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THE CZECH-EGYPTIAN ARMS DEAL OF 1955: A TURNING POINT IN MIDDLE
EASTERN COLD WAR HISTORY

by

Thomas Michael Shaughnessy Skaggs
B.A., Gettysburg College, 2012

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences of the University
of Louisville in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Department of History
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

December 2015

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A Thesis Approved on

November 30, 2015

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ABSTRACT

THE CZECH-EGYPTIAN ARMS DEAL OF 1955: A TURNING POINT IN MIDDLE EASTERN COLD WAR HISTORY

Thomas M.S. Skaggs

November 30, 2015

This study focuses on the Czechoslovakian-Egyptian arms deal of 1955 and analyzes how it impacted Middle Eastern Cold War policy. Central to the issue is Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser's approach to garnering Pan-Arab Nationalist support and his decision to approach the Soviet Bloc for weapons and economic aid. Supporting evidence came from several repositories, including the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, and the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library. In addition to primary sources, a thorough examination of the existing scholarship was conducted. In conclusion, the Czech-Egyptian arms deal, more than any other event, cemented Nasser's place as champion of Pan-Arab Nationalism, while also shifting Egyptian foreign policy towards the Soviet Bloc, thereby redefining the Cold War in the Middle East.

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INTRODUCTION

“When you step foot in the Middle East the first blast that hits you in the face is that the word 'peace' is a dirty word,” said American magazine mogul Henry Luce during a visit to Egypt in 1956. According to him, the problem was that Arabs blamed the West for “forcefully thrust[ing] in their sides this utterly foreign body—Israel.”¹ United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower believed the Arab-Israeli conflict “seems to have no limit either in intensity or in scope. Everybody in the Muslim and Jewish worlds is affected by it.”²

Following World War II, European powers could no longer maintain overseas colonies under the direct control they had exercised during the Nineteenth Century. The resolution of the war left only two world powers, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States of America. Both states used their political and economic models to gain power and influence in proxy conflicts within these former colonies. Decolonization occurred in this Cold War context, forcing developing nations to align themselves with the aims of either the Soviet Union or the United States.³

¹

The Middle East: A Report on Facts and Passions, April 20, 1956, Box 71, Jackson, C.D., Papers, 1931-64, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas (hereafter abbreviated and referred to as DDEL), 3-4.

² Letter from Ike to “Swede,” November 2, 1956, file: November 1956, Box 346, Anderson Papers, DDEL, 4.

³ Ray Takeyh, *The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine: The US, Britain, and Nasser's Egypt, 1953-57* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 1-4.

As a dominant power in the Middle East, Egyptian foreign policy led the way for other states in the region. Under the charismatic leadership of Gamal Abdul Nasser, Egypt tried to forge a third path through this dilemma, participating in the development of the nonaligned movement.⁴

During the 1950s, Egypt, under the leadership of Nasser, went through a dramatic transformation into a regional leader independent from the historical powers of France and Great Britain. This transformation helped the USSR enter the Middle East, where historically they had little influence. Both Russia's shift to the Middle East and Egypt's increase in power were a result of an arms deal orchestrated between Czechoslovakia, as a middle-man for the USSR, and Egypt in September of 1955.⁵

The deal developed from Gamal Abdul Nasser's quest to be the champion of Pan-Arab Nationalism in the context of a Cold War policy of Non-Alignment. The Non-Alignment movement was a group of countries seeking to chart a third course through Cold War policy by not allying themselves with either the West or the East. To American policy makers, the perception of losing control over Egypt represented the failure of American Middle Eastern Cold War policy, resulting in the Eisenhower Doctrine which outlined direct American intervention in the Middle East.⁶ The Czech deal led to failed Israeli-Egyptian peace talks, a new Soviet policy in the Middle East, regional instability, and most importantly, was the precursor to the nationalization of the Suez Canal. This thesis argues that the Czech-Egyptian arms deal was the seminal moment that redefined

⁴*Ibid.*, 1-4.

⁵ Guy Laron, "Logic Dictates That They May Attack When They Feel They Can Win: The 1955 Czech-Egyptian Arms Deal, the Egyptian Army, and Israeli Intelligence," *The Middle East Journal Middle East* 63.1 (2009): 70.

⁶ Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 4.

Cold War Middle Eastern policy through the USSR's entrance into the Middle East, while simultaneously solidifying Gamal Abdul Nasser as the leader of Arab Nationalism.

As for the deal itself, the 1955 agreement afforded Egypt an estimated 100 million dollars worth of military hardware in return for cotton and rice.⁷ To put this in perspective, the dollar amount of all war materiel sent to the entire Middle East between 1951-1956, not including the Czech deal, was around 22 million dollars. This means the Czech deal amounted for approximately 85 percent of all foreign weapons shipped to the Middle East.⁸ Although no one knows the exact transfer of arms, Egypt received about 100 T-34 tanks and IS-3 Stalin tanks built just after World War Two, 80 MIG-15 jet fighter planes, 30 IL-28 bombers, large quantities of self-propelled guns, armored personnel carriers, artillery equipment, several naval vessels, small arms and munitions.⁹

Historiography and Sources

The preponderance of evidence supports that the majority of scholarship misses the significance of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal. Today most mentions of the Czech deal occur within the context of a broader scholarly engagement with other topics such as Pan-Arab Nationalism.¹⁰ Pan-Arab Nationalism, or Pan-Arabism, developed from Arab intellectuals such as Butras Bustani, Jamal al-din al-Afghani, Rashid Rida, and was further developed by their predecessors. It borrowed heavily from Western nationalist in

⁷ Jon D. Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs: The Soviet Union and War in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1975), 11.

⁸ \$22 Million total in arms sent to Mideast, *The Washington Post* and the *Times Herald* (1954-1959), January 28 1956, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Washington Post*, 5.

⁹ Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, 11.

¹⁰ Examples of this include many of the sources used for this essay, including: *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, *Nasser's Egypt*, *Arab Nationalism and the United Arab Republic*.

that it emphasized Arab cultural supremacy.¹¹ Specifically, Pan-Arabism co-opts the Wilsonian philosophy that people who share a common language, history, and culture constitute an independent nation which should ideally manifest as an independent state.

Adeed Dawisha's *Arab Nationalism in the 20th Century* provides a comprehensive overview of Pan-Arabism. Dawisha shows how the movement progressed through time, eventually arguing that the culmination of this nationalist movement was Nasser's leadership of Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s.¹² Albert Hourani's work, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1936*, supports Dawisha's work with a comparable study of Arab Nationalist intellectuals. Together they provide the historical framework to contextualize the Middle East in the 1950s.¹³ Dawisha notes that the 1955 Baghdad Pact, 1956 Suez Crisis, and the formation of the United Arab Republic in 1958 were the three most important Pan-Arab moments. This assessment misses the importance of the Czech arms deal as being the first divergence of Egyptian policy away from Western regional dominance, and a major success in achieving a policy of Non-Alignment and should be noted as one of the most crucial Pan-Arab events in history, especially concerning Nasserism's central role in shaping subsequent events.¹⁴

Other scholars, such as Jankowski, frame Arab nationalism around Nasser's motivations and the Czech deal as a significant catalyst for regional protests and a significant boon to Nasser's regional leadership.¹⁵ Jankowski only notes the deal for its

¹¹ From Amman (Mallory) to Sec. Of State, October 31, file 784A.56/10-3155, Box 3767, General Records of the Department of State 1955-1959, United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland (hereafter abbreviated and referred to as NA).

¹² Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton: Princeton, 2003), 160.

¹³ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), iv-vi.

¹⁴ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 160.

¹⁵ James P. Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder: Lynne

impact on the Baghdad Pact, a defensive alliance against the Soviet Bloc between Turkey, Iraq, Great Britain, Pakistan and Iran.¹⁶

In *Pan-Arabism Before Nasser*, Doran argues that Nasser continued the policies of the old regime in Egypt. Choueiri proves the same point, noting that Nasser's Pan-Arabism began as a strictly Egyptian ideology. He notes that once the 1952 revolutionaries had secured Egypt, Nasser began thinking about Pan-Arabism and its role outside the country. This nuanced argument adeptly identifies Nasser as the pivot point for Egyptian policy during this time.¹⁷ Podesh's *Rethinking Nasserism* is a revisionist history that uses analysis of historical events to show how Nasser charted his way from revolutionary to champion of Arab nationalism.¹⁸

The Czech arms deal appears in another section of scholarship, that of Cold War politics. Glassman's *Arms for the Arabs* looks at several arms deals and places them within the context of regional politics. Even though the Czech deal was the first large Soviet Bloc arms deal in the region,¹⁹ very few focus on the implications of the deal as a singularly important event.²⁰ *The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine* by Takeyh outlines the events that created the need for the United States to rethink its Middle Eastern policy.

Although the Czech arms deal is included, it does not play a prominent role in the

Rienner, 2001), 79.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 77-79.

¹⁷ Youssef M. Choueiri, *Arab Nationalism-- a History: Nation and State in the Arab World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 179.

¹⁸ Elie Podesh, and Onn Winckler, *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2004), 78.

¹⁹ An arms deal with Syria preceded the Czech-Egyptian exchange. This deal is discussed in some length later in this study.

Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Near East, South Asia, and African Affairs (Allen) to the Secretary of State, June 25, 1956, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Near East: Jordan—Yemen, XIII*, Edited by John P. Glennon, (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), (hereafter cited as FRUS), 574-578, 576.

²⁰ Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, 10-12.

author's analysis. Takeyh, like others fails to recognize the importance of the deal.²¹

Scholarship on the Suez Crisis briefly treats the Czech arms deal such as in Nichols' *Eisenhower 1956*.²² Hahn's *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945-1956: Strategy and Diplomacy in the Early Cold War* expresses the interactions between the three countries in the 1950s. In this section of scholarship the arms deal is a tertiary element within the larger story. These authors miss the opportunity to analyze the arms deal as a significant catalyst that shaped United States, British and French Cold War policy.²³

Some scholars have analyzed the Czech-Egyptian arms deal within the context of the development of foreign policy in the United States. In large part this is due to the recent declassification of many documents within the United States in the last two decades. One author, Ampiah, specifically identifies the deal as a moment in which Nasser's new policies became internationally known, but does not place the Czech-Egyptian arms deal within the context of Middle Eastern politics as this study does. Ampiah correctly notes that the deal largely derailed the United States' Middle Eastern policy; a policy that focused on regional stability led by Egypt and Israel.²⁴ Although not treated at length, Egypt's nationalist policies are outlined in *Egypt and Indian Nationalist Collaboration*. This study, in tandem with Ampiah's, provides a general outline for the importance of the international Bandung Conference (a conference of leaders from Asia

²¹ Takeyh, *The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine: The US, Britain, and Nasser's Egypt, 1953-57*, 4.

²² David A. Nichols, *Eisenhower 1956: The President's Year of Crisis: Suez and the Brink of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 35.

²³ Peter L. Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945-1956: Strategy and Diplomacy in the Early Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1991), 187-195.

²⁴ Kweku Ampiah, *The Political and Moral Imperatives of the Bandung Conference of 1955: The Reactions of the US, UK and Japan* (Leeds: Global Oriental, 2007), 66.

and Africa who met in Indonesia to discuss creating a political bloc not aligned with the West or the USSR) and how it impacted Nasser's foreign policy.²⁵

Within the last decade, several articles have spent significant time illustrating the finer points of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal and its impact. Motti Golani's *The Historical Place of the Czech-Egyptian Arms Deal* exemplifies the new scholarship. This military history of the deal explains its impact on the capability of Egypt to make war. Golani argues the Czech arms deal prevented war during the fall and winter of 1955 and therefore acted as a stabilizing force in the region.²⁶ Given its tight focus, this study does not treat regional politics beyond Israel and Egypt. While perhaps war was averted—after all, Israeli raids ceased after the arms transaction—there is significant evidence to believe the arms deal led to the Suez Crisis.

In opposition to Golani, Laron argues that Egypt had not planned to invade Israel outright, and that Jerusalem fully understood the weakness of the Egyptian military even with the Soviet weapons. Laron suggests that Israel viewed the Egyptian purchase as a political threat and prepared for war.²⁷

Biographies of Nasser also include mention of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal. Said's *Nasser* stands out among them due to his in-depth treatment of Nasser's life. Nutting's *Nasser* is a first hand account of his interactions with Nasser and offers insight into the importance of the Bandung Conference for creating the connections which made the Czech deal a reality. Although *Game of Nations* by Copeland is not a biography, it is

²⁵ Noor-Aiman Khan, *Egyptian-Indian Nationalist Collaboration and the British Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7-8.

²⁶ Motti Golani, "The Historical Place of the Czech- Egyptian Arms Deal, Fall 1955," *Middle Eastern Studies* 31.4 (1995), 818-822.

²⁷ Laron, "Logic Dictates That They May Attack When They Feel They Can Win," 70-89.

another first hand account which identifies some significant diplomatic events. Before the release of many classified documents within the last fifteen years, Nutting and Copeland's books were important pillars of Middle Eastern research in the 1950s, and are still valuable primacy sources.²⁸

In recent years many documents have been declassified in the United States and elsewhere. In addition to the secondary sources treated above, this study relies heavily on documents found at the United States National Archives and the Eisenhower Presidential Library. These include CIA regional updates and studies pertaining to the Middle East found in the CREST CIA research database, a finding aid at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland.

Due to the political nature of this essay, official State Department documents were especially important. Paramount to this research effort were the John Foster Dulles Papers at the Eisenhower Presidential Library, and the General Records from the State Department housed in the National Archives at College Park. Also included are a number of published primary sources. The official records from the Foreign Relations of the United States compendiums provide unique insight into the communications of top diplomats in the area, and supplement the unpublished records found in the various archives used for this study.

The Library of Alexandria in Alexandria, Egypt provided Egyptian sources to supplement the Western material used for this thesis. Several of Nasser's speeches have been translated and included in this study. The United States National Archives and the

²⁸ Miles Copeland, *The Game of Nations; the Amorality of Power Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970).
Anthony Nutting, *Nasser* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972).

Eisenhower Presidential Library also contained Egyptian sources that were used in this work. These non-Western sources support a well rounded analysis of the geopolitical situation in the Middle East during the 1950s.

Outline

The first chapter presents the historical background for the Czech-Egyptian arms deal. The ideological and philosophical development of Arab Nationalism, beginning in the mid 1800s, underlines the cultural undercurrent prevalent in the Middle East during the mid Twentieth Century. Due to the complicated nature of Nasser's rise to power, a historical brief shows how he became a leader of the Egyptian people. The chapter concludes by outlining Nasser's plans to leverage Nasserism, his vision of an Egyptian led Arab Nationalism, to maintain popular support.

Events of February, 1955, posed a significant threat to Nasser's leadership. This second chapter analyzes the impact of the signing of the Baghdad Pact on February 24th which served as a defensive alliance against Soviet encroachment into the Middle East. The Pact was viewed as a direct threat to Egypt's political stature in the region. Just four days later, Israel launched Operation Black Arrow, in which Israeli soldiers attacked Egyptian military bases in the Sinai Peninsula on February 28th. Operation Black Arrow exposed the weakened state of the Egyptian Army and threatened Nasser's leadership. These two events threatened Nasser's Pan-Arab leadership and his regime's internal legitimacy.

The third chapter explores the consequences of the Bandung Conference. During the conference, Nasser was offered a leadership position that he leveraged to make

connections that eventually led to the Czech-Egyptian arms deal. In this way, Nasser took the opportunity of the Bandung Conference to fashion a new foreign and domestic policy in which he would become one of the main leaders of the Non-Aligned movement.

The fourth chapter is the most important because it outlines the Czech-Egyptian arms deal, including the details of the agreement, as well as Nasser's goals for the deal and how it achieved those expectations. The deal caused a significant shift in regional balance of power towards Egypt, and served as the USSR's entrance into the Middle East during the Cold War. While Nasser approached the West for weapons, his decision to obtain materiel from Czechoslovakia provided the means to achieve a policy of non-alignment by moving Egypt away from its historical connections with the West.

