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## **Diplomacy under the nuclear shadow: Kennedy, Nasser, and Dimona**

In 1960, the Middle East was on the verge of making a leap into the nuclear age. Israel's advancing nuclear capabilities became public knowledge triggering concerns about the spread of nuclear weapons in the region with wider implications for regional and international security. While most of the literature on this early phase of regional nuclear history had focused on Israeli nuclear advances and US efforts to address it, this article expands that focus to examine how a secret dialogue on nuclear weapons was a significant but hidden part of Egyptian-US relations at the time. Using Arabic and English sources, the article examines a series of secret, diplomatic engagements between the US and Egypt that aimed at addressing the evolving nuclear situation in the region. In doing so, the article demonstrates how Israel's nuclear activities and reactions to it were a source of tension in Egyptian-US relations. Both John F. Kennedy and Gamel Abdel Nasser were confronted with dilemmas that they could not find any easy answers to. Kennedy was unable to halt Israel's advance toward the bomb but focused on assuring the Egyptian leader that Israel was not pursuing a nuclear weapon. Nasser, while anxious about the prospect of an Israeli bomb, was keen to allow the budding rapprochement with Kennedy to continue. The result was a secret diplomatic dance where the two presidents tested each other's patience to the limit.

The article begins by examining how, in December 1960, both Egypt and the US separately came face to face with the prospects of a nuclear Israel and traces their early reactions. The article then examines the different stages of Egyptian-US diplomacy on the issue. The US tried to reassure Egypt about Israeli intentions against a backdrop of warming relations between

Cairo and Washington. At a later stage, the Kennedy administration proposed a regional arms control initiative. This was followed by an American-Egyptian dialogue that focused on nuclear renunciation and nuclear safeguards. Each of these stages is examined in the article in a separate section before ending with wider reflections on the nuclear interactions between Kennedy and Nasser.

In examining Kennedy's nuclear diplomacy with Nasser, this article relies on several primary sources from both the US and Egypt. In the US, this includes records from the US National Archives in College Park as well as the John F Kennedy Library (JFKL) in Boston. Some of the new material used from the JFKL was made available through successful Mandatory Declassification Review requests. The research also draws from the private archival collection of John McCloy, Kennedy's envoy to Nasser, held at Amherst College. It also uses many Egyptian sources not previously analyzed in terms of the nuclear question in the Middle East. This includes an interview with Nasser's chief of staff, Samy Sharaf, and the published Arabic memoirs of Nasser's confidant, Mohammed Hassanein Heikal. The Arabic editions of Heikal's book contain verbatim records of official Egyptian documents that were also used. The article also used references from Nasser's archival collection held by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, including audio recordings of his speeches. In addition to these sources, research for this article relied on several online archival sources, including the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series, the reading room of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the archive of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and e-briefing books produced by the National Security Archive (NSA).

### **The Kennedy-Nasser Rapprochement**

Kennedy's foreign policy in the Middle East is frequently regarded as proactive, innovative, and balanced. Arthur Schlesinger described it as one of Kennedy's 'most interesting

experiments in foreign policy'.<sup>1</sup> Kennedy reshaped US relations with both Egypt and Israel. On the one hand, he believed in a strong US commitment to the Jewish state. He was the first US president to authorize the sale of advanced weaponry to Israel and was much less inhibited than preceding presidents in publicly committing to Israel. On the other hand, he identified Nasser as the most potent force in the Arab world and invested in developing good relations with the leader of Arab nationalism. Kennedy exchanged frequent correspondence with Nasser covering a wide variety of issues, signed mutual cultural and investment guarantee agreements with Egypt, and, significantly, secured the provision of a three-year economic aid package to Cairo.<sup>2</sup>

Revisionist critiques of Kennedy's foreign policy that attribute many of his innovations to style rather than substance have challenged the early histories idolizing the president's achievements. Yet when it comes to his policy in the Middle East, the impression of Kennedy's wizardry in the region prevails.<sup>3</sup> New evidence and analysis are starting to challenge this view and add nuance and detail to our understanding, particularly of Kennedy's relationship with Nasser. Kennedy's openness with Nasser had its roots in the final years of the Eisenhower administration, when a working relationship with the Egyptian leader started to take hold.<sup>4</sup> Roby Barrett perhaps goes too far in arguing that Kennedy 'essentially followed the course set by Eisenhower', attributing Kennedy's innovations to 'mystique or myth'.<sup>5</sup> However, there is more than a grain of truth in that Kennedy's rapprochement with Egypt was less a radical change of direction and more of a refinement and expansion of previous policy.

Assessments of Kennedy's rapprochement with Nasser vary. For Douglas Little, Kennedy made the journey from being 'even-handed' in the Middle East to being 'empty-handed'.<sup>6</sup> A pro-Nasser approach failed because of the inevitable clash between rising Arab nationalism

and the forces sustaining the regional status quo. The Arab monarchies, Israel, and Britain were all opposed to Nasser and tried to dissuade Kennedy from a rapprochement.<sup>7</sup> For Warren Bass, the failure of this rapprochement is attributable to Nasser who, unlike David Ben-Gurion, did not seize the opportunity presented by the new American president and did not reach for Kennedy's extended hand.<sup>8</sup> Other voices are cognizant of the odds stacked against Kennedy's foreign policy experiment yet do not see it as a failure. Malcolm Kerr posits that the rapprochement 'worked fairly well' until 1964.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Fawaz Gerges describes Kennedy's relationship with Nasser as a 'marriage of convenience' that persisted, rather than collapsed, through differences over Egypt's military involvement in Yemen.<sup>10</sup>

This study contributes to the debate on Kennedy's diplomacy in the region through the examination of a key, yet understudied, aspect of his foreign policy: his engagement with Nasser on the nuclear question. This speaks to a double gap in studies of this period. Kennedy's nuclear dealings in the Middle East have been frequently discussed in the context of American-Israeli relations. Abraham Ben-Zvi has dissected Kennedy's bargaining strategy with Israel.<sup>11</sup> In tracing the origins of Israel's nuclear opacity, Avner Cohen reveals how American-Israeli interactions played a role in shaping that policy.<sup>12</sup> In his sympathetic account of Kennedy's Middle East policy, Warren Bass further places the nuclear question within the context of a transformed relationship between Kennedy and Israel.<sup>13</sup> While these and other studies have provided valuable insights into Kennedy's nuclear relations with Israel, the administration's approach to Nasser on the nuclear issue has received far less dedicated attention.

The literature on Kennedy's relationship with Nasser also includes a gap pertaining to the nuclear component of their relations. American-Egyptian relations under Kennedy have been frequently assessed through the prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the conflict in Yemen,

economic modernization, or the general trajectory of the relationship.<sup>14</sup> The nuclear dimension of that relationship has not been as well covered as all these other aspects. The importance of this factor was picked up on by Douglas Little when he highlighted how his ‘own reading of fragmentary declassified material at the JFK library’ indicated that Israel’s nuclear drive was a complicating factor in Kennedy’s relationship with Nasser.<sup>15</sup>

### **Cairo and Washington facing Dimona**

As the year 1960 drew to a close, both Egypt and the United States concluded that they could not afford to ignore Israeli nuclear activities any longer. Both countries had been following Israel’s nuclear program and secret activities in Dimona but remained quiet on the subject – at least publicly. In December 1960, US intelligence prepared an intelligence briefing indicating that Israel was getting dangerously close to a nuclear weapons capability. Referring to Dimona, the report said: ‘On the basis of all available evidence, including configuration of the complex, we believe that plutonium production for weapon is at least one major purpose of this effort.’<sup>16</sup> This was not the first encounter between US intelligence and Dimona. Suspicious Israeli activity was detected at least as early as 1958 but had not been acted upon.<sup>17</sup> By 1960, the mounting evidence could no longer be ignored.

In a National Security Council meeting held in December 1960 by the departing Eisenhower administration, the alarming consequences of Israeli nuclear activity were discussed. The Director of the CIA mentioned that agency analysts believed that ‘the Israeli [nuclear] complex cannot be solely for peaceful purposes’.<sup>18</sup> The consequences were clear. He warned that Arab states and the Soviet Union would ‘undoubtedly interpret Israeli nuclear activity as intended for production of weapons’, adding that Arab reactions ‘will be particularly severe’. Secretary of State Christian Herter mentioned that he would raise the ‘serious’ implications of such

developments with the Israeli ambassador. Fred Scribner, the US Undersecretary for the Treasury, highlighted the ‘far reaching consequences’ if donations from Jewish charitable organizations were implicated in financing Israel’s nuclear activities.<sup>19</sup> In a region where the US had been criticized for its support of Israel, they also worried that the US could be seen as complicit in Israeli nuclear activities. Yet this was a problem that the departing Eisenhower administration was happy to leave to its successors.

