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Introduction by Fred H. Lawson

**Jesse Ferris. *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power.*** Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780691155142 (cloth, \$45.00/£30.95).

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Introduction by Fred H. Lawson, Mills College

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Lost among the hundreds of books and articles that analyze the international relations of the Middle East by focusing on the Arab-Israeli conflict stands Egypt's disastrous military intervention in Yemen. This largely forgotten episode, which got underway immediately following the death of North Yemen's dynastic ruler in September 1962 and lasted until Egyptian troops left the country almost exactly five years later, played a pivotal role in transforming Cairo's influence in inter-Arab politics, shaping Egypt's strategic partnership with the Soviet Union, undermining relations between Cairo and Washington, and setting the stage for the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

How such a major turning-point in regional affairs could remain overlooked for so long is a story in itself, which Jesse Ferris addresses at the outset of *Nasser's Gamble*. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that Egypt's diplomatic and military archives continue to be closed to academic researchers. Another part reflects the impact of the momentous 1967 war, which ended up eclipsing almost all other aspects of Egyptian foreign policy from the 1952 revolution to the 1979 peace treaty with Israel. In addition, Ferris notes that Anwar al-Sadat was "an enthusiastic proponent of the intervention in Yemen and one of those most responsible for its consequences" (17). Once al-Sadat assumed the presidency of Egypt in the fall of 1970, prospects for a public (much less an objective) examination of the Yemen war plummeted. Journalists, intellectuals, government officials and military commanders alike deliberately avoided dredging up the memory of what was at best a bitter failure of Egyptian leadership and at worst a painful instance of "corruption, insubordination, and incompetence in the armed forces" (19).

Ferris sets out to restore the balance by exploring several interrelated dimensions of Cairo's half-decade adventure in Yemen. No other study of Egyptian involvement in the Yemeni civil war covers so many different topics, nor rests on such a solid foundation of source materials in Arabic, Russian, and Hebrew. In earlier studies, Adeed Dawisha explained Cairo's decision to embark on the expedition in terms of the entrenched attitudes and perceptions of key policy-makers;<sup>1</sup> Laura James highlighted aspects of political culture, which generated the profound miscalculations that led Egyptian leaders to embark on the risky operation;<sup>2</sup> and Ali Rahmy and Saeed Badeeb traced reciprocal strategic interactions between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, without delving as deeply into the causes and vicissitudes of Egyptian policy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adeed I. Dawisha, "Intervention in the Yemen: An Analysis of Egyptian Perceptions and Policies," *Middle East Journal* 29(Winter 1975); Dawisha, "Perceptions, Decisions and Consequences in Foreign Policy: The Egyptian Intervention in Yemen," *Political Studies* 25(June 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Laura M. James, *Nasser at War: Arab Images of the Enemy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), chaps. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Ali Abdel Rahman Rahmy, *The Egyptian Policy in the Arab World: Intervention in Yemen, 1962-1967* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1983); Saeed M. Badeeb, *The Saudi-Egyptian Conflict over North Yemen, 1962-1970* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986).

*Nasser's Gamble* emphasizes political-economic trends inside Egypt as the driving force behind the intervention, but the book goes on to wrestle with a range of other facets of the Yemeni civil war. Cairo's actions both reflected and transformed regional rivalries associated with the global Cold War, a topic that Salim Yaqub has done much to elucidate. The fate of Egypt's involvement was sealed by the complex politics of North Yemen, through whose intricacies and vagaries one could have no better guide than J. E. Peterson. And the book offers an innovative perspective on Soviet military and economic assistance to the Egyptian war effort, thereby contributing to a body of scholarship pioneered by Yaacov Ro'i. The three reviewers evaluate the insights that the book accords specialists in these discrete fields, as well as the ways in which that Ferris synthesizes the separate strands of the narrative into a compelling whole.

### Participants:

**Jesse Ferris** is Vice President for Strategy at the Israel Democracy Institute. He holds a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University and a BA in History from Yale University. His first book, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* was published in 2013 by Princeton University Press. He is currently at work on a history of Israeli foreign policy.

**Fred H. Lawson** is Lynn T. White, Jr. Professor of Government at Mills College. He is author most recently of *Global Security Watch Syria* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2013).

