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# Cutting the Gordian Knot: The Post-WWII Egyptian Quest for Arms and the 1955 Czechoslovak Arms Deal

By Guy Laron  
February 2007



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Christian F. Ostermann, Series Editor

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# **Cutting the Gordian Knot: The Post-WWII Egyptian Quest for Arms and the 1955 Czechoslovak Arms Deal**

## **Introduction**

Gamal Abdel Nasser's 27 September 1955 announcement of his decision to buy a massive amount of weapons from Czechoslovakia sent shockwaves around the world. The years preceding 1955 had seen a long lull in the arms race between Israel and the Arab states, the result of strenuous efforts by Britain, the US, and France. Now, the quantity and quality of weapons that Egypt was about to purchase were going to tip the scale in the Arab side's favor. Furthermore, in the years 1952-55, Egypt received considerable sums of American aid money for economic development. American diplomats in Cairo had been trying to convince Nasser to sign a military assistance agreement with the US, which would have allowed Egypt to obtain American arms at low cost. But despite all that effort, it seemed that Egypt was drifting away from the West and into the communist orbit after the announcement of the arms deal.

In Washington and London, high-ranking officials were dispatched to Egypt to attempt to convince Nasser to retract his decision<sup>1</sup>. On the other side of the Egyptian border, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion instructed his chief of staff to prepare for a war in the following summer.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Miles Copeland, *The Game of Nations* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969) pp. 133-140; FRUS Vol. XIV (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1989) pp. 520-22.

<sup>2</sup> Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949-1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 291.

Nasser's motives for concluding the arms deal have become a thorny political question which is reflected in the current historiography.

The Egyptian version of events was that while Nasser was sincere in his intention to establish good relations with the US and purchase American armaments, he understood that he could not accept the terms of the deal he was being offered by the Americans. Nasser further claimed that the Czech arms were necessary because of Israel's devastating attack on the Gaza Strip on the night of 28 February 1955, during which thirty-four Egyptian officers and enlisted men were killed. Realizing that the cause of this defeat was his army's inferior equipment, and believing that such attacks were likely to continue, Nasser concluded that he had no choice but to change course and turn toward the socialist camp.<sup>3</sup>

American scholars who were interested in the question of who lost Egypt concluded that no one was to blame, and that the causes of friction between the US and Egypt were Nasser's exaggerated demands and regional ambitions, which led the arms deal negotiations between the two countries to a dead end.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Mohamed Heikal, *Nasser, The Cairo Documents* (London, 1971) pp. 41-74; Ahmed Hamrush, *Mujtma' Gamal Abed al-Nasser* (Cairo: Maktabat Madboli, 1983) pp. 39-86; and Nasser's own version in his arms deal announcement speech: *Hadith al-Batal al-Zai'm Gamal Abd al-Nasser I'la al-U'ma* (Maktab al-Tahrir, n.d.) pp. 390-394.

<sup>4</sup> Peter L. Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945-1956* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1991) pp. 180-210; Mathew F. Holland, *America and Egypt, from Roosevelt to Eisenhower* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1996) pp. 53-91.



Israeli scholars have tried to disprove the linkage between the Gaza raid and Nasser's decision to buy arms from the socialist camp.<sup>5</sup> The main thrust of their argument is that the Czech arms deal was actually the result of lengthy negotiations which began in 1953.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, they stressed that the deal was concluded with the arrival of an official Czech delegation in mid-February 1955, well before the Israeli raid that took place at the end of that month. Finally, and more broadly, it has been argued that by pursuing an arms deal with the Soviet Union, Nasser was merely a successor to the last *Wafd* government (1950-52), which enacted a neutralist foreign policy and also sought an arms deal with the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> Their conclusion, in any case, is clear: Israel was not to blame.

In recent years, Russian and Czech documents which illuminate the issue have been declassified.<sup>8</sup> These, along with Western sources, reveal that the Egyptian effort to buy weapons from the communist bloc began well before 1955.

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<sup>5</sup> Uri Ra'anani, *The USSR Arms The Third World: Case Studies in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Massachusetts: The M.I.T Press, 1969) pp.1-172; Rami Ginat, *The Soviet Union and Egypt, 1945-1955* (London: Frank Cass, 1993) pp. 205-228; idem "Origins of the Czech-Egyptian Arms Deal: A Reappraisal" in David Tal ed., *The 1956 War* (London: Frank Cass, 2001) pp. 145-168.

<sup>6</sup>Ginat, "Origins....," p.147 emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> Ginat, *The Soviet Union*, pp. 107-134. See also his "The Egyptian Left and the Roots of Neutralism in the Pre-Nasserite Era," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 30 (2003): 5-24.

<sup>8</sup> The first to use these documents were Laurent Rucker, "L'URSS et la Crise de Suez," *Communisme* 49-50 (1997): 154-155, and Petr Zidek, "Vývoz zbraní z Československa do zemi třetího světa 1948-1962" [Arms exports from Czechoslovakia to Third World countries in 1948-1962], *Historie a vojenství* 3 (2002): 540-541. However, Rucker and Zidek were interested primarily in Soviet and Czech foreign policy respectively and they did not use these sources in order to interpret Egyptian foreign policy.

Post-World War II Egyptian governments had, in fact, preferred an arms deal with the West. Despite this preference, the exigencies of the Cold War proved to be insurmountable obstacles to that goal. The British and American position was that Egypt could obtain arms only if it would join an anti-Soviet defense pact modeled along the lines of NATO and SEATO. The Western powers naturally assumed that because the British had their largest military base in the Middle East on the western bank of the Suez Canal, and because Egypt was thought to be the political leader of the Arab World, that the headquarters of the new defense organization, tentatively named Middle East Command (MEC) and later the Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO), would be in Cairo.<sup>9</sup> Yet, because Egyptian public opinion was adamant in its objection to such a move, Egypt could not comply with that desire.

Egyptian statesmen tried to bridge the gap between Western demands and political realities by offering secret and informal commitments in exchange for arms, but these offers were rebuffed several times by British and American officials. Thus, the Anglo-American efforts to organize a regional defense pact created a ‘Gordian knot’ which locked before Egypt the gates to an arms deal with the West.

After the visit of US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to the region in 1953, the Americans and British were in agreement that the chances of convincing Egypt to join the pact were slim and that there was a need to shift efforts towards creating a ‘Northern Tier’ of states which would include Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan. In 1955, this would become the ‘Baghdad Pact’. This change in the structure of the pro-Western defense alliance was

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<sup>9</sup> Magnus Persson, *Great Britain, the United States and the Security of the Middle East: the Formation of the Baghdad Pact* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1998) pp. 80-81.

understood by Egypt, the UK and the US as a new element of the power play that was developing between Egypt and the Western powers. Thus, the 'Northern Tier' was another means of weakening Egypt's hand by finding a substitute to its participation. Egypt's response, further discussed later in this article, was to make continuous efforts to thwart Anglo-American policies by inciting resentment against them through its powerful radio service 'The Voice of Arabs,' and by creating a counter-alliance with Saudi Arabia and Syria.<sup>10</sup>

Naturally, Egyptian governments were trying to cut this 'Gordian knot' as early as 1946 by concluding a major arms deal with the communist bloc. Indeed, Czechoslovakia was known as a major exporter of arms to Third World countries; its massive arms deal with Israel in 1948 was thought to be crucial to Israel's victory in its war with the Arab states that year.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, discussions were held with the Soviets and Czechoslovaks, increasing from 1951 onwards, but with little initial success. Stalin watched the events in the Middle East with great interest, but he was inclined to keep his hands out of the region for fear of British retaliation. The real change in the Soviet attitude towards the Third World would appear only with Khrushchev's rise to power in the years 1953-55.

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<sup>10</sup> See: Elie Podeh, *The Quest for Hegemony in the Arab World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995); Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Radicalism: the Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004) pp. 23-56.

<sup>11</sup> On the rise and decline of the Israeli friendship with the Soviet bloc in general and with Czechoslovakia in particular see: Arnold Krammer, *The Forgotten Friendship: Israel and the Soviet Bloc 1957-53* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974); Yaacov Ro'i, *Soviet Decision Making in Practice: the USSR and Israel, 1947-1954* (New Brunswick: Transaction Press, 1980); Karel Kaplan, Jiří Dufek, Vladimír Solsar, *Československo a Izrael v letech 1947—1953: Studie* (Prague: Ústav Pro Soudobě Dejiny, 1993)

Khrushchev took a keener interest than Stalin in the countries of the Third World in general, and the Middle East in particular, and was more ready to meddle in their affairs.<sup>12</sup>

While it is true that Egypt's contacts with the Soviet bloc started well before 1955, contrary to the previously mentioned Israeli contentions, the Czech-Egyptian arms deal was not concluded in February 1955. In fact, negotiations did not begin in earnest until April 1955, after the Gaza raid. In his conversations with the Soviet ambassador, Nasser explained his reasons for concluding the deal, which included his fear of Israeli attacks and his feeling that there were Anglo-American attempts to ostracize and weaken Egypt and to topple his regime. In other words, beside Israel, the Baghdad Pact was Nasser's primary concern. Another less known consideration was a last-minute attempt to save his regime's Sudan policy.

### **The failed negotiations with Britain: 1947-1951**

The Egyptian quest for a strong military equipped with modern weapons began in 1936, with the Anglo-Egyptian treaty that granted Egypt military sovereignty. Obtaining arms prior to and during World War II was difficult for obvious reasons, but by April 1947 the Nuqrashi government had sent a delegation to the US to explore possibilities for an arms deal.<sup>13</sup> Immediately after the failure of the Egyptian army in the 1948 Palestine War, the Egyptian government decided to allocate £52 million to "build an army which will be

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<sup>12</sup> William Taubman, *Khrushchev: the Man and his Era* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003) pp. 264, 354. See also: Ra'anan, *The USSR* pp. 86-129.

<sup>13</sup> Hamrush, *Mujtma'*, pp. 60-61; Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement, Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 41.

one of the most formidable in the Middle East." It was also reported that an Egyptian delegation ordered tanks, jets, armored vehicles, and several other types of weapons from Britain.<sup>14</sup> Purchasing arms became a more politically urgent issue in 1949, when it was alleged that the Egyptian army had lost the campaign in Palestine because of defective weapons purchased by corrupt generals, aided by equally corrupt politicians. These allegations created a public scandal which was highly embarrassing to the government and the monarchy.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of March 1950, the British informed the Americans that they would sell weapons to the Egyptians as part of a plan to create a British-Egyptian military partnership to defend the Middle East from Soviet aggression.<sup>16</sup> But the British neglected to take into account that the Egyptian government would probably not be able to sign such an agreement due to anti-Western public opinion.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Egypt insisted upon the complete withdrawal of British forces from the Suez Canal. As a result, the British informed the Egyptian government in September 1950 that they had stopped arms shipments.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> FRUS 1950, Vol. V, p. 287.

<sup>15</sup> Roel Meijer, *The Quest for Modernity: Secular Liberal and Left Wing Political Thought in Egypt, 1945-1958* (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 141.

<sup>16</sup> FRUS 1950, Vol. V, pp. 132-133.

<sup>17</sup> For the formation of the anti-Western consensus among the Egyptian *effendia* in the pre-1952 period see: Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Hoda Gamal Abdel Nasser, *Britain and the Egyptian Nationalist Movement, 1936-1952* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> FRUS 1950, Vol. V, p. 186.

In early 1951, Egyptian Prime Minister Nahas Pasha tried to bridge the gap between the political reality and the British demands by offering secret commitments. The essence of this offer was that Egypt would contribute to the defense of the Middle East in exchange for arms, but the British refused. This was the end of Egyptian attempts to obtain weapons from Great Britain. From then on, the issue of the British presence in the Suez remained an obstacle to the delivery of weapons.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, expelling the British from their Suez Canal base became a top priority for the *Wafd* government, deepening the bitter conflict with the British.<sup>20</sup>

#### Initial attempts to buy weapons from the communist bloc: 1946-1952

Because of the obstacles to the purchase of weapons from the West, Egyptian governments made attempts to explore an arms deal with the communist bloc from 1946 onwards.

During 1946-47, Egypt bought weapons from Czechoslovakia totaling 368 million *Korona*. The deal probably involved only small arms such as rifles, and it is unclear how many of those actually reached Egypt because deliveries stopped in 1948, probably as a result of the Soviet Union's support of the Israelis in the Palestine War.<sup>21</sup>

In September 1951, a year after the British refusal to deliver the agreed-upon weapons to Egypt, an anonymous representative of the Egyptian al-Alamia Company met

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<sup>19</sup> J.A. Hail, *Britain's Foreign Policy in Egypt and Sudan, 1947-1956* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996) pp. 69-75.

