Nasser: The Last Arab by Said K. Aburish

A Revolutionary Biography

Since the death of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970 there has been no ideology to capture the imagination of the Arab world except Islamic fundamentalism. Any sense of completely secular Arab states ended with him and what we see today happening in the Middle East is a direct result of Western opposition to Nasser's strategies and ideals.

Nasser is a fascinating figure fraught with dilemmas. With the CIA continually trying to undermine him, Nasser threw his lot in with the Soviet Union, even though he was fervently anti-Communist. Nasser wanted to build up a military on par with Israel's, but didn't want either the 56 or 67 wars. This was a man who was a dictator, but also a popular leader with an ideology which appealed to most of the Arab people and bound them together. While he was alive, there was a brief chance of actual Arab unity producing common, honest, and incorruptible governments throughout the region.

More than ever, the Arab world is anti-Western and teetering on disaster, and this examination of Nasser's life is tantamount to understanding whether the interests of the West and the Arab world are reconcilable.

Nasser is a definitive and engaging portrait of a man who stood at the center of this continuing clash in the Middle East.
Said Aburishs biography of Gamal Abdel Nasser, president of Egypt 1954-1970, is an opinionated examination of one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century - a man who fifty years ago captured the imagination of the Arabic-speaking people from the Atlantic to the Gulf. The Suez crisis of 1956 made Nasser (as he was known) an international statesman.

The author, a controversial Egyptian-Palestinian journalist based in Nice, lived through Nassers era stationed in various Arab capitals; he witnessed the rayyes in action many times. He was in Damascus as the Syrian masses descended on the city clamouring for Nasser to come out and speak to them; when he did, he spoke to them slowly, in a voice of reason and intimacy that told them he loved them too. The world was different then.

The British and French empires were shutting shop, and the US had become the new supremo of the West. Britain and France had carved up the Arab-speaking world between them, and most Arab governments were appointed or arranged by them; oil had been discovered in the fields of Arabia and Iraq; the Suez Canal was run by Britain and France, both of whom would not entrust the vital pathway to Egypt; Algeria was just beginning to fight for long, bloody independence from France.

In Egypt, the pashas, who were less than 2 percent of the population, owned more than 65 percent of the land and exploited millions of peasants who tenanted for them. Furthermore, a new presence had been approved by the major powers, including the USSR: Israel. Even the pro-West Arab governments of the day couldnt stomach this new, imposed entity, and they fought its founding, but lost.

It was at this time that a young army officer from an ordinary Egyptian background appeared. Aburish portrays him somewhat sketchily as a brooding, serious man, an avid reader who also enjoyed playing chess, and a practical man who nevertheless placed honour and dignity first. At first, this untested leader spoke for Egyptians, but soon he directed his rhetoric to all the Arabs. By 1958 he had become the Arab peoples undisputed leader, and various governments, including local Arab ones, resented him for it.

What did he want and why? What happened? How did he fare? How did he respond to new events and ideas? What is his legacy? Those are the kind of questions that any biography attempts to answer. In that respect, Said Aburish does a fair job.

Nasser possessed an almost hypnotic ability to inspire his audience and gain its trust, but Aburish says he was beholden to his peoples love, unable to tell them what he really thought. In terms of Nassers capacity to cope with and manage the heavy dose of politicking that occurs in the Middle East, Aburish shows him certainly rising to its demands - and losing
his self-control at times, but underestimating the regressive, conservative instinct of the Arab people.

In Egypt, he ruled dictator-like even when he would have won any democratic elections easily. He discarded many opinions of the ruling circle in Egypt when he might have been better served to share his decision-making with them, and he trusted responsibility to only those he knew to be loyal when he also knew how incompetent and corrupt they were. In pan-Arab affairs, Aburish portrays him as making policy on the hoof; he got himself involved in Algeria, in Yemen, and elsewhere when he knew that Egypt's economy was weak, and that outside forces were conspiring against him (the USA, the USSR, Israel, and Saudi Arabia).

In private, Nasser smoked three packs of cigarettes a day and regularly worked very long hours; throughout the sixties he was not well because of diabetes and heart disease, yet he pressed on - and died at 52.

Said Aburish's biography fails in many respects; it does not possess a timeline of events; there is no map of the region; and the key characters are not introduced beforehand. There are a few punctuation mistakes, and the text does not read well; it needed a good editor.

Aburish has his issues with Islamist movements and does himself no favours by letting us know that, and not explaining himself. Indeed, Aburish fails to offer reasons why Nasser himself was never enamoured with political Islam.

Overall, the biography assumes the reader is familiar with events and launches into opinion too quickly. The author does not balance well between his two responsibilities as biographer: to narrate the various strands of story and to offer insight and opinion. There are too many flaws in this biography; it needs a major revision.

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