Eastward Drift of Arabs and Iranians

*Ferris on Soviet Arabs, American Arabs, and Islamists in the Cold War*

It should have taken five weeks, but it lasted five years. Yet, Abd an-Nasir's intervention in Arabia's North Yemen—the South of which was in British hands, and securing access to the Sues Canal played a major role in all considerations—didn't come out of the blue. In his first book, Jesse Ferris wants to show how Egyptian troops in Yemen became a part of president Abd an-Nasir's defeat by Israel in the war of June 1967. He uncovers how the intervention accelerated the demise of Nasirism. Most recently, all of this became popular in Cairo again. A civilian-military axis deposed the "Muslim Brotherhood's president," Muhammad Mursi, in the 2013 "coupvolt," a merger of coup d'état and revolt. The new "1/3 Sues Canal" was finished a year later. And the Egyptians debated sending troops to Yemen to help the Sunni Saudi coalition, and Cairo guards with its navy ships the Bab al-Mandab to stop Shia Iranian deliveries of weapons in the battles against the al-Huthis.

In this light the author, who works at the Israel Democracy Institute of Jerusalem, wrote a highly topical book. I will name the chapters, discuss the key thesis and add notes, also on basic German insights which may lead to a more global view on the research and methods.

**Background**

First a few words on the background. Ferris mentioned Cairo's 1953 intelligence plans to spread revolts among the Arabs (32). A year later began the first Egyptian police training mission in Sana. In March of 1958, northern Yemen—the southern Aden was still a British Crown colony for three decades until 1967—joined the United Arab Republic, UAR. Since a turn to the Socialist nationalization and centralization after 1960 also affected Syria, that UAR of Egypt, Syria and soon Yemen was not to last long. A coup in Damascus ended it on September 28, 1961. About a year later, on September 18, 1962, Yemen's ruler imam Ahmad Bin Yahya Hamid ad-Din passed away. His son Muhammad al-Badr succeeded him.

A week thereafter officers under Abdullah as-Sallal rebelled in Sana. They stormed the palace and proclaimed a republic. Muhammad, in his mid-thirties, escaped. Thus, the fight of Royalists, supported by Saudi Arabia and other conservative monarchies, against the Republicans, aided by Abd an-Nasir and radical leaders, widened the Mideastern Cold War. The term "Arab Cold war," though, is too narrow: it leaves out main actors like Israel, Turkey and Iran.
Contents
The first three chapters deal with results of: Syria's act to secede from the 1958 United Arab Republic in 1961; Soviet support to send Egyptian forces to North Yemen a year later during the Cuban missile crisis; and the breakdown of Cairo's ties to America in 1965 as result of Egypt's continued support for the revolt in Yemen. Chapter four deals with Cairo's growing dependence on the Soviets. How the interplay shaped between the fronts in Yemen and at home on the Nile, is aptly illuminated by chapters five to seven as well as the Saudi-Egyptian ties, and the striking year of 1967 with a fresh look into the Six-Day or June War.

The afterword contains the thesis (295-311), though Ferris uses the term "revolution" too lightly where "revert" or coup d'état suffices (233). Egypt lost Sudan in 1956, but it won it again and "the glory days of Arab revolution" lay not yet fully in the past in 1967 through the decline of Nasirism. Such conclusions come too early. On the contrary, as we can see lately too, the people in the Middle Eastern region moved ahead by their usual and unusual coupsvolts.

Jesse Ferris stresses that the suspension of American help in 1965 drove Egypt into debt to the Soviet Union. But the Kremlin, he argues too, was in no position to make up for the loss of US aid. The Cold war ties between Moscow and Cairo, 1955 to 1975, were framed by one US president refusing aid to Egypt, and another completely succumbing to it. Claiming that for Cairo the ties with Washington had always mattered more than with Moscow, remains unproven as the thesis of the decline of Egypt and the rise of Saudi Arabia (298). Both lands fulfil specific regional roles, one as civilizational center, the other one as "protector of Holy Sites" and generator of related ideologies. But the monarchy was no real match for Egypt.

