

## Introduction

A LOW-RESOLUTION PHOTOGRAPH of Egypt's international position around 1960 would have looked something like this: For the first time in centuries, perhaps millennia, Egypt was completely free of foreign domination. The great powers of the East and of the West competed against each other to arm Egypt's military, build its industry, and feed its people. Egyptian power extended deep into the Levant, further than at any time since Muhammad Ali. Egypt's charismatic president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, was the undisputed leader of the Arab world. Peace reigned, thanks to an astute leadership's assiduous avoidance of war.

A second snapshot taken a decade later would have revealed a dramatically different picture: Following the secession of Syria in 1961 and Israel's conquest of the Sinai Peninsula in 1967, the territory under Egypt's effective control had shrunk by 20 percent. Nasser's reputation was in tatters, shredded by serial setbacks at home and abroad. Egypt's economy lay in debt-ridden ruin, its future dependent on Saudi largesse. Ties with the United States had disintegrated. And the defense of the realm from Israeli attack relied on a Soviet division in quasi-occupation of the Nile Valley.

The reflexive answer to the question "What happened?" is "June 1967." Looking back nearly half a century later, Israel's crushing victory over Egypt looms so large that it makes other factors appear small and insignificant in comparison. Viewed in retrospect, the Six-Day War is an obvious watershed separating the age of Egyptian ascendance from the following two generations of inglorious stagnation. But a closer look at the gloomy picture of Egypt post-'67 reveals that many of its ingredients were already present on the eve of the Six-Day War. Egypt still possessed the Sinai desert, but its territorial expansion had long since ground to a halt; Nasser was still the most popular Arab leader, but his image was tarnished; Saudi financial aid was not yet a factor, but Egypt's economy hovered on the brink of disaster; diplomatic relations with the United States endured, but they had sunk to their lowest point since 1952; and although the Soviet armed forces were not yet welcome on Egyptian soil, Cairo's dependency on aid from Moscow had never been greater.

In the span of less than a decade, Egypt lost its regional leadership position, its independent posture in the Cold War, and its truce with Israel. How did this happen? What drove the destabilization of Egypt's foreign relations in the 1960s? And, since in tandem with these international developments the Egyptian economy went from sluggishness to the verge of collapse, the state underwent intensified socialization, society became less free, and Nasser's appeal waned considerably, one should also pose the question: To what extent were Egypt's foreign and domestic predicaments related, and how did they figure in the diminution of Egyptian power over the course of the decade and thereafter? Clearly, there can be no monocausal theory of this decline. But some causes are more significant than others. The main argument of this book is that the key to the decline of Egyptian power at the height of the Cold War lies in Egypt's five-year intervention in the Yemeni civil war.

The central axis, around which Middle Eastern politics revolved at the height of the Cold War, was not, as is often assumed, the Arab-Israeli conflict; it was rather the inter-Arab conflict between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Between 1955 and 1967, the so-called Arab Cold War split the Arab world in two, aligning revolutionary military regimes backed by the Soviet Union against conservative monarchies supported by the United States and Great Britain. The two major contenders in this bitter struggle for power and influence were Moscow-backed Egypt and Washington-supported Saudi Arabia. In its early phases, the Arab Cold War consisted mostly of vociferous propaganda and intelligence intrigue. But in September 1962, the Arab Cold War turned hot. The occasion for this flare-up was a coup d'état in Ṣan'ā', where a coterie of military officers succeeded in overthrowing the Imamate, a dynastic institution of religious rulers belonging to the Zaydi branch of Shiite Islam. Despite the great distance separating Ṣan'ā' from Cairo, the Egyptian government sprang to the aid of the revolutionaries, while the Saudi monarchy, fearing that the revolution would prove contagious, vowed to do everything within its power to restore the Imam. The local civil war that ensued thus became caught up in a regional struggle for power, which was itself embedded in the global Cold War at its peak.

From October 1962 until December 1967, Egypt and Saudi Arabia were locked in a bloody struggle to control the outcome of the Yemeni civil war—and shape the political future of the Middle East. For Egypt, this struggle would prove more costly in lives, treasure, and squandered influence than any of its wars with Israel—with the possible exception of 1967. From a few hundred commandos at the beginning of October 1962, the Egyptian expeditionary force grew to about 70,000 men by the

summer of 1965. The force's presence in Yemen threatened both Saudi Arabia and the British position at Aden, producing a near-immediate Saudi-British rapprochement after decades of conflict. The clash between Egypt and two key American allies on the Arabian Peninsula strained US-Egyptian relations to the breaking point. The ensuing suspension of US aid to Egypt exacerbated the burden wartime expenditure placed on the economy, already strained by the radical socialization drive of the 1960s, and drove Egypt deeper into debt to the Soviet Union. As shortages proliferated and casualties mounted, popular discontent soared to a level unknown since the revolution of 1952. All the while the army continued to stagnate in Yemen, increasingly restless and ill prepared for large-scale conventional war. Egypt, in short, was already deep in the throes of political, military, and economic crisis when Israel delivered the coup de grâce in 1967.

Overshadowed by the titanic battle with Israel, which fixed world attention on Sinai and Suez from 1967 onward, Egypt's five-year campaign on behalf of the fledgling republic in Ṣan'ā' was an episode of tremendous significance not only for the states directly involved in the conflict but also for the region as a whole. The decline of Egypt and the rise of Saudi Arabia, the twilight of Arab nationalism and the dawn of political Islam, the end of decolonization and the fate of the Cold War in the Middle East—these were the grander themes at play in the forgotten war in Yemen.

### THE GOLDEN AGE OF NASSERISM

The revolution of July 1952, which toppled the Egyptian monarchy and brought to power a clique of young nationalist officers, ushered in an era of radical politics to the Arab Middle East. In the years that followed, a revolutionary tidal wave rolled through the Arab world, swallowing Iraq in 1958 and, at its peak, threatening to engulf both the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Hashemite monarchy of Jordan. Although instability came in local flavors, most Arab revolutionaries followed, to varying degrees, the nationalist ideology of pan-Arabism, which Stephen Humphreys has defined simply as “that form of Arab Nationalism which seeks to unite all the Arabic-speaking peoples from Morocco to Iraq and Oman within a single country.”<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of pan-Arabism

<sup>1</sup>R. Stephen Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 277n. Adee Dawisha, however, argues

traced its intellectual roots to Syria and Iraq. But Egypt, as the largest and most powerful Arab state, soon became its most important practitioner. Since both Egypt's trajectory from 1952 to 1970 and the career of pan-Arabism became identified with the memorable leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the term *Nasserism* has come to denote the era as a whole, the policies Nasser introduced during his reign, and the Egyptian brand of pan-Arabism he espoused.

