

2016

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Recommended Citation

Jackson, Pria G., "Nasser of Egypt and the Egypt of Nasser" (2016). *Undergraduate Research Awards*. Paper 31.
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November 21, 2015

Nasser of Egypt and the Egypt of Nasser

In the Egyptian consciousness, there is a date that resonates in the nation's memory as the official catalyst that led to the rise of modern Egypt: July 23, 1952. On this day, a military group called the Free Officers rose up and seized control of Egypt from the monarchs and British colonizers in a near bloodless coup d'état. The face of the Free Officers at the time of the coup was General Muhammad Naguib (1901 – 1984), but the brain and heart of the movement was the then colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918 – 1970). During the first three years after the coup, Naguib played his role of Egyptian President even though, it was clear to the public – Egyptian and foreign – that Nasser was the one who truly held power. Nasser finally came into the presidential title to match his presidential power when Naguib was removed from office in 1954 after being implicated as a conspirator of a failed assassination plot on Nasser. Shortly after Nasser took office, he penned his historic work, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (1955). The book reads like a confessional of all that Nasser had done and all that he aspired to do in the name of making Egypt as strong as he knew it could be. He saw the Egyptian nation shaking away the yoke of western colonization and becoming a nation of strength and success. If Egypt could rise to become the ideal Arab nation, free of colonial influence, all other Arab nations would be moved to unite as well (as individual nations) and create a nationalistic pan-Arabism future. In all, Nasser did successfully sow the seeds for the illustrious Arab future he saw. He inspired Egyptians to work together to become a powerful nation and cultivated immense support for the pan-Arabism movement amongst the multi-national Arab public. Unfortunately,

there was to be no fruition of Nasser's goals because the nationalist ideology was simply too closely identified with Nasser's image, rather than inherent within the government or a potential successor. When Nasser died on September 28, 1970, the Egyptian revolution – and much of the pan-Arabism revolution – died with him.

Nasser's revolution, began long before his birth; beginning with the British colonization of Egypt in 1884. Egypt had not been under self-governance for centuries and when the British began colonization, it was the last straw on the camel's back. Egypt under British colonial rule was a poor time. Government officials put in place by the British crown put up facades of Egyptian grandeur to the international audience. They tried to "Europeanize" the architecture, engineering, and culture of Egypt while repressing the culture of the Egyptians.¹ Underneath this glaze of prosperity, poverty levels among the Egyptian population were abysmally high. There were housing shortages, the nation's infrastructure was not being maintained, and the fertile land along Nile River was owned by a few rich men who, therefore wielded immense power in the nation. The Egyptian public was extremely discontented with British government policy. When the Free Officers rose to overthrow the monarchy in 1952, they rose with support from a huge portion of Egyptians. In fact, the Free Officers came into power with the support of the Wafd party and the Muslim Brotherhood, two radically different Egyptian political groups who found unity in the fight for decolonization. Egyptians longed for a revolution, and according to Nasser, they got three.

In *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, Nasser writes that every nation goes through two internal revolutions – one political and one social – in order to become the ideal, modern version

¹ Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak* (United States: Yale University Press, 2010), 35-40

of itself. While every nation has or will go through two internal revolutions, Nasser believes that the situation Egypt found itself in during 1952 was particularly unique

*Every nation on earth undergoes two revolutions... Other nations have preceded us along the path of human progress and passed through the two revolutions but not simultaneously. In the case of our nation, it is going through the two revolutions together and at the same time, a great experiment putting us to the test.*²

Egypt was being forced to endure two internal revolutions at once because of colonial powers stunting the natural growth of the nation.³ This same type of colonization that so negatively affected Egypt, also affected the Middle Eastern region as a whole. The British or French crown colonized the entire region, repressing the natural flourish of a collective Middle Eastern culture. As a result, the revolutionary government of Egypt found itself having to manage two Egyptian revolutions while, at the same time, navigating the effects of a third, multi-national social revolution that affected all Arabs. Each revolution was interconnected in many ways and the decisions of leaders throughout the world during key events wound up affecting all three revolutions. Nasser balanced the three revolutions with copious amounts of propaganda, political cunning, and high-levels of charisma.

