

## *Chapter ten*

**DURING 1948, the crisis in the Middle East maintained a state of tension between the Zionists and the Arabs, who were now condemned to long years of exhausting struggle to achieve their aim—the liberation of Palestine! This portion of history does not lie within the scope of my book, and I shall content myself with noting certain psychological factors.**

**The Palestine question is quite simply the legacy of the widespread domination of the Middle East by Western powers which began at the end of the nineteenth century, and which has only just now come to an end. The creation of a State of Israel was a strategic move by the West, designed to weaken the Arab world.**

**Exhausted by two world wars, the Western powers realized that they were powerless to maintain their position by force, and evolved another means to attain their ends: namely, to place the industrial power and energy of Israel at the service of imperialism. It was**

**imperialism's last fling. History shows that great powers are at their most dangerous, from the victim's point of view, when they are on the point of disintegration. The Roman Empire took four hundred years to break up, and its last convulsions were as chaotic as those we now witnessed.**

**The British Empire reached its zenith with the cutting of the Suez Canal. It was to emerge victorious from the Second World War, only to start crumbling away. History is nothing but a constant humbling of arrogance.**

**The imperialist economy of the United States came to the assistance of European imperialism in Palestine, by investing an enormous capital sum in the country. American ambition had been roused by the war, and the State Department dreamed of forcing its authority on the Islamic world, from the Caucasus to the Indian Ocean. They set up the State of Israel in the hope of gaining a foothold in the Middle East, astride one of the world's**

trade routes, where they could keep an eye on the Russian colossus.

The discovery of the world's richest petroleum deposits on the Arabian peninsula exerted an irresistible attraction for the Americans. It might well be asked whether this understandable eagerness would not have been better served had they adopted a more conciliatory attitude to the adjacent Arab states, instead of antagonizing them by supporting Israel. Apparently Anglo-Saxon logic is very different from Arab logic.

In 1948, hostilities began in Palestine, and the Jewish terrorist organizations went into action. The Irgun Zwei Leumi, the Stern gang and the Haganah—the self-styled "Jewish Resistance Movement"—inaugurated a widespread reign of terror. One after another, Arab towns and villages were razed. The defenseless Arabs were massacred, or driven from their homes. The British mandate did not allow the inhabitants to take up arms, and the attacks by Jewish terrorists took place well before the mandate ended. The terrorists aimed, of course, at putting an end to both the mandate and the

**Arab people. In the circumstances we could not stand by with our arms folded.**

**There can be no one in Egypt who does not remember the feeling of horror aroused by these savage Zionist attacks, and how the young men talked of a Holy War to defend this hallowed part of the Muslim world. As the mandate had not yet expired, our intervention could not be an official one. But the government allowed the dispatch of volunteers. Among the most enthusiastic were the Muslim Brothers.**

**The leaders of the volunteer forces and representatives of our movement met at Hassan EL Banna's home. Among those present were Gamal Abdul Nasser, then at the Staff School, Kamal Eddin Hussein, an artillery captain, and many other officers who were attached to the Brotherhood. At the same time, our movement established contact with Hag Amin EL Hussein, the Grand Mufti of Palestine, and Abdul Rahman Azzam, the Secretary of the Arab League, in order to arrange the training and equipping of volunteers.**

**Early in May, 1948, Great Britain announced her decision to abandon her mandate in Palestine. On the fifteenth of the same month, this announcement was followed by a warning that the British government would not permit an international police force, or any United Nations organization, to be set up in Palestine before the withdrawal of all British troops in the area had been completed. This was tantamount to an invitation to both Jews and Arabs to settle their disputes by bloodshed. The departure of the British, and the absence of any official control, would make Palestine an open battlefield.**

**The terms of the mandate made it quite clear that the mandatory power was responsible for the maintenance of law and order until a proper authority was set up in the country. Instead of fulfilling her international obligations by referring the matter to the United Nations, England had provoked war. She was, of course, only too willing to set the Arabs on the Jews, believing that this would be to her advantage.**

**On May 15th, tension was near breaking point. Even before the mandate had expired, the Jews had already seized the larger towns—Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jaffa and Jerusalem—as well as the coastal plains and the hills of Galilee. To liberate Palestine, we had to drive the Jews from all these points.**

**When he gave the order for the Egyptian forces to cross the northern border, Nokrachy Pasha seemed to be under the impression that the whole affair would be a military picnic. It was far from that. On the same day, Nokrachy sent a note to the great powers, stating that Egypt had no territorial ambitions, and was intervening in Palestine merely to assist its people to restore law and order.**

**Unless he left the Army, no Egyptian soldier could take part in the struggle, as a state of war did not exist between Egypt and Israel. A number of officers chose this course, and the Chief-of-Staff, Ferik (Field Marshal) Osman EL Mahdi, granted their requests for release.**

The military authorities had divided Palestine into four zones, each under a separate command responsible to the Supreme Military Council at Damascus. Egypt was represented on this council by General Saleh Harb. The southern zone assigned to Egypt was under the command of Lewa (General) Soliman Abdul Mahed Sobol, a senior officer of whom we thought very highly. The troops levied by the mufti of Palestine and the Arab League were placed under his command. The Egyptian volunteers were commanded by General Ahmed Abdul Aziz, who was later killed in Palestine. The only authorized equipment was the rifle, and when the government finally agreed to allow the volunteers a few cannon, the news was received as a great triumph.