**Dr. J.E. Peterson** is a historian and political analyst specializing in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf. He has taught at various universities in the United States, has been associated with a number of leading research institutes, and served as historian in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Security and Defence in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman. He is the author or editor of a dozen books, including *Yemen: The Search for a Modern State*, as well as many scholarly articles and contributions to edited works.

**Yaacov Ro'i** is Professor of History Emeritus at Tel-Aviv University. Among others, he is editor of *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Woodrow Wilson Center and Stanford University, 2008) and has written several articles on Soviet policy in the Middle East and Soviet-Egyptian relations.

**Salim Yaqub** is Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he specializes in the history of U.S. foreign relations, with a particular focus on U.S. involvement in the Middle East. He is also director of UCSB's Center for Cold War Studies and International History. His first book, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East*, was published in 2004 by the University of North Carolina Press. Dr. Yaqub is now writing a book on U.S.-Arab relations in the 1970s.

This is very much a case study of Egyptian foreign policy – primarily political and military – with emphasis on Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir’s (hereafter Nasser) tortured relations with the superpowers. The principal thesis, i.e., a “revisionist interpretation of the Six-Day War as an unintended consequence of the Saudi-Egyptian struggle over Yemen” (22) is well argued, although the afterword’s contention that Nasser failure in Yemen and the catastrophe of the 1967 war were responsible for a fundamental shift in the regional balance of power in the Middle East may be somewhat overly ambitious. The book has been adapted from the author’s 2008 Princeton Ph.D. dissertation, “Egypt, the Cold War, and the Civil War in Yemen, 1962-1966,” and the change in the title for the book, along with the addition of a seventh chapter on the Six-Day War and the end of intervention in Yemen, seem to redirect emphasis away from the Yemen case study and towards Egypt’s relations with the superpowers and the beginning of Nasser’s ‘twilight’ more generally.

There may not be a lot of surprises in the author’s conclusions, particularly since the subject of his focus is a very well-trodden path. But Jesse Ferris has been at pains to utilize as much source material as possible, including publications and archives in English, Arabic, Hebrew, Russian, and German. As a consequence, this book provides persuasive documentation for events and policies that generally have been long accepted but not verified. The one major lacuna is the official Egyptian record but, as Ferris points out, Egyptian archives remain closed. He does, though, rely heavily on published memoirs.

It cannot be emphasized too highly that this is a book about Nasser and his Egypt. While the case study consists of the background to and impact of the war in Yemen, as the title states, Yemen remains relatively peripheral to Ferris’s story. This reviewer would have liked to have seen more discussion of what was happening in Yemen itself. The major figures in Yemeni politics at that seminal time are not fleshed out, and this can sometimes lead to inaccurate impressions. For example, there is no indication that the extreme volatility of Hasan al-‘Amri, Prime Minister of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) on several occasions during the 1962-1967 period, made him an even more unsuitable Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) strongman than even ‘Abdullah al-Sallal, the country’s President (the bizarre incident that forced ‘Amri’s departure from politics is not mentioned). Another example concerns al-Qadi ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Iryani, the effective YAR President from 1967 to 1974, who is barely mentioned. Iryani played a vital unifying role at a fragile point (perhaps not unlike Nelson Mandela, former president in South Africa) and was the only possible individual who could inspire confidence and loyalty from both republicans and royalists (although he, in the end, was not the perfect solution to the end of the internal Yemeni conflict, but that’s another story).

Ferris seems to discount any significant Egyptian role in the September 1962 putsch in San‘a’, attributing Nasser’s decision to intervene as being essentially opportunistic after the fact. He cites ‘Abdullah al-Juzaylan, one of the ‘Septembrist’ officers who carried out the coup, to the effect that the instigators were for the most part students of the Soviet military

advisers resident in San'a' (94, n66). But Ferris does not mention the fact that various senior Yemeni officers involved in the coup (including Juzaylan) were trained in Egypt. While barely alluding in passing to the presence of Egyptian military training missions in San'a', he does not note that many of the junior and more activist officers in the coup were Egyptian-trained in Yemen. What role Egypt played in instigating or colluding in the coup still remains ambiguous.