<sup>20</sup> Michael T. Thornhill, "Britain and the Collapse of Egypt's Constitutional Order, 1950-52," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 13 (2002): 121-152; Gordon, *Nasser's*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>21</sup> Zidak, "Vývoz...", p. 540. See also: Ginat, *The Soviet Union*, pp. 84-85

with the Soviet commercial attaché Victor Alexenko and asked him whether the Soviet Union would be willing to sell weapons to Egypt. The representative asked for tanks, planes, torpedo ships, machine guns, and other items, without mentioning specific quantities. He added that the company would buy the weapons either directly from the Soviet Union or via a third party such as Czechoslovakia. But Andrei Vishinsky, the Soviet foreign minister at the time, and Mikhail Menshikov, the Soviet trade minister, reported to Stalin that they suspected that this request was nothing more than an attempt by the Egyptian government—hiding behind the al-Alamia front—to exert pressure on the British. Accordingly, Alexenko was instructed to tell the Egyptian representative that he was not authorized to discuss this matter and that if this issue was important to the Egyptian government, it surely knew the right conduit for raising it. The embassy was instructed to inform the foreign ministry immediately if any official representative made such a request. Apparently, none ever did.<sup>22</sup>

However, Vishinsky and Manshikov were probably wrong in their assessment; the Egyptian desire for weapons, even from the Communist bloc, was real enough. In 1951, the *Wafd* government, initially without British knowledge, sent a mission to Europe in search of arms.<sup>23</sup> Presumably as a result of this mission's activity, Egyptian representatives were able to sign a new commercial agreement with Czechoslovakia on 24 October 1951, which included a secret clause stating that "the government of Czechoslovakia will provide

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<sup>22</sup> V.V. Naomkin, A.Z. Igorin, Y.D. Zvyagelskaya, G.K. Prozorova ed., *Blizhnivostchni Konflikt, 1947-1956, Dokyamenti, iz Dokumentov Archiva Vneshni Polotiki Rosiskoy Federatsi* (Moscow: Materik, 2003) ["The Middle Eastern Conflict, 1947-1956, Documents from the Russian Federation Foreign Policy Archive"] [hereafter *Dokumenti*] pp. 148-149; see also Hamrush, *Mujtma'*, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon, *Nasser's*, p. 41

the Egyptian government with arms and ammunition - to be selected by Egyptian experts - worth about 600 million Egyptian pounds, to be paid in Egyptian cotton." The Egyptian experts requested 200 tanks, 200 armored vehicles, 60 to 100 MIG-15 planes, 2,000 trucks, 1,000 jeeps, and other items.

Dr. Yussof M. Kabil, the Egyptian chargé d'affairs in Prague, was very much involved in the Egyptian-Czech rapprochement. In mid-November 1951 he arranged a dinner attended by Viliam Shiroky, the Czechoslovak foreign and prime minister and Antonin Gregor, the Czechoslovak trade minister, as well as several other officials from these ministries. During the meeting Kabil urged those present to speed up the arms shipments. In order to convince the Czechoslovaks, he explained that while "Egypt has liberated itself from imperialism forever...it cannot turn [to the Soviet Union] because this will create too much noise." Yet, at the beginning of December 1951 Gregor informed Kabil that for various reasons Czechoslovakia would not be able to supply weapons to Egypt in 1952. And each year, from then until 1955, Prague kept finding new reasons to delay the shipments.<sup>24</sup>

Further attempts to acquire weapons from Czechoslovakia were made in late January of 1952, just before the collapse of the last *Wafd* government. Gregor reported to Shiroky that on 16 January, Henry Mirsa, who presented himself as the director of the Egyptian SOGENA Company, came to the trade ministry. He said he had been sent by the Egyptian finance minister, who was, according to Mirsa, a powerful man within the Egyptian government and for all practical purposes the actual prime minister. His mission, Mirsa added, was to probe the Czechoslovak government secretly on the possibility of an arms

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<sup>24</sup> Zidak, "Vývoz...", pp. 540-54; see also Gordon, *Nasser's*, p. 41.



deal. Mirsa said that, besides machine guns, Egypt was interested in cannon, anti-aircraft guns, and possibly airplanes. In a report that was sent to Shiroky four days later, Gregor's assistant Jan Soucek was able to record six other cases in which companies approached the Czechoslovak government in order to acquire weapons on Egypt's behalf. Soucek explained that because of a decision adopted at the end of 1951 these requests had been denied.<sup>25</sup>

The Egyptian finance and interior minister at the time was Fu'ad Sirag al-Din, and indeed, as Henry Mirsa claimed, he was a very powerful man in the Egyptian government. Later, Sirag al-Din testified that at the end of 1951 he approached several East European governments on behalf of Egypt in order to obtain weapons for Egyptian guerrilla warriors, who were fighting against British forces in Suez.<sup>26</sup> New archival evidence, however, shows that the *Wafd* government was looking for heavy weapons which were not suited for guerilla warfare. Why the government was so anxious to purchase the weapons, particularly in late 1951 and early 1952, is unclear from the archival evidence.

### General Naguib's requests rejected by the East and the West: 1952-54

In July of 1952 a military coup in Cairo brought a group of young officers, calling themselves the Free Officers, to power. While Nasser was perceived by American diplomats as the power behind the throne with General Naguib, the President, as a mere figurehead,<sup>27</sup> archival evidence shows that Naguib had considerable influence over

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<sup>25</sup> Archiv Ministerstvo Zaharanichni Vetsi, [the Czechoslovak foreign ministry, hereafter A MZV] GS-A 1945-54, kr. 147, ob. 211, telegrams No. 57/52-taj and 211/52-taj. The reports were written in the end of February.

<sup>26</sup> Hamrush, *Mujtma'*, p. 61; Ginat, *The Soviet Union*, pp. 115-125; Gordon, *Nasser's*, pp. 23-25.

negotiations for arms deals with both the US and the Soviet bloc during the first two years of the new regime.

Like his predecessors, Naguib was trying to acquire weapons from the West, however, he tended to turn to Washington rather than London.<sup>28</sup> In September and November of 1952, Naguib sent messages to the US, saying that he was prepared, in return for economic and military assistance, to join the planned pro-Western defense alliance then known as MEDO.<sup>29</sup> When there was no meaningful American response, Naguib reiterated several times to Ralph Stevenson, the British Ambassador, that he badly needed military and economic assistance in order to survive politically.<sup>30</sup> US Ambassador Jefferson Caffery wrote at the end of November that several members of the Revolutionary Command Council (the Free Officers' high committee, hereafter RCC) told him they were convinced that the only way for them to preserve the loyalty of the armed forces was to prove that they were able to obtain substantial military aid from the West.<sup>31</sup> In January 1953 a delegation of two Egyptian officers was sent to Washington to discuss a future arms deal with the US. By the end of that month, however, it was clear that contrary to earlier

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<sup>27</sup> Gordon, *Nasser's*, p. 123; Hahn, *The United States*, p. 157.

<sup>28</sup> For the Free Officers relations with the U.S. see: Mohamed Heikal, *Nasser*, pp. 41-74; Elie Podeh, "The drift Towards Neutrality: Egyptian Foreign Policy during the Early Nasserite Era, 1952-55," *Middle Eastern Studies* 32 (1996): 159-178; James Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder, Co., 2002) pp. 48-54, Peter L. Hahn, *The United States*, pp. 180-210; Matthew F. Holland, *America and Egypt*, pp. 53-91; Muhammad Abd el-Wahab Sayed-Ahmed, *Nasser and American Foreign Policy 1952-1956* (London: Laam, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> FRUS 1952-54 Vol. IX pp. 1889, 1877-78, 1879-81, 1894-95; Gordon, *Nasser's*, p. 167.

<sup>30</sup> FRUS 1952-54 Vol. IX pp. 1946-1947.

<sup>31</sup> FRUS 1952-54 Vol. IX p. 1897.

Egyptian expectations, the officers would be forced to return to Cairo empty-handed. Caffery wrote to the State Department that this failure bitterly disappointed the Egyptian leadership.<sup>32</sup>

Consequently, at the end of January 1953, Naguib brought up the arms issue during a meeting with Soviet Ambassador S.M. Kosierev. Naguib explained that Egypt was required to join the planned Middle East Command in order to obtain arms. Kosierev remarked that this did not sound like a good offer. It seems that Naguib was waiting for this reply: he asked Kosierev whether the Soviet Union could become an alternative source of tanks and planes. Kosierev was evasive. The remarks that he added to his report to Moscow show that he was suspicious of Naguib, convinced that Naguib was trying to entrap the USSR by making him refuse the Egyptian request, supplying Naguib with a perfect justification to sign a deal with the West. On 10 February, Vishinski ordered Kosierev to inform Naguib that the Soviet government was not interested in selling arms but this position could be reconsidered if the Egyptian government so wished.<sup>33</sup> Naguib, however, did not meet again with Kosierev until October of 1953; even then Naguib stated that he did not want to raise the arms issue again and that Egypt was primarily interested in buying agricultural machinery.<sup>34</sup>

As in the case of the *Wafd* government, Naguib made attempts to approach the Czechoslovak government directly. On 13 May 1953, during a meeting between the

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<sup>32</sup>FRUS 1952-54 Vol. IX p. 1985; Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt*, p. 51; On the two officers, Ali Sabri and Hasan al-Fqlawi, and their disappointment from the attitude of American officials in Washington see: Hamrush, *mujtmaa'*, p. 63; Copland, *The Game*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>33</sup> *Dokyomenti*, pp. 180-182.

<sup>34</sup> *Dokomenti*, pp. 190-191.

Egyptian ambassador Mohamed Abd Al-Muneim Mohamed and Vaclav David, the Czech foreign minister, Mohamed expressed the Egyptian government's wish to strengthen its commercial relations with Czechoslovakia and added that Egypt would like to implement the secret addition to the 1951 commercial agreement between the two states and buy as much weaponry as Czechoslovakia was prepared to sell.<sup>35</sup>

Another Czechoslovak report of Egyptian requests for arms arrived from Rome. The Egyptian ambassador to Italy (unnamed in the documents)<sup>36</sup> was evidently taking every opportunity to impress the Czechoslovak ambassador, Oldzhich Kaiser. During May and June the Egyptian ambassador lectured Kaiser about Egypt's desire to free itself from the yoke of Western imperialism. He also "spoke favorably on the policy of the 'peace camp states' and explained that their policy conformed to the existential interests of his country." He wanted to draw Kaiser's attention to the fact that "as part of the austerity measures adopted by the new government, diplomatic missions were closed down all over the world; yet Egypt preserved two of its diplomatic missions in the 'peace camp': Moscow and Prague." Finally, on 27 June 1953, the Egyptian ambassador asked Kaiser "to convey to the Czechoslovak government the importance of the following message that came personally from the Egyptian president: that our government would sell about 100 small

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<sup>35</sup> A MZV, TO-T Egypt 1945-54, kr. 1, No. 121.055/53/AO4.

<sup>36</sup> The name of the Egyptian ambassador is not mentioned beside the fact that he was the foreign minister in General Naguib's government. This suggests that he was Ahmed Frag Tiya.

tanks to Egypt as quickly as possible.” Kaiser reported that he reacted evasively but promised to deliver the message to his government.<sup>37</sup>

Still, the failure of these contacts did not weaken Naguib’s resolve. In late 1953 the Egyptian foreign ministry dispatched a formal trade delegation—headed by Hasan Ragab, the undersecretary for war factories at the war ministry—to several Eastern European countries and the USSR. The delegation arrived in Prague in December, and during its stay conducted negotiations with the Czechoslovak government. Ragab told the local officials that he was sent to discuss the strengthening of trade ties between Egypt and Czechoslovakia. He said that the Egyptian government was interested in certain items listed in the commercial agreement of 1951 and, more specifically, in arms shipments. When Czechoslovak officials suggested that a team of experts and technicians be sent to Cairo to further discuss the details of such a transaction, Ragab welcomed it. However, when the idea was later discussed with unspecified “governmental authorities” in Cairo, they stated that the time was not right for the arrival of the Czechoslovak delegation. These authorities reacted in the same manner to similar offers from the Hungarian and Polish governments. All in all, this behavior did not leave a good impression on the Czechoslovak officials who met with the delegation. Therefore, the anonymous Czechoslovak official who wrote the report concluded it thus: “The Egyptian visit was mainly a propaganda trip meant to impress the West and to inspect our industrial facilities. The Hungarian

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<sup>37</sup> A MZV, SM-T 1945-63, kr. 53, ob. “Egypt, Israel, Syria,” No. 0574/I-1/53. Document translated in the appendix. It is interesting to note that the request for “100 tanks”, was first enunciated by Naguib in his conversation with Caffery in November 1952: FRUS 1952-54 Vol. IX pp. 1894-1895.

authorities had the same impression”.<sup>38</sup> It is safe to assume that what hampered the Ragab mission to Czechoslovakia was the rivalry between Naguib and Nasser, the unofficial leader of the Free Officers. Clearly Nasser, who at the time supported a pro-Western policy, had the upper hand.<sup>39</sup>

## Khrushchev's rise to power and the change in Soviet Middle East policy, 1954-1955

While the later parts of this article describe why and how Nasser changed his policy towards the Soviet Union, it is equally important to note that a parallel change was taking place in Moscow. Indeed, without this change Nasser would have found himself in the same situation in which the *Wafd* government and General Naguib found themselves: with the political will to buy arms from the Soviet bloc but without a partner on the other side.

The difference between Stalin's more cautious approach towards the Middle East and Khrushchev's more active attitude had practical ramifications which were evident even by early 1954.

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<sup>38</sup> A MZV, TO-T Egypt 1945-54, kr. 1, No. 121.055/53/AO4 and 412.993/54. Translated in the appendix.

