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The Role of Military Backgrounds in the Liberation Movements of Middle Eastern Leaders: A Case Study of the Free Officers Movement in Egypt

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Abstract. The military backgrounds allowed strategic discipline and command structures and elite networks to lead decolonization through the study of Egypt's Free Officers Movement. The research shows that military officers who initiated uprisings such as Gamal Abdel Nasser employed their battlefield experience to rapidly achieve revolutionary objectives, while creating enduring authoritarian systems of control. The research uses content analysis along with historical-comparative analysis of primary documents to present new insights about how military origins influenced both liberation movements and permanent government systems in the region. The research demonstrates that military leadership functioned as a fundamental power force which molded revolutionary movements and state development in post-colonial nations.

Keywords: Military Background, decolonization, coups, Egypt, historical analysis

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Роль профессиональной военной подготовки в освободительных движениях лидеров Ближнего Востока: пример Движения свободных офицеров в Египте

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Аннотация. Профессиональная военная подготовка в прошлом позволило сформировать стратегическую дисциплину, командные структуры и элитные сети, что позволило Движению свободных офицеров Египта возглавить процессы деколонизации. Показано, как военные офицеры, инициировавшие восстание, такие как Гамаль Абдель Насер, использовали свой боевой опыт для быстрого достижения революционных целей, создавая при этом устойчивые авторитарные системы контроля. Исследование использует контент-анализ в сочетании с историко-сравнительным анализом первичных документов для представления выводов о том, как военное прошлое повлияло как на освободительные движения, так и на сложившиеся системы правления в регионе. Автор приходит к выводу, что военное руководство функционировало как фундаментальная опора власти, которая формировала революционные движения и векторы государственного развития в постколониальных странах.

Ключевые слова: военный опыт, деколонизация, перевороты, Египет, сравнительный анализ

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Introduction

During the twentieth century the Middle East experienced numerous anti-colonial movements which were fueled by different actors who wanted to gain independence and sovereignty. Two major leadership approaches developed during this time including military-led movements alongside civil-led movements. The two approaches developed different strategic methods alongside their organizational approaches and their post-independence governance models. Evaluating the political foundations of contemporary Middle Eastern states requires analyzing leadership backgrounds particularly the military's influence on revolutionary movements. The research defines military-led movements through their origin and leadership by professional military officers and personnel who serve in formal armed institutions. These leaders utilized their military command experience together with hierarchical discipline and power control to execute quick and well-coordinated takeovers through coups and

direct colonial authority challenges. A significant example of military-led movement occurred when the Free Officers Movement consisting of army officers Gamal Abdel Nasser and others overthrew the monarchy and British rule in Egypt to create a new republican government in 1952. Civil-led movements describe liberation efforts that are initiated by non-military actors among which political parties, trade unions along with religious leaders, professionals, student movements and civil society coalitions exist. These actors placed their emphasis on winning the masses to their cause through persuasive tactics while building support from the grassroots population. The process of consolidation took longer for civil-led movements but they worked to build pathways to independence through negotiations and participation. The Neo Destour party under Habib Bourguiba led Tunisia's fight for independence and the Sudanese Professionals Association served as the main force behind Sudan's anti-colonial and post-colonial mass uprisings. The research shows that military leadership provided specific strategic benefits to achieve liberation objectives through centralized control and logistical capabilities along with organizational structure and access to military equipment and alliances. Post-independence authoritativeness became common in nations where military leaders maintained their power because their hierarchical military systems transferred into new political systems. Civil-led movements demonstrated stronger institutional and ideological foundations than their counterparts yet they struggled to preserve unity and fight against foreign interference and military takeover.

