

Examining the Reconstruction of Egyptian Morale During the Aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War: An Arab Perspective

by

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Introduction

If you say the Arabic words *Al-Naksah* (The Catastrophe) to an Egyptian, you get an immediate reaction that is unmistakable. For Palestinians, the same term referred to as *Al-Nakbah*, means the partition of Palestine in 1948. However to Egyptians it means only one date June 5, 1967, the Six-Day War. Most historians are aware of the specifics of the military campaign and the events leading to Israel's surprise attack and destruction of the armed forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects on Egyptian morale and the particular ways in which the nation was able to recover its morale from a sociologic and military perspective. Few Americans have taken time to examine the writings of Egyptian scholars about the 1967 War. Some do not care to study losing side. Also there is the cumbersome task of reading and understanding Arabic. The author will utilize Arabic sources in discussing this topic. A basic understanding of Egyptian history and the Arab-Israeli Wars is necessary for readers to have a full appreciation of the period of time covered in Egyptian history (1967-1973). As the author does not intend to focus on military tactics, this will allow a more thorough examination of socio-political events. The Egyptian armed forces will only be explored as a subsection of society.

This paper will explore the emotions of the military, Egypt's youth, social questioning of the defeat, the effect the war had on popular culture, the reform of the military and finally the effects on the country's political culture. Through this examination, readers will gain an appreciation of the experiences of many of those in power today, as well as an understanding of a key ally of the United States. In addition, it should answer part of the question regarding the disdain that Egyptians have for U.S. policy in the Middle East.

The Students

One positive effect of the war on society was the opening of free expression among Egyptian males between fifteen and twenty-five years of age. From 1954 onward, the government encouraged the organization of student groups. One group dominated the political life of students in Egypt, the Arab Socialist Student's Union. Prior to June 1967, it wielded a commanding presence in the political expression of students at universities in Egypt. The defeat would see an erosion of this organization as many of its members secretly joined the Islamic Brotherhood or the Association of Arab Nationalists. Discussions on campuses of Cairo University as well as other institutions centered on the reasons of the defeat, the external factors of the Israeli victory, and an inward focus on whether or not socialism was appropriate for Egypt.¹ Another issue was

the corruption of the regime of President Gamal Abd-al-Nasser. It would not take long for such radical questioning of authority to permeate the young generation in high school as well as the armed forces whose draftees were of the same generation.²

Initially, youth demonstrations the week after the war took on a nationalistic tone. It was accompanied by a refusal to accept defeat and unwavering support for Nasser with chants of *Qaid, Nizam* and *Watan* (Leader, Government, and Nation). What helped Nasser in these early days after the 1967 defeat was his ability to gage Egypt's masses and unexpectedly take full responsibility for the debacle, even submitting his resignation as president to the people directly. This was unprecedented in Middle East history. The Egyptian response was one of support and an expectation that he would restructure the government and rid it of corrupt figures like Field Marshal *Abd-al-Hakim Amer* (Defense Minister) and *Salaah Nasr* (Interior Minister). However, this support would only last Nasser less than a year with violent riots erupting on February 1968.³

Anatomy February Riots: The Result

On the 21st of February the Egyptian Military Tribunal passed out verdicts against senior officers of the air force accused of dereliction. The sentence was viewed by many to be extraordinarily light, with only fines and reductions of rank given. The public wanted dismissals, jail sentences. Some of the more radical members of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) and *Al-Ikhwan* (The Muslim Brotherhood) called for executions. Rioting began among the defense factory workers in Hilwan on the outskirts of Cairo. A chain reaction resulted in sympathetic strikes and protests among most factory workers in Cairo. These protests were violent and resulted in clashes with police. By mere coincidence, the 21st of February is also Egypt's Day of the Student, a custom that began in 1946. This volatile mix was the proverbial genie out of the bottle. Students joined the clashes and demonstrated with workers and other members of civilian society. It was the first time student activism was felt on the streets of Cairo. Riots continued until the 27th of February, and students from Alexandria joined their comrades in Cairo.⁴ A description of the actual rioting is not the object of this paper. However, the revolutionary effect it has had on Egyptian democracy is the main point of this discussion.

