

'URABI ['ARABI], AHMAD MUHAMMAD [AHMAD MUHAMMAD 'URABĪ; KNOWN AS ARABI PASHA] (1841-1911), army officer and politician in Egypt.

Arabi was born on 31 March 1841 (7 Safar 1257 according to the Islamic calendar) in the village of Huriyyah Razna, near the delta town of Zaqaзиq, the second of four sons and six daughters of al-Sayyid Muhammad 'Urabi (*d.* 1848), religious scholar and graduate of the famous Cairo mosque-university of al-Azhar, and al-Sayyida Fatima Sulayman, one of his three wives. 'Urabi claimed descent from the family of the Prophet Muhammad through a thirteenth-century Iraqi settler in Egypt, though the lineage is disputed. Both parents were native Egyptians of peasant extraction.

At the age of five 'Urabi entered the Koranic school in the village, where he studied under his father for three years before his father's death of cholera, and then under his elder brother Muhammad's tuition until the age of twelve. He then entered the University of al-Azhar in Cairo, where for two years he was exposed to the rudiments of the Islamic sciences. He abandoned his religious studies in 1854 when the new governor of Egypt, Sa'id Pasha, opened the military to the sons of village headmen. Seizing the new opportunity, 'Urabi enlisted as a common soldier on 6 December 1854.



In the ten years of Sa'id Pasha's reign (*r.* 1854–63), 'Urabi enjoyed rapid promotion to officer grade. Within six years he was the first native-born Egyptian to reach the rank of *kaymakam*, or lieutenant-colonel, thanks to the patronage of Sa'id Pasha and the French general under whom he served, Süleyman Pasha. Just before Sa'id's death 'Urabi travelled in the governor's retinue to visit the Islamic holy city of Medina in Arabia. In later life he was to look back on this period of royal patronage and rapid promotion as the happiest days of his life.

With the accession of Isma'il (*r.* 1863–79), native-born officers found promotion obstructed by the Turco-Circassian élites favoured by the new governor. 'Urabi was court-martialled for insubordination following a dispute with a Circassian brigadier, Hushrev Pasha, and sentenced to twenty-one days' imprisonment. While 'Urabi successfully appealed the decision, he earned the enmity of the minister of war. The ambitious 'Urabi received no promotions in the reign of Isma'il, in spite of his service in the Abyssinian campaign (1876). He was seconded to the civil service for three years (1867–70), during which time he married Karima, a lower member of the khedival household. Karima was a milk-sister to the wife of Khedive Tawfiq, Isma'il's son and successor, and served as wet-nurse to Prince Ilhami Pasha. This was not a unique honour: three of the six conspirators later exiled to Ceylon with 'Urabi had also married women of the royal household.

It was in the reign of Khedive Tawfiq (*r.* 1879–92) that 'Urabi was promoted to his highest rank of full colonel, and during this period he entered the political arena. The economy of Egypt had been largely in British and French hands since 1876, when the Egyptian treasury had been unable to honour its commitments to foreign creditors. In order to satisfy its European creditors, the Egyptian government began to make cuts in expenditure, which led to pay arrears and the threat of reductions in the size of the army that touched native-born Egyptian soldiers and officers.

In July 1880 the khedive issued a decree limiting military service to four years, which was interpreted by 'Urabi and his fellow officers as a means of preventing native-born Egyptians from ever reaching officer rank. 'Urabi led a group of dissident officers who began to petition the khedive to appoint an Egyptian as minister of war. In January 1881 government plans to arrest 'Urabi and his fellows were leaked to the dissidents, who instructed their soldiers to mutiny. When, on 1 February 1881, 'Urabi and two colleagues were arrested, their troops stormed the ministry of war, seized the military judges, and released their commanders. Tawfiq defused the crisis by appointing the dissidents' candidate as minister of war, though relations between the military and the khedive continued to deteriorate. The dissident officers made common cause with members of the national assembly and landed élites with grievances against European influence or the khedive's rule. These grievances were presented in a military demonstration before the vice regal palace on 9 September 1881 in which Tawfiq was forced to concede to demands for representative government and an enlarged army. 'Urabi then claimed to speak on behalf of Egyptian interests rather than just those of the army.

'Urabi's anti-European agitation turned against Tawfiq, who was accused of subservience to the powers. This point seemed reinforced by the Anglo-French joint note of 8 January 1882, written by French foreign minister Léon Gambetta, in which the two powers undertook to preserve the khedive on his throne. The initiative had the opposite effect to that intended, raising objections from Egypt's suzerain, the Ottoman sultan, and discrediting Tawfiq and his government. The 'Urabists capitalized on the Gambetta note to force a change of cabinet in February 1882 in which 'Urabi was appointed minister of war.