This research examines through historical-comparative analysis the military leadership role in shaping revolutionary outcomes by focusing primarily on the Free Officers Movement in Egypt. The analysis includes a comparison between selected civil-led liberation movements to study their unique institutional characteristics and strategic features. The study also provides essential understanding of how military versus civilian leadership origins affected state development, political stability and governance practices in the Middle East after colonial rule. This case study examines how the Free Officers led by Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser and others combined their professional military backgrounds with anti-colonial nationalism to launch the 23 July Revolution. We situate the Egyptian case in a broader historical-comparative framework. "In Egypt (1952) a group of military officers abolished the Egyptian monarchy, and installed an republic … pursued under a banner of Arab socialism" (Kårtveit & Jumbert, 2014). Their example inspired coups in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. We also apply civil–military relations theory and institutional analysis: classic modernization theorists saw young militaries as vanguards of change, whereas scholars like Huntington (1968) and Perlmutter (1969) warned of a "praetorian state" with military rulers (Kårtveit & Jumbert, 2014). Our neutral, scholarly account draws on recent research and original Arabic sources (speeches, communiqués).

Civil–Military Theory and Institutional Context

Political science provides frameworks for understanding coups and military regimes. Early modernization scholars argued that officer corps could act as a new middle class leading development (Kårtveit & Jumbert, 2014). Halpern, Shils, and

Vatikiotis, for example, saw Middle Eastern militaries as agents of social and economic progress (Kårtveit & Jumbert, 2014) By contrast, Huntington (1968) emphasized that a professional military must remain subordinate to civilian leaders; he nonetheless allowed that in weak new states "military forces would represent the most competent, enlightened branches of society, even while serving as guardians of conservative forces"(Kårtveit & Jumbert, 2014) This view implies that officers with broad authority might pursue modernization but also resist change. Critiques followed: Perlmutter coined "praetorian state" to describe Nasser's Egypt, where the military "dominates the executive" and officers supply most political leaders (Kårtveit & Jumbert, 2014). In a praetorian model, the armed forces institutionalize their power over civilian politics. Nordlinger (1977) and Finer (1962) elaborated related ideas, identifying conditions favoring coups. Finer argued that military interventions often stem from factors such as perceived national interest, officers' corporate self-interest, social/sectarian loyalties, or individual ambition (Kårtveit & Jumbert, 2014). For example, Finer shows that officers may justify a coup as patriotic even while protecting their own privileges. Coup opportunities arise when civilian governance is weak or crises erupt, enabling militaries to intervene (Kårtveit & Jumbert, 2014).

Another strand of theory considers civilian control and coup-proofing. Modern authoritarian regimes often seek to prevent exactly the kind of revolt that the Free Officers carried out. (Measures include parallel security forces, political co-optation of the military, etc.) But in 1950s Egypt, no effective coup-proofing existed: the monarchy had politicized and weakened the army, creating conditions ripe for an organized officer revolt. Indeed, prior to 1952 the Egyptian military was resentful after the defeat of 1948 and influenced by rival secret societies (Liberation Party, Communist Party, Muslim Brotherhood). The Free Officers drew on such discontent and mobilized their institutional networks within the army to seize power. In summary, institutional theory and civil–military literature suggest that the Free Officers' success reflected both their cohesive organization within the military and the failure of civilian governments to control the armed forces (Kårtveit & Jumbert, 2014).

Historical Background: Egypt, 1945–1952

Egypt under King Farouk faced growing unrest in the 1940s. The end of World War II revived nationalist demands against the British "protectorate" (which persisted de facto) and against the monarchy seen as corrupt. The 1948 Arab–Israeli War discredited the old guard: Egypt's army performed poorly against Israel, suffering heavy losses. Widespread outrage blamed the monarchy and its clique. Politically, the dominant Wafd Party fractured over cooperation with the king and British; leftist and Islamist groups increasingly mobilized the masses. In this volatile environment, mid-ranking officers formed the Free Officers Movement. Gamal Nasser and others had been radicalized by anti-British sentiment (Nasser earlier spent time in prison for nationalist activities) and by frustration with military mismanagement. Many participants in the Free Officers had led units in 1948 or traveled abroad on British contracts and felt betrayed by imperialist influence.

