# NATIONAL CHARACTER AND MILITARY STRATEGY: THE EGYPTIAN EXPERIENCE, OCTOBER 1973

by

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It has for some time been an article of faith that the Prussians make good soldiers and that the Italians do not, just as the English are assumed to be reticent and the Irish garrulous.[1] Such broad ethnic generalizations are, perhaps, not without some truth, although confirmation remains rather beyond the normal province of the social scientists. It is, however, possible to analyze such an entity as "the Arab mind" with sufficient rigor that, despite the remarkable diversity of "Arabs," a composite will be useful and valid.[2] Though, for example, the Sudanese and the Iraqi are vastly different in many respects, a practiced eye can perceive without difficulty the innate Arab quality of both. A pervasive reciprocal relation exists between the Arab mind, on one hand, and the institutions of Arab society, the form of the language, the style of life, and the architecture, on the other—a mosque not only reflects the values of Arab society but instills them. Consequently, an Arab army, no matter what the weapons, uniforms, or deployment, reflects an Arab society, an Arab mind. Certainly for over a century before the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, the Egyptian experience had indicated that the Arab mind and an effective modern army were incompatible. Every effort to emulate the Western armies, to educate a new Egyptian military elite, and to become competitive in military enterprises had somehow foundered on the jagged rocks of Arabism.

For many Arabs such as the bedouin on the edge of the Arabian Empty Quarter or the intellectual from Damascus, the Egyptians are not *really* Arabs at all but rather simple *fellaheen*—peasants, converted to the Prophet but still stolid toilers beside the Nile, persistent, narrow men with village virtues, little changed in habit or custom since Pharaonic times. And this picture is partially true, although "village" virtues may be found as well in the desert emir or the Syrian Baathist. In any case, the Egyptian himself spurns such ignorant analysis, although he is quite willing to label the Sudanese Arab a mere African or the Moroccan a berber. To the Egyptian, it is clear that Cairo, not Mecca, is the center of the Arab world, that he, not a nomad on a camel, represents the real Arab. But his pride in being Egyptian and Arab had been so eroded by repeated military defeats that, after the Egyptian-Israeli War of the summer of 1967, to be Arab was to be

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humiliated, to be Egyptian shameful. As perceived by most Western observers, the Arab as soldier was a fit subject for scorn and ridicule.

Where a generation before the Arab had been a man of legend and romance, a warrior out of the desert led by Lawrence of Arabia or the leading man of Hollywood films, after the war in 1967 Nasser had become the archetype for a beaten braggart. Perhaps the most unpleasant and peculiar Arab characteristic in Western eyes has been his seemingly fragile grip on reality, manifested by boasting beyond reason, as Nasser did in 1967, then accepting his own bombast as truth. The repeated claims of Arab victory in June 1967, followed by wild charges of Anglo-American collusive aggression against Egypt in support of Israel, were received in the West first with amazement and ultimately with repugnance. The Arab analysis of reality does indeed differ considerably from that of the West, for the ideal—what ought to be—plays a far greater part in the Arab's perception of what is. To evade shame, avoid humiliation, and protect honor, the Arab has long structured his perceptions to blot out the unpleasant, to sublimate the undesirable into a more acceptable form. Within the Arab mind an effective accommodation to unpleasant reality can easily be arranged, a construct aided by the Arabic language that readily permits the confusion of word and deed—a deed that if beyond physical control can yet be shaped by the mind, perceived as it is desired to be, and turned from sand to pearl. To do otherwise would be to lose honor, to be shamed in public. Nasser in June 1967 did not "lie," but fashioned reality to his measure, and so believed. And such an attitude, a defense against humiliation, is necessary—for the Arab exists in a world where his pride and honor face constant threat, where representation of truth is instrumental, and where the intrusion of the hard edges of reality produce a manic cycle of euphoric triumph and bleak depression.

In 1967 the Israelis, marching as always to a different drummer, were concerned with empirical realities and Zionist facts. Undeterred by Nasser's inflated braggadocio and the rising Arab hysteria and frenzy, the Israelis launched a preemptive strike on June 5th, winning the lightning war in only three hours. As in the past, the Egyptian army admitted no error, reported no adversity, and conceded no defeat. As unpleasant battle dispatches were reported up through succeeding echelons, they were embellished and elaborated into triumphs. Few Egyptian officers could bring themselves to face the reality of defeat and fewer still to accept responsibility for it. Nasser "believed" that his air force was in the air raining destruction on Israel when in fact it lay on its own runways in ashes. Hussein believed Nasser against the evidence of his officers' eyes. Egyptian pilots and tank commanders believed that they had hit each target; regimental commanders believed that their troops were attacking the Israelis, not streaming to the rear. In the Egyptian view, the Israeli air force was destroyed over and over, while Egyptian tanks massed on the edge of Tel Aviv.