Although the Israeli mission in Prague claimed that Ragab visited arms factories (Ginat, “The Soviet Union and Egypt,” pp. 171-172) there is no mention of that in this report. Further, after the 1955 Czech-Egyptian arms deal was concluded Ragab had to ask for a special permission to visit these factories. See: SUA – A UV [the Czech State Archive, Prague] KSČ – f. 02\2, sv. 67, ar. J. 80, (clause 23), Czechoslovak politburo meeting, 17.10.55.

<sup>39</sup> Ginat, *The Soviet Union*, pp. 171-174.

On 25 March 1954, the Czechoslovak charge d'affaires in Cairo, Arnosht Karepishek, paid a visit to his Soviet colleague, Danil Solod. Karepishek reported that Solod

...asked whether we are going to have an ambassador in Cairo. When I answered that I do not know, he asked me in a straightforward manner whether I made such a proposal and why I didn't. He told me that he thinks that all of the people's democracies should have ambassadors in Cairo and especially us because the Egyptians had an ambassador in Prague and besides Czechoslovakia had an economic and political interest in Egypt... He said that it should be taken into consideration that the Arab countries would have a growing importance for us. Among other things he also asked me why our diplomatic corps in Cairo did not know Arabic.<sup>40</sup>

Further evidence for the profound change which occurred in Soviet foreign policy towards the Middle East is provided by a report which Dr. Otakar Taufer, the general director of the Czech Foreign Commerce Ministry, wrote on his meetings with Soviet officials prior to a planned visit of a trade delegation to Sudan in February 1955:

at this point it is important to point out that the representatives of the Soviet Union with whom I had the opportunity to talk to had a lively interest in the travel of our delegation to Sudan; most of all the Soviet ambassador in Cairo, Danil Semyonich Solod. When he heard about our voyage he was very interested and stated that this trip is important not only in the economic sense but also in the political sense. He pointed out that until now the Soviet Union had not penetrated Sudan and it would be very important if Czechoslovakia could be successful in doing so. The Soviet commercial attaché in Egypt, Comrade Alexenko, was also very much interested in our voyage... Likewise the Soviet ambassador in Ethiopia, Alexei Petrovich

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<sup>40</sup> A MZV, TO-T Egypt 1945-54, kr. 1, Telegram No. 667/54.

Korobochkin, whom I visited during our second day in Addis Ababa, asked the head of the Czech delegation to inform him on our negotiations in Khartoum.<sup>41</sup>

Evidence that Solod was prodding the Czechoslovaks under strict orders from Moscow may be found in a letter sent to him from the Soviet foreign ministry on 7 April 1955. In this letter Solod was reproached for not doing enough to improve relations between the Soviet Union and Egypt as well as other Arab countries. He was instructed to give a detailed assessment of the situation in Egypt and to prepare proposals for improving Soviet-Egyptian relations in the political, economic, and cultural spheres.<sup>42</sup>

The strategic logic behind the new approach to the Middle East in particular and the Third World in general was later formulated in a letter which Ivan Mayevskii, the veteran Soviet deputy minister, sent to Khrushchev and Soviet premier Nikolai Bulganin in December 1955. He wrote:

The next stage in the struggle for the global hegemony of socialism would focus on the liberation of the colonial and semi-colonial peoples. In Asia, Africa, and Latin America there are more prospects of winning the next stage than in Europe or America. Moreover, the loss [by the imperialists] of their colonies and semi-colonies should hasten the victory of Socialism in Europe and eventually in the US as well.<sup>43</sup>

The efforts of the new Soviet leadership, led by Khrushchev, to open a new front in the Cold War—a front in which the Soviet Union might have the upper hand since it was not tainted with a colonial past like Britain, or burdened like the US by the need to

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<sup>41</sup> A MZV, TO-T Sudan 1955-59, kr. 2, ob. 10, No. 332138.

<sup>42</sup>Rucker, "L'URSS...", p. 152

<sup>43</sup>Mayevskii, quoted in Rucker, "L'URSS...", p. 154



coordinate its policy with past colonial powers—forms the background to the positive Soviet responses to Nasser's attempts to secure weapons from the Soviet bloc, described later in this article.

## Establishing Plan B: Nasser and his initial contacts with the Soviet Union, February 1954- March 1955

In 1954, after a two-month-long political struggle between Naguib and Nasser known as the March Crisis, Nasser emerged victorious. Although Naguib retained the position of president, he lost whatever authority or political relevancy he had held.<sup>44</sup>

During that year, much like his predecessor, Nasser had emphasized in his contacts with American diplomats that he badly needed a large arms deal in order to preserve the support of the armed forces in his government; and like his predecessor, he had little success.<sup>45</sup>

As will be argued in detail further on, until March-April 1955 Nasser believed that an arms deal with the U.S. was feasible. Yet at the same time he was trying to develop a 'Plan B,' or a fallback position, in case negotiations with Washington were to fail.<sup>46</sup>

In February of 1954 he sent Aziz al-Mursi, the Egyptian ambassador to the Soviet Union, to meet with Soviet Ambassador Danil Solod in Cairo. Mursi talked about Egypt's need for weapons and the hope that the Soviet Union would be willing to fulfill it. The

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<sup>44</sup> Gordon, *Nasser's*, pp. 127-137; Kirk J. Beattie, *Egypt During the Nasser Years* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994) pp. 89-99.

<sup>45</sup> FRUS 1952-54 Vol. IX pp. 2104-2105; See also pp. 2321, 2322 of the same volume and Copeland, *The Game*, p. 85.

<sup>46</sup> For a similar assessment: Ginat, *The Soviet Union*, p. 174; Hamrush, *Mujtma'*, p. 65.

Soviet diplomat, however, tried to avoid the issue and remarked acidly that relations between the two countries must not be limited solely to the arms issue. Moreover, Solod said that during his stay in Cairo he had not been aware of any special efforts by the regime to strengthen relations, and he could give some examples that proved his point if Mursi wished to hear them. Mursi responded by saying that this was indeed the case, but only because of the fear that the British would respond harshly should it become known that Egypt was trying to improve its relations with the Soviet Union. Solod, much like Kosierev before him, remained incredulous.<sup>47</sup>

Another feeler was sent out in April 1954 when Hassan Tuhamy, head of the intelligence branch in the Egyptian president's office, was sent to Moscow. Tuhamy was able to meet Georgy Zaytsev, the head of the Near Eastern Affairs desk at the Soviet foreign ministry. The latter answered positively when asked whether the Soviet Union would be ready to sell arms to Egypt. The matter was reported to Nasser who decided not to pursue this further.<sup>48</sup>

The issue was raised again on 15 June 1954, this time by higher ranking officials than Mursi and Tuhamy; Nasser himself, accompanied by Minister of Communications Lieutenant Colonel Gamal Salem, met with Solod.

Nasser explained that Egypt needed arms to liberate itself from the occupation and asked Solod what the Soviet position was on that issue. Solod said he did not know but that

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<sup>47</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 199-200 and Rucker, "L'URSS...", p. 152.

<sup>48</sup> Muhammad al-Tawil, *Lubat al-Umam wa-Abd al-Nasser* (Cairo: al-Maktab al-Misri al-Hadith, 1986) pp. 162-3, 168

he would inquire. He then asked Nasser sternly whether this was a formal request. Nasser consulted with Salem in Arabic and then replied in the affirmative.<sup>49</sup>

The importance of this meeting was not limited to the rank of Solod's interlocutors; the conversation touched on other important issues as well. Salem said that he was very interested in the Soviet offer to assist in the development of Egyptian industry, as presented to the Egyptian economic delegation that visited Russia in February 1954. It is remarkable that Salem would say this, considering that his first reaction to these offers in February was an indignant refusal to discuss them. Nasser's original reaction was also negative, yet in June Salem asked for a meeting with Solod and the embassy's commercial attaché. Furthermore, Nasser updated Solod on the latest meeting between the Saudi king and Saleh Salem, Egypt's minister of national guidance and Nasser's envoy to Arab capitals.<sup>50</sup>

All in all, the meeting was an important step but not a breakthrough. Nasser was still hoping he could get a better deal with the US; his 8 July 1954 meeting with Solod may be taken as a case in point. Solod told Nasser that the Soviet government was ready to discuss, in principle, an arms deal with Egypt. Nasser marked something in his notebook,

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<sup>49</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 210-212

<sup>50</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 210-212. Translated in the appendix. On the delegation's visit in Russia and Nasser's and Gamal Salem's reaction to the Soviet offers see: FRUS 1952-54 Vol. IX, p. 2216-2215, 2218; *Docomenti*, pp. 209, 304-305; Hamrush, *Mujtma'*, p. 64, 66; al-Tawil, *Lubat*, pp. 161-2; Meijer, *The Quest*, p. 180; Ginat, "Origins...", pp. 151-152.

asked Solod to convey his gratitude to the Soviet government and did nothing with this information until March 1955.<sup>51</sup>

### March-April 1955 as a turning point in Egyptian-Soviet relations

While in Cairo, as part of a Czechoslovak trade delegation that was sent there in March 1955, Jaroslav Kohot, Czechoslovak deputy minister for foreign commerce, met with the Egyptian deputy war minister, Hassan Ragab. During the meeting the latter delivered a preliminary list of requirements for tanks, airplanes, and cannon. Ragab added that in order to discuss the matter further, an Egyptian delegation would travel to Prague as soon as some important arms shipments from England arrived.<sup>52</sup> Apparently, after reaching a settlement with the Egyptians over the Suez base, the British decided to release some of the arms shipments which Egypt had paid for in 1950. However, these included no more than 30 'Centurion' tanks and 20 jet planes; an amount large enough to make the Egyptians delay their negotiations with the Czechoslovaks but not enough to satisfy their hunger for more arms.<sup>53</sup>

Later, on 6 April, Ragab, to complement the meeting with Kohot, contacted the Soviet military attaché to ask him again whether the Soviet Union was ready to sell arms to Egypt.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 214-216; See memorandum by Gregori Zaytsev, head of the Middle East desk in the Soviet foreign office, dated April '55 quoted in Rucker, "L'URSS...", p. 155.

<sup>52</sup> SŮA, f. ŰPV-Tajné (Secretariat V. Shiroky), kr. 1546, sign. 11/34/26, documents number 009338 and 009931.

<sup>53</sup> Hamrush, *Mujtma'*, p. 67; *Dokumenti* p. 288.

<sup>54</sup> *Dokumenti*, p. 276

This started the chain of events that would ultimately lead to the famous 1955 arms deal. Yet, these dates precede the Bandung Conference, during which Nasser allegedly met with Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier and foreign minister, and asked for his help in obtaining arms from the Eastern bloc.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, several studies and memoirs attach special significance to this conference, claiming that the meetings with other leaders from the Third World had broadened Nasser's horizons and inspired him to take a new direction in his foreign policy.<sup>56</sup> However, during Nasser's first meeting with Solod after his return from Bandung, Nasser assessed the conference decisions in a pragmatic manner and said that they did not amount to much because each country might interpret them differently. Moreover, when Solod and Nasser discussed the meeting with Zhou Enlai, neither described it as crucial to the arms deal negotiation. Indeed, neither of them mentioned that Nasser had discussed the arms issue during his meeting with Zhou Enlai.<sup>57</sup>

In fact, the Israeli raid on Gaza in the end of February and the collapse of Nasser's efforts to create a complementary alliance to the Baghdad Pact were the main motives for the sudden change in Egyptian foreign policy. The Bandung conference, on the other hand, was only an arena in which Nasser implemented his new policy.

In his relations with the US, Nasser was faced with the same dilemma that had burdened Nahas's relations with Britain in 1950. Because Egyptian public opinion was adamant in its objection to any alliance with the US, Nasser wanted the future US-

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<sup>55</sup> Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria : a Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965) p. 235; Heikal, *Nasser*, pp. 57-58; al-Tawil, *Lubat*, p. 167.

<sup>56</sup> Hamrush, *Mujtma'*, p. 52; Copeland, *The Game*, pp. 158-159; Beattie, *Egypt*, pp. 120-121; Ginat, *The Soviet Union*, pp. 192-193.

<sup>57</sup> *Dokumenti*, p. 276.

Egyptian military alliance to be kept secret. Yet, like their British counterparts in 1950, American officials insisted that the alliance be formal and public.<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand, Nasser's conversations with American diplomats and journalists, as well as their British counterparts, suggest that until March-April 1955 Nasser was confident that he would make a deal with the US.<sup>59</sup> Though Nasser never said it in so many words, his belief was that Egypt was indispensable to the Western camp as an ally due to its strategic location, the Suez Canal, and Egypt's dominant position in the Arab world; he felt he had an excellent bargaining position vis-à-vis the US, which was bound to make the Americans yield to his terms.

