Radical Self Critique: An Analysis of the 1952 Egyptian Revolution

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The Free Officer's Movement of 1952, which ended the parliamentary monarchy system in Egypt, created a split in the country's 20th century history. In his book on Egyptian historical scholarship, Anthony Gorman writes how "the period from 1919 until 1952 is characterized by great political volatility," as opposed to the period after 1952 where "the Nasser regime appropriated, then monopolized, the field of legitimate political activity."[1] Nasser himself describes the Revolution as having crystallized Egyptian society, which before was "boiling over and restless."[2] Ultimately both men agree that following the revolution the political atmosphere became far more stable than before. This change can be attributed to Nasser's autocratic policies as much as to his leadership, yet one must not dismiss the whole revolution because of these actions. Regardless of what the revolution resulted in, Nasser is correct in stating that it was the culmination of a national struggle which, if not traceable to the early 19th century and Muhammad Ali, certainly escalated in the decades following the 1919 revolution of independence. This essay seeks to show how, while in large part caused by external forces – the British imperial presence, the Arab Nationalist ideal, and the Israeli issue – the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 was primarily a moment of self-critique

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[1] Anthony Gorman, *Historians, State and Politics in the Twentieth Century Egypt* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 112.

[2] Gamal Abdel Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (Buffalo: Smith, Keynes & Marshall Publishers, 1959), 52.

where Egyptian society restructured itself on its own basis and thus became truly independent after decades of political turmoil.

The 1952 Revolution was an extension of the 1919 fight for independence in that it sought to accomplish the goals that the latter had failed to carry out. It fought against British colonialism and for self-governance because Egypt had not in fact achieved these goals after 1919. Rather, as Nasser writes, "tyranny became more arbitrary whether it was in the form of the open forces of occupation or their veiled cat's paws, headed by Sultan Fouad and later by his son Farouk."[3] Consequently, the 1952 revolution was as much a battle against internal problems as against external occupation. The two came hand in hand, and it was the internal government structures that were found to be causing the continued British presence. The battle against the British was essential, but it became clear that a change in the Egyptian political structure needed to occur in order to get rid of them. The desire to remove the British did not warrant much discussion between political groups. It was the realization of the country's internal problems which created the tumultuous political atmosphere that the revolution arose from.

In his *Philosophy of the Revolution*, Nasser acknowledges these separate facets of the struggle when he describes the two aspects of the Free Officer's Movement, the political and the social. The former he equates with the recovery of "self-government from an imposed despot, or an aggressive army occupying its territory without its consent," the latter with the internal class struggle that results in "justice for all countrymen."[4] These two separate revolutionary moments can be associated with the external and internal battles described before. The former is a fight against an external occupying force, the latter against internal social problems. However, the significant internal problems in pre-revolution Egypt were more than just a need for social reform. In fact, after World

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[3] Ibid., 37

[4] Ibid., 36.

War II all the main political groups had adopted at least partially socialist agendas.[5] Issues of social reform were important but did not constitute the main point of contention for Egyptians. The larger problem was the parliamentary monarchy system and its increasing inability to meet the people's demands. By 1952 it was clear that the whole political structure would need to be replaced, and Nasser was able to take advantage of this convergence of opinion, at least in terms of the problem, to lead the Free Officer's coup. James Jankowski is generally correct in stating that "the Egyptian parliamentary monarchy was dead before the military coup of July 1952… because the generation inheriting it had lost all hope in it,"[6] however this consensus only came to be in the few years before the revolution. The realization that Egypt's external problems were only being aggravated by its inept parliamentary monarchy arose slowly from the events of the 1930's and 1940's.

This period was one of great intellectual and political activity and can be approached through the growing unpopularity of the Wafd and the increasing power of the more radical groups, the Muslim Brethren and the Young Egypt Society. The latter groups "sapped the strength of the old establishment and made them unable to govern."[7] They symbolized the dissatisfaction of the Egyptians in the lead up to Nasser's coup and, as Michael Doran notes, while they all agreed on the major problem of the British imperialist presence, they also "viewed the inability of the traditional politicians to treat the disease as proof of its severity and of the need for a radical cure."[8] The "traditional politicians" Doran speaks of came to be represented in 1952 by the Wafd party. In the post-war period the party attempted to recover its old popularity, but fell victim to the growing nationalist fervour which it could no longer

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[5] P.J. Vatikiotis, *The Modern History of Egypt* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 340.