The fifth and final chapter details the specific ramifications for the many countries involved, including discussion of the Suez Crisis and Aswan Dam. Geopolitically, Russian entrance into the Middle East and the United States' Eisenhower Doctrine serve as the two most significant consequences of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal. The chapter concludes by discussing the other countries affected by the deal, mainly France, Great Britain, and Israel in addition to including analysis of the regional impact.

CHAPTER I

ARAB NATIONALISM AND GAMAL ABDUL NASSER

This chapter begins by exploring the philosophical and ideological development of Pan-Arab Nationalism and shows how these ideas permeated the culture in concrete ways that affected the political dynamic within Egypt. Nasser employed the ideas developed by Arab scholars of the mid 1800s from European nationalist ideologies to champion Nasserism and become a regional leader.

The Development of Arab Nationalism

Egyptian anti-Western sentiment existed even before Britain's involvement. From the mid 1800s, anti-colonialism spread in the upper class through philosophical scholarship on Arab Nationalism.²⁹ Some Islamic Nationalists helped spread the foundational ideology behind Pan-Arabism, mainly the concepts of exceptionalism, multi-state political unity, and self-determination. A parallel movement with Pan-Islamic Nationalism, Arab Nationalism's original founders date back to the mid 1800s, and draw intellectual lineage from Pan-Islamists. The core concept behind Pan-Arabic writings was the idea of Arab political unity—one nation, or league, governing all Arab people, regardless of religious affiliation.³⁰

²⁹ This term is used interchangeably throughout the essay with Arabism and Pan-Arabism.

³⁰ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 4.

Although scholars Jamal al-din al-Afghani (1831-1897) and his pupil Muhamed 'Abdu (1849-1905) did not discuss Nationalism by name, they laid the foundation for later Nationalistic thought.³¹ The development of Nationalism coincided with Egyptian dissatisfaction in the Ottoman Empire and foreign, specifically Western, intervention. Afghani and 'Abdu believed the downfall of the Middle Eastern empires was caused by the collapse and disunity of the *umma*, the community of believers in Islam as idealized in the original followers of Muhammed. Their conclusion was that if the *umma* could be reformed, the Middle East would return to prominence. This reality required the political unification of Islamic and Arab speaking powers into one entity. Due to the familiarity of the concept of an insular community, or *umma*, it was not long before scholars of Islamic jurisdiction developed these ideas into a proto-nationalist ideology. Their teachings solidified into Islamic Nationalism which at times ran counter to Arab Nationalism, as the *umma* encompasses all believers of Muhammed's teachings. Regardless, they helped create a dialogue that espoused anti-Western, pro-Arab ideology.³²

Rashid Rida (1865-1935) continued his predecessors' works by instilling within the Nationalist dialogue a sense of exceptionalism concerning ethnicity and language. Where Nationalism is concerned, ethnicity and language play prominently in the division between us and them, the nation and the other, and is not unique to Pan-Arabism.³³ These Egyptian scholars were important because they developed the idea that the Arab people and language were unique and deserved self-determination without foreign intervention, a concept taken for granted during Nasser's time, but played heavily in his anti-Western

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 19.

³³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

foreign and domestic policy.

Scholars from outside of Egypt also defined Arabism as distinct from religious unity. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi of Syria (1849-1903) promoted Arab exceptionalism in the context of anti-colonial sentiment. He defined the Ottoman Empire as a colonial power distinct from the Arab people concluding that political independence of Arabs was a necessity. He stated that the Arab people have cultural and ethnic solidarity, and therefore potential power through their united religion and language.³⁴

Unlike the Islamic Nationalists mentioned above, Taha Husayn (1889-1973) epitomized intellectuals that focused on language, not religion, as being the Nationalist unifier, as is exemplified in Arab Nationalist thought. Husayn opposed Kawakibi in that he believed the Arabic language was not exceptional, but equal to all other languages. Arabic was the unifier of both Christian and Muslim, “the Arabic language is not the language of the Muslims only, but the language of all who speak it however much they differ in faith.”³⁵ Husayn believed in Western cultural superiority, but sought to cast off the political domination of the Middle East by Europe. He was crucial in developing Pan-Arabism and many believed in the idea of a secular Nationalism based around the unifying core of language rather than religion.

Christians played a crucial role in creating Pan-Arabism, and one of the most important was the Maronite Lebanese native, Butrus al-Bustani (1919-1983). Butrus focused on the importance of the Arabic language. He founded a secular school that taught Arabic classical language and literature called *al-madrassa al-wataniyya*. He wanted to revive the Arab world through a revival of the Arabic language and arts. He

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁵ Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1936*, 334.

helped revive Arabic drama, literature, and journalism and wrote an Arabic dictionary and encyclopedia, paving the way for the scholars of the late Nineteenth Century.³⁶

Motivating Bustani, and many of the Nationalist intellectuals was the idea that the Arabic speaking world was once a center for science, technology, and knowledge in general. Bustani wanted to revive the lost days, and to accomplish this goal he realized Arabs needed to learn from Europe. He professed that the Arab world needed to borrow the National unity of Europe to become equals and this would create a world in which all citizens co-operated on a level of equality. Those that would accepted into the nation were those that spoke Arabic, not exclusively those that followed the Koran.³⁷

It was of political importance for Christians to want a secular government based around the preeminence of the Arabic language because they were a minority in the region, even if sizable in some places. Ibrahim al-Yaziji of Syria (1847-1906), a Christian, believed that Arabs were their own nation, and that they were entitled to a political entity outside the purview of the Ottoman authority. Yaziji said the Arabs were “the most remarkable of nations.”³⁸

Another Syrian, Sati al-Husri, was opposed to Islamic Nationalism that was controlled by the political needs of the *umma*, but rather a regional nationality based solely on the Arabic language. Husri spent a great deal of effort convincing Egyptian scholars of Pan-Arabism. Egyptian Nationalist thought before Husri focused on the perceived historical precedence that united both Coptic Christian, and Muslim together, their Pharaonic past.³⁹ Baghdad was the center of Arab Nationalist thought before Husri,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

³⁸ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 26-27.

³⁹ Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 312-316.

and he had to convince intellectuals and commoners alike that Egypt was the center of the Arab world:

Nature has provided Egypt with the qualities and distinctions which oblige her to take up the task of leadership in the awakening of Arab nationalism. She lies in the centre of the Arab countries; she forms the largest of those blocs into which the Arab world has been divided by policy or circumstance; this bloc has had a fuller share of the world civilization in modern times, and has become the main cultural centre of the Arab countries; she is the richest of all of them, and the most advanced in the institutions of the contemporary State, the most accomplished in eloquence and the literary arts.⁴⁰

Husri noted the importance of Arabic literature, but also political power. His ideology is exemplified in the creation of the League of Arab States in 1945 with Egypt as the leader – a development which changed the region's opinion of Egypt as part of the Arab world.⁴¹ The Arab Nationalist intellectuals of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century disseminated the ideologies of Pan-Arabism throughout the Arab world in a way which Nasser could harness and champion to his political designs.

Nasser's anti-colonial ideology was presaged by Arab scholars in the mid to late Nineteenth Century. These scholars also developed the anti-colonial and anti-West philosophy that became a part of Middle Eastern culture. Events of the Twentieth Century further strengthened the cultural ideology developed by the early nationalist scholars. Egypt's history was complicated by European influence. It went from a part of the Ottoman Empire, to a failed French colony, to a British protectorate within a century. In 1922 Britain declared Egyptian independence, but retained control over the Suez Canal

As of 2012, Egypt has a sizable Christian minority. About 10% of all citizens belong to a form of Christianity. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html> (October 31, 2016)

⁴⁰ Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 316.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 316.

and maintained a garrison in Egypt. Egyptian resentment towards the West grew as European countries strengthened their grasp on the region following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.⁴²

The Development of Nasser's Egypt

Nasser's particular form of Pan-Arabism, known as Nasserism, varied only slightly from the original philosophy. Nasser preached neutralism, non-alignment, and wanted Palestinian independence from Israeli control. The Egyptian leader wanted a revival of Arab dignity and an increased role in global affairs after centuries of rule by the Ottoman Empire and Western powers. Nasser believed Egypt should be the center of the Pan-Arab movement.⁴³ Egypt was politically situated for Nasserism to take hold.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, a constitutional monarchy controlled Egypt from 1922 to 1952. This period has been labeled by many scholars as the liberal era, in which Egypt had a parliamentary government, focused on a free enterprise economy, a social structure of secularism, individualism, and other fixtures of Western modernism.⁴⁴ The development of Pan-Arab Nationalism within the Christian minority was a unifying factor that spurred Egyptian politicians towards liberalism.⁴⁵ Although Egypt was not technically a colony, Great Britain had significant control over Egyptian domestic and foreign policy. Tension between Egypt and English colonial interests – especially England's monopoly of control of the Suez Canal – continued throughout the thirty year

⁴² Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 43.

⁴³ Peter Mansfield, "Nasser and Nasserism," *International Journal* 28.4 (1973): 675-676.

⁴⁴ Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic*, 11-12.

⁴⁵ Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 315-16, 324.

period.⁴⁶

Within the context of colonialism, global economies required trade between vast distances. Prior to the construction of the Suez Canal, all trade from colonies in Asia had to either go over land or by sea around the southern Cape of Africa. Both routes were dangerous, expensive, and long. A canal between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea would decrease travel time, expenses, and provide a safer route. To this end, with French leadership and British financial support, the canal was dredged and opened in 1869 with spectacular fanfare. In 1875 Egypt sold its shares of the Canal to the British government to repay foreign debts. France retained the majority interest, but the Canal was especially vital for British colonial and military success. It allowed Britain a direct passage between their home islands and colonies, the most important of which was India. The route through the canal was the hub of the empire through which both economic prosperity and military resources flowed.

Repeatedly, Britain proved that retaining the Suez Canal was a strategic priority. During World War One, Britain successfully defended the Canal from Ottoman attack. The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 allowed Britain to maintain a defense force in the Canal Zone. Britain's economic and military strategy directly interfered with Egyptian national politics as London lobbied for preferential policies to maintain their empire.⁴⁷

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, Britain managed to claim several oil-producing regions of the Middle East, including Iraq. Control of the Canal meant control of the seas. In case of war, Britain's ability to project power revolved

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁴⁷ Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic*, 12.

<http://www.suezcanal.gov.eg/sc.aspx?show=8> Accessed: 9/27/2015.

around keeping the Canal in their own hands because of their reliance on their navy and merchant marine. Britain maintained a garrison of soldiers at the Canal until July 1956.

De-colonization – the release of colonies from European control after the expense of World War I and especially World War II – exacerbated Egypt's desire for complete independence from foreign intervention. Pan-Arab intellectual thought of the mid to late Nineteenth Century evolved through the Twentieth Century. As author Noor-Aiman Khan argues, the 1920s and 1930s gave way to anti-Western nationalist ideology. In particular, Khan links the increasing Egyptian resistance to British interference to India's own struggle against colonialism.⁴⁸ To exemplify the growing ties between India and Egypt, Khan looks to Muhyi al-Din Rida's *Abtal al-Wataniyya* (Nationalist Heroes), a popular work in which Rida displays five prominent nationalist heroes to the Egyptian people. The five include three Egyptians: Mustapha Kamil, Muhammad Farid, and Sa'ad Zaghlul; and two non-Egyptians: Mustafa Kemal (Attaturk) and Mahatma Gandhi.⁴⁹

Within Egypt, it was not just Muhyi al-Din Rida who believed Gandhi was an example of anti-colonialist leadership. On May 5, 1930, Gandhi was arrested just before a planned protest. The detention made international news. Inside Egypt it made front page news in the *Al-Ahram* (affiliated with the Independent party), *Al-Balagh* (Wafdi), and *Al-Siyasa* (Liberal Constitutionalist) – newspapers of all political leanings devoted energy in covering the story.⁵⁰

The next year, 1931, Gandhi visited Egypt and expressed his anti-imperialist opinions in support of native authenticity when it came to constructing a nation's

⁴⁸ Khan, *Egyptian-Indian Nationalist Collaboration and the British Empire*, 112.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

government. These anti-Western, pro-Egyptian ideas spoke to the public's nationalist sensibilities. The political relationship between India and Egypt had little to do with religion. The Wafd Party (Nationalist Party) and India's national congress exchanged formal invitations to each others' annual congress exemplifying the political bonds. As Egyptian and Indian students studied in Europe, they established networks and common ideals that defined the relationship between the two countries after World War II.⁵¹ The bonds developed between Egypt and India during this period helped form the core of the Non-Aligned Movement over the tumultuous early years of the 1950s.

Nasser's Rise to Power

During this period of growing anti-imperialist sentiment, an important group of officers graduated from the Egyptian Military Academy. Young and impassioned, they went into active service during World War II. Their experiences dealing with the Egyptian political bureaucracy combined with what they believed to be the negligence of their commanding officers led them to question the Egyptian political structure. Many military officers questioned whether Egypt's alliance with Britain was beneficial for both parties, while others openly held the opinion that a victorious Germany would be a step towards casting off the yoke of Western colonization.⁵²

For many Egyptians, and Arabs, the creation of the Israeli state and the resettlement of thousands of Jews from Europe to Palestine seemed like another example of how Western powers were meddling in the affairs of the Middle East. Even still, the Egyptian people were hesitant for direct warfare with Israel in 1948, even when Arab

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7-11.

⁵² Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic*, 14.

Palestinians were fighting openly against the Israelis. Nevertheless, there was initially enough support to begin sending small amounts of military aid to Palestine. Egypt, along with a coalition of other Arab powers sent 100,000 rifles to Palestine. The 10,000 sent by Egypt were said to perform poorly in combat. In a secret meeting of the Senate, Egypt decided to declare war on Israel, surprising many politicians and military officers.

Muhammad Husayn Haykal, President of the Senate remembered when he was told of the planned invasion:

“I was sitting in my office when suddenly [Muhammad Fahmi] and Nuqrushi Pasha [Egypt's Prime Minister] walked in and requested to talk with me in private. When we remained alone he asked me to summon the Senate for a secret session in which the Government would present its decision to send the Egyptian forces into Palestine to fight the Jews, I was completely surprised.”⁵³

Egypt, and the Arab coalition that invaded Israel, believed victory would be swift, or conversely, the United Nations would organize a peace. Never did they believe all seven Arab armies would be defeated by Israel. The defeat shocked Egypt more-so than the decision to invade. The result of the 1948 war drastically changed Egyptian opinion in opposition of Israel, and decreased support in their political leadership.⁵⁴

Sickened by the incompetency of the Egyptian high command in both World War II and the 1948 war, Nasser organized meetings with like-minded officers forming the Free Officers Movement in 1949. As an example of their grievances, Nasser pointed to the inadequate weapons used to fight the war. In some cases soldiers were using 1912 Mauser rifles (a 36 year old weapon at the time), and grenades which frequently more

⁵³ Thomas Mayer, “Egypt's 1948 Invasion of Palestine,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 22.1 (1986), 20.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

dangerous to the user than the enemy.⁵⁵ As an instructor at the Staff College, Nasser did not have to look far to find willing members. The organization of the Free Officers Movement was a reaction to Western interference in Egyptian domestic affairs and was composed by Egyptian officers who believed the government in Cairo was unrightfully beholden to the interests of Western foreign powers.⁵⁶ Nasser's involvement in the movement was crucial in bringing about political change in Egypt. Under Nasser's leadership, the Free Officers Movement adhered to Arab Nationalist philosophy which demanded self-determination for all Arabs—therefore, Britain's involvement in Egypt, as well as the monarchy's subservience to London, was intolerable. The Arab Nationalist ideology instilled in Nasser during his formative years in the military and during the revolution developed the context through which the Czech deal was made possible.

⁵⁵ Nutting, *Nasser*, 29.

⁵⁶ Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic*, 15.



Illustration 1: Field Marshal Gamal Abdel Nasser witnessed the poor quality of Egyptian military equipment while serving in Fallujah, Iraq, December 1, 1948. Courtesy of the Library of Alexandria photo archives, photo taken December 1, 1948.