Most attempts to come to terms with Nasser's legacy have rightly highlighted the transnational or more specifically pan-Arab characteristics of Nasserism.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore ironic that the present attempt to locate the source of national decline in a foreign adventure should begin with an emphasis on the essential Egyptianness of the phenomenon. But it is difficult to make sense of the international politics of the Middle East in the period under discussion without recognizing that Nasserism as foreign policy was first and foremost an Egyptian ambition for regional hegemony.

A series of propitious historical circumstances in the late 1950s and early 1960s combined to produce the specific expression of an ancient Egyptian impulse for preeminence. These circumstances included the weak legitimacy of the post-Ottoman system of "nation"-states; the consequent surge in pan-Arab sentiments in the mid-twentieth century; the wave of decolonization coursing through the developing world in the postwar period; the waning of British imperial power; the ensuing power vacuum in the Middle East; the Cold War competition between the Soviet Union, the United States, and their respective allies; and the immense personal charisma of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Although a physical empire was probably never in the cards, the aspiration for predominance in the Arab world—and to a lesser extent, throughout the Middle East and Africa—constituted the most persistent attribute of Egyptian foreign policy under Nasser.<sup>3</sup>

that Arab nationalists did not distinguish between pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism (*Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003], 1–13).

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, Shimon Shamir, "The Fall of Nasserist Messianism" (Hebrew), in idem, ed., *The Decline of Nasserism, 1965–1970: The Fall of a Messianic Movement* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Mif'alim universita'iyim le-hotsa'ah la-or, 1978), 16.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism*, 2. See also Michael Doran, "Egypt: Pan-Arabism in Historical Context," in *Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers*, ed. L. Carl Brown (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 97–120; and L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 169–71.

Transforming Egypt into the preeminent power in the region required a strong military nourished on a steady diet of advanced weaponry; a healthy, independent economy; an ideology of transnational appeal; and a reliable source of leverage on the world stage. The Cold War provided just the constellation of opportunities for the fulfillment of all four conditions. Soviet geostrategic needs supplied the rationale for arming the Egyptian military, US interests demanded the pacification of Egypt through economic aid, decolonization offered a suitable context for the development of a specifically Arab doctrine of national liberation, and the stiff competition between the superpowers afforded ample scope for manipulation and maneuver.

The Cold War environment was crucial. Indeed, the architecture of Nasser's mature policy toward the great powers ultimately rested on a single principle, apparently inculcated by his Yugoslav mentor, Tito: to maximize foreign aid and political clout in the context of the Cold War it was necessary to steer clear of dependence on either of the two competing powers, and instead to play one off against the other. For Nasser everything depended on navigating the tightrope of neutralism. Bereft of oil, short on arable land, and weighed down by a rapidly growing (and mostly illiterate) population, Egypt operated on narrow margins even without the added burden of hegemonic ambitions. Although its rulers had two major cards to play, the first—Egypt's cultural and political centrality—was intangible, while the second—Egypt's strategic real estate—was nonnegotiable. In order to maximize the potential of this mixed hand, considerable dexterity and resourcefulness were required.<sup>4</sup>

Nasser's skillful management of the competition between the superpowers for a seat in the cockpit of Arab nationalism produced the golden age of Nasserism. Assured a steady supply of advanced weapons and cheap development credits from the East, and plentiful economic aid from the West, Egypt in the late 1950s and early '60s seemed to benefit from the best of all possible worlds. Astoundingly, Nasser's regime derived those benefits without any of the limitations associated with membership in either bloc: Egypt belonged to no defense pact, hosted no foreign bases, and professed neither capitalism nor communism in the conduct of its domestic policy. At home, the regime utilized plentiful foreign aid to launch an ambitious development plan designed to industrialize Egypt and double its national income within a decade.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism*, 142–47; Doran, "Pan-Arabism in Historical Context," 97.

Abroad, Nasser used the immunity afforded by superpower favor to conduct an activist, immensely popular foreign policy at the helm of the Arab nationalist movement, the nonaligned movement, and the broader national liberation front in Africa and the rest of the Third World.

With hindsight it is perhaps too easy to conclude that this was a dream that could not last, that sooner or later it would be shattered in an inevitable collision between the regime's stubborn independence and the vital interests of one or more of the great powers. It was not merely that Nasser's tussles with the superpowers betrayed a flair for indignant brinkmanship rarely tempered by a willingness to retreat when the circumstances demanded; there were also limits to Egyptian behavior, beyond which the threat to great power interests overrode their fear of losing Egypt. Even barring some giant conflagration, it seems in retrospect unavoidable that one of the two great powers, disappointed with the escalating costs of—and meager return on—its investment, would eventually tire of the competition and retire.

The crux of the problem, however, was internal. A double contradiction existed at the heart of Nasserism. First was the gap between intent and action. Like most revolutions the Egyptian revolution promised a sweeping transformation of state and society. Yet the revolutionaries who came to power in 1952 did surprisingly little to generate the capacity necessary to realize their grandiose visions of change. Students of the Nasser era have rightly focused on his failure to articulate a comprehensive ideology or a political program and on his unsuccessful (and perhaps half-hearted) attempts to construct a mass organization that would constitute a durable basis for his rule.<sup>5</sup> But it was in the armed forces—the very institution whence the Free Officers emerged, and upon which they staked their claim to power—that the gap between purpose and effort was most glaringly obvious.

Even absent a territorial dimension, the aspiration to pan-Arab unity under Egyptian stewardship demanded a strong army—for reasons of prestige and deterrence alike. Nor was this merely a theoretical requirement. In practice the Egyptian military was called upon repeatedly to deter aggression or hold territory against a hostile power in the first decade after the revolution: against Israel, France, and Great Brit-

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Raymond Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution under Nasser and Sadat* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 13, 50–51, 101, 239; Richard Dekmejian, *Egypt under Nasir: A Study in Political Dynamics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971), 53–55, 64–65, 144–54, and *passim*.

ain in 1956; Iraq in 1961; Syria in the same year; Morocco in 1963; and Saudi Arabia after 1962. Yet despite the demonstrable need for a strong military—and this is one of the central paradoxes of the Nasser era—the regime seems to have done everything within its power to build an army that was magnificent in parade but impotent in battle.<sup>6</sup> Two features stand out from the damning portraits of Egypt's military painted by students of the 1967 war: rampant incompetence at the highest echelons and an appalling deficit of training at all levels.<sup>7</sup> There was, in other words, a gulf between the regime's soaring rhetoric and its almost flippant approach to implementation. The Free Officers may have spared no effort in the attempt to secure their regime, but they conducted the serious business of revolution in an almost amateur manner that would appear strange to students of Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, or even Fascist Italy.