[6] James P. Jankowski, *Egypt's Young Rebels* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1975), 88.

[7] Vatikiotis, *History*, 357.

[8] Michael Doran, *Pan-Arabism Before Nasser* (New York: Oxford University Press,

claim to represent.

The Wafd was the party most associated with the 1919 revolution. From that time forward it consistently had the largest popular base in the country, and prided itself on acting as an umbrella party for all of Egypt's problems. However by 1952 it had become clear that it was no longer fit for that role.[9] It had become riddled with internal dissent and furthermore, due to its relationship with the British, could no longer justify its claim to be the representative of the will of the Egyptian people and its nationalist demands. Its growing unpopularity came to symbolize the slow realization of the parliamentary monarchy's ineffectiveness.

The party had experienced several schisms in its history but the most significant split in relation to the revolution occurred in 1942 when Makram Obayd, the finance minister in the Wafdist government at the time, was dismissed from the party after much infighting with party leader Mustafa al-Nahhas.[10] Makram formed the Wafdist Bloc and published the *Black Book*, which broadened and publicized his problems with the party. This particular split is notable because it only helped enhance public discontent with the party and "prompted all opposition parties and groups to come together in a united campaign against the Wafd Government."[11] The effect of Makram's book was due largely to the manner in which the Wafd government had been put in power: through British military pressure in what came to be known as the incident of February 4, 1942.

At the time, Britain's fate in World War II was uncertain. Egypt constituted an important strategic position that the Axis powers were rapidly approaching. Furthermore, the latter were bombarding Egypt with propaganda, which was heavily influencing radical groups like Young Egypt. Thus it was essential for Britain to have a government in Egypt that could mobilize the people

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[9] Vatikiotis, *History*, 333.

[10] Ibid., 352-3.; Zaheer Masood Quiraishi, *Liberal Nationalism in Egypt* (Delhi: Jamal Printing Press, 1967), 144-5.

[11] Vatikiotis, *History*, 354.

for their cause. Although the Egyptian government of the time asserted their loyalty to the British, the pro-Axis leanings of the Commander in Chief and the head of the Ministry of War indicated otherwise.[12] Furthermore, that government's dissolution came "amidst demonstrations in Cairo crying 'Forward Rommel; Long Live Rommel'" in favour of the German general.[13] At the time, the Wafd "alone was straightforward in its anti-Palace and anti-Axis attitude" and it furthermore had large public support.[14] Believing that the Wafd were the only suitable party to have in power, the British sent King Faruq a message on February 4: "unless I hear by 6 p.m. that Nahhas Pasha has been asked to form a Cabinet, His Majesty King Faruq must accept the consequences." Upon rejection of this demand, the British sent a tank garrison to surround the Royal Palace, and the king was forced to ask Nahhas to form a Wafdist government.[15]

In the long-term, the February 4 incident was firm proof that that the Wafd no longer represented Egypt's true national interests. As Gabriel Warburg remarks in his essay on the event, quoting King Faruq's biographer, "Lampson's action brought down the very party the British had installed; it was the final inspiration and confirmation of their cause to those forces in Egypt working to rid themselves of Farouk and the British."[16] The Wafd lost its militant national wing to the Muslim Brothers due to the incident, making the party even more obsolete in the increasingly volatile political environment.[17] Nasser recalls his reaction to the event, writing to a friend, "what is to be done now that the catastrophe has befallen us, and after we have accepted it, surrendered

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[12] Quiraishi, *Liberal Nationalism*, 138.

[13] Vatikiotis, *History*, 348.

[14] Quiraishi, *Liberal Nationalism*, 140.

[15] Ibid., 141; Vatikiotis, *History*, 348.

[16] B. St. Clair McBride in Gabriel Warbur, "Lampson's Ultimatum to Faruq, 4 February, 1942," *Middle Eastern Studies* 11 (1975), 24.

