



Relations between Egypt and the United States of America in the 1950s

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It is important to bear in mind the fact that when we speak of 'Egypt's policy in the 1950s', or of 'Egyptian-US relations' during this period, we are in effect referring to the policy of President Nasser. He was his own decision-maker and relied only on a marginal input from his advisers. He had no inner cabinet, or equivalent of the US National Security Council. He did occasionally consult key personalities, such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and he did convene the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) from time to time. However, he used them more as sounding boards, rather than as instruments for policy guidance. For most of the time in question, the RCC simply rubber-stamped his decisions, especially after 1954 when Nasser had come to dominate the political system. In short, one can say that Nasser was his own man and charted the course of Egypt's foreign policy with little reference to others. The domestic and the regional factors which he was obliged to take into consideration in order to maintain this position of supremacy help to explain much of his foreign policy, including the relationship with the US.

During most of the 1950s, relations between Egypt and the US resembled a game of chess, played out between Nasser and John Foster Dulles (US Secretary of State, 1953-9). The young Egyptian leader aspired at the time to the leadership of the Arab Middle East. For their part, Dulles and Eisenhower, whilst they professed support in principle for the anti-colonialist nationalism represented by Nasser, were in practice constrained by the fact that the US was a status quo power. Nasser found the status quo invidious, since he regarded it as unfairly loaded to the advantage of the West and to the disadvantage of Egypt. He was intent on doing his utmost to right the balance. In other words, there existed the grounds for a

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conflict between a regional and a global power, with each trying to outmanoeuvre the other, in the belief that they would eventually win .

In 1953, the new American administration, led by Eisenhower and in 1958, was particularly concerned with the marked decline in and

Dullesid American prestige in the Middle East. The region, as a whole, appeared to constitute a major gap in the Western defence a whole. The Eisenhower administration began worm a new systerican strategy towards the Middle East, in which Egypt is obviously the key and which was aimed at the defence of the Middle East. The American National Security Council (NSC) re- port of March 1953 confirmed this intention and recommended that the USAJ... should develop Egypt as a point of strength a Such American assessments persuaded the US administration to send Dulles to investigate the situation in person. The purpose of his visit was to generate support for a regional alliance, known as the Middle East Defence Organisation (MEDO). After speaking with Nasser, Dulles became convinced that MEDO would never materialise, that the original MEDO proposal no longer met the

situation and was, as a consequence, outdated. At the end of May 1953 Dulles returned from his mission. He submitted an extensive secret report to President Eisenhower, explaining the main reasons behind his decision that the idea of setting up a defence system centred on Egypt should be tempor- arily shelved. Dulles now perceived the success of MEDO as a very remote possibility. He stated that many of the Arab peoples 'are more fearful of Zionism than of Communism' and that they were so engulfed in their quarrels with Great Britain and France that they paid little heed to the Soviet threat. 5 His assessment of t f the role Egypt can be attributed to a number of factors of MEDO and of According to Dulles's top secret file 'the Suez Canal base was not important. Furthermore, it had become evident both to American and to British strategists that the defence of the Middle East against the USSR called for several bases in the 'Northern Tier', that is, on the borders of the USSR itself. Moreover, the existence of nuclear more ons made the need for a dispersal of military resources all the perative and it was, therefore, necessary to build up the Tier, ranging from Turkey in the west to Pakistan in the east. These facilities available in the countries which constituted the 'Northern countries felt, in Dulles's words, 'the hot breath of the Soviet Union.

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more directly than did Egypt and, as a consequence, promised to be more amenable to American influence.⁷

Nevertheless, the failure of Dulles to secure Egyptian participation in an American-inspired Middle East defence organisation did not affect American hopes that Egypt might become the first Arab country to make peace with Israel. While negotiations dragged on between Egypt and Great Britain, Egyptian-Israeli contacts moved even more slowly. The Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Muhammad Fawzi, speaking to the UN official, Ralph Bunche, suggested that Egypt could accept one partition, but not two. These feelers were abandoned when information concerning them was leaked to the press. However, both Bunche and the State Department agreed that an Arab-Israeli settlement might yet be possible.⁸