The author has been impressively diligent in his pursuit of source materials, but it is possible that a perusal of Italy's archives might have produced a small but useful contribution. Admittedly, Italian documents are unlikely to shed much light on Egyptian thinking and policy. However, it seems reasonable to assume that they might provide a wealth of material on personalities and events in Yemen up to September 1962; the Italians enjoyed the closest relations of any European power with Imams Yahya and Ahmad (in an alliance of common interests in reaction to the British occupation of Aden and the Protectorate). In particular, the Italian ambassador in Yemen from 1953 to 1962 was the only envoy permitted to spend much time in San'a', instead of being confined with the other diplomats to the city of Ta'izz where Imam Ahmad resided.

The author asserts, with good reason, that Nasser desired to retain a presence in Yemen until after the British departure from Aden, which had been scheduled for 1968 but was effected in November 1967. But Ferris does not explain how Nasser's vision of influencing politics in Aden and the south of Yemen actually was untenable since Nasser backed the losing horse in the race to succeed the British, i.e. the discredited Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (FLOSY) instead of the victorious – and Marxist-oriented – National Liberation Front.

Similarly, Ferris briefly references the YAR's urgent necessity of importuning Moscow for immediate aid, particularly air cover, when the last Egyptian troops departed Yemen. But he omits mention that the siege of San'a' in 1967-1968 was more than just the last gasp of royalist efforts to regain the capital and victory. More importantly, it was the last stand of the true leftists – Arab nationalists, Nasserists, socialists, and Marxists – in the YAR. By the end of the siege, their power had been permanently broken and many of them retreated to Aden. The resolution of the civil war under Iryani's leadership meant that the YAR's resolutely republican and socialist rhetoric masked what undoubtedly was and remains the most conservative republic in the Arab world.

The text is sprinkled with illustrations and cartoons drawn from the contemporary Egyptian press, as well as from a private Yemeni collection. The only map is one of Yemen but it is well-drawn and useful (and is used a second time to illustrate an Egyptian campaign). *Nasser's Gamble* is an impressive and authoritative work, destined for a prominent place among the necessary volumes on twentieth-century Middle East history.

Review by Yaacov Ro'i, Tel-Aviv University

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Jesse Ferris has written a meticulously documented analysis of Egypt's intervention on behalf of the Yemeni republican regime which ousted the imamate in September 1962. His argumentation is convincing and the story (and thesis) he provides leave no room for doubt that here we have the ultimate narrative, even though, as Ferris points out, there are still holes in the documentation, most particularly on the Arab side – both Egyptian and Yemeni – leaving a number of intriguing questions unanswerable. Ferris has made extensive use of archival material in the United States, Britain, Russia and Israel and read a most impressive gamut of relevant publications in English, Arabic, Russian and Hebrew.

Ferris's first chapter provides the Egyptian political and military background, demonstrating the weaknesses of Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime, most particularly the complexity of the Nasser-Amir relationship which well-nigh crippled the leadership of Egypt's military machine. It comes as no surprise, after following Ferris's research, that Nasser got bogged down in Yemen without being militarily prepared for so ambitious and adventurous an undertaking, and that he indeed was, as it were, dragged into a prolonged war which he lacked the wherewithal to win and could not afford to lose.

Perhaps the most revealing and innovative chapter is the one that tells how the Soviet-Egyptian partnership made Egypt's intervention possible. The role the Soviets played in the crucial initial stages was infinitely more proactive than has hitherto been known. In late 1967 and early 1968, five full years after 'Abdullah Sallal's coup in San'a, the West was perturbed by stories concerning the participation of Soviet pilots in combat missions in the Arabian Peninsula; that they had played such a part in the early weeks and months of the Yemeni civil war had been so carefully covered up that no Western intelligence appears to have ferreted it out. Ferris has gone to great lengths to dot all the i's and cross all the t's to show how and why the Soviets took up the challenge that Nasser and Sallal threw at their feet.

The deterioration of U.S.-Egyptian relations did not seem at first to be a necessary concomitant of United Arab Republic (UAR) intervention in Yemen. Yet, as time passed, it became clear that Nasser was unable or unwilling to go along with American efforts to mediate his conflict with Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and in fact exacerbated the situation by threatening the British hold in South Yemen, then still the British Protectorate of Aden. Cairo thus left Washington little, or no, choice other than to gradually cut off economic and food aid. In parallel, while the Soviets are not recorded as having actively goaded Nasser into provoking the West in the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, Libya, Algeria or Congo, his anti-Western rhetoric and deeds – combined with his ongoing need for weaponry and economic aid - brought him ever further into the Soviet camp.

