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NASSER'S DEATH AND

MY RELATIONS WITH TITO

Nasser died on September ٢٨, ١٩٧٠. That day, U.S. President Richard Nixon was in the Mediterranean, visiting his Sixth Fleet, which was engaged in large-scale maneuvers. Relations between Egypt and the United States were very strained at that period, reflecting the hatred that had grown up since our defeat of June ١٩٦٧. Egypt accused the U.S. of backing Israel with arms; the U.S. believed Egypt had fallen prey to the Soviet Union and had become a threat to U.S. interests in the region. The American newspapers were filled with material that Egypt considered antagonistic and improper.

Nixon's visit to the Sixth Fleet amounted to nothing more or less than a display of force. No one was planning to attack U.S. interests in the Mediterranean. On the contrary: following its great victory over the Arab armies and its occupation of vast tracks of Arab land, Israel, America's principal ally in the region, was experiencing its most successful years, and America shared in its happiness and rejoicing. The United States was prepared to threaten action, right up to a third world war, against any country which threatened the security of Israel.

The nations of the Arab world were, in contrast, undergoing the worst moment in their history, having suffered a harsh defeat that was intolerable to its people. They had to bear the derision of the whole

world, which mocked them for having failed to defeat a little state whose population was smaller than one medium-sized Arab capital!

We in Egypt suffered the most pain, grief, and bitterness. The largest and most powerful of the Arab states, we had suffered the greatest disaster in our history, ancient or modern. More painful than the derision of our enemies was the glee of our friends, whose malice only made the disaster worse. The Egyptian citizen no longer believed a word about the war; he had lost all hope in the slogans he had echoed or the victories he had anticipated. Suddenly, we seemed to have become orphans.

On that day, with the U.S. President aboard his flagship and the U.S. Fleet close to our shores, the American newspapers declared that the purpose of the maneuvers "is for Nasser to hear the sound of our guns." It was an extreme provocation and showed the utmost contempt for the feelings of Egyptians, who had still not recovered from the horrors that had overtaken them. But before the roar and thunder of the guns that America wished Nasser to hear had begun, a messenger came to Nixon with an item of news written in a single line. "Nasser died an hour ago," it read.

Nixon did not immediately believe the news. When Golda Meir, the Israeli prime minister, heard that Nasser had died, she too refused to believe it. "Stop this nonsense," she ordered the messenger who brought the tidings. But the news was true. Confirmation poured in from all sides. Whispers of Nasser's death had begun at ٧:٠٠ p.m., but we made no official announcement until ١١, when I broadcast the news on television myself. It was minutes before the Sixth Fleet's biggest maneuvers were

about to begin, but without hesitation Nixon ordered them canceled out of respect for the Egyptian leader.

He decided instead to fly direct to Belgrade, bringing forward by one day his visit to President Tito of Yugoslavia.

Taken up by this visit. President Tito was unable to come to Cairo to attend the funeral of his dear friend, Gamal Abdel Nasser. I cannot deny I was taken aback by Tito's attitude. I had expected him to ask Nixon to postpone his visit so that he could bid his friend a last farewell. This would not have caused Tito any embarrassment, since Nixon had already canceled the entire naval maneuvers out of respect for our late leader.

Tito's failure to attend Nasser's funeral truly distressed me. I was bewildered by his conduct, particularly as we remembered the extent of Nasser's love for him and the strong bonds of friendship that had united them for many long years. It was no secret that Nasser was a keen personal admirer of Tito and had been greatly influenced by the Yugoslav president's long struggle to bring happiness to his people and freedom to his country. One effect of this was Nasser's adoption of Yugoslavia's unique party system, the Socialists' Union, in which Tito had combined all the political parties under the leadership of the Communist party. Nasser had proceeded likewise, making the National Union a modified version of Yugoslavia's political system.

So little was Nasser's regard for Tito a secret to the people of Egypt that every time Tito came on a visit to Cairo they would say: "I wonder what will happen in Egypt at the end of this visit?" The general feeling was

that nothing was adopted in Egypt without Tito having first been asked for his opinion and guidance. For all these reasons, I repeat that I could not see any justification whatsoever for Tito's absence from Nasser's funeral, not a single excuse. It was his one action that I could neither understand nor accept. It was in such contrast to his usual conduct. Many a time he had taken stands I shall never forget; they could only have come from one of the great leaders of the world.