In 1953-4, the US did not want to see Nasser weakened. In Ambassador Caffery's view, 'Nasser is the only man in Egypt with strength enough and guts enough to put over an agreement with Britain'. With the Anglo-Egyptian treaty signed in 1954 and with Nasser's control secured, US policy-makers, especially the architect of American foreign policy, Dulles, believed that a gradualist approach would resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Furthermore, the Egyptian government appeared to show a greater willingness to compromise. ¹⁰ The Egyptian inclination to ease the tension with Israel at any cost should be viewed in conjunction with the regime's policy of improving its relations with the US, as well as with its eagerness to consolidate its domestic power base as rapidly as possible, in the face of strong opposition. However, the hopes of easing this tension were dashed when Israeli forces attacked Gaza on 28 February 1955/ The Israeli raid marked the end of the relative calm which had hitherto prevailed along the Egyptian-Israeli border. A chain reaction of increasingly violent confrontation was initiated between the two countries, reaching a climax in the Suez war twenty-one months later. As one historian has observed, 'with

the Gaza raid, the count-down to war began'. Nasser's humiliation in Gaza and the almost simultaneous announcement of the establishment of the Baghdad Pact, led him to assume that there was pressure being brought to bear to force Egypt to participate in the Pact. ¹² Egypt's historical rivalry with Iraq for leadership of the Arab

world led Nasser to think that he must not appear to be weak, nor must he submit to any Israeli threat. As a result, it seems that the timing of the Gaza raid, rather الوقت

than the Egyptian military defeat, was the main factor behind
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Egypt's later policy towards the Baghdad Pact and Israel. Nasser felt that his emergence as one of the leading figures in the Arab world would be seriously damaged if he were to show a greater willingness to compromise, especially after the visible destruction wrought by the raid. This episode marked the inauguration of an Arab 'cold war', between Cairo and Baghdad. This, in turn, helped to shape the course of the peace process between Egypt and Israel. The chain of events did not help Egypt to become a bridge for peace, as the US administration had hoped. Rather, it became a barrier against any such peace for some time to come. As for the Americans, they believed that 'the raid put an end to any hope for the steps towards peace',¹³ * The sequence of events touched off by the Gaza raid does, in

fact, seem to have driven a wedge between Egypt and the US, since it marked the end to the honeymoon between the governments of the two countries.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Nasser was still hoping to keep on good terms with the US and hoped eventually to acquire American arms. Before leaving for the Bandung Conference, Nasser did his utmost to see Dulles, in order to discuss a matter of mutual interest.¹⁵ However, it was all in vain. The Egyptian president became convinced that no Egyptian argument could change an American strategy which was based on the assumption that all Arab countries, and Egypt in particular, should be maintained simply as defensive powers, not offensive ones. As a result, at Bandung, Nasser informed the Chinese of his eagerness to obtain arms from the Eastern bloc. This did not prevent him from simultaneously continuing to press the US for arms, since he was eager to avoid any further rift in relations with the US. Undoubtedly, also, Nasser was wary of some of the political implications of arms purchases from the Eastern bloc

For his part, Dulles did not take the matter seriously, since he was convinced that Nasser was bluffing and was simply trying to blackmail the US.¹⁷ However, events were soon to prove him

wrong. On 27 September 1955, Nasser made public the details of his arms purchases from the Eastern bloc (known as the Czech arms deal), thus facing the US administration with a *fait accompli*. In a memorandum to his brother, Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA, offered his own assessment of Nasser and of Egyptian policy: 'Nasser has won prestige and a position of leadership in the Arab world by the Soviet arms deal. He is determined to do everything possible to maintain this position

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pendence and prestige through an arrangement with the West, he would prefer that to a closer tie-up with the Soviets. 18 Despite the arms deal and the improvement in Soviet-Egyptian

relations, Egypt continued to demonstrate a willingness to improve its bilateral relations with the US. Egypt's diplomacy was aimed at mitigating American disappointment at Egypt's deal with the Eastern bloc. The Egyptians were keen to deny that, because of the arms deal, Egypt 'is going to open the door to the Soviet penetration of the area' 19 However, the American leadership did not remain passive in the face of this development. Dulles revealed the American peace initiative for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. This was considered to be one of the most comprehensive such plans of the 1950s. American hopes were centred on the mission of Robert Anderson. In January 1956, eighteen years before Kissinger, Anderson shuttled between Cairo and Tel Aviv. However, in spite of his optimism, as well as that of Dulles, his mission was a failure.²⁰

