



Shifting Sands: The United States, Great Britain, and the Muslim Brotherhood, 1945 – 1954

John Perry

Abstract: Anti-US sentiments in Egypt began in the late 1940s and 1950s. This development is traced by examining the Muslim Brotherhood, a non-state actor, and its relationship with the United States. Non-state actors are crucial to understanding both the history of the United States in the Middle East and contemporary US/Middle East relations. Large segments of the region's population did not, and still do not, view their governments with legitimacy. This is largely due to the role of colonial powers both in determining the national borders of the area after WWI and the influence those powers wielded over many of the regimes that governed Middle East nations. But from 1945 to 1954, US actions moved non-state groups like the Muslim Brotherhood from focusing on Great Britain to focusing on the United States as the primary foreign threat in the Middle East. US officials' support of Britain's military occupation of Egypt, the US government's backing of an Israeli state carved from the Palestinian homeland, US policymakers' continued pursuit to secure the region's economic resources, and Washington's assistance, or perceived assistance, to Gamal Abdel Nasser from 1952 to 1956 laid the foundations to anti-US attitudes in Egypt. This period is one of the genealogical origins of contemporary beliefs that place a hostile emphasis on the United States.

Keywords: *United States, Middle East, Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood, Cold War, Decolonization.*

Introduction

In the 2000s, the United States' relationship with the Middle East took on new significance. The attacks on September 11, 2001, the War on Terror, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, the rise of ISIS, and the continued threat of attacks both in the United States and around the world has made US/Middle East relations an important topic of continued debate. But to properly understand ISIS, or similar groups, the historical evolution of their being must be considered.

Historians have examined the United States' early relations with the Middle East through various models. Many, like Peter Hahn or Christopher D. O'Sullivan, have examined the US role in the Middle East by focusing on the upper echelons of policy-making. Hahn traces the complicated interactions that took place between the US, British, and Egyptian governments from 1945 – 1956. His study focuses on the top level of government officials

John Perry is a PhD student at the History Department of the University of Kentucky.

E-mail: Jpe256@g.uky.edu

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to explain the Suez Crisis.¹ O’Sullivan, on the other hand, explores the New Deal style programs implemented by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration during WWII. O’Sullivan emphasizes Roosevelt’s aid programs and his attempts to modernize the Middle East through progressive reform packages.² Other historians like Douglas Little have pointed to the role of oil and business in the US government’s early relations with the region.³ But historians of US foreign relations have paid less attention to the role of non-state actors.

Non-state actors are particularly important when examining the United States in the Middle East in the 1940s and 1950s. Large segments of the region’s populace did not acknowledge the validity of their governments due to colonial influence over the state. After WWI, the British and the French decreed many of the national borders in the Middle East. Rarely, if ever, were native peoples considered in these decisions. Moreover, many regimes in the Middle East during the interwar years became puppets of British or French authority. As a result, native individuals and groups often turned to institutions, other than the state, for social aid, communal fraternity, or platforms for political change. One such institution was the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that continued to play a fundamental role in Egyptian politics up to the present.

Many aspects of the ideologies of contemporary groups’, like ISIS, or Al Qaeda before it, can be traced back to the immediate post-WWII period. In particular, anti-US sentiments can be traced back to this time. Although different conditions framed the United States’ relationship with the Middle East in different ways across time, following WWII is when significant numbers of anti-colonial nationalists first began to move their focus from Great Britain to the United States. There are many strands of thought within political Islam and each of these strands has its own hereditary history but regarding the United States, this is the historical starting point. From 1945 onwards, the US government focused on a campaign of security and stability in the Middle East. This strategy revolved around the protection of the region’s oil reserves and the prevention of Soviet influence in the area.⁴ However, in carrying out this strategy, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations also authorized illegal coups, regime overthrows, and secret military and intelligence operations. While some of these actions resulted in short-term gains for Washington, the long-term effects of these actions have been catastrophic for populations in the Middle East and have given credence to the belief that the United States is simply a violent, imperial power. Developments like the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and US

1 Peter L. Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945 – 1956: Strategy and Diplomacy in the Early Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

2 Christopher D. O’Sullivan, *FDR and the End of Empire: The Origins of American Power in the Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

3 Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

4 Little, *American Orientalism*, chap. 2 and 4; Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt*, introduction, chap. 3 and 4.

support for it, the CIA led coup in Syria in 1949, the overthrow of the democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Moseddegh in 1953, US officials' continued quest to secure the region's oil fields, and the US government's support to colonial powers like the British all helped create the perception that the United States was simply a new imperial power. In the 1940s and 1950s, anti-colonial groups in the Middle East were greatly affected by these developments.