In Cairo, the Israeli reactor had also been in the Egyptian spotlight for some time. According to Nasser’s chief of staff, Samy Sharaf, Egyptian intelligence knew that the French, following the Suez crisis, had become involved in building a secret reactor in Dimona.<sup>20</sup> Egyptian officials expected the worst. Yet while Egyptian intelligence was busy collecting information on the project, Nasser kept quiet about what Israel was doing. Egypt had started a small nuclear program in 1955 and by 1957 had reached an agreement with the Soviet Union to build a small research reactor in Egypt.

On the 21 December 1960, Ben-Gurion acknowledged in a public statement that Israel was building a nuclear complex in Dimona, describing it as intended ‘exclusively for peaceful uses’. The announcement caused uproar in Cairo; the leader of Arab nationalism could no longer publicly ignore the issue. Nasser was due to speak at a large political rally commemorating Egypt’s resistance to the 1956 invasion of the Suez Canal. The Egyptian president decided to devote a significant part of his speech to addressing the nuclear issue.

The audio recording of the political rally indicates that this was a fiery speech and one dominated by criticism of Israel and its Western allies for recklessly introducing the danger of nuclear weapons to the Middle East. The speech made it clear that Nasser viewed the possibility

of a nuclear Israel as both unacceptable and as a game changer. Yet, perhaps with a domestic audience in mind, he also tried to minimize Israel's nuclear achievements, warning against buying into 'propaganda' intended to influence Arab morale and resolve.<sup>21</sup> He blamed Western and imperialist backers of Israel, explicitly mentioning France, for providing Israel with nuclear technology and warned Western countries not to provide Israel with nuclear weapons. Nasser's speech also carried threats. He mentioned that he would not stay idle if Israel got or developed nuclear weapons. Nasser further declared that Egypt couldn't wait for such an eventuality and had to actively intervene to prevent Israel from going nuclear. He said: 'If we become positive that Israel was building nuclear weapons, then this means war between us and them. We cannot allow Israel to have nuclear weapons.'<sup>22</sup> If Israel acquired nuclear weapons, he warned, Egypt would get them at 'any price'. In short, Nasser was saying he would not accept a nuclear Israel and assigned a big part of the blame to Israel's international backers.

Nasser's explosive speech drove the US ambassador in Cairo to ring the alarm bells in Washington. It indicated that a nuclear Israel would come at a cost to US relations with Egypt. In his report to Washington DC, the Ambassador noted how the US 'has not come in for such a sharp specific criticism for long time'.<sup>23</sup> The risk was that Nasser would see the US or the West as complicit in arming Israel with nuclear weapons. The Egyptian President would then be driven to develop his own nuclear weapons with reliance on the Soviet Union. The US Ambassador warned in his report: 'If [the] West should provide Israel with atom bomb, or provide Israel with money and know how enable it produce bomb themselves, UAR [United Arab Republic] would obtain bomb from Soviet Union at any cost.' The Ambassador's warning highlighted the risk that Nasser, in response to Dimona, might be tempted to drop his flagship non-aligned foreign policy to seek a bomb under Soviet guidance.



Nasser actively encouraged fears of an end of Egypt's non-alignment policy or the pursuit of a nuclear weapon even when these dramatic policies were not seriously pursued. He occasionally raised them with Western officials to push them to bring pressure on Israel and other governments assisting it in the nuclear field. Dimona featured in a discussion, a week after his speech, between Nasser and the US ambassador. Nasser warned that Israeli nuclear weapons would 'compel UAR to take radical action', telling the ambassador that he 'feared French might again support Israeli aggression as they had in 1956'.<sup>24</sup> In a discussion with the Canadian ambassador, the content of which was made available to the US embassy in Cairo, Nasser warned that if Israel went nuclear, Egypt would put an end to its international non-alignment.<sup>25</sup>

Reports from Cairo had their echoes in Washington particularly as a visit by the Deputy Soviet Foreign Minister Vladimir Semyonov raised concerns that the nuclear issue might be on the table.<sup>26</sup> US analysts began considering scenarios like the 'probable stationing of Soviet nuclear weapons on the soil of Israel's embittered Arab neighbors'.<sup>27</sup> These scenarios did not only envision that regional nuclear tensions would translate to a Soviet advantage but could also provide a foothold for China in the region. China could draw Egypt to its sphere of influence by 'driv[ing] a hard bargain' with Nasser. In exchange for sensitive nuclear assistance from China, Egypt would lend its support to Chinese activities in the developing world and among the Afro-Asian block of newly independent states.<sup>28</sup> For Kennedy's administration, the stakes were high enough to merit an intervention.

### **A double game**

There were many reasons why Dimona deserved US scrutiny apart from the reactions it triggered in the region. The planned reactor was Israel's second. How many reactors would a small country like Israel need or be able to afford? Why had Israel chosen a plutonium-

producing design for its second reactor? Then, there was the issue of the intentional secrecy surrounding the whole project. Whereas Israel relied on a public partnership with the US for its first reactor, it kept Dimona under wraps and hidden from its nuclear partner. Could Israel be pursuing a nuclear weapons program in secret? Some of the US assessments appear clear-eyed in assessing Israel's trajectory.

Three US intelligence and Department of Defense reports were upfront in their assessment of Israel's nuclear activities. A 1960 CIA report projected that 'Israel will produce some weapon-grade plutonium in 1963-1964 and possibly as early as 1962.'<sup>29</sup> Another intelligence report titled 'The Outlook for Israel', produced in 1961 but only declassified in 2015, mentions that the Israelis 'intend at least to put themselves in the position of being able to produce nuclear weapons fairly soon after a decision to do so' adding that they would likely to 'continue to work toward an operational nuclear capability'.<sup>30</sup> In a 1962 report by the Department of Defense that addressed the status of nuclear proliferation, Israel was included high on the list of countries likely to develop nuclear weapons, preceded only by China.<sup>31</sup>

The Kennedy administration decided it had to intervene. It played a double game to contain any political impact from a regional nuclear flare up. Internally, the administration was clear about the risks entailed by Israel's plutonium-producing reactor and the Israeli commitment to the project. In its interactions with Nasser, and other Arab leaders, it projected a far more benign image of Israel's nuclear activities. The administration organized a series of visits by US scientists to Dimona under the pretense of scrutinizing Israel's nuclear activities. Recent evidence raises doubts about the nature and outcomes of these visits. They appear to have been conceived to give the façade of scrutiny but organized and executed in a way that precluded any serious investigation into the true nature of Israel's nuclear activities. Simultaneously, the

administration started a dialogue with Cairo meant to put the best face on Dimona and to assure Egyptian officials about Israel's nuclear potential.

The first extended discussion between the Kennedy administration and Egyptian officials took place during a meeting between the new Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and the Egyptian Ambassador to Washington, Hussein Kamel. Rusk assured Kamel that the Israeli 'reactor was for peaceful purposes and not for weapons production', according to information provided by the French and Israelis.<sup>32</sup> He emphasized that the US held a principled position against the proliferation of nuclear weapons and that the government 'opposed any extension of nuclear weapons capabilities'. He added that the US government 'would make every effort [to] remain currently informed re [the] status and nature [of] Israeli development [in] this field'.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, he told Kamel that 'A quiet exchange of facts could correct or forestall an adverse public reaction.'