Related to the Arab inability to face reality is their preference for the grand but suicidal gesture over the mundane but discreet. Thus even if all were to be lost, the loss should be absorbed in a manner befitting history, in whose eyes the loss would metamorphose into an honorable act beyond recrimination and shame: a glorious disaster therefore becomes far preferable to a tactical setback. What matters is the rhetoric, not the reality. When in 1948 Sir John Glubb, commander of the Arab Legion, sought permission to move into a secure defense position to thwart an Israeli drive, the Prime Minister of Transjordan, Taufiq Pasha, refused: "Better to have the army destroyed than to give up part of the country to an enemy who has no right to it."[3] The Arab insists on justice though the heavens fall, for the falling sky would not be *his* responsibility. In November 1973, Qaddafi of Libya, horrified that Sadat would open negotiations with the Israelis at Kilometer 101, urged continuation of a just war no matter what the cost:

> You will be greater, Mr. President, if you

> led us through a war even with swords, during which we would live in the mountains, the forests, and open without oil, without electricity, without towns or amusements, but with dignity, chivalry, religion, and Arabism.[4]

Then honor would be saved; if the war were lost that would be the whim of fate, *Kismet*.

An Arab, then, fantasies a world the West cannot recognize in order to evade shame and protect honor; inwardly dubious, outwardly bold, he lives a life often subservient to the opinions of others. Eager for admiration, he works in spurts and calculates his gestures. Determined on power himself, he views as an affront the application of power by others. He is a strange combination of the ox and the falcon. Patient, stoical, and enduring, he can also be swift, daring, and courageous. Thus, the Arab is not a man for all seasons, but rather a man of contending parts. The combination has over the centuries produced a great civilization: awe-inspiring architecture, a major religion, and cultural achievements without measure. The combination has also failed patently to produce an effective modern army.

Such an inner life of turmoil and challenge creates a society charged with free-floating animosity, cut through with private suspicion and doubt. It generates an atmosphere so exhausting that an Arab appears to swing from the extreme of lethargy to that of frantic gesture and great intrepidity. The rigid discipline, meticulous training, obedience to trusted authority, consistency of effort, and acceptance of adversity so essential to contemporary armies are not characteristic Arab traits. To a degree, the bleak alternatives of the desert and the black and white patterns of a simple life are still reflected in the Arab outlook. The demands of those desert roots shaped a man who must conform, if by no other means than outward appearance, to his ethnic and tribal ideal. To fail to do so would not only be personally shameful, but it would also be disastrous for the tribe that was dependent on his skill, prestige, and leadership. Though no longer operating with camels and tents, the modern Arab still must shape his image to others' expectations, must resist the inroads of rivals, must appear regularly to win and never to fail, must never forfeit his fragile honor. Not that the teachings of Islam cannot accommodate themselves to failure. So long as honor has been served and history satisfied, the patience and fortitude become the orders of the day. The temptation of resignation becomes fatalism. This fatalism alternates with the frantic gesture. The result is an improvidence of extremes, a feast or famine, a hectic camel charge or a sullen withdrawal. But it does not produce a disciplined military campaign.

Excluding the imported tactics and techniques of those who long ruled the Arabs, whether Turk or Briton, the traditional native forms of war reflect bedouin society. The great desert battle was the *razzia*, a spectacular ritualized raid involving wheeling horses, volleys in the air, huge battle flags of green and black and red, camels stolen, the odd casualty, honor saved, and few the worse. Such a *razzia* was the extended gesture of war; fighting was conducted largely at a distance, impelled by the needs of honor, not the lust of blood or the strategy of vast gain. On such a field of battle, the virtues of the desert could be displayed, daring could be rewarded, and reputations could be enhanced without heavy tribal losses. Cunning, guile, the swift foray, the quick ambush, the wild charge from the top of the wadi that swept by the goats and through the scattered tents and beyond—all could be admired. Such frenzies exhausted the martial impulse for the moment, but guaranteed the inevitable cycle of revenge and challenge, testing and response. For the Arabs in 1967, then, war as an institution was still influenced by these pre-Islamic customs and attitudes of the nomadic bedouins of the Arabian peninsula, as it had been for over a millennium. These customs and attitudes as adapted by the *fellaheen* in the Nile villages or the urban society of Cairo produced a complex and

