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BEYOND WEAPONRY AND SOCIALIST INTERNATIONALISM:
SOVIET ENGAGEMENT WITH POSTCOLONIAL STATE-BUILDING
IN THE ARAB MIDDLE EAST, 1954-1966

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Preface: An anecdote from the field

It was July of 2016 when I visited Jordan for the first time to attend a basic-level course of Arabic. I had been studying the language for about a year, in my spare time; I could sustain a very elementary conversation to introduce myself and my family, to say where I came from and what job I did; I could comment on the weather, was it hot, cold, rainy or dry. Queuing at the passport control of Amman's international airport, I remember how eager I was to practice the little that I knew. As I passed through the airport's sliding doors into a torrid afternoon, a taxi driver approached me and showed me to his car. Taking place in the front seat, I greeted him in Arabic. Then, enthusiastically, I exercised a few sentences that I had prepared. Although I did my best, and the man did his to acknowledge my efforts, as expected, our conversation in Arabic did not last long.

"Which other languages do you speak?", he politely asked me in English.

"English and French", I replied. Moved by ingenuity – or ignorance – I thought that those could have been our only two mutual languages. He nodded. I was sure this information would have not been of any importance, still, perhaps to give justice to years of hard study, I added distractedly: "...Well, and Russian".

"*Vy seryozno govorite po-russky? Kak vas zovut?*", he cried. "Do you really speak Russian? What is your name?".

"*Da! A kak vy govorite po-russky?*", I replied, failing to hide my incredulity. "Yes! How come you speak Russian?".

He was a retired Syrian medical doctor of no less than 65 years old who had fled Syria with the start of the civil war in 2011 to reinvent himself as a taxi driver in Amman. Back in the years of his medical specialisation, he told me – supposedly the 1970s – he was admitted to the Faculty of Medicine of the Lomonosov Moscow State University. He had spent years in the Soviet Union's capital; his Russian was impeccable. He referred to his years in Moscow as a one-of-a-kind experience, a privilege that not every aspiring doctor was granted. Plenty of students of the most varied disciplines studied in the Soviet Union, he explained to me, but many experienced difficulties, whether in adapting to a very different lifestyle or bureaucratic procedures. Fortunately, his experience had always run smoothly, and he had taken the best advantage of his study abroad. His graduation from the Soviet Union was automatically recognised by the Syrian Government, so that

he could start practicing his profession as soon as he made his return to Damascus. A sense of pride shined through his words, mixed with a tip of nostalgia. It was about a one-hour drive to the flat-share in Jabal al-Weibdeh that the Arabic school had assigned me to. We spent our time chatting, in Russian, about anything in Moscow that was dear to us. I remember him describing his living experience in the later version of a “*kommunalnaya*”, the typical, old Soviet form of housing of communal apartments with private bedrooms and shared hallway, kitchen, and toilets. “*Kommunalnye*” as he knew them were no longer there for decades when I first went to Moscow in 2009, but I used to live in what remained of them: former bedrooms were turned into mini-apartments with all private facilities. We talked about Russian cuisine and culture and the harsh conditions of Russian weather: although we established that the rigid winters of a time are no longer a thing today.

He gently let me and my backpack out of the car in front of the building’s door. At a first glance it looked like a nice neighbourhood; later, I would have known it was famous for being the embassies area and the home of many internationals. I climbed the stairs of the building until the last floor. The door to the apartment had been left open for my arrival, so I went in. I remember the emotion as I dove into my first Arab house and looked around, enchanted, for every tiny detail. From the living room’s big window, the sun was setting and colouring Amman’s white roofs with shades of pink and orange; small groups of turtle doves flew above certain rooftops in a funny round way and then, curiously, made their diligent return to their cages; a mosque’s minaret’s green light began to sparkle against the dark, and the house was filled with a warm smell of coffee and cardamom. I settled into my bedroom quickly and went immediately exploring the kitchen to see what I could dispose of to arrange myself a dinner. The surprise had not vanished yet for speaking Russian with my first Arab interlocutor when I opened cupboards and drawers to an entire battery of Soviet kitchen tools. Pans, pots, teapots, dishes, cutlery: the classic, indestructible aluminium Soviet “*posudy*” which most often came in white and light green, decorated with red flowers and little berry bushes. I was so familiar with the same flatware, for having found them in many kitchens that I used in Moscow.

“Let me check, maybe these are just similar in style but...”, I thought while turning around the big white pot to check for information about its production.

“*Sdelano v CCCP*”, it was written. “Made in the USSR”.

I will not bother the reader with the list of the many Soviet items – from blankets to stuffed animals, books and cars, all quite old looking admittedly – that I enjoyed discovering during my stay in Jordan. But that hot summer, many episodes and many encounters have made me reflect: that city, so ‘Arab’ in its look, in its sounds and colours, hid signs of a past epoch, a ‘foreigner epoch’, that somehow was still living in its streets, its houses, its people. I did not know the history of Soviet-

Arab relations that well, but I knew that, after World War II and with the start of the Cold War, the Soviet Union collaborated with the Middle East countries and many other countries of the so-called “third world” that were not aligned to either of the two camps of the bipolar order. I knew about the Soviet military adventures in the region, the military base in Syria, the provision of loans to Arab governments. But I genuinely believed that these ties had not gone beyond politics. Especially, I suppose I believed that they had gone forgotten; I did not expect to find living traces of the Soviet Union in the contemporary Arab world. But how fascinating it was, and worth exploring, the encounter of two extraordinary worlds! The idea of a doctorate had been in my mind for a while, but it was not a research topic, let alone a valid research question. I went back to Amman and spent another couple of months there in the winter of 2017, where I gradually began to develop an idea for a research project. The proposal developed throughout the year, nurtured by informal chats with colleagues and friends, and then was accepted for a PhD work under the supervision of Professor Massimiliano Trentin, whom I thank. But I like to believe that those unexpected summer discoveries had been the real starting point of this research, for they made me think that there might have been something that was worth narrating. Something that spoke of how deep, wide and enduring must have been the contacts of two distant, fascinating worlds: Russia and the Arab Middle East.

Introduction

The history of the Soviet Union in Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa has been studied widely. Scholars of multiple disciplines have traced the origins and evolutions of the relations between Russia – whether in its tsarist, Soviet or post-Soviet dress – and the Arab world, investigating various dimensions and phases of their encounter. The study of relations between these two regions of the world has fed scholarly research in the field of history: history of the Russian and the Ottoman Empires, history of the 19th century, history of Orthodox Christianity, history of the Soviet Union, history of the Cold War, international history of communism, contemporary history and recent history. Historians such as Elena Astafeva¹, Alex Carmel², Paul du Quenoy³, Chantal Lemerrier Quelquejay⁴, Derek Hopwood⁵, Michael Khodarkovsky⁶, Irina Yuryeva Smirnova⁷, Hugh Ragsdale and Valery Nikolaevich Ponomarev⁸, have highlighted how tsarist Russia in the 19th century had already projected its position within the Ottoman Empire, and particularly, had strengthened it in the area of contemporary Syria and Palestine. Here, by assuming the role of guarantor and protector of the Greek Orthodox Church's interests, imperial Russia had established robust ties with local minorities. These ties endured, survived the fall of the Ottoman rule and the establishment of the Soviet Union, and continued throughout the colonial era, expanding to enclose most countries of the Middle East and North Africa. As Soviet-Arab relations have not flourished while Arab countries were under European rule, the scientific literature is quite limited, but relevant studies have been made by historians like Philip Shoukry Khoury⁹. The study of the Soviet Union's role in the Arab

¹ Elena Astafeva, *The Russian Empire in Palestine, 1947-1917, A look back at the origins of Russia's Near Eastern policy*, Tepsis Papers, February 2016.

² Alex Carmel, "Russian Activity in Palestine in the Nineteenth Century", in *Vision and Conflict in the Holy Land*, edited by Richard I. Cohen (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, Hebrew University, 1985), 46–77.

³ Paul Du Quenoy, "The Russian Empire and Egypt, 1900-1915: A Case of Public Diplomacy", *Journal of World History*, 19:2 (2008), 213–233.

⁴ Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay and Alexandre Bennigsen, "Musulmans et missions orthodoxes en Russie orientale avant 1917", *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, 13:1 (1972), 57–113.

⁵ Derek Hopwood, *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine 1843-1914: Church and Politics in the Near East*, London: Clarendon Press, 1969; Derek Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986. Politics and Society*, London: Routledge, 1988.

⁶ Michael Khodarkovsky, " 'Not by Word Alone': Missionary Policies and Religious Conversion in Early Modern Russia", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 38:2 (1996), 267–293.

⁷ Irina Y. Smirnova, *Церковно-дипломатические отношения России с иерусалимским и Антиохийским патриархатами* (вторая треть XIX в.), Moscow, 2009.

⁸ Hugh Ragsdale and Valery Nikolaevich Ponomarev (eds.), *Imperial Russian foreign policy*, Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Series, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

⁹ Philip Shoukry Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate. The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1987.

world has also fed the field of international relations, postcolonial studies, Cold War studies, area studies of both Russia and the Middle East, Slavonic studies, and Arab studies. Monumental are the studies of Evgeny Primakov¹⁰ and Alexey Vasiliev¹¹. Against the background of a wide range of possibilities in terms of scholarly research, this research is framed under the disciplinary field of the international history of the Soviet Union, Soviet-Middle East relations and the history of the Cold War¹².

During the first half of the 20th century, Soviet-Arab relations remained largely underdeveloped. The 1917 October Revolution (*Великая Октябрьская Социалистическая Революция*) marked the passage to a new socialist era, which would reform Russia politically and economically. New decision-makers engaged in consolidating their power domestically and, for some time, their Revolution at home kept them away from international adventures. Although initially, Soviet Russia had little contact with the Arab world, the Revolution's message resonated with local anti-imperialist movements. Joining the fight against European colonialism, Moscow-inspired communist parties began to emerge all over the Middle East and North Africa in the 1920s and 1930s, although they hardly reached governmental positions. Throughout the whole Stalinist period, while the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with most Arab countries, these were not followed by significant collaboration in either international affairs or trade. The reason for this lied partially in Stalin's reluctance to cooperate with countries not fully embracing the communist ideology – which he measured mainly through to the strength of local communist parties and their actual alignment with Moscow – but also in the weaknesses of the Soviet military and economy, harshly struck by the Second World War. The Soviets' interest in the Arab countries, and the Arabs' interest in the Soviet Union, only grew with the end of the conflict, the burst of the Cold War and the consolidation of the bipolar system of international relations. As two diverging models stood out, the capitalist one led by 'the West', primarily the United States, and the communist-socialist one led by the Soviet Union, all 'third countries' that did not fit into this scheme emerged as potential theatres for the ideological and commercial competition of the two leading camps¹³.

The Middle East presented the Soviet Union with promising opportunities for geographical and historical reasons. Furthermore, since the late 1940s and 1950s, many Arab countries had been

¹⁰ Evgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs Behind the Scene in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, New York: Basic Books, 2009.

¹¹ Alexey M. Vasiliev, *Россия на Ближнем и Среднем Востоке: от Мессианства к Прагматизму*, Москва: Наука, 1993; Alexey M. Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy. From Lenin to Putin*, London: Routledge, 2018.

¹² As for the latter, in terms of epistemology and methodology, see the results and insights of the Cambridge History of the Cold War.

¹³ Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; Odd Arne Westad, *La Guerra Fredda globale. Gli Stati Uniti, l'Unione Sovietica e il mondo. Le relazioni internazionali del XX secolo*, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2015.

undergoing deep political and economic transformations. The end of European colonial – or semi-colonial – rule had initiated a new era, one where nationalist movements struggled to identify the new socio-political, institutional, and economic existence of postcolonial states. Whereas early Arab nationalists in the 1920s and 1930s had encountered obstacles in rallying political support as they operated in societies fragmented by ethno-sectarian divisions, tribalism and regionalism, in the 1950s, Dawisha argues, the threat of the Jewish state and the issue of Palestine had created some form of “political unity” that allowed Arab nationalism to resurge¹⁴. The Nasserist experience in Egypt – leader of the Arab nationalism through the struggle against Western imperialism – and the Baathist ones in Iraq and Syria were among the most relevant manifestations of this new development. In this long phase of political transformations, nationalism and processes of decolonisation crossed with the Cold War rivalries. On its side, the Soviet Union did not miss the chance to grasp such an opportunity, and enhanced a sustained cooperation with postcolonial Arab countries, which would continue until the end of the Cold War. In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union would again push Russia to limit its international engagement, reorient its foreign policy on relations with the West, and focus on its domestic priorities.

In Russian, Arab and ‘Western’ literature, it is acknowledged that competition with the West led the Soviet Union to attempt to bound the Middle East Arab countries to its sphere of influence over, be it through arms sales, diplomatic engagement, or massive economic assistance. Between 1955 and 1979, Soviet financial aid, weapons, goods, and technicians, flooded the region. In the Middle East alone (not counting North Africa), the Soviets spent around \$40 billion in economic and military assistance programmes¹⁵. The provision of aid, authors have argued, was strictly linked to political considerations on how to promote the Soviet influence in recipient countries¹⁶. In perspective, the global order imagined by Moscow would include a Middle East aligned to the Soviet power, to be possibly favourable to the Soviet models of economic development and socio-political modernisation. Among others, Soviet interests and strategies in the region have been studied by authors like Robert Cassen¹⁷, Karen Dawisha¹⁸, Basil Dmitryshin and Frederick J. Cox¹⁹, Robert H.

¹⁴ Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: from Triumph to Despair*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

¹⁵ Guan-Fu Gu, “Soviet Aid to the Third World an Analysis of Its Strategy”, *Soviet Studies*, 35:1 (1983), 71–89.

¹⁶ In this context, “influence” is intended as per Efraim Karsh’s definition: “the influence of country A over the policy of country B is its ability to get country B (without the use of physical force) either to adopt, or, at least, proceed to a foreign policy course desired by A, or to refrain from taking a course of action that contradicts A’s interests and/or preferences”. Efraim Karsh, “Influence Through Arms Supplies: The Soviet Experience in the Middle East”, *Conflict Quarterly*, 6:1 (1986), 45–55.

¹⁷ Robert Cassen (ed.), *Soviet Interests in the Third World*, London and Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1985.

¹⁸ Karen Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy Towards Egypt*, London: Macmillan, 1979.

¹⁹ Basil Dmitryshin and Frederick J. Cox, *The Soviet Union and the Middle East 1917-1985: A Documentary Record of the Fertile Crescent Arabs*, Kingston Press, 1987.

Donaldson²⁰, Moshe Efrat²¹, Robert Freedman²², Fawaz Gerges²³, Galia Golan²⁴, Roger E. Kanet²⁵, Efraim Karsh²⁶, Rashid Khalidi²⁷, Walter Laqueur²⁸, Pedro Ramet²⁹, Oleg Smolansky³⁰, Odd Westad³¹, Vladislav Zubok³². However, the commonly used framework of the Cold War led most authors to read the Soviet Union's role and impact in the area within a 'triangular relation': Moscow, the West, and the Arabs. While competition with the Western rivals was undoubtedly a significant component of Soviet Middle East policy, this may not always have been the driving one. Indeed, the 'competition narrative' might have led to quite unprecise conclusions. The widespread understanding about the Soviet Union's role in the Middle East and North Africa – and more broadly the countries of the so-called "third world" – depicts the Soviets as having failed to export communism in these States (understood as the communist model of organisation of the state apparatus, primarily in the economic realm, but also in the institutional and socio-political one) and, therefore, as having failed to bring them closer to Moscow, to its sphere of influence and values. This seems to be the scientific literature's mainstream understanding, and the overall perception of Western diplomats and agents during the Cold War, as emerging starkly, for instance, from an analysis of the British national archives.

However, various Soviet archives suggest a different reality. Contacts between Soviet officials and Arab officials were not just incredibly frequent, but they went to the core of all main issues of socio-economic development in these transforming countries: party politics, institution building, agrarian reforms, industrialisation, security sector reforms, trade, cultural exchanges, etcetera. It seems difficult to assess that the Soviet penetration in such specific spheres of these countries' socio-economic development was driven by competition with the West. The depth of the Soviet-Arab dialogue, its longevity and the development projects that the Soviets conceived for the region seem

²⁰ Robert H. Donaldson (ed.), *The Soviet Union in the Third World: Successes and Failures*, London: Routledge, 1981.

²¹ Moshe Efrat, *Superpowers and Client States in the Middle East: The Imbalance of Influence*, London: Routledge, 1991.

²² Robert O. Freedman, *Soviet Policy Toward the Middle East Since 1970*, Preager Press, 1975; Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

²³ Fawaz Gerges, *The Superpowers in the Middle East. Regional and International Politics, 1955-1965*, Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1994.

²⁴ Galia Golan, *Moscow and the Middle East. New Thinking on Regional Conflict*, London: Chatham House Papers, 1992.

²⁵ Roger E. Kanet, *The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the Third World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

²⁶ Karsh, *Influence Through Arms Supplies*, 1986.

²⁷ Khalidi Rashid, Arab Views on the Soviet Role in the Middle East, *Middle East Journal*, 39:4 (1985), 716–732.

²⁸ Walter Laqueur, *The Struggle for the Middle East: The Soviet Union and the Middle East, 1958-68*, London and New York: Routledge.

²⁹ Pedro Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955: A Troubled Alliance*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1990.

³⁰ Oles Smolansky, *The Soviet Union and the Arab East Under Khrushchev*, Bucknell University Press, 1974.

³¹ Odd A. Westad, *La guerra fredda globale. Gli Stati Uniti, l'Unione Sovietica e il mondo. Le relazioni internazionali del XX secolo*, Il Saggiatore, 2015.

³² Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire. The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, Chapel Hill: The University of Chapel Hill Press, 2007.

to deviate from the ‘competition narrative’ and move the eye from a triangular relation (Moscow, the West, and the Arabs) to a binary one: Moscow and the Arabs. Whereas competition with the Western rivals over the Arab Middle East was a component of this binary relation, the Soviets’ ultimate goal appeared to be that of getting into contact with the Arab elites, of knowing them, advising them and, possibly, have a say in the Arab decision-making processes.

Moving from the discourse on Soviet influence in the Middle East³³, this research aims to make a step forward, as it seeks to unpack the main features of this influence, its materialisation, objectives and the impact it effectively exerted. While Soviet-Arab relations are the object of a relevant historiographical debate, they still leave room for scrutiny. In particular, Moscow’s intention to affect these countries’ *internal* balance of power pushing them towards socialist-Leninist models of development, that is, its role in shaping the state-building processes of postcolonial Arab countries, has not been sufficiently investigated. The study aims to investigate whether the Soviet Union had indeed conceptualised an organisational model to promote in these countries – that it would apply in different ways and through various tools – that would replicate some features of the Soviet model and be adaptable to the Arab specificities. What did the Soviet leaders demand from their Arab counterparts and what did they obtain in return? Was there a Soviet ‘hegemonic project’ for the postcolonial Arab world? And in case, what were its main goals and tools? Did the ‘special relationship’ established by Moscow with certain postcolonial Arab countries intend to impact their state-building processes and socio-economic trajectories? To what extent was it effective?

In order to address these questions, the research examines the Soviet Union’s contacts with the Arab world in a specific period, stretching from the mid-1950s to the mid-to late-1960s. The analysis of this period is significant for at least two reasons. Firstly, 1953 marks the end of Stalin’s rule, and the gradual passage to a different, new phase of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy. Nikita Khrushchev embraced a new pragmatism in international affair. He did not abandon ideology as a whole – the spread of communism remained an important background factor in the Soviet foreign policy making – but he abandoned the *ideological approach* of limiting cooperation to friendly regimes in favour of an opening to *any* country that pursued independent foreign policies, which found good allies in postcolonial Arab countries. His “reinterpretation of peaceful coexistence”³⁴ among nations made of him the initiator of the era of Soviet aid to the “Third “World”. Secondly, it is important to look deeply at these early stages of Soviet aid to the Arab world for they may reveal insights on how Soviet policy towards the area was born, developed and evolved over time. This is in fact a major objective

³³ Robert O. Freedman, “The Soviet Union and Syria: A Case Study of Soviet Policy”, in *Super Powers and Client States in the Middle East. The Imbalance of Influence*, edited by Efrat Moshe and Bercovitch Jacob, London: Routledge, 1991.

³⁴ Erik P. Hoffmann, “Soviet Foreign Policy Aims and Accomplishments from Lenin to Brezhnev”, *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, 36:4 (1987), Soviet Foreign Policy, 10–31.

of this research: investigating *the launch* of the Soviet Union's collaboration strategies with the Arab regimes, as this laid the foundation for the development of a half-century long Soviet Middle East policy.

Accordingly, the study will focus on a few significant case studies: Egypt, Iraq and Syria. For each of them, periods will be considered when the Soviet engagement started to weigh its influence in the respective countries. For Egypt, from the years preceding the Suez Canal crisis to the establishment of the United Arab Republic, UAR (1954-1958); for Iraq, from the establishment of the Iraqi Republic to the "Ramadan Revolution" (1958-1963); for Syria, from the secession from the UAR to the years following the second Baathist coup d'état (1961-1967). On one side, the analysis of specific country case studies allows to enlarge the perspective and gain insights into the broader Soviet Middle East policy. On the other, it allows one to zoom in on each country's specificity and investigate whether – and to what extent – relations with the Soviet Union mixed with internal factors in the evolution of these states. The closer the look at Soviet activities in these countries, the better understanding is possible. Indeed, the analysis emphasises the 'personal dimension' of the Soviet-Arab dialogue during the Cold War: state visits, institutional exchanges, private visits, declarations and agreements will be considered. Indeed, Moscow's influence went hand in hand with the ability of Soviet leaders to establish relations of *personal* trust with postcolonial Arab leaders and those élites elaborating new economic and institutional settings, as well as new strategies to cope with international rivalries.

To this purpose, the study considers various Soviet archives: the State Archives of Contemporary History (*Российский Государственный Архив Новейшей Истории, РГАНИ*); the Archives of the Russian Federation (*Государственный Архив Российской Федерации*); two major collections named "The Middle East Conflict" (*Ближневосточный Конфликт*), tome 1 (1947-1957) and tome 2 (1957-1967) gathering an enormous number of sources of the Foreign Ministry archive; and other online archive sources. All these sources consist mostly of either diplomatic correspondences between Soviet officials serving in the Middle East and their supervisors, referees and heads in Moscow, or records of conversations between Soviet officials and their Arab interlocutors. A deep review of the *Pravda* (*Правда*) and *Izvestia* (*Известия*) newspapers is also made. They were not only the official voice of the Party, but *the only* official voice of the Party; hence they revealed its political views. The media propaganda served as a real amplifier of the socialist values the Party aimed to transmit and, despite addressing a domestic Russian audience, it played a

role in building foreign-policy narratives³⁵. The study of Soviet sources is complemented by archive research in the Kew National Archives of London, given the United Kingdom's leading role among the Western countries with a stake in the Middle East. In particular, Fond 371 of the Foreign Office on Soviet political and economic relations with Egypt, Iraq and – to a lesser extent – Syria is analysed scrupulously. These collections contain thousands of reports drafted by British officials – often working alongside US colleagues – who monitored the Soviet activities in the region closely and diligently reported to London.

Therefore, the study develops through a chronology of the main historical and political events that have allowed the Soviet Union to get closer to these countries and is articulated in four main chapters. The first chapter offers a historical overview of the formation and evolution of the Soviet foreign policy towards the postcolonial Arab world. It is sub-articulated into three subparagraphs, corresponding to three distinct phases of the Soviet Middle East policy maturation; the 'discovery phase' through the years of the Second World War, wrapping up symbolically with the death of Stalin (1940-1953); the consolidation phase initiated by Khrushchev and carried on by Brezhnev (1953-1970); and the 'descendent phase' phase that followed the very decline of the Soviet Union (1970-1990). For each of these periods, the chapter delves into the Soviet strategies towards Arab anti-colonial, postcolonial and nationalist movements, the leading forces behind and the instruments through which these were implemented. This section's time frame of analysis is voluntarily broad. While the chapter does not claim to provide an exhaustive investigation on Russia's policy towards the region, it seeks to highlight some basic elements on which the case studies are based.

The following three chapters analyse country-specific contexts. The second chapter focuses on the relationship between Nikita Khrushchev's Soviet Union and Nasser's Egypt, a period of deep change for the Arab country, with a particular focus on the Suez canal's crisis. These were the years of the consolidation of the relationship between Cairo and Moscow, in which Egypt benefitted from Soviet economic support and aid. While the 1955 arms deal signed with Nasser offered the Soviets an entrance door into the Middle East markets, Moscow's relations with Nasser fluctuated. The third chapter delves into the Iraqi context, framing the analysis from the 1958 Revolution led by Qassim, which overthrew the existing monarchical regime and brought a coalition of nationalist and left-wing forces to power. Since then, based on their common anti-imperialist ideology, the Soviet Union and Iraq established sustained collaboration. Infrastructural projects of immense relevance, commercial

³⁵ On 1 January 1940, Yemelyan Yaroslavsky, a *Pravda* columnist, praised the newspaper as follows: "Suspended by the war, [*Pravda*] reappears amongst the revolution's fire of 1917 and leads the masses to the Great October Socialist assault. [Today] Marxism-Leninism is victorious over 1/6 of the world. A new era of humanity is now beginning – the era of socialism".

agreements, trade and military collaboration: the new-born Iraqi Republic was flooded with Soviet technicians and experts working in all possible sectors and factories. The fourth and final chapter focuses on Syria between the 1961 secession from the UAR to the second coup d'état of the Baath Party in 1966. These were troubled years for Syria domestically, due to high political instability led to continuous changes of government, and regionally, due to increased rivalries with Israel. In those years, Moscow and Damascus moved the first steps of a relationship that would have strengthened and strengthened in the years to come: Syria began to rely on Soviet support, and the Soviets gradually saw Syria as an important ally among the Arab confrontation states.

Two main results are expected to emerge from this research. First of all, the study will allow understanding whether the formation and evolution of the three analysed states were affected by the massive Soviet engagement; whether – and to what extent – the Egyptians, Iraqi and Syrians adopted some of the political, economic and institutional development models, advice and plans that the Soviets designed for them. Therefore, a re-interpretation of the Soviet Union's diplomatic, economic and military history in these postcolonial Arab countries will give new insights into the effective role and impact that the Soviets had. Furthermore, the comparative approach through analysis of country-specific case studies will shed light on the broader Soviet policy for the Middle East. Egypt, Iraq, and Syria were not isolated contexts but deeply interconnected countries: the Egyptian-Syrian union under the UAR, the political affinity of the Iraqi and Syrian Baathists, the shared anti-imperialist feelings and the common sense of kinship and belonging to the Arab cause. Very often, the Soviet Union's considerations, puzzlements, choices and actions about each of these countries had to triangulate with considerations about the others and other regional actors, not least, Israel. The 1950s and 1960s were testing years for Soviet diplomacy, when – for the first time in the Arab Middle East – Moscow found itself to balance resources and commitments with various actors, often competing with each other. Perhaps this explains the Soviet impulse to boost its presence so far in each of these countries – sometimes even beyond its actual capabilities – leaving signs of its presence that would endure along the following decades and, arguably, are still visible. Indeed, a closer study of the historical relationship between the Soviet Union and the Arab world might also shed light on the current convergence that links Moscow to the region, clarifying whether it is a relationship of strategic convenience or one that is grounded on deeper roots; roots that recall cooperation and shared projects, and, more crucially, the nexus between international relations and development.

Chapter 1

The evolution of Soviet policy towards postcolonial Arab countries: An overview

The evolution of Soviet policy towards postcolonial Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa went hand in hand with the evolution of a broader framework of Soviet foreign projection. At the beginning of the century, Lenin's theorisation for the communist state was still characterised by a poorly elaborated conceptualisation of diplomacy: relations with other powers were not as relevant as the domestic organisation of the state. The Bolshevik leaders did not go to power with construed, unified views on foreign policy and the relative importance of the interplay between internal and international goals. Between 1917 until the late 1920s, they disputed frequently over what system should govern Russia's relations with the external world; Nikolai Bukharin called for "revolutionary war", Leon Trotsky for "no war, no peace", and Lenin for "immediate peace"³⁶. The lack of clarity in the Russian international thinking was admitted by the father of socialism himself. In a speech delivered at the Moscow Gubernia Conference (20-22 November 1920), he openly claimed to the audience that "until now [the Bolsheviks had] had no basis in the international sense"³⁷. By "now", Lenin was meaning the watershed represented by the First World War, which had stirred things in Moscow leadership's eyes. In fact, in the same Conference, he declared:

If we cast a glance at the conditions in which we defeated all attempts made by the Russian counter-revolutionaries and achieved a formal peace with all the Western states, it will be apparent that we have something more than a breathing space: we have entered a new period, in which we have won the right to our entire international existence in the network of capitalist states³⁸.

However, Soviet policy activity remained primarily focused on internal matters under Joseph Stalin's rule. Relations with external powers existed, but they were functional to the domestic domain:

³⁶ Erik P. Hoffmann, "Soviet Foreign Policy Aims and Accomplishments from Lenin to Brezhnev", *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 36:4 (1987), 10–31, 13.

³⁷ Lenin, Speech at the Moscow Gubernia Conference, the 21st of November 1920.

³⁸ Lenin, speech at the Moscow Gubernia Conference, the 21st of November 1920.

dialogues with other countries was established largely in an effort to spread the revolution worldwide³⁹. Funded in 1919, the Comintern (*Коммунистический Интернационал*), also known as Third International, should have served as the brain of the communist revolution and should have dedicated to fighting the capitalist model across the world⁴⁰. When communist parties were born in foreign countries throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Comintern served as a guarantor of Moscow's relation with them: it aimed to ensure that communism developed along its own lines and to undermine Moscow's possible political rivals. With the Second World War then, the Soviet Union's 'international outlook' was boosted: relations with foreign powers became necessary for security and economic reasons to pursue mutually beneficial economic, commercial and trade partnerships⁴¹. In this framework, and also considering a remarkable local communist presence, the Middle East and North Africa region acquired increased importance for the Soviets. Furthermore, in the post-war period, many Arab countries were going through deep transformations: the rise of anti-colonial and nationalist movements was subverting the existing imperial order and challenging the Western powers' rule. Unavoidably, the formation of Soviet MENA policy was impacted by anti-colonial first and postcolonial struggles later.

This chapter offers a chronology of the evolution of Soviet policy towards the Arab world, laying the basis for grounding the analysis of the Egyptian, Iraqi and Syrian case studies (respectively Chapter 2, 3, and 4). The time-lapse for analysis is consciously broad, encompassing a period extending roughly from the 1940s to the 1980s, in order to provide a comprehensive background to contextualise and read the case-studies analysis: in the following chapters, each country case-study will take shorter periods into consideration. The chronology is organised into three main periods, corresponding to different, subsequent phases of the evolution of the Soviet Arab policy: the 1940-1953 'discovery phase'; the 1953-1960s 'consolidation phase'; and, finally, the 1970-1980s phase of a steady decline.

³⁹ Alastair Kocho-Williams, *Engaging the world: Soviet diplomacy and foreign propaganda in the 1920s*, UWE University, 2007; Sergey Blinov, *Vneshniaia politika sovetskoi Rossii: pervyi god proletarskoi diktatury* (Moscow, 1973); Leonid Nezhdinskii (ed.), *Sovetskaia vneshniaia politika, 1917-1945 gg: poiski novykh podkhodov* (Moscow, 1992).

⁴⁰ More precisely, the Comintern initially worked alongside the Peoples' Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (Народный комиссариат иностранных дел СССР), commonly known as Narkomindel, which served as the State internal dedicated organ to foreign affairs from 1923 to 1946. In 1947 (22-27 September), the Cominform replaced the Comintern.

⁴¹ Robert H. Donaldson and Vidya Nadkarni, *The foreign policy of Russia. Changing systems, enduring interests*, New York: Routledge, 2019 (Sixth edition).

1.1. From World War II to the end of Stalin: The “discovery phase”, 1940-1953

1.1.1. Global strategies for anti-colonial and nationalist movements

In 1840, a young and talented literary critic, Vissaryon Grigoryevich Belinsky, commenting on Marx's and Engels' writings in the January issue of the journal *Memories of a Nation* (*Отечественные Записки*), wrote: “We envy our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, who are destined to see Russia in 1940 – standing at the head of the educated world, instructing both sciences and arts, and receiving a reverent tribute of respect from the entire, enlightened humanity”⁴². In this fashion was Russia seen by influential Russian ideologues of the 19th century: a strong state with a promising international future. Yemelyan Mikhailovich Yaroslavsky (*Емельян Михайлович Ярославский*, 1878–1943), a Bolshevik revolutionary, ideologue and frequent *Pravda*'s contributor, in an article on 1 January 1940 referred to Belinsky's words of one century earlier as “prophetic” words: “How enormously powerful do these words sound today! How deep and truthful do they sound after one century! They were written with the blood of one's heart and the juice of one's nerves [...]”⁴³. And, going through the soiled pages of *Pravda*'s issues of the 1940s, this is how the Russian political thinkers seemed to feel, or, at least, how the organs of power propaganda aimed to depict the Soviet Union: as a nation proud of its national history and more determined than ever to count among the world powers. The successes registered by the Red Army (*Рабоче-крестьянская Красная Армия*) and the Soviet fleet during the Second War World, but also essential trade agreements to regulate markets with neighbouring countries⁴⁴, were presented as inestimable successes in public discourse. Most importantly, since the 1940s, the idea of a ‘Soviet supremacy’ appeared to be consolidating: the idea of the Soviet Union as a champion – among the concert of global powers – of certain ideological values.

The consolidation of this new identity trait took shape in two main ways. First, through the continued affirmation of socialism ‘at home’ and the implementation of socialist policies. Second, through the affirmation of this ‘Soviet identity’ by negation of – or opposition to – something else: the capitalist world led by the Western powers. Of course, the consolidation of this new ‘opposing identity’ in foreign policy reflected power dynamics unfolding in the international chessboard. In 1956, William Henry Chamberlin, an American historian of the Cold War, speaking of the Soviet Union's relations with Western powers highlighted the passage from what he defined as “Wartime Alliance with the West (1941-1946)” to “the Cold War (1946-1953)”; in other words, a passage from

⁴² В. Г. Белинский, Полное собр., ооч., Т. XII, стр. 224, ГИЗ. 1926 г.

⁴³ Yemelyan Yaroslavsky, “Столетие” (“Century”), January 1, 1940.

⁴⁴ “Like the Soviet-Japanese agreement on fishing in shared waters”, *Pravda*, January 1, 1940.

a collaborative to a non-collaborative era⁴⁵. Chamberlin highlights how, since that moment, which corresponded to end of the world war, the official Soviet attitude towards the West became extremely hostile and suspicious. In the power circles, a new school of Soviet foreign policy thinking emerged, corresponding to what Andrei P. Tsygankov has defined as the “Socialist Statist” school⁴⁶. The socialist Statists, the author argues, advocated for no accommodation with the West and they much insisted on the importance of the Communist Party’s firm control over the society for the purpose of maintaining political order and averting external capitalist threats.

The growing anti-Western discourse was well represented by the Soviet media outlet. In the Soviet press, for instance, the contradictions of the Western powers were highlighted and even ridiculed. The following vignette is take from the *Pravda* issue of 1 January 1940 titles “The capitalist world at the threshold of 1940” (“Капиталистический мир на пороге 1940 года”). A caravan of Western-like-dressed personalities enters the door of the new decade, guided by a lion and a rooster, symbols of pride. The lion carries a torch, symbol of peace: but around its waste is tied a cord with which it pulls a tank. The League of Nations sits on the tank, and it is being pushed by men carrying ammunitions and bags of money, symbolising the material interests that guide international affairs. Two figures carry three tombs, where “trade unions” (*профсоюзы*), “freedom of press” (*свобода печати*), and “freedom of speech” (*свобода слова*) lie dead. The entire caravan is pushed by a man driving a big pot of “anti-Soviet kasha” (*антисоветская каша*), the typical Russian cereal dish. Shaking at the stroll of wheels that carry it, the pot pours out part of its content, which effectively seems to be oil.

⁴⁵ The author identifies 7 phases of Soviet foreign policy: 1) All-out revolutionary offensive against the "bourgeois" world (1917-1921); 2) Defensive Isolationism (since 1921 to WWI), a period of “uneasy and distrustful co-existence” with foreign powers (especially European powers as US-Soviet relations were limited: by 1921, as the flame of revolution had failed to spread from Russia to other lands, the ambitions of Russian revolutionaries and of allied interventionists had winded down; 3) Popular Front (1934-1938), when the rise of Nazi Germany and of militarist Japan moved the Soviet government ostensible orientation from Germany to the Western powers; Moscow conducted alliances with France and with Czechoslovakia, and it entered the League of Nations; 4) Aggressive Isolationism (1939-1941), when the Soviet Union started to depart from its ostensible Western orientation; 5) Wartime Alliance with the West (1941-1946); 6) The Cold War (1946-1953), again putting an end to alliances with the West; 7) and finally the “Smiling Non-Cooperation (1953-)”, when “Stalin's death marked the beginning of a transition to a policy of outward amiability, accompanied by inflexibility as regards the main objectives of Soviet foreign policy. Some of the more extreme restrictions on foreigners in the Soviet Union were dropped or relaxed. More visas were granted to foreign visitors”. William Henry Chamberlin, “Seven phases of Soviet foreign policy”, *The Russian Review*, 15:2 (1956), 77-84.

⁴⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's foreign policy: Change and continuity in national identity*, Fifth edition, San Francisco: San Francisco State University.



The imperialists' policies, according to *Pravda*, put pressure on smaller states of Europe and elsewhere, to join their forces: "one by one", writes *Pravda*, "small states are drawn into the war by external forces"⁴⁷. On the contrary, the Soviet Union and the Soviet peoples were described as a peace-loving, non-belligerent nation: they had been pulled into a war, the Second World War, that they had not started⁴⁸. They were now ready to stand at the lead of the world and guide a revolutionary, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist global movement.

Beyond propaganda, however, in the 1940s, the reality of the Soviet Union's relations with the outside world offered a different perspective⁴⁹. The Second World War was an economic and humanitarian catastrophe of gigantic proportions for the Soviets; they suffered the largest absolute number of casualties, with estimates fluctuating between 20 and 25 million losses that caused a demographic crisis with long-term consequences⁵⁰. While the war (and even more the end of the war) presented Moscow with new political and military avenues to achieve security of the socialist system, such avenues were arduous. The greatest concern and most complicated issue for the Soviet Union was Eastern Europe. During the war, the relevance that Moscow attached to securing Eastern Europe was evident in a series of accords: the agreement with Nazi Germany to limit its expansion to the East (1939–1940); the Soviet security bloc in the Balkans to counter Germany activities in Europe (1940–1941); and then the "Grand Alliance" with the UK and US, projecting the Soviet sphere of

⁴⁷ Dimitrov, Georgy, "Первое Мая и Борьба Против Империалистической Войны" ("The First of May and the fight against imperialist forces"), May 1, 1940.

⁴⁸ Dimitrov, Georgy, "Первое Мая и Борьба Против Империалистической Войны" ("The First of May and the fight against imperialist forces"), May 1, 1940.

⁴⁹ Mark Kramer, *The Soviet role in World War II: realities and myths*, Analysis, May 18, 2020, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University. Retrieved from: <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/soviet-role-world-war-ii-realities-and-myths>

⁵⁰ Warren W. Eason, "The Soviet population today: An Analysis of the First Results of the 1959 Census", *Foreign Affairs*, 37:4 (1959), 508–606.

influence in Eastern European countries (1943–1944) and its realisation after the War⁵¹. After the war, the region acquired vital geostrategic importance in Moscow’s defence policy⁵². The chosen means to safeguard the Soviet interests in this area was what Geoffrey Roberts defined as the “sphere of influence policy”: the creation of spheres of regional complexes where Soviet strategic and political predominance could remain unchallenged. The “Iron Curtain”, as it became famous after Winston Churchill’s speech of March 1946, projected the Communist power from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic Sea, establishing an area of uncontested Soviet supremacy⁵³. Throughout this elaborated phase for Moscow’s foreign policy, the Middle East and North Africa region did not rank at the top of the Soviet Union’s security priorities.

At the same time, neither the Soviets were disinterested about the region’s developments; on the contrary, the Soviet diplomacy was already active in building bridges with these countries, whose potential as recipient of the Soviet revolutionary ideology was increasingly clear. A new development was indeed taking root in the region, that of nationalist movements and anti-colonial movements. To be precise, the “early years of Arab nationalism”, as Rashid Khalidi defined them, dated back to the period before the British and French mandates and originated in the Arab Levant region, the *mashriq*, and encompassed various phases. These include the earliest roots of the modern ideology of Arabism in the late 19th century, which was directed towards autonomy and independence that developed among Arabs of Western Asia under the Ottoman rule; the crucial second Ottoman constitutional period from 1908-1914; the events of World War I; and the brief interlude of King Faysal’s Arab government in Damascus from 1918 until 1920⁵⁴. In the 1920s and 1930s, Ernest Dawn argues, the prevailing ideology of Arab nationalists was formed, and this drew both on ideas of Islamic and Western modernism; indeed, according to Dawn, it was thanks to increased contacts with Western societies that the idea of “Arab nationality”, long-latent and obscured by Islam and the Ottoman

⁵¹ Indeed, Roberts specifies that Moscow’s “sphere of influence policy” was fully compatible with collaboration with Western countries, and even with constructing a co-operative and peaceful international order for the after-war: it did not aim to provoke the counter-construction of an anti-Soviet Western bloc. It is indeed what the author describes as “the great paradox of the Cold War”: that it came about not because of a communist threat to the West or the inevitability of inter-systemic conflict between the American and Soviet superpowers but because Moscow assumed that it would be possible to establish a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and have good relations with Britain and the United States. If determining whether Moscow’s calculations were animated by deep antagonism or the eventual research for peace and coexistence would be a difficult task, what is sure – and more relevant to this analysis – is that the Second World War marked a watershed in the conceptualisation of Soviet foreign policy. Events unfolding in Europe, Asia, and beyond somehow allowed the USSR to “discover itself” as a foreign policy actor and define its geopolitical interests and areas of influence. See Geoffrey Roberts, *The Soviet Union in World Politics Coexistence, Revolution and Cold War, 1045-1991*. London: Routledge, 1999.

⁵² Roger Kanet E., *The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the Third World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

⁵³ For in-depth studies of the Soviet Union’s projection in Eastern Europe: Odd Arne Westad, *The Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, Palgrave Mcmillan, 1994.

⁵⁴ Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Anderson, Muhammad Muslih, and Reeva S. Simon, *The origins of Arab nationalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. (introduction)

domination, had revived⁵⁵. A later phase of Arab nationalism came later, the author argues, in the 1940s and 1950s, and it presented many differences compared to the earlier phase. First of all, Arab nationalist movements began to have a strong anti-colonial attitude. The foremost theoretician of this phase of Arab nationalism, Abu Khaldun Sati al-Husri, believed that the Arab states were artificially created by the Western imperialist powers: they had carved out cultural and national identities and built sovereign political identities that were alienated to the Arab local societal realities⁵⁶. Second, new the attention was placed on the idea of Arab unity: for the Arabs to be strong, politically and militarily, political and national identities had to be condensed into one single body. In fact, while Arab anti-colonial and nationalist movements had been present already in the 1920s and 1930s, since the second-half of the 1940s and the 1950s these movements began to organise into structured political forms. In this context, the birth and raise of the Arab Socialist Ba‘ath Party, or Arab Socialist Renaissance Party, a transnational political movement that advocated for values of socialism and anti-imperialism, was one of the most significant events. For obvious reasons, the regional developments met the interests of the Soviet leadership.

While it is hard to speak of well-developed Soviet strategies for these anti-colonial and nationalist movements, it is still possible to deduce insights on Soviet attitude towards them from narratives appeared in the public discourse. Georgy Michailovich Dimitrov (*Георгий Михайлович Димитров*, 1882-1949), a legendary communist fighter and an outstanding leader of the Comintern and then leader of Bulgaria since 1946 until he died in 1949, gave crucial intellectual contribution to the Soviet conceptualisation of the Second World War. A Bulgarian of humble, Ottoman origins, Dimitrov initiated his political career when he was about twenty years old and joined the Social Democratic Labour Party of Bulgaria in 1903, which became the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1919. In his view, the Second World War was a war of “international classes”: the bourgeoisie was oppressing the working class, and the only way to subvert the system was to engage the working class in an anti-imperialist fight⁵⁷. The working classes were deemed “the only international class”, brought together by all its individual national detachments’ common interests⁵⁸. Working classes had to free themselves from the yoke of capitalism, which is the root cause of wars. Capitalist countries aimed to enrich themselves to the detriment of the working classes of Arab countries, making huge

⁵⁵ Ernest Dawn, “The origins of Arab nationalism”, in Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Anderson, Muhammad Muslih, and Reeva S. Simon, *The origins of Arab nationalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

⁵⁶ Adeed Dawisha, “Arab nationalism in the twentieth century: from triumph to despair”, Princeton University Press, 2016.

⁵⁷ Georgy Dimitrov, “Первое Мая И Борьба Против Империалистической Войны” (The First of May and the fight against imperialist forces), *Правда*, May 1, 1940, 3.

⁵⁸ Vladimir Viktorovich Zagladin, *Международное коммунистическое движение: Очерк стратегии и тактики* (“The International Communist Movement: Sketch of Strategy and Tactics”), Том 2, Moscow: USSR Joint Publication Research Service (p. 332).

deductions from the people's earnings for their military needs, cutting back on the peoples' already meagre profits. This was leading, according to Dimitrov, to inequalities of scandalous proportions that the war had made evident. As he wrote in a *Pravda*'s article in May 1940:

Lenin, amid the first plague imperialist war in 1915, wrote: "Is war a terrible thing? Yes. But it is a terrible, lucrative thing (Vol. XXX, p. 226)". [...] So, for instance, according to official data, England's Cammell Laird shipyard profit in 1939 was four times that of 1936 – from £150,000 up to £610,000. The British Aluminium company earned £773.432 in 1937 and £1.075.796 in 1939. In France, the Nickel joint-stock company's profit tripled – from 53.6 million francs in 1937-1938 to 153.9 in 1938-1939. Shares of Schneider Creusot are quoted four times above their nominal value. The shares of the Suez Canal Company, one of the bigwigs of which is General Weygand, who combines a post on the administrative council of this company with the command of the army in Syria, is quoted at 18,420 francs at a nominal value of 250 Fr. The 'neutral' bourgeoisie of the United States rakes in no less huge profits in the war. According to the largest American bank report, the National City Bank, 900 large enterprises earned in 1938 a net profit of \$647 million, and in 1939 - \$1.281 million; that is, its profits doubled over one year. The Lockheed Aircraft Company earned only \$100.000 in profit in 1936, and in 1939 it raked \$3.1 million. Concerns of other capitalist states are not lagging behind their fellows in predatory money-grubbing. Here is who needs war and who warms their hands on it⁵⁹!

Dimitrov's thinking indeed reflected the classic points of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine for the colonial world. Faced with such inequalities, the masses in oppressed colonial countries had a specific responsibility, which they could not ignore: to rally in a common front against the imperialist war and the imperialist West, both in their countries and in the international arena. The fulfilment by the international proletariat of such mission, according to Dimitrov, required the following steps:

- a) First, the unification of the fighting forces of the working class in each country;
- b) Second, the creation of a genuine working people's front under the leadership of the working class;
- c) Third, the establishment of the proletariat's unity of action on an international scale, the pursuit of a single international policy for the struggle against the imperialist war;

⁵⁹ Dimitrov, *Первое Мая*, 3.

- d) Fourth, combining the struggle of the working people of the capitalist countries with the anti-imperialist movement in the colonial and dependent countries;
- e) Fifth, rallying the working people around the great country of socialism [the Soviet Union], the only state that upholds the cause of peace among peoples, defending the fundamental interests of the working people of the whole world⁶⁰.

While the message was quite clear, however, how the masses should have implemented this strategy, that is, how they should have organised their struggle against the imperialist war, was not specified. Moreover, there was no instruction on which socio-economic strata of the colonial or semi-colonial countries were to take power, as the proletariat was not equipped to do so. The most honest answer to this enigma was the national liberation movements, but also in this case it was not clarified what political strategy, or alignment, should each movement pursue nationally, regionally or internationally⁶¹. Should the movements remain spontaneous, should they elect a leader, should they bet on nationalist forces? Most importantly, neither was clear how the Soviet Union could assist these countries' revolutionary pushes. For how charming and rousing those words sounded, it is hard to assess that they were inscribed into a well-developed, constructed strategy for anti-colonial movements. Provided that some sort of 'strategy' towards anti-colonial movements had been conceptualised and developed by the Soviet leadership during the years of Stalin's rule, it was quite a rudimentary one, and it was simply about presenting the Soviet Union as the ally of the oppressed peoples and an enthusiastic supporter of any national liberation forces.

In such an effort, the Soviets hoped to find support from communist parties with significant activities in colonial and semi-colonial countries of the region. Indeed, across the 1930s and 1940s, on the wave of Lenin's concept of revolutionary party, communist parties had started to raise all over the Arab world, and the Soviet Union provided both an ideological framework and an organisational model for their development⁶². The Comintern supervised the very creation of all parties in the Arab world (except the Sudanese Communist Party), which looked at the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as the main – and a sufficient – provider of ideological values, political leadership and material support. The relationship that the Soviet Union established with local communist parties was therefore one of mutual support. On one side, smaller, communist forces in colonial or semi-colonial countries will find support in the Soviet Union in their legitimate struggle for independence and anti-

⁶⁰ Dimitrov, *Первое Мая*, 3.

⁶¹ Hashim Behbehani, *The Soviet Union and Arab nationalism, 1917-1966* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 6.

⁶² For instance, as reported by Tareq Y. Ismael remembers, the Secretary General of the Palestine Communist Party, Bashir Barghouti, admitted, "The organisational forms that we had were taken from the Soviets. However, not all Marxists accepted the Bolsheviks' type of organization".

colonialism. On the other, the Soviet Union, leader of the international proletariat and ally of colonies, will find support in local communist movements, whose peoples do not want to be dragged into the war and lose their independence to the imperialists⁶³. As it was declared during the Seventh Congress of the Comintern:

In colonial and semi-colonial countries, the most important task of the communists consists of working to create a popular anti-imperialist front. To this end, they must engage the broad masses in a national-liberation movement against growing imperialist exploitation and cruel slavery and for the expulsion of the imperialists and national independence, actively participate in mass anti-imperialist movements led by national reformists, and arrange joint action with national revolutionary and national reformist organisations based on a concrete anti-imperialist platform⁶⁴.

Gradually, the communists became more and more influential in several Arab countries. As Tarek Y. Ismael argued in his book “The communist movement in the Arab world”, one of these parties’ main features was their superior organisation compared to other indigenous Arab political parties. In that period, the author argues, the communists had “better contacts than other parties in the nascent labour movement (especially in Egypt)” but also among civil servants and military circles, which granted them a considerable long-term political advantage⁶⁵.

However, the relationship between the Soviet communism – better, the leadership of the Soviet Union – and Arab communists was all but simple. To some extent, the Middle East and North Africa depicted a paradox: while communist parties arose everywhere in the Arab world, the honest confidence that the Soviets place in them seemed to decrease. In many of these countries, communism had developed as a response to Western imperialism, thus as a different approach to postcolonial struggle rather than a genuine desire to embark on a real communist or socialist revolution. Most importantly, Ismael argues, Arab communist parties that had developed in the colonial era were ideologically and politically immature; they tended to follow the Soviet model in a slavishly “anachronistic” way, without really applying it to their respective specific contexts. Local issues seemed therefore to merely, or passively, *interact with* the Soviet theoretical framework in an attempt to explain their own economic and political realities, not to *use it* to drive their communist

⁶³ Dimitrov, *Первое Мая*, 1940.

⁶⁴ Rezolyutsii VII Vsemirnogo Kongressa Kommunisticheskogo internatsionala, Moscow, 1935, pp. 27-28, in: Bulletin, p. 31.

⁶⁵ Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World*, New York: Routledge, 2005.

revolutions⁶⁶. According to Ismael, these parties tended to uncritically accept the principles of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine sponsored by the Soviets and failed “to formulate independent social analyses of the specific conditions within the Arab world”⁶⁷.

To some extent, the ‘Arab variant’ of communism could even prove dangerous for the Soviet Union. If communism had to expand in the Arab world without really integrating to it, this could not lead to any useful result. On the contrary, it could even have the counterproductive effect to prove the failure of the communist system, and turn around as a boomerang against the Moscow’s leadership’s determination to expand its global reach. At the same time, ‘educating’ the Arab people to the true communist doctrine would have been an enormously demanding task, which did not worth the game. At least not in the period between the two World Wars, when the Soviet foreign policy priorities did not stem from the Middle East and North Africa. Moreover, even in the event that the Soviets wanted to engage more with the region, opportunities for them were quite limited. As the British and French colonial powers were still very influential and determinant in countries such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria, the Soviets could simply not aspire to exert much influence in the area⁶⁸. Not only, Moscow’s desire to establish a friendship with anti-colonial movements was confronted with the need not to compromise relations with the colonial powers. As a matter of fact, while in some country decolonisation processes characterised as smooth, non-violent ones (Morocco, Tunisia), in other countries the clashes between revolutionary movements and the foreign political establishments were significant, and it was difficult for Moscow to support national liberation forces while keeping good relations with especially France and the United Kingdom without losing face. In the Arab Maghreb, for instance, and in Algeria particularly, Yahya Zoubir argues that the Soviet Union’s contradictions were all apparent in its attempt to reach the double objective of pleasing France and comforting the nationalist movement that was seeking to overthrow it⁶⁹. Overall, during the World War and the first phase of the Cold War’s bipolar setting, it seems that the radical, revolutionary ideas sponsored by the Soviets were not followed by practical policies aimed to accelerate the independence of the Arab countries. On the contrary, the Soviet moves were extremely cautious, and, in most cases,

⁶⁶ Ismael, *The Communist Movement*, 2005.

⁶⁷ Ismael, *The Communist Movement*, 2005.

⁶⁸ More precisely, literature highlights a distinction between the Soviet consideration of the Middle East area and the North Africa area. Referring to Arab countries in North Africa, and to Algeria specifically, Yahya Zoubir (1995) argues that Stalin was “little impressed” with the raise of Maghrebi nationalisms in the 1940s: despite the turmoil unfolding in the region, Stalin perceived the region as to be distant from Soviet Russia’s geopolitical sphere of interest, failing to see it as an extension of the Middle East and the Muslim world (p. 59). Moreover, Maghrebi nationalists were generally anti-communist and had close ties with the United States and European powers, making Stalin suspicious of their genuine political inclinations. As Zoubir put it, the Soviets primarily saw them as “puppets or lackeys of imperialism” (p. 59). From: Yahya Zoubir, “The United States, the Soviet Union and Decolonization of the Maghreb, 1945-62”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 31:1 (1995), 58–84.

⁶⁹ Zoubir, *The United States*, 1995.

between 1940 and 1953, no significant actions followed the anti-colonial discourse. While observing events quite closely and providing their nominal support to these movements⁷⁰, the moment for the Soviets to develop proper strategies and engage with the region will have to wait for the end of Stalin's rule.

1.1.2. The Leninist ideological legacy

The Soviet attitude towards anti-colonial movements and postcolonial Arab countries during the Second World War and the early Cold War phase had a strong ideological character. Such an ideological posture was largely inspired by Lenin's vision of the world and the very concept of revolution. The theorisation of the concept of "revolution" and its applicability to all nations alike is indeed attributable to Lenin himself. Lenin had led the movement that culminated in the 1917 Great October Socialist Revolution (*Великая Октябрьская Социалистическая Революция*) that would change the face of Russia forever. The Bolshevik revolution's main target was the Tsarist autocracy, its privileges and tyranny on the working class. The Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia (2 November 1917) proclaimed equality and sovereignty of the people of Russia, their right to self-determination, the abolition of all national and religious privileges, the free development of minorities and ethnic groups inhabiting the Russian territory⁷¹. At the same time, that movement advocated for values of change that had no boundaries: Lenin denounced *any* form of imperial domination and even the imperial system of international relations. The Bolshevik slogan "doloy...!" (*долой...!*), "down with...!", in its many declinations ("down with the Zar", "down with the oppression", "down with capitalism and the capitalist leader") was not shouted for the Russian people uniquely. According to Alexey Mikhailovich Vasiliev, who collected his seminal field research in his latest book "Russia's Middle East policy: From Lenin to Putin", despite the writings of Marx and Engels on the revolution contained very little that pertained to foreign policy, and despite Lenin, himself focused on the domestic front, the Revolution enclosed an extraordinary potential: the universality of its message⁷². What was born as an essentially domestic movement, actually addressed any people of any nation who felt oppressed by autocratic governments and humiliated by imperialism's unfairness and could

⁷⁰ The most relevant case of Stalin's support for national liberation movements is perhaps that of Palestine. Stalin was anti-Zionist, as he saw in Zionism a reactionary force upheld by the Jewish bourgeoisie to distract the Jewish proletariat from the proletariat's general struggle, but he was neither pro-Jewish nor pro-Arab. He was pro-Jewish and pro-Arab masses alike and pro-liberation of Palestine by the British mandate. The Soviet leader took decisive steps in 1947 to bring the Palestinian liberation issue to the United Nations attention, believing that peaceful coexistence between Jewish and Arabs in a newly independent state was possible. When the Jewish state was born in 1948, the Soviet leadership had to recognise its evaluation mistake and had to accept the United Nations' partition plan.

⁷¹ Alexey Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy. From Lenin to Putin* (London: Routledge, 2018), 11.

⁷² Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy*, 11.

therefore look at Russia as a source of inspiration or a model to follow. The Revolution's potential was too significant to remain constraint into geographical or ethnical boundaries, and the Muslim Arab world, at the borders of the Empire, was one of the regions where to try to export it. In fact, attempts to transmit the revolutionary message to the Arab population of the Middle East and North Africa can be identified in the aftermath of the October Revolution and even before the establishment of the USSR. Two major events are worth mentioning, which testify this dynamic.

One was the holding of the Baku Congress of the People of the East in September 1920. Born for the initiative of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, the Baku Congress had the double goal to attract Muslim populations to communism and incite them against imperialism⁷³. Another one, which preceded the Baku Congress, was a decree that Stalin and Lenin had signed on 20 November 1917 and that was addressed to the Muslim of Russia and the East, claiming that the Arabs – among others – had the right to be the masters of their countries and to decide their destiny as they wished. An extract of the decree reads as follows:

Muslims of the East, Persians, Turks, Arabs, and Hindus, all those for whose lives and property, liberty and land, the greedy robbers of Europe have bartered for centuries-all those whose countries the plunderers who started the war wish to divide!

We declare that the treaty regarding the partition of Persia is null and void. As soon as military operations are ended, the troops will be withdrawn from Persia, and Persians will be guaranteed the right to choose their destiny freely.

We declare that the treaty regarding Turkey's partition and wresting from her of Armenia is null and void. As soon as military operations are ended, the Armenians will be guaranteed the right to decide their political destiny freely.

Not at the hands of Russia and its revolutionary government does slavery await you, but at the hands of the marauders of European imperialism, of those who converted our fatherland into their ravished and plundered "colony."

Throw off these ravishers and enslavers of your country. Now that war and desolation are tearing down the structure of the old world, when all the world is aflame with wrathful indignation against the imperialist plunderers, when every spark of revolt kindles into a mighty flame of revolution, when even the Indian Moslems, worn out and suffering under the foreign yoke, are starting a rebellion against their oppressors—now it is impossible to

⁷³ Mohammed Nuri El-Amin, "The Role of International Communism in the Muslim World and in Egypt and the Sudan", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. 23:1 (1996), 29–53.

be silent. Do not waste any time in throwing from your shoulders the age-long enslavers of our land. Do not permit them longer to rob you of your native homes. You yourselves must be the masters of your country. You yourselves must build your life in your own way and according to your own desires. You have this right, for your fate is in your own hands...

Comrades! Brothers!

Firmly and decisively, let us strive for an honourable, democratic peace.

On our banners, we proclaim the liberation of oppressed peoples of the world.

Muslims of Russia!

Muslims of the East!

We await your sympathy and support in this cause of building a new world⁷⁴.

Although the Soviet attitude towards the Muslims – especially Soviet ‘domestic’ Muslims – will be nothing but peaceful⁷⁵, the decree revealed the Bolsheviks’ desire not to constraint the revolution's message within geographical, ethnographical or religious limits. Instead, they aimed to present it as a global force and exploit its powerful message as a foreign policy tool, one could say in a modern fashion. Indeed, there is little doubt about the attractiveness of the document in the Arab world. As Vasiliev argues: “the Bolshevik brought [to the Arabs] a messianic concept of salvation, of God’s kingdom on earth, with a new, previously unknown and mysterious name – “socialism” or “communism”⁷⁶. In colonial Arab countries, Lenin’s anti-imperialistic message represented an appeal to the Arab population to their right – and even their duty – to self-determination, to initiate their struggle towards national independence⁷⁷. Communist ideology and propaganda offered new ideals

⁷⁴ “Обращение к трудящимся Мусульманам России и Востока”.

⁷⁵ Russia’s relationship with the Muslim world has been troubled ever since. Under the Russian Empire’s expansion, the Muslim land’s conquests began with Kazan’s conquest in 1552. Russian Muslims under the Empire were not treated as equals to the Russians but as second-rate subjects to whom the Christians’ rights were denied. Then, in the Soviet Union, the term “Muslim” came to describe someone who, before the 1917 Revolution, belonged to the Muslim culture and religion. The integration of those populations into the Soviet system only partially improved their rights: they have equated to the Russians administratively, but not politically. Neither their millennial cultural, “national” identity was preserved: the Soviet Union asked them to become “sovietised”, like any other Russian. The anti-Islam campaign followed the anti-Christianity campaign in the 1920s: communist ideology had to prevail over Islam, the “Soviet man” (*советский человек*) had to prevail over the Muslim. Extensive anti-Muslim propaganda sided persecutions of Muslims of Russia, Tartars of the Volga and the Crimea, Kirghiz, Sarts of Siberia and Turkestan, Turks and Tartars of Transcaucasia, Chechens and Mountaineers of the Caucasus. For more on this subject, see: Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Muslim threat to the Soviet state*. New York: Routledge, 1983.

⁷⁶ Vasiliev, *Russia’s Middle East Policy*, 11.

⁷⁷ In countries like Egypt, for instance, this would have meant to get rid of the British colonial power; similarly, in Syria or Iraq, the struggle for independence would have meant to get rid of, respectively, the institutions of the French and British Mandates, which intended to “lead” these countries to independence.

to both élites in 'the East' who fought for national liberation and people in these countries who felt oppressed by foreign dominance. As an Egyptian historian wrote:

The manifestos of the newly-born State were quite new for humanity. Peace among nations! Workers of all lands, unite! Colonial peoples, free yourselves! We render moral and material support to all who wish to be free...". For the first time in history, a great power appeared which did not wish to colonise, occupy or exploit anyone but which sided with the forces of liberation around the world⁷⁸.

In fact, the Bolshevik leader was genuinely persuaded that class struggle would burst not only in Russia and in capitalist countries but also in the colonies. For this to liberation happen, he believed, societies had to bet on the working classes. Peasants and workers would have had to take the lead and drive national liberation agrarian revolutions. At the Second Congress of the Comintern, held between July and August 1920, Lenin paid particular attention to this potential of a revolutionary process in colonial countries, to the national liberation movements and their aspirations. As Hashim Behbehani argues, "this nationalist aspect of the colonial countries was the hope on which Lenin put so much emphasis in analysing the revolutionary process in them"⁷⁹. The working class had to rely on the peasants as the vector of the revolution: by seizing lands and taking possession of their countries, the peasants will bring about the colonial powers' demise. In this effort to liberation, workers and peasants could rely on the Soviet Union's friendship. Trotsky also gave a significant theoretical contribution to this reflection. His point of view was that once achieved the revolution, the proletariat would have had to implement socialist policies, transforming the democratic revolution into a proper socialist one. In peasant Russia and other agrarian societies, this would have entailed eliminating the capitalist stage of development⁸⁰. Socialism was indeed the most prominent decisive force, the most powerful bulwark of the international proletariat's struggle for the cause of liberation. By definition, the socialist state was not interested in colonies, conquests or imperialist wars; it was devoted to strengthening its borders, ensuring its peoples' wellbeing, and pursuing an independent foreign policy⁸¹. Furthermore, the success of the Soviet Union's international future was tangled with the success of socialism in other countries, especially colonial countries: socialism was the glue that

⁷⁸ Quoted in Vasiliev (p. 12): Al-Shafi'i, A. S. 1961. *Развитие национально-освободительного движения в Египте, 1882-1956* (The development of a national liberation movement in Egypt). Москва: Наука. (p. 56.)

⁷⁹ Behbehani, *The Soviet Union*, 11.

⁸⁰ John Joseph Dziak, *The Soviet Union and national liberation movements: An examination of the development of a revolutionary strategy*, Thesis, Georgetown University, 1971, 39.

⁸¹ Dimitrov, *Первое Мая*, 1940.

would unite people of different races and proveniences. Effecting socialism in Arab countries was a responsibility of the communist parties. Formally, the programme of the Comintern regarding the struggle against imperialism in colonial countries and the role of local communist parties was as follows:

To fight against feudalism and the pro-capitalist forms of exploitation and to develop the peasant agrarian revolution [...] to fight against foreign imperialism and for national independence [...] the Comintern supports every movement against imperialist violence in the colonies, semi-colonies and dependencies themselves [...] the communist parties in the imperialist countries must render systematic aid to the colonial, revolutionary liberation movement and the movement of oppressed nationalities generally [...] the communist parties in the colonial and semi-colonial countries must carry on a bold and consistent struggle against foreign imperialism and unfailingly conduct propaganda in favour of friendship and unity with the proletariat in the imperialist countries⁸².

