

Remembering the June 1967 War after Fifty Years: The Egyptian Version

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The Egyptian media marked the 50-year anniversary of the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War with a number of articles, opinion pieces, and interviews with prominent political and cultural figures who experienced the war. The media coverage was characterized by harsh criticism of the events during the run-up to the war, the decisions made during the war itself, and the war's consequences and implications.

The commentaries, discussions, and debates were characterized by three main lines of argument: The first approach insisted on clearing President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser of full or partial responsibility for the *Naksa* (lit. "setback")¹ pinning it instead on 'Abd al-Hakim 'Amer, the vice president and deputy supreme commander of the armed forces, and Shams Badran, the defense minister. The second approach, by contrast, was unsparingly critical of 'Abd al-Nasser, assigning him primary responsibility not only for the defeat but also for Egypt's inability to recover from it. The third trend focused its criticism on the policy of concealing the truth from the public, which was expressed then, as now, by the hermetic seal on information related to the run-up to the war, the decision-making process of the senior political and military leadership during the war, and the testimony of senior and junior officers who fought on the battlefield.

Articulating the first approach, the historian Khaled Fahmy pinned responsibility for the defeat on 'Amer. It was 'Amer, he said, who, on May 14, without bothering to inform President 'Abd al-Nasser, surprisingly made the decision to mobilize

¹ The expression, *Naksa*, was coined by Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, who was the editor of *al-Ahram* at the time. The expression was originally used to refer to a camel kneeling on its knees. Heikal used the expression to soften the blow of the defeat, for the term refers to a temporary state of affairs. The qualities of a camel – stubborn, tolerant, loyal, but not likely to forget to take revenge on its enemies – were attributed to 'Abd al-Nasser. The moral was that Egypt lost the battle, but would win the war.

more than 100,000 Egyptian troops and raised the level of military preparedness to a full alert for war. Fahmy argued that such a fateful decision was supposed to be made by the president himself, and not one of his deputies. Fahmy claimed that there was no dispute that the mobilized forces were undoubtedly not prepared for a confrontation with Israel, and given that the mobilization was a *casus belli* for Israel to initiate the war, then indeed full responsibility for the consequences rests with ‘Amer.² Fifty years later, the government authorities still have not opened the official archives, and so Fahmy based his arguments on the accounts of Egyptian military officers, such as those expressed in Issam Diraz’s book, *June Officers Speak: How Egyptian Soldiers Saw the 1967 Defeat* (*Dubat Yunyu yatakalinun: Kifa Shahada Junud Misr Hazimat* 67), which was published in 2000, as well as on accounts of ordinary soldiers, presented in another book by Diraz, *A Love Story from June 1967* (*Qisat hub min Yunyu* 67). Diraz’s story illustrates the chaos in the Sinai following Egypt’s mass mobilization: An ordinary soldier named ‘Adly encounters the driver of an armored vehicle who called for his help. ‘Adly rescued the driver and helped repair the vehicle, and as he returned to his car he came upon an ambulance that could not start its engine. Its driver began to push the ambulance to the side of the road, out of the way of the thousands of vehicles on the road behind it. Unfortunately, a tank in the opposite lane collided with the ambulance, which burst into flames. Four soldiers were killed, and their bodies were left on the side of the road until they could be collected for burial. ‘Adly, who witnessed these events, did not stop cursing: “This is a disgrace (*mahazila*), brother.” Dozens of accounts in the same spirit confirm the historians’ assumption that Egypt was not prepared for war, and that the defeat was inevitable.

At the same time, Fahmy emphasized that however important these sources may be, they are no substitute for the information contained in the government archives that are withheld from researchers and the general public. “At the end of the day,” he declared, “this was a war whose results continue to leave their mark on the life of the Egyptian public, but its history is a black box. It is our responsibility and obligation as researchers and citizens to investigate and discover what happened during the war.”

The second approach to the war was represented by the writing of Osama Ghareeb. In an article published in *al-Masry al-Youm*, Ghareeb focused on ‘Abd al-

² Khaled Fahmy, “[Fifty Years since the June Defeat \(1\): The Mobilization of Forces](#),” [Fifty Years since the June Defeat \(2\): Questions of Defeat](#),” “[Fifty Years since the June Defeat \(3\): The Information War](#)” [in Arabic]; Khaled Fahmy, “[What do you know about the defeat? Nothing...](#)” [in Arabic]” *Mada Masr*, June 5, 2017.

Nasser's resignation and on the Egyptian public's call for his return to office.³ The issue that needs to be clarified, he argued, is whether the masses that took to the street in support of 'Abd al-Nasser knew what really happened during the six days of war, or whether their support was a product of government propaganda published by the Egyptian media about a global conspiracy led by the U.S. to overthrow the Nasser's regime.

The issue Ghareeb focused on is not new. It was the theme of Lenin al-Ramly's 1992 play, *Sa'dun the Madman*, in which a young Egyptian, Sa'dun, refuses to believe in the illusion of an Egyptian victory on June 6, 1967. "The war started and I was swept away with news of the victories," relates Sa'dun, "and then came June 9...and people came out into the streets, running all over the place shouting: Nasser! Nasser!" Sa'dun continues, "I said to myself, surely we won, but they shouted and cried...No! 'Abd al-Nasser cannot be beaten! The newspapers don't lie and neither do the radio and the television...I said to myself, surely this is a dream!" Sa'dun was incredulous that Egypt lost, reflecting the gap between the truth and the reality, and the illusion created by the Egyptian media for the public.

