

## Mohamed Hassanein Heikal: Reflections on a Nation in Crisis, 1948

*Egypt's foremost journalist and political commentator, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, was a correspondent for Akhbar al-Yawm at the time of the 1948 war. In the following interview, conducted in Arabic in Cairo on 21 May 1988, Heikal recalls the situation in Egypt at the time of the war and discusses his vision of what the future holds.*

*JPS: How would you describe the political situation in Egypt just before and during the 1948 Palestine war?*

*Heikal:* Generally speaking, the situation in Egypt was characterized by a lack of awareness about what was happening. There were some voices like those of Salih Pasha Harb, Muhammad 'Ali 'Alluba, and 'Abd al-Rahman 'Azzam, the secretary general of the Arab League, as well as a number of Egyptian pan-Arabists who were talking about what was happening in Palestine. But the reaction to what was going on was partly tied up in differing perceptions of Egypt and its role in the area.

In the early part of the century there were two primary ideas regarding Egypt's future: loyalty to the Ottoman Califate or Egyptian independence, even if this led to collaboration with the British authorities. The question was finally settled with the revolt of 1919, with independence and negotiations with the British. At this point the pan-Arabist trend in the country was weak and, to a certain degree, mixed with Islam. During the 1920s and 1930s the idea of Arabism began to be voiced more forcefully, but the message was not immediately well understood.

*JPS: What was the nature of the Jewish community in Egypt?*

*Heikal:* The Jewish community in Egypt at the time was quite large, about 92,000. Because of the European capitulation agreements, most of them had foreign passports—Italian, Spanish, British, or French. Ben-Gurion used to visit Egypt quite often. When he came, he would stay in a pension in the Khidawi Building on 'Imad al-Din Street, and it was there that I first met him. The chief rabbi of Egypt at the time was Haim Nahhum Effendi. The most prominent among the Jewish community in Egypt were people like Salvator Siccoralbi, who owned the largest department store in Egypt. There was also Qattawi Pasha, who was the chairman of the board of the Sugar Company and whose wife was then the chief lady-in-waiting to Queen Nazli; and Busayri Pasha, who was with the Realty Bank of Egypt (al-Bank al-'Aqari al-Misri). It was through these people as well as other prominent businessmen that the community had ties to the royal family. The Egyptian Jews were an indispensable part of Egyptian life.

In the newspapers in Egypt Jews were advertising the establishment of camps to accommodate those Jews who had been persecuted by the Nazis. These were staging camps in which these Jews would stay temporarily before going on to Palestine. At the same time, the Jewish brigade, which was created by the British and was stationed in Egypt. I saw its bases in al-Hammam, but it did not strike me as strange. The Zionist organizations were also very active in Egypt, especially HaShomer HaTsa'ir, a Jewish youth movement.\* At the time, I was living in al-'Abbasiyyah and I had many Jewish friends who told me about what was happening in the settlements in Palestine. I think my situation then was similar to that of other Egyptian youth: none of us had any awareness of what was happening. I didn't find their activities extraordinary, although I did find them somewhat fascinating.

Haim Nahhum Effendi as well as some of the other leaders of the Jewish community began to see the dangers of what was happening in Palestine. They began to confront Ben-Gurion and, later, Moshe Sharett, in order to stop any further involvement, but the Jewish Agency was exerting a lot of pressure on the community. So there was a lot of anxiety in the Jewish community at this time. The rabbi, who was a wise and cautious man, was afraid that the community would become too involved in the plans of the Jewish Agency. Nevertheless, the balance eventually tipped against the rabbi's opinion, and the Jewish youth, who were under the influence of the

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\*HaShomer HaTsa'ir was a Zionist youth movement formed in 1913. In 1946 it formally became a political party in Palestine, and in 1948 it participated in the formation of Mapam.

ideas of the kibbutz movement and HaShomer HaTsa'ir, began to be more active in Egypt. The center of their activities was the Maccabee Club. I even attended several basketball games there but again, I was unaware of the real political importance of the organization. At the same time, Abba Eban was also in Egypt. He was, in fact, the spokesman for the British Army command in Egypt and used to hold two briefing sessions every week in the Immobilia Building in Cairo. I remember attending one of his briefings.

*JPS: When did Egyptian awareness of what was happening in Palestine begin to develop?*

*Heikal:* After the war, some people began to realize that there was a problem, primarily a Muslim problem, one that concerned Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa mosque. There was concern that the Jews were threatening the holy places as well as the people of the country. A campaign was undertaken to raise funds and to send rations, tents, and first aid to Palestine. During this period, Hajj Amin al-Husayni came to Egypt\* and there began to be an Arab-Egyptian concern; but it was corrupted by King Faruq's idea that the Palestine problem was related to old conflicts, to the Eastern Question and to the question of who would lead the Islamic world.

