

# FROM OCCUPATION TO NOMINAL INDEPENDENCE: 1882-1923

[Egypt Table of Contents](#)

## The Occupiers

With the occupation of 1882, Egypt became a part of the British Empire but never officially a colony. The khedival government provided the facade of autonomy, but behind it lay the real power in the country, specifically, the British agent and consul general, backed by British troops.

At the outset of the occupation, the British government declared its intention to withdraw its troops as soon as possible. This could not be done, however, until the authority of the khedive was restored. Eventually, the British realized that these two aims were incompatible because the military intervention, which Khedive Tawfiq supported and which prevented his overthrow, had undermined the authority of the ruler. Without the British presence, the khedival government would probably have collapsed.

In addition, the British government realized that the most effective way to protect its interests was from its position in Egypt. This represented a change in the policy that had existed since the time of Muhammad Ali, when the British were committed to preserving the Ottoman Empire. The change in British policy occurred for several reasons. Sultan Abdul Hamid had refused Britain's request to intervene in Egypt against Urabi and to preserve the khedival government. Also, Britain's influence in Istanbul was declining while that of Germany was rising. Finally, Britain's unilateral invasion of Egypt gave Britain the opportunity to supplant French influence in the country. Moreover, Britain was determined to reserve its control over the Suez Canal and to safeguard the vital route to India.

Between 1883 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, there were three British agents and consuls general in Egypt: Lord Cromer (1883-1907), Sir John Eldon Gorst (1907-11), and Lord Herbert Kitchener (1911-14). Cromer was an autocrat whose control over Egypt was more absolute than that of any Mamluk or khedive. Cromer believed his first task was to achieve financial solvency for Egypt. He serviced the debt, balanced the budget, and spent what money remained after debt payments on agriculture, irrigation, and railroads. He neglected industry and education, a policy that became a political issue in the country. He brought in British officials to staff the bureaucracy. This policy, too, was controversial because it prevented Egyptian civil servants from rising to the top of their fields.

Gorst, who was less autocratic than Cromer, had to face a growing Egyptian nationalism that demanded British evacuation from the country. Gorst's attempt to create a "moderate" nationalism ultimately failed because the nationalists refused to make any compromises over independence and because Britain considered any concession to the nationalists a sign of weakness. When Kitchener arrived in Egypt in 1911, he was already famous as the man who had avenged the death of General Charles Gordon in Khartoum in 1885 during the Mahdist uprising. In 1913 Kitchener introduced a new constitution that gave the country some representative institutions locally and nationally. When the British occupation began, the Assembly of Delegates had ceased to exist. It was superseded by an assembly and legislative council that were consultative bodies whose advice was not binding on the government. The Organic Law of 1913 provided for a legislative assembly with an increased number of elected members and expanded powers.

On October 29, 1914, the Ottoman Empire entered World War I on the side of the Central Powers. Martial law was declared in Egypt on November 2. On November 3, the British government unilaterally declared Egypt a protectorate, severing the country from the Ottoman Empire. Britain deposed Khedive Abbas, who had succeeded Khedive Tawfiq upon the latter's death in 1892, because Abbas, who was in Istanbul when the war broke out, was suspected of pro-German sympathies. Kitchener was recalled to London to serve as minister of war.