

1969**Ahmad Hamrush, 'An Egyptian in Vietnam, Korea, and China' (Excerpts)****Citation:**

"Ahmad Hamrush, 'An Egyptian in Vietnam, Korea, and China' (Excerpts)", 1969, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Ahmad Hamrush, *Masri fi Vietnam wa-Kuriya wa-l-Sin* (An Egyptian in Vietnam, Korea, and China) (Cairo: Kitab al-yawm, 1969), 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 18. Contributed, translated, and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh.
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/291055>

Summary:

The author of the Arabic-language book from which these excerpts are derived from is Ahmad Hamrush (1921-2011). Involved in the Free Officers' coup of July 23, 1952, Hamrush left the army in 1955, but stayed a regime insider. He became a historian who wrote a multi-volume history of the coup, among other books; he edited several journals including the army's *al-Tahrir* and the famous political magazine *Rose al-Yusuf*; he was Secretary General of the Egyptian Committee for Afro-Asian Solidarity in the 1960s; and he was a travel writer, as this book shows. It recounts a journey in 1968 to the People's Republic of China, North Korea, and North Vietnam.

Although in the 1950s and deep into the 1960s, African decolonization struggles had attracted much attention in the Arab world and perhaps especially in Arab North Africa, Asia was a key concern, too—in the 1960s especially Vietnam. This was of course not exceptional. As books like Quinn Slobodian's *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (2012) have shown, Vietnam as a cause—and some Vietnamese as actors—helped midwife the German student movement in the 1960s. (In Germany, the shah's Iran and Iranian activists mattered greatly, too, however.) To take two more examples, Vietnam as a mode and model of reference mattered to anti-Soviet Lebanese leftists in the 1960s, as Laure Guirguis' *"La référence au Vietnam et l'émergence des gauches radicales au Liban, 1962-1975"* (2018) has shown, and Iranians—leftists and others—followed developments in Vietnam closely, as Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet has noted in *"The Anti-Aryan Moment: Decolonization, Diplomacy, and Race in Late Pahlavi Iran"* (2021).

What distinguishes this text is its timing. Hamrush reflects on a journey he made soon after the Six-Day War of June 1967. That month Israel inflicted a humiliating defeat on Arab armies, including Egypt's, the most powerful Arab state. This drastically amplified concerns some already had had about President Gamal Abdel Nasser's (1918-1970) regime and triggered much self-critique in books like *Al-naqd al-dhati ba'da al-hazima* (1968; in 2021 translated as *Self-Criticism after the Defeat*) by the Syrian Marxist

political thinker Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm (1934-2016).

Original Language:

Arabic

Contents:

Translation - English

Civilian aircraft land in Hanoi only after nightfall. They move from Nanang only after Hanoi reports that the sky is empty of enemy US bombers or fighters. [...] On the road [from Hanoi Airport to the hotel] there were loudspeakers broadcasting news .. they serve for air raid warnings. [...] [Once in the hotel] the first information we received was the location of the air raid shelter in the Hotel Unity and the need to follow the instructions to descend to it immediately upon hearing the warning siren. [...] And when the warning siren sounded for the first time after our arrival, I was astonished to see that the female employees wore steel helmets and carried rifles. They hurried from room to room to instruct the guests and insist they descend to the shelter; then each one turned to carry out their particular duty in the Civil Defense (*al-difa' al-madani*) or in the Popular Resistance (*muqawamah sha'biyyah*).

[...]

You won't hear a Vietnamese talk in obtuse ways .. He won't raise his voice when talking about the barbaric crimes of the American enemies .. You won't find anyone bragging about any of his deeds .. And you won't find that their faces are masks that change according to the circumstances and the story [the tell].

A simple people in everything. Their bodies are delicate, their cloths sparse, their words modest .. But this human simplicity hides [images of] heroism and sacrifice and ma(u)'anah:

Is not this pure simpleness one of the secrets of their power? Is not this just equality between all [Vietnamese] the greatest spur for their struggle and sacrifice? The equality of the Vietnamese people is manifest in various clear ways. Like [North] Korea, they do not know any private cars. There are cars only for foreign guests, and the state has official cars that officials use only for official trips. The bicycle is a practical and health solution to the problem of traffic.

[...]

By coincidence, two days after I arrived in Hanoi, [US President Lyndon B.] Johnson declared he had decided to stop all bombardments of Democratic [North] Vietnam and to accept that the [National] Front for the Liberation of the South [aka the Viet Cong] would attend the Paris negotiations. .. I expected that there would be a clear reaction in the streets to this great victory of the Vietnamese people. .. I imagined the people would celebrate.

[...]

But nothing of the sort happened. In Hanoi, life went on, unmoved. What dominated, among all, was a scientific analysis of the situation. .. The cessation of the bombardments represents a victory for the people of Vietnam and for all peace-loving people ... but it is only one step on a long way to peace.

[...]

How can a small nation vanquish the largest military force of this age? I don't think that the answer to this question can be given in short in this quick exposé .. Vietnam's situation is much deeper than this .. and the war that has been going on in the north and in the south for years holds fascinating secrets and stupefying witnesses ..

We tried hard to get to the bottom of the secret of this new humanity in Vietnam.

This new humanity in Vietnam is what merits most attention. .. The humanity of the simple human being .. the worker and the peasant .. who speaks the language of our epoch just like the intellectuals .. and prevails in war and struggle over the graduates of the greatest military academies, in Saint Cyr, Sandhurst, and West Point.

[...]

As I write these words, the terrifying noise of a machine pierces the window .. It is digging a new shelter in the hotel, only days after Johnson announced the unconditional stop of all bombardments of North Vietnam. .. Perhaps this expresses the Vietnamese people's distrust in Washington's pronouncements. .. And perhaps it is an affirmation that the battle in Vietnam cannot be sidetracked to negotiations that do not carry out the will of the people for freedom and independence and unity .. in the north and the south alike.

[...]

In the Hotel Tun Nit and the Hotel Unity, in which I stayed and that once was called Metropole, there was not a single picture of Ho Chi Min, and in the streets there was not a single sign with quotes by him or pictures of him or a statue .. And many of the offices that I visited did not bear anything related to him or other leaders. .. This is not contempt for the role of the great leader and the revolutionary fighter .. but represents the simplicity of the Vietnamese people and its democratic spirit .. which made Ho Chin Min to point in many of his texts to the masses and to stress that “the people is the hero.”