

From the Suez to the Panama Canal and Beyond

Gamal Abdel Nasser's influence in Latin America

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ABSTRACT This article explores the influence of the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser in Latin America. In the 1950's, a generation of Latin American intellectuals and politicians saw in the success of the emergent Arab Nationalism, epitomized by Nasser, an example to emulate. In Panama, the 1956 Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal would trigger a new wave of demands against the control and ownership of the interoceanic canal by the United States. Across the region, confronted with the onset of reactionary regimes, intellectuals from the left would call for the need of a Latin American Nasser; a modern day caudillo, that would come from the Armed Forces donned with the force of an uncompromised nationalism and a unnegotiable commitment to social progress.

KEYWORDS Nationalism; Panama; Nasserism

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“—Still the Suez problem—[the doctor] said glancing at the headlines. The West is on retreat.”¹

Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo, a prominent Venezuelan intellectual and founding member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), reminded Latin Americans of the powerful lesson the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser gave to the region. Egypt, according to Pérez Alfonzo, stood firmly against the war of aggression unleashed by the United Kingdom, France, and Israel three months after Nasser ordered the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company in July 1956. By successfully confronting the tripartite attack in October of that year, Egypt showed the world that it was possible for countries in the periphery of the system to claim for themselves the rightful ownership of their natural resources and to administer these resources in the most efficient manner. Pérez Alfonzo argued that Egypt showed the world that “*human solidarity could confront blatant injustices*” and that small nations could find the necessary qualified manpower to operate large enterprises such as the Suez Canal. Pérez Alfonzo urged his readers in Latin America to see Egypt as a nation “successful in her fight for development, and economic liberation,” a nation focused on helping herself and other Arab nations.²

It appeared that Egypt had succeeded where Latin America failed. Less than four years after coming to power following a coup d'état against the old regime in 1952, Nasser had transformed his country. Egypt, in the eyes of the world, had achieved a true place in international affairs by pursuing an assertive nationalism and had demonstrated that it was not only willing but also capable of taking control of its own destiny. In contrast, fears of a communist expansion had put an end to social experiments in democracy and social progress across Latin America,

1 MÁRQUEZ, 1996, p.80.

2 ALFONZO, Juan Pablo Pérez. Organización de Países Exportadores de Petróleo (OPEP). *Política: Ideas para una América Nueva*, vol. 45, p.8-9, jan. 1966.

and in world affairs, the region was gravitating within the United States' orbit. By 1952, the Colombian historian Germán Arciniegas denounced the unfolding of what he described as a "vast conspiracy against democracy, liberty, and respect for human rights that has been set in motion in Latin America." The "forces of totalitarianism," Arciniegas maintained, were in a "life-and-death struggle" against the forces of democracy (Arciniegas, 1953, p.xi).

Confronted with this reality, Latin Americans took note of the events across the Atlantic. There is extensive literature on Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt but scant information on its impact on Latin America, in part because the region seemed so distant, both geographically and politically, from the events in the Middle East. This article explores the influence of the resurgent Egyptian nationalism in Latin America, particularly in Panama, and the articulation by some sectors of the left of the idea of a Latin American Nasser. It argues, first, that the events in Egypt triggered and inspired a new wave of nationalist demands for the revision of treaties that had allowed the United States control of the Panama Canal since 1903. Second, this paper presents the articulation from the left of the idea that, barred from a normal electoral process, a man within the armed forces, a modern caudillo, would achieve social and political aspirations in the region. This idealized concept of Nasser and "Nasserism" would be latent for the next three decades, only to be readdressed and redefined by members of a generation marked by the events in Egypt.

LATIN AMERICA AT THE TIME OF NASSER

The New World Order in Latin America (1945-1948)

The triumph of the allies in the Second World War represented the triumph of democracy not just in Europe but across the world.³ In Latin America, where democratic regimes had been rather exceptional

3 For a comprehensive study of this period on which this segment is based, see: BETHELL, ROXBOROUGH, 1992.

occurrences, students, intellectuals, union leaders, and a new generation of politicians demanded a political transition toward open societies and democratic political systems. In making their demands, they counted on the unrestricted support of the United States government, which was committed to being a force for democratic transition across Latin America (Huntington, 1991, p.18), (Bethell, Roxborough, 1992, p.8). By the end of the war, there was already a noticeable move toward democracy across the region. Although non-democratic sectors remained powerful, they became sidetracked under the mounting pressure for political change. Over a short period of time, new governments came to power through general elections that were, for the most part, open and free from major corruption.⁴ Democracy continued in countries with a previous democratic tradition, such as Uruguay, Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica.⁵ In other countries, however, these events were largely a novel experience. In Ecuador, a coalition of political forces deposed the dictator Carlos Arroyo del Rio and installed the progressive regime of José María Velasco Ibarra.⁶ Around the same time, Cuban strongman Fulgencio Batista permitted partially free elections. Multiparty elections were also allowed in Peru,⁷ whereas Venezuela experienced the first democratically elected government in its history when the progressive regime of Rómulo Betancourt came to power.⁸ In Guatemala, the thirteen-year dictatorship of General Jorge Ubico ended in October 1944, and a new progressive regime was elected under José Arévalo. In Brazil, Getúlio Vargas, who had been in power since 1930, allowed

4 South America's Rising Cry: 'Democracia'. *New York Times Magazine* (New York), p.13, 13 jan. 1946.

5 Chilean Disavows one Party Regime. *New York Times* (New York), p.47, 3 nov. 1946.

6 Candidate A Red, Ecuadorians Say: Foes Assail former Interior Chief and a Top Presidential Aspirant Free Elections Promised. *New York Times* (New York), p.4, 31 mar. 1956.