The Free Officers organized secretly from 1949–1952. They drew together in small cells across army garrisons, motivated by personal camaraderie and shared ideology. As one officer recalled, the movement began as "a political movement within the military," not the entire army (Gordon 1992). (Scholars similarly note it was "not the military, nor the army as such, but a political movement within the military," representing all opposition trends.) Their stated goals were nationalist and anti-corruption. For example, the first communiqué read after the coup emphasized purging the army and government: it proclaimed a need for "the purification of the army and an uprising against corruption" and declared that "Egypt has passed on a troubled period in its recent history from bribery, corruption, and instability of judgment" (presidency.eg). This language (translated from the Arabic scripts) directly tied the Free Officers' legitimacy to their military professionalism and moral mission. The message assured the public that the guilty corrupt officers and officials would be cleansed from power, while promising stability under the new regime.

The Free Officers Movement and 1952 Revolution

On the night of 22–23 July 1952, Free Officers launched a coordinated coup. King Farouk was effectively sidelined; the Revolution Command Council (RCC) took power. Military units occupied key points in Cairo and Alexandria, notably without mass civilian mobilization or foreign intervention. The operation was rapid and disciplined, reflecting the conspirators' military training. The Movement's leaders (Major General Muhammad Naguib as figurehead and Col. Nasser as organizer) then used military broadcasting to announce the Revolution. The initial communique written by Nasser's aide Col. Gamal Hamad, was read on air by officer Anwar Sadat (later president). Its promises (cited above) highlighted loyalty to nationalist ideals and unity of the armed forces.

In power, the Revolutionary regime initiated institutional reforms shaped by the officers' backgrounds. They abolished the monarchy and dissolved the old political parties; King Farouk was exiled. The RCC "installed a republic" ruled by military officers. The new state pursued Arab socialism: sweeping land reform redistributed large estates to peasants; industry and trade were placed under state control; and major projects (education, health care) were expanded. The RCC justified such policies with rhetoric of social justice. For example, Nasser later explained that true *'social justice'* meant transferring wealth into the hands of the people and building a strong public sector. (This principle — to eliminate feudalism and foreign control — became a stated goal.) The officers drew upon their institutional discipline to implement reforms quickly. For instance, the extensive land-reform laws of 1952–54 were enforced by military and bureaucratic apparatuses rather than elected bodies. The regime also created new security institutions: military courts tried the former regime's figures, and a vast police surveillance network (the Mukhabarat) was expanded, reflecting the officers' preoccupation with order and loyalty.

The fusion of military leadership and nationalist ideology produced a distinctive political style. The Revolution's slogans ("Salvation of the homeland!", "Power

to the army!") emphasized the officers' service to Egypt. In speeches, Nasser often stressed that the army must remain nonpartisan yet dutiful. He warned against external influence and corruption, themes resonant with military values of discipline and honor. For example, in later addresses Nasser framed his rule as continuing the armed struggle: he famously said he would "live and die struggling for you" language echoing his identity as a soldier-leader. The first RCC presidency under Naguib also underscored continuity: Naguib had been Egypt's "first soldier" in the 1920s, and his elevation reassured officers. Yet internal splits soon emerged over how far to restrict the military's role. The RCC began purging military rivals (e.g., 1954–55 crises with Naguib), reflecting the officers' concern for unity of command and corporate interest. Eventually Nasser sidelined moderates and assumed full power by 1956. In practice, the Free Officers' regime operated as a military institution: decisions were made in a small council, and policies were enforced by the chain of command.

> *"From Major General Muhammad Naguib to the Egyptian people: Egypt has passed on a troubled period of bribery, corruption, and unstable governance… We have cleansed ourselves of traitors and placed our trust in loyal officers."*(presidency.eg) (First RCC communiqué, July 1952)

This translated excerpt from the first communique (as recorded in the official museum record) illustrates how the Free Officers invoked their military duty to justify regime change. The quote emphasizes "purification of the army" (tathir al-jaysh) and rectitude, central themes of the revolutionary ideology. It is a primary source in Arabic (here rendered in English) that symbolizes the movement's self-image: the liberating army as Egypt's protector and redeemer (presidency.eg).

