

Nasser And Arab Socialism

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ABSTRACT: Arab Socialism, developed by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, was a unique model of state socialism aimed at both domestic transformation and regional ideological dissemination. This approach sought to balance Western capitalism and Eastern communism by emphasizing social justice, economic equality, and Arab unity. Nasser reinterpreted the concept originally introduced by Ba’athist thinkers in 1947, prioritizing land reform, nationalization, and social equity.

The ideology was institutionalized through the National Charter and the Arab Socialist Union, enabling the state to exert full control over key sectors such as industry, agriculture, media, and trade. Political freedoms were curtailed, justified by the regime as necessary for development and stability. Nasser rejected Marxist atheism, portraying Islam as the foundation of a socialist tradition, and restructured religious institutions to align with state objectives.

Egypt aspired to lead a pan-Arab socialist revolution; however, the authoritarian nature and ideological rigidity of Nasser’s model limited its regional appeal. While countries like Syria and Iraq adapted the ideology to local contexts, others—such as Lebanon, Jordan, and North African states—remained sceptical or indifferent, opting for alternative paths to modernization.

KEY WORDS: Nasser, Egypt, Arab Socialism, Middle East

INTRODUCTION

The term “Arab Socialism” has been in use since as early as 1947. Nasser, however, applied it to Egypt’s version of State Socialism, which he aimed to promote across the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa. In Egypt, there was a significant gap between the theory and practice of Arab Socialism. Its stated goals were to establish social justice, eliminate exploitation, and ensure public ownership of all means of production. Social freedom was defined as freedom from capitalist exploitation, and until that was achieved, political and intellectual freedom were considered secondary.¹

In practice, while the illusion of popular control and personal freedom was carefully maintained, Egypt had moved significantly toward becoming a totalitarian state. Nasser argued that this was a temporary necessity due to Egypt’s developmental challenges, poverty, and overpopulation. Nasser consistently denied that Arab Socialism contained Communist elements or was secular and thus opposed to Islam. Nonetheless, similarities with Communism existed, with differences mainly in degree and application. Communists criticized the Egyptian regime for its bourgeois nature and nationalist orientation. To his Muslim critics, Nasser responded that Islam was the first Socialist state, and he acknowledged Islam’s role as a unifying force in the Arab world and beyond. However, his regime took steps toward secularization, such as abolishing religious courts and modernizing Al Azhar University.²

Egypt positioned itself as the model of an Arab Socialist revolution, which it saw as its duty to extend to other Arab nations. Since true Socialist principles could only be adopted in “liberated” countries, this implied the need for revolution in others. Nasser argued that Arab unity was inseparable from Arab Socialism. In disputes with the Ba’ath Party in Syria and Iraq, he insisted that only Egypt’s version of Socialism was valid. Politically, the regimes differed, but in terms of social welfare and economics, they were largely aligned.³

Arab Socialism began to gain emotional appeal across the Middle East, largely due to Nasser’s personal prestige. However, in practice, it had few adherents outside of small groups in Syria and other Arab countries. Ultimately, Arab Socialism was used by Nasser’s regime to promote Egypt’s model of State Socialism and guided democracy. While it had some success in Egypt, its acceptance elsewhere in the Arab world remained uncertain. Yet, given the transitional nature of many Arab societies, a clearly stated doctrine of state-led development might still find traction.⁴

ARAB SOCIALISM IN EGYPT

In theory, Nasser frequently stated that he did not hold doctrinaire views on politics or economics, and that his approach to development problems was opportunistic and empirical. However, the Free Officers, as the vanguard of the revolution, were motivated from the beginning by strong Socialist principles. While this might have been true in the case of land reform, in most

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other areas, action preceded theory, and the ideology was later developed to justify and popularize what had already been done. From the outset, the revolutionary regime was guided by what Nasser later described as the Six Principles of the Revolution: (1) Elimination of imperialism, (2) Elimination of feudalism, (3) Elimination of capitalism and monopoly, (4) Establishment of social justice, (5) Creation of a strong army to defend the revolution, (6) Establishment of a democratic way of life.⁵