7 In Peru, the leading candidates promised a "peaceful revolution," and all pledged to address the historical inequalities of the country.. All Parties Vote on Peru President. *New York Times* (New York), p.16, 10 jun. 1945.

8 Betancourt Wins Latin Recognition. *New York Times* (New York), p.8, 26 out. 1945.

open elections for the first time in December 1945.⁹ By the end of the war, only the smallest and most backward regimes of Central America and the Caribbean had not experienced significant changes in their political structures.¹⁰

As Latin America emerged with a stronger commitment to democratic systems, the progressive sectors that had made the transition possible were demanding and working toward the achievement of more inclusive societies. Across the region, new political actors articulated a new range of social demands to set in motion the transformation of their societies. As beneficiaries of Soviet participation in the war on the side of the Allies, most countries allowed socialist and communist parties to participate in the political process of the moment—although their popular appeal remained low, perhaps with Chile as the only exception.¹¹ In this progressive environment, the United States helped to broker the establishment of diplomatic relations between several Latin American countries and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).¹²

The Onset of the Cold War — the Collapse of the Democratic Experiment

The alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States proved to be short-lived. Two years into the end of the Second World War, suspicion over each other's policies across Europe signaled the beginning of

9 President Dutra of Brazil. *New York Times* (New York), p.25, 12 dez. 1945.

10 Nicaragua Ruled by One-Man Regime. *New York Times* (New York), p.12, 26 may 1952; at the Cost of Liberty. *New York Times*, p.7, 28 mar. 1953; BETHELL, ROXBOROUGH, 1992, p.5.

11 Chilean Reds Seek Key Cabinet Posts; Despite Setbacks in "Broken" Strikes, Party is Strong—It Now Condemns the U.S. *New York Times* (New York), p.12, 10 abr. 1946.

12 Latins Urged to Accept Russia; US and Mexico Striving to Persuade 13 Republics to Recognize Ally Formally. *New York Times* (New York), p.14, 25 fev. 1945; Informal good offices of the United States in the establishment of diplomatic representation between the Soviet Union and certain of the American republics. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1945* (Washington, D.C.), vol. IX, p.223-230, 1969; Argentina, Soviet Enter Relations; 28 Year Nonrecognition Ends as Peron Beams. *New York Times*, p.1, 7 jun. 1946; Also, BETHELL, ROXBOROUGH, 1992, p.10-11.

a forty-year conflict that soon extended across the globe. The Rio Conference of 1947 crafted an inter-American treaty of reciprocal defense that expanded the definition of security to include attacks of a non-military nature and to include the protection of American states in cases in which “the *sovereignty* or *political independence* of any American State should be affected by an aggression which is not an armed attack or by an extra-continental or intra-continental conflict, or by any other fact or situation might endanger the peace of America.”¹³

Latin American reactionary sectors previously displaced by progressive social forces took note of the changes that began across the Atlantic and promptly began to play into the security anxieties of the United States to reverse recent social and political changes.¹⁴

Progressive sectors of society soon began to be seen and portrayed by reactionary forces as potential instruments of international Soviet-style communism. The first victims of this conservative backlash were labor unions, followed by Communist parties, culminating in the severance of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union by several Latin American countries.¹⁵

By the 1950s, Latin Americans were living in less democratic and less inclusive societies. Juan Domingo Perón was deposed in Argentina. In Venezuela, a military coup in 1948 against President Romulo Gallegos put an end to one of the most progressive regimes in the region. Gallegos had refused to ban the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV), and his administration had continued to deny diplomatic recognition to the

13 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, Art. 6, <http://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/b-29.html> Downloaded from Department of International Law: Organization of American States, Washington D.C., Downloaded 7 October 2014; Text of Marshall and Vanderberg Talks on Rio Treaty. *New York Times* (New York), p.4, 5 set. 1947.

14 This analysis of the collapse of democracy after the Second World War draws mainly from the ideas expressed by BETHELL, ROXBOROUGH, 1992, p.16-32.

15 Brazil is on Guard after Ban on Reds: President is Expected to Issue Decree Barring Reorganizing of the Communist Party. *New York Times* (New York), p.6, 9 may 1947; Brazil and the U.S.S.R. *New York Times* (New York), n.d., 22 out. 1947; Chile Seizes Communist Chiefs; Army Controls in Four Provinces. *New York Times* (New York), p.1, 23 out. 1947; BETHELL, ROXBOROUGH, 1992, p.16.

dictatorships of the Caribbean and Central America in an effort to force a democratic transition in the region. A coalition of conservative forces, with the support of the United States, supported the ten-year dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez after its coup in November 1948. Venezuela under Pérez Jiménez was described by the American press as “completely friendly, she is anti-Communist and she has the best of intentions. The western world can keep its fingers crossed and hope for the best.”¹⁶ In Guatemala, an experiment in social justice brought about by President Jacobo Arbenz ended with a coup d’état organized by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States in 1954. Arbenz had dared to enact a land reform that went against the interests of the largest landlord in the country, the American United Fruit Company.

Panamanian Nationalism and Nasser

Fifty-three years before the events in Suez, the United States had carved out a country from land occupied by Colombia to build an interoceanic canal after the Colombian Congress refused to accept the conditions initially agreed upon by both governments. Structured as an American protectorate, the country, which was given the same name as its isthmus,--Panama-- granted the United States the right to build an interoceanic channel together with the use, occupation, and control of a five-mile zone on each side of the waterway, also known as the Canal Zone (Arias, 2000, p.212). The concessions stipulated in the first diplomatic treaty between the new republic and the United States were in perpetuity with the possibility of unilateral territorial expansion and the acceptance of military intervention in the Canal Zone and across the country, should it become necessary to facilitate the operation or defense of the canal.

