

Reconstructing A Shattered Egyptian Army: War Minister Gen. Mohamed Fawzi's Memoirs, 1967–1971

Youssef H. Aboul-Enein (ed.). (US Naval Institute Press, 2014), 320 pp., bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Jason U. Manosevitz

Military and strategic analysts routinely grapple with the complex problem of force generation, which all agree is more than simply putting guns into the hands of soldiers. Addressing this problem is of even greater concern and urgency in the aftermath of military defeat, such as that suffered by Iraq against the forces of ISIL last year. Analysts can gain insight into force generation issues by reviewing case studies and teasing out the key questions, such as what underlies the tactical, operational, and strategic choices military leaders face and what value do they place on internal reform and foreign military aid to accomplish those goals?

In *Reconstructing A Shattered Egyptian Army: War Minister Gen. Mohamed Fawzi's Memoirs*, US Navy Cdr. Youssef H. Aboul-Enein offers analysts a case study that probes the issues related to rebuilding a force soundly defeated in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Aboul-Enein's work is based on Fawzi's 408-page memoir, which was originally published in Arabic in 1984. *Reconstructing*, unfortunately, is not a direct translation of the memoir itself but rather a collection of essays based on the memoir.

The book is worth the read, but readers will have to work for insights because the individual essays do not quite add up to a coherent book, and occasionally it is difficult to distinguish between translated portions of Fawzi's memoirs, Aboul-Enein's commentary, and other material. The parts of Fawzi's memoir that Aboul-Enein does translate show a deeply reflective, determined military mind wrestling with immediate combat needs while also striving to regenerate and transform a defeated military into an effective fighting force.

Fawzi scopes the macro problem he faced by tracing the sources of Cairo's stunning loss to Tel Aviv to the military itself. He trenchantly assesses the "symptoms for the crippling defeat of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war

began not with the mass retreat of the Egyptian Army or the decimation of the Egyptian air force within an hour but years before." (9–10) Fawzi fingers Egypt's military institutions and leaders for creating a malformed culture that could not possibly achieve any of the military goals with which it was tasked, let alone achieve national strategic objectives.

Fawzi chastises President Gamel Nasser's then War Minister Abdel-Hakim Amer for having focused on gaining political power and leading "military leaders to become inward looking" and failing to "plan and train for projecting offensive power outside Egypt's borders." In Fawzi's view, Cairo's military leaders failed to cultivate useful counterinsurgency tactics during Egypt's five-year war in Yemen and neglected combined arms training. Instead they created a military culture in which artillery fire was meant to reassure troops rather than hit enemy targets and promotions were given to boost morale rather than to reward action. (9, 21–25)

Fawzi's views on rebuilding Egypt's military, in part, stem from his distaste for Minister Amer. This is evident in his description of the chaos in Egypt's command during its hasty retreat on 6 June 1967 and the ridiculousness of Amer's order to Fawzi to draft a plan for retreat in 20 minutes. (50) Amer's lack of attention to Fawzi's reform attempts before the war also shaped his view of the minister. Fawzi, as army chief of staff in 1966, was already thinking about endemic problems in the force and had endorsed reports asserted that defense against Israel was "becoming compromised." The fact that Fawzi found one such report collecting dust in Amer's safe in the Defense Ministry surely added to Fawzi's determination to reform Egypt's military. (21)

Fawzi paints himself as a reformer redefining civil-military relations, boosting training, and managing foreign assistance as the foundations for reconstructing

the Egyptian military—essentially reversing institutional failings he believed had led to Egypt’s defeat. His reflections also convey an emphasis on quickly rebuilding military intangibles, such as troop moral. For example, to Fawzi, the creation of a defensive line along the west side of Suez in the immediate aftermath of Egypt’s retreat was not only tactically important but psychologically key, because he believed it helped show Egyptian troops that the Israelis were not invincible.

Subordinating the military to civilian authority and reorienting the military to external, vice internal, threats were also fundamental to Fawzi. (70.) Egypt’s military most needed training, however, and Fawzi judged education and repeated exercises to be critical. With this focus, he showed himself to be an acute student of defense economics. For example, Fawzi judged it would “take six months to bring the Egyptian air force into quantitative balance with Israel’s, but two and half years to plan, train, and rehearse the force.” (77)

Aboul-Enein notes that Fawzi wrote of the need to align acquisition, training, and proficiency with advanced weapons (90). For example, Fawzi transferred an entire Egyptian air wing to Russia for advanced training to realize his objective of graduating 300 to 400 pilots a year. (107). How Fawzi arrived at his calculation is unclear, but training schedules, weapons procurement, and battle preparation were central to his thinking. Fawzi’s memoir also sheds light on his view of Russian military assistance. Nasser wanted greater access to Russia’s most advanced arms and trainers and sought to persuade Moscow that an Egyptian military defeat would be damaging to the prestige of Soviet weaponry. He also ordered Egypt’s forces placed under the command of Russian trainers.

Also wanting to advance Russian arms aid, Fawzi initially opposed placement Egyptian forces under Russian advisers, but he ultimately accepted a large Russian military mission, which permeated Egypt’s forces, including a senior adviser who worked with him. It is unclear what operational concerns Fawzi might have had with these arrangements, but the excerpts show he was pleased with Russia’s aid, which led to gradual improvements in the operational proficiency of Egypt’s air defenses and the Egyptian General Staff’s growing

understanding of how to employ Russian SA-6 and SA-3 surface-to-air missile systems. (69, 156)

Aboul-Enein, has had a distinguished military career and currently serves as an adjunct military professor and chair of Islamic Studies at the National Defense University. He has authored two books on the region and coauthored one. In *Reconstructing*, Aboul-Enein demonstrates the value of foreign language skills and the insights analysts can gain from memoirs such as Fawzi’s.

The book suffers from two drawbacks, however. The first is that Aboul-Enein never rigorously questions Fawzi’s perspectives or accounts. Fawzi’s differences with Amer and his 1971 removal by President Sadat for an alleged role in an attempted coup leaves ample reason to believe Fawzi’s memoir would include interpretations of events that would cast him in the most positive light possible. Indeed, in the passages Aboul-Enein recites, Fawzi seems to have made no mistakes.

The second weakness is that the essays were essentially left as they were originally published in *Military Affairs* and *Infantry*. These include introductory passages written by different people, which become tedious after awhile. Moreover, some repetition between chapters slips in, and there are some blurred lines between what are direct quotations from Fawzi’s memoir, summations of his thoughts, and Aboul-Enein’s commentary.

Despite the flaws, military analysts will benefit from this quick read because it offers a case study for identifying key analytic issues around the complex problem of force generation, particularly following military defeat. *Reconstructing A Shattered Egyptian Army* also provides strategic analysts with food for thought about military reform and the limitations of foreign military support. For all of Fawzi’s attention to planning and training, Egypt’s military ultimately failed again during the 1973 October War against Israel in spite of Russian military support and operational military ties. At that point Cairo chose to break with Russia and engage Washington.