It could be argued that Arab Socialism, both in theory and practice, was essentially an extension of these principles. These principles were as much nationalist and republican as they were Socialist. Nationalism was evident in the call to eliminate foreign influence and built a strong army. Republicanism was reflected in the abolition of feudalism and capitalism-systems based on monarchy, wealth, land ownership, and political privilege. Socialism, however, was only vaguely present with the aim of establishing social justice and democracy.⁶

In a series of speeches following the nationalizations of July 1961, but before the assembly of the People's Congress of Popular Forces, Nasser attempted to define democracy and social justice for the Egyptian people. On 22 July 1961, he stated that democracy meant establishing social justice and equality among all classes. Government should serve the entire nation, not a small exploiting elite. There can be no freedom without equality, and no equality while feudalism and capitalism dominate.⁷

Later, in a speech in Alexandria on 26 July 1961, Nasser claimed the revolutionary regime had succeeded in liberating the people, both socially and economically. "The peasants have become landowners or are on the way to becoming so... the machines in the factories are no longer owned by exploiters; they have become the property of the people." In this view, social freedom is equated with freedom from capitalist exploitation, while political and intellectual freedom are considered secondary.⁸

Nasser promised a brighter future, envisioning a utopia where peasants would double their land holdings, factories would expand, and low-paid workers would become affluent citizens with improved living standards. According to Nasser, Egypt was on an endless path toward Socialism, ultimately leading to a new society based on fraternity and national unity, where class distinctions were largely eliminated. National income would be distributed equitably, and society would be free from political, social, and economic exploitation. Private ownership and enterprise would be allowed and even encouraged, provided they were non-exploitative.⁹

The National Charter, summarizing the regime's achievements and policies, described Socialism as "the true expression of the Arab national conscience." It defined Socialism as a system based on sufficiency, justice, social freedom, work, and equal opportunity. It emphasized the need for efficient planning through scientific Socialist methods and the development of a public sector guided by Socialist planning to ensure progress and optimal use of national resources.¹⁰

In practice, despite the democratic rhetoric of its leaders, Egypt's regime had become increasingly authoritarian in the years following the revolution. The entire political and social structure of the state had undergone significant transformation. In an interview with the editors of Pravda and Izvestia in July 1961, Nasser outlined the main achievements of the revolution: the nationalization of 90% of the country's industry, control over foreign trade-including all imports and 75% of exports-and near-total control over internal trade and distribution. Only minor sectors remained private hands. A punitive income tax was also imposed on high-income earners.¹¹

Nasser did not exaggerate. Government ownership or control extended to all banks and insurance companies, public transportation, the cotton market, advertising, the press, broadcasting and television, and most of the distribution trade, especially in agricultural commodities. In agriculture, government influence was increasingly assertive. Trade unions were closely supervised by the Ministry of Social Affairs, and workers were denied the right to strike.¹²

No individual might own more than 100 acres of land, earn a basic salary exceeding £E2,000 per year, or hold industrial shares in certain listed companies worth more than £E10,000. The state regulated the prices of all essential goods and was developing a system of state insurance to increase individual dependence on the government and to generate additional funds for national development. Property sequestration was justified on the grounds of national security and the need to prevent any forces capable of opposing the revolution from surviving. Much of the revolution's economic legislation was aimed at isolating opposition and erecting barriers against counter-revolutionary efforts.¹³

The myth of popular control was carefully cultivated, as Nasser emphasized in his public speeches. State ownership, according to the regime, was not a pretext for confiscation or bureaucratic control. The government was portrayed as a mere instrument of the people's will, with executive actions reflecting popular desires.¹⁴

If this was Socialism, it differed significantly from the Western understanding of the term. It clearly drawn more from Soviet and Yugoslav models, adapted to local conditions, Islamic influences, and Egypt's historical context. In practice, Arab Socialism resembled a form of totalitarianism or state capitalism, which Nasser argued was necessary for Egypt's welfare. Given the country's stage of economic development and its struggle against poverty and population growth, Egypt could not afford the luxury of laissez-faire governance or political and economic indiscipline.¹⁵

The Arab Socialist Union, while a commendable attempt to build a popular foundation for the regime and give ordinary citizens a voice in governance, can also be seen as a political straitjacket for the Egyptian people.