Over the years, Panamanian nationalism turned against the American presence and against American influence over local and international politics, its control of the labor market in the most important economic

¹⁶ ELLNER, 1992, p.167-169; Venezuela’s role is Vital to the West, *New York Times* (New York), p.5, 28 abr. 1951.

sector of the country, the expansion of Anglo-Saxon culture in the Canal Zone, and its monopoly over the canal and the business infrastructure that supported its activities. This growing discontent, which included a wide sector of society from the poor unskilled labor force to the more affluent middle class, forced the Panamanian government throughout much of the 1930s to seek the renegotiation of the 1903 founding treaty, the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty. This attempt culminated in the nominal ending of the protectorate status in 1939 and minor concessions that did not alter the nature of Panama's demands against the American presence.¹⁷ Although nationalist claims receded during the Second World War as Panama, like most Latin American countries, set aside past grievances against the United States and lent its support to the Allied cause, demands for the renegotiation of the conditions resurfaced in 1947. In that year, Panama's foreign minister, Ricardo Alfaro, resigned in protest over his government's consideration of a proposal to extend the leases of thirteen military bases outside the Canal Zone. Under the threat of a national strike and constant pressure from a mob outside who wanted to lynch any member who voted in favor of the agreement, the National Assembly, Panama's legislative body, rejected the extension of the leases for American bases outside the Canal Zone. Therefore, the United States decided to confine the defense of the canal exclusively to the Canal Zone. However, nationalist demands grew throughout the early 1950s, and the National Assembly unanimously called for the Panamanian government to urge Washington to further negotiate the 1903 treaty (Harding, 1959, p.110).

Gamal Abdel Nasser's challenge to the remnants of British colonialism began to appear as an issue in the negotiations between the United States and Panama. As early as 1954, a new round of demands from Panama forced the United States to return to the negotiating table and to accept a recalculation of royalties and an improvement in the labor and economic situation of Panamanians working in the American Zone.

17 For an account of this growing nationalism and the first renegotiation of the 1903 Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, see: LANGLEY, 1968, p.220-233.

The following year, when the United States asked the government of Panama for two hilltop sites for military radar systems under US jurisdiction outside the main Canal Zone, the government of Panama not only rejected the request but again raised objections regarding the labor conditions in the Canal Zone and the amount of contraband coming from the Canal Zone into Panama, which was cheating the country of vital customs revenues. President Eisenhower met with Panamanian President Ricardo Arias in Panama and promised him that the United States would do everything possible to help his government.¹⁸ Shortly after, President Eisenhower asked his Secretary of Defense to seek an agreement with the Panamanian government that would leave the Panamanians satisfied because “local politics can feed on resentments brought by real or imagined injustices to the native population.” The United States should attempt to meet the Panamanians “half-way,” but, as the President wanted to make clear, “without incurring the risk of divided control or beclouding our clear title to ownership.” In short, Eisenhower emphasized to his administration that every concession should be made to ensure that “future years do not bring about for us, in Panama, the situation that Britain has to face in the Suez.”¹⁹

It was already too late. The nationalization of the Suez Canal Company by the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser on July 26, 1956, rekindled Panama’s nationalism. Nasser’s decision reignited demands and aspirations in the isthmus. The diplomatic correspondence between Panama and the United States provided clear notice of the change. The Acting Officer in charge of Central American and Panamanian Affairs, in a memo to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State of Inter-American Affairs, explained the situation to his superiors in Washington:

18 Political and Military Relations of the United States and Panama: Impact of the Suez Canal Crisis, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* (Washington D.C.), vol. VII, p.274, 275, 277-280, 1987.

19 Political and Military Relations of the United States and Panama: Impact of the Suez Canal Crisis, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* (Washington D.C.), vol. VII, p.281, 1987.

The Panamanians, unable or unwilling to see beyond the superficial analogies between the two situations, have made no secret of the fact that they follow with keen interest the developments of the Suez. The Government of Panama unquestionably looks to the day when it will be able in one way or another to emulate the recent action of Egypt. There is quiet talk from time to time in even responsible circles in Panama of eventual nationalization or internationalization of the Panama Canal. Within the last few months an ex-Foreign Minister, who has always shown himself to be friendly toward the United States, remarked to our Ambassador that “Now Egypt has her canal and we shall someday have ours.”²⁰

Panamanian overtures in support of Egypt’s policies went from private to public in Panama City.²¹ The United States wanted to make it clear to the Panamanians that emulating Nasser, even if only at the level of his nationalist discourse, would bring consequences to Panama. On August 9, 1956, the US ambassador to Panama, Julian Harriman, and Assistant Secretary of State, Henry Holland, met with President Arias, the Panamanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Chairman of the Panamanian Council of Foreign Relations in Panama City. Holland unambiguously warned President Arias about Panama’s interest in Nasser and the consequences it would have for Panama’s position in world affairs. In unambiguous terms, Holland told his audience,

I had, in my thinking, attempted to put myself in the place of a Panamanian and determine what would be the best course for my country. This, of course, depended upon what my objective with respect to the Panama Canal might be. I knew that some Panamanians favored eventual

20 Political and Military Relations of the United States and Panama: Impact of the Suez Canal Crisis, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* (Washington D.C.), vol. VII, p.284-285, 1987.

