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KENNEDY AND NASSER - A FAILED RELATIONSHIP

By Josephine Lippincott, *Arcadia University*

John F. Kennedy became President of the United States in 1961, in the middle of the Cold War. Prior to Kennedy's presidency, the United States was focused on the containing communism and creating friendships with predictable, anticommunist nations. When Kennedy was sworn in, he maintained the containment policy, but began to focus on building new relationships in the Middle East and in Africa.¹ In order to combat the Soviet Union, Kennedy believed it was crucial to establish relationships with nonaligned states so as to contain communism solely through alliances. This mindset brought the Middle East, particularly Egypt and its nationalist leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, to the forefront of American foreign policy. How did the United States' Cold War lens interact with on the ground Middle Eastern politics? Although Kennedy worked to establish a friendly relationship with Nasser, it proved much more complex and difficult than he intended. In spite of Kennedy's hopes of a friendship to help contain communism, the Cold War had very little effect on the relationship between Egypt and the US. Rather, it was the politics of the Middle East that would define the strength of the relationship. This paper will focus on Kennedy's efforts to build a relationship with Nasser by examining Arab nationalism, foreign aid and friendship, regional politics, as well as Nasser's relationship with communism, and ultimately how this relationship would fail.

THE COLD WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST: AMERICAN MOTIVATIONS

When Kennedy came into the Presidency, the Cold War was the main focus of American foreign policy. Both Kennedy and previous President Dwight D. Eisenhower aimed to contain communism in any way possible. Prior to Kennedy's presidency, Eisenhower had also attempted to engage nonaligned nations, such as India, Egypt, and Ghana, in the Cold War struggle, using diplomacy and foreign aid.² During the Kennedy Administration, there was a continued use of aid, but also use of force as demonstrated by the Bay of Pigs, the failed military invasion of Cuba. While Kennedy's military action was unsuccessful, he also sought to engage Third World nations in a more diplomatic manner, such as through the establishment of the Peace Corp whose primary purpose was to aid these nations in terms of education through volunteering. Regardless of Kennedy's intentions, he mistakenly believed he could work around regional complexities, and as a result, his friendships with the Third World suffered.

Although Kennedy aimed to create relations with and provide aid to Third World nations, in particular the Middle East, the region was tense when Kennedy came into office. This tension was a result of the Suez Crisis, where Israel, Great Britain, and France invaded Egypt, following Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal, and attempted to take control of the canal and remove Nasser from power. This failed attempt to take control of the Suez Canal not only resulted in tension, but also affected the dynamics between France, England, Israel, and Egypt. Following the chaos of the Suez Crisis, the United States' relationships with both Israel and Egypt were very fragile.³ As a result of these tensions, the United States needed to reexamine foreign policy within the Middle East. The reasons for Kennedy's focus on the Middle East were multifaceted. On the one hand, the oil of the Middle East was a valuable commodity for the majority of Western Europe, which imported three quarters of its petroleum from the Arab world, which could allow the United States to strengthen alliances with Western Europe⁴. On the other hand, positive relations with Nasser could allow the United States to gain a stronger

¹ Philip E. Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy's Courting of African Nationalist Leaders* (New York: Oxford, 2012), xi.

² Roby C. Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War* (London: L.B., 2007), 2.

³ Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S. Israel Alliance* (New York: Oxford University, 2003), 48.

⁴ Douglas Little, "The New Frontier on the Nile: JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism," *The Journal of American History* 75, (1988): 501.

position in the Middle East.⁵ This position could encourage stronger alliances with Syria, Israel, and Iraq, but also allow the United States to reduce Soviet influence in the region. Furthermore, as the historian Douglas Little writes that friendship with the nationalistic Nasser could demonstrate to the rest of the world “that the United States could live with political and economic diversity.”⁶ This message would allow the United States to strengthen and establish new alliances, while containing communism.

PRESIDENT NASSER

Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power as a result of a bloodless military coup in 1952. He played a large role in the new government for several years before becoming Prime Minister in January of 1956 and being elected President in June of that same year as the only candidate on the ballot.⁷ Under Nasser’s leadership, Egypt established centralized parliamentary rule.⁸ Nasser implemented change in various social programs, such as land reform, free education for youth, as well as progressing medical infrastructure.⁹ Prior to Nasser’s presidency, the elite in Egyptian society were very wealthy with half a percent of the population owning fifty percent of the entire nation’s wealth.¹⁰ When Nasser became president, he took that wealth and power away from the elite and nationalized it.