One such stand that inevitably springs to mind was Tito's visit to Egypt two months after the defeat of ١٩٦٧. There had been no need for him to come, nothing that called for a meeting between Tito and Nasser. Nevertheless he came, giving no specific reason. Boarding his cruiser Ghaleb, he headed for Alexandria, where we were overjoyed to meet him. Tom apart by the pain and shattered by our defeat, we had felt we were alone in the world, surrounded by people who hated us. Tito's arrival had a magical effect on us. I was sitting at home in the village ofMit Abul-Kom, thinking of the disaster that had overtaken us, when suddenly Tito came in, like a father, an older brother, a dear friend come to share in my distress, to console me, to ease my pain, to encourage me, to succor me. I said to my companions: "That man has unwittingly done for us what no one else had done; for we were each like a man who had lost his clothes and stood shivering from cold and embarrassment when Tito arrived carrying all the garments in the world."

I was baffled by Tito. In ١٩٦٧ he came as a genuine human being who knew how to honor his friends—a mass of emotions, akin to us people of the East. On Nasser's death he appeared in a different light, putting the

interests of his country above all emotional or personal considerations. Even so, his earlier visit made me love that man and I shall always speak well of him.

I still have unforgettable memories of that visit in ١٩٦٧. We held a series of talks with him at the Ras El Tin Palace, two delegations facing each other across the long conference table, I seated at Nasser's right, Tito opposite us. Nasser began to speak, expressing his intense anger at the difficulties he was having with the Soviets over rebuilding our defeated army. I recall looking at Nasser's arm and noticing in alarm that it had turned yellow. I was aware that our defeat had aggravated Nasser's diabetes, which he had previously been able to keep under control. After the defeat of June ٥, medication failed to keep the diabetes in check and serious complications had ensued. Although his daily dose of insulin injections had been doubled, it was a few months before the amount of sugar in his body was under control.

I was therefore concerned for his health as he spoke of his problems to Tito. The Soviets had halted their arms supplies, saying those they had already sent would take three years for us to learn how to use. We trained our officers and soldiers to use them in five months and asked for further supplies. Nasser told Tito we were in dire need of them to establish our line of defense from Port Said to the Suez, but the Soviets had sent their inevitable reply: "We are unable to answer you as all our leaders have left for the Crimea"!

Nasser's agitation deepened as he said to Tito: "I beg of you, go to Moscow immediately and repeat to the Soviet leaders what you have

heard from us. Tell them that we are so displeased that surrender to Israel or the United States would be preferable and less crushing than their treatment of us." Nasser said this to Tito in a fit of rage and frustration, but Tito did not fail to carry out our request. He sailed home and then flew to Moscow where the Soviet leaders heard him out (although they did nothing until the beginning of the following year).

I cite this as evidence of President Tito's nature as a leader and a friend, adopting our cause and fervently advocating it. Tito told us we were not the only ones to suffer from the Soviets. He himself had waged fierce battles against Stalin, refusing to be a Soviet satellite. He did not lose courage. He did not retreat or submit. On the contrary, he drew strength from the people who stood behind him. Stalin did his best to get rid of Tito, pursuing the most base, contemptible and brutal methods. He was behind a number of attempts to assassinate Tito. "Stalin did not leave a single method untried in his attempts to assassinate me," Tito told us. "He even attempted, on more than one occasion, to put poison in my food."

Tito related that story to us as we sat with him at dinner at the Officers' Club in Zamaiek in the early days of the Egyptian revolution. To our astonishment, he had brought along his own cook, who had prepared a meal for him different from the one we had offered. We were not used to dealing with rulers and heads of state and were ignorant of such matters. He explained that after he had discovered Stalin's plots to poison him, he had resolved to eat only from the food prepared by his trusted private cook and served from behind his chair by a Yugoslav servant.

Tito informed us that all heads of state followed the same procedure and advised us to emulate his example. We laughed at the suggestion and never for a moment considered assigning a special cook and servant. Not long afterward, however, we discovered a plot to poison Nasser's food. His enemies had bought off one of the Groppi waiters, who had put poison on Nasser's plate at a reception he attended. The plot was discovered at the last moment, and as of that day Nasser decided to take Tito's advice: he would eat only the food prepared for him by his personal cook. And that is what I too now do.

We met with Tito on many occasions. He always opened up to us, speaking of his problems, his dreams, and his opinions of world events. He told us at length of his differences with the Soviet Union and would often scoff at the empty Soviet slogans, using an amusing catch phrase, always repeating in his delightful English accent: "Socialism, socialism . . and no food." This criticism of the mistakes in the application of socialism confirms my impression of Tito's strength and self-assurance. This is not making too much of him, for he merits the status of a world leader. During World War II he stood side by side with heroes like Churchill, Elsenhower, and De Gaulle, although Yugoslavia is only a small country with a scant population and inconsiderable wealth. It does not produce arms. It does not have an enormous army. Yet in spite of this the Yugoslav people were able, under Tito's leadership, to terrify Hitler's Germany.

