled to create a uniform registration system of internal passports. This eventually led to the first census, carried out in 1827. Village shaykhs were held responsible for making sure young men were available and present when the recruiters arrived. Desertion was made more difficult by tattooing large military insignia on the conscripts’ arms and legs and by circulating lists of deserters to their home regions. Sailors, for example, were marked by tattoos of fish or anchors on the back of their hands and legs. If married, the conscript was prevented from seeing his family. In many ways army life within Egypt was little different from prison life, as the soldier was rarely allowed to mix with the world outside his barracks and training ground.

In theory the new Egyptian army was to avoid looting and related discipline problems by receiving both rations and salaries from the state. In practice the reforms broke down under the pressure of an inefficient pay system that left men without their wages for up to two years at a time.

Most notable among the French renegades who joined the pasha in the early 1820s was a French colonel named Octave Joseph Anthelme Sève. Once a promising young naval officer, Sève killed a senior officer in a career-ending duel. He found renewal in Napoleon’s vast army, fighting in Italy, Russia, and eventually at Waterloo. Sève showed his commitment to the pasha by adopting Islam and the name Sulayman Agha. Sève was rewarded by gaining entry to the highest levels of the pasha’s military administration, as well as marrying into Muhammad ‘Ali’s family.
The Frenchman’s success in Egypt was in large part due to his willingness to immerse himself completely into his adopted society, dispelling any notion of divided loyalty. Besides his social agility, Sève’s personal courage won him the favor of the army. At one point a disgruntled recruit on parade took a shot at the colonel from a range of 20 meters, the bullet whistling by his head. Sève’s reaction was to roundly curse his men for their appalling marksmanship. According to the American William Loring, a later general of the Egyptian Army,

Becoming a Mussulman, he accepted all the accessories of that faith, and had a well-filled harem. He avoided European society, and only countenanced foreigners when business forced him into their association. In spite of an habitual air of dignified reserve he could unbend on occasion, and, being of versatile mind and well informed, was often very entertaining. ... He was a brave and good soldier, and had he left a staff as good as the well-drilled army, he would have conferred a great benefit upon Egypt.³

The new army was carefully designed to preserve the social supremacy of the Turko-Circassian ruling class. Turkish was the language of command, and promotion into the senior ranks was forbidden to the Arabic-speaking Egyptians who formed nearly the whole of the population. In this sense the army was a reflection of Egypt’s civil society, where all senior positions were reserved for the Turkish-speaking minority.

Conscription proved the last straw for the long-suffering Egyptian fellahin. The pasha was obliged to personally subdue a rebellion in the Delta in 1823 with his household troops, but a much larger revolt in Upper Egypt the following year compelled Muhammad ‘Ali to commit his newly trained soldiers to its repression. Led by a Mahdist pretender named Shaykh Radwan, the rebellion threatened to spread into Middle Egypt despite application of the most ferocious measures by the local governors. The nizami formations broke the rebellion in two weeks, killing over 4,000 Egyptians in the process. The pasha was highly impressed by the willingness of his Upper Egyptian nizami to beat and kill their former neighbors. The new army also quickly restored order in Cairo after a huge explosion rocked the Citadel in March 1824, killing as many as 4,000 people. It was alleged that the charge had been set in the powder magazine by Albanian troops unhappy with the military reforms.

In 1823 another Wahhabi revolt erupted in the Arabian town of ‘Asir. The viceroy was forced to rush a regiment of fellahin across the Red Sea straight from their training camp in Middle Egypt. Twenty-five hundred of the new troops defeated a force of 25,000 Wahhabis, a great triumph for the new army and one that brought great satisfaction to the pasha.

In keeping with his style of personal rule, Muhammad ‘Ali’s sons, Tussun, Ismail, and Ibrahim were all given command positions in the Egyptian army, regardless of age or military skill. Both Tussun and Isma’îl
were unfairly rushed into tasks that called for degrees of diplomacy, creativity, strategy, and leadership far beyond those developed at their young age. Ironically, it was Ibrahim, in whom Muhammad ‘Ali had the least faith, who truly proved to have the intelligence, energy, fortitude, and ruthlessness to entrench his father’s rule and expand his incipient empire. Rotund and short-legged, with features scarred by smallpox, Ibrahim’s appearance was deceiving. He was most at home in the field with his army of disciplined fellahin, whose courage he never failed to praise. He had less regard for many of the Turko-Circassian officers in his command, but was generally open to the advice of the many Europeans in the Egyptian army’s staff. The young general’s professionalism and undivided loyalty to his father endeared him to the pasha. Ibrahim would eventually go down in history as the man who had his hands on the throat of the Ottoman Empire—twice.

The *Nizam al-Jadid* and the Slave Trade

Firearms alone gave the Egyptian troops the advantage in slave raiding. Poison arrows and the serrated edges of fishing spears still posed real dangers to the troops if they met strong resistance. A contemporary account describes the risks posed to *Nizam-i al-Jadid* units by raiding Dinka warrior tribes during the rule of Governor-General Khurshid Agha:

During the course of the raid Khurshid caught some Dinka asleep in their village, but further on he encountered great opposition. The Dinka vigorously attacked the infantry, shouting and firing their arrows. When the cavalry charged them they defended themselves with their spears and embarrassed the movements of the horsemen. The Egyptians turned and fled but were pursued by the swift and agile Dinka, who held on to their horses’ tails while striking the riders with their spears or large ebony clubs. The infantry could not fire for fear of hitting their own men, but eventually charged with the bayonet and drove off the Dinka. The cavalry pursued them but on the Dinka turning round they drew off and allowed the natives to escape. The mortality on both sides were great: 200 Dinka were taken prisoner, but many died of their wounds. A sergeant of the 5th battalion told the writer of the remarkable courage of the Dinka.4

Another Nilotic tribe, the Shilluk, was in the habit of raiding Muslim villages in their long canoes. Expeditions were mounted in 1826 and 1830 to reduce the Shilluk to slavery, but both were driven off. The Shilluk’s introduction to Egyptian grapeshot in 1830 had only a temporary effect on their fighting spirit, and the Egyptians were lucky on that occasion to withdraw in their boats with 200 captives.
Disaster in Taka

In 1831 Khurshid Pasha led a large raiding party of 6,000 soldiers east to the Taka Region, just beyond the present-day town of Kassala. Khurshid’s target was the Hadendowa tribe, part of the great Beja confederacy of African nomads that had once provided the Ancient Egyptians with their best troops. The unusual size of Khurshid’s force probably reflected the resistance they expected in seizing the Hadendowa’s slaves and herds of cattle. Unsurprisingly, the Hadendowa declined Khurshid’s invitation to submit and withdrew into the nearby forest. Khurshid made the blunder of pursuing them into the woods where he lost almost all his cavalry. The infantry then came under a desperate attack that broke the force into small groups that wandered blindly through the forest. The two field guns of the expedition were captured, but the Hadendowa were unable to carry them away. On the third day of confused combat Khurshid rallied 500 men in a clearing and began a fighting withdrawal. The group collected isolated detachments of soldiers on the way, but 1,500 men were left behind in the forest. The cannons were retrieved and loaded with grapeshot to repel a final attack from the Hadendowa. Khurshid led the survivors back to Khartoum with nothing to show for his efforts except a lesson in tactics from the Hadendowa.

Campaigning on the Abyssinian Frontier

The border region between the Egyptian Sudan and Abyssinia was poorly defined and subject to raiding from both sides. The frontier was especially tense in 1837 after a series of cross-border raids. The capture of a Christian priest by an Egyptian tax-collecting expedition under Ahmad Kashif was enough to provoke a force of 20,000 Abyssinians to spill out of the mountains into the Sudanese plain. The Abyssinians were led by the local governor, Kanfu (a relative of the captured priest). Ahmad was sure of an attack by Kanfu on his small garrison of 300 men in the border town of al-Atish. Twelve hundred reinforcements arrived, consisting of 600 regulars, 400 Berber irregulars of the Hawwara tribe of Upper Egypt, and 200 Sha’iqiya cavalry.

Ahmad Kashif’s small army was quickly surrounded. Ignorant of all military tactics, Ahmad sensibly requested the commander of the infantry, Binbashi Salim Effendi, to take command, but this petulant officer, already bristling at having been placed under the command of a civilian, refused to take responsibility, even at the risk of his own survival. Despite the enormous discrepancy in numbers, Egyptian discipline and firepower should have ensured success in the battle, but Ahmad failed to form a square, availing himself of a courageous but pointless cavalry charge. The Egyptian advantage in firepower was wasted by the failure to fire in
volleys. Binbashi Salim did little to save the day and was captured, along with the chief of the Hawwara and the leader of the Sha’iqiya. The latter two were ransomed by their families, but Khurshid Pasha had no further use for Salim or the other captive officers who had performed so poorly and so declined to offer any ransom. Orders were given that should he escape on his own, Salim was not to return to his position as an officer. Khurshid prepared a large invasion force to cross into Abyssinia, but the effort was called off at the last moment by Muhammad ‘Ali, who had received word that London would look unfavorably on any foray into Abyssinia.
The Greek Revolution

In the early nineteenth century the new ideology of nationalism began to penetrate the Greek consciousness. There was a growing feeling that it was time to expel the nation’s Ottoman rulers, but there was no agreement on how or what type of rule should replace it. Some simply sought a Greece as it was, only without the Ottomans. Others of a more modern frame of mind wished to “Westernize” the country by abandoning all the trappings of Oriental government.

As anti-Ottoman revolts broke out in the spring of 1821, Greek ships began attacking Ottoman shipping in the Mediterranean, leading the sultan to call upon his Egyptian viceroy for naval forces to eliminate the Greek threat. By this point both the Egyptian navy and army were superior to the antiquated forces under Ottoman command. The pasha’s navy was largely French built and the crews trained by French instructors. Muhammad ‘Ali saw a chance to expand into the northern Mediterranean before the Russian navy intervened on the Greeks’ behalf. The Ottoman sultan, Mahmud II, had an ulterior motive in asking for Muhammad Ali’s assistance; the sultan had witnessed the creation of a superior military in Egypt with apprehension and took the opportunity of simultaneously using it to his advantage while weakening it through combat losses. At the very least he could keep the Egyptians too busy to threaten his own rule.

Both sultan and viceroy were concerned with European intervention in the Greek Revolt, especially from Russia. The czar considered himself the guardian of fellow followers of the Orthodox faith in lands controlled by the sultan. In similar fashion, the sultan, as the caliph of Islam, was regarded as the guardian of Muslims living under Russian rule. These types of overlapping responsibilities are unfamiliar now, but in the
nineteenth century they were a frequent source of diplomatic friction between empires that often spilt over into war.

The Greek Revolution spread like a fire across Greece. In its fury all the Turks in Morea who could not make it to the safety of the coastal fortresses or the capital city of Tripolitsa were massacred. In the summer of 1821 Egyptian ships joined Algerian and Turkish ships as they rounded the Morea resupplying the Turkish garrisons in their seaside fortifications. The Egyptian ships continued right into the Gulf of Corinth where they seized a rebel fleet of over 30 ships. The Egyptians bombarded the town of Galaxidi before landing troops to finish the job of destruction. The Ottoman admiral made a triumphant return to Istanbul, hanging 30 Greek sailors taken at Galaxidi from the yardarms of his flagship as he entered the harbor.

The Greeks had no revolutionary army; instead they relied on fighters from two sources, the klephts (or bandits) and the armatoli, the Turkish-paid police force. There was, in fact, little difference between the two groups. The armatoli were often recruited from the ranks of the klephts, and the two groups occasionally united to plunder rural communities. Their favored method of warfare minimized personal risk in the ambushes and skirmishes that composed most of their fighting. The Klephtic style was to try to gain higher ground and deploy as individuals or in small groups. If there was no available cover, the kleph would build a small pile of stones and fire from behind it. Insults were usually as important as bullets in a typical klephtic skirmish. The aim of any klepht was to survive to fight another day, which was fine for bandits but not enough for revolutionaries. Indeed, it is doubtful that the klephts and the armatoli of the early 1820s saw the fighting as anything other than a rich opportunity to plunder the wealth of Turks and Greeks alike.

Forming a Greek Regular Army

In June 1822 Prince Demetrius Hypsilantes made a dramatic landing in Greece. The prince was a member of the Phanarion, a community of Greek families who had lived in Istanbul for generations, serving in some of the highest posts of the Ottoman administration. A small, balding man in his twenties and fond of flamboyant uniforms, Hypsilantes had difficulty in communicating with the native Greeks who had trouble understanding his Istanbul dialect of Greek. Nevertheless, he was the choice of the Philiki Hetairia (“The Friendly Society”) to rule a unified Greece. The Hetairia was a secret Greek nationalist organization whose vague aims were usually thought by each of its members to be synonymous with their own personal ambitions. It had grown widely since its foundation in 1815 and was extremely popular in a diaspora community that was quickly absorbing
and adopting the ideals of nationalism. In Greece itself there was little interest in the idea of Greece as a unified nation among the rebel leaders, each desiring only to establish his own fiefdom once the Turks had been driven out. The prince was unknown to most Greeks, but there was
beginning to be some consensus among Greeks that rule by brigand leader was a poor replacement for Ottoman rule. Hypsilantes was thus welcomed by many as a symbol of order and placed in nominal command of the Greeks besieging the coastal fortresses of the Morea, the last strongholds of the Ottomans.

Hypsilantes harbored grand designs of marching on Istanbul and brought with him a plan for creating a European-style army from nationalist-minded Greeks. The immediate problem was that there were no Greek nationalists in Greece, but the prince paid a French veteran of the Napoleonic wars, Colonel Baleste, to create such a force. Baleste used the prince’s money to recruit other French and Italian officers and buy arms. Baleste also devoted considerable effort to designing an all-black uniform, topped with a fearsome skull badge bearing the motto “Freedom or Death.” When he arrived in Greece, Baleste discovered there was no interest from Greeks in joining a bizarrely clad unit whose members danced to the barked orders of foreigners. No encouragement came from the Greek leaders, all of whom had no desire to see Hypsilantes develop a force of disciplined regulars capable of enforcing his rule. In time the regiment became the home of many of the unemployed European officers who headed to Greece to practice their trade. Of the Greeks, only refugees with no means of support could be enticed to join, and the “Baleste Regiment” had the unusual distinction of having more officers than men.

One by one the Ottoman coastal fortresses began to fall. A pattern began to form of Greek promises to escort the starving garrisons and Turkish refugees to the safety of ships to carry them on to Ottoman territory, followed by the horrific slaughter of all who accepted these worthless commitments. The Greeks took Navarino where they stacked Turkish heads and limbs and continued on to Tripolitsa, the old Ottoman capital, where a similar massacre ensued, followed by the sale of thousands of prisoners into slavery. By this time some of the European officers had seen enough of Greek warfare and began to leave for greener pastures. Hypsilantes went broke, and Baleste himself left for Crete.

The men of the Baleste regiment carried on for a short while under an Italian officer named Tarella, their once proud uniforms in rags. They marched barefoot, followed by a few wretched Turkish boys and women they had purchased in the slave market. They were joined by a new group of European Philhellenes (mostly Germans, Italians, French, and Swiss) who formed their own battalion. At Peta in July 1822 the Europeans and the Tarella Regiment (as it was now named) were massacred when their Greek allies abandoned them. The continental European governments realized that their young men were going only to a miserable death in Greece and shut down the pipeline that funneled volunteers through Marseilles to Greece.
In January 1822 a group of Greek political leaders declared the independence of their homeland. Though Hypsilantes was involved, Alexander Mavrocordatos, who became Greece’s first president, engineered the entire proclamation. A constitution and a flag were produced, but Mavrocordatos’s assembly had no real power and only Europeans bothered to read the new constitution.

The Naval War

For years Greek pirates had ravaged Turkish and Egyptian shipping in the Mediterranean. Their success inhibited the creation of a capable Greek rebel navy as the best sailors were inevitably attracted to the adventure and booty promised by pirate life. The sultan appointed Muhammad ‘Ali’s old rival Khusraw Pasha as admiral of the Ottoman fleet, and he soon set to work eliminating rebels and pirates alike in the Aegean.

A Greek revolutionary navy was cobbled together under the leadership of Andreas Miaoulis. His command was always subject to the whims of the admirals of each Greek island’s naval contingent. These commanders were used to operating independently and often regarded orders from Miaoulis as requests to be approved or denied. The result was a perpetual sluggishness in organizing any naval action. The Ottoman navy had always relied heavily on Greek sailors who were suddenly unavailable. Its poor performance in naval actions over the next few decades was partly due to the poor caliber and insufficient training of the Turkish conscripts who now formed the core of the navy’s manpower. Officers were appointed through corrupt methods and brutality was a byword throughout the service. The ships’ guns were only pointed rather than raised or lowered, so most Turkish volleys burst into the sea or sailed through the sky to parts unknown.

The Greek navy’s most effective tactic was its use of fireships. The fireship was packed with any flammable or explosive material at hand and fitted with grappling hooks and irons to latch onto the enemy ship. The trick, of course, was to get the fireship up close enough to the enemy ships to set it afire without first being hit by the enemy’s guns. The fireship’s skeleton crew would abandon the ship for a small boat once it was afire, the captain traditionally being the last one off. Wooden warships packed with gunpowder were incredibly flammable vessels, and the sight of fireships approaching fast could panic an undisciplined crew. A warship with a well-trained crew could usually destroy or evade a fireship. With ships on the move, however, a fleet’s lines and formations could be quickly disrupted by the approach of fireships, leaving it vulnerable to attack by conventional warships. Obviously the destructive potential of fireships was
maximized when used against ships lying close together at anchor or in harbor.

If its captain was daring enough, a single fireship could do immense damage. At the battle of Chelma in 1770 a young Russian officer brought his fireship alongside a Turkish 84-gun battleship and hooked onto it with grappling irons. The battleship’s subsequent explosion set most of the Turkish fleet on fire, resulting in the loss of 10,000 sailors, 15 battleships (of 16 in the fleet), all 6 frigates, and scores of smaller vessels. The Royal Navy also used over 300 fireships before their use passed out of fashion in the early nineteenth century.

European navies had no difficulty manning the dangerous fireships, but Greek sailors, many of them experienced pirates, were used to receiving some type of booty or reward at the end of a successful action. Since service on the fireships held no prospect of loot, crews often demanded hefty payments up front. By 1824 some fireship crews could not be moved even by large financial incentives.

The leading Greek exponent of the fireship was Constantine Kanaris, who burst onto the scene with a bold fireship attack on the flagship of the Turkish fleet in June 1822. Kanaris and his men were exacting vengeance for the massacre, enslavement, or exile of nearly the entire population of Chios (100,000 to 120,000 people at the beginning of 1822).

On May 31, 1822, Admiral Miaoulis appeared off the Gulf of Smyrna with a Greek fleet. A desultory three-day engagement with the Turkish navy followed in which the Greeks were unable to use their fireships with any effect. June 18, 1822 was the last day of Ramadan, and the Turkish fleet of Kapitan Pasha Kara ‘Ali was found celebrating the event at anchor in the Gulf of Smyrna. Most of the senior officers were aboard the Kapitan Pasha’s flagship, which was unwisely illuminated for the occasion. The ports of the Turkish warships were also open, which was to have a fatal result. Kanaris skillfully brought two fireships right into the midst of the Turkish fleet. Kanaris rammed the bowsprit of his brig into an open port on the flagship before calmly lighting the fuses and slipping away with his crew in a small boat. The conflagration spread immediately through the Turkish flagship, rendering it impossible to organize any efforts to extinguish the flames or scuttle the ship. The open ports provided unlimited oxygen to fuel the flames as they rushed through the interior. Locked in the depths of the ship was an unfortunate cargo of Chiote prisoners, whose pitiful cries could be heard throughout the harbor.

As the other ships tried to move off from the threat the few boats that could be launched quickly capsized under the weight of desperate sailors. Kara ‘Ali himself was mortally wounded by a falling spar while making his escape. The catastrophe was completed when the fire reached the powder room of the flagship, destroying it with nearly 2,000 crewmen. The new Kapitan Pasha hurriedly took his fleet to safety in the
Dardenelles. The attack was considered a just revenge for the ruin of Chios and the beginning of an illustrious career for Kanaris, who emerged as one of the few irreproachable heroes of the Greek Revolution.

The Egyptian Expedition: 1824

Sultan Mahmud’s generals were faring poorly in repressing the revolution and he soon had little choice but to order his vassal in Cairo to provide military assistance. Muhammad ‘Ali was far from ready to challenge the sultan’s authority at this time. For all his ambition, the pasha still observed all the duties of a true servant of the sultan, unfailingly remitting the annual tribute and taking every opportunity to demonstrate that the pasha ruled only at the sultan’s pleasure. The sultan meanwhile was growing aware that the Egyptian military was adapting to change while his own forces were rapidly falling behind. Proof of the pasha’s danger to the sultan ironically came with the massive fleet and force of 17,000 disciplined troops that the pasha sent in compliance with Sultan Mahmud’s request.

The first object of the Egyptian admiral, Isma’il Gibraltar Pasha, was to eliminate any Greek pirates that might pose a threat to the transportation of the army to Greece. To complete his mission the admiral brought along an old corsair captain named Giustiniani as a tactical advisor. Ships from the island of Kasos had harassed the Egyptian fleet during the Crete campaign, but the island was taken unawares by the arrival of Isma’il Gibraltar’s fleet. Three thousand Albanians under the command of Husayn Bey landed, making quick work of the pirates. After some 500 pirates were slain, the Albanians seized over 2,000 women and children as slaves.

With the sea-lanes secured by joint Egyptian-Turkish action, it was time for Ibrahim Pasha to embark from Alexandria with a force of 8,000 men and 1,000 horses on 100 transports and an escort of 25 to 50 warships. Among the soldiers on their way to crush the Greek Revolution were a number of European ex-Philhellenes, who had transferred their loyalty to the army of Muhammad ‘Ali. Under Admiral Muharram Bey the fleet sailed to meet the Turkish fleet at Bodrum. Overall command of the Egyptian forces was given to Ibrahim Pasha. The fleet left on July 19, 1824, but it would be months before they arrived in Greece. On their way to Bodrum the Egyptian fleet stopped at the Gulf of Makri to celebrate the Muslim feast of Bayram:

In the afternoon the whole army was drawn up on the beach. When the sun went down, bright-coloured lanterns were hoisted at the mastheads of all the ships, and a salute was fired from every gun in the fleet. The troops on shore followed the example, firing by platoons, companies and battalions as rapidly as possible, until their fire became at last a continuous discharge of musketry along the whole line, which was prolonged in an incessant roar
for a quarter of an hour. The spectacle was wild and strange, in a deserted bay. ... Suddenly, when the din of artillery and musketry had swelled into a sound like thunder, every noise was hushed, and, as the smoke rolled away, the thin silver crescent of the new moon was visible. A prolonged shout, repeated in melancholy cadence, rose from the army, and was echoed back from the fleet.¹

Once aground the Egyptians began inflicting defeats on the Greek rebels that the sultan’s men had labored so hard against without result. The efficiency of the Egyptians was in sharp contrast to the indiscipline of the Ottoman troops and the general incompetence of their officer corps. Popular opinion across Europe was solidly behind the Greek rebels, however, who were romanticized in poetry and song.

The expedition passed Kasos on its way to Bodrum on the Anatolian coast, where they rendezvoused with a Turkish fleet after many delays owing to unfavorable winds. A Greek fleet appeared off the islands of Kos and Kappari on September 5, 1824, to challenge the Egyptian/Turkish force, but in the action that followed neither fleet proved willing to close in for a decisive fight. A few days later the Greek navy sank a Turkish corvette and a Tunisian frigate, driving the Ottoman ships back to the safety of Bodrum. The Egyptian expedition was held in Bodrum by the constant harassment of Greek ships until early November 1824, when Ibrahim decided to force his way to Crete, the first objective of the Egyptian campaign. It was inadvisable to send a convoy of transports over the winter seas, but it was impossible to keep the entire force in Turkey over the winter. Many of the transport ships were hired from European companies and their contracts were about to expire. Knowing that Miaoulis was waiting at sea for their departure the Egyptian fleet had little choice but to attempt the crossing.

A determined group of Greek ships flew into Ibrahim’s armada, seizing eight troop transports while scattering other ships, some of which sailed all the way back to Alexandria. Most of the fleet wound up back in Turkey, seemingly for the winter. Miaoulis could no longer keep his remaining ships together, and they all headed home for the winter, as was their custom. Ibrahim now took his fleet on an unexpected second crossing to Crete. Without opposition the ships landed the Egyptian army without difficulty. The sultan had offered the pashalik of Crete to Muhammad ‘Ali on the condition of ending its rebellion, a task which Ibrahim now undertook with his usual efficiency.

The Greek fighters that the Egyptians encountered in 1824 were relatively well armed through the capture of Turkish weapons and the supply efforts of the European Philhellenes. These Philhellenes were the second wave of Europeans to insert themselves into the Greek/Ottoman conflict. They were very different from the first wave of unemployed veterans and costumed frauds that had joined the army of Hypsilantes. This new wave
consisted of romantics who had absorbed the glories of ancient Greece from the classical education given to young gentlemen of the time. Most were fluent in ancient Greek, a language as dead as their idealized vision of a noble Greece of democratic freemen yearning to throw off the oppression of a barbarian Oriental empire (here the Ottomans stood in nicely for the ancient Persians). Militarily, most were amateurs with nothing to offer the cause, young men whose lust for adventure was thwarted by the general peace reigning in a Europe exhausted by the Napoleonic wars. Across Europe academics, poets and journalists all took up the cause of the Greeks, reminding their fellow citizens that Greece was the birthplace of Western civilization. Some returning veterans of the Baleste Regiment tried to warn the young volunteers, but their message was unwelcome.

On arrival the volunteers discovered that their ancient Greek was unintelligible to the modern Greeks, who themselves had no nostalgia for their ancient past. The modern Greek saw himself as heir to the civilization of Orthodox Byzantium, a creature of the East rather than the West. In time many of the Philhellenes would have the last of their illusions destroyed by the shocking realities of Eastern warfare. Others gladly bought captive Turkish women in the slave markets to indulge fantasies of Oriental life. Among the Philhellenes was the poet Byron, whose epic verses had inspired much of the European fever for Greek independence. Byron’s short military career ended ingloriously on a sick bed, bled to death with leeches by his physicians. All the Philhellenes were dismayed by the fractious nature of Greek politics and the absence of any kind of national cohesion. This Greece was not the glowing beacon of freedom and liberty its mythologists were portraying in Europe.

With Crete subdued, the time was right to use the island as a base for the invasion of Morea. Civil war was raging in Morea as various factions fought over the spoils of their “victory” over the Turks, and no preparations had been made to repel Ibrahim’s attack. The Egyptian fleet sailed twice from Crete, bringing 10,000 trained infantry, 1,000 cavalry, and a supply of field artillery between February and March 1825. A winter crossing was deliberately chosen as the winds would keep the lighter Greek fleet off the open seas. Methoni, the landing place, was a former port of the Venetians, whose presence was still marked by a massive castle.

**Attack on Navarino**

While Ibrahim consolidated his force ashore, the Greeks began to address the presence of his army by assembling a force of about 7,000 Greeks together with some mounted irregulars. The brilliantly clad Greeks initially hurled abuse at the small, plainly uniformed Arab infantry, but they were about to receive a lesson in the importance of battlefield
discipline. The Egyptians scattered the Greeks with ease with a force only half their size, but took heavier losses in attempting to take the coastal fortress of Old Navarino, a crumbling ruin from the thirteenth century. The fortress stood at the northern end of Navarino Bay and the castle of Pylos at the southern end, where entrance to the bay is made through a narrow entrance flanked by rocks. Above the town of Pylos was another aging fortress, New Navarino, built by the Turks in 1573. The strategic island of Sfaktiria protects the horseshoe-shaped bay, which measures about three miles by two miles in size.

Navarino was the second fortress to fall to the Greeks in 1821. Hypsi-lantes negotiated a treaty of surrender in which the Turks were promised ships and safe passage to Africa. When the gates opened a horrific slaughter ensued. Men, women, and even babies were exterminated in the most brutal fashion. The living had their limbs hacked off before their heads were added to the growing piles. In a final indignity the bodies were tossed over the walls and left to rot. The Greek garrison in Navarino had little hope of mercy if it failed to repel the Egyptians.

Hearing of the approach of the Egyptian fleet, the Greeks rushed 500 troops and some artillery to Sfaktiria under Alexander Mavrocordatos, a Greek political leader who would go on to become president once and prime minister three times. The Greeks were unable to withstand an overwhelming amphibious assault on the island by 3,000 Egyptians carried in feluccas. The Greek batteries were overrun, but Mavrocordatos made an astonishing escape in the Greek ship Ares, which evaded the Egyptian fleet after a six-hour battle. It was said later that Mavrocordatos spent the entire time with a loaded pistol in his hand to avoid being captured alive. He need not have worried; as Lord Byron (a witness to the affair) remarked, “These Turks, with so many guns, would prove dangerous enemies if they should happen to fire without taking aim.”

With the island in Egyptian hands, the fortresses of Old Navarino and New Navarino capitulated shortly thereafter, their access to food and water being completely cut off. Recalling their own violation of the terms offered to the Turkish garrison in 1821, the Greeks straggled out of the fortress to what seemed certain death. To their astonishment Ibrahim honored his agreement to send the disarmed Greeks away in transports escorted by a French and Austrian warship. Ibrahim was too calculating to ever do anything out of kindness or pity; it is more probable here that Ibrahim was making a demonstration of the difference between Greek rabble and the viceroy’s disciplined troops.

Ibrahim’s Campaign in Morea

Ibrahim intended to move the rest of his fleet to Navarino Bay, a marked improvement on his landing point of Methoni, but the Greeks
struck first with their fireships. In a fierce attack the Greeks destroyed 3 frigates (including the English-built Asia, perhaps the finest ship in the Egyptian fleet), 3 corvettes, and 15 transports, as well as blowing up the arsenal. None of this prevented Ibrahim from securing the area around Navarino Bay. The Greek army was in danger of disintegrating, as the troops from Rumeli headed north after hearing rumors of a Turkish offensive in their home region. Others walked away in disgust with the military incompetence of their leader, Kiriakos Skourtis, a sea captain with no knowledge of land warfare. The Piedmontese mercenary, Colonel Gubernatis, who had once tried to organize a Greek regular army, now reassessed the situation and joined Ibrahim’s army.

Most of the Moreot leaders were in Greek jails, the result of the never-ending conflicts between the Greek regions and commanders. In this emergency the Moreots were released to take the fight to the Egyptians. A hastily raised force of 3,000 men confronted the Egyptians at the village of Maniaki, but over half deserted the night after seeing Ibrahim’s army. The Greeks were led by the Orthodox cleric Dikaios, an unscrupulous politician and bitter enemy of many of the Moreots under his command. Dikaios had no knowledge of military affairs, but swore to defeat Ibrahim or die in the attempt. In the battle that followed nearly a third of the Greek force fell, including Dikaios, while many others fled from the Egyptian attack. Nevertheless, the Greeks who stood firm inflicted many casualties on the Egyptian force, inspiring their compatriots to commit to a campaign to drive the Egyptians from Morea. Large numbers of Greek fighters began to assemble under the Greek leader Kolokotrones in order to prevent an Egyptian drive north, but Ibrahim consistently outmaneuvered them on their home ground.

Through late May and early June 1825, there were frequent skirmishes at sea as the Greeks attempted to disrupt Ibrahim’s lines of communication. At one point the Greeks managed to corner the Egyptian fleet in Crete’s Suda Bay, a perfect opportunity to send in fireships. Contrary winds, however, swept most of the fireships and blockading ships off course, allowing the Egyptians to resume their voyage to Morea. At Methoni Miaoulis launched a more successful attack, destroying seven Egyptian warships. In late June 1825, Ibrahim was marching north, ready to seize the fortified granaries at Lerna. A small group of 500 Greeks and a handful of Philhellene volunteers swore to defend the granaries to the death. Holding them to their word, the Greek commander Makriyannis sent away the horses and boats that could be used for escape. They prepared for their death stand with rations of rum provided by the French Admiral de Rigny, who was cruising offshore. It was vital to withhold the provisions of the granaries from Ibrahim’s army, which had advanced without sufficient food on the assumption that the granaries would be easily taken. They were also the sole source of food and water for the
Greek garrison in nearby Navplion. The Greek volunteers were fortunate to have the support of two gunships commanded by a French Philhellene, which poured accurate fire into the Egyptian columns advancing on Lerna.

Eventually the defensive wall was breached, but the Greeks concentrated their fire on the Egyptian officers as they tried to lead their men through. Makriyannis and an American Philhellene named Jonathan Miller led a desperate Greek counterattack with swords, a rare departure from the klephtic style of fighting. As Egyptian losses mounted Ibrahim decided to withdraw to Tripolitsa, leaving 500 dead behind. Reinforcements arrived from Alexandria and the summer of 1825 was spent in a series of small engagements with the Greeks and repeated raids through the countryside to obtain provisions. Even the arrival in the Greek camp of the aloof Maniats, claimants of the Spartan heritage, failed to check Ibrahim’s plundering of the region.

The entire Egyptian war effort was placed in jeopardy by a daring Greek raid on Alexandria in July 1825 while most of the Egyptian fleet was in the harbor. Two Greek warships escorted three fireships commanded by Kanaris to the main Egyptian port. Flying European colors, the fireships entered the harbor unhindered. Once close to the Egyptian flagship, one of the Greek ships was set alight, but a sudden change in the wind blew the fireship away from the fleet. The Egyptians opened fire, but poor marksmanship allowed all four remaining Greek ships to reach the safety of the open sea. Muhammad ‘Ali was predictably enraged by the negligence that allowed such an attack. In another blow to the navy Gibraltar Pasha, one of its finest admirals, died and received a burial at sea on his way to Alexandria. Muhammad ‘Ali was later informed that the body washed ashore at Damietta and was buried by the local shaykh.

The Siege of Missalonghi

After Ibrahim’s summer campaign alarming rumors circulated in Europe that Ibrahim intended to repopulate the Morea with Egyptians. A Greek delegation to London unsuccessfully sought the protection of Great Britain in September 1825. While Ibrahim was busy that summer, the Turks were again laying siege to the walled town of Missalonghi on the mainland just north of the western Morean peninsula. Several years before an Ottoman army had conducted a farcical siege of several months duration in which both sides favored a good night’s sleep over posting sentries. This time the Turkish commanders were clearly instructed that failure was not an option. Rashid Pasha displayed his seriousness by impaling a priest, a woman, and three teenage boys (all accused of
spying) in full view of the besieged. Ibrahim was ordered to join Rashid with his army at Missolonghi.

After weeks of preparation Ibrahim was ready to begin the attack. Forty pieces of Egyptian artillery opened up on the February 25, 1826, followed by two days of unsuccessful assaults by Egyptian and Turkish infantrymen. When it became apparent that the city would not fall so easily, Ibrahim put together an amphibious assault group to seize the fortifications in the swampy lagoons that bordered on Missolonghi. Operating from a small flotilla of flat-bottomed boats, the Egyptians cleared the lagoons of most Greek resistance by mid-March. Only the tiny island of Klissova remained, manned by 150 Greeks protected by earthworks and surrounding waters too shallow even for flat-bottomed boats. An Albanian unit under Rashid’s command attacked in early April 1826, but was forced to approach the island through thick mud while the Greeks picked them off at leisure. Eager to prove that his men could succeed where Rashid’s had failed, Ibrahim now ordered three successive attacks by his Egyptian regulars. It was an unusual display of tactical incompetence by Ibrahim, who lost 500 men and his finest commander (Husayn Bey) when he could have waited a couple of days for mortars to be brought up to pulverize the Greek positions effortlessly.

The Greek admiral Miaoulis attempted to relieve the siege in mid-April, but a much-improved Turkish fleet repulsed all attempts to reach Missolonghi. Miaoulis launched his fireships, but the Turks had learned how to avoid their approach. Miaoulis was forced to abandon the city, turning round with the desperately needed food and ammunition still aboard his ships. For the 9,000 Greeks still in Missolonghi, it was time to attempt a breakout.

Soon after darkness fell on April 26, 1826, the garrison quietly breached the walls and put bridges down over the defensive ditch before taking up positions to protect the thousands of noncombatants as they poured out of the city. The whole operation was well organized, but to the Greeks’ misfortune, one of their own deserted and revealed the entire plan to Ibrahim and Rashid Pasha. The Turks and Egyptians opened fire on the masses, creating a mad “live-or-die” rush against the Ottoman lines. Led by the sword-wielding soldiers of the garrison, the Greeks burst through, though with tremendous loss of life. Panic overtook the native Missalonghiooi, the last to leave the city, and they began to rush back to the imagined safety of Missolonghi’s now undefended walls, preventing the rearguard of the breakout from leaving the city.

Pursued first by cavalry, then ambushed by Albanians, the fugitives could find little safety. Of the 1,500 Greek armatoli expected to assist in the breakout, only 50 actually arrived and those did little to help. Nearly all the noncombatants died before reaching shelter. Of the 1,500 survivors who reached safety in May 1826, 1,300 were soldiers. Three thousand
heads were collected and presented to Ibrahim and Rashid for cash rewards. Of the 2,000 Greeks left behind in Missalanghi the young and fit were enslaved, while the elderly, sick, and infirm were slaughtered. The garrison troops of the rearguard sold their lives dearly, fighting from the powder magazines until their ammunition ran out, at which point they would ignite the powder in a tremendous explosion.

For Ibrahim it was a costly victory, leaving him with less than 5,000 troops under his command. The Egyptian army retired into Morea to await reinforcements. Once these arrived Ibrahim’s army spent the rest of 1826 subduing all opposition in his new possession. Greeks were shot, enslaved, or forced into the inhospitable mountain heights to die slowly of starvation. Those crops not carried away were burned, and all the animals were seized for use by the Egyptian army. Ibrahim’s actions seemed to verify that his future plans for the Morea did not involve Greeks. The Turks turned their attentions to Athens, besieging and capturing the ancient city in 1827. Without external support, the Greek Revolution was on the verge of collapse.

Allied Intervention

By the terms of the July 6, 1827, Treaty of London, France, Britain, and Russia agreed to blockade the Morea with their combined fleets as a means of enforcing an armistice on the warring parties. Russia already claimed protection of the Greeks and all other Christians in the Ottoman Empire through their interpretation of the 1774 Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji. The Allies’ suggestion that Greece become an autonomous province under the suzerainty of the sultan was accepted by the Greeks, but firmly rejected by the sultan. The Allies’ pledge to do their best to prevent further conflict between the two parties “without taking any part in the hostilities” suggests the Allies had some early form of peacekeeping in mind. In practice, however, the British commander of the Allied Fleet, Sir Edward Codrington (a veteran of Trafalgar), was unable to resist provoking the Ottoman fleet into a massive naval battle that would change the face of Europe.

Muhammad ‘Ali had no desire to confront the Europeans, whom he recognized as far ahead of his own developing army and navy in the military sciences. In a letter to his agent in Constantinople the viceroy expressed his fear that an attack by the Allied fleet would result in the loss of his navy and up to “thirty to forty thousand men.” For Muhammad ‘Ali, the entire campaign had been “a lost effort.”

Codrington’s ships were joined in their blockade of Ibrahim’s army by a squadron of French ships under Admiral de Rigny. The Allied fleet made no effort to prevent a Greek navy force under the command of Captain Frank Hastings from ravaging Turkish shipping in the Gulf of Corinth.
Codrington even fended off an attempt by some Ottoman ships to break out of Navarino in order to deal with Hastings. By October 13, 1827, Codrington and de Rigny had been joined outside Navarino by a strong Russian fleet under Rear Admiral Heiden. An enraged Ibrahim wreaked his frustration upon the Greeks under his control, devastating the countryside, burning villages, and enslaving thousands. Though Ibrahim was charged with initiating these savage reprisals, they were actually in conformity with his orders from the sultan, who urged the harshest measures against the Orthodox Christians of Morea. The Allied command tried to entreat Ibrahim, but they were given the reply that Ibrahim had left Navarino, his whereabouts unknown.

With his blockade of Navarino threatened by 1827 autumn gales capable of blowing his ships from their positions, Codrington, who was now in command of the joint fleet, decided that the only way to prevent the Ottoman/Egyptian fleet from leaving was to join them in the Bay of Navarino.

With a naval confrontation looming, de Rigny now demanded the withdrawal of the ten French officers serving as naval advisers on the Egyptian ships. Nine left for Alexandria with Egyptian permission, but Captain Letellier remained with the fleet. The Egyptian contribution to the Ottoman fleet trapped at Navarino was 43 ships, the most notable of which were the frigates *Isaniya*, *Suraya*, *Sirene*, *Trident*, *Murshid al-Jihad*, and the French-built *La Leone* and *La Guerriere*. The corvettes and brigs included the *Gazelle*, *L’Amazone*, *Tigre*, *La Ville de Navarino* (French-built), and the American-built *Crocodille* and *La Lionne*.

**The Battle of Navarino**

On October 20, 1827, the Allied fleet sailed into Navarino Bay and took up lines opposite the traditional crescent formation of the Ottoman/Egyptian fleet. The Allied fleet had 12 ships of the line and 8 frigates to the Ottoman/Egyptian force of 7 ships of the line, 15 frigates, and 22 corvettes. The captain of the British ship *Dartmouth* spotted a Turkish fireship (as yet unlit) windward of the Allied ships and sent a boat to demand its withdrawal by the Ottoman admiral, Tahir Pasha. For reasons unknown the Turks opened up on the boat with muskets, killing many of its crew. The *Dartmouth* opened up with her guns and suddenly both sides were firing at once. With their larger guns and the skills of their trained crews, the Allied fleet annihilated its foes with relative ease. When the smoke cleared over three-quarters of the Muslim fleet had been methodically destroyed. Over 6,000 men were lost. A small Tunisian squadron attached to the fleet escaped ruin by remaining at their anchorage on the other side of the harbor. The Allies lost only 172 men and no ships, though some received severe damage. Of the Egyptian fleet only the frigate *La Leone* Egyptian in the Greek Revolution 99
survived. Codrington was recalled to London to face an inquiry on this unauthorized intervention in a foreign war. Popular sentiment in Britain was solidly behind Codrington, however, and he was eventually cleared and decorated.

Muhammad ‘Ali, who liked to see a profit from all his endeavors, could not have been satisfied with the results of the Egyptian intervention in Greece. With his great fleet at the bottom of a Greek harbor, the viceroy lost interest in expanding his realm into Greek territory. Muhammad ‘Ali had always feared that his participation in the sultan’s war in Greece might spark a larger confrontation with the Europeans, and Codrington found the viceroy in an agreeable frame of mind when negotiating the Convention of Alexandria in August 1827. Among its provisions was the evacuation of all Egyptian troops from the Morea.

An Auspicious Event in Istanbul

The Allied intervention came at a bad time for the sultan. Since reinvading Greece in 1825, the sultan’s army had slowly reoccupied the country, finally taking Athens after a siege in 1827. Yet with Europe in full support of the Greek rebels, every Ottoman battlefield success was also a diplomatic setback. Moreover, the sultan’s struggling army compared poorly when measured against Muhammad ‘Ali’s trained infantry. The sultan quickly learned the need for his empire to develop an efficient Western-style army if it wished to continue as a modern power in the same league as the Europeans or even the Egyptians.

In 1826 Sultan Mahmud II destroyed the Janissary Corps in their barracks in a slaughter that officially came to be known as “the Auspicious Event.” The Janissaries had been out of control since the late sixteenth century, having become a semi-independent force in Ottoman society. By the early nineteenth century the Janissaries operated a vast and powerful organized crime syndicate. The contemptuous merchants on whom they preyed referred to the Janissaries as “the old women.” The Corps typically spent as much time plotting against the sultan and his vizier as in defending the Ottoman Empire, signifying the beginning of their frequent revolts by overturning the giant metal cooking pots which both fed the troops and signified their allegiance to the sultan. The ferocious din created by this display of defiance would thunder ominously throughout Istanbul. In June 1826, the Janissaries overturned their pots for the last time, refusing to participate in the “infidel” military exercises they were learning from foreign instructors. The Janissaries were ultraconservative in their ways, including their traditional fighting methods, which were no longer effective against modern armies. Sultan Mahmud and the Porte learned of the rebellion some days in advance, allowing them to prepare a response.
The unusual move of bringing out the Prophet Muhammad’s black banner (the same one seized from Egypt in 1517) from the Ottoman reliquary as a rallying device for the sultan’s loyalists reflected the urgency of the situation. The sultan and his officials were gratified to see the marines and artillery coming to their aid, as well as the religious students and hordes of common people who poured into the palace to receive weapons from the royal armory. A “whiff of grapeshot” from the loyal guns of the artillery sent prowling Janissaries flying to their fortress-like barracks. Though the unfurling of the Prophet’s banner was a menacing sign, the Janissaries still believed too much in their own importance to imagine that the sultan would risk the consequences of asking one part of the army to attack the other. They realized they were gravely mistaken when a cannonade shattered the gates and the loyal troops made a furious assault. As the sultan’s men poured in through the breach, the Janissaries began to search out hiding places in the vast barracks complex. Rather than bother with the costly and time-consuming work of ferreting out the rebels, the entire complex was set on fire, incinerating over a thousand Janissaries. In the days that followed, the sultan’s officers took to disguise to root out survivors hiding in the city. Even part of the nearby forest was set alight to drive out the miserable fugitives. Hundreds of Janissaries were brought before the grand vizier to be condemned and strangled, their bodies forming heaps in the streets.

The new army of the Ottomans was given the grand name of Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye (the Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad) and placed under the command of the grand vizier. A few fortunate Janissary officers received pardons and commissions in the new army. Otherwise, the Auspicious Event was a turning point in Ottoman history and an abrupt end for a famous military force that had declined greatly in effectiveness and reliability.

Mahmud appealed to Muhammad ‘Ali for assistance in developing a modern army, but the viceroy found numerous unconvincing reasons to avoid rendering such services. For the independent-minded viceroy, there appeared to be little reason to improve the army of his suzerain. Further appeals to Muhammad ‘Ali for military assistance in campaigns in Moldavia, Anatolia, and the Caucasus were calculatingly rebuffed through the demand for territories in Anatolia in return. Muhammad ‘Ali was well aware that the granting of a governorship in the Anatolian Turkish heartland was out of the question.

The Egyptian Departure from Morea

The winter of 1827–1828 was a time of suffering for the poorly provisioned Egyptian army in Morea. Despite this, the army there was still a
force to be reckoned with, consisting of about 20,000 infantry and 4,000 cavalry. Ibrahim succeeded in staving off starvation by buying supplies from Ionian merchants, but it was not enough to prevent 2,000 Albanians in the fortress of Coron from engaging in a mutiny. The more disciplined Egyptian regulars held fast, and there was little sign that Ibrahim had any intention of abandoning his new possession. The British governor of the Ionian Islands finally put an end to the trade with Ibrahim, placing the army in great difficulty. In negotiations with the Europeans Ibrahim always cited the need for permission from Muhammad ‘Ali or the sultan to withdraw from Greece. With British and Russian consent, the French landed 14,000 men in the Gulf of Coron on August 30, 1828, to pry the Egyptians out. Recognizing the futility of a war against the European powers, Muhammad ‘Ali agreed to order Ibrahim to evacuate his forces, beginning on September 16, 1828. By October 5, 1828, Ibrahim sailed with the last of his troops.

Ibrahim left the fortresses of Navarino, Rhion, Coron, Patras, Chloumoutsi, and Modon in the hands of their Ottoman garrisons. His defense was that he was simply leaving them the way he had found them, occupied by Ottoman troops. The convention ending the Egyptian role in the conflict had left the fortresses seriously undermanned. Only Rhion gave a perfunctory resistance to the French before the French artillery was rolled up, while the others went through the pride-saving charade of locking their gates and forcing the French to scale the walls by ladder in order to open the gates themselves from the inside. With little real fighting to be done, the French troops were kept occupied by restoring the interiors of the filthy and disease-ridden fortresses.

Unable to convince Britain and France to take up a general campaign against the Ottomans, Russia declared its own war in April 1828. While Britain and France were content to leave the sultan on his throne, the Russians were intent on destroying the sultan’s power once and for all. In order to remain in alliance with the French and British, the czar agreed not to pursue the fight in the Aegean, restricting the Russian assault to Asia and the Balkans.

The Ottoman Empire was weakened by the blockade of the Dardanelles and a series of rebellions throughout its territories, but it was not yet finished. In Ottoman Europe the sultan’s troops fought fiercely in defense, extracting a heavy cost from the Russians in every part of their advance. It was a surprising performance, given that the sultan had not yet had time to replace the Janissaries with a professional force. Exhausted and diminished in number, the Russians were unable to organize a final advance on Istanbul. Without supplies and reinforcements, however, the Ottoman position was unsustainable, forcing the sultan to sign a peace treaty in September 1829 (the Treaty of Adrianople) that saw the Russians pull back from their positions in the Balkans and eastern Anatolia, but
consolidated Russian rule over Georgia and provided for a large war indemnity on the part of the sultan. An autonomous Greek state (far smaller than its modern dimensions) was created. In 1832 a German prince, Otto of Bavaria, accepted an invitation to become king of the new nation after the ever-fractious Greeks failed to agree on any ethnic Greek candidate.
With the unsuccessful adventure in Greece finally over, Muhammad ‘Ali returned to his designs on Ottoman-ruled Syria, intending to return that province to Egyptian rule as it had been in the days of the Mamluks. Though the sultan had promised Muhammad ‘Ali certain pashaliks in Syria for his contribution to the Greek war, these territories were never transferred to his control. The army was brought back up to strength through a massive conscription campaign, and a new navy was built in Alexandria under the supervision of French naval engineer Louis-Charles de Cerisy. Other ships, like the 60-gun frigate L’Egyptienne (renamed Rashid) and the frigate Bahira, were built in Venice. By 1833 the viceroy, at enormous expense, had restored the fleet to 12 ships of the line, 12 frigates, and a host of lesser craft. French nationals were prominent among the naval officers and even commanded some ships. A naval school with 1,200 cadets was established at Ras al-Tin, run entirely by French officers.

In view of his losses in men, material, and funds in Greece, Muhammad ‘Ali considered himself woefully undercompensated by the sultan and was prepared to settle the account himself. The viceroy had to search for some pretense to justify military action in Syria and eventually found one in the reluctance of Acre’s governor ‘Abdullah to return several thousand Egyptians who had fled the viceroy’s recruiting drives. The timing was carefully chosen; the Ottoman sultan’s armies were at the time engaged in heavy fighting in Bosnia and Albania. This left a window of opportunity for the viceroy to seize the pashaliks he had been promised. The European powers knew that the sultan had reneged on his agreement. They were prepared, to an extent, to regard an internal settling of differences as a natural event.
After a small delay caused by an outbreak of cholera in Cairo, Ibrahim led an Egyptian army of 30,000 men into Syria in October 1831, taking Jaffa, Jerusalem, Acre (after a lengthy siege), and Damascus, defeating every Ottoman army thrown at him in only eight months. On the march into Syria the Bedouin auxiliaries, who were supposed to watch the rear of the army, took the opportunity to attack and loot the Syrians who had come out to watch the Egyptian advance. It was a sign of things to come. Most Syrians were glad to see the corrupt Ottoman administration tossed out and generally provided no obstruction to the Egyptian advance. The large Christian minority compared their situation under the Ottomans unfavorably to that of the Copts under Egyptian rule and thus especially welcomed Ibrahim. Within a few years the Syrians would be as united in their opposition to Egyptian rule as they were to Ottoman rule.

Ibrahim began the campaign by besieging Acre, the fortified city that had defied Napoleon 30 years earlier. ‘Abdullah was prepared to defend it, but was counting on eventual relief from Istanbul. Repeated attacks on the fortress took many lives on both sides before the Egyptians settled in for a siege. They were still there in April 1832 when the Porte finally sent an army from Istanbul. On the way to Acre the Ottoman commander of the advance force heard that Ibrahim had set out to meet him with an army of his own. The Ottoman pasha turned his horse around and fled back to Istanbul, leaving his leaderless army to decide its own fate. The army disintegrated before Ibrahim even reached it. The demoralized Ottoman force rallied near Homs, but was easily defeated by the Egyptians. With the threat from the north eliminated for now, Ibrahim returned to Acre determined to end its resistance once and for all. On May 27, 1832, he threw everything he had at the city until its now crumbling walls were breached. With his usual iron discipline, Ibrahim was reported to have struck down several officers with his sabre who made the mistake of retreating without having achieved their objective. Only 400 of the city’s garrison of 6,000 survived the siege to be taken into captivity. ‘Abdullah was among them, bitterly reproaching the Porte for its failure to relieve him. To his surprise he was taken to Cairo where he not only retained his head, but was honored for his courage.