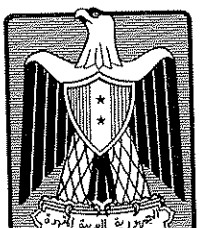
creative society, charming in many ways, but alien to most Western experience. Certainly, the bedouin-influenced Arab armies ran rampant during the Middle Ages, threatening the West largely because of those same bedouin virtues. Increasingly in modern times, however, the Arabs began to fall behind, the virtues of the desert having evolved into insurmountable handicaps and the "Arab mind" into an obstacle to military modernization.

The era of the modern Egyptian army really begins in 1809 when Mohammed Ali, the Macedonian successor to the displaced Mamelukes, first sent apprentice officers to Europe, largely to the small Italian principalities, for military training.[5] In 1816 a military academy was established in Cairo and European advisors soon appeared. In the new model army the officers were Ottomans and Circassians, while the soldiers were Sudanese, initially, and later conscripted *fellaheen*. The bedouin virtues produced the dashing cavalry officers, the stolid *fellaheen* traits produced the plodding infantry, and the French advisors added the merest touch of Western sophistication. With a rising income resulting from the introduction of long staple cotton in 1821, Mohammed Ali further modernized the army, purchasing equipment and hiring additional advisors. In 1831, his invasion of Syria threatened the Ottoman Empire, thus causing Russian intervention in 1833. In 1839 his second challenge to the Ottomans produced a serious crisis and a European-imposed settlement in 1841. The Great Powers reduced Mohammed Ali's army to a tenth of its 1839 size and eliminated Egypt as a serious military power. By then, the complexity of the armies of industrialized Europe was such that they could no longer be matched in Egypt by advisors, a few imported factories, and the investment of funds. Each year the Egyptian army, relying on native levies (untrained and untrainable), archaic tactics, and ancient weapons, became relatively more primitive, obsolete by every European standard. Still the Egyptians did manage to extend their control over most of the Sudan with the aid this time of former United States Civil War officers. Ensuing years saw a gradual military decay and rising European interference in Egyptian affairs. The army was little threat to anyone, a tarnished toy of alien rulers. The officers were largely foreign (no Egyptian could hold a rank higher than colonel), the equipment antiquated, and the soldiers–Egyptian *fellaheen*–ignorant. Then, in 1882, a nationalist revolt under Colonel Ahmed Arabi, an Egyptian and a *fellah*, led to changes that threatened European interests and consequently to British occupation in July 1882.

At that time the Egyptian army had a strength of 45,000 and, despite its limitations, represented a potential institutional threat to the British presence. By 1914 the army had been reduced in size to 10,000, with a small Egyptian officer corps dominated by British officers. Even during World War I, the size was only doubled and then without an increase in the combatant branches. After the war the army again decayed as a result of British policy. There was no reform, no new men, no sense of a potential mission, and no modern equipment except for a few unarmed planes. The army was little more than a club for officers drawn from an upper class dominated by tactical precepts of almost proto-dynastic antiquity. The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 did permit some modernization, including opening the Military Academy to those other than the elite. This change permitted within a year or two the entry of a group of cadets, often in an accelerated program, who would eventually become the nucleus of the Free Officer movement that led to non-monarchical rule for the country. Between 1937 and 1947, however, little was actually accomplished because the grandiose Egyptian plans foundered on British opposition and British priorities. There was improvement in the artillery, but still no effective air force, no armor worthy of the name, no change in the attitudes of the higher ranking officers, only a growing distaste for the old system by the

new careerists. Thus, in 1948, on the eve of the Palestinian war, the Egyptian army of 30,000 was poorly led, poorly equipped, poorly trained, divided by class, and ruled by clique, palace intrigue, and personal interest–all the heritage of the years of British manipulation.

The Palestinian war of 1948 was the first independent Egyptian military disaster, the first real campaign since the Sudanese expedition of the 1860s. King Farouk, against the advice of his government and without due thought, ordered the army to intervene at the moment the British withdrew from the Mandate–mainly to enhance his prestige and confound his Arab rivals, particularly Abdullah of Transjordan. Farouk's order to his unready army was a splendid gesture in the old tradition. Responsible Arab partisans were appalled at the risks, but little could be done. There were no war plans, no coherent control from headquarters or in the field, inadequate transport, no spare parts, insufficient ammunition, inadequate medical facilities, and no rations. Major Gamal Abdel Nasser, for example, was simply given 1,000 pounds sterling to purchase food. Some of the soldiers did not even know they were engaged in a real war; many officers acted as if they were not. The disorganized Egyptian army consequently stumbled into a "political" war, failed to achieve any initial success, held on under pressure for a while, and was nearly destroyed ultimately.