Furthermore, he designated that Egyptian law would also apply to foreigners. Nasser encouraged nationalism through attempting to extricate Egypt from any type of foreign domination. Nasser’s nationalism was not simply about building a stronger, independent Egypt but also unifying the Arab world. As Mohammed Hossain Heikal explains, “Gamal Abdel Nasser was bound by the ideas of Arab unity and he felt a moral, political, and ideological obligation to the Palestinian people.”¹¹ Nasser had strong notions of pan-Arabism and wanted Egypt to be on the forefront of the Arab empire he envisioned. This was further demonstrated in 1958 when, under his leadership, Syria and Egypt merged, forming the United Arab Republic (UAR).¹² This political move gained him power and prestige in the region as well as the international community. Furthermore, due to the strength of the United Arab Republic’s military, Nasser emerged as a new power in the Middle East. The UAR was the only Arab fighting force at this point that could oppose the Israeli Defense Force in any legitimate way.¹³

One of the most prominent factors in Kennedy and Nasser’s relationship was Nasser’s nationalism and panArab belief. Prior to Kennedy’s presidency, US government officials viewed nationalism in many places as a threat to American interests and power. During Eisenhower’s presidency, Nasser’s nationalism was seen as dangerous and unpredictable. In February of 1958, following the creation of the United Arab Republic, Secretary of State John Dulles stated that Nasser “whipped up PanArabism much as Hitler whipped up PanGermanism as a means of promoting an expansion of his power.”¹⁴ President Kennedy, however, believed that Egyptian nationalist interests could coincide with American interests. Nasser and Kennedy exchanged letters back and forth outlining their

⁵ Little, “The New Frontier on the Nile,” 502.

⁶ Ibid., 504.

⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, “Gamal Abdel Nasser”. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/404045/GamalAbdelNasser>.

⁸ Al Jazeera, “Arab Unity: Nasser’s Revolution,” *Al Jazeera*, last modified June 20, 2008, <http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/arabunity/2008/02/200852517252821627.html>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mohammed Hassanein Heikal, *The Cairo Documents: The Inside Story of Nasser and His Relationship with World Leaders* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company Inc, 1973), viii.

¹¹ Ibid., 27.

¹² Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 48.

¹³ Ibid., 77.

¹⁴ Ibid., 48.

thoughts about current events in their regions as well as how the two could work together. The correspondence between the two leaders began shortly after Kennedy's inauguration in 1961 and would last up until the day of Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963.¹⁵

The Kennedy Administration, however, was also wary of Nasser's relationship with the Soviet Union, due to the status of the Cold War, as well as the Eisenhower Administration's previous view of Nasser as a communist sympathizer. These beliefs arose when Nasser obtained weapons from Czechoslovakia in September 1955, after he was denied weapons by the US¹⁶. Furthermore, when Nasser recognized Communist China as a legitimate country in 1956, the United States felt this meant that Egypt was leaning towards the Soviet Union and communism.¹⁷ As a result, American policy makers were skeptical when Kennedy decided to strengthen the Egyptian-American relationship.

In reality, at the beginning of Kennedy's presidency, the relationship between Egypt and the Soviet Union was strained. Nasser first began to minimize his ties to the Soviets through the establishment of the UAR, starting with the merger between Egypt and Syria.¹⁸ The creation of the UAR implied to the Soviets as well as the Americans that Egypt and its new republic would remain nonaligned. However, Nasser was also interested in closer ties with the Americans. Nasser viewed Kennedy as someone he could truly work with on account of his foreign policy goals.¹⁹ Little writes, "Eager for closer ties with Washington, he welcomed JFK's narrow victory in November 1960 and cabled his hope for better relations with the United States early in the New Year."²⁰ Furthermore, Kennedy realized that in the case of Nasser, nationalism did not directly correlate to communism or Soviet sympathizing. This recognition demonstrated the difference in Kennedy's policies versus that of his predecessors. In spite of Nasser's nonalignment, Kennedy still believed that friendship with Nasser had numerous benefits such as a foothold in the region. Nasser's actions throughout Kennedy's presidency, however, demonstrated that Egypt was not going to be a party to either the US or the USSR.

