



Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash That Shaped the Middle East by Fawaz A. Gerges.

Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018. Pp. xx, 483. ISBN 978-0-691-16788-6.

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The creation of Israel as an independent state in 1948 was one many dramatic changes in the postwar Middle East. European imperial powers like Britain were seeking to reimpose their influence in the region, while in Egypt Army officers led by Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew the British-supported monarch King Farouk and sought to establish a secular nationalist identity for Egypt. Nasser even hoped to create a United Arab Republic centered on Arab nationalism. Then, in 1967, Egypt mobilized its forces in anticipation of a pan-Arab assault on Israel, only to be defeated in an Israeli surprise attack that destroyed Arab forces in six days. Thus ended Arab nationalism both as a political ideology and as a uniting force in the Middle East.

Into this vacuum came Islamism, which sought a political role for Islam. Leaders like Sayyid Qutb promised to make the Arab states more powerful if their societies and governments returned to the ways of the Prophet Muhammad. Politically engaged Islamism posed a threat not only to Israel but also to secular Arab state governments. The rise of Islamism after the failure of secular nationalism is the received explanation for the evolution of Islamic fundamentalist groups that exported terror far beyond the Middle East to the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In *Making the Arab World*, professor of International Relations Fawaz Gerges (London School of Economics) argues that conventional wisdom has oversimplified the complicated interactions of nationalists and Islamists in the mid-twentieth century. By concentrating on Muslim Brotherhood leaders like Sayyid Qutb, he gets to the heart of Islamism. However, he does not rely only on the writings of Qutb; he also interviews those who worked with Qutb and Nasser, usefully contrasting personal experience with the documentary record. Instead of seeing nationalism and Islamism as opposing ideologies, Gerges argues that they collaborated to overthrow the monarchy and build political support for revolution. That said, they had very different ideas about post-revolutionary Egypt. This division, Gerges argues, not ideological differences, explains the fracture between Qutb, a Muslim Brotherhood leader, and Nasser, who led the Free Officers who overthrew King Farouk. But the Muslim Brotherhood was not the only competitor Nasser had to overcome to gain control of Egypt:

Nasser struggled to establish his dominance first over competitors within the military and then against other rivals across the political spectrum. Only then did Egypt's new military leader take advantage of the this newfound stability to move against the Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood] and try to crush the Islamist movement by imprisoning thousands of Ikhwan members, including its top leaders. In charting stage by stage the evolution of the relationship between the Free Officers and the Muslim Brothers from 1952 onwards, it becomes apparent that realpolitik and the thirst for power and recognition, not ideology, are the source of the decades-long conflict that has continued to shape the identity of the postcolonial, post-independence state in much of the Arab world. (78)

Gerges's emphasis on the interaction between the Muslim Brotherhood and Nasser shows that the driving force of Egyptian politics in the post-colonial world was not simply ideology but power sharing. His analysis of Anwar Sadat's presidency is particularly effective. He explains that Sadat sought to leverage religion in order to distance his political philosophy from that of his predecessor, Nasser. Sadat freed Muslim Brothers from prison and allowed the group more freedom within Egyptian society. They could hold public meetings and were in general spared the persecution they suffered under Nasser. However, the move toward piety was aborted when Sadat normalized relations with Israel after the Yom Kippur War. Islamists saw this as a betrayal and one of the more radical groups assassinated Sadat in 1981. This provoked renewed persecution by the Egyptian government led by another Egyptian general, Hosni Mubarak. For Gerges, Sadat's use of religion is evidence of the false divisions that some project on Middle East politics, that of secular or Islamic based groups. He argues that this is a false choice, because both leverage Islam and both covet secular political power. The real difference lies in what the leaders plan to do with that power.

The author's narrow focus on Egyptian politics comes at the expense of situating them within the larger Arab world. Certainly, Egypt is influential in the Middle East but it would be helpful to see some analysis of the effects of the war in Yemen, the decision whether to accept Soviet or US support, the role of Egypt in founding the Non-Aligned Movement, the rise of Saudi Arabia, and the theocratic revolution in Iran. But these quibbles do not detract from the value of Gerges's work. *Making the Arab World* will serve as a valuable complement to more politically focused histories of the region.¹ And, too, Gerges's closer inspection of the relations between Nasser and Qutb shows why the tensions in the Middle East are more than simply Arab-Israeli or Secular-Nationalist. Resolving them will require not only external partners but also internal determination.

¹ E.g., Mehran Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East: A Political History since the First World War*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 2013).