

Nasser at War

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Nasser at War

Arab Images of the Enemy

Laura M. James

palgrave
macmillan



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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2006 978-0-230-00643-0

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First published 2006 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-1-349-28224-1 ISBN 978-0-230-62637-9 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230626379

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

James, Laura M., 1978–

Nasser at war : Arab images of the enemy / Laura M. James.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

1. Egypt–History–1952–1970. 2. Nasser, Gamal Abdel, 1918–1970. 3. Egypt–History, Military–20th century. I. Title.

DT107.83.J234 2006
962.05'3092–dc22

2006046444

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06

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Acknowledgements

So many people assisted in the writing of this book that to thank each as he or she deserves would make the acknowledgements longer than the work itself, 'contrary to usage'. I owe a great debt to the constant good advice and interest of my supervisor, Philip Robins. My editor, Michael Strang, was unfailingly helpful. Avi Shlaim's feedback shaped the original direction of my research. I am also immensely grateful to Louise Fawcett, Clive Jones, Deirdre Parsons, Barry Rubin, Noa Schonmann, Rachel Scott, Michael Thornhill, Dominik Zaum and one splendid anonymous reader, who commented on all or part of the manuscript. Valuable advice was provided at various stages by Hassan Abu Talib, Richard Aldrich, Nigel Ashton, Patrick Belton, Peter Catterall, John Ciorciari, Dominic Coldwell, Paul Dresch, Henry Frendo, Roy Giles, Anthony Glees, Galia Golan, Salwa Sharawi Gomaa, Bahgat Korany, Karma Nabulsi, Michael Oren, Richard Parker, William Quandt, Ya'acov Ro'i, Abdel Monem Said, Mustapha al-Sayyid, Amy Scott, Avraham Sela, Mohammad Selim, Ahmed al-Shahi, Jennifer Welsh, Jon Wilks and Ahmad Youssef-Ahmad. The original doctoral research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council; and some of the material appeared in my article, 'Nasser and his Enemies', in *MERIA Journal* (2005).

This project would have come to nothing without the patience and good humour of those individuals who consented to be interviewed, and I would like to express my gratitude to all of them. In particular, I am indebted to the Helal family and to Sir John and Lady Graham, for their generous hospitality; to Mohsen Alaini, Abdel Hamid Abubakr, Tharwat Okasha and Ahmed Said, who provided me with additional research materials; and to Ahmad Hamrush, Amin Howeidy and Sami Sharaf, each of whom answered my questions on more than one occasion. I am also very grateful to staff at the UK National Archives, the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Social Studies, Dar el-Kutub and the Egyptian Foreign Ministry; as well as to many individuals in Oxford, including Robin Darwall-Smith, Lucie Ryzova, Debbie Usher and Marga Lyall. In Cairo, I owe special thanks, for introductions and advice, to Mostafa Elwi-Saif, Yasser Elwy, Tariq Habib, Iman Hamdy, Samer al-Karanshawy, Gamil Matar, Summer Said, Gamal Shaheen, Mohammed Shokeir and Hisham Radwan. I am likewise indebted to Walid Abdelnasser, Khaled

Abubakr, Hadeel Alaini, Yoav Alon, Jehan Attia, Richard Belfield, Ian Boag, Jeremy Bowen, Simone de Brincat, Richard Crampton, Laura Engelbrecht, Gamal Hamed, James and Caroline Hanks, Charles Holmes, Abdalla Homouda, Mike Lattanzi, Charles Levinson, Abdel 'Aaty Mohamed, Sarah Mosad, Gamila 'Ali Raga'a, Mohamed Abdel Rashid, Kevin Rosser, Magda Shafei, James Vaughan and Ali Abdel Wahab.

Without the dedication of Abeer Heider, my Arabic would never have reached the necessary standard. Additional linguistic support was provided by Iman, Shima'a and Rose; as well as by the Hawamdeh family in Amman, the Ibrahim family in Damascus, Cynthia Dearin, Clive Holes, Ahmed Sidahmed and Jan Taaks. I owe much to my former teachers, especially Richard Wilkinson. Finally, for impressive patience and practical assistance of all kinds when I was in the throes of research, I owe a more-than-honourable mention to my long-suffering flatmates and friends, Josie Delap, Mariana de Castro, Michael Horton and Sophie Pownall; to my kind hosts, Lindsay Wise, Rachel Ziemba and Gerard van Rootselar; and, most of all, to my family.

I need hardly add that all errors remain my own.