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ARAB SOCIALISM, COMMUNISM AND ISLAM

Nasser's vision of a socialist, democratic, and cooperative society, along with the sweeping reforms he introduced—such as the elimination of feudalism, monopolies, capitalist dictatorship, and exploitation—had drawn criticism from both Communists and Islamic conservatives. Communists argued that his reforms lacked substance without their participation, while others accused him of promoting a diluted form of Communism and of contradicting Islamic principles.¹⁶

In a speech on 30 May 1962, during the debate on the draft Charter of the National Action, Nasser outlined the key differences between Arab Socialism and Marxism-Leninism:

Belief in Religion: Arab Socialism embraces religion, whereas Marxism does not.

Respect for Prophets: Arab Socialism acknowledges prophets; Marxism does not.

Democracy: Arab Socialism aims for democracy for all, moving away from Leninist dictatorship and class-based rule.

Private Ownership: Arab Socialism allows private ownership, distinguishing between exploitative and non-exploitative forms.

Peaceful Reform: Arab Socialism rejects the Marxist call for violent class extermination, advocating peaceful resolution and reform without confiscation.¹⁷

Despite these distinctions, the differences between Arab Socialism and Marxism-Leninism were largely matters of degree and application. Nasser's regime, fundamentally materialist in nature, leaved limited room for religion, despite his insistence otherwise. Nasser was particularly sensitive to accusations that the United Arab Republic (U.A.R.) was becoming a totalitarian state. His chief spokesman, Hassanain Haikal, editor of *Al Ahrām*, defended the regime by claiming it had developed a “third path”—a middle way between Western capitalism and Eastern communism.¹⁸

Communist criticism was notably voiced by Nikita Khrushchev in a speech on 3 May 1961, during a visit by the U.A.R. parliamentary delegation to Moscow. Khrushchev stated:

“As a scientific phenomenon, Socialism is the first step to Communism. You are still in the early stages of your thinking. If you want to build Socialism, you must not reject Communism. Socialism is the first letter of the alphabet of human society; Communism is the next.”¹⁹

Other Communist leaders, such as Secretary of the Algerian Communist Party, criticized Nasser's reforms as superficial and ineffective without Communist involvement. They accused the U.A.R. of disguising a bourgeois dictatorship under the guise of Socialism.²⁰

Articles like those by R. Avakov and L. Stepanov in *World Relations* in May 1963 analyzed the “Third Path” ideology, noting its strong nationalist tone and its rejection of Marxism as unsuitable for underdeveloped countries. They argued that this middle way-between capitalism and scientific socialism—was inherently contradictory, combining progressive and reactionary elements. The result, they claimed, was a confused political outlook burdened by bourgeois illusions and anti-Communist rhetoric.²¹

Nasser's persecution of democrats strained relations with the USSR and led to criticism from Communist parties worldwide. His crackdown on Communists in Syria during 1957–1958, and the imprisonment of hundreds of Communist sympathizers in Egypt in 1958–1959, highlighted his determination to suppress opposition. To counter claims that Arab Socialism was anti-Islamic, Nasser asserted that Islam was the first Socialist state, citing the early caliphates of Abu Bakr and Umar. Since the revolution, his regime took steps to modernize and secularize Islamic institutions, including the abolition of religious courts in 1956 and the reorganization of Al Azhar University in 1958. The university was brought under government control, expanded to include faculties of technology and commerce, admitted women for the first time, and increased its intake of foreign students, especially from Africa.²²

Nasser, a believer himself, did not view Islam as the “opium of the masses,” but rather as a unifying force for hundreds of millions of Muslims. In his *Philosophy of the Revolution*, he wrote: “When I consider these hundreds of millions united by a single creed, I am struck by the tremendous possibilities we might realize through cooperation among Muslims.”²³

While Nasser recognized Islam's potential as a unifying force, it is doubtful that his vision extended far beyond the Arab world.