Military Backgrounds and Regime Characteristics

The Free Officers' professional training and organizational culture heavily shaped their governance. Their military backgrounds contributed to both strengths and pathologies: the officers prized order, hierarchy, and decisive action, enabling rapid implementation of policies (land reform, education expansion, etc.). As Perlmutter predicted, the new Egyptian state became "praetorian": power was wielded through military rank and a small coterie of officers (Kårtveit & Jumbert, 2014). Entry into political leadership required loyalty to the regime's version of nationalism and socialism.

Furthermore, the Free Officers' unity was partly a result of their shared experiences and group identity. Many had served together in the same units, studied in the same military academies, or belonged to the same secret cells. This institutional esprit de corps helped them overcome class and ideological differences: they included conservatives and leftists, rural and urban officers, Muslims and secularists. In one sense they were a cross-section of the officer class, yet their conspiracy excluded senior generals who were seen as compromised by the monarchy. The resulting power structure was tightly controlled by the RCC's senior members (Nasser, Amer, Sadat, etc.), who rewarded loyal subordinates. Over time, the military meant more than just men in uniform; it became the ruling party.

The regime's policies also reflected a military-influenced worldview. For example, foreign policy under Nasser stressed sovereignty and anti-imperialism, mirroring the officer caste's nationalist ethos. The military defeat at Suez in 1956 (followed by the pan-Arab mobilization) reinforced the idea that the army was the guardian of Egypt's honor. Internally, economic planning took on a quasi-military organization: five-year plans and centralized command-economy measures. The education of the population included paramilitary elements (youth brigades, civil defense training), aiming to instill collective discipline. In short, life in post-1952 Egypt was militarized in tone and structure, a legacy of the coup leaders' backgrounds.

Notably, the Free Officers regime did make concessions to popular nationalism. It mobilized public support through mass campaigns (e.g. literacy, health, Arab solidarity rallies). Yet it kept tight control of the political process. As Huntington's theory would suggest, they maintained a high degree of autonomy from society: the RCC did not rely on civil-military balancing or elections, but on the military chain of command and revolutionary councils. Scholars have characterized this arrangement as a strong "guardian" or even "ruler army" model, in which officers see their own corporate interests as intertwined with the nation's [Kårtveit, Jumbert 2014].

Analysis: Historical-Comparative and Content Analysis

The study combines historical-comparative research with process tracing alongside archival methods for identifying critical junctures and causal mechanisms according to [Mahoney, Thelen 2010]. This research shows how political leaders from military and civilian backgrounds affected the tactics used by liberation movements in the Middle East together with their end results and sustained governmental structures.

Case Selection and Rationale

- Primary Case: Egypt's Free Officers Movement (1952)
- Comparative Cases: Iraq (1958 Revolution), Syria (Ba'athist coups)
- Civilian Comparison: Tunisia's Neo Destour (1950s independence movement), early PLO organizing This selection includes military-led and civilian-led liberation models to discover common strategies alongside differing outcomes and institutional context effects. Process Tracing and Within-Case Analysis the Free Officers succeeded in carrying out a fast and successful coup because their secret organization combined with operational discipline and coercive power control [Abdel-Malek 1968, Gordon 1992].

The Free Officers implemented extensive reforms and consolidated power because their military background promoted hierarchical decision structures and centralized command structures [Cook 2007]. Civilian actors gained no meaningful influence following the revolution so military control remained dominant in the new state [Hinnebusch 2001].

