



The Heikal Papers: A Discourse on Politics and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser

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Introduction

Mohammed Hassanein Heikal is perhaps the most prolific and influential presidential chronicler in Egypt's modern history. He has written many volumes on the Egyptian perspective of the Arab-Israeli Wars and continues to write books that help Egypt's intellectuals rationalize modern events. He has spent over five decades as a journalist, presidential confidant to Egypt's presidents Nasser (1954-1970) and Sadat (1970-1981), as well as editor and commentator. Heikal had the unique opportunity to spend 10 hours with President Gamal Abdel Nasser on June 9, 1967, four days into the 1967 Six-Day War. Heikal's interview represents Nasser unedited, as having a discussion with a close confidant (Heikal) as the 1967 war rages around him.

Heikal was asked by Nasser to help craft his resignation speech that was later rejected by an Egyptian public that could not conceive of losing the charismatic Nasser—despite a military blunder that would enter the annals of history. It still remains a point of historical debate whether the rejection by the Egyptian public of Nasser's resignation was orchestrated or not, but the Egyptian leader would remain President for three more years, until his death in 1970.

This review will examine two of Heikal's recent works. The first is a chapter titled, "10-Hours with Abdel-Nasser the Evening of June 9, 1967," in his book *Amm Min Al-Azamat (Year of Conflict)*, part of the Heikal's series *Kalam Fee Al-Siyasa (Political Discussions)*, published in 2001 by Al-Misriyah for Arab and International Publications [1]. The second book examined is Heikal's 1987 work *Lee Misr La Lee Abdel-Nasser (For Egypt and Not for Abdel-Nasser)* published in Cairo by Dar Al-Shirook Press[2]. The review essay of Heikal's work will focus on exposing Nasser's military-political thoughts and decision-making on the eve of the 1967 Six-Day War.

Nasser Discusses Field Marshal Abdel-Hakim Amer

When Heikal entered Nasser's office at his home, he was on the phone with his Field Marshal Abdel-Hakim Amer—Commander in Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces and hereafter referred to in this essay as Amer—getting a report that Israeli units were crossing the Suez Canal westward. Responding to Heikal's incredulous look at the news, Nasser and Heikal discussed how a real

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war with the Israelis can begin, and that the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) was not equipped to handle urban and guerilla warfare as they make their way towards the Nile Delta. It became a three-way conversation with Amer that ended with Nasser telling the Egyptian Field Marshal simply to try his best to salvage the situation. After Nasser put down the phone, his first discussion with Heikal was his lamenting not dismissing Amer after his mismanagement with the union Syria led to the break up of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1961.

Nasser believed that Amer had become a demoralized commander after that break-up that was due in large part to his treating Syrians as second-class citizens in this alliance and, moreover, using Syria as his own personal fiefdom. Amer was an incompetent military leader who rose from Major to Field Marshal politically and who focused on controlling the internal apparatus of the Egyptian government. The Egyptian leader reflected how the 1967 War was a repeat of the 1956 Suez Crisis and that Amer had learned nothing tactically from the 1956 tripartite war with Israel, France and England.

Discussion on the Sinai and Strategic Depth

Both men then turned their discussion to the issue of strategic depth; Egypt had concentrated its forces in the Sinai along the border with Israel. Would it have been better to deploy forces closer to the Suez Canal giving army units access to shorter logistical support lines and more importantly a closer proximity to command and control located along the Nile Delta? This seems like a basic understanding of the principles of war, yet Amer chose pride and conceit by positioning air and land forces closer to the Israeli border where it was extended logistically and lacked cover provided by the hills and mountains of central Sinai.

Nasser remarks to Heikal that this was the lesson that should've been learned in the 1956 War. Nasser comments that Field Marshal Amer had ordered a general retreat—on the morning of June 6th—after being overwhelmed by the shock of the Israeli air strike. Nasser lamented that his Commander-in-Chief could not even conduct a defensive action in the Sinai to buy political time to negotiate a cease-fire. Nasser complains that Amer hid losses from him and was in paralysis for three hours while his general staff looked into fighting a holding action in the Sinai.