Despite Egypt's evident need for Soviet weaponry, wheat and credits, Nasser persisted in rejecting Moscow's pressure for base rights for the Soviet Mediterranean squadron, which from the Soviet point of view were the prime rationale behind what seemed to them the extremely generous terms and concessions in the realm of aid to Egypt. While giving way

up to a point, Nasser was able to withstand demands for regular access to port facilities at Alexandria and to an airbase from which the Soviets could conduct reconnaissance flights over the U.S. Sixth Fleet. As 1966 drew to a close, to quote Ferris, “largely as a result of Egypt’s continued involvement in Yemen, [Nasser] stood on the verge of losing aid from one [superpower] and was busy staving off assaults on Egypt’s sovereignty by the other” (173). The war in Yemen was not only costly and a heavy drain on Egyptian military hardware, even if the Soviet Union may well have committed itself to purveying all weapons needed for the campaign, as well as other connected costs; the failure to bring it to an end thus disrupted Egyptian maneuverability in the international arena.

Perhaps even more deleterious was the war’s effect on the implementation of Arab socialism at home. The economic crisis that became the prime issue on Nasser’s domestic agenda in the mid-60s was widely linked to the cost of the war in Yemen. Moreover, despite persistent government attempts to conceal information concerning the war, its price in human life and its failures, the Egyptian public was able to glean some data: it proved impossible, for example, to hide 150 to 200 deaths per month over a period of five years, let alone prevent their “cumulative impact on public morale” (195). The war became one of the major causes of the discontent that seemed to threaten Nasser’s regime in 1965-66. In addition, the failure to turn the Yemeni Arab Republic and Sallal’s corrupt and incompetent regime into a ‘progressive’ or ‘revolutionary’ society boded ill for development plans within Egypt.

Paradoxically, the Egyptian endeavor to modernize Yemen often mirrored the attempts of other colonialist powers to ‘civilize’ allies they had come to rule. True, over time, the Egyptians abandoned some of the prejudices toward the ‘primitive’ tribes they encountered in Yemen and learned ways to control the country with far fewer troops than the 70,000 they had had at the peak of the intervention. Yet, there seemed no way to totally withdraw without an inconceivable blow to Egypt’s and Nasser’s prestige. As Ferris claims, “To lose in Yemen would be to concede defeat in the Arab Cold War, forcing Egypt to surrender its claim to Arab primacy” (214).

Arab summitry in 1964 – ostensibly initiated in order to promote the Palestinian cause – was in fact designed to provide the scenario for Saudi-Egyptian negotiations. Yet despite apparent good intentions on the part of both Nasser and Prince Faysal, preliminary agreements broke down. This was true of both the Alexandria agreement of September 1964 and the Jidda agreement of August 1965 (by which time Faysal had become king), neither ruler being able to control the vagaries of Yemeni politics, particularly the divisions within the Republican camp. Be that as it may, the Egyptians withdrew 20,000 troops in the spring and early summer of 1966, leaving 40,000 behind. Yet, Nasser made clear his intention to retain a force in Yemen until such time as the British pulled out of Aden, which in February 1966 they announced would happen the following year. In parallel, Faysal showed signs of threatening Egyptian centrality in the Arab world by initiating what came to be known as the Islamic Pact and by an Anglo-American-Saudi arms deal. These comprised a manifest endeavor to make Saudi Arabia and Iran the new axis of power in a post-British Middle East, most specifically in the Persian Gulf. Moscow also seemed unhappy at the possibility of Egypt’s taking over South Arabia, and Nasser was concerned

by the possibility of a Soviet-Yemeni arms deal that would undercut the Egyptian role in the peninsula. In an attempt to salvage his position, the Egyptians bombed Saudi territory and put an end to Arab summitry with the announcement that they could not cooperate with reaction. They also had recourse to poison gas when bombing hostile areas in northern Yemen.

