

# AFTER THE UNITED ARAB REPUBLIC

## A Defense of the Status Quo

*Thomas Molnar*

The quickly resolved crisis of the so-called United Arab Republic has a few lessons for the student of Near Eastern affairs. The first is that the regimes erected on the ruins of British and French presence are not so stable as their improvised leaders pretend; the second lesson is that their policy of conquest or, rather, non-colonialism, carries in it the seeds of destruction; and the third lesson points to the great force of nationalism which in this, as in other parts of the world, is shaping the destinies of old and new peoples.

Judging by its aspects in the Near Eastern countries, nationalism is a complex phenomenon. In the eyes of the Egyptians, for example, the awakening is baptized by the name of "revolution," although for the Western eye the country seems to dream the eternal dreams of the slow-rolling Nile. The catchwords on everybody's lips are "industrialization," "unity of all Arabs," and "Israel must be destroyed,"—a mixture of realism and illusions. Nasser represents for these people the Hercules who has cleansed the stable of a despised and abhorred Farouk, a champion of the underdog, a miracle maker who creates industry in the desert, and—finally—the hero who will reconquer Palestine.

All these expectations are discussed by Egyptians on a rather elementary level, while the press writes about them in demagogic terms. The average man is most impressed by Nasser's personal life, which is puritanical and decent, and by the lesser degree of corruption in government and administration. If he uses the other catchwords too, it is because that gives him an air of independence and progressive thinking in the eyes of foreign inquirers. Otherwise, private conversations and press comments are distressingly simplistic: the English-language *The Scribe*, a magazine with the format of *Newsweek*, is filled with praise and flattery of Nasser, scorn for his opponents, and it freely uses all the clichés of a certain international language about peace, progress and positive neutralism.

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Mr. Molnar, who is a member of the faculty of Brooklyn College, recently returned from a trip through the Near East.

I have said that one of the most often heard catchwords is industrialization. It is considered the remedy for all evils which afflict the Arab societies, and to question its absolutely beneficial character is to invite danger. Yet, it is more spoken about than actually achieved, mainly because it depends not merely on the good will of foreign powers nor on loans by the World Bank but on a number of factors which determine life in these areas. The Egyptian *fellah* is an exhausted creature with innumerable generations of Nile Valley peasants behind him, and he is far from having learned the ways of industrial workers. When he comes to settle in towns or big cities, he looks for easy and free occupations like servant, merchant, dragoman or small official. At present this temptation is even greater: the Nasser regime has divided the land and allotted a small sum to each new proprietor. As the fields of the Nile valley are the oldest cultivated fields in the world, the independent peasant can anticipate neither surprise nor a highly productive source of wealth, even if he invests his money wisely. The chances are that many will yield to the attraction of town life.

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Industry, however, still remains a mirage, a rootless thing. Like all young dictatorships, the regime favors spectacular projects but it neglects and even hinders some of the existing operations. The Jews and the Greeks in whose hands commercial and business life used to be, have left or are leaving; the confiscation of foreign-owned property and the low ceiling set on individual incomes discourage investors. The newly created industries are supervised and advised by foreign experts whose privately expressed opinions are not flattering. In spite of Egyptian success in coping with the intricate problems of the Suez Canal, West German engineers working at the Aswan Dam or other projects doubt that these could be operated by Egyptians alone. In fact, although the regime had broken with Belgium after the death of Lumumba, a Belgian team has been asked, unofficially, to return in order to run the telephone system.

Such examples abound in industry, commerce and the hotel business. Egypt lacks the cadre of efficient, ambitious, well-trained men. "Positive neutralism" means, thus, the opportunity to tap freely the resources that East and West can offer in manpower, materials and loans.

These words are not meant as criticism; one should not blame the Arab lands for the obvious inefficiencies and lack of Western-type organization. Rather, one should indict those who create exaggerated hopes in people's minds while sitting behind their desks, thousands of miles away. But if one has seen the Nile valley, its palm trees, clay cubic dwellings, donkeys and camels transporting man and his modest goods, the veiled women going to the well with gracefully balanced jars on their heads, the conclusion is inevitable that this is still the way of life of Biblical times; the distance the Arab lands must travel to reach the twentieth century is still enormous.

Yet this century has generated a kind of revolutionary nationalism which cannot be reversed or stopped, and which feeds on success as well as on failure, since both render passions more violent. This nationalism is vague in its objectives, a fact which allows it to crystallize around prestige projects, dreams of grandeur, and heroes. Of the latter, there is only one, in a category by himself: Nasser. The grandeur he is supposed to bring to this area is the much-talked-about unification of all Arabs in an empire reaching from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic. And the one obstacle, in Arab eyes, to the birth of this empire is Israel.