The second contradiction involved a gap between aims and means. The incongruence between Egypt's limited resources on the one hand, and the limitless ambitions of its leaders on the other, bred tensions that foreign aid could suppress for only so long. From King Farouk to President Mursī, every ruler of Egypt in the postwar period has faced the same fundamental dilemma: how to support a rapidly growing population on a near-stagnant resource base. As Nasser never tired of telling his interlocutors, his biggest problem was how to feed 600,000 new mouths every year. The solution the Free Officers adopted was, by and large, the Soviet one. Agricultural Egypt was to be transformed from above into an industrial powerhouse, substituting state enterprise for private property and local production for foreign imports. With proper direction this new indigenous industry, it was hoped, would spur economic growth at a pace outstripping the growth rate of the population. Even under optimal conditions, however, the plan launched in 1960—like the giant dam on the Nile that remains its most vivid testament—required at least a decade of stable progress to produce results, and a decade of stability was anything but what Nasser had in store for the 1960s. At home and abroad Egypt's ambitious rulers champied impatiently at the bit of economic reality. Nasser and his colleagues showed

<sup>6</sup> This is a harsh judgment, with which Nasser's private secretary concurs. Sāmī Sharaf, *Sanawāt wa-ayyām ma'a Gamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir: Shahādāt Sāmī Sharaf*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Fursān li-l-Nashr, 2005), 1:319.

<sup>7</sup> This is most apparent in the memoirs of the Egyptian chief of staff in 1967, Muḥammad Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt 1967/1970: Mudhakkirāt al-farīq awwal Muḥammad Fawzī, wazīr al-ḥarbiyyah al-asbaq* (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaḡbal al-'Arabī, 1984–86), 8–67.

little inclination to make the sacrifices necessary to keep the development plan on track by restraining government expenditure or public consumption. Nor did they appear capable of setting priorities. Yet priorities were essential in a situation where exports continued to stagnate while the population grew at a rate consistently surpassing 2.5 percent per annum. From a purely internal perspective, there appears to have been a built-in tendency to overextension and collapse.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time these internal dynamics affected—and could not fail to be affected by—external factors of great consequence. Egyptian policy did not take place in a vacuum; the image of total freedom of action on the international stage was an illusion. In Egypt's situation at the beginning of the 1960s, with no foreign currency reserves left to speak of, and an appallingly low national savings rate, the controlled accumulation of external debt was the only way to finance the import of food, capital, and arms until the industrialization drive bore fruit. Egypt's success hinged on the uninterrupted supply of foreign aid.<sup>9</sup> Yet no single factor contributed more to jeopardizing this crucial supply line than the regime's reluctance to limit its commitments abroad. Nasser's commitment to the export of revolution set him on a collision course with his neighbors. This necessarily brought him into conflict with their great power allies.

Like revolutionary France at the end of the eighteenth century, republican Egypt under Nasser's charismatic rule posed a threat to the teetering legitimist order that predominated in the Arab Middle East, from Morocco to Iraq, and from Yemen to Jordan. Like the new nationalism wielded by Napoleon, the militant nationalism brandished by the Free Officers menaced the weak states of the Arab East with a new form of legitimacy that heralded revolution and regime change. There was, however, an important difference. Unlike Napoleon's Grande Armée, Nasser's army, though the biggest in the Middle East, was still too weak to threaten Arabia, Mesopotamia, and the Levant with outright con-

<sup>8</sup>John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 41, 83; Khalid Ikram, *Egypt: Economic Management in a Period of Transition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 341–42. A crisp summary of the regime's predicament is to be found in a dispatch by the British ambassador to Egypt, Sir George Middleton. Middleton (Cairo) to Walker, no. 49, December 18, 1964, FO 371/178580, PRO.

<sup>9</sup>P. J. Vatikiotis, *Nasser and His Generation* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 215; Kirk Beatie, *Egypt during the Nasser Years: Ideology, Politics, and Civil Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 192–93; Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution*, 45–46.

quest. The nature of the threat was different. Up to 1962, it was the endless string of coups and conspiracies, funded by Egyptian money, aided by Nasser's agents, and encouraged by the vociferous blare of revolutionary propaganda emanating from Cairo radio, that made the peril palpable.

If Nasser inspired exaltation in the Arab masses, his most pronounced effect on their leaders was fear. Following his successful campaign against the Baghdad Pact—a pro-Western alliance Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Great Britain established in 1955—Nasser's rising star began to unnerve monarchs from the Maghreb to the Persian Gulf. His political triumph against the British, the French, and the Israelis in the Suez War of 1956 precipitated a historic reconciliation between the rival Saudi and Hashemite royal families.<sup>10</sup> Two years later, when Nasser announced a union between Egypt and Syria, the Hashemite kingdoms of Jordan and Iraq hurried to form a federation of their own. Although the federation dissolved over the summer as Iraq convulsed in revolution, the new nationalist regime in Baghdad soon turned out to be as hostile toward Egypt as the Iraqi monarchy had ever been.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as Nasser went from strength to strength after 1956, it was not only Arab monarchs who began to shift uneasily on their thrones. If, as some pan-Arab intellectuals proclaimed,<sup>12</sup> Egypt was the latter-day Prussia, and Nasser was its Bismarck, what attitude could the Middle Eastern analogues of Denmark, Austria, and France possibly assume toward the expanding entity other than alarm? This was as true in Amman and Riyadh as it was in Jerusalem and Ankara.

With hindsight it seems a foregone conclusion that sooner or later Egypt's restless rulers were bound to incur the wrath of the principal guarantor of the conservative order in the Middle East, the United States. The relatively harmonious history of relations between Egypt and the United States in the latter quarter of the twentieth century suggests that the logic of geopolitics alone did not foreordain a clash—it was the revolutionary policies of the Nasser regime that made conflict

<sup>10</sup>See Elie Podeh, "Ending an Age-Old Rivalry: The Rapprochement between the Hashemites and the Saudis, 1956–1958," in *The Hashemites in the Modern Arab World: Essays in Honour of the Late Professor Uriel Dann*, ed. Asher Susser and Aryeh Shmuelevitz (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 85–110.

