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Rapprochement, Containment and Stability

Kennedy's Cold War in the Middle East

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Rapprochement, Containment and Stability:
Kennedy's Cold War in the Middle East

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Abstract

This thesis analyses Kennedy's foreign policy towards the Arab world and Israel in 1961-1963, by focusing on three states of core diplomatic concern for the administration: Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Examining the Kennedy administration's policies towards Egypt, Israel, and the outbreak of the Yemen crisis, this thesis adds to the historiography on the subject a nuanced understanding of Kennedy's incomplete attempt to find a balance between the American Cold War objective of containment of the Soviet Union, and its regional interests in Arab oil and in the security of Israel.

This thesis argues that Kennedy's Mideast policies were conceived in the context of his strategy of rapprochement with Nasser. The administration extended diplomatic and economic support to Egypt in order to gain pro-American sentiments in the region, steer Nasser towards a moderate, non-socialist course, and reduce his dependence from the Soviet Union. Hoping to succeed in such an effort, Kennedy offset his pro-Nasser policy with strategies of containment and stability. The administration embraced Israel's security concerns in order to forestall its pre-emptive strikes against the Arab neighbours, mitigate the tensions between Arabs and Israelis, and prevent the Soviet Union from gaining strategic and political opportunities. Kennedy's pro-Nasser policy also compelled the administration to secure its economic interests in the Saudi oil through the promotion of social, economic and political reforms, aimed at broadening the domestic political consensus of the Saudi regime, and thus stave off a possible revolutionary threat inspired by Nasser's propaganda.

This work challenges a number of studies that have been conducted on the subject, such as Warren Bass's *Support Any Friend*, Douglas Little's *American Orientalism*, and Roby C. Barrett's *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*. It is argued, contra Bass, that Kennedy's Mideast strategies were not simply designed to support any regional ally

to gain a wider range of Cold War options; that the administration did not intend to transform Saudi Arabia and Israel into regional proxies, as Little argues; and that Kennedy's policies cannot be seen as a mere continuation of Eisenhower's, as contended by Barrett. Rather, this thesis argues that the administration's enhancement of the US relationship with Saudi Arabia and Israel was the necessary obverse to its Nasser policy. Seeking to bolster his rapprochement with Nasser, Kennedy laid the foundations of two special alliances for his successors to build upon, but such result was not intended.

Kennedy's legacy in the Middle East could best be understood as an attempt to balance larger Cold War objectives with more specific regional interests. Of course, it was his inability to appreciably influence the course of the events in Yemen, and Congress's amendment in November 1963, to prompt the paradoxical result of his Mideast strategy. Indeed, the shift in US strategies occurred after his untimely death, ultimately confined Kennedy's experience to be an ambitious footnote in history, whose idealist drive and diplomatic capability with the Arab leaders however, still echoes to this day, in a time when, perhaps, a point of connection with the Arab world is mostly needed.

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Chronology of the main events

Pre-presidential

May 1933: The United States and Saudi Arabia sign the contract for ARAMCO.

March 1947: Truman launches the Truman Doctrine.

May 1950: The United States, France and Britain issue the Tripartite Declaration

July 1952: The Free Officers overthrow the Egyptian monarchy of King Farouk.

November 1952: John F. Kennedy is elected senator.

March 1953: Stalin dies.

June 1953: ARAMCO workers begin to protest against King Saud of Saudi Arabia.

February-April 1955: Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and the United Kingdom enter the Baghdad Pact. An Israeli raid against Gaza kills 30 Egyptians. Leaders of the Third World meet at the Bandung Conference.

September 1955: Nasser signs an arms deal with Czechoslovakia.

February 1956: Khrushchev speaks of “peaceful coexistence” at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

May 1956: ARAMCO workers demand the fall of the Saudi monarchy.

July 1956: US withdraws economic help for Aswan Dam project. Suez crisis explodes.

September 1956: Nasser visits Saudi Arabia, opposition to the Saudi regime increases.

January 1957: Kennedy enters the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Eisenhower’s speech to Congress on the Middle East Resolution.

March 1957: Congress approves the Eisenhower Doctrine.

July 1957: Kennedy gives his famous Algeria speech.

February 1958: Syria joins Egypt in the United Arab Republic (UAR).

July 1958: Violent uprisings in Jordan and Lebanon. Fall of the Iraqi monarchy:

Qasim becomes prime minister. President Eisenhower sends marines to Lebanon.

October 1958: Iraq shifts towards the Soviet Union and rejects Nasser's pan-Arabism. The Eisenhower administration officialises the NSC 5820/1.

Presidential

January 1961: John F. Kennedy becomes the 35th President of the United States.

Eisenhower warns new administration of Dimona reactor.

February 1961: Israel advances HAWK request to the Kennedy administration.

April 1961: US launches the invasion of the Bay of Pigs.

May 1961: President Kennedy meets Ben Gurion. Two scientists visit the Dimona facility.

June 1961: Kuwait crisis explodes.

September 1961: Third World leaders participate in the Belgrade Conference.

Syria leaves the United Arab Republic.

October 1961: Kennedy recognises secessionist government in Syria.

December 1961: Kennedy rejects Brazzaville Resolution on refugees.

February 1962: Kennedy sends Bowles and Mason to Cairo to discuss Egypt's economic problems.

March 1962: Violent clashes between Syria and Israel on Lake Tiberias. The Kennedy administration condemns Israel's actions in the UN.

July 1962: German scientists begin to build rockets for Egypt.

August 1962: After long negotiations, Kennedy officialises the PL-480 as a multi-year agreement. Kennedy decides to sell the HAWK to Israel. Administration decides to link HAWK sale and Johnson Plan. Feldman travels to Israel to discuss HAWK and Johnson Plan. Johnson officialises plan for the refugees.

September 1962: Israel creates problems on allegedly modified text of Johnson's proposal. News of the HAWK sale is leaked to the international press. Nasserite coup overthrows Imam in Yemen. Sallal establishes the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). Strong Syrian propaganda against Nasser and Israel over the refugee issue. Second inspection of Dimona (only 40 minutes).

October 1962: Faysal abolishes slavery in Saudi Arabia. Cuban missile crisis.

November 1962: The Shah of Iran announces the White Revolution.

December 1962: Kennedy recognises the YAR. King Hussein of Jordan announces he would recognise some Soviet satellites.

January 1963: Meetings between members of the administration and representatives of the oil companies. Kennedy sends Terry Duce, former vice president of Aramco, to Saudi Arabia. Israel's unshakable rejection of the Johnson Plan. Kennedy decides to push the Johnson plan no further.

February 1963: Johnson confesses to Kennedy that his plan is officially "dead". Qasim is killed. Iraq shifts towards Egypt. Kennedy recognises new Iraqi regime. Macmillan rejects definitively Kennedy's suggestion of recognising the YAR. Kennedy approves operation HARD

SURFACE. Kennedy sends Ellsworth Bunker to Saudi Arabia to discuss HARD SURFACE.

March 1963: Coup in Syria. Kennedy recognises new Syrian regime. Egypt, Syria and Iraq announce Tripartite Declaration.

April 1963: UAR constitution includes “liberation of Palestine”. Kennedy rejects Ben Gurion’s proposal for joint US-USSR security guarantee. Violent uprisings in Jordan.

May 1963: Kennedy issues informal security guarantee to Israel. Kennedy’s first tough letter to Ben Gurion: US support jeopardised by Dimona.

June 1963: Kennedy’s second tough letter to Ben Gurion. Ben Gurion resigns; Levi Eshkol is the new prime minister of Israel. First UN observers arrive in Yemen. Controversy over personnel of Jewish faith delays HARD SURFACE.

July 1963: Kennedy’s first tough letter to Eshkol. HARD SURFACE arrives in Saudi Arabia. Nasser admits using chemical weapons in Yemen. New tensions between Syria and Israel.

August 1963: Israel and Egypt sign the Limited Test Ban Treaty.

September 1963: Israeli leaders suggest US-Israeli intelligence exchange on UAR missile capabilities.

October 1963: Kennedy sends reinforcements to HARD SURFACE.

November 1963: Faysal extends UN mandate in Yemen and agrees to stop aid to the royalists. US-Israel first joint consultations on regional security issues. Congress approves Gruening amendment against the UAR. Kennedy’s last press conference against Gruening amendment. Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

Introduction

When John F. Kennedy was brutally assassinated on Friday, November 22, 1963, the entire world fell into a sorrowful silence. A countless number of people watched the funeral on television, while hundreds of thousands of letters of condolence flooded the White House, and almost one million stunned Americans lined up in the cold streets of Washington to pay their respects to the 35th President of the United States. In his struggle for civil rights, tax reform, social welfare programmes and economic development, Kennedy forged an image destined to remain impressed in the minds and hearts of millions of Americans, who still regard him as the most beloved American president.¹

Despite controversies, allegations and critical re-examinations of the thousand days of Camelot, one thing remains immutable: Kennedy was loved, and not just in America.

Among the many letters received by Jacqueline Kennedy after the death of her husband, there were those sent from a region that has often slipped under the radar in the historical accounts of John F. Kennedy's presidency, the Middle East. On November 23, 1963, Abdul Salam Arif, President of Iraq, wrote that he was "shocked by the sad and sorrowful death of the late President Kennedy"²; "With deep pain and sorrow I convey... on behalf of the Syrian people our heartfelt condolences on the death of the late great President John Kennedy"³, followed the President of Syria; "The assassination of President Kennedy was a tragedy not only to American people; it also echoed in the hearts

¹ Rebecca Stewart, 'CNN Poll: JFK remains most popular past President', *CNN Politics*, January, 20, 2011.

² Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), *Arif Condolences to MRS John Kennedy, Baghdad Domestic Service in Arabic*, 0915 GMT, November 23, 1963.

³ Ibidem, *President Al- Hafiz extends condolences, Damascus Domestic Service In Arabic*, 1215 GMT, November 23, 1963.

of every good person in this world”⁴, wrote the King of Jordan, as he ordered a three-day mourning period in the royal court.

Such letters are themselves a testament to Kennedy’s impact in the Middle East, one that, for better or worse, helped to define America’s posture in the region for years to come.

In a time dominated by the Cold War polarization of the globe, and the revolutionary transformations of the Third World that accompanied the gradual collapsing of the colonial empires after the Second World War, the Middle East came to be a pivotal stage for the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was indeed in the Middle East where the first struggles between communist bloc and Western world took place. During the crisis of Iran-Azerbaijan and that of the Turkish straits, both in 1946, the threat of the Soviets’ attempt to extend their influence in the region called for Washington’s first efforts to implement strategies designed to contain international communism.

And it was again the Middle East where the Eisenhower administration focused its efforts of foreign policy. The adoption of the Middle East Resolution, the Eisenhower Doctrine, is clear evidence of the level of attention that the White House had given to the Middle East.

But why, if during Eisenhower’s presidency the Middle East was at the top of Washington’s agenda, is so little attention given to the years of Kennedy? Although the events of Cuba, Berlin and Vietnam have rightfully drawn the attention of scholars and historians investigating Kennedy’s foreign policy, why do we know so little about his approach to the Middle East? And why is it regarded almost exclusively in the context of

⁴ Ibidem, *Husayn cables to Johnson, MRS Kennedy, Amman Domestic Service In Arabic*, 1200, GMT, November 23, 1963.

the making of a special relationship with Israel?⁵ In short, if the Middle East was arguably one of the first stages of the Cold War, then what happened in the region during the Kennedy years, when the Cold War was so dangerously hot elsewhere?

Such questions constitute the premise of this work, and the motivation behind an attempt to analyse a portion of history often overlooked and yet so pivotal in the understanding of the history of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

Of course, only by investigating the tripartite relations between Kennedy and the Arab nationalists, the Arab monarchies and Israel, is it possible to fully discern the significance of Kennedy's approach to the region, and to understand the paradox of the final outcome of his foreign policy in the Middle East. Indeed, as this thesis argues, Kennedy's actions in the Middle East paved the way for the making of those two special alliances that would define US posture in the region for years to come: the one with Israel and the one with Saudi Arabia. However, the thesis explains how Kennedy did not actively pursue closer ties with either country, and the above-mentioned result is the inadvertent product of Kennedy's main goal in the Middle East: the rapprochement with Nasser. Strongly driven by considerations of Cold War, Kennedy saw the policy of rapprochement with Nasser as the best tool to fight the Kremlin's influence in the Middle East. By courting Egypt, the force of attraction of the whole Arab world, Kennedy hoped to enhance the US position in the region, to foster pro-American sentiments among the

⁵ Because of the long-term consequences that it has produced on the bilateral relations of the United States and Israel, a number of studies exists on Kennedy's foreign policy towards Israel: Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of The U.S. Israel Alliance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Abraham Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002); Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001); Herbert Druks, *John F. Kennedy and Israel*, (Westport: Praeger, 2005). Critical arguments about Kennedy's foreign policy towards Israel are also made in Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, Third Edition, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Roby C. Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War: US Foreign Policy under Eisenhower and Kennedy*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007) and Steven Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).

Arab population and the nationalist elites, to steer the forces of Arab nationalism in a direction that could serve US interests, and to counteract Moscow's influence in the Middle East as well as in the Third World.

As expressed in a memorandum entitled "Basic National Security Policy",

"The United States had a military interest in seeing nations not fall under Communist control, an ideological interest in seeing them "evolve in directions" which would "afford a congenial world environment for our own society," and an economic interest that "the resources and the markets of these areas are available to us and to the other industrialized nations of the free world."⁶

That is why, as Robert Komer recalled in his Oral History Interview, Kennedy was eager to show to the Arab nationalists that "the New Frontier was really anxious to get off on the right foot with them."⁷ For its entire duration, the administration sought to bolster its rapprochement with Nasser, which remained the main goal of its Middle East policy even during the controversial affair in Yemen.

This thesis explains how the administration's policies towards Israel and the Arab monarchies were thus designed in the context of the policy of rapprochement with Nasser, the true core of Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East. For this reason, they produced a final outcome that was largely inadvertent, as they strengthened Washington's ties with Cairo's nemeses, Tel Aviv and Riyadh. In its quest to court the revolutionary Egyptian leader, the Kennedy administration found itself compelled to enhance Israel's security, with the goal of containing it and forestalling possible military actions that could upset US Cold War regional strategies, and to stabilise the Saudi and Jordanian regimes through programmes of political, social and economic reforms in order to secure US economic and geo-strategic interests (incidentally, the same approach was used in Iran as well, where for most of the Kennedy years the Shah was threatened by potential uprisings

⁶ Editorial note. Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1961-1963, Vol. VIII, National Security Policy, 70.

⁷ Ibidem, July 16, 1964, 4.

against his authoritarian rule⁸). Unintentionally, Kennedy's manoeuvres ended up bringing Washington closer to Israel and Saudi Arabia, but ironically enough that was never his goal.

This thesis argues that the Kennedy administration never wished to use Saudi Arabia or Israel as regional proxies⁹ but only to prevent the first from collapsing and the latter, (in the words of Secretary of State Dean Rusk), from feeling the urge "to undertake a pre-emptive attack against [the] UAR".¹⁰ The strategies of stabilising Saudi Arabia and enhancing Israel's security were not designed because Kennedy wished to "support any friend" (as Warren Bass argues¹¹) or to use them as regional proxies (as Douglas Little contends¹²), but were conceived in an attempt to allow Kennedy to carry out his rapprochement with Nasser, without the fear of provoking Israel into undertaking military actions against Cairo or of causing the Saudi Royal Family to fall under the weight of Cairo's progressive propaganda: "We want to get across to Saud" Komer told Kennedy in early 1962, "that his still feudal regime will come under increasing domestic pressure unless it makes more of an effort to keep up with times." Nasser's activities, Komer continued, "add to the pressure."¹³

⁸ See for instance April R. Summitt, "For a White Revolution: John F. Kennedy and the Shah of Iran", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (autumn, 2004)

⁹ Such is the argument of Douglas Little, who in his book *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* and in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: America's Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, suggests that Kennedy's actively sought closer ties with Saudi Arabia and Israel. A similar point is made in *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of The U.S. Israel Alliance*, by Warren Bass, who sees in Kennedy's even-handedness an attempt to court as many actors as possible in order to gain more Cold War options in the region.

¹⁰ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, August 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, *Near East 1962-1963*, 14.

¹¹ Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 12.

¹² Little, *American Orientalism...*, 137.

¹³ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, February 12, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 156A, Saudi Arabia, General, 2-1-62, 2-19-62. The administration was particularly concerned that the royal family would be challenged by elements of the population inspired by Nasser, as well as by Nasserite cells within the royal palace. As Komer recalled, the administration wished Faysal to focus on domestic reforms so that "our oil assets wouldn't be endangered by violent revolution or Egyptian-inspired coup". Robert Komer, *Oral History Interview (OHI)*, July 16, 1964, 14. A more detailed analysis is provided on Chapter 2.

Both the Arab kings and Israel feared Nasser's increasing influence in the region. They regarded the Egyptian leader as the main threat to their countries, and his pan-Arabist ambitions as an alarming, destabilising force in the region. In 1952, after the Arabs' defeat in the 1948 war against Israel, Nasser wrote *The Philosophy of the Revolution*¹⁴, in which he advocated dissolution of the traditional structures of power and the creation of a united Arab front to oppose external powers and to destroy Israel. In 1956, and again in 1958, Nasser's actions caused turmoil across the entire region, sparking a direct war against Israel and severe crises in Jordan and Lebanon. While the Eisenhower administration dealt with the emergencies by forcing Israel to withdraw its troops from Egypt during the Suez crisis, and by sending the marines to Lebanon to save President Chamoun from a domestic uprising inspired by Cairo's progressive propaganda, Nasser became the hero of the Arab world and a symbol of the fight against Western imperialism. However, by opposing Nasser and the Arab nationalists, Eisenhower antagonised a leader who was destined to play a crucial role in the Middle East for nearly two decades, and leaving Kennedy to deal with a region where anti-American sentiments were firmly solidified among the Arabs. Eisenhower's conversation with Vice President Nixon in July 1958 says it all regarding the Arabs' perception of the United States' approach to the Middle East up to that moment: "The trouble is that we have a campaign of hatred against us, not by the governments but by the people. The people are on Nasser's side."¹⁵

From this point of view, Kennedy's approach to the Arab world emerges as significantly innovative. Contrary to Eisenhower and Dulles, who considered Arab

¹⁴ Gamal A. Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, (Washington: Public Affair Press, 1955).

¹⁵ Memorandum of a conversation between the President and the Vice President (Nixon), White House, Washington, July 15, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XI, *Lebanon and Jordan*, 139.

nationalism as largely “dependent upon Communism”¹⁶ and thus unacceptable, the New Frontiersmen pursued a policy primarily designed to support the Arab nationalists and steer them in a direction that could serve US interests in its Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union. As a result, Kennedy developed an even-handed policy, with the goal of enhancing US prestige among its new clients without losing or provoking old ones. But even-handedness is not tantamount to supporting any friend. Kennedy was not seeking to bolster Washington’s ties with just any taker in the region¹⁷, as Warren Bass argues, but only to allow himself some time to carry out his policy of rapprochement with Nasser without jeopardising the US oil interests in Saudi Arabia or provoking Israel into taking up arms against the UAR. In adopting skilful, personal diplomacy with the Arab leaders, supporting the Arabs’ desire for self-determination and emancipation, and pushing for political, social and economic progress, Kennedy showed much more flexibility than his predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower, and much less partisanship than his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson¹⁸, temporarily redefining the role that the United States had played in the region until that moment.

But Kennedy was not a benefactor, he was a hawk. Undoubtedly, to a certain degree John F. Kennedy was also an idealist, inspired by Wilson’s famous “Fourteen points” and by the numerous senators he cited in his book *Profiles in Courage*, written

¹⁶ Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, February 5, 1957, FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XIII, *Near East: Jordan, Yemen*, 135

¹⁷ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 12.

¹⁸ Little explains that, already during his time in Congress, Johnson was one of Israel’s leading friends and that, as president, he “did not disappoint”. Little, *American Orientalism...*, 97, 98. Abraham Ben-Zvi argues that Johnson’s relationship with Israel “was closely and irrevocably patterned on the basic premises of the ‘Special Relationship’ paradigm”. Ben-Zvi, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the politics of arms sales to Israel: In the shadow of the hawk*. (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 2. Jonathan Colman contends that “Johnson’s sympathies in the Arab-Israeli rivalry lie mainly with the Israelis.” Jonathan Colman, *The Foreign Policy of Lyndon B. Johnson: The United States and the world, 1963-1969*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 146. A Similar argument is provided by Spiegel in *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*.

after back surgery in 1955-1956. But he was also one “without illusions”¹⁹, as he jokingly used to describe himself.

His actions in the Middle East are indeed testament to deep, Cold War pragmatism, not to idealism. In the summer of 1961, Kennedy confirmed the programme of economic aid to Egypt through the Public Law 480 (the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act, also known as Food for Peace programme) with the hope of gaining leverage on Nasser’s foreign policy, of building up Egypt’s ties with Washington as an alternative to the Soviet Union, and of restraining him from foreign adventures that could upset the stability of the region. Throughout his entire presidency, he also pushed Saudi Arabia and Jordan (as well as Iran) to adopt a series of economic, social and political reforms for the purpose of stabilising their conservative regimes against possible nationalist uprisings that could threaten the US interests in the region. He enhanced Israel’s security, famously through the 1962 HAWK sale, because he sought to contain it and prevent it from jeopardising his Cold War policies by exacerbating the Arab-Israeli dispute and thus create political and strategic openings for the Soviet Union.

Kennedy’s actions in the Middle East unintentionally paved the way for the formation of the American special alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel. In an attempt to secure his goal of fostering a working relationship with Nasser, Kennedy strengthened the regime in Saudi Arabia through programmes of reforms which allowed the Saudi monarchy to become America’s future regional proxies under the presidencies of Johnson and Nixon. Likewise, by selling the HAWK missile system in August 1962, and by starting the first high-level consultations between the two governments in November 1963, Kennedy put an end to the arms embargo and the cold association that had

¹⁹ Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963*, (Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 299.

characterised the US attitude towards Israel during the Eisenhower years, opening the road to future arms sales and to a closer military, strategic and political relationship that would flourish under the presidencies of Johnson and Nixon.

Such an assessment integrates, or in some cases differs from, the research that has previously been conducted on this topic. Although this thesis has been mainly based on the analysis of primary sources, it has not – and could not have – disregarded the main literature on the subject.

Warren Bass's "Support any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the US-Israel Alliance" is possibly the most exhaustive and detailed account of Kennedy's foreign policy in relation to the Arab-Israeli dispute. Bass relies on a number of primary sources, including Hebrew documents present in the Israel State Archives and the David Ben-Gurion Archive, and his personal interviews with members of the Kennedy entourage, such as Theodor C. Sorensen and Phillips Talbot. However, although Bass develops his arguments around the Kennedy/Ben Gurion/Nasser triad, he misses out on important primary sources available on Saudi Arabia, a key protagonist during the Yemen Crisis. For instance, Parker T. Hart's "Saudi Arabia and the United States: Birth of a Security Partnership"²⁰ is a crucial book for those investigating Kennedy's foreign policy towards the Arab world, as it is authored by Kennedy's ambassador in Saudi Arabia himself. Hart provides a critical recollection of his first-hand experience in Riyadh, integrating the history of Kennedy's policies towards Saudi Arabia with a critical explanation of how they have impacted the Saudi government, which Bass does not analyse. On the secondary sources, works such as Madawi al-Rasheed, "A History of Saudi Arabia"²¹, Peter W. Wilson and Douglas F. Graham, "Saudi Arabia: the Coming

²⁰ Parker T. Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States: birth of a security partnership*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

²¹ Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (London: Cambridge University press, 2002).

Storm”²², and Rachel Bronson, “Thicker than Oil: America’s Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia”²³, also provide very relevant accounts of Kennedy’s strategies towards Saudi Arabia and the simultaneous struggles of power within the royal family, which are pivotal to understanding the motivations behind Kennedy’s strategies towards Saudi Arabia. The absence of such works in *Support any Friend*²⁴ is evidence of the scarce relevance that Bass gives to Kennedy’s approach to the Arab monarchies. Although very articulate on the relationship between Washington, Egypt and Israel, Bass’s work cuts out of the picture a key aspect of Kennedy’s foreign policy in the Middle East, namely his attempt to stabilise the Arab monarchies through programmes of development and modernization. Given the historical significance of Kennedy’s policy towards Saudi Arabia, one that would affect US posture in the region for years to come, this work examines Kennedy’s approach to the Arab monarchies as an integral part of his Mideast strategy.

When it comes to the relationship between Washington, Israel and Egypt, Bass makes a number of very insightful points, building the narrative with meticulous accuracy, and identifying in Kennedy’s rapprochement with Nasser, the HAWK sale, the Dimona issue and the Yemen crisis the main topics of his work. Rightfully, Bass explains how the core of Kennedy’s Middle East policy was Nasser.²⁵ He argues that the attempt to court Nasser represents Kennedy’s greatest innovation in the region, because it “represented a sharp break with past US and UK policies in the Middle East. America’s

²² Peter W. Wilson and Douglas F. Graham, *Saudi Arabia: the Coming Storm*, (New York; M E Sharpe Inc., 1994).

²³ Rachel Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil: America’s Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁴ In terms of secondary sources on Saudi Arabia, Bass refers almost exclusively to Nadav Safran, who provides an analysis of “the national security policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia... since the creation of the Kingdom through 1982”. Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 1. However, it moves very quickly over the Kennedy years, failing to capture the essence of Kennedy’s strategies towards the Saudi government.

²⁵ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 64.

traditional Middle East friends had been conservative monarchs”²⁶, and that, above all other considerations, the Kennedy administration’s approach to the Middle East was driven by Cold War necessities.²⁷ These arguments are largely supported in this thesis. Indeed, evidence shows that Kennedy sought closer ties with Nasser as part of a regional strategy, and even aspired to a more extended Third World strategy, aimed at reducing Soviet gains among Arab nationalists and world neutralist leaders.

However valuable and comprehensive Bass’s work is, this thesis differs from “Support any Friend: Kennedy’s Middle East and the Making of the US-Israel Alliance” on a number of key points. The first one is his very interpretation of the result of Kennedy’s Middle East experience. Bass argues that “The Kennedy administration... constitutes the pivotal presidency in U.S.-Israel relations, the hinge that swung decisively away from the chilly association of the 1950s and toward the full-blown alliance we know today.”²⁸ But coming from such a standpoint prevents Bass from stressing the unintentional nature of such an outcome. According to Bass, Kennedy sought to support any friend in the Middle East in order to “advance his wider Cold War strategy”²⁹ and this eventually resulted in closer ties with Israel, the only country, together with the Arab monarchies, willing to take advantage of Kennedy’s strategy of supporting any friend. Bass comments that “Kennedy had spoken of supporting any friend; in the Middle East he found takers only in Israel and the Arab kingdoms and emirates”³⁰, but Nasser too took advantage of Kennedy’s opening, until Congress’s intervention in late 1963 crushed the relationship between the two Presidents.

²⁶ Ibidem, 65.

²⁷ Ibidem, 3.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem, 5.

Although it is true that Kennedy did support Israel, historically through the HAWK sale, the joint high-level security talks and other forms of security guarantees, it is not true that Kennedy did this in light of a strategy aimed at securing as many allies, or friends, in the region as possible. Kennedy's focus in the Middle East was Nasser, and the rapprochement with the Egyptian leader constituted the core of his Cold War regional strategy. Only by supporting Nasser, Kennedy thought, would Washington be able to enhance its prestige in the region and steer the forces of Arab nationalism away from Moscow and in a direction that could serve US interests. Bass does not fully take into account the unintentional nature of Kennedy's special friendship with Israel, and he does not emphasise Kennedy's decision to enhance Israel's security with the goal of forestalling its "active defence" in order to contain it and prevent it from jeopardising his rapprochement with Nasser. This is a crucial point because it is the basis for understanding the motivations behind certain policies, particularly the HAWK sale - a watershed moment in the history of US relations with Israel. Kennedy feared that Israel's reprisal policy could threaten his reconciliation with Cairo, and thus gave security guarantees in the hope that those could somehow satisfy Israel's main national security objective, the *bitahon* – the defence and security of Israel.

With regards to the HAWK, Bass makes a point of linking the sale to Israel's "dangerous arms imbalance"³¹ against Nasser, arguing that, "The ongoing Soviet arms sales to Nasser's Egypt had made Israel increasingly vulnerable."³² Although it is true that Nasser was acquiring weapons from the Soviet Union, it is also true that the administration never fully believed that Israel was at a disadvantage, as Bass suggests. On the contrary, it was a rather widespread belief that Nasser was not in a position to pose

³¹ Ibidem, 4.

³² Ibidem, 148.

any threat to Ben Gurion.³³ The HAWK was sold mainly to forestall Israel's reprisal policy, not because the administration believed Israel was in danger.

Kennedy was not seeking to "support any friend", as Bass argues, he was seeking to support Nasser to achieve his Cold War objective of defeating the Soviet Union in the region. Indeed, Kennedy believed that only by providing Nasser with a Western alternative to his dependence on the Moscow, could neutralism in the Middle East prevail over socialism and lead, in the long-term, to a Westernised development that would thus reject communism.³⁴ Because of the centrality of Nasser for the New Frontier's approach to the region, Kennedy's policies towards Israel and the Arab monarchies were simply a result of the policy of rapprochement. Fearing that the administration's support of Nasser could provoke Israel to act and the monarchies to fall, Kennedy adopted strategies aimed at securing US interests in the Saudi oil and to contain Israel. Bass states that Kennedy's policies towards Israel and Saudi Arabia were designed to "gain a wider range of Middle Eastern options"³⁵, but closer alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia were never really options for the administration. They came to be so only with the later presidencies of Johnson and Nixon, and exclusively because Kennedy's diplomacy with Nasser was abruptly interrupted by the simultaneous occurrence of Congress's decision to stop the program of foreign aid towards the UAR, and Kennedy's assassination. Indeed, evidence shows quite clearly that Kennedy perceived Israel as a destabilizing force in the Middle East (during the Jordan crisis for instance, Kennedy commented quite plainly that Israel was "really the danger"³⁶) and that Saudi Arabia was important exclusively its oil. Furthermore, while discussing the bitter end of Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with

³³ Airgram from John Badeau to Secretary of State, August 23, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli relation.

³⁴ Record of the 508th Meeting of the National Security Council, January 22, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. VIII, *National Security Policy*, 125.

³⁵ Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 12.

³⁶ Memorandum for the Record, Washington, April 27, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 222.

Nasser, Bass argues that, “Kennedy had tried to moderate the foremost Arab radical and failed, which meant that risking Nasser's friendship over a deepening American special relationship with Israel was not risking much at all.”³⁷ Such an assessment seems to imply that Kennedy, unable to contain Nasser’s adventure in Yemen, chose Tel Aviv over Cairo to advance his Cold War strategies. If it is true that Kennedy had lost faith in Nasser as result of the Yemen crisis, it is equally unquestionable that only Congress’s meddling and his premature death prevented him from pursuing his policy of rapprochement with Nasser. The administration’s severe reaction against the Gruening amendment, which Kennedy himself described during his last conference in mid-November 1963 as constituting “the worst attack on foreign aid”³⁸, shows that, if Washington deepened in its special relationship with Israel, it was not in light of Kennedy’s strategic considerations.

Finally, Bass argues that Kennedy was only “occasionally directly involved in the Middle East policy.”³⁹ This assessment conveys a misleading picture of President Kennedy, who was in fact very heavily involved with any decisions regarding the Middle East. Several members of the administration, even those more directly involved with the Middle Eastern issues such as Robert Komer, Phillips Talbot and Parker T. Hart, recall that Kennedy was very much his own secretary of state, particularly when it came to the Middle East.⁴⁰ Certainly, the Kennedy administration was not a homogenous entity, but Bass seems to put too much emphasis on the different voices within the administration and too little on the role that Kennedy himself played as the main director of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

³⁷ Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 5.

³⁸ President John F. Kennedy News Conference #64, November 14, 1963. John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL), President’s Office Files, News Conference, November 1963.

³⁹ Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 12.

⁴⁰ Robert Komer, *OHI*, June 18, 1964, 2.

Another key contribution to the literature is provided by Roby C. Barrett's "The Greater Middle East and the Cold War: US Foreign Policy under Eisenhower and Kennedy", which offers an interesting comparison between the policies of the two presidents towards the Middle East. While acknowledging the importance of Barrett's work, this thesis challenges his main argument that "both administrations practiced containment in a remarkably similar manner."⁴¹ Rightfully, Barrett argues that both Eisenhower and Kennedy's main concern was the containment of communism, but he contends that to a large extent Kennedy adopted the same strategies implemented by Eisenhower.⁴² Given that Kennedy's focus in the Middle East was Nasser, to make such a comparison one would thus have to look at his policy towards Cairo, and the profound difference between the approaches of these two presidents would become apparent. While stressing the centrality of US economic aid to the Arab world, Barrett fails to capture the main distinction between the Eisenhower-Dulles team and the New Frontiersmen. While the first perceived nationalism as the first step towards communism, the latter regarded Nasser as a key neutralist leader, not as a Soviet agent.

Eisenhower excluded Egypt from his regional strategies in light of his belief that Arab nationalists would favour a Soviet infiltration. Thus, he opposed Arab nationalism, tried to isolate and replace Nasser with King Saud as leader of the Arab world, and designed policies that ended up antagonising the Arab nationalists and favouring Soviet infiltration. As this thesis argues, while the Baghdad Pact and the Eisenhower Doctrine were, in the eyes of Nasser, clear attempts to polarize the Arab world within the Cold War framework, Kennedy's approach was centred around the need of "adopting a more sensible policy"⁴³ towards Nasser and the other world neutralists, and moving past the

⁴¹ Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 2.

⁴² Ibidem, 4.

⁴³ Robert Komer, *OHI*, June 18, 1964, 5.

Eisenhower administration's tendency of "casting into the outer darkness those countries which for one reason or another didn't feel they should be tied to Washington as opposed to Moscow."⁴⁴ Kennedy's prime strategy was based on efforts to improve the Arabs' perception of the Western world, and so to silently steer the forces of Arab nationalism in a direction that could serve US interests, and thus frustrate the Soviet's ambitions in the region. The goal might have been the same – containment of communism – as Barrett argues, but the means of achieving it were significantly different. Barrett fails to capture such a critical difference.

Indeed it is hard to see in Kennedy's strategies the same kind of endeavours made by the Eisenhower-Dulles team in pushing for alliances, for the creation of regional organisations in the style of the Baghdad Pact, or for the subordination of US economic help to the Arabs' willingness to side with Washington in the fight against communism. One could look for instance at the events that sparked the Suez crisis to appreciate the rather different course followed by the Eisenhower administration. After the Bandung Conference of 1955, a milestone in the history of the non-aligned movement, Eisenhower realised Nasser would never side with the United States, and refused to provide Egypt with the military aid it requested. Again, James P. Richards, the special ambassador appointed by Eisenhower to test the Arabs' willingness to subscribe to the Doctrine, never went to Egypt. The Eisenhower administration had no interest in dealing with the key Arab nationalist. Conversely, Kennedy made Nasser the main focus of his approach to the Middle East. Even during the Yemen crisis, an event that dramatically strained Washington's relations with Cairo, Kennedy threatened to interrupt the PL-480 if Nasser did not disengage, never actually doing so. Responsibility for the decision of putting an end to Kennedy's rapprochement with Cairo lay exclusively with Congress, not the White

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

House. Thus, Kennedy's Mideast approach was significantly different from Eisenhower's because its very nature was opposite. Kennedy focused on rapprochement with the Arab nationalists; Eisenhower fought them.

Barrett criticises "Support any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the US-Israel Alliance" because, he contends that Bass "underestimates the understanding of Arab policy."⁴⁵ While this might be true (as argued earlier, Bass does not refer to some crucial works such as Hart's, which offers a good analysis of Faysal's policy in relation to Washington's plans), and represents an intrinsic limit of Bass's work, both authors fail to capture that Kennedy's Middle Eastern policy was designed around the rapprochement with Nasser, and consequently his strategies towards both Israel and the Arab monarchies were themselves a result of the administration's effort to court Egypt. Kennedy wished to prevent Israel from posing a threat to his policy of rapprochement with Nasser, and simultaneously he sought to preserve the stability of Saudi Arabia against Nasser's propaganda in order to secure US interests in the Saudi oilfields. Critically, Kennedy's even-handedness derived from this same policy of rapprochement with Nasser, a crucial point that both authors seem to miss.

Barrett also argues that "Kennedy often overestimated the impact of personal Presidential diplomacy"⁴⁶ and again he seems too quick to dismiss the importance of one of Kennedy's main tools in dealing with international leaders. Indeed, only by acknowledging the importance of Kennedy's personal diplomacy it is possible for instance to capture the entirety of Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Nasser. An extract from Robert Komer's interview offers a clear picture of the type of governments Kennedy dealt with:

⁴⁵ Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*..., 23.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 4.

“In most of the less developed world there is no firmly structured constitutional system or anything like that. It is very largely a matter of personal government. Kennedy himself sensed very quickly that through personal communication with these heads of state and prime ministers, the key foci of power in these countries, he could far more effectively carry out the policy objectives that he had rather firmly in mind.”⁴⁷

Komer’s argument is far from groundless. In Egypt for instance, Nasser was the “real focus of power” and he “unilaterally made major policy decisions.”⁴⁸ Likewise, in countries like Saudi Arabia and Jordan (not to mention Iran), the policy-making process was handled ultimately by the monarchs, who had the last word over any law or policy that the government would suggest.⁴⁹ Thus, it is unsurprising that Kennedy’s one-on-one diplomacy proved to be a terribly important instrument in dealing with the Third World leaders. When Kennedy approached Cairo, he realized that the most important thing to do was to develop a personal relationship with Nasser: “He had probably concluded even before becoming President that this was important”, commented Phillips Talbot in his Oral History Interview, explaining how the president, once in office, had immediately set out to get into communication with the Egyptian president.⁵⁰ Such a position is echoed by Kennedy’s ambassador in Cairo John Badeau, who admitted that Kennedy’s letters, and the way they were crafted, did have a big impact on the Egyptian leader.⁵¹ And it is by assigning the proper significance to Kennedy’s personal diplomacy, among other key aspects of his approach to the Middle East, that it is perhaps possible to understand Nasser’s acceptance of US recognition of the new government in Syria after the UAR break-up in 1961, and even the almost complete lack of reaction in Egypt after the announcement of the HAWK sale in August 1962.⁵² Nasser’s response to Kennedy’s

⁴⁷ Robert Komer, *OHI*, June 18, 1964, 2.

⁴⁸ James P. Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 24, 25.

⁴⁹ See for instance Parker T. Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States...*, 84.

⁵⁰ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, July 27, 1965, 25.

⁵¹ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 26.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 10, 11. The impact of Kennedy’s personal diplomacy will also be analysed with regards to the Dimona nuclear issue.

warning letter on the HAWK sale is probably the best testament to the importance of Kennedy's personal diplomacy: "Of course, I don't like this. You knew I wouldn't like it, but I'm grateful to have been told".⁵³ Although Nasser might not have had any other choice - after all Kennedy specified that he was not consulting Nasser "in any way"⁵⁴ - there can be little doubt that such a gesture helped at least to generate good will between the two governments, particularly after Nasser's bitter experience with Eisenhower and Dulles.

Finally, Barrett's most debatable point emerges with regard to Kennedy's relationship with Israel. Barrett argues that "Kennedy, after considerable internal debate, succumbed to domestic pressure and increasingly pursued pro-Israeli policies for domestic political reasons."⁵⁵ Barrett's position opens a larger debate on the role that the Israeli lobby has played in Washington's policy-making process. However, to the extent of analysing the Kennedy years in relation to this issue, Barrett's analysis appears unfounded. In Dean Rusk's Oral History Interview, the issue of the domestic pressure exerted by the Israeli lobby is dismissed quite clearly:

"I was genuinely impressed by the relative absence of direct pressure on Middle Eastern questions... I don't recall that anybody ever came into see me to pressure me on a particular point of policy affecting Israel."⁵⁶

Warren Bass argues that, although the lobby had some friends in Congress, it had "little true clout in the executive branch in the early 1960s."⁵⁷ Although Barrett promptly dismisses the analysis provided in *Support any Friend*, by asserting that Bass "consistently understates the impact of the pro-Israeli Lobby on the administration"⁵⁸, a number of studies seem to acknowledge that during the Kennedy years, the lobby was not

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 6.

⁵⁶ Dean Rusk, *OHI*, August 21, 1970, 352.

⁵⁷ Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 147.

⁵⁸ Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, xxii.

so powerful after all. David Verbeeten asserts that during the early 1960s, the Israeli lobby did not have enough power to influence, let alone shape, the course of US foreign policy⁵⁹, while Henry Feingold contends that the idea that the lobby was able to manoeuvre the White House is “far removed from reality.”⁶⁰ Isaiah L. Kenen argues at length that the power of the Israel lobby in America grew with the improvement of US-Israeli relations, but did not dictate it. In fact, only after the Six-Day War, did Washington start to perceive Israel as a credible deterrent for the containment of communism, enhancing the bilateral relations between the two countries and thus benefiting the lobby.⁶¹ Even John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, who certainly do not hold back in their analysis of the power of the Israeli lobby in the United States, admit that Israel’s help to the United States in containing Moscow’s communism after 1967 was extremely significant for the influence that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) had in the United States.⁶²

Barrett centres his focus around the key moment of the HAWK sale, making his argument largely by referring to Talbot’s Oral History Interview, where Kennedy is quoted as saying: “The trouble with you, Phil, is that you’ve never had to collect votes to get yourself elected to anything”⁶³, and on the conversation Kennedy had with Ben Gurion in May 1961, when the president said he would do something for the Jews to thank them for their support.⁶⁴ Barrett however moves too hastily over the strategic considerations of containment behind the HAWK sale, putting too much emphasis on words that Kennedy meant as mere courtesy for the support showed by the American

⁵⁹ David Verbeeten, “How Important Is The Israeli Lobby?”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2006.

⁶⁰ Henry Feingold, *Jewish Power In America: Myth and Reality*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey; Transaction Publishers, 2011), 71.

⁶¹ Isaiah L. Kenen, *Israel's Defense Line: Her Friends and Foes in Washington* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982), 111.

⁶² J.J. Mearsheimer and S.M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, (New York; FGSbooks, 2007), 4.

⁶³ Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 411, note 35.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

Jewish community during his 1960 presidential elections. Words are words, and Kennedy was not committing the US foreign policy in the Middle East to the support of Israel simply because the American Jewish community preferred him over Nixon. The HAWK was sold with the goal of appeasing the Israeli government, alarmed by Kennedy's support of Nasser, and forestalling possible pre-emptive attacks.

Another crucial contribution to the literature is provided by historian Douglas Little, who deals with Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East on a number of occasions: Although "From Even-Handed to Empty-Handed: Seeking Order in the Middle East" and "The New Frontier on the Nile: JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism" are short, yet considerably valuable accounts of Kennedy's policies towards the Arab world, Little's great endeavour "American Orientalism: the United States and the Middle East since 1945"⁶⁵ is, in its third edition, a crucial book for those who wish to investigate the history of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

Little identifies the Yemen crisis as the event that forced Kennedy to part from Cairo and move closer to Tel Aviv and Riyadh⁶⁶, and rightfully suggests that "Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson laid the groundwork for what would become the Nixon Doctrine, a 'twin pillars' policy in which Iran and Saudi Arabia would serve as anti-Soviet regional proxies."⁶⁷

However, Little operates from a premise that is not shared in this thesis, as he argues that "while Kennedy worked to strengthen the bonds between the United States and Israel, he also sought to improve relations with Egypt's Gamel Abdul Nasser."⁶⁸ Such an assessment implies that Kennedy actively pursued a closer relationship with Israel,

⁶⁵ "From Even-Handed to Empty-Handed: Seeking Order in the Middle East", in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: America's Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, ed. Thomas G. Paterson... "The New Frontier on the Nile: JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism", *Journal of American History*, Vol. 75, No. 2, September 1988.

⁶⁶ Little, *From Even-Handed to Empty-Handed*... 157.

⁶⁷ Little, *American Orientalism*..., 5.

⁶⁸ Little, *From Even-Handed to Empty-Handed*..., 157.

while this thesis argues that he only wished to contain it. The paradoxical result of Kennedy's foreign policy towards Israel lies in the fact that, in order to secure his rapprochement with Nasser, Kennedy enhanced Israel's security to make sure that the Ben Gurion government would not feel threatened and thus pre-emptively attack the UAR.

Little makes a similar argument with regards to Saudi Arabia. He contends that Kennedy wished to see Saudi Arabia "fill the vacuum created by Whitehall's eventual departure from the region"⁶⁹ and thus be transformed into a regional proxy. However, evidence shows that Kennedy never pursued such an objective, and that his strategy towards Saudi Arabia was exclusively designed to secure the Saudi oilfields. Even when, during the Yemen crisis, Kennedy approved substantial military help to Faysal, notably through operation HARD SURFACE launched in July 1963, his goal was never to transform Riyadh into a proxy, but only to deter Nasser from directly attacking Saudi Arabia, and thus secure the US oil interests. Eventually, Kennedy's strategies strengthened Faysal's regime enough to allow it to survive the revolutionary transformations taking place in the region at that time, further fuelled by the wave of Nasserism sparked by the Yemen crisis. After Kennedy's assassination, Johnson seized the opportunity of putting a definitive end to Washington's relations with Cairo (Nasser was still entangled in Yemen by the time Johnson accessed the White House) and of relying more consistently on Faysal, who had given evidence of being a credible ally in the region.

Finally, Little suggests that the administration agreed to make the sale of the HAWK in the hope that this would restrain the Ben Gurion government from introducing

⁶⁹ Little, *American Orientalism...*, 137.

atomic weapons in the region.⁷⁰ Although Little's argument is intriguing (the HAWK was the most advanced defensive missile system and would have been ideal to defend the Dimona nuclear facility), and has the merit of identifying the Dimona issue as one of Kennedy's great concerns, there is no strong evidence to support the statement. Little bases his argument on a conversation that Kennedy had with Ben Gurion on May 30, 1961, but even though the discussion developed around both the issue of the HAWK request and of Dimona, there is simply no evidence of a clear attempt to link the sale to the nuclear issue.⁷¹ There is however evidence of efforts to link the sale to the acceptance on the Israeli side of the Johnson plan for the refugees, a proposal based on the repatriation or resettlement with compensation formula that the UN envoy, Dr Joseph Johnson, advanced to both Israel and the Arab states to tackle the issue of the Palestinian refugees.

In this regard, Abraham Ben-Zvi, author of *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arm Sales to Israel*, argues that the HAWK sale was authorised by the Kennedy administration in order to gain Israel's acceptance of the Johnson plan.⁷² Although it is true that the administration attempted to link the HAWK sale to Israel's acceptance of the Johnson plan, it is also true that this idea only came about, moreover rather casually, after the administration had already pretty much decided to make the sale.⁷³ Such a time-frame confirms the thesis argued in this work that, above all other considerations and attempted *quid pro quos*, the key motivation behind the HAWK sale was Kennedy's attempt to contain Israel by enhancing its *bitahon*.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, 95.

⁷¹ Memorandum of a Conversation, May 30, 1961, FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 57. Aronson Shlomo too argues that the HAWK "was badly needed to protect Dimona", and that Kennedy negotiated the sale in exchange for regular inspections to Dimona. Aronson Shlomo, Oded Brosh, *The Politics and Strategy Of Nuclear Weapons In The Middle East: Opacity, Theory, Reality- An Israeli Perspective*, (Albany, New York; State University of New York Press; 1992), 72. Although such analysis is intriguing, there is no evidence that the administration negotiated the HAWK sale with the Dimona issue in mind, but exclusively with the Johnson Plan for the refugees. Warren Bass makes a good point in this regard: "There is only so much mileage one could get out of one arms sale, however historic." Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 204.

⁷² Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel...*, 65.

⁷³ Notes of Conference, August 14, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 19.

Ben-Zvi also argues that Kennedy perceived Israel as a credible asset in the region to contain the wave of Nasserism, particularly after the Jordan crisis of April 1963.⁷⁴ However, this thesis argues that Kennedy never really perceived Israel as an asset, but as a liability. Specifically, as stated earlier, on the occasion of the Jordan crisis Kennedy and his administration spoke at length of the danger that Israel's threatening position and ambitions over the West Bank constituted for the stability of the region. Kennedy feared that if King Hussein fell under the pressure of Nasserite elements in Jordan, and if consequently the Egyptian leader moved his troops to Amman to secure a new Nasserite government (just like he did in Yemen), Israel would pre-emptively attack Cairo's troops and, by seizing the opportunity, conquer the West Bank, causing a full-blown Arab-Israeli war.⁷⁵ As will be discussed in this work, Kennedy made further security guarantees in an attempt to restrain the Israeli government from starting a pre-emptive war against the UAR. In May 1963 Kennedy reaffirmed publicly the American commitment to Israel's survival, and in November 1963, he agreed to the joint high-level security talks, inadvertently laying the foundation of the US-Israel special alliance.

In this regard, it is important to mention that this work has deliberately not ventured into analysis of the presidencies of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. Although the two presidents are mentioned, this is intended exclusively to guide the reader to through the understanding of the centrality of Kennedy's actions within a more comprehensive overview of US foreign policy in the Middle East. Indeed, this thesis is developed around Kennedy's approach to the Arab world and Israel, and an analysis of the following presidencies of Johnson and Nixon would take this work far beyond its reach. It would be misleading not to acknowledge the significance of the 1967 war for the

⁷⁴ Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel...*, 98.

⁷⁵ Memorandum for the Record, April 27, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 222.

American regional strategies, of Johnson's personal relations with the American Jewish community and with Israel, or of Kissinger's diplomacy. This thesis does not argue that Kennedy was directly responsible for the creation of regional strategies based upon the special relationships with Saudi Arabia and Israel. These came about later, during the Johnson and Nixon years, and in light of a multitude of regional events and new considerations of foreign policy. Kennedy, however, inadvertently created the conditions for these strategies to be developed, laying the groundwork for their future implementation. Kennedy never wished to establish closer ties with Israel, but in an attempt to contain it he put an end to the arms embargo, reaffirmed US commitment to the defence of Israel and started the high-level joint consultations between the two governments. Similarly, Kennedy never wished to transform Saudi Arabia into a regional proxy, but in an attempt to secure US oil interests he reinforced Saudi Arabia's military power and strengthened the regime enough to allow it to survive the revolutionary transformations taking place in the Middle East.

It is equally important to state that this work is articulated around the Arab-Israeli snare, and has thus excluded actors that are commonly not regarded as part of it, such as Iran. Being the focus of this thesis the Arab-Israeli dispute, it deals for the most part with the United Arab Republic, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Yemen. Furthermore, while the historiography on Kennedy and Iran is fairly comprehensive, that on Kennedy, the Arab world and Israel still presents gaps and controversies, which these thesis tries to address.⁷⁶ Of course, although developed around the Arab-Israeli dispute, this work does

⁷⁶ See for instance, Barry Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Stephen McGlinchey, *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran*, (London, new York: Routledge, 2014), Babak Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation: The Foreign Policy of the USA and Revolutionary Iran*, (London, New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), Richard W. Cotta, *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study*, (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1988), John P. Miglietta, *American Alliance Policy in the Middle East, 1945-1992: Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia*, (Lanham; Lexington Books, 2002), Kristen Blake, *The US-Soviet Confrontation in Iran, 1945-1962: A Case in the Annals of the Cold War*, (Lanham; University Press of America, 2009).

not confine itself to this binary conflict, but touches briefly on the question of Kennedy's policy of stability in Iran, in order to guide the reader through a general understanding of the administration's strategy of promoting reforms to preserve certain monarchical regimes in the region. Given its similarity to Kennedy's approach to Saudi Arabia, a brief analysis of the case of Iran would be provided in Chapter 2.

This work is divided up in the following way:

In order to clarify the framework within which Kennedy's strategies were developed, the first chapter covers the topic of Kennedy's inheritance. This chapter allows the reader to follow Kennedy's bid for the presidential seat in relation to his numerous stands on Middle Eastern issues during his time as a senator, emphasising his criticism of Eisenhower's overall approach to the region. It also provides the reader with an understanding of how Kennedy organised his team, his priorities and his overall approach to the region. This chapter argues that when Kennedy accessed the White House, he was confronted with a number of issues left on the table by the Eisenhower administration, mainly the question of America's loss of prestige in the Middle East, and of the Soviet infiltration in the region. This chapter aims at explaining how Kennedy decided to tackle the problems of the Middle East

The second chapter considers Kennedy's strategies for the Middle East. It will focus on the key features of Kennedy's Middle East policy, highlighting its strategic, economic and ideological drive. This chapter provides a general analysis of the issues that are not discussed in the three case studies that are examined in the following chapters. It focuses on Kennedy's strategies of modernization of the Arab monarchies (also including an overview of Iran), his strategy of containment of communism, and his relations with the British government. This chapter is largely intended to introduce the reader to the

three case studies (Egypt, Israel and the Yemen crisis) with an understanding of Kennedy's overall approach to the region.

The third chapter examines Kennedy's policy towards Nasser. It argues that Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Nasser constituted the core of his overall strategy for the Middle East, and that behind Kennedy's wooing of Nasser lay very pragmatic Cold War considerations. This chapter provides an analysis of the development of the Kennedy-Nasser relationship, describing the administration's approach to Cairo before the Yemen crisis of September 1962. It analyses the issue of the UAR break-up; the PL-480; Nasser's reaction to the HAWK sale and to the Johnson plan.

The fourth chapter examines Kennedy's policy towards Israel. It argues that Kennedy's strategy towards Israel was mainly designed to forestall possible pre-emptive attacks against Egypt, and that, in order to do so, Kennedy opted for a policy aimed at enhancing Israel's security. This chapter provides an analysis of the development of the Kennedy-Israel relationship before the Yemen crisis, tackling the issues of the Dimona nuclear facility, the HAWK sale, and the Johnson plan.

The fifth chapter examines Kennedy's policy during the Yemen crisis. It argues that in order to bolster his rapprochement with Nasser, Kennedy adopted policies aimed at containing Israel and strengthening Saudi Arabia through programmes of domestic reforms, thus inadvertently laying the foundations for the making of two special alliances. The Yemen crisis provides an excellent lens to understand the many facets of the Kennedy administration's foreign policy in the Middle East, as the number of international actors involved and of interests at stake, compelled Kennedy to find a balance between his Cold War objective that was Nasser, and the more regional concerns that were Israel and Saudi Arabia.

This work offers a unique interpretation of the events that punctuated the history of Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East, focusing on three overlapping concerns (Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia) rather than fixating on Kennedy-Israel relations, as previous works have done. Such innovation derives from the need to provide a nuanced understanding of Kennedy's regional strategies, and to present a fresh portrait of a president whose actions have significantly contributed in shaping the contemporary Middle East. A good assessment of Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East is perhaps provided by his own New Frontiersman, Phillips Talbot: "We didn't solve any of the fundamental problems...But maybe the combination of everything we were doing helped to keep it tamped down. I hope so."⁷⁷ On balance however, Kennedy's foreign policy was far more than a buffer. Kennedy showed great initiative and understanding of the Middle East: he seduced Nasser, breaking from the Eisenhower-Dulles approach and offering the key Arab nationalist a credible alternative to the Soviet Union in his pursuit of a neutralist path; he contained Israel, reducing the threat of pre-emptive attacks and of a full-blown Arab-Israeli war, even when this appeared to be imminent; he secured US interests in the Arab monarchies by designing a strategy aimed to strengthen these regimes from inside, even when these were trembling under the wave of Nasserism in 1962-1963.

Unfortunately, Kennedy's death prevented his strategies from ever coming to full fruition, and this is perhaps why Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East has too often slipped under the radar, or been examined almost exclusively in the context of the making of a special alliance with Israel. But there is no doubt that Kennedy's actions in the region were far more than this, and that his presidency constituted a pivotal moment in the history of the US foreign policy in the Middle East.

⁷⁷ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 70.

Chapter 1. From senator to president: JFK and the making of a new Mideast approach

The senator who wanted to be president

By the end of the 1950s the Middle East had become without doubt one of the most important stages for the Cold War. The need for oil still dominated the minds of the American policy-makers, as consumption was growing at “a pace that simply would not have been conceivable at the beginning of the post-war era”⁷⁸, while the region was progressively becoming the global centre of production⁷⁹, with profits expected to “reach \$10,000 million a year by 1975”⁸⁰. The events of Suez and the nationalisation of the canal had proven the importance of its geo-strategic passages for Western economic interests, while simultaneously marking the gradual loss of influence of the former European empires and the handover of their power to Washington. The question of the rising tension between Arabs and Israelis and the issue of the Palestinian refugees were still very much on the table as no significant steps towards conciliation had been made. Israel’s reprisal attacks against the Arab countries, Jordan in particular, and the occasional episodes of “Arab harassment”⁸¹ along the Israeli borders, were causing incidents of varying severity, further contributing to the instability of a region already stormy with inter-Arab disputes.⁸² In this regard, the local crisis that occurred in 1958 in Jordan and Lebanon, the

⁷⁸ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power*, (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore; Simon & Schuster: 1991), 499.

⁷⁹ Between 1948 and 1972, oil production in the Middle East had increased of 1500%. Ibidem, 500.

⁸⁰ “Oil in the Middle East- Its markets and Europe’s dependence upon it”. JFKL, Pre-Presidential papers, Box 789, Foreign Policy Near East.

⁸¹ Research Memorandum, May 23, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli relation.

⁸² In 1962, the State Department provided the administration with a list of the most significant incidents that had occurred because of Israel’s retaliation: January 23, 1953- Falamah (Jordan); January 28, 1953- Falamah and Rantis (Jordan); December 18, 1953- Bethlehem road (Jordan); March 28-29, 1954- Nahhalin (Jordan); September 1-2, 1954- Bayt Liqya (Jordan); May 18, 1955- Dayr al Balah, Gaza Strip (Egypt); August 31-September 1, 1955- Khan Yunus, Gaza Strip (Egypt); October 27-28, 1955- Al Kuntillah (Egypt); December 11-12, 1955- Lake Tiberias shore position (Syria); August 16, 1956- Dayr al Balah and Rafah, Gaza Strip (Egypt); September 11-12, 1956- Rahwah (Jordan); September 13-14, 1956- Gharandal

Iraqi coup of July 1958 and the union between Egypt and Syria into the UAR federation in February 1958, proved not only that the wave of Arab nationalism was not a phenomenon to be underestimated, but that Nasser was the key regional player to deal with. Even more frightening, the Soviet Union was a step ahead of the United States in the region, as it was managing to exploit its propaganda to distance the Arab world from Washington. In July 1958, the National Security Council informed Eisenhower that “Many Arabs believe that the USSR, on the contrary, favours the goals of Arab nationalism and is willing to support the Arabs in their efforts to attain these goals without a quid pro quo”⁸³, pointing out that the political trends in the Near East were “inimical to Western interests.”⁸⁴ Indeed, during the 1950s, Moscow had managed to conclude several military agreements with the Arab leaders, such as the Czech arms deal with Nasser right before the Suez crisis, or the one with Iraqi leader Qasim in 1958, and to exploit internal divisions within the Arab world to present itself as true supporter of the Arabs’ ambitions. On the other hand, given Eisenhower’s opposition to Arab nationalism, the United States was portrayed as a force eager to “turn back the wheel of history”, and working for “the preservation of colonialism.”⁸⁵

As events in the Middle East were developing, a young politician from Boston, Massachusetts, was learning how to exploit the failures of the administration to his personal advantage, in his quest for the presidency of the United States. Arguably the White House had indeed always been John F. Kennedy’s objective, as he grew up with one lesson from his father in mind: “If you can’t be captain, don’t play.”⁸⁶ Acknowledging

(Jordan); September 25-26, 1956- Husan (Jordan); October 10-11, 1956- Qalqilyah (Jordan); January 31-February, 1960- Tawafiq Arab village (between Syria and Israel). Ibidem.

⁸³ Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Planning Board, July 29, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XII, *Near East Region; Iraq; Iran; Arabian Peninsula*, 5.

⁸⁴ Ibidem.

⁸⁵ Speech by D. T. Shepilov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. at the 20TH Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, February 16, 1956, (London: Soviet News, 1956).

⁸⁶ Dallek, *An Unfinished Life...*, 15.

the fact that his contribution in congressional discussions about global issues could encourage party leaders to take his political ascent more seriously⁸⁷, from the very early stages of his senatorial career, Kennedy entrenched himself in the world of international affairs, particularly the Middle East, not only because the region was Eisenhower's hot-spot, but also because its explosive dynamics had made it critical for the Cold War.⁸⁸

At the age of 35, Kennedy became senator, after having defeated Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. in the 1952 Congressional elections. He knew that being so young he “would be one of the least-influential members of the Senate”⁸⁹, especially in an era in which, as Truman put it later in 1960, only leaders “with the greatest possible maturity and experience”⁹⁰ were taken into consideration. Thus, in order to prove his credentials as leader and to gain political credibility, he had to take a stand on the most controversial issues and prove in Congress that he belonged to a new generation of progressive and innovative policy-makers who could move America forward in an era dominated by competition with the Soviet Union.⁹¹ The Middle East offered Kennedy the perfect platform to prove to Congress he was a credible politician.

Kennedy had been interested in the Middle East since he was very young. In 1939, although still a student, he wrote a long letter to his father, businessman and Government Official Joseph Kennedy, regarding the issue of Palestine and the British White Paper. Kennedy took a rather firm position, showing great analytical skills and interest in the region, and labelling the White Paper as a theoretically good solution that would not

⁸⁷ Ibidem, 222.

⁸⁸ Ibidem, 165.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, 179. Furthermore, as Kennedy suffered major back problems, he was often forced to stay in the hospital rather than in the Senate. In fact, the chairman of the 86th Congress declared in 1960: “Take our candidate, Mr Kennedy, how many times has he been on this Committee? How many times have you seen him here this year, last year or the years before?” Congressional Records, 86th Congress, 2nd session, Vol. XII, 86-2, 1960, 716.

⁹⁰ Dallek, *An Unfinished Life...*, 260.

⁹¹ Elie Abel, *OHI*, March 18, 1970, 5.

work.⁹² The idea behind the White Paper was the creation of a mixed Palestine, governed by both Palestinian Arabs and Jews, proportionally to the number of their population. “It surely sounds like a fair plan”, Kennedy wrote to his father, “but they need something that would actually work and not something that merely sounds good.”⁹³ Consequently, he hypothesized the separation of the country into two autonomous districts both with governmental powers “to the extent that they do not interfere with each other and that British interest is safeguarded.”⁹⁴

However, although a personal intellectual interest in the world of foreign policy and in the Middle East in particular was also part of Kennedy’s background⁹⁵, a clever and focused campaigning strategy was behind the numerous stands he took in front of Congress. In 1952, Kennedy commented that “foreign policy... overshadows everything else”⁹⁶ and in light of this belief, eager to reach the highest office in the United States, he followed Eisenhower’s foreign policy closely, firm in his belief that this could be the key to the White House.

This resulted in Kennedy’s increasing criticism of the policies designed by Eisenhower and Dulles and their general approach to the Middle East, which brought the young senator that domestic and international attention he sought, both from other members of Congress and foreign political personalities.⁹⁷ Consequently, with each

⁹² “Letter written to his father following trip to Palestine, 1939”. JFKL, President Office Files, Box 135, Special Events through the Years.

⁹³ “Letter written to his father following trip to Palestine, 1939”. JFKL, President Office Files, Box 135, Special Events through the Years.

⁹⁴ Ibidem.

⁹⁵ William B. Benton, *OHI*, July 18, 1964, 22-69.

⁹⁶ Dallek, *An Unfinished Life...*, 158.

⁹⁷ One of Kennedy’s most famous speeches in the Senate was about the situation in Algeria. His anti-colonialist stand brought him the praises of the Yemeni Chargé d’Affaires, Assayed Ahmad Zabarah, who commented: “A beautiful speech by an excellent man”. Peter Kihss, “Kennedy decries colonial policy”, *New York Times*, November 24, 1958, 7. Even the Egyptian press was quite impressed with Kennedy’s Algeria speech, branding Eisenhower’s position as “indefensible”. FBIS, *Eisenhower attitude indefensible*, Cairo, Egyptian Home Service, Jul. 5, 1957, 1. As Hart recalled, it “made him a good name among the Arabs.” Parker T. Hart, *OHI*, April 15, 1969, 2.

failure of the White House, Kennedy strengthened his conviction that “the old ways will not do” and that it was time “for a new generation of leadership”⁹⁸, for which he undoubtedly wanted to be the spokesman. Kennedy learned valuable lessons from the old administration’s mistaken approach to the Middle East and, although in 1958 Eisenhower had tried to adjust his policy with the NSC 5820/1, a new strategy centred upon the need to establish a working relationship with the Arab nationalists⁹⁹, Kennedy had the merit of realising the real regional challenges years in advance.

Kennedy considered the Middle East during the Eisenhower years a “monument to Western misunderstanding.”¹⁰⁰ During a conference in 1957, Kennedy attacked Eisenhower’s Baghdad Pact, the US sponsored regional organisation born in 1955 which included Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey, as well as Britain, describing it as a “clumsy tool to treat Communist infiltration.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, noticing that Eisenhower’s “tools” were trembling under the weight of Arab nationalism, regional fighting, and the imperialist attitude that the American policies were conveying, Senator Kennedy began to base his criticism on the basic assumption that Washington’s policy-makers had been dealing with the Middle East “far too long almost exclusively in the context of the East-West struggle”.¹⁰² In fact, he strongly believed that the reason the approach had failed up to that point was the fact that the previous administration had disregarded the challenging peculiarities of the Middle East, dealing with the regional issues exclusively, as he wrote in his 1960 book *The Strategy for Peace*, “in terms of our own battle against International Communism.”¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Convention acceptance speech, *The New Frontier*, 15 July 1960, 4. JFKL, President Office Files, Box 137, Special Events through the Years.

⁹⁹ National Security Council Report, November 4, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XII, 51.

¹⁰⁰ John F. Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace*, (New York: Allan Nevins, 1960), 106.

¹⁰¹ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, “The New Dimension of American Foreign Policy”, November 1, 1957. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

¹⁰² Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace...*, 107.

¹⁰³ Ibidem.

Kennedy spoke at length of the urgency to “formulate ... a new approach to the Middle East”¹⁰⁴ based on the need to accept the forces of Arab nationalism and to channel them “along constructive lines”.¹⁰⁵ Refusing to “talk only in terms of guns and money”¹⁰⁶, a clear reference to the Eisenhower Doctrine, Kennedy commented that “The Middle East needs water, not war; tractors, not tanks; bread, not bombs”¹⁰⁷, and that the United States should never “consider the problem of the nations of the Middle East apart from the economic and social conditions which surround them.”¹⁰⁸ Concurring with Walt Rostow’s theory that economic development and social and political modernization could help the Third World countries to resist “the blandishments and temptations of Communism”¹⁰⁹, Kennedy concluded that it was crucial for the United States to help “move more than half the people of the less-developed nations into self-sustained economic growth”¹¹⁰, and thus shield them from the Soviet ambitions.

This is why Kennedy never fully subscribed to any of Eisenhower’s policies in the Middle East, believing that, being designed exclusively to prevent Soviet infiltration, they disregarded the real regional challenges: the issue of Arab nationalism and of social and economic development. This is not to say that the young senator underestimated the relevance of the Cold War, as he was on the contrary very sensitive to it, as any politician with presidential aspirations would have been at that time.¹¹¹ Kennedy always

¹⁰⁴ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy in the Senate, Washington, June 14, 1960. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁶ Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace...*, 108.

¹⁰⁷ Speech by Senator John F. Kennedy, Zionists of America, August 26, 1960. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

¹⁰⁸ Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace...*, 111.

¹⁰⁹ Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Third Edition, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960, 1971, 1990), 134. Under Kennedy, Walt Rostow became deputy national security advisor.

¹¹⁰ Editorial Note, FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. IX, *Foreign Economic Policy*, 100.