Western Decolonization, Eastern Ideologies
What about Egypt's revolutionary exports Soviet style? Ferris opines that it produced not liberty, prosperity and unity but repression, expropriation and bloodshed. This was true in in the P.L.O., in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Sudan as examples until September 10, 1967, as the Egyptian withdrawal from Yemen began, and six infantry brigades with 25,000 troops left. Their posting on Sinai convinced the author that this move ignited a fire that lead to war. There are texts on other war reasons including misjudgments by Arabs and Soviets.

Egypt's withdrawal from Yemen was a small spark, and not the war's main reason. It was just a brief war, troops didn't play a key role. In Yemen, the Soviets filled the void due to an appeal by president Abdullah as-Sallal in Sana. In November Moscow's airlift of arms and officers began. In South Yemen a Muscovite tale of turmoil started as the British left on November 29, 1967. Telling this story as well, is a big challenge that awaits a new book.

Was Yemen's decolonization complete, as Jesse Ferris alleges, or did the Soviets start it anew? In 1970, after Abd an-Nasir's death, emerged just a partial de-ideologization of inter-Arab ties. The left and conservatives remained active. Socialists went on in Algeria, Syria and Iraq. The Saudis exported much more of their Wahhabi Islam and promoted their Salafi brand of global Islamism. The continuing and expanding ideologies pointed at major shifts of identities. Some Arabs turned away from liberalism or "godless Socialism." And a new wave of Islamism relied on an older "foreigners gift," the global German-Ottoman input of 1914.
Ferris, born in 1972, likes to provoke: Yemen's civil war was the single most important foreign policy issue facing Egypt from October 1962 to May 1967 (16). It was not. The war in Algeria and the Arab-Israeli conflict ranked at the top. Even Mideastern echoes of the German question, the German-Arab imbroglio, topped Yemen. Americans dealt with Arab plans "to algerianize the Palestine situation by a credible Palestine Entity" and the Egyptian aid to Congolese rebels. Look at the agenda of US Chiefs of Mission in 1965 (see below doc. 1, page 5). Yemen moved in the rear, though Ferris is right that it has almost vanished. It was time to probe this Yemen war's role in the Egyptian-Saudi-Arab Cold war.

**Source Limits**

An obstacle, Ferris says, remains the closure of Cairo's archives, especially records of the supreme command of the armed forces and the state. I add, in the light of the ideological role of Arab Socialism that most of the 1960s protocols of the Arab Socialist Union are available. They are telling basic ideological trends in president Abd an-Nasir's circle and adopting a Soviet Socialist model to Egypt. His Yemen gamble was rooted in this world view. After his defeat in 1967, he said to the East German envoy Gerhard Weiss with an eye to new East bloc aid: "Without declaring it officially, in reality we are Communists."  

Having not fully recognized the role of that overbearing ideology is a major gap in this otherwise highly innovative study. Inaccessible records, Ferris continues, left the field to doubtful memories and biases of aging actors. But there are two record groups with solid files: American plus German East and West. Surely, the reader would have wished for a fine tuned account on how the American administrations of Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson coped with the Soviet-Egyptian challenge and how it translated into antagonistic advises given by the Germans East and West close to Abd an-Nasir and his men. Ferris began as if there has been some ideological point zero in 1952.  

**Four Trends**

But there were four intertwined trends: Islamist, liberal, Nazi and Socialist. They can be seen in German records on Abd an-Nasir and Yemen. But East German sources, Ferris claims, proved little that was original or relevant (314). He must have been in the wrong archives. Likewise, he missed the secondary German literature on that topic. These gaps lead to a misunderstanding of inner and outer factors in history to which I shall return soon.

Otherwise Ferris delivered what was possible by other than Arab records. He knows the limitations and writes that his book is neither a comprehensive history of the Egyptian intervention in Yemen nor a history of Yemen’s Civil War (22). He points at a meager secondary literature on the subject and that memoirs, interviews and press material, filled the blanks as flashes of light in the dark. I will discuss now three points of contents, two matters with a "Berlin view" and give an example in this story on the key ideological role.

**Chatham House History**

The author says the "Chatham House version of Middle Eastern History" privileges deeds and misdeeds of foreign powers over actions of locals. According to this approach, many of the region's problems stem to the false designs and promises of external factors. But this focus obscures local dynamics that are often far more important for understanding of the regional history (14). Although I share this main concern, the mix of external and internal factors evolves in more dynamic changes: what was an outside factor may soon turn into
an inner factor by some delicate shifts, and vice versa. Ideologies belong to basic drivers of this process and their perception lies within a wide range of changing multiple identities.

