



## Nasser's Inter-Arab Rivalries: 1958-1967

By Michael Sharnoff\*

In his 1955 memoir, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser claimed that Egypt's unique geography and historical legacy enhanced its ability to influence Africa, the Muslim world, and the Arab world. Of these three significant regions, it was the Arab world which captivated Nasser's attention the most: "I always imagine that in this region in which we live, there is a role wandering aimlessly about in search of an actor to play it."

Nasser envisioned himself in that role. However, while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the cause of much inter-Arab rivalry which pitted Arab radicals against moderates, Nasser's secular, radical vision of Arab nationalism contrasted sharply with conservative, pro-Western Arab leaders including Saudi King Faisal, Jordanian King Hussein and Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba. Professing that Egypt represented a revolutionary, progressive model for Arab development also placed his country in perpetual conflict with Faisal, Hussein and Bourguiba, whom he denounced as imperialists, reactionaries, and traitors. Nasser's military intervention in Yemen also tarnished his image as an Arab hero, notably for deploying chemical weapons against fellow Arabs. Moreover, Nasser's reliance on Soviet aid and eagerness to denounce Faisal, Hussein and Bourguiba as puppets and collaborators for receiving aid from the West exposed his own hypocrisies and exacerbated inter-Arab tensions.

### » *Nasser and Faisal*

Nasser and Saudi King Faisal had vied for leadership in the Arab and Muslim world since the 1950s. Addressing Egypt's provisional constitution on March 5, 1958, Nasser revealed that Saudi Arabia had allegedly bribed an Egyptian officer with one million pounds to stage a coup against him. While Nasser's relationship with Faisal had been tense, the North Yemen Civil War in 1962 severely damaged Egyptian-Saudi ties. Yemeni radical republicans and conservative royalists contested for power, and Nasser, hoping to expand his influence into the Arabian Peninsula, supported the radicals while Saudi Arabia, seeking to curb Nasser's influence, backed the royalists.

Republicans appealed to Nasser for an Egyptian military intervention and in October 1962, Egypt launched a proxy war against Saudi Arabia in Yemen. By 1964, there were nearly 30,000 Egyptian soldiers in Yemen and Nasser praised the Yemeni Revolution for its ability "to tip the balance, bring back the initiative to the Arab revolutionary power and force reactionism to be in the defensive position." Despite the friction, Egypt and Saudi Arabia issued a joint communiqué on March 3, 1964, pledging to respect Yemen's sovereignty. The following month, however, Nasser indicated he would not abide by his word. Speaking to Egyptian troops in Yemen, Nasser said that the Egyptian Army is "co-operating with the glorious vanguard of



the Yemeni revolution to rid this revolutionary and free Arab nation of injustice and darkness.”

Faisal accused Nasser of meddling in Arab affairs and condemned Egypt for waging war against fellow Arabs. A December 27, 1966 *Jeddah Radio* broadcast questioned, “If there is no war in Yemen and the Egyptian Army is not fighting, then why is it there? Why do the Egyptian forces stay there if the Yemenis are ruling themselves?” The broadcast said that Nasser’s invasion of Yemen “lies in Egypt’s attempt to return international relations to the law of the jungle” and added that “It also lies in the fact that it is achieving Zionism’s primary objective by keeping the Egyptian Army away from the battlefield and by fabricating a battle in which Arab fights Arab instead of confronting and fighting Zionism.” Despite an Egyptian-Saudi ceasefire brokered in August 1965, the Civil War lingered until 1970 and allegations of Nasser bombing North Yemeni Royalist forces and civilians with mustard gas tainted his image as an Arab hero.

In addition to the political disunity caused by the Civil War, Nasser and Faisal accused each other of subservience to their respective superpower patrons. On May 25, 1966, an editorial in the Saudi newspaper *al-Bilad* stated that Nasser’s close re-

lationship with Moscow had weakened Arab unity by allowing Secretary-General of the Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev and Premier Alexei Kosygin to introduce Communism to the Arabs. It berated Nasser’s Arab policy and claimed it could turn the Middle East “into another Vietnam while leaving Israel safe.” The editorial also criticized Nasser’s refusal to use force to liberate Palestine and denounced Egypt’s war in Yemen and threats against Saudi Arabia as paradoxical to the Arab cause.