Anti-US sentiments in Egypt began before the Eisenhower Administration took office. Both the circumstances and actors involved are vital to understanding the contemporary relations the United States shares with the Middle East. The Muslim Brotherhood, a non-state organization of the period, played a fundamental role in Egyptian politics. By 1945, the organization had a membership of roughly 500,000 branches throughout the Middle East, and a sophisticated hierarchy and organizational structure that enabled it to efficiently engage the masses.⁵ As such, the Muslim Brotherhood is crucial to the history of Egypt and, therefore, is crucial to understanding US/Egyptian relations. Nevertheless, Washington's support of London after WWII, particularly for the British troop presence around the Suez Canal, US officials' endorsement of the Israeli state in 1948, and the US government's accommodation of Gamal Abdel Nasser from 1952-1956 all contributed to the brotherhood's shift in focus from Great Britain to the United States as the primary foreign threat.

Backdrop: The US, Great Britain, and the Muslim Brotherhood

A major US presence in the Middle East began at the turn of the twentieth century. In the early 1900s, vast reserves of oil were discovered in Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. These resources played a vital role in US officials' Middle East policies. With the outbreak of WWII, US and British policymakers formed a wartime union but continued challenging each other economically. The British had long held a presence in the area and considered the Middle East their sphere of influence. However, the Muslim Brotherhood challenged this assertion. It emerged amidst the turmoil of the Paris Peace and worked to undermine both the Egyptian state and its British backers.⁶

After WWI, anti-colonial nationalists regarded Europeans as their primary hindrance to independence. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, secretly made during WWI, divided control of the Middle East largely between the British and the French. News of it, as well as European and US officials' refusal to consider self-determination for populations outside of Europe, helped lead to protests throughout Egypt.⁷ The US government lost an

5 Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford University Press, 1969), chap. 2, 6, and 7.

6 Ziad Munson, "Islamic Mobilization: Social Movement Theory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Autumn, 2001).

7 Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 3.

important opportunity to strengthen ties with colonial populations in these years.

Instead, US leaders pursued policies revolving largely around the economic concessions of oil. While the US government was content to let the British police the Middle East, at least for the time being, US businesses wasted no time in developing commercial footholds. By 1941, five major firms had become invested in Middle East oil – Jersey Standard, Socony, Socal, Texaco, and Gulf. These companies created an informal network of diplomacy between themselves and the countries they operated in.⁸ However, Washington’s attention to the area grew as it became apparent that the region’s resources and strategic location made it vital to US interests.⁹

When war erupted again in 1939, US officials moved to strengthen ties with both the business community and governments of the Middle East. Washington hoped to strengthen its economic position in the Middle East, largely at the expense of the British. But it did not want to jeopardize its strategic relationship with London. The hope was to make clear that although they were wartime allies, the US government did not support British imperialism. This was a fine line to walk, as US officials deemed British troops in the Middle East, particularly around Egypt’s Suez Canal, a vital resource in the protection of the region. In the early Cold War, US policymakers viewed the Middle East as one of the most strategically important regions in the world.¹⁰ But as its attention to the area grew, so too did Washington’s conflict with London.

The US government found its growing presence in the Middle East almost always framed by the British. Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria were all footholds of the British Empire by the outbreak of WWII. But in 1942, Roosevelt made it clear to Churchill that although British influence had preeminence in the region, the United States had control over the monetary concessions of Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Egypt, the British had a protracted and complicated history that was characterized largely by military rule and political coercion.

Due to the unrest caused by the Paris Peace Conference after WWI, the British imposed martial law on Egypt in December 1921 and in February 1922 the British unilaterally declared Egyptian independence. A constitutional monarchy was created but the British pulled the strings from behind the scenes. The system of government divided power between the King, and his cabinet, Parliament, and, unofficially, London. From 1922 onwards, each body, including London, struggled for power and influence over the others. The Egyptian King, Farouk I, wanted total control of his country, like his forefathers, and hoped to both free himself from British influence and suppress the democratic aspirations of the opposition parties. On the other hand, the various opposition groups – liberals,

8 Matthew F. Jacobs, *Imagining the Middle East: The Building of an American Foreign Policy, 1918 – 1967*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2011) and Little, *American Orientalism*.

9 Little, *American Orientalism*, chap. 2 and 4; Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt*, introduction, chap. 3 and 4.

10 Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt*, chap. 3 and 4.

nationalists, socialists, and religious groups – each moved to implement their individual interpretations of society. London, conversely, looked to reassert its political authority and strengthen its presence militarily.