However, this assessment would have been nullified if the West could find a reasonable strategic alternative to an Egyptian alliance. That was the logic behind the attempts to form an alternative alliance centered on Iraq, known as the Baghdad Pact, and the strenuous Egyptian efforts to thwart this plan. Indeed, one of the recurrent themes in the memoir of Miles Copeland, a CIA operator, was that Nasser did not look at his relations with the Arab world from the standpoint of a pan-Arab ideologue, but rather as a union leader trying to strengthen his bargaining position vis-à-vis the factory management

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<sup>58</sup> FRUS 1952-54 Vol. IX pp. 2314-2316, 2322-2323; For anti-Western public opinion during the Nasserite period and the Muslim Brotherhood-Nasser conflict see: Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) pp. 105-162; Joel Gordon, *Nasser's*, pp. 176-184; Jean and Simone Lacoutre, *Egypt in Transition* (London: Methuen, 1958) pp. 203-215; Rifa'at Sayed Ahmed, *Thawrat al-General: Gamal Abd al-Nasser* (Cairo: Dar al-Hadi, 1993) p. 341-344.

<sup>59</sup> Podeh, "The drift...".

by unionizing the workers. In that sense the Baghdad Pact had been an attempt to weaken Nasser's bargaining position by promoting a pet union leader in his stead.<sup>60</sup>

In January 1955, Turkey and Iraq announced their intention to form a military alliance later known as the Baghdad Pact. It is noteworthy that although Nasser knew since August 1954 that the Soviet Union was willing to sell arms to Egypt, he did not turn to the Soviets at this point, but rather made another attempt to regain his bargaining position vis-à-vis the US by creating a complementary alliance to the Baghdad Pact.

Nasser's conversation in November 1954 with two Pentagon officials provides evidence that he was already thinking at that point about forming an Arab alliance which would complement the 'Northern Tier' (the nickname of the Baghdad Pact in Washington's parlance). He referred then to "the vacuum that exists between the northern tier of defense and the Egyptian base" and added that this vacuum must be filled. According to Nasser, the 'filling' was to be the Arab League.<sup>61</sup> When a larger organization proved difficult to create, from January through March 1955 Nasser tried to form a smaller military alliance between Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. When he met with British ambassador Ralph Stevenson on 5 March, he reiterated his position that the pact he was

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<sup>60</sup> On the support of the Pentagon, the British and, until September 1955, Secretary of State Dulles, in this line of policy see: H.W. Brands, "The Cairo-Tehran Connection in Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East," *The International History Review* 11 (1989): 434-456; Copeland, *The Game*, pp. 126-128; Nigel John Ashton, "The Hijacking of a Pact: The Formation of the Baghdad Pact and Anglo-American Tensions in the Middle East, 1955-1958," *Review of International Studies* 19 (1993) pp. 133-134. For Nasser's stance see: Copeland, *The Game*, pp. 144-170; Elie Podeh, *The Quest for Hegemony in the Arab World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995) p. 111.

<sup>61</sup> FRUS 1952-54 Vol. IX, pp. 2319-2320.

trying to create could fill the gap at the back of the northern defense line.<sup>62</sup> Had Nasser succeeded in his efforts to create this complementary alliance he would have regained his bargaining position.

Yet, while Saleh Salem was able to extract favorable pronouncements from both Syria and Saudi Arabia in the beginning of the process, obstacles appeared when representatives of these countries met in Cairo at the end of March to discuss the details of a tripartite agreement. The main obstacle was the difference of opinion between Nasser and Khaled A'zam, the Syrian foreign minister. While Nasser considered the agreement a loose alliance, A'zam wanted to create a stronger union. The meeting ended in a stalemate and on 4 April the Saudi and Syrian delegations left Cairo.<sup>63</sup>

Ragab contacted the Soviet military attaché exactly two days after the talks in Cairo ended in failure. This can reasonably be interpreted as evidence of Nasser's understanding that his chances to force the U.S.'s hand were shrinking, but that was not his only worry. In July 1954 Nasser began to fear Western collusion to isolate Egypt. His suspicion grew when the US decided to sign a military pact with Libya in September 1954, and became a certainty when the signing of the Baghdad Pact was announced in February 1955.<sup>64</sup>

When Israel attacked the Gaza strip at the end of February 1955, Nasser interpreted this as a third step in the Western plan. Indeed, in two secret memos submitted to Nasser on 15 and 17 June, Hasan Tuhamy, head of the intelligence branch in the president's office, wrote that Egyptian intelligence had information "that Britain and America are

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Podeh, *The Quest*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>63</sup> Podeh, *The Quest*, pp. 129, 136-138; Jankowski, *Nasser's*, p. 76; see also Seale, *The Struggle*, pp. 224-225.

<sup>64</sup> *Dokominti*, pp. 215-216; Jankowski, *Nasser's*, pp. 70-71, 76; Haykal, *Milafat al-Swyes* (Cairo: al-Aharam, 1986) p. 318.



behind Israel's action."<sup>65</sup> Thus, in Nasser's view, the Western powers were attempting to isolate Egypt, surrounding it with pro-Western countries (Libya in the west, Sudan in the south, Iraq and Syria in the north), so it would have to face Israel alone.<sup>66</sup> As negotiations with the Soviet Union were progressing, Nasser saw more and more signs of a Western conspiracy to destroy his regime.

Yet during the Bandung conference, additional unsuccessful negotiations took place between the Egyptian, Syrian, and Saudi delegations regarding the tripartite agreement.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Ragab received a positive answer to his request for a Soviet arms deal on 12 April, but Nasser waited another month to meet with Solod in order to discuss the issue.<sup>68</sup>

Why was Nasser stalling? Surely not because he had hope of renewing negotiations with the US. Since Nasser's return from Bandung, Henry Byroade, the US ambassador, was complaining about Nasser's hostile attitude toward American diplomats residing in Cairo.<sup>69</sup>

A plausible explanation is the fear which existed within the RCC of severe Western retaliation in response to a significant step such as an arms deal with Moscow. The Egyptian officials who met with Soviet and Czechoslovak diplomats repeatedly raised this concern and used this as an explanation for their inclination to move carefully and slowly on their way to an alliance with the Soviet Union. This was also why the Egyptians asked

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<sup>65</sup> Al-Tawil, *Lubat*, pp. 149, 165. The memos are translated in the appendix.

<sup>66</sup> *Dokumenti*, p.256; Seal, p. 235; Heikal, *Millafat*, p. 340; Podeh, *The Quest*, pp. 126-127; see also the Saleh Salem-Solod conversation in *Dokumenti*, p. 287.

<sup>67</sup> Podeh, *The Quest*, p. 143.

<sup>68</sup> *Dokumenti*, p. 277.

<sup>69</sup> FRUS 1955-57 vol. XIV, pp. 188-190.

their Soviet and Czechoslovak counterparts to promise that the negotiations would be kept secret until the very last minute. In one of his conversation with Solod, Nasser confided that his next foreign policy decision should have been made in June 1956, when the last British soldiers were expected to leave. By that time, he said, there would have been no substantial Western military presence in Egypt. But when the Baghdad Pact was announced in February, he was forced to act quickly.<sup>70</sup>

#### May-July 1955: From mock negotiations with Byroade to the Shpilov visit

Nasser's first meeting with Solod after his return from Bandung took place on 21 May. Nasser explained to Solod why he decided to buy weapons from the Soviet Union. He said that Egypt was exposed to Israeli aggression because the Western powers were supplying Israel with heavy weapons while denying them to Egypt. Nasser said that if the Americans were to allow Israel to attack Egypt, the Egyptian army would be annihilated within a day. He added hastily that it was doubtful that the Americans would do such a thing, but on the other hand they had the opportunity to arbitrate each time Israel and Egypt clashed and thereby force Egypt to comply with their rules. Therefore, the government of Egypt decided to make the purchasing of arms its top priority. Nasser said that this was why he had ordered Ragab to contact the Soviet military attaché, but added that he did not know what the response had been. Solod explained that Ragab received a reply on 12 April saying that the Soviet government was ready to discuss the issue. Furthermore, Ragab asked whether the negotiations could take place in Prague and the Soviet government accepted that too, but so far there had been no Egyptian response.

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<sup>70</sup> *Dokumenti*, p. 311. Document translated in the appendix.

Nasser replied that if this were the case then he would send Ragab for negotiations "tomorrow."<sup>71</sup>

Saleh Salem testified that after hearing Solod's proposal, Nasser convened the RCC to discuss the issue, and the RCC decided that a final attempt to obtain military aid from the US should be made.<sup>72</sup> Nasser's conduct in the negotiations with Byroade shows that he complied with the RCC's decision but that he was not doing so in good faith.

When he met with Byroade on 9 June 1955, Nasser asked whether the US would be willing, in principle, to sell weapons to Egypt, but did not specify quantities.<sup>73</sup> When Byroade presented Nasser with Washington's positive response on 22 June, Nasser remained unmoved and said, according to Byroade's report, that "he did not believe we would find ourselves able to let him buy any significant amounts of equipment" and "spoke at some length about apparent inability of tripartite powers to let Egypt become as strong as Israel."<sup>74</sup> But Nasser had to report to the RCC on the American response, and on 1 July, after a long late-night session, the RCC reaffirmed its decision to make a serious effort to purchase arms from the US. Byroade was handed a shopping list so that Washington could price it.<sup>75</sup> When he handed Nasser the estimated cost on 14 August, Nasser conveniently recalled that he had just discussed his financial situation with his finance minister, and "his dollar position was really far worse than he had realized." Nasser then asked Byroade whether he could purchase the equipment with Egyptian pounds, knowing very well that

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<sup>71</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 276-277. Document translated in the appendix.

<sup>72</sup> Seale, *The Struggle*, p. 235.

<sup>73</sup> FRUS 1955-57 Vol. XIV, pp. 237-240.

<sup>74</sup> FRUS 1955-57 Vol. XIV, pp. 263-264.

<sup>75</sup> FRUS 1955-57 Vol. XIV, p. 270.

this was not possible. Byroade answered that there was no precedent to this request and added that he was not hopeful.<sup>76</sup>

After August, the mock negotiations stopped. It is noteworthy that Saleh Salem argued that Nasser tried to use the June Soviet offer as leverage to get a better offer from the Americans, but the Americans did not respond because they thought he was bluffing.<sup>77</sup> This claim probably explains the distorted reports that RCC members received from Nasser on his efforts to purchase arms from the US.

Meanwhile, negotiations with the Soviets continued. On 9 June, Saleh Salem met with Solod and brought up the weapons issue. He said that as much as Egypt would like to get Soviet economic and military assistance, it was worried about the Western response. Britain had sent shipments of arms that were already paid for and the Egyptian army had received 30 jets and 20 tanks. If Britain were to discover that Soviet-Egyptian negotiations had been ongoing over this issue, it would stop further shipments. Egypt did not want to lose this source of weapons and therefore wanted to ensure that the negotiations with the Soviet Union would remain secret. Solod was more than happy to reassure him that this indeed was the case.<sup>78</sup>

The Soviet eagerness to secure this deal can be discerned from the fact that only a week after this meeting, on 16 June, deputy foreign minister Andrei Gromyko and defense minister Marshal Georgy Zhokov recommended that the Central Committee authorize the

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<sup>76</sup> FRUS 1955-57 Vol. XIV, pp. 353-354; *Docomenti*, p. 333

<sup>77</sup> Seale, *The Struggle*, p. 236; see also Hamrush, *Mujtama'*, p. 69.

<sup>78</sup> *Dokomenti*, pp. 286-288.

sale of MiG-15s to Egypt and send corresponding instructions for the Soviet ambassadors in Cairo and Prague.<sup>79</sup>

At the same time, negotiations with the communist bloc were ongoing via another channel. The story of the Czechoslovak-Egyptian negotiations reveals a lack of coordination on both the Egyptian and the Soviet sides. At the end of May 1955, the Czechoslovak Politburo, probably on Soviet encouragement, decided to dispatch another Czechoslovak commercial delegation to Cairo.<sup>80</sup> On 6 June, the Czech charge d'affaires, Arnosht Karpishek, met with Saleh Salem in order to discuss reception arrangements for the Czechoslovak delegation which was due to arrive the next day. During that meeting Salem asked Karpishek about "the possibility of shipments...mainly heavy commodities." When Karpishek said that there were no new developments "he [Salem] was surprised that Ragab had not replied yet and said that a meeting with [Abd al-Hakim] Amer [the Egyptian chief of staff] would be arranged."<sup>81</sup> According to this conversation it appears that both sides knew that the delegation came to discuss an arms deal.

However, the two reports which Jaroslav Kohot, Czechoslovak deputy minister for foreign commerce, wrote to prime minister Viliam Shiroky (one on 14 July during his stay in Cairo and another on 21 July upon his return to Prague) clearly show that the Soviets did not inform their Czechoslovak allies about the existing negotiations with Nasser. Ill-informed and anxious to secure a lucrative arms deal for his government, Kohot turned to his former contact within the Egyptian government – Hassan Ragab. However, Ragab told

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<sup>79</sup>Rucker, "L'URSS...", p. 155

<sup>80</sup> SÚA, f. ÚPV-Tajné (Secretariat V. Shiroky), K. 1546, sign. 11/34/26, documents number 3302\dův\108\55 and 416.036\55-AO\2.

<sup>81</sup> A MZV, TO-T Egypt 1945-54, kr. 1, telegram no. 418.037/55.

him that he was not authorized to discuss the matter further and referred him to Nasser and Abd Al-Hakim Amer.