Civil order in Egypt began to break down as the military and the khedive became rival poles of authority. Britain and France, fearing for their financial interests in Egypt, dispatched a joint fleet to prop up the khedive. They demanded the resignation of the cabinet on 25 May, calling in particular for 'Urabi to withdraw from Egypt to reduce tensions. 'Urabi responded by denouncing Tawfiq for betraying his country to foreign interests. Tawfiq retreated from Cairo to his palace in Alexandria to be closer to the protection of the European fleet, leaving Egypt under 'Urabi's effective control. Tensions between Egyptians and Europeans erupted in riots in Alexandria (11 June). 'Urabi ordered the building of shore defenses to protect Alexandria from attack by sea, which elicited repeated demands from Sir Beauchamp Seymour, the commander of the British fleet in Alexandria, that construction be halted. This led to a series of ultimatums and to the bombardment of Alexandria. The French, unwilling to take military action, withdrew their naval squadron and on 11 July the British fleet opened fire, marking the beginning of the British intervention in Egypt which would ultimately lead to a seventy-four-year occupation.

'Urabi, in control of Cairo and most of Egypt, responded to the British occupation of Alexandria by calling for a general conscription and declaring war on Britain. He obtained a religious ruling (*fatwa*) from al-Azhar calling for Tawfiq's deposal as a traitor to his country and religion for bringing about a foreign occupation. Tawfiq, confined to Alexandria and its hinterlands, backed by the British, declared 'Urabi a rebel. This dual authority crisis endured until Sir Garnet Wolseley landed a British force of 20,000 men, who routed 'Urabi's army near the Suez Canal at Tell al - Kebir (13 September 1882). 'Urabi was arrested two days later and subsequently tried for treason, along with a number of his leading supporters. His cause was taken up by a number of sympathetic Britons, particularly Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, who arranged for an English lawyer, A. M. Broadley, to undertake the defense of the group which came to be known as 'Arabi and his friends'. On 3 December 1882 'Urabi pleaded guilty to the charge of rebellion and had his death sentence commuted to perpetual exile, along with six of his colleagues. They and their families were shipped at British expense on a chartered steamer, the *Mareotis*, to Ceylon.

After nineteen years in exile 'Urabi was pardoned by Khedive 'Abbas II (r. 1892–1914) and returned to Egypt on 1 October 1901. In his final years he declined all political activity and applied himself to preserving his rightful place in Egyptian history. He wrote his memoirs and gave autobiographical essays to his friend W. S. Blunt to publish in English and to Jurji Zaydan to publish in his Arabic biographical dictionary of luminaries of the nineteenth century. He died at his home on Jawhar al-Qa'id Street in the Munira district of Cairo, after nine months' illness, on 21 September 1911 and was buried the same day in the Imam al-Shafi'i mosque

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*Sources* : Ahmad Muhammad 'Urabi, *Mudhakkirat 'Urabi* , 2 vols. (Dar al-Hilal, 1953) · Jurji Zaydan, *Tarajim mashahir al-sharq*, 1 (Cairo, 1910), 254–80 · W. S. Blunt, *Secret history of the English occupation of Egypt: being a personal narrative of events* (1922) · A. M. Broadley, *How we defended Arabi and his friends* (1884) · A. al-Rafi'i, *Althawra al-'Urabiyya* (1949) · P. J. Vatikiotis, *The history of Egypt*, 3rd edn (1985) · A. Schölch, *Egypt for the Egyptians: the socio-political crisis in Egypt, 1878–1882* (1981); trans. of *Ägypten den Ägyptern! Die politische und gesellschaftliche Krise der Jahre 1878–1882 in Ägypten* (1972) · J. R. I. Cole, *Colonialism and revolution in the Middle East* (1993) · *al-Jaridah* [Cairo] (21 Sept 1911) · *al-Muqattam* [Cairo] (21 Sept 1911)

*Archives*: Egyptian National Archives, Cairo, Mahafiz al-thawra al-'Urabiyya · Egyptian National Archives, Cairo, Mukatabat 'Arabi, corresp. [Arabic correspondence]

*Wealth at death: essentially nothing; all possessions confiscated by the state after conviction: 'Urabi, Mudhakkirat; Broadley, How we defended Arabi*

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