The Muslim Brotherhood, in stark contrast to most of the other political parties in Egypt, relied on indigenous beliefs and supported the creation of a state that revolved around the Islamic faith. While most of Egypt's political parties had existed since the late nineteenth century, the Muslim Brotherhood was a relative newcomer to the political scene. In 1928, Hassan al Banna began teaching in the town of Ismailia, located nearby the Suez Canal. Al-Banna's societal beliefs quickly grew in popularity. His principles regarding the role of Islam, in relation to the state, presented a culturally authentic, non-western social formula that was in stark contrast to the country's current political situation. These threads of thought led al-Banna to found the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*), initially a small, local club for discussing important social and religious matters. In the beginning, the Muslim Brotherhood functioned as a spiritual organization that provided social aid, cultural and religious fraternity, and a space to voice public concerns. However, from the 1930s onwards, the Brotherhood rapidly grew in popularity and sophistication.¹¹ It developed strong representation in various public institutions like labor parties, student groups, the police, and the army as well as in large private establishments, like advertising firms, transportation businesses, publishing and printing companies, and textile mills. This gave the Ikhwan a powerful influence in Egyptian politics.

The Muslim Brotherhood arose largely as a result of the instability of the Egyptian state. By 1945, the Brotherhood viewed the Egyptian government as one of the primary hindrances to social reform. However, it was Great Britain who pulled the strings from behind the scenes. As a result, the Ikhwan directed most of its anger at Egyptian and British authorities.

The Beginning: The US, Great Britain, and the Muslim Brotherhood, 1945 – 1947

In 1945, Truman and his advisors favored Egyptian independence, over support of the British, as the best means to secure the areas' resources. Both the Middle East's oil production and its geographic location were deemed vital to US interests in the early Cold War.¹² However, although they continued to contest each other's economic influence, from 1946 onwards the quest for security began to outweigh the desire for commercial supremacy for both the United States and Great Britain. After WWII, the Muslim Brotherhood continued to focus its public protest on British and Egyptian authorities,

¹¹ Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford University Press, 1969), chap. 2 – 5.

¹² Little, *American Orientalism*, chap. 2 and 4; Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt*, introduction, chap. 3 and 4.

however the first hints of anti-US sentiments emerged in this period.

Although most Egyptians desired independence, as the United States claimed to support, the US government's backing of an Israeli state carved from the Palestinian homeland left many doubtful of its sincerity. For example, in early November 1945, riots erupted around the US Consulate in Egypt. "Gangs of hoodlums and street urchins" attacked the buildings surrounding the American Embassy with stones and sticks to protest the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration – one of the first public pronouncements of an Israeli state made in 1917. The police were called in and they fired on the mob leaving ten dead, 300 wounded, and 1,000 arrested.¹³ For the Egyptian people and the Muslim Brotherhood, freedom from colonial powers was by far the most pressing post-war issue. Riots in protest of the national government and its relationship with the British had broken out regularly throughout 1945. Moreover, in the same year, three major assassination attempts were made against top officials in the Egyptian government.¹⁴ This instability had a strong influence on US policy.

By 1946, the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union had deteriorated. Soviet activity in Turkey and Iran distressed Washington and London. In Egypt, both moved to strengthen ties with the other as a result. The fear was that Moscow might exploit the country's instability in attempts to move it towards the Soviet Union. Alarm of socialist influence often framed US policy, even when those fears were imagined. US officials deemed British positions in the Middle East, particularly its military bases in Egypt, as crucial to the protection of US interests.

However, on January 6, 1946 Amin Osmin Pasha, a high-ranking Egyptian minister, was shot and killed. According to the US Embassy in Egypt, this was undoubtedly a result of the deep-seated resentment of British rule one saw apparent everywhere and many suspected the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁵ With the end of WWII, the 1936 lease agreement to station British troops by the Suez Canal became a focal point for many Egyptians.¹⁶ In early February 1946, students clashed with police on Abbas Bridge while attempting to cross into Cairo to protest the British. 150 were wounded and 80 were estimated hospitalized. In the following days, demonstrations took place at universities across Egypt, the authorities, in attempts to keep order, killed twelve students. Protests, demonstrations, riots, and looting continued throughout the next few weeks.¹⁷ Washington chose to re-strengthen ties with London as anti-British sentiment in Egypt was reaching a pinnacle. US officials assumed, incorrectly, that the unrest was due to Soviet agitators. Therefore,

13 US Department of State, US Legation in Egypt to Washington, *Confidential US State Department Central Files, Egypt, 1945 – 1949, Internal Affairs Decimal Number 883 and Foreign Affairs Decimal Numbers 783 and 711.83*, microfilm collection, telegram from the 10th of November, 1945.

14 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, telegram from the 7th of January, 1946.

15 Ibid.

16 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, telegram from the 23rd of February, 1946.

17 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, telegram from the 11th of February, 1946.

they moved to support the continuation of Britain's 1936 lease to station troops by the Suez but this further alienated Egypt's anti-colonial groups.