Abbreviations

ANA	Arab News Agency
ACPSS	Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Social Studies (Egypt)
ASU	Arab Socialist Union (Egypt)
BBC-SWB	<i>British Broadcasting Corporation: Summary of World Broadcasts</i>
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
FLOSY	Front for the Liberation of South Yemen
FO	Foreign Office (UK, later Foreign and Commonwealth Office)
FRUS	<i>Foreign Relations of the United States</i>
FYW	<i>The Fifty Years War: Israel and the Arabs</i> (Interview Transcripts)
IDF	Israel Defence Force
IDP	<i>International Documents on Palestine</i>
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti (Soviet Intelligence)
MEDO	Middle East Defence Organisation
MP	Member of Parliament (UK)
NA	National Archives (UK, formerly Public Record Office)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NLF	National Liberation Front (Aden)
NSC	National Security Council (USA)
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLA	Palestine Liberation Army
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council (Egypt)
SAF	South Arabian Federation
SAS	Special Air Service (UK)
SCUA	Suez Canal Users' Association
SEC	Supreme Executive Committee (of the ASU)
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service (UK, also called MI6)
SOE	Special Operations Executive (UK)
UAC	United Arab Command
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAR	United Arab Republic
UNEF	United Nations Emergency Force
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic
YFM	Yemeni Free Movement

Introduction

The Nasser era in Egypt marked a critical turning point in modern Middle Eastern history.¹ From his 1956 triumph at Suez to the tragedy of the 1967 War, President Gamal Abdel Nasser became the ultimate symbol of Arab revolution. 'Nasserist' Arab nationalism, through a combination of new radio technology, radical rhetoric and personal charisma, changed the political face of the region and defined a common Arab identity. A common identity can be fortified by a common enemy, and this book assesses how Nasser's changing adversaries affected the nature of Arabism. It explains the failure of initial Egyptian attempts to improve relations with Britain, the former colonial power; the bitter dynamics of inter-Arab competition; and how the Arab-Israeli conflict at last reached an uncompromising impasse. Most significantly, it explores Nasser's gradual redefinition of the United States, from sympathetic collaborator to imperialist archenemy – an image that the USA seems unable to discard in the Arab arena.

Nasser's initial consolidation of power in Egypt following the Free Officers' *coup d'état* of 23 July 1952 soon came to be based on a more anti-Western foreign policy attitude, culminating in the Suez Crisis of 1956. Thereafter, Cairo began to promote revolution in the wider Arab region, through such adventures as the experimental union with Syria of 1958–61 and a lengthy intervention in the 1962–67 Yemeni Civil War. However, crushing defeat in the June 1967 'Six Day War' with Israel eventually exposed the hollowness of Arab nationalist pretensions. In the aftermath, the Egyptian leaders attempted to come to terms with their new environment through limited domestic reform and a national focus on the renewed War of Attrition with Israel. Nasser's death on 28 September 1970 abruptly terminated this epoch.

As a leading light of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Egyptian President was an important player on the world stage from the mid-1950s. He also dominated the Arab countries, as the political stances of rulers and revolutionaries alike came to be defined in terms of their attitude towards him. At home, Nasser's pre-eminence was evident. He was the regime's principal decision-maker in matters of war and peace.² There was a limited circle of people he might consult – former revolutionary colleagues, confidential aides, a very few respected experts – but he was never bound by their advice.³ When he wanted assistance in

formulating a policy, Nasser used to send a neat conference agenda to the people he meant to invite, remembers one such aide. The agenda specified place, time, purpose, attendance and the date by which the President expected to receive their written positions. The meeting itself would never last more than an hour or so, since Nasser believed 'the conference is not for discussing the problem, it is for taking a decision'.⁴

It may have been a brisk and militarily efficient management style; it was probably not conducive to a full and frank exchange of views among advisors. And there were no other routes through which the President was likely to be exposed to diverse opinions. He attached a high importance to knowledge, spending much of his time each day reading the foreign newspapers and secret internal reports.⁵ But Nasser's personal control of the apparatus of government created every incentive for subordinates to tell him what they thought he wanted to hear.⁶ In any case, his charismatic – and incredibly lengthy – speeches soon enabled him to shape the political preconceptions of a generation for whom he could do no wrong. The President's orations were continually lauded and disseminated by the state-controlled press.⁷ Political parties were banned and the influence of interest groups was minimal. Thus Nasser's own decided views regarding the international situation were subject to few checks and balances as they guided the formation of Egyptian foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s.

Any attempt to understand these views must address the problem of identifying reliable sources. Among Arab countries, Egypt is now relatively open to historical research. Nonetheless, access to archives remains difficult. Formal records of policy discussions, such as minutes of meetings and internal memoranda, are largely unavailable – except when they are reproduced, not necessarily accurately, in memoirs. Indeed, in the most critical cases, the documents may never have existed. It has therefore been necessary to compare an eclectic range of more partial accounts. This book draws on tapes, transcripts and contemporary translations of Nasser's keynote speeches, as well as the weekly *Al-Ahram* newspaper editorials by his close confidant Mohammed Hassanein Heikal, who was often perceived as the informal voice of the Nasser regime.⁸ Over 30 first-hand interviews with former Egyptian and Yemeni insiders – including a vice president, prime ministers, ministers, generals and ambassadors – were performed in Cairo, Alexandria and London. Recently published Arabic memoirs, Western archives and a range of secondary materials have also been useful.