Kennedy's administration sought to provide positive, reassuring messages about Dimona whenever feasible. In preparation for the first meeting between Kennedy and the Egyptian ambassador, Kennedy's talking points reiterated the assurances that 'as presently projected Israel's atomic program represents no cause for special concern'.<sup>34</sup> In other words, Cairo should trust Washington, as the US would not 'relax its vigilance nor our opposition to the proliferation of nuclear weapons capabilities'. Washington also tried to tempt Cairo with nuclear assistance to establish its own good will. Before the newly appointed Ambassador John Badeau departed for Cairo, Kennedy discussed the possibility of providing Egypt with assistance in peaceful nuclear technology.<sup>35</sup>

Assurances about Israel's nuclear bona fides became more substantial after US scientists were allowed access to Dimona. The first visit to the reactor, by two US scientists, took place on 20 May 1961. Ben-Gurion had initially appeared ready to allow a visit to the controversial reactor in December 1960 when Dimona had surfaced, causing an international storm.<sup>36</sup> The Israeli leader, however, withheld his authorization before finally allowing a visit almost five months after the initial proposal was made.<sup>37</sup> The visit was organized jointly by the US and Israeli governments and ended up as an exercise in window-dressing rather than a serious probe. The visit took place on the Jewish sabbath, with only select Israeli staff around while inspectors were on site. The Israeli hosts stage-managed the activity and controlled what the US scientists were allowed to see, without much push back. For their part, the US scientists appear to have suspended their critical faculties. Back in the US, the inspectors reported that they were 'satisfied that nothing was concealed from them and that the reactor is of the scope and peaceful character previously described to the United States'.<sup>38</sup>

The clean bill of health that the US inspectors provided, however, was not accurate. As Ambassador Thomas Graham and Keith Hansen describe it, 'the Israelis successfully pulled the wool over the eyes of US inspectors and concealed the true purpose of Dimona.'<sup>39</sup> But if that was the case, US officials were also partly complicit. According to an oral history interview with Myer Feldman, Kennedy's White House advisor involved in organizing the visit, the US scientists were handpicked 'after considering who might be acceptable to Israel'.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Feldman explicitly stated that the reason behind the visits to Dimona was to 'give the color of virtue to it'.<sup>41</sup> Unclassified US intelligence reports appear to ignore the findings of the visit in assessing Israeli nuclear potential. The findings of the visit, however, were a useful tool in Kennedy's diplomatic outreach to Nasser and other Arab leaders.

The visit allowed a *modus vivendi* on the nuclear issue between Ben-Gurion and Kennedy. The Israelis wanted to keep Dimona under wraps and avoid serious scrutiny of their nuclear activities. For Kennedy, the visit meant that he was taking some action on non-proliferation while at the same time avoiding a clash with Israel that he did not want. When Kennedy met Ben-Gurion in New York, ten days after the Dimona visit, the US president expressed his satisfaction with the ‘good report’ by the US scientists.<sup>42</sup> In their discussion, Kennedy repeatedly referred to the importance of appearances. Notably, he told Ben-Gurion: ‘A woman should not only be virtuous but also have the appearance of virtue.’ Kennedy added:

It is to our common interests that no one thinks that Israel is involved in the proliferation of atomic weapons. Obviously, the UAR would not permit Israel to go ahead in this field without getting into it itself.

He urged Ben-Gurion to allow him to pass on the findings of the visit to Arab states. In his reply Ben-Gurion mentioned ‘you are absolutely free to do what you wish with the report. If you feel you should publish it, we have no objection.’ The meeting was conducted in a cordial atmosphere and was non-confrontational. During the meeting, Kennedy took Ben-Gurion to one side and, to the shock of the Israeli premier, told him, ‘You know, I was elected by the Jews of New York. I will do something for you.’<sup>43</sup> In dealing with the nuclear issue, Kennedy here appears more willing to look the other way.

And yet Kennedy’s administration seized the opportunity to reassure Nasser and Arab leaders that the Israeli nuclear issue was under control. A meeting was organized with Arab ambassadors in Washington where they were briefed on the meeting with Ben-Gurion. They were told that Kennedy ‘expressed deep concern that there be no proliferation of atomic weapons since this would constitute a danger to peace’ and that that the US would have to ‘use

its weight to prevent such proliferation'.<sup>44</sup> A few days later, Dean Rusk contacted the American ambassador in Cairo, asking him to convey a verbatim message to Cairo that contained a briefing on the pre-arranged visit by US scientists to Dimona. The message stated that the reactor would produce small quantities of plutonium but that American experts 'found no evidence that the Israelis have weapons production in mind'.<sup>45</sup> Rusk's message went on to emphasize: 'I am therefore happy to renew to you the personal assurance I furnished to your ambassador that we believe this reactor is exclusively for peaceful purposes.' The US included what the Arab ambassadors had previously been told: 'Ben-Gurion assured the president [Kennedy] that the reactor's only purpose is to develop a cheap source of industrial power and that weapons production was not contemplated.' The message to Cairo was that it need not worry too much, as the US was on the case.

The visit was followed by sequels that equally failed to provide an honest examination of Dimona. In September 1962, another visit was organized that was even more contrived than the first one. The visit was proposed when two US scientists, already in Israel, were invited to take a detour from a sightseeing excursion to the Dead Sea.<sup>46</sup> They ended up spending forty minutes in Dimona, where the Israelis provided a guided tour of the facility. The inspectors were not able to see all the facility, but they were ultimately able to 'confirm the research nature of the installation'. It was later revealed that 'the inspectors were not certain whether they were guests of their scientist hosts or on an inspection'. The Intelligence services, however, 'did not agree with the inspectors that the inspection was completely satisfactory'.<sup>47</sup>

Similar to the earlier assurances to Cairo, the US ambassador was asked to tell Nasser 'in confidence' about the visit and that it

enables USG renew assurances of June 1961 that latest observations again confirm Israeli statements that reactor intended for peaceful purposes only. No rpt [ repeat] no evidence of preparation for nuclear weapons production. Work on the reactor progressing normally.<sup>48</sup>

The administration eagerly promoted and communicated the outcomes of these visits with Nasser and other Arab leaders despite its own concerns over Dimona. What is openly available from the US archival record indicates that this happened almost seamlessly and without any hint of the obvious contradictions between internal US assessments and external messaging.

We do not have enough evidence to accurately discern how Cairo assessed these repeated US assurances. US records show that the Egyptian government did not challenge or actively undermine American reassurances or visits (when results were communicated to Cairo). Nasser appears to have been equally eager not to disturb the improving bilateral relations with Kennedy. According to Egyptian records of his speeches and interviews, Nasser remained silent, at least publicly, on Israel's nuclear program. His strongly-worded public denunciation of Israel and its western backers in December 1960 after revelations of Dimona would not be repeated while Kennedy was president. Nasser did not rush to build a crash nuclear program in response. Egypt had only a small Soviet-supplied research reactor that was not suitable for weapons production and, while Cairo had plans for a nuclear expansion, these plans never materialized. The US government kept an eye on Egypt's nuclear activities and in one report described Egypt's nuclear thinking as 'not yet far advanced'.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, Nasser never sufficiently invested in a nuclear option or prioritized a nuclear weapons program to match Israel's, as later and more detailed US assessments confirmed.

Assessments of American-Egyptian relations from the period show Cairo increasingly invested in a good relationship with the US. Reports from the US embassy describe ‘prevailing political atmosphere of relative calm and virtual absence of anti-American attacks in the press’.<sup>50</sup> The Embassy noted, with surprise, how Ben-Gurion’s visit to the US was treated ‘with unusual restraint’ in Egypt. Senator Hubert Humphrey, following a meeting with Nasser, reported that the Egyptian president was ‘very impressed’ with his frequent correspondence with Kennedy. According to Humphrey, Nasser ‘was not exuberant but he was pleased with the manner in which things had developed’ between Egypt and the US.<sup>51</sup> When the newly appointed US ambassador met Nasser, he reported that the ‘presidential charm turned on to full’.<sup>52</sup> Taking stock of Egyptian-American relations, the ambassador asked whether the Egyptian president had any comments on or problems with UAR-US relations, the answer he received was ‘negative’.

### **A diplomatic offensive**

In 1962, William Polk of the US State Department’s Policy Planning Council wrote that the US was getting nowhere with its efforts to broker regional reconciliation in the Middle East.<sup>53</sup> The Kennedy administration had already made proposals, including plans for the repatriation or compensation of Palestinian refugees, but without much success. The ambition to achieve an Arab-Israeli settlement that had driven earlier US presidents remained elusive. Instead, Polk proposed directing US diplomatic efforts to brokering an arms-control-style agreement between Egypt and Israel. As the region began to show interest in advanced and unconventional weaponry, including nuclear weapons, some in the US started to see an unlikely opportunity. Rather than seeking a peace initiative based on addressing the intractable Palestinian issue, the US could try to bring regional actors together around ‘arms control’.



When Polk's proposal reached the White House, it found in Robert Komer an eager supporter. Komer had previously served in Eisenhower's White House after a career in the CIA. With the changing of administrations, he was retained in the White House as a member of Kennedy's national security team. As Kennedy's point-person on the Middle East, he (along with Myer Feldman) played a hands-on role on regional policy in the White House. Archival US records show Komer as a prolific producer of memos containing witty and Machiavellian analyses on how the US could meet the challenges it was facing in the region.