On February 26, 1946 the US Legation received a report from the Cairo Division of the Office of Strategic Service, which concluded that "beyond question" the Ikhwan was responsible for the rioting in November 1945 and the student demonstrations that occurred in the previous weeks. The report was the first major effort to understand the Muslim Brotherhood's organizational structure, ideology, and membership. US officials made clear that the Brotherhood had a complex hierarchy and administrative composition, as well as broad support from the populace that was growing daily.¹⁸

Despite the report, Washington's reasoning held that although the Kremlin may not have initiated the most recent series of protests, it might use similar circumstances to their advantage in the future. In May 1946, US officials intervened on behalf of the British in the talks to renegotiate the 1936 treaty. Moreover, through synchronized pressure, US and British officials were able to force the Soviets to withdraw from Iran the same month. However, this public intervention on behalf of the British had significant consequences for US policymakers.

May 1945 was the first time the United States officially and publicly supported the colonial interests of London in Egypt. Soon after the two largest political groups, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wafd, briefly resolved their differences to create a united front. For these groups, US support made the British threat now appear even more pressing and the need to unify seemed to outweigh their differences. Furthermore, six months later the brotherhood and the state began open attacks on one another. In October the Egyptian government arrested 56 members of the Ikhwan.¹⁹ In response, the Brotherhood bombed six police stations. The following day, the government arrested the organization's leadership, confiscated its property, and shut down its newspapers.²⁰ Although most of the brothers were released and their property returned, these events helped initiate the Muslim Brotherhood's shift in focus towards the United States. From this point, the organization slowly began moving towards viewing the United States as the primary foreign threat. US public endorsement of Britain's colonial policies helped start this process.

The end of WWII was a high point in US and British economic competition. The Cold War moved the US and British governments to increase collaboration in the Middle East. Although they continued to challenge each other in financial spheres, both Washington and London placed the prevention of Soviet influence above commercial hegemony. The Muslim Brotherhood abhorred US support to the British but continued directing most of its energy towards challenging the Egyptian state and its backer, London.

18 US Legation in Egypt from the Office of Strategic Service, Cairo, memo titled, *'Office of Strategic Services' analysis of protests received by the Legation at the time of the November Riots*, from the 27th of February, 1946.

19 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, telegram from the 23rd of November, 1946.

20 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, telegram from the 3rd of December, 1946.

Sowing Seeds: The US, Great Britain, and the Muslim Brotherhood, 1947 – 1952

From 1947 to 1952, US officials continued to swing back and forth between policies of security and stability, and continued to safeguard US economic interests in the region. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War, however, moved Washington and London to reaffirm the need for troops in the area. Throughout the war, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian state waged open combat against one another on the streets of Cairo. Ultimately, this led to the assassination of Hasan al-Banna in 1949, the Ikhwan's spiritual guide and leader. The Brotherhood interpreted continued US support to the British, as well as to the newly created state of Israel, as an attack on both the rights of the Arab people and on the sovereignty of the Egyptian state.

By the late 1940s, US oil companies had greatly expanded in the Middle East. For the Truman Administration, these firms played a vital role not only in Cold War security but also in the US domestic economy. Oil was a fundamental resource in fueling the US military and, increasingly, US transportation needs. In 1948, construction of a massive pipeline stretching from the Gulf to the Mediterranean began. Washington assisted immensely in its construction, it provided financial relief to oil companies through various economic packages but its primary help came from the CIA. In March of 1949, the CIA assisted a faction within the Syrian army in the overthrow of Syria's democratically elected government. The primary motivation for this action was the Syrian government's refusal to sanction construction of the pipeline through its territory. Securing the region's resources for both strategic and economic purposes were central to the Truman Administration.

In 1947, when American congressmen refused to lift import restrictions on Egyptian cotton, however, Cairo threatened to seek Moscow's help. Despite evidence that Egypt was not vulnerable to communism,²¹ US and British officials extended the policy of containment to the country. Fear of socialism's spread continued to lead the two powers to favor policies of security over stability. When war broke out between Egypt and the newly created state of Israel in May of 1948, these fears were further exacerbated. The US endorsement of the Israeli state infuriated populations throughout the Middle East. The effect on British and US policymakers was the reaffirmation of the need for British military bases.²² The Muslim Brotherhood interpreted the creation of Israel in 1948 as violent, colonial expansionism and the Egyptian state, by ending hostilities and not waging total war, was viewed as complicit with America.

Within Egypt, the government and the Muslim Brotherhood waged daily battles against one another throughout the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.²³ In January, the state announced that

21 Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt*, chap. 4.

