

“Signals of a Revolt” (December 5, 1956)

Abstract

Contrary to what this article in the West German magazine *Der Spiegel* spells out, Nasser's popularity reached an all-time high in Egypt and the Arab world after the Suez Crisis. Nasser's move to nationalize the Suez Canal had been popular, even among his opponents, and the political victory of Egypt in the Suez Crisis only increased his popularity. With Nasser as the movement's spearhead, pan-Arabism became a dominant ideology in the Arab world in 1957. Leaders of other Arab countries were not necessarily as enthusiastic about Nasser as the Arab people were—for example, King Saud of Saudi Arabia considered Nasser's popularity an existential threat to the Saudi royal family. Nasser's campaign for pan-Arabism peaked with the formation of the United Arab Republic, a short-lived union with Syria from 1958-1961. Despite Nasser's popularity, his rule was not without brutality—in 1954, after a member of the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to assassinate Nasser, he banned the political party. Many Brotherhood members were imprisoned in prisons and concentration camps and tortured during Nasser's rule.

Source

Colonel Gamal Abd el-Nasser is currently fighting the most dangerous battle of his life. Since the young officer dedicated himself to politics, he has made a play for power every two years. In 1952 he toppled the royal capon Farouk, in 1954 he sent the president General Mohammed Nagib into retirement, and in 1956 he survived the Anglo-French attack.

Since the ceasefire at the Suez Canal and the arrival of the UN police, the military danger for Egypt and the world has been averted. For the little Pharaoh in the land of the Pyramids, however, the waves of war have receded to reveal a greater threat: the peril of a new coup d'état.

This is the secret whose publication strict Egyptian censorship has managed to prevent thus far: A fight to the finish has broken out between Colonel Nasser and a powerful group of his former revolutionary comrades. This time, the Colonel is playing not just for power, but for his very life.

Whether Egypt will orient itself towards Washington or Moscow depends on how this conflict ends. The outlines of this struggle were sketched during a reception for Poland's departing Red party head Gomulka in Moscow, when Nikita Khrushchev's tongue ran away with him once again:

“The Western powers are trying to ostracize Nasser, although he is not a Communist. Politically he is closer to the powers conducting a war against him, and he has even thrown Communists into prison.”

Soviet head of state Kliment Voroshilov tried to interrupt the speaker: “He had to.” Annoyed, Khrushchev turned to his president: “Don't try to help me, Kliment.”

The arrested Communists whom Khrushchev mentioned are being held prisoner in their hundreds by Nasser's military police in the oasis of El Charge, 200 kilometers west of the Nile Valley at the height of Luxor. About the same number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood are interned with them at the oasis.

In that united front encompassing left and right, whose minor functionaries are jailed together there, Nasser sees adversaries, even in his capital among his former fellow revolutionaries and fellow officers,

and in his own cabinet.

His most dangerous opponents from these various camps are:

— Major Khalid Muhyiddin, a former member of the Revolutionary Command Council and now head of a state-owned newspaper concern and a staunch Communist.

— Major Salah Salem, a former member of the Revolutionary Command Council and Nasser's propaganda minister, now editor-in-chief of a state-owned newspaper with Communist leanings, and chief of the "Liberation Army," the Egyptian national guard in the Suez Sector.

— Ex-Education Minister Gamal el-Din Hussein, once a fanatical Muslim Brother and now commander of the entire "Liberation Army."

— A group of some 60 air force and cavalry officers. These officers are sitting in prison or are under house arrest and are led by the commander of the air force, if he is still alive, which nobody knows for sure.

While Colonel Nasser's defeated army was still within sight of the Anglo-French invasion troops, separated only by a thin veil from the UN Police, the head of state sought to prevent the pro-Soviet clique in Cairo from seizing power.

In the realm of foreign policy, his dream of dominance in the Arab world has been shaken. In the Arab League, the Anglophile Iraqi government called on him to cease the "mobilization of the street" controlled and financed by Cairo. Saudi Arabia, which is slowly drowning in its own oil because of transport problems, demands that he compromise with the West. Egyptian propaganda about the "strongest Arab army" has vanished into thin air. Domestically, inflation has already begun, and economic collapse is on the horizon.

Given this situation, Nasser has sounded out the possibility of Egypt returning to a pro-American policy in three conferences with US Ambassador Hare. The resumption of the Aswan project would doubtless free Nasser of the worst domestic policy pressures and perhaps also cut the ground from under Salah Salem's pro-Soviet activities.

After several hours of discussion with his three closest confidants, the army commander and friend from their shared days as lieutenants General Amir, the political cabinet chief and unofficial foreign minister Ali Sabri and the municipal affairs minister Baghdadi, Nasser admitted with tears in his eyes that he saw no other possibility to save Egypt.