21 Continued U.S. Consideration of the Suez Situation; United States Diplomatic Activity Prior to the Suez Canal Conference, August 3-15. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* (Washington D.C.), vol. XVI, p.163, 1990; A Questão de Suez. *O Estado de São Paulo* (São Paulo), p.1, 19 set. 1956.

nationalization or internationalization of the Canal. If I belonged to this group I would see two possible courses. The first would be to try to intervene in the Suez problem, to identify Panama with Egypt and to draw analogies between the two canals. The second course would be to avoid any participation in the Suez problem and to await a more favorable time to pursue my objective. Of these two courses, the second seemed to me the better. The first would necessitate the immediate sacrifice of some exceedingly valuable short-term assets of Panama. These are the present good will of the United States people and Government and the intention of the administration to urge favorable action by the next Congress on the legislation appropriating funds to construct the bridge across the Canal, the legislation regarding equal pay rates in the Zone and the legislation transferring to Panama certain lands and other assets covered by the recent treaty amendment. Likewise, the first course would necessitate Panama's identifying herself with the enemy of the United States and of Panama, since it is probable that Soviet Russia will align herself with Egypt.²²

The United States wanted to raise the stakes by warning Panama of the consequences of these overtures to Egypt. This interest in the events in Egypt had brought Panama to a political crossroads. According to Washington, it was time for Panama to make a decision. The Ambassador was clear, Panama needed to decide between either continuing its alliance with the United States or going down the Egyptian-Soviet path. If it decided to follow Egypt's pro-Soviet policies, "the present peculiar relationship between Panama and the United States would, of course, come to an end."²³ Holland placed the blame on "local communists,

22 Political and Military relations of the United States and Panama; Impact of the Suez Canal Crisis. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1955-1957*, (Washington D.C.), vol. VII, p.292, 1987; Z., Alemán, Roberto. La presencia militar de Estados Unidos. *Enfoques*, Panamá Universidad de Panamá, Facultad de Administración Pública, n. 3, p. 89-93, 1999.

23 Political and Military relations of the United States and Panama; Impact of the Suez Canal Crisis. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1955-1957*, (Washington D.C.), vol. VII, p.294, 1987.

the local sector which favors nationalization of the Panama Canal and the local opposition to the existing Government” and accused them of pressuring the President to follow the Egyptian example. “Expressing some interest on the situation in Egypt,” the Ambassador continued, “might not had been a bad decision after all, but it was now time to close and file this episode.” According to the Ambassador, It was now time for Panama to “desist from further statements on the subject; otherwise, it might find itself unwillingly embroiled in a problem that could only prejudice the interests of Panama.”²⁴

Diplomatic communication between Egypt and Panama also had to be discouraged. When Acting Foreign Minister Molino informed Holland that the Panamanian government had instructed its ambassador in Rome to travel to Egypt to learn about the Suez situation, Holland said “... that this might prove to be a mistake, and that it might be better for him to advise his Ambassador to stay away from Cairo. This would prevent the possibility of Egypt’s managing to draw Panama into the dispute in some way.”²⁵ If the Panamanians seemed attentive to his admonitions and “disinterested” in advice during their meeting with the Assistant Secretary, this was not the case in practice; the government supported Egypt and invited it to send a delegation to the inauguration of the new Panamanian president on October 1, 1956.

Eisenhower, however, was losing patience with the Panamanians and their infatuation with Egypt. A diplomatic plot was hatched to “bring the Panamanians to their senses.” The State Department began to circulate the idea of contacting the government of Nicaragua to explore the construction of a new interoceanic canal in that country. Panamanian fear of the United States constructing a new canal would:

24 Political and Military relations of the United States and Panama; Impact of the Suez Canal Crisis. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1955-1957*, (Washington D.C.), vol. VII, p.294, 1987.

25 Political and Military relations of the United States and Panama; Impact of the Suez Canal Crisis. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1955-1957*, (Washington D.C.), vol. VII, p.295, 1987.

...discourage possible moves by Panama, inspired by developments at Suez, to challenge our treaty rights in the Canal Zone, [and] also to bring about a more reasonable attitude on the part of Panama on Canal Zone problems. Its effectiveness would depend upon the degree to which we could impress the Panamanians that we are in earnest.²⁶

If the Americans had to leave, an impatient Eisenhower vowed, we “would take the locks with us.”²⁷ Nationalist demands were articulated by the Panamanian government because of their own interests in the events in Egypt as well as pressure from different sectors of the society that were following the events in the Middle East. The events in Suez had awakened different sectors of society to the realities of the Middle East in general and Egypt in particular. A survey conducted by the University of Michigan among law students in Panama City found that an overwhelming majority thought that the nationalization of the Suez Canal “was a great thing” and that Nasser’s Egypt was a primary foreign model to Panama (Goldrich, 1962, p.16-21). In support of Nasser, university students in Panama City called for a General Assembly in September 1956. They demanded that the Panamanian government abolish the 1903 treaty and lend its full support to the cause in Egypt. Nasser, according to the Panamanian students, had acted within “the legitimate exercise of its sovereign rights” (Harding, 1959, p.125). By the late 1950s, organized groups of students began a series of peaceful protests against the American presence in the Canal Zone. On May 2, 1958, university students entered the Zone, planting seventy-five Panamanian flags across the Zone in demand of a renegotiation of all bilateral agreements. The following year, on November 3, 1959, two members of the National Assembly led a group of Panamanians on a “sovereignty” rally

26 Political and Military relations of the United States and Panama; Impact of the Suez Canal Crisis. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1955-1957*, (Washington D.C.), vol. VII, p.305-306, 1987.