ARAB SOCIALISM FOR EXPORT

For over half a century, advocates of Arab unity had based their arguments on shared language, tradition, culture, and, to a lesser extent, religion. Egypt had introduced a fifth element—Socialism, though in a form unique to itself, which it sought to propagate throughout the Middle East and North Africa. For strategic and ideological reasons, Egypt had labelled this system as Arab Socialism.²⁴

Egypt saw itself as the vanguard and model of an Arab Socialist revolution that should eventually encompass the entire Arab world. In 1950s, Socialism was a popular concept across the region, both in countries that had undergone “liberation” and in those where the old order still prevailed. While it was unlikely that even the most radical reformers would fully embrace Egypt's version, Socialism was closely associated with Nasser, and his personal popularity gave Egypt a distinct advantage in promoting its model.²⁵

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Nasser's Egypt did not recognize borders among Arab nations and was committed to spreading the revolution to all countries still suffering from injustice and reactionary rule. Egypt believed it had a duty to support progressive elements wherever they existed, so that liberty, unity, and Socialism could become the shared inheritance of all Arab peoples. In this context, Arab Socialism served as a powerful propaganda tool, especially when directed against regimes that had not yet followed Egypt's revolutionary path. The Egyptian propaganda machine was relentless in exploiting this opportunity.²⁶

Egypt maintained that Arab Socialism could only be implemented in countries that had undergone a revolutionary experience. This implied that some form of revolution was necessary in nations still under traditional or reactionary rule. Consequently, Arab Socialism became a vehicle for Egypt to challenge and confront other Arab governments with which it had strained relations. These include King Saud of Saudi Arabia, the late Abdul Karim Qasim of Iraq, the post-union regime in Syria, Hashemite Jordan, and republican Tunisia. The latest addition to this list was the Ba'athist regime in Syria, which, according to a statement by the Arab Socialist Union on 19 September 1963, was considered a reactionary force opposed to genuine revolutionary Socialism.²⁷

This stance was based on the belief that true Arab unity required complete agreement on political, social, and economic issues. Egypt claimed that unity was the ultimate goal of all Arabs, regardless of their governmental systems, and that Arab unity existed even before Egypt redefined it through Socialism. The idea was that developments in one Arab country affect all others; therefore, what benefits Egypt must benefit the entire Arab world. Egypt could not admit that its version of Socialism was not universally applicable and thus feels compelled to export its ideology by any means necessary.²⁸

If efforts to revive the federal union between Egypt, Syria, and Iraq ever resume, it would be revealing to see whether Egypt's Arab Socialism could coexist with the Ba'ath Party's version or Iraq's interpretation of Socialism. While the Ba'athists might agree with Egypt on the importance of Arab unity, they rejected Egypt's model as unsuitable for other Arab nations. The Ba'ath Party's platform included many of the same economic and social goals-such as wealth redistribution, nationalization of key industries, worker participation, and agrarian reform-but differs politically. The Ba'ath favoured a more flexible constitution and pluralistic expression, unlike Egypt's monolithic political system and top-down democracy.²⁹

Despite these ideological differences, both regimes had, in practice, adopted authoritarian governance and suppressed dissent. The Cairo Agreement of April 17, 1963, attempted to reconcile these differences by allowing each side to pursue its own policies temporarily. However, this effort at unity quickly devolved into competition between two Socialist factions, each accusing the other of betraying the Arab masses and deviating from true Socialist principles.³⁰

Egypt had criticized the regionalism of Ba'athist Socialism, which tolerated national variations in applying general principles. From Egypt's perspective, this was heresy-a corruption of the revolutionary spirit. Egypt insisted that Arab Socialism must be applied consistently and uniformly across all Arab countries, or else it risked losing its unity, its Arab identity, and its revolutionary essence.³¹

ARAB SOCIALISM ABROAD

In Syria, where the foundations of Arab Socialism were laid during the 1958-61 union with Egypt, and where similar economic and socialist ideologies had long been promoted by the Ba'ath Party, the concept found support among many social groups-except the business community. There was general approval for land reform, improved working conditions and wages, and the dismantling of capitalist monopolies. However, enthusiasm for the Ba'ath Party was limited due to its vague ideology and poor administrative performance. Support for reuniting with Egypt under its version of Arab Socialism was even weaker, except among certain army factions and small pro-unity groups like the Arab National Movement and the Arab Unity Front.³²

In Lebanon, Arab Socialism appealed primarily to strongly pro-U.A.R. groups such as the Najjada Party and segments of the left-wing intelligentsia and Muslim student population. As a partly Christian country whose prosperity had largely been built on private enterprise, and where political power was delicately balanced among various factions, Lebanon was unlikely to embrace a rigid, centralized, and doctrinaire form of Arab Socialism.³³