This failure marked a turning point in the thinking of the Eisenhower administration in general, but specifically in that of Dulles himself, regarding both Nasser and Egypt. The US administration now began to move towards the achievement of three political aims. Firstly, it tried hard to form a competing anti-Nasser and anti-Soviet camp, under the banner of the leadership of Saudi Arabia.²¹ Secondly, in seeking to limit Nasser's influence in the Arab world and to counter his activities in the Middle East, Dulles suggested to President Eisenhower that the US should encourage Great Britain to maintain its existing relationship with Jordan and thus help to prevent a situation in which a pro-Egyptian coup d'état might succeed. Thirdly, Dulles increased American support for the Baghdad Pact.²³ It was clear that American policy-makers' real concern was to find a new strategy in the area, aimed at isolating

Egypt from the rest of the Arab world, and leaving it no ally but the USSR. In Eisenhower's view, this might lead Egypt to 'join us [the United States] in the search for a decent peace' 24 However, the sequence of events moved rapidly. Not only did Dulles consider Nasser wholly responsible for the failure of Anderson's peace mission, more importantly, he was never to forget that Nasser helped the USSR to 'leap over the northern tier of defence'. For the first time since 1946, the USSR was a full participant in Middle East politics.²⁵

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the one hand, from April 1956 onwards, Dulles actively used his influence to ensure that Israel solved its major defence problems, by putting pressure on Canada and France to provide Israel with more arms. 26 On the other hand, Dulles, as an international lawyer, began to study the legal aspects of imposing an arms embargo on Egypt. However, for Egypt the major blow came on 19 July 1956, when Dulles withdrew the American offer to help finance the construction of the Aswan High Dam. It appears that it was Dulles's personal decision to withdraw the offer of American funding and that President Eisenhower was content to be guided by him in this respect.²⁷ Neither Great Britain, nor the World Bank, as equal partners with the US in funding the scheme, had been consulted prior to this sudden change in American plans. 28 The abrupt manner with which Dulles revoked the American offer reflected the new American approach towards Egypt. It marked the use of the tactic of the 'big stick, aimed at punishing Nasser for his refusal to co-operate with the West. On 26 July 1956, seven days after Dulles's decision, Nasser reacted to 'the slap in the face received from the West by nationalising the Suez Canal Company, the revenue from which would henceforth be used to construct the dam at Aswan. Faced with this startling development, the major concern of the US administration was the reaction of France and Great Britain. Dulles called the apparent Anglo-French eagerness to use force and to drag the US along with them 'a crazy policy. The American attitude can be attributed to a number of causes. Firstly, the US administration wanted to keep the Anglo-French dispute with Egypt over the Suez Canal separate from the Arab-Israeli conflict. The fear that the two western countries would find a willing partner in Israel for a military solution to their problems increased the Eisenhower administration's

pre-election anxieties. 29 Added to this, was the attitude of Dulles himself, who was still hoping to win over Nasser, since he saw him as the only Arab leader capable of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Secondly, the American leadership understood that US interests were not greatly affected by Egypt's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal, as long as it continued to function efficiently. The US had no financial interests in the Canal, whereas it did have considerable economic and military interests in the Middle East as a whole. 30 There was clearly some concern about the adverse effect which American military involvement might have, not simply on world public opinion, but especially on attitudes in the Arab and Muslim worlds.31 1

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Finally, it was clear to the US administration that only the USSR stood to gain from the poor image of the US which such action might encourage. Subsequently, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff stated in their assessment that 'it would be harmful to the US and to Western interests, if the Middle East became more closely affiliated with the Communist bloc, or more firmly neutralist' 32 In addition, the CIA warned that the resort to force by Great Britain and France in the Suez crisis 'would result in increased Soviet pressure on Iran' and that this would undoubtedly affect adversely the American strategy of containing Soviet penetration in the area.

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As a result of these considerations, the US insisted upon the withdrawal of British, French and Israeli forces after the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in October 1956. In advising President Eisenhower to take this course of action, not only had Dulles played a major role in preserving Western interests in the Middle East, he had also helped to enhance Nasser's prestige and popularity. Nasser, however, deceived himself, not realising that his popularity would cause the American policy-makers to consider him as the Grand Master of the Middle Eastern chessboard, under new American rules. From 1956 onwards, Soviet-Western rivalry in the area of the Arab-Israeli conflict had been transformed into a Soviet-American rivalry. This consequence became more apparent in January 1957, when Eisenhower outlined the new American initiative to fill the 'vacuum' created by the Anglo-

French withdrawal from Egypt. The 'Eisenhower Doctrine of January 1957 sought to mobilise the Middle East against the perceived Soviet-Egyptian threat. The US promised to help countries by protecting their independence and integrity against overt armed aggression from communist or 'communist dominated' countries. 34 This was necessary, Dulles explained, because Great Britain's unwise attack on Suez destroyed British credibility and crippled the Baghdad Pact. Although Dulles refused to cite any particular 'communist dominated' country in the Middle East before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Admiral Radford identified Egypt and Syria as the states in question.³⁵

Nevertheless, in the late summer of 1957, after the Jordanian and Syrian crises, the US State Department's Office of Intelligence Research produced a new assessment of Nasser. This report declared that 'He [Nasser] expects Arab nationalism to save the Near East from Communism, just as it is freeing the Near East from.

