Book Reviews


*Nasser’s Gamble* is both more extensive and more limited than its title indicates. While dealing fully and insightfully with the causes, course, and consequences of Egypt’s 1962–1967 military intervention in Yemen, it also provides a rich and often original analysis of Egypt’s tangled international relations over the same period, particularly with the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and how intervention in Yemen adversely affected Egypt’s international standing. Yet in another respect the title suggests too much: the role of Egypt’s Yemen intervention in producing the Six-Day War of June 1967 is only a small and less integral part of the book.

As the work’s Introduction states, “[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” (p. 2). The remainder of the book makes a powerful case for this thesis. Its implicit definition of “Egyptian power” encompasses both domestic and international dimensions; hence, the book deals equally with the largely negative effects of the Yemen intervention on Egypt’s domestic politics, economy, and society, and with Egypt’s deteriorating international relations due to its involvement in Yemen.

The study is based on a remarkable range of sources. It relies most heavily on a combination of archival materials, particularly American and Soviet, and on the use of published Egyptian sources. As the author repeatedly acknowledges, the inaccessibility of Egyptian archival materials severely limits what one can say with certainty about the regime deliberations that determined Egyptian policy and behavior in Yemen. Nonetheless, through a scrupulous and perceptive dissection of the numerous (and often conflicting) published Egyptian studies and memoirs that deal with the subject of Yemen, the work succeeds in providing an original and generally convincing interpretation of numerous aspects of Egypt’s involvement in Yemen and its international repercussions. The other area where the study makes its greatest contribution relates to the Soviet Union and its relations with Egypt: through an equally careful analysis of
recently declassified Soviet archival materials and published sources, the work offers a number of provocative theses that often challenge conventional wisdom regarding Soviet policy both in Yemen and the Middle East generally. Egypt’s relationship with the United States throughout the 1960s is better-traveled terrain, but the work’s account of it, while less original, is nonetheless solidly based on U.S. archival sources and offers valuable insights on the evolution of Egyptian-U.S. relations. The discussion of the Egyptian-Saudi rivalry over Yemen is largely based on American archival and published Egyptian sources.

The work’s several chapters discuss discrete dimensions of Egyptian intervention in Yemen and its international repercussions. The introductory chapter provides a thoughtful overview of the post-1952 revolutionary regime in Egypt, its ambitions for regional hegemony, the domestic constraints under which it conducted its foreign policy, and the relationship between Arab regional politics and the Cold War. Chapter one is a detailed analysis of the initial Egyptian intervention in Yemen. It argues that, while some sort of Egyptian intervention in Yemen after its 1962 military coup was “the natural product of Egypt’s revolutionary foreign policy” in the wake of the 1961 Syrian secession from the United Arab Republic (p. 32), the military form that intervention took was the product of intense regime debate. While unable to provide a definitive answer to all of the questions related to Egyptian military intervention due to the unavailability of Egyptian archival sources, the author’s thorough analysis of external archival materials, and more importantly the sizable Egyptian memoir literature that is now available, provides a fascinating account of Egypt’s limitations and errors in its military intervention. These include internal Egyptian rivalries, particularly the struggle for influence between President Nasser and his former friend and deputy Field Marshal ʿAmir, the alternative positions concerning possible assistance to the Yemeni rebels being taken by different voices within the regime, Egypt’s limited knowledge about what intervention in Yemen might entail (“its commandos went off to Yemen equipped with maps that might have embarrassed a tourist”—p. 57), and its underestimation of the likely international consequences of military involvement in Yemen. The chapter concludes by arguing that committing the Egyptian military to a significant involvement abroad in effect postponed the ultimate Nasser-ʿAmir clash until 1967, and thereby prevented both badly-needed institutional reform of the military and its corrupt leadership: “the war’s most pernicious effect may have been to perpetuate the calcified command of the Egyptian armed forces by a crucial half-decade” (p. 69).

In chapters two, three, and four, the work’s focus shifts from Egyptian policy in Yemen to Egypt’s relations with the great powers. Chapter two is an original account of the initial Soviet involvement in Yemen based primarily on Soviet sources that have recently been made available. Its detailed discussion of