Ibrahim took Damascus without a battle. Just north of Homs he met the army of the pasha of Aleppo and routed it with little effort. By now the main Ottoman force under Husayn Pasha had reached Aleppo, but failed to occupy the city due to the hostility of its inhabitants. Ibrahim quickly reached Aleppo by forced marches and entered the walls to the cheers of its people. Husayn took flight without having faced Ibrahim in battle, his army following close behind. The Ottoman troops were cleared from their positions in the pass leading into Anatolia in just one day; the way into the Turkish heartland was now open.
The sultan declared the viceroy a rebel in April 1832, but this only intensified Muhammad 'Ali's efforts. The declaration placed the pasha in a difficult position in Egypt where his enemies tried to proclaim his rule as illegitimate. A round of executions demonstrated that he was still in control. For European consumption the viceroy presented himself as a loyal subject of the sultan, merely liberating Syrian regions from the misrule of corrupt pashas.

In general, the officer corps of Ibrahim’s army was still the product of nepotism and favoritism and was not of the same general quality as the rank and file they commanded. The heavy drinking of many of his officers frustrated the ever-focused Ibrahim. The commander dealt harshly with those who undermined his authority, leaving no question as to who led the army. Though Ibrahim could not reform a well-entrenched system of promotion overnight, he was able to bring some discipline to his officer corps by a willingness to bring even senior officers before courts-martial or summary executions.

A march by Ibrahim’s army into Anatolia was bound to alarm the European powers, but Ibrahim cared little for the sensibilities of diplomacy. His army had done everything he had asked of it, and he would not now hold it back from pursuing full victory. Ibrahim sent his nephew 'Abbas (son of the late Tulun) down into the Adana Region with an advance force while he himself took the rest of the army to the port of Alexandretta where they seized an enormous stock of provisions meant for the Ottoman army.

Sultan Mahmud dispatched his Grand Vizier, Muhammad Rashid Pasha, fresh from victories in Albania, to Anatolia to lead the sultan’s army of 53,000 men against Ibrahim. Rashid had fought alongside Ibrahim at the siege of Missolonghi in Greece. While he had 50,000 men, only 10,000 were regulars. The Ottoman minister of war, Khusrav Pasha, withheld an available force of 45,000 Bosnian veterans. As subsequent events will show, Khusrav may not have been eager to see the vizier return. Ibrahim did not wait idly for Rashid Pasha’s army, but spent his time reconnoitering a battlefield of his choice near the Anatolian city of Konya. The army was drilled through their expected battlefield movements over and over, until the plan became automatic. This repetition gave the Egyptians an enormous advantage when the battle began in a heavy fog on December 21, 1832. The Egyptian army at Konya had only 15,000 men, but it was highly professional by this time in comparison to the disorganized and provisionless Ottoman force making its way to meet them.

The opening bombardment by the Ottomans at Konya was ineffective as the fog made their targets nearly invisible. With the Ottomans unable to correct their range, Ibrahim simply had to move men out of the area where cannon balls were falling. The Egyptian artillery replied with much greater effectiveness, creating disarray in the Ottoman lines. It became
clear to the Egyptians that the Ottoman left wing had swung away from the rest of the army in the confusion of the fog and bombardment, leaving it isolated. The smoke of the guns was doing nothing to increase visibility. Ibrahim did not hesitate, sending his elite Guardia Regiment and the cavalry to attack the Ottoman left wing. Ahmad al-Manikli, one of the most courageous commanders in the Egyptian army, led the cavalry in a thunderous charge that broke the Ottoman lines. When he saw the collapse of his wing, Rashid Pasha tried to rally his men in person, but became lost in the fog and was captured by Egyptian soldiers. The Ottoman second-in-command tried to flank the Egyptian left in a last chance to seize victory. For 45 minutes the Ottomans counterattacked, but were repeatedly repulsed by the Egyptian infantry and artillery, the guns of the center being rushed to join the guns of the Egyptian left wing. The broken Ottoman army fled in retreat, leaving the field to Ibrahim. His defeat of an army three times the size of his own was a brilliant victory that opened the road to Istanbul.

Ibrahim marched on to the capital of the Ottoman Empire until a letter from his father stopped him. The viceroy always kept one eye on Europe and now hesitated to complete the triumph as he sensed the diplomatic winds against him. The army was ordered to halt where it was. Muhammad ‘Ali’s failure at this point to authorize his eager and capable son to press on to Istanbul changed history, but the viceroy kept his principal war aim in mind: the consolidation of his rule in Syria, not the overthrow of the sultan. Most European nations still regarded the Ottoman Empire as a force for stability in the East and had little interest in seeing the viceroy bring about its destruction.

A Russian envoy, General Muraviev, was sent to Cairo where he made clear Russia’s opposition to an Egyptian conquest of Istanbul. Muhammad ‘Ali did not realize that the sultan, to his dismay, was finding little support in Paris and London, preoccupied as they were with more local problems. From desperation the sultan opened talks with his rebellious viceroy, but the sultan’s failure to concede Syria resulted only in new and outrageous demands by Muhammad ‘Ali for parts of the Turkish heartland of Anatolia as well. The sultan’s denial of these claims brought about Ibrahim’s occupation of the ancient Ottoman capital of Bursa to press home his father’s demands.

The sultan appealed to London to provide a naval squadron to defend Istanbul, but was abruptly turned down. With no international support and nothing to impede Ibrahim’s triumphal march into the Ottoman capital, Sultan Mahmud resolved to do a “deal with the devil” and appealed to the Russian czar for military support. The no-doubt astonished czar responded eagerly, sending a squadron of warships into the Bosphorus in February 1833. A second squadron soon followed, with a Russian army of 5,000 men landing on the Asian side of the Bosphorus.
These developments finally attracted the attention of Britain and France, who were greatly alarmed by this new and strange alliance. The British prime minister, Lord Palmerston, was receiving rumors from his anti-Russian ambassador in Istanbul of a developing alliance between the czar and Muhammad ‘Ali to divide the Ottoman Empire. Pressure was brought to bear on the belligerents, resulting in a treaty giving the viceroy control of Syria and the region of Adana in Anatolia. Adana was of more than symbolic interest to the viceroy; its large forests contained the timber desperately needed to build Egyptian ships. The Russians withdrew, though the bill for their services came in 1833 with the Russian/Ottoman Treaty of Hunkar Iskelesi. A secret clause in an otherwise innocuous agreement of mutual support affirmed that the Dardanelles would be closed at the wish of the czar to any naval force seeking entrance to the Black Sea.

In Syria the people initially welcomed the expulsion of the Ottoman administration, but they soon came to resent the demands of the viceroy’s rule. Attempts to conscript the Druze led to mass uprisings in Mount Lebanon and the Jabal al-Druze. Though conscription, forced labor, and higher taxation were all irritants, it was the disarmament campaign that proved the last straw. Ibrahim’s usual brutal efficiency in squashing the subsequent revolt did nothing to help endear Syrians to Egyptian rule.

By the end of his war with the sultan, Muhammad ‘Ali had assembled a powerful regional army and navy that allowed him to expand and control his dominions. Britain was distressed to find a strong and independent Egyptian empire standing between it and its vast possessions in the Indian subcontinent. A look at Egyptian army deployments in 1837 gives an excellent snapshot of Muhammad ‘Ali’s foreign commitments:

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<td>Infantry</td>
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<td>1 Guards regiment</td>
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<td>Cavalry</td>
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<td>Artillery</td>
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<td>Veterans</td>
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<td>Sappers:</td>
<td>1 battalion, Alexandria</td>
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The price of maintaining such an impressive and far-flung military was an almost endless campaign of conscription. Having discovered that the fellahin made good soldiers with training and discipline, the pasha abandoned his dream of an army of black slaves. With as many as 130,000 fellahin conscripts now in the army there was a danger of seriously depleting the manpower needed for agriculture. At times certain areas were granted temporary exemptions from conscription in order to devote their energies to growing food for the army.

The Conquest of Arabia

A Circassian (or Georgian) Mamluk named Turçe Bilmez launched a rebellion in the Arabian coastal town of Jiddah in the summer of 1832. Turçe Bilmez had 2,000 Albanian troops under his command who had not been paid for months, most of the viceroy’s revenues being devoted to supporting naval operations against Greece. The Mamluk had apparently measured the region’s political winds and come to the conclusion that the sultan was about to depose his Egyptian viceroy and was prepared to hand his territory over to the sultan in return for the governorship of the Hijaz. The rebels helped themselves to the treasury in Jiddah before assembling their own fleet by seizing Egyptian ships. Helped initially by Wahhabite ‘Asiri tribesmen under ‘Ali ibn Mukhtar, the rebels began to occupy towns along the Red Sea coast. Falling back before
Egyptian troops sent from Mecca, Türçe Bilmez moved south into Yemen, settling in at Mocha.

At the time Yemen was in a state of chaos. The ruling Zaydi imam had died, leaving his brothers to battle for the succession. Shipping had nearly come to a stop and the ‘Asiris were now laying siege to Mocha.
after Turçe Bilmez broke his pact with ‘Ali ibn Mukhtar. British interests in the coffee trade through Mocha were threatened, easing the way for a reluctant British acceptance of Muhammad ‘Ali’s proposal that Egypt take control of Yemen, solidifying the pasha’s rule on both sides of the Red Sea.

Before shipping his troops to Yemen, Muhammad ‘Ali had his navy clear the Red Sea of Turçe Bilmez’s ships. The pasha then sent a regiment of nizam jadid infantry with cavalry and artillery support by sea to Mocha. Another detachment of nearly 4,000 men (mostly cavalry) followed by sea while camel caravan transported their equipment overland. The Egyptian campaign began with a fairly bloodless start; the ‘Asiris abandoned Mocha for a bribe and Turçe Bilmez and the remaining mutineers made an undignified escape on a British ship bound for Bombay before heading for Istanbul. In a demonstration of Mamluk ineptness at sea, Bilmez and his party set out for the British ships in boats without sails or oars and had to be rescued by British boats before the current carried them into the open ocean.

After these initial successes the Egyptian campaign took a turn for the worse in 1834. The army was poorly supplied and the animals badly handled. The ‘Asiris dealt several defeats to the Egyptian force commanded by the viceroy’s nephew, Kuçuk Ibrahim. The army also had great difficulty penetrating the highlands of Yemen despite further reinforcements and large cash payments to rebellious factions. Some Bedouin were enticed to join the Egyptians and by January 1835, the Egyptians controlled most of the Tihama coastal region. The ‘Asiris fell back before the gullible Kuçuk Ibrahim and ambushed the Egyptian army in the mountains. The Egyptian force was shattered, the survivors fleeing to the coast with many lost in the desert. By now Muhammad ‘Ali had invested too many men and too much money to give up, so two regiments of Sudanese blacks were sent with Kurshid Pasha, who was to assume command of the army on his arrival. Over 500 of these recruits died on the Red Sea crossing, while hundreds more perished on the march from the Nile to Suakin. Kurshid fared no better in Arabia than his predecessors as the Egyptians made little progress through 1836.

The war was threatening to drag on interminably as it drained the viceroy’s treasury, but in early 1837 fresh troops and leadership turned the tide, recapturing the coastal cities of the Himaz region on the Red Sea coast of Yemen. The viceroy’s new strategy was to release the old Wahhabi leader Khalid ibn Sa’ud from detention in Cairo, where he had remained since being captured in 1818 at the siege of Dar‘iya. Having adopted a pro-Egyptian attitude during his years in Cairo, Khalid was now put at the head of several thousand Egyptian troops with the objective of overthrowing the Wahhabi leader Faisal ibn Turki in Riyadh. Faisal abandoned his capital, later coming to terms by acknowledging Muhammad
‘Ali as suzerain. In the south the mountains of Yemen were finally entered and pacified, bringing a temporary end to the campaign.

British intelligence reports suggested that the viceroy now intended to take Aden. Halfway between Suez and Bombay, Aden would provide a perfect port and refueling station for British ships en route to India. British agents informed the viceroy they were familiar with his plans and would regard a move on Aden as a threat to British interests in the Persian Gulf. At the same time the Bombay government began to complain of Aden-based piracy, creating a pretext for the port’s occupation.

The East India Company sent a small squadron of warships to claim compensation from the sultan of Lahaj (who ruled Aden at the time) for various looted ships and “insults to the British flag.” The mission was entrusted to the capable Captain Haines. With the guns of his ships trained on Aden, Haines revealed that the required compensation would be the transfer of the entire port and surrounding territory to the Indian government in exchange for a tiny annual rent. Haines’s coup took the Egyptians by surprise. They had not moved fast enough and now there was nothing to done beyond official protests. Muhammad ‘Ali was always careful to distinguish between regional and European rivals, avoiding direct conflict with the latter (especially Britain) whenever possible. In pacifying Yemen the viceroy had bought the oyster, but the British plucked the pearl.

Khurshid Pasha was again put in charge of the army in Najd in 1838, where he received reinforcements from Cairo. Together with Khalid he led the army east over the desert to what he hoped would be an early arrival on the eastern coast of Arabia. Faisal ibn Turki renounced his earlier submission, which was probably made only to buy time. By the end of 1838, Khurshid Pasha was busy occupying the Hasa Region along the Persian Gulf. Britain was alarmed with the sudden appearance of the Egyptian army in an area it was beginning to regard as part of its sphere of influence. The wealthy island state of Bahrain appeared to be Khalid’s next target, possibly followed by an Egyptian sweep northward into Baghdad. Bahrain’s ruler, Shaykh ‘Abdullah ibn Ahmad, offered to place Bahrain under British protection, but was refused. While Muhammad ‘Ali continued to maintain that he had no designs on Bahrain, Khurshid was busy informing the British agent on the island that he intended to take Bahrain but would not interfere with British commerce. Shaykh ‘Abdullah received an emissary from Khurshid demanding tribute and his sons as hostages, as well as the return of certain Wahhabi leaders who had taken refuge with the shaykh. In his desperation the shaykh tried to bribe the Egyptian envoy before attempting to place Bahrain under Persian protection.

No help was forthcoming from any quarter, and Shaykh ‘Abdullah eventually adopted a more fatalistic approach to the future of Bahrain.
In answer to British protests to the threat to Bahrain, Muhammad ‘Ali pointed out that Bahrain had paid tribute to Najd since 1803, and he was now ruler of Najd. These payments to the Wahhabis had, however, been sporadic rather than regular and were usually paid only under the threat of force. Interestingly, the viceroy in his claims cited the authority of the Ottoman sultan, with whom he was about to go to war in Syria. British warnings failed to prevent Khurshid from taking Bahrain without a struggle in April 1839. In response to yet another cautionary note from the British, Khurshid replied by sending a copy of Shaykh ‘Abdullah’s submission as a tributary of the Egyptian viceroy. The restless Khurshid began to occupy the coast south of Bahrain into northern Oman, threatening British influence in the area. Indeed, the British were beginning to look ineffectual compared to Khurshid’s string of military successes.

Egyptian taxation soon brought the tribes out in revolt in Najd and the coastal region of Hasa. There was now a chance of the Egyptian forces being cut off from their supply lines, so Khurshid began to gradually withdraw on the orders of Muhammad ‘Ali. Khurshid hesitated to give up his hard-won territories, but his position was rapidly becoming unsustainable. In fact, the viceroy was in the process of withdrawing nearly all
his troops from Arabia to meet the more immediate threat of war with the Ottoman sultan in Syria. The viceroy pulled out all 12 regiments of regular infantry from the Hijaz, leaving the region under the control of the sharif of Mecca.

In Yemen British agents poured through the country in an attempt to persuade the tribes to divert the coffee trade through Aden instead of Egyptian-controlled Mocha. Muhammad ‘Ali produced the Ottoman firman that granted him control of all Yemen, but London went ahead and declared Aden a British dependency in January 1839. By September 1839, the British made an official request to the viceroy to remove his troops from Yemen altogether. By now Muhammad ‘Ali appeared to be heading for a confrontation with the European powers with Britain’s Lord Palmerston in the lead. The British could fight a war on two fronts; the viceroy could not. Kuçuk Ibrahim was ordered to bring the army home from Yemen. For the next three years it was an annual event for the local Arabs to try to drive the British from Aden, but it proved impossible. Over a hundred years later, Egypt and Britain would again confront each other over control of this strategic port.

The War over Syria

By 1839 the sultan decided the time had come to drive the upstart viceroy from his Syrian provinces. The viceroy was proclaimed a traitor simultaneously with an Ottoman advance into Syria. Muhammad ‘Ali had issued orders to Ibrahim to stand fast in the face of Turkish provocations after the European powers made known their opposition to any attempt by the viceroy to take Istanbul. The European powers were concerned (as always) that a weakened Ottoman Empire might fall prey to the Russians, who would seize control of the Bosphorus Straits. The sultan’s army was led by Hafiz Pasha, who was urged on to confront the Egyptians by his confident Prussian staff. The Ottoman army was, nevertheless, an undisciplined horde compared to the well-organized Egyptian army. The Ottomans dealt small blows to the fringes of the Egyptian force without showing much for their efforts. Ibrahim sent a letter to Hafiz Pasha assuring him that his tolerance for military provocations was not a sign of fear. He went on to urge Hafiz Pasha to abandon his “intrigues” and meet the Egyptian army (“men who know nothing of fear”) head on.

Ibrahim finally received permission from his father to attack. Discovering that the Prussians had directed the creation of a strong camp at Nezib (south of the Euphrates), Ibrahim’s staff met to consider alternatives to a frontal assault. Sève advanced an audacious plan that could result in the destruction of the Egyptian army if it failed. The French general proposed withdrawing the Egyptian army from its camp and exposing its flank on
the first phase of a daylong march around the Ottoman position. Sève’s plan depended on the professionalism of Hafiz Pasha’s Prussians, whom Sève thought were unlikely to believe that the Egyptian army was capable of performing such a foolhardy maneuver until it was too late.

Once it was discovered that the Egyptians were on the move, Hafiz Pasha incensed his Prussian staff by refusing to attack the Egyptians before they reached safe ground. Some attempted to resign on the eve of the battle, but Hafiz shamed them into remaining by questioning their professionalism. On June 24, 1839, the armies began hostilities with a 90-minute artillery duel. The Egyptian advance that followed was met with waves of Ottoman cavalry. The disciplined conscripts of the Egyptian infantry held their ground against the cream of the sultan’s horsemen until the attacks collapsed. The Egyptian infantry led by Ahmad Pasha al-Manikli advanced and swept the field of Ottoman resistance. It was now the turn of the Egyptian cavalry to pursue and slay the fleeing Ottoman soldiers.

The Turkish artillery at Nezib was commanded by a young Prussian captain, Helmuth Von Moltke, later field marshal of the Prussian army and architect of the German victory over France in 1870–1871. Von Moltke was attached to the Turkish army at the time as a staff officer, but the failure of Hafiz Pasha to listen to any of his advice led to a request for command of the artillery instead. Though Von Moltke had done his best to reposition the artillery for the battle, the Turkish guns had little more success than did the rest of the disorganized army. The gunners at least had the distinction of being the last to take to their heels. When Ibrahim entered Hafiz Pasha’s luxurious tent to write his dispatches to Cairo, he had the satisfaction of finding all the Ottoman campaign plans and a firman making Hafiz the new pasha of Egypt. The Ottoman commander had apparently forgotten it in his flight from the battlefield. For the second time in a decade Istanbul found itself defenseless against the Egyptian army.

The disaster at Nezib was followed by the death of Sultan Mahmud (though before he received the bad news). At this critical time Mahmud was succeeded by his 16-year-old son, Abdul Mejid. Raised in the harem, the boy was utterly incapable of dealing with the crisis; his closest companions were a dwarf and two black eunuchs. Muhammad ‘Ali issued orders to Ibrahim to halt his advance (against Ibrahim’s judgment). The viceroy’s old enemy, Khusrav Pasha, appointed himself grand vizier in Istanbul, though this news had immediate and surprising benefits for the viceroy. The grand-admiral of the Ottoman fleet, Ahmad Fawzi, just happened to be another old enemy of the new vizier and astonished Europe by taking his fleet of eight ships of the line and 12 frigates into the harbor of Alexandria to surrender it into Egyptian hands. Ahmad Fawzi may have been spurred by a bribe by the viceroy and a suspicion
that Khusraw intended to turn the fleet over to the Russians. With Muhammad ‘Ali threatening to declare complete independence of the sultan, the collapse of the now-defenseless Ottoman Empire appeared imminent. Khusraw was authorized by the sultan to offer Muhammad ‘Ali the hereditary pashalik of Egypt and to give the pashalik of Syria to Ibrahim until his father’s death.

**The Egyptians Driven from Syria**

At this point the European powers intervened, demanding to play the central role in the negotiations. While France continued to support Muhammad ‘Ali, Great Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia agreed to the “Convention of London for the Pacification of the Levant” on July 15, 1840, in an effort to settle the crisis that threatened to tear the Ottoman Empire apart. The London settlement called for the sultan’s recognition of the viceroyalty of Egypt as a hereditary position, as well as the cession of Acre to Muhammad ‘Ali. In turn the viceroy was to withdraw from all occupied areas in Syria, Adana, the holy cities in the Hijaz, and the island of Crete. The Ottoman fleet was to be returned in its entirety with no deduction in the annual tribute to Istanbul for its keeping. There was a time limit of 20 days for the viceroy to implement all its conditions. A vicious diplomatic row followed between France and its erstwhile partners, but with the French fleet in no condition to sail at the time, there was little Paris could do about the situation.

Muhammad ‘Ali put his new Turkish ships to the task of crushing rebellion in the Beirut region, but was soon faced with a British order to leave Syria and Palestine after doing nothing to meet the demands of the London Convention. In Istanbul the sultan officially removed Muhammad ‘Ali from his position as viceroy of Egypt. Through September and October 1840, a combined British/Austrian squadron of warships under Commodore Charles Napier cruised along the Syrian coast, systematically expelling Egyptian garrisons. On October 10, 1840, the Egyptians were completely defeated in battle near Beirut, leading to massive desertions by locally raised Druze conscripts.

By November 1840, only the ancient Crusader-built citadel of Acre was left to the Egyptians on the coast. The British Mediterranean fleet, joined by smaller groups of Austrian and Turkish ships, moved into position off Acre on November 3, 1840. Sailing in two lines, the fleet hammered the ancient fortifications for two hours with deadly accuracy. The Egyptian guns fired too high, allowing the British to bring the fort’s walls down on the heads of its defenders. The short battle ended when a shell detonated the main Egyptian magazine, killing over 1,100 men. By evening the city was occupied by British troops. Thousands of fleeing Egyptians
were captured by local villagers and brought into British custody. The Egyptian army also lost a large portion of its artillery, which was stored in the Acre citadel.

Syrian displeasure with the viceroy’s rule now began to boil over into revolt, often with the prodding of Ottoman agents. In late November 1840, Napier arrived off Alexandria. Over several days Napier persuaded the viceroy to sign an agreement to give up Syria and return the Ottoman fleet in return for the hereditary pashalik of Egypt. The European powers agreed to this resolution of a sticky situation. There was nothing left for the viceroy to do except order Ibrahim to evacuate Syria and return the fleet (short a frigate, a brig, a cutter, and four transports, all retained by the viceroy). Ibrahim was forced to make a fighting retreat from Syria as rebels assaulted his force from all sides. Thousands were lost in battle or from thirst and starvation. The young Ottoman sultan was held to his part of the agreement, and by June 1841, Muhammad ‘Ali was proclaimed the hereditary viceroy of Egypt. The same firman reduced the size of Muhammad ‘Ali’s army to a strength of 18,000. The army’s uniforms and insignia were to conform to Ottoman standards, and naval ships were to be built only with the sultan’s permission. In the original firman the sultan was to declare the successor to the viceroy, but Muhammad ‘Ali negotiated the right to have succession fall on the eldest male of the royal family, following Ottoman practice.

The period of 1839 to 1841 was a strange roller-coaster of success and disaster, but when the smoke finally cleared Muhammad ‘Ali had firmly established himself as the first in a new dynasty of foreign rulers of Egypt. This had been his primary goal since first wresting power from the Mamluks. Egypt now existed solely for its exploitation by Muhammad ‘Ali’s descendants as they saw fit. Though the firman of 1841 set Egypt along an inevitable path of separation from the Ottoman Empire, the idea of Egypt as a nation had yet to take hold and certainly played no part in the deliberations of its Turko-Circassian ruling class. Muhammad ‘Ali had lost a small empire which cost him greatly but returned little to his treasury, but losing control of the holy cities was a special blow to the viceroy’s prestige. There were many in Istanbul, however, who understood that penning the viceroy up within Egypt represented a loss to the empire as well. The Ottoman Empire could never hope to control its southern regions from Istanbul in the way Muhammad ‘Ali could. While the viceroy might inflate his importance through the control of these regions, the sultan still received tribute from these provinces at no expense to himself. Now the cost of occupation of these distant regions in men and money would be transferred to Istanbul.

The firman of 1841 eased international tensions in the Middle East. British relations with Egypt improved, as did relations between the viceroy and the Ottoman sultan. Muhammad ‘Ali’s rule gradually became
regarded as force for security in the region. At the same time, however, the viceroy was forced to relinquish some of his power within Egypt. His small attempts to introduce industrialization to Egypt had failed by the mid-1830s, and there was increasing pressure on his system of agricultural monopolies that directed major crops into the hands of the government. Products would then be sold back to the population or exported, all to the personal enrichment of the viceroy. The Turko-Circassian elite now demanded a share of these revenues while Britain continued to call for direct dealings with the producers, rather than the viceroy’s middlemen. Eventually the monopolies system had to be disbanded.

The dissolution of a large portion of the army after 1841 left many Turko-Circassian officers unemployed and eager to carve out some part of Egypt’s wealth for themselves. For the *fellahin* it was largely a time of relief from incessant conscription and heavy taxation to support Egypt’s large army. Conscription continued on a smaller scale for the diminished army, which continued to campaign in the Sudan and elsewhere.

As the 1840s progressed Muhammad ‘Ali’s mind steadily deteriorated. Ibrahim, without a war to fight for the first time in his adult life, began to assume the duties of administration. With the onetime Lion of Egypt now toothless, the viceroy was received with honor in a trip to Istanbul in 1846. Muhammad ‘Ali even met with Khusrav Pasha, his bitter enemy for four decades. These two remarkable survivors of the unforgiving world of Eastern power politics finally made their peace, recognizing each other as worthy adversaries. In 1848 the Ottoman sultan formally appointed Ibrahim the new viceroy of Egypt, but he died a little more than two months later. Whispers claimed that he was poisoned by the sultan, but Ibrahim’s health had been poor for several years. Had Ibrahim lived longer, he would surely have effected a total separation of Egypt from the Ottoman Empire. During his short reign the sultan had inquired after his yearly tribute. Ibrahim was said to have replied the money was not sent “because I have no money to send. I have spent all my cash in the purchase of cannon and ammunition.” After Ibrahim’s death, Muhammad ‘Ali returned briefly as viceroy until his own demise in August 1849.
The Egyptian Empire at War: Crimea, Mexico, and Crete

The Crimean War

The Greek frontiers established in 1832 formed the boundaries of a much smaller nation than modern Greece. A line stretching from the western port of Preveza to the Gulf of Volos in the East marked the northern frontier. The Greek regions of Epiros, Thessaly, and Macedonia all remained under Ottoman rule. Farther north the Russians provoked a dispute over the rights of Orthodox Christians in Ottoman territory, leading to the invasion of the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia (modern Moldova and Romania) in the summer of 1853. The Russian generals foresaw great numbers of Greek and Slavic Orthodox Christians joining their army as it marched on Istanbul through Bulgaria. Great Britain and France sent their Mediterranean fleets to the mouth of the Dardanelles while the European powers (Austria, Prussia, France, and Britain) debated the wisdom of going to war against the czar. Though the Russians first entered the principalities in July 1853, the Ottomans were restrained by the European powers from declaring war until October 4, 1853. The Russians intended to press on to Istanbul to force a settlement on the sultan, but Ottoman regulars under Omar Pasha offered stiff resistance where they met the oncoming Russian army in the Danube region, a traditional battleground between the two empires.

Omar Pasha, commander of the Army of the Danube, was one of the sultan’s most trusted generals, with a long record of successfully repressing revolts throughout the empire. The pasha was originally an Austrian Croatian of the Orthodox Church, but drifted into the Ottoman Empire after deserting the Austrian army in 1827. Conversion to Islam opened a new world of possibilities for the ambitious young man, who enrolled in the Ottoman army. A chance meeting with Sultan Mahmud II while teaching languages at the military academy led to his appointment as language
tutor to the crown prince. Omar passed through the ranks without ever leaving the military academy and was made brigadier general days after the crown prince took the throne in 1839 as Sultan Abdul Mejid. When the Allied European navies began evicting the Egyptians from Syria in 1840, Omar was installed as liason officer with the Anglo-Austrian fleet. In the years following, Omar seems to have been on almost continuous service, campaigning in Albania, Syria, Kurdistan, Wallachia, Bosnia, and Montenegro. Omar Pasha dealt with revolts against his patron with ruthless severity, but had an unusual sensitivity for diplomatic considerations, always important in dealing with the European powers.

The Russian attack, led by Don Cossacks, failed to take the islands and south shore of the Danube. The weeks of heavy fighting in the region did little to benefit the Orthodox Christians the Russians claimed to be rescuing. Winter food stocks were completely lost to the rampaging armies, and many civilians were killed in the crossfire before fleeing. One correspondent described villages that were “now nothing but ruins steeped in blood. The most miserable hut on the plain was made to serve as a position for either attack or defence.” The Christian Wallachians were soon in revolt against the Russian occupation force. Some Russian troops appear to have been told they were on their way to liberate the Holy Land, inquiring of astonished villagers how far it was to Jerusalem. The Ottoman force in the region consisted of Turkish regulars, Albanian irregulars, and six regiments of Egyptian veterans (a force of 14,400 men when formed in Cairo). The Ottoman officer corps contained a large number of British officers, though Great Britain remained (with France) neutral until the summer of 1854. European armies in the nineteenth century habitually maintained far more officers than were actually needed for the units in active service. In peacetime this left many officers the choice of idling about on half-pay (or less) or seeking appointments in foreign armies at war. The opening of hostilities in Eastern Europe led to a wave of such men descending on Bulgarian ports. Many Poles and Hungarians were also part of the regular Ottoman army, including both exiled revolutionaries and converts to Islam.

Though ‘Abbas Hilmi I (1848–1854), the Egyptian viceroy, had been involved in numerous disputes with the Ottoman sultan over the extent of his powers, the Egyptian response to the sultan’s call for military aid was impressive at first glance. ‘Abbas delivered the six regiments together with a fleet of three ships of the line (Benhauf, Halep, and Mefta Cihat), four frigates (Dimyad, Bahri, Resid, and Zir-i Cihat), three corvettes (Cihat Bekker, Cena Bahri, and Samrah Bahri), two steamers, and a number of troop transports and other ships. The fleet had suffered from neglect since the death of Muhammad ‘Ali in 1849, and many of the ships were outdated. The army under Abbas had been allowed to decline to a force of only
9,000 men, but the viceroy managed to raise an army of 15,000 men to fight in support of the sultan.

During their 28-day transport from Alexandria the troops were restricted to a 1½-pound chunk of biscuit and a single drink of water each evening, taken through a straw from a barrel to prevent overimbibing. Under the terms of ‘Abbas’s agreement with the sultan, the Ottoman Empire was entirely responsible for the provisioning and equipment of the Egyptian expeditionary force. The viceroy’s generosity went only so far, and he sent his soldiers with only the bare necessities needed to get them alive to Turkey. The army’s arrival at a camp north of Istanbul was scarcely dignified, marked as it was by a mad but entirely understandable rush for the closest stream. Once fed and watered the men were finally properly equipped with warm clothing and tents. The sultan himself inspected the force on parade, a rare gesture never made to the sultan’s own army. The troops were deeply impressed, while the generals were presented with diamond-encrusted snuffboxes. The entire force was given an extra month’s pay.

The army that arrived to defend the empire, however, was not the same as the one the sultan had requested. The sultan may have noticed in his inspection the lack of young men in the Egyptian regiments and the number of white beards. If he had looked a bit closer, he may even have noticed that many of the men lacked the forefinger on their right hand and their right eye, desperate attempts at self-mutilation to evade military service. ‘Abbas was unwilling to part with his regular army, but did not have time to raise and train a new force. A scheme was thereby devised
to rake the country for veterans and impress them into the expeditionary force. Having survived the worst horrors of war in Greece, Syria, Anatolia, and the Sudan, these veterans never expected the misery of their initial recruitment to be once again visited upon them. For a second time, they were dragged from their villages and families in chains. Not surprisingly, desertion remained a major problem for the army until it was committed to battle in the Danube region. Days after the sultan’s inspection, the army was again embarked to Varna in miserably crowded conditions. It would soon become involved in heavy fighting against the Russian invasion, which was quickly halted by the spirited resistance of the Turks and Egyptians, who were now reinforced by Albanians, Bosnians, and Macedonians.

At sea the Egyptian fleet was split up among three Ottoman squadrons operating in the Black Sea. The Ottoman fleet was aided by the presence of Sir Adolphus Slade, a capable British naval officer who had the role of official advisor to the fleet for 40 years under the name Mushaver Pasha. On November 18, 1853, the Egyptian steamer _Pervaz i-Bahri_ was attacked by the Russian paddle steamer _Vladimir_, which captured the Egyptian ship after the loss of 58 of its crew. Osman Pasha’s squadron (with two Egyptian ships) took up winter quarters at Sinop, on the northern coast of Anatolia. Osman wished to keep his squadron at Sinop until it could be fully trained, but his position was jeopardized by his failure to establish naval gun batteries on the cliffs overlooking the harbor. The existing batteries contained only antique guns, some of Genoese manufacture, manned by local militia. The squadron’s lack of ships of the line meant that it was no match for Russian naval forces in the Black Sea, and the appearance of Russian ships off Sinop was an ominous sign. One of the Egyptian ships, the frigate _Dimyad_, found itself in a familiar position, having survived the Battle of Navarino 26 years earlier. Mushaver Pasha convinced the Ottoman admiral to send three ships of the line to Sinop, but the order was reversed at the urging of the British ambassador.

On November 27, 1853, a powerful Russian squadron of six ships of the line, two frigates, and three steamers approached Sinop. The Russians feared that Osman Pasha’s squadron was intent on delivering supplies to the Circassian insurrection. To prevent this, orders were issued calling not just for the defeat of the Ottoman squadron, but its complete destruction. Though the return of the Russian ships was inevitable, Osman failed to take even the simplest precautions, such as off-loading all the loose and flammable materials from the decks of his ships. On November 30, 1853, the Russians sailed into the harbor, leaving their steamers behind to cut off any escape. Just as at Navarino, the Russian squadron was allowed to close in, taking positions opposite the curve of the Ottoman line. Eventually the captain of the _Nizammiye_ gave the order to fire. The opening salvos of the Ottoman ships had some initial effect, but the hanging smoke of
the guns obscured the vision of both fleets, leaving them to fire away ineffectually for half an hour. When the wind cleared the smoke the Russians were first to find their targets, and within a few minutes the smaller Ottoman ships were being crushed in a rain of iron and hot shot.

The hellish fire continued without respite, and the crew of the Egyptian frigate *Dimyad* took to the water, preserving at least 300 lives. The Turkish sailors, most of whom could not swim, had fewer options. Several Turkish captains distinguished themselves in the fighting, including ‘Ali Bey, captain of the corvette *Navek i-Bahri*. At the moment his ship was about to be boarded, ‘Ali Bey ordered his crew overboard before igniting the ship’s magazine. Some of the other ships slipped their cables to drift toward shore where their crews could make their escape. Many attempted to keep up their fire with difficulty, as many of the powderboys had been among the first casualties. The failure to clear the decks and remove the sails before battle now led to numerous shipboard fires and a deadly rain of splinters with every hit on the decks. It was now, with the battle won, that the Russian admiral carried out his orders to the fullest, refusing to order the cease-fire until every Ottoman ship had been pulverized, slaughtering men trapped on burning hulks. Ironically the one ship to escape this one-sided battle was the steamer *Taif*, the only ship in the squadron actually carrying supplies for the Circassians. After a running battle with the Russian ships posted outside the harbor, the *Taif* abandoned its mission and headed straight to Istanbul to deliver news of the defeat.

The destruction of the Ottoman-Egyptian fleet provided the spark sought by the French emperor and the prowar faction of the British government to commit to war against Russia. British and French ships were present in the Black Sea at the time of the battle, and their inaction against the Russians was regarded as a scandal in London. In March 1854, London and Paris issued simultaneous ultimatums demanding that Russia quit the principalities of Wallachia and Moldovia. The czar’s refusal to respond was regarded as a declaration of war. Austria and Prussia held back from war, but supported the measures taken by their French and British Allies.

French and British armies had already landed at the Black Sea port of Varna (in modern Bulgaria), but did not come to the aid of the Ottoman forces standing against a far larger Russian army on the Danubian frontier. At Citate on January 6, 1854, the Turks swept the oncoming Russian columns with waves of grapeshot until the army lost its nerve, fleeing before Turkish bayonets. The Turks continued until they seized the Russian trenches on the heights, killing or wounding 6,000 Russians to an Ottoman loss of 1,000 men. Omar Pasha’s successes at Citate and in the overinflated skirmish at Oltenitsa were making him a hero in Istanbul and a household name in Britain courtesy of the English war correspondents. By March 1854, though, the Russian army was crossing the Danube
despite having suffered several defeats in battle. The Ottoman cause was little helped by Omar Pasha’s strategy of spreading his forces across the empire’s border regions in Eastern Europe, leaving much-needed formations idle in Serbia and Bosnia. As the Ottoman army fell back the local population of Muslims and Christians suffered looting and murder at the hands of the poorly disciplined Ottoman irregulars and Albanian volunteers. Circassian fighters were prominent in the irregular forces of both armies, exiles with the Ottomans and collaborators with the Russians.

The Egyptian garrison at the fort of Arab Tabya (“Arab Redoubt”) distinguished itself during the Russian siege of the Silistrian forts of Arab Tabya and Illani Tabya in May–June 1854. These bastions overlooked the Danube and stood in the way of the Russian advance. In the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829 Silistra was doggedly defended by Ottoman troops who held their positions for nearly a year while only the faintest efforts were made to relieve them. The forts of 1854 consisted only of earthworks rather than masonry (a rarity in European warfare at the time) and their successful defense was soon included in the curriculum of European staff colleges. Four battalions of Egyptians and 500 Albanian auxiliaries under Husayn Pasha garrisoned Arab Tabya. In mid-May the forts came under heavy and continuous fire from Russian batteries on islands in the Danube. On the night of May 29, 1854, Arab Tabya was attacked by at least nine battalions of Russians at midnight. The Egyptians repelled numerous fierce assaults by the Russian army, which hurled itself at the fort’s walls to the beat of their drummers. The Russian assault broke off shortly after dawn, when the rising sun revealed thousands of Russian corpses lying outside the fort.

The Russians continued their bombardment and attacks over the following days, only to be thrown back on every occasion. The presence of three British officers in the Ottoman staff directing the defense of Arab Tabya ensured that the battle was closely followed by the British public through the efforts of British war correspondents, a new addition to the London press. The British officers, veterans of the army of the East India Company, played important roles in the defense. The operation of the six guns of Arab Tabya was aided by the presence of a Prussian artilleryman, Lieutenant Grach, who was also known for having furious arguments with Husayn Pasha over the conduct of the battle. Continuous bombardment of the fort had little effect on the Egyptians, who simply dug deep during shelling, emerging afterward to make repairs to the defenses with spade and shovel. The defenders also made a habit of digging tunnels underneath the outer fortifications, allowing them to emerge in the midst of the attacking Russians, causing terrible confusion and mayhem in the advancing ranks. The fire of the Russian guns and the numerous mines laid by Russian sappers reduced the forts to what garrison member Lieutenant Charles Nasmyth described as “a shapeless
mass,” but one that the Russians proved incapable of breaching. The Russians exhausted themselves in advancing tunnels for mines only to find the defenders had abandoned their position to throw up a new one farther back.

On June 3, 1854, the Austrians issued their own ultimatum to the Russians to evacuate the principalities, and the czar was now faced with the threat of attack by the powerful Austrian army, possibly with the support of Prussia. With British gunboats entering the Danube the Russian position in the region was no longer tenable. On June 13, 1854, the Russians committed everything in a last effort to seize the forts, but the ferocity of the Ottoman counterattacks drove the superior Russian force back across the Danube. Among the Russian survivors was a young Lev Tolstoy, who narrowly escaped death at Silistria to become one of the great novelists of his age. Captain Butler, the British officer who had played such an important role in the defense of Arab Tabya was not so lucky, taking a bullet through the forehead in the last Russian attack. By the end of July 1854, the Russians left the Danube area, abandoning thousands of sick and wounded Russian troops to the care of the Turks. The conduct of the veterans of the Egyptian army in this unwelcome campaign was crucial to the success of the Ottomans, though nearly half the Egyptian expeditionary force remained in damp graves by the Danube far from their beloved Nile.

Egyptian troops were also involved in the concurrent campaign in Greece. By 1854 the Greeks were convinced that the time had come to confront the sultan and unite their tiny kingdom with Greek territories still under Ottoman rule. New taxation measures brought the Epirotes and Thessalians into armed revolt, and a group of Greek volunteers crossed the northern border with the empire to raise rebellion. Upon request from the sultan, ‘Abbas Hilmi sent 9,000 troops to Istanbul for use in Greece. Cold and exhausted on arrival, they were immediately sent on to Volo just in time to deter a Greek attack. A column of Egyptian troops heading into the interior a short time later was caught in an ambush at the pass of Kalabocca, suffering heavy losses.

The war could easily have ended with the Russian withdrawal, but Britain and France decided to pursue it, finding it embarrassing to reembark their armies for home without doing any real fighting. The Crimean Peninsula in the Black Sea was selected as the new scene of Allied operations against the wishes of both Lord Raglan and Marshal St. Arnaud, the British and French commanders. The region was poorly known to the Europeans. The Ottomans themselves no longer had anyone with first-hand knowledge of the Crimea, having lost it to Catherine the Great in 1783. Since then the Russians had built a powerful fortress at the port of Sevastopol. Frontal assault against the Russian guns was out of the question, but the fortress was poorly defended on its landside.
Fresh Egyptian troops began to arrive at the Allied camp in Varna in mid-June 1854, consisting of four battalions of infantry, artillery, and lancers. The drill of the infantry did not impress British observers, but the artillery appeared well handled and the guns kept in excellent condition. A *London Times* correspondent’s view of the Ottoman contingent was consistent with the opinions of most of the British and French officers:

Behind stone walls, intrenchments, or ramparts, defending a breach, or in the dash of a sortie, the Osmanli [Ottoman], with his wild courage, savage fanaticism, and disregard of death, which he considers indeed as his passport to heaven, may repel the attack of European troops, or carry temporary destruction among their ranks; but no one who sees the slow, cautious and confused evolutions of the Turks, their straggling advance and march, their shaky squares and wavering columns, can believe they could long stand against a regular army in the open field.

Poor sanitation in the huge Allied camp led to an outbreak of disease in July 1854. Cholera ravaged the Allied armies at Varna before spreading to the fleets in the harbor. The cholera did its work so quickly the officers discovered it was possible to dine with a comrade one day and attend his funeral the next. Poor Bulgarian villagers dug up the bodies of the cholera victims for the blankets they were buried in, leaving the bodies exposed to vultures and wild animals. Drunkenness began to plague the French and British armies, with soldiers of the finest regiments splayed out on the mud, oblivious to the swarms of flies that enveloped them. Inebriation soon led to crime and even murder. The Ottoman soldiers neither desired nor could afford spirits, but brandy never ran short in their officers’ messes. The Bashi-Bazouks (Ottoman irregulars) amused themselves through robbery and kidnapping of the Bulgarian locals. On August 10, 1854, a great fire broke out in one of the many spirit shops that served the armies, spreading to the town and the camps while destroying most of the Allied stores. Both food and clothing were lost, including nearly 20,000 pairs of shoes, the infantryman’s most valuable commodity. Loot ing by soldiers eliminated much of the surviving stores, especially the food stocks. When embarkation to Crimea finally began in late August 1854, it was the saving of the Allied armies.

The Allies were forced into battle several times shortly after landing in the Crimea. On October 25, 1854, Russian General Liprandi appeared at Balaclava with an army of 30,000 men to challenge the Allied forces. Ottoman troops were positioned in three advance redoubts on the battlefield, each equipped with several English naval guns on loan and a British artilleryman to oversee their use. Unfortunately the Turkish troops assigned to the redoubts were not veteran soldiers used to repelling Russian attacks on the Danube front, but fresh recruits with only several weeks’ training
behind them (a fact usually omitted from accounts of the battle). The redoubts were quickly abandoned when the Russian cavalry charged. When the “Thin Red Line” of the 93rd Highlanders turned back the Russian horsemen, it provided an unfortunate comparison to the flight of the Turkish troops, who had abandoned well-defended positions. This entire episode occurred in full sight of the Allied armies and was largely responsible for the lack of confidence the Allied generals displayed in the Ottoman army for the duration of the campaign.

The winter of 1854–1855 was a time of misery and suffering for the Egyptian expeditionary force in the Crimea. Allied insistence that the Ottoman troops be used primarily for heavy labor rather than fighting demoralized the men, and the arrival of winter found the troops severely underclothed and underfed. A shortage of tents left many men to live in the mud. As the temperature dropped, dysentery and typhoid began to spread. The lone Ottoman field hospital, attended by a single Armenian doctor, was little more than a place to consign dying soldiers by the hundreds. The “hospital” possessed neither surgical tools nor medicines and lacked even sufficient water to drink. Eventually the Ottoman command was urged to prepare a hospital ship for use in the Crimea. A 60-gun frigate was swept of her armaments, and a fully equipped hospital with 300 beds was installed on her decks. When the hospital ship arrived off the Crimean coast in February 1855, it was ordered to wait offshore before docking at either Kamiesh or Balaclava, the two Crimean ports in use by the Allies. After ten days passed, the ship was ordered back to
Constantinople on the grounds that no berth could be found. Many of the ships in the two harbors were actually being used for the spacious accommodation of Allied officers and their mistresses, while others belonged to private merchants making a profit on sales to the Allied army.

The winter winds of late October 1854 brought tragedy to the Egyptian fleet, with the loss of a battleship and a frigate in a storm off the coast of Roumelia on October 31, 1854. Over 1,000 men disappeared into the Black Sea, including Vice Admiral Hassan al-Iskandarani Pasha. Hassan had survived the explosion of his ship at Navarino to become one of Egypt’s finest naval commanders before his death.

The Egyptians in Crimea

Short of men to undertake new operations in the field in Crimea, the Allied command now requested the transfer of the Ottoman Army of the Danube to the Crimea. The Porte agreed with reluctance, for the Army of the Danube was its finest, and the Crimea promised a slow degradation of the morale and health of the Turkish and Egyptian troops. Nevertheless, the entire Army of the Danube, 60,000 men, 12,000 horses, and 18 batteries of artillery, was transported across the Black Sea to the small port of Eupatoria. The whole operation took four months, from December 1854 to April 1855. In Istanbul a drive was held to collect warm vests for the lightly clothed Army of the Danube. Eupatoria had been abandoned by the Russians and consisted of only 10,000 people, mostly Tatars and Jews, with smaller numbers of Armenians, Greeks, and Russians. Beyond the synagogues and minarets of Eupatoria lay a flat steppe marked by a few small hills in which Cossack patrols roamed.

Russian interest in Eupatoria was renewed after the arrival of the Ottoman troops and Allied ships. By February 1855, Eupatoria was occupied by 20,000 Ottoman soldiers, supported by a number of British gunboats. The French warship *Henri Quatre* had been demasted and beached in Eupatoria harbor during one of the terrible storms of 1854. Fortunately, its guns were still serviceable and, in its beached position, they pointed straight down the southern road. Other 24-pounder guns were salvaged from wrecked Turkish ships and set into defensive works. On February 17, 1855, a large Russian force of 30,000 infantry, 3,000 cavalry, and 50 guns arrived at Eupatoria after crossing the frozen steppe beyond the town. Three Russian attacks were repulsed before the czar’s men retreated, leaving 420 men behind on the battlefield. Three British gunboats and a Turkish steamer did outstanding work in firing their shells over the Ottoman army into the midst of the massed Russian formations.

Though the Ottoman force suffered only 103 killed, they numbered among them an outstanding Egyptian officer, Salim Pasha. By some
accounts the pasha led a brigade of Egyptians in a bayonet charge against Russian attackers, but was felled by a musket ball. Other accounts suggest that Salim was killed while commanding the outermost redoubt of the Ottoman defense, the main target of Russian gunfire. Salim had been among the first of the Turko-Circassians of Egypt to be trained in Western methods of warfare by Colonel Sève (Sulayman Pasha). His gift for offensive operations was greatly missed by the Ottoman army after his death, such talents being rare among the Ottoman officer corps. The victory at Eupatoria secured the port and allowed the safe debarkation of the remainder of the Army of the Danube. By the time the last troops had landed in April 1855, Eupatoria formed one of the most formidable Allied positions in the Crimea. As such it was a constant threat to Russian lines of communication with the southern battlefields in Sevastopol and Balaclava and formed a useful base for raids by Ottoman cavalry and bashi-bazouk irregulars.

**Failure of the Circassian Uprising**

The Egyptian navy was involved in the abortive attempt by the Allies to raise a general rebellion in Circassia. Egyptian and Turkish ships under the command of Vice-Admiral Ahmad Pasha carried artillery, muskets, ammunition, food, clothing, and other provisions to equip the Circassian tribesmen. Four thousand Ottoman regulars and a corps of European instructors accompanied the stores.

The Ottoman ships were intercepted on their way across the Black Sea by the ships of their British and French Allies. The Allied admirals insisted that the Ottoman fleet turn back, giving the reason that the Russian warships at Sevastapol remained free to pursue the Ottoman ships. When Ahmad Pasha finally consented to turn about, it was a deathblow to the Circassian cause. The arrival of an Ottoman fleet, bringing weapons, stores, and Muslim troops, all under the flag of the crescent moon, would have had an enormous effect on the Muslim resistance in the Caucasus. Instead months passed at anchor in Baltchik until the Allied admirals received an intelligence report from Circassia. Learning that Russian troops had evacuated parts of the Circassian coast, the admirals now considered it vital to immediately land the supplies they had earlier prevented the Turkish and Egyptian ships from delivering. The Ottomans were ordered to transfer their entire cargoes of arms and stores, together with the many merchants and political exiles and their families who had accompanied the expedition, to three steamers for fast passage to the Circassian coast. The orders were given without respect to the reality of the operation, and in the chaos that followed as much of the original cargo as could be transferred was packed haphazardly into the steamers,
without records or arrangement. Guns were shipped without ammuni-
tion, artillermen drowned, and the Circassian dignitaries and their fam-
ilies were packed on like cattle.

The dumping of this undignified cargo on the Circassian coast was far
from what the Circassians had expected in terms of relief from the Porte.
The exiles were poorly received, the instructors found no one to instruct,
and the supplies were taken away piecemeal by the Circassians without
having any impact on the course of the war. The bulk of the Ottoman fleet
was still prevented from sailing in support of the Circassians, though the
admirals did make a request for 4,000 regulars, who were unfortunately
no longer available due to the intensification of fighting in the Danube
region.

The Turkish/Egyptian fleet, having no other desire than to fight the
Russians, was instead kept at Kavarna in order to “fend off Russian fires-
ships” directed at the French and British ships. There being no fireships
to fend off, the fleet passed several months of inactivity during which
10 percent of the men developed scurvy on a diet of closely rationed meat
and boiled wheat. Virtual captives of the Allied fleet, the exasperated
Turkish and Egyptian admirals composed a letter in which they asked
the reason for keeping 20 warships from pursuing the war with Russia
and their officers from fulfilling their obligations to the sultan.