27 Political and Military relations of the United States and Panama; Impact of the Suez Canal Crisis. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1955-1957*, (Washington D.C.), vol. VII, editorial note, p.291, 1987.

to demand the presence of the Panamanian flag in the Zone, which ended with skirmishes between American and Panamanian forces and the expulsion of the students from the Canal Zone.²⁸

Panamanians had developed an interest in knowing more about the situation in Egypt and its parallels with their own situation. In 1960, the University of Panama organized the first international conference on inter-oceanic channels in Panama City. The conference gathered scholars from other Central American countries and Mexico and served as the forum for the first legal and political comparative studies between Egypt and Panama. There was a general interest in studying both the legal arrangements imposed by the owners of the waterways and the national aspirations of both countries. Among those studying Panama's nationalist demands from a comparative perspective was the Panamanian jurist Professor Eloy Benedetti, who provided the first academic study of the legal framework governing the two waterways based on a fact-finding mission he undertook in Egypt. Comparing both countries, Benedetti found that Panama was in a more precarious situation than Egypt before Nasser's nationalization in terms of its national rights over the Canal Zone. He lamented the encroachment of the United States on Panama's sovereign rights over the Panama Canal in granting consular representations to third countries, holding a monopoly over the toll system, using the Zone as the army's largest military base south of the United States, and being the place that other American agencies used to extend Washington's control over the rest of the continent. Benedetti decried the administrative inefficiencies caused by the United States' control over all functions in the Zone and argued that Egyptians were far more efficient in the administration of their canal than Americans were of the Panama Canal (Benedetti, 1965, p.60-68-69). Egypt, Benedetti urged, was the only country that could serve as a referent for Panama's unique

28 ABRAHAMAS, Enrique Gerardo. Nuestras relaciones con los Estados Unidos. *Anuario de Derecho*, Universidad de Panamá, Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Políticas, n. 5, año 5, p.233-237, 1961-1962; Also: Proyecto Nuevo 87, Available in: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjcrvLo_ME; Accessed 7 Oct. 2014.

circumstances. There was much to coordinate in the future between the two governments, so he advised the government of Panama to “keep close and cordial relations with the government in Cairo” (Benedetti, 1965, p.103).²⁹

Panamanian demands continued unabated throughout the 1960s, inspired by the Egyptian example and the successful installation of the first nationalist revolution in Cuba in 1959.³⁰ Demands erupted again on January 9, 1964, when a group of Panamanian students demanded that their country’s flag be raised in one of the Canal Zone’s secondary schools in response to the refusal by American students to accept a previous agreement allowing the Panamanian flag on their campus alongside the US flag. American students surrounded the Panamanian students, chanting the American anthem and tearing up the Panamanian flag. The reaction was a general uprising against the American presence in the Canal Zone that resulted in the destruction of American property and twenty human deaths, events that led President Roberto Chiari to break diplomatic relations with the United States until Washington accepted the full revision of the treaties governing the US presence in the isthmus.³¹

Both countries resumed diplomatic relations later in the year, and the United States allowed Panamanians to raise their flag alongside the American flag in the Canal Zone. The events of 1964 eventually led to a comprehensive treaty in the following decade between the United States and Panama. By 1968, General Omar Torrijos had taken the armed forces to power and installed a populist regime branded by friends and foes as a “Nasserist” regime both for its military origins and for its

29 For another valuable comparative study, see the work of another intellectual, the Costarican SAENZ, 1957, p.13-16.

30 Panama—Storm Center of Hemisphere Frictions; Crisis Reflects Bitter History Outbreaks Stir Deep Concern. *New York Times* (New York), section E, p.4, 12 jan. 1964;

31 ROYO SÁNCHEZ, 1979, p.39; and Gunfire Flares; Relations Severed Till Pacts Are Altered, Chiari Asserts Panama Moves to Scrap Canal Treaties. Embassy Evacuated; 20 Die in Riots Oder Restored But Zone is Tense Troops Bar New Clashes --- Panama Officials Bitter Over Army Firing. *New York Times* (New York), p.1, 11 jan. 1964.

commitment to neutralism and social progress (Wiarda, 1972, p.472). Torrijos successfully negotiated a final agreement with the United States in 1977 that abrogated the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903, returning sovereignty and, ultimately, full control of the canal and the Canal Zone to Panama. However, after his regime's defeat at the hands of Israel in 1967, Nasser was hardly a successful model that new leaders in the region aspired to emulate. When asked by a journalist about Nasser as a model for his country, Torrijos responded, "What has Nasser done?"³²

"Military Nasserism": Clamoring for a Latin American Nasser

Egyptian nationalism also had an echo in other Latin American countries beyond Panama, although governments were more cautious in their official positions, favoring the mediation of the United Nations. Nonetheless, the nationalization of the Suez Canal and Egypt's response to the French, British, and Israeli invasion of October 29, 1956 were widely supported by different sectors, especially in countries with a considerable Arab population.

The night of the tripartite invasion of Egypt, the Argentinean local press reported that as news of the military attack reached Buenos Aires, supporters gathered in front of the Egyptian Embassy and presented the ambassador with a note of support signed by an ad hoc commission created to gather national support for Egypt's cause—the Commission in Solidarity with Egypt. Supporters of Egypt chanted slogans in support of Nasser and against Israel, France, and Britain. At some point, the police had to intervene to restore order, but the protesters disobeyed the police orders, which required the police to send reinforcements. Failing to disperse the crowds, police used tear gas in an effort to end the demonstration and surrounded the Egyptian embassy. With access to the embassy blocked, protesters moved to the Syrian embassy, where

32 TACK, 1999, p.712; Progress in Panama. *The News and Courier*, p.4, 21 oct. 1969.

they were also met with tear gas and forced to disperse.³³ As news of the protests spread around the city, a new group of protesters gathered in the streets connecting the embassies. They chanted pro-Egypt slogans and were broken up by the police, who were about to confront a new group of three hundred people in Calle Corrientes. These and other groups began to chant “Argentina with Egypt” and “Death to Israel.” A third group of approximately a hundred people formed in Corrientes Street after the two previous groups were dissolved. Most, mainly Argentinians of Arab descent and several Syrians, ended up in jail that night, accused of disorderly behavior.³⁴

