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1961
Ahmed Sa‘id, 'Returning from Cuba' (Excerpts)

Citation:

"Ahmed Sa‘id, 'Returning from Cuba' (Excerpts)", 1961, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Ahmed Sa‘id, ‘A’id min Kuba (Returning from Cuba), series Kutub qawmiyya (Political books) #106 (Cairo:
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‘a wa-l-nashr, 1961), 5-12. Contributed, translated, and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh.
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Summary:

The author of the Arabic-language book from which this excerpt has been translated, Ahmed Sa‘id (1925-2018), was from 1953 until the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War the inaugural director and main announcer of the Cairo-based Arab nationalist Sawt al-‘Arab. This radio was a crucial public relations instrument for the post-revolutionary Egyptian government and the by far most popular station in the Arab world in the 1950s-60s. Consequently, Sa‘id was a household name to Arabs.

While most Arabic books on non-Arab decolonization movements and, related, anti-imperialist movements in the 1950s and 1960s concerned African states, there was much interest in other countries, too. One was Cuba, where a revolution that had started in 1953 succeeded on January 1, 1959. For realpolitik reasons Cuba early on became a Soviet ally, and eventually in the 1960s turned communist, though it continued to pursue a rather fiercely independent foreign policy including armed engagements in Africa, as Piero Gleijeses’ Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976 (2003) showed. Egypt, on the other hand, repressed its domestic communists, though entertaining considerable ties with the USSR and defining itself as a socialist state. Thus, when Sa‘id accepted a Cuban invitation to attend the revolution’s second anniversary celebration, it was not leftism that attracted him most. Rather, he in this book depicted Cubans as fellow fighters in a continuous revolution against US-led imperialism, a political battle superseding any cultural or linguistic differences.

Original Language:

Arabic

Contents:

Translation - English

Twenty days which I lived in Cuba.

Surely, a few days do not suffice to provide a picture of Cuba's reality. But they without doubt suffice to cast a brief light on the primary outstanding attractions [of Cuba] for the 200 million inhabitants of this world in which we live [i.e., his Arab readers] and whose wellbeing we wish.

I got to know Cuba already before seeing it.

I got to know it from all that has been written about it and its revolution.

And I got to know it more and more when I was in Madrid, as I was waiting for the Cuban plane that was to transport [sic[i]] me to Havana.

There, in the Spanish capital, I met all that the Cuban revolution is preoccupied with and all it is fighting to obliterate.

That meeting rather resembled a play.

The curtain was drawn up when the Cuban Airlines office informed me that its plane was two days delayed. And when I asked for the reason, I was told that one of the planes engines had suffered a defect while landing in Bermuda, and that the British authorities governing the island refused to provide the Cuban airplane with the necessary spare parts. Hence, the airlines was forced to delay its journey to Madrid until the arrival of spare parts from Cuba to Bermuda.

I remembered the time when my country rebelled against Britain's imperialism, and the economic blockade of Britain's friends against us. and I smiled. for the economic blockade did not help imperialism against us, and it will doubtlessly not [continue to] extract from Cuba all the victories it had won.

And I said I felt sorry [to the airline officer].

My two-day long stay in Madrid doubtlessly made me miss the first day of the celebrations of Cuba's Revolution..

It was only the next day that I realized which small hostile arrangement had [caused] my delay. Cuba's Ambassador in Madrid told me that some states allied with the United States and hostile to the Cuban Revolution had created many difficulties for Kenya's, Zanzibar's, and Somalia's delegations as the latter were passing through their territories. Some even prevented them from entering their country or expulsed them barely had they landed in their capital's airports.

My knowledge of Cuba increased [further], before getting there, when my travel companion Hussein al-Tariki, the Arab League delegate in Latin America, conveyed to me confidentially the news that the Peruvian Republic had cut its diplomatic relations with Cuba. [Moreover] on his trip to Spain a known Argentine journalist told him that Cuba's enemies are preparing to isolate it from the world and especially from the United States, in preparation for an attack by a band of paid mercenaries; and that the US Navy is sailing from its bases to besiege Cuba, and that the damage of the plane [in Bermuda] may have been on purpose, to deprive Cuba of one of its few planes.

And an opportunity beckoned.

For us to make haste for Cuba. By any plane. To live its decisive battle for freedom.

But the airplane was faster than us. We found its two pilots in the Cuba Airlines office in Madrid. And we learned that they had arrived from Bermuda half an hour ago, and were awaiting Havana's instructions to return to Cuba.

We asked them for news. News about Cuba. The only thing new we learned was that Fidel Castro had declared a general mobilization and distributed weapons to all able-bodied inhabitants. And our desire to travel to the country of [that] battle grew [further].

And at last.

Cuba's orders arrived.

Our plane left Madrid on Sunday, at nightfall. and got us to Havana the next day, at sunrise.