**Western Insights, Eastern Identities**

To illuminate this, I now offer three examples. Ferris writes, in 1960 Egypt was free of the foreign domination, and Great Powers competed there to arm the land, build its industry, and feed its people. A decade later Cairo had lost a war, territory and Abd an-Nasir's role came into question. The economy laid in debt-ridden ruin, depended on the Saudis, and the defense was based on a Soviet quasi-occupation of the Nile valley. This is wrong. Since in 1960, all key decisions were already taken: in the March crisis of 1954 the officers decided for Socialism in Egypt (see Ahmad Hamrush's history, Khalid Muhi ad-Din's memoirs).  

Egyptians asked the East bloc for arms—announced in 1955—as Americans refused to finance the Aswan High Dam. This triggered a chain of events: the nationalization of the Sues Canal, the Sues War and Abd an-Nasir's first trip for two weeks to the Soviets in 1958. He returned with a strong will and concrete ideas on how to turn Egypt into a "Soviet" state with a big industrial public sector and one ruling party, soon the Arab Socialist Union.

Clearly, in Abd an-Nasir's case, an original factor from the outside evolved into a fully internalized left vision against the "imperialists, Zionists, Communists and reactionaries." The knowledge how this ideology fell on fertile soil and how the Free Officers adopted it, is the key for the "revolutionary exports" to Yemen. I add, before this, Egyptians were long impressed by Nazism too. Then they hired hundreds of ex-Nazis, some of whom advised Abd an-Nasir in his 1952 coup against London and continued a genocidal course against Jews and Israel.

Therewith I come to my second example. Since American, East and West German files are open, we can triangulate them about the same events in Egypt and Yemen. Typically, an American report contained basic data, information about atmosphere, sentiments and idiosyncrasies. A 1965 key document of the US Chiefs of Mission Conference says: "We deal with individuals, we cooperate with governments, but we support peoples." Here is the clue: most individuals morphed into "Socialist collectives," state and non-state actors like the leftist parties or Islamist brotherhoods. Especially non-state actors have been often neglected.

Usually, a West German text was dry, full of facts. Its East German counterpart contained evidence fitting into an ideology and how to interpret it, delivering a whole world view. Since East Berlin's envoys shared the Egyptian world view, or vice versa, they told a lot about problems of their comrades on the Nile. Readers from liberal Western states are not used to the grip of ideologies. Many have a hard time discovering clues of Mideastern Cold war files. We need to deconstruct such text codes, though. Absent of recent Arab files, East and West German files offer keys, chiefly if you contrast them with Anglo-American files.

Thirdly, besides often not discovering the internalized strains of ideologies, some do not see the dynamics of multiple identities. Ferris gives examples when he speaks about the Arab nationalists. "Nationalists" reacted as Muslims too, and vice versa. When useful, they evolved into Islamists as in the late 1950s. Their identity's hierarchy had greatly changed.
So "nationalists versus Islamists" was already then questionable. It mislead not only the Westerners to wrong analyses, but it does so with historians in retrospect. There were the multiple layers of shifting identities, not fitting in black-and-white judgments. But this is a more general problem not to be solved in one book. A line of the above quoted discussion paper was: "The widening gap of misunderstanding between the U.S. and the Arab revolution." It seems to me that this point remains unresolved to this day. Thus, I attach the whole schedule and the discussion paper of 1965. It mentions Yemen three times, though it puts it in a forgotten corner, where it finally lingers no more, partially due to this book by Ferris.


Before I come to my final point, some notes perhaps for a next edition of this fine book. Usually, tuwaqqifu means "he stops" not "will stop." This would be satuwaqqifu (226); it is Leitmotiv (220), and kaffat not kaffat (241). Abd an-Nasir's will to export revolts did not bring him into a collision course with his neighbors (8, 28), look at his emulators in Algeria, Libya or Syria.