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, protesters gathered around the Egyptian embassy, and more than a dozen law students declared their willingness to go to Egypt and fight in the Egyptian army.³⁵ By mid-November, students in different schools in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro mounted protests against the invasion of Egypt. A student’s communiqué rejected the tripartite attack on the small nation and derided “futile” actions against “all of those who are fighting, as the Brazilian people are, for the consolidation of national sovereignty and the political and economic independence of their country from any world power.”³⁶ Brazilian students at the Egyptian embassy also called on President Juscelino Kubitschek to oppose the hostile actions against Egypt at the United Nations and through all other available diplomatic channels.³⁷

The left saw an opportunity to bring Nasser’s Egypt to national politics when, on November 8, 1956, Kubitschek’s government asked the Brazilian Congress for approval to send a military detachment as part of an Emergency Force created by the UN General Assembly to guarantee

33 Los Diplomáticos Argentinos saldrán de El Cairo y Budapest. *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), p.4, 3 nov. 1956.

34 Los Diplomáticos Argentinos saldrán de El Cairo y Budapest. *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), p.4, 3 nov. 1956.

35 Uma Ficção Criada Pelo Imperialismo e Inimizade entre Israel e o Egito. *Imprensa Popular* (Rio de Janeiro), p.1-2, 1 nov. 1956.

36 Contrários a Agressão que atingiu o Egito. *Imprensa Popular* (Rio de Janeiro), p.4, 2 nov. 1956.

37 Contrários a Agressão que atingiu o Egito. *Imprensa Popular* (Rio de Janeiro), p.4, 2 nov. 1956.

the separation of forces and the end of hostilities. Throughout the crisis, Brazil had decided to remain neutral while actively attempting to find a solution to the crisis through the United Nations. Macedo Soares, Brazil's Minister of Foreign Relations, announced that the country believed "the Suez Canal belongs to Egypt, but its use constitutes an international service,"³⁸ and problems relating to it should be discussed and resolved within the United Nations.³⁹ Yet, the left wanted to record its support for Nasser. During the debate, Senator Kerginaldo Cavalti, leader of the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), defended Egypt and its uncompromising nationalism. Cavalti warned other members that Brazil might someday face the same situation as Egypt. The senator warned that the invasion of Egypt could be the first in a series of attacks against the national interests of other countries such as Brazil. According to Cavalti,

[A]s they intervene today in Egypt, in order to take the Suez Canal, tomorrow either England or the United States could intervene in Brazil in order to fulfill their interests. They might want us to subordinate our interests in our national oil industry "Petrobras" [Brazilian Petroleum Company] to their whims.⁴⁰

Arab-Brazilians lauded the decision to send troops to Egypt as Brazil's entry onto the international stage as "a leader against tyranny." They asserted that his stance would have the support of "the nations of the Americas, Arab countries, and those who loved peace."⁴¹ Soon, support for Nasser's policies evolved into a general call for the emergence of a nationalist leader within the armed forces of Latin America to follow the steps of Egypt and lead his country to a meaningful political

38 A Posição do Itamarati na crise de Suez. *O Estado de São Paulo* (São Paulo), p.1, 20 set. 1956.

39 Argentina also decided not to take an official position and work through a UN solution. See: Posición de la América Latina ante la Grave Crisis en el Cercano Oriente. *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), p.3, 8 nov. 1956.

40 Protesto no Senado Contra a Brutal Agressão ao Egito. *Imprensa Popular* (Rio de Janeiro), p.2, 7 nov. 1956.

41 MOSSADEQUE, K.. Caravana. *Imprensa Popular* (Rio de Janeiro), p.3, 11 nov. 1956.

and economic independence from foreign interests while launching his nation onto a path of solid economic development and social progress.

The left was not alone in its attempts to create an image of Nasser in Latin America, and it faced parallel competition from other sides. Parallel to demonstrations supporting Egypt, Latin American Jewish communities began to organize to support Israel against Nasser's rising influence. Jewish newspapers in Portuguese and Spanish constantly criticized Nasser and lobbied their own governments' solidarity with Israel. In Chile, Argentina, and Brazil, the three Latin American countries with the largest Jewish communities, there was an organized campaign to influence public opinion against the Egyptian leader. The editorial pages of the Jewish newspaper *Mundo Judío* analyzed the efforts of the Jewish community in Chile to support Israel and concluded that although at "the beginning of the conflict between Israel and Egypt Chilean public opinion seemed to side with the Egyptians," the work done by their community among politicians in the Chamber of Deputies, at press conferences, and in presentations to the public had an effect; now, "public opinion has turned to support the truth".⁴²

They presented Nasser not as a threat to the existence of Israel alone but as an eventual threat to Latin American culture in general. "I do not understand how writers and journalists in the Americas are in support of Nasser's advances in the region," one editorialist in *Mundo Judío* wrote, and continued arguing that,

Nasser is not fighting against imperialism, he dreams of having full hegemony over the Mediterranean. This is no other thing but the old Saracen ambitions, which our cultural forefathers fought against for centuries. A well-armed Arab confederation, as it is in its way of being, will threaten Greece, Italy, France, and Spain, all the countries of the Latin seas. Arabs instead of moving forward have been moving backward and are at the doorsteps of being a semi-barbaric people to the point that, nowadays, they cannot demonstrate any major cultural advance.

