Gamal Abdul Nasser vs. Sayyid Qutb: An Unreconciled Battle Upon Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism but Towards A Collective, Anti-Imperialism End

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Abstract

Gamal Abdul Nasser's regime ruled Egypt from 1956 to 1970. During this period, *Sawt Al Arab* ('The Voice of the Arabs' in English), a radio broadcasting program, was used by Nasser to publicize his idea of Arab solidarity and anti-colonialism. The daily-broadcasting radio channel firmly strengthened the Pan-Arabism identity. However, many Egyptian intellectuals opposing his policies, such as Sayyid Qutb, actively responded to Nasser's ambitions. Sayyid Qutb penned over 20 publications and profoundly impacted organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and others, that opposed Nasser's Pan-Arab dream. Nasser did utilize multiple media, but national radio (*Sawt Al Arab*) was the most noteworthy strategy to publicize his ideologies of Pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism. At the same time, Sayyid Qutb focused more on printed publications to deliver his thoughts and ideologies on Pan-Islamism. This paper covers the sword-plays between Gamal Abdul Nasser and Sayyid Qutb in the ideological sphere, defining the distinctive but somehow collective meanings and goals that Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism achieve separately.

In the spheres of politics and ideology of Egypt's twentieth century, Gamal Abdul Nasser and Sayyid Qutb are two crucial but distinctive figures whose intellectual and political legacy has had a profound impact on the following generations. Gamal Abdul Nasser represents the government or those in power, while Sayyid Qutb represents intellectual dissenters, who led the rebellious spirits and ideologies against the government-controlled narratives.

Before the media analysis of Gamal Abdul Nasser and Sayyid Qutb begins, clarifying the definitions of Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism is necessary. Undergoing multiple political experiments across the Arab world, Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism are two significant political movements which profoundly influenced Arab politics and the establishment of Arab or Muslim solidarity in the post-colonial times in the Middle East.[1]

In addition to the ideological discussions, this paper spotlights how different media representations regarding Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism gradually influenced public opinions during Nasser's time and afterward. It mainly investigates the radio-based media strategy, as a unique cultural tradition of communication means in the Arab world, which plays a crucial role in transmitting information as well as ideologies and cultivating the innermost solidarity in Egypt. Ultimately, by merging the discussion of both ideological and political aspects, this paper aims to illustrate that even though two of the most influential statuses in Egypt supported each's opposite standpoint, they managed to realize collective goals of the anti-colonial and anti-Western dominant solidarity at the end of the day.

In Gamal Abdul Nasser's grand political blueprint in both Egypt and the broader Arab world, Pan-Arabism is an essential piece of the jigsaw at both the ideological and political levels.[2] To the domestic Egyptian society, he employed it as a powerful strategy to consolidate his regime according to multifaceted political publications and policies. To the external world, Pan-Arabism to him functioned as a fundamental logic that established common goals and concreted the figures of common enemies, such as colonial impacts left by Westerners and the uprising trend of Westernization disguised as modernization. During Gamal Abdul Nasser's regime, in the media sphere, he especially employed *Sawt Al Arab* to publicize a Pan-Arabist ideology and in a way contributed to a broader picture of Arab solidarity. Despite the post-colonial influences, a group of intellectual dissidents also challenged Gamal Abdul Nasser. The Muslim Brotherhood and one of its influential intellectual leaders, Sayyid Qutb, were typical representatives.

According to one of Qutb's most influential printed works, Ma'alim fi al-Tariq ('Milestones' in English), he presented the idea that Islam is more than a religion because it dictates the ideal religion-life relationship and could be applied to every aspect of people's daily lives. He also attributed sovereignty to the God and only the God, whereas the current Muslim world, governed solely by mankind and secular law and political system, fell into a troubled time with ignorance (*jahiliyyah*). And to some extent, jihad is necessary, to revive the time of the Prophet and after his death.[3] Hence, according to his explanations of "true" Islam and a "real" Muslim, Islam is the only panacea to reassemble the ideal Pan-Islamic world.

