

## Commentary VIII: Confronting Indiana Jones in the Middle East

When two or more people regard an archaeological object targeted for removal as “priceless,” negotiation is impossible and conflict is inevitable. This is what happened in Egypt during the two years after Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun. The key turning point here was World War I. Yes, the locals needed their own museum, and yes they needed their own Westernized native elites. But the Ottoman Empire had both of those in the 1870s and Schliemann still did pretty much as he pleased. What they also needed was a political calamity that delegitimized the Westerners’ high moral ground and forced them to craft a new national identity from scratch. And that was World War I in most parts of the world. With Egypt gaining its independence in 1922 under the influence of the Wafd party, any future archaeological proceeds would have to meet with the approval of local Westernized Egyptian officials—because they needed to construct a new national identity that was distinct from the old Ottoman imperial discourse (which really only catered to elites anyways) and spoke directly to the people, who now voted for their leaders. The discovery of Tut’s tomb was the perfect opportunity to begin to craft this new national identity. Note how this new identity needed to accomplish several things. First, it had to be derived from the sort of things that the Westerners themselves admired. This would ensure Western respect for your new state. Fortunately, Westernized Egyptian elites who were educated in Western-influenced institutions and often traveled abroad were already inclined to do this. Second, this new identity had to have an anti-Western spin. Think of secular pharaonism: though rooted in Western respect for the ancient pharaonic past, it also included an element of anti-Westernism (remember how Egyptian mummies chase foreigners out of Egypt, while Western-conceived mummies chase anyone?). This is why someone like Hasan al-Banna can loathe both the Westerners and Westernized Egyptians equally—to him, they are both cut from the same cloth, even if the Westernized Egyptians think otherwise.

Anyways, the end result is that the Westernized Egyptian elites in charge of the new nation now regard the objects in Tut’s tomb as priceless—and that spells trouble for the Westerners, since few forms of compensation can match a priceless valuation. What I always find interesting about the obstruction of Carter is just how petty the pretext for conflict actually was. I mean, come on: the famous inaugural obstruction of Western archaeologists at the most famous tomb of all time was premised on control of ... a guest list? It’s almost comical. Now, in his diary, as you should noted, Carter does think that some of the new guards posted to the tomb are there to make sure he doesn’t remove anything: “We now have three native inspectors... watching us, on behalf of the Egyptian Gov. I imagine to see if we do not take anything...” But this wasn’t the chief source of tension, and Carter doesn’t seem to have minded these guards all that much. The chief tension revolved over who controlled access to Tut’s tomb—that’s it! Of course, from the larger perspective, this is of paramount importance—he who controls access to Egypt’s most famous ancestor is he who controls Egypt’s political sovereignty. In this light, the secret agreement that Carnarvon signed with *The Times* was bound to go over poorly with the Egyptians—why should a foreign newspaper get first dibs on “our” ancestor’s tomb? But even this wasn’t the specific precipitating factor: Carter whines about tensions this agreement gave rise to, but he does not fly into a rage about them. He does, however, fly into a rage about the Egyptian government—usually in the guise of Pierre Lacau, who receives his paycheck from Cairo and is utterly loyal to the Egyptians—telling him who can and cannot visit the tomb while he is trying to do his work. There are many excerpts from Carter’s diary that illustrate this tension. Here are a few:

**Commentary VIII:  
Confronting Indiana Jones in the Middle East**

“One of these letters demanded a full list of my staff, and the other introduced new rules as to visits and visitors of the tomb.”

“In the case of the staff the Eg. Gov. claimed the right of approving or refusing any member they thought fit”

“I should create a wrong precedent if I accepted such a proposition as allowing the Gov. to accept or refuse entry of anyone of my staff.”

“Lacau immediately referred to past events and said that I was guilty of taking into the tomb a great number of visitors - I answered 'let us stick to facts' I haven't taken in one twentieth of the number the government had invited...”

My favorite petty tension, however, is when Carter complains about how he is supposed to give two hours' notice if he thinks he will need a lamp illuminated so he can work in the tomb! Ha! Tut's tomb obstructed over a 10-cent light bulb! So you can see that Hollywood will never make a movie out the most famous discovery of all time—because apart from the suitably dramatic scene of actual discovery, the rest of the story is all tedious digging in the sand and then bureaucratic bickering over light bulbs and guest lists. The bottom line is simple: Carter and Carnarvon were used to calling the shots, and they cannot stomach having the Egyptian government call the shots for them, without recourse to any form of compensation deemed valuable enough to shift the balance of negotiations back in their favor. In response, Carter declared that he would “decline absolutely to follow the instructions I have now received from you and I now propose to conduct the work in the tomb under the legal rights with which I am empowered under the terms of my original concession.” In other words, he wanted to go back to the way things were before Egypt got its independence and the new government in Cairo decided that Tut's tomb was the ultimate nationalist symbol for the new nation. But that ship had sailed, and with it so too did the era of unilateral Western excavations and expeditions.