Anybody suggesting that this view be nuanced is in serious trouble. Recently the Nasser-appointed editor of a Cairo magazine brought up the possibility of making peace with Israel and trying to "re-absorb" it among the Arab states. A modest enough proposal, yet the editor was at once suspended; he may consider himself lucky for having escaped the fate of King Abdullah of Jordan, assassinated several years ago for sending peace feelers to the arch-enemy.

Another question is, of course, whether Nasser and a holy war led by him might be successful. To answer this question we must consider the principal elements of the Near Eastern situation.

In Egypt, as well as in the other countries of this area, Nasser is the undisputed champion of pan-Arabism and what is almost synonymous with it, the "reconquest" of Israel, the reunification of Palestine.

(On Arab maps Israel is not mentioned and the Arab press puts in quotation marks such terms as Israel or Israeli government.) But first, how stable is Nasser's position and Nasserism itself?

The recent split with Syria seems to be a good indication that the Egyptian dictator's appeal has its limits. Nobody can tell what would have happened if the Franco-Anglo-Israeli forces had managed to dislodge him, but it is obvious that American and Soviet support in the decisive hour has not only saved him but has also enhanced his prestige. While no Arab will thank Eisenhower and Dulles for this action—on the contrary, Dulles's memory is hated, Eisenhower forgotten, and the United States severely blamed for supporting Israel—they consider Nasser to be under the special protection of Allah. In Jordan, whose King Hussein is his personal enemy, young people see in him the Liberator and the great pan-Arab leader, and would be ready, circumstances permitting, to overthrow the present regime in Nasser's favor. In Iraq, General Kassem maintains himself in power only by balancing Nasserist influence with Communist agitation—and vice versa. In Lebanon, among the Moslem half of the population, Nasser's men ceaselessly stir unrest, and when discovered, they simply cross over—at least until a few weeks ago—to Syria.

A special breeding ground of pro-Nasser sentiment has been the camps of Palestinian refugees. Located in the Gaza strip, in Jordan and Syria, the close to one million refugees—including their children born in the camps—have only one thought, one hope: return to the fields, the orchards, the houses, the workshops taken away by the Israelis. They live in squalor and mostly in idleness, and the indefinite waiting exacerbates their bitterness and thirst for revenge. They form a restless, revolutionary mass, privately blame the Arab League for not helping them, and put their faith in a war that Nasser will start against Israel.

The other side of the picture is, however, this: Nasser's revolution has entered its "socialist" stage, as is evidenced by the recent measures in both the Northern Region (Syria) and the Southern Region (Egypt). Everywhere on the streets of Cairo one sees posters glorifying Tito and those among the African leaders who openly advocate Marxist ideas, like Sekou Touré and Nkrumah. Lucid Egyptians predict that in the coming years the regime will adopt more and more of the Yugoslav form of Communism. This prospect had obviously alarmed the

Syrian business classes which, aided by nationalist officers, carried out the coup.

Let us bear in mind that throughout their history, North and South, Egypt and Assyria, tried to conquer each other's land. Nasser's nationalization plans were not substantially different from the Soviet-type pillage of the satellites; if not Nasser, certainly his entourage considered and treated Syria as a conquered territory, not to say a colony. In this respect it is instructive to note an article of *Al Mouslimoun*, the paper of the Moslem Brotherhood, which speaks of Nasser's "impotence in making use of Islam." The paper also makes a transparent allusion to Ramses II (glorified by the present Egyptian regime as the pharaoh who had evicted the Jews) of whose name "God made a term of curse and contempt in the Torah, the Gospels and the Koran."

Even the Israelis admit that there was one Arab field commander of great quality in their 1948 war against the Arab armies—Nasser. Skillful statesman and soldier, will the Egyptian president attempt to consolidate his position and recapture, after the Syrian setback, his prestige by launching a war against Israel? Again, Israeli authorities may be quoted who were surprised to find during the Sinai campaign large quantities of up-to-date material in Egyptian military depots. These depots, at that time considerably reduced by the returning Israeli army, may well be replenished by now, and from the same source.

Yet, neither Egypt nor Jordan seem to prepare for war, although all along the Israeli border the military camps and installations are very much in evidence. There is no question that individually none of Israel's neighbors is a match for her; this is the main reason why any Arab politician envisaging such a conflict must first seek the amalgamation of all the Arab states of the area. Thus the Syrian coup all but destroyed Nasser's imperial ambitions; the quick recognition extended to the new government by Jordan and Turkey (to be followed by Iraq and Iran), shows that these countries are more interested in maintaining the balance of power in the Near East than in letting any one of them grow at the expense of the others.