[17] Warburg, "Lampson," 25.

to it and taken it submissively and meekly?"[18] The incident showed the stranglehold the British still had on Egyptian politics, but it was also a sign of the corruption of the Egyptian system itself, which could be manipulated by the British so easily. To argue, like Zaheer Mahood Quraishi does, that "the allegation of betrayal against Nahhas does not seem to be justified" is fruitless. Even disregarding the evidence that came out years after the fact through the British archives, which indicate that the Wafd suggested to the British that they intervene,[19] Nahhas' actions before the event show that whether or not he knew for certain it was going to occur, he knew the British were willing to intervene on his part. Even Quraishi writes how "efforts to form a coalition government [before the intervention] failed because the Wafd Party fully realized that Britain would ultimately have to rely on it."[20] Nahhas waited out in order to form a Wafdist government, rather than a coalition.

Makram's dismissal and the publication of the *Black Book* came within this imposed government, which by this point had garnered much anger from the opposition parties and from the King. His protests only further demonstrated the problems of the Wafd, this time by showing its internal corruption. His ability to unite the opposition came also as "the King was taking every opportunity to dismiss Nahhas."[21] Eventually the Wafd government would be asked to resign, but it is indicative to the situation that this only occurred when the British decided it was not necessary to their security to have them in power, thus only reaffirming the ineffectiveness of the Egyptian government system.[22] At this point the Wafd's unpopularity was still only a growing problem, the true breadth of which would become evident in 1952. However, the February 4 incident further demonstrated the growing internal

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[18] Nasser, *Philosophy*, 30.

[19] Warburg, "Lampson," 27.

[20] Quraishi, *Liberal Nationalism*, 139.

[21] Vatikiotis, *History*, 354.

[22] Ibid., 335.

problems that were a part of the anti-British struggle.

The growing unpopularity of the Wafd was only one aspect of the pre-revolution political climate. Another was the rise of other far more radical parties, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and the Young Egypt Society.[23] Both groups were of great importance in bringing about the dissolution of the parliamentary monarchy because they gave the revolution its intellectual footing and radicalized the masses. The two parties emerged during the 1930's and represented a turn away from Islamic reform and the ideas of the West to a more radical religious and nationalist character.[24] The various radical groups that emerged during that time sought to counter the West, be it in its Christian missionary movements, its secular ideals, or its imperialist policies.[25] They fought for the emergence of an Arabic society, and in the post-war period both Young Egypt and the Muslim Brothers would call for the boycott of anything associated with Britain, to the extent of burning books written in English.[26] By the start of World War II both were adamant in the defense of Islam, positing the solution to Egypt's problems within an Islamic framework.[27] While neither group would ever completely implement their policies, the political environment that led to the Revolution was created mainly due to their work.

P.J Vatikiotis and James P. Jankowski have attempted to show how the Young Egypt Society's ideology in particular directly influenced the ideas of the Free Officers Movement once they got into power, however it is questionable whether an actual causal relationship existed between the two. Nasser indicated that

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[23] For the sake of simplicity I will be using the term Young Egypt Society throughout the essay rather than the group's various changing names.

[24] Vatikiotis, *History*, 323.

[25] Ibid., 326. Young Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood fit all of these, although it is the Young Muslim Men's Association that offered an alternative to the missionaries mostly.

[26] Doran, *Pan-Arabism*, 47.

[27] Jankowski, *Young Rebels*, 81.

as an adolescent he had been a member of Young Egypt,[28] and the two groups certainly shared similar perceptions on Egypt and the world, but to create a direct link between the two groups is too simplistic an analysis.[29] The Muslim Brotherhood for their part infiltrated the army and were therefore able to influence the future Free Officers as well.[30] The very reason Nasser and his group were able to stage a coup by themselves is because they were influenced by a wide spectrum of the groups in pre-revolution Egypt. We must work instead under the framework that Vatikiotis sets up at another point in his book:

> The Free Officers who assumed power in 1952 were not… the only vanguard group capable of leading a reformist or revolutionary movement in the country. They constituted a miniscule section of the new, post-Second World War younger radical nationalist elite of the country.[31]

The Free Officers were part of an intellectual and political climate created by the Young Egypt Society and the Muslim Brotherhood and in which all of Egypt at that time was immersed. The influence of the two parties was felt by the whole of Egyptian society, not only the Free Officers.

