

## Egyptian Independence: 1919-22

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Dr. Stephen Zunes & Jesse Laird  
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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance  
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**Dates:** 1919-22

**Nature of Struggle:** Independence

**Target:** British Empire

**Movement:** Saad Zaghlul, The Delegation (Wafd), National Party (Wantani Party), People's Party (Al Hizb al Umma), organizations of students, workers, and professionals, and participants from all walks of Egyptian life.

**Conflict Summary:**

Broad-based nonviolent action erupted against British occupation forces and the colonial administration of Egypt in 1919 following the exile of popular pro-independence leaders. Nonviolent boycotts, petitions, pamphleteering, demonstrations, and a sustained general strike by students, professionals, and workers forced the British to declare limited independence for Egypt on February 28, 1922.

**Political History:**

Since its height as one of the world's great early civilizations, Egypt had contended with occupation by the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and Ottomans. Napoleon Bonaparte invaded in 1798, but the French were quickly expelled by the combined armed forces of the British, Mamluk and Ottoman empires in 1801. Albanian forces, nominally loyal to the Ottomans initially, emerged in the four years of chaos that followed the French retreat. An Albanian commander, Muhammad Ali, quickly distinguished himself as a popular leader and became the Ottoman Viceroy in Egypt in 1805. Ali's son and grandsons succeeded him, and often continued his legacy of development and modernization of the Egyptian state, infrastructure and economy. Completed in 1869, the Suez Canal was one of several expensive development projects that put Egypt heavily into debt with usurious European bankers. The debt reached crisis levels by 1875, forcing Ali's grandson and successor Ismail to sell his interest in the canal to Britain. Taxes were also

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raised to pay foreign debt, which was widely unpopular.

Nationalism emerged in the late 19th century in response to concessions to British and French interests and increased further with the informal establishment of a British protectorate in 1882. Protests against Egyptian Viceroy Khedive Tawfiq were suppressed. After Tawfiq's son Abbas Hilmi II ascended to become Egyptian Viceroy, the move toward independence picked up among Egyptians. Two political parties emerged by 1907 that increasingly became vehicles for Egyptian nationalism: the People's Party (Al Hizb al Umma) and the National Party (Wantani Party), founded by the wealthy journalist and prominent lawyer Mustafa Kamil. The religiously conservative National Party appealed to young professionals, such as students and people seeking government positions. The party called for the evacuation of the British from Egypt in 1907 and controlled a major newspaper, The Banner (Al Liwa). The People's Party and their outlet, simply known as The Newspaper (Al Jaridah), took a more moderate position, appealing to intellectuals and landowners who advocated gradual reform through education and selective cooperation with the British.

Antagonism toward British rule crystallized in response to unpopular trade and agricultural policies. Cotton became a ubiquitous crop, reflecting Egypt's policy of free trade that was created to help service foreign debt. By 1914, cotton was nearly 90 percent of Egypt's exports. Imported British goods undercut the local economy because they were cheaper than locally produced products. This price competition put many small urban artisans out of work. At the same time, new factories were being built to process raw materials. Work in these new factories eventually expanded to a small-scale industrial economy of more than 30,000 workers by 1916. Jobs in the factories were often unsafe, unclean and failed to offer meaningful pay. The National Party helped to organize trade unions and consumer associations from among these low paid workers. The new unions were diverse, including cigarette makers, cotton spinners, as well as warehouse and railroad workers, and waged limited strikes for better pay and safety. New organizational structures like unions played an essential role in the uprising to come.

During World War I, the British conscripted hundreds of thousands of

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Egyptian peasants into a campaign to seize Syria and Palestine from the Ottoman Empire and forced many into work for the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. The wholly unwelcome presence of foreign troops was an additional factor straining relations. Tension between Egyptians and the British flashed in highly symbolic and charged clashes, such as in an incident in Dinshawi where a fight between villagers and British officers turned deadly and resulted in a spat of retaliatory executions. By the time the British government unilaterally declared Egypt a protectorate in November 1914, a desire for independence had already become fixed among Egyptian students, intellectuals, political parties, and segments of the working class. However, wartime conditions, such as martial law, restrictions on cotton planting, and inflation, were also significant immediate grievances that helped to fuel the revolution. Egyptians hoped at the time that after the war Britain would pull back its troops or that Egypt would win the support of some of Britain's allies, neither of which happened.

Unemployment, inflation, and failed attempts by the British to squelch dissent after the war all helped to galvanize national support for independence. Nationalists in September 1918 attempted to put together a delegation to the upcoming Paris Peace Conference to advocate Egyptian independence. Opposition leaders Saad Zaghlul, Abd al Fahmi, Ali Sharawi, and others from the People's Party brought demands for independence to the local authority, British High Commissioner Wingate, on 13 November 1918, seeking permission also to travel to London as a delegation advancing national independence for Egypt and making their case before the Foreign Office in London. All demands were refused. The Foreign Office also questioned Zaghlul's (and the rest of the would-be delegation's) legitimacy as representatives of Egypt in an attempt to undermine his program of political agitation. Zaghlul's followers responded by gathering money and signatures that confirmed his legitimate role as a representative. Some of these petitions were confiscated and British officials refused to meet with nationalists. Barred from making the Egyptian case at the Paris Peace Conference by the United States' recognition of Egypt as a British protectorate, Zaghlul sent memoranda instead, even to American President Woodrow Wilson. Known in Egypt as The Delegation (Wafd), Zaghlul and other opposition leaders continued working for independence until they were finally arrested in March 1919. Within a day

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of their arrest they were exiled to the British-controlled island of Malta. This attempt by the British to silence dissent by deporting opposition leaders immediately triggered an unprecedented popular uprising that led to limited independence within the next three years.