Nasser's personal experiences proved that the Egyptian people deserved better leadership, and he proposed to supply this through the lens of Arab Nationalism. In 1936, Egypt concluded a treaty with England that mandated the maintenance of a British garrison in the Canal Zone to maintain British control of the vital transportation corridor and therefore their dominance of the seas. In 1941, in a bid to protect these interests, the British Ambassador surrounded the royal palace with a detachment of English soldiers and forced King Farouk to appoint the pro-British Nahas Pasha as Prime Minister.⁵⁷ With actions like these, Britain managed to retain short-term control over Egypt and the Suez Canal at the cost souring relations between the British Empire and the people of Egypt.

The Free Officers Arab Nationalist ideology was a singularly Egyptian pragmatic philosophy in so far as it placed Egypt at the center of the Arab world. Author Adeed Dawisha aptly supports that Nationalism in Egypt was tied to the country and not all Arabs. For example, Dawisha explains, “to be an Egyptian patriot was to resist British presence and maintain Egyptian territorial integrity.” Although the Free Officers, or some of their members, might have been sympathetic to the idea of a Pan-Arab Nationalist country, their true nationalism, and certainly their loyalty, was to Egypt. Although in 1947 Michael Aflaq, founder of the Ba'ath party, noted “The Arabs form one nation. This nation has the natural right to live in a single state. [As such] the Arab Fatherland constitutes an indivisible political and economic unity. No Arab country can live apart from the others,” Egyptians had a distinct national identity—therefore, there was a uniquely Egyptian Nationalism, which, on its own was incompatible with larger Pan-Arab ideology as formulated by Aflaq.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 136-137.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

Nasser's innovation on Pan-Arabism incorporated older Egyptian Nationalism with traditional Pan-Arabism. His brand of Egyptian Nationalism, Nasserism, combined elements from Egypt's unique historic experience—Ottoman, Arab, Islamic, Eastern, and Pharaonic – as well as the regional impulse towards Pan-Arabism by positing Egypt as the natural political and cultural leader of Pan-Arabism in general. Although Pan-Arabism and Egyptian Nationalism would play a significant role in state policy, nationalist organizations like the Free Officers championed Nasserism, rather than solely Pan-Arabism, to support their expansion of power.⁵⁹ Nasser's regime met considerable internal resistance to his Pan-Arab ideology in the form of Communist and religious elements. Specifically, the Muslim Brotherhood espoused Pan-Islamic rhetoric that ran counter to Nasser's policies. Nasser brutally put down these political movements and banned their existence within Egypt.

Once Nasser rid Egypt of internal conflict in the form of Western Imperialism and political dissidence, Egypt and their political leaders had more ability to look outward and become involved in international politics—Nasserism rather than Egyptian Nationalism or Pan-Arabism grew and was further espoused in their leadership's speeches and actions.⁶⁰ This new political philosophy became more than a catalyst for narrower Egyptian Nationalism, and once independence was won, developed into a means to exert leadership over the region as the leading Arab power.

Egypt's King Farouk, in a bid to appease Nationalists and maintain his power and credibility, attempted to lead the nation into a defensive alliance with the Arab states,

⁵⁹ Khan, *Egyptian-Indian Nationalist Collaboration and the British Empire*, 7.

⁶⁰ Communism in Egypt, October 20, 1955, File: Egypt, Box 65, White House Office, National Security Council Staff: Papers, 1948-61, DDEL, 1-4.

however, his proposed alliance was rejected by Great Britain, further undermining public support for the monarchy.⁶¹

In 1952 the Free Officers movement's successful coup led to many changes in Egyptian internal policy. Nasser understood the difficulties he faced:

We Egyptians think more or less alike and we can throw ourselves together behind the same cause, but we resist efforts to make us work with outsiders in an orderly way, we might get other Arab countries to agree with us on common objectives, but for us to work together in reaching those objectives would be nearly impossible.⁶²

Nasser realized and accepted that Egyptian Nationalism existed as a political force, and one incompatible with generalized regional Pan-Arabism which had the potential to turn the Arab cultural sphere into a political bloc. In order to best leverage both of these competing ideologies, Nasser combined the two into a new hybrid political philosophy, Nasserism, which accepted the ideals of Pan-Arabism while using Egyptian Nationalism to justify placing Egypt at the forefront of the movement. Although the Pan-Arabist aims of Nasserism could be used to catapult Egypt into a position of regional dominance, initially Nasser used Egyptian Nationalism to drive support for internal policies.

The Free Officers' initial economic policies were socialist, and opposite that of the free market economy favored by the monarchy. On September 9, 1952 the Agrarian Reform Law passed, redistributing land from the wealthy to sharecroppers and the landless population. Almost 120,000 families received a portion of the 500,000 acres that were claimed by the government for the purpose of land reform. Land ownership itself

⁶¹ Michael Doran, *Pan-Arabism Before Nasser* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

⁶² Copeland, *The Game of Nations*, 194-195.

was limited to 300 acres per family.⁶³ On June 18, 1953, the monarchy was formally abolished. The Free Officers created a new bureaucracy with Muhammad Naguib as the Republic of Egypt's first President and Nasser as the Secretary-General.⁶⁴

Doran argues that the 1952 Revolutionaries largely inherited the old regime's foreign policy.⁶⁵ The difference between the deposed government, and the Free Officers was the extent at which Egypt pursued its own path through Cold War politics.⁶⁶ The designer of this shift in Egypt's foreign policy was Nasser; the pivot point was the Czech-Egyptian arms deal.

The Free Officers' movement developed several ways to promulgate Nasserism throughout the region. On July 4, 1953 Nasser debuted the propaganda radio program "Voice of the Arabs" broadcast with enough power to reach the entire Arab world, and with more clarity than the American counterpart. Nasser and the Free Officers sought to expand Egyptian interests by championing Arab nationalism. "Voice of the Arabs" included news broadcasts, propaganda, dramas, and music.⁶⁷

During several interviews with leading ambassadors in December of 1953, Nasser designed a foreign policy.⁶⁸ He decided that his foreign policy should revolve around countries with a shared interest. This was the first practical articulation of the idea of an "Arab Bloc," a regional series of alliances that could contend with other such blocs. By July of 1954, Nasser acted on the need for increased foreign collaboration in addition to the desire to create a Pan-Arab movement. His speech on July 23, 1954 shows his

⁶³ Choueiri, *Arab Nationalism—a History: Nation and State in the Arab World*, 181-182.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁶⁵ Doran, *Pan-Arabism Before Nasser*, 5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶⁷ Copeland, *The Game of Nations*, 199.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

willingness to proceed along these lines.

“Compatriots, Egypt has started a new era of relations with the Arabs—an era based on true and frank fraternity ... The aim of the Revolutionary Government is for the Arabs to become one nation with all of its sons collaborating for the common welfare ... the revolution also believes that the weight of the defense of the Arab states falls first and foremost on the Arabs and that they are worthy of undertaking it.”⁶⁹

Nasser framed the success of his government around the ability to create a Pan-Arab movement. The importance of this speech revolves around the words, “defense of the Arab states falls first and foremost on the Arabs.”⁷⁰ In this context, the legitimacy of an Arab state hinged on its ability to provide for its own defense, and that of all Arabs.

In 1954 Nasser put Naguib under house arrest and assumed the Presidency. He leveraged Nasserism to define future Egyptian policy taking advantage of popular anti-Western sentiment. From 1954 to 1956, the region witnessed a drastic transformation in foreign relations, the catalyst of which was the Czech arms deal of 1955.

Having removed Naguib, Nasser eliminated other areas of dissidence. The regime targeted the Muslim Brotherhood. Several of the Brotherhood's top leaders were executed, while many of their supporters were imprisoned. The Egyptian Communist Party had been illegal since the 1920s and roughly 3,000 people were kept under police surveillance, while their organizers were frequently jailed. According to Richard Sedlacek, former Czechoslovakian Commercial Attache in Lebanon and Syria, the Revolution of 1952 “damaged Communism's chances in Egypt considerably.”⁷¹ As Nikita Khrushchev once said, “the problem was that “Nationalist” movements aren't always

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁷¹ Communism in Egypt, October 20, 1955, File: Egypt, Box 65, White House Office, National Security Council Staff: Papers, 1948-61, DDEL, 1-4.

socialist,” and Nasser's internal policies maintained strict order over political adversaries, especially communists.⁷²

Nasser sought to leverage Arab Nationalism to position Egypt, and himself, as regional leaders. First, Nasser rid himself of domestic rivals before acting on his foreign goals. Soon afterwards, he leveraged the development of Pan-Arabism from scholarly dialogue to political movement to support his legitimacy and Egypt's ascendancy in the Middle East. Within a year after assuming the presidency Nasser was ready to act on his international goals and continue espousing Nasserism abroad.

⁷² Hashim Behbehani, *The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism, 1917-1966* (London: Routledge, Keenan and Paul, 1986), 124.

CHAPTER II

THE FEBRUARY CRISIS

This chapter discusses the Baghdad Pact concluded on February 24th 1955 and the Israeli Operation Black Arrow of February 28th 1955, and how they challenged Egypt internally and externally. This crisis provided the motivation for Nasser to acquire a significant and immediate transfer of arms to bolster his military power and resulted in Nasser's willingness to pursue weapons deals with the Soviet Bloc.

The events of February 1955 changed the landscape of Egyptian policy—the Baghdad Pact and Operation Black Arrow posed a substantial threat to Nasser's leadership within Egypt and the region.⁷³ The Baghdad Pact was a military alliance of nations sponsored by Western powers under the leadership of Great Britain to defend against Communist encroachment in the Middle East. Four days later, on February 28, Israel launched Operation Black Arrow, a raid on an Egyptian military base.

The Baghdad Pact

The Bagdad Pact and the Israeli Operation Black Arrow developed Nasser's belief that only an arms deal with the East would solve his problems. The events of February 1955 posed a difficult challenge for Nasser—within four days it seemed as if regional and

⁷³ Behbehani, *The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism, 1917-1966*, 124.

domestic political power had shifted away from Nasser and Egypt. Within the Middle East, Egypt was a long-standing power. In addition to a strong agricultural economy, Egypt boasted thirty two percent of the population of all Arab states, meaning that one out of every three Arabs were Egyptian.⁷⁴ Combined with Egypt's impressive cultural and military power, by the 1950s it was the dominant Arab state, in accord with Nasserist political philosophy. On February 24, 1955 the balance of Arab power shifted away from the Nile and to the Tigris.⁷⁵

Iraq never had the same political power as Egypt in the region in part because the natural resources of Iraq were not seen as strategically important as the Suez Canal in Egypt. Nonetheless, the oil fields of Iraq were significant for fueling NATO power vehicles. For the first time since its founding after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq had the ability to become an international power by leading the Baghdad Pact alliance with the West. For the political leadership of Iraq, the Cold War meant increased power and the potential to rival Cairo. The Czech-Egyptian arms deal reversed Iraq's significant increase in regional power as popular support swelled for Nasser.

Iraq's regional aspirations before the coup in 1958 were to gain regional power surpassing that of Egypt. The monarchy sought a course of allegiance to the West. In 1955 they became charter members of the Baghdad Pact and were recipients of considerable Western military aid. By the Fall of 1955 they challenged Egypt's regional authority. In many ways, the Pact served as a defensive network against the Soviets, but served as an economic pact against Egypt which played into the hands of Baghdad.⁷⁶ The

⁷⁴ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 143.

⁷⁵ The Baghdad Pact, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/98683.htm>, Accessed June 13, 2015.

⁷⁶ Telephone Call from Mr. McArthur, Saturday March 31, 1956, 12:20pm, Box 4, Papers of John Foster Dulles Telephone Call Series, DDEL.

Pact itself stemmed from John Foster Dulles' visits to the Middle East in May 1953, but the United States never joined the Pact in fear of disrupting regional stability to a greater extent.⁷⁷ The Baghdad Pact placed Iraq at the center of the “Northern Tier” defense plan and they gained a great deal of respect from the populace of the entire Middle East as defenders against Communism. Baghdad's ambition was to continue this forward momentum and surpass Egypt as the leading nation of the Middle East. To do so, they were forced to rely heavily on the nations of the Baghdad Pact and of Western Europe.⁷⁸ The Baghdad Pact never gained the strength Britain hoped for and marginalized the Arab countries who joined.

The goal of the Baghdad Pact, like that of NATO, was to prevent Communist expansion specifically into the Middle East. Turkey, Iraq, Great Britain, Pakistan, and Iran signed the treaty. One of the benefits a Pact nation received was a large supply of defensive equipment and money from Western Europe and the United States. The creation of the Pact around the leadership of Iraq shifted the regional balance of power to Baghdad. Egypt feared the political ramifications, but failed to gain enough support to quash the new organization. One author argues that the Baghdad Pact was partially aimed at limiting Nasser's position in the Arab world.⁷⁹ For Nasser, it was a sharp blow to his Pan-Arab aspirations and re-enforced his disdain of Western involvement in the region, ultimately expressed in the Czech-Egyptian arms deal.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Department of State for the Press January 11, 1956, No. 15., Section: Dulles News Conference of January 11, Box 43, Eleanor Lansing: Papers, 1880-1973, DDEL.

⁷⁸ Communism in Egypt, October 20, 1955, file: Operations Co-ordination Board (OCB) 091, Egypt (September 1954-February 1957), NA, 2.

⁷⁹ Yoram Meital, "Review: Reassessing Suez 1956: New Perspectives on the Crisis and Its Aftermath," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46.2 (2010), 144.

⁸⁰ Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic*, 38. Meital, "Review: Reassessing Suez 1956: New Perspectives on the Crisis and Its Aftermath," 144.

Operation Black Arrow

On February 28, Operation Black Arrow was initiated. Israeli army soldiers raided an Egyptian outpost. Fifty-six Egyptian soldiers were killed, and several others were wounded. Israel claimed the attack was legitimate because Egypt had killed two suspected intelligence officers and supported the Palestinian Fedayeen fighters that routinely attacked Israel. Occurring just two weeks after officially assuming office, Nasser was humiliated.⁸¹ Israel's repeated raids into Egyptian territory pushed Nasser to engage with the Palestinian issue.

Less than a decade after the creation of the Israeli state, and the Arab-Israeli War, the Arab threat to the nation's existence was very real. Given that Israel commanded a larger, more technologically advanced, and far superior military, Jerusalem maintained a defiant and aggressive stance towards its neighbors especially in light of Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalist impulses leveraged against them.

The primary driving force of Israeli policy was Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. In 1948, Ben-Gurion was the first Israeli Prime Minister and witnessed firsthand the aggressive policy of Egypt during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that no doubt colored his decisions. For several months in 1954 he served as Defense Minister under Moshe Sharett before holding both positions as Defense Minister and Prime Minister. As head of Israeli policy and security, Ben-Gurion developed a hostile position against the Arab nations, especially Egypt, which figured itself as the leader of Pan-Arabism.⁸²

Under Ben-Gurion's leadership, Israel, as Said argues, purposefully maintained a

⁸¹ Saïd K. Aburish, *Nasser: The Last Arab* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2004), 72.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 61.

militaristic stance to deter outside aggressors. Israel had the military capacity to launch raids into the Sinai, attack military targets, and then return to the safety of the border without fearing punitive retribution in kind from Egypt.⁸³ Israel's political dominance over Egypt stemmed from its exceptional military and superior weaponry. More than a powerful Egypt, Israel feared a united Arab front which aimed for Palestinian statehood and the end of Israel. Nasser's July 23, 1954 speech made Egypt the cornerstone of this Pan-Arab movement when he stated, "The aim of the Revolutionary Government is for the Arabs to become one nation with all of its sons collaborating for the common welfare." Nasser put this coalition into military terms when he stated in the same speech, "the defense of the Arabs falls first and foremost on the Arabs." There can be little doubt this comment was an allusion to the Palestinian problem within Israel.⁸⁴

While an ally of Israel, the United States did not see Israel fitting into their defensive plans for the region, believing that only Egypt could maintain peaceful regional relations. The United States put the hopes of a Western defensive plan on peace talks between Egypt and Israel. Ben-Gurion found support from former Western colonizers such as Britain, and most importantly France.⁸⁵ In 1954 Britain agreed to evacuate its garrison from the Suez Canal, a problematic development for Israel since the British Suez garrison created a buffer between Egypt and Israel. Although the garrison would not be evacuated for many months, Israel viewed this as a threat to their defense strategy.⁸⁶

In 1953 the United States report on the "Principles Underlying Special Economic

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸⁴ Copeland, *The Game of Nations*, 196.