Young Egypt is particularly interesting to study in respect to the radical groups' role in the revolution because its policy changes from the 1930's until 1952 reflect the country's intensifying political climate. The original Young Egypt Society, while being radically anti-government and anti-British, wholeheartedly supported the monarchy. Its slogan, "Allah, Fatherland, and King," attests to this. The monarchy still represented something which could be maintained and defended within a nationalist

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[28] 2P.J. Vatikiotis, *Nasser and his Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 33.

[29] Jankowski, *Young Rebels*, 124.

[30] Vatikiotis, *Nasser*, 40.

[31] Ibid.

stance and the society's primary objective at the time was to save Egypt from its foreign influences, which included British imperialism as well as Western, materialist customs in general.[32] The important transitions in the party for our purposes come in 1940 when the party changed its name to the Islamic Nationalist Party and 1949 when it became the Socialist Party of Egypt. Both represent important changes in the Egyptian political landscape and the growing realization of the country's internal problems.

The switch to being the Islamic Nationalist Party came at the beginning of the Second World War and represented "the last step in the movement's defensive effort to combat the appeal of the Muslim Brotherhood on its own ground, that of the defense of Islam which it had begun in 1938."[33] The growing following garnered by the Muslim Brotherhood, and the fact that Young Egypt was forced to react to it, indicates the increasing radical nature of the Egyptian populace. A quick digression on the Muslim Brotherhood will help explicate this point.

Christina Phelps Harris describes the general ideology of Muslim Brotherhood founder and leader Hasan al-Banna in the following manner:

> In view of the fact that the Muslim Brothers considered the progressive secularization of Egyptian life to be a threat to traditional Islamic institutions and an encroachment on the Islamic way of life, and in view of the further fact that all secularizing tendencies could obviously be attributed to the multitudinous impacts of the West on Egyptian society, the Muslim Brotherhood took a strong position against the westernization of Egypt. Hasan al-Banna rejected, in theory, westernism in all its forms.[34]

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[32] Jankowski, *Young Rebels*, 47-48.

[33] Ibid., 81.

[34] Christina Phelps Harris, *Nationalism and Revolution in Egypt* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1964), 166.

The Muslim Brotherhood represented a complete defense of self-identity against the encroaching other. Al-Banna further believed "that foreign residents imported and practiced, and thereby encouraged, a foreign pattern of social behavior."[35] It was this foreignness that was completely unacceptable. The Egyptinization of Egypt was essential, and this involved removing the influence of everything foreign and corrupt. By no means is this drastically different from Young Egypt's viewpoint. Both groups were fighting against the influence of "insidious Western ideas" and the difference was that "for the Muslim Brothers, the British presence encouraged people to stray from the fundamental tenets of Islam; for the followers of Young Egypt, it corrupted the national character."[36] In growing closer to the Brotherhood's ideas, Young Egypt was following the general populace and distancing itself slightly from its "nationalist" points of view to an Islamic stance that was more opposed to the political structure in general.[37] In retrospect then, Young Egypt's change to become the Islamic Nationalist Party can be seen as a middle point in the society's growing awareness that the Egyptian political structure was the true problem. Consequently, while it still supported the monarchy at this point, it was only a matter of time before this would end as well.

This final change occurred when the party became the Socialist Party of Egypt in 1949. The party's slogan changed from "Allah, Fatherland, and King" to "Allah, Fatherland, and the People." The party turned "on the monarchy which it had supported so ardently a decade earlier"[38] and began to call for total revolution and the implementation of a socialist government. As Young Egypt's ideology became more violent towards the government, the political turmoil in Egypt was becoming increasingly violent

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[35] Ibid., 168.

[36] Doran, *Pan-Arabism*, 18.

[37] Muhammad al-Ghazali states the difference clearly in one of his chapter titles, "Islamic, not National rule," in Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Our Beginning in Wisdom* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975).