Simultaneously with the renewal of the Arab Cold War, Egypt's position in the international arena was at a low ebb. Tensions with the Kremlin were overshadowed by the deterioration of relations with the West, and the United States in particular. To quote Ferris, by early 1967 Egypt was "threatening an international crisis – in Yemen, Tunisia or perhaps Sinai? – in a panicked attempt to grab Washington's attention and escape Moscow's tightening bear hug" (265). According to Ferris, "the key to the enigma of Egypt's surprising decision to send troops into the Sinai Peninsula" in May 1967 lay "between Cairo, Riyadh and Washington". It was "the existential crisis in Egypt, precipitated by five years of conflict with Saudi Arabia in Yemen, that set the stage for [the Six Day War,] the grand conflagration of 1967," with "the deadlock in U.S.-Egyptian relations that formed the crucial ingredient." Nasser seized on Syrian-Israeli border tension and the implied Soviet commitment to support provided by Moscow's misinformed intelligence about Israeli intentions to attack Syria, as a pretext to withdraw one-third of his remaining troops in Yemen and simultaneously restore his "battered prestige" in the Arab world by remilitarizing the Sinai with what seemed "a minimal risk of war" (267-8).

Summing up, Ferris gives a devastating appraisal of Nasserism as it brought Egypt – still officially and ironically named the United Arab Republic – to disaster on all fronts. Perhaps the most humiliating was its replacement by Saudi Arabia as the determining force in the Arab world. The war in Yemen in which Nasser embroiled his army put the lid finally on his version of Arab nationalism, Arab revolution and 'Arab socialism,' and on Nasser's overriding ambition.



The monographic subtitle is a peculiar genre with its own special quirks, among them a propensity for brash monocausality. We have learned to make allowances for this tendency. When a book promises to explain “How Illicit Trade Made America” or “How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine American Wars,” we know better than to accept the offer entirely at face value.<sup>1</sup> So it is with Jesse Ferris’s exploration of “How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power.” Once we have reminded ourselves that the author doesn’t *really* see his subject as wielding, on its own, such vast explanatory power, we can settle down to appreciate the scope and richness of his achievement. For in this excellent book, featuring exhaustive multilingual research, sharp analysis, shrewd judgment, and graceful prose, Ferris not only brings the Yemeni Civil War to life but also shows that an understanding of that conflict is crucial for making sense of recent Egyptian history.

A basic question drives this work: How to explain the steep decline in Egypt’s domestic and international fortunes over the course of the 1960s? At the start of the decade, Ferris writes, Egypt was “[f]or the first time in centuries, perhaps millennia, . . . completely free of foreign domination.” Its economy was sluggish, but the superpowers vied with each other to provide material assistance. Egypt’s leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, was at the apex of his power, his writ extending to Syria, which had joined Egypt to form the United Arab Republic in 1958. “Peace reigned, thanks to an astute leadership’s assiduous avoidance of war.” Yet by 1970, Ferris continues, Egypt was in deep trouble. “Following the secession of Syria in 1961 and Israel’s conquest of the Sinai Peninsula in 1967, the territory under Egypt’s effective control had shrunk by 20 percent.” The country’s economy was a shambles, its relations with the United States at or near their nadir. “And the defense of the realm from Israeli attack,” writes Ferris, “relied on a Soviet division in quasi-occupation of the Nile Valley” (1).

Conventional wisdom attributes Egypt’s woes primarily to the 1967 debacle, but Ferris finds this explanation inadequate. “[A] closer look at the gloomy picture of Egypt post ‘67,” he writes, “reveals that many of its ingredients were already present on the eve of the Six-Day War” (1). Rather, “the key to the decline of Egyptian power . . . lies in Egypt’s five-year intervention in the Yemeni Civil War” (2). In the fall of 1962, still smarting from the Syrian secession, Nasser sent troops to support the newly established Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), which faced a rebellion by ousted Royalist forces. The Egyptian intervention was supposed to be limited and brief. But once Cairo’s prestige was committed, and as it became clear that the YAR would collapse without Egyptian support, Egypt’s war expanded and escalated; not for nothing did they call it ‘Nasser’s Vietnam.’ Because the venture brought Egypt into direct conflict with Saudi Arabia and Britain—both of them U.S. allies—Cairo’s relations with Washington sharply deteriorated, undermining the latter’s

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Andreas, *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

commitment to provide economic aid to Egypt. (As it happened, a leading advocate of cutting off assistance to Egypt was Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska, who, by casting one of the two 'nays' on the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, took a much lonelier stand against 'Lyndon Johnson's Yemen.') Egypt became increasingly dependent on Soviet assistance, sowing discord in *that* relationship as Cairo struggled to repay its debts to Moscow. Meanwhile, the failure to subdue the Royalist insurgency damaged Nasser's prestige abroad and stymied his socialist state-building at home.