Komer repackaged Polk's initial arms control proposal and, in the process, gave it new life. He wrote to Kennedy that an arms control initiative was 'the most promising card available to us in [the] Arab Israeli game'.<sup>54</sup> Komer, however, was not driven by an idealistic vision of arms control as a stepping-stone towards Arab-Israeli peace. Rather, he opportunistically saw in the proposal a way to deflect some of the pressures the US faced in managing its regional alliances. As he explained to Kennedy, if successful, an arms control initiative, 'would both limit the risks of local war' and also 'reduce our indirect subsidies to Israel to compensate for Soviet arms to Egypt'.<sup>55</sup>

The proposal started to gain momentum with the release of a CIA report in March 1963 on 'the likely consequences of Israeli acquisition of nuclear weapons'. The report made the clear case that an Israeli bomb would be detrimental to US strategic interests in the region. It warned that a nuclear Israel would cause 'substantial damage to the US and Western position in the Arab World'.<sup>56</sup> It went on to describe how an emboldened nuclear Israel might:

seek to exploit the psychological advantages of its nuclear capability to intimidate the Arabs and to prevent them from making trouble on the

frontiers. It would probably feel freer than it does now to take vigorous retaliatory action against border harassments when they did occur. And it would probably make propaganda underlining the impotence of the principal Arab governments in the face of Israeli power, and would thereby seek to compound Arab frustrations and to promote disunity in the Arab world.<sup>57</sup>

The report also highlighted that Nasser had no easy options with which to respond to an Israeli bomb. If he considered a nuclear option, Nasser would find such an endeavor to be ‘lengthy and costly’ as well as ‘highly provocative’ for Israel. If he sought Soviet assistance, Moscow would likely refuse to help Egypt with any nuclear weapons program. A preventive military attack, as Nasser threatened in his 1960 December speech, would not be effective due to Israel’s superior military. In short, there was ‘no real satisfactory course of action’ open to Nasser or the Arabs.<sup>58</sup>

A few days later, and with Komer’s prodding, Kennedy authorized National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) number 231.<sup>59</sup> The presidential directive carried two specific tasks. It asked the US intelligence community to improve as a ‘matter of urgency’ their intelligence on Israel’s nuclear program as well as on other advanced weapons program in Egypt and Israel. It also tasked the State Department with preparing specific proposals on a regional arms control arrangement with the aim of forestalling the proliferation of advanced and unconventional weapons in the Middle East.<sup>60</sup>

What followed was a major and secret effort by the US government to study the issue of advanced weapons in the Middle East. A State Department-led working group was created with the involvement of the US intelligence community and the newly established Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) to examine and evaluate regional capabilities for advanced

armaments. The result was a series of ‘top secret’ studies that provided the White House with a thorough assessment of Egyptian and Israeli capabilities.<sup>61</sup> Not only did the studies highlight that Israel was superior militarily, it also had greater future potential. Israel had a ‘head-start’ and a ‘far greater capacity’ in the nuclear field than Egypt. Even when it came to missiles, the studies predicted that Israel ‘will soon overtake’ Egypt, whose missiles were described as ‘show pieces’ with little military utility.<sup>62</sup>

By May 1963, the secret inter-departmental working group concluded its examination and the State Department sent a detailed memo to Kennedy that included a proposal for a regional arms control initiative.<sup>63</sup> The proposals focused on two weapon systems as a priority and identified its objective as the pursuit of an ‘unobtrusive, reasonably simple, arrangement in the Near East designed to prevent Israel and Egypt from acquiring at a minimum, (1) nuclear weapons and (2) surface to surface strategic missiles’.<sup>64</sup> The US also reasoned that an approach to both countries could have an ‘educative effect’ so that both Nasser and Ben-Gurion would have a ‘better appreciation of the problems, economic costs, and risks involved if they try to develop unconventional weapons’.<sup>65</sup> The proposal suggested sending a presidential envoy on a secret mission to the region.

While the group examined, in a clinical manner, the potential for and available policy responses to a regional arms race in advanced weapons, the White House had pressing concerns of a slightly different nature. Israel was pushing for an alliance or a formal security guarantee from the US.<sup>66</sup> Israel’s quest for such a guarantee had gained momentum after reliance on France and Britain in 1956 showed the clear limitations of those countries’ support. Israel started to push back, when the nuclear issue was raised, with demands for an upgrade in its security relations with the US. Moreover, Israel had sympathetic friends in Washington. Two senators,

Hubert Humphrey and Jacob Javits, proposed that the US would undertake ‘collective defence arrangements’ with Israel, efforts that were described by Komer as creating a ‘hullabaloo’ for the Kennedy administration. Nevertheless, in Komer’s words, the initiative ‘buys us time to stall on Israel security guarantee’.<sup>67</sup>

This was not only about Israel and its friends in Washington. Komer worried about the strategic impact of a visible military association with Israel, particularly on US relations with Arab states and Nasser. In this sense, the initiative could play a useful role. Namely, it allowed Washington to justify its position to Nasser if the US decided to upgrade its security relations with Israel. Komer clearly outlined this instrumental logic when he wrote to Kennedy: ‘(1) if Nasser buys [into the initiative] we tell him we have to give one [security guarantee] to get BG [Ben-Gurion] signed on; (2) if Nasser refuses, we tell him we have to give one to protect Israel. So on these grounds alone it’s worth the try.’<sup>68</sup> The administration would certainly welcome a positive outcome of its initiative, but that was not readily expected. In a memo to Kennedy, Komer wrote, rather dismissively, ‘I’d give this only a 50/50 chance at best.’<sup>69</sup> The reasons for this attitude was clear: ‘basic suspicions’, mutually reinforced in Egypt and Israel, ‘will be hard to overcome’. Here, the initiative appears as a tool to manage and deflect some of pressures the administration was under, from Israel, Nasser, and domestically, as it considered its own bargaining hand concerning Dimona. For the White House, the initiative was part of an effort to engage regional actors while being clear-eyed about its practical chances of success.

Kennedy gave the green light to take the proposal to the region. Cairo was the place to start. To lay the groundwork, Kennedy wrote a long letter to Nasser putting the issue of regional arms competition on the Egyptian-US agenda and asking the Egyptian President to receive a presidential envoy to discuss the issue. He cautioned that ‘Israel could have the capability to

develop nuclear weapons in the next few years if it were to divert its efforts in that direction.’<sup>70</sup> His change of tone was unmistakable and could not have been missed in Cairo. Previously, the US had repeatedly assured Cairo about Dimona. Now, Kennedy had begun to refer to Dimona in ominous terms. Kennedy also wrote that ‘offensive missiles now under development both in Israel and in the UAR would also add a new and dangerous dimension’ to regional instability. Nasser was already nervous on the issue of missiles. He believed that Israel was orchestrating an embarrassingly successful campaign of sabotage against German scientists working on missiles in Egypt while feeding a public relations campaign in Washington against his program.

According to Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, Nasser’s confidant and chronicler, Kennedy’s tone triggered concern in Cairo. Questions were raised about the American president’s intentions and motives. Had the US changed its stated opposition to an Israeli bomb? Was Kennedy giving in to Israeli pressure on Egyptian missiles? Ultimately, however, Nasser’s willingness to open up to Kennedy took precedence. He sent a message to Kennedy agreeing to receive an American envoy in Cairo while sharing some of his concerns. He told Kennedy that Israel wanted to ‘harm the growing relations between the US and the UAR’.<sup>71</sup> He further mentioned that Israel’s public campaign against Egyptian missiles was designed to extract more aid and assistance from the US, referring to the sale of American HAWK missiles to Israel. In this context, Kennedy pressed on with his administration’s plan. A week later, he wrote to Nasser mentioning that John McCloy would be his personal envoy and asking Nasser to receive him ‘in total secrecy’.<sup>72</sup>

As Egypt was preparing to receive Kennedy’s envoy, an internal discussion began regarding how Cairo should address the consultations scheduled with the US envoy while reflecting

concerns about US capacity for impartiality. The Egyptian foreign ministry noted how McCloy's trip included a stop in Cairo but not in Israel. In a memo for Nasser, they wrote that it was 'initially understood from Kennedy's message that McCloy's mission will be pursued in parallel with both sides. Restricting this mission to Cairo only means they [the US] wants to extract promises from us with nothing in return from the other side [Israel].'.<sup>73</sup>

Egypt's Foreign Minister Dr Mahmoud Fawzi summed up the deep frustration felt in Cairo about previous efforts to reach a regional settlement. He wrote to Nasser:

You might wish to remember that our experiences proved that we practice politics with benign intentions and this is not what the other party [Israel] does. Then, we find ourselves committed to our promises while they do not commit to any promise. Promises are just means to win time that could help them move faster to where they were going anyway.<sup>74</sup>

But despite this, the ultimate advice for Nasser was to receive US proposals with an 'open heart' but not committing Egypt to the proposals without reciprocation from Israel.