¹¹¹ When Kennedy took office in 1961, the Cold War was clearly at the top of his mind, more than any domestic matter: “the issue of war and peace is involved, and the survival of perhaps the planet, possibly our system; and therefore this is a matter of primary concern to the people of the United States and the people of the world”. Press Conferences of President Kennedy, January 25, 1961, Ready reference, Presidential News Conferences.

acknowledged the great threat that international communism constituted but, he stated in his book, “We were wrong in believing that what was so clear to us could be made equally compelling to other peoples with problems very different from our own.”¹¹² The failures of the Eisenhower administration moved him to realise that only by understanding and playing along with certain regional dynamics could the threat of the Soviet Union be removed from the Middle East.

As the Suez crisis was developing during the spring and summer of 1956, Kennedy agreed, albeit reluctantly, to try to run for the office of vice president, along with presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, in order to take the next step in his political career. He “did not really want to be vice president”, as he confessed to Ted Sorensen, already a member of his entourage, but Kennedy recognised that in 1956 it was “the only game in town”¹¹³, and that the chances of success were high because Eisenhower’s health problems had made his re-election rather doubtful.¹¹⁴ The vice presidential nomination was eventually won by Senator Estes Kefauver, and thus Kennedy focused back against Eisenhower’s foreign policy, particularly towards the Middle East.

In reference to the Baghdad Pact, the ineffectiveness of which had been proved by the Soviet arms deal signed in September 1955 by Egyptian President Nasser and Czechoslovakia, the young senator asserted: “We are neither members nor non-members of the Baghdad Pact, but some sort of half-member”¹¹⁵, arguing that without the presence of its main promoter and contributor, the organisation was left with no real power. Eisenhower and Dulles saw it differently. They argued that the real issue “was that the

¹¹² Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace...*, 107.

¹¹³ Theodore C. Sorensen, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*, (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2008), 169.

¹¹⁴ Eisenhower was in fact dealing with personal and delicate health problems, which made his re-election even more doubtful. Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President, 1952-1959*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Sydney, 1984), 377.

¹¹⁵ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at the Junior Chamber of Commerce Dinner in Richmond, Virginia, October 15, 1956. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

British have taken it over and run it as an instrument of British policy - that has drawn down upon it a tremendous amount of criticism”¹¹⁶, causing Nasser to be pushed “into the deal with the Russians.”¹¹⁷

Though the British presence had undoubtedly contributed in giving an imperialist feel to the organisation, in his 1957 article *A Democrat Looks at US Foreign Policy* Kennedy contended that among the reasons behind the fragility of the pact there was also the lack of “identity of interests among all States of the Middle East”¹¹⁸ and the false American assumption that there was actually one just because of their geographic proximity. “Our response to the Soviet challenge in... the Middle East has been exaggeratedly military”¹¹⁹, he continued, arguing that while the Soviet Union was using new political, diplomatic and economic techniques to ingratiate themselves with the Middle East, based largely on the propagandist support of the Arabs’ ambitions, Washington had tried too hard to develop a system of alliances among countries that had nothing to tie them together. Kennedy’s analysis was far from groundless, and many questioned the effectiveness of the Baghdad Pact. For instance, in an article appeared on the Pittsburgh Press in 1956 entitled “Baghdad Pact Is Problem”, it was quite plainly stated that “None of these steps is seen as contributing to peace and stability in the Middle East.”¹²⁰ After all, just one month before Kennedy’s article, the same Baghdad Pact Council had issued a communiqué on the “ever present danger of subversion in the Pact area”¹²¹, a threat that the organisation was quite clearly unable to contain.

¹¹⁶ Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation between the President and the Secretary of State, April 7, 1956, FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XII, 111. Britain suspected that Eisenhower’s policies were designed “to take [Britain’s] place in the Middle East.” Note by the Minister of State, February 12, 1954, Cabinet Office (54) 53, CAB 129-66. Thus, on March 30, 1955, Prime Minister A. Eden announced that Britain would join the pact. Editorial note. Ibidem, 31.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹¹⁸ John F. Kennedy, “A Democrat Looks at US Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Affairs*, October 1957 issue.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹²⁰ Peter Edson, “Baghdad Pact Is Problem”, *The Pittsburgh Press*, April 17, 1956.

¹²¹ “Baghdad Pact”, *International Organization*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (spring, 1958), 230-232.

Kennedy commented how the administration, unable to tackle the real issues of the Middle East, had just “tinkered with notions of a Middle East defence pact” without being able to decide “who would be defended and against whom.”¹²² Kennedy labelled the pact as “a creature of crisis jugged in its ups and downs and ambiguous in its direction”¹²³, and after the Iraqi revolution of 1958 and its consequent withdrawal from the organisation, he simply acknowledged the obvious: “We relied in the Middle East on the Baghdad Pact, and yet when the Iraqi government was changed, the Baghdad Pact broke down.”¹²⁴ In *The Strategy of Peace*, Kennedy finally wrote: “Military pacts provide no long-term solutions. On the contrary, they tend dangerously to polarize the Middle East, to attach us to specific regimes, to isolate us very often from the significant nationalist movements.”¹²⁵

Kennedy’s bid for power was just beginning, strengthened by the inexorable collapse of the tools designed by the Eisenhower administration.

Suez, the Doctrine, and Kennedy’s bid for power

The Suez crisis offered Kennedy a perfect opportunity to prove his point: it was time to develop a new approach to the Middle East and to change the course of American foreign policy. With vice-presidential campaign to run, maturity to prove and political credibility to gain, the senator sharpened his criticism against the Eisenhower administration. During the many conventions he was invited to attend, he repeatedly returned to the issue of Suez, in order to highlight the limits of the Eisenhower administration and the need for a change in the government.

¹²² Ibidem.

¹²³ The New York Times, *Kennedy Criticizes US Foreign Policy*, Sep. 23, 1957.

¹²⁴ *Face-to-Face, Nixon-Kennedy*, Vice President Richard M. Nixon and senator John F. Kennedy Fourth Joint Television-Radio Broadcast, October 21, 1960. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches. This statement Senator Kennedy’s opening line, to which Nixon did not give a direct response.

¹²⁵ Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace...*, 122.

On October 5, 1956, Kennedy stated: “The security and leadership of the United States... are currently threatened most seriously in three Middle Eastern-Mediterranean areas - Suez, Cyprus and French North Africa”¹²⁶, and just ten days later he moved against the administration, blaming it for its hesitancy.¹²⁷ By the end of the month, Kennedy had moved directly against Eisenhower: “A leader does not sit back and await with hope... A leader is not caught wholly unprepared for an invasion of Suez.”¹²⁸

In attempt to broaden his constituency, Kennedy’s speeches on Suez soon started to focus on that portion of the electoral constituency that could play an important role in his personal ascent, the American Jewish community. In November 1956, standing in front of the Hisadrut Zionist Organisation, he declared that “The dependence of the world upon the Middle Eastern oil and its transportation through the Suez Canal has been made abundantly clear during the past weeks”¹²⁹, and he stressed Israel’s entitlement to free access to the Canal, “both by virtue of international treaties and by virtue of being a specific American commitment”.¹³⁰ Obviously, the senator had no idea how to reopen the canal through peaceful means, nor did he discuss it much with his collaborators¹³¹, but he knew that supporting Israel would be a wise move for his political ambitions, especially at a time when Israel was highly antagonised by the White House. That is also why, as Feldman recalled, “Kennedy fully committed himself to the free passage in the Suez

¹²⁶ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at the Annual Convention Banquet of Young Democrats of North Carolina in Winston-Salem, NC, October 5, 1956. Ibidem.

¹²⁷ Remarks by Senator John F. Kennedy at the Democratic National Convention, Conrad Hilton, Chicago, Illinois, August 16, 1956. Ibidem. Ironically enough, Eisenhower had his revenge during the Bay of Pigs invasion, during which Kennedy was impugned for having allowed the operation, and for not intervening enough at the end. James Reston, “President is undertaking review of Foreign Policy”, *New York Times*, September 25, 1961.

¹²⁸ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at the Democratic City Committee Annual Pre-Election Dinner in Easton, Pennsylvania, October 30, 1957. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

¹²⁹ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at the Annual Banquet of Hisadrut Zionist Organisation, Baltimore, Maryland, November 27, 1956. Ibidem.

¹³⁰ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, August 26, 1967, 550-552

¹³¹ Ibidem. In 1960, Kennedy asked Feldman: “What can a President do to reopen the Canal?” “You can invade Egypt” Feldman replied, a solution that Kennedy however did not contemplate, as “of course he wanted to keep peace in the Middle East”. Ibidem.

Canal, and did not commit himself in saying how that was to be achieved.”¹³² In fact, even during the 1960 presidential campaign, the soon-to-be President of the United States declared “we must remove all discrimination from the Suez Canal... we must commit ourselves to the free transit of the Suez Canal.”¹³³

In *A Democrat Looks at US Foreign Policy*, Kennedy accused the administration of being too slow in “recognising the need for a broader-gauge and more sustained policy”¹³⁴, and of having dealt with the Suez crisis in a “surprised and divided”¹³⁵ manner. Kennedy asserted that Eisenhower’s hesitancy, and especially his withdrawal of the economic help promised for the Aswan Dam, had allowed Moscow to present itself as a champion of the anti-colonialism movement and to strengthen its ties with Nasser, who, as he would describe in *The Strategy of Peace* a few years later, was the “leader of the Arab bloc, champion of the Arab unity”.¹³⁶ Moving once again against the initiatives of the Eisenhower administration, during a speech in November 1957, entitled “The New Dimension of American Foreign Policy”, Kennedy stated: “It is not enough that we proclaim our anti-colonialism; we must also help these new states to find the means for accelerated economic growth and stable self-rule.”¹³⁷

However, Kennedy’s biggest strike occurred during the congressional debate on the Middle East Resolution, the Eisenhower Doctrine. By that time, Kennedy was becoming progressively more involved in American foreign policy, since after the disappointing results of the 1956 presidential elections, in January 1957 he had entered

¹³² Ibidem, 564.

¹³³ “Suez Blunders Charged”, *The Guardian*, August 26, 1960.

¹³⁴ Kennedy, *A Democrat looks at US Foreign Policy...*, 51.

¹³⁵ Ibidem.

¹³⁶ Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace...*, 112.

¹³⁷ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, *The New Dimension of American Foreign Policy*, November 1, 1957. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, ready to take a more decisive stand on the foreign policy platform.¹³⁸

His proactive participation in the congressional debate about the Eisenhower Doctrine allowed the senator to gain even more exposure in the national press and among other members of Congress, thus continuing his personal quest to gain that political credibility necessary to access the White House. Right after the polls for the “Mansfield amendment”, an extensive clause to the Doctrine that allowed military intervention whenever US interests were threatened, even if the threat did not come from the Soviet Union or a country controlled by international communism¹³⁹, Kennedy advanced his own proposal to the Senate, suggesting that Eisenhower, “in support of certain general policies and principles for the settlement of the problems of the Middle East”¹⁴⁰, should seek negotiations for such settlements basing his efforts on six principles. These principles would later come to constitute the general guidelines for Kennedy’s overall approach to the region as president, indicating a certain continuity in his views towards the Middle East: 1) recognition of full sovereignty of the countries of the Middle East; 2) renunciation of the use of armed forces as a tool for diplomacy; 3) the making of permanent Middle Eastern national boundaries; 4) the creation of a free and open transit of Suez under the sovereignty of Egypt; 5) repatriation (or resettlement with compensation from Israel) of the Arab Palestinian refugees, with economic assistance to

¹³⁸ Dallek, *An Unfinished Life...*, 221.

¹³⁹ The ‘Mansfield amendment’ constituted “the sole provision of the Eisenhower Doctrine that the administration could invoke in justifying its military intervention in Lebanon”. Salim Yaquob, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 112. In *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*, Barrett does not put enough emphasis on such a key aspect of the Eisenhower Doctrine. The nationalist revolts of 1958 had little to do with Moscow’s communism, and only through this extensive clause was the United States able to help President Chamoun to suppress the revolts.

¹⁴⁰ 85th Congress, Vol. IX, 85-1, 1957, 374.

Israel in the event of such programme; 6) development of the economic resources of the area for the use of its people.¹⁴¹

Kennedy's analysis was far from groundless. In his opinion, the doctrine was "narrowly drawn"¹⁴² because the threat of communism was distant. The people of the Middle East, he noted, did not seem to care about the threat of communism, or at least not as much as they did about their right to "develop their own resources in that area, and whether the United States recognises it."¹⁴³ Once again, Kennedy complained that the Eisenhower administration was focusing too much on the threat of communism and too little on the real challenges of the Middle East.¹⁴⁴

The six principles highlighted by Kennedy did indeed reflect the six big issues that were afflicting the Middle East at that time, therefore their importance appeared unquestionable. Thus, why should the Doctrine, Kennedy wondered, not allow concrete intervention on these subjects? In addition, the Middle East resolution, in its original formulation, could easily be manipulated for counter-propaganda: "we are opening ourselves by this resolution to the charge of Western imperialism"¹⁴⁵, he feared, and he believed that the only way to lessen such a risk was by committing to the solving of urgent regional issues. Kennedy's intervention impressed several senators: "When we get something like this spelled out, we are really making progress"¹⁴⁶, commented Senator

¹⁴¹ Ibidem, 394. As President, Kennedy was unable to succeed in all these areas. Particularly, as it will be later discussed, he was unable to solve the issue of the Palestinian refugees, a problem he tried to tackle during 1962 with the Johnson plan.

¹⁴² Ibidem.

¹⁴³ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁴ Kennedy blamed Washington's attitude and mistaken approach for the rise of communist parties and of the Soviet prestige in the Middle East, particularly during the 1950s. He argued that Washington's attempt to impose its control over the region had alienated the countries in the Middle East, favoured the development of closer ties between the Middle Eastern countries and the Soviet Union, and increased the appeal that the socialist ideology had on profoundly troubled societies. Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace...*, 110, 111.

¹⁴⁵ 85th Congress, Vol. IX, 85-1, 1957, *US Government Printing Office*, 374.

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem.

Sparkman, as he congratulated his younger colleague for his contribution. Others, however, were less convinced.¹⁴⁷

After nearly two months of debate within Congress, the Middle East Resolution was eventually passed, without Kennedy's amendment but thanks to Kennedy's help. Being particularly sensitive to the issue of the Cold War, the senator was more concerned with the fact that dismissing the Eisenhower Doctrine would "Blunt out warning to the Soviets"¹⁴⁸ than with the act of implementing a strategy that "treated the Middle East as an American province"¹⁴⁹, and thus urged Congress, sceptical about the expense required by the Doctrine¹⁵⁰, to pass the resolution in order to avoid repudiating the US government "on a major foreign policy issue before the eyes of the world."¹⁵¹ In 1960, after having observed the scarce results produced by the Eisenhower Doctrine, Kennedy commented in his book that "the resolution should never have been introduced"¹⁵² in the first place, and made it clear that he supported it only to show unity among the US political apparatus.

By 1960, Kennedy was closer to the presidency than ever before. The young senator had indeed proved to the nation and many of his fellow politicians that he was more than a "spoiled candidate"¹⁵³ as some had suggested, and certainly not a "mediocrity

¹⁴⁷ Senator Capehart was the first to reply to Kennedy's proposal, charging "You tie the President's hands". If Washington renounced the use of armed forces, it would give a big advantage to the Soviet Union, allowing it to ship as many arms as they wanted, and thus easily move war against America in the Middle East. "We are not tying his hands", replied Kennedy, "we are attempting to undertake by this statement that they should not be used aggressively." Senator Hickenlooper shared another concern when he asked "I wonder what this is getting us into", referring to the third point of Kennedy's proposal, concerning the boundaries. "They haven't even agreed among themselves", he charged, fearing that such a declaration would eventually force the United States to take a position on any treaty arrangements or sovereignty declarations, thus overcommitting itself. Eventually Kennedy's amendment did not pass. The *noes* exceeded the *ayes* and the debate moved on. Ibidem, 394-396.

¹⁴⁸ Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace*..., 106.

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁰ The financial aspect was the 'hot-spot' of the resolution: Eisenhower was asking for big expenses (200 million dollars was the amount he requested) and Congress, the Treasury Department and the same Republican Party frowned upon the prospect of spending that amount of money on the Third World. Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President*..., 377.

¹⁵¹ "The Congress: Debate on the Doctrine", *The Time Magazine*, March 11, 1957.

¹⁵² Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace*..., 106.

¹⁵³ Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*..., 256.

in the Senate... a nobody who had a rich father”¹⁵⁴, as Eisenhower had once described him. With his campaign efforts finally paying off, Kennedy found himself running for the highest office against Eisenhower’s vice president, Richard Nixon.

In October 1960, Kennedy’s fourth and final face-to-face debate with Nixon on television virtually assured him of victory. Millions of Americans followed the event. Outside the studio, a crowd of several hundred “demonstrated at the curb for Mr Kennedy”, while the *New York Times* reported no “evidence of any Nixon rooting section.”¹⁵⁵ Even in Cairo, President Nasser watched the debate closely, eager to get a look at the future American president. Muhammad Heikal, one of Nasser’s long-time friends, recalled that after the debate, Nasser was convinced that Kennedy was “the better man”, and that while Nixon did not do well, Kennedy, on the contrary, perfectly “‘sold’ himself to the people.”¹⁵⁶

The two candidates covered a number of topics. Economic and social issues were key to win over the American constituency, but in a time of great international peril caused by the Cold War, issues of foreign policy inevitably occupied the largest space. Kennedy identified Cuba, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East as the most critical areas where the United States was “going to have to do better”¹⁵⁷, opposing one of Nixon’s previous statements that American prestige abroad was “at an all-time high...

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem, 261. When John F. Kennedy won the White House, Eisenhower colourfully wrote in his diary that he felt as if he had been “hit in the solar plexus with a ball bat”. Louis Galambos and Daun Van Ee, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower. The Presidency: Keeping the Peace*. Vol. XVIII, (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), xxviii.

¹⁵⁵ “Nixon and Kennedy Clash in TV Debate on Spending, Farms and Social Issues”, *The New York Times*, September 26, 1960.

¹⁵⁶ Mohamed Heikal, *Nasser, The Cairo Documents: The private papers of Nasser*, (London: New English Library, 1973), 170, 171. Nasser also confessed that he was very impressed with the phrase in Kennedy’s inaugural address “ask not what your country can give to you but what you can give to your country”, as he felt it represented a whole new philosophy, more adapted to the new era. He also liked Walt Rostow’s book ‘Stages of Economic Growth’, to the point that he ordered it to be translated and distributed to every member of the Egyptian cabinet. Ibidem, 173.

¹⁵⁷ “Face-to-Face, Nixon-Kennedy” Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy Fourth Joint Television-Radio Broadcast, October 21, 1960. JFKL, Ready References, JFK speeches.

and that of the Communists at an all-time low.”¹⁵⁸ Kennedy stated that in all these areas the communist influence was rising because of the lack of US interest or a mistaken approach: “I have seen Cuba go to the Communists. I have seen communist influence and Castro influence rise in Latin America. I have seen us ignore Africa.”¹⁵⁹ With regards to the Middle East, Kennedy summed up his long-standing opinions on Eisenhower’s foreign policy with one, sharp, comment:

“We relied in the Middle East on the Baghdad Pact, and yet when the Iraqi Government was changed, the Baghdad Pact broke down. We relied on the Eisenhower Doctrine for the Middle East which passed the Senate. There isn’t one country in the Middle East that now endorses the Eisenhower Doctrine.”¹⁶⁰

Eventually Kennedy won the elections, entering the White House in January 1961, as the 35th President of the United States. Although he was not particularly pleased with the results of the elections¹⁶¹, he had no time to dwell on them, or to show weakness or second thoughts. The vigour with which he faced the entire presidential campaign had to be proved now from the Oval Office. He had to show that the strength with which he pursued the White House would now be used to pursue America’s interests, and that this new generation of politicians was far more capable than the previous one. It was the time for the New Frontiersman to fulfil the promises made during his campaign.

New and old players: reshaping the White House

With such intellectual background and personal fascination with the region, it is hard to subscribe to Bass’s argument that John F. Kennedy was only “occasionally

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁶¹ The 0.2% margin over his rival, made the newly-elected president think that his victory tasted more of ‘semi-failure’. Kennedy considered himself much better than Nixon, and he was sure he had run a much more intelligent campaign, yet Nixon proved to be a viable opponent, far above expectations. Dallek, *An Unfinished Life...*, 299.

directly involved in the Middle East policy.¹⁶² Indeed, such an assertion seems to disregard the uniformity between Kennedy's view of the Middle East as senator and as president: as a Senator, Kennedy spoke of the need to assist the Arab nationalists, to sponsor programmes of economic and social development, to overturn the Arabs' perception of the United States by supporting their ambitions for self-determination and emancipation, and in general to secure US interests by adopting a new approach to the Middle East (as he wrote in *The Strategy of Peace*, the United States "should look with friendship upon those people who want to beat the problems that almost overwhelmed them, and wish to concentrate their energies on doing that"¹⁶³, a concept remarked during the debate with Nixon, when Kennedy stated: "If we become known as friend of freedom... helping these people in the fight against poverty and ignorance and diseases... I believe... we can put the communist on the defensive"¹⁶⁴). As a president, Kennedy pursued exactly such goals, giving clear evidence that the administration took exactly the direction Kennedy wished it to take.

The analysis of Kennedy's White House shows two key features of the Kennedy administration. The first one is that, contrary the years of Eisenhower, the appointments disregarded the political affiliation or political experience, the seniority or even the age of the officials¹⁶⁵, but were based exclusively on a practical assessment of their capabilities and expertise in the field for which they were chosen, thus revealing the pragmatism behind Kennedy's approach to the world of international affairs. The second feature is that, differing again from Eisenhower, Kennedy himself played a crucial role in

¹⁶² Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 12.

¹⁶³ Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace...*, 218.

¹⁶⁴ "Face-to-Face, Nixon-Kennedy" Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy Fourth Joint Television-Radio Broadcast, October 21, 1960. JFKL, Ready References, JFK speeches.

¹⁶⁵ Charles Bowles, *OIH*, February 2, 1965, 16-21. During Eisenhower's administration, the presidential appointments followed a very traditional and bureaucratically strict scheme, for instance nobody under the age of 50 could be appointed ambassador. With Kennedy, those rules were overturned. The president did not believe age could be a discriminating factor in his appointments, which were simply based on a pragmatic evaluation of the candidate's abilities.

directing the US policies towards the Middle East. Kennedy was “determined to run his own foreign policy”¹⁶⁶, a view largely shared by several members of his administration. The analysis of the Kennedy administration also offers a valuable insight into the orientation of Kennedy’s foreign policy in the Middle East. Appointing only one pro-Israel voice in his administration, Myer Feldman, Kennedy surrounded himself with Arabists who could help him design the strategies necessary to pursue his goal of re-approaching Gamal Nasser. Arguably, much of Kennedy’s strategy to bolster a policy of rapprochement with Nasser is reflected in his appointments.

Shortly after Kennedy became president, he was asked by his collaborators what his policy in the Middle East was going to look like. Replying that he did not yet know the specifics, Kennedy remarked that he was however certain of the need to elaborate “a fresh and unprejudiced... policy.”¹⁶⁷ The first step towards achieving such a result was thus to find the right people to help him shape his policy towards the Middle East. In order to do so, Kennedy relied on his personal skills as well as on his team, known for being composed only of the “best and brightest” Washington could offer.

Kennedy’s White House was rather informal, and the policy-making process was based on his “habit of asking you what you thought about problems”¹⁶⁸, as many of his collaborators recalled, therefore the president surrounded himself with expert and dynamic people with whom he would be able to quickly exchange information and elaborate strategies. To this end, Kennedy spent “an enormous amount of time”¹⁶⁹ trying to put the right people in the right places, until he reached the point in which, as Feldman

¹⁶⁶ Robert Komer, *OHI*, December 22, 1969, 33.

¹⁶⁷ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969 1.

¹⁶⁸ Robert Komer, *OHI*, January 30, 1970, 16.

¹⁶⁹ Lucius D. Battle, *OHI*, July 9, 1968, 10, 11.

recalled, “We felt that our team was the best in history.”¹⁷⁰ The team was indeed composed of real experts, whether they were old or new officials, Democrats or Republicans.

For instance, people like Parker T. Hart, the ambassador to Saudi Arabia and William Macomber, the ambassador to Jordan, were old members of the Eisenhower administration, who were kept on by Kennedy because of their level of expertise, and who became true protagonists of American foreign policy during the early 1960s.

Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy were both Republicans, yet they were appointed respectively secretary of defence and special assistant for national security affairs because of their skills and qualities. McNamara was “a superlative manager”¹⁷¹, and Bundy was “tremendously quick, tremendously well-organised intellectually” and “superbly action-oriented.”¹⁷² Bundy was also responsible for the appointment of Robert Komer, who became national security council advisor and one of the White House’s main protagonists during the Yemen crisis, and who had also served during the Eisenhower years.

The story behind Komer’s appointment reflects Kennedy’s pro-Nasser orientation. Before joining the administration, Komer sent a memo to McGeorge Bundy, already a member of the entourage, seeking a job at the CIA, in which he stated that the issues the New Frontier had to tackle were not the “great big issues that your fellows already know, like arms control or re-examination of NATO strategy”¹⁷³, but were questions like “Can we establish a workable relationship with Nasser?”¹⁷⁴ Intrigued by Komer’s new perspective, Bundy replied “Interesting memo. Why don’t you come over and talk to us about it?” and after a short interview he told Komer “You’re the kind of

¹⁷⁰ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, August 6, 1966, 361, 362.

¹⁷¹ Robert Komer, *OHI*, December 22, 1969, 28

¹⁷² *Ibidem*, 2.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*, 4.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

guy we'd like to have over here at the White House. The President's looking for fellows like you. How'd you like to come and work for Kennedy?" Komer asked: "How soon do you want me?" "How soon can you come?" "As fast as I can empty my desk."¹⁷⁵

This anecdote clearly illustrates a key aspect of Kennedy's Mideast approach. Having learnt from Eisenhower that a policy of hostility against the Arab nationalists would be detrimental to US interests, Kennedy sought to appoint officials who shared his strategy of placing Nasser as the main focus of the US new approach to the Middle East. The new president was actively seeking to surround himself with collaborators who could help him establish a working relationship with Nasser.

There was great enthusiasm around Kennedy's White House and people seemed eager to serve under him. When McNamara was appointed secretary of defence for instance, he declared on his acceptance letter that he would "remain in the job as long as you wish me to stay."¹⁷⁶ Such a declaration reflects another difference between Eisenhower and Kennedy's administrations. While in the first one, the designated officials had stated right from the beginning that they would serve for a limited period, in the second one the commitment was complete and unlimited.¹⁷⁷

However, the administration would not only involve those with political experience. Phillip Talbot, the assistant secretary of state, was "well-known for his judgement and integrity"¹⁷⁸ and was, as Rusk recalled, "the kind of man we wanted in the Kennedy administration"¹⁷⁹; John Badeau, Kennedy's ambassador to Cairo, was a true expert on Egypt, with a vast knowledge of that world¹⁸⁰, and "with a long background"¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁵ Ibidem, 5.

¹⁷⁶ David E. Bell, *OHI*, July 11, 1964, 15.

¹⁷⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁸ Dean Rusk, *OHI*, August 21, 1970, 8.

¹⁷⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁰ John S. Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 1.

¹⁸¹ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 35.

in the field. Neither Talbot nor Badeau had political experience¹⁸², yet they became pivotal players among the Kennedy administration.

Myer “Mike” Feldman, the deputy special counsel to the president and special ambassador for Israel, also lacked political experience. Feldman, a Jewish lawyer and politician born in Philadelphia, began working for Kennedy on his presidential campaign in 1958, and soon became the channel between Kennedy and the American Jewish community. It is significant that Kennedy appointed only Myer Feldman as a pro-Israel voice in the administration. Kennedy would consult Feldman whenever he required a report on the attitude of the Jewish community towards certain decisions of foreign policy, but he never let Feldman’s pro-Israel stance dictate them.

The role of Mike Feldman has contributed to the myth that Kennedy’s foreign policy towards Israel was dictated, or at least largely influenced, by domestic political calculations. In *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*, Barrett argues that Feldman “became Kennedy’s ‘de facto ambassador to American Jewry’, a position that did not exist in Eisenhower’s White House”¹⁸³, and that “Kennedy felt obliged to have Feldman in the White House and to adjust his Middle East policy... to placate the American Zionist community.”¹⁸⁴ Barrett’s analysis, however, seems misdirected for three reasons.

Firstly, because as argued by Komer, “Every President has a minority adviser who represents the domestic constituency. Mike Feldman was it.”¹⁸⁵ Kennedy was aware that

¹⁸² Andrew I. Killgore, “Dr. John Stothoff Badeau, 1903-1995”, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, January 1996, 17. An amusing anecdote shows John Badeau’s passion and commitment to his new job: when he arrived in Cairo, he insisted on speaking Arabic with Nasser, but his very strong American accent moved the Egyptian leader to ask him to switch to English. The ‘gaffe’ did not however displease Nasser, who on the contrary sensed the new administration’s friendliness. Heikal, *The Cairo Documents...*, 180.

¹⁸³ Barrett, *The Greater Middle East...*, 182.

¹⁸⁴ Ibidem, 411. A similar argument is made by Paul Findley, who argues that the pressure in the White House was applied on several levels, and one of these was through “officials close to the President”. Paul Findley, *They Dare To Speak Out: People and Institutions confront Israel’s Lobby*, Third Edition, (Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1985, 1989, 2003), 116. Findley cites in the case of Kennedy’s deputy special counsel Feldman to make his point about the infiltration of pro-Israel members into the White House, adding that “When the pressure is from friends of Israel, Presidents... often yield”. Ibidem, 115.

¹⁸⁵ Robert Komer, *OHI*, December 22, 1969, 38.

Feldman's position was strongly one-sided, and would always cross-check Feldman's recommendations with his national security advisers, primarily McGeorge Bundy and Robert Komer.¹⁸⁶

Secondly, because Kennedy had made clear that a pro-Israeli position unjustified by strategic considerations of foreign policy "would not be tolerated."¹⁸⁷ There are several examples of Kennedy dismissing Feldman's pleas. For instance, during the Yemen crisis, Feldman, preoccupied by Kennedy's pro-Nasser policy, advised against the recognition of the YAR, a suggestion Kennedy did not act upon.¹⁸⁸ Then, when the Egyptian rockets controversy emerged during the spring of 1962 and Israel roared with fear asking for more arms, Kennedy told Feldman: "Listen, Mike, go tell your friends.... they're barking up the wrong tree. I don't have to give them fifty more planes, because there just isn't any rocket threat."¹⁸⁹

Third, because Feldman's pro-Israel stance was counterweighted by many members of the Kennedy inner circle, such as Badeau, Bundy, Rusk and Komer, who had "a reputation of being... pro-Arab and anti-Israel."¹⁹⁰ It would be a mistake to attribute to Feldman a more preeminent role than that of people like Komer or Bundy.

The assembling of the team had not however been an easy task. Kennedy used to joke that during his career in Congress he had met so many people who in his opinion could be president that now he had trouble finding anyone who would help him be president.¹⁹¹ In truth, the resentment towards his victory among the other Democratic candidates constrained his selections, as in the case of Adlai Stevenson, who was excluded for the role of secretary of state after the problems he created during a

¹⁸⁶ Ibidem, 39.

¹⁸⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁸ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, July 29, 1967, 502, 503.

¹⁸⁹ Robert Komer, *OHI*, December 22, 1969, 83.

¹⁹⁰ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 12.

¹⁹¹ Dean G. Acheson, *OHI*, April 27, 1964, 5.

Democratic convention in Los Angeles, during which he had made Kennedy's nomination "a little bit less easy than it otherwise would have been."¹⁹² To avoid possible troubles, Kennedy relied mostly on the people who had served him during his campaign, like his brother, Attorney General Bob Kennedy, and Ted Sorensen, special counsel to the president.¹⁹³

As far as the vice presidency was concerned, Kennedy offered the nomination to his rival Lyndon B. Johnson. There is still much speculation surrounding the real reason behind Kennedy's decision, as Johnson was among those congressmen who had created a sort of "cartel" to oppose Kennedy's nomination. But a strictly political calculation, based on the conviction that without Johnson on the ticket he could not win the Southern States and so eventually he would have risked the presidency, moved Kennedy to believe that Johnson had to get the office.¹⁹⁴ Kennedy did not have a great relationship with Johnson. He did not like the fact that the vice president would always agree with the president, supporting whatever decision he took. Nevertheless, Johnson decided to simply "listen and to say, in effect, that he [was] vice president and that he fully supported the president's policy whatever it was going to be or whatever it was."¹⁹⁵

Among the five names that came up for the position of secretary of state, Stevenson, Fulbright, Bowles, McCloy and Lovett, none of them took the office; Stevenson, as mentioned, was excluded for the episode in Los Angeles, McCloy and Lovett declined the offer, and Fulbright, having signed in 1956 the "Southern Manifesto", a document in opposition to racial integration of public spaces, was excluded for the bad

¹⁹² Chester B. Bowles, *OHI*, February 2, 1965, 11, 12.

¹⁹³ David E. Bell, *OHI*, July 11, 1964.

¹⁹⁴ Sorensen, *Counselor: Life at the edge...*, 243, 244. Sorensen argues that, even though many historians have interpreted Kennedy's move as a fake act of courtesy, as it was believed that Johnson would have chosen the senate over the vice presidency, in truth the nomination was "genuine", made to ensure the vote of the South.

¹⁹⁵ Joseph W. Alsop, *OHI*, June 26, 1964, 61, 62. Alsop argues that this might have been Kennedy's misinterpretation of the role of vice president, which is supposed to follow the presidential line in order to provide a 'smooth' change of leadership in case it is needed.

publicity he would bring to the new administration's relations with Africa. Dean Rusk's name came out during a dinner Kennedy had with Chester Bowles, and after a short interview Rusk had with the President, during which he confessed "he didn't understand me, I didn't understand him"¹⁹⁶, he got the position. Bowles became undersecretary of state.

The relationship between Kennedy and Rusk is remarkable. Among the whole administration, Rusk was possibly the person Kennedy held in the lowest esteem, for at least two reasons: first, because Rusk would refer to Kennedy in a very formal way, almost excessive considering that Kennedy was "anything but formal."¹⁹⁷ Second, because Rusk, a "courtly Georgian...stuck to his stiff, formal manner"¹⁹⁸, as described by Ted Sorensen, struggled to keep up with Kennedy's new policy-making style.

However, Rusk was appointed because he was not a "dominant man."¹⁹⁹ Kennedy wanted to be "his own secretary of state"²⁰⁰, and Rusk perfectly "fell into the role that is natural for a secretary of state with a president who is determined to run his own foreign policy."²⁰¹ Rusk would not challenge Kennedy's desire to steer the course of US foreign policy, and Kennedy could rely on him as head of the State Department.

Such a noteworthy relationship between Kennedy and Rusk, significantly different from that of Eisenhower and Dulles, where the president had delegated the reins of foreign policy to his secretary of state, indicates again that Kennedy was committed to controlling US foreign policy. Unsurprisingly, under Rusk's guidance, and so indirectly

¹⁹⁶ Chester B. Bowles, *OHI*, February 2, 1965, 11-15.

¹⁹⁷ Sorensen, *Counselor: Life at the edge...*, 233.

¹⁹⁸ Ibidem. Sorensen recalled an episode in which, during one of the numerous White House advisory sessions, Rusk refused to provide Kennedy with an answer because of the number of people present at the meeting.

¹⁹⁹ Robert Komer, *OHI*, December 22, 1969, 33.

²⁰⁰ Sorensen, *Counselor: Life at the edge...*, 233.

²⁰¹ Robert Komer, *OHI*, December 22, 1969, 33.

under Kennedy's, the State Department came to be a very strong advocate of the policy of rapprochement with Nasser.

After the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, just a few months after his election, Kennedy implemented important changes in his foreign policy team. Having lost faith in the military and in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whose recommendations were seen as "pretty appalling"²⁰² by the president himself, Kennedy took a more direct role in foreign policy, reducing the size of the meetings and tailoring them "to the nature of the subject to be discussed."²⁰³

Kennedy's lead on US foreign policy became apparent with regards to Middle Eastern affairs. Kennedy relied largely on Robert Komer, McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk, officials with whom he shared his overall strategies for the region and who helped him overcome disagreements with other members of the administration. For example, not everyone in the State Department considered the HAWK sale advisable (Phillips Talbot was for instance particularly opposed²⁰⁴), nor did Parker T. Hart and William Macomber, ambassadors to Saudi Arabia and Jordan, consider the policy of rapprochement with Nasser particularly desirable.²⁰⁵ Yet, under Kennedy's guidance, the HAWK was eventually sold²⁰⁶ and the rapprochement with Nasser remained the main goal of the US Mideast policy.

Conversely, Kennedy was convinced by Robert Komer and Dean Rusk about the importance of recognising the YAR promptly in order to gain leverage on Nasser. During a meeting between Kennedy, Feldman and Komer (the president contacted Rusk on the

²⁰² David E. Bell, *OHI*, July 11, 1964, 35.

²⁰³ Ibidem. Among the most evident changes, in early 1961 Kennedy abolished the National Security Council Planning Board and the Operation Coordinating Board, which would be used "as an advisory body" to which the President would "ask directly to prepare plans". Congressional Records, 87th Congress, 1^o Session, part VIII, 1174-1178.

²⁰⁴ Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot) to Secretary of State Rusk, July 9, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 2.

²⁰⁵ William B. Macomber, *OHI*, February 14, 1969, 29.

²⁰⁶ The administration's discussion on the HAWK will be later analysed in this work.

telephone), Kennedy was indeed convinced by Komer and Rusk that the sooner the US government recognised the YAR the more chances it would have to terminate the conflict and restrain Nasser from moving into Saudi Arabia.

Significantly, both the decision on the HAWK sale and on the recognition of the YAR occurred during small, intimate meetings between Kennedy and his closest advisors, showing not only Kennedy's propensity for taking a decisive role in the US Mideast strategies, but also the informality of Kennedy's policy-making style.

Finally, another key aspect of the Kennedy administration was the role of the ambassadors, who became more central in the determination of the policies towards the countries where they were assigned to. In fact, while Eisenhower had introduced the concept of "country-team", according to which a policy would be defined and adopted by having the embassy's officers sit down around a table and vote on a certain proposal until a majority was reached, Kennedy abolished the system. The first thing he did was to send letters to the ambassadors stating that each ambassador "was held responsible for the activities and operations of all agencies and departments who had representation overseas."²⁰⁷ This is probably one reason why Kennedy's selection had been so carefully conducted, and why he had changed about 70% of the old ambassadors, because he considered them unsuitable for the new direction of the administration.²⁰⁸

The ambassadors were also invited to meet annually and to discuss in general terms the US policy towards the Middle East. If a crisis situation emerged, the ambassadors, under direct orders from the White House, would gather together in a city

²⁰⁷ Dean Rusk, *OHI*, August 21, 1970, 244.

²⁰⁸ Chester B. Bowles, *OHI*, February 2, 1965, 21-25. The ambassadors for examples, were put into office according to their knowledge of the country they were destined for, and not because of their political experience. The most enlightening example is provided by the appointment of Badeau as ambassador to Cairo. He had a vast, pragmatic knowledge of the country and his appointment was very well received by Nasser, although he did not have any political experience in the United States. *Ibidem*, 21.

near the area²⁰⁹, and form opinions on the specific issue, through an exchange of ideas. Such meetings, which were presided over by members of the State Department (usually Talbot and Komer in the case of the Middle East) were intended to gather points of view on specific problems, and to formulate a list of recommendations that would be then discussed in the White House.²¹⁰

But the most significant change in the Kennedy administration was the president's role itself. While as noted earlier, Eisenhower had relied almost entirely on his secretary of state for the elaboration of strategies and policies towards the Middle East, Kennedy made sure he would have the last word on any issue. This reflected entirely the type of president that Kennedy was: young, informal and proactive. A president that evidently belonged to a new generation, the generation of the New Frontiersmen. Much as the old bureaucrats did not like this new style, Kennedy wanted to be the protagonist of the new era that America was going to go through. And he knew that the only way to do this, in a time of great danger and uncertainty during the Cold War, was by shaping US foreign policy. That is why, when asked about his relation with the secretary of state, pointing at the floor of the Oval Office, he said "foreign policy is made right here."²¹¹

The place of the Middle East

As discussed, John F. Kennedy had focused his presidential campaign on criticism of the Eisenhower administration, exploiting the unsuccessful outcome of its Middle East policy to his personal political advantage. Stressing the need to move past the old ways of the Eisenhower era, Kennedy urged a change in the American approach to the world of foreign policy and to the Middle East: as he declared during a speech at the Senate in

²⁰⁹ John Badeau recalls a meeting about the Middle East held in Cyprus in the summer of 1961. John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 5.

²¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 5, 6.

²¹¹ Jack L. Bell, *OHI*, April 19, 1966, 53.

1960, “We must formulate... an effective and realistic American policy designed to preserve peace in the Middle East.”²¹²

However, in his *Oral History Interview*, Myer Feldman has asserted that “The Middle East was never at the top of Kennedy’s agenda.”²¹³ Indeed, he contends that Kennedy often delegated decisions on the Middle East because during his presidency his focus had shifted towards different areas of the world, such as Cuba, Berlin and Vietnam, where the emerging crisis involved, to different degrees, a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union.²¹⁴ Although it is true that Kennedy spent an enormous amount of time on Cuba, probably more than on any other foreign policy issue²¹⁵, it is also true that he was very much involved in the Middle Eastern affairs.

Robert Komer has indeed conversely argued that “JFK was really heavily engaged in the Middle East policy.”²¹⁶ Such a statement seems to reflect more truthfully Kennedy’s contribution to the making of the US policy towards the Middle East, for at least three reasons: first, the documents produced show that the president was nearly always involved in the Mideast policies, either directly or through Komer, Rusk or Bundy, particularly when important decisions had to be made (for instance on the HAWK sale, the Johnson Plan for the refugees, the PL-480, and the Yemen quagmire). As recalled by Komer, in 1963 Kennedy sent Nasser alone nine presidential letters, which “was really quite a substantial number.”²¹⁷ Second, Kennedy’s policy of rapprochement with Nasser was part of his more global strategy of enhancing American prestige with the major world neutralist, such as Indian Prime Minister Nehru, Indonesian President Sukarno and others,

²¹² “Kennedy Says Middle East Goal Is End of War Against Israel”, *The New York Times*, August 18, 1960.

²¹³ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, December 11, 1966, 473.

²¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 473, 474.

²¹⁵ Thomas G. Paterson, “Fixation with Cuba: The Bay of Pigs, Missile Crisis, and Covert War Against Castro”, in *Kennedy’s Quest For Victory: American Foreign Policy 1961-1963*, ed. Thomas G. Paterson, (New York, Oxford: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 123.

²¹⁶ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 1.

²¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

in order to advance his main goal of containing the Soviet Union. “The underlying rationale for this policy”, Komer told Kennedy in early 1963, “is that in the game of competitive co-existence, we can hardly afford to let the major neutralists become clients primarily of Moscow.”²¹⁸ Bundy agreed, attaching a personal note to Komer’s memorandum: “we should be strong in our assistance in competing for the neutrals, using both carrot and stick.”²¹⁹ Nasser was a key world neutralist leader, and Kennedy was acutely aware that much of his strategies towards Cairo would somehow echo across the Third World. Third, because during his presidential campaign Kennedy had “stirred great hopes”²²⁰ domestically and abroad, promising he would “waste no time”²²¹ in taking initiatives that could help in solving the problems of the region, facilitating the economic development of the Arab countries, ensuring the survival of Israel, and thus promoting stability that would allow the administration to guard the Western interests, while simultaneously defeat the Soviet Union. Failing to live up to such expectations could compromise the US position in a number of regions, and thus jeopardise Kennedy’s goal of containing communism.

Kennedy had also possibly reserved great attention for the Middle East because the situation he inherited after eight years of Eisenhower was far from quiet. On a large scale, the new administration was confronted with two general issues in the Middle East. The United States’ strained relationship with the Arab nationalists and the USSR’s growing prestige among the Arab population were arguably Kennedy’s greatest concerns in the Middle East.²²²

²¹⁸ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 19, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. VIII, National Security Policy, 124.

²¹⁹ Ibidem.

²²⁰ Memorandum from the President’s Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) to President Kennedy, February 28, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. IX, *Foreign Economic Policy*, 94.

²²¹ Speech by Senator John F. Kennedy, Zionists of America Convention, Statler Hilton Hotel, New York, NY, August 26, 1960. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

²²² Robert Komer, *OHI*, December 22, 1969, 4.

During the 1950s, the Soviet Union had managed to exploit the imperialist impression conveyed by Eisenhower's policies to establish closer ties with the Arab nationalists, and in more general terms, to enhance its prestige among the Arab population. Taking advantage of Eisenhower and Dulles's hostility towards Nasser and their reluctance to provide Egypt with arms, in September 1955 Moscow sealed a 250 million dollars arms deal with Nasser, who had requested military aid after the Israeli raid against Gaza in February 1955. This historical deal eventually provided Egypt with 200 jet aircrafts, six jet training planes, 100 heavy tanks, six torpedo patrol boats and two submarines, and was seen in Washington as clear evidence of Soviet infiltration in the region.²²³

Furthermore, Washington's refusal to provide Egypt with financial assistance for the Aswan Dam further contributed to widening the gap between Cairo and Washington, bringing Nasser closer to Moscow. While Dulles, adding insult to injury, publicly declared that Nasser had no resources to build the dam without external help²²⁴, a statement seen by the Egyptian leader as a clear attempt to undermine his prestige in the Arab world, Khrushchev's Foreign Minister Dmitri Shepilov seized the opportunity to advance Moscow's offer to finance of the project.²²⁵

Along with the events of the Suez crisis, during which Moscow had made clear that it would do everything necessary to assist Nasser²²⁶, the Czech arms deal and the Soviet Union's support for the Aswan Dam project paved the way for a closer relationship between Nasser and Khrushchev. Although Nasser was cautious in his approach to the

²²³ Memorandum from the Secretary of State's Special Assistant for Intelligence (Armstrong) to the Secretary of State, September 23, 1955. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XIV, *Arab-Israeli dispute 1955*, 301.

²²⁴ Antonio Donno, *Ombre di Guerra Fredda: gli Stati Uniti nel Medio Oriente durante gli anni di Eisenhower, 1953-1961*, (Napoli: Edizione Scientifiche Italiane, 1998), 442.

²²⁵ Laurent Rucker, "The Soviet Union and the Suez Crisis", in *The 1956 War: Collusion and Rivalry in the Middle East*, Ed. David Tal (London, Portland: Frank Cass, 2001), 66.

²²⁶ Aleksandr Fursenko, Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's cold war: The inside story of an American adversary*, (New York: Norton, 2006), 92.

USSR, whose doctrine he considered as the negation of freedom and equality²²⁷, the Egyptian leader actively sought to exploit Khrushchev's military and economic aid to advance his regional goals. Nasser was not seeking closer ties with the Soviet Union, but simply pursuing a neutralist, pan-Arabist path, which meant he had no problem in seeking aid from either the US or the USSR.

But while the Eisenhower administration had arguably a two-camp view of the world, and thus had little interest in the Third World leaders' neutralism²²⁸, Khrushchev had accepted the existence of a third pole, the non-aligned countries.²²⁹ This allowed the Kremlin to portray the United States as an imperialist force whose aim was to polarize the Middle Eastern countries through alliances and military bases²³⁰, while presenting Moscow as the only, true supporter of Arab nationalism.

As a result, by early 1958 the Eisenhower administration had to come to terms with the fact that the Soviet Union had successfully strengthened its ties with Egypt and Syria, which would be incorporated into the UAR under Nasser's leadership in February 1958. The USSR was indeed providing them "with substantial military and economic credits and technical assistance" and thus "acquiring an increasing stake in the area - in terms of influence and prestige."²³¹ Significantly, while the Eisenhower administration perceived Nasser's strategy as a clear indication of his pro-Soviet attitude (speaking in front of Congress in 1958, Secretary of State John F. Dulles declared that Nasser was taking a "much more benevolent attitude towards communists"²³²), the Egyptian leader

²²⁷ Peter Mansfield, ed. By Harold Beeley, *Nasser- Makers of the Modern World*, (London; Methuen Educational Ltd, 1970), 98.

²²⁸ Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1991), 16.

²²⁹ Ibidem.

²³⁰ Roger E. Kanet, *The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the Third World*, (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne; Cambridge University Press, 1987), 106.

²³¹ National Security Council Report, January 24, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XII, *Near East Region; Iraq; Iran; Arabian Peninsula*, 5.

²³² Senate Foreign Relation Committee, 85th Congress, Jan.-Dec. 1958, Vol. X, 7-10.

was simply taking from the Soviet Union what he could not obtain from the United States, as the Czech arms deal and the Aswan Dam funding controversy reveal.

Eisenhower's opposition to Nasser and to the Arab nationalists contributed towards spreading the feeling among the Arab population that the United States was "opposing political or economic progress"²³³, working to polarize the Middle East against the Soviet Union, exploiting the Arabs' oil resources and opposing the Arabs' ambition for emancipation and self-determination.²³⁴ As a result, reads a report from the National Security Council dated January 1958, "the prestige of the United States and of the West has declined in the Near East while Soviet influence has greatly increased."²³⁵ That is why, during a conversation with Nixon in July 1958, Eisenhower spoke of a popular "campaign of hatred" against the United States, because the people were with Nasser.²³⁶

After the July 14, 1958 coup in Baghdad against the monarchy, which brought to power Abdul Karim Qasim, Moscow tilted progressively towards Iraq, because of Qasim's shift towards communism in response to Nasser's pan-Arabism²³⁷, and because of Nasser's repressive measures against the communist parties in Egypt and Syria. Qasim's opposition to Nasser's pan-Arabism opened a range of possibilities for the Eisenhower administration, as it could now try to exploit Khrushchev's shift towards Iraq to re-approach Nasser.

However, the NSC 5820/1, the new policy envisioned by the Eisenhower administration during the summer of 1958 and made official later in October 1958, which had the purpose of establishing "an effective working relationship with Arab

²³³ National Security Council Report, January 24, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XII, *Near East Region; Iraq; Iran; Arabian Peninsula*, 5.

²³⁴ Ibidem.

²³⁵ Ibidem.

²³⁶ Memorandum of a Conversation between the President and the Vice President (Nixon), White House, Washington, July 15, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XI, *Lebanon and Jordan*, 139.

²³⁷ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 76.

nationalism”²³⁸, showed its limits during the events that occurred in Lebanon and Jordan during the summer of 1958. Eisenhower’s decision to send the marines to Lebanon against the Nasserite forces that were seeking to overthrow President Chamoun, showed once more to the Egyptian leader that Washington was not seeking a rapprochement after all. As a result, Eisenhower’s experience in the Middle East ended on a bitter note. On December 24, 1960, Nasser gave a public speech in Port Said during the celebration for the Victory Day, taking a clear anti-American stand and accusing Washington and all its allies, whether in the Middle East or abroad, of being “stooges of imperialism.”²³⁹

Kennedy had thus inherited a region where anti-US sentiments were firmly crystallised among the Arab population; where the Arab nationalists perceived the United States as an inimical, imperialist force; and where the Soviet Union was exploiting Eisenhower’s mistakes to enhance its position in the region, signing arms agreements with the Arab revolutionaries and crafting its propaganda in line with Arab ambitions.

This scenario determined Kennedy’s approach to the Middle East, and moved the focus of the US policies towards Nasser. As Feldman recalled, Kennedy feared that something like the crisis in Suez or Lebanon could happen to him as well, and was “concerned about the history of failures in that area.”²⁴⁰ As noted earlier, Kennedy linked such failures to Eisenhower’s opposition to Arab nationalism and to his tendencies towards perceiving the Middle East exclusively in the context of the East-West struggle. Seeking to steer the Arab nationalists in a direction that could serve US interests, and thus defeat the Soviet Union by building up neutralism as an alternative to communism, Kennedy concluded that the rapprochement with Nasser was the key objective on his new

²³⁸ Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Rountree) to Secretary of State Dulles, October 10, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XII, 47.

²³⁹ Telegram From the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, December 24, 1960. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XIII, *Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa*, 266.

²⁴⁰ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, August 20, 1966, 398.

Mideast agenda. The rapprochement with Nasser became the main goal of the new administration, who sought to provide him with “a Western alternative to excessive dependence on the Bloc”²⁴¹, while simultaneously gaining leverage on his foreign policy and restraining him from stirring up troubles in the region.

The policies designed by the administration for the Middle East were a result of Kennedy’s goal of enhancing US prestige among the Arab nationalists, and among the Third World neutralists, to the detriment of the Soviet Union. Kennedy wished to bolster his rapprochement with Nasser because he had learned from Eisenhower’s failures that opposing the Egyptian leader would enhance Moscow’s standing in the region.

Clear evidence of Kennedy’s commitment to his policy of rapprochement with Nasser is provided by his statement during the 508th meeting of the National Security Council, in January 1963:

“We cannot permit all those who call themselves neutrals to join the Communist bloc. Therefore, we must keep our ties to Nasser and other neutralists even if we do not like many things they do because, if we lose them, the balance of power could swing against us.”²⁴²

Of course, the events that punctuated the history of Kennedy’s foreign policy in the Middle East might induce one to believe that Kennedy sought to support any friend in the region (after all, Kennedy himself declared during his inaugural address that the US “shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe”²⁴³). Indeed, during his time in the White House, and as result of Arab-Israeli tension and inter-Arab disputes, Kennedy eventually strengthened Washington’s ties not only with Nasser, but also with Nasser’s nemeses, namely Ben Gurion and Faysal. The significance of such a result echoes throughout history, because Kennedy had

²⁴¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

²⁴² Record of the 508th Meeting of the National Security Council, January 22, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. VIII, *National Security Policy*, 125.

²⁴³ John F. Kennedy Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961. JFKL, Historic Speeches.

unintentionally laid the foundations for a closer association between the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia, which would be reflected, during the administrations of Johnson and Nixon, in the implementation of a closer, strategic partnership with the two countries.

Kennedy however was not seeking to rely on Saudi Arabia and Israel to advance his Cold War strategies, nor was he seeking to support any friend in the Middle East. The New Frontiersman was convinced that the main goal in the region was that of establishing a closer relationship with Nasser and thus gaining leverage on the real force of attraction of the Arab world. With Kennedy's Middle East policies being decisively located within a more global Cold War framework, Kennedy concluded that only by overturning Washington's relations with Cairo could the Soviet threat in the region be reduced.

The paradoxical result of Kennedy's Mideast experience lies in the fact that Kennedy adopted policies towards Saudi Arabia and Israel that were themselves the outcome of his attempted rapprochement with Cairo. The enhancement of Israel's security, historically through the HAWK sale, was a result of the administration's concern that its support to Nasser could spur Israel into pre-emptive attacks against Egypt. Similarly, Kennedy's decision to strengthen the Arab monarchies through programmes of political, social and economic reforms derived from the need to secure these traditional regimes at a time when Nasser's progressive regime, supported by the Kennedy administration, was demanding radical socio-political changes in the Arab world.

As will be discussed later in this work, at the time of his death in late November 1963, Kennedy's Mideast experiment looked like a failure because of Nasser's adventure in Yemen. The impossibility of getting Nasser to disengage eventually moved Kennedy to believe that the Egyptian leader was untrustworthy, and Congress passed an amendment that officially interrupted the US aid program towards the UAR. It was indeed Congress that put an end to Kennedy's rapprochement with Nasser and to the

administration's attempts to do business with Cairo. Despite the problems that emerged between Washington and Cairo, by late 1963 Kennedy still believed that maintaining close ties with Nasser could offer to United States the best means to keep the Soviet Union at bay. But after Kennedy died, US foreign policy in the Middle East took a completely different course. Johnson's pro-Israel sentiments prevailed over the State Department's Arabist outlook²⁴⁴, while the US geostrategic and economic interests in Iran and Saudi Arabia convinced the new administration that the two monarchies could be transformed into regional proxies.²⁴⁵ Unwilling to rely on Nasser, who was still entangled in Yemen, Johnson shifted towards more stable allies.

Kennedy left a legacy that has affected the course of United States foreign policy in the Middle East. He created the conditions for his successors to rely on Saudi Arabia as a regional proxy, he sold arms to Israel and established a closer strategic partnership through the November 1963 talks, and he failed to move Nasser away from Yemen, exacerbating Johnson's mistrust of the Egyptian leader and his hostility towards the Arab nationalists. The most cynical might be tempted to say that Kennedy's policy in the Middle East was the result of mistakes, misunderstandings and, to a certain degree, overconfidence²⁴⁶, but in truth, the Kennedy administration did not have many alternatives. Indeed, the competition with the Soviet Union and the intricate dynamics of the region during the early 1960s, compelled the New Frontiersmen to find new means to balance larger Cold War objectives with regional interests. Chapter 2 addresses this very

²⁴⁴ Jonathan Colman, *The foreign policy of Lyndon B. Johnson...*, 148.

²⁴⁵ Little, *American Orientalism...*, 140.

²⁴⁶ Such is for instance the argument of Alan R. Tylor and Roby C. Barrett. Tylor however, ascribes it to Kennedy's premature death, as he states "Had Kennedy been able to serve as president for another five years, he might have developed a real policy" in the Middle East. Alan R. Tylor, *The Superpowers and the Middle East*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 74. Barrett argues that the outcome of Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East was simply a result of strategic miscalculations and "political myopia". Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 326.

issue, providing an overview of Kennedy's approach to the Middle East in the context of the Cold War.

Chapter 2. Kennedy, the Cold War and the Middle East: an overview

A peaceful coexistence?

In April 1946, as the crises in Iran and in the Turkish Straits were developing, the Truman administration listed in a memorandum entitled “Soviet Foreign Policy in the Middle East” the Soviet Union’s four main goals of foreign policy in the region. According to the memorandum, Moscow sought to prevent the United States and Britain from accessing the oil reserves; to control ports and marine passages; to replace Britain in the role of dominant power in the region; and to create a bloc of countries aligned with the Soviet Union.²⁴⁷ As a result, in 1947 Truman elaborated his Doctrine, which allowed the United States to provide “assistance to all democratic nations under threat from external or internal authoritarian forces.”²⁴⁸

Truman’s containment of the Soviet Union in the greater Middle East was a response to the emerging struggle between communist and Western world. Stalin’s attempt to create a puppet state in Iran by taking advantage of the presence of the Red Army in the north of the country, and to gain control of the Turkish straits in order to secure a south-western flank, amplified the significance of the local crisis which exploded in Greece between the newly-elected government and the Greek communist party (KKE) after the 1946 elections. For the first time, the United States recognised that its national security interests in peacetime no longer depended exclusively upon the physical integrity of its own territory, but on the survival of Western-oriented regimes threatened by communist forces across the world.

²⁴⁷ Memorandum, *Soviet’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, April 1946. Truman Library, Harry S. Truman Administration Files, Elsey Papers.

²⁴⁸ “The Truman Doctrine, 1947”. *Milestone 1945-1952*. US Department of State, Office of the Historian.

But beyond these countries and their immediate tensions, both Stalin and Truman took much less interest in the rest of the region than they did in other parts of the world. Truman was far more concerned with post-war Europe than he was with the Middle East²⁴⁹, while Stalin sought primarily to consolidate his control over the Eastern European satellites.²⁵⁰

However, when Khrushchev took the lead on USSR foreign policy in 1955, a significant shift occurred. The new Soviet policy, in the Middle East and in other regions of the Third World, was driven, as noted earlier, by Khrushchev's critical acknowledgement of the existence of a third bloc of non-aligned countries.²⁵¹ Such a shift dramatically changed the course of Soviet foreign policy, because Moscow's foreign policy objectives would no longer be carried out through Stalin's blatant aggrandizement strategies, but through "political struggle, economic and scientific competition, subversion."²⁵²

Under Khrushchev, Moscow abandoned Stalin's plainly expansionist foreign policy to focus on more subversive ways to expand its sphere of influence. Wishing to avoid a direct military confrontation with the United States, Khrushchev believed that if the Soviet Union adopted the instruments of foreign aid and propaganda to gain favour with the neutralist leaders, they would move past the model of Western capitalism and consolidate their independence under the umbrella of socialist development. By doing so, Moscow would thus be able to expand its influence among the Third World countries and reduce that of the United States, while simultaneously depriving the West of the resources and markets needed to advance the capitalist model on a global scale.²⁵³

²⁴⁹ Little, *American Orientalism...*, 23.

²⁵⁰ Talal Nizameddin, *Russia and the Middle East: Towards a New Foreign Policy*, (London: Hurst and Company, 1999), 255.

²⁵¹ Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East...*, 16.

²⁵² National Intelligence Estimate, December 1, 1960. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. V, *Soviet Union*, 1.

²⁵³ Nizameddin, *Russia and the Middle East...*, 21.

Through this new strategy, known as “peaceful coexistence”, the Kremlin hoped to foster pro-Soviet sentiments among the Arab population and thus to manipulate the Arab countries into the Eastern bloc. By supporting the Arabs’ cause over issues such as economic development, nationalism and anti-colonialism, the Soviet Union sought to “capture and organize in broad mass movements the sentiments which focus on the great issues of the current period”²⁵⁴, create a political struggle between traditional and revolutionary forces, and eliminate Western influence while building up its own. As recalled by Nikita Khrushchev in his memoirs:

“The aim I pursued was to destroy capitalism and build a new social system based on the ideas developed by Marx, Engels, and Lenin. I think...that the capitalist system has outlived its time.”²⁵⁵

As noted in chapter 1, Khrushchev’s new strategy allowed the Soviet Union to enhance its prestige in the Middle East while simultaneously portraying the United States, entangled in pacts and alliances, as an imperialist force. The result of the Northern Tier, the Baghdad Pact and the Eisenhower Doctrine, products of Eisenhower’s and Dulles’s “active containment”, was that they eventually estranged the Arab revolutionaries, alienated the Arab population, and contributed to the decline of the United States’ prestige in the region.²⁵⁶ Since 1955, when Nasser signed the Czech arms deal, Moscow successfully managed to expand its sphere of influence in the Middle East transforming Egypt, Syria and Iraq into friendly states opposed to the United States.

²⁵⁴ National Intelligence Estimate, December 1, 1960. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. V, 1.

²⁵⁵ Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, Vol. 3, Statesman, 1953-1964, Ed. Sergei Khrushchev, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2007), 354.

²⁵⁶ Shortly after the emanation of the Eisenhower Doctrine, Dmitri Shepilov articulated six points about the Middle East, which show how the Soviet Union sought to exploit the imperialist mark of Eisenhower’s policy to its own advantage. Shepilov spoke of the need to respect the Arabs’ full sovereignty and independence, to avoid bringing any Arab country into any Cold War block, and to provide economic assistance while restraining from any other interference that could limit their sovereignty. Keesing’s Contemporary Archives, Vol. XI, 1957-1958, (London: Keesing’s Publication’s Limited, 1961-1986), 15370.

In this regard, it is significant, if not slightly ironic, that the Eisenhower-Dulles administration's view of the world resembled that of Stalin.²⁵⁷ Much like the results produced by Stalin's two-camp view of the world, the Eisenhower administration ended up antagonising the Arab population and alienating the emerging nationalist forces in the Middle East. As a result, despite the strong ideological differences and some diplomatic issues, mostly related to the role of the communist party in Egypt, Khrushchev had managed to steer the key Arab nationalist away from Washington and closer to Moscow simply by showing support for Arab nationalism.²⁵⁸

Like that of his predecessor, John F. Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East was defined by the Cold War and by the need to contain the Soviet Union to prevent it from expanding its influence in the region. Unlike Eisenhower however, Kennedy had acknowledged, similarly to Khrushchev, the existence of a third bloc of non-aligned countries.

In 1960, during the acceptance speech for the Democratic Party Nomination, Kennedy declared:

"All over the world, particularly in the newer nations, young men are coming to power--men who are not bound by the traditions of the past - men who are not blinded by the old fears and hates and rivalries - young men who can cast off the old slogans and delusions and suspicions."²⁵⁹

Kennedy's statement reflects much of the New Frontier philosophy in relation to the issues of the Third World. Leaders from the main neutralist countries such as India, Egypt, Indonesia and Yugoslavia had met at the Bandung Conference in 1955, and forged upon the principles of "non-alignment", "anti-colonialism", and "anti-imperialism" the foundation of a new spirit of solidarity that defined their international posture in the

²⁵⁷ Robert Komer, *OHI*, June 18, 1964, 4.

²⁵⁸ Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Planning Board, July 29, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XII, 5.

²⁵⁹ Address of Senator John F. Kennedy Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States - Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960.

polarized world of the Cold War.²⁶⁰ Kennedy acknowledged the importance of meeting the aspirations of the neutralist leaders because, as he commented in 1957, “the forces of nationalism are rewriting the geopolitical map of the world”²⁶¹ and because, as he reiterated a few years later, “More energy is released by the awakening of these new nations than by the fission of the atom itself.”²⁶² Rhetoric aside, Kennedy believed that by showing support to their goals, namely political self-determination, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, and equality²⁶³, the United States could enhance its prestige in the Third World and reduce that of the Soviet Union.

The Belgrade Conference of September 1961, further strengthened the administration’s belief that Third World leaders would play an increasingly significant role in the international arena. After the USSR announced its decision to resume nuclear testing in August, and with the Berlin crisis in the background, the administration began to perceive Sukarno, Nehru, Tito and Nasser’s voices as pivotal on a number of international issues, including the East-West struggle over Berlin.²⁶⁴ Back in 1957 Kennedy had declared: “These nations have gained an effective voice in the United Nations... Today the Arab states alone have as many Assembly seats as all the countries of Western Europe.”²⁶⁵ After the Belgrade Conference, the feeling that the neutralist countries’ “anti-Western, anti-colonial attitudes”²⁶⁶ could result in an anti-US stand over

²⁶⁰ Scott Thomas, *The Diplomacy of Liberation: The Foreign Relations of the African National Congress Since 1960*, (London, New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), 95.

²⁶¹ Kennedy, *A Democrat looks...*

²⁶² Address of Senator John F. Kennedy Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States - Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960.

²⁶³ Milestones, 1953-1960: *Bandung Conference, 1955*.

²⁶⁴ Robert B. Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson and the Nonaligned World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 74.

²⁶⁵ Kennedy, *A Democrat Looks...*

²⁶⁶ Central Intelligence Bulletin, September 5, 1961. JFKL, President’s Office Files, Non-Aligned Nations Summit Meeting, Belgrade, September 1, 1961.

international disputes, contributed significantly in shaping Kennedy's approach to the non-aligned leaders.

In the words of Arthur Schlesinger, special assistant to the president for Latin American affairs, the president's "tolerance of neutralism was not based on any sort of *New Statesman* belief in the moral superiority of neutrals... but he was quite prepared, when feasible, to build neutralism as an alternative to communist expansion."²⁶⁷ Such words reflect well Kennedy's Cold War pragmatism: his policies towards the neutralist leaders, including Nasser, are clear evidence of his attempt to build neutralism as an alternative to communism. As Kennedy commented in May 1961:

"The great battleground for the defence and expansion of freedom today is the whole southern half of the globe – Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East - the lands of the rising people. Their revolution is the greatest in human history."²⁶⁸

Thus, the Belgrade Conference soon turned into an attempt, on both the American and Soviet sides, to win the neutralists' support over international issues²⁶⁹, and contributed to defining Kennedy's foreign policy towards the Third World. Kennedy believed that winning the sympathy of the non-aligned leaders by showing support for their self-determination ambitions, and promoting models of capitalist development would be the key to winning the battle with the Soviet Union on a number of international issues, while simultaneously allowing Washington to reduce the Soviets' gains across the countries belonging to the non-aligned pole.

In order to prevent the Third World countries falling under the Soviet umbrella, Kennedy relied largely on the theories of Walt Rostow, deputy national security advisor and author of the book *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*.