In Soviet ideology, the strength of the communists lied in the fact that they were and will remain the only party that consistently and selflessly defended the struggle and ultimate goals of the working class. They could do so, Dimitrov argued, because their “great teachers” Lenin and Stalin brilliantly foresaw where the bourgeoisie was leading: not towards democracy, but towards tyranny; not towards raising the welfare of the masses, but towards a spectacular increase of capitalist exploitation; not towards peace among peoples, but to the imperialist world wars⁸³. History, he believed, had proved these foresights right with the Second World War. Having warned the masses, the communist fathers had prepared them to fight. The war had created incomparably tricky conditions for the communist parties’ struggle, yet the communist parties passed the test: they had reached positive results in several countries and became more united globally. “Difficulties,” he wrote, “harden the Communists”⁸⁴.

Despite Lenin attempted to give some embryonal practical guidance on how to assist other populations in achieving the revolution, it was left to Stalin to handle Lenin’s ideas in practice. Stalin paid greater attention to the countries immediately bordering Russia, especially Iran and Turkey, for strategic, geographical reasons; close cultural ties existed as Soviet citizens in these bordering regions were predominantly Muslim themselves. Problems with the Arab world were multiple. First, the

⁸² Rami Ginat, “The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba’ath Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36:2 (2000), 150–171.

⁸³ Dimitrov, *Первое Мая*, 1940.

⁸⁴ Dimitrov, *Первое Мая*, 1940.

Soviets' analysis of it depended almost entirely on the existing Arab communist parties, which, in many countries, were illegal, thus not reflecting the real dynamics of power in the region. Furthermore, soon it was evident that the most basic Marxist-Leninist analysis points were not applicable to the Arab 'variants' of communism. Nationalism and national liberation movements' theorisation in the Arab world did not fit with the rigid rigour of either the Marxist-Leninist pattern or Stalin's theory.

However, it would be incorrect to assert that ideological motivations uniquely drove the Soviet Union actions towards anti-colonial movements. There is common agreement in the scientific literature that, especially with the end of the Second World and the beginning of the Cold War, the Middle East and North Africa emerged as an area of geopolitical interest to the Soviet Union⁸⁵. Syria and Iraq, where major communist parties had developed, although far from the ideological rigour of the Soviet ideology; or Sudan and South Yemen, where the respective communist parties enjoyed a broad consensus, met the dream of Soviet Russia to expand its camp's reach and surround with allied regimes. Countries such as Egypt, Libya and Algeria offered the Soviets new opportunities as crucial markets for their arms and goods. Beyond ideology, the Soviet Union increasingly began to find in these countries a theatre for its strategic geopolitical and economic interests and rich opportunities to expand its area of influence.

1.1.3. 'Propaganding' the revolution: The Soviet "ideological warfare"

As anticipated, Lenin's ideas for anti-colonial and nationalist movements did not comprehensively explain how the Soviet Union could assist them. One way that the Soviets adopted was to rely on the Comintern and the contacts that it could establish with the Arab communist parties. Another approach was to exploit the West's contradictions and mistakes to present itself as a valid alternative. However, both approaches did not guarantee success. Communist parties were not always part of the nationalist movements; on the contrary, in cases like Egypt, nationalist élites were fiercely anti-communist. Neither did the disillusionment of certain Arab countries towards European colonial powers or the United States always result in a political rapprochement to the Soviet Union.

The Soviet diplomatic class was quite nourished and well trained to what the Soviet interpretations of diplomacy and its foreign policy main trajectories were. The volume "History of

⁸⁵ See, for instance, Igor Belikov, "The Soviet Scholars. Debate on Socialist Orientation in the Third World". *Millennium*. 20:1 (1991), 23–39; Robert Cassen (ed.), *Soviet Interests in the Third World*. Beverly Hills (CA): Sage Publications, 1985; Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha, *The Soviet Union in the Middle East. Policy and Perspectives*, London: The Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1982; Basil Dmitryshin and Frederick J. Cox, *The Soviet Union and the Middle East 1917-1985: A Documentary Record of the Fertile Crescent Arabs*, Kingston Press, 1987; Robert H. Donaldson (ed.), *The Soviet Union in the Third World: Successes and Failures*, London: Routledge, 1981.

Diplomacy” (Russian), published in three toms between 1941 and 1945, represents a monumental attempt to investigate the diplomatic history of Europe as it was understood by the Soviet Union at that time, which gives a sense of how well-developed the Soviet diplomatic school was⁸⁶. However, despite well-developed analyses on diplomacy, in most cases during the analysed period, Soviet policy towards the Arab world had inadequate means at the early stage of its experimentation: diplomatic relations, trade routes, and economic exchanges with Arab countries were underdeveloped in terms of amounts and reach. Formal diplomatic relations with most of these countries were to be established yet. Except for Saudi Arabia (1926, then Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd), one had to wait until the mid-1940s for the establishment of first, formal bilateral relations (Egypt in 1943, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria in 1944) and then the 1950s or even the 1960s to expand it to other Arab countries (Libya in 1955, Tunisia in 1956, Morocco in 1958, Algeria in 1962, Jordan in 1963). Moreover, even when formal relations existed, they were not immediately sided by deep personal relations among Soviet and Arab leaders, thus lacking the necessary degree of trust to base deep collaboration forms.

Under Stalin’s rule, the main instrument of Soviet policy towards anti-colonial movements of the Arab world was propaganda. Especially in the post-World War II period with the beginning of the Cold War, the use of propaganda was massive from the part of both competing sides. Literature has highlighted how the task of “winning hearts and minds around the world” was important for Moscow as much as its Western rivals, and both sides fought a “cultural war of radio waves, television transmissions, propaganda and other forms of psychological pressure”⁸⁷. Sticking to the Soviet side, examples of propaganda are uncountable both in *Pravda*’s records and the scientific discourse. There seem to have been two main directions of propaganda. The first, and most consistent one, was Soviet propaganda meant for a domestic audience, which used to give general ‘instructions’ or guidelines to the Soviets on how to address the Arab peoples and how to counter Western influence in the area. Communiqués, editorials, authored pieces and cartoons effectively described the status of deprivation, oppression, and injustice in which people in colonies were drawing, inciting the Soviets

⁸⁶ In the interlude period between the two World Wars, Soviet policy realigned both domestically and internationally: Soviet scholars of international relations adopted a broader interpretation of Marxism, which took a more morbid view of the Soviet Union’s traditional interests. This approach is fully reflected in the History of Diplomacy volume, edited by Vladimir Petrovitch Potemkin, which draws on contemporary scholars’ works and a collection of memoirs, sources, and transcripts of the pre-revolutionary and the post-revolutionary period. This massive study is of interest for the insights it offers of the Soviet viewpoint on contemporary diplomacy and its understanding of the international situation at that time; indeed, it was quite an outreach publication of half a million copies, thus meant not for scholars only but a broader, general public. As written in the volume’s introduction: “This survey is intended to use the Soviet intelligentsia, party workers, propagandists, lecturers, history teachers, military personnel, and students in higher educational institutions. It has particularly in view the practical worker in Soviet diplomacy and the young cadres preparing themselves for such a career. For them, the History of Diplomacy may serve as one of the basic guides.” Cyril Edwin Black, “Review: Diplomatic History: The Soviet Approach”. *The American Slavic and Eastern European Review*. 7:3 (1948), 276–288.

⁸⁷ Kenneth A. Osgood, “Hearts and Minds: The Unconventional Cold War”. *Journal of Cold War Studies*. 4:2 (2002), 85–107.

to engage in an altruist fight alongside their Middle Eastern comrades. Furthermore, in a circuit of ‘propaganda for propaganda’, literacy efforts were also spent in telling the Soviets what they should do to improve their propaganda. K. Kalashnikov, for instances, explained how the comrades had to engage more in political self-education to raise their propaganda work to a greater ideological and political height. Ideas for doing so would be that the Party carry out concrete measures for cadres’ economic education, i.e. increasing and improving the practice of reading paid lectures in all branches of knowledge”⁸⁸. Better propaganda would need to implement the Party’s central task better: broaden the political and cultural horizon of the Soviet intelligentsia, do not limit their sights to the Soviet Union, but tirelessly move beyond it. Similarly, G. Alexandrov writes as follows:

[...] the struggle for effectiveness, an offensive fighting character, revolutionary passion and genuine Marxist concreteness, clarity, the truthfulness of Bolshevik propaganda is one of our most important tasks. [...] Propagandists, lecturers, party writers – everyone who sees the whole meaning of their lives in the propaganda of the great Leninist-Stalinist ideas – devote yourself to their favourite cause with their passion as fighters for communism. They confidently draw inexhaustible strength for their joyful work in the great examples of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin⁸⁹.

The other target of Soviet propaganda was the local audience in colonies, semi-colonial countries or countries dragged into conflict by the perpetrators of World War II. Moscow Radio (*Московское Радио*), the Soviet Union’s official international broadcasting radio, was one of the first radios to broadcast in foreign countries in their respective languages, including countries of the Middle East and North Africa⁹⁰. Moscow Radios’ broadcasts to the region began on 23 June 1941 in Iran to counter Hitler’s espionage and sabotage activities in the Persian land, that were resulting in pro-German sentiments in the country and then expanded to Arab bordering countries to spread the Soviet’s vision of regional events⁹¹. During World War II, the discourse about imperialist actions run

⁸⁸ K. Kalashnikov, “Итоги Двух Лет”, *Pravda*, October 1, 1940, 2.

⁸⁹ G. Aleksandrov, “Краткий Курс Истории ВКП(Б). И Партийная Пропаганда”, *Pravda*, October 1, 1940, 2.

⁹⁰ Naowaf Ibrahim, “Вещание ‘Московского Радио’ на страны Ближнего и Среднего Востока в Советский период” (“The Moscow Radio Broadcasting in Countries of the Middle East during the Soviet Period”), *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 1 (2011), 64-72.

⁹¹ Naowaf reports that “the first fifteen-minute editions of Moscow Radio in Persian were simple reports of the Sovinformburo. The Soviet radio coverage changed in September 1941, when the USSR sent its troops to the northern provinces of Iran and Britain-to the southern ones. The allies’ military action in the anti-Hitler coalition caused a severe government crisis, the abdication of Reza Shah’s. Under these conditions, the main content of the Moscow Radio broadcasts in Persian was the clarification of the Soviet Union’s policy towards Iran. In January 1942. The triple Anglo-Soviet-Iranian treaty was concluded. In the programs of Moscow Radio, much attention was paid to the popularisation of the provisions of this Treaty”.

by Nazi Germany and its fascist allies, which had spurred war and negatively affected people's lives in colonial and semi-colonial countries, occupied the principal place in the Party's newspaper. The war's harshness and the fight against Germany had provoked one only positive outcome: they had united different nations under the flag to resist imperialist aggression, with the Soviet Union as a bastion of this fight. The *Pravda*'s first issue of May 1942 published an article from Stalin, which read as follows:

All freedom-loving peoples [outside the Soviet Union] have united against German imperialism. Their gaze turns to the Soviet Union. The heroic struggle waged by our country's peoples for their freedom, honour, and independence evokes all progressive humanity's admiration. The peoples of all freedom-loving countries look at the Soviet Union as a force capable of saving the world from Hitler's plague. Among these freedom-loving countries, the first place is occupied by Great Britain and the United States of America, with which bonds of friendship and alliance bind us and which are rendering your country more and more military assistance against the German fascist invaders⁹².

Both the United States and European powers became the new enemies when the War was over, and the Cold War dynamics began. By the end of the 1940s, the Palestinian issue received particular attention, with the Soviets denouncing the "United Kingdom and United States's plot"⁹³.

Against this background, these population had the duty to rebel against oppression; the Soviets should have been regarded as a model to pursue this goal. Soviet propaganda offered a few references, powerful representations of Soviet values, which other nations could look at in their struggle for independence. One of these was the image of the 'Soviet hero' as a simple man, someone who fought for freedom through their daily life. The Soviet hero was a farmer, a technician, an engineer, a doctor, a teacher, a vendor; someone who served the cause of the nation through their work, for work benefitted the community and, eventually, national independence. The Soviet hero was someone deemed invincible: "the entire history of the Soviet state shows that there are no difficulties that the Soviet people under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party could not overcome"⁹⁴. The exaltation of the concept of work, its dimension of collectiveness, and the working class's relevance as a national unifying factor were all narratives used to appeal to the proletarians' consciences across the world.

⁹² Joseph Stalin, "Приказ № 130 Народною Комиссара Обороны", *Правда*, May 1, 1942, 1.

⁹³ М. Маринин, "Что скрывается за кризисом в Палестине?" ("What's hidden behind the Palestinian crisis?"), *Правда*, May 4, 1948, 4.

⁹⁴ "Ленин и Сталин о германском империализме" ("Lenin and Stalin on German imperialism"), *Правда*, August 1, 1942.

On the First of May, the workers' day, was grandly celebrated in public discourse, and it often became the right occasion to address the working classes in Arab countries.

Another frequent image that fed socialist propaganda was the cult of personality of the fathers of socialism. A quasi-sanctification of the fathers of socialist political thought, Marx and Engels, was often proposed with a tip of nostalgia. According to Robert H. Donaldson and Vidya Nadkarni, the personal leadership of determined political figures is an element of continuity in the evolution of the entire Russian political thought⁹⁵. The ensemble of all these was used to conduct what Rami Ginat has defined as "ideological warfare"⁹⁶ in the colonies. Ideological warfare became a prominent political weapon, and propaganda activity became the principal tool used by the Soviet Government to claim its superiority.

1.2. From the end of Stalin throughout the 1960s: The 'consolidation phase'

1.2.1. Global strategies for the postcolonial Arab world: A new pragmatism

With the end of Stalin, the Soviet vision towards the world drastically changed. Stalin had brought the Soviet Union to achieve military success in World War II by building a strong industrial and military power, but he had caused human losses and sufferance, and his controversial politics had fatigued many, both inside and outside the Soviet Union. Tensions did not lack within the socialist camp. In Europe, in Eastern Germany for instance, protests arose about three months after Stalin's death⁹⁷. On many levels, it was clear that a new policy course was needed that mitigated the harsher characteristics of Stalin's rule. The years of 1954 and 1955 were experimental in this sense: the solution of the conflict in Indochina, the renegotiation of a partnership with China, the Warsaw Pact, security rearrangements in central Europe were the Soviet priorities.

The years following the end of Stalin's rule and the rise to power of Nikita Khrushchev as the CPSU Secretary (1953–1964) were crucial for Moscow to define and consolidate its foreign policy,

⁹⁵ Robert H. Donaldson and Vidya Nadkarni, *The foreign policy of Russia. Changing systems, enduring interests*, New York: Routledge, 2019 (Sixth edition). The authors refer to Fred Greenstein's (1969) opera *Personality and Politics* to discuss the circumstances in which individual actions may affect events. According to Greenstein, the likelihood of personal impact on public policy varies with: the degree to which the actions occur in an environment that admits restructuring, the actor's location in the environment, the actor's peculiar strengths or weaknesses. As Greenstein explains, political environments are often unstable or in a state of precarious equilibrium, which allows for the personal qualities of a leader to emerge as driving factors of politics. Whether useful or not to boost Soviet policy in the Arab countries, indeed, the image of Lenin, Stalin and the greatest socialist figures was reported in public discourse as a model to follow to pursue the path of socialism and, thus, of liberation from imperialist oppression.

⁹⁶ Rami Ginat, *The Soviet Union and Egypt, 1945-1955* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), 7.

⁹⁷ Christian F. Ostermann, "Keeping the Pot Simmering: The United States and the East German Uprising of 1953", *German Studies Review*. 19:1 (1996), 61–89.

including its interests and goals in the Middle East and North Africa. When the 20th Congress of the CPSU convened in February 1956, the new direction of Soviet foreign policy was already a fact. However, the Congress played a significant role in articulating and approving the new interpretation of the Marxist-Leninist doctrinal approach to foreign relations.⁹⁸ Such approach necessitated a turn away from Stalin's uncompromising vision of the world as divided into two camps, communist and anti-communist, which left little room for the Soviet Union to cooperate with countries that were non-communist, yet not anti-communist and did strive against imperialism. The task, Donaldson and Nadkarni argue, "was not to invent an entirely new approach but to return Lenin's concept of the contemporary strategic alliance between the Soviet Union and various 'neutralist' or 'nationalist' forces against the imperial powers"⁹⁹.

In that same period, the Middle East and North Africa region was undergoing deep transformations in the wake of the decolonisation from European powers. In Egypt, between 1952 and 1954, the July Revolution put an end to King Faruq's rule and gradually brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power, who would have soon become the champion of independence policies in the Arab world by putting an end to the British rule over his country and by nationalising the Suez Canal, an event that came to symbolise the victory of Arab nationalism and encouraged other independence movements across the region. In February 1954, a coup d'état in Syria overthrew the Government of the military man Adib Shishakli¹⁰⁰. Between 1956 and 1958, Morocco and Tunisia gained independence from France officially. In 1958, while the United Arab Republic (UAR) reunited Syria and Egypt under the same state under the slogan of 'Arab unity against Western-led imperialism', Iraq witnessed a revolution that overthrew the Hashemite monarchy and led to power anti-imperialist, nationalist forces. Again, the 1960s were crucial years for Syria, where two *coup d'état* (1963 and 1966) steadily led the Pan-Arab, Ba'ath Party to power. The years of decolonisation and national affirmation in the region offered the Soviet Union new opportunities to boost its influence. Whether to create political anti-Western coalitions or exploit new markets, the region's governments witnessed an unprecedented emergence of new ties and varied forms of collaboration with the communist superpower.

In fact, while Stalin's doctrine did not conceive national independence away from the proletarian socialist revolution, Khrushchev operated a shift toward a more morbid and pragmatic approach. In his report presented at the Twentieth Congress, he expressed satisfaction with *any* new nation that pursued independence and independent foreign policies, despite away from communism;

⁹⁸ Donaldson and Nadkarni, *The foreign policy of Russia*, 81.

⁹⁹ Donaldson and Nadkarni, *The foreign policy of Russia*, 81.

¹⁰⁰ This event was not dealt with by the *Pravda*.

he offered these countries economic aid and promised them Soviet support as long as they did not engage in military alliances with the Western bloc. “Strengthening friendship and cooperation with neutralist and peace-loving states in Europe and the third world” was one of the Soviet Union’s tasks outlined in the Congress¹⁰¹.

Khrushchev ‘de-Stalinisation campaign’ was part of a foreign policy reflection boosted, among others, by the Soviet chief ideologue Mikhail Andreyevich Suslov. Born of a humble family of peasant origins in 1902, Suslov joined the Communist Party in 1921 during the October Revolution’s upheavals at the age of 19 and pursued an economic education at Moscow State University. His political career began in the 1930s when he served as an official in various Soviet republics, always covering the supervision of Stalin’s purges and deportations, an activity that he carried on throughout the Second World War. However, in the 1950s, following his appointment as a Politburo member in 1952, Suslov became a pivotal political figure within the ruling élite and one of the most appreciated ideologues by the highest spheres of the Soviet State. He was a conservative of origins, critical of communist brands independent of Moscow’s rigid interpretation, yet he often advised his leaders for political solutions of compromise, and became among the persons who favoured the Soviet shift towards pragmatism away from pure ideological thinking. Suslov’s theorisation can be summarised in his idea that it was not essential that these countries adopt socialist economies modelled on the Soviet system, as long as they remained friendly and aligned to the Soviet camp. Rather than ‘capitalism as an ideological model’, the aggressive actions of capitalist colonialist states were to be fought. This new discourse was evident when, for instance, in 1956, Egypt was suffering the pressure of British and French revindications over the Suez Canal and increasingly aggressive policies by Israel. Slogans like “The bandit war against Egypt must be stopped!”, “Hands off Egypt!”, “Curb the aggressors and restore peace in Egypt”, or “Down with colonialism” were recurrent in the Soviet press throughout 1956, particularly in the month of November. The newspapers showed photos of a manifestation held on 5 November in Moscow, when workers demonstrated outside the British, French and Israeli embassies, demanding an end to Egypt’s aggression. All peace-loving peoples, especially the Soviet people and the Soviet government, supported the Egyptian people’s just struggle against the colonialists. In an article of 7 November 1956, titled “The foreign public welcomes the proposals of the Soviet Union to establish peace in the Middle East”, the *Pravda*’s editorial teams writes as follows:

¹⁰¹ Donaldson and Nadkarni, *The foreign policy of Russia*, 82.

All the newspapers today publish on the front pages, under large headlines, an account of the steps taken by the Soviet Government to put an end to the criminal aggression of England, France, and Israel against Egypt. The newspapers noted that the messages of P. A. Bulganin to Eden, Guy Molle and Ben Gurion represent a strong warning against further continuation of the aggression. Today, the Syrian press' focus is on the Message of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR Bulganin to US President Eisenhower and the Foreign Affairs Minister of the USSR Shepilov, the Chairman of the Security Council. All the newspapers on the front pages with large headlines print these important documents. The newspaper's headlines express satisfaction with the noble position taken by the Soviet Union in connection with the criminal aggression unleashed by Britain, France and Israel against the Egyptian people. Al-Jumhur highly appreciates the USSR's sincere and friendly attitude to Egypt and other Arab countries¹⁰².

Fighting colonial plans and actions was also the 'theoretical framework' applied to other north African countries, notably Algeria¹⁰³. Furthermore, as Algeria struggled for its independence (early 1960s), the Soviet propaganda increased and spread towards the whole African continent. "Africa will be free" (*Африка будет свободной*), "Our hearts are with you" (*Наши сердца с вами*), "There is no space on earth for colonialism!" (*Колониализму нет места на земле!*) became frequently used slogans¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰² "Зарубежная общественность приветствует предложения СССР по установлению мира на Ближнем Востоке" (The foreign public welcomes the proposals of the USSR to establish peace in the Middle East), *Правда*, November 7, 1956, 6.

¹⁰³ The translation of an Algerian poetry was offered by *Pravda*'s first issue of December 1961: "I hear you, freedom. / Algerians, prisoners of French prisons. / The night creeps like a beggar girl, alone / through the merciless streets of Paris. / Oil is bubbling / in the arteries of the deserts. / And through the concrete curtain, / through the cold / of the prison walls, / through the shouts of the gendarmes / I can hear your voices. / Soldiers die giving back / their rifles to the brothers who survived, / the soldiers who remained alive. / And in these days, when there is a struggle / for the bright future of Algeria, / your weapons are in battle formation. / Neither hunger, / nor prison gloom, / nor torture / will drown you, / your cry, / new-born Freedom, / your proud cry, / flying over the earth!"

¹⁰⁴ "Колониализму нет места на земле", *Правда*, December 1, 1961, 4.

Neither this new course led to abandon the cause of socialist development. In a discourse to the Central Committee published by *Pravda* in June 1966, Leonid Brezhnev stated that socialism was expanding and had increasing influence on the entire course of international events: the consolidation of peace and the development of liberation movements all over the world still tangled with socialism. “That is why”, Brezhnev argued, “we see our international duty, our sacred duty, entrusted to us by history, by the interests of the world revolution, by our communist conscience, in carrying out the construction of socialism and communism in our countries, while at the same time tirelessly strengthening the world socialist community”¹⁰⁵. The Soviets were still convinced that socialism was the solution to the world’s troubles, including the Middle East and North Africa, and, formally, they did not abandon this ultimate goal. Rather, they realised that politics alone was not enough to win the game of expanding their presence – and influence – into Arab countries.

1.2.2. Leading forces behind: Strategic interests and functionality

To motivate the Soviet Union’s pragmatic shift toward the postcolonial Arab world was Khrushchev’s broader discovery of the so-called “Third World” as the “vital strategic reserve of imperialism”¹⁰⁶. In the wake of their victory in World War II, the United States attempted to expand their spheres of influence as far as possible, starting from “underdeveloped” countries, as first mentioned by Marshall and Truman in the 1940s. Khrushchev – and his inner circle – soon realised the strategic importance of third countries as an area where to counter the United States influence: this became one of his foreign policy distinctive characters and one that his successor at the leadership of the CPSU, Leonid Brezhnev, largely inherited (1964-1982). Several significant events in the 1950s revealed this rise in awareness: Soviet increased interest and diplomatic activity in South Asia, namely India, Afghanistan and Burma; increased economic assistance to developing countries in industrialisation and infrastructural processes¹⁰⁷.

As far as the Middle East and North Africa region is concerned, these countries became increasingly important for the Soviet-American confrontation in 1947 with the issue of the so-called “Truman Doctrine”. Harry Truman, then President of the United States, made a declaration for economic support to governments in the Mediterranean region (Greece and Turkey) that Washington perceived to be threatened by Soviet expansionistic ambitions in the basin. As the US was claiming to take responsibility of protecting the Middle East against the Soviet Union influence and helping it

¹⁰⁵ “Речь товарища Л. И. Брежнева” (Speech by Comrade Leonid Brezhnev), *Правда*, June 1, 1966.

¹⁰⁶ Donaldson and Nadkarni, *The Foreign policy of Russia*, 87.

¹⁰⁷ Oscar Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization. The Political Economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

develop in the field of socio-economic development, the Soviet Union saw in the American engagement a continuation of pre-Cold War imperialist policies. Moscow believed that Washington was using economic aid as bait to bring countries of the region within the orbit of American, capitalist policies, and thus had to be contained. The Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa was set to become one of the most important regions for Soviet-Western Cold War competition, and perhaps the preferred one by the Soviets to boost their geostrategic interests. It was indeed was contiguous to the Soviet borders and a part of the Soviet Union's 'neighbourhood policy'. Furthermore, postcolonial Arab states offered a better ground for Soviet penetration in institutional circles than other "Third World" countries. Betting on the scars that years of European colonialism had left on the region, the Soviet Union could aspire to offer a different model for the Arabs, to represent a more attractive model for them than Western powers had ever represented. Postcolonial Arab countries soon became a battlefield for disputed political, economic and ideological interests between the superpowers: for the Soviets, there was a higher degree of possibility of success and a lesser risk for clash than competing in the main arenas, such as Europe. Rather than ideological purposes, functionality increasingly drove the Soviet push towards the region.

Indeed, in Russian, Arab and "Western" literature, it is widely acknowledged that the Soviet Union was determined to exert its influence over the Middle East, functionally to its bipolar confrontation with the West¹⁰⁸. In perspective, Moscow's global order included the Middle East aligned to the Soviet power against the West, to be possibly favourable to the Soviet models of modernisation and development, especially in countries moving towards full independence. In turn, the leaning of these countries towards the socialist, Soviet-led camp would increase Soviet influence over the area and, thus, globally¹⁰⁹. Economic assistance, trade agreements, military cooperation, cultural and educational exchanges could increase Soviet influence in the area. Khrushchev initiated this most critical decade of Soviet venture into the Middle East and North Africa and especially the Arab countries, where Moscow effectively boosted its physical and political presence. On a concrete level, the Soviet leadership engaged in frequent trips to the region (particularly famous was the Foreign Minister Dmitri Shepilov's trip to Egypt in June 1956) with the intention to establish contacts with the Arab postcolonial elites, make themselves known to the Arabs, make them know what the Soviets could offer, and search for opportunities to cooperation. It is in this way that major economic

¹⁰⁸ Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha, *The Soviet Union in the Middle East. Policy and Perspectives*, London: The Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1982; Margot Light, *The Soviet Theory of International Relations*, New York: Palgrave, 1988; Margot Light (ed.), *Troubled Friendship: Moscow's Third World Venture*, London: British Academic Press, 1993; Peter Mangold, *Superpower intervention in the Middle East*, London, Crook Helm, 1977; Matthieu Rey, *Domestiquer la Guerre Froide au Moyen Orient (1945-1961): Dynamiques Externes et Trajectoires Irakienne et Syrienne*. Relations Internationales, Presses Universitaires de France, 2017; Massimiliano Trentin (ed.), *The Middle East and the Cold War. Between Security and Development*, Newcastle Upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Silvio Pons, *The global revolution. A History of International Communism 1917-1991*, Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2014.

partnerships like the construction of the Aswan Dam in Egypt or the Basra-Baghdad railway in Iraq were reached¹¹⁰.

According to Oles Smolansky, who analysed Soviet Middle Eastern policy during the 1955-1964 decade, Khrushchev's Arab policy was based on a coincidence of "short-range tactical interests", among which the mutual desire for weakening Western influence in specific local contexts, and not on "long-range strategic interests", as it might have been for Stalin's ambition to turn "Third World" states into communist states¹¹¹. That the fight against Western influence prevailed over the spreading of the communist/socialist ideology in the new Soviet foreign policy course was a fact. However, neither meant that socialism stopped being the preferred aspiration for the Soviets in the third countries. On the contrary, the Soviets kept praising countries and leaders whose nationalist, revolutionary choices tangled with socialist ideas, although more successful examples were to be found outside the Middle East, in Cuba for instance. Long-term strategic interests were still present in Khrushchev's plan for the region. A renounce on ideology did not result in the renounce of the Soviet Union to attempting to sell its model of development – economic development especially – to these countries. Soviet aid and assistance to develop state-owned farms and industries in these countries, he believed, will eventually free them from their economic dependence on the West, while at the same time promoting the rise of a communist-oriented industrial proletarian society.¹¹² A sort of realist awareness arose in the Soviet leadership, which led it to find a new language to talk to these countries, but the old, ultimate goal of expanding socialism worldwide still existed.

1.2.3. Instruments: The golden age of Moscow's economic assistance to the Arab countries

Since the mid-1950s and throughout the 1960s, economic aid in development assistance projects, trade in goods and arms supply became the Soviet main instruments to establish close and substantial collaboration with postcolonial Arab elites. It was the overall political shift operated by the post-Stalinist leadership that made this boost possible. As wrote by Orah Cooper and Carol Fogarty, as the ideology was being overtaken by pragmatism, "aid was offered with less concern for the political orientation of potential client"¹¹³.

The most recurrent aid came in the shape of military cooperation and arms supply to states and nationalist groups ripe to conflict. In many postcolonial Arab countries, where weak, newly

¹¹⁰ James E. Dougherty, "The Aswan Decision in Perspective", *Political Science Quarterly*, 74:1 (1959), 21–45.

¹¹¹ Oles Smolansky, *The Soviet Union and the Arab East Under Khrushchev* (Bucknell: University Press, 1974), 295.

¹¹² Donaldson and Nadkarni, *The foreign policy of Russia*, 87.

¹¹³ Orah Cooper and Carol Fogarty, "Soviet Economic and Military Aid to the Less Developed Countries, 1954-78", *Soviet and Eastern European Foreign Trade*, 21:1/2/3 (1985), 54–73.

established elites were often dependent on the army to survive, military support from any external aid provider was deemed essential. The Soviet arms were perhaps not as high-quality as those offered by the Western partners – with whom the Arabs did continue to dialogue – but the Soviets often offered more competitive prices and, most importantly, fewer conditionalities. It will be assessed more in detail in the following chapters, the Soviets, on several occasions, closed an eye on Arab political developments that certainly did not please Moscow – for instance, the persecutions of communists in countries like Egypt and Iraq – and kept running ‘business as usual’, for the sake of economic accords. Arms were important for the Middle East and North Africa region for another reason: between the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, the growing Israeli threat coupled with Western countries’ ambiguous policies – and support to Tel Aviv – gradually convinced Arab leaders of the need to strengthen their defence systems. The Soviet Union’s most important achievement with this respect was undoubtedly the Egyptian-Soviet arms deal signed in Prague on 12 September 1955 through the intermediary of Czechoslovakia, the very first Soviet-Arab arms deal and the one that initiated the long era of Soviet provisions to the region. Beyond trade interests, the agreement reflected the need of the Egyptians to receive the Soviet protection amid turmoil in the escalation of the Suez crisis¹¹⁴.

Military cooperation also took the form of technical assistance provided by the Soviets to Arab military personnel. Stalin had built a strong and well-trained army, and the know-how that the Soviets had acquired in the ‘the art’ of war was an attractive factor to postcolonial élites. As Karsh argued, not only did the Arabs import Soviet arms, they often imported “Soviet training patterns and combat doctrines”¹¹⁵, rendering military hardware from non-Soviet sources increasingly irrelevant to their operative needs. Moreover, due to the relatively low level of technical and scientific competence of most Arab military personnel, Soviet experts were usually required to assemble and maintain the newly arrived weapons in the recipient countries and to instruct local military personnel and technicians in their use. As Cooper and Fogarty report, between the mid-1950s and 1980, the Soviet Union issued nearly \$47 billions of economic and military pledges to 73 countries of the third world¹¹⁶. The Soviets has trained 50,000 students from 98 developing countries in academic disciplines and nearly 75,000 LDC nationals in military and technical skills. The record for Soviet

¹¹⁴ Later on, when Hafiz al-Assad took power in Syria in 1970, a similar pattern was in place. Internally, Hafez al-Assad tried to create a political system capable of centralising power in the Army and Ba’ath party’s hands and allowing him to lead a “revolution from above” (Hinnebusch, 1982). The resources for this project derived, at least partially, from the ability of Syrian leaders to gain the protection of Moscow; arms supply, in this context, proved to be crucial since it supported the armed forces, the backbone of a highly fragmented country (Ginat, 2000; Golan, 2006). Not by chance, it was with the Ba’ath revolution and the ascent to power of Hafez al-Assad that relations between Moscow and Damascus significantly strengthened (Karsh, 1988; 1989).

¹¹⁵ Efraim Karsh, “Influence Through Arms Supplies: The Soviet Experience in the Middle East”, *Conflict Quarterly*, 6:1, 1986, 45–55.

¹¹⁶ Cooper and Fogarty, *Soviet Economic and Military Aid*, 1985.

personnel serving in “less developed countries” in a single year (1978) was nearly 28,000 economic technicians and 11,000 military technical personnel (not including troops stationed in Egypt in the early 1970s)¹¹⁷.

Educational aid was another form of aid that has quite been understudied, yet it helped create deep connections between the Soviets and the local leaderships. Educational cooperation agreements were often established upon the Arab élites’ request. The Soviet Union was seen as a frontrunner in sciences, humanities, cultural studies, while many countries of the Middle East and North Africa were still lagging behind in terms of solarisation and higher education. Exchanges allowing Arab students to receive a training period in countries of the Soviet Union were signed with Egypt, Syria, Algeria. Remarkable is also the Iraqi case. On 16 March 1959, the Soviet Union and Iraq signed an economic and technical cooperation agreement; shortly after that, Soviet geologists arrived in Iraq to detect and evaluate oil fields, and a few others began to work in the oil industry¹¹⁸.

The 1950s and the 1960s were, therefore, the years when the Soviet leadership established varied collaborations with postcolonial Arab countries, often creating a relationship that took the shape of a client-patron dependency, although an unbalanced one. As Moshe Efrat and Jacob Bercovitch argued, the Soviet Union may have extracted less than expected from its sustained collaborations with the Arabs¹¹⁹. A paradox in the super power-client relations in the Middle East, which particularly fits the example of the Soviet Union, is the fact that increasing client dependence on the superpower for economic and military aid coincided with increased independent initiatives by the client states – “initiatives that are often at variance with, or in defiance of, the patron’s interests”.¹²⁰

1.3. The 1970s and the 1980s: Towards the decline of the USSR and its role in the Muslim world

1.3.1. The Soviets between a ‘growing multipolarity’ of the Middle East and neo-colonial actions

In the early 1970s, if Moscow was to turn its back to look at its accomplishments all over the Middle East and North Africa, it had good reason to be satisfied. The Soviets had developed close partnerships with most Arab countries (Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Libya), and non-Arab countries,

¹¹⁷ Cooper and Fogarty, *Soviet Economic and Military Aid*, 1985.

¹¹⁸ Katsakioris, Costantin, “Soviet Lessons for Arab Modernization: Soviet Educational Aid towards Arab Countries after 1956”, *Journal of Modern European History*, 8:1 (2010), 85–106.

¹¹⁹ Moshe Efrat and Jacob Bercovitch, *Superpowers and client states in the Middle East. The imbalance of influence*, New York: Routledge, 1991.

¹²⁰ Efrat and Bercovitch, *Superpowers and client states*, 28.

especially Turkey and Iran. The partnership with Syria, for instance, earned Moscow the opening of the naval military base in Tartus (1971), the first and to date the only Russian fleet base outside the borders of the Russian Federation. As Vasiliev argued, as a result of a decade and a half of constant engagement, “the Soviet Union had become a Mediterranean power with recognised interests in the Middle East where it was regulating economic investments, exerting political influence and using military bases”¹²¹. In the following decades, however, Soviet fortunes in the region were mixed: while Soviet Arab policy had fully ridden the wave of events and flourished between the 1950s and the 1960s, the same cannot be said for what has happened since the 1970s. On the Soviet side, the period between the CPSU leadership of Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev and that of Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev witnessed the decline of the Soviet state apparatus, and the Soviet push towards the postcolonial Arab world lost part of its original strength. As much as the Soviet leadership attempted to hide this pattern¹²², it was unfolding, and it was going to be irreversible. On the other side, countries of the Middle East and North Africa were changing profoundly, and new elements were adding to the picture that complicated the Soviet-Arab and Soviet-Middle Eastern relations.

One of these elements – explaining the partial decline of Soviet Arab policy in the 1970s-1980s – was a sort of ‘lack of motivation’ of the Soviet policy itself due to the weakening of the anti-imperialist discourse. Whereas the anti-colonial, nationalist sentiment of the 1950s and 1960s was skilfully used by the Soviets to push their anti-imperialist narrative and secure the friendship of many Arab countries against the West, since the 1970s, Arabs-Western relations began to acquire a different meaning. On the Arab side, the struggle to achieve political independence and distance themselves from their Western oppressors was no longer a valid political paradigm; all those countries had achieved independence, and they were now looking forward to next phase of their political and economic development. Arab political elites felt that they were now able to determine their destinies by themselves; to identify themselves as autonomous political actors (in the domestic as much as in the international realms), and not ‘as opposed to’ someone else. Furthermore, in the frame of this new political ‘maturity’, the West was no longer an enemy but became a partner to dialogue with and, in some cases, even a model to follow. Egypt was once again a pioneer in this sense, as its trend towards a “bourgeois conversion” – as Vasiliev has named it – was evident in a change of policy of the ruling class:

¹²¹ Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East policy*, 82.

¹²² It is interesting to note how a few major events in the 1980s were not dealt with by the *Pravda*. Among these, there is no reference to Chernobyl's disaster on the 26th of April 1986, a global shock and scandal for the Soviet leadership. On the 16th of March 1988, Iraq's government of Saddam Hussein, a Soviet ally, conducted a real small-scale genocide against the Kurdish population in the country's Northern areas, and neither this event has gained attention. Neither the newspaper dedicate attention to the fall of the Berlin wall (the 9th of November 1989).

A stratum of rich farmers (*kulaks* in Marxist jargon) was springing up again in the countryside and becoming a dominant force outside the big cities, and their objective interests, which differed from the progression towards deeper leftist transformations and reforms, had exerted pressure even in the last years of Nasser's rule. The Egyptian 'national' bourgeoisie was increasingly resisting measures that obliged it to sacrifice personal and class interests in the name of vague, all-national purposes. The Egyptian ruling class, composed of the top stratum of the military and administrative apparatus and the parasitic and national bourgeoisie, relied on the massed base of wealthy farmers, urban merchants, and artisans trying to rid itself of obstacles to development. Egyptian society's upper strata were frightened by radical transformation and were ready to do anything to hinder it. Reluctant to make concessions to the lower strata, they attempted to use the public sector for their interests, helped by an important new factor – the financial and political might of the oil monarchies of Arabia – that appeared in the Middle East and that encouraged the capitalist trends in Egyptian society¹²³.

In other words, it became natural for new Arab elites not to distance themselves from the Soviet Union perhaps, but to broaden the spectrum of their international partnerships, which entailed relying more on the Western partners as well, especially the United States. Of course, such a process did not pertain to all Arab countries to the same extent. In countries like South Yemen, Algeria, Libya and Syria, the leftist trend continued to be a predominant one and allowed for prolonged, good ties with the Soviet Union, which continued cooperating with these countries on the 'anti-imperialist' basis. Nevertheless, the overall picture appeared to depict the emerging 'US factor' as a determinant one¹²⁴ in the Middle Eastern affairs and, at the same time, what could roughly be described as a 'growing multipolarity' of the Middle East and North Africa.

Related to this discourse, indeed, another element that added to the picture of the Soviet Middle East policy was a (at least) partial change in some key-partnerships that Moscow had established and that, over the years, had been giving the best results. This change was motivated precisely by increased Arab relations with the West, especially with the United States. The most important example to this regard is the Soviet-Egyptian partnership: while the Soviets had found in Gamal

¹²³ Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East policy*, 96.

¹²⁴ Sometimes, the Arab leaning towards the 'US camp' was unconsciously favoured by the Soviets themselves. The numerous inter-Arab and regional disputes and conflicts (Syria-Iraq, North Yemen-South Yemen, Ethiopia-Somalia, Algeria-Morocco) frequently pushed the Soviet Union to favour one side at the expenses of another, with the result often driving the latter toward the Western orbit.

Abdel Nasser a good interlocutor and someone to trust, they did not come to trust Nasser's successor, Muhammad Anwar Sadat, equally. Sadat was indeed very oriented to cooperation with Washington, which he hoped could have shielded Egypt from Israel's aggressive policies. This caused irritation in Moscow, which, on several occasions, happened to delay the delivery of military equipment to the Egyptians, causing, in turn, the irritation of Cairo and a general worsening of bilateral relations. At the same time though, while Moscow's ties with Cairo were losing ground, ties with other countries were flourishing. Syria stands out as the most blatant examples, but also Lebanon and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). With the raise to power of Hafiz al-Assad in Damascus in 1970, Soviet-Syrian relations flourished and brought to military, political and economic convergences that were largely unprecedented¹²⁵. January 1970, for instance, opened up with a visit of a Soviet economic delegation (namely the delegation of the Union of Soviet Friendship Societies and the Kyrgyz Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, headed by the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan B. T. Murataliev) to Damascus. The delegation was received by the Syrian Prime Minister Nouredin al-Atassi who noted the great importance of the assistance provided by the Soviet Union to Syria in the implementation of its social and economic reforms and in shielding Syria from regional turmoil caused by Israel¹²⁶. The comparison of evolving Soviet relations with Egypt and Syria seems to suggest that, while keeping the door open on multiple arms and trade collaboration, the Soviets might have chosen to differentiate their partners: in other words, to choose which ones was more convenient to 'drop', and which other ones was important to invest on.

Against this background of shifting alliances and new strategic choices that were made on the international chessboard, one can observe that since the 1970s, in the overall weakening of the ideological discourse against the 'Western enemy', in both ideologic discourse and propaganda the anti-imperialist narrative gave pace to a new one. In the *Pravda* newspaper, for instance, ideologues, journalists and politicians no longer wrote about the need to revolt against the oppressor, but they raise awareness on the prospect of "neo-colonial" actions carried out by Western powers¹²⁷.

¹²⁵ Dawisha Adeed, "Syria Under Assad 1970-1978: The Centres of Power", *Government and Opposition*, Cambridge University Press, 13:3 (1978), 341–354.

¹²⁶ "Визит Дружбы" ("Visit of friendship"), *Pravda*, January 16, 1970, 5.

¹²⁷ It is also interesting to notice that, quite often, the Middle East and North Africa countries' struggles were associated to the struggles of the African continent. Much of this narrative, indeed, spoke to African countries. For instance, the day following the dissolution of Biafra (16 January 1970), the short-lived secessionist republic established in 1967 in South-Eastern Nigeria, an editorial article in the *Pravda* titled in big, capital letters "The neo-colonisation plans of Western powers" (*Неоколониаторские Планы Западных Держав*). The article commented on the new challenges ahead of the reunited Nigerian republic and warns about the offer of aid from Western powers, as this will not go for the good of Nigerian people but the good of the American footprint in the area. It read as follows: "Now the Nigerian government is faced with serious problems of rebuilding the devastated eastern regions of the country, strengthening the unity of the state and helping the millions of affected civilians. There is no doubt that the Nigerian government can deal with these problems and restore the country's disrupted peaceful life. However, an unimaginable excitement began in the West

Especially in the aftermath of the 6 Day War of 1967 and with the growing of the 'Arab cause', the symbol of neo-colonialism in the Arab world became Israel, although the Soviets in official discourses were careful not to refer to the Israelis as "neo-colonialists", but rather as "aggressors". Increasingly aggressive Israel's policy was deemed "barbaric" and American imperialists were condemned for they supplied the Israeli security forces with deadly weapons. In this new prevailing narrative, the ruling circles of the United States shared almost the same degree of responsibility as Tel Aviv's authorities. As the *Pravda* columnist Nikolay Bragin put it, in the early 1970s the United States was flaming on "anti-Arab hysteria" by encouraging the Israeli Golda Meir's government (1969-1974) to continue aggressive attacks against the Arabs¹²⁸. Needless to say, the Arabs could count on the Soviet sympathy and support against the American neo-colonial policies. Indeed, the first months of 1970 witnessed various waves of popular mobilisation in many Soviet lands against Tel Aviv's rulers. As reported in an editorial article that appeared in *Pravda*'s first issue of March 1970:

A rally of protest against Israeli aggression was held at the Voinovich Moscow Carriage Repair Plant. Brigadier of painters A. S. Seliverstova noted in her speech that Israel's aggressive actions against the Arab countries might not only increase tensions in the Middle East but they can lead to another world war. All honest people in the world have to immediately stop the hand of the aggressor and demand that Israel return the territories seized from them to the Arabs¹²⁹.

In an unanimously adopted resolution, the rallies' participants warmly approved the policy of the CPSU to condemn Israel's aggression. The resolution noted that "the sympathies of the Soviet people were on the side of the people of the United Arab Republic and the peoples of other Arab countries".¹³⁰ Protests also took place at the Moscow Electromechanical Plant named after Vladimir Ilyich, the Moscow firm Voskhod and other enterprises in capital cities. In Kyiv, a group of writers and artists united their anger to the Soviet voice of protest against the crimes of the Israeli military. The poet Leonid Pervomaysky wrote: "the events in the Near East cannot but worry me as a Ukrainian

around the future aid to the affected areas. Again, in all cases, the words 'humanity', 'compassion', 'philanthropy', etc. are preferred. [...] The US government has allocated \$ 10 million in 'aid' and keeps planes ready for immediate airlift to Nigeria. England, to be accurate, prepared only one military aircraft with medicines, but the government announced its desire to provide 'comprehensive assistance' and 'donate' Nigeria five million pounds". From: "Нео-колониаторские Планы Западных Держав" (The neo-colonisation plans of Western powers). *Правда*, January 16, 1970, 5.

¹²⁸ "Силы Прогресса не Остановить", *Правда*, March 1, 1970, 5.

¹²⁹ Агрессоры Должны Убраться с Арабских Земель, *Правда*, *Правда*, March 1, 1970, 1.

¹³⁰ Агрессоры Должны Убраться с Арабских Земель, *Правда*, *Правда*, March 1, 1970, 1.

poet, a representative of Soviet literature, which never passed by human grief”. Demonstrators took the streets of Russia’s extreme Orient, too, Vladivostok, to express solidarity with the Arab peoples and warmly approve the Soviet government’s position on the Middle East crisis. Other protest rallies in support of the Arabs against Israel took place in Temirtau, Kazakhstan. Neo-colonialist actions were hampering progress in Arab countries, to Israel’s benefits and its Western sponsor, and the Soviet people could not remain silent; although the weight of their words was probably diminishing.

1.3.2. Safeguarding influence in an evolving region

The driving factor of the Soviet Arab policy (and Middle East policy more broadly) since the 1970s appears to be the necessity to safeguard the influence that Moscow had obtained in the area, despite changing alliances and balance of power in the region, as well as changes in the Soviet-Arab relation itself. To pursue this goal, the Soviet Union adopted different approaches. On the one hand, Moscow sought to consolidate its regional influence by concluding several long-term Friendship, and Cooperation Treaties and Agreements, such as the ones concluded with Egypt (1971), Iraq (1972), Somalia (1974), Ethiopia (1978) and Afghanistan (1978). According to Robert Freedman (1980), however, the repudiation of the treaties by Egypt (1976) and Somalia (1977) is an indicator of the precarious basis on which Soviet standing rested in the region¹³¹. On the other, concerning the broader domain of economic assistance, the Soviets consolidated the use of arms supply as the preferred instrument. Actually, a shift away from aid in economic planning and infrastructure towards the military sector had been already in place since the second half of the 1960s, when massive engagement in specific projects like the Aswan Dam had raised doubts among the Soviet leadership on the cost-and-benefits of these projects. Bulky Soviet investments barely resulted in either remarkable improvements in Arab peasants and proletarian masses’ lives or the diffusion of socialist values. The arms business guaranteed a good level of cooperation with Arab countries, with fewer efforts and lower economic losses from the Soviet side. Furthermore, the arms supply was an effective instrument of influence¹³².

The greatest challenges, however, were posed by changing alliances and equilibria of forces on the ground; this dynamic was well clarified by the 1973 Yom Kippur war and the Camp David agreements of 1978. As anticipated, one of the most important developments that challenged the

¹³¹ Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

¹³² Karsh, *Influence Through Arms Supplies*, 1986.

Soviet interests in the region was the advent of Muhammad Anwar Sadat to the leadership of Egypt¹³³; someone that the Soviets did not trust particularly, not much as they did trust Nasser, at least. Sadat did sign the Soviet-Egyptian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1971, but he also turned his eyes to the United States, his preferred partner in which he hoped to find a ‘patron’ to force Israel to make concessions and relax its aggressive policy towards his country and the Arabs¹³⁴. Soviet dissatisfaction with the Aswan dam results, coupled with Egypt’s dissatisfaction with the delays in Soviet military provisions in the early 1970s, contributed to fuel mutual irritation and mistrust. To the point that, in July 1971, Sadat informed the Soviet ambassador in Cairo that 15,000 Soviet specialists should leave Egypt in the run of a few days. It holds that there was also a certain feeling of relief among Soviet officials: leaving Egypt, the Soviets moved away from the risk of a direct military confrontation with Israel¹³⁵. However, that was a slap in the face for the Soviets: the crown jewel country of Moscow’s Arab policy until that moment, Egypt, where Moscow had sent arms and specialists upon the Egyptians’ own request, was treating Moscow like an unfriendly partner. But if Egypt disappointed the Soviets, opportunities arose for Moscow as Arab-Israeli tensions grew bigger, ending in the 1973 Yom Kippur war, also known as Ramadan War. The decision to move into conflict was taken by Sadat and the Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad, who attacked Israeli positions in the Sinai, causing Israel’s response. Israel’s attacks presented the Soviets with the occasion to equip and train Arab armies, demonstrating they were willing to take significant risks to prevent these countries’ defeat¹³⁶. The war lasted less than 20 days (6-25 October 1973), and ended with a de-facto non-victory of any side. As Vasiliev argued, “the Arab-Israeli war had ended in a draw but in the specific conditions prevailing in the region, lack of victory had meant a defeat for Israel inflicted by Arab armies equipped and trained by the Soviet Union”¹³⁷. It holds that Moscow exploited the war to project its military power by, for instance, concentrating its navy in the Eastern Mediterranean, safeguarding naval communications with Syria and Egypt, and counterbalancing the American interference in the conflict¹³⁸. Moreover, despite standing to the Arab side – not only for ‘political’ reasons but, more simply, for the need to protect their arms supplies – at the same time, the Soviets worked alongside the Arabs’ Western allies to impose a ceasefire and end the conflict diplomatically. Nevertheless, it emerged that the Soviet Union was caught in a difficult position, but tried to take the best advantage of the situation.

¹³³ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Egyptian Politics Under Sadat: The Post-Populist Development of an Authoritarian-Modernizing State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

¹³⁴ Vasiliev, *Russia’s Middle East policy*, 83.

¹³⁵ Vasiliev, *Russia’s Middle East policy*, 86.

¹³⁶ Guy Laron, “Playing with fire: The Soviet–Syrian–Israeli triangle, 1965–1967”, *Cold War History*, 10:2 (2010), 163–184.

¹³⁷ Vasiliev, *Russia’s Middle East policy*, 95.

¹³⁸ Vasiliev, *Russia’s Middle East policy*, 95.

Such position was confirmed a few years later in the occasion of the Camp David agreements of 1978 for the conclusion of peace in Middle East. Cairo included representatives of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and the PLO, as well as Israel, the US, the Soviet Union and the UN in peace-making efforts; on March 1979, a further agreement was reached in Washington between Egypt and Israel, which foresaw the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Sinai, completed in 1982 with the effective demilitarisation of the peninsula. The agreement testified that the 'power-broker' of the Egyptian affairs, and, more broadly, of the Arab-Israeli fight was had become the United States. As Vasiliev commented, Sadat was effectively "putting all his eggs in the American basket", de-facto terminating Egypt's ties with the Soviet Union, or, at least, Egypt's reliance on the Soviet Union as a security provider and partner in complex regional negotiations¹³⁹. Not much was left to the Soviets but be satisfied with the role of "critical observer" that was given to them:

Not surprisingly, the Soviet Union evaluated Camp David as a "separate deal", as a "capitulation" and "destruction of Arab unity", and as "actions in the interests of reaction and imperialism", and Moscow held Sadat personally guilty. Gromyko wrote: "It was becoming gradually and increasingly clear that Sadat's line was to make changes in Egyptian-Soviet relations with the aim of curtailing them. [...] Sadat knew what he was doing. His actions were not miscalculated or a mistake. They were committed through conviction and revealed his fundamental view"¹⁴⁰.

Beyond the troubled relation with Egypt and lost opportunities on the Arab-Israeli dossier, other elements that challenged the Soviets' position in the region between the 1970s and 1980s included the situation of communist parties and the emergence of the 'Islamic issue'. The very existence of Communist parties in the Arab countries has repeatedly represented a double-edged sword for the Soviets. Arab Communist activities have periodically deteriorated relations between the Soviet and the Arab leaderships for their different visions that did not meet Soviet expectations. In the analysed period, the *coup d'état* supported by the Communists in Sudan (1971) and communist efforts to organise cells in the Iraqi army in the mid and late 1970s are examples of this problem¹⁴¹. Not least, since the late 1970s and particularly in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution (1979), another piece featured in the puzzle of Soviet interests in the region: the Islamic "awakening". An Islamic

¹³⁹ Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East policy*, 107.

¹⁴⁰ Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East policy*, 107.

¹⁴¹ Robert O. Freedman, Soviet Policy Toward Ba'athist Iraq, 1968-1979, in Robert H. Donaldson (ed.), *The Soviet Union in the Third World: Successes and Failures*, Routledge, London, 1980.

revolution in a country neighbouring the Soviet territory was deemed by Moscow as a major security threat. Relevant historical studies on the complicated relationship between the Russian and the Muslim world, an underlying factor in Russia's history which is not possible to deepen here, have been conducted by Alexandre Benningsen and Marie Broxup¹⁴². They analyse how, while Muslim communities have always inhabited Russia, the 1917 Revolution had somewhat (apparently) obscured Russia's internal ethno-religious diversity and 'pacified' Russia's troubled relations with indoor Muslim communities. The Muslim territories of Central Asia and the Caucasus were absorbed into the Soviet Union. While not nullifying religious identities, at the same time these were brought together under one single 'identity umbrella': the Soviet identity, a new community gathered around new foundations of socialism and the proletarian inclusive values. As reported by Benningsen and Broxup, the term "Muslim" in the Soviet Union was generally used to describe people who belonged to the Muslim religion and culture *before* the October Revolution. After that moment, a new "Soviet culture", as the authors defined it, replaced any religious meaning¹⁴³. While this coexistence had worked for several years, events in the 1970s risked to threaten it, as they risked to alter the balance of forces within plural societies in favour of the Muslim component. Most importantly, though, the slogan of the Iranian Revolution as chanted by Ayatollah Khomeini, 'neither the West nor the East', were not very well received by Moscow; although the official Soviet narrative remained that of no-interference with Iranian affairs. The emerging Iranian leadership had a political vision that was narrowly anchored on Islam and the importance of religion in civic life; Iran's Islamic leaders were fiercely hostile to communism and they referred to the Soviet Union and "the second great Satan" (with the first one being the United States). The country's new political path was a big threat for the Soviets. Moreover, in the wake of the Iran-Iraq war, the fear for Iran's allegedly been determined to spread an Islamic revolution arose among the Soviet leadership.

It is no coincidence that, in the Soviet public discourse, increased focus was placed on the need to fight extremism, violent militancy and terrorism (as the debate on internal matters was increasingly dominated by the *perestroika*). Even more so, the Soviets believed, as what they saw as an Iranian

¹⁴² The authors explore how, within the Russian territories, the "Muslim factor" has been an identifying feature of the Russian culture "ever since the conversion of Khan Ozbek of the Golden Horde to Islam" (Benningsen and Broxup, 1983). In the 14th and 15th centuries, the Khans of the Golden Horde ruled over their Russian vassals. In 1552, the Russians conquered the Khanate of Kazan; in 1556, they conquered the Khanate of Astrakhan and the khanate of Sibir in 1584, all predominantly Muslim regions. The Russians' relation with other Muslim populations was troubled: in 1571 the Crimean Tartars burned out Moscow, while in 1604, the Russian Empire was defeated by the Daghestani and the Ottomans. The 18th and 19th centuries saw the beginning of Russian supremacy and a continuous Russian effort to fix Muslim communities' relations within and outside the Russian territories. Benningsen, Alexandre and Broxup, Marie, "*The Muslim threat to the Soviet state*", New York: Routledge, 1983

¹⁴³ For a comprehensive analysis which puts the Islamic threat to the Soviet state in 1970/1980 in a historical and cultural perspective, read Alexander Benningsen and Marie Broxup book "*The Islamic threat to the Soviet state*", Routledge revivals, 1983.

“crisis” was being ‘pushed from behind’ by the United States, that had all interests in fuelling crises to pursue their economic and military interests. The following vignette represents American personalities shooting at Iran’s maps:

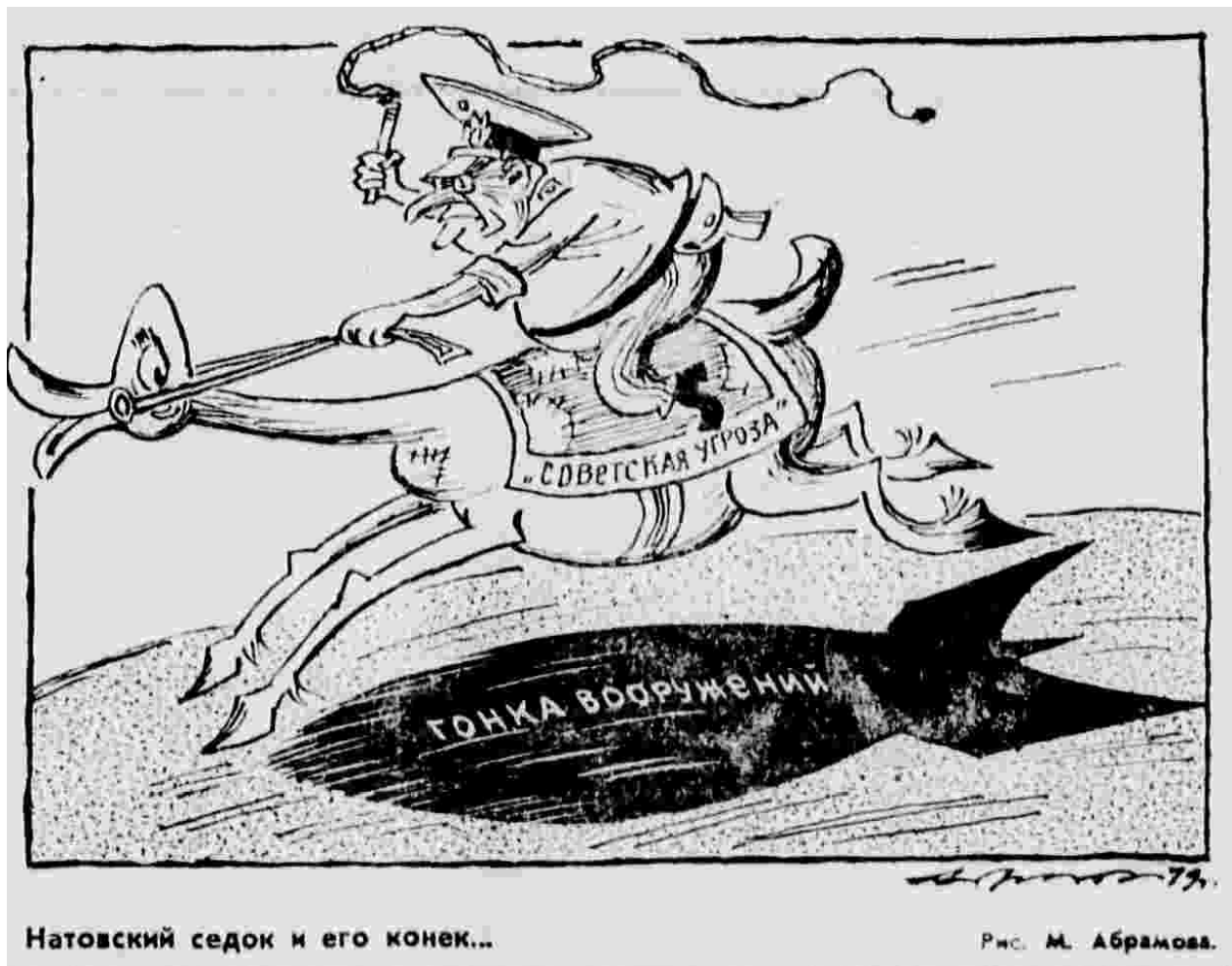


It is written: “A significant intensification of the imperialists’ policies is going on around Iran. The US is increasingly intervening in a complex national crisis”¹⁴⁴.

The increasingly important role of NATO, the transatlantic alliance, in countries of the Middle East and North Africa also represented a threat to the Soviet interests that had to be safeguarded at any costs. As NATO missions and activities in the region became more and more influential, they

¹⁴⁴ *Pravda*, 3 February 1979, p. 5.

shrunk the room for the Soviets to act unchallenged. In this case too, the Soviet propaganda engaged massively in boosting an anti-NATO discourse. The following vignette represents what must be a NATO or Western general, riding a horse named “the Soviet threat” (*советская угроза*). The horse’s shadow, however, reveals the truth: the Western scramble is not about containing a Soviet threat, but it is about “the arms race” (*гонка вооружений*)¹⁴⁵:



Finally, to cast the darker shadow on the Soviet Union’s long-searched achievements in the Middle East and North Africa, however, was the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which lasted until 1989, representing one of the main elements of a decade that Robert Legvold has defined also as a “revolution of Soviet foreign policy”¹⁴⁶. In late December 1979, Soviet troops invaded the country in support of the Afghan communist government that was clashing with anti-communist Muslim groups

¹⁴⁵ *Pravda*, 11 February 1979, p. 5.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Legvold, “The Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Affairs*, 68:1 (1988/1989), 82–98.

in the frame of what is known as the Afghan war, fought between 1978 and 1992¹⁴⁷. Beyond the failure to bring to power a sympathetic regime in Kabul, and the humiliation to having to reach a multilateral agreement with the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan to withdraw its forces, the Soviet Union's invasion was damaging of its image in the entire Muslim world. Years of engaging in promoting a 'healthy' image of the Soviet Union as the liberator of oppressed populations from the imperialist yoke; years spent advocating for the Middle East's countries independence and economic development; years of claims against Western powers' alleged interferences into those countries' internal affairs; all this was swiped away by the communist leader's aggression. Except for a few countries (Algeria, Syria, North Yemen and Libya), the rest of the Muslim world condemned the Soviet invasion and increasingly took an anti-Soviet stance. As much as the Soviet propaganda attempted to distract the Middle East and North Africa's governments' attention away from Afghanistan, betting on massive pro-Palestine propaganda¹⁴⁸, the fact remained that Soviet-Arab/Soviet-Middle East relations had worsened significantly. Such a worsening seemed to be irreversible in the 1980s and even more early 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet state and the end of the global project of communism.

Whereas the present chapter has offered a broad overview of three distinct phases of the Soviet Middle East policy, the following three chapters will all focus on what has been labelled here as the 'consolidation phase', going approximately from 1954 to 1966. It is crucial to analyse this period in-depth as it represents the launch of cooperation with countries of the Middle East and North Africa by the Soviet Union. Many of the Soviet strategies, the tactics, the 'ways' to do diplomacy with these countries have remained as distinctive traits for decades; indeed, they resemble to the contemporary Russia's Middle East policy. The three chapters will deal, separately, with the Egyptian, Iraqi and Syrian case study.

¹⁴⁷ Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, *The Afghanistan war and the breakdown of the Soviet Union*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

¹⁴⁸ Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East policy*, 112.