At the same time, wrote Kohot, the Soviets had given very clear instructions to their ambassador and through him to Ali Sabri, Nasser's assistant and close confidant, that all the specifics of the matter must be discussed directly between the Egyptians and the Czechoslovak delegation. Indeed, the Soviets refused to send any military experts to Cairo to discuss the matter.

Kohot did not say with whom in the Egyptian government he eventually negotiated, but he got the same impression which Saleh Salem was trying to convey to Solod in his conversation with him on 9 June: that Egypt wanted Czechoslovak weapons but feared a Western reaction. Specifically, his Egyptian interlocutors referred to the danger of a severance of the arms shipments trickling in from Britain, the suspension of the American economic aid, and the reaction of the British garrison still occupying the western bank of the Suez Canal. Kohot also reported that the Egyptians said that they did not believe that Czechoslovakia would sell them weapons in the quantity and quality they needed. Furthermore, the Egyptians were apprehensive toward the idea of revealing their specific needs, fearing that this would expose their military weaknesses and that the Czechoslovaks would leak this information. Finally, Kohot mentioned in his reports that towards the end of his sojourn in Cairo, he was able to obtain an elaborate list of required items which included 80 MiG fighters, 20 bombers, 100 heavy and 50 light tanks, and 24 self-propelled 105mm cannon, among other items.

Before Kohot's departure to Prague on 19 July, he met with Sabri who told him that Nasser and Amer had decided to buy the weapons from Czechoslovakia. Sabri added that

from now on he would personally conduct the negotiations. Sabri also informed Kohot that although Egypt would like to immediately begin negotiations, they would not be able to receive the first shipment before 15 August, because most of the French and British arms shipments would have arrived by that time.<sup>82</sup>

At the same time it was clear to both the Egyptians and the Czechoslovaks that the agreements reached between them were conditional on Soviet acquiescence. This approval could be given only by a high ranking Soviet official. Accordingly, at the end of June, Solod asked Saleh Salem to invite Dimitri Shpilov to the third anniversary of the Free Officer's revolution in July. Solod explained that Shpilov had an important role in forming Soviet foreign policy.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Shpilov was the editor of *Pravda*, the soon-to-be foreign minister and, perhaps most important of all, Khrushchev's confidant.<sup>84</sup>

Egyptian attempts to thwart the organization of a pro-Western defense pact in the Middle East played a key role in the decision of the Soviet leadership to dispatch Shpilov with a positive reply to Cairo. For instance, when Gromyko presented the Egyptian invitation before the Central Committee, he recommended that the Committee react positively to the invitation because "the Egyptian government takes a clear stand against the aggressive military alliances which are being organized by the US and Britain in the

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<sup>82</sup> For the Kohot reports see: SÚA, f. ÚPV-Tajné (Secretariat V. Shiroky) kr. 1546, sign. 11/34/26, documents number. 009338 and 009931. Document translated in the appendix; For the length of the delegation's stay in Cairo: A MZV, TO-T Egypt 1945-54, kr. 1, No. 420430; In a brief that was prepared in July 18 for Shpilov's coming trip to Cairo it was mentioned that negotiations over the arms deal were already going on: *Dokumenti*, pp. 305-306; see also FRUS 1955-57 Vol. XIV, p. 266; Seale, *The Struggle*, p. 236.

<sup>83</sup> Seale, *The Struggle*, p. 236.

<sup>84</sup> Rucker, "L'URSS...", p. 152.

Middle East and shows a clear inclination to develop its relations with the Soviet Union”.

<sup>85</sup> Likewise, the brief which was prepared for Shpilov prior to his departure by Georgy Zaitsev, head of the Near Eastern Affairs desk at the Soviet foreign ministry, opened with a report on Egypt’s resistance to Anglo-American pressure to join the Baghdad Pact and its ability to prevent other Arab from joining the Pact as well.<sup>86</sup>

Shpilov arrived in Cairo on 21 July and left on 29 July.<sup>87</sup> During his stay the magnitude of the Russian offer was revealed. Shpilov offered MiG fighters, Ilyushin bombers, and Stalin tanks, mostly payable in cotton over a 12-year period.<sup>88</sup> According to Saleh Salem, a group of Egyptian technicians flew to Prague on 26 July to begin studying the MiGs.<sup>89</sup> A few weeks later, in 20 August, the Egyptian delegation to the arms talks arrived in Prague, led by Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Hafez Ismai’l, head of the operations branch in the Egyptian army.<sup>90</sup>

### August-September 1955: Nasser confides and haggles

During August and September, negotiations entered the final stretch. Nasser and Solod were no longer arguing about whether there would be an arms deal but rather about its size. Nasser talked at length about his fear of Western plots to oust him from power, the

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>*Dokumenti*, p. 303. Document translated in the appendix.

<sup>87</sup> FRUS 1955-57 Vol. XIV, p. 356.

<sup>88</sup> FRUS 1955-57 Vol. XIV, pp. 355-357; Seale, *The Struggle*, p. 236; Hamrush, *Mujtma’*, p. 70.

<sup>89</sup> Seale, *The Struggle*, p. 236.

<sup>90</sup>Zidak, “Vývoz...,” p. 541; for Ismail’s identity see al-Tawil, *Lubat*, p. 170.



escalation of violence on the Israeli-Egyptian border, the need to strengthen the Egyptian military, and his resolve not to yield to the British in Sudan.<sup>91</sup>

On 22 August Ali Sabri stormed into the Soviet embassy and told Solod that he had come on Nasser's orders to convey that lately the al-Azhari government in Sudan had been openly pursuing a policy of separation from Egypt. Moreover, the Egyptian government was concerned by the latest incident on the Israeli-Egyptian border during which an Israeli unit attacked an Egyptian force, killed one officer and injured four enlisted men. This attack, Sabri said, had occurred after a long lull on the border and with no provocation. It was therefore the Egyptian government's conclusion that there was a connection between that incident and the revolt in the southern provinces of Sudan, and that Israel had initiated this attack under British instructions in order to prevent Egypt from concentrating its attention in Sudan.

Furthermore, Nasser had concluded that the British provocations in Sudan and Palestine would stop if the British saw that Egypt had a well-equipped army. Nasser wished to convey a request to hasten negotiations between Soviet and Egyptian representatives in Prague. As a first priority, Egypt asked the Soviet government to send any number of airplanes and bombers without delay. The Egyptian government was even ready for the possibility of Soviet pilots flying these planes into the "al-Maza" airport in Cairo. Sabri added that it might be possible to reach an understanding with the Sudanese

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<sup>91</sup> On Nasser's relations with the West and Israel during that time see: Podeh, *The Quest*, pp. 126-172; Morris, *Israel's*, pp. 350-365.

government concerning the dispatch of Egyptian units to southern Sudan. The Egyptian government could not send troops there without the airplanes.<sup>92</sup>

Indeed, at that stage, Nasser's policy toward Sudan lay in ruins, after Saleh Salem, his minister of state for Sudanese affairs, had blatantly interfered in the 1953 elections there by handing out massive bribes to various politicians. In addition, General Naguib, who was the most popular Egyptian politician in Sudan, had been ousted the following year. After years of talk by Egyptian governments about Sudan being inseparable from Egypt and "the unity of the Nile valley," the Sudanese government seemed poised to declare its independence.

By turning to Solod for arms, Nasser was thus also trying at this late stage of the Sudanese game to help his colleague, Saleh Salem, redeem his policy there. From the second half of 1954, Salem had been striving to use the hatred felt among the black population of Southern Sudan toward the Arab population of the north to foster to a Southern secession from Sudan, which was to be followed by the establishment of a federation with Egypt. The anti-Northern riots in the South in August of 1955 presented Salem with a golden opportunity. Upon learning of the riots, he urged immediate Anglo-Egyptian military action to restore order. The planes that Nasser requested from Solod were clearly the means to implement that plan, which ultimately failed. The British did not swallow the bait, and the planes did not arrive on time.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 316-317. Document translated in the appendix.

<sup>93</sup> Hamrush, *Mujtma'*, pp. 11-25, Jankowski, *Nasser's*, pp. 42-45; M.W. Daly, *Imperial Sudan, The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, 1934-1956*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp. 352-394; Gabriel R. Warburg, *Historical Discord in the Nile Valley* (London: Hurst and Company, 1992) pp. 69-81. On the

The rest of the summer devolved into haggling with Moscow via Solod. Thus, when Sabri met Solod again on 30 August he said that Nasser was concerned by the fact that the Soviet delegation had not yet confirmed whether Egypt would receive tanks. While comrade Shpilov was in Cairo, added Sabri, he promised that Egypt would receive both airplanes *and* tanks. Sabri argued that Israel's latest military provocations against Egypt further underlined its need for tanks.<sup>94</sup> On their next meeting, on 4 September, Solod was able to announce to Sabri the good news: Moscow would be willing to supply tanks.<sup>95</sup> The agreement was signed on 12 September in Prague. The last meeting between Nasser and Solod, in which the details of the deal were discussed, took place three days later. Nasser still expressed concern that an agreement on the sale of heavy type IS-3 tanks, two torpedo ships, and two submarines had not been reached. Nasser emphasized that the details of this deal would soon leak and Egypt's chances of obtaining these weapons from a Western country would be slim. Nasser added that just two weeks prior a war with Israel had been barely averted and that without heavy tanks and a strong fleet, the Egyptian army would never be able to stem an Israeli attack. Nasser stated bitterly that the Western powers were hoping for an Egyptian defeat, as American agents would then be able to create disorder in the country. This could lead to the collapse of his regime and the rise of some Egyptian pasha who would be more accommodating towards the West. In fact, Nasser was so adamant on this point that he was ready to dispatch Ali Sabri to Moscow because,

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1949-51 period see: Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) pp. 700-707.

<sup>94</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 317-319.

<sup>95</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 322-324.

according to him, it was hard to explain all of this with a diplomatic telegram.<sup>96</sup> But Sabri never took such a trip. According to Czechoslovak documentation, the eventual list of weapons to be supplied to Egypt did not include heavy tanks or submarines, but did include twelve torpedo boats.<sup>97</sup>

After all this talk about the Israeli menace, it is noteworthy that in a meeting in late September of 1955, Sabri told Solod that Nasser had agreed to begin negotiations with Israel in order to find a peaceful solution to both the Palestinian problem and the armistice-line skirmishes between Israeli and Egyptian troops.<sup>98</sup> One can conclude, accordingly, that Nasser viewed the Czechoslovak weapons as a defensive rather than an offensive means vis-à-vis Israel.

### Regaining a bargaining position

In two memos submitted to Nasser in June 1955, Hassan Tuhamy, who was also Nasser's chief contact person with CIA operatives Miles Copeland and Kermit Roosevelt, campaigned for a different policy on the Soviet arms deal. Tuhamy claimed that buying the weapons would allow Egypt to blackmail the US into selling even more weapons to Egypt while acceding to the Egyptian demand for secrecy. Tuhamy therefore envisaged only a small arms deal with Russia which Egypt could disown if Washington decided to turn against Egypt as a result.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 329-334. Document translated in the appendix.

<sup>97</sup> Zidak, "Vyvoz...", p. 542.

<sup>98</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 337-340.

<sup>99</sup> al-Tawil, *Lubat*, pp. 149-151, 165-169.

The Tuhamy memos uniquely show how resolutely Nasser broke ties with the US. By ensuring that the Czech arms deal was large, he made sure that there would hardly be a way to turn back toward the West. Indeed, when Tuhamy learned of the size of the Czech arms deal, he made a futile last minute attempt to salvage the American option. He undertook a personal and unaccompanied diplomatic mission to Washington in order to appeal to American officials there to send an immediate arms shipment to Egypt. Even before he could report his failure to Nasser, he learned that Nasser had already publicly announced the conclusion of an arms deal with the Czechoslovaks.<sup>100</sup>

Through the Czech arms deal Nasser was able to regain what the Baghdad Pact was supposed to take away: his dominant position in the Arab world and his bargaining position vis-à-vis the West. But he did it in a completely different way than what Tuhamy had recommended. Indeed, he could now regain his bargaining position because he was functioning as a mid-level patron, mediating between his small clients, the Arab states, and the major patron, the Soviet Union.

During the negotiations on the arms deal and afterwards, Nasser helped Jordan and the Soviet Union exchange messages when King Hussein showed an interest in establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>101</sup> He promised Solod on 15 September 1955 that he would try to convince King Saud of Saudi Arabia to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>102</sup> And in January 1956, he acted on behalf of Syria in organizing another Czech arms deal. He informed the Russians that due to Syria's

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<sup>100</sup> al-Tawil, *Lubat*, pp. 170-173.

<sup>101</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 322-324, 329-330, 340.