Qutb's radical political ideologies led to his death under Gamal Abdul Nasser's regime; however, his ideas circulated profoundly throughout the Muslim world after his death.[4] During his time in prison, he wrote and later published a lot of his works which preserved his thoughts.[5] Although these printed publications did not intellectually function like Nasser's radio strategy and national media plan, they were the most influential legacies

that Qutb left behind, strongly impacting the Muslim Brotherhood and the development of Pan-Islamism later on. Nonetheless, one question remains, do Qutb's theories and ideologies completely contradict with Nasser's Arab solidarity? Not really. Just like Nasser's United Arab dreams or the initial intention of Pan-Arabism which are both calling people to unite and jointly break the nutshell created by colonists that had been haunting above the Arab world for a long time, the ultimate goal of Qutb's Pan-Islamic dream is also a form of anti-colonial and anti-Western solidarity that can grow strong enough to protect God's people.[6]

Pan-Arabism vs. Pan-Islamism: Everlasting Disagreements or Solutions?

Pan-Arabism, which has once been described as a "dream" by historian Barry Rubin, refers to the idea that all Arab countries should be united and constitute a new Arab state. Unlike the European interpretation of nationalism, which emphasizes the establishment of an independent nation-state, the so-called "new Arab state" focuses on the commonly shared Arab characteristics, which are utilized to form the definition of an Arab and to identify the boundaries of the "new Arab state".[7] In short, the European philosophers focused more on the result, while Pan-Arabism is aimed more at the process. While going further in Pan-Arabism discussion, there are two significant parts which play a role: a common goal, such as an external enemy that all people in the community are jointly against, and cultural roots for common identification.

The goal is significant to build a bond among communities, which even have estrangements before. For instance, it can explain why Egypt and Syria, two Arab countries without shared borders or geopolitical intimacy, made a deal with the United Arab Republic. This was due to both having similar political pursuits of forgoing the chains of colonialism. In general, there is an urgent need for leadership at both the political and intellectual level to counter against Westernism and imperialism.

In addition to this, the historian Eugene Rogan provides a more explicit description of the common cultural roots in his book, indicating that "Most people in the Arab world believed they were united by a common language, history, and culture grounded in the Islamic past, a culture shared by Muslims and non-Muslims… They believed that Arab greatness in world affairs could only be restored through unity".[8] From Rogan's statement, it is clear that Islam did play an essential role in the cultural roots of Pan-Arabism; but Islam was not the only reason behind it. Another vital case to support this statement is the perseverance of Egyptian Christians who are also included in the Arab communities' scale under the definition of Pan-Arabism. Looking at the cultural aspects of this discussion, it is worth noting that a soft but firm emotional connection to the Arab community and Arab identity recognition brought by the Arab cultural roots should be a necessary element in establishing solidarity among the Arab people.

Nonetheless, Pan-Islamism aims to build up the consolidated Muslim world upon its commonly held religious beliefs, which predominantly comes from Islam.[9] Briefly speaking, Islam, as not just a world religion, weighs more in Pan-Islamism. Under the universality of Islam, "the idea of political unity is inherent in Islam, whose character is a priori international, no less than a complete moral, cultural, legal, social and political system"[10]. In the narration of Pan-Islamism, the comprehensive impacts that Islam's religion carries carve strong marks in every corner of society. In addition to the social effects, Islam is regarded as a bed-stone of Pan-Islamic society or state politics in many cases. The scholar Haifaa Jawad also mentioned that "the precedent to which the

proponents of pan-Islamism look is the dynamic period of early Islam, the 'golden age' in which the Muslim peoples were united" in the research project discussing the symbiotic connection between Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism.[11]

Gamal Abdul Nasser, His *Sawt Al Arab*, and the Politicalized Voice of Pan-Arabism

In the political sphere, Pan-Arabism is prone to a unique form of nationalism. As Benedict Anderson's famous explanation of 'nation' indicates, he depicts a nation as a socially well-constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group.[12] More specifically, in Gamal Abdul Nasser's political blueprint upon the Arab world, the ultimate outcome of Pan-Arabism should be formation of the United Arab Republic. In order to publicize and realize the ideal Arab state, political propaganda via a radio channel, *Sawt Al Arab*, was Nasser's most successful and influential instrument.