On June 3, 1966, Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, Nasser’s confidant and editor-in-chief of *al-Ahram*, repeated Nasser’s anti-Saudi line by suggesting that Faisal’s strategy sought to incite a conflict between Egypt and the United States. Seven days later, Heikal claimed that hatred from the Arab monarchies against Israel was genuine, but their hatred against the “progressive” Arab regimes

was stronger.

On April 6, 1967, *Jeddah Radio* condemned an invitation Nasser sent to Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere as a result of the African leader’s cooperation with Israel. The broadcast said Nyerere “had shed the blood of Muslims and planned the massacre of thousands of them” and the invitation represented “a grave offence to the people of Egypt and all true Muslims.” Not to be deterred, Nasser increased verbal at-

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tacks against Faisal on May 2, charging him with betraying the Arabs. Nasser claimed that Faisal was unworthy to represent Islam and belittled him to “a snake seeking a chance to bite.”

#### » *Nasser and Hussein*

Nasser’s relationship with Jordan remained poor throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with each leader accusing the other of betraying the Arab cause and condemning the other for serving either Communism or imperialism. In a speech delivered in Damascus on February 27, 1958, Nasser, while praising the nascent union between Syria and Egypt, cautioned against Arab “Agents of Imperialism.” He denounced Jordanian Prime Minister Samir al-Rifai as “the imperialists’ ace agent and oldest stooge” and warned that those like Rifai posed a threat to Egypt and “are a lot more dangerous than imperialism itself.” Speaking to a Lebanese delegation in Damascus on March 2, Nasser articulated the need for Arab unity to protect Arabs from the dangers of imperialism and Zionism. He singled out Jordan, whom he did not describe as a sovereign nation but rather “a forced Hashemite union which does not represent the people but follows the lines set up by imperialism to divide the Arab peoples.”

Later that year on the eve of the sixth an-

niversary of the Egyptian Revolution, Nasser extolled the Jordanians and declared their struggle for Arab unity and freedom would persist regardless of King Hussein, whom he said had “deceived us and deceived the people of Jordan, subjugated them and opened Jordan once more

to foreign occupation regardless of the bitter struggle the people had put to get rid of British occupation, and despite the death of many.” Nasser continued to view Hussein as a “reactionary” leader and in 1965, Egyptian-Jordanian relations quickly soured over the former’s support for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

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In September 1966, PLO Chairman Ahmed Shukairi, who was handpicked by Nasser and operated from Cairo, insisted during an Arab League meeting that Jordan move its capital to Jerusalem. In response, Jordan’s *Amman Radio* denounced his comments as traitorous, asserting that it was an impractical concept which would weaken Jordan and provoke a swift Israeli response. Hussein continued to attack the PLO for their attempt to overthrow his kingdom and criticized Moscow on November 29, 1966 for instigating tensions in the Middle East. The King rejected pleas to allow the PLO to operate in Jordan, claiming that Palestinian fighters were seeking his deposal. On December 4, Cairo’s *Voice of the Arabs* broadcast insisted



that Jordan should be renamed Palestine and on the following day urged Jordanians to overthrow Hussein like his cousin Faisal II had been overthrown in Iraq in July 1958.

In January 1967, Hussein snubbed Nasser for his remark that Jordan served “imperialist powers” by revealing Jordan’s military capabilities, which had been previously confidential. Hussein announced that the Jordanian Armed Forces had been strengthened to more than 55,000, compared with 4,000 in 1948. Nasser boldly retaliated during a February 22 speech, denouncing the King as “the whore of Jordan” (*‘ahir al-Urdun*). The following day, Jordan recalled its Ambassador to Egypt, justifying the decision as “an expression of denunciation of the level to which the UAR president has chosen to descend to express his thoughts on Arab relations and dealings among civilized nations.”