### **Secret talks**

Thus, John McCloy travelled to Cairo as Kennedy's secret envoy to meet with the Egyptian president in late June 1963. McCloy had considerable experience with arms control. His personal papers show that he was also a familiar face in Cairo. He was a member of a United Nations (UN) team tasked with assisting Cairo to clear the Suez Canal and open it for navigation after the 1956 war.<sup>75</sup> When Nasser's chief of staff was told that McCloy would be Kennedy's envoy his response was, 'excellent choice'.<sup>76</sup>

McCloy had two meetings with Nasser to discuss nuclear and missile proliferation in the region and to present US proposals. Part of the discussion aimed to ensure that Nasser remained non-nuclear. McCloy began by saying that nuclear proliferation was an issue that ‘deeply concerned’ the US president. He opened with an economic argument: McCloy described nuclear weapons as ‘fantastically expensive’ and as investments that ‘would certainly diminish the resources which could otherwise be employed in economic development’. He also mentioned that nuclear weapons produce destruction of ‘a character which would destroy all [that] Nasser had been seeking to accomplish and with consequences no one could accurately appraise’.<sup>77</sup> The US could not ignore the issue: an outbreak of nuclear weapons proliferation would ‘certainly greatly increase the chances of US involvement’ in the region. There was a ‘common interest’, McCloy highlighted, between Nasser’s ‘desire to increase the wellbeing of his people’ and ‘our interest in avoiding proliferation of these weapons’.

When it came to Dimona, McCloy tried to strike a fine balance between presenting the Israeli reactor as a serious issue, but one that was under control. He told Nasser that Israel had a ‘sizable reactor’ which, when completed, ‘could be used for the purpose of manufacturing material for use in weapons’. However, the US had ‘no information that the reactor was presently being used for such a purpose’. McCloy then presented Nasser with the US proposals for a secret arms control arrangement between Egypt and Israel on nuclear weapons and missiles. McCloy added that the US was ready to assist in the ‘observance and inspection of critical sites’ to assure Egypt and Israel that each side remained true to their commitments.<sup>78</sup>

Nasser was open to discussing and engaging with the American proposals. Furthermore, he had no objection to a nuclear-free Middle East. As McCloy wrote in his report, Nasser ‘repeated several times that I could report to the president that he had no intent or desire to

manufacture nuclear material and he had no intention of attacking Israel'.<sup>79</sup> Nasser explained that Egypt only had a small experimental nuclear reactor that was not suitable for plutonium or weapons production. Moreover, he was not interested in a military confrontation with Israel. In Nasser's words, Egypt's military strategy was 'purely defensive'.

On missiles, Nasser was less categorical and more circumspect. He mentioned that his program was intended to respond to Israel's acquisition of French Mirages and Surface-to-Air missiles. He stressed that the missiles Egypt was developing were strictly intended for conventional ordinance. Their payload was one to two tons of TNT and had simple guidance systems; furthermore, their maximum range was 600 km.<sup>80</sup> Nasser also stated that Egypt had no plans to significantly increase the capabilities of its missiles unless it was compelled by Israel to do so in order to 'preserve the military balance' in the region. Nasser emphasized that the missiles Egypt had already developed still needed further experiments to develop their primitive guidance system.<sup>81</sup>

In describing the country's weapons in this way, Nasser was making the case that Egypt's capabilities in the nuclear field and in missiles were limited, and that Cairo was not pushing for a race in advance weapons. What Nasser could not accept was the semblance of a deal with Israel that would ultimately spell the end of his leadership of the Arab world. The proposed arrangement, even if done in secret and indirectly through mediation, 'would still appear' as an Egyptian-Israeli deal. Nasser also took issue with two other aspects of the proposals. It was problematic for Egypt to be 'singled out' among all non-nuclear powers to formally commit to abandoning a nuclear option. He also told McCloy that Egypt 'had traditionally taken a very firm view against any form of inspection' and that reversing that position presented 'real difficulties'. Nasser further raised the point of 'political sensitivity'. Any arrangement that



would make Egypt look like a ‘protectorate’ or a ‘satellite’ state under foreign domination was problematic.

Yet Nasser made some counterproposals. He mentioned he ‘was not averse to some form of renunciation’, if it was in a ‘collective setting’. To avoid being singled out, he proposed that ‘all the non-nuclear powers in the UN might make the same commitment’. During the discussion, the Egyptian president made another proposal. He could issue a formal statement to the effect that he ‘had no intention whatsoever of engaging in nuclear weapons’ and that he ‘had no intention of attacking Israel’.<sup>82</sup>

The US record of the meeting shows Nasser to be suspicious of the US’s capacity as an impartial interlocutor between Israel and Egypt. During the discussions, McCloy mentioned he felt a ‘little suspicion’ from Nasser about the US being ‘too favorably disposed to Israel’. Nasser replied with a smile and clarified: the suspicion he felt was ‘little more than a little’. McCloy’s report also reflects Nasser’s concerns that McCloy’s visit was a response to Israel’s ‘propaganda campaign’ between its allies in the US about Egypt’s missile program. This point, as well as Nasser’s complaints about US impartiality, come across much stronger in excerpts of the Egyptian memo of the meeting used by Heikal. According to the Egyptian record, Nasser challenged US proposals for inspections, mentioning that Israel ‘refuse[s] [to] provide information on Dimona’ and citing Israel’s refusal to allow a delegation from the US senate to visit the nuclear site.<sup>83</sup> The report also mentions McCloy’s request for Egypt to get rid of the Nazi-era German experts it had hired for its missile program. Nasser mentioned that those German missile scientists were employed by the US (referring to Wernher von Braun), the Soviet Union, and other countries around the world.

Ultimately, Nasser rejected the idea of a secret deal, but analyses provided by US officials were sympathetic to his position and tried to make the most of his willingness to meet the US, if not halfway, then somewhere along the way. John Badeau noted that the US was ‘not resented’ for raising the question of nuclear weapons and missiles, and that Nasser had shown ‘much frankness’ in the discussion.<sup>84</sup> He recommended the continuation of these discussions, with Nasser to follow up on his offer for a written assurance committing Egypt to nuclear restraint. McCloy’s assessment was that ‘main motivation of his attitude toward our proposal was based on political sensitivities’ and that ‘sheer military considerations were not the main factors’. Badeau agreed, explaining Nasser’s rejection as based ‘almost entirely on political rather than military and financial considerations’.<sup>85</sup>

The White House reached similar conclusions. Komer wrote that ‘none of us are [*sic*] too discouraged with these initial results. There is still a chance we can get Nasser signed on to some kind of scheme.’ Significantly, the meeting showed Nasser as uninterested in a nuclear or missiles race in the Middle East. In briefing Kennedy, Komer described Nasser’s references to Egypt’s nuclear capabilities and its future intentions as a ‘refreshingly frank revelation’.<sup>86</sup> He wrote: ‘We still might be able to get some kind of unilateral renunciation, as suggested by Nasser himself.’

The talks with Nasser did little to address the nuclear challenges facing US policy in the Middle East. Gerald Steinberg links Nasser’s disinterest in arms control limitations to the American inability to ‘convince the Israeli leadership that Egypt could be restrained’.<sup>87</sup> Cohen also makes the link between Nasser’s position and how the ‘first and most serious’ US regional non-proliferation effort ‘came to naught’.<sup>88</sup> Nasser’s refusal to endorse the initiative certainly undermined its prospects. Yet as a State Department memorandum assessed, the Israelis were

likely to castigate Egypt's nuclear restraint as 'inadequate to warrant renunciation by them of nuclear weapons'.<sup>89</sup> The key pressing challenge in reversing regional proliferation was thus how to cause Israel to abandon its nuclear pursuits. On that question, many US officials were clear that, short of direct coercion, the price for an Israeli renunciation would be a politically costly security alliance or guarantee.

