

Short Essay II: Nasser - Hero or villain?

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It was the middle of the Cold War, and while the infamous divide between East and West and Capitalist and Communist stratified, another assertive and independent figure gained traction - Gamal Abd al-Nasser. The Egyptian leader who would later embody "Nasserism" was caught between the Anglo-Egyptian tensions, in which Britain refused to evacuate its troops from Egypt, scared of losing the Suez Canal (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, pp.301-302). It was in a time of animosity, hatred, and inequality that, in 1952, Nasser led the Free Officers in a military coup, claiming to solve two of the country's main issues: unequal land distribution and Egyptian relations with colonial powers (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, pp. 303-307). This essay will analyze the misjudgments of Nasser's regimes regarding domestic and foreign policy.

Apart from dissolving the Parliament, abolishing the monarchy, and much more, the 1952 coup also implemented the Agrarian Reform Law of September 1952 (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p.307). It is worth mentioning that no significant change in the social structure can be made in a few years. Still, the Nasser regime challenged this norm by implementing a provision that limited the amount of agricultural land a single individual could own up to 200 feddans (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p. 307). In the end, this series of reforms did not strip the old landowning elite from all their wealth but did significantly reduce their political and economic power, pushing for a bill of rights to protect Egyptians' civil rights and introducing the country's tradition of plebiscites instead of elections (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p.308). Gettleman & Shaar (2012) is cautious about praising Nasser's domestic policies, emphasizing that, at first, Nasser's government was exalted throughout the Middle East for its developmental policies and commitment to social justice; however, when the regime outlawed all political parties and persecuted political dissent and radical movements, social justice in Egypt suffered dramatically (p. 329).

However, Nasser's dramatic foreign policy should be understood through a different lens - geopolitics. Gettleman & Shaar (2012) start with Nasser's Arab nationalism, which translated into advocating for foreign policy, triggering the wrath of Western countries and Israel and often misunderstanding Nasser as a communist (p. 329). He first challenged the West by joining the leaders of Yugoslavia and India and bluntly refusing to align Egypt with the Soviet or American blocks at the height of the Cold War (p. 329). The moribund Anglo-Egyptian relations did not improve, mainly due to the developments in Sudan; after back-and-forth negotiations, both countries signed the 1953 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement, recognizing Sudan's right to self-determination (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, pp.308-309). A year later, the crisis sparked again, with the Suez Canal being the object of contention. Despite the 1954 treaty providing for the evacuation of all British troops from the Suez Canal, the crisis escalated with the Baghdad Pact and the clash between imperialism and the Arab's desire for sovereignty (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p.309). As much as Nasser's support grew within the Arab community, he alienated himself from Western allies. For example, his agreement with Czechoslovakia to purchase Soviet military equipment strained relations with London and Washington and solidified Nasser's image of a leader who would not only break the imperial domination but would use his country's military strength to avenge the "disaster of 1948" (p. 310). He was navigating dangerous waters, and the more he would rise, the higher his fall would be. When the US and other Western powers refused to give Egypt loans, Nasser dramatically nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 to fund national projects, meeting with more hostility from the West (p. 311). This led to a tripartite attack on Egypt, the Suez Canal crisis, and a heroic victory for Nasser (p. 313). He became the Pharaoh of the people. Yet, his popularity still depended on further foreign victories, to which the UAR's creation and imminent death did nothing to help his reputation (p.314).

As the years went by, Nasser saw his power and popularity slowly diminishing due to his distaste for sharing power, increasing societal changes, challenges of unifying the Arab world under Egyptian leadership, more military defeats, and a series of complex events (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, pp. 319-324). "Nasserism was a feeling, a sense of excitement, and hope for a new Araba future" (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009, p.321), but with any other type of excitement, the party will have to end at some point.

Word count: 724

References

- Cleveland, W. L., & Bunton, M. (2009). *A History of the Modern Middle East* (4th ed.). Westview Press.
- Gettleman, M., & Schaar, S. (Eds.). (2012). *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader*. Grove Press.

Appendix A - LO Appendix

#il12001_regionaldynamics: I applied this LO thoroughly by examining the elements influencing political, cultural, social, and economic behaviors in the region during Gamal Abd al-Nasser's presidency in Egypt. I gave a detailed overview of Nasser's domestic policies, such as the implementation of the Agrarian Reform Law and the ensuing diminution of the old landowning elite's dominance. In addition, I wrote about Nasser's foreign policy, focusing on his support for Arab nationalism and his conflicts with Western powers, particularly during the Suez Crisis. By researching Nasser's ascent and collapse, I displayed a knowledge of how his actions influenced regional dynamics, highlighting the interdependence of political, social, and economic variables in creating not only the dynamics of the region at the time but also the region's interactions with other regions and powers.

AI statement: I did not use AI to write this essay, except for ChatGPT to evaluate my work once it was complete.