A political revolution, Nasser wrote, was the process of recovering the “right of self-government from an imposed despot, or an aggressive army occupying its territory without its consent.”⁴ The act of organizing and pulling off the coup of 1952 was a successful and relatively easy first step towards the political revolution Egypt needed to see. The next steps, were significantly more difficult to execute as it required the engagement of the Egyptian people

² Gamal Abdel Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (United States: Smith, Keynes & Marshall, 1959), 36

³ Saleh Omar, “Arab Nationalism: A Retrospective Evaluation” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1992): p. 23-37

⁴ Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 36

within their government. Even before the British occupation, Egypt had been under the rule of various foreign governments for nearly a century resulting in Egyptians who had become subdued and politically subservient to foreign rule.⁵ In order for the political revolution in Egypt – as the social revolution throughout the Arab nations – to succeed and be sustained, the psychology of an entire nation had to be shifted to remake Egypt into a catalyst that would usher in a new era.⁶

The agrarian reforms were Nasser's first major step to initiate this nationwide psychological reprogramming.⁷ The reform redistributed the fertile land along the Nile among peasant class causing a complete overhaul of the old Egyptian economy. To give an Egyptian man land was to give him the ability to support himself and his nation which, therefore, give him dignity.⁸ Nasser delivered this dignity directly to the Egyptians by handing out land deeds in person.⁹ Not only did the agrarian reform initiate a distinct shift in the Egyptian psychology and bolstered public support of the revolution, but it also sharply reduced the political power that big landowners had previously wielded in government. As an added bonus, the land left over from after the redistribution gave the new government a source of rather convenient reliable income as they could sell and rent out the excess land.¹⁰

The new government also received income and public support by nationalizing the Suez Canal. An economic resource long exploited by the French and British, the Suez Canal was a critical in shortening trade routes between Europe and the Far East. By nationalizing the canal, Nasser essentially reclaimed the Egyptian economy from the hands of the British and French. It

⁵ Clive Christie, ed., *Race and Nation: A Reader*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), p. 206

⁶ Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 61-62

⁷ Peter Mansfield, "Nasser and Nasserism" *International Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1973): p. 671-672

⁸ Omar, "Arab Nationalism: A Retrospective Evaluation," 28-30

⁹ Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 74

¹⁰ Mansfield, "Nasser and Nasserism", 671

marked the end of British occupation in Egypt almost as significantly as the July revolution itself. In the 1996 biopic film, *Nasser 56*, this importance of the nationalization of the canal is a central theme.

The film opens on 18 June 1956 with Nasser taking down the Union Jack as British troops prepare to evacuate the Suez Canal zone, ending their seventy-four-year occupation. Primarily a political adventure, the film then traces the breakdown in negotiations over the Western project to finance the Aswan High Dam; Nasser's personal decision to nationalize the Suez Canal Company¹¹

In the film, Nasser's role in the Egyptian struggle for Suez is inflated to reflect the commonly held public opinion of Nasser himself. The idea that it was Nasser who truly made the reclamation of the Suez Canal Company happen – that it was not only his personal decision to nationalize the canal, but that he was also powerful enough to execute the act on behalf of the prosperity of the Egyptian people – was within the realm of cinematic believability for the Egyptian public because, at the time, he was constantly being portrayed as the ultimate figurehead for a prosperous Egyptian future.

These critical moves executed so early in the revolution made the government a friend to the masses. Nasser's tactical and constant propaganda resulted in the Egyptian public absolutely adoring him.¹² His powerful speeches broadcast throughout the nation and became the inspiration for many. As a political figure, Nasser enjoyed a remarkable amount of popularity for an even more remarkable amount of time. Nasser's popularity was at its lowest after failing to win the six day Arab-Israeli war, but even then, when Nasser offered his resignation from

¹¹ Joel Gordon, "Film, Fame, and Public Memory: Egyptian Biopics from Mustafa Kamil to Nasser 56." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Vol. 31, No. 1 (1999): p 73

¹² Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak*, 58

presidency, millions of Egyptians took to the streets in protest.¹³ The public viewed him as a savior of the nation and refused to authorize his resignation for the loss. Losing the war did cost Nasser his hero status, but it took little toll on the amount of loyalty he received from the Egyptian people.

Despite the many supporters Nasser had, there were many enemies as well that Nasser considered a natural consequence of any revolutionary thought. “I realize we have aroused the wrath of old politicians; but was it possible not to do so and yet behold our country a victim to their passions, their corruption, and their struggle for the spoils of office?”¹⁴ The enemies Nasser made were not just local Egyptians who resented the end of the old regime, but other national leaders as well. Because of Egypt’s role in the third Arab-wide social revolution, Nasser’s image and propaganda, which held within it the fundamental philosophies of his Egyptian revolution, was spread across the Arab world. Rulers in other Arab countries that operated under more traditional rule became wary of this spread of ideas that was soon to become known as Nasserism.¹⁵ Nasserism found its ways into other countries and began inciting other groups to act against their respective governments. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria that operated under those types of traditional governments that most likely would have shunned Egypt entirely during this time if it had not been for two reasons.