The accumulation of these setbacks and pressures created what Ferris calls an "existential crisis in Egypt" (267). In the late spring of 1967, Nasser sought to escape that crisis through a diplomatic showdown with Israel. Apparently, the Egyptian leader hoped to score a public relations victory over the Zionist enemy without firing a shot. The Israelis had other ideas. In short, Ferris concludes, while "the Six-Day War is an obvious watershed separating the age of Egyptian ascendance from the following two generations of inglorious stagnation" the approach to that watershed takes us through Yemen (1).

I am persuaded by Ferris's claims that the war in Yemen was key to Egypt's decline in the 1960s and that, by early 1967, the venture had helped to place Egypt in a truly untenable position. While I came to the book with some sense of the intervention's significance in these respects, I had scarcely appreciated the full dimensions of Nasser's folly, which Ferris so painstakingly and effectively uncovers. Especially acute is his discussion of the war's impact on Egypt's military establishment—the spawning of a vast patronage system that perpetuated the war and bankrupted the country's economy; the further postponement of institutional reforms that the top brass should have undertaken following the army's dismal performance in the Suez War of 1956 (40-45, 61-69, 199-205).

Where Ferris struggles a bit is in the effort to establish a more direct link between the Yemen intervention and the countdown to the 1967 War—though his treatment of the latter succeeds in other ways. At first, it appears that Ferris *has* found a strong connection. The reentry of Egyptian troops into the Sinai in May 1967, he writes, "offered [Nasser] a silver bullet with which to kill several acute problems at once," among them the increasingly conspicuous failure of Egyptian arms in Yemen. "[B]y withdrawing combat troops unilaterally from Yemen so as to confront a greater enemy, he would mitigate the potentially fatal acknowledgement" of his inability to defeat the Royalists (267-8). But then Ferris reconsiders: "the documentary record—such as it is—indicates that in the spring of 1967 Nasser, far from throwing in the towel [in Yemen], was determined to hold out until the British completed their planned evacuation of [neighboring] Aden in 1968, allowing him to claim victory and withdraw" (268). Having thus set Yemen aside, Ferris endorses the more-or-less conventional (and in my view correct) interpretation that Nasser remilitarized the Sinai largely to silence Arab critics who charged him with using the presence of United Nations peacekeepers in the Sinai as an excuse to avoid tangling with Israel. Yet even here Ferris had an opportunity, which he surprisingly didn't take, to establish a Yemen connection: some of those accusing Nasser of "hiding behind the UN"

could not resist observing, in the same breath, that the Egyptian leader had no hesitation about killing fellow Arabs in Yemen.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Yemen seldom appears in Ferris's discussion of the lead-up to the 1967 War. The author instead offers a number of perceptive and plausible speculations, mostly unrelated to Yemen, about the motivations of various actors in the drama. Take, for example, the erroneous Soviet intelligence report to the effect that Israel was preparing a major attack on Syria. Ferris portrays the report as the last in a series of warnings Moscow had issued since the previous year, most of them public, about the imminence of Israeli aggression—all part of an effort to demonstrate to Arab leaders (and perhaps to audiences in third world and communist countries) that the Kremlin remained as vigilant as ever in guarding the security of its 'progressive' Middle Eastern allies (278-84).

Surveying the work as a whole, one finds some curious omissions. Ferris's chapter on Soviet support for Nasser's initial intervention in Yemen in the fall of 1962 (including at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis) is a triumph of multi-archival research and judicious analysis, and it makes a significant contribution to Cold War historiography. Strangely missing, however, is any discussion of a U.S. reaction to Moscow's provocative move. While American perspectives are not at the center of Ferris's study, they are integral to his overall argument and should not be wholly absent here. Also surprising is how little Ferris has to say about Egypt's use of poison gas against Royalist forces. In light of more recent events, there is a danger of becoming too fixated on this part of the story, and Ferris is to be commended for avoiding that presentist trap. But surely the topic merits more than two fleeting references, each in a different chapter (188, 260).

