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Challenges to the pursuit of American Cold War interests in the Middle East posed by Gamal Abdel Nasser between 1953 and 1970

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MA Thesis

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**Challenges to the pursuit of American Cold War
interests in the Middle East posed by Gamal Abdel
Nasser between 1953 and 1970**

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Abstract

After a military coup in 1952, the Egyptian Gamal Abdel Nasser developed into the leader of the Arab nationalist movement that was spreading quickly throughout the Middle East. This research will examine how Nasser challenged the pursuit of American Cold War interests in the Middle East. Nasser's entire period of leadership will be covered: from January 1953 when the coup had just taken place until September 1970 when Nasser died. By means of a very extensive examination of the archival documents of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, this research will show that Nasser, as a powerful leader of a secondary power, was capable of seriously obstructing the pursuit of Middle Eastern interests of a superpower like the United States. Interestingly, this case study of the relations between Nasser and the US interests in the Middle East over the course of 18 years will show that Nasser's ability to challenge the pursuit of American interests in the Middle East mainly derived from the continued American attempts to get closer to Nasser, even though he proved time and again that he could not be trusted to cooperate with. The Americans apparently valued the influence of powerful secondary powers in the Cold War very highly and therefore put a lot of effort in the attempts to get these powers to align with the American side of the global Cold War rivalry.

Introduction

Why Nasser?

The central figure around whom this research is shaped is Gamal Abdel Nasser, the charismatic leader of Egypt and Arab nationalism from 1953 until 1970. A connection will be established between his actions and behavior, and the American Cold War interests in the Middle East. Studying Nasser's role in the interests of a superpower such as the United States will create a better understanding of the role of secondary countries within an international community that is dominated by one or two hegemons. The focus of this research is on the Middle East; this was the area where Nasser exerted most of his influence, as well as the world region which the Americans had come to see as increasingly vital within the Cold War sphere of security, economy, and politics.¹

The existing literature on the interests of the US in the Middle East that will be discussed in the literature review shows how complicated a great deal of different competing actors and interests make the situation in the Middle East. This research will put the focus on two of these actors, answering the question of how the pursuit of American Cold War interests in the Middle East was challenged by the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser during his leadership of Egypt and the Arab world between 1953 and 1970? The following three main interests on which US officials based their Middle Eastern policy will be concentrated on throughout the research: the containment of communism, the access to Middle Eastern oil resources, and the protection of Israel.

As Egypt became the key Middle Eastern player after the military coup in 1952 with Nasser as its undisputed leader, this research will focus on how his actions and ways in which he dealt with disputes within and outside of the Middle East challenged the pursuit of American interests in the Middle Eastern region. By choosing to study the full 18 years of Nasser's leadership, one can find out what the role of one of the most influential leaders of a secondary power during the Cold War was in the American pursuit of its interests in a strategically vital region. This question fits into the broader academic debate on the role of secondary powers in a global superpower rivalry, addressed by Lorenz M. Lüthi in his book *Cold Wars*.²

¹ Peter L. Hahn, "Securing the Middle East: The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 36:1, (2006): 38.

² Lorenz M. Lüthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Continuity and change

This research adds to the existing knowledge on Nasser and US-Nasser relations as it specifically examines the effects that Nasser's actions and behavior had on US interests in the Middle East during the full 18 years of Nasser's leadership. Most other works that look into US-Nasser relations only focus on a shorter period of time, for instance one American presidency. Choosing to study the full 18 years of Nasser's reign in this historical research also enables one to look for the continuity and change in his leadership, and how the different American administrations responded to this.

When taking a bird's eye view, continuity will be visible in the overall picture of Nasser's actions and behavior during those 18 years. An example of this is that throughout the entire period that is studied in this research, Israel remains to be considered the one major obstacle when attempts are made to improve the relations between the US and Egypt. Even when a period of optimism was experienced with regard to the US-Egypt relations, the Israeli problem was always looming in the background.

Another factor that makes this research stand out amidst the existing scholarship is the in-depth examination of the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series that was conducted.³ This series contains the documentation of US foreign relations and activities from various government agencies, revealing how American foreign policy was both created and executed over time.⁴ The careful examination of these documents enables one to study the challenges that Nasser posed to US interests in the Middle East in the context of his own time. Studying these documents very closely and extensively, it became clear that the American policy towards the Middle East was also very much subject to change because of Nasser's unpredictable decision-making.

Over time, Nasser would adapt his attitude in ways that were favorable to US interests at some points, but were considered serious threats at others. These trends become visible from the primary sources that were studied for this research, which will be discussed in the following chapter on methodology. Remarkably, it will become evident that even though Nasser proved time and again that he could not be trusted by the US, the Americans continued to attempt to establish friendly relations with him, as they apparently considered him to have the potential to become a very important instrument in the Middle East.

Structure

The research of the *FRUS* documents is divided into four chapters, each dealing with different US presidential terms. By dividing the research chronologically, a coherent overview can be given of the development of the American position and interests in the Middle East in relation to Nasser's actions and

³ "About Us", *Office of the Historian*, accessed on 20 February, 2021.

⁴ "Office of the Historian", *U.S. Department of State*, accessed on 9 May, 2021.

behavior. Before moving on to the empirical chapters, the methodology used in this research will be studied, followed by the literature review and the theoretical framework.

Methodology

This research was conducted by means of qualitative historical analysis for which primary historical documents were examined. This method enabled a very in-depth case study in order to gain more understanding on how Nasser challenged the pursuit of American interests in the Middle East between 1953 and 1970. This research will take as data the primary historical documents from the *FRUS* series.

The period covered in this research is 1953 until 1970, so *FRUS* volumes from this period had to be analyzed. The volumes are ordered per presidential administration, so I had to look into the first and second Eisenhower Administrations from 1953 until 1956 and from 1957 until 1960, the Kennedy Administration from 1961 until his death in 1963, the Johnson Administrations from 1963 until 1964 and from 1965 until 1968, and lastly the first Nixon Administration from 1969 until 1970. After selecting a certain volume, a search tool became available which enabled me to search for all the documents within that volume that contained references to “Nasser” or “Nasir”, as his name was sometimes written. The earliest volumes studied in this research have been declassified since the 1980s, whereas the later volumes have only been available since the late 2000s and even the 2010s.

Using the documents of the *FRUS* enabled me to accurately study every reference made to Nasser in the US State Department over the 18 years that are covered in this research. While analyzing the findings, I could then examine how one or more of the three main interests of the US in the Middle East – oil, Israel and containment – had been challenged by Nasser according to the American officials that had a say in that particular document. By looking for references to Nasser in relation to the American interests in the Middle East in this extensive range of *FRUS* documents, a deeper understanding could be created of Nasser’s role as leader of a secondary power in the challenges posed to a superpower like the US. The qualitative analysis of the *FRUS* documents will be discussed in the empirical chapters of this research, after discussing the literature review and the theoretical framework.

Literature review

Threats to US interests in the Middle East

In this research, the challenges that Nasser posed to the pursuit of American interests in the Middle East are studied. As Douglas Little states in his book *Us versus Them*, the three main interests of the US in the Middle East were the maintenance of access to oil, protecting Israel, and the containment of communism.⁵ Access to oil from the Middle East was very important to the West and could be secured by regional stability, Israel's dependence on the US had created a special relationship between the two nations, and the American fear for Soviet communist expansion to the Middle East was demonstrated by the Eisenhower Doctrine, which authorized the use of armed forces in the region in the case of "armed aggression from any country controlled by international communism".⁶ These three interests are also the interests that will be examined in this research in relation to the challenge that Nasser posed to them.

Peter Hahn states that during the years after World War II, a realization began to grow among American security experts that the Middle East was about to become vital with regard to security, politics, and economy on the world stage.⁷ Within this context, Roland Popp writes that the rise of Nasser-led radical nationalist movements all across the Middle East after the Second World War caused anxiety among the Americans.⁸ They were worried that Moscow would be able to use this widespread Arab nationalism as a way to increase their influence in the Middle East.⁹

Michael E. Latham has another view on how US policymakers felt about postcolonial nationalist movements in countries like Egypt. He writes that US officials expected that when they would demonstrate the US commitment to postcolonial development, the nonaligned and nationalist aspirations in these Third World countries would be channeled in pro-Western directions.¹⁰ These differing

⁵ Douglas Little, *Us versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 16.