The Allied admirals did not care to elaborate on their decisions and the
whole matter was referred to negotiations between the Porte and the
Allied ambassadors. The result was the withdrawal of the Ottoman fleet
(with the exception of two ships) to the Bosphorus, where their crews
could at least be fed. With the fleet back at home by July 3, 1854, some
300 sailors were sent to man boats on the Danube. The chance to open a
new front against the Russians in Circassia had been squandered, as well
as the chance of inspiring the Muslim Crimean Tatars to rebellion by
showing the crescent flag off the Crimean coast.

The War Continues: The Abkhazian Front

On the Crimean front the war ended quietly for the Ottoman army,
which played only a small role in the final battles at Sevastopol in the
summer of 1855. When the fortress finally fell in September 1855, the
Allies had their victory and were more than ready to call an end to the Cri-
mean campaign. For the Egyptians of the Army of the Danube, the war
was not yet over, however. The Egyptians, together with Tunisians and
regular Ottoman forces, formed part of a 45,000 man army that landed at
the Caucasian seaport of Sukhum-Qal’a in September and October of
1855.

Omar Pasha hurried to deploy his men before winter made relief of the
besieged garrison at Kars impossible. British enthusiasm for a Caucasian
campaign was renewed, and British steamers took the lead role in transporting the army quickly across the Black Sea. The French continued to show little interest in a Caucasus campaign. In their advance to face the Russians near the Ingûr River, the combined Ottoman force faced heavy going through mud and thick forests. When the Ottomans finally encountered a Russian division, they found a ford across the river protecting the Russian front and flanked the Russian redoubts. In the midst of heavy fighting an Ottoman unit was nearly surrounded, but a Muslim Polish officer in Ottoman service began shouting orders to retreat in Russian, saving his unit as the Russians fell back.

The battle at the Ingûr River was the first and last success of the campaign. The Ottoman fortress at Kars fell on November 28, 1855, though news of this was slow to reach Omar Pasha. As the Ottoman army pressed on into Georgia, it was beset by torrential rains that made progress through the deep mud nearly impossible. Disease came with the rains, and by December 1855 the Army of the Danube was in disorganized retreat for the coast. Georgian militias harried their flanks on the way. Omar Pasha arrived at the coast well in advance of his command, followed by most of the English officers, leaving only Colonel Ballard with the troops. For the few Egyptians who managed to straggle back to the Black Sea coast, the Crimean War was at last over.

**Conclusion: Crimea**

The Egyptian army suffered, like the rest of the Ottoman forces, from the corruption prevailing in the officer corps, which habitually sold supplies of food and warm clothing intended for the troops. The criminality of the Ottoman pashas responsible for the surrender of Kars inspired deep resentment in its survivors, many of whom became involved in an unsuccessful attempt to depose the sultan in 1859. It was clear to all in the Crimea that Omar Pasha’s army had been uselessly deployed as garrison troops in Eupatoria when a fraction of the force would have sufficed. Having requested its presence, the Allied commanders were reluctant to allow the army to leave for the relief of Kars.

The combined Turkish/Egyptian fleet was criminally misused in the campaign, but this is perhaps to be expected in the conduct of a war whose name has become a byword for military incompetence. The behavior of the Allied admirals clearly indicated a lack of political will in London and Paris to see through their supposed support of a Circassian insurrection.

**Reign of Muhammad Sa’id (1854–1863)**

‘Abbas Hilmi did not survive the Crimean War, being murdered on July 14, 1854. Allegedly two slaves strangled him in his bed. The reasons
for this assassination remain obscure, but may have been related to the cruelty with which ‘Abbas ran his household. The death certificate gave apoplexy as the cause. During his reign, ‘Abbas realized the future of Egypt rested with its Arab population and did much to revive their rights. Though he maintained the traditional retinue of household Mamluks, he also took time to learn Arabic and eased the fellahin’s burden of conscription in peacetime. The Crimean War changed the situation and once again the recruiters descended on Egyptian villages. Muhammad Sa’id, ‘Abbas’s successor and fourth son of Muhammad ‘Ali, continued to raise men for the war with Russia. Unlike ‘Abbas, Muhammad Sa’id had a great interest in European culture and methods. One of the innovations introduced to Egypt at this time was the borrowing of money on credit. The notion appealed to Muhammad Sa’id, who had been left a heavy burden of debt by ‘Abbas, the latter having routinely ignored all bills in his lifetime. Eager to develop his realm, the new viceroy began to borrow heavily from foreign sources in 1862. Muhammad Sa’id little realized that he was laying the foundation for Egypt’s ruination a quarter of a century later.

Military manpower shortages in 1855 led to several unusual measures, including the conscription of rural Copts and Bedouin. The Copts had not performed any military service since their collaboration with Napoleon’s French army. The Bedouin formed an important part of the Egyptian army in volunteer detachments, but the ill-considered imposition of conscription on the freedom-loving nomads lit the fire of insurrection immediately. The price of their resistance was fearsome, as the desert tribes suffered mass executions and enslavement in the Alexandria arsenal, where most of the prisoners died of ill-treatment and disease.

Shortly after the end of the Crimean War, Sulayman Pasha (Sève) died. This loyal servant of Egypt had survived many campaigns while ceaselessly promoting the interests of the army. In 1845 he made a return visit to his French homeland in the company of Ibrahim Pasha. After his death the army fell into neglect for several years, rapidly decreasing in numbers. By 1863 the army consisted of little more than a few regiments of infantry and some Bedouin cavalry. Muhammad Sa’id also allowed the navy to deteriorate. His disinterest was reflected in the closing of the Ministry of the Navy. Responsibility for what remained of the fleet was transferred to a subdepartment of the Ministry of War. There was little attempt to replace the ships lost at Sinop.

The Circassian Exodus

From 1862 to 1864 the Russian army drove into the Circassian homeland in an effort to seize the lush valleys that ran into the Black Sea and
drive the Muslim tribesmen out forever. Employing all the usual tactics of “ethnic cleansing,” the Russians carried out wanton massacres of civilians while putting crops and settlements to the torch. Forced from their homes, the Circassians had little choice but to begin emigrating to the Ottoman Empire, which was willing to resettle them. Well over a million Circassians were shipped by freighter from Black Sea ports under Russian control. Packed into the ships like animals, at least a quarter of the emigrants died en route from disease, hunger, and exhaustion. Though some remained to accept Russian rule (at least nominally), it was the end of the Circassians as the dominant group in the northwest Caucasus. The exodus also marked an end to the use of Circassia as a source of manpower for the Egyptian military, a tradition which had been in steady decline in any case.

The Mexican Adventure

Of all the campaigns of the Egyptian army, its involvement in supporting the rule of the ill-fated Hapsburg Archduke Maximilian in Mexico was undoubtedly the most extraordinary. That the entire expeditionary force consisted of Sudanese troops made it even stranger. While the campaigns of the European powers to colonize Africa are well known, the efforts of the Sudanese soldiers to bring imperialism to North America are not.

The French Emperor, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, had designs on Mexico. The failure of the Mexican government of Benito Juarez to make a payment on its international debt to France in 1861 gave the emperor a pretext for military occupation. Normally such efforts would be immediately opposed by the United States as a violation of the Monroe Doctrine, but the United States was convulsed in its own Civil War. Rather than establish a French colony in Mexico, Louis Napoleon convinced a sincere but not especially bright Hapsburg prince, Maximilian, that his destiny was to become emperor of Mexico.

A French expeditionary force landed at Veracruz in March 1862, but almost immediately began to suffer from the diseases endemic to the region, especially yellow fever. It was believed that black troops would be immune to these diseases, so Louis Napoleon asked Muhammad Sa’id Pasha for the loan of a Sudanese regiment of the Egyptian army. The viceroy consented to the provision of an understrength battalion of 447 men, with a promise of more men in several months’ time. A battalion of Sudanese troops left Alexandria for Mexico by French troopship in early January 1863. Aside from their Syrian commander, a veteran of Ibrahim’s campaigns against the Ottoman sultan named Major Jabartallah Muhammad, the rest of the battalion was almost entirely drawn from the tribes of
Kordofan and the South Sudan. When the men reached Veracruz, over 70 were suffering from typhoid, but only one, the Arab commanding officer, succumbed to yellow fever. Command of the expedition now fell to the senior Sudanese officer, Muhammad Bey Almas, an outstanding Dinka soldier.

Since none of the Sudanese could speak French, men were loaned from the Tirailleurs Algériens to act as translators. The Sudanese troops were known in Mexico as les Égyptiennes, but were entirely reequipped with French rifles and Algerian uniforms. In Mexico the Sudanese found themselves part of a diverse army led by Marshal Bazaine that included French, Algerians, Martiniquans, Austrians, Belgians, and men of the French Foreign Legion. The men were assigned the task of guarding the trains running out of Veracruz to the interior as well as counterguerrilla activities, which they carried out with a certain fierceness based on the African methods best known to them. For over four years the Sudanese were engaged in nearly constant fighting with the Republican Mexicans.

By the middle of 1866 Louis Napoleon had tired of his own meddling in Mexico, which was growing expensive. There were political considerations as well: the U.S. Civil War had ended, allowing the U.S. government to turn its attention to Mexico, and the looming prospect of war with Prussia demanded a temporary abandonment of foreign adventures. It was time for the French and the “Egyptians” to return home. Before their departure Maximilian awarded Muhammad Bey Almas, Khalil Fanni, and Faraj Azazi each with a decoration called “Our Lady of Guadeloupe,” a somewhat bizarre honor for Muslim soldiers. By March 1867 the Sudanese were aboard the same troopship that had brought them to Mexico. Maximilian should have left with the French, but he deluded himself into thinking that the Mexicans would eventually accept him as their ruler. He and his chief Mexican general would face a firing squad instead.

The remains of the battalion were diverted through Paris at Marshal Bazaine’s insistence. There they paraded in review past the French emperor, following which they received a shower of decorations. On their return to Alexandria they received further honors, including double promotions. The unit was then broken up so that the whole Egyptian army could benefit from their experience.

The Revolt in Crete: 1866–1869

An Egyptian brigade under Shahin Pasha took part in repressing the 1866–1869 rebellion in Crete. The campaign was marked by terrible atrocities against the civilian population, allegedly on the personal orders of its Ottoman commanders. The island was always difficult to govern, and Ottoman authority vanished in its mountainous regions. Crete was the
last of the Greek-speaking regions to be incorporated into the Ottoman Empire.

The revolt began as a series of local revenge killings that grew out of control, engulfing the Christian and Muslim communities on the island. Mustafa Na’ili Pasha, a former governor of Crete, was brought back to restore order. Well-known for his brutal repression of earlier revolts, the pasha quickly assembled an army of 10,000 regulars (including the Egyptian brigade sent by Isma’il) and 2,000 Albanian irregulars. The army was ready to take the field by September 1866, but the Ottoman naval blockade proved porous, so Greek volunteers and arms were pouring into Crete to support the insurrection.

Mustafa Na’ili’s first target was an improvised Greek fortification at Vafé, where 1,000 Cretan fighters and 200 Greek volunteers debated their course of action. The Cretans wished to retire rather than face the onslaught of regular troops, but the volunteers insisted on making a stand. Though the volunteers prevailed in the debate, the Cretans voted with their feet during the night, leaving only 500 men to defend the redoubt against the Ottoman army. The pasha ordered a frontal assault by the Egyptian brigade, which predictably suffered heavy casualties without being able to take the redoubt. The Greeks spotted the Albanians flanking their position, but managed to make a clean escape.

The Ottomans did not engage the rebels again for nearly a month. They met again at the mountainside monastery of Arkadi, where a large number of rebels and their families had barricaded themselves. Ottoman artillery focused on the monastery gates, creating a breach, but several assaults by Turkish regulars proved fruitless. Mustafa Na’ili now demonstrated he could be as callous with the lives of men under his command as he was with the lives of Crete’s civilians. An Egyptian unit was ordered into the breach, forced forward by Turkish bayonets behind them. This despicable tactic succeeded, at great loss to the Egyptians. With the Ottoman troops now inside the monastery, an Orthodox priest blew up the magazine, slaughtering Greek families and Ottoman soldiers alike.

The remaining insurgents fought to the last bullet before surrendering on the condition they would be spared. The rebels could hardly have had much hope that their terms would be respected, as they had violated the unwritten laws applying to such sieges. Defenders of a fortification might be shown mercy if they surrendered before much damage had been done to the assaulting force, but there was little chance of being spared after inflicting maximum casualties on the attackers. The Greek insurgents themselves were notorious for violating terms of surrender, so it is not surprising that the enraged Ottoman troops followed their massacre of the civilians by cutting down every one of the Greek prisoners. The massacre at Arkadi was a black day in Ottoman military history, but an entirely satisfying victory for the pitiless Mustafa Na’ili.
Egyptian expeditionary forces seemed to have a knack for arriving in northern regions just as the worst winters on record arrived. The winter of 1866–1867 was no exception, and the onset of heavy rains, snow, and damp cold found the Egyptian troops clad in only their linen summer uniforms. Even tents were in short supply and the pasha’s desultory winter campaign did not offer much opportunity to loot much-needed supplies from villages. Unpaid and unsupplied by the Ottoman commissariat, the Egyptians had no other means of obtaining the goods necessary for survival. Pneumonia spread through the Egyptian brigade, and soon hundreds of men and pack animals succumbed to the elements. Eventually Mustafa Na’ili ordered his army to ravage the villages in the plains of Kissamos, raping, torturing, and murdering a population that had already made its submission.

On April 9, 1867 Omar Pasha took command of the Ottoman army in Crete, eager to put a quick end to the rebellion. Unlike Mustafa Na’ili, however, Omar Pasha and his staff had no experience in Crete and undertook a poorly planned offensive against scattered guerrilla forces in the mountains. With little to show for their efforts, Omar Pasha’s army reverted to terrorizing the civilian population. Some of the European officers in the Ottoman force were shocked by Omar Pasha’s orders to rape and murder Cretan civilians. Smoke rose from dozens of burning villages as the army carried out his commands. Refugees took to caves in the mountains, but were smoked out to their massacre by Ottoman troops burning green wood at the cave entrances. The Prussian commander of artillery, Dilaver Pasha (Geissler), vigorously opposed Omar’s cruelty to no avail. The pasha was accused of forming a personal harem from the pick of the young women torn from the arms of their murdered families.

As the weather improved Omar determined to find and destroy the rebels, despite having a cavalier attitude toward gathering intelligence on the terrain and the enemy’s deployment. The army paid for this lack of preparation, frequently being ambushed or cut off in their forays into the mountains. Omar Pasha’s solution was to drive the men harder as the summer heat began. A combination of bad water, sunstroke, and dysentery took a toll of hundreds of soldiers. The Cretans had only to entice the exhausted army to the chase and then let nature do the rest. The ill and the exhausted struggled to pursue the rebels with little chance of inflicting damage in the difficult mountain terrain. Omar Pasha had lost his touch as a field commander, concluding his long and successful career as an active soldier with this last disgraceful performance. The pasha was recalled in November 1867. By this point most of the Egyptian brigade had returned home, as had most of the Greek volunteers on the rebel side. The rebellion sputtered along for another two years before coming to a quiet close amid the desolation of the war-ravaged Cretan countryside. Omar Pasha went into retirement and was murdered soon after.
American Officers in the Service of the Khedive

The entire Egyptian armed forces had fallen into disrepair after the financial crisis of the early 1860s. The Egyptian treasury was empty when Khedive Muhammad Sa’id died in 1863. His successor, Isma’il Pasha (1863–1879) was an energetic but ultimately disastrous leader. The combination of ambition with a lifelong failure to understand the implications of his financial decisions spelled ruin when he discovered the ease with which he could obtain enormous loans on international money markets. His extravagance was unlimited when he had the opportunity to impress the monarchs of Europe as part of his campaign to distance himself from the rule of Istanbul. Though the weaknesses of his reign have condemned him in history, Isma’il also oversaw the development of infrastructure, vast increases in cultivatable land, the reconstruction of a much-neglected Cairo, and the development of a largely independent foreign policy.

Isma’il decided to dispense with the army’s French advisors, who tended to check every decision with the French consul-general in Cairo. To build his empire, he required soldiers from a nation with no strategic or colonial interest in Africa, and the sudden availability of many experienced officers after the American Civil War fit the bill perfectly. Colonel Thadeus Mott, an American living in Istanbul with connections to the Ottoman court (as well as a Turkish wife from the ruling class), was commissioned to find suitable candidates. Mott turned to General William Tecumseh Sherman for recommendations. Sherman’s cooperation in this project was likely designed to rid the United States of a number of ex-Confederate officers of suspect loyalty and unhappy officers of the U.S. regular army who had been placed on half-pay after demobilization.
Service in Egypt was considered respectable employment, and many of the officers came from some of the most distinguished families in America.

Eventually former Union General Charles Pomery Stone was selected to lead the American contingent in 1869. At first he was chief of staff to Mott, but Stone took over three years later when Mott fell out of favor with the khedive. A Confederate veteran of the Indian Wars of the American West, General Henry Hopkins Sibley, was put in charge of the khedive’s artillery.

Highly efficient but formal and somewhat distant as an officer, Stone was a graduate of West Point and a veteran of the Mexican War. When the Civil War broke out, Stone, then a civilian, was in Washington, D.C. The city was dangerously exposed with officers of the garrison defecting daily to the Confederate forces. The aging General Winfield Scott, a veteran of the War of 1812 and commander of U.S. forces in the Mexican War, was still in command of the army. Scott knew Stone and put him in charge of Washington’s defenses, a task he undertook with great energy. Stone foiled an assassination attempt on the new president, Abraham Lincoln, and raised a volunteer force that held Washington for a week until Federal reinforcements could reach it.

A few months later things fell apart rather quickly for Stone. In line with Lincoln’s own policy, he ordered runaway slaves to be returned to their owners in Maryland, drawing the wrath of Republican abolitionists in Congress. Shortly after this Stone ordered a brigade to reconnoiter across the Potomac River at Ball’s Bluff. The Confederates were waiting for them and 1,000 men were lost, including the Union commander (a Republican senator and a friend of Lincoln). Stone, a Democrat, was chosen as the scapegoat for this disaster. Against military law, Stone was convicted of unspecified charges by a secret committee of Congress. Denied a court-martial, Stone was arrested and sent to the military prison at Fort Lafayette in New York’s harbor. After nearly 200 days in prison, Stone was released without explanation. Only the intervention of Ulysses S. Grant managed to get Stone back into the army, but he remained under nearly constant surveillance. After the war his string of business failures continued with unsuccessful attempts to trade on the Indian frontier, stock promotion, and the management of a coal mine in Virginia. When the offer came of a senior position in the Egyptian army, Stone was ready for a change of scenery.

**Army Reforms**

The 18,000-man army that Stone found was probably incapable of fighting any war. There was little organization, illiteracy was common even
among officers, and there was no command structure to speak of, each regiment commander reporting directly to the Minister of War. There was no system of logistics, no general staff, no intelligence corps, and no signals corps. Ammunition was imported and in short supply while the artillery consisted only of antique muzzle-loading cannon. With the help of his staff, Stone implemented the following series of important reforms and establishments:

- literacy education for all ranks,
- a staff college and training center for each arm of the service,
- a school for noncommissioned officers teaching a uniform drill,
- schools for the free education of soldiers’ sons,
- an increase in the size of the army to 60,000 men,
- the creation of a repository of maps (the army had only three maps when Stone arrived),
- the creation of a library of works on military science,
- the creation of an army printing office,
- the creation of powder, munitions, and firearms factories, and
- the purchase of 600 modern Krupp breach-loading artillery pieces (these were German surplus from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871).

Stone and his staff took over the old harem quarters of Muhammad ‘Ali in the Citadel and established their headquarters there. By the mid-1870s Egypt again had the most formidable military in the Middle East. Its actual performance on campaign was, however, still an open question. Stone could never quite convince the Turko-Circassian officers of the Egyptian army of the merits of the staff system of military administration.

The Khedive’s Secret Weapon

General Stone recognized that the greatest strategic threat to Egypt was from the north. French, British, and Turkish forces had all attacked Egypt by landing troops on the Mediterranean coast. Stone set out to fortify the coast and its frequently medieval fortifications, planning an ambitious network of underwater mines to make the coast unapproachable and railroads to rapidly move troops to where they were needed.

Stone had little difficulty in getting Khedive Isma’il’s support for the coastal defense project. Isma’il was enthusiastic about the new Whitehead torpedo being tested by the British navy and ordered his agent in London to obtain some together with other coastal-defense equipment. Ever ready to throw money at his enthusiasms, Isma’il now arranged for the recruitment of John L. Lay, a Buffalo, New York, native and one of the leading lights in torpedo development. Lay had developed a new torpedo, 23 feet
long and 3 feet, 3 inches wide. The engine was propelled by carbonic acid
gas, and the explosive charge was an enormous 500 pounds of nitrogly-
cerine. Over two miles of electrical cable ran off a wheel in one of the
torpedo’s compartments, allowing technicians onshore to control the
movement and direction of the weapon.

French and Turkish agents took careful note of the new coastal
defenses. Sultan ‘Abdul Aziz was especially concerned with the new
gun emplacements built at Port Said and Suez and ordered them disman-
tled, with the guns shipped to Istanbul. An imperial order forbade the
khedive from purchasing new coastal artillery, but Lay’s work in con-
structing an underwater defense system at Abukir Bay continued. In
1873 Lay was given a contract to install his system and create a naval col-
lege at Rosetta to instruct Egyptian officers in its operation. Lay left Egypt
forever in November 1874, but continued to send equipment from his
works in Buffalo, including a fully operational Lay torpedo, shipped to
General Stone in Alexandria in unmarked crates.

Activities of the American Officers

Although some Americans were given command ranks in the Egyptian
army (rather than advisory positions), they were for the most part initially
given technical tasks, training roles, or detailed to explore and chart the
far reaches of Isma’il’s expanding empire. When they accepted their com-
missions, they agreed to fight any enemy of the khedive save the United
States. Some beat a hasty retreat back to the United States, but most of
the roughly 50 Civil War veterans served out their five-year enlistment
period.

Many of the Americans did important exploration work in Africa, but
the most accomplished (and flamboyant) of their number was Colonel
Charles Chaillé-Long. Born in Maryland, Chaillé-Long enlisted as a pri-
vate in the Federal Army during the Civil War, fought at Gettysburg,
and finished the war as a captain. After his arrival in Egypt in 1874 he
was attached to General Charles Gordon’s staff in Equatorial Sudan. From
the Egyptian camp at Gondokoro (2,700 miles south of Cairo) Chaillé-
Long marched south for 58 days in the rainy season to reach the capital
of the Baganda people, near the modern Ugandan capital of Kampala.
King Mutesa signed a treaty with the colonel that was interpreted in Cairo
as adding Uganda to the khedive’s dominions, but Egypt did not have the
resources to occupy such remote territories and Mutesa later grew highly
suspicious of Egyptian intentions. In the meantime, Chaillé-Long
explored Lake Victoria with a fleet of 40 huge Bagandan canoes. On his
return to the Sudan he was attacked by the powerful Bunyoro tribe and
nearly lost his life. When he reached Gondokoro he was a fearful sight:
one eye closed and blackened, a gunshot wound to his nose, bearded, filthy, and half-starved. It was some time before Chaillé-Long could convince Gordon it was really he.

**Expedition to Darfur**

Alexander McComb Mason joined the khedive’s army out of a lifetime love of adventure. In 1861 Mason joined the Confederate navy and fought in several major battles before becoming a blockade-runner. In 1861 Mason was sent to aid his uncle in the Mason-Slidell Mission to seek British help for the Confederacy. Their British ship, the *Trent*, was stopped on the high seas by Union warships and the Confederate party was removed. British pressure forced their release but the “*Trent Incident*” nearly brought the British into the war on the side of the Confederacy. Captured again at the Battle of Sailor’s Creek, he survived the death-trap prisons of the Civil War and immediately headed to Chile to fight in the rebellion against Spain. After a trip to China he joined the revolutionaries in Cuba. Unhappy with the quiet life of an Egyptian naval commander, he was given the assignment of charting the remote Siwa Oasis. The sailor now became a desert explorer, following his work in the Western Desert with missions to the Red Sea and Berber in the Sudan.

In December 1874 the khedive sent a two-part mission to explore and chart Kordofan and his new possession of Darfur. In the Dongola to al-Fashir party Mason was second in command to Colonel Erastus Purdy. Also with this group was Turkish officer ‘Umar Rushdi Pasha, who would later be one of the few officers to distinguish themselves during the disastrous Arrendrup expedition to Abyssinia. The second party, which was to explore Kordofan before joining Purdy’s group in Darfur, was led by a former Confederate Brigadier, Raleigh Colston Bey, with Henry Prout Bey as the second in command. Once in Kordofan the expedition suffered greatly from disease in the rainy season, with Colston Bey near death in al-‘Ubayd. Despite terrible losses, Prout assumed command and pulled off a remarkably thorough exploration of the geography and peoples of the region before joining Purdy in Darfur. Prout was unimpressed with social conditions in Kordofan and remarked of the natives, “They are a mean-spirited, incontinent, rascally race in whom I see the material for very good slaves, but who will disappear from the earth before they are sensibly elevated above their present condition.”¹ When their two-year mission was completed, Prout and Purdy agreed in their report that there was nothing in Darfur to justify or repay the costs of a military occupation. As for the “rascally race,” neither could know that the natives of Kordofan would humble the Egyptian army in just a few years’ time.
The Arrendrup Disaster

In 1875 Isma’il led Egypt into a poorly calculated colonial misadventure whose timing could not have been worse. For several years the Egyptians had been consolidating their expansion into the Red Sea coast of Africa. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 required that the Red Sea and its approaches become an “Egyptian Sea.” Egyptian parties were soon establishing claims all over the coasts of the Horn of Africa. In some cases Istanbul already had prior claims to certain seaports, but there was little interest in maintaining these distant harbors if a suitable buyer was available. The Red Sea port of Massawa, Abyssinia’s only outlet to the sea, was purchased in this way from the Ottoman Porte in 1865. The creation of this new Egyptian province served a second purpose in denying the Abyssinians an outlet to the sea (and thus a means of obtaining foreign arms and advisors).

In order to pursue a more aggressive policy in refuting Abyssinian claims on the region, Isma’il appointed a Swiss adventurer, J. A. W Munsinger, as governor of Massawa. Munsinger’s relentless efforts to expand the Egyptian-controlled hinterland and to prepare the port for an Egyptian campaign against Abyssinia were well rewarded by the khedive. Munsinger’s troops were almost all Sudanese units of the Egyptian army, ably commanded by veterans of the Mexican war. Fueled by early successes, Munsinger Bey attempted to march across a searing desert with his Tigrean wife and a column of Sudanese troops in an attempt to seize the vital rock-salt mines of the Haramat Mountains. The column was ambushed and destroyed by fiercely independent Somali tribesmen. The khedive, undeterred, was determined to have King Yohannes (John) of Abyssinia yield his claims to territories bordering the Red Sea. Isma’il sought an end to the constant raids of semi-independent Abyssinian tribesmen along the Sudanese/Abyssinian frontier and into the region of Massawa.

Perhaps convinced that his importance was as well-known in Abyssinia as in Cairo, the khedive dispatched only a small force of 2,500 troops to convince King Yohannes to come to terms. Isma’il’s choice of agent for this mission, the ailing Danish captain Soren Arrendrup, remains inexplicable to this day. Arrendrup had retired from the Danish army after a bout of tuberculosis, possessed no combat experience, and had never commanded Egyptian troops. While convalescing in the dry air of Egypt, Arrendrup met General Stone, who offered him the rank of colonel in the Egyptian army with responsibility solely for the manufacture of munitions. Arrendrup was unwisely contemptuous of the “savages” he expected to encounter in Abyssinia and omitted carrying out even the smallest precautions expected of an army on the march in hostile territory. Nevertheless, Arrendrup was so green in the field that he loaned
100 thalers to two Englishmen posing as journalists in Massawa. They quickly disappeared into the Abyssinian interior with the colonel’s money and intelligence bound for King Yohannes.

Once across the border Arrendrup’s column was joined by four companies of Sudanese troops from the small Egyptian garrison at Sanhit under the command of a Nuba officer, Faraj al-Zayni. Other members of Arrendrup’s staff included Colonel James Dennison, Major Ruchdy (an Egyptian-born Turk), and Major Durholz, a Swiss veteran of the pope’s guard (when it was still an active fighting force). The country’s leading Catholic missionary, Abbé Duflot, also joined the expedition.

From a point only 30 miles inland Arrendrup sent a letter to King Yohannes, demanding indemnities and territorial concessions; otherwise Arrendrup threatened to march his army on the Abyssinian capital. Dividing his small force even further by posting detachments to remote and unimportant positions, Arrendrup now made a fatal demonstration of his inexperience by attempting to lead his remaining 800 men with four pieces of artillery and two rocket batteries through a narrow and thickly forested valley along the Mareb River. In only half an hour the column was utterly destroyed in an Abyssinian ambush, thousands of warriors suddenly erupting from the brush close along the river. The artillery and rockets were useless firing into the forest, nor could the infantry sweep the ground with regular fire. The Egyptians were quickly forced into a defenseless mass, surrounded by their executioners. Among the dead was the well-respected Arrikel Bey, governor of Massawa and nephew of the Egyptian prime minister. Arrikel Bey was badly wounded by a bullet that passed through his body, but he continued fighting. When all hope was lost, the governor mounted a rock, took a last swig from his flask, and shot himself. Arrendrup himself was reported to have emptied his revolver at the charging horde before slashing into his attackers with his sabre. Those brief minutes of terror would be the colonel’s only experience of combat.

Hearing the noise of battle, Rushtan Bey hurried his men down the steep slopes of the river valley. They soon came under attack from the large number of Abyssinians now controlling the valley. Rushtan Bey was wounded in the head, but wrapped a kerchief around the wound and continued to lead his men. For some time the Egyptians held their ground on the heights, but this only allowed the victors of the battle in the valley to join their comrades, enveloping the Egyptians from all sides. A second shot struck Rushtan Bey, who used his last breath to order the charge. In the end it was futile bravado from a dying man; in leading his men in a descent of the slopes he had doomed them as surely as their companions in Arrendrup’s troop.

The Abyssinians celebrated their victory by massacring and mutilating most of the Egyptian prisoners. An Austrian, Count Zichy, who had
joined the expedition for a bit of adventure, was found two weeks later, crawling through the brush naked, a wretchedly disfigured victim of the Abyssinians’ knives. Zichy was the brother of the Austrian ambassador in Istanbul and may have been promised a governorship in one of the khedive’s new Egyptian provinces. The unfortunate man was entrusted to the care of a Greek merchant before transport to the coast, but was murdered when he was turned over to some of King Yohannes’s followers instead.

There still remained the various detachments of Arrendrup’s army, scattered over the approach to the interior. The largest group was at the plateau of Addi-Huala under the command of Colonel Dennison. Some Egyptian stragglers who had witnessed the battle before fleeing brought the sorry news to Dennison’s camp. The colonel was determined to take two of his four companies to investigate these reports, but the men refused to move from their fortifications. King Yohannes’s army was now streaming into the Addi-Huala area, and it was not long before a letter from the king arrived, demanding Dennison’s surrender.

It was now clear that Arrendrup’s column no longer existed and mutilated Egyptian prisoners were released into the Egyptian lines, terrifying the soldiers. Dennison spiked the guns and left in a rapid march to the coast that threatened to disintegrate into flight at any moment. Colonel Dennison and Major Ruchdy were both obliged to ride at the head of the retreat with revolvers drawn, threatening to shoot any man that passed them. Collecting the other detachments along the way, Dennison eventually reached Massawa, where he was held under suspicion for abandoning his position after many alarming but unsubstantiated reports were sent to Cairo by Massawa’s new governor, Ahmad Bey. Dennison, the intended scapegoat for Arrendrup’s failure, was freed months later through the intervention of General Loring, who concluded the American officer’s actions were entirely justified by the circumstances and had, in fact, saved the remainder of the Egyptian expedition.

**Expedition to the Juba River**

Ismail also wished to establish his claims to the Somali coast as far south as the mouth of the Juba River, which he saw as an outlet to the sea for his landlocked possessions in Equatorial Sudan. Gordon Pasha, governor of Equatoria Province, suggested an overland route could be established from the Indian Ocean coast to the provincial capital of Gondokoro. The Somali coast was also claimed by the sultan of Zanzibar, a British ally at the time. In November 1875 a squadron of ships in the Red Sea was turned over to the command of Henry Frederick McKillop Pasha, a Royal Navy veteran of the Crimean War now serving the khedive. The
squadron consisted of two warships, the *Muhammad 'Ali* and the *Latif*, and two troop transports. McKillop Pasha took his ships to the mouth of the Juba River. An infantry force led by Colonel Chaillé-Long and Lt. Col. William H. Ward was landed at Kismayu. A large fort was built from the wood of palm trees and a garrison of 1,000 men installed. Chaillé-Long and two Egyptian officers, Hassan Wassif and Muhammad Effendi, explored the Juba River for 150 miles in a steam launch with 15 men. It was hoped that the Juba River might provide a shortcut into the Great Lakes region, but the expedition discovered it turned north instead. Before they could begin the work of consolidating the region as part of the khedive’s empire, the entire expedition was recalled and the fort abandoned because of British objections to Egyptian interference in an area claimed by the sultan of Zanzibar. Despite these claims the British government gave Italy permission to seize the area in 1889, and the area became Italian Somaliland. The Somalis, of course, were not consulted.

**A Show of Power in Abyssinia**

Meanwhile the destruction of Arrendrup’s expedition could not be allowed to stand. The khedive was urged by his American staff to launch a decisive retaliatory campaign against King Yohannes, though his own advisors were more cautious. The Egyptian army was, in the opinion of its officers, well trained, well equipped, and ready for action. Ismail’s ever-present financial woes argued against the expense of a major war, but the khedive understood the message that such a violent rebuff to his advances would give to the rest of his empire. Committing the army to an African campaign was sure to annoy the sultan, who was at the same time asking the khedive for a contribution of troops for the Ottoman campaign in Herzegovina. The decision was made, and Stone Pasha’s staff was given the order to prepare for war. A Russian officer, General Fadeev, resigned his commission when he learned the Egyptian army was to go to war against Christians. The American officers appear to have suffered no qualms about fighting the Christians of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the service of a Muslim army, regarding the Christian beliefs of the Abyssinians as a barbarian form of the faith.

Stone intended to entrust command to William Loring Pasha, a 62-year-old Florida-born ex-major-general of the Confederate army. In the end the Egyptian prime minister, Nubar Pasha, decided to entrust command to the Circassian sirdar of the Egyptian army, Ratib Pasha, with Loring as his chief of staff. Nubar Pasha, a politically astute Armenian Christian, was concerned for the political repercussions of a Christian leading a Muslim army. Though politically sound, Nubar’s decision removed any
chance of Loring striking the decisive victory in Abyssinia he was capable
of delivering. A force of 12,000 men was assembled, including three regi-
ments of fellahin infantry and one regiment of Sudanese blacks. The
Egyptian officers regarded the inclusion of the latter as indispensable,
much to the surprise of the American officers, who tended to regard black
troops as the lowest form of military life.

The Egyptian commander, Ratib Pasha, started his career as a Circas-
sian slave in the service of Khedive Muhammad Sa’id (1854–1863). As a
boy he was sent for education in Paris at the expense of the khedive. At
some point after his return Muhammad Sa’id struck Ratib in a fit of anger.
To efface the indignity Ratib attempted suicide, but succeeded only in
putting a bullet through his nose. One wonders what the old Frenchman
Sulayman Pasha might have said about Ratib’s marksmanship. According
to Loring, Ratib owed his rapid series of promotions to the remorse of the
khedive. Under Khedive Isma’il, Ratib continued to have his interests
advanced by Cherif Pasha, a political rival of Nubar Pasha and leader of
the Circassian party in the government (Cherif Pasha was married to a
daughter of the late Sulayman Pasha). Nearly all the senior officers of
the expedition were Circassian, the junior officers Arab Egyptians, the
composition reflecting the declining influence of the Turkish element in
the army.

Loring Pasha was a professional soldier who began his military career
in Sam Houston’s Texas army. Following that he fought Seminole Indians
in Florida as part of the U.S. Army and then served as a captain of
mounted rifles in the Mexican War, where he lost an arm. At the outbreak
of the Civil War Loring resigned his commission as a colonel in the Feder-
al Army to serve as a major-general in the Confederate force, where
he was again wounded in the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain. Loring
was a forceful physical presence who felt idle in his command of coastal
troops in Alexandria until called upon for the Abyssinian campaign. The
inspector-general of the expedition was Colonel Charles W. Field, a
former major-general of the Confederate army. Both Field and
Colonel William McEntyre Dye (a professional soldier and graduate of
West Point) had long experience in fighting unconventional enemies in
the Indian Wars of the American West. Besides the Americans there were
also several Italian and Austrian officers.

The expedition was shipped down the Red Sea to Massawa where they
spent several months in preparation, watched closely by King Yohannes’s
agents. The treeless port of Massawa had a reputation for brutal heat in all
seasons save winter and was garrisoned by a battalion of Egyptian crim-
inals impressed into service in this barren place. The harbor was protected
only by a battery of four guns in a half-ruined Turkish fort. The camels
needed for the expedition’s transport did not materialize, the local herd-
ers driving them into the hills to prevent their confiscation. Valuable
weeks were wasted in gathering the necessary pack animals, allowing King Yohannes to remobilize his army, which had disbanded after the destruction of Arrendrup’s column. A single Abyssinian elephant turned up, but it proved to be of little value (the British 1867–1868 expedition to Magdala in Abyssinia had actually made good use of 44 of these animals). The packing materials and ropes gathered at Massawa were already rotten with age and use. A dozen shaykhs were sent down from Cairo to provide the men with spiritual leadership. The American officers thought that the shaykhs had a generally negative influence by encouraging fatalism. The Americans suspected that Islam placed too much emphasis on the will of God and not enough on the power of gunpowder.

The third son of the khedive, Prince Hassan Isma’il Pasha, joined the expedition with an entourage of 50 men at Massawa, where the Egyptian staff diverted a great deal of their energies to ensuring the comfort and full table of the prince. A mere delay in the return of the prince from one of his frequent hunting expeditions was enough to send the entire Egyptian officer corps into a panic. The son of one of the khedive’s slave girls, the prince had the benefit of an Oxford education and military studies at the Prussian Military Academy in Berlin. The 22-year-old Hassan had been commissioned in 1872 as a 2nd lieutenant in the Prussian army’s Hussars, but received permission from Kaiser Wilhelm to join the Egyptian army on this campaign. Hassan would eventually become a lieutenant general in the Ottoman army and a Minister of War in the Egyptian government.

Meanwhile, Ratib Pasha, fearing that he had been maligned in some of the outgoing correspondence of the expedition, forbade the American officers from sending any unopened communications for the duration of the campaign. The restriction prevented the European and American officers from reporting the numerous deficiencies of the expedition to the chief of staff (Stone) in Cairo, while the Egyptian officers continued to send sealed reports to the Minister of War. The European staff also went without incoming personal mail for months (all of it being held at Suez), save for a bizarre inquiry addressed to General Loring from a would-be Egyptologist who wished to know whether mummies had tails and straight or curly hair! These annoyances and other slights, such as an order by a junior Egyptian officer to the sentries to stop saluting General Loring, began to suggest that the American and European officers were to be given only limited input in the conduct of the campaign.

King Yohannes’s Scottish General

The staff’s preoccupation with the prince and the paranoia of the commanding officer were but minor setbacks measured against the effect of
the arrival of Scottish mercenary John Kirkham outside the Egyptian lines. Kirkham had allegedly marched with William Walker’s mercenary army in Nicaragua and with Gordon’s “Ever Victorious Army” in China. He had arrived in Ethiopia several years before with Napier’s expedition, but remained behind when the British and Indians left. Now a general in King Yohannes’s army, Kirkham arrived looking much the worse for wear in an old British army uniform. With him were 105 Egyptian prisoners from Arrendrup’s ill-fated column, supposedly a gesture of goodwill from the King. Thirty-seven of the returnees had been genitally mutilated after their capture, and these unfortunates and their nearly equally miserable companions were allowed to circulate through the ranks, proclaiming to all the horrors awaiting them in the interior.

Kirkham did not come in with the prisoners, but bade his time outside the camp, waiting for a chance to pass through unobserved to a ship in the Massawa port. Kirkham was on a mission from King Yohannes to deliver a letter to Queen Victoria, complaining of Egyptian aggression. Yohannes was on good terms with the British, having been helped to power with British arms during the Napier expedition to Abyssinia in 1867–1868. Yohannes’s predecessor, King Tewodros, was unwise enough to take British and European hostages after his own letter to Queen Victoria went unanswered. Sir Robert Napier and his Indian army troops made quick work of the king, who committed suicide rather than be captured.

In time Kirkham and the letter fell into the hands of an Egyptian patrol. Kirkham was thrown into a filthy hole for several weeks of solitary confinement, save for periods of interrogation by American staff. The “General” complained long and loud of the presumption of the Egyptians for interfering with legitimate correspondence between monarchs, but freely offered advice and information to Loring about King Yohannes’s movements and intentions. Kirkham professed that he was free with his information when speaking to Americans because of the friendship he had developed with the American mercenaries Frederick Ward and Henry Burgovine in China and did not wish to see the Americans “eaten up.” Ratib Pasha, offended by the mercenary’s pretensions, abruptly dismissed all of Kirkham’s information, most of which was later proven accurate. Kirkham eventually died in detention at Massawa, convinced he was being poisoned in what he termed “Egyptian hospitality.”

The March to the Interior

With guns by Krupp and rifles by Remington the Egyptian expedition was fully equipped at great expense to the khedive’s treasury, but the advance into the Abyssinian interior, led by another Circassian officer, Osman Pasha, was in a shambles on just the first day. At the last moment
all the best animals were seized for the transport of Prince Hassan’s enormous baggage train, leaving many important departments of the army with only whatever poor specimens could be gathered from the reserve. On the march, mere use alone caused the decayed ropes connecting the camel train to break, allowing the animals to venture off onto the hillsides in search of grazing, dropping their cargo as they went. Many of the camel men recruited from Suakin decided the expedition was likely to be more trouble than it was worth and fled with their government-issued rations and arms.

The guides took the column across a waterless route, forcing the men to spend their nights digging wells to water the immense number of mules, camels, and horses attached to the expedition. As the Egyptian army advanced into the mountains they encountered new dangers. At night native drivers scattered as lions sprang from the darkness, attacking the fully loaded pack animals. Moving a column through mountain passes proved a taxing challenge for an army of valley dwellers unused to such terrain. In his frustration Ratib Pasha eventually gave Major Loshe (the Chief of Transportation) permission to cudgel both officers and men alike in order to get the baggage train moving. Conflicting sets of orders were sent to the van of the army as Loring communicated with Colonel Field and Ratib Pasha sent his orders to Osman Pasha. Most of the American and European officers possessed no Turkish or Arabic abilities, creating more confusion along the line of march. The talents of the American officers had so far been used for exploration and administration rather than warfare, so that this important campaign was for most their first operation commanding large numbers of Egyptian troops.

Isma’il had placed Loring’s hand in that of Ratib Pasha’s when making his appointments in Cairo, enjoining “brotherly concord between them” and, in Loring’s mind at least, impressing upon Ratib Pasha the importance of acting on all of Loring’s advice. In practice Ratib Pasha went to great lengths to avoid accepting the counsel of his second in command, despite his own lack of battle experience. Loring accused Ratib Pasha of creating a kind of parallel general staff of Muslim officers who followed verbal commands differing from the general orders issued to the army. Verbal commands were customary in Egyptian armies on campaign as they usually traveled without the clerks needed to commit orders to paper. Both Turko-Circassian and foreign officers alike relied on interpreters to put their commands into Arabic, and at least one Turkish major in the campaign was completely illiterate in any language. French was a working language for some of the Egyptian staff, but few of the Americans spoke it. The Circassian sirdar was entirely unfamiliar with American staff practice, and his inexperience was shown by his habit of issuing contradictory orders. Ratib worked closest with the other Circassian commanders, Osman Pasha and Rashid Pasha. His immediate staff
consisted of Rifat Effendi and the Austrian major Turnheysen as aide-de-camp. Like many of the Egyptian veterans in the expedition, Turnheysen had also fought in Mexico in support of Maximilian. The Muslim Rifat Effendi served as the sole clerk, a position usually given to a Coptic Egyptian. Rifat was accused later by many of the American officers of wielding a disproportionate authority in the conduct of the campaign.

The difficulties experienced in trying to carry through an unopposed march after months of preparation did not bode well for the future of the expedition. Eighty miles inland the army stopped to regroup, building fortifications in the Gura Valley at Ratib’s insistence, though Loring urged continuing the march on the Abyssinian capital. Two positions were built: Fort Gura, the better-built advance post, held about 7,000 men, while the remaining 5,000 troops under ‘Uthman Pasha were held six miles down the valley at Kaya-Khor.

Some of the problems of the supply column had been worked out by this point, due to the efforts of Major Loshe and Major Möckeln. Locally recruited animal handlers were replaced with a new battalion of Egyptians and an efficient Egyptian officer, ‘Ali Effendi Ruby, took control of the transport at Massawa. Nevertheless, problems persisted as inexperienced baggage handlers strapped impossible loads to poorly cared for animals. Egyptians were notoriously hard on their work animals at home, and it proved impossible to correct a lifetime of habit with a few blows from an officer’s walking stick. One of the biggest problems was preventing both men and officers from riding fully loaded animals up the mountain trails, sometimes two at a time. In the earlier British expedition, the original Egyptian transport corps was actually dismissed and replaced with Punjabis.

Disaster at Gura

Tens of thousands of Abyssinian warriors tried to draw the Egyptian army out from its posts at Gura, but the officer staff was confident that the Abyssinians would soon run out of provisions and be forced to attack the Egyptians’ defensive positions. Like most African armies, that of King Yohannes marched without a supply train, living off the land as best they could. In these circumstances the army could not remain immobile for long. Only 10,000 of the Abyssinians bore any type of firearm (including many ineffective antiques), the rest carrying an array of swords, spears, shields, and clubs. The best weapon in the Abyssinian arsenal was the Brown Bess musket, a relic of the Napoleonic wars that was sent in the thousands to King Yohannes as a gift from the British Crown. Lead shot was in short supply in Abyssinia, so the muskets and flintlocks were often
served with small stones instead. The remarkably strong hide shield of a typical Abyssinian warrior was built to stop or deflect such projectiles, but held no hope of protection from a Remington rifle.

Ratib Pasha’s American staff advised leaving 800 men with the six breech-loading Krupp guns at the better-fortified Fort Gura, taking the rest of the force to Kaya-Khor to meet the Abyssinian attack in force. The pasha prevaricated for three days until March 7, 1886, when the Abyssinians were observed marching down the road into the valley. At this point Ratib Pasha did just about the worst thing he could do in the circumstances, marching 5,000 men out to a point equidistant between the two fortifications. Some 40,000 to 50,000 Abyssinians fell onto the Egyptians, though only a part of the Abyssinian force could be brought to bear at any one time due to the narrowness of the valley. Some Egyptian officers were allegedly seen fleeing by horse for the safety of Fort Gura before the action even started. Ratib foolishly placed his two batteries of artillery on his flanks, where they were at risk without infantry support. The Abyssinians moved to cut off the Egyptian right from Kaya-Khor, but were met with a furious and determined fire from the right battery under Major Isma’il Sabri. Ratib Pasha refused Colonel William Dye’s advice to move two battalions from the left, where the fighting was light, to support Sabri’s battery on the right. The grapeshot of the guns scythed through the charging Abyssinians, but their enormous numbers allowed them to sweep over the artillery.

Sabri’s battery was wiped out, but the Major managed to survive, despite having been left for dead with many wounds. The commander of the First Division, Rashid Pasha, was observed hacking at his foes with his sabre before falling under the relentless onslaught. With Raschid Pasha, Muhammad Bey Gabir, and many of the other Turko-Circassian officers slain on the field, a major weakness of the Egyptian army was demonstrated. The Arab rank and file, discouraged from any type of initiative in their training, quickly proved helpless without direction. The carnage they had created in the Abyssinian horde was great, the Egyptian lines were holding, and there was still the possibility of an Egyptian victory if Osman Pasha moved up reinforcements from the fort. Osman and the garrison at Kaya-Khor were content, however, to watch the slaughter of their comrades from the safety of their defensive works, and the leaderless Egyptians in the valley sought solace in fatalism rather than gunpowder, ceasing their once vigorous defense as they awaited the deathblow. It was an astonishing scene for the Civil War veterans present that brought home with a jolt how little they understood the men under their charge. Some Egyptian troops began to move off, not toward the fort, but toward the hills, where only death awaited. A few remaining officers managed to rally about 500 troops and fought their way through the Abyssinians to the safety of the fort.
The massacre in the Gura Valley surprisingly changed little in the strategic situation of the Egyptian army. They still held Gura Fort, and the battle had bought time for General Field to bring up 3,000 reinforcements to Kaya-Khor. Though victors on the field, the Abyssinians suffered great losses to disciplined Egyptian fire (while it lasted), and it was two days before another assault could be mounted. On the morning of March 9, 1886 the hills surrounding Kaya-Khor were ringed with tens of thousands of swaying, chanting warriors. The Abyssinian artillery opened up, but was quickly silenced by the more accurate fire of the Krupp batteries. A concerted attack was made on the southeast salient of the fort, with sharpshooters concentrating a deadly fire against Egyptian officers and artillerymen. The Abyssinians made good use at first of the cover offered by some ancient breastworks that Ratib Pasha had never got around to destroying, despite the advice of his officers. The Egyptian guns switched to grape and canister shot, inflicting huge losses in the tightly packed Abyssinian ranks. The battle continued for hours as wave after wave of Abyssinians threw themselves at the fort. According to Loring,

It was not long before we had a desperate and deadly conflict at all points... in which our artillery did deadly execution; and their frantic efforts to storm our position were beaten back with great loss of half-naked warriors. Their masses, spread out by the thousands along the hillsides, kept swaying and surging to and fro, yelling and brandishing their lances and clubs, ready to move on us en masse as soon as they saw their attacking column leap our breastworks, when we should be overwhelmed by numbers.2

At last the crest of the attack broke under a withering fire, and the Abyssinians fell back slowly, keeping up a steady fire as they did.

Further attacks were expected, but as the sun rose the next day the hills appeared empty. Colonel Derrick set out on a reconnaissance of the field, passing naked and mutilated Egyptian soldiers struggling to make it back to Egyptian lines. These men were the survivors of King Yohannes’s massacre of some 600 Egyptian prisoners the night before.

We pressed on until we reached their camp, which we entered whilst their camp fires were still burning and I shall never forget the sickening sights that greeted our eyes. The ground was covered with the dead and wounded victims of King John’s brutality, stripped and violated with every conceivable indignity; their bodies burned, stoned, clubbed, hacked with swords and pierced with lances. The supplicating cries of the wounded, who could yet speak, for water and for succor, were enough to appall the stoutest heart.3

Assigning the Blame

King Yohannes sent a letter the next day, acknowledging the many deaths on both sides and suggesting that peace talks should begin. As negotiations began the Egyptians strengthened their positions in the Gura
Valley, but the war was effectively over. The American officers were blamed for the shortcomings of the campaign, and their influence declined sharply. Derrick afterwards spoke of “the incompetence and vacillation of Ratib Pacha” and the “insane jealousy and intolerance of foreigners which activated him and his chief subordinates and induced him to thwart and disregard the advice given to him.” Loring long insisted that the intervention of Osman Pasha’s 3,000 men at Fort Gura could have saved the day for the Egyptians in the battle of March 7, 1886. Both Derrick and Loring acknowledged the heroic but doomed stand made on open ground against an overwhelming foe by many of the fine officers of the First Division. Once back in Cairo all the Arab and Turko-Circassian officers received promotions, including Osman Pasha. The American officers had difficulty collecting their back pay. Prince Hassan received word that Kaiser Wilhelm had promoted him to major in the Prussian Hussars.

Part of the problem between Ratib Pasha and the American officers was a different understanding of war and its objectives. Ratib understood his role as making a demonstration of strength with the army prior to entering negotiations. The Americans brought with them the concept of total war developed during the bitter U.S. Civil War, an understanding that their purpose was to engage and utterly destroy the enemy in battle. The American veterans of the campaign vilified Ratib Pasha for his military shortcomings in their memoirs. Though they are correct that the battle at Gura could have been won, there is little acknowledgment that Egypt could never have conquered and held Abyssinia.