He never produced a coherent blueprint for a state transformation (12)? Sure, he did, consult the 1962 National Charter. The Egyptian was backed by the Sudanese rulers as well (28). Pan-Arabism rooted not just in "Syria and Iraq," but unfolded as a part of, and in opposition to, Ottomanism (2).

Picture: Egyptian 1962 stamp on the National Charter
Abd an-Nasir's chemical warfare of 1966 (260) could have been more investigated. The grand mufti of Jerusalem Amin al-Husaini mediated in the 1934 Saudi-Yemeni war. So he knew the imams Yahya, Ahmad and Muhammad, and swayed Ibn Saud in Egypt and Yemen. Both were close. In 1958, it is possible that the mufti instigated the assassination attempt on Abd an-Nasir (25, 225). Al-Husaini engaged as hidden mufti of Saudi politics.

**German Input**

Since there is an Anglo-American wealth in the writing of Mideastern history, I shall add a perspective from Berlin which might widen the view point to something more inclusive. Before 1900, in the absence of effective parties and parliaments, from Berlin's view point there evolved regional agents: anti-Christian brotherhoods, and the military. While Max von Oppenheim, the kaiser's Abu Jihad for two decades in Cairo, named in his 1914 jihad plan eight Islamist brotherhoods (Egypt's 1928 Muslim Brotherhood became number nine) in Istanbul the Prussian general Colmar von der Goltz and his heir Otto Liman von Sanders were training many Ottoman officers since 1882: an outer factor turned into an inner one.

Those two lines, relaying on the 1) Islamists and 2) military, often moved the "German" Ottoman officers who also served after 1918 as leaders in upcoming successor states like Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Berlin's sway reached to Iran with the idea of an allied Islam Pact. Having no Middle Eastern colonies, it became Berlin's focus to stab the European rival in its colonial back by inciting Islamist revolts and military coups before and in world wars. Without an empire of their own, Germans spread the theories of "anti-imperialism."

A chain reaction unfolded in Africa, Asia and Europe, for the Kaiser, later Hitler, invited trainees to Potsdam and Berlin (about 100 Ottoman officers until the Young Turk's revolt in 1908). Berlin provided money, Krupp's guns, expert linguists, and methods or ideas how to globally jihadize transnational Islamism and national militarism. The imperial and the revolutionary ways were to be linked in an allied Islam Pact with Turkey, Arabs and Iran.

Swayed by the Nazis, thereafter by the Palestinian Islamist mufti Amin al-Husaini and thousands of ex-Nazis in Cairo, the Young Officers of Muhammad Najib and Abd an-Nasir hired Germans for three goals: to train the military (also guerrilla warfare in British Sues Canal and in Aden), for the expertise in coups against Great Powers, and fighting the Jews and state of Israel. Berlin's double line, compatible with "ideological colors" black, brown, red and green totalitarian strains, resulted in two self-fulfilling adaptations after 1945. It was Abd an-Nasir's military, his 1952 coup, that initiated a state policy of spreading revolts and related ideologies in red pro-Soviet versions, called Arab Socialism. Often flying under the flag of pan-Arabism or leftist expansive Third Worldism mixing Islam and Socialism as in al-Qadhafi's case, it enthused people from Algeria via Egypt and Iraq to Yemen. It was Ayatullah al-Khumaini's 1979 Islamist revolt and the ensuing state to export green Islamist revolts, still ongoing, that fitted the second line. What are the internal and external factors?

Of course, Mideasterners did not act as puppets on some German strings. On the contrary, in their "Islamic prism" they went along on three ways: refused, adopted and adapted this sway of half a century. Ideological strains promoted this Islamist, fascist, Nazi and Soviet impact. It lingered on in the Cold war in the other half century also in its West German and East German fashions. This came to the fore in the "-isms" of left and right guiding leaders or events. Exploring them all, offers more profound insights into this contemporary history.
East Berlin continued on Soviet lines with devastating success in Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and even in Afghanistan. Today’s lands with massive bases of Islamists belong to Abd an-Nasir’s former left radical camp as many 1962 leftists became 1992 Islamists. There are two points on the writing of Middle Eastern history: it is still too dominated by Anglo-American views and methods leaving out German, Russian, French and Italian impacts, and, above all, the actions of Mideasterners based on their own records.