The main plan of the Arab armies was a pincer movement, with the Egyptian Army moving from the south, along the coastal plain towards Tel Aviv, and the Transjordan Arab Legion from the east. The Syrian and Lebanese detachments were to create diversions by attacking the villages on their frontiers which were occupied by Zionists. The Arab forces came within

seven kilometers of Tel Aviv. The first truce enabled the Israelis to bring up reinforcements and reorganize their forces. The cooperation of Jewish organizations throughout the world gave new heart to the Israelis, and they managed to stem the Arab advance. The designs of the imperialists, and—it may as well be admitted—treachery among the Arab forces, did the rest.

After the battle of Natroum, king Abdulla of Jordan abandoned his allies, and devoted his attention to sharing what remained of Palestine with the Israelis. This betrayal enabled the Zionists to occupy Galilee and the Negev, forcing the Egyptians into a narrow coastal strip between the Gaza and the northeast frontier.

The Egyptian forces entered the fight in great haste and confusion, without adequate equipment, and with almost no preparation. They were given no reliable information as to the enemy's strength, with the result that they were taken completely by surprise by the Jewish superiority in equipment and numbers. Our transport and medical services were poor, the food was

terrible, heavy arms almost nonexistent. The only thing not in short supply was defective equipment such as the hand grenades which exploded in the hands of the throwers. Surprise was followed by deep indignation at the criminal inadequacy of the preparations, and disgust with the men who had betrayed the Army into such a situation. The volunteers swore that on their return to Egypt, things would change. The Palestine war was also a cause of the Egyptian revolution.

All I need add is that operations were directed from Cairo, and that there were seven different Arab commands located in seven different places. Sometimes farce crept into the tragedy, as when the Engineer Corps was instructed to build a villa at Gaza for Farouk.

The Palestine affair rocked the whole Arab world. Jewish influence was strong enough to persuade President Truman to declare himself the champion of Jewish claims in Palestine, and to recognize the State of Israel five minutes after its birth.

Whenever I think back on this unhappy time, I am reminded of my own ill fortune. For, at a time when all my comrades were in action, I was in prison, and unable to join them. Fate has sent me many trials, but I, who have never been able to live or act in isolation, found this detention the most painful experience of my life. During the Palestinian campaign, Gamal Abdul Nasser, leading a counterattack of one hundred and fifty men, distinguished himself by relieving the Egyptian garrison at Falouga besieged by the Israelis.

After the Palestine campaign, Egypt moved rapidly towards revolution. The humiliation, frustration and anger aroused by the incompetence of the men who had led Egypt to defeat instead of victory, provoked a passionate desire to overthrow a regime which had once again demonstrated its complete impotence. The discontent of the masses was utilized by the Muslim Brotherhood, which grew enormously in power. It is possible that by 1948 Communism had infiltrated the Brotherhood, which had gathered around it a bitter and discontented mob. At all events, this politico-religious society was not dedicated to terrorism and violence.

**The Muslim Brothers had to their credit the assassination of Ahmed Maher, Amin Osman, and Selim Zaki, the Cairo Chief-of-Police, as well as several attempts against Nahas Pasha's life. Still the authorities hesitated to outlaw them—it was not an easy thing to do, as they had been the first to volunteer to fight in the Holy Land, and had been widely acclaimed for their patriotism and bravery. If the government had tried to deal severely with them, it would have been accused of persecuting patriots, and of being hand in glove with foreign powers. But the menace of the Brotherhood became so grave that public opinion began to turn against them, and Nokrachy Pasha felt that he could take action without being accused of lack of patriotism.**

**On December 25th, 1948, he ordered the dissolution of the Brotherhood. Three days later, he was assassinated by a terrorist disguised as a police officer. Public opinion was outraged by this murder, for Nokrachy was probably the most honorable politician of the old regime. The cry went up for rigorous suppression of the Brotherhood.**

Ibrahim Abdul Hadi, chief adviser to the King, succeeded Nokrachy as Prime minister, and took firm action against the terrorists. Frequent arrests broke their ranks, and after six months the country was able to breathe again. In March, 1949, Sheikh Hassan EL Banna, an upright and honorable man, who I believe disapproved of the excesses committed by the Brothers, was assassinated by the Secret Police. He was succeeded by Hassan EL Hodeiby, a singularly dull-witted and colorless ex-magistrate.