[38] Jankowski, *Young Rebels*, 93-94.

as well. Violent terrorist acts occurred throughout Egypt and culminated in the burning of Cairo on January 26, 1952, an event which, if not started by members of Young Egypt, was certainly promulgated by the groups' insidious anti-foreign press campaign in the year before.[39]

An analysis of Young Egypt's development indicates an important point about the radical groups. While they certainly were founded on certain principles, these were generally quite broad. Young Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood were there to defend and act on the part of Islam and Egypt. In doing so they fought against anyone who opposed their ideas of the two, eventually turning on the Egyptian government itself. Most importantly, their actions sparked reactions from all facets of Egyptian society. Young Egypt's connection to the 1952 violence was direct, yet the Muslim Brotherhood had already begun this sort of action years earlier right after World War II:

> [The Brotherhood's] decision to lead a guerrilla war against the British in the Canal Zone had an electrifying effect on Egyptians. The government became apprehensive; the rebels everywhere, but especially in the army, became excited, envious and worried over the possibility of their being left out of this 'popular, national struggle'[40]

Both groups created a violent and intellectual environment that eventually could only result in revolution, since the problems they were presenting, and which the people were realizing still existed even after 1919, could not be properly addressed by the current parliamentary monarchy. In 1952, these protests became directed at the ruling Wafd party, which by now was facing external as well as internal opposition to its policies. Although the party had at times been in agreement with the radical groups, by 1952 it was

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[39] Ibid., 102-104.
[40] Vatikiotis, *Nasser*, 92.

seen to represent what Young Egypt decried as the failure of the whole parliamentary monarchy after 1919, after which the British had "broken the unity of the nation" and "succeeded in domesticating Egyptian politicians."[41]

In order to fully understand the defeat of the parliamentary monarchy in 1952 the nature of Anglo-Egyptian relations at the time needs to be analyzed since it was by trying to end British influence in Egypt that the internal problems of the government structure came to light. The violent atmosphere that arose in late 1951 was an extension of the intellectual, political climate which had been fermenting since the 1930's; however it was relations with Britain that acted as a catalyst. While it is important to emphasize the important self-critique that occurred in Egypt leading up to the revolution, one cannot gloss over the importance of Anglo-Egyptian relations to the events of the day. It is over the British issue that Young Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood were able to criticize the Wafd, and eventually it was British actions that provided the final push towards revolution.

The 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty set the tone for all future relations between the countries until the 1952 coup. The treaty entrenched British presence in Egypt and also required that Egypt support any forthcoming British military campaign. This included allowing British military presence in Egypt and keeping British control over the Suez Canal. The treaty became increasingly unpopular to Egyptians in the early 1940's, and by the end of WWII there was consensus that it needed to be abolished. This posed tremendous problems for the Egyptian government, who attempted to negotiate with a British government unwilling to concede to the fundamental demands of the Egyptian people: the complete withdrawal of British troops from Egypt and the recognition of Egypt's control of the Sudan. Doran makes the British position clear in his book, stating that for them "nothing less than the future of

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[41] Jankowski, *Rebels*, 47-48.

Europe… was at stake in the Middle East."[42] Various meetings were set up in the post-war period to attempt negotiations with the British and finally the Egyptians made a plea to the United Nations to hear their case.[43] The British, however, at no point made the concessions required by the Egyptian people.

It was in protesting negotiations with the British that opposition groups were most often able to unite. In 1947, the left wing of the Wafd party was able to unite the Muslim Brothers, Young Egyptians, and Communists against the government's attempt to revise, rather than abolish, the 1936 treaty.[44] The evacuation of British troops from Cairo and Alexandria in 1946 was also met with protest:

> For Egyptian nationalists, the bottom line was this: Bevin [the British Foreign Minister] himself had insisted that a vacuum would not be left in Egypt; clearly, then, the British did not intend to leave, but rather to substitute one form of control for another.[45]

On the British issue there was no division between groups. All demanded the full evacuation of British troops from Egypt and were "sharply against the perpetuation of the Anglo-Egyptian alliance in any form."[46] By 1947 the Egyptian government was consistently calling for the same thing from the British, and its continued failure to achieve results became increasingly criticized.

In 1950 the Wafd formed a coalition government which attempted to represent a wider breadth of Egyptian society by including more radical individuals from the Muslim Brotherhood, Communist and Socialist groups.[47] Although filled with internal

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[42] Doran, *Pan-Arabism*, 24, 48.