FOREIGN AID AND FRIENDSHIP

During his administration, Kennedy significantly increased foreign aid to Egypt by donating \$500 million in total aid to Egypt compared to the \$254 million Egypt received from both Truman and Eisenhower combined.²¹ In 1961, Egypt was running a balance-of-payments debt, suffered from stalled national growth and investment, as well as a crop failure. To assist Egypt, the United States provided American grain, as well as financial loans.²² Through economic means, President Kennedy wished to address any concerns that Third World countries were having so that there was no opportunity for the Soviets to interfere. He wanted to provide Nasser with positive reinforcement that friendship with the United States, as opposed to the Soviet Union, was to Egypt's advantage.

The aid offered to Nasser by the Kennedy Administration, however, went further than simply economic loans and food aid. As a result of Egypt's unaligned position, there emerged a sort of tension between Egypt and the Soviet Union. This was particularly visible with Egypt's study abroad programs where Egyptian students studying in the Soviet Union were being harassed and targeted by Soviet citizens. As a result, an opportunity emerged for

¹⁵ Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, 224.

¹⁶ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 40.

¹⁷ Peter Mansfield, *Nasser's Egypt* (Baltimore : Penguin, 1965), 85.

¹⁸ Little, "The New Frontier on the Nile", 504.

¹⁹ Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, 192.

²⁰ Little, "The New Frontier on the Nile", 504.

²¹ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 86.

²² Mansfield, *Nasser's Egypt*, 87.

President Kennedy. Early in the correspondence between these two presidents, Kennedy's Administration asked Nasser if there was anything that they could do for him. Nasser asked if the United States could take all 240 Egyptian students studying in the Soviet Union and transfer them into American universities, a proposition to which Kennedy agreed. Journalist and friend to Nasser, Mohammed Hassanein Heikal writes, "The Americans were surprised and hesitant about taking such a large number, but the transfer was arranged and the students went from Russia to America."²³ While the students were only a minor example, this demonstrated Kennedy's determination to establish a relationship with Nasser. Kennedy wished to form such a strong relationship with Nasser that Egypt would turn away from the Soviet Union and communism.

REGIONAL POLITICS

While the Egyptian-American relationship seemed promising in its early months, it was not to last. One component that tore apart Kennedy's goal was the issue of Middle Eastern regional politics. The Nasser Initiative was established on the basis of containing communism, however, it simplified the complexities of Middle Eastern politics. Without factoring in these intricacies, the initiative had no chance at success. Various leaders in the Middle East had drastic differences in how a country should be led as well as who should lead those countries. Conservative Arab leaders, on account of his nationalistic views, did not hold President Nasser in high esteem. Nasser's nationalist views questioned the tradition of various monarchies, which challenged the rights of various leaders to rule. In fact, many Arab states, such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, were distressed by Kennedy's attempt to form a relationship with Nasser. Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations Warren Bass writes, "Even though the president's men argued repeatedly that an American policy that gave the United States more influence over Egyptian behavior would ultimately redound to Israel's benefit, Israeli Prime Minister David BenGurion remained unconvinced."²⁴ Kennedy's attempt to establish a strong relationship with Egypt made sustaining a friendly relationship with Israel much more difficult. This did not only apply to Israel. Little writes, "JFK might have been willing to accept neutralism or even socialism on the Nile, but Arab conservatives were not because they regarded Nasser's shrill calls for Arab unity, economic modernization, and mass political mobilization as mortal threats to their own traditional regimes."²⁵ The root of the struggle was between nationalist and conservative Arabs, and Kennedy was playing a complex game of foreign policy and diplomacy.

These complex dynamics in the region escalated as a result of events in Syria and Yemen. Nasser faced an unexpected obstacle in 1961 when Syria seceded from the United Arab Republic. The secession occurred in the form of a coup, which was funded by Saudi money and toppled the existing pro-Nasser regime in Syria.²⁶ This was a huge blow to Nasser's goals for a unified Arab state but also presented an opening for President Kennedy. This was a moment of weakness for Nasser could affect much of his foreign policy and how he decided to proceed with the United States relationship. Bass explains, "In fact, Kennedy's foreign policy bureaucracy ultimately found itself presented not with a war but with a potential opportunity: a chastened, more tractable Nasser, dented in the eyes of the Arab world and perhaps inclined to focus on development at home rather than joust for leadership abroad."²⁷ As a result of the failure of the UAR and consequently Nasser's dream of pan-Arabism, the Kennedy Administration belief that Nasser would be easier to work with. This idea of a humbled Nasser may have worked in Kennedy's favor, if it had not been for the rumor of CIA involvement behind the coup in Syria. To this day, it is inconclusive whether the CIA was truly involved in Syria, but regardless, Nasser's suspicion played a large role in his relationship with the United States after this point. Nasser's doubts about

²³ Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, 196.