42 Esclarecimiento. *Mundo Judío* (Santiago), p.3, 29 nov. 1956.

The way Nasser acts is a clear manifestation of their rudimentary state. An empire is always an undesirable thing, but an uncultured empire is a double disgrace.⁴³

The Jewish community in Rio de Janeiro also mobilized in support of Israel and against Nasser. On December 13, 1956, more than 1,500 people attended a rally organized by the *Federação das Sociedades Israelitas do Rio de Janeiro* (Federation of Israeli Societies of Rio de Janeiro) in the Carlos Gomes Theater. Important members of the political class were invited to the theater to support Israel and reject Nasser.⁴⁴ The Jewish newspaper *Jornal Israelita* justified the Israeli invasion of Suez⁴⁵ and warned its readers that Nasser was yet another totalitarian leader building a political system “without a clear political orientation but with a cheap anti-westernism, anti-Israelism, militarism, and a vacuous idea of greatness.”⁴⁶ If Nasser was left unchecked, they argued, the world would witness a rerun of the events of Munich in 1938, when the European powers were unable or unwilling to confront Hitler’s defiance of the international system. In another editorial, this newspaper concluded that Israel was engaged in self-defense and that France and England were merely upholding international law.⁴⁷ Farther north, in Venezuela, the pro-American dictator General Marcos Pérez Jiménez blamed the Suez crisis squarely on Nasser, a leader he considered “a very dangerous element in the world picture today”.⁴⁸

43 ALEGRIA, Ciro. Los Sueños de Gamal A. Nasser y nosotros los Lationamericanos. *Mundo Judío* (Santiago), p.4, 5 set. 1956.

44 Protesta a Comunidade Israelita Contra As Perseguições No Egito. *Jornal Israelita* (Rio de Janeiro), p.1, 23 dez. 1956.

45 Porque Israel Invadiu o Egito. *Jornal Israelita* (Rio de Janeiro), p.1, 18 nov. 1956.

46 O regime Totalitário do Coronel Nasser no Egito. *Jornal Israelita* (Rio de Janeiro), p.2, 2 out. 1957.

47 A Crise do Oriente Médio. *Jornal Israelita* (Rio de Janeiro), p.2, 11 nov. 1956.

48 *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1955-1957*, (Washington D.C.), vol. VII, p.1148, 1987.

Despite this opposition, support for Egypt among the left evolved not only as support for Nasser but also as a call for the emergence in Latin America of a member of the armed forces who would be capable of duplicating his charisma, leadership, and commitment to social justice and national independence from foreign and local interests. In other words, what Latin America needed was the emergence in the region of a “*Latin American Nasser*.”

The Brazilian congressman and prominent intellectual leader of the left, Neiva Moreira, a founding member of the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (Brazil’s Workers’ Party), argued in favor of a Nasserist regime and prescribed the conditions under which a Latin American Nasserist regime would appear. Moreira argued that Nasserism might not be an unknown phenomenon in Latin America because the region had been governed by the military throughout history, with civilian rule being the exception. Members of the armed forces have historically been defined as protectors of foreign and local interests and custodians of the social status quo. When those men in arms are the protagonists of a process of political liberation or help to transform old political institutions, they deserve the name of “the people in uniform” (*pueblo uniformado*) (Moreira, 1971, p.186). In modern times, the emergence of a leader of this type would only be possible if close attention were paid to three fundamental changes in the Egyptian armed forces and were replicated in Latin America. Moreira argued that under Nasser, the Egyptian armed forces broke with the counterrevolutionary role that the colonial powers had assigned to military institutions in the Third World. As such, these armed forces broke with their historical design because they had been created or transformed into custodians of social immobility and of the socio-political order subordinated to foreign interests and local oligarchies. Furthermore, Nasser assigned the Egyptian armed forces to the vanguard of a people’s revolutionary nationalism. Finally, revolutionary nationalism had to be both anti-capitalist and geared toward a special type of socialism adapted to the realities of an Arab society and determined to clash with the structures of the old regime (Moreira, 1971, p.199-200). Independence from foreign and local interests would clear

a path toward full development under the guidance of a military leader with the same qualities of those of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The Secretary General of the Socialist Party of Uruguay, Vivían Trías, took Moreira's argument further and argued, disregarding both the history of Egypt and that of Latin America, that the armed forces, if ideologically grounded in the ideas of Nasser, could serve as the vehicle to lead the masses into a revolutionary process. "Nasserist" could apply to any officer who was "nationalist, progressive or inclined towards socialism" (Trias, 1971, p.239). With the exception of Chile, the Communist Party throughout Latin America had been decimated by years of repression, and it was clear by the 1960s that the weakened party could not bring about a communist revolution without the support of the masses. Oblivious to the fact that Nasser had persecuted and incarcerated Egyptian communists by the thousands, several Latin American Marxists saw the "Egyptian Revolution of 1952" as a model to emulate (Trias, 1971, p.240-254).

In practice defining the ideological boundaries of what "Nasserism" would represent in Latin America was more difficult than the romantic call for a revolutionary caudillo emerging from the Armed Forces. This was especially true in the 1970s when some "new" military regimes were either branded or claimed themselves to be "Nasserists" across Latin America. "On an extremely vague and theoretical level," wrote the American Political Scientist Howard Wiarda in 1972, "the term [Nasserism] has been applied to any military group whose objectives are a combination of radical independence and the reconquest of national identity, national development and social progress" (Wiarda, 1972, p.472). The term was also used, Wiarda argued, to stress the "populist" element of these "new" military regimes, their "demagogic aspects," and their connection to an emerging Middle Class in Latin America (Wiarda, 1972, p.472). "Nasserism" was also used in reference exclusively to the realities of Egypt, as a model to emulate in terms of its social, economic, and political accomplishments (Wiarda, 1972, p.473). On a closer look, apart from a language that now included a call for the incorporation of the urban masses and the dispossessed into the national life, and