[43] Ibid., 51.

[44] Quraishi, *Liberal Nationalism*, 172.

[45] Doran, *Pan-Arabism*, 36.

[46] Ibid., 40.

[47] Quraishi, *Liberal Nationalism*, 172.

disagreements on most major issues, the government "took the drastic step of presenting to the Egyptian Parliament drafts of decrees for the unilateral Egyptian abrogation of the Treaty of 1936 and the Sudan Conventions of 1899."[48] At this moment the government acted on the national consensus, and it is the British decision to not acknowledge the validity of the government's demands that set off the final drive towards the revolution. The Wafd had not anticipated the unwavering British adherence to the 1936 treaty and this set off a violent struggle in the Suez Canal zone between British troops and Egyptian guerrilla forces, led by the radical parties.[49]

Here the government made a pivotal and ultimately self-defeating decision. Realizing the increasingly violent atmosphere created by the conflict, the Wafdist-led government attempted to control the situation, eventually by prohibiting the meeting of political organizations and confiscating the radical groups' journals.[50] Ahmad Husayn, leader of Young Egypt, stated at the time:

> The government has begun, under the influence of reactionary circles and under the influence of the class and interest groups of which it is composed, to turn its weapons and its force against the people themselves.[51]

For the radical parties it became clear that "the Wafd government was not prepared to risk armed combat with British troops."[52] The party no longer represented the nationalist Egyptian mindset, a fact made all too clear by its attempts to accommodate the British.

It became apparent that the problem with the British was due largely to a problem with the Egyptian government, which was unable to fulfill the requirements set on it by the Egyptian

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[48] Jankowski, *Young Rebels*, 98.
[49] Vatikiotis, *History*, 370.
[50] Jankowski, *Young Rebels*, 101.
[51] Ahmad Husayn in Ibid., 101.
[52] Vatikiotis, *History*, 371.

people. In a sense, the problem with the British was not a problem at all. In the post-war period the solution was clear to the majority of the Egyptian population, the complete removal of the British and its influence. What was revealed was the inability of the present Egyptian government structure to bring that goal to fruition. It was this fundamental problem that the Egyptian Revolution set out to solve primarily, because through it the problem with the British would be resolved as well. Internal problems with the government structure needed to be addressed before the relationship with the British could be altered. This was not because of the government's failure solely, but was also connected to the British unwillingness to negotiate on the fundamental terms presented by Egypt. Within that framework the only solution was to have a group in power able to take firm action without negotiation, at which point the problems Egypt faced with the British could be handled in the proper manner.

The same can be said for the two other external aspects associated with the revolution: Arab Nationalism and Israel. The former cannot be emphasized over the principal goal of the Egyptian Revolution, which was to attain full independence for Egypt. Doran asserts that "while the call for the 'Unity of the Nile Valley' certainly occupied a place of importance in the pantheon of Egyptian national claims, it did not enjoy greater importance than the call for total independence." He is speaking of the unity of Sudan and Egypt here, but the statement can be broadened to include Arab unity as well. Even though it was certainly in the Egyptian mindset prior to the revolution and became an important part of Nasser's ideology afterwards, Arab Nationalism was forced to wait until Egyptian independence had been achieved.[53] An Egypt still under imperialist influence could not realistically form part of a truly Arab union.

Likewise, although the Palestine War of 1948 was a pivotal moment in the Arab world, Nasser states in his *Philosophy of the Revolution* that it must not be seen as the impetus for the revolu-

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[53] Doran, *Pan Arabism*, 42.

tion. While in Palestine, Nasser writes, all he and his fellow officers could think about was the situation in Egypt. Nasser's fellow army officers "spoke to [him] of the future of [Egypt]," and along with the experiences of the war only made Nasser realize the fundamental problem of imperialism, which intensified his need to save Egypt from it.[54] The Palestine War, and the Zionist problem in general, was certainly important to the Arab world, but one must make the distinction between how it affected Arab nationalism and how it affected the Egyptian Revolution. As Adeed Dawisha notes, the whole Palestinian issue, starting in the 1930's, gave life to the Arab nationalist movement:

> Here was a concern that would unite the Arab nationalist, the Islamist, and the believer in Greater Syria. From their different loyalties and perspectives, they all would agree on the need to resist the demographic changes that were under way in Palestine.[55]

However, the Egyptian Revolution was, as we have said, not primarily an Arab Nationalist movement. The coup was a moment where Egypt asserted its full independence by establishing a government on its own terms. All policies dealing with foreign elements (the Suez canal, Arab Nationalism, the fight with Israel) were to come after.