The beginning of real Egyptian awareness came at the meeting of the extraordinary summit of the Arab League Council in Bludan, Syria (8–12 June 1946), which I covered as a very young correspondent. In 1946 the prime minister of Egypt was Sidqi Pasha, and the Bludan Conference was preparing to discuss and pass resolutions on the situation in Palestine. Sidqi Pasha had formed an administrative cabinet, seeking to get rid of the politicians. Thus it is possible that, unconsciously, he created an atmosphere of awareness, because he decided to put at the head of the Egyptian delegation to Bludan the leaders of the four major political parties, with the exception of the Wafd: Haykal Pasha, the leader of the Liberal Constitutionalist party; Nuqrashi Pasha, the leader of the Sa'dists; Makram 'Ubayd Pasha, the leader of the Kutlah party; and Hafiz Ramadan Pasha, the leader of the Nationalist party. Thus, the Egyptian delegation to Bludan was extremely high-level. At Bludan the Egyptian delegation had its eyes opened to what was happening in Palestine. After that, an important shift occurred, because concern about what was happening in Palestine was no longer restricted to the traditional pan-Arabists, but spread to political parties with real influence in Egyptian political life.

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\*Al-Husayni arrived in Cairo from France on 19 June 1946.

After attending the Bludan Conference, I went to Palestine for the first time. It happened that Dr. Haykal Pasha, the leader of the Liberal Constitutionalist party, was in Jerusalem at the same time. Both the Arabs and the Jewish Agency were very interested in his visit. It was on this trip that I met Ben-Gurion for the second time, in the King David Hotel. Behind this hotel was the British General Command and facing it was the YMCA. I do not remember who arranged for my meeting with him, but I do remember that I crossed through the YMCA, and went to the King David Hotel. I left the meeting shocked. He and the Jewish Agency were talking openly and clearly about a Jewish state, but they seemed certain that Egypt would remain outside the issue.\*

It was only during this trip that I first began to see the real picture. I visited Rehovoth, and went to another settlement, I think it was called Hadera. I found the Jewish settlers assembling armored vehicles in one of their workshops. I returned to Egypt shocked, and wrote not only about what had happened at Bludan, but also about what I had seen in Palestine. But, again, the full impact had not yet hit me.

Then the situation escalated, especially with the trial of those accused of killing Lord Moyne, who had been assassinated in Egypt on 6 November 1944. The trial was held in 1946, about the same time as the Bludan Conference. This created further awareness regarding what was happening in Palestine, but this understanding was still mixed with the Islamic question and the question of the holy places in Jerusalem. Al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni and 'Azzam Pasha used to speak out from time to time, but Egypt continued to send only modest assistance to Palestine—through the Red Crescent Society, for instance—in the same way that she dealt with any other Muslim country.

*JPS: What impact did the UN Partition Resolution have?*

*Heikal:* The Partition Resolution of November 1947 was like an earthquake in Egypt, the aftereffects of which did not appear until the beginning of 1948. In early 1948 al-Hajj Amin, 'Azzam Pasha, and Salih Harb of the Young Men's Muslim Association began to recruit groups of volunteers to join the mujahidin in Palestine. At that time 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni was the leader of the Palestinian irregulars organized by the Arab Higher Committee. In any case, there was a movement composed of volunteers,

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\*Eliyahn Sasson, head of the Arab Section of the Political Section of the Jewish Agency, had, in fact, already convinced Sidqi Pasha, of the idea of partition. See Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 76.

which was then joined by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and others. Interest in the issue then began to gain momentum.

*JPS: Could you describe your second trip to Palestine in the spring of 1948?*

*Heikal:* Before I visited Palestine the second time, in March 1948, I met with a number of people for briefings about the situation. I understood from Ibrahim Pasha 'Abd al-Hadi, chief of the royal cabinet, that Egypt would not enter the war. All that would happen would be that volunteers like the Muslim Brothers and some army officers would respond to the appeals of al-Hajj Amin. One main reason was that at the time we were involved in negotiations with the British. They were arguing that their presence in the Suez Canal Zone base was important in order to fill the power vacuum in the Middle East. Egypt's argument was that the Egyptian army was capable of filling this vacuum. 'Abd al-Hadi's opinion was that even if the Egyptian army was capable of defeating all of the Jewish "gangs" in Palestine, Egypt's contention that the Egyptian army was capable of filling this vacuum would be discredited if any miscalculation occurred.

When I returned to Palestine in March 1948, the roads were still open: you could go to Tel Aviv and the new city of Jerusalem without any problems, but there was a great deal of turmoil. I visited the same settlement of Hadera, which Dr. Haykal Pasha and I had visited in 1946, where there had been a plant for assembling armored vehicles. I discovered that this plant had become an assembly line, and I was forbidden to enter. I also found Rehovoth totally different from what it had been in 1946. Again, I was allowed to enter only limited areas. What they had wanted us to see in 1946 was off-limits in 1948.