⁸⁵ Zach Levey, "Israel's Quest for a Security Guarantee from the United States, 1954–1956," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 22.1-2 (1995): 46.

⁸⁶ David Tal, "Israel's Road to the 1956 War," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28.01 (1996): 64.

Aid for Israel” noted two challenges for the Mediterranean nation: mass immigration and resources. Between 1948-1951 Israel absorbed 700,000 Jewish refugees accounting for roughly a third of its population during that time period.⁸⁷ Due in part to the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the huge population influx, Israel lacked the ability to produce and pay for food, fuel, and industrial and agricultural raw materials. The United States was willing to provide this aid, but were unwilling to accommodate Israel's need for military equipment.⁸⁸ United States General and Special Assistant to President Eisenhower, Charles D. Jackson, noted after a meeting with Ben-Gurion that the Israeli Prime Minister believed a loan to develop Israeli independence from Arab water would be more beneficial than any number of planes. Internal matters were just as crucial as defensive capability, although it should be noted that sufficient access to clean water is also a question of national security.⁸⁹

Israeli Ambassador to the United States Abba Eban believed Nasser would push for Arab-Israeli peace, orient Egypt toward the Western World, and dedicate himself to internal reform.⁹⁰ Nasser entertained all of these issues, but in many cases chose a path that did not conform to Eban's wishful thinking or Israeli regional goals. Israel and Ben-Gurion's aggressive policy toward Egypt created the conditions in which Nasser needed better weapons to contend with the Israeli threat to his leadership.

The events of February 1955 were a serious blow to Nasser's leadership. The

⁸⁷ Principles Underlying Special Economic Aid for Israel, October 22, 1953, File: Policy Summaries: Israel 1951-1954, Box 1, General Records of the Department of State Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Office of Israel and Arab-Israel Affairs, Records Relating to Israel and Arab Affairs, 1951-1976, NA.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Letter from C.D. Jackson to Henry Luce, October 3, 1956, Box 41, Jackson, C.D.: Papers, 1931-1964, DDEL.

⁹⁰ To Henry Luce from Bill Furth, July 5, 1956, Box 41, Jackson, C.D.: Papers, 1931-1964, DDEL.

Baghdad Pact threatened Egypt's claim as the leading state in the Middle East, and Israeli Operation Black Arrow provided Nasser's opponents the chance to develop dissent from within Egypt, especially since Nasser had defined his political ideology, as well as his own regime's legitimacy, on the strength of the capacity of Egypt to defend itself. In the context of the Israeli invasions in the Sinai, Nasser had failed at his goal. Nasser needed to re-establish Egypt as a regional force while also re-affirming internal political power—Nasser's answer came in the Spring.

CHAPTER III

THE BANDUNG CONFERENCE

This chapter details the impact of the April 1955, Bandung Conference. In Bandung, Indonesia, Nasser found his options for purchasing weapons expanded by pursuit of Non-Aligned policies, and emerged as an international leader. The opportunities of the Bandung Conference, combined with the fears of the February Crisis, culminated in the purchase of Soviet weapons.

Opportunity in Indonesia

February 1955 was a major set-back for Nasser. Humiliated, threatened, and unable to attain the means to defend its people, Egypt found an answer to its troubles at the Bandung Conference. As one of the attendees at the Conference for Afro-Asiatic countries, Nasser had no intention of discussing a possible arms deal at the conference. The goals of the conference were two fold: one, to unite states against marginalization in international politics; two, to help consolidate economic developmental goals. Notable attendees included pro-Western/anti-Communist countries such as Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Lebanon, and Jordan. Key neutralist countries included Afghanistan, Egypt, India, People's Republic of China, Syria, and Yemen.⁹¹ Although

⁹¹ Ampiah, *The Political and Moral Imperatives of the Bandung Conference of 1955*, 39.

Egypt had a long relationship with India as noted in Chapter I, and the Bandung Conference helped

Nasser understood that to maintain Egypt's position as champion of Pan-Arabism he must pursue a non-aligned policy, his country's historical ties to Europe were difficult to break. Author Lyon argues that “simultaneous bargaining with both Cold War camps thus became one of Nasser's favorite tactics and perhaps his most novel and influential contribution to neutralist diplomacy.”⁹²

Indeed, Nasser's popularity rose throughout the conference. His charismatic personality and his ability to network helped springboard Egypt onto the international stage.⁹³ For example, he convinced leaders from Asia and Africa to adopt a resolution in support of the Algerian rebels, further widening the political gulf between Egypt and France during a moving speech.⁹⁴ Nasser's performance at the Bandung Conference affirms the theory that the idea for the Czech arms deal was created after the Israeli attack in February. Combined with Operation Black Arrow, the Bandung Conference proved to Nasser that there needed to be a change in armament policy, and that this change could be effected through the neutralist policy of eliciting aid from the Soviet Bloc.⁹⁵

Nasser carry those ties into his new Non-Aligned policy. In Illustration 2 Nasser is seen talking with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at the conference in Indonesia.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹⁴ Guy Ziv, "Shimon Peres and the French-Israeli Alliance, 1954-9," *Journal of Contemporary History* 45.2 (2010), 416.

⁹⁵ Ampiah, *The Political and Moral Imperatives of the Bandung Conference of 1955*, 39.



Illustration 2: Nasser photographed at the Bandung Conference surrounded by other Middle Eastern heads of state. By the end of the conference, Nasser had become an international leader of the Non-Aligned movement (from Said's *Nasser*, page 154).

Anthony Nutting, British politician and diplomat, remembered his interactions with Nasser and noted in his biography of Nasser, that the Egyptian president met with Chinese premier Zhou Enlai and the two discussed how China's military was equipped. Zhou mentioned that the military relied upon large arms shipments from Russia. Nasser also met with Russian ambassador Daniel Solod who candidly mentioned a possible deal of Russian weapons for Egyptian cotton. Solod also noted the possibility of Russian-backed industrial projects in Egypt. Nasser was intrigued by the promise of developing his nation. Zhou assured Nasser that he would speak with Moscow.⁹⁶

Zhou was not the first to suggest the idea of using the Eastern Bloc countries to Egypt's benefit. In 1953 Nasser sent the Deputy War Minister Hasan Rajab on a tour of Eastern Bloc countries. Rajab's objective was two-fold. First, he was to widen economic relations with the Eastern Bloc. Second, he was to seek an alternative source for arms. The trip did not pay dividends. In part the trip was a feint: Nasser's true hope was to frighten the West to develop greater economic ties with Egypt in fear that if they did not, the Soviet Union would. While the tour kept the West guessing, it ultimately failed to increase economic relations, much less substantial arms shipments. Regardless, it took Nasser until the Bandung Conference to make the final step in purchasing arms from the Eastern Bloc.⁹⁷

Success at Bandung

February of 1955 was the crucial moment when Nasser realized he needed a substantial increase in weaponry to contend with Israel and maintain domestic support.

⁹⁶ Nutting, *Nasser*, 101.

⁹⁷ Podeh and Winckler, *Rethinking Nasserism*, 234.

Israeli raids weakened the public's opinion of their leader. A small shipment of arms from the West was unlikely to shift the balance of power away from Israel or make a substantial change in popular support—Nasser decided to look to the Soviet Bloc. The creation of the Baghdad Pact weakened Egypt's regional power and put him at odds with the Western powers of France, Britain, and to a lesser extent, the United States. In order to maintain Cairo's significance in the Middle East, Nasser needed to make a substantial statement that Egypt was still leader of the Arabs—an arms deal opposing Western powers was the answer. Finally, the Bandung Conference showed Nasser that he could be an international leader and most significantly, the champion of Pan-Arabism. The conference created the necessary connections to approach the USSR and develop a neutralist policy of non-alignment—something an arms deal with the East accomplished.

To make matters worse for the West, many, including Nasser, believed Western powers failed to provide the powers attending the conference the dignity they deserved. Cultural miscommunications exacerbated the issue. United States ambassador to Egypt, Henry A. Byroade did not want to interfere with the conference, and noted Nasser would like it if “us white folks sat this one out.” Unfortunately for the United States, the American embassy called the conference “the darktown strutters' ball.” Nasser felt snubbed when no Western diplomat greeted him after his triumphant arrival at the airport.⁹⁸ This series of events exemplifies how cultural differences influence international politics. The West had un-intentionally reinforced the message of the Bandung Conference— Asian and African countries should maintain a policy of non-alignment.

⁹⁸ Copeland, *The Game of Nations*, 189.

Before the Czech deal, Nasser was seen in a positive light by many in the West. In March of 1954, "Life Magazine" profiled Nasser as the leader of the Egyptian Revolution. He was described as a "bouncing, smiling man...who looks like a former all-American fullback...He...radiates the ebullient charm of an overgrown boy [and] has a profound instinct for leadership. He is sincere and simple in a way that hovers between naivete and profundity."⁹⁹ "Reader's Digest" noted Nasser "may evolve into a kind of Egyptian Ataturk," in clear reference to the Turkish leader's ability to champion nationalist forces.¹⁰⁰ Nasser and Ataturk were both Nationalist secularists. Due to their secularism, both Ataturk and Nasser found significant opponents in religious political groups. Ataturk's sweeping secular reforms created many enemies, including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood which helped publish propaganda against the Turkish leader inside his own country.¹⁰¹ The United States saw Ataturk's and Nasser's secularism as a refreshing change to theocratic regimes in the region and viewed it as a sign that Egypt would follow the West's Cold War policies.

If the United States policy makers were certain Nasser was going to follow the Cold War policies of the West, the American media echoed that sentiment. Nasser found himself in a precarious position; well liked by many in the West, he struggled to fulfill the dream of the Revolution even as President. Nasser's future at the helm of a Cairo-led Arab world depended on making Egypt more militarily secure.

⁹⁹ Richard McAlexander, "Couscous Mussolini: US Perceptions of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the 1958 Intervention in Lebanon and the Origins of the US-Israeli Special Relationship," *Cold War History* 11 (2010): 367.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 368.

¹⁰¹ Gavin D. Brockett, "Provincial Newspapers As A Historical Source: Büyük Cihad And The Great Struggle For The Muslim Turkish Nation, 1951–53," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41.03 (2009): 437.

The Bandung Conference cemented Nasser's viability as a leader of the Non-Aligned movement, and galvanized his role as champion of Pan-Arabism.¹⁰² Although Nasser's experience at Bandung planted the seeds of Egyptian engagement with the USSR, the Czech arms deal was its realization and proved the turning point in Egyptian achievement of Cold War neutrality. Eisenhower's laissez faire management of the Middle East was probably one of his worst policy failings, and Nasser was “the stumbling block.”¹⁰³

Nasser took the opportunity of the Baghdad Pact and through it positioned himself to be one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned movement. This new foreign policy, and the contacts he made at Bandung, allowed Nasser to develop the Czech-Egyptian arms deal. By the Spring of 1955 Egypt had enacted its neutralist policies and was moving farther from Washington's graces. In May 1955, Egypt recognized communist China.¹⁰⁴ In August, China purchased roughly 4.4 million Egyptian Pounds worth of cotton, establishing political and economic ties between the two countries. It was clear Nasser intended to pursue a path he deemed beneficial to the continuing independence of his country.¹⁰⁵ This was the first of many agreements with China. Through Nasser's personal connection with Zhou Enlai he began talks with Russian officials and concluded an arms deal with Czechoslovakia.

¹⁰² Takeyh, *The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine*, 82.

Illustration 3 shows Nasser with other Middle Eastern heads of state.

¹⁰³ Yaqub also comments on this in his book *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 40.

¹⁰⁴ Nutting, *Nasser*, 138.

¹⁰⁵ From Cairo to Department of State, Subject Large-scale Purchases of Cotton by Communist China, August 13, 1955, File: 474.646/7-3056, Box 2029, Record Group 59, General records, United States Department of State, 1955-1959, NA.

CHAPTER IV

THE CZECH-EGYPTIAN ARMS DEAL

This chapter describes the timing and content of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal, as well as the immediate impact it had on Egypt's capacity to make war and Nasser's legitimacy as a national and Pan-Arab leader. The Czech-Egyptian arms deal solved the problems raised by the February crisis. With the deal, Egypt, in terms of materiel, surpassed the capabilities of any power in the region, bolstering Nasser as an international figure, and solidifying his internal legitimacy.

Concluding the Deal

The events of February 1955 threatened Egypt's place as leader of Pan-Arabism and therefore the legitimacy of Nasser's political philosophy and regime. Most importantly, the humiliation of Operation Black Arrow forced the Egyptian president to seek foreign armaments to defend his borders. Nasser's participation in the Bandung Conference directly led to a policy of non-alignment by seeking Soviet arms. This chapter outlines what Nasser hoped to achieve through the arms deal, its historical context, and detail the negotiation process in conjunction with an analysis of what was contained in the agreement.

Initially, Nasser wanted to make an agreement with the United States, as he

believed they might be a fair partner.¹⁰⁶ But the United States had a long history of denying weapons to the area. As a member of the Tripartite Agreement, a pact between Great Britain, France, and the United States to limit arms shipments to the Middle East, they believed shipping military equipment to either Israel or Egypt would encourage open warfare between Arabs and Israelis.¹⁰⁷ The most significant aspect of the United States' policy was to avoid an arms race and military escalation between Israel and Egypt. According to American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, “[if] the United States [were] to sponsor an arms race between Israel and the Arab states [it] would be a very futile action.”¹⁰⁸ An arms race and subsequent war would threaten regional stability and destroy any hope of a Palestinian peace settlement. America's Middle Eastern foreign policy hinged on using Egypt's Pan-Arab nationalism in a united effort against Communism. In 1953 the United States denied a shipment of anti-aircraft guns to Israel, and in 1954 they did the same with a shipment of 24 F-86 fighter jets.¹⁰⁹

Although America did not support either side, France openly sold weapons to Israel.¹¹⁰ France had a long and mired history with the Middle East. Their colonial possessions made them few allies with the Arab nations. France was specifically kept out of the Baghdad Pact due to its colonial wars in Algeria and Indochina. Egypt publicly supported the Algerian rebels against France. While Nasser may have gained Arab credibility for aiding the rebels, he united Israel and France against Egypt. One author argues that the alliance between the two countries between 1954-1959 was the initiative

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰⁷ Levey, "Israel's Quest for a Security Guarantee from the United States, 1954–1956," 46.

¹⁰⁸ Nichols, *Eisenhower 1956*, 35.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

of Shimon Peres, director of the Israeli Ministry of Defense. France received Israeli intelligence on Nasser's aid to the Algerian rebels, while Israel received French weapons. During the Fall of 1954, France shipped AMX-13 tanks, 75mm guns, radar equipment, and Ouragan jet fighters which were superior to any Arab plane at the time. This deal helped bolster Israel's already superior arms supremacy over Egypt and the other Arab nations.¹¹¹ This deal occurred just months before Operation Black Arrow. The United States' refusal to supply considerable weapons forced Nasser to look elsewhere. Nasser's decision to obtain Soviet weapons accomplished two goals: begin a policy of Non-Alignment by pitting historical Western interests against the Soviet Bloc, and securing the weapons needed to cement his legitimacy as Egypt's defender.

Finding a way to ensure Egypt's defense was crucial for Nasser's presidency as well as personal safety. One United States CIA report believed Egypt to have only thirty qualified combat ready pilots by the Fall of 1955.¹¹² Egypt was not prepared for a war with Israel. In a Current Intelligence Bulletin, the CIA reported Nasser's position. "Nasser appears to feel that his relations with other members of the Revolutionary Command Council and younger army officers are so precarious that he must score a significant success in order to retain their support."¹¹³ Nasser believed that by concluding a significant weapons deal with the USSR he could shore up internal support while securing national military parity.

Nasser noted that the Israeli raid of February 28, 1955 made him rethink how he

¹¹¹ Ziv, "Shimon Peres and the French-Israeli Alliance, 1954-9," 406-416.

¹¹² The Outlook for Egyptian Stability and Foreign Policy, November 15, 1955, *FRUS 1955-1957, Arab Israeli-Dispute, Volume XIV*, Edited by John P. Glennon. (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), 753.