Prior to the 1952 coup in Egypt, the Egyptian national press lived in a much-unrestricted circumstance with rich cultural and intellectual diversity (Khamis, 2011).[13] It had not served as the voice of a state apparatus. However, once the Free Officers and Gamal Abdul Nasser assumed the power of Egypt, they started to censor the country's media outlets. Therefore, after completely shift to Nasser's absolute presidency, Gamal Abdul Nasser took efforts in state-hold media for his political propaganda.[14] This goes back to the fact that one of the deciding factors of Pan-Arabism is the establishment of an emotional connection. When it is necessary, such soft power weapons could serve as the consolidating foundation of mobilization against any common external enemies to the Pan-Arab state, such as Western Imperialism and Zionism.[15]

Considered Egypt's social and economic environment under Nasser's leadership since 1952, rigid censorship, illiteracy and physical distance between cities and villages were two significant factors limiting the influence of printed media such as newspapers and magazines.[16] Meanwhile, more advanced electronic media such as television had lower popularizing rate in typical Egyptian families. Hence, broadcasting via radio stations seemingly became the most feasible solution to Gamal Abdul Nasser's ambitious political dream. Thus, *Sawt Al Arab* then emerged.

Sawt Al Arab, meaning "Voice of the Arabs" in English, was initially founded in 1953.[17] Although it is a state-owned radio station, managed by the National Media Authority in Egypt, it was one of the most popular radio stations across Egypt during Nasser's regime and one of the most influential radio channels across the MENA region at its peak period, which was during most of the 1950s to the 1960s. As a protagonist in Nasser's strategic publications to the general public, *Sawt Al Arab* broadcasted national news and multiple entertainment programs which had to undergo restricted checks by the national authority.[18] It functioned as the major mouthpiece through which President Gamal Abdul Nasser conveyed his will of Arab unity and Pan-Arab solidarity. Therefore, *Sawt Al Arab* acted as the central microphone that controlled broadcasts of Nasser's speeches indicating the domestic struggles in the post-colonial era and presented his calling for the Pan-Arab dreams as well as Arab solidarity.

In Nasser's Pan-Arabism picture, *Sawt Al Arab* was deemed to not only be "an extremely effective state apparatus to disseminate forms of information",[19] but also function as a cultural bond connecting Nasser himself and different audiences. For instance, *Sawt Al Arab* founded the radio culture and set the standard for Arabic music across the MENA region lately.[20] Furthermore, it is worthwhile mentioning that all of the content, including multiple public speeches made by

Gamal Abdul Nasser and the music or poems broadcasted through this radio channel, had been through restricted content check and censorship by the government. Therefore, the popularized songs and poems from *Sawt Al Arab* gradually incorporated Nasser's political message within the lyrics of common Egyptian's subconscious.

In order to further eliminate the communication gaps between the regime and the massive audience whom Gamal Abdul Nasser aimed to approach, the niche-targeted message chosen to be broadcasted and the specific words utilized in Nasser's radio broadcasts were precisely conveying the anti-colonial and anti-imperial sentiments. From the serial broadcasts about the Suez Crisis to the biased coverage of the Six Days War against Israel, the information contained in these special broadcasts was supported and approved by the government. When necessary, they even took risks to fake or create misleading content.[21] For instance, during the Six Days War, *Sawt Al Arab* created broadcasts of great victories even after Israel rapidly occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza region, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights.[22] According to a broadcaster and director of *Sawt Al Arab*, Ahmed al-Said, his exaggeration of the number of downed aircrafts was based on policy-makers' information whose numbers added up wrong. It was, he says, his duty to "follow orders in time of war, and to assist the army by issuing propaganda to deceive the enemy."[23]

Apart from these, Gamal Abdul Nasser also fueled the radio-based media strategy with some details, which successfully cultivated the essential emotional bonds with Arab solidarity. For example, he spoke in colloquial Arabic rather than the more formal, fus'ha Arabic language, while broadcasting via *Sawt Al Arab*.[24] To Nasser's massive audience, it was undoubtedly a signal that Nasser managed to approach them as much as he could. Additionally, the colloquial language

delivered speeches provided a more listener-friendly way for better understanding. Not to mention that Gamal Abdul Nasser himself was a powerful public speaker. Based on the audience-friendly oral-aural connection, the Pan-Arab messages had been directly conveyed.