<sup>11</sup>James Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 138–39, 151–55.

<sup>12</sup>'Izzat Darwazah and Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī, cited in Elie Podeh, *The Decline of Arab Unity: The Rise and Fall of the United Arab Republic* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 29.

all but inevitable.<sup>13</sup> Of course, it was these same policies that made Egypt appealing to Soviet policy makers. Although Nasser and Khrushchev might quarrel over Arab Communists, as they did in 1958, Moscow was far less likely to apply the brakes on Egyptian foreign policy than Washington. The paramount Soviet objective in the Arab Middle East was to minimize US influence in a region close to the southern borders of the Soviet Union. In practice, this boiled down to winning allies and turning foes against the United States. Whether or not Communism flourished among the Arabs—a dubious proposition in any case—was ultimately of secondary importance from the Kremlin’s perspective; as long as Nasser was making trouble for the Americans, he was worth the investment. The Americans too sought to block the spread of their rival’s influence in the region. But to anti-Communism they added a second, in some ways transcendent, objective: to assure the steady supply of cheap oil to the West. The oil factor translated into a much greater degree of commitment to the region. In practice, protecting the supply of oil meant preserving the regimes that pumped it.

The importance of Middle Eastern oil had three important implications for US policy. First, it meant that the United States had greater stakes in the Arab world than the USSR ever did. From this followed a greater determination to safeguard interests. Second, the centrality of oil meant that US stakes in the Middle East were *not*, for the most part, located in petroleum-starved Egypt. It was easy to lose sight of this basic truth in the heady years of Kennedy’s love affair with Nasser: ultimately, US interests in Egypt were derivative and negative. They were derivative because what mattered had less to do with Egypt itself but rather with Egypt’s role in the Middle East. And they were negative because the objective of US friendship was to restrain Nasser and avoid worse alternatives to his rule. In fact, the paramount US interest in stability ran exactly counter to the Free Officers’ commitment to upending the status quo; the illusion of common interests was a balloon waiting to be punctured.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the oil factor introduced a higher degree of complexity into US policy. Since the Americans had so much to lose, they had perhaps too much to defend. Whereas the Soviet position in the Middle East rested upon one country above all—Egypt under Nasser—the United States had at least one other key Arab ally to consider, the

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Malcolm Kerr, “‘Coming to Terms with Nasser’: Attempts and Failures,” *International Affairs* 43, no. 1 (1967): 67–69.

<sup>14</sup>John Badeau, *The Reminiscences of John Badeau* (New York: Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1979), 240.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whose strategic worth, in American eyes, surpassed that of Egypt.<sup>15</sup> This is one reason why, when Egyptian commandos descended upon the Arabian Peninsula in the fall of 1962, much more was at stake than the future of Yemen.

### IDEALISM AND PRAGMATISM IN NASSER'S FOREIGN POLICY

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Egypt's hegemonic aspirations was that they were disguised by, and at times confused with, the promotion of revolutionary ideals. This was especially true with regard to pan-Arabism. The Arab yearning for unity at midcentury provided fertile ground for the promotion of Egyptian-led solidarity among the weak and divided offspring of the defunct Ottoman mother-state. As is often the case with revolutionary entities, the sincere espousal of transnational ideals by the Free Officers camouflaged the less appealing pursuit of Egyptian state interests, which typically involved a naked struggle for power, and cloaked the subversive attempt to speak to the people over the heads of their leaders in a mantle of legitimacy. Whether by accident or design, the ambiguity of Egypt-as-state and Egypt-as-revolutionary-vanguard served the purpose of bolstering state influence quite well.

Indeed, all of the international causes associated with Nasserism—Neutralism, Pan-Arabism, Anti-Imperialism, Anti-Zionism, Arab Socialism, even Anti-Communism—are best understood both as desirable goals in and of themselves *and* as implements for the pursuit of Egyptian primacy. To take one further example: Egypt's principled opposition to imperialism. Nasser's anti-imperialism was suffused with a similar ambiguity between utility and belief. The adoption of anti-British policies was natural for a junta that rode to power on a promise to rid Egypt of its British overlords. Yet once independence had been achieved, the continued pursuit of a relentless campaign against British influence in the region did not stem merely from an ideological commitment to the founding principles of the revolution: it issued from a pragmatic desire to undercut one of the primary obstacles to the expansion of

<sup>15</sup>On the origins and evolution of the Saudi-American alliance, see Parker Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States: Birth of a Security Partnership* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). On the primacy of Saudi Arabia in US calculations, see Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99–100.

Egyptian power. As London's influence waned, anti-British speech and action came to serve a more subtle series of objectives as well. Opposition to Great Britain enabled Nasser to undermine the legitimacy of his rivals, which, with few exceptions, relied on the residues of British power. It also allowed him to threaten US interests without attacking America directly. Above all, Nasser's championship of the popular anti-imperialist cause cemented his position as natural leader of the Arabs.

The utilitarian aspects underlying much of Nasserist propaganda do not diminish the significance of ideology in Nasser's foreign policy. Indeed, the imperative of living up to vague revolutionary ideals lent an undisciplined character to an otherwise calculating leadership. Perhaps this was because Nasserism never amounted to an elaborate doctrine on the model of Marxism-Leninism, or because the Free Officers never produced anything approaching a coherent blueprint for the transformation of the state. In any event the underlying commitment to a sharp break with the monarchic and colonial past, to a radical transformation of Egyptian society, and to the uncompromising preservation of national honor made the consistent practice of pragmatism difficult. As students of Nasser have observed, this lent a distinctly messianic quality to Nasserism, which tended to push Egypt into uncompromising positions of principle and fanciful overextension.<sup>16</sup>

And yet the messianic strain coexisted with a strong dose of what Isaiah Berlin famously termed a "sense of reality," which trimmed the excesses of Nasser's ambition at key junctures in his career.<sup>17</sup> In fact, many of Nasser's major decisions bear the stamp of pragmatism: witness his decision to relinquish Egyptian claims to Sudan in 1954, his acquiescence in Britain's right to reoccupy the canal zone in time of war, his acceptance of a UN peacekeeping force on the Sinai Peninsula in 1956, his determination to let Syria go its separate way in 1961, and his resolution to sue for peace with Saudi Arabia in 1965.<sup>18</sup> But the distance from pragmatism to opportunism can be a short one. Indeed, all of the decisions listed above can also be explained as temporary concessions to reality, which did not signify long-term abandonment of a radical goal.<sup>19</sup> And many others came abruptly, bearing the marks of an impulsiveness bordering on recklessness: the surprise announcement

<sup>16</sup> Vatikiotis, *Nasser and His Generation*, 197; Shamir, "Fall of Messianic Nasserism," 10.