These are the qualities of world leadership. And what Tito achieved in war, he also achieved in peace. Stalin emerged from the war victorious

and mighty. He was able to swallow up almost a half of Europe and impose Marxism forcibly upon its people. But Stalin, for all his power and tyranny, could not get rid of Tito, even by assassination. Through its armed forces and organizations such as Comicon, the Soviet Union continued to rule eastern Europe according to a specific policy, distributing different roles to each country in order to preserve Soviet hegemony. The Soviet Union specifies to each country what it should plant, manufacture, buy, export, and import. It also determines the production of raw materials and their distribution, all according to a comprehensive plan. But Tito would not accept this modus operand!. He would not agree that his role should be limited to carrying out Moscow's instructions, unable to modify or refuse them. It was his opinion—which he repeated again and again to the Moscow leadership—that each country knows its own needs better than anyone else, and that each government should therefore be left to establish economic policy that suits it best. Tito wanted to give absolute priority to the production of food. For it was not reasonable to neglect agriculture in order to give more importance to the production of, say, iron and steel. It was from this that he derived his phrase: "Socialism, socialism ... and no food."

Tito found no ears in Moscow ready to darken to him. On the contrary, he had to listen to criticisms of his style of rule. So he decided to act independently, knowing full well that the other eastern European leaders thought as he did, even if they did not share his boldness. He planned his own agricultural policy regardless of the fact that it clashed with the Soviet master plan. Not only that, but he decided to challenge the Soviet

theory itself where it concerned agriculture. For Tito was convinced that the peasant could not be nationalized. He believed the greatest of all the Soviet Union's mistakes was to deprive the peasants of the tenure of the land. Instead offending his own farm, the Soviet peasant simply carries out instructions from a high-ranking official, and for this reason Soviet farm production is very meager.

The agricultural slump in the Soviet Union happened in other Communist countries, even Yugoslavia, where Tito was taken by surprise to find that production was insufficient to feed his people. He found himself forced to import foodstuffs from abroad to avoid a frightful famine. This was happening in spite of Yugoslavia’s excellent soil. Throughout history, the Yugoslav people had been self-sufficient, the farmers irrigating and harvesting the land they owned in order to increase their income. When the land was nationalized, all incentive for increased production was lost, and the nationalized peasant was offered only the minimum of his sweat and labor. Agricultural produce dwindled. Tito decided he could no longer stand and watch the disaster, as other Communist leaders had done. Completely ignoring the laws of Soviet hegemony, he passed his own law allowing the farmer land tenure up to a limit of twenty-five acres.

This bold decree worked a miracle. The Yugoslav peasant regained his freedom, production increased, modern methods of farming were introduced, and the country not only fed its own people but also exported food to numerous other countries in western Europe. Tito disregarded the storm that his decree provoked in Moscow, and the Kremlin leaders were

finally impelled to accept his policies. With all its power and authority, the Soviet Union stood powerless before the leader of a small country who wished only to provide his people with enough food. Tito's victory proved that the Communist theory of agriculture is the cause of the veiled famine suffered in many countries where it has been imposed by force. There is more proof of this in the fearful shortage of farm produce inside the Soviet Union itself.

Tito proved his leadership and boldness with this act of defiance. His courage is characteristic of true world leadership. Khrushchev also had many reservations about Marxist theory but was not as courageous as Tito and so only said secretly what others said openly. I recall how surprised we were to hear Khrushchev say to us on one of his visits to Cairo: “Listen, folks, I beg you not to repeat what I am about to tell you, for if it reaches the ears of the Politburo I shall be swiftly dismissed from office.” We laughed and Khrushchev laughed with us before he went on to say: “If the wheel of time could be turned back and I had the power, we would not have nationalized either housing or crafts or craftsmen.” These had all rapidly proved a failure, but in spite of Khrushchev’s convictions and in spite of his influence and power, he could not find Tito's courage to speak his opinion and do something about it. This is the difference between one leader and another.

The leaders of another east European Communist country—Czechoslovakia—were like Khrushchev and lacked Tito’s courage. During a visit to Prague, I sat next to a friend who had a high-ranking position in the leadership of the Czech Communist party. When he was

assured we were alone, he confessed to me that the nationalization of housing, crafts, and agricultural land had created problems to which there was no solution. But he could not find the courage to proclaim his views and rectify the errors.

True world leadership needs special qualities that are only available to the strong and courageous. Tito had those qualities, and they earned him the hatred of the Soviet leadership that stooped to undermine him by any means in its power.