In Jordan, the educated and semi-educated classes showed strong interest in politics but lack platforms for intellectual expression due to the ban on political parties. While opposition groups like the Ba'ath, National Socialists, and Nationalists were active and enjoy some support, none had developed a serious socialist agenda. Egyptian radio propaganda had had some influence, and Arab Socialism was often praised simply because it was associated with Nasser. If Nasser were to adopt a different ideology, many Jordanians would likely follow him without question.³⁴

In Iraq, the political landscape remained unstable. Neither Arab Socialism nor its Ba'athist variant had deeply influenced political theory. Supporters of Arab Socialism were mostly found among Nasser's admirers-teachers, lawyers, journalists, and university students-many of whom belong to splinter groups like the Nationalist League, Istiqlal Party, Movement of Arab Nationalists, Arab Socialist Party, and Socialist Democratic Bloc. After the coup of November 18, 1963, Prime Minister General Taher Yahya outlined a policy that vaguely endorsed Arab Socialism and justice, promising employment, equal opportunity, and improved living standards. The government also pledged to support private enterprises within the public sector's framework. Iraq appeared to favour a moderate form of Socialism, aimed at economic prosperity, social welfare, and political stability, while

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preserving individual freedoms. Historically, Iraq's middle class had preferred oligarchic governance, and it was likely that Arab Socialism would be applied gradually and selectively under their influence.³⁵

In Kuwait, a welfare state with a relatively free and democratic political system, Arab Socialism held little appeal. Kuwaitis generally believed their system offers superior social justice and living standards compared to other Arab nations. While some politically active Kuwaitis supported Nasser's Arab nationalist stance, few endorsed his economic or social policies. However, over half of Kuwait's population consists of non-Kuwaiti Arabs, who were treated as second-class citizens and might be more receptive to U.A.R. propaganda.³⁶

In the other Persian Gulf states, Arab Socialism had made minimal impact. Interest, where it existed, was driven more by Nasser's personal charisma than by the ideology itself.

In Yemen, following the revolution, Arab Socialism had gained traction among republican circles. Lacking their own political theories and heavily influenced by Egypt, the ruling elite seemed willing to adopt U.A.R. models. The ideology appealed to the young, semi-educated generation aspiring to lead the country. However, widespread tribal resistance to foreign ideas and Egypt's unpopularity among the tribes limited its broader acceptance.³⁷

Across the border, the People's Socialist Party-whose slogan was "freedom, unity, and Socialism"-had declared that stability was impossible without Socialism as the foundation of society. It aimed to establish a republican, democratic, and public regime resembling the U.A.R.'s one-party system. While influenced by Egyptian propaganda, the party's understanding of Arab Socialism might differ from Egypt's version.³⁸

In Sudan, recent history had made the country unreceptive to Socialist ideas. Political activity was banned, and opposition was limited to ineffective remnants of old parties. In the southern provinces, resentment towards northern rule was strong. Elsewhere, there was little unemployment, abundant cultivable land, and few class-based grievances. The economy was largely state-directed, with major public services-agriculture, irrigation, railways, and health-already under government control. Private enterprise played a minor role. A small, loosely organized pro-U.A.R. group, the Nationalist Party, occasionally distributed Arab Socialist literature but held little influence.³⁹

In North Africa, Arab Socialism had had limited impact. In Libya, political power remained with the aging king, and parties were banned. While no organized Socialist opposition existed, Arab Socialism appealed to urban intellectuals and, to a lesser extent, workers. In Morocco, Socialist ideas were gaining ground in urban areas. The National Union of Popular Forces, which won 28 of 144 parliamentary seats, supported rapid socialization modelled on Algeria. The Istiqlal Party, however, remained conservative and bourgeois, and rural peasants were largely indifferent to Socialist propaganda. In Tunisia, President Bourguiba had developed a unique Socialist policy favouring gradual reform and controlled private enterprise. In Algeria, the government supported a mixed economy, but recent trends suggested a shift toward increased public ownership under Ben Bella, driven by personal conviction and pressure from the left. While Ben Bella was open to borrowing ideas from Egypt, he did not fully embrace Cairo's Socialist doctrine.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

Arab Socialism, as developed and promoted by Nasser, was a propagandistic adaptation of State Socialism tailored for export across the Arab world. It combined authoritarian governance, centralized economic planning, and nationalist rhetoric to create a unique ideological framework. While it drew inspiration from Marxist and Islamic principles, it diverged significantly in its emphasis on religion, peaceful reform, and selective private ownership.