One unfortunate survivor of the campaign was Major Durholz, who suffered severe wounds to his head and body from sword and lance before being captured by the Abyssinians. Durholz was given into the custody of an Abyssianian ras notorious for his cruelty to prisoners. After the campaign Durholz arrived in Massawa damaged in mind and body. Rather than being sent on to Cairo for medical treatment, Durholz was inexplicably detained at Massawa. When Durholz finally arrived in Egypt he discovered that Captain Sormani and Major Turnheysen had spread the vile rumor that he had turned traitor and commanded the Abyssinian guns at Gura. Turnheysen repeated the slander in Durholz’s presence, eventually goading the major into challenging the Austrian master swordsman to a duel. With Captain Sormani as his second, Turnheysen took only a few moments to kill his still-weakened opponent. Some saw Prince Hassan’s hand behind this whole sorry affair.

As the Ottoman Empire entered into yet another war with the Russians, the sultan called on Isma’il for troops, and the Egyptian army in Abyssinia was largely withdrawn for service against the Russians. The Egyptians sailed without the Americans, but even in the Danube region the poor performance of the Egyptian troops against the Russians was blamed on American training. Isma’il’s ambitions in the Red Sea only
added to his astonishing debt of 100 million pounds. The desperate sale of his shares in the Suez Canal to Great Britain raised only 4 million pounds. Ismail’s foolhardy and expensive burst of Egyptian imperialism in Abyssinia ended with little glory and no advantage for the khedive.

Further south Muhammad Ra’uf Pasha took the southern Abyssinian province of Harrar with an expedition of 4,000 men and artillery. Reports were received at Massawa that Ra’uf Pasha followed the beheading of the king of Harrar by inviting 25 local chiefs to dinner, where they were all massacred.

In a few short years the boundaries of the Egyptian empire in Africa would be rolled back to her traditional borders. In November 1875 Isma’il was bankrupt and forced to sell his shares in the Suez Canal to Britain, immediately changing the international balance of power in Britain’s favor. The discount sale of this incredibly valuable asset eventually generated nearly a century of conflict and military occupation. Under pressure from the khedive’s French and British creditors, the Ottoman sultan deposed Isma’il in 1879. The American officer corps was an unaffordable luxury and was dismissed in mid-1878 on the recommendation of a commission of inquiry and the advice of various European consuls who resented the American presence in their strategic “backyard.”

Some of the American officers suspected Prince Hassan wished to replace them with Prussian officers, the preferred foreign advisors of the Ottoman army. Loring, the khedive’s favorite, lingered for another nine months before he, too, returned to the United States, laden with decorations and honors. General Stone remained as the khedive’s chief of staff until the ‘Arabi rebellion in 1882. Prout and Mason stayed on as civilian employees of the khedive. Promoted to Bey, Mason served as deputy to General Charles Gordon in the Sudan and later circumnavigated Lake Albert/Nyanza at the headwaters of the Nile. A short term as governor of Massawa was followed by a series of diplomatic missions to Abyssinia. Mason Bey died while on leave in the United States in 1897. Purdy Bey also remained in Cairo, but only because he was bankrupt and could not afford to return to America. Harassed by his creditors, he died in poverty in 1881, his tombstone in the Protestant cemetery of Old Cairo provided by the Khedival Geographic Society. In 2000 American residents replaced the decaying tombstone with a ten-foot stone obelisk in a ceremony attended by a U.S. major-general.

The efforts of the American officers were soon forgotten. Chaille-Long would probably be a household name in the United States today had his explorations been undertaken for his native country rather than for the Egyptian khedive. Instead he was consigned to a gallery of fez-wearing eccentrics whose achievements in Africa were quickly forgotten, their service in a Muslim state regarded as something of an embarrassment in both Egypt and their home country.
Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire on April 24, 1877, again nominally in defense of the Ottoman Christians, who had endured severe measures in the repression of revolts in Serbia and Bulgaria. Russia’s real goal was the same as in prior wars: to diminish the Ottoman Empire while expanding Russian influence and territory. When Sultan Abdülmelik II first asked Khedive Isma’il for assistance, the khedive enraged the sultan by proposing that Egyptian troops garrison Istanbul “to free Turkish forces to go to the front.” When he had finished having his fun at the sultan’s expense, Isma’il finally agreed to send troops to the front in Bulgaria. The survivors of the disastrous Abyssinian campaign were shipped from the baking heat of Massawa and reequipped to join Ottoman forces in Bulgaria. With fresh levies from Cairo the Egyptian expeditionary corps formed a division of about 8,000 men.

There was little action on the frontier until June 1877 when the level of the Danube dropped enough to allow troops to cross. By now the Danube formed the northern frontier in Europe of the ever-shrinking Ottoman Empire. The Russians also opened a second front in eastern Anatolia in the usual pattern of Russian-Ottoman hostilities. This time the Russians avoided the Silistrian forts, making their main crossing of the Danube at Siminitza. Ottoman units were, as usual, too dispersed to make a concentrated defensive effort and began to withdraw. An orderly retreat disintegrated after a few hours into unseemly flight. The army threw away its equipment to move faster even though the Russian army was not in pursuit.

Eventually the army regrouped, but missed many opportunities to strike a blow at the invading Russians through the timidity of the Ottoman generals. They continued to try to hold every position instead of concentrating their forces for a decisive counterattack. In battle the Ottoman soldiers seemed to have the advantage in terms of superiority with
modern Peabody-Martini rifles and Krupp breach-loading artillery, but the men had little practice in the use of their weapons in order to save money on munitions. The Russians were aided by Rumanians and thousands of Bulgarian volunteers. Once again Circassians fought for both sides as irregular troops, though most were with the Ottomans. They were responsible for numerous atrocities against the civilian population, as were the Cossacks and Bulgarian militias fighting for Russia. Mutilation and decapitation of Russian casualties was common among the Circassians in the Ottoman army and was practiced even at times by the Ottoman regulars. In some battles, like those at Shipka Pass, the Ottoman army gave no quarter after having encountered massacres of Muslim civilians on their way to the pass. Volunteers of the Russian-allied Bulgarian Legion were regarded as rebels and usually executed if captured.

Egyptian troops were involved as part of a select force in the defense of Shipka Pass, which was well fortified with entrenched batteries of artillery. A Russian attack by forces under Prince Mirsky was repulsed on July 17, 1877. The next day General Gourko brought up reinforcements and sent an officer to suggest a truce with the Ottoman commander. Ottoman troops interpreted a movement by one of the Russian units as threatening and opened fire, striking down about 140 Russians. The unfortunate Russian captain bearing the truce offer was mutilated and decapitated before the Ottoman force fell back under a Russian attack. The Ottoman army was reeling in a state of disarray until the arrival of Osman Nuri Pasha (the victor of the previous year’s campaign in Serbia). Osman Nuri rallied the broken units to stage a counterattack, leading the men into battle personally against superior Russian forces at Vidin. By forced marches Osman Nuri attempted to relieve the besieged garrison at Nigbolu (Nikopol), but arrived too late. Unused to Russian tactics, Osman Nuri found his division enveloped by Russian troops at a place called Plevna. Osman Nuri combined leadership with iron discipline, at one point threatening to open fire from his headquarters battery on any troops seen fleeing the battlefield. The Russian generals kept the Ottoman position at Plevna surrounded for months, occasionally feeling the need to hurl thousands of men against the repeating rifles of the dug-in Ottoman troops. A desperate breakout attempt failed, and most of the Ottoman prisoners died in the following weeks of cold and starvation.

Elsewhere on the same front Ottoman reinforcements from Montenegro under the command of Sulayman Pasha arrived by the end of July 1877. The appearance of these fresh troops was enough to throw the Russians in some sectors into retreat. The Bulgarian Legion suffered heavily in the fighting withdrawal, but it was nothing compared to the vicious retribution meted out to the “disloyal” Bulgarian civilian population once its Russian protectors abandoned it.
Prince Hassan in Bulgaria

Egyptian reinforcements were sent to Bulgaria in August 1877, under the command of Prince Hassan. Captain Sormani and Major Turnheysen accompanied the prince. Zubayr Pasha, the conqueror of Darfur and the Bahr al-Ghazal, also went with the army as the commander of cavalry. At the time anything seemed better to this man of action than rotting away in comfortable house arrest in Cairo.

In Bulgaria the Egyptians joined a division of Ottoman troops that included an English officer named Valentine Baker Pasha, who would later command Egyptian army troops in the eastern Sudan. Valentine was the brother of Samuel Baker, the former governor-general of Egyptian Equatoria. A highly promising officer and confidante of the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII), Valentine Baker fell victim to the sexual phobias of Victorian England. When the young officer sought a kiss from a young lady he met on a train, the object of his affection became hysterical, screamed incessantly and, at one point tried to hurl herself from the moving train, saved only by the same young man who could see his career suddenly crashing around him. The young lady rejected all attempts to settle the matter out of court, and at the subsequent trial Baker adhered to the Victorian gentleman’s code of honor, refusing to offer any defense. Baker was convicted of attempted rape, sentenced to a year in prison, and dismissed from the British army. The Queen was especially concerned about the company her son, the prince of Wales, was keeping, and rejected all attempts to have Baker reinstated in the army. On his release from prison, Baker found that his friends had not forgotten him, having obtained Baker a commission in the Ottoman army until the Queen could be convinced to relent. The war in Bulgaria appears to have allowed Baker to unleash some of the anger he must have built up in prison as his reputation was shredded by England’s polite society. Baker was ferocious in leading the attack, cutting paths through the Russian enemy with his sabre. A number of Ottoman officers wondered what madness had possessed the British army when they dismissed this man.

As the Egyptians arrived Sulayman Pasha was busy wasting his best troops in pointless frontal assaults on fortified Russian positions at the entrance to Shipka Pass. Twenty thousand men perished in this way. Sulayman had already tarnished his reputation by abandoning an entire Ottoman division to its destruction by the Russians at Eski Zagra. The pasha appears to have been unable to understand the difference between fighting Montenegrin guerrillas and Russian regulars, but lacked the common sense to stop sending his men to certain death. Nevertheless, he was well connected at court and was never called to account for his actions.

The Egyptians were placed under the command of Mehmet Pasha, a capable and responsible Ottoman general whose foreign origin often left
impossible to deal with incompetent but well-connected officers under his authority. Born Jules Détroit, the pasha came from a French Huguenot family resident in Prussia. At age 15 his impoverished father placed him on a merchant ship, where he was badly treated by captain and crew. He escaped while moored in the Bosphorus and soon came to the attention of ‘Ali Pasha, who took him into his household until he was old enough to begin military college. There he distinguished himself and soon found himself a junior officer at the siege of Silistria in which his outstanding conduct landed him a position on Omar Pasha’s staff for the duration of the Crimean War. Since then Mehmet ‘Ali had served in Montenegro, Arabia, Bosnia, Crete, Thessaly, and Serbia. When given command of Ottoman forces in Bulgaria, Mehmet ‘Ali’s first task was to reinvigorate the demoralized army.

Prince Hassan was placed in command of the 2nd Corps of the Ottoman army, consisting of 52 battalions of infantry, 14 squadrons of cavalry, and 11 batteries of artillery. The infantry was mostly Egyptian and Turkish, the cavalry Circassian. Of “royal” blood, the prince considered himself the equal, if not the superior, of his commanding officer, Mehmet ‘Ali, and conducted himself accordingly. Prince Hassan had a fine officer, Salih Pasha, directly under him, but he frequently failed to avail himself of the good advice offered by this soldier, preferring his own counsel as the “victor” of Gura. This attitude was no doubt reinforced by the sycophancy of his close companions, Captain Sormani and Major Turnheysen. Zubayr Pasha had his own complaints about Mehmet ‘Ali (he accused him of receiving money from the Russians hidden in watermelons!), but found Prince Hassan disinterested in his charges of cowardice. Hassan is reported to have told him that “the war was against a civilized power and not a horde of savages.” Having spent most of his life in the unrelied heat of the South Sudan, Zubayr suffered greatly with the onset of the Balkan winter. A pair of Turkish officers who saw him riding with the reins in his teeth in order to keep his hands inside his coat took pity on him (after they had finished laughing) and arranged for his return to Egypt.

Fresh from its defeat in Abyssinia the Egyptian army still looked highly professional, but the damage to morale had not been repaired:

Arrived in camp, the well-shod, well-clad, and well-paid Egyptians looked down with contempt upon the rough Turkish soldiers, most of whom had lost their shoes in the Bulgarian mud, and left shreds of their uniform in all the thickets they had passed through. At working and digging the Egyptians maintained their superiority over the less active Turks; but when it came to a question of fighting, this brilliant little force proved unequal to the reputation it had gained in other respects.¹

There were opportunities to restore the spirit of the Egyptian expeditionary force, but these were foiled each time by Prince Hassan. Twice
during the Lom campaign Mehmet ‘Ali placed the prince in charge of destroying a retreating Russian army; both times the prince declined to commit his troops at the vital moment. Denying his men the spoils of an easy victory destroyed the confidence of the army in his leadership. Mehmet ‘Ali was inclined to dismiss the prince, but this proved impossible so long as Hassan continued to enjoy the favor of the sultan. Not long after this, Ottoman field hospitals began to fill up with hundreds of Egyptian soldiers with self-inflicted wounds and mutilations made in the hope of escaping the pointless and rewardless fighting.

The largest Egyptian action in the war occurred at the Battle of Cerkovna in mid-September 1877. Mehmet ‘Ali Pasha brought his army, which included Prince Hassan’s Egyptians, against two Russian corps in order to relieve pressure on the siege of Plevna. The battle began late in the morning with a largely ineffective artillery barrage by both sides. Mehmet ‘Ali intended to make only a demonstration against the Russian center and left, while sending the Egyptian contingent in to destroy the weak Russian right. Nothing went right for the Ottomans that day; the Turkish troops sent against the left and the center became entangled with the Russians and could not disengage before Russian reinforcements arrived to rout them. The Egyptian attack collapsed as soon as the Russians opened fire, and they soon joined the rest of the army in falling back on Cerkovna. The Egyptian reserve of nine battalions that was meant to force home the attack got bogged down on muddy roads and never reached the battlefield. After a truce to bury the dead the Egyptians beat a hasty retreat to safer positions, needlessly abandoning much of their equipment on the way. Mehmet ‘Ali was relieved of his command on October 2, 1877, and replaced by Sulayman Pasha, whose deficiencies as a commander were apparently punished solely with promotions.

By October 1877 Prince Hassan declared he had seen enough of Sulayman Pasha and Ottoman incompetence, withdrawing the Egyptian contingent to Varna to be shipped back to Egypt. The Egyptian army was completely unequipped for the coming winter, and it was apparent that there would be few troops to return by the following spring. The Ottoman command may also have seen enough of Prince Hassan, whose leadership was not particularly distinguished in this campaign. Though no one knew it at the time, the 1877 Russo-Turkish War was the last time Egyptian forces would fight in the sultan’s service.

Hard pressed on both fronts, the sultan had little option but to seek an armistice by the end of January 1878. Under the Treaty of San Stefano concluded in March 1878, the Ottoman Empire lost control of most of its Balkan provinces to Russian-sponsored Slavic independence movements, while several provinces of eastern Anatolia were lost to Russian annexation. Great Britain, which had aided in halting the conflict before the Ottoman Empire was destroyed, now demanded that the Porte yield Cyprus
to British control. Russia’s penetration into eastern Anatolia was bringing it dangerously close to the Middle East, where it might threaten Britain’s links to India. The idea in London was to use Cyprus as an advance base from which Britain could move swiftly to contain further Russian advances.

**Effectiveness of Egyptian/Ottoman Military Cooperation**

The Egyptian experience in fighting with the Ottoman army was rarely fruitful, due to several weaknesses in Ottoman armies on campaign and the established methods of Egyptian/Ottoman military collaboration:

- No apparent system existed for controlling an Ottoman army on the march. On the advance there was mass confusion; in retreat there was chaos, with the infantry often chasing the officers to safety. Reconnaissance either before or behind the army was regarded as unnecessary, as were cohesive systems of sentries and pickets. In this environment rumor substituted for intelligence. In the consequent atmosphere of uncertainty the troops lived in fear of partisan activities by civilians, a large factor in the proclivity of Ottoman armies to conduct civilian massacres in hostile territory.

- A wretched communications system meant that battles were often lost when orders could not be delivered to commanders on the battlefield.

- Most Egyptian expeditionary forces were sent on the condition that the Porte would supply arms, clothing, food, tents, and all other provisions. In practice only arms and munitions were usually sent, leaving the Egyptians to forage or die. At other times the Porte would fulfill its conditions, but the goods would disappear somewhere along the supply chain, sold by corrupt Ottoman officers.

- Little was to be learned by Egyptian officers from the Ottomans in the way of staff work, planning, or any of the other usual occupations of military officers. In fact, Egyptian officers seem to have absorbed some of the worst strategic habits of Ottoman commanders, such as spreading out available forces to hold as many positions as possible.

- Egyptian troops sent to aid Ottoman armies were generally regarded as unlikely to return, reflecting the known proclivity of Ottoman commanders to squander the lives of their men. Whenever possible, Egypt’s best troops were kept at home, while the sultan in Istanbul was offered a selection of sometimes elderly and often mutilated veterans and inexperienced recruits.

- The Ottoman officer corps was so rife with competition and rivalry that commanders were often as pleased with the defeat of their comrades as they were with a victory. In practice, this often meant the inactivity of Ottoman commanders when their intervention was most urgent.

- The unpopularity of foreign campaigns with the Egyptian conscript army led to widespread desertion, even in a hostile country. These significant noncombat losses only ensured further waves of conscription and social disruption to provide their replacements.
Egypt’s small Turko-Circassian ruling class always relied on its monopoly on force to maintain itself atop Egypt’s social pyramid. The changing world of warfare had forced the army to look within Egypt for the manpower it needed, but the uneducated fellah could be counted on to have no more aspiration than to return to his village. Opening the ranks of junior officer to Egypt’s Arab majority changed the power equation. The new generation of Arab officers was different from the fellah rank and file. They were well educated, ambitious, and dedicated to a military career. Fueled by the emergence of the philosophies of nationalism and Arabism, some officers felt they were at the forefront of a social and cultural revolution. Just as they began to prosper in military service Ism’ail took the throne in 1863, and the senior ranks were effectively closed to the Arab officers due to the khedive’s preference for Turks and Circassians.

Ahmad ‘Urabi was a perfect example of the frustrated Arab officer. After studies at al-Azhar University and the Military Academy, ‘Urabi moved quickly through the ranks until his progress slowed under Isma’il. In the Abyssinian campaign he was given only the duties of a transport officer. From 1879 onward ‘Urabi appears to have been part of a secret society of nationalist officers, apparently supported in Istanbul by Muhammad ‘Abd al-Halim Pasha, the khedive’s uncle and heir to the throne under the traditional Turkish laws of succession until the rules of succession in Egypt were modified by Isma’il. ‘Abd al-Halim was the Porte’s choice as khedive in 1879, but was rejected by the British in favor of the more malleable Tawfiq Pasha (1879–1892).

In 1881 the Ottoman Empire was still suffering from the consequences of the 1877 war with Russia, the consequent war indemnities, and the Congress of Berlin, which detached 40 percent of the empire from the
sultan’s rule. Sultan Abdulhamid II began to promote pan-Islamism as an ideology to reinvigorate the empire and spread his personal influence internationally as “Caliph of Islam.” Pan-Islamism was also intended to contain the growing concept of Arabism, which threatened to further divide the empire. Arabism began to make an impact in Egypt where ‘Urabi emerged as the leader of a delegation of Arab officers protesting Turko-Circassian favoritism by the Minister of War, ‘Uthman Rifqi (a veteran of Crete and Abyssinia). The Circassian Rifqi had ‘Urabi and fellow colonels Mahmud Fahmi (one of Egypt’s finest engineers and a veteran of Ottoman campaigns in Serbia and Montenegro) and ‘Abd al-Al arrested, but they were later freed by their outraged colleagues who seized the Ministry of War. An emergency council of senior officers and ministers was convened. General Stone was present in his capacity as chief of staff. Writing in the third person, Stone later related his own role at the meeting:

The Chief of Staff of the Army insisted that there was but one way to treat a military revolt and that was severe, terrible repression; making an example which would never be forgotten in the land. What if the present demands
were accepted and the Minister of War dismissed on the demand of mutineers; the next demand would be the dismissal of a whole ministry—and the next the destruction of the sovereign. He (Chief of Staff) offered to suppress it by using only such officers as he knew were faithful and a company of Circassian volunteer infantry still in service.1

More cautious ministers believed that Stone’s solution might at worst only hasten the end of the regime, or at best delay an even greater explosion of antigovernment sentiment. To placate the rebellious officers the khedive sent Rifqi to Istanbul and replaced him with a popular third-generation officer of Circassian descent, Mahmud Sami al-Barudi. A veteran of Crete and the Crimean War, al-Barudi was sympathetic to Egypt’s Arab culture, eventually becoming one of Egypt’s finest Arabic language poets.

The Nationalist officers had scored a triumph of sorts, but they remained in a precarious position should the Turko-Circassians reassert their authority. On September 9, 1881, they surrounded ‘Abdin Palace with 4,000 soldiers and demanded that soldier-turned-politician Muhammad Sharif be placed at the head of a new constitutional government. Sharif was a curious choice for the officers. Though he had gained a reputation as a political reformer, Sharif was a proud Turk and major landowner who was openly disdainful of Arab Egyptians. All other ministers were dismissed save for al-Barudi, who continued as Minister of War.

In time it became apparent that Sharif Pasha was not the man to lead the Nationalist movement, and he was replaced by al-Barudi. ‘Urabi Pasha, by now the real power in the government, contented himself by taking control of the Ministry of War. Al-Barudi and ‘Urabi began to correspond with the sultan in Istanbul, criticizing the khedive, described by al-Barudi as a liar and a “buffoon.” The sultan regarded such opinions as presumptuous and disloyal, describing their authors as “vermin.” Tawfiq remained his agent in Egypt, and rebellion against him was the same as rebellion against the “Sublime Empire.” Now that he had found a political use for the caliphate, Abdülhamid was particularly concerned that ‘Urabi might attempt to revive an “Arab” caliphate centered in Cairo.

‘Urabi was now in position to begin reducing the power of the Turko-Circassian officers. Al-Barudi and ‘Urabi claimed to have discovered a plot by Circassian officers to kill ‘Urabi. Secret courts-martial sentenced dozens of Circassians to exile in the Sudan, a close equivalent to a death sentence in the minds of most Egyptians. The verdict was questionable and the sentences excessive, so much so that the khedive refused to give the necessary approval. The British and French consuls-general weighed in on the side of the khedive, and there were even absurd rumors that Russia might come to the aid of the Circassians, whose homeland had now been incorporated into the Russian Empire.
Britain and France, who by this time had a significant financial presence in the country, viewed the momentous changes in Egypt with alarm. European nationals who had enjoyed immunity and wealth in the midst of their Arab Egyptian hosts now found their lives and investments at risk in the changing atmosphere. Britain and France sent a joint protest in January 1882, but remained unsatisfied with the response. On May 20, 1882, a combined French and British squadron of warships arrived off Alexandria, with an Ottoman mediator arriving on June 7, 1882. American, German, Greek, Italian, and Russian gunships were also present to protect the interests of their respective nations, though they took no part in the coming fighting.

In Istanbul, Sultan Abdülhamid saw dark motivations in ‘Urabi’s revolt. Well aware of the growing strength of “Arabism” in his Middle East provinces, the sultan suspected that ‘Urabi was actually in league with the British to separate Arab lands from the Ottoman Empire. Despite this, Abdülhamid refused a request from Khedive Tawfiq to send Ottoman troops to resolve the crisis, suspecting the entire affair might be some type of trap. The Porte was aware of the damage to the empire that could be caused by a clash between Turks and Arabs. A proclamation was issued in Egypt in the name of the sultan, warning the Egyptians that “tribalism” and “nationalism” had no place in Islam. The delegates of the European powers met June 3, 1882, at the Istanbul Conference on Egypt to resolve the growing crisis, but their efforts throughout that summer were largely ineffectual due to the sultan’s prevarication on almost every issue.

The unendurable tension within a multiethnic city under the guns of a potentially hostile fleet eventually exploded on June 11, 1882, when a Maltese killed an Egyptian donkey driver in a street fight. The Egyptians considered Maltese as Europeans (Malta was occupied by Great Britain), and word began to spread that the Europeans were killing the Egyptians. The Egyptians poured into the streets to defend their community, only to be attacked by Europeans, Greeks, Syrian Christians, and Maltese who fired on the Egyptians from balconies and windows. Rioting deteriorated into mass murder as Christian battled Muslim in the streets. The police either stood aloof or joined in the mayhem, and eventually the army had to be called in to restore order. Instead of providing swift justice ‘Urabi convened an inquiry, giving the Europeans a pretext for intervention.

**Attack on Alexandria**

On July 9, 1882 Admiral Seymour sent a message to Alexandria declaring that a British bombardment of Alexandria and her forts would begin in only 24 hours. The French decided at the last minute not to participate in any military action. The forts of Alexandria were armed with Armstrong naval guns designed to cover the torpedo system in the harbor.
Unfortunately Tawfiq’s neglect of Egypt’s defenses meant that the torpedo cables designed to guide the weapons had deteriorated into uselessness. At the time the shelling began the khedive had only five Westerners still with him, being Stone and four Italians, one of whom was the admiral of Tawfiq’s decrepit fleet. Stone knew full well that the Alexandrian forts posed no threat to Admiral Seymour’s fleet, but understood the reason behind the Admiral’s sudden concern for its safety:

The pretext which the Admiral of this superb iron-clad fleet armed with 18 ton, 25 ton, 35 ton, 81 ton guns, already inside the port, made, was that the strengthening of the parapets and the mounting of guns “created a danger to his fleet!” The forts were such as our old Farragut [the Union’s outstanding naval commander in the U.S. Civil War], with wooden ships in the position of [Seymour’s ironclads], would have asked half an hour to demolish; and the guns which were being mounted were 9” and 10” Armstrongs, which certainly created no great new danger to ships clothed with 12”, 14”, 18”, and 24” iron armour! However, as a pretext was necessary, the pretext was found.2

The British ships stood out of range of the Armstrong guns and suffered only six dead during the first day of the bombardment, July 11, 1882. Seymour expected that the Egyptians would desert their posts after the first salvo, but to his surprise the Egyptians stood by their guns for nearly 12 hours, taking terrible losses from direct hits from the ships. The Armstrong guns weighed 18 tons, and when they or their carriages were hit they would fly, spin, or roll, obliterating their crews in the process. Over 100 gunners died and up to 400 were wounded on that first day of the bombardment.

The next morning the surviving Armstrong guns were silent, but the British fleet mistook Egyptian fire-fighting operations for an attempt to repair the batteries. The fleet opened up once more and fires began to spread through Alexandria. The Egyptian troops were withdrawn, but not before looting the European quarter of the city. Egyptian civilians continued the destruction. There were even reports of Arab Bedouin riding into town to seize what they could.

On July 13, 1882, ‘Urabi ordered a unit of his troops to surround Ramleh Palace. According to some reports ‘Urabi instructed his officers to set it afire with the khedive inside. The officers, suddenly faced with the enormity of their orders, sent a delegation to meet with the khedive inside the palace, where they pledged their services in his protection. The khedive sought and received an offer of safety from Admiral Seymour and his new military escort led him to central Alexandria, where British marines were being landed. By July 14, 1882, the marines were restoring order in most of the city while the multinational fleet provided firefighting crews. For three weeks ‘Urabi failed to counterattack when the city was held only by a small force of British marines, preferring to await
the British attack further inland. The Egyptian rumor mill continued to run unabated; when a young English midshipman was captured in Alexandria, he was transported in a closed carriage to Cairo for detention. By the time he arrived in Cairo the locals were filling the streets to celebrate “the capture of Admiral Seymour.” Strangely enough the citizens of Cairo were not too far from the mark; the beardless midshipman would in later life become Admiral Sir Dudley de Chair of the Royal Navy.

In late July 1882 the khedive officially dismissed Urabi from his position as Minister of War. Urabi responded with a heated proclamation of his own after hearing the khedive was taking refuge on a British warship:

The Khedive, whose life the country has spared up to the present time, has now joined the enemy in attacking Egyptian Muslims, and they plunder and slaughter all those who fall into their hands or who enter the town [of Alexandria]. The Khedive remains at night with his women, afloat amongst the English, and at day returns to the shore to order the continual slaughter of the Muslims in the streets of Alexandria.3

At this time Urabi received a telegram from Istanbul. In the name of the sultan, it reminded Urabi that he was but a “common man,” with no authority to rebel against anyone.

The European attack on Alexandria might have failed if the plans of Colonel Beverley Kennon had been carried out a few years earlier. A veteran of both the U.S. and Confederate navies, Kennon devised a brilliant system of coastal defense. Instead of constructing forts to defend Alexandria, Kennon proposed hiding single gun emplacements along the coast with interlocking fields of fire. The guns would be hidden in the sand hills, raised by a hydraulic system of Kennon’s own invention before taking a shot and disappearing again into the sand bank for reloading. Kennon finished a working prototype before being told the khedive’s finances could not afford the completion of the system. The Egyptian fleet was also a mere shadow of its former power, consisting only of two frigates, two corvettes, four gunboats, and three large yachts for the personal use of the khedive.

But what of the khedive’s secret weapon, the Lay torpedo? Urabi tried to find it, but the English customs administrator in Alexandria had been asked by British intelligence to watch for a mysterious weapon they believed to be in the customs warehouse. Discovering the torpedo in several unmarked containers, the customs chief crudely smashed whatever looked like working parts before sending it on to the British warship Invincible.

The Battle of Tel al-Kabir

The British spent the summer of 1882 consolidating control over the Suez Canal (which Urabi failed to defend adequately) and transporting
reinforcements to do battle with ‘Urabi’s army. Ferdinand de Lesseps had made a successful appeal to ‘Urabi to respect the official neutrality of the Canal, and orders were issued to withdraw dynamited charges that were in place to cut the Canal in four places. In return both France and Italy pledged to keep their troops from Egyptian soil. The British bypassed the international treaty guaranteeing the Canal’s neutrality by obtaining a written mandate from Khedive Tawfiq authorizing their occupation of the Canal. By August 20, 1882, the British had secured both ends of the Canal in the name of preserving their link with India. Much of the Egyptian population in Suez fled for fear of being murdered by British troops. In the Sinai a small party led by Cambridge Arabic scholar Professor Edward Palmer was brutally murdered while attempting to bribe the Bedouin of the Sinai into supporting the British.

By late August Sir Garnet Wolseley had 25,000 British and Indians under his command at Isma‘iliya. It seemed more logical to join the two expeditionary forces here rather than at Alexandria, so that most of the campaign took place in Egypt’s Eastern Desert. There were fears that the Sanussis of Libya might intervene on ‘Urabi’s behalf, and there were even rumors that Garibaldi’s sons were enlisting Italian volunteers to join ‘Urabi’s “fight for independence.” Skirmishes occupied both sides until the first major engagement at the Kassassin Lock (30 miles west of Isma‘iliya), where a British brigade had difficulty repelling an Egyptian attack until the arrival of the main force of British cavalry. Just before the final battle between Britain and ‘Urabi’s Egyptians, General Loring observed that prior to ‘Urabi’s rebellion,

[...]there was no such thing as patriotism among the Arabs. They looked upon the government as their natural enemy. They hated the Turks and Circassians as the ruling class and oppressors thrown over them by a despotic government, who made them feel that they were their masters. They love their families and their mud huts—their religion above all else. They are drawn to Arabi because he is an Arab and the representative not only of their religion but of their race. For the first time in centuries there may be born some notions of patriotism. 4

The sultan’s long-awaited declaration of ‘Urabi as a rebel was finally issued on September 7, 1882. It is instructive of Ottoman attitudes to learn that this Turkish-language document was issued in Arabic only at the insistence of the British. Outnumbered by the Egyptian army, Wolseley decided on a surprise attack set for September 13, 1882, as the best means of quickly smashing the Egyptians. The entire British force marched silently through the night to reach the brink of the Egyptian defenses at dawn. The Brigade of Scottish Highlanders (Gordons, Camerons, and Black Watch) took the front line of trenches at bayonet point, allowing the rest of the army to flood into the Egyptian camp. As the Egyptians
began to retreat, the horse artillery rushed to the front to pour grapeshot into the fleeing troops. The pipers of the Highland Brigade were still trying to inflate their instruments when the first charge ended. In another part of the battlefield the Seaforth Highlanders, operating with the Indian Army Brigade, stormed entrenched artillery, taking the gun pits at bayonet point. Later that day the 20th Bengal Infantry launched its own bayonet charge on a village still held by the Egyptian army. The success of these wild assaults was helped by the efficient support of British artillery and Gatling guns. 'Urabi was still sleeping when the attack began, but the action progressed too quickly for him to rally his already retreating troops. With little choice, he made his morning prayers and boarded the train to Cairo. 'Urabi Pasha surrendered the great city the day after the battle. He and his confederates were to be tried for treason against the khedive with the real possibility of a death penalty.

A small party of 150 Dragoons and mounted infantry made a night march through the Tombs of the Khalifs north of Cairo on their way to the Citadel. A garrison of 5,000 men remained within its walls, but after a few negotiations the garrison marched out of the Bab al-'Azab gate to the Kasr al-Nil barracks beside the river where they waited to be disarmed. It took two and one-half hours for the entire garrison to march out before the keys of the Citadel were handed over to the senior British officer. That night hundreds of prisoners chained in the Citadel’s dungeons attempted to break out after noting the absence of their guards, but were restrained by British troops until their cases could be investigated.

The Aftermath

Only days after the defeat at Tel al-Kabir the khedive issued a decree abolishing the Egyptian army. The British occupation marked the end of the adventures of the Stone family, who appear to have been quite happy in Egypt. The British were intent on once again rebuilding the Egyptian army and had no place for an American chief of staff. Knowing this, Stone resigned his commission, lamenting the end of Egypt’s independence. The general also expressed bitterness at the ransacking of his Citadel offices by British soldiers, who destroyed much of the cartographic work of the Americans in the Sudan. British carelessness in preserving these charts would come back to haunt them in 1916, when they suddenly needed the maps to plan an invasion of Darfur.

Stone returned to an uncertain future in the United States, but discovered that he was not without friends. He received an engineering commission to supervise the installation of the massive base of the new Statue of
Liberty in New York harbor. Only a short distance away, he could see the Fort Lafayette prison where he had endured his undeserved disgrace. The work went well and Stone was a distinguished guest at the statue’s opening ceremonies, which he attended bareheaded in a cold, driving rain. A few days later he took sick and died.

The Egyptian rebels were spared execution, but were exiled to British-occupied Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka). Al-Barudi remained in Ceylon until 1900. During his separation from Egypt al-Barudi went blind, but began a new career as a distinguished poet when he returned to Cairo. ‘Urabi remained in Ceylon until 1901. His efforts being regarded as an embarrassing failure within Egypt, he wrote his memoirs and dwelt in obscurity in Helwan until his death in 1911. With his rebellion looked on by many as the catalyst for British occupation, ‘Urabi was a forgotten man until his memory was rehabilitated by Nasser’s Free Officers Movement in the 1950s. ‘Urabi was, like them, a patriotic Arab nationalist willing to challenge the old order for the benefit of native Egyptians. ‘Ali al-Rubi, who commanded the Egyptians at the battle of Tel al-Kabir was not so fortunate. Sentenced to 20 years of exile at Massawa, he was later moved to Suakin where he died in 1891. Mahmud Fahmi, who acted as chief of staff of ‘Urabi’s army, died in Ceylon in 1894.
CHAPTER 13

Defeat in the Sudan: The Mahdi Triumphs over the “Turks”

Struggle for Darfur

An Ottoman firman of 1841 gave Muhammad ‘Ali control of the sultanate of Darfur, even though the region had never been occupied by either the viceroy or the Ottomans. Though Muhammad ‘Ali planned invasions in 1822, 1837, and 1843, they were called off for varying reasons at the last minute. During the reign of Muhammad Sa’id (1854–1863) relations between Darfur and the viceroy improved, and the two cooperated in dealing with the rebellious Arab tribes that straddled the border of Darfur and Egyptian-occupied Kordofan. When Isma’il became viceroy he considered adding Darfur to his empire. A talented Egyptian secret agent, Kaimakan Muhammad Nadi Bey, penetrated the court of the ever-suspicious Darfur sultan in preparation to an invasion, but it too was called off. By now Egypt had lost the initiative to the slave raiders of the Sudan, Nile Arabs and Nubians who were prepared to go where the Egyptian army did not. They built their own armies of bazinqirs, Sudanese warriors who were taken as slaves and then used to capture more slaves. The latter were then divided between the leader, who sold his for profit or kept them to replenish or enlarge his army, and the bazinqirs, who took their pick of female slaves to bring along on their campaigns. This slave economy proved remarkably successful in creating a bond between master and bazinqir. It was the type of army Muhammad ‘Ali had tried and failed to create, the differences being that the bazinqirs were not dragged away to some foreign country and were offered a chance to share in the wealth of their conquests.

The most successful of the slave raiders was Zubayr Mansur Pasha, a Ja’ali Arab who claimed descent from the old ruling house of the
‘Abbasids. Zubayr had worked his way up in the business from a lackey not even entitled to carry a firearm to the foremost of his trade. A cool head and audacity in battle brought him promotion and wealth that he used to purchase men awaiting execution for crimes ranging from cannibalism to adultery. This core of intensely loyal but shockingly brutal fighters soon made Zubayr Pasha the independent ruler of a private domain in southern Sudan as large as many European countries. General Gordon called the bazingirs the “terror of Central Africa,” but noted that they were more respected than the Egyptian government troops. In his later years Zubayr justified his actions by noting that the slaves freed by Gordon died in their tens of thousands trying to find their way home, while he (Zubayr) offered his slaves “good pay and a life of adventure which they liked.”

When Zubayr’s men murdered a Sudanese fiki (holy man) appointed as Cairo’s representative in the Bahr al-Ghazal region of South Sudan (held
entirely by Zubayr), the government recognized reality and anointed Zubayr as governor. Thus when Zubayr invaded and seized Darfur in 1874 he did so (at least nominally) in the name of Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. The bazinqirs were armed with modern rifles and trained in European-style volley firing and the formation of squares, which proved decisive in several engagements against the medieval army of Sultan Ibrahimm of Darfur. The sultan and his closest knights were left dead on the battlefield of Manawashi after smashing into Zubayr’s own square in a last desperate cavalry charge.

An Egyptian army under Governor-General Isma’il Aiyub was sent to seize the Darfur capital before Zubayr arrived, but arrived too late, finding al-Fashir occupied by bazinqirs and the Fur treasury already looted. Zubayr was away conquering eastern Chad when he received an order to report to Cairo. Though it was tempting to remain where he was, Zubayr hoped to receive official recognition for his domain and so proceeded to Cairo with a rich train of gifts, despite the very real possibility he was reporting for his own execution. Instead Zubayr was sentenced to house arrest in a luxurious Cairo palace.

In Darfur the royal family gathered in their mountain strongholds to resist the “Turkish” occupation (all Egyptians, Ottomans, and Europeans were known as “Turks” in nineteenth century Sudan). A new line of what became known as “shadow sultans” was established to lead the resistance. The first of their number ignominiously surrendered without a fight, but his successors developed an effective system of mountain-based guerrilla warfare.

The task of ending the rebellion in Darfur now fell into the hands of General Charles Gordon Pasha, a British army engineer and Crimean War veteran on loan to the khedive’s government. At the time Gordon was still known as “Chinese Gordon,” a reference to his string of stunning victories as leader of the “Ever Victorious Army” (a collection of Chinese soldiers and foreign mercenaries) during the Taiping Rebellion, a terrible episode in Chinese history that left 20 million dead. From 1874 to 1876 Gordon then served as governor of the khedive’s remote Equatoria Province, a still wild and largely unexplored region of the South Sudan. In 1877 Gordon became Governor-General of the entire Sudan. He remained in this role until his resignation in 1879.

Gordon approached his work with inhuman energy, rigorous self-discipline, a well-read Bible, ample supplies of brandy, and a belief in fate so enormous that he waded into combat carrying nothing more than a walking stick. Impossibly self-sufficient he characteristically declined pay raises or even demanded smaller wages. His utter incorruptibility combined with various eccentricities and a tendency for violent quarrels with his peers and superiors rendered him a volatile individual, but his unique and irreplaceable talents in the most unusual situations made
him useful to Her Majesty’s government and a popular fighting hero of the Victorian era.

Gordon’s first job was to deal with the continuing rebellion of Sultan Harun in the mountains of Darfur. A two-pronged attack was planned, the columns led by two Circassian officers, Kaimakan Zakariya Bey and Mirtiva Hassan Pasha Hilmi. The two regarded the suppression of the Fur “rabble” as a simple task, but soon found that there was plenty of fight left in the sultan and his men. Harun used the mountain terrain to his advantage and avoided the pitched battles in the plains that cost Sultan Ibrahim his life and his kingdom. Zakariya Bey was killed, his 800 men slaughtered, and his two cannons lost to the Fur. Hasan Pasha Hilmi lost two-thirds of his 1,300 men and barely escaped the mountains alive. Harun then took the offensive, recapturing much of the old sultanate, including the capital of al-Fashir.

Egyptian command was now assumed by ‘Abd al-Raziq Haqqi Pasha, a competent Turkish soldier with a long record in the Sudan. ‘Abd al-Raziq rallied the army and marched against Harun. The Fur sultan foolishly met the Egyptians on the plains at Burush and was predictably defeated by superior firepower. By 1879 Harun’s forces were back in their mountain strongholds.

Gordon realized that a strong hand was needed in Darfur and approached the famous British explorer and social renegade, Sir Richard Francis Burton, with an offer of appointment as governor of Darfur. Burton, however, was obsessed at the time with finding gold in Egypt’s Eastern Desert and declined (sadly for Burton the last of the gold had already been pulled out of the ground by the Romans centuries earlier). Gordon, who had a general preference for Europeans over Turks and Circassians in his administration, now appointed Rudolf von Slatin as governor of Dara Province in Darfur. A 29-year-old Austrian of Jewish ancestry (his family had converted to Christianity, a common practice among Austrian and German Jews of the late nineteenth century), Slatin’s only experience as a soldier came from a short stint as a sublieutenant in the Royal Austro-Hungarian Army. Placed in command of some 200 Sudanese with a small group of Turkish and Egyptian cavalry, Slatin was charged with the defeat of Harun’s army of 17,000 men. Slatin was initially defeated, but the treachery of a Fur prince allowed his men to ambush Harun’s own entourage twice, killing the sultan on their second try. The sultan’s head was cut off and sent to al-Fashir for public display.

Gessi’s Pursuit of Sulayman Pasha: 1878–1879

In the Bahr al-Ghazal region of South Sudan Zubayr’s bazinquir army was now under the command of his son, Sulayman Pasha. From his house
arrest Zubayr sent a secret message to his son to drive the Egyptians from the Bahr al-Ghazal and make himself master there. Sulayman immediately destroyed the government garrison at Dem Idris, seized all the stockpiles of ammunition, and began putting the countryside to the torch and sword, slaughtering all who supported the government. In the interests of restoring Egyptian control and suppressing the slave trade, Gordon had already recruited Romolo Gessi, an Italian officer whom Gordon knew from his days in the Crimea. Gessi, who had developed skills in irregular warfare while serving with Garibaldi in the Italian Wars of Independence, was charged with bringing Sulayman to submission. Gordon recorded in his journal, “I shall give Gessi £1,000 if he succeeds in catching (Zubayr’s) son. I hope he will hang him ….”

Gessi’s small force of Egyptian and Sudanese regulars (along with a number of Danaqla traders from the North Sudan who sought to end the dominance of the Jallaba traders) built a zaribah, a stockade built primarily of thornbushes. On Christmas Day, 1878, Sulayman launched five ferocious attacks on Gessi’s zaribah, but the Egyptians maintained their fire discipline and carved great gaps in the ranks of their attackers. Sulayman withdrew hastily, leaving behind 800 slave women and the contents of the Fur treasury captured in al-Fashir. Gessi now began a measured pursuit of Sulayman’s demoralized army, which turned north in July 1879 in an attempt to link up with Sultan Harun’s guerrillas. Gessi was delayed in following them, but could not allow Sulayman to join Harun. A picked force of 275 men began a series of forced marches to catch up with Sulayman in southern Darfur.

Sulayman’s force was far too unwieldy to make the march to Darfur. Besides his troops and their numerous slave women, Sulayman had his own collection of hundreds of slaves. Three thousand Jallaba Arab traders accompanied the group along with an additional 5,000 slaves. The natives in the path of this ravenous horde gathered all their grain and fled the area, leaving nothing behind. When Gessi caught up to them he did not make the mistake of attacking with his own exhausted force, but instead began to harry the flanks of the column, never allowing it a moment’s rest. Sulayman ordered a series of forced marches to reach Harun. Wounded bazinqirs or others unable to walk were beheaded along the way. Sulayman’s second in command, Rabi Fadl Allah, left for the west with 800 of Sulayman’s best fighters. When Gessi felt Sulayman’s force was sufficiently weakened and demoralized, he sent a note to Sulayman’s camp informing him he was surrounded and had five minutes to surrender. Gessi had calculated correctly; instead of forming squares, Sulayman’s camp broke into wild confusion as many sought to escape the final disaster. Unable to mount a defense, Sulayman proceeded with ten of his chief men to Gessi’s camp to offer his surrender. When Gessi revealed that he commanded only 200 men Sulayman was possessed with rage, but it
was too late to do anything. Perhaps by a prior and secret arrangement with Gordon, Gessi had Sulayman and his ten aides executed a few days later, allegedly for trying to escape.

Despite the controversial end to this campaign, it was clear Gessi and his men had accomplished a remarkable military feat against a well-armed and much larger army. Much of the credit was due to the tactical skills of Gessi’s second in command, a Nubian officer named Yusuf Pasha Hassan al-Shallali, who was subsequently promoted to liwa. There was to be no hero’s welcome for Gessi, however. On the way back to Cairo from the Bahr al-Ghazal his steamer became trapped in the thick vegetation of the sudd, the vast swamp that covers much of the South Sudan. Discipline broke down and Gessi barely survived a nightmare of fever, murder, starvation, and cannibalism aboard the immobile ship. When he finally reached Suez, he was deprived of his governor’s rank and died soon after, broken in both body and spirit.

Emergence of the Mahdi

Widespread dissatisfaction with Ottoman/Egyptian rule in the Sudan created conditions ripe for the emergence of a revolutionary leader. A young Sufi holy man named Muhammad Ahmad ibn ‘Abdullah seized the opportunity, leading a rebellion in 1881–1882. While preaching Islam in the Blue Nile region some years before, he was sought out by a young Ta’aisha tribesman from Darfur named ‘Abd Allahi ibn al-Sayyid Muhammad. Muhammad Ahmad’s message of asceticism and complete submission to the will of God was gaining him a large following, no doubt enhanced by a belief in the young Sufi’s healing and visionary powers. Attended by followers who one and all were struggling to support a corrupt and un-Islamic regime in Khartoum, Muhammad Ahmad’s preaching began to inevitably take on a political tone. His disciple, ‘Abd Allahi, encouraged the preacher in his secret belief that he might be al-Mahdi al-Muntazar, “the Expected Guide,” who would restore Islam and deliver the world from corruption. Belief in the Mahdi was a local borrowing from Shi’ite Islam rather than belonging to the Sunni brand of Orthodox Islam that prevailed in the Sudan. The point meant little at the time; the Sudanese needed a leader to rid themselves of the hated Turko-Egyptian administration and Muhammad Ahmad’s charismatic leadership fit the bill.

Muhammad Ahmad (henceforth known as the Mahdi) was touring the Sudan quietly revealing his identity when reports reached Khartoum of his activities. The governor-general, Ra’uf Pasha, received a verdict from Khartoum’s learned men of Islam that this Sudanese Mahdi was an imposter, but a delegation urging the Mahdi to desist was met with
hostility. On August 12, 1881, two companies of the Egyptian army arrived by steamer at the Mahdi’s headquarters on Aba Island (in the jazira region) to put an end to this minor nuisance. A mob armed with nothing more than sticks and spears fell on the soldiers as they tried to wade ashore through the mud and high grass at night and wiped them out. It was the final proof of the Mahdi’s legitimacy, and news of the event spread through the Sudan, the feat growing in the telling.

Not ready to test his powers on the much larger army that was bound to follow, the Mahdi left for the safety of the remote Nuba Hills of Kordofan. It was here that the Mahdi’s followers came to be known as the Ansar (“helpers), just as the Prophet Muhammad’s followers were known. As deputies the Mahdi appointed three of his followers as khalifas (‘Abd al-Allahi being foremost of their number), following the precedent of the four Companions of the Prophet Muhammad who became the first four caliphs of Islam. The role of fourth khalifa was offered to the leader of the powerful Sanussi order in Libya, who quickly turned it down. Shari’a (Islamic law) was implemented and a holy war was proclaimed against the “Turks.”

In December 1881 an Egyptian column of 1,500 men (of whom 1,000 were Shilluks) attempted to surprise the Mahdi at his headquarters at Jabal Qadir, but were themselves ambushed and destroyed. With new (mainly Arab) followers arriving at Jabal Qadir daily, the government finally roused itself to send a proper expedition. The hero of Gessi’s campaign, Yusuf Pasha Hassan al-Shallali, was given command of 6,000 men to eliminate this growing threat. The army went by steamer to Fashoda and then marched 100 miles inland to Jabal Qadir, arriving in June 1882. There the old Ottoman habits of failing to post pickets or do reconnaissance resulted in the nighttime massacre of the army, including its leader. All the Egyptian Remington rifles were seized, together with the barely used ammunition. Ra’uf Pasha was relieved as governor-general and replaced by ‘Abd al-Qadir Pasha, who raised a new army and began fortifying Khartoum. Back in Cairo Ra’uf Pasha was appointed to the panel of judges in the trial of ‘Urabi Pasha and his confederates.

In August 1882 the Mahdi’s army surrounded the Kordofan capital of al-‘Ubayd, held by its governor, the Circassian Muhammad Sa’id Pasha. Though Muhammad Sa’id executed the delegation sent to demand his surrender, he could not prevent the inevitable. It did not help that the Mahdi was being aided from within by the town’s leading merchant, Ilyas Pasha, a Ja’ili trader and relative of Zubayr. A determined attack by the Ansar drove the garrison into the citadel, but finally withered under concentrated rifle fire, with a loss of thousands of men. Among the dead was the Mahdi’s brother. The city was then put under siege, rather than risk another blow to the Mahdi’s reputation. The Mahdi realized that a war against professional soldiers would require a disciplined force of his
own. A veteran of numerous campaigns, Hamdan Abu ‘Anja, was given the job of forming a trained corps of ex-slaves and southern tribesmen known as the jihadiya. It was further confirmation that the black Nuba and Nilotic warriors of the South Sudan were establishing a reputation as the region’s best fighters when organized in disciplined regiments.

A relief column of 3,000 Egyptians under ‘Ali Bey Lufti foolishly set out into the desert for al-Ubayd without any logistical support, expecting to find water along the way. All the wells had been filled or poisoned, except for the one where the Ansar lay in wait. When the desperate army broke ranks to relieve their unbearable thirst, the Ansar fell on them. The Egyptian army was suffering enormous losses with nothing to show for it. By now there was really no one left to undertake the relief of al-‘Ubayd, where the population was reduced to eating animal skins, cockroaches, and white ants. The soldiers made an occasional feast from slow-moving vultures that had grown fat on their dead comrades. The city finally fell in mid-January 1883, with the loss of all its military equipment. Muhammad Sa’id and a number of his officers were executed for their defiance. The rest of the army was incorporated into the Mahdi’s forces, though some died almost immediately from overeating. The Egyptian artillery officer Yusuf Mansur became second in command of the Mahdist artillery, remaining with the guns for the next 15 years.