The Egyptian case-study, 1954-1958

On 23 July 1952, a coup d'état of the Free Officers Movement led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and Mohammed Naguib overthrew the rule of King Farouk. The "Egyptian Revolution", or "23 July Revolution" as it was also called, initiated a period of deep socio-political and economic transformations for the country. In a few years, the Free Officers managed to abolish all traces of the monarchical regime, establish a Republic and put an end to the British occupation. Gradually, Nasser took the leadership of the country and became a champion of nationalist policies based on the values of Arab nationalism and the principle of non-alignment at the international level¹⁴⁹. The new course undertaken by Egypt made it earn the interest of the Soviet Union, which increasingly identified Cairo as a potential ally and reliable partner among the confrontational states of the Middle East and North Africa. In fact, although the two parties had established official diplomatic relations back in 1943, sustained collaboration only flourished since the first half of the 1950s. On one side, the Soviets saw the Revolutionary Council in Egypt, Nasser's charismatic leadership and the theories of Arab nationalism as the emergence of a new, non-aligned political path among the developing countries. Egypt's refusal to enter into military alliances either with the Western camp or with countries of the Middle East (above all the Middle East Treaty Organisation, commonly known as the "Baghdad Pact", 1955) were particularly appreciated by the Soviets. On the other side, postcolonial Egyptian authorities, Nasser *in primis*, saw the Soviet Union as not only a political ally against the West's aggressiveness but a trustworthy provider of desperately needed know-how in the field of military industry, economic development and agro-industrial planning.

However, a mutual caution initially guided the Soviet rapprochement to Egypt. In particular, as they prepared to boost dialogue with Cairo, the Soviets' had to confront their enthusiasm with a different reality: Soviet officers on the ground frequently complained with the heads of both Moscow's Foreign Ministry and the Communist Party that Egypt was not answering Moscow's call for expanding bilateral economic and trade relations. For the Egyptians, strengthening a partnership with Moscow and the Soviet Socialist Republics would entail compromising relations with, above all, the United Kingdom and the United States. To the Soviets' complaint that Egypt was not doing

¹⁴⁹ James Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab nationalism and the United Arab Republic*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002.

enough to welcome their interest and support, the Egyptians authorities used to answer that London and Washington were making it clear that they would strangle Egypt in case its Government showed some rapprochement to Moscow. They were not pursuing an unfriendly or cautious policy towards the Soviet Union: on the contrary, Egyptian officers claimed, their thinking was “really directed towards the Soviet Union” but the risk to enter into open rivalry with Western powers was worth avoiding¹⁵⁰. Indeed, Egypt provides perhaps the most telling example of the interplay between Cold War rivalries and decolonisation processes in the Arab world.

Behind initial mistrust, however, the desire to intensify collaboration is apparent in the transcript of several increasingly frequent meetings amongst Soviet and Egyptian political leaders that are registered since early 1954. Both sides agreed to establish new forms of collaborations, in the belief that they would be of mutual benefit. This chapter attempts to investigate the nature and substance of such collaboration. The time-lapse of the analysis is 1954–1958. These years, it will be argued, were fundamental to build the Egyptian authorities’ trust in the Soviet expertise, know-how and good intentions, and thus the period that really set the basis for future – and increasingly deeper – collaboration. On the one hand, the Soviet-Egyptian case study will allow to get into details of the strategic political-economic relationship that bound Moscow to Egypt and the Nasser regime, one of the principal Soviet allies in the Arab world. On the other, more generally, it will permit to shed light on the global connections built up by the Soviet Union in the Cold War years and particularly in the context of the decolonisation process across the 1950s.

2.1. Soviet support in defence and security: Between arms supply and diplomacy

2.1.1. Egypt’s request for Soviet weapons

Between 1954 and 1956, Daniel Semyonovich Solod (*Даниил Семёнович Солод*, 1908–1988) served as the Soviet Ambassador to Egypt. Solod was an experienced diplomat and an Arabist by education¹⁵¹. After entering the Diplomatic service in 1937¹⁵², for a few years, he served as an officer of the central apparatus of the Foreign Ministry (*Центральный Аппарат, Народный Комиссариат Иностранных Дел СССР*) and then as an officer of the Soviet embassy in Yugoslavia. In 1941,

¹⁵⁰ № 123. Б69. Запись беседы посланника СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с посланником Египта в СССР аль-Масри. (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Envoy to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Egyptian Envoy to the USSR al-Masri”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 1 февраля 1954 г.

¹⁵¹ Даниил Семёнович Солод, *Дипломатический Словарь*, Том 3.

¹⁵² Coincidentally, in the same year, another person’s life path was being decided: Gamal Abdel Nasser’s, who was entering the military academy in Heliopolis, at that time a suburb outside Cairo. Years later, Solod and Nasser would have met in Cairo’s governmental palaces, respectively, as senior diplomat and the charismatic leader of the Egyptian republic, and they would be the advocates of Soviet-Egyptian friendly relationship.

Solod was assigned to the Soviet embassy in Teheran, where he served until 1943 when he was appointed Counsellor to Egypt (1943-1944). His most significant experience in the region was when he served as the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Syria and Lebanon concurrently, from 1944 to 1950, a post that owed him the place of Deputy Head of Department of the Near and Middle East at the Foreign Ministry from 1951 to 1953. When he returned to Egypt in 1953, first as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary before becoming Ambassador in 1954, his knowledge of the Arab world and the profound changes that it was undergoing was certainly in-depth and accurate. In particular, Egypt was emerging as the champion revolutionary country, the carrier of new values of Arab nationalism and Arab socialism¹⁵³. The revolution led by Muhammad Nagib and Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1952 had overthrown King Faruq. The years between 1952 and 1953 offered the time frame to consolidate the new internal power: an agrarian reform was conceptualised and put in place; the political system was reformed by abolishing all parties and replacing them with the Liberation Rally, appointed by the Revolutionary Command Council and which soon became associated with Nasser uniquely¹⁵⁴. Once he consolidated his position in power after the 1954 crisis, Nasser remained the sole and undisputed ruler in the Egyptian political landscape, and he accelerated an ambitious program of political, social and economic reforms aimed at creating a “socialist” system¹⁵⁵. On the external level, caught in between regional rivalries, coupled with the Cold War ones, the Egyptian leadership was defining its political orientation. In light of his diplomatic position, his knowledge and analytical skills Solod became one of the main initiators – if not the main one – of the Soviet-Egyptian collaboration.

On 1 February 1954, in one of his first visits as the new Ambassador to Cairo, Solod visited the envoy (*посланник*) of Egypt to the Soviet Union, Aziz al-Masri. Al-Masri, Solod reports in his recording of the visit, was requested by Nasser, then Deputy Prime Minister, to reach out to him in order to start a conversation on an urgent issue for his government: the need to receive arms supply from the Soviets. Such a request was part of a broader need for assistance in the security and defence domain, which the Egyptians felt to be desperately in need of, not only arms but diplomatic support as well. At the core of Egyptian concerns were three main events: the Israeli threat; foreign pressure on the Suez Canal; and the Baghdad Pact.

First, the Israeli threat to Egypt’s territorial sovereignty was growing. Israel advanced complaints to the Security Council about restrictions on Israel on the passage of goods through the

¹⁵³ Adeed Dawisha. *Arab nationalism in the twentieth century. From triumph to despair*. US: Princeton University Press, 2003.

¹⁵⁴ Massimo Campanini. *Storia dell’Egitto. Dalla conquista araba a oggi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017), 191.

¹⁵⁵ Campanini, *Storia dell’Egitto*, 199.

Suez Canal. Although the Egyptians believed, “according to the information available to them”¹⁵⁶, that Israel filed this complaint, not on its initiative, but because the UK and US forced it to do so to put further pressure on Egypt and push it to make concessions on negotiations with London on Suez, Israel’s actions were deemed extremely dangerous. The same day, right after visiting al-Masri, Solod was called for a visit also by the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mahmoud Fawzi (1952-1964), who wanted to bring this to the urgent attention of the Soviet Government. Solod reports of a cautious approach from the side of the Egyptian leader¹⁵⁷, stressing that Fawzi made a reservation that “he did not want to influence in any way the position of the Soviet Union in the Security Council in the event of an Israeli complaint”, but he asked that the Soviet government take an objective position and back Egypt in the Security Council, “since Egypt cannot commit what would be a suicide”¹⁵⁸. Second, and related to this, the British revindications over the Suez Canal and the UK troops’ protracted occupation. Between 1953 and 1954, Nasser had negotiated the UK troops’ withdrawal from the Canal, while remaining open to collaboration with London, which indeed kept the ownership of the Suez Canal Company. The UK support to Israel in its aggressive policy against Egypt, however, preoccupied Cairo (tensions will increase in 1956, when the UK refused to provide financial assistance to Egypt in the construction of the Aswan Dam, leading Cairo to nationalise the Company, provoking the UK-, France- and Israel-led aggression). Finally, the progressive formation of an anti-Soviet movement culminated in the Baghdad Pact (1955). The intention of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Pakistan, under the UK’s auspices, to create a third alliance in the Cold War between the West and the communist camp was vehemently opposed by Nasser and perceived as a threat to Egypt and the Arab world. In the name of the Arabs’ best interests, Nasser wanted to side openly, neither with the West nor with the USSR¹⁵⁹.

The Egyptian request for weapons supply was unprecedented. However, it did not seem to take Ambassador Solod by surprise. His quiet, prudent response to al-Masri suggests that the Soviets were entirely conscious of their primary interests in the North African country and even that a reflection had been made already on how to answer in case such a request would have had arrived. In his recording of the conversation, Solod reports his reaction to the Egyptian proposal:

¹⁵⁶ № 124. Б69. Запись беседы посланника СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с министром иностранных дел Египта Мм. Фаузи. (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Envoy to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt M. Fawzi”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 1 февраля 1954 г.

¹⁵⁷ № 124. Б69. Запись беседы посланника СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с министром иностранных дел Египта Мм. Фаузи. 1 февраля 1954 г.

¹⁵⁸ On that occasion, Solod had promptly informed the Soviet diplomatic headquarter about Fawzi’s message. The Soviet leadership in Moscow decided to support Egypt’s side in the Security Council. Reports of Egyptian gratitude for this gesture fill in the records of several conversations that occurred in the following weeks.

¹⁵⁹ Campanini, *Storia dell’Egitto*, 207.

I avoided talking about weapons and pointed out to him [al-Masri] that the issue of expanding economic ties between our two countries should not necessarily be limited to the arms trade. There are several other goods whose trade is no less important for both countries than the trade of weapons. However, I can say that during my stay in Cairo, the desire for such cooperation with the Soviet Union is not particularly noticeable on the part of the Egyptian authorities. In particular, if he wishes, I can translate several examples for him¹⁶⁰.

In fact, the sale of arms was not the Soviets' priority, or at least not the preferred path through which to boost relations with Nasser's Egypt. It will be discussed later in this chapter, in terms of economic cooperation, initially, Moscow was more interested in working at the Egyptian agrarian reform and the economic planning rather than the defence industry. Working on those matters would allow deeper collaboration of Soviet officials and technicians with Egyptian officials and technicians than buying and selling would do. Arms supply had more to do with business than development. Moreover, doing business in the defence industry was politically charged; it had dangerous implications, especially as Egypt was believed to have good ties with the West and, somehow, to be fascinated by Western leaders¹⁶¹.

Furthermore, following Stalin's death (1953), it took a while for the new leadership under Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev (1953-1964) to redefine its foreign policy trajectories. Under Stalin, the world was divided based on an 'international class struggle' between two opposed international systems, the bourgeois camp of the capitalist world and the proletariat of the communist camp. It was a zero-sum game in which one side had to prevail over the other: the coexistence of the two systems was unacceptable. In this game, no war was justified except for the proletarian war waged by the communists against imperialist capitalist forces. *Pravda's* archives are filled with examples of the Party's propaganda and even Stalin's personal propaganda on this¹⁶². Khrushchev overturned this

¹⁶⁰ N° 123. Б69. Запись беседы посланника СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с посланником Египта в СССР аль-Масри. ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Envoy to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Egyptian Envoy to the USSR al-Masri"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 1 февраля 1954 г.

¹⁶¹ Further in the recording mentioned above, Ambassador Solod noted as follows: "Al-Masri is trying to depict the current Egyptian rulers as advocates of the rapprochement with the Soviet Union in a purely 'eastern way'. In practice, however, the entire Egyptian ruling military élite emulates German and Italian fascism in everything. The other day, the Egyptian Minister of Social Affairs, Major Kamal el-Din Hussein, bluntly stated that he considers Hitler as the greatest figure of the century". N° 123. Б69. Запись беседы посланника СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с посланником Египта в СССР аль-Масри. 1 февраля 1954 г.

¹⁶² *Pravda's* first issue of May 1942, for instance, reports an article signed by the USSR's leader, Stalin, which reads as follows: "As for the international relations of our homeland, they have become stronger and have grown in recent years as never before. All freedom-loving peoples have united against German imperialism. Their gaze is turned to the Soviet

perspective and slowly introduced a new thinking in policy analysis: the coexistence of the two systems became not only doable but a crucial element in Soviet foreign policy objectives¹⁶³. Conditions in the Middle East and North Africa, including Egypt, were dramatically different from those of Stalin's era: most of these countries enjoyed good relations with the capitalist camp countries, despite being entrenched in decolonisation. A new model for the Soviet Union to engage with the region was necessary.

Although they do not belong to the socialist world system, these countries can draw on its achievements in building an independent national economy and raising their peoples' standards. Today, they need not go begging their former oppressors for modern equipment. They can get it in the socialist countries, free from any political or military obligations¹⁶⁴.

Despite the uncertainties, the Soviet Union eventually entered Egypt. And it did so through military cooperation, regardless of its initial attempt to push the cooperation discourse to themes of its more significant interest. At the centre of the increasingly frequent conversations between Soviet and Egyptian political leaders in 1954, Soviet support in Egypt's defence and security ranks as the main feature. Solod's negotiation efforts are nothing but the start, the very first sign of a sustained collaboration that would have lasted long in time.

On 1 March 1954, Minister Fawzi asked Solod to come over at the Ministry palace to convey that the day before, the 28th of February, a group of 70 Israeli soldiers had violated the Egyptian border in the Gaza area, gone 100 meters deep from this line and opened fire, using artillery and mortars¹⁶⁵. The attack caused deaths and wounded within Egyptian and Palestinian security forces alike, and the village where the Egyptian Army's command post was located went destroyed¹⁶⁶. The

Union. The heroic struggle waged by the peoples of our country for their freedom, honour, and independence evokes all progressive humanity's admiration. The peoples of all freedom-loving countries look at the Soviet Union as a force capable of saving the world from the Hitlerite plague. Among these freedom-loving countries, the first place is occupied by Great Britain and the United States of America, with which bonds of friendship and alliance bind us, and which are rendering your country more and more military assistance against the German fascist invaders". From: Joseph Stalin, 1 May 1942, Приказ № 130 Народную Комиссара Обороны, *Pravda*, No. 121 (8892). (p. 1)

¹⁶³ Hashim S.H. Behbehani. *The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism, 1917-1966* (UK: Routledge, 2016), 112.

¹⁶⁴ Nikita Khrushchev, 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, February 1956.

¹⁶⁵ № 158. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с Министром Иностранных Дел Египта М. Фаузи ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt Malt with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt M. Fawzi"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 1 марта 1955 г.

¹⁶⁶ Soviet documents report that, as a result of the clash, 38 people were killed, including one officer and 13 Egyptian soldiers and 24 Palestinian members of the National Guard; 30 more people were injured, including 14 Egyptians and 16 Palestinians.

Egyptian government attached great importance to Israel's aggression against its regular army force in the Gaza strip, violating the armistice signed in 1949¹⁶⁷. Especially, as it was perceived as an act of pressure by Israel on Egypt, pushed by the UK to abandon its position of not concluding military alliances with the Western powers – a policy that the Egyptian government pursued with determination –, and force it to join the Baghdad Pact.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, Nasser feared that the Anglo-Americans forces might grant their support to Israel and allow it to intensify its aggressive policy against Egypt; in such a crisis, they would have the opportunity to act as intermediaries and impose their favourite conditions on Egypt.

Faced with this escalation, Egypt asked for Soviet weapons more insistently. Soviet authorities began to see an opportunity that was worth catching. Until that moment, the USSR influence in the Middle East and North Africa was practically non-existent, and its partnership with the developing countries of this region was all new to build: military collaboration with Egypt could be a right way to initiate this path. Indeed, more than a lack of motivation was a lack of opportunities that had missed until that moment¹⁶⁹: apart from isolated examples, Arab governments were generally pro-Western in outlook. The intent to close ties with countries in this region was evident in a Foreign Ministry statement on the eve of Bandung, condemning the pressures imposed on Egypt (and Syria) to join the Baghdad Pact, enunciating the threat posed to Soviet security by Western military alliances trying to involve the Middle East countries, and stating the USSR's readiness "to support and develop cooperation with the countries of the Middle East and North Africa"¹⁷⁰. Furthermore, collaboration with Egypt fitted into the Soviet Union's broader 'African strategy' of fighting colonialist, imperialist forces. As I. Plyshyevsky, a *Pravda*'s special correspondent who was sent as an observer at the Bandung conference wrote:

The memoranda submitted to the conference by the Union of South Africa's and the countries of North Africa's indigenous delegations were distributed to the correspondents. They made a great impression. These documents, rich in factual material, provide irrefutable proof of the poverty, disenfranchisement, colonial oppression, and racial discrimination that exist both in the Union of South Africa and in the countries of

¹⁶⁷Hilde Heriksen Waage, "The Winner Takes All: The 1949 Island of Rhodes Armistice Negotiations Revisited", *The Middle East Journal*, 65:2 (2011), 279–304.

¹⁶⁸ Most commonly referred to as the "Turkish-Iraqi pact" in Soviet documents.

¹⁶⁹ Karen Dawisha. *Soviet Foreign Policy Towards Egypt* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1979), 9.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in: Karen Dawisha. *The Communist International, 1919-1943*. Vol. 3. (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 347.

North Africa. [...] The facts given in the memoranda of the African peoples' delegations are an indictment of imperialism¹⁷¹.

Efraim Karsh argues that the Soviet Union had little choices at its disposal to reverse this path and offer itself as a better model to the developing nations of the Middle East and North Africa: arms supply was the only field it could (attempt to) compete with the West¹⁷². As far as Egypt is concerned, evidence from archive documents suggests quite a different reality. Arms supply was not the preferred path chosen by the USSR, rather the easiest one, to which the Soviets had to adequate. Nasser's government desperately needed support in the military realm, which he put forward to any other form of collaboration. In Summer 1954, Ambassador Solod and Nasser had a long conversation, in which the former attempted to convince the latter that industrial development had to be taken as the Egyptian government priority over arms supply:

To my remark that Egypt should produce weapons itself, by developing the relevant industries first, in particular electrical and metal industries, in which the Soviet Union has already expressed its readiness to assist in, Nasser replied that the Egyptian government had already discussed this issue. But the development of heavy industry requires a long time, and the development of a military industry on its basis requires even more time. Moreover, the development of heavy industry requires huge funds, which Egypt has very little. Weapons are needed immediately. Without any hesitation, he asked me how the Soviet government has reacted to the proposal of the Egyptian government to purchase weapons from the Soviet Union. When I replied that I didn't have a reply about it, Nasser asked me to explore this with the Soviet government and get back to him¹⁷³.

In a way, Soviet primary interest in the development of the Egyptian industry was sacrificed for the sake of bilateral relations. A purely diplomatic calculus seems to have guided the Soviet decisions: if they seconded Egypt's request, their leverage in the country will increase, and this will place Soviet authorities in a better position to keep pushing for what the Soviet Union really wants. Not only

¹⁷¹ И. Плышевский. 23 April 1955. "Народы Африки Требуют Независимости" ("The Peoples of Africa Demand Independence"). *Правда*. No. 113 (13411). (p. 4)

¹⁷² Efraim Karsh, "Influence through arms supply. The Soviet Experience in the Middle East", *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, 6:1 (1986), 45–55.

¹⁷³ № 131. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с Премьер Министром Египта Г. Насером. ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt DS Solod with the Prime Minister of Egypt G Nasser"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 15 июня 1954 г.

negotiations on Soviet arms supply were therefore initiated, but such practice gradually became a major foreign policy instrument adopted by the Soviet Union to pursue its wider goals in developing countries and the Middle East and North Africa particularly. Nasser's person to take care of this process was the Deputy War Minister Hasan Rajab, who had already paid a tentative arms-buying tour to the USSR in December 1953 and now received specific instruction to contact the military *attaché* at the Soviet Embassy to start negotiating a deal¹⁷⁴. Documents reveal that many of the negotiation efforts among the two sides aimed to keep the deal's secrecy. Nasser feared that Egypt's economic ties with the Soviet Union could provoke a reaction by the US and UK. In a conversation with Solod, the Egyptian Minister for National Guidance Salah Salem (1953-1955), one of the persons charged by Nasser with the task to negotiate with the Soviets, claimed that the Egyptian government was afraid that if the US and UK would become aware of the negotiations, they could push Israel to attack Egypt. Then the existing regime in Egypt would come to an end¹⁷⁵. Furthermore, if they had to learn about the supply of Soviet weapons, the British may suspend theirs (30 jet planes and 20 tanks for which Egypt had already paid) and even suspend their troops' evacuation from the Suez Canal zone and extend the occupation indefinitely. Signals of warning were already arriving from the US and UK about such a rapprochement's dangerous consequences. Solod reports the words of the Egyptian Ambassador to Moscow al-Quni:

“If Egypt was sure that there would be an absolute secret about the purchase of weapons until the weapons arrived on the Egyptian territory, then it will purchase the necessary weapons from the Soviet Union with no further hesitation”. To this, I [Solod] remarked that the question of maintaining secrecy depends not only on us and the countries of the democratic camp but also on the Egyptian Government¹⁷⁶.

¹⁷⁴ N° 169. Б69. N° 169. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с Премьер-Министром Египта Г. Насером. (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Egyptian Prime Minister G. Nasser”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 21 мая 1955 г.

¹⁷⁵ N° 175. Б69. Из записи Беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с министром национальной ориентации и государственным министром по делам Судана Египта С. Салемом. (“From the recording of the Conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D. S. Solod with the Minister of National Orientation and the Minister of State for Sudan Affairs of Egypt With Salem”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 9 июня 1955 г.

¹⁷⁶ N° 185. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с послом Египта в СССР аль-Куни. (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Egyptian Ambassador to the USSR al-Kuni”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 18 июля 1955 г.

Egyptian authorities asked that negotiations were conducted not in Moscow but Prague, and they were given consent to do so. Czechoslovakia was thus used as an intermediary in order for Moscow to dissociate itself from the deal and to safeguard the temporary relaxation in Cold War tensions¹⁷⁷.

2.1.2. Growing Israeli threat and Western engagement

In summer 1955, Egyptian-Israel tensions escalated. On 14 June, in the demilitarised zone of El Auja, a contested area about 40 miles south of Gaza, an Israeli survey team started to undertake topographical surveys near the Quseima Road. The team was accompanied by an Egyptian liaison officer from El Auja, to guarantee that Egyptians soldiers working in the area would not fire on them. At the last minute, a sergeant from the Egyptian security forces decided to join the mission: the Israeli liaison officer objected to his presence. An argument mounted, but the United Nations military observer decided to drive to El Auja with the whole team. On their way, however, the Israeli people accompanying the surveyors took the Egyptian jeep by force and disappeared to Kibbutz Xiot; they removed and detained the Egyptian liaison officer until the car was away¹⁷⁸. This episode was considered by the Egyptians as a serious interference with their military personnel working legitimately within the demilitarised zone in accordance with the General Armistice Agreement of 1949. The Egyptian military Chief of Staff immediately made an official request to the Israelis to arrange for the release of the officer and the return of the jeep, and warned them against any retaliation which might set off a chain of incidents in the area with the most serious results.

The incident was eventually sorted and the liaison officer released, but the episode was taken by the Egyptians as a confirmation of increased aggressive attitude on the part of Israel. Indeed, the United States intelligence had been collecting evidence that Israel was moving troops into the Gaza area, and that there were discussions in the Israeli cabinet whether to take over the area by force¹⁷⁹. The American, British and French diplomacy activated immediate talks among them. The Americans believed that evidence of the Israeli plans should have been brought to the attention of the Security Council. Differently, the Europeans were persuaded that this would have escalated tensions further

¹⁷⁷ Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy Towards Egypt*, 11.

¹⁷⁸ VR 1092/171. 213. Israel-Egypt. Incident on June 14. Text of press communiqué issued by Truce Supervision Organisation about incident during which Israelis from survey party took Egyptian jeep by force and drove away to Kibbutz Xiot and three Israelis forcibly detained the Egyptian liaison officer while car drove away. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 16, 1955.

¹⁷⁹ VR 1092/172. 478. Israel-Egypt. Gaza situation. Secretary of State reports conversation with Mr. Dulles and M. Pinay. US proposal that it would deter the Israelis if Security Council was alerted in San Francisco. French and UK objections to proposal. The three permanent representatives to United Nations to meet further on this. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 17, 1955.

and certainly increased the chances that an open conflict would burst; better it was to talk to the two parties and urge them to talk. This was even more urgent as, while Western agents debated on the better solution to take, however, the Egyptians were taking a few firm steps. On June 14 and 15, Cairo Radio broadcasted statements by the Libyan Prime Minister Ben Halim that, if Israel attacked Egypt, Libya would not stand by with its hands bound¹⁸⁰. The expression of solidarity from the Libyan leader does not surprise: the possibility of a large-scale Israeli reprisal in Gaza, which might lead to war with Egypt, would have had serious repercussions on the entire Arab world.

Among the Arab countries, Israel's aggressive plans posed significant threat to another one of its neighbours: Jordan. In fact, the British understanding with regard to the escalation in Gaza was that Jordan was risking to fall in a trap. Their appreciation was that the Israelis had little real interest in taking over the Gaza area, as their actual objective was the territory held by Jordan to the West of the Jordan River. By attacking Gaza, they were hoping to lure Jordan into going to Egypt's aid, thus making an excuse to counter-attack, push the Arab Legion over the Jordan River¹⁸¹. Whether this was true or not, the Jordanian Government had announced that it would not remain neutral if Israel continued aggression on Gaza, and that Jordanians would carry out their duty to Egypt and the Arab states. Indeed, frequent incidents occurred at the Israeli-Jordanian border too through spring-summer of 1955. The British agents reported detailed lists of infiltrations and border crossing cases on a monthly basis. The majority of these was carried out by Jordanians, and included thefts or attempted thefts; shepherds and herds crossing the demarcation line; Arab legion crossing the demarcation line; stone-throwing across the demarcation line; destruction of demarcation like markers; destruction of crops; illegal cultivations; unidentified fire; and others¹⁸². These incidents caused at least 6 casualties and wounded among the Israeli military¹⁸³. In response, the Jordanians reported Israelis to open fire

¹⁸⁰ VR 1092/173. 59. Israel-Egypt. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 17, 1955.

¹⁸¹ In fact, UK officials tried to convince the Jordanians not to take any actions. Although Jordan had obligations to Egypt under the Arab League Collective Security Pact, that was no reason for falling into the Israeli trap. They told that they were fully aware of Israel's dangerous policy of organised reprisal, and they were worried about the situation in Gaza, but, at the same time, the Egyptians were not entirely blameless. That was perhaps due to the inefficiency and lack of control in the Egyptian army, but several provocative actions had been carried out by the Egyptians too, including mine lying. From: VR 1092/174. Gaza situation and the implications of the Anglo-Jordanian Treaty. Brief for the Minister of State in talks with the King of Jordan. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 16, 1955. (p. 1-2).

¹⁸² VR 1092/185. Colonel Gammon's monthly report on incidents. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May, June, July, August and September of 1955.

¹⁸³ VR 1092/182. 220. Israel-Jordan. Incident on June 20/21. Colonel Brevster's information does not confirm Jordanian version of the incident. There is no evidence of incursion by Israel Platoon into Jordan or firing by Israelis over the D/Z but Jordan troops did fire into Israel. Further incident on June 21/22 – one Israeli wounded. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 22, 1955.

directed at villages, adjacent land and Jordan citizens from across the demarcation line and, in some occasions, Israeli aircrafts flying over the Arab territory.

As Western diplomacy was doing its job, the Soviets gave a different reading to the events. On 18 June 1955, the Soviet Ambassador to Israel Aleksander Abramov (*Александр Абрамов*, 1954–1958) wrote a letter to Vyacheslav Mikhaylovich Molotov (*Вячеслав Михайлович Молотов*), then the USSR's Minister of Foreign Affairs and First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, to give him advice on the situation¹⁸⁴. In his view, the Egyptian-Israeli escalation was connected to Western meddling, and particularly the UK and US attempts to draw the countries of the Middle East into Turkish-Iraqi Pact. The Western powers were exerting pressure on Syria, Lebanon and Jordan in order to force them to join the pact; at the same time, the US intended “to supplement this pact with bilateral military agreements with Egypt and Israel”¹⁸⁵. Solod, the Soviet Ambassador to Cairo, shared the same reading of events. December of 1955 was the last month of his serving as the Soviet Ambassador to Cairo. In a letter to the Foreign Ministry in Moscow, he gave his final report of the situation on the grounds. he explained that London and Washington had significantly increased pressure on Egypt and other Arab countries “in connection with the change in the foreign policy of the Egyptian Government”¹⁸⁶. Such change was indeed expressed in Egypt's refusal to participate in blocs with non-Arab countries; in its rapprochement to the Soviet Union and other countries of the socialist camp, and the acquisition of weapons from Czechoslovakia. To exert pressure, Solod explained, the UK and US used both diplomatic measures and the threat of Israel's military action against Egypt:

Kermit Roosevelt, a Special representative of the US President, came to Cairo and directly told the Egyptians that if Egypt did not refuse to fulfil the agreement on the supply of weapons, then the US Government would instruct the Sixth American Navy to block the port of Alexandria, or encourage Israel to launch military operations against Egypt. [...]

¹⁸⁴ № 178. Б69. Письмо посла СССР в Израиле А.Н. Абрамова первому замес председателя совета министров СССР, министру иностранных дел СССР В.М. Молотову. (“Letter from the USSR Ambassador to Israel A.N. Abramov to the first deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR V.M. Molotov”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 18 июня 1955 г.

¹⁸⁵ № 178. Б69. Письмо посла СССР в Израиле А.Н. Абрамова первому замес председателя совета министров СССР, министру иностранных дел СССР В.М. Молотову. 18 июня 1955 г.

¹⁸⁶ № 226. Б69. Письмо посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода в МИД СССР “к вопросу Арабо-Израильских отношений” (“Letter of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod to the USSR Foreign Ministry ‘on the issue of Arab-Israeli relations’”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 4 Декабря 1955 г.

In addition, Israeli Ministers Dov Yosef and Moshe Sharett made official statements about the need for a preventive war by Israel against Egypt and other Arab countries¹⁸⁷.

In fact, The US Representative's visit to Cairo followed the proposals made by the US Secretary of State, Dulles, for the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict (26 August 1955). These proposals contained different points. First, to resolve the issue of Palestinian refugees by repatriating them in Arab countries of the Middle East, with compensations paid to them by the Israeli Government, after having provided the Israeli Government with an international loan. Second, most importantly, they offered a framework for security in the Middle East that included a protagonist role of the US. Security in the area, according to Dulles' plans, should have been ensured "by collective means", that is with the participation of the US in formal agreements to prevent attempts to "change by force the border between Israel and its Arab neighbours"¹⁸⁸. Furthermore, the US was also resuming attempts to impose Johnson's plan on the use of waters of the Jordan River, which Arab countries had repeatedly rejected. Through the implementation of this plan, the US was seeking to seize key positions in the construction of a common irrigation system between Israel and Arab countries and seize key positions in the economic control and subordination of these countries to the UN. Solod wrote to Moscow that Dulles' proposals were sharply criticised in Egypt and other Arab countries, as they ran against the UN decisions on the Palestine issue of 1947, and were also seen as an attempt by the US to revive an aggressive Middle Eastern military bloc under the guise of an agreement to guarantee the borders of Israel and Arab countries¹⁸⁹.

Soviet propaganda also placed the spotlight on the West's plans against Egypt. On 8 November 1955, *Pravda* commented the UN General Assembly's extraordinary session meeting to further consider "the issue of the aggression of England, France and Israel against Egypt"¹⁹⁰. A delegation of 19 Asian and African countries was present and submitted a new draft resolution to the General Assembly for consideration. The General Assembly called on Israel to immediately withdraw its forces beyond the lines established by the truce agreement of 24 February 1949, and called on the

¹⁸⁷ № 226. Б69. Письмо посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода в МИД СССР "к вопросу Арабо-Израильских отношений". 4 Декабря 1955 г.

¹⁸⁸ № 226. Б69. Письмо посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода в МИД СССР "к вопросу Арабо-Израильских отношений". 4 Декабря 1955 г.

¹⁸⁹ Besides, Solod believed that the 'Wester front' was somewhat dividing. The attempts of American diplomacy to take the settlement of the Palestinian issue into their hands were causing serious concerns to Britain, fearing that such a settlement of the Palestinian issue would lead to a strengthening of the US position in the Middle East, to the detriment of the Crown's interest. From: № 226. Б69. Письмо посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода в МИД СССР "к вопросу Арабо-Израильских отношений". 4 Декабря 1955 г.

¹⁹⁰ "Дело Египта – это дело объединенных нации и всех свободолюбивых народов" ("The cause of Egypt is the cause of the United Nations and all freedom-loving peoples"), *Pravda*, November 8, 1955.

UK and France to immediately withdraw their armed forces from the Egyptian territory. “The cause of Egypt is the cause of the United Nations and all freedom-loving peoples”, titled *Pravda*’s article.

Therefore, due to escalating Western plans, the Ambassador in Tel Aviv wrote to Minister Molotov, the political situation in the area was very unstable, and the Soviets had a responsibility to intervene. Therefore, he suggested Moscow to do as follows:

In order to prevent such a development of events and to support the anti-imperialist tendencies that have recently intensified in these countries, I would consider it useful, in the nearest future, to enter into direct negotiations between the Government of the Soviet Union and the Government of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel about how to strengthen peace and security in the region of the Middle East. To this purposed, I consider it necessary to send a Soviet delegation to each of these countries, consisting of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, the representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the head of the Observatory and an interpreter. The official purpose of the visit should be announced to get acquainted with the orientation in these countries and establish direct contact with their leaders, in the interests of peace and security¹⁹¹.

During talks with the Arab leaders and the Israeli ones, Abramov believed, the Soviet officials could have showed them a plan for the neutralisation of the area, in accordance with the “Statement of the USSR Foreign Ministry on security in the Middle East” issued on 16 April 1955. At the same time, Moscow could have used the occasion to discuss issues of trade, economic assistance, and even discuss the opening of diplomatic ties with Jordan and Saudi Arabia¹⁹². Regardless of the concrete results of these possible talks, Abramov believed, a Soviet delegation’s trip to these countries would have had a positive significance, as it would have helped strengthen the positions of the neutralists in the countries of the Middle East and would counterbalance the policy of pressure from the US and the UK towards these countries.

By the end of June 1955, the situation in Gaza seemed to have improved. British and American agents had produced evidence that tension in Israel had decreased and there were indications that the

¹⁹¹ № 178. Б69. Письмо посла СССР в Израиле А.Н. Абрамова первому замес председателя совета министров СССР, министру иностранных дел СССР В.М. Молотову. 18 июня 1955 г.

¹⁹² Soviet-Jordanian diplomatic relations were only established in 1963, while Soviet-Saudi relations never officially started, as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia only opened up to Russia after in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Government was trying to lower the temperature¹⁹³. In Gaza, there was a fair amount of Israeli military activity, but nothing inconsistent with normal training and nothing to indicate the imminence of a large-scale attack. At the United Nations Commemorative Meeting of 17 June in the New York's Headquarters, the Secretary General expressed reassuring words; after checking up on alarmist reports of Israeli intentions, there was now no reason to believe in the imminent risk of an Israeli attack¹⁹⁴. Despite improved, the overall security situation, however, remained precarious and the Soviet-Egyptian arms deal continued.

2.1.3. The Prague agreement, September 1955

In August 1955, armed Israeli units attacked a part of Gaza, a kind of incidents that were not taking place for a long time. Nasser believed that the attack was sponsored by the UK to divert Egypt's attention away from Sudan, where a civil rebellion was growing threatening the British-Egyptian rule, and prevent Egypt from taking measures that would pacify the Sudanese situation. The British provocations in Gaza gave a further boost to negotiations with the Soviets, prompting in Nasser the desire to defend his country at best: aggressive actions against Egypt will stop, he believed, if the British see the presence of a well-equipped army. This circumstance led him to boost the demands that Egypt was advancing to Moscow for over a year, asking the Soviet government to speed up the delivery of Czechoslovak weapons produced under Soviet license, which was already under negotiation in Prague¹⁹⁵. As it's written in Solod's recording of a conversation with the Director of Nasser's Cabinet Ali Sabri held on 22 August:

First of all, the Egyptian government asks to supply Egypt with transport planes and bombers in any quantity and in the shortest possible time. The Egyptian government asks that the planes be delivered to Egypt in the summer by Soviet pilots who can land at the Cairo airport 'Almaza'. The urgent delivery of Soviet weapons to Egypt, especially aircrafts, is necessary, according to the Egyptian government, in order to put the British

¹⁹³ VR 1092/180. 15: Gaza. Israel-Egypt. Addressed to the United Kingdom Delegation San Francisco. Telegram No. 22 of June 21. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 21, 1955.

¹⁹⁴ VR 1092/187. Extract from record of conversation between Secretary of State and the Secretary General of the United Nations. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 17, 1955.

¹⁹⁵ N° 184. Б69. Справка отдела стран ближнего и среднего востока МИД СССР Г.Т. Зайцева "к поездке товарища Шепилова Д.Т. в Египет". ("Certificate of the Department of the Near and Middle East of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR G.T. Zaitsev 'for the trip of Comrade Shepilov D.T. to Egypt'."). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 18 июля 1955 г.

before the accomplished fact of the possibility of serious resistance from the Egyptian army. Besides, Egypt needs transport planes so that in case of an agreement with the Sudanese government on the need to send Egyptian troops to the southern provinces of Sudan, the Egyptian government can transfer its troops to southern Sudan on transport planes [...]¹⁹⁶.

A week later, the Soviet delegation in Prague authorised to go ahead with the supply of armaments, although it reserved the right to think about it for another week regarding the sale of tanks. A few days later, an agreement was finalised that will be signed in Prague (on 12 September). Part of the agreement reads as follows:

- “1) The Soviet side agrees to make payments for the supply of weapons to Egypt through commodity deliveries with a loan of 2% per annum. The list of commodity supplies is proposed to include cotton, rice, raw leather and artificial silk yarn;
- 2) The Soviet side agrees to supply Egypt also with tanks. The types of tanks will be negotiated in Prague with the Egyptian delegation;
- 3) The Soviet side agrees to deliver weapons as soon as technically possible”¹⁹⁷.

The first Soviet weapons supply agreement in the Arab world was thus signed with Egypt in September 1955. The agreement's conditions were found to be very favourable by the Egyptians, who praised “especially the supply of aircrafts and the agreement's condition of paying one-fifth of the cost of supplies in pounds sterling”¹⁹⁸. Nevertheless, two elements were still preoccupying Nasser. The first was the Soviet reluctance to provide for heavier weaponry, particularly IS-3 (ИС-3) heavy tanks, two destroyers and two submarines, that were in fact excluded from the Prague negotiation agreement. The Egyptian Government was in dire need to obtain those weapons to improve its

¹⁹⁶ N° 192. Б69. И записи беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с директором кабинета премьер-министра Египта А. Сабри. (“And recordings of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Director of the Cabinet of the Prime Minister of Egypt A. Sabri”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 22 августа 1955 г.

¹⁹⁷ N° 196. Б69. Из записи беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с директором кабинета премьер-министра Египта А. Сабри. (“From the recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Director of the Cabinet of the Prime Minister of Egypt A. Sabri”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 4 сентября 1955 г.

¹⁹⁸ N° 201. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с премьер-министром Египта Г. Насером. (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Prime Minister of Egypt G. Nasser”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 15 сентября 1955 г.

security and, at the same time, re-balance security relations in the Middle East: Israel was receiving large quantities of weapons from both the US and UK, and Egyptian forces would not be able to repel an Israeli attack if under-equipped.

The second, and most important, was Nasser's fear of repercussions from the UK and US once they would discover about the Soviet-Egyptian negotiations when, on 25 October 1955, the first batches of Soviet weapons were expected to be delivered. The British agents had been investigating on the Soviet-Egyptian talks for a while, and they had already produced some evidence that negotiations on a major arms supply were being reached. On 15 June, the British embassy in Amman had obtained the following information leaked by the Jordan Military Attaché in Cairo, who was also a member of the Arab League Military Committee:

“The Egyptians declared that in approximately four months, the situation might change. In this period, they hope to get two million pounds worth of heavy equipment from Czechoslovakia and this would enable them to put two fully equipped infantry divisions and one armoured brigade on the Israeli frontier. This sounds less like an equipment programme than the sort of talk with which the Egyptian leaders might hope to maintain the morale of their army and Arab allies. But perhaps there is some element of truth in it, which either Cairo or Prague (to whom we are sending copies of this letter) can confirm. We are also sending copies to the British Middle East Office at Nicosia”¹⁹⁹.

As for the US, over the summer of 1955 Nasser had been receiving pressure about his increased talks with the Soviets. On 20 June, the US Ambassador Henry Byroade had a long talk with Nasser in the course of which, he reported to his British colleagues, the Egyptian President had expressed annoyance at having received representations from Her Majesty's Ambassador concerning his alleged intention to buy arms from the Soviet Union. Nasser reportedly admitted that was “merely an idea”, which was not even discussed with Minister of Foreign Affairs and that the Egyptians had only “at some level opened the question” with the Soviet Embassy in Cairo²⁰⁰. Nasser also commented, somewhat ingenuously, to Byroade that he saw advantage to everyone in getting weapons out of

¹⁹⁹ VR 1092/183. 1199/34/55. Israel-Egypt. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Colonel Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1955.

²⁰⁰ VR 1092/178. 184. Israel-Egypt. US Ambassador's further conversation with Colonel Nasser who expressed annoyance at H.M. Ambassador's representations concerning his alleged intentions of buying arms from Russia. Said it was merely an idea, but did say that the Egyptian at some level had opened question with Soviet Embassy in Cairo. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Colonel Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 21, 1955.

Soviet hands in exchange for cotton of which Egypt was holding too much. “You can imagine”, Nasser said to Ambassador Solod later on “in that very moment, everything will immediately be known from Alexandria to Aswan”²⁰¹. To avoid this, *Pravda* reported an announcement of Prime Minister Nasser on 29 September, stating that an agreement was signed between Egypt and Czechoslovakia²⁰². Between 20-21 October, the Soviet transport ship Krasnodar (*Краснодар*) made its entrance directly to the military port of Alexandria accompanied by an Egyptian ship²⁰³.

The first programs of retraining (*переподготовка*) were also launched, decided by Moscow in coordination with Major Abdel Hakim Amer, then Ministry of Defence. The Egyptians particularly appreciated the availability of the soviets to this task: Amer repeatedly expressed his gratitude to the Soviet government, saying that Soviet instructors had won the deep sympathy and respect of the Egyptian Army with their high skills, exceptional results in their work and friendly relations with the Egyptians²⁰⁴. Egyptian authorities, including the chain of command’s highest representatives, paid frequent visits to the USSR between 1955 and 1958. In Shepilov’s report of his conversation with Minister Amer, to whom an invitation to the Soviet Union has just been issued, Amer replied as follows:

Amer cordially thanked for the invitation and said that he would certainly use it as soon as he had the opportunity to go to Moscow, which he will visit not as a guest, but as a student, to get friendly advice and to borrow our experience in building and training the army. I told him that we would be happy to show him our academies, equipment, introduce him to the combat training of troops and provide any possible assistance that he would find useful. I added that at any time and for any period, alone or with a group of generals and officers, officially or unofficially, the Minister of War can come to Moscow where he will be received fraternally. I recommended that Major Amer keep in

²⁰¹ № 201. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. солода с премьер-министром Египта Г. Насером. 15 сентября 1955 г.

²⁰² “Заявление премьер-министра Египта”. *Правда*. 1955. № 272 (13В70) (р. 3)

²⁰³ № 210. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с премьер-министром Египта Г. Насером. (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt DS Solod with the Prime Minister of Egypt G Nasser”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 18 октября 1955 г.

²⁰⁴ № 254. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел СССР Д.Т. Шепилова с военным министром Египта генерал майором А. Америком. (“Recording of the conversation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR D.T. Shepilov with the Minister of War of Egypt Major General A. Amer”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 18 июня 1956 г.

touch with our military *attachés* on this issue and, through him, inform Moscow in advance to programme the visit²⁰⁵.

Soviet support in building a well-equipped and well-trained army was of tremendous importance to Egypt, since the armed forces were perceived as the 'backbone' of a developing country. In Nasser's analysis, the army was even the interpreter of popular will: the people wanted the Revolution, but they could not lead it²⁰⁶. The army did it. A wide range of scholarship has outlined how arms trade was used by the USSR as the privileged tool to establish close and substantial economic collaboration with political elites in Arab postcolonial countries, where the military was often crucial to the survival of weak, newly established elites²⁰⁷.

It is therefore in Egypt that the Soviet Union concentrated its efforts in the Middle East and where its presence, in the first half of the 1950s, was most significant. The arms deal of September 1955 gave an unprecedented boost to Soviet-Egyptian cooperation, and Soviet ties with Nasser intensified. In August of 1955, Nasser accepted the Soviet Government's invitation to visit Moscow in spring the following year. The Egyptian state-owned newspaper *Al Gomhuria* commented that should not have surprised close observers of Egyptian foreign policy, which was directed towards the supreme goal of peace and peoples' independence. "Nasser had gone to Bandung, had opposed military alliances and would go anywhere and speak to anyone in the cause of peace"²⁰⁸. For the Egyptian state-oriented press, the projected visit to Moscow was therefore a proof of Egypt's independent foreign policy. On the contrary, the Westerners considered it as fresh evidence that Egypt was leaving it open to the Soviet intention to have closer relations with the Middle East governments²⁰⁹. In fact, the news had caused concerns in the United States, as Nasser was one of the

²⁰⁵ № 254. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел СССР Д.Т. Шепилова с военным министром Египта генерал майором А. Амером. 18 июня 1956 г.

²⁰⁶ Campanini, *Storia dell'Egitto*, 197–198.

²⁰⁷ See, among others: Dmitryshin Basil and Cox Frederick J., *The Soviet Union and the Middle East 1917-1985: A Documentary Record of the Fertile Crescent Arabs*, Kingston Press, 1987; Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha, *The Soviet Union in the Middle East. Policy and Perspectives*, The Royal Institute for International Affairs, London, 1982; Robert Cassen (ed.), *Soviet Interests in the Third World*, Beverly Hills (CA) – Sage Publications, London, 1985; Robert Freedman, *Soviet Policy Toward the Middle East Since 1970*, Praeger Press, 1975; Margot Light, *The Soviet Theory of International Relations*, New York; Palgrave, 1988; Moshe Efrat, *Superpowers and Client States in the Middle East: The Imbalance of Influence*, London: Routledge, 1991; Vadislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire. The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, Chapel Hill: The University of Chapel Hill Press, 2007.

²⁰⁸ JE 10338/2. African Department. Egypt and Sudan. Visit of Colonel Nasser to Moscow. Addressed to Foreign Office Saving telegram no. 164 of August 11. FO 317/113786. Political relations between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 11, 1955.

²⁰⁹ JE 10338/2. African Department. Egypt and Sudan. Visit of Colonel Nasser to Moscow. Addressed to Foreign Office Saving telegram no. 164 of August 11. FO 317/113786. Political relations between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 11, 1955.

leading world statesmen and would be the first Arab leader to visit the Soviet capital²¹⁰. The United Nations diplomatic circles too, the newspaper argued, considered the visit as evidence that the Soviet Union recognised Egypt to be a country struggling for world peace without attaching itself to any camp. Indeed, *Akhbar* specified, the Egyptian Government and people did not believe in communism: but communism was one thing, the Soviet Union as a state was another²¹¹.

In fact, while the Prague Agreement undeniably served to bound Egypt to Moscow, it never resulted in a convergence of political views among Soviet and Egyptian policy-makers²¹². In this regard, the British secret agents collected interesting information. During a private conversation of a British official with the Yugoslav Ambassador to London, Vladimir Velebit, held in late November 1955, the former reported he had evidence that the Soviet Government was bringing pressure to bear on Nasser on a number of issues, among which the demand that the Communist Party should be given a free run in Egypt. “Nasser”, the official commented, “was a man who did not seem to realise the danger of putting his head into the Russian jaws”²¹³. As a personal note, Velebit added that the Russians were being “rather silly”: a secret Communist Party in Egypt would, in his opinion, be a more effective instrument of Russian policy than an overt one²¹⁴. While Moscow certainly attempted to raise the communist question with Nasser, however, in the analysed period a real political discussion was not on the table. The Egyptians had made it clear that their initial caution was moved precisely by the risk for Egypt to lean towards socialist political sphere of influence, a socialism ‘with Soviet characteristics’, and the Soviets avoided to enter too much into this subject. Furthermore, Nasser’s antipathy for communism and his suppression of local communists’ activities did not cease; it was evident in the Arab leader statements that cooperation with the Soviets did not come along with communism. On the other side, the Soviets seemed disposed to close an eye on it, for the sake of economic cooperation.

²¹⁰ JE 10338/2. African Department. Egypt and Sudan. Visit of Colonel Nasser to Moscow. Addressed to Foreign Office Saving telegram no. 164 of August 11. FO 317/113786. Political relations between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 11, 1955.

²¹¹ JE 10338/2. African Department. Egypt and Sudan. Visit of Colonel Nasser to Moscow. Addressed to Foreign Office Saving telegram no. 164 of August 11. FO 317/113786. Political relations between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 11, 1955.

²¹² Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy Towards Egypt*, 12.

²¹³ JE 10338/4. African Department. Egyptian and Sudan. Egyptian-Russian relations. FO 317/113786. Political relations between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. November 29, 1955.

²¹⁴ JE 10338/4. African Department. Egyptian and Sudan. Egyptian-Russian relations. FO 317/113786. Political relations between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. November 29, 1955.

2.1.4. International backing: The nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company

Since 1956, tensions around the Suez Canal arose, and, especially, the European-Israeli collaboration threatened Arab countries of the Middle East²¹⁵. At the beginning of the year, as Solod was called back to service in Moscow, Yevgeny Dmitryevich Kiselev was appointed the new USSR Ambassador to Egypt. On 11 May (1956), Kiselev had a long conversation with Nasser, who reiterated his gratitude to the Soviet Government for the military support, which had strengthened Egypt's national security and Cairo's image regionally and internationally. Moving from a successful military cooperation, what the Egyptian President now expected from the Soviet Union was diplomatic support in the negotiations with foreign powers involved in the management of the Suez Canal, particularly the British and the French, who had a stake in the Suez Canal Company. Nasser stated to Ambassador Kiselev that he was confident "in the position of the Soviet Government in negotiations with the British", as he "knew and understood" the principles of Soviet policy²¹⁶.

In fact, Egypt's view on the regional situation was clear: the main danger in the Middle East was not Israel, but the UK's desire to preserve its sphere of influence at any cost, therefore, to extend its colonial-like control over the Suez Canal at the expenses of Egypt's sovereignty and sovereign territorial rights. The Soviet Ambassador reported to Moscow the following extract of the conversation with President Nasser:

Nasser said: "Fighting for its spheres of influence, Britain exploits Israel by selling it weapons, while at the same time it offers Arab countries its protection from Israel. To this end, they slander Egypt, belittling its military capabilities and achieving some success, for instance in Lebanon, where the Army Chief of Staff Shehab openly stated that he did

²¹⁵ A proof that of this was Syria's growing preoccupation not to be sufficiently equipped in the case of a major Israeli attack. On 8 January 1956, Solod paid a visit to Nasser for what he thought would be just a courtesy visit in connection with his imminent return to Moscow. Instead, the President caught the Soviet officials by surprise, as he informed him that he had just received a letter from the Syrian President al-Quwatli with the request to buy arms from Czechoslovakia for Syria to the amount of £10 million, whose payments could have been compensated by supplying Syrian goods. The reason why al-Quwatli referred to Nasser and not to the Czech authorities directly, was that there was too strong opposition among Syrian small entrepreneurs and large capitalists to the countries of the democratic camp. These would have never accepted the Damascus government's decision to get closer to socialist countries; on the contrary, they would have used Syria's direct acquisition of such arms to cause serious problems to al-Quwatli's rule. Nasser had found these arguments convincing, and indeed a special Syrian delegation had already arrived in Cairo on 7 January 1956, bringing a detailed list of weapons needed, mostly jet planes, tanks and artillery. Nasser asked Solod to inform the Soviet government. From: № 230. Б69. Из записи беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с премьер-министром Египта Г. Насером. ("From the recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Prime Minister of Egypt G. Nasser"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 8 января 1956 г.

²¹⁶ № 247. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Египте Э.Д. Киселева в МИД СССР ("Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt Ed Kiselev to the USSR Foreign Ministry"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 11 мая 1956 г.

not believe in Egypt's strength. In order to prevent England from seducing some Arab countries with its protection from Israel, we, Egypt, declare that any Israeli attack on the Arab state of Egypt will be considered as an attack on its territory. To resist England, a strong Egypt is needed, and a strong Egypt is what the English are most afraid of". At this point, Nasser said a phrase, the meaning of which was: do not put us under the power of the British, help us become strong, and then the Arab world will be able to resist British imperialism²¹⁷.

Among other signs of Western powers' meddling into the Middle East, Nasser also mentioned a "difficult battle" that he was fighting with Saudi Arabia, where King Saud was suspicious of Egypt leaning to danger of the communist contagion. Nasser repeatedly told him that, from the observation of many Soviet delegations that came to Egypt, he himself was convinced that "the Soviets were not engaged in communist propaganda (!)" and that the Arabs had nothing to fear²¹⁸. However, according to Nasser the matter was simpler: the Saudis were under strong pressure from Washington, which, having bribed the King advisers with large sums of money, frightened the King by refusing to support him in the dispute with England if he did not behave as the US needed. "Hence", Nasser concluded, "the policy of closed doors for the USSR and other countries friendly to the Soviet Union"²¹⁹. Nasser went on speaking in detail about the Egyptian radio propaganda against the British occupiers. The power of this propaganda, he stated, was that for the first time in the history of Africa, an official radio station expressed in its native language what the peoples of the African colonies thought and what they dreamt about.

In the Soviet official narrative about the escalating situation of 1956, the Western powers' interests over the Canal were motivated by the desire both to exploit foreign lands for their benefit, and to involve Egypt in aggressive military alliances²²⁰. "Under the guise of helping against the non-existent Soviet danger", the British especially had tried to impose their military assistance on Egypt, with a view to subjugate the Egyptian armed forces and thus restore the domination of their colonial. Having failed in their attempts, as Egypt neither joined military alliances (i.e. the Baghdad Pact) nor restrained from asking for military support elsewhere (i.e. the Soviet Union), *Pravda* wrote, the Western powers had undertaken a new manoeuvre. The UK and US governments offered to assist the

²¹⁷ N° 247. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Египте Э.Д. Киселева в МИД СССР ("Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt Ed Kiselev to the USSR Foreign Ministry"). 11 мая 1956 г.

²¹⁸ N° 247. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Египте Э.Д. Киселева в МИД СССР ("Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt Ed Kiselev to the USSR Foreign Ministry"). 11 мая 1956 г.

²¹⁹ N° 247. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Египте Э.Д. Киселева в МИД СССР ("Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt Ed Kiselev to the USSR Foreign Ministry"). 11 мая 1956 г.

²²⁰ "Египет сам вершит свою судьбу" ("Egypt decides its own destiny"), *Pravda*, July 29, 1956.

Egyptian government in the construction of the Aswan Dam on the Nile. “It goes without saying that the ruling circles of the USA and England, taking this step, did not care at all about the interests of the Egyptians. They hoped to use this economic aid as a means of political pressure on Egypt: in return, they demanded that Egypt changed its foreign policy and support the aggressive plans of Western powers in the Middle East”²²¹. It was when Egypt refused to fall into this trap, that, according to the Soviets, the UK and US governments withdrew their offer to finance the Dam project, and Egypt pushed for the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company.

On 26 July 1956, the Egyptian President announced the nationalisation of the British and French owned Suez Canal Company that operated in the Canal. Nasser’s decision posed a serious threat to the two European powers stock holding in the Company and to Europe’s oil supply in general, as the Canal guaranteed Western countries direct access to the oil fields of the Middle East. Indeed, the West’s political offensive against President Nasser increased dramatically after the Egyptian Government announced the decision. In the Soviet official view, however, the law on the nationalisation of the Company was legitimate from the point of view of international law, as the right to nationalise followed from the sovereignty of States, and many other governments had behaved similarly²²². The day after the announcement, 27 July 1956, the Soviet Foreign Minister Shepilov had a conversation with the Egyptian Ambassador to the USSR al-Quni. After congratulating the Ambassador on the progress made by his country, Shepilov listened to his worried remarks.

Al-Quni confirmed that the significance of the nationalisation was undeniable; Egypt had long been aspiring to be free economically and to get rid of political monopolies and military domination, and a first significant step was made in this sense²²³. He was convinced that, sooner or later, other countries of the Middle East would have followed Egypt’s path and neutralised any monopolies – be they economic or political – of foreign powers, especially Western countries. If Egypt could resist the fight for independence and nationalism, then the fight would eventually be won not only by Egypt, but by all Arab countries and all peace-loving countries of the world. Above all, the Egyptian interest was directed to the Soviet Union. Hence, Shepilov reportedly said:

²²¹ “Египет сам вершит свою судьбу” (“Egypt decides its own destiny”), *Pravda*, July 29, 1956.

²²² “Египет сам вершит свою судьбу” (“Egypt decides its own destiny”), *Pravda*, July 29, 1956.

²²³ № 266. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел СССР Шепилова с послом Египта в СССР Аль-Куни (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Foreign Minister Shepilov with the Egyptian Ambassador to the USSR M. Al-Kuni”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 27 июля 1956 г.

In these circumstances, al-Quni explained, any kind of support for Egypt would be of great importance, especially from such a great country as the Soviet Union, which, in principles, I am sure, approves of the step taken by the Egyptian Government as it also opposes foreign monopolies. The Suez Canal is of interest not only economically, but it is also a strategic and political stronghold of the great powers of the West, such as England and France. The [Soviet] actions taken in relation to the Suez Canal correspond to the interests of peace and, undoubtedly, first of all, to the interests of Egypt²²⁴.

Al-Quni thanked Shepilov for his words and further confirmed that, if the Soviet Government expressed its support, it would help not only the people of Egypt, but the entire Arab world. Showing all interest in supporting his requests, Shepilov asked the Ambassador how, in his opinion, the Soviet support for the Egyptian Government should be expressed. Al-Quni thus explained that it would have been very helpful if the Soviet Union indicated that Egypt was acting within its full rights; that Egypt was a sovereign state and that the nationalisation of the Company did not affect the freedom of navigation through the Canal; on the contrary, without foreign interests over it, freedom of navigation will be better guaranteed even for the great powers and all other states that enjoy peaceful relations with Egypt. Of course, al-Quni continued, it would have also been useful to let the Western powers know somehow that the use of force on their part – or the threat of the use of force – is not recommended as it will increase international tensions. How exactly to express these opinions, al-Quni specified, was to be decided by the Soviet government²²⁵.

The Soviets did not hesitate to fulfil the Egyptian Ambassador's request. In the days following the announcement of the Canal's nationalisation, the Soviet state media reported the events carefully and showed the greatest support for the Egyptian cause. *Pravda* of 28 July (1956), titled "We want to be really strong and independent, and we will achieve this!" and reported a discourse that Nasser addressed to his nation:

We celebrate the day of our revolution after a long time! The struggle to get rid of imperialism, which for a long time dominated our nation, after a stubborn struggle for freedom and independence. The fight against imperialism is not over yet. We achieved the goals for which the revolution was made, relying only on ourselves, on our own

²²⁴ № 266. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел СССР Шепилова с послом Египта в СССР Аль-Куни. 27 июля 1956 г.

²²⁵ № 266. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел СССР Шепилова с послом Египта в СССР Аль-Куни. 27 июля 1956 г.

strength and resources. But there are still many difficulties ahead. We want to be really strong and independent and we will achieve this. Egypt knows who its friends are, and it knows who its enemies are. We will be friends with those who want our friendship, but we will not forgive those who want to be your enemy²²⁶.

Pravda's same issue also reprinted an article of the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, expressing joy over the nationalisation of the Company after 90 years of foreign states owning, used as an excuse to interfere in the internal affairs of Egypt. The Suez Canal, *Al-Akhbar* explained, was of great international importance, and every foreign state tried to establish its influence and domination over Egypt by exerting control over it. Britain pursued well-known methods of imperialist policy towards Egypt, bringing and moving its troops into the Canal zone under the false claim that they were necessary "to protect the imperial net of trade and communications":

In the negotiations that were conducted between Egypt and England regarding the evacuation of their troops from the Canal zone, the British always resorted to subtle arguments, keeping silent about the economic importance of the canal for Egypt. Now Egypt itself has become the owner of the channel, and the income received by the company will be used by the Egyptians for the implementation of the country's economic plans, and above all for the construction of the Aswan Dam²²⁷.

In fact, Nasser's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal Company had come after the UK and US reneged on a previous agreement to finance the Aswan Dam project, which was designed to control the Nile's flood waters and provide electricity and water to the Egyptian population and, as such, was a symbol of Egypt's modernisation²²⁸. The UK and US decision to withdraw their financial support for the Dam project was linked to Nasser's rapprochement with countries of the socialist camp, symbolised by the Prague Agreement of 1955. Indeed, *Pravda*'s article mentioned the refusal of the Western powers to finance the construction of the Aswan Dam, stating that such a refusal would have not affected the important development plans of Egypt, which would have continued to

²²⁶ "Мы хотим быть действительно сильными и независимыми, и мы этого добьемся" ("We want to be really strong and independent, and we will achieve this!"), *Pravda*, July 28, 1956.

²²⁷ "Теперь Египет стал хозяином Суэцкого Канала" ("Now Egypt has become the master of the Suez Canal"), *Pravda*, July 28, 1956.

²²⁸ US Department of State. Archive. Suez Crisis, 1956. Accessed on January 15, 2022, Retrieved from: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/97179.htm>

build it with its own resources. However, no mention was made by either *Al Akhbar* or *Pravda* about the Soviet financial contribution for this crucial project.

Pravda of 29 July (1956) reported similar comments. An article titled “Egypt decides its own destiny”, describes the enthusiasm in which Egypt celebrated the nationalisation of the Canal, which falls on the fourth anniversary of Egypt’s national revolution, which freed the country from “the domination of a corrupt bunch of feudal lords and from the oppression of foreign imperialism”²²⁹. Egyptians, it is argued, took revenge on the anniversary day as a big joyful holiday, and they certainly had reason to rejoice. Nasser’s speech, which he delivered at a large rally in Alexandria, was met with great popular attention; summing up Egypt’s achievements over the past years, Nasser stressed that the fight against imperialism was not over yet and the search for full independence continued. Having painted a vivid picture of the struggle of the Egyptians for the creation of the economic foundations of the country’s independence, Nasser ended his speech with a statement that Egypt will follow the path of “progress, construction, industrialization and creation”, believing in itself, in its own strength²³⁰. By eliminating the remnants of colonialism, *Pravda* argued, Egypt inspired by its example the peoples of other colonial and dependent countries to fight for freedom and independence.

The Soviet propaganda showed sympathetic support of the Soviet people who followed the struggle of the Egyptian people for independence. Broader support for “all the peoples who had thrown off the colonial yoke” and wanted to be master of their political and economic destiny was repeatedly expressed²³¹. Indeed, in the Soviet media discourse at least, political freedom was always associated to these countries’ economic independence through the development of industry and agriculture. “The Soviet Government is ready to look favourably at specific requests from the outside Egypt’s request for assistance in carrying out the industrialisation and development of the country’s rural economy”, *Pravda* reported²³². The times of colonialism, when the imperialists ruled the countries dependent on them as they wanted, were receding into the past. Moving into the future, instead, entailed focusing on economic planning.

²²⁹ “Египет сам вершит свою судьбу” (“Egypt decides its own destiny”), *Pravda*, July 29, 1956.

²³⁰ *Pravda*, July 29, 1956.

²³¹ *Pravda*, July 29, 1956.

²³² *Pravda*, July 29, 1956.

2.2. Soviet assistance to Egypt's economic development

2.2.1. A “political issue”

When the Soviet Union and Egypt first started a dialogue on cooperation, the military discourse was not as central in the Soviet interests as it was economic development. Although Western powers deemed Soviet-Egyptian cooperation in defence and security as the most worrisome element, which they closely monitored, it was in economic planning that the Soviets had their main game. Egypt was in a phase of profound transformation, attempting to move from a mainly agrarian society to an agro-industrial one: the assistance that the Soviets could provide in this domain would leave way more enduring marks in the construction of the Egyptian postcolonial state than arms supply. In political terms, then, while military support to build a robust and well-equipped army entailed neither a socialist political orientation nor the renounce to Western support, the construction of an economic structure modelled around socialist models did. And the Egyptian seemed to be aware of this.