In this light, Jesse Ferris left the "old rules, dangerous game" school of mainly gleaning US and British works by also drawing on Russian, Arabic and Hebrew files. An ultimate book, however, would include rivaling German files on Yemen North and South. The main thesis that Egypt’s removal of troops from Yemen to Sinai caused the 1967 war remains too unconvincing. In his best chapters, the author shows how Abd an-Nasir made himself key to Mideastern interests. Both, Jesse Ferris and Abd an-Nasir, thus offer unique insights.

I hope for a wide readership of this study also by Arab, American and Russian leaders. No doubt, Vladimir V. Putin wants to reclaim history by enlarging his Mideastern camp, to which belongs this time ex-adversaries like the Chinese Communists (see "Near Eastern Trends Favoring the Sino-Soviets," p. 8). Islamist rulers in Tehran, and all their Shia/Sunni proxies. The latter will gain if they keep an empire or caliphate. Try to exchange the words "Nationalism" by Sunni/Shia Islamism (below p. 8-9). You may see, where Mideasterners will go in the "eastward drift of Arabs and Iranians," to the detriment of their people. The Western leadership is weak, inept. Yet, they invite back to the Mideast Russian and Chinese leftists whom they used to roll back for 60 years. Today, they let them build axes with old clients from Egypt via Syria and Iraq to the Islamists, also in Tehran. They jumped from "oppose it" to "join it," see below p. 9 "alternatives to radicals." Wolfgang G. Schwanitz


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1 For the Protocols of the Arab Socialist Union see my article: West- und ostdeutsche Bemühungen um das Aswan-Hochdammprojekt und die Nationalisierung der Sueskanalfirma, in Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, ed., 125 Jahre Sueskanal, (Hildesheim: Olms 1998), 218-240; for archives and bibliographies, East and West German records and books related to America, Middle East and Europe see my bibliography in Islam in Europa, Revolten in Mittelost (Berlin: Trafo Verlag 2014), 681-746.


3 The West German Ambassador to Cairo (and Yemen), Dr. Günther Pawelke, left quality papers on Egypt and Arab lands. He traveled from Aden to Sana, in fall of 1953. Parts of his manuscript of 65 pp., are in his book: Der Jemen, das verbotene Land [Yemen, the forbidden land] (Düsseldorf: Econ Verlag 1959), 212 pp.


against them. From the Arab view they subsidize a compliant regime in Jordan, they recognize the oil industry, they subsidize Israel, they hold special treaty rights in the Arab Peninsula, and they monitor bases attached to the area of Soviet attack. The Arab revolutions believe the Soviets can do no less in the area than the West has already done. The Soviets are kindred spirits and purveyors of weapons; the West clings to imperialist political, military, and economic arrangements that perpetuate Arab subjugation. Soviet advice has already infiltrated the inner circles of the countries in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan—outright confrontation between the Arab and the West could provoke a Viet-Nam situation.

3. Arab Nationalism

This is a trend that warrants special attention, since it can operate either to our advantage or disadvantage, depending on how we play it. In the short run, Arab nationalism is a stimulus of special Western policies; in the long run, it may be the best bulwark against anti-Western infiltration.

1. The Unity Treaty

This is a growing Arab crusade for nationalism, based on the acts to strengthen Arab defense against foreign intrusion, to gain a more influential voice in international society, to put all resources to work in her own cause, to create a market for the products of Arab industry, and to reduce opportunities for playing off Arab states against each other. The chief spokesmen of this doctrine is Nasser, who recognizes that Egypt as the most populous and most central Arab state has most to gain if the doctrine prevails. More than any other Arab state, Egypt has most to lose if it fails. He unabashedly wants to create a wider Egyptian leadership that could if necessary hold the united Arab crossroads without outside help. He starts to be a classic of non-alignment; the specialist at playing off East against West.

2. The Doctrine of Particularism

This is the nearest the Arab states are to a form of trusteeship. In Syria, the regime is trying to build up a state-oriented army to a battalion against a rebellion of tribes; the indigenous population of Israel is being translated into better educated Arabs from outside. As the net the Egyptians are exploiting this trend by preparing to sweep Arab front against Israel. However, if they get too heavily involved, countless fronts of Egyptian expectation could clog the anti-particularistic trend.

