



The United States' Role in the Early Days of the Egyptian Revolution 1952

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Abstract:

In the decade following World War II, the United States sought to establish stability in Egypt in order to achieve its objective of drawing the Middle East into Western defense system. This matter brought a new degree of US involvement in the Egyptian internal affairs. Hoping that King Farouk could bring Egypt into the Western fold and could stabilize the country, the State Department showed its desire to back his regime. Later, when this proved futile, it discarded the monarchy in favor of the Free Officers' movement, which represented itself as the most influential faction that could play a leading role in the Egyptian political scene. Lacking experience and organization, the Free Officers, by their turn, looked for the United States to back their coup. These mutual interests have led to speculation that there were previous contacts between the Free Officers and the Americans prior to July coup of 1952. This early relation is a point of heated debate between scholars and writers. Thus, it is worth pausing to evaluate this debate and the nature of the evidence, as it has some bearing on the Egyptian revolution in respect of Nasserism and its origin.

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After the Second World War, the United States realized that it had to assume a new and more influential approach in its relations with the Middle East. In the East-West struggle for global supremacy, this area came to be seen essentially in the context of Western defense (CIA FOIA 1951). It became vital for the security of the United States and its allies that political stability be achieved in the Middle East and that a basis for mutual defense of that area and its resources be established against Soviet expansion (FRUS 1951: 257-64).

Because Egypt was a leader in the region destined to play an important political role, its ability to influence the attitudes of the Arab states toward the West, on the Arab-Israeli relations and on the communist influence in the area (CIA FOIA 1953), made Egyptian policy a factor that policy-makers in the State Department could not ignore. The United States had become obliged to pay a great deal of attention to the internal situation of this country, as without reliable and stable Egypt, the United States' objectives of regional stability and security would not be fulfilled.

Anxious to become more involved in Egyptian matters, Secretary of State, Dean Acheson wisely appointed Jefferson Caffery -who had a reputation as one of the most distinguished and formidable members of the US foreign service- as ambassador to Egypt (NA RG 59 611.74/9-2750). Caffery's posting to Egypt (after 5 years as ambassador in Paris) was a mark of the region's growing Cold War importance to America and was challenged the traditional, preeminent position of Britain in Egypt (Dur 1974). Ambassador Caffery succeeded rapidly in developing good relationships with King Farouk and the Egyptian politicians. He became a prominent public figure on the Egyptian scene and his political and social actions were constantly reported in the leading Egyptian newspapers and magazines (Alterman 2002).

By the late forties and the early fifties, most of the reports of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the American Embassy in Cairo were scrutinizing the deterioration in Egypt's internal political situation due to the corruption and poverty, which had become more evident in Egyptian society during that time. Caffery surmised that: "factors of instability in Egypt out balance by far the factors of stability.....," engendering a very important question to the State Department "What can we do about stability in Egypt?" (NA RG 59 774.00/8-1351).



Still hoping that Farouk could be counted on, Acheson formed a committee under Kermit Roosevelt, the head of the Middle East section in the CIA, to study the situation in Egypt. The Secretary believed that the Wafd leaders, who were concerned with "making personal fortunes rather than introducing social reforms" (NA RG 59 774.00/5-950), and not the king that were responsible for the instability in Egypt¹. Acheson hoped that this committee could come up with some ideas to consolidate king Farouk authority and restore stability. During his stay in Egypt, Roosevelt tried to induce Farouk to achieve a peaceful revolution by initiating land reform, but the king's disinclination to accept Roosevelt's suggestion dashed the United States' hope in Farouk (Sayed-Ahmed 1991).

On the other hand, the Cairo riots in January 1952 created a major watershed in the Egyptian political life, as neither the Palace nor the Wafd had the ability to control the uprising. Fears mounted that only local extremist elements might benefit from the situation (FRUS 1952-54: no.956). The American leadership energetically sought to look for a new political party who had the power to handle the situation and to conduct a rational foreign policy in America's interest (Meyer 1980).