### **Nasser's non-nuclear pledge**

While Nasser turned down US proposals for a nuclear deal with Israel, his self-professed commitment to non-proliferation presented another opportunity for the western powers. The US decided, as a State Department memo proposed, to 'keep the dialogue going' between Nasser and the US Ambassador on nuclear issues.<sup>90</sup> That dialogue focused on two issues. The first was ensuring that Nasser remained non-nuclear. The Americans would press Nasser to make good on his offer to commit in writing not to go nuclear. The second focus of the dialogue was to 'plant in Nasser's mind' the value of Egypt's adherence to IAEA safeguards.<sup>91</sup>

In a letter to Nasser sent in September 1963, Kennedy urged the Egyptian president to confirm his commitment to nuclear restraint. Kennedy wrote:

I find in your statements assurance that the United Arab Republic regards itself as committed, in a broader sense, not to seek or acquire nuclear weapons through any means. Your confirmation that this understanding is correct would represent a further step which others might follow to insure that the threat of nuclear warfare is further constrained.<sup>92</sup>

Instructions from Washington repeatedly asked the US Ambassador to raise the issue in Cairo. In a meeting with Nasser, Badeau mentioned that such assurances would reinforce American 'continuing insistence that Israel [: does] not go nuclear'.<sup>93</sup> In response, Nasser repeated his

earlier promise and told Badeau that he would provide ‘something along these lines’ but without specifying when he would do so.<sup>94</sup>

Badeau also tried to get Nasser to warm up to the idea of foreign inspections and IAEA safeguards. Nasser frequently explained his reluctance to support international inspections, referencing the intrusion to national sovereignty that this entailed. In response, the US deployed many arguments to soften Nasser’s resistance. In one meeting, Badeau told Nasser that as Egypt ‘wishes [to] avoid [the] hazards of [a] nuclear arms race; it needs to exercise sovereignty in a way which will contribute to avoidance of hazard’.<sup>95</sup> Another argument was that Egypt’s acceptance of safeguards could help with getting Israelis to accept them, as well. Badeau told Nasser that Egypt’s endorsement of IAEA safeguards would have a ‘profound effect’ on bringing international pressure to bear on Israel to also subscribe to them. Nasser became more interested and asked whether the US could get Israel to implement safeguards on Israel’s nuclear facilities. Badeau replied that Egypt’s endorsement of safeguards would help and that this would put Israel ‘under heavy pressure’ not to develop nuclear weapons.<sup>96</sup> In his report to Washington, Badeau mentioned that Nasser was starting to show greater flexibility on the issue of inspections and safeguards after meeting with McCloy.<sup>97</sup>

Kennedy did not live long enough to see the full impact of his sustained covert diplomacy with Nasser on the nuclear issue. A few weeks after Badeau’s meeting with the Egyptian President, Kennedy was shot dead in Texas. Kennedy’s assassination brought a US president less keen on fostering a working relationship with Cairo to the White House. American-Egyptian relations started a slow path to deterioration, eventually rupturing in the immediate aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. However, it was in the early period of Johnson’s administration that we can see evidence of Kennedy’s diplomatic footwork showing some returns. On 26 July

1964, Nasser produced the written confirmation borne from Kennedy's push for a formal anti-nuclear commitment by Egypt. Addressing Kennedy's successor, Nasser wrote:

I assure you that the United Arab Republic, as she resists the possibilities of nuclear war or the impositions of peace through nuclear terror in the entire world, does not think of bringing that terrifying danger to the region she lives in... Our people and their Government have neither the effort nor the resources to devote to the weapons of total destruction.<sup>98</sup>

The confirmation was welcomed in Washington as delivering on Nasser's promise to Kennedy 'to put in writing his oral assurances that the UAR will not develop nuclear weapons or introduce them into its defense program'. In writing to Johnson, Secretary of State Rusk mentioned how earlier diplomacy had 'resulted' in Nasser's promise.<sup>99</sup> Johnson wrote back to Nasser: 'It is most gratifying to have your personal assurance that the United Arab Republic does not intend to devote its efforts or resources to acquiring weapons of total destruction.'<sup>100</sup> Egypt also started to take supportive steps towards the evolution of the safeguards regime in the IAEA, and in 1965 it voted for the first time in favor of upgrading this regime.<sup>101</sup> Egypt's explanation of the vote resonates with the arguments first put forward by Kennedy's administration. In announcing the vote, the Egyptian Ambassador to the IAEA, Hassan Tuhami, also asked that other countries 'follow the same principle' and called for controls on Israel's 'plutonium and the facilities producing them'.<sup>102</sup>

The Egyptian-US dialogue on regional nuclear proliferation with Kennedy was secret; so was Nasser's declaration on nuclear restraint. Furthermore, the episode is hardly discussed in Egyptian narratives of the period. These factors make it difficult to accurately appraise the influence this dialogue had on shaping Nasser's attitude towards nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the correlation between the dialogue and Egypt's nuclear policy suggests this is

more than just a coincidence. Testimony by Hassan Tuhami, who before working as Egypt's ambassador in the IAEA was a close aide to Nasser, is one of very few sources that refers to that link. Tuhami mentions that Nasser reached an 'agreement' with the US on non-proliferation and that Nasser was adamant about sticking to his word.<sup>103</sup> Tuhami, who was eager to push for an Egyptian nuclear program, further mentioned that he failed to convince Nasser to change course.<sup>104</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Three concluding insights emerge pertaining to Nasser, Kennedy and their relationship in light of the nuclear question in the Middle East. Firstly, a less familiar side of Nasser emerges compared to the defiant and uncompromising image that he is frequently depicted as both domestically and regionally; and which he encouraged during his lifetime. Over several rounds of talks, Nasser was open to discussing his own nuclear policy with US officials, and eventually committed to applying constraints on Egypt's nuclear options. When the US proposed an arms control deal with Israel that he was not ready to politically accept, he presented counterproposals rather than flatly rejecting nuclear restraint. Moreover, Nasser also pledged to put down in writing his commitment to nuclear abstinence – a pledge he followed through on after Kennedy's death. Throughout his interactions with US officials, Nasser did not appear interested in developing nuclear weapons and remained cautiously open to US diplomatic overtures.

Secondly, the dialogue sheds some light on aspects of Kennedy's shrewd diplomacy in the Middle East. Kennedy infused new energy in relations with Nasser and his diplomacy was proactive and personal – but on the nuclear issue his diplomacy was also two-faced. At its core, Kennedy's strategy for engagement with Cairo was built on assurances that the US would not

accept an Israeli bomb and that it was keeping a watchful eye on Dimona. In reality, Kennedy had many reasons to doubt the information that he was feeding Nasser on Israel's nuclear potential and Washington had no clear strategy for stopping Dimona. This duplicity allowed Kennedy, at the time, to shield the improving relationship between Egypt and the US from the damaging impact of Israel's nuclearization. But it also meant that Kennedy in reality opted to manage the regional consequences of a nuclear Israel while offering no answer to stop an Israeli bomb.

The previous two insights pose an interesting counterfactual. Would Kennedy have been more serious in stopping Dimona, had Nasser tried to provoke US fears of an Egyptian bomb or signal a tilt toward the Soviet Union? In reality, Nasser did not seriously embark on either. Despite being shrewd in the practice of pitting one great power against the other, Nasser refrained from playing that game when it came to the nuclear issue. If anything, Egypt's commitment to non-alignment grew in the early 1960s, and Nasser's relationship with the Soviet Union was more fragile than ever during Kennedy's presidency. Moreover, the US had a relatively easy ride in extracting a nuclear renunciation pledge from Nasser. It even appears that the Egyptian president presented his nuclear renunciation as a principled position, rather than as a bargaining chip.

Finally, in focusing on the management of the nuclear dimension, this article points to some of the structural factors that complicated American-Egyptian relations under Kennedy. While US objection to Egyptian military involvement in Yemen is frequently marshaled to reflect incompatibilities in the relationship, this study points to other additional sources of unresolved tension. Egyptian-US rapprochement under Kennedy was premised on putting their differences over Israel 'in the icebox' (as described by the Egyptian ambassador in Washington DC).

Fallout with Nasser over Israel's nuclear pursuit was contained largely through misleading US assurances on Dimona yet the Israeli program proceeded unchecked at a critical point in its history. To this day, US toleration of Israel's nuclear monopoly has undermined US non-proliferation policy in the region and repeatedly exposed the US to accusations of double standards.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), p.566.

<sup>2</sup> According to Robert Komer, Kennedy wrote up to 15 messages to Nasser and received 15 replies from the Egyptian President. Robert Komer, recorded interview by Elizabeth Farmer, 16 July 1964, p.2, JFKL Oral History Program; John S. Badeau, 'USA and UAR: A Crisis in Confidence', *Foreign Affairs* 43, no. 2 (1965), pp.281–296.

<sup>3</sup> For reviews of scholarship on Kennedy's foreign policy, Burton I. Kaufman, 'John F. Kennedy as World Leader: A Perspective on the Literature', *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 3 (1993), pp.447–470; Campbell Craig, 'Kennedy's International Legacy, Fifty Years On', *International Affairs* 89, no. 6 (2013), pp.1367–378.