4. Western Military Presence

This, the United Nations and the Arab League, have been the U.S. friends in the area, have found valuable windows to the West.

3. Proxy States

An extensive effort of communist infiltration and support, not only to Western concepts of private acceptance and how thought to the state which the communist interests have so far been combined by that means to the maximum advantage of the United States. Special concern for the United States are now being made by the United States.

5. Western Middle East

As the United Nations and the Arab League, the United States friends in the area, have found valuable windows to the West.

1. Social Democrat

The power in which the people of the Arab East as long as armed and not been armed by a government with the West, whose rule of reason has undermined Arab nationalism, even as its medicine has multiplied the pressure of population on the land. From an inadequate economic base, governments are struggling to meet growing expectations. If they fail, their bases will fall prey to Jordan and Communist forces; if they succeed, they may be pressuring a number of the United States, who have so far been combined by reciprocal sources of income. However, the index of nationalism which have been adopted as insidious to meet the maximum advantage of the United States, Special concern for the United States are now being made by the United States.

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gate. If we should go into outright opposition, the Arab
nationalist attitude would probably evolve from unfriendliness
to hostility.

E. Alternative Strategies for Dealing with Radical Arab Nationalism

1. Deny IE - This strategy would imply attack on Western inter-
ests and pro-Western governments. It would push the Arabs closer
to the Soviets. It would divert Arab attention from economic
development to a crucial role. However, we might lose. Our
strategy would cost the U.S. from $600-$700,000,000 per month
except at unacceptable cost, not to mention the risk of touching
off an East-West breeze war. In any confrontation continued to
political and economic devices, the West would have the advantage
of power and the Arabs the advantage of position; both would
suffer; only the Soviets would gain. Conservative Arab regimes
would be under great pressure to break their ties with the West.
Two states intermediaries (access to oil, transit rights, investments, trade relationships, free access to the Red
Sea, exclusion of special Soviet position) would be placed in
jeopardy.

2. Join IE - This strategy is equally unrealistic. It would be
morally indefensible and economically impossible to betray our
commitments to the non-friendly governments in the area. Mor-
over, we would be giving up too soon. We can perceive a trend
toward radical nationalism, but the end-product will undoubtedly
be mediated by traditional, conservative, and regional forces.
We should not forsake that inter-active process.

3. Adapt to IE - Our indicated strategy therefore, is to defer to
the inevitable trend, but maintain a mandate capability to im-
pose economic and political devices. We should have at least two
strategies: (1) the string of strategy which would go on all fronts
in confrontation with the West. In order to maintain the
Arab government, however, there are elements working for the
quiet, non-coercive resolution of differences with the West.
We can support such state-like elements and exert
a constructive influence on events if we maintain the following
points:

a. Immateriality - we should take no sides in intra-area disputes.
We should welcome open competition between the West and the
Soviets, and encourage the evolution of power. (In the M. thesis,
we can try to focus on areas of common interest with each side). We should not
try to isolate our state of the areas -- least of all the U.A.R.

b. Aid - Our economic strength can be our best tool. The U.S.
should provide enough surplus wheat to thwart famine and
participate in development programs, insofar as the recipients' polities and national resources allow, in order to promote
Western private investment and a gradual rise in the standard
of living.

c. Continuity - U.S. policy is long-range, not to be allowed
by isolated events. We want every non-West government to
recognize the U.S. will support its development as long
as it respects vital U.S. interests and carries its share
of the load. We should not work against any incumbent regime,
however unfriendly. We deal with individuals, we cooperate
with governments, but we support peoples.

d. Envision - In the long run, we seek to keep the Arab world
in economic and cultural contact with the West long enough
for the benefits of the Western system to be felt and
leading them to seek alliances that will lead the area in the
social-economic matrix of the Atlantic community. Aid is a
two-way street: it opens the recipient to the products,
investments, and ideas of the donor. Its acceptance is a
functional surrender of sovereignty -- an advantage that
in the course of time can be built up into a position of
commanding influence. To be most effective, our influence
must be subtly applied. We cannot attach blatant political
conditions without raising doubts about our motives.

e. Force - For emergencies, the U.S. should maintain sufficient
military force to act unilaterally to protect vital American
interests.