### **Strategic Actions:**

The uprising was notable in that members from all religions and classes of Egyptian society were moved to action. Within weeks of the arrest of The Delegation, isolated student demonstrations turned into strikes by transportation workers and professionals, which then quickly became a national general strike that dragged the economic and political affairs of Egypt to a standstill. Courtrooms were empty of lawyers. Railroad tracks and telegraph lines used by British interests were sabotaged at strategic locations. Protest demonstrations broke out throughout the country, sometimes accompanied by small-scale violence in the form of rioting such as in Cairo, the city of Tanta, and in Asyut Province. The British violently suppressed demonstrations and killed hundreds of protesters.

On March 15, 1919, 10,000 students, workers, and professionals marched on Cairo's Adbin Palace in open defiance of the British crackdown. Thousands more joined them at the scene in what would be the largest demonstration of the uprising. In a historic action the following day, several hundred traditionally veiled women gathered to protest openly against the British occupation, led by Safia Zaghlul, Huda Sharawi, and Mana Fahmi Wissa, wives of the exiled nationalist leaders. These women and others from the upper classes of Egyptian society played critical roles in the resistance by organizing strikes and boycotts of British goods, and petitioning foreign embassies on behalf of the independence movement.

British authorities in Egypt and London understood that they had lost control of the situation by the third week of March and sent out conflicting signals. They replaced High Commissioner Wingate with an Acting High Commissioner, only to appoint war hero General Allenby as Special High Commissioner almost immediately thereafter. On March 25, the day after he

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arrived in Egypt, Allenby met with a group of emboldened Egyptian nationalists who demanded that they release The Delegation leaders in exile and grant them permission to travel to Paris. The scene around the meeting was one of total mobilization. Winston Churchill, then State Secretary of War and Air, declared before the British House of Commons that the whole of Egypt was virtually in insurrection. The Delegation won these concessions by agreeing to sign a letter calling-off the demonstrations. Zaghlul, and other members of the exiled Delegation, left for Paris on April 7.

The question at this point for the British was how to placate the Egyptian demand for independence without giving up Egypt as a protectorate or losing control of local interests, such as the lucrative cotton industry and nearby shipping routes. Lord Milner was commissioned and then later led a mission to Egypt in December 1919 to seek a political solution to this effect. Instead he found the Egyptian pro-independence leaders wholly uncooperative. Delegation leaders turned the tables and boycotted his attempts to meeting with them, and his mission was met with renewed strikes, the closing of shops, pamphleteering, and open dissent in the streets. Milner had no choice but to bring Zaghlul to the negotiating table in London. Private talks ensued in the summer of 1920 and led to the abolition of the protectorate as a condition for negotiation of a treaty with Egypt.

Zaghlul returned home on April 4, 1921 as a national hero. The Special High Commissioner Allenby believed his popularity threatened the viability of a puppet group being created behind the scenes to run a future independent Egypt in line with British interests. Consequently, in December Zaghlul was again deported, this time to the Seychelles via Aden. Again, his deportation triggered strikes and demonstrations in a dozen cities and towns throughout Egypt.

The British declared limited independence for Egypt on February 28, 1922 without involving Zaghlul or other opposition leaders in negotiations as part of a calculated move that allowed certain key details to remain up in the air. The British retained for themselves, for example, control of Sudan and the right to intervene to defend foreign interests in Egypt. A constitution was

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approved on April 19 and an electoral law establishing parliamentary elections was established a few weeks later.

### **Ensuing Events:**

Political tension between the Egyptian monarch, The Delegation and the British continued for some years. The monarchy perceived a threat to its autocratic rule posed by The Delegation. The British, who maintained considerable power in Egypt even after the revolution, understandably saw the widespread popular support for The Delegation as a continuing threat to its interests. In the January 1924 elections, The Delegation won an overwhelming majority of seats in parliament. Zaghlul became Prime Minister, but it was a post that would not last. In a twist of events, an assassin in Cairo cut down the British Governor General of Sudan, Sir Lee Stack. British officials demanded a litany of punitive concessions from Egypt. Zaghlul conceded on some points, including a large cash payment, but flatly denied others. He shortly resigned, dying three years later.

It would not be until the 1952 revolution, resulting in a coup by reformist military officers which overthrew the monarchy, that Egypt finally wrested itself from British influence. However, the largely nonviolent independence struggle between 1919-1922 is still considered a significant step toward self-determination.