During this time and after the humiliating defeat of the Egyptian Army in the 1948 Palestine War, the young army officers began to impose themselves on Egyptian political life (NA RG 59 774.55/9-1450). Eventually known as the Free Officers, they represented themselves as an independent new force, who was not either loyal to the king or to the existent political parties. The American Embassy in Cairo watched them as the most crucial factor in Egyptian internal affairs (FRUS 1952-54 no.961). The precise nature of the United States' connection with the Free Officers has been the subject of great deal of speculation. Over the years, historians and scholars have debated the extent of the US involvement in the military coup of 1952. This work will argue that the State Department knew of the Free Officers' movement, encouraged it prior to

¹ By the 1940s, popular faith in the Wafd Party had been shaken. Nahhas's willingness to lead a government forced upon the King by a British ultimatum in February 1942, the publication shortly thereafter of Makram Ubayad's Black Book, in which he accused Nahhas and members of his cabinet of corruption and nepotism, and splits in Wafd leadership tarnished the Wafd's image. In the time that these incidents created a great stir throughout the country, they cost the party a growing part of its middle and lower class support; as it lost support, it became more dependent on the big landlords whose influence took it in an increasingly conservative direction.



July 1952 and played an important role in consolidating and nurturing it from the earliest hours of the coup.

As known, the memoirs of Miles Copland, a former CIA agent, was one of the main sources which asserted that America was closely involved with the coup leaders from early 1952. According to Copland, Roosevelt came to Egypt in March 1952 with the mission of creating an Egyptian Arab leader, who would guide the Arabs out of their political and economic morass and hence towards the West. Convinced by Caffery's assessment that "only the Army could cope with the deteriorating situation and establish a government with which Western powers could talk sense" (Copland 1969: 64), Roosevelt held a series of meetings with the Free Officers (one of them was attended by their leader - Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser), discussing their intentions towards a military takeover and promising that America would do nothing to interfere with their coup (Copland 1989).

Repudiating Copland's version, Wilbur Crane Eveland, another ex-CIA operative, contended that the coup had "caught the CIA completely by surprise" (Eveland 1980: 97). This account is supported by the diplomatic historian Peter Hahn (Hahn 1991) and Nasser's friend and confidant, Mohammed Heikal (Heikal 1972).

Unfortunately, none of these claims could be completely substantiated by the declassified documents, as the CIA was not and is not in the habit of revealing its covert operations (Holland 1996). However, there is plenty of evidence that makes Copland's account more persuasive.

In the meeting of the Council of Foreign Relations in December 1951, Washington was increasingly disposed to view the solution for the Middle East problems in the creation of a position of Cold-War strength managed by a solid middle class nationalists, declaring: "What is really neededis a better quality of leadership. The Middle East law schools have been unsuccessful in producing many leaders.....The lower class is down trodden. The solution lies in a solid middle class" (CFR archives 1951). Who was better to consolidate the influence of the Arab middle class than junior officers, such as those who entered the Egyptian Military Academy in 1936 and showed their resentment at the political situation after 1948? (Aronson 1986)



By going through the State Department archives, it is very obvious that the United States had paid a great deal of attention to the Egyptian army situation since 1950. The growing discontent among the army officers and their dissatisfaction with Farouk's leadership was of the most important topics in the exchange of top secrets reports and correspondence between the State Department and the American Embassy in Cairo. In his meeting with the British Foreign Minister Eden, Acheson concluded that: "Present danger was frustration on part of young officers who do not like Farouk." (Declassified Documents May 1952)

Also, Caffery continued to stress the threat in his diplomatic correspondence, surmising that: "Reoccupation, revolt, revolution may sound like over-emphasis; they are all visible on the cards in Egypt today" (NA RG 59 774.00/2-2152). He added that the young officers: "must be watched as a potential source of a coup d'état." (NA RG 59 774.55/9-1150). Accordingly, the United States was cognizant of the role that could be played by the Free Officers during this stage.