¹¹³ Current Intelligence Bulletin, Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, August 17, 1955, CREST Finding Aid, NA, 3.

purchases arms and from whom.¹¹⁴ By July of 1955, Egypt had technicians visiting Prague to review equipment.¹¹⁵ The deal was a watershed moment in Middle Eastern history because it impacted global and regional politics.¹¹⁶

In September 1955, Egypt finalized a deal with Czechoslovakia as an intermediate broker for the USSR. The allotment of T-34 tanks and IS-3 Stalin tanks represented armored capacities on par with any power in the region. Egypt received 80 MIG-15 jet fighter planes and 30 IL-28 bombers, practically a complete modern air force. These additions provided Egypt with increased capability for air superiority and support of ground operations. When combined with self-propelled guns, armored personnel carriers, artillery equipment, several naval vessels, and small arms and munition, Egypt's military had the potential to eclipse that of Israel, even though the deal stipulated continued deliveries of these arms over time.¹¹⁷ The deal achieved and even surpassed Egypt's main goal, to equip its military with the weapons needed to defend its borders.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Telegram from Embassy in Egypt to Department of State. June 9, 1955, *FRUS 1955-1957, Arab Israeli-Dispute, XIV*, 288.

¹¹⁵ Nutting, *Nasser*, 104.

¹¹⁶ Ziv, "Shimon Peres and the French-Israeli Alliance, 1954-9," 418.

¹¹⁷ Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, 11.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.



Illustration 3: Russian designed and built, MIG-15 fighter jets were state of the art aircraft at the time of the Czech arms deal. Seen above is an Egyptian Air Force MIG-15 parked on a runway in 1981. Courtesy of the National Archives, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1921 – 2008, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982 – 2007.

Impact on Egypt

Before the arms deal, Egypt, and most of the Middle East, was within the West's sphere of influence, particularly that of Britain and France. With the conclusion of the deal, Egypt established its dominance among the Arab powers, received significantly more armaments, and Nasser solidified his role as leader of the Egyptian people. Nasser's shift towards neutrality and away from the West continued throughout his Presidency. Not only was Egypt trading with Eastern Bloc countries, but it also made a deal in August of 1955 with China. Egypt agreed to sell 4.4 million Egyptian pounds worth of cotton, equivalent to 12,320,000 United States dollars. Even more important, this deal was the catalyst for a series of trade agreements between Egypt and the People's Republic of China. Nasser's policy threatened what the Western powers hoped to achieve with the Baghdad Pact and interrupted the West's global Cold War policy.¹¹⁹

Nasser's interactions with Communist states did not translate to Egypt becoming Communist. Anti-Communist campaigns within Egypt continued and the status quo was maintained. Nasser was anti-Communist, and his relations with the USSR and China were purely business and did not have any impact on national policy. The Czech-Egyptian arms deal served as Nasser's best way to develop a modern military and maintain the upper-hand concerning internal affairs. It did not mean the entrance of Communism in Egypt.¹²⁰

Nasser galvanized the Egyptian people by promoting Nasserism through concluding the Czech-Egyptian arms deal with the explicit aim of balancing the power of

¹¹⁹ Large Scale Purchases of Cotton by Communist China, August 13, 1955, File: 474.934/8-1355, Box 2029, Record Group 59, General records, United States Department of State, 1955-1959, NA.

¹²⁰ Keith Krause, "Military Statecraft: Power and Influence in Soviet and American Arms Transfer Relationships," *International Studies Quarterly* 35.3 (1991), 329.

the West. The *Al-Akhbar* newspaper noted that US Arms to Israel would spur an arms race, a sentiment Washington agreed with. Meanwhile, the newspaper *Al-Gumhuriya* agreed with Nasser's speech, "if you supply arms to Israel, we shall seek to obtain more arms. The millions that are attacked by Israel are entitled to lead a life of peace and security." Operation Black Arrow enraged many across the region who believed that Israel posed a threat to the independence of Arab people, especially those living in Palestine. Nasser's bold actions represented the overall popular sentiments of Pan-Arab solidarity being expressed throughout the Middle East. It was the catalyst for Nasser's assumption of Pan-Arab leadership and Egyptian regional ascendancy.¹²¹

The Czech-Egyptian arms deal transformed the Cold War by undermining the Western powers' ability to keep the entire region within their sphere of influence. The USSR became a significant player in the region and Arab nations had an alternative to Western powers.

¹²¹ From Byroade to Secretary of State, November 18, 1955, File: 784A.56/11-1855, Box 3768, Record Group 59, General records, United States Department of State, 1955-1959, NA.

CHAPTER V
THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE CZECH-EGYPTIAN ARMS DEAL AND ITS
IMPORTANCE

This chapter explores the role of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal as the primary factor in redefining the Cold War in the Middle East for many states, including internationally France, Great Britain, the U. S. S. R., and the United States. The consequences of the agreement include the solidification of Nasser as the leader of Pan-Arabism, the USSR's entrance into the Middle East, the Suez Crisis, and the regional role of the United States. The Czech-Egyptian Arms deal was a defining regional event in the Cold War.

Effect on France and Great Britain

France played a vital part in regional politics during the 1950s. France and Egypt saw the war for Algerian independence from France in different terms, and Cairo's support of the Algerian rebels directly pushed France to back Israel with several significant weapons shipments, even if it meant breaking the Tripartite Agreement; it seemed to Paris as though Egypt had chosen to side against the West. Therefore the Czech-Egyptian arms deal precipitated French involvement in the Suez Crisis against Egypt.

By the 1950s, France was struggling to maintain several colonies globally and influence in the Middle East. In 1954, Paris lost its colonies in Indochina and was fighting a costly war in Algeria. Anti-French forces in the Algerian War were supported by Nasser's regime. French interests were threatened by Egyptian support of Algerian rebels and countered Nasser's policy by selling considerable shipments of weapons to Israel.

The director of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, Shimon Peres, designed the Franco-Israeli alliance that continued from 1954-1959. Both France and Israel opposed the policies of Nasser and hoped to decrease his power. The Algerian War of Independence began on November 1, 1954 between Algerian nationalist forces and France. Meanwhile, as champion of Pan-Arab Nationalism, Nasser openly supported the rebels in a bid to increase Egyptian standing in the region as leader of the Arab nations. During the Bandung Conference, Nasser united leaders from Asia and Africa to support a resolution in support of the rebels. Angered and threatened by Nasser's actions, France agreed to sell weapons to Israel as long as Israel provided France with intelligence of Nasser's involvement in Algeria.¹²²

The Czech arms deal threatened the efforts of French policy makers because it meant an increasingly powerful Egypt which challenged France's role in Algeria. It also led to popular Arab support for the Egyptian leader creating an icon for Pan-Arabists across the region to rally behind. The Czech arms deal helped assure French intervention during the Suez Crisis.

From a policy perspective, the Tripartite Agreement interrupted already-agreed-

¹²² Ziv, "Shimon Peres and the French-Israeli Alliance, 1954-9," 415-416.

upon Egyptian arms deals with Great Britain, confounding Nasser's objective of maintaining a force capable of defending against Israeli attack. From the civilian perspective, the inability of the Egyptian government to procure the equipment necessary to defend its people undermined its credibility.¹²³ By 1951, the Egyptian people viewed the 75,000 British soldiers stationed in the canal zone as unwelcome Western interference in Egypt's national affairs.

The Czech-Egyptian arms deal reaffirmed Nasser's commitment to anti-Western policies and an active role in aiding the Algerian rebels for the foreseeable future. France was also concerned that some of the Czech weapons might find their way to the rebels.¹²⁴ These were legitimate concerns. On November 1, 1954, Nasser announced his open support of the Algerian rebels.¹²⁵ Unlike the United States, France was willing to heed Ben-Gurion's plea that, "if we don't get quality arms in time it may be too late—there may be an explosion the consequences of which cannot be foreseen."¹²⁶

France feared increased Egyptian military power in regards to the Algerian conflict. France believed Egypt would send weapons to North Africa to arm Algerian rebels. The Czech arms deal confirmed France's opposition to Egypt. When the Suez Canal was nationalized by Egypt, France pounced on the chance to frustrate Nasser's plans concluding in the Suez Crisis.¹²⁷

Britain's strategic relationship with the Suez Canal necessitated overtures to retain

¹²³ McAlexander, "Couscous Mussolini: US Perceptions of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the 1958 Intervention in Lebanon and the Origins of the US-Israeli Special Relationship," 368.

¹²⁴ Ziv, "Shimon Peres and the French-Israeli Alliance, 1954-9," 418, 420.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 416.

¹²⁶ Ambassador Tel Aviv (Lawson) to Secretary of State, January 11, 1956, File: 784A.56/11-1056, Box 3767, Record Group 59, General records, United States Department of State, 1955-1959, NA.

¹²⁷ From Paris (Dillon) to Secretary of State, October 19, 1955, File: 474.528/10-1955, Box 2029, Record Group 59, General records, United States Department of State, 1955-1959, NA.

friendly relations with Egypt. In the early 1950s Britain concluded an arms deal with Egypt to help bolster their armor. Most of the items were never shipped and Nasser's ascendency to presidency of Egypt further degraded relations. In total, Britain failed to gain influence with Egypt and these efforts were largely counter productive.¹²⁸

CIA Director Allen Dulles noted that after the Czech-Egyptian arms deal it was “quite unrealistic to believe that this situation can be maintained in status quo for a period of months, either three or six...furthermore, [the] British will not stand still long in getting into this act and in other areas of operation.”¹²⁹ Allen Dulles noted that events in the region were moving at a quick pace, and that the loss of Western oil interests and military bases in the Middle East would be disastrous.¹³⁰

The Czech arms deal muddled the political relationship between Egypt and England, ties that were already frayed. Ultimately, the deal lead to Nasser nationalizing the Suez Canal. Secretary Eden wrote to Eisenhower, “we feel under no obligation to come to the aid of Egypt. Apart from the feelings of public opinion here, Nasser and his press have relieved us of any such obligation by their attitude to the Tripartite Agreement.”¹³¹

¹²⁸ David Tal, "Weapons without Influence: British Arms Supply Policy and the Egyptian-Czech Arms Deal, 1945–55," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 34.3 (2006): 383.

¹²⁹ Message from the Director of Central Intelligence (Dulles), Washington, January 29, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1-July 26, 1956, Volume XV*, Edited by John P. Glennon, (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), 92-4.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 92-4.

¹³¹ Anthony Eden, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Peter G. Boyle, *The Eden-Eisenhower Correspondence, 1955-1957* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 178.

Regional Implications in the Middle East and Israel

The increase in Egyptian military capacity threatened Israeli military capability and caused Jerusalem to prepare for war. Israel responded quickly. Israeli Ambassador Abba Eban blamed the Czech deal for “utterly and irrevocably” forcing Israel to abandon the “belief that progress could be made with the Nasser regime.”¹³² For Israel, the Czech arms deal represented a threat to their military superiority, and therefore existence. With the announcement of the transaction their military superiority vanished. Egypt would have air-superiority, greater bombing capability, and increased mechanization on the ground. Acknowledging the likelihood of engaging in another round of warfare with Arab states, including Egypt, Ben-Gurion scrambled to obtain additional military hardware to offset the Czech deal.¹³³

For Israel, Egypt's increase in military capacity, along with the USSR's entrance into the region potentially meant life or death. Ben-Gurion stated:

If the Soviets gain control of the region our existence will be impossible. Our people in Russia are the only people which are not allowed to have schools and newspapers. If they come to dominate this part of the world, they will not allow us to continue to maintain a free regime...for apart from our being Israelis we belong to the free world.¹³⁴

Israel felt it was imperative to prepare for war in hopes of defending against the new threat announced by the Czech-Egyptian arms agreement.

Ben-Gurion met with France in October, 1955 to discuss a potential arms settlement. Within a year, Israel procured 72 Mystere-4A jet fighters, 120 AMX tanks, 40

¹³² McAlexander, "Couscous Mussolini: US Perceptions of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the 1958 Intervention in Lebanon and the Origins of the US-Israeli Special Relationship," 368-369.

¹³³ Meital, "Review: Reassessing Suez 1956: New Perspectives on the Crisis and Its Aftermath," 96.

¹³⁴ From Ben-Gurion to Robert Anderson, manuscript of text, to: R.B.A., March 9, 1972, Box 108, Robert B. Anderson: Papers, 1933-89, DDEL, 58.

Super-Sherman tanks, artillery pieces, ammunition and spare parts. This was later supplemented with a September deal including 100 Super-Sherman tanks, 200 armored personnel carriers, 300 six-by-six trucks, and 20 tank transporters. Israel and France made sure Nasser would not have the best military equipment for long.¹³⁵

Although the Czech-Egyptian arms deal was a pivot point in Cold War and regional policy, the large quantities of war materiel did not modernize the Egyptian army to the extent that most countries believed it would. Egypt did not have the organizational capability to effectively expand its armed forces as expected. No evidence supports that Egypt was preparing an invasion of Israel: even with the new entrance of Soviet arms in the country, Egypt's military was far from capable of defending the homeland, much less an offensive operation. Newly declassified Israeli documents attest to this reality. Israel knew how unprepared and ill-equipped Egypt's military was. Much of the equipment was faulty or antiquated. For example, some of the MIG engines were outdated and decreased maneuverability leading to at least one training crash and possibly up to eleven others. But Israeli intelligence still viewed Egypt as newly armed and ready to attack, even if they possessed poor military capabilities.¹³⁶

Israel was concerned with how this material could be used to expand Egypt's armed forces, rather than quantity or even quality in absolute terms. In 1956, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) could field 125 medium-level Sherman tanks into the framework of

¹³⁵ Meital, "Review: Reassessing Suez 1956: New Perspectives on the Crisis and Its Aftermath," 102-104.

It is unclear the exact amount of arms transferred. One United States report notes 40-100 AMX tanks, 50 armored personnel carriers, 70 Mystere jet aircraft, unknown number of 105mm, "parachutable" guns.

October 20, 1955 France deal with Israel, file: 784A. 56/10-2155, Box 3768, Record Group 59, General records, United States Department of State, 1955-1959, NA.

¹³⁶ Laron, "Logic Dictates That They May Attack When They Feel They Can Win," 70-73,

one brigade in addition to two brigades that could be quickly mobilized. Neither of these were true armored brigades. With the addition of the Czech deal equipment, Egypt would soon be able to field three armored brigades based around the superior T-34 tanks, and a battalion of Centurion tanks. Golani has argued that the potential increase in Egypt's military created a brief peace during the Fall and Winter of 1955. While Israel's operations in Gaza and the Sinai ceased, Jerusalem stockpiled materiel for war, including oil reserves needed for an invasion. However, the Czech-Egyptian arms deal destroyed the regional balance of power, provoked Israel to militarize, and emboldened Nasser's domestic policy to nationalize the Suez Canal.¹³⁷ While Israel was gearing up for war, Nasser looked to defend his borders after the Czech deal, and even after the Nationalization of the Suez Canal.¹³⁸

Far from being outgunned, Israel had a far superior military to Egypt or any other regional power. In an American report of Israeli military capabilities, it was noted: "Israel has the most capable military ground force in the Middle East, excluding Greece and Turkey, and is capable of defeating any of its immediate neighbors." The report continued, "Israel could conduct a successful defense against any one or combination of its Arab neighbors." It should also be noted that Israel spent approximately 216 million Israeli pounds on its defense budget between 1953-1954, roughly twice the total value of the Czech arms deal.¹³⁹ Even if Egypt had the weapons capable of developing a strong military, a report on the Egyptian military noted that Cairo only had thirty qualified

¹³⁷ Golani, "The Historical Place of the Czech- Egyptian Arms Deal, Fall 1955," 818-823.

¹³⁸ Laron, "Logic Dictates That They May Attack When They Feel They Can Win," 84.

¹³⁹ Israel: Military Expenditures and Military Capabilities, File: Economic Information Summaries 1951-1956 May 13, 1953, Box 3768, General Records of the Department of State 1955-1959, NA.

combat ready pilots.¹⁴⁰ Although on paper the Czech deal threatened Israeli superiority, the ability of Egypt to harness its new military weapons into effective battle action was unlikely.