In short, Gamal Abdul Nasser successfully utilized the radio as a powerful, cross-hierarchy, massive-reaching, inexpensive, and boundaryless medium to fuel an atmosphere heavily concentrated on Pan-Arabism across Egyptian society and later the MENA region. However, while applied to reality, Pan-Arabism still could not avoid the very differentiation among different Arab countries and communities,[25] Gamal Abdul Nasser here smartly amplified the cultural similarities as a mild emotional bond and materialized the exact figure of common enemies, such as colonialism, imperialism, Western-dominant regimes, and Zionism via the nation-supported radio broadcasting. And Arab solidarity had then been naturally produced.

Sayyid Qutb: More Than an Intellectual Dissent and His Legacies of Pan-Islamism

Moving to the discussion of the intellectual dissents, it is firstly worth noting the significance of The Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood continuously held the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic state or a Caliphate in Egypt. Yet, following the death of its founder and the first leader, Hasan Al Banna, in 1949, a drastic change in both structural and ideological level took place inside the Muslim Brotherhood.[26] Along with many disputes and arguments around the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership, internal factionalism, and ideological polarization occurred.[27] Sayyid Qutb, joined in 1953, was the leader of the pro-radicalism faction.[28]

Born in a small village in Upper (southern) Egypt in 1906 as the oldest of a

five-children family, Sayyid Qutb was once a writer and poet in the Egyptian literary scene. In addition, Qutb was once a member of the Wafd party and an active critic of the monarchy, yet he continued to work within the governmental system. [29] Although Gamal Abdul Nasser and Sayyid Qutb were basically two Egyptian men who lived not-so-different lives, they eventually embodied distinctive visions for Egypt and the Arab world.[30] The sword-play between them was not just the governmental suppression towards intellectual dissents; it also represented the irreconcilable rivalry between political Islamists and pan-Arab nationalists.

To Qutb, his journey to the United States in 1948 completely altered his opinions of the promises of the West.[31] He then devoted more efforts to his Islamic roots and the exploration of Islam. He was involved in the Muslim Brotherhood while his publications did not merely criticize Egyptian society, but more specifically, looked into Egypt's Western leanings and focused more on its Islamic identity.

When Nasser banned the Muslim Brotherhood in 1954, Sayyid Qutb was jailed as a member and began the first of several trips to jail during his short lifetime.[32] From then on, Qutb, as a dangerous intellectual dissent of Nasser's presidency, would spend most of his life in prison. His experience in jail was filled with torture, but he continued to work on his publications. For example, he finished one of his most significant works, *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* ("Milestones" in English), and successfully published it in 1964. In 1965, after a short period of time, Qutb left the prison, he was arrested again due to his publications. Later on, Qutb was sentenced to death on August 29, 1966. [33] In short, by observing the brutal treatment of Sayyid Qutb, it is apparent that Qutb's Islamic philosophy created great fear and detestation from the ruler's aspect.

However, Sayyid Qutb left behind revolutionary thoughts, not just in Egypt but also the entire Middle East and the Muslim world. In his book, the *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* ("Milestones" in English), he innovatively laid out an outline of an ideal Pan-Islamic world. Qutb made a call to re-establish a Muslim world based on purely and strictly Quranic principles. Sayyid Qutb's legacies also include his absolute rejections of all the forms of governments at that time because those political systems, following with each's law operations, were wrongly offering sovereignty to mankind but not the God. People were submitting themselves to certain people but not the God. The phenomenon demonstrated that the current Muslim world, including the Egyptian government and other Muslim governments, was receded into a time of ignorance, which is *jahiliyyah*, and it was similar to the pre-Islamic Arabia before the revelations of Prophet Muhammad.[34]Another relevant claim Qutb made is that "most Muslims today do not practice Islam properly, are not true Muslims". [35] Therefore, Islam, functioning in the grand Muslim world, is a religion and a standard of everyday life and the foundation of political systems. Others who had little relations to Islam were marginalized in Qutb's theory.