The new careerists were stunned. They suspected that the palace would profit, the politicians would profit, the bankers and merchants would profit, and the army would pay. And the army paid. The Egyptian attacks collapsed. In October, the Egyptian hold on the Negev had been broken, leaving only an isolated pocket at Faluja. In December, an Israeli offensive swept the Egyptians into the Sinai and only diplomatic intervention prevented a worse disaster. At least at Faluja the army had held on and fought off a series of Israeli attacks. After the final ceasefire the men at Faluja marched out with their arms intact and their colors flying. All else had been lost. There at Faluja, the Egyptian remnants, with the Israelis seeking the pocket's surrender, were told, "We are saving the honor of the Egyptian army. . . ."[6] And the Faluja episode represented the only honor saved. The new officers, Nasser, Abdul Hakim Amer, and the rest, horrified at the army's betrayal, embittered by the corruption and intrigue, humiliated by the British presence, began to plot in earnest. Egypt must be transformed, British exploitation ended, the army reformed. Nasser, like Mohammed Ali, felt that a powerful, Westernized, independent Egypt could be created, featuring a talented, morally resolute society, and with it a modern army. After the Free Officer coup in July 1952, Nasser assigned Amer the task of molding such an army.

Amer essentially faced three hurdles: the nature of the Arab character, so ill-suited to a modern disciplined army; the shape of Egyptian society; and the demands of competing priorities in the problem-plagued nation. Nothing could be done about the Arab character, little was done about the structure of Egyptian society, and so the focus was on the problems of weaponry and expansion. As a result the army continued to reflect an earlier and divisive society. Until the departure of King Farouk in 1952, the Egyptian economic elite had largely consisted of cosmopolitan, exotic Turks, Greeks, Armenians, and Albanians. While such entrepreneurs whirled and glittered in Cairo and Alexandria, skimming off the cream of cotton profits and dominating commerce, the old life of the Egyptian village continued as always and the native middle class took second place. The *fellaheen* persisted. The village elders ruled their small worlds while Cairo imposed taxes and military service. With the July 1952 coup, the exotics disappeared, while new men came to power. With the advent of Nasser, son of a post office clerk and grandson of a successful *fellah*, a new elite came to power, but an elite still removed from the *fellaheen* and the urban poor in terms of skills and power. The division was still vast between the literate and the

ignorant, the shod and the barefoot, between the Mercedes and the buffalo. And as always the Egyptian army reflected the reality of its peasant background—the private soldier humble and reluctant, often illiterate, a village child from a simpler age who in time might grow proud of a weapon he could barely maintain and a career beyond his comprehension. Above him the officer was a careerist, who had risen above his grandfather's lot, who at considerable cost had evaded the hardship of manual labor or the marginal life of the petty clerk, who foresaw power, prestige, a place in the new Egyptian sun, who thought on technological matters and techniques, who shared little with his soldiers except his uniform. The new officer in *fellaheen* eyes was little different than the old tax collector. The soldiers consequently had no more trust in their officers than was necessary, for the officers represented authority imposed, often with ill-hidden contempt, from above. And the officers had little understanding of or interest in the simple aspirations of the *fellaheen* soldiers. The egalitarian principles of the new regime simply did not eradicate the army's class division, nor did the army's commanders do so, since they were more intent on the outward symbols of modernization than on the inner reality.

Even those outward symbols proved hard to come by. The British were particularly reluctant for a variety of perfectly sound British reasons to sell Egypt modern arms. Even after the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1954 that supposedly opened a new era, no arms were forthcoming from Britain or the West in the quantities that Nasser and Amer wanted. In effect the Egyptian army was still hampered by foreign manipulation. Finally the great arms deal with Russia in 1955—the "Czech arms sale"—seemed to open broad horizons. The new Soviet weapons, advanced but unfamiliar, were unevenly absorbed by the army, however. The task was greatly complicated by the remarkable number of competent career officers who had been drained off into civilian administration—several thousand to the Ministry of Interior alone—leaving fewer trained instructors to do more work. Still, by 1956 the expanded and lavishly equipped 90,000-man army was a far cry from the scratch force of 1948.