Throughout 1954, as correspondence and visits among Soviet and Egyptian leaders were getting more frequent and richer in substance, economic development assistance was first mentioned. On 7 April 1954, Ambassador Solod was called to visit by Minister Fawzi to comment on the travel to the USSR, between late 1953 and early 1954, of the Egyptian economic delegation headed by Hasan Rajab and the positive impression that it had made on the Egyptians. The delegation had presented a report summarising the possibilities that were discussed in Moscow of developing economic collaboration. Notably, the Soviet Union had offered financial and technical assistance to Egypt in constructing an extensive irrigation system in the area of Aswan for a total of \$ 1 billion foreign currency rubles; in building factories and heavy industry; and it had given encouraging response on the provision of loans. In the Soviet plans, around 5/6 Soviet specialists could have been sent to Egypt to work on this project²³³. Fawzi expressed his desire to implement such proposals. He also asked that the Soviet trade adviser meet with the director of the Economics Department of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Nabi, in order to discuss with him the possibility of using Egypt's funds allocated by the Soviet Union to the United Nations fund for economic assistance to underdeveloped countries”²³⁴. However, the perspective of hosting Soviet specialists to work at Egypt's economic planning was not particularly welcomed by Nasser, initially at least. According to the Soviet Embassy

²³³ № 184. Б69. Справка отдела стран ближнего и среднего востока МИД СССР Г.Т. Зайцева “к поездке товарища Шепилова Д.Т. в Египет”. 18 июля 1955 г.

²³⁴ № 129. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с министром иностранных дел Египта М. Фаузи. (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt M. Fawzi”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 7 апреля 1954 г.

in Egypt, the Egyptian leader had made reservations on the invitation of Soviet specialists, fearing the spread of political sympathy among Egyptians for the Soviet Union²³⁵.

A few months later, Nasser introduced Solod to Lieutenant Colonel Gamal Salem, member of the Revolutionary Council and at that time Minister of Communications of Egypt, and the person entrusted with the implementation of all economic projects that Egypt would provide for in its seven-year plan for the development of the Egyptian economy, including those discussed in Moscow during the Egyptian delegation's stay. Blindly trusting the Soviet Ambassador, as "he did not have time to read the delegation's report yet", Salem expressed his and the Egyptian government's will to boost this kind of economic collaboration on several different projects, among which the construction of a dam on the Upper Nile, the construction of an oil pipeline and a nitrogen plant²³⁶. While asking to fix several meetings with Soviet representative in Cairo, Minister Salem asked that, alongside the Soviet technical adviser and Commercial Attaché Alexeenko, Ambassador Solod was present in person, believing that this was "not a purely economic, but also a political issue" (this sentence was registered as a particularly relevant element by the Soviet officer)²³⁷.

Indeed, economic development was directly linked to political development: the political independence that Egypt had achieved in the context of decolonisation could not have been lasting, nor credible, had it not been accompanied by economic independence. According to Hashim Behbehani, this was the most frequent analysis that the Soviets systematically applied to the postcolonial Arab world: they were persuaded that, once these countries had gained political independence, they immediately took active steps to achieve economic independence as well²³⁸. Indeed, Economic development was at the top of the Egyptian political agenda. Nasser had emerged through the 1952 Revolution as the new nationalist leader of the Arab world whose mission was to cure the wounds of the Arab people and solve the mounting problems of his country. After consolidating power, one of his first tasks was introducing a new form of economic reconstruction, which he labelled as 'socialism'. The dynamics of the situation led him, naturally, to the Soviet Union: an alliance with Moscow was necessary to gain the know-how for economic reconstruction on socialist lines²³⁹, and this theme was, in fact, at the centre of increased Soviet-Egyptian discourse on

²³⁵ № 184. Б69. Справка отдела стран ближнего и среднего востока МИД СССР Г.Т. Зайцева "к поездке товарища Шепилова Д.Т. в Египет". 18 июля 1955 г.

²³⁶ № 131. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с Премьер-Министром Египта Г. Насером. ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt DS Solod with the Prime Minister of Egypt G Nasser"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 15 июня 1954 г.

²³⁷ № 184. Б69. Справка отдела стран ближнего и среднего востока МИД СССР Г.Т. Зайцева "к поездке товарища Шепилова Д.Т. в Египет". 18 июля 1955 г.

²³⁸ Behbehani, *The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism*, 112.

²³⁹ Behbehani, *The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism*. 114.

cooperation. For the Soviets, any economic collaboration with Egypt would have brought it closer to the USSR, and any improvement in its society would have improved the USSR's image globally. On the 27th of September 1954, Solod had another private and friendly conversation with Minister Fawzi:

Fawzi began the conversation by saying that the main task now facing the Egyptian government is the economic revival of the country, particularly the restructuring of the irrigation system and the development of new lands. This task is arduous. Therefore, the Egyptian government hopes to receive assistance from the Soviet Union, which has great achievements in these matters. At this point, I [Solod] pointed out to him that the point of view of the Soviet Government in these matters is well known to the Egyptian government and, in particular, to him personally²⁴⁰.

At the same time, Nasser feared that the expansion of economic relations between Egypt and the USSR would strengthen the activities of the local Communist Party, which opposed his regime and interfered with the implementation of the revolutionary changes that Nasser wished to bring into the country. This represented a deep concern to Nasser with regard to his relationship with the Soviets, as he believed that Egyptian communists reflected Moscow's policy: by extension, he feared that the USSR itself opposed his political regime. When Nasser frankly explained his concerns to Solod, the Ambassador answered as follows:

I noticed that he [Nasser] had a completely wrong idea about the Soviet Union's policy. The Soviet Union pursues a policy of strengthening peace and coexistence of two systems, the capitalist and the socialist. The Soviet Union has never interfered in other countries' internal affairs. [...] If the Egyptian government wants to be sure that the Soviet Union has no selfish intentions towards Egypt, then why not to discuss the conclusion of an appropriate 'friendship agreement', which would include an article on non-interference in each other's internal affairs. [...] I told him that we also consider the political side of development issues with Egypt's economic ties. [...] Nasser noted that he needs to better understand the issue of economic and technical cooperation between

²⁴⁰ № 140. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с Министром Иностранных Дел Египта М Фаузи. ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt M. Fawzi"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 27 сентября 1954 г.

Egypt and the USSR. Therefore, he requested that his cabinet secretary, Ali Sabri, who was present at the interview and who, according to Nasser, is 'his most trusted person', contact our trade adviser and the embassy's representatives to clarify the details of this collaboration. Based on Sabri's report, he will take a decision and, if positive, he will personally instruct the relevant ministries and institutions to implement Soviet development assistance in practice²⁴¹.

Indeed, Nasser would soon abandon his scepticism. A few months later (August 1955), he will admit to Solod that the Egyptian government had misunderstood the position of the Soviet Union concerning the existing regime in Egypt and was now pleased to acknowledge that the Soviets have sincere feelings of friendship for Egypt and its leader²⁴². He will show gratefulness to the Soviet government and its representatives for supporting his country in its fight against imperialism and will admit the need to join forces: "the struggle for development will be successful only if it is carried out not alone, but together, with all the forces fighting against imperialism. [...] We have nothing from each other because our goals are largely the same".

2.2.2. Beyond arms: Trade and technical assistance

Existing payments agreements between the Soviet Union and Egypt already existed before the 1950s. As per declared estimations of the Soviet embassy in Cairo, the volume of trade between the two countries had reached £10 million, but the Soviets hoped to rise it to £15 or £20 millions²⁴³. As per data collected by the British embassy, actual Egyptian statistics showed imports from the Soviet Union in 1953 to have been £4,9 million (consisting almost entirely of grain)²⁴⁴. Projection for the following, however, did not foresee a big improvement: as Egypt was likely not so import much wheat, trade in 1954 was estimated to only amount to about £5 million. Under the Soviet-Egypt oil deal, oil to the value of about £2.7 million would be supplied between March 1954 and February

²⁴¹ N° 169. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с Премьер-Министром Египта Г. Насером. ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Egyptian Prime Minister G. Nasser"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 21 мая 1955 г.

²⁴² N° 189. Б69. Из записи беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с премьер-министром Египта Г. Насером. ("From the recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Prime Minister of Egypt G. Nasser"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 9 августа 1955 г.

²⁴³ JE 11338/2. C. 5118/4/54. Trade Agreement: Egypt and Russia. This was initiated on March 10. Gives details of goods agreed upon, etc. FO 371/108403. Signature of trade agreement between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 13, 1954, 1–2.

²⁴⁴ JE 11338/2. C. 5118/4/54. Trade Agreement: Egypt and Russia. This was initiated on March 10. Gives details of goods agreed upon, etc. FO 371/108403, 1–2.

1955. As for exports, estimation said that, in 1953, Egypt exported to the Soviet Union £4.1 million (mostly in cotton)²⁴⁵.

Tangible signs of Soviet-Egyptian plans to boost these accords further began as early as 1954. Early in March that year, the British Ambassador Sir Ralph Stevenson, serving in the country from 1950 to 1955, reported to the Foreign Office about rumours that a trade agreement between the two countries had been under negotiation for some weeks²⁴⁶. Indeed, he was right. The agreement was initiated on 10 March by the Director of the Economic Affairs Department of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kamel Abdel Nabi – who had been heading similar trade missions to various European countries – and Victor Alexenko, the Commercial Counsellor at the Soviet delegation in Cairo²⁴⁷. Following the initialling of the agreement, Alexenko was reported to have said to the Egyptian press that it would help in increasing commercial exchanges between the two countries. The best proof of a desire to develop this was the recent signature of the barter agreement for the exchange of Soviet petroleum products for cotton. Alexenko remarked that the first consignments of 20,000 tons of oil would be arriving in Egypt towards the end of March, and that deliveries would continue until February 1955²⁴⁸. The Soviet Union would then begin buying Egyptian cotton, he said, as soon as it had the necessary Egyptian payments for the petroleum products. The Egyptian official, Nabi, then added that it had been thought appropriated, from the Egyptian side, to add a Trade Agreement to the existing payments agreement with Russia. The former was similar to those which had been concluded with other countries, as there was no justification for treating with the Soviet Union in a different way. The Soviet Union was a country rich in resources and industries, and it was a matter for satisfaction that Egypt had agreed on the broad lines of trade with Moscow, in order to derive profit from it. He also declared, officially, that the draft had been initialled and would be submitted for the approval of the Council of Ministers prior to formal signature.

After a few days of further negotiations and work on the draft, the Soviet-Egyptian Trade Agreement was eventually signed on 27 March 1954, in Cairo, at the presence of Alexenko and Nabi. The duration of the Agreement was initially of one year, automatically renewable for further periods

²⁴⁵ JE 11338/2. C. 5118/4/54. Trade Agreement: Egypt and Russia. This was initiated on March 10. Gives details of goods agreed upon, etc. FO 371/108403, 1–2.

²⁴⁶ JE 11338/1. Trade Agreement between Egypt and Russia will probably be signed on March 8th. FO 371/108403. Signature of trade agreement between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 4, 1954.

²⁴⁷ JE 11338/2. C. 5118/4/54. Trade Agreement: Egypt and Russia. This was initiated on March 10. Gives details of goods agreed upon, etc. FO 371/108403. Signature of trade agreement between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 13, 1954, 1.

²⁴⁸ In that occasion (11 March 1954), Alexenko was also inquired by the Egyptian journalists about the Soviet Union's plans to hold an exhibition of Soviet products in Egypt. He replied that the project was indeed under study, although the Soviets would have probably started with an exhibition of heavy industrial goods first. Indeed, the Permanent Exhibition would have opened the next year, but included products of the most varied kinds. From: JE 11338/2. C. 5118/4/54. Trade Agreement: Egypt and Russia. This was initiated on March 10. Gives details of goods agreed upon, etc. FO 371/108403. Signature of trade agreement between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 13, 1954, 1.

of one year, unless three months' notice was given by one or other of the parties for its termination or amendment. The Agreement contained a most-favoured-nation clause which covered customs duties, import and export regulations and quotas. Supplements of trade transactions were through accounts opened at the Central Bank of the USSR and the National Bank of Egypt and were in accordance with provisions of payments agreement between the two countries²⁴⁹.

The Agreement stated that Egypt would import the most varied goods from countries of the Soviet Union: machinery, petroleum and its derivatives, tractors and agricultural implements, motor vehicles, wheat, timber, geological instruments, iron and steel products, electrical and telephone apparatus, maps, cinematographic apparatus, cinema films, radio sets, pressure stoves, glassware, chemical products, sulphur, engraving instruments, mineral waters, toilet articles, oil cake, pepper, vodka, wines. On its side, the Soviet Union would import mostly raw cotton, silk yarns (mostly rayon yarns), manganese ore, phosphates, medicinal plants, vegetables and fruit (mostly bananas and dried dates), rice (within the limits prescribed by availability and the quota allowed for export), henna, sponges, groundnuts, alcohol, tanned skins, rice starch, fresh and dehydrated onions, gum Arabic and indigo²⁵⁰. Furthermore, each party was asked to take steps to facilitate the export and import of goods not appearing on the lists annexed to it and government departments would facilitate the grant of permits for such goods. Letters exchanged between the two contracting parties envisaged the transport of goods to be exchanged by Egyptian vessels in the proportion of 50% where that was possible. In other circumstances, Russian ships could effect the transport.

Both the Soviets and Egyptians were clearly satisfied about the Trade Agreement's signature. This followed a completely separated path from the Soviet-Egyptian arms deal that, in the same months, was being negotiated in Prague, and supplied Egypt with products that it much needed. However, President Nasser seemed to aware of the risks that increased collaboration with the Soviets would expose him to with regards to its Western supplier of arms and goods. In an interview with the Cairo correspondent of the Hearst group of newspapers in the US, Nasser was reported to have stressed on that Egypt was not leaning towards the Soviet Union economically and even less so politically. He specified that it was because of British threats to cut off Egypt's petroleum supplies that the oil deal had been negotiated with the Soviet Union (alongside Rumania), and pointed out that the UK had trade relations with the Soviet Union too; Winston Churchill, he added, had even

²⁴⁹ JE 11338/1. Trade Agreement between Egypt and Russia will probably be signed on March 8th. FO 371/108403. Signature of trade agreement between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 4, 1954.

²⁵⁰ JE 11338/2. C. 5118/4/54. Trade Agreement: Egypt and Russia. This was initiated on March 10. Gives details of goods agreed upon, etc. FO 371/108403. Signature of trade agreement between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 13, 1954. (p. 1)

advocated the fostering of those relations²⁵¹. What sounded like a defensive statement, was at the same time a way to tease the Brits and move them to adopt a more morbid approach towards Cairo.

2.2.3. Into enhanced cooperation: Energy, infrastructures and culture

According to Hashim Behbehani, Egypt had been courting the Soviet Union immediately after the July 1952 Revolution, when the Egyptian Minister of Finance made a speech on the country's economic crisis due to the inability to market Egyptian cotton²⁵². Contacts were made with countries of the socialist camp to look for new markets, although there was no clear vision of how the socialist camp could help reinvigorate Egypt's economy. On the other side, although they had begun to show interest in expanding to the Egyptian markets, the Soviets had not elaborated a proper plan to boost relations with Cairo yet.

Since 1953 onwards, as the Soviet Union and Egypt boosted dialogue on economic collaborations, a relevant figure that would make essential steps on this path was the Soviet official Dmitri Trofimovich Shepilov (*Дмитрий Трофимович Шепилов*, 1905-1995). A Turkmen of Russian origins, Shepilov studied at the faculty of law at the Lomonosov Moscow State University, when he parallelly cultivated a passion for agrarian themes working at the monthly magazine "On the agrarian front" (*На Аграрном Фронте*). His first assignment right after the graduation in 1933 was in a state-owned farm (*совхоз*) as the Head of the political department, where he remained until 1935 when he was appointed Deputy Chief of the Sector of Agricultural Science of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR. He then continued his academic path in economic studies, holding the Secretary's post at the faculty of Economics for the Soviet Academy of Sciences (*Академия Наук СССР*), the Soviet Union's highest academic body. He then specialised in Soviet propaganda and became first the *Pravda*'s propaganda department head and then Head of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Communist Party Central Committee (1948). During his militant years in the Party, he got the sympathy and respect of Stalin, who, in 1952, charged him with the task to write a new Soviet economic handbook to outline the Soviet economic strategy for the years to come. When Nikita Khrushchev took power after Stalin's death, Shepilov became one of his most trusted persons. The new leader knew that Shepilov was essential in providing ideological support and theorisation on the Soviet Union's future path, seconding his personal desire to step into a different trajectory from Stalin's (which entailed going against many of Stalin's purists and

²⁵¹ JE 11338/2. C. 5118/4/54. Trade Agreement: Egypt and Russia. This was initiated on March 10. Gives details of goods agreed upon, etc. FO 371/108403. Signature of trade agreement between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 13, 1954, 2.

²⁵² Quoted in Behbehani: Philip Jelab. *Qusat al-Soviet ma' Nasir*. Cairo, 1983, 65–81.

loyalists)²⁵³. Given the growing importance that Nasser's Egypt had for the Soviet Union, Shepilov was soon tasked with the mission to visit Cairo, in quality of *Pravda*'s editor attending the 23 July Revolution anniversary, and explore how to boost Soviet-Egyptian ties.

In summer 1955, Shepilov paid a long trip to Cairo, during which he managed to get close to the Egyptian government's highest spheres, including Nasser, and gain their admiration and trust. It's written in a report of Ambassador Solod to the USSR Deputy Foreign Minister Valerian Alexandrovich Zorin (*Валериан Александрович Зорин*, 1902-1986) in late September 1955 that the arrival of Shepilov to Cairo and his conversations with Nasser and other leading members of the Egyptian government helped to dispel any residual distrust in the Egyptian authorities towards the Soviet Union²⁵⁴. Shepilov's technical skills and his discourses on the richness of Soviet heavy industry, the agrarian system of state-owned farms, the cooperative, seemed to have literally enchanted Egypt's nationalist circles²⁵⁵. Indeed, on 29 July 1955, after Shepilov had a two-hour discussion with Nasser, Cairo Radio released the following statement:

Before leaving Cairo for home after attending the liberation festivities, the editor of *Pravda* declared that the Soviet people know that the Egyptian people desired to maintain their independence and freedom. The Egyptian people, he said, had proved their great vitality in their struggle against the usurping imperialists, and the Soviet people fully supported the Egyptian people's aspirations²⁵⁶.

Indeed, Shepilov's mission and his diplomatic skills did not go unnoticed to the British agents. Shepilov was a well-known specialist in foreign affairs, and his name had already been mentioned at times as possible successor to Vyacheslav Molotov as Foreign Minister (which in fact he became in 1956). As the British embassy wrote to the Foreign office, "his presence in Cairo [was] clearly significant"²⁵⁷. Although the Egyptian Government always asked a large number of press

²⁵³ Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's cold war: From Stalin to Khrushchev*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.

²⁵⁴ № 205. Б69. Из письма посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода заместителю министра иностранных дел СССР В.А. Зорина. ("From the letter of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR V.A. Zorin"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 26 сентября 1955 г.

²⁵⁵ № 205. Б69. Из письма посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода заместителю министра иностранных дел СССР В.А. Зорина. 26 сентября 1955 г.

²⁵⁶ JE 1676/I(A). Russian journalists in Egypt. Mr Shepilov, an editor of *Pravda*, is staying in Egypt as the guest of the editor of *Al Ziza*. FO 371/113771. Journalists from Soviet Union in Egypt. National Archives, London Kew. July 29, 1955.

²⁵⁷ JE 1676/I(A). Russian journalists in Egypt. Mr Shepilov, an editor of *Pravda*, is staying in Egypt as the guest of the editor of *Al Ziza*. FO 371/113771. Journalists from Soviet Union in Egypt. National Archives, London Kew. July 29, 1955. (p. 1)

representatives from many countries to attend their anniversary celebrations, that was the first time, as far as the British embassy knew, that they had asked a Soviet journalist as high-powered as Shepilov. It was perhaps also no coincident that much less had been heard in Egypt lately about Nasser's struggle against communists, although there was no reason to supposed that it was in fact been released). In his marathon speech on 22 July, Nasser was careful not to mention communism or the Soviet Union once, either in the context of home or foreign affairs. Nevertheless, due weight was given to the "evils of imperialism" and the "monopoly of capitalism". A sign that the Soviet influence was growing in Egypt is in fact given by severe comments from the British embassy during the days of Shepilov's visit:

All this probably adds up to no more than a neutralist flirtation on the part of the Egyptian leaders, who are undoubtedly slightly star-struck to find themselves rubbing shoulders with the Nehirus and Chen En Lais, and who also derive a considerable moral 'boost' from being able to see themselves treating on equal terms with the members of both blocs without being committed to either. Nevertheless, the position does seem to be rather less favourable to ourselves than formerly, and will require careful watching²⁵⁸.

In fact, it is also thanks to Shepilov's mediation and the degree of trust that he enjoyed among the Egyptians, cooperation flourished in 1955. In a summary to the Foreign Ministry, approaching the end of his mandate, Solod wrote as follows:

The following concrete facts have been characterising the strengthening of Soviet-Egyptian relations in the recent months:

- 1) negotiations and conclusion of an agreement on the supply of Soviet weapons to Egypt
 - 2) conclusion of a trade deal for the purchase of 60,000 tons of rice in exchange for the supply of 500,000 tons of crude oil to Egypt
 - 3) trip to the USSR of a delegation of Egyptian doctors and journalists
 - 4) opening of the permanent Agricultural Exhibition (*BCXB*) in Cairo
 - 5) consent of the Egyptian government to the opening of the Soviet consulate in Port Said.
- [...] In order to consolidate our position in Egypt and further strengthen Soviet-Egyptian relations, as well as to counteract the Anglo-American pressure on Egypt, the embassy

²⁵⁸ JE 1676/I(A). Russian journalists in Egypt. Mr Shepilov, an editor of Pravda, is staying in Egypt as the guest of the editor of Al Ziza. FO 371/113771. Journalists from Soviet Union in Egypt. National Archives, London Kew. July 29, 1955. (p. 5-6)

considers it appropriate to hold the following events: [...] To assist Egypt in establishing a laboratory for research in the field of nuclear energy applications²⁵⁹.

Indeed, when Shepilov was in Cairo, he also started to discuss assisting Egypt in the peaceful use of atomic energy. Perhaps replying to the over enthusiastic proposal of Shepilov, which did not seem to have been discussed thoroughly with his superiors in Moscow, the Head of the Near and Middle Eastern countries desk, G. Zaitsev wrote that the Egyptian *charge d'affaires* in Moscow was promptly informed that the provision of such assistance by the Soviet Union was not subject to any conditions of a political nature. Soviet assistance in atomic energy, if any, only had the purpose to further expand Soviet-Egyptian cultural ties and technical cooperation. Later that year, an Egyptian expert on nuclear energy issues visited Moscow upon invitation of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

Exchanges intensified in the domain of culture and education as well. Despite his fear for Soviet communist propaganda, the Nasser government, unlike the previous Egyptian governments that banned the screening of Soviet films, allowed the rental of Soviet films on Egyptian screens. It also allowed the opening of the permanent Agricultural Exhibition (*Всесоюзная Сельскохозяйственная Выставка, ВСХВ*²⁶⁰) in Cairo, while a group of Egyptian agronomists was invited to visit the original one in Moscow. Soviet sports teams visited Egypt, and Egyptian athletes visited the Soviet Union. Upon al-Masri's request, 20 young Egyptians who graduated from higher educational institutions were sent to Moscow to study Russian language and improve their skills in the field of culture, technology, medicine, and possibly, military affairs²⁶¹. A delegation of Egyptian doctors and journalists was also invited to Moscow for a training²⁶².

Another essential accelerator in Soviet penetration in the Egyptian economics was the Egyptian search for a partner in the Aswan Dam construction, also known as High Dam. The dam was an enormous infrastructural project that would exponentially increase Egypt's agricultural production and hydro-electric self-sufficiency. Egypt had no means to face costs by itself. On 11 October 1955, a few days after the arms deal was struck, all Egyptian newspapers reported conspicuously a

²⁵⁹ № 205. Б69. Из письма посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода заместителю министра иностранных дел СССР В.А. Зорина. 26 сентября 1955 г.

²⁶⁰ Renamed "Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy" (Выставка Достижений Народного Хозяйства, ВДНХ) in 1956.

²⁶¹ № 126. Б69. Запись беседы заместителя министра иностранных дел СССР В.А. Зорина с послом Египта в СССР аль-Масри. ("Recording of the conversation of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR V.A. Zorin with the Ambassador of Egypt to the USSR al-Masri."). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 31 марта 1954 г.

²⁶² № 184. Б69. Справка отдела стран ближнего и среднего востока МИД СССР Г.Т. Зайцева "к поездке товарища Шепилова Д.Т. в Египет". 18 июля 1955 г.

declaration by the Soviet Ambassador Solod after his meeting with Hussein Aziz, Egyptian Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs²⁶³. The declaration claimed that the Soviet Union had offered economic assistance to Egypt – and other Arab states – that the Soviet Union’s economic position permitted it to aid any country needing it. The Soviets stressed that aid would not consist of cash but of agricultural implements, building materials and other equipment for economic development. As reported by *Ahram*, news had come from Cairo that Nasser was discussing with Solod the Soviet participation in financing the High Dam project, since the UK had rejected to, and the US had been procrastinating in offering financial aid to Egypt to finance that vital scheme (a decision that, most likely, was taken in light of the arms deal’s discovery)²⁶⁴. The press of the day after, 12 October (1955), confirmed the rumours: *Akhbar* wrote that the Soviet Union had agreed to finance the Aswan Dam project, and to be paid for machinery and other materials in easy instalments over a period of 25 years²⁶⁵. The *New York Times*’ Cairo correspondent had also collected information that Dr Ahmed Selim, of National Production Council, had told him that Egypt would find it difficult to reject the Soviet offer to finance the Dam although it would have preferred finance to come from the West²⁶⁶. *Ahram* of 12 October had also reported that Hassan Ibrahim, Minister of State for Production, in an answer to question had declared that, as of that date, the Cabinet had not considered the Soviet offer yet; Nasser was the only one who considered it, personally²⁶⁷. Therefore, Egypt had turned to the Soviet Union. For Nasser, it might have been an “obliged choice” for Nasser²⁶⁸, but for the Soviets it turned out to be an excellent opportunity.

Not surprisingly, in fact, Solod’s declarations caused agitation among the British and the Americans. The regime set out to develop the country quickly. Egyptians were generally satisfied with agreements held with the UK; they were not much impressed by American aid, which they know is very small compared with American aid to other countries like Turkey, and it was even set to be reduced in the next years. However, they were impatient at the delays and difficulties involved, and

²⁶³ JE 11338/2. 1413. Russian aid for Egypt. Gives press comments and reactions to the declaration by the Soviet Ambassador that Russia had offered economic assistance to Egypt. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 11, 1955.

²⁶⁴ JE 11338/2. 1413. Russian aid for Egypt. Gives press comments and reactions to the declaration by the Soviet Ambassador that Russia had offered economic assistance to Egypt. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 11, 1955.

²⁶⁵ JE 11338/5. 1433. Russian aid to Egypt. Gives press reports of October 12th on Russian aid. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 12, 1955.

²⁶⁶ JE 11338/5. 1433. Addressed to Foreign Office telegram No. 1433 of October 13, 1955. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 13, 1955.

²⁶⁷ JE 11338/5. 1433. Addressed to Foreign Office telegram No. 1433 of October 13, 1955. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 13, 1955.

²⁶⁸ Campanini, *Storia dell’Egitto*, 208.

this was the reason why they were turning to the Soviets. In a cyphered top secret message to the Cairo embassy and shared with embassies in Washington, Moscow and Tel Aviv, London's Foreign Office asked the Ambassador Trevelyan for his assessment of the Egyptian attitude towards the Soviet proposal²⁶⁹. In particular, the Office wanted to know if the Ambassador thought that the Egyptian Government was dissatisfied with prospects of Western economic aid for economic development and especially for the High Dam. Trevelyan's answer was very accurate:

On the High Dam, the Egyptian technicians complain against the International Bank's meticulous procedure and objections to an Egyptian deal with the Consortium without international tender. They have not so far expressed dissatisfaction with the credit terms proposed by the Consortium, but too much reliance should not be placed on this. If the Russians make offers which will ostensibly enable Egypt to accelerate her development projects, the Egyptians will find them very attractive. The Egyptians may want to show their political independence by accepting some Russian offers, but they may also want to show the West that they have not fallen completely into the communists' lap, and there will be a number of experienced officials to urge the risks involved, at any rate where major engineering projects are concerned, in deserting the firms and engineers whom they know for the unknown Russians (some satellites are, however, well-known here already for engineering and as suppliers of machinery). The Egyptians may naturally be expected to procure material from the Soviet bloc if they can get it on better terms than from the West. An offer to erect and equip new factories would probably be most welcome²⁷⁰.

In the British Ambassador's understanding, not only did Egypt want to boost its development quickly, especially the construction of the Dam, but, it wanted to blackmail the West through increased cooperation with the Soviet Union. Whether this was true or not, the British embassy immediately followed up with a plan on what actions to take concerning the Dam. They pressured the Consortium to pursue their negotiations on aid provisions "vigorously", and press to conclude their contract at once. Especially, they pressured the International Bank to withdraw their objections to an Egyptian contract with the Consortium without international tender and to tell the Egyptians that they were

²⁶⁹ JE 11338/3. 2221. Telegram to Cairo. Russian aid for Egypt. Gives press comments and reactions to the declaration by the Soviet Ambassador that Russia had offered economic assistance to Egypt. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 12, 1955.

²⁷⁰ JE 11338/7. 1442. Russian aid to Egypt. Gives his estimation of the Egyptian attitude to Russian aid to accelerate Egyptian development projects and suggests action that we might take regarding the High Dam. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. (October 14, 1955), 1.

prepared to conclude their negotiations for a loan, subject to Egyptian agreement with Sudan for the division of the waters²⁷¹. Joint Anglo-French-German talks were held in this regard, as also the French and German Ambassadors believed that action had to be taken. As *The Times* reported, the Soviet engagement in Dam move would be “a master stroke of Soviet policy and the severest rebuff for the Western powers”²⁷². The British seemed to be more confident, believing that, even if the Egyptians would use the Soviet offer to blackmail the West on their participation in the High Dam scheme, they will have everything to gain by action on the above lines.

2.2.4. Industrialisation and technologies: The actual Soviet priority

Nasser’s plans for postcolonial reconstruction included industrialisation. This goal had been set by the Free Officers in July 1952 already, almost immediately after they took power, having deposed King Faruq. The Officers had proclaimed an industrial capitalisation policy that reversed the 1947 legislation prohibiting foreign investments in the stock of Egyptian corporations and issued several decrees (throughout 1953) encouraging foreign capitalisation of the Egyptian industry. The Revolutionary Command Council introduced decrees that limited large landholdings, abolished family trust estates and distributed surplus lands to peasants who hailed the decrees. Proletarian workers who strove against such decrees, however, were brutally persecuted. Soviet observers like Radio Moscow (*Московское радио*) or Novyi Mir (*Новый Мир*) repeatedly underlined the inconsistency of a regime which enabled progressive social legislations while persecuting peasants²⁷³. When Nasser consolidated in power in 1954, his industrial political economy’s contours were undefined. Although his government did pass specific industrial and agrarian reform measures, no clear ideological cohesion was in evidence: as Rami Ginat called it, Nasser led in his early years a “revolution in search of a theory”²⁷⁴. Agrarian reforms were issued in 1952 and later modified in 1953 and 1958, but neither did they mark a shift towards socialist policies nor improved the peasants’ life conditions. Malcom Kerr in 1962, nine years after the Egyptian revolution, observed that a series of piecemeal measures, beginning with the 1952 Land Reform, did have brought the government into an increasing participation in the economy, to the point where “an extensive though the rudimental

²⁷¹ JE 11338/7. 1442. Russian aid to Egypt. Gives his estimation of the Egyptian attitude to Russian aid to accelerate Egyptian development projects and suggests action that we might take regarding the High Dam. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. (October 14, 1955), 2.

²⁷² JE 11338/3. 2221. Addressed to Cairo telegram No. 2221 of October 12. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 12, 1955.

²⁷³ Rami Ginat. *Egypt’s incomplete revolution. Lutfi al-Khuli and Nasser’s socialism in the 1960s*, London: Routledge, 1997.

²⁷⁴ Ginat, *Egypt’s incomplete revolution*, 1–13.

structure of state ownership and control was an accomplished fact and the word ‘socialism’ a natural if undefined slogan”²⁷⁵. What was needed after that, which Nasser was attempting to do, was to give the structure a more rational form and define its purposes more clearly, “not only for propaganda reasons but for the sake of policy planning”²⁷⁶.

If there was one guiding principle, that was uniquely about the belief that a socialist, industrial revolution could only be achieved in Egypt after the British imperialism was defeated. This was discussed between Soviet and Egyptian leaders on several occasions. Perhaps not by coincidence, in January 1956, Ambassador Solod was called back to Moscow to serve as Deputy Head of the Middle East Department of the Foreign Ministry, and he was replaced by Yevgeny Dmitryevich Kiselev (Евгений Дмитриевич Киселев, 1908–1963). Kiselev had a very different profile than Solod: he was not an Arabist, his appointment to Egypt was the first one in the Middle and North Africa region and the first one in a developing country of the ‘third world’. Yet, he had very good connections in the US and European countries, having worked for the diplomatic mission of the USSR in German Königsberg (Kaliningrad) from 1940 to 1941 and in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR were Soviet General Consul in New York, the political representative of the USSR in Austria, and the Soviet Ambassador to Hungary. If collaboration with Egypt had to dig deeper, the Soviets needed to be represented by someone who well knew the West and was well known by the West²⁷⁷. It was also with the facilitation of Kiselev in 1956 that the Soviets initiated a discourse on industrialisation with the Egyptians. Kiselev’s proposals seemed to encounter Nasser’s interest:

Nasser further stated that he was very eager to receive Soviet assistance in the country’s industrialisation, which would be an overwhelming contribution to the creation of a strong, independent Egypt. Nasser said that they intend to take up the construction of factories in the country seriously, and the construction of cooperatives in the villages, without paying any attention to what will be said and even shouted outside Egypt²⁷⁸.

First ‘exploration’ on how to develop the Egyptian industry were thus made by the Soviets early in 1956. On 24 March 1956, Nikolay Melnikov, head of the Soviet technical mission visited Cairo

²⁷⁵ Malcom H. Kerr, “The emergence of a socialist ideology in Egypt”. *The Middle East Journal*, 16:2 (1962), 127–144.

²⁷⁶ Kerr, “*Socialist ideology in Egypt*”, 127–144.

²⁷⁷ And indeed, from 1962 to 1963, Yevgeny Dmitryevich will be even appointed in the high post of Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, the first and last time such a post was assigned to a USSR representative.

²⁷⁸ № 247. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Египте Э.Д. Киселева в МИД СССР. (“Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt Ed Kiselev to the USSR Foreign Ministry”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 11 мая 1956 г.

for an intended stay of ten days which was ten prolonged to April 11²⁷⁹. The delegation was composed on seven engineers who were experts in various industrial branches. Among these, mechanical workshops installation, foundation of chemical and food industries, plants for pumps and turbines, railway engineering and petroleum extraction and refining. Melnikov himself was not a political figure, but an engineer who was described as an expert in heavy industry and the head of the Soviet Techno-Expert Foundation, engaged in machinery and complete plant exports. The Techno-Expert Foundation had a wide experience in the installation of factories and the establishment of important extensive enterprises. Since 1950, the firm had established more than 500 factories and industries, including iron and steel factories in the Russian territory, Eastern European countries, Poland, China, Afghanistan and India (the Indian one was particularly efficient production for 1957 was estimated around 2 million tons of steel). Techno-Export was also engaged in a large number of electrical and chemical stations, drug factories. The Foundation also undertook geological research work and made studies of raw materials, potentialities and marketing needs, making a complete economic study of every single enterprise, and, when the scheme was proved to be favourable, the Foundation undertook its execution. It then undertook the necessary obligations, provided the necessary experts and arranged the training of those concerned, either in Russia or in the country itself. The Foundation also took an interest in assisting every state to utilise its national resources to the extreme limit²⁸⁰.

Few details of the mission's activities are available, but it is known that it met members of the National Production Council and visited the Misr Bank, the Industrial Bank, the Federation of Egyptian Chambers of Commerce and various industrial concerns. The oil experts that took part in the mission did not visit any of the oil refineries or the oilfields. The mission also conferred with the Egyptian Minister of Commerce and Industry on 29 March and was reported to have expressed its preparedness to give technical advice the Egyptian Government²⁸¹. It also declared the Soviet Union's readiness to set up complete industrial plants in Egypt against payment on a long-term basis or in return for the products of plans constructed, without any strings attached. To the *Al-Ahram* newspaper, Melnikov declared that the purpose of his visit was to get familiar with local industrial circles and to study Egypt's industrial conditions to enable him to work for the consolidation of cooperation between the Soviet and Egyptian industries²⁸². The mission hoped to get fully acquainted

²⁷⁹ JE 1109/5. 1158/4/56. Visit of Soviet Technical Mission to Egypt from March 24-April 11. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 15, 1956.

²⁸⁰ JE 1109/3. 46 (10321/42/56). Visit of Russian engineers to Egypt. Informs of statement made by Melnikov as reported in "Ahram" on March 29. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. (May 14, 1956), 2.

²⁸¹ JE 1109/5. 1158/4/56. Visit of Soviet Technical Mission to Egypt from March 24-April 11. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 15, 1956.

²⁸² JE 1109/3. 46 (10321/42/56). Visit of Russian engineers to Egypt. Informs of statement made by Melnikov as reported in "Ahram" on March 29. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. (May 14, 1956), 3.

with the situation during its short stay. To do so, it would approach both state and private quarters with a view to determining the Soviet Union's possible contribution to the development of Egypt's process of industrialisation²⁸³.

On 29 March, all Egyptian newspapers published accounts of Melnikov's statements. Menlikov declared that the mission had come to Egypt to acquaint itself with local industry with view to consolidating Soviet-Egyptian industrial cooperation²⁸⁴. Techno-Expert Foundation had wide experience in establishing all kinds of factories and industrial enterprises, in line with the Soviet Union's interest in providing countries with technical aid to help them exploit national resources. It had no political motives, Menlikov wished to stress, and was not acting out of fear of unemployment or competition; Soviet industry was planned economically, and was working at full pressure. In reply to a question on this, he affirmed:

It is not chivalry on our part. We are practical businessmen. We have no surplus because we produce only what we need and our people absorb all production. But we also need products which we don't have. We sell the world what it needs and we buy from it what we need. We sell machinery and factories in exchange for crops or money. These are purely commercial deals and they are made only for the benefit of our country and the other party. Take Egypt for example. We need cotton and you need factories and national industries. You have the cotton and we have the factories. On this basis alone our deals and our exchanges are made. But this practical economy also has its idealistic side. Fair deals are the best bridges of friendship between peoples particularly if they meet vital mutual requirements. We believe that peace and independence depend on prosperity. The latter, in turn, depends on sound national economy which meets the people's requirements. When we contribute to the building up of mutual interests, we serve the great cause of humanity, the cause of peace. [...] Our economy is not based on profit or exploitation. It is based on science and the service of man. We cannot be and do not want to be exploiters or colonisers. We do not need colonies or markets of spheres of influence. Moreover, we are not so naïve as to colonise or deceive or exploit peoples who fought for

²⁸³ JE 1109/5. 1158/42/56). Visit of Soviet Technical Mission to Egypt from March 24-April 11. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 15, 1956.

²⁸⁴ JE 1109/1. Visit of technical mission to Egypt. Comments on the visit. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 29, 1956.

countries to achieve sovereignty and independence. As I told you, we are only merchants and businessmen²⁸⁵.

Unlike other representatives of other foreign industries who bet on capital investments and exploitation, Menlikov stressed that Soviet economic aid was given through cash and barter deals. Making the example of Britain, France and Germany, he stressed that if those countries look upon Egypt as a market for export and commercial exploitation, the Soviets offered their economic aid on other bases whether in regard to payments or other facilities. In doing so, they did not participate or contribute to the capital of those industries for exploitation. By means of their barter and goods, the Soviets obtained the products of Egypt – the important country – and were prepared to give all facilities to dispose of the products of Egypt. Such facilities were afforded by the Soviet Union only. Furthermore, the Soviet Union's production was effected in conformity with most modern methods and it guaranteed that the machinery supplied was of real efficiency and long durability. Melnikov also said that he had visited Syrian and Lebanon too, and he had been impressed by the ability of Arab workers and engineers to understand, harmonise with and control machines. He was firmly convinced that Arab workers could reach the greatest degree of industrial efficiency "if they were given the chance"²⁸⁶. Egypt in particular, he believed, had unlimited potentialities for both light and heavy industry, becoming the main productive centre and thus a leading for in the Middle East.

In January and February 1956, a small scientific mission composed of three Egyptian scientists and technicians (Colonel Mohsin Idris, Dr Gamal Nouh, and Dr Mahmoud El-Shirbini) had visited Moscow in and collaborated with Melnikov personally on the atomic reactor²⁸⁷. On that occasion, the two parts had concluded an agreement on the provision of Soviet technical assistance to Egypt in the nuclear physics field. As industrial cooperation was therefore set to be launched, Nasser required the presence in Cairo of Shepilov, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, as an essential condition to get works started. In May 1956, the Egyptian government invited Shepilov to Cairo, begging him to stay "as long as possible"; a residence at the Tarja Palace would be prepared for him (the same where Tito was also hosted), and he could even have had a vacation in Luxor²⁸⁸. Less than one month later, on

²⁸⁵ JE 1109/2. Visit of technical mission to Egypt. Comments on the visit. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 2, 1956.

²⁸⁶ JE 1109/2. Visit of technical mission to Egypt. Comments on the visit. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 2, 1956.

²⁸⁷ Egyptian journalists inquired Melnikov about the atomic reactor. He replied by reminding the reactor was being studied for atomic research and that the employment of those researches and their results would have only been used in peaceful objectives. Indeed, before the mission finally left Cairo, it was announced that the Soviet Union would be most willing to prospect for uranium in the Egyptian deserts. From: JE 1109/3. 46 (10321/42/56). Visit of Russian engineers to Egypt. Informs of statement made by Melnikov as reported in "Ahram" on March 29. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. (May 14, 1956), 2.

²⁸⁸ N° 247. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Египте Э.Д. Киселева в МИД СССР. 11 мая 1956 г.

the 18th of June 1956, Minister Shepilov was in Cairo, meeting with Major Amer, then Minister of War, in his office at the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief²⁸⁹. The conversation looked like a more explorative one: Shepilov attempted to enter into details of industrial planning, but Minister Amer instead stayed on broad general lines, expressing gratitude on behalf of his government for the Soviet generosity and agreeing that industrial development was crucial to Egypt. A more satisfying conversation did Shepilov have the following day, the 19th of June, with Nasser himself. Relevant to note is how the industrialisation discourse climbed the hierarchy of the Soviet power chain of command. While all cooperation agreements on trade, arms supply, and also cultural exchanges were discussed among soviet ambassadors or envoys and heads of the Foreign Ministry, reports on Egypt's industrialisation process – and what the USSR should do to support it – were addressed directly to the USSR and the Communist Party's Head, Nikita Khrushchev. The following is an extract of Shepilov's record of the conversation with Nasser for Khrushchev:

At all meetings, Nasser asks me for detailed advice on how to practically solve the country's industrialisation issue and the rise of agriculture, including agricultural cooperatives. In the last conversation, which lasted about 6 hours, I tried to give him the necessary explanations. He also wanted to talk about this with the Minister of National Production Hassan Ibrahim, the Minister of Trade and Industry Abu Nusair and Deputy Prime Minister Gamal Salem. All these conversations take place in an atmosphere of exceptional cordiality and full confidence of the Egyptians authorities in us. Nasser, impatiently, asked to send two Soviet planning economists as soon as possible, who would help draft a five-year plan and prepare the agenda for Nasser's talks with Soviet authorities when he will be travelling to Moscow²⁹⁰.

The request for receiving assistance from two Soviet specialists in economic planning was immediately met by Moscow: the two arrived in Cairo a few weeks later, in July 1956²⁹¹. They were

²⁸⁹ № 254. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел СССР Д.Т. Шепилова с военным министром Египта генерал майором А. Амером. ("Recording of the conversation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR D.T. Shepilov with the Minister of War of Egypt Major General A. Amer"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 18 июня 1956 г.

²⁹⁰ № 255. Б69. Телеграмма министра иностранных дел СССР Д.Т. Шепилова первому секретарю ЦК КПСС Н.С. Хрущеву. ("Telegram of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR D.T. Shepilov to the first Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU N.S. Khrushchev"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 19 июня 1956 г.

²⁹¹ № 262. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Египте Е.Д. Киселева в МИД СССР. ("Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt E.D. Kiselev to the USSR Foreign Ministry"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней

received by Nasser in person and worked closely to the Nasser's Deputy, Abdel Latif Baghdadi, also Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs²⁹². Based on their concluding report, the Soviets identified the objectives for aid in constructing industrial and agricultural facilities. Given Egypt's urgency, the Soviet Union immediately discussed the possibility of providing the Arab country with a loan for the construction of these facilities.

As very sensitive negotiations were being set up, Nasser seemed to be conscious that he needed to move carefully. In April of 1956, a British "reliable source" reported to the Foreign Office about a recent meeting in Jeddah between the Egyptian leader, King Saud of Saudi Arabia, and the Imam Ahmed, King of Yemeni. As the Yemeni raised the question of Soviet technical assistance, Nasser is reported to have replied that all Arab countries should make use of Soviet technical assistance when this suited them, but they should agree that "in no circumstances" should the Soviets be brought into the Middle East in connection with either exploration for or the exploitation of oil²⁹³. He gave two reasons for this. First, the Arab states were interested in attracting capital and capital would undoubtedly be frightened if the Soviets were allowed into business. Secondly, and most importantly, if the Soviet Union was given a share in the Middle East oil, it would mean that the Soviet Government would be directly involved. In the event of any dispute arising, and in the oil business disputes were inevitable, the Arab government – or governments – concerned would come into conflict with the Soviet Government and not with a company, as it would be the case in oil dealings with any Western countries.

Furthermore, 1956 was also the year when the basis was laid for Egypt's five-years economic plan. The Soviets observed this very closely. In July, Ambassador Kiselev informed the Soviet Union's Foreign Ministry that their "German comrades" had informed the embassy confidentially about the Egyptian government's intention to direct most of the funds to such a plan. This meant directing funds almost entirely to heavy industry, with long terms of capital turnover, completely ignoring (at least for the upcoming 5/10 years), the most important task of gradually raising the low living standard of peasants, which made the vast majority of the Egyptian population. Economic planners invited from East Germany, Kiselev reports, had listened to statements like: "Our people

политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 15 июля 1956 г.

²⁹² An anecdote concerning the two soviet technicians is worth mentioning. The two specialists were late on arrival. The reason for their belated arrival is not stated; however, when Nasser asked the Soviet authorities about the reasons for the delay in their arrival, they replied that it was because of some logistical difficulties to get air tickets. Nasser responded by offering to establish a direct air Moscow-Cairo connection, which the Egyptian authorities supported. The first talks were held on the establishment of flight connections between the two capitals for the first time.

²⁹³ JE 1109/4. 1143/3/56). Russian technical assistance. At recent meeting in Jeddah between Colonel Nasser, King Saud and the Imam Ahmed, the Yemenis raised the question of Russian technical assistance. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 28, 1956.

will be quite patient for another 5/10 years, and during this time, we have come to build our heavy industry at all costs”²⁹⁴. While recognising the correctness of the Egyptian authorities’ will to foster the creation of industry in Egypt – which among other things will significantly strengthen the role and position of the working class – the Soviets warned the Egyptian leaders tactfully that, if they neglect to improve the situation of workers and peasants in the nearest future, and not through 5/10 years, it may create difficulties for them in the country, which the reactionary elements, the Comprador bourgeoisie and the agents of the imperialist powers will immediately take advantage of. If peasants and living conditions were not prioritised, the unanimous support of Nasser’s nationalist direction may give pace to a period of growing discontent with the lack of any tangible measures to improve the living conditions of the masses.

However, the very fact that the Egyptian government was planning to industrialise the country, to plan new large-scale structures, including the construction of irrigation facilities to ensure the development of agriculture, was considered as deeply progressive by the Soviets. They supported the Egyptian government’s desire to mobilise all available resources to ensure the development of the domestic economy and free itself from the influence of foreign monopolies and foreign capital, including through the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. The following year, 1957, a five-year industrialisation plan was drafted, and 62 million pounds in industrial financing from the Soviet Union were negotiated. In 1958, a law requiring approval from the Ministry of Industry to construct new industrial plants and modification of existing ones was drafted, and the growing practice of opening new industries financed up to 50 per cent by private subscription in partnership with the state. By adopting these measures, the Egyptian government was certainly moving from the revolution’s vague slogans of “eradication of monopolies, eradication of capitalist control, social justice” towards more concrete socialist policies, at least in the field of economics²⁹⁵. The new slogan became “the establishment of a democratic, cooperative, socialist society”.

Conclusions

The collaboration discussed so far was studied carefully by the Soviet authorities for its political implications. In terms of foreign policy, between 1954 and 1957, it became clear to the Soviets that Egypt’s political orientation went in neither direction: Nasser’s Egypt preferred a neutrality position between the two opposing camps of the Cold War. The Egyptian government aimed to cooperate

²⁹⁴ N° 262. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Египте Е.Д. Киселева в МИД СССР. 15 июля 1956 г.

²⁹⁵ Kerr, “*Socialist Ideology in Egypt*”, 127–144.

equally with all countries and did not want to join any camp, and there was not much that the Soviets could do – and wanted to do – to change this course. Internal politics gave the Soviets greater hopes and perspectives. While Nasser was firm on his neutrality position in the international arena, he soon abandoned fears of communist interferences in his government disguised by ‘Soviet know-how’ for the sake of socialist economic planning.

Facilitated by the West’s contradictory policies and the Suez Canal crisis in 1956, the Soviet authorities attempted to propose themselves as a more coherent, constructive partner for Egypt. Their intention to impact the state’s economic building emerges clearly from the analysis of intra-Soviet discussions. A conscious choice was taken forward through diplomatic activity and amplified through propaganda to support Egypt in this process. Propaganda activities to praise Egypt’s efforts to build a socialist state system were strengthened in Soviet press and radio broadcasts to Egypt and the Arab countries upon the Soviet officers’ residing in Cairo specific proposal. Exhaustive coverage of the Soviet government’s friendly policy towards the Arab people was often counter posed to the imperialist, colonial plans of the US and UK for political and economic enslavement of Egypt and the Arab world.

It holds that the solid collaboration established between 1954 and 1957 did not result in a convergence of political views, neither it served to ease Nasser’s antipathy for communism. However, it emerges clearly from the analysis of private conversations among Soviet and Egyptian officers that the former’s expertise in some domains was trusted blindly. The Egyptians seemed to welcome the models offered by ‘theorists’ such as Shepilov and implemented by the Soviet specialists during their long stays in Cairo. The socialist elements in Egypt’s policy remained very far from the purism of Soviet doctrine both in theory and practice: as Kerr observed (1962), they were “limited in practice to a selective system of state capitalism”. It was perhaps disappointing for the Soviets, especially for those of the ‘old guard’ who stuck to Stalin’s intransigent view that cooperation with ‘third countries’ had to be tangled with the promotion of communism but widely accepted by the new line of Soviet foreign policy.

Chapter 3

The Iraqi case-study, 1958-1963

The Soviet policy towards the Arab world awakened to a new awareness and pro-activism in the late 1950s. At least two somehow complementary reasons motivated this. To begin with, the successes registered through cooperation with Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt gave the Soviet leadership new impetus to replicate a promising model into other contexts. Nasser, since 1958 President of the United Arab Republic (UAR), was presented in Soviet propaganda as a hero of national liberation, the man who achieved the evacuation of the British troops, led the struggle of the Egyptian people against the Anglo-French-Israeli aggressors, was driving the Egyptian Arabs towards a future of economic and social prosperity²⁹⁶. His success was not *due to* the Soviets' support, yet it was bound to it in a way: Egypt had struggled, defended its territorial integrity and fought for independence *with* the Soviet peoples' support and comfort. At that time, Moscow looked at such a partnership as its core success in the region, which gave great reasons for hope in building a Middle East security architecture with the Kremlin as a leading protagonist. In addition, evolutions on the international scenario triggered a defensive – or 'pre' defensive – reaction in Moscow. Following the negotiations of the Baghdad Pact of 1955, on 5 January 1957, the US President Dwight David Eisenhower announced a measure under which any Middle East country threatened by armed aggression from another state was eligible to ask for the US military and financial protection. What became known as the "Eisenhower Doctrine" had a robust anti-Soviet goal: the US was granting their aid "to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations, requesting such aid against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by international communism"²⁹⁷. The Doctrine soon became no less than a nightmare for the Soviets, urging Moscow to move more accurately and consistently in the area.

²⁹⁶ On the front page of the 29 April 1958 issue, next to a picture of Nasser and a celebrative description of his life and political achievements, *Pravda* titled "Let the Friendship of the Peoples of the USSR and the Arab East Grow Stronger". The article refers to Nasser's visit to Moscow that same day, as he was invited by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR President. The Soviet people attached great importance to this visit, *Pravda* writes, considering it as a new manifestation of the growing friendship between the Soviet peoples the young UAR. "True to the Leninist principles of its foreign policy, the Soviet Union has consistently provided and continues to provide sincere support to the peoples defending independence in the struggle for the colonialists". From: "Пусть Крепнет Дружба Народов СССР и Арабского Востока". *Правда*. April 29, 1958.

²⁹⁷ United States, Department of State, *Bulletin*, XXXVI, January 21, 1957, 86–87.

The Soviet leadership found in Iraq a fertile ground to move further steps into the Arab regions of the Middle East and North Africa, counter the Western influence and develop more and more articulated strategies for development aid and assistance. The 14 July 1958 Revolution led by Abd al-Karim Qassim, the highest-ranking member of the Free Officers revolutionary group who took over Baghdad, and Abd al-Salam Arif, overthrew the existing monarchical regime and proclaimed the Iraqi Republic. The country thus entered into a phase of profound transformations and contradictions. On one side, movements for Arab unity and national liberation from Western domination arose in Iraq after 1958²⁹⁸. On the other, somewhat paradoxically, Baghdad became even more connected to, and dependent on, external financial and political powers to pursue much needed economic and cultural development. While the dominant foreign power in Iraq remained the United Kingdom, whose diplomatic and intelligence services kept conducting capillary monitoring activities, the Soviet Union gradually started to penetrate the centres of power, acquiring an increasingly significant role.

3.1. Between defence and diplomacy: Soviet perspectives on the ‘new Iraq’ in an evolving international context

3.1.1. Since the mid-1950s, a new attention on Iraq

Since the first half of the 1950s, Iraq found itself in the middle of a new international dynamic. As the Cold War vamped, Western powers began developing post-war strategic plans to defend their interests. On one side, the UK felt it had to cope with its “imperial responsibilities”, as John Kent has called them, thus prevent an erosion of its influence: “the Middle East was where the UK was expected to lead the Western alliance and thereby maintain Britain’s global standing”²⁹⁹. Politically, Iraq was a dangerous spot, for it provided fertile ground for the spread of communist ideology. A new political intelligentsia was rising in the country that approached politics on Arab-socialist lines and risked falling victim to the fascination of Soviet socialism. Moreover, from a military perspective, the UK (and US) feared that Iraq could be the entrance door for possible aggression of the Soviet troops into the Middle East³⁰⁰. On the other side, the US shared similar concerns. The United States

²⁹⁸ Orit Bashkin, “Hybrid nationalisms: Watani and Qawmi visions in Iraq under and al-Karim Qasim, 1958-1961”, *International journal of Middle East Studies*, 43:2 (2011), 293–312.

²⁹⁹ John Kent, “British foreign policy and military strategy: The contradictions of declining imperial power and the Baghdad Pact, 1947-55”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 56:5 (2020), 730–743.

³⁰⁰ In 1948 already, under the frame of “Plan Doublequick” – the UK first emergency plan for global war in consultation with the American allies – a Joint UK-US Intelligence Committee had produced assessments stating that Russian forces were ready to attack the Middle East. Faced with the necessity to reduce the number of troops on the ground, the British and American planners started to develop a defence strategy based on pre-stocking of supplies and equipment, reinforcement from outside the theatre and airstrikes, through which a possible advance of Soviet troops might be delayed in the Zagros mountains of eastern Iraq.

Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, took an historic trip across eleven Middle Eastern capitals in May 1953. However, during this famous tour – the first-ever to the area by an American head of diplomacy and generally considered as a watershed in Middle East politics – Dulles was forced to reconsider the long-cherished Middle East Defence Organisation (MEDO), a UK-led initiative designated to create a regional bulwark against any possible Soviet penetration. Dulles was indeed convinced during the said tour that the continuing controversy between the British and Iranian governments over the fate of the recently nationalized Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, the conflict between Egypt and Britain over British military presence in the Suez Canal base zone, and the continuing Arab-Israeli dispute over Palestine clearly made MEDO a future rather than an immediate possibility³⁰¹. He also deduced that MEDO had not worked because of Western predominance³⁰². Instead, Dulles concluded that the prospect of an anti-Soviet collective defence alliance was more encouraging in Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq and Syria, where political leaders seemed to be more aware of the Communist threat. His new approach envisaged an association of local forces under an indigenous command. It is this difference of view that gradually formed the military background to the emergence of the alliance of the Baghdad Pact.

Dulles wanted to replace MEDO with a collective defence project, based on the voluntary participation of pro-Western Middle Eastern countries lying on the Southern borders of the Soviet Union³⁰³. First, as the demands for the implementation of such a Plan were beyond the existing logistic resources of the joint planners, a crucial factor for implementing this strategy was involving Turkey and make sure that Turkey would be able to defend herself. Turkey was then moved closer to Pakistan, which was seeking Western support to equip and retrain its military forces faced to territorial disputes with Afghanistan and India. The first American step to implementing Dulles's new policy was indeed the decision, in 1954, to provide Pakistan with military aid. On 2 April the same year, in Karachi, a Turkish-Pakistani bilateral defence cooperation deal was signed.

³⁰¹ Ara Sanjian, "The formulation of the Baghdad Pact", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 33:2 (1997), 226–266.

³⁰² Moreover, the US suspected that the MEDO was not a defence of the Middle East, rather a defence of the own British interests and especially the British interests in Egypt. While such a suspect had always been present, it grew stronger during Dulles' visit to the region, as he "discovered the considerable animosity Britain's imperial domination had produced". With a view also not to be linked with the colonial past of Britain – and European powers in general –, Dulles concluded that the US had to develop their new approach, rather than relying on the UK to represent them in the region. Close cooperation with Britain was still possible, but the interests of Washington had to be particularised. Especially, Dulles believed, the US must abandon their "preconceived ideas", inherited by London, "of making Egypt the key country in building a military defence of the Middle East". From: Kent, *British foreign policy and military strategy*, 2020.

³⁰³ Although the UK was involved, however, such an American activism preoccupied London: if Washington persuaded Baghdad to join the Turkish-Pakistani alliance, backed by the US, there was not much room left for the British in Iraq. As the Pact was recognised as an American initiative, the Iraqis would have thought that there was no need for further military cooperation with Britain, and London's influence would be severely reduced.

After this, the choice of Iraq as the first Arab country to be approached came quite naturally. Among the Arab countries, the anti-communist Iraqi leadership felt most that the Soviet Union was a threat to the country's independence and it established political order³⁰⁴. It believed that Iraq's rich oil reserves could lure the Soviet regime to try to extend its influence there either through direct aggression, or, more probably, through members of the banned local Communist Party and its sympathizers, or through manipulating Kurdish nationalist sentiment in Northern Iraq. In the early 1950s Iraq was still a relatively poor country, and the establishment feared that widespread discontent among the lower strata of society could be easily manipulated by propaganda coming out of Moscow and, even more skilfully, by its local sympathizers. Furthermore, Iraq it represented a geographically strategic region. Beyond the Zagros mountains, there was no obstacles to Southern Levant and thus to the Mediterranean to any possible advance of Soviet troops. Iraq's adherence to the Turkish-Pakistani alliance would give it a strategic position in depth, air bases, and lines of communication from Turkey to the Persian Gulf, which could be used to support vital defensive positions³⁰⁵.

The Baghdad Pact was initially announced on 13 January 1955 as a cooperation framework between Iraq and Turkey and signed on 24 February. It became a comprehensive five-power regional security treaty when it was joined later the same year by the UK³⁰⁶, Iran and Pakistan. Until 1959, the alliance was known as the *Baghdad Pact* (or Middle East Treaty Organisation), included Iraq and had its headquarters in Baghdad. However, it did not bring many results and became ineffective after Iraq withdrew formally in March, 1959, shortly after the pro-Western monarchy was overthrown. The same year, the US joined as an associate member, and the name of the alliance changed to Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), and its headquarters moved to Ankara.

The Baghdad Pact raised concerns among the Soviet leadership as it threatened the Soviet interests in its Southern neighbourhood. Although Soviet officials reported uncountably how Iraqi leaders were dragged into the Pact with force by the Westerns³⁰⁷, they saw the choice to give up to American pressure and join the alliance as an unpopular foreign policy move, for it opened the door to American interferences and reinforced the British post-imperial rule in the country. Internally, such a choice demonstrated that Iraq's monarchical leadership cherished foreign interests more than the interests of their population. By joining the Baghdad Pact, Iraq had led to an unbalance of forces favouring the US and UK. This shift was even scarier to the Soviets as Iraq's contacts with the British

³⁰⁴ Ara Sanjian, *The formulation of the Baghdad Pact*, 1997.

³⁰⁵ Ara Sanjian, *The formulation of the Baghdad Pact*, 1997.

³⁰⁶ As for the British, according to John Kent, their joining of the Pact resulted more from London's perceptions that the US interests were damaging its influence rather than from actual fear for Soviet military aggression in the Middle East.

³⁰⁷ Б69. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы); Том 2: 1957–1967.

former mandatory power were still deep, so it was Iraq's reliance on Western aid. Furthermore, later in 1958, Iraq's alliance with countries of the Baghdad Pact implied its opposition to the establishment of the United Arab Republic (UAR) by Egypt and Syria, a project that received a great deal of Soviet appreciation³⁰⁸ and support³⁰⁹. Furthermore, the Baghdad Pact posed a threat to Egypt, the Soviet Union's best ally in the region. The week following the announcement of the Pact, Nasser engaged in a vigorous propaganda campaign against it, threatening Egypt's withdrawal from the Arab League Security Pact if the Turkish-Iraqi Pact was implemented. However, Soviet archives suggest evidence that the Egyptians overlooked this issue quite soon, believing that the risks of Egypt and the Arabs were not that high, as the risk that other Arab countries would follow Iraq and join the Pact was almost inexistent – a vision which seemed to persuade the Soviets. In a conversation with the Soviet Ambassador to Egypt Solod occurred on 1 March 1955, when asked about the risks brought about by the Turkish-Iraqi alliance, the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Fawzi told:

When I asked [Fawzi] about the reasons why Iraq, despite such resolute insistence and other Arab countries, still went for the conclusion of a military treaty with Turkey, Fawzi said that there is no monolith population in Iraq. The population of Iraq, as known, is divided into three parts – Kurdish tribes, Sunni and Shia. The Sunni élite are those in power, but they do not have strong roots among any population of the country. The Kurdish tribes and the Shia are hostile not only to the government, but also to the rest of the population. For this reason, to keep its hold on power the Iraqi government finds it easier to keep one group against the other. Nevertheless, in order to sign this agreement with Turkey, the Iraqi government needed to smash political parties once, to put in prison all the more or less thinking elements, close newspapers, liquidate any opposition, appoint deputies in parliament, and only after these events could the Iraqi government sign the agreement with Turkey. In other Arab countries, according to Fawzi, such events could not happen: governments of other Arab countries cannot follow Iraq³¹⁰.

³⁰⁸ Regarding the UAR, *Pravda* of 29 April 1958, writes: "The Soviet people deeply sympathize with the desire of the peoples of the Arab countries to strengthen their national independence. Guided by the high principles of self-determination of peoples and respect for the age-old aspirations of the Arab peoples for unity, the Soviet Union welcomed the creation of the United Arab Republic- which united the peoples of Egypt and Syria in one state on the basis of common goals in the struggle against imperialism. The emergence of the new republic strengthened the forces of the national liberation movement in the Arab East and inflicted a new a blow to the colonialists' plans". From: "Пусть Крепнет Дружба Народов СССР и Арабского Востока", *Правда*, April 29, 1958.

³⁰⁹ Indeed, despite off the record, there seems to be evidence that the Soviets were urging Iraqis to get into better terms with the UAR, as a Pakistani diplomat told to the British Ambassador to Iraq Humphrey Trevelyan. EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan's visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 8.

³¹⁰ Б69. № 158. Запись Беседы Посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с Министром Иностранных дел Египта Фаузи ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of

However, on 5 January 1957, the announcement by the US President Dwight David Eisenhower of the so-called *Eisenhower Doctrine* introduced a new element in the picture. The US was raising their hands on the Middle East, declaring that they would provide economic and military aid and, if necessary, will use military force to stop the spread of communism. That was seen by Moscow not only as a shrewd attempt to strengthen the US political, economic and military positions in the Middle East, taking advantage of the military and political defeat of Britain and France in the war against Egypt, but as a declared intention to set the US presence in the region in the long term. That was arguably a wrong perception: by issuing the Doctrine, Eisenhower raised the prospect that the US would fight in the Middle East and accepted responsibilities in the region that the US would retain for decades to come. As the two European mandatory powers were stepping back, there were few doubts, as per Soviet perception, that Washington had put its eyes on the area, intending to replace and pursue a sort of ‘neo-colonialisms by different means’. Indeed, the Soviet press developed a proper obsession for the Doctrine. It was presented as the threat to the freedom and independence of the Arab peoples, a crude attempt by the United States to establish its colonial rule in this area of the globe by force of arms. Frequent examples from the Arab press were also reported. In *Pravda* of 8 January 1957, for instance, it’s written:

The Arabs see the Eisenhower doctrine as an open challenge to the national liberation movement, and a serious threat to peace and security. ‘Colonialism’, writes the newspaper *Al-Joumhouria*, ‘does not want to consider the fact that the Middle East is not just a land containing large oil reserves, but these are peoples and states that want to be the masters of their own destiny’. The imperialists should know, the newspaper continues, that ‘we will never welcome a force that intends to turn us into slaves. We have the first and last word in relation to your countries’³¹¹.