22 Ibid, chap. 5.

23 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, telegrams from January to December 1948 make clear that throughout the year the Egyptian state faced disorder and confusion. This coincides with Mitchell's

after a clash with Ikhwan members, it had discovered 165 bombs and pieces of arms. In March, the Brotherhood assassinated a respected judge, Ahmad al-Khazindar. Numerous attempts were also made to take the life of Nahhas Pasha, who served as Egypt's Prime Minister on and off from the late-1920s to the early-1950s. In May, two days before the Egyptian offensive against Israel was launched, the Egyptian government declared martial law. A month later, some houses were blown up in the Jewish quarter of Cairo. In October, the government discovered a cache of arms and munitions on the estate of a prominent brother and then, in November, the police seized a jeep filled with documents that referenced the Brotherhood's "secret apparatus." This wing of the organization was reserved for the most devout and loyal members. It was established sometime between 1939 and 1942 with the purpose of carrying out paramilitary operations, arms build-ups, and intelligence gathering.²⁴

With the discovery of the "secret apparatus," the state felt it had sufficient strength to rid itself of the Ikhwan. On December 8, 1948, the Egyptian government announced a public ban on the Muslim Brotherhood – police surrounded its headquarters, arrested everyone inside, confiscated its property, and shutdown its newsletters. In response, the Ikhwan assassinated the Egyptian Prime Minister, Mahmoud an-Nukrashi Pasha. Two months later, on February 12, 1949, the police retaliated by murdering Hasan al-Banna, the Ikhwan's supreme leader and spiritual guide.²⁵

At this point, hostilities between the Brotherhood and the Egyptian government subsided substantially. The Muslim Brotherhood had to deal with the leadership crisis that arose in the wake of al-Banna's murder, as well as strategize how best to deal with its outlawing. For the latter, the Ikhwan moved to strengthen its alliance with the Wafd, at some point after the brothers' ban, an agreement was made between the two. The Wafd promised to re-establish the Brotherhood if voted into power in return for electoral support in the upcoming elections for the Egyptian Parliament. No other group in Egypt enjoyed the popular support like that of the Muslim Brotherhood, even with its official proscription. In January 1950, the Wafd won 225 of 319 seats in Egypt's House of Representatives. However, the real issue for the Ikhwan was dealing with the death of al-Banna.

When the "secret apparatus" was established in the late 1930s or early 1940s, a subtle split began in the organization's ranks. However, by the time of al-Banna's murder, the two factions were in full view. The minority faction was composed largely of members who worked in the "secret apparatus." They advocated a much stronger and proactive approach – guerilla actions aimed at the Egyptian state and implicitly Great Britain and the United States. These individuals were deeply involved with the Ikhwan's operations in

account in *The Society of Muslim Brothers*.

24 Abd Al-Fattah Muhammad El-Awaisi, *The Muslim Brothers and the Palestine Question, 1928 – 1947*, Tauris Academic Studies, 1998; Mitchell, *The Society of Muslim Brothers*.

25 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, numerous telegrams from December of 1948 to February of 1949 describe these events, as does Mitchell in *The Society of Muslim Brothers*.

Palestine during the 1948 war, as well as its paramilitary actions in Egypt.²⁶ The majority faction advocated a more conservative approach and looked to use official channels to attain the organization's goals. This split in the Ikhwan's ranks never fully healed and played a crucial role in the unfolding of events up to 1954.

The Muslim Brotherhood was becoming more and more aware of the United States' role in the region. Support to Great Britain and Israel, as well as the US pursuit to secure the region's economic resources, led to increasing resentment and mounting perceptions of the United States as a greedy, violent, colonial power. But despite the growing anger, US policy-makers remained fixed on Moscow as the potential source of Egypt's unrest, not their coordination and support of imperial policies.

The US still considered policing the Middle East a British responsibility but Egyptian nationals were now threatening to completely terminate the 1936 troop lease. In May 1950, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France jointly issued the Tripartite Declaration. It guaranteed the territorial status quo of the Arab-Israeli armistice and pledged each country's intention to uphold peace and stability in the area. This was the first US commitment to the region and, although largely a token gesture, was a portent of the United States' future role in the area.

From 1950 on, US officials worked to enlist Egypt in the creation of a Middle East security network like that of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Truman Administration aimed to use this network to appease both the Egyptian and British governments. Bringing the important countries of the Middle East, like Egypt, together in an officially organized defense apparatus would help negate the need for British influence in the area and appease Egyptian nationals, while also maintaining counter-measures to Soviet encroachment. The Middle East Command (MEC) was a program created by the British to coordinate resources in the region. The United States joined MEC during WWII and by the 1950s had largely taken command of the program. MEC, later changed to the Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO), attempted to bring together the United States, Europe, and Middle Eastern nations into a security structure to defend against Soviet threats.

Washington and London, however, refused to treat Egypt as a full partner in the creation of MEDO. As a result, the talks failed and helped further alienate much of the Egyptian populace. First and foremost, Egyptians wanted the British military presence removed from their country. No agreement could be made without exploring their removal as a primary dimension to the treaty but American and British officials refused to do this.