The first opportunity to test the new army in battle came swiftly during the Suez Crisis of October-November 1956. The result was another military disaster, this time without the palace and the politicians to serve as scapegoat. Israeli armor, protected by an Anglo-French air umbrella, swept into Sinai through the Egyptian forces and on to the banks of the Suez. The British and French destroyed the new Egyptian air force, landed in Egypt, and had nearly seized the Canal before international intervention forced a cease-fire. Once again humiliated, the Egyptians found new explanations to define away the disaster and shape it to manageable size. The blame was placed upon distant powers and unforeseen forces. The Israelis could not have "won" without the collusion of the British and French—and Egypt could not be expected to match the strength of major powers. In any case, the Egyptians had not really committed their major forces in Sinai and besides had withdrawn for strategic reasons. The evacuation of the Anglo-French expedition could be and was viewed as a tremendous victory for Egypt. Without the need for an orgy of recrimination, it was easier to accept some of the Sinai lessons. The army's disposition had been inept. While strong in static positions, where the soldiers fought well, the army had responded poorly to the rapidly shifting Israeli thrusts. The air force had not provided adequate support, and the officers in general had not distinguished themselves. All that was needed, Cairo assumed, was more time and training, more modern weapons which the Russians seemed eager to supply, and more careful war planning. The key necessity was time, for Nasser accepted that for the moment the Egyptian army was not a match for the Israelis.

After the Suez War, a serious effort was undertaken to modernize the Egyptian army with Soviet aid and comfort. New MIG-17s and MIG-21s were brought onto line. Pilots

were trained by Russian methods. There were SUKHOI-7s and Soviet heavy tanks and modern naval vessels. There were as well German advisors and research and development programs for missiles and combat aircraft. On parade, the Egyptian army glittered with new equipment, the envy of Israel. In the barracks, however, little had truly changed. The army was larger and had modern equipment and enthusiastic officers, but in private and at times in public Nasser noted that the transformation, while heartening, did not yet mean that the military balance in the Middle East had shifted. Israel still could not be challenged openly, but Egypt was on the move.

The first serious test of the new army proved to be both unexpected and unconventional. In September 1962, a military coup replaced the new Imam of Yemen and sparked a royalist revolt. The republicans turned to Nasser for aid; mindful of his role in the Middle East and eager to extend his influence in South Arabia, he responded. With little knowledge of Yemen and bad intelligence to boot, the Egyptian army rushed into a disastrous, intractable guerrilla war of attrition. By 1963, 15,000 troops had been dispatched, 40,000 by 1964, and by the following year 65,000. The war dragged on without resolution. The royalist tribes, operating with Saudi Arabian subsidies, persisted; the republican allies in the meanwhile grew quarrelsome and ungrateful. Trapped in an obscure and primitive country, lacking all hope of dazzling success, uneasy at the slaughter of brother Arabs, frustrated and forgotten, the glittering army seethed with discontent and recrimination. In Cairo, the Yemeni troubles could be forgotten or explained away on strategic grounds; but basically the humiliation of the unsuccessful and protracted campaign was simply ignored. The new army of MIGs and heavy tanks was, as Nasser said on 22 May 1967, "ready for war"—a decade of building had at last created a modern Arab army.

June 1967 stripped away these cherished martial illusions. Within a week it became clear to everyone from Delta village to the President's office that in a decade Amer had not built an effective modern army. All the old weaknesses appeared once more, if anything in amplified form. The Egyptians despite calling for war had not expected it, had not planned for it. When war came, the Egyptians once more surprised, could not, would not respond to the reality of war. In three hours the Egyptians lost 256 of 340 planes, and the war. Without air cover Egyptian armor in Sinai was hostage to fortune. Israeli tanks pierced the static Egyptian positions and raced for Suez. In Cairo, the euphoria of the first hours was replaced by depression and then renewed optimism as the inevitable reports of "victories" seeped upward. These peaks and lows at General Headquarters in turn produced a series of see-saw orders to an imaginary front, destroying any remaining cohesion. Withdrawal turned into rout, and the few roads became killing grounds along which were interred columns of burned-out Egyptian armor. Everything had been lost. The road to Cairo was wide-open, protected only by a few thousand civilian militiamen.