What is unique about these protests is the impact they had on Nasser's government. Engineering students of Cairo University played a pivotal role. On the 24th of February, these particular students were vocal protestors in front of the *Majlis al-Ummah* (National Assembly) and were permitted to select a few among them to submit a petition of grievances to Anwar Sadat. At the time, Sadat was the leader of the Majlis. During the exchange of demands, some students expressed fear of government retribution. However Sadat gave these students his word that no harm should come to those petitioning the assembly.⁵ The late Sadat also gave each petitioner his personal telephone number. They were instructed to call him or pass his number onto any internal security forces that may harass them. Amazingly, no harm came to these engineering students. This was at a time when Nasser's repression of opposition was brutal, particularly after a failed assassination attempt in 1954 by the Muslim Brotherhood. The students listed eight demands. The petition mostly centered on the democratization of Egyptian society and accountability for those who were to blame for the 1967 disaster. Student slogans included; "end the rule of internal security"; "down with the lies of Heikal" referring to the editor of the

government controlled *Al-Ahram* newspaper Muhammad Hassanien Heikal, and finally, "it is not about pilots but about freedom!"⁶

The Results of Student Activism

The protests were so compelling, that Nasser agreed to meet with student union leaders and answer questions that were sent to him. The questions centered on the state of the nation and political situation after the defeat. What was supposed to be a half hour meeting lasted over three hours. Nasser's security forces did not interfere heavily with the protests because there were cloaked in Arab nationalism and a genuine concern for the country. Nasser also ordered a retrial of those air defense and air force officers who were given light sentences and began a process of civilianizing his circle of ministers.⁷ This is key because since 1954, control of Egypt rested with military officers who were involved in the 1952 coup. Today many members of this student activist generation are middle-aged and have gone onto become an active part of Egypt's social, political, military, education and business communities. These events can be analogous to the Vietnam protests of the 1960s. Egyptians in academic circles are quick to point out that this was a positive aspect of the 1967 War and part of the nation's healing process. There would be several other student riots before the 1973 Yom-Kippur War, one was in 1968 and another in 1971 and 1972. However none was as effective as the February riots.

Artists and Writers

Many analysts seem to ignore the expressive power of the arts in society. By simply reviewing short stories, books of fiction, plays and films you notice a pattern in which fantasy, reality and the aspirations of a people collide. Egyptian movies, music and entertainment is known throughout the Middle East to the point that the Egyptian dialect is understood throughout the Arab world. But even in this realm, one can find evidence of a nation trying to recover from the shock of defeat.

Playwrights

Egyptian plays from 1967 to 1973 centered on three typical groupings.⁸ One basically involved your typical soap-opera themes dealing with sexual scandal, wealth and power. The second seemed more telling with an emphasis on depressive themes, black comedies, and a psychological treatment of guilt usually shrouded in a personal story. The final group tried desperately to deal with themes involving the 1967 defeat and its reasons. This group would be the target of severe censorship. They had to cloud their topics in language not directly referring to Nasser, his government, the army or the Israelis. Among these playwrights was Mikhail Ruman. He spent many days in prison yet continued to argue that the only way for Egypt to be victorious was to deal head on with the realities of defeat. He wrote the famous play *Al-Zujaj* (The Glass) in August 1967. The play was only shown during political protests. It featured the story of a young man wanting to rid the neighborhood of corruption, nepotism, and the status quo. He is married and has a son, who basically leaves the house never to return. The plot seems simplistic but when narrated in Arabic, it is clear that the young man Hamdi is the activist movement; the neighborhood and its characters represent Egypt and Nasser's regime. The son is the lost land of Sinai. Playwrights like Youssef Idris and Mahmoud Diab wrote over two dozen

of these plays. These plays were highly popular among the Egyptian poor, as they did not own a television at the time.

Writers and Actors

Many Egyptian writers also tried to make sense of the defeat and to help the public deal with the emotions of guilt and depression. The most famous of these authors was Naguib Mahfouz, the Arab world's only Nobel Laureate for Literature. He writes a series of short stories that deal with a man who was imprisoned for 25 years and was released to see an Egypt he did not recognize. It basically calls for a liberal democracy to be the salvation of all Egyptians. Amazingly, his short books were officially published in 1973 after the death of Nasser. Many artists in particular actors fled to Beirut and began a flourishing production of movies and other material that were not anti-government but primarily designed to help Egyptians make sense of the crushing defeat of the war. Many of these artists returned to Cairo during Sadat's programs known as *Al-Ifitah* (The Opening of Society and the Economy). It was only in 1971, did the Sadat administration begin seeing the importance of artistic expression on the rehabilitation of Egyptian morale. The government began authorizing a series of documentaries such as "We Shall Not Die Twice" and "Soldiers in the Trenches." These movies that explore heroic aspects of the 1967 war and firmly lay out the government's position of not negotiating until an honorable battle can be fought and the Sinai returned.⁹

The Armed Forces

Like the students and artists, the armed forces are a major part of Egyptian society. Not only were they the architects of the Egyptian revolution of 1952, but also they were the guarantors of government stability. In addition, every Egyptian male with few exceptions had to serve in the Egyptian armed forces for a minimum of two years. This offers a common experience for Egyptian males. Their morale like that of the general population required reconstruction. This segment of society was under tremendous pressure as their reconstruction directly related to the morale of the overall population.