The success of Arab Socialism in Egypt was largely due to Nasser's personal charisma and the regime's ability to present itself as the embodiment of revolutionary progress. However, its reception in other Arab countries was mixed, with many nations preferring to develop their own versions of Socialism or maintain existing political structures.

Ultimately, Arab Socialism served as a tool for Egypt to assert ideological leadership in the region. Its future depended not only on the appeal of its principles but also on the willingness of other Arab nations to adopt Egypt's model or forge alternative paths toward unity and social justice.

Arab Socialism, as articulated by Gamal Abdel Nasser, was Egypt's unique version of state-led socialism. It was designed to promote social justice and economic equality, foster Arab unity, serve as an ideological alternative to both Western capitalism and Eastern communism. Nasser's model emphasized Islamic compatibility, peaceful reform, and non-exploitative private ownership, distinguishing it from Marxist atheism and class warfare.

While the ideology promised democracy and equality, the actual implementation in Egypt leaned heavily toward authoritarianism. The state nationalized major industries, agriculture, media, and trade, political freedoms were restricted, justified as necessary for development, the illusion of popular control was maintained, but real power was centralized. This gap between theory and practice is a main theme throughout the Nasser era in Egypt.

Nasser's Arab Socialism attempted to reconcile Islamic values with socialist principles. He claimed Islam was the first socialist state; religious institutions were modernized and brought under state control; he rejected Marxist atheism and violent

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revolution; despite these efforts, both Communists and Islamic conservatives criticized the regime-Communists for its bourgeois nature, and conservatives for its secularizing tendencies.

Egypt positioned itself as the vanguard of Arab Socialism, aiming to export its model across the Arab world. However, Syria and Iraq's Ba'athist Socialism clashed ideologically with Egypt's version; Countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, and North African states were sceptical or indifferent; Egypt insisted on ideological uniformity, viewing regional adaptations as heretical; Arab Socialism thus became a tool of Egyptian regional influence, but its rigid nature limited broader adoption.

Arab Socialism was received: some support in Syria, but Ba'athist ideology prevailed; in Lebanon limited appeal due to sectarian balance and capitalist prosperity; in Jordan and Iraq, ideological interest tied to Nasser's personal popularity; in Kuwait and Gulf States were minimal impact due to existing welfare systems; in Yemen and Sudan, there were some traction among youth and elites, but tribal and regional resistance; in North Africa, there was mixed responses; Algeria showed some alignment, Tunisia and Morocco pursued their own paths.

Arab Socialism was Charisma-driven, relying on Nasser's leadership; authoritarian in nature, despite democratic rhetoric; ideologically rigid, limiting adaptability; partially successful in Egypt, but largely resisted elsewhere; it functioned more as a propaganda tool than a universally applicable model. As a result, Arab Socialism under Nasser was a complex blend of nationalism, socialism, and religious rhetoric. While it offered a compelling vision for Egypt, its authoritarian tendencies and lack of flexibility hindered its regional appeal.

Arab Socialism, as developed by Nasserists, Ba'athists, and other progressive Arab governments, was not a system based on rigid rules; rather, it was an effort to harmonize modern goals of social justice and equality with Arab traditions and Islamic values. This approach accepted certain aspects of Marxist thought while rejecting the notion that a flawless classless society could exist on earth. For this reason, Arab Marxists often dismissed the achievements of these progressive regimes, viewing them as authoritarian administrations of a modern bourgeois class. For better or worse, this new middle class—composed of officers, technocrats, and civil servants—had largely replaced the traditional elites of kings, landowners, and the old bourgeoisie, and was moving toward consolidating political power.

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- ²³ TNA/FO370/2757/LR 6/24. TNA/FO370/2757/LR6/3. See Abd El-Nasser, Gamal, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, Dar Al-Maaref, Cairo 1954.
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- ³⁶ TNA/FO370/2757/LR 6/24. TNA/FO370/2757/LR6/3. Ovendale, age, passim. Stegagno, agm, p. 154-176.
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