Whether the Egyptian can change the course of his country once again, however, depends not just on whether President Eisenhower and his government are prepared to accept the prodigal son back into the fold, but also on the strength of the colonel's domestic position.

Both commander-in-chief General Amir and Ali Sabri warned their head of state against proceeding too abruptly with the planned change of course. Abd el-Hakim Amir: "That would be a signal (for Nasser's opponents) to strike out."

The first outcome of this secret conference was an order to the government censors to prevent the future appearance of anti-American articles in the Egyptian press. Journalists loyal to the regime were also instructed to inculcate Egyptians bit by bit with the new pro-American political line on a daily basis, but to proceed very cautiously.

But Nasser is no longer the sole ruler in Egypt. His adversary Major Muhyiddin is engaging in massive Soviet propaganda in the state-owned evening paper *Misa*.

He has the support of numerous journalists at Egyptian state radio and the government paper *Al Gumiya*, which is run by Revolutionary Command Council member Anwar el Sadat. The former major and current director of the Cairo Opera, Ahmed Hamrush, is also constantly beating the drum for Russia in his publication *Al Hadaf*.

For other reasons, but with no less impact than the do-gooder Khalid Muhyiddin, another member of the Revolutionary Command Council has gone over to the Eastern camp: Nasser's former propaganda minister Salah Salem. His fanatical hatred of the British, which leads him to equate the entire Western world with England, has made him dependent on Moscow. Every day, he promotes Egyptian-Soviet friendship in his newspaper *Al Shaab*.

In the case of this most ambitious of Nasser's adversaries, it then became especially obvious the week before last how dangerous the putschist mood has already become in Cairo. When for foreign policy reasons the government censors instructed the Egyptian newspapers to mention a speech by the acting head of the British government Butler as little as possible and only in a single column, Salah Salem ignored the ban and printed the headline "Butler Threatens Egypt" in his paper. Salah Salem swept aside his censor's objections in true revolutionary fashion: "If Gamal (Abd el-Nasser) doesn't like it, he should have me arrested."

Editor-in-chief Salah Salem has been back in uniform for a few weeks now. At a time of national emergency, Nasser appointed him commander of the Suez sector of the so-called Liberation Army.

In setting up this militia-like army, Nasser sought not merely to strengthen his military potential: He also inducted into the "Liberation Army" all of those unreliable elements who could bring unrest to the country in times of crisis. This has allowed him to keep the urban mob under control.

A German diplomat, whose friend, a regular Egyptian army officer, presented the "liberation units" he was training to him, noted with dismay: "But they look like criminals." The Egyptian major laughed: "They don't just look like criminals, they are criminals. Surrounded by normal troop units they train with wooden rifles and when the time comes to shoot live ammunition, my sergeants are standing by with loaded pistols."

The commander of the second sector of this former army is the ex-minister of education Gamal el-Din Hussein. As a strictly religious Muslim he is far from being a Communist. But as a former supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was banned and persecuted by Nasser's military police, he prefers to ally himself with the East rather than the West. As in Europe, so in Egypt, too, the politics of left and right have come full circle.

If Khalid Muhyiddin, Salah Salem and their friends already control a large segment of public opinion through their newspapers, a significant power factor is also in pro-Soviet hands via the leadership of the "Liberation Army."

In addition, however, these forces have also become firmly entrenched in the regular army. For a start, equipping the army with Soviet weapons did not fail to influence the officer corps. They are impressed and also dependent on Soviet supplies.

One massive group of Nasser opponents consists mainly of the two key branches of the armed forces, the air force and the cavalry, which controls the tanks. The stance of the armored force may be attributed mainly to the influence of Khalid Muhyiddin, who comes from this branch of the service, while the air force is hostile to the head of state for military reasons.

After Egypt's devastating defeat in the battle against Israel and the Anglo-French invasion units, Nasser went looking for a guilty party and believed that he had found it in the negligent air force leadership.

While in public he asserted that the enemy had largely destroyed wooden decoys, and hastily had a wooden model airplane constructed for newspaper photographs, a total of 27 high-ranking air force officers were given long sentences by a court martial for failing to prevent the destruction of nearly all of Egypt's military aircraft on the ground. Their commander-in-chief has allegedly been shot dead; in fact, no foreign correspondent has managed to see or speak to him.

During the same week when Colonel Nasser received the American ambassador, army and air force officers held a conference with Muslim Brothers and Communists in Cairo's Garden City. There they discussed the possibilities of a "government reshuffle." One member of the former Revolutionary Command Committee and one minister attended. Their names are unknown.

Unmistakably, Nasser's most dangerous fight has begun.

Source of original German text: "Signale einer Revolte," *Der Spiegel*, December 5, 1956, pp. 42–4.
Accessible online at: <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-43064774.html>

Translation: Pam Selwyn

Recommended Citation: "Signals of a Revolt" (December 5, 1956), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-5235>> [July 06, 2025].