In Istanbul the sultan (still the suzerain power in Sudan) declared the Mahdi a rebel. Ottoman garrisons in the Hijaz were reinforced, and ships were sent to the Red Sea. Abdülhamid mistakenly believed that a combination of British intrigues and support from the followers of ‘Urabi Pasha were behind the rise of the Mahdi. It was feared that Muhammad Ahmad intended to take the holy cities of the Hijaz and establish an Arab caliphate that would greatly weaken the power and authority of the sultan.

In the search for solutions to the crisis, that of McComb Mason Bey (still in the Egyptian civil service) was perhaps the most novel. Following the British and American attempts to resettle black slaves in Sierra Leone and Liberia, respectively, Mason suggested “repatriating” willing freed slaves from the United States (nearly all American-born Protestant Christians) to the Sudan. As grateful subjects of the khedive, they would help stabilize the country. The recommendation ignored both racial and religious realities in the Sudan and was given the quiet death it deserved.

The Hicks Pasha Expedition: 1883

Though he had some success against the Mahdists in the Jazira and Sinnar, ‘Abd al-Qadir Pasha was relieved as governor-general in March 1883. His offense was to oppose a military expedition to Kordofan, preferring a defensive posture. The new governor was ‘Ala al-Din Pasha, a Circassian
cavalry officer with about 15 years’ experience in the Sudan. The Mahdist revolt occurred simultaneously with the political upheaval of ‘Urabi’s rebellion in Egypt, and government policy in the Sudan had now fallen under British control. Ten thousand members of ‘Urabi’s defeated army were shipped by steamers to Suakin, where they were to make the overland march to Khartoum. Desertion was soon out of hand, so most of the army made the journey to Suakin in chains.

The commander of this rabble, Colonel William Hicks Pasha, arrived in Khartoum in March 1883. Hicks was a retired veteran with 30 years’ experience with the Indian army, including action in the Indian Mutiny and as part of the Napier expedition to Abyssinia in 1867–1868. The staff was a mix of Europeans and Egyptians, with Egyptian Liwa Husayn Mazhar Pasha in command of the four infantry battalions. The chief of staff was Colonel Arthur Farquhar, a former member of the Coldstream Guards. The staff also included Major Götz von Seckendorff, a German baron, and Captain Herlth, an Austrian, who commanded the cavalry. Only the intelligence officer, Major Edward Evans, could speak Arabic. Most of the other Europeans (one of whom could not even read a compass) were second-rate officers at best. The expedition was accompanied by the governor-general, ‘Ala al-Din Pasha, whom many of the Egyptian officers regarded as the true commander of the expedition.

When Hicks Pasha called on Cairo for more men and money, he was sent 3,000 men who had attempted to join the reorganized Egyptian army but were rejected as being physically inadequate. These untrained recruits were not soldiers, but simply more mouths to feed. It is difficult to imagine what the British expected from such poor material in dealing with a highly motivated and well-armed rebellion. The British government declined any responsibility for Egyptian operations in the Sudan.

Communication was a major problem for the expedition’s staff; Hicks Pasha spoke no Arabic or Turkish and ‘Ala al-Din Pasha did not speak any European language. Hicks lost his first argument with the governor-general, who wished to follow a longer route than that planned by Hicks. The route had more water, but took them through territory held by the Mahdists. In the second week of the advance the force began to suffer from thirst as the Mahdists had filled in all the wells on their way. Horses and camels began to die, and Hicks took to quarreling with his staff, especially Husayn Mazhar Pasha. Snipers made the Egyptians’ lives miserable and morale dropped accordingly. At one point the army reached an area of thick brush and thorn trees. Rather than march round it, Colonel Farquhar took a compass bearing and ordered the army to march straight ahead in formation, leading most of the rank and file to question his sanity. The army marched continually in one large square, slowing its progress and presenting an inviting target for marksmen. On November 4, 1883, the Mahdi began to attack the Egyptians in earnest. The jihadiya fell
in behind the Egyptians and cut off any possible retreat. That evening a mutiny was foiled, but there seemed little hope for the army. Hicks gathered his staff together and asked for ideas, but none were forthcoming. The commander was beginning to reveal why he had never been raised higher than lieutenant colonel after 30 years in the Indian army. On November 5, 1883, the Mahdi attacked with his main force at a place called Shaykan. In expectation of the attack Hicks divided his army into three squares. As the Mahdist soldiers fell on the first square the men of the remaining two groups began to fire wildly, killing more friends than foes. Each of the other two squares collapsed in turn. ‘Ala al-Din escaped the destruction of his own square and was on his way to join Hicks when he was killed. Hicks and his staff fought with pistol and sabre, slaying scores before they too were overwhelmed. It took days to finish looting the dead. Of the 6,000 men of the Egyptian army who had set out for al-‘Ubayd, only 300 survived.

On November 13, 1883, rumors began to circulate in Khartoum of a series of victories for Hicks Pasha, who was now in al-‘Ubayd. When the truth became known, merchants and Europeans began an exodus from the capital. All the garrisons south of Khartoum save Sinnar and those in remote Equatoria were withdrawn.

The disaster in Kordofan led to the cancellation of a preliminary withdrawal of some British troops from Cairo to Alexandria. The evidence that the Ottoman sultan was wrong about ‘Urabi’s collusion with the British did not prevent Abdülhamid from reaching the same conclusion about the Mahdi—it was all a British plot to establish an Arab state at the expense of his empire. Abdülhamid went so far as to call the Mahdi a “second ‘Urabi.” The khedive had lost most of his army at Shaykan and turned to the sultan with a request to recruit a new volunteer army in Ottoman territories, his faith in Egyptian troops having evaporated in the aftermath of the catastrophe in Kordofan. This appeal was denied (against the counsel of all the sultan’s advisers) on the grounds that such a force would still amount to a de facto Turkish army under British command.

Gordon and Zubayr

It was clear to both the khedive and the British government that Egyptian administration in the Sudan was now unsustainable. They jointly agreed that withdrawal from all but the Red Sea region of the Sudan was the only solution. ‘Abd al-Qadir Pasha (vindicated in his opposition to the Hicks Pasha expedition) was approached to undertake the task, but refused when he learned he was expected to magically round up garrisons and civilians scattered over a million square miles of territory and
dispatch them post haste to Egypt. With the same sound judgment that led him to oppose the Kordofan expedition, ‘Abd al-Qadir declined the appointment, pointing out that it would take up to a year to carry out the evacuation.

The British press now took up a campaign to recruit Gordon for the job of saving the Sudan. The government agreed to send him as an observer to report on the situation, but once in Cairo he was appointed governor-general by the khedive with the responsibility of evacuating the Sudan. The missions were clearly at cross-purposes and would be the source of much political debate in the coming months.

While in Cairo Gordon had the opportunity to meet Zubayr Pasha, still in house arrest. After an emotional and often confrontational meeting between the two men, Gordon suggested, on the basis of a “mystic feeling,” that his old enemy was the only man to tackle the revolt and made a request that Zubayr accompany him to Khartoum. The more pragmatic Sir Evelyn Baring, the British consul general, refused Zubayr’s return to Sudan much to the relief of the outraged and politically powerful Anti-Slavery Society of London. When the British eventually learned that Zubayr had sent a massive shipment of gunpowder to Sulayman from his house arrest in Cairo, they immediately had him removed to the isolated confines of a small cottage in Gibraltar, from where Zubayr pursued his lawsuit against the khedive for the costs of the invasion of Darfur.

**Slatin’s Defeat in Darfur: 1880–1883**

By 1880 Slatin was in a precarious position in Darfur, the lone Christian and European in the local administration. Harun’s death did nothing to end the rebellion of the Fur, which had now been taken over by a new shadow sultan, ‘Abd Allah Dud Banja. At the time Slatin was preoccupied with a series of revolts by the Arab tribes of South Darfur. A promotion in 1881 made the young Austrian governor of the entire province. The deteriorating situation in Sudan reflected a major weakness of the Turko-Egyptian administration: an emphasis on territorial expansion at the expense of consolidation and just rule of regions already added to the khedive’s empire. In addition the Sudan was a net drain on the resources of the Egyptian government despite the most extreme efforts to make it pay for itself. The existing taxation regime inspired little more than subsistence agriculture, with state violence the only means of compelling greater efforts. As noted by a *London Times* correspondent in 1883,

> If [the Sudanese] wish to grow corn they must pay for permission to do so, pay for liberty to take water from the broad Nile... and pay for liberty to sell the corn. If the crop is good, pay double taxes (one for the private purse of the Pasha and one for the government in Cairo). If they don’t grow the corn they can’t pay the taxes at all, and are kourbashed [beaten with a hippopotamus
hide truncheon on the soles of the feet, an often debilitating punishment] and put into prison.²

Most of Slatin’s troops were themselves Fur, and had many friends and relatives among Dud Banja’s forces. Slatin displayed a talent for intelligence work and set up an extensive network of spies. In this way he learned of a plot in his Fur contingent to desert to Dud Banja in the mountains. Slatin asserted his authority by having the six ringleaders executed in front of the garrison.

Soon both Dara and al-Fashir were under siege from Mahdist rebels. Al-Fashir was bravely defended by Sa’id Bey Juma, an Egyptian officer from the Fayyum. Slatin learned from his spies of the discontent of the troops in serving under a Christian commander. In a desperate attempt to rally his men, Slatin gathered his soldiers and publicly converted to Islam, taking the name ‘Abd al-Qadir Salatin. The governor-general sent orders to abandon Darfur, but Slatin never received them. Knowing that Hicks Pasha was on his way with a large Egyptian army Slatin tried to buy time, hoping that Hicks might defeat the Mahdists before the main force had time to occupy Dara. The Arab tribes were repelled several times before Slatin was driven back into Dara by Maddibu Bey, a famous desert fighter and leader of the Rizayqat tribe.

The Mahdists announced their triumph over Hicks Pasha’s army by sending Slatin three wounded Egyptians, a parcel of Hicks’ effects, and a demand for surrender. Slatin continued to fight for another month, but surrendered on December 23, 1883. A few weeks later al-Fashir fell, with many residents tortured and murdered in attempts to discover the hiding places of their wealth. Sa’id Bey Juma was pressed into the Mahdi’s army as its commander of artillery. Slatin was invited as a fellow Muslim to join the Mahdi’s movement. Gordon, whose personal Christianity bordered on mysticism, was enraged when he finally learned of Slatin’s conversion and surrender. It was the beginning of 12 years of captivity for Slatin, serving as a prisoner/advisor/translator to Khalifa ‘Abd Allahi.

**Defeat in the East**

In February 1883 a Cretan of Jewish descent, Muhammad Tawfiq Bey, was given the task of holding Suakin and the neighboring region. Tawfiq was a brave soldier who led his Egyptian troops from the front, but unfortunately he was up against ‘Uthman Abu Bakr Diqna, one of the Mahdist regime’s finest and most creative commanders. Muhammad Tawfiq defeated the Mahdists at Erkowit, but his army was eventually besieged and destroyed at Sinkat in 1884. The offspring of a Turkish father and a Hadendowa mother, ‘Uthman Diqna’s development of a superb system of guerrilla tactics (after learning some hard lessons about fighting British troops) would bedevil the British and the Egyptians until the
collapse of the Mahdiyya (the Sudanese government established by the Mahdi and his successors).

In October 1883 command of Egyptian troops in the eastern Sudan was given to Liwa Mahmud Tahir Pasha, an individual who had once been dismissed as governor of Kordofan for dishonesty but was soon after appointed subprefect of the Cairo police. His immediate task in his new role was to relieve Tokar, which was besieged by the Beja of 'Uthman Diqna. Tahir Pasha led his troops to annihilation at the battle of al-Teb on November 4, 1883, but managed to escape himself. His influential friends deserted him, and he was convicted of incompetence at a court-martial.

**Gordon’s Army**

Gordon was not impressed with the Egyptian troops serving in the Sudan, but showed some understanding of their reluctance to engage the enemy: “What possible interest can they take in warlike operations in the Soudan? The English beat them up in Egypt, and then sent them up here to be massacred in detail. One may say the massacred ten thousand of Hicks’ army, at any rate, showed they could die, if they could not fight.” Gordon’s most trusted troops tended to be Sudanese veterans of the Mexican campaign. By 1885 these men were survivors of a hundred battles and skirmishes, and their loyalty to the colors was generally unshakable.

The Sha’iqiya of Nubia remained an important part of the Egyptian army in the Sudan. These highly mobile irregulars had a number of successes against the Mahdists before they succumbed to the sheer force of numbers. Their leader was Liwa Salih Pasha al-Mak, a veteran fighter who lost two sons in the defense of Khartoum.

**The Siege of Khartoum and The Gordon Relief Expedition**

Once in Khartoum Gordon set about repairing ‘Abd al-Qadir’s defensive works, improving them in many places with the addition of barbed wire and land mines. Though Khartoum was barely 60 years old at the time, it was already the largest center in the Sudan. Of the 50,000 inhabitants, as many as 35,000 were slaves. On the west was the White Nile, which met the Blue Nile running along the north side of the city. There were four forts along the city walls, one on the north bank of the Blue Nile, where a group of Sha’iqiya irregulars had settled, and another near the small fishing village of Omdurman across the White Nile.
Gordon realized that he could not undertake the evacuation of the country without more troops. In the spring and summer of 1884 he appealed for British troops, asked for 3,000 Turkish infantry to be sent, and made frequent requests for Zubayr Pasha. All were denied. Khartoum was surrounded by the Mahdists, but Gordon hoped to escape south to Equatoria with his garrison if he could not hold the city. Gladstone’s government came under extreme public pressure to relieve Gordon, eventually promising an expedition for the fall of 1884.

The siege began in mid-March 1884 when the Mahdists cut off communications to the north. Two Egyptian officers tried to betray their own men to the Mahdists during a sortie across the Blue Nile to reopen communications. Their soldiers discovered their plot and they were brought to a
court-martial before being shot. Treachery remained a constant danger during the siege. In the meantime Gordon still had a flotilla of steamers capable of running through the Mahdist lines on the banks of the Nile north of Khartoum.

In late July 1884 Gordon’s best officer, Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha Husayn (a Nuba known as “The Fighting Pasha” and a member of the French Legion of Honour for his service in Mexico), began a daring series of attacks that cleared the Mahdists from all but the western approaches to Khartoum. In early September 1884 Muhammad ‘Ali led a steamer expedition to al-Alayfun, 20 miles south of Khartoum on the Blue Nile. The town was captured, but the overconfident Muhammad ‘Ali made the mistake of pursuing the enemy into thick woods. Treachery struck again, as the guides led his men into an ambush, where the commander and a thousand of his men were killed. Besides the loss of Gordon’s best troops, this disaster also placed another thousand Remington rifles in the hands of the Mahdist rebels.

The Mahdi now sent one of his best generals, ‘Abd al-Rahman Wad al-Najumi, to Khartoum to restore the siege. The Krupp guns captured at al-Shaykan and their Egyptian artillermen were put to work shelling the city. The Mahdi himself was now on his way from Kordofan with a horde of 60,000 followers. It was necessary to get the word out of Khartoum’s dire position, so Gordon ordered his aide, Colonel Stewart, to take the steamer ‘Abbas northward to British positions in Dongola. The ship struck a rock on the way, and Stewart and his companions were murdered. With Stewart gone Gordon relied more heavily on the Nuba officer Faraj Pasha Muhammad al-Zayni. Fluent in Arabic, Turkish, and French, Faraj Pasha became Gordon’s chief of staff and commanded the 1st Sudanese Regiment.

The Mahdi sent several letters to Gordon, urging him to surrender and join the Mahdist cause. The prisoner Slatin also sent several letters in French and German offering to aid Gordon in any way possible. Gordon’s sense of honor did not include religious conversion to save one’s self, so Slatin’s correspondence went unanswered. British help was making its way slowly up the Nile. The Gordon Relief Expedition, as it came to be called, was a select force of 7,000 men of the British army under the command of Sir Garnet Wolseley, Britain’s most respected general. The reformed Egyptian army was assigned to maintaining the lines of communication.

The Fall of Khartoum

In September 1884 Gordon needed a dependable man to take most of the remaining government steamers downriver. He chose a Turkish
officer, Miralai Muhammad Nushi Pasha. Trained at a military school in Berlin, Muhammad Nushi had fought in the Turko-Russian War of 1877. He succeeded in breaking through the Mahdist lines and waited at Shendi for four months to hook up with the slow-moving relief expedition, finally turning the steamers over to the British to enable them to reach Khartoum more quickly.

In November 1884 the Egyptian army fort at Omdurman (opposite Khartoum on the White Nile) was cut off and besieged. Its commander, Faraj Allah Pasha Raghib, conducted a determined defense for two months before it fell in early January 1885. In Khartoum food was scarce, as the steamers were no longer available to seize and carry in foodstuffs from the outside. Gordon used every trick to delay the approach of the Mahdists. Wooden soldiers were placed on the ramparts to draw the fire of the Mahdists, and towers were built to fire down into the encroaching trenches. Food remained the biggest problem, so in early January 1885 Gordon allowed any civilians who wished to join the Mahdi to do so. Most took advantage of this chance, but it was too late. The rations were gone, and from this point the garrison was forced to eat dogs, unripe grain, leather, and gum arabic. In desperation Gordon promised his troops a month’s pay for every day they remained at their posts. On November 19, 1884, a party of officers deserted to the Mahdi. The civilians who remained died of hunger in the streets. Faraj Allah surrendered the fort at Omdurman when he used up the last of his food and ammunition. His valiant defense earned him a commander’s position in the Mahdi’s army and the name Faraj Allah al-Omdurmanli.

The advance force of the relief expedition crossed the Bayuda Desert by camel. The men, mostly drawn from guards regiments and various cavalry units, had little training with camels, resulting in heavy losses of the animals. The dispatch from England of several blacksmiths to shoe the camels gives some measure of the British understanding of the beast. Just short of reaching the Nile they were attacked by a large army of Mahdists who succeeded in breaking the British square. Disaster was averted only when the rear rank of the Guards turned and fired a volley within the square, bringing down most of the Mahdist warriors and a number of British soldiers as well. When news came of the defeat of the Mahdists, the Mahdi nearly abandoned the siege of Khartoum. In late January 1885, two steamers set out for Khartoum after several delays with a company of Sudanese troops, two bands of Bashi-Bazouks, and 20 men of the Royal Sussex Regiment. The holds of the steamers were filled with the wives, slave girls, and children of the Muslim troops. The Mahdi and his advisors decided to take Khartoum before the ships arrived.

For the final attack the Mahdi and his followers crossed the Nile at night by means of a sandbar in the river. At dawn on January 26, 1885, the Mahdi’s army launched an all-out assault on the starving troops on
the ramparts. The defenders fired their weapons until they were too hot to hold, but were overwhelmed by sheer numbers. The only chance of survival was to feign death and hope to surrender later when tempers had cooled. The city was quickly penetrated, and Gordon was slain in violation of the Mahdi's orders to take him alive (the Mahdi apparently wished to exchange Gordon for al-Zubayr and 'Urabi Pasha). The city was given
over to rape, looting, and slaughter for six hours. Gordon’s chief of staff, Faraj Pasha, was among those captured and murdered. Eventually the entire town was either destroyed or disassembled, the building materials being used to construct the Mahdi’s new capital of Omdurman. On January 28, 1885, the British steamers finally reached Khartoum under heavy fire from the riverbanks, only to find Gordon’s palace in ruins and the city in Mahdist hands.

Forced by public opinion into mounting a rescue operation for Gordon, his death marked the end of any British interest in the interior of the Sudan for the time being. The British government demanded that Egypt evacuate the Sudan, save for the useful coastal regions. The Egyptian prime minister, Muhammad Sharif Pasha, refused, informing London that the Sudan was sovereign territory of the Ottoman sultan and any such withdrawal would have to be approved by him. This answer was unsatisfactory, and the more compliant Nubar Pasha replaced Sharif Pasha as prime minister. The sultan naturally saw the dark hand of British expansionism behind these maneuvers.

The Egyptian army withdrew, but the Mahdi had little opportunity to savor his victory or to fulfill any designs on the Holy Cities, dying in June 1885. His successor, Khalifa ‘Abd Allahi, was a Ta’aisha Arab from Darfur, and from the time of his accession the power of the riverain followers of the Mahdi went into decline. The Ta’aisha and other Baqqara Arab tribes gradually formed a type of military elite to govern the country. In Egypt Muhammad Nushi Pasha was appointed to head a commission of inquiry to investigate the circumstances of the fall of Khartoum.

**Operations in the Red Sea Region**

Defeats in the Sudan were taking a terrible toll on trained men in the Egyptian army. Egypt still held the Red Sea Province but needed to quickly replace Tawfiq Bey’s lost army. Several thousand members of the newly formed Gendarmerie (an odd mix of policemen and ex-convicts) were sent by steamer under the command of Valentine Baker Pasha. They arrived at the end of 1883. ‘Uthman Digna already had the Egyptian garrisons at Sinkat and Tokar under siege. Baker did not seem to differentiate between the Turkish veterans he had commanded in the Balkans and the assorted riffraff he now commanded. In February 1884 he led them out into the desert to relieve the besieged towns. On the way to Tokar the Gendarmerie were attacked at a place called al-Tab by the Beja, descendants of the Medjay mercenaries that once formed the backbone of the armies of ancient Egypt. Still ferocious fighters, the Beja warriors crashed into the Gendarmerie before they could finish forming a square. The thousand Beja attackers were outnumbered three to one, but the Egyptian
pseudosoldiers had no fight in them, throwing down their arms and pleading for mercy. A hundred officers and nearly 2,300 of the Gendarmerie perished, losing 3,000 rifles and a vast quantity of ammunition. Baker somehow survived the slaughter, accompanying the panicked remnants of his army back to the coast. A few days later Tawfiq Bey attempted to break out of Sinkat, but his weakened troops were massacred outside the walls.

By mid-March 1884, a British army of 4,000 men under General Sir Gerald Graham had assembled at the Red Sea port of Trinkitāt. The expedition included the 1st Brigade of Guards, English infantry, Royal Marines, and a brigade of Indian infantry. Too late to relieve Sinkat, they marched to Tokar, only to learn it too had fallen. The British army marched around the searing desert for a month, demonstrating to ‘Uthman Diqna several times the difference between attacking a British square and an Egyptian square, but accomplishing little else. The British were a 250-mile march across the desert to the Nile at Berber, from where it would be possible to relieve Khartoum. General Graham was eager to try, but in London the prospect of a Hicks-style massacre of British troops was too terrifying to contemplate. When ‘Uthman Diqna’s followers began to slip away it became impossible to bring the Beja to a decisive fight and the British reboarded their ships for several months of recuperation in more pleasant climes.

In August 1884, the British ordered an Egyptian withdrawal from Harrar. As Egypt pulled back from the ports along the Red Sea and the Somali coast, the Ottoman sultan failed to fill the void with his troops even though the European powers were ready to step in. The Italians occupied Massawa in February 1885 before the Egyptians had even finished pulling out. The sultan was concerned by the possibility of losing Yemen and the Hijaz to either the Mahdists or the Europeans (all much the same in Abdülhamid’s mind) and sent Ottoman ships and reinforcements to the threatened regions. The British foreign secretary requested an Ottoman occupation of Suakin, failing which he warned that the British government might be forced to form alliances with the Arab tribes that “might not always be favourable to His Majesty.” This message only reinforced the sultan’s suspicion that he was being offered Suakin in exchange for Egypt. The request was denied. Talks surrounding an Ottoman occupation of Sudan after the withdrawal of Wolseley’s expedition came to nothing after the Porte failed to take any action.
Unwanted Empire: The Sudan

After the fall of Khartoum the new Mahdist government did not gain diplomatic recognition by any country (nor, indeed, did they seek any). Nevertheless, neither Britain nor the still suzerain Ottomans seemed especially interested in retaking this lost Egyptian province. Containment would suffice for the moment, while the French and Italians were content to pick away at Egypt’s isolated ports on the Red Sea coast.

Lord Salisbury, who had replaced Gladstone as prime minister, was rebuffed when he sought Ottoman troops to garrison Suakin and defend the Egyptian border with the Sudan. Instead Sir Henry Drummond Wolff and Gazi Ahmad Muhtar Pasha were appointed as joint commissioners to explore negotiations with the Mahdists, whom they hoped would be more receptive after the unexpected death of the Mahdi. These efforts came to nothing and the commissioners turned their attentions to the withdrawal of British troops and the reformation of the Egyptian army. Sir Henry had little confidence in the fighting ability of the Egyptians and revived the idea that a new Egyptian army be recruited from Turkish volunteers. The end result of the commissioners’ efforts was a May 1887 agreement that called for the withdrawal of British troops from Egypt in three years’ time. The status of the Red Sea coast was left unresolved. When the sultan refused to ratify even this modest treaty under pressure from France and Russia, the British abandoned efforts to involve the sultan as a partner in resolving the problem of Egypt and the Sudan.
The Army Rebuilt

Starting almost from scratch, the British set out to rebuild the army. Opposition from Queen Victoria prevented the appointment of Valentine Baker as the commander in chief, so Sir Evelyn Wood was given the task. The officers were Turkish and Egyptian, though Sudanese were later allowed to progress into the junior officer ranks. British officers were carefully selected for their martial skills, but also had to speak French (which had replaced Turkish as the language of Egypt’s elite) and to pass an exam in Arabic. In 1889 the reformed army drove back a Mahdist invasion of Upper Egypt at the Battle of Toski. The Mahdists had grown used to having their way with the Egyptian army, but those days were now over.

Despite the progress of the British in rebuilding the Egyptian army, Khedive ‘Abbas Hilmi II went out of his way to denigrate their efforts at every opportunity. On a visit to Wadi Halfa in the Sudan in 1894, the khedive went too far, creating an incident that would still have implications 20 years later when he voiced his opinions to the sirdar, Horatio Herbert Kitchener:

At Wadi Halfa a grand parade was held in the young ruler’s honour, but he spent his whole time disparaging the British troops and glorifying the Egyptians. “Just look at that British battalion!” he cried. “Why, the men can’t even march! How on earth can they be expected to fight?” Then, as an Egyptian battalion marched past, he turned to Kitchener and said: “Now that is real marching. Why can’t your British troops march like that?”

The khedive continued his abuse of the British soldiers after the parade, prodding Kitchener to offer his immediate resignation. Sir Evelyn Baring, the British agent in Cairo, reacted quickly; Kitchener was to be retained, the anti-British Minister of War, Mahir Pasha, was to be dismissed, and an Order of the Day was to be issued by the khedive, acclaiming the efficiency of the Egyptian army and thanking the British officers for their work. It would take a while, but the rift that opened that day between ‘Abbas Hilmi and Kitchener would eventually be the khedive’s undoing.

Despite the somewhat confusing political status of the Egyptian officer as a British-led servant of the Ottoman sultan, service in the army became a respectable profession for native-born Egyptians. The al-Samma family of Cairo, for example, had four brothers holding commissions in the army.

Kitchener’s Expedition

The man entrusted to destroy the khalifa’s Sudanese Islamic state came, like Gordon, from the ranks of the Royal Engineers. Horatio Herbert Kitchener was not a brilliant combat leader, but had a firm grasp of the logistical problems of moving an army through hostile and climatically
punishing country. He had no care for personal popularity and was as much feared as respected by his subordinates. In battle he was sensible enough to leave most decisions to one of the outstanding fighting officers of his day, Liwa Sir Archibald Hunter Pasha.

The invasion force was based on Egyptian and Sudanese troops of the Egyptian army reinforced by British regulars. The expedition’s Camel Corps was now wisely composed of Egyptian and Sudanese troops, rather than British cavalrymen. To transport his army and ensure his supply lines, Kitchener ordered the construction of a railway across 230 miles of near waterless Nubian Desert from Wadi Halfa to Abu Hamed. At a cost of hundreds of lives, a young Canadian officer, Lieutenant Edouard Percival Girouard, completed the work in only ten months with Egyptian troops providing security. While the work was under way, Kitchener took the advance force up the Nile by steamer and gunship.

Kitchener was fortunate to have the services of Sir Francis Reginald Wingate, who had been running the intelligence operation of the Egyptian army since 1884 with the assistance of two outstanding intelligence officers, the Syrian Christians Milhem Bey Shakoor and Na’um Bey Shuqair. Fluent in Arabic, Wingate had agents working throughout the country and even helped Slatin escape to Aswan in 1895, forming a lifelong friendship in the process. Wingate was also a master propagandist who kept the threat of Mahdism in the public eye back in England (at one point he was not only the Director of Intelligence, but also the Reuters correspondent!).

**Battle of the Atbara**

On April 8, 1898 (Good Friday) the Anglo-Egyptian army of 15,000 men rose before dawn to prepare for an attack on 16,000 Mahdists under the command of Amir Mahmud at Atbara. Before the battle Kitchener reminded his troops that they were about to face “the murderers of Gordon.” For the assault on the Mahdist *zariba*, the British and Sudanese troops took the lead while the Egyptian troops were held in reserve. Once the army breached the *zariba*, a wild fight ensued. The Sudanese fired wildly causing casualties on both sides, while the British offered no quarter, shouting “Remember Gordon!” while making good use of the bayonet. The discovery of a mutilated Egyptian trooper further inflamed the attackers. At a loss of 83 dead, they killed more than 3,000 Mahdists. Mahmud was captured, but ‘Uthman Diqna and the Baqqara horsemen escaped.

**Battle of Omdurman**

Military planning in the khalifa’s council in Omdurman depended as much on dreams and prophetic interpretation as strategic considerations. As the Anglo-Egyptian army approached, Wingate’s spies began to leave
Omdurman, some bearing the complete battle plans of the khalifa’s council. The Anglo-Egyptians had a distinct advantage in firepower for the coming fight. Of the thousands of rifles seized from the Egyptians 15 years before, there were only less than a thousand left in good condition, and these only because the khalifa kept them locked up. Most of the others had seen half their barrel sawn off to make them easier to carry or had lost their sights. Lead was unavailable in Sudan, and the locally made gunpowder was of extremely poor quality. Target practice was unknown as ammunition was issued only for active campaigns; at times small stones or pebbles substituted for bullets. The khalifa’s army contained a corps of jihadiya, black veterans of the Egyptian army or ex-Bazinqirs who had been captured and pressed into service. Though trained riflemen, their marksmanship deteriorated from lack of practice and they gradually fell into the Sudanese practice of firing from the hip without aiming. The Mahdist artillery was now under the command of Yusuf Mansur and his Egyptian gun crews were organized into eleven batteries, though they too had few shells left by 1898.

On a plain north of Omdurman the Anglo-Egyptian army formed a semicircle of five infantry brigades with their backs to the river, where the gunboats were deployed. During the day the gunships pounded Omdurman, their favorite target the magnificent dome of the Mahdi’s tomb. The army spent a restless night in its position while the searchlights of the gunboats swept back and forth on the plain. At dawn the army could see the Mahdists gathering in the distance, a vast apparition from the Middle Ages. Beneath the colored banners of each division were horsemen in full armor, surrounded by tribesmen from every part of the Sudan wielding spears, swords, and antique firearms. They were nearly 35,000 in number and ready to die for the Mahdiyya. Unfortunately the strategy finally adopted by the khalifa of a frontal assault across an open plain was guaranteed to ensure their martyrhood.

Charging against the concentrated fire of gunships, the artillery’s grapeshot, Maxim guns, and thousands of rifles, the Mahdist attacks crumpled far from the Anglo-Egyptian lines. Wave after wave roared to the attack to be torn apart by a hail of lead. The Egyptian Brigade under General Sir John Maxwell was in the thick of the “fighting,” if it can be called that. The only part of the battle where the Sudanese were able to get to grips with the “Turks” (as the British and Egyptians were known) was the ill-advised and costly charge of the 21st Lancers, immortalized by soldier/correspondent Winston Churchill. The Lancers had been lured into a trap by ’Uthman Diqna, the only Mahdist commander who truly understood how to fight the British.

As the army moved forward, most of the wounded Sudanese were finished off with the bayonet. Some of the wounded died slowly over the next few days, crawling to the Nile or whatever puddle might slake their
overwhelming thirst. Many were killed while trying to surrender. The gunships continued pounding the Mahdi’s tomb even as the advance guard reached Omdurman, an errant shot killing a British correspondent in the yard of the khalifa’s home. Slatin Pasha pursued the khalifa with a battalion of Egyptian mounted infantry, but the khalifa made good his escape. Once back in Omdurman, prisoners thought to be important were taken before Slatin, who ordered their executions. In the ruins of the Mahdi’s tomb a party of soldiers seized his mortal remains and cast them into the Nile. Kitchener intended to keep the Mahdi’s skull as a war trophy, but word leaked out, and the scandal went as far as an outraged Queen Victoria. The skull was subsequently buried at Wadi Halfa.

Though the khalifa’s frontal assault seemed an outrageous waste of men, at least one Egyptian army officer present that day seems to have missed the lesson. Bimbashi Douglas Haig later earned infamy in World War I as Field Marshal Haig by repeatedly ordering his armies into massed frontal daytime assaults against dug-in lines of machine guns and artillery, pointlessly losing the cream of a generation.

Considering the conditions of Egyptian/Ottoman military service at the time, it is astonishing to realize that some of the Sudanese troops of the Egyptian army present at Omdurman that day were veterans of the Mexican campaign, some three decades earlier.

**Umm Dibaykarat 1899: Death of the Khalifa**

In January 1899 the khalifa was a fugitive in Kordofan. He had 10,000 fighters left in his camp and twice as many women and children. It was impossible to feed such a group in the field, and many began to desert as starvation took hold. A return to Darfur was the natural solution, but the last Fur “Shadow Sultan,” ‘Ali Dinar, had beat him to it and was no doubt preparing a hot reception for the khalifa if he dared show his face on the border. By November 24, 1899, he was trapped with 5,000 men at Umm Dibaykarat, near the White Nile. That evening the khalifa absolved all of those with him of their oath of allegiance as he announced his plan to seek martyrdom in that place. Nearly all repledged allegiance and awaited the attack of the Egyptian army in the morning.

The Egyptian force was commanded by Wingate, who had devoted so many years of his life to the destruction of the khalifa. With him he had 3,700 men, divided between two battalions of Sudanese regulars, Egyptian cavalry, camel troops, artillery, and Maxim guns operated by Royal Marines, and a large number of Sudanese irregulars eager to take revenge for injustices incurred during the khalifa’s rule.

At dawn the Mahdist, led personally by the khalifa, attempted their customary frontal attack. The combined fire of the artillery, Maxim guns,
and rifles of the Sudanese troops killed over a thousand of the khalifa’s followers, at a loss of just three men to the defenders. The Mahdists fell back and the Sudanese troops advanced, discovering a group of bodies lying atop some sheepskins. It was the khalifa and his amirs, who had dismounted and awaited death facing Mecca while sitting on their furwa (sheepskins), an ancient Arab expression of disdain for death when a cause is obviously lost.

The prisoners taken at Umm Dibaykarat were shipped to Egypt to join thousands of their comrades at a military prison in Rosetta. Many died from raging epidemics of tuberculosis and other diseases. ‘Uthman Diqna’\'s well-honed sense of self-preservation took charge as the Egyptian army had nearly finished surrounding the Mahdists, and he managed to slip away to the Red Sea Hills. He made his quarters in a cave and planned to reach safety in Arabia, but was betrayed and taken prisoner.

The Mutiny of 1900

With the outbreak of the Boer War in South Africa the British had little time to savor their hard-won victory in the Sudan. Kitchener was called to be chief of staff for the British forces in South Africa, but not before reducing the pay and pension of Egyptian and Sudanese officers of the Egyptian army and arranging to take the best battery of artillery in the Sudan with him. Amid the uproar over these changes came orders for all Egyptian army units in the Sudan to return their surplus wartime stocks of arms and ammunition, leaving only a modest supply for normal peacetime duties. Rumors quickly spread that the arms were headed for South Africa, with the Sudanese regiments of the Egyptian army soon to follow. The timing of these orders could not have been worse, coming as they did during Britain’s string of defeats in South Africa that became known as “The Black Week.” The most damaging rumors appeared to originate with the Egyptian officer corps, still incensed by their cuts in pay.

Colonel Wingate was appointed sirdar of the Egyptian army and governor-general of the Sudan after Kitchener’s departure. On hearing of the mutiny of one of the Sudanese battalions, Wingate hurried from Cairo to Omdurman, where he offered to hear the grievances of the Egyptian officers. A delegation of seven was appointed to tell Wingate that if their pay and privileges were restored, the trouble would come to an end. His reaction was well described by a contemporary:

Wingate flared out at them (I can picture “the little man” as he was called, with his waxed mustache bristling with fury as he faced the mutinous crowd). “What!” he exclaimed. “You stir up a mutiny in the army I command, and then demand that I should cancel one of my predecessor’s orders? 
Not until every round of the stolen ammunition has been given up and discipline has been re-established will I do anything. You can kill me,” he ended “and you can kill the few British officers here, but if you do, then a British army will descend upon you and wipe you all off the face of the earth.”

Most of the Egyptian officers knew such threats were very real, and popularity for the mutiny began to evaporate. Trusted British officers reassured the Sudanese troops that they were not on their way to South Africa, and all the missing arms and ammunition were returned without penalty. The seven Egyptian officers who made demands at Omdurman were drummed out of the army in front of the garrison and returned to Egypt.

**Conclusion**

The Ottomans passed up numerous chances to assert their rights in the Sudan and found that their sovereignty of the region had been eliminated by the formation of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium. An 1896 offer to occupy Suakin came far too late; by then the British had no intention of leaving.

During their time in the Sudan the British attempted to rule Africa’s largest country with only a handful of men. These were carefully selected graduates (almost exclusively) of Oxford and Cambridge universities. All were given a year of intensive Arabic language training before being set loose to administer territories larger than many European nations. Britain had no interest in colonizing the Sudan, so security remained the main British concern. To this end the British administrators concentrated on their relations with the Sudanese. The concerns of Egyptian officers were always secondary. These men were destined to remain a merely tolerated sublevel of military command, appreciated for subservience but likely discharged should they question the equity of “Anglo-Egyptian” rule in the Sudan.
Egypt began the First World War as a political contradiction. It was simultaneously part of the Ottoman Empire and was occupied and controlled by the British Empire. Egypt was at no time an ally of the British or an official part of the British Empire, yet Egyptian soldiers did see action in several important engagements, including the defense of the Suez Canal and an invasion of Darfur that was characterized as a blow against German/Ottoman ambitions at the time. The Ottoman alliance with the Central powers of Imperial Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire against Britain and her Allies of France and Russia brought quick changes in Egypt’s political status and leadership.

When the European war began in August 1914, Prime Minister Husayn Rushdi Pasha pledged the support of the Egyptian government and offered all necessary wartime facilities for British use. The Ottoman Empire did not join the conflict until October 29, 1914. Martial law was proclaimed in Egypt several days later. In Cairo Lieutenant-General Sir John Maxwell made a grave error when he declared Britain would assume sole responsibility for the defense of Egypt, making the entire Egyptian army a superfluous structure in the nation’s defensive scheme:

Great Britain is now fighting both to protect the rights and liberties of Egypt, which were originally won upon the battlefield by Mehemet Ali, and to secure to her the continuance of the peace and prosperity which she has enjoyed during the thirty years of the British Occupation.

Recognizing the respect and veneration with which the Sultan, in his religious capacity, is regarded by the Mohammedans of Egypt, Great Britain takes upon herself the sole burden of the present war, without calling upon
the Egyptian people for the aid therein: but she expects and requires, in return, that the population shall refrain from any action of a nature to hamper Her military operations or to render aid to the enemy.1

The announcement inflamed the nationalists and made enemies in the Egyptian officer corps. Annexation of the entire country to the British Empire was considered as a means of dealing with Egypt’s conflicting political status. Wiser heads prevailed, however, and the idea was abandoned.

The Ottoman sultan Muhammad V declared a jihad against the Allied powers of Britain, France, and Russia in mid-November 1914. London had prepared for such an eventuality, and the declaration of a British protectorate over Egypt on December 18, 1914, effectively ended any chance of Egyptian participation in the war on the Ottoman side. Khedive ‘Abbas Hilmi II was absent from Cairo at the time, having never come back from his traditional summer vacation in Istanbul after an assassination attempt on July 25, 1914. During his recovery ‘Abbas Hilmi came to believe the attempt came at the orders of the Ottoman grand vizier, Muhammad Sa’id Halim, son of the late Muhammad ‘Abd al-Halim, pretender to the Egyptian khediviate and supporter of ‘Urabi’s rebellion. There were fears in the Ottoman government that ‘Abbas Hilmi was gaining a following in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire and intended to restore the caliphate to Egypt. When the war began Kitchener (who never forgot the khedive’s insult in 1894) made it clear that ‘Abbas Hilmi was not welcome back in Egypt for the duration of the war.

‘Abbas Hilmi was ordered deposed by the British on December 19, 1914. At the same time all remaining political ties to the Ottoman Empire were severed, making the new ruler king of (nominally) sovereign Egypt. The ex-khedive was replaced by his uncle, the popular Prince Husayn Kamil, which tempered Egyptian reaction. The Legislative Assembly established in 1913 was short-lived, being shut down in October 1914 for fear it would become a means of nationalist expression. Like most such measures, it served only to increase the popularity of the nationalist movement, at this time under the leadership of Sa’d Zaghlul Pasha, a former Cromer-allied moderate.

The Egyptian nationalists found themselves in a quandary as to the proper course of action; support for the British violated their core beliefs, while it was apparent that Istanbul was not so intent on liberating Egypt as reabsorbing it into the Ottoman Empire. If it was necessary to choose, Egypt’s experience had shown that British administration was preferable to that of the Ottomans. Nevertheless, the sultan’s empire was Muslim, unlike the British. Independence, the preferred course, was simply impossible for the moment as the Egyptian army was incapable of resisting the military might of either empire.
Nationalist extremists were few in number but potentially dangerous; two attempts were made on the life of King Husayn Kamil during the war. ‘Abbas Hilmi continued to agitate from Istanbul through 1914, encouraging a popular revolt against the British in Egypt and issuing orders for the dismissal of “his government.” Though he enjoyed the support of Berlin, Istanbul preferred someone more reliable as the new ruler of Egypt, such as Vizier Muhammad Sa’id Halim. The ex-khedive spent most of the war in Vienna (far from his nemesis the vizier) where he openly backed the Central powers while intriguing with Britain for the restoration of his lost properties in Egypt and recognition of his son ‘Abd al-Mun‘im as the next legitimate ruler. ‘Abbas Hilmi did not renounce his family’s claims to the throne until 1922, and he supported the Axis powers in World War II until his death in 1944.

With the disruptions to international trade brought on by the war, Egypt found itself able to procure high prices for its main crops, cotton and food. Cotton brought in more money, so there was always pressure from the landowners on the government to allow more land to be used for cotton cultivation. Food prices also rose on the international market, resulting in landowners exporting crucial reserves needed to feed Egypt. Hoarding was the natural result, and the food-producing fellahin found themselves with very little to eat. Balance was restored only through the imposition of severe measures to regulate the market. In Cairo and the towns of the Delta many Egyptians were able to improve their incomes by providing goods and services to the legions of Imperial troops that passed through Egypt.

The Battle for the Suez Canal

In 1892 the Ottoman sultan attempted to separate the Sinai from Egypt when he inserted an additional clause in the firman declaring ‘Abbas Hilmi II as the new khedive of Egypt after the death of Tawfiq. The sultan, still officially suzerain of Egypt, was within his rights in making the changes. As the firman would eliminate Egypt’s buffer zone with the Ottoman Empire and result in Ottoman troops on the banks of the Suez Canal, British diplomats made it clear that such restrictions were unacceptable. A chance to take the Canal by force did not arise until 1915, when the project was handed to Djemal Pasha, commander in chief of the Ottoman army in Syria and Palestine. Djemal was a leading member of the “Young Turk” movement of Ottoman army officers that had reduced the sultan to a figurehead position in 1908. Efficient and ruthless, Djemal tried to open relations with the Entente powers (Great Britain, France, and Russia) in July 1914, but Britain and France were reluctant to alienate Russia (the traditional enemy of Turkey) when war seemed imminent. His advances
rebuffed, Djemal threw himself into the alliance with the Central powers of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires.

Since the opening of hostilities the British had rushed huge numbers of Australian and Indian army troops to Egypt. It would take a much larger army than that available to the Ottomans to take the country by force, but Djemal Pasha was confident that his appearance on the Suez Canal would spark a general uprising within Egypt in support of the sultan. He had been encouraged in this view by ‘Abbas Hilmi, who told all who would listen that the Egyptians were ready for a general revolt. The minimal goal of the campaign (and the most realistic) was to seize part of the Suez Canal and defend it for several days, just long enough to destroy a section, sink some ships to block other areas, and withdraw before the full force of the Imperial armies in Egypt could be brought down on the Ottoman force. The resulting closure of the Canal for some months (or even years) might be just enough to tip the balance of the war in favor of the Central powers.

The Bavarian chief of staff to the Ottoman VIII Corps, Kress von Kressenstein, assumed control of the planned offensive. The Porte denied a request from Berlin that ‘Abbas Hilmi be given official leadership of the expedition. Major General Liman Von Sanders, the head of the German Military Mission in Istanbul, opposed the offensive on the grounds that the attacking force would be far too small, but he was overruled by Berlin and the Porte, where the political significance of an attack on the Canal took precedence over military considerations. Working with a staff of six Germans, von Kressenstein created an audacious plan to avoid the ancient “invasion road” along the Sinai coast. The coastal route was no longer safe as it was within range of the guns of the British fleet. After an extensive survey of the Sinai and consultations with local Bedouin (who were nearly all hostile to the British) von Kressenstein plotted a 300 km route through the desert to the Canal.

The route was designed to cross hard ground as much as possible, with unavoidable stretches of soft sand laboriously covered by brushwood. Five thousand camels were loaded with water to sustain the force, and large water tanks were moved to depots ahead of the army. Since animals must be watered too, tents were left behind and only a minimal amount of baggage brought along in order to reduce their number. The Ottoman army crossed the Sinai with barely the loss of a pack mule. The 20,000 men brought across the desert were four times the number British Intelligence believed possible. It was a salutary demonstration to the Ottoman officer corps of the value of staff work and logistical planning. The Ottoman expedition maintained an eccentric character through the inclusion of a company of Mevlevi dervishes, famed for their whirling dances and tall conical hats, which they wore on campaign.
An attack on the Suez Canal south of Isma’iliya was set for February 3, 1915, with a German officer, Hauptmann Von Dem Hagen in charge of the canal crossing. The expedition set out on January 14, 1915. The approach of the Ottoman army was well-known to the defenders from the British reconnaissance aircraft and French seaplanes that flew daily. The small bombs used at the time initially caused some panic, but when the troops saw them exploding harmlessly in the sand they began to take little concern. The Ottoman troops approached the Canal in three columns along the ten-mile stretch of the Canal between Lake Timsah and the Great Bitter Lake. This sector was defended by Indian army troops (Punjabis, Rajputs, and Gurkhas), the 19th Lancashire Battery of the Royal Field Artillery, and the 5th Battery of the Egyptian Artillery (with four mountain guns and two Maxims). Many of the Indian army troops were Muslims, but aside from a few desertions they proved intensely loyal. The Ottoman force contained both Turkish and Syrian Arab formations (including Syrian Circassians), with a large number of Bedouin irregulars motivated by the sultan’s call for *jihad* against the British and their Allies.

High winds created a suffocating sandstorm on February 2, 1915. Planes were grounded as the defenders stayed on high alert, listening intently for the approach of the enemy through the day and into the night. The Ottoman force used this cover to move its assault force up to the eastern banks of the Canal. So far fortune had smiled on the German/Ottoman expedition, but just as the first metal pontoon boats of the assault force hit the Canal the clouds parted, illuminating the landscape right in front of the Egyptian positions. The mountain guns and Maxims of the Egyptian battery opened fire, sinking most of the boats and driving the Ottoman troops back from the Canal to seek cover. Bayonet countercharges by the Indian troops took care of the Syrian Arabs in the three boats that succeeded in crossing the Canal.

The assault on the Canal had been stopped, but the Ottoman army was far from defeated and was still in the area, waiting for another chance. At dawn the Indian troops began a series of counterattacks to clear the enemy from the east bank of the Canal. British and French gunships now entered into an artillery duel with an unseen Ottoman battery of 10” howitzers that did heavy damage to HMS *Hardinge*. More ships were moved into the area, including the French cruiser *D’Entrecasteaux*, whose big guns were used to good effect. During the night Indian army reinforcements were brought up and when morning broke on February 4, 1915, the Allies were braced for a new assault, but the bulk of the Ottoman army had moved off to the east. The withdrawal was tentative, however, as if the army was not entirely committed to it. Covering units gave stiff resistance to advancing Indian troops; among their dead was the German Von Dem Hagen, the thwarted leader of the Canal crossing. The British found themselves unprepared to mount a counteroffensive—they had
great difficulty in getting their men across the Canal quickly and had given no thought to water supply and transport in such an eventuality. In any case Kitchener had given strict orders that a modest victory was preferable to a reversal that might destroy popular belief in the power of British arms.

After the attack there was agreement in the German/Ottoman command that it was a mistake to send two Syrian Arab divisions (the 23rd and the 25th) in the vanguard of the attack while holding back better trained and motivated Turkish troops for the anticipated breakthrough. No uprising accompanied the arrival of the Ottoman expedition, which barely disturbed life in Cairo. The fighting took place well away from any significant population centers; this, combined with wartime censorship, poor communications, and general illiteracy among the fellahin meant that the whole affair was over before most Egyptians ever learned of it. In the distant Sudan Turkish agents spread rumors that the British had actually lost the battle for the Canal.

The British Command realized that the brief battle for the Suez Canal could have gone either way and determined never to let the Ottoman army or its allies get so close to the Canal again. A new defensive line was built in the Sinai Desert east of the Canal, and large numbers of Egyptians were used in camel transport and the construction of a new railroad line. The Ottomans pinned the failure of the expedition on the German staff officers’ alleged deficiencies. Even though the army returned to Palestine in good shape, the Germans would never again enjoy the full confidence of the Ottoman public, army, or government again. As for Djemal Pasha, he focused on his personal rule of Syria through the rest of the war, becoming well-known for his persecution of the Armenians. Four years after the war, Armenian assassins took his life in Georgia.

At Gallipoli in 1915, the Turks, once despised by their French and British Allies in the Crimea, gave the armies of those nations a sound lesson in defensive warfare and a demonstration of the tenacity of the Turkish soldier. With the Allied army unable to make any progress against the Turks, Kitchener warned Egyptian authorities to quash any rumors of an Allied defeat. By late November the ex-khedive, ʿAbbas Hilmi, was using intermediaries to offer the British his leadership of the Arab tribes in the Hijaz and Syria in a revolt against Istanbul, but there was no interest in London. When the Arab revolt broke out in the Hijaz in June 1916, a battery of Egyptian army mountain artillery was sent to help the Sharif of Mecca. Muhammad Sadiq Yahya Pasha, an Egyptian veteran of the reconquest of the Sudan, was decorated for his services there.

The Sudan: 1914

The bulk of the Egyptian army, some 14,000 men, was stationed in the Sudan throughout the war. Forty-one garrisons were spread out over this
vast territory, supported by a battalion of British troops and a unit of garrison artillery in Khartoum. Still nominally an Ottoman province at the beginning of the war, Turkish attempts at sedition in the Sudan were countered by a careful British counterpropaganda and the solicitation of statements of loyalty from the leading religious figures. Censorship and martial law were instituted to ensure continued stability. British efforts were largely successful; the light hand of British rule in the Sudan even brought the Mahdists on board. Although the British were infidels, there was a general consensus regarding the undesirability of a return to Turkish rule. There were several revolts in the Nuba Mountains, but they had nothing to do with the larger war and were subdued with some difficulty by Egyptian and Sudanese troops.

Egypt’s Western Front

To the north of Darfur and west of Egypt was Cyrenaica (part of modern Libya), the domain of the Grand Sanusi, leader of a highly organized Muslim religious brotherhood with expansionist designs. This brought the Sanusi order into direct competition with the French for the control of the peoples of the Sahara and Sahel, and into eventual conflict with Italy and Britain. The Sanusi order’s austere version of orthodox Sunni Islam appealed to members of many of the varied groups of North African Muslims, including Arabs, Berbers, Black Africans, and even the aloof Tuareg. The Sanusi leadership was able to harness the tribal cohesion brought about by the order’s religious appeal to introduce a political element to their teachings, leading to the creation of an effectively independent Sanusi state (under nominal Ottoman suzerainty) in the late nineteenth century.