The first reason was that the reinvigorated Egypt was becoming an economic powerhouse, a crucial political player just as Nasser had wished.¹⁶ Having ties with the Egyptian economy was superbly lucrative, and there was plenty of opportunity to do so as Nasser often refused to deal with Western powers. The second reason these countries did not isolate Egypt

¹³ Anees Jilani, “Nasser, Saddam and Pan-Arabism” *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1991): p 75

¹⁴ Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 53

¹⁵ Mansfield, “Nasser and Nasserism,” 678

¹⁶ Omar, “Arab Nationalism: A Retrospective Evaluation,” 28-30

was because they all were in agreement that they needed to work together to solve one issue that was seen as an affront to the entire Arab world: the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Throughout Nasser's reign – in fact throughout his entire life – the tangled Israeli-Palestine struggle would be a pan-Arabism nationalist theme that he would be forced to address as a political leader. The repercussions of the British forcing the Palestinians from their land by way of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 was of constant international focus. Quite fortunately, Nasser's own passionate views of the struggle reflected that of many other Arabs.

I remember that the first elements of Arab consciousness began to filter into my mind as a student in secondary schools, wherefrom I went out with my fellow schoolboys on strike on December 2nd of every year as a protest against the Balfour Declaration whereby England gave the Jews a national home usurped unjustly from its legal owners.¹⁷

The Israeli nation had, in the eyes of Nasser and a large portion of Arabs, poached Palestinian land with the support of the already stigmatized Western powers. As the excerpt suggests, protests of the Balfour Declaration were frequent across almost all Arab nations and violence occurred often between the two groups. Nasser believed, like most Arabs, that the Israelites had to be removed from Palestine as a way to remove the residual stain of Western influence in Middle East. But Nasser also saw the Palestinian-Israeli struggle as a direct by-product of a social revolution that had been in play across all Arab nations since before his birth.

Every social revolution required discord according to Nasser "...in which the classes of society would struggle against each other until justice for all countrymen has been gained and conditions have become stable."¹⁸ He saw the continuous discord between Arabs as a result of social upheaval rather than a result of the few differences between each nation. While it was all

¹⁷ Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 62

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36

necessary for social progression, this had prevented the Middle East from thriving, allowing Western influence to remain.¹⁹ Nasser must have believed the acceptance of the pan-Arabism movement was an indicator that the Arab revolution was, at the time, nearing its end.

By this point, the Arab Nation had become “unmistakably defined as embracing all the Arabic-speaking people in Asia and Africa”²⁰ and because of the massive successes Egypt had seen thanks to the cunning of Nasser, it was commonly believed that his Egypt would be the leader of this union, should it ever exist.²¹ Nasser, of course, had confidence that Egypt could be the leader of the Arab world too²² and realized that a success in Palestine could be the catalyst that would unite the nations.²³ In order to pave the road to the success of the pan-Arabism social revolution – and also pave the road for the closely intertwined Egyptian revolutions – Nasser planned to groom Egypt to be the example pan-Arabism nation. He released propaganda that glorified pan-Arabism and made a point to repeatedly include pan-Arabism ideology in the Egyptian constitution of 1923.

*We, the people of Egypt, realizing that we form an organic part of a greater Arab unity, and aware of the responsibilities and obligations towards the common Arab struggle for the glory and prestige of the Arab Nation...*²⁴

Nasser absorbed the pan-Arabism revolution to become an intrinsic part of his public identity just as he had done with the other two revolutions. Nasser was just a man, but he became the Egyptian and Arab revolutions personified. This was to be the ultimate cause of the failure of all three revolutions.

¹⁹ Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 71

²⁰ Anwar G Chejne, “Egyptian Attitudes toward Pan-Arabism,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 11 No. 3 (1957): p. 258

²¹ Chejne, “Egyptian Attitudes toward Pan-Arabism,” 264

²² Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 57-78

²³ *Ibid.* 62-71

²⁴ Chejne, “Egyptian Attitudes toward Pan-Arabism,” 266

Nasser's re-mortalization after the loss of six day war in June 1967 was a devastating blow to the people's faith in all revolutions.²⁵ Not only was Nasser defeated, but he was defeated at the hands of Israel, an indirect branch of the western civilization he stood so firmly against. This was a devastating blow to the Egyptian people who had derived strength from their leader. "President Sadat, years later, commented that Nasser did not die on 28 September 1970 but on 5 June 1967 (the day the war broke out)"²⁶ If it had been only Nasser the hero who died, then the revolutions might have been salvaged, but three years later, Nasser, the man, died as well. Gamal Abdel Nasser died at the age of 52 on September 28, 1970 of a heart attack. This unceremonious death was honored nationally by millions of Egyptians taking to the streets in mourning, but there was no outlet for their grief. There was no single enemy to rally against. It was Nasser's own flesh and blood that had ultimately betrayed him.

Without Nasser's direct influence, there was no longer any force driving the Egyptian and Arab movements. Within three years Egypt reverted to dependency under the leadership of President Anwar Sadat, who had no issues supporting western powers. Infrastructure fell back into disrepair, the economy fell into a decline, and the revolutions ended.

²⁵ Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 61-66

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 64

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