Nasser also discusses how the Egyptian media had contributed to the overall noise that made many, including Amer, underestimate the Israelis. Headlines blamed President Lyndon Johnson for conducting a campaign of economic, military and political pressure on Egypt. There were fantastic stories about how the United States had flown military stocks from Wheelus Air Force Base in Libya to Israel. Another story was that a U.S. aircraft carrier was off the coast of Port Said requesting permission to transit the Suez Canal; the Sixth Fleet carriers were actually 500 miles from the Israeli coast in the Mediterranean. In answering Heikal's question of how Amer was caught so unprepared, Nasser rationalizes that Amer was caught unprepared in the 1967 War, because he relied heavily on United Nations Secretary General U Thant's assurances that he would negotiate a two week moratorium between the parties—this left until 13 June at the latest before hostilities began, and that U Thant along with Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Premier Kosygin would enforce the UN's efforts for a cooling period between Egypt and Israel. Nasser then tells Heikal that weapons could be replaced, but the troops would be more difficult to replace.

Nasser on His Resignation and Words to Describe the 1967 Military Debacle

During this ten-hour session with Heikal, Nasser discusses taking full responsibility for the debacle. Nasser initially discusses transferring power to War Minister Shams Badran, for the sake of the morale of the Army. Heikal is surprised by the choice and argues that Badran bears the taint of responsibility for the 1967 debacle and had no popular following among the Egyptian masses. Heikal was stunned to learn that Nasser had planned the transfer of power to War

Minister Badran with Field Marshal Amer. This is revealing, for it shows a total focus on politics by Egypt's top military officer and president and the abandonment of the battlefield. Nasser asked Heikal to help draft his resignation remarks that were then read on Cairo Radio on June 10th at 7:43 pm to a stunned Arab audience. Heikal argued with Nasser, urging him to consider his options of possibly naming a transitory leader, but Nasser retorted that the Egyptian people were in too much shock to endure the constitutional process of a transitory leader and then potential elections.

Heikal then turned to the subject of War Minister Shams Badran to succeed Nasser and argued that Vice President Zakariya Moheiddine would be a good successor. He was the oldest member of the Revolutionary Command Council that had created the current Egyptian Republic in 1952; the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) accepted him; and he was also one of the closest Egyptian officials to the West. Nasser considered Moheiddine an unacceptable choice to Moscow and the Soviets would read too much into Moheiddine's appointment. Nasser also tries to understand why the quality of the U.S.-Israeli relationship was not on par with the Egypt's relationship to the Soviet Union? Nasser had to think about weighting the choice of Moheiddine or Badran as successor.

The two men turned to discuss Nasser's speech and what is fascinating about the Heikal papers is the selection of Arabic word *Naksah* (setback) to describe the 1967 military debacle. Heikal came up with *Naksah* and when Nasser asked about his choice of a singular word to describe the 1967 War they went down the list of words *Hazimah* (defeat), *Sadmah* (shock), and *Karithah* (catastrophe) as well as the 1948 War that is called *Nakbah* (another Arabic dialect for catastrophe).

The choice of words to describe a catastrophic military setback for Egyptian arms such as the 1967 War was a matter of great importance. According to Heikal, Nasser was obsessed with the right description of this military defeat; he wanted to leave his successor enough political room to rebuild and place Egypt once again on the offensive. To describe the Six Day War as a *Hazimah* (defeat) would leave no room for reconstruction and would upset the Soviets who provided the bulk of the military hardware that Syria and Egypt incompetently deployed. He then blamed Lyndon Johnson for his defeat, accusing the United States of flying military hardware to Israel from Wheelus Air Force Base in Libya. He informed Heikal of a letter he dictated to Syrian President Atasi, urging that he accept a cease-fire to save what remained of the Syrian Army. Nasser did not need to say more, for the Syrian Army needed to be preserved to suppress any internal threats that would topple the regime. Nasser then reflected on how the Soviets were likely to help Syria more than Egypt, how Moscow seemed to understand Baathism more than Arab Socialism. Heikal and Nasser then talked about Moscow's need to preserve its gains in the Arab world at the expense of Washington. Nasser understood he could rely on using the Cold War to extract further military aid from Moscow.

A more revealing aspect of Nasser's thoughts during the Six Day War was his attempt at anticipating what Israel would do next that it controlled the Sinai. Among the options discussed, is that Israel:

- pulls its forces from the Suez Canal zone and to the center of the Sinai to reinforce the passes.
- reinforces the eastern side of the Suez Canal, thereby settling into a defensive mentality. (*This was what the Israeli Defense Force settled on*).
- advances westward into Egypt proper and along the western towns of Ismailiah, Suez and Port Fouad which would have meant a form of warfare the Israelis are not used to, urban warfare.