²⁶⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, (London: Mayflower-Dell Paperback, 1967), 518.

²⁶⁸ President Kennedy's Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs, May 25, 1961. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

²⁶⁹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*..., 520.

Rostow's argument that capitalist development could bring the Third World countries to refuse communism and evolve "within the orbit of the democratic world"²⁷⁰ brought the Kennedy administration to acknowledge the importance of using the instrument of foreign aid to lead these countries towards self-sustained growth. "Societies in the transition from traditional to modern status are peculiarly vulnerable to such seizure of power. It is here, in fact, that Communism is likely to find its place in history"²⁷¹, argued Rostow in his book, and Kennedy sought to prevent the Soviet Union from taking just such advantage of the Third World's social, political and economic struggles to extend its sphere of influence by building up socialism as an alternative to capitalism. As he declared in his message to Congress on foreign assistance "The 1960s presented an historical opportunity for the United States... to initiate a major foreign assistance effort that could move more than half the people of the less-developed nations into self-sustained economic growth."²⁷² Distancing himself from Eisenhower's military-oriented approach to foreign aid, in March 1961 Kennedy asked Congress for a reduction in the military aid from 1.8 to 1.6 billion (out of the 4 billion dollar budget asked by the previous administration) in order to allocate more funds to development loans.²⁷³

Thus, during the Kennedy years, the US-USSR competition in the Third World took a somehow more ideological turn, marking a difference from the years of Stalin's expansionism and Eisenhower's "active containment". Under Khrushchev and Kennedy, both the Soviet Union and the United States realised that the non-aligned countries were destined to play an increasingly significant role in the world of international affairs, and

²⁷⁰ Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*..., 134.

²⁷¹ Ibidem, 163.

²⁷² Editorial Note. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. IX, *Foreign Economic Policy*, 100.

²⁷³ Ibidem. Congress however cut nearly 1 billion out of the programme. R. Baker, "Why Kennedy has Troubles on the Hill", *New York Times*, April 16, 1961, sm3. Among the American people, the reaction towards Congress's decision was of disappointment "Why doesn't the President crush a few of those crusty old Southern Committee Chairmen?" Many wondered why the foreign aid programme got impoverished if it was designed to "prevent the Soviet expansion." Ibidem.

that the best way to steer these countries towards their respective orbits was by sponsoring programmes of socio-economic development that could lead such countries to embrace either socialism or capitalism, and thus be moved under the USSR or the US umbrella.²⁷⁴

The Soviet Union hoped to take advantage of the common anti-imperialist sentiment shared by the Third World countries to foster pro-USSR and anti-US sentiments among their population; it sought to exploit the association between the United States and the former colonial empires to crystallise the idea that Moscow would genuinely support their struggle for emancipation and self-determination; it sought to support and fund programmes of socialist development that might steer the Third World away from the capitalist model embraced by the Western world. Conversely, Kennedy hoped to move past the assumption that the United States opposed the ambitions of the Third World countries by pursuing a strategy designed to promote self-determination and emancipation; he sought to enhance US prestige among the Third World countries by fostering a working relationship with the key neutralist leaders; he sought to promote economic, social and political development that could move these countries to embrace the capitalist model and refuse the socialist one.

²⁷⁴ Bruce Porter argues for instance that after Stalin's death, the Soviet Union realised that the decolonization process occurring in the Third World offered "plentiful opportunities for political gains" and thus it tried to win the favours of the leaders of Middle East and South Asia not through military activities but through programs of foreign aid. Bruce D. Porter, *The USSR in Third World conflicts: Soviet arms and diplomacy in local wars, 1945-1980*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 16-19. Similarly, Kanet argues that after Stalin, Khrushchev realised that countries such as India or Egypt were "independent states whose interests overlapped in many areas with those of the Soviet Union and the other members of the redefined 'Socialist Community'". Kanet, *The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe...*, 5, 6. Rubinstein argues that Khrushchev realised that the Third World was "ripe for socialism... capable of weakening the camp of capitalism", and thus adopted policies towards the Third World "whose effect was to alienate them from the West." Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Moscow's Third World Strategy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 21, 22. Similar arguments are also provided in Mark N. Katz, *The USSR and Marxist Revolutions in the Third World*, (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). With regards to the US, Westad raises an interesting point on the paradoxes of Kennedy's foreign policy, when he suggests that the Vietnam crisis marked the moment when "US foreign policy ideology turned radically interventionist". Odd Arne Westad, "The global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times", (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 27.

In Latin America, Kennedy established the Alliance for Progress, securing a 500 million dollar aid programme and an investment flow estimated at around 20 billion dollars in a period of ten years; in India, 500 million dollars development aid was sponsored through the Public Law 480, and similar economic assistance was provided to Indonesia and Ghana as well.²⁷⁵ Kennedy combined the instrument of foreign aid with a new, engaging form of diplomacy. His Third World strategy was complemented by his support for the ambitions of the Third World leaders - particularly with regards to colonial issues - and his personal diplomacy with the key non-aligned leaders.

In the Middle East, Kennedy hoped that by providing Cairo with economic and development aid through the PL-480, Nasser would turn inwards and focus on Egypt's own economic problems, while simultaneously adopting a less hostile attitude towards Washington that could allow the United States to enhance its reputation among the Arab population. But Kennedy's focus on Nasser related not only to the objective of steering the Arab world towards a pro-US stand, but also to larger Cold War strategies of fostering a better relationship with the key neutralists. By showing support to one of the main neutralist leaders in the world at that time, Kennedy hoped to foster pro-US sentiments among the others as well. In short, Nasser was the key to American strategies towards the Third World.²⁷⁶

As noted earlier, among the Kennedy administration Rusk, Komer, Bundy and Badeau became the strongest advocates for the strategy of rapprochement with Cairo. They believed that by enhancing US prestige with the leader of the Arab world they could

²⁷⁵ See Thomas G. Paterson, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*.

²⁷⁶ Kennedy offered the same type of economic assistance provided by the PL-480 to other Third World, neutralist countries, such as India, providing the country with \$225 million in food aid. Robert J. McMahon, "Choosing Sides in South Asia", in Thomas G. Paterson, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory...*, 202. Similar aid were also provided to Ghana and Indonesia. Michael L. Latham, *The right kind of revolution: modernization, development, and US foreign policy from the Cold War to the present*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 88; and Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson and the Nonaligned World...*, 190.

fulfil the double objective of “convincing the Arabs that we [the US] did not oppose their legitimate aspirations”, while simultaneously preventing neutralist countries from becoming “exclusively clients of the Soviets.”²⁷⁷

However, other members of the administration such as Hart, Macomber and Feldman believed conversely that Nasser was untrustworthy, unpredictable and dangerous, and that United States foreign policy in the Middle East should focus on relationships with the moderate Arab monarchies, already oriented towards the US because of their long histories of economic partnerships.²⁷⁸

Such a notion however, did not fully convince Kennedy. As this work demonstrates, Kennedy bolstered his reconciliation with Nasser throughout his entire presidency - even in spite of the turbulent events that occurred as a result of the Yemen crisis and the wave of Nasserism in 1962-1963 - because of the larger Cold War objectives mentioned above. Kennedy’s approach to the Arab monarchies lay not in the administration’s desire to rely on several regional proxies, as argued in the works of Bass and Little, but in the need to secure US interests in Arab oil while fostering a better relationship with Cairo. The administration believed that “If Nasser can gradually be led to forsake the microphone for the bulldozer, he may assume a key role in bringing the Middle East peacefully into our modern world”²⁷⁹, which meant that if Nasser was to restrain from his propaganda and focus on the Westernised modernization envisioned by the Kennedy administration, he would shield the entire Middle East from the Soviet influence, being, as the administration often repeated, “the key guy in Arab world.”²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ Memorandum for the Record, May 2, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 3-63, 5-63.

²⁷⁸ William B. Macomber, *OHI*, February 14, 1969, 29.

²⁷⁹ Airgram from the Embassy in Ethiopia to the Department of State, February 21, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 195.

²⁸⁰ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, July 19, 1962, 7. As discussed in the next Chapter, the administration was rather pragmatic in its predictions about Nasser. It did not believe in fact that the Egyptian leader would become a “Western agent” in the region, but that he would, at least, distance himself from the Soviet orbit.

Caught between two worlds: Kennedy, monarchies and republics

Although Kennedy was committed to his rapprochement with Cairo in order to advance his regional and global Cold War strategies mentioned earlier, he found himself entangled between the two opposing Arab forces present in the Middle East, products of gradual collapse of the British and French empires following the end of World War II. The presence in the Middle East of such contrary forces, epitomised in the monarchical and republican regimes dichotomy, forced Kennedy to effect policies designed to let him pursue his main goal of re-approaching the key Arab nationalist while simultaneously preserving US interests (largely economic) in the survival of the monarchical Arab regimes. Ironically, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, by late 1963 Kennedy ended up closer to the Arab monarchies than he was to Nasser, but that was never his goal.

Kennedy's approach to the Arab monarchies should be examined within the larger context of his Cold War strategies in the Middle East. It would be a mistake to interpret Kennedy's actions towards the Arab monarchies as an attempt to gain a wide range of options in the region, as argued by Bass²⁸¹, or even to rely on them as proxies, as contended by Little.²⁸² Kennedy had no interest in the Arab monarchies in that sense, and he did not wish to rely on them as regional proxies. In the minds of the New Frontiersmen, the challenges of the Cold War in the Middle East revolved around the confrontation with the Arab nationalists, the true expression of the Arab population's desire for emancipation and modernization: "Nationalism will remain the most dynamic force in the Arab world and Nasser will remain its foremost leader. His influence is likely to grow rather than decline"²⁸³, reads a 1961 memorandum from Komer, which followed an estimate of the US intelligence agencies that stated that Nasser was in fact the "leading exponent of Arab

²⁸¹ Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 12.

²⁸² Little, *American Orientalism...*, 137.

²⁸³ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Walt Rostow, June 30, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 74.

reformism.”²⁸⁴ Thus, the administration believed, only by courting Nasser and fostering pro-American sentiments among the Arab population could the threat of Soviet expansion across the region be averted.

Because the Kennedy administration had long acknowledged the importance of establishing a working relationship with Nasser, both in its regional and international objectives, the Arab monarchs never really constituted a Cold War option for Kennedy. There were three main reasons for this.

First, Kennedy had learned from Eisenhower’s mistakes about the impossibility of relying on Arab monarchs to advance US Cold War strategies. Back in 1956, the Eisenhower administration had tried to replace Nasser with King Saud as leader of the Arab world. Unwilling to do business with Nasser, and disregarding the issues related to Saud’s questionable style of governance, Eisenhower wrote in late March:

“Arabia is a country that contains the holy places of the Moslem world... consequently the King could be built up, possibly, as spiritual leader. When this were accomplished we might begin to urge his right to political leadership.”²⁸⁵

This attempt however failed shortly after with the explosion of the Suez crisis. Nasser was crowned leader and force of attraction of the Arab world, and his prestige was consolidated across the entire Middle East²⁸⁶, while Eisenhower’s hope to replace him with the Saudi monarch inexorably collapsed.

Second, when Kennedy accessed the White House, it was a widespread belief among the administration that the monarchies were doomed to disappear.²⁸⁷ The Kennedy administration, with the exception of Hart and Macomber, believed that the traditional Arab regimes would not be able to survive the revolutionary transformations occurring in

²⁸⁴ National Intelligence Estimate, June 27, 1961. Ibidem, 68.

²⁸⁵ Diary entry by the President, March 28, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XV, *Arab-Israeli dispute, January 1 – July 26, 1956*, 226.

²⁸⁶ Simon C. Smith, *Reassessing Suez 1956: New Perspectives on the Crisis and its Aftermath*, (Hampshire, Burlington; Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 115.

²⁸⁷ William Macomber, *OHI*, February 14, 1969, 29.

the Middle East under the force of Nasser's progressive propaganda, and was thus unwilling to rely on them to advance US Cold War strategies. This acknowledgement that the political, economic and social backwardness of the Arab monarchies could cause them to fall under the weight of widespread social unrest, brought Kennedy to elaborate strategies aimed at stabilising them through programmes of reforms (aimed for example at increasing popular participation in the government, reducing bribery and graft in the government, improving the education system, restricting the expansion of the bureaucracy, and others²⁸⁸), and preserving American economic interests, but it certainly did not convince him to transform them into regional proxies.

Third, on a more personal level, Kennedy neither liked nor trusted King Saud²⁸⁹, and even the administration considered him "a dissolute person"²⁹⁰ who should not have been in power. Even more significantly, Kennedy was tired of being associated with clients who "represented yesterday rather than tomorrow."²⁹¹ As noted earlier, Kennedy had made modernization and social, political and economic development the pillars of his Third World strategies, and the presence of backwards monarchical regimes in the Middle East was sharply in contrast with his progressive view of the Third World, which conversely worked well with Nasser's role as "key Arab reformist".²⁹²

But with strong economic interests in the Arabs' oil, the administration was willing, in Komer's words, "to overcome these moral scruples."²⁹³ Kennedy committed himself to pushing the Arab monarchies to implement programmes of reforms that could broaden their domestic consensus and thus strengthen their regimes, but this strategy was

²⁸⁸ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Saudi Arabia, November 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1962, Vol. XVII, 91.

²⁸⁹ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, July 29, 1967, 527.

²⁹⁰ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 46.

²⁹¹ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 16.

²⁹² National Intelligence Estimate, June 27, 1961. *Ibidem*, 68.

²⁹³ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 16.

exclusively designed to secure oil interests, not to bring about reliance on them as regional allies. After all, Kennedy had put the rapprochement with Nasser at the top of his Mideast agenda, knowing all too well that the Middle East envisioned by the revolutionary Egyptian leader was very much in contrast with the old-fashioned one symbolised by the Arab monarchies. The 1958 crisis in Jordan and Lebanon spoke loudly of the tension between new and old Middle East, which Kennedy did not fail to grasp, remarking: "Lebanon and the Middle East, Algeria and North Africa... every part of the world is in flames or in ferment... our alliances are crumbling - our prestige is declining".²⁹⁴

The inter-Arab tensions that exploded in the region during the 1950s and 1960s, were largely a result of the struggle between revolutionary regimes and traditional ones that followed the collapse of the former European colonial powers. Indeed, the gradual end of the colonial domination perpetuated by Britain and France in the Middle East and North Africa, opened the road for a new system of Arab states to develop, marked by the search for new economic, political and social systems, and in general a new identity.²⁹⁵

The 1952 Egyptian revolution that overthrew King Farouk and established Nasser's rule later in 1954, was responsible for spreading new sentiments across the Arab world, encompassing principles such as progress, development and secularism, as well as anti-imperialism. Demanding a break from the outdated, atavistic rule of the conservative Arab monarchies - one anchored to strict sectarianism and a traditional law system - these revolutionary, progressive regimes (such as the ones in Egypt, Syria and the post-1958

²⁹⁴ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy, Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, May 17, 1958. JFKL, Ready References, JFK speeches.

²⁹⁵ Michael J. Cohen, *Demise of the British Empire in the Middle East: Britain's Responses to Nationalist Movements, 1943-55*, (London, Portland: Frank Cass Publisher, 1998), 79-81. Martin Kramer has conversely argued that the primary form of Arab nationalism derived not from opposition to European colonisation, but from a sentiment of revolution against the Ottoman Empire. After 1920, Arab nationalism became "anti-imperialist", as the European countries, after the San Remo Conference, decided to split the former Ottoman Empire in accordance with the League of Nations mandates. In 1948, after the creation of Israel sponsored by the United States, Arab nationalism became in effect "revolutionary". Martin Kramer, "Arab Nationalism: Mistaken Identity," *Daedalus*, (Summer 1993), 171-206.

Iraq), were located in a sort of “grey area” between communist and Western worlds, one that embraced socialism as well as Arab nationalism. Indeed, such regimes, while gravitating closely to socialist concepts such as redistribution of land and the rejection of class struggles, embraced to a different degree the concept of pan-Arabism, of which Nasser was the main spokesman.²⁹⁶ The administration hoped to take advantage of Nasser’s commitment to his policy of “positive neutralism” to provide him with a Western alternative to his dependence from Moscow, particularly if the Soviets were to increase pressure on his regime, and thus cause a “fundamental breach between Nasser and the USSR.”²⁹⁷

Countries like Syria and Iraq were subject to frequent struggles of power between Nasserite and more extreme left-wing elements in both the political arena and the army. For instance, under the Arab Socialist Resurrectionist Party (ASRP), the best organised communist parties in the entire Arab world²⁹⁸, Syria had established close ties with the Soviet Union and expelled, the American diplomatic corps in 1955.²⁹⁹ In 1958, pan-Arabist sentiments prevailed among the government, and Syria joined the United Arab Republic under Nasser’s leadership, but left it, as shall be seen later, in September 1961 after a coup staged by the army.³⁰⁰ Under Qasim, Iraq adopted a progressively more hostile attitude towards Nasser, particularly after the failure of an attempted coup carried

²⁹⁶ Under Nasser’s leadership, Egypt managed to embrace a different socio-economic path which constituted a significant evolution from traditional Arab regimes. Nasser promoted reforms that touched on Egyptian social welfare (housing, education, health services and nourishment) as well as other aspects of Egyptian life such as literature, music, theatre. Hosny Guindy and Hani Shukrallah, *Liberating Nasser’s Legacy*, Al-Ahram Weekly Online, 28 Sept-4 Oct 2000, Issue 501. Nasser also promoted a different kind of Islam, which “supported gender equality and promoted women and fought obscurantism”. As’ad AbuKhalil, *Progressive Versus Reactionary Islam* - Fri, 2011-11-11 03:33- Angry Corner, Alakhbar English.

²⁹⁷ National Intelligence Estimate, June 27, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 68.

²⁹⁸ Paper Prepared by the Operations Coordinating Board Working Group on National Security Council Action 1290-d. FRUS 1955-1957. Vol. XIII, *Near East: Jordan-Yemen (1955-1957)*, Syria, 299.

²⁹⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰⁰ Malik Mufti, *Sovereign creations: pan-Arabism and political order in Syria and Iraq*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 134.

out by Nasserite revolutionaries from the northern city of Mosul³⁰¹, and established closer ties with the Soviet Union, resuming trade agreements with Moscow in October 1958 after they had been interrupted since 1955.³⁰² By early 1963, as a result of the second wave of Nasserism that followed the explosion of the conflict in Yemen, both Syria and Iraq turned back to Nasser. As a result, Qasim was murdered by members of the Iraqi Ba'ath party in February 1963, which inspired a coup d'état in Syria one month later.

But the internal struggles within the Syrian and Iraqi governments accompanied a more important, regional trend, which defined Kennedy's approach to the Arab world and is thus critical to understanding his strategies towards the Arab monarchies.

Indeed, after Nasser's 1956 victory in Suez, the Arab population found itself reunited by a common hatred for Western imperialism, which manifested itself in demonstrations and riots across the entire Middle East, most famously in Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon in 1958, and in clear expressions of support for the Egyptian leader.³⁰³ Important social developments, such as significant growth of the Arab population, migration from rural to urban areas, the expansion of the middle class, and increasing illiteracy and poverty³⁰⁴, further emphasised the divide between new progressive Arab regimes, promoters of modernization and development, (the administration was aware that "despite important differences between competing brands of Arab nationalism, the significant ones all reflect desires for independence and neutralism, social and economic

³⁰¹ Telegram from the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State, Baghdad, March 26, 1959. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XII, 166. Qasim's response was inevitably cruel - most of the nationalist officers were killed, thousands of opponents were jailed and almost every ministry was purged. As a consequence, Qasim tilted entirely towards the Soviet Union.

³⁰² Editorial Note. Ibidem, 140.

³⁰³ Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 181. From a wider perspective, the CIA-staged coup against Mossadegh in 1953, also contributed significantly in fuelling a greater nationalist ideology against the 'Western imperialists'. R. Scott Appleby, *Spokesmen for the despised: fundamentalist leaders of the Middle East*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 28.

³⁰⁴ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the twentieth century...*, 139.

reform and varying degrees of Arab unity”³⁰⁵, and that it was thus important for the United States “not to appear to stand against reformist movements”, of which Nasser was the main spokesman³⁰⁶), and the traditional monarchies, entangled in alliances with the “Western imperialists” and oblivious to their societies’ needs. As John Badeau commented in his later work *The American approach to the Arab world*, it was in fact a revolt of the middle and lower classes against the traditional elites.³⁰⁷ Nasser’s domestic socialist revolution, still framed within the non-aligned movement and thus opposed to international communism, epitomised perfectly the struggle between “new” and “old” Middle East:

“Each nation on earth undergoes two revolutions: One political, in which it recovers its right of self-government from an imposed despot or any army of aggression occupying its territory without its consent. The second revolution is social, in which the classes of society struggle against each other until justice for all citizens has been gained and conditions have become stable.”³⁰⁸

The Arab monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and Jordan, were seen by Nasser as an anachronistic presence in the region.³⁰⁹ While the Arab revolutionary regimes,

³⁰⁵ National Intelligence Estimate, June 27, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 68.

³⁰⁶ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 126.

³⁰⁷ John S. Badeau, *The American approach to the Arab world*, (New York; Council on Foreign Relations, 1968), 45, 46.

³⁰⁸ Nasser, *The Philosophy of Revolution...*, 24.

³⁰⁹ Nasser wrote in his book: “If the army does not move, we said to ourselves, who else will? We were the ghost with which the tyrant haunted the dreams of the nation. It was high time that the same ghost turned against the tyrant and upset his dreams.” Ibidem, 18. The argument that Nasser perceived the Arab monarchies as an anachronistic presence in the region is rather widespread in the literature. Joel Gordon has for instance argued that, once in power, Nasser became in effect the “torchbearer for liberation... from monarchical rule”. Joel Gordon, *Nasser’s Blessed Movement: Egypt’s Free Officers and the July Revolution*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 198. Similarly, Steven A. Cook has pointed out that Nasser considered the monarchies as “an impediment to Arab progress.” Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle For Egypt: From Nasser to Tahir Square*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 75. Similar arguments are made by Peter J. Chelkowski and Robert J. Pranger, who argue that the Free Officers’ revolution increased the feeling that the “Saudi monarchy might also be anachronistic”. Peter J. Chelkowski and Robert J. Pranger, *Ideology and Power in the Middle East: Studies in Honor of George Lenczowski*, (Durham; Duke University Press, 1988), 58; and by Moshe Gat, who argues that “Nasser believed that Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other conservative Arab states, were little more than willing surrogates for British power and interests. Accordingly, he embarked on a vicious campaign of hate”. Moshe Gat, *Britain and the Conflict in the Middle East, 1964-1967: The coming of the Six-Day War*, (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2003), 4. Robert Komer somehow shared Nasser’s opinion of the Arab monarchies, as during the Kuwait crisis of 1961, he described the country as an “anachronistic place.” Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, December 29, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 156.

whether directly affiliated to Cairo or not, pursued development, modernization, and secularism, and were united by a common nationalist sentiment that often merged into Nasser's pan-Arabism, the Hashemite Kingdom and the Saudi Royal Family were still anchored to Islamic law, were defined by a genealogical political structure and, even more significantly, were allied with the "Western imperialists".

Nasser blamed such regimes for having subscribed to the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957, and for having allowed the perpetuation of Western domination in the region through their economic partnership with the Western powers³¹⁰, and he sought to exploit his propaganda to stimulate revolts aimed at destabilising their power. Appealing to the Arabs' desire for emancipation from foreign domination and to the socio-economic problems afflicting the Arab world, Nasser launched his campaign against the Arab monarchies, puppets of the "Western imperialists" and exploiters of Arab oil³¹¹, which resulted in countless riots and demonstrations that shook the very foundations of the power structures of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon. While Saud was dramatically losing domestic support as Cairo labelled him "the special friend of the Western imperialism... protector of Israel and the profiteer of the Arab oil"³¹², in Jordan, as recalled by King Hussein, "Amman was torn by riots as the people, their senses blurred by propaganda, turned to Nasser, the new mystique of the Arab world."³¹³

Thus, Kennedy's approach to the Arab monarchies ought to be analysed within this larger context of social unrest, revolutionary transformations, and the anti-imperialist

³¹⁰ Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States...*, 83. The reference is to the Arab oil concession granted to Western companies: Kuwait Oil Company (Kuwait), owned by Britain (50%) and the United States (50%); Aramco (Saudi Arabia), owned by the United States (100%); Iran Oil Consortium (Iran), owned by Britain (40%), the United States (40%), joint British-Dutch (14%); and France (6%); Qatar Petroleum Company (Qatar), owned by Britain (23,75%), the United States (23,75%), joint British-Dutch (23,75%); and France (23,75%); Bahrain Petroleum Company (Bahrain), owned by the United States (100%). International Review Service, Vol. V, No. 52, 6. JFKL, Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 791, Middle East.

³¹¹ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century...*, 220.

³¹² Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States...*, 83.

³¹³ King Hussein of Jordan, *Uneasy Lies the Head: an Autobiography*, (London: Heinemann, 1962), 110.

campaigns launched by Cairo. Unwilling to oppose Nasser, the real force of attraction of the Arab world and key figure in the non-aligned movement, Kennedy pushed the Arab monarchies to promote reforms aimed at stabilising them internally by broadening their domestic political consensus, such as the elimination of extravagant expenditures, elimination of the powers of religious officials, acceleration of the government's decision-making process, improvement of the administration of justice and other fiscal and economic reforms.³¹⁴ However, such an approach did not derive from his strategy of gaining a wide range of regional options to contain communism, but exclusively from the US's most immediate concerns: the need for oil and the prevention of an Arab-Israeli war.³¹⁵

Kennedy and Saudi Arabia: the importance of oil

In his 1960 book *The Strategy of Peace*, Kennedy analysed several critical objectives in the Middle East towards which the United States had to focus its foreign policy efforts. Among the challenges of Arab nationalism, the issue of economic development and social and political progress, as well as the threat of communism, Kennedy identified in Middle Eastern oil the second most critical aspect of the region, as he wrote:

“The second permanent factor in the Middle East of which we must never lose sight is oil. The dependence of the world upon Middle Eastern oil... has been made

³¹⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Saudi Arabia, November 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 91.

³¹⁵ The literature interprets Kennedy's support of Saudi Arabia as an attempt to secure a regional proxy. As noted in the introduction, this is for instance the argument of Douglas Little and Warren Bass (although Bass ascribes it to Kennedy's strategy of 'supporting any friend' to gain more Cold War options). A similar point is made by Rachel Bronson, who asserts that Kennedy realised that “the most obvious alternative to Egypt was Saudi Arabia”. Rachel Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil...*, 88. Barrett too argues that eventually “Kennedy bet the future of the United States in the Greater Middle East on Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Israel.” Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 266. Although these authors acknowledge the importance of the Saudi oil for the United States, they ascribe Kennedy's support of Saudi Arabia to larger geo-strategic objectives of Cold War.

abundantly clear... we must remember that Europe's dependence upon these oil supplies will continue - and continue indefinitely..."³¹⁶

Such a statement reflects much of Kennedy's pragmatism in relation to his approach to Saudi Arabia, a country that alone controlled the 27% of the world's oil supplies³¹⁷, and which had produced, in the period between 1953 and 1958, over 1.5 billion dollars in oil revenues.³¹⁸ As a senator, Kennedy acknowledged the importance of the Saudi oil for Europe and the Western world, then, as president, he elaborated strategies aimed squarely at preserving American interests in the Saudi oilfields. The New Frontiersmen's interests in Saudi Arabia was limited to its oil. Because of the administration's belief that "the moderate regimes were bound to fail", and that thus it had to "gain influence with the most radical regimes"³¹⁹, it saw little chances of relying on Riyadh to contain communism. Conversely, relying on the rapprochement with Nasser to enhance US prestige in the region and foster pro-American sentiment among the Arab population was deemed to pay the highest dividends on both a regional and global scale. Preservation of the Saudi oilfields in the context of the rapprochement policy with Nasser became the administration's main concern in its strategies towards Saudi Arabia.

Significantly, the Kennedy administration's stance in relation to the Saudi Arabia/Nasser/oil dilemma emerged clearly on two occasions.

First, in the summer of 1962, Komer, perhaps unkindly, confessed to McGeorge Bundy: "If it weren't for ARAMCO we ought to treat this country [Saudi Arabia] like Yemen, i.e. leave it back in the 15th Century."³²⁰ Komer's outburst followed Saud's

³¹⁶ Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace...*, 110. Kennedy listed seven "permanent factors" in the region: the geographic position of the region, oil, Soviet penetration, economic and social problems, the rise of Arab nationalism, the role of Egypt, and Israel.

³¹⁷ Mamoun Fandy, 'U.S. Oil Policy in the Middle East', *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Jan 1, 1997.

³¹⁸ "Oil in the Middle East- Its markets and Europe's dependence upon it". JFKL, Pre-Presidential papers, Box 789, *Foreign Policy Near East*.

³¹⁹ William Macomber, *OHI*, February 14, 1969, 29.

³²⁰ Robert Komer memorandum to McGeorge Bundy, June 7, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 156A, Saudi Arabia, General, 6-6-62, 6-30-62.

condemnation of Kennedy's programme of assistance to the UAR, which, according to the Saudi King, implied "a lessening of US concern for Saudi Arabia."³²¹

The second, and perhaps more significant occasion, was during the events of 1963, when a new wave of Nasserism, triggered by the fall of Qasim in February and of the military regime in Syria in March, shook the entire Arab world. While the administration was discussing how to deal with the new Nasserite regimes in Syria and Iraq, in the broader context of the war in Yemen, Komer declared: "It's one thing to defend the Saudis against aggression. It's another to declare we choose the kings over the bulk of the Arab world; that would be the real way to lose our oil."³²²

The episodes described above are testament to Kennedy's pragmatic approach to Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the strategies designed by the New Frontiersmen to enhance the security of the Saudi regime through the promotion of programmes of reforms and through the military tokens granted during the Yemen crisis (famously through HARD SURFACE, a US military operation deployed to defend Saudi Arabia), were exclusively intended to protect the Saudi oilfields while carrying out the policy of rapprochement with Nasser. Kennedy's policies towards Nasser defined the administration's strategies towards Saudi Arabia, but these were never intended to transform Riyadh into a regional proxy, nor were they intended to secure a strategic friendship between the New Frontiersmen and an old-fashioned regime that Kennedy, as recalled by Feldman, quite frankly disliked.³²³ Even Parker T. Hart explained Kennedy's strategies exclusively in relation to US interests in Saudi oil, never mentioning larger geo-strategic objectives.³²⁴

³²¹ Memorandum from the Department of Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), June 4, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 288.

³²² Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, March 6, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Robert Komer, Staff Memoranda, 3-63, 5-63

³²³ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, July 29, 1967, 527.

³²⁴ Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States...*, 144.

The Saudi oil was particularly important for the United States because of the concessions that King Abdul Ibn Saud had made to the California Arabian Standard Oil Company, associated with the American Standard Oil of California. The contract, signed in May 1933, granted the United States full ownership of the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO)³²⁵, generating a business whose total profits (including extraction, refining, and transportation) were so high, they were almost impossible to calculate.³²⁶

Aside from the enormous profits of ARAMCO, Washington's policy-makers were confronted by the larger question of oil supply to Europe. Indeed, as Kennedy's reflections on the Middle Eastern oil in *The Strategy of Peace* suggest, oil became an American national security interest because of Europe's dependence upon it. While the United States was the world leading oil producer, with figures of production around 331 thousands of metric tons³²⁷, the economies in Europe were paralysed and the shortage of coal was causing a very severe energy crisis throughout the entire "old world", already devastated by the war. With such scenario, it became clear that oil was going to be the key instrument in facilitating, if not entirely allowing, the recovery of Europe, and that in the long-term, the United States, already experiencing an impressive increase in domestic consumption of oil, would be unable to satisfy both its domestic market and its European allies.³²⁸ Indeed, even by the early 1950s, 80% of the European oil supply came from the Middle East³²⁹, half of which, an abundant 40%, was transported from Saudi Arabia to the Mediterranean Sea through the Trans-Arabian Pipeline, also known as "Tapline".³³⁰

The need to secure the Saudi oilfields defined Kennedy's approach to Saudi Arabia, but there were no geo-strategic interests, in terms of Cold War regional alliances,

³²⁵ International Review Service, Vol. V, No. 52, 6. JFKL, Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 791, Middle East.

³²⁶ Ibidem.

³²⁷ Ibidem. Venezuela, the Soviet Union, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq followed in this order.

³²⁸ Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest...*, 409, 410.

³²⁹ Ibidem, 425.

³³⁰ "Saudi Arabia Oil Company", *International Directory of Company Histories*, 2003.

behind Kennedy's attempt to stabilise the Saudi regime. Kennedy did not wish to rely on Saudi Arabia to contain international communism - an experiment that had already failed during the years of Eisenhower - but only to secure US interests in the large reserves of oil hidden under the Saudi soil.³³¹ Furthermore, the relationship between Kennedy and Riyadh suffered initially from some awkward diplomatic setbacks. King Saud responded more than harshly to Kennedy's conciliatory letter to the Arab leaders sent on May 11, 1961, through which the president sought to establish a friendly dialogue with the Arab countries around Middle Eastern issues, including the Arab-Israeli dispute. Saud's disrespectful reply, marked by repeated and severe attacks against Washington's pro-Israel policy, offended Kennedy to the point that his "face turned white with anger as he read the long and acerbic response to his thoughtful and balanced message."³³² This incident, together with the issues surrounding the renewal of the Dhahran Airfield concession³³³, made Kennedy less and less inclined to establish a geo-strategic partnership with Riyadh. Oil was Kennedy's sole concern, rather than more far-reaching objectives.

As early as Kennedy's accession to the White House, things appeared rather gloomy in Saudi Arabia. In Washington, Komer made clear to the new president that "the staying in power of the Saudi monarchy declines with every passing day"³³⁴, a position largely shared among the administration and in the State Department; this same opinion was common in the Middle East as well, where in Cairo Nasser acknowledged that "the Saudi Arabian monarchy was falling apart"³³⁵, and in Israel, the Ben Gurion government

³³¹ Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States...*, 144.

³³² Ibidem, 90.

³³³ In early 1961, King Saud had decided not to renew the concession of the Dhahran Airfield, an agreement signed between the two countries in 1945 that, in essence, had allowed the United States to have an operational Airfield in Saudi territory. The main reason behind Saud's decision was the propaganda campaign mounted by Nasser that Saudi Arabia had allowed foreign imperialist into its country.

³³⁴ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, June 7, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 156A, Saudi Arabia, General, 6-6-62, 6-30-62.

³³⁵ Parker T. Hart, *OHI*, June 10, 1970, 50.

“considered Saudi Arabia to be quite fragile and likely to crumble”.³³⁶ Indeed, the impression of quiet conveyed by the lack of direct uprisings against the King, hid severe political fragmentation that was expected to cause the Saudi monarchy to fall at the first bout of turbulence, likely to be caused by the rampancy of the Arab nationalists.

Such fragmentation was caused by the power struggle between King Saud and his brother Crown Prince Faysal, two political figures diametrically opposed. While the first was associated with extravagant luxury, plundering of oil resources, and corruption, the second was seen as a sober, loyal leader whose financial wisdom could contribute to the stabilisation of the regime.³³⁷ Such tension, which lasted until 1964 when Faysal officially came to the throne, helps understanding the framework within which Arab upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s influenced the dynamics of the Saudi government and of Washington’s strategies.

Problems began to appear as early as June 1953, when thousands of Arab ARAMCO workers went on strike to protest against their living conditions and to demand the same conditions as their American colleagues.³³⁸ Saud’s luxurious lifestyle did not help to ease the tensions, for a King accustomed to spending billions of dollars³³⁹ on extravagant whims could hardly set an example or give comfort to his population. Furthermore, the King destined over 60% of the country’s total oil income for royal emoluments³⁴⁰ a habit that had made the country go through fairly severe economic crisis, and further contributed towards widening the gap between the palace of power and the Saudi people. However, this ambition for better working conditions soon turned into protests of an increasingly political nature. The people’s desire for a change in Saudi

³³⁶ Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States...*, 145.

³³⁷ Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia...*, 103.

³³⁸ Peter W. Wilson and Douglas F. Graham, *Saudi Arabia: the Coming Storm...*, 49.

³³⁹ Hart remembers that over 3 billion dollars were spent to build palaces and recreational homes. Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States...*, 98.

³⁴⁰ Ibidem, 84.

Arabia's politics grew in parallel to Nasser's ascent as leader of the Arab world, as his progressive visions and propaganda spread the idea that monarchies could be overthrown after all.³⁴¹ As a matter of fact, in May 1956 strikes erupted again among the ARAMCO workers, but this time people started demanding the creation of a Saudi republic and the fall of the monarchy.³⁴²

Eventually, King Saud managed to crush the protests with bloodshed, but after the Suez crisis, as Nasser's popularity reached its pinnacle, the King found himself more and more isolated. Although benefiting from the aid provided by the Eisenhower Doctrine, the King was losing domestic support dramatically and, growing progressively more obsessed with the new revolutionary trend in the Middle East brought to the fore by the Egyptian revolution of 1952, he further estranged himself from Saudi society and refused contacts with the circles of intellectuals and educated Saudi personalities who were demanding reforms.³⁴³

In September 1956 however, Nasser's visit to Saudi Arabia finally stimulated the more progress-oriented circles in the royal palace, led by Prince Talal Bin Abdulaziz, to begin opposing Saud's reign. This resulted in the creation of a Nasserite cell within the royal palace of power, which aimed at replacing the stagnant monarchy with a new, constitutional one.³⁴⁴ The distance between Saud and the reformist cell, now gathered in the Free Princes movement, grew parallel to Nasser's popularity and his incessant campaign "against the King, his extravagance, his wastage of the oil that should belong

³⁴¹ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*..., 108.

³⁴² Wilson, *Saudi Arabia: the Coming Storm*..., 49.

³⁴³ An oral narrative describes King Saud once hearing drilling coming from a nearby construction site and, mistaking it for a coup, "rose up in panic and retreated to his private quarter". Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*..., 108.

³⁴⁴ Wilson, *Saudi Arabia: the Coming Storm*..., 49.

to 'all the Arabs' and other such charges"³⁴⁵, until 1958, when Saud was forced to resign and to turn the management of all the government's business to his brother Faysal.

When Faysal stepped in with the blessing of Talal and the Free Princes, he immediately sought to tackle the severe economic problems that were afflicting the country. He reduced the royal emoluments to from 60% to 14%³⁴⁶, gaining approval from businessmen and intellectuals, and pursued the establishment of the first real national budget, with the aim of restoring the country's economy by cutting down royal spending. By the end of 1960 however, whether through jealousy of his brother's popularity or through unwillingness to accept the financial stringency imposed by Faysal, Saud refused to sign the budget, and Faysal resigned from his role of prime minister, moving to the desert to live in almost complete isolation.³⁴⁷ The law still required the King's approval for the proposed budget to come into effect, and Saud used this power - one of the few he had left - in an attempt to restore his control over the country.

With Faysal temporarily out of the picture, Saud seduced Talal and the Free Princes by promising reforms and granting them prestigious positions in the government. Talal became minister of finance and vice president of the Supreme Planning Board³⁴⁸, but he still hoped that Saud would accept the reforms proposed by the Free Princes: the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, guarantees for private ownership and equal opportunity, freedom of expression and association.³⁴⁹ However, once Saud managed to re-establish firm control over the government, he rejected Talal's programme entirely, adjudging that the only law in Saudi Arabia was the Sharia. Betrayed and disillusioned, Talal went into voluntary exile.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁵ Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States...*, 73.

³⁴⁶ Ibidem, 84.

³⁴⁷ Ibidem.

³⁴⁸ Bronson, *Thicker than Oil...*, 77.

³⁴⁹ Wilson, *Saudi Arabia: the Coming Storm...*, 50.

³⁵⁰ Ibidem, 51.

Only Saud's deteriorating health during the autumn of 1961 would provide the conditions for Faysal's return, in the guise of prime minister and acting king. Wiser and certainly less extravagant, Faysal subscribed to Kennedy's idea of reforms and modernization aimed at stabilising the country's regime, particularly during 1962-1963, when a new wave of Nasserism instigated turmoil and uprisings against the socially, politically and economically troubled monarchies in the region. Faysal established local governments and favoured the formation of an independent judiciary, tried to improve social welfare and to give a push to the economic growth of his country³⁵¹; he began large education programmes, he introduced Western technology³⁵², and he took steps to increase the participation of "educated Saudi youth in the administration of the state."³⁵³ In October 1962, Faysal also proclaimed an end to slavery, one of the great embarrassments of the Saudi regime, given its traditional role as defender of the Islamic faith. Indeed, as many African Muslims were still "held in bondage"³⁵⁴ through contracts enforced by Saudi courts, domestic and international malcontent fuelled by Nasser's propaganda risked bringing Faysal's rule to an early end.

The Kennedy administration welcomed the effort of Faisal's reformist regime. A telegram from the Department of State sent in November 1962, informed the royal family that "US [is] pleased at evidence of serious intent [to] carry out reforms", and that Kennedy was ready to assist the regime "in finding experts in appropriate fields interested in temporary service with [the] Saudi Arabia Government who can aid in work of [the] Supreme Planning Board and [the] Saudi Arabia Government ministries."³⁵⁵ Under

³⁵¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic and Energy Dimension*, (Westport; Praeger Publisher, 2003), 17.

³⁵² *Ibidem*.

³⁵³ Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States...*, 114.

³⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 148.

³⁵⁵ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Saudi Arabia, November 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 91.

Kennedy, the US government also established “a civic action program in Saudi Arabia in the form of road building supervised by the United States Army Corps and Engineers”, and dispatched the American economic survey team to Saudi Arabia in order to establish a closer technical assistance and collaboration between the two countries.³⁵⁶ The team, headed by the American Mr Harold Folk, who was employed as top planning advisor in the Saudi Supreme Planning Board, collaborated with the Saudi government on specific projects for economic development. During a meeting with Hart in mid-November 1962, Faysal announced his intention to draft a “Fundamental Law”, a constitution which would also include a “statement on the basic rights of the citizens”; to draft a “Provincial Law”, aimed at bringing some decentralization of power and increasing the popular participation in the governmental process at provincial level; to create an independent judiciary system, thus removed from the hands of religious authorities; to restrict the power of the Ulema - a council of senior scholars that would advise the King on political issue - to religious matters; and to allocate the money from outstanding unsettled claims against ARAMCO into a special fund for development.³⁵⁷ The administration confirmed its appreciation of Faysal’s effort: “[The] US [is] impressed with reform program announced by Faysal government and believes it provides [the] basis for healthy progress and modernization.”³⁵⁸

Faysal’s set of reforms eventually allowed the Saudi regime to survive the impact of the wave of Nasserism that followed the coup in Yemen of September 1962. Although in the historiography of Saudi Arabia there is no recollection of direct domestic uprisings similar for instance to those of Jordan in April 1963, the political struggle between King

³⁵⁶ Memorandum from E.S. Little to McGeorge Bundy, October 5, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 157, Saudi Arabia, General, 10-62.

³⁵⁷ Memorandum from the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State, November 15, 1962. Ibidem, 1-63, 3-63.

³⁵⁸ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Jidda, March 7, 1963. Ibidem.

Saud, Crown Prince Faysal and the members of the Free Princes constituted a serious danger to the survival of the regime.

By pushing Faysal towards this reformist path, not only did the administration bring the acting king to vastly improve “his international image, not only in Washington but also in the Arab East”³⁵⁹, but Kennedy himself gained credit and popularity “among Saudi intellectuals, diplomats and high officials”, who welcomed the New Frontier’s effort to modernise the country.³⁶⁰ Educated Saudi intellectuals were in fact the breeding-ground for revolutionary propaganda, and by subscribing to Kennedy’s directions, Faysal managed to satisfy their demands and quell their unrest.³⁶¹ Had he ignored Kennedy’s strategy, Hart and the rest of the administration, had little doubt about his chances of survival.³⁶²

From a long-term perspective, Kennedy’s policies towards Saudi Arabia laid the groundwork for the country’s future strategic partnership with the US, for at least two reasons. First, because by pushing Saudi Arabia to adopt progressive reforms, Kennedy ensured the survival of Faysal’s rule during such a turbulent period, possibly the most uncertain in Saudi history.³⁶³ It is not unrealistic to think that, had Faysal failed to implement such reforms, he would have lost political support and perhaps caused the collapse of the Saudi monarchy and the seizure of power by Nasserite cells already present in the royal palaces. Second, as will be described in Chapter 5, is that operation HARD SURFACE represented in effect a direct pledge of US support to Saudi Arabia in

³⁵⁹ Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States...*, 148.

³⁶⁰ Ibidem.

³⁶¹ Al-Rasheed also points out that the Saudi army was rather weak, so it was unlikely to stage a clean military coup in the style of the Free Officers’ 1952 revolution. Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia...*, 108.

³⁶² Airgram from the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State, January 10, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 157, Saudi Arabia, General, 1-63, 3-63.

³⁶³ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia...*, 108.

the context of the confrontation between Cairo and Riyadh in Yemen, which eventually inevitably strengthened Washington's ties with the country.

But Kennedy destined this military aid to Faysal as a mere political manoeuvre, in the hope of deterring Nasser from directly attacking Saudi Arabia and to show to Faysal Washington's *bona fides* during the disengagement negotiations.³⁶⁴ Although Kennedy never wished to rely on Saudi Arabia as regional proxy but only to secure US oil interests, his actions inevitably opened the road for Johnson and Nixon's strategies of containment of communism and defence of US regional interests through Saudi Arabia.

The case of Jordan and Iran

While Kennedy's strategies in Saudi Arabia were confined to the need to preserve the American interests in the Saudi oil and maintain the economic partnership between the royal family and ARAMCO, in Jordan and Iran the administration was moved by larger geo-strategic objectives. Preservation of the Hashemite regime in Jordan to avoid an Arab-Israeli war, and of the Shah regime in Iran over both the question of oil and of CENTO (Central Treaty Organization- formerly Baghdad Pact), required the Kennedy administration to overcome its disliking of these traditional and authoritarian regimes and to focus on finding a way to stabilise them. Much like in the case of Saudi Arabia, the Kennedy administration referred to its strategy of promoting social, economic and political progress as a means to quell the population's unrest and broaden the domestic political consensus of both King Hussein and the Shah.

Although there are similarities in the approach of the Kennedy administration to Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, one that advocated progress and modernization to gain domestic consensus, there are some differences in the results that this produced. While in

³⁶⁴ Robert Komer, *OHI*, September 3, 1964, 1, 2.

Jordan, King Hussein proved himself very slow in implementing reforms (some progress would be registered in Jordan only after the food riots in 1989³⁶⁵), and thus was eventually forced to rely on martial law to regain control of his country during the crisis in April 1963³⁶⁶, in Iran the Shah succumbed to Kennedy's pressure by implementing a questionable set of reforms, largely concerning land redistribution, known as White Revolution.³⁶⁷ Moreover, there were different interests involved in the case of Jordan and Iran. While the first, due to the nature of its soil, had no oil³⁶⁸ and was thus important almost exclusively for the Arab-Israeli dispute, the second was pivotal both for its oil and for the containment of the Soviet Union.³⁶⁹

With Palestinians constituting two-thirds of the population³⁷⁰, close ties with both the United States and Britain (exacerbated by Hussein's "foolish marriage" to an English girl³⁷¹), and extreme economic, political and social problems³⁷², Jordan was a hotbed for Arab nationalists.³⁷³ Anti-imperialist and anti-Israel sentiments, fuelled by Nasser's propaganda, had indeed already caused King Hussein's regime to tremble under the grave social unrest that had hit the West Bank in 1958, the well-known crisis that had forced

³⁶⁵ Marina Ottaway and Julia Choucrair-Vizoso, *Beyond the Facade: Political Reform in the Arab World*, (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), 50.

³⁶⁶ Memorandum from Macomber to Rusk, April 21, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 125, Jordan, General, 4-63.

³⁶⁷ April R. Summitt, "For a White Revolution: John F. Kennedy and the Shah of Iran", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (autumn, 2004), 569.

³⁶⁸ In 1957, Edwin W. Pauley, an American businessman and founder of the Petrol Corp., obtained concessions to drill holes in Jordan. Geologists however reported that no traces of oil could be found. However, many in the Jordanian government believed that US businessmen were deliberately not finding oil in Jordan in order to keep Hussein's regime in a "permanent state of dependence" on the West. Memorandum, "Jordanian Bid for Soviet Oil Exploration in Jordan". JFKL, NSF, Box 125A, Jordan, General, 11-62, 3-63.

³⁶⁹ Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara. January 26, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 4.

³⁷⁰ Memorandum, "Jordanian Bid for Soviet Oil Exploration in Jordan". JFKL, NSF, Box 125A, Jordan, General, 11-62, 3-63.

³⁷¹ "Jordan: Key to Stability". JFKL, President's Office Files, Box 119A, Israel, Briefing Book, Ben Gurion Visit, 1961.

³⁷² "Jordan: Guidelines of United States Policy and Operations". JFKL, NSF, Box 125, Jordan, General, 1-61, 3-62.

³⁷³ A detailed account of Jordan's policies during the early 1960s is provided by Shalom Zaki, *The Superpowers, Israel and the Future of Jordan, 1960-1963: The Perils of the Pro-Nasser Policy*, (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999).

Britain into direct intervention, and the Eisenhower administration to rely for the first time on the Middle East Resolution.

Just like Eisenhower, Kennedy had promptly acknowledged the importance of keeping Hussein in power. A paper prepared by the State Department, conveniently entitled “Jordan: Key to Stability”, clearly expressed the significance of Hussein’s survival for US strategies:

“Jordan is the key to the precarious stability which has been maintained in the Middle East for the past three years. Were something to happen to King Hussein either the surrounding Arab countries, or Israel, or both, might move in militarily to fill the vacuum.”³⁷⁴

The problem with Jordan was relatively straightforward. If Hussein’s regime was to fall, either Israel or some Arab state (most likely a Nasserite regime, given his popularity among the Palestinian population³⁷⁵) would try to take over and thus, wherever the first move came from, an Arab-Israeli war might be triggered. The main concern related to a possible Israeli pre-emptive action, an issue that would become more visible during the 1963 crisis. The administration feared that if Hussein fell, Israel would make a move to either prevent an Arab regime from taking over a country so near its doorstep, or to directly seize the West Bank. This would consequently set the basis for “acute area instability, including a possible renewal of Arab-Israel hostilities, and creation of conditions favourable to Soviet interference.”³⁷⁶ In the minds of the New Frontiersmen, Jordan was indeed a ‘key to stability’.

³⁷⁴ “Jordan: Key to Stability”. JFKL, President’s Office Files, Box 119A, Israel, Briefing Book, Ben Gurion Visit, 1961.

³⁷⁵ Betty S. Anderson, *Nationalist Voices in Jordan: The Street and the State*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 4.

³⁷⁶ “Guidelines of United States Policy and Operations Concerning Jordan”. JFKL, NSF, Box 125, Jordan, General, 1-61, 3-62.

Kennedy advocated joint US-UK budgetary support (1.6 million dollars on a five-year programme, and 0.7 million dollars allocated by Britain³⁷⁷) and assistance for economic development in order to permit “visible improvement in living standards”³⁷⁸, and he pledged Washington’s continued, but limited, military assistance, upon which Hussein’s survival largely relied.³⁷⁹ Much like in the case of Saudi Arabia, Komer noted, the key for the survival of the Hashemite regime lay in Hussein’s “effort to keep up with the times”³⁸⁰, and thus to embrace the path of development and modernization that could allow him to resist the “increasing domestic pressure”³⁸¹ fomented by Nasser’s propaganda. To achieve such an objective, the administration recommended the use of foreign grants to destine to economic development, the use of technical support to develop indigenous sources of income, to practice rigorous budgetary economy, as well as frequent bilateral consultations on any expense that might increase the budgetary deficit.³⁸² Furthermore, Washington pledged its support for the completion of certain local projects, such as the construction of the East Ghor Irrigation Project, and to provide surplus commodities under the Food for Peace scheme.³⁸³

³⁷⁷ “Note on Anglo-American Talks on Aid to Jordan, July 9, 10, 11, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 125A, Jordan, General, 4-62, 10-62.

³⁷⁸ *Ibidem*. Washington’s suggested to reshape Jordan’s Development Plan and concentrate on productive scheme that would allow the government to meet its balance of payments deficit.

³⁷⁹ “Guidelines of United States Policy and Operations Concerning Jordan”. JFKL, NSF, Box 125, Jordan, General, 1-61, 3-62.

³⁸⁰ Robert Komer, Memorandum for the President, February 12, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 156A, Saudi Arabia, General, 2-1-62, 2-19-62

³⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

³⁸² “Guidelines of United States Policy and Operations Concerning Jordan”. JFKL, NSF, Box 125, Jordan, General, 1-61, 3-62.

³⁸³ *Ibidem*.

Although puzzled by Kennedy's overall support of Egypt³⁸⁴, which the administration explained was designed to "gain a somewhat greater influence with President Nasser"³⁸⁵, and particularly concerned about the HAWK sale³⁸⁶, King Hussein's relationship with Kennedy remained in line with his overall friendship with the United States. However, by the time Hussein had reluctantly accepted Kennedy's decision to sell the HAWK missiles to Israel, the Yemen crisis exploded, dragging Jordan not only into the confrontation with Cairo, but also into a crisis that much resembled that of 1958.

Iran was somehow a different case. Separated from the Arab-Israeli tangle³⁸⁷, the authoritarian regime of the Shah suffered nonetheless the repercussions of Nasser's global popularity, as leader of the Arab world and of the non-aligned movement. Anti-imperialism, self-determination, progress and emancipation were concepts that, after the Bandung Conference in 1955, echoed through the streets of Tehran through Cairo's incessant propaganda³⁸⁸, provoking turmoil, social unrest and threatening the stability of a leader who would later be described by Kissinger in 1972 as one of America's closest allies.³⁸⁹ Because the Shah was corrupt, eccentric, and a dictatorial leader who

³⁸⁴ William M. Brubeck Memorandum for McGeorge Bundy, September 26, 1962. Ibidem. After a meeting at the White House in April 1963 between Shimon Peres and Kennedy, Peres flew back to Israel and leaked a comment to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* on his meeting with the American president: according to the Israeli deputy defense minister, Kennedy "would continue to support trends of unity in the Arab world". Salom, *The Superpowers, Israel and the Future of Jordan...*, 61. Promptly the White House told Hussein that "no credence should be given to a recent article in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*". Telegram From the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State, April 28, 1963 FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 226. Although the King expressed his gratitude for such a communication, the efficacy of the message was arguably very poor: during a meeting with the British ambassador, Hussein confessed his sense of frustration and isolation. Salom, *The Superpowers, Israel and the Future of Jordan...*, 62.

³⁸⁵ "US Policies towards the UAR". JFKL, NSF, Box 125A, Jordan, General, 4-62, 10-62.

³⁸⁶ Memorandum from William Macomber to Dean Rusk, December 23, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 125A, Jordan, General 11-62, 3-63.

³⁸⁷ As stated in the introduction, this work is centred around the Arab-Israeli dispute, and as such, touches only briefly upon the fascinating questions relating to the Kennedy administration's policy towards Iran. The purpose of this quick analysis is to explain the similarity between Kennedy's approach to Iran and to Saudi Arabia, one based on the promotion of modernization of the countries to stabilise them internally.

³⁸⁸ Memorandum from the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to McGeorge Bundy, June 21, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 304.

³⁸⁹ Little, *American Orientalism...*, 145.

disregarded his people and their needs³⁹⁰, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Kennedy administration was not particularly fond of the Iranian leader.³⁹¹ But two factors had made Iran a critical asset for the United States. The first one was oil. Iran's vast oil reserves and the economic partnership ensured by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was too important for both Britain and the United States to risk a repetition of the events of early 1950s, when the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) was nationalised. Secondly, Iran's geographic position, given its proximity to the Soviet Union, made the country a natural buffer-state against Moscow's ambitions in the region. If the Shah fell, CENTO would inexorably collapse. As Talbot reported in October 1961:

"To prevent Soviet domination of Iran must be our immediate and overriding objective. This requires the continuance in power of a pro-Western regime, for the ultimate alternative is a weak neutralist government which could not withstand Soviet pressures and maintain Iran's independence."³⁹²

However, as early as January 1961, the Joint Chiefs of Staff informed Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara that Iran was at risk and that "inflation and other economic difficulties, the so-far unsuccessful land reform program, Soviet propaganda and subversive efforts, and the long deferral of free elections"³⁹³ were likely to cause the Shah to be overthrown. Indeed, the situation in Iran was far worse than that for instance of Saudi Arabia: censorship, police abuses, suppression of personal liberties, economic recession and the Shah's inability to effectively tackle the social and economic issues afflicting his country, had provoked a wave of protests from the political opposition and other dissident elements. For instance, as early as May 1961, Kennedy was informed that 50,000 demonstrators had clashed with the army and security forces in Tehran, causing

³⁹⁰ Summitt, "For a White Revolution...", 562.

³⁹¹ McGlinchey, *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran...*, 26.

³⁹² Report by the Chairman of the Iran Task Force (Talbot) October 14, 1961 FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 127.

³⁹³ Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, January 26, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 4.

the prime minister and his cabinet to resign.³⁹⁴ Thus, as the Shah appointed a new prime minister, Ali Amini, Kennedy put together a task force designed to find a solution to the Iranian crisis.³⁹⁵ Among recommendations of a more military nature, the task force agreed that political and economic measures had to be adopted in order to “bolster the present Western-oriented government.”³⁹⁶ Significantly, and in line with his overall approach to the Middle Eastern monarchies, Kennedy subordinated the Shah’s request for more arms to the implementation of reforms: “Every time the Shah mentioned ‘more arms’, JFK’s response would be ‘more reforms’.”³⁹⁷

In early August however, a gloomy Komer reported to Kennedy that “the situation has gotten worse instead of better.”³⁹⁸ Amini, although regarded by the administration as Tehran’s best option, tried to implement a programme of reforms aimed at solving the economic crisis and tackling the social issues, but lacked political support, a strong cabinet, and the backing of the middle class. In addition, continued Komer, the National Front, “a disparate congeries of middle and left politicians”³⁹⁹, was seeking to topple the Amini government through demonstrations and calls for free elections. For his part, the Shah did not seem to care about reforms as much as he did about the need to boost his military through American aid. His “almost psychotic obsession”⁴⁰⁰ with the status of his army resulted in an almost complete lack of interest in Amini’s reforms, and in an

³⁹⁴ Editorial Note. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 41.

³⁹⁵ The task force included: Talbot and Ambassador Holmes as deputy. William Bundy represented the Defense Department’s International Security Affairs Office. Other members were: Maurice Williams from the International Cooperation Administration; Kenneth Hansen, assistant director of the Bureau of the Budget; William King from the US Information Agency; John Leddy from the Treasury; and Robert Komer of the National Security Council Staff. Names of CIA representatives are not included in Department of State files. Ibidem.

³⁹⁶ Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, May 17, 1961. Ibidem, 49.

³⁹⁷ Letter from President Johnson to the Shah of Iran, Washington, January 2, 1964. FRUS 1964-1968, Vol. XXII, *Iran*, 1, note 3.

³⁹⁸ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, August 4, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 93.

³⁹⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰⁰ Memorandum from the Administrator of the Agency for International Development (Hamilton) to the National Security Council, undated. Ibidem, 208.

increasing insistence on military aid. Although the administration was not particularly inclined to arm the Shah, rather wishing to see him support Amini and broaden his domestic consensus through social, political and economic reforms, Ambassador Holmes reported from Tehran that, should Kennedy decide not to accommodate the Shah, he might be moved to rely more heavily on oil revenues – “to the detriment of the country’s development programs”⁴⁰¹ – and perhaps make a step towards the Soviet Union. Although Kennedy and Komer were reluctant at the idea of granting more military aid to the Shah, Holmes’s memorandum touched the right spot in Washington: “is it worth the candle to threaten so directly our political position in this area by adopting recommendations based on theory and unaccompanied, as far as I can see, by careful evaluations of the political risks involved?”⁴⁰² Seeking to avoid such a scenario, and hoping to gain some leverage on the Shah, Kennedy agreed to send more arms to Iran, but told the embassy to inform the Shah: “this all the give we’ve got.”⁴⁰³ Kennedy urged the Shah to turn “toward real social-economic needs of Iran.”⁴⁰⁴ The similarity between Kennedy’s approach to Iran and Saudi Arabia is remarkable: the Kennedy administration advocated the need to promote socio-economic reforms (that might reasonably fall under the notion of “democratic reforms”⁴⁰⁵, as Kennedy told some Iranian diplomats during a meeting in March 1961) and pushed them to stabilise them, not through American arms, but mainly through internal reformist programmes.

However, back in Iran, the Shah continued to frustrate Amini’s efforts to implement reforms: the prime minister sought to reform the cabinet excluding corrupted officials, whom the Shah intended to protect; he sought to devote more funds to

⁴⁰¹ Letter from the Ambassador to Iran (Holmes) to Secretary of State Rusk, January 22, 1962. Ibidem, 172.

⁴⁰² Ibidem.

⁴⁰³ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran, September 18, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 43.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁰⁵ Memorandum of a Conversation, March 1, 1961. Ibidem, Vol. XVII, 17.

agricultural development and education by cutting the expenses of the military, to which the Shah was opposed; he sought to decentralize the government, but the Shah strengthened his grip on power.⁴⁰⁶ Exhausted by his confrontation with the Shah, in July 1962 Amini resigned, and Asadollah Alam became the new prime minister.

For the following months, the Kennedy administration watched the development of the Iranian situation carefully, and by late 1962, things appeared to be back to normality. Holmes reassured Washington that the Shah was finally taking measures to tackle the issues that had threatened his regime in the first place, and that he had started to design a programme of land reform that was “truly revolutionary.”⁴⁰⁷ With an aid package of nearly 100 million dollars per year granted by the Kennedy administration, the Shah had managed to retain control of the country and, through strong propaganda and the backing of the army, quiet down the dissident voices. Kennedy had managed to allow the Shah to gain some precious time “required for necessary reforms, and socio/economic progress”⁴⁰⁸ which would be encapsulated in the so called “White Revolution”.

The “White Revolution”, which mainly consisted of land redistribution necessary for the modernization of the country (and thus was fully supported by the people⁴⁰⁹), also included measures such as anti-corruption campaigns, decentralization of government functions, privatization of some factories owned by the government and profit sharing plans for workers.⁴¹⁰ By adopting such programmes, at Kennedy’s insistence, the Shah survived, although only temporarily, the crisis which occurred during the Kennedy years. With the Shah firmly back in power, the Kennedy administration turned its attention

⁴⁰⁶ Summitt, *For a White Revolution...*, 567.

⁴⁰⁷ Memorandum for the Record, November 5, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 93.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁰⁹ Summitt, *For a White Revolution...*, 569.

⁴¹⁰ Ibidem.

elsewhere, particularly to the crisis that was taking the Arab world by storm after the events of Yemen in September 1962.

With regards to Iran, it is unquestionable that Kennedy's strategies had managed to stabilise, although only temporarily, the Shah's regime, thus paving the way for Iran's future as regional proxy. For better or worse, the Kennedy administration had accepted the "White Revolution" as a sufficient manoeuvre to avoid a communist takeover in Tehran. The short-term benefit of having the Shah firmly in power to avoid a communist infiltration, overcame in the minds of the New Frontiersmen the need to find a balance between the impulse towards modernization and the more conservative forces in Iran.

However, the reforms soon appeared designed to gain support among the lower-classes rather than genuinely reforming Iranian society through the redistribution of wealth⁴¹¹, and they soon backfired. The most conservative Islamist forces in the country considered the Shah's "White Revolution" an immorality prompted by the West that sacrificed the true Islamic values of their country⁴¹², and in the summer of 1963 they began to fuel protests against the Shah, who crushed them violently. The Kennedy administration did not pay much attention to this development, the true consequences of which would become obvious in 1979, perceiving it as a confined event caused by a few fanatics, "bazaar employees, South Tehran gangsters and riffraff, and many unemployed."⁴¹³

For the purpose of this analysis, it is significant to stress however that, unlike the case of Saudi Arabia where Kennedy never subscribed to the idea of using Riyadh as one of Washington's regional agents but only to secure access to the oilfields, the geo-strategic importance of Iran was the driving force behind the administration's efforts to

⁴¹¹ McGlinchey, *US Arms Policies Towards...*, 32.

⁴¹² Summitt, *For a White Revolution...*, 570.

⁴¹³ Telegram from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, June 24, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 279.

rescue the Shah. But the parallels between the case of Saudi Arabia and that of Iran are easily drawn. After all, Komer himself had tried to stimulate Faysal to adopt reforms in Saudi Arabia by suggesting the comparison with Tehran: “We think Saudi future will hinge most... on the extent Faysal succeeds in reform and modernization at home. Look how Shah of Iran greatly strengthened his regime in just this way.”⁴¹⁴

Kennedy, Macmillan and the changing of the guard

By the time Kennedy accessed the White House, US policy-makers had long acknowledged the importance of taking the reins of the Western policies in the Middle East. The gradual collapse of the former European empires convinced the Eisenhower administration “that the United States must make its presence more strongly felt in the area”⁴¹⁵, and although Washington tried to reassure the British and French government that its policies “were not designed to replace them”⁴¹⁶, after the Suez crisis and the adoption of the Middle East Resolution, the United States became in effect the principal Western actor in the region.

Kennedy too acknowledged the new American role in the region: “The Persian oil crisis, the Israeli war for independence, the British evacuation from the Suez area”, he wrote in 1957, “these and other events marked a recession of British influence from the Middle East and a sudden pressure for American intervention.”⁴¹⁷ Much like during the Eisenhower years, Kennedy’s presidency reflected Britain’s decline and its inability to significantly influence the American plans: Washington pursued its Cold War strategies

⁴¹⁴ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, October 7, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box157A Saudi Arabia, General 9-63, 11-63.

⁴¹⁵ Memorandum of a Conversation between the Secretary of State and Senator William F. Knowland, December 8, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XII, 167.

⁴¹⁶ Memorandum of a Conversation, February 6, 1957. Ibidem, Vol. XIII, 136.

⁴¹⁷ Kennedy, *A Democrat Looks...*

centred upon the rapprochement with the Egyptian leader, and London remained more attentive towards certain specific regional interests.

The centrality of Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Nasser for the US Mideast strategies is largely reflected in the relationship that developed between Kennedy and Macmillan in the period between 1961 and 1963. Indeed, even though on a larger scale the alliance between the United States and Britain and the coincidence of their strategic and economic interests in the region remained unaltered, the divergence between the two governments over the Yemen crisis, the proxy war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia exploded in September 1962, is testament to two key aspects of the relationship between the US and Britain during the Kennedy years.

First, it illustrates the different priorities between London and Washington, the former still anchored to a system of alliance based on the support of the traditional, Western-oriented Arab monarchies, the latter committed to the pursuit of a different path based on rapprochement with Nasser, and to supporting progressive, neutralist Arab regimes. Second, it shows that despite the insistence of the Macmillan government, Kennedy did not alter his policy towards Nasser, who was perceived by the administration as the key to a more stable Middle East even during the crisis. Withstanding London's pleas to withhold the recognition of Sallal's Yemen Arab Republic, Kennedy pursued his strategy confident that his manoeuvres could allow Washington to gain leverage against Cairo's foreign policy and prevent an exacerbation of hostilities. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*, Barrett argues that Kennedy often found himself compelled to change his foreign policy in the Middle East because of British influence.⁴¹⁸ The analysis of the Kennedy-Macmillan debate over Yemen proves the very opposite.

⁴¹⁸ Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 5.

Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963, was well aware of the strategic importance of Aden, the little seaport city in the south of Yemen overlooking the Aden Gulf, which had been a British protectorate for over a century.⁴¹⁹ After the tragic events of Suez, the city became in fact a sort of British last stand in the Middle East, a key intervention post for the defence of the Persian Gulf's oil, and a fundamental staging area for routes to the Far East.⁴²⁰ Given that the anti-Imamate rebels were both inspired and supported by Nasser - whose ability to get on British nerves was renowned since the events of 1956 - following the coup, Macmillan immediately made clear the implications of the crisis: "If things go wrong, we may be faced with the loss of Aden and therefore of the Gulf... Nasser may be intervening openly."⁴²¹ Unable to trust the new regime in Yemen, Britain supported the royalist faction despite Kennedy's opposite recommendation, never managing however to play a significant role in helping to define or even simply influence the American strategies designed to deal with the crisis. The evolution of the Yemen affair, and the different approaches adopted by Washington and London, eventually caused the two allies to drift apart, and the two leaders to question each other's competency, bringing back frightening memories of the Suez crisis, the emblem of the divergence of the two governments.

In early October 1962, Komer informed Kennedy that London had an "acute concern"⁴²² over the Nasserist regime in Yemen, because it feared it could constitute a threat to its protectorate in Aden. Indeed, during a Cabinet meeting that occurred on October 9, 1962, Macmillan acknowledged that even though the development of an actual

⁴¹⁹ Robert McNamara, *Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power in the Middle East, 1952-1967: From the Egyptian Revolution to the Six-Days War*, (London, Portland; Frank Cass Publisher, 2003), 175.

⁴²⁰ R.J. Gavin, *Aden Under the British Rule: 1839-1967*, (London; C. Hurst & Co., 1975), 344.

⁴²¹ Macmillan to Thorneycroft, *PREM 11/3877*, October 6, 1962.

⁴²² Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, October 4, 1962. *FRUS 1961-1963*, Vol. XVIII, 68.

civil war between republicans and royalists would be “politically repugnant”⁴²³, the news of the Egyptian troops being deployed in Yemen left no alternatives other than covertly supporting Prince Hassan to re-establish the Imamate against the republicans.⁴²⁴

However, on October 12, John Badeau was informed that the UAR Ambassador in Washington, Yusuf Haikal, had met just the day before with the British ambassador in Egypt, Sir Harold Beeley, extending the following communication: “President Nasser wished [to] assure Her Majesty’s Government he did not intend any damage to British position [in] Aden.”⁴²⁵ In light of this communication, and in consideration of Kennedy’s willingness to maintain close ties with Nasser, the Cabinet started to take into account a possible recognition of the Nasserite regime in Yemen:

“It would be necessary to watch the situation as it developed from day to day so that recognition would be timed to take place after the ground had been sufficiently prepared by talks with the Rulers, but would not be so delayed that our relations with the republican Government in the Yemen would be damaged.”⁴²⁶

During December 1962, as the debate between the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office over the issue of recognition divided the government in London⁴²⁷, Macmillan asked Kennedy to get on the phone on a secure line to discuss Yemen, promptly confessing that the crisis was “a very difficult dilemma” because, he explained, Britain’s troubles lay with “the protectorate and the colony.”⁴²⁸ As Komer recalled, Macmillan

⁴²³ Minutes of Cabinet Meeting, *CAB 128-36*, October 9, 1962, 419.

⁴²⁴ Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot) to Secretary of State Rusk, October 9, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 76.

⁴²⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, October 10, 1962. *Ibidem*, 77.

⁴²⁶ Cabinet Meeting, *CAB 128-36*, October 23, 1962, 436.

⁴²⁷ The Colonial office pointed out three reasons to oppose recognition: “I- Recognition may seem to have been forced on Her Majesty’s Government by the Americans and may discourage the rulers and sheiks in the Protectorate, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and the Gulf, who... will be tempted to join the stronger side; II- The fact that recognition may make it harder to give countenance still more assistance to Royalists attempts to overthrow Sallal; III- It may make diplomatic relations with the Saudis impossible. Prime Minister Office to Foreign Office, *CO 1015/2153*, December 12, 1962. Conversely, the Foreign Office offered another perspective: “1- It will enable the United Kingdom to maintain a mission in Taiz. This might give... a better chance of influencing the new regime in our favour... 2- Recognition may discourage the Yemen regime from devoting particular attention to subversion in Aden as opposed to attacking Saudi Arabia”. *Ibidem*.

⁴²⁸ Foreign Office to Washington. *PREM 11/3878*, November 15, 1962.

gave Kennedy “some big song and dance”.⁴²⁹ After a while, since Macmillan was repeating the same things over and over again Kennedy told him: “You and I seem to be going around in circles. I’ve got my Yemen expert here... he’ll explain to you why we don’t think delay is such a good idea.”⁴³⁰ The prime minister, while discomforted by Kennedy’s impassibility, eventually agreed to speak to Komer, who promptly explained: “The trouble is that Nasser is not going to get out until he wins because he knows he is ahead. So we have to get the Saudis and the Jordanians out as the condition of getting Nasser out.”⁴³¹ Komer added that part of the plan was “to recognise and then convince the Saudis and the Jordanians that they are backing the losing side.”⁴³² But Macmillan maintained his scepticism: “I was just wondering whether in the modern world it would be better for all parties to say that they will not intervene”, he stated, and Komer replied: “Nasser will not move until the other two have moved. We cannot get him to move first.”⁴³³ The prime minister again expressed his concern over Aden when he clearly said “I am afraid that your recognition will depress the people in Aden”, but Komer had nothing better to offer in reply than a “Yes. We recognize this is a risk”.⁴³⁴ Acknowledging Kennedy’s firm position over the issue, Macmillan reported in his diary: “The situation in Yemen... is developing very badly for us. If the new revolutionary government is established, the pressure on the Aden Protectorate and then on the Aden Colony and Base will be very dangerous”.⁴³⁵

Kennedy urged Macmillan to “play it smart”⁴³⁶, and thus to recognise the YAR in order to maintain some leverage over Nasser, but the British prime minister begged to

⁴²⁹ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 17.

⁴³⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴³¹ Foreign Office to Washington, *PREM 11/3878*, November 15, 1962.

⁴³² *Ibidem*.

⁴³³ *Ibidem*.

⁴³⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴³⁵ Harold Macmillan, *The Macmillan Diaries: Prime Minister and After, 1957-1966*, Ed. Peter Catterall (London, Basingstoke, Oxford; Macmillan Publisher Limited, 2011), 503.

⁴³⁶ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 17.

differ: “The danger seems to be that if you play your cards... in exchange for mere words, you may lose all power to influence events”⁴³⁷, he told the president on November 14, 1962. “You apparently feel that to keep it going as long as possible is not adverse to our interest”⁴³⁸, Kennedy replied the following day, “But we are convinced that... a Republican victory is inevitable.” He explained to Macmillan that “Nasser is so committed to victory in Yemen that he will do whatever is necessary to assure it.”⁴³⁹

However, Kennedy failed to convince Macmillan. On November 15, 1962, the British prime minister wrote “Sir Charles Johnston, who is Governor in Aden... has reported very strongly that recognition... would spread consternation among our friends throughout Arabia”, and concluded by saying “So I am quite convinced that we should not give recognition in exchange for mere words.”⁴⁴⁰ Finally, when in early February 1963 the YAR communicated its decision to close the British Legation in Taiz by

⁴³⁷ Foreign Office to Washington, *PREM11/3878*, November 14, 1962.

⁴³⁸ Ibidem, November 16, 1962.

⁴³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁴⁰ Foreign Office to Washington, *PREM11/3878*, November 15, 1962. A very interesting memorandum sent from the Foreign Office to the British embassy in Cairo later in April 1963, was entitled “British Policy towards President Nasser, ‘Nasserism’ and Arab Nationalism”, and it illustrated quite clearly the Foreign Office’s position on such an important issue. It was written that Nasser, through his propaganda and subversion, had managed to put the entire Middle East in ferment, promoting principles and ideas against the traditional regimes, generally friends with the West. “Two contrary views have been expressed about the degree of danger to British interests represented by Egyptians activity”, continued the memorandum, “One view is that Nasser is incorrigibly and actively hostile to British interests... According to this view our policy should be to adopt a robust anti-Nasser position...The other view is that... he is more concerned at present with building up his own influence...he will do to our interests harm” should London “adopt a policy of hostility towards Nasser”. Foreign Office to Cairo, *FO 1110/1631*, April 17, 1963. The Foreign Office concluded that “the second view is better founded”. Ibidem. “The image we want to adopt in the Arab world is one of benevolent non-interference”, continued Lord Home, but also one of “readiness to oppose Egyptian subversion in territories with which we are directly concerned”. Ibidem. “I think we can welcome the way in which on most points the United States Government have handled matters in the last few years”, he concluded, adding finally that the two government’s policies “are co-ordinated and each properly understood by the other”. Ibidem. As discussed above though, such a position, while giving proof of an evident agreement with Kennedy’s overall policy towards Nasser and the Middle East, was not shared by the Colonial Office, which was quite influential in the decision to withhold the recognition. Undoubtedly, Macmillan had to in mind the voices of those officials who did not wish to see the British government granting the recognition. On February 15, 1963, the Aden Governor, Johnston, sent to British prime minister a clear message: “From the point of view of our strategic interest in Aden, which is what matters to us here, the essential requirement is to have a regime in the Yemen which is reasonably friendly and reasonably stable. As regards friendliness, there can be no doubt that the prospects are better if the Royalists win”. Aden to Prime Minister Office, *PREM 11/4357*, February 15, 1963.

February 17⁴⁴¹, Macmillan was offered the perfect opportunity to escape Washington's pressure:

"As you probably know we have now received a message from Taiz to say that the President of the Yemen requires our legation to leave... As you know, we have been very torn between the benefits, of which you are very conscious, of our recognising the Republican regime and being able to have a man in Taiz and the serious difficulties which recognitions seemed likely to make for our friends in Aden"⁴⁴²

With some sense of relief, Macmillan concluded: "But as I say, the Yemeni Republicans have now got impatient and so we shall just have to accept this situation for the time being."⁴⁴³

Macmillan never recognised the Yemen Arab Republic. On October 9, 1963 he resigned from the role of prime minister, disappearing from the scene just one month before Kennedy's assassination. Ironically enough, Britain would completely evacuate Aden just four years later, on November 30, 1967, in light of a massive review of its foreign policy brought about by Prime Minister Harold Wilson.⁴⁴⁴

The diplomacy that occurred between Washington and London over the Yemen crisis reveals a critical aspect of the Kennedy years: the decreasing role of Britain in the confrontation of superpowers in the Middle East, and the independence of the White House's thinking from the Whitehall's concerns. With the decline brought to light by the 1956 great embarrassment over Suez, by late 1962 the government in London found itself once again at odds with Washington's policy-makers, and unable to change the course of

⁴⁴¹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, February 12, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 156.

⁴⁴² Macmillan to Kennedy, *PREM 11/4357*, February 15, 1963.

⁴⁴³ Ibidem. The Cabinet meeting that took place on February 14, 1963, confirmed the finality of the British position: "It would not now be possible to recognise the republican regime, at least in the short-term", regretted the foreign secretary, suggesting by way of validation for the British refusal that the Republicans were not yet fully in control of the country, and still depended very much on Nasser's help. Cabinet Meeting Minutes, *CAB 128-37*, February 14, 1963, 3.

⁴⁴⁴ According to Jeffrey Macris, the British decision to abandon Aden left a vacuum that Nasser did not fail to fill, perceiving the British withdrawal as another victory for his pan-Arabist quest. Jeffrey R. Macris, *The Policy and Security of the Gulf: Anglo- American Hegemony and the Shaping of a Region*, (London, New York; Routledge, 2010), 137.

US foreign policy in the Middle East. It is interesting to note that the first Arab crisis in the Middle East during the Kennedy years, caused by Iraq's claim over oil-rich Kuwait in the summer of 1961⁴⁴⁵, saw an almost exclusive collaboration within the UN between London and the UAR, when Nasser expressed his willingness to support Kuwait's entry into the United Nations and the Arab League, and even to meet Kuwait's request for troops to deter Qasim from making a move in their country.⁴⁴⁶ But during the Kuwait crisis, everyone's interests coincided. Nasser and the other Arab countries were not willing to accept Qasim's expansionism, Britain wished to preserve its interests in the Kuwaiti oilfields and even Kennedy had been assured that "the UAR had come out flatfooted for Kuwait's independence."⁴⁴⁷ But when interests did not coincide, as for example in the case of the Yemen crisis, things fell apart. Nasser and Macmillan renewed their hostilities, albeit indirectly, and Britain and the United States realised that they were pursuing different strategies after all.

Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Nasser prevailed eventually over the ambitions of the former European colonial power, but this should hardly come as a surprise. Indeed, Nasser was not only the leader of the Arab world, but a leader among the neutralist countries, and Kennedy was committed to enhancing American prestige among the Third World countries, even if that meant displeasing traditional allies. After all, one of Kennedy's most famous speeches as a senator was aimed squarely at the French ambitions in Algeria:

"US retreat from the principles of independence and anti-colonialism has damaged our standing in the eyes of the free world, our leadership in the fight to keep the

⁴⁴⁵ When on June 19, 1961 the Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty of 1899 terminated, therefore making Kuwait an independent state, Qasim announced his claim over Kuwait as "an indivisible part of Iraq." Memorandum from Robert B. Elwood of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research to the Director of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs (Strong), June 26, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 66.

⁴⁴⁶ Robert McNamara, *Britain, Nasser and the Balance...*, 162. McNamara also suggests that Kennedy had managed to improve the relationship between Washington and Cairo to such extent that London was "carried along in the slipstream." Ibidem, 203.

⁴⁴⁷ Memorandum of a conversation, June 29, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 71.

world free. Perhaps is already too late to save the West from the total catastrophe in Algeria, but we dare not fail to make the effort”⁴⁴⁸

Although Yemen was not Algeria, it is nonetheless significant evidence of Kennedy’s priorities in his foreign policy agenda. Unwilling to jeopardise his strategy of enhancing US prestige among the Arab and Third World countries, Kennedy eventually chose Nasser over Macmillan, further contributing to the decline of British influence in the region.

Indeed, an insurmountable divergence between Washington and London emerged, emblematic of the US new approach to the Middle East and of the inevitable changing of the guard in the region. While Kennedy saw Nasser as the key for his Cold War objectives in the region, Macmillan was still anchored to a rather inflexible opinion among the British government’s policy-makers: “For Nasser put Hitler and it all rings familiar.”⁴⁴⁹

Of course, it was the very collapse of the European colonial powers, and the rise of the nationalist movements across the Third World, to prompt the shift in the American foreign policy in the Middle East. The Kennedy administration saw slim chances to contain communism if Washington opposed to the reformist ambitions of the Arab population, and disregarded the nationalist voice of the Egyptian government. The goals of subduing the Arabs’ hostility towards the West, and of building up neutralism as an alternative to communism, guided the Kennedy administration’s policies through a delicate and ambitious diplomatic effort based on courting Nasser while keeping the other regional actors in check, and on protecting the Western economic interests while abating the charges of ‘Western imperialism’. By mid-1962, the Kennedy administration

⁴⁴⁸ “Foreign Relations: Burned Hands Across the Sea,” *Time Magazine*, July 15, 1957.

⁴⁴⁹ Macmillan, *The Macmillan Diaries...*, 538. The US and British position also diverged on Israel, particularly over the issue of the HAWK sale. While the Kennedy administration, as will be seen in Chapter 4, thought that the sale of the HAWK could contain Israel’s active defence, Britain feared that Washington’s decision depended mainly on “a domestic political situation in [the] US rather than overall Western interests in [the] Near East.” Telegram from Cairo to the Secretary of State, September 20, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 119, Israel, General, 9-6-62, 9-21-62.

succeeded in its attempt of fostering a working relationship with Nasser, and taking advantage of the propitious moment, it even attempted a mediation over the refugee issue. But by late 1962, the White House would come to term with the limits and problems involved in its attempt to keep Arab nationalists, Israel, and the Arab monarchies, in the balance.

Chapter 3. Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Nasser

Devil in disguise

Although Kennedy's Mideast policy is mainly regarded in relation to the making of the special friendship with Israel, it was the rapprochement with Nasser's Egypt that constituted the core of the New Frontiersmen's foreign policy in the Middle East and that dictated the general posture that the American government would keep in the region during the Kennedy years. Indeed, arguably most of the administration's policies in the Middle East were set in the context of its strategy of establishing a working, friendly relationship with Nasser. For instance, the enhancement of Israel's security was dictated by the need to forestall possible pre-emptive attacks that Kennedy's pro-Nasser policy could instigate the Ben Gurion government to launch.⁴⁵⁰ Likewise, Kennedy's strategies towards Riyadh found their roots in the administration's attempts to secure the US economic partnership with the Saudi royal family, which, as noted earlier, could be threatened by the Nasserite progressive propaganda against the traditional Arab regimes.⁴⁵¹

Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East has thus to be examined in the larger context of the policy of rapprochement with Nasser, which constituted the real driving force behind certain historical decisions such as the HAWK sale or the HARD SURFACE operation, or even less famous ones, such as the recognition of the Yemen Arab Republic or the White House's attempt to push the Arab monarchies to embrace programmes of

⁴⁵⁰ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, June 1, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 6-62.

⁴⁵¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, February 12, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 156A, Saudi Arabia, General, 2-1-62, 2-19-62

development and modernization. For this reason, it would be a mistake to interpret Kennedy's even-handedness as merely an attempt to "support any friend" in the region.

It is significant to note that, contrary to Warren Bass's argument, Kennedy did not seek to establish friendly ties with both Nasser and his nemeses, Saudi Prince Faysal and Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion, with the hopes of gaining more Cold War options.⁴⁵² Kennedy's even-handedness rested largely on the administration's attempt to allow itself time to carry out its rapprochement with Nasser, without putting in jeopardy its economic interests in Saudi Arabia, or provoking Israel into pre-emptive attacks against the Arab nationalists. Even if the final result of Kennedy's policies in the Middle East was indeed closer ties with both Ben Gurion and Faysal, this work argues that such a result was largely unintentional.

As noted previously, in the minds of the New Frontiersmen, the Cold War confrontation in the Middle East gravitated around the challenges with the Arab nationalists, and there was clear reasoning behind such firm beliefs. Kennedy had learned from Eisenhower that a policy of hostility towards Nasser would be detrimental to US interests in the region, because not only would it alienate the Arab population (Eisenhower's 1958 conversation with Nixon about the "people's campaign of hatred against the United States" speaks for itself) but it would also push the Arab nationalists into the welcoming arms of the Soviets. As noted earlier, Eisenhower's refusal to provide Egypt with weapons after the 1955 Israeli raid in Gaza, brought the Egyptian leader to sign the historic arms deal with Czechoslovakia, opening the road for Moscow's future arms sales to the Arab nationalists.⁴⁵³ The new administration blamed the old one for

⁴⁵² Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 12.

⁴⁵³ In the period between 1953 and 1961, the Soviet Union sold nearly 3000 weapons to Egypt alone, including guns, radars, tanks, aircraft, helicopters and submarine, for a total of over 500 million dollars. Similar arms sales were made to Syria, which received nearly 1000 weapons, and Iraq, with nearly 1500, for a total of over 200 million dollars each. "Arms Transfers Database", *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 1953-1961. See also Robbin F. Laird, "Soviet Arms Trade with the Non-communist

having pushed Nasser towards the Soviet Union by closing the doors to any collaboration with Cairo on the assumptions that Nasser was a “Soviet stooge”⁴⁵⁴ and that Arab nationalism was nothing more than a first step towards communism, and Kennedy thus sought to correct such a misguided posture by supporting and feeding Arab nationalism in order to guide it in a direction that could serve US interests.⁴⁵⁵

There were several reasons behind the administration’s belief that establishing a working relationship with the Arab nationalists would be beneficial to Washington’s interests in the Middle East. Firstly, because it would offer Nasser an alternative to his dependence on Moscow, and would thus reduce the Soviet Union’s influence in the region. The Czech arms deal and the Aswan Dam controversy were, in the minds of the New Frontiersmen, clear indications of the need to avoid leaving the Cairo government with no other options than the Soviet Union. As Komer pointed out in early January 1962, “Egypt’s economic troubles are such that if we do not help her she will almost be forced to turn even more to Moscow.”⁴⁵⁶ Secondly, because by embracing the Arab nationalists’ desire for emancipation, self-determination and modernization, Kennedy hoped he could enhance US prestige among the Arab population and reduce that of the Soviet Union. As a report from 1956 had illustrated, the Soviet position was considerably enhanced among the Arab people because Moscow “appeared as the defender of the sovereignty of small countries and of Arab nationalism against the threats of Western “Imperialism”.”⁴⁵⁷ Nasser was the leader of the Arab people, especially after his “victory” during the Suez crisis, and by establishing a working relationship with him Kennedy hoped to foster pro-

Third World”, *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, Vol. XXXV, No. 3, The Soviet Union in the 1980s (1984), 202.

⁴⁵⁴ McGeorge Bundy, *OHI*, March, 1964, 71

⁴⁵⁵ Robert Komer, *OHI*, June 18, 1964, 3.

⁴⁵⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 23, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 173.

⁴⁵⁷ Operations Coordinating Board Report, December 22, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XII, 178.

American sentiments among the Arab population as well. After all, in 1958 Eisenhower himself had concluded, rather too late, that the people were with Nasser.⁴⁵⁸ Thirdly, Kennedy hoped that by gaining leverage on Nasser, he could prevent Cairo's foreign policy from causing troubles with its Arab neighbours or with Israel.⁴⁵⁹ As noted earlier, Eisenhower's opposition to Nasser ended up alienating the Arab world and fuelling the struggle between the old-fashioned, Western-aligned monarchies and the progressive, nationalist ambitions of the Arab people, which resulted in a series of crises that in 1958 hit Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, and which Kennedy was determined to avoid.⁴⁶⁰ Finally, on a more global scale, Kennedy hoped to overturn the perceptions that the Third World countries belonging to the non-aligned movement had of the United States, in the hopes, as noted earlier, of gaining pro-US votes in international disputes, such as Berlin or the Nuclear Ban Treaty. The administration was aware that there were little chances of bringing Nasser directly "into the Western camp"⁴⁶¹ but, seeing the Egyptian leader as the centre of gravity in the region, it hoped that by establishing a working relationship with Egypt, it could reduce his dependence from the USSR, effectively build up neutralism in the region and thus reduce the Soviet influence, and steer the region towards a Western-friendly, moderate course that would not endanger US interests.⁴⁶²

During the short Kennedy presidency, the relations between the two countries improved exponentially. They benefited from Washington's programmes of assistance, mainly through the economic aid provided by the PL-480, and Kennedy's personal diplomacy with Nasser, but gradually collapsed over the Yemen affair, an event that

⁴⁵⁸ Memorandum of a Conversation between the President and the Vice President (Nixon), July 15, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XI, 139.

⁴⁵⁹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

⁴⁶⁰ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, August 20, 1966, 398.

⁴⁶¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Walt Rostow, June 30, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 74.

⁴⁶² Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

showed the unpredictability of the Egyptian leader and the limits of Washington's capability to manoeuvre the big players in the Middle East. The administration lost its bet on Nasser, and Nasser lost contact with the most accommodating American president he had ever dealt with, marking a bitter ending to his relationship with the United States. As a matter of fact, L.B. Johnson would not be a new Kennedy to the government in Cairo.

In general, the strategy of rapprochement with Egypt was based on the need to "get back on a better footing with the key actor of the Arab world"⁴⁶³, and so to steer the forces of Arab nationalism away from Moscow and possibly towards the Western world, by inculcating "a respect for Western culture"⁴⁶⁴ that could in the long-term prevent the spreading of communist ideology. "Given the undoubted geo-political importance UAR", reads an action memoranda of October 1961, "it appears obvious that we must continue to do business with Nasser and the UAR, and make the best of it."⁴⁶⁵ Such an approach, while inspired by Eisenhower's 1958 NSC 5820/1, found in Kennedy an innovative spokesman who regarded Nasser as the Mr Big of the Arab world, Arab nationalism as an unstoppable force capable of re-writing the geopolitical map⁴⁶⁶ and the US-sponsored development of Arab countries as a strategically vital step to undertake in order to defeat the Soviet Union in the Middle East. Kennedy broke with the traditional US stand in the region of supporting the Arab monarchies over the Arab nationalists, and gave priority to those progressive regimes that, as noted above, could better serve the US Cold War strategies in the Middle East. Indeed, while some in the administration, such as Hart, Macomber, and Feldman, as well as other officers in the State Department and the CIA⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶³ Robert Komer, *OHI*, June 18, 1964, 2.

⁴⁶⁴ "Guideline of United States policy and operations toward the United Arab Republic". JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 3-62, 5-62.

⁴⁶⁵ Memorandum from L.D. Battle to McGeorge Bundy, October 16, 1961. JFKL, NSF, Box 332, Policy towards Egypt and Syria, 10-16-61.

⁴⁶⁶ Kennedy, *A Democrat looks...*, 44

⁴⁶⁷ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969.

believed that “the fragmentation of the Arabs after World War I”⁴⁶⁸ had become so deep that it was impossible to avoid the tumbling of one regime after another despite the promotion of economic development, Kennedy embraced the theory that “a general consolidation of the Arab world was in process” and that Egypt was going to be “the force of attraction” of the entire Arab world.⁴⁶⁹ Thus, by fostering a working relationship with the Cairo government, the Kennedy administration hoped to gain pro-American sentiments across the region to the detriment of the Soviet Union.

The centrality that the Kennedy administration attributed to Nasser was such that all the other actors in the Middle East, or those involved with its affairs, were regarded and dealt with in relation to Washington’s policy of rapprochement with Cairo: “France will be most unhappy, and even UK and Turkey may need convincing. Such anti-Nasser clients as Jordanians and Saudis will also need a lot of reassuring as our plans become clearer”⁴⁷⁰, confessed Komer in January 1962, also pointing out, under Feldman’s advice, “the importance of parallel gestures toward Israel.”⁴⁷¹ Komer’s reflection is testament to the true nature of Kennedy’s even-handed approach in the Middle East. Kennedy made sure that for every kindness towards Nasser similar gestures to the other Mideast actors would follow, but there was a clear strategic objective behind this. Indeed, Kennedy’s even-handedness should not be interpreted as an attempt to merely support any friend in the region, but as a strategy designed to foster a new, working relationship with Cairo, while simultaneously restraining the other actors from taking actions that could put in jeopardy the policy of rapprochement with Nasser. As expressed in a document entitled “Guidelines of United States policy and operation toward the United Arab Republic”:

⁴⁶⁸ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 970, 29.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 28.

⁴⁷⁰ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR General, 1-62, 2-62.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

“We seek to turn the energies of the UAR government to programs of internal development with benefit to the peace and tranquillity of the area... The UAR needs (a) strong US able to offset Soviet power and to restrain Israel and other enemies from attacking Egypt, and (b) US assistance in modernizing its economy and feeding its people. The US should continue efforts to emphasize those areas where mutually beneficial cooperation with the UAR is possible, notably in Food for Peace, social development, economic development and cultural exchanges... efforts to inculcate a respect for Western culture is of prime importance.”⁴⁷²

As noted earlier, the new approach that the administration developed was largely influenced by the regrettable experience of the Eisenhower years. Eisenhower’s refusal to provide military aid to Cairo led to the 1955 arms deal with Czechoslovakia. The withdrawal of the funding for the Aswan Dam led to the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and to Britain, France and Israel’s tripartite invasion of Egypt. The opposition to Arab nationalism led to the crystallisation of anti-American sentiments across the region, the enhancement of Soviet prestige and the 1958 wave of nationalism against the Western-oriented Arab monarchies. Although NSC 5820/1 was designed to correct the American strategies by showing support to the Arab nationalists, by late 1958 the relationship between the Cairo government and the White House was so strained that it had become impossible for Eisenhower to repair nearly six years of misguided policies.

Kennedy subscribed to the key points of NSC 5820/1, such as the need to develop a working relationship with Nasser, to sponsor a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute and to promote social and economic development in the Middle East⁴⁷³, and he combined these goals with economic aid provided by the PL-480, his skilful personal diplomacy with Nasser and his general support to the Arab nationalists’ cause, the three main pillars of his rapprochement with Cairo. Eager to steer Arab nationalism away from the Soviet Union in order to respond to more general Cold War objectives, Kennedy also hoped that establishing a working relationship with the Egyptian leader would allow the

⁴⁷² “Guidelines of United States policy and operation toward the United Arab Republic”. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 3-62, 5-62.

⁴⁷³ National Security Council Report, November 4, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XII, 51.

administration to gain some leverage on his foreign policy, restrain him from foreign adventures and thus create a more stable Middle East, that would safeguard the Western economic interests and shield the region from the communist influence.

Although the relationship between Washington and Cairo ended on a bitter note over the Yemen affair, Kennedy had the merit of being the “first American President who really understood the nationalist revolution and the revolution of modernization in the underdeveloped areas”, and of keeping the Yemen crisis from becoming a major emergency despite the multitude of actors involved and conflicting interests at stake.⁴⁷⁴ Although his premature death prevents a full assessment of the long-term effectiveness of his policies towards Nasser, the Kennedy administration had effectively managed to keep a certain balance in the Middle East while simultaneously accomplishing its Cold War objective of developing an enduring rapprochement with Cairo.

It would be a mistake to interpret Kennedy’s policies towards Israel and Saudi Arabia as an attempt to shift the administration’s focus onto more trustworthy allies during Nasser’s adventure in Yemen, as argued by Bass.⁴⁷⁵ By late 1963 the administration still believed it could exercise a positive influence on the Egyptian leader’s foreign policy. Kennedy sided with Nasser until the New Frontier was “criticized both at home and abroad”⁴⁷⁶ and blocked through Gruening amendment by a Congress unable to fully appreciate the benefits of Kennedy’s strategies towards Egypt. The friendship between Washington and Cairo during the years of Kennedy ended in fact on Capitol Hill, not in the White House.

⁴⁷⁴ Robert Komer, *OHI*, June 18, 1964, 3.

⁴⁷⁵ Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 5.

⁴⁷⁶ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, October 19, 1963. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVIII, 347.

A limping start

Although he benefited largely from the lessons he learned during his time on Capitol Hill during the Eisenhower years, Kennedy struggled to make a fresh and genuine start during the early phases of his rapprochement with Cairo. While the Bay of Pigs fiasco of April 1961 spread the belief across the Arab world that the new American president would in fact “continue to pursue the very same policy which has been denounced by the peoples who are fighting for freedom and independence”⁴⁷⁷, Nasser was particularly suspicious of the rumours that the US government was negotiating the sale of “arms, tanks and planes to Israel”⁴⁷⁸, and of the relationship between Kennedy and the American Jewish community.⁴⁷⁹ Indeed, during his time as a senator, Kennedy had remarked not only on the importance of securing Western interests in Arab oil, as noted in his 1960 book *The Strategy of Peace*⁴⁸⁰, but also on the obligation to ensure Israel’s survival: “For Israel was not created in order to disappear - Israel will endure and flourish”⁴⁸¹, he declared in August 1960, garnering the praises of the American Jewish community but also the criticism of the Cairo press.⁴⁸²

Kennedy was however aware of the need to reject the previous administration’s two-camp view of the world, the philosophy of which was “either you sign alliance with us... or you are a neutralist and ... we don’t trust you”⁴⁸³, and he promptly sought to show Nasser that the United States would not oppose the aspirations of the Third World

⁴⁷⁷ FBIS, *Kennedy told to abandon imperialism*, Baghdad, Iraqi Home Service, January 20, 1961. The Iranian press for instance commented that the new Kennedy’s administration was just “a new instrument in the hands of American expansionism”, and that in reality, only the most credulous Arabs would be convinced by his campaign’s pretensions. FBIS, *Tudeh excoriates American Ambassador*, Iran in Persian to Iran, May 25, 1961.

⁴⁷⁸ FBIS, *Nasir interviewed by US journalists*, Cairo, Egyptian Home Service, March 22, 1960, 2.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁸⁰ Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace...*, 110.

⁴⁸¹ Speech by Senator John F. Kennedy, Zionists of America Convention, Statler Hilton Hotel, New York, NY, August 26, 1960. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

⁴⁸² Ibidem.

⁴⁸³ Robert Komer, *OHI*, June 18, 1964, 3.

countries: “The United States... is no stranger to the aspirations of other people to true liberty and independence”⁴⁸⁴, he wrote to Nasser shortly after the Bay of Pigs invasion, “Noting your evident interest in this problem, I have therefore considered it useful to make clear...my own convictions with respect to the meaning of recent Cuban events.”⁴⁸⁵ Nasser’s reply, which arrived at the White House two weeks later, contained words of appreciation for Kennedy’s declaration of full responsibility over the Cuban crisis.⁴⁸⁶

During the spring of 1961, the administration was presented with a range of possibilities that emerged over some rather vague, favourable circumstances, and that allowed the US government to launch its policy of rapprochement with Nasser. Indeed, after the 1958 crisis, tensions between the Arab monarchies and the Arab nationalists appeared to be reducing, Nasser seemed more interested in tackling the severe economic crisis that had been afflicting Egypt since early 1961 (mainly caused by a severe reduction on both the country’s production and exports – an enormous problem for Egypt’s economy⁴⁸⁷), and severe frictions between Moscow and Cairo had been mounting over significant ideological differences between Nasser and Khrushchev since 1958. While Nasser was committed to a neutralist path and harboured severe doubts about the political, economic and social system in the USSR and communist China⁴⁸⁸, Khrushchev, irritated by the Egyptian-Yugoslav planning of a non-aligned states conference and by Nasser’s

⁴⁸⁴ Telegram from the White House to the Embassy in Cairo, May 2, 1961. JFKL, NSF, Box 169, Nasser Correspondence, 1-20-61, 4-30-61.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁸⁶ Heikal, *Nasser, The Cairo Documents...*, 178.

⁴⁸⁷ The Agency for International Development prepared a prospect for Kennedy about the economic crisis in Egypt. “In 1961, severe insect infestation and abnormal flooding of the Nile reduced output sharply in the agricultural sector”, reads the 1962 memorandum, explaining that the production of corn was down 20%, wheat production was down 50%, while cotton exports (which constituted 70% of the total exports) were also one-third down, with potential losses of over 100 million dollars for the country’s economy. Memorandum from the Administrator of the Agency for International Development (Hamilton) to President Kennedy, April 14, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 249.

⁴⁸⁸ Telegram from the Embassy in Cairo to the Department of State, February 8, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

incarceration of several key members of the Egyptian communist party⁴⁸⁹, spoke at length of the “inevitability of communism in Egypt” and of the futility of Nasser’s attempt to contain it.⁴⁹⁰ The administration knew that such doctrinal difference could not in itself constitute a reason for a major breakdown in USSR-UAR relations, especially given Moscow’s leverage on Cairo “resulting from military aid, cotton purchases, high dam and economic development credits”⁴⁹¹ but it believed that “Soviet-UAR tension... may provide [the] US with certain tactical opportunities”⁴⁹², such as a closer relationship with Washington.

As a matter of fact, eager to preserve close ties with at least one of the two world powers so as secure a certain level of foreign aid, Nasser had eventually welcomed Kennedy’s presidency despite the rumours of his support for Israel that had accompanied his ascent to power⁴⁹³ and, as noted earlier, the clumsy attempt to overthrow the Castro regime during the infamous Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961. A polite and frank diplomacy developed between Kennedy and Nasser after the Cuban invasion, which revealed the high level of strategic interests that both leaders harboured in each other. This diplomacy became one of Kennedy’s main tools in dealing with the Egyptian leader. Kennedy justified his actions to the Cairo government by saying that that Castro’s new government was violating basic human rights, and that the nature of the Cuban revolution was far from Nasser’s genuine nationalist revolution⁴⁹⁴, and the incident was eventually put behind them. Simultaneously, fearing that the rumours of his support for Israel and of Ben Gurion’s visit to the White House scheduled for May 30, 1961, could spoil the

⁴⁸⁹ Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, August 5, 1958. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XIII, 215.

⁴⁹⁰ Telegram from the Embassy in Cairo to the Secretary of State, May 20, 1961. Ibidem, 1-61, 6-61.

⁴⁹¹ Telegram from the Embassy in Cairo to the Department of State, February 8, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

⁴⁹² Ibidem.

⁴⁹³ FBIS, *Nasser interviewed by US journalists*, Cairo, Egyptian Home Service, March 22, 1960, 2.

⁴⁹⁴ Heikal, *Nasser, the Cairo Documents...*, 177.

effectiveness of his rapprochement with Nasser, on the 11th of the same month Kennedy wrote to Cairo:

“In recent weeks I have noted some speculation as to the direction of the policies of the new United States administration with respect to the Middle East... Let me assure you... You will find us at all times and all places active in the struggle for equality of opportunity”.⁴⁹⁵

Eager to encourage the rapprochement with Nasser, in June 1961 Kennedy instructed his ambassador in Cairo John Badeau, an Arabist “with a long background”⁴⁹⁶ and a direct experience in Egypt, to begin the talks by putting controversial issues, such as the Palestine question, in an “icebox” and focusing on “points of mutual interest”⁴⁹⁷: “What’s the use of starting every conversation with an argument about Palestine; we’re not going to change our policy and attitude, and you’re not going to change yours”⁴⁹⁸, Badeau told the Egyptian leader, and much to his surprise Nasser agreed. Such an exchange reflects again the centrality of Kennedy’s rapprochement with Nasser for the US strategies in the Middle East. The administration was more concerned with making a good start with Nasser than it was with imposing its mediation over the controversial issue of the Palestinian refugees. Indeed, in early June 1961, Komer made clear that the administration should not try to exercise direct pressure on Nasser in order to achieve “quick solutions of central problems, such as the Palestine issue”⁴⁹⁹, but conversely it should try to make some gestures towards Nasser in the hope that they could eventually set the basis for future understandings. “The new policy is based on long-term rather than on short-term calculations... it is in our long-term interests to encourage Egypt to steer a

⁴⁹⁵ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, May 11, 19612. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 47.

⁴⁹⁶ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 35.

⁴⁹⁷ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 8.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹⁹ Robert Komer, Memorandum for Walt Rostow, June 2, 1961, JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-61, 6-61.

moderate neutralist course”⁵⁰⁰, Komer told Kennedy in January 1962, pointing out that, while a debate on controversial issues such as the Palestinian refugees was likely to reduce dramatically the chances of a successful rapprochement, a genuine effort to promote the economic development of Egypt through a US-sponsored programme of foreign aid could indeed “open a new chapter in US relations with this key neutralist.”⁵⁰¹ Strengthened by such beliefs, in Cairo Badeau tried to push Nasser to focus on the economic problems afflicting Egypt rather than on foreign adventures: “If you try to involve yourself in the inner working of all the other Arab states, you are going to run into trouble after trouble after trouble. Modernize Egypt and you’ve got a place in history.”⁵⁰²

Badeau’s statement reflects much of the administration’s strategy towards Nasser. First, the United States would seek to exploit the Egyptian economic crisis in order to provide the Cairo government with economic aid that could offer an alternative to its partnership with the Soviet Union, already strained by the growing tension between Khrushchev and Nasser.⁵⁰³ Second, it would seek to foster a working relationship with Nasser, in the hopes that it could “help over [the] long-term in resolving [the] Arab-Israeli dispute”⁵⁰⁴ because, as noted by Komer, “Egypt’s attitude is the key to such a settlement; no other Arab state dares get out ahead of Nasser in moving toward a settlement, lest he revile it as a traitor.”⁵⁰⁵ Third, it hoped that “greater reliance on the US would also have some restraining influence on UAR policies”,⁵⁰⁶ which meant that if Nasser was to turn

⁵⁰⁰ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. Ibidem.

⁵⁰¹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰² John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 36.

⁵⁰³ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁰⁵ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, March 5, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 332, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 3-62.

⁵⁰⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

inwards and focus on the economic recovery of Egypt, he would restrain himself from foreign adventures across the Arab world. It is also significant to note that, while Nasser had made clear to “high-level Western leaders”⁵⁰⁷ that he did not intend to declare war on Israel because he knew “he would be defeated”⁵⁰⁸ the administration had received hints from Ben Gurion that it “would help”⁵⁰⁹ if Nasser was to turn inwards, because it would create “conditions of calm”⁵¹⁰ that Israel could use to focus on its economic development. The administration believed that if it could move Nasser to focus on Egypt’s own economic problems, it would indeed contribute towards creating a quieter Middle East: “In the short run, the basic positions of the Regime on international issues are not subject to much change”, wrote Talbot in May 1960, “but the violence with which they are expressed and promoted might be reduced.”⁵¹¹

However, during the early stages of his rapprochement with Egypt, Kennedy struggled to prove the genuine nature of his intentions to Nasser. By late 1960, the Egyptian press began to perceive Kennedy’s campaign speeches on Israel and his commitment to ensuring its survival as proof that he too would “become a tool in the service of Zionist ambitions”⁵¹², while the disaster of the Bay of Pigs invasion lingered in the back of Nasser’s mind as evidence that Washington had not abandoned its imperial designs in the Third World. To complicate things, in early 1961 the Kennedy administration was confronted with the issues of the UAR break-up and of the Israeli

⁵⁰⁷ Airgram from the Embassy in Cairo to the Secretary of State, August 29, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli relation.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibidem. Such an important assessment also shows that the reasons behind the HAWK sale was not because Nasser’s acquisition of Soviet weapons had caused an arms imbalance in the region, as argued by Bass, but as an attempt to forestall Israel’s reprisal attacks by enhancing its security, as argued in this work.

⁵⁰⁹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

⁵¹⁰ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, July 13, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 86.

⁵¹¹ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to George McGhee, May 30, 1961. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-61, 6-61.

⁵¹² FBIS, *US politicians ‘tools’ of Zionism*, Cairo, Egyptian Home Service, August 25, 1960.

nuclear facility in Dimona, two events that further contributed to threatening the policy of rapprochement with Cairo and revealed the urgency of showing Nasser the good-will behind Washington's policies.

The UAR break-up and Dimona

Washington's rapprochement with Cairo suffered straightaway from the development of two issues that emerged under circumstances over which the new administration had no real control. These put Kennedy in a rather difficult position in dealing with an already suspicious Nasser, and tested immediately the administration's determination in bolstering its policy of rapprochement with Nasser. The 1961 UAR break-up and the rumours of CIA involvement⁵¹³, the issue of US recognition of the new Syrian regime during September 1961, and the simultaneous revelation of the Dimona nuclear programme, a facility that the Israeli government had been building since 1958, not only constituted serious threats to the stability of the region (firstly on account of the risk that Nasser might restore his leadership over Syria through direct military intervention, and secondly because of the fear arms race in the Middle East), but also risked spoiling the effectiveness of Kennedy's overall approach to the region before it could even be implemented.

⁵¹³ Heikal, *Nasser, The Cairo Documents...*, 182.

The UAR break-up that occurred in late September 1961⁵¹⁴, a major setback in Nasser's pan-Arabist ambitions, was accompanied by rumours that CIA agents played a role in staging the coup that left the Egyptian leader with no governmental support in Syria. Nasser, tormented by the Syrian secession and obsessed with the fear that domestic or international players were plotting against him, wondered provocatively why "if Kennedy was making new approaches to him... was the CIA working against him."⁵¹⁵ Over the following days, John Badeau worked hard to prove to him that the rumours of a CIA involvement in the secession were unfounded, pointing out that the United States had no interest in plotting against him, but it is reasonable to think that, although he might have allowed himself to be persuaded, Nasser maintained some scepticism on the matter.

Evidences show however that the CIA played no role in staging the coup.⁵¹⁶ First, because Nasser was the key priority in Kennedy's Mideast agenda, and the administration would hardly have risked its rapprochement with Egypt to prompt a new regime in Syria. As Komer noted in November 1961, "peace with the largest and most influential country of the Arab world"⁵¹⁷ was indeed more important than setting up a "volatile" new regime

⁵¹⁴ In late September 1961, Syrian rebels had taken control of the country, overthrowing the pro-Nasser government and parting from the United Arab Republic (Nasser decided however to keep the name UAR for Egypt). Nasser was accused of having misspent public and state funds and of having shifted towards a more authoritarian regime. Robert Stephens, *Nasser: A Political Biography*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973), 339, 340. Although Heikal recalled that Nasser dismissed the idea of a conflict with the rebels to avoid bloodshed (Heikal, *Nasser, The Cairo Documents...*, 184), Stephens suggests that Nasser had simply realised that nobody in Syria supported him anymore after the resignation of Abdul Amin Sarraj. Stephens, *Nasser: A Political biography...*, 340. On his side, Kennedy appreciated Nasser's rejection of "force or shedding of Arab blood" something that he did not hesitate to communicate to him. Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, October 3, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 119.

⁵¹⁵ Heikal, *Nasser, The Cairo Documents...*, 182.

⁵¹⁶ While Heikal recalled that some Egyptian officers were determined to blame the CIA (one could say possibly to contain the effects of the secession for Nasser's prestige), the literature poses more emphasis on internal factors rather than on external. Jankowski for instance ascribes it to the fact that the UAR "was never genuinely united." Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt...*, 172. Elie Podeh justifies it in light of Nasser's "ruling of Syria as a subjugated province rather than as an equal partner." Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler, *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 189. Similar arguments are also made in Little's *American Orientalism*, Bass's *Support Any Friend*, and Barrett's *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*.

⁵¹⁷ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy and W.W. Rostow, November 3, 1961. JFK Library, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 11-61, 12-61.

in Syria.⁵¹⁸ Second, because the US government believed that a new regime in Syria would be detrimental to its strategies, because it was “likely to be affected with same or worse chaos and rivalry that existed prior to union.”⁵¹⁹ After all, the union between Egypt and Syria prevented the Syrian regime from being absorbed into the Soviet orbit, which played well with Washington’s strategy of containing communism. Third, because shortly after the coup in Syria, CIA director Allen Dulles himself showed genuine surprise as he complained that CIA officers had not “adequately forecast the events that occurred... in Syria”, and that “it should at least have noted that a coup was being attempted”.⁵²⁰

In terms of US strategy, the UAR break-up opened up the question of the recognition of the new Syrian regime. In an attempt to reduce Nasser’s regional influence, Saudi Arabia and Jordan immediately cabled Washington, urging Kennedy to recognise the new Syrian regime, which was after all “more pro-Western than [its] predecessor”.⁵²¹ However, resisting the temptation to secure Syria among the pro-US regimes and placing the rapprochement with Nasser ahead of the hopes of the Arab monarchies, the Kennedy administration decided to withhold recognition, aware that only by treating the Egyptian leader with the utmost sensitivity could it manage to overcome yet another hindrance in its rapprochement with Cairo.⁵²² As pointed out by Rusk:

“If ... [the] US should “jump” to recognition while forgetting trends in the area, forgetting its impact upon public opinion in the Arab world, it will be endangering its own interests and antagonizing the biggest country in the area (Egypt)”⁵²³

⁵¹⁸ Ibidem.

⁵¹⁹ Memorandum for the record, September 28, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 109.

⁵²⁰ Deputies Meeting, September 29, 1961. FOIA, Doc No/ESDN: CIA-RDP80B01676R0024/0005-7. http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/5829/CIA-RDP80B01676R002400060005-7.pdf accessed (01.10.2014).

⁵²¹ Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State, October 1, 1961. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVII, 116.

⁵²² Ibidem. Macomber told King Hussein: “when Nasser [was] down, I did not think it [was] either wise or useful to give him gratuitous extra kick.” Ibidem.

⁵²³ Ibidem, 117.

Furthermore, the administration believed that early recognition of the new regime in power would only contribute to estranging the Egyptian leader and increasing his sense of isolation, thus pushing him to intervene directly to restore his leadership in Syria. Indeed, in early October 1961, Komer pointed out that this would inevitably “open the Pandora’s box”⁵²⁴, because if Nasser was provoked into military action to win back Syria, there was the possibility that Saudi Arabia and Jordan would move against him, and that Israel would try to exploit the situation so as to seize the West Bank.⁵²⁵ Although at first the administration believed it was unlikely that Nasser would move into Syria because of the military difficulties related to “problems of distance and geography”⁵²⁶, an “unequivocal” interception of a conversation between Nasser and members of the Egyptian army revealed that the Egyptian leader was indeed “determined to snuff out [the] revolt.”⁵²⁷ Thus, while Kennedy advocated further discretion and sensitivity in dealing with Nasser, the administration sent telegrams to Jordan and Israel in order to “forestall active interference by third parties”⁵²⁸, urging them not to undertake pre-emptive actions. The administration informed Hussein that his move could “contribute to a catastrophe that will engulf area, have unforeseeable outcome for Jordan itself and have wider consequences than simple intra-Arab conflict of interests.”⁵²⁹ Likewise, the Ben

⁵²⁴ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, October 3, 1961. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 10-61.

⁵²⁵ Ibidem.

⁵²⁶ Memorandum for the record, September 28, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 109. Nasser also confessed that “he really felt relieved” by the Syrian secession. Memorandum from Senator Hubert H. Humphrey to President Kennedy, October 23, 1961. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 7-61, 10-61. He admitted that he was more concerned about the impact that this would have on his prestige in the Middle East than about losing control of a country in which “he never felt at home.” Ibidem.

⁵²⁷ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, September 28, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 110.

⁵²⁸ Memorandum for the record, September 28, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 109.

⁵²⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan, September 28, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 111.

Gurion government was asked to use “extreme circumspection in taking internal military precautions” and to refrain “from provocative public statements.”⁵³⁰

Sensing Nasser’s distress, on October 3, 1961, Kennedy sent a warm message to Cairo, in which he stated that “decision on recognition of Syrian regime has not been undertaken”, and that he still wished to “continue development of fruitful relations on both [a] personal and official plane.”⁵³¹ By the end of the month, as a “result of [a] change of heart or [the] inability of advance [his] force [to] gain [a] foothold”⁵³², Nasser renounced his ambitions in Syria. It is significant to note that, in terms of US strategies, Kennedy had managed to secure the two objectives he pursued during the Syrian crisis. On the one hand, he managed to hold off the recognition long enough to please Nasser, and although Cairo’s decision to not intervene in Syria cannot be directly attributed to Kennedy’s actions, these at least served the purpose of proving the administration’s goodwill to Nasser. On the other hand, Kennedy had also successfully managed to contain Jordan and Israel, thus preventing them from undertaking pre-emptive actions Syria that could have sparked a war against Egypt.

When in October 1961 the administration decided to recognise the new Syrian government, as there had been reports of Nasser’s “increasing flexibility”⁵³³ on the issue, Kennedy made sure the decision was conveyed to the Egyptian leader before any official statement was made, in accordance with his diplomatic strategy of communicating in advance any unpleasant decision. After a meeting with his advisors, the president said: “Look, I’m going to have to tell this guy we’re going to have to recognize the new government because it is the government that’s in power, but let’s explain our policy”.⁵³⁴

⁵³⁰ Ibidem.

⁵³¹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, October 3, 1961. RUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 119.

⁵³² Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan, September 29, 1961. Ibidem, 113.

⁵³³ Nasser told his ambassadors at the United Nations not to oppose Syria’s entry into the UN. Ibidem, 124.

⁵³⁴ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 5.

Shortly after Badeau informed the Cairo government of the decision and, although the Syrian secession was indeed a very bitter moment for Nasser⁵³⁵, the Egyptian president sent signals of interest towards Washington's friendliness.

In early 1961, the administration was also confronted with another serious hindrance to its policy of rapprochement with Cairo and to the preservation of stability in the region. The development of the Israeli nuclear facility in Dimona was an issue that the Kennedy administration had inherited from Eisenhower, and one that remained on the table for the entire duration of his presidency.⁵³⁶ It constituted a severe threat to Kennedy's attempts to foster a working relationship between the United States and Egypt, already trembling under the allegations of Kennedy's support of Israel, the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the rumours of CIA involvement in the Syrian coup of September 1961.

By the beginning of February 1961, Kennedy had already confessed to Rusk his concerns about Nasser's reaction to Israel's nuclear plan, urging his administration to make a "public announcement concerning the peaceful use of the Israeli project"⁵³⁷ Indeed, even if the administration did not fear an actual nuclear confrontation in the Middle East - as it was aware that Israel would not start a nuclear war against the Arabs and that the Soviet Union would not provide the UAR (Nasser had kept the name 'UAR' despite the Syrian secession) with the means to produce nuclear weapons⁵³⁸ - the implications of Dimona were nonetheless dangerous for Kennedy's Mideast strategies. One worry was that Israel might use the nuclear deterrent to "press its interests more vigorously and be less inclined to give concessions" on a number of "deep-seated disputes

⁵³⁵ Stephens, *Nasser: A Political Biography...*, 340.

⁵³⁶ On December 8, 1960, during a meeting of the Eisenhower administration, Dulles informed the participants that "Israel was constructing, with French assistance, a nuclear complex in the Negev", which the administration thought "cannot be solely for peaceful purposes." Also, as Dulles reported, "President-Elect Kennedy had been briefed on this matter" thus implying that the issue rested now in the hands of the new administration. Memorandum of Discussion at the 470th Meeting of the National Security Council, December 8, 1960. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XIII, 177.

⁵³⁷ Memorandum of a conversation, February 3, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 7.

⁵³⁸ Paper Prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, undated. Ibidem, 95.

which do not seem capable of early solution.”⁵³⁹ Another concern was that if Israel acquired nuclear weapons, the Arab world would “blame the United States as well as the French for Israeli accomplishments”, exposing the United States to anti-Western propaganda while simultaneously jeopardising Western interests in “the transit of the Suez Canal and access to the Middle East oil”.⁵⁴⁰ Finally, it could provoke Nasser into acquiring larger and more sophisticated non-nuclear weapons from the Soviet Union, thus causing the Arab nationalists to shift towards the Communist Bloc, and further accelerating the arms race in the region.⁵⁴¹

Unable to force Israel to terminate its nuclear research, the nature of which was still peaceful at the time, the administration decided to keep the Arabs constantly updated on the issue, and to reassure them that the United States would not allow military nuclear development in the region. Indeed, during a meeting with UAR ambassador Kamel held in early February 1961, Rusk tried to reassure Cairo that Washington would oppose the “spread [of] nuclear weapons” and that it would make “every effort to remain currently informed on the status and nature of the Israeli development [in] this field”.⁵⁴² Despite this attempt to reassure the Cairo government, the administration was informed shortly afterwards that a furious Nasser had threatened to “mobilize four million men”⁵⁴³ against Israel. Such a declaration, which according to Harman, the Israeli ambassador in Washington, was caused more by the big around the issue than from a genuine risk of a Middle Eastern nuclear war⁵⁴⁴, nonetheless constituted a serious danger to the American goals of both maintaining peace and stability in the region and channelling the Arab

⁵³⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁵⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁵⁴² Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, February 8, 1961. Ibidem, 9.

⁵⁴³ Memorandum of Conversation, February 16, 1961. Ibidem, 12.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibidem.

nationalists towards a Western-oriented neutralist course.⁵⁴⁵ Significantly, by taking advantage of Nasser's threat, Harman advanced during the same meeting Israel's request for the HAWK missile system, adjudging that Cairo's acquisition of Soviet weapons had moved Israel "into a state of arms imbalance"⁵⁴⁶ This argument, however, never fully convinced the administration.⁵⁴⁷

Ben Gurion's visit to Kennedy in May 1961 offered a good chance to make contact with the Egyptian leader. Bowles cabled Badeau recommending that Ben Gurion's visit be explained to Nasser as an opportunity to "move forward with respect to... Israel's nuclear reactor".⁵⁴⁸ After the Israeli leader assured Kennedy that the Dimona reactor was used only for peaceful purpose⁵⁴⁹, Rusk wrote to Nasser that the inspection of the nuclear site showed "no evidence that the Israelis have weapons production in mind".⁵⁵⁰

Despite the good result of the first inspection, the administration was aware that Israel's nuclear development could produce significant consequences for Washington's strategies, causing Nasser to shift towards the Soviet Union and exacerbating the tensions between Arabs and Israelis. In the meantime, the administration sought to exploit the propitious moment to move forward its rapprochement with Nasser, made even more urgent by these dangerous dynamics developing in the region.

⁵⁴⁵ Paper Prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, undated. Ibidem, 95.

⁵⁴⁶ Memorandum of a conversation, February 16, 1961, Ibidem, 12.

⁵⁴⁷ A more careful analysis of the HAWK sale is provided in Chapter 4.

⁵⁴⁸ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, May 10, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 45.

⁵⁴⁹ Memorandum from the President's Deputy Special Counsel (Feldman) to President Kennedy, May 26, 1961. Ibidem, 55.

⁵⁵⁰ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, June 15, 1961. Ibidem, 65.

Grain for gain: the PL-480

Once Kennedy had managed to temporarily reassure the Arabs over the Dimona issue, to ward off the dangerous allegations of CIA involvement in the UAR break-up and to secure Nasser's permission for the recognition of the new Syrian government, it was time to attempt a "limited marriage of convenience with the guy who", Komer pointed out, "is still, and will remain, the Mister Big of the Arab World."⁵⁵¹

To this end, by late 1961 the administration revived talks on possible foreign aid to be distributed to Cairo through the PL-480, a programme of assistance that made American grain available to developing countries, which had been offered to Egypt on a year-to-year basis since 1955⁵⁵², and had been interrupted in 1957 and 1958 as a consequence of the Suez crisis.⁵⁵³ Even if Kennedy resumed a tool previously adopted by the Eisenhower administration, (of course, the rapprochement included other measures, such as Kennedy's personal diplomacy), it was only during his term that a significant effort to use the PL-480 to enhance Egypt's economy was made.

The administration considered the moment propitious, as the political crisis caused by the UAR break-up and the rising tension between Khrushchev and Nasser (an article had appeared in the Soviet press in January 1962 hinting negatively at Nasser's crackdown on the communist party in Egypt⁵⁵⁴) constituted the backdrop to a severe

⁵⁵¹ National Security Action Memorandum No. 105, October 16, 1961. Ibidem, 128.

⁵⁵² In 1955, under Title III of the PL-480 (Voluntary Relief Agencies), the United States provided Egypt with 23.5 million dollars. In 1956, under Title III and I (grants and loans), Egypt received 30.8 million dollars. "US Foreign Assistance: Obligations and Commitments". JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 11-61, 12-61.

⁵⁵³ In 1957 and 1958, Egypt received only 1.3 million from Voluntary Relief Agencies. The aid was resumed in 1959, with 45.4 million dollars under Title I and III. In 1960, Title I and III provided Egypt with 68.9 million dollars. Under Kennedy, the PL-480 improved exponentially. 123.7 million dollars under Title I, II (emergency relief) and Title III. Ibidem. For 1962, the administration allowed 180.3 million dollars under Title I, II and III. Fowler Hamilton, Memorandum for the President, April 14, 1962. Ibidem, 3-62, 5-62.

⁵⁵⁴ Memorandum from L. Thompson to President Kennedy, January 12, 1962. Ibidem 1-62, 2-62. The Soviet press complained that there were no signs of socialism in Egypt, that the Egyptian government owned everything and that increasing US aid symbolised Nasser's shift towards the Western Bloc. CIA Telegram, May 7, 1962. Ibidem, 3-62, 5-62.

economic crisis afflicting Egypt. The underdevelopment of rural areas, rapid population growth, high level of corruption and “unwillingness of industrialists to expand their investments in a growing productive system”⁵⁵⁵, had put Nasser in a position where he was dependent on foreign aid.⁵⁵⁶ The administration was aware of Egypt’s economic troubles, and sought to exploit them in order to woo Nasser. If Washington could manage to encourage the economic development of the country by sponsoring direct programmes of assistance, not only would it have more leverage against the Cairo government and its foreign policy, but it would also prove to Nasser the benefits of developing under the US umbrella rather than that of the Soviets.

A talk on the PL-480 had already taken place back in June 1961, during a meeting with the UAR ambassador in Washington, Kamel. The Egyptian ambassador confessed that if the programme was to be put on a multi-year basis that could allow medium to long-term economic planning and save the country’s economy, the relations between the United States and Egypt would improve greatly.⁵⁵⁷ In the hope of achieving such a result, Washington started to contemplate the possibility of agreeing to Nasser’s request: “We’ve come to another crossroad in our relation with Nasser, similar to that over Aswan Dam”⁵⁵⁸, pointed out Komer, bitterly recalling how the awkward withdrawal of the dam’s funding had eventually led to the Suez crisis.

However, as Talbot recalled, one question delayed the administration’s decision: “How much carrot do you put out there?”⁵⁵⁹ Although the PL-480 aid package was generally granted on a three-year basis, the administration was more careful in dealing with Nasser than with other Third World leaders as, given his unpredictability, no one

⁵⁵⁵ Airgram from the Embassy in Cairo to the Secretary of State, February 20, 1962. Ibidem, 1-62, 2-62.

⁵⁵⁶ Memorandum from L. Thompson to President Kennedy, January 12, 1962. Ibidem.

⁵⁵⁷ Editorial Note. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 64.

⁵⁵⁸ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

⁵⁵⁹ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 34.

could be sure how he would use the aid⁵⁶⁰, nor if his desire for closer ties with the US would eventually “trip up and fail at one point or another.”⁵⁶¹ If the foreign assistance programme was to be made available to gain some influence over Cairo, many thought that essentially it would be advisable to keep the year-to-year deal.

A strong supporter of this viewpoint was William Gaud⁵⁶² of the Agency for International Development, who thought that the PL-480 had to remain on a short term basis, instead of being made on a three-year arrangement under Nasser’s pressure. Gaud feared that Washington would end up losing its leverage on Nasser because it would be “much harder for us to cut off the food to his people who needed it badly when we had an outstanding agreement” based on a long term programme.⁵⁶³ His position however was opposed by other members of the NEA (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs), such as Talbot, who believed that a three-year agreement “would help persuade him to do things that we wanted him to do”⁵⁶⁴, such as reducing Cairo’s hostile propaganda against the Arab monarchies and Israel, and preventing the country from shifting towards the Soviet Union.⁵⁶⁵ He also feared that a leader as sensitive as Nasser might be offended if Washington showed “first class recipients and second class recipients”⁵⁶⁶ in the making of the foreign assistance programmes. Komer too suggested a policy of friendship based on genuine help: “As a very important wheel in the Arab and neutralist world, he too should get the Kennedy treatment”.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁰ Ibidem, 40.

⁵⁶¹ Ibidem, 35.

⁵⁶² William S. Gaud was Assistant Administrator, Bureau for the Near East and South Asia, for the Agency for International Development.

⁵⁶³ William S. Gaud, *OHI*, February 16, 1966, 6. Gaud argued that right after Nasser secured the American aid, “he embarked on a whole series of political activities which were inimical” to the United States. The three-year agreement, he recalled several years later, had made Washington lose its power of negotiation and influence on Nasser’s policy.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibidem, 7.

⁵⁶⁵ Paper Prepared in the Department of State, May 24, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 276.

⁵⁶⁶ Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 40.

⁵⁶⁷ Editorial Note. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 64.

Even Kennedy, backed by an enthusiastic Badeau, believed that a genuine and “fresh” effort would eventually “set the stage for better relations.”⁵⁶⁸ A year-to-year agreement could help to improve the political effectiveness of the policy, but it would also reduce the long-term economic benefits. If Washington was looking for better relations with Cairo, already trembling under the rumours about the Syrian coup and Kennedy’s alleged closeness to Israel, it could not manifestly favour its own political gains to the detriment of Cairo’s economic benefit.⁵⁶⁹

Throughout January and February 1961, the administration was also confronted by the Israeli government and the regimes in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, who were concerned that such a manoeuvre was dictated by Nasser’s pressure and that Kennedy was going “too fast and too far”⁵⁷⁰, as well as by Congress⁵⁷¹, who were reluctant at the idea of making an effort with Nasser. In addition, rumours about Cairo’s intention to use the American aid as a trading tool to obtain weapons inevitably slowed down the entire process and contributed to making the effectiveness of a rapprochement with Nasser more uncertain in the eyes of a Congress already sceptical about the Egyptian leader. In early January 1961, the *New York Times* published an article after a tip-off from one correspondent, in which it stated that they had some information about Nasser’s desire to barter the PL-480 cotton supplies “for two new wings of Soviet jet aircraft.”⁵⁷² In an excess of zeal, Kennedy informed Nasser of the difficulties he was experiencing in getting Congress to agree on financing a programme of assistance to Egypt, as they believed that the Cairo government would use it as a trading tool to get weapons.⁵⁷³ Nasser was

⁵⁶⁸ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 18.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷⁰ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 35.

⁵⁷¹ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 10, 18-19.

⁵⁷² Memorandum from the Department of Executive Secretary (Battle) to McGeorge Bundy, January 2, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 157.

⁵⁷³ Heikal, *Nasser: the Cairo Documents...*, 182, 183.

particularly offended by the message, and blamed Kennedy for having failed to take into consideration the difficult times Cairo was facing.⁵⁷⁴ However, swallowing yet another bitter pill in order to proceed with the negotiations, he informed the administration that since mid-1961, the UAR “has been severely restricting its cotton exports to the Soviet Bloc” and that he intended to reorient 60% of its export to Western countries.⁵⁷⁵ Nasser was determined to keep “Communism out of the Middle East”, and indeed was aware that the American aid was far more appropriate than the Soviet socio-economic model to tackle the crisis in Egypt.⁵⁷⁶ Comforted by Nasser’s position and determined to start a new, better relationship with Cairo, the administration decided to acquiesce to Nasser’s request of putting the PL-480 on a multi-year agreement.⁵⁷⁷

Before making the agreement official, in February 1962 Kennedy sent Chester Bowles to Cairo in order to reassure Nasser of Washington’s desire for a long-lasting friendship and, more importantly, to see how the Egyptian leader envisioned the development of this new relationship.⁵⁷⁸ The special ambassador was quite impressed with Nasser’s cordiality and frankness, but warned Kennedy that “It would be foolhardy... to expect Nasser or any likely successor to stop acting like the revolutionary leader that he clearly is”.⁵⁷⁹ Bowles pointed out that Cairo would still “use the Soviets as a source of arms or investment whenever it suits their purpose”, exactly as it would do with the US and that, having “underestimated the basically revolutionary character of the regime”, the

⁵⁷⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁷⁵ Memorandum from the Department of Executive Secretary (Battle) to McGeorge Bundy, January 2, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 157.

⁵⁷⁶ Airgram from the Embassy in Cairo to the Secretary of State, February 21, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

⁵⁷⁷ As Talbot recalled it was a stage at which nobody was actually stating their opposition to undermine Kennedy, so the resistance was not indeed crucial. Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 42- 43.

⁵⁷⁸ Letter from President Kennedy to President Nasser, January 24, 1962. JFKL, President’s Office Files, UAR, Security, 1962, Jan 20- Dec 11.

⁵⁷⁹ Airgram from the Embassy in Cairo to the Secretary of State, February 21, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

administration's idea of Nasser was "oversimplified and defective".⁵⁸⁰ However, Bowles recommended a "skilful, sophisticated, sensitive effort to establish a more affirmative relationship" confident that, if treated properly, Nasser would be "likely to meet us more than half way."⁵⁸¹

Harvard economist Edward Mason echoed Bowles's position, following a trip to Cairo conducted shortly afterwards to assess Egypt's economic requirements. Although he was not "too impressed" with the economic planning carried out by Nasser's associates, he too recommended the multi-year agreement.⁵⁸² In fact, as Nasser's economic policies appeared to be dictated more by "reactions rather than on advance planning"⁵⁸³, Mason too believed that, in order to pursue a policy of friendliness and cooperation with Egypt, Washington needed to undertake the multi-year PL-480, expand technical assistance, increase development lending and thus allow the long-term economic planning that Egypt needed.⁵⁸⁴

In addition to the overall policy of rapprochement to Cairo, two strategic reasons strengthened the administration's belief that the multi-year agreement was the best course of action. The first one was connected to the fact that Soviet agents were spreading rumours in Egypt of another "imperialist plot"⁵⁸⁵ designed by the Arab monarchies, London and Washington to overthrow Nasser, which were intended to push Egypt back

⁵⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁵⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁵⁸² Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, March 31, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 230. Mason managed to make a good impression on Nasser. He took a very simple and frank approach with the Egyptian leader who, after confessing that he didn't "understand economics", and complaining that his economists always told him things he did not understand, he appreciated Mason's clearness. John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 17. Mason told Nasser: "There are just two rules. You cannot have a, b, c, d, e, and f. You've got to make a choice. And when you make the choice, you choose the thing that gives the greatest economic benefit". Nasser's answer was grateful: "Well, nobody ever told me that before". Ibidem, 18.