Still, let's not lose sight of the main achievement: Ferris both vividly recreates the Yemen War and shows that the shadow it cast was much deeper and longer than we have appreciated. If important elements of the narrative and the argument remain to be worked out, that has more to do with gaps in the documentary record than with the small number of opportunities the author has missed. Future scholars will build on Ferris's outstanding work, and no historian of Nasserist Egypt can ignore it.

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<sup>2</sup> Jordanian leaders and propagandists were especially prone to make this charge. See Nigel John Ashton, *King Hussein of Jordan: A Political Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 111; Moshe Shemesh, *Arab Politics, Palestinian Nationalism and the Six Day War: The Crystallization of Arab Strategy and Nasir's Descent to War, 1957-1967* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), 132; Samir A. Mutawi, *Jordan in the 1967 War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 82; Peter Snow, *Hussein: A Biography* (Washington, DC: R.B. Luce, 1972), 171.

Author's Response by Jesse Ferris, Israel Democracy Institute

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I would like to thank Tom Maddux for organizing this roundtable and my three reviewers for their valuable contributions to the discussion.

Salim Yaqub has many kind words to offer as well as a number of insightful comments. Yaqub's sharpest critique concerns my treatment of the Six-Day War as a byproduct of the war in Yemen. He faults the book's sub-title for its implied mono-causality and is surprised when I fail to exploit opportunities to substantiate my argument by linking the two wars more directly. While I claim no special immunity from the temptations of titular overreach, this critique misses a fundamental point and is thus worth dwelling on.

Let us remind ourselves of the starting point for this debate. Open the best new book on the history of modern Egypt and you will find a handful of paragraphs on the Egyptian intervention in Yemen—a war that Gamal Nasser compared to the American experience in Vietnam, and which one might fairly compare also to the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, to the Israeli experience in Lebanon or to the French experience in Algeria.<sup>1</sup> Then turn to the definitive account of the Six-Day War for a reminder that contemporaries were convinced that war between Egypt and Israel was impossible so long as the Egyptian army remained mired in Yemen.<sup>2</sup> I pick on these fine exemplars merely to illustrate the fact that the Yemen War has received nowhere near the scholarly attention it merits in Egypt or anywhere else; and that Nasser's predicament in Yemen, to the extent it is even considered in conjunction with the Six Day War, is seen mainly as a barrier to or distraction from confrontation with Israel. In this context, the revelation that Egypt's intervention in Yemen in fact had everything to do with the decline of Egyptian power in general, and with Nasser's fateful decision to remilitarize the Sinai in mid-May 1967 in particular, is a discovery of some consequence.

The book's sub-title captures a much broader claim about the significance of the intervention for Egypt than Yaqub implies. As I state plainly in the introduction, "[t]he main argument of this book is that the key to the decline of Egyptian power at the height of the Cold War lies in Egypt's five-year intervention in the Yemeni civil war" (2). The Six-Day War, according to this interpretation, was merely a signpost—a major one, to be sure—on a path of decline that began with the dissolution of the United Arab Republic and led through five years of quagmire in Yemen. There were, as I acknowledge, other factors at work: "Clearly, there can be no monocausal theory of this decline. But some causes are more significant than others" (2). In my view, the intervention in Yemen was the most significant factor in the decline of Egyptian power under Nasser.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 77, 96-97.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 40, 76.

Among the war's manifold effects on Egyptian fortunes, its impact on the outbreak of the Six Day War turns out to have been especially substantial. It is not necessary, in my opinion, to identify, let alone prove a direct connection between cause and effect in this regard. In fact, I began my investigation of the crisis of May 1967 seeking precisely the sort of direct link between the two wars that Yaqub seems to expect. But I soon discovered there was no 'there' there. Simply put, Nasser did not send his armies against Israel in order to get them out of Yemen—indeed, he wanted to have his cake in the Sinai and eat it in San'a. Instead, a less tidy but more significant *indirect* connection between the two wars emerged. Egypt's intervention in Yemen had a number of unintended consequences that have hitherto not attracted serious historiographical attention. The most significant of these, for Egypt, were the transformation of the Arab Cold War into an unwinnable hot war with Saudi Arabia; the destabilization of Nasser's all-important balancing act between the United States and the Soviet Union; and the aggravation of a serious economic and political crisis in Egypt. It was under the cumulative impact of *these* developments that Nasser sought a way out of his predicament—and found one that led through Sinai.