I recall for example when Nasser and I, at the end of an official visit to the Soviet Union, agreed to stop over in Belgrade for two days to meet President Tito before returning to Cairo. A few moments before we boarded the plane at the Moscow airport, a high-ranking official who had once worked for Pravda in Cairo said to Nasser in a mocking tone, full of resentment: “Ah, you are on your way to visit the Communist Emperor!" It was a phrase used by the Soviet leaders to denigrate Tito whenever they could. Because Tito liked to live in palaces built by former princes and kings, they pretended he lived in a style different from the rest of the Communist leaders. But Tito's only mistake was to do publicly what they did secretly. For the leaders of the Soviet Union—at the summit of communism, holding Marxist views and supposedly protecting Socialist peoples—live the life of American millionaires! The only difference between them and Tito is that Tito did not conceal his movements or forbid the publication of pictures taken in the government palaces where he resided.

The Soviet leaders reside in emperors' palaces in the Crimea, elegant chalets are reserved for them on the shores of enchanting lakes—and they do not permit photographs or one word to appear on this capitalist life-style they enjoy at the expense of the people. How unjust of them, therefore, to dub Tito “the Emperor of Communism”!

I knew Tito well and can say he was distinguished by rare qualities and a nobility that made you respect him, admire him and be influenced by him. I was most careful to keep him acquainted with our military and political situation when I took over the reins of government in Egypt.

Tito took a truly honorable stand as the appointed time for the October War drew near in ١٩٧٣. I had made preparations to ensure there would be a unified Arab stand when the life-and-death battle began. Then I prepared the way for African support and, following that, for international support. That left only the nonaligned countries to deal with. Luckily, I met Tito in Algiers at the Nonaligned Conference of September ١٩٧٣, only a few weeks before the battle. I admitted that war with Israel was imminent and that, in fact, the date had been set. Tito wished us success and did not ask me about zero hour nor press me with questions.

I returned to Cairo and a few weeks later the whole world was awakened to news of the sweeping Egyptian attack. After six hours of fighting, I was surprised to receive a request for a cease-fire from the Soviet ambassador, who said it had been asked for by Syria. Of course I refused this absurd request, but the reason for it soon became evident. From the first, the situation on the Syrian-Israeli front was not favorable to the

Syrians, and Moscow's great fear was that Syria might be lost and its regime—which they had shored up after their dismissal from Egypt—might be irretrievably overthrown.

At this juncture, Brezhnev phoned Tito and said to him: "Please intervene with your friend Sadat and persuade him to agree to the request for a cease-fire or he will be the cause of a complete Arab debacle. Syria faces the danger of a sweeping defeat and el-Assad has asked us three times already to arrange a cease-fire, but Sadat still refuses." Tito heard Brezhnev out, but he was never in touch with me to inform me of Brezhnev's request. I heard of it only when I later visited him in Belgrade. He told me Brezhnev had used a not too polite word to describe me, which caused Tito to flare up and answer: "Sadat knows what he is doing and is better able than anyone to assess the situation. I cannot intervene to ask him to do something he does not wish to do. If you want to inform him of your opinion, it is for you to contact him from Moscow."

Later in the war, Tito took an even more noble stand on our behalf. The battle was at its fiercest; Egypt had lost ٥٠٠ tanks, Israel ١،٠٠٠, and Syria had lost ١،٢٠٠ tanks in a single day. We were in great need of replacements. I found none but Tito to ask for help. We asked for ١٠٠ tanks, or one armored brigade under the system we use. Tito, without delay, sent us ١٤٠ tanks, ready for immediate action. All were supplied with ammunition and their fuel tanks were filled up. He asked for no advance payment, as arms dealers do, and the tanks were transported directly by train to the front. It was an astounding action, and after the

disengagement I decided to fly to Belgrade to thank him. What increased my respect for him was that he had sent the tanks to a country the Soviet Union had told him would be utterly defeated! For Brezhnev had assured him Israel would destroy us within days if not hours.

After that I always made a point of visiting Tito every time I returned from Europe or the United States. Once I also asked the Egyptian Vice President, Husni Mubarak, to visit Belgrade after one of his trips, and he duly cabled to ask for an appointment with Tito. The reply came that the appointment was with Tito's deputy, and not Tito himself. Mubarak immediately canceled the visit and I approved of his'action, telling him: “From now on, leave the man alone. We will not attempt to impose on him.”

Later, when Tito toured the Gulf states but did not visit Cairo, I was not offended but understood that he had to keep his distance so as not to impair his economic ties with the “boys” who ruled Libya.

Yugoslavia has enormous interests in Libya, and Tito depended greatly on their oil. To anger the child Qadaffi could deal a hard blow to the Yugoslav economy. For these reasons I was not angered by Tito's stand in the period before his death, which followed Arab rejection of Egypt and its leadership. The organizers of the rejection were like children behaving foolishly, and Tito knew them to be foolish. He knew full well that I would appreciate his position and understand his every step, although others would view his actions differently. Our feelings toward him were of gratitude and loyalty.