⁵⁸³ Special National Intelligence Estimate, March 28, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 225.

⁵⁸⁴ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, March 31, 1962. Ibidem, 230.

⁵⁸⁵ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, February 8, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 2-62. The reference was to alleged British-Israeli activity along the Sinai frontier.

towards Moscow by aggravating Nasser's fears and sense of isolation. Knowing that "Nasser and his associates are products of the long history of suspicion, fear and weakness"⁵⁸⁶, further exasperated by the events of the UAR break-up, the administration concluded that making a fresh effort with the Egyptian leader and proving Washington's good-will was indeed a matter of urgency.⁵⁸⁷ As Mason pointed out: "the mood right now is forthcoming and it would be a mistake not to take advantage of it. If this opportunity for meaningful but modest progress is missed it may not soon reoccur."⁵⁸⁸

The second one was connected to the question of Dimona, an issue that, lurking in the background of US-UAR relations, further convinced the administration of the need to promptly try to turn Nasser inwards while simultaneously restoring his faith in Washington. The talks for the PL-480 had given the administration some leverage over Cairo's attitude towards the Israeli nuclear facility. Back in November 1961, when Kamel and the Kennedy administration were beginning the negotiations for the PL-480 agreement, the UAR ambassador had suggested that the Arab-Israeli controversy "should be left alone for a time"⁵⁸⁹ to allow both factions to focus on the aid programme. Already by January 1962 things seemed to have quietened down: Rusk informed Kennedy that Nasser was moving towards "a more truly neutral position"⁵⁹⁰ with regards to nuclear proliferation and his relations with Moscow, and that he seemed determined to make the best of Washington's friendliness. Thus, when in February 1962 Bowles was sent to Cairo for his meeting with Nasser, he took the opportunity to test Egypt's "attitude toward

⁵⁸⁶ Telegram from the Embassy in Sudan to the Department of State, February 19, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 193.

⁵⁸⁷ It was stressed that the UAR break-up, the new rumours about France, Britain and Israel's plot to overthrow Nasser, and the Dimona reactor issue required a prompt gesture from the administration to show the US commitment to its rapprochement with Cairo. Ibidem

⁵⁸⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁸⁹ Memorandum of Conversation between the Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow) and the United Arab Republic Ambassador (Kamel), November 22, 1961. Ibidem, 144.

⁵⁹⁰ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, January 10, 1960. Ibidem, 159.

Dimona Reactor”⁵⁹¹, and Nasser’s general intentions of increasing its armament. Reporting Nasser’s belief that the Arab-Israeli tensions could be “scaled down... if [the] UAR [was] reassured of US intent to help preserve peace”⁵⁹², the administration decided to move forward its negotiations with Cairo, reassuring Nasser of US support to Egypt and strongly hinting at the acceptance of the multi-year programme, which would be made official in August 1962.⁵⁹³

Analysing the pros and cons of the new policy towards Cairo, the administration concluded not only that the rapprochement would be based on “long-term rather than short-term calculations”, and would thus be “quite expensive without many quick returns”⁵⁹⁴, but also that an approach aimed to “modify basic UAR policies” would not only be “unproductive but damaging”⁵⁹⁵, and that any coercive manoeuvre would inevitably alienate the Egyptian leader. After all, the experience of the Eisenhower years was still fresh in Kennedy’s memory. Nasser could be guided, but he could not be manoeuvred. In addition, Komer highlighted the strategic benefit of the improvement of the US-UAR relations, as it would offer Washington “more leverage toward promoting an ultimate Arab-Israeli settlement than any other course”⁵⁹⁶, but he also stressed the importance of making similar gestures to both Saudi Arabia and Israel. While the first was asking for various forms of economic assistance⁵⁹⁷, the second, alarmed by US rapprochement with Cairo, demanded “more tangible reassurance”⁵⁹⁸ for its *bitahon*.

⁵⁹¹ Memorandum from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Grant) to the President’s Special Representative and Adviser on African, Asian, and Latin American Affairs (Bowles). Ibidem, 188.

⁵⁹² Telegram from the Embassy in Sudan to the Department of State, February 19, 1962. Ibidem, 193.

⁵⁹³ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 8.

⁵⁹⁴ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁹⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, March 5, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 3-62.

⁵⁹⁷ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, April 27, 1962. Ibidem, 4-62.

⁵⁹⁸ Memorandum for the record, April 30, 1962. Ibidem.

Concerned by Kennedy's friendliness towards Nasser, and stressing how the Egyptian acquisition of Soviet weapons had caused military imbalance in the region, during his visit in May 1962, Israeli Minister of Defence Shimon Peres pressed the administration for military aid, listing the HAWK as a "vital element in Israeli military requirements".⁵⁹⁹ It was the beginning of a long negotiation between Washington and the Israeli government that, running parallel to the rapprochement with Egypt, brought the Kennedy administration to elaborate its *quid pro quo* policy with the goals of simultaneously containing Israel, courting Nasser and attempting a mediation over the refugee issue.

The HAWK sale and the Johnson Plan

During the spring of 1962, the relationship between Washington and Cairo flourished under the 'Kennedy treatment'. The two presidents had by then established an intimate and friendly diplomacy, "practically unique in the history of US-UAR relationship"⁶⁰⁰ and largely appreciated by the Egyptian leader, who started to perceive the United States as a positive force in the world of international affairs. Furthermore, Nasser appeared to be increasingly committed to focusing on Egypt's domestic problems rather than on his pan-Arabist objectives, and to embracing a Western-oriented model of development that incidentally suggested a further parting from Moscow. After having denounced the communist ideology, the Egyptian leader accepted the idea of decentralization of authority, advocated social reforms, opened the doors to foreign investments and even extended "an olive branch to former imperialist countries".⁶⁰¹ Thus, already by the summer of 1962, the policy of rapprochement with Nasser seemed to have

⁵⁹⁹ Memorandum from William P. Bundy to Phillips Talbot, May 23, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 118, Israel, General, 4-62, 5-62.

⁶⁰⁰ Memorandum from William H. Brubeck to McGeorge Bundy, June 25, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 169, UAR, Nasser Correspondence, 6-62, 7-62.

⁶⁰¹ Ibidem.

settled into a working friendship between the two countries: Komer commented “We’ve made a score on relations with the key guy of the Arab world. Let’s keep nurturing it”⁶⁰², and taking advantage of the propitious moment, the administration sought to move towards some kind of settlement for the refugee issue, the core of the Arab-Israeli dispute.⁶⁰³ Indeed, despite the administration’s concern for other issues, such as Dimona or the Israeli diversion of the Jordan waters, the refugee problem constituted a central issue because, as Robert Komer pointed out in May 1962, “all Arabs love to use the Palestine issue as a popular diversion from their own domestic failings”⁶⁰⁴, and they could thus use it as an instrument to “force Nasser into a more actively anti-Israeli policy.”⁶⁰⁵

Having pledged during his presidential campaign to “initiate action designed to facilitate an Arab-Israel settlement”⁶⁰⁶, already back in May 1961 Kennedy had approached the Egyptian leader over the issue of the refugees.⁶⁰⁷ A warm letter sent to Cairo, in which Kennedy recognised the “deep emotions” involved in the controversy of the Palestinian issue, served the purpose of confirming Washington’s desire “to help resolve the tragic Palestine refugee problem on the basis of the principle of repatriation or compensation for properties”.⁶⁰⁸ After apologising for his delay in giving a response, justified by “the deep and careful consideration”⁶⁰⁹ that Kennedy’s letter required, Nasser wrote an honest but severe reply, arguing that the promise of a Jewish home in Palestine

⁶⁰² Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, June 12, 1962. Ibidem.

⁶⁰³ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Mike Feldman, May 31, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 5-62.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibidem.

⁶⁰⁶ Memorandum from Acting Secretary of State Bowles to President Kennedy, April 28, 1961. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVII, 38.

⁶⁰⁷ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, May 11, 1961. Ibidem, 47.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibidem. Not everyone appreciated Kennedy’s words on the Palestine issue. Iraqi revolutionary leader Qasim, for instance, declared “Kennedy has nothing to do with Palestine and this letter was interference in the Middle East affairs”. “Kennedy writes to Nasser”, *The Irish Times*, June 20, 1961, 9.

⁶⁰⁹ Letter from President Nasser to President Kennedy, August 22, 1961. JFKL, President’s Office Files, UAR, Security, 1961.

deriving from the Balfour Declaration⁶¹⁰ was “a fraud which any tribunal would condemn”, deriving from a decision taken by “he who did not own giving to him who did not deserve”.⁶¹¹ Nasser also accused Washington of putting “its entire weight”⁶¹² in support of the Jewish cause in order to win “Jewish votes in the Presidential elections.”⁶¹³ The Suez invasion, Nasser continued, provided the best example of Israel’s imperialism and it should have made Washington realise that the Arab opposition against it was not dictated by ideology, but rather by a concrete fear of aggression. Nasser concluded his letter by saying that independence and development were the only keys to solving tension in the Middle East and that he was sure that the New Frontier would work towards an easing of Arab-US relations.

Despite Kennedy and Nasser’s mutual decision to put the issue on ice and focus on points of mutual interest that could ease the relations between the United States and the UAR, from the summer of 1961 the administration quietly started to think about a plan to settle the refugee problem, aware that the issue was one of the main obstacles to reaching stability in the Middle East. In May 1962, referring to the issues relating to the Arab-Israeli disputes, Komer made clear: “We ought to be forehanded in anticipating new troubles in the Near East, not just sit back and wait for it.”⁶¹⁴ Indeed, as noted earlier, the administration feared that the refugee issue could reignite the hostilities between Arabs and Israelis, bringing the Arab countries to press Nasser for a more anti-Israel stand (in September 1962 the State Department informed the White House that Syria had urged the

⁶¹⁰ The declaration stated that “His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object”. M.E. Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East 1792-1923*, (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc., 1987), 290.

⁶¹¹ Letter from President Nasser to President Kennedy, August 22, 1961. JFKL, President’s Office Files, UAR, Security, 1961.

⁶¹² Ibidem.

⁶¹³ In a quite provocative way, Nasser cited US former President H. Truman’s question: “Do the Arabs have any vote in the American Presidential elections?” Ibidem.

⁶¹⁴ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Mike Feldman, May 31, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 5-62.

Cairo government to “arm the refugees in the Gaza sector and in the Arab countries”⁶¹⁵ against Israel) and thus jeopardising Kennedy’s policy of rapprochement with Egypt by forcing Nasser to “queer his relations”⁶¹⁶ with the United States and to turn back to the Soviets. The administration’s approach to the refugee issue reveals once again that Kennedy’s Mideast policy was elaborated in the context of his policy towards Nasser. Kennedy hoped to bolster his rapprochement with Nasser by adopting a “quiet diplomacy”⁶¹⁷ to remove the refugee issue from causing friction not only between Arabs and Israelis, but between Arab states as well.

In March 1961, Kennedy talked to Feldman about the possibility of elaborating a plan and, having learned that a private discussion with Nasser and Ben Gurion would “perhaps lead to some kind of solution”⁶¹⁸, Kennedy decided to rely on Badeau for the talks with the Cairo government and on Feldman for those with the Israeli leaders.⁶¹⁹ In August 1961, after a preliminary conversation with the Egyptian leader, the ambassador confessed that Nasser’s position would probably depend on “his mood and feelings at the moment the question arises”, adding however that “a proper approach to Nasser is the obvious starting point”.⁶²⁰ Thus, when in the spring of 1962 the relationship between Washington and Cairo had reached its highest point due to the Kennedy treatment, the administration decided the time was right to attempt the elaboration of a plan.

After having learned that Nasser was coming under mounting criticism from Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, for having adopted an allegedly softer line with Israel in

⁶¹⁵ Memorandum from William M. Brubeck to McGeorge Bundy, September 22, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli relation.

⁶¹⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Mike Feldman, May 31, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 5-62.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹⁸ Feldman, *OHI*, August 20, 1966, 399.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 400.

⁶²⁰ Letter From the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot) to the Acting Assistant Secretary of State (Meyer), August 3, 1961. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVII, 91.

exchange of US economic aid, particularly with regards to the refugee issue⁶²¹, Kennedy tried to promote some sort of settlement to the Palestine question in the hopes of preventing the refugee issue from jeopardising his rapprochement with Nasser. In May 1962, Dr Joseph Johnson, President of the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, flew to Cairo in the guise of special representative of the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine, and in a “uniformly friendly atmosphere” the two spoke for two hours about a possible plan for the refugees, agreeing on the importance of starting some sort of negotiation.⁶²² Stressing the importance of having most of the refugees returning and of creating “a Palestine in which Jews and Arabs would have equal rights”⁶²³, Nasser appeared much more favourable to discussing the Johnson plan than any other Arab party: the representatives of Lebanon, Jordan and Syria were for example among the most sceptical, making clear that they “would not accept that Israel would have last word”⁶²⁴, while the Egyptian leader had at least “promised to give further thought to [the] Johnson Plan”.⁶²⁵

Although Nasser seemed willing to discuss the Johnson plan, the final draft of which was presented on August 7, 1962, on the Israeli side things looked much more difficult, as Ben Gurion feared that a massive number of Arabs would choose repatriation over resettlement.⁶²⁶ Thus, having agreed to sell the HAWK in order to forestall Israel’s active defence, on August 14, 1962, the administration decided to link the HAWK sale to

⁶²¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, December 22, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 5-62.

⁶²² Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, May 3, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVII, 263.

⁶²³ Ibidem.

⁶²⁴ Telegram from the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State, September 10, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVIII, 36.

⁶²⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, August 24, 1962. Ibidem, 31.

⁶²⁶ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, August 7, 1962. Ibidem, 15.

the Johnson plan, in the hope of exploiting Israel's *bitahon* to persuade Ben Gurion to accept the plan for the refugees.⁶²⁷

From the Israeli side, the HAWK sale could not have come at a better moment, as in July 1962 Nasser had fired the first rocket built with the help of German scientists, brought to Cairo in order to develop rockets and aircraft.⁶²⁸ But from a military point of view the issue was nothing more than “a tempest in a teapot”, not only because they were “very poor rockets” but also because it was clear that the German scientists were focusing on air frames and engines for aircrafts and not so much on rockets.⁶²⁹ The Kennedy administration knew that the chief reason behind Nasser's decision was his desire to reduce Egypt's dependence on Soviet's military equipment⁶³⁰, but it was also aware of Ben Gurion's obsession with the Arab threat and of the need to enhance Israel's security with the goal of containing it and forestalling its “active defense”.⁶³¹ Thus, responding to Kennedy's *quid pro quo* policy, in August 1962 the Johnson plan was eventually tied to the HAWK sale.

In accordance with his personal diplomatic technique, Kennedy sent Nasser a sort of preliminary letter, in which he stated that he would have Badeau discuss with him some “hot” topics, but that he could be reassured that “there is involved no change in United States policy toward the United Arab Republic”⁶³². Hoping to make Nasser “more

⁶²⁷ Notes of a Conference, August 14, 1962. Ibidem, 19.

⁶²⁸ Although the German rockets became an actual issue for the administration only in 1963, when Israel created a big fuss about the German scientists, Nasser's collaboration with Germany was first brought to light during the meeting between Kennedy and Golda Meir in December 1962, when the Israeli minister told the president: “Israel knows that Egypt has, with German help, been building ground-to-ground missiles since 1960.” Memorandum of a Conversation, December 12, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 121. After Egyptian intelligence managed to bring the scientists to Cairo, the Israelis started sending parcel bombs to them and harassing their families. Nasser was accused of using “Nazi scientists” and was branded as “the new Fascist Dictator”. Heikal, Nasser: *The Cairo Documents...*, 184.

⁶²⁹ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 14.

⁶³⁰ Ibidem.

⁶³¹ Research memorandum, May 23, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli relation.

⁶³² John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 22.

cautious about further Soviet arms deal”⁶³³, the administration agreed to justify the HAWK sale in light of the “UAR acquisitions of new types of equipment”⁶³⁴ from the Soviet Union. However, the real strategy behind the HAWK sale was clear:

“The main problem ... was the danger that if a serious imbalance of vulnerability should develop it would create a real temptation to pre-emptive attack. This, rather than whether there was a defense “gap” on either side of the Arab-Israeli quarrel, was seen as the central problem.”⁶³⁵

Much to Kennedy’s surprise, Badeau registered “practically no reaction in Egypt.”⁶³⁶ The ambassador informed Washington that there had been “no newspaper attacks, no artificially created crowds”⁶³⁷ and, perhaps even more oddly, that Nasser even expressed some sort of appreciation for Kennedy’s sensitivity: “Of course, I don’t like this. You knew I wouldn’t like it, but I’m grateful to have been told.”⁶³⁸ Arguably, Nasser’s need for American economic aid prevailed over his concern at the Israeli acquisition of such advanced defensive weaponry. Furthermore, during his meeting with Badeau on August 24, 1962, Nasser expressed more concern about the political repercussions that Kennedy’s decision would have across the Arab world than about the military significance of the HAWK. He commented that the argument of the need to balance out Cairo’s acquisition of Soviet weapons was unfounded because his non-aggressive policy towards Israel had made “increased defensive capacity [of] Israel irrelevant”⁶³⁹, and he stressed his concern at the “intra-Arab propaganda” accusing

⁶³³ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, June 22, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVII, 306.

⁶³⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, August 22, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVIII, 28.

⁶³⁵ Memorandum From the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Grant) to Secretary of State Rusk June 17, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVII, 299.

⁶³⁶ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 11.

⁶³⁷ *Ibidem*. Badeau commented quite surprised: “people continued to come to my parties” like nothing had happened. *Ibidem*.

⁶³⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶³⁹ Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, August 24, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVIII, 31.

him of adopting a softer line with Israel in exchange for US economic aid.⁶⁴⁰ Although contained in his reaction, Nasser concluded his meeting with Badeau with a warning: “the American or Western sale to Israel of any kind of missiles even those known to be purely defensive would be countered by [the] Soviet offer of [a] variety missiles to Arab states”.⁶⁴¹ He implied that the responsibility for an arms race in the Middle East would thus lie with Washington’s decision.

During the following weeks, the administration pursued its *quid pro quo* policy in attempts to secure some sort of agreement over the Johnson plan before the news of the HAWK sale leaked into the press and caused Washington to lose its leverage over Israel. However, that hope did not last long. If during the month of August Nasser appeared “moderate and slightly encouraging”⁶⁴² towards the plan, Ben Gurion had managed to delay the process by aggravating and appealing the problem of the quota of refugees that would repatriate or resettle. Eventually, by late September 1962, the news of the HAWK sale leaked, and the press announced to the world that the United States would sell the HAWK to Israel. As discussed in Chapter 4, when the news became public, Israel closed the doors to the Johnson plan.

The Arabs reacted to the news of the HAWK sale fiercely. Radio Baghdad labelled Washington’s policy as aggressive, newspapers in Jordan regarded it as a “disgraceful attempt to support the entity of the Jews”⁶⁴³, while words of condemnation and surprise arrived from Lebanon, Tunisia, Kuwait, India and Pakistan. Moscow immediately accused the United States of favouring Israel and of threatening the peace and stability of the Middle East, and even Nasser eventually wondered with some dismay

⁶⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁶⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁶⁴² Ibidem.

⁶⁴³ “Foreign Radio and Press reaction to US decision to sell missiles to Israel”. JFKL, NSF, Box 119, Israel, General, 9-22-62, 10-1-62.

if the US government was so infiltrated by Israeli agents “that no policies could be evolved in secret.”⁶⁴⁴

The Yemen crisis, which exploded in late September 1962, diverted everyone’s attention from the issue of the HAWK sale. Nasser engaged in a proxy war against the Arab monarchies in Yemen, and the controversy over the HAWK missile system fell under the radar. The same destiny awaited the Johnson plan, since, after Israel’s definitive refusal to subscribe to Johnson’s “repatriation or resettlement with compensation” formula, the administration decided to adopt a policy of non-commitment towards the plan, and so to avoid the embarrassment of pushing a proposal that had been refused by both Arabs and Israelis. The refugee issue was eventually consigned to talks within the United Nations⁶⁴⁵, while during the last year of the Kennedy presidency the administration became more “involved in other more pressing questions of US-UAR relations.”⁶⁴⁶ Significantly for the US strategies, the *quid pro quo* policy did not work, but the administration could at least be reassured that its policy of rapprochement with Cairo had not been jeopardised by the sale of the HAWK.

The administration’s approach to the Johnson Plan and the HAWK sale reveals once again a critical aspect of Kennedy’s strategy, which is the centrality of the policy of rapprochement with Nasser. Indeed, Kennedy’s attempt to tackle the refugee issue should not be interpreted as an effort aimed at taking advantage “of whatever regional openings he could find or create”⁶⁴⁷ in the context of the Arab-Israeli dispute, but as a strategy designed to bolster his rapprochement with Nasser. Bass is correct when he argues that

⁶⁴⁴ Telegram from the Embassy in Cairo to the Secretary of State, September 29, 1962. Ibidem.

⁶⁴⁵ Letter From the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot) to the Ambassador to the United Arab Republic (Badeau), May 20, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 253.

⁶⁴⁶ Memorandum From the Director of the Office of United Nations Political Affairs (Sisco) to the Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs (Cleveland), September 19, 1963. Ibidem, 326.

⁶⁴⁷ Bass, *Support any friend...*, 246.

Kennedy did not try to solve the refugee issue as much as he tried to circumscribe it⁶⁴⁸, but he misinterprets this approach as an effort to gain “more Cold War options in the Middle East.”⁶⁴⁹

Kennedy’s mediation over the refugee issue derived from his attempts to shield Nasser from inter-Arab propaganda. During a meeting at the White House on August 21, 1962, Robert Strong, director of the office of Near Eastern affairs, told Kennedy that Nasser was under “quite serious attack from the Saudis, from the Jordanians and from the Syrians”⁶⁵⁰ for having allegedly liquidated the Palestinian issue in exchange for US economic aid. As expressed in Komer’s memorandum to Feldman, sent in May 1962, the Arabs used propaganda around the refugee issue to divert popular attention from domestic social and economic problems, and their attacks against Nasser risked bringing the UAR into a more active anti-Israel and anti-US policy.⁶⁵¹ Given that the entire focus of Kennedy’s Mideast policy was Nasser, the New Frontiersmen sought to protect their goal of fostering a working relationship with Cairo by attempting mediation over the refugee issue. But Kennedy himself was quite sceptical about the Johnson plan, declaring during the same meeting: “I don’t see how it’s possibly going to work.”⁶⁵² It should not come as a surprise that when the Johnson plan started to tremble under the opposition from both Arabs and Israelis, Kennedy did not hesitate to disengage from it. When the Yemen crisis exploded, the administration shifted its focus towards more immediate concerns, while on his side Nasser sought to regain the prestige lost after the Syrian secession by committing Cairo to the YAR independence.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibidem, 247.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁵⁰ Timothy Naftali, ed., *The Presidential Recordings of John F. Kennedy: the Great Crisis*, Vol. I, (New York; London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001). 619.

⁶⁵¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Mike Feldman, May 31, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 5-62.

⁶⁵² Timothy Naftali, ed., *The Presidential Recordings of John F. Kennedy...*, 562.

Similarly, the administration did not decide to sell the HAWK missile system because of a military imbalance in the region⁶⁵³, let alone to force Ben Gurion's hand into accepting a plan that even Kennedy was not too sure of.⁶⁵⁴ The decision to sell the HAWK to Israel was once again in the context of the policy of rapprochement with Nasser. Because of Kennedy's pro-Nasser policy, the administration concluded that "some kind of satisfactory reassurance to Israel is the essential obverse of our policy towards Nasser"⁶⁵⁵, an approach that the administration would return to during the Yemen crisis, when in 1963 it allowed the first US-Israeli joint talks on the security of the region.

Yemen Crisis and "Disillusion"

The military coup that overthrew the Yemeni monarchy of Imam Mohammed al-Badr in September 1962⁶⁵⁶, and that brought to power a pro-Nasser regime led by Colonel Abdullah Sallal, opened a fourth phase of US-Egypt relations, one which Heikal called "Disillusion"⁶⁵⁷, as it was indeed defined by a mutual sense of distrust and disenchantment that gripped both leaders until the very end of their relationship. Because of the multitude of regional actors involved, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel, as well as international actors such as Britain and the Soviet Union, Kennedy and Nasser found themselves progressively more entwined with their own personal priorities and objectives, realising that an insurmountable divergence had emerged because of the incompatibility of their goals. It was however Congress, not Kennedy, that decided to end the policy of rapprochement, when in November 1963 it amended the foreign aid bill,

⁶⁵³ A more thorough analysis on the issue of Nasser's acquisition of Soviet weapons in relation to the HAWK sale is provided in the following chapter.

⁶⁵⁴ Such is the thesis offered by Ben-Zvi, who states that the HAWK was mainly sold to gain leverage for the refugee plan. Abraham Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arm Sales...*, 65.

⁶⁵⁵ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Phillips Talbot, May 1, 1962. JKF Library, NSF, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli Relation.

⁶⁵⁶ A more thorough analysis of the Yemen crisis is provided in the last chapter of this work.

⁶⁵⁷ Heikal, *Nasser, The Cairo Documents...*, 196.

terminating the programme of foreign economic assistance to the UAR. Kennedy's reaction to the amendment⁶⁵⁸ is testament to the president's desire to keep open the door for Nasser. Tragically, he would be assassinated only two weeks later.

In a region shaken by the new wave of Nasserism triggered by the coup in Yemen, the Kennedy administration soon found itself juggling on the one hand the need to protect the Saudi oil fields, to secure the British interests in the Aden port and to defend Jordan from a possible Israeli move to seize the West Bank, and on the other the need to bolster its rapprochement with Cairo by supporting the new, republican regime in Yemen. Shortly after the coup, on October 4, 1962, the administration received reassuring words from Yemen's Prime Minister Sallal, who stated that his intention was to focus on internal economic reform, maintain independence from outside influence, refrain from "foreign adventures" and establish friendly relations with Saudi Arabia.⁶⁵⁹ Such principles were dear to Kennedy, who had focused his Mideast policy on the promotion of Arab nationalism, self-determination and modernization, especially if these would replace stagnant and traditional Imamates like the one of Yemen.

For his part, Nasser took advantage of the coup to regain prestige in the region. Driven by his pan-Arabist ambition, which was sparked again by the coup against the old Yemeni monarchy, the Egyptian leader saw in the events of Yemen a perfect opportunity to move past the devastating UAR break-up, to redeem his popularity in the Arab world by supporting the nationalists in Yemen, and by resuming the Arab fight against Britain's colonialist desires, represented by its possession of the Aden port. On a more practical level, Nasser was also facing serious troubles in Egypt itself, as members of the Free

⁶⁵⁸ President John F. Kennedy News Conference #64, November 14, 1963. JFKL, President's Office Files, News Conference, November 1963, 5.

⁶⁵⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Legation in Yemen, October 4, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 86.

Officers had started to challenge his foreign policy, urging him to fill the vacuum left by the Syrian secession.⁶⁶⁰

The crisis soon evolved into a civil war, with the royalists on one side supported by Saudi Arabia and Britain, and the republicans on the other supported by Egypt and the Arab nationalists. The Soviet Union, trying to make the best use of the crisis to get back into Nasser's good books, extended support to Cairo, warning all the other parties to "keep 'hands off' Yemen"⁶⁶¹, while the United States, committed to the defence of its economic interests in Saudi Arabia and those of Britain in Aden, tried to mediate between all the factions involved without jeopardising its rapprochement with Nasser.⁶⁶²

When the issue of the recognition of the new republican government in Yemen emerged, the Kennedy administration reached a crossroad. Britain, Jordan and Saudi Arabia urged Kennedy to delay the recognition and stop aiding the UAR, charging Nasser's involvement with being provocative and dangerous.⁶⁶³ Israel demanded reassurances as to Cairo's intentions⁶⁶⁴, while Congress started to wonder how much

⁶⁶⁰ Stephens, *Nasser: A Political biography*..., 385.

⁶⁶¹ Memorandum of a conversation, October 3, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVIII, 66.

⁶⁶² Although the direct involvement of the Egyptian leader cannot be confirmed, historian Clive Jones explains how the "timely arrival of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF)... suggests, at the very least, a measure of Egyptian connivance". Clive Jones, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War: Ministers, Mercenaries and Mandarins; Foreign Policy and the Limits of Covert Action*, (Eastbourne, Portland, Thornhill; Sussex Academic Press, 2010). Conversely, according to Bass, the outbreak of the Yemen civil war was caused by the internal clash between the traditional Imamate and the progressive forces led by Sallal, inspired, of course, by Cairo's propaganda. Nasser was caught by surprise by the revolution, but sought to take advantage of it to consolidate his prestige in the Arab world after the Syrian secession of 1961. Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 102. Little contends that, since Yemen was one of the most backwards countries in the world, Nasser's propaganda was "bound to appeal to Sallal and other YAR leaders". Little, *American Orientalism*..., 184. Bass and Little's arguments seem more founded, because in the early 1960s Nasser's policy appeared to be far more cautious than it had been back in the 1950s (particularly with regards to Israel), and even after the Iraqi and Syrian coup in February and March 1963, the Egyptian leader did not appear to be particularly pleased. Perhaps, as Jesse Ferris argues, the truth lies somewhere in the middle: "The Egyptians had known about preparations for the coup and prepared to aid it in advance, but they did not take an active role in the coup itself. Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power*, (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2013), 31.

⁶⁶³ Paper by the Officer in Charge of Arabian Peninsula Affairs (Seelye), October 17, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVIII, 81

⁶⁶⁴ Memorandum of a conversation, December 27, 1962. Ibidem, 121.

longer the Egyptian leader could be tolerated.⁶⁶⁵ However, very few in the US administration wished to reverse the positive trend that had been developing in the US-UAR relations by refusing to recognise the new regime, which also happened to be in line with Kennedy's idea of a progressive and modern Middle East. Seeking to ease the tensions, on November 17, 1962, Kennedy wrote a personal letter to Nasser, in which he urged him to promptly withdraw Egypt's troops from Yemen and proceed with disengagement, an action that he guaranteed would be reciprocated by Saudi Arabia and Jordan.⁶⁶⁶ Nasser replied a few days later, stating that his involvement in Yemen was a consequence of Saudi Arabia's attack on the will of the Yemeni population, but he also manifested interest in cooperating with Washington.⁶⁶⁷

Three reasons brought Kennedy to recognise the new government on December 6, 1962. First of all, the administration still perceived Nasser as the key to enhancing Washington's prestige in the Arab world and among the other international neutralist leaders. It believed that by extending recognition to the new regime it could placate Nasser and encourage all factions to disengage, thus preventing the risks of deepening the crisis, endangering the Saudi oilfields and causing an explosion of popular anti-Americanism in the region. Second, the Soviet Union had already gained ground in the region by granting prompt recognition to Sallal's new government.⁶⁶⁸ All the work done until that moment to shield the region from the Soviets by steering the nationalists away from Moscow, could be jeopardised by refusing or delaying the recognition. Third,

⁶⁶⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, December 30, 1962. Ibidem, 123.

⁶⁶⁶ Heikal, *Nasser: The Cairo Documents...*, 191.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁶⁸ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, November 12, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVIII, 96.

Kennedy and his administration were getting tired of supporting “old Kings against Republicans”⁶⁶⁹ and of being associated with old-fashioned, backwards clients.⁶⁷⁰

Thus, when in early December 1962 the United States decided to extend formal recognition to the Yemen Arab Republic⁶⁷¹, Nasser’s response seemed to give credit to Kennedy’s strategies. On December 14, 1962, Cairo stated that since “the Yemen Arab Republic has firmly established itself” it was now ready to “undertake a reciprocal expeditious disengagement and phased removal of its troops from Yemen”.⁶⁷²

On December 19, 1962, the recognition was made official. A few days later Kennedy wrote to Nasser, emphasizing the need “to reach an understanding among the parties involved in the current conflict in Yemen”⁶⁷³ and hoping that Nasser would keep his promise. Shortly after however, the administration was informed that on December 31, 1962, a new UAR raid had taken place, this time against the city of Najran, in Saudi soil.⁶⁷⁴ Although the new raid was allegedly provoked by the deployment of 15,000 Saudi-supported royalist troops near Najran⁶⁷⁵ and by the fact that Britain was mounting a progressively more hostile attitude towards the republican government⁶⁷⁶, the administration began to fear that Nasser’s interest was extending beyond the objective of ensuring Yemen’s self-determination. As the incident “created new difficulties in resolving the Yemen conflict”, Washington promptly informed Cairo that it would

⁶⁶⁹ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 16.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷¹ Memorandum from the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to McGeorge Bundy, December 6, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVIII, 112. King Saud and King Hussein were immediately reported to “have expressed displeasure” with US recognition. Prime Minister Faysal asked for clarification on the change of strategy, wondering why Kennedy had changed his view from the last meeting they had. *Ibidem*, 113.

⁶⁷² Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, December 14, 1962. *Ibidem*, 114.

⁶⁷³ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, December 24, 1962. *Ibidem*, 120.

⁶⁷⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, December 31, 1962. *Ibidem*, 124.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷⁶ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, January 2, 1963. *Ibidem*, 126.

consider “any attack on that integrity as damaging to direct US interests”⁶⁷⁷ and asked Badeau to investigate if Nasser was really after the Saudi oil. The Egyptian leader denied it promptly.⁶⁷⁸ During the meeting, in which the ambassador underlined the nature of US commitment to protecting Riyadh, Nasser made clear: “I know you’ve got oil interest[s]. I’m not after the oil of Saudi Arabia”.⁶⁷⁹ The same statement was repeated a couple of months later when, in March 1963, after Kennedy had sent Ellsworth Bunker as a special ambassador to mediate between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Nasser told him that the rumours about him marching into Saudi Arabia’s oilfields “were nonsense” and that he went to Yemen for a whole different reason.⁶⁸⁰ Arguably, much of Nasser’s commitment in Yemen derived from his attempt to regain prestige after the UAR break-up rather than from an actual military effort to invade Saudi Arabia. Indeed, while on the one hand it is hard to believe that Nasser would have disregarded the American and British interests in Saudi Arabia, or that he would have risked losing Kennedy’s support, on the other it is plausible to argue that his campaign in Yemen was aimed at restoring his prestige in the Arab world after the 1961 Syrian secession, and at countering Arab propaganda against his allegedly soft line on the Palestinian question.⁶⁸¹ Even the administration did not believe that Nasser would venture into Saudi Arabia: “UAR bombings are designed to pressure [the] Saudi Arabia government to move rapidly towards cessation [of] aid and/or to stimulate [the] United States government into increased efforts so to persuade [the]

⁶⁷⁷ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Saudi Arabia, December 31, 1962. Ibidem, 124.

⁶⁷⁸ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 21.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁸⁰ Heikal, *Nasser, The Cairo Documents...*, 193. Nasser told Bunker: “Tell the President that I am not Hitler and I don’t have a Rommel in the Yemen.” Ibidem. At the end of March, Bunker made a proposal to stop the conflict in Yemen which included the use of UN observers and a mutual disengagement plan. Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVIII, 205.

⁶⁸¹ Timothy Naftali, ed., *The Presidential Recordings of John F. Kennedy...*, 562.

Saudi Arabia government”⁶⁸², reported Badeau in January 1963, while in March the CIA confirmed that Nasser would be “concerned about [the] United States reaction” should something happen to Saudi Arabia.⁶⁸³

However, as events in Yemen appeared to be escalating, such conjectures began to be insufficient. The Kennedy administration found itself under mounting pressure from Britain, Israel, the Arab monarchies and even the American oil companies, over its support for a leader whose actions were threatening the stability of the region and the multitude of Western interests. Representatives from ARAMCO, Texaco, Gulf Oil and others oil giants, “violently anti-Nasser in their policy”⁶⁸⁴, made clear that they were “very unhappy”⁶⁸⁵ with the course of Kennedy’s policy in Yemen and advocated an end to the policy of rapprochement. During a meeting held in the White House on January 28, 1963 between Robert Komer and Kermit Roosevelt of Gulf Oil, the administration was informed that the oil companies were indeed rather sceptical about turning Nasser inwards because, as Roosevelt commented, “each time Nasser has tried this, he has found it so frustrating (because of the enormity of the problem) that he has turned back to foreign adventures.”⁶⁸⁶ In response, Komer tried to explain to the oil representative that it would be “folly not to cultivate decent relations with him” because such a course of action would leave Nasser an “exclusive client of the Bloc.”⁶⁸⁷ But despite Komer’s words, Roosevelt walked away unconvinced.⁶⁸⁸

The Egyptian leader was indeed making it difficult for the administration to justify its UAR policy in light of the events taking place in the Middle East as a consequence of

⁶⁸² Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Secretary of State, January 9, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 208, Yemen, General, UAR Cables, 1-63, 3-63.

⁶⁸³ CIA Telegram, March 13, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 168A, United Arab Republic, General, 1-63, 3-63.

⁶⁸⁴ Memorandum for the Record, February 25, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 164.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁶⁸⁶ Memorandum for the Record, January 28, 1963. Ibidem, 145.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibidem.

the new wave of Nasserism that fuelled the regional disputes in the period between 1962 and 1963. By April 1962, King Hussein of Jordan was trembling under the threat of a Nasserite coup caused by violent uprisings, which the administration also feared could open the doors to an Israeli invasion of the West Bank and thus spark an Arab-Israeli war. Saudi Arabia feared both direct military action from Cairo as well as internal uprisings.⁶⁸⁹ Congress, Ben Gurion and the oil companies feared for both the security of Israel as well as for the Arab oilfields. Britain feared for its possession of Aden. All these players advocated an end to Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Nasser, arguing that the events were proving that despite the "Kennedy treatment" the indomitable Egyptian leader was above all guided by his pan-Arabist ambitions and by threatening objectives of foreign policy. Yet even though all the actors involved had their reasons to be alarmed and to press Kennedy to overturn his approach to Cairo, the administration still believed that Nasser was the key to a more secure Middle East, as only he could ease the tensions in the region by starting to withdraw his troops from Yemen and by focusing back on the modernization of Egypt. Once again, the administration was not inclined to reverse the positive trend that it had managed to develop through the "Kennedy treatment", and it also feared that a policy of hostility would only provoke Nasser to escalate his foreign adventures while simultaneously causing an explosion of anti-Americanism in the region.⁶⁹⁰

However, acknowledging the difficulty of getting Cairo to disengage from Yemen and the importance of pacifying the other factions involved in the crisis, the administration decided to adopt a different line, moving from carrot to "stick"⁶⁹¹ in the

⁶⁸⁹ Parker T. Hart, *OHI*, April 15, 1969, 5.

⁶⁹⁰ Memorandum from the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to McGeorge Bundy, May 8, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 240.

⁶⁹¹ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 20.

hope of bringing Nasser's "policies and actions within tolerable limits"⁶⁹², and placating the domestic and international actors who were mounting increasing attacks on the US stance. Komer suggested Kennedy send a blunt letter to Nasser, in the hopes that "a few harsh words" would move the Egyptian leader to a more conciliatory position.⁶⁹³ On January 19, 1963, Kennedy expressed his disappointment to Cairo: after outlining that Washington's policies were not designed "to support Saudi policies in Yemen"⁶⁹⁴, the president made clear that the "mutually promising relationship" they had tried to establish was being jeopardised by the events of Yemen, as every time the administration had the feeling they were "making some progress toward disengagement" Nasser's reaction had set everything back.⁶⁹⁵ Kennedy finished however with a note of hope: "Many people in both of our countries question whether good relations between us are really possible. I think they are wrong, but it is up to us to prove them wrong."⁶⁹⁶

Even if during a follow-up meeting with Badeau held in late January 1963, Nasser reaffirmed that he had no intention of overthrowing Saudi Arabia's regime, and that it was in "no one's interest"⁶⁹⁷ to prolong the conflict, by the beginning of February 1963 the administration was still receiving information that Nasser was reinforcing his troops in Yemen.⁶⁹⁸ Thus, in mid-February 1963, Kennedy approved operation HARD SURFACE⁶⁹⁹, a "politico-military reassurance of a plate glass fighter squadron" aimed at deterring Nasser from moving against Saudi Arabia and at reassuring Faysal of the

⁶⁹² Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, January 2, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 126.

⁶⁹³ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, January 2, 1963. Ibidem, 127.

⁶⁹⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, January 19, 1963. Ibidem, 135.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁹⁷ Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, January 24, 1963. Ibidem, 141.

⁶⁹⁸ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, February 7, 1963. Ibidem, 151.

⁶⁹⁹ Memorandum for the Record, February 25, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 164. A more thorough analysis of operation HARD SURFACE is provided in Chapter 5.

American support.⁷⁰⁰ Despite Kennedy's manoeuvres and diplomatic efforts, by late November 1963, the conflict in Yemen was nowhere near resolution.

Was HARD SURFACE the moment at which Kennedy's rapprochement with Nasser began to crumble or, as Warren Bass puts it, at which Faysal managed to reinforce "the centrality of the House of Saud to American diplomacy"⁷⁰¹ to the detriment of Kennedy's rapprochement with Cairo?

Significantly, Feldman argued in his Oral History Interview that from that moment Kennedy began to think that Nasser was "completely untrustworthy" and that he should not have believed "anything he said."⁷⁰² From the day of Sallal's seizure of power in September 1962 until that tragic November of 1963, the administration had received various reassurances from Nasser, such as that he would "reduce his commitment to Yemen" or that he would "let the Yemenis rule themselves", but his course of action eventually moved Kennedy to think that "what Nasser was saying bore no relationship to what he was thinking"⁷⁰³ According to Feldman, Kennedy even regretted his decision to recognise Yemen, but it was one decision that he could not take back.⁷⁰⁴

In truth, whether Kennedy changed his personal opinion about Nasser or not, his overall strategy in the region remained largely unchanged. During the last year of Kennedy's presidency, and despite the difficulties of bringing the factions to disengage, the administration was still convinced of the importance of its policy of rapprochement with Nasser for the American strategies in the Middle East.

Indeed, Komer's memorandum to the president, dated February 21, 1963, shows that the strategies towards Cairo still prevailed over Riyadh's concerns: "to commit

⁷⁰⁰ Robert Komer, *OHI*, September 3, 1964, 1, 2.

⁷⁰¹ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 4.

⁷⁰² Myer Feldman, *OHI*, July 29, 1967, 507, 508.

⁷⁰³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, 509.

ourselves to take on Nasser in defense of Faysal's right to intervene covertly in Yemen seems folly”⁷⁰⁵, he told Kennedy, pointing out that if the administration shifted towards the royalist side, it would lose prestige in the Arab world, turn Nasser back to the Soviet Union, and show Faysal that Washington would “bail him out of his scheme to bleed Nasser in Yemen”⁷⁰⁶ “True, Nasser may still try greater pressure on Saudis”, continued Komer “but Faysal is asking for it.”⁷⁰⁷ Komer concluded by saying that it was important to “make any commitments to Faysal dependent on his willingness to play ball.”⁷⁰⁸

This memorandum reveals three important aspects of the administration’s approach to Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the context of the Yemen crisis. First, it shows that Cold War objectives still prevailed in the minds of the New Frontiersmen. The administration was still committed to enhancing US prestige in the Arab world by supporting Sallal’s regime, rather than supporting an Imamate that “would be unpopular with most Arabs except Faysal and Hussein.”⁷⁰⁹ Second, it demonstrates that the Kennedy administration was still committed to steering Nasser away from the Soviet Union by showing him support rather than adopting policies that could antagonise him: “he can cause a lot more trouble if he's against us than if we have an "in" with him”⁷¹⁰, remarked Komer, perhaps the strongest supporter of Kennedy’s Nasser strategy. Third, it shows that what might be interpreted as a shift towards Saudi Arabia caused by the administration’s realisation of Nasser’s unreliability in Yemen, was in truth a strategy primarily designed to gain leverage on Faysal in the context of Kennedy’s policy towards Cairo. Indeed, operation HARD SURFACE is not evidence of Kennedy’s

⁷⁰⁵ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, February 21, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 160.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibidem.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibidem.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibidem.

⁷¹⁰ Ibidem.

acknowledgement of the impossibility of carrying out the rapprochement with Nasser, nor should it be interpreted as Faysal's success in establishing Saudi Arabia as main focus of the White House's strategies in the Middle East. Kennedy was not willing to interrupt his policy towards Egypt, let alone replace Nasser with the Saudi royal family. Until Congress approved the Gruening amendment, just two weeks before Kennedy's assassination, the US administration worked unrelentingly to preserve its policy of rapprochement with Nasser while simultaneously trying to contain the Yemen crisis in order to secure the oil interests in Saudi Arabia. But HARD SURFACE was a "purely political effort"⁷¹¹ designed to deter Faysal from prolonging his military operations in Yemen, not a testament to Kennedy's willingness to abandon his policy of rapprochement with Nasser and to transform Saudi Arabia into an American proxy in the region. Kennedy tried to bolster his strategies towards Nasser until the relationship between Cairo and Washington crumbled under pressure from Congress.

On October 19, 1963, Kennedy sent a frank letter to Nasser, the last missive of their extensive correspondence. Kennedy revealed his bitterness "over the UAR's failure... to carry out its part of the Yemen disengagement agreement"⁷¹² and confessed that, as the US government was being "criticized both at home and abroad", the administration's "policy of friendly collaboration in areas of mutual interest with the UAR" was becoming more and more uncertain. Yet even so, Kennedy ended with a note of hope, proving once again that the end of the New Frontier's attempt to do business with Nasser did not rest with the White House: "I continue to believe in this policy... The alternative... could not but lead to a situation in which the US and UAR, instead of

⁷¹¹ Robert Komer, *OHI*, September 3, 1964, 2.

⁷¹² Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, October 19, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 347.

moving closer together, would drift further apart.”⁷¹³ Disappointments aside, Kennedy was not yet ready to turn his back on Nasser.

Nasser, however, was less sanguine. According to Heikal, after having learned of rumours about a possible interruption of the PL-480, the Egyptian president had concluded that “although Kennedy had come with new ideas” he was after all imposing them with “ruthless means and... without any sense of direction”.⁷¹⁴ But more than with Kennedy, Nasser’s frustrations lay with Congress, as on November 7, 1963, it amended the foreign aid bill with a formula that allowed the US to withhold foreign aid “to any country that the President determined was engaging in or preparing for aggressive military action against the United States or any country receiving U.S. assistance.”⁷¹⁵ As a result, during a meeting between Nasser and Badeau held on November 8, 1963, the Egyptian president spent most of the time “speaking bitterly and at length against the American tactics of using aid to put pressure on him”, ending the conversation saying that “he would have to go back to 1957.”⁷¹⁶

But November was also the month of Kennedy’s assassination. His policy in the Middle East came to a bitter end, leaving the burden to his vice, L.B. Johnson. Significantly, Nasser was shocked by the news of Kennedy’s assassination. Despite the growing distrust between the two presidents, he and his people were “genuinely grieved.”

⁷¹³ Ibidem.

⁷¹⁴ Heikal, *Nasser: The Cairo Documents...*, 195.

⁷¹⁵ Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to Senator J. William Fulbright, November 11, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 160, 357. Since the spring of 1963, Congress had been openly attacking the administration for its foreign aid programme towards the UAR. Back in May, Senator Javits charged: “Nasser is not pulling out his troops at all... Mr President I think the policy of the US must be deeply and intensively reviewed.” Congressional Record, May 16, 1963, 88th Congress, 1st session, 1963. When by October the withdrawal from Yemen still appeared distant, the senators found more ground to level accusations. In October 1963, Senator Keating stated: “Mr President, it is incredible to me that the United States continues, even under these circumstances, to supply Nasser with US foreign aid”. Congressional Record, October 1, 1963, 88th Congress, 1st session, 1963. The administration’s reaction to the Gruening amendment is examined in Chapter 5.

⁷¹⁶ Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to Senator J. William Fulbright, November 11, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 160, 357.

Arriving at the office, he said: “My God, why have I dressed, why have I come here? There is nothing any of us can do about it”.⁷¹⁷

Although the relationship between the two presidents ended on a sour note, Nasser’s sorrowful words reveal however a certain degree of closeness and faith unique in the history of US relations with Cairo. Kennedy had indeed managed to establish closer ties with the Egyptian leader and to overturn the role that the United States had played until that moment with the key player in the Middle East, reducing the influence of the Soviet Union by steering the forces of Arab nationalism away from Moscow, and by focusing on the US-sponsored programmes of economic development and modernization. Much more than Eisenhower, Kennedy had tried to implement a program of foreign assistance that could really help the Cairo government tackle the economic issues of Egypt, agreeing to a multi-year basis deal that could allow that long-term economic planning needed by the government. Kennedy’s ability to seduce Nasser through the PL-480, his personal diplomacy and his support of Arab nationalism, allowed the administration to keep the Arab-Israeli dispute on ice, despite the numerous hindrances that it had encountered and the implementation of hazardous policies such as the HAWK sale of 1962, while simultaneously convincing Nasser that the New Frontier would not repeat the mistakes of the previous administration.

The nature of Kennedy’s policy towards Cairo was significantly innovative for the region, as it was based on an attempt to gently guide the Egyptian leader to a Western-oriented neutralist course rather than forcefully pushing him in one direction through the making of alliances and the use of threats. Kennedy was the first president to clearly break with the assumption that Arab nationalism would favour the diffusion of communism and to acknowledge and support the existence of the third pole of non-aligned countries,

⁷¹⁷ Heikal, *Nasser: The Cairo Documents...*, 197.

enhancing US prestige in the region by overturning Arab portrayal of Washington as an imperialist force in the Middle East that had prevailed since the early 1950s.

It is also important to acknowledge that, although Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Nasser was punctuated by highs and lows, the administration had a clear, pragmatic idea of what could and could not be gained from Nasser. As expressed in Komer's memorandum to Kennedy, dated January 15, 1962, the policy towards Egypt was admittedly based on a long-term programme with scarce short-term benefits. Ever the pragmatist, Komer told Kennedy: "despite the inevitability of further ups and downs in US-Egyptian relations, it is in our long-term interest to encourage Egypt to steer a moderate neutralist course."⁷¹⁸ The tragedy of Kennedy's overtures to Egypt lies with the fact that the New Frontiersman did not live long enough to see the long-term benefits of his strategy, but only to experience the disappointments of its short-term costs. But despite the Yemen quagmire, by late 1963 the Kennedy administration was still convinced that the policy of rapprochement with Nasser could not be jeopardised by the interests of Nasser's enemies: "We make people more, and not less, nationalistic by actions which seem to them to be 'neo-colonial pressure'"⁷¹⁹, Bundy told Senator Fulbright a few days after the amendment passed Congress, a statement that reflects perfectly the administration's evaluation of Congress's decision. Indeed, it was Capitol Hill, not the White House, which ended the history of Washington's attempt to do business with Nasser. Kennedy never believed, as Bass argues, that "risking Nasser's friendship over a deepening American special relationship with Israel was not risking much at all"⁷²⁰, nor was he convinced that a friendship with Faysal would give him "more Cold War options

⁷¹⁸ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

⁷¹⁹ Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to Senator J. William Fulbright, November 11, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 160, 357.

⁷²⁰ Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 5.

in the Middle East.”⁷²¹ The policy of rapprochement with Nasser remained at the top of the administration’s agenda as part of both a regional strategy, and a more comprehensive Third World strategy, designed to contain communism. Nasser was the only Cold War option for Kennedy, which meant that the policies towards Saudi Arabia and Israel were elaborated in the context of the rapprochement with Cairo, not the other way around.

It is hard to say what would have happened if Kennedy had lived, but arguably many of his strategies had allowed the administration to temporarily reduce Moscow’s influence in the region, and to keep the Arab-Israeli dispute at bay while even attempting mediation over the refugee issue. Indeed, even if Kennedy benefited from very favourable circumstances over which the New Frontier had no real influence, such as for instance the friction between Nasser and Khrushchev, he was able to seize the opportunities that were presented before his eyes. More so than Eisenhower, Kennedy managed to steer the forces of Arab nationalism away from Moscow by presenting the United States as a supporter of their nationalist ambitions, and by designing policies that would not be perceived as an attempt to polarize the Arab world within the context of the Cold War. More than Johnson, Kennedy managed to maintain a balance between his policies towards the revolutionary forces in the Middle East and the American interests in Arab oil and in the defence of Israel. Indeed, Johnson’s tenacious opposition to Nasser and to the Arab reactionaries, and his bold support of Israel, ended up estranging the Arab nationalists, reigniting the issue of Palestine, and setting in motion a series of events that would culminate with the Six-Day War.

However, despite Kennedy’s efforts, the New Frontiersmen lacked the ability to fully appreciate the gravity of inter-Arab discords. It was not in fact the dispute between Arabs and Israelis, but between Arab monarchies and Arab republics, which provoked

⁷²¹ Ibidem, 247.

the turbulence that occurred during the last year of his presidency. Kennedy had managed to keep the Arab-Israeli dispute on ice, but by September 1962 the administration realised that the heat was coming from the desert as much as from that remote corner of the Arabian Peninsula, theatre of the proxy war between conservative and progressive Arab world. Even more significantly, Kennedy misjudged Nasser's pan-Arabist ambitions, assuming that their shared idea of development, modernization and self-determination could alone be the basis of a comprehensive, mutual understanding. The administration pushed an aid programme aimed at turning the Egyptian leader inwards and focusing his attention on the economic development of his country, but learned with the Yemen crisis that Nasser was a leader whose ambitions were more geared towards foreign than domestic policy. With dismay, Kennedy eventually had to come to terms with the fact that Nasser the revolutionary had prevailed over Nasser the statesman.

The paradoxical result of the New Frontier's experience with Nasser lies with the fact that, by the time Kennedy was assassinated, Washington was closer to Saudi Arabia and Israel than it was to Egypt. In an attempt to gain leverage on Faysal and on the Israeli government and to contain the Yemen crisis, during 1963 Kennedy approved HARD SURFACE and pushed Faysal to accelerate his domestic reforms, while simultaneously reaffirming Washington's commitment to the defence of Israel and allowing, by early November 1963, the first joint security consultations between the two countries, thus setting the basis for a dramatic shift in the US strategies in the region. Significantly, Kennedy never wished for the United States to abandon their policy of rapprochement with Cairo, nor did he intend to rely on conservative Arab monarchies to pursue Cold War objectives. However, by failing to terminate the conflict in Yemen, the Kennedy administration failed also to convince Washington of the importance of bolstering the strategy of rapprochement with Nasser. Johnson dismissed the idea of dealing with Nasser

and shifted the focus of the US Mideast policies towards more stable allies, Saudi Arabia and Iran, while simultaneously fully embracing Israel's friendship. The two-pillar strategy and the special relationship between the United States and Israel were the products of the Johnson administration, but much of their foundation dates back to the Kennedy years. Kennedy's strategies towards Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran came in the context of his policy of rapprochement with Nasser. Despite placing the Arab nationalist at the top of his Mideast agenda to achieve Cold War objectives, the New Frontiersman ensured that the conservative regimes in Riyadh and Tehran would survive the revolutionary transformations occurring in the region under Nasser's progressive propaganda⁷²², and he embraced Israel's *bitahon* in an attempt to forestall its pre-emptive attacks. Ironically, after Kennedy died, Iran and Saudi Arabia were stable enough to cover the role of proxies, Israel was by then an integral part of Washington's regional strategies, and the revolutionary Nasser was still stirring up troubles in Yemen. In trying to preserve his policy of rapprochement with Nasser, Kennedy had unintentionally set the basis for Johnson's new approach to the Middle East.

But the bitter end of Washington's attempt to do business with Cairo was more Nasser's responsibility than Kennedy's failure. The Egyptian leader failed to take advantage of the most significant opening in his diplomacy with Washington's policy-makers, embarking on a conflict that would not only be the death of his relationship with the United States, but would also mark the beginning of his decline as leader of the Arab world. By the mid-1960s, the Syrian regime was openly challenging Cairo's role in the Arab world, since Nasser's personal focus on Yemen had little to do with the Arabs' ambitions in Palestine⁷²³, while the Arab population grew disenchanted with Nasser's

⁷²² A paper prepared by the State Department highlighted the importance "to persuade the UAR to abate its radio propaganda against Iran and the Shah". Paper prepared in the Department of State, May 24, 1962. FRUS 1961-1962, Vol. XVII, 276.

⁷²³ Little, *American Orientalism...*, 186.

achievements.⁷²⁴ The astonishing 1967 defeat of the Cairo-led Arab coalition against Israel, prompted by Nasser's attempt to regain consensus across the Arab world, marked the moment at which his dream of Arab unity collapsed, and the secular and progressive precepts encapsulated in his idea of Arab nationalism gave in to more traditional and strictly sectarian Islamic values.⁷²⁵

In summary, how should Kennedy's policy towards Nasser be assessed? Perhaps, conjectures aside, Kennedy's policy towards Cairo should just be examined for what it was and what it meant historically: an ambitious, yet overall bright, footnote in an otherwise controversial tale of misunderstandings, disputes and missed opportunities.

⁷²⁴ Fred Halliday, "The Cold War: Global Conflict, Regional Upheavals", *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 116.

⁷²⁵ *Ibidem*, 122.

Chapter 4. Kennedy, Israel and the policy of containment

The making of an unintentional friendship

Despite the short duration of his presidency, Kennedy was responsible for one of the major changes in United States foreign policy in the Middle East. The development of a new, closer relationship with Israel not only ended the period of estrangement that had characterised the Eisenhower era, but also unintentionally laid the foundation for that special alliance that, sealed during the presidencies of Johnson and Nixon, would define the American stand in the region for years to come. Indeed, after Kennedy's death, Johnson would take a clear pro-Israel stand, closing on Nasser and cementing a more intimate relationship between the two countries⁷²⁶, while Nixon, after the astonishing outcome of the Six Day War, would come to regard Israel as a precious, strategic asset to contain Soviet ambitions in the region.⁷²⁷

However, the unintentional element of this relationship constitutes a pivotal aspect to the analysis of the outcome of Kennedy's foreign policy towards Israel. Contrary to what has been argued in previous works, where authors such as Douglas Little and Abraham Ben-Zvi have implied that Kennedy's shift towards Israel was dictated by geo-strategic considerations⁷²⁸, or that it was caused by his acknowledgement of Nasser's unreliability, as Warren Bass suggests⁷²⁹, or even that it was provoked by the pressure exercised by the Israeli Lobby, as Roby C. Barrett disputes⁷³⁰, this work contends that the shift in the US-Israel relationship occurred mainly in light of Kennedy's strategy of

⁷²⁶ Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*..., 123.

⁷²⁷ Ibidem, 173.

⁷²⁸ Little, *From Even-Handed to Empty-Handed*..., 157 and Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arm Sales to Israel*..., 98.

⁷²⁹ Bass, *Support any Friend*..., 5, 145.

⁷³⁰ Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*..., 6.

containment of Israel. In trying to carry out his policy of rapprochement with Nasser, and aware that “what [the] Israelis really need and want is [a] reaffirmation of our security guarantee”⁷³¹, Kennedy enhanced Israel’s security and strengthened its bond with Washington in the hopes of containing it and forestalling pre-emptive attacks against its Arab neighbours. As a result, by the end of his presidency, the New Frontiersman had set the basis for the development of a special alliance between the two countries, though such an outcome was never really intended.

Significantly, Kennedy adopted a more balanced approach than his predecessor with regards to the Arab-Israeli dispute. During the Eisenhower years, Israel was regarded as nothing more than a hindrance in the formulation of the American strategies, which were limited to the traditional Arab allies, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon and the pre-1958 Iraq. But during the Kennedy years, Israel became part of the New Frontier’s even-handed approach to the region, a strategy designed to allow the administration to carry out its rapprochement with Nasser while containing the fears of other Middle Eastern actors who perceived the Egyptian leader as a threat. Crucially, Kennedy’s close relationship with the Ben Gurion government did not derive from his alleged sympathy towards Israel, nor from domestic political considerations.⁷³² If it is true that Kennedy exploited his connection to the Israeli government for his own domestic benefit, never for instance making a mystery of his gratitude for the support of the American Jewry during the presidential elections of 1960, it is also true that the reason behind such a friendly and even-handed attitude was a critically strategic one. The new administration had not only acknowledged that pacts and alliances in the style of the Baghdad Pact or the Middle East resolution should give way to programmes of economic development and modernization

⁷³¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, June 1, 1962. JFKL, NSC, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer 6-62.

⁷³² A section of this chapter is thus devoted to explaining the role of the Israeli lobby in the Kennedy White House.

sponsored by the US that, as argued earlier, would lead the Arab world to embrace capitalist development and refuse socialism, but also that containing and limiting the tensions between Arabs and Israelis was pivotal to defeating the Soviet Union and protecting the Western economic and strategic interests in the region. A quieter Middle East would allow Washington to carry out its Cold War strategies without the risk of seeing them jeopardised by the rivalry between Arabs and Israelis, and thus the promotion of an Arab-Israeli settlement was key for Washington's Cold War strategies. As Robert Komer commented in June 1962, this depended "largely on a sufficiently even-handed attitude toward Arabs *and* Israelis to give us leverage with the Arabs."⁷³³

Seeking to establish better relations with Nasser, the central focus of Kennedy's approach to the region, the administration decided that, paradoxical as it might sound, the enhancement of Israel's security was the key to lessening the tensions in the region. Indeed, given that Israel's national policy was based on "active defence", a strategy according to which Israel would prevent attacks against its own territory by attacking first⁷³⁴, the administration had concluded that only by embracing Israel's concerns and strengthening its security, could the risk of pre-emptive attacks be contained. The State Department, Talbot told Rusk in November 1961, was in fact concerned that Israel would "come to feel politically isolated and/or in grave military jeopardy" and thus "be tempted to engage in pre-emptive military attack against the UAR or Syria, or both."⁷³⁵ But if the Kennedy administration was to offer security guarantees to Israel, Ben Gurion could perhaps be manoeuvred to assume a less threatening and hostile stance in the region. Such

⁷³³ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, June 1, 1962. JFKL, NSC, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer 6-62.

⁷³⁴ Department of State, "Israel's Policy of Reprisal against the Arabs", May 23, 1962. JFKL, NSC, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli Relation.

⁷³⁵ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, November 22, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 143. As noted in Chapter 3, Nasser kept the name UAR for Egypt, even if Syria was no longer a part of it.

a position was largely shared among the Kennedy administration. In May 1962 for example, Komer made clear:

“Some kind of satisfactory reassurance to Israel is the essential obverse of our policy toward Nasser... We are committed to Israeli’s independence and integrity, as a means of forestalling excesses on their part.”⁷³⁶

As a matter of fact, Eisenhower’s toughness with the Israelis had produced the counter-effect of exacerbating their fears and sense of isolationism. The Qibya operation and the Jordan Water issue of 1953⁷³⁷, were for instance the first signs of Israel’s aggressive policy and of the friction and distance between the Israeli government and the Eisenhower administration. When the two crises exploded, Eisenhower furiously condemned Israel’s attitude, accusing the Ben Gurion government of preventing “the restoration of stability... in the Near East”⁷³⁸ and of lacking in the “realism required for a successful adjustment into the Near Eastern environment.”⁷³⁹ When the Baghdad Pact

⁷³⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Phillip Talbot, May 1, 1962. JFKL, NSC, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli Relation.

⁷³⁷ In September 1953, Washington found out that the Israeli government had started works to divert the flow of water of the Jordan River from Syria into their own country. While the formal justification was that it was simply a diversion of the river to power a hydroelectric station on the Tiberias lake, the Eisenhower administration found out that the project was actually designed to irrigate the Negev desert (which meant a loss of 12,000 acres of land for Syria). Only at the end of October, after several threats of suspension of the foreign aid programme, did Israel communicate to Washington that it would stop the works. Donald Neff, “Israel-Syria: Conflict at the Jordan River, 1949-1967”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (summer, 1994), pp. 26-40. The second event took place simultaneously to the Jordan River controversy. The night of October 12, a squad crossed the Jordanian border into Israel and placed a grenade in a civilian house in Yehud, near Tel Aviv, killing three people. Immediately, the Jordanian government apologized and promised to arrest the responsible. But in the morning of October 13, some members of the Israeli government and army leaders moved a massive military operation against the town of Qibya, in Jordan. The command of the operation was entrusted to Major Ariel Sharon, who organized an army of 600 soldiers and heavy artillery, surrounded Qibya, and began an indiscriminate bombing destroying homes, mosques and public buildings, and killing over 60 civilians. Benny Morris, “The Israeli Press and the Qibya Operation, 1953”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (summer, 1996), pp. 40-52. The tragic event of Qibya is well documented. For instance, authors such as Igor Primoratz and Michael Bell cite the Qibya Operation to indicate the extent of Israel’s reprisal policy. Igor Primoratz, “Terrorism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Case Study in Applied Ethics”, *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* / 55 קיבוץ, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, January 2006 pp. 27-48. Micheal Bell, “Ariel Sharon”, *International Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter, 2004/2005), pp. 247-254. Norman H. Finkelstein reports Sharon’s comment on the operation: “Qibya... was to be a lesson”. Norman H. Finkelstein, *Ariel Sharon*, (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Co., 2005), 28.

⁷³⁸ Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Byroade) to the Secretary of State, November 10, 1953. FRUS 1952-1954, *The Near and Middle East (in two parts)*, Vol. IX, Part 1, 725.

⁷³⁹ Ibidem.

was created, one of the reasons behind Washington's decision not participate directly in the organisation was to prevent Ben Gurion from making a similar request.⁷⁴⁰ Following the Suez crisis, the president supported the United Nations resolution to impose sanctions on Israel should it not withdraw from the occupied territories, and pursued the arms embargo that had started with Henry Truman. Eisenhower furiously stated that he did not "care in the slightest whether he is re-elected or not" and that it was necessary to seek an UN condemnation of the invasion.⁷⁴¹

Such an attitude, while proving Eisenhower's tenacity and commendable independence from electoral considerations, proved also his inability to move past his "black and white"⁷⁴² view of Middle Eastern affairs and his incapacity to fully appreciate the intricate dynamics of the region. The rapid development of the Nasserist wave across the region after the 1956 Suez Crisis, Nasser's acquisition of Soviet weapons after the famous 1955 Czech arms deal, and Eisenhower's seductive approach to the Arab monarchies in an effort to protect US oil interests, inevitably added fuel to Israel's fear and aggravated the tensions between the two factions.⁷⁴³ In fact, besides its traditional problems, such as being a narrow strip of land, surrounded by hostile Arab countries, smaller in population, and fearful because of its troubled past⁷⁴⁴, Ben Gurion saw in Eisenhower's bitterness a danger for the *bitahon*, right at the time when the Egyptian leader was becoming the 'Mr Big' of the Arab world. "If Nasser were to send his Army

⁷⁴⁰ Memorandum from the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Murphy) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Rountree) and the Assistant Secretary's Special Assistant (Burdett), December 3, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XII, *Near Eastern Region; Iraq; Iran*, 153.

⁷⁴¹ Memorandum of a Conference with the President, White House, Washington, October 29, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, *Suez Crisis, July 26-December 31, 1956*, Vol. XVI, 411.

⁷⁴² Robert Komer, *OHI*, August 16, 1964, 3.

⁷⁴³ Research Memorandum, May 23, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli relation. As noted in Chapter 1, a number of border incidents related to Israel's pre-emptive strategy occurred during the Eisenhower administration.