<sup>17</sup> Shamir, "Fall of Messianic Nasserism," 13–14.

<sup>18</sup> See also Brown, *International Politics*, 171.

<sup>19</sup> Doran, "Pan-Arabism in Historical Context," 105.

of an arms deal with Czechoslovakia in September 1955, the dramatic nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956, the hurried dispatch of Egyptian soldiers to Yemen in September 1962, and the sudden break with a decade of prudence in May 1967 come to mind.

In any event, ideology cannot fully account for the impetuous character of Nasser's foreign policy. There was an undeniable *restlessness* about the regime, reminiscent of Khrushchev's style of government, that lengthened the shadow of unpredictability the revolution cast on the region from 1955 to 1970. One thinks of the rapid shifts between verbal extremes; the sharp twists and turns in policy; the frenetic, periodic reorganizations of government.<sup>20</sup> Nowhere was this more apparent than in the realm of rhetoric. Nasser had a penchant for letting words run wild. To a certain extent the verbal excesses reflected personal character. But they were also the bread and butter of Arab political discourse in an age of uncertain legitimacy. While a conservative king felt compelled to tone down the rhetoric because it was a war he could not win, a populist president had a tendency to escalate the war of words because it was a war he could not lose. Regardless of how seriously it was intended, all the talk about revolution was perceived as a mortal threat by the shaky governments of the surrounding Arab states. And there was a limit to how forgiving sensitive monarchs could be toward a leader who specialized in invective *ad hominem*.

In large measure the instability of Egypt's foreign policy stemmed from an extreme emphasis on national prestige.<sup>21</sup> Adeed Dawisha is certainly correct in viewing this as a direct consequence of Nasser's obsession with dignity. The identification of the state with the charismatic individual at its head blurred the boundaries between the collective and the personal, creating a volatile situation in which any slight against the president constituted an inexcusable offense against the national honor, and vice versa. As an individual, Nasser was hypersensitive, ever quick to take offense and rarely one to swallow pride. And since the president personified the state, his sensitivities became Egypt's. This made anticipating Egypt a risky business for intelligence agencies the world over. And it made dealing with Egypt on a bilateral basis extremely trying.

<sup>20</sup>See, e.g., Leonard Binder, "Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser: Iconology, Ideology, and Demonology," in *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*, ed. Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 52.

<sup>21</sup>Adeed Dawisha, *Egypt in the Arab World: The Elements of Foreign Policy* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 136.

The unpredictability of the whole package—by turns messianic or pragmatic, impulsive or calculating, abusive or conciliatory—was enough to unsettle the most steely nerved of neighboring autocrats.

### THE NATURE OF MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICS

This book is primarily about local agency. In important respects it elaborates on the thesis Malcolm Kerr introduced in his classic work, *The Arab Cold War*. As Kerr intimated in a preface to its last edition, one of his main concerns had been “to dispel the notion of Arab politics as a projection of decisions made in Washington, London, Moscow, and Jerusalem.”<sup>22</sup> In his view, as in mine, Arab politics was first and foremost about Arab agency.

Implicit in this view was a rejection of what the late Elie Kedourie termed the “Chatham House Version” of Middle Eastern history, an interpretation still alive in contemporary analysis of the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> The Chatham House version, more a set of attitudes and assumptions than a school of history, privileges the deeds, and especially the misdeeds, of foreign powers—from the Ottoman Empire to the United States of America—over the actions of locals. According to this reading of history, many of the region’s endemic problems, such as sectarianism, political violence, and war, owe ultimately to the malevolent designs and false promises of external actors. At its most extreme, the Chatham House version tends to absolve indigenous governments of responsibility over their own destiny, portraying them as essentially passive—at worst acted upon by, at best reacting to the machinations of colonial powers and their agents. Whatever the merits of great power policies toward the Middle East over the last several centuries—and no one can deny their importance, for both good and evil—an excessive focus on external actors obscures local dynamics that are often far more important for understanding the major developments of regional history.

In this particular drama, set in Yemen of the 1960s, the deeds of external players—be they great powers, like the United States and the Soviet Union, or regional players operating offstage, like Israel or Iran—take a

<sup>22</sup> Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958–1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), vi.

<sup>23</sup> Elie Kedourie, *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies* (New York: Praeger, 1970).

back seat to those of the principal actors: Egyptians, Saudis, and Yemenis. While the familiar bogeymen of modern Middle Eastern politics (Americans, British, Zionists, and Communists) all play an important part in this story, their role is ultimately secondary to that of the main protagonists, Arabs whose fate lies largely in their own hands.

This is also a story about the nature of relations that developed among the Ottoman successor states after the Second World War. As was the case elsewhere in the developing world, decolonization provided the crucial backdrop for the practice of international politics. But it is remarkable how swiftly the supposedly common struggle against European domination came under the shadow of fraternal conflict. The myth of pan-Arab unity—a powerful one that continues to exert strong emotional attraction on citizens, policy makers, and scholars alike—tends to obscure the reality of pluralism, division, and conflict that has prevailed in the Middle East throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The Middle East in the postwar period is neither the romantic Eden of pan-Arabist theory nor the postcolonial trauma ward implied by Kedourie's opponents: it is a violent place where weak regimes vie for survival and supremacy using Arab nationalism as a battering ram.

