

Glimpses of the Egyptian army during the First world War

Introduction

Inspired by the work on my articles Glimpse of the Egyptian Army, 1940 and Britain's Figures - Sudanese Infantry, as well as the appearance of an article from the English magazine Navy and Army (Source 2) with a number of interesting photographs, I wanted to investigate the Egyptian Army's participation in the First World War.

Table 1: The Egyptian Armed Forces, 1914 1) —

The army

- The Camel Corps
- 2 cavalry squadrons • 3 mounted infantry companies • 6 artillery batteries (field and mountain artillery) • 3 fortress artillery companies 1
 - machine gun company
- 17+ infantry battalions o 8 Egyptian battalions o 7 Sudanese battalions o 1 Arab battalion 2) o 1 Equatorial African battalion o 1 company of Nubian volunteers o 6 Sudanese reserve companies • Supply troops etc.

Coast Guard 3)

- A camel corps • A number of vessels, including the gunboats Abbas, Nur El Bahr and Rasheed.

Gendarmerie

In the Sinai Peninsula there was a small paramilitary police force - *the Sinai Gendarmerie* - recruited from local Bedouin tribes; the officer corps came from the Egyptian army.

The Egyptian Army, 1914

Before the First World War, Egypt was actually a Turkish possession, but in reality an English possession. The Suez Canal was the reason for the English interest, the canal being a vital one

connecting line between the western and eastern parts of the Empire. On 18 December 1914, Egypt was declared a British protectorate, a status the country retained until 1922.

The army numbered 18,000 men. There was a conscription period of three years, but since the army was not large, it was relatively easy to avoid being called up, or to be represented by deputies.

Sudanese citizens could volunteer for the army, on long-term contracts.



A patrol from the Egyptian camel corps, approx. 1900.

From the NYPL Digital Gallery.

The army was primarily stationed in Sudan, and in Egypt itself there was only: 1 artillery battery, 1 fortress artillery company and 3 infantry battalions.

The Camel Corps consisted in 1897 of 4 Egyptian and 4 Sudanese companies. At this time a camel company numbered 152 men. (Source 3).

The Camel Corps was, during the First World War, equipped with Martini-Henry rifles.



Cannon exercise by the Egyptian artillery, approx. 1900.

From Source 3.

The field guns were 75 mm howitzers from Krupp.



Egyptian lancer, ca. 1914.
From Source 1.



Egyptian lancer.
From a vignette reproduced in the Illustrated London News, 3 June 1882, found on the Internet.



Egyptian infantry and cavalry, c. 1914.
From Source 1.

The mounted soldiers who appear to be wearing some sort of turbans could be from one of the mounted infantry companies.

