

Great Britain to Egypt, 04-02-1942

Egypt – given its key strategic geographic location – was of critical importance both to the Axis and the Allies in the Second World War. The government of Great Britain had pressured the government of Egypt to break off relations with Vichy France in early 1942. Egypt, although *de jure* independent, in reality still functioned as a vassal state to Great Britain. The decision of the Egyptian government to break off relations with Vichy France caused considerable internal upheaval, both on the streets of Cairo and within the governing coalition of the country itself. Initially the pro-Vichy Egyptian minister of finance resigned. Not long thereafter, however, King Farukh, who opposed the fissure with Vichy, forced the prime minister to step down.¹ Ambassador Lampson of Great Britain then demanded that the king request that Nahhas, the leader of the Wafds party, form a majority government on 2 February. King Farukh politely refused stating that he intended to convene all political leaders for consultations. The advance of German forces commanded by general Rommel close to Egyptian borders fed British fears that the Egyptian king would install a pro-Axis government. Ambassador Lampson and the British Minister of State Lyttleton sanctioned by Foreign Minister Eden then decided to draft an ultimatum.² They coordinated their efforts with Nahhas. Shortly before noon on 4 February, the British ambassador presented the following ultimatum to the king through the King's adviser: "Unless I hear by 6 P.M. today that Nahhas has been asked to form a Government His Majesty King Farouk must accept the consequences."³ The advice of the United States representative to the king was to heed the British ultimatum.⁴ King Farukh gathered the opposition leaders by 3.30 p.m. and at 6.15 pm a message was delivered to the British embassy signed by all of them declaring the ultimatum to be an unacceptable meddling in Egyptian affairs.⁵ Three hours later a British delegation headed by the ambassador and the general commander of the British forces in Egypt showed up at the king's palace in an armoured colonne of vehicles. They forced their way into the palace.⁶ When the British ambassador told the king he would have to vacate his throne, the king changed his mind. Thereupon he reconvened the political leaders of the different Egyptian factions, and informed them of his decision to appoint Nahhas as prime minister.⁷ Shortly thereafter, Nahhas assumed office and parliament was dissolved for elections to be held in March.⁸ Nahhas held on to power over the course of the Second World War, even though constant infighting between the various Egyptian parties persisted. After the end of the war, the British government shifted its support back to the king. This marked the end of the rule of Nahhas.⁹ The ultimatum left a long (and bitter) legacy. Many leading Egyptians, including future leaders Nasser and Sadat, who partook in the coup against the king in 1952, cited these events later as a source of anger.¹⁰

¹ George Kirk, "'(Xi) The Egyptian Bid for Independence, January-February 1942'." in *Survey of International Affairs 1939-1946. The Middle East in the War.*, vol. 6 (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 207–8; Charles D. Smith, '4 February 1942: Its Causes and Its Influence on Egyptian Politics and on the Future of Anglo-Egyptian Relations, 1937–1945', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 04 (1979): 467–68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800051291>.

² Smith, '4 February 1942', 469–70. See also G. Warburg, 'Lampson's Ultimatum to Faruq, 4 February, 1942', *Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 1 (1975): 28–29.

³ Smith, '4 February 1942', 471.

⁴ Kirk, "'(Xi) The Egyptian Bid for Independence, January-February 1942'." , 210.

⁵ Smith, '4 February 1942', 472. Warburg, 'Lampson's Ultimatum to Faruq, 4 February, 1942', 29.

⁶ Kirk, "'(Xi) The Egyptian Bid for Independence, January-February 1942'." , 210. Warburg, 'Lampson's Ultimatum to Faruq, 4 February, 1942', 30. For the report on the use of force - which did not result in any fatalities - see fn. 92 on Stefanie Wichhart, 'Dissertation: "Intervention: Britain, Egypt, and Iraq during World War II' (University of Texas, 2007), 177–78, https://www.academia.edu/7073770/Dissertation_Intervention_Britain_Egypt_and_Iraq_during_World_War_II.

⁷ Kirk, "'(Xi) The Egyptian Bid for Independence, January-February 1942'." , 210. Smith, '4 February 1942', 472.

⁸ Kirk, "'(Xi) The Egyptian Bid for Independence, January-February 1942'." , 210.

⁹ Smith, '4 February 1942', 475–78.

¹⁰ Warburg, 'Lampson's Ultimatum to Faruq, 4 February, 1942', 24–25.

