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Part I: The Liberation of Egypt

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The transition from the rugged coast of the Levant across a choppy winter sea to the shores of Egypt is abrupt and the change of scene total. By plane it is scarcely more than an hour after leaving Beirut before the first sighting is made of the long sandbanks which divide the waves of the Mediterranean from the still waters of the countless inland lagoons into which a weary, muddy Nile has emptied itself at the end of its long odyssey from tropical Africa.

The thin, gray sliver stretching out on the left is Suez, still the alimentary canal of an oil-dependent world. Directly below is a checkerboard landscape of green fertility and mud-brown villages, floating like lotus flowers in a giant pond whose triangular shape can just be made out--the Delta--the perennial breadbasket of Egypt, as flat as the stomachs of the spare fellahin who overinhabit and overwork it. To the right, on the far horizon, an almost imperceptible yellow haze frames the other end of the picture, completing the trio of forces of man and nature which have shaped modern Egypt: the river with its rich siltlands, the canal which brought the world to Egypt's doorstep, and everywhere else the desert.

The startling change in physical geography is paralleled by the human contrasts within these distinct regions of the Arab world. Each landscape

in its way reflects its society. The rough peaks of the coastal ranges from Latakia to Tyre, the shadowed valleys between them, and the semiarid plateaus and steppeland lying behind, have formed a distinct type of Arab, recognizable as such within an enormous diversity whether he be Levantine or Bedouin, mountain villager or desert tribesman, 'Alawite, Kurd, Circassian, Muslim, Christian, Sunni, Shi'a, Druze, or whatever. Recognizable as such for an attitude of vigorous, brash self-confidence, dour pride and excessive sensitivity, and an often anarchistic ungovernability--the cultural Arab of the Fertile Crescent.

How much harder to define is the lumpy clay from which the great bulk of the Egyptians of the villages and fields have been molded. Like their land they are without relief or sharp feature, their costume and accent are more drab, and their skins tend to blend inconspicuously with the earth about them. Placid as the waters which nourish them, patient to an extreme beyond which it is unwise to push them, and plodding through the unending toil of extracting a living from the minute area in which they have flourished for five thousand years. But this is only one aspect of them. They mirror another side in the easy majesty of their movement, the dignity in which their poverty is clothed, by no matter what combination of outlandish rags, and in the soft anonymity with which time has mantled impartially the monuments of antiquity and their builders, and now bestows on the farmers and countrypeople who are their descendants.

Whether looking at Egypt through the glass of ancient history or of modern economics, it is constantly this mass that one is conscious of rather than the person. Egyptian crowds, even in Cairo, seem so much less made up of fiercely egoistic human units than those in Damascus, Beirut, or Amman. And it is this sense of endless indivisibility which links present-day Egypt, for all its Arabness and its Arabism (and the two are not at all the same), to its own past with a slender thread of timeless integrity, just as it somewhat separates it from the rest of the Arab countries and puts it in a perspective perhaps more meaningful in our time, in which the struggles of collective man are acquiring an ever-growing ascendance over those of the individual.

If Egypt is considered from this optic, several important consequences arise. The first and most serious of these is the conflict which is set up between Egypt as a continuous culture area with a largely homogeneous population and a strong sense of nationhood, and Egypt as the heartland of the United Arab Republic, as the moral and intellectual center of the Arab community, and the spiritual fount of Islam. Another consequence is the severity and the uniqueness of the economic and social problems which beset modern Egypt, and which have driven it into political patterns which may or may not be suitable for export, voluntary or involuntary, to other Arab states or to various nations of Asia and Africa who have in the recent past admired many of the attitudes of the Egyptian Government on questions of vital national interest. These grave economic conditions, in their turn, present the world with the

there was an interlocking, equal guilt borne by all of them.