On April 2, *Amman Radio* announced that it was no longer a secret that Nasser—“the divider of the Arabs—had fallen into the camp of international communism and its plans to obliterate Arabism.” In a speech the following month, Nasser leveled more personal attacks against Hussein, calling him “the agent who cooperates with imperialism and with Israel” and “a stooge king” collaborator with the Central Intelligence Agency.

#### » **Nasser and Bourguiba**

Although not a monarch like Faisal and Hussein, Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba had a pragmatic approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict and maintained a pro-Western alliance with Jordan and Saudi

Arabia. These conservative stances placed him at odds with Nasser, and on November 27, 1958, Nasser delivered a lengthy speech expressing his views on the divisions within the Arab world. He praised the fraternal unity with Sudan and Syria, whom he claimed adhered to the principles of Arab solidarity while denouncing Bourguiba for working against it. Bourguiba had chided Egypt as a “Communist agent” and criticized Nasser’s doctrine of positive neutrality and Non-Alignment. Responding to the Tunisian President’s motives, Nasser sarcastically questioned, “does he rather do that at the behest of the Americans to gratify the desire of his lords and masters the imperialists, his lords and masters the British, his lords and masters the French, his lords and masters the Americans?”

Later on March 3, 1965, Bourguiba delivered an unprecedented speech, suggesting that Arab states recognize Israel based on the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan. This represented the first time an Arab leader publicly recommended that the Arab world explore a political solution with Israel. Consequently, Nasser unleashed scathing attacks against Bourguiba at Cairo University on May 31, stating “servants of colonialism live amidst us” (*a’wan isti’mar ‘ashau bainna*) and denounced Bourguiba as a Western agent and a betrayer of Palestinian rights.

In an address commemorating the thirteenth anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution on July 22, 1965, Nasser continued to berate Bourguiba for his pragmatism and belittled him as an imperialist agent:

“The whole Arab nation is of the same



opinion and we consider Habib Bourguiba one of the setbacks to the Arab cause. As I have said it is a deplorable setback but our only consolation is that he has now become known as an agent of imperialism and Zionism. The whole Arab nation now knows him as such.”

On March 22, 1966, Nasser spoke to the Arab Socialist Union at Suez, and again singled out Bourguiba for his involvement in an Islamic alliance with Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Nasser claimed the alliance was an American and British imperialist plot aimed at dividing the Arab and Muslim world:

“And so we have begun to hear the tune of the Islamic alliance or the Islamic conference... Bourguiba too is an agent of imperialism and Zionism. Bourguiba, who is now speaking of imperialism, is the biggest apostate of Islam in his country. Today he is defending Islam. Bourguiba issued a legal opinion allowing fast-breaking in Ramadan. He cancelled the feast holiday. Now he dons a turban and has become Sheikh Bourguiba within the framework of the Islamic alliance.”

Nasser continued to attack Bourguiba’s attempts to exploit Islam for political gains. On November 8, *Cairo Radio* re-

sponded to *Tunis Radio*’s claim that Bourguiba was the Muslim world’s single greatest benefactor of Islam. *Cairo Radio* claimed that Bourguiba had built only seven mosques in Tunisia and the Tunisian President had a history of banning religious institutions, favoring French schools over Islamic schools, sanctioning Muslims not to fast during the Islamic month of Ramadan, and discouraged bureaucrats from leaving early for Friday prayers.

#### » **Conclusion**

Throughout much of the 1950s and 1960s, Nasser wanted to unite the Arab world under his leadership. However, his espousal of secular, radical Arab nationalism, his proxy war in Yemen and his close ties to the Soviet Union, placed him in direct confrontation with pro-Western and conservative leaders who also vied for Arab supremacy including Saudi King Faisal, Jordanian King Hussein and Tunisian President Bourguiba.

Therefore, the evidence indicate that even with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict aside, Nasser’s political and ideological differences between Faisal, Hussein, and Bourguiba were so profound and the enmity between these Arab leaders ran so deep that Nasser’s vision of uniting the Arab world under his leadership would remain unfulfilled.

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