It seemed there could be no longer any blinking the fact that Egyptian arms had been humiliated: the officers had not led but fled, the soldiers had at a stroke turned into a fleeing rabble of bootless peasants. The tank drivers were untrained, the pilots at coffee. No one had foreseen a preemptive strike; yet those responsible had dared Israel to strike that first blow. No one had been willing to credit the reported loss of the air force. Hussein was brought into the war still innocent of the scope of the disaster, for Nasser himself could not accept its scope. Finally came an explanation of sorts—Anglo-American collusion, air strikes from American carriers. Even to the last, in a frenzy of self-deception, Radio Cairo continued to report huge victories. Finally, Nasser took full responsibility for what he

called not the defeat but *naksa*—the setback—and resigned, only to be returned to office by the hysterical Cairo mob. The new Saladin might have erred but without him there was not hope at all.

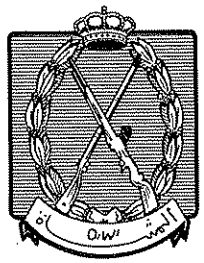
The recriminations began immediately, and once again the battlefield was parsed for lessons. First it was assumed, not unreasonably, that *someone*—other than the system or the nation—must be at fault. Consequently, excluding Nasser, there was a general housecleaning that included Amer, who was himself soon to attempt a coup, fail, and commit suicide. There were discreet revelations of corruption, nepotism, evasion of duty, sloth—the same endless, shoddy sins of the past. No one truly believed that the disaster was a consequence of Amer's beautiful second wife or various sins of omission—the humiliation was too great, the entire Arab world had been disgraced. While much of Egypt remained in the grip of *al qalaq*—the anguish—mocked and scorned from abroad, without pride or direction at home, the new, apolitical military careerists, aware that the defeat had not been as sweeping as it might appear, determined on real rather than apparent change.

The first step was an immediate refitting, courtesy of the Russians, followed by a stream of Soviet technicians, advisors, still more advanced equipment, and a growing Russian presence. Despite the Russians, the Egyptian position along the Suez decayed. The vaunted war of attrition, the only option seemingly available, was met and blunted by the use of Israeli airpower. The Russians responded with SAM missiles. The Egyptians still seemed incapable of responding effectively to a series of Israeli commando raids. Apparently only the Israeli fear of an armed confrontation with the Russian "advisors" in MIG-21s prevented more humiliating incursions. Eventually a temporary ceasefire was negotiated and world attention focused on the spectacular if ineffectual operations of the Palestinian *fedayeen*. There, too, Arab division produced disaster when Hussein sought to curb *fedayeen* power and initiated a civil war. In September 1970, Nasser managed to negotiate a ceasefire in Jordan, but, long a sick man, he collapsed and died, leaving Anwar Sadat as heir. The Egyptian system appeared to enter a period of active ferment. There were plots, collapsed coups, promises, and displays. Sadat ruled by gesture and promise. The year of decision came and went. Diplomatic initiatives aborted and the stalemate ossified. An unexpected but locally popular expulsion of the Soviet advisors in the summer of 1972 produced no applause in Washington but instead more American planes for Israel. Worse for Arab purposes, the new Soviet-American detente implied a continued lack of movement toward a settlement in the Middle East.

During this period, the leadership of the army concentrated largely on the only tasks within their grasp, planning for a cross-canal thrust and establishing the air defense of the country, particularly the Nile Delta. Every effort was made to repair a generation of repeated errors, to rebuild pride and teach competence. Educational standards of the soldier were raised: the illiterate were sent home, the educated conscripted. Cleanliness became a fetish. Promotions and rewards went to the able. Training, whether for tank drivers or commandos, was rigorous and extended. Every effort was made to maintain morale in spite of the depressing political climate. While it proved possible to create a core of elite troops, weed out the primitives and incompetent, inject the educated into the ranks, improve maintenance and logistics, move the missiles up to the canal, and undertake commando raids, the Egyptian army *still* reflected the adversity of a larger Egyptian reality. Yet some of the men had been transformed, all had been improved. With the exception of one or two offensive weapons that Sadat had wanted for political purposes and that the Soviets had denied out of prudence, the Egyptian army on paper was imposing; but so had been Amer's 1967 model.

Few Western military observers felt that the Egyptians had by 1973 achieved more than a partial reformation—the Israelis could

still defeat the Arabs and in a relatively brief war. All the new equipment was seen as another glittering patina inadequately hiding the same old Egyptian soldier, who remained prey to fantasy and bravado, lacking discipline or trust, still an Arab, still an Egyptian. All assumed that an Egyptian cross-canal expedition to renewed total war would cost more than Cairo could afford. Though the Jordanians wanted no adventures, the Syrians, always willing to risk more and suffer more than the Egyptians, appeared quiescent, re-equipped but still Syrians. And by and large this estimate was reasonably accurate.