I am looking from my airplane window as the plane is still flying above the aiport, and catch sight of of trenches in the earth from which jut out artillery muzzles, and on the roof of the Customs buildings I see sand bags, and on them alert eyes, and next to

them the [muzzle] eyes of rapid-fire artillery.

And I land in Cuba.

It is hot. very hot, although it's winter. Its revolution and preparedness for its enemies aside, Cuba lies on the same latitude like *Nuba* and northern Sudan.

Turning right and left and forward and backward, I do not see anybody in civilian clothes other than us, the plane passengers and an old man working at the passport office.

In Cuba, everybody is wearing a yellow shirt and is carrying a gun, or is slinging a gun around their shoulder, or is putting a machine gun on their desk..

And I read the eyes.

And observed the banners.

And heard the shout of the hearts.

For every movement. every whisper. every smile underlines the people's determination to defend their freedom and their revolution and its socialist direction and nonaligned politics.

This poster reads:

"Cuba, land of freedom in America"

And these eyes point to a machine gun in front, thus answering the question.

"What is the news about the [US] attack?".

And this porter calls out to me asking for the phone number of our ambassador to Cuba, 'Omar al-Jamal.

"We are fighting with Fidel. We are not afraid of the might of the enemies. You became our model when you fought with Nasser in Port Said against both Britain and France."

And a strange beat swept my body.

It was a feeling of glory that we created and that heightened our worth in the eyes of humankind. all humankind.

It also is a feeling of hope that we wish for Cuba and for all peoples of the world.

And as the sun rays stretched on the horizon, I saw tents and queues and crowds, all dressed in yellow shorts and carrying a gun or rifle, attentively laying in ambush for the enemy.

The representative of the Cuban Institute for the Friendship of Peoples greets us.

His first name is Jose Marti; he was named after the hero of Cuba's independence. I asked him after his hero name. And the youngster launched with sincere enthusiasm and deep knowledge into a talk about Jose Marti's revolution for the sake of Cuba's independence and about Fidel Castro's revolution to reinforce this independence.

And the Cuban youngster surprised me by comparing the relationship between Castro's revolution and Latin America to the relationship between Nasser's revolution and the Arab countries.

The same revolution.

The same objectives.

And the same enemies.

The two revolutions are aimed at obliterating foreign occupation and [its] agents and feudalism.

And the two revolutions seek to realize the unity that the Spanish-speaking people in Latin America and the Arabic-speaking masses in Asia and Africa call for.

And the two revolutions fight capitalist imperialism and power-grabbing capital; generally speaking, capitalism seeks to exploit people and steal their assets.

As our car zipped from the airport to the capital, Jose Marty Junior ended the speech he gave me by saying:

"You will see. You will see that there is no difference between us other than our language. We speak Spanish and you, Arabic, and other than the chin. Castro's chin. which Nasser does not have.

And we started to live with Havana's suburbs at sunrise.

Sandbags topped by artillery in every quarter and on each building.

Lines of workers and employees armed with guns and rifles waiting for their bus to get to work.

Armored cars. tanks. soldiers. officers. and a plentitude. a strange plentitude of women bearing arms and leading groups made up of men and women.

And finally.

We reached Havana.

She looks rather like a military camp of an army going to war. Just like a battle field that is ready to bury the enemy on its grounds.

And on each building. countless sets of sand bags, and behind them rapid-fire machine guns and anti-aircraft guns.

And in each corner: many parallel trenches from which jut out the muzzles of death that lay in ambush for the enemies and crouch under the protection of tanks and armored vehicles.

And the people.

The entire people. with the exception [only] of the elderly and the women and the children. in militia attire. the men in yellow shirts and Kaki pants, and the women in khaki shirts and black skirts.

And all are bearing arms.

Even the ministers, and street vendors, and even the garbage collectors: all are bearing arms.

The US Navy is lurking in the Caribbean Sea, one hour away from Cuba's territorial waters.

And the agents of treason are massing in the area of [the] Escambray [Mountains] and have lit there a small revolution in order to drain the power of the people and Castro's attention.

And hired saboteurs blew up one of the largest costume stores in the capital in order to disrupt the anniversary celebrations of the revolution.

This was the picture of Cuba and its capital Havana that I saw .

Even our hotel. the Hilton Havana. which Castor had nationalized and renamed Free Havana. looked more like a weapons arsenal than a hotel for tourists.

The entrances of the hotel are guarded by somebody from the *Shabāb Kubā al-Musallah* (Armed Young Cuba [the author may be referring to the Youth Labor Army]), and from balconies that are close to the ground floor jut the muzzles of machine guns, and a cluster of light anti-air guns lurk on the hotel roof, which is about 100 meters and 25 stories high. Even the hotel halls are filled with armed militia, who track every movement with alacrity. And their fingers are always on the trigger, to thwart any attempt at treachery or sabotage.