Ghareeb, for his part, was not satisfied with criticizing the regime's propaganda about the outcome of the war; instead, he focused his critique on the president himself and his show of taking responsibility. "What is the real meaning of assuming responsibility?" Ghareeb asked rhetorically, and answered that "among the nations that are aware of the responsibility of rulers towards their people, assuming responsibility means first and foremost resigning from the government and transferring authority to someone suitable to fill the position." In the second stage, the ruler is willing to bear punishment, which is the responsibility of the courts to impose on the parties responsible for the failures. If 'Abd al-Nasser had explicitly declared: "It was me who saw with my own eyes those in charge of the military sitting in their comfortable chairs, and I did nothing to remove them and replace them with others that would properly prepare the military for war," would large numbers of Egyptians have taken to the streets and sworn their allegiance to him? If the president had declared, "I am responsible for the media that misled you and deluded you into thinking we were on the outskirts of Tel Aviv, when it soon became clear that the Israelis were on the outskirts of Cairo," would Egyptians have demanded that he resign? Had 'Abd al-Nasser admitted that he was the one who precipitated the crisis, and that he was the one who brought about the escalation when he was aware that the Egyptian military was not prepared for war... "would you have expressed your support for him then?" Ghareeb challenged his readers. If they had known the truth, Ghareeb argued, the Egyptian people would have acted as the Italian

³ Osama Ghareeb, "[June 5, 1967](#)," [in Arabic], *al-Masry al-Youm*, June 6, 2017.

people did with Mussolini. But the Egyptian government's well-oiled lie-machine made it possible for 'Abd al-Nasser to finish his term. Ghareeb concludes that the 'Abd al-Nasser did not hesitate to sacrifice thousands of soldiers and officers to maintain his political position.

The third trend focused on the lack of transparency regarding both the failures of the war and the problems of today. *Al Ahram Weekly* published an article, "Memories of Defeat: The Road to Naksa," by Abdou Mubasher, which addressed the lack of access to official documents about the war. For example, a sudden decision by the Egyptian command to withdraw troops from Sinai on June 5 was, according to Mubasher, "one of the most bizarre things about this war.... I have made several attempts over the years to find any written document for this order, but couldn't find one piece of paper to verify it."⁴ He compares the transparency in Israel about the war to the information lock-down in Egypt. Unlike Israeli military commanders, who produced memoirs of the war, Mubasher points-out that Egyptian commanders have not produced any first-hand accounts. Only one book, *The Third Round*, provides a detailed Egyptian account documenting the failures that occurred before and during the war. The book was published by the Military Research Agency and was distributed to senior military commanders. However, when General Mohamed Fawzy was appointed Defense Minister, he ordered all copies of the book to be collected and banned. Moreover, Mubasher points out that the findings of the Egyptian Commission of Inquiry, which gathered documents and recorded the testimony of the commanders and soldiers who took part in the fighting, were shelved and never released. Even a report prepared by the Soviet Union and hand-delivered to 'Abd al-Nasser and Fawzy was never released.

Mubasher's argument was repeated in numerous articles that were published on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the June 1967 debacle. 'Amr al-Shobaki, writing in *al-Masry al-Youm*, argued that the lack of transparency prevents Egypt from learning from its mistakes. The guarantee for a better future, he stated, lies in the ability to identify mistakes and to discuss them so as not to repeat them.⁵ Mohamed 'Afifi, writing in *al-Dustur*, argued that in private "we are ready to talk about the disgrace of the *Naksa* and about the second *Nakba*,⁶ but in public we don't have the courage to admit it." The only option to escape defeat, argued 'Afifi, was to investigate the truth. "Can we open the files documenting the war and ask the penetrating questions, and conduct the required investigations, and or will we continue to adhere to our old perverse ways and accuse anyone of

⁴ Abdou Mubasher, "[The Road to Naksa](#)," *Al Ahram Weekly*, June 7-13, 2017.

⁵ Amr al-Shobaki, "[The Road to June 5](#)," *al-Masry al-Youm*, June 7, 2017.

⁶ Literally "disaster" – referring to the collective Arab defeat in 1948 in the first Arab-Israeli war.

treachery and heresy who dares to critically examine the events and draw the necessary lessons?"⁷

There was almost complete unanimity in the writers' perceptions of the 1967 war: most of them saw it as a broken dream, a black day in contemporary Arab history. An entire generation of young Egyptians, which believed in 'Abd al-Nasser's leadership and policies, experienced a trauma from which it has not recovered. Moreover, most, if not all, of the writers believe that the sins of 1967 are still ingrained in the consciousness of Egyptians. For them, the only path to redemption is to provide an adequate response to the many unresolved questions, to demonstrate a commitment to locating the 5,000 missing persons buried in the Sinai, to acknowledge the 10,000 victims, and to prosecute those responsible for the crimes of defeat. Only then will the Egyptians be able to restore their pride and dignity.

There is no doubt that these critical lines of argument about the 1967 war, which place full responsibility for the *Naksa* on the leadership of the Egyptian regime, constitute an implied criticism of the current regime, and especially at the president, 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi. This is not to say that in the past there was no criticism of the war, however this criticism was marginal and weak. The current focus on the leaders' responsibility for the war's failures, and the demand for full transparency about what happened, are the main messages that today's critics are sending to Egypt's current president and the leaders of the Egyptian regime.

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⁷ Mohamed 'Afifi, "[The Road to Defeat June 1967: The Failure Within \(1\)](#)," *ad-Dustur*, May 11, 2017.