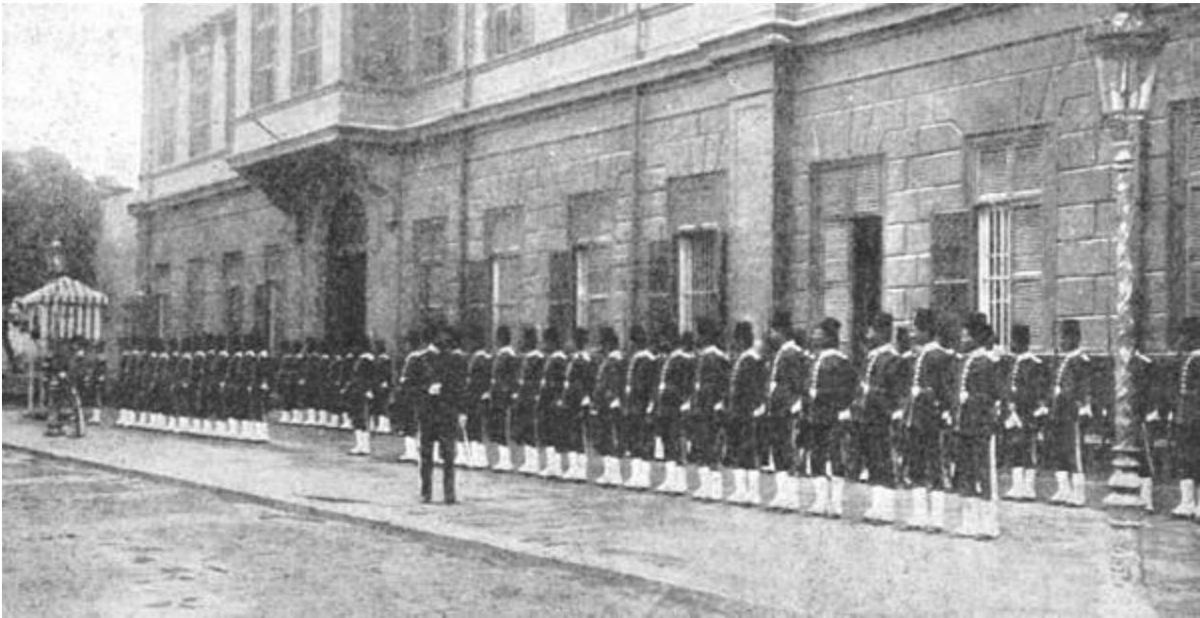
Uniforms



Egyptian infantryman.
From a vignette reproduced in
the Illustrated London News, 3
June 1882, found on the Internet.

The field uniforms of the Egyptian army in the period were, as far as is known, khaki-coloured canvas uniforms, where the jacket could be replaced in the winter by a knitted uniform blouse (jersey), brown or blue-grey for the Egyptian infantry battalions and dark blue for the Sudanese battalions. Viklers were grey-blue or dark blue.

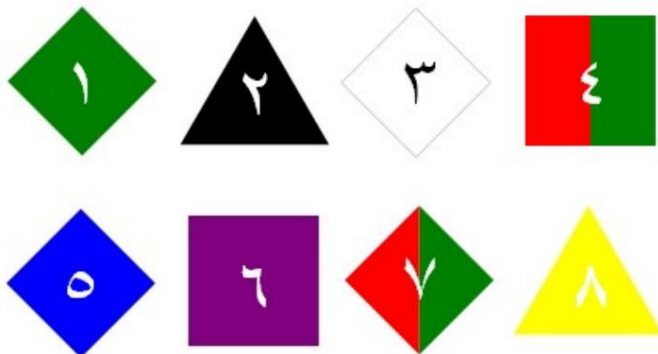
Judging by the renderings in Source 4, the leather clothing was black (in the infantry) and brown (Camel Corps).



The Guard at the Governor General's Palace in Cairo.
From FirstWorldWar.com.

Collectors of Britain's figures will see a close resemblance between the guard uniforms and Britain's catalog number *117 Egyptian Infantry*.

Hue marks



Egyptian battalion badges, ca. 1900.
Own design after Source 2.

Top row: 1st to 4th Battalion.

Bottom row: 5th to 8th Battalion.

In the field, the Egyptian battalions wore the badge on the front of the cover over the fez, while the Sudanese battalions wore their badges on the side.

Source 4 reproduces illustrations of soldiers from the 1st Battalion showing that the badges continued to be used during the First World War. A fez with a cover is shown in the photograph of Captain Abd-el-Daim, see Glimpses of the Egyptian Army, 1940. Similar covers were worn during the First World War.

Sash and lance flag

As a further distinguishing feature, the units apparently wore a different colored sash, possibly the same color as the battalion badge. In Source 4, a reproduction of a soldier from the 1st Battalion is shown, and an addition to the plate text shows that the soldier should have been depicted with a green sash.

A rendering of a soldier from the Camel Corps shows a blue sash.



Source 4 states that the cavalry wore a red and black sash, and a lance flag in the same colors; the colors are said to symbolize the army's Turkish past 4).

Source 4 reproduces the lance flag with the red color at the top, but the photographic reproduction of an Egyptian lancer in this paper clearly shows that the dark color is at the top.

