The Legitimacy of Nasser's Ideology during Eisenhower Administration

Cristina Nedelcu

The purpose of our work is to establish a schedule of the evolution of Gamal Abdel Nasser's ideology during a part of Dwight Eisenhower's second administration. From a chronological point of view, the period stretches from 1955 to 1958, where the first year of this limit represents the moment when Nasser actually took the political power and 1958 was the moment of obvious deterioration of American-Egyptian relations.

Our intention is to answer to the following question: did Eisenhower's foreign policy in Middle East help the creation of a favorable framework for Nasserism's legitimacy? In order to ask to this question, we shall focus mainly on two moments: 1956 and 1958.

First of all, it is necessary to present the explanation of some concepts, which are going to be used in this text.

The ideology of Egyptian president was called Nasserism, which is the political and social attitude of Arabs from many countries, who regarded Gamal Abdel Nasser as the leader of all Arabs, and republican Egypt as the prototype of a nation progressing towards national freedom and social justice. This movement takes its inspiration from the personality, actions and utterances of Nasser[1]. This ideology, gradually developed, mostly after its promoter got Arabs admiration for his daring political acts, most of them against Western interests in Middle East. The Nasserism required for Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism, neutrality (idea which during this period became to described feelings against West and pro-Soviets), and Arab socialism.

In establishing a definition for the Arab nationalism, we should keep in mind the continuous change of signification of the word "Arab". If centuries ago, this word described the people from Arab Peninsula's tribes, during Nasser's time the Arab language became the most important aspect of the definition and, as well, the cultural and historical heritage got through the Arabization process combined with Arab's geographical heterogeneous area.

In the early times, the creation of Arab nationalism was influenced by the penetration of Western civilization to Middle Eastern area and, inspired by the XIX-th century European liberation and romantic nationalism. The Arab nationalism idea clarified after the First World War, since during the previous century it was marked by proto-nationalism[2].

During the period of time between the two World Wars, Arab Nationalism asked for liberation from foreign influence and for the creation of a great Arab state (there had been many such projects known as "Great Syria"). After the Second World War and 1948 War, Arab nationalism doctrine had two shapes: Nasserism and Ba'athism. Both ways of expression had the same request:" Arab unity, liberty, socialism and revolution", and, as well, they had the same tendency to undermine rival regimes. The totalitarian approach of the political system was supported by the structure of one party and a single ideology. Still, there had been differences between Nasserism and Ba'athism[3], which with the time passing became more obvious and after Syrian-Egyptian union broke in 1961, had turned to direct clashes between the two movements.

Pan-Arabism was an element of the nationalism's doctrine, which had spoke for

solidarity, cooperation and political unity. After the mid of 50's, Nasser developed a pan-Arab policy, through which he had tried to impose Egypt's hegemony in the entire Arab Middle East. Despite the many projects of Arab unification[4], the Arab States League was the only inter-Arab cooperation structure which survived during time.

Arab socialism was Nasser's official doctrine for Egypt's internal and social affairs. Its main characteristics referred to the growth of Egyptian people's income, the development of social legislation in fields such as health, education and the protection of workers rights, the nationalization of basic industries and foreign trade and the planned economy. Unlike communism, Arab socialism allowed the private property over the production tools, in some fields encouraged national capitalism and strongly rejected the nationalization of agricultural properties. Arab socialism didn't reject openly the Islamic religion, and even presented itself to the masses as a form of applying some religious precepts, such as the equality between umma[5]'s members.

In order to answer to the question on which is based this article it is necessary to establish the chronology of the creation and the search of legitimacy of Nasserism. Concerning the Egyptian policy we should point that one of the most important moments of their post Second World War period is the July 1952 Revolution.

In the Arab world during the 50's it had been a decade of coup d'etats, which had started in 1949 in Syria with colonel Zaim's violent action. As a common characteristic of these movements is that those who took the power came from the military structures or had been its allies, and were the members of the generation, which had reached maturity age during 30's or the beginning of 40's, when they had been put out the political system by the old elites and the colonial establishment[6]. The alliance with the military structures was absolutely necessary not only because they needed instruments of action, but as well because the Army was a symbol of dignity and national pride. National armies were recent creations in the Arab environment; in Egypt's case the Military Academy opened for everybody in 1936 and the first generation of graduates were the officers (The Young Officers) who took the political power in 1952.