⁶ William B. Quandt, "Introduction: How American Middle East Policy is Made", *The Middle East and the United States: History, Politics, and Ideologies*, edited by David W. Lesch and Mark L. Haas, 1-14. (London: Routledge, 2018), 7; Joseph Heller, *The United States, the Soviet Union and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948-1967: Super Power Rivalry*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 24; Jeffrey H. Michaels, "Dysfunctional Doctrines? Eisenhower, Carter and U.S. Military Intervention in the Middle East", *Political Science Quarterly*, 126:3, (2011): 472-473.

⁷ Hahn, "Securing the Middle East", 38.

⁸ Roland Popp, "Accommodating to a working relationship: Arab Nationalism and US Cold War policies in the Middle East, 1958-1960", *Cold War History*, 10:3, (2010): 398.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 398.

¹⁰ Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 66.

perspectives make it unclear how the Americans would feel about a strong postcolonial leader like Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Even though the literature on Nasser is extensive, this research stands out because of its considerable timeframe of 18 years and the strong focus on documents of the *FRUS* and therefore on the relations between the specific different American administrations and Nasser. By taking this approach, it will be possible to define whether Nasser's Arab nationalism indeed had negative effects on the American position in the Middle East as the Americans feared according to Popp, or whether the US could use this movement to demonstrate that they supported decolonization, as Latham writes.

Works on Nasser

Many scholars have dedicated works to Nasser over time. Biographies have been written on him by scholars such as Robert Stephens and Anne Alexander.¹¹ Stephens already published his biography *Nasser: A Political Biography* in 1971, taking a rather positive approach towards Nasser.¹² From an American perspective, this approach might have differed if Stephens would have had access to the *FRUS* documents of the years of Nasser's presidency. He did not have such access however, because the earliest documents on Nasser would only be published in the mid-1980s.¹³ Anne Alexander's biography is a later work on Nasser. She provides an overview of his entire life in which she logically also mentions some aspects of his relations with the US, but she leaves out consequences for the US of important events such as Nasser's arms deal with the Soviet bloc in 1955 and the formation of the UAR in 1958.¹⁴

Another way of studying Nasser is by focusing on his leadership of Egypt and the inter-Egyptian and inter-Arab interactions and conflicts that he dealt with. *Making the Arab World* by Fawaz Gerges is an example of such a work that focuses more on these internal politics of Egypt and the Middle East instead of on the global Cold War.¹⁵ Gerges concentrates on the rivalry between Nasser's pan-Arabism and the pan-Islamist movement, mentioning briefly that the US aligned itself mainly with the Islamist states in order to counter the pan-Arab movement.¹⁶ Gerges interviewed some of Nasser's senior advisors who told him that Nasser had hoped to create friendly relations with the US, but that this was made impossible by

¹¹ Robert Stephens, *Nasser: A Political Biography*, (London: Penguin Books, 1971); Anne Alexander, *Nasser*, (London: Haus Publishing, 2005).

¹² Stephens, *Nasser*

¹³ *FRUS*, 1952-1954, 9(1); *FRUS*, 1952-1954, 9(2).

¹⁴ Alexander, *Nasser*

¹⁵ Fawaz Gerges, *Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash that shaped the Middle East*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

the American demand that Egypt would choose sides in the Cold War conflict.¹⁷ This is obviously the Egyptian perspective, and by studying the *FRUS*, the American perspective will be examined in this research.

A book on Nasser that also pays some attention to the role of the US in Nasser's leadership is written by James Jankowski.¹⁸ Jankowski focuses on Nasser's position as leader of Arab nationalism, taking his relations with Western powers and Israel into account.¹⁹ By including these relations, Jankowski manages to demonstrate the difficulties on Nasser's side to establish more friendly relations with these powers. Jankowski's work pays attention to the challenges in the US-Nasser relations, but his research ends in 1961, almost 9 years before the end of Nasser's leadership. As a result, Jankowski does not present a complete analysis of Nasser's presidency, which is an issue that returns in reviewing many of the works on US-Nasser relations.

US-Nasser relations

There are quite a few scholars that have previously studied the relations between the US and Nasser. Some important works include those by Matthew Holland on the period from Roosevelt to Eisenhower and by Peter Hahn on American policies towards the Middle East and Egypt.²⁰ Even though very useful, most of these works only study certain periods of Nasser's years as president, whereas my research will provide an examination of the full 18 years of his leadership.

There is another contribution by David Lesch to a book edited by Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler that also covers most of Nasser's presidency in relation to the US.²¹ In this book chapter, Lesch asks himself the question whether Nasser was a friend or foe to the Americans, but he recognizes correctly that the American relationship with Nasser fluctuated over time and that the Americans never quite knew whether Nasser's actions would turn out beneficial or detrimental to US interests in the Middle East.²² Lesch

¹⁷ Ibid., 202.

¹⁸ James P. Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab nationalism, and the United Arab Republic*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

¹⁹ Ibid., 1-2.

²⁰ Matthew F. Holland, *America and Egypt: From Roosevelt to Eisenhower*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996); Peter L. Hahn, "National Security Concerns in US Policy Toward Egypt, 1949-1956", *The Middle East and the United States: History, Politics, and Ideologies*, edited by David W. Lesch and Mark L. Haas, 64-74, (London: Routledge, 2018); Peter L. Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945-1961*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

²¹ David W. Lesch, "'Abd al-Nasser and the United States: Enemy or Friend'", *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*, edited by Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler, 205-229, (Gainesville, FL: UPF).

²² Ibid., 205.

divides the period from the Truman Administration to the end of Nasser's reign into two acts, the transition between the acts being the aftermath of the Suez Crisis, of which he writes that at this point, Nasser had officially transformed into a foe to the Americans, which I think is a little reductive.²³

Even though my research will show that the period after the Suez Crisis was indeed a very important moment in US-Egypt relations, the accurate study of the *FRUS* documents will result in the discovery of many more changes and fluctuations in the relations between American administrations and Nasser that can be described as essential turning points in the pursuit of American interests in the Middle East. This will be clearly displayed in this research by examining a different presidency in every chapter.

Studying the effect of a leader like Nasser on the interests of a superpower fits into the broader debate on the role of secondary powers during the Cold War addressed by Lüthi.²⁴ Reem Abou-El-Fadl argues in his work on positive neutralism in Egypt that the Cold War power struggle between Washington and Moscow resulted in dynamics of power politics over secondary powers, which reminded newly independent countries of the colonial era and caused them to adopt neutralism.²⁵ Nasser, being a product of the decolonization period himself, shared this tendency towards neutrality. Elie Podeh argues that apart from his tendency towards neutrality, Nasser was also a pragmatic leader who would be willing to cooperate with Western nations if such cooperation would be based on his own terms.²⁶

Moreover, Salim Yaqub wrote a contribution to *The Oxford Handbook on the Cold War* in which he also paid attention to how Nasser could use his influence in the Arab world to establish a public opinion that opposed the US and other Western powers.²⁷ By closely studying the *FRUS* documents, a more specific case study will be presented on such challenges that Nasser posed to the interests of the US in the Middle East in order to create a better understanding of the role of secondary powers during the Cold War.

²³ Lesch, "Abd al-Nasser and the United States: Enemy or Friend?", 211.

²⁴ Lüthi, *Cold Wars*.

²⁵ Reem Abou-El-Fadl, "Neutralism Made Positive: Egyptian Anti-colonialism on the Road to Bandung", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42:2, (2015): 220.

²⁶ Elie Podeh, "The Drift towards Neutrality: Egyptian Foreign Policy during the Early Nasserist Era, 1952-55", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32:1, (1996): 159.