From there I wrote a series of articles that was published in *Akhbar al-Yawm*, a newspaper with a circulation of 300,000-400,000. The title of the series was "*Al-Nar Fawq al-Ard al-Muqaddasah*" (Fire over the Holy Land). The series was also published in several other places and then even turned into a radio program.

After I wrote the series of articles and returned to Egypt, I found that the Egyptian prime minister was furious with me. He called for me in order to tell me that I was exaggerating, sensationalizing events, and harming public morale by writing such stories. I tried to explain the situation to him, but I was only twenty-two years old and he did not take me seriously. An indication of the general underestimation of the gravity of the situation was that most people were talking about the Haganah, Irgun, and Stern as if they were all nothing more than criminal gangs.

*JPS: What are your recollections regarding the Egyptian decision to enter the Palestine War?*

*Heikal:* In March 1948 I had met Eliyahu Sasson, the man in charge of Arab Affairs in the Political Section of the Jewish Agency. He told me that he thought Egypt would enter the war by sending forces to Palestine as part of an indecisive Arab initiative. I disagreed and in fact we bet \$10 on it. In April and May 1948 Egypt was still debating whether to be satisfied with sending the volunteers to Palestine or whether to send part of the regular army. In the parliament's April meeting, Prime Minister Nuqrashi who had replaced Sidqi stated that he would not allow the Egyptian army to go to Palestine.

But there was a division in Egypt over this question. Because of the influence of the Anshas Conference\* (28–29 May 1946) and for reasons related to the role Faruq wanted to play in the Arab East, the king was eager to send the army to Palestine. The prime minister ultimately changed his mind and it was decided to send the Egyptian army into battle. Because there were strong indications that war would break out with the creation of the Jewish state on 15 May, I went to Amman and then took a car to Bab al-'Amud (Damascus Gate) in Jerusalem. At the head of the Egyptian volunteer forces in Palestine was a man named Colonel Ahmad 'Abd al-'Aziz. I went from Jerusalem to Hebron to visit these forces, and spent 13–15 May with them. On 15 May it was declared that the Egyptian army was entering the war. Even Colonel Abd al-'Aziz, who was a regular in the armed forces, was surprised when he heard of Egypt's decision. I then left Hebron by jeep and went to Gaza, passing through Bayt Jibrin and al-Majdal. There I found that the Egyptian army had entered Palestine. But no one seemed to realize that they were entering a war, nor were there enough maps of Palestine for the troops. Worse, the troops were transported in old and broken tourist cars provided by a travel agency. They did not know the directions, so they were forced to follow the railroad track.

The Egyptian army entered the war without really knowing what it was facing.\*\* It was unable to confront the strong and fortified entrenchments of the Jewish settlements, or the former British police stations,\*\*\* which, after taking them over, the Jews converted immediately into armed

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\*This was the first Arab Summit. Held under the auspices of King Faruq at a royal estate outside Cairo, it was summoned to discuss the deteriorating situation in Palestine.

\*\*See "Nasser's Memoirs of the First Palestine War," ed. and annotated by Walid Khalidi, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. II, no. 2 (Winter 1973): 3–32.

\*\*\*These were, in fact, fortresses built by the British after the Arab rebellion of 1936–39. About 50 such structures were built throughout Palestine as a means of controlling the country.

fortresses, surrounded with ditches and barbed wire. I should also mention that the Jews generally chose elevated positions for their settlements, positions dominating the valleys and plains surrounding them. In Gaza, for instance, I saw the settlement at Dayr Sunayd, another across from al-Majdal, and Kefar Darom, in the south toward Rafah. Moreover, because of the political games—the cease-fires and the breaking of cease-fires—as well as the hesitation and confusion of the Arab armies, the war became a tragedy. Thus came the catastrophe of 1948.

*JPS: In a recent address to students at Cairo University, you said that the Arab nation is in a crisis (ma'zumah), but not defeated (mahzumah). Could you explain this statement?*

*Heikal:* What I meant was the following. What happened to the Arab nations in 1967 was terrible, but the Arab will was not broken. We refused to surrender unconditionally and continued fighting. During this fighting we accomplished many great objectives. In the 1973 war, for example, by all standards, we made a good showing, although I do not say that we achieved victory. This could have been a message for the future: the message that we can fight, we can absorb modern arms, and we can achieve many things. At the Syrian front, the Syrian tanks advanced through the Israeli fortifications and almost reached the Galilee; the Egyptian forces crossed the huge water barrier—the Suez Canal—and the Israeli Bar-Lev line of fortifications; and the road to the Straits was almost opened. But for some reason we hesitated; we acted as if we were still in 1967.