While Nasser's group took quite easy the political power, from 1955 on, after General Neguib's departure, his main problem had been his legitimacy. In order to gather prestige, considered as a source of legitimacy, Nasser had to establish a system of ideas which answered people's needs and expectations and then to apply it in internal and foreign policy. In which concerns Nasser, the problem of legitimacy has to be analyzed separately on both Egyptian and Arab levels. Nasser was the charismatic leader, who managed to mobilize political the Egyptian masses and then, by underlying in his speeches ideas like unity, the restoration of past times Arab glory, he appealed the Arab population too. The great popularity he received from Arabs after the Bandung Conference and Suez crisis made him the leader of Arab world. In other words, he had started to gain legitimacy first on Egyptian level and then he had moved to the Arab circle.

The period of Nasserism's creation and search for legitimacy started in 1955 and ended in 1961 when the United Arab Republic broke. As many authors underlined the period 1958-1961 is the peak of Nasser's ideology.

Nasser got masses support by resorting to Arab past glory and by announcing his intention to recover it. Seven years after 1952 Revolution he told to Egyptian people that the people and the army are "those who in such a short time accomplished glorious pages of history" such as "king's expulsion, who had spread corruption around the country; the expulsion of imperialists and above all they've put the foundation of glory, liberty and dignity."[7]

In reaching the status of Arab leader (not just Egyptian leader) he had to develop spectacular actions in foreign policy field, but also in the internal policy. His interior policy was marked by the Arab socialism's principles and their application turned in a source of legitimacy even in the foreign field, since republican Egypt became the model to follow by all Arabs. Socialism was a new phenomenon in Middle East. The Arab version represented an ideological adaptation of Socialism to Egypt's needs. Before the 60's the idea was spread mainly inside the intellectual group, because the political segment was preoccupied with problems as independence, while the social aspect was secondary on their lists. The socialism was an attractive idea for the Young

Officers because they had theirs origins in the middle or low social structures, which had been ignored by the traditional political leadership. In Egypt the Young Officers had observed the corruption of the liberal democratic system and the fanatic approach of "Muslim Brotherhood". They concluded that the solution for all social problems could be only a new ideology, which represented the real democracy and social justice. For them Arab socialism was:

1. The symbol of real independence. Since the European companies still had the control of Middle Eastern economy even after these countries had granted their political independence, the solution of nationalization and establishing the planned economy (supported be Arab socialism) had made these new governments to declare the full political and economic independence;
2. The symbol of modernity. It was an ideology that hadn't been used before, so it became prove that a country which had applied Arab socialism hadn't been backward anymore.
3. A way to introduce new values into Arab world such as equality, sharing of goods, cooperation, which were considered to be superior to those promoted by the capitalism world, where the individual existence was underlined[8].

The Aswan Dam, the industrialization programs and the agrarian reform are examples practicing Arab socialism's principles. For Nasser Aswan Dam was the symbol of "determination and decision of the entire Arab nation to carry his self-taken task of building the great, free home"[9]. Still, its principles couldn't solve the most important of Egyptian society "that another 175.000 people were to be born in the country that month and they had to be fed"[10].

Arab socialism was a way to gain popularity beyond Egyptian borders. In other words, we can say that Nasser's prestige in Arab world was first obtained involuntary and then in a second phase he started to build purposeful activities — most of them in foreign policy field — to enhance prestige. These activities were:

1. The Bandung Conference (April 1955), the moment which stands as the beginning of an Egyptian active foreign policy, Nasser strongly opposed colonialism and foreign domination. His first success in this field was in 1954 when, after the negotiations with Great Britain in order to conclude a new treaty, he obtained total withdrawn of the British troops from Egyptian territory. This was also the developing point of a new approach in foreign policy: the neutrality. Fundamental for this evolution of his future political acts had been the meetings with Tito and Nehru from February 1955. Mohammed Heikal wrote about those meetings and the admiration shared between one and another. His relation with Nehru became even better and stronger after Nasser had tried to find a peaceful solution for the conflict between India and China[11].
2. The arms deal with Czechoslovakia (September 1955), behind which had stood the Soviet Union, although in a declaration from September 30th 1955, after the treaty with Czechoslovakia had been signed, Nasser tried to put USSR aside this arms deal, underling that "we [the Egyptian people] have accepted the arms deal offered by Czechoslovakia on a pure commercial base. Therefore, it is not necessary an accord with USSR"[12].
3. The rejection of the Baghdad Pact (1954-1955), which Nasser considered to be a new type of British domination.
4. Building Aswan Dam, which Nasser presented as an all Arabs property.
5. The nationalization of Suez Company (1956).
6. The creation of United Arab Republic in 1958.

From Eisenhower point of view, USSR was e main enemy of USA. All his foreign policy actions were in the direction of an active containment and roll back of communism. Concerning Arab world he considered that the Americans had the mission to put some order into the chaos[13]. For him reaching peace in Middle East was synonymous with reducing the chances for Russians to go deeper in Arab world. Accordingly, if Nasser's foreign policy wasn't helpful for American interests then it became automatically pro-Russian.