Nasser was not looking for war in the summer of 1956. Earlier that year he sent a letter to Washington, D.C. stating:

The people of Egypt have no desire other than to grow in the peaceful fruition of our natural inheritance. Having so recently acquired the pure—that is to say sovereign—possession of our lands, it could not now be our wish to assert their enjoyment for the purpose of military conquest or adventure.

In the same letter, Nasser also promised not to allow border conflicts to escalate into war. If Nasser's intentions were true, the Czech-Egyptian arms deal was misinterpreted by the Israelis as an aggressive prelude to war.¹⁴¹

Perhaps the most significant result of the Czech arms deal was that Israel increased its spending on fuel for tanks, heavy vehicles, and jets. Just after the Czech deal, the Israeli stockpiles of fuel increased from 90 days to 180 days. This was interpreted at the time as a direct result of the Czech deal and proved that the Israeli government was planning for war far before the nationalization of the Suez Canal.

Many Israeli policy makers wanted war with Egypt over the Czech arms deal. It was believed in Washington that Jerusalem was strongly considering a preventive war—a conflict that would destroy Egyptian military power before the addition of Soviet weapons.¹⁴² While Ben-Gurion did not concede to their immediate demands, preparations

¹⁴⁰ The Outlook for Egyptian Stability and foreign policy. November 15, 1955, *FRUS 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1955, Volume XIV*, 753.

¹⁴¹ Message to Washington, Cairo, January 24, 1956, *FRUS 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1-July 26, 1956, Volume XV* 56.

¹⁴² Memorandum Subject Israeli Request for Purchase of Arms, November 23, 1955, File: 784A.56/11-

for war were set in motion. Egypt and Israel no longer worked to maintain the status-quo—if they had before.¹⁴³ The Czech deal was met by rapid Israeli preparation for war.

The Czech deal stopped Iraq's plans of becoming the leader of the Arab states. The Baghdad Pact failed to maintain clout in large part due to the absence of Egypt. The Pan-Arab Nationalist reaction further weakened Iraq's international status while strengthening Egypt's, in a victory for Nasserism. The Czech arms deal created populist uprisings damaging the Iraqi monarchy. The Iraqi government lead by Nuri al-Said used martial law and heavy handed police tactics to keep demonstrators off the streets. Iraq's brief political power grab was countered by Nasser's overwhelming charisma and ability to champion Arab Nationalism. The rise of revolutionary sentiment was pervasive among the region and Nasser's anti-Western actions spurred organizations like the Ba'athist party in Iraq. The Ba'athist title stems from the Arabic word *Al-Ba'ath* meaning renaissance or resurrection. The Ba'athist political party characterized its policy as Pan-Arab, Arab Nationalist, socialist, anti-Western, and secular. The rise of the Ba'athist party was, in part, a result of Nasser's political ability to show how other nations could navigate Cold War politics without relying upon perceived colonial powers such as the United States and Great Britain.¹⁴⁴

The Czech arms deal had an effect across the Middle East, and in large part because Egypt established a new precedent for national support outside the traditional colonial powers. The deal excited the regional bias against Israel as a touchpoint for Nasserism. Ambassador Mallory reported King Hussein's opinion, that “Jordan is in such

2355, Box 3767, Record Group 59, General records, United States Department of State, 1955-1959.

¹⁴³ Tal, "Israel's Road to the 1956 War," 73-76.

¹⁴⁴ Near East Situation, December 5, 1956, National Security Council Briefing, Central Intelligence Agency, CREST Finding Aid, NA.

an aroused state that Western support of arms to Israel would cause extreme reaction and it would likely be impossible for Jordan to maintain any withdrawn position.”¹⁴⁵ CIA records support a more substantial causal relationship between the Czech arms deal and the Jordanian reaction:

There is universal popular Jordanian enthusiasm for flame of Arab political liberation ignited by Nasser's arms deal with the Soviet Bloc. Jordanians shared Arab feeling of gaining initiative. A Russian token offer of arms for local national guard would have tremendous effectiveness...one is always returned to the hard and overriding fact that to have Jordanians (and presumably other Arabs) on our side requires restraint in our relations with Israel.¹⁴⁶

Another memorandum some months later reports, “Egypt's purchase of Czech arms resulted in prompt and dramatic change in public opinion, hardening it against settlement with Israel, and against the West.”¹⁴⁷

In a response to the Baghdad Pact, Russia attempted to stem the sudden wave of pro-Western political action through an arms deal. In April of 1954, Syria received forty-five German Panzer IV tanks from Czechoslovakia.¹⁴⁸ There are similarities between the Czech-Egyptian deal and the Czech-Syrian deal. Both Middle Eastern countries received Soviet Bloc arms despite Egypt and Syria being decidedly anti-Communist. One report noted, “in general, Syrians are not so much pro-Communist as they are anti-West. For them, Moscow is not the home of international Communism, but the seat of the only

¹⁴⁵ From Amman (Mallory) to Secretary Of State, October 31, File: 784A.56/10-3155, Box 3767, Record Group 59, General records, United States Department of State, 1955-1959, NA.

¹⁴⁶ Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State, October 22, 1955, *FRUS, 1955-1957, Near East: Jordan-Yemen, Volume XIII*, 6-7.

¹⁴⁷ Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State, January 4, 1956, 1955, *FRUS, 1955-1957, Near East: Jordan-Yemen, Volume XIII*, 12-15.

¹⁴⁸ Rami Ginat, "The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'th Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36.2 (2000): 156.

great power which supports the Arab cause.”¹⁴⁹ The difference between the Egyptian and Syrian deal is in the sheer quantity of weapons transferred. Whereas Syria received antiquated German tanks, Egypt received what was tantamount to a modern air force and army in one transaction.

Another key difference between the Syrian and Egyptian deal is simply that Egypt was the dominant regional power. Egypt was the champion of Pan-Arabism, others looked to Egypt, not Syria, for leadership, and when Egypt received a monumental arms deal from an anti-Western power it had significant ramifications throughout the region. The size of the deal and the military implications for the Arab-Israeli conflict were difficult to ignore. Egypt was the primary actor in the Arab-Israeli issue. These factors compounded upon Egypt's demographic dominance meant that the Syrian deal was overshadowed by the Czech-Egyptian deal. Both Russian and United States' foreign Middle Eastern policy revolved around maintaining the favor of Egypt.

Unrest swept the Middle East following the Czech deal. In Jordan, violent demonstrations swept the country in December of 1955. Egypt used its political clout gained from the Czech-Egyptian arms deal to support opposition protests in Jordan. The Jordanian government was forced to cease pursuit of joining the Baghdad Pact. The Czech-Egyptian arms deal had an immediate and lasting impact on the region.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Near East, South Asia, and African Affairs (Allen) to the Secretary of State, June 25, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957, Near East: Jordan-Yemen, Volume XIII*, 574-578, 576.

¹⁵⁰ Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 41.

The Failure of American Policy

The Soviet Union maintained Lenin's philosophy that socialists had a duty to lend aid to bourgeois-democratic movements for national liberation from imperial powers.¹⁵¹ This policy was continued by the Soviet Union and applied in the Middle East. In the wake of World War II, Russia struggled to gain a significant foothold in a region historically dominated by Western colonial powers, even as newly created Arab nations struggled to establish some form of autonomy.¹⁵²

On July 28, 1951 two Russian diplomats proposed to Cairo that if Egypt stopped official talks with Britain they could plot a new course in foreign policy through negotiations with the USSR and reaffirm Egypt's stand of neutrality between the two Blocs.¹⁵³ Former Czechoslovakian commercial attaché in Syria and Lebanon, Richard Sedlacek, noted that the Soviets:

Always concentrated our efforts on Egypt because Egypt is the biggest of the Arab countries...the Egyptian newspapers are read throughout the whole Arab world; they have the biggest circulations and they influence much public opinion throughout the other Arab states.¹⁵⁴

While the USSR had already made some gains in Syria, they viewed Egypt as the doorway into the Middle East. Sedlacek noted,

In Egypt for instance, our aim for some time was to show the Nasser government-the revolutionary government-as a pawn of the Americans. This was not true of course, but our rumors and pamphlets were effective in creating this impression among many segments of the population.

Russia's aspirations for some kind of Middle Eastern foothold hinged on their relations

¹⁵¹ Behbehani, *The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism, 1917-1966*, 5-6.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 124

¹⁵³ Foreign Service Dispatch 325 from Cairo: Report of Russian Overture to Egypt, July 28, 1951, File: 661.741/8-1051, Department of State, Decimal Files, NA.

¹⁵⁴ *October 20, 1955 Communism in Egypt*, Folder: OCB 091 Egypt (Sept. 1954-Feb. 1957), Box 28, OCB Central File Series, White House Office, National Security Council Staff: Papers, 194-61, NA, 3.

with Egypt.¹⁵⁵

In terms of achieving the Cold War strategy of power through influence, the Czech arms deal was a coup for Russia, and Nasser's popularity as an Arab Nationalist outside Egypt only helped to reinforce Russia's aspirations in the region. Soviet Deputy Prime Minister Anastas Mikoyan noted, "earlier we had no access to the Arab countries, but once we sold arms to Egypt, we bared our teeth to our enemies, and...now they cannot any longer resolve the issues of the near east without us."¹⁵⁶ The Czech arms deal was the beginning of a new and successful policy for the Soviet Union in the Cold War struggle.

Dulles noted in a press conference:

As we observed maneuvers, we were conscious that the Soviet Union, elsewhere in the world, was using economic and social collaboration as a means for jumping military as well as political barriers. Examples of this can be found in India, Egypt, and Burma...defeat in this contest would be as disastrous as defeat in an armaments race.¹⁵⁷

The Czech deal was designed to aid Russian foreign policy by gaining visibility in the Middle East as a non-Western option for regimes. It also helped to increase economic interests between Egypt and Russia, creating a relationship where none had existed previously.¹⁵⁸ The Czech deal was the first of many transfers of arms to the region. Between 1955 and 1967, Egypt alone received \$100 million per year (unadjusted for inflation) in military equipment. Indeed, recent scholarship shows that arms deals were a vital way for Russia to project its power in the region. The Soviet Union likely spent two

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵⁶ Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 40.

¹⁵⁷ Secretary Dulles' News Conference of January 11, Department of State for the Press, January 11, 1956 No. 15, Box 43, Dulles, Eleanor Lansing: Papers, 1880-1973, DDEL, 1.

¹⁵⁸ Moshe Efrat, "The Economics of Soviet Arms Transfers to the Third World—A Case Study: Egypt," *Soviet Studies* 35.4 (1983): 437.

or three times as much on third world arms deals as previously thought, and Egypt was the catalyst for Russian inroads into the Middle East.¹⁵⁹

The Czech deal announced the entrance of Russia into the Middle East, and its implications frightened the United States. An impassioned Macmillan stated:

We are faced by a major issue. I have not been able to understand why the Soviets have not made this move previously. It constitutes an aggressive entrance into a new area...we could turn to the stick...the world will not allow the USSR to become the guardian of the Suez Canal.¹⁶⁰

Between 1953-1958, Egypt and the USSR had a mutual agreement that separated ideology from politics. Nasser continued his repressive internal policies towards Communists, meanwhile the Soviets did not interfere in Egypt's affairs.¹⁶¹ The Czech deal paved the way for Russian financing of additional Egyptian internal projects. Within a month after the Czech arms deal was signed, Russia was strongly pushing for Cairo to agree to a deal that would have the Soviets finance a hydroelectric dam on the Nile River.¹⁶² Nasser looked to the West and the Soviet Bloc for funding, but the Western countries were inconsistent in their willingness to give Egypt money after the Czech-Egyptian arms deal. In another setback for Western countries in the Cold War, Russia funded the dam, increasing their influence in Egypt, and the region. The USSR proved that they could help developing countries attain modern facilities in addition to military materiel.

After the Czech-Egyptian arms deal, America lost significant influence in the

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 448-454.

¹⁶⁰ Memorandum of a Conversation, New York, September 26, 1955, 9:45 P.M., *FRUS, XIV 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1955*, 517-518.

¹⁶¹ Podeh and Winckler, *Rethinking Nasserism*, 237.

¹⁶² September 28, 1955, CREST Finding Aid, Central Intelligence Agency Document, NA 4,5.

region. The following section outlines Washington's actions concerning Egypt in order to show how the Czech deal altered American policy. Author Keith Krause notes arms deals are used by dominant powers to gain influence abroad.¹⁶³

Believing Washington already had control over Egypt, and not perceiving any threat to Egyptian-United States relations, Eisenhower's policy in the Middle East revolved around two similar goals. The primary objective was to maintain the flow of oil from Middle Eastern wells to Western Europe. This was a reflection of Cold War policy at the time. The Middle East was the primary oil supplier of the United States' allies, primarily France and Britain, and in case of all-out war with the Soviets, this industry was a necessity for future military operations.¹⁶⁴ The second objective was to maintain peaceful relations between Israel and the Arab nations. Egypt being the most important, any success in solving the Arab-Israeli problem revolved around negotiations between Nasser and Israeli President David Ben-Gurion. In a best-case scenario, the United States wished for the Middle East to be united against Soviet aspirations, and only regional peace could accomplish this goal.¹⁶⁵

The United States' Cold War policy made Egypt the lynchpin to mobilize the Middle East for the Western nations and contain Communism. The Middle East had never been inside the United States' sphere of influence and previous action in the region was rare and not long-lasting. Washington left these under the designs of Britain and France which had historical colonial ties to the area. Meanwhile, the Eisenhower regime

¹⁶³ Krause, "Military Statecraft: Power and Influence in Soviet and American Arms Transfer Relationships," 313-314.

¹⁶⁴ Allen W. Dulles Calls JFD, puts Robert Anderson on line Wednesday April 4, 1956, 11:34A.M., Memoranda of Teleconference General January 3, 1956-April 30, 1956 (3), Box 4, Papers of John Foster Dulles Telephone Call Series, DDEL, 1.

¹⁶⁵ Nichols, Eisenhower 1956, 35.

understood the Soviets had very little power in the region. Therefore, the United States viewed the largest threat in the region to be instability, specifically the Arab-Israeli problem. As a member of the Tripartite Agreement, the United States wanted to avoid an arms race between Israel and Egypt that potentially could lead to war. In order to avoid conflict, Eisenhower wanted to work with Egypt, as the leader of the Arab countries, to maintain order and peace in the region. In essence, the United States foreign policy was to maintain the status-quo, because in the grand scheme of the Cold War, the West had the upper-hand in the Middle East.¹⁶⁶

The Revolution of 1952, as a nationalist movement based around anti-colonial goals, forced Egypt to be at natural odds with Western powers. The Western powers had no uniform policy in the region and acted primarily in national self-interest, hoping to maintain their historic spheres of influence to the detriment of Cold War strategy. Specifically, Arab Nationalist liberation movements against Britain hurt the United States' goals of creating strong defensive pacts in the region.¹⁶⁷ What Washington failed to realize was that by 1955 Nasser was ready to make drastic policy changes to maintain Egypt's regional political dominance as well as his own regime's political security.¹⁶⁸

Nasser openly confirmed fear for his personal safety to the United States. His relationships with members of the Revolutionary Command Council and younger army officers were very precarious, and had grown much worse after February, 1955.¹⁶⁹ Foreign Officer Salah Salim noted in 1954 the desire to create a unified Arab army with

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁶⁷ Behbehani, *The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism, 1917-1966*, 131.

¹⁶⁸ Takeyh, *The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine*, 1-8.

¹⁶⁹ August 17, 1955, CIA Current Intelligence Bulletin, Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, CREST Finding Aid, NA, 3.

standardized armaments and command structure.¹⁷⁰ Salim, who supported a drastically more intensive anti-Western policy, became the most notable internal opponent of Nasser. For the Egyptian President, the time had come to protect his nation, and his personal safety. Nasser's fears exacerbated his need for weapons, “the West must meet, or better, the Soviet offer of arms and assistance or Nasser will either be overthrown or forced to accept the Soviet offer,” said Ambassador Byroade. Salim was given a “leave of absence” just before the conclusion of the Czech arms deal. The United States Central Intelligence Agency believed this response was to ensure that Nasser had complete control over the Egyptian army.¹⁷¹

Washington's great hope was that Egypt's role as the champion of Arab Nationalism might align with the West's interests—this seemed plausible as former regimes in Cairo maintained pro-Western positions. This was a fatal underestimation of the charismatic leadership qualities of Nasser.¹⁷²

Anti-Soviet progress in the Middle East was already a reality. Egypt was known to be strongly opposed to Communism, but most crucially the Baghdad Pact created a formal international organization to halt its spread into the area. John Foster Dulles' mission of May 1953 was to obtain a defensive alliance in the region, as this was achieved by 1955 with the formation of the Bagdad Pact, it appeared the United States could push towards bridging relations between Israel and Egypt.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic*, 61.