Table 2: Egyptian degree designations

Egyptian (Turkish) degree	Title	Degree in Danish
Sirdar		Commander in chief
Farik	Pasha	Lieutenant General
Lewa		Major General
Miralai		Colonel
KaiMkan	Bey	Lieutenant Colonel
Bimbashi		Major
Yuzbashi		Captain
Mulazim awal	Effendi	Lieutenant
Mulazim tani		Second lieutenant

From the establishment of the Anglo-Egyptian army in 1883, the Turkish rank designations of earlier times, accompanied by a special title, were continued.

It soon became practice for ranks from Bimbashi (major) to be held by English officers, while ranks from Yuzbashi (captain) downwards were held by Egyptian and Sudanese officers.

Bosses



General Sir FR Wingate.
From Source 1.

General Wingate [5](#)) was from 1899 to 1916 Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Army, Sirdar, and Governor-General of the Sudan.



Horatio Kitchener, Sirdar
in the Egyptian Army, 1882-1899
7). —

Both generals played a major role in building the Egyptian army.

He replaced General Horatio Kitchener [6](#), who in 1899 became commander-in-chief of the British troops in South Africa.

From 1911 to 1914, Lord Kitchener held the post of Governor-General of Egypt.

As Minister of War (from 5 August 1914), Lord Kitchener had special prerequisites for the conditions in Egypt and not least the strategic importance of the Suez Canal, which was the lifeblood of relations between England and the colonies.

Closing

So far, the Egyptian Army's participation in World War I is covered in the following articles:

- Part 2: The Defense of the Suez Canal (1914-1915)
- Part 3: The Senussi Uprising (1915-1917)
- Part 4: Operations in Darfur (1916) - under preparation.

Thanks

I thank Torstein Snorrason for providing me with a copy of the article from Navy and Army that helped get the work started.



Sudanese soldiers with heliograph.

From Source 1.

Sources

1. *The King's Egyptians - The armed forces of British Egypt, Navy and Army*, Volume II, No. 18, 19 December 1914.
2. *History of the Great War, Military Operations Egypt & Palestine, Volume I, From the outbreak of war with Germany to June 1917* by Lieutenant General Sir George Macmunn and Captain Cyril Falls, HSMO, London 1927. On loan from the Royal Garrison Library, catalog number 426261.
3. The Egyptian Army 1880-1900 by Doug Johnson. (Savage & Soldier Online). The article was originally published in *Savage & Soldier*, Volume VIII No. 1.
4. *Lawrence and the Arab Revolts* by David Nicolle, Osprey Men-at-Arms No. 208, London 1989, ISBN 0-85045-888-9.
5. *Colonial Armies in Africa 1850-1918* by Peter Abbot, Foundry Books Publications, Nottingham 2006, ISBN 1-90154-307-2.
6. Sir John Maxwell's Egypt Despatch (The Long, Long Trail).

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Notes:

1) The information about the army is primarily based on Source 2; they differ somewhat from Source 1, but are assessed as more authoritative. The information about the coastguard is, among other things, taken from Source 6, while information about the gendarmerie is taken from Source 4.

2) Source 5 states that the Arab battalion became part of the Egyptian army in 1897. The battalion was originally established in Kassala (in north-eastern Sudan), which from 1894 to 1897 belonged to the Italian colony of Eritrea.

3) In September 1914, soldiers from the Coast Guard carried out a small action in the middle of the Sinai Peninsula, where they destroyed some wells in the town of Nekhl, approx. 110 km east of Suez.

4) My only other source - for what it's worth - for the Egyptian army lance flags and cavalry sashes are Britain's figures. Here the colors red and green were used - the sash red with a green central stripe, and the lance flag red and green (at some times, however, green and red). The Turkish army's own lance flags were red, which was also used by Britain's.

5) See Francis Reginald Wingate (1861-1953) (Wikipedia).

6) See Horatio Herbert Kitchener (1850-1916) (Wikipedia).

7) From Kitchener, Organizer of Victory by Harold Begbie, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1915 (World War 1 Document Archive).