In this scenario, since the mid-1950s, Iraq was seen by the Soviets as it was finding itself as “caught in between” Cold War dynamics and dangerously leaning towards a pro-Western dynamic. In a note to the CPSU Central Committee of 8 February 1957, the Soviet Foreign Ministry expressed preoccupation over emerging dangerous trends in the political situation in the Near East:

Египт М. Фавзи”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

³¹¹ “Угроза свободе и независимости арабских народов!” (“Threat to the freedom and independence of the Arab peoples!”), *Правда*, January 8, 1957.

Dangerous trends in the development of the political situation in the Near and Middle East have begun to emerge. The United States of America, taking advantage of Britain and France's serious military and political defeat in the aggressive war against Egypt, is taking successful measures to adopt and implement the so-called Eisenhower Doctrine. As rightly noted by the world community, its purpose is an attempt to strengthen the political, economic and military positions of the United States in the Middle East and take the place of England and France in this area³¹².

In a preoccupying regional evolution, however, opportunities arose for Moscow. The Suez crisis and the Suez-Sinai war of 1956-1957 had discredited the image of Britain and France, while the image of the Soviet Union and the socialist camp's countries was rising, and so it was the extent of engagement that these countries were willing to display in the area. Even the Middle East pro-Western rulers were more and more vulnerable to Nasser's pan-Arab, independentist ideas and the Soviet influence³¹³. Most importantly, Iraq's 14 July 1958 Revolution overthrowing the pro-Western Hashemite monarchy of King Faysal II gave Moscow good reasons for hope. In line with the Soviet Middle-East strategy of supporting anti-imperialist movements in the Arab world, the Revolution received great appreciation from Nikita Khrushchev, who rushed in to recognise the Iraqi Republic a few days after it was born (17 July 1958) and promptly expressed his government's interest in working with the new-born Iraqi Republic³¹⁴. In the words of Anastas Mikoyan, too, the First Deputy Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers in a visit to Iraq:

The Revolution of 14 July struck a telling blow at imperialism, was an important milestone in the history of the long-suffering Iraqi people who have now taken their place in the family of free nations. [...] The young Iraqi Republic put an end to the disgraceful

³¹² Б69. № 7. Запись беседы заместителя министра иностранных дел СССР А. Я. Вышинского с посланником Египта в СССР Биндари-Пашой ("Recording of the conversation of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR A. Y. Vyshinsky with the Egyptian Envoy to the USSR Bindari Pasha"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

³¹³ Peter L. Hahn, "Securing the Middle East: The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 36:1 (2006), 38–47.

³¹⁴ Телеграмма Н. С. Хрущева Абдель Керим Касему ("N. S. Khrushchev's Telegram to Abdel Kerim Kasem"). *Правда*. Июля 17, 1958, 1.

isolation imposed by the imperialists upon Iraq and established extensive contacts with many peace-loving countries³¹⁵.

Soviet authorities certainly had great hopes in the Qassim's new rule. Qassim, of course, made his gratitude for the Soviet stance towards the revolution repeatedly public, showing his "profound pleasure" at the attitudes taken by the Soviet Union towards the Iraqis after the "immortal 14 July Revolution, and at the realistic policy pursued by it in combatting imperialism and aiding the peace-loving peoples"³¹⁶. Diplomatic relations between Moscow and Baghdad, first established in 1944 but broken in 1955 by Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Said following the Kremlin's criticism of his choice to join the Baghdad Pact – were restored. This initiative boosted a significant improvement in Moscow-Baghdad relations, and a Soviet-Iraqi cooperation dialogue began as soon as the new anti-Western leadership took office in Baghdad in 1958, moving from what the new Iraq most needed: a strong army.

3.1.2. A Soviet-styled army for Iraq?

The Iraqi intelligentsia that had arisen over the 1930s and 1940s and from which the revolutionary thinking had eventually born, considered the army a crucial element of state building³¹⁷. In 1958, the military played a crucial role not only in executing the coup but also in gathering massive popular support around its revolutionary action. It contributed to the emergence of a new idea of Iraqi unity, based on independence in domestic and foreign policy, which, the Soviets believed, entailed Iraq to move away from reliance on Britain's heavy military and economic presence and from the US neo-colonial design to make Iraq abandon its position of neutrality. Such an independence had to be granted and defended by the armed forces, and thus Iraq needed a robust defence system to face these challenges.

By the time the Iraqi Republic was born in 1958, the Soviet Union had three years of experience in military cooperation with Nasser's Egypt, which had brought Moscow to trade extensively with Cairo and establish cooperation based on mutual benefits. What better occasion for the Soviets to offer their assistance to Iraq as well. Indeed, as Oles Smolansky and Bettie Smolansky argue, "the aspirations and actions of the Iraqi military corresponded closely – or so it seemed to the Kremlin –

³¹⁵ EQ10338/3. 10313/1/3. Treatment by the Soviet Press on the Communist split in Iraq. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 1, 1960.

³¹⁶ EQ103138/2. 1034/2/62. Iraq/Soviet relations. FO 371/164246. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 27, 1962.

³¹⁷ Johan Franzén, *Red star over Iraq: Iraqi Communism before Saddam* (London: C. Hurst & Co Publishers, 2011), 25–28.

to the analysis of the situation in the third world which Khrushchev developed in the mid-1950s”³¹⁸. Opposed to Stalin’s stark vision of the world as a two-camps arena in which ‘all those who were not with the Soviet Union, were against the Soviet Union’, Khrushchev scaled down the Kremlin’s ambitions to establish military, economic and cultural collaborations with postcolonial countries. The contribution that they would give to the Soviet Union was no longer their contribution to the international struggle against capitalism, but some practical advantage that they offered to the Soviet Union in its quest to protect and advance its national interests.

By 1961, several arms trade agreements were concluded between the Soviet Union and Iraq and the ship Sergey Kirev arrived in Basra’s port with a vast charge of military equipment, mostly artillery (22 January)³¹⁹. Soviet prices for military equipment to their Iraqi customers were roughly in line with world prices, but the Soviets applied substantial discounts to older equipment which were surplus to their own needs. This discount was essential in inducing the Iraqi leadership to deal with the Soviet Union and continue doing so after the first supplies arrived. Indeed, although Baghdad was dissatisfied with some of the equipment supplied, it kept proceeding towards the complete Soviet re-equipment of the Iraqi forces. One effect of the Soviet discount was that the £60 million which the Iraqis were spending in 1961, will by equipment valued well over £100 million (in terms of Soviet list prices and approximately world market prices)³²⁰. Over the year 1961, Iraqi authorities visited Moscow to strike other deals with the Soviets. “Reliable sources”, according to British officers in Iraq, reported that an additional loan agreement for 30 million dinars was reached during one of these visits to cover purchases of 28 aircraft, anti-aircraft artillery, air and military bombs and ammunition³²¹. By the end of November, onboard the Lermontov ship, another charge of military equipment (including jeep trailers and wheel-lorry trailers) was unloaded in Basra’s port.

³¹⁸ Oles Smolansky and Bettie Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq: The Soviet quest for influence*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991.

³¹⁹ These included: AFVs. 76 Tk T-34; 180 Tk T-54 ; 120 SU 100 ; over 60 APC 4x4 BTR 40 ; over 200 APC 6x6 BTR 152. ARTY. FD: 12 of 76mm Mtn gun M-1938; over 90 of 85mm Div gun M-1945; 36 of 100mm Fd gun M-1944; 38 of 122mm How M-1938; 28 of 152mm How M-1937. AA: 268 of 37mm LAA gun; 26 of 100mm AA gun; 29 of 14.5mm ZPU. A/Tk: 23 of 57mm A/Tk gun M-1943; 104 of 82mm Inf A/Tk launcher; 1 82mm A/Tk. MORS. 180 of 82mm M-1941; 76 of 120mm M-1938. ROCKET LAUNCHERS. 24 of 132mm RL (16 rds) M-13. VEHICLES. Personnel and load carriers: 820 Jeep GAZ 69; 1630 truck cargo GAZ 63; 6 truck cargo ZIS 150; 2450 truck cargo ZIS 151; 10 truck cargo MAZ 200; 45 truck cargo ZIL 157; 114 truck cargo YAZ 210; 38 truck cargo (Tptr) YAZ 210. TRAILERS. 24 prime movers; 312 2 whld, 100 of 2 whld (water). Specialist vehicles: 44 comd vehicles; 39 Fd kitchens. NAVAL CRAFT. 10 motor boats; 12 torpedo boats; 4 training or torpedo-recovery crafts. SMALL ARMS. 7.62mm semi authentic Simonov; 7.62mm SMG Kalashnikov; 7.62mm pistol Tula Tokarev M-1933; 7.62mm LMG RPD; 7.62mm MG Goryunov M-1943. ENGINEERING EQUIPMENT. Light Pontoon eqpt Bow and centre sections; 65 TMP pontoon on ZIS 151 chassis; 6 BAV 6x6 whld Amphibian; 6 MAV 4x4. From: EQ1193/2. Estimated Russian equipment in Iraq – January 1961. FO 371/157702. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. January 24, 1960.

³²⁰ EQ1193/4. 1194/61. Cost of equipment supplied by Russia. FO 371/157702. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 8, 1960.

³²¹ EQ1193/9. 1470. Iraq military mission. FO 371/157702. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. November 3, 1961.

The same year, a separate agreement for the purchase of MiG 19 aircrafts was also concluded. Iraqis paid 40,000 dinars apiece, and they had bought 10,000 worth of spares for each aircraft. Payments were to be spread over ten years, meaning that the Iraqis were buying at about one-quarter of the market value of those products³²². According to British investigations, Qassim was not utterly convinced about the purchase, especially the aircraft. The UK military attaché was told (by the son of the Chairman of Iraqi Airways) that, when considering the purchase of MiG 19's, Qassim's preferred choice would have been to buy from the British for their superior technology. If he eventually went for the deal with the Soviets, it was because he was thinking of the perspective of regional conflict: "we must look to the future", he said, "when we fight in Palestine, we shall be working with the UAR, who also has Russian aircraft, and we shall need to use their repair and maintenance facilities – we must therefore buy Russian"³²³. The first MiG 19's arrived in Iraq and few on 22 February 1961. In those same days, Iraqi Airways decided to buy Soviet YAK 18 and MiG 15 trainers for the Iraqi Air Force Flying College. In early September 1961, an Iraqi military mission led by the Director of Plans at the Ministry of Defence Brigadier Taha Shaikh Ahmad and the Commander of Air Force Brigadier Jalal al-Anqati – both known for their pronounced communist sympathies – left for Moscow to negotiate new agreements for the supply of Soviet arms along the lines of the one previously negotiated.

However, the Soviets' interest in the Iraqi army appeared to remain primarily a story of trade. The report of a British military attaché to the Foreign Office of January 1960 describes this well. On 6 January, the Russian Orthodox Christmas Eve, the Iraqi military attaché Lieutenant Colonel al-Saad gave a reception at the Praga Restaurant, a historic luxury place in the proximity of Old Arbat Street in Moscow's city centre to mark the Iraqi Army Day. The reception was lavish: an entire floor of the Praga hotel was hired, and an "unusual number" of senior Soviet officers, Iraqi officers, attachés to the security services of the UK and the US, and civilians were called to attend³²⁴. During the evening, an anonymous Iraqi artillery officer who had done his staff training in Solnechnogorsk, a small locality North-West of Moscow, in quite an incautious manner revealed some critical information to the British military attaché who, on behalf of London's Foreign Office, was presenting at the party and hunting around for precious information on the Soviet military activities in Iraq. "He was very

³²² EQ1193/5(A). 1194/61. Iraq decides to buy Soviet trainers for Iraqi Air Force Flying College. Qassim's preference for Russian aircraft reported to be because of technical advantages in future Palestine fight. FO 371/157702. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 8, 1961.

³²³ EQ1193/5. 1194/61. Iraq decides to buy Soviet trainers for Iraqi Air Force Flying College. FO 371/157702. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 23, 1961.

³²⁴ Numbers of military officers, however, could have been even higher. Iraqi officers who were junior to the rank of Colonel were asked by the Soviets not to wear their uniform but to show up in their civilian clothes in an effort to play down to the eyes of the UK and US officials the number of Iraqi military officers present. From: EQ10338/2. 10213/26/1. Report by Military Attaché on reception given by Iraqi Military Attaché to mark Army Day. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. January 26, 1960

affable”, the attaché wrote, “spoke English fluently, and unhesitatingly answered all questions put to him although he made sure that he was not overheard”³²⁵. The officer had probably been looking forward to reporting on the Soviet training courses for a while, as he cried that “[Soviet] instructions were so elementary as to be ridiculous”³²⁶. Not so much because the Soviets did not have good military techniques, he explained, but because they did not want to share them with the Iraqis. Why had so many Iraqis been taken to the Soviet Union if that was the treatment they were reserved, he wondered? Did they not trust Iraqis enough to share with them the latest information?

As an indication of the unsatisfactory nature of the course, [the Iraqi attaché] stated that although they are attending a Staff Course, they have been given no information on Soviet Army organisation or staff organisation. For example, the week before, instead of receiving information on the Soviet army organisation for their work, they were given the Russians’ recommendations as to how the Iraqi army should be organised. [...] Whenever an Iraqi officer questions any of the instructions, he is curtly cut off by the Russian instructor with a statement to the effect that ‘you must take our word for it, since we are more experienced’. [The Iraqi officer] volunteered the information that all the Iraqi officers were disappointed with their visit [to Moscow]. They were particularly angry about the security precautions taken against them and felt that the Russians did not trust them. Many who had come with a great deal of respect for Communism had been shocked into reality³²⁷.

Although the last words especially resound like the Iraqi officer’s attempt to please his British interlocutor, they seem to tell there was a lack of trust from the Soviets in the Iraqis. Between the late 1950s and early 1960, there were 90 Iraqi officers attending courses in the Soviet Union, ranging in rank up to and including Colonel. At least 10 of them were members of the Iraqi Air Force and were being trained in the Southern part of the Soviet Union³²⁸; 50 Air Force Cadets were attending a longer-

³²⁵ EQ10338/2. 10123/26/1. Report by Military Attaché on reception given by Iraqi Military Attaché to mark Army Day. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. January 6, 1960.

³²⁶ EQ10338/2. 10123/26/1. Report by Military Attaché on reception given by Iraqi Military Attaché to mark Army Day. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. January 6, 1960.

³²⁷ 10213/26/1. Report by Military Attaché on reception given by Iraqi Military Attaché to mark Army Day. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. 26 January 1960

³²⁸ The Iraqi informer, for how incautious he seemed to the British agent, was however careful enough not to provide the British with the exact name of the place where these courses were being held. According to the British military attaché, there was good reason to think that the area in the “Southern Part of Russia” referred to was the small, lake city of Krasnodar. Several Iraqi Air force Officers had been registered to be resident in Krasnodar since late Spring 1959 under UK visas.

term course of 4 years also in the Southern part³²⁹. Instructions were given on how the Iraqi army should be organised, yet the Soviet military doctrine and was not shared with them. However, what was perceived by the Iraqis as a lack of trust might have been even a more fundamental lack of interest in training Iraq's armed forces in a Soviet-styled manner. In those years, as the Soviet Union emerged as the principal military patron of Egypt, Iraq and Syria, these states' armed forces were equipped massively, if not mainly, with Soviet arms. It should not surprise that many military analysts assumed that these militaries also adopted Soviet military doctrine and organizational structures and that this factor largely accounted for their generally dull performance on the battlefield. Nevertheless, Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack argue that the reliance on Soviet military doctrine varied considerably between these three militaries – in some cases even opposed the Soviet model – and “at times contributed to success when they adapted it to their own cultural predilections and operational requirements”³³⁰. While Syria's was probably the closest system to the Red Army, and Egypt's attempted to borrow some of its organizational and operational tactics, Iraq provided a good example where the state did not adopt the Soviet doctrine, and the Soviets did not insist that much export it³³¹.

Provided that there even was a Soviet interest in building an Iraqi military doctrine, it ended soon. The size of the Soviet military mission in Iraq was reduced from its peak of 262 in 1959 to 135 in early 1960. The reduction probably reflected, at least partially, the completion of the Soviet equipment assembly and the training of Iraqi soldiers to use it. However, a definite trend away from Soviet training started to develop as soon as summer 1960. No formal statement marked such a trend, which was nonetheless real. Indeed, Iraqis started to take up offers of army training in the UK, showing renewed interest in the United Kingdom Training Publications, and senior Iraqi Air Force officers were negotiating for the purchase of British aircraft so that the primary flying training could be carried out in Iraq instead of the Soviet Union³³².

To sum up, rather than “building” the Iraqi army in a Soviet-like fashion, the main interest in this field appeared to be trading arms with Iraq. What Iraqi officers visiting the Soviet Union for staff training were given were various demonstrations on how to use those weapons and artillery. Upon

³²⁹ 10213/26/1. Report by Military Attaché on reception given by Iraqi Military Attaché to mark Army Day. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. January 26, 1960.

³³⁰ Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Armies of Snow and Armies of Sand: The Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries”, *Middle East Journal*, 55:4 (2001), 549–578.

³³¹ The fact that Iraqis were not trained in the Soviet military doctrine, Eisenstadt and Pollack argue, became clearer about ten years later when the Iraqi Army joined the Arab-Israeli war in October 1973. Fighting against Israel's troops as they threatened to outflank Syrian defences on the northern Damascus plain, Iraqis were driving newly arrived Soviet T-55 tanks. Though using Soviet equipment, however, they still employed a mostly British-based system, with an admixture of American, French, and some indigenous Iraqi practices. Iraqi tanks and APCs were not moving to contact in a Soviet-style assault line but instead were attempting to use British-style overwatch techniques.

³³² EQ11338/23. 1161/25/60. Principal developments of Communist aid to Iraq. Definite trend away from Soviet training to armed forces. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1960.

their return to Baghdad, they were advised to make recommendations to their government on purchasing weapons from the Soviet Union. Indeed, low interest in Iraq's military doctrine did not mean that the Soviet Union could not pursue its trade interests by selling Iraq its military equipment. Indeed, the British suspected that all economic cooperation activities - discussed in the following section - were, in fact, an excuse to disguise the Soviet monitoring of what happened all around Iraq³³³.

3.2. Economic development by Soviet means

3.2.1. The launch of Soviet-Iraqi economic cooperation and the Trade Agreement of 1958

Iraq's pre-revolutionary economic structure was based mainly on agriculture and livestock, with the management of lands mostly entitled to tribal leaders and organised locally³³⁴. For the first part of the 20th century, labour outside agriculture and local trade of agricultural products was almost inexistent. Tareq Y. Ismael reports the words of a British Colonial Office reporting to the Council of the League of Nations who, regarding the condition of labour in Iraq in the mid-1920s, observed: "In Iraq, there are hardly any organised industries worth mentioning. Local industries are mostly of the cottage variety, namely tanning, weaving, copper and iron smiting, and a few others of less importance. Families in their homes carry on these industries. There are no factories in the ordinary sense of the word, and the problems associated with factory conditions do not exist"³³⁵. The 1930s represented a decade of change. An extent of economic diversification away from agriculture and an overture to external markets was registered as Iraq steadily integrated into the international economic system as a significant oil exporter. Moreover, the development of oil production brought about a beginning of industrialisation and the organisation of the modern centralised bureaucratic state. Iraq's urban

³³³ EQ11338/3. 1161/4/605. Summary of Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 16, 1960, 5.

³³⁴ To understand this, it is worth to go back to the beginning of the 20th century. When the British occupation of Iraq began in 1920, Iraqis were still nominally Ottomans. Despite declining, the Ottoman Empire was still the ruling authority of Iraq and vast lands of the Middle East and North Africa, and the relation with it presented the British with a challenge. In Iraq, British rulers were concerned of conquering "if not the loyalty, at least the neutrality" of the local population to ensure that they did not cooperate with the Ottomans. What they did was to empower tribal shaykhs and landlords by giving them "the security of tenure over the lands that they had been unable to claim as their own under the Ottomans". Shaykhs and selected tribal leaders thus received vast areas of land and acquired increased political power too. This policy of bolstering power of tribal leaders continued throughout the entire British mandate over Iraq. For more on this see, for instance: Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001 (Third Edition).

³³⁵ Tareq Y. Ismael, *The rise and fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2008), 12.

population also increased dramatically since the 1930s, reflecting the economic changes occurring in the country.

While the development of an oil industry threw Iraq on the international trade scene, it brought limited advantages to the population regarding wealth and services provision. The Iraqi Petroleum Company kept controlling both production and prices for the oil trade, and the government had no control over this process. As Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett argue, in pre-revolutionary Iraq, the pattern of economic activity remained typical of a colonised or semi-colonial Third World country³³⁶. The vast majority of the population continued to be employed in agriculture, although because of the value of oil exports, agricultural production only accounted for a relatively small proportion of national income, some 29 per cent by 1951. Industry developed slowly, contributing only about 8 per cent in that year and 10 per cent ten years later³³⁷. State intervention in economic life was also minimal, as all profitable economic activities belonged to the private sector. In addition, due to the influx of revenue from the oil companies, “the state became, in large measure, economically autonomous from society,” and this dislocation heightened its potential for despotism³³⁸. To a large extent, this process resulted in a concentration of wealth in the hands of a very few landlords who, consequently, hold political power³³⁹. In this way, a bourgeoisie Iraqi social class arose, namely with a “bourgeois” being someone who “owns irrigation pumps and agricultural land and some urban real estate, undertakes transactions in one or more branches of commerce and owns industrial stocks and shares if he is not the main founder of an industrial establishment”³⁴⁰. As the Iraqi high-middle income bourgeoisie was flourishing in the pre-revolutionary years, the working class lagged behind. With the 1958 Revolution economic development became the imperative of the new Iraq alongside national independence³⁴¹.

This trend created a window of opportunities for the Soviets to engage more with Iraq, who believe that the working-class conditions depended on the development of Iraq’s economy and industry. The first step towards sustained economic cooperation occurred on 11 October 1958, when, less than three months after the Revolution, the Iraqi-Soviet Trade agreement was signed in Baghdad, at the presence the Soviet Ambassador to Baghdad Grigory Zaitsev and the Iraqi Minister of Economics Ibrahim Kubba. The Agreement’s eleven articles established general lines on which, “based on the principle of respect for mutual commercial interests”, several trade bilateral trade

³³⁶ Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 2001.

³³⁷ Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 35.

³³⁸ Ismael, *The rise and fall of the Communist Party of Iraq*, 16.

³³⁹ Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 35.

³⁴⁰ Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 36.

³⁴¹ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba’thists and Free Officers*, London: Saqi Books, 2004.

agreements and contracts could be established between countries of the Soviet Union and the new-born Iraqi Republic³⁴². The Agreement provided that each country's exports were subject to the minimum customs duty in the other country unless the ultimate country of origin of the goods does not enjoy the most favoured nation status in the importing country. Starting as a one-year contract, the Agreement provided a clause of automatic annual extension unless one of the contracting parties gives the other three-month notice before the end of the year. Soviet exports to Iraq included factories and factory equipment (cranes, compressors, pumps), construction and road-building equipment, railway equipment, machinery for Iraq's oil industry and geological exploration, printing machines, mobile electric stations, diesel power stations, agricultural machinery, motor vehicles and cycles, cinema equipment, scientific instruments, clocks and watches, ball and roller bearings, rolled iron and steel products, chemicals and drugs, ceramic goods, sewing machines, wooden cases for pressing dates, telephone sets, cables, and other technological products. Iraqi exports to the Soviet Union were lesser ranged and included dates, barley and cereals, cotton, wool, oilseeds, tobacco, hides and intestines³⁴³.

The Agreement signature's ceremony in Baghdad showed not just a convergence of aims but proper reciprocal enthusiasm for such an achievement. However, two diverging views were displayed officially. Zaitsev insisted that aid to Iraq aimed to foster the latter's progress in the path of economic development and hoped that the Agreement might lead to economic cooperation in other fields between the two countries, "in a manner free from political conditions"³⁴⁴. On the contrary, Minister Kubba's words were charged with meaning much beyond the economic sphere. The Iraqi official linked the Soviet Union's aid to a "defence of the Arab cause", for which he expressed the Iraqi government's and nation's great gratitude to the Soviet Union. He accused his country's former government of seeking to isolate Iraq from the most critical social and political forces in modern history, keeping it in a social, political backwater. He argued that the entire nation was subjected to torture by the ruling group, acting as the puppets of imperialism. Post-revolutionary Iraq was determined to break these chains and create the political, economic and social conditions needed to keep the pace of development draw level with the other liberated nations of the world. Iraq intended to consolidate trade relations with all friendly countries, irrespective of political and social differences. The reaching of mutual economic profits and development appeared to be the main

³⁴² Торговое Соглашение между Союзом Советских Социалистических Республик и Иракской Республикой ("Trade Agreement between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Iraqi Republic"), Электронный Фонд Правовых И Нормативно-Технических Документов, October 11, 1958.

³⁴³ EQ11338/2. 11233/21/58. Commercial Secretariat. Baghdad to Eastern Europe. FO 371/133103. Commercial relations between Iraq and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. November 29, 1958.

³⁴⁴ EQ11338/1. 11233/21/58. Commercial Secretariat. Baghdad to Eastern Europe. FO 371/133103. Commercial relations between Iraq and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 16, 1958.

priorities. From the Iraqi perspective, the Agreement with the Soviets was functional to this goal: it would lead to more comprehensive agreements that could help Iraq achieve economic independence, consolidate its commercial position, and raise its living standards. He praised the attitude of the Soviet Union to peace, democracy, and coexistence and called for the cooperation of forces of liberation throughout the world to defeat the common enemy, world imperialism³⁴⁵.

It is interesting to note how Michael Wright, the British ambassador to Baghdad (1954-1958), perceived the situation. Commenting on what must have been a surprisingly short comment from Zaitsev to Kubba's praise, he ironically wrote in his report to the Foreign Office: "After so full a statement of the communist viewpoint by Dr Kubba, the Soviet Ambassador may well have felt that there was little for him to add by way of reply"³⁴⁶. While the speech rather resounded as a long list of prepared formulas to please the Soviet audience, it doubtless was very politicised³⁴⁷.

Indeed, initially, at least, the Agreement seemed to perform better politically than economically. The diplomatic dialogue between Moscow and Baghdad boosted, while Soviet efforts to penetrate the Iraqi market began with fatigue and slowed pace. One year into the Agreement's implementation, there was no indication of Iraqi governmental favouritism in granting import licenses to the Soviets over other Bloc countries. Instead, the UK imports into Iraq in 1959 were even higher than in 1958³⁴⁸, a significant date suggesting that the Soviet presence was experiencing difficulties penetrating and was far from undermining its Western competitors. However, a closer look at Soviet activities suggests that building the Iraqi industry from inside Iraq, rather than trade, was Moscow's priority.

³⁴⁵ EQ11233/11/58. Commercial relations between Iraq and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. FO 371/133103. October 16, 1958.

³⁴⁶ EQ11233/11/58. Commercial relations between Iraq and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. FO 371/133103. October 16, 1958.

³⁴⁷ The reaction of the British offices to the Agreement seem to prove its highly political nature. In his report of the inaugural ceremony, the British ambassador to Iraq Michael Wright (1954-1958), wrote as follows: "[...] the interest of the occasion lies not so much in the terms of the Agreement, which are probably on stereotyped lines, as in the remarks of the Iraqi Minister of Economics. There are strong rumours that Dr Kubba is a Communist and one member of the Council of Ministers, the Minister of Communication, is known to hold the belief that Dr Kubba is in fact a Party [the Iraqi Communist Party] member. Dr Kubba shows a marked friendship on public occasions towards members of the Iron Curtain missions and his speech on this occasion, including the reference to national equality, sovereignty and independence, was all that the Soviet Ambassador could have hoped for; Mr Zaitsev appeared moderate by comparison. [...] The danger to Western economic interests lies more in the presence of Dr Kubba at the Ministry of Economics [than in the Agreement itself]. With all goods now subject to import licensing, it presents no administrative difficulty within his department to ensure that licenses are issued in preference to those importers who seek to do trade with the Eastern bloc. Some local merchants are already complaining that this is being done".

³⁴⁸ EQ10338/4. Bloc penetration in Iraq. Requests comment on State Department Paper. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 14, 1960.

3.2.2. Industrialisation: The engine of development

Alike Egypt, the boost towards industrialization was undeniably the most prominent trait of Soviet policy in Iraq too. As much as for other so-called “Third World” countries, the Soviet foresaw for Iraq a national, state-owned and state-managed economic system as the only way to abolish poverty and backwardness. The key to developing the economy was industry. Discussions between Soviet leaders and Qassim on how to rebuild Iraq’s economic structure in this sense began as early as the latter’s establishment in government. On 16 March 1959 in Moscow, they led to the signature of the Iraqi-Soviet Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement. The Agreement was signed in Moscow at the presence of Valentin Michailovich Gushchin (*Валентин Михайлович Гущин*, 1912-1982), Economic Affairs Councillor to the USSR Embassy in Baghdad, and Iraqi authorities. The Agreement’s boundaries will have been amended and ratified in the following years, but that signature represented a milestone, if not *the* milestone, in the development of Soviet-Iraqi relations. The Agreement’s first article read as follows:

The Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, meeting the wishes of the Government of the Republic of Iraq, agrees to provide technical assistance to Iraq in the construction of:

- an oil refinery in Mosul with an oil pipeline to supply the plant with Kirkuk crude oil;
- Baghdad-Basra oil product pipeline;
- two hydroelectric power plants on the existing Dukan and Derbendikhan dams with high-voltage power transmission lines to connect these hydroelectric power plants to the state power system;
- a mine with a processing plant at the Akashat phosphorite deposit and a superphosphate plant;
- fishing facilities (fish cannery, refrigerators, fish berths, research and training centers), including the supply of fishing vessels;
- two dairies.

The capacities of the facilities and the production volumes will be determined by the competent organizations of the Parties when approving the tasks for the design of the facilities.

The Iraqi Side has the right, after consultation with the Soviet Side, to exclude or modify any object provided for in this Article, and also has the right to include, by agreement

with the Soviet Side, any new objects within the amount of the loan specified in Article 3 of this Agreement³⁴⁹.

Four Soviet foreign corporations were designated to assist in implementing the Agreement: Technoexport (for provision of technologies, machinery and coaches to railway projects; pharmaceuticals and anti-biotics plant³⁵⁰; drug factory; textile and tailoring factory projects), Tjach Prom Export (for heavy industrial equipment and metallurgical plant), Prom Mach Export (for supplying equipment for radio stations, cannery factory, television, radio communications and telephones) and Techno Prom Export (for a sulphur plant in Kirkuk, a fertiliser plant in Basra, atomic centre – reactor and laboratory for the production of radioisotopes – near Baghdad, state farms and machine tractor stations)³⁵¹. The four provided the equipment for their respective projects individually and gave practical economic and technical aid where required; they had two permanent representatives in Baghdad and one in Basra.

Under the framework of the Technical Cooperation Agreement, many deals were reached in different fields of production. The most relevant one was certainly agriculture, standing up on the top of the Soviets' priorities, which aimed to transform Iraq's production system from agrarian to agro-industrial by betting on State-owned farms. It appeared that The Iraqis highly valued Soviet suggestions on agricultural matters. For instance, in mid-December 1959, Soviet advisers submitted a report on the Government Cotton Farm, recommending the Iraqis to expand it from 18,400 donums to 40,000 donums³⁵². A few weeks later (26 January 1960), Iraq's Higher Committee for Agrarian Reforms approved the recommendation and asked that one of these agrarian stations be opened at Kut (the other one in Abu Ghraib), the location suggested by the Soviets. By the first half of January 1960, the Iraqi Economic Planning Board had approved most of the recommendations made by the Soviet advisers on sites for the state-owned factories to be built under the Technical Cooperation Agreement. These included: a farm implements factory near Musayyib; an electrical equipment

³⁴⁹ Соглашение между Правительством Союза Советских Социалистических Республик и Правительством Иракской Республики о дальнейшем развитии экономического и технического сотрудничества ("Agreement between the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Government of the Republic of Iraq on further Development of Economic and Technical Cooperation"), Москва: *Электронный Фонд*, Марта 16, 1959.

³⁵⁰ This plant, based in Samarra, was the largest plant for the manufacture of pharmaceuticals and anti-biotics in the entire Middle East. It had the following annual capacity: 5,5 tons of penicillin; 5,5 tons of streptomycin; 6,5 tons of biomycin; 800 tons of tinctures and extracts (liquid, dry and concentrated); 250 tons of medical pastes; 100 tons of tablets; 40m pieces of ampules. From: FO 371/157694.

³⁵¹ EQ11338/24. 1161/30/60. List of latest developments in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. September 27, 1960, 1.

³⁵² Later the same month, a contract was also signed for the soviet supply of agricultural machinery: 100 tractors, 50 seed spreaders, 95 ploughs and other tools.

factory in Waziriyah, northern Baghdad; a steel mill in Kadhimiyah; a cotton textiles factor at Kut; and a glassware factory at Ramadi³⁵³.

The Soviet Union allocated funds to cover expenditure for state farms, whether created from scratch upon her suggestion or developed from existing facilities. Allocation funds in the first half of 1960 covered expenditure for the Government farm at Suwaira, one of the five model farms to be established with Soviet advice, and primarily intended for specialisation in cotton and grasses (12.250 Iraqi Dinar). In addition, they covered part of the expenses on the sugar beet farm near Mosul, an originally Iraqi project now developed with Soviet assistance (6,090 Iraqi Dinars out of an estimated cost of 960,000 Iraqi Dinars). Soviet funds also covered part of the Kut Agricultural Machinery Station (135,000 out of 309,000 Iraqi Dinars). Other significant allocations included funds for the Agricultural Machinery Stations in Kirkuk and Mosul (respectively 150,000 and 193,000 Iraqi Dinars came from Soviet credit), and the Agricultural Machinery Station at Abu Ghraib (298,000 Iraqi Dinars)³⁵⁴. Several integrations of credit were made in the following months and years to improve it. Further projects were added later, including the construction of two silos, each of 12,000 tons capacity, with two-grain elevators, each with a capacity of 1,000 tons per hour, and the construction of another agricultural implement factory in Iskandariyah, near Baghdad³⁵⁵.

A second priority for the Soviets was to boost Iraq's infrastructures and public works, much needed to support the agroindustry transition. In this field, the most spectacular work was undoubtedly the Baghdad-Basra railway line, for which the Soviets invested massively, dedicating a specific part of their loan budget to it (180 million roubles). Soviet and Iraqi experts were first engaged in surveying the widening of the metre-gauge line to standard gauge. Survey works in this project were completed in less than a year (1959-August 1960); as Russian surveyors returned home upon completing their work, they were replaced by 47 Russian engineers working on the widening of the line³⁵⁶. Works started in the Spring of 1961, involving: 2,500 workers, earthworks of over 6 million cubic metres, the construction of 600 bridges and culverts and the use of 1,5 million cubic metres of sand and stone. Once completed, in 1964, Soviet officials presented the Baghdad-Basra line

³⁵³ EQ11338/3. 1161/4/605. Summary of Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. 16 February 1960.

³⁵⁴ EQ11338/3. 1161/4/605. Summary of Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 16, 1960.

³⁵⁵ EQ113138/5. Contracts signed for Soviet concrete silos under Iraqi/Soviet economic agreement. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 21, 1961.

³⁵⁶ EQ11338/23. 1161/25/60. Principal developments of Communist aid to Iraq. Definite trend away from Soviet training of armed forces. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1960, 4.

as the Middle East's most modern railway³⁵⁷. Repair works on the Baghdad-Mosul line were also started in the same period. Agreements were concluded between the Hungarian Government and the Iraqi Airways to provide ground and technical services; a few officials (three) of the Mosul Passenger Transport administration were sent for a year's training in the maintenance and repair Skoda vehicles in the USSR. As early as January 1960, six Soviet railway engineers had already been employed and begun to work on the survey of the new Baghdad-Basra railway (to be converted to standard gauge); further 14 were about to arrive. Six interpreters were also engaged to work with surveyors working at the railway³⁵⁸.

Irrigation was another primary concern for the Soviet planners, although expenses in this sector were too high for the Kremlin's pockets. As the deputy Counsellor for Economic Affairs of the Soviet diplomatic mission, Viktor F. Bachinskiy, declared during a press conference at the Soviet embassy in Baghdad, the storage capacity and total cost of irrigation projects and drainage work in Iraq would have been even more than that for the first and second stages of Egypt's Aswan Dam³⁵⁹. He added that, however, providing effecting remedy for the problem of floods, one of the greatest and age-old Iraqi problems, remained a great concern for Moscow, as the problem was closely connected with the raising of the Iraqi peasants' life standards, the increase of agricultural production, navigation, and generation of electric power.

Among infrastructural projects, the Soviets dedicated considerable attention to Iraq's urban planning as well. In December 1959, four East German engineers visited Iraq to study the requirements of Iraq's municipalities to find ways to get qualified drinkable water and electricity. The Director General and the engineer of the Sewage Board at Iraq's Ministry of Municipalities paid various visits to East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia to recruit water, electrical and sewage engineers and rural planners. A massive electro-technical plant was then built in Baghdad, extending over 43,000 square meters. The plant started operating in 1963 and produced about 40,000 motors annually, employing 663 workers (384 skilled workers, 180 unskilled, 91 engineers). In January 1960, a contract was signed in Baghdad entrusting the management of a new Iraqi power plant in Basra to

³⁵⁷ EQ11338/23. 1161/25/60. Principal developments of Communist aid to Iraq. Definite trend away from Soviet training of armed forces. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1960, 4.

³⁵⁸ EQ11338/5. 1161/9/60. Further development in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 29, 1960, 4.

³⁵⁹ The greatest importance attached by the Soviets to Iraq's dam projects raised strong suspicions among Western observers, especially the British, who defined this as the most "surprising point" in the Soviet aid strategy to Iraq. While they were persuaded that the Soviets were just trying to impress the Iraqis, they believed that the Soviets had overlooked the possibility that the Iraqis may not be delighted at having to pay more than the Egyptians and that the Egyptians, on their side, may resent this overshadowing of the High Dam. EQ113138/10. Iraqi/Soviet economic agreement anniversary. Report of press conference held by the Soviet acting commercial counsellor, Baghdad. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 6, 1961.

a nine-man group of Polish specialists³⁶⁰. A state electric lamp factory was built with Soviet assistance near the Daura oil refinery (completed in a few years and started production in 1963), drawing gas and diesel oil supplies from the refinery. It produced 8 million bulbs of up to 100 watts, 7 million bulbs of up to 200 watts, and 2 million fluorescent strips annually; 44% of production was planned to go to Baghdad³⁶¹. Around 780 people were employed in the factory, of which 108 were engineers and technicians, 288 workers, and the rest were officials and executives³⁶².

As the Iraqi soil was largely under-explored, most agricultural and infrastructural industrial projects required extensive survey work before technicians could even plan them. Under the terms of the Technical Cooperation Agreement, Soviet experts of the Technoexport conducted mineral surveys alongside Iraqi experts and included mineral and geological surveys especially in Iraq's north and drilling for phosphates and sulphur (both Soviet and Iraqi experts paid by the Iraqis for the overall amount of D 433,000). The geological works indicated the existence of various kinds of minerals in Iraq: sand used in glass production, phosphorous near al-Rutbah, sulphur near Mosul, lead and zinc in other northern areas; copper, iron ore, and manganese in other mountains areas. Technoexport and Iraqi experts also conducted surveys for the improvement of the Tigris and Euphrates' navigation. Works in this matter included; building a canal between Chibayish and Bani Said, improving other canals, building three regulators, broadening the Tigris, repairing pumping machines, building side barrages on the Tigris and improving navigation in general in the Shatt-al-Arab (overall cost of the survey work D 676,000 of which the Soviets provided 510,000). In five years, the transport on the Tigris river reached around 1 million tons annually, saving an estimated sum of between D 600,000 and 700,000 in transport expenditure³⁶³. Surveys to shipbuilding and repair yards in Basra were also conducted³⁶⁴. A total of around 36 Soviet technicians were employed in this field by summer 1960³⁶⁵. The British closely scrutinised the high costs of these surveys, who believed that, especially at the current rate of exchange of 25 roubles to the dinar, the Soviet offer to the Iraqis was all but a fair one.

³⁶⁰ This was actually the second industrial plant in Iraq to be supervised by the Polish, the first one being a sugar refinery in Mosul.

³⁶¹ EQ11338/5. 1161/9/60. Further development in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 29, 1960, 3.

³⁶² EQ113138/4. Preliminary studies for Government electric lamp factory under Iraqi/Soviet agreement have been completed. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 20, 1961.

³⁶³ EQ113138/10. Iraqi/Soviet economic agreement anniversary. Report of press conference held by the Soviet acting commercial counsellor, Baghdad. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 6, 1961.

³⁶⁴ EQ11338/11. 1161/15/60. Costs of surveys carried out by Soviet experts under the Iraqi/Soviet Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 22, 1960.

³⁶⁵ EQ11338/23. 1161/25/60. Principal developments of Communist aid to Iraq. Definite trend away from Soviet training of armed forces. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1960, 4.

Of lesser importance for Iraq's development, but with a similar potential for impact on the flourishing of Iraqi-Soviet relations, were several cultural exchanges occurred under the umbrella of the 1959 Technical Cooperation with countries of the socialist camp. Iraqi and East Germany signed a Cultural Agreement on 1 April 1959; Soviet cultural delegations toured around the country and got in contact with writers and artists; an East German troupe of folk dancers visited Baghdad; Soviet prominent academics in the field of economics as well oriental languages lectured in Baghdad's university³⁶⁶; the Iraqi embassy opened a Cultural Department in Prague (February 1960) to supervise Iraqi cultural relations with Eastern bloc countries; or again Hungarian Cultural Week (April 1960) in Baghdad to include film festivals, art exhibitions and concerts³⁶⁷. In January 1960, Iraq also signed an agreement with Albania on broadcasting during Kadhim Samawi's, Director of Broadcasting visit in Tirana. Radio broadcasting was indeed a central theme for Iraq. Qassim's post-revolutionary government was well aware that Iraq was lagging on communication technologies; the country could not provide a viable domestic signal to the citizens and reach to neighbouring countries with a radio signal, as Egypt did, for instance. Therefore, it was Qassim to order extensive transmission facilities from the Soviet Union to broadcast his government actions, especially regarding military matters³⁶⁸. The Salman Pak radio station wave transmitter was then built South of Baghdad by Iraqis employees under the supervision of Soviet technicians. Symbolically, Salman Pak began transmitting on 14 July 1961, on the third birthday anniversary of the Iraqi Republic. As Douglas Boyd argued, this moment marked Iraq's entrance into the Arab world club of high-power transmitter operators, and for a time, Iraq was equal to Egypt in transmitter strength³⁶⁹. Other works to expand broadcasting facilities included works at the station and ancillary facilities in Dawodiyah, construction of buildings to house two 100 kilowatt transmitters at Abu Ghraib, and improvements of the Baghdad broadcasting studios³⁷⁰.

While the Soviets designed and supervised all these projects, the funds were almost entirely from Iraqis. Under the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement, the Soviet Union initially offered Iraq a 550 million rouble loan for 12 years, which was ratified about one year and a half later (25 September 1960) to provide for the granting of up to additional 180 million roubles, with an

³⁶⁶ EQ11338/3. 1161/4/605. Summary of Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 16, 1960.

³⁶⁷ EQ11338/5. 1161/9/60. Further development in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 29, 1960, 2.

³⁶⁸ Douglas A. Boyd, "Radio and Television in Iraq: The Electronic Media in a Transitional Arab World Country", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 18:4 (1982), 400–410.

³⁶⁹ Boyd, *Radio and Television in Iraq*, 402.

³⁷⁰ EQ11338/24. 1161/30/60. List of latest developments in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. September 27, 1960, 4.

interest of 2,5%³⁷¹. The provision of such a loan, through which the Soviet Union committed to a long-term project of assistance and helped the country's economic development, generated suspicion among Western countries with a stake in Iraq, starting from the UK. However, in the words of Soviet officials, there was no second goal to the Agreement, and the Soviets were not aiming at any benefits for themselves. As Gushchin stated at the first anniversary ceremony of the Agreement (March 1960): "the Soviet Union is obsessed with a noble desire to help the Iraqi people develop a national industry to be their own"³⁷². However, these funds were not even remotely enough to cover all the projects mentioned above.

Soviet authorities followed up with frequent visits to oversee the practical results of the Agreement, and repeatedly propagandised their satisfaction about the development of technical cooperation with Iraq³⁷³. On 15 March 1960, the Soviet embassy in Iraq hosted a press conference to meet the Agreement's first anniversary. Gushchin spoke proudly of the "vast-scale" progresses and researches that Soviet establishments were making in the field of planning and designing for improving navigation in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, using the water resources of the two rivers to produce energy; carrying out geological exploration for valuable metals, and other large-scale researches at the request of the Iraq government³⁷⁴. He claimed that the Soviet Union expected Iraq's irrigated lands to increase by 2 million hectares; cultivated areas in the South to increase by 1.5 million hectares after the project of draining marshes was carried out; local production of alloy for the Baghdad iron and steel mill to overcome current import; the fertiliser Plant in Basra to soon fully meet the country's need. The Soviet technicians, he said, expected Iraq to soon meet self-sufficiency in the supply of cotton, woollen and knitted, and agricultural machines, glassware, and electric lamps. Moreover, they expected to increase the capacity to ship goods by the Tigris and Euphrates and reach large-scale use of atomic power for peaceful purposes once they set up an atomic energy centre. All these improvements will not only increase living standards significantly but they will create jobs in the above-mentioned industries³⁷⁵. The Soviet official expressed his gratitude to the Iraqi government for facilitating the task of the Soviet experts and his hope that several difficulties – which he did enter into details of – will be overcome. He also expressed his confidence that Iraqi and Soviet experts,

³⁷¹ The provision of such additional amount was to be used specifically for the construction of the Baghdad-Basra gauge railway line and factories related to it. EQ11338/25. 11012/8/60. Ratification of Iraqi/Soviet Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 8, 1960, 1.

³⁷² EQ11338/4. 1161/8/605. Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 15, 1960.

³⁷³ "Развитие технического сотрудничества с Ираком", *Правда*, January 11, 1961.

³⁷⁴ EQ11338/4. 1161/8/605. Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 15, 1960.

³⁷⁵ EQ11338/4. 1161/8/605. Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 15, 1960.

engineers, technicians and workers will surmount all obstacles in their way. He then cheered for the life of Iraqi-Soviet friendship. One month later, in April 1960, the First Deputy Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, Anastas Mikoyan, visited Iraq. "During our short visit to this country", he wrote, "we could not, of course, visit many localities, but what we managed to see attests to the definite progress already made and the great possibilities of the Republic of Iraq in advancing the national economy and culture and raising the living standards of the population"³⁷⁶.

3.2.3. The Soviet Industrial Exhibition in Baghdad, 1960

In Spring 1960, the Soviet Industrial Exhibition was hosted in Baghdad. On the morning of 10 April, premier Qassim went personally to the airport to welcome, with all honours, Anastas Mikoyan. Mikoyan was sent to represent the Soviet government in such a high-level initiative. The Exhibition covered about three acres of soil; three pavilions were erected, two of which were very attractive modern structures with glass walls. At the entrance of the building serving as the Exhibition's hall, a life-size statue of Lenin surrounded by models of Sputnik and Lunik gave a perfect Soviet styled welcome to the visitors. Across the three buildings were scattered different products. Samples of products of non-ferrous metals, iron and steel; consumer goods (tinned food, textile, jewellery, household equipment, radio and television sets, bottles of "Red Moscow" and "Kremlin" perfume, matches, cigarettes, books of Lenin, crockery and flashlight bulbs); machinery (machine tools, textile machinery, drilling rigs, tractors, combine harvesters and other agricultural equipment and mechanical shovels); motor cars and lorries; cinema shows³⁷⁷. There was a commercial section where Iraqi businessmen could get in touch with representatives of the soviet export corporations³⁷⁸. These and many other products filled the Exhibition³⁷⁹.

³⁷⁶ EQ10338/8. FO 371/149867. Mikoyan's press conference in Baghdad. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 16, 1960.

³⁷⁷ With a note of disdain, the British agents commented as follow about the quality of the Soviet goods: "The appearance of the consumer goods suffers from the familiar defect in Soviet taste... The household equipment would not attract a second glance if it were exhibited alongside similar articles of Western manufactures". From: EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan's visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 2.

³⁷⁸ EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan's visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 2.

³⁷⁹ 1) *Machinery*. Machine tools: lathes, shaping machines, cutting machines, gear cutting machines, wooden box machines. Textile machinery: wool carding machines, wool spinning frame, small cotton loom. Contractors equipment: drag line, mechanical shovels, portable drilling rig, mechanical post hole digger, winch gears. Other machinery: small bottling machines, lino-type machines. Agricultural machinery: crawler and wheel machines, wheel tractors, combine harvesters, ploughs, harrows. Vehicles: saloon motorcars, ranging from four-seater to heavy six-seater, three wheeled delivery van, lorries, cycles ranging from racing cycles to children cycles, motor cycles light and heavy, a speed boat, small marine engines, large electric motors, a diesel electric generating set, electronically driven water pumps. Models: coal fired thermic power station, sputnik/lunik/heavy drilling rig, mammoth excavator. Instruments and photographic equipment: X-ray equipment, cameras, surveyor equipment, cinema projection equipment, barographs. 2) *Materials*: samples of semi-finished products of aluminium, iron and steel; samples of electric transmission cables, plastic insulation

The Exhibition was inaugurated by Mikoyan's and Qassim's speeches during an evening ceremony. Mikoyan chanted about the Soviet Union's higher rates of industrial and agricultural development than any capitalist country in the world and the Soviets' current technical supremacy³⁸⁰. Such a supremacy, he claimed, was at the service of all. The Soviet Union by then was about 42 years old, half of which it had spent in wars and in dealing with heavy post-war recoveries. Despite this, and in a relatively short time, Soviet countries had transformed from backward agricultural societies suffering from the yoke of Czarism into powerful, highly advanced industrial societies with high standards of economic and socio-cultural development. Czarist Russia ranked fifth in the industrial field after the US, Germany, Britain and France. Instead, the Soviet Union became the second industrial state in the world and followed the US, leaving behind all other capitalist countries. The industrial output under the Soviet rule had increased by more than 40 times; the heavy industry had increased by 59 times.

Our socialist industry", Mikoyan said, "has been developed and is developing on the basis of the advice of the great Lenin, [who] repeatedly said that it was impossible to achieve any progress without modern industry. When the Iraqi people will see the Exhibition, they will know from where the Soviet people started their constructive work and what was the road they had followed during the years of development and what are the great and magnificent horizons lying ahead [for Iraq too]³⁸¹.

On his part, after a few words to praise Iraq's friendship with the Soviet Union, Prime Minister Qassim appealed to the citizens of Iraq to make the Exhibition "a stimulus for intensifying their efforts and work to raise the standard of living in the homeland"³⁸². Iraq's four-year Interim Economic Plan

materials, soft woods, hardboard, window glass. 3) Consumer goods: canned foods, wines and liquors, perfume, china, cutlery, watches and clocks, musical instruments, un-made-up furs, cotton textiles. 4) Household equipment: sewing machines, washing machines, floor polishers, vacuum cleaners, television sets, radio sets. From: EQ10338/15. CS 1865/1/60. Report on Soviet Industrial Exhibition in Baghdad. FO 371/149889. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 21, 1960.

³⁸⁰ All good except for a small detail that Humphrey Trevelyan, the British Ambassador to Baghdad (1958-1961), ironically reported in a letter to the Foreign Office: "At the opening Mahdawi and his associates in the Camarilla,³⁸⁰ with an assortment of Ministers and Generals, were seated comfortably on the dais while the Diplomatic Corps was left standing in the wings, an arrangement which prompted the remark that if the Soviet Union were so advanced in industrial production, it might have got around to making a few chairs. From: EQ10338/7. 10315/4/60. Report on Qassim's speech at the opening of the Soviet Industrial Exhibition. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 12, 1960.

³⁸¹ EQ10338/3. 10313/1/3. Treatment by the Soviet Press on the Communist split in Iraq. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 1, 1960.

³⁸² "I declare to all the sons of the people that we cherish the closer friendship between us and the Soviet Union. This is because this friendship. [...] The friendly Soviet people and their Republic appreciated the firm principle of the Iraqi people that they refuse always and persistently to bow to any imperialist or a greedy quarter. [...] We had smashed the

had started, and the collaboration with the USSR was a way to attract experts, technicians, engineers and machinery to implement the projects agreed with the Soviet Union. "I thank the Soviet personalities for opening this exhibition and enabling us for being acquainted with their personalities and carry out deliberations with them for the good of the Iraqi and the Soviet peoples"³⁸³.

Overall, the Industrial Exhibition appeared to be quite an elaborate deal. A staff of around 80 Soviets was employed, about 450,000 Iraqis visitors were estimated by Soviet authorities, and the variety of products shown was remarkable, although their quality did not seem to keep pace with Western products³⁸⁴. Genuinely being a country new to the Iraqi market, the exhibition certainly had a great deal of commercial justification and showed the Soviets' desire to establish contacts in this market. Goods to the value of one million roubles were sold, and the demand for Soviet goods in Iraq appeared to have increased³⁸⁵.

The Exhibition was primarily meant to show and sell many of the machinery and tools employed in the industries operating under the Iraqi-Soviet Technical Agreement, as well as to offer the curious Iraqi public, for the price of about 5 dinars, a demonstration of up to date technologies from the countries of the socialist East. Beyond the commercial purpose, it served a clear political end. Indeed, Mikoyan had planned an 8-day long visit (8-16 April 1960) with scheduled private meetings with the Iraqi Foreign Minister Hashim Jawad, the Minister of Finance Muhammad Hadid, the Minister of Trade and Planning, that were also attended by Soviet economic experts. However, the Soviet official's primary purpose was to convince Qassim that he could rely on the Soviet Government's friendship and support, regardless of how he handled the internal situation but provided he remained neutral and did not again submit to Western influence³⁸⁶. Mikoyan visited

impregnable imperialistic base in Iraq and we had destroyed imperialism and especially British imperialism in Iraq, but this does not mean that we bear any aggressive idea towards a people or any people in the world. [...] Therefore, our policy has become clearly a neutral and peaceful policy, which does not aim at attacking any side. It hates the idea of aggression and we declare that we are friends with the Soviet people and that this friendship had been established on the basis of mutual benefit". From: EQ10338/7. 10315/4/60. Report on Qassim's speech at the opening of the Soviet Industrial Exhibition. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 12, 1960.

³⁸³ EQ10338/7. 10315/4/60. Report on Qassim's speech at the opening of the Soviet Industrial Exhibition. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 12, 1960.

³⁸⁴ British agents wrote back to the Foreign Office: "A number of exhibits e.g. samples of semi-finished products of non-ferrous metals and iron and steel are placed where they are difficult to study. The food store is dominated by a nondescript pile of tinned foods which look as if they were bought from a grocer's shop in liquidation and are all labelled unattractively in Russian. The machinery is not demonstrated enough. Nor have the Russians succeeded in keeping the exhibition clean against the dust of Baghdad and after two weeks everything looks rather shop soiled". From: EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan's visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 7.

³⁸⁵ Although, the British estimated that such increase was quite a modest claim, providing the evidence that the commercial appeal of the exhibition was relatively small. From: EQ10338/15. CS 1865/1/60. Report on the Soviet Industrial Exhibition in Baghdad. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 2, 1960.

³⁸⁶ Regarding this, the British Ambassador Trevelyan frankly noticed: "That, after all, is more or less our line in reverse". From: EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan's visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 9.

multiple sites where agricultural state projects were being carried out under the supervision of the Soviets³⁸⁷. He also visited the Ports Administration in Basra, where 38 Soviet experts were working on the development of port facilities, a project that was highly cherished by the Iraqis for the strategic importance that nationalised “fully Iraqi” ports would have for the country both in term of defence and trade. As the Director General of the Ports Administration, Muzhir al-Shawi, told Mikoyan, “the achievements of the Ports Administration in the ‘Iraqisation’ of the ports was one of the big achievements since the 14 July Revolution”³⁸⁸.

However, it is interesting to note how the success of the Industrial Exhibition was not sided by a similar success on the political level. The Soviet authorities complained that they did not find the expected degree of availability in the Iraqi leaders, and even accused the embassy in Baghdad to have provided them with the wrong information about the Iraqi government positive attitude. The Soviets’ expectations were largely disappointed and, indeed, the communist press covered Mikoyan’s visit poorly. Also, in spite of large communist crowds that gathered in Baghdad to honour him, there was no sign that Mikoyan concerned himself at all during his visit with the affairs of the Iraqi communists³⁸⁹. As a matter of fact, Mikoyan’s visit caused mixed reactions among the Iraqi leadership. Except for Qassim, whose international prestige was boosted by the visit of the leader of a global superpower, other personalities and factions of Iraqi politics were not equally happy about the Soviet Union involvement with Iraq in general, and with Mikoyan’s visit specifically. Mikoyan’s speech at the ceremony was widely criticised by anti-communist elites: “Why”, it was asked, “should he not have confined himself to the remarks suitable to the opening of an industrial exhibition instead of making a political speech?”³⁹⁰. Although he stressed Iraq determination to maintain its independence and neutrality and not to be anyone’s satellite, Qassim’s speech was also perceived as an exaggerated political declaration of friendship to the Soviet Union³⁹¹. Especially, Mikoyan’s visit

³⁸⁷ These visits included the rural housing at Latifiya and agricultural co-operative at Greater Musayib; the oil refinery at Daura where Soviet experts have been working; the railways, for which Soviet experts are engaged on surveying the widening of the metre-gauge Basra line to standard gauge; a visit to the city of Basra, where Soviet pilots and others are working in the Port; as well as the College of Education, the ruins of Babylon and the Iraqi museum.

³⁸⁸ Indeed, Soviet experts working at the Ports Administration were all engaged for short periods, at that time expected to head back home by 1961, to leave place to Iraqis workers and technicians. From: EQ10338/10. 5151/60. Mikoyan thoroughly dissatisfied with his visit to Basra (letter to chancery, Baghdad). FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 18, 1960.

³⁸⁹ As per the British agents’ understanding, it seemed *likely* that Mikoyan was able to convince Qassim that he could still rely on Soviet Government support, and that the Soviet Government were not seriously concerned by his treatment of the Iraqi Communist Party. Beyond this, however, no further commitment was shown by the Soviet Official at the time of this visit. From: EQ10338/7. 10315/4/60. Report on Qassim’s speech at the opening of the Soviet Industrial Exhibition. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 12, 1960.

³⁹⁰ EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan’s visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 5.

³⁹¹ EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan’s visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 5.

caused irritation to the Foreign Minister Jawad, a fierce anti-communist, who did actually exploit the occasion of having Mikoyan there in person to state publicly what he meant by “peace, independence and neutrality”³⁹². That is, that although Iraq was friendly to the Soviet people, it would not tolerate any interference and was determined to remain independent, a concept that was due to stress as he clearly felt threatened by potential Soviet interferences in his country’s public affairs. The Iraqi nationalist press was hostile, while the radio largely ignored the visit, which thus did not receive a great deal in terms of popular attention³⁹³. The visit did receive appreciation from the Minister of Finance, but no official communiqué or telegram showing gratitude was published afterwards. On the contrary, Iraqis were constrained as they were trying to show to the British that the initiative for Mikoyan’s visit came from the Soviets, and the British had no reason to doubt this. All this made Western missions in Baghdad believe that Mikoyan had not left on a particularly cordial note and that his visit had not done very much to benefit relations between Iraq and the Soviet Union³⁹⁴.

3.2.4. Education and training

On 27 December 1959, in Baghdad, the Soviet Minister for Vocational Training Grigory Nikolaevich Zelenko (*Григорий Николаевич Зеленко*) and the Iraqi Minister of Education Brigadier Muhiddin Abdul Hamid signed the Iraqi-Soviet Technical Agreement for Vocational Training. The Vocational Agreement was an extension of the Technical and Economic Cooperation of March, aimed specifically to provide a legal cooperation framework to prepare and train new cadres of Iraqi specialists and skilled workers, both in Iraq and in the Soviet Union, to operate under the industrial projects carried out. Ratified on 26 September 1960, the Agreement established solid institutional cooperation between the two countries, based on deep information sharing:

Article 1. The Government of the USSR guarantees that Soviet institutions will provide technical assistance to Iraqi institutions for organising vocational technical training centres for preparing technicians and skill labourers for the Republic of Iraq. [...]

³⁹² EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan’s visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 8.

³⁹³ EQ10338/7. 10315/4/60. Report on Qassim’s speech at the opening of the Soviet Industrial Exhibition. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 12, 1960.

³⁹⁴ EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan’s visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960. (p. 8)

Article 2. The technical assistance for organising vocational technical training centres, provided for in Article 1 of this Agreement, by Soviet institutions will be provided by means of:

- Preparing drawings, sketches and plans for organising training work in centres and providing same to the Iraqi institutions.
- Providing training and production equipment, such as implements, machinery, tractors, and various tools and instruments, audio-visual means for theoretical studies, workshops for training and related instructional and training books of reference and text-books.
- Sending Soviet experts to Iraq for giving technical assistance for organising vocational technical training centres, making equipment available, and for working as instructors in theoretical instruction and trainers in practical training.

The Soviet institutions will provide assistance for organising special courses in the Republic of Iraq for preparing instructors for theoretical instruction and in trainers for practical training from among Iraqi experts and will admit into the Soviet Union Iraqi experts for achieving these purposes.

The Iraqi institutions will furnish the Soviet institutions with all necessary first-hand information for preparing drawings for vocational technical training centres constructed in accordance with the Technical Assistance by the USSR³⁹⁵.

The Agreement's Article 3 foresaw that "Iraq will be responsible for all expenses incurred in delivering equipment, providing textbooks, bringing Soviet specialists to Iraq and any other type of technical assistance", for an estimated cost of around 3 million Iraqi dinars³⁹⁶. The number of instructors required under the Agreement would be about 100, plus interpreters, and they were supposed to stay in Iraq for about five years until Iraqi instructors were trained. "Since the length of the courses themselves was two years, this meant that – if the agreement comes into full force, over

³⁹⁵ EQ10338/22. 1161/32/60. Encloses translation of official text of Iraq/Soviet Agreement of Technical Vocational Training, signed Dec. 27. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 19, 1960.

³⁹⁶ EQ11338/1. 1162/26/59. Iraqi/Soviet Vocational Agreement. Comments on Agreement. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. December 31, 1959.

8000 young Iraqis will have received instruction from these Russian experts before the Iraqis take over from them”³⁹⁷.

The Soviets believed Iraq lacked well-equipped professional education centres where primary school graduates could receive proper training to become technical workers in the different sectors. Therefore, under the Vocational Agreement, different centres were built in relevant to the activity places all over Iraq, including: an Architectural Centre, a Metal Cutting Centre, an Oil Centre, an Irrigation and Agricultural Implementation Centre, an Automobiles Centre, a Road Building Machines Centre, a River Communications Centre, a Railways Centre, an Electricity Centre; a Radio and Wireless Centre; a Spinning and Weaving Centre; and Air Transport Centre. Special courses were also held for long-employed workers who needed to improve and develop their skills to keep pace with the fast speed of development. These new centres would also improve the standards of the existing training centres that were now old and underqualified. The Soviets provided extensive assistance in arranging special training courses to prepare teachers for theoretical studies and trainers for practical training. The subjects to be taught at the various vocational centres were multiple: architecture, oil, irrigation and agricultural implements, river communications, electricity, spinning and weaving; but also metal cutting, automobiles, road building machinery, railways, radio, air transport.

Furthermore, several education programmes, scholarships and exchanges were issued for Iraqi students of any discipline to study in countries of the Soviet Union and its satellites. Education was indeed used by Moscow as a powerful ‘soft-power’ tool; it improved its image in Iraq and, simultaneously, increased the prestige of some of the main Soviet universities, which claimed they were welcoming students from Iraq and other countries that suffered underdevelopment under the persecution of unfriendly regimes. A major university was even founded in Moscow in 1960, to host students from Third World countries. The Peoples’ Friendship University ‘Patrice Lumumba’, as it was named, was the most important venture in international higher education during the Cold War, a flagship of Soviet internationalism and aimed to educate a Soviet-friendly intelligentsia and foster a Soviet–Third World alliance³⁹⁸. Besides the Soviet Union, Bulgaria was among the countries hosting the highest numbers of students and providing the highest number of scholarships. The studentship programme carried out under the Iraqi/Bulgarian Cultural Agreement 1959-1960, included: 150 scholarships for Iraqi students in Bulgaria; 2 specialist courses in Bulgaria for Iraqi scientists; 5

³⁹⁷ The British embassy highlighted this issue as of “significant importance”. From: EQ11338/1. 1162/26/59. Iraqi/Soviet Vocational Agreement. Comments on Agreement. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. 31 December 1959, 1.