⁷⁴⁴ The closest nations, Egypt and Syria, had in fact a decisive advantage in terms of population. While Egypt counted 25 million and Syria 5 million, Israel was a nation of only 2 million people. Memorandum of a Conversation, March 10, 1960. FRUS 1958-1960, Vol. XIII, 131.

into Israel... he would exterminate the Jews just as Hitler exterminated them in Germany”⁷⁴⁵, complained Ben Gurion during a meeting with Eisenhower in March 1960, worried about the Egyptian acquisition of Soviet weaponry that had started with the 1955 arms deal. Hundreds of instructors and thousands of aviators, new bombers (much improved in terms of capacity to carry bombs), tanks, armoured vehicles, heavy mortars, anti-tank guns, anti-aircraft guns, jets, bombers helicopters and torpedo boats were being delivered by Moscow straight into the hands of the ever-popular Egyptian leader.⁷⁴⁶ After the 1955 Czech arms deal, many in the Israeli government started to advocate pre-emptive strikes against Nasser⁷⁴⁷, while simultaneously seeking to enhance Israel’s own military capability with American arms. However, Eisenhower perceived Ben Gurion’s apprehensions as a typical Israeli obsession with the Arab threat, and thus closed the doors to any sort of arms shipment to the Ben Gurion government. Declaring to his entourage that “Israel will not, merely because of its Jewish population, receive preferential treatment over any Arab State”⁷⁴⁸, throughout the 1950s Eisenhower firmly declined any sort of protective arrangement or military contribution to Israel’s security, replying to Ben Gurion’s demands that he did not believe that “security lies in arms.”⁷⁴⁹ Such an opposition derived from the administration’s critical belief that Washington’s support to Israel was the prime factor responsible for its decline in the region⁷⁵⁰, and thus that any sort of special treatment or favour would be “clearly against United States over-all interests in the Middle East.”⁷⁵¹

⁷⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁷⁴⁷ Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, (London: Allen Lane, 2000), 244.

⁷⁴⁸ Statement of Policy by the National Security Council, July 14, 1953. FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, Part 1, 145.

⁷⁴⁹ Memorandum of a Conversation, March 10, 1960. FRUS 1958–1960, Vol. XIII, 131.

⁷⁵⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Officer in Charge of Palestine-Israel-Jordan Affairs (Waller), June 9, 1953. FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, Part 1, 622.

⁷⁵¹ Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Byroade) to the Secretary of State Rusk, June 3, 1954. Ibidem, 830.

But while Eisenhower pursued his strategy of containment of communism and of preservation of American and European interests in Arab oil, Ben Gurion grew progressively more concerned with the Arab threat, Nasser's ambitions, and the White House's estrangement. In fact, as Avi Shlaim rightfully argues, if on the one hand the Suez crisis had shown Israel's military superiority over Cairo, on the other it had also proved its international isolation.⁷⁵² The Arab world found itself ideologically reunited under Nasser's leadership, the Soviet Union did not miss the opportunity to side with the Arabs, and even the United States condemned the Israeli invasion. In this climate of profound uncertainty, the Israeli government concluded that it was critical to obtain external security guarantees, an urgency further unveiled by the wave of Nasserism which exploded in 1958.⁷⁵³

With Eisenhower underestimating Israel's fears, Washington's stance soon backfired, causing the administration to lose leverage with the Israeli government. As a result of his sense of isolation and of Nasser's growing ambitions, Ben Gurion developed a progressively more hostile position in the Arab world, as he tried to defend Israel's "right to existence"⁷⁵⁴ against a possible Arab threat. Israeli policy-makers believed in fact that, should Nasser succeed in his unification of the Arab world, a war against Israel would take place⁷⁵⁵, and thus they resorted to pre-emptive attacks in the hopes of deterring the Arabs from launching such a war. For this reason, after the Suez crisis, as Nasser's popularity was reaching its pinnacle, the Ben Gurion government pressed the Eisenhower administration even harder to obtain some sort of security guarantees. Perhaps even more significantly, after the 1958 crisis in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, and the unification between Egypt and Syria - the first concrete step towards Nasser's pan-Arabist objective-

⁷⁵² Shlaim, *The Iron Wall...*, 186.

⁷⁵³ Ibidem, 188, 199.

⁷⁵⁴ Memorandum of a Conversation, March 10, 1960. FRUS 1958–1960, Vol. XIII, 131.

⁷⁵⁵ Shlaim, *The Iron Wall...*, 187.

Israel began, with the help of the French government, the development of the Dimona nuclear facility, allegedly “for the desalinization of seawater”⁷⁵⁶, but covertly for the long-term objective of gaining military supremacy in the region through nuclear weapons, the ultimate deterrent against the Arabs.

Arguably the Eisenhower administration had indeed underestimated, or failed entirely to take into account, Israel’s “active defence”, the purpose of which was to “keep the Arabs psychologically off balance by repeated reminders of Israel’s alertness and striking capability”.⁷⁵⁷ Indeed, even though the Eisenhower administration believed that “there was little likelihood that the Arab states would resort to war against Israel”⁷⁵⁸ (as did the Kennedy administration for that matter⁷⁵⁹), the Ben Gurion government, obsessed with the Arabs’ “State of War against Israel”⁷⁶⁰, believed that only by “constantly strengthening the deterrent power of the Israeli defence force” and by “securing the moral and political support”⁷⁶¹ of the world powers (the United States above all others) could the threat of an Arab war of destruction against Israel be averted. In the minds of the Israeli policy-makers, deterrence and pre-emptive retaliatory raids, key instruments of “active defence”, had in fact “helped discourage the Arabs from larger-scale military activities against Israeli territory.”⁷⁶²

However, this “active defence” constituted a risk to US interests, even more so when the Israeli government believed the White House to be insensitive towards their concerns. For instance, feeling excluded by Eisenhower’s regional plans, and to a certain

⁷⁵⁶ David Ben-Gurion, *OHI*, July 16, 1965, 8.

⁷⁵⁷ Research Memorandum, May 23, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli relation.

⁷⁵⁸ Memorandum of Discussion at the 298th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, September 27, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XVI, 273.

⁷⁵⁹ Airgram from John Badeau to Secretary of State Rusk, August 23, 1962. JFKL, National Security Files, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli relation.

⁷⁶⁰ Message from Prime Minister Ben Gurion to President Eisenhower, October 20, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XVI, 361.

⁷⁶¹ Statement to the Knesset by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, May 6, 1963. Meron Medzini, *Israel’s Foreign Relations, Selected Documents 1947-1974*, Vol. II, (Jerusalem: Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1976), 659.

⁷⁶² Research Memorandum, May 23, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli relation.

degree antagonised by the US government, particularly after the Qibya operation, Israel carried out a raid against the Gaza Strip in February 1955, causing Nasser to seal the arms deal with Czechoslovakia and allowing Moscow to meddle in Middle Eastern affairs. Such a raid was only one of the many attacks carried out by the Israeli government against its Arab neighbours⁷⁶³, but its outcome was perhaps the most significant. Realising the inadequacy of his military forces, Nasser turned to the Soviet Union to fill the gap between the Egyptian and the Israeli army. For this reason, Spiegel's argument that "when heavy pressure on Israel was exercised, US problems were worsened"⁷⁶⁴, seems to fit perfectly in the analysis of the Eisenhower administration's foreign policy towards Israel.

During his own presidency, Kennedy tried to bring balance in Washington's policy towards both Arabs and Israelis through an even-handed approach that would placate the Israeli government and allow the administration to deal with the Arabs without the threat of Israel's reprisal policy. The enhanced defence and security of Israel during the Kennedy administration, famously through the sale of the HAWK missile system, was thus not a goal set out for the president's own political benefit, nor was it a way to gain a "wider range of Middle Eastern options"⁷⁶⁵ in light of the difficult overtures to Nasser, but simply a means to carry out larger Cold War strategies in the region. In the shadow of the Dimona nuclear threat and with the policy of rapprochement with Nasser at stake, Kennedy dealt with the Israelis through a clever game of *quid pro quos*, ending the era of the bitter relationship between American and Israeli governments and gaining leverage against Israelis policy-makers in the pursuit of his strategies towards Cairo. In the process, he also unintentionally laid the foundation for the making of a special alliance between the two countries.

⁷⁶³ See note 75, page 40.

⁷⁶⁴ Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict...*, 91.

⁷⁶⁵ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 12.

Downsizing the lobby

Kennedy's presidency is one which fuels controversy among scholars and historians investigating the Arab-Israeli dispute, the US foreign policy in the Middle East and the role of lobbies in the American policy-making process. Because of the outcome of his policy towards Israel - one that saw its ties with the United States significantly strengthened - some authors have placed Kennedy's domestic political calculations above the administration's strategic concerns in the region, implying that the pressure exercised by the Israeli lobby on the Kennedy White House eventually influenced, if not shaped, the course of US foreign policy in the Middle East during the early 1960s.⁷⁶⁶

The reasoning behind such a misleading assessment lies in the fact that, from his early days in Congress, and during his time as a president, John F. Kennedy kept close contacts with the Jewish world, spoke eloquently (and sometimes rather incautiously) of the "special relationship"⁷⁶⁷ between the United States and Israel, and candidly confessed to his entourage his domestic political concerns over issues regarding Israel.⁷⁶⁸ But it would be a mistake to subscribe to the theory that Kennedy merely adopted a pro-Israeli policy in the region for his own political benefit. Certainly, the Israeli lobby eventually played a role in the New Frontiersmen's foreign policy in the Middle East as, together with the oil representatives, it eventually moved Congress to interrupt the programme of

⁷⁶⁶ Such is for instance the thesis of Roby C. Barrett, who states that, as the Yemen crisis developed, "increasing Israeli domestic political pressure on Kennedy left little to be gained" in the relation between Washington and the Arab states, particularly Nasser. Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 326. J.J. Mearsheimer and S.M. Walt also argue that "the influence of several pro-Israel advisers, and Kennedy's understandable desire to maintain support from Jewish voters and donors played a role in his decision" to sell the HAWK, a milestone in the history of US-Israel relations. J.J. Mearsheimer and S.M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy...*, 25. Yakub Halabi echoes such positions, writing that the outcome of Kennedy's policy towards Israel is "a proof of the power of the pro-Israel Lobby in the US". Yakub Halabi, *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: From Crisis to Change*, (Farnham, Burlington; Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 48.

⁷⁶⁷ Memorandum of a Conversation, December 27, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 121.

⁷⁶⁸ In his Oral History Interview, Phillips Talbot quoted Kennedy saying: "The trouble with you, Phil, is that you've never had to collect votes to get yourself elected to anything". Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, December 5, 1964, 24. Barrett uses this quote to suggest that Kennedy was considerably tied down by domestic political calculations that limited his freedom of action. Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 411.

economic assistance to the UAR through the Gruening amendment in November 1963. But if the lobbies managed to exercise their power on Capitol Hill, the same cannot be said for the White House.

It is undeniable that, during his pre-presidential years, Kennedy took a clear stand in favour of Israel. After having seduced the Boston Jewish community with the help of some preeminent local political figures⁷⁶⁹, he advocated the need to create an “independent Jewish commonwealth in the Near East”⁷⁷⁰, he spoke of the need to “formulate... a new approach to the Middle East” in order to, among other things, “hasten the inevitable Arab acceptance of the permanence of Israel”⁷⁷¹, and he declared his “own deep admiration for Israel and her people”.⁷⁷² As a congressman, Kennedy opposed the United Nations sanctions against Israel, even advocating the need for greater assistance to Israel in the withdrawal of its troops from the Egyptian territory.⁷⁷³ He also spoke of the need to reopen the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping “by virtue of being a specific American commitment”⁷⁷⁴ and, again in 1956, he strongly opposed Eisenhower’s embargo on arms sales to Israel, commenting that “if the Egyptians and Arab States are going to receive arms from the Soviets and if we continue to embargo shipments to Israel, military imbalance against Israel will result.”⁷⁷⁵ During a speech in front of a furiously cheering crowd at the Yankee Stadium in New York⁷⁷⁶ for the Israeli Independence Day

⁷⁶⁹ Hirsh Freed was one of the local connections Kennedy had in Boston. He soon became his personal advisor and guide through the Jewish world, being himself a Jew. During the campaign for the House of Representatives, Kennedy started to weave a scheme of alliances among the Jewish American through Freed’s connections, making sure his name would be associated with the right people in the Jewish community, in order to avoid bad publicity. Hirsh Freed, *OHI*, June 05, 1964, 3,4,17.

⁷⁷⁰ Lewis H. Weinstein *OHI*, June 3, 1982, 11.

⁷⁷¹ Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy in the Senate, June 14, 1960. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

⁷⁷² Remarks by Senator John F. Kennedy at Yankee Stadium on April 29, 1956. Ibidem.

⁷⁷³ Lewis H. Weinstein *OHI*, June 3, 1982, 17, 18.

⁷⁷⁴ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, August 26, 1967, 550-552.

⁷⁷⁵ John F. Kennedy, *John F. Kennedy on Israel, Zionism, and Jewish issues*, (New York: Herzl Press for the Zionist Organization of America, 1965), 15.

⁷⁷⁶ The choice of location might not have been a coincidence. In fact, as Badeau commented, there are some States in America where it is believed that the constituency will respond to beneficial declarations about Israel, such as the State of New York. John Badeau, February 25, 1969, 22.

celebration, Kennedy made clear: “Israel is here to stay. She will not surrender - she will not retreat - and we will not let her fall”⁷⁷⁷, a motto he would often repeat as president too.

However, if Kennedy’s pro-Israel stance appears clear, then so do the reasons behind it. With the White House on his mind, Kennedy acknowledged quite early the importance of the Jewish constituency for his personal political ascent, as he knew that, coming from Congress, he would be conditioned in his campaign efforts by the American Jewish community.⁷⁷⁸ The importance of the Jewish constituency had already become evident during Truman’s successful 1948 election as, in the words of Snetsinger, “his shift to a pro-Zionist stance... was, after all, one of the key factors in his victory.”⁷⁷⁹ Facing a more experienced opponent (after all Richard Nixon had served under the Eisenhower administration as vice president), Kennedy hawkishly sought to seduce the American Jewish community and obtain the same kind of support.⁷⁸⁰

There are at least three reasons why the Jewish electorate constituted such an important portion of the overall American constituency for Kennedy’s ascent. First, because Kennedy was particularly concerned about the awkward legacy left by his father, J. P. Kennedy, who was well known inside and outside of Boston for his anti-Semitism.⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁷ Remarks by Senator John F. Kennedy at Yankee Stadium on April 29, 1956. JFKL, ready reference, JFK speeches.

⁷⁷⁸ Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict...*, 52.

⁷⁷⁹ John Snetsinger, *Truman, The Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel*, (Stanford; Hoover Institution Press, 1974), 134. Snetsinger argues that Truman had attracted some 30,000 last-minute votes in Ohio, California and Illinois, three key states, simply by proposing a pro-Israel policy late in the campaign. Ibidem.

⁷⁸⁰ The exception that proves the rule is provided by Kennedy’s predecessor. Eisenhower benefited from his military career, his status as a war hero and his great popularity, and his political success had little to do with the Jewish electorate. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict...*, 52. ‘Ike’ did not come from Congress, had no influential Jewish friends, and in short he “owed nothing” to the Jews. Edward Tivnan, *The Lobby: Jewish Political Power And American Foreign Policy*, (Old Tappan, New Jersey; Touchstone Books, 1988), 36.

⁷⁸¹ During the Second World War, when J.P. Kennedy was appointed US ambassador to London, he gave evidence of some sort of hostility against the Jews, when a Rabbi asked him to help his American family struggling in Europe with the Nazi persecution. However, after receiving him reluctantly, J.P. Kennedy told him to “stop being a pest”. Druks, *John F. Kennedy and Israel...*, 17, 18. It is indeed a largely shared opinion that J.P. Kennedy was anti-Semitic, and that he was “ready to accommodate himself to Nazi

By showing sympathy for Israel and its people, Kennedy hoped he would be able to distance himself from any unfortunate comparisons.⁷⁸² Second, because by showing support to Israel, Kennedy had managed to obtain substantial financial contribution from members of the American Jewish community to run his campaign.⁷⁸³ Even though Kennedy came from a very wealthy family (his father was a very capable businessman and stockbroker who had accumulated an impressive fortune in just a few years⁷⁸⁴), he was aware that “although he had all the money in the world to spend on it, he [would] be subject to criticism”⁷⁸⁵ if he funded his campaign exclusively using his family wealth. Third, because unlike Eisenhower, whose popularity and “war hero” fame preceded him, Kennedy was in an open campaign, aware that the votes of American Jews could be critical for his victory. His campaign efforts however eventually allowed him to secure, in the popular vote, only some 118,000 votes more than Nixon⁷⁸⁶, an “astonishing margin of less than two votes per voting precinct.”⁷⁸⁷ Given such a narrow margin, it might well have been that the 80%⁷⁸⁸ of American Jews who eventually voted for Kennedy by virtue of his pro-Israel stance during the presidential campaign, had influenced the result just as they did back in 1948.⁷⁸⁹

domination of Europe” Dallek, *An Unfinished Life...*, 141. See also Edward Renehan Jr., “Joseph Kennedy and the Jews”, April 29, 2002, *History News Network*. <http://hnn.us/articles/697.html>. Accessed (18.11.2013).

⁷⁸² Tivnan also argues that the American Jewish community tends to label as “anti-Semitic” those candidates that do not show clear support to Israel. Edward Tivnan, *The Lobby...*, 54-56.

⁷⁸³ Hirsh Freed, *OHI*, June 05, 1964, 14-16.

⁷⁸⁴ Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life...*, 22.

⁷⁸⁵ Hirsh Freed, *OHI*, June 05, 1964, 15.

⁷⁸⁶ “Campaign of 1960”. JFKL, JFK in History.

⁷⁸⁷ James Reston, “Kennedy's Victory Won By Close Margin; He Promises Fight For World Freedom; Eisenhower Offers 'Orderly Transition'”, *The New York Times*, November 10, 1960.

⁷⁸⁸ Tivnan, *The Lobby...*, 54.

⁷⁸⁹ Kennedy himself realised that the support of the American Jewish community had been very important for his victory (his Jewish friends made a number of phone calls to the Jewish community urging it to support his campaign). Kennedy's victory was marked by a very small margin, and somehow he felt as if he owed it to his Jewish friends. Joseph F. Feeney, *OHI*, October 5, 1976, 13.

Because of the American Jewish community's critical support for his presidential elections⁷⁹⁰, during a meeting with Ben Gurion held in New York in 1961, Kennedy manifested his gratitude by telling the Israeli prime minister privately: "You know I was elected by the Jews. I have to do something for them."⁷⁹¹ Such a bold remark, intended merely as a sign of gratitude and aimed at generating good-will between the two governments, particularly after the Eisenhower era, has further contributed in spreading the myth that Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East was largely influenced by domestic electoral considerations.⁷⁹² After all, the history of Kennedy's relationship with the Israeli government might reasonably raise suspicions that such was the case. But as shall be discussed, Kennedy's most historic decisions in relation to Israel, the HAWK sale in August 1962 and the joint security talks in November 1963, occurred in light of clever strategies of foreign policy, not to repay a supposed debt the New Frontiersman had to the Jews. Golda Meir might well have thought the HAWK was proof that the United States was Israel's ally⁷⁹³, but in the minds of the New Frontiersmen the missile system had a rather different significance.

Furthermore, the HAWK sale in particular adds doubt to the legitimacy of Kennedy's decisions, given its coincidence with the congressional elections of 1962. John Badeau has for instance recalled that this was the reason why Kennedy agreed to the sale: "It was done because the Congress was facing the first election to Congress after Kennedy had been elected... [It] is private individual pressures."⁷⁹⁴ Roby C. Barrett goes even further, arguing that "Kennedy's offer was to demonstrate support for Israel with one eye

⁷⁹⁰ Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict...*, 97.

⁷⁹¹ David Ben-Gurion, *OHI*, July 16, 1965, 1.

⁷⁹² See for instance, Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 411. Len Colodny and Robert Gettlin, *Silent Coup: The Removal of a President*, (New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1992), 168, 169. Todd Gitlin and Liel Leibovitz, *Chosen Peoples: America, Israel, and the Ordeals of Divine Election*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 184, 185.

⁷⁹³ Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 205.

⁷⁹⁴ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 22.

on the upcoming presidential campaign in 1964.”⁷⁹⁵ Knowing all too well the importance of the Jewish vote, Barrett suggests that Kennedy thus secured his re-election by making such a historical gesture.

However, beyond the most immediate interpretations of this key moment in the history of the US-Israel relationship, a number of other explanations have been provided in the literature, which seems to give less and less importance to the Israeli lobby or to Kennedy’s own domestic objectives, and more to diplomatic strategies.⁷⁹⁶ Indeed, even if the president did try to maximise the benefits of his decision, making sure that “those people who should know about it, know about it”⁷⁹⁷, the HAWK sale should be interpreted as a cleaver manoeuvre of foreign policy, the spill-over effects of which benefited Kennedy’s domestic standing, and not the other way around. The HAWK was sold to contain Israel, not to strengthen its bonds with Washington or to secure Kennedy’s re-election.

As Bass argues, it is hard to believe that Kennedy, a “political animal”⁷⁹⁸, was oblivious to domestic political considerations, just as it is equally hard to subscribe to the theory that his White House had simply adopted a pro-Israel policy. If that was the case, how should Kennedy’s intransigency over the Dimona issue be interpreted? Or why would Kennedy so consistently cross-check the recommendations of Myer Feldman, the only pro-Israel voice in his administration, with Arabists such as Bundy and Komer?⁷⁹⁹ And why was he so committed to the rapprochement with Nasser, Ben Gurion’s number

⁷⁹⁵ Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 205.

⁷⁹⁶ As noted earlier, Little has linked the HAWK sale to the Dimona issue, suggesting that Kennedy agreed to the sale to prevent Israel from developing nuclear weapons. Little, *American Orientalism...*, 95. Ben-Zvi has argued that it was sold to obtain Israel’s acceptance of the Johnson plan for the refugees. Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel...*, 65. Finally, Bass has suggested that Kennedy sold the HAWK in an attempt to correct the military imbalance in the region caused by Nasser’s acquisition of Soviet weapons. Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 148.

⁷⁹⁷ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, July 29, 1967, 539, 540.

⁷⁹⁸ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 148.

⁷⁹⁹ Robert Komer, *OHI*, December 22, 1969, 39.

one enemy and yet the core of the New Frontier's foreign policy in the Middle East? Once again, despite Kennedy's imprudent remarks, the documents produced by his administration reveal that Washington's policies towards Israel had little to do with Kennedy's personal ambitions.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, a number of studies on the subject tend to agree that the Israeli lobby during the early 1960s was unable to exercise direct pressure on the Executive.⁸⁰⁰ Because the United States and Israel relate to each other as sovereign countries⁸⁰¹, the bond between their two governments is strengthened simply when their interests coincide. That is why, as Kenen argues, the power of the lobby increased significantly after the Six-Day War, when the United States started to perceive Israel as a credible asset to containing Soviet expansion in the region.⁸⁰² But during the Kennedy administration, that was not necessarily the case. If the administration's overall approach to the region, one based on the rapprochement with Nasser, is clear evidence that it did not simply adopt a pro-Israel policy, the Dimona issue is perhaps the best testament to Kennedy's independence from domestic political considerations and from the lobby's pressure. His letters to Ben Gurion and Eshkol on Israel's nuclear research program were so severe that certain lines of the documents remained classified until 2004.⁸⁰³

The issue of the lobbies' pressure on the Kennedy administration is also quite frankly dismissed by some of his closest collaborators who operated from inside the White House. As noted earlier, Kennedy's Secretary of State Dean Rusk admitted that he was never pressured on Middle Eastern questions by the Israeli lobby⁸⁰⁴, a position

⁸⁰⁰ See for instance Verbeeten, "How Important Is The Israeli Lobby". Feingold, *Jewish Power In America: Myth and Reality*. Kenen, *Israel's Defense Line: Her Friends and Foes in Washington*.

⁸⁰¹ Feingold, *Jewish Power in America...*, 71.

⁸⁰² Kenen, *Israel's Defense Line...*, 111.

⁸⁰³ "Excerpts from Presidential Correspondence (JFK, Ben Gurion and Eshkol) on Arms Limitation Control (e.g. Dimona) in the Middle East". JFKL, NSF, Box 427, Israel- Nuclear Energy Program, 1963, 1.

⁸⁰⁴ Dean Rusk, *OHI*, August 21, 1970, 352.

echoed by Robert Komer in reference to the oil companies: “I have never had any pressure put on me or even attempted influence-peddling”.⁸⁰⁵ Of course, such pressure was eventually exercised on Congress, which by 1963, with the Yemen crisis appearing nowhere near resolution, became convinced of the paradox of supporting a leader like Nasser, who represented a threat to US interests in the region. Yet the rapprochement with Nasser was interrupted by the Senate, not by the Kennedy administration, which proves that the White House remained largely untouched by the interests of the lobbies.

Kennedy did make some gestures towards both the Israeli and the oil lobbies when he felt that Capitol Hill was becoming unsettled. For instance, in January 1963 he allowed some members of his administration, Talbot, Komer, Strong and others, to meet representatives of the American oil companies to discuss issues related to the conflict in Yemen.⁸⁰⁶ In May 1963, when the wave of Nasserism nearly caused the fall of King Hussein, Kennedy reaffirmed US commitment to the survival of Israel, among other reasons, to calm down Congress.⁸⁰⁷ But such episodes are themselves not enough to argue that the lobbies played a role in shaping Kennedy’s foreign policy in the Middle East, let alone in influencing important decisions such as the HAWK sale or operation HARD SURFACE. If anything, Kennedy’s readiness to listen to their concerns is testament to his willingness to bolster the rapprochement with Nasser - whose stand in the region appeared to Congress more and more controversial - without seeing it jeopardised by the private interests of the lobbies. In the words of Phillips Talbot, Kennedy “understood the importance in our domestic policy, and to the Democratic Party, of that body of Americans roughly categorized as friends of Israel”, yet when there was “a real issue that

⁸⁰⁵ Robert Komer, *OHI*, January 30, 1960, 10.

⁸⁰⁶ Memorandum of a conversation, January 11, 1963. Nina Davis Howland et al., *FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. 17, 18, 20, 21, Near East, Africa: Microfiche Supplement*, (Washington: Department of State Publication, 10361).

⁸⁰⁷ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, May 1, 1963. *FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII*, 232.

was... fairly urgent, we could get to the President and he would stand up on it if he were persuaded.”⁸⁰⁸

In summary, it would be misleading to attribute a more prominent role to the pressure exercised by the lobbies than that of the Kennedy administration’s own strategic thinking in the elaboration of its Mideast policies. The documents produced by the administration, the testimonies of Kennedy’s entourage, and the events related to for instance the Dimona issue or the Jordan crisis in April 1963, refute the argument that Kennedy was tied to domestic political considerations or that his administration had simply adopted a pro-Israel policy in the region. Kennedy was a clever politician and, as such, he knew which strings to pull and when to pull them. But behind his historic decisions to enhance Israel’s security, there were clear objectives of foreign policy.

The policy of arms shipment to Israel

Having scaled down the importance of domestic political considerations in Kennedy’s foreign policy towards Israel, one question still remains unanswered. Why did the administration contribute so significantly to Israel’s defence and security? Kennedy’s enhancement of Washington’s ties with Israel, historically through the 1962 HAWK sale and the 1963 joint high-level security talks, might in fact suggest a paradox in his approach to the region, one that as seen earlier was centred upon the rapprochement with Nasser.

In *Support Any Friend*, Warren Bass appears to oversimplify the Kennedy-Nasser-Ben Gurion conundrum:

“How can one explain an administration that reached out to both Israel and to Israel’s nemesis? How to explain an administration that tried to befriend both Nasser and Saudi Crown Prince Faysal? How to explain an administration that sold Hawks to Israel

⁸⁰⁸ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, July 27, 1965, 23, 28.

to assuage Ben-Gurion's fears of Nasser...? The answer may simply be that Kennedy was determined to give himself a wider range of Middle Eastern options".⁸⁰⁹

But as argued in this work, Saudi Arabia and Israel did not constitute Cold War options for Kennedy. His even-handedness did not derive from attempts to "support any friend" in the region, but to secure a working relationship with Nasser without alarming or provoking Faysal and Ben Gurion. In Saudi Arabia for instance, Kennedy's sole concern was oil, not transforming the old monarchy into a regional proxy.⁸¹⁰ The widespread belief among the administration that the royal family would collapse because of the grave domestic problems it faced, brought Kennedy to push the wiser Faysal into embracing the path of economic, social and political development and modernization in order to broaden the regime's political consensus and avoid internal uprisings inspired by the nationalists' propaganda. Yet the economic partnership between ARAMCO and the House of Saud, and Europe's dependence on Saudi oil, were the only reasons why the Kennedy administration supported Riyadh, making sure, during the Yemen crisis, that Nasser would not extend the conflict to Saudi Arabia.

Of course, Israel is different case, yet the overall argument stands: Israel did not constitute a Cold War option for Kennedy. In fact, Kennedy's decision to embrace the *bitahon* ought to be explained in light of his strategy of containing Israel, not as an attempt to secure Ben Gurion's friendship after having acknowledged Nasser's untrustworthiness, as Bass suggests.⁸¹¹ After all, Kennedy never believed that interrupting the rapprochement with Nasser and turning to less revolutionary allies was an option, and his reaction to the 1963 Gruening amendment shows anything but acquiescence to Congress's decision. For that matter, the Kennedy administration also never fully

⁸⁰⁹ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 12.

⁸¹⁰ Robert Komer recalls in fact that during the Yemen crisis Kennedy extended support to Saudi Arabia simply "because it was Saudi oil we were interested in", never mentioning larger geo-strategic objectives. Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 10, 16.

⁸¹¹ Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 5.

believed that Israel could be a strategic partner. For instance, when the crisis in Jordan exploded in April 1963, the White House's most immediate concern was Israel's pre-emptive manoeuvre aimed at avoiding the establishment of a Nasserite regime in Jordan and, possibly, seizing the West Bank.⁸¹² Kennedy labelled Israel a "danger"⁸¹³, not a "friend".

But more so than Eisenhower, who had adopted a rather tough line with the Israelis, Kennedy understood the importance of making gestures towards the Ben Gurion government. Indeed, the administration was aware that, with a Mideast policy centred on the rapprochement with Nasser through diplomatic and economic means, it was important to reassure the Ben Gurion government of the US commitment to the integrity and security of Israel.⁸¹⁴ Yet such commitment did not derive from Kennedy's attempts to secure a friend in the region, but to forestall Israel's pre-emptive attacks and keep the tensions between Arabs and Israelis at bay.⁸¹⁵

Since the era of Eisenhower, Israel's "active defence" had constituted a danger to the American interests in the region. Throughout the 1950s, the strategy designed by David Ben Gurion according to which Israel would prevent attacks against its own territory by showing its military superiority through large-scale retaliations⁸¹⁶, had resulted in a series of reprisal raids⁸¹⁷ that, as noted by the Eisenhower administration as early as 1953, exacerbated the tensions between Arabs and Israelis, posed a threat to the "objectives of achieving political and economic stability and building up area defense

⁸¹² Memorandum for the Record, Washington, April 27, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 222.

⁸¹³ Ibidem.

⁸¹⁴ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Phillips Talbot, May 1, 1962. JFKL, NSC, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli Relation.

⁸¹⁵ Ibidem.

⁸¹⁶ Research Memorandum, May 23, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 407, Robert Komer, Arab-Israeli relation.

⁸¹⁷ The Kennedy administration listed nearly 20 of the most significant Israeli attacks against its Arab neighbours that occurred in the period between 1953 and 1958. Ibidem.

potential”⁸¹⁸, and reduced dramatically the chances of bringing the Arabs to “peace with Israel.”⁸¹⁹ Indeed, the Eisenhower administration complained that the numerous border incidents, which the CIA, the Departments of State and other intelligence departments believed in fact to be caused largely by Israel’s “active defence” and its reprisal raids⁸²⁰, were damaging “the US security position in the Middle East by increasing area instability, [and] by adding to the difficulty of organizing area defense”.⁸²¹

Of course, the Soviet threat amplified the need to prevent Israel from undertaking actions that could threaten the stability of the Middle East: “[The] entrance [of] Russia into Middle East politics makes Israel’s game extremely dangerous”, warned R. Tyler, Consul at Jerusalem, in April 1954, “Israel must be made to... ease border tensions.”⁸²² The administration feared that the USSR, eager to take advantage of the tensions between Arabs and Israelis to expand its sphere of influence, would enhance its relationship with the Arab states in order to gain standing in the Middle East, by offering “diplomatic and possibly matériel support to the Arab participants”⁸²³ against Israel’s aggressive policy. As a result, it was not long before the Eisenhower administration concluded that reducing the tensions in the region would allow Washington to strengthen “the area for defense against the Communist threat.”⁸²⁴

Because Soviet ambitions in the Middle East constituted “the primary threat to the interests of the United States and the West in the Middle East (especially oil, Suez Canal

⁸¹⁸ The Ambassador in Israel (Davis) to the Department of State, February 9, 1953. FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, part I, 562.

⁸¹⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, Prepared in the Embassy in Jordan, May 15, 1953. Ibidem, 15.

⁸²⁰ National Intelligence Estimate, 18 August 1953. Ibidem, 649.

⁸²¹ Ibidem.

⁸²² Memorandum from the Consul at Jerusalem (Tyler) to the Department of State, April 17, 1954. FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, 799.

⁸²³ Special National Intelligence Estimate, February 28, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XV, 137.

⁸²⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, March 9, 1955. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XIV, 45.

and pipelines)”⁸²⁵, as early as 1953 the Eisenhower administration sought to restrain Israel in order to mitigate the Arab-Israeli dispute.⁸²⁶ In February 1953, the American ambassador informed the Israeli government that “active defence” was “unnecessary and extremely harmful to [the] interest of Israel as well as [the] US”⁸²⁷, but found the Israeli government largely unmoved by such warnings, and ready to reject Washington’s concerns on the basis that “reprisals might in certain circumstances, be [the] only effective means of self-defence.”⁸²⁸ After all, Ben Gurion was seeking American support, not a lesson on how to protect Israel.

Many of his concerns were, however, not shared by the Eisenhower administration, which believed that, since the Arabs were not willing to engage in a full-blown war against Israel, the reprisal raids were unjustified.⁸²⁹ But the issue was not whether the United States thought the Arabs would launch a war of destruction against Israel, but that the Ben Gurion government believed the policy of reprisal was the only way to “hold down Arab attacks.”⁸³⁰ The key objective of “active defence” was in fact to remind the Arabs of Israel’s military superiority, so that they would be less inclined to conduct raids against the Israeli territory, let alone launch a war.⁸³¹ Of course, the Eisenhower administration never agreed to such a doctrine. In 1954 Tyler pointed out that

⁸²⁵ Paper Prepared in the Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs and the Policy Planning Staff, December 5, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XII, 161.

⁸²⁶ Ibidem. The novelty of Kennedy’s approach lies in the fact that the New Frontier embraced Israel’s security concerns, while the Eisenhower administration’s tough line with the Israeli government only contributed in exacerbating its sense of international isolationism.

⁸²⁷ Memorandum from the Ambassador in Israel (Davis) to the Department of State, February 20, 1953. FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, 573.

⁸²⁸ Ibidem.

⁸²⁹ Memorandum from the Secretary of State to the Embassy in Israel, March 19, 1954. FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, 779.

⁸³⁰ Memorandum from the Ambassador in Israel (Davis) to the Department of State, February 20, 1953. FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, 573. Terence Robertson recalls a statement by Orde Wingate, a British captain who served in Palestine during the 1930s, to the kibbutz settlement in Palestine: “If you want to stop Arab attacks, go out and attack them. If they know you will kill two Arabs for every Jew they kill, these raids will stop.” Terence Robertson, *Crisis: The Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy*, (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 11.

⁸³¹ Editorial Note. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XVI, 240.

“There is... [An] enormous difference between individual acts of infiltrators and group reprisals officially undertaken or condoned by governments”⁸³² adding that Israel’s arguments about the Arab threat were constructed so that the government could “justify her official reprisal raids.”⁸³³ However, notwithstanding Eisenhower and Dulles’s concerns, Israeli policy-makers remained convinced that the “language of reprisals is [the] only one Arabs seem to understand”⁸³⁴, and “active defence” remained a cornerstone of Israel’s national policy.

For the American interests in the region, the most significant consequence of Israel’s “active defence” was the incident in Gaza in February 1955, when thirty Egyptians were killed in a retaliatory raid conducted by the Israeli army, moving Nasser to ask Washington for weapons in order to close the military gap with the Israeli army. Finding the doors of the White House closed, as a consequence of Dulles’s suspicion of Nasser’s international posture, the Egyptian leader then turned to the Soviet Union, sealing the 1955 arms deal with Czechoslovakia and opening the way for a series of events that would result in the 1956 Suez crisis. The administration’s predictions were thus proved to be accurate: the Soviet Union did not hesitate to provide Egypt with the military aid required and to take advantage of the frictions between Arabs and Israelis (not to mention Eisenhower’s own hostility towards Nasser) to gain status among the Arab nationalists. The Czech arms deal was only the first in a long series of arms deals between the USSR and Egypt, Syria and the post-1958 Iraq.

As noted earlier, Eisenhower’s condemnation of Israel’s actions contributed towards aggravating the fears and sense of isolation of Ben Gurion, who, convinced that

⁸³² Memorandum from the Consul at Jerusalem (Tyler) to the Department of State, April 17, 1954. FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, 799.

⁸³³ Ibidem.

⁸³⁴ Memorandum from the Ambassador in Israel (Davis) to the Department of State, January 23, 1952. Ibidem, 390.

without “[The] US Government, Israel could not survive”⁸³⁵, adjusted Israel’s relationship with Washington by agreeing to the quick withdrawal of his troops from Egypt. But by March 1956, when the diplomatic friction between the two governments had been overcome, Ben Gurion sought to acquire weapons from the United States in order to counter Nasser’s growing popularity.⁸³⁶ Israel’s fears were clearly expressed by Golda Meir in October 1957, when she addressed the General Assembly arguing that the Czech arms deal and the events of Suez had increased “the danger of a destructive war”⁸³⁷ against Israel. The 1958 wave of Nasserism, which led to the creation of the UAR, and caused two severe crises in Jordan and Lebanon and the fall of the Iraqi monarchy, further contributed in exasperating the Israeli government, which pressed the administration for military aid, including the HAWK.⁸³⁸ However, during a meeting held in the White House in March 1960 between Eisenhower and Ben Gurion, the American president maintained a posture in line with his overall attitude towards arming Israel, and firmly rejected Israel’s request. Constrained by Eisenhower’s impassibility, as early as 1958 the Ben Gurion government began working on Israel’s nuclear program, building up the Dimona facility with French help.⁸³⁹

Together with Dimona, one of Kennedy’s great concerns in the Middle East, the New Frontiersmen inherited the issue of Israel’s “active defence”. Of course, in early 1961 the Middle East was quieter than it had been in 1958, as Nasser, by then still president of the Egypt-Syria federation, appeared more interested in the economic

⁸³⁵ Memorandum from the Ambassador in Israel (Davis) to the Department of State, February 20, 1953. FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, 573.

⁸³⁶ Memorandum of a Conversation, March 28, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XV, 225.

⁸³⁷ Address to the General Assembly by Foreign Minister Golda Meir, October 7, 1957. Medzini, *Israel’s Foreign Relations...*, 641.

⁸³⁸ Memorandum from the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Merchant) to the Secretary of State, July 15, 1960. FRUS 1958–1960, Vol. XIII, 157.

⁸³⁹ Memorandum of Discussion at the 470th Meeting of the National Security Council, December 8, 1960. Ibidem, 177.

development of the UAR than in his Pan-Arabist ambitions.⁸⁴⁰ The reduction of inter-Arab tensions, the friction between Cairo and Moscow, and Nasser's willingness to find common ground with Washington, resulted in a temporary relaxation across the borders that the administration sought to exploit in order to pursue its strategy of rapprochement with Nasser. Thus, the Kennedy administration started to discuss the PL-480 (the first talk with Egyptian representatives would take place in as early as June 1961), while simultaneously trying to keep diplomatic interferences at bay.⁸⁴¹

As the administration sought to generate good will with the Cairo government, mainly through the talks on the PL-480 and Kennedy's personal correspondence with Nasser, the New Frontiersmen tried to tackle the Dimona issue and Israel's security concerns, in order to bring stability to the region and thus pursue their Cold War objective of fostering a working relationship with Nasser. The first official meeting between Kennedy and Ben Gurion, held on May 30, 1961, focused on the nuclear issue and Israel's request for weapons.

Kennedy was particularly averse to the issue of nuclear development, as he had already made clear earlier in March 1961, saying: "with the development of these new and terrible weapons war no longer offers any... solution".⁸⁴² But the Dimona issue was particularly alarming because, as noted earlier, it constituted a serious threat to US interests in the region. The administration, although considering an Arab-Israeli nuclear war highly unlikely, feared that the Israeli government would take advantage of the psychological effects of its nuclear facility to assume a less accommodating attitude

⁸⁴⁰ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to the Chairman of the Policy Planning Council (McGhee), May 30, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 58.

⁸⁴¹ The reference is to the "Cleopatra" incident. In April 1960 a UAR vessel was denied permission to unload in New York "in retaliation for the UAR boycott of Israel." Ibidem. Similarly, the Bay of Pig fiasco constituted another hindrance to the rapprochement with Nasser.

⁸⁴² White House Audio Collection, *Interview with the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation*, 25 March 1961 (released in late April 1961).

towards peace negotiations; that the Arabs would blame the West (after all Dimona was being built with French help) for Israel's achievement; and that Nasser would turn to the Soviet Union to acquire more advanced weaponry.⁸⁴³ Thus, despite the good result of the first visit to the Dimona site, carried out on May 18, 1961, by the scientists Ulysses Staebler, Assistant Director of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) Division Reactor Development, and Jesse Croach, heavy water expert, who confirmed the peaceful purpose of the facility⁸⁴⁴, the administration concluded it was also advisable to "seek similar visits at frequent intervals."⁸⁴⁵ During the May 1961 meeting, Kennedy managed to obtain permission from Ben Gurion to issue a statement of reassurance to the Arab countries with the positive result of the first inspection. If the administration could not stop Israel's nuclear research, the purpose of which was at that stage still peaceful, it could at least contain its psychological effects.⁸⁴⁶

The second point on the agenda was Israel's security. In February 1961, the Israeli ambassador Avraham Harman introduced the new administration to the problem of Israel's security, arguing that Nasser's acquisition of Soviet weapons, particularly the Soviet MIG-19, had moved the region "into a state of arms imbalance in the UAR's favour".⁸⁴⁷ Harman renewed Israel's request for the HAWK, a ground-to-air defensive missile system that, he commented, could be "ideally adapted to the purpose of defending Israel's airfields."⁸⁴⁸ During his meeting with Ben Gurion in May 1961, after the prime minister had again raised the question of Israel's security arguing that Nasser's acquisition of weapons had caused a deficit in Israel's arms, Kennedy expressed his reluctance to introduce such a weapon into the Middle East: "should missiles come into

⁸⁴³ Paper Prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, undated. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 95.

⁸⁴⁴ Memorandum of a Conversation, April 10, 1961. Ibidem, 31.

⁸⁴⁵ Memorandum from Myer Feldman to President Kennedy, May 26, 1961. Ibidem, 55.

⁸⁴⁶ Memorandum of a Conversation, May 30, 1961. JFKL, NSC, Israel, Box 118, Israel General, 6-61.

⁸⁴⁷ Memorandum of a Conversation, February 16, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 12.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibidem.

the Middle Eastern area, military weaponry will escalate fast”⁸⁴⁹, he warned Ben Gurion, promising however a careful examination of the arms balance in the region.

Kennedy was, however, more accommodating than his predecessor. The New Frontiersman was aware of the importance of generating good-will with the Israeli government, particularly because the pro-Nasser shift in American policy had made Ben Gurion (together with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iran), “vocally unhappy.”⁸⁵⁰ The 1961 meeting served exactly that purpose. In June, after Ben Gurion had returned to Israel, Barbour informed Kennedy that the prime minister was “particularly pleased with his talk with the President”⁸⁵¹, and the administration could thus exploit the cordial mood to try to work towards the rapprochement with Nasser. Back in 1953 Israeli policy-makers had warned Eisenhower that the US policies might have a “dangerous effects on Israeli population, whose feeling of isolation and lack of friendship tends to lead to despair.”⁸⁵² In 1961, Kennedy made sure they would not feel that way.

However, the administration had not embraced the theory that an arms imbalance existed between the UAR and Israel. During the meeting of February 1961, Harman had linked Israel’s request for the HAWK directly to the UAR acquisition of the Soviet’s MIG-19, stating clearly: “Israel is now reviewing its circumstances in the light of the UAR’s acquisition of the MIG-19.”⁸⁵³ Harman contended that the new weapons acquired by Nasser constituted a significant change in the arms balance of the region, and thus that Israel’s request was justified on the basis that Eisenhower had promised to reconsider the HAWK sale if a change in the status quo occurred. But the administration confirmed that

⁸⁴⁹ Memorandum of a Conversation, May 30, 1961. JFKL, NSC, Israel, Box 118, Israel General, 6-61.

⁸⁵⁰ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, May 28, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 5-62.

⁸⁵¹ Memorandum from Walworth Barbour to the Secretary of State Rusk, June 21, 1961. JFKL, NSC, Israel, Box 118, Israel General, 6-61.

⁸⁵² Memorandum from The Chargé in Israel (Russell) to the Department of State, October 17, 1953. FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, Part 1, 694.

⁸⁵³ Memorandum of a Conversation, February 16, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 12.

the French Super-Mystere fighter-bomber was “virtually on a par with the MIG-19” and that the French Mirage aircraft was “much superior to the MIG-19”⁸⁵⁴, thus making clear that there was no arms imbalance after all.⁸⁵⁵

The UAR break-up in September 1961, shifted the administration’s focus from the supposed arms imbalance to the issue of Israel’s “active defence”. Indeed, while Nasser had clearly expressed his unwillingness to engage in a conflict with Israel, particularly in light of the fact that he was more concerned with “rebuilding his political stature in Egypt”⁸⁵⁶ after the secession of Syria, the change in the Syrian government reignited that country’s hostilities against Israel.⁸⁵⁷ As early as March 1962, the administration was informed of clashes between Syrians and Israelis on Lake Tiberias, caused by Israel’s attempt to withdraw water from the lake through pumping installations.⁸⁵⁸ As a result of the tensions, the Israeli government conducted a large retaliatory raid with the purpose of destroying a Syrian military base and deterring the new Syrian government from “molestation of Israel’s territory.”⁸⁵⁹ Fearing new large-scale hostilities between Arabs and Israelis, which could spoil the rapprochement with Nasser and favour Soviet infiltration, on March 20, 1962, Talbot met Harman to remind the Israeli government that “the United States continues very much opposed to the employment of such raids”⁸⁶⁰, because it feared they could provoke a spiral of incidents and doom the region to the instability of 1956 or 1958: “Violence invites violent responses and greater violence still”, argued Talbot, but Harman rejected the warning,

⁸⁵⁴ Memorandum from the Department of Executive Secretary (Stoessel) to McGeorge Bundy, February 24, 1961. Ibidem, 15.

⁸⁵⁵ This conversation is one of several examples that refute Bass’s argument that the HAWK was sold because of “a dangerous arms imbalance against Nasser”. Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 4.

⁸⁵⁶ Research Memorandum, October 30, 1961. JFKL, NSF, Box 332, Action Memoranda, Policy towards Egypt and Syria, 10-16-61.

⁸⁵⁷ Memorandum from L.D. Battle to McGeorge Bundy, October 16, 1961. Ibidem.

⁸⁵⁸ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, March 28, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 226.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁸⁶⁰ Memorandum of a Conversation, March 20, 1962. Ibidem, 216.

leaving the meeting without accepting the department's argument or expecting his government to do so.⁸⁶¹

Rusk promptly informed Kennedy of the situation. On March 28, 1962, the secretary of state pointed out that Israel could not “continue to take the law into its own hands” and that anything other than condemnation would result in “strong feelings in the Arab world against the US”, would spoil the effectiveness of the policy of rapprochement with Nasser, and could possibly cause future incidents that could be exploited by the Soviet Union to enhance its position among the Arab countries.⁸⁶² Thus, during the same month, the White House approved a draft resolution condemning Israel's military action as a “flagrant violation” of the ceasefire of 1948⁸⁶³, and the incident was eventually resolved with the mediation of the UN secretary general, who called on both factions to “abide fully by all the provision of the General Armistice Agreement”.⁸⁶⁴ Significantly, Israel's position on the issue did not change but was, if anything, aggravated by the UN decision. In April 1962, Ben Gurion expressed his concerns in front of the Knesset, arguing that the text of the UN resolution showed that Israel's “honour and vital interests will be sacrificed to the needs of the Cold War”⁸⁶⁵, and calling for the use of Israel Defence Force (IDF) to forestall aggressions against Israel.⁸⁶⁶

The clash between Syria and Israel renewed the issue of Israel's “active defence”. During a meeting between Shimon Peres and members of the State Department on May 24, 1962, the Israeli deputy defence minister complained that “[The] US assistance to [the] UAR increases Israel's security problems” and that both the French and British

⁸⁶¹ Ibidem.

⁸⁶² Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, March 28, 1962. Ibidem, 226.

⁸⁶³ Ibidem.

⁸⁶⁴ United Nations. Secretary General, *Repository of Practice of United Nations Organs: Supplement*, Issue 3, Vol. 1-4, (United Nations, 1972), 149.

⁸⁶⁵ Statement to the Knesset by Prime Minister Ben Gurion on the situation along the Israel-Syria frontier, April 10, 1962. Medzini, *Israel's Foreign Relations...*, 650.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibidem, 652. The Knesset rejected the Security Council Resolution, arguing that it would “preserve its sovereignty in principles and practice, under all conditions, in all its territories and waters.” Ibidem, 653.

governments seemed more inclined to maintain “their own position in the Arab world”⁸⁶⁷ than to satisfy Israel’s requests. Thus, Peres insisted that the American HAWK was an essential requirement for the security of Israel. While the US intelligence departments had informed the administration that Israel’s defence forces were “qualitatively superior to the UAR”⁸⁶⁸ Talbot and McGhee, both present during the meeting, shifted the focus of the conversation to Israel’s raids, arguing that they were the cause of Nasser’s decision to “embark on major increase in defence with Soviet assistance”.⁸⁶⁹ After all, the 1955 raid against Gaza and Nasser’s consequent acquisition of Soviet weapons was a clear evidence of the risks behind Israel’s national policy. Yet, once again unmoved by the US concerns, Peres ended the meeting commenting that the retaliatory raids were indeed a “valuable instrument [of] Israel policy.”⁸⁷⁰

The different opinions between US and Israelis policy-makers on the stability of the region seemed beyond the reach of any mere diplomatic agreement. On the one hand, the Kennedy administration was committed to preventing Moscow from exploiting the tensions between Arabs and Israelis to expand its interests in the Middle East, as it believed that “active defence” would only result in an exacerbation of regional tensions to the advantage of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Ben Gurion government was convinced, just as it had been during the 1950s, that retaliation was a key instrument to prevent the Arabs from launching a war of destruction against Israel - a threat that the administration considered however “too remote to discuss seriously.”⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁷ Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to Phillips Talbot, May 23, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 273.

⁸⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁸⁶⁹ Ibidem.

⁸⁷⁰ Department of State Telegram, May 24, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 118, Israel, General, 4-62, 5-62.

⁸⁷¹ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, November 22, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 143.

Over the following months, the administration started to discuss the possibility of embracing Israel's *bitahon*, i.e. making a gesture towards the Ben Gurion government to show that the US was committed to the integrity and security of Israel. The reactivation of the portion of the 1950 Tripartite Declaration that dealt with external aggressions, envisioned by the administration as early as May 1962 to satisfy Israel's demands⁸⁷², was simply not enough. Ben Gurion was asking Kennedy to provide Israel with "sufficient deterrent strength"⁸⁷³ to stop the Arabs' attacks against his country, and, although he was opened to diplomatic understandings with Washington, what he was really seeking was "a security guarantee specifically formulated for Israel, and access to a wider range of military equipment"⁸⁷⁴, in particular the HAWK. Furthermore, even Nasser manifested his scepticism towards such a solution when, questioned in May 1962 about his view of the external guarantees provided by the Tripartite Declaration, "he made a bitter reference in this connection to the 1956 action"⁸⁷⁵ of Britain and France, two of the three signers of the declaration. But with the policy of rapprochement with Cairo at stake and the renewed hostilities between Israel and Syria, the administration had concluded that forestalling Israel's reprisal policy and easing the tensions in the region was critical for the US strategies. In this scenario, the HAWK sale appeared increasingly to be the only way to counter Israel's "active defence".

⁸⁷² Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, May 3, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 263. The Tripartite Declaration, signed by the US, Britain and France in 1950, sought to "obtain a clear commitment from Israel and the Arabs on two points: to refrain from modifying the present borders by force, and to maintain stability and peace in the area." G. Avner (Tel Aviv) to M. Sharett, 18 May 1951. Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel, Vol. V, 1950, Vol. VI, 1951, Edited by Yemima Rosenthal, 127.

⁸⁷³ Letter from Prime Minister Ben Gurion to President Kennedy, June 24, 1962. JFKL, President's Office Files, Israel, Security: 1961-1963.

⁸⁷⁴ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, August 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 14.

⁸⁷⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, May 3, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 263.

Bargaining: the HAWK sale and the Johnson Plan

From a long-term perspective, the HAWK sale of August 1962 constitutes perhaps the most significant event of Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East as, by agreeing to the sale, the Kennedy administration became in effect responsible for putting an end to the 13-year policy of arms embargoes on Israel, and for introducing the most sophisticated weapon the region had ever seen. Thus, it should hardly come as a surprise that the literature identifies the Kennedy presidency as the moment at which the relationship between the United States and Israel shifted towards a closer partnership, setting the basis for the special alliance we know today. Such an argument is possibly partially responsible for having focused the attention of scholars and historians primarily on the relationship between Kennedy and Ben Gurion.⁸⁷⁶

However, although some of the most insightful works conducted on the subject have discussed at length the reasons that brought Kennedy to such a historic decision, the literature still presents a gap when analysing the HAWK sale. The arguments presented by authors such as Ben-Zvi, Bass, and Little to explain the sale (respectively on the refugee issue, the supposed arms imbalance between the UAR and Israel, and the Dimona threat) are reasonable explanations for the HAWK sale. After all, the documents produced by the administration show that the HAWK sale was linked to Israel's acceptance of the Johnson plan for the refugees; that it was also justified in light of Nasser's acquisition of Soviet weapons; and that it would possibly have deterred the Israelis from producing nuclear weapons. But this work argues that, beyond these most immediate explanations,

⁸⁷⁶ Several authors traced the origins of the US special alliance with Israel back to the Kennedy years, such as Warren Bass, Douglas Little, Abraham Ben-Zvi and Roby C. Barrett. John P. Miglietta has also argued that "It was the Kennedy administration that initiated the special relationship between the United States and Israel." John P. Miglietta, *American Alliance Policy in the Middle East...*, 133. Similar arguments are also made in Herbert Druks's *John F. Kennedy and Israel*, and in Spiegel's *The Other Arab-Israeli conflict*, in which the author argues that Kennedy's decision to sell the HAWK "would basically alter the American-Israeli relationship." Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli conflict...*, 108.

lies a more intricate strategy of foreign policy designed to contain Israel's "active defence", ease the tensions between Arabs and Israelis, and thus succeed in the policy of rapprochement with Nasser.

Of course, much of Kennedy's agreement to the sale derived from the impossibility of finding a viable alternative for Israel's request of security guarantees. The reactivation of the Tripartite Declaration that dealt with external aggression was not enough for Ben Gurion and, in light of the events of 1956, rather unconvincing for Nasser. Other forms of security guarantees, such as the US-Israel bilateral defence agreement suggested by Harman as early as February 1961, were excluded because the administration feared they would be interpreted "as an abandonment of an impartial attitude on the part of the United States"⁸⁷⁷ in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Even the British alternative to the HAWK, the surface-to-air missile Bloodhound, was frankly rejected by the Israeli government: "Israel has no interest in the Bloodhound"⁸⁷⁸, commented Golda Meir during a meeting with Feldman in August 1962, adding that, since the system was inferior, Israel would choose the HAWK, even if it was more expensive than the Bloodhound.⁸⁷⁹

Because of the impossibility of finding a different course, throughout the summer of 1962 the administration became more and more convinced that the HAWK could be sold after all. A gesture towards Israel would in fact reduce "any temptation Israel may have to take pre-emptive offensive action" against its Arab neighbours⁸⁸⁰, Talbot told

⁸⁷⁷ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, May 1, 1961. FRUS 196-1963, Vol. XVII, 39.

⁸⁷⁸ Memorandum of a Conversation, August 24, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 30.

⁸⁷⁹ Ibidem. Israel's rejection of the British alternative was hardly a surprise. Robert Komer recalled in fact how the Israelis used to complain "we can't get HAWKS from anybody else", and that the administration would reply: "the British have a thing called Bloodhound." But when questioned whether they would buy the British missiles for US own defence, the administration's response would be a frank "Hell, no!" Komer, *OHI*, December 22, 1969, 80.

⁸⁸⁰ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, June 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 290.

Rusk in June 1962, adding that, despite the UN resolution of April that had condemned the retaliation against Syria, Israel's conduct had not changed. The "active defence" was still "portrayed as being necessary to [the] defense of its security".⁸⁸¹

The regional political backdrop further reinforced the importance of satisfying Israel's request as a means to forestalling Israel's policy of retaliation. The border incidents between Israel and Syria following the UAR break-up, reignited the tensions between Arabs and Israelis, giving voice to strident Arab propaganda aimed directly at Israel and Nasser.⁸⁸² Besides the renewed "indoctrination of young Arabs with hatred of Israel"⁸⁸³, countries like Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Jordan had started accusing Nasser of adopting a soft line with Israel in exchange for US aid, calling for a more active policy against Israel.⁸⁸⁴ Furthermore, in July 1962, the Egyptian leader had also fired the first rockets built with German help, allowing the Israeli government to take the issue as evidence of Nasser's hostile intentions, and thus furthering its cause for the HAWK.⁸⁸⁵ Finally, from a Cold War perspective, the issue of Lake Tiberias had also given further evidence of the importance of keeping Israel's retaliation policy under control. When the border incidents between the two countries exploded in March 1962, Moscow did not miss the chance to promise "all out support to Syrians"⁸⁸⁶ against Israel.

Of course, the sale of such advanced weaponry to Israel was unprecedented, and needed justification. After all, the administration had already concluded that the risk of joint aggression by all the Arab states against Israel was very unlikely and that, on their

⁸⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁸⁸² Memorandum from Robert Komer to Myer Feldman, May 31, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 5-62.

⁸⁸³ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, June 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 290.

⁸⁸⁴ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Myer Feldman, May 31, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 5-62.

⁸⁸⁵ Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 14.

⁸⁸⁶ Telegram from the Department of State to the Mission to the United Nations, March 26, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 223.

own, no country represented a threat to Israel's security.⁸⁸⁷ But having excluded other special security arrangements⁸⁸⁸, and given Israel's insistence, the US government became convinced that the HAWK could in fact become the best way to "reduce any temptation Israel may have to take pre-emptive offensive action."⁸⁸⁹ Nasser's acquisition of Soviet weapons offered a way to justify the sale of the HAWK and, the administration hoped, even to deter him from doing further business with Moscow.⁸⁹⁰ By request of the administration, in mid-July 1962 the Joint Chiefs of Staff prepared a document explaining that, after Nasser's latest purchase of the Soviet TU-16, Israel might in fact become vulnerable to air attacks, also adding that the HAWK, being merely a defensive system, would not alone shift the balance of power.⁸⁹¹ It was also explained that the delivery would only take place 24 months from the receipt of the funded order, and that the US army could begin training no earlier than the summer of 1966.⁸⁹² Given the military justification, and in light of the fact that it would be years before the Israelis could use the HAWK, Kennedy decided to agree to the sale, which would be finalised on August 19, 1962. It is significant however that the administration was aware that "despite [the] acquisition by the UAR of TU-16 bombers", "as a result of Israel's purchase of Mirage III aircraft", Israel would still enjoy air superiority, as well as on the ground.⁸⁹³

⁸⁸⁷ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, November 22, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 143.

⁸⁸⁸ A number of reasons were listed against a possible special arrangement between the US and Israel, such as: 1) It would destroy the Arabs confidence in Washington's impartiality. 2) It could not be counterbalanced by similar arrangements between the US and the Arab countries. 3) It would make the US responsible for Israel's actions. 4) Would encourage the Arabs to seek similar arrangements with the Soviet Union. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot) to Secretary of State Rusk, June 7, 1962. Ibidem, 290.

⁸⁸⁹ Ibidem.

⁸⁹⁰ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, June 22, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Robert Komer, 6-62.

⁸⁹¹ Letter from McGeorge Bundy to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Grant), June 25, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 3.

⁸⁹² Ibidem.

⁸⁹³ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, June 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 290.

Thus, even though the Joint Chiefs of Staff had suggested that Nasser's acquisition of Soviet weapons could justify the HAWK sale, Bass's argument about the "dangerous arms imbalance"⁸⁹⁴, could not alone have brought the Kennedy administration to agree to such a historic gesture. Despite Nasser's acquisition of Soviet weapons, the administration had concluded that Israel would still retain overall military superiority, even without the HAWK. In addition, the administration's acknowledgement of the improbability of an Arab war against Israel suggests that the supposed arms imbalance was not so dangerous after all. Nasser's unwillingness to engage in hostilities against the Israelis had made Israel's increased defence system, as he commented in August 1962, "irrelevant".⁸⁹⁵

Of course, Kennedy sought to maximize the gains of the HAWK sale by trying to push forward a compromise on the refugee issue. Indeed, even though the administration had decided to keep the issue on ice, primarily because it feared that pressing Nasser to find "a quick solution of central problems" could jeopardise the policy of rapprochement⁸⁹⁶, domestic and regional dynamics brought Kennedy to at least attempt a mediation. By December 1961, in order to gain prestige in the Arab world, the United States had already rejected the draft of the Brazzaville resolution, an Israeli-inspired direct negotiation on the refugees within the UN that would have implied the Arabs' recognition of the State of Israel⁸⁹⁷: "There is not the slightest prospect of the Arabs agreeing to sit down with the Israelis", Rusk told Kennedy in November 1961, adding that the "proposal could offer no practical result in advancing the interests of the refugees or a solution of

⁸⁹⁴ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 4.

⁸⁹⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, August 24, 1962. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVIII, 31.

⁸⁹⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Walt Rostow, June 2, 1961, JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-61, 6-61.

⁸⁹⁷ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan, December 25, 1961. FRUS 1961–1963, Vol. XVII, 153.

the problem.”⁸⁹⁸ The Arabs appreciated the administration’s gesture⁸⁹⁹, but by June 1962 increased domestic criticism against Kennedy called the US president “to redeem his campaign pledges” for a “comprehensive settlement in the Near East.”⁹⁰⁰

However, more than with such domestic headaches, the administration was concerned with the stability of the region and even more with the rapprochement with Nasser. The Arab campaign mounted during the spring of 1962 against the Egyptian leader’s soft-line with Israel, focused inevitably on the refugee problem, an issue that, as Komer pointed out, always succeeded in distracting the Arab population from the domestic failings of its governments.⁹⁰¹ The administration was not concerned that the new wave of Arab propaganda, which sought to bring Cairo to adopt a tougher line against the Ben Gurion government, would result in a war against Israel, but feared that that it could prevent Kennedy’s efforts to steer the Egyptian leader towards a more moderate course.⁹⁰² In addition, the refugee issue constituted a particularly sensitive problem for Jordan, a country facing serious economic and social issues and whose population was predominantly Palestinians. Should the Arab propaganda provoke a successful coup against Hussein, the administration feared that the result would almost certainly be an Arab-Israeli war.⁹⁰³

The administration had opened private talks on the refugee issue as early as February 1961, when the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs pointed out that the problem was in fact a “perennial focal point for argument”.⁹⁰⁴ Bundy echoed the

⁸⁹⁸ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, November 26, 1961. Ibidem, 145.

⁸⁹⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan, December 25, 1961. Ibidem, 153.

⁹⁰⁰ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, June 7, 1962. Ibidem, 290.

⁹⁰¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Myer Feldman, May 31, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 5-62.

⁹⁰² Robert Komer, Memorandum for the President, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

⁹⁰³ “Jordan: Key to Stability”. JFKL, President’s Office Files, Box 119A, Israel, Briefing Book, Ben Gurion Visit, 1961.

⁹⁰⁴ Paper Prepared in the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, February 1, 1961. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 8.

bureau's position shortly afterwards: the refugee issue was "the best key to progress on this entire Arab-Israel problem, including such issues as Suez transit, the Arab League boycott, boundaries"⁹⁰⁵, he told Kennedy in April 1961, also reminding the president of his campaign pledge to "initiate action designed to facilitate an Arab-Israel settlement."⁹⁰⁶ Furthermore, as the US covered 70% of the costs of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which amounted to approximately 23 million dollars annually, the administration feared that if progress was not made, Congress would not continue to allocate funds.⁹⁰⁷

The May 1961 meeting with Ben Gurion offered Kennedy the chance to approach the refugee issue. After discussing the Dimona nuclear reactor and Israel's security guarantees, Kennedy stressed the need for Israel to collaborate with the Palestine Conciliation Commission (PCC): "The United States is committed to the United Nations resolutions on the Palestine refugees"⁹⁰⁸, Kennedy told Ben Gurion, inviting the prime minister to at least adopt a constructive approach towards a possible move by the United Nations.⁹⁰⁹ Ben Gurion was of course sceptical, arguing that the Arabs did not care about the Palestinians as much as they cared about using the "refugee weapon" to flood Israel with Arabs, but he left the doors open saying "Yes, it is always worth trying."⁹¹⁰

Seeking to contain the refugee issue and prevent Arab propaganda from steering Nasser towards a more hostile course, the US government welcomed the UN decision to have the American Dr Joseph Johnson, President of the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, working together with the Palestine Conciliation Committee on a

⁹⁰⁵ Memorandum from Acting Secretary of State Bowles to President Kennedy, April 28, 1961. Ibidem, 38.

⁹⁰⁶ Ibidem.

⁹⁰⁷ Ibidem.

⁹⁰⁸ Memorandum of a Conversation, June 2, 1961. Ibidem, 59.

⁹⁰⁹ The PCC plan, although not yet officialised, entailed a selection of a PCC special representative, and a phased programme that would offer the refugees three choices: 1) repatriation; 2) resettlement in special work projects in Arab countries; 3) resettlement in non-Arab countries. Memorandum from Myer Feldman to President Kennedy, May 26, 1961. Ibidem, 55.

⁹¹⁰ Memorandum of a Conversation, May 30, 1961. Ibidem, 57.

plan for the refugees. After his tour across the Middle East, during which the UN envoy tested the Arabs' and Israelis' willingness to discuss the refugee issue, Johnson presented his proposal to the Kennedy administration on August 7, 1962, essentially based on a repatriation or resettlement with compensation deal. The plan entailed several steps: first, a round of preliminary discussions to determine "what the possibilities are for repatriation and resettlement"⁹¹¹; second, a questionnaire to be distributed among the refugees allowing them to indicate their initial preference "for repatriation to Israel... or for compensation and resettlement in the Arab countries or elsewhere"⁹¹²; third, a formal interview with each refugee would take place to obtain a final decision on repatriation or resettlement; finally, designated officials would start consultations with the governments to seek the implementation of the plan.

The White House considered Johnson's plan "an even-handed proposal, honest... valid for all parties concerned"⁹¹³, but anticipated Israel's opposition on the basis that the Ben Gurion government feared that a massive number of refugees would choose repatriation instead of resettlement.⁹¹⁴ A meeting at the White House was called on August 14, 1962, and the main subject of discussion was how to obtain Israel's pledge of cooperation with the Johnson plan. Johnson reported that "The chances of success are slim" but, he added, "If we don't try this, nothing will be done". As Kennedy asked what leverage the administration had on Israel, Feldman promptly suggested the *quid pro quo*: "If we could tie in the HAWK, it might work."⁹¹⁵

⁹¹¹ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, August 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 15.

⁹¹² Ibidem.

⁹¹³ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 22.

⁹¹⁴ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, August 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 15.

⁹¹⁵ Notes of a Conference, August 14, 1962. Ibidem, 19.