So why Nasser? Why the Free Officer's Movement? In such a politically volatile environment the biggest surprise is that one small group of officers who before had had negligible impact on the political landscape were the ones to step in and take power. In his book on the coup, Vatikiotis states importantly: "[the officers] lacked a clear political objective. They were simply committed to removing the British from Egypt."[56] The Free Officers were a small

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[54] Nasser, *Philosophy*, 29.

[55] Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 107.

[56] Vatikiotis, *Nasser*, 103.

part of the political environment created by groups such as Young Egypt and the Muslim Brothers, yet they were willing to act against the problem without set parameters. In his book Nasser writes that the difficulty following the Free Officer's coup was that "every leader we came to wanted to assassinate his rival. Every idea we found aimed at the destruction of the other."[57] Thus he argues that he and the Free Officers were the only people willing to ignore group rivalries in order to take power. This is somewhat exaggerated since unity between the opposition groups had occurred before and because Nasser in the end would also turn his back on all political groups when he banned political parties. However, Nasser's willingness to act certainly cannot be ignored as a reason why the Free Officer's were able to take power rather than any other group.

Ultimately Vatikiotis offers the most compelling reason for the success of the Free Officers: their inclusive ideology and timely action. The Free Officer's Movement "carried with it the political influence of the radical agitation and terrorism generated by Young Egypt, the Ikhwan and National party in the preceding decade"[58] and therefore could appeal to the masses that were living in the political landscape created by those groups. Importantly, though, the coup was an unexpected move:

> The Free Officers relied on secrecy with a view to a sudden coup at a propitious time when the public at large would be so thoroughly alienated from their rulers as to eagerly embrace their new soldier saviours. Above all, with the firm seizure of the army, the largest state institution, the conspirators would be able to impose their will on the rest of society.[59]

Nasser appeared at a time when the government needed to

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[57] Nasser, *Philosophy*, 33.

[58] Vatikiotis, *Nasser*, 108.

[59] Ibid., 110.

change and he and the Free Officer's had the means of acquiring it. Nasser offered firm, charismatic leadership which Egyptians embraced. The other parties in the meantime were left to look on as he took advantage of their hard work.

Ideologies like those of Young Egypt or the Muslim Brothers offered Nasser's generation what Erik Erikson calls "overly simplified yet determined answers to exactly those vague inner states, and those urgent questions which arise in consequence of identity conflict."[60] It was groups such as Young Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood that created the Egypt which Nasser was a part of and would come to lead. When Nasser later stated that the Free Officer's Movement was the crystallization of a tumultuous Egyptian society, he forgot to add that this revolutionary, political turmoil was not inherent to Egyptian society but was created by the radical groups of the time. The rise in popularity of these groups signified the emergence of an Egyptian populace which once again began to demand full independence after the long-term failure of the 1919 revolution. The Wafd's inability to meet these demands the way it had in 1919 only solidified this viewpoint, and showed that the parliamentary monarchy was incapable of leading to significant change.

While in the end it was the Free Officers who led the coup, it is important to recognize the circumstances in which they came to power: a political landscape marked by a conflict as to what Egypt was and should be, and a fervent desire to resolve that conflict through a revolutionary self-critique. In the end, the external factors – the British, Israel, and Arab Nationalism – were secondary to the internal Egyptian problems, although the latter only emerged as a result of a confrontation with the former. There was a realization over time that the ineffectiveness of the parliamentary monarchy needed to be addressed in order to proceed to confront the country's other problems. Regardless of the actions of Nasser's regime thereafter, and whether the relatively calm political environment reflected his leadership or his autocratic policies,

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[60] Erik Erikson in Ibid., 57-58.

the 1952 Egyptian Revolution created an Egypt formed on its own basis and with its own principles, and thus allowed it to move forward to its other problems.