<sup>102</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 330-331.

internal problems, Egypt would function as the buyer of the weapons and would then sell them to Syria. The Soviets agreed to this arrangement.<sup>103</sup> His role in these events formed a pattern in which, as one of the foremost Soviet diplomats later commented on: "Nasser became the bridge on which Arab leaders moved towards us".<sup>104</sup>

Furthermore, Nasser was able to successfully create alliances with Syria and Saudi Arabia. On 20 October 1955, Syria and Egypt signed a military alliance. The agreement was concluded in part because Syrian military officers were exerting pressure on the government hoping that an alliance would help obtain Soviet weapons. The breakthrough with Syria convinced Saudi Arabia of the necessity of signing a military alliance of its own with Egypt, and the two bilateral agreements became a substitute for the original tripartite pact.<sup>105</sup>

Finally, the Soviets began to co-ordinate their policy toward Sudan with Nasser. For instance, when the Soviets were thinking about sending a liaison officer to Sudan, Solod mentioned this to Sabri on 30 August 1955 and made sure the Egyptians were not opposed to the Soviet move. In the same manner, when the Sudanese asked in 1955 for an arms deal of their own with Czechoslovakia, Solod went to see Nasser on 5 October, seeking his consent.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *Dokumenti*, pp. 378-379, 380-383; See also Seale, *The Struggle*, p. 256.

<sup>104</sup> Brutentz K.N., *Trinatzet Let na Staroy Ploshadi* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnie otnasheniya, 1998) p. 369.

<sup>105</sup> Podeh, *The Quest*, pp. 164-167.

<sup>106</sup> *Dokumenti*, p. 319; SÚA – A ÚV KSČ – f. 02\2, sv. 68, ar. J. 84; in 1956 the Sudanese Prime-Minister, Abdalla Khalil, informed the Czechoslovak charge d'affairs that his country was no longer interested: A MZV, TO-T Sudan 1955-59, kr. 2, ob. 8, No. 015344.

## Conclusion

The story of the Czech-Egyptian arms deal is the story of a politician pushed into the same corner as his predecessors. Both the *Wafd* government and General Naguib tried to cut the ‘Gordian knot’ which locked the gates to an arms deal with the West by making an arms deal with the Soviet Union. However, the Soviet side was much less enthusiastic about selling those weapons in the years 1946-1953 than it was in 1954-55. Had Khrushchev not decided to take a more aggressive attitude than Stalin vis-à-vis the West in the Third World in general and the Middle East in particular, Nasser might have found himself in the same position as previous Egyptian governments: with the political will to buy weapons, but without a supplier.

In that sense the Egyptian version of events was inaccurate when it emphasized the role of the Gaza raid. Egyptian efforts to acquire arms began well before Nasser assumed power. However, that raid, as well as others that followed, did play a significant role in Nasser’s decision to start the negotiations over an arms deal with the Soviet Union. The negotiations started one month after the raid, and from the outset of his talks with Solod, Nasser said that the Gaza raid was the reason he decided to negotiate with the Soviet Union in earnest.

The sequence of events suggests that Nasser’s failure to create a complementary alliance to the Baghdad Pact pushed him further into the Soviet sphere. This convinced Nasser that his bargaining position vis-à-vis the US was irredeemably lost, and that his only chance to reach a deal was to approach the communist bloc.

Paradoxically, Nasser’s attempts to thwart Anglo-American efforts to establish the Baghdad Pact, initially motivated by his desire to preserve his close relations with the U.S.,

served to endear him in Moscow's eyes and convince decision-makers in the USSR that his requests for arms should be granted.

Both the Baghdad Pact and the Israeli raids therefore played the role of catalysts rather than initiators in the arms purchasing process. However, this was not an unimportant role. Nasser confided on several occasions that he wanted to make his next major foreign policy decision after June 1956. Whether or not he would have then kept the promise to sign a military alliance with the U.S., which he gave to Pentagon officials in November 1954, *without* the raids and the Baghdad Pact, is anybody's guess.<sup>107</sup>

What is clearer is that by concluding the arms deal, Nasser was able to restore his bargaining position and his dominance in the Arab world.

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<sup>107</sup> FRUS 1952-54 Vol. IX, pp. 2319-2322.



## About the Author

Guy Laron is a PhD candidate in the International Relations Department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The article is taken from his forthcoming dissertation which examines the interrelations between domestic politics and foreign policy in Israel and Egypt during the years 1952-1956.

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## **Document 1**

### **Report from the Czechoslovak Ambassador to Rome, Oldzhich Kaiser, on the Egyptian government's interest in Czech military and agricultural equipment, 27 July 1953**

[Source: the Archive of the Czech Foreign Ministry (hereafter: MZV) Record Group SM-T 1945-63, Box 53, Folder "Egypt, Israel, Syria," Telegram Number 0574/I-1/53 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

In May of this year a new Egyptian ambassador<sup>108</sup> who used to be the foreign minister in General Naguib's government, arrived in Rome. Immediately upon the commencement of his activity in Rome he paid his first obligatory visit to me... This should be seen as an extraordinary gesture of friendship... According to custom I paid him a visit seven days later...

In both formal visits the Egyptian ambassador spoke very amicably to me about international problems, and he strongly criticized British imperialism in Egypt and in the rest of the world. He also criticized US policy. He spoke favorably of the 'peace camp states' policy and explained that their policy dovetailed with the existential interest of his country in radical economic and social transformation of all of the slowly developing countries (due to colonial repression and the exploitation by foreign capitalists). He declared that his country wanted to establish reciprocal and friendly relations with all of the world's countries - including the USSR and the rest of the people's democracies - and to do so indiscriminately and unconditionally. As he emphasized, that meant intensive relations, mainly in the economic sphere, without any discriminations.

Referring to relations with Czechoslovakia, he said that it should be noted that, after a long absence, an Egyptian ambassador was again being sent to Prague, and that this was happening while diplomatic missions were closing down all over the world, as part of the austerity measures that were adopted by the new government. Egypt has preserved its diplomatic missions in two places in the 'peace camp' - Moscow and Prague.

He further announced that the new Egyptian government was interested in preserving and strengthening economic relations with Czechoslovakia. Egypt was interested in rifles, machine guns and ammunition (allegedly to equip their guerilla forces who were fighting against the British occupation), and in agricultural machinery.

Our last meeting took place on 27 June 1953, during a reception at the Brazilian embassy. He asked to talk to me in private. At that conversation he asked me to convey to the Czechoslovak government the importance of the following request, which came from the Egyptian president personally: that our government would sell to Egypt about a hundred small tanks as quickly as possible. To this he added that his government knew that the USSR and the people's democracies were averse to dispatching weapons to countries which might use them against the 'peace camp' once an armed conflict, provoked by imperialism, erupted. Nevertheless, he asked that this position would be reconsidered, bearing in mind that Egypt would never become an ally of the imperialists... and that

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<sup>108</sup> The name of the Egyptian ambassador is not mentioned.

Egypt had a very small amount of weapons by any international criteria, and that weapons would be used only to defend a country which was now fighting for independence and against colonialism.

I, of course, responded evasively and said that I knew very little on the issue of arms exports and that Czechoslovakia did not engage in arms deals. When the ambassador had insisted, I said that I could only pass on the message to my government... At the end of our conversation the Egyptian ambassador said that he would inform the Soviet military attaché in Rome, [Mikhail Alekseevich] Kostylev [who was actually the Soviet ambassador to Rome]<sup>109</sup>, and that he would be happy if he could have the opportunity to discuss this matter with an appropriate official in Prague. He added that he could do so with the pretext of visiting the Egyptian ambassador in Prague who was a good friend of his. He intends to carry out his visit in Prague during his upcoming official visit to Vienna.

In Prague, 15 July 1953, Kaiser

## **Document 2**

### **Report on Czechoslovak-Egyptian Economic Relations, 10 June 1954**

[Source: MZV, TO-T Egypt 1945-54, Box 1, attachment to telegram number 412.993/54 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

“... Following a request from the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, an Egyptian delegation, headed by General Hassan Ragab, visited Czechoslovakia last December. Its mission was to negotiate the strengthening of relations between Egypt and Czechoslovakia, mainly in the commercial arena. The Egyptian delegation had an interest in certain items from the 1951 agreement, and specifically in military equipment... It wanted mainly to import metals, engines, armed cars, airplanes and airplane engines ... Besides Czechoslovakia, the mission also visited Poland, East Germany, Hungary, the USSR and Romania. Now it can be said that the Egyptian delegation was a propaganda ploy aimed at pressuring the West and inspecting our factories. The Hungarians had the same impression.

The Foreign Ministry proposed to send a Czechoslovak delegation made up of technicians and commercial experts to Egypt, in order to discuss the further development of the [commercial] agreement. The delegation would have also tried to effect changes in the contract to our advantage.

Although the head of the Egyptian delegation, General Ragab, viewed our idea favorably, higher Egyptian authorities – when this idea was discussed with them – stated that the time was not right for the arrival of our delegation. The Egyptian government took the same position regarding the arrival of a Hungarian and a Polish delegation...

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<sup>109</sup> On Kostylev's identity see: [<http://www.knowbysight.info/KKK/03571.asp>; accessed 22.2.07]

### **Document 3**

#### **Memorandum of a conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod and Egyptian Prime Minister G. Nasser, 15 June 1954**

[Source: Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (hereafter AVPRF) fond 087, opis 17, papka 34, delo 5, listy 190-192 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

When I came to visit Nasser he introduced me to Lieutenant Colonel Gamal Salem, a member of the Revolutionary Council and minister of communications, and said that Salem was involved in the implementation of all the economic projects in Egypt's seven-year plan, including the projects which were discussed during the stay in Moscow of the Egyptian economic delegation, headed by Brigadier Hassan Ragab.

Salem, on his part, said that because the Egyptian government had had a lot of important commitments it had not been able to study in detail the offers made to the Egyptian delegation while in Moscow. However, he would like to meet with Soviet delegates in Cairo to discuss a variety of issues, such as the construction of a dam in the upper Nile, a pipeline, and a nitrogen factory. Salem explained that he wanted to meet with me rather than our commercial attaché, so that the discussion would not revolve solely on economic issues but on political ones as well.

Since I did not object to such a meeting, he asked us to come to the Ministry of Communication at 6 o'clock on 21 June.

Nasser started complaining that Egypt was still an occupied country and under the current conditions nothing could be done to liberate it because the army did not have the necessary equipment [for this task]. In the past, Egypt had received weapons, mainly light ones, from Britain. But, lately, Britain had stopped the arms shipments and tried to prevent the supply of weapons to Egypt from other European countries. That was the reason why Egypt had to turn to several European countries through secret channels in order to obtain arms, since it was unable to supply even a hundredth of its army's needs. He gave the impression that the US was offering military help but that the stipulations were of a kind that Egypt could not accept.

I remarked that Egypt might manufacture weapons by developing its industry, in particular electronics and metal works, and that the Soviet Union had already announced its willingness to help, but Nasser said that the Egyptian government had already discussed the subject and the conclusion reached was that the development of heavy industry would take a long time, and the development of arms factories even longer. Moreover, this step required huge resources, which Egypt did not have, and the weapons were needed immediately. Without further ado, he asked me, what was the Soviet government's position on selling arms to Egypt. I said I knew very little about this matter, and Nasser asked me to submit this request to the Soviet government. Nasser explained that Egypt did not approach the Soviet government directly because it was apprehensive that it might receive a negative response.

I asked whether this was an official request on behalf of the Egyptian government. After talking in Arabic with Gamal Salem, Nasser replied in the affirmative...

#### **Document 4**

#### **Memorandum of Conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod and the Egyptian Prime Minister G. Nasser, 21 May 1955**

[Source: AVPRF fond 087, opis 18, papka 36, delo 3, listy 176-180 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

According to prior arrangement, I met with Nasser who preferred to discuss the results of the Bandung conference at the beginning of the conversation. He doubted whether the participants would follow its resolutions, since those gave each country the opportunity to interpret them according to [its] liking. He thought that the importance of the conference lay in its moral effect. He remarked that out of the ten points of the resolution whose subject was [world] peace, seven were proposed by Egypt and this was the best answer to the question, 'Does Egypt want peace?'

Regarding the contacts that he had with representatives of Communist China, Nasser said that Sheikh Bakuri, the religious endowment (*Wakf*) minister, and Prof. Mustafa Kamel were currently in Beijing to study the question of whether to establish commercial relations between Red China and Egypt. He also discussed the question of whether to recognize Red China with Zhou Enlai who understood Egypt's constraints in this regard. According to Nasser, the Americans and the British were exerting pressure on the Egyptian government not to have any relations with China. Egypt could not ignore the Anglo-American position for fear that they [the Anglo-Americans] might stop the evacuation of the British forces from the Canal Zone. That was the reason why Egypt abstained during the vote in the UN over the inclusion of China, yet in his [Nasser's] heart of hearts he was for recognizing China. Nasser asked for my advice on this and I said that the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Egypt was in Egypt's and the other Arab countries' interest because this would strengthen their position in the UN. For instance, during the [25 September 1954] UN vote over the Moroccan question, Egypt and the Arab countries were unable to obtain a sufficient number of votes [in order to inscribe the item on the U.N.'s agenda]. But had China participated in that vote, several abstaining states might have voted otherwise.

Then Nasser declared that Egypt was facing the grave threat of Israeli aggression. In his view, the Western powers were supplying Israel with heavy weapons while denying them to Egypt, despite [Egypt's] best efforts. France had agreed to supply Egypt with tanks but later doubled their price, which brought the negotiations to a standstill. Nasser was worried that the Americans might allow Israel to invade Egypt, and the Egyptian army would be wiped out within 24 hours. Of course, the Anglo-Americans would not let such a thing happen, and yet they could appear as arbitrators [in the conflict with Israel] and force Egypt to comply with resolutions it did not accept. That was why the Egyptian government had decided to make the equipping of its army with heavy weapons a top priority.