Prior to 1967, there were no constitutional clauses that delineated a national security policy. The President, Defense Minister, Foreign Minister, Army Chief of Staff and command structure had no written document highlighting their responsibilities for national defense and their relationship to one another during times of crisis. From a purely armed forces perspective, Command and Control was in the hands of only one individual, Field Marshal Abd-al-Hakeem Amer.¹⁰ Despite the fact that there was a Command and General Staff structure created by British advisors prior to the 1952 revolution, Field Marshal Amer was too inexperienced in military affairs and did not utilize this body. He was more concerned with maintaining an image with Nasser and was single-handedly engrossed in the Yemen War.¹¹ When the revolution occurred, he was only a major with little combat experience and no command experience. In addition to this military bureaucratic chaos, there's the fact that over 70,000 Egyptian troops were committed in a guerilla war in Yemen (1962-1967). It is important to note that among the main reasons Syria left the union with Egypt (1958-1961) was the complete inability to organize both armed forces in a fair and equitable way. Egypt had always maintained the more senior position in this union to the discontent of Damascus. Despite Amer's failures, Nasser looked the other way. He had

always considered the Field Marshal a favorite among the Free Officers Movement and possible successor. Nasser looked upon his criticism as jealousy and refused to open his eyes to the state of Egypt's armed forces.¹²

Internal Threats

The entire Command and General Staff as well as Defense Minister Amer gave their resignations on the 9th of June. That same day, Nasser would effectively resign and pass his office to the Speaker of Parliament Zakariah Moih-al-Deen. Nasser gave a speech in which he took full responsibility for the defeat. Pro-Nasser rioting followed, that would allow Nasser to regain his position in less than 24 hours. There have been arguments that this had been staged. However, the sudden end to the war and the fact that it was unprecedented for an Arab despot to take responsibility for defeat negate these theories.¹³ When Field Marshal Amer realized that Nasser would take the full blame he sought ways to regain his post and began a process of polarizing the armed forces and drawing Egypt into a potential civil war, this would end with Amer's suicide and the arrest of senior level officers that supported him in September 1967. This represented the most dangerous internal challenge to the Egyptian government since the 1952 revolution.¹⁴ What is significant is the incident further cemented the need for a reorganized armed forces with its responsibilities delineated in law and the constitution.

Addressing the Void Between Military and Civil Authority

The reforms were implemented immediately after the Field Marshal Amer affair. First, a civilian would occupy the post of Defense Minister, he would be responsible for preparing the nation's war effort, financing and procurement. The Army Chief of Staff would take on the responsibility of organizing, training and preparing the specific armed forces units for war. A Minister for War was created to be the chief military advisor to the president and was given the title General in Chief of all armed forces. His job primarily was to advise the president and commander-in-chief as well as the Majlis (legislature) on military threats and the state of preparedness of the armed forces.¹⁵ Egyptians borrowed heavily from the Soviet style of organization. What is unique to Egyptian military organization of the time is the appointment of the Vice-President of the Republic and Assistant Army Chief of Staff to jointly deal with day-to-day issues where civil decisions of military matters needed to be made. It is important to realize that the current Egyptian military structure has changed slightly. One of the goals of Exercise Bright Star was to move away from former Soviet style doctrine and embrace western technology and war fighting techniques. For example, today's post of Defense Minister has reverted back to an army officer.

In effect, the taking of the Sinai by Israeli forces caused a complete reorganization of Egypt's military. Planning centered on assigning numbers of troops to brigade, corps and other units with the liberation of the Sinai as an objective and basis for reorganization. The recovery of the morale of the armed forces was quicker than that of the general population because mistakes that led to the 1967 War were openly discussed in an effort toward reform. The Egyptians in the general population were not allowed to express these feelings like those within the military officer corps.

Law 4 of 1968

The Ministry of Defense and Combined Egyptian General Staff conducted a comprehensive study looking at all aspects of the failures that resulted in the Six-Day War. Their results were presented to Nasser and portions were made into a law known simply as 4/68. The laws codified the responsibilities of the President, General-in-Chief, the Majlis Committee for National Defense, Ministry of War (Training, Recruitment and Execution) and the Ministry of Defense (procurement, funding and allocation). It was the first time in modern Egyptian history that such a document on national defense was drafted. Previous to this, such high level military planning was conducted by British senior military officials in London and stationed in the Suez, and prior to 1952 the British Expeditionary Forces Headquarters in Cairo. Some of the major points of this legislation:

- (1) Viewing warfare from an economic perspective, mobilizing industry, agriculture, and transportation as part of the general mobilization plan;
- (2) The division of Egypt into military districts with an independent command and control structure, combat arms and logistical element;
- (3) Focusing on plans for rapid mobilization and the training of forces to handle warfare in the Sinai.¹⁶

The analysis of this key legislation points to a radical change within the Egyptian armed forces and is worth studying. Among the items debated in the formulation of this law are the gradual withdrawal of Egyptian forces in Yemen and the entanglement of Egypt in foreign adventures in the future. Luckily for Nasser, the republican forces in that country had gained the upper hand in dealing with the royalist forces supported by the Saudis.