Taken in isolation, most of these sources are problematic. Archived foreign diplomatic documents only contain second-hand accounts of

Egyptian decision processes. Contemporary statements intended for public consumption have obvious incentives to mislead. *Ex post facto* reconstructions of events, as narrated in memoirs and interviews, tend to be distorted by the universal human habit of rewriting the past, consciously or unconsciously.⁹ Effective analysis thus depends on comparing a range of sources, with painstaking reference to the original context.¹⁰ In the case of each contention made in a primary source, one must consider whether it might be better explained than by the theory that it is simply true. It is necessary to ask both why an assertion might be unintentionally inaccurate (due, for example, to lack of first-hand knowledge or the passage of time) and why it might be deliberately misleading.¹¹ Nonetheless, when assessed, analysed, compared, contrasted and generally taken with a hefty pinch of salt, the available sources shed a fresh light on Nasser's legacy of confrontation.

During Nasser's lifetime, he tended to be viewed in the West as an irresponsible rabble-rouser: wilfully undermining British and French interests in the Third World; siding with the USSR against the USA in the Cold War; and refusing to come to any reasonable compromise with Israel. Shortly after his death, however, both the journalist Robert Stephens and the politician Anthony Nutting published sympathetic biographies, which set the tone for most subsequent analysis. Each author had met the Egyptian President several times and experienced many of the events related at first hand.¹² Nevertheless, much new information on the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s has since become available, some of which is exploited in the latest biography by Saïd Aburish.¹³ In contrast to Stephens' explicit focus on political minutiae, the key strength of Aburish's work lies in his use of personal detail. His major purpose, however, is to explore the importance of Nasser's ideology in a contemporary context, arguing that Western opposition to Arab nationalism caused modern Islamic fundamentalism. In the end, perhaps none of these works entirely manages to avoid the biographer's snare of accepting at face value the subject's rationalisations of his own decisions.

Consequently, despite the existence of some excellent studies of Egyptian domestic politics under his rule, Nasser's periodic – and highly dramatic – foreign policy crises have never been systematically assessed in light of modern research.¹⁴ The omission is particularly remarkable since the perspectives of Nasser's adversaries in these crises have been the focus of much attention in recent years. There is a lively current debate on Anglo-American involvement in Egypt prior to the Suez affair.¹⁵ Several ground-breaking studies of secret British opposition to

Nasser in Yemen have been inspired by newly released archival material.¹⁶ Finally, the enhanced international profile of the Israeli-Palestinian problem has reignited interest in the 1967 War and its aftermath, which defined the parameters of the present *impasse*.¹⁷ This book draws on such fresh insights into the US, UK and Israeli viewpoints, in order to integrate them with recent revelations from the Egyptian side, previously published – if at all – only in Arabic.

The book analyses conflict decision-making in Egypt during the Nasser era by focusing on changing images of the enemy. When a country faces war, attention becomes sharply concentrated on the opponent.¹⁸ Leaders make foreign policy decisions with primary reference to the enemy's intentions and capability.¹⁹ In fact, however, they can only respond to their *idea* of the enemy, which will necessarily be a simplified and selective representation of a complex reality.²⁰ Nonetheless, it is possible to identify regularities in the way such images of the enemy develop, interact and endure. 'Perceptions of the world and of other actors,' avers Robert Jervis, 'diverge from reality in patterns that we can detect and for reasons that we can understand.'²¹ For example, adversaries' actions tend to be seen as more deliberate, centralised and co-ordinated than is in fact the case, encouraging the formulation of elaborate conspiracy theories.²² Furthermore, images of the enemy are resistant to change, since policy makers tend to interpret incoming information in line with their existing beliefs.²³

That raises an obvious problem. 'We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies,' Lord Palmerston told the House of Commons more than a century and a half ago. But how, if images are fixed, does the one transform into the other?²⁴ This book explores how conflicts can act as catalysts for shifting perceptions. Describing how Nasser and his regime viewed their various adversaries in an ongoing series of hostile confrontations – the Suez War, the Yemen War, the 1967 War and the War of Attrition – it demonstrates how such images help to explain choices that have long baffled historians. At the heart of the analysis, the rapid and resentful deterioration in relations between Egypt and the United States emerges as a constant theme. In a Middle East divided by internal rivalries and Cold War commitments, Nasser's rising star kindled the growth of a common Arab identity that defined itself in firm opposition to the West. It was to prove his most lasting legacy.