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But even before the events that took place in Syria, it was an open secret that, in case of an attack of the now defunct United Arab Republic on Lebanon (from the "Northern Region"), the latter would have opened its border to Israeli troops coming to repel such an offensive. Indeed, if it is in the inter-

est of the Arab states to preserve the territorial status quo, the Israelis consider it essential and vital. And the military position and actions of Israel are evidently central to the whole Near East. The shape of the country exposes it to sudden attack which, if carried out with sufficient strength and determination, may cut it in two and may isolate whole sections from the main body.

All along the Israeli border the irrigated valleys, the hills of Galilee, the Negev desert, etc., are heavily protected by well-armed border police, the military installations of the kibbutzim, airfields and army camps. About seventy percent of the Israeli budget is absorbed by the army, and—what cannot be similarly measured—the militant spirit of old and young is a further guarantee of the country's determination to resist at all costs. Besides, one look at the irrigation system, for example in the Jordan-Sea of Galilee area, is sufficient to realize how vulnerable the settlements are in these parts and how heavily they must be protected if the Israelis are to pursue their work of land reclamation and forestation.

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In spite of the uncomfortable yet carefully preserved status quo, Nasser's dynamism and popularity might have carried him from one conquest to another and tempted him to start operations against Israel. The Syrian coup marks not only a halt in these plans, but it is a serious reverse for Nasser. The proclamation of Syria's secession included a call to the Egyptian "brothers" to throw off the yoke of their dictator and seek the goals of Arab unity through peaceful means. Unless Nasser has new and undetected bows to his arrow, no war in the Near East seems to be probable in the predictable future.

But even before the reversal of his fortunes in Syria, Nasser was a cautious man with a strong sense of realism. He understood the data of the situation described above, and also the advantage of the Near Eastern balance of power. Indeed, any disturbance of the latter would have only benefitted Communist agitation in the area, and it must be said that while the Arab press, in general, affects an air of anti-Western feelings, the more lucid newspapers in Jordan and Lebanon, for example, are more anti-Communist in tone than many European or American publications.

When all these elements of the Near Eastern situation are kept in mind, it will be understood that any change in the status quo would be the result of a modification in the balance of forces in the East-West world conflict. To put it bluntly, nobody is

willing to stick out his neck until the green light is given by one of the two great powers, the United States or the Soviet Union. And precisely for this reason, everybody in this area is watching developments in the Cold War.

Two factors debilitate America's position in the Arab world. One is the support extended to Israel without which, so the Arabs argue, they would have long ago driven the Israelis into the sea. The Truman administration is remembered here as the main culprit in a crime perpetrated against the Arabs; the Eisenhower-Dulles intervention which saved Nasser in 1956 has done nothing to alleviate this disappointment. In fact, the Arabs imagine the United States as living under a Jewish-dominated government, thus permanently hostile to them.

The other factor is the amazement with which the Arabs receive the repeated news of American reverses in the Cold War. The Arab is a man with common sense and one who, through the vicissitudes of a very long and agitated history, has understood that there is no substitute for power in the relationship among nations. The American declarations of good will and peaceful intentions are lost on them as they are lost on every other nation in a world of hard facts. Without exception, those with whom I talked in the Near East expressed surprise over American "weakness," for this is how they interpret the events in Cuba, Laos, Berlin, etc.

My arguments, citing the tremendous military and economic power of the United States, met with polite but unbelieving smiles. They know of course that the United States is strong, but they are also aware of Khrushchev's propaganda successes among their countrymen; unless you have the policy corresponding to your strength, an intelligent Arab merchant of Jerusalem told me, you might as well be weak.

There is no love lost among the leaders of the Near Eastern Arab world—Nasser, Kassem, Hussein, Kouzbari, Chebab, etc., but they all seem to be united in their strongly anti-Communist feeling. Yet, they need constant encouragement to persist on this road, that is, a Western policy of intelligently given aid and a steady demonstration, in this and other areas, of Western unity and strength. The Communist technique of gaining a foothold in areas where initially they would be ill-received, is to sharpen and profit by existing antagonisms. They skillfully apply their black-and-white terminology to existing differences and proclaim these differences unsolvable except by the revolution that they, in turn, are eager to organize, lead, and exploit.

• Under these circumstances, the wisest course of action, both for keeping peace in the Near East and for maintaining our present foothold there, would be to uphold the status quo and give immediate aid to any country which might be attacked from outside or torn, through the activity of foreign agents, from inside. Our intervention, swift and decisive, in Lebanon in 1958 shows that such action can be effective over a long span.

A *New York Times* editorial recently expressed optimism about Nasser's "wise statesmanship" in not attempting to put down the Syrian insurrection against his rule. I am less sure that Nasser might not try some other means of reasserting his supremacy over Syria. An ambitious dictator does not fade away easily. At any rate, we ought to be prepared for this or similar eventualities. The Near East must remain calm, even if only relatively so, and must never become, like Southeast Asia, a Communist base for world conquest.

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