It should be pointed out that some of the Free Officers had received military training in the United States in the last two years before the coup. Being in direct contact with the American style of life, many of the Egyptians officers were inspired by the American image as a supporter of democracy and freedom throughout the world (Sayed-Ahmed 1991). This paved the way for direct contact between the Free Officers and the Americans Embassy officials and military officers. Ali Sabry, the chief of air force intelligence, had good relations with Col. David Evans, the American air force attaché (Sabry 1992). Also, Bill Lakeland, second secretary and political officer, became the Free Officers' liaison with the Embassy in the months preceding the coup. His youth and military background allowed him to easily befriend the young officers, especially Nasser, who by some coincidence was Lakeland's neighbor (Aronson 1986). It would seem natural that they exchanged information about the likelihood of the revolution in Egypt and the United States reactions towards it. Undoubtedly, these contacts produced favorable impressions and helped both sides to predict their respective goals in the following phase.

According to Khaled Mohiedden, the leftist officer who played a leading role in the coup, great efforts were made to reassure US officials that the Free Officers' movement was pro-American. In March 1952 (the same date which Copland assumed that Roosevelt held his meetings with the Free Officers), Nasser



insisted that the epithet "Anglo-American Imperialism", which had appeared in the Free Officers' leaflets, be sharpened to "British Imperialism" in order to avoid American infuriation (Mohi El Din 1992). Nasser knew that he would require the assistance of a big power to insure the success of his coup. He looked naturally to the United States, taking advantage of America's apprehension with the Cold War security measures and with the widespread perception that there was competition between Britain and United States in the Middle East (Louis 1986). He plausibly tried to develop his relations with the United States before the coup through secret channels, might be through Roosevelt, who according to Heikal "a familiar figure in Cairo before the revolution." (Heikal 1986: 64)

As stated by Copland, Roosevelt discussed with Nasser the outline of their planned military takeover and promised that America would do nothing either to oppose or interfere with their coup. Roosevelt, in his reports to Acheson, assured that: "it was (not) our coup.....almost totally free of our influence, which we could assist only by not opposing it." (Copland 1969: 72)

Although the State Department was aware that "the King control over the military forces had been shaken" (NA RG 59 774.00/1-1452) and he urgently needed equipment to create a private police army to consolidate his power after January riots (FRUS 1952-54: no. 961), however, Farouk received nothing from the State Department, leaving him at the mercy of the army (Holland 1996).

In Egypt, the sequence of events moved quickly. Cabinets changed rapidly in the spring of 1952 and the advent of the revolution became a matter of days. Although the United States saw the danger, they did not move to save Naguib el-Hilali's government which was regarded by Caffery as the last chance: "to maintain internal security with strong hand" and "to deal sternly with corruption, graft and subversion" (FRUS 1952-54: no.967). In the time that Britain asked for their interference to save el-Hilali, the State Department did not believe that: "The US should involve itself in Egypt domestic political crisis as UK suggested" (FRUS 1952-54: no.989). This matter showed that the United States was not concerned in sustaining the ancient regime.

During the same period, Washington dispatched Henry Byroade, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern affairs, to the Middle East to gain experience of the local and regional situation. In his report to Acheson on July 21, Byroade concluded that the time had come: "to make greater use of our



position in Egypt" (FRUS 1952-54 no. 995). Forty-eight hours, the Free Officers seized power and overthrew Egypt's monarch.

Officially, the Americans were the first to learn of the revolt. In the early morning of July 23, exactly at 3:00 am, Nasser delegated Ali Sabri to Colonel Evans to convey message to Caffery, who was in Alexandria (Sabry 1992). Given the experiences of Urabi's crushed uprising in 1882 and of 1942, the officers hoped to forestall British intervention by reassuring to Caffery that the coup was a purely internal matter and that the rights and property of the foreigners would be protected as long as the British refrained from intervening. According to Naguib, Caffery was: "one of the few foreign diplomats whom we believed that we could trust" (Naguib 1955), despite of his well-known friendship to Farouk. The important role the Free Officers assigned the American Ambassador from the earliest hours of the revolution is indirect evidence that the American response to the coup was already known to the junta prior to July 23.