³⁹⁸ Costantin Katsakioris, “The Lumumba University in Moscow: Higher education for a Soviet–Third World alliance, 1960-91”, *Journal of Global History*, 14:2 (2019), 281–300.

scholarships for Bulgarian students of Arabic in Baghdad; a delegation of 25 Iraqi teachers leaving for Bulgaria; visits to Bulgaria of a cultural delegation, journalists, poets and physicians; visits to Bulgaria of a cultural delegation, a folk dance team, and journalists; Iraqi art exhibition in Sofia³⁹⁹. Other vital destinations included Czechoslovakia and East Germany.

Frequent education exchanges were organised for medical students. Early in 1960, 15 Iraqi doctors headed to East Germany for specialised training. A decision that did not see unanimous agreement, as the Director of Iraq's Military Medical Services appeared to have put pressure on Qassim to have all his doctors attending courses in England, not the Soviet Union⁴⁰⁰. Vice versa, it also occurred frequently that students of the Soviet Union and countries of the socialist camp were invited to attend courses of Arabic and Muslim culture in Iraq⁴⁰¹. Indeed, an official statement issued in August 1960 by Iraq's Ministry of Education showed a picture showing the Soviet Union as the primary provider of education programmes for Iraqi students both at the Iraqi Government's expenses and on scholarships granted by foreign countries⁴⁰²:

	Iraq Government Students	Scholars (granted scholarships by the host country)
USSR	350	50
UK	300 (including 100 graduates)	
USA	200 (graduates)	
Czechoslovakia	85	15
West Germany	50	
Italy	25	2
Belgium	20	
China		5
Yugoslavia		20

³⁹⁹ EQ11338/23. 1161/25/60. Principal developments of Communist aid to Iraq. Definite trend away from Soviet training of armed forces. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1960, 3.

⁴⁰⁰ EQ11338/3. 1161/4/605. Summary of Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 16, 1960.

⁴⁰¹ EQ11338/5. 1161/9/60. Further development in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. 29 March 1960, 3.

⁴⁰² EQ11338/23. 1161/25/60. Principal developments of Communist aid to Iraq. Definite trend away from Soviet training of armed forces. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1960, 4.

The Vocational Agreement received a good deal of publicity in the Soviet press⁴⁰³. It once again boosted the Soviets' image as saviours of the postcolonial third world populations from their backward imperialist past and sponsor of their socio-economic development. As G. Zelenko stated at the Agreement's signature:

The Soviet people fully appreciate and heartily sympathise with the attempts aiming at implementing the vast projects for developing economy and culture in the nascent Iraqi Republic which has been liberated from imperialistic bondage, under the leadership of His Excellency, Leader Abdul Karim Qassim, the Prime Minister and Commander in-Chief of the Armed Forces. The industrial and agricultural development projects, which the Iraqi government intends to implement, will provide for the Iraqi Republic great capabilities for raising the living standard of the Iraqi people in the shortest possible time and for assuring a respectable position in the ranks of the independent, free and advanced countries⁴⁰⁴.

However, as for the Technical Cooperation Agreement, the fortunes of the Vocational Agreement were mixed. Substantial controversy arose between the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Education concerning the very purpose of the Agreement. At the latter's signature ceremony, the Director of Technical Affairs at the Foreign Ministry, Nuri al-Kadhimi, lamented with British authorities about the fact that the proposal for the Agreement had suddenly sprung upon his department as a result of the "political enthusiasm" of certain officials of the Ministry of Education. He suspected that the Agreement had been discussed with the Soviet government during one of the "communist-inspired officials" of the Ministry of Education visit's to Moscow a few weeks before⁴⁰⁵. However, the Minister of Education did not take on the provocation but defended the importance of such an Agreement for Iraq's social and cultural development. The Iraqi authorities, he believed, had the moral duty to achieve the aims of the development plans drawn up after the Revolution, which included obliteration of illiteracy, application of obligatory teaching, and expansion in the fields of vocational teaching. For the achievement of these aims, he made it clear, Iraq would not hesitate to

⁴⁰³ Иракско-Советское Коммюнике. 16 марта 1959 ("Iraqi-Soviet Communique. March 16, 1959"), *Pravda*, March 17, 1959.

⁴⁰⁴ 27 December 1959. Vocational Training Pact with USSR Signed. *Iraq Times*.

⁴⁰⁵ EQ11338/1. 1162/26/59. Iraqi/Soviet Vocational Agreement. Comments on Agreement. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. December 31, 1959, 3.

enlist the possible aid of any quarter⁴⁰⁶. The Agreement was cementing partnership already in place, as Minister Hamid clarified at the ceremony:

[...] it can be considered as a complementary to the Economic and Cultural Agreements signed previously between our two friendly countries, as a result of which many Iraqi students are now studying in the Soviet Union, while Soviet technicians have been giving valuable service to the development of industry and agriculture in our Republic. It would not be long before the results of this co-operation will become visible in all fields. [...] Our Republic has realised that the most important factors in her progress and welfare is the fact that it has liberated itself in all fields. Therefore, it has laid down the necessary plans and foundations to achieve this, aiming all at securing the people's interests and increasing its national income and consequently raising their social, cultural and health levels⁴⁰⁷.

Another controversy raised by the Vocational Agreement was that it risked overlapping with similar education missions offered to Iraq by the United Nations. According to British espionage, in April 1960, while a team of Soviet politicians and experts arrived in Baghdad to negotiate the opening of an Institute of Technology without telling the Iraqis in advance and without their final agreement to pursue this project, the Iraqi government was having parallel official discussions with UNESCO on the provision of a Higher Industrial Institute in Baghdad⁴⁰⁸. The Soviet proposal cost the Iraqis about D 6-7 million; the Soviet government did not finance anything but merely provided experts who would get paid out of the Soviet loan. The Iraqis much preferred the UNESCO proposal; it was valued at D 2-3 million (between \$700.000 and \$800.000), and the Iraqi share was about D 650,000. However, this included the building's value and some existing equipment that the Iraqis would merely allocate to this scheme⁴⁰⁹. The UNESCO had also offered to be a loaner and participate with \$1 million, to be spent in the course of the following five years (1960-1965), to set up the Institute which would ensure preparing technical teachers to meet the requirements of the industrial schools and provide technicians for the existing factories and future ones⁴¹⁰. The Institute would also provide

⁴⁰⁶ EQ11338/1. 1162/26/59. Iraqi/Soviet Vocational Agreement. Comments on Agreement. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. December 31, 1959, 3.

⁴⁰⁷ Vocational Training Pact with USSR Signed, *Iraq Times*, December 27, 1959.

⁴⁰⁸ Also referred to in official documents as "Technical Institute" or "Institute of Technology."

⁴⁰⁹ EQ11338/9. 1161/15/60. Soviet proposal to establish technical institute in Iraq; difficulties arising out of the financing of the project. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 12, 1960.

⁴¹⁰ EQ11338/1. 1162/26/59. Iraqi/Soviet Vocational Agreement. Comments on Agreement. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. 31 December 1959, 4.

technical teachers to replace the non-Iraqi (primarily Soviet) experts in training centres and factories as Iraq could not depend totally and for long on foreign experts. For Iraqi politicians who were not favourable to the Iraqi-Soviet Vocational Agreement, its signature was particularly embarrassing, as they feared that UNESCO might withdraw its offer having learned of Iraq's acceptance of the Soviet one.

Another critic of Soviet education missions in Iraq concerned the quality of students' life. While official public discourse repeatedly praised it, in many instances, Iraqis complained about the quality of instruction that was provided to them. In Spring 1960, Iraqi Baghdad-based *Al-Wadi* magazine reported about the "miserable life" of Iraqi students in the Communist countries as denounced by the Iraqi Students Union in the Soviet Union to address the Minister of Education Muhiddin Abdul Hamid directly⁴¹¹. As in a letter of one student to *Al-Wadi*:

It never occurred to us, when we came to Budapest on scholarships and missions, that we would not be able to continue our studies because of the deterioration of our material situation. We are in a pitiful state; our allowances are totally insufficient for our monthly expenses. This has an undesirable effect on us when compared with the golden dreams that we had before we came. It also hinders our studies, although we spend all our time in our rooms, never leaving them, and spend absolutely nothing on trivialities or any other things that are not necessities... the barest necessities, such as razor blades, soap, stationery, books, dictionaries and so forth. This is what costs us so dear, and no wonder, when you know that every razor blade is used by four of us⁴¹².

The Iraqi authorities, however, denounced that there was no truth in the students' reports. While several worried Iraqi parents approached the Federal Germany Embassy in Baghdad asking to move their sons from Eastern to West Germany, the Ministry recommended that they stick to their choice. At worst, moving to Moscow was recommended for students who complained about living standards in countries like Bulgaria⁴¹³. As a matter of fact, it holds true that the cost to the Iraqi government of tuition in the Soviet Union was much less than in the West. Frequently reported – and indeed more disappointing than the lack of razors – was mismanagement, the deterioration of studying facilities,

⁴¹¹ "For the attention of His Excellency the Minister of Education. Screaming complaints by our students in Socialist Countries. Our students in Budapest, Prague and Moscow cry for help." *Al-Wadi*, March 29, 1960.

⁴¹² "For the attention of His Excellency the Minister of Education. Screaming complaints by our students in Socialist Countries. Our students in Budapest, Prague and Moscow cry for help." *Al-Wadi*, March 29, 1960.

⁴¹³ EQ11338/13. 1161/16/60. Communist aid to Iraq and treatment of Iraqi students in Communist countries. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 3, 1960.

the inadequacy of allowances and the scarcity of didactic material, primarily books, which often made the students think that if their problems would not be solved, they should prefer head back to Iraq⁴¹⁴. The poor quality of the education offered to international students was indeed a major problem, which, literature has noted, may have even been considered – by Iraqis and by other Third World beneficiaries of such schemes – as an “intolerable reminiscence of old relations between colonisers and colonised”⁴¹⁵.

3.2.5. *A double edge sword?*

The Soviets began their collaboration with Iraq based on grand ambitions and a clear vision of the benefits if all the projects described above were eventually carried out. Difficulties on the way, however, challenged their design. A significant degree of criticism was mounting among the Iraqis about the quality of Soviet aid. In an article published by *Al Hurriyah* in July 1960, as a Soviet economic delegation was visiting Baghdad, hurtful words were used on the Technical Cooperation Agreement. Iraq, it was written, did depend on Soviet aid for its technological, agricultural, commercial and infrastructural advancement, but “the terms of the Agreement were ambiguous and undefining to the responsibilities of the Soviet side in a clear manner and the consequences incumbent upon these responsibilities”⁴¹⁶. For this reason, they believed, the implementation of the projects was proceeding at a slow pace. The Agreement, the newspaper argued, had to be fundamentally amended to meet Iraq’s – and not the Soviet Union’s – interests. More than the Agreement’s conditions, what attracted the Iraqis might have been the loan perspective:

Had it not been for the offer of a loan of 550 million roubles by the Soviet Union as indicated in the text of the Agreement for the purposes of executing some of these

⁴¹⁴ Beyond the Soviet Union, similar conditions were shared by Iraqi students studying in countries of communism and socialism. As another student studying in Albania wrote to al-Wadi: “This is not a letter, but the story of a tormented student who lives on his nerves, affected by the great shock he received in a country where all the means of life and comfort and all the simple necessities for study are non-existent. At first the responsible person sent me to the People’s Republic of Albania to study political economy. But when I arrived in Tirana I discovered that there was no College teaching this subject, quite apart from the fact although the university there was established years ago the building has not been completed yet! Besides, there are no set books [...] Allowances are very bad. Students have to be satisfied with only bread and cheese [...] The place where students sleep are devoid of sanitation. Heat is either non-existent or, sometimes by wood stoves which fill the room with poisonous and suffocating gases. Oil is never available. Each room contains 8 or 9 beds, believe me, the whole house has only one very small and old-fashioned bathroom which is used by 900 students, twice a week”. From: 29 March 1960, “For the attention of His Excellency the Minister of Education. Screaming complaints by our students in Socialist Countries. Our students in Budapest, Prague and Moscow cry for help.” *Al-Wadi*, March 29, 1960.

⁴¹⁵ Georges Fischer and Henri Laugier, “Pour une université internationale au service des pays sous-développés”, *Tiers-Monde*, 1:1–2 (1969), 17–26.

⁴¹⁶ EQ11338/13. 1161/16/60. Communist aid to Iraq and treatment of Iraqi students in Communist countries. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 3, 1960.

projects, we would not have found any need for contracting an agreement of such a nature and in such a form, and we would have advised the responsible authorities to abrogate it and get rid of the problems and complications which it will give birth to in the field of economy and industry if the Agreement stands in its present form⁴¹⁷.

A significant problem concerned the prices of Soviet goods. The projects' costs were believed to be "unlimited", and the quality of their final results was unknown. The Agreement was indeed highly criticised in Iraq because the Russians had fixed an unfavourable rate of exchange for the line of credit. The Soviet Union made a line of credit of 550 million roubles available to Iraq to pay for experts, technical advice, and equipment for projects covered by the Agreement. According to Article 5 of the Agreement, the rouble was valued at 168,222 grams of pure gold, while the dinar was 2,48828 grams, giving the dinar an exchange rate of just under 15 roubles. Instead, Iraq was getting a rate of exchange of 25 roubles, causing deep dissatisfaction on the Iraqi side⁴¹⁸. Based on purchasing power, the rate should have been 75 to 110 roubles to the dinar; at that rate of 25 roubles to the dinar, Soviet prices went higher, and they were not competitive with world prices. Moreover, rumours that the UAR was getting better treatment were further irritating the Iraqis⁴¹⁹. As Qassim complained personally about the costs (and slow pace) of Soviet goods, Mr Malakhov, Deputy Chairman of the USSR State Economic Committee for the Current Planning of the USSR National Economy, visited Baghdad in February 1961⁴²⁰. Malakhov's visit appeared to be successful. The British Ambassador reported to the UK Chancery that, whereas before the visit Iraq's Ministry of Industry seemed to contemplate the possibility of getting consideration for competitive Western offers for the projects

⁴¹⁷ EQ11338/20. 1683/22/60. On the occasion of the Iraqi/Soviet negotiations: views and suggestions on the subject of amending the economic and technical aid agreement between the two countries. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. July 11, 1960.

⁴¹⁸ EQ11338/8. CS 11012/1/60. Iraqi/Soviet Economic Agreement. Difficulties arising out of rate of exchange. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 5, 1960.

⁴¹⁹ This evidence was confirmed on April 1960 by the British diplomatic mission in Cairo. Indeed, Article 6 of the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation signed with Egypt (29 January 1958) fixed the value of the rouble at 222168 grams of fine gold. As the *Annuaire Statistique 1957-1958* reported that the Egyptian pound was valued on 19 September 1949 at 2.55187 grams of fine gold, and it had not change ever since, the rate of exchange under the Egyptian-Soviet Agreement was about 11.49 roubles to the Egyptian pound. Overall, according to the British sensitivity, Iraq's responsibility for accepting such unfavourable conditions – especially compared to the treatment reserved to others – was all of Minister Ibrahim Kubba. As per their understanding, the Soviets courted him well, knowing that he was not such an expert of economic issues and made him sign an Agreement which was of no real benefits to his country. Indeed, they believed the Iraqis to have fairly keen noses for prices, the trick that Mr Kubba had undergone did not find any other explanation. As he left the Government in 1960, his successors were believed to scrutinise contracts to be concluded under the terms of the Agreement way more critically than he ever did. From: EQ11338/8. CS 11012/1/60. Iraqi/Soviet Economic Agreement. Difficulties arising out of rate of exchange. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 26, 1960.

⁴²⁰ EQ113138/3. Soviet aid to Iraq. Projects to be speeded up. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 17, 1961.

included in the Soviet Agreement, after the visit the Ministry informed the British Trade and Industries Mission that British firms should not waste time on making such offers⁴²¹.

Furthermore, the Iraqis often denounced delays in the goods' delivery. As a result, the Prime Minister set up a committee to report on delays in unloading, clearing and delivering Soviet goods shipped to Basra under the Economic and Technical Assistance Agreement. The committee would monitor the actual implementation of the agreement and investigating possible misreporting from Soviet sympathising Iraqi press; for instance, it was found in September 1960 that a Baghdad newspaper had announced the arrival of seven Soviet ships to Basra, while the Consulate-General reported to the committee that in fact, only one ship had made its way to the port⁴²².

On several occasions, Iraqis also reported on frequent miscalculations and approximations on the projects' budget. The knitwear factory in Kut, for instance, produced socks exceeding the actual demand; advanced payments were asked for installing three telephone exchanges for which they were to be given a contract with nearly 1 million dinars⁴²³; several thousand dinars were allocated for rice and cotton farms in Baghdad, but few of those allocations were being taken up. On many occasions, Iraqis asked the Soviets to reconsider the budget allocation reports they had submitted. These mistakes raised doubts on whether much progress will be made with those farms. Such problems frequently led to the decision to rescind or suspend contracts. Besides, European diplomats kept reporting stories of problematic behaviours of the Soviet experts and arrogance shown by officials and technicians, often referred to as "unpleasant people", when problems occurred⁴²⁴.

Furthermore, Iraqis often believed Soviet technicians to be underqualified. By early 1961, approximately 1.500 Soviet experts – both men and women – were working in Iraq⁴²⁵. In many instances, the contingency of Soviet experts sent to work in the various industrial projects were halved in a few months. Especially in those sectors where Iraqis did have better, pre-established knowledge, the Soviet aid often felt unnecessary, and Soviet experts made their way back to their countries. Contracts were rarely interrupted, but they were often not renewed⁴²⁶. Complaints were frequently

⁴²¹ EQ11338/7. Mr Malakhov's visit to Iraq to clinch Soviet/Iraqi economic agreement. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 7, 1961.

⁴²² EQ11338/24. 1161/30/60. List of latest developments in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. September 27, 1960, 2.

⁴²³ EQ11338/7. 1161/11/60. Soviet embassy statement of Soviet aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 24, 1960, 2.

⁴²⁴ EQ11338/23. 1161/25/60. Principal developments of Communist aid to Iraq. Definite trend away from Soviet training of armed forces. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1960, 2.

⁴²⁵ EQ11338/24. 1161/30/60. List of latest developments in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. September 27, 1960, 2.

⁴²⁶ EQ11338/18. 1161/21/60. List of developments in Communist aid to Iraq up to June 15 (1960). FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 17, 1960.

collected by the British agents about the low quality of some of the Soviet experts, who were believed not to have the same qualifications as their foreign colleagues in the period before the Revolution, and who were not fluent either in Arabic or English, thus requiring expensive interpreter services:

1. Contrary to first reports, the technicians at the Daura oil refinery were far below the standard of the British and American technicians whom they replaced. The Russians were in fact not used to equipment of such advanced design. Some of the Iraqi employees felt that they were teaching the Russians instead of vice versa. The Russians are at all events leaving more precipitately than had been intended.
2. The [Soviet] engineers at the new power station South of Baghdad had apparently been trained only on one type of generator and were at sea with the German equipment which they were supposed to be running in for the Iraqis. They were in particular not accustomed to a high degree of automation, some of the Iraqis have expressed serious alarm at the damage the Russians may do. We have been told by the last British engineer at the Baghdad Electricity Services that the Russians working for the Services were leaving at the end of their one-year contract. This was partly because the Iraqis wanted to run the stations themselves and partly because the Russians were finding it very difficult to work with them.
3. The Iraqi committee appointed to discuss the projected woollen textile mill with the Russians found that the Russian expert had been evidently given his brief in Moscow, and would not depart from it even when the committee showed that it was wrong. Our informant, a member of the committee, had argued that there were already three woollen textile mills in Iraq working only one shift and that it would obviously be better to expand production at these mills than to build a new one⁴²⁷.

Soviet medical doctors employed at Baghdad's hospital also caused problems. The story of a Soviet surgeon who had visited an Iraqi hospital in a demonstration tour was given a list of 11 serious operations to do, and confessed he had never performed any of them, made its way to the *Daily Mail*⁴²⁸.

⁴²⁷ EQ11338/7. 1161/11/60. Soviet embassy statement of Soviet aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. 24 March 1960. (p. 2)

⁴²⁸ Ralph Izzard, "Russian experts' flop in Iraq", *Daily Mail*. 3 August 1960.

Complaints on both the quality of Russian military equipment and the staff were also reported. In June 1960, the Iraqi General Staff asked for the removal of the Head of the Russian Military Mission as they considered his knowledge inadequate. Even in domains where the USSR excelled the most, like nuclear engineering, a reported “ignorance” of Soviet experts on the field arose suspicions, especially among other foreign powers, about the fact that they were in fact been sent there to get training themselves, to get experience and information on up-to-date machinery. A German engineer working at South Baghdad’s power station reported as follows:

They [the Russians] had been very full of themselves when they arrived, but as their ignorance became more obvious, they became more affable. In the end, the two or three good ones, including their chief, a man called Goralky, had all but begged to have the workings explained to them in detail. Goralky even wanted to be given a full explanation of a still more modern type of plant which had nothing to do with the Baghdad contract but was being sold by West Germany to the Soviet Union⁴²⁹.

The Soviets were perfectly aware of such critics and made further efforts to monitor the projects’ progress. In June 1961, Georgy Khadakhtskoevich Baskaev (*Георгий Хадакцикоевич Баскаев*, 1918-1985) was appointed Branch Manager of the Trade Representation of the USSR to monitor Soviet-Iraqi trade more closely. A Caucasian from the North Ossetia Republic, Baskaev had had a military formation, having served at the front during the war, and had previously worked as the USSR Trade Representative to France, after which he was appointed straight to Basra with a small staff of three political officers. His appointment seemed to mark a positive effort by the Soviet government to develop commercial activities in Basra (spoke English, did not speak Arabic). However, not much is reported about his job, except that he found difficulties competing with Western goods. This, and an embarrassing sensation that he must have caused when, having rented a villa in Basra’s residential neighbourhood of Ashar to serve as both his office and private residence, he flew the Soviet flag over it, making the local population think that the Soviet Union was setting up a consulate without even asking for their permissions⁴³⁰.

All such difficulties, however, appeared to be technicalities that did not impact much on the progression of the Iraqi-Soviet cooperation. On the contrary, the vast majority of projects kept going

⁴²⁹ EQ11338/18. 1161/21/60. List of developments in Communist aid to Iraq up to June 15 (1960). FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 17, 1960.

⁴³⁰ EQ113138/15. Georgy Baskaev, Russian Trade representative, will open up trade links in Basra with the USSR. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 6, 1961.

smoothly, and when projects ended successfully, the Soviets did not hesitate to make triumphal statements about them. As was the case for the Baghdad-Basra railway, for instance, initially accused of producing at a plodding pace. One year after the works had started, in Spring 1962, the Soviet Deputy Minister of Transport Ivan Podchufarov (*Иван Иванович Подчуфаров*) paid a 16-day visit to Iraq to inspect the continuation of the works. Although the visit received scarce publicity in the Iraqi press⁴³¹, he was received by Qassim together with the Soviet ambassador and other Soviet authorities (probably Gushchin), in a long meeting to discuss progress on the gauge line, further needs in the railway project and other steps that might have been taken to advance Soviet-Iraqi cooperation on the matter of transports. Podchufarov also exchanged views with the Director General of Iraqi republican railways, General Zaki Tawfik, and the chief engineer of the Baghdad-Basra line, Sayd Mohammed Haba, who received him with all honours and accompanied him through his visit. In a press conference on 6 February, Podchufarov triumphally stated that his own eyes could see that the Cooperation Agreement was “not just a mere paper documents, but it was life itself”, and claimed:

All along the line the work is in full swing, several thousands of Iraqi labourers, engineers and technicians in co-operation with the soviet specialists fill the embankment, construct bridges and culverts, lay out the track, install equipment and operate complicated building machinery. All what I saw made me believe that a good beginning makes a good ending, and the successful commencement of the construction will result in the completion of work within the projected time, limits, and, probably, even beforehand. [...] Eight months ago, when I first came to Iraq, the construction was but only started. Now it is in full swing. [...] we met with many people who expressed to General Tawfiq and Sayid Haba their sincere satisfaction in the construction of this new line. Special gratitude was expressed by those who live in the vicinity of the Hammar Lake, where the line, following the instructions of the Prime Minister Abdul Karim Qassim, shall be routed through the marsh area, thus enabling people of this area to have permanent communication with all cities of the Republic and providing for improvement of their economic and cultural life. [...] The Soviet Union cooperates with liberated countries of Asia and Africa following the principles of equality, mutual benefit and non-interference in home affairs and mutual respect to national dignity and sovereignty. We wish the living standards of the people of these countries to be raised within the shortest period. And this is as well the purpose of

⁴³¹ EQ113138/1. 1161/2/62. Visit of Podchufarov – Soviet Deputy Minister of Transport to inspect progress on the Baghdad-Basra railway. FO 371/164256. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 7, 1962.

the Baghdad-Basra railway line construction. [...] On my part, I would call this railway line the line of friendship between the people of our countries. [...] All success to you, our friends⁴³²!

However, Iraqi complaints with many aspects of Soviet aid gave the Western chancelleries the convinced impression that the Communist bloc was losing ground there. The British, for instance, believed that the Soviet Union had pushed Iraq to trade with countries of the socialist camp before they knew how to handle this market. The problems experienced by Iraqi traders in their dealings with the Soviet countries were seen as the result of the Soviet Union “rush against time” to beat the Western markets. Affairs would have gone better, the British ambassador to Iraq believed, “if trade with the Communist countries had been allowed to take its natural course”⁴³³. Indeed, except of arms, trade in goods remained largely underdeveloped. If this interpretation was true, then Soviet efforts towards socio-economic development and industrialisation may have even been a double edge sword. Soviets may have overestimated their actual capacities to ‘export’ their economic models: the project to build an industrial economy from scratch was probably too ambitious if proportioned to both the Soviet actual economic capacities to sustain it and the concrete know-how they could share.

At the same time, however, it would be misleading to think that technical difficulties hampered the Soviet influence in Iraq. A great number of Soviet advisers were still coming to the country upon the Iraqi government’s request. There was no general reaction among Iraqis against Soviet assistance, and despite different extents of success and different fates, all industrial projects described above were carried out through advanced stages. Neither there was any sign that the Iraqi government would slow down on the acceptance of Soviet aid. In his speech before leaving at the head of a delegation to celebrate the October Revolution in Moscow (1960), the Iraqi Minister of Education spoke in glowing terms of the help offered in all fields to Iraq by the Soviet Union⁴³⁴. That remained the official Iraqi attitude and Qassim’s conviction as well, regardless of the opinion of some Iraqi officials or technicians working on the field. Despite difficulties and adverse criticism that was often heard about and reported by the Westerns, no doubt the degree of penetration was remarkable (and, by no coincidence, so profoundly scrutinised by the British). The Soviets had no reason to be displeased with their position in the early 1960s. Between 1958 and the early 1960s, communist advisers were

⁴³² EQ113138/1. 1161/2/62. Visit of Podchufarov – Soviet Deputy Minister of Transports to inspect progress on the Baghdad-Basra railway. FO 371/164256. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 7, 1962.

⁴³³ EQ11338/6. 11230/2/60. Discrimination in the granting of import licenses. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 29, 1960.

⁴³⁴ EQ11338/28. 1161/38/60. List of developments in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. December 1, 1960.

well placed in a number of Ministries⁴³⁵. Neither this meant, however, that political relations with Iraq were running smoothly. On the whole, the Soviet camp was comfortably settled in Iraq. Perhaps, the most that could be said was that they were no longer accepted without reserve and that they would have to do somewhat better than hitherto if they were to maintain their position.

3. Political relations: A shadow on a successful economic partnership?

3.3.1. Origins of an Iraqi communist political thought and the ICP's Foundation

According to Ismael, the first embryonal signals of communist political thought in Iraqi society date back to the early 20th century, when Husain al-Rahhal (1901–1981), an enthusiastic young Iraqi, began to spread the Marxist theory into Baghdad's intellectual circles⁴³⁶. Al-Rahhal was a high school student in Berlin in 1919 when he witnessed the Spartacist uprising, an attempt by the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) to seize control of Berlin; this event left a deep impression on him kindled his interest in socialism and Marxism. Returning to Iraq a year later and profoundly affected by the unstable conditions of the country under British occupation, he gradually started to teach Marxist and socialist thought. A socialist consciousness thus began to develop, also favoured by the increased availability of Arabic journals through the foreign postal services that managed to bypass Ottoman censorship; *Al Muqtataf*, *Al Hilal*, *Al Siyasa*, and *Al Muqatt* became increasingly popular in Iraq's emerging educated classes⁴³⁷. In addition to Arabic journals, the publications of the Communist Party of Britain also began to circulate among a limited number of intellectuals in Iraq, including al-Rahhal, who translated them into Arabic and held discussions about them with his friends in Baghdad. The French Communist Party newspaper, *L'Humanité*, available to those Iraqis who spoke French, was also translated into Arabic and made available to Rahhal's circle. Despite al-Rahhal's and his followers were undoubtedly inspired by political events shaking Russia, namely the October Revolution and the rise of the Soviet Union, they did not establish contact with the Russians. It was only during World War I that Iraqi soldiers and officers met their Russian adversaries on the Russian front as part of the Ottoman armies. Although interaction between civilian Iraqis and Russians remained limited, the opinion of Iraqis who did encounter the revolutionaries was favourable to the

⁴³⁵ EQ11338/7. 1161/11/60. Soviet embassy statement of Soviet aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 24, 1960, 2.

⁴³⁶ Ismael, *The rise and fall of the Communist Party*, 2008.

⁴³⁷ Philip Willard Ireland. *Iraq: A Study in Political Development*. London: Jonathan Cope, 1937.

Bolsheviks. Tareq Ismael has found that this was related to the human, good treatment that the Bolsheviks had reserved to their Iraqi prisoners⁴³⁸.

Throughout the 1920s, al-Rahhal began translating and disseminating the works of European socialists for a circle of young Iraqi intellectuals, gathering around himself several young nationalists and socially concerned students that he provided with communist hand-to-hand knowledge. In 1929, al-Rahhal, with al-Saiyyid's cooperation, established the bi-monthly *Al-Sahifah*, which became the realisation of his efforts to introduce scientific socialist thought into the intellectual circles of Iraq, and aimed to disseminate the ideas of revolution and Marxism. As al-Rahhal later stated:

After the initial five years of thinking out loud in Baghdad's coffee shops, discussing and learning through the translation of foreign socialist journals and magazines – as I spoke English, French, German, and Turkish and thus had more access to socialist thought – I gathered around me a number of eager, thirsty young critical minds looking for answers to their country's problems. I felt like Aristotle, and these were my disciples. Our circles became wider, so we decided on 28 December 1924 to start the journal in order to publish mature analyses of a scientific socialist approach. [...] In 1922, we tried to form the first socialist circle. It had no name and our group was basically for intellectual debate. We held Marxist meetings in a mosque maintained by al-Saiyyid's father. We were basically personal friends, and we produced one serious report on the social, political, and economic conditions of Iraq in 1923. To impress Lenin, we translated it into Russian and had it delivered to the Russian Embassy in Teheran to send to him. The embassy later advised us to join the Iraqi Nationalist Party, though we did not do this. Thus, when we established al-Sahifah with its title in red, we hoped it would become the intellectual socialist articulator of all revolutionaries [in Iraq]⁴³⁹.

Between the late 1930s and early 1940s, such new communist knowledge began to organise into forms of political engagement. There appears to be more than one version, according to literature, on how the first communist political organisations originated and developed in Iraq. According to

⁴³⁸ Some of these prisoners even ended up embracing socialist ideas, and even became known in Iraq as Bolsheviks. "One such Baghdadi", Ismael writes, "known as Bolshevik Salih (1892-1973), adopted his nom de guerre and used it for the rest of his life". In an interview with the author occurred in 1968, Baghdadi said "My contact with the Bolsheviks was a humane one, and even when I was in captivity during the Tsarist period I could tell from the way our guards treated us who was a Bolshevik and who was not. As soon as the revolution took place I was freed, and became part of the comradeship, which is how I acquired my name – and I am proud of it. Although I have never been a communist, I thought the Bolsheviks were very caring, and thus, their ideology must also be of that nature". From: Ismael, *The rise and fall of the Communist Party*, 5–6.

⁴³⁹ Ismael, *The rise and fall of the Communist Party*, note 76.

Ismael, however, most historians trace it to Yusuf Salman Yusuf (1901-1949), a young Iraqi political activist⁴⁴⁰. Historians demonstrated that, following a series of meetings and intellectual exchanges between the chairman of the Palestine Communist Party, Haim Auerbach (alias Abbud), Yusuf Salman Yusuf took the initiative and founded the al-Nasiriyah Marxist circle in 1929. Shortly after that, according to Marxist principles, he also formed the short-lived Jamiyyat al-Ahrar al-la-Diniyyah (Secular Liberal Society). Another version suggests that the Comintern agent Butrus Abu Nasir (also known as Pyotr Vasili, or Petros), posing as a tailor, arrived in Nasiriyah in 1929 and converted Yusuf Salman Yusuf to Marxism. He enabled Yusuf to travel to Moscow to study Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism in the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV). Despite the origins and contours of how the party remain unclear, it can quite easily be stated that it was out of a meeting of Iraqi communists held on 31 March 1934 that the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) was created.

The foundation of the ICP marked the beginning of a new era in Iraqi politics, for it did have ampler repercussions than those linked to the development of the party itself. It marked the passage, Johan Franzén argues, from political mobilisation along the lines of ethnicity, tribe and sect to modern forms of political mobilisation based on ideologies and carried out by political parties⁴⁴¹. The ICP optimised this development and managed to gain support from all sections of Iraqi society. Regardless of the origins of its ideology and the unavoidable association with the Soviet communist thinking, the ICP in the mind of its leadership was a genuinely Iraqi party, representing the population as a whole rather than specific groups or interests. Well-educated, lower-middle-class people, including professionals, army officers, and civil servants with clearer views on politics and anti-imperialism, got membership in the ICP – and the other parties⁴⁴².

Many of these officers, doctors, teachers, businessmen and civil servants had themselves come from poor families, and thus often brought to their new positions a certain degree of concern for social justice and equality, born from their own experience. [...] Since this stratum was relatively well-educated, it was also one of the most important carriers of nationalist and anti-imperialist ideas, and formed the core of the political parties [...] Many, probably most, people in this stratum were against the monarchy and the existing political structure, which was perceived as serving British rather than Iraqi interests⁴⁴³.

⁴⁴⁰ Ismael, *The rise and fall of the Communist Party*, 20.

⁴⁴¹ Franzén, *Red star over Iraq*, 2011.

⁴⁴² Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 37.

⁴⁴³ Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 37.

This should have been, in principle, a positive thing for the Soviets. Since its establishment and throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and until Saddam Hussein took power in 1979, the Iraqi Communist Party was one of the most prominent and influential parties in Iraq's political scene and the largest communist party in the Arab world, and thus an important achievement of communism in the Arab world. Not much for direct benefits that Moscow could extract from it, but for what it represented for Iraq: a "vanguard" of democracy in a country raised from years of occupation and oppressive rule⁴⁴⁴. In practice, however, the 'Iraqi specificity' of the ICP turned out as a boomerang against Moscow: as the Party developed along its peculiar lines, Moscow could not exert any control over it. There is no evidence that the Soviet Union 'guided' the ICP, nor that the ICP referred to Moscow as a model to follow. On the contrary, archives suggest that the Soviets were closely keeping an eye on the ICP activities, political evolutions, for it was probably perceived to be very distant from Moscow⁴⁴⁵. Johan Franzén investigated how a Party with a rigorous ideology that was grounded in a European political tradition managed to become not only a political factor in Iraqi politics, but, crucially, an ideological influence shaping culture and other social aspects of Iraqi society. This success, he argues, was due precisely to the fact that ICP had developed around *its own* Iraqi lines. In other words, the key to the ICP's success would not be the Soviet support, rather the evolutions occurring between 1934 and 1958, moving ICP from a Marxist-Leninist, quite élite organisation to a party of the masses⁴⁴⁶.

3.3.2. Communists' deteriorating conditions since the late 1950s and Soviet reaction

Between 1959 and early 1960, two large-scale events marked a shift in the conditions of Iraqi communists, bringing new levels of political fragmentation and impacting both the country's internal balance and the Soviet policy. First, on 8 March 1959 – the same month when the Soviets were signing the Technical Cooperation Agreement with Baghdad – Radio Mosul announced that several brigades of the Iraqi army under the leadership of Colonel' Abd al-Wahhab al-Shawwaf had staged an uprising aimed at the overthrow of Premier Qassim, who was pronounced guilty of betraying the principles of the July Revolution for its open break with the nationalists. Led by a group of anti-communist army officers and the pan-Arabists, the "Mosul revolt" (or "Mosul Uprising") thus broke out. Qassim promptly crushed the Revolt. Although the Revolt had limited impact on the ground, it had essential repercussions on Iraq's politics. As Oles Smolansky argues, the Revolt temporarily eclipsed the Arab nationalists, most of whom were caught unaware by the events in the North and

⁴⁴⁴ Деятельность ИКП и других демократических сил. Посольство СССР в Ираке ("The activities of the ICP and other democratic forces. Embassy of the USSR in Iraq"). January 27, 1965.

⁴⁴⁵ Деятельность ИКП и других демократических сил. Посольство СССР в Ираке.

⁴⁴⁶ Johan Franzén, *Red star over Iraq*, 2011.

could not offer Shawwaf their assistance⁴⁴⁷. As the nationalists' influence faded, the Communists, alongside National Democrats and Kurds, attempted to fill the political vacuum. Second, in 1960, a split within the ICP occurred. Daud al-Sayegh, a Christian lawyer from Mosul who had been expelled from the Iraqi Communist Party in 1958, gave birth to a new organisation, which he also managed to register under the name of Iraqi Communist Party, and existed parallel to the main ICP (which was instead still being denied legal recognition). Although he called all communists to join his party, he attracted only a tiny portion of the main Iraqi communists and his project had a short life. The party was condemned by the main Iraqi Communist Party and in the international communist press, including *Pravda* and the *World Marxist Review*. Furthermore, throughout 1960, Iraqi district governors and military commanders took local action to hamper communist activities. For instance, the Martial Courts issued a verdict against the communists in Mosul; communists were defeated in the elections to the Teachers' Association (February); some were sentenced to death for leading reprisals on nationalists in Mosul and Kirkuk in 1959; others were liquidated for motives of revenge in Baghdad, Kirkuk and Mosul.

Overall, as Soviet penetration through aid was deepening in Iraq, then, the condition of Iraqi communists was deteriorating and causing increasingly great preoccupation in Moscow. In particular, the Soviets were worried about the ICP split. In April 1960, *Al Mabda*, the official newspaper of al-Sayegh's Party, gave prominence to an encounter between al-Sayegh and Mikoyan, who was visiting the country to open the Soviet Industrial Exhibition. As al-Sayegh attacked the *Ittihad Al Shaab* group, the ICP's main organ, in reply, Mikoyan defended it firmly. While expressing his confidence in the unity of all Iraqi communists, Mikoyan made it however very clear that ICP under Zaki Hari was the only authentic Communist Party⁴⁴⁸.

Not surprisingly, as strife between Communist and Nationalist factions was mounting, Mikoyan received attacks from the Nationalist press, which showed no desire to refrain from lambasting an important State guest in exceedingly hostile terms⁴⁴⁹. Mikoyan's final press conference at the airport was enlivened by a brush with Yunis al Ta'i, Editor and owner of *Al Thawra*, the anti-communist newspaper and organ of the National Democratic Party, who attacked him on the ambiguity of Soviet policy (including towards the Arab-Israeli issue)⁴⁵⁰. The unpleasant treatment reserved to Mikoyan

⁴⁴⁷ Oles Smolansky, *The Soviet Union and the Arab East Under Khrushchev*, Bucknell University Press, 1974.

⁴⁴⁸ EQ10338/9. 10315/5/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan's visit to Iraq. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 19, 1960.

⁴⁴⁹ EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan's visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 5.

⁴⁵⁰ Yunis al-Ta'i exact questions reads as follows: "First of all, I would like to thank the great USSR for its friendly feelings towards the Arab nations, and especially towards the Iraqi nation. My question is a historical one: as is well-known, Israel was created by the imperialists, and is a jumping-off point for the imperialists in this part of the world. If the USSR is a friend of the Arabs, and recalling that the position of the USSR is different from the position of the imperialists

treatment did not go unnoticed by the Soviet press. An article complaining about his treatment in Basra was published in *Izvestia* before his departure from Iraq, and put something of a damper on the last part of his visit. Without clarifying what they were referring to exactly, officials in the Iraqi Ministry for Foreign Affairs commented that Mikoyan was only being treated in Basra “in the same way as Iraqis and other foreign visitors were treated in the Soviet Union”⁴⁵¹.

As Mikoyan headed back to Moscow, however, the Soviet government’s approach to the events unfolding in Iraq was initially cautious. Soviet mediatic coverage of the splint was poor and limited, and the press failed to explain the circumstances in which a splinter group succeeded in obtaining a licence in the name of the Communist Party. Soviet newspapers published information from Baghdad setting out the programme of Zaki Hari’s Party. However, they reported mainly the accusations of *Ittihad Al Shaab* that Daoud Sayegh’s articles in *Al Mabda* contained attacks on the Soviet Union and the socialist countries, rather than making direct statements. As a result, their support to *Ittihad al-Shaab* sounded a weak one. Perhaps, as the British noticed, at that time, the Soviet authorities did not want to commit themselves irrevocably to backing the *Ittihad Al Shaab* group and opposing the new Communist Party⁴⁵². If the Ittihad failed to obtain a license, the situation would be embarrassing for Moscow. A deep feeling of discomfort was however mounting among the Soviet leadership with regard to Baghdad’s handling of the situation.

Powers, why does the USSR support Israel? If the USSR supports the growth of the revolution of 14th July and its leader, why does it not support the slogan of the Palestinian Arabs “We shall return!”? Why does the USSR support the policy of the imperialists in this question, as it did in Stalin’s times, and as it continues to do?”. Reply of Mikoyan: “I cannot understand how one can think up such thoughts which misinterpret the policy of the USSR. It is not the USSR who bears the responsibility for the expulsion of the Arabs from Palestine. You know very well that Israel is under the influence of Britain and the USA, and that the USSR has no influence there. We recognised, and recognise, the rights of the Palestinian Arabs to return to their homeland. A decision to this effect was taken in the UN, and we took part in getting the resolution adopted. Must I prove to an Arab, an intelligent man, that the policy of the USSR and its relations with the Arab nations are different from the policy of the imperialist Powers? Back in 1946, when it was necessary to fight for the freedom of the peoples of Lebanon and Syria, the representatives of the USSR at the UN defended in most vigorous terms the right of these peoples to independence”. From: EQ10338/8. Mikoyan’s press conference in Baghdad. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 16, 1960. (ME/312/E/2)

⁴⁵¹ EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan’s visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 4.

⁴⁵² As reported by Humphrey Trevelyan, Embassy of Iraq, to the UK Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd: “During [Mikoyan’s] visit, the quarrel between the two Iraqi Communist parties continued, Mr Mikoyan must surely have been careful to have no contacts with the real Iraqi communist group which is in opposition to Qassim’s official Communists. No suggestion has appeared that Mr Mikoyan was interfering in Iraq’s internal political affairs and he must have been at great pains to avoid the impression that he was in any way concerned, while doubtless seeking to efface the impression given to Qassim by the support in the European press (especially in the satellites) for the real against the official Communist party. Nor has his visit as yet been followed by any sign of rapprochement between the two groups, though rumours of negotiations persist”. From: EQ10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan’s visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960, 6.

3.3.3. *Growing Soviet criticism of Qassim and the start of a media warfare*

Since February 1960, official organs of the Soviet press broke the silence and began to speak openly against Qassim's regime, leading to the first official frictions between Moscow and Baghdad. The first direct criticism against Qassim occurred in reaction to the news of the imprisoning of Iraqi communists involved in the Mosul revolt in March 1959. The first attack was in the Soviet journal *Pravda* on 6 February⁴⁵³. The following day, on 7 February, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (*Литературная Газета*, "The Literary Magazine") titled "Freedom for the Iraqi patriots"⁴⁵⁴, publishing the text of the World Federation of Trade Unions' protest, which referred to severe violations of Iraqi trade unions rights and continued attacks on the trade union and democratic movement⁴⁵⁵. The Bulgarian press was also very vocal. On 8 March, the agrarian newspaper *Zemedelsko Zname* (*Земеделско Знаме*, "The Agricultural Flag") titled "Our public energetically protest against the persecution of Iraqi patriots", reporting as follows:

The Committee of Democratic Lawyers⁴⁵⁶ in Bulgaria has sent a protest telegram to the Prime Minister of Iraq, Abdul Karim Qassim, in connexion with the persecution of Iraqi progressive workers. "With profound anxiety we learn" says the telegram, "that for the past few months the authorities in Iraq have been making numerous arrests of workers of the Trade Union movement and of persons with progressive ideas, who fought against imperialism and for the freedom of Iraq. These patriots are being tried for their political activities and we have also heard of new persecutions and death sentences. The Committee of Democratic Lawyers considers that these acts violate the basic principles of justice and all democratic freedoms. The implementation of the amnesty laws for political prisoners will give satisfaction to all who support the cause of the July Revolution, the authority and the prestige of Iraq"⁴⁵⁷.

⁴⁵³ "Развитие событий в Ираке" ("Evolution of events in Iraq"), *Правда*, February 6, 1960.

⁴⁵⁴ "Свобода для иракских патриотов!" ("Freedom for the Iraqi patriots"), *Литературная Газета*, February 7, 1960.

⁴⁵⁵ Later articles published by *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (March 1961) included denounces of the French communist newspaper *Humanité* which went particularly strong on attributing full responsibility to Qassim for the events; telegrams to Qassim from the Vietnamese Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, the Bloc of Independent Trade Unions of Lebanon, the Union of Hungarian Jurists, the North Korea Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, the Central Committee of the Japanese Communist Parties; and opinions of leading journalist of the Lebanese newspaper *An-Nida*. They asked, for instance, whose interests were served by the death sentences and expressed indignant protests at unjust measures taken against the will of the Iraqi people.

⁴⁵⁶ An association composed of eleven eminent Chinese lawyers also expressed concerns about the government treatment of Iraqi patriots, following unprecedented interests of the Chinese press in Iraqi affairs. Chinese reports were clearly designed to add Chinese weight to the pressure being exerted on Qassim by the communist bloc and the communist parties in opposition in various countries.

⁴⁵⁷ EQ103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq's treatment of Communist Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq's counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961, 6.

By the end of March 1961, protests about persecutions in Iraq appeared regularly in the Bulgarian press, many of which addressed to General Qassim personally. A protest telegram was also sent by the Union of Bulgarian journalists:

We, the Bulgarian journalists, cannot understand why such judicially arbitrary acts are allowed, such as the sentencing to death of honest patriots and heroes who two years ago defeated the counter-revolutionary rebellion in Mosul and saved the Republic from a new imperialist slavery. We are still more puzzled by this fact because such anti-democratic actions can only be of use to the mortal enemies of the Iraqi Republic⁴⁵⁸.

The international communist community seconded Soviet condemnations: the Swedish Communist Party, for instance, through an open telegram to Qassim, and the Czech Communist Party through its organ “Rude Pravo” condemned the death sentences passed on Iraqi communists⁴⁵⁹. On 10 February, *Pravda* published a telegram sent to Qassim by the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, which stated that information about the legal persecution of public and trade union leaders, patriots and democrats in Iraq had aroused profound alarm and indignation of the Soviet people. “The Committee”, they wrote, “could not remain silent when the threat of capital punishment and imprisonment was hanging over dozens of the best sons of the brotherly Iraqi people”⁴⁶⁰. On 12 February, *Trud* (Труд, “Labor”), the Soviet trade unions newspaper, published a message from the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions to Qassim, asking him to intervene against the incorrect actions of anti-democratically inclined persons in authority and to take the necessary steps to release and stop the persecutions of patriots. *Trud* also published a message from the Union of Soviet writers, denouncing: “In the persecution of the healthy democratic force of Iraq, we see the dark schemes of reaction striving to return the country to the heavy and terrible system of the times of imperialist slavery”⁴⁶¹. The Secretary General of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) wrote a letter – published by *Nazor* (Назор, “Supervision”) and *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and publicised by Moscow

⁴⁵⁸ EQ103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq’s treatment of Communist Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq’s counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961, 6.

⁴⁵⁹ EQ103138/1. 10313/1/3. Soviet Afro-Asian solidarity committee call on Qassim to free jailed communists. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961.

⁴⁶⁰ EQ103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq’s treatment of Communist Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq’s counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961, 10.

⁴⁶¹ EQ103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq’s treatment of Communist Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq’s counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961, 10.

Radio – to Qassim, in which the former objected strongly to the methods adopted in Iraq against democracy and trade unions. Later the same year (19 May 1961), *Trud* again published a protest against the arrest of Ali Shikeir, chairman of the Iraq General Federation of Trade Unions, denouncing this as only one of the numerous attacks by the reactionaries on the democratic rights won by the working class of Iraq. The *Otechestven Front* (*Отечествен Фронт*, “The Domestic Front”) also denounced: “the anti-democratic measures against the Iraqi champions of peace should be revoked”⁴⁶². The Soviet Central Trade Union Council also made calls for Qassim to re-establish the rights and freedoms of Iraq’s trade unions and workers and end their “persecution”⁴⁶³.

All such attacks were given unprecedented publicity in the Soviet media. The honeymoon with Qassim after his seizure of power in July 1958 seemed to be over, as several irritants in Soviet-Iraqi relations were troubling the Soviets. The main one was certainly the General’s reluctance to license the Moscow-oriented ICP and his removal of many communists from positions of influence. Moreover, Moscow’s motives to speak publicly were also to bring some comfort to Iraqi communists, make their voice heard and make them feel like the Soviet Union, the mother of Communism, was there fighting on their side. Support to Iraqi communists was a due fact for ideological reasons, and as they were to retain control of the party and diminish the power of pro-Chinese extremists. As in the words of the Soviet Ambassador, which replicated the Party line, it was “merely the spontaneous expression of Soviet public opinion”⁴⁶⁴. However, and despite unofficially expressed indignation, the Soviet government, at that stage, did not make any direct representations to the Iraqi government: that would have exposed them to the charge of interfering directly in the internal affairs of Iraq. Nevertheless, the media outlets that were sending telegrams and messages to Qassim were all unmistakably under full control of the Soviet government, and the official distinction between a government organ and a public media outlet was thin⁴⁶⁵.

In the Iraqi press, only *Al Insaniya*, a major communist-oriented newspaper, took the defence of the Soviet government. The newspaper reminded Iraqis of the Soviet support for the 1958

⁴⁶² EQ103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq’s treatment of Communist Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq’s counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961, 10.

⁴⁶³ Ian Colvin, “Gen. Kassem rebuked by Russians”, *Daily Telegraph*, February 15, 1961.

⁴⁶⁴ EQ103138/11. 1034/24/61. Soviet Ambassador’s analysis of Iraq situation is in accord with the British. He is despondent about inefficiency of Iraqis. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1961.

⁴⁶⁵ The Iraqis were well aware of this, in fact, they reaction was so harsh as they identified the attacks with the Soviet official position. As the nationalist *Al Bayan* newspaper would write in June 1961: “It is well known that nothing can be broadcast or published in the Soviet Union without a directive from the Government or the Communist Party, and therefore any reports on the internal affairs of any country had official significance and were to be considered Soviet interference in that country’s internal affairs. From: EQ103138/12. 1034/25/61. War of words between the National Progressive Party newspaper and nationalist newspaper over proper Iraqi attitude towards soviet propaganda campaign. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 22, 1961.

Revolution when the imperialists sent warships to Lebanon or Jordan and the massive aid in industrial projects to boost the country's development. It claimed that if the Soviet government stepped in for such adverse criticism against the Iraqi government, that was more in sorrow than in anger. Iraq was leaning towards the capitalist camp, deceived by the Western anti-Soviet campaign as the Soviets were intent to ratify the contracts connected with the Cooperation Agreement, and the imperialists' rule was deteriorating all over the Middle East and North Africa⁴⁶⁶. Furthermore, the newspaper suggested that the Soviet evaluations were based on a wholly false picture of the situation in Iraq. For instance, Moscow Radio, they said, was broadcasting material that did not come from Soviet sources but secondary sources from other countries, including countries of the West.

Those who follow Radio Moscow and other broadcasts, and what has been published in the world press will find: firstly, that what has been broadcasted and published on this subject is not derived from Soviet sources alone, or from socialist sources alone, but from many countries of the world, including the capitalist Western world; secondly, what has been broadcasted and published on this subject was, in reality, a reflection of what had been published by the Iraqi and the national Arab press, and relied on them in the first instance; thirdly, we therefore find that what has so far been broadcasted and published is simply an expression of the feelings of appreciation and support for the national revolution of Iraq, and surprise and regret for the actions taken against the progressive elements which weaken the maintenance of national independence, and an expression of a sensing of black reactionary attempts behind those measures which aim at weakening the national opposition and obstructing the country's progress; fourthly, an appeal to the Leader Abdul Karim Qassim to stand against this dangerous reactionary inclination, and personally to intervene by stopping the measures against the most solid national elements and the most loyal to their country and people⁴⁶⁷.

Most importantly, *Al Insaniya* was concerned about drawing a clear distinction between the local communists and the Soviet government. They suggested that Moscow's behaviour was a logical, natural continuation of attitudes of solidarity with the Iraqi people and of active support of their national independence, in line with their support to Iraq.

⁴⁶⁶ EQ103138/5. 1034/1/61. Further reaction of Iraqi press to Moscow Radio's attack on Government's treatment of Communists. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 6, 1961, 5.

⁴⁶⁷ EQ103138/5. 1034/1/61. Further reaction of Iraqi press to Moscow Radio's attack on Government's treatment of Communists. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 6, 1961, 5.

However, most Iraqi press was directed against the local communists and had a fierce reaction to the Soviet attacks. The general line that was adopted was that, on any count, those attacks were a flagrant interference in Iraq's internal affairs. The more nationalist the paper, the more specifically anti-communist was the tone of its comments. Two newspapers generally considered under Qassim's inspiration, *Al Ah'd Al Jadid* and *Al Mustaqbil*, carried the immediate reply. *Al Ah'd Al Jadid*, nationalist-oriented, first criticised Moscow Radio's broadcasts on 10 February 1960. Under block headlines "Moscow's campaign against our Republic", it printed an article injuring against Moscow Radio's comments and the Soviet press in general "pursuing their attacks on what they term the inexorable measures and the persecution adopted against the unionist and democratic movements in Iraq"⁴⁶⁸. The broadcast had to be considered directed interference in Iraq's internal affairs and independence, pursued by Soviet agents operating in Iraq:

What are the connections between the Soviet Union and those whom they are defending, if they are not their agents? These [the communists] are a gang of criminals whom nobody defends except those who helped and encouraged them to commit these savage crimes. This campaign clearly indicates that the anarchist Communists are agents of foreign countries, coming crimes under protection. If the criminals were not these countries' agents, they would not have received this combined defence from Russia, the imperialists and Israel. The hidden hands that induced the agents to commit crimes, from behind the scenes, have now appeared, and are attempting to extricate them from their lawful fate. Everybody in Iraq denounces this interference by the Soviet Union on behalf of a criminal gang⁴⁶⁹.

Al Mustaqbil, strongly anti-communist, was quick to pile it on. It placed Moscow's attacks on a par with the imperialists' attempts to bring pressure to bear on Iraq's "patriotic government", urging Baghdad to make a strong reply (including the purging of all those who sympathised with the Communists)⁴⁷⁰. The paper wrote, "Those whom the Soviet Union radio supports, and attacks Iraq for their sake, are murderers and blood shedders", openly saying that Moscow's words were actual

⁴⁶⁸ EQ103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq's treatment of Communist Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq's counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961, 2.

⁴⁶⁹ EQ103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq's treatment of Communist Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq's counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961, 6.

⁴⁷⁰ EQ103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq's treatment of Communists Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq's counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961, 3.

interferences with Iraq's internal politics. Such an interference, they believed, was an insult to the Revolution itself, a carrier of the highest value of independence, which felt to be ridiculed and threatened:

Moscow should realise that Iraq has achieved its full independence – it is a grave affront to say [as broadcasted by Moscow Radio] that the Soviet Union is striving its utmost for the release of the democratic strugglers in Iraq, who struggle for *complete* national independence. What is understood by that phrase in the Soviet Union; does it mean becoming a satellite state⁴⁷¹?

Al Mustaqbil even attacked *Al Insaniya*'s owner personally to defend Moscow Radio, defining him as a "tool in the hand of his communist masters"⁴⁷². It argued that his remarks about the greatness of the Soviet Union and its noble actions in Iraq intended to justify Moscow's meddling with Iraq's internal affairs, proclaim the Soviets' tutelage over the nations of the world, and grant it the right to intervene in domestic politics.

In the time of a few weeks, however, the 'war of words' gradually winded down. The Iraqi press, particularly the closest to Qassim news agencies, made steps back and adopted a more balanced approach. They began to refer to the Soviet Union as "the friendly country" and made several appeals to Moscow for it reconsidered its attitude. Even *Al-Mustaqbil* wrote that it was necessary to preserve good Soviet-Iraqi relations as they represented the broader Soviet-Arab friendship and a shield against the imperialists, who might have played a filthy role in fabricating false evidence to undermine it. Indeed, the newspaper argued, the "imperialist agents", enemies of Iraqi-Soviet friendship, had infiltrated the ranks of the Communist Party and succeeded in conveying wrong information to Moscow, on which Moscow's attacks must have been based⁴⁷³. Also, *Al Bayan*, the newspaper of Muhammad Hadid's National Progressive Party, published an editorial on 14 June 1961 calling for an end to the propaganda campaign before it caused permanent hard to Soviet-Arab relations. They argued it was not in Iraq's interests to do more than make a gentle protest: Iraqis wished to remain neutral and maintain friendly relations with the Soviet Union.

⁴⁷¹ EQ103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq's treatment of Communist Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq's counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961, 6.

⁴⁷² EQ103138/5. 1034/1/61. Further reaction of Iraqi press to Moscow Radio's attack on Government's treatment of Communists. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 6, 1961, 4.

⁴⁷³ EQ103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq's treatment of Communist Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq's counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961, 2.

Similar caution was shown by the Iraqi government. Despite Soviet criticism was initially received with ominous silence in Baghdad's circles of power, it was probably not unexpected. Qassim must have been uncomfortably aware that an ideological rift with Russia was imminent since November 1960, when he struck at the hard core of Iraqi communists by arresting their leader, Abdel Khader Ismail. Since then, he had been pursuing a policy of positive neutrality to the Soviet attacks: his response to Moscow could not be too strong, not openly at least. After all, the Iraqi government desperately needed Soviet aid, and the perspective of the loan that the Soviets were ready to provide was superior to any other offer by Western countries. Indeed, speaking through *Al Mustaqbil* against the Moscow Radio campaign, Qassim conveyed that he blamed the "imperialist agents" in Iraq more than he blamed the Soviet Union, leaving the door open for reconciliation if Moscow ceased the campaign.

A relaxation of relations was indeed registered. Between the end of February and March 1961, General Danilov paid a 2-week visit to Iraq as "Inspector of the Soviet Experts", and was treated with all comforts by the Iraqis. The British Ambassador wrote to the UK Chancery: "Qassim attended a dinner for him on March 11 – another instance of his willingness to see and be entertained by Soviet officials, when he keeps Western Ambassadors waiting so long for appointments"⁴⁷⁴. Also, Kisilev, Head of the Near East Department at the Foreign Ministry, paid a three-day visit in November (27-30), when travelling from Moscow to Khartoum with President Brezhnev. He was received with all honour by ministers, the military Governor General and senior army officers and heads of diplomatic missions to Iraq, and met Qassim over dinner. Before leaving, he made a brief anodyne statement on the "sound friendship" existing between Iraq and the Soviet Union⁴⁷⁵. However, such apparent calm was the prelude to further escalation of tensions on the Moscow-Baghdad relation.

However, beyond the official channels, the Soviet trust in the Iraqi government had reached a historical low. In this context, an unprecedentedly friendly conversation and convergence of views occurred during an informal conversation between Zaitsev, Soviet Ambassador to Baghdad, and Humphrey Trevelyan, his British counterpart. Zaitsev was probably not in his best shape: he admitted to be back to Baghdad's hot summer after being treated with gastritis in Moscow, and he kept saying, with feeling, that in all he had spent seven years in Baghdad; as Trevelyan in quite a compassionate

⁴⁷⁴ EQ103138/7. 1194/61. Qassim attends dinner for General Danilov, Inspector of Soviet Experts on visit to Baghdad. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 16, 1961.

⁴⁷⁵ EQ103138/12. 1034/25/61. War of words between the National Progressive Party newspaper and nationalist newspaper over proper Iraqi attitude towards soviet propaganda campaign. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 22, 1961, 5.

way wrote, “he was obviously fed up all round”⁴⁷⁶. Whatever reasons were troubling Zaitsev, he let himself go to frank comments on his disillusion about the Soviet aid to Iraq. He was full of the hopelessness and inefficiency of the Iraqi administration and the great difficulties he had in his work, which he did not experience when working with the Egyptian administration. In his record of the conversation, Trevelyan wrote “I found that he had very much the same analysis of the situation as we have”⁴⁷⁷, and reached to the conclusion that, perhaps, the British “had given Iraq independence too soon”⁴⁷⁸. Zaitsev thought that Qassim’s policy of balancing one side against the other would never bring stability and agreed that Qassim’s liberty of manoeuvre was much smaller than it had been a year or two ago. He also revealed to Trevelyan, emphatically, that the ICP was in no way under the direction of Moscow, as the Soviet Union “was not trying to introduce socialism into Iraq”. Besides, “if the Iraqi communists were under the direction of Moscow”, he said with regret, “they would not have made so many mistakes”⁴⁷⁹.

3.3.4. The Kurdish factor: Towards a deterioration of relations

Signs of a new re-deterioration of political relations began in 1962. On the first days of January, a few departures from the Iraqi embassy were registered: two Third Secretaries and the Assistant Military Attaché left, and the embassy was left with a First Secretary and three Attachés (military, air and cultural). Soviet disappointment had to do mainly with the Kurdish issue and Qassim’s handling, which led to a deterioration of relations with him personally⁴⁸⁰.

As Kurdish grievances were mounting in the wake of the 1959 Revolt, initially, the Soviets did not expose themselves to support the Kurdish cause. On one side, Iraqi Kurdistan was vital to the Soviet Middle East policy for its strategic location, South of the Soviet Republics of Transcaucasia, and for the importance of the Kurds’ position in the success of the CENTO regional defence system. Kurdistan occupied an area in the “Northern Tier”, which, extending from Soviet Armenia in the

⁴⁷⁶ EQ103138/11. 1034/24/61. Soviet Ambassador’s analysis of Iraq situation is in accord with the British. He is despondent about inefficiency of Iraqis. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1961.

⁴⁷⁷ EQ103138/11. 1034/24/61. Soviet Ambassador’s analysis of Iraq situation is in accord with the British. He is despondent about inefficiency of Iraqis. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1961.

⁴⁷⁸ EQ103138/11. 1034/24/61. Soviet Ambassador’s analysis of Iraq situation is in accord with the British. He is despondent about inefficiency of Iraqis. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1961.

⁴⁷⁹ EQ103138/11. 1034/24/61. Soviet Ambassador’s analysis of Iraq situation is in accord with the British. He is despondent about inefficiency of Iraqis. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1961.

⁴⁸⁰ EQ103138/2. 1034/2/62. Iraq/Soviet relations. FO 371/164246. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 27, 1962.

north to Iraq in the South, effectively separated Turkey from Iran. For the Soviet Union, therefore, the Kurds offered an attractive instrument for the penetration and disruption of the CENTO region, hence their behaviour and orientation was of great importance to Soviet strategists. On the other, however, until that moment it had not been in Moscow's interest to rally a Kurdish revolt, as this would lead to a weakening of Qassim's rule. The latter's continuance in power had for a long time offered the Soviets the best hope of penetrating Iraq through political relations and aid. Soviet contacts with the Kurdish leadership were underdeveloped compared to those with the Iraqi leadership of Baghdad. Although Moscow had somewhat made its preference for the Kurdish treatment of communists quite clear, and despite good relations with Kurdish leader Mustapha Barzani – who was even invited as a guest to Moscow to celebrate the New Year's Eve (1960-1961) – Baghdad remained the privileged partner. The Soviets had bet their image on the many projects being implemented in those years. Qassim was their main interlocutor and a guarantor of the many contracts signed under the Cooperation Agreement. From what Moscow knew, Qassim's successor could have been a nationalist with anti-communist views. Therefore, they showed sympathy for the Kurds while avoiding giving a direct endorsement of the Kurdish rising⁴⁸¹.