Following upon these goals came the desire to establish, through the constituting of a strong, respectable, and self-proud state, a framework for greater unity among the various countries of the Arab community from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf. Before any kind of unity could be envisaged, however, independence must come. And since several of the Arab countries now free were then still under foreign control (Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia), and others were considered by the revolutionary government to be indirectly dominated by a foreign power manipulating the same kind of rotten ruling classes who had just been eased out of power in Egypt, the new regime was fatally brought into conflict with Britain and France on the one hand as it incited the Arab peoples of their colonies and protectorates to rebellion, and with those Arab governments (Iraq and Jordan in particular) associated with them.

The final, overriding goal, viewed in the early years of the revolution (but not necessarily now) as realizable only after all the other preconditions had been met, was the establishment of a new social order for Egypt and, by extension and attraction, all the Arabs. This meant the elimination of feudalism and the archaic social legacy of the Ottoman Empire, the development of industry and agriculture, the spread of mass education--in short, to Arab leaders, the revival of the Arab world and a restoration to it of the glories of its past after what was felt as a long period of humiliation and debasement at the hands of the West.

These objectives were not new in terms of Egyptian-Arab nationalism, for they had been outlined by Egyptian writers and patriots for at least half a century; nor were they confined to Egypt. Ever since World War I Arab thought throughout the Middle East had been coalescing around these principles which were given further stimulus by the disastrous results of the Palestine War. The series of military coups in Syria beginning in 1949, the assassination of King Abdullah of Jordan in 1951, indeed, every major political event in the Middle East since World War II had as its logical underpinning this same general area of aspirations. The difference lay in the fact that the colonels in Syria, and the embittered killer of the Hashimite monarch in Jerusalem were not men who could seize the imagination of Arabdom. They were not the right men in the right country, but the Free Officers who formed the Revolutionary Command Council were, in large measure because what happened in Syria and Jordan was peripheral, but what happened in Egypt was central to the development of Arab nationalism. With the advent to power of the Nasserite group a page in Arab history was turned, and it is not only Egypt but all of the Arab world which can never be the same again as it was before 1952. As one Middle Eastern scholar put it:

> I believe that in the perspective of history the Egyptian revolution will be to the Middle East what the French revolution was

the country who gave him reason to worry: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communists. Apart from minor crackdowns on Communist supporters in 1953 and 1954, he had taken little action against them before relations with the Eastern bloc began to improve; they were not considered dangerous enough at the time, and later they became almost fashionable. Communists never really flourished as such, however, and there was an ambivalence in their attitudes and acts even at the height of the honeymoon with the Soviet Union. It was not, in any case, until much later that serious measures were taken against them.

The case of the Muslim Brotherhood was different. It was a well-organized and powerful association having contacts throughout the army and it had been on the closest terms with the Free Officers in the first days of the revolution. The reduction of this Right-wing extremist group was forced upon Nasser when it began to sabotage by terrorism the negotiations he was conducting with the British regarding evacuation. To the Government there was considerable evidence at this time of collusion between the Brotherhood and the Communists in a plot to overthrow Nasser. During the summer of 1954 Nasser drove hard against the Brotherhood and in October he was given an opportunity to destroy its organization when an attempt was made on his life in Alexandria. Several thousand members were rounded up, and in the trials that followed, the leaders were given little mercy. The execution of two members of the Supreme Guidance Council, along with others who had participated directly in the assassination plot (one of the few occasions when the bloodless revolution violated its principles), consolidated Nasser's power by removing his Right-wing opponents, just as the arrests of the Communists, on a smaller scale, had eliminated those on the Left.

The period following this internal consolidation, from mid-1954 until the attack on Suez in October 1956, was that in which Nasser emerged as a leading actor on the world political stage. This was perhaps less the result of his ambition than it was due to the counterpressures being exerted against the new regime throughout the Middle East by external forces, in the name of the famous vacuum theory. This theme was popularized in the West at the time of the British withdrawal, and according to it the absence of stable power in the area, by which was meant Western military power, condemned the Middle East to the danger and even probability of anarchy and Communist penetration. Disguised in a variety of shapes it existed through the Richards Mission, the Eisenhower Doctrine, and the landings in Lebanon in 1958, but it seems mercifully to have been laid at rest in the last year. Soviet policy in the Middle East had, it is true, been patiently alert for some time to any and all possibilities of infiltration, but there was very little that the USSR needed to do which was not being done for it by the West. As the Arabs were quick to point out, the powers seeking most desperately to fill the alleged vacuum were precisely those who had created the idea of it in the first place, i.e., the "imperialist West" or Israel, which was in Arab eyes the "creature of imperialism."

importance accorded to Egypt in the mid-'50's, mostly as a result of his policies.