By then, Kennedy had in fact already decided to sell the HAWK in order to forestall Israel's pre-emptive attacks, but the administration had not yet made its decision public in the hopes of using the HAWK as a possible bargaining card in the negotiations with the Israelis.⁹¹⁶ In light of the delicate diplomatic period and of the pressure put on Nasser by the Arab countries to adopt a tougher line with the Israelis, the administration decided to improve the chances of the Johnson plan's success by linking it to the HAWK sale. Feldman was commissioned by Kennedy to fly to Israel and talk Ben Gurion into the Johnson Plan, making sure that the *quid pro quo* would not be seen as a bluff.⁹¹⁷ On August 15, 1962, Kennedy wrote to Ben Gurion that his special emissary would be sent to Israel to discuss such delicate issue, and find the "bases for an understanding"⁹¹⁸, while simultaneously he instructed Badeau to inform Nasser of the administration's decision to sell the HAWK.⁹¹⁹

The three and a half hour-long meeting between Feldman, Ben Gurion and Golda Meir, took place on August 19, in Tel Aviv. Feldman opened the meeting with the news that "the President had determined that the Hawk missile should be made available to Israel"⁹²⁰, witnessing the Israelis' ecstatic reaction.⁹²¹ The special ambassador went on to say: "Now, now that you've come down off the roof, let me tell you what we think you ought to do also."⁹²²

While the issue of Dimona was discussed with relative calm, on the refugee issue Ben Gurion was, as predicted, "much more [*sic*] tougher."⁹²³ The prime minister

⁹¹⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to Myer Feldman, May 31, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 5-62.

⁹¹⁷ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Myer Feldman, August 9, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 17.

⁹¹⁸ Letter from President Kennedy to Prime Minister Ben Gurion, Ibidem, 21.

⁹¹⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, August 22, 1962. Ibidem, 28.

⁹²⁰ Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, August 19, 1962. Ibidem, 24.

⁹²¹ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, July 29, 1967, 536.

⁹²² Ibidem.

⁹²³ Ibidem, 537.

reminded Feldman of the threat that repatriation posed to the State of Israel, and refused to talk numbers. But after a long discussion, Ben Gurion declared that he could agree to the plan if Nasser agreed to re-settle in the UAR those refugees determined by the administrator, and if he restrained from producing propaganda aimed at having them repatriate or be considered traitors.⁹²⁴ After Feldman's report, on August 20, 1962, Rusk informed him that Ben Gurion's attempt to place conditions on Israel's acceptance of the plan, would be "inconsistent with the Johnson Plan", which was based on "good faith...without prior specific commitment", and thus unacceptable for the United States⁹²⁵: "I hardly need stress", Rusk wrote, "that it would be most unfortunate if Israelis were to end up with the Hawks... while being responsible for derailing the Johnson Plan".⁹²⁶ Indeed, if the news of the HAWK was to leak before Ben Gurion's pledge to cooperate with the Johnson Plan, the administration would lose leverage on Israel, whose acceptance of the plan would then become even more doubtful.

The day after, on August 21, 1962, Feldman met only with Golda Meir, but the result of the meeting was not of great comfort. The foreign minister spoke of the "impracticability of the plan"⁹²⁷, as she handed over a five-page letter signed by Ben Gurion, in which the Israeli government contested the plan on the basis that the Arab rulers had not yet abandoned their plan to destroy Israel: "There is only one way to resolve the refugee question", reads the letter, "and that is for the Arab rulers... to reconcile themselves... to the existence of the State of Israel."⁹²⁸ On his return to Washington, on August 24, 1962, Feldman reported that the Israelis distrusted Johnson because he was

⁹²⁴ Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, August 19, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 24.

⁹²⁵ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, August 20, 1962. Ibidem, 25.

⁹²⁶ Ibidem.

⁹²⁷ Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, August, 21, 1962. Ibidem, 27.

⁹²⁸ Letter from Prime Minister Ben Gurion to President Kennedy, August 20, 1962. JKF Library, NSF, Box 119, Israel, General, 9-6-62, 9-21-62.

“considered naïve”, but at least they promised they would not “say anything to obstruct implementation of the Plan.”⁹²⁹

However, on September 20, 1962, during a meeting with Feldman in New York, Golda Meir stated clearly Israel’s strong opposition to the plan: “The written plan”, she argued, “is stacked against Israel... there is nothing in writing which protects Israel... in pushing the plan we have worsened Israel's position in the Near East”.⁹³⁰ The Israeli foreign minister argued that on September 10, 1962, Johnson had made some changes to the draft proposal and then presented it to the Palestine Conciliation Commission “with an attitude of finality”, omitting the key-sentence “Governments would retain the ultimate right to decide on the acceptance of refugees.”⁹³¹ Of course, in the eyes of the administration the change did not affect “the substance and intent of the plan”, but provided the Israeli government with a perfect pretext to oppose to the plan “without public onus for Israel.”⁹³² By late September 1962, when the news of the HAWK sale was leaked to the press⁹³³, the Israeli government closed the doors to the Johnson plan.

Collapse

By the beginning of 1963, the Kennedy administration was forced to come to terms with the insurmountable differences between Arabs and Israelis, and with the impossibility of leading both factions to an agreement on the refugees. By early February 1963, Johnson reported to Kennedy that his plan was officially “dead”⁹³⁴, and with the development of the Yemen crisis, the issue of the new wave of Nasserism, and Israel’s

⁹²⁹ Memorandum of a Conversation, August 24, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 30.

⁹³⁰ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, September 20, 1962. Ibidem, 48

⁹³¹ Ibidem.

⁹³² Ibidem.

⁹³³ Circular Telegram from the Department of State, September 25, 1962. JKF Library, NSF, Box 119, Israel, General, 9-22-62, 10-1-62.

⁹³⁴ Memorandum of a Conversation, February 6, 1963. JKF Library, NSF, Box 408, Arab Refugees-Arab Unity, Arab Refugees 1961-1963, 2.

ambiguity over Dimona, the administration disengaged from the plan.⁹³⁵ Kennedy shifted the focus of his of his Mideast policy from the intricate refugee issue to more immediate concerns, such as Nasser's war in Yemen, the Saudi oil, the Dimona nuclear reactor, and the tensions in Jordan, though he did pledge US cooperation on possible new UN attempts to tackle the issue.⁹³⁶

The administration was however divided over assigning responsibility for the unsuccessful outcome of the plan. Many resented the Israeli government's attitude during the negotiations, blaming its lack of cooperation with the US government. "Perhaps", Talbot told Rusk on September 20, 1962, "having now received assurance of the Hawk missile the Israelis feel free to take a hard line".⁹³⁷ It was a reasonable suspicion. During the conversations with Feldman about the refugees and the Johnson plan on August 19, 1962, the Israeli leaders showed no more than a vague interest in solving the dispute, certainly not comparable to that shown in the HAWK: during the meeting with Golda Meir, Feldman reported: "In the middle of this discussion she told me she had just received concrete evidence that Egyptians have guided missiles."⁹³⁸ Komer echoed Talbot's suspicion: "Israel (having gotten its Hawks) is making an all-out effort to sink the Johnson Plan."⁹³⁹ As a matter of fact, when the news of the HAWK sale was leaked in late September 1962, thus making it impossible for Kennedy to withdraw the offer, the administration lost the leverage necessary to push Israel to accept the plan. In a cable sent to Kennedy in November 1962, Robert Komer summed up:

"Your administration has done more to satisfy Israeli security preoccupations than any of its predecessors. We have promised the Israelis HAWKS, reassured them on the

⁹³⁵ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, December 5, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 109.

⁹³⁶ Memorandum of a Conversation, February 6, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 408, Arab Refugees-Arab Unity, Arab Refugees 1961-1963, 2.

⁹³⁷ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, September 20, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 48.

⁹³⁸ Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, August 19, 1962. Ibidem, 24.

⁹³⁹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kaysen), September 22, 1962. Ibidem, 52.

Jordan Waters, given a higher level of economic aid (to permit extensive arms) and given various security assurance. In return, we have gotten nothing from our efforts... the score is 4-0.”⁹⁴⁰

From their side, the Israelis took no responsibility over the failure of the Johnson Plan. Komer told Kennedy in November 1962 that Israel was “unwilling even to talk about the Johnson plan”⁹⁴¹, since the small changes on the draft presented by Johnson to the Palestine Conciliation Commission were enough for the Ben Gurion government to disengage from whatever previous promises it had made. “The United States is not prepared to defend with the Israelis any modifications on what... he [Feldman] explained to Ben-Gurion”⁹⁴², Bundy told Komer on September 20, 1962, right after Feldman’s meeting with Golda Meir, while Kennedy hoped that the Israelis had stayed “where they were when Ben-Gurion talked to Mike.”⁹⁴³ It was not to be so. Israel flatly rejected the Johnson plan and any negotiations on his proposal, adjudging that, because of the change, it would not have the last word on “how many refugees would be repatriated.”⁹⁴⁴

Unsurprisingly, Feldman took Israel’s side. In his *Oral History Interview*, Kennedy’s special counsel recalled spotting sixty-two changes differences between the two versions, which inevitably provoked strong opposition from Israel.⁹⁴⁵ Feldman recalled finding out that the State Department had worked with Johnson on a new draft while he was in Israel in August 1962, before Johnson met with the Arab delegation: “Yes, we decided these changes didn’t really make much difference”⁹⁴⁶, Talbot and Strong confessed, as they aimed to make it slightly more “palatable to the Israeli and more

⁹⁴⁰ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, November 29, 1962. JFK Library, NSF, Box 408, Arab Refugees-Arab Unity, Arab Refugees 1961-1963, 1.

⁹⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁹⁴² Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to Robert Komer, September 20, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 47.

⁹⁴³ Ibidem.

⁹⁴⁴ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, September 20, 1962. Ibidem, 48.

⁹⁴⁵ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, August 20, 1966, 422.

⁹⁴⁶ Ibidem, 425. Feldman suggested it was probably Talbot and Strong who advised the changes.

palatable to the Arabs.”⁹⁴⁷ According to Feldman, from that moment on it became impossible to sell the plan to Golda Meir, as she commented:

“I don’t care what the United States government tells me unofficially what they might do. I have to have the Plan recognize something along these lines. Most of the changes changed that recognition.”⁹⁴⁸

The administration was not convinced by such arguments, particularly because it could still have provided Israel with written guarantees for their security in relation to the number of refugees allowed to repatriate. Also, it considered the plan to be “unaffected by the changes made in the language”, and regarded Israel’s reaction as “unjustified and contrived.”⁹⁴⁹ But, as Komer pointed out, the Israelis were not as concerned with the plan itself as they were “anxious that the onus for sinking it not fall squarely on them.”⁹⁵⁰

On October 4, 1962, Syria announced its “unshakable rejection of [the] Johnson plan”, causing the other Arab countries to be “forced to go along” with its position.⁹⁵¹ The Syrian prime minister accused the Johnson Plan of being a “solution aimed only at expatriating them and settling them finally outside their homeland”⁹⁵², but Komer sanguinely informed Bundy: “rejection in Arabic means maybe.”⁹⁵³ A few months later, Komer would find out that Ben Gurion had a rather different vocabulary.

On January 23, 1963, after learning from the American ambassador in Israel, Barbour, that the Israeli government would not discuss the Johnson plan any further, Komer wrote to Kennedy: “Ben Gurion’s conditional ‘Yes’ on refugees is in fact a flat

⁹⁴⁷ Ibidem, 424.

⁹⁴⁸ Ibidem, 426. Feldman does not recall the specific date, but he was probably referring to the meeting they had on September 20, 1962, in New York, the only official meeting they had in that time frame.

⁹⁴⁹ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, September 20, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 48.

⁹⁵⁰ Memorandum from Robert Komer to the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kaysen), September 22, 1962. Ibidem, 52.

⁹⁵¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, October 9, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 408, Arab Refugees-Arab Unity, 1961-1963, 1.

⁹⁵² Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, October 9, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 75.

⁹⁵³ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, October 9, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 408, Arab Refugees-Arab Unity, 1961-1963, 1.

‘no’⁹⁵⁴, as he had imposed “a total, final solution which must be firmly accepted beforehand by the Arabs” as a requirements of Israel’s agreement to discuss a plan, thus imposing “impossible conditions.”⁹⁵⁵ Ben Gurion’s “no” eventually sunk the plan, forcing Kennedy to disengage and to reassure Israel that the US government had “no intention of trying to push it further with reluctant parties.”⁹⁵⁶

Kennedy’s relationship with the Israeli leaders ended on an even bitterer note. For most of 1963, as the administration tried to contain the effects of the Yemen crisis, Kennedy tackled the issue of the Dimona facility, growing progressively more concerned and intolerant towards Israel’s ambiguous nuclear policy. Back in September 1962, after consistent insistence, the administration had managed to organise a second inspection of the nuclear facility, but the two scientist of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) in charge of the report, were taken to Dimona without any notice and allowed only a 40-minute tour of the facility.⁹⁵⁷ Although the inspection confirmed that the reactor was “intended for peaceful purposes only”⁹⁵⁸, the administration contested that it did not last long enough, many areas of the facility were restricted and, since the Israeli government had accepted the inspection so unexpectedly, the scientists had not been allowed to prepare for it adequately.⁹⁵⁹ Frustrated with the Israeli government for its lack of collaboration on the refugee issue, its opposition to the Johnson plan, its seeming ingratitude for the HAWK, and its bellicose attitude in the Arab world (in December 1962 Ben Gurion threatened retaliation “deep into Syrian territory”⁹⁶⁰ despite the US attempt

⁹⁵⁴ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 23, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 138.

⁹⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁹⁵⁶ Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, January 22, 1963. Ibidem, 137.

⁹⁵⁷ Circular Airgram from the Department of State to Certain Posts, October 31, 1962. Ibidem, 87.

⁹⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁹⁵⁹ Scope Paper, undated. JFKL, NSF, Box 119, Israel, General, 11-14-62, 12-21-62.

⁹⁶⁰ Ibidem.

to forestall military actions), the Kennedy administration privately complained for Israel's international conduct.⁹⁶¹

The *amimut*, as Avner Cohen defined Israel's ambiguity over Dimona⁹⁶², added doubts to the legitimacy of the Ben Gurion government's intentions surrounding the nuclear facility. In March 1963, the CIA argued that Israel was possibly trying to "exploit the psychological advantages of its nuclear capability to intimidate the Arabs" and deter them from causing troubles on the frontiers⁹⁶³, also pointing out that the "Arab reaction to the revelation of an Israeli nuclear capability would be one of profound dismay and frustration."⁹⁶⁴ Propaganda, riots and violence would rise from the Arab world against Israel and its allies, causing anti-US sentiments to grow and limiting US influence in the Arab world.⁹⁶⁵

By the end of March 1963, the situation was not improving. Kennedy had become even more sensitive about the nuclear issue after the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 had brought the world to the brink of a third, and nuclear, world war, and he urged the administration to organise as soon as possible "the next informal inspection of the Israeli reactor complex".⁹⁶⁶ Of course, many of the administration's concerns were related to the possible Soviet gains in the region: "We do not believe that the USSR would be willing to provide Arab governments with nuclear weapons", reads a memorandum prepared by the CIA in early March 1963, "The Soviets would, however, see plenty of opportunity for

⁹⁶¹ Memorandum from the Board of National Estimates, Central Intelligence Agency, to Director of Central Intelligence McCone, March 6, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 179.

⁹⁶² Avner Cohen argues that the nuclear bomb was part of Ben Gurion's plan for the *bitahon*, as it was the only way to provide a "stable and long term deterrence". Cohen explains that the *amimut* ("opacity"), consists of "saying but not saying" that Israel has a nuclear bomb. See Avner Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*, (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁹⁶³ Memorandum from the Board of National Estimates, Central Intelligence Agency, to Director of Central Intelligence McCone, March 6, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 179.

⁹⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁹⁶⁵ Ibidem.

⁹⁶⁶ National Security Action Memorandum No. 231. Ibidem, 199.

winning political advantage.”⁹⁶⁷ The CIA argued that Moscow would try to use Israel’s nuclear facility to gain sympathy and support from the Arab states, provide the Arab states, particularly Nasser, with non-nuclear weapons, and eventually “find the basis for a firmer Bloc-Arab alignment against the West”.⁹⁶⁸ Once again, Kennedy’s attempts to find common ground with Nasser and enhance US prestige in the region were threatened by Israel’s national policy.

On March 26, 1963, Rusk met with McCone, the CIA director. During the meeting, it emerged that in February 1963, an editorial in the London *Jewish Observer and Middle East Review* had predicted Israel’s future acquisition of nuclear weapons, arguing that it would explode a bomb in the near future.⁹⁶⁹ Fearing that the article could in fact fuel the Arab world’s hostility against Israel and the United States, and thus accelerate Soviet infiltration in the region, the administration put even more pressure on Israel to share, even just privately, the real short and long-term intentions of Dimona.

“The President is very, very concerned about any proliferation of nuclear weapons”, Feldman told Shimon Peres during a conversation in early April 1963, “and he hope[s] that Israel would not develop or obtain this kind of weaponry.”⁹⁷⁰ Peres commented that Israel “would not do anything in this field unless it finds that other countries in the area are involved in it”⁹⁷¹, but Ben Gurion’s letter to Kennedy, dated April 26, 1963, cast doubt on Peres’s statement: in light of the Tripartite Declaration of Egypt, Syria and Iraq, which promised to “establish a military union to liberate Palestine”⁹⁷²,

⁹⁶⁷ Memorandum from the Board of National Estimates, Central Intelligence Agency, to Director of Central Intelligence McCone, March 6, 1963. Ibidem, 179.

⁹⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁹⁶⁹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, March 22, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 119, Israel, General, 3-7-63, 4-27-63.

⁹⁷⁰ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Phillips Talbot and Myer Feldman, April 5, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 207.

⁹⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁹⁷² Memorandum from the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to McGeorge Bundy, April 27, 1963. Ibidem, 220. On April 17, 1963, Egypt, Syria and Iraq issued a statement which envisioned the re-creation of the UAR.

because of Nasser's acquisition of Soviet weapons, and with the uprisings in Jordan prompted by the 1963 wave of Nasserism, Ben Gurion commented that "the Hawk alone is not a deterrent."⁹⁷³ What did the prime minister mean? Could his letter be interpreted as an actual declaration that Israel was looking for a more effective deterrent? Could that be the atomic bomb?

On May 4, 1963, Kennedy sent his reply to Ben Gurion. The president was under attack from some congressmen who were accusing the administration of having a pro-Nasser policy in the Middle East.⁹⁷⁴ Kennedy reassured Ben Gurion of the US commitment to the defence and security of Israel, but took the opportunity to give him a veiled warning: "the danger which we foresee is not so much that of an early Arab attack as that of a successful development of advanced offensive systems".⁹⁷⁵ The reference to Dimona is clear: Israel's fears, while understandable, could not in any way justify the nuclear proliferation.

The 1963 wave of Nasserism compelled the administration to tackle the issue of Israel's "active defence" as strongly as Dimona. Seeking to prevent growing tensions between Arabs and Israelis, on May 1, 1963, the administration issued a statement of security guarantee in the hopes that it could give satisfaction to Ben Gurion, forestall Israel's reprisal policy and avoid the risk of losing ground in the Arab world. "[The] US remains, as it has been since 1950, deeply interested in the maintenance of peace and stability anywhere in the Near East. It remains strongly opposed to the use of force or threat of force between any of the states in that area as well as to the violation of frontiers or armistice lines."⁹⁷⁶ By September 1963, Israeli leaders advanced the idea of joint consultations between the two governments, and just a couple of months later a secret

⁹⁷³ Ibidem.

⁹⁷⁴ Memorandum for the Record, May 1, 1963. Ibidem, 231.

⁹⁷⁵ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, May 4, 1963. Ibidem, 236.

⁹⁷⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, May 1, 1963. Ibidem, 232.

meeting between US and Israeli officials, aimed at discussing the UAR and Israel's missile capabilities took place in Washington.⁹⁷⁷ Although the administration tried to explain that the meeting was “merely [an] exchange [of] views”⁹⁷⁸, the secret talks of November 1963 constituted in fact the first high-level consultation between Washington and Tel Aviv on the security of the region.

With regards to Dimona, on May 10, 1963, the administration decided it was time for a new inspection. Barbour was told to press Ben Gurion to allow another visit on the basis of the previous apparent spirit of collaboration shown by the Israelis. Fearing that Ben Gurion would try to “throw question of Dimona inspections into [the] arena of bargaining for things Israel wants”, the ambassador was instructed to take a hard line: “This is matter of global responsibility for [the] US Government transcending what we expect to be reciprocal give and take in our day-to-day bilateral relations.”⁹⁷⁹ Almost unsurprisingly, from the Israeli Embassy in the United States, Komer was told that “the Israelis were determined to get something out of the US in the way of greater security reassurances.”⁹⁸⁰

The *amimut* was getting on Kennedy's nerves. On May 18, 1963, the president sent another letter to Ben Gurion, making even clearer Washington's position on the nuclear proliferation issue. A close look at some of the main points of Kennedy's message allows a better understanding of his firm position:

“I am sure you will agree that there is no more urgent business for the whole world than the control of nuclear weapons... the dangers... are so obvious that I am sure *I need not repeat them here*... We are concerned with the *disturbing effects* on world stability which would accompany the development of a nuclear weapons capability by Israel... I

⁹⁷⁷ Department of State, Outgoing Telegram, November 13, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 119A, Israel, General, 11-7-63, 11-17-63.

⁹⁷⁸ Department of State, Outgoing Telegram, November 13, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 119A, Israel, General, 11-7-63, 11-17-63.

⁹⁷⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, May 10, 1963. Ibidem, 243.

⁹⁸⁰ Memorandum for the Record, May 14, 1963. Ibidem, 248.

can well appreciate your concern for developments in the UAR. But I see *no present or imminent nuclear threat to Israel from there.*"⁹⁸¹

But the most interesting and significant passage of Kennedy's letter to Ben Gurion, censored for nearly 40 years because it was considered too sensitive, represents the pinnacle of Kennedy's discontent with the Israeli government:

"This commitment and this support would be *seriously jeopardized* in the public opinion in this country and in the West as a whole if it should be thought that this Government was unable to obtain reliable information on a subject as vital to peace as the question of the character of Israel's effort in the nuclear field."⁹⁸²

Nevertheless, Ben Gurion's response was again disappointing. The prime minister refused to allow twice-yearly inspections, accepting instead only annual inspections. Also, he took back an earlier agreement that inspections be conducted by both American and neutral scientists, accepting "either-or, not both."⁹⁸³ Such conditions clearly worked to the detriment of the transparency sought by the Kennedy administration, yet were perfect for the *amimut*: annual inspections allowed a longer time for covert operations⁹⁸⁴, and even if the previous inspection had not been convincing at all, Ben Gurion insisted it was effective. In addition, as the scientists had to be either neutral or American, the US position was jeopardised in either case: exclusively neutral scientists would deprive

⁹⁸¹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, May 18, 1963. Ibidem, 252. Italic added for emphasis. Kennedy's reference is to the issue of the Jordan uprisings, and Nasser's acquisition of German rockets.

⁹⁸² Excerpts from Presidential Correspondence (JFK, Ben Gurion and Eshkol) on Arms Limitation Control (e.g. Dimona) in the Middle East". JFKL, NSF, Box 427, Israel- Nuclear Energy Program, 1963, 1. Italic added for emphasis.

⁹⁸³ Memorandum From the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), May 29, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 258.

⁹⁸⁴ The CIA, the AEC (Atomic Energy Commission) and the ACDA (Arms Control and Disarmament Agency) all agreed that: "A reactor of this size would at the optimum be discharged every two years if devoted to research, but at approximately six months intervals if the object was to produce a maximum of irradiated fuel for separation into weapons grade plutonium. For a reactor of this size, the IAEA minimum inspection systems calls for two inspections yearly, with far more complete controls than Israel is prepared to allow us. A visit before the reactor goes critical is essential because a more detailed observation of its structure is then possible than after its operation renders certain portions inaccessible". Memorandum from the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to McGeorge Bundy, June 12, 1963. Ibidem 267. Therefore the three points to get Israel to agree to were: 1) twice-yearly inspections; 2) full access to the facility; 3) sufficient time for a thorough examination. Ibidem.

Washington of a direct eye on Dimona, while exclusively American scientists would rob the inspections of the neutrality needed in front of the international community.

Kennedy's reply was not long in coming. On June 15, 1963 he stressed to Ben Gurion how important it was that the inspections conformed to international standards, thus urging him to agree to twice-yearly visits, and to allow sufficient time and full access to the facility.

Just like in his previous letter, Kennedy warned:

"As I wrote you on 18 May, *this Government's commitment to and support of Israel could be seriously jeopardized* if it should be thought that we were unable to obtain reliable information on a subject as vital to peace as the question of the character of Israel's effort in the nuclear field."⁹⁸⁵

This, however, was Kennedy's last letter to Ben Gurion. On June 26, 1963, Ben Gurion resigned after the MAPAI political crisis linked to the "Lavon Affair"⁹⁸⁶, and Evi Eshkol became prime minister.⁹⁸⁷ The change in the Israeli government did not however change the administration's concerns about Dimona.

Kennedy tackled Eshkol with the same vehemence he did with Ben Gurion, writing on July 5 that, if no progress was made on Dimona, "this Government's commitment to and support of Israel *could be seriously jeopardized*."⁹⁸⁸ While a frustrated Komer wished that the administration could "literally force them to back

⁹⁸⁵ Excerpts from Presidential Correspondence (JFK, Ben Gurion and Eshkol) on Arms Limitation Control (e.g. Dimona) in the Middle East". JFKL, NSF, Box 427, Israel- Nuclear Energy Program, 1963, 1. Italic added for emphasis.

⁹⁸⁶ The 'Lavon Affair' refers to Israel's abortive attempt to provoke incidents against American and British civilian installations in Egypt, in order to strain Washington's relations with Cairo. Ministry of Defence Lavon took the blame, resigning in February 1955, but asked for the re-examination of the case. A committee eventually cleared him of charges, and Lavon accused Shimon Peres and Moshe Dayan, Ben Gurion's political allies, of being involved in the plot. A fracture within the MAPAI emerged, and Ben Gurion resigned in protest for Lavon's exoneration and as a consequence of the severe political crisis that affected his party during 1963. Memorandum of a Conversation, January 31, 1961, FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVII, 6. See Avi Shlaim for a thorough examination of the Lavon Affair. Avi Shlaim argues that Kennedy's pressure on Dimona might as well have contributed. Shlaim, *The Iron Wall...*, 216, 217.

⁹⁸⁷ When Ben Gurion was informed of Kennedy's assassination, he recalled that that was "one of the greatest shocks I ever had in my life." Ben Gurion, *OHI*, July 16, 1965, 3.

⁹⁸⁸ Excerpts from Presidential Correspondence (JFK, Ben Gurion and Eshkol) on Arms Limitation Control (e.g. Dimona) in the Middle East". JFKL, NSF, Box 427, Israel- Nuclear Energy Program, 1963, 1. Italic added for emphasis.

down”, or, more colourfully, “cram our policy down Israel's throat”⁹⁸⁹, Kennedy waited patiently for Eshkol's reply, which arrived on August 19, 1963. While allowing inspections for the end of the year, the prime minister “carefully avoided explicit commitment” on the issue of twice-yearly inspections, providing a “sufficiently unclear” wording on the matter. With regards to the second point of Washington's request, concerning full access to the facility, Eshkol limited it to the sole reactor but gave “no response on the other points”.⁹⁹⁰ A perfect *amimut* after all.

However, after Israel signed the Limited Test Ban Treaty on August 8, 1963, the pressure on Dimona was soothed. The US, Britain and the Soviet Union had finally reached an agreement within the UN, which committed the countries "not to carry out any nuclear weapon test explosion, or any other nuclear explosion" in the atmosphere, under water, or in outer space, or in any other environment if the explosion would cause radioactive debris to be present outside the borders of the state conducting the explosion.⁹⁹¹ With the Yemen crisis still to be resolved, and Congress's pressure on the White House on account of Kennedy's support for Nasser, the administration accepted Eshkol's promises on the inspections and the Limited Test Ban Treaty as temporarily sufficient guarantees on Dimona. Kennedy however, would not live long enough to witness the effectiveness of his warnings to the Israeli government, or to pursue his anti-nuclear policy. Following his assassination, Johnson put an end to the American pressure on Israel's nuclear programme and Nixon to the inspections. To this day, the “don't ask,

⁹⁸⁹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, July 23, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 300.

⁹⁹⁰ Memorandum from Acting Secretary of State Ball to President Kennedy. Ibidem, August 23, 1963. 317.

⁹⁹¹ Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance. <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/4797.htm> accessed (03.12.2014).

don't tell" agreement dominates the frightening understanding between the United States and Israel over the nuclear issue.⁹⁹²

Kennedy had unintentionally laid the foundations of America's special alliance with Israel. In an attempt to secure his rapprochement with Nasser and limit the consequences of Israel's aggressive policies, Kennedy embraced Israel's security to forestall its "active defence" and thus avoid an Arab-Israeli war that could favour the Soviet infiltration in the region.

Kennedy's most significant actions towards Israel, the HAWK sale in 1962 and the 1963 joint consultations on security issues, were indeed adopted in the context of the renewed frictions between Arabs and Israelis, whether originating from the inter-Arab propaganda of 1962 or in the shadow of the Yemen crisis of 1963. Both Eisenhower and Kennedy did not wish to rely on Israel as a regional proxy, but differently from his predecessor, Kennedy sought to contain Israel by embracing its security concerns. Of course, the administration tried to maximise the gains of such historic gestures, for reasons of both domestic and foreign policy. However, whatever secondary intent the administration might have had, Kennedy's policies towards Israel were designed to secure the rapprochement with Nasser, which remained the cornerstone of Kennedy's Mideast strategy until Congress's amendment and his brutal assassination.

In summary, it would be misleading to argue that Kennedy simply adopted a pro-Israeli policy, or that he actively sought closer ties with Israel to advance his Cold War strategies. Kennedy's sole Cold War option in the region was Nasser, and in an attempt

⁹⁹² On the 'Don't Ask Don't Tell', see for instance Avner Cohen, *The Worst Kept Secret*; James A. Russell, *Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East: Directions and Policy Options in the New Century*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Noam Cochavi, *Nixon and Israel: Forging a Conservative Partnership*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

to contain Israel in order to foster a working relationship with the key Arab leader, he unintentionally laid the foundations of the US-Israeli alliance for Johnson to build upon.

Chapter 5. The Yemen crisis

End of the road

Although from a global point of view the Yemen crisis was one of the least significant events that occurred during Kennedy's short but intense presidency, certainly not comparable to the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, from a regional standpoint it emerges as a watershed moment in the history of Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East. The involvement of regional players such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel, and foreign ones such as Britain and the Soviet Union, contributed towards making an international quagmire of the 1962-1963 crisis, the unexpected consequences of which would influence American posture in the region for years to come.

The Yemen crisis marked the end of Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Nasser, and contributed significantly in strengthening Washington's ties with Faysal and Ben Gurion, thus laying the foundations of the US special alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel prompted by the change of administration in late 1963. Indeed, the administration's inability to significantly influence the course of the events in Yemen, brought Congress, concerned that the US government was "buying both butter and guns for aggressor nations"⁹⁹³ to interrupt Kennedy's overture to Nasser by passing the Gruening amendment in early November 1963. Kennedy opposed the amendment, commenting during his last press conference on November 14, 1963, that nothing was "more dangerous than to end this program"⁹⁹⁴, but his death, which occurred just two weeks later, prevented the administration from taking significant actions to bolster the

⁹⁹³ Ernest Gruening, *Many Battles: The Autobiography of Ernest Gruening*, (New York: Liveright, 1973), 457. Also quoted in Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 137.

⁹⁹⁴ President John F. Kennedy News Conference #64, November 14, 1963. JFK Library, President's Office Files.

rapprochement with Cairo. By ending the programme of economic assistance to Egypt, the Congress put a definitive end to Washington's attempts to do business with Nasser.

Throughout the crisis, as Kennedy sought to maintain a good relationship with Cairo and endure Congress's pressure, the administration pursued a strategy aimed at stabilising Saudi Arabia and enhancing Israel's security, thus securing US oil interests, and containing Israel without openly reversing the positive trends in US-UAR relations. By late 1963 however, Washington's ties with both Saudi Arabia and Israel were so enhanced, and those with Cairo so strained, that after Kennedy's assassination neither Congress nor the new US president questioned who America's Mideast allies really were. Indeed, Kennedy's actions during the Yemen crisis inadvertently laid the foundations for the US special alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel. Kennedy never actively pursued this goal, because neither country constituted a real Cold War option for the administration, but in trying to stabilise the first and contain the second, the administration became in effect responsible for setting the basis for a closer partnership with both the Saudi and the Israeli government.

As noted earlier, although the Kennedy administration did not nurture any great sympathy towards the ultra-conservative Saudi regime, it was however aware of the importance of preserving the integrity of the country, whose natural resources and close ties with the West, enhanced by the economic partnership between the American-owned ARAMCO and the House of Saud, had made Saudi Arabia one of Washington's greatest concerns in the region. Since early 1961, the administration had been sceptical about the Saudi Royal Family's chances of survival (much as it was of the Shah of Iran's, for that matter⁹⁹⁵). In a time marked by the tension between tradition and modernity, progressive and conservative regimes, old and new Middle East, many US policy-makers, including

⁹⁹⁵ Parker T. Hart, *OHI*, April 15, 1969, 5.

Kennedy, had embraced the theory that the old Arab monarchs were doomed to disappear if they failed to implement socio-economic and political reforms that could broaden their domestic consensus and lead to the internal stability of their countries.⁹⁹⁶ However, even if a revolution in Yemen was a good thing, a similar event in Saudi Arabia, Jordan or even Iran, risked jeopardising the multitude of the Western interests in the Middle East, whether economic or geo-strategic. Thus, when a new wave of Nasserism developed across the region during the Yemen crisis, provoking two coups in Syria and Iraq in early 1963 as well as severe tensions in Jordan in April 1963, the Kennedy administration turned its attention to Saudi Arabia, a country whose political problems caused by Saud's extravagant living and poor financing, had made the country particularly susceptible to popular uprisings and internal power struggles. Kennedy pushed acting King Faysal to adopt a series of social, political and economic reforms, strengthening Washington's ties with Saudi Arabia through programmes of economic and military assistance (historically through operation HARD SURFACE, launched in July 1963), in order to ensure its survival in the face of the pan-Arabist and revolutionary propaganda of the UAR.

The failure to channel the "wave of the future" in a direction that could serve US interests, brought Washington to return towards a pre-Kennedy mindset, one in which, as the Eisenhower era revealed, the Arab monarchies were considered a safer bet than the nationalists, and the Western-oriented Saudi regime was considered a valid alternative to Cairo for the role of force of attraction of the Middle East.⁹⁹⁷ After Kennedy's abortive experiment with the revolutionary forces in the region, L.B. Johnson would come to regard the policy of rapprochement with Nasser as little more than a naïve strategy, and

⁹⁹⁶ JFK Library, NSF, Box 125, Jordan, General, 1-61, 3-62. The strongest advocate of such a thesis was Robert Komer, one of the administration's main protagonists in the Yemen crisis. Interestingly, both Parker T. Hart, US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and William B. Macomber, US ambassador to Jordan, believed that the United States had a better chance with the Arab moderates rather than with Nasser. Macomber, *OHI*, 28, 29.

⁹⁹⁷ Diary entry by the President, March 28, 1956. FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XV, 26.

would thus significantly strengthen Saudi Arabia's relationship with Washington through the sale of over 100 million dollars in military hardware in 1966.⁹⁹⁸ It is important to point out that, as mentioned earlier in this work, Kennedy promoted the same kind of reforms in Iran, where the Shah was facing a severe domestic crisis caused by his authoritarian rule. When in late 1962, he finally promoted the reforms encapsulated in the White Revolution, the Shah managed to suppress the protests and to retain his power, becoming, together with Saudi Arabia, one of the two pillars of Nixon's regional strategy.

In terms of long-lasting alliances, the events of 1962-1963 also indirectly favoured Israel, moving the country towards the full-blown alliance with the United States that we know today. The Tripartite Declaration signed in April 17, 1963 by Egypt, Syria and Iraq, informally restored the United Arab Republic after the break-up which had occurred in late September 1961⁹⁹⁹, aggravating Israel's fears for an Arabs' "war of destruction against Israel."¹⁰⁰⁰ Complaining of the renewed alliance between the three Arab republics, later that month Ben Gurion sent a letter to Kennedy, stating that the HAWK could no longer constitute an effective deterrent¹⁰⁰¹, and hinting shortly after to a pre-emptive strike against the Arab threat: "Inaction would be tantamount to suicide"¹⁰⁰², warned Ben Gurion, and the Kennedy administration was once again confronted with the issue of Israel's "active defence" and its incessant demands. Furthermore, when in mid-April

⁹⁹⁸ Little, *American Orientalism...*, 144, 145, 185.

⁹⁹⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, April 18, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 215.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Memorandum of a Conversation, April 28, 1963. Ibidem, 227. The constitution of the new-born Arab unity in fact clearly stated among its principles "The solution to the Palestinian problem, destruction of the Israeli entity, and return of the plundered lands to their owners". Moshe Shemesh, *Arab Politics, Palestinian Nationalism and the Six Day War: The Crystallization of Arab Strategy and Nasir's Descent to War 1957-1967*, (Eastbourne, Portland; Sussex Academic Press, 2008), 25. Cheerfully, Bundy phoned Ball saying: "Can you imagine writing a constitution of Arab unity that didn't say something like this?" Ball promptly replied: "Oh no. I pointed this out well to him but this doesn't impress him at all." Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation between McGeorge Bundy and Acting Secretary of State Ball, April 29, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 228.

¹⁰⁰¹ Memorandum from the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to McGeorge Bundy, April 27, 1963. Ibidem, 220.

¹⁰⁰² Memorandum of a Conversation, April 28, 1963. Ibidem, 227.

1963, rumours of a possible coup against King Hussein of Jordan reached the White House, the administration's first objective was to prevent Israel from pre-emptively moving its troops to the West Bank, and thus avoid an all-out Arab-Israeli war that would endanger US interests and create significant openings for the Soviet Union. Seeking to forestall Israel's active defence, Kennedy, who in late April 1963 had rejected Ben Gurion's "unrealistic" request for a joint US-USSR declaration in support of the territorial status quo¹⁰⁰³, issued an informal security guarantee in early May 1963, reaffirming the US commitment to Israel's survival.¹⁰⁰⁴ However, as the conflict in Yemen appeared nowhere near resolution, and with incessant propaganda directed against Israel by the Syrian and Iraqi governments¹⁰⁰⁵, in November 1963, Kennedy agreed to the Israeli suggestion of joint consultations on security issues.¹⁰⁰⁶ The secret talks of November 1963, aimed at giving yet another assurance to the Israeli government, inevitably strengthened the bond between the two countries.

Yemen also became the tomb of British ambitions in the region. As noted earlier, throughout the crisis the Kennedy administration urged the Macmillan government to recognise the Yemen Arab Republic, to stop aiding the royalists, and in general to align its regional strategy with Washington's. However, unable to trust Nasser and unwilling to put in jeopardy its protectorate in Aden, London maintained a posture in line with its general mistrust of the Egyptian leader and the Arab nationalists, disregarding Kennedy's warnings and, in early 1963, flatly rejecting the idea of recognising a regime perceived as hostile to its own interests in the Arabian Peninsula. However, despite its ambitions to retain power in defending its own interests, the Yemen crisis revealed London's inability

¹⁰⁰³ Memorandum for the Record, April 27, 1963. Ibidem, 222.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, May 4, 1963. Ibidem, 236.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Memorandum of a Conversation, October 28, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 119A, Israel, General, 11-1-63, 11-6-63.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Department of State, Outgoing Telegram, November 13, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 119A, Israel, General, 11-7-63, 11-17-63.

to play a significant role independently from Washington, let alone to influence American plans in the region. Nasser remained Kennedy's number one priority in the Middle East, and London could do nothing but watch the United States' firm grip on the Western policies in the region. When in 1968 the last British troop evacuated Aden, the United States would in fact become the main international actor in the region and the guarantor of Western interests, thus completing the changing of the guard.¹⁰⁰⁷

From a more general perspective, two more considerations can be drawn from the analysis of the Yemen crisis. First, that just as during the Eisenhower presidency, the US government remained unable to control events in the region. Kennedy criticised Eisenhower's "black and white" approach to the intricate dynamics of the Middle East, but like his predecessor, he had to come to terms with the fact that, regardless of what strategy he implemented, events in the region would follow their own course. Of course, Kennedy showed more flexibility than Eisenhower and a better understanding of the challenges that the New Frontier had to face, but the Yemen crisis revealed nonetheless that, though the United States could play the role of mediator and adjust its posture in the region, it could certainly not dictate events. Secondly, the crisis shows how the US struggled to fully appreciate the significance of inter-Arab disputes, and thus

¹⁰⁰⁷ A number of studies exist on the issues of the British decline in the Middle East and the Yemen war. W. Taylor Fain argues for instance that the different priorities between the two governments emerged clearly during the Yemen crisis. While Britain's priority was to preserve its protectorate in Aden and retain a degree of control in the Middle East, the United States was far more concerned with Nasser and the East-West struggle in the region. W. Taylor Fain, *American Ascendancy and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 133. Robert McNamara echoes this position, arguing that the Yemen crisis showed the "growing discord" between Washington and London over Nasser. Robert McNamara, *Britain, Nasser and the Balance...*, 284. Nigel Ashton completes this picture, contending that the Yemen crisis showed in effect the dichotomy between the US broader concern with communism and the British preoccupation with its regional interests. Nigel Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan, and the Cold War: the Irony of Interdependence*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 98. Similar arguments are also made in Simon C. Smith, *Ending Empire in the Middle East: Britain, the United States, and the Post-War Decolonization, 1945-1973*, (London, New York; Routledge, 2012); Tore T. Petersen, *Challenging Retrenchment: the United States, Great Britain, and the Middle East, 1950-1980*, (Trondheim; Tapir Academic Press, 2010); Ahmed Noman Almadhagi, *Yemen and the USA: A Super-Power and a Small-State Relationship, 1962-1992*, (London; Tauris Academic Studies, 1996).

demonstrated its own inability to predict regional conflicts between different Arab states. For as much as Washington's analysts prioritised the dispute between Arabs and Israelis, perceiving it as the core reason for the instability of the Middle East, conflicts across the region developed among different Arab factions as well, and more often than not these were more significant than US policy-makers expected. Just like Eisenhower during his second term, and even like several presidents after him (such as Nixon during the 1970-1971 Jordan crisis, or Carter during the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s), Kennedy found himself unprepared to deal effectively with the multitude of opposing Arab actors, finding himself caught in a proxy war that would redefine the US priorities in the region and reshape its alliances.

Yemen coup and recognition

On the day of Colonel Sallal's seizure of power and the brutal killing of several members of the Hamid al-Din family, the Kennedy administration found itself inevitably thrown into the dispute between republicans and royalists, both seeking to influence Washington's position to their own advantage. Shortly after the coup, the Yemeni representative at the UN and al-Badr's uncle, Prince Hassan bin Yahya, met with Phillip Talbot in order to convince the administration to support him against the republicans and to recognise him as the new leader of Yemen.¹⁰⁰⁸ After arguing at length that the revolution did not represent the Yemeni people and trying to assert the legality of his title, Hassan soon learned that the royalists were not going to get Washington's help: the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs promptly told him that it would be "virtually impossible to assist him because the United States did not

¹⁰⁰⁸ Circular Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Posts, September 27, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 60.

interfere in the internal affairs of other countries”¹⁰⁰⁹, and he was thus forced to fly to London, hoping to get a more accommodating response.

The same fate awaited Anwar Sadat, secretary and main spokesman of the UAR, who on September 27, 1962, phoned Badeau offering a “word of advice”.¹⁰¹⁰ “Ninety percent of [the] country’s intelligentsia support [the] coup and republic”¹⁰¹¹, he warned, urging Kennedy not to associate himself with the royalists or to allow the US allies, Saudi Arabia, to press him into doing so. Badeau promptly reaffirmed Washington’s position of non-involvement with the Arabs’ affairs, but warned that Aden and the Arab neighbours should be left alone: “We would be deeply concerned if [the] new Yemen Government undertook [a] campaign against [the] Aden protectorate and British flank”¹⁰¹², he stated, also stressing the US concerns about the stability of the Saudi regime. Sadat promptly replied that the UAR government had warned the YAR that they “considered it highly inadvisable for them to mix in any way in current British difficulties in [the] southern peninsula”¹⁰¹³, and that Nasser was not “after the oil of Saudi Arabia.”¹⁰¹⁴ The UAR, he said, only planned to stay in Yemen until Sallal’s regime was definitively stabilised against the Imam’s supporters.

Several reasons brought the administration to refuse to join either the royalist or the republican cause. Kennedy could not openly support Prince Hassan because both the UAR, whose support for the republicans had become immediately clear, and the Soviet Union, had promptly recognised the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), sending an ultimatum

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰¹⁰ Telegram from Cairo to the Secretary of State, September 27, 1962. JFK Library, NSF, Box 207, Yemen, General, 8-61, 9-62.

¹⁰¹¹ Ibidem.

¹⁰¹² Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, October 1, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 63.

¹⁰¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁰¹⁴ John Badeau, *OHI*, February 25, 1969, 21.

to all the third parties involved to “keep ‘hands off’ Yemen”¹⁰¹⁵, which brought the administration to the immediate conclusion that siding with the royalists would be strategically too dangerous. In early October 1962, Komer told Kennedy that “Nasser policy is more important than that towards Yemen”¹⁰¹⁶, implying that supporting Hassan would be tantamount to losing Cairo, and would jeopardise more pivotal strategies: “What we say, coming after the Hawk offer and Yemen, could greatly affect our relations with Arabs and Israel”¹⁰¹⁷, he also warned, showing the administration’s unwillingness to spoil the good results of the Kennedy treatment to Nasser by backing an unknown prince in Yemen. Furthermore, given Moscow’s prompt recognition, Komer also warned that a policy supporting the old Imamate would allow the USSR to exert even more, if not exclusive, influence over the Arab nationalists, who would once again perceive the United States as a force opposed to their interests and aspirations, just as they had during the Eisenhower years. Finally, Hassan was not young, popular, or charismatic, and the administration feared that “by becoming known to be actively associated with Hassan... we shall alienate the very elements who are likely to assume power in Yemen sooner or later.”¹⁰¹⁸ This perfectly illustrates the administration’s predictions about the precarious future of the most traditional Arab monarchies.

However, although the administration’s “instinctive sympathy”¹⁰¹⁹ towards Sallal’s new regime, other interests forced Kennedy to withhold, albeit temporarily, the recognition of the YAR. Concerned that the Nasserite coup would soon trespass across Yemen’s borders and shake the foundations of their own regimes, Saudi Arabia and

¹⁰¹⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, October 1, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 63.

¹⁰¹⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, October 5, 1962. Ibidem, 70.

¹⁰¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁰¹⁸ Memorandum from Roger Hilsman to the Secretary of State Rusk, September 20, 1962. JFK Library, NSF, Box 207, Yemen, General, 8-61, 9-62.

¹⁰¹⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, October 13, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 80.

Jordan (as well as Britain, concerned for its protectorate in Aden) urged the Kennedy administration not to recognise the YAR. Knowing all too well the American interests in the Saudi oilfields and in the preservation of the Hashemite Kingdom, but unwilling to openly choose the Arab monarchies over Nasser, Kennedy tried to buy some time with the nationalists while reassuring the Arab monarchies by unveiling the strategy behind US support of Cairo: “Our hope is that gradually we can turn [the] UAR attention towards its internal problems, thus creating a UAR need for tranquillity, which should be reflected in greater calm and peace in the area generally”¹⁰²⁰, he explained during a meeting with Faysal in early October 1963, stressing the importance for the Arab monarchies of accelerating the process of modernization and development of their countries as the “best antidote to Nasserism.”¹⁰²¹ Despite Kennedy’s assurances, Faysal remained unconvinced by Washington’s rapprochement with Nasser, particularly after Radio Cairo began issuing propaganda against Saud, claiming “he will be next.”¹⁰²² During the meeting, the acting king confessed that the pro-Nasser regime in Yemen was “a mortal threat to his position”, and he stood openly against the PL-480, complaining that the US aid to Cairo was being used by Nasser for “injurious and subversive activities”, and that “money which otherwise would have been spent on food is set free for Nasser's subversive efforts in other Middle Eastern countries.”¹⁰²³ Interestingly, Congress would make similar remarks before passing the Gruening amendment.

As the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 unveiled the danger of a direct nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union¹⁰²⁴, the Middle

¹⁰²⁰ Memorandum of a Conversation, October 5, 1962. Ibidem, 71.

¹⁰²¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, October 4, 1962. Ibidem, 68.

¹⁰²² Ibidem.

¹⁰²³ Memorandum of a Conversation, October 5, 1962. Ibidem, 71.

¹⁰²⁴ The CIA U-2 spy-planes had in fact discovered a site with SAM surface-to-air missiles, but they were not considered a threat as they were defensive missiles. Shortly after however, new flights brought to light a site of SS-4 medium-range ballistic missiles. It was the “unmistakable evidence” of Russian missiles in Cuba”. John T. Correll, “Airpower and the Cuban Missile Crisis”, *Air force Magazine*, Vol. 88, No. 8, August 2005.

East became a smaller concern for Kennedy, who for the entire month pursued his policy of non-involvement in order to focus on the Caribbean. As with the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, Kennedy kept Nasser in mind and, on October 22, 1962, he wrote a message to the Egyptian leader, along with other world leaders, explaining the US position on the Cuban issue.¹⁰²⁵ He accused Khrushchev of breaking his promise not to supply offensive weapons to Cuba, and he explained his actions as means of defending the United States and its allies.¹⁰²⁶ Nasser replied nine days later: "I appreciate indeed your effort to clarify the line of American policy... We confidently state our belief that the United States, with its might and prestige, can consolidate the peace more than any other nation."¹⁰²⁷

But by late October 1962, as the heat in the Caribbean was subsiding, the Yemen affair was turning into a proxy war between the UAR, backed by Moscow, on one side, and the Arab monarchies, backed by London, on the other. Both factions had rushed to support their respective protégés, flooding Yemen with troops, advisors, technicians and weapons¹⁰²⁸, and the administration soon realised that the policy of non-involvement was no longer an option.

There were no doubts in the minds of the administration that recognition of the Republican regime was the most promising choice in terms of both regional and global strategies. By early November 1962, having learned that the YAR was already "in firm

¹⁰²⁵ It was reported that in most of the Arab countries, the Cuban missile crisis was taking up the majority of the broadcasting space: the Palestinian Students General Federation accused Washington for its aggressive attempt on Cuba, stating that "the United States is continuing its aggressive policy against the people". In Syria the press claimed that "when Americans object to the establishment of a hostile military base in its vicinity at the same time it, itself, has set up military bases along the borders of its opponent's territory, we cannot see that it has any right to this objection". The Iraqi press stated that the anti-imperialist members of the UN should be checking on US imperialism. FBIS, *Foreign Radio and Press Reaction to President's Kennedy 22 October Speech on Cuba*, Oct. 24, 1962, 5.

¹⁰²⁶ Heikal, *Nasser, The Cairo Documents...*, 185.

¹⁰²⁷ Letter from President Nasser to President Kennedy, October 31, 1962. JFKL, United Arab Republic, General: 1961-1962.

¹⁰²⁸ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Saudi Arabia, November 2, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 88.

and effective control of most of Yemen”¹⁰²⁹, the administration acknowledged the improbability of a royalist victory and the importance of siding with the republicans in order to gain influence over Nasser, speed up the disengagement and avoid being caught supporting the losing faction. Believing that Nasser would not quit Yemen until he had ensured victory, Kennedy explained to an increasingly concerned Macmillan that the recognition of the YAR could give the administration some leverage to restrain Nasser from further adventures. “Paper promises from Nasser and Sallal will give us more to build on than if we delay much longer and then end up having to recognize without even these”¹⁰³⁰, he wrote in mid-November, stressing the need for both Western powers to use recognition as a bargaining card while it was still possible. Unexpected support for this strategy came from Israel and the American Jewry. Feldman, who at the beginning of the crisis in late September 1962 was asked by the president to investigate Israel’s position, promptly met the Israeli ambassador and some other Jewish friends, and confirmed that if the US wanted to recognise the YAR, it should try to obtain both a promise from Nasser to cut down Cairo’s propaganda on the refugee issue and some sort of commitment of respect for Israel.¹⁰³¹

By recognising Sallal’s regime, the Kennedy administration also hoped to prevent Faysal and Hussein from prolonging their “futile war in Yemen”¹⁰³², a conflict which might provoke Nasser into stretching the war beyond Yemen’s borders. Kennedy’s letters to Macmillan, sent later in January and March 1963, reveal the administration’s concerns over Faysal’s actions. “Faysal’s attempt to bleed Nasser in Yemen would recoil upon

¹⁰²⁹ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, November 12, 1962. Ibidem, 96.

¹⁰³⁰ President Kennedy to Prime Minister Macmillan, November 16, 1962. *PREM11/3878*, November 16, 1962.

¹⁰³¹ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, July 29, 1967, 505-507. Feldman does not mention exactly the dates of his meetings, but recalls that by the time he was ready to report to Kennedy, the administration had just recognised the YAR (December 1962).

¹⁰³² Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, November 21, 1962. *FRUS 1961-1963*, Vol. XVIII, 103.

himself, and lead Nasser to try to undermine the Saudi regime”¹⁰³³, he wrote, adding that only recognition could deprive Nasser “of an excuse to maintain a heavy presence in Yemen”. “If we force the UAR to reinforce rather than reduce its presence in Yemen”, Kennedy continued, “we may end up with a situation far more threatening to us.”¹⁰³⁴

Komer shared Kennedy’s position, confident that if Washington weighed into the dispute to mediate among the factions involved, it could lead the factions to stop flooding Yemen with arms and troops. As he told Kennedy on November 21, 1962, “we still face the painful task of insuring actual disengagement, but at least we’ll have started the trend toward settlement rather than escalation.”¹⁰³⁵ Robert Komer was indeed the strongest advocate for such a strategy, as he also believed recognition would pay the highest dividends on a global scale: “For my money, our real gains in Afro-Asian world in the last year have been with Nasser, Sukarno, Nehru, even Toure, not with our so-called allies...all things considered, we’re putting some real spokes in [the] Soviet wheel”¹⁰³⁶, he told Bundy in November 1962, showing once again the administration’s tendency to support high-profile neutralist leaders in order to reduce the Soviet gains in the third world.

Of course, Kennedy was not deaf to the monarchies’ pleas. Following UAR bombing of the Saudi city of Muwassam, on November 7, 1962, the US government began to discuss the possibility of “preparing appropriate military measures to underline its Saudi commitment”, making it clear however that such a commitment was subordinated to “progress and reform in Saudi Arabia.”¹⁰³⁷ Hoping to increase Faysal’s

¹⁰³³ Telegram from President Kennedy to Prime Minister Macmillan, March 8, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 3-63, 5-63.

¹⁰³⁴ Telegram from President Kennedy to Prime Minister Macmillan, January 26, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 142

¹⁰³⁵ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, November 21, 1962. Ibidem, 103.

¹⁰³⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, November 1962. JFK Library, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 11-62, 12-62.

¹⁰³⁷ Such measures included a US destroyer patrolling the Saudi Red Sea coast, the visit of three US aircraft to Dhahran and possible joint military exercises. Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in

sense of security and gain enough leverage to move Riyadh to disengage, the Kennedy administration began to toy with the idea of enhancing Saudi Arabia's military capability with the goal of containing it, through a strategy that much resembled that designed for Israel.

Towards the end of December 1962, the State Department concluded that recognition of the YAR was inevitable: the administration had indeed received Sallal's word that he would respect all international obligations, implement social and economic reforms, restrain Nasser from manipulating Yemen's policies and live in peace with his neighbours.¹⁰³⁸ Shortly after, on December 18, an official statement was released, in which Sallal declared that the Yemeni government would "honour its international obligations, including all treaties concluded by previous government", that it would "live in peace and harmony with all our neighbours" and that it would focus on its internal affairs "in order to ensure the equality of all citizens before law, raise social and economic standards of Yemen people and develop the country's heretofore neglected resources for the benefit of all the people."¹⁰³⁹ The day after the UAR had released its own statement, underlining its willingness to "undertake a reciprocal expeditious disengagement and phased removal of its troops from Yemen"¹⁰⁴⁰, Kennedy extended formal recognition to the Yemen Arab Republic¹⁰⁴¹, proving that the rapprochement with Nasser within the

Saudi Arabia, November 7, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 91. It is also interesting to note that similar remarks were made to the Shah of Iran (see Chapter 2).

¹⁰³⁸ Memorandum of a Conversation, November 3, 1962. JFK Library, NSF, Box 157, Saudi Arabia, General, 11-62, 12-62.

¹⁰³⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, December 14, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 114.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁴¹ Editorial Note. Ibidem, 116. Among the reasons behind the US decision to recognise the YAR, the presence of 150 American aid workers in Yemen is worth mentioning. The administration feared that they could be expelled and replaced by Soviet technicians, which would obviously be inimical to both American and Saudi interests. Memorandum of a Conversation, November 3, 1962. JFK Library, NSF, Box 157, Saudi Arabia, General, 11-62, 12-62.

broader strategy of supporting the progressive forces of Arab nationalism was the White House's top priority.

Containment, development and viral Nasserism

Despite its recognition of the YAR, by early 1963 things appeared rather gloomy for the White House. The administration found itself caught in a crossfire of criticisms coming from the Arab monarchies, Israel and Britain, and even Nasser seemed unmoved by Kennedy's gesture, as by the end of December 1962, he had carried out another attack, this time against Najran, a small city in southern Saudi Arabia. As the conflict in Yemen appeared nowhere near a resolution, with neither faction seeming willing to disengage first, the US government found itself alone in the pursuit of its strategy.

Indeed, on January 10, 1963, the Macmillan government closed the doors to a possible recognition of the YAR, making clear to Kennedy that "recognition in the present circumstances would be a recognition of an Egyptian puppet" and "a humiliation for us."¹⁰⁴² Faysal showed no support for Kennedy's solicitations to disengage, telling Hart that he would "feed fires of counterrevolution by all means short of dispatch of forces into Yemen."¹⁰⁴³ As noted earlier, even oil giants such as Standard Oil, Aramco, Texaco, Gulf Oil and others had their say, meeting with members of the administration such as Talbot, Strong and McGhee on January 10, 1963. They complained that the United States was providing the UAR, a country regarded as a "police state", with over 700 million dollars per year in foreign aid (a greatly exaggerated figure, as pointed out by Talbot), and that Nasser would never go through with a disengagement agreement.¹⁰⁴⁴ The

¹⁰⁴² Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, *CAB 139/112*, January 10, 1963.

¹⁰⁴³ Telegram from the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State, December 28, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 122.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Memorandum of a Conversation, January 11, 1963. Nina Davis Howland et al., FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. 17, 18, 20, 21.

administration, while confessing its discomfort about Nasser's propaganda against Saudi Arabia, Jordan and even Iran, pointed out that treating Nasser "like the cornered rat", would only stir up more troubles¹⁰⁴⁵: Nasser's capability for stirring up difficulties in the Near East remains", interjected Strong, "he can foment Palestinian refugee unrest; make other Arab governments take an activist line against Israel; and stir up troubles for the oil companies."¹⁰⁴⁶ Finally, when the administration was questioned about the reforms in Saudi Arabia, Talbot commented that "the pressures for change in Saudi Arabia were such that if it did not take place by evolutionary means it would by revolution"¹⁰⁴⁷, thus sharing with the representatives of the oil companies, the administration's concerns and strategies around the Arab monarchies.

Of course, although the administration had already privately expressed that its sole interest in Saudi Arabia was its oil¹⁰⁴⁸, Kennedy sought to make a gesture and limit the noises to a minimum. Dispatching Terry Duce, former vice president of ARAMCO, to Saudi Arabia in late January 1963, Kennedy hoped to build "a bridge with Faysal and the Saudis"¹⁰⁴⁹ by reassuring the acting king that the US government was committed to the integrity of his country. Kennedy's gesture, as argued earlier, was however merely designed to reduce some domestic pressure on the White House while keeping in check both the Saudis and the oil companies, and should not therefore be interpreted as a sign of the lobby's power over the administration's policies. Referring to the requests of the oil companies, Talbot recalled in his Oral History Interview, "I never got the impression that...we really were under instruction to accommodate this."¹⁰⁵⁰

¹⁰⁴⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, June 7, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 156A, Saudi Arabia, General, 6-6-62, 6-30-62.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Parker T. Hart, *OHI*, April 15, 1969, 50.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Phillips Talbot, *OHI*, August 13, 1970, 57.

Saudi Arabia was not the only monarchy to openly manifest its discontent with Kennedy's policies. Even more dramatically, in late December 1962 King Hussein of Jordan had in fact announced he would recognise some Soviet satellites, a decision he took for both economic and political reasons before the Yemen crisis, but that was accelerated by Kennedy's sale of the HAWK and, especially, by US recognition of Sallal's regime.¹⁰⁵¹ While making immediately clear that no Soviet aid should be received by Jordan, pragmatism prevailed over anxiety among US policy-makers: "It seemed inevitable that sooner or later [the] King would establish relations with the Soviets"¹⁰⁵², argued the State Department later in August 1963, in what might seem a paradoxical point of view. However, it was specified that, if anything, Hussein's slight opening to some Soviet satellite could perhaps strengthen his regime by mitigating the allegations that he was a Western puppet and by tuning his policies with those of his Arab neighbours.¹⁰⁵³

As the administration sought to find balance between monarchies and nationalists, new problems emerged on the Israeli front, as during a meeting with Kennedy in Palm Beach on December 27, 1962, Golda Meir raised Israel's concerns about Washington's tolerance of Cairo's manoeuvres: "There is a constant shadow of Nasser's ambitions in the Middle East", she complained, a shadow that was now strengthened by the Egyptian acquisition of "more arms from the Soviets", shipped in to fight the war in Yemen. Reiterating that "in case of an invasion the United States would come to the support of Israel", Kennedy explained once again the strategic advantage of supporting Nasser: "we went ahead in order to try to lessen the impact of the fighting on Saudi Arabia and the

¹⁰⁵¹ Supplementary Briefing Memorandum-Jordan, and CIA Telegram- Information Report, December 27, 1962. JFK Library, NSF, Box 125A, Jordan, General, 11-62, 3-63.

¹⁰⁵² Department of State, Incoming Telegram, August 23, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 125A, Jordan, General, 5-63, 11-63.

¹⁰⁵³ Ibidem. The administration knew that, despite Hussein's opening to some Soviet satellites, he would still tenaciously oppose communism in his country. Ibidem.

risk that a pro-UAR regime might take over in Saudi Arabia... this seemed an action in your interest.”¹⁰⁵⁴

Although the administration tried to reassure the parties involved that its diplomatic leverage with the UAR was critical to maintaining a certain degree of control over events, Kennedy concluded that a frank letter to Nasser would not hurt after all. Seeking to proceed towards a termination of the hostilities, at the end of January 1963, Kennedy wrote to the Egyptian leader that his actions in Yemen could “prejudice our growing rapport”, stressing however that the message was intended to “clear the air”¹⁰⁵⁵ rather than to threaten him.

As the conflict in Yemen dragged on, on February 9, 1963, news of a pro-Nasser coup in Iraq arrived in Washington. Rusk sent Kennedy a memorandum, explaining that a coup led by Colonel Abdul Karim Mustafa had manage to overthrow and kill Qasim, and establish a new nationalist government “with a strong pan-Arab bent.”¹⁰⁵⁶ Seeking to “encourage a constructive Iraqi role in the Yemen problem”¹⁰⁵⁷, and hoping to foster a new, better relationship between Washington and Baghdad, which had previously been tarnished by Qasim’s close association with Moscow, the US government agreed to grant recognition. The administration believed that closer ties with the new regime in Iraq promised to pay high dividends on both a political and economic level, by favouring constructive relationships with the Arab neighbours, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and oil-rich Kuwait, and by opening the country to international investors after “Qasim's restrictive measures against foreign business.”¹⁰⁵⁸ Of course, if on the one hand promoting

¹⁰⁵⁴ Memorandum of a Conversation, December 27, 1962. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 121.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, January 19, 1963. Ibidem, 135.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, February 9, 1963. Ibidem, 154.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Ibidem. The administration hoped to capitalize on Iraq, given that since 1958 Qasim had established close ties with the Soviet Union. The administration hoped that with recognition, it could steer Iraq away from Moscow and towards the West, thus reducing the Soviet presence in the region while simultaneously securing the multitude of economic interests in Iraq and the oilfields in Kuwait. Ibidem.

neutralism over communism in Iraq fulfilled Kennedy's larger regional and global strategies, on the other recognition of the new regime further exacerbated the fears of Nasser's nemeses, as the coup of February opened the road for a second wave of Nasserism that, resembling that of 1958, promised to unleash panic across the region. As a matter of fact, on March 6, 1963, Komer rightfully predicted "a period of heightened fluidity in inter-Arab politics", and thus suggested: "Best policy for us is to sit tight and be prepared to deal with whoever comes out on top", adding one warning: to choose Saudi Arabia over the revolutionary forces in the region, who were once again able to re-write the geopolitical map (as Kennedy had commented on the occasion of the 1958 uprisings), would be tantamount to jeopardising the US interests in the Saudi oilfields.¹⁰⁵⁹ Kennedy would respond to the 1963 wave of Nasserism during the following months, when the attempted coup in Jordan, and the Iraqi and Syrian hostile propaganda against Israel forced the administration to take special measures to contain the Ben Gurion government, laying the foundations of the US-Israel alliance.

Seeking to forestall an inevitably hostile reaction, Kennedy promptly agreed to make gestures towards Israel and Saudi Arabia, both concerned at Nasser's seemingly increasing power in the region. The administration hoped that small diplomatic tokens could restrain Israel from undertaking pre-emptive attacks against the UAR, stabilise Saudi Arabia, and perhaps restrain Nasser from escalating the conflict in Yemen. On March 2, 1963, Kennedy pledged to ensure "Israel's security and well-being, its right to exist as a state" - a generic commitment intended to reassure Ben Gurion without spoiling the US position among the Arabs – thus resisting, at least for time being, "any Israeli attempts to formalize or institutionalize a special American-Israeli relationship."¹⁰⁶⁰

¹⁰⁵⁹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, March 6, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 322, Robert Komer, Staff Memoranda, 3-63, 5-63.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Circular Airgram from the Department of State to Certain Posts, March 2, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 174.

Indeed, as noted earlier, Kennedy did not actively seek to establish closer ties with Israel, but such a result was the unintended outcome of a strategy largely designed to contain the country. After all, Ben Gurion had obtained the HAWK, doomed the Johnson Plan, and had still not come clean on Dimona, and Kennedy was less and less inclined to jeopardise the US position in the Arab world (to Moscow's advantage), in order to openly favour an ambiguous leader like Ben Gurion.

With Saudi Arabia, Kennedy pursued a double policy intended to enhance its security with the goal of both appeasing Faysal on one hand and deterring Nasser on the other, while simultaneously strengthening the regime through political, social and economic reforms. In keeping with his strategy of securing US interests in Saudi oil without reversing the trend in the US-UAR relationship by openly favouring Faysal over Nasser, Kennedy strengthened Washington's ties with Riyadh through a clever diplomatic manoeuvre, which would be implemented later, in early July 1963. During a meeting in the White House on February 25, 1963, it was decided to send a special emissary, Ellsworth Bunker, to Saudi Arabia in order to "offer the politico-military reassurance of a 'plate glass fighter squadron'"¹⁰⁶¹, should Faysal agree to disengage. Operation HARD SURFACE, as the manoeuvre later came to be known, consisted of "eight F-100 tactical fighter aircraft and one transport-type command support aircraft"¹⁰⁶² and was aimed at assisting Faysal in the development of "a better air defense capability of their own."¹⁰⁶³ Kennedy made clear that the offer to Faysal should not assume the American Air Force would stay permanently on the mission, but simply for a few months, just long enough to get the disengagement process to start. It was, to put it in Komer's words, no more than a "token".¹⁰⁶⁴

¹⁰⁶¹ Memorandum for the Record, February 25, 1963. Ibidem, 164.