The first change in this policy occurred in summer 1962, as Baghdad raised its hand against the Kurdish uprising, and the Kurds were seeking external support for their national aspirations both in the West (including the United Nations) and in countries of the socialist camp⁴⁸². The seventh issue of the *World Marxist Review* published fierce attacks against Qassim in July 1962. The article was entitled "Decide the Kurdish question by peaceful means" and it rebuked Qassim for "trying to mislead public opinion" and "distorting the truth about the position in Kurdistan, where once again, as in the autumn of last year, the blood of the Kurdish people, who have risen in defence of their national rights, is being spilled"⁴⁸³. A following article of the same review went further, writing that the Iraqi government was carrying on an armed struggle against the Kurds for nearly a year, despite the demands of democratic forces in Iraq for a peaceful solution to the problem. Contrary to Article 3 of the provisional Constitution, which accorded equality of rights to the Kurds and the Arabs, the

⁴⁸¹ So did the Iraqi communists as well: the mild support they gave to the Kurds was aimed at gaining Kurdish sympathy for Communism rather than to undermine Qassim. Curiously, such propaganda was supported by Iran. *Peyk-e-Iran*, the mouthpiece, clandestine radio station of the Tudeh Party in East Germany, broadcasting in Persian mainly, but also in Arabic, Azerbaijani and Kurdish for a few hours a week, frequently attacked Qassim's attitude to the Iraqi Kurds and praised the ICP policy towards them. Initially, it urged the peaceful settlement of the Iraqi Kurdish problem, asking Baghdad government to accept the Kurds just demands. As the purge of communists escalated in February 1963, the radio station openly incited communists and Kurds to join forces and overthrow the new regime.

⁴⁸² Wilson Nathaniel Howell. *The Soviet Union and the Kurds. A Study of National Minority Problems in Soviet Policy*. 1965. Dissertation: University of Virginia.

⁴⁸³ EQ103138/4. 10213/23/7. Iraqi-Soviet relations. Attack on the Qassim government for its Kurdish policy published in the *World Marxist Review*. FO 371/164246. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. July 23, 1962.

Qassim regime since mid-1959 advanced the slogan “assimilation of the Kurds” and began to carry out a policy of their national subjugation, and in considerable harsher forms than those applied under the monarchist regime. The article then described various kinds of discrimination directed against the Kurds: the refusal to allow Kurdish as a language of instruction in schools, the neglect of industrial and cultural development, the banning of the term “Kurdistan”. Since 1961, they wrote, young patriots were forced to take to the hills, where they set up armed detachments to face Baghdad’s oppressive policies.

In September 1962, the *World Marxist Review* referred to Qassim’s rule as a “one-man dictatorship”. The article called for establishing a self-governing Kurdistan as part of a parliamentary democratic republic of Iraq. It also demanded the end of Qassim’s operations against the Kurdish rebels and stated that “the struggle against the aggressive militarist policy of the government towards the Kurdish people was gathering momentum. The government – it continued – was isolating its supporters and giving the patriotic parties and organisations wide opportunities for building a united national front. Therefore, the article stated, a “joint struggle against General Qassim by the communists and the Kurd national bourgeoisie was possible and necessary”⁴⁸⁴.

The ‘media warfare’ carried out by *World Marxist Review* resulted in its ban by the Iraqi government in October 1962. On 6 May 1963, also *Pravda* published an article titled “The Iraqi Kurds are fighting for their rights” by the newspaper’s correspondent in the Arab East P. Demchenko. Most of the article was given up to a historical account of the Kurds’ struggle to recognise their rights, with particular emphasis on how Qassim subsequently shattered their hopes at the time of the 1958 Revolution. “The hypocritical attempts of Qassim to depict the National Liberation Movement in the mountains of Kurdistan as inspired by agents of imperialism could not deceive anybody. It is well known that it is precisely the American and British imperialists who speak out against a just solution of the Kurdish question”⁴⁸⁵.

The Soviet attitude and increased protection for the Kurdish cause was preoccupying the Iraqis as well. In the Summer of 1962, the Iraqi ambassador to Moscow, Major General Abdul Muttalib Amin al-Hashimi, visited the British Embassy in the Soviet capital. He revealed that his Embassy was receiving dozens of letters a day from Soviet citizens complaining that the Iraqi government was using arms provided by the Soviet Union to shoot down the Kurdish people fighting for their legitimate freedom. As the British ambassador to Moscow noticed in his visit report: “since there is virtually nothing in the Soviet press about the Kurdish revolt, he agreed with me that these letters

⁴⁸⁴ EQ103138/9. Soviet attacks on Qassim regime demand for Kurd self-rule. FO 371/164246. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. September 22, 1962.

⁴⁸⁵ 6 May 1963. Иракские Курды борются за свои права (“The Iraqi Kurds are fighting for their rights”). *Pravda*.

must have been officially inspired”⁴⁸⁶. The Iraqi ambassador even feared that the Soviets had a hand in the present troubles, and they were infiltrating the Kurdish forces through the military training programme they were carrying out in Mosul and Kirkuk. His view was that all that was part of a vast Soviet scheme to weaken Iraq – as well as Iran and Turkey, where big Kurdish communities lived – and use the Kurds to get at the Iraqi oilfields. A view, however, that did not convince the British authority, who admitted to having seen no evidence for that either in public discourse or through private investigations⁴⁸⁷.

The revolution of 8 February 1963 – discussed later – had raised Soviet hopes that the Kurdish aspirations could be raised. However, such hopes were soon disillusioned. On 10 June 1963, The Iraqi National Council of the Revolutionary Command issued an ultimatum demanding that the national liberation forces in Iraqi Kurdistan laid down their arms within 24 hours; otherwise, they would resume military operations against them. The Soviets were convinced that the communiqué left no doubt that the government of Iraq was resuming hostilities against the Kurdish tribes. After the overthrow of Qassim, the new Iraqi government had declared its intention of solving the Kurdish issue through negotiations, and the Kurdish leaders had agreed to negotiate with the government, proving their peaceful, collaborative intentions. However, in reply to the Kurdish demand for autonomy, Baghdad was now proposing to decentralise the administration of Iraq’s separate provinces, including those inhabited by the Kurds. Furthermore, three months into the negotiations, no concrete results were even insight: the position adopted by Baghdad leaders, the Soviet argued, was all about procrastinating and gaining time to regroup their forces and struggle against the Kurds⁴⁸⁸. Demchenko, *Pravda*’s correspondent to the Arab East, spoke of the “hypocrisy of the Iraqi Baathist leaders, who dragged out the talks and did not have the slightest intention of meeting the

⁴⁸⁶ EQ103138/3. 1034/2/62. Views expressed by the Iraqi ambassador on the extent of Russian support for the Kurds. FO 371/164246. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 27, 1962.

⁴⁸⁷ In later correspondences throughout summer 1962, British officers keep recalling the unprecedented willingness of the Iraqi ambassador to open up, and his surprisingly frank anti-Soviet (and by consequence anti-Qassim) statements. In a confidential note to London’s Foreign Office, the UK Ambassador to Moscow appeared to have found one possible explanation of his Iraqi counterpart kindness. “I should perhaps add that in the intervening period the ambassador had been troubled with some growth and had consulted the supposedly best Soviet surgeon, who had treated him so roughly and promised him such austere hospital accommodation that the ambassador had immediately consulted our own doctor, who has experience of the Arab world and who had fortunately been able to put him in touch with one of our leading cancer surgeons, Mr Dickson Wright, who was here for the recent Cancer Conference, and had offered to treat him whenever he was able to come to London. My conversation yesterday therefore opened with very warm thanks for all we had been able to do, the ambassador adding that if he had to be operated on he would like this to be done in a friendly and comfortable capital like London, where he could rely upon the best doctors and surgeons and at least speak to them in English”. EQ103138/5. 10313/31/7.

⁴⁸⁸ P. Demchenko. 12 June 1963. Ультиматум не оставил сомнений в намерении иракского правительства возобновить войну с Курдами (“Ultimatum left no doubt on intention of Iraqi government to renew war on Kurds”). *Pravda*.

national demands of the Kurds halfway or of carrying out their promises”⁴⁸⁹. Even harsher words were used by Moscow radio broadcasting in Arabic:

This warning by Baghdad to the Kurdish leaders comes four months after the advent of the new authorities in Iraq. During this period, the Baghdad government pretended that it would adhere to its promises and talked about its intention to achieve a peaceful solution of the Kurdish issue. But facts show that all this was merely a manoeuvre intended to deceive the national liberation movement in Iraqi Kurdistan and to gain time to prepare the necessary forces to resume military operations. The new authorities in Iraqi have treacherously violated their sacred promises and have thrown themselves into the same camp as the Western imperialists, who have exerted all possible efforts at this stage to exacerbate the differences and to bring about new bloody battles between Iraqi army units and the Kurdish armed forces. [...] These authorities have chosen the path of resuming war, fratricidal war between the Arabs and the Kurds, the path of increasing tension in the country. This is what is wanted by the Western rulers, whose aim is to protect the plundering of their oil monopolies in Iraq. [...] There is no doubt that the news of the torpedoing of the negotiations and of the warning sent by the Iraqi authorities to the Iraqi Kurds will arouse joy in Washington and in London⁴⁹⁰.

By summer 1963, the Soviet press was giving unrestrained support to the Kurds and was attacking the Iraqi Government for resuming hostilities. On 11 June *Izvestia* published an interview of the correspondent in Baghdad, K. Vishnevetsky, with General Jalal Talabani, member of the central committee of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, who concluded that, if the talks with the Iraqi government to find a solution to the Kurdish quest for national independence will fail, “the [Kurdish] revolution will continue”⁴⁹¹.

Beyond politics, concrete instances of deterioration of political relations were multiple. Education, one of Soviet-Iraqi cooperation crown jewel, was hit. By 1963, there were about 1,600

⁴⁸⁹ P. Demchenko. 12 June 1963. Ультиматум не оставил сомнений в намерении иракского правительства возобновить войну с Курдами (“Ultimatum left no doubt on intention of Iraqi government to renew war on Kurds”). *Pravda*..

⁴⁹⁰ 11 June 1963. Moscow Radio in Arabic. “Baghdad’s attitude to Kurds treacherous and hypocritical”. 17.30 GTM. Text of commentary reported by the British Embassy to the UK Foreign Office: EQ103138/13(A). “Pravda” article on the Iraqi Government’s ultimatum to the Kurds. FO 371/170457. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 14, 1963, 2.

⁴⁹¹ K. Vishnevetsky. 11 June 1963. Интервью с Курдским лидером (“Interview with Kurdish leader”). *Izvestia*.

civil Iraqi students in the USSR and about 200 military, most of them Air Force cadets. In 1963, of 457 civil and military students nominated by Iraq, only 70 accepted to leave for the Soviet Union⁴⁹².

3.3.5. Soviet reactions to the “Ramadan Revolution”, 8 February 1963

On 8 February 1963, a coup led by the Iraqi wing of the Ba’ath Party overthrew Qassim’s regime and installed the new government of Abdul Salam Arif, former companion of Qassim in the 1958 Revolution. Through a radio broadcast, the new regime announced unity, independence, and freedom as its guiding principles and claimed Iraq would follow a social and agrarian reform policy. Although the new leadership in Baghdad claimed that neutrality and non-alignment would govern its foreign policy, the tone of the broadcast was strongly anti-communist and referred to Qassim as a “betrayal” of the Revolution, alluding to its friendship with Moscow⁴⁹³.

The Soviet immediate reaction was mild and cautious. There was a notable lack of comment in the Soviet press, except for factual, plane reports on the progress of the Revolution. Although, since 1958, the Soviets had undoubtedly cooled off a lot in their attitude to Qassim, they had done this gradually and managed to dilute their sense of disillusion on Iraq. After all, it was thanks to him that they were able to strengthen their foothold through economic aid first and military cooperation later, and their trade had increased drastically. Though Qassim was probably something of an embarrassment to them in many respects, he had given them an opportunity for infiltration. Hopes were not as high that the same opportunities would exist under a new regime, whose immediate action against communists could hardly presage any improvement from the Soviet point of view. There appeared to be also a hope that the *Ramadan Revolution* may improve the condition of communists in the country. In a later (1965) note of the Soviet Embassy to Iraq, it is written as follows: “In this way, at the end of 1963, the Iraqi Communist Party again occupies the place of a vanguard party in the country. The November coup d’état put an end to a fascist regime and replaced it with forces that are favourable to the fight for achieving national independence and the return of Iraq to the common national liberation movement”⁴⁹⁴.

A crescendo of criticism against the new Iraqi government’s purge of communists arose soon after the coup. An unsigned article in *Pravda* of 15 February 1963 reported criticism from overseas Iraqi students and French Communist Party, concluding that “the Soviet people are deeply alarmed

⁴⁹² EQ103138/1. 1743. Discussion with Iraqi Ambassador. Iraqi students in the Soviet Union. FO 371/170457. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. January 3, 1963.

⁴⁹³ Claire Hollingworth, “The Ba’athist Revolution in Iraq”, *The World Today*, 19:5 (1963), 225–230.

⁴⁹⁴ Деятельность ИКП и других демократических сил. Посольство СССР в Ираке (“The activities of the ICP and other democratic forces. Embassy of the USSR in Iraq”), Января 27, 1965.

at the orgy of terror in Iraq, the persecution of Iraqi democrats”⁴⁹⁵. A couple of days later, another article incited the “firm belief that the policy of brigandage and the annihilation of the best sons of the Iraqi people will fail. The freedom-loving people of Iraq will find the strength to frustrate brutal reaction by united, active measures”⁴⁹⁶. The same accuses appeared in *Izvestia* as well, denouncing the Iraqi government’s hypocrisy in trying to hide this: “A wave of blood has swamped Baghdad”, wrote the CPSU Central Committee’s correspondent from Iraq K. Vishnevetsky, “despite the claims of the new government that all is quiet, anyone on the spot can see that this is not so”⁴⁹⁷. On 17 February 1963, the CPSU issued a statement titled “Reprisals and bloody terror against Communists in Iraq” (also broadcasted in Arabic on 19 February), in which it strongly condemned the “policy of robbery and destruction of the best sons of the Iraqi people” carried out in Iraq:

Reports from Iraq indicate that mass reprisals and a bloody terror against communists and other representatives of the democratic patriotic forces of Iraq are being carried out there. Various organs of the authorities are organising mass searches, arrests, beating-up and the murder of hundreds of completely innocent persons. Communists and other democrats and patriots are being rounded-up everywhere on the pretext that they supported the Qassim regime. Prisons are overcrowded, and special camps for the victims of the reprisals are being set up. The lives of thousands of heroic sons of the Iraqi people, who had struggled selflessly for many decades against the pro-imperialist dark regime of Nuri Said, and who, after the overthrow of that regime constantly supported the implementation of the aims of the Iraqi Revolution of 1958, are in danger.

The Iraqi Communist Party always held high the banner of national struggle. It showed no appeasement towards the colonialists and their agents in condition of the cruellest terror, which Iraq underwent in the period of the rule of the royal dynasty and the pro-imperialist clique. Neither was its determination diminished by persecution, nor by prison nor by the gallows. In the struggle for national interests and the progress of the Iraqi people, it suffered tremendous losses, such as were not borne by any other Party in Iraq. The Iraqi Communists played an active part in the preparation for and the carrying out of the July Revolution of 1958. In the period of Qassim’s personal dictatorship, despite persecution and reprisals, the Communists continued the heroic struggle for the implementation of the aims of the Revolution. They strove for the unity of the national

⁴⁹⁵ “Преследования коммунистов в Ираке” (“Persecution of Communists in Iraq”), *Pravda*, February 15, 1963.

⁴⁹⁶ “Преследования коммунистов в Ираке” (“Persecution of Communists in Iraq”), *Pravda*, February 17, 1963.

⁴⁹⁷ “Ирак охвачен кровавым террором” (“Iraq is gripped by bloody terror”), *Izvestia*, February 18, 1963.

patriotic forces in the struggle against imperialism, for the genuine independence of their motherland, for the satisfaction of the just national demands of the Kurdish people, for democracy, and for the rights and the vital interests of the Iraqi people. They resolutely unmasked the forces which sought to turn back the development of the country.

In all its activity the Communist Party relied on the broad people's masses and enjoyed their support. It worked for close cooperation with all national patriotic and democratic forces in the country in the struggle against the regime of personal dictatorship and violence. The persecution of Communists is in complete contradiction to the proclamation of a policy of national unity, freedom, democracy and social justice. [...]

Communists of the Soviet Union, all the Soviet people, are deeply concerned for the fate of the friendly Iraqi people, are troubled about the present situation in Iraq. Together with the whole of progressive society the world over, they protest wrathfully against the unjustified mass reprisals in Iraq. The reprisals and persecution to which the vanguard of the Iraqi people is now subjected arouses legitimate indignation among broad masses of world public opinion. Soviet Communists, the entire Soviet people, resolutely condemned the bloody terror and reprisals in Iraq. They firmly believe that the policy of banditry and the annihilation of the best sons of the Iraqi people will fail. The freedom-loving people of Iraq will find the strength to rebuff this bestial action by united and vigorous action⁴⁹⁸.

Izvestia of 13 March and *Pravda* of 14 March took the protest campaign a step further, publishing reports of meetings held at factories and enterprises in various parts of the Soviet Union. Despite Soviet media – including Moscow Radio – were careful to avoid anything that could be construed as an incitement to mobilisation⁴⁹⁹, nor any of the exhortations to stop the terror were explicitly addressed to the new Iraqi government, those reports indicated an increasingly pessimistic view of the Soviet institutions on the continuation of a profitable collaboration with Iraq. A major protest was held in March 1963 outside the Iraqi embassy in Moscow, in response to which the Iraqis organised a manifestation outside the Soviet embassy in Baghdad. Iraq's Acting Foreign Minister Sayid Jawad expressed harsh words: "Our embassy was besieged for more than four hours, and its windows were shattered without the Soviet authorities making any attempt to stop the aggression.

⁴⁹⁸ Шодмон Ахтамович Ниязматов. *Ирано-Иракский Конфликт* ("The Iran-Iraq Conflict"). Исторический очерк. М. Наука: Москва. 1989. С. 37. // "Преследования Коммунистов в Ираке", *Pravda*, February 17, 1963.

⁴⁹⁹ Not only, it is interesting to note how Reuters, who misquoted Moscow Radio as having indeed made an incitement to revolt, was severely reprimanded by the Soviet authorities. This was reported by British observers in Iraq, see: EQ193138/3. 10313/14/2. Soviet press comment on the revolution in Iraq has been cautious. FO 371/170457. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 4, 1963.

This is a contravention of international commitments and usages which dictate defending the sanctity of foreign embassies and protecting their staff”⁵⁰⁰.

A few press articles in mid-June 1963 carried specific attacks on the Iraqi Baathists. For example, *Pravda* of 16 June published a statement entitled “Soviet people express full support for Kurds’ struggle in Iraq for their national rights”, assessing that:

The pseudo-socialist Baathist leaders of Iraq do not have the support of the people and, having set themselves up against all the patriotic and democratic forces in the country, want to remain in power by means of terror and provocation, acting so as to please the imperialist circles. It has been no accident, therefore, that from their very first days in power they have unleashed repression against the true fighters against imperialism [...] The methods used in suppressing the democratic forces, including the Kurdish National Democratic Movement, do not differ in any way from the methods extensively employed by the Nazis to do away with their political opponents. In Kurdistan, the Iraqi Government is pursuing a policy of genocide, which is contrary to elementary human rights and to the United Nations Charter⁵⁰¹.

Beyond the Kurdish factors, *Pravda* accused the Ba’athists of “sliding ever closer towards Nationalist-Fascist positions” as the front of repression was beginning to widen, affecting all bourgeois-democratic and nationalist groupings, not in agreement with the policies of the Baathists. Indeed, in April and May, massive arrests took place in Iraq. The leaders of the Arab Nationalist Movement, of the Istiqlal party, and the Arab Socialist parties were imprisoned. “Certain Arab circles”, *Pravda* wrote, “hoped in vain that the terror in Iraq would be directed only against the Communist Party in that in the future they might reach an agreement with the Baath Party on the creation of a Nationalist bloc”. The Soviet official campaign was also sided by frequent protests of the Kurds living in countries of the Soviet Union: a significant number of letters and telegrams to ask for the end of military operations (which began on 10 June) persecuting the Kurdish community in Iraq reached the Soviet Peace Committee from different parts of the Soviet Union. On 20 June 1963, *Pravda* published an unsigned observer article under the heading “Stop the crimes in Iraq”, stating that:

⁵⁰⁰ “Attack on Iraq Embassy was “flagrant aggression. Iraq Protest to Moscow”, *Iraq Times*, March 18, 1963.

⁵⁰¹ EQ103138/17. Protests against persecution of the Kurds received by the Soviet Peace Committee. FO 371/170457. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1963.

What sort of “freedom”, what sort of “socialism” is it when the jails of Iraq are packed with communists, when fascists thugs of the so-called National Guard are massacring all patriots, when a fratricidal war has been started in the north of the country in order physically to exterminate the Kurdish people? What sort of “unity” is it when the Baathist leadership of Iraq is uniting with imperialism in suppressing the democratic movement within the country and splitting the Arab national liberation movement? [...] The Soviet Union, naturally enough, cannot ignore the events that are taking place in Iraq. [...] We are far from indifferent to the uses to which our aid is put. Soviet people cannot reconcile themselves to the fact that the resources which they supply to young States should be used against the interests of the peoples of these States for ends which have nothing in common with the struggle against the shameful remnants of colonialism⁵⁰².

Towards the end of June 1963, in what has been described by the Western press as “an action which has no precedent since the Soviet Union began giving aid to the underdeveloped countries”⁵⁰³, the Soviets started to warn Iraq to stop further action against the Kurdish rebellion or risk the withdrawal of Soviet aid⁵⁰⁴. However, this was only shown in *Pravda*’s and other Soviet newspapers: the official discourse of the Soviet government did not include any reference to possible cuts of Soviet aid to Iraq. On the contrary, on 9 July, the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs Gromyko received the Iraqi Ambassador to Moscow and handed him a statement issued from the Soviet government to the Iraqi government, which concluded by underlying the Kremlin’s desire to keep developing good relations:

The Iraqi government is doubtless aware of the resolute condemnation by the Soviet people and other peoples of the world of the bloody outrages being committed by the Iraqi authorities against the peaceful Kurdish people who account for nearly one quarter of the population of the country. There is no doubt that such developments can only weaken the Iraqi state and damage its international positions and also enable the forces of colonialism to make use of these events for undermining Iraq’s independence and for strengthening their positions in the Near and Middle East. [...] The Soviet government finds it necessary to emphasise resolutely that the policy of the Iraqi government which gives the imperialist forces an opportunity for interference in the Near and Middle East

⁵⁰² “Прекратите преступления в Ираке” (“Stop the crimes in Iraq”), *Pravda*, June 20, 1963.

⁵⁰³ Victor Zorza, “Soviet threat to end aid to Iraq. Support for Kurdish rebels”, *The Guardian*. 21 June 1963.

⁵⁰⁴ *Pravda*, June 20, 1963.

is fraught with serious consequences. [...] Taking all this into consideration, the government of the Soviet Union is compelled to issue with this statement and the warning it contains. The Soviet government sincerely hopes that the government of Iraq will not permit the continuation of foreign interference in the events now taking place in the north of Iraq and will put an end to this interference. The Soviet government takes this opportunity to declare that, given a reciprocal desire on the party of Iraq, it will continue to pursue the policy of developing good relations with the Iraqi republic⁵⁰⁵.

Baghdad Radio replied strongly, rejecting the accusations and addressing it back to the Soviets⁵⁰⁶:

It is really strange that Moscow should speak about the policy of extermination, respect for human rights, and the principle of liberties for all. It is also strange that its spokesmen in international circles should speak about the crimes, killing and terror practiced in Iraq. Anyone listening to Moscow Radio would imagine that it holds the decree of custodianship for tyrannised people, and that it is the undisputed upholder of the violated rights of mankind. In our view, if there are any who should not speak about these delicate points, it is Moscow: because its history and the history of every country where its forces have trod, or over which the hateful red communist shadows have passed, is associated with tragedies, tears and sufferings. The whole world still remembers the bestial suppressive methods, and the extermination of thousands of citizens in the Soviet Union because they rejected communism as an ideology for directing their life and dominating their circumstances and destinies.

It appears that Moscow was in deep slumber when the Iraqi communists dragged the bodies of the innocents through the streets, hanged women on lamp posts, killed infants before the eyes of their parents, and barbarously entered peaceful homes to commit disgraceful deeds... after defending the killers, the shedders of blood and criminals, Moscow now wants to speak about freedom, dignity and humanity. Where was Moscow

⁵⁰⁵ EQ103138/17. Protests against persecution of the Kurds received by the Soviet Peace Committee. FO 371/170457. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1963.

⁵⁰⁶ What the Soviets probably did not expect, was that the denouncement of their "crocodile tears" would have been expressed even by some Kurdish association. The Arab-Kurdish league followed up the above statement with denouncement of the Soviet "crocodile tears" for the Kurdish rebels, not only for their hypocrisy faced to the killing of workers in Pozman and Budapest, but for ignoring, the League said, the crimes and injustices that Iraqis and Kurds suffered under Qassim. From: EQ103138/23(C). Test of soviet government statement to the Iraqi government about the outrages being committed against the Kurds. FO 371/170458. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. July 23, 1963.

and where was its conscience when it cooperated with Western imperialism in the tragedy of displacing a million Arabs from their homelands? [...] Seized by hysteria after the ignoble communist plot had been crushed by our great people and army, Moscow has started to intensify its erroneous campaign against our revolution and its leadership, and against our people. We remind the Soviet Union, which seeks to bring its lies and blustering before the international organizations, that this very organization in the past has condemned the USSR forces for their flagrant aggression against the Hungarian people in 1956 after the forces which claim to love freedom, democracy and peace had committed the ugliest and fiercest of crimes⁵⁰⁷.

Over the Summer of 1963, the Soviet press either turned silent or moderated the tones, in striking contrast to the stridency of the previous months. Only *Pravda* made a few stark references to the execution of freedom-loving Iraqis including members of the ICP Central Committee⁵⁰⁸. The chairman of the Soviet Peace Committee, Nikolay Tikhonov, denounced the killing of the leader of the Iraq peace movement Ismail Saffat, among the 11 people shot secretly at dawn on 26 May 1963, including two leaders of the ICP and the leader of the Student Union Sahib Mirza. Tikhonov linked these killings with the deaths of other communists in Greece (Mr Lambrakis) and Spain (Grimau), as connected dots in a chain of open terror carried out by the imperialists against all progressive forces. This attempt to move the focus of vilification from the Iraqi government to the imperialists, and the way in which the subject was largely evaded in the Soviet press, suggested the extreme caution of Soviet policy in the Middle East at that moment. *Pravda* of July 28 published an article entitled “Iraq in the grip of terror”, where it reported the news of the execution of the three communists Jamal al-Haidari, Abdel Jabbar Wahba and Mohammed Salek M. Abaji to launch into a graphic description of the torture inflicted on the Iraqi communists. Following a bunch of details on the techniques supposedly used by the government, the article concluded that no possible form of terror could destroy the Iraqi Communist Party. In other sporadic articles, the possibility of an Iraq-Iran convergence against the Kurds was also mentioned⁵⁰⁹, as well as a dispute with China over support

⁵⁰⁷ EQ103138/23(B). Test of soviet government statement to the Iraqi government about the outrages being committed against the Kurds. FO 371/170458. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. July 16, 1963.

⁵⁰⁸ “Пусть будет суровый ответ подлым убийцам борцов за мир” (“May there be a stern answer to the base murderers of the fighters for peace”), *Pravda*, June 2, 1963.

⁵⁰⁹ The Soviets were quite preoccupied that Iraq could enter into an anti-Kurdish alliance with Iran. “Judging from the latest reports”, *Pravda* writes, “the Baathist leadership is strengthening its relations with reactionary circles in Iran – a country drawn into the aggressive CENTO bloc. The authorities in Baghdad want to establish an alliance with Iranian reaction, which is now rearing its head in order to fight against the Kurds. In other words, they want to bring back the days of Nuri Said, when Iraq and Iran, two countries which were pursuing identical pro-imperialist policies, pooled their efforts in the struggle against the democratic forces and in the suppression of the Kurds’ desire for freedom”. From: *Pravda*, June 20, 1963.

for the Kurdish cause⁵¹⁰. The Soviet propaganda support for the Kurds and attacks on the Baath also winded down; even when it resumed later in fall 1963, with a couple or three major articles per week on average, both the tone and the quantity were less fierce than it was in the first part of the year.

It looked as if the Soviet leadership may have awakened somewhat belatedly to the damage to their relations with the Arabs that was likely to result from their rejection of the new regime and their espousal of the Kurdish cause. Indeed, by the end of 1963, the Soviets approved Iraq's new government. *Pravda* of 28 November published the first official Soviet reaction to the new regime in an article signed by G. Sibiryak titled "Kurds fight for justice"⁵¹¹. After describing the crimes of the Baathist leaders, which included a campaign against the Kurds even more brutal than Qassim's, Sibiryak refers with approval to president Arif's statement that the new government is going to grant equal rights to all citizens irrespective of their nationality and religion. In the light of President Arif's statement and of the opinion of the Minister of National Guidance that peace with the Kurds would be restored in a few days, Sibiryak considers that "the Iraqi Kurds have every reason to expect from the new government a peaceful and just solution of the Kurdish problem on democratic principles"⁵¹². Moscow was therefore adopting a friendlier attitude towards the new regime, but with the remark that the new regime's declared intention to return to the principle of the Revolution (freedom and independence, breaking the Baghdad pact, rejecting the Eisenhower doctrine, liquidating British bases) was in contradiction with the treatment against the enemies of imperialism. Not only that would turn back the historical development of Iraq, but it would play into the hands of the imperialists, according to *Pravda*. Indeed, if anti-communist purges continued, the danger will increase that the Western countries, the "forces of imperialism", may drive Iraq away from its policy of neutrality and join forces with the West. Failure to see the dire results of a policy of anti-communism, it was argued, could be construed only as either political blindness or open support to imperialism⁵¹³.

⁵¹⁰ *Pravda* published a letter from a member of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the ICP, Anvar Mustapha, to the Central Committee of the CPSU, printed initially in the Lebanese paper *Al Akhbar* and reprinted in *Pravda* of 29 August. The letter was primarily a sycophantic endorsement of the Soviet line in a Sino-Soviet dispute, dwelling on the Chinese allegation that the Soviet Union did not help the revolutionary struggle of the peoples for freedom. On the contrary, Mustapha argued, the Soviet Union did support the Iraqi Revolution, and, after the "ill-starred reactionary imperialist military coup of 8 February 1963", did condemn the repression against the progressive democratic forces. In a similar way, the Soviet state and CPSU "supported in every possible way the struggle of the Kurdish people for their democratic rights" when the Baathists renewed their criminal, racist war against them". From: *Pravda*, August 29, 1963.

⁵¹¹ *Pravda*, November 28, 1963.

⁵¹² *Pravda*, November 28, 1963.

⁵¹³ *Pravda*, February 26, 1964.

Chapter 4

The Syrian case-study, 1961-1966

Among the three case studies examined by this study, Syria makes an exception for the longevity of its historical relations with Russia. As early as the 19th century, Syria and the broader geographical region of Palestine were the first arrival ports of Russian Christian pilgrims. Accordingly, the Russian Empire developed new interests tied to the necessity to protect the holy sites of Orthodox Christianity and the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church⁵¹⁴. Protection of the holy sites of Orthodox Christianity convinced certain groups of the Russian clerics and Russian political figures of the need to establish a stable presence in the area. As a result, Russian missions, religious institutions and schools in Syria and Palestine flourished between the 1830s and 1840s. An exchange based on religious ties soon acquired political meaning. Contacts between the Russians and Arab local communities developed well beyond the Christian domain, leaving a significant mark on Russia's approach to the Arab region⁵¹⁵. Literature has highlighted that Russians increasingly aimed to build pro-Russian constituencies in the Arab lands of the then Ottoman Empire that believed that Russia was a trued, disinterested friend, to co-opt any different group of people who seemed remotely sympathetic⁵¹⁶. In particular, according to Elena Astafieva – besides the organisation of mass pilgrimages to the holy sites – imperial Russian policy's distinguishing feature was a proactive acquisition of Palestinian lands directly by the empire, which allowed the Empire to establish a long-lasting consolidated presence in the region, giving it an advantage compared to other 'European' religious institutions⁵¹⁷. Through religious institutions, the authors argue, the Russians approached local Arab populations and consolidated the Empire's position in the broader Middle East. In contemporary terms, one could say that religious engagement in the Arab world was a skilful tool for

⁵¹⁴ For more on this subject, a few relevant studies are: Alex Carmel, "Russian Activity in Palestine in the Nineteenth Century", in *Vision and Conflict in the Holy Land*, edited by Richard I. Cohen, Yad Izhak Ben Zvi (Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1985) 46-77; Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay and Alexandre Bennigsen, "Musulmans et missions orthodoxes en Russie orientale avant 1917", *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, 13:1 (1972), 57-113; Michael Khodarkovsky, "Not by Word Alone": Missionary Policies and Religious Conversion in Early Modern Russia", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 38:2 (1996), 267-293.

⁵¹⁵ Derek Hopwood, *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine 1843-1914: Church and Politics in the Near East*, London: Clarendon Press, 1969.

⁵¹⁶ Paul Du Quenoy, "The Russian Empire and Egypt, 1900-1915: A Case of Public Diplomacy", *Journal of World History*, 19:2 (2008), 213-233.

⁵¹⁷ Elena Astafieva, *The Russian Empire in Palestine, 1947-1917, A look back at the origins of Russia's Near Eastern policy*, Tepsis Papers, 2016.

Imperial Russia to exert its “soft power” over the Arabs⁵¹⁸. Regardless of the effective results that this brought, these relations would have consolidated and survived the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the later stages of Syria’s foreign occupation.

With the end of the Ottoman Empire, Syria fell to the French Mandate (1923-1946), and contacts with the new-born Soviet Union were almost non-existent. Elections held in 1943 brought Shukry al-Quwatli to the presidency of the Syrian Republic, with which the Soviets established diplomatic relations in 1944. However, Soviet-Syrian relations only boosted with the Arab country’s complete independence from the French (and British) military presence in April 1946⁵¹⁹. More precisely, the process of Soviet rapprochement to Syria began even a few weeks earlier, in February 1946, which can effectively be considered as the starting point of an everlasting friendship. On the first day of the month, through the mediation of Daniil Solod, then the USSR Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Envoy to Syria and Lebanon (*Чрезвычайный и Полномочный Посланник СССР в Сирии и в Ливане*), the Soviets got the Syrians to sign a secret agreement in which they accepted Moscow’s offer for assistance in the formation and training of the army, as well as its diplomatic and political support in regional rivalries⁵²⁰. Indeed, the Soviets immediately demonstrated their will to stick to their promises, as in a UNSC session that same month, they openly called for the removal of French (and British) troops from the country, which were indeed removed in April. Another relevant step in the development of Soviet-Syrian defence cooperation was made on 10 April 1950 when the two signed a non-aggression pact, highly wanted by Maarouf al-Dawalibi, then Syrian Minister of National Economy (who later served as Prime Minister for two short mandates in 1951 and 1961-1962).

Politically, in the years following independence, Syria experienced high volatility. Between the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, domestic politics was shaken by various military coups that, among others, increasingly brought about the rise of the Baath Party to the fore of Syrian politics. At the regional level, the 1948-1949 war with Israel, the West-inspired Baghdad Pact of 1955 and the Suez crisis of 1956 were all events that undermined Western influence and drove Syria closer to the Soviets for military, diplomatic, and political support. The so called “Baghdad Pact” – vehemently opposed by the Soviets, Egypt and the Syrians alike – was perhaps the first significant event to mark an alignment of views between Moscow and Damascus. As Iraq and Turkey threatened to attack Syria if it continued to oppose the Pact and reaffirm its adherence to the principle of non-participation in

⁵¹⁸ Astafieva, *The Russian Empire in Palestine*, 2016.

⁵¹⁹ Remarkably, the Soviet Union had *de facto* recognised Syria as an independence country *before* it became officially independent, while the country was still struggling for its full liberation from the French rulers (22 July 1944).

⁵²⁰ Rami Ginat, “The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba’ath Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36:2 (2000), 150–171.

foreign military blocs, the Soviets stood firmly on her side and promised to defend Damascus in a possible future confrontation with its neighbours⁵²¹. In late 1954 already, even before Cairo signed the military agreement through the mediation of Czechoslovakia (1955), Damascus purchased 44 German Mark IV tanks from the Soviet bloc for very advantageous prices. That was certainly a significant step in the development of the relations between the two countries. Syrian officers were also admitted to training in Egypt, again led by Czechoslovak instructors, while teams from various Eastern camp countries went to Syria to train the local military. The Soviet-Syrian military dialogue increased to include agreements for economic assistance and cultural cooperation⁵²².

Between the late 1950s and early 1960s, as the Suez crisis burst forth and Israel became an increasingly concrete threat for Syria, the rapprochement between the two countries became more and more consistent.

At the beginning of 1956, observing the results of Egypt's military cooperation with the Soviet Union, the Syrian President Shukry al-Quwatli was asking Egypt to buy weapons from Czechoslovakia for his country⁵²³. A few months later, in October 1956, the Syrian leader was invited for an official state visit to Moscow, which was welcomed by the Soviet press as a "testament" of the Soviet-Syrian friendly ties, as well as a proof of the Soviet Union's international achievements of the recent years⁵²⁴. A celebrative article made its appearance on *Pravda*'s front page, where a large picture of al-Quwatli was surrounded by praising words acclaiming Syria's achievements of independence and development goals:

⁵²¹ Ginat, *The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'ath*, 2000.

⁵²² Pedro Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955: A Troubled Alliance*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1990.

⁵²³ № 230. Б69. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

⁵²⁴ За Дружбу Народов СССР и Сирии ("For the Friendship of the Peoples of the USSR And Syria"). *Правда*. 31 Октября 1956 г. N. 305 (13968).

Декларация Правительства Союза ССР об основах развития и дальнейшего укрепления дружбы и сотрудничества между Советским Союзом и другими социалистическими государствами

Незыблемой основой внешних отношений Союза Советских Социалистических Республик была и остается политика мирного сосуществования, дружбы и сотрудничества между всеми государствами.

Наиболее глубокое и последовательное выражение эта политика находит во взаимоотношениях между социалистическими странами. Будучи объединены общими идеалами построения социалистического общества и принципами пролетарского интернационализма, страны великого содружества социалистических наций могут строить свои взаимоотношения только на принципах полного равноправия, уважения территориальной целостности, государственной независимости и суверенитета, невмешательства во внутренние дела друг друга. Это не только не исключает, но напротив того, предполагает тесное братское сотрудничество и взаимопомощь стран социалистического содружества в экономической, политической и культурной областях.

На этой основе после второй мировой войны в разгроме фашизма сложился, окреп и показал свою великую жизненную силу строй народной демократии в ряде стран Европы и Азии.

В процессе становления нового строя и глубоких революционных преобразований общественных отношений было немало трудностей, нерешенных задач и прямых ошибок, в том числе и во взаимоотношениях между социалистическими странами, нарушений и ошибок, которые уязвляли принцип равноправия в отношениях между социалистическими государствами.

XX съезд Коммунистической партии Советского Союза со всей решительностью осудил эти нарушения и ошибки и поставил задачу последовательного осуществления Советским Союзом в своих взаимоотношениях с другими социалистическими странами ленинских принципов равноправия народов. Он провозгласил необходимость полного учета исторического прошлого и особенностей каждой страны, вставшей на путь строительства новой жизни.

Советское Правительство последовательно проводит в жизнь эти исторические решения XX съезда, которые создают условия для дальнейшего укрепления дружбы и сотрудничества между социалистическими странами на незыблемой основе соблюдения полного суверенитета каждого социалистического государства.

Как показали события последнего времени, возникла необходимость сделать соответствующее заявление о позиции Советского Союза во взаимоотношениях СССР с другими социалистическими странами, прежде всего в экономической и в военной областях.

Советское Правительство готово обсудить совместно с правительствами других социалистических государств меры, обеспечивающие дальнейшее развитие и укрепление экономических связей между социалистическими странами с тем, чтобы устранить какие бы то ни было возможности нарушения принципа национального суверенитета, взаимной выгоды и равноправия в экономических отношениях.

Этот принцип должен быть распространен и на военники. Известно, что в первый период формирования нового общественного строя Советский Союз по просьбе правительств стран народной демократии направлял в эти страны некоторое количество своих специалистов — инженеров, агрономов, научных работников, военных советников. За последний период Советское Правительство неоднократно ставило перед социалистическими государствами вопрос об отзыве своих советников.

В связи с тем, что к настоящему времени в странах народной демократии сложились свои квалифицированные национальные кадры во всех областях хозяйственного и военного строительства, Советское Правительство считает нецелесообразным рассматривать совместно с другими социалистическими государствами вопрос о целесообразности дальнейшего пребывания в этих странах советников СССР.

В военной области важной основой взаимоотношений между Советским Союзом и странами народной демократии является Варшавский договор, по которому его участники взяли на себя соответствующие политические и военные обязательства, в том числе обязательство принимать согласованные меры, необ-

30 октября 1956 года.

Работники социалистической промышленности! Боритесь за технический прогресс и всемерное повышение производительности труда! Внедряйте в производство новейшие достижения отечественной и зарубежной науки и техники, передовой опыт предприятий!

(Из Призывов ЦК КПСС к 39-й годовщине Великой Октябрьской Социалистической революции).

ЗА ДРУЖБУ НАРОДОВ СССР И СИРИИ

Сегодня в Москве по приглашению Президиума Верховного Совета СССР и лично тов. К. Е. Ворошилова президент Сирийской Республики Шукри Куатли. Этот визит является свидетельством крепких дружественных связей нашей Родины со странами Востока.

Одним из важнейших событий последних лет, способствующих расширению международного сотрудничества и упрочению мира, укреплению дружественных связей Советского Союза со странами Востока является визит тов. Шукри Куатли в Москву. Шукри Куатли, являясь руководителем одной из ведущих стран арабского Востока, в числе и с Сирийской Республикой.

Вот уже пятнадцать лет назад началась история независимой Сирийской Республики. Десять лет — срок войсковой, но и за это время сирийский народ сумел многое сделать для преодоления экономической и культурной отсталости, доставшейся ему в наследство от колониаторов. Почти удалось ликвидировать колониальные земельные владения, расширить ирригационную систему, сделав первые шаги по пути развития национальной промышленности.

Известно, что империалисты, не желавшие мириться с потерей своих бывших колоний, стремились вновь установить свой контроль над экономической и политической стран Арабского Востока. Эти цели служат, в частности, агрессивный багдадский пакт, созданный империалистическими кругами Англии и США. С этой же целью колониаторы пытаются различными путями обострить обстановку на Ближнем и Среднем Востоке.

Провозгласив принцип неучастия в военных конфликтах, создаваемых империалистическими государствами, правительство Сирии вместе с правительствами Египта, Иордании, Саудовской Аравии принимает меры для упрочения мира на Ближнем Востоке.

Характерной чертой нашей эпохи стало то, что народы, обрешенные цепи колониального гнета и экономической зависимости, стремятся к освобождению со странами демократии и социализма. Народы Востока, в том числе арабские страны, ищут в Советском Союзе государство, которое восстало с сочувствием и глубоким пониманием отношения к их нациям и проблемам.

Отношения между Советским Союзом и Сирией строились на принципах полного сотрудничества, обоюдных выгоды и равноправия. В последние годы возрос обмен торговлей между нашими странами. Недавно было заключено соглашение о культурном сотрудничестве. Сейчас, когда Сирия приступила к осуществлению обширных планов национального развития, все более большие перспективы для расширения экономических связей между нашими странами на взаимовыгодных условиях.

Сюда была первой арабской страной, которая откликнулась на Декларацию Верховного Совета СССР об основах парадоксальных взаимоотношений. Летом 1955 года в нашей стране гостил делегация сирийского парламента, а в сентябре этого года в Сирию побывала с официальным визитом делегация Верховного Совета СССР.

Послания советского народа встретили в Сирии с большим интересом. Президент Сирийской Республики Шукри Куатли выразил, что дружба и взаимные симпатии между народами Сирийской Республики и великого Советского Союза будут крепнуть и развиваться в интересах мира и процветания наших народов.

Михаил Горбачев, секретарь президиума ЦК КПСС, заявил, что не только на Ближнем Востоке, но и во всем мире на благо всего человечества.

Принимая в Советский Союз Президента Сирийской Республики Шукри Куатли — важный шаг на пути укрепления дружественных отношений между нашими странами, новый визит в дело взаимопомощи и сотрудничества между народами.



Президент Сирийской Республики
Шукри Куатли

Шукри Куатли родился в 1891 году в г. Дамаске. Среднее образование он получил в Дамаске, а высшее — в Стэмбуле. В годы первой мировой войны, когда Сирия еще находилась в составе Османской империи, Шукри Куатли становится активным участником борьбы за освобождение своей страны от иностранного господства и принимает активное участие в деятельности негласных патристических организаций, за что в 1915 году был арестован и приговорен к смертной казни.

Когда Сирия находилась под французским мандатом, Шукри Куатли продолжал борьбу за независимость страны, он участвовал во всеобщем восстании 1925—1927 годов против французского господства, за что снова был приговорен к смертной казни, но эмигрировал в Египет и вернулся в Сирию в 1931 году, после объявления амнистии.

В 1936 году Шукри Куатли был избран депутатом парламента, а затем вскоре во-

шел в состав сирийского парламента и на протяжении 1937—1939 годов был министром финансов, министром национальной обороны и заместителем премьер-министра.

В 1943 году Шукри Куатли был избран первым президентом Сирийской Республики. В 1948 году он вновь избирается на пост президента, но в связи с военным переворотом в Сирии в 1949 году ушел в Египет, где находился до 1954 года.

В августе 1955 году Шукри Куатли в третий раз был избран президентом.

Шукри Куатли является выдающимся государственным деятелем Сирии и Арабского Востока. Он известен как сторонник политики неутраченности и неучастия Сирии в агрессивных военных конфликтах.

Шукри Куатли является сторонником укрепления сотрудничества между арабскими странами и выступает за политику мира и сотрудничества со всеми странами на основе известных принципов, одобренных Багдадской конференцией.

Прибытие в Советский Союз Президента Сирии Шукри Куатли

СПИДЕРГОЛЬД, 30 октября. (Мор. «Правды»). Сегодня в Спидергольде сел на самолетный отапливаемый самолет Президент Сирийской Республики Шукри Куатли.

В 16 часов 40 минут самолет, escorted советскими реактивными истребителями, совершил посадку на аэродром. Из самолета вышел Президент Сирийской Республики Шукри Куатли с супругой и дочерью. Вместе с президентом прибыли министр иностранных дел Сирийской Республики Салах ад-Дин Битар, министр сельского хозяйства Рашид Хамри, министр национальной обороны Абул Хасиб Ресал, генеральный директор управления информации и пропаганды Фуад Шаби, генеральный секретарь президентской канцелярии Фуад Халил и другие официальные лица.

Одновременно в Дамаске в СССР прибыли послы СССР в Сирии С. С. Немчина и СССР в Сирии Б. А. Зарков.

Гостей встретил заместитель Председателя Президиума Верховного Совета СССР А. С. Саркис, зам Председателя Верховного Совета СССР Э. Н. Бурико, заместитель Председателя Президиума Верховного Совета Украинской ССР С. А. Бончук, ответственные сотрудники Президиума Верховного Совета СССР и Министерства иностранных дел СССР, депутаты Верховного Совета Украинской ССР, городского областного и Симферопольского городского Советов депутаты трудящихся, представители печати.

(Окончание на 3-й стр.)

The Soviets believed it was important for Syria not to be dragged into regional rivalries that would weaken it and to focus as much as possible on the issues of economic development, which would have enhanced the country's prestige and led it to new collaborative paths, starting from countries of the Soviet Union. "Now that Syria has started implementing extensive national development plans",

Pravda claimed, “there are great prospects for expanding economic ties between our countries on mutually beneficial terms”⁵²⁵.

However, the perfect contingency for Soviet penetration into Syria had to wait until the early 1960s, when two significant events occurred. First, the end of the short-lived experience of the United Arab Republic, the UAR (*Объединенная Арабская Республика, ОАР*, 1958-1961), presented Moscow with a new window of opportunities. Throughout its existence as a two-state union, the Moscow-Cairo axis drove the Soviet partnership with the UAR, as sustained cooperation with Nasser had brought the Soviets closer to him than any leader in Damascus. Gradually, the perspective of autonomous Syria convinced Moscow of the possibility of a new independent path of collaboration with the Syrians. Secondly, the rise of the Baath at the fore of Syrian politics – initially looked at with suspicion by Moscow – created unexpected convergence of views, as the Soviets seemed to feel closer to the socialist views of the Syrian Baathists than anyone else in the region. With the 1963 and 1966 Syrian coups d'état, the Soviet Union, sealed an increasingly deep alliance with Damascus which would have consolidated in the years to follow, in a way that was probably unexpected by the Soviets in the first place. Against the worsening of relations with Nasser's Egypt, against disillusion on Iraq, and limited partnership with Lebanon and Jordan, Syria gradually emerged as the “crown jewel” of Soviet foreign policy in the Arab Middle East.

4.1. Regional relations: A testing ground for Soviet diplomacy

4.1.1. The 1961 Syrian coup d'état and the dismissal of the UAR: Regional reactions

Although internal and external factors had convinced the Syrian leadership about the advantages of the union with Egypt (1958), problems arose rapidly. Instead of the well-expected progress, Syria experienced regression, and many sectors of the population soon began to feel frustrated by how President Nasser was ruling their country. Syria's political view for an ‘Arab socialism’ had always been very distant from the Nasserist ones. Particularly, Nasser's socialism alienated the Syrian Baathists, who had given major impetus to the union in the first place and, therefore, claimed it was upon them that the union relied for its very existence⁵²⁶. As the Party's leaders were still granting formal support to the UAR project and remained ideologically committed to it, many Syrian Baathists increasingly began a passive resistance to Nasser's policies, and individual Baathists in Nasser's

⁵²⁵ За Дружбу Народов СССР и Сирии. 31 Октября 1956 г.

⁵²⁶ Monte Palmer, “The United Arab Republic: An Assessment of Its Failure”, *Middle East Journal*, 20:1 (1966), 50–67.

administration resigned across 1959. In 1961, Nasser's measures to nationalise banks, insurance companies, industrial plants and public utilities were perceived by the Baathists not as a step toward socialism but as thinly disguised state capitalism. Moreover, such measures left the significant bourgeois elements of Syria worried about the future of private enterprise⁵²⁷. Disenchantment and discontent soon gave place to the enthusiasm that had initially characterised the establishment of the union. Then, on 28 September 1961, a coup d'état led by Syrian Army Officers resulted in the secession of Syria from the UAR and the restoration of its independent national sovereignty. Landowners and bourgeois elements supported conservative military units who moved into Damascus that day and declared the end of the union with Egypt. Parliamentary elections were held, which gave the coup's supporters a majority and gave them a legalistic and democratic covering⁵²⁸. Established in December, the secessionist regime quickly started to dismantle the socialist measures introduced under the UAR (agrarian reforms, nationalisations), and almost no concessions were made to the socialist Baathists and the pro-Nasser Pan-Arabists.

The 1961 Syria coup had consequences that reverberated on Syria's domestic political landscape and international relations. Internally, the dismissal of the UAR brought about the end of Nasserism and opened up to the rise of new political streams and the surge of the Baath Party at the core of Syrian politics (this will be discussed later in this chapter). Furthermore, various strata of the Syrian society were left with a sour taste in their mouth towards Egypt's rule. Nasser had centralised power around Cairo and himself, practically dominating over Syria in all fields of political and economic life, discharging former Baathists from their positions in the civil administration, while at the same time carrying out social programs and reforms of their inspiration⁵²⁹. Widespread revulsion against the UAR was also high among the population, who deemed Nasser a "police dictator" who had suffocated the Syrians' freedom of expression and destructed their civil liberties⁵³⁰. Internationally, Syria's new independence caused different reactions and quite an agitation. The Soviets, in particular, found themselves confronted with the complex exercise of balancing their interests with Egypt, Syria, and, increasingly, Israel.

Evidence on the Soviet Union's understanding and first reaction to the dismantling of UAR can be found in an interesting conversation that occurred between a Soviet diplomat and an Israeli Government's authority. Only a few days after the Egyptian-Syrian union had ceased to exist, the Soviet Chargé d'affaires in Israel G.P. Zimin (Г.П. Зимин) had a conversation with the Israeli Minister of Agriculture Moshe Dayan (in office from 1959–1964) at the latter's private residence in

⁵²⁷ Karol R. Sorby, "The Separatist Period in Syria, 1961-1963", *Asian and African Studies*, 75:2 (2009), 145–168.

⁵²⁸ Avraham Ben-Tzur, "The Neo-Ba'th Party of Syria", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 3:3 (1968), 161–181.

⁵²⁹ Ben-Tzur, *The Neo-Ba'th Party*, 1968.

⁵³⁰ Sorby, *The Separatist Period*, 2009.

Tel Aviv. Zimin was a lesser-level diplomat; not much information is found about him in Soviet archives, but that was undoubtedly his first official encounter with Dayan, and most likely, with an Israeli Minister in general. After Dayan gave him a house tour and a proud show of his vast collection of Israeli pieces of antiquities, a lengthy conversation took place on the issue of the Syrian coup⁵³¹. Taking that event as an example among many, Zimin drew a whole picture of the Soviet understanding of the national liberation movements in the Middle East, making his Government's point of view quite clear. Moscow, he explained, saw the Arab national liberation movement as a two-stage development:

The first stage is when all the country's national forces act as a united front for national liberation in the struggle against imperialism. The second stage comes when political independence is successfully achieved, and the liberated states face complex internal development problems. If these problems are solved based on democratic, progressive principles, then all national forces would be united to face the challenges of transitioning⁵³².

According to this vision, the UAR project had started with the best premises. What went wrong was that 'second stage of development'. Egypt, Zimin complained, had tried to sort internal difficulties by taking the path of nationalism, which was a slippery one, for it led to the suppression of democratic freedoms in Egypt as much as in Syria. Such a line did not meet the peoples' support, and therefore,

⁵³¹ Upon Zimin's request, Dayan also expressed his own Government's view on the Syrian events: such events are fraught with all kinds of provocations for Israel, since Arab countries often resort to anti-Israeli attacks in the struggle among themselves. It would have been better, the Israeli believed, if the Arab countries were united: in this case, they would pursue a certain political course towards Israel, and the latter would have more clarity about their intentions. Syria embarking on the path of independent development was yet another element to add to the picture of Middle East intrigues, and thus Tel Aviv was more than wary of these events. Furthermore, Dayan expressed Israel's fear of a military confrontation in the Middle East, and particularly an aggression against Israel, especially as they were observing "aggressive tendencies" in a number of countries in the Middle East due to the fact that they received large quantities of weapons. Since Dayan's statement hinted at the supply of Soviet weapons to the UAR, the Soviet official, in quite a provocative way asked whether by "Middle East countries" he meant Arab countries, since Israel also received large weapon supplies from Western powers. Dayan apparently evaded the question, claiming that he was referring only to those countries in which there are aggressive plans against Israel. From: N° 153. Запись беседы временного поверенного в делах СССР в Израиле Г.П. Зими́на с министром сельского хозяйства Израи́ля М. Дая́ном ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Chargé d'affaires in Israel G.P. Zimin with the Minister of Agriculture of Israel M. Dayan"). 2 Октября 1961 г. Б69. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

⁵³² N° 153. Б69. Запись беседы временного поверенного в делах СССР в Израиле Г.П. Зими́на с министром сельского хозяйства Израи́ля М. Дая́ном ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Chargé d'affaires in Israel G.P. Zimin with the Minister of Agriculture of Israel M. Dayan"). 2 Октября 1961 г. Б69. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

it was natural that Egypt's nationalist rule over Syria sowed discontent among the Syrian people and created a favourable ground for the events that eventually led to the 1961 coup⁵³³.

Probably unsatisfied with a comment that remained on general lines, Dayan attempted to get his Soviet interlocutor, asking him about his Government's attitude towards the Syrian events specifically and the new Maamun al-Kuzbari (September-November 1961) leadership more specifically. Dayan was covering a much higher post than Zimin at that time and was probably more 'diplomatically' skilled; however, Zimin managed to evade Dayan's questions, noting that any conclusions on this point would be premature, since neither the programme nor the intention of the new Syrian Government, nor the attitude of the Syrian masses about it was still any known. A few days later, on 7 October (1961), *Pravda* reported a statement originally broadcasted by Damascus radio, in which the new Syrian government's program's main points were announced. These included the restoration of fundamental freedoms and immediate annulment of emergency laws; "improvements" of the army; freedom of trade unions, participation of workers in profits and management of enterprises; achieving economic prosperity by stabilizing the currency and prices, raising living standards, increasing production and respecting legitimate profits; taking measures to ensure conditions for the creation of a workable state apparatus⁵³⁴. *Pravda* also reported the al-Kuzbari's Government's statement about Damascus' willingness to cooperate with all Arab States and work together with them "in order to achieve real and complete unity of the Arabs on the basis of freedom and equality"⁵³⁵. However, these pieces of information were listed by the Soviet newspaper in a very neutral way, with no significant comment of either appreciation or disregard attached to it. Beyond the actual impossibility to give premature judgement about the new Syrian Government, the Soviet caution was motivated by the need to move more than carefully as to preserve its growing and consolidating interests in the Middle East. From an analysis of the many letters, reports and notices given by Soviet officials in the regions to their superiors in Moscow, it emerges clearly that the Kremlin's main preoccupations were essentially two: Egypt and Israel.

As far as Egypt is concerned, Syria's secession was a slap in the face for Cairo's leadership: it should not surprise that the Soviets were initially reluctant to support it, as they were afraid to compromise their relationship with Nasser. Although by 1961, Soviet ties with the Arab leader had

⁵³³ № 153. Б69. Запись беседы временного поверенного в делах СССР в Израиле Г.П. Зими́на с министром сельского хозяйства Израи́ля М. Дая́ном ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Chargé d'affaires in Israel G.P. Zimin with the Minister of Agriculture of Israel M. Dayan"). 2 Октября 1961 г.

⁵³⁴ Положение в Сирии. Выступление Мамуна Куэбери по Дамасскому Радио ("The situation in Syria. Maamun al-Kuzbari's speech on Damascus Radio"). *Правда*. 7 октября 1961 г. N. 273 (11763).

⁵³⁵ Положение в Сирии. Выступление Мамуна Куэбери по Дамасскому Радио. 7 октября 1961 г.

considerably cooled down due to his treatment of local communists⁵³⁶, Egypt remained Moscow's closest ally in the region and a vital market – by then, “the” vital market – for Soviet weapons. Only two days after Pravda published the new Syrian Government's ‘manifesto’, on 9 October (1961), the UAR Ambassador in Moscow, Mohammed Galeb asked to be received by Khrushchev. Galeb was most probably shaken by the visibility that Pravda's article – for how plain it could be – was unavoidably giving to the new Syrian government, and rushed to the Soviet leader with the explicit goal to inquire him about his government's view of the Syrian secession, and, most importantly, about the continuation of Soviet-Egyptian cooperation. Khrushchev welcomed the Ambassador and his alarmed requests for clarification about the Soviet Union's views on the situation. He made his point very clear about Syria's secession, which, in his view, was ascribable to Egypt's mistakes, better, Nasser's mistakes, as the very union with Syria had not to be pursued in the first place:

I do not mean to say that what happened in Syria is good. If I said that, you would think badly of me. I understand the President's [Nasser] position. Needless to say, the events in Syria have damaged the UAR and the President personally. Indeed, the President knows our point of view, I had already expressed my opinion to him regarding Egypt's union with Syria. [...] I had advised him not to take the lead of the Syrians, not to opt for the union. ‘Go for the creation of a federation or confederations’ [I had told him]. In that case, all internal issues will remain in Syria, with the exception of foreign policy and defence. For instance, if internal economic difficulties appeared in Syria, then the Syrians' discontent would turn against their own [Syrian] government. Whereas now, the discontent is directed against Egypt and President Nasser⁵³⁷.

At the same time, Khrushchev spoke in a balanced way, trying not to give Galeb the impression of either a Soviet support for Syria's search for independence or any change of attitude from the Soviet Government towards Cairo and the President:

I do not want [the Soviet Union] to be misunderstood. [...] I want President Nasser to strengthen his position. [...] If Nasser had gone for a confederation, then other Arab

⁵³⁶ Walter Laqueur. *The Struggle for the Middle East: The Soviet Union and the Middle East, 1958-68* (London and New York: Routledge Library Editions, War and Security in the Middle East), 64.

⁵³⁷ № 154. Б69. Запись беседы Н.С. Хрущева с послом ОАР в СССР Мохаммедом Галемом (“Recording of a conversation between N.S. Khrushchev and the UAR Ambassador to the USSR Mohammed Galeb”). 9 Октября 1961 г. Б69. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

countries, for example, Sudan and Libya, could have joined such a confederation. But when these countries saw what happened with Syria, they got scared. Now it will be necessary to work for many years to compensate for the damage caused to the very idea of Arab unity. As I told Nasser, the Soviet Union is not afraid of Arab unity. From the point of view of quantity, meaning, roughly speaking, of 'power', we are not afraid of [the Arabs]. You are 80 million people – we are 220 million people. An Arab unity would be even convenient to us, as the Arabs would be even stronger in the fight against colonialism. After all, if not allies, still, we are like-minded people in such a struggle. Instead, [when I told this to the President, he] overreacted and behaved in the wrong way. I tell you this openly, as a communist. No one among the Arabs will tell you this. I am not an enemy of Nasser, and I do not depend on him, so I can express my opinion frankly, even if he does not like it. What happened in Syria should serve as a big and serious lesson⁵³⁸.

Khrushchev's answer may have been just a way to avoid the Egyptian Ambassador's question about the Soviet decision on the new Syrian government. However, it revealed that the Soviet Union was more inclined to take Syria's defence against Egypt, which represented a novelty indeed. Whether they believed it or not, the Soviets were claiming that the secession of Syria had much to do with the Egyptian ruling class' mistakes, which had turned as a boomerang against Nasser himself, weakening his position internationally and domestically as well. But, of course, the Egyptian understanding of the crisis was very different. At least per the Ambassador Galeb's understanding, the events in Syria were simply due to the lack of a solid base – among the Syrian leadership and population – in support of the union. In 1958, he believed, varied segments of the Syrian population had welcomed the union with Egypt as a guarantee of preserving their national interests. Instead, strata whose material interests had been affected by the union had turned against it⁵³⁹. Again, Khrushchev did not seem to espouse such a view, believing that, if the Syrian communists had collectively backed the union, they would have created strong support among the working-class people, and the union would have lasted and flourished. "When the people are organized", he said, "there is no need to resort to force of arms"⁵⁴⁰. Beyond the diverging views on the issue, what

⁵³⁸ № 154. Б69. Запись беседы Н.С. Хрущева с послом ОАР в СССР Мохаммедом Галемом ("Recording of a conversation between N.S. Khrushchev and the UAR Ambassador to the USSR Mohammed Galeb"). 9 Октября 1961 г.

⁵³⁹ Karol R. Sorby. 2009.

⁵⁴⁰ To this purpose, Khrushchev took the example of Cuba. "Take Cuba, for example. Fidel Castro is not a communist, but he created a strong popular support around himself, he distributed weapons to workers and peasants, carried out agrarian reforms. Therefore, when the United States launched their intervention against Cuba, the whole people rose up to defend their country and discouraged the aggressionists from encroaching on the independence of Cuba. Nasser says he is building socialism. I told him in our previous meeting: 'of what socialism are we talking about if you keep in prison

emerged clearly was a similar awareness of the two officials about the risk that the Syrian coup was posing to the Soviet-Egyptian friendship.

A second variable that Moscow was obliged to become increasingly aware of was Israel. The 1961 Syrian coup had provoked a lively reaction within the Israeli press and pro-government circles. Although the Government did not express its official position about the Syrian events, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a communication stating that authorities monitored the events closely⁵⁴¹. However, according to the Soviet agents, there was good reason to believe that Israel's position was clear and was somewhat twofold. On the one hand, Tel Aviv saw the secession as a severe blow to Nasser's domestic and international prestige, after which he will not be able to recover soon, and they expressed satisfaction about this frankly. In a letter to the Foreign Ministry in Moscow, the Soviet embassy in Tel Aviv explained how the UAR was "an artificial political creation", whose only reason to exist was to stand against Israel⁵⁴². The end of the union and the failure to establish a "pan-Arab empire" will have now encouraged Nasser to focus on Egypt's internal politics and keep away from regional adventures. In other words, an independent Syria posed a lesser threat to Israel than it did under the UAR's umbrella, and this seemed to be registered by the Soviets as a positive development. On the other hand, the Israeli authorities were certainly not giving in to any illusion, and they still considered Syria an enemy country. There was no reason, an Israeli official confessed to the Soviet Embassy's third secretary, V. Khudoleyev (В. Худолеев), to assume that the new Syrian regime would have been less anti-Israeli than the previous one⁵⁴³. Many reasons motivated such pessimism. First of all, the security situation at the Syrian-Israeli border was very precarious, and the leadership change in Damascus would lead to no positive changes in this regard. Even before the unification with Egypt, Syria had shown no desire to comply with armistice agreements with Israel, and the Israeli-Syrian border has always been a weak point for preserving peace in the Middle East. Secondly, the Syrian independence would likely result in Damascus strengthening its regional relations beyond Egypt, namely, Jordan and Iraq. A stronger Damascus-Amman axis would potentially strengthen the position of King Hussein in the region and the Arab League because he

the most dedicated fighters to the cause of socialism, that is, the communists"? Mr. Ambassador, you don't have to write down this phrase, the President remembers it well. I did not impose my opinion on him, everyone talks about their own understanding of socialism. [...] Nasser is also for socialism, but for his own special socialism". From: N° 154. Б69. Запись беседы Н.С. Хрущева с послом ОАР в СССР Мохаммедом Галебом. 9 Октября 1961 г.