When Nasser returned home from Bandung an international statesman in Egyptian and Arab eyes, the stage was set for the third, and most dramatic, reaction to Western policy in the Middle East. As relations between his regime and the West became constantly cooler, misunderstandings multiplied; any slight semiofficial slip or press indiscretion became magnified into a source of umbrage. Long-standing Egyptian requests for arms, principally from the United States, to counterbalance Israeli strength as revealed in 1955 were hedged on. Nasser was no longer considered politically trustworthy, primarily in London and Paris, but increasingly so in Washington. And Cairo's unremitting suspicions that the Western powers planned somehow eventually to arrange the overthrowal of the regime were heightened by the tractations over weapons. It was bad enough that Nasser had been made a charter member of the neutralist club at a time when neutralism was considered immoral by the State Department, but when he began to warm up toward the Soviet bloc, commercially and culturally, in mid-1955, his stock went further downhill. After Khan Yunis, however, Egyptian pressure for arms increased sharply; to Nasser it was a matter of great urgency and, at the same time, a test of American attitudes toward him. But the American offers were associated with conditions unacceptable to him, such as the acceptance of military missions, and continuing efforts were made to entice Nasser back into a regional defense agreement, something which he manifestly could not accept in view of the virulence of his own radio attacks on Iraq for having committed this sin. Hints were thrown out that materiel would be had at any cost, but they were alternately ignored or thought to be blackmail which could not be effectively implemented.

It was in these circumstances that the purchase of arms from Czechoslovakia in return for cotton was announced. Relations with the Occident sagged to a new low, American officials put on a tawdry show of running after Nasser and asking him to reconsider. But success was breeding success and in his own world he was even more of a popular hero. Enthusiasm in Egypt hit a new high when the news was released and his popularity in other Arab countries, lukewarm in 1954 but on the upgrade since Bandung, began to overshadow even that of local political figures. Accordingly, consideration had to be given once more in London and Washington to the necessity of trying once again to treat with Nasser, always from a worsened bargaining position, or, more exactly, of buying him off. A real understanding of Nasserism as a fundamental force within Arab nationalism was never really attempted in those years, apart from the scattered cries of a few, unheeded voices in the State Department who were powerless to act. (In looking back at this period, one must try to remember the utterly unreal Western appraisal not only of the Middle East as such, regarded as a private Western sphere of influence, guarded by the Sixth Fleet, and guaranteed by the tripartite declaration on existing frontiers and the embargo on arms shipments, but of the

on their own terms. Thus another round of misunderstandings got under way.

Negotiations were difficult in the climate of early 1956. Britain was irritated with Nasser for many reasons of policy: the telling attacks on the Baghdad Pact; the support given to anti-British nationalism in Jordan which resulted in the eviction of Glubb Pasha from command of the Arab Legion; the excesses of Cairo Radio in its broadcasts to colonial Black Africa; and the Egyptian policy of stirring up the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms and the Aden area. All of these infuriated the British at a time when they considered they were faithfully fulfilling all obligations to withdraw from Egypt as agreed. In America, Congressional opinion and Zionist pressures, particularly in an election year, made it unusually hard to give in to the least Egyptian arrogance. Fighting continued on the Israeli-Egyptian border and Nasser's position as the now acknowledged leader of the Arab world against Israel forced him to take a strong stand in the skirmishes. His creation of the fedayin commando groups using Soviet-supplied equipment was widely publicized as a Communist-Nasserite plot against Israel and the West. Finally, when in May the Egyptian Government did what the British had done six years before and recognized Communist China because of the greatly expanded trade with Peking, almost the last chance of coming to an arrangement with the United States was dispelled.