²⁷ Salim Yaqub, "The Cold War and the Middle East. *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, edited by Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde, 249-251, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Theoretical framework

To properly understand the role and interests of both the Americans and Nasser in the years between 1953 and 1970, it is important to define a theoretical framework. With regard to understanding US-Egypt relations, the international relations theories of realism, liberalism, Marxism and constructivism will be used. How these theories will provide a broad framework for understanding the relations between Nasser and the different US administrations will briefly be explained below.

Realism

The Cold War background against which these relations between the US and Nasser play out can well be understood from the perspective of realist theory as defined by John J. Mearsheimer. He writes that from a realist perspective, “international relations is not a constant state of war, but it is a state of relentless security competition, with the possibility of war always in the background.”²⁸ This accurately describes the Cold War situation in the Middle East. Realists do consider it possible for states to cooperate within such a competitive arena, but a peaceful world without competition is not likely.²⁹ It might therefore be possible for the US and Egypt to cooperate if that cooperation serves the national interests of both states, but such friendliness is not likely to last once those national interests shift.

Within realism, the term “bandwagoning” is used to explain the phenomenon that weaker states align with great powers in order to promote their interests in the existing balance of power.³⁰ This concept can be used to explain the policy of the US towards the Middle East. By convincing newly independent Middle Eastern states such as Egypt that the US supported their anti-imperialism, the Americans hoped to encourage those states to align with Washington instead of Moscow. For realists, the question will be whether the US succeeded in this, or whether Nasser’s national interests lay elsewhere, causing him to pose challenges to US interests in the Middle East?

Liberalism

Where realism argues that all actors are potential enemies of each other, liberals believe that peaceful cooperation is possible between states.³¹ Because the self-interest of individuals leads them into social

²⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions”, *International Security*, 19:3, (1994): 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁰ Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In”, *International Security*, 19:1, (1994): 74.

³¹ Bruce Russett, “Liberalism”, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, edited by Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, 68-87, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 69.

contracts that create governments or market-systems, actors will be driven into a position where they have no other choice but to cooperate with one another.³² Especially democratic states are likely to cooperate. This is because democracies will not soon decide to use force against each other, as this would be harmful for the trade between these states.³³ This creates a problem for liberals in the US-Nasser relations, as Nasser's regime was authoritarian instead of democratic.

A positive factor according to liberals would be that the UN had been established after the Second World War as an international organization to maintain the peace, and that both the US and Egypt were members. Liberals argue that the interdependence, which can be promoted by memberships of international organizations, will have a pacifying effect.³⁴ Will this indeed be the case for the US and Nasser?

Marxism

According to Marxism, realist and liberalist explanations of international relations are very limited.³⁵ Where realism and liberalism see humans as social actors that are pre-constituted, Karl Marx's understanding is that humans are historical beings who produce historical processes, and are also products of history themselves.³⁶ Within the Marxist framework, the Italian Antonio Gramsci developed the theory of hegemony, which can be applied to the Cold War-position of the US. This theory describes that in a hegemonic situation, a dominant group will claim to serve the interests of all other groups, while actually recruiting them into its own coalition in order to weaken the opposition.³⁷ Even though Gramsci applied this theory within a single society, using it for understanding the global Cold War situation might justify the suspicion of secondary powers like Egypt towards a hegemon like the US.

Constructivism

Just like Marxism, constructivism is another theory that does not take regularities of different actors for granted. Constructivists raise questions about changing international relations such as transitions from cooperation to conflict. Constructivism does not see human actors as rational individuals, but it emphasizes processes of interaction which cause actors to make certain decisions based on the interaction

³² Mark Rupert, "Marxism", *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, edited by Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, 127-143, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 127.

³³ Russett, "Liberalism", 75.

³⁴ Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Neoliberalism", *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, edited by Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, 88-105, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 91.

³⁵ Rupert, "Marxism", 128.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

they have with others. According to a constructivist explanation of international relations, it is not possible to separate individuals or states from the normative context that shaped them.³⁸ This is important to keep in mind when examining the relations between a Western superpower like the US and a Middle Eastern state like Egypt where a military coup was committed to achieve independence. Having such a different social background also means that the actors involved in the US-Egypt relations are all socially constructed in a different way, which might make cooperation difficult.

The frameworks that these theories provide will be revisited throughout this research when examining how Nasser's actions threatened the pursuit of American interests in the Middle East. By doing so, this research aims to clarify the importance of the role that Nasser played in the unfolding of the Cold War in the Middle East.

³⁸ K.M. Fierke, "Constructivism", *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, edited by Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, 161-178, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 163-164.

1. Nasser Sets The Tone

Introduction 1953-1956

In this first chapter, the following question will be answered: how did Nasser already challenge the pursuit of American interests in the Middle East in the early years of his reign during the first Eisenhower Administration between 1953 and 1956? This chapter will show that in the beginning, the tone of US officials toward Nasser was rather optimistic, as they hoped that Egypt could be won over to the American side of the Cold War rivalry. From 1955 onward however, Nasser's actions seemed to cause the hopes for creating a relationship with Egypt that could be beneficial to US interests in the Middle East to decline considerably.

A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of January 1953 outlines the main obstacles to US influence in the Middle East that Eisenhower inherited.³⁹ Issues such as the American role in the establishment of Israel caused friction, because the Arabs saw this establishment as an act of “ruthless anti-Arab imperialism”.⁴⁰ This shows that the experience of imperialism in the Middle East played a large role in the Arab distrust of Western countries.⁴¹ The Americans on their part believed that this anti-Western, nationalist sentiment in the Middle East could threaten Western oil interests, fearing for further Arab nationalization of the oil resources in the Middle East.⁴²

The overall picture that one gets from this NIE is that the Americans recognize that Egypt is a strong player in the Middle East, but that getting Egypt on their good side might prove challenging. Will Washington succeed in using Nasser to pursue its interests in the Middle East during Eisenhower's first term, or will Nasser already becomes a challenge to American interests early on?

A satisfactory relationship

In May 1953, Secretary of State Dulles traveled to Cairo where he encountered Nasser for the first time.⁴³ Nasser took the opportunity of this meeting to attempt to convince the American delegation that all British influence should be removed from Egypt.⁴⁴ Even though the tone of the conversation remained friendly, Nasser expressed great disappointment when Dulles stated that the “US cannot equip Egyptians

³⁹ National Intelligence Estimate (hereafter NIE), January 15, 1953, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954*, Volume IX, Part 1. (hereafter *FRUS*, followed by year, volume number and page number).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 338-339.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 341.

⁴³ “John Foster Dulles”, *Office of the Historian*, accessed 21 February, 2021.

⁴⁴ Conversation, May 12, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, 9(1):21.

to fight the British”.⁴⁵ In response to Dulles’ statement, Nasser threatened the US by saying that if they would maintain this position, he would have no other choice but to tell his army officers that Washington was withholding arms under the pressure of the British.⁴⁶ This could be problematic for the US, as they were hoping to make Egypt their pro-Western ally in the Middle East.

The American position on an arms sale to Egypt can be explained by the liberal argument that democracies are more likely to cooperate with each other than with authoritarian regimes. Eisenhower would be betraying his democratic British allies by supplying the Egyptians with arms, which is why he chose against it, even though he wanted Nasser to align with the US. This situation shows that even though the tone of the first meetings between the Americans and Nasser was rather friendly, it was hard to combine the attempts at a solid relationship with Nasser with the defending of the interests of America’s British allies.

By the end of 1954, Nasser sent word to Washington that “the need for military aid is desperate” in Egypt, which the Americans could now use to their advantage by making Egypt more dependent on the US and therefore possibly more useful to US interests.⁴⁷ Overall, Eisenhower’s relationship with Nasser seemed satisfactory during these first two years. If the US would be able to provide Nasser with military assistance, realists would say that the US could get Nasser to bandwagon with the Americans, which could cause other secondary powers in the Middle East to follow Nasser’s example. Unfortunately for Eisenhower however, the prospect of military aid would prove insufficiently convincing for Nasser to align with the US.