Protests, riots, and rallies occurred throughout the talks. In early April 1950, the Muslim Brotherhood held demonstrations in the Sayida Zeinab section of Cairo. Although largely in protest of foreign influence in Egypt, the organization now also began to protest the

26 El-Awaisi, *The Muslim Brothers and the Palestine Question*.

Wafd government.²⁷ The relationship between the Wafd and the Muslim Brotherhood had deteriorated by spring 1950. The Ikhwan's popularity made it a danger to the state regardless of the political faction that held the reins of power. The Wafd was fully aware of this and hoped to delay the Brotherhood's readmission into the mainstream. But by May 1951, the brothers had pressured the government to the point where it was forced to lift the public injunction on them.

In July and August 1951, a "highly confidential" source informed the US Legation in Egypt that he had attended a meeting between the opposition groups – the Muslim Brotherhood, the Nationalists, the Socialists, and the Communists.²⁸ According to the source, these groups met to affirm their opposition to the current government.²⁹ In October, violence erupted in the Canal Zone in protest of the continued Western influence in the country. This tension continued into 1952 and set the stage for Nasser's takeover in July.

The United States continued to pursue a strategy of security and stability in the Middle East, even when these policies contradicted each other. However, their efforts to create a regional defense organization failed. Moreover, Washington's continued support to the British and the newly created state of Israel, as well as its growing coordination with the major oil firms in the region, further enflamed the Muslim Brotherhood.

Pivot-Point: The US, Great Britain, and the Muslim Brotherhood, 1952 – 1954

In 1952, Nasser and the Free Officers took over the Egyptian government. This was made possible in large part due to a new alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. But both sides were wary of the other and within a year the relationship soured. Washington viewed the new regime, in particular Nasser, as potentially new means to help secure its interests. In 1954, Nasser eliminated the Muslim Brotherhood from official Egyptian politics. But the group continued to function underground until the 1970s when it began to be reinstated.

In late January 1952, Cairo erupted in rioting, looting, and fire – hundreds of buildings were destroyed. The riots were in reaction to the killing of 50 Egyptian policemen by British troops in a battle the previous day. The Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the other opposition groups, held numerous protests and demonstrations.³⁰ By early 1952, nearly every political party in Egypt, including factions within the military, was disaffected with the Wafd. Their continued tolerance of the British led most groups to perceive the

27 US Department of State, US Legation in Egypt to Washington, *Confidential US State Department Central Files, Egypt, 1950 – 1954, Internal Affairs Decimal Number 774, 874, and 974 and Foreign Affairs Decimal Numbers 674 and 611.74*, microfilm collection, memo with the subject line: *Demonstration By Moslem Brothers* from the 3rd of April, 1950.

28 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Report of a meeting of Opposition and Extremist Egyptian Groups* from the 17th of July, 1951.

29 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Meetings of Political Groups Sponsoring August 26 Demonstrations* from the 30th of August, 1951.

30 Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, chap. 4 and 5.

legitimacy of the government as having completely evaporated. On the same day as the riots, the US Legation in Egypt met with the Ikhwan. The Brotherhood's representative made clear to the legation that it was displeased with the current government.³¹ Moreover, in March, Hassan Ismail al-Hudaibi, the group's newly elected leader, declared that the organization would not be participating in future elections.³² With hindsight, these references signal the Brotherhood's transition from a union with the Wafd to their new alliance in 1952 with the Free Officers, the faction in the military with whom Nasser was associated. At some point a deal was made that ensured the Brotherhood's ban would remain lifted, while in return the organization pledged its support to the Free Officers.

In late July 1952, the Free Officers successfully performed their bloodless coup. The new regime quickly declared its intention of friendly relations with the United States. Furthermore, the US Legation in Egypt reported that although young and largely inexperienced, the Free Officer's intelligence and aims were impressive.³³ In Washington, the news of the takeover was met with optimism. The Free Officers represented a promising new avenue to securing US interests in the region. If strong ties were made with the new regime, the US government might be able to now enlist Egypt in a regional security apparatus while also supporting Egyptian independence. The British would largely be left in the cold but, for US policymakers, possible means to achieve both security and stability finally seemed to present themselves.

In mid August 1952, the US Embassy in Egypt noted that the current government was aware of the dangers the Brotherhood posed and believed they could control them. But Jefferson Caffery, the head of the US Legation in Egypt, remained unconvinced.³⁴ In late December 1952, Caffery had his first official meeting with Hassan al-Hudaibi, the new leader of the Ikhwan, and reported that al-Hudaibi claimed the brotherhood is willing to accommodate the new regime as well as its future dealings with the United States. However, Caffery remained skeptical and informed Washington of his concerns.³⁵ Throughout 1953, tension between the Muslim Brotherhood and the government grew. General Muhammad Naguib, originally intended to be the new Egyptian government's straw man, began to acquire political clout of his own. Two factions – one aligned behind Naguib, the other behind Nasser – came to being. Al-Hudaibi and the official faction of the Ikhwan supported Naguib and hoped to use him to suppress Nasser, while the more extreme, minority group within the Brotherhood looked to directly undermine the

31 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Conversation with Sheikh Al Baquri, Executive Council, Moslem Brotherhood* from the 6th of January, 1952.