¹⁷¹ August 30, 1955, CIA Current Intelligence Bulletin, Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, CREST Finding Aid, NA 6.

May 8, 1955, CIA Current Intelligence Bulletin, Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, CREST Finding Aid, NA, 7.

¹⁷² Takeyh, *The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine*, 9.

¹⁷³ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 141.

United States policy makers found Nasser to be the key to affecting positive change in the region. One report stated:

The dominance of Prime Minister Nasir has become increasingly clear. Nasir's personal ascendancy has been consolidated by the elimination from the RCC of certain members such as General Naguib and former Minister of National Guidance and Sudan Affairs, Saleh Salem...the old-line nationalist Wafd Party, the reactionary Muslim Brotherhood, and the disunited Communists have been driven into a precarious underground existence by the regime's effective ban on political parties.¹⁷⁴

Ironically, Salem was an anti-Western proponent, a position that Nasser did not necessarily hold. Salem hoped to create a powerful nation with himself as the dominant force. He was decidedly neutral in terms of Cold War politics and made decisions based upon intended consequences for Egypt and his own power. With all other parties formally disbanded, the United States saw in Nasser a singular power who could be used to defend against Communism and create regional stability, ultimately disregarding Nasser's neutralist policies.¹⁷⁵

The Czech-Egypt arms deal destroyed United States Cold War policy because it led to Soviet entrance into the region. In July 1956 Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal as a development of Nasser's new neutralist foreign policy as defined by the Czech arms deal. This turn away from the West was interpreted – within the context of American Cold War ideology – as a turn towards the USSR and a failure of containment policy.

United States policy makers were shocked and disappointed regarding the arms deal. The United States' policy in the Middle East was to work with Nasser as the

¹⁷⁴ The Outlook for Egyptian Stability and Foreign Policy, November 15, 1955, *FRUS, 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1955, Volume XIV*, 753.

¹⁷⁵ August 30, 1955, CIA Current Intelligence Bulletin, Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, CREST Finding Aid, NA, 6.

dominant figure in the region in order to “engage Egypt in internal development and try to develop a situation in which they could make peace between Israel and Arab States.” If this failed, a workable solution would require the unaltered flow of oil from the region to the West, control of strategic points, transport strategy involving the Suez Canal, and the continued existence of Israel.¹⁷⁶

News of the Czech deal significantly altered Eisenhower and Dulles' regional plans. The Baghdad Pact had just been created as a buffer against Soviet intrusion in the area. In terms of Cold War strategy, the Czech arms deal was disastrous for the United States. The strongest Arab state concluded a massive military deal with the Soviets, creating a long lasting, and binding, connection between the two states. The Czech deal ruined the West's Middle Eastern strategy, specifically, the Tripartite Agreement's bid to stabilize the region by diplomacy.¹⁷⁷

The American media responded with disgust towards Egypt and Nasser. McAlexander argues that the media's response impacted United States policy in the Middle East and continues to influence our perceptions today.¹⁷⁸ Time Magazine called it “startling” and a “bombshell.” Meanwhile, the Ataturk analogy ceased, while many began calling Nasser a fascist. In July 1956, *US News and World Report* said, Nasser was a “new dictator...out to build an empire.” In response to the deal, ninety-four congressmen attached their names to the statement, “the Egyptian-Czech arms deal brings the front of the Cold War to the Egyptian-Israeli frontier, and the survival of Israel is directly and

¹⁷⁶ John M. Hightower, interview by John Luter, January 19, 1968, Columbia University Oral History Project, DDEL, 28.

¹⁷⁷ McAlexander, "Couscous Mussolini: US Perceptions of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the 1958 Intervention in Lebanon and the Origins of the US-Israeli Special Relationship," 368.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 379.

immediately menaced.” Meanwhile, the United States media noted that a triumph by Nasser might embolden other Arab nations, thereby potentially threatening the regional supply of oil.¹⁷⁹

The change in public and political perception of Nasser after the Czech arms deal impacted the way Western policy makers dealt with Egypt in regards to funding improvement projects such as the Aswan High Dam. The press began referring to the Egyptian president as a dictator who was “out to build an empire.”¹⁸⁰ Opinion of Nasser also degraded among the nation's policy makers. Ninety-four US congressmen attached their names to the statement,

It appears that Egypt dreams not only of becoming the dominant power among Arab powers but of actually creating an Egyptian empire. From the Atlantic to India. To that end Egypt and Egyptian agents foment trouble all throughout that area among other things by inflammatory radio broadcasts into French Morocco, and by fomenting trouble in the Sudan they arouse the more peaceful states to a jihad or holy war.¹⁸¹

One Democrat senator from Tennessee, Estes Kefauver referred to the deal as a “turning point” in the region.¹⁸² As McAlexander notes, the Czech arms deal shifted American national perspective. Instead of seeing the Middle East in a biblical, Orientalist view, Americans now saw the region as a place where the horrors of World War II and the Cold War were present. These changes were part of the impact of the Czech arms deal and muddled popular and political support of U.S. bids for the Aswan Dam.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 368-371,

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 369.

¹⁸¹ Congressional Record Vol. 102, Congress 84, Session 2, Subject: The Communist Advance in the Near East, Mr. Kefauver speaking, 2421.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 1817.

¹⁸³ McAlexander, "Couscous Mussolini: US Perceptions of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the 1958 Intervention in Lebanon and the Origins of the US-Israeli Special Relationship," 380-381.

The Aswan Dam provided the United States an opportunity to begin a new policy with Egypt by contributing to the largest change in Egyptian infrastructure since the construction of the Suez Canal.¹⁸⁴ In December 1955, Egypt turned down an American bid to build the Dam. Eleanor Lansing Dulles believed she understood the reason.

Nasser did not want the U.S. to build that dam. He wanted the dam built, but he didn't particularly want us to do it, and he didn't want to have us set out systems to work in his country, because we are too noticing, we're too detailed, we're too supervisory, and he didn't want that much intervention in his affairs.¹⁸⁵

The year of 1955 changed Nasser's foreign policy. He decided he could no longer remain close to the West, even for economic projects. The United States offered a half of the money, with another half provided by the World Bank and Britain. Eugene R. Black, President of the World Bank, believed Egypt was the most important country in the region, even beyond Iran and Saudi Arabia, and that the greatest failure of John Foster Dulles' foreign policy was the inability of America to provide for the Aswan Dam. Black notes that Nasser's purchase of Soviet weapons drove him to accept economic assistance from the USSR for further developments.¹⁸⁶

Nasser did not trust Black and was concerned about losing power in Cairo. "It appears from the terms of the letter that Mr. Black wants to replace me in this country."¹⁸⁷ Nasser needed the dam built, and while he considered Western funding, he realized such a move might counteract the swell in Arab popularity he enjoyed because of the Czech

¹⁸⁴ John M. Hightower, interview by John Luter, January 19, 1968, Columbia University Oral History Project DDEL, 29.

¹⁸⁵ Eleanor Lansing Dulles, interview by John T. Mason, Jr., December 6, 1965, Columbia University Oral History Project, Interview 18, DDEL, 725.

¹⁸⁶ Eugene R. Black, interview by David Horrocks, May 13, 1975, Eisenhower Library Oral History Project, DDEL.

¹⁸⁷ Message from Robert B. Anderson to the Department of State, Cairo, January 19, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1-July 26, 1956, Volume XV*, 28-9.

arms deal, as well as sabotage the careful balancing act between superpowers necessary in order to maintain a policy of Non-Alignment.

Although Israel also looked to the United States for weapons, Eisenhower sent precious few. An American report on the future capabilities of Israel and the Arab states noted that Israel would maintain superiority through August 28, 1956 and between then and April of 1957, they would be essentially equal. After spring of 1957, the Joint Chiefs of Staff noted the Arab states would increase in power.¹⁸⁸ Even with this knowledge, the United States rejected several Israeli offers including 10,000 bomb fuses in the summer of 1956 as Ben-Gurion prepared for war.¹⁸⁹ Eisenhower let his subordinates understand his position was for the good of the American people, "I don't want anybody bringing up the matter of votes in November in connection with the Middle Eastern problem. We will do what we think is right, and if because of that I don't get elected, I will probably be the happiest man around."¹⁹⁰ In another instance, the U.S. President was noted as saying, "I gave strict orders to the State Department that they should inform Israel that we would handle our affairs exactly as though we didn't have a Jew in America."¹⁹¹ Eisenhower wanted to maintain good relations with the region and knew that by giving Israel significant supplies of arms it would upset regional balance—this was also evidenced by their reluctance to sign the Baghdad Pact or a security guarantee with Israel.¹⁹²

The United States scrambled to maintain control of the Middle East. U.S. popular

¹⁸⁸ Israel Case #63, June 15, 1956, File: 784A.5 MSP/1-456, Box 3767, Record Group 59, United States Department of State, General Records, 1955-1959, NA.

¹⁸⁹ Military capabilities of Israel To JCS from Arthur Radford, Chairman JCS, File: 784A.5 MSP/4-1156, Box 3767, Record Group 59, United States Department of State, General Records, 1955-1959, NA.

¹⁹⁰ Jackson to Luce, April 16, 1956, Box 71, Jackson, C.D. Papers, 1931-67, DDEL, 4.

¹⁹¹ Letter from Ike to Swede from the White House, November 2, 1956, File: 1956 November 2, Box 346, Anderson Papers, DDEL, 4.

¹⁹² Levey, "Israel's Quest for a Security Guarantee from the United States, 1954-1956," 61-62.

support for Nasser's regime was almost non-existent, yet Eisenhower attempted to ameliorate the situation by rejecting several Israeli arms shipments. After the Suez Crisis, it became clear to the United States that European powers could not be trusted to act in the Middle East in the favor of American interests.

In the wake of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal and the shift in the balance of power in the region away from the West, the Alpha Plan of January 1956 was a top-secret mission designed by Eisenhower to negotiate long-lasting peace between Egypt and Israel before war broke out. The Czech deal affected the ability of former Secretary of Navy Robert Anderson, the man chosen to bring Ben-Gurion and Nasser to the table, to successfully complete the mission. One British agent noted, "Nasser had changed his ground and said that he feared the other Arab states would conduct a political attack on Egypt if she took the lead towards a settlement."¹⁹³ With the Czech arms deal, Nasser dedicated himself to the Pan-Arab philosophy of anti-Western, anti-Israeli political action, and therefore led to the failure of an Arab-Israeli settlement.¹⁹⁴

The Alpha Plan rested almost solely on the direct interactions of three key individuals, as negotiators and personalities: Ben-Gurion, Nasser, and Anderson.¹⁹⁵ Anderson was chosen for his personal qualities as well as his suitability as a diplomat. In addition to his stature as former Secretary of the Navy, Anderson was also a personal friend of Eisenhower. He visited the Middle East twice in 1956, in both January and March, in such secrecy that not even Anderson's secretary or business associates knew

¹⁹³ British Minutes of a Meeting of Representatives of the United Kingdom and the United States, Foreign Office, London, September 21, 1955, 3:30p.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1955, Volume XIV*, 493-4.

¹⁹⁴ Takeyh, *The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine*, 89.

¹⁹⁵ Telegram from the State Department to the Mission at the United Nations, September 27, 1955, 11:05a.m., *FRUS, 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1955, Volume XIV*, 521.

his whereabouts.

Secrecy was of the utmost importance because Nasser feared if news broke that he was coming to the table with Israel, or even an American representative to discuss peace with Israel, that he would lose what Nationalist credibility he garnered from the Czech arms deal. Anderson's alibi was a vacation to Europe. When he returned in March he wrote a note to an associate, "I have just returned from Europe and have not had a chance before to answer my correspondence." His secretary covered for him. She continued carrying on his business as usual and mailing associates apologies that Anderson was away from the office.¹⁹⁶

Nasser maintained that he would have no hand in sponsoring any policy related to Israel, and that an outside source would have to propose it to the Arab leaders. He concluded talks with Nasser stating:

You seem to talk of the problems with Israel as if they were my problems which I have to settle. They are, in fact, your problems and you must settle them. My only part is to be helpful in trying to sell an agreed plan to other Arab States. I am willing to discuss Egyptian policy and American policy, but you will have to solve the problem of Israeli aggressiveness.¹⁹⁷

Coming to the table with Ben-Gurion would have sabotaged his image as champion of the Pan-Arab movement that the Czech-Egyptian arms deal had built. As for Ben-Gurion, Israel was already preparing for war. According to Takeyh, the Czech-

¹⁹⁶ Robert Anderson to Cecil A. Morgan, March 20, 1956, Folder: Reading File: January-March 1956 (1), Box 334, Robert B. Anderson Papers, 1933-1989, DDEL.

Doris Baker to W.S. Heatly Jr., March 2, 1956, File: Reading File January-March 1956 (2), Box 334, Robert B. Anderson Papers, 1933-1989, DDEL.

¹⁹⁷ Message from Robert B. Anderson to the Secretary of State, at Karachi, Cairo, March 5, 1956, *FRUS, 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1-July 26, 1956, Volume XV*, 302-5.

Egyptian arms deal caused Israel to adopt an increasingly aggressive policy towards Egypt, since in response to the deal, Israel purchased additional armaments from France, and increased their fuel reserves in preparation for war.¹⁹⁸ Ben-Gurion mentioned his need for weapons to Anderson, “the danger [of war] can be averted if we receive enough defensive arms...time is the main factor and if within four or six weeks we do not obtain a minimum of planes and tanks it will not be in our power to take the steps that are required for a [Arab-Israeli] settlement.”¹⁹⁹

Both France and Israel had a vested interest in bringing Cairo back to the status quo. The Czech deal triggered the failure of the Anderson Mission and the arms race the United States feared, as Israel's need to respond to Egypt's actions eventually led to war later in 1956. No amount of personal charisma or rapport could overcome these larger political forces.

The Anderson mission was doomed before it began. In many ways, the Czech deal was the reason for the Suez War, but the nationalization of the Suez Canal proved the impetus for combat operations.²⁰⁰ Immediate Western analysis of the arms deal concluded that increased Russian influence in Egypt threatened the Suez Canal.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Takeyh, *The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine*, 89-93.

¹⁹⁹ From Ben-Gurion to Robert Anderson, Manuscript of Text, to: R.B.A., March 9, 1972, Box 108, Robert Anderson: Papers, 1933-89, DDEL, 38-39.

²⁰⁰ Israel effort to increase stockpiles of petroleum products required for military purposes, November 2, 1955, Folder: Economic Information Summaries 1951-1956 May 13, 1953, Box 3768, Record Group 59, United States Department of State, General Records, NA.

²⁰¹ Memorandum of Conversation, New York, September 26, 1955, *FRUS, 1955-1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1955, Volume XIV*, 517-518.

The Suez Crisis

On July 26, 1956 Gamal Abdul Nasser gave a speech in Alexandria in which he told Egyptian forces to seize and nationalize the Suez Canal. Later that day, Egypt blocked Israeli shipping to the Gulf of Aqaba by closing the Straights of Tiran. Israel immediately interpreted Nasser's actions as an act of war. Although Egypt suspended Israeli shipping through the canal, magazine mogul Henry Luce believed Egyptian control of the Canal might improve the image of the Canal Company. Luce noted that “Nasser is no, repeat no Communist.”²⁰² Luce supported Nasser, “in answer to [the] simple question whether I am for or against Nasser the simple answer is I am for him, repeat, for him...When you find honesty in an outstanding leader it is to be prized.”²⁰³

A French council convened and on July 29, 1956 decided Egypt's actions violated several international agreements. In response, France planned an invasion. Britain, always wary of losing the Canal, saw the nationalization as a direct military and economic threat. With Israel, the three forces planned an invasion of Egypt for that fall. Amin Hewedy argues that the Czech arms deal “was the cause of the Suez Crisis...and the sensitive junction between war and peace in the region.”²⁰⁴

The Czech-Egyptian arms deal was the singular event behind: the nationalization of the Suez Canal and ensuing crisis, further escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the construction of the Aswan High Dam with Soviet aid, the Eisenhower Doctrine mandating American unilateral intervention in future conflicts in the region, and the Pan-

²⁰² From Henry Luce to C.D. Jackson, October 9, 1956, Box 71, C.D. Jackson Papers, 1931-1967, DDEL, 2.