Serving as the editor-in-chief of *'al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (the Muslim Brotherhood's official journal) right after Sayyid Qutb returned from the US, he started to write against the current regime, calling for an Islamic state for Egyptian people. His radical philosophy caused intimate concentration and vigilance of Nasser's government.[36] Nevertheless, Qutb's support of resilience against the existing political order might be the more dangerous interpretation that enraged Nasser's government while creating fear. According to Qutb, there are two ways to approach his ideal Pan-Islamic trajectory, which is *hakimiyyah* (sovereignty of Allah), and free people from other mankind's sovereignty.[37] As scholar Leonard summarized in her article, one is via mild

persuasion and preaching. However, while referring to the oppressive dictatorship he lived in, Sayyid Qutb believed that this way could not successfully achieve the ultimate goal of Pan-Islamism, at least in a short period of time. [38] The second way towards Pan-Islamic trajectory is via jihad, according to Qutb, which comes out with violent and revolutionary persuasion. Just like the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau endorsing the necessity of employing violence to free people under oppression and inequality, [39] Sayyid Qutb had a similar tone in his argumentation regarding violent revolution. According to Qutb, any people or political order representing "oppressive political systems" and mankind-leading sovereign become the collective enemies to the Pan-Islamist community, to jihadists, and generally to all the other free people.[40] Yet, it is worth noting that non-Muslims are not necessarily the enemies or the opposite targets; the jihad will merely let them free to submit to the God.[41]

Compared to Nasser's charisma transmitting through *Sawt Al Arab*'s broadcasting, Sayyid Qutb's theories and ideas are more dependent on the printed publications to influence more people after his tragic death. Despite Qutb's advocation to violent jihad[42], which is regarded as a guide to modern Islamic extremism lately, the historical stage he grew up from and lived in should be another focal point in his Islamic philosophical structure. The nation of Egypt he lived in was in a very early stage of national self-determination and self-independence. The monarchical past and the Western-dominant colonial past still left marks on this contemporary Egyptian society; the oppressive dictatorship of present Egypt and the bipolar political circumstance reinforced the darkness brought by mankind-leading governance.[43] Hence, at the end of the day, Pan-Islamism is another way held by Sayyid Qutb against the bitter colonialism past and the hegemonic present and future. It is the

Muslim solidarity, obtaining apparent differences with Arab solidarity. One of its ultimate objectives is to eliminate imperialists, colonialists, monarchs, oppressive dictators, monarchs, and a Western-dominant world.

Conclusion

Having looked into the representations of both Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism, Gamal Abdul Nasser and Sayyid Qutb proposed two distinct social solutions to Egypt's post-colonial newborn society. From the different political capital they obtained, Gamal Abdul Nasser and Sayyid Qutb, with pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism as each one's respective underpinnings, which offered different paths to salvation for the Egyptian state at the turn of the century. And given that the great disparity of political power existed in between, the life-or-death combat between Gamal Abdul Nasser and Sayyid Qutb was unaviodable. When the political ideas of both are implemented at the level of communication and media landscapes, different factors closely related to their socio-political identities also shape their choices. Various questions and means to achieve the goals were put in front of Gamal Abdul Nasser and Sayyid Qutb, respectively: how to reach a larger target group more efficiently through these media vehicles? Can this specific medium convey their political ideas in their entirety? Or even help establish an idealized political figure?

There is no doubt that both Gamal Abdul Nasser, with his populist colloquial Arabic speeches, and Sayyid Qutb, a pioneering dissident who had a profound influence on later Muslim ideologists groups, successfully approached their targeted audiences through different media. Therefore, through a comprehensive analysis combining the characteristics of the media landscapes, specific contents, target groups, and key messages can be an interdisciplinary methodology for future research, especially at the level of media studies of ideological trends

and political movements in Egypt and other MENA countries during the second half of the 20th century.

Apart from this, while returning to the initial standpoint of each's political aims, a collective goal in Egyptian politics can still be found, which is the attitude towards common enemies. Through different means, both attempted to eliminate the scars of colonialism, imperialism, and the Western-dominant powers in newborn Egypt's. This is not just a reality in nascent Egypt; it is a common problem for other countries that have just declared their independence from colonialism and suzerain influence and the shadows of WWII. From a macro-scale perspective, these scars call for decolonization as the the most

urgent affair that a newly independent nation-state has to deal with domestically and internationally, especially under a broader background of the Cold War.[44] In order to better survive the polarized world, the priority was given to finding tactics and a strategic ideological path. There was the need for internal state's ruins, the incorporation of governors, opinion leaders, thinkers, and dissidents, who hold most of the social and political capital. It was necessary to involve different representatives of the people in order to figure out an answer to cope with the societal contradictions. Thus, Gamal Abdul Nasser and Sayyid Qutb's similarity in their ideological core proves this conflict of interest.

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