When World War I began the Sanusi had already been involved in years of hard fighting with the French Colonial Army and Italian invaders. The Sanusi were aided by a varied group of Ottoman professional soldiers who had remained behind after the Italian expulsion of the Ottoman regime in 1912. They included Arabs, Circassians, Albanians, Kurds, and others from every corner of the Ottoman Empire and were under the command of ‘Aziz ‘Ali al-Misri, a mixed Turkish-Arab Egyptian.

For years the Sanusi had refused all appeals for external aid or cooperation, whether from the Ottoman sultan in his 1877 war with Russia, the Sudanese Mahdi, or even ‘Urabi Pasha. The sudden cooperation of the Sanusi leadership in 1914 with the Germans and Ottomans reflected the gradual loss of Sanusi dominions under pressure from the French and Italians. It was also a recognition that European military training was necessary if the movement was to survive. The Sanusis had already convinced the Tuareg to add marksmanship and infantry tactics to their no-longer-useful mastery of the sword and spear, creating an elite force
in the process. They now wished to transform the rest of their army. German submarines began to deliver Ottoman and German officers with arms, money, and decorations. Istanbul sent Nuri Pasha, brother of Enver Pasha (the Ottoman Minister of War and member of the ruling troika), and the Iraqi Arab Ja’afar Bey al-’Askari (a hardened military man) as advisors.

In the years before the Great War the Sanusis had made great progress in expanding their communities into Egypt. Until 1915 the Sanusis sought no trouble with the British and were even considering asking for British protection of their settlements in the Libyan interior. When the war began the British closed the western border cutting off the Sanusis from their Egyptian markets and access to Mediterranean ports. The result was Sanusi reliance on German and Ottoman aid, the price being cooperation in the war on Britain. Some Sanusi leaders in Egypt tried to influence the still-wavering Sanusi leadership to accept British aid instead (though this aid did not extend to arms and ammunition, needed for the war against the Italians).

While the austere Sanusist desert-inspired version of Islam had little attraction to the urban Muslims of Egypt, its broad-based appeal still offered a refuge for some Egyptian nationalists. The best known of these was ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Azzam, at the time a young political activist but later an important member of the Wafd Party and the first secretary general of the Arab League (1945–1952). ‘Azzam joined the Sanusi leader, Sayyid Ahmad al-Sharif, in 1915 and would remain in Libya until 1923. Some of the advisors sent to assist a German-inspired Sanusi offensive against Egypt were Egyptian-born officers serving in the Ottoman regular army (a prewar alternative to a career in Egypt’s British-dominated armed forces).

By 1915 the Sanusi fighters had pushed the Italians back to the Mediterranean coast. Nuri led a Sanusi attack on the Egyptian border town of Sollum in November 1915. An Ottoman garrison was sent here in 1904 to assert the sultan’s rights to the Gulf of Sollum, but after the Ottoman evacuation of Libya in 1912 the fortifications were turned over to the British rather than the Italians. Three-quarters of the Egyptian garrison followed its commander, Muhammad Salih al-Harb, in joining the Sanusi force during the attack.

Al-Harb joined the command group of the Sanusi army and proposed a drive through the Libyan Desert to the Nile by sweeping through the group of oases in Egypt’s western regions. It seemed entirely within the means of the Sanusi desert fighters and would create all kinds of confusion in the Cairo command. Nuri and Ja’afar preferred more conventional confrontations with the British along the Mediterranean coast. A strategic mistake was now made, dividing limited Sanusi resources to undertake both missions. The invasion along the coast was stopped by British forces. Ja’afar was taken prisoner and Nuri chased back to Libya by British armored cars.
Ahmad al-Sharif joined the expedition to the oases of Western Egypt as its formal commander. Al-Harb and ten Ottoman officers were to control the military elements. The campaign started out well enough. The Siwa Oasis was taken, but the Sanusis did not remain there long with a British army in the area. By March 1916 the Sanusis held the oases of Bahriya, Dakhla, Kharga, and Farfara. From there the Sanusis could go no farther as much of the Egyptian army was now dedicated to the defense of the Nile Valley. Emissaries were sent to Middle and Upper Egypt to raise revolt, but Egyptian discontent with British rule was insufficient to accommodate such a rash plan, especially with no sign of an advance by the Sanusis from the west.

Over the course of a year Ahmad al-Sharif was reduced to wandering the Western Desert with his ever-diminishing army of hungry, unwanted liberators. In autumn 1916 the British began to reoccupy the oases one by one, driving the Sanusi force back to Siwa. In February 1917 a column of British Rolls-Royce armored cars and a mix of transport vehicles set out from Mersa Matruh to Siwa. After a short battle the Sanusis abandoned the oasis, and the Siwa lodge of the Sanusis was destroyed. By the time Ahmad al-Sharif returned to Libya he had fewer than 200 ragged men under his command. The Sanusi leader had lost all influence in the religious order, and when the war was over he went into exile in Anatolia, accompanied by his loyal Egyptian lieutenant, Muhammad Salih al-Harb.

The Sanusi expedition to Egypt failed for several reasons. The oases of Western Egypt were still isolated places, unconnected by roads and barely integrated into the Egyptian nation. Their communities were largely self-sufficient, but incapable of supplying an invasion force with large quantities of provisions or trained manpower. The expedition had no supply lines and was entirely dependent upon whatever it could obtain in the field. Modern arms were virtually nonexistent in the oases, which meant that any recruits had to be equipped from Ahmad al-Sharif’s limited stores. Sanusi demands for provisions, pack animals, and soldiers soon alienated the local population, which grew weary and uncooperative with the Sanusi presence. Instead of causing alarm in Cairo, the British were surprisingly unconcerned with the Sanusi presence in the west, wisely preferring to allow the revolt to fizzle out without chasing the Sanusi all over the Libyan Desert. With the main element of the Sanusi army defeated in the north, the desert raiders were a nuisance rather than a strategic threat.

The Darfur Campaign

The sirdar of the Egyptian army, Sir Reginald Wingate, began agitating for a campaign against Darfur in 1915. He suggested that Sultan ‘Ali
Dinar of Darfur was about to mount a German/Ottoman inspired invasion of the Sudan. The Foreign Office in London was not overly impressed with the danger posed by the little-known sultan and his armor-clad horsemen when the British Expeditionary Force was in such dire straits in western Europe. Wingate found a more sympathetic ear with Lord Kitchener, now in Britain as commander of the entire British war effort. Kitchener was also unconvinced at first, but Wingate, the master propagandist, forwarded numerous instances of ‘Ali Dinar’s “barbarous behaviour” to the busy field marshal. Because of their long friendship in the Sudan, Kitchener obligingly read the inflammatory dispatches, of which the following is but a sample:

It is further reported to me that a woman had the audacity to name her two week old baby ‘Ali Dinar, and that the Sultan in his fury sent for her and her baby, had the latter beaten to a pulp in a large pestle and mortar and made the wretched woman eat the mess.2

Faced with such creative examples of the sultan’s inhumanity combined with repeated (but fictitious) assertions of a Turkish and German presence in al-Fashir, Kitchener eventually lent his support to the invasion. The French had designs on Darfur’s western border sultanates of Dar Masalit and Dar Tama (if not Darfur itself) and feared that the British might seize these territories. Most of the French colonial troops in neighboring Chad had been sent to the campaign against the Germans in Cameroon, but as that campaign drew to a close it was imperative for Wingate to mount his offensive before their return.

Initially called the Darfur Field Force (later the Western Frontier Force, or WFF), the expedition to overthrow ‘Ali Dinar had over 2,000 men, consisting of

- two companies, mounted infantry,
- two batteries of artillery (six 12½-pound mountain guns and two Maxims),
- one Maxim battery (ten Maxims),
- one Egyptian machine-gun camel battery (a special unit, six Vickers guns),
- five companies of the camel corps,
- four companies of the 13th Sudanese Infantry Regiment,
- two companies of the 14th Sudanese Infantry Regiment,
- three companies of 4th battalion, Egyptian infantry,
- two companies of Sudanese Arab infantry,
- five transport companies with 1,200 baggage camels, and
- Medical & Supply detachments.

The expedition was placed under the command of Miralai Philip J. V. Kelly. With the organization of such a large force, it was necessary to bring
in Egyptian engineers and Indian infantry to reinforce the seriously depleted garrison in Sudan during the campaign. Most importantly, the WFF, apart from a handful of British officers, consisted entirely of Egyptian army units. Once in the field the British would find themselves in a precarious position should their Muslim army mutiny or decide to go over to their companions in religion in Darfur.

On the approach to the border at Jabal al-Hilla, the WFF came under attack and formed a square. The attacking Fur were given their first taste of Egyptian army machine guns, which scattered the astonished attackers. It was reported back to the sultan that the fire of the invaders “was like Hell.” French objections to the British advance now began to reach the British high commissioner in Cairo, but it was too late to stop the expedition.

Defiance of the Egyptian Officers

Shortly after the force left Kordofan word spread that Mulazim Awal ‘Abd al-Majid had disappeared, allegedly after mistreatment by a British officer. When the bodies of two murdered Sudanese policemen were discovered outside the lines, it became clear that the Egyptian officer had deserted. When the bodies were brought into the Sudanese police camp, Kelly noted one lady who “looked very war-like, she was dancing about waving a stick over her head stripped to the waist … I wouldn’t have cared to have passed at the time if I had been an Egyptian officer.”

Al-Majid was said to be influenced by the ideas of Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Shawish. Born in Tunisia, the shaykh had been a lecturer in Arabic studies at Oxford University before moving to Cairo, where he took up the cause of pan-Islamism and preached loyalty to the Ottoman sultan as caliph of Islam. When the war began, his fiery sermons became intolerable to the authorities, and he was forced to leave for Istanbul. Shortly after al-Majid’s disappearance three other Egyptian officers were summarily arrested and dispatched to the British military base at Giza. The remaining Egyptian officers were gathered inside a local building to hear a speech on loyalty from a senior Egyptian officer, Mahmud Hafez. Kelly, the political officer MacMichael, and two other British officers attended with their hands kept close to their revolvers, “so if anything had happened not many of them would have got out of that small room alive.”

On March 17, 1915, the Egyptian officers of the WFF received a letter from al-Majid, in which he revealed he had gone over to the service of the Fur sultan (“my glorious deed”). Al-Majid described the justice of Sultan ‘Ali Dinar and the strength of his army in glowing terms while encouraging his “brothers” to join him. He also reported the delivery of both the Mejidia and Osmaniyeh decorations from the Ottoman sultan
to ‘Ali Dinar. Machine guns and mountain guns were allegedly on their way, via the Sanusi caravans from Libya to Darfur. On the same day Wingate sent ‘Ali Dinar “a last warning” to submit to the government.

The next day the Egyptian officers sent off a remarkable letter to their commander in chief, the sirdar. In the delicate relationship between the British and the Egyptian army during the Great War, it is perhaps the most honest expression of the quandary of the Egyptian soldier, sent to fight his co-religionists in support of British interests in the name of the Egyptian king. It illuminates, as well, some of the ethnic tensions that existed at the time in the Egyptian army:

There is no doubt that you are indebted to us since the outbreak of the present war, because we have been and still are peaceful and obedient to your orders, listening to your advice and helping you in all times and in whatever places you wish—to say nothing about lending a deaf ear to that great and most mighty voice, the voice of our exalted [Ottoman] Sultan, our honourable Khalifa and the Khalifa of our Prophet Mohammed, upon him be the prayers of peace, who has called out to the Jihad the Muslims in all the different parts of the world. … In spite of all that, Your Excellency the Sirdar, we see our brothers, the officers, dismissed, their services no longer required, imprisoned and put in chains, while we are sure that they did not commit the least thing for which they deserve such a punishment, but we are certain that our brothers are harmed by a slander from a mean Syrian, or cursed Copt, or a hypocritical Egyptian, or a fool of an Englishman, and we think that this is a kind of oppression and foolishness for which the officers are dismissed or imprisoned and their services no longer required.5

The letter concluded with a warning not to harm the arrested officers or “a thing which you did not expect will happen, and you will gather the fruits of what your hands have sown.” It was signed “The Assembly of the West, whom God hath ordered to the Jihad.”

While pan-Islamic agitation and Ottoman propaganda doubtless had a part in the disturbances in the Egyptian officer corps, what most rankled the Egyptians was their subordinate status, no matter their rank, to the most junior British officer. It was, after all, the “Egyptian Army.” Most were well aware that they were being used by a stronger power to fulfill its imperialist ambitions (in the manner of colonial armies everywhere). While the remaining Egyptian officers resolved to continue the campaign, the message of defiance had nearly been the realization of the worst fears of the small group of British officers. When word arrived of the surrender of the British army at Kut in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) to the Ottomans, Wingate warned Kelly to keep the news from his troops.

The British officers of the WFF were concerned with the effect ‘Abd al-Majid might have on the skills of the Fur army as a military adviser. In xenophobic Darfur the Egyptian officer was extremely conspicuous and soon reports began to reach the British of multiple foreign officers in al-
Fashir. It appears that ‘Abd al-Majid was initially given charge of the army’s training, built a rifle range, and even attempted to refurbish the sultan’s four old artillery pieces, but this activity suddenly ceased and ‘Abd al-Majid had a much diminished role after this point. One of the many spies employed by the British in al-Fashir reported that al-Majid had been accused of sodomy with three slaves belonging to the Fur commander in chief and had therefore lost all influence at court.

The Battle of Berinjia: 1916

At first Sultan ‘Ali Dinar considered fleeing his capital to take up guerrilla resistance in the Jabal Marra Mountains in the fashion of the “Shadow Sultans,” but he was severely reprimanded by his influential sister, Mayram Tajah, who offered to swap clothes with the sultan and go out to meet the enemy in battle if the sultan really wished to leave. The sultan now favored fortifying al-Fashir to fight the Egyptian army from strong defensive positions. Ramadan ‘Ali, his sirdar and former slave, insisted on meeting the Egyptian army outside the capital, an unfortunate plan supported by most of the sultan’s advisors. Twelve miles north of al-Fashir near the village of Berinjia, Ramadan ‘Ali had 2,000 yards of trenches built in a crescent shape, with most of the position concealed by a wadi. Ramadan’s plan was to allow the Egyptian square to get close before unleashing his ambush. If his army, far greater in numbers than the WFF, could spring an attack from close in, the Egyptian Maxims and artillery might be overrun before they could inflict serious damage. On the morning of May 25, 1916, Ramadan ‘Ali’s army was in its trenches awaiting the arrival of the Egyptian square.

Exceeding his orders, Major Hubert Huddleston was far in advance of the rest of the army, leading a party of the Camel Corps near the village of Berinjia. They approached too close to the concealed enemy who suddenly opened up a heavy fire. Unfortunately for Ramadan ‘Ali, this fire was taken as the signal for a general charge across open ground toward the still distant Egyptian army, which had ample time to deploy its Maxims and artillery. Slightly in advance of the charge were Huddleston and his camelmen, making a desperate attempt to regain the Egyptian lines. Despite all odds, some of the Fur army reached to within six yards of the Egyptian square. The heroic but doomed assault of men of many tribes put the lie to British propaganda that the sultan was a universally reviled drunkard and tyrant whose men would desert him at the first opportunity. The sultanate proved extraordinarily resilient to this point, but the defeat at Berinjia fulfilled an apocalyptic prophecy made by a Fur fiki to the sultan many years before, that the arrival of the British in
Darfur would mark the end of time. For the old world of the sultanate this was entirely true.

Fur casualties in the battle were estimated at 1,000 out of an estimated 3,600 men, a staggering loss that left the sultan little hope of reviving resistance in any serious way. At 3 A.M. the following morning the sultan’s cavalry (which had played little role in the battle) tried to catch the exhausted expeditionary force sleeping, but the sentries were alert and the guns were brought up to repel the attack. The final advance to al-Fashir repelled one more cavalry attack and then entered the capital unopposed.

Soon after their entry into al-Fashir, the Egyptian army began to loot the town. The archives of the sultanate were tossed into the street in search of more valuable loot, and the expedition’s intelligence officer could be observed in the street trying to shove wind-borne papers into a bag. Discipline soon became a problem with the Sudanese troops of the 13th and 14th regiments. Absence without leave and robbery were common, and many of the soldiers broke into houses in search of “temporary wives.”

The British feared that ‘Ali Dinar might fall back on the neighboring sultanate of Wadai (the eastern region of modern Chad), newly conquered by the French. The Fur sultan preferred, however, to remain in his homeland rather than put his fate into the hands of his traditional enemies in Wadai.

The Battle of Jiuba

‘Ali Dinar and his supporters now began a nightmarish attempt to evade the Egyptian army. For months the sultan continued to evade his pursuers, his own force suffering from thirst, desertion, and smallpox. At one point rumors reached the sultan that the Germans had driven the Egyptian army out of al-Fashir, but investigation proved these to be false. ‘Ali Dinar’s following, which included large numbers of children, women, slaves, eunuchs, court officials, and other noncombatants, was far too weak to attempt a desert crossing to the Sanusi. To the west the French had moved up 150 men and two Maxim guns to the border with Dar Sila.

Major Huddleston, who had occupied the town of Kabkabiya with about 300 Sudanese troops and ten Egyptian officers, learned that ‘Ali Dinar’s camp was nearby and in desperate condition. Defying orders to remain where he was until operations could be coordinated with the French, he assembled a mobile unit of 100 men by combining the mules of the Arab battalion with requisitioned ponies. Called “Huddleston’s Horse,” the odd-looking group packed their Maxim guns and set off in pursuit of the sultan.

‘Ali Dinar’s camp was discovered at a place called Jiuba. No sentries had been posted outside the camp, which was much weakened by
exhaustion and smallpox. Huddleston opted for a surprise attack rather than offer a chance for surrender, and the Maxim guns were wheeled to within 500 yards. The guns opened fire at dawn. Panic ran through the camp as the bullets ripped through men and women alike. Those who could took flight with the mounted infantry in pursuit. The sultan’s lifeless body was discovered a mile from the camp, the victim of a “random bullet” that struck through the center of his forehead. Huddleston’s success allowed him to narrowly escape disgrace for disobeying orders, and he finished the war as a brigadier general on the Palestinian front. The bill of £500,000 for the reconquest of Darfur was sent to Cairo for payment by the Egyptian taxpayer.

Months later news arrived of the fate of Mulazim al-Majid, the Egyptian officer who had deserted to ‘Ali Dinar. After the fall of al-Fashir, al-Majid accompanied ‘Ali Dinar at first, then headed northwest, probably in an attempt to join up with the Sanusis in Libya. One morning at a place called Bao, he was befriended by three Bidayat tribesmen who gave him milk. When al-Majid drank it and took a nap under a tree, the men crept up and stole his rifle and revolvers before stabbing him in the throat. Al-Majid jumped up and went for his pistols only to discover they were gone. With several sword cuts to his throat, al-Majid was left to bleed to death.

**The Camel Transport Corps**

Much of the success of the British campaign in Palestine and Syria can be credited to the performance of the Camel Transport Corps. The Corps had only one commander through the war, the inexhaustible and ruthlessly efficient Lt. Col. C. W. Whittingham. In a testament to its leadership, the Camel Transport Corps operated with a ratio of only one British soldier (of any rank) for every hundred Egyptians.

As no camels could be spared for training, the Egyptian recruits (many of whom knew little of the animals) were simply equipped and sent into the field. The resulting loss of camels as the men learned their trade was greater than the numbers required for proper training, but such is military efficiency. Working in the hostile ground just behind the front line, the men were constant targets of artillery and sniper fire. When the transport columns reached the front, the camels were often transferred to the hands of British troops for use in the front line. This usually spelled doom for the animals, as the typical British soldier “never succeeded entirely in ridding his mind of the strange obsession that a camel possessed the endurance of a motor-car.”

In the first few years of the war, the British gave no more thought to the welfare of the men of the Camel Corps than their animals. Only a small
blanket was provided, with not even a uniform. In these conditions it should not have been surprising that disease and exposure began to take a heavy toll of the men. Better equipment was issued for the beginning of the Palestine campaign. In all, over 170,000 Egyptians served in the Camel Transport Corps during the war.

The Egyptian Coast Guard

The Egyptian Coast Guard was a small paramilitary force charged with patrolling the Mediterranean coast by camel. Perhaps through regular contact with Sanusi patrols along the Libyan border, the Coast Guard exhibited divided loyalties on several occasions. The Grand Sanusi, Sayyid Ahmad, had corresponded with the force on many occasions prior to the war, and the guards were even visited at Siwa Oasis in 1913 by Muhammad al-‘Abid, a top Sanusi military leader.

On November 20, 1914 an Indian army detachment of the Bikanir Camel Corps was attacked by 200 Bedouin who had approached under a white flag. The Indians lost half their men in making a fighting escape, but their Coast Guard guides surrendered so easily it “amounted to desertion.” In Western Egypt other units left to join the Sanusi.

One notorious veteran of the Egyptian Coast Guard was Captain Ahmad Mansur, who was dismissed from the force for “irregularities” just prior to the war. Bitter about his dismissal, Mansur joined the Ottoman army as the war began. In 1915 he was put in charge of the captured British crew of a coastal defense vessel sunk by a German submarine. He was well noted for his cruelty in this role before the crew was freed in a short campaign by the British Western Desert Force. Mansur became a fugitive, but was captured by the Italians (the colonial power in Libya) and turned over to the British, who promptly executed him as a traitor.

The defections of the Coast Guard were incorrectly interpreted in Cairo as a sign that average Egyptians were ready to align themselves with the Sanusi. This analysis played a large role in the British unwillingness to use Egyptian troops in the Great War. It was an overreaction; the Sanusi were allied to the Ottomans, and almost nobody in Egypt wanted a return to direct Ottoman rule.

The Egyptian Labour Corps

With the exception of the Darfur campaign (which was never officially regarded in London as part of the Great War), Egyptians were not raised for front-line formations in a war against the Muslim Ottomans and their allies. This is not to say that Egyptian help in other areas was unwanted. The fellahin were encouraged to join voluntary labor corps that performed
often-backbreaking work behind the lines in both Europe and the Middle East. An initial experiment in using Egyptian labor in the Gallipoli campaign was regarded as a success, and it was decided to raise a large group of fellahin to be known as the Egyptian Labour Corps. Unfortunately for the British the demand for Egyptian agricultural products and the high prices they brought in wartime meant that the average fellah could actually make some money without having to leave his home. As recruitment lagged in the latter stages of the war, local governors were advised to meet the required numbers at the expense of their jobs. For many Egyptians, British demands for labor meant a return to the evil days of conscription and the corvée. The main labor formations were the Egyptian Labour Corps (98,000 men, of whom 23,000 served overseas) and the Camel Transport Corps (96,000 men). The Egyptians performed difficult work in France, Palestine, and Mesopotamia, often taking serious losses from shellfire and disease.

The British army was notorious for enormous losses in camels in their Middle Eastern campaigns. When the British finally began their advance on Palestine, the army began to requisition every available camel and mule in Egypt, stripping the fellahin of their sole method of transporting the produce of their farmlands. At the same time the prosperity of the early years of the war disappeared under ever more exacting demands for provisions by the British army. The fellahin were called to make enormous sacrifices for a war in which Egypt was not only a nonparticipant, but was explicitly forbidden from joining for fear the postwar cost might be independence.

A monument to the dead of the long-suffering Egyptian Labour Corps was built outside Jerusalem’s Golden Gate where 198 Egyptians were buried. The role of the Egyptian Labour Corps in the Great War was ably defined by Lt. Col. P. G. Elgood: “Egypt has every right to be proud of the achievements of her Labour Corps: but no fellah joined it from desire to save his country from invasion, and no educated Egyptian ever served in its ranks.”

Conclusion: World War I

Egyptian King Husayn Kamil took ill during 1917 and died in October. A crisis in the succession was reached when his son Kemal al-Din declined the role of king. Annexation was briefly raised again as a possibility, but eventually Prince Ahmad Fu‘ad took the throne.

The commonly held view that the Egyptian army played no part in the Great War does not stand up under scrutiny. Though it was treated as a force of last resort for political reasons, the British Command did use small units of Egyptians when necessary, usually when Imperial troops
were unavailable. The Egyptian army’s importance in maintaining order in the Nile Valley cannot be underestimated, as it allowed British garrison troops to move to other battlefields in Turkey and Europe.

Desertion to Ottoman or Ottoman-allied forces occurred, but the numbers involved were remarkably small, reflecting the growing political and social distance between Egypt and Turkey. A small number of Egyptians answered the sultan’s call to arms, such as Prince ‘Abbas Halim, who served as a fighter pilot in the German air force before joining the Ottoman Air Corps. Other Egyptian officers showed remarkable loyalty to the British. When Turkish officer Almaz Effendi was sent to Port Sudan to call the Egyptian officers there to rebellion, he was arrested by the Egyptians, court-martialed, and shot.

In retrospect, one wonders if Germany did not take the problem of the Suez Canal seriously enough. It is true that Germany was fighting a two-front war at the time, but in early 1915 the Canal was poorly defended and pretty much there for the taking, if only for long enough to cause severe damage. A brigade of German troops might have made the difference in Von Kressenstein’s assault, but religious and political reasons dictated the use of a purely Ottoman army. There were 70,000 Imperial troops in Egypt at the time, but the vast majority were Australians and New Zealanders, untrained volunteers. At this stage they formed only the raw material for an army and were thus prevented from taking any part in the fighting. As it was, the Central powers would never have another opportunity to take the Canal, allowing Britain to equip itself with supplies and troops from Australia, New Zealand, and India at will. Von Kressenstein tried again in 1916 with a Turkish division supplemented by a German contingent that included a squadron of warplanes, two batteries of howitzers, machine-gun companies, and a unit of German military specialists bearing the odd name of the “Pasha Formation.” It was all too little and too late.

The British decision to exclude the Egyptian army from the defensive scheme was born from an arrogant confidence that the Central powers would quickly collapse when faced with the might of the Allies and the tenacity of the British soldier. In truth Britain maintained only a small regular army (most of whom were drawn from Britain’s Celtic population), devoting most of its resources to the Imperial Navy. The navy was capable of blockading the Central powers, but this was the work of years rather than months.

The Ottoman sultan’s call for jihad in his role as caliph had little resonance in Egypt. It had been many years since the sultan’s temporal authority had any value in Egypt, and there was always some suspicion that the caliphate had been stolen from its rightful place, in the hands of an Arab in Cairo, the “real capital” of the Islamic world. The entire question of Egyptian loyalty to the sultan and his government in Istanbul died
without debate shortly after the war for several reasons:

1. The removal of ‘Abbas Hilmi II from the khedivate and his failure to assure the succession of his son (who showed little interest in any event) broke the chain of Ottoman-approved rulers of Egypt.

2. The general collapse of Ottoman rule in Arab lands in the late phases of the war and the dismemberment of the Empire by the postwar Treaty of Sevres.

3. The elimination of the sultanate by the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 1922. The sultan, Mehmet VI Vahidettin, retained the role of caliph, but fled Istanbul on a British warship several weeks later.

4. The elimination of the caliphate and all Turkish claims to such by Turkish reformer Mustafa Kemal in 1924. The caliph became a political tool of the conservative movement in Turkey that opposed the transition to a republican nation-state, so the caliphate was abolished once and for all. The last caliph, Abdülmecit, was sent into exile. His attempt to move to Egypt was blocked by the British, who were uninterested in seeing even a symbolic return of the caliphate to Egypt after four centuries.
CHAPTER 16

Mutinies and Nationalism in the Postwar Egyptian Army

With the war over, Egypt’s nationalists were ready to claim the compensation they felt due for their restraint and aid during Britain’s time of need. No acknowledgement of Egypt’s assistance was forthcoming, no change to the political structure, and certainly no end in sight for the protectorate. The latter was intended to be a temporary measure, but British authorities had grown comfortable with the control it gave them over most aspects of public policy. With a sense of hope and relief in the air at the close of the war, there was no more opportune time to advance the principles of stability, development, and ultimate self-government that Britain had advanced at the time of occupation in 1882. American President Woodrow Wilson was at the same time advocating the dissolution of the colonial system and the self-determination of all nations. His message was certainly welcome in Egypt.

Instead Egypt’s prime minister Rushdi Pasha was told by the British that the time was inopportune for any discussion of independence. Both Rushdi Pasha and his more ardent nationalist political rival Zaghlul Pasha failed to get permission to visit London for discussions of Egypt’s political future. The Egyptian leaders found it difficult to understand why Egypt’s aspirations were ignored while the independence of other Arab regions was to be discussed at the Paris Peace Conference. The political situation in Egypt began to deteriorate rapidly. Rushdi Pasha resigned, and nationalist groups throughout the country began to agitate against British rule despite warnings. In March 1919 Zaghlul Pasha and three of his associates were arrested and deported to Malta. Injury had been added to insult, and the frustration of the Egyptian people now erupted into violence. Misdirected anger led to the destruction of much of Egypt’s transportation and communications infrastructure. Many British citizens fell victim to mob violence, suffering beatings and even murder. Over 800 Egyptians were killed in the unrest. British troops were
brought in to restore order, but the uprising had finally caught the attention of the Foreign Office in London, thanks in part to Wingate, who urged the government to issue permission for Egyptian delegates to proceed to the Peace Conference in Paris. Surprisingly the conscripts of the Egyptian Labour Corps, which had not yet been demobilized, took no part in the unrest despite numerous appeals by the militants to join in. Their conduct stood in contrast with the riots by European and North American soldiers furious with the sluggishness of the demobilization process in Europe.

General Allenby was now sent to Cairo with extraordinary powers to resolve the crisis. Against the wishes of the Foreign Office, Allenby allowed Zaghlul and his associates to return to Egypt. This was but an unsatisfactory half-measure, however, for Allenby’s orders explicitly called for the maintenance of the protectorate. Unable to accommodate even the most reasonable requests for progress on self-government, Allenby’s mission was doomed from the start. Zaghlul headed for the peace talks in Paris while violence and strikes again consumed Egypt. An attempt by Rushdi Pasha to form a new government lasted only 12 days. A British Commission of Enquiry was formed with terms of reference that included the preservation of the protectorate. Unsurprisingly Egypt’s political leaders boycotted the Commission. No progress could be made until Zaghlul Pasha joined the Commission in London, negotiating a set of proposals calling for a type of limited independence that still included a British military presence and avenues of influence with the government.

Forming a delegation to discuss the proposals was difficult; Adly Yeghen Pasha was prime minister by this time, but Zaghlul Pasha, who had great popular support but no official position in the government, had done all the negotiating work. Adly Yeghen made the unpopular decision to head the delegation himself without Zaghlul’s participation. Riots broke out, the talks failed, and the prime minister was forced to resign. Zaghlul was behind most of the agitation and was again deported, this time to the distant Seychelles Islands. Allenby identified the protectorate as the main problem in British-Egyptian relations and battled the Foreign Office for its elimination. In time Allenby prevailed, and on February 28, 1922, the British government issued a unilateral declaration that terminated the protectorate and made Egypt “an independent sovereign state.” The statement also proclaimed an end to martial law, which had been in effect since 1914. Final determination was withheld on most of the other sensitive issues pending discussions with the Egyptian government. These issues included “security of communications of the British Empire” (i.e., the Suez Canal), the defense of Egypt, protection of foreign interests, the protection of minorities, and the status of the Sudan. Most significantly for the army, the continued assumption of responsibility for Egypt’s defense by Britain consigned the Egyptian military to an almost
redundant role. Independence did not extend to the army, whose sirdar would continue to be a drawn from the British military.

Egyptian attempts to produce a new constitution produced a revolving-door in the prime minister’s office over the next few years. The issue of the Sudan was the most difficult, with King Fu’ad weighing in with the nationalists for the incorporation of the Sudan as an integral part of Egypt. There were, of course, no Sudanese invited to these discussions. A constitution was eventually hammered out and proclaimed on April 19, 1923. In the meantime, Zaghlul Pasha had been moved to Gibraltar, Zubayr Pasha’s old place of exile. He returned to sweep the 1924 elections with the Wafd Party. In 1927 the British were obligated to respond to an infiltration of the Egyptian army by radical Wafd agents, intent on using the army to overthrow King Fu’ad.

**Patrols in the South Sudan**

The Egyptian army averaged five to six major patrols per year in the South Sudan, involving anything from 50 to 1,000 men. The patrols were sometimes routine expressions of government authority, but they were just as likely to involve deadly attacks by tribal warriors who usually outnumbered their government opponents. Typically these patrols consisted of Sudanese troops, Egyptian officers, and a British commander. Larger efforts might include the use of Egyptian artillery or Maxim guns, laboriously transported through trackless bush and swamp. Few patrols proved decisive, often bringing order to a region for only a few short weeks before disturbances broke out again. The Dinka and Nuer tribes well remembered the Egyptian slave raiding of the nineteenth century, and there seemed to them little difference between these new “Turks” (a term that included the British) and the old ones. As a result these perpetual patrols represented some of the most demanding work of the Egyptian army; the Shambe Field Force was an example of the difficulties military work in the south presented:

On the first day after leaving Shambe a Sudanese officer died from heat-stroke and exhaustion, and so severely were the troops suffering from thirst that a guard had to be posted on the maxims to prevent the men from drinking the water round the greasy gun barrels. Sometimes when water was found it stank so abominably that few liked to drink the nauseous stuff, and in any case, it had to be filtered through a cloth to get rid of the unpleasant creatures in it. … When the rains broke, storms of tropical violence were frequent; rain fell more or less heavily on twenty-four out of forty-eight days, and officers and men, wet to the skin, often had to sleep on the soaking ground with no ground-sheets or protection against the deluge. Mosquitoes of a particularly large and voracious kind attacked the face, hand and any exposed parts of the body; if a man put his hands up to his face and squashed
one, half a dozen more took its place. As a result of the mosquitoes and the
drenching rain, the men and officers were continually down with malaria;
on one occasion twenty-eight out of 101 Sudanese, and twenty-seven out of
thirty-five Egyptians in the Shambe Field Force alone, were on the sick list.\footnote{1}

It was thankless work that depended on the abilities of the Egyptian offi-
cers involved, who characteristically performed well, though many were
troubled by the degree of Egyptian suffering involved in maintaining Brit-
ish control of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Their work in the region gave
the officers’ movement of later years a proprietary interest in the mainte-
nance of Egyptian rule in the Sudan.

The Murder of the \textit{Sirdar} and the White Flag Revolt
of 1924

Many of the Egyptians serving in the Sudan (including future Egyptian
president Muhammad Naguib) and a number of graduates of Khartoum’s
Gordon College belonged to a nationalist organization known as the
White Flag League. The nominal leader of the White Flags was 1st Lt.
‘Ali ‘Abd al-Latif, an Egyptian-born Dinka who published a manifesto
entitled “The Claims of the Sudanese Nation.” When the White Flags
organized anti-British demonstrations, the group was proscribed and sev-
eral of its leaders imprisoned. In June 1924 the Egyptian Railway Battalion
at Atbara mutinied and began sabotaging its equipment. Sudanese troops
(most of whom remained loyal throughout the disturbances) restored
order and the railway men were sent back to Egypt. A minor insurrection
at the military school in Khartoum was put down in the same month.

Sir Lee Stack, \textit{sirdar} of the Egyptian army and governor-general of the
Sudan, was assassinated in Cairo by nationalist radicals on November 19,
1924. Zaghlul Pasha again ignored British warnings to cease his anti-
British agitation and perpetually confrontational attitude toward Britain.
The high commissioner, Lord Allenby, now presented the Egyptian prime
minister with a set of demands that included an indemnity of £500,000
and the immediate withdrawal of all Egyptian military personnel in the
Sudan. Zaghlul resigned rather than meet the demands, so Allenby
ordered the Egyptian troops out of the Sudan himself. When the Egyptian
artillery and two battalions of infantry had not moved from their barracks
in Khartoum North by the ultimatum date of November 24, 1924, they
were surrounded by British troops. Though the British did not know it
at the time, this action prevented a plan to have the Egyptian gunners
open up on the governor-general’s palace and other government build-
ings across the Blue Nile. One battalion was induced to board the train
to Cairo, but the remainder refused to move until they received a direct
order from the king of Egypt.
Before the order arrived, 100 men of the 11th Sudanese Regiment mutinied and marched to the Blue Nile bridge on their way to support the Egyptians in Khartoum North. Huddleston Pasha (the acting sirdar) ordered the men back to their barracks, and when they refused, he ordered soldiers of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders to open fire. Many surrendered at this point, but others took refuge in the Khartoum hospital where they were dislodged by howitzers and machine guns. A later investigation revealed that their junior Egyptian officers gave the Sudanese “mutineers” ample supplies of local home-brewed beer before ordering them to Khartoum North. The Sudanese actually believed they were on their way to attack rather than support the Egyptians there. When three Egyptian officers were afterwards sentenced to death, there was no shortage of volunteers for the firing squad from the 11th Sudanese. Other Egyptians were sent to prison where serious riots were started both by the mutineers and Sudanese criminals who objected to sharing their prison with the Egyptians.

In accordance with Allenby’s orders, those Sudanese of the Egyptian army based in Egypt were transferred back to their homeland to help form a new Sudan Defence Force, answerable only to the governor-general of the Sudan. As part of the reorganization the governor-general was no longer also sirdar of the Egyptian army.
Aware that past agreements between Egypt and Britain could reasonably be viewed as instruments imposed by the power of a military occupation, the British conducted a series of difficult negotiations with the Wafd government of Nahas Pasha in order to formalize their relations in an equitable way. The discussions were conducted as Mussolini’s Italy took what the Egyptian khedives of the nineteenth century could not: control of Abyssinia and the source of the Blue Nile. Italy was also active militarily along Egypt’s western border with Libya. The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 thus produced a defensive alliance between Egypt and Britain, with the provision that British troops might be permanently stationed only along the sensitive Suez Canal in barracks well removed from Egyptian settlements.

The Egyptian politicians were unanimous in their insistence that Egypt could no longer have the humiliating appearance of an occupied nation. The eviction of British troops everywhere in Egypt was a main principle of the Wafd Party, but the Suez Canal clause appears to have been a nod to the reality of British intent to hold the Canal at all costs. While transferring responsibility for Egypt’s defense to the Egyptian army, the agreement also called for a British military mission to train the army along British lines. The Egyptian army would also return to the Sudan, a political triumph but an unwelcome prospect for troops used to garrison duty in their own country. The Treaty, effective for 20 years, was initially well received in Egypt and was followed the next year by the final abolition of the hated Capitulations and Mixed Courts, allowing foreigners resident in Egypt to finally come under Egyptian laws and authority. In another demonstration of independence, Egypt joined the League of Nations in May 1937.

Attitudes toward the Treaty of 1936 began to change as the prospect of war began to darken Europe in 1939. The defensive alliance and the
British Suez garrisons seemed to guarantee that Egypt would be dragged into a war in which she had no interest. Egypt could not remove the British or revoke the terms of the treaty, but at the same time she had no reason to give offense to the Fascist Axis, with whom many Egyptians quietly sympathized, often merely on the grounds that they were anti-British. When war broke out, it soon became clear that Egypt would oblige by the terms of the Treaty in rendering assistance to the British, but without doing one bit more than what was explicitly called for in the Treaty. Indeed, the Egyptians had little incentive to do otherwise; some bitterly suggested that they had no fear of military occupation by the Fascists as they were already under military occupation. Rather, many viewed an Axis victory as an opportunity to expel the British. These Egyptians did not reckon with Britain’s willingness to throw diplomatic niceties out the window if they felt their strategic interests were threatened, as will be seen. The Suez Canal, lifeline to the Indian Empire, would be as stoutly defended as London itself if the need arose.

As the war began in September 1939, the Egyptian army began to deploy in a defensive mode. Though allied to Germany, Mussolini’s Italy had not yet joined the war. Egyptian troops were sent to the Mediterranean coast to guard the harbor at Alexandria, man the coastal artillery, and protect the Mersa-Matruh to Alexandria railway. Regular patrols of the border with Italian Libya were started. Leaving Egypt’s western defenses in the hands of the Egyptians was a political decision for the British, who were following a strict policy of nonprovocation toward the Italian army. An enormous effort was also begun to assemble the supplies and infrastructure needed to host the 300,000 British, Indian, Australian, New Zealand, and South African soldiers on their way to Egypt. General Sir Archibald Wavell had already arrived in August to start preparations for this massive effort. The small German community, most of them members of the Nazi Party, was rounded up for internment. Politically unreliable types were expelled from Alexandria to Upper Egypt.

British war plans continued to include the Egyptian army until mid-1940. If the Italians attacked, it was assumed that Egypt would meet her obligations for self-defense in harmony with British efforts to repel the invaders. In this atmosphere it was foreseen that Egyptian units would be placed in support of British troops and under British command. The British, who could field only 10,000 men to the Italians’ 80,000 in 1939, would desperately need the manpower.

A Reluctant Ally

The first year of the war proved a somewhat precarious time for the British. The young King Faruk and his appointee as prime minister were
both opposed to the British presence, and the disasters that befell the Allies in France were making others reconsider the wisdom of an alliance with the British. Egypt’s age-old bureaucracy began to drag its feet on cooperative measures, and prime minister ‘Ali Mahir began replacing pro-British officials. Faruk maintained an anti-British posture throughout the war. Several times the British came close to deposing him. In Istanbul ‘Abbas Hilmi was still alive, and when the Germans later enjoyed success in the Western Desert campaign, he began to present himself as the legitimate king. Italy joined the war in June 1940, but Egypt still refused to declare war on either Germany or Italy, though she did promise to provide an armed response to any violation of her territory. ‘Ali Mahir resigned as prime minister, alleging British pressure to declare war. The charge is unlikely; the British still had little faith in their air defenses and knew that the destruction of Cairo by superior Italian aircraft would inevitably be blamed on Britain.

In September 1940 ‘Ali Mahir’s successor Hassan Sabri Pasha hesitated to send the army when Marshal Graziani crossed the Libyan frontier into Egypt. Graziani was well-known in Egypt for the atrocities he carried out in Libya to clear its lands for Italian colonizers in the 1930s. The more politically astute in Egypt realized that while Britain might insist on a limited military presence to secure the Suez Canal, the Italian Empire was designed to resettle the poor and overpopulated regions of southern Italy. Interestingly their reaction was to adopt the same policy of nonprovocation that the British had pursued toward Italy before their entry into the war. Beset by British pressure to act and nationalist misgivings about the possibility of being absorbed into the Italian Empire as a consequence of cooperation with Britain, Hassan Sabri was felled by a stroke while giving the Throne Speech in December 1940.

Graziani advanced only 60 miles into Egypt, taking the coastal towns of Sollum and Sidi Barrani on September 13, 1940. Though his forces outnumbered the British five to one, Graziani was content to build defensive positions while the war took to the air. The Royal Air Force (RAF) made constant attacks on Italian positions in their second-rate aircraft while Italian bombers flew over Cairo on October 19, 1940, before dropping a few bombs on the heavily European suburb of Ma’adi. When Wavell finally felt his forces were ready to advance, he sent them against the Italians under Lt. Gen. Richard O’Connor in December 1940. O’Connor’s decisive strikes shattered the Italian lines and sent thousands of Italian soldiers in two directions, fleeing westward through Libya or eastward into prisoner-of-war camps. By February 7, 1941, it appeared to be all over with a final British victory over the Italians at Benghazi. The real desert war was about to begin, however, with the arrival of General Erwin Rommel’s crack Afrika Korps in Tripoli a few days later.
This fresh German army was part of an ambitious plan by oil-hungry Germany to seize most of the world’s known oil reserves. German armies in Russia would push southward through the Caucasus and the oil-rich Caspian Sea region on into the Middle East while Rommel drove east through Egypt to link up. Rommel was consistently forced to fight the clock as well as the British army as he was entirely dependent upon imported petroleum products for his heavily mobilized task force. Rommel’s force was by far the weaker partner in this giant pincer movement and would have to fight for every drop of the fuel it needed to operate in the desert.

Defying orders to wait for reinforcements, Rommel smashed his way through a stunned Western Desert Force in March 1941. O’Connor was captured, and the British army was sent reeling eastward. Only Tobruk held out in a famous siege, but this was not enough to stop the Afrika Korps from pressing on into Sollum.

While the war raged round it in 1941, the Nile Valley and Delta remained relatively calm. Alexandria was bombed in June 1941, causing some panic, and a successful pro-German coup in British-occupied Iraq inspired Egyptian extremists before a British field force sent the putschists fleeing to Persia. British censorship allowed little in the way of alarming news to reach the Egyptians through official channels, even as German armies seized nearby Greece and Crete. The imbalance between cotton production and food production that usually led to Egypt purchasing food abroad each year resulted in high prices and hoarding of food supplies as cotton exports became disrupted. The British stepped in and bought the entire cotton crop before increasing the amount of land devoted to food production. Problems continued in this area as many Egyptian members of Parliament were landowners interested in maintaining production of their main cash crop, cotton.

Within Egypt there were numerous sympathizers with the Axis cause, primarily in the hope that the destruction of Britain would mean the liberation of Egypt. Several anti-British groups emerged that adopted the ultranationalism of the European Fascists. The most notorious of these was “Young Egypt” (Misr al-Fatat), founded in 1933 by Ahmad Husayn and Fathi Radwan. The typical fascist program of state-controlled economic production and military expansion was adopted as the group’s core belief. Young Egypt took the paramilitary “Brownshirt” and “Blackshirt” formations of Fascists in Germany, Italy, and Britain as its model, but not without a costume change to “Greenshirts” in a nod to Islamic sensibilities (green being the symbolic color of Islam). Nationalism came before Islam, however, and the group referred to the Muslim Brothers as “The Criminal Brothers.” Two future presidents of Egypt, Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser and Anwar al-Sadat, came under the influence of this group. When the Greenshirts of Cairo began to display a taste for the political
street violence of their European role models, the Wafd Party organized its own group of "Blueshirts." British Intelligence believed that the Greenshirts were being funded by Italy.

Italian propaganda revealed that Mussolini was the "Protector of Islam," though his record in Libya suggested otherwise. As early as 1919 Mussolini pledged fascist support to the Egyptian revolutionary movement, though his references to Egypt as "that ancient Roman colony, the natural granary of Italy" suggested that he had something in mind other than independence. Mussolini's conquests in Libya and Somalia paled beside possession of Egypt, and dispossessing this prize from British hands remained a constant theme in Italy's foreign policy. The Italians began a largely inoffensive Arabic-language radio service to Egypt in 1934. Just to make sure the fellahin could listen large numbers of inexpensive Italian radio sets were shipped to Egypt. By the time British-Italian tensions threatened to spill over into war two years later, the Italian Fascists had already developed an audience for anti-British propaganda.

Some Egyptians, having little knowledge of Germany or German methods in Europe, were informed by Germany's Arabic-language radio broadcasts that Adolf Hitler was the latest Protector of Islam. Germany's covert operations branch had obviously familiarized themselves with Napoleon's attempts to ingratiate himself with Egypt's Muslims by letting it be rumored that he had secretly adopted Islam. Similar rumors now began to spread about Hitler, who was said to be a secret Muslim. Muhammad Haider (Hitler's "true" Islamic name) was waiting for his chance to restore Islamic rule to Egypt. It was even claimed that the Egyptian village of Tanta was the birthplace of Hitler's mother. The British responded by hiring their own rumormongers in the lower classes of Egyptian society.

Anti-British broadcasts and pamphlets often found a receptive audience among the Egyptians, who, regardless of social status, had to endure trying encounters with the unruly young men of the British Empire on a daily basis. Notions of racial and religious superiority ran deep on both sides, giving ample opportunity for offense to be given. The failure of Egypt to commit its army to the Allied cause did nothing to create a feeling of fellowship in struggle for the Allied forces. Muhammad Naguib, Egypt's first president, recalled how, as a lieutenant colonel traveling in civilian clothes, he was assaulted on a Cairo streetcar by three drunken South African soldiers who broke a beer bottle over his head and stole his wallet. Such incidents were all too common.

Berlin's propaganda efforts were helped by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, who had gone over to the Germans in the expectation they would drive the British from Palestine and eliminate the growing Jewish population. After falling out with authorities in the British mandate government of Palestine in 1937, al-Husayni fled first to
Syria and later to Iraq, where he joined the pro-Nazi coup leaders in 1941. When chased from Iraq by the British, the mufti took refuge in Axis-sympathetic Tehran until Allied occupation of that country forced al-Husayni to escape in disguise. Passing through Turkey, the mufti eventually landed in Berlin where he was received by Adolf Hitler. In Germany the mufti became an important part of the Nazi war effort, devising propaganda for the Arab world and organizing espionage activities in the Middle East. The mufti was also central to the creation of two Muslim Waffen SS divisions, the 13th “Hanjar” Division (Bosnians) and the 21st “Skanderberg” Division (Albanians).

The War-Time Egyptian Army

The Egyptian army numbered only 23,000 at the beginning of the war. Conscription was still the sole means of recruitment, but the small size of the army allowed most Egyptian males to avoid military service. Exemptions from conscription could be bought so that most of the enlisted men were Nubians from Upper Egypt who did not find military service as repulsive as did the *fellahin*. The Turko-Circassian elite continued to have strong representation in the officer corps. Though officers and men now at least had Arabic as a common language, they had little else in common. Many morale problems in the Egyptian army had less to do with pro-Axis sympathies than the traditional social gulf between officers and men and the remote posting of many detachments. Through 1941 units of the Egyptian army were entrusted with guarding the pass between the Libyan Sand Sea and the Qattara Depression, both impassable wastes for mechanized armies. It was lonely, isolated duty. The average *fellahin* soldier had no real experience or knowledge of the desert and found it bitterly sterile compared to the lush Nile Valley. Both the Axis and British armies rarely strayed from the coastal strip many miles to the north. While allegedly stationed on the western frontier, many of the officers could be found living in hotels in Alexandria, comforted by their wives and fine food while their men scraped by on a diet of beans in the desert.

There was also a disturbing tendency by the British to treat the Egyptian army as an arms depot when their own supplies ran short. In these circumstances it was difficult for young officers to feel pride in their profession. One such was 2nd Lt. Khalid Muhyi al-Din of the First Tank Regiment, a later member of the 1952 military junta:

One morning when I arrived at the brigade barracks, I found several British officers inspecting our tanks. I asked what was going on and the reply was like a fatal knife-stab: “The British are taking our tanks”. The British army had suffered a crushing defeat at Dunkirk at the hands of the Germans and lost much of its armor. We were easy prey and so they took our tanks. There
were four tank battalions in the brigade; so the British took three and left only one. Our bitterness and humiliation were indescribable. How could we be an army without arms? How could the occupiers take our weapons? The words “First Tank Regiment” became bitter in my mouth.1

The army would gradually increase to 100,000 men by the end of the war, its growth encouraged and supplied by the British when they were not obliged to ensure their own survival. Sedition affected certain elements in the officer corps, but seems to have had little effect on the junior ranks. The large British military mission allowed the British to continue to wield considerable influence on the army. There are accounts of Arab volunteers fighting in German units in Greece, the Russian front, and even in the Battle of Berlin, but documentation is extremely rare and it is impossible to know how many, if any, of these soldiers might have been Egyptian.

The Egyptian chief of staff, ‘Aziz al-Misri Pasha, attempted to flee to Iraq on May 16, 1941, when his loyalty came into question, but was captured after his plane was forced down by pilot error over Egypt. ‘Aziz al-Misri was a former tutor of the king and in the habit of comparing the British army unfavorably to the German army. Before the war ‘Aziz had joined ‘Ali Mahir in forming a secret society of nationalist army officers known as “The Ring of Iron.” Just before the war Egypt’s military academy began graduating young Arabs and Nubians with few of the connections needed in Egypt to reach the higher ranks. The Ring of Iron promised promotions and patronage in return for absolute loyalty. As chief of staff he refused to cooperate with the British Military Mission and was suspected of establishing links with Axis agents. At one point a pro-Axis member of the Ring of Iron, a young officer from Upper Egypt named Anwar al-Sadat, urged ‘Aziz to mount a rebellion against the British. On British insistence ‘Aziz al-Misri was placed on sick leave but not removed from his post. Sadat, another future president of Egypt, was in 1941 a member of a secret group of junior officers planning to disrupt and sabotage the expected retreat of British forces from the Axis onslaught.