Accordingly, even before his trip to Bandung, Nasser gave Hassan Ragab, Deputy Minister in the War Ministry, instructions to contact the Soviet military attaché and ask him about the Soviet position regarding the purchase of arms by Egypt. So far he has not received any news from Ragab.

I answered that on 6 April Ragab called upon the Soviet military attaché and approached him with this question and, as far as I know, on 12 April Ragab got our reply, which was that the Soviet authorities were ready to start negotiations on this subject. Later Ragab had asked that these conversations would be conducted in Prague rather than in Moscow. We had agreed to that as well. Yet, Ragab had not returned to us with any sort of reply and it seemed that it was up to Egypt to make the next move. Nasser answered that if that was the case then ‘tomorrow I will send Ragab to negotiate with your representatives’.

Nasser then turned to the economic relations between the USSR and Egypt and said that Egypt had no preference for either East or West. Moreover, Egypt wanted to strengthen its economic ties with the Soviet Union; however, it had a limited ability to do so since the Americans and the British had already told Egypt that any move in that direction might have negative consequences. The Egyptian government interpreted that as a threat to stop the evacuation of the British troops from the Canal Zone.

Then he started to develop a ‘theory,’ which stated that strengthening of the economic and cultural relations between Egypt and the Soviet Union would encourage the local communists to intensify their activity against the current regime.

In his words, the local communists were behaving in ways which were detrimental to the national interest. Allegedly, they interfered in the establishment of the revolutionary regime and portrayed Nasser as an Anglo-American stooge. Since it was clear that communist activity in Egypt was connected to, and a reflection of, the general policy of Moscow, he assumed that the Soviet Union was poised against the current regime. I told him that he had the wrong impression of Soviet policy. The Soviet Union was interested in the enhancement of world peace and the coexistence of the two systems – both capitalism and socialism. Nowhere and at no time did the Soviet Union interfere in the internal affairs of other countries... Besides, if the Egyptian government wanted to verify that the Soviet government did not have any kind of egoistic intentions towards Egypt it should suggest to start a discussion on signing an agreement which would contain a clause on mutual non-interference in internal affairs. Nasser did not provide any reply to this question and said that Egypt was in great need of economic assistance. [Nasser added that] this issue had political as well as economic ramifications. I replied that we understood the political aspect of developing the economic ties with Egypt. In particular, when [Abd al-Moneim] al-Kaisouni, the Egyptian Minister of Finance, raised the possibility of starting negotiations over the purchase of rice from Egypt, our positive reply was given with the political dimension in mind.

Nasser said he needed to study the issue of economic and technological relations between the Soviet Union and Egypt. Accordingly, he wanted Ali Sabri, the director of his office, and, in his words, ‘the man he trusted the most,’ to meet with the commercial attaché and

other representatives of our embassy to discuss the issue in detail. After hearing Sabri's report he would himself reach a conclusion and instruct the appropriate ministries as to how to approach the issue. However Nasser reiterated that strengthening economic ties between Egypt and the Soviet Union might lead to serious complications in his relations with the US and Britain and thus he could not expedite the process.

According to Nasser, Egypt was currently under a lot of pressure, exerted by the Anglo-Americans and caused by its defiant position with regard to the Turkish-Iraqi Pact. Then he added that initially he had no intention of acting against the American plans in the Middle East, but events made him reconsider his position and reach his current stance. The Egyptian government's main goal was the evacuation of the British troops from the Canal Zone and it would achieve that goal regardless of the Anglo-American actions.

Afterwards Nasser asked whether the Soviet Union might assist in convincing Syria to sign the tripartite agreement between Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. When I asked what kind of assistance he had in mind he did not respond...

The Soviet ambassador in Egypt D. Solod.

#### **Document 5**

**An intelligence brief submitted by Hassan Tuhami, head of the intelligence branch at the President's office, to Gamal Abd al-Nasser, 15 June 1955**

[Source: Muhammad al-Tawil, *Lubat al-Amm wa-Gamal Abd al-Nasser* (Cairo, 1986) pp. 165-169 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

Top Secret

#### **The visit of the Russian Ambassador (12:30 21 May 1955)**

As a result of the Israeli aggression, mounting tension on the borders, and the intelligence which was elucidated in the memo submitted on 11 June 1955, which pointed out that Britain and America were behind the Israeli move, the president called upon the Russian ambassador to Cairo at 12:30 on 21 May 1955 and told him the following:

1. Egypt wanted to crush the Israeli interference, which was an Anglo-American tool used to exert pressure on the Arab army and to blackmail Egypt into capitulating to certain demands. In order to convince the ambassador [Nasser] said that his government was willing to accept military aid from the Soviet Union.
2. The president asked the Russian Ambassador to submit before the Soviet government the request to export weapons to the Egyptian military in order to stop Israeli aggression now and in the future.

3. The Russian Ambassador said that his government was ready to supply Egypt with jets, bomber planes, and tanks, in exchange for Egyptian rice and cotton. This had not happened before, as the Soviet Union exported its weapons [only] to communist countries, but it would do so for Nasser...

The future arms deal with the Soviet Union and the Egyptian position between East and West:

1. Russia has already shown its willingness to export weapons to Egypt in exchange for raw materials in April of the preceding year (1954), through a representative of the Foreign Ministry in the Kremlin (during the presentation of credentials of the Egyptian ambassador to Moscow).

2. (The Bandung conference) – During the Bandung conference the President met with Zhou Enlai, who was willing to assist Egypt in its struggle against Israel. Zhou Enlai was willing to supply the Egyptian army with weapons from China, Moscow, or Czechoslovakia – we believe that Zhou Enlai contacted Moscow and reached an agreement on this with officials there.

3. During an interview with the Russian ambassador agreed, on behalf of his government, to supply the Egyptian army with weapons, including planes and tanks. This is a change in the traditional Russian policy – which means that the ambassador had instructions from Moscow to answer the way he did and that his government has already made its decision.

4. If we receive the weapons from Russia our argument should be that this was done according to a semi-commercial agreement. This is an important issue for Russia because it does not want to appear as a Cold War superpower which encourages [other nations] to arm themselves to war.

If this is the case, my personal assessment is that this process will take three or four months if Egypt starts moving forward immediately – during this time a visit to the Soviet factories should take place in order to decide what kind of weapons Egypt could ask for. Later, we should negotiate prices with Russia.

5. During this time American policy will change and our assessment of this [future] change appears in this clause. The relations with Russia will not be detrimental to Egypt. On the contrary, the Russian weapons will give it [Egypt] a better bargaining position - the US will take concrete steps to supply Egypt with weapons, and the connection with Russia has the power to make the US correct its policy towards Egypt. The US would speed up its efforts to improve its relations with Egypt fearing that the relations between Russia and Egypt might develop further...

**Document 6**

**An intelligence brief submitted by Hassan Tuhami, head of the Intelligence Branch at the President's office, to Gamal Abd al-Nasser, 18 June 1955**



[Source: Muhammad al-Tawil, *Lubat al-Amm wa-Gamal Abd al-Nasser* (Cairo, 1986) pp. 149-151 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

Top Secret

To the President Gamal Abd al-Nasser

I want to update you on the following:

I met with Jones [code name for Miles Copeland, a CIA operator in Cairo] and it appears that the Americans are convinced that exerting pressure on the Egyptian government would yield only contrary results...<sup>110</sup>

Comment:

In view of the reaction in Washington as documented by this and the previous memo and the clear change in the American policy towards Egypt, Israel, and the Arab countries in the last few days, we still recommend that Egypt continue its speedy negotiations with Russia, in order to obtain weapons, for the following reasons:

1. The Egyptian army needs these arms to stand against Israel and we now have ample justification to buy them from Russia even in small quantities and to keep the option of revoking the agreement with it if the US decides to turn against Egypt completely – though we do not foresee such a move.
2. The continuation of the Cairo-Moscow negotiation and its consequences in the coming months will have a strong influence on decision makers [in America] to do what Egypt wishes, as they will feel that our position is real. Luckily, this period [of negotiations with the Soviets] dovetails with the time in which the American policy towards next year is being studied and formed.
3. Egypt's ability to achieve an arms deal with Russia would push the Pentagon to act against the State Department's policy, which led America into the state of affairs in which Egypt became a military force armed with Eastern weapons. This move impedes the Pentagon's plans to arm Egypt with Western weapons. Indeed, the Pentagon has a concrete five-year plan to build a strong Egyptian army with 550 million dollars in military aid.
4. Egypt will reap great benefits from the rapprochement with Russia, because now we can win Russia's support when the world's problems will be discussed during the next Big Four summit, and we will ensure that both [Cold War] camps keep on struggling over control of our area. This, in turn, will keep Egypt free from the influence of either camp.
5. It is high time to appoint a military attaché and an air force attaché in our Moscow embassy to help determine what weapons we should purchase from Russia.

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<sup>110</sup> From this point onward Tuhani describes his conversation with Copeland which adds little to the contents of the previous memo.

Yours truly,  
Hassan Tuhami

**Document 7**

**A report on the activity of the Czech Commercial Delegation in Cairo, July 1955**

[Source: The Czech State Archive (hereafter: SÚA), Record Group ÚPV-Tajné (Secretariat v. Širokého), Box 1546, sign. 11/34/26, Document Number 009338 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

In Prague 22 July 1955    Top Secret!

From: The Ministry of Foreign Trade

To: Comrade Major L. David, the Prime Minister's Office

Subject: Special Export to Egypt

Attached you will find a report regarding the special export to Egypt which was sent to us by Deputy Minister Comrade Kohout, who led the delegation to Egypt. We ask that you refer this to the Prime Minister.

Special Export to Egypt

During the time that I was in Egypt for the [industrial] exhibition in March, the undersecretary at the War Ministry, General Hassan Ragab, handed me a list of preliminary requests for airplanes, tanks, and cannon. He added that an Egyptian delegation would be sent to Prague to discuss these matters as soon as some important shipments, expected from Western Europe and especially England, would arrive.

Until the arrival of our delegation [to Cairo] in June, nothing came of it. [Then] I tried to make the Egyptian side start negotiations. But it turned out that General Ragab, who is an assistant for military commerce, cannot negotiate the matter further and could help only by informing... the Minister of War, Amer, and the Prime Minister, Nasser, about the possibility of negotiating with us. It was discovered then that Egypt did not really believe that we are willing to sell heavy weapons in considerable amounts, with their ammunition and replacement parts. Moreover, they were apprehensive about revealing their specific demands because they feared that we would expose their weaknesses. Lastly, they feared the intervention of the Western powers in the form of [discontinuation] of military equipment shipments and of "American [economic] assistance," and [as another form of interference] the pressure of the British garrison in the Canal. After the Soviet ambassador probed the possibility of shipments from Moscow, he received instructions from Moscow that this matter should be handled by Czechoslovakia. Before the departure of our delegation I obtained a specified list for:

80 MIG 15 fighter planes;  
20 bombers;  
100 heavy and 50 light tanks with transporters;  
24 self-propelled 105 mm cannon with transporters;  
125 armed infantry carriers;  
2 medium sized artillery regiments,

together with ammunition and spare parts. [The Egyptians] put a great emphasis on issues such as prices, quick delivery, payments in kind (e.g. cotton), and on spreading out the payments...

Before my departure I discussed the matter with the head of Nasser's office, Ali Sabri, who confirmed that Nasser and Amer had decided to buy weapons from us and that the negotiations will be conducted personally by Ali Sabri...

The Soviet ambassador, who was informed [about all of this], explained that the Soviet side refused to send soviet experts to Cairo and that Ali Sabri was informed by the Soviet military attaché that he should approach Czechoslovakia about this.

It is important to keep the negotiations secret and inform the [Czechoslovak] ambassador that there is a possibility that Sabri may speak about the matter with others. Sabri emphasized that they wanted to start the negotiations at once [but] they would not be able to accept the first shipment before 15 August, when the [arms] shipments from France and England would have arrived.

General Ragab warned us about the Egyptian diplomats in Prague - he claimed he had reports that they were inclined to support the Western powers.

Prague, 22 July 1955 Ing. Jaroslav Kohout

PS The Egyptian side decided, according to a preliminary report, to send its delegation to Prague in the beginning of August.

## **Document 8**

**Background paper prepared by the head of the Near and Middle East desk at the Soviet Foreign Office, G.T. Zaitsev, for Dimitri Shpilov, before his trip to Cairo, 18 July 1955**

[Source: AVPRF, fond 087, opis 18, papka 37, delo 10, listy 17-22 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

Secret

1. Egypt's position towards the military alliances established by England and the US during the past few years:

The Egyptian government has decided not to join the aggressive alliances that the US and England are creating in the Near and Middle East. The leading figures in the government publicly criticized the Western Powers' imperialist and colonial policy and especially [their efforts] to pressure Egypt or other Arab countries to join the military pacts. 'We support the right of self-determination and object to wars, [we are] for world peace and

want an end to imperialism in all parts of the world' – declared the Egyptian Prime Minister in a meeting in Fiume [Rijeka] in the beginning of this month.