Political weakness was arguably the most important source of regional instability and the driving force behind the disputatious character of inter-Arab politics. This weakness stemmed from one characteristic common to all the Ottoman Empire's Arab successor states: an acute deficit of legitimacy.<sup>24</sup> The legitimacy deficit operated on two planes of meaning simultaneously: first, in the sense of a just and accepted domestic order within each state, and second, in the sense of an agreed framework for the negotiation of change in the international order, without which the practice of diplomacy is impossible.<sup>25</sup> Whether monarchic or republican in form, all the young Arab regimes suffered to varying degrees from shallow political traditions, authoritarian government, minority rule, and a proclivity for political violence. As a consequence a deep sense of insecurity plagued every single member of the Arab League. Although they would not have appreciated the irony, the two principal adversaries in this story—King Faysal of Saudi Arabia, guardian of the holy sites of Islam, and President Nasser of Egypt, champion of secular pan-Arabism—shared a remarkable sense of vulnerability

<sup>24</sup>Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>25</sup>Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812–1822* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

and a similar preoccupation with domestic stability. At home, insecurity produced iron rule. Abroad, it bred aggressive rhetoric, ceaseless subversion, and an emphasis on ideological absolutes rarely susceptible to reasoned compromise. The resultant regional dynamic was one in which fragile regimes, preoccupied with the quest for legitimacy, engaged in a never-ending contest of one-upmanship. The image of an assemblage of despots housed in glass busily pelting one another with stones aptly depicts inter-Arab politics at the height of the Cold War.

### THE PLACE OF THE INTERVENTION IN EGYPTIAN MEMORY

The civil war in Yemen was the single most important foreign policy issue facing Egypt, the Arab world's center of gravity, between October 1962 and May 1967. Yet it has all but disappeared from the history books. Nowhere is this truer than in Egypt itself. An aging Egyptian veteran of the war, driven by a near-death experience in the late 1990s to break his vow never to speak out, titled his memoir *The Embarrassed Silence and the Yemeni Revolution*.<sup>26</sup> What baffled the author was the astonishing lack of scholarly or journalistic writing by Egyptians about the war—especially when compared with the substantial Yemeni literature on the subject—and the ensuing vacuum in public consciousness. To this day there are no good answers to such basic questions as: How many Egyptians died in the war? How much did it cost? What role did the Egyptian government play in the coup d'état that precipitated the intervention? Or even: What took place on the battlefield between 1962 and 1967? To grasp the scope of the omission one need only consider a hypothetical situation in which the Vietnam War—to which the intervention in Yemen is often compared—was virtually excised from American historiography of the twentieth century.

The biggest obstacle remains the closure of the relevant Egyptian archives to researchers of any nationality. As a consequence our position today is little better than it was in the mid-1970s, when Luwīs 'Awaḍ posed the question: “must the Egyptian people wait forty more years before they can read a documented historical study of the Yemen War, [explaining] why it began and why it ended . . . how many soldiers did we lose . . . and how many guineas did we expend?”<sup>27</sup> The closure

<sup>26</sup> Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Maḥrizī, *Al-Ṣamt al-ḥā'ir wa thawrat al-Yaman* (Cairo, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *Aqni'at al-nāṣiriyyah al-sab'ah: Munāqashat Taḥfīq al-Ḥakīm wa-Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal* (Beirut: Dār al-Qaḍāyā, [1975?]), 21–22. All translations are the author's unless stated otherwise.

of the archives has left the historical playing field to the memories and biases of aging participants. Unfortunately for historians, the caution—and pessimism—of one outspoken veteran continues to characterize official attitudes in Egypt: “As for when the story commenced, when Cairo knew about it, what was the position of those responsible concerning it, this I cannot expose or enter into details, for there are state secrets, which it is inappropriate to discuss or publish, and which it is necessary to preserve for a long period, until they lose their value in the course of time. Despite my conviction that only a paltry few know how the story began, and my great doubt that any of them will one day put in writing the entire truth, I will not waver here in refraining from setting down the historical facts, even though I know that the [archives of the] supreme command of the armed forces and the supreme command of the state are empty of documents that would aid the researcher in the future to discover the secrets of the Yemen revolution.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this explains why only one professional historian in Egypt has been brave enough to tackle the subject thus far. Published in 1981 and based entirely on published sources, Aḥmad Yūsuf Aḥmad’s *The Egyptian Role in Yemen* remains the most systematic study of Egyptian decision making during the war.<sup>29</sup>

To a certain extent, the relative silence on Yemen in Egypt over the last forty years reflects inertial perpetuation of the censorship the Nasser regime enforced over the course of the war. The easy shift from intimidating suppression to unconscious repression was accomplished through the sudden and forceful takeover of the national agenda by the *naksah*—the “setback” of June 1967. There was no opportunity to come to terms with the legacy of Egypt’s involvement in Yemen because the war was superseded immediately by a crisis of greater urgency, which captivated the attention of the politically conscious for the better part of a decade. This decade, moreover, passed mostly under the sway of Anwar Sadat, an enthusiastic proponent of the intervention in Yemen and one of those most responsible for its consequences. Although Sadat himself wrote quite openly, if briefly, about his role in the Yemen imbroglio, the subject can hardly be said to have gotten a full vetting in public.<sup>30</sup> In any event, the war received something of a free pass in the

<sup>28</sup> Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ḥadīdī, *Shāhid ‘alā ḥarb 67* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1974), 38.

<sup>29</sup> Aḥmad Yūsuf Aḥmad, *Al-Dawr al-miṣrī fī al-Yaman (1962–1967)* (Cairo: Al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmah li-l-Kitāb, 1981).

<sup>30</sup> Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 162–63.

decade of reckoning with Nasser's legacy following his death in 1970. There were more convenient failures on which to dwell.

More broadly, Egyptian reserve on Yemen appears to stem from deep-seated discomfort with the place of the episode in the country's history. A noble, selfless campaign on behalf of oppressed fellow Arabs on the one hand, it involved undeniable elements of fratricide and occupation on the other. Waged in the name of progressive pan-Arab ideals, the war also served the Egyptian leadership's less savory quest for regional hegemony at the expense of the more popular struggle against Israel and the more important struggle for Egypt's own development. It was hard to reconcile the noble ideals that inspired men to fight and die so far from home with the betrayal of those same ideals by those who sent them. It was, and still is, more convenient to debate the immaculately legitimate conflict with Israel, setbacks and all, than to come to terms with the Saudi-Egyptian war in Arabia.

