EGYPT’S OVERLOOKED CONTRIBUTION TO WORLD WAR II

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Introduction

The war began on the Egyptian front with the advance of the Italian Marshall Rodolfo Graziani across the Egyptian-Libyan border on September 1940. The crossing released a series of attacks and counter-attacks and the removal of one general and the appointment of another. General Sir Archibald Wavell succeeded in pushing Graziani back and occupying the city of Benghazi on February 1941. Graziani was then removed and General Erwin Rommel appointed as the Head of the Axis Forces in North Africa, succeeding in standing up to Wavell and forcing him out of Libya. Wavell in turn was removed and a series of British Generals were subsequently appointed and removed in countering Rommel of whom the last was General Auchinleck who managed to score some victories and eventually was forced to retreat back to the Egyptian territories. He finally managed to achieve a Pyrrhic victory after a battle that lasted six days halting Rommel’s attacks in El Alamein on June 6, 1942.

The position of the British remained tenuous to the extreme and in an attempt to save the situation, Winston Churchill issued some important changes in the British leadership of the Armed Forces in the Middle East by appointing General Montgomery as head of the Eighth British Army and General Harold Alexander as the General Command to the British Forces in the Middle East succeeding General Auchinleck. Montgomery successfully repelled Rommel’s attacks in August and September, turning the defensive into an offensive and achieving victory in the Battle of El Alamein (October 23–November 4, 1942). He forced Rommel to retreat to Tripoli in January 1943, then further into Tunis where the British Armed Forces in collaboration with the Americans on both the Eastern and Western front managed to encircle him. Rommel kept the fighting going until April 1943 when he fell ill and was transported to Germany; the Axis Forces were defeated in North Africa in May. The Allied Forces
crossed over from Sicily in July, laying the ground for the invasion of Italy which surrendered in September 1943.¹

The history of the war on the Egyptian Front just summarized above can be described as the standard narrative of attack and retreat which hundreds of volumes reproduce as they focus on the brilliance of Rommel and the genius of Montgomery. In all these narratives Egypt is presented as a theatre of war rather than a participatory player. The two questions this paper sets out to answer are thus the following: Would it have been possible for the Allied Forces to withstand the attacks of Graziani and Rommel without help from Egypt? After dozens of battles on the North African front, would an Allied victory have been possible had Egypt taken the side of the Axis Forces and declared war against Britain and its Allies? In Western narratives of war which focus on the fact that Egypt did not have much to offer militarily and economically to the Allies, the answer to these usually comes out as a straightforward yes. On the basis of new sources which reveal the extent of Egypt’s overlooked contribution to WWII, this paper contends otherwise.

Britain realized early on the important role Egypt could play—with its army, its resources and its strategic position—in the case war broke out. This explains the reason behind the 1936 Treaty where Britain required Egypt to offer all possible assistance in case of war. As the international situation became more complex in Europe throughout the month of August 1939, the British Ambassador to Egypt Miles W. Lampson warned the Egyptian Prime Minister Maher Pasha that the situation in Europe is moving toward war and that Egypt should prepare to declare martial law and take the necessary precautions to inspect the ships arriving to the Egyptian ports according to the provisions of the 1936 Treaty.² The Egyptian government did indeed comply and on August 28, 1939 set up a special commis-

¹ For further details regarding these military operations see ʿAbd-ar-Rahmān ar-Rāfiʿī, Fī ʿaqāb ath-thawra al-misriyya [After the Egyptian Revolution] (Cairo, 1951), pp. 122–130. Also note the bibliographic list in footnotes 14 and 15.
² Document number 0075–051082; “Naval Examination Service at Egyptian Ports,” and two other documents with no number entitled “From the British Ambassador to the Prime Minister of Egypt, August, 4 and 25, 1939”. Dār al-Wathāʾiq al-Qawmiyya, Arshīf Majlis al-Wuzarāʿ.