Heikal took Nasser's first draft of his resignation remarks to Sami Sharaf, the presidential secretary; it was during this initial draft that Nasser had second thoughts of his successor, weighing both Shams and Moheiddine. Nasser made several decisions that night. He would choose Moheiddine to succeed him; he would not inform Field Marshal Amer of this decision and cut him out of national policy making; General Mohammed Fawzy would be appointed Commander-in-Chief to replace Amer; and Saharawy Goma'a would be named interior minister.

When Nasser delivered his speech accepting responsibility for the 1967 War and offering to resign, the Egyptian and Arab street erupted in indignation and anger. To many in the Arab world, Nasser represented the first time they understood and identified with an Arab leader on a massive scale—his speeches made Arab nationalism, pride and history accessible to millions.

Who Should Take Responsibility for the 1967 War?

In analyzing Heikal's second book, *For Egypt and Not For Abdel-Nasser*—and in particular, the author's comments on the 1967 War—he attributes sole responsibility for the 1967 defeat of Egyptian arms squarely on Nasser. Heikal specifically justifies this statement on two policy decisions that Nasser took on the eve of the Six Day War. The first was declaring a blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba and Tiran Strait for ships bound for Israel; the second was leaving his Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal Amer as Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces even after his dismal performance during the 1956 Suez War, and Amer's inexcusable actions that led to the break up of the union with Syria and the ending of the United Arab Republic.

Heikal writes that Nasser and Amer did not listen to their General Staff that advised that it would take 15 years to absorb advanced Soviet military hardware into Egyptian formations. The earliest at which the Egyptian armed forces could be fully competent would be 1972—assuming the earliest major delivery of Soviet arms was in 1957. To say, however, that Nasser threw his forces into battle unprepared would be too simplistic, for he envisioned a gradual escalation with Israel on an economic and political front. Nasser relied on the superpowers, the greater Cold War and the UN to keep him out of a direct confrontation with Israel, while continuing to rattle his saber. Among the items Heikal brings to light from his interviews with Nasser and a deep study of his personal papers are:

- President Lyndon Johnson's decision to cease U.S. wheat subsidies to Egypt (Public Law 480)—Nasser viewed this as an escalation of the economic war against his nation, and him personally.
- Nasser believed the U.S. would step into the fray as it did in 1956—Nasser miscalculated that President Johnson would react like President Eisenhower should Israel exercise a first-strike option.
- Egypt could not undertake a war with Israel with two crack divisions mired in the 1962-1967 Yemen War.
- Nasser did not listen to Jordan's King Hussein, who warned of a conspiracy to bring Egypt into a war with Israel while Cairo was not ready.

The Mythological Israeli Military Build-up Along the Syrian Front

Anwar Sadat was in North Korea in early May 1967 as Speaker of Egypt's Parliament and upon his return to Egypt stopped in Moscow. There, Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny passed a message to Sadat for Nasser warning of Israel's intent to deploy nine to eleven battalions on the Syrian border. That week, Egypt's ambassador to Syria sent an urgent cable to Cairo of an imminent Israeli attack on Syria on May 22-26, 1967. Nasser dispatched the senior General Mohammed Fawzy to see the Syrian front for himself; he reported no Israeli build-up—yet Nasser put his faith in Soviet intelligence. The message from the Soviet Premier led to a series of action and reaction on the part of Egypt, the Soviets and other Arab states:

- On May 13th, Nasser decides to deploy Egyptian forces into the Sinai. Nasser's intention was a *Muzahara* (Military Demonstration).
- Moscow assures Syria they can rely on Soviet military support up to and including direct military intervention.
- Nasser advises Syria's leader Atasi not to escalate with Israel or undertake a first strike.
- Nasser intended to escalate gradually and made the decision to close the Gulf of Aqaba to ships bound for Israel. All members of his cabinet took this decision unanimously, and this activated Israeli military options to respond with a first-strike attack. The Israelis needed access to the Aqaba Gulf, as its port of Eilat was the chief port from where it received petroleum energy supplies from Iran (under a little publicized deal with the Shah of Iran).
- Closing Aqaba meant the removal of United Nations (UN) observer force in Rafah, Taba and Sharm-el-Sheikh placed there after the 1956 Suez War.