The Egyptian government's position is explained chiefly by the Egyptian people's anti-imperialist mood, a consequence of the 73-year-old English occupation of Egypt. However, we must note that there was a tendency toward neutralism and non-participation in Western military pacts in the Egyptian bourgeois elite, and the same can be said about the current foreign policy of the Nasser regime.

After the US and England organized the signing of the Turkish-Iraqi pact in February and tried to convince other Arab countries to sign it too, the Nasser government, fearing that the strengthening of the Turkish role in the Middle East and the promotion of Iraq to the first tier [of Arab countries] would result in the loss of Egypt's leading position in the Arab world, acted against the widening of the aforementioned alliance to other Arab countries and proposed the establishment of an independent non-Western Arab military alliance, based upon the Egyptian-Syrian-Saudi pact. The Egyptian initiative, supported by Syria and Saudi Arabia, hamstrung the implementation of Anglo-Americans plans to establish an aggressive bloc based upon the Turkish-Iraqi pact.

While the Nasser government is currently opposed to the aggressive alliances, it does not hide its close relations with the Western powers and internally represses the democratic movement [while] declaring publicly that it is anti-Communist. Nasser, in his meetings with Anglo-Americans, said that Egypt's non-participation in a military alliance with the West could be explained by the 'psychological unpreparedness' of the Egyptian public to such an alliance. In an interview on March 20 Nasser told a correspondent of the *Sunday Times* that, for 'psychological reasons,' the time was still not ripe for Egyptian support of the 'Organization for the Defense of the Middle East,' which is being established by the US and England. It should also be noted that Emile Boustani, the well-known Lebanese politician and capitalist, declared that Egypt 'is one hundred percent ready to conciliate with Turkey and the West, but now feels that the Arab countries can achieve more if they haggle with the West.'

Despite the inconsistency of Nasser's foreign policy, and how it might change if closer relations with England and the US were possible, the current Egyptian position of non-participation in the aggressive blocs certainly impedes the Anglo-American attempts to establish an anti-Soviet bloc in the Near and Middle East, and enables us to take countermeasures.

The Egyptian government's stance against the Turkish-Iraqi military bloc helped Syria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen maintain their position of non-participation, and has recently precluded the governments of Lebanon, Jordan, and Libya, who are closely aligned with the US and England, from joining this bloc. This position has also played a positive role at the time of the Afro-Asian Bandung Conference, where the representatives of Egypt, led by Nasser, stood in one bloc with India, Indonesia, and other countries against openly American agents such as the delegations of Turkey, Iraq, Ceylon, and Thailand. Another

encouraging sign is the joint statement regarding international affairs, which Nehru and Nasser released on 12 June.

## 2. Soviet-Egyptian relations:

The Egyptian government's position regarding the aggressive blocs, and the criticism by several Egyptian representatives of the colonial policy of the imperialist countries, were the precondition for cooperation between Soviet and Egyptian representatives in international forums. More than once, the Soviet Union supported the rightful demands of Egypt to strengthen its government's sovereignty and its national independence.

As a result of the difficulties that Egypt has encountered in its economic relations with the West, it started in the past [few] years to develop its economic, and especially commercial, relations with the Soviet Union and the European People's democracies. In late 1953 and early 1954 the Egyptian government sent an economic delegation to those countries, led by the Deputy War Minister, General Ragab. The delegation presented the Egyptian government's interest in developing economic ties between Egypt, the Soviet Union, and the people's democracies. While the Egyptian economic delegation was in Moscow, the Ministry of Foreign Trade submitted to it a list of projects which the Soviet Union might be able to assist with, such as building industrial facilities and irrigation systems. The Egyptian government did not respond to these offers. In July 1954, Prime Minister Nasser and Deputy Prime Minister Gamal Salem discussed, in meetings with our ambassador Solod and the commercial attaché Alexenko, the possibility that the Soviet Union would aid Egypt financially and technically by building a large irrigation system in the Aswan region (Upper Egypt). The investment was estimated at over one billion rubles. The Egyptian government said it would be useful to know in advance who are the Soviet specialists who would come to Egypt [and added] that five or six Soviet experts could be sent to Egypt. However, the Egyptian government failed to issue visas for those specialists. According to the Soviet embassy in Egypt, Nasser, the Prime Minister, was against inviting the Soviet experts, fearing that it might encourage sympathy for the USSR. During 1954 a revival of the economic relations between Egypt and the democratic camp countries was discerned...

The Egyptian government has turned to us requesting that we sell it arms. A positive reply was given to the Egyptians and currently a negotiation over the selling of Czechoslovak weapons, manufactured by our license, is going on...

## 3. Future development of Soviet-Egyptian relations:

Egypt's interests and the Soviet Union's are not opposed. Our stance in regard to the imperialist blocs and the colonial policy of the Western powers has given rise to a great wave of sympathy towards the Soviet Union among very broad segments of the Egyptian public...

The participation of Arab countries in the aggressive blocs which are being created in the Near and Middle East is a very important issue for the Soviet Union. Hence our policy in these countries and especially in Egypt should be aimed at impeding the Anglo-American attempts to make other countries join those blocs.

Therefore it would be useful to find out whether the Egyptian government is going to continue with its policy of non-participation in the Anglo-American military pacts and how it will conduct its relations with the Soviet Union in the future.

Head of the Near and Middle Eastern countries desk, G. Zaitsev

#### **Document 9**

#### **Memorandum of a conversation between the Soviet Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod and the Egyptian Prime Minister G. Nasser, 9 August 1955**

[Source: AVPRF, fond 087, opis 18, papka 37, delo 4, listy 19, 26-31 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

... When the conversation broached matters of international politics, Nasser said that the Egyptian government was resolute in its decision to conduct a neutralist policy despite great difficulty. The Egyptian government was prepared to wage war in the Sudan, repulse the Anglo-American attempts to force it to join the military pacts and fight against the internal opposition, which the Western imperialists were using to undermine the current regime.

According to Nasser, Egypt was in a real predicament, being surrounded by many countries whose governments did not represent the people's will and would rather cooperate with the Western imperialists in order to keep the reigns of government in their hands. Egypt, Nasser said, was like an island stormed by imperialistic waves, since the Americans and the British understood that once they subdued Egypt, it would be easier to subdue the rest of the Arab countries.

The Egyptian government was certain that the Arab countries would always support [Egypt], whether the imperialists liked it or not. This was another proof of the importance of Egypt's continued independent stance and neutralist policy.

According to Nasser, the Egyptian government initially wanted to implement a neutralist policy only after the complete evacuation of British troops from the Canal Zone, that is, after 19 June 1956. However, circumstances forced Egypt to implement this policy much sooner. To begin with, the proclamation of an independent Egyptian policy was one of the revolution's main aims. But for this line to be taken, the imperialistic agents within Egypt would have to be crushed and the complete evacuation of the British troops taken place. Yet, the signing of the Turkish-Iraqi pact in February 1955, and Egypt's fear that the rest of the Arab countries might join in, left the Egyptian government no choice other than to proclaim a neutralist policy ahead of the allotted time and declare that it would not participate in any Western military alliances. The Anglo-Americans have reacted strongly and, at the time of [Nasser's] trip to Bandung, they started to prepare the ground for an anti-government conspiracy, using for that purpose a group of officers who wanted to cooperate with the West...

#### **Document 10**

**Memorandum of Conversation between the Soviet Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod and the director of the Prime Minister's office, A. Sabri, 22 August 1955**

[Source: AVPRF, fond 087, opis 18, papka 37, delo 4, listy 42-44 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

Top Secret

Sabri called the embassy and asked to be received to discuss an urgent issue. In the conversation, on behalf of the Prime Minister, he said the following:

Recently, the al-Azhari government in Sudan has shown a tendency to move away from Egypt...

The Egyptian government is deeply disturbed by the fact that today, at seven AM, an armed Israeli unit attacked a part of Gaza. During this unprovoked incident one Egyptian officer was killed and four soldiers were injured. It should be noted that for a long time there have not been any incidents along the Egyptian-Israeli demarcation line.

The Egyptian government, according to Sabri, thinks that the recent incident in Gaza is related to the events in South Sudan and was provoked by the Israelis, under British pressure to drive Egyptian attention away from the events in Sudan and prevent Egypt from taking measures which would pacify the Sudanese situation.

After considering the complicated and thorny situation which had been created, Nasser thought that the British provocations in South Sudan and Palestine would cease if the British saw that Egypt had a well-equipped army. Therefore Nasser wanted to submit to the Soviet government the Egyptian government's request to speed up the delivery of the weapons which were the subject of talks between the Egyptian military delegation and Soviet representatives in Prague. The Egyptian government's first priority was transport and bomber aircraft, in any number and as soon as possible. Moreover, the Egyptian government was prepared to give permission to Soviet pilots to land these planes in Cairo's "al-Maze" airport.

The Egyptian government believed that the expedient delivery of weapons to Egypt, especially airplanes, was needed so that the Egyptian army's substantial ability to resist would appear as an established fact to the English. Besides, Egypt needed the transport airplanes in case an understanding would be reached with the Sudanese government regarding the landing of Egyptian troops in south Sudan. In such a case, the Egyptian government would have no way to land troops there other than by [air]. Sabri noted that the Egyptian government had no way of sending instructions to its military delegation in Prague regarding the speeding up of the negotiations, since the delegation was instructed to avoid any contact with the Egyptian embassy in Prague unless circumstances made this an absolute necessity.

I told Sabri that I would bring Nasser's request to the attention of the Soviet Foreign ministry...

**Document 11**

**Memorandum of Conversation between the Soviet Ambassador in Egypt D.S. Solod and Egypt's Prime Minister G. Nasser, 15 September 1955.**

[Source: AVPRF, fond 087, opis 18, papka 37, delo 4, listy 94-103 obtained and translated for CWIHP by Guy Laron.]

Top Secret

...When I told Nasser, according to instructions from headquarters, about the signing of the Soviet-Egyptian arms deal on 12 September in Prague, he said that he had heard the same news and had already received the full text of the agreement. He was pleased with the agreement, especially the delivery of airplanes and the financial arrangement that allowed the Egyptian government to pay [only] a fifth of the deal's worth in British pounds... Nasser, hinting at the Americans and the English, said: "You can imagine what would happen on 25 October when the first shipment of Soviet weapons arrives. This would become the talk of the day from Alexandria to Aswan."

Nasser expressed the Egyptian government's concern that an agreement to supply IS-3 heavy tanks, two torpedo ships, and two submarines had not yet been reached. Nasser alleged that the Soviet representatives were not authorized to negotiate over these weapons. The Egyptian government was in great need of these weapons and had no other source of supply, since once the news of the Soviet-Egyptian arms deal leaked out, no Western country would agree to sell weapons to Egypt. Egypt had a contract with Britain for the supply of heavy 'Centurion' tanks and two torpedo ships already paid for, [yet] Britain had not delivered them to Egypt, while it had supplied Israel with two of these ships...

Then Nasser noted that the Americans reacted severely to rumors about Soviet-Egyptian negotiations regarding weapons supply by the Soviet Union to Egypt. According to Nasser, the rumors on the supply of Soviet weapons to Egypt had barely started when the American ambassador in Cairo, [Henry] Byroade, asked to meet with Nasser, and dwelt in particular on the danger of the growth of Soviet influence should Egypt purchase Soviet weapons, not only in Egypt but in all of the Arab countries. At the end of the conversation, Byroade produced a list of American weapons which the US could supply to Egypt in any time and in any amount. The document listed over a hundred types of bombers, fighters, and tanks as well as other weapons systems. Byroade allegedly said that if Egypt joined the American collective defense, it would receive these weapons for free.

Nasser turned down the American offer, and also declined to purchase American weapons in dollars. He did agree to buy American weapons in Egyptian currency, knowing full well that American law allowed acquisition of weapons in dollars only. After that, Byroade allegedly started 'pestering the Egyptian Foreign Minister Muhammad Fawzy by engaging him in long conversations on this subject'.

That was why, Nasser summed up, Egypt could not acquire weapons from the West. Egypt, in this context, would be in a disadvantaged position in relation to Israel, which could get heavy weapons from the U.S. or Britain in any quantity.



Considering all of this, Nasser asked me to submit his request for [purchasing] heavy tanks [of the] 'IS-3' type, two torpedo ships, and two submarines from the Soviet government. [A positive reaction, he said] would lead to a renewed balance of power in the Middle East.

In order to simplify the negotiations over this request and to explain how detrimental to Egypt's position the situation in the Middle East was, Nasser asked to allow his office director, Ali Sabri, to travel to Moscow to explain why the weapons were so essential for Egypt. His trip to Moscow was essential also because one could not explain all of this in a diplomatic telegram. Nasser also added that without heavy tanks and a navy, the Egyptian army would not be prepared to repel an Israeli attack. The threat of such an invasion always existed. Two weeks prior a war with Israel was on the verge of eruption, and this threat was even more substantial in light of the Western powers' dissatisfaction with the Soviet-Egyptian arms deal. Besides, the Western powers assume that Egypt's first defeat in a war with Israel would open a window of opportunity for the American agents in Egypt, in which they could use the defeat to set the Egyptian people against its government and create anarchy. All of this would pave the way for the overthrow of the current regime and its replacement with some Egyptian pro-Western Pasha...