President Sadat had for three years magically pulled one rabbit out of his hat after another; he had confounded and imprisoned his domestic opposition, threatened and maneuvered on the international stage, placated his Arab oponents, tossed out lines, fished in troubled waters, proposed a new Arab republic and evaded the reality, adjusted to the oil rich without alienating the radicals, thrown out the Russians and invited them back, promised immediate action and then delivered an amazing diversion. But by 1973 his hat appeared empty. A rising Arab and Egyptian resentment over the stalemate threatened to engulf him—the students were unhappy, as was the army and the bureaucracy. The intellectuals were alienated and the peasants uncertain. There were too many people and too many problems. Something more than one more rabbit had to be produced and soon. What Sadat decided to do essentially was to accept for the first time the real limitations on Arab maneuver by using the *real*, not the ideal, potential of the Egyptian army.

Sadat recognized that the Egyptian army had two cardinal virtues: first, the men fought well from set, defensive positions, and second the best service was the artillery. Dug into place (perhaps as at Faluja where retreat was not possible), protected by guns and missiles, decently led and decently treated, the men could be expected to respond for limited purposes. Next, there could no longer be any blinking the fact that in the mobile armor battles of option and wedges, swift maneuver, and instant decision in the deserts of Sinai, the Egyptian army could not cope. And repeated exposure to combat with Israeli aircraft indicated as well that the Egyptian air force was not competitive. What Sadat suggested and the commanders accepted was a strategy that would make use of the real Egyptian virtues, admirable or no, and avoid tactics, however fashionable, that had previously proven beyond Egyptian capacity. The plan was quite simple: a straightforward "invasion" of Sinai across the Suez Canal, protected by a missile umbrella. The army should be able to seize and hold wedges on the east bank of the canal long enough to force international recognition of the Arabs' demands, long enough to end the diplomatic stalemate. This cross-canal thrust was to be in tandem with a Syrian attack into the Golan Heights to divide Israeli attention. Without revealing his full plans, Sadat set out to orchestrate a united Arab response, an oil boycott, Third World moral and political support, and Israeli complacency.[7]

The Egyptian army had long been training for just such a canal crossing. The concept of a short lunge forward—a mass attack with heavy artillery support—to be followed by consolidation had been conventional Soviet doctrine. The Egyptian army was finally prepared to try the strategy proposed by their Soviet advisors. The new elite units would drive over in the first wave, with the bulk of the army following under the missile umbrella; the whole would then hedgehog in and prepare for the inevitable Israeli counter-attack. Because of the new antiair missiles, the Israelis would not be able to deploy their air force over the battlefield with impunity as in the past; because of the surprise, Israeli armor would be delayed long enough for at least some of the cross-canal wedges to be secured. The Israelis would have to mobilize, meet the Syrian threat, find a swift answer to the SAM-7 mobile missile, and risk their armor in a battle of attrition against

prepared Egyptian positions. All might, of course, fail at the very first Egyptian thrust; but then perhaps the elaborate plan could be called off and a "commando" raid admitted. All might, of course, succeed; but then, no matter what the euphoria and initial momentum, the army was not to be allowed to swirl east toward the passes and beyond the missile umbrella, not to risk, not to dare; they were only to persist and endure, letting the Israeli armor move in front of the Egyptian hedgehog, holding on while the major battle, the political campaign, was waged and won elsewhere. It is doubtful whether the strategists in Cairo believed that this scenario could be enacted to perfection, with all the wedges succeeding, the Syrians tying the Israelis down for a week, the missiles working on the ground and in the air, the hedgehogs holding without commitment of the MIGs in support. And yet, all these hopes were realized.

What the accomplishments of the first week of the Yom Kippur War did for Egyptian morale can hardly be imagined. The shame of 1967 was dissipated, honor regained, humiliation purged. The Egyptian army proved it could fight with modern weapons and that it was not a primitive array of cowardly natives. What had been done was indeed remarkable, in some cases the direct opposite of Arab habit. The patient, rigorous, and painstaking training effort so alien to the Arab had actually succeeded in modernizing the army, not necessarily to a level comparable to the Israelis, but sufficient for Arab purposes. No sand in the gears, no pause for tea, no cog left in Cairo. And the successful Egyptian strategy of seize, hold, and persevere depended more upon the virtues of the village, the habits of the *fellaheen*, rather than the swirl and dash of the bedouin. In time, of course, the Israelis as was their wont collected their resources, drove forward, looped through the hedgehogs, and endangered not only the Egyptian army but Cairo. By then, however, the Egyptian army had performed the essential military task assigned by Cairo and in so doing restored the pride of the Arab world.

