



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Nasser's Legacy on the 50th Anniversary of the 1967 War

by Dr. Michael Sharnoff

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 472, May 21, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser once shaped and guided Arab public opinion. Cairo was the capital of the Middle East, and Nasser's secular pan-Arab ideology challenged the West, Israel, and other Arab states. Nasser's Egypt showed how a developing country with a large population could persevere despite tremendous economic, political, and military challenges. As the 50th anniversary of the 1967 War approaches, Egyptians and Arabs of that generation might reflect with nostalgia on a bygone era when Cairo dominated the Middle East.

Cairo was the political capital of the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was the most charismatic ruler in the region, and he tried to become the undisputed leader of the Arab world. In his 1954 memoir, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, Nasser revealed his vision of Egypt as a unique geostrategic influence in the African, Arab, and Islamic world. He believed Egypt was destined to play a pivotal role in Arab affairs.

Initially, Nasser was concerned primarily with consolidating power and expelling the British from Egypt. After stabilizing his rule by suppressing communists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, he championed pan-Arabism as a strategic tactic to unify the Arab world under his command. Pan-Arabism was a secular ideology that advocated Arab unity, freedom from foreign control, and the liberation of Palestine – a euphemism for a Palestinian state built on Israel's ruins.

Nasser's political star rose after he nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 and subsequently survived a direct assault from the UK, France, and Israel. He

graced international venues as a hero of the Nonaligned Movement, rubbing shoulders with established anti-imperialist leaders like Tito of Yugoslavia, Nehru of India, Nkrumah of Ghana, and Sukarno of Indonesia. No major world leader could dispute Nasser's growing popularity and legitimacy.

Through his spokesperson Muhammad Heikal, editor of Egypt's state-run newspaper *al-Ahram*, Nasser adopted a brilliant strategic communications campaign to shape and influence public opinion. Cairo became the Arab capital of influence. Nasser's policies were cautiously observed by Israel, neighboring Arab states, and the Western powers, as well as the Soviet Union. In the era of Cold War rivalry, Nasser adroitly played off the two rival superpowers to maximize his country's economic, political, and military stature while offering minimal concessions.

Nasser's Egypt demonstrated how a developing country with a large population could persevere in the face of tremendous economic, political, and military challenges. Despite the expectations of Western and Soviet intelligence officials, the regime did not collapse. Egypt lost the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip after the 1967 War, but Nasser managed to turn that stunning military defeat into a political victory. He employed skillful diplomacy at the UN to appease Moscow and the West in order to rebuild Egypt's military and sustain his own unique leadership status in the Arab world.

Nasser remained defiant. Egypt endured, despite losing territory and suffering from a depressed economy due to a collapse in tourism and the closure of the Suez Canal. After the war, Egypt lost \$30 million a month to lost Canal revenues and an additional \$1.5 million in tourism each week. (The Canal remained closed until 1975, when Israel withdrew its troops from the east bank as part of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy and the second Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement).

After Nasser's untimely death in 1970, other Arab leaders like Qaddafi, Assad, and Saddam tried to replicate his successes – but none had the charisma or mandate to shape public opinion and extract concessions from Washington and Moscow. Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, long suppressed under Nasser, gradually resurfaced, capitalizing on the political and ideological vacuum.

Those movements argued that Muslims had become weak because Nasser, Qaddafi, Saddam, and Assad were not true believers. They had failed to implement sharia (Islamic law), aligned with *kuffar* (infidel) Western or Russian powers, and abandoned the pursuit of the liberation of Palestine. They had become apostates, unfit to rule, and should be replaced with Islamic governance.

The solution to secular pan-Arabism, in their view, was Islam. They promoted Islam as the only ideology with the capacity to satisfy Muslim aspirations. Secularism, nationalism, liberalism, socialism, and communism were foreign concepts incompatible with Muslims.

The Muslim Brotherhood expanded its influence through social services and redoubled its devotion to the eventual construction of an Islamic state governed by sharia. Extremist Islamist movements like al-Qaeda and ISIS continue to seek to achieve these goals by engaging in terrorism against the West and committing genocide against non-conforming Muslims and ethnic and religious minorities.

The removal of Saddam and subsequent violence and instability of the 2003 Iraq War, the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world, and the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) accelerated the expansion of these non-state Islamist actors, as well as Iran. In this “new” Middle East, these players compete for influence while Egyptian and Arab leaders grapple with instability, insurgency, civil war, and failed states.

Egypt’s declining influence shows no sign of reversing itself in the near future. In 2017, there is no Arab leader remotely resembling Nasser in terms of prestige. As the 50th anniversary of the 1967 War approaches, many Egyptians from that generation might reflect with nostalgia on a bygone era when Egypt dominated Middle Eastern affairs.

The ultimate lesson of the 1967 War is the total shift of power and influence from Egypt to non-state Islamist actors and Iran. Egypt can barely contend with the scores of domestic challenges it faces, let alone project influence beyond its borders. Cairo struggles to contain an Islamist insurgency in Sinai, protect its Christian population, sustain its economy, and provide meaningful twenty-first century skills and jobs to its youth to prevent brain drain and radicalization.

Dr. Michael Sharnoff is Director of Regional Studies at the Daniel Morgan Graduate School of National Security. He is the author of Nasser’s Peace: Egypt’s Response to the 1967 War with Israel (2017).