EGYPT UNDER NASSER

Gamal Abdul Nasser gave coherent expression to an anti-colonial sentiment that had been bubbling among Egyptian nationalists since early in the twentieth century. Born in 1919 into a lower-middle-class family, Nasser had become intensely nationalist in the 1930s and set off on a military career, one of the few paths of advancement open to a young man of modest means. He came to power in 1952 as part of the Young Officer Movement, impatient with the compromises of the king and the leading politicians. Nasser's first priority was ending subordination to Britain, which meant most urgently the removal of British bases and privileges and acquire greater control over the Suez Canal. He survived an Anglo-French-Israeli invasion in 1956, a triumph that emboldened him to try more radical measures at home and to exploit the influence that he had gained as a hero throughout the Arab world. His domestic policy moved toward large-scale industrialization and government planning of the economy. His foreign policy championed non-aligned and pan-Arab movements. The latter involvement led to a short-lived union between Egypt and Syria and a united front in opposition to Israel.

Nasser provides a fascinating exemplar of two prominent features of the third world in this period. He freely mixed various ideological currents to create an amalgam uniquely his own. And far from having some master plan, he improvised — but with a general tendency to implement ever-more ambitious programs. In both these respects — the complexity of his outlook and the rising tempo of his programs — Nasser was fully in step with other third-world leaders in this era.

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"We Almost Lost Our Balance, But We Have Not Fallen"

In 1952 Nasser produced a work that was half autobiographical and half programmatic. It offers an account of how he and other officers who overthrew the monarchy on July 23 of that year came to a decision to seize power and how they planned to use their new-won power. The relative moderation of the document reflects the uncertainties and optimism that marked the early Nasser years.

How does Nasser account in personal and national terms for the revolution? What are the major goals or objectives of the revolution and what major threats or obstacles seem to stand in the way of revolutionary success? How does Nasser see developments in Egypt in broader regional and global context?

Gamal Abdul Nasser
"The Philosophy of the Revolution"
1952

I can now say that we are going through two revolutions, not one.

All people on earth go through two revolutions: a political revolution to recover their right to self-government from the hands of a despot who has

Source: M. Hunt, The World Transformed

imposed himself upon them, or to free themselves from the domination of alien armed forces which have installed themselves in the land against their will; and a social revolution — a class conflict that ultimately ends in realising social justice for all the inhabitants of the country. . . .

There was no alternative to carrying out the two revolutions together. In fact, the day we proceeded towards political revolution and dethroned [King] Farouk, we took a similar step towards social revolution and limited the ownership of land.

. . . One revolution demanded that we should stand united and forget the past. And another revolution demanded that we should restore the lost dignity of moral values, and not forget the past. . . .

At a certain phase of my life, enthusiasm represented "positive action." But I later came to realise that it is not enough to be alone in that enthusiasm. To be effective, it should be communicated to others. I was then a student at the Nahda School, leading many demonstrations in those days, shouting myself hoarse along with other fellow-students, in our importunate demand for complete independence. But it was to no avail; our cries died into faint echoes that moved no mountains and blasted no rocks.

Then I came to believe that "positive action" rested on the solidarity and agreement of all the leaders of the nation. So our rebellious roaring ranks went round visiting these leaders, in their own homes, calling on them in the name of Egypt's youth to agree on concerted action. They did actually agree, but it was on the calamitous decision which destroyed my conviction — they agreed to conclude the 1936 Treaty.[1]

Infuriated by World War II, and the tragic events which immediately preceded that conflagration, not only our youth but the whole generation began to tend towards violence. I confess — and may the Public Prosecutor not take me severely to task for making such a confession — that political assassination struck my then inflamed mind as the inevitable positive action to be taken, if we were to save the future of the homeland. . . .

. . . [I]t would have been grossly unjust to have had a reign of terror imposed on us, taking into account the historical circumstances through which our people had lived — circumstances which have left their mark on our souls and have made of us what we now are. . . .

If the Crusades marked the first dawnings of the Renaissance in Europe, they heralded the beginning of the ages of darkness in our country. Our people alone bore almost the whole brunt of those battles, which left them completely impoverished and utterly helpless. And at the very time when they were weakened by the shattering blows of battle, it was their lot to suffer further humiliation and misery under the heels of Circassian tyrants and the Mongol despots. . . .

[1]The treaty assured Britain military bases in Egypt and maintained British control in Sudan despite promises from London to turn that territory over to Egypt.

Gamal Abdul-Nasser, *Nasser Speaks: Basic Documents*, trans. E.S. Farag (London: The Morssett Press, 1972), 26, 28, 30, 34–38, 44–46, 50, 52–57.

My soul is torn with grief when I think . . . of that period in our history when a despotic feudalism was formed, a feudalism directed towards bleeding the people and depriving them of their last vestige of power and dignity. We shall have to fight hard and long before we can rid ourselves completely of the influences of that system.

What still remains latent in our souls from those influences has on many occasions provided me with an explanation of some aspects of our political life. Sometimes, for instance, it seems to me that many adopt towards the revolution the attitude of mere onlookers, interested simply in the result of a fight between two sides with whom they are in no way connected. . . .

It would also seem to me that we depend too much on our imagination to realise our aims and solve our problems, so that more often than not our indulgence in such flights of imagination hinders us from exerting real efforts to attain our aims. Many have still not discarded that attitude, nor have they realised that the country is theirs, and they are the masters. . . .

. . . Our contacts with Europe and the whole world began anew [over the course of the nineteenth century]. So also began our modern awakening, but it began with a new crisis. . . .

We were subjected to currents of ideas for which we were not ready at that stage of our development. Our minds were still under the influence of the 13th century when they were invaded by some aspects of the 19th and then the 20th century. We were trying to catch up with the advancing human caravan from which we had dropped out five centuries or more before. The race was terrible but decisive.