From 8 am. onwards, the king was in constant communication with Caffery (NA RG 59 774.00/7-2352). He repeated each time that only foreign intervention could save him and his dynasty (Eden 1960). Finding no response from Caffery, Farouk asked directly the Commander of British troops in Egypt, Sir Slim, to occupy Cairo and bomb Alexandria. Slim passed the request to Eden, who by his turn informed Washington. The United States reply was negative, assuring that: "It would not countenance foreign intervention to save the monarchy" (Naguib 1955: 120). Despite the widespread rumor that the rebellious officers were communists (Hahn 1991), Acheson warned the British that: "foreign intervention would be disastrous", indicating that: "the army action was purely an internal affair." (NA RG 59 774.00/7-2352). Washington's prompt support to the coup belied any idea that they had been surprised by the event. On July 24, the State Department informed the Foreign Office that: "they knew everything about the revolutionary elements and were aware of their attitudes" (FO.371/7896878- 1952), a declaration which dashed the claim that the United States largely ignorant of the perpetrators and their aims.

It is doubtful, however, that Washington knew of the exact date of the coup and the details of the plan decided upon by the officers. Copland himself affirmed that: "Our Government learned of the actual coup by reading about it in the newspapers the day it happened, following the usual flurry of CIA reports



indicating that something was up but failing to pinpoint the exact time and movements." (Copland 1969: 74).

In spite of the fact that the United States was concerned with the King's safety, as any harm to the royal family might precipitate British intervention, Washington was cautious to distance itself from Farouk. It renounced the King's appeal to supply a warship to transport him out of Egypt despite the availability of several American vessels near Alexandria (NA RG 59 774.55/7-2552). Later on, the State Department refused to give Farouk the permission to visit the United States when he was in his exile at Italy (NA RG 59 611.74/7-3052).

Ensuring that abdication of Farouk took place and that the coup was as peaceful as it was, Caffery escorted Farouk to the port of Alexandria where the latter embarked on the royal yacht "Mahrousa" en route to his exile on July 26 (NA RG 59 774.11/7-2652). Heikal curtailed the American's role at this stage, assuming that it attained only a symbolic significance: "Her representative (Caffery) was the last man to see off the remains of the old regime and the first in contact with the new." (Heikal 1986: 47). The Soviet was not of the same mind. Russian intelligence reported that the coup was: "the work of reactionary officers linked with the USA" which inspired their military takeover to: "create conditions for drawing Egypt into the United States Middle East Command." (Zubok 1995: 459).

From the outset, the Free Officers made no secret of its political proclivity to the United States. They assured Caffery in their first meeting the total anti-communist nature of the coup and they would consider bringing Egypt into the Middle East Command (NA RG 59 774.00/7-2552). The junta spent the next few weeks trying to woo the American Ambassador, asking for his political guidance and following his advices. They succeeded in showing their subservient to the Americans to the extent that Caffery used to call them by "our boys" (Alterman 2002).

Denying any political ambitions of their own, the Free Officers installed Ali Maher as prime minister, who resigned after only six weeks over a dispute on land reform. As a result of Caffery's interference in the formation of the new cabinet, Dr. El-Sanhuri, the junta's first choice for prime minister, was excluded and General Naguib was nominated. Caffery also vetoed the appointment of Rashad El-Barawi, the architect of land reform, as a minister whom he dismissed as a "commie" (NA RG 59 774.00/9-1052). In addition, the Free



Officers submitted the agenda of the new cabinet to Caffery before announcing it publicly (NA RG 59 774.00/9-752). All evidence indicated that the American Embassy was the one who run the show behind the Free Officers. The new Egyptian leaders were caring for keeping the United States abreast of their steps, seeking for advice and support (Gordon 1992). Hence, it can be said that the United States had replaced Britain as the backstairs power in Egypt political life from the early time of the revolution (Thornhill 2006).

Despite British misgivings, Acheson publicly praised the Naguib regime proclaiming the beginning of a new era of close cooperation between Egypt and America (Bulletin 1952). Within ten days of his coming to power, Naguib moved to bolster Egypt's new relation with the United States. A representative of General Naguib secretly approached the American Embassy with a proposal to cooperate with Washington and to undertake certain commitments, including participation in the MEDO (Middle East Defence Organization) in return for military and economic aid (FRUS 1952-54 no.1010).

Such a move from General Naguib, the head of the RCC (Revolutionary Command Council), instigated the State Department to regard the support of the Free Officers as essential to sustain the Western orientation of Egypt and maintain stability and security in the Middle East. On September 30, Acheson emphasized the importance of supporting and strengthening the Free Officers regime, and he recommended material as well as moral support of the Egyptian regime as the best means of achieving the objectives of the United States and the West vis-a-vis Egypt (FRUS 1952-54 no. 1012).