<sup>4</sup> Roby Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War: US Foreign Policy under Eisenhower and Kennedy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007); Roland Popp, 'Accommodating to a Working Relationship: Arab Nationalism and US Cold War Policies in the Middle East, 1958–60', *Cold War History* 10, no. 3 (2010), pp.397–427. On the strong tensions characterising early years of Eisenhower administration and Nasser: Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab nationalism: the Eisenhower doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and Nigel Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the problem of Nasser: Anglo-American relations and Arab nationalism, 1955-59* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> D. Little, 'From Even-Handed to Empty-Handed: Seeking Order in the Middle East', in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy 1961-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) pp.156–77.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Little, 'The New Frontier on the Nile: JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism', *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 2 (1988), pp.501–27.

<sup>8</sup> Warren Bass. *Support any friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the making of the US-Israel alliance*. (Oxford University Press, 2004), p.9

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm Kerr, '"Coming to Terms with Nasser": Attempts and Failures', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 43, no. 1 (1967), p.76.

<sup>10</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, 'The Kennedy Administration and the Egyptian-Saudi Conflict in Yemen: Co-Opting Arab Nationalism', *The Middle East Journal* (1995), p.311.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp.97–130; Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, vol. 21 (London: Routledge, 2002); Ben-Zvi, 'Stumbling into an Alliance: John F. Kennedy and Israel', *Israel Affairs* 15, no. 3 (2009), pp.224–45.



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<sup>12</sup> Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press 1998); Avner Cohen, 'Israel and the Evolution of U.S. Nonproliferation Policy: The Critical Decade (1958–1968)', *The Nonproliferation Review* 5, no. 2 (1998), pp.1–19; A. Cohen, 'Stumbling into Opacity: The United States, Israel, and the Atom, 1960–63', *Security Studies* 4, no. 2 (1994), pp.195–241.

<sup>13</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*. Zakai Shalom, 'Kennedy, Ben-Gurion and the Dimona Project 1962-1963', *Israel Studies* 1, no. 1 (1996), pp.3–33.

<sup>14</sup> Little, 'The New Frontier on the Nile'; Little, 'From Even-Handed to Empty-Handed'; Gerges, 'The Kennedy Administration and the Egyptian-Saudi Conflict in Yemen'; Peter L. Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (Lincoln: Potomac Books 2005), pp.44–45; Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*; Nathan J. Citino, 'The 'Crush' of Ideologies: The United States, the Arab World, and Cold War Modernisation', *Cold War History* 12, no. 1 (2012), pp.89–110.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Little, 'Gideon's Band: America and the Middle East since 1945', *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 4 (1994), p.534.

<sup>16</sup> CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, 'Special Intelligence Estimate Number 100-8-60, Implications of acquisition by Israel of a nuclear weapons capability, 8 December 1960':

[https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0005796843.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005796843.pdf) (last accessed 10 March 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Early evidence on Dimona came through analysis of routine American aerial U2 reconnaissance flights over the Middle East. The US did not pursue further early evidence of Israel's nuclear activity. Cohen, Avner. *Israel and the Bomb*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp.81-83; M. Gerlini, 'Waiting for Dimona: The United States and Israel's Development of Nuclear Capability', *Cold War History* 10, no. 2 (2010), pp.143–61; Seymour Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1991), pp.52–58.

<sup>18</sup> Memorandum of discussion 470th meeting of the National Security Council, 8 December 1960, FRUS 1958-1960, Volume XIII, Arab-Israeli dispute, UAR, North Africa, doc. 177.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Samy Sharaf, Interview with the author, 4 June 2011, Cairo.

<sup>21</sup> Abdel Nasser, Gamal. Speech on Victory Day. Port Said, 23 December 1960 (source in Arabic).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, 24 December 1960, FRUS 1958-1960, Volume XIII, Arab-Israeli dispute, UAR, North Africa, doc. 266.

<sup>24</sup> Handwriting on the telegram, 'president has seen', indicates that Kennedy read it. Incoming Telegram from Cairo to Secretary of State No. 1292, 25 January 1961, NSF: United Arab Republic, General 1/61-6/61, Box 168, JFKL.

<sup>25</sup> Untitled, 27 January 1961, NSF: United Arab Republic, General 1/61-6/61, Box 168, JFKL.

<sup>26</sup> Memorandum from NEA Jones to Secretary of State 'President's suggestion re Israeli reactor', 2 February 1961. USNA. RG 59, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. Office of the Country Director for Israel and Arab-Israeli Affairs, Records Relating to Israel, 1964-1966, box 8, Israel Atomic Energy Program 1961

<sup>27</sup> Secretary of State Rusk to President Kennedy, 'Your Appointment with Ogden R. Reid, Recently Ambassador to Israel', 30 January 1961, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Office of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA/NEA). Records of the Director, 1960-1963, box 5, Tel Aviv – 1961, National Archives College Park, RG 59, USNA – Document 1A In Briefing Book #547, NSA

<sup>28</sup> Incoming Telegram From Cairo to Secretary of State, number 2004, 12 June 1961, NSF: United Arab Republic, General 1/61-6/61, Box 168, JFKL.

<sup>29</sup> CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, 'Special Intelligence Estimate Number 100-8-60, Implications of acquisition by Israel of a nuclear weapons capability, 8 December 1960':

[https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0005796843.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005796843.pdf) (last accessed 10 March 2018).

<sup>30</sup> CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, 'National Intelligence Estimate Number 35-61 The Outlook for Israel 5 October 1961': <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R01012A018500020001-6.pdf> (last accessed 10 March 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to President Kennedy, 'The Diffusion of Nuclear Weapons With or Without a Test Ban Agreement', n.d. [circa 26 July 1962] In Electronic Briefing Book The Test Ban Challenge: Nuclear Nonproliferation and the Quest for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, NSA.

<sup>32</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. Israeli reactor (three of three) 7 February 1961. Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. Office of Near Eastern Affairs. Records of the United Arab Republic Affairs Desk, 1956-1962, Box 3, Arabic Reaction to Israel's Atomic Reactor, RG 59, USNA.

<sup>33</sup> Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the UAR, 8 February 1961, FRUS 1961-1963, Volume XVII, Near East, 1961-1962, doc. 9.

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- <sup>34</sup> Memorandum for the President. Meeting with the Ambassador of the United Arab Republic, 5 May 1961, NSF: United Arab Republic, General 1/61-6/61, Box 168, JFKL.
- <sup>35</sup> Status of UAR nuclear development. 7 July 1961, NSF: United Arab Republic, General 7/61-10/61, Box 168, JFKL
- <sup>36</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, pp.94–95; Gerlini, 'Waiting for Dimona', 153.
- <sup>37</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, p.102.
- <sup>38</sup> Memorandum from Executive Secretary L. D. Battle to McGeorge Bundy, 'U.S. Scientists Visit to Israel's Nuclear Reactor', 26 May 1961, Records of the Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for Atomic Energy and Outer Space, Records Relating to Atomic Energy Matters, box 501, Z1.50 Country File Israel f. Reactor 1961, Part 2 of 2, RG 59, USNA, Document 8 A, Briefing Book #547, NSA.
- <sup>39</sup> Thomas Graham and Keith A. Hansen, *Preventing Catastrophe: The Use and Misuse of Intelligence in Efforts to Halt the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2009), p.49.
- <sup>40</sup> 'Interview with Myer "Mike" Feldman by Avner Cohen', 10 January 1994, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, from the personal collection of Avner Cohen:  
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116882>.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Conversation between President Kennedy and Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, 30 May 1961, FRUS 1961-1963, Volume XVII, Near East, 1961-1962, doc. 57.
- <sup>43</sup> David Ben-Gurion, recorded interview by E.A. Bayne, 16 July 1965, (p.7), JFK Oral History Program.
- <sup>44</sup> Memorandum of Conversation Discussion with Arab Ambassadors 2 June 1961, NSF: Israel, Ben-Gurion Visit 5/20/61-6/2/61, Box 119, JFKL.
- <sup>45</sup> Outgoing Telegram, Department of State, To: Amembassy Cairo, Undated NSF: United Arab Republic, General 1/61-6/61, Box 168, JFKL.
- <sup>46</sup> An interview with the Israeli scientist Yuval Ne'eman that hosted the US visitors revealed the circumstances of the visit were intentionally planned by Israelis to bring the US visitors to Dimona on Israel's terms Avner Cohen, William Burr, 'How the Israelis hoodwinked JFK on going nuclear', *Foreign Policy*, 26 Apr. 2016.
- <sup>47</sup> Rodger P. Davies to Phillips Talbot, 'Second Inspection of Israel's Dimona Reactor', 27 December 1962 Avner Cohen and William Burr, Briefing Book 547, NSA.
- <sup>48</sup> Outgoing Telegram to Amembassy Cairo, 451, 22 October 1962, NSF: UAR, General 9/62-12/62, Box 168, JFKL. A few days later, a similar message was delivered to Arab capitals: Circular Air gram from DOS to certain posts, Israel's Dimona Reactor, 31 October 1962, FRUS 1961-1963, Volume XVII, Near East, 1961-1962, doc. 87.
- <sup>49</sup> Status of UAR nuclear development, 7 July 1961. NSF: UAR, General 7/61-10/61, Box 168, JFKL.
- <sup>50</sup> Incoming Telegram from Cairo to Secretary of State, 1888, 20 May 1961, NSF: UAR, General 1/61-6/61, Box 168, JFKL. Also on lack of blowback on Ben-Gurion visit:  
Incoming Airgram, From Amembassy Cairo to Secretary of State, G-609. 2 June 1961, NSF: UAR, General 1/61-6/61, Box 168, JFKL.
- <sup>51</sup> Memorandum from the president to senator Hubert Humphrey, 23 October 1961, NSF: UAR, General 7/61-10/61, Box 168, JFKL.
- <sup>52</sup> From Cairo to Secretary of State, No.396, 28 August 1961, NSF: UAR, General 7/61-10/61, Box 168, JFKL
- <sup>53</sup> Draft paper, The Palestine Problem: the next phase, 3 December 1962, NSF, Robert W Komer Papers, Middle East (CANE) 1961-1963 [Folder 1 of 3], Box 437, JFKL.
- <sup>54</sup> Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, 9 February 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 155.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Memorandum From the Board of National Estimates, Central Intelligence Agency, to Director of Central Intelligence McCone, Consequences of Israeli Acquisition of Nuclear Capability, 6 March 1963. FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 179.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> Memorandum From Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy, 22 March 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 197.
- <sup>60</sup> National Security Action Memorandum 231, 26 March 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 199.
- <sup>61</sup> The working group compiled an impressively comprehensive list on different aspects of WMDs in the Middle East with a particular focus on Egypt and Israel. The studies included: 'Nuclear Test Detection Capability for the UAR and Israel', 'Biological Warfare', 'Chemical Warfare', 'Radiological Warfare', 'Motivation for Nuclear