The first major blow: an arms deal with the Soviet Bloc

After attending the first Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, Nasser adopted a policy of neutralism with regard to the global Cold War rivalry, which can be regarded as a setback for the Americans. After Bandung, it became clear that Nasser was planning on using this policy of neutralism to play Washington and Moscow off against one another. He argued that he was afraid that Western powers would boycott the Arabs if Israel should start a war and that therefore, he had to try to obtain arms from the Soviets.⁴⁸ Such a deal between the USSR and Egypt would now strengthen the opportunities of the Soviets in the Middle East.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Caffery to Department of State, June 29, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, 9(2):2104.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2105.

⁴⁷ Jernegan to Secretary of State, December 31, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, 9(2):2322; Radius to Acting Secretary of State, September 28, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, 9(2):2308.

⁴⁸ Embassy in Egypt to Department of State, June 9, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 14:238.

⁴⁹ Embassy in Egypt to Department of State, July 2, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 14:272.

Nasser's threat to agree to an arms deal with the Soviets can be interpreted as a way of trying to get Washington to meet the requirements that Egypt set for military assistance. During the summer of 1955, Ambassador Byroade tried to convince the State Department to prevent this arms deal from concluding, saying that the Egyptian reliance on Russian arms "very possibly would open Egypt [to] Soviet penetration [in] all spheres with considerable influence [in] other Arab States".⁵⁰ Despite attempts to prevent the deal from happening, Nasser agreed to it in September 1955.⁵¹ Internally in the US, aid to an authoritarian regime and enemy of Israel could not be secured that easily, and this would now only become harder after an arms deal with the Soviets.⁵²

Even though Nasser was not a Marxist, he reasoned along the lines of Gramsci's hegemonic theory in trying to get the US to support him. According to this theory, the Americans would want to convince Nasser that they were willing to support him, while actually their intention was to use Egypt to weaken their Soviet enemies. It was true that one of the reasons why the Americans wanted Nasser to align with them was so that he would not fall into the hands of the USSR, and at first, Nasser's tactic seemed to work. However, domestic politics and public opinion in the US probably made it difficult for the US State Department to offer Nasser a better deal than the USSR, given that Nasser was the enemy of Israel and not a democratic ally of the US.

The second major blow: nationalization of the Suez Canal Company

Despite the setback of the arms deal with the Soviet Bloc, Washington did not seem completely discouraged that a favorable relationship with Egypt might still be possible. They continued to work on a plan to provide Nasser with financial aid for the construction of the High Aswan Dam: a project of enormous proportions that would boost the Egyptian economy.⁵³ For months, it appeared that this Dam would be constructed with aid from the US, until Dulles suddenly declared that it "was not feasible at present for the United States to go forward with this undertaking [the financing of the High Aswan Dam]".⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Embassy in Egypt to Department of State, July 20, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 14:305.

⁵¹ Conversation, September 26, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 14:516-517.

⁵² Richard J. 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*, 11:3, (2011): 364.

⁵³ Murphy to Hoover, May 23, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 14:199-205; James E. Dougherty, "The Aswan Decision in Perspective", *Political Science Quarterly*, 74:1, (1959): 22.

⁵⁴ Silvia Borzutzky and David Berger, "Dammed If You Do, Dammed If You Don't: The Eisenhower Administration and the Aswan Dam", *The Middle East Journal*, 64:1, (2010): 91; Conversation, July 19, 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 15:865.

Given that the construction of the High Aswan Dam was a project of great importance to Egypt, Nasser stated that he would reply to this withdrawal decisively.⁵⁵ In a speech on July 26, 1956, he followed through on this statement by announcing the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company.⁵⁶ He claimed that imperialists from the West had tried once more to extend their influence in the Middle East, but that Arab nationalism has triumphed.⁵⁷ After an extensive history of Western imperialism, Nasser probably knew that this kind of rhetoric would grant him the support of the Egyptians for a daring move like the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company.

This speech in Alexandria marked the beginning of a chain of events that became known as the Suez Crisis and led to the invasion of Egypt by France, the UK and Israel. In a Special National Intelligence Estimate of the July 31, 1956, the challenges that the nationalization of the Canal Company posed to the American interests in the Middle East are outlined. Nasser's action accounted for a strengthened anti-Western and nationalist trend throughout the Middle East, and would encourage the early nationalization of oil pipelines and petroleum facilities.⁵⁸ In addition to this, damage to the relationship between Egypt and the West opened the door for an expansion of Soviet influence in the Middle East.⁵⁹

Conclusions 1953-1956

After the first two years of Eisenhower's presidency, it was possible to be stemmed hopeful that the relations between the US and Nasser could unfold in a way beneficial for the US. However, by concluding an arms deal with the Soviet bloc and nationalizing the Canal Company, Nasser seriously challenged the pursuit of US interests in the Middle East. The arms deal opened the door to more Soviet influence in the Middle East, challenging America's interest of the containment of communism. Nationalizing the Canal Company also played into the hands of the USSR, as it caused the anti-Western sentiment in Arab states to grow. Furthermore, it increased the chances that Western access to Middle Eastern oil would be jeopardized. It seems as if Eisenhower now realized that a trustworthy relationship with Nasser might not be possible, as he describes him as undependable and unreliable.⁶⁰

Something else that becomes clear after Eisenhower's first term is that the Americans had to weigh the different interests in the Middle East against each other constantly, which shows from the American response to the Suez Crisis. When France, the UK and Israel invaded Egypt, Eisenhower condemned the

⁵⁵ Rountree to Acting Secretary of State, July 25, 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 15:897.

⁵⁶ Embassy in Egypt to Department of State, July 26, 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 15:906.

⁵⁷ Nasser, Gamal Abdel. "Discours de Gamal Abdel Nasser sur la nationalization de la Compagnie du canal de Suez". Speech, Alexandria, July 26, 1956, 4.

⁵⁸ Special National Intelligence Estimate (hereafter SNIE), July 31, 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 16:79.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶⁰ MacArthur to Acting Secretary of State, November 20, 1956, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 16:1165.

side of the Israelis. After outweighing US interests in the Middle East, he probably concluded that the interests of preventing Nasser from turning to Moscow because of Washington's support for Israel and stabilizing the region to secure access to oil outweighed the interest of protecting Israel.

In the next chapter, the years of Eisenhower's second term will be studied in order to find out how the relationship between the US and Nasser developed over the next four years.

2. Radicalism and Moderation

Introduction 1957-1960

The question of the second chapter is how Nasser challenged to the pursuit of the three main American interests in the Middle East during Eisenhower's second term between 1957 and 1960? The extent of these challenges will vary over the course of the next four years. A rather strong divide will be seen between the first and last two years of Eisenhower's second term, as was the case in his first term as well. The outlook on American and Western interests in the Middle East in general will continue to deteriorate until well into 1958, but then a sudden change in Nasser's attitude will make the Americans more optimistic.

Characteristic of the communication between Nasser and the Eisenhower Administration at the start of Eisenhower's second Administration is an example given in May 1957 by Raymond Hare, the new Ambassador to Egypt. He writes that Nasser felt like Washington never really took notice of his position on certain topics, which is why he adopted an attitude of "stubborn resistance or intemperate reaction rather than compromise".⁶¹ Constructivists explain how American and Egyptian officials that met with one another were no rational individuals, but acted according to certain processes of interaction. This means that the communication that took place between Nasser and US officials is essential to the development of Washington's relations with Cairo. A lack of good communication could therefore be a primary cause to the deterioration of relations.

Deterioration of the outlook on US interests in the Middle East

An NIE of October 1957 sheds light on how Nasser contributed to the weakened position of the three main US interests in the Middle East in 1957. Firstly, the Arab nationalism led by Nasser had provided an opportunity for Moscow to become more involved in the Middle East. Secondly, the Estimate states that together with the Syrian leaders, Nasser was most activist in his anti-Westernism hostility towards Israel. Finally, the Nasser-led nationalist movements put pressure on the production and transportation of oil in the Middle East. However, the authors do not consider it likely that Nasser and his Syrian counterparts will completely stop the export of oil from the Middle East.⁶²

Even though Nasser was cooperating with Moscow, he kept ensuring US officials that he was definitely no supporter of domestic communism.⁶³ His Syrian allies however, appeared to become more

⁶¹ Embassy in Egypt to Department of State, May 2, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 17:590.