By the time Caffery and Lakeland established close relations with Naguib and Nasser (Alterman 2002), the CIA was building an Empire behind the RCC. The CIA officers were soon training a new Egyptian intelligence service (Beisner 2006). They were now dealing with the Egyptian government at almost every level as well as with the influential Egyptian Press (Eveland 1980).

Accordingly, the American's influence was remarkable during the formative years of the Egyptian revolution. The United States did not confine itself for moral and economic aid² but extended to essential political support. The role played by Washington in mediating the dispute between the British and the Free

² In February 1953, President Eisenhower extended \$10 million worth of financial assistance to Egypt (FRUS 1952-54 no.1101).



Officers and in promoting the Egyptian's reasons to the British, in the Anglo-Egyptian negotiations that led up to 1954 agreement, is a new evidence of the extent to which Washington adopted the officers and fostered their rule. America's quest for stability and the junta's needs to bolster its authority produced a strange symbiotic relationship. Both countries needed each other to accomplish their respective goals (Holland 1996).

Finally, linking all this together, we can clearly conclude that from the earliest hours of the Egyptian revolution, the United States had enthusiastically embraced the Free Officers and offered them great support. This patronage was a crucial factor in helping them to seize power and to consolidate their authority during a period in which they challenged many political constraints. Although the coup was an indigenous one, not instigated by Washington, yet the sequence of events seems to confirm that the State Department knew about the coup and tried to exploit it for American interests. Washington's quick positive response towards the military movement and its concern for making revolutionary plotting successful belied the allegation that US had been surprised by the coup and it was ignorant of the identities of those who had seized the power in Egypt.



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دور الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية في الأيام الأولى لثورة يوليو ١٩٥٢

مع انتهاء الحرب العالمية الثانية و انقسام العالم إلى معسكرين متنافسين و بروز الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية كقوى عظمى، ازدادت أهمية منطقة الشرق الأوسط بشكل كبير و أصبحت من أكثر المناطق التي تسعى القوى العالمية للسيطرة عليها. ولذلك تطلعت أمريكا لزيادة نفوذها و تكثيف تواجدتها في هذه المنطقة، التي كانت تعاني في ذلك الوقت من عدم الاستقرار، الأمر الذي جعل منها حقلاً خصباً للتغلغل الشيوعي. و قد أدركت واشنطن منذ البداية أن مصر هي أحد أهم المفاتيح التي يمكن من خلالها السيطرة على منطقة الشرق الأوسط وأنشاء حلف عسكري موال للغرب تشترك فيه دول المنطقة. و كخطوة أولى لتنفيذ هذه السياسة، أصبح من الضروري على الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية أن تتابع عن قرب مسار و تتطور الأحداث التي تشهدها مصر في ذلك الوقت، حيث كانت تعاني البلاد من أنتشار الفساد و المحسوبية و عدم الاستقرار في أوضاعها الداخلية.

مع بداية الخمسينات، فرضت حركة الضباط الأحرار نفسها على مسرح الأحداث السياسية المصرية و ظهرت في شكل تنظيم مستقل في توجهاته و أفكاره عن القصر و عن الأحزاب السياسية الأخرى، و التي كان من الممكن أن يكون له دور فعال و مؤثر في تغيير مجرى الأحداث. و قد كان للدور التي لعبته أمريكا في دعم رجال الثورة منذ اللحظات الأولى على قيام ثورة يوليو ١٩٥٢ أكبر الأثر في أفعال الكثيرين بامكانية وجود علاقة سابقة بين الضباط الأحرار و الأمريكان. و قد كانت هذه العلاقة من أهم النقاط التي أثارت جدلاً كبيراً بين كثير من المؤرخين و السياسيين، و لذلك يجدر بنا التوقف عند هذه العلاقة عن طريق التحليل الدقيق للدور التي لعبته أمريكا في دعم حركة الضباط الأحرار في الأيام السابقة على قيام الثورة و بعد قيامها.