On the other hand, during Nasser's time the Western states when analyzing Arab world's realities were strongly influenced by the contrast between Arab visions about building the great Arab nation and the conflict situation,

which developed inside the Arab system[14]. Eisenhower perceived the Middle Eastern area as one of contradictions. This perception was found in "Eisenhower Doctrine": Eisenhower and Dulles's geopolitical vision was concerned with the containment of communism, so the Middle East region was tied with containment—disregard for the aspirations and interests of the local populations and states. This was not a very successful strategy because the threats perceived by the regional states and those perceived by United States were different: Israel's threat were the Arabs and Israel the threat to the Arabs not the USSR.

During 1956 Suez Canal Crisis: the US demonstrated with its actions that: it wanted to exert more influence in the area (tough on Britain and France) and didn't consider Israel as its top ally in the area.

At the same time the US conception of Arabs and Palestinians has been negative in the above mentioned period of time:
1. their way of life threatens ours,
2. the historical animosity between Islam and Christianity,
3. the colonial and imperialist legacies,
4. they are anti-democratic/hence all the authoritarian regimes in the area,
5. they are terrorists

What a reader should keep in mind is the fact that in the period 1955-1958 Nasser was in an active search of legitimacy, while Eisenhower's intentions were to stop and to roll back communists, regardless the means he might've been forced to use.

In Eisenhower's policy in Middle East there are few moments which must be stressed, because they had helped Nasserism's legitimization.

After Nasser had signed the arms deal with Czechoslovakia, Eisenhower had perceived this as a Soviet advancement in Middle East. He wrote in his diary that "the Arabs, absorbing major consignments of arms from the Soviets are daily growing more arrogant and disregarding the interests of Western Europe and of the United States in the Middle East region"[15]. Assuming that his perception was correct Eisenhower decided over the necessity to isolate Egypt using two methods:
1. To support strongly Saudi Arabia up to the point where this country could've become Nasser's rival.

2. To withdraw the American financial aid for Aswan Dam.

Eisenhower believed that if the above two mentioned situation were realized then, eventually, Egypt would turn to USA. He thought that "if Egypt finds herself thus isolated from the rest of the Arab world, and with no ally in sight except Soviet Russia, she would quickly get sick of that prospect and would join us in the search for a just and decent peace in the region"[16].

While United States had this tough attitude, the Russian Foreign Ministry had had underlined in a declaration from April 16th 1955 — a declaration very well received by Nasser — the idea that the Western world was aggressive, while the Soviet government had always supported the legitimate requests of Middle and Near Eastern countries for national independence and sovereignty"[17].

Nasser felt any kind of pressure from the Russian side but he perceived the Americans as a new dominative power.

Eisenhower did not pay enough attention to Arab Nationalism's or Nasserism's success[18]. The Nasserism was a new movement and with growing popularity in Arab countries, while Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism[19] reached only one country. If the first movement had a political and a social program and ideals to achieve, the Wahhabism insisted only on society's morality aspects.

Among other things, which do not concern the subject of this paper, the official announcement of American's administration decision to stop financial for Aswan project made Nasser to react very harsh: he nationalized Suez Company. Through this action, Nasser achieved one of his political goals: the restoration of national property over the most symbolic remain of foreign domination. Although, the war which broke soon after ended badly for Nasser on battlefields, he transformed it in a political victory. In 1956 he proved to all Arab masses that his political program considered by some to idealist can be achieved.

Eisenhower deepest fear was a direct confrontation with the Russians, so, in 1956 he contained not just the Soviets but also the British and French. Nasser used American position in his advantage, presented as a support vote for Egyptian policy.

Another crucial moment was 1958 because of the creation of the United Arab Republic and the application of "Eisenhower Doctrine" in Lebanon.

The American administration received with doubts all the unification plans from Arab world, especially if they included Egypt, because they were afraid of positive neutrality's expansion[20]. In the first phase neutrality didn't mean communist advancement, but since they could not control Nasser, they hadn't had any guarantees about keeping the status quo.

For Nasser the situation from Lebanon represented a form of imperialist intrusion in Arab world. The American intervention in the name of "Eisenhower Doctrine" helped Nasser to create an atmosphere of insecurity by presenting within his speeches the danger of a new foreign occupation. Convinced that 1956 was still fresh in Arab people's minds he stressed the idea that he had been the only one who could've done something to prevent the "imperialist conquest". Arab unity under Nasser's leadership was presented and perceived as the only solution.