32 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Current Attitudes of the Muslim Brotherhood* from the 2nd of April, 1952.

33 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Egypt's New Era – The First Three Weeks* from the 18th of August, 1952.

34 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Role of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan El Muslimin) Under Egypt's New Regime* from the 27th of September, 1952.

35 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Views of the Supreme Guide, Moslem Brotherhood, on Current Political Situation* from the 24th of December, 1952.

entire state through terrorist action. At this point, those brothers who had been part of the “secret apparatus” largely split from the Ikhwan and started acting independently from its official command. Washington was made aware of these developments and received regular updates from the US Legation.

Throughout the summer 1953, Caffery met with al-Hudaibi several times. In cables sent to Washington, he made clear that the tensions between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Free Officers were growing.³⁶ Nasser, in particular, had to be eliminated from the new government because, according to al-Hudaibi, his national policies, which were regarded largely as secular policies by the Ikhwan, were preventing the creation of a proper, Islamic state.³⁷ Moreover, he declared that the Ikhwan would now take all possible measures to drive out the British. The embassy’s “secret source” within the organization repeated these intentions and suggested that future action against the British would derive from civilians on the basis of commando action.³⁸ The specific relationship between Washington and Nasser in these years is hazy. What, if any, support the US government provided to him is unclear. Nevertheless, by the end of 1953, Nasser and the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) had successfully implemented a massive, state-sponsored propaganda campaign against the Brotherhood. Al-Hudaibi especially felt the brunt of this program, as Nasser hoped to exploit the split in the Ikhwan’s ranks as means to control the organization. While Washington may or may not have provided Nasser with intelligence and logistical support, Washington nevertheless continued its strategy of securing economic resources throughout the Middle East.

In August 1953, Washington and London coordinated the overthrow of Iran’s democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and installed Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah, or King, of Iran. Much like Syria in 1949, the Iranian government had refused economic concessions proposed by American and British oil companies and, as a result, unofficial avenues to securing those concessions were implemented. Although perhaps not aware of this development immediately, as with the Syrian coup, the Muslim Brotherhood observed US actions throughout the Middle East with more and more contempt. Prolonged support to the British, the backing of Israel, continued actions to secure the region’s oil, and now support or at the least, the perceived support given to Nasser helped move the United States towards the center of many Ikhwan members’ gaze, including Sayyid Qutb, who later became an important ideologue of the organization. Qutb, at this stage, was a mid to low level associate but his writings on the United States turned into the foundation to the Ikhwan’s belief structure in the 1960s and 1970s. Regardless, the Brotherhood, at least the official faction, was not ready yet to completely

36 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Muslim Brotherhood Probably Not Involved in Republic Move* from the 23rd of June, 1953.

37 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Transmitting Memorandum of Conversation with Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood* from the 5th of August, 1953.

38 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Views of the Muslim Brotherhood On Current Situation* from the 20th of July, 1953.

abandon its relationship with the RCC and aimed to lessen tensions between the two in the months to follow.

In September 1953, the organization declared that the Brotherhood and the government were not at odds with each other and it was the “imperialist trinity” of Britain, Israel, and America that was responsible for spreading such rumors.³⁹ Nevertheless, on September 16, 1953 the Egyptian government announced the establishment of a revolutionary tribunal. According to a cable transmitted to Washington, it was created, at least in part, “to disrupt and weaken, if not destroy, the Muslim Brotherhood.”⁴⁰ Consequently, the Ikhwan turned from directly challenging Nasser and returned to publicizing the role of foreign powers in Egyptian politics.

On October 30, 1953 a conference was held at the Muslim Brotherhood headquarters in Alexandria. Over 5,000 undergraduates of Alexandria University and various religious institutions attended. According to a dispatch to the Department of State whose subject line read, “Muslim Brothers Are ‘Ready for Battle,’” the organization declared that they soon would wage a decisive battle against the “imperialists” and they urged all Arab governments to abandon the United Nations because of its control by powers like the United States.⁴¹ Tensions between the Muslim Brotherhood and the RCC were growing. But the United States was now on an equal footing with the imperialist characterizations of Great Britain. No longer was London the primary foreign threat in the region. Washington’s backing of Nasser led the Ikhwan, which deemed Nasser the most dangerous element of the RCC, to finally hold the United States as a chief, if not the chief, enemy of anti-imperialism.⁴²

Throughout the next few months, the legitimate faction of the Brotherhood attempted to demonstrate the organization’s religious and non-political nature while simultaneously demanding its reinstatement. In June 1954, al-Hudaibi left to visit King Saud of Saudi Arabia, largely to assess Brotherhood support outside of Egypt. But this effectively marked the end of his leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴³ By his return, propaganda efforts against him, both by the state and from his rivals within the organization, had achieved their aims. In mid-July, the American Legation wired Washington to inform them that the “truce” between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian government was rapidly disintegrating. Violent clashes between the government and the Brotherhood

39 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Former Premier And Police Officers Charged With Torturing Muslim Brothers* from the 22nd of August, 1953 and the memo with the subject line: *Moslem Brotherhood Publicly Declares It Supports Present Regime* from the 12th of September, 1953.