Nevertheless, a number of Egyptians have broken the silence on Yemen over the years. The first to disturb the peace was journalist Wagih Abū Dhikrī, in *The Flowers Are Buried in Yemen*, a historical novel published not long after Nasser's death.<sup>31</sup> The former Yemen correspondent for the influential Egyptian weekly *Ākhir Sā'ah*, Abū Dhikrī recounts the history of the war from the vantage point of a commando officer. The narrative comprises the wartime correspondence between the man and his wife and relates the progressive disillusionment that affects each of them as they experience the painful gap between propaganda and reality on the ground in Yemen and in Egypt. No doubt intended as an allegory for the disillusionment of the Egyptian population with the war, the book challenged the official narrative of a just and necessary war. In his attempt to dismantle the triumphalist narrative of official Egypt, Abū Dhikrī ended up tipping the scales too far in the other direction. Moreover, as was the case with Abū Dhikrī's accomplished contemporary Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, author of the explosive tract *The Return of Consciousness*, there was something sour about the belated effort of a previously committed intellectual to deconstruct Nasserist mythology after the death of its idol.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, the attempt was

<sup>31</sup> Wagih Abū Dhikrī, *Al-Zuhūr tudfanu fī al-Yaman* (The flowers are buried in Yemen) (Cairo: Dār al-Waṭan al-'Arabī, 1977).

<sup>32</sup> Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, *'Awdat al-wa'ī* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1974). As Shim'on Shamir points out, this was a shortcoming common to all the early critics of Nasser in the 1970s ("The Fall of Nasserist Messianism," 49–50). See also Tharwat 'Ukāshah, *Mudhakkirātī fī al-siyāsah wa-l-thaqāfah* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1990), 1:16.

revealing; here was an important journalist, who had written dozens of enthusiastic reports from the field over the course of the war, confessing that all along he had been either lying or hopelessly naive. Abū Dhikrī exposed the lie that he and his fellow journalists had helped sustain, day after day, year after year, by means of tendentious reporting from the field delivered in an unfailingly exulting tone.

Another of the war's early critics was, surprisingly, Egypt's former chief of military intelligence and its first commander of operations in Yemen, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ḥadīdī. In *Witness to the Yemen War*, published in 1984, Ḥadīdī argued that the intervention had been a disastrous error on the part of the politicians, who let a private vendetta against the Saudi monarchy get in the way of the national interest.<sup>33</sup> Although Ḥadīdī focused his ire on the political echelon, he presented a damning portrait of corruption, insubordination, and incompetence in the armed forces.

Not surprisingly, most other former officials have chosen to exonerate Nasser, mitigate his responsibility, or minimize the costs of the intervention. Thus, for example, journalist and Free Officer Aḥmad Ḥamrūsh concluded in his multivolume study of the Nasser era that the intervention had been just and necessary.<sup>34</sup> Writing soon after Nasser's death, Ḥamrūsh exculpated the political echelon but condemned Egyptian military administrators for squandering, in their myopic militarism, a historic opportunity to transform Yemeni society and eliminate its feudal and tribal characteristics forever. In this Ḥamrūsh followed the tendency of the Egyptian Left to fault Nasser for engaging in half-way measures.<sup>35</sup>

Even officials prepared to grapple seriously with the legacy of the war have labored under a continued reluctance to criticize Nasser, reinforced by lack of archival materials. In 1992, General Maḥmūd 'Ādil Aḥmad published the most ambitious attempt by a veteran at a scholarly chronicle of the war. His massive *Memoirs of the Yemen War*, which relies on personal recollections, numerous interviews, and much of the available literature on the subject, ends with a two-hundred-page section dedicated to answering thirty-five sensitive questions about the war. Critical readers may disagree with some of Aḥmad's conclusions—an exhausting series of speculative calculations ends up confirming the

<sup>33</sup> Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ḥadīdī, *Shāhid 'alā ḥarb al-Yaman* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1984).

<sup>34</sup> Aḥmad Ḥamrūsh, *Qiṣṣat thawrat 23 yūliyyū*, vol. 3, 'Abd al-Nāṣir wa-l-'arab (Beirut: Al-Mu' assasah al-'Arabiyah li-l-Dirāsāt wa al-Nashr, 1974–), 227–69.

<sup>35</sup> Binder, "Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser," 55.

official body count—but he deserves credit for grappling with such matters in earnest.<sup>36</sup>

Those with the greatest access to archival materials have proven the most disappointing in this regard. Sāmī Sharaf, Nasser's private secretary, waited three-and-a-half decades before reflecting on his time in office in *Years and Days with Gamal Abdel Nasser*, published in Cairo in 2005. Although Sharaf did offer a series of revealing insights into the origins of the intervention, his description of the war was a stale and apologetic compendium of other sources. As the closest official to Nasser for almost fifteen years, Sharaf missed a valuable opportunity to come to terms with the intervention and its place in Egyptian history.<sup>37</sup> But it was Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, celebrated Nasser confidant and former editor of *al-Ahrām*, who squandered the biggest opportunity to come to terms with the legacy of the intervention. By virtue of his proximity to the seat of power, and his prolific writing on the subject, Haykal has become the doyen of Nasser interpreters. But in his massive three-volume study of Egyptian foreign policy, completed in 1990, Haykal gave the Yemen war short shrift, playing down the significance of the intervention and treating it in the apologetic vein characteristic of his work. Since he could not ignore it entirely, Haykal tried to stitch the war into a broad historical canvas depicting an international conspiracy against the Egyptian revolution culminating in the “trap” of June 1967. Given his unparalleled access to state archives, Haykal's failure to grapple with the problem of Yemen was a major lost opportunity for a serious historical reckoning.<sup>38</sup>

The fall of Mubarak may well affect Egyptian attitudes toward the war in Yemen—as it may toward other failures of the Nasser regime. The pent-up frustrations released onto the streets of Cairo in January 2011 had built up steadily over the preceding half-century as a consequence of pathologies spawned during the Nasser years. Although it is still difficult for many Egyptians—and for many in the Arab world and in the West as well—to avoid a deep sense of nostalgia for the charisma of Nasser and the grandeur of his era, the historian cannot ignore Nasser's responsibility for the problems he bequeathed to his successors.

<sup>36</sup> Maḥmūd 'Ādil Aḥmad, *Dhikrayāt ḥarb al-Yaman, 1962–1967* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Ukhuwwah, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> Sharaf, *Sanawāt wa-ayyām ma'a Gamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir*.

<sup>38</sup> Muḥammad Haykal, *Sanawāt al-Ghalayān* (Cairo: *Al-Ahrām*, 1988); *idem*, 1967: *Al-Infijār* (Cairo: *Al-Ahrām*, 1990).

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Chapter one traces the course of events from Syria's decision to secede from the United Arab Republic in September 1961 to Egypt's decision to intervene in the incipient civil war in Yemen exactly one year later. Sparked by humiliation at the Syrian secession, the intervention was the culmination of a decade of support for revolutionary movements on the Arabian Peninsula ultimately aimed at toppling the Saudi monarchy. The hastily made decision to send military forces to Ṣan'ā' was taken under the cloud of a power struggle within the Nasser regime, which carried serious consequences for military preparedness in June 1967.