On this ground, the application of United Arab Republic project under Nasser's condition (total domination of this newly created structure by the Egyptians) became easy to do, although Syria had had the first initiative towards unification[21].

Sadat wrote that all this foreign policy actions made Nasser as popular as one of world's leaders[22].

Again, like in 1956, indirectly Eisenhower's foreign policy in Middle East helped Nasser's plans. The Egyptian leader talked to Arabs about the danger represented by Israel, supported by the Americans, and on the background of the situation from Lebanon, Nasser could sustained in front of the Arabs the "theory of a Western plot" against Arabs. In 1958 he got the prove he needed to show Western world's aggressive intentions.

Thanks to US position Nasser could say he had won his war with colonialism and foreign domination and had achieved a good part of the Arab unification plan. Through these achievements he put into practice some main goals of Nasserism and transformed it from a political idea in a legitimate state policy.

NOTES:

[1] Yaacov Shimoni and Evyatar Levind (eds.), *Political Dictionary of the Middle East in the Twentieth Century*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, The Jerusalem Publishing House Ltd., Jerusalem, 1972, p. 270

[2] The word "Arabism" was first used by C. Ernest Dawn to describe early Arab nation's beliefs, which had been in contrast with the Ottoman's, the ideology from the final stage of the Ottoman Empire. Before First World War most of the Arabs kept the political loyalty towards the Ottoman Empire and had asked just for more autonomy for the Arab group. Also, they wanted to follow the economical and technological track of the European countries. From ideological and political points of view, the word Arabism concerns proto-nationalism, not full nationalism, which requires the constant, need of Arab people to separe themselves from Ottoman Empire's structures.

[3] The Nasser underlined the charismatic leader, but kept the pragmatism, which consisted in Nasser's availability to negotiate with Islam and opposed political regimes, while the Ba'ath orientation considered more important collective leadership, the pure doctrine and secularism.

[4] In 1958 Syria and Egypt have created the United Arab Republic, project which lasted until 1961; in 1958 the union project between Iraq and Jordan remained only on paper; in 1963 appeared a new project which engaged Egypt, Iraq and Syria, but was never concluded; the 1971 Egypt-Libya union plan got a premature burial.

[5] Umma is the Arab word which describes the entire community of Muslim believers.

[6] Hisham B. Sharabi, *Nationalism and Revolution in the Arab World*, D. van Nostrand Company Inc., New Jersey, 1966, p. 60.

[7] *Address by President Gamal Abdel Nasser on the Anniversary of the July 23rd Revolution, President Gamal Abdel Nasser's Speeches and Press-Interviews, 1959-1960*, vol. 1, Information Department of UAR, Cairo,1961, pp. 252-253.

[8] Bruce Maynard Borthwick, *Comparative Politics of the Middle East. An Introduction*, Prentice Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1980. p. 73.

[9] Speech Delivered by President Gamal Abdel Nasser on January 9 1960 on the Occasion of the Laying of the Foundation Stone of the High Dam, in Gamal Abdel Nasser's Speeches and Press-Interviews 1959-1960, vol. 2, Information Department of UAR, Cairo, 1961, p. 2.

[10] Robert Stephens, *Nasser. A Political Biography,* Allen Lane-The Penguin Press, Hazell Watson and Viney Ltd., London, New York, 1979, p. 8.

[11] Mohammed Heikal, *Nasser. The Cairo Documents*, New English Library, London, 1972, pp. 262-263.

[12] T.G. Fraser, *The Middle East, 1914-1979 (Documents)*, Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd., London, 1980, p. 87.

[13] Robert H. Ferrel (ed.), *The Eisenhower Diaries*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1981, p. 318.

[14] Allan M. Findlay, *The Arab World*, Routhledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 11.

[15] Robert H. Ferrel (ed.), *op.cit*, p. 318.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 319.

[17] W. Bruce Lincoln, *Documents in World History, 1945-1967,* Chandler Publishing Company, San Francisco, 1968, p. 225.

[18] Steven S. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict. Making America's Middle East Policy from Truman to Reagan,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1985, p. 50.

[19] The Wahhabism is a political-religious movement which had been developed in Saudi Arabia area from 1744 on by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who had based his preaching on a XIVth century doctrine. The Wahhabism became the state's policy and religion. One of its main characteristics refers to the very traditional attitude towards all the changes that might occur in society.

[20] *Foreign Relations of United States (FRUS),* vol. XIII: *Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa,* United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992, p. 408.

[21] John F. Devlin, *The Ba'ath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis,* in "The American Historical Review", vol. 96, no. 5, Dec. 1991, pp. 1399-1400.

[22] Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity. An Autobiography,* St. James's Palace, London, 1978, p. 136.

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