²⁴ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 66.

²⁵ Little, "The New Frontier on the Nile", 504.

²⁶ Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, 205.

²⁷ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 80.

Kennedy and the CIA's role in Syria demonstrate that Kennedy's attempts to establish friendship were not successful. Nasser was confounded by the idea that the CIA had been working against his goals at the same time that President Kennedy had been working to strengthen the Egyptian-American relationship.²⁸ While the American ambassador worked to reassure Nasser that the United States was not involved in the Syrian coup, the damage was already done. The breaking of the United Arab Republic was close to Nasser's heart for his main goal was to unify the Arab states, and Syria's secession was a large setback. For Nasser to think that the United States was involved in any capacity put a large strain on the developing relationship he and Kennedy had.

Further, Syria's secession presented a new dilemma for Kennedy and his Administration: how to or if to recognize the new Syrian government. Failing to recognize the new Syrian regime held consequences with various parties in the region. Bass explains, "The new regime in Damascus soon sent Washington a formal request for recognition, leaving the administration in a conundrum; recognizing the new Syrian regime too quickly would irritate Nasser, and recognizing it too slowly would irritate the Arab conservatives."²⁹ Nasser, however, was able to alleviate tensions when the Egyptian United Nations ambassador announced that Egypt would not oppose Syria's participation in either the UN or the Arab League.³⁰ Nasser's wounded pride as well as his doubts about Kennedy and the US led to various American fears, such as the effect on Egypt's relationship with the Soviets, the region, and Egypt's relationship with the United States?

THE CONFLICT IN YEMEN

The relationship between Egypt and the United States became even more difficult a few months later with events in Yemen. In the same year as the Syria secession, Colonel Abdullah alSallal, a young nationalist, overthrew the ruling Imam in Yemen.³¹ This provided Nasser with another opportunity to achieve his dream of panArab nationalism. Egypt recognized AlSallal and the Yemen Arab Republic, however the rest of the region did not. Muehlenbeck explains, "...Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Great Britain withheld recognition and supported the reestablishment of a royalist regime – arguing that Egypt's action was directed by Moscow as the first step in a plot in which Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria were the real targets."³² The events in Yemen soon escalated into a civil war, with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan involvement. The proxy war in Yemen had evolved into nationalist Arab nations against conservative Arab nations. Nasser's nationalism and the tradition of the conservative monarchies were complete opposites. There was no way that either of these two political ideologies could coordinate with the other, which further challenged the goals of the Kennedy Administration. The Kennedy Administration wished to maintain friendships with all the various powers, but were left with an extremely difficult situation. Initially, the Administration feared that covert Saudi and British intervention would cause other forces to react, including Nasser and the United Arab Republic. While Kennedy wanted to stay out of the conflict in Yemen, he also wanted the Persian Gulf region to remain stable. Despite Kennedy's wishes, Egypt became more and more involved in the region.³³

Nasser's escalating involvement in Yemen culminated with a force of 70,000 troops being sent to Yemen to help support the new, nationalistic Yemeni leader. His motive for the large amount of troops remains unclear today, though several conjectures have been offered. His personal friend and one of his advisors Mohammed Hossenein Heikal claims, "Nasser sent troops to the Yemen to sustain the republican government and was forced to send

²⁸ Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans*, 127.

²⁹ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 84.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans*, 133.

³² Ibid.

³³ Little, "The New Frontier on the Nile", 511.

more and more as they were swallowed up in the wilderness.”³⁴ There were also fears that Nasser was pursuing the oil of Saudi Arabia for his own interest.³⁵ Another explanation of his actions is that Nasser wished to appear as the leader of Arab nationalism once again, as well as to test the skills of his military.³⁶ Regardless, the conflict in Yemen quickly evolved into a proxy war among the regional powers. Each of the international forces in Yemen had a variety of goals, interests, and activity within the country. For instance, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia spent large amounts of money on the war in Yemen to further his own interests. Further, there was a fear from oil companies that the Egyptian army would attack Saudi oil wells. The British, on the other hand, were concerned about their colony of Aden, which was located in Yemen.³⁷ The various motivations and diverse goals of the different parties made a complex situation that much worse.