⁶² NIE, October 8, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 12:594-612.

⁶³ Embassy in Egypt to Department of State, September 1, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 13:668.

and more involved with the Soviet bloc during the second half of 1957.⁶⁴ Washington was skeptical of Nasser's positive neutralism, because they saw this as beneficial to communism and therefore not neutral at all. However, the prospects of Syria being added to the Soviet sphere of influence would be even worse.⁶⁵ It appears that this could be an issue that Washington and Nasser agreed on.

Ambassador Hare had already noticed in September 1957 that Nasser sometimes seemed to be speaking on behalf of Syria as well as on behalf of Egypt.⁶⁶ A few months later, Syria and Egypt united in the United Arab Republic (UAR). On the one hand, Nasser's decision to form the UAR with Syria can be said to have served the US interest of Soviet containment in the Middle East, as it countered the domestic movement of communism that had been rising in Syria. On the other hand however, the popularity of Nasser's message of Arab unity among the people of the Middle East worried American officials.⁶⁷ The radical Arab nationalism that Nasser was spreading was considered to be hostile to American interests and Nasser's success was causing the US to be sidelined and unable to exert much influence in the Middle East.⁶⁸ The union of Egypt and Syria into literally the "United" Arab Republic gave the message of Arab unity a boost, of which the first major effects were soon to be seen.

The crises of 1958

In the spring of 1958, Nasser's followers start taking to the streets of Beirut to protest against the US-friendly government of Lebanon.⁶⁹ Not much later, in July 1958, rebel groups led and influenced by Nasser committed a coup in the pro-Western state of Iraq, murdering the crown prince and prime minister.⁷⁰ Two states through which the US could exert influence in the Middle East were now plummeted into crisis because of Nasser's popular call for Arab unity. After the coup in Iraq, Eisenhower mentioned that he considered Nasser's "capture of Arab loyalty and enthusiasm throughout the region" to be the main reason for the trouble that the US was experiencing in the Middle East.⁷¹ This can be explained by looking at the three main interests of the US in the Middle East once more.

⁶⁴ SNIE, September 3, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 13:677-678.

⁶⁵ Department of State to Embassy in Egypt, June 17, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 17:646.

⁶⁶ Embassy in Egypt to Department of State, September 1, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 13:665.

⁶⁷ Rountree to Dulles, March 24, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 12:49.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 50-52.

⁶⁹ Douglas Little, "His Finest Hour? Eisenhower, Lebanon, and the 1958 Middle East Crisis", *Diplomatic History*, 20:1, (1996): 39.

⁷⁰ Conference With the President, July 14, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 11:218.

⁷¹ President to Humphrey, July 22, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 11:364.

Firstly, the Soviets had been able to create the idea amongst Arabs that they supported Arab nationalism, and Soviet influence had vastly increased as a result.⁷² Secondly, one of the principal interests of the West in Iraq was the access to Iraqi oil.⁷³ The Americans predicted in October 1957 that as long as conservative governments such as the one that used to exist in Iraq would maintain power, Western access to Middle Eastern oil would be safeguarded.⁷⁴ An anti-Western, Nasserist coup in Iraq can therefore be regarded as a threat to Western oil interests. Lastly, the spread of Nasser's influence in Israel's neighboring countries obviously alarmed them as well.⁷⁵

Altogether, the year 1958 was a year in which the US seemed to lose its grip on the Middle East. The American objective of getting Nasser to bandwagon with the US in order to promote US interests in the Middle East had failed, as Nasser continued to claim a position of so-called non-alignment. Moreover, some of Nasser's objectives, such as the removal of Israel and the overthrowing of regimes that were friendly to the West, seemed to make it impossible for the US to improve relations with the UAR, and only pushed Nasser further towards the USSR.⁷⁶ This caused Washington to increasingly consider Nasser as a Soviet puppet, a conclusion which they might have drawn too quickly.⁷⁷

The sudden improvement of Nasser's attitude

An unexpected change occurred in Nasser's attitude during the last few days of 1958, when he suddenly started to worry about communist influences on the new regime that had been installed in Iraq after the coup.⁷⁸ He pointed out that he wanted to cooperate with the US on this issue, also if that meant that he would have to ignore the Israeli problem for the time being.⁷⁹ Under Secretary of State Christian Herter even observed that Nasser was becoming more moderate towards Israel than the other Arabs.⁸⁰ President Eisenhower admitted that Nasser might have "grown up a little".⁸¹

Even though the Americans maintained their caution towards Nasser, his realization that communism posed a great threat to the Middle East was seen as beneficial.⁸² The American Ambassador to Jordan,

⁷² National Security Council [hereafter NSC] Planning Board, July 29, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 12:115.

⁷³ Rountree to Dillon, December 22, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 12:369-370.

⁷⁴ NIE, October 8, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, 12:596.

⁷⁵ Briefing Notes Dulles, July 14, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 12:310.

⁷⁶ Dulles to Eisenhower, July 25, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 12:109.

⁷⁷ Conference With the President, July 15, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 11:245.

⁷⁸ Conference With the President, December 23, 1958, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 13:509.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 509-510.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 510.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 510.

⁸² Rountree to Dulles, January 17, 1959, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 13:138.

Sheldon Mills, followed the realist line of thinking when he pointed out to the Jordanian King that Nasser could be trusted to follow a policy that he considered to be in his own and in the Arabs' best interest.⁸³ This is why Nasser's turn against communism was so beneficial for the US: the undisputed leader of the Arab world was now trying to contain communism in the Middle Eastern region himself.

Unexpected as it may be after the setbacks of 1958, the years 1959 and 1960 are fairly quiet with regard to American interests in the Middle East. A National Security Council Report of July 1960 comments on this, stating that "the dynamism of Arab nationalism has been reduced at least temporarily and has lost a good deal of its radical and unifying appeal."⁸⁴ After the major challenges to the American position and interests in the Middle East in 1958, the shift that some Arab states made away from Western influence seemed to soften Nasser's anti-West campaign considerably.⁸⁵

After almost 8 years of presidency, Eisenhower finally met with Nasser during Nasser's visit to the UN in September 1960. During this meeting, Nasser told Eisenhower that he had desired good relations with Washington from the moment he had come to power in 1952, but that Israel had always remained the barrier that had prevented such relations.⁸⁶ Over the next decade, this Israeli problem would only prove to grow further.

Conclusions 1957-1960

During Eisenhower's first term, it seemed as if friendly relations between Nasser and the US could have been possible. Over the course of his second term however, the further spread of Nasser's pan-Arab movement had seriously threatened US interests in the Middle East. The Americans had also come to realize that obstacles such as this revolutionary movement and Nasser's hostility towards Israel would prevent this.

On the positive side, Eisenhower's second term also showed that it was not impossible for Nasser to serve US interests in the Middle East from time to time. As Nasser's turn against the Soviet and communist expansion in 1959 shows, his rule could be beneficial for the US if his interests correlated with the American interests. Another example of this is the formation of the UAR: although the Americans worried about the extension of Nasser's influence throughout the Arab world after forming a union with Syria, this formation did prevent Syrian communists from taking over in that country.

During Nasser's meeting with Eisenhower, he had pointed out the fact that he considered favorable relations between Cairo and Washington impossible because of Israel. This is something to keep in mind

⁸³ Embassy in Jordan to Department of State, May 14, 1959, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 11:715.

⁸⁴ NSC, July 19, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 12:264.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁸⁶ Conversation, September 26, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, 13:603.

when studying the next four years of American interests in the Middle East: what priorities will presidents Kennedy and Johnson have with regard to Israel and the Arab states?

3. American Positivity towards Nasser

Introduction 1961-1964

When John F. Kennedy gave his inaugural speech on the 20th of January 1961, Nasser was probably paying close attention. After 8 years under President Eisenhower, which way would American policy towards the Middle East turn under Kennedy? The question that will be asked in this chapter is how Nasser challenged the American interests of containment, oil, and Israel in the Middle East between 1961 and 1964? This chapter will therefore cover the period between Kennedy's inauguration in 1961 and the inauguration of Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 after he won the elections of 1964.

