

Egypt's heritage and dilemma in a world of rival power blocs

By Lorne M. Kenny

In 1957 Alfred Lilienthal wrote a book entitled *There Goes the Middle East*. His thesis was that U.S. fears of international Communism, coupled with an emotional involvement with the state of Israel, had blinded the United States both to the injustice done to the Arabs and also to its own interests. The inevitable result, he foresaw, would be to force the Middle East irrevocably into the arms of the Russian bear.

Recent events have shown, however, that the Arabs, who were thought to be in immediate danger of being swallowed up, have no greater love for Russian than for Western imperialism. This is true not only of Anwar Sadat's Egypt but also of the rest of the Arab world. Arab leaders may feel that there is no other source to turn to in their quarrel with Western imperialism and with Zionism, which they regard as an extension of the former; but no Arab country or government has turned Communist and there is not a single one amongst them, including Iraq and Syria, that is not dragging its feet with respect to Soviet demands for more direct influence upon their policies and for a greater say for the local Communists in affairs of state.

If the Arab states do not relish the thought of becoming Soviet satellites, why, then, do they flirt with the Communist bloc and put themselves so far in its debt that it will be most difficult for them to reassert their independence (although

Egypt has recently made an astonishing move in that very direction)? The political behaviour of the Arabs seems incomprehensible to many people in the Western world, whereas, as a matter of fact, there is little mystery attached to it. (It might be added that the Arabs find our political behaviour just as mysterious.)

One cannot generalize about the Arabs, though, for the various Arab states do not follow identical policies because of the differences in their individual histories, political experience and a host of other factors. Let us turn, therefore, to one Arab country, Egypt, and try to understand the factors behind its recent action in dismissing its Russian advisers, its attitude toward Israel and the Palestinian cause and Egypt's embarking upon yet another experiment in Arab unity.

Illustrious history

Egypt is possessed of a long and illustrious history, of which it is justly proud. The Valley of the Nile was one of the earliest centres of civilization and an awareness of his Pharaonic past runs deeply in the veins of every Egyptian, if more consciously so in those of the educated class. Egypt has often been the seat of an empire embracing Greater Syria, the Sudan and both shores of the Red Sea, including the Yemen, and at times North Africa as far as Tunisia. A resurgent Egypt naturally looks in these directions. More important than its Pharaonic heritage in determining present attitudes and policies is its Islamic past. Egypt was a Christian country for half a millennium before the Moslem conquest in 640, and although the Arabic language and the Islamic faith gradually gained dominance over a period of four or five centuries, there is still a significant Coptic (derived from the word "Egypt") minority and influence present in the country. However, Egypt is mainly a Moslem country and the Islamic circle, as Gamal Abdel Nasser indicated in his *Philosophy of the Revolution*, is one of the three important circles within which Egypt moves. Pres-

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