When secret British plans for the defense of Siwa Oasis in the Western Desert were found in the possession of a captured Italian general, the suspicion fell on ‘Aziz. After his failed attempt to join the pro-Axis Arab officers in Iraq two months passed before ‘Aziz was found in Cairo. British plans for a quick court-martial were derailed when ‘Aziz revealed he had prepared an alibi in advance by pitching a plan to the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) (responsible for secret and covert operations) in which ‘Aziz would fly to Iraq to persuade the putschists to abandon their rebellion. When this account was confirmed, the British sacked the SOE officer involved (even though he never approved the plan) and set aside the court-martial. ‘Aziz was eventually interned in 1942.
Offensive and Counteroffensive in the Western Desert

In late November 1941 Rommel temporarily gave up on besieging Tobruk and began a surprise offensive toward the Egyptian border, scattering South African and British troops before him. Only lack of supplies forced him to turn back in December 1941, a problem that would constantly plague the Afrika Korps. Equipped with new Mark IV Panzers, a tank far outclassing anything the British could field, Rommel again went on the attack in January 1942.

In May 1942 Rommel’s tanks drove round the south flank of the Allied defensive positions and burst into their rear. The Afrika Korps rolled up the British and Free French garrisons after fierce fighting. By the middle of June 1942 Tobruk had fallen, together with the vast quantities of stores with which it had been reinforced. The South Africans had little time once the German attack began, but still managed to destroy all the petrol and water, the most valuable of their supplies. Forever short of these essentials, Rommel needed to finish his mission as soon as possible. His troops had little respite from the constant orders to advance. By the end of June 1942, they reached al-Alamein in a state of exhaustion, only 60 miles from Alexandria.

With the British Eighth Army in full retreat there seemed little hope the Germans could be stopped. German Stukas bombed Alexandria while Cairo waited for the same treatment. The British fleet left Alexandria to prevent its destruction or capture, doing little to encourage those left in the city. In Cairo some nationalist officers prepared to aid the Germans when they arrived. Many were arrested and Egyptian guards were replaced by British troops at the most sensitive installations. In Cairo and Alexandria government functionaries and military officers began burning every document they could get their hands on. British troops were not unaware of the sudden anxiety of their superiors, and many deserted into the swamps of the Delta region to avoid captivity in Germany.

Political Turmoil

In the political sphere the British stumbled badly in 1942 when they insisted that the new prime minister, Husayn Sirri Pasha, declare war on Vichy France. France had long-standing ties with Egypt dating back to Napoleon’s arrival. French culture, rather than British culture, had gained the most influence in Egypt, and French was in large part the language of the press, commerce, and the government. Moreover, Vichy France could in no way be considered a military threat to Egypt in 1942. The acquiescence of the new prime minister, Husayn Sirri Pasha, was widely unpopular. King Faruk demanded the resignation of the foreign minister and
was instead given the resignation of the prime minister and his entire cabinet.

In response to this political crisis the British now urged the king to appoint his political enemy, Nahas Pasha, as prime minister. Faruk refused, of course, and the British now began to fear the return of former prime minister ‘Ali Mahir Pasha, whom they suspected of conniving with the Italians. Sir Miles Lampson, the British ambassador and a veteran of Egypt and the Middle East, gave Faruk an ultimatum: appoint Nahas Pasha as prime minister by 6 P.M. February 4, 1942, or expect the consequences. Hassanein Bey, the king’s aide, delivered Faruk’s refusal to the British Embassy. One of the most interesting individuals in Egypt at the time, Hassanein Bey had published several books about his camel-borne exploration of the Egyptian desert, tracing ancient trade routes unused for centuries. At one point the king’s tutor, Hassanein was now Faruk’s closest advisor, as well as the Queen Mother’s secret lover.

When Faruk refused to budge, the ‘Abdin Palace was surrounded by British armored cars, tanks, and a mixed brigade of British, South African, and New Zealand infantry. All these units were in place only three hours after the deadline had expired. The king’s Royal Guards presented arms as the British drove past them into the palace courtyard; under Faruk’s orders they did nothing to prevent the intrusion. Lampson arrived and after a short meeting Nahas Pasha was invited to form a government. Faruk had been invited to sign a document of abdication, but on Hassanein Pasha’s advice the king suddenly adopted a more flexible attitude to British demands. The whole incident enraged Egypt’s nationalists and forever tainted the Wafd Party with the charge of collaboration in the minds of many Egyptians. Many nationalist officers later cited the event as a turning point in their political development, even though many had little respect for the king.

Nahas Pasha was generally cooperative with the British. He no doubt realized that a war situation was the wrong time to issue demands for a British withdrawal, preferring to wait until the end of the war to claim compensation for Egypt’s support. Nahas seems to have appreciated the threat posed to Egypt’s independence by an Axis occupation. Rather than bringing liberation from European domination, such an occupation would threaten all his work in gradually decreasing British influence in Egypt. For his purposes it was imperative that Britain not lose the war.

In April 1942 ‘Ali Mahir Pasha was placed under house arrest for reasons “relating to the security of the state.” Elections were held under strict conditions forbidding mention of the events at ‘Abdin Palace, King Faruk, or British activities in Egypt. Not surprisingly the major opposition parties (the Liberals and Sa’adists) boycotted the elections, allowing the Wafd Party of Nahas Pasha to take 234 of 264 seats. Nahas’s authoritarian rule soon created conflicts within his own party. The finance minister was
forced from the government, taking his knowledge of its inner workings with him. These secrets appeared in an underground pamphlet entitled *The Black Book*, which alleged corruption and profiteering on the part of Nahas Pasha and his wife’s family, the powerful Wakil clan. Nahas Pasha’s failure to sue the author for libel only reinforced the public perception that the charges were accurate.

**The Tide Turns in North Africa**

The Axis surge into Egypt broke on the shoals of al-Alamein in early July 1942. The Afrika Korps was exhausted and short of virtually everything. Rommel’s supply lines were nearly 1,000 miles long and were under constant attack from RAF fighters. After Rommel was forced to retire at al-Alamein, the Commonwealth forces and the Eighth Army went on the offensive. Since the beginning of the war the British had been commanded by General Sir Archibald Wavell, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, and Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Alexander. They were all capable commanders in their own right, but when command devolved on General Bernard Montgomery in August 1942 the British found a man ready to inspire and lead the Allied forces to a crushing defeat of the Germans. Even the deserters in the Delta began to return to the army. On November 12, 1942, Tobruk was retaken.

The last Axis forces in North Africa were forced to surrender in Tunis in May 1943. There were celebrations in Egypt at the time of the British victory, but with no external threat to the country the population soon returned to resentment of the British presence. The 1936 Treaty called for British troops only in the Suez Canal Zone. Now temporary British bases elsewhere in the country showed no sign of closing while British soldiers seemed to fill the streets of Cairo. Nahas Pasha was accused of working in concert with the British to reinstate full military occupation. It was a groundless charge, but the opposition, with the support of King Faruk, had little difficulty in inflaming popular opinion against Nahas Pasha. Abandoned and isolated, the prime minister was dismissed by the king in October 1944.

Dr. Ahmad Mahir Pasha, leader of the Sa’adist Party and brother of ‘Ali Mahir Pasha, was invited to form a new government. Though he had been charged and acquitted as a conspirator in the assassination of Sir Lee Stack in 1924, Ahmad Mahir was accommodating to British wartime needs, pledging the cooperation of the Egyptian government until the war against Germany and Japan was over. Moreover, Ahmad Mahir suggested that, in view of Egypt’s political sacrifices and contributions to the war effort, it was impossible to consider Egypt as neutral in the ongoing conflict. With the war nearly over, the government joined most
of the world’s nations in declaring war on Germany, a condition of mem-
bership in the new United Nations organization to be created after the
war. It was a sensible decision made in concert with the international
community, but resulted in the assassination of Ahmad Mahir as he left
the Chamber of Deputies on February 24, 1945.

The Sudan Question

In 1944 the attention of Egypt’s politicians returned to the Sudan when
they interpreted British actions as favoring the severance of the Sudan
from Egypt. The Sudan’s curious political situation gave plenty of room
for disputes between the two governing powers. Administratively, the
nation was ruled by the Sudan Government, which theoretically
answered to the two condominium partners. It was, under international
law, neither a colony of Britain nor of Egypt. This situation could not be
changed without the prior agreement of both Egypt and Britain. Many
Egyptian politicians, including Nahas Pasha, proclaimed that the Sudan
was an indivisible part of the Egyptian nation. A growing Sudanese
nationalist movement was eager to learn the arts of self-governance that
were being offered by the British in Sudan and had little interest in con-
tinuing under the condominium arrangements.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the War

The Muslim Brotherhood was an Islamic revivalist movement founded
in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna. Originally intended as an association to facili-
tate Islamic teaching, it quickly took on political overtones and began to
agitate for an Islamic state in Egypt. Besides challenging the government,
it threatened the Islamic leadership of al-Azhar (Cairo’s Islamic univer-
sity), which had grown rather tame since being brought under state con-
trol in the nineteenth century.

The British suspected Egyptian frontier defense units of facilitating
arms smuggling to the Muslim Brotherhood and ordered these units
pulled back in April 1941. Al-Banna was sent to live in Qena in Upper
Egypt at the same time, but was back in Cairo a few weeks later. British
Intelligence believed the armed branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was
ready to sabotage British installations. On the insistence of British ambas-
sador Lampson, al-Banna was arrested. Within a month he was released
by the Cairo police. The Brotherhood spread rumors of British malfe-
sance whenever possible. In early 1945 rumors spread that the British
were demanding the provision of an Egyptian labor corps for use in the
Far East in the war against Japan. Egypt’s establishment of diplomatic
relations with the atheist Soviet Union provoked street demonstrations
in 1943 by Muslim Brothers and students of al-Azhar. Hassan al-Banna was exiled to Upper Egypt in an attempt to prevent further unrest.

The Royal Egyptian Air Force

The Egyptian air force began modestly in 1932, when three Egyptian pilots joined two British pilots in flying a squadron of five De Havilland Gypsy Moths. One of the conditions of the 1936 Treaty called for Britain to offer assistance in developing the Egyptian air force. The Royal Egyptian Air Force (REAF) was formed in 1937. The air force received a donation in 1939 of a squadron of British Gloster Gladiators, the last biplane fighter built for the RAF. Further Gladiators were purchased from Britain in 1940, where the five-year-old fighters were already being treated as surplus. Though not regarded as first-rate war machines, they at least gave Egypt the foundation of a war-capable air force. Highly maneuverable, the biplanes were outclassed as fighting machines by the new aircraft of the Axis nations. When the British realized later under Italian threat that their air defenses for Egypt were inadequate, the RAF repossessed a number of the Gladiators, the only reinforcement immediately available.

By the end of the war the air force had five squadrons of planes, including three squadrons of fighters, one transport squadron, and one bomber squadron. The fighter squadrons added Westland Lysanders, Avro Ansons, and Hawker Audaxes to the original Gladiators. The bombers were of the British Halifax and Lancaster types. The transport squadron flew Curtiss C-46s and Douglas C-47s. Twenty-three Miles Magister trainers were transferred from the RAF to the REAF in 1940 for pilot training. All the aircraft were serviced by British personnel on loan and mechanics from Egypt’s civilian airline.

During the war Egyptian pilots and air crews gained experience by joining British air patrols over the Suez Canal and the Western Desert. The fighter squadron in the Suez region was officially there for training purposes only, but Egyptian pilots here flew against Axis bombers, though their Gladiators were generally too slow to catch them. A special force was detailed to Bahriya Oasis to defend the western frontier. This unit, under the command of Prince Isma’il Daoud, consisted of six light tanks, motorized troops, and a squadron of Lysander aircraft. The prince was sent to this isolated outpost as a result of his pro-British sympathies.

Several of the squadrons had little to do in the way of combat activity and began to wile away the long hours of the war by scheming against the British. The Egyptian pilots were educated young men who had been exposed to the highly politicized atmosphere of the Egyptian universities. Most had strong nationalist opinions, and some were recruited by the
Muslim Brotherhood. Anwar al-Sadat involved several of the pilots in anti-British activities. In 1941 several incidents tainted the political reliability of the air force. In May 1941, Squadron Leader Husayn Zulficar was the pilot in ‘Aziz al-Misri’s aborted attempt to fly to Iraq. Aerial photography was a common mission of the REAF, and in July 1941 a small group of pilots attempted to deliver photos of British positions to the Afrika Korps. On the first attempt, the Egyptian-marked plane was shot down by the Germans. Warrant Officer Muhammad Ridwan Salim tried again the next day and this time reached the German lines intact. This type of activity threatened the existence of the entire air force, which could be easily shut down by the British. The REAF commander resigned and dozens of men were transferred to the infantry.

Conclusion

It is difficult to evaluate the World War II Egyptian army. For political reasons it was never sent to the battlefield even when German and Italian armies were marching across the frontier. Though some British officers may have yearned for the days of stalwart regiments of fellahin under British command, those times were already consigned to history. Despite frequent concerns that the Egyptian army might rebel in a crisis, it, in fact, behaved with extraordinary professionalism for the most part, executing its many defensive roles in a manner that allowed the British to concentrate fighting troops in the western frontier instead of dispersing them in a myriad of other duties. It is interesting to compare the relative inactivity of the Egyptian army compared to the Sudan Defence Force (now completely separate from the Egyptian army), which was very active in fighting in Ethiopia and Libya.

Axis sympathies and hatred of British occupation inspired some Arab officers to view the war as an opportunity to pursue a policy of radical nationalism. Finding a common enemy in Christian Britain, officers such as Sadat established ties with the Muslim Brotherhood that would be used to depose the king shortly after the war.
CHAPTER 18

The Army Takes Charge:
The Failure of 1948, The “Free Officers Movement” of the 1950s, and the Suez Crisis

1948: Egypt’s First War with Israel

The Arab League was formed in May 1945 to unite postcolonial Arab states. The charter members included Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Transjordan, and Iraq. Egypt, the largest and most powerful of the group, expected to once again take up its leadership role in the Arab world. The Arab League was not the brotherhood of nations it pretended to be. Iraq felt itself ready to challenge Egyptian arrogance, while the Saudi royal family was still engaged in a bitter feud with the Hashemite kings of Iraq and Transjordan. Lebanon still had a majority Christian Arab population and a Christian-based government.

When the Second World War ended, the paramilitary wing of the Muslim Brotherhood began a series of strikes against the British occupation. Bombs destroyed Jewish businesses, soldiers were attacked, and judges assassinated. The Brotherhood quickly became a threat to the Egyptian government as well as the British. As Germany began to collapse under the weight of the relentless Soviet offensive in 1945, the Grand Mufti, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, made his escape through Switzerland and Egypt, surfacing in Palestine in 1946. Here he began a struggle with both Jews and the king of Jordan for dominance in Palestine.

In 1948 Egypt became part of a deeply flawed coalition of Arab states determined to prevent the foundation of a Jewish state in Palestine. While the campaign has entered Israeli political mythology as an attempt by a monolithic Arab adversary to erase the heavily outnumbered Jewish people from the Holy Land, the Israelis succeeded from the start in exploiting
the weaknesses of the fractious Arab coalition. The numerical superiority of the Arab allies did not make itself felt on the battlefield, and the Israel Defense Force had at all times superiority in military numbers in the theater of operation. Egypt’s armed forces had entered another period of decline due to several factors, including the refusal of Egyptian officers in the name of nationalism to cooperate with the British Military Mission after 1945, the subsequent expiration of the Mission in 1947, and a reluctance to purchase the arms suggested by the Mission. Well aware of its weakened state, the army became the main opposition to King Faruk’s eagerness for a popular war in Palestine. It was no doubt enticing for Faruk to see himself at the front of a wave of public approval after the indignities endured during the Second World War.

The Israelis had superior arms after they were resupplied with Czech weapons during the war’s first truce. The Arab League imposed quotas for arms contributions on each member state, but the quotas cited only numbers, not quality. Saudi Arabia contributed over 200 Austrian rifles taken from the Ottomans in the nineteenth century. Needless to say, no ammunition could be found for these antiques. Other nations, such as Egypt, had the means to supply modern arms but instead contributed its own scrap heap of vintage weapons. The subsequent political scandal over the quality of arms provided to Egyptian fighters would become one of the main causes of the downfall of the Egyptian monarchy a few years later.

**Guerrilla War in Palestine**

Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood considered the Jewish Zionists another branch of European imperialism. Members were sent as early as 1946 to join Palestinian militant groups. Once in Palestine the Brothers became closely allied to Mufti al-Husayni. By 1947 the Brotherhood began military training for volunteers. Brotherhood leader Hassan al-Banna promised to deliver 10,000 fighters to Palestine. King Faruk refrained from interfering with these activities. He no doubt realized that any attempt to control the Brotherhood would result in a civil conflict. As long as the militancy of the Brotherhood could be directed beyond Egypt’s borders, their participation in the Palestinian conflict was acceptable. There remained the danger, however, that the Brotherhood might use the conflict to create a combat-experienced army capable of overthrowing the king and his government at home.

When the regular Egyptian army arrived in a later stage of the conflict, the Brothers supplied the Egyptian officers with a great deal of tactical and strategic information, most of which was ignored. The Brothers had
gained a reputation for ferocity in battle, but to the regular army they remained military amateurs.

**Invasion of the Arab Armies**

The British mandate in Palestine expired in May 1948. Tired of religious and political terrorism, the British army was eager to leave. Unknown to his allies in the Arab League, Jordan’s King ‘Abdullah had spent the last two years conducting secret negotiations with the Palestinian Jews and the British. It was arranged that Transjordan would enter Palestine as the British mandate expired and occupy everything except the Jewish areas defined by the UN partition plan. On May 14, 1948, the Egyptian government issued a proclamation stating that Egyptian forces had been ordered to restore order and “stop the slaughter that the Jewish forces are perpetrating against the Arabs.”

The other Arab armies expected to do little more than show up in Palestine to bring an end to the Zionist project. The Arabs lacked fighting experience, however, as Arab troops had for the most part remained spectators to World War II’s battles. Jewish forces, on the other hand, contained large numbers of veterans of the Second World War (many served with the British-led Jewish Brigade in Italy), with more battle-savvy volunteers joining the fray from abroad as the war progressed. Of the three Arab armies that mattered in the war, Egypt and Iraq were both still struggling to establish new, postoccupation militaries, while the army of Transjordan was actually still under British command. Syria and Lebanon had only small, poorly organized armies. The “armies” of Saudi Arabia and Yemen were little more than tribal militias and could contribute little to the war. The Palestinians themselves had no military experience other than some training in militant organizations.

In Egypt General Ahmad ‘Ali al-Mu’awi was placed in command of the expeditionary force, with Colonel Muhammad Naguib as his second in command. Three infantry battalions and a battalion of scouts formed the core of the force, with three battalions in reserve. The force was augmented with field artillery, a machine-gun battalion, an antiaircraft battalion and various support units. Their vaguely defined mission was to eliminate Jewish resistance and occupy the southern part of Palestine.

With the regular army on its way it became imperative to draw the fighters of the Muslim Brotherhood under the command of the Egyptian army. Colonel ‘Abd al-Aziz, a cavalry officer and lecturer at the Staff College, was sent to take command of the Ikhwan in Palestine, now reformed into a battalion of the Egyptian army. Ignoring the advice of the Brotherhood’s veterans to avoid direct attacks on Jewish settlements, ‘Abd al-Aziz ordered an assault on the besieged settlement of Orthodox Jews at
Kfar Dorom in the Negev Desert on May 10, 1948. The opening barrage of Egyptian artillery failed to hit any targets in the settlement, but the Brothers were urged on to the attack by the Egyptian Command. When they reached the wire surrounding the settlement, the Brothers were mown down by concentrated fire and improvised explosives. At this crucial moment in the battle the Egyptian artillery opened up with a second barrage. This time the shells fell short, raining down on the trapped assault force. The Brothers’ advance was shattered, and they began to retreat, leaving at least 50 dead behind. The fiasco at Kfar Dorom was blamed on the military shortcomings of the Muslim Brotherhood.

A relief column sent to Kfar Dorom was destroyed in an ambush by Egyptian troops, its survivors reaching the settlement only to add to the mouths to feed. A last attempt was made to take the settlement, this time with Egyptian armor. The tanks, however, turned back after taking fire from the settlement’s single antitank weapon. Once again, the Brothers were left to take heavy casualties on the wire. It was an inauspicious start to military collaboration between the Brotherhood and the regular army.

While Kfar Dorom could be set aside for later conquest, the settlement of Yad Mordechai could not be bypassed, lying as it did on the main land route of the Egyptian army into Palestine. Other detachments of the Egyptian army were being landed by sea farther north at Majdal, and it was desired that the two groups join up as soon as possible. Yad Mordechai held out for five days against repeated assaults by a vastly superior Egyptian force that took hundreds of casualties. When the Israeli survivors abandoned the place after running out of ammunition and water, the way seemed finally clear to Palestine. The Egyptian lines of communication continued to be hit hard by raids of the “Negev Beasts,” a local Israeli commando formation.

‘Abd al-Aziz’s first battalion of Ikhwan fighters (two more would be added during the war) moved into Hebron and then into Bethlehem, which had already been taken by the Jordanian Arab Legion. The Legion’s refusal of a request for the Brotherhood’s flag to be raised alongside the Jordanian flag over the captured police headquarters raised friction between the two allied formations that lasted until both units received orders to cooperate.

The Egyptians proceeded north on the road to Tel Aviv. Israel’s newly delivered Messerschmitts attacked the column on the way but did little damage. At Ashdod the Egyptian brigade was met by three battalions of Israelis (including one battalion of Irgun fighters) and a number of jeeps with mounted machine guns from the Negev Brigade. The Israeli attack was repulsed, but succeeded in halting the advance of the Egyptians. With rumors of an approaching truce, both sides intensified their activity, the Egyptians mopping up resistance in their rear and the Israelis retaking positions lost to the Egyptian army. An amateurish counterattack on the
main Egyptian force at Isdud on June 2, 1948, resulted in heavy Jewish casualties. The Muslim Brothers took heavy casualties in the fighting for villages and settlements, including the capture of Nitzanim Kibbutz alongside Egyptian regulars in a 15-hour battle.

On June 11, 1948, a truce was declared, but Egyptian planes continued to bomb Israeli positions, including Tel Aviv. Jewish militias, for their part, used the truce to continue the expulsion of Arabs from their villages. Egypt opposed the truce at first, but King ‘Abdullah, whose Arab Legion had fulfilled most of his war aims, held sway over the rest of the Arab allies in promoting the cease-fire. Both Egypt and the Arab Legion’s British commander appealed to London for desperately needed arms, but were refused due to the international arms embargo on the conflict. In the weeks leading up to June 11, 1948, the Israelis had received shipments of artillery, mortars, tanks, and warplanes while doubling the size of the new Israel Defence Force.

When the Syrians took advantage of the truce to evaluate the performance of their military, the contributions of the infantry were found lacking. In search of good fighting material, the Syrians decided to recruit from the Circassian diaspora population concentrated on the Golan Heights.

**Egyptian Air Operations**

One advantage of the participation of Egyptian regular forces was the participation of the air force in coordinated assaults. Out of the Arab League states at the beginning of the war only Egypt had anything like a real air force. By 1948 all British personnel had been phased out, leaving the air force solidly in Egyptian hands, though spare parts and ammunition continued to be obtained from the RAF. At the start of the war the air force consisted of two squadrons of Spitfires and two squadrons of transport planes. The Israelis possessed an almost useless grab bag of commercial aircraft and trainers, none of which could challenge Egyptian authority in the skies. The abandoned RAF base at al-Arish was used as an advance base for air operations over Palestine.

Near the end of May 1948, the Israelis began receiving deliveries of Messerschmitts almost daily. Pilots were no longer lacking as experienced Jewish World War II veterans began to arrive from South Africa, Britain, and Canada. Some of the vintage Egyptian aircraft were soon outclassed by the new Israeli warplanes, though this did not always ensure Israeli success. A pilot of one of the new Messerschmitts thought he spotted an easy target in one of the REAF’s Lysanders, but the Lysander pilot was Air Commodore ‘Abd al-Moneim Mikaati, an expert in the plane’s capabilities:
The pilot of the Israeli aircraft came up behind us. I told my gunner to fire just before the Messerschmitt came into range and I went down to about 100 feet. Then the gunner fired and I throttled right back. You know the Lysander can drop like a stone to land in a field—like they did when the RAF took spies in and out of France. The Israeli must have been concentrating on keeping me in his sights because he dropped his nose to follow. He overshot and went right in, almost level with me. I honestly felt sick in my stomach and—I don’t know why—I saluted him. Then we flew straight back to Cairo.¹

The War Resumes

Yielding to the pressure of public opinion, the Arab nations decided to resume the war on July 6, 1948. Egyptian operations resumed on July 8. Though reinforced during the truce, the Egyptian army continued to suffer from logistical inefficiency and the inability of its officer corps to deal with changing conditions on the battlefield. The fresh Egyptian offensive concentrated on securing the Negev Desert, forming nearly half of the new Israeli state. Progress was slow and a dispute between General al-Muʿawi and Colonel Naguib led to the latter being temporarily relieved of command. Israeli planes bombed Cairo for the first time in the war, killing over 20. By July 14, 1948, the Israelis felt confident enough to take the offensive, eager to retake lost ground in the Negev before the UN Security Council imposed another truce on the belligerents. The next day the Jordanian government announced that the Arab Legion had run out of ammunition. When the second truce began on July 18, the Israelis had retaken some points but had not driven the Egyptians from the Negev. Before the truce expired the Egyptian army was joined by small units from Sudan and Saudi Arabia. The 250 Sudanese were handpicked World War II veterans, but were wasted by an Egyptian decision to split the unit up as piecemeal reinforcements.

Third Phase of the 1948 War

The Egyptian army was left badly exposed by ‘Abdullah’s withdrawal of his forces. An Israeli offensive (Operation Moav) beginning in mid-October 1948 split the Egyptian forces into three groups. The greater part of the army was pinned down in the Gaza and Palestine while a further brigade was encircled at Faluja. Two future members of the revolutionary Free Officers Movement, Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser and Zakariya Muhyi al-Din, were part of the brigade at Faluja. Glubb Pasha and King ‘Abdullah declined to send the Transjordanian army to relieve the siege, regarding Egypt as nearly as much an enemy as the Jewish state. Instead they used the Arab Legion to consolidate control of the West Bank and to disarm the forces of Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husayni.
With another truce approaching the Egyptians sent their flagship, the *Amir Faruk*, to a point outside Tel Aviv to prevent Israel from resupplying during the truce. Israeli commandos filled two former Italian navy motorboats with explosives and drove them at high speed toward the *Amir Faruk*. The drivers dropped out of the boats once they were close to their target and were rescued by other Israeli ships, a modern and more effective version of the old fireship attack. The Egyptian flagship took only a few minutes to sink, taking 500 Egyptian sailors with it.

A third truce came into effect on October 31, but lasted only until December 22, 1948, when Israeli forces launched a new offensive against the Egyptians. Without any assistance from its erstwhile allies, Cairo was pressed to negotiate, leading to the UN sponsored cease-fire of January 7, 1949.

In contrast to the regular Egyptian army, the volunteer units of the Muslim Brotherhood emerged from the war with their reputation enhanced by courageous fighting against the Israelis. They were now a serious political force in Egypt. As recriminations began to mount against the government’s ineffective and often corrupt handling of the war, the prime minister, Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi, attempted to ban the Muslim Brothers on December 18, 1948, citing their alleged involvement in a plot to overthrow King Faruk. A few weeks later al-Nuqrashi was assassinated by the Brothers’ paramilitary wing. Al-Banna denounced the killing, but was now a marked man himself. Government agents murdered al-Banna in public in Cairo on December 27, 1948. Thousands of Muslim Brothers were rounded up and placed in prison indefinitely. Most remained there until April 1951, when a court decided the original charge of plotting against the monarchy was unsubstantiated.

The Circassians in 1948

Circassians were active on both sides of the war. Hundreds joined the Arab Liberation Army of Fawz al-Din Qawukji, once more fighting alongside Egyptian volunteers. Others fought as a group in the Syrian army, most notably in the battle of Tel ‘Azayzat. Fighting in the traditional style, the lightly armed Circassians suffered heavy losses against the heavier weapons of the Israelis, losing their commander, Jawad Anzor, in battle. Other Circassians were convinced (along with some of their Druze neighbors) to join the Israeli 7th Brigade, fighting along the northern border with Syria. In Transjordan the Circassians formed the core of the army at its formation in 1921. By 1948 many Circassians held officers’ ranks in the Arab Legion and formed the royal bodyguard, as they do to this day.
The 1952 Revolution

In the years after the war there was little progress in shaking off the British presence in Egypt. The Wafd Party was again in government and again embroiled in numerous corruption scandals. The party tried to redirect Egyptian anger toward the British. In October 1951 Nahas Pasha announced in a fit of anger that he was scrapping both the 1936 Treaty and the 1899 Sudan Agreement. In the British Embassy in Cairo intelligence agents conspired to dispose of the Wafd government. Armed attacks, often led by the Muslim Brotherhood, now began to target British installations and individuals. Paramilitaries and radical groups sprang up everywhere, all with the same intention of expelling the British. The rebels were often aided by the Buluk al-Nizam, the auxiliary police. Even 72-year-old ‘Aziz ‘Ali al-Misri returned to action, leading guerrilla attacks against British targets. The Canal Zone became especially unsafe, and food deliveries had to arrive in armed convoys. Roads often ran alongside one of Egypt’s many irrigation canals, and the sunken banks made excellent cover for guerrilla ambushes. Roadside bombs were also used to some effect. British attempts to snuff out the violence only inflamed public opinion. In December 1951 the British demolished part of a suburb of al-Isma’iliya to eliminate sniper fire and allow for the passage of a new water supply for the garrison. This poorly considered decision provoked Egyptian nationalists throughout the country.

At the first light of January 25, 1952, British troops attempted to disarm Egyptian police at their barracks in al-Isma’iliya. The police were suspected of aiding and even participating in the numerous guerrilla attacks in the Canal Zone. The Egyptian police received orders from the Minister of the Interior to resist the British, even though tanks formed part of the British force. The lightly armed Egyptians fought for five hours, leaving 50 policemen dead and 100 wounded when they finally surrendered.

The government encouraged an anti-British demonstration in Cairo, but quickly lost control. Gangs of young men roamed the city, setting fire to British businesses and offices as well as any business that catered to the British, such as cinemas, clubs, and bars. Looters followed the arsonists (many of whom seemed carefully organized rather than spontaneously angry). The mob was given the run of the city until 6 P.M., when the Egyptian army finally made an appearance on the streets. Order was restored, but most of the infrastructure of British society in Egypt had disappeared in a matter of a few hours. Twenty-six foreigners were killed in the rioting.

Faruk took the opportunity to dismiss his old enemy, Nahas Pasha, from government on the grounds that he had failed to maintain security and order. The 68-year-old ‘Ali Mahir Pasha made a return as prime minister, ready to pursue his objectives of expelling the British from the Canal Zone and consolidating Egyptian control over the Sudan. Egypt’s political
system, however, was in a state of collapse. Only the army provided authority to the state, and it was almost inevitable that the army would seize control to “save the nation.”

On July 23, 1952 the Free Officers Movement seized power. Faruk was ordered to abdicate in favor of his infant son, Prince Ahmad Fu’ad. The king and his family were expelled from Egypt the same day, leaving for Europe on the royal yacht Mahroussa. As the ship left the harbor at Alexandria, it was presented with a 21-gun salute by the Egyptian navy. The well-planned and ultimately bloodless coup was distinctly different from the bloody overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq a few years later, in which the royal family and leading politicians were slaughtered in the streets.

Unlike some revolutions, there was no clean sweep of existing political institutions in Egypt. ’Ali Mahir remained prime minister, there was still a king, and the government continued to meet. Nasser, the real power behind the revolution, remained cautious, not yet revealing himself or his plans. The army’s commander in chief, Muhammad Naguib, was thrust into the spotlight as the new president and supposed leader of the revolution.

It was two months before a clear picture of the military junta began to emerge. The most important members were all part of the “Committee of Nine” (from which Naguib was noticeably absent). The following is a list of founding members of the Free Officers Movement:

Colonel Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser—A 34-year-old Alexandrian, Nasser was a proponent of socialism and Arab nationalism. Distinguished in his defense of Faluja in 1948, Nasser was especially eager to eliminate the corruption he blamed for the Egyptian defeat against Israel.

Major ‘Abd al-Hakim Amir—A 33-year-old member of the Muslim Brothers, he was regarded as the best military man of the group. One of Nasser’s closest associates, the major was propelled to the rank of field marshal in less than six years.

Major Salah Salim—A 32-year-old member of the general staff, of Circassian descent, he was born in the Sudan where he worked hard to achieve the political unity of the Nile Valley. He was often in disagreement with the other Free Officers.

Major Khalid Muhyi al-Din—A 30-year-old Marxist-Communist, he was often at odds with other members of the Revolutionary Council. He quickly fell out with Nasser over the restoration of constitutional government.

Lt. Col. Anwar al-Sadat—The 34-year-old son of an Egyptian father and a Nubian mother, his militant activities had placed him in prison several times and cost him his commission during the Second World War before he was allowed to rejoin the army in 1950. A Nasser loyalist, Sadat became Egypt’s first vice president.
Major Kamal al-Din Hussayn—A 31-year-old major in the artillery, he resigned from the army in 1948 to join Muslim Brotherhood irregulars in Palestine. He trained fedayeen fighters in Palestine before returning to Egypt, where he commanded guerrillas in the Canal Zone in 1951.

Zakariyya Muhyi al-Din—A 34-year-old, part Circassian, infantry officer with experience in Sudan and the 1948 war in Palestine, he took control of military intelligence for the RCC and later established the Mukhabarat (secret service).

Wing Cmdr. Gamal Salim—A 34-year-old Sudanese-born wing commander in the Royal Egyptian Air Force, he was a member of the Egyptian Socialist Party.

Wing Cmdr. Abd al-Latif Boghdadi—A 35-year-old, he was a former partner of Sadat in planning anti-British sabotage during World War II.

Sqdn. Leader Hassan Ibrahim—This 35-year-old pilot was a veteran of the “Young Egypt” organization.

The Free Officers Movement made ample use of the network established by the Muslim Brothers. Many officers of the regular army had close contacts with the Brothers, such as Major Mahmud Labib, leader of the organization’s paramilitary wing. The support of the Brotherhood was based on al-Banna’s assertion that the Ikhwan did not desire political power for themselves, but were ready to support any group or individual who was prepared to restore Islamic rule to Egypt.

The traditional political and economic elites of Egypt were about to receive several shocks. Land reform broke up the vast commercial estates, at last giving the fellahin an opportunity to profit from their own labor. The titles of pasha and bey were abolished as Ottoman relics. Nearly 500 army officers, including many of the Turko-Circassian class, were dropped from the military establishment. The political parties were presented with a challenge to clean up their sorry record of corruption or face direct military rule. This message took some time to sink in, particularly with the Wafd Party, which by this time had taken an almost proprietary attitude toward the rule of Egypt, military junta or not. The Committee of Nine demanded the sacrifice of Nahas Pasha as leader as one of its conditions for the continued existence of the Wafd Party. The Muslim Brothers fared worse, being officially banned and their leader, al-Hodeibi, imprisoned.

Nasser eventually emerged as the true leader of the military junta and assumed the role of president while Naguib went into retirement. While giving a speech in Alexandria in October 1954, Nasser was nearly assassinated by gunmen. The Muslim Brothers were blamed and again thousands of members were thrown into jail. Nasser’s rage
worked its way down to the jailers, and several of the Brothers died under torture.

**The Suez Crisis: 1956**

British troops left the Canal Zone following an October 1954 agreement on the evacuation of British troops. By June 1956 the last British soldiers had gone. The new Egyptian regime promptly began to turn up the heat on the young Israeli state, blockading the Gulf of Aqaba, closing the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping, and providing material support to the nascent Palestinian resistance movement.

In February 1955 an Israeli raid on an Egyptian military base in Gaza left 37 Egyptian soldiers dead. The attack came as a surprise to the Egyptians since there had been little activity along the armistice lines in the area for nearly four months. The raid, led by a young officer named Ariel Sharon, was viewed as a humiliation to Egyptian arms. Nasser failed to react to the provocation despite public outrage. The Egyptian army was simply not ready for a war with Israel. The regime realized the immediate need for modern weapons and sealed a deal a few months later with the Soviet Union for Czech-made weapons, including T-34 tanks. Efforts were made to obtain up-to-date weapons from the United States and Britain, but their unwillingness to supply them led Egypt into the dangerous diplomatic territory of an alliance with the Communist East. At the same time, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan prepare plans for an invasion of Egypt.

**Egypt’s Armed Forces in 1956**

Egypt possessed a significant air force of 400 planes by 1956, though many were inoperational at any one time. New Russian-made MiG fighters were being added to the squadrons of British-built Vampires and Meteors. There were also squadrons of Russian Ilyushin bombers and transport craft. The air bases were protected by an efficient antiaircraft corps armed with new Czech guns. The number of trained pilots was small, however, and the Egyptians were still far from having mastered their new Soviet warplanes. The air force was, therefore, augmented by a number of Czech and Soviet pilots.

The army of five divisions (90,000 men) was still organized along British lines and deployed mainly in the Sinai and the Gaza Strip, with the remainder dedicated to the defense of the Suez Canal. Artillery, personnel carriers, armored cars, and tanks were a mixture of British and Russian equipment that reflected Egypt’s changing political orientation. Some 80 German World War II veterans were hired as military advisors and given the task of preparing a military evaluation of the Sinai. The
commander in chief of the armed forces was Nasser’s close ally, Field Marshal ‘Abd al-Hakim Amir. The division holding the Gaza Strip was formed from Palestinian conscripts (with Egyptian commanders), but was otherwise fully integrated into the regular army as the 8th Infantry Division.

The navy was insignificant, consisting of two surplus British destroyers and two surplus Soviet destroyers as its main ships. A handful of smaller ships of little potential provided the rest of the fleet, save for a score of motor torpedo boats (of Soviet and British make) that constituted the navy’s sole threat.

**Countdown to Crisis**

Egypt’s relations with the West deteriorated rapidly following the Soviet/Czech arms deal, with the United States, Britain, and the World Bank all pulling their financial assistance for the Aswan Dam project in the summer of 1956. Nasser responded with a bold and unforeseen move—the nationalization of the Suez Canal. In Egypt the move was interpreted as an expression of Egyptian sovereignty and independence. In a rebuff to the West, the proceeds of the Canal’s operations would now pay for the construction of the Aswan Dam. In his announcement of the move, Nasser emphasized the unsavory financial history of the Suez Canal Company and evoked the cost in blood and limbs to the Egyptian workers killed or maimed in its construction.

Though the political timing of the seizure was designed to maximize its impact on the Egyptian people and the larger Arab world, it came without consideration of the state of the Egyptian army, which was ill-prepared to defend the Canal against a military challenge. Egyptian intelligence warned of an imminent attack by Britain and/or France throughout 1956, and the bulk of the Soviet-supplied arms had not yet arrived. Egypt’s new ally, the USSR, was also involved in a political crisis in its satellite state of Hungary, which would lead to the Soviet intervention of November 1956. The seizure of the Canal was a dangerous gambit based on the assumption that Britain and France would hesitate to begin a new conflict in the region and risk alienating the Arab world. In the meantime Egyptians would prove their ability to manage the Canal while keeping the Canal open to international shipping and promising to compensate the shareholders of the Suez Canal Company. In this scenario the danger of war would drop sharply within weeks.

In placing his faith on a single possible outcome, Nasser ignored the likelihood of a swift Anglo-French military reaction and, more importantly, the possibility of Israeli collusion with the European imperialists. Of crucial importance here was Article 4 of the 1954 agreement of the withdrawal of British forces from the Canal Zone. This article provided
for a return of British troops in the event of an attack by an outside power against any Arab League state. Unsettled by Nasser’s support for armed Arab nationalist movements in colonial territories such as the Aden Protectorate and Algeria, the British and French made a secret agreement with Israel, in which Israel would attack the Sinai, enabling the European powers to reoccupy the Canal Zone. Israel was convinced of the importance of tackling the Egyptian threat before Egypt received its new Soviet arms.

Britain’s prime minister, Sir Anthony Eden, staked much of his reputation on his prewar opposition to the appeasement policy of Neville Chamberlain. Eden now saw himself in a position to prove the effectiveness of strong action in dealing with petty and presumptive rulers such as Nasser. Comparing Nasser’s nationalization of European assets to the earlier nationalization programs of Hitler and Mussolini, Eden was determined to avoid any accusations of appeasement.

In the meantime the British and French found themselves unable to make an immediate military response to the Egyptian seizure of the Canal Zone. Preparations were slow, as naval forces were redeployed, paratroops trained for the attack, and a joint air force assembled on Cyprus. The months that elapsed allowed Nasser to make diplomatic inroads on an Egyptian claim to the Canal based on international law. By the time the Anglo-French militaries were ready to attack, Nasser held the upper hand in the international arena. In Cairo the British Embassy once again burned all its documents.

**Israeli Assault on the Sinai**

The Israeli assault on the Sinai began on October 29, 1956. With their focus on the British and the French, Egypt’s military was entirely unprepared for the attack. The European Allies now used Israel’s attack to publicly justify reoccupation of the Canal. Britain and France issued an ultimatum demanding a cessation of hostilities within 12 hours and a pullback by both sides from the Canal Zone in order to allow the “temporary occupation” of positions by a joint Anglo-French field force. With many of its units already in flight across the Sinai from the Israeli advance, the Egyptian command sensibly withdrew the rest of its forces in the Sinai to the Canal Zone to prepare defenses against the expected arrival of the Anglo/French force. The Israelis were now being provided with daily arrivals of French military equipment.

The Israeli plan called for one battalion of paratroopers of the 202nd Parachute Brigade to land at the eastern end of Mitla Pass in the western Sinai and to hold this position until the arrival of the rest of the brigade overland. An Egyptian platoon at the border post of al-Kuntilla tried but failed to hold up the Israeli tanks attached to the motorized column. As the Israelis reached various Egyptian military posts on the road to Mitla,
their commander, Colonel Ariel Sharon, typically ordered a frontal assault after a short shelling by British 25-pounder field guns. The tactic worked and Sharon moved his brigade 190 miles to the Pass in just 28 hours. Mitla Pass is a narrow and winding 20-mile trail overlooked by rocky, cave-studded hills. The Egyptians made the most of its ambush potential, denying passage to a battalion of Israeli paratroopers. Though they were eventually driven from their positions after three hours of hand-to-hand fighting, the Egyptians had held up the Israeli advance, forcing Sharon to abandon attempts to seize the Pass on his way south to Sharm al-Shaykh. A strategic town at the southern tip of the Sinai, Sharm al-Shaykh controlled the passage through the Straits of Tiran to the Israeli port of Eilat. As Sharon made his way down the west coast of the Sinai, an Israeli infantry brigade was advancing down the east coast. They met at Sharm al-Shaykh, which fell without a fight on November 5, 1956, after its waterless garrison pulled out.

In the northeast Sinai Israel planned to seize the important crossroads and Egyptian communications center at Abu Aweigila. Here the frontal attacks of the Israelis had less success. Egyptian antitank guns were handled effectively, allowing T-34 tanks to move in and take on the Israeli Shermans. Gradually the Egyptian positions were outflanked and overrun, and a decision was made to withdraw on October 31, 1956. The Israelis anticipated this move and blocked the highway out of Abu Aweigila, forcing many of the defenders into the desert where they expired from heat and thirst.

A third Israeli strike force, consisting of the 27th Armoured Brigade, fought a brief battle against Egyptian prepared positions at Rafah (near the border of Sinai and the Gaza Strip) before heading west along the old northern invasion route. On November 1, 1956, Nasser gave orders for a general withdrawal from the Sinai, and over the next few days nearly the entire Peninsula was turned over to the Israelis. Israeli warplanes strafed the unprotected Egyptian columns, and thousands of prisoners were taken from those who could not reach the safety of the Canal quickly enough. Eventually the number of prisoners proved overwhelming, and they were simply released to make their way back to Egypt after being disarmed. Hundreds of abandoned vehicles lined the routes west. Having achieved their war aims, the Israelis now agreed to the terms of a British-French cease-fire. Two squadrons of French fighters now began operating in the Sinai from Israeli air bases after their insignia was replaced by the Star of David.

**Anglo-French Intervention**

The execution of the Anglo-French attack on the Canal was from the beginning beset by political considerations. The greatest of these was
British insistence that the well-prepared Anglo-French offensive appear to be a spontaneous response to the Israeli advance in the Sinai. The British plan of operations therefore called for a cautious six-day assault in which Egyptian defensive positions could be pounded while air superiority was established by jet fighters flying from Cyprus. This approach was deeply opposed by the French, but was based on the time that it would take for the bulk of the invasion force to steam from their base in Malta. For appearances’ sake, the troop carriers could not sail before the Suez Canal was “threatened” by an Egyptian-Israeli conflict. After the Israelis invaded the Sinai, the British and French issued an ultimatum on October 30, 1956, demanding that both sides withdraw their forces ten miles from the Canal and allow Allied forces to occupy the Canal Zone to guarantee the safety of shipping. With the Israelis nowhere near the Canal the ultimatum was rejected by Egypt as a rather transparent attempt to recolonize the Canal. Air attacks on Egypt began the next night.

At first there was no response from the Egyptian air force (EAF), but it turned out that most of the Egyptian planes had been moved to the supposed safety of air bases farther to the south. Others never received orders to take off, night flying being generally unknown in the EAF. The high-level bombers of the night were replaced at dawn by fast, low-flying Anglo-French fighter/bombers that eliminated the Egyptian planes that had not yet been moved and caused great destruction to military installations. A squadron of evacuated Ilyushin bombers was discovered and destroyed by French aircraft at its Red Sea refuge, while British Canberras struck the airfield at Luxor in Upper Egypt. A foolhardy attempt by the Egyptian frigate Domiat to engage the much larger British cruiser Newfoundland in the Gulf of Suez ended in the quick sinking of the frigate.

The main Allied attack began on November 5, 1956, with a joint British-French airborne operation to seize important points and airfields around Port Sa‘id. The drop force was small, consisting of some 600 largely inexperienced British paratroopers and 500 French of the Colonial Parachute Division, professional soldiers with airborne experience in Indo-China and Algeria. The French seized Port Fu‘ad without great difficulty, but the British ran into strong Egyptian resistance in the cemeteries outside Port Sa‘id. The British demand for unconditional surrender was rejected as Egyptian General al-Moguy broke open crates of Soviet-made rifles and issued weapons to anyone who wanted them. The city itself was swept with rumors that London and Paris had been destroyed in nuclear attacks and that Soviet troops were on the way to relieve Port Sa‘id. Nearly 30 ships were scuttled along the Canal by the Egyptians to prevent the passage of foreign warships.

On November 6, 1956, the Allied fleet bombarded Egyptian positions before launching one of the last great amphibious attacks. The shelling had driven the Egyptian defenders from the coast, allowing the landing
vehicles to pour troops onto the beach with little opposition. British commandos and Centurion tanks pressed south into the city while the paratroopers worked their way in from the other direction, occasionally calling for support fire from a British destroyer. Egyptian snipers were everywhere, causing many British casualties. The Naval Headquarters at Port Sa’id repelled numerous British attacks before its destruction in a British air strike. In the French zone of operations the paratroopers of the Foreign Legion were delivered by landing craft to Port Fu’ad where they stood off several Egyptian counterattacks on the bridges at Raswa.

As their troops consolidated their possession of the Canal Zone, it became apparent that the Anglo-French command was making plans to advance on Cairo itself. As preparations were made for the city’s defense, Nasser promised “a bitter war,” fought “from village to village and from place to place.” Egypt was in a state of national emergency but the cause was popular, and massive amounts of small arms were distributed to hastily organized irregular forces. Some attempt at coordination of the huge number of volunteers was made through the creation of the Jaysh al-Tahrir al-Watani (National Liberation Army). These preparations suggest that the Egyptian command (reasonably) did not expect the regular army to last long against a joint attack by Israel, Britain, and France, but had faith in the traditional methods of attrition and guerrilla warfare practiced in the past against foreign occupation forces.

The attack on Suez had now assumed the proportions of an international crisis as Soviet military intervention appeared imminent. The United Nations secretary general demanded a cease-fire that was accepted and went into effect at midnight, November 6, 1956. Sniper and grenade attacks continued in Port Sa’id for days, with many of the Egyptian fighters unaware that a cease-fire had been proclaimed. Those caught aiding the invaders were threatened or shot. By November 10, 1956, United Nations peacekeepers began to arrive, and the gradual evacuation of British and French forces began, though Egyptian guerrilla attacks in Port Sa’id continued until mid-December. By December 22, 1956, the last British and French troops left the Canal Zone.

Conclusion

The Egyptian withdrawal from the Sinai was not the complete rout that is often depicted. The best part of the regular army was successfully withdrawn. Under the circumstances, this was regarded in Cairo as a success. Many, including Moshe Dayan, praised the performance of Egyptian troops in the bitter battles at Umm Qatf and Mitla Pass. Nevertheless, despite episodes of stiff resistance, Egypt’s war against its three attackers was a convincing military defeat. In a clear illustration of the changing
international mood in the postwar years, Nasser and his diplomats managed to salvage a political victory over their assailants who were easily vilified as imperialists of the old order. Israel was persuaded to withdraw from the Sinai in return for freedom of navigation through the Straits of Tiran to its port of Eilat. Israel attempted to retain Sharm al-Shaykh and the Gaza Strip until it was persuaded to evacuate by U.S. pressure. Their demonstration of military might in a Cold War world of nuclear-armed tension paradoxically struck a blow at the imperial pretenses of both France and Britain. American reluctance to support this assault on Egypt’s sovereignty led to a rift between the Western powers and the withdrawal of France from the Atlantic Alliance. Once again, Egypt had played a central role in the reshaping of the international political world. An indication of the embarrassment the whole incident inflicted upon British pride was the government’s failure to award a campaign medal for the Suez assault until June 2003.
Egypt’s intervention in the Yemen civil war was the ill-advised product of the postcolonial revolutionary fervor that gripped much of the Arab world in the 1960s. Inspired by the new ideology of Arab unity and nationalism, Nasser’s entry into Yemen’s complex arena of political struggles and tribal allegiances ultimately prolonged the conflict and contributed to Egypt’s defeat by Israel in 1967, as a large part of Egypt’s armed forces were committed to the Yemen battlefield by that time. By the time of Egypt’s withdrawal from Yemen in 1968, Arab unity had been replaced by postdefeat disarray and a bitter conclusion to Nasser’s efforts to create a new Arab nation. Long forgotten now, the Soviet-supported Egyptian intervention once threatened to engulf the entire Arabian Peninsula with its invaluable petroleum resources, opening the possibility of another world war.

Egypt’s modern involvement with Yemen was the result of Yemen’s limited membership in the Cairo-led United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958. Yemen’s ruler, Imam Ahmad ibn Yahya, presided over a nearly medieval Islamic kingdom, an Arabian bastion against the modern age. His alliance with Egypt was intended to put pressure on British control of south Yemen, officially known as the Aden Protectorate. When students and officers went to study in Egypt, they were indoctrinated in the ideology of secular Arab socialism and returned to Yemen as agents of revolution. An enraged Imam denounced Nasser, and, in turn, Nasser announced the expulsion of Yemen from the UAR in December 1961. Syria, tired of Egyptian pretensions, had already left earlier that year.

Republican Coup: 1962

Imam Yahya’s death in September 1962 unleashed all the forces that had been pent up in Yemen during his rule. The Imam’s son, al-Badr,
assumed the imamate and promised a program of reforms. Led by the army chief of staff, Colonel ‘Abdullah al-Sallal, the Republican officers seized their chance and mounted a coup several days later. Republican radio announced al-Badr’s death, but to their embarrassment he surfaced in the mountains of Yemen where he promised to raise a tribal army to wipe out the Republicans (the Republican cause was strong with Yemen’s Sunni minority, but also included many Zaydi Shi’ites, of whom Sallal was one). The revolutionaries did not even control all the army, much less the tribes, so they quickly asked for Egyptian military support (a circumstance they had already cleared with Nasser before attempting their coup).