This was not to be the end of the Brotherhood's activities. The Revolutionary Council's first action after the *coup d'etat* was to pardon the Brotherhood, believing that its members had sufficiently expiated their crimes. This generosity was ill-rewarded, for the Brothers whom we had rehabilitated and given a fresh chance in life, turned against us savagely. The attempted assassination of President Nasser on October 28th, 1954, was to have been the signal for the massacre of the entire Revolutionary Council, and of one hundred and sixteen officers.

**Martial law, which had been proclaimed on May 15th, 1948, at the outbreak of hostilities, was still in force. Freedom of the individual was restricted, meetings prohibited. The Prime Minister, Abdul Hadi, had set up a dictatorship, under the pretext of suppressing terrorism. When he had dealt with the Muslim Brotherhood, he turned his attention to our movement. He issued a warrant for the arrest of Gamal Abdul Nasser, and for the search of his house.**

**Ferik Osman EL Mahdi, with a posse of military police, descended on Gamal's home. A thorough search revealed only a few bullets. As there were not sufficient grounds for his arrest, he was sent for by the Prime Minister, who accused him of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and of supervising their military training. This was, of course, untrue. Usually very much in control of his feelings, Gamal lost his temper with Abdul Hadi, and there ~vas a stormy interview. This seemed to impress the Prime 5Tinister, for Gamal was not further molested.**

**When the danger had passed, we set to work again. At the beginning of 1949, the Army lead just returned**

from Palestine, where our movement had lost a large number of its most valuable adherents. We decided to reorganize. Control was delegated to an Executive Committee composed of ten members. Gamal Abdul Nasser, Kamal Eddin Hussein, Abdul Hakim Amer, Hassan Ibrahim, Abdul Moneim Abdul Raouf, Salah Salem, Gamal Salem, Abdul Latif Boghdadi, Khaled Mohieddin and myself. This Committee was later to be the Revolutionary Council.

In 1950. Gamal was elected president of the Executive Committee. He was 29 years old, and held the rank of Major. He was re-elected in 1951, and remained president until the *coup d'etat*.

We called ourselves "Free Officers," and the name soon became familiar to the public, for it was with these words that we signed our pamphlets. Our organization became known as the Society of Free Officers.

We had improved the vertical structure of our organization, to prepare for direct action.

**A cell was composed of five members, each of whom formed a fresh cell whose members remained unknown to the other members of the parent cell, thereby limiting, for security purposes, the individual's knowledge of the whole organization. Each member was required to make monthly payments into a savings account, to build up an emergency fund.**

**The officer in charge of each section was now empowered to authorize expulsions and the admission of new members, reporting such cases to his superiors.**

**The first action of our newly organized Society was the issue of our celebrated manifesto, in which we pledged ourselves to put an end to foreign occupation, to form a strong, modern army, and to establish a democratic parliamentary system.**

**Such a program was unlikely to appeal to the British and their Egyptian puppets. The Secret Police strained every nerve to discover at least one link in the chain. They never found a weak link, although many traps were**

laid for us. Captain Moustapha Kamal Sedky, for example, suggested to Gamal the fusion of his group with ours. He believed that our aims were Utopian, and that it was better to try to gain the King's confidence and set him on the right path. This was manifestly absurd, for the root of the trouble lay with the King, and the compromise suggested would have meant a betrayal of our revolutionary ideals.

Gamal pretended to be taken aback by Sedky's proposal. He took great pains to persuade the Captain that he was not the leader of a secret society, and was therefore not interested in his proposition. Gamal then instructed one of our most trusted officers to join Sedky's deviationist group, to keep an eye on their movements, and keep our Committee informed.

By this means we learned that the group which had planned to convert the King had soon been converted by him, and that it had become his Iron Guard. Farouk very cleverly pretended to espouse their cause, corrupting them with gifts and favors—notably, orgiastic evenings with champagne, caviar and pretty women. The Sedky group yielded to such persuasive arguments, and became one of the chief instruments of the King's

intrigues. They committed many murders at the instigation of the Palace secret police.

One of these was the "execution" of an old politician, whose only crime was that he had protested against the current scandalous abuses. Our agent was one of the men appointed as executioners, and he immediately reported to us. We told him to continue acting his part, but to fire to miss. The unfortunate victim was riddled with bullets, but somehow managed to survive. He is still alive today!

The Society of Free Officers had to contend with two opponents: the Palace, and the Army High Command. Salah Salem obtained the confidence of Ferik Heydar Pasha, Chief of Staff of the Army, while I did the same with Dr. Youssef Rachad, the King's confidant and *eminence grise*. We got secret information from both of them.

Once Heydar thought he had trapped the Free Officers when a palace informer caught one of our men, Lieutenant Hassan Allam, writing a revolutionary pamphlet. He was sent before a board of enquiry, and

**we were forced to abandon him to his fate, so as to safeguard the future of the Society of Free Officers.**

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