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Western imperialism. 36 Eisenhower began to reconsider his own attitude towards Nasser and decided that it might be a good idea to try to come to terms with him. In a secret memorandum to his Secretary of State, the president asked, 'Do you think there would be any percentage in initiating a drive to attempt to bring back Nasser to our side?' In this memorandum, Eisenhower said that he did not have in mind 'anything spectacular, nor indeed anything that would get in the papers'. Rather, he was thinking in terms of a trusted envoy who would ask Nasser whether he saw 'any basis for a rapprochement'. 37 This change of attitude by Eisenhower and his staff can be attributed to a number of factors. During the Jordanian crisis in April 1957, Nasser had proved that he had the ability to whip up the support of the Arab people and the Arabs had come to look upon him as symbol of their unity and their independence.³⁸

The Syrian crisis in August-September 1957, was a demonstration of the new political reality: Egypt under Nasser - not Iraq under Nuri al-Said, or even Saudi Arabia under King Saud - had become the main champion of the Arab world. 39 Nasser had proved his ability by 'saving Syria from communism' and was thus estimated to have put an end to communist penetration of the area. 40 By the end of 1957, and the beginning of 1958, the US National Security Council

analysts had come to the conclusion that Nasser has become so clearly identified with great success, that no rival is likely to challenge him. 41 Consequently, it should have been evident to American policy-makers at the time that their approach to the Middle East was likely to fail, if it came into conflict with Arab nationalist sentiments promoted by Nasser. By lending its support to unpopular regimes, the US might have been able, momentarily, to subdue nationalist resistance, but such regimes would be unable to resist indefinitely the internal pressures of such forces. In fact, by ignoring its tremendous popular appeal, American policy tended to unify and to strengthen Arab nationalist

sentiment.⁴² In conclusion, it is possible to say that US-Egyptian relations in the 1950s represented the epitome of a conflict between the interests and needs of a growing regional power - Egypt - and those of an established, Western, global power - the United States. One of Nasser's principal ambitions was to diminish any foreign influence in the region. This was based in part on his experience of Egypt's

national movement, and thus on his memories of the long struggle
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to bring about the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country as a precondition for full independence. More immediately, Nasser's aim was also based on his belief that the Arab collective security system was the only valid solution to the area's defence problems. Quite apart from the relative efficacy of such a system, it would mean primarily that Egypt's regional hegemony could be assured.

For their part, the US administration took some time to perceive that, by assisting Nasser to achieve some of his regional aims, they might also be serving their own long-term objectives, at least with regard to the East-West conflict. The Eisenhower administration had originally tended to operate on the principle that 'those who are not with us, are against us'. However, when they realised that Nasser, in pursuing his own interests, and the interests of Egypt as he conceived them, was far from uncritical of the behaviour and the policies of the USSR, let alone of regional communist parties, grounds for common interests could be established. Conditional and unspectacular as this might

have been, it nevertheless suggested that the US had come to recognise, in Nasser and in Egypt, a leader and a country worth cultivating, rather than antagonising.

NOTES

1National Archives, Washington, D.C. (NA) RG 59-Box 4020-774-11/31745 from Cairo to Secretary of State, 17 March 1954. Also, personal interview with Fathi Radwan, Cairo, 1985.

2Dulles's statement to the Foreign Relations Committee of the US Senate, 25 May 1953. See also J. C. Campbell, *Defence of the Middle East* (New York, 1960), p. 49.

3Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Eisenhower Papers, National Security Council (NSC). Summaries of discussions of the NSC, 31 March 1953. 4 Princeton University, Dulles Papers Box 73: 'Near East Trip'. There is

an important point made by Dulles on pp. 1-2. See also NA RG 59

Department of State, from American Embassy, Ankara to the State

Department, 28 May 1953.

5*ibid.*

6NA RG 59, Top Secret File (Washington, bilateral talks with the United Kingdom, concerning the Suez Canal base), 11 July 1953, p. 9.

7Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Eisenhower Papers, NSC meeting 147, 1 June 1953.

8Washington National Record Centre, Diplomatic Branch (WNR) Reports of 28 August 1953 and 10 September 1953, US Embassy Files, Box 2667, file 320 'Egypt and Israel,'

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9 NA RG 59-Box 4016-A774-00/3-154, from Cairo to Secretary of State, 3 March 1954 (Secret.)

10 NA RG 59-Box 2979-764-87/9-154, from Cairo to Secretary of State, 11 September 1954.

11 Donald Neff *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower takes America into the Middle East* (New York, 1981), p. 33.

12 The agreements, marking the establishment of the Baghdad Pact (grouping together Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Great Britain in a single defence organisation), had been signed on 24 February 1955, a few days only before the Gaza raid.

13 Princeton University, Dulles oral history project, Francis Russell, pp. 6-7.

14 NA RG 84 - Box 2 from US Embassy, Cairo to Department of State 28 September 1955. In an interview with C. Foster, Nasser said 'the behaviour of Israel was standing as an obstruction between the United States and the Arab world.'

15 Princeton University, Dulles Papers Box 96: 'Nasser 1955'. 16 NA RG 59-Box 4042-780-5 MSP/9-453.

17 Personal interview with Ambassador H. Byroade, Washington D.C., 1984.

18 Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, John Foster Dulles Papers, White House memo series, from Allen Dulles to John Foster Dulles, undated.

19New York Times, 30 September 1955, 'Cairo Statement.'

20Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Eisenhower Papers, International Series, Box 8, folder 1: 'Egypt 27, from Eisenhower to Colonel G. A. Nasser, 27 February 1956.

21NA RG 59, CIA Papers, personal and private copy by Allen Dulles.

22Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Dulles-Herter Series, Box No. 5: 'Dul- les', 28 March 1956, Top Secret.

23ibid.

24Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Eisenhower Diary, Box No. 9, File No. 1: 'Diary', 8 March 1956.

25B. Lewis, 'Middle Eastern Countries' Reaction to Soviet Pressure', Middle East Journal, vol. 10, Spring 1956, No. 2, p. 136.

26Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Dulles Papers, Telephone Call Series, Box No. 4, memo of telephone call to the Canadian Prime Minister, 11 April 1956.

27Princeton University, Dulles oral history project, Anderson Dillons, p. 38.

28Princeton University, Dulles oral history project, Black p. 23.

29Neff, Warriors at Suez, p. 288.

30NA RG 218 CCS-092 'Egypt', note by Secretary of State to JCS, 31 July 1956.

31Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Dulles-Herter Series, Box No. 6 'Dul- les', draft letter from Eisenhower to Sir Anthony Eden, September 1956: The use of military force against Egypt under present circum- stances might have consequences even more serious than causing the

Arabs to support Nasser.' 32 NA RG 218 CCS-092 Egypt', JCS 2105/38, July 1956

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33Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Eisenhower Papers, Ann Whitman File, Box No. 8, NSC 297, meeting of the NSC, 7 September 1956, CIA Report.

34Text in US Department of State, United States Policy in the Middle East, September 1956-June 1957 (Washington D.C., 1957), pp. 144-50.

35Executive Session of the Foreign Relations Committee of the US Senate,

29January 1957, vol. 9, vol.9, pp. 10 and 151. 36 NA RG RG 59 Intelligence Report 7577, 1 September 1957.

37Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Dulles Papers, White House Memo Series, Eisenhower to Dulles, 13 November 1957.

38Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Eisenhower Diary Series, Box 23, April 1957, telephone call from Dulles to Eisenhower, 26 April 1957.

39Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Dulles Papers, White House Memo Series, Box No. 5, Meeting with the President, memo of conversation with the President, 2 September 1957; see also Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Dulles Papers, Telephone Call Series, Box No. 7, telephone call from Mr Rowntree, 26 October 1957.

40NA RG 59-674-83/9-657, memo of conversation, subject 'Egypt's relations with Syria and Saudi Arabia', 6 September 1957. See also Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Dulles Papers, Telephone Call Series, to Secretary of State, 28 October 1957, Dulles: The Arabs now realize that Syrian conduct is being dictated from Moscow and even the

Egyptians are concerned 41 NSC 580/11, Policy towards the Near East', p. 4.

42G. E. Meyer, Egypt and the United States: the formative years (Rutherford, N.J., 1980), p. 194...