



Reconstructing a Shattered Egyptian Army: War Minister Gen. Mohamed Fawzi's Memoirs, 1967–1971 ed. Youssef H. Aboul-Enein.

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Review by Jonathan House, US Army Command and General Staff College (j_house245@hotmail.com).

On 10 June 1967, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) stood triumphant along the Suez Canal, while the Egyptian armed forces lay shattered, demoralized, and disarmed. Six years and four months later, Egypt and Syria launched a carefully planned offensive that seized the initiative, restored Arab morale, and pushed Israel close to defeat. Eventually, the IDF battled its way back to regain and expand its prewar positions, but Cairo had achieved its strategic aim—demonstrating that Tel Aviv must eventually negotiate a compromise peace. The Israeli victory had been possible only because President Anwar Sadat, coming to Syria's rescue, advanced his troops beyond Egypt's air defense umbrella east of the Suez Canal. The process by which the Egyptian military went from utter defeat to achieving its strategic goal of forcing Israel to negotiate is the subject of *Reconstructing a Shattered Egyptian Army*.

As commander in chief from 1967 to 1971, Col. Gen.¹ Mohamed Fawzi (1915–2000) was a key figure in the renaissance of the Egyptian military. His 1984 memoirs provide an insider's view of political and diplomatic as well as military developments. Unfortunately for historians, they contain nothing about the alleged 1971 coup against President Anwar Sadat, for which the general was arrested and imprisoned.

The book's editor, Youssef Aboul-Enein, is a commander in the US Navy's medical service corps. His linguistic and cultural skills have made him an effective intelligence analyst and instructor at the National Defense and National Intelligence universities. He is, thus, superbly equipped to analyze Fawzi's memoirs, colored as they often are by the general's credulity concerning the United States and Israel.

Fawzi begins by describing the disarray of his country's armed forces, where political reliability and personal profit counted for more than combat effectiveness. Between 1962 and 1967, Egypt had focused on a counterinsurgency campaign in Yemen rather than preparing its troops to fight the IDF. Fawzi faults President Gamal Abdel Nasser for giving too much influence to his military commander and lifelong friend, the egotistical Field Marshal Abdel-Hakim Amer, who precipitated the 1967 crisis without adequate planning and training. In the ensuing war with Israel, Amer's nervous breakdown produced a catastrophic retreat on 6 June 1967:

The erratic nature of his [Amer's] orders and his subversion of the chain of command in issuing his orders led field commanders to rely on MPs [Military Police] and military intelligence officers for orders. Rumor and confusion were the order of the day.... In one evening an estimated 120,000 troops were stampeding toward the Suez Canal. (51–52)

Meanwhile Amer remained sequestered in his bedroom with the minister of war, Shams Badran, guarding his door, when both should have been in the field giving orders. Badran did

1. Equivalent to a full (4-star) general in the US Army.

make phone calls to Nasser, the Soviet ambassador, and the Soviet foreign minister. Amazingly, at this late stage, Amer asked chief of operations Gen. Anwar al-Qadi to assume command of the 4th Armored Division and defend the Giddi and Mitla passes. The Soviet military attaché was beside himself at Cairo headquarters when Egyptian units were ordered to retreat. He finally yelled, “Why didn’t you let the Egyptian combat units fight and demonstrate their valor?” (51–52). Despite this debacle, hundreds of tactical commanders remained blindly loyal to Amer. When Nasser placed Fawzi in charge of the wrecked armed forces, the general’s first task was to force his way into Amer’s home, arrest the field marshal, and remove a truckload of weapons and ammunition.

The bulk of this book focuses on Fawzi’s efforts to rebuild and motivate the Egyptian armed forces. For example, immediately after their 1967 defeat, the Egyptians sent four-man special forces teams into the Sinai to collect intelligence against the occupiers; eventually these probes escalated into battalion-sized raids, increasing Egyptian self-confidence prior to the 1973 attack. Similarly, Fawzi describes his attempts to improve Egyptian air defense measures, including secret redeployments of air defense missiles to target Israeli aircraft in previously safe sectors. Told from the Egyptian side, this account of the “War of Attrition” naturally exaggerates Egypt’s successes against the IDF. Fawzi’s account, nonetheless, provides sharper perspective and greater detail than available in accounts by, for instance, Mohamed Heikal and Saad el Shazly.²

Besides retraining and inspiring his armed forces, Fawzi negotiated with the Soviet Union for weapons and advisors. His efforts bore fruit in 1970, when General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev sent thirty-one battalions with SA-3 missiles, eighty-five MiG-21 fighters, and ten Tu-95 bombers, all with Soviet crews, to defend Egypt until its own personnel learned to operate the new equipment. As a Nasser loyalist, Fawzi attributes these successes to the brilliant diplomacy of his president, who not only defended the country but forced Israel to accept a ceasefire to avoid direct confrontation with the Soviets. He does, however, acknowledge that the need for Russian translators forced the Egyptians to break up trained crews and distribute them as individuals, slowing the rearmament process.

The principal flaw in this otherwise excellent volume lies in its format. Seeking to make it more accessible to western readers, Aboul-Enein has provided not a full translation of General Fawzi’s recollections, but a sophisticated analytical summary of the original text, interspersed with passages from the memoirs (translated by the editor) and chapter introductions by various American intelligence and military officials. The reader must, therefore, constantly distinguish between Fawzi’s own words and those of his expert interpreters. Nonetheless, students and scholars of twentieth-century Middle Eastern history and politics will find *Reconstructing a Shattered Egyptian Army* to be very instructive reading.

2. Respectively, *The Road to Ramadan* (NY: Quadrangle/NY Times Book Co., 1975) and *The Crossing of the Suez* (San Francisco: Amer. Mideast Research, 1980).