These years will prove to have been difficult years for Nasser in which he experienced a few major setbacks, starting with the secession of Syria from the UAR in 1961. By adopting an approach of rapprochement towards Nasser, the Americans tried to use this setback to draw Nasser closer into the Western camp of the Cold War rivalry and to create stability in the Middle East, both of which would be beneficial to US interests. However, by intervening in a conflict in Yemen in 1962 and destroying any short-term prospects of stability in the Middle East, Nasser showed once again that he had no desire of being made into a puppet.

The break with Syria and the American response

It seems as if President Kennedy understood what constructivists meant decades after his death when they argued that human actors are not just rational individuals, but that their decisions are based on processes of interaction. By establishing extensive personal correspondence with Nasser, Kennedy tried to create better mutual understanding which he hoped would improve the relations between Washington and Cairo.⁸⁷ He gave examples such as that the US had been pleased to recognize the UAR in 1958, the US itself also being “the product of a union of several independent states”.⁸⁸ Kennedy clearly wanted to establish common ground with Nasser, realizing along a constructivist line that the relations with Nasser had been uneasy because of the completely different backgrounds and global positions of the UAR and the US.

In September 1961, a revolt broke out in Syria and a new, conservative, anti-Egyptian regime was installed that broke with Nasser and left the UAR.⁸⁹ Where the formation of the UAR had been a huge

⁸⁷ Bailey D. Barnes, “From New Frontiersman to Cold Warrior: John F. Kennedy's Failed Rapprochement with Gamal Abdel Nasser and Arab Nationalism”, PhD diss., Middle Tennessee State University, (2018), 2.

⁸⁸ Department of State to Embassy in the UAR, May 11, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 17:111.

⁸⁹ Komer to Bundy and Rostow, September 30, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 17:272.

boost to Nasser's position as leader of the Arab world, this break of Egypt and Syria three and a half years later was a major blow to his prestige.⁹⁰ The Americans recognized that this humiliating situation left Nasser vulnerable to outside influences. Robert W. Komer, the National Security Council member responsible for the Middle East, expressed the concern that this setback might cause Nasser to turn to Moscow for help again, and he advised to treat Nasser with kindness as this might cause him to seek more help from Washington instead of Moscow.⁹¹

The Americans also recognized the threat that Nasser might start lashing out in different directions, feeling humiliated and desperate.⁹² To prevent such events, Komer proposed a new, positive American initiative toward Nasser in December 1961 that was supposed to improve the relations between the US and the UAR and had to prevent the kind of challenges to American interests in the Middle East that Nasser had previously posed.⁹³ This proposal was supported in the State Department in early 1962.⁹⁴

Failure of Washington's positive approach

In its early days, the positive approach towards Nasser and the UAR seemed to be working. By May of 1962, the view of the State Department was that the policy toward Nasser was going "so far so good".⁹⁵ The State Department considered his behavior moderate, from which can be derived that he did not actively challenge US interests in the Middle East during this period.⁹⁶ However, trouble would soon re-emerge in the Middle East as a new, serious conflict materialized in Yemen when a coup was committed by pro-Nasser revolutionaries in September 1962.⁹⁷ Two major Arab powers quickly intervened: the UAR in supporting the revolutionaries and Saudi Arabia in choosing the side of the conservative royalists.⁹⁸

The UAR and Saudi Arabia now stood against each other in Yemen. As Saudi Arabia was of vital interest to the US because of its oil production, the Americans valued stability in Saudi Arabia highly and tried to urge Nasser to withdraw his troops from the Yemeni conflict.⁹⁹ However, such a withdrawal

⁹⁰ Komer to Bundy and Rostow, September 30, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 17:273.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁹² Battle to Bundy, September 30, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 17:269.

⁹³ Komer to Bundy, December 8, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 17:359.

⁹⁴ Rusk to Kennedy, January 10, 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 17:384-395.

⁹⁵ Komer to Kennedy, May 28, 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 17:686.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 686.

⁹⁷ Hilsman to Rusk, September 13, 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 18:91-92.

⁹⁸ Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 98.

⁹⁹ Embassy in Saudi Arabia to Department of State, November 19, 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 18:230; Kennedy to Macmillan, November 15, 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 18:223-224.

would not take place anytime soon. Time would tell that Nasser only withdrew his troops from Yemen in 1967, despite the economic and human hardship that this intervention caused.¹⁰⁰

After months of a relatively successful positive approach towards Nasser, it appeared from his intervention in Yemen that at the end of the day, Nasser valued the inter-Arab relations more highly than his relations with Washington, choosing an intervention in Yemen over securing American goodwill. By preferring solid inter-Arab relations over a friendly relationship with the US, Nasser would always remain capable of challenging the US interests in the Middle East if this would benefit his relations with the other Arab states. Even the kind approach of rapprochement that the Kennedy Administration conducted could not change this.

The transition from Kennedy to Johnson

It seems that the realist argument is convincing on the issue of Kennedy's positive approach towards Nasser in 1961 and 1962. Cooperation might be possible between states, but only as long as this serves the national interests of both states. When Washington tried to use the setback of the secession of Syria to its advantage, Nasser showed that he values his position as powerful leader in the Arab world more highly than good relations with the US. In this case, Nasser's interests did not lie with the US, but with the other Arab states.

Apart from shifting interests, Nasser also continued to feel a certain suspicion towards the Americans which can be justified by Gramsci's hegemonic theory, which argues that a hegemonic power only uses smaller powers to weaken its opponents. This suspicion that Nasser felt towards the US prevented him from ever putting the UAR in a position where it would be too dependent on the US. I think this theory resembles the reality to quite some extent, as the Americans saw Egypt as a possible instrument to prevent their Soviet opponent from strengthening, and were therefore eager on establishing friendly relations with Nasser.

Even though the US-UAR relations that Johnson inherited after Kennedy's death were not exactly warm and friendly, the communication with Nasser had improved because of Kennedy's personal and frequent approach, which Johnson was meaning to continue.¹⁰¹ Komer had predicted that 1964 was going to be a very difficult year in the Middle East, but eventually, no real blowups took place.¹⁰² The Western oil interests in Saudi Arabia had been threatened by Nasser's aggression towards Yemen and the Saudis,

¹⁰⁰ Nawaf Madkhli, "'Nasser's Vietnam': The Egyptian Intervention in Yemen, 1962-1967", PhD diss., University of Arkansas, (2003), 5.

¹⁰¹ Record, January 3, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 18:6.

¹⁰² Komer to Bundy, December 30, 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, 18:860-861; Conversation, January 13, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 21:14.

but other than that, Nasser had not allowed Moscow to gain too much influence and he had not made any serious advances towards Israel.

Nevertheless, the new President Johnson had an image of Nasser as being fundamentally anti-American.¹⁰³ He was also more pro-Israel than Kennedy had been, which was inimical to US-UAR relations as Nasser still saw Israel and the heart of the problem in these relations.¹⁰⁴ Even though the Johnson Administration was doing little to alter the direction towards the Middle East set by Kennedy, Nasser started to feel more hostile towards the US because he regarded Johnson as pro-Zionist and therefore an enemy of Arab nationalism.¹⁰⁵ Despite this new found hostility, US officials state at the end of 1964 that “to date no major U.S. interest has been hurt by Nasser”.¹⁰⁶ However, Nasser’s rhetoric proved that this could change anytime.

Conclusions 1961-1964

Between 1961 and 1964, Nasser experienced considerable setbacks. Syria left the UAR, he intervened in Yemen and got stuck in a costly conflict, and the American president that was relatively friendly towards him was assassinated. By creating personal correspondence with Nasser, Kennedy tried to create common ground and goodwill with his Egyptian colleague. This caused the communication between the two presidents to improve, but it did not bring Nasser much closer into the American Cold War-camp. Instead, he challenged the stability that the US was trying to establish in the Middle East by intervening in Yemen, showing that he would rather strengthen his position as pan-Arab leader among the Arab states than his relations with the US.