¹⁰⁶² Editorial Note. Ibidem, 270.

¹⁰⁶³ Memorandum for the Record, February 25, 1963. Ibidem, 164.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 23.

As noted earlier however, Kennedy's decision to approve operation HARD SURFACE cannot be seen as a testament to his intention of shifting Washington's regional goals from the revolutionary forces of the Arab nationalism to the traditional Arab monarchy. Warren Bass has for instance argued that the operation constituted in effect "a glum terminus for the attempt to woo Nasser"¹⁰⁶⁵, yet he seems to exaggerate the impact of an operation carried out by a squadron that lacked "the radar, communications, and munitions necessary to perform an effective air defense function."¹⁰⁶⁶ The aim of HARD SURFACE was in fact simply to provide a "credible" warning to Nasser, so as to deter him from thinking of moving his troops into Saudi Arabia¹⁰⁶⁷, and not to make the House of Saud the centre of the American regional strategies.¹⁰⁶⁸ After all, Kennedy had imposed strict rules of engagement¹⁰⁶⁹, and had made sure that he would have the last word on any action taken by the US Air Force.¹⁰⁷⁰ Furthermore, as Robert Komer would point out later in August 1963, the US military support to Saudi Arabia was mainly intended to "buy some time for Saudi Arabia to modernize", given that progress and development were "the only way these monarchies can survive."¹⁰⁷¹ Even though the administration believed that there was "more smoke than fire"¹⁰⁷² in the theory that Nasser would march into Saudi Arabia, the risk of internal

¹⁰⁶⁵ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 133.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Memorandum from the Joint Chief of Staff to the Secretary of Defense McNamara, December 24, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 393. Barrett has pointed out that "the Kennedy administration had damaged its credibility." Roby C. Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War...*, 297. Yet, although Nasser might not have appreciated Kennedy's decision, the US president had made sure to use his personal diplomacy to reassure Cairo that his policy towards the UAR had not changed. More in line with the analysis provided in this work, Douglas Little has argued that HARD SURFACE was "ostensibly intended as a symbolic deterrent". Little, *The New Frontier on the Nile...*, 521.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Memorandum for the Record, February 25, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 164.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 4.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, June 12, 1963. Ibidem, 268.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Telegram from the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kaysen) to President Kennedy, June 28, 1963. Ibidem, 284.

¹⁰⁷¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, August 23, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box157A, Saudi Arabia, General, 7-63, 8-63.

¹⁰⁷² Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, February 21, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 160.

uprisings fomented by the UAR propaganda constituted a much more serious threat than a direct invasion. Thus, the administration chose to avoid any risk: by dispatching its air force, the US government hoped to deter Nasser from extending the conflict beyond Yemen's borders long enough to allow Faysal to stabilise his regime internally.

While the administration kept a close eye on the US economic missions to Saudi Arabia and on Faysal's reform plan (as early as January 1963 Hart reported in fact some setback on its implementation¹⁰⁷³), on March 2, 1963, Kennedy sent another blunt letter to Nasser: "I think there is a real risk that events might lead to a collision involving the interests of our two countries. The question is how to avoid such a collision."¹⁰⁷⁴ Even Komer admitted that Kennedy's message was one of the strongest he had ever seen.¹⁰⁷⁵ The president explained the purpose of Bunker's mission, inviting Nasser to respect his part of the agreement: "unless UAR stops overt attacks on Saudi Arabia [the] United States Government will be forced [to] review its policy toward UAR."¹⁰⁷⁶ Although such letters might reasonably give the impression that Kennedy was linking the PL-480 to Nasser's disengagement, the future correspondence between the two leaders and the administration's private talks on Nasser show that the New Frontiersmen still perceived Nasser as "the bulk of the Arab world"¹⁰⁷⁷, and were not willing to put an end to the

¹⁰⁷³ As seen in Chapter 2, by mid-November 1962 Faysal had announced his ambitious reform plan, but by early January 1963, Hart informed the administration of some awkward setbacks in its implementation. Hart pointed out that the budget announced by Faysal included some hidden allocations for the Royal Family and to finance the war in Yemen. In addition, the funding for the Public Morality Committee had been increased instead of reduced, and the Ministry of Justice, another key point of the reform plan, "will not be a man versed in Western law" but a member of the Ulema. Furthermore, the US economic mission to Saudi Arabia, headed by Harold Folk, struggled to effectively put things in motion. For instance, Hart reported, Folk explicitly refused to allocate further development funds on schools and hospitals without having an adequate staff of doctors, nurses and teachers. Airgram from the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State, January 10, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 157, Saudi Arabia, General, 1-63, 3-63.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, March 2, 1963. Ibidem, 175.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 25.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, March 2, 1963. Ibidem, 175.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, March 6, 1963. JFKL, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 3-63, 5-63.

‘Kennedy treatment’. On March 4, 1963, Nasser met Badeau, agreeing to “make an initial cut in its forces simultaneously with a temporary Saudi suspension of support to the royalists.”¹⁰⁷⁸ Ever the pragmatist, Komer reassured Kennedy that “Nasser’s reply to your warning is just about as responsive as could be expected”¹⁰⁷⁹, given that the royalists were still being supplied by the Arab monarchies. Nasser had agreed to “hold off further attacks for a few weeks to give our mediation efforts a chance”. “His answer”, Komer added, “also shows that our new policy has given us leverage with him.”¹⁰⁸⁰

That same month however, the administration’s efforts to terminate the conflict in Yemen suffered from two setbacks. The first one was caused by an article published by Hedrick Smith of the New York Times, entitled “US Assured by Nasser Attack on Saudis Will Halt”¹⁰⁸¹, in which Smith claimed: “The United States has been assured by President Gamal Abdel Nasser that the United Arab Republic will suspend its military attacks on against Saudi Arabia” and that “the commitment came in response to a stern Unites States warning.”¹⁰⁸² Even worse, Smith wrote that “In return for the Egyptian commitment to suspend such attacks, the United States is reported to have promised that it would make a maximum effort to persuade Prince Faysal of Saudi Arabia to cease giving aid to Royalist forces in Yemen.”¹⁰⁸³ The wording of the article seemed thus to imply that the Saudi disengagement would follow the Egyptian withdrawal, while in actual fact Nasser had made abundantly clear that he would stay in Yemen as long as Faysal supported the royalists. To put the “agreement” in that way seemed a clear provocation to the Egyptian leader, and an indirect attack on his prestige in the Arab

¹⁰⁷⁸ Editorial Note. Ibidem, 176.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, March 5, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 168A, UAR, General, 1-63, 3-63.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁸¹ Hedrick Smith, “U.S. Assured by Nasser Attack on Saudis Will Halt; U.S. Pledge Is Reported NASSER TO HALT ATTACK ON SAUDIS”, *Special to the New York Times*, March 8, 1963.

¹⁰⁸² Ibidem.

¹⁰⁸³ Ibidem.

world. Kennedy promptly told Badeau to inform Nasser that the White House was “highly embarrassed by the “distorted stories” in the US press”¹⁰⁸⁴, and to invite him to pursue the disengagement plan regardless. Komer’s reaction to the news gives an idea of the full extent of the danger: “Disaster has struck. You know this is the one thing Nasser can’t take. For it to get out publicly that he was forced to back down would cause him to lose tremendous face. We’re in trouble.”¹⁰⁸⁵ Nasser’s response in fact, was the renewal of a “small scale bombing of the two Saudi towns”, adjudging that Saudi support to the royalists was still “going full blast.”¹⁰⁸⁶ Although the Egyptian leader justified the new attack in light of continued Saudi support for the royalists, Komer reported: “We are convinced that Nasser’s renewed small scale bombing of the two Saudi towns is a carefully calculated answer to the leak that we warned him and he agreed to lay off”.¹⁰⁸⁷ Critically, with this new bombing, the chances of calming down Faysal diminished dramatically.

Even more dramatically, on March 8, 1963, the Syrian government was overthrown in a Ba’athist coup, bringing to power, just as in Iraq, a pro-Nasser regime. Rusk promptly told Kennedy that “similar factors which motivated our prompt recognition of Iraq are operative in this case”¹⁰⁸⁸ and that Komer and the State Department advocated swift recognition. Indeed, the new Syrian regime had announced its intentions to respect international obligations, it met the legal criteria, was strongly anti-communist and sought friendly relations with the West, was anti-Israel though wished to maintain a defensive posture, and would seek Arab unity but “will undoubtedly seek to preserve Syria’s identity”.¹⁰⁸⁹ More importantly however, the administration hoped that the new

¹⁰⁸⁴ Memorandum for the Record, March 11, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 189.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Robert Komer, *OHI*, July 16, 1964, 25.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, March 13, 1963. Ibidem, 191.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, March 10, 1963. Ibidem, 185.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Ibidem.

regimes in Iraq and Syria could result in some strategic “advantages for the United States.”¹⁰⁹⁰ In fact, as the CIA reported on March 13, 1963, Nasser clearly expressed that he did not want “a coup in Saudi Arabia, nor for that matter in Jordan”, being now too busy dealing with the new regimes in Syria and Iraq. “The Nationalists” it was reported, “now have their hands full digesting the two coups in recent weeks. Two more now would be too much of a good thing.”¹⁰⁹¹ Furthermore, not only did both governments in Baghdad and Damascus, incidentally strongly anti-communism, seem eager to maintain a certain degree of independence from Cairo, but Nasser himself appeared “not entirely happy about the coups”: after describing the newly-formed governments as “largely incompetent and irresponsible”, the Egyptian leader admitted his scepticism about his chances of avoiding embarrassments caused by the two new regimes¹⁰⁹², as well as his doubts about provoking coups in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, being particularly “concerned about [the] United States reaction.”¹⁰⁹³ Hoping to gain some leverage against Nasser by showing support to Arab nationalism, and that the new coups would “distract” him from the conflict with Saudi Arabia, on March 13, 1963, Washington extended formal recognition to the new Syrian government.

The brave, young king

While the Kennedy administration hoped that recognition of the new regimes in Iraq and Syria would give it leverage on Nasser, and so restrain him from instigating similar coups in Saudi Arabia, the 1963 wave of Nasserism increased Faysal and Hussein’s fears about Nasser’s ascendancy, as well as Ben Gurion’s concerns about

¹⁰⁹⁰ Memorandum from the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to McGeorge Bundy, March 23, 1963. Ibidem, 198.

¹⁰⁹¹ Telegram from the CIA. Information Report. JFK Library, NSF, Box 168A, UAR, General, 1-63, 3-63.

¹⁰⁹² Nasser was probably referring to the brutal killing of several members of the communist party in Iraq. Ibidem.

¹⁰⁹³ Ibidem.

greater Arab unity. Seeking to contain the effects of Nasser's renewed influence and avoid widespread panic across the region, by mid-March 1963, the administration acknowledged the "urgency of bringing the Yemen conflict to an early close" and having Faysal withdraw his troops and focus on internal reform.¹⁰⁹⁴

Ever the strategist, Kennedy appealed to the Saudis' fear, if not their very survival instinct, in order to speed up Faysal's disengagement. On March 14, 1963, Kennedy wrote that the Yemen crisis was no longer an internal conflict within a small country, nor was it any more a battlefield of clashing interests; it was on the contrary the spark plug of "a new atmosphere in the Arab world", the symbol of Nasser's redemption, the clear indication that the old monarchies were not welcomed in this newly-shaped Middle East.¹⁰⁹⁵ "The Egyptian offensive in Yemen seems to us on the eve of success. Our intelligence confirms your remarks that revolutionary ideas are abroad in your country", Kennedy continued, "Frankly I think it is emphatically in your interest that the disengagement process begin". In short, Kennedy concluded, "we want to help you, but you must make it possible for us to do so".¹⁰⁹⁶

By early April 1963, Kennedy's warnings finally seemed to be paying off. Because of the White House's warning and the increasing domestic pressure caused by Saudi Arabia's economic and social problems¹⁰⁹⁷ (the State Department made clear that Faysal's actions in Yemen would "strengthen opposition elements in Saudi Arabia and weaken Saud regime", and that the Royal Family was "on a course of self-destruction"¹⁰⁹⁸), Faysal appeared more inclined to cut off Saudi aid to the royalists, to

¹⁰⁹⁴ Memorandum from the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to McGeorge Bundy. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 190.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Saudi Arabia, March 14, 1963. Ibidem, 194.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Airgram from the Department of State to Certain Posts, March 2, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 208, Yemen, General, 3-63, 4-63.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Ibidem.

establish a demilitarised zone on the border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen and to cooperate with the United Nations towards disengagement, provided that the UAR carried out its own part of the agreement.¹⁰⁹⁹ For his part, even Nasser appeared progressively more inclined to cooperate with the disengagement plan. Concerned about Kennedy's reaction to a possible nationalist takeover in Saudi Arabia and Jordan and, given the mixed results of the recent coups in Iraq and Syria, the Egyptian leader confessed he did not want to "get the blame" if Faysal fell.¹¹⁰⁰

Enthusiastically praising Nasser's "constructive and statesmanlike approach", on April 18, 1963, Kennedy wrote to Cairo: "United States policy has not changed, nor do I see any current reason to change it". Kennedy concluded his letter by expressing "a word of congratulation on the agreement in principle announced in Cairo on the formation of a new and enlarged United Arab Republic" able to meet "the aspirations and views of the Arab peoples concerned".¹¹⁰¹ Despite the harsh words that Kennedy had previously written to Nasser in order to obtain his cooperation in the disengagement plan, their April correspondence shows that the rapprochement with the UAR was still key to the New Frontier's overall strategy for the Middle East.

However, by mid-April 1963, the Kennedy administration was forced to shift the focus of its Mideast policy from Sanaa to Amman, where the explosive situation in Jordan and the threat of a possible Israeli invasion risked provoking a full-blown Arab-Israeli war. On April 17, 1963, the administration was informed that King Hussein could fall victim to an imminent Nasser coup¹¹⁰²: Radio Cairo had indeed been fuelling the

¹⁰⁹⁹ Telegram from the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State, April 7, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 209.

¹¹⁰⁰ CIA Telegram, March 13, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 168A, United Arab Republic, General, 1-63, 3-63.

¹¹⁰¹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, April 18, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 215.

¹¹⁰² Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs (Strong), April 25, 1963. Ibidem, 219.

Jordanian population's anger against the king for his support of the royalists in Yemen, for his opposition to pan-Arabism, for his close ties with the West and, allegedly, with Israel, and for opposing the nationalist ambitions of the Jordanian people.¹¹⁰³ Advocating a war of destruction against Israel, Cairo's propaganda found a receptive audience in a population composed largely of Palestinians, and they quickly started rioting in the streets of Amman demanding the fall of Hussein and the annexation of Jordan to the UAR, leaving King Hussein with no support but his army. Concerned for the events of Iraq and Syria, back in early April 1963 Shimon Peres had confessed to Kennedy that "If there should be outright intervention by the UAR, this would certainly call for a reaction by Israel."¹¹⁰⁴ Thus, when in mid-April, tensions exploded across the streets of Amman, the administration was once again confronted with Israel's "active defence" and the risk that Ben Gurion would escalate the turmoil in Jordan to a war against the UAR, incidentally seizing the opportunity to grab the West Bank. The administration however, did not perceive Israel's fears as justifiable, as it believed that the "trouble was largely caused by enthusiastic students" rather than by a direct plot orchestrated by the UAR, adding that, given the Yemen affair, Nasser would not "risk Israeli military intervention in Jordan".¹¹⁰⁵

Sensing Washington's growing agitation, on April 27, Barbour promptly cabled that Israel appeared "concerned but not excited" about the turmoil in Jordan, and that he had seen no indications that Ben Gurion planned on seizing the West Bank.¹¹⁰⁶ Arguing that the Israeli government "prefers no essential change in Jordan's status quo", the ambassador described the West Bank as a possible "economic and demographic liability"

¹¹⁰³ Telegram from the Embassy in Cairo to the Secretary of State, April 25, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 125A, Jordan, General, 4-63.

¹¹⁰⁴ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Phillips Talbot and Myer Feldman, April 5, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 207.

¹¹⁰⁵ Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs (Strong), April 25, 1963. Ibidem, 219.

¹¹⁰⁶ Telegram from the Embassy in Tel Aviv to the Secretary of State, April 27, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 125A, Jordan, General, 4-63.

for Israel, thus implying that the alarmism was perhaps unjustified. The ambassador stressed however that Ben Gurion would not tolerate the presence of Nasser's troops so close to his own territory "for it would not be Jordanian internal affair any more than Soviet rockets in Cuba was internal affair".¹¹⁰⁷

Ben Gurion's subsequent letter to Kennedy seemed indeed to confirm Barbour's last remark. "Recent Middle East events... adversely affect area stability and Israel's security" he commented, adding that Israel would not acquiesce to such attempts at "liberation".¹¹⁰⁸ If some UAR devotees toppled Hussein, Ben Gurion made it clear that Israel would not sit by and watch. Therefore, when the very same day Under Secretary of State Ball phoned McNamara to inform him that "there may be coups in Jordan today if it didn't occur during the night", and that they might be carried out "with the complete knowledge of the UAR", the administration's concern shifted immediately towards Israel: "The real problem is whether the Israelis will sit still", Ball told McNamara. "Suppose they didn't?" asked the latter.¹¹⁰⁹

A meeting was thus immediately called in the White House: Kennedy's top aides were all present to discuss how to react to a possible Israeli move. Somehow anticipating the dramatic events of 1967, James Grant, the deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, commented that if Israel intervened and "grabbed the West Bank, it would prolong Arab-Israeli hostility by 15 years"¹¹¹⁰; consequently, Grant continued, the UAR might at that point launch direct attacks against Israel, Israel might react against Egyptian targets and the war might explode. Kennedy interjected explaining

¹¹⁰⁷ Ibidem.

¹¹⁰⁸ Memorandum from the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to McGeorge Bundy, April 27, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 220.

¹¹⁰⁹ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between the Under Secretary of State (Ball) and Secretary of Defense McNamara, April 27, 1963. Ibidem, 221.

¹¹¹⁰ Memorandum for the Record, April 27, 1963. Ibidem, 222. On June 5, 1967, Israel did in fact conquer the West Bank, as a result of the growing tension between the Israel on one side, and Egypt, Syria and Jordan on the other.

how Ben Gurion's letter had given evidence that the real problem was going to be Israel's move. "Israel is really the danger, since it wants to move first if there is a coup in Jordan".¹¹¹¹ Fearing that Israel could exploit the situation in Jordan to take control of the West Bank, Kennedy ordered joint talks between his ambassadors and the Israeli and Egyptian leaders. At that point, the president continued, it was necessary to contact the Israelis and urge them "not to take precipitate action", while at the same time to "make sure that Nasser understood the consequences if Israel moved."¹¹¹² Secretly, Kennedy instructed his administration to allow the use of US military force "to maintain status quo in Jordan"¹¹¹³, should the situation take a turn for the worse. By the end of April, however, good news arrived from Jordan. Macomber cabled that "recent relative absence public disorders, together with other surface indicators, tend suggest possibility that immediate threat internal turbulence may, for time being, be subsiding"¹¹¹⁴, and the Kennedy administration could heave a sigh of relief: Hussein was not killed or overthrown and Israel did not intervene. For the time being, Nasser's fixation with Yemen and Kennedy's warnings to Ben Gurion had prevented the explosion of an Arab-Israeli war.

However, as the Jordan crisis temporarily obfuscated the conflict in Yemen, it had also brought the Arab-Israeli conflict to the fore and, while Hussein's concerns were growing quieter, domestic pressure and criticism against Kennedy's Middle East policy was as loud as ever. During the first session of the 88th Congress on April 30, 1963, Senator Keating expressed the Congress's disappointment:

"I hold no brief for the old monarchies that still govern in some of the Arab lands... But it is one thing... to make their way forward through a process of self-reform; it is a completely different thing when the government of the United Arab Republic... sends in its agents to subvert them... as it did in Yemen."¹¹¹⁵

¹¹¹¹ Ibidem.

¹¹¹² Ibidem.

¹¹¹³ Position Paper, Scenario 1963-64. JFK Library, NSF, Box 119, Israel, General, 5-10-63, 5-13-63.

¹¹¹⁴ Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State, April 28, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 226.

¹¹¹⁵ Congressional Record, April 30, 1963, 88th Congress, 1st session, 1963, 713.

Later in May, as news of the German technicians' activities to build up Nasser's rockets spread across Washington due to Israel's incessant, and largely exaggerated, propaganda (the administration had in fact concluded that "Israel will probably retain its overall military superiority a vis-à-vis the Arab states for the next several years"¹¹¹⁶), everybody began to question Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East. An article which appeared in the New York Post on May 1, pointed out that the Kennedy administration was under harsh criticism of its Mideast policies voiced by dozen senators, who "assailed the administration for building up President Nasser while he continues to threaten the peace and the stability of the Middle East".¹¹¹⁷ The friends of Israel in the Senate did not seem able to let the issue rest. On May 8, Senator Javits levelled accusations that "the foreign aid from [the] US... enables him [Nasser] to use Egypt's cotton crop for the purpose of buying Soviet-bloc arms... jeopardising peace and security... to the State of Israel".¹¹¹⁸ He complained the administration had moved "rather precipitately... to recognise the new regime in the Yemen", adding that "enough problems have been raised for us by Syria and Iraq with the UAR... whose declared intention is the liquidation of Israel". The senator concluded by saying: "I believe we have made and are making some extremely grave mistakes".¹¹¹⁹

Faced with mounting criticism, Kennedy privately began to question his own approach to Nasser: "What [have] we gained from our policy toward Nasser?...We naturally wanted to stay on the right side of him, but what about the growing accusation that our support was helping him pursue expansionist policies?"¹¹²⁰ Although frustrated

¹¹¹⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, May 2, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 3-63, 5-63.

¹¹¹⁷ Congressional Record, May 8, 1963, 88th Congress, 1st session, 1963, 7949

¹¹¹⁸ Ibidem, 7949.

¹¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹¹²⁰ Memorandum for the Record, April 27, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 222.

by the domestic pressure against his foreign policy, and by the difficulty of terminating the conflict in Yemen, the Kennedy administration still believed that the benefits of the rapprochement with Nasser outweighed the criticism against it: “Nasser had put the Israeli problem in the icebox, he had shown restraint on various international issues where previously he had been strongly anti-US, etc.”, pointed out Grant, promptly followed by Robert Komer, who stressed that “it was necessary to distinguish between the sheer physical fact that the UAR was the largest power in the Arab world and hence the natural focus of Israeli concerns and the question of whether the UAR was actively pursuing an anti-Israeli policy.”¹¹²¹ Once again, the true nature of Israel’s concerns and demands had left the administration rather sceptical.

The shift that wasn’t

Once the fear of an Israeli takeover in Jordan appeared to have subsided, over the following months the Kennedy administration sought to calm down Capitol Hill explaining that it was not “US food which [is] creating problems in the Middle East”¹¹²², while pursuing its strategies to terminate the conflict in Yemen. The events that would take place between May and November 1963 marked the moment at which the shift in US policies in the Middle East came to completion, yet, as argued earlier, such a result was not intended. Although authors such as Little, Ben-Zvi and Bass, have reasonably interpreted Kennedy’s 1963 policies towards Saudi Arabia and Israel as a testament to the administration’s attempt to find new regional assets, Kennedy’s overall approach to the Middle East was still centred around Nasser, as the final correspondence between the two presidents reveals. Kennedy’s attempt to stabilise Saudi Arabia and prevent the fall

¹¹²¹ Ibidem.

¹¹²² Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, May 6, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 322, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 3-63, 5-63.

of the royal family, and to contain Israel and forestall its active defence, resulted in the involuntary enhancement of Washington ties with both countries.

On May 1, 1963, as discussed previously, Kennedy issued an informal statement of security guarantee to Israel with the purpose of containing both Congress's pressure and Israel's pre-emptive strikes against Nasser's supporters in Jordan.¹¹²³ Kennedy had refused Ben Gurion's idea of a joint US-USSR statement in protection of the territorial status quo¹¹²⁴, but seeking to contain Israel, he further strengthened its bond with the United States. During the same month, the administration tried breathe new life into the disengagement plan, but financial stringency was considerably delaying the UN efforts. The administration urged A. Stevenson, Washington's permanent representative at the United Nation, to press Secretary-General U Thant to cut the number of UN observers from 200 to 50, and so to give an impulse to the disengagement plan.¹¹²⁵ By early June however, the impossibility of getting Faysal and Nasser to agree to share the expenses of the UN mission resulted in a chronic impasse of the disengagement efforts and a further escalation of the hostilities. The UN plan was ready, but it could not get started.¹¹²⁶

Kennedy also tried to deter Nasser from causing more troubles in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Yemen. Admitting that the administration was taking harsh criticism from Congress for its pro-UAR policies, on May 27, 1963, Kennedy wrote to Nasser,

¹¹²³ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, May 1, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 232.

¹¹²⁴ As Little correctly notes, it would have been unacceptable for the United States to agree to the US-USSR security guarantee to Israel, as the United States had worked unrelentingly to "reduce Russian influence in the region". Little, *From Even-Handed to Empty Ended...*, edited by Paterson, 172.

¹¹²⁵ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, May 31, 1963. Ibidem, 260. As Komer confessed a few years later in his interview "If we had got the disengagement agreement signed, sealed and delivered back in April without all of this UN delay, we might have had the Yemen affair closed out in the middle of 1963". Robert Komer, *OHI*, September 3, 1964, 3.

¹¹²⁶ The plan consisted in sending 36 people, including 12 officials (3 Americans and the rest from Netherlands, Italy, France, Australia and Canada). The main group would be despatched to Sa'na, then the rest in Beirut, Jidda and Hodeida. After establishing the groups in the respective areas, observers from Scandinavia, Yugoslavia and Canada would be sent to deal with the countries directly interested. Memorandum From the Deputy Director of the Bureau of International Security Affairs, Department of Defense (Stoddart) to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Nitze), June 3, 1963. Ibidem, 262.

reaffirming his commitment to pursue a policy of economic assistance to the UAR, and endorsing Nasser's revolution as proof of the "Arab's ability to evolve his life towards a better future."¹¹²⁷ Kennedy warned the Egyptian leader however that an arms race, let alone a nuclear one, between Arabs and Israelis contained "the seeds of disaster" and that, should worse come to worst, "the Arab forces might not be at any advantage."¹¹²⁸ Although Nasser's reply, which arrived on June 11 1963, seemed to be rather moderate, as he commented that he was ready to discuss with Kennedy issues such as the Arab-Israeli dispute and the Yemen conflict ¹¹²⁹ (later in the summer of 1963, Cairo would also the Nuclear Test Ban Agreement, one of Kennedy's great achievements¹¹³⁰), news of new problems in Yemen reached the White House in early June 1963. The UN plan was "fully in effect", pointed out the Department of Defense, but "the political situation in the Yemen is deteriorating and... the Sallal regime cannot last."¹¹³¹ Indeed, the YAR leader had executed three coup plotters and was now allegedly seeking formal union with the UAR "as a way to save his regime."¹¹³² While promising the US government that he would terminate the conflict, Nasser was thus preparing the reinforcements to send into Yemen, in an effort to prevent his protégé from falling.¹¹³³

Issues emerged on the Saudi front as well. On June 12, 1963, after learning that, in light of Nasser's renewed bombing, Faysal had pointed out that the situation "had

¹¹²⁷ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, May 27, 1963. Ibidem, 257.

¹¹²⁸ Ibidem.

¹¹²⁹ Memorandum from the Department of State Executive Secretary (Brubeck) to McGeorge Bundy, July 11, 1963. Ibidem, 266.

¹¹³⁰ Memorandum from William Brubeck to McGeorge Bundy, August 17, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 169, UAR, General, 6-63, 8-63

¹¹³¹ Memorandum From the Deputy Director of the Bureau of International Security Affairs, Department of Defense (Stoddart) to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Nitze), June 3, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 262.

¹¹³² Ibidem.

¹¹³³ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, June 7, 1963. Ibidem, 264.

become intolerable and he could no longer depend on [the] promises made”¹¹³⁴, Rusk warned Kennedy that relations with Saudi Arabia were reaching “a dangerous low point.”¹¹³⁵ The acting king complained that throughout the crisis the Saudi government had in fact embraced the path towards the development of their country, reforming the cabinet, abolishing slavery and implementing a full set of social and economic reforms to strengthen the regime against the wave of Nasserism, just as Kennedy had prescribed during 1961-1962.¹¹³⁶ Now, as Yemen heated up again after the scare in Jordan, Faysal had concluded that “the United States has let him down and is failing to live up to its assurances of protection.”¹¹³⁷ But as the first UN observers were expected to reach Yemen by June 13, 1963, the US government was ready to pay off its debt. On June 12, 1963, the HARD SURFACE squadron was put on a 48-hour alert.¹¹³⁸

However, although operation HARD SURFACE was ready to begin, a controversy exploded on June 14, 1963 over the presence of personnel of Jewish faith in the American mission to Riyadh. This delayed the deployment of the US Air Force, incidentally causing great embarrassment in Washington, and adding doubts to the mind of a president already little inclined to put up with civil rights abuses. Back in May in fact, when the State Department was laying down the rules for the mission, it had been decided to exclude personnel of Jewish faith, in order to avoid any possible Saudi opposition to Jewish people entering Saudi Arabia, a country that had always denied visas

¹¹³⁴ Telegram from the President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kaysen) to the Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (Hart), June 8, 1963. Ibidem, 265.

¹¹³⁵ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, June 12, 1963. Ibidem, 268.

¹¹³⁶ Airgram from the Embassy in Jidda to the Department of State, November 15, 1962. JFK Library, NSF, Box 157, Saudi Arabia, General, 11-62, 12-62.

¹¹³⁷ Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, June 12, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 268. Rusk referred in particular to the reassurances Kennedy had sent to Faysal. On October 25, 1962 the president wrote that, because Saudi Arabia was moving “successfully on the path of modernization and reform”, Washington had granted “full United States support for the maintenance of Saudi Arabia's integrity”; again on March 1, 1963, Kennedy wrote “Saudi Arabia's integrity and stability must be defended against external intrusions”. Ibidem.

¹¹³⁸ Ibidem.

to American Jews. Although the State Department did not share the reasons behind such a decision, it decided to avoid any obstacles in the operation. However, on June 10, 1963, Senator E. Celler leaked to the *New York Times* the information that there were indeed American Jews among the personnel selected to take part in the operation. Nasser immediately took the opportunity to stir up the Arab world against Faysal, accusing him of having agreed to the entry of Jewish people onto holy Saudi soil in exchange for US protection. In response, on June 14, Faysal summoned Hart to urge the White House to denounce Celler's statement and to communicate that he would not "let any U.S. servicemen enter the Kingdom until he received a U.S. response to this demand."¹¹³⁹ The same day, during a meeting at the White House, Talbot officially announced: "The projected Hard Surface air squadron to Saudi Arabia has been temporarily suspended."¹¹⁴⁰ After weeks of embarrassments and negotiations, on June 27, the administration managed to find common ground with the acting king: an official communication was released declaring that "Saudi Arabia had not altered its visa policy with respect to persons of the Jewish faith and still retained the sovereign right to screen applicants for visas on the basis of its own policies". To avoid embarrassment and to balance out the respective positions, the administration added: "Our own policy of non-discrimination among American citizens on grounds of race, creed or colour is firmly established". By June 29, the US Air Force was finally on its way to Saudi Arabia, and the awkward setback was put behind them.¹¹⁴¹

Despite Kennedy's efforts, by mid-summer 1963, Washington's relations with Cairo were collapsing. The oil and Jewish lobbies in America found new fuel for their campaigns against Nasser when the Egyptian leader began using mustard gas against the

¹¹³⁹ Editorial Note. Ibidem, 270.

¹¹⁴⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹⁴¹ Ibidem.

royalists, which put even more pressure on Kennedy's Nasser policy.¹¹⁴² During a meeting with Badeau held on July 11, 1963, the Egyptian leader admitted that a new "bomb was being used which had been manufactured in UAR, of which he did not know precise chemical content"¹¹⁴³, but when the ambassador tried to stress the impact of the news on the international community and on the White House, Nasser refused to take any responsibility: "If military commander in Yemen felt air bombing and support was necessary for [the] troops, the decision would be his".¹¹⁴⁴ However, if on the one hand Nasser appeared oblivious to the administration's domestic concerns, on the other hand Capitol Hill was more and more averse to the policy of rapprochement. Indeed, a number of senators complained that UAR activities posed a direct threat to Israel¹¹⁴⁵, frankly stating: "Mr President, it is incredible to me that the United States continues, even under these circumstances, to supply Nasser with US foreign aid."¹¹⁴⁶

The growing wave of protests coming from Capitol Hill flooded the White House, and although Komer wished everyone to realise "that we've never been in [a] better position in [the] Arab world; we're on reasonably good terms with revolutionary Arabs, yet without losing our old clients. This is right where we want to be, despite pain and strain involved in staying there"¹¹⁴⁷, an assessment not too far from reality, Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Nasser seemed to be moving towards a bitter end. Trying to gain leverage on both Faysal and Eshkol, during the fall of 1963 the Kennedy

¹¹⁴² Congressional Record, April 4, 1963, 88th Congress, 1st session, 1963, 5808. As Bass puts it, news of the Egyptian chemical weapons "were making the rounds on Capitol Hill." Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 134.

¹¹⁴³ Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, July 11, 1963. Ibidem, 294.

¹¹⁴⁴ Ibidem.

¹¹⁴⁵ Congressional Record, April 4, 1963, 88th Congress, 1st session, 1963, 5808.

¹¹⁴⁶ Congressional Record, October 1, 1963, 88th Congress, 1st session, 1963, 18445.

¹¹⁴⁷ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, July 15, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 296.

administration inadvertently strengthened its ties with both Saudi Arabia and Israel, while Senator Gruening began to draft the amendment against the UAR.

On October 8, 1963, in support of operation HARD SURFACE, the president directly approved the deployment of two tactical fighter squadrons and a second carrier strike force from the Sixth Fleet. For added certainty, Kennedy also ordered the stationing of some B-47s in Spain.¹¹⁴⁸ Such a strategy, Kennedy told Secretary of Defence McNamara, was aimed to “unequivocally spell out [the] US intentions and assure other friendly nations of our firm intention to honour our commitments”, in order to put an end to the conflict in Yemen. “Above all”, Kennedy continued “the US desires to confine the conflict to the area of the Middle East.”¹¹⁴⁹ Of course, by extending the duration of HARD SURFACE and enhancing the US presence in the area in defence of Saudi Arabia, Kennedy strengthened the bond with the country, but that was not his goal. Kennedy sought to prevent the conflict from escalating and compromising the US oil interests in Saudi Arabia, to gain time until a political settlement in Yemen could be reached, and to deter Faysal from walking out of the disengagement plan.¹¹⁵⁰ HARD SURFACE, Kennedy clearly stated, would stay in Saudi Arabia “so long as the Saudis continue adhering to the disengagement agreement.”¹¹⁵¹

At the end of October, Hart explained to Faysal that Kennedy was ready to withdraw HARD SURFACE if the Saudis resumed their arming of the royalists, but would leave it longer (until the end of the year) if the Saudi government continued to support the UN mission and the disengagement plan.¹¹⁵² Faysal yielded. On November 6, 1963, the administration was informed that the Saudi government had agreed to extend

¹¹⁴⁸ Memorandum for the Records, October 8, 1963. Ibidem, 335.

¹¹⁴⁹ Ibidem.

¹¹⁵⁰ Letter from the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Nitze) to Phillips Talbot, October 8, 1963. Ibidem, 336.

¹¹⁵¹ National Security Action Memorandum No. 262, October 10, 1963. Ibidem, 337.

¹¹⁵² Telegram for the Department of State to the Embassy in Saudi Arabia, October 28, 1963. Ibidem, 350.

the UN mandate in Yemen and to respect the disengagement agreement. “Last month we indicated to Faisal that we would withdraw Hard Surface should Saudi Arabia resume its aid to the royalists”, Talbot told Bundy, “This played an important role in getting Faisal both to continue to go along with UNYOM [United Nations Yemen Observation Mission] and to refrain from resuming his aid to the Yemeni royalists.”¹¹⁵³ HARD SURFACE, it was thus decided, would stay in Saudi Arabia until the end of the year.

Kennedy did not live long enough to see the US Air Force leave Saudi Arabia. His death prevented the US president from completing his strategy, leaving the reins of the US Middle East policy to L. B. Johnson, and thus prompting a shift in the US regional strategy. As Douglas Little suggests, Johnson disengaged the air force from the Arabian Peninsula in light of increasing US commitment in Southeast Asia¹¹⁵⁴, but by then the new president had already made up his mind about Nasser. The Johnson administration might as well have terminated operation HARD SURFACE by late January 1964, but it was in effect responsible for allowing significant arms sales to the old Arab monarchy.

November 1963 was also the month of the first joint consultations between the US and Israeli governments. Back in late September 1963, Golda Meir had met with Rusk and other members of the administration to discuss Israel’s security concerns. The Israeli minister explained that her government was particularly concerned about Nasser’s use of poison gas, his collaboration with German scientists to build up missiles, and his advancement in the field of military power, and stressed therefore how important it was for Israel to “maintain a strong deterrent.”¹¹⁵⁵ Thus, when Rusk commented that “it would be useful for the United States and Israel to exchange views on this situation”, Meir seized the opportunity to plan a joint conversation on November 12, 1963, in order to discuss

¹¹⁵³ Letter from Phillips Talbot to McGeorge Bundy, November 6, 1963. Ibidem, 354.

¹¹⁵⁴ Little, *American Orientalism...*, 239.

¹¹⁵⁵ Memorandum of a Conversation, September 30, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 331.

the UAR and Israel's military capability.¹¹⁵⁶ A few days later, after learning that the Israeli government planned to use the November 12 talks to advance further requests for arms purchases, Rusk cabled Barbour, specifying that the November talks he had suggested were merely designed to "exchange views on specific information Israel might have that has given rise to Israeli concern about [the] UAR progress in [the] development [of] missiles and other sophisticated weapons affecting [the] UAR-Israel military balance."¹¹⁵⁷ The administration agreed to the idea of receiving Israel's intelligence on Nasser's military force, but was not willing to let the consultation become a platform for Israel to ask for more arms.

The November talks also had another purpose, in line with Kennedy's strategy of containment of Israel. Indeed, during the summer of 1963, the Syrian and Iraqi governments had built up strong propaganda against Israel on account of the imminent diversion of the Jordan waters, which, the administration feared, could provoke Israel's retaliation.¹¹⁵⁸ To make things worse, during the summer of 1963 new tensions emerged between Israel and Syria. On July 13, 1963, a group of Syrian soldiers imprisoned three Israeli citizens, and just one month later, two Israeli farmers were murdered in Almagor.¹¹⁵⁹ Thus, during a session in late August 1963, the Knesset warned: "The responsibility for defending the territorial integrity of the State... lies with the Government of Israel... The Government of Israel will be in duty bound and entitled... to take steps to defend itself".¹¹⁶⁰ In light of the renewed tensions, further exacerbated by the crisis in Jordan just a few months earlier and by Nasser's campaign in Yemen, Komer

¹¹⁵⁶ Ibidem.

¹¹⁵⁷ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, October 16, 1963. Ibidem, 339.

¹¹⁵⁸ Memorandum from Benjamin Read to McGeorge Bundy, November 5, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 119A, Israel, General, 11-1-63, 11-6-63.

¹¹⁵⁹ Statement to the Knesset by Prime Minister Eshkol, August 26, 1963. Medzini, *Israel's Foreign Relations...*, 662, 663.

¹¹⁶⁰ Ibidem, 664.

warned Kennedy of the importance of forestalling “a possible Israeli reprisal raid, which would seem increasingly likely if [the] crisis continues.”¹¹⁶¹ After all, back in late May 1963, Kennedy had already made clear that it was “important to give serious consideration to Israel's strong desire for a more specific security guarantee”, in order “to forestall possible Israel preventive warfare and to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons.”¹¹⁶² Thus, when on October 28, 1963, Talbot met the Israeli ambassador Harman, who confessed in fact that “the hostile combination of Syrian and Iraqi forces would place increased strain upon Israel’s defence effort”, also warning that Israel was “reserving its position” on the issue¹¹⁶³, the administration was faced once more with the danger of Israel’s pre-emptive strikes. Kennedy knew that with the consultations of November Israel was attempting “to get greater security assurance”¹¹⁶⁴ from the US government, but was willing cooperate in order to “forestall military hostilities and/or a decisive break with the Arabs.”¹¹⁶⁵ Incidentally, during the November talks, the administration had concluded that Israel needed new tanks in order “to meet [the] anticipated UAR tank build up by 1965.”¹¹⁶⁶ Once again, Kennedy’s attempt to contain Israel resulted in the establishment of a special bond between the two countries.

November was the month in which the ‘Kennedy treatment’ came to an end. On November 7, 1963, Congress approved the Gruening amendment by a vote of 65 to 13, which imposed a termination of the US foreign aid programme to any country engaged in a conflict against another country receiving US assistance. The Egyptian press reacted

¹¹⁶¹ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, August 22, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 314.

¹¹⁶² Letter from Phillips Talbot to the Ambassador to the United Arab Republic (Badeau), May 20, 1963. Ibidem, 253.

¹¹⁶³ Memorandum of a Conversation, October 28, 1963. JFK Library, NSF, Box 119A, Israel, General, 10-24-63, 10-31-63.

¹¹⁶⁴ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, November 5, 1963. Ibidem, 11-1-63, 11-6-63.

¹¹⁶⁵ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, November 18, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 364.

¹¹⁶⁶ Circular Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Posts, November 13, 1963. Ibidem, 359.

fiercely to the Senate's amendment. The newspaper *Al-Ahram* entitled its first page "Israel hides behind the American Senate"; *Goumhouriya* wrote "Israel creates a crisis in Washington"; and *Akhbar el-Yom* wrote "America tries to protect Israel."¹¹⁶⁷ The Cairo government also manifested its deep dissatisfaction to Badeau, pointing out that the amendment was a "true indicator of Zionist strength in [the] US"¹¹⁶⁸, while Nasser commented that, despite the great improvement of the US-UAR bilateral relations prompted by the Kennedy administration, he would now have to revisit his posture.¹¹⁶⁹

The Kennedy administration reacted negatively to Congress's intervention. During a press conference on November 8, 1963, Rusk commented:

"I must say that I am very much concerned about the tendency in the Congress to legislate foreign policy... These are responsibilities carried by the President of the United States. They are very heavy responsibilities. The President is the one whom the country will hold responsible if things go badly"¹¹⁷⁰

The secretary of state concluded: "So I would very much hope that the Congress would withhold its hand and not try to legislate in detail about the application of an aid program to a particular country."¹¹⁷¹ McGeorge Bundy echoed Rusk's position, arguing that the effects of the amendment were "the opposite of what supporters of the Amendment must have intended", and that such pressure would only make people more nationalistic.¹¹⁷² From Cairo, Badeau cabled that he was "gravely disturbed by the Gruening amendment against the UAR", and that it would certainly jeopardise all the

¹¹⁶⁷ Department of State, Incoming Telegram, November 9, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 169, United Arab Republic, General, 9-63, 11-63.

¹¹⁶⁸ Memorandum from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Secretary of State, November 9, 1963. Ibidem.

¹¹⁶⁹ Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to Senator J. William Fulbright, November 11, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 357.

¹¹⁷⁰ Press Conference, November 8th, on Vietnam and Foreign aid; Folder_ 14 November 1963: Background materials, 2. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-061-008.aspx> (accessed 16.01.2015).

¹¹⁷¹ Ibidem.

¹¹⁷² Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to Senator J. William Fulbright, November 11, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 357.

“efforts to reduce tensions in the region.”¹¹⁷³ Talbot and other members of the State Department were also particularly “cast down about [the] gathering criticism of our Yemen policy”¹¹⁷⁴ while Komer, taking advantage of a meeting with the Israeli Minister Gazit on November 21, 1963, expressed his anger saying that “the Gruening amendment had so limited our freedom of action with the Arabs as to make it very difficult for us to be as forthcoming with Israel in the refugee or other issues as we would otherwise like.”¹¹⁷⁵ With a clear reference to Israel’s active defence, Komer roared: “How could one define ‘aggression’, much less ‘preparing for’ aggression? It was even possible that Israel could be called to account under this amendment as a result of a reprisal raid.”¹¹⁷⁶

Holding the major responsibility for the success or failure of US foreign policy, Kennedy too attacked Congress’s intervention: “This is the worst attack on foreign aid that we have seen since the beginning of the Marshall Plan”, he complained during what ended up being his last press conference on November 14, 1963; “The President bears particular responsibilities in the field of foreign policy. If there are failures in the Middle East... it is usually not the Senator who is selected to bear the blame, but it is the administration, the President of the United States.”¹¹⁷⁷ Kennedy warned that there was nothing as dangerous as the Congress’s amendment, and added:

“I am asking the Congress of the United States to give me the means of conducting the foreign policy of the United States, and if they do not want me to do so, then they should recognise that they are severely limiting my ability to protect the interests. That is how important I think this program is.”¹¹⁷⁸

Speaking specifically about Nasser, Kennedy said:

¹¹⁷³ Department of State, Incoming Telegram, November 9, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 169, United Arab Republic, General, 9-63, 11-63.

¹¹⁷⁴ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, November 12, 1963. Ibidem.

¹¹⁷⁵ Memorandum of a Conversation, November 21, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 368.

¹¹⁷⁶ Ibidem.

¹¹⁷⁷ President John F. Kennedy News Conference #64, November 14, 1963. JFK Library, President’s Office Files, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-061-007.aspx> (accessed 16.01.2015)

¹¹⁷⁸ Ibidem.

“I don’t think... that the language that the Senate adopted... particularly strengthens our hands or our flexibility in dealing with the UAR. In fact it will have the opposite result... these threats that the United States is going to cut off aid is a great temptation to Arabic countries to say, ‘cut it off’. They are nationalist, they are proud, they are in many cases radical. I don’t think threats from Capitol Hill bring the results which are frequently hoped”.¹¹⁷⁹

Despite the administration’s objections, the amendment, combined with Kennedy’s untimely death, marked the end of the New Frontier’s attempted new strategies for the Middle East. By terminating the policy of rapprochement with Cairo, Capitol Hill ended the era of Washington’s attempt to do business with Nasser, crystallising the shift in US regional strategies prompted by the Kennedy administration’s policies of containment and stability. Indeed, when he became president, L. B. Johnson embraced friendship with both the Israeli and Saudi governments, firmly opposing Nasser and the other Arab nationalists and steering the course of the US foreign policy in the Middle East in a more familiar, and less experimental, direction. It was the beginning of a new phase in the US-UAR relations, one that the Egyptians called “Violence”.¹¹⁸⁰

¹¹⁷⁹ Ibidem.

¹¹⁸⁰ Heikal, *Nasser: The Cairo Documents...*, 225.

Conclusion

By the time Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on November 22, 1963, shortly after the Gruening amendment had passed the Senate, the steep barren mountains of Yemen were still peppered with thousands of Nasserite troops busy fighting the golden army sponsored by Faysal. In late 1963, approximately 36,000 UAR troops were entangled in a Vietnam-style guerrilla war against the royalist tribes, funded by tens of millions of Saudi government dollars. By early 1967, the numbers had doubled, the use of chemical weapons had stopped being news, and the Arab world found itself marching at a blistering pace towards the Six-Day War. Indeed, only with the explosion of the third Arab-Israeli war in June 1967, did Nasser's gloomy adventure in Yemen begin to end.

Much to Washington's surprise, this "internal dispute in a remote corner of the Middle East"¹¹⁸¹ as Badeau defined it, ended up becoming the tomb of Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East and the springboard for Washington's reassessment of its posture in the region. By failing to end the conflict in Yemen, Kennedy failed his rapprochement with Nasser, allowing Congress to shift the course of US foreign policy. By moving away from the Arab nationalists and closer to the Arab monarchies, Washington rejected Kennedy's strategies, finding itself resuming that mindset emblematic of the old Eisenhower-Dulles era, in which moderate traditional Arab regimes were chosen over progressive Arab republics to function as regional proxies in protection of the Western economic and geopolitical interests in the Middle East.

The main result of the Yemen crisis was the failure of Kennedy's policy towards Nasser. Since the early stages of its mandate, the Kennedy administration had embraced the theory that Eisenhower's hostility towards Nasser was responsible for the decline of Washington's prestige in the region and the consequent improvement of Moscow's stand.

¹¹⁸¹ Badeau, *The American Approach*..., 123.

Seeking to correct such a trend, the administration promoted programmes of economic development and adopted a skilful personal-based diplomacy running through the hands of a president who was naturally more supportive of progressive over conservative regimes, modernity over tradition, new over old Middle East.

However, the assumption that, given Egypt's grave economic problems, Nasser could be encouraged through a large programme of economic assistance – the PL 480 – to turn inwards and restrain from foreign adventures, constituted the Kennedy administration's biggest miscalculation. The Egyptian leader, whether because he was obsessed with his pan-Arabist vision, or because he was eager to redeem his prestige in the Arab world after the UAR break-up in 1961, or even because he was simply unable to stop the spiral of events that took the Middle East by storm in 1963, found himself entangled in a war that he himself would later recall as “my Vietnam”¹¹⁸², a guerrilla conflict that could not be won and that was costing over 80 million Egyptian pounds per month.¹¹⁸³

It was however Capitol Hill, not the White House, that ended the era of Washington's attempts to court Nasser. Unable to directly influence the White House, the oil and the Israel lobbies in America had eventually managed to exercise enough pressure to divert Congress's posture in a direction that could better serve their interests. Thus, even though by the time the Gruening amendment had passed the Senate, Kennedy had already adopted a tougher tone in his personal diplomacy with Nasser, the decision to put a definitive end to Washington's tolerance of Cairo rested with Capitol Hill. Indeed, the administration's reaction to the Gruening amendment shows that, despite the Yemen issue, Kennedy still placed confidence in the policy of rapprochement, as much as he

¹¹⁸² Anthony Nutting, *Nasser*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972), 323, as quoted in Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 141.

¹¹⁸³ Memorandum of a Conversation, September 30, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 331.

believed that ending the programme of foreign assistance to the UAR would be detrimental to the US Cold War strategies in the region. “What happens in Yemen itself”, Komer told Kennedy in late September 1963, “remains far less important to us than to... maintain decent relations with Nasser, and keep the USSR from making real gains.”¹¹⁸⁴ It is no coincidence that the administration’s immediate concerns related to the political openings that the amendment could create for the Soviet Union: “Strong anti-US reaction [is] certain to encourage [the] Soviets in [the] belief [that] they can exploit [the] situation to strengthen their own influence”, reads a cable from the Embassy in Moscow dated November 6, 1963. “Atmosphere of hostility to [the] US and gratitude to [the] USSR... inevitably plays into Soviet hands in number of ways.”¹¹⁸⁵ Despite all the domestic and international problems that the policy of rapprochement with the UAR entailed, the Kennedy administration saw no alternative to Nasser in fighting the Cold War in the Middle East. “In the game of competitive co-existence”, Komer told Kennedy in mid-January 1963, “we can hardly afford to let the major neutralists become clients primarily of Moscow.”¹¹⁸⁶

It would thus be misleading to interpret Kennedy’s 1963 policies towards Saudi Arabia and Israel as an attempt to build up Washington’s relations with the two countries as an alternative to Nasser, as Bass has argued.¹¹⁸⁷ “Those who cavil over our Nasser... policy also ignore the absence of any realistic alternative”¹¹⁸⁸, continued Komer, proving that the enhancement of US ties with both Saudi Arabia and Israel was not a purposely designed strategy aimed at finding new regional assets, but the unintended result of

¹¹⁸⁴ Paper prepared by Robert Komer, September 20, 1963. Ibidem, 329.

¹¹⁸⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in Moscow to the Secretary of State Rusk, November 6, 1963. JFKL, NSF, Box 169, UAR, General, 9-63, 11-63.

¹¹⁸⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 19, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. VIII, 124.

¹¹⁸⁷ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 5.

¹¹⁸⁸ Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 19, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. VIII, 124.

Kennedy's policy of stability and containment in the wake of the Yemen crisis, the Jordan uprisings and the frequent tensions between Syria and Israel.

However it was supportive of the Arab nationalists, the Kennedy administration also acknowledged the economic and geostrategic importance of countries like Saudi Arabia and Jordan, not to mention Iran, and thus sponsored programmes of reforms aimed at stabilising these regimes by broadening their domestic political consensus. By doing so, Kennedy hoped to prevent them from the revolutionary changes prompted by Nasser's progressive propaganda, which could put in jeopardy the multitude of Western interests. But the administration did not actively seek to rely on the old Arab monarchies as regional allies to defeat the Soviets in the Middle East, but simply to protect the US interests in the context of the rapprochement with Nasser.

The events of 1962-1963, forced the administration to adopt some special measure that paved the way for the American special alliance with the Saudi Royal Family. HARD SURFACE was, as Bass points out, the most significant military operations to Saudi Arabia before the Gulf War in 1990¹¹⁸⁹, and thus represented a significant commitment for the US government. Yet if Kennedy's overall policies towards Saudi Arabia are a testament to the importance of American interests in the Saudi oilfields, the strategy adopted through HARD SURFACE is clear evidence of his attempt to gain leverage on Faysal, and to prevent the conflict in Yemen from jeopardising the larger Cold War objective that was the rapprochement with Nasser. Kennedy dispatched the US Air Force to Saudi Arabia, but made the *quid pro quo* crystal clear to the government in Riyadh: should Faysal resume his support for the royalists, HARD SURFACE would immediately be terminated.

¹¹⁸⁹ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 132.

HARD SURFACE eventually outlasted Kennedy, and contributed significantly to reshaping American strategies in the region. Johnson withdrew the air force shortly after Kennedy's assassination, but made clear that Washington would not abandon the Saudi Royal Family to its fate. Privileging a programme of foreign assistance based primarily on military aid, thus resembling the Eisenhower Doctrine more than the attitude of his immediate predecessor, Johnson provided Saudi Arabia with 100 million dollars in military hardware and with a 400 million dollars in air-defence programmes.¹¹⁹⁰ Interestingly, Johnson also provided the Shah with Phantom Jets and a credit of 200 million dollars for arms purchases¹¹⁹¹, but this time, no strings were attached. The days of JFK's "more reforms before more arms" were long gone, and the new president deemed the Iranian regime stable enough to protect US interests in the Persian Gulf.¹¹⁹²

The wave of Nasserism that spread from Yemen across the entire region, also brought Kennedy and Israel closer together, laying the foundations for the alliance that would definitively flourish under the Johnson and Nixon presidencies. However, the enhancement of Israel's ties with Washington was not a goal set out by the administration to either contain Nasser, as Ben-Zvi has argued¹¹⁹³, or to secure it as a regional ally, as suggested by Bass¹¹⁹⁴, but to forestall Israel's active defence. During the Jordan crisis, the Kennedy administration found itself once more confronted with the issue of Israel's reprisal raids, and with the fear that Ben Gurion would launch a pre-emptive strike against the UAR troops, should they move into Jordan, in order to prevent the formation of a pro-Nasser regime so close to Israel. It was in fact Israel, not Cairo, that proved the biggest headache for the administration: "I'm beginning to think that the immediate problem is

¹¹⁹⁰ Ibidem, 141, and Little, *American Orientalism...*, 140.

¹¹⁹¹ Little, *American Orientalism...*, 140.

¹¹⁹² Letter from President Johnson to the Shah of Iran, Washington, January 2, 1964. FRUS 1964-1968, Vol. XXII, 1.

¹¹⁹³ Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arm Sales to Israel...*, 98.

¹¹⁹⁴ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 12.

less Jordan than Israel's obvious effort to take advantage of current tensions", Komer told Bundy on April 30, 1963, adding that "Israel's patent attempt to embrace Hussein... is so much a kiss of death to the brave young king".¹¹⁹⁵ If the Israeli army was to march into Jordan, the administration had little doubt that it would also try to seize the West Bank and cause a third Arab-Israeli war.

Kennedy put the Cold War priorities before such regional dynamics, rejecting Ben Gurion's suggestion for the joint US-USSR guarantee on the territorial status quo, but he agreed to the idea of an informal security guarantee issued by the US government in early May 1963, which incidentally served the purpose of "calming down on [Capitol] Hill."¹¹⁹⁶ Although the New Frontiersmen were little inclined to give in to Israel's pressure, they were even less inclined to let the Ben Gurion government threaten the stability of the Middle East. Just a few months later, in November 1963, the administration also agreed to an informal meeting aimed at discussing Israel's intelligence on the UAR missile capability, thus placing another milestone in US-Israeli relations. For the first time, US and Israeli intelligence exchanged valuable information on regional security issues.

Was Kennedy purposely laying the foundations of the US-Israeli alliance? It hardly seems so. Although Bass argues that Kennedy had made the assumption that "Israel was not an aggressor state"¹¹⁹⁷, and was thus willing to provide Israel with defensive military aid, the strategy of containment implemented by the administration seems to prove the opposite. It is in fact no coincidence that the three most significant concessions made by the Kennedy administration, the HAWK sale in August 1962, the security guarantee in May 1963, and the November 1963 talks, happened at moments when Israel's active defence was likely to cause more troubles than contributing to its

¹¹⁹⁵ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, April 30, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 230.

¹¹⁹⁶ Memorandum from Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, May 1, 1963. Ibidem, 232.

¹¹⁹⁷ Bass, *Support Any Friend...*, 248.

defence and security. The HAWK was sold after the clashes between Syria and Israel on Lake Tiberias in March 1962, and because of Israel's immediate concerns surrounding Kennedy's pro-Nasser policy and Cairo's acquisition of Soviet weapons. The administration did not buy into the argument of a military imbalance, but agreed to the sale to restrain Israel from launching pre-emptive attacks against its enemies. Similarly, the security guarantee issued in May 1963 was a direct response to Israel's growing concern about the wave of Nasserism that had just nearly caused the fall of King Hussein, while the November talks were designed to placate Israel's fears of Nasser's military capabilities, of Arab propaganda against Israel, and of the renewed hostilities against Syria.

Furthermore, Ben Gurion's rejection of the Johnson Plan and the Israeli *aminut* over Dimona, did arguably even less to move Israel on the top of the New Frontier's strategic assets in the region. While bitterness and frustration about Israel's objection to the refugee plan remained in the State Department for years¹¹⁹⁸, the ambiguity over the nuclear facility in the Negev desert, moved Kennedy's tolerance of Israel very close to an early end. The final correspondence between the president and the Israeli leaders, showed in fact a much tougher side of Kennedy, one that not even the revolutionary Nasser had ever witnessed. Bass has suggested that the Yemen crisis eventually moved Kennedy to choose Israel over Nasser¹¹⁹⁹, but the documents produced by the administration tell a different story. Kennedy was seeking to contain Israel and, by doing so, he became in effect the unintentional founding father of that special alliance that lasts to this day.

Looking back at the administration's Middle East agenda, it is ironic to note that the main consequences of Kennedy's new approach to the region were largely unintended.

¹¹⁹⁸ Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict...*, 117.

¹¹⁹⁹ Bass, *Support any Friend...*, 5.

Kennedy did not seek a closer partnership with Saudi Arabia or Israel, but rather he sought to reverse the dangerous trend prompted by the Eisenhower administration in the US foreign relations with Third World, neutralist countries. Kennedy was committed to defeating international communism by supporting Third World neutralism, and in the Middle East that meant that establishing a working relation with Nasser was the only course of action. But in trying to open a new era in US-UAR relations, the New Frontier found itself inevitably drawn into inter-Arab disputes and Arab-Israeli tensions, and thus compelled to offset its pro-Nasser policy with strategies of containment and stability that ended up strengthening Washington's ties with both Israel and Saudi Arabia. Courting Nasser came at a price. Cairo's nemeses had little sympathy towards Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Egypt, and sought security guarantees that could counterbalance Nasser's growing popularity in the region, and the US government's support of the revolutionary Arab leader. Kennedy agreed to such requests not because he sought to take advantage of any regional opening he could find, but because he was trying to find a balance between the larger Cold War objective that was Nasser, and the US regional interests in Saudi Arabia and Israel. Kennedy's even-handedness came in the context of the policy of rapprochement with Nasser, not as a mere attempt to "support any friend".

Much to the New Frontiersmen's dismay, Congress believed that the short-term costs of supporting Nasser outweighed the long-term benefits, and Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East crumbled under the pressure and criticism that would eventually give rise to the Gruening amendment. Had Kennedy not been assassinated, there can be little doubt that the administration would have tried to contain the effects of Congress's decision in an attempt to pursue its overtures to Nasser. "President Kennedy was angered and distressed by this Amendment, and we understand was considering making a

statement on the matter when he signed the Aid bill”¹²⁰⁰, Talbot told Rusk on November 23, 1963, just one day after Kennedy’s assassination. Kennedy had no intention of closing the chapter on the Egyptian leader, but his premature death prevented him from shielding his relationship with Nasser from Capitol Hill. Just as he had repeatedly warned, by interrupting the programme of economic assistance to the UAR, Washington effectively lost its leverage on one of the most preeminent Arab leaders in the history of the Cold War.

But in just three years, and despite the severe international crisis that escalated the US-USSR confrontation to dangerous levels, the New Frontier managed to open a new chapter in the history of the American foreign policy in the Middle East. Arab nationalism was not a threat, but rather an opportunity; Nasser was not a communist agent, but a preeminent neutralist leader; the American oil interests could be better secured through programmes of social, political and economic reforms, rather than with American arms; and Israel could be better contained by meeting its security concerns, rather than by firmly opposing its demands.

Perhaps, had Kennedy dealt with President Sadat instead of President Nasser, or with Prime Minister Shimon Peres instead of Ben Gurion, his foreign policy in the Middle East would not have looked like a failure by the time of his assassination. But Nasser’s crusade across the Arab world soon became Kennedy’s own cross to bear, and the administration’s intricate system of compromises, agreements and *quid pro quos* became after all the only valuable instrument to tame the untameable. Kennedy asked the parties involved to put the Arab-Israeli issue “on ice”, he promptly disengaged from the Johnson plan for the refugees when he realised that a reasonable agreement could not be reached,

¹²⁰⁰ Memorandum from Phillips Talbot to Secretary of State Rusk, November 23, 1963. FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XVIII, 371.

and he did not force the regional players into broad agreements that could facilitate US goals in the region. Indeed, Kennedy proved less willing to resolve larger regional issues than he was to confine them, and more inclined to promote small steps towards mutual understanding, than he was to find comprehensive solutions for central problems. While his charm, his mannerisms, and his use of the media have in fact “introduced the modern political era”¹²⁰¹, his diplomacy in Middle East also set an important precedent. It is indeed hard not to notice the resemblance between Kennedy’s “step-by-step approach”¹²⁰² and Kissinger’s “step-by-step” diplomacy.¹²⁰³

The Yemen crisis, however, taught a valuable lesson to the New Frontier. Inter-Arab hostilities proved to be as dangerous as Arab-Israeli tensions, and it was in fact the clash between monarchies and republics that eventually compromised Kennedy’s foreign policy in the Middle East. With some irony, Kennedy’s fear that something like 1958 could happen to him¹²⁰⁴, eventually became a dangerous reality that found the US government once again unprepared. The administration had hoped that establishing a working relationship with Nasser could be enough to bring stability in the Middle East, but was eventually forced to come to terms with the unpredictability of Nasser’s pan-Arabism, and with the implications of the revolutionary transformations that were occurring in the Middle East. By failing to prevent an Arab hot war, the administration compromised its own Cold War.

¹²⁰¹ James D. Boys, “The Continuing Kennedy legacy in US politic”, *The Commentator*, November 28, 2012. http://www.thecommentator.com/article/2154/the_continuing_kennedy_legacy_in_us_politics, (accessed 20.01.2015).

¹²⁰² Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, January 15, 1962. JFKL, NSF, Box 168, UAR, General, 1-62, 2-62.

¹²⁰³ On Kissinger’s step-by-step diplomacy in the Middle East, see Jussy M. Hanhimaki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*, (New York; Oxford University Press, 2004). Abdel Monem Said, Shai Feldman, Khalil Shiqaqi, *Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East*, (Basingstoke, New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Fredrick Logevall, Andrew Preston, *Nixon in the world: American foreign relations, 1969-1977*, (Oxford, New York; Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹²⁰⁴ Myer Feldman, *OHI*, August 20, 1966, 398.

Of course, although unable to prevent it or terminate it, the Kennedy administration deserved some credit for at least containing the crisis. Kennedy never involved US military force in the conflict, never allowed Jordan or Saudi Arabia to fall, and never created political opportunities for the Soviet Union by openly turning against Nasser. Although the Kennedy experience inevitably reveals America's inability to direct the course of events, it also offers a valuable lesson in diplomatic and mediation skills. Indeed, as Komer commented some years later, despite his failure to end the conflict, Kennedy had still been able to somehow mediate between all the forces involved, to set the right policy, and to keep Yemen from turning into something much bigger.¹²⁰⁵ Komer's assessment seems appropriate. The administration managed to maintain a good relationship with Nasser, to hold Israel's ambitions at bay, and to secure its interests in the Saudi oilfields. Rapprochement, containment and stability proved indeed to be Kennedy's best tools to fight the Cold War in the Middle East.

¹²⁰⁵ Robert Komer, *OHI*, September 3, 1964, 5.

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A comment on the sources

Rapprochement, Containment and Stability: Kennedy's Cold War in the Middle East, is a work that aims at discussing the Kennedy administration's policies and policy-making towards the Middle East. Although a non-US perspective would have added considerable value to this thesis, I have deliberately chosen to focus on the American side of the story, for two reasons: first, because of the intrinsic problems that sources in Arabic, Hebrew and Russian present. As an English speaker, I would have not been able to analyse and elaborate on non-English documents. Second, because of the difficulty, both financial and practical, that seeking out such documents entails. Limited personal funding, and strong censorship on documents relating to the foreign policy of Egypt and Israel, would not have allowed me to develop a comprehensive analysis of the regional events that occurred during the early 1960s.

I have however consulted memoirs and other primary sources on Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Soviet Union, whenever they were available in English. The volumes of Israel's Foreign Relations, the Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel, Keesing's contemporary archives, and the Foreign Broadcast Information Service documents, integrated the non-US perspective provided in the National Security Files of the John F. Kennedy Library. Hart's and Badeau's memoirs were helpful in obtaining an insight into Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The diaries of Heikal, Nikita Khrushchev, Harold Macmillan and King Hussein also served a similar purpose. Among the secondary sources, some works have been of great influence: the research of, among others, Avraham Avi-hai, Avner Cohen, Robert Dallek, Adeed Dawisha, Louis Fawcett, John Lewis Gaddis, Robert O. Freedman, James P. Jankowski, Roger E. Kanet, Nadav Safran, Avi Shlaim, Daniel Yergin, and Zaki Shalom, has added a valuable contribution to my personal knowledge and to this thesis.

In the writing of this thesis, I have found myself in dialogue primarily with four authors who have dealt with the subject, Warren Bass, Douglas Little, Abraham Ben-Zvi and Roby C. Barrett. Their works on the foreign policy of the Kennedy administration towards the Middle East remain to this day crucial instruments for the understanding of

the subject, and thus the obvious starting point for any historian who wishes to investigate the US Middle East policies in the early 1960s.

I have however attempted to provide a nuanced understanding of the policies of the Kennedy administration, and thus I have primarily relied on a number of primary sources, yet they also presented challenges that have inevitably limited the amount of information available: many American documents, particularly those regarding arms sales, nuclear programmes and other issues related to the national security of the United States, remain classified to this day. Although appreciative of the need to protect certain information, I remained disappointed by the impossibility of providing, some 70 years later, a full picture of the Kennedy administration's policies towards the Middle East. Perhaps with time, historians will be able to overcome such obstacles.

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