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Capabilities in the Middle East', 'Control of Nuclear Weapons Materials in ME Nuclear Free Zone', 'US Nuclear Test Detection Capabilities in the Middle East', 'Israel's Attitude Toward the International Atomic Energy Agency's Safeguards', 'The United Arab Republic's Attitude Toward the International Atomic Energy Agency', 'Delivery Systems', 'Value of Indirect Controls Through Greater US Involvement in Atomic Energy Development Activities in Israel and the UAR', 'Carrots and Sticks', 'Range of Approaches [to UAR & Israel]', 'US Bilateral Relations During the Approach', 'Contingency Guidance in Case of Leaks During the Initial Approach', 'Steps to Help Nasser', Records relating to the near east arms initiative, 1963-1964, NEA, NEA/IAI, RG 59, USNA.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> The report was sent on 14 May 1963.

<sup>64</sup> Middle East Arms Limitation and Control Arrangement – Plan of Action, 14 May 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 247.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> On US and security guarantees to Israel as well as pressure on the White House from Israel lobby on the issue; See Memorandum From Robert Komer to President Kennedy 16 May 1963; FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 250.

<sup>67</sup> Memorandum for the President, 31 May 1961, NSF: Robert Komer, UAR Nuclear Program 1963, General 7/61-10/61, Box 446, JFKL.

<sup>68</sup> Memorandum From Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy, 31 May 1963; FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 260.

<sup>69</sup> Memorandum From Robert Komer to President Kennedy, 31 May 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 260.

<sup>70</sup> The letter was reproduced in Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, *Sanawat Al-Ghalayan* (Cairo: Al-Ahram 1988), pp.706–7. Original English version of the letter in: Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic Washington, 27 May 1963. FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 257.

<sup>71</sup> Nasser replied to Kennedy's letter on 7 June 1963. (Source in Arabic) reproduced in: Heikal, p.711.

<sup>72</sup> Heikal, p.711.

<sup>73</sup> Heikal, p.714. Citing verbatim extract of the memo (source in Arabic)

<sup>74</sup> Heikal, p.714.

<sup>75</sup> Memorandum of Conversation Nasser with JJM, 1 April 1957, Suez Canal Clearance, Folder 59, Box 35, John J. McCloy Papers, Amherst College. McCloy continued to keep a line of contact with Nasser and went to Cairo to attend Nasser's funeral in 1970.

<sup>76</sup> Telegram 2270 from AEC to Secretary of State, 10 June 1963, POL 7 McCloy, Box 4092, RG 59, USNA.

<sup>77</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in the UAR to the Department of State, 28 June 1963; FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 283.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Telegram 2470 from AEC to Secretary of State, 28 June 1963, POL 7 McCloy, Box 4092, RG 59, USNA.

<sup>81</sup> Telegram 2491 from AEC to Secretary of State, 30 June 1963; POL 7 McCloy, Box 4092, RG 59, USNA.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Heikal, *Sanawat Al-Ghalayan*, pp.715–16.

<sup>84</sup> Badeau particularly emphasised Nasser's frankness in addressing Egyptian military capabilities and plans particularly on rockets which he said the embassy tried to collect from intelligence sources beforehand without much success. Telegram 11 from American Embassy in Cairo to Secretary of State, 1 July 1963, POL 7 McCloy, Box 4092, RG 59, USNA.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Memorandum from Robert Komer to President Kennedy, 3 July 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 288.

<sup>87</sup> G. M. Steinberg, 'Realism, Politics and Culture in Middle East Arms Control Negotiations', *International Negotiation* 10, no. 3 (2005), p.3.

<sup>88</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, p.251.

<sup>89</sup> Memorandum From Rusk to President Kennedy, McCloy Mission on Near East Arms Limitation Washington, 23 July 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963 Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 301.

<sup>90</sup> Badeau was prompted for another meeting with Nasser to continue the dialogue with him. Telegram from DOS to AEC, 4 July 1963; RG 59, POL, Box 4092, POL 7 McCloy, NARA II. Further instructions for Badeau were sent in: Telegram from the DOS to AEC, 7 July 1963, POL 7 McCloy, Box 4092, RG 59, USNA.

<sup>91</sup> Memorandum from Rusk to President Kennedy, Near East Arms Limitation Probe—Next Steps, 10 September 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 323.

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- <sup>92</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, 12 September 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 324.
- <sup>93</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, 12 September 1963; FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 325.
- <sup>94</sup> Telegram 799 from American Embassy in Cairo to Secretary of State, 8 October 1963, POL 7 McCloy, Box 4092, RG 59, USNA.
- <sup>95</sup> Telegram from the DoS to American Embassy in Cairo, 12 September 1963, POL 7 McCloy, Box 4092, RG 59, USNA.
- <sup>96</sup> Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the United Arab Republic, 12 September 1963; FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume XVIII, Near East, 1962–1963, doc. 325 ft. 2 citing Telegram 799 from Cairo, 8 October 1963, POL 7 McCloy, Box 4092, RG 59, USNA.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>98</sup> Letter from Nasser to Johnson, 26 July 1964, Records relating to the Near East Arms Initiative, 1963-1964, DoS, NEA/IAI, Lot files entry A1-5268, USNA. US archives include two copies of the letter, an original copy in Arabic and another with an unofficial translation into English.
- <sup>99</sup> Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Johnson, 12 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XVIII Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1964-67, doc. 89.
- <sup>100</sup> Letter from President Johnson to President Nasser, 13 August 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XVIII Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1964-67, doc. 90.
- <sup>101</sup> Official Record of the Ninety-Fourth Meeting on Wednesday 22 September 1965, GC (9)/O.R 94, General Conference of IAEA, IAEA Digital Archive
- <sup>102</sup> For a detailed account on the evolution of Egypt's approach to IAEA safeguards see: Memorandum from NEA to SoS, UAR Position on IAEA safeguards – Briefing Memorandum, Mar 1, 1966, Entry 3008D, Box 5, RG 59, USNA.
- <sup>103</sup> Hasan Tuhami and Muhammad Sa'd 'Awadi, *Hasan al-Tuhami yaftahu milaffatihi min Harb Filastin ilá Kamb Difid* [Hassan Tuhami recounts from Palestine War to Camp David:] (Star Press: Cairo, 1998), pp.49–50.
- <sup>104</sup> Tuhami and 'Awadi, p.49.