Cross-Case Comparison Military-led coups in Iraq and Syria produced immediate political upheaval which led to the creation of authoritarian regimes that frequently functioned as single-party states [Marr 2012, Hinnebusch 2001]. The Ba'athist regime of Syria obtained its control through uniting military and party structures thus forming a highly centralized repressive state [Baram 1991, Perlmutter 1977]. The Iraqi officer corps maintained continuous instability because of internal divisions which fragmented its ranks [Baram 1991]. The Syrian Ba'athist regime managed to fuse military authority with party power to form a highly centralized and repressive state structure [Perlmutter 1977]. Mass-based movements led by civilians such as the Neo Destour in Tunisia and the early PLO focused on building coalitions and negotiating with various groups [Perkins 2004, Sayigh 1997]. The movements gained stronger political support from their citizens but faced higher risks of disintegration and external interference and frequently encountered difficulties in defending their power against military or authoritarian opponents [Anderson 1986].

Iraq and Syria: Military Replication and Divergence

The Egyptian model of military-led revolution inspired similar movements across the Arab world, most notably in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the 1958 coup led by General Abd al-Karim Qasim overthrew the Hashemite monarchy, establishing a republic dominated by military officers. Like Egypt, the new regime embarked on ambitious land reforms and nationalization policies, but internal divisions and factionalism within the officer corps led to chronic instability and repeated coups [Marr 2012]. Eventually, the Ba'ath Party, itself heavily militarized, consolidated power through a blend of military and ideological control [Baram 1991].

In Syria, a series of coups throughout the 1950s and 1960s culminated in the rise of the Ba'athist regime, which fused military authority with party organization. The Syrian military, drawing on sectarian and regional networks, established a highly centralized and repressive state apparatus [Hinnebusch 2001]. In both cases, the initial promise of social justice and anti-imperialism gave way to entrenched authoritarianism, with the military as the ultimate arbiter of political life [Perlmutter 1977].

Civilian-Led Movements: Tunisia and the Palestine Liberation Organization

In contrast, civilian-led movements such as Tunisia's Neo Destour party under Habib Bourguiba pursued a different path to independence. The Neo Destour built broad-based coalitions, engaged in protracted negotiations with the French, and emphasized mass mobilization and political inclusivity [Perkins 2004]. The process of decolonization was slower and less dramatic than in Egypt, but it resulted in a more participatory political order-at least initially. Over time, however, Bourguiba's regime also drifted toward authoritarianism, illustrating the structural challenges faced by post-colonial states [Anderson 1986].

The early Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) similarly prioritized popular legitimacy and coalition-building, seeking to represent the diverse interests

of Palestinians in exile and under occupation. The PLO's civilian leadership faced persistent challenges: internal fragmentation, external interference, and the constant threat of militarization. These difficulties limited its ability to consolidate power and achieve its objectives, highlighting the vulnerabilities of civilian-led movements in the face of regional and international pressures [Sayigh 1997].

Content Analysis

Military-led movements used primary documents to support their role in revolution and governance through messages about discipline, national unity and salvation according to [Abdel-Malek1968] and [Gordon 1992]. The civilian-led movements adopted negotiation approaches, popular sovereignty and broad social alliances which showed their distinct organizational priorities and legitimacy bases [Perkins 2004. Sayigh 1997].

Content Analysis: Revolutionary Rhetoric and Military Values

The primary sources including military manifestos and speeches from the Free Officers and their counterparts demonstrate how military values became fundamental to revolutionary discourse. The documents [Abdel-Malek 1968] are filled with language that emphasizes discipline and unity as well as sacrifice and national duty. The Free Officers presented their six-point program which included eliminating corruption and restoring national dignity and building a modern strong army to achieve national renewal [Gordon 1992]. Nasser and his colleagues delivered public speeches which portrayed the revolution as the solution to civilian elite failures while presenting the military takeover as essential for national salvation [Cook 2007]. Through this framing the military established its right to take power and simultaneously removed civilian actors from governing roles. The documents of civilian-led movements focused on negotiation, popular sovereignty and broad social alliances because these elements aligned with their organizational needs and legitimacy bases [Perkins 2004, Sayigh 1997].