Yemen brought the problems of the Nasser initiative to the forefront. Prior to events in Yemen, the Kennedy Administration attempted to maintain alliances with various countries in the Middle East. Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, however, each had different goals and did not share the same alliances as the United States. Kennedy’s immediate concern in the region was to neutralize the conflict in the Yemen. To accomplish this, he sent identical letters to Nasser, King Hussein of Jordan, Prince Feisal of Saudi Arabia, and President Salal of Yemen. The letter clearly laid out his plans for ending the war in Yemen, starting with his initial goal to remove all military powers from Yemen.³⁸ Nasser replied to Kennedy’s letter shortly after, agreeing with his assessment of the situation and accepting his terms. He then went on to explain why he intervened, and what implications this had. Nasser writes, “Unfortunately, His Majesty King Saud misinterpreted the situation; he imagined the Revolution in Yemen to be a battle between monarchical and republic regimes. With that erroneous impression, he launched himself with all his power and potentialities in an attempt to invade Yemen from the outside.”³⁹ Nasser went on to state that due to King Saud’s misjudgment, he believed it was necessary to aid the Arab Republic of Yemen.

After weighing the options, the Kennedy Administration decided to recognize the new regime in Yemen. This recognition, however, had little benefit except to anger Saudi Arabia. The monarchy in Saudi Arabia was fully invested in Yemen and was actually increasing the number of “clandestine operations” along the Yemeni border.⁴⁰ The conflict became more challenging for the Kennedy Administration when Egyptian planes began bombing Saudi territory.⁴¹ This left the Kennedy Administration with a decision: support Nasser or support alliances with the conservative Arab countries. Kennedy ultimately chose to defend the conservatives and break with Nasser. Historian Michael B. Oren writes, “The choice, in the end, was virtually made for him when Nasser violated an American-brokered ceasefire. Two years after posting his first letter to Cairo, in November 1963, Kennedy sent warplanes to defend Riyadh.”⁴²

The events in Yemen exacerbated already high tensions in the region, which ultimately led to the failure of Kennedy’s Nasser initiative. While President Kennedy thought he could work with Nasser and use his nationalism to promote his own interests, this idea ultimately failed due to the struggle between Nasser and

³⁴ Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, 215.

³⁵ Little, “The New Frontier on the Nile”, 511.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, 215.

³⁸ Ibid, 216.

³⁹ Ibid, 218

⁴⁰ Little, “The New Frontier on the Nile”, 517.

⁴¹ Ibid., 521.

⁴² Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007) , 520.

conservative Arab leaders. The politics on the ground proved to be more complex than the Kennedy Administration initially envisioned, culminating in the proxy war in Yemen. This served as the final blow to the Nasser initiative. Yemen established a definite block in the relationship between Kennedy and Nasser, which could not be repaired due to Kennedy's death on November 22, 1963.⁴³

CONCLUSION

President Kennedy saw Nasser and his nationalism as an alliance that would yield numerous benefits. Unlike his predecessors, Kennedy believed that nationalism was not directly a threat to the American position. Rather, he attempted to create stronger ties with Egypt, in order to use that nationalism to American advantages. Kennedy's attempt to establish a relationship with Nasser was based on the idea of containment stemming from the Cold War. While Nasser had some history with the Soviet Union, he was by no means a communist or in an alliance with the Soviet Union. During Kennedy's presidency, there was little to no activity by the Soviet Union in this region. It can be argued that perhaps Kennedy succeeded in his motives for his relationship with Nasser to keep the Soviets on the region. On the other hand, it can also be argued that the relationship with Nasser did very little. At the end of Kennedy's presidency the relationship with Egypt had cooled, and relations with Israel had become stronger.⁴⁴ The Cold War played a small role in shaping Kennedy and Nasser's relationship due to the fact there was no communist activity in the region.

While it may be difficult to judge whether Kennedy's Nasser initiative accomplished anything, the relationship was not what Kennedy had intended. Kennedy misjudged how he could incorporate Nasser's nationalism to aid American interests, and, furthermore, underestimated both the complex politics of the region and the importance of his other alliances' opinions on Nasser. The lengths Kennedy went to in order to keep his relationship with Nasser alive demonstrate how great the threat of communism was viewed at the time. Ultimately, the regional politics of the Middle East played more of a role on the relationship between these two leaders than the Cold War did. The KennedyNasser relationship manifested a new approach to foreign policy during the Cold War, placing a great importance on the Middle East, but one that ultimately accomplished very little.

⁴³ Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, 224.

⁴⁴ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 4.

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