The armed protection inside the hotel was [even] tighter and heavier than outside. [but] we did not feel it [even] for a moment. we only saw it, and got used to it. and we understood and excused it. About 900 visitors were hosted in this hotel; they had come to Cuba from various countries of the world, following the invitation of the revolution, to participate in the popular celebration of its second anniversary.

We immediately merged with [those] delegations.

And as the days went by, we discovered the secret of why we and the various delegations understood each other so quickly.

At least 850 of them were from different Latin American countries. Parliamentarians. Judges. Lawyers. Journalists. Doctors. Engineers. Peasants and teachers. Workers and students. And with these hundreds of people we merged quickly.

There [also] were delegations from Britain, Russia, the People's Republic of China, and the United States, with whom we sat and became friends – though we did not merge with them like we did with the Latin American delegations..

And the secret. was stronger than the Spanish language which they speak but I do not, and stronger than the Arabic language that we speak but they do not, and stronger as well than the English language that allowed us to mix and exchange opinions and thoughts.

The secret [rather]. lies in the similar circumstances in which we live, and identical colonialism from which we suffer, and the revolutionary spirit that aspires to complete freedom and correct democracy and just socialism and the reclamation of [one's] country's natural resources.

And I lived my days in Cuba with the various Latin American countries.

Through them I got to know their countries, their problems, their hopes, and ways of facing the enemies and realizing their dreams.

And from them all and through the magnanimity of Castro's revolution, I learned a number of fascinating contemporary truths.

They came from different Southern and Central American countries, motivated by the desire to get to know what the Cuban Revolution had created, and what can be brought to their [own] countries and shared to develop their lives and realize their beliefs and raise the living standards of their people.

All were speaking Spanish, except for the delegates of one Lusophone country. I immediately imagined what ties and solidarity and concord has to exist between them, turning them into a great power that can impose its will and honor and share spreading peace and coexistence between all human beings. The world's armed camps [certainly] is having a thousand accounts open with them.

They count about 300 million people.

And the language of almost 94 percent of them is: Spanish.

The US American life of ease and comfort is [built on] the products of their [Latin American] lands, their oil riches and export [of] phosphate and sugar and coffee beans and minerals and food stuff which are seven times as large as Europe's.

But they [Latin Americans] did not possess their country's resources [even] for a day.

Only the people of Cuba are the owners of their [own] resources.

Except Cuba, Latin America's resources are fully owned by US capitalism and its monopolistic companies which rule the overwhelming majority of the countries of Latin America through the intermediacy of a bunch of agents who do not differ from Tshumbi and Casafovo and Nuri al-Sa'id and Haza' al-Majali and the other agents whom the masses of the Arab nation know well. …

Castro's revolution—the way I saw it and became immersed in its events and experienced the sentiments of the Latin American delegations towards it—is not simply a revolution by a power-hungry son of Cuba. Rather, it's a revolution whose face is liberation, whose content is socialist, whose nature is [Latin] American, and whose outlook is global.

It's striving to liberate Cuba.

And calls for and works to raise the Cuban people's living standards, under the aegis of a just socialism through which the people own all their country's resources.

It does not look at itself simply as a local revolution for Cuba and its people, but regards itself as the onset of similar revolutions that will start burning in all Latin American countries.

What's more, [the Cuban Revolution also] defies Western colonialism in its most powerful and numerous strongholds, where it is clinging to the Western viewpoints on government and the economy and world politics. This is turning [Cuba] into a fortress protecting Latin America's people and into their hope for a safe and free life and, at the same time, into a thorn in the side [throat] of Western colonialism and the United States specifically.

This is how I saw the Cuban Revolution through the eyes of about a thousand Latin Americans [p. 13] representing 200 million people in Southern and Central America.

[The Cuban Revolution] is indeed similar to our revolution in Egypt in 1952.

A revolution of liberation … a revolution of socialism.

A revolution striving to create solidarity between millions of human beings whom colonialism had torn apart.

The only difference I discerned between our revolution and the Cuban Revolution. is that ours is now about nine years old while theirs just turned two; and that our stabilized after it rushed into the battle for its independence and forced its enemies and the whole world [to accept] its existence, while theirs is still in the stage of fully annihilating its domestic enemies and bolstering its victories and exporting them to the other Latin American countries.

Havana’s situation during those hot days in the winter of 1961 is just like that of the Arab homeland during the [Anglo-French-Israeli] Tripartite Aggression [of 1956], as I saw it.

And the beat of victory swept my body.

And called, deep inside me. :

This people has to be victorious.

This people has to be victorious.

[i] There is a typo in the Arabic original text: *sa-taqqalani* instead of *sa-naqqalani*.