The war of June 1967 came about because five years of inconclusive war in Yemen had brought Egypt to an impasse that could only be resolved through confrontation with Israel. The real historical goldmine was struck, in other words, not by uncovering various mechanical connections between the stalemate in Yemen and the crisis in Sinai but by realizing that the entire Yemeni episode constituted the crucial, hitherto ignored backdrop to the crisis that precipitated the Six-Day War. Viewed thus, much of the book amounts to a revisionist interpretation of the origins of the third Arab-Israeli war. In short, I stand by the title.

Reading J.E. Peterson's review it occurred to me that the title of the book may not have been bold *enough*. Peterson finds few surprises in this walk down "a very well-trodden path" and applauds the provision of "persuasive documentation for events and policies that generally have been long accepted but not verified." One could imagine a more spirited reaction to the appearance of the first monograph in forty years on a subject which, far from being well understood, is more of a historical black hole. Indeed, I wish my reviewers had grappled more directly with some of the more provocative arguments laid out in the book, including its jarring depiction of Egyptian colonialism, heretical take on inter-Arab politics and the Arab-Israeli conflict, probing anatomy of Nasser's regime, and new understanding of the Soviet role in the Middle East. There are controversial historical claims here that deserve a debate.

I am flattered that Yaacov Ro'i sees in my book "the ultimate narrative." However, lest others be deterred from taking up the chase, I wish to emphasize, along with Peterson, that much work remains to be done, in particular when it comes to assembling a fuller chronicle of events on the battlefield. I am particularly gratified that Ro'i appreciates the significance of the book's new findings on Soviet involvement in the conflict. I did not expect to find that Nikita Khrushchev, far from being preoccupied with the prospect of nuclear war with the United States over Cuba, was sending Soviet planes and pilots to help Nasser launch his revolutionary gambit in Yemen. Nor was I prepared for the discovery that Leonid Brezhnev,

far from conspiring with Nasser about war with Israel, was engaged in a dark struggle with the Egyptian President over access to military bases—well before the Six-Day War. The enormity of the economic dimension in Soviet and Egyptian calculations also came as a surprise, and yielded significant insights into the deteriorating relationship between the two countries on the eve of the war.

J. E. Peterson misreads my evaluation of Egyptian involvement in the events of September 26, 1962 as discounting any significant Egyptian role in the putsch. True, I conclude that the Egyptians did not take an active role in the coup itself, but I argue for a still more significant Egyptian role in preparing the ground for revolution in Yemen. Following Sami Sharaf and others, I find that Nasser placed Yemen at the heart of his ‘freedom agenda’ soon after seizing power in Egypt. From 1953 onwards, the Department of Arab Affairs within Egyptian General Intelligence provided sustained encouragement and support for the revolutionary movement in Yemen, most tangibly through the dispatch of military training missions in the mid-50s. This effort proved critical in the emergence of a capable group of Yemeni officers who were prepared to act against the Imam on the assurance of support from Cairo (31-33, 73-74).

Peterson makes a good point that in clinging to the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (FLOSY), Nasser picked the losing horse in South Yemen, thereby undermining his own vision of a pro-Egyptian political order after the war. Indeed, it is remarkable how such a sophisticated political operator could misjudge, time and again, the domestic balance of power in other countries, as happened in Syria in 1961, in Northern Yemen over the course of the civil war, and in South Yemen from 1966 onwards. Considerations of pride and control seem consistently to have trumped realism in Nasser’s relations with foreign clients.

There will no doubt be many students of Yemen who, along with Peterson, will lament the missing details from the Yemeni side of the story. There is also, one might add, a fascinating *Saudi* side to this story that remains to be told. The void in the historiography of the war is indeed enormous. To the charge of not having filled it entirely, I plead guilty. In writing *Nasser’s Gamble*, I had one specific purpose: to tell Egypt’s untold tale. The book is very much an invitation to area specialists to pick up where I have left off and lift the veil on other aspects of this important but long-neglected episode in the history of the Middle East in the twentieth century.

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