But despite extensive analysis to the contrary, Arab conduct in the Yom Kippur War by no means indicated a radical transformation in the Arab mind or even in the competence of the Egyptian army. Certainly a conscious effort had been made in various quarters to be less Arab and at least to expunge those characteristics so mocked in 1967—hysterical war communiques, threats, excuses, bombast. Certainly and properly, Arab spokesman and foreign observers noted the striking differences in Arab military conduct—no ignominious flight across the desert, no defeat in a few days, no mass desertions and surrenders. Certainly, the Arabs had used sophisticated equipment to good effect. Yet the military strategy employed by Cairo rested on the assets of the Arab, in particular the *fellaheen*, and on the competence of the Egyptian army to perform specific limited missions. It was the responsibility of Cairo to assure that the Army contented itself with limited success, rather than allowing rampant euphoria to tempt it into catastrophic over-extension.[8] The strategy of the hedgehog had been to exploit the most useful aspects of the Egyptian character rather than to emulate the more spectacular virtues of the Israelis. Nothing made this more clear than the refusal to commit the air force except sporadically—in the past, Arab air sorties had proven to be an expensive form of suicide. Unable to play that game in October 1973 the Arabs played their own—what was remarkable was the initial demonstration that there *were* limitations on Israeli arms imposed by Arab competence—not by great power collusion or *Kismet* or treason. Cairo accepted these limitations of character, tailoring tactics to fit reality. And the Egyptian army performed to these altered expectations. No matter that Cairo and Damascus grew expansive and ambitious, no matter that "victory" was salvaged only by Soviet intervention, no matter that a few more days of war would have once more produced fresh humiliation; those were second generation problems arising out of the initial military success. The old Arab under the new missile umbrella had been

used in congenial ways, in ways determined by the art of the possible. All that was new about Egyptian military strategy was the exploitation of the real rather than ideal virtues of the army—and that was very new indeed.

## NOTES

1. It is reported that Henry Kissinger indicated that one of the American problems in Vietnam was that we had the Bavarians and they had the Prussians. Still, competent or not the Prussians have managed to lose a great many wars, while the Italians, who invented modern war, revealed during the bitter fighting of the resistance that, given sufficient motivation and proper organization, they could fight as well as any.

2. The pioneer study of the Arab mind is Sania Hamady's *Temperament and Character of the Arabs* (New York: Twayne, 1960). Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind* (New York: Scribner's, 1973) is a major undertaking, the results of years of study that incorporates much of the detailed, if still limited, research within and without the Arab world.

3. See Sir John Bagot Glubb, *A Soldier with the Arabs* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 152.

4. Eric Pace, "Libyan Leader Voices Dismay at Egyptian-Israeli Negotiation," *New York Times*, 16 November 1973, p. 2.

5. Although there is substantial literature on Middle Eastern armies, the focus has been on the relation of the military to politics rather than armies as armies. Most purely military analysis is confined to the Israel-Arab wars, from an Israeli perspective. See the excellent brief treatment of the Egyptian army in J. C. Hurewitz, *Middle East Politics: The Military Dimension* (New York: Praeger, 1969).

6. Yeruham Cohen, "The Secret Negev Talks," *Jewish Observor and Middle East-Review*, 2 (1953), 6-8. During the Suez crisis, Nasser contended that he, not the Sudanese commander of the Faluja pocket, had made the "honor" speech.

7. One of the lessons that the Yom Kippur War would teach observers according to Sadat was that Egyptians could keep secrets, and that Israeli intelligence was not perfect. Apparently few had known of the final plans; the annual autumnal army maneuvers along the canal in large part cloaked preparations and therefore only near the end was the secret shared beyond the highest circles in Cairo and Damascus.

8. On the basis of past experience, the Russians doubted the view from Cairo to the extent that Kosygin flew to Egypt to discover that time had run out, despite Sadat's enthusiastic victory speeches. He returned to Moscow and in sessions on October 20 and 21 pressed cease-fire proposals on Henry Kissinger. Cairo was still reluctant to accept the implications of the Israeli presence on the west bank—at one point Sadat spoke of the trapped Third Corps on the east bank threatening the Israelis on the east bank. At a word, the Israelis had become the surrounded and the Egyptians the encirclers.