Even though Johnson’s administration attempted to continue the solid correspondence that Kennedy had created, Johnson’s relations with Nasser were given a false start. This was because of the combination of the facts that Johnson had a reputation of being pro-Israel and that ever since Nasser’s meeting with Eisenhower in 1960, he had established that the Israeli problem would prevent friendly US-UAR relations. At the end of the previous chapter, the question was asked as to what priorities Kennedy and Johnson would have with regard to Israel and the Arab states? It can now be said that both presidents attempted to divide their attention over Israel as well as over Arab states such as the UAR in order to maintain a solid position in the Middle East that would promote the pursuit of US interests. Kennedy

¹⁰³ Warren I. Cohen, “Lyndon Baines Johnson vs. Gamal Abdul Nasser”, *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968*, edited by Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker: 279-309, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 282-283.

¹⁰⁴ Embassy in the UAR to Department of State, March 4, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 18:55.

¹⁰⁵ Ethan Nadelmann, “Setting the Stage: American Policy toward the Middle East, 1961-1966”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 14:4, (1982): 446.

¹⁰⁶ Conversation, December 23, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 18:254.

started this policy, and Johnson tried to continue it during his first year as unelected president. Unfortunately, the distrust that had been built up in previous years still existed between Nasser and the US, and proved too extensive to overcome.

In the next chapter, Johnson's first real term as elected president between 1965 and 1968 will be discussed, as well as the last years of Nasser's life during the first Nixon Administration.

4. The Final Escalation of Nasser's Reign

Introduction 1965-1970

Secretary Rusk states in January 1965 that “none of our major interests in the Near East have been damaged over the past six years”.¹⁰⁷ He uses this as an argument to convince Johnson that it is important to once more normalize the relations with Nasser by continuing to food aid to the UAR by means of the PL-480 program. However, Johnson was not known to be the president most fond of maintaining friendly relations with the Egyptian president whom he saw as fundamentally anti-American.¹⁰⁸ The question for this chapter will be what kind of challenges to the pursuit of US interests in the Middle East Nasser would actually pose during the last years of his life under Johnson and Nixon? This chapter will cover more time than the previous chapters, as it will also discuss the last year and a half of Nasser's life during the Nixon Administration.

It will show that during the first years of Johnson's term as elected president, the American interests in the Middle East were not challenged very seriously. This changed in May 1967, when a crisis broke out that led to the Six Day War between the Arabs and the Israelis in June. This chapter will show that despite the setbacks that Nasser experienced during the Kennedy Administration, he was still determined to remain the leader of the Arab world and the primary advocate of Arab unity. This will prove to have harmful effects for both his own and the American position in the Middle East.

Political quiet changes into turmoil

US-UAR relations seemed to improve notably in the spring of 1965. Nasser's attitude changed, because he tried to get Washington to resume its suspended PL-480 food aid to the UAR.¹⁰⁹ Nasser adopted a positive tone when addressing Johnson and he started to conduct a policy of restraint toward the Saudis, which was favorable to the stability in the region.¹¹⁰ The US had decided to suspend the PL-480 aid to Nasser in an attempt to get him to adopt courses of action that were more in line with American interests, a strategy that the Americans argued was met with some successes.¹¹¹

After nine months of suspension of PL-480 aid to Nasser, Secretary Rusk realized that if the US would continue this suspension, Nasser would have to look for alternative sources of food aid which he

¹⁰⁷ Rusk to Johnson, January 22, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 18:277.

¹⁰⁸ Cohen, “Lyndon Baines Johnson vs. Gamal Abdul Nasser”, 282-283.

¹⁰⁹ Department of State to Embassy in the UAR, May 21, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 18:461.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 461.

¹¹¹ Rusk to Johnson, October 11, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 18:503.

might find in communist states.¹¹² Therefore, negotiations on the resumption of PL-480 were set up at the end of 1965.¹¹³ Additionally, Nasser reached an agreement with the Saudi King Faisal on the Yemeni issue in August of 1965, which caused UAR-Saudi Arabia tensions to quiet down.¹¹⁴ Overall, the year 1965 in the Middle East ends on a relatively quiet tone, no major US interests being threatened by Nasser at that point.

The prospect of more stability in the Middle East would soon change, as Nasser's interests shifted again. The first setback occurred in March 1966, when he gave a speech in which he threatened to attack Saudi Arabia.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the UAR seemed to be moving closer towards Moscow during 1966, giving the Soviets the opportunity to further spread their influence in the Middle East.¹¹⁶ Even though US officials still wanted to find a way to get closer to Nasser, his trend towards the USSR in 1966 made it hard to legitimize this strategy back home.¹¹⁷ This change of Nasser's attitude in 1966 after the rather positive outlook on US-UAR relations at the end of 1965 shows once more how hard it was to predict his next moves. This is one of the reasons why the relations between Washington and Cairo fluctuated so much during Nasser's presidency.

Arab-Israeli Crisis

As a result of the deterioration of US-UAR relations, many US officials felt that a showdown was rapidly approaching.¹¹⁸ The war in Yemen had damaged Nasser's image as the powerful leader of the Arab world, and in an attempt to restore his prestige, he initiated a war that would prove to have disastrous effects: the Six Day War with Israel.¹¹⁹ Not only would this war have detrimental consequences for Nasser himself, also US interests in the Middle East would be very seriously challenged by the events surrounding the war.

First and foremost, the American interest of the protection of Israel was probably more extensively threatened than ever before, not in the least because Nasser mobilized his army and closed the Gulf of Aqaba for Israeli shipping in May 1967, blocking Israel's access to Asia, Africa, and the Red Sea.¹²⁰ This act of aggression was also felt in Western countries that depended on oil from the Middle East and feared

¹¹² Rusk to Johnson, October 11, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 18:504.

¹¹³ Komer to Johnson, December 28, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 18:527.

¹¹⁴ Hare to Johnson, December 27, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 21:721.

¹¹⁵ Department of State to Embassy in the UAR, March 26, 1966, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 21:747.

¹¹⁶ Intelligence Memorandum CIA, May 28, 1966, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 18:590.

¹¹⁷ Rostow to Johnson, June 18, 1966, *FRUS*, 18:603.

¹¹⁸ Rostow to Johnson, February 14, 1967, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 18:763.

¹¹⁹ Cohen, "Lyndon Baines Johnson vs. Gamal Abdul Nasser", 298.

¹²⁰ Record, May 26, 1967, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 19:134-135; *Ibid.*, 298.

for their supplies because of this blockade.¹²¹ For decades, the Americans had tried to uphold friendly relations with radical Arabs, moderate Arabs, and the Israelis alike, but when the US chose to side with Israel in this conflict with Nasser, most Arabs were forced to believe that “the US is the staunch ally of Israel and can in effect control its actions.”¹²²

In the early years of Nasser’s leadership, the US had tried to get him to bandwagon with their side of the Cold War conflict. As a result of the Arab-Israeli War in 1967 however, the concept of bandwagoning was now working in Nasser’s advantage, as even formerly pro-American states such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran were now moving into Nasser’s camp.¹²³ It therefore seemed that by openly and directly threatening Israel and forcing Washington to choose sides in the Middle East, Nasser beat the Americans at their own game.

The aftermath of the Six Day War

From 5 until 10 June, the Six Day War raged in the Middle East. In the wake of the war, relations between Washington and Cairo were broken and President Johnson stated that the hopes he had had for improving relations with Nasser were now shattered.¹²⁴ Special Assistant to the President Walt Rostow writes in early 1968 that Nasser believed that Washington is 100 percent behind Israel, and “that suspicion of us [the US] is so great that it is not yet possible to move into a new period of friendship based on trust”.¹²⁵ Not only did this end Nasser’s policy of non-alignment, it also meant the end of the strategy of promoting US interests in the Middle East through attempts at a friendly relationship with Nasser.