Within days of the Republican coup Egyptian troops were landing at Republican-held airfields. Within a month over 8,000 men with artillery, armor, and air support were bolstering the tiny Republican force, which held only the area around the cities of Taiz, San’a, and Hodeida. Even at this early stage the Egyptian army already outnumbered the Yemen Republican force, which quickly fell under Egyptian control. There appeared to be little interest in training or arming the ragtag Republicans. Indeed, Republican forces provided little more than a political screen for the activities of the Egyptian army. Deliberately kept weak, they posed little threat to the regional ambitions of Nasser and did not come into their own until after the UAR abandoned the Yemen campaign in the latter days of 1967.

The Egyptians maintained that they had entered the fray in Yemen in order to “protect” Yemen from foreign invasion. In reality Nasser viewed Yemen as an excellent base from which to spread the Arab revolution north throughout the Arabian Peninsula, sweeping the anachronistic kings, sultans, and amirs from their thrones. Nasser’s grand ambitions were well in advance of the careful planning needed for such broad political change, and it was perhaps unsurprising that the Egyptian army was never able to assume its projected role as a vanguard for Arab revolution. With hundreds of largely autonomous tribes in Yemen, there was a great deal of groundwork to do, but an exploratory mission under Anwar Sadat returned after just one day with a recommendation for military intervention. The army was committed to battle without a clear course of action or a defined set of long-term objectives.

Diplomatic preparation was similarly lacking, and the failure of either the United States or Great Britain to recognize the Republican government drove the Egyptian-Republican effort further into the Soviet sphere of influence. Great Britain, of course, had nothing but suspicion for Nasser’s aims in Yemen, while Nasser viewed British control of the Aden Protectorate as an unwanted colonial presence in Arab lands. The Republican cause was popular in the Protectorate, supported by a covert Egyptian campaign to destabilize British rule.
The Egyptian Army in Yemen

At first the Egyptians struggled to expand their area of control against confident tribesmen who had repulsed similar attempts to invade their wild land in the past. The Egyptian campaign in Yemen was directed by Field Marshal ‘Abd al-Hakim Amir, a competent leader thoroughly trusted by Nasser at this stage (Amir would die in mysterious circumstances described as a “suicide” in September 1967). He and some other members of the officer corps were accused of enriching themselves in Yemen in the manner of the Mamluks. The export of consumer goods purchased in Aden back to Egypt was particularly lucrative. The field marshal treated Yemen as a personal fief and loyalty to the commander came to outweigh success on the battlefield.

No kind of revolutionary unity ever developed between the Egyptian rank and file and the Yemeni citizenry. Egyptian soldiers, with little or no experience of life at any distance from the Nile’s waters, were often befuddled by the cultural differences they experienced in Yemen. Differences in dialect hindered communication, and religious differences, especially with the Zaydi Shi’ites (who dominated the conflict on both sides) could be a significant barrier to the Sunni Egyptians. The tribal habit of switching allegiances repeatedly with an eye to always maintaining the advantage tended to infuriate the Egyptians. All the tribes were open to bribery from either side, and distrust permeated all Egyptian-Yemeni relations. Maps and intelligence were almost completely unavailable when the Egyptian troops arrived, and they remained in short supply throughout the war. Reliance on guides whose political sympathies at that moment were never exactly known was inadvisable but often unavoidable. Yemen’s mountains formed an alien and hostile terrain to the Egyptian valley dwellers, and the Yemeni practice of mutilating enemy dead threatened a grisly end on foreign soil for the home-loving Egyptians. In short, the campaign in Yemen was no more popular with Egypt’s conscripts than any other foreign adventure, but this did not prevent the Egyptian armed forces from carrying out their objectives at the beginning of the war.

In many ways Egypt’s revolutionary project in Yemen resembled earlier colonial campaigns in the region. The use of modern weaponry and communications and complete control of the air were advantages traditionally enjoyed by the colonial powers, but in Nasser’s hands they were used to the benefit of revolutionary Arab socialism. Repeated (but never confirmed) charges of the use of poison gas against Yemeni settlements reminded many of Italy’s use of gas against Ethiopian troops in the 1930s. The targeted bombing of villages thought to support the Royalist cause proved effective only in rallying more tribes to the Royalist banner and gave much of the rest of the world reason to question the nature of Nasser’s “Arab solidarity.”
From the beginning, Nasser insisted that all foreign military aid from friendly “socialist” nations to Yemen’s Republicans be directed through Egypt first. Nasser held most of the equipment back, both as compensation for Egypt’s enormous expenditure on its Yemen campaign and as a means of ensuring that the Republicans could never form a military threat to their Egyptian “benefactors.” Four hundred Russian military technicians arrived in Yemen to aid the Republicans in November 1962.

War in the Mountains

The Royalists (as the supporters of the Imam were known) fought a guerrilla-style war of mines and ambushes. The Egyptians, who had been trained to fight set-piece battles in the open, soon had to develop counter-insurgency tactics and strategies. The high command decided to try holding a smaller triangle of territory with Taiz, San’a, and the port of Hodeida at its points, while the Republican army would fight in the regions beyond this. The Republicans fought poorly and soon the triangle was penetrated and San’a placed under siege.

While the Republicans had the help of the Egyptian armed forces and clandestine Soviet military personnel, the Royalists also relied heavily on foreigners to give their army some semblance of professionalism. Jordan supplied some 60 officers, while Pakistan and Iran supplied small amounts of arms. The royal family of Saudi Arabia was bound to uphold the anti-Shi’ite Wahhabi movement and hence had little interest in the survival or success of the Zaydi Shi’ite Imam of Yemen. Nasser’s revolutionary Arab socialism was of greater concern, however, so Saudi arms, supplies, and trainers began to filter into the Royalist camps.

The Ramadan Offensive: 1963

In mid-February 1963 the Egyptians launched a major offensive to retake most of the country, seize its major towns, and seal the porous border with Saudi Arabia. Tanks and infantry succeeded in taking their objectives in the east and south, and in an impressive operation in the north paratroopers took the town of Sadah deep in Royalist territory and built an airstrip to allow an infantry brigade to flow in. To some the war appeared over, but Egyptian gains could not be consolidated and the Royalists gradually began to infiltrate back into lost territory. More and more Egyptian troops poured into the country in a futile effort to stabilize it enough for a turnover to the Republicans and an honorable withdrawal for the Egyptians. Left largely to their own devices in the remote mountains, the Egyptians often formed “live-and-let-live” arrangements with
local Royalists, with both sides issuing reports of combat activity to satisfy their respective headquarters. Al-Sallal’s rule was widely unpopular, however, and assassination attempts and scores of public executions (including that of the chief executioner) did little to legitimize the Republicans internationally. The president relied on an Egyptian bodyguard of 3,000 men to protect himself from his subjects and fellow officers.

The War Continues

After the failure of the “triangle,” the Egyptian command settled on a new strategy in which much of the country would be abandoned in favor of holding selected areas of strategic importance with large concentrations of troops. The Egyptians and Republicans spent the summer of 1964 chasing Imam al-Badr around the mountains of north Yemen, eventually forcing him into Saudi Arabia. Though thousands of Royalists were killed, the Egyptians were once again unable to consolidate their victory.

Royalist forces under Prince Muhammad Husayn now took the offensive in January 1965. Over the next six months they went from success to success, driving Egyptian and Republican troops out of numerous towns and strongpoints. Egyptian paratroopers were kept busy trying to relieve isolated garrisons. Nasser blamed the Saudis for these setbacks and threatened to attack the Saudi kingdom. With Egypt on the brink of invading, cooler heads prevailed in both capitals and a negotiated agreement and cease-fire were reached in late August. The agreement called for a graduated reduction in foreign involvement in Yemen. By November 1965 only some 20,000 Egyptian soldiers remained in Yemen. The Yemenis themselves, unfortunately, could not agree on anything at subsequent peace talks and the war resumed. The Egyptians retreated to the triangle and settled in for an extended stay.

By 1966 the frustrated Egyptians were depopulating the countryside through a scorched-earth policy designed to eliminate support for the Royalist guerrillas. Republican troops were finally coming into their own, even achieving a few small victories without Egyptian aid.

The Air War

From the beginning, Egypt enjoyed complete control of the skies over Yemen. The political unreliability of the Saudi air force, which had suffered defections to Egypt, forced its grounding until a complete reassessment of the political loyalties of its aircrews could be undertaken. The Egyptians took advantage of this opportunity to launch a series of precautionary strikes on the Saudi frontier as a warning to Saudi support for
the Royalists. As friction increased between the Saudis and the Republicans, the United States sent planes and warships to the Kingdom to make a demonstration of support. It was finally agreed that Yemen (i.e., the UAR air force) would not bomb Saudi Arabia or Jordan if they did not attack first. If the kingdoms did strike Yemen first, the Americans agreed to withdraw their warplanes. Otherwise the main occupation of the EAF was preemptory or retaliatory strikes on Yemeni villages. Long-range bombers commanded by Air Force General Hosni Mubarak usually flew directly from Egypt and back again. This “unmanly” method of fighting and its indiscriminate casualties among women and children embittered rather than impressed most of the conservative tribesmen. Imam Yahya had been right; there was something wrong with the modern world.

Withdrawal from Yemen

Nasser wanted to leave a substantial number of Egyptian troops in Yemen while the British pulled out of the Aden Protectorate, but the June War of 1967 forced Nasser to abandon any ambitions in this area. Fighting continued through July 1967, but with the Egyptian army in the Sinai destroyed, it was essential to bring the army in Yemen back to defend the homeland. During their withdrawal, the Egyptians were attacked several times by angry civilians who felt they were being abandoned. Over 100 Egyptians were killed in this way at the port of Hodeida. Republican president al-Sallal was deposed by his fellow officers on November 5, 1967, while on a mission abroad. Egyptian troops had been ordered in advance not to oppose any coup attempt in the Republican camp.

As the last Egyptians pulled out in December 1967, the Royalists put the capital of San’a under siege. Just as everyone anticipated disaster, Republican general Hassan al-Amri was released from political detention in Cairo and revitalized the city’s defenses. Al-Amri appealed directly to the Soviets for aid (something Nasser had always forbidden), and with their help the siege was broken. Soon after, Saudi Arabia stopped its financial support of the Royalist cause. By the end of 1968 the Royalists were broke, their mercenaries gone home, and the Royalist leaders took to bitter infighting. The war eventually ran out of steam without a decisive victor on either side for the time being.

Conclusion

Egypt’s involvement in Yemen’s civil struggle diminished Egypt’s standing in the Arab world and brought disunity to the Arab nationalist movement. As the events of June 1967 were to prove, Nasser had
recklessly placed a significant part of the Egyptian army far from the potential front line with a much more dangerous adversary, Israel. Those seeking to put a positive spin on the events of 1967 have noted that the absence of a large portion of the army from the Sinai battlefields preserved a core group around which the Egyptian army could rebuild itself. There was, indeed, little else of profit in this war.
CHAPTER 20

The Arab-Israeli Wars: 1967–1973

The June War: 1967

The June War had its roots in Israel’s ongoing efforts to expand its frontiers in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) of the Syrian-Israeli border. The DMZ was established in 1949, but was the scene of constant small episodes of violence that a small UN force attempted to extinguish. As armed Israeli settlers expanded north they were met by the guns of the Syrian artillery in early 1967. Israel replied by a series of air attacks on Syria, destroying six Syrian planes and 30 fortified positions. When General Yitzhak Rabin warned that Israel was prepared to march on Damascus, Syria invoked the provisions of its November 1966 Mutual Defense Pact with Egypt. The UN force in the Sinai was ordered to leave, and on May 14, 1967, Nasser sent two divisions of Egyptian troops there. The size of the force clearly indicates it was intended as a demonstration of Egyptian solidarity with Syria rather than an invasion group.

One of the most important questions surrounding the 1967 War is just how much of Egypt’s total armed force was still in Yemen at the outbreak of the war. The question addresses not only Egypt’s preparation for war, but also its intentions. Many observers have cited the presence of up to a third of the Egyptian army in Yemen as proof that Nasser never intended to mount an invasion of Israel, much less an “extermination.” Many Egyptian troops had been withdrawn from Yemen just prior to the war, however, as a result of recent success in consolidating Egyptian/Republican control of the country. There were probably no more than 20,000 Egyptian troops left in Yemen when the 1967 war began.

In the 1960s the Egyptian army was completely reequipped by the Soviet Union. A mission of 500 Russian military instructors attempted to train the Egyptians in the use of the weapons and related Soviet tactics. English was the language of instruction, leading to many opportunities
for misunderstanding. Unlike the nineteenth century, when even the ill and the self-mutilated were conscripted, the Egyptian soldier of the 1960s was healthy and fit, thanks to Egypt’s population explosion, which had vastly increased the pool of available young men. The military had grown to nearly 200,000 men, many of whom had combat experience in Yemen, but the officer corps remained poor, largely incapable of initiative (which was hardly encouraged by the rigid Soviet-style battle plans) and unwilling to spend any more time with their troops than was necessary.

Destruction of the Egyptian Air Force

The Egyptian air force was now almost entirely Soviet supplied. Various classes of MiG and Sukhoi fighters formed its core, with the MiG 21 being the most modern plane and the main challenge to Israel’s French-built Mirages and Super Mystères. Ilyushin 28 and TU-16 jet bombers provided Egypt’s strategic attack force. Pilots were still in short supply.

The Israeli preemptive strike plan called for massive attacks on the air capabilities of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, with a smaller attack on Iraq. On June 5, 1967, the Israeli attack began at 8:45 in the morning. By the end of the day both the once powerful Egyptian and Syrian air forces were no longer effective fighting forces, while the Jordanian air force was completely annihilated. Many elements of the Israeli plan were designed to catch the Egyptians off guard. Normally one would expect a dawn attack beginning with raids on radar installations. The late start of the Israeli strike (8:45 A.M.) was designed to come after Egyptian air defenses stood down from their normal morning alert. It was also designed to take advantage of the changing watch in the Egyptian Command centers. Instead of first hitting the Egyptian radar installations along the Sinai frontier, the Israeli warplanes headed well out into the Mediterranean Sea before sweeping back southeast to take the unaware Egyptian positions from the rear. The surprise was total, and the execution of the attacks became a mandatory study at war colleges around the world. With a total of only 350 military aircraft, including 200 fighter planes, the Israelis needed to keep as many of their planes in the air as possible in order to carry out their bold plan to destroy three air forces simultaneously.

In Egypt the attack lasted 80 minutes, with each wave of Israeli aircraft hitting Egyptian positions for 10 minutes before making room for the next wave. Israeli losses were slight while the turnaround time for Israeli warplanes of 7 minutes kept most of the Israeli air force in near continuous flight. The planes came in such swift succession that Nasser became convinced British and American jets had joined in the attacks from their aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean. Israel lost only 10 to 20 planes in the attacks, but nearly every one of the warplanes involved was hit by
Egyptian ground fire. The Egyptian aircraft presented attractive targets in unconcealed groups on the ground. Only a handful of MiGs got off the ground in time to shoot down a pair of Israeli Mirages before being shot down themselves. Twenty other MiGs took off from the Egyptian Red
Sea base at Hurghada, but were all shot down in the air. Throughout the day the Israelis spread out and destroyed secondary air bases in Upper Egypt and elsewhere.

When the attacks began, the commander in chief of the armed forces, Field Marshal ‘Abd al-Hakim Amir, the commander of the air force, Lieutenant General Mahmud Sidki, and many other leading air force officers were in the air on their way to visit a new installation. Unable to land until the first wave of attacks was finished, they were effectively shut out of decision making until it was too late. Some elements in the Egyptian Command announced the destruction of the Israeli air force, and Baghdad radio falsely announced that Iraqi bombers had struck Tel Aviv. Even President Nasser appears to have been kept in the dark for most of the day regarding the reality of the situation. By evening the picture grew clear: the Egyptian and Jordanian air forces were destroyed, the Syrian air force badly damaged, and the Iraqi air force slightly damaged. In the first two days of the war the Arab forces lost over 400 aircraft compared to a loss of 26 Israeli warplanes. In the coming days Egypt, Syria, and Jordan all alleged the participation of U.S. and British aircraft carriers in the attacks, though they were unable to produce any evidence. Nasser eventually retracted his accusations.

Ground War in the Sinai

The Israeli battle plan was to use its Centurion tanks to blast holes through the Egyptian defensive lines and get substantial forces in behind the Egyptians in the Sinai as quickly as possible. Their army was formed into three groups under generals Abraham Tal, Ariel Sharon, and Abraham Joffe. The first two forces attacked the Egyptians on the morning of June 5, 1967, the Tal group in the Gaza Strip and the Sharon group in the familiar territory of Abu Aweigila and Umm Qatf. Egyptian defenses consisted of four infantry divisions covering the routes into the Sinai and a Palestinian Division of the Egyptian army continued to hold the Gaza Strip. Behind the Egyptian infantry were two armored divisions ready to strike any Israeli breakthrough. The army in the Sinai was commanded by Lt. Gen. ‘Abdul Mohsen Murtagi.

The description of Egyptian deployments is misleading; the buildup from one division in the Sinai to six had been carried out quickly, and there was considerable confusion in the army regarding their positions. Troop movements were so common that many officers did not bother to give orders to create trenches and defensive works. Fuel and food were in short supply in many units, and mechanical breakdown took much of the armor out of the picture when the war broke out. By contrast the Israeli army conducted daily training exercises and vehicle maintenance in the weeks before the war.
The Tal group ran into stiff resistance from well-camouflaged Egyptian gun positions and minefields. Israeli orders to succeed in Gaza at all costs for strategic and political reasons led to heavy losses for the attackers. Egyptian gunners took a steady toll of Israeli tanks, but eventually Israeli air strikes were able to break the resistance, allowing the Tal group to pass through al-Arish to the Suez Canal, which they reached on June 9, 1967. Israel's Shaked commando unit killed hundreds of Egyptian prisoners after the fighting at al-Arish, though their mass graves were not discovered until 1995. Many Egyptian soldiers wondered what happened to their air cover, but were told that the Egyptian air force (EAF) was busy bombing Israel. General Murtagi himself was not informed of the loss of the EAF.

The Israelis encountered strong resistance to the south in the important crossroads region of Abu Aweigla and Umm Qatf. A coordinated night assault involving all arms of the Israeli army was undertaken on June 6, 1967. A ground attack and landings of helicopter-borne paratroopers in the Egyptian artillery parks followed a massive artillery barrage. At Umm Qatf and other strongholds the Egyptian army continued fighting after the Israeli breakthrough was made.

The Egyptian army in the Sinai began to collapse on the third day of the war when an order to retreat was issued. Tossing off their equipment on the way, the men fell back toward the Canal. Unfortunately many of the senior officers had not waited for the order to leave, abandoning their units to the Israeli assault. When the Egyptian units reached the passes through the central ridge of the Sinai, they discovered they were blocked by Israeli forces in many places. A bitter battle erupted at Mitla Pass, as Sharon’s troops blocked determined efforts by the Egyptian 6th Division to break through to the safety of the Canal. Isma’iliya Pass was well defended by Egyptian troops and remained open for Egyptian armor to escape. Fuel was running short and retreating Egyptian Patton and Centurion tanks sometimes got mixed up on the roads with identical Israeli armor. The desert was full of Egyptians on foot (several thousand died of thirst and exposure) while the roads were lined with abandoned equipment, forcing the Israelis to halt and bring up bulldozers to clear the way.

On the fourth day of the war (June 8, 1967) the Israelis fought a pitched battle to break through Isma’iliya Pass. Centurion tanks, which were superior to the Russian built T-54 and T-55 tanks, led a frontal assault, while lighter Patton tanks crossed dangerous patches of loose sand to attack the rear of the defensive positions. Unopposed in the sky, Israeli warplanes attacked the Egyptian armor with precise napalm strikes. When the Egyptian tanks and other vehicles abandoned their positions and crowded together to get through the pass before it was too late, they were hit by a massive Israeli napalm strike. The Israelis used their tanks to smash through the wreckage and began to pour into the undefended
plains east of the Canal. So many Egyptians were taken prisoner that the Israelis began to simply disarm them while suggesting they make their own way to the Canal. That evening a cease-fire was agreed upon through the United Nations, but the Israelis continued on until they reached the Canal on the afternoon of June 9, 1967.

**Conclusion: The June War**

The leadership of the Egyptian armed forces was badly exposed by the June War. Its dismissed commander, Field Marshal ‘Abd al-Hakim Amir, fell under Nasser’s suspicion and was placed under house arrest before his death, reported as a suicide. The results of the investigation were never made public, though it was said that he had become too highly influenced by the Soviets. Many other officers were purged from the government following the war. According to Muhammad Fawzi, chief of the Egyptian general staff in June 1967, divisions in the Egyptian leadership prevented the full weight of the Egyptian army from being brought to bear in the battle against Israel:

> At this point, I can assert, looking back 30 years after the battle took place, that we were doomed to lose before a single shot was fired. It was not the best time for Egypt to fight, and the situation was aggravated by the total discord between the political and military leaderships. The military leadership had separated itself from the constitutional organisation of the state, a situation which can lead to nothing but failure. The proof is that the battle was fought by one side only, Israel. A staggering 75 per cent of Egypt’s ground forces did not even see the enemy, let alone engage in combat … Egyptians did not consider themselves to have fought a war and lost it; the term defeat did not seem to apply. To be defeated implies the conquest of territory, the collapse of the regime, but this did not occur in June 1967. In fact the people’s overwhelming rejection of Nasser’s resignation on 9 and 10 June is proof that the regime had not collapsed in the least. The June experience was therefore referred to as the “setback.”

After the war Israel used its media skills to reinforce the impression that it had acted solely in self-defense to prevent its extermination. Some senior Israeli military and government officials later described this interpretation as a postwar invention. In 1982 Prime Minister Menachem Begin stated, “The Egyptian army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that Nasser was really about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him.”

Israel’s territorial gains in 1967 solidified the state’s stability, security, and sustainability. Israel had gained important buffer zones from their closest adversaries, in the Sinai and the Golan Heights. One of the consequences of the seizure of the Golan was the expulsion of some 12,000 Circassians, who left for Damascus. A smaller number remained, many of
them taking up military service in the Israeli state. Possession of the Heights offered an important strategic advantage. The capture of the West Bank’s aquifers and the headwaters of the Jordan River also offered Israel control of the region’s most vital resource.


In the aftermath of the June War the Israelis began fortifying their positions along the eastern side of the Suez Canal. In time this would become an extensive fortification known as the Bar Lev Line. Using the materials at hand, the Israelis built two parallel sand embankments 8 to 10 meters high, topped by 33 fortified observation posts known as meozim.

The rapid defeat of Egypt in the summer of 1967 was followed by a much longer period of low-scale warfare with Israel in its new positions along the Canal and in the Sinai. The raids, sniper fire, and small engagements, while insignificant in themselves, all played a larger purpose in restoring the morale and confidence of the Egyptian troops. According to the Egyptian commander at the time, Major-General ‘Abdul-Moneim Khalil, the “War of Attrition” gave young Egyptian officers valuable combat experience and opportunities for leadership. A steady supply of intelligence reached the Egyptian Command, allowing them to begin formulating the plans for reconquest of the Suez Canal.

The exact duration of this undeclared war depends on the source, but it may be loosely defined as occupying the period 1967 to 1970. Along the Suez front the conflict was most intense from the Fall of 1968 to the Summer of 1970. Designed primarily to test Israel’s ability to hold its conquests from the June War, the War of Attrition involved fighting along each of the Syrian, Jordanian, and Egyptian fronts.

The War of Attrition gained its name from Nasser’s tactic of slowly bleeding the Israeli army. In practice it became a model of military escalation that could easily have developed into a nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. With a military force far larger in numbers than Israel’s, Egypt could afford losses that were unsustainable in Israel. Israel’s natural response was to escalate their responses, delivering disproportional retaliatory strikes against the Egyptians. In an act of bravado, Nasser repudiated the cease-fire with Israel on March 3, 1969. Within days Egyptian artillery opened fire along the length of the Canal. The barrage continued for 80 days after which Egyptian commandos began to probe the line for weaknesses. Soviet-supplied surface-to-air missiles were deployed to forward positions, greatly reducing Israel’s ability to compensate for a shortage in artillery by launching precise air strikes against Egyptian positions.
Israeli artillery forced hundreds of thousands of Egyptian civilians from their Suez region homes. In one barrage ‘Abdul Munam Riyadh, the Egyptian chief of staff, was killed. In July the air war started in earnest, with the Egyptian air force losing 20 MiGs in dogfights with the American-made Israeli jets. These powerful A-4 Skyhawks and F-4 Phantoms had been arriving in Israel after Israel’s traditional supplier, France, placed an embargo on further deliveries after the 1967 War. The Soviet Union responded by delivering advanced SAM-3 missiles operated by Soviet troops. Soviet pilots also began flying Egyptian aircraft in operations against Israel. Soviet pilots played a major role in the weeks of dogfights, but their MiG fighters were no match for the Phantoms. The Soviet crews of the SAM-3 missiles had more success, downing five Israeli fighters.

The aerial battles were followed by months of air attacks against the Egyptian missile defenses until they were finally knocked out of action in November 1969. By January 1970 the Israeli air force was striking deep into Egypt, demonstrating its ability to wreak havoc behind the front lines. Helicopter-borne commando missions began to exploit weaknesses in the Egyptian defenses. In late 1969 one such mission managed to seize a new P-12 Soviet-made radar system, carrying the four-ton apparatus with two Sikorsky CH-53 heavy-lift helicopters back to Israeli lines.

As Nasser predicted, the slow loss of Israeli life in a seemingly aimless war proved unpopular in Israel. While Egypt and Israel were locked in a growing death struggle, the rivalry between the two superpowers was growing out of control as they supported their respective proxies. A U.S.-negotiated 90-day cease-fire supported by the Soviets went into effect on August 7, 1970, but the Suez Canal remained closed with the two armies still at high alert. The Egyptians and Soviets were accused of using the cease-fire to station SAM-2 and SAM-3 missiles in the restricted zone 32 miles west of the Canal. The cease-fire marked the effective end of the War of Attrition, though hostilities continued on a smaller scale.

The Death of Nasser

After several years of ill health Nasser was felled by a heart attack on September 28, 1970. His funeral, which attracted millions, was the largest in the nation’s history. Within the next three years Egypt would abandon its leading role in the Arab nationalist movement, dissolving the United Arab Republic to become the Arab Republic of Egypt. Nasser’s political apparatus was dismantled and all manifestations of “Nasserism” repressed.

After 18 years as Nasser’s loyal vice president, Sadat was eager to consolidate his position. Following his takeover on October 15, 1970, Sadat
began moving officers from important government posts to reduce the influence of the army. An exception was Air Force Commander Hosni Mubarak, who was appointed vice president. Sadat urged the officer corps to focus on Israel rather than politics and to develop a professional approach to their duties. While Nasser had discouraged study of the Israeli military, Sadat now urged his officers to conduct a thorough investigation of Israeli defenses and tactics. For the first time Egyptian officers were given instruction in Hebrew, a useful skill on the battlefield. The armed services still maintained their grip over defense and security ministries in the government, but most other involvement in civilian politics was discouraged. On May 13, 1971, Sadat purged the armed forces, arresting all possible rivals.

A new radical Islamic group emerged shortly after Sadat assumed the presidency, the Takfir wa'l-Hijra, a more radical organization than the Muslim Brothers. They announced their presence by kidnapping and murdering a cabinet minister and attacking an Egyptian military academy. It was the opening of a new and hidden front against the Egyptian president.

The Ramadan War: 1973

Sadat made a surprising decision in mid-1972, dismissing most of the Soviet advisors in the Egyptian armed forces. Sadat and his circle had become increasingly alarmed at the influence Soviet officers were developing in Egypt. The Egyptian Command was also unhappy with the quality of Russian arms delivered to Egypt, demanding at least parity in weapons technology with Israel. Unlike the French and British, the short Russian presence in Egypt was almost entirely of a military nature and left little lasting impression on Egyptian society.

Aside from cutting ties with a somewhat unenthusiastic sponsor, the move allowed the Egyptian forces to prepare for the Ramadan War in relative secrecy and without foreign interference. Sadat was of the view that if the weapons were insufficient, then sacrifices had to be made until the Russians felt compelled to release the modern weaponry the Egyptians needed in a conflict situation. Sadat was also alarmed with the growing American-Soviet détente and realized that diplomatic conditions might soon be unfavorable for a military offensive. The war would go ahead, under the leadership of the newly appointed war minister, General Ahmad Isma’il ‘Ali. It was yet another political appointment made at the expense of military efficiency—the new Minister of War would pose no threat to Sadat. Ahmad had already been dismissed twice from the army by Nasser for incompetence and was suffering from cancer when Sadat made his appointment. Lt. Gen. Sa’ad al-Shazly, the commander in chief, was still outraged by the promotion years later:
Why did Sadat appoint a sick man at that most critical time? Could it be that he put his own ends above the vital interests of his country? I regret writing about him as I do. But the truth must be told. Ismail was unfit for his job; and his weakness had terrible consequences for his country. The wickedness lies in the man who appointed and then manipulated Ismail, knowing as he did that Ismail was a dying man.3

The differences between al-Shazly and Ahmad Isma’il ‘Ali dated back to Egypt’s participation in the 1960 Congo peacekeeping force, when al-Shazly had struck his fellow officer during a disagreement. The enmity between the two officers would have been well-known to Sadat, who can only be seen as implementing a “divide and rule” policy among his senior officers by this appointment. In planning the operations Sadat took even professional criticism as a personal slight and sacked many of Egypt’s most experienced commanders during this stage. One of these, General ‘Abdul Khadir, was arrested a month after his dismissal in October 1972 as the leader of a wide army-based coup plot. Scores of officers were arrested, and intelligence resources were devoted to watching the rest of the army.

Sadat was determined not to carry on negotiations with Israel from the state of weakness Egypt found itself in after the 1967 War. Israel should have noted the Egyptian and Syrian war preparations and acted accordingly, but the victory in 1967 bred an unwarranted arrogance toward Arab militaries. Most of the Israeli leadership could not even envision an attack from Arab regular armies.

In appearance the Egyptian and Israeli armies gave the impression of Cold War proxy forces. Israel fielded mostly American equipment, including Phantom and Skyhawk fighter jets, but still relied heavily on its British-made Centurion tanks. Besides their Soviet air defense system Egypt was armed with MiG fighters and the famous T-62 battle tank. Israeli equipment was marginally better, but while Egypt was overhauling its military strategy and training, Israel made few changes to the tactical methods successful in 1967 while adding its own version of the Maginot Line in their Bar Lev defenses along the Suez Canal.

Egypt and Syria began joint planning of Operation Badr in January 1973. There appears to have been a measure of duplicity in Egypt’s dealings with its Syrian ally and Soviet patron. In order to gain their support, battle plans were presented that described an Egyptian penetration into the inland passes of the Sinai. In reality Egyptian ambitions ended at seizing both sides of the Suez Canal and establishing defensive positions within the cover of its formidable antiaircraft array. Despite the constant training for the operation, the Egyptians still managed to catch the Israelis off guard when they opened up a huge artillery barrage from 2,000 artillery pieces against Israeli positions on the east bank of the Canal on October 6, 1973. The date was chosen for practical reasons, but also had
symbolic meaning: it was the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad’s great victory at Badr in 626 A.D. and was also the day of Yom Kippur, a major Israeli holiday. It was hoped that Israel would be in a reduced state of alertness and would have trouble mobilizing quickly.

Three Egyptian armies were prepared for the conflict:

**Egyptian 1st Army:** Reserve force of two mechanized divisions based near Cairo.

**Egyptian 2nd Army:** Three infantry divisions, one armored division, and one mechanized infantry division based on the northern Sinai front and commanded by Major General Sa’aduddin Mamun.

**Egyptian 3rd Army:** Two infantry divisions and two armored divisions based on the southern Sinai front and commanded by Major General ‘Abdul Munim Wassel.

**Crossing the Canal**

On the morning of October 6, 1973, Egypt had five divisions arrayed on the west bank of the Canal, with another five in reserve. On the east bank was a single Israeli division stretched out in defensive posts over the 102-mile-long Canal. When the attack began Egyptian experiments and training paid off as water cannons carved their way through the sand berms (defensive embankments up to 75’ high) in a way explosives could not. The water cannons were a secret Egyptian invention made from British and German pumps. Other tools used in the assault were less creative but no less important; the Egyptian infantry was equipped with over 22,000 four-wheeled carts that allowed the troops to transport equipment that would otherwise require the efforts of 20,000 men.

Armor quickly exploited the breaches in the line while the troops scaled the berms with rope ladders. After 12 hours the Egyptians had reached a line one kilometer beyond the Bar Lev Line. A network of ten bridges and 50 ferries was quickly deployed, allowing 80,000 troops and a great deal of armor to cross the Canal in the first day. At one point in the planning, the use of hovercraft as tank transporters across Timsah Lake and the Bitter Lakes was considered, but the cost was prohibitive. In the end, bridges were constructed with specialized Soviet amphibious vehicles. The total surprise with which the Egyptians took the Israelis seemed to represent an astonishing failure for Israeli intelligence. The Egyptian buildup could not be completely concealed and Israel collected a great deal of information on it, but an arrogant disbelief at the highest levels that Egypt would mount an attack prevented its proper interpretation. Through constant threats and continual mobilization of the army up to points on the Canal, Sadat had created a state of military tension that Israel’s resources could not match. That nothing had come of previous
mobilizations only assured the Israelis that nothing would come of it now.

In view of the disaster of 1967, the quick incapacitation, if not destruction, of the Israeli air force was an essential part of the Arab war plan. The Syrian and Egyptian air forces were to strike Israeli aircraft simultaneously, hopefully evading early detection by low-level flying. Since Israel was out of range for the planes of the Egyptian air force, they would concentrate on airfields and antiaircraft installations in the Sinai, while the Syrians would attack air bases within Israel. The Egyptian strike was so successful that a second wave was called off as unnecessary.

The Egyptians now had the opportunity of operating under a defensive umbrella provided by hundreds of batteries of the new Soviet-supplied surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and some 2,500 radar-guided antiaircraft guns. Mobile batteries and shoulder-launched missiles augmented the fixed defenses, the whole creating a system of interlocked fire. Egyptian warplanes were instructed to carry out their attacks quickly, avoid dogfights with Israeli planes, and return as quickly as possible to the safety of Egyptian air defenses. Frustrated by their inability to engage the Egyptian planes in combat, the Israeli fighters frequently made the fatal mistake of pursuing them within range of the Egyptian missiles. The wisdom of this tactic was shown on the Syrian front, where Syrian fighters suffered severe losses in dogfights with the highly trained Israeli pilots and Damascus was bombed as a demonstration of Israeli air superiority. On the Egyptian front the Israelis were actually forced to temporarily restrict air operations against Egypt. The Israelis knew of the enormous Egyptian air defense system, but their only plan to deal with it was a preemptive operation. These plans became scrap paper when the Egyptians initiated the war themselves.

Egypt had projected at least 10,000 dead in the Canal crossing; instead 208 Egyptian soldiers lost their lives that day. Though Israel quickly began a series of counterattacks, the new antitank weapons supplied by the Soviets proved effective in repelling the Israelis. Egyptian commandos (al-Sā‘iya) operated in the Israeli rear. A score of large armored counterattacks were beaten back in the first three days alone. The Israelis failed to mass their armor according to their own strategic doctrine and suffered great losses as a result. Israeli commanders were shocked to discover that Arab infantry no longer ran at the approach of their armor, but used effective antitank techniques to neutralize Israeli attacks. The aggressiveness of the Israeli counterattacks played into the hands of the defenders. Surprisingly, the Israelis began the war with few antitank weapons, believing that the best tank killer was another tank. The United States quickly provided the latest TOW antitank missiles.

Egyptian troops were seven to ten kilometers inland by October 9, 1973. After a few days of confusion and piecemeal counterattacks the Israelis regrouped and stopped trying to relieve or retake their fortifications on
the east bank of the Canal. In the north the Syrians also had success in their surprise attack, and it was decided by the Israelis to apply all available resources to stabilize that front while holding defensive positions in the Sinai. By October 10, 1973, the Israelis had retaken the Golan Heights and destroyed over 1,000 Syrian tanks in the process. Syrian calls for an Egyptian offensive into the Sinai were supported by the Soviets, who pressured Sadat into carrying out the plans he had presented them by noting that once Syria was broken, Israel would apply its full might against Egypt. Egyptian chief of staff Sa’ad al-Shazly opposed any attempt to leave the cover provided by the air-defense systems, but was overruled by the commander in chief, Ahmad Isma’il ‘Ali, who understood his role as implementing all the president’s decisions.

By October 14, 1973, Egyptian armored columns of the Second Army were heading east to take the Khatima, Mitla, and Giddi passes in the Sinai. On their way they suffered heavy losses from Israeli aircraft. When the Egyptians met Israeli armor in defensive positions, a massive tank battle began. While the Egyptian tanks tried to advance against a smaller defensive line of Israeli tanks and infantry, they were struck repeatedly in the flanks by mobile groups of Israeli armor. Over 300 Egyptian tanks were lost on the first day of battle. This action marked the high tide of the Egyptian advance as the Israeli guns began to take a terrible toll on the Egyptian tanks. The general of the Second Army, General Mamun, suffered a collapse as his army took a terrible beating. The delayed Egyptian incursion into the Sinai allowed Israel to assemble 60,000 men and 500 tanks to resist them.

On October 16, 1973, the Egyptians rushed a Moroccan brigade to join the Third Army, which was in danger of being encircled in the Sinai. Sadat also finally made a statement regarding Egypt’s war aims; Egypt was not seeking the annihilation of Israel, but was fighting to restore her honor and recover land lost in 1967.

At this point the Egyptian First Army was rushed across the Canal into Sinai. With its entire strategic reserve now committed, Egypt had no forces of significance on the west bank of the Canal. Eager to exploit their first success in the defense of the Sinai passes, the Israelis allowed Ariel Sharon to organize a counterattack on October 15, 1973, that succeeded in establishing a small bridgehead on the western side of the Canal north of Great Bitter Lake. The Egyptian response was slow because of the inability of the Egyptian officer corps to react rapidly to such developments. Once across the Canal the Israelis quickly destroyed as many SAM radar positions as possible, creating a dangerous gap in Egyptian air defenses. Egyptian ground forces and warplanes eventually launched attack after attack on the bridgehead, but Israeli troops managed to hold them off until they managed to break out to the west on October 19, 1973. Ten thousand Israeli soldiers had crossed the Canal by this time.
Chief of Staff al-Shazly became convinced that a withdrawal from the Sinai was the only way of saving the army, but Sadat quietly removed him from his command. There was a general feeling in the staff that even a partial withdrawal to reinforce the west bank of the Canal could cause panic in the Egyptian ranks.

As the Israelis exploited their breakthrough, the Egyptian Third Army on the east bank of the Canal became cut off from the rest of the Egyptian forces. Israel also attempted to strike at the south end of the Canal, but stiff Egyptian resistance in the towns of Isma‘iliya and Suez repelled the Israeli advance. Sensing an imminent disaster, Sadat requested direct Soviet intervention but was turned down. Many in the Soviet leadership recalled that Sadat had expelled the Soviet military mission and there were misgivings about the degree of honesty with which Sadat was conducting relations with the Kremlin. An American airlift began to pour military equipment and supplies to Israel on October 14, 1973. The new Phantom and Skyhawk jets rushed into battle were equipped with cluster bombs and laser-guided missiles. Soviet war material was also arriving in Egypt and Syria, but was having little impact on their strategic situation.

Sadat decided to accept another cease-fire and diplomatic intervention in the conflict. His Syrian allies had already withdrawn to their secondary line of defense and were looking for a way out of the war. Israel violated the conditions of the cease-fire that began October 22, 1973, in order to strengthen its grip over the Egyptian Third Army in the Sinai. The encirclement continued for two days until U.S. diplomatic pressure forced a stop to Israeli troop movements. Tensions between the nuclear-armed patrons of the war, the United States and the Soviet Union, reached a peak October 25, 1973, when the U.S. government issued a red alert for all its armed forces.

**The Naval War of 1973**

The Egyptian navy played an important but little-known part in the Ramadan War. The main focus in Egyptian naval planning was the implementation of a blockade of all Israeli-bound shipping traveling through the Red Sea. This plan called for sealing the strategic Bab al-Mandab Straits at the narrow southern entrance to the Red Sea between Yemen and Somalia. Such a blockade would effectively close the Israeli port of Eilat at the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba.

Since operational waters were hundreds of miles away from Egypt, some measure of subterfuge was necessary to move the Red Sea Destroyer Squadron into place beforehand without raising any alarms. While cruising off India Commodore Mustafa Kamal Mansur opened orders on October 6, 1973, that sent his squadron to the Bab al-Mandab Straits to cut off
shipping bound for Israel, particularly the all-important oil shipments from Iran. Sadat later used the successful Egyptian blockade of the Israeli port of Eilat in his negotiations to free the encircled Egyptian Third Army in the Sinai.

Eventually other destroyers and submarines joined the blockade and a flotilla of fast attack boats was deployed north of the Bab al-Mandab Straits. Several Israeli oil tankers were destroyed in the region, while other naval units interrupted Israeli shipping in the Mediterranean. Egyptian missile boats battled with Israeli missile boats, but usually took the worst of it as Israeli electronic countermeasures interfered with the Soviet Styx missiles the Egyptians relied on.

**Conclusion: 1973 Ramadan War**

With Egypt now established as a capable (if not triumphant) military power in the Middle East, Sadat was finally able to negotiate a settlement with Israel satisfactory to Egyptian aspirations. The performance of the military in the 1973 War restored its prestige and renewed the Egyptian people’s pride in their armed forces. The dying Ahmad Isma’il ‘Ali was promoted to field marshal, while other commanders were either promoted or dismissed with the compensation of other appointments to prevent dissatisfaction. Setbacks were blamed on American intervention, while Sharon’s counterattack across the Suez Canal went unmentioned. Sadat assured his people that a great victory had been won and rode the limited success of his army to a negotiated return of the Sinai to Egypt and a Nobel Peace Prize. The price of peace with Israel was the abandonment of armed support for the Palestinian cause, but this troubled Sadat little. Others were troubled, however, particularly in Egypt’s Islamist community, and the decision was a contributing factor to Sadat’s assassination by *Takfir wa’l-Hijra* at a military review celebrating the war in 1981.

In the buildup to the war the army carried too many officers in its establishment, their numbers swelling rapidly in the two years before the Ramadan War. Thus, while the War of Attrition had created a core of experienced officers, their numbers were supplemented by an almost equal number of officers with less than two years’ experience prior to 1973. Senior posts were allocated according to personal loyalty to Sadat rather than military competence. Once the war started Egyptian attempts to direct its progress from the rear left the army slow to respond to events and often dangerously immobile. In contrast Israeli officers often led from the front and showed great initiative and leadership in adapting to the rapidly changing battlefield. There were numerous differences among the Israeli commanders, but they were never allowed to achieve the paralyzing effect such differences caused in the Egyptian leadership. Egyptian
communications along the line of command remained poor, and coordination with its Syrian ally virtually nonexistent. Syria and Egypt ended up fighting quite separate wars.

During the war there were fears that Israel might target the Aswan Dam, unleashing the vast reservoir of Lake Nasser on a “tsunami” wave of water that would effectively destroy life in much of the Nile Valley. The political cost of such a move was obviously far beyond what Israel could sustain, and despite the fears, it would seem that the Dam was never in any real danger from the Israelis, few, if any, of whom sought the complete destruction of Egypt. Nevertheless, the presence of the Aswan Dam created a permanent strategic liability that always had to be accounted for in Egyptian war plans.

Sadat always acted surprised at the degree of U.S. military aid offered to Israel during the war. The Egyptian plan to use a large, well-rehearsed army to seize the Canal from a much smaller force was certainly sound. The opening of a second front on the Syrian border would allow the Egyptians to dig in and virtually guaranteed the operation’s success. Egypt would then be able to reassert its traditional rights to the Canal and Israel would likely find little support in Washington (and certainly no where else in the climate of 1973) for a reopening of hostilities. If Sadat believed that the United States would abandon Israel to defeat by what was referred to in the language of the Cold War as a “Soviet client-state,” then Sadat was clearly out of touch with political realities.

Once the war began many Arab governments decided to become involved through the donation of various fighting forces to Egypt and Syria. The nature of these donations was decided by what the donor nations could spare, and not what Egypt and Syria needed or desired. Not having been included in the war planning, these forces arrived after lengthy overland travel without any idea of what they should do or where they should go. In the style of the Ottoman era they arrived with minimal supplies and no logistical system. Most of these Arab units joined the fighting on the Syrian front, where Iraq and Jordan made the largest contributions, while smaller groups of Saudis and Kuwaitis were also present. Throwing these disparate and uncoordinated groups into battle on unfamiliar terrain had predictable results. The Arabs of the Syrian front spent much of their time shooting and shelling each other, with Jordan’s Centurion tanks (identical to those of Israel) taking the worst of it. Iraq and Algeria both sent squadrons of Russian-built planes (the performance of the Iraqi pilots was highly rated by their allies), while Libya’s President Khadafy sent two squadrons of his French jets and a substantial financial contribution. Other infantry and armored units arrived from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Kuwait, and Sudan, though without airlift or effective mobilization plans some of this assistance arrived too late to be deployed.
The military balance between Egypt and Israel soon changed, however, with Israel’s pursuit of nuclear weapons production. The Ramadan War had been a close call for Israel, and the government was determined to never again allow Arab armies to threaten the existence of the Israeli state.

**The Egyptian Armed Forces: Into the Future**

Since the end of the Ramadan War, Egypt’s military has faced a host of new challenges. Repercussions over Sadat’s deal with Israel led to a four-day border war with Libya in 1977.

There has also been a strategic realignment. Since the Camp David Accords Egypt has become a major recipient of American military aid and training and has formed a partnership with NATO. Egyptian troops served alongside American soldiers in the U.N.–sponsored coalition against Iraq in 1990–1991.

The role of the foot soldier remains a problem in Egypt. Recruits and conscripts are poorly paid and have little incentive to make a career of military service. The cheapness of this manpower encourages the military to maintain a bloated structure, which is seen as alleviating unemployment (a chronic problem in modern Egypt). Dissatisfaction in the ranks has festered into a number of riots and mutinies by conscripts. The meager educational standards of rural communities leave many of the recruits incapable of understanding or operating the complex technology of modern arms and military equipment. Like Western armies, Egypt’s armed forces find it difficult to retain trained men eager to make real money in the private sector.

Nevertheless, Egypt’s armed forces continue to guard the nation’s security, keeping one eye on Israel and the other on a new and unconventional enemy, the terrorist. Egypt’s own war on terrorism began in the early 1990s and involved the army in a brutal back-alley fight against Islamist radicals, some of whom went on to join al-Qaeda. The search for a leaner, better-trained and better-equipped military will continue as Egypt seeks to establish itself as a bastion of stability in the volatile Middle East.
Chapter 1

1. All maps throughout the book are by the author.

Chapter 4

1. The Wild Geese were professional Irish soldiers who served in Catholic France and Spain in the many seventeenth and eighteenth century wars against England. This often developed into a multigenerational family profession, and accounts of the mid-twentieth century colonial wars in Indo-China and Algeria still reveal an unusual number of Irish names, often those of third- or fourth-generation French officers. Though often referred to as mercenaries, professional soldiers of the time had no guarantee of employment from their own ruler and often sought employment where they could be used, preferably not in campaigns against their homeland. In this sense, soldiering was simply another profession, seeking employment on the open market.


Chapter 5

1. The Austrian Maria Theresa dollar coin was the most widely accepted currency in the Sudan. The exchange rate to Egyptian piastres was set by the Egyptian government.

Chapter 6


   2. See Chapter 5, note 1.


Chapter 7

Chapter 8
1. These numbers must be regarded as approximate; there are conflicting reports about the exact numbers of ships in the rebuilt Egyptian navy in this period, mostly obtained from European intelligence sources.

Chapter 9

Chapter 10
4. Ibid.

Chapter 11

Chapter 12
2. Ibid., 159.
Chapter 13

2. Frank Power, Letters From Khartoum, Written During the Siege (London: 1885), 38.

Chapter 14

2. Ibid., 188.

Chapter 15

1. Proclamation by the General Officer Commanding His Britannic Majesty’s Forces in Egypt, November 6, 1914.
2. Letter, Wingate/Erkowit to Kitchener/Whitehall, 27-4-16 Durham Sudan Archive 128/3/48-60. The author has made a thorough search of the relevant military intelligence reports held in Khartoum, but has been unable to find any original record of this or several other lurid tales concerning the Sultan conveyed to Kitchener by Wingate in 1914–1915.
5. Letter from the “Assembly of the West” to Wingate, March 18, 1916, Durham Sudan Archive 129/5/10–11.
7. Ibid., 241.

Chapter 16


Chapter 17

Chapter 18


Chapter 20


Agha. Honorific for officers below the rank of bey
Amir al-mu’minin. Commander of the faithful
Ansar. Followers of the Sudanese Mahdi; literally, “helpers”
Awlad al-Nas. “Sons of the People”; i.e., Descendants of Mamluks
Banu al-Atrak. The Turkish people
Baqqara. Cattle-owning Arab tribes of south Darfur
Bashi-Bazuq. Irregular cavalry, usually Kurds, Albanians, Circassians, and Slavs
Bazinqirs. Slave troops
Bey (or Bay). Civil and military honorific below pasha
Caliph. (Anglicized form of Arabic khalifa—see below)
Corvée. System of forced labor
Danaqla. People of the Dongola region of Nubia
Daftardar. Treasurer, literally “keeper of the register of lands”
Dem. Another term for zaribah, a brush stockade
Devshirme. Ottoman recruiting system
Fellah, (pl.) Fellahin. Peasant farmers of Egypt
Fiki. Muslim holy man
Firman. Religious/political edict
Furwa. Sheepskins
Haramayn. The Holy Cities of Mecca and Madina
Hukumdar. Governor-General
Ikhwan. Literally “Brothers,” commonly used to refer to the Muslim Brotherhood
Imam. Muslim religious scholar
Jallaba. Trader of Nile Valley origin
Jihadiya. Corps of Black Sudanese slave soldiers skilled in the use of firearms
Julban. Mamluks of the sultan’s royal household
Kashif. Civilian Ottoman tax-collecting official
Khalifa. “Successor”; supreme leader of the Muslim community
Maghariba. People of the Maghrab, i.e., Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco
Mahdi. “He who is rightly guided,” i.e., the expected Prophet
Glossary

Mahmal. Covering for the Ka’aba shrine in Mecca
Malik. King (used in the Sudan)
Maqdum. Royal commissioner of the sultan of Darfur
Mek. Minor king
Mukhabarat. Secret service/Intelligence
Mulazim. Lieutenant; in Mahdist use a member of the khalifa’s bodyguard
Naqib al-ashraf. Descendants of the Prophet
Nizam Jadid. “New Order,” i.e., the New Army
Ojak. Military corps
Pasha. Highest title in the Ottoman hierarchy
Pashalik. Administrative territory governed by a pasha
Porte. See Sublime Porte
Ras. Abyssinian chief
Sadrazam. Grand vizier
Sanussiya. Sufi order based in Cyrenaica
Serasker. Commander in chief/Minister of War
Sharif. Descendant of the Prophet Muhammad
Shaykh. Local religious and/or political authority
Sublime Porte. The Ottoman government and/or court
Sudd. Vast marsh/swampland of South Sudan
Wadi. A dry riverbed or seasonal stream
Zaribah. Field fortification made of thornbushes
Zawiya. A religious lodge and communal center, in Sanusi practice often fortified

Ranks of the Egyptian Army

Sirdar (Pasha). Commander in chief
Ferik (Pasha). Lieutenant-general
Liwa (Pasha). Major-general
Miralai (Bey). Brigadier or colonel
Kaimakam (Bey). Lieutenant-colonel
Bimbashi (Effendi). Major
Sagholaghasi (Effendi). Adjutant-major
Yuzbashi (Effendi). Captain
Mulazim Awal (Effendi). Lieutenant
Mulazim Thani (Effendi). 2nd Lieutenant
Solkolaghasi. Quartermaster
Mulahiz. British NCO
Bash Shawish. Sergeant-major
Shawish. Sergeant
Ombashi. Corporal
Nafar. Private

- The honorary title of effendi was used only by Egyptian officers, never British.
- Bimbashi was usually the lowest rank held by British officers.
- All ranks are in the Turkish language

The House of Muhammad ‘Ali

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