Undoubtedly this state of affairs is responsible for the lack of strong united public opinion in our country. The difference between one individual and another is vast; that between one generation and another is vaster still.

There was a time when I complained that the people did not know what they were about, that they never agreed on the same road. I later realised, however, that I was asking for the impossible, that I had not taken the society in which we live into account. Actually we live in a society which is not yet crystallised. It is still in a state of ferment and agitation. It is not yet stabilised in its gradual development compared with other people who have passed before on the same road.

I believe, without intending to flatter my countrymen by expressing such a belief, that our people have wrought a veritable miracle. Any other society subjected to the same severe trials as ours might possibly have succumbed. It would have been swept away by the powerful currents that overtook us. We have, however, weathered the tempest. It is true we almost lost our balance, but we have not fallen. . . .

I see all this and feel in my heart that I know the cause of the perplexity torturing our minds, and the confusion destroying our very existence. I then say to myself: "Surely our society will crystallise; surely it will be solidified; surely it will be welded into a strong homogeneous whole. But it is essential that we strain every nerve to hold our ground during this period of transition." . . .

. . . I often ask myself: 'What is our positive role in this troubled world, and in which region do we play that role?' I review our circumstances and find that we are in a group or circle which should be the theatre of our activity, and in which we try to move as much as possible. . . .

There is no doubt that the Arab Circle is the most important of all these circles and the circle most closely connected with us. Its history merges with ours. We suffered in common the same hardships, lived through the same crises, and when we were trampled under foot by the conquerors, it suffered with us the same fate. We are also bound by the ties of a common religion. The centres of religious radiation moved within the boundaries of its capitals from Mecca to Koufa and then to Cairo. Furthermore, neighbourliness has welded us all into a homogeneous whole, strengthened by all these spiritual, historic and material factors.

I remember, as far as I am personally concerned, that the first notions of Arab consciousness began to creep into my mind when I was still a secondary school student. I used to come out with my fellow-students on general strike every year on the 2nd December as a protest against the Balfour Declaration which favoured establishing a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, despotically usurped from the legitimate owners of the land. When I asked myself at that time why I should be carried away with enthusiasm and why I should be furious for a country I had never seen, the only echoes that rang in my ears were those of sympathy.

I began to have a better understanding of the situation, however, when I joined the Military Academy and studied the history of that region in general, and the history of the Palestine campaigns in particular, and the conditions which made it in recent times an easy prey, torn to shreds and ravaged by a pack of wild beasts. The situation became still clearer when I joined the Staff College and began studying the details of the Palestine campaign and other Mediterranean problems. And when the Palestine crisis began, I became fully convinced that fighting in Palestine was neither a war in an alien country nor a matter of sympathy. It was a sacred duty of self-defence. . . .

It was clear that imperialism was the most prominent of all these forces. Even Israel itself was nothing but a manifestation of . . . imperialism. Indeed, had not Palestine fallen under the British Mandate, Zionism could never have found the support it needed to realise the national home project, which would have remained a fantastic idea never destined to see light. . . .

After all these facts had become firmly established in my mind, I began to believe in one common struggle. I said to myself that since the region is one, with the same conditions, the same problems, the same future and the same enemy, no matter how different the masks that enemy might wear to conceal his identity, why should our efforts be dissipated? . . .

. . . When I analyse the elements of our strength, I cannot help being struck by three sources standing in bold relief, which should be taken into account before everything else.

The first of these sources lies in the fact that we [in the first circle consisting of Arab countries] are a group of neighbouring nations welded into a

homogeneous whole by every possible material and moral tie that would unite any group of nations. Moreover, our peoples possess characteristics, potentialities and a civilisation inspired by the spiritual principles of the three divine religions, which can never be overlooked in any attempt to build a new stable and peaceful world.

The second source is our land itself and the position it occupies on the map of the world — that important strategic position which makes it the crossroads of the world, the main route of its trade and the highway of its armies.

There remains the third source. This is oil, which is the backbone of material civilisation, and without which all the world's largest factories, all means of land, sea and air transport, all war weapons whether they be the fighters and bombers flying high above the clouds or the submarines diving deep into the unfathomable depths of the ocean, would become mere iron blocks, devoid of motive power. . . .

As for the Second Circle — the African Continent Circle — . . . we cannot under any condition, even if we wanted to, stand aloof from the terrible and terrifying battle now raging in the heart of that continent between five million whites and two hundred million Africans. We cannot stand aloof for one important and obvious reason — we ourselves are in Africa. Surely the people of Africa will continue to look to us as the people who are the guardians of the Continent's northern gate and who constitute the connecting link between the Continent and the outer world. We certainly cannot, under any conditions, relinquish our responsibility to help spread the light of knowledge and civilisation into the very depths of the virgin jungles of the Continent. . . .

There remains the Third Circle — the circle encompassing continents and oceans which, as I have said, is the circle of our brethren-in-Islam who, wherever their place under the sun, turn with us towards the Qibla,[2] their lips solemnly saying the same prayers. . . .

As I contemplate the eighty million Moslems in Indonesia, the fifty million in China, the several millions in Malaya, Thailand and Burma, the hundred million or so in Pakistan, the well nigh over a hundred million in the Middle East, the forty million in the Soviet Union, and the millions of others in the far-flung corners of the earth — as I think of these hundreds of millions of Moslems, all united by the same Faith, I become increasingly aware of the potential achievements which co-operation among all these millions could accomplish — co-operation naturally not going beyond their loyalty to their own countries, but which would ensure for them and their brethren-in-Islam unlimited power.

[2]The direction for prayer pointing to the holy Islamic site in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.