Capitalizing on Strengths

The Egyptian ability to mass human forces is a strength that the armed forces always possessed. The problem lies in reshaping this strength to deal with the massive leaps in military technology. Military planners began to see the advantages of recruiting and drafting high school and college level students capable of dealing with and comprehending complex weapons systems. The 1967 War led to a radical shift in recruitment with an emphasis on not bringing in illiterate or semi-illiterate soldiers.¹⁷

Testing the Success of Military Reform

Nasser realized early on that it was important for Egypt to engage Israel as soon as possible to counter public criticism and mounting pressure from the public to act. Israeli forces coveted control over both sides of the Suez Canal and began limited strikes in and around Port Fuad and Port Said in July 1967. The attack was repelled by Egyptian Special Forces known as Saaqa with heavy losses on both sides. To Egyptians, this battle became known as *Ras al-Eesh*, after the area in which the fiercest fighting occurred about 15 kilometers from Port Fuad. Although it was a limited engagement would be a valuable tool in boosting national pride. Nasser ordered limited air strikes on Israeli positions in the Sinai that were used by the Egyptian leader to rally his people. The most competent attack was the sinking of the Israeli destroyer Eilat on the 21st of

October 1967. This would be the first time in naval history any warship sank another with a missile.¹⁸ Egypt declared the 21st day of October 1967 to be its Navy Day, a tradition still observed today. From March 1969 to August 1970, Egyptians would engage in the War of Attrition with the concept of a protracted strategy to wear down Israeli forces in the Sinai. This war was designed to politically engage the Egyptian public rather than to score a major military defeat on the Israelis. It also allowed the Egyptian General Command and Staff to begin the development and practice of tactics and reconnaissance used in the 1973 Ramadan or Yom-Kippur War.

Conclusion

Many Egyptian authors have written about various aspects of the reconstruction of their society after the 1967 War. This paper only highlights the following three aspects of society: the students, artists, and armed forces. Translating and analyzing these works will enable American policymakers to understand a key ally in the region and also dispel the myths that Arab forces are incapable of democratic reform, long-range planning, and military competence. This is essential in not succumbing to mirror imaging or stereotypes that will cause a serious miscalculation of intentions or fighting abilities.

Since the early nineties, an explosion of books in Arabic have been written about the Arab-Israeli Wars. Many memoirs of senior officers are now in the shelves of booksellers in Cairo, and other Egyptian cities. They started in 1990 with Muhammad Hassanien Heikal multi-volume study about the 1967 and 1973 Wars. More books followed including the much-anticipated autobiography of Field Marshal Muhammad Abd-al-Ghany El-Gammassy in 1998. Gammasy was the Egyptian Chief of Staff during the 1973 War and rose to become Egyptian Defense Minister. What is significant is that these writings are beginning to appear now, over 25 to 30 years after the incident. This illustrates a renewed pride and interest among Egyptians in their tactics, strategy, and relations in the region. There is no doubt the 1967 War left indelible mark on the Egyptian psyche. Many scholars are beginning to study internally the reasons behind the failures and not totally rely on the excuse that Israel was helped by the United States. Egyptian senior officers and political scientists have started to move beyond such simplistic explanations and view their defeat in the context of the region, the cold war and the decisions made by Nasser. It is up to American analysts to capitalize on the books written in Arabic to understand military tactics from an Arab perspective and gain a clearer insight into allies and adversaries in the region. Some books are propaganda but within these pages we see what is important for a government to narrate as history to its people. Comparing Arab with Israeli accounts will create an even clearer account of the Arab-Israeli conflict and become a source for many scholarly treatises.

Editor's Note: LT Aboul-Enein is studying at the Joint Military Intelligence College in Washington DC. He serves as a part-time Arabic linguist at the Defense Intelligence Agency and wishes to thank his instructor Mr. Thomas Dowling of the U.S. State Department for giving him the guidance and inspiration to write this essay.

Notes

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10. Muhammad H. Heikal *Al-Infijaar Alf wa Tisoomeeah was Sabaa wa Siteen* (The Explosion, 1967) (Cairo: Al-Ahram Publishers) 1990.
11. Heikal, 57-74.
12. Heikal, 83-86.
13. Heikal, 92-97
14. Heikal. 103-119.
15. Taha Al-Majdoob, *Min al-Naksaa illa al-Instinzaaf* (From the Catastrophe to the War of Attrition) (Cairo: Dar al-Hillal Publishers), 1988, 8-26.
16. Al-Majdoob, 64-73
17. Heikal, 223-229
18. Heikal, 248-261

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