Chapter two draws on declassified sources in Russian and Arabic to tell the extraordinary tale of clandestine Soviet support for the dispatch of Egyptian forces to Yemen at the height of the Cuban missile crisis. The Egyptian intervention was made possible by logistical support from the Soviet government, which viewed the civil war in Yemen as an opportunity to advance the cause of revolution in a region critical for Western security. The joint intervention in Yemen turns out to have been the high-water mark of the Soviet-Egyptian revolutionary endeavor in the Middle East.

Chapter three analyzes the breakdown of Egypt's crucial relationship with the United States as a result of the intervention in Yemen. Contrary to conventional wisdom, which posits a later break in US-Egyptian relations over Lyndon Johnson's pro-Israel policy, this chapter highlights the primacy of the US-Saudi alliance and the early emergence of Yemen as the central bone of contention in the final year of the Kennedy administration. The resultant suspension of American aid placed Egypt and the United States on a collision course that led to the Six-Day War.

Chapter four investigates Egypt's growing dependence on the Soviet Union as a result of the war in Yemen. It explores the tensions that developed between the two countries after Khrushchev's ouster as the Soviet government began to exploit Egypt's difficulties in order to obtain basing rights that would even the playing field against the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. The uneasy dependency on Moscow, in conjunction with the rupture in relations with Washington, shattered the edifice of Egyptian neutrality, which stood at the foundation of Nasser's international clout in the 1950s, and set the stage for the crisis that produced the Six-Day War.

Chapter five explores the interplay between the battlefield in Yemen and the domestic front in Egypt. The chapter begins with a revisionist account of the Egyptian counterinsurgency campaign, based on Egyptian memoirs and captured documents, and then proceeds to discuss three Egyptian taboos—casualties, cost, and corruption—demonstrating that the pursuit of revolutionary politics abroad contributed significantly to the enfeeblement of the revolution at home. Although the direct cost of the war in lives and treasure may not have been as great as some have argued, the indirect costs of the war proved catastrophic for Egypt.

Chapter six studies the vicissitudes of Saudi-Egyptian relations as the two countries attempted to negotiate a peaceful settlement in Yemen. Based primarily on US diplomatic cables and Egyptian memoirs, it demonstrates how negotiations between Nasser and Faysal faltered over mutual mistrust, exacerbated by the perennial spoiling effect of Yemeni politics. The chapter also shows how the Egyptians and the Saudis used the Arab summits, ostensibly convened to discuss the Palestine question, as a camouflage for the mediation of the conflict between them.

Chapter seven brings the story of the Egyptian intervention to a close. Covering the momentous year of 1967, it exposes the little appreciated link between inter-Arab tensions and the Arab-Israeli conflict and provides a revisionist interpretation of the Six-Day War as an unintended consequence of the Saudi-Egyptian struggle over Yemen. Egypt's defeat forced Nasser to confront the necessity of withdrawing his forces from the Arabian Peninsula and accepting Saudi financial aid. Both acts presaged a crucial shift in the regional balance of power in the late twentieth century as a result of the civil war in Yemen: the decline of Egypt and the rise of Saudi Arabia.

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The book that follows is not a comprehensive history of the Egyptian intervention in Yemen. Still less is it a history of the Yemeni civil war. It is primarily an attempt to situate an important but largely forgotten episode within the framework of Nasser's foreign policy in the 1960s. Even so, it necessarily reflects the limitations imposed on any historian of the modern Arab world. Given the impoverished nature of the secondary literature on the subject, a great deal of the research has been based on primary sources. Abundant foreign archival material has proven invaluable in reassessing Egypt's foreign relations. It has not, however, been particularly helpful in penetrating the fog shrouding the inner workings of the regime. Nor has it succeeded in illuminating the

battlefield. Memoirs, interviews, and press materials have been extremely useful in providing context and filling in blanks but often offer little more than flashes of light in the dark. The military aspects of the campaign in particular remain murky, making it difficult for the historian to place political decision making in its proper battlefield context, let alone produce an informed account of the war effort. This is not a position the historian of the twentieth century is accustomed to occupying. Future scholars who endeavor to construct a full narrative of the Egyptian intervention in Yemen will have to find a way to get at the material presumably locked away in the archives of the presidency and the Egyptian armed forces. Perhaps now, with the embers of Nasser's legacy still glowing amid the ashes of Mubarak's regime, it will become possible to unlock the secrets of the past and come to terms with one of the darker chapters in the history of a great nation.

\* CHAPTER ONE \*

## The Road to War

I sent a company to Yemen and had to reinforce it with 70,000 soldiers.

—*Gamal Abdel Nasser, in conversation with the historian Aḥmad Ḥamrūsh, 1967*

BEFORE DAWN ON SEPTEMBER 28, 1961, units of the Syrian military seized control of Damascus and put an end to the grand experiment in pan-Arab unity launched with Egypt more than three years before. Egypt's most famous journalist, Muḥammad Haykal, called Syria's unilateral secession from the United Arab Republic (UAR)—the infamous *infiṣāl*—"the greatest blow to the Arab revolutionary movement" since 1952.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the blow landed squarely in Egypt.

Nasser's star had been on the ascendant ever since 1955. With the formation of the United Arab Republic in February 1958, his influence in the Arab world attained its climax. To the crown of anti-imperialism he had won at Suez, the Egyptian president, in Damascus, added the mantle of Arab unity. And he did it without shedding a drop of blood. In the wake of his great victory in Syria, Nasser's inchoate call for unity seemed irresistible to many ordinary Arabs. Gripped by the quasi-messianic fervor that engulfed Nasser everywhere he traveled in the Arab world, they seemed ready to follow "Gamāl" wherever he might lead. Their leaders, however, had other ideas.

The union was an improbable one from the outset. Separated by sea and enemy territory, Egypt and Syria were widely disparate in terms of elite structure, ethnic makeup, economic foundations, and political culture. Egyptian policies compounded the structural weaknesses of the union. If the enormous disparities between the two states militated in favor of considerable autonomy, the Egyptians proved incapable of restraining the centralizing reflex of their regime. The appearance of a voluntary union between two equal entities masked a considerably less

<sup>1</sup> Haykal, *Sanawāt al-ghalayān*, 554, quoted in Podeh, *Decline*, 149.