Sequencing, Critical Junctures, and Policy Feedback

The examination reveals how specific critical periods including the Egyptian coup of 1952 and Iraqi revolution of 1958 determined institutional paths that shaped later political transformations [Mahoney, Thelen 2010]. The military seizures of power in Iraq and Syria resulted in unstable conditions which eventually developed into oppressive militarized governments [Marr 2012, Hinnebusch 2001]. Without strong military cores in Tunisia and the PLO these movements managed better political participation yet they became more susceptible to break-up and outside interference [Perkins 2004, Sayigh 1997]. Military leadership in Middle Eastern liberation movements continues to affect the region through complex historical developments. The military background of leaders in liberation movements enabled them to build organizational discipline which helped dismantle colonial regimes and establish new

states [Abdel-Malek 1968, Cook 2007]. The Egyptian military continued its control following multiple political disruptions including the 2011 uprising when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces reasserted control over state institutions [Cook 2012].

The Egyptian case fits a broader pattern in the Middle East during the mid-20th century. Across the region, newly independent states often saw military coups and military interference [Kårtveit, Jumbert 2014]. For instance, Iraq in 1958 was overthrown by young army officers (Qasim and Abdel-Salam Aref) who similarly invoked anti-monarchy and nationalist rhetoric. Libya's 1969 coup by Lt. Col. Muammar Qaddafi, and Syria's series of coups in the 1940s–70s, also had striking similarities: charismatic officers leading small conspiracies, ousting kings or weak regimes, and establishing regimes with pan-Arab or socialist programs. Like Egypt, these leaders mixed modernizing agendas with strict rule. However, differences appear too: the Egyptian officers built stronger state institutions (especially the military itself) and remained in power longer. Other countries' armies were often fragmented by faction (e.g., sectarian splits in Iraq's army after 1958) or by external patronage. In Turkey or Pakistan (outside MENA), generals also intervened, but they often justified coups with anti-corruption or nationalist pretexts rather than a clear ideological program.

Comparatively, one can observe that officer-led revolutions tend to institute strong executive presidencies and rule by decree. This matches Perlmutter's "ruler army" type, as seen in Egypt (Nasser), Libya (Qaddafi), and later Iraq (Saddam's Ba'athists, who were civilianized military men). In contrast, coups where officers acted more as "moderators" (In Nordlinger's terms) led to shorter military juntas that eventually yielded to civilian rule (e.g., Turkey's 1960 coup, which by the 1980s began reintroducing civilian politics). In Egypt, the armed forces retained direct influence for decades, even as they professionalized. Thus, the Egyptian experience underscores the theory that once officers seize power in weak institutional contexts, they often become the new ruling class [Kårtveit, Jumbert 2014].

Middle Eastern liberation movements have inherited a complex dual nature from their military leadership. The organizational discipline and strategic cohesion of military backgrounds proved essential for dismantling colonial regimes while establishing new states according to [Abdel-Malek 1968, Cook 2007].

Conclusion

This historical-comparative analysis shows that military backgrounds profoundly shaped the Free Officers' revolution and its aftermath. Their professional identity provided the organizational capacity and elite cohesion needed to overthrow the monarchy. It also infused the new state with values of discipline, hierarchy, and nationalist zeal. As a result, Egypt's post-1952 regime combined radical social reforms with strict military rule, a pattern noted by observers from Anouar Abdel-Malek to contemporary scholars. By grounding the narrative in reputable scholarship and primary Arabic sources (as translated above), this study avoids unverified accounts and highlights how ideological and institutional factors intertwined. In essence, the Free Officers case illustrates the civil-military dynamics of decolonizing states: the

same military organization that liberated a nation can also entrench its power. Future research might compare Egypt's case with other Arab revolutions (e.g. Yemen 1962, Algeria 1962) to further test these theoretical insights within Middle East studies.

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