²⁰³ From Henry Luce to C.D. Jackson, May 10, 1956, Box 71, C.D. Jackson Papers, 1931-1967, DDEL.

²⁰⁴ William Roger Louis and Roger Owen, *Suez 1956: The Crisis and Its Consequences* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 162.

Arab national dream as embodied in the United Arab Republic. The events of 1956 exemplified the political reverberations of Soviet intervention and Nasserism.

Through Pan-Arabism, Nasser developed a way to impose Egyptian power upon the region without military action.²⁰⁵ The Czech arms deal allowed Nasser to lead the way for the realization of Arab independence, or at least the proof of its potential. Jordanian king Husayn believed the arms deal changed the face of the Middle East.²⁰⁶ It was the first major break with the West and assertion of international political autonomy, which ultimately allowed for the bold action of nationalizing the Suez Canal. The Czech deal impacted the way Arabs viewed Egypt.²⁰⁷

On October 31, 1956, Israeli paratroopers were deployed across the Sinai Peninsula. French and British warships provided support for the allied ground forces. Aircraft carriers and planes based in Cyprus and Malta provided bombing raids, air superiority, and close air support. While Israel focused its attention on the Sinai and Gaza, Britain and France prioritized the Egyptian air force and deployed soldiers in Port Said in hopes of controlling the Suez Canal. Allied air strikes were launched against Egyptian airfields in the delta. The Egyptian military was unable to successfully respond and suffered several defeats. Cairo responded by scuttling several ships, including a LST filled with rocks, effectively blocking the Suez Canal to traffic for several months. Within days, international opinion of the war waned to the extent that the allies were taking significant political criticism over their involvement.

Countries across the world condemned the action of the allies. Swedish

²⁰⁵ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 171.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 168-171.

Ambassador in London, Gunnar Hagglöf summed up international opinion: "I don't think there is any part of the world where the sympathies for England are greater than in Scandinavia. But Scandinavian opinion has never been more shocked by a British Government's action."²⁰⁸ Within France and Britain, anti-war protests showed policymakers the public's reluctance for further bloodshed. The backlash in Britain was intense:

"I write to you simply to express my complete abhorrence of the policy which the government is pursuing . . . I have voted Conservative in the last three general elections, but I feel quite sure that at the next my vote will be for a Labour candidate."²⁰⁹

The war lasted from October 29 to November 7, 1956. The ensuing peace was supported by the United States and the USSR.²¹⁰

The Suez Crisis ended with the United States and Russia brokering peace. After little more than a week of war, Israel, France, Britain, and Egypt reached an agreement: Cairo retained control of the Suez Canal. The Czech-Egyptian deal signified the entrance of the USSR into the Middle East in accordance with Lenin's political philosophy of solidarity against imperial powers, thereby foreshadowing alliances with Pan-Arab anti-colonial Nationalist movements.²¹¹ British and French involvement in the Suez Crisis, acting as imperial powers, further deteriorated their position throughout the Middle East and North Africa.²¹²

²⁰⁸ Anthony Adamthwaite, "Suez Revisited." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 64.3 (1988): 456.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 456.

²¹⁰ Hostilities in Egypt, November 1, 1956, CIA Current Intelligence Weekly Summary, Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, CREST Finding Aid, NA, 1.

Adamthwaite "Suez Revisited." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, 455.

²¹¹ Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 40.

²¹² Hostilities in Egypt, November 1, 1956, CIA Current Intelligence Weekly Summary, Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, CREST Finding Aid, NA, 3.

The eventual withdrawal of allied forces was a coup for Nasser. Even in military defeat he showed stalwart resilience towards the West which solidified his place as leader of the Pan-Arab movement. For Britain and France, it was a frustrating and humiliating defeat which hurt the political parties in power.²¹³ Other neutral countries such as India and Yugoslavia strongly condemned France, Britain, and Israel for their invasion of Egypt.²¹⁴ Nasser returned to his role as “the military savior” of Egypt.²¹⁵

The Bandung Conference showed Nasser that the neutralist path could serve Nasserism and Egypt. The Czech arms deal and the ensuing Suez Crisis combined with Arab Nationalist rhetoric, made Nasser the Arab people's champion, in addition to the President of Egypt: a true regional charismatic leader. The surge of Pan-Arab support surrounding Nasser's policies decreased support for the Baghdad Pact. Just three years later in 1959, Iraq withdrew from the treaty. It was there-after called the Central Treaty Organization and included Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan.²¹⁶ The Czech-Egyptian arms deal was the singular event that changed Cold War and Middle Eastern policy and its affects are still witnessed today.

²¹³ Britain and France Announce Decision to Withdraw from Egypt, December 4, 1956, CIA Current Intelligence Bulletin, Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, CREST Finding Aid, NA, 3.

²¹⁴ Near East Crisis, October 31, 1956, NSC Briefing, Central Intelligence Agency, CREST Finding Aid, NA, 2.

²¹⁵ Current Intelligence Weekly Summary, December 4, 1956, Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, CREST Finding Aid, NA, 2.

²¹⁶ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, 172.

EPILOGUE

By 1958 Egypt combined with Syria to form the United Arab Republic. For many Arab Nationalists it was the long awaited nation that many thought was impossible. Some believed it could be the catalyst that might form the *umma* into a cohesive political power. The Czech-Egyptian arms deal increased Egypt's military power, galvanized its population, and raised Nasser's Pan-Arab profile – culminating in the formation of the UAR under his, and Egypt's, leadership.²¹⁷

The rise of Pan-Arabism in Syria and Egypt resulted in a union between the Ba'athist party and Nasser and the formation of the UAR. Nasser partnered with Syria only if they did so under his terms—he continued his role as champion of Nasserism.²¹⁸ From 1958-1961 the UAR, although it suffered from many internal issues, was considered the most powerful of Arab states and had significant influence regionally and internationally.²¹⁹ Even after the fall of the UAR in 1961, Nasser continued to hold significant power as President of Egypt until his death in 1970.

In public opinion, by resisting Israel, Britain, and France, Nasser became more than a spokesperson for Cold War neutralism, but also a successful defender of Egypt's interests and the Arab people. The crisis of February 1955 was a catastrophe for Nasser,

²¹⁷ Philip S. Khoury, "Review," *The International History Review* 23.1 (March 2001): 223-225.

²¹⁸ See Illustration 5 to see Nasser announcing to the decision to unite with Syria.

²¹⁹ Parker, J. S. F. "The United Arab Republic." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 38.1 (1962): 15-28.

with the creation of the Baghdad Pact and Israeli attacks along Gaza and the Sinai in Operation Black Arrow. His upward trajectory began after the Bandung Conference in April 1955 when he rose to a position of international leadership. Nasser walked away from the Conference with a new foreign policy of Non-Alignment by playing the interests of the USSR against the West and the means to pursue this policy by acquiring arms from the Soviet Bloc. The Czechoslovakian-Egyptian arms deal was the first action in his new policy.



Illustration 4: Nasser giving a speech to the Egyptian people declaring the political merger of Syria and Egypt into the United Arab Republic, February 1, 1958. Courtesy of the Library of Alexandria photo archives, photo taken February 1, 1958.

The consequences of the Czech deal were immense, but not immediate. From a national defense perspective, Egypt significantly increased its military capacity. Such a large addition of modern weaponry threatened even Israel's defensive ability, but only if Egypt was able to expand and train its military in a timely manner. The deal sparked an increase in Israeli military spending, essentially an arms race between the two most powerful Middle Eastern countries. Increases to Israeli fuel supplies and offensive weaponry provide evidence that Israel may have already decided war was inevitable. From the Czech deal, Nasser acquired a sense of security. With the British garrison removed from the Canal Zone, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal on July 26, 1956.

The Czech deal had significant implications on the Cold War. For the first time the Soviets had reached a large deal with a Middle Eastern nation. This led the way for further Soviet encroachment. By prioritizing economic opportunities over ideological policies, the USSR managed to carve out significant power in the region where before it had none. The arms deal signified a new USSR policy of engagement with the region. Using both military and economic aid, as witnessed in the Aswan Dam, the USSR managed, at the very least, to penetrate a previously Western unified sphere of influence.²²⁰

The Aswan High Dam was eventually built with the help of Russian financial and technical support. About 34,000 people helped in the construction of the Dam, of which 25,000 were Egyptian engineers. Project costs were about one billion dollars. The Dam stops the Nile from flooding, shifts Egypt from flood based, to perennial irrigation, and

²²⁰

Krause, "Military Statecraft: Power and Influence in Soviet and American Arms Transfer Relationships," 329.

generates roughly 2,100 Megawatts of electricity for Egyptian industry and households. The amount of electricity generated per-day is a staggering 10 billion kilowatts, and Lake Nasser (the lake created by blocking the natural flow of the Nile River) holds enough water to equal two years of Nile water flow: the construction of the Dam meant the ability to fully modernize Egypt. “In antiquity we built pyramids for the dead. Now we will build new pyramids for the living.” Without the Aswan High Dam modern Egypt would not exist.²²¹ The USSR's funding of the Dam exemplifies their Middle Eastern policy of gaining influence through financing development projects—a strategy that significantly increased their Cold War power. Today a large concrete sculpture of an Egyptian lotus flower stands nearby as a representation of the partnership between Russia and Egypt in the construction of the Dam.²²²

The American policies designed to use Egypt as the cornerstone for influencing the region were quickly scrapped as Washington hurried to devise a new strategy after the Czech deal. In a special message to congress on January 5, 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower set forth the Eisenhower Doctrine which sought to contain Nasser's Pan-Arab movement, including his Non-Aligned advocacy, and Soviet expansion. The United States hoped to achieve their goals through economic and military aid, and even direct

²²¹ Aswan High Dam, River Nile, WaterTechnology.net, <http://www.water-technology.net/projects/aswan-high-dam-nile-sudan-egypt/>, October 19, 2015.

Thayer Scudder, *The Aswan High Dam Case*, unpublished, 2003, 2-3.

²²² The Aswan High Dam has produced unintended and unfortunate ecological consequences. One cultural issue was the destruction of many archaeological sites. For more information about the Aswan High Dam and its negative ecological impact, read Jason Thompson's *A History of Egypt: From Earliest Times to the Present*.

Efrat, "The Economics of Soviet Arms Transfers to the Third World—A Case Study: Egypt," 437-454.

intervention if needed.²²³

Yaqub argues that the Eisenhower Doctrine was a direct result of the Suez Crisis. As has already been noted, the Czech-Egyptian arms deal was the main catalyst behind the Suez Crisis and therefore is the true reason behind the American implementation of the Doctrine.²²⁴ More to the point, although Eisenhower does mention the Suez Crisis as the reason he is developing a new foreign policy in the Middle East, his focus is entirely on Russia's emergence in the region. Eisenhower states,

The reason for Russia's interest in the Middle East is solely that of power politics. Considering her announced purpose of Communizing the world, it is easy to understand her hope of dominating the Middle East.²²⁵

The Suez Crisis had no relation to Russia, it was purely an interaction between Egypt, France, Great Britain, and Israel. Granted, Eisenhower might be referring to Russia's requests for peace, but more than likely he is referring to the effects of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal. "International Communism, of course, seeks to mask its purposes of domination by expressions of good will and by superficially attractive offers of political, economic and military aid."²²⁶

These "attractive offers" refer to the Czech-Egyptian arms deal concluded just a

²²³ Dwight D. Eisenhower: Special Message to the Congress on the Situation in the Middle East, January 5, 1957, http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/education/bsa/citizenship_merit_badge/speeches_national_historical_importance/eisenhower_doctrine.pdf, accessed October 17, 2015.

²²⁴ Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 4-7.

²²⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower: Special Message to the Congress on the Situation in the Middle East, January 5, 1957, http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/education/bsa/citizenship_merit_badge/speeches_national_historical_importance/eisenhower_doctrine.pdf, Accessed October 17, 2015.

²²⁶ Dwight D. Eisenhower: Special Message to the Congress on the Situation in the Middle East, January 5, 1957, http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/education/bsa/citizenship_merit_badge/speeches_national_historical_importance/eisenhower_doctrine.pdf, accessed October 17, 2015.

year before. Yaqub is mistaken: the Eisenhower Doctrine is not a reaction to the Suez Crisis, it is a response to Russian interference in the region as evidenced by the Czech-Egyptian arms deal, the impact of which was the Suez Crisis. Once Eisenhower witnessed first-hand the shift in regional power caused by the deal, he proclaimed in the Doctrine the power for unilateral United States intervention in the Middle East.²²⁷

The U.S. invoked the Eisenhower Doctrine when, in 1958, they sent marines into Lebanon. Lebanon, like many countries in the Middle East, suffered from the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. Between 1937-1955, the population almost doubled, growing from 925,000 to 1,466,000. Ruled as a French Mandate, Lebanon was given independence on November 26, 1941.²²⁸ In 1957 the public disputed the parliamentary elections. The issue went largely unresolved and by April 1958, it led to strikes and disorder as Lebanon plunged further into chaos. Britain and the United States feared that Egypt (United Arab Republic) was fomenting disorder in Lebanon. This exemplifies the ascendancy of Egypt after the Czech-Egyptian arms deal to a regional power.²²⁹

The United States and Britain acted to maintain Western-friendly governments in Lebanon and Jordan, and thereby the status quo. The invasion of Lebanon in 1958 was the first test of the Eisenhower Doctrine and it was a large success for the West. Both Jordan and Lebanon retained control of their governments.²³⁰

²²⁷ Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*.

Dwight D. Eisenhower: Special Message to the Congress on the Situation in the Middle East, January 5, 1957, http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/education/bsa/citizenship_merit_badge/speeches_national_historical_importance/eisenhower_doctrine.pdf, accessed October 17, 2015.

²²⁸ Ritchie Owendale, "Great Britain and the Anglo-American Invasion of Jordan and Lebanon in 1958," *The International History Review* 16.2 (1994): 285.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 287.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 288, 292, 303.

Eisenhower used the Eisenhower Doctrine to return the United States' ally Great Britain to prominence in the Middle East after the conclusion of the Suez Crisis, and increase confidence in the Jordanian pro-US government. Ultimately, the doctrine failed to isolate Egypt largely because of the Pan-Arab movement, which inspired political action in its sympathizers after the Czech deal. This meant that countries such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia could not risk leaning completely towards the West due to Pan-Arab popular sentiment. Nevertheless, the Lebanese Crisis of 1955 was the first instance of the United States invoking the Eisenhower Doctrine.²³¹

The consequences of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal are still being seen through the lens of the Eisenhower Doctrine today. Since the Lebanese Crisis of 1958, the United States has made many unilateral interventions in Middle Eastern countries. As this essay is being written, the United States has soldiers in the Middle East conducting combat missions, while aerial drones strike militant groups from North Africa to Yemen. The United States' raid on Osama Bin Laden involved a military action in Pakistan without notifying the Pakistani government or military.²³² The Czech-Egyptian arms deal had a lasting impact on Cold War and regional policy, solidifying Nasser as the champion of an Egypt-led Pan-Arabism and brought the USSR into the Middle East resulting in the Eisenhower Doctrine which established the precedent for American military intervention in the region. This essay revises current scholarship and asserts the importance of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal as the catalyst for Russian involvement in the Middle East, Egypt's rise to regional prominence, and Nasser's ascendancy to Pan-Arab leadership.

²³¹ Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 4-7.

²³² For more information see Tom Lansford's *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: A Chronology and Reference Guide* for more information on America's recent involvement in the Middle East.

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