40 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Attitude of RCC Toward Muslim Brotherhood* from the 19th of September, 1953.

41 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Moslem Brothers Are ‘Ready for Battle’* from the 31st of October, 1953.

42 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Dissolution of the Muslim Brotherhood* from the 15th of January, 1954 and two memos marked “priority” from the 1st of March, 1954

43 Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, chap. 5.

occurred throughout July, August, and September.⁴⁴

On October 27, 1954 while giving a speech to a crowd in Alexandria, eight shots rang out in an attempt on Nasser's life. The gunman, Mohamad Abdel Latif, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, had missed his mark and was soon apprehended. But this provided Nasser with the means to finally crack down on the Muslim Brotherhood. Thousands were arrested. The group's leadership, as well as numerous lower level members like Sayyid Qutb, was jailed, while Naguib and his followers were dismissed from the government. In the end, eight brothers were sentenced to death, including al-Hudaibi, but at the last minute his sentence was curtailed to life in prison. This effectively ended the public presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian politics for the next two decades.

The Brotherhood's massive popularity and sophisticated organization made it a danger to any regime in control of the government. However, Nasser's efforts allowed him to successfully liquidate the organization at the end of 1954. It is unclear what specific role US officials played in these events. But it is clear the US government continued to secure its economic interests in the region and continued to support Great Britain and Israel. This led many brothers to perceive US support given to Nasser. As a result, in the years to come the US government, as much as Nasser, was blamed by the Muslim Brotherhood for the woes of the Egyptian state.

Conclusion

From 1954 to the early 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood was officially outlawed in Egypt. However, its organization and popularity allowed it to effectively function underground. This period represents the next phase in the Ikhwan's evolution. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s thousands of brothers and associates of the organization were imprisoned and tortured by the Egyptian state. Sayyid Qutb was one such individual. His theories on *jahiliyyah*, or Western "barbarism," became the backbone to the next generation of brothers' ideology. Published throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, Qutb authored numerous texts on Islam, Egypt, and the West. His thoughts on the West were almost all critical and derived from his time at Colorado State Teachers College in 1949 or 1950 and were also heavily influenced by the events leading up to the Brotherhood's liquidation. Qutb was executed in 1966 for plotting to assassinate Nasser and as a result he and his work became extremely popular to Ikhwan followers. For the Muslim Brotherhood, the United States was the power that propped up Nasser's regime and, therefore, was just as responsible as the Egyptian state for their harsh repression. The brutal and cruel treatment many brothers suffered at the hands of the government radicalized many moderate and more liberal members of the Ikhwan and hardened in them the idea that the United States

44 US Legation in Egypt to Washington, memo with the subject line: *Regime's Attitude Towards The Muslim Brotherhood* from the 12th of July, 1954.

was to blame.⁴⁵

In the immediate post-WWII period, the United States pursued the dual strategy of security and stability in the Middle East. However, these policies were often contradictory. Moreover, in this time, the Middle East's economic resources were deemed vital to US interests. As such, Washington implemented policies, both public and clandestine, to secure rights to oil business. Sometimes the United States worked with Great Britain in these endeavors, for instance in Iran, but usually that was not the case. Although the two nations shared a strong strategic relationship, they often competed fiercely over the Middle East's financial spheres. Most historians agree that by 1956, with the outbreak and conclusion of the Suez Crisis, the United States had become the dominant power in the region. It was also after the Suez Crisis that US officials abandoned Nasser as a potential ally and began implementing a policy of containment towards him and Arab Nationalism. But the US government's actions from 1945 to 1954 laid the foundations to anti-US sentiments in Egypt. Washington's support of British troops in Egypt, its backing of Israel, its economic policies in the region, and its perceived support of Nasser moved groups like the Muslim Brotherhood to focus on the United States as the primary foreign threat in the Middle East. These developments demonstrate the significance of non-state actors to the history of the Middle East, as well as to the history of the United States' interactions with the region. State to state relations will certainly continue to be an important part of the discourse. But many of the effects of US actions during this time have yet to fully play themselves out, particularly with regard to non-state groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. As such, the study of these relationships have become, and most likely will remain, vital both to the history of the United States in the Middle East and to understanding the present day international situation. **GPR**

45 Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1990).

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