the conspicuous theatrics of populism, not much was “new” in terms of the commitment of these regimes in Latin America to a profound social change, the challenge of foreign and local interests, or an alternative model of economic development (Wiarda, 1972, p.475). Dissimilar regimes from Brazil and Argentina to Bolivia, Panama, and Peru could have aspects of these characteristics but it was impossible to provide a coherent and comprehensive definition to gather these regimes into a single encompassing concept. So was it a stretch to compare any of the leaders of these regimes with the charisma and “stature” of Nasser; nor could most Latin-American countries be compared with Egypt in terms of the level of development as “the bulk of the Latin American nations would seem already too complex, too highly articulated and mobilized, too differentiated and pluralistic, too far advanced socially, economically and politically to be salvaged by a simple expedient as “Nasserism,” concluded Wiarda (Wiarda, 1972, p.476). “Nasserism” the call of a leader within the armed forces to act as modern caudillo perhaps was in practice no more than a romantic, yet desperate, call for an ideal leader in times of internal repression and external control.

Hugo Chávez, the “Soldier of Nasser”

The idea of a Latin American “Nasserist” caudillo faded by the 1970s. The idea of a strongman who would come from the armed forces to lead the nation toward a path of social and economic progress seemed more an illusion of a sector of the left than a real possibility. After Nasser’s death in September 1970, Egypt’s new leader Anwar Al Sadat would align his country with the United States and take distance from Nasser’s economic and social policies. Latin Americans were no longer viewing the Middle Eastern countries as models of progressive societies and assertive national regimes.

Paradoxically, almost at the turn of a new century, just when “Nasserism” and nationalism seemed to be from an era gone by, a new leader, Hugo Chávez Frias, emerged in Venezuela and reclaimed from history the image of a “Latin American Nasser.”

The ballots in December 1998, and not two failed military uprisings six years against the government in 1992, catapulted Lieutenant Colonel Chávez to power. His commitment to put an end to Venezuela's neo-liberal policies, and to have a larger role for the state in the economy in favor of Venezuela's poor made him a target of Venezuela's traditional economic elites. His determination to challenge the an international order controlled by a sole superpower endeared him to those opposing the rationale of the "war on terrorism" and the "expansion of democracy" heralded by the United States. His commitment to an anti-imperialist union in Latin America reminded many of Nasser. His was government was a "Nasserist" regime as much as "we had a social project, even Socialist if you want, a Panamericanist ideology, that is Bolivarian, and an anti-imperialist position" (Ramonet, Chávez, 2014, p.553-554).

Committed to an alliance of Latin American and Arab nations, Chávez was an enthusiastic supporter of both a revival of the OPEC and the meetings of Arab and Latin American leaders. In 2005, during the first Summit of Arab and Latin American states in Brazil, Chávez reminded his audience that the way to build a strong relationship between the two continents and a strong alliance between the peoples of the South would be to follow Nasser's path: "I am very Nasserist. I wish I could have been at the orders of my Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser".⁴⁹

The image of Nasser would be a constant throughout his fourteen years in power. A firm contradictor of the United States policies in the Middle East, he would the only voice challenging the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006, and its military response on Gaza in December/January 2008-2009, and the only voice calling for a Panamericanist and Arab unity against the uni-polar world. His ideas clearly stated in front of Syria's television in 2009. During a visit to Syria, Chávez urged the Arab peoples to "retake the

49 CHÁVEZ, Hugo. Discurso del Presidente de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela Hugo Chávez Frías con motivo de la I Cumbre de la Comunidad Suramericana de Naciones y la Liga Árabe de Naciones (10 May 2005). In: *Ministerio de Comunicación e Información* (Ed.), Año del Salto Adelante (2005). Caracas: Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, p.341-342, 2005.

flags of pan-Arabism, to retake the flags of Arab unity, retake the flags of Arab dignity. Not a single Arab should be crawling to the interests of the American empire that has caused so much damage to the Arab people, not a single Latin American should be crawling to the interests of the Yankee Empire that has caused us so much damage.” The heir of Nasser urged action: “Enough of so many defeats, enough of so many divisions”.⁵⁰

CONCLUSIONS

Although the literature on Nasser’s influence in the Middle East and Northern Africa is abundant, we know little about his influence in Latin America. It is clear that the region was living a process contrary to that of Egypt in the 1950s, with the collapse by force of progressive regimes and the silencing of nationalistic aspirations, such as the Gutemalan experience of 1954. On a first approach, it seemed that the region was utterly disconnected from the events in the Middle East in the 1950s. Yet, the events in Egypt seem to prove that the region was attuned to developments in the Middle East and that these developments affected the articulation of national demands in the region, especially in Panama. The construction of a modern image of the Middle East, however polemic and contested by different sides, seems to have emerged as early as the 1950s. The apparent success of Nasser’s foreign policy and his calls for an end to colonialism and the unity of Arabs in a broader movement for social progress attracted sectors of the left that disregarded Nasser’s persecution of communists in his own country. They were convinced that, given the political repression and lack of channels for effective democratic participation, the only way to achieve social progress in the region would be through a Nasser-like caudillo. It is only because of Nasser that the left in Latin America began to contemplate, for the first time, the idea of a member of the armed forces leading a nationalist

50 CHÁVEZ, Hugo, interview with Syrian Television, Syria, 6 set. 2009. Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFokRfICRU> Accessed 7 Oct. 2014.

revolution. The image of such leader, a modern day caudillo inspired by Nasser, survived decades of changes and transformations in Latin America. At the dawn of a new century, Nasser would revive in the region, as new “soldiers of Nasser” would challenge both the social order and the international system.

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