At this point positions became somewhat reversed. Rather alarmed by the standoffishness of the West, President Nasser (he had assumed the title after elections early in 1956) decided almost a little too precipitately, to accept the Western offer. But the Occident had become meanwhile almost certain the Russian offer was no longer firm. It now looked to them as if Nasser were beyond redemption and, especially in American politics, standing up for it began to be equated with political suicide. Both parties advanced into a tactical retreat. The Egyptian Ambassador in the United States announced prematurely on his way back to Washington that Egypt would accept the assistance, whereupon the United States, almost as if it had waited for an opportunity to administer a public rebuff, informed him that it was no longer interested. The ostensible reasons were that the Egyptian economy was incapable of supporting the burden of its own share of the project and that, furthermore, no agreement on water rights had been reached with other Nile states. When the American offer lapsed, those of Britain and the World Bank were automatically invalidated.

This was July 1956, and it was the beginning of the apogee of President Nasser's career in the role of principal non-Communist (although many were not sure of that) enemy of the West anywhere in the world. In fact, in the space of one short week his personality was blown up to that of an evil, despotic world dictator, mad with rage. He had just returned from a three-man conference with Nehru and Tito at Brioni, and a few days later, in a bitter anti-Western speech in which an altogether Arab emotional disappointment overflowed, he answered the American slap by announcing in melodramatic terms

did that he was hopelessly inferior, is shown by the sober correctness with which he behaved after his first outburst in Alexandria, and by the absence of any inflammatory statements on his part. With the remarkable political acumen which has seen him through all his crises, he counted upon the abating of passions through dilatory conversations while he continued to run the Canal efficiently and smoothly. And if, finally, it was written that an attack would come, he relied upon international pressure and outside support to save him. The first tactic nearly succeeded, the second did.

The military aspects of the Suez invasion are so well known that they do not properly belong in this account which is attempting instead to define the background of Egyptian political objectives show how they were arrived at, and further indicate how their realization is now changing the personality of the leaders of the revolution and the country itself. All that needs be remembered is that, although support for canal nationalization was hesitant in many countries in August 1956 (even some Arab states were unsure at the beginning), as threats to Nasser increased support for him grew, and by the time the Anglo-French-Israeli forces had been brought to a halt by a combination of United Nations disapproval, United States separation from its allies, and Russian rocket threats to Britain and France, almost the entire world, and certainly every country from Morocco to Japan, was solid in opposition to the invasion.

The Egyptian regime had been militarily routed and discredited, with much of the materiel just purchased destroyed before it was paid for. The Canal on which Nasser had counted for revenue was blocked and useless to world shipping. Humiliated in the eyes of the world, but not in those of his own people or those of the Arabs who were uninformed or unwilling to hear of the military debacle, much of what Nasser had presumably stood for seemed to be in ashes at that moment. But, in reality, all was far from lost. It was the West which suffered much more. The strain on those who had believed in British fair play was equaled by the drain on sterling and the stresses within the Commonwealth. It was Europe which had to ration fuel that winter, but the economic losses to the subsistence economy on which most Egyptians lived was negligible. Suez marked the end of the privileged Anglo-French position in the Middle East after a hundred years and the bitterness has still not disappeared.

As he looked about him at the end of 1956, Nasser found that he had been supported to the hilt by his people. There had been no rising against him as confidently expected in London and Paris and he now had the Arab states firmly behind him. Under the cover of the United Nations Emergency Force, which spread a thin line of protection between him and his adversaries, he began, Phoenix-like, like Egypt itself, to rise from the ashes. His losses had been tactical and they could be replaced; but his victory had been strategic and he and his closest associates felt that their moral position was unassailable. The first objective of the revolution had been fully accomplished in seeming defeat, and to many it must have seemed a true miracle. Good progress had