⁵⁴¹ N° 156. Б69. Записка посольства СССР в Израиле в МИД СССР ("A note from the USSR Embassy in Israel to the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs"). 25 Октября 1961 г. Б69. Ближневосточный Конфликт. Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

⁵⁴² N° 156. Б69. Записка посольства СССР в Израиле в МИД СССР ("A note from the USSR Embassy in Israel to the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs"). 25 Октября 1961 г.

⁵⁴³ N° 156. Б69. Записка посольства СССР в Израиле в МИД СССР ("A note from the USSR Embassy in Israel to the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs"). 25 Октября 1961 г.

would find Damascus an ally in the fight against Nasser. With Baghdad, Damascus would have sought to strengthen energy cooperation to possibly extract oil in Iraq and transport it through pipelines passing through Syria. While all this would undoubtedly result in a weakening of Nasser's regional position, which could have played in Tel Aviv's basket, at the same time, it would have created a new 'Arab front' that would represent a threat to Israel. The attention with which this information was collected and reported to Moscow proves that Israel's concerns were increasingly present in the Soviet radar's eye. Although the Soviet leadership did nothing to hide its sympathy for the Syrian and the Arab cause, relations with Tel Aviv were growing in importance⁵⁴⁴, and so it was growing Moscow's need to balance its relationship with it.

The Syrian coup of 1961 thus marked the beginning of a difficult phase for Soviet diplomacy in the Middle East. An expert diplomat, Anatoly Aleksandrovich Barkovsky (Анатолий Александрович Барковский), already serving as Consul General of the USSR in Damascus (Генеральный Консул СССР в Дамаске) under the UAR, was promptly appointed to the role of Soviet Ambassador to Syria, which he held until 1968. Not only Barkovsky had a 10-year experience working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he had entered in 1951, but he had long served in Egypt, from 1952 to 1958, as the First Secretary of the USSR Embassy (1-й Секретарь Посольства СССР в Египте), and then as Adviser to the USSR Embassy in the UAR (Советник Посольства СССР в ОАР) from 1959 to 1961. Barkovsky had a deep knowledge of Egypt, the UAR and the regional dynamics. On 18 October 1961, during the 12th Congress of The Communist Party of The Soviet Union, Khrushchev, for the first time, spoke publicly about his Government's decision to open up to collaboration with the Syrian Arab Republic. While praising the USSR's satisfaction with the development of cooperation with countries of the East and the signs of progress these countries were making, the leader stated that "We are ready to develop business cooperation with the Syrian Arab Republic"⁵⁴⁵. After all, Soviet sympathies for the Arabs and the Arab cause were not a mystery, and there were no consistent reasons why Moscow should not have collaborated with the newly established Syrian leadership. At the same time, the Soviet diplomats' efforts to keep a dialogue open with Egypt and even their availability to initiate a more significant one with Israel revealed that Moscow was moving carefully as it found itself in the complicated position to balance *its* interests

⁵⁴⁴ Yosef Govrin, *Israeli-Soviet Relations 1953–1967: From Confrontation to Disruption*, London: Frank Cass, 1998.

⁵⁴⁵ The full quote reads as follows: "The Soviet people are deeply satisfied with the development of our cooperation with the great powers of Asia, namely India and Indonesia. We are pleased with their successes, we understand their difficulties and are ready to expand business cooperation, which helps them to raise the economy and culture. Our relations with other Asian and African countries that have freed themselves from the foreign yoke — Burma — are successfully developing on the same basis. Cambodia, Ceylon, the United Arab Republic, Iraq, Guinea, Ghana, Mali, Morocco, Tunisia, Somalia and others. We are ready to develop business cooperation with the Syrian Arab Republic". From: XXII Съезде Коммунистической Партии Советского Союза. ("XXII Congress of The Communist Party of The Soviet Union"). *Правда*. 18 October 1961. № 292 (15782).

and commitments with *their* interests and fears, for the sake of positioning itself a credible interlocutor – if not a possible mediator – of regional rivalries.

4.1.2. Between Syria's request for protection and Israel's temptation, 1962

On 21 February 1962, the new Syrian Prime Minister Maarouf al-Dawalibi – in office for a short period from December 1961 to March 1962 – requested the Soviet Ambassador Barkovsky to reach him at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Damascus for an urgent discussion. In his detailed recording of the conversation, Barkovsky reported deep Syrian worries about Israel's behaviour and ambitions on the Israeli-Syrian border. In particular, al-Dawalibi wanted to warn the Soviet Government about some "alarming news": Israel was about to begin works to divert the Jordan River, in preparation for pumping water from the Sea of Galilee (*Тивериадское Озеро*, "Lake Tiberias" as most frequently named in Russian) to irrigate the Negev desert area in Southern Israel⁵⁴⁶. The scarcity of water in the region and the fierce competition between Arabs and Israelis to access it became indeed an inflammable issue in the early 1960s. All but one of the principal tributaries of the River rose in the Arab territories, especially the Hasbani in Lebanon and the Banias in Syria, the two tributaries recognised as the River's sources: of the 1,880 m. cubic metres of water flowing in the River every year, an estimated 77% originated in Arab lands, whereas the remaining 23% originated from Israeli sources⁵⁴⁷. Several plans were made from both sides on how to manage the waters, but no proposal was accepted unanimously. Israel had made its plans to use waters in the Jordan River valley clear already a decade before, in the early 1950s, but her plans to begin drawing water from the River were now becoming more concrete. The new canals would have carried the waters to irrigate the deserted region of the Negev, in Southern Israel, and connected them with pumping plants located under the mountain North of the Lake in the Israeli territory. The Syrian intelligence and aerial photography had provided evidence that the construction was already advanced, and two canals were already completed. Al-Dawalibi diligently showed Barkovsky the maps of the sites where the Israeli were allegedly planning to implement the Jordan river's diversion and several aerial photographs showing evidence of the construction of such works. In this way, Israel would be able to extract large amounts of fresh water from the Tiberias Lake and the Jordan River in its course to the Dead Sea, risking lead to rapid salinization of the Lake and threatening the desertification of the Jordanian lands around the

⁵⁴⁶ № 159. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Сирии А.А. Борковского с Председателем Совета Министров САР Мааруфом Давалиби ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Syria A.A. Barkovsky with the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the SAR Maarouf Dawalibi"). 21 Февраля 1962 г. Б69. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

⁵⁴⁷ G. H. Jansen. "The Problem of the Jordan Waters". *The World Today*, February 1964, 20:2, pp. 60-68. Published by: Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

River. To ensure the operation of pumping stations, Israel needed electricity, and for this reason, it was planning to begin works in the demilitarised zone north of Lake Tiberias to divert water flowing in this area. Geographical conditions made it easy to do this since the altitude of the terrain decreases in the direction of Lake Tiberias. Therefore, Israel intended to build a hydroelectric power station on the newly laid riverbed, which would give current to pumping turbines in the mountain area north of the Lake.

The Syrian leadership felt increasingly threatened. As soon as the project was completed, the Syrians feared Israel would have been able to settle several million people in the area of Negev, who will constitute a new force threatening the whole of the Arab world. Furthermore, this appeared not to be a matter of mere border security, but it also pertained to regional and domestic politics. Indeed, as al-Dawalibi confessed to Barkovsky, Nasser was increasingly accusing the Syrian “separatists” of being “agents of the imperialists” as they were turning a blind eye to Israel’s actions, and thus to some extent of betraying the Arab cause⁵⁴⁸. For the Syrians, turning to the Soviet Union was a natural move, for Moscow had already shown to stand with them on this issue. When Israel first launched the project in 1953, the Syrian government had submitted a complaint to the UN Truce Supervision Organization, who deliberated that Israel had to stop the work – which they had already begun – and could not continue without Syria’s consent⁵⁴⁹. Faced with Israel’s refusal to comply with that decision, Syria had then brought the issue to the UNSC. Al-Dawalibi recalled Barkovsky with words of gratitude that, on that occasion, the Soviet Union had provided significant support to the Arabs by vetoing the “project of imperialist states”, which, eventually, was suspended⁵⁵⁰. However, although Israel had relented in part, also allowing four UN observer posts to be set up in its territory, it continued to send her patrol boats close to the North-Eastern border, as the Arabs’ continued use of the Lake’s waters despite its opposition. As the UN observer facilities were not adequate in those areas, incidents continued to occur, and both sides kept accusing each other of illegal firing across the demarcation lines and illegal fishing in the contested waters. Nevertheless, despite these irritants, the security situation around Lake Tiberias had remained relatively under control until 1962⁵⁵¹.

Given the urgency to act, in February 1962, the Syrian Ministry of Affairs thus prepared a communication to address the UN Security Council members regarding Israel’s plans. Before

⁵⁴⁸ N° 159. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Сирии А.А. Борковского с Председателем Совета Министров САР Мааруфом Давалиби. 21 Февраля 1962 г.

⁵⁴⁹ UNSC. Items in Peace keeping operations – Middle East – Syria/Israel – Security Council documents. 02/03/1962. Archival item. S-0861-0044-06-00001: Peace-Keeping Operations Files of the Secretary-General: U Thant: Middle East.

⁵⁵⁰ N° 159. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Сирии А.А. Борковского с Председателем Совета Министров САР Мааруфом Давалиби. 21 Февраля 1962 г.

⁵⁵¹ Fred J. Khouri. Friction and Conflict on the Israeli-Syrian Front. *Middle East Journal*, Winter-Spring, 1963, Vol. 17, No. 1/2, pp. 14-34.

submitting the communication, the Syrian government informally shared its content with the Soviets. In that conversation, al-Dawalibi handed over the note's text to Barkovsky, saying that – a few moments earlier – he had just shared the same note with the US and British ambassadors, inquiring them about the position of their respecting governments about the hostilities between Syria and Israel. He asked Barkovsky to inform Moscow about the note's text, noting that he would like to receive the Soviet “advice on how best to act in the current situation”⁵⁵². Probably irritated by the fact of having been consulted only after his Western counterparts, or simply trying to take time before giving any answer, Barkovsky replied:

Having accepted the note, I promised to communicate its text and statement to the Soviet Government's Prime Minister. I said that, in my opinion, given the close ties they have with Israel, the Western powers can put significant pressure on it if they really wish for peace in the Middle East. I suggested that Israel's actions may have been taken on the advice of Western powers, who, after the failure of the rebellion in Lebanon, are looking for new ways to aggravate the situation in the Middle East, pursuing certain political and other goals. Al-Dawalibi said that he does not exclude such a possibility⁵⁵³.

The Soviet Ambassador registered this as an important, very long conversation of approximately one hour and a half. When discharging his guest, as a confirmation of the urgency of the Syrian request for Soviet support, al-Dawalibi complained that correspondence from Moscow arrived slowly, asking if anything could be done to improve and speed up communications.

Al-Dawalibi did not last long in office, as he was discharged in March 1962 and replaced by Bashir al-Azma (in office from April to September 1962), who carried on the Syrian grievances on the issue. Indeed, the situation further escalated when, in the night between 16 and 17 March (1962), Israeli forces launched a large-scale aerial attack from Ein Gev on the Eastern shore of the Lake, against Syrian posts in the village of Nuqeib and al-Kursi, as a reprisal for repeated attacks of Syrian soldiers against Israeli fishermen in the Lake Tiberias⁵⁵⁴. Accordingly, on 8 April 1962, the Syrian Government submitted a complaint to the UNSC. The day after (9 April 1962), the Council released Resolution 171, through which it declared that the Israeli attack constituted a “flagrant violation” of

⁵⁵² № 159. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Сирии А.А. Борковского с Председателем Совета Министров САР Мааруфом Давалиби. 21 Февраля 1962 г.

⁵⁵³ № 159. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Сирии А.А. Борковского с Председателем Совета Министров САР Мааруфом Давалиби. 21 Февраля 1962 г.

⁵⁵⁴ Fred Khouri found that the actual numbers of casualties have never been clarified as neither part engaged in a competent, neutral report. Israel claimed that 30 Syrians had been killed, Syrians claimed that 200 Israelis were killed, and the Israeli military had suffered a major rebuff. From: Fred J. Khouri. 1963.

Charter of the United Nations and of the General Armistice Agreement between Israel and Syria, which supervised on the military activities in the Lake Tiberias area and the demilitarised zone, and called upon Israel scrupulously to refrain from such action in the future⁵⁵⁵. The resolution also condemned Israel's plans regarding the Lake, claiming that, by diverting the Jordan river's – an international river – waters, to the Negev, Israel was assuming new rights over the river without the consent of interested parties, thus violating the international law principles regarding the sharing of rights over international waters⁵⁵⁶.

The Soviets were monitoring these events closely and with preoccupation. At that time, Mikhail Fyodorovich Bodrov (*Михаил Фёдорович Бодров*) was serving as the Soviet Ambassador to Tel Aviv (1958-1964). Bodrov was a member of the CPSU, a graduate from the Moscow Financial Institute and had begun his diplomatic career in 1946. Before being appointed to Israel, he had long served as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Soviet Union to Bulgaria (1948-1954). He would have soon become one of the main architects of the Soviet Union's rapprochement with Israel⁵⁵⁷. At the time of the Syrian-Israeli escalation of 1962, in a letter to Moscow's Foreign Ministry, Bodrov reported that the Syrian complaint to the UNSC had caused great concern in Israel's ruling circles, primarily due to the fact that the US, Britain, France, and UN observers, were upset with the Israeli plans and the March attack. The UN observers, in particular, believed that the Israeli operations were "inappropriate" and that borders disputes could well have been resolved peacefully, following the guidelines of the UN peacekeeping operators provided in the months following the incident, which, instead, had not been listened to⁵⁵⁸. In June (1962), Bodrov had a long conversation with the Chief of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in Palestine, General Carl Von Horn, who was one of the persons in charge of peace-keeping operations in the area, a task to which he seemed to be passionately committed to. Von Horn had advanced concrete proposals on how to sort out the situation, which included: the establishment of an observation post of the UN headquarters on Lake Tiberias and allow the UN cartridge boat to move around the lake; allowing the UN aircraft

⁵⁵⁵ UNSC. Items in Peace keeping operations – Middle East – Syria/Israel – Security Council documents. 02/03/1962. Archival item. S-0861-0044-06-00001: Peace-Keeping Operations Files of the Secretary-General: U Thant: Middle East.

⁵⁵⁶ Which, however, were not considered as 'international' waters by the Syrian Government, which kept refusing to acknowledge Israel as a party in all matters involving the Jordan river.

⁵⁵⁷ Indeed, the Soviet Foreign Ministry's archive documents report increasingly frequent visits of Bodrov with Israeli officials, held both in Moscow and Tel Aviv. Despite acting with caution and prudence given the importance of preserving good relations with the Syrians (and the Arabs), Bodrov became one of the protagonist figures around the Soviet-Israeli rapprochement. Among his major achievement was the so-called "Orange Deal" (*Апельсиновая Сделка*), officially known as "Agreement No. 593 on the sale of Soviet state property to Israel", concluded on 17 October 1964 and signed by Foreign Minister Golda Meir and the Finance Minister Pinchas Sapir. The agreement was so named because Israel agreed to pay the Soviets with oranges – which it produced in large quantities – rather than money.

⁵⁵⁸ № 161. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Израиле М.Ф. Бодрова в МИД СССР ("Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Israel M.F. Bodrov to the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs"). 26 Марта 1962 г. Б69. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

to land at the Mahanaim airfield in order to make Shaba's communication with the office in Damascus more operational; and establishing additional UN posts on the Lake Tiberias Eastern shore⁵⁵⁹. However, Von Horn complained to Bodrov that the Israeli Government had refused to accept such proposals; the local Israeli press had even been publishing articles attacking Von Horn, and the UN headquarters had even received anonymous letters threatening him personally. As Bodrov could understand, not only the Israelis considered the proposal unsatisfactory, but Israeli political circles were secretly seething with anger at the idea that the Syrian complaint was putting England, France and the US in a difficult position, forcing them to take either an Israeli or an Arab position. The local Israeli press had leaked information that France would have soon presented a proposal to the UNSC to prevent a broad discussion of this issue, rather than to hush it up and bring Western countries out of difficulties. Israel's official aim, instead, was to keep speaking out against Syria and affirm its position of strength: "peace with the Arabs", Golda Meir declared in a press conference on 24 March (1962), a few days after the incident, "will only be achieved if Israel is strong"⁵⁶⁰.

Indeed, Israel's signs of strengthening its position internationally had already commenced. In December 1961, near the end of his office (1959-1961), the Israeli Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Arie Harel, had an important conversation with the Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko. The Ambassador was reporting on his Government's disappointment with the underdeveloped status of Soviet-Israel ties, and fed on the claim that the Soviet trade and cultural organisations were "unwelcome" with Israel⁵⁶¹. Israel, he claimed, had been pointing out her desire to develop trade and cultural ties with the Soviet Union at all meetings and conversations with Soviet officials. Israelis had been expressing the intention to buy oil from the Soviets and, in turn, sell them citrus fruits, fertilisers, chemicals and other goods. Israel had also been looking forward to launching cultural partnerships, perhaps by opening Soviet exhibitions in Israel and vice-versa, to design exchange programmes in the field of performative arts, literature and science. The fact that the Soviet Union was not willing to accept Israel's offer to boost bilateral relations was perceived by Israel as a clear sign of

⁵⁵⁹ № 163. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Израиле М.Ф. Бодрова с начальником штаба ООН по наблюдению за соблюдением условий перемирия в Палестине генералом Фон Горном ("A recording of a conversation between the USSR Ambassador to Israel M. F. Bodrov and the Chief of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in Palestine, General Von Horn"). 14 Июня 1962 г. Б69. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

⁵⁶⁰ № 161. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Израиле М.Ф. Бодрова в МИД СССР ("Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Israel M.F. Bodrov to the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs"). 6 Марта 1962 г.

⁵⁶¹ № 157. Б69. Докладная записка заведующего отделом стран Ближнего Востока МИД СССР Е.Д. Киселева Заместителю Министра Иностранных Дел СССР Я.А. Малику ("Memo by the Head of the Middle East Department of the USSR MFA E.D. Kiselev to the USSR Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs YA.A. Malik"). 13 Декабря 1961 г. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

“discrimination” based on political – if not ideological – motives⁵⁶². In July of 1962, the Israeli leadership returned to knock on the Kremlin’s door with more insistence. The newly appointed Israeli Ambassador in Moscow Yosef Tekoah (1962-1965) asked to be received by Gromyko. Presumably, Tekoah was well aware of increasing dialogue between the Soviets and the Syrians and, following up on Gromyko’s warm words of welcome and congratulation to his new assignment, he elaborated a series of wishful proposals to strengthen Soviet-Israeli ties. To the Ambassador’s proposals, however, Gromyko gave a firm answer:

I said that I had already talked to his predecessor about this topic and that I could tell him the same thing that I told the previous Israeli Ambassador in Moscow, which is the following: our two countries have neither anything to share nor anything to fight for. Our bilateral relations may not be called cordial, but, at least, they are normal diplomatic relations. I stated already that we could not agree with all aspects of Israel’s foreign policy and regret the Jewish-Arab strife. In Israel, they talk about the ‘Arab problem’; in the Arab countries, they talk about the ‘Jewish problem’. Regardless how you call it, the fact remains that Israel has not always behaved as it should have behaved. We [the Soviet Union] believe that Israel’s participation in the Anglo-French adventure against Egypt was a mistake. It is difficult to hope for a victory when one participates in such adventures: you can only lose, lose friends⁵⁶³.

Although Gromyko’s response did not seem to leave much hope, Tekoah did not let it go and stressed that his duty as Ambassador was to bring Israeli-Soviet relations to another level, from merely “normal diplomatic relations” to friendly, warm ones. He seemed to capture Gromyko’s attention when he, skilfully, shifted the focus on the conversation on trade. Until a few years earlier, the Soviet

⁵⁶² On that occasion, according to Kiselyev’s report, who was present at the conversation, Gromyko had pointed out that such an accusation about Soviet discrimination in trade with Israel was erroneous. Business considerations were the only drivers of the Soviet Government trade relations with other countries; the Soviet Union had never pursued a policy of discrimination against any country. If trade with Israel was not developed, Gromyko claimed, it was simply because Soviet trade organisations were not interested in Israeli goods. “Dozens of other countries”, he claimed, “would like to have cultural ties with the Soviet Union, but they have not yet been established”. There were no political motives behind the absence of developed internal ties with Israel, nor the expression of any specific Soviet policy. However, Gromyko’s efforts to justify the absence of proper commercial ties between the Soviet Union and Israel suggests a need to balance relations with Tel Aviv. This was indeed an element of true novelty in the Soviet Union’s broader Middle East policy and one that would have characterised Soviet Syria policy. From: № 157. Б69. Докладная записка заведующего отделом стран Ближнего Востока МИД СССР Е.Д. Киселева Заместителю Министра Иностранных Дел СССР Я.А. Малику. 13 Декабря 1961 г.

⁵⁶³ № 165. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел Громыко с послом Израиля в СССР Текоа (“Recording of a conversation between Foreign Minister Gromyko and the Israeli Ambassador to the USSR Tekoa”). 6 Июля 1962 г. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

Union moderately traded with Israel, supplying it mainly with oil and receiving citrus fruits in return. In 1956, however, with the beginning of the Anglo-Franco-Israeli aggression against Egypt, Soviet countries had stopped their oil supplies to Israel. Since then, economic relations have been very limited to a few exchanges in the field of literature, arts and tourism⁵⁶⁴. The lack of comprehensive trade with the Soviet Union, including Israel's arms request to the Soviets in 1958 which was not met⁵⁶⁵, was a reason of deep regret for the Israelis, especially as the Soviet choice not to trade with Israel was motivated by political reasons:

There was a time when the Soviet-Israeli trade was good. You sold us citrus fruits – we sold you oil. Back then, our mutual trade flourished regardless of political and ideological differences. After all, the Soviet Union now supports trade with such countries – we will not name them specifically – which have more irreconcilable differences politically than you have with us. Trade, no matter with whom it is conducted, brings not only economic benefits, but also contributes to the growth of mutual understanding and friendly feelings between peoples⁵⁶⁶.

Gromyko appeared to agree that Soviet and Israeli trade organisations had to conclude trade deals when mutually beneficial and not be guided by ideological differences. Although no concrete steps followed that conversation, a mutual consensus was reached that efforts would have to be made to expand trade relations between the Soviet Union and Israel⁵⁶⁷. Gromyko concluded that, probably, not all opportunities had been exploited to develop Soviet-Israeli relations and suggested the Israeli Ambassador formulate a new proposal regarding the development of Soviet-Israeli relations, taking advantage of his new appointment in the Soviet capital. Tekoa welcomed such a proposal with enthusiasm and promised to immediately get to work to formulate concrete proposals for Soviet-Israeli cooperation, noting that that conversation was “only a preliminary one”⁵⁶⁸. He, therefore, expressed the intention to talk with members of the Soviet Government, with the leadership of the

⁵⁶⁴ N° 170. Б69. Записка посла Ссэр в израиле М.Ф. Бодрова заместителю министра иностранных дел СССР С.Г. Лапину (“A note by the USSR Ambassador to Israel M.F. Bodrov to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR S.G. Lapin”). 4 марта 1963 года. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

⁵⁶⁵ Yosef Govrin, *Israeli-Soviet Relations 1953–1967: From Confrontation to Disruption*. London: Frank Cass, 1998. (p. 51-52)

⁵⁶⁶ N° 165. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел Громыко с послом Израйля в СССР Текоа. 6 Июля 1962 г.

⁵⁶⁷ Indeed, fields other than trade were mentioned, including the fields of science and culture. The Israeli official mentioned a recent report of the UN ranking Israel right after England and Sweden for the development of sciences, a development of which the Soviet Union could benefit as well.

⁵⁶⁸ N° 165. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел Громыко с послом Израйля в СССР Текоа. 6 Июля 1962 г.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Trade on these issues, and to establish small trade delegations consisting of 2–3 people to explore specific opportunities for increasing Soviet-Israeli trade.

Gromyko seemed to be perfectly aware that that was only the first step from Israel, noting in his record of the conversation that “a large extent patience and optimism” drove the Israeli officials in their courting of the Soviet Union. At the same time, improving trade relations with Israel could have proved beneficial for the Soviet Union countries. However, his opening to the Israeli Ambassador in no way implied that the Soviet Union was ‘taking the Israeli side’ in the Syrian-Israeli dispute, nor that the Soviet Union felt constrained by having to decide which side to take. Instead, it proved that Israel’s proposals increasingly tempted the Soviet leadership and suddenly had to add a new piece to the puzzle of its relations with Syria. Indeed, Israel’s proposals were registered by the Soviets as a new development to be monitored carefully. At that stage, however, the Soviet leadership did not do much to improve cooperation with Israel, as the situation was still too volatile and the risk of compromising relations with the Syrians, and the Arabs, was too high⁵⁶⁹. Rather, the Soviets cautiously observed and studied while careful not to close any doors.

4.1.3. Soviet-Israeli friendship: A shadow on Soviet-Syrian partnership?

In the Summer of 1963, incidents at the Syrian-Israeli border nearby Lake Tiberias became more frequent. Over the night between 19 and 20 August, a dozen Syrian soldiers crossed the Syrian-Israeli border. They penetrated about 1 kilometre into the Israeli territory in the Korazim area, near the village of Almagor, attacking Israeli settlements in Galilee and shooting dead two Israeli peasants. The “Almagor incident”, as it was called, was considered by Israel as a severe violation of the General Armistice Agreement that was signed in July 1949 and regulated the security situation in the broader region of Palestine⁵⁷⁰. Furthermore, the Israeli complained, the Almagor incident came a few days after the Syrians had concentrated a large number of their troops at the border, thus showing their war intents. The Syrians defended themselves by claiming that such an escalation had arisen following a new wave of aggression perpetrated by the Israeli authorities”, who had been concentrating troops at

⁵⁶⁹ It was only months after the long conversation that Gromyko had with Tekoa, in March 1963, that the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs included in its work plan the study of the possible activation of economic and cultural ties between the Soviet Union and Israel. From: № 170. Б69. Записка посла СССР в Израиле Бордова заместителю министру иностранных дел СССР Лапину (“Note by the USSR Ambassador to Israel Bodrov to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Lapin”). 4 Марта 1963 г. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

⁵⁷⁰ Israel and Syria. No. 657. General Armistice Agreement (with annexes and accompanying letters). Signed at Hill 232, near Mahanayim, on 20 July 1949. Retrieved from: <https://peacemaker.un.org/israel-syria-general-armistice49>

the border too⁵⁷¹. The day following the incident, on 20 August, the Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol decided to ask for an urgent meeting of the UNSC to discuss the Syrian attack⁵⁷². Israeli authorities also submitted a list of 98 incidents, mostly gunfire, alleged to have been perpetrated by the Syrians since December 1962⁵⁷³.

In this context, authorities in Moscow faced an unprecedented request. On 21 August, one day after the Almagor incident, the Israeli Chargé d'Affaires, A. Agmon, urgently asked to be received by the Head of the Middle East Department at the Soviet Foreign Ministry Alexey Dmitriyevich Shchiborin (*Алексей Дмитриевич Щиборин*, 1962-1968). The Israeli official wanted to let Shchiborin know that his Government had appealed to the UNSC with the request to urgently convene a meeting to condemn the actions of the Syrians. If the international community had not condemned Syria's actions, Israel would have had no other choice but to defend its citizens and territory by force of arms. Most importantly, on behalf of his Foreign Ministry, Agmon wanted to ask for the Soviet Union's support in the Council when this issue will be discussed. Shchiborin did not let the Israeli catch him by surprise and, while acknowledging that the frequent military conflicts taking place on the borders between Israel and its Arab neighbours concerned all, he recalled that Israelis often carried out these incidents⁵⁷⁴. He even recalled that the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in Palestine had repeatedly condemned Israel's actions and that Israel had carried on its illegal activities irrespectively of international law and UN regulations. Probably irritated by Shchiborin's words, the Israeli official reiterated that his country would feel obliged to legitimately use force as a defensive measure if it will not be supported diplomatically. The conversation ended with Shchiborin reiterating that conflicts have to be resolved through peaceful means, but with no promises to his Israeli interlocutor.

The same day (21 August 1963), in Tel Aviv, the Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir invited the Soviet Ambassador Bodrov to her office (meetings with other UNSC US, UK, and France followed). After greetings, she conveyed that the incident near Almagor was only the last one of a long series of brutal attacks from the Syrian side. The Syrian border troops, she claimed, had been

⁵⁷¹ US Participation in the UN. Report by the President to the Congress for the year 1963. Department of State Publication 7675. International Organization and Conference Series 51. Released August 1964.

⁵⁷² Israel Minister of Foreign Affairs. 8 Statement to the Knesset by Prime Minister Eshkol. 26 August 1963. Volumes 1-2: 1947-1974. X. THE SECOND DECADE. Retrieved from: <https://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/mfadocuments/yearbook1/pages/8%20statement%20to%20the%20knesset%20by%20prime%20minister%20eshko.aspx>.

⁵⁷³ US Participation in the UN. Report by the President to the Congress for the year 1963. Department of State Publication 7675. International Organization and Conference Series 51. Released August 1964.

⁵⁷⁴ № 172. Б69. Запись беседы заведующего отделом стран ближнего востока МИД СССР А.Д. Щиборина с временными поверенными в делах Израиля в СССР А. Агмоном ("Recording of a conversation between the Head of the Middle East Department of the USSR MFA A.D. Shchiborin and the Charge d'affaires of Israel in the USSR A. Agmon"). 21 августа 1963 г. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

shooting almost every day against Israeli farmers, fishermen and civilians working around the Lake Tiberias area. Meir reported the episode of two Israeli girls had allegedly been captured and detained in an unknown place, and the Syrians did not allow either the Israelis or the UN military representatives to see them. The Israeli Government had appealed to the UN Secretary General U Thant to help the Israeli girls return home, but no results had yet been reached. Or again, a few days earlier, a group of Syrian soldiers had invaded the Israeli territory and killed two Israeli tractor drivers on Israeli territory. The day before, Syrian MIG-17 aircraft had invaded the Israeli airspace⁵⁷⁵. Meir reminded Bodrov that, until that moment, Israel had refrained from any responsive action in the name of preserving peace with all its neighbours but, as Israeli complaints to the UN Truce Supervision Organization for Palestine had not given results, the Israeli Government was forced to appeal to the UNSC. If the Security Council had not taken adequate measures against Syria and limited itself to call equally on all parties to de-escalate tensions, then the Israeli Government would have taken all necessary measures to protect its citizens, “like any other government that would find itself in a similar situation would certainly do”⁵⁷⁶. As her requests were not followed up, on 28 August, she again invited the UNSC member States’ Ambassadors and reiterated her request and expressed concern that it was not being discussed. To Bodrov, she again asked that the Soviet Union address the Security Council “in such a way so that it would be clear that Syria was guilty of having committed an act of aggression against Israel”, claiming this was necessary for Israel, for the sake of truth and for the cause of peace in the Middle East⁵⁷⁷.

However, the Soviets ignored the Israeli authorities’ requests. Supporting Israel would not have been possible in the wake of Soviet-Arab growing cooperation. At the same time, evidence shows that neither the Soviets chose to ‘stand with Syria’ on this issue without hesitation. In a correspondence to Gromyko marked as “secret”, Bodrov takes a ‘third way’, as he tries to minimise the range of the events:

In our opinion, the incident on the Syrian-Israeli border on the night between 19-20 August was not such to require a mandatory intervention of the Security Council. If

⁵⁷⁵ № 173. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Израиле Бордова с министром иностранных дел Израиля Меир (“Recording of a conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Israel Bodrov and Israeli Foreign Minister Meir”). 21 Августа 1963 г. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

⁵⁷⁶ № 173. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Израиле Бордова с министром иностранных дел Израиля Меир (“Recording of a conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Israel Bodrov and Israeli Foreign Minister Meir”). 21 августа 1963 г.

⁵⁷⁷ № 177. Б69. Записка посла в Израиле Бордова министру иностранных дел СССР Громыко (“A note by the Ambassador to Israel Bodrov to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Gromyko”). 5 Октября 1963 г. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

desired sincerely, the situation could undoubtedly be solved by other means, namely, with the help of the UN observers. In this regard, we would like to draw attention to the fact that, for a short time, on the Israeli-Jordanian border near the Jerusalem area, two Israeli citizens were also killed due to border incidents. However, at that time, the Israeli Government had not considered it necessary to appeal to the Security Council with a complaint against Jordan, and an armistice committee only considered the issue. All this gives reason to believe that when addressing the Security Council, the Israeli Government was not moved by the effective seriousness of the situation (as it claimed) that had developed on the Syrian-Israeli border but was moved by political considerations. The Israeli Government is trying to take revenge and somehow rehabilitate itself in the eyes of the world community in connection with the Security Council's decision on 9 April last year, when the Council found Israel guilty of committing aggression against Syria⁵⁷⁸.

Even more than the Israeli political elites, Bodrov believed, the Zionist propaganda was giving excessively ample resonance to the Almagor and other incidents, by referring to them as acts of aggression against Israel. By doing so, the press "had artificially been inflaming a military hysteria, shouting about the seriousness of the situation that *allegedly* arose near the northern borders of the country"⁵⁷⁹.

Bodrov's considerations reveal the difficult position he was finding himself in. Despite his understanding of Syria's border crisis was clear, and although he – alongside the Soviet Union's authorities – did not hesitate to take Syria's side, ignoring Israel's calls was becoming increasingly difficult. Archive evidence proves that, throughout 1963, Soviet ties with Israel became more and more intense: conversations were held on a frequent basis, and most of the time – as per Soviet official reports at least – they were requested by the Israeli highest-level authorities, Meir and Eshkol. In an anti-Syria logic, Israel was playing the card of cooperation to attract the Soviets on its side. In September 1963, the Prime Minister Eshkol invited Bodrov to his Jerusalem office and the two had a "significant conversation", as Bodrov reported to Moscow. Officially, Eshkol had invited the Soviet Ambassador to exchange views with him on some issues; instead, he seemed to want to convince him that Moscow had more to gain from collaboration with Tel Aviv than it had with Damascus. Besides the massive Russian diaspora in Israel, over 50% of the Israeli factories and other enterprises belonged wholly or partly to the State and the trade unions (*Histadrut*); and the party in power was a

⁵⁷⁸ № 177. Б69. Записка посла в Израиле Бордова министру иностранных дел СССР Громыко ("A note by the Ambassador to Israel Bodrov to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Gromyko"). 5 Октября 1963 г.

⁵⁷⁹ № 177. Б69. Записка посла в Израиле Бордова министру иностранных дел СССР Громыко ("A note by the Ambassador to Israel Bodrov to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Gromyko"). 5 Октября 1963 г.

party of the workers, the Workers' Party of the Land of Israel (*Mifleget Poalei Eretz Yisrael, MAPAI*). "In essence and spirit", Eshkol told Bodrov, "Israel was closer to the Soviet Union than Egypt, Syria, Iraq or any other Arab state"⁵⁸⁰. Although the Israeli authorities recognised the essential divergence with the Soviet Union on the issue of its support to the Arabs, they did want to establish better relations with Moscow. Especially, Eshkol was demanding the Soviet authorities to resume trade relations, which, as mentioned, had been suspended in 1956 due to Israel's involvement in the Suez dispute.

The policy of the Soviet Union towards the Arab countries of the Middle East is understandable to Israel. However, according to Israel, Soviet relations with Arab countries will not suffer if the Soviet Union trades with Israel. For example, America helps Israel; it has even promised to supply Israel with missiles, but, at the same time, the US has good relations with Egypt and other Arab countries, in particular, Nasser does not refuse American aid: he welcomes aid from the USSR and the US alike. Israel would also like to trade and receive assistance from the US and the USSR alike. If the Soviet Union for some reason cannot restore normal trade relations, then the Israeli Government asks the Soviet Government to tell her what she should do so that there are no obstacles from the USSR to start normal trade with Israel⁵⁸¹.

It seems reasonable to believe that the Israeli interest in the Soviet Union caught Soviet officials by surprise. Reports of the conversations with Meir and Eshkol are filled with scrupulous details about their requests and analyses of the Soviet diplomats about Soviet-Israeli relations and their development, and an increased understanding of Israel's needs to defend herself. Not once the Soviet officials on the ground hazarded premature answers, but they always ended up with the typical formula "I took note of your requests, and will promptly report to Moscow". The Soviets' general caution line was understandable given their sustained cooperation with Arab countries in the Levantine region. Despite mixed fortunes and existing issues, the early 1960s were the Soviet Union's golden age in the region, which did not worth the risk of being compromised by a significant

⁵⁸⁰ № 175. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Израиле Бодрова с премьер-министром Израиля Эшколом ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Israel Bodrov with the Prime Minister of Israel Eshkol"). 25 Сентября 1963 г.

⁵⁸¹ In that conversation, Prime Minister Eshkol also stressed that, if necessary, he could have prevented Israeli newspapers to write "tall tales" about the Soviet Union. Despite "the existence of freedom the press" in Israel, he clarified, he could have done a lot to stop these rumours, or, at least, to keep them at their minimum. From: № 175. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Израиле Бодрова с премьер-министром Израиля Эшколом ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Israel Bodrov with the Prime Minister of Israel Eshkol"). 25 Сентября 1963 г.

improvement of relations with Israel. Signs of an initial Soviet opening to Israel only appeared in late 1963. Early in October, Minister Meir asked Gromyko for another meeting as they were both finding themselves in New York. Congratulating Gromyko for the signature in Moscow of the Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty with the US and UK, she expressed hope that such an improvement of the international situation will positively impact the situation in the Middle East, where the threat of war persisted. She complained that Arab countries kept rejecting Israel's proposals for negotiations and accumulated weapons, buying them massively from the Soviet Union. As Israel was ready to "disarm in the Middle East" under an international scheme of control of the parties involved or to conclude a non-aggression pact, Meir asked Gromyko to mediate in this process. Indeed, Meir's request reveals that the Soviets had reached quite an extent of credibility in the region and were considered more than a valuable partner: they were considered the best placed than any other foreign country to influence the Arabs to resolve the dispute with Israel peacefully. Gromyko rejected Meir's request, saying that he preferred to refrain from interfering in specific Syrian-Israeli dispute issues. Instead, he shifted the focus on the conversation on the Soviet-Israeli relation, and welcomed the possibility of a significant improvement in this regard:

We cannot ignore the general unfriendly and sometimes hostile mood in Israel towards the Soviet Union, which is also manifested in the speeches of the Israeli press, which, apparently, reflects the opinion of the Israeli leadership. In Israel, they do not like the Soviet Union because our state is socialist, but this is not a convincing reason for a bad attitude towards us. All countries should have peaceful and good relations with each other, regardless of the existing system in them⁵⁸².

Although Gromyko – and other Soviet officials – remained quite suspicious about boosting relations with Israel, especially as they had found "anecdotal evidence" that the Israeli aggressive plans at the Syrian border were sponsored by the Americans⁵⁸³, that moment seemed to mark a stark change in Soviet policy for the region.

⁵⁸² № 177. Б69. Записка посла в Израиле Бордова министру иностранных дел СССР Громыко ("A note by the Ambassador to Israel Bodrov to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Gromyko"). 5 Октября 1963 г.

⁵⁸³ According to the Soviet agents working in Israel, the Americans had offered Israel to cover costs in the field of nuclear research and the construction of relevant facilities in Israel, and the Israelis had already accepted such a proposal. An American delegation of experts in nuclear research was expected to arrive in Israel by the end of the year (1963). It was no coincidence, the Soviets believed, that Israeli Foreign Minister Meir had stated that "Israel has no greater friend than the people and the Government of the United States". Furthermore, according to unofficial information available to the Soviet Embassy, the Israeli initiative to improve relations with the Soviet Union was being carried out with the US approval. From: № 177. Записка посла в Израиле Бордова министру иностранных дел СССР Громыко ("A note by the Ambassador to Israel Bodrov to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Gromyko"). 5 Октября 1963 г.

The early 1960s, therefore, witnessed a sort of paradox of Soviet Syria policy. While Moscow had seen the establishment of a new independent Syria after the fall of the UAR as a new piece in the puzzle of its defence of the Arab cause at the regional level – as well as a new window of political and commercial opportunities to be developed at the bilateral level – increased attention on Syria led to increased dialogue with Israel. Despite Moscow always formally took the side of the Syrians, the repeated incidents at the border with Israel, ironically, represented the excuse to boost Soviet-Israeli relations, which, if they did not turn into a proper ‘friendship’ any soon, they did improve steadily and remarkably. At the same time, neither the Soviet-Israeli relationship represented an obstacle to the Soviet-Syria partnership, which, in fact, would have developed greatly in the upcoming years, giving way more tangible results on Syrian domestic level than the regional one.

4.2. Political relations: The Soviets and the Baath

4.2.1. The 8 March 1963 coup: First Soviet reactions to Syria’s Baathism

The history of Soviet-Syrian political relations is indissolubly tied to the history of the Baath Party. The Syrian branch of the Arab Socialist Baath Party (Hizb al-Baath al-Arabi al-Ishtiraki), commonly known as Baath Party, the Party of Arab Renaissance (Baath), was founded and developed over the 1940s under the guidance of Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar⁵⁸⁴. With its constituency in the middle-class and the petit-bourgeois, the Syrian Baath’s ideology was based on a “blend of nationalist pan-Arab radicalism with a moderate social programme”, made of nationalisations and agrarian reforms without infringing individual property rights, and with a neutralist policy towards the global struggle between the Eastern and Western camps⁵⁸⁵. To emphasise the aspiration for unity, since its inception, the Party was organised not on a regional, but on an all-Arab basis. Branches of the Party were set up in various Arab countries (the so called “regional” branches), but the Syrian “regional” branch remained the core one and, from 1954, the “national” (namely, the all-Arab) Party leadership headquartered in Damascus and led all of “regional” ones. At the end of 1957, fearing the rise in influence of the Syrian Communist Party, together with attempted Coups by conservatives and Turkish military pressures at the border, the Party leaders contributed to the decision to enter into the union with Egypt under the UAR. Nevertheless, President Nasser’s condition for the political union was the dissolution of all parties, including the Baath itself, which was indeed suspended. In other Arab countries, however, local branches continued to exist and to recognise Michel Aflaq as the head

⁵⁸⁴ John F. Delvin, *The Ba’ath Party. A History from its Origins to 1966*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976.

⁵⁸⁵ Avraham Ben-Tzur, “The Neo-Ba’ath Party of Syria”. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1968, 3:3, pp. 161–181.

of the all-Arab leadership, and they expressed frustration for the Party's suspension and for the hopes they had placed in Nasser's project (particularly vocal was the Lebanese branch)⁵⁸⁶.

Such a frustration soon mounted in Syria as well. First of all, Nasser removed members of the Baath who had held key positions in the civil administration and the armed forces during the first year of the UAR. At the same time, he was actually carrying out the Baath programme of agrarian reforms and the nationalisation of several important enterprises. The Baathists felt betrayed and 'robbed'. Secondly, and most importantly, the UAR's centralised structure around Cairo and Nasser had given Egypt practical domination over Syria in all fields, causing growing dissatisfaction and anger among all strata of the Syrian nation⁵⁸⁷. Indeed, Soviet archives document quite well an attitude of 'predominance' of Egyptian authorities over Syria. On several occasions, when Soviet officials inquired their Egyptian counterparts about the situation in Syria and how the Soviet Union should have related to Damascus, Egyptian officials used to refer to the latter as there was practically no difference with Cairo⁵⁸⁸. As the Syrians, it seems that the Soviets, too, could not hide a general feeling of resentment against the UAR's treatment of Damascus, which was in line with a broader resentment towards Egypt and Nasser himself⁵⁸⁹.

⁵⁸⁶ Delvin, *The Ba'ath Party*, 1976.

⁵⁸⁷ Ben-Tzur, *The Neo-Ba'ath Party*, 1968.

⁵⁸⁸ Emblematic is a conversation that occurred in December 1960, when Syrian resentment towards Egypt was high, between the Soviet Ambassador to the UAR, V. Ya. Erofeev's and the General Governor of Cairo Salah Dessuki. When Erofeev asked Dessuki about the relation between Moscow and *Damascus*, the Egyptian referred to it as it was practically Egypt, saying: "Concerning the relations between the Soviet Union and the Syrian Arab Republic, Dessouki said that a sharp turn in *Soviet-Egyptian* relations occurred from the moment of Shepilov's arrival in Cairo and subsequent events – the active support of the Soviet Union for *Egypt's* position on the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the trip of Nasser and Amer to Moscow. At the same time, he noted with satisfaction that he had the opportunity to accompany Nasser to Moscow". From: № 146. Запись беседы посла СССР в ОАР В.Я. Ерофеева с Генерал-Губернатором Каира Салахом Дессуки ("Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to the UAR V.Ya. Yerofeyev with the Governor-General of Cairo Salah Dessouki"). 10 Декабря 1960 г. Б69. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

⁵⁸⁹ In January 1961, the Referent of the USSR Embassy to the US B.N. Davydov had a tough conversation with the Press Attaché and the Counsellor of the UAR to the US. To Davydov's question on how a better understanding between the Soviet Union and the UAR could have been achieved, the two Arab officials complained that "the Soviet Union did not fully understand the situation in the Middle East, in particular, it underestimated the role of the UAR and Nasser as the leader of the Arab world". The proof of this, according to the two Arabs, was that, as trust in Nasser's political project was decreasing, the Soviets were increasingly looking for other 'reactionary forces' to bet on all over Egypt, Syria and beyond, especially the communists. The Press Attaché even claimed that an underground radio station, "Voice of Free People", which, according to information available to the Americans, was located on the territory of Bulgaria and is funded by the Soviet Union, was engaging in a fierce anti-Nasser propaganda in Arabic. Davydov defined this as a "fiction of opponents of friendship between our countries" and refused to discuss the issue further, claiming that those tall tales were unknown to him. From: № 147. Б69. Запись беседы референта посольства СССР в США Б.Н. Давыдова с пресс-атташе посольства ОАР в США М. Хабибом и советником посольства Х. Багдади ("Recording of a conversation between the referent of the Embassy of the USSR in the USA B.N. Davydov with the Press Attaché of the Embassy of the UAR in the USA M. Habib and the Counselor of the Embassy H. Baghdadi"). 11 января 1961 г. Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

When the UAR was eventually dismissed in 1961, the Soviet Union opened up to recognise the new Syrian regime and establish formal relations with it, although only after a period of mistrust guided by a 'wait-and-see' approach. As Moscow was preparing itself to boost dialogue with the Damascus Government, the latter was less stable than it looked. For Syria's internal politics, the secession from the UAR entailed the *de facto* dismissal of Nasserism as a political stream. The new Syrian rulers embarked on policies that annulled what Nasser had been pursuing: nationalisations and agrarian reforms. The decision to halt agrarian reforms, in particular, caused a rebellion among peasants and workers that led to a series of attempted coups in the Spring of 1962 and growing agitation between pro-Nasserist and anti-Nasserist factions. Most importantly to the Soviet Syria policy, however, the end of Nasserism brought about new political development: the nationalist Baathist movement began to grow and attract consensus both from the capitalist, entrepreneurial middle class on one side, and from marginalised lower classes of Alawite, Druze and Ismaili minorities. Throughout 1962, the Syrian Baathists began to recruit young peasants from radical peasant movements and mobilise increasingly large sectors of the Syrian population. In May (1962), the fifth all-Arab Baath conference was held in Lebanon. It was decided to advocate an all-embracing Arab federative union under collective leadership. This programme, Ben-Tzur highlights, offered a third way between the Nasserist-unionists and the separatists, thus opening the way to reorganising the Baath Party in Syria. Indeed, four years after its dissolution, the Syrian Baath party was resurrected.

The impulse to the renewal of the Party had come from a group of Baathist officers calling themselves the Military Committee. In 1962, the Committee became the leading force behind the plan to oust President Nazim al-Kudsi's Government. Such plans gathered a varied spectrum of Syrian political and military figures, including opposing factions, such as Baathists and Nasserists (formally pro-re-establishment of a union with Egypt), highest-level members of the Government, and the military intelligence. In particular, the military component was a fundamental driving force. Military officers were angry at the Government for dismissing many of them because of their connexions with the old Baath or their participation in former Syrian coups while preventing others from accessing political posts⁵⁹⁰. A new coup would give them the chance to restore and improve their positions in the army, while the re-establishment of the party would bring them public support⁵⁹¹. The coup took place on 8 March 1963, leading to the ousting of President al-Kudsi, replaced by Lu'ay al-Atassi for

⁵⁹⁰ Considerable impulse to carry out the coup plan was also given by the success of the Iraqi Baath Party coup that ousted the rule of President Qassim (8 February 1963). Although there was no coordination between the Iraqi and the Syrian events, the Syrian coup's two main planners of the coup, Michel Aflaq and his military ally Amin al-Hafiz, may have been encouraged by their Iraqi neighbours.

⁵⁹¹ Ben-Tzur, *The Neo-Ba'ath Party*, 1968.

a short period (March-July 1963), then followed by Amin al-Hafiz (1963-1966). Most importantly, Baathists were restored to their positions, and the Baath Party emerged as the ruling Syrian party.

The Soviet initial reaction to the 1963 coup d'état was unclear. It is interesting that, despite the signs of opening and increased attention that Moscow was giving to Syria, very little information is found in Soviet archives about Moscow's view of the 1963 coup. Only a few comments appeared in the Soviet press, although most of them describe the events in a journalistic way:

Today night in Syria, a coup d'état happened. At 5 am, Moscow time, Damascus Radio broadcasted a message, saying that the Syrian Army had seized power in the country by its hands. After that, a message was addressed to the Command of the National Revolutionary Council explaining the coup's purposes. "The movement of the Army", the statement explained, "aims to turn Syria back to the principles of authentic Arabism". Concerning foreign policy, it is proclaimed loyalty to international accords and agreements; compliance to the UN and the Bandung Conference principles, and a politics of positive neutrality and cooperation with all countries on an equal basis. Later in the statement, it is stressed that the Army fully supports the revolution in Yemen and the new order in Iraq. After that, orders were transmitted to the National Council, prohibiting all movement around the country and inside cities, demonstrations, including hanging banners and portraits. A curfew has also been imposed across the country. All the borders have been closed; ports are closed; the airspace is closed; telephone communications have been interrupted. Nothing is known about the fate of the former leaders of the Syrian Arab Republic, especially the President and the Prime Minister. The Lebanese press believes that all former government members have all been arrested⁵⁹².

The short article's tone was plain, and no significant comment was made to the list of restrictions to civilian freedoms as denouncement by Damascus radio. Instead, the article described the regional reactions to the Syrian coup. A few hours after the regime was overthrown, the Minister of National Orientation of the UAE, Abdel Kader Khatem made a statement emphasising his Government's determination to respond promptly if any act of international aggression was committed against Syria, saying that Cairo would consider any aggression against Syria as aggression to the UAR (Egypt). Similar statements, the articles reported, were made by the Iraqi Government in Baghdad, which, like Cairo, supported the coup. In the upcoming days, a few articles of mere update followed up to mention

⁵⁹² События в Сирии ("Events in Syria"). *Правда*, 9 Марта 1963 г. № 68 (16289) (стр. 1)

the publication of the composition of the new Syrian Government, headed by Salah Bitar⁵⁹³ and the security situation in Damascus. In particular, *Pravda* reported that tanks and armoured vehicles were allegedly continuing to patrol the streets of Damascus. The new authorities were dismissing members of the deposed Government. According to information collected by the agency, the former President of the Syrian Arab Republic, Nazim al-Kudsi, and former Ministers of his Cabinet, as well as the former commander of the Syrian army, General Zahreddin, were under house arrest⁵⁹⁴. However, no comment was made on the Baath's takeover.

Similarly, the entire Spring and Summer were relatively muted periods in the Soviet press on Syria (as well as Iraq). *Pravda* of 29 July contained a TASS report from Cairo of a speech by Nasser at Alexandria in which he attacked the Syrian Baathists in Iraq, but with no significant comment from the Soviet newspaper⁵⁹⁵. Only *Izvestia* of 7 August 1963 published an article entitled "The philosophy and policy of the Baathists", by V. Petrov. The article consisted of an attack on the cult of Michel Aflaq as a prophet of Baathism, loaded with accusations of hypocrisy, collusion with oil monopolists and imperialists, and secret deals with the CENTO bloc. According to Petrov, the Baathists were neither socialists nor nationalists; they were just criminals:

These gentlemen have one God: big capital, and no other god than this. Their anti-communism is born in hatred for the working class and peasantry. Having acquired new rights, the bourgeoisie of Iraq and Syria is striving to leave the workers and peasants in a state of slavery as before. Were they nationalists, they would surely have realised that now was no time for mediaeval wars such as the wars of the Roses in England... it is not the time nor the place because in such a fratricidal war of Arabs against Kurds [referring to events unfolding in Iraq at that time], and Arabs against Arabs there is a *tertium quidens* ready to fill the vacuum: imperialism and colonialism. They rightly fear the wrath of the people, and hence are driven to even greater reliance on the imperialists⁵⁹⁶.

However, except for a few comments, the Soviet press did not release any official statement or comment on the situation. Soviet caution towards expressing rushed views on Syria's Baathism may have been motivated by various reasons. Primarily, they might have well believed that Baathists at

⁵⁹³ События в Сирии ("Events in Syria"). *Правда*, 10 Марта 1963 г. № 69 (16290) (стр. 6)

⁵⁹⁴ Положение в Сирии ("The situation in Syria"). *Правда*, 11 Марта 1963 г. № 70 (16291) (стр. 3)

⁵⁹⁵ EQ 103138/29. 10313/1/8. Continuation of Soviet press campaign against Iraq: *Pravda* article describes torture of Iraqi Communists; Kurdish problem only briefly mentioned. FO 371/170458. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 1, 1963.

⁵⁹⁶ В. Петров. Философия и политика баасистов ("The philosophy and politics of the Baathists"). *Известия*, 7 Августа 1963 г.

that stage did not seem to be able to bring stability to the country. Indeed, between May 1964 and February 1966, frequent government changes occurred in Damascus that reflected the divergence of views and ‘rush for power’ between the centrist and leftist wings of the Baath Party⁵⁹⁷. Even the Baathist components within the army – a relatively small group of officers – faced potential severe opponents and the threat of subversion, internal and external, due to the mixed composition of the new establishment. Secondly, Soviet initial mistrust – or lack of enthusiasm – for the Baathist coup was probably also linked to Moscow’s experience in Iraq.

Furthermore, Moscow did have a relevant Syrian interlocutor already: the Syrian communists. Although the partnership with the Syrian communists did not translate into organised political joint action, there was a consistent general convergence of views between Soviet and Syrian communists. For instance, in July 1964, the Central Committee of the CPSU invited a delegation of the Syrian Communist Party to Moscow, headed by the Party’s Secretary Khalid Bakdash, and including three members of the Politburo. The Head of the International Department of Soviet Central Committee, Boris Nikolayevich Ponomarev (Борис Николаевич Пономарёв), received them for “a cordial and friendly talk on matters of mutual interests”⁵⁹⁸. *Pravda* of 6 July writes that, during the talks, the Syrian leaders noted the supreme importance for strengthening the Arab national-freedom movement of Khrushchev’s recent visit to the UAR. That visit, it was said, represented a new stage in the development of Arab-Soviet relations in general, and confirmed that the Soviet Union was a genuine, disinterested friend and reliable support of the Arab people in the struggle for peace and the strengthening of their independence and the development of their national economy and social progress⁵⁹⁹. There was also a “complete coincidence of views” on questions concerning the situation in the international communist movement. Both sides condemned the disrupting activities of the Chinese leaders and came out for the necessity of calling a conference of fraternal parties to strengthen the unity of the communist international movement⁶⁰⁰. The Syrian Ambassador Barkovsky also kept close relations with local communists. In late August 1965, at a reception at the Romanian Embassy, Barkovsky was approached by a Syrian Communist Party member, Yusuf Faysal. Mr Faysal told Barkovsky that promising opportunities were there for the Communist Party to operate well in Syria.

⁵⁹⁷ While during this period Amin al-Hafiz continued to dominate the public scene, two other Baathist generals, Salah al Jadid and Hafiz al-Assad, began to exercise increasingly decisive power. They would have been the two figures that, on 23 February 1966, joined Nureddin Atassi in a coup that placed the radical leftist wing extremist wing of the Baath Party in power.

⁵⁹⁸ EY. 103138/2. A delegation of Communist party of Syria arrived in Moscow on July 3 at invitation of central Committee of the CPSU – it is headed by Haley Bagdash: during talk Syrian leaders noted importance for strengthening of Arab National freedom movement of Khrushchev’s visit to UAR. FO 371/175864. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. July 9, 1964.

⁵⁹⁹ Сирийская коммунистическая партия в Москву (“The Syrian Communist Party to Moscow”). 6 Июля 1964 г. *Правда*. № 57 (12756).

⁶⁰⁰ Сирийская коммунистическая партия в Москву. 6 Июля 1964 г.

Granting two seats to the Communists in the National Revolutionary Council, he believed, although not significant, was still a significant moment in strengthening the position and influence of the Communist Party in the country⁶⁰¹. At the same time, he suggested, the Party – and the Soviets – would have had to be very “vigilant and cautious” about the Baathists⁶⁰². The Soviets were somewhat following Faysal’s suggestion already. However, closer and deeper relations with the Baathists would have developed soon.

4.2.2. The 23 February 1966 coup: Second thoughts on a ‘socialist takeover’?

Towards the end of 1965, Hafiz al-Assad and Salah Jadid, the leader of Baath’s regionalist faction, started to plan a military takeover of the entire Baath Party. On 21 February 1966, the conspirators staged a crisis, warning the government members that fighting between officers stationed on the front lines against Israel had broken out. Prime Minister Amin Al-Hafiz was therefore attracted to the Golan Heights to prevent a mutiny, not knowing that it was a hoax. When the group returned to Damascus on 23 February, Jadid made his move and attacked al-Hafiz’s private residence overnight, injuring part of his family. He thus took power over Syria, despite resistance from outside Damascus (in Latakia, Deir Ez-Zor and Aleppo), and manifestations against the coup broke out, which were promptly suppressed.

Like the 1963 coup, the Soviet press initially reported the Syrian events without qualitatively significant comments. As British observers commented, first reports “betrayed a certain confusion, perhaps not difficult to understand”⁶⁰³. Later pieces, however, began to bring out statements by the new Syrian leaders in favour of socialism and cooperation with countries of the socialist camp. It seems remarkable that, despite no direct comment, the tone of these articles was not unsympathetic. It is certainly remarkable, instead, that Syria’s Prime Minister Yusuf al-Zuayyin gave his first interview to a foreign newspaper to *Pravda*. On 6 March, the newspaper’s correspondent to the Arab

⁶⁰¹ The ‘excuse’ Faysal approached Barkovsky with was a more specific one. On behalf of the Party politburo, Faysal asked Barkovsky to tell Moscow that the Communist Najah Saati, who was studying in Moscow, had to make her return to Damascus before 1 September. On that day, works of the National Revolutionary Council were supposed to start, to which she had been called to take part by the Presidential Council, together with another Communist Party member and 3/4 other people who were not communists but close to the Communists (among which a member of the Executive Council of the General Federation of the Syrian Trade Unions, Mr. Sasila, and a member of the Syndicate of Lawyers, Mr. Rikabi). From: № 0178. МИД СССР. Посольство СССР в Сирии. Запись беседы с членом политбюро ЦК коммунистической партии САР тов. Фейсалом (“Embassy of the USSR in Syria. Recording of a conversation with a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Syrian Arab Republic, comrade Faisal”). 30 Августа 1965 г.

⁶⁰² № 0178. МИД СССР. Посольство СССР в Сирии. Запись беседы с членом политбюро ЦК коммунистической партии САР тов. Фейсалом. 30 Августа 1965 г.

⁶⁰³ EY 103138/1. 10322/10/3. Soviet press reports (without comment) on Syrian developments in February. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 10, 1966.

East, E. Primakov (*Е. Примаков*), published the interview, in which Jadid claimed that his government controlled the country “one hundred per cent”, and that rumours of unrest in the army were imperialist inventions⁶⁰⁴. However, this did not mean that there was no struggle: there were different tendencies in the Baath party itself. “We understand”, al-Zuayyin claimed, “that imperialism and reaction will not cease their attempts to fix an order in Syria agreeable to them. Therefore, a vital necessity in these circumstances is the support of all progressive forces outside Syria, in the first place of the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries”⁶⁰⁵.

These words must have sounded very promising to the Soviets’ ears. Indeed, there were clear indications that Moscow was increasingly inclined to look favourably on the new regime in both the Soviet press and in the private conversations of Soviet diplomats serving in the Middle East. *Pravda* of 10 March published extracts from an exchange of telegrams between the Syrian Prime Minister and Kosygin (Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers), and between the new President of Syria and Podgorny (President of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet). The telegrams were sent on the occasion of the Prime Minister’s and the President’s appointments and referred on the Soviet side to the hope that the existing friendly relations between Syria and the Soviet Union would continue to develop to the mutual benefit of the peoples of the two countries⁶⁰⁶. *Izvestia* of 12 March also contained a long article by its special correspondent, K. Vishnevetsky, which gave the first direct assessments of the coup and its results. Much of the piece was mere reportage of the events, but Vishnevetsky made specific points of interest. In discussing the coup, he argued that the events of 23 February in Damascus could not be described as one of those military revolts that have become frequent in recent times, “this was not a putsch inspired by some foreign capitals like the one which took place in Accra”⁶⁰⁷. The conflict was an internal one carried out in the name of the popular revolution. The new leaders had emphasised the importance they attached to the development of Syria’s public economic sector while stressing that they regard the petite bourgeoisie as their allies in building socialism. The Syrian middle classes, Vishnevetsky was sure, were revolutionary-minded and in favour of socialist reforms, and they would have become the protagonist force of Syria’s new course.

But the somewhat one-sided reforms carried out in Syria recently have discouraged and even embittered the middle classes. [...] Too often and too easily people sometimes talk of socialism in various parts of the world, many political speculators cover their political

⁶⁰⁴ EY 103138/1. 10322/10/3. March 10, 1966.

⁶⁰⁵ EY 103138/1. 10322/10/3. March 10, 1966.

⁶⁰⁶ 10 March 1966. *Pravda*.

⁶⁰⁷ 2 March 1966. *Izvestia*.

nakedness with popular slogans. [...] This is one more reason why the new Syrian leaders, who have proclaimed high slogans and aims, should be prepared for serious work in putting their aspirations into effect. The first steps are already being made in this direction, and regard the agrarian reforms⁶⁰⁸.

Another point which met with Vishnevetsky's approval was the inclusion of representatives of left-wing forces in the new government, because of the importance of cooperation between all progressive forces in the struggle for socialism and democracy, and against reaction and imperialism, as well as the importance that Syrian positive developments would have in the broader Arab region.

However, the Soviet leadership kept an eye on the new Syrian leadership and the Baathists in particular. The Soviets were well conscious about the new centrality that the Baath Party was having in the country and the broader region of Levant. Especially as the new Prime Minister had claimed that the Syrian leadership of the Baath would now try to unite all progressive groups in Syria around itself⁶⁰⁹. A few Soviet voices were very pessimistic about enhancing cooperation with Damascus based on previous disappointing experiences with the Iraqi Baathists. Commenting on the political situation in Syria in a Moscow Radio home service broadcast on 2 March (1966), Farid Mustafevich Seyful-Mulyukov (*Фарит Мостафа улы Сәйфелмөлеков*), a Soviet Arabist of Tatars origins, said that three years was a sufficient period to judge the results of any party's administration or government⁶¹⁰. Recalling that they had both taken power under the slogan "Unity, freedom, and socialism", he believed profound similarities existed between Syrian and Iraqi Baathists. Recent crimes of the right-wing Baathists and extremists in Iraq thus threw a sinister shadow over their Syrian counterparts:

Of course, no one would want to place the blame for the crimes of the Iraqi Baathists on the party as a whole, but they could not be ignored. There was a time when certain leaders of the Baath in Syria were in solidarity with the reactionary forces in Iraq and tried to form a Syrian-Iraqi union based on the suppression of popular democratic movements by brute military force⁶¹¹.

⁶⁰⁸ 2 March 1966. *Izvestia*.

⁶⁰⁹ 6 March 1966. *Pravda*.

⁶¹⁰ EY103138/1. 10323/10/3. Soviet press reports (without comment) on Syrian developments in February. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 10, 1966.

⁶¹¹ EY103138/1. 10323/10/3. Soviet press reports (without comment) on Syrian developments in February. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 10, 1966.

Furthermore, concerning the programme of the Baathists, Mulyukov acknowledged that, under the pressure of the popular forces in the Syrian masses, and with the active assistance of the progressive forces, the former Syrian leaders at the beginning of 1965 already had passed several laws on the nationalisation of private firms, and did begin implementing the agrarian reform. However, further progressive social and economic transformation in Syria had been hindered by the acute struggle within the ruling Baath Party and a sort of drive to the right of the Party itself. The Syrian Government's line, according to Mulyukov, had been strongly influenced by the Baath Party's so-called Arab National Command, in which Michel Aflaq, the ideologist of Baathism, and Salah Bitar, one of its founders and well-known in the Arab world for his right-wing views, played the leading role. It was