

Grenadier Guards

Non-World War conflicts

Anglo-Egyptian War 1951-52



Following years of British dominance over Egypt coupled with WW2 and Egypt's increasing frustrations regarding the rise in profile of the Israeli statehood, Egypt went to war with Britain in 1951.

These frustrations were brought to a head when the Wafd party returned to power in January 1950, with Mostafa El-Nahas as its prime minister. Prime minister Nahas introduced a decree which the Egyptian parliament approved seeking the abrogation of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, and proclaiming Faruk as king of Egypt and Sudan.

Egypt erupted in delight, with newspapers proclaiming that Egypt had broken away from "the fetters of British imperialism". The Wafd government gave way to pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood and other leftist groups for militant action against the British and created "liberation battalions" arming both themselves, and the auxiliary police force in the process.



The 1936 treaty gave Egypt slightly more independence in its internal and foreign affairs; it eliminated the posts of British advisers attached to the Egyptian government and bound England to aid the abolition of the regime of capitulations and to support Egypt's application for entry into the League of Nations. According to Article 1 of the treaty, the occupation of Egypt by British troops was formally ended. At the same time, the treaty provided that the main military positions of British imperialism in Egypt would be maintained. In peacetime, England was to have the right to maintain a force of about 10,000 troops in the Suez Canal zone; in the "event of war, the immediate threat of war, or an emergency international situation," Egypt was obligated to grant to England all ports, airfields, and means of communication. On October 15th 1951, the Egyptian parliament denounced the Treaty of 1936. England accepted its abolition in the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1954.

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Action was undertaken to stop food supplies reaching the Suez Canal Zone, and Egyptian workers were prevented from working at the base. The Muslim Brotherhood and militant students then implemented a guerrilla style war against the British, in the Suez Canal Zone.

In December of 1951 the British army began work to construct and open a road to a water supply for the army, in the process they demolished approximately fifty Egyptian mud houses using bulldozer's with tanks in support.

On the 25th 1952 January the British attacked the Egyptian Police barracks at Ismailiya following refusal by its occupants to surrender to the British troops, approximately 50 Egyptians were killed, with almost 100 injured and provoked intense Egyptian anger. The incident led directly to what's referred to as "Black Saturday," on January 26th 1952. The day began with mutiny by police in Cairo protesting against the death of their colleagues in Ismailiya, at the same time groups of people in Cairo went on a rampage against British property and other symbols of Western presence.

By the end of the that day over 700 properties valued at 50 million pounds (£1,4 Billion in 2020 terms) had been burned, damaged or destroyed, 30 people were killed with hundreds injured.

The British believed there was official connivance in the rioting following a report by the Egyptian government, and the Wafdist interior minister Fuad Siraj ad Din was subsequently accused of negligence and dismissed.

It is difficult to be certain if Fuad Siraj ad Din was influential in the riots as his name appears little in Arabic, or western histories of modern Egypt. His name appears in odd passages and articles which indicate a strong minded and skilled political operator, who strongly supported Mustafa al-Nahhas.

King Farouk dismissed Mustafa el-Nahhas's government and in the following months three different politicians; Ali Maher, Ahmed Naguib El-Hilali and Hussein Sirri were instructed to form governments. These "salvation ministries" failed in their attempts to put their political houses in order, and address the widespread corruption in the system.

It became clear that the Egyptian ruling class had become unable to rule and none of the radical nationalist groups were strong enough to take power, this power vacuum gave the Free Officers their opportunity. On the 22nd of July they learned the king had obtained a list of dissenting officer names and was preparing to arrest them, and they began the coup that same night.



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Early on the morning of 23rd July key royalist commanders were arrested before they reached barracks and the royalist chief of staff Hussein Sirri Amer along with other officers at the Military General Headquarters were arrested, before they could gain control over their soldiers.

At 6:00 am the Free Officers air force units began flying over the skies of Cairo and at 7:30 am a local broadcasting station issued the first communiqué of the coup d'état in the name of General Naguib, to the Egyptian people.

The broadcast explained the reasons and justifications for the coup, which was sometimes referred to as the "Blessed Movement".

The person reading the message was the Free Officer Anwar Sadat, who was later to become president of Egypt. The coup was carried out by less than one hundred officers most of which were of junior rank, the speech prompted huge celebrations by cheering mobs.

On July 26, King Faruk was forced to abdicate in favour of his infant son Ahmed Fuad and sailed into exile on HMS Mahroussa, the same yacht his grandfather Ismail had left for exile some seventy years earlier.



Unfortunately, this would not be the last time Suez would engage in conflict.

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