The real crisis is that we subsequently forgot what we achieved in 1973 and continued talking about the same issues discussed in 1967. Consequently, a nation that had made considerable progress returned to the same situation, or mindset, of setback. The question, then, is not one of being defeated, but of being in crisis. We were unable to understand the meaning of what we achieved in 1973 for a variety of class, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual reasons. The result was that we all rushed to the spoils: oil, money, and the fruits of the open door (*infitah*). We sold cheaply what we achieved in 1973, as if we had made no progress since 1967.

When the fighting in 1973 ended we were not in a bad position. But there were those who wanted to convince the youth that we had been defeated so as to make the first and then the second disengagement agreement more palatable to them. They forgot 1973 completely and focused entirely on 1967. This was the crisis I referred to when I gave the address at Cairo University. I meant to say to the students, “You are not

defeated; but you are in an economic crisis, an intellectual crisis, and a crisis of political will." We are a nation in crisis, but not a defeated nation.

*JPS: You have lived the forty years since the nakbah as a close observer of political developments. What are your expectations for the future?*

*Heikal:* I am a very optimistic person. Right or wrong, every war between us and Israel has produced a significant result. In 1967, the Israelis achieved a victory beyond their imagination. However, since then, they have discovered that military power is sterile; it leads to nothing. They seized large amounts of Arab land, and then were unable to do anything. If they want to have a normal life, peace, prosperity, and development, their military might is of only limited use.

The 1973 war proved to them that the Arabs could fight, despite the fact that the Arabs abandoned the positive gains of the war. Then after 1982, in Lebanon, the Israelis realized that they could achieve nothing further with military power and were forced to withdraw. When they are faced with resistance in populated areas, they have to pull back, because they can tolerate neither the human losses nor a continuing mobilization.

Another war, the current *intifadah*, proves to them that coexistence in the occupied territories is not possible either. What is happening today in the West Bank and Gaza Strip demonstrates that they cannot continue to occupy these territories. Even without fighting, maintaining the occupation of Palestine in this way, with a master race ruling over second class citizens, cannot go on. The result has been a clear internal crisis which has caused erosion in the structure of Israeli society itself.

The military balance has been, and continues to be, in the Israelis' favor. But the historical and human dimension show that it is not possible for this situation to continue forever. No military power, not even a nuclear capability, is sufficient.

At the same time, I believe that the Arab people have reached a level of equilibrium with their governments whereby they can confront the regimes. This is clearer in Egypt than in any other country in the Arab world. In Egypt, there is some democracy, but not true democracy. The regime knows that it cannot adopt oppressive measures against its people, because the sum total of the popular forces is equivalent to the power of the regime. Because Anwar al-Sadat tried to ignore the strength of the people, in 1981 his action ended in catastrophe for him. Consequently, the regime knows that it has certain limits, because it is confronting the masses—even if they are not yet organized—as well as growing social forces and ideas. But

there is a demarcation line of sorts. There are people with the right to speak out the way they want, but there is no bridge between those who speak out and the decision-making process. Nevertheless, this is a healthy sign, because, at very least, it shows that a change has begun to take place in the old patterns in the Arab world.

The situation, then, may be summarized as follows. First, internal erosion is taking place in the structure of Israeli society. The military balance is still in their favor and may remain so until the end of the century, but that power has proved to be irrelevant or, at least, of limited importance. Thus, the Israelis are facing a serious crisis. At the same time, the power of the Arab masses is changing. When you look at these masses you realize that qualitative changes are occurring. Sharp transformations are taking place beneath the surface.

If you look at a country like Egypt, for instance, you realize that there are three million university graduates. No matter what one may say about the level of university education in Egypt, three million university graduates constitute a power to be reckoned with. And if you look to the labor force, you will find 2.5 million women. This is also very important. You will find nine million children in school as a result of compulsory education. The number of those who have Ph.D.s and master's degrees from foreign universities is about 25,000. All of these factors are forces of change in society. For the next few years I remain pessimistic, but this period is one of maturation and transformation for Egyptian and, I believe, other Arab societies.

*JPS: Do you still view Egypt as a key or a gate to the Arab world?*

*Heikal:* Yes. First, because of its geographic location; second, because of its large population; and third, because of the many ideas it has produced. Even if one chooses to ignore Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir's achievements in terms of building factories or introducing land reform, at very least, one must acknowledge the ideas he raised for discussion in Egypt. Anyone who wants to bulldoze all this can try, but many of the same seeds will grow again. I think that by the end of this century there will be a moment of awakening. The nonchalance that exists at the official level in Egypt and the Arab world today will change. There is a process of fermentation taking place today at the very roots of Arab society.