As the War of Attrition continued in the Middle East and Nasser was in a continued state of belligerency with Israel, Richard Nixon was inaugurated as president of the US in January 1969. To the Americans, it was clear that they had “a responsibility in our own national interest to do everything in our power to try to achieve peace in the Middle East”, as the new Secretary of State William Rogers wrote in May 1969.¹²⁶ The US had been interested in stability in the region for years, but continuing violence had prevented this, causing a constant threat to Israel and the access to Middle Eastern oil resources.

¹²¹ Cohen, “Lyndon Baines Johnson vs. Gamal Abdul Nasser”, 299.

¹²² Saunders to Rostow, May 31, 1967, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 19:209; Board of National Estimates to Helms, June 1, 1967, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 19:228.

¹²³ Board of National Estimates to Helms, June 1, 1967, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 19:228; Intelligence Memorandum CIA, June 3, 1967, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 19:271.

¹²⁴ Department of State to Embassy in Turkey, August 4, 1967, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 19:752; Conversation, August 30, 1967, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 19:816.

¹²⁵ Rostow to Johnson, January 20, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 20:119.

¹²⁶ Department of State to Embassy in Israel, May 10, 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 23:99.

Conclusions 1965-1970

Returning to the question asked in the introduction of this chapter: how was Nasser harmful to US interests in the Middle East between 1965 and 1970? Especially the protection of Israel was very extensively challenged by Nasser in the hostilities before, during, and after the Six Day War. Moreover, the events of 1967 showed where the American allegiance in the Middle East really lay; not with the Arab states (moderate or radical), but with Israel. Had Nasser not forced the Americans to choose sides, the US might have maintained a satisfactory relationship with at least the moderate Arabs.

The fact that Nasser managed to get all of the Arab states to align with him against the US can be seen as a major success. The Americans had been working on solid relations with Arab states for many years in order to promote their interests in the Middle East, but the fact that they had to choose the side of Israel in the Six Day War promptly revealed where their real loyalty lay. As a result, Nasser aligned more clearly with the USSR and US ties with conservative, pro-Western Arab leaders deteriorated, causing the American position and the chances at pursuing the American interests in the Middle East to decline.

In July of 1968, the Israeli Prime Minister Eshkol had described that the “Israelis have come to know Nasser as an actor who tells all who speak to him what he knows they want to hear”.¹²⁷ This is an image that I clearly recognize after studying 18 years of Nasser’s life and leadership. In the last years of his life during the Johnson- and Nixon Administrations however, it became apparent that the issue of the US interest of protecting Israel would eventually cause the end of the non-alignment policy that Nasser had always tried to adhere to so strongly during his reign.

¹²⁷ Embassy in Israel to Department of State, July 17, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 20:419.

Conclusion

Recapping 18 years

After studying the 18 years of Nasser's reign in the Middle East in relation to the US interests in this region, a final balance sheet can be drawn up to answer the question of how Nasser challenged the pursuit of American interests in the Middle East between 1953 and 1970.

Nasser's arms deal with the Soviet bloc after the Bandung Conference and the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company marked the first Eisenhower administration. These events provided the USSR with opportunities to expand its influence in the Middle East and damaged the relations between Western countries and Egypt. Nationalizing the Canal Company also created a strengthened anti-Western sentiment throughout the Middle East that made it more tempting for Arab nations to start nationalizing oil companies.

The formation of the UAR in 1958 can be seen as a legitimization of Nasser's message of Arab unity and was therefore bad news for the American position in the Middle East. Nasserist coups in Lebanon and Iraq also enabled the further spread of Nasser's influence. On the other hand however, developments such as the formation of the UAR prevented communists from taking over in Syria, which promoted Soviet containment. A turning point in Nasser's revolutionary nationalist message occurred in 1959, when he suddenly became aware of the dangers of Soviet communism, and adopted a much more moderate rhetoric.

The positive approach that Kennedy conducted towards Nasser failed because of his costly intervention in Yemen. Not only did this intervention destabilize Yemen, Nasser also took on an aggressive attitude towards Saudi Arabia. This challenged US interests, as stability in Saudi Arabia was of major importance for oil production. The Americans feared that 1964 would become a rough year in the Middle East, but no major blow ups would take place during this first year of Johnson's presidency.

The opposite is true for Johnson's Administration after he was elected in November 1964. Numerous acts of aggression of Nasser against Israel harm the US interest of the protection of Israel, but maybe more importantly, they force the Americans to choose the side of Israel against the Arabs. This is detrimental to the position of the US in the Middle East, which challenges the pursuit of its interests in the area on the long term. Where the Americans had chosen the side of the Egyptians during the Suez Crisis in 1956, it was now clear also to the moderate Arabs that the US would always support Israel.

Theoretical analysis

In this research, realism, liberalism, Marxism and constructivism were used to explain the relations between the US and Egypt between 1953 and 1970. It is a combination of these theories that provides a

framework for understanding these relations. Both Nasser and the US officials made many attempts over the years to come closer to one another and at times, they succeeded. Despite the fact that the Americans seemed to realize early on in their relations with Nasser that he was unreliable, they continued to attempt to establish better relations with him. None of the US' allies thought this was a good idea; throughout the 18 years of documentation studied in this research, American allies such as the UK, Israel, and Iran are exclusively negative about any aid or assistance that the Americans want to provide Nasser with.

Liberalism is a theory that is rather optimistic about cooperation. However, it states that especially democracies are likely to cooperate, and that authoritarian regimes are more likely to make threats and use force, as their leaders are not likely to be held accountable for such actions.¹²⁸ As Egypt was not a democracy, liberals would say that its incentive for long-term cooperation was not big enough. There were however moments during Nasser's leadership when he took a positive approach towards the American interests in the Middle East, because this helped his own agenda. These occasions can legitimize the continuous American attempts at better relations to some extent.

From a realist point of view, cooperation should have been possible when this was in the national interests of both states involved. This means that at times, Nasser could serve the American interests in the Middle East, for example when attacking domestic and foreign communists. However, as soon as the American interests were not Nasser's own interests or Egypt's national interests anymore, any form of cooperation would once again seem unlikely.

Despite Kennedy's efforts to normalize relations with Nasser by trying to create common ground through personal correspondence, which constructivists would say should lead to a more favorable relationship, Nasser's own position and personal desires would always prove stronger than his wish for good relations with the US. As was addressed by the Israelis in 1968, Nasser established a reputation of giving lip service in many instances to many different actors in order to maintain a friendly tone, but proved time and again that he could not be trusted on his word.¹²⁹

Adherers of Gramsci's hegemonic theory would argue that from Nasser's point of view, it was very understandable that he wanted to prevent becoming too dependent on the American hegemons, as they would only use him to weaken their Soviet opposition. There is in fact very much truth in this argument. From the 18 years of US documentation that was studied for this research, it becomes very clear that any move the Americans made towards Nasser was with the global Cold War rivalry in the back of their heads, even though they made it seem to Nasser as if they were genuinely trying to support Egypt.

What does this tell us about the role of secondary powers in a bipolar world order? For one thing, studying the *FRUS* documents has shown that the US as a superpower thought of those secondary powers

¹²⁸ Russett, "Liberalism", 75.

¹²⁹ Embassy in Israel to Department of State, July 17, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, 20:419.

as important instruments that could help achieve American goals. Even though Nasser was not very often willing to cooperate with the US, Washington kept supplying him with aid and assistance, hoping that he would at some point come around. When Nasser started leaning more and more eastward, they still continued this aid for a while in order to prevent him from coming under the complete influence of the USSR. It appears that this way, secondary powers could exert their share of influence on superpowers. However, even though Nasser aimed at conducting a policy of non-alignment in the bipolar world order of the Cold War, it proved to be too difficult for a secondary power to truly stay away from alignment with one of the superpowers.

Suggestions

For further research on the role of secondary powers in global conflicts such as the Cold War, it would be interesting to take more relations between world hegemony and secondary powers and their leaders from the Third World as case studies. By comparing different cases, it would be possible to establish a complete picture of global power relations and the ways in which larger and smaller powers are connected and interact throughout history. Examples could be the relations between the US and Nehru of India or Nkrumah of Ghana, who were just like Nasser also leaders of newly independent countries and of the non-aligned movement.

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