Nasser Places Too Much Hope on the UN and a Message from Lyndon Johnson

On the eve of June 5, 1967, the first day of the Six Day War, Nasser had the following views firmly entrenched in his mind: He (Nasser) would maximize his effort to find a political solution to perceived Israeli and Syrian hostilities; by this time both nations fought an aerial duel in which the Syrians were badly defeated. The longer the crisis loomed, the less chance for war. Nasser completely disregarded his act of closing the Gulf of Aqaba to Israel, which represented to Tel-Aviv indirect aggression on the nation's economy and energy supplies. If Israel exercised a first strike option against Egypt, then Egyptian forces could conduct a tenacious defensive action in the Sinai. Nasser believed that the longer Israel remained engaged militarily, that in of itself could be translated into an Arab victory despite actual tactical defeats. The International Community, the superpowers and the UN will intervene to stabilize any crisis in the Middle East to avoid global escalation and restore global economic calm in maritime trade.

Nasser also placed much hope in a message sent by President Lyndon Johnson urging all parties to cooperate with UN Secretary General U Thant in finding a solution to the crisis between Egypt, Syria and Israel. In addition, French President Charles DeGaulle sent Nasser a note urging him not to fire the first shot. On May 24th, U Thant met with Nasser and asked for a Moratorium on any further action by Israel, Egypt and Syria. Egypt would stop its reinforcement of the Gulf of Aqaba and allow third party ships to dock in the Israeli port of Eilat. All parties—Arab, Europe, Soviet and U.S.—would cease arms shipments to each side. The official letter sealing these terms arrived Cairo from UN Headquarters in New York on May 30th. Lyndon Johnson and Nasser agreed to a June 6th meeting with Egyptian Vice President Moheiddine in Washington. Nasser had no reason to suspect a first strike given the political progress of the crisis.

Nasser Addresses His Armed Forces

In light of the political developments, Nasser went to address the Egyptian General Staff on June 2nd. He explained the progress of political talks and his confidence that Egyptian arms could absorb a first strike, and that it would then hold a defensive action in the Sinai. His Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal Amer, despite some disagreements particularly among his air force commanders who argued that Egypt should conduct a first strike, reinforced this delusion. Some of the men in the room were military pragmatists who understood that once Egypt's airpower was defeated, the ground forces would be useless. Add to this was a concern of Egyptian forces mired in Yemen and the incomplete absorption of, and training on, advanced Soviet weapons.

Some Egyptian scholars of the 1967 war—Heikal included—seem to believe in a conspiracy of two policies within the U.S. government: one conducted by the State Department, and another more hawkish option exercised by the Central Intelligence Agency. The book offers no reference

or archival material to support this conspiracy theory; add to this an Arab predisposition of misreading the U.S. interagency debate process in the formulation of American foreign and military policy.

Conclusion

On June 5, 1967, the Israeli Air Force struck a brilliant tactical first strike that within hours destroyed the air forces of Jordan, Syria and Egypt. Israel—within six days—had more than doubled its size, capturing the Egyptian Sinai peninsula, the Syrian Golan Heights, and the Jordanian-held West Bank to include all of Jerusalem. Egyptian forces, ill-trained and without any plans or orders, executed a disorganized retreat. A panicked Field Marshal Amer gave the retreat order on June 6th—one day into the war.

Heikal ends his assessment by drawing comparisons of the Six Day War to the retreat of the British Expeditionary Forces (BEF) from Dunkirk in World War II, and the U.S. defeat at Pearl Harbor in 1941. In the end, Egyptians were searching for answers—some found it in explanations from the recent past as demonstrated by the Dunkirk and Pearl Harbor examples of allied defeats, resulting in the end in the ultimate surrender of Germany and Japan.

Others less educated in history abandoned Arab Nationalism and flocked to Islamic militancy. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda's number two and chief strategist, made the migration to Islamic militancy after the 1967 War. There is much to be learned from Arabic sources that help rationalize what is going on in the region, and why Arab leaders make certain decisions. American war colleges must begin a serious assessment of such works as Heikal's in the original Arabic as U.S. forces become engaged in the Middle East. It is imperative that we study Arab military authors and writings by Islamic militants with the same zeal as Soviet doctrine was scrutinized during the Cold War.

About the Author

LCDR Aboul-Enein is a Navy Medical Service Corps officer and Middle East Foreign Area Officer specially detailed as Country Director for Egypt and North Africa at the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He has published numerous essays on the Arab military thought processes of the 1973 and 1967 Arab-Israeli Wars in such journals as the U.S. Army's *Infantry* and *Military Review* he is a recent contributor to the Naval Postgraduate School on-line journal [Strategic Insights](#). Translation and analysis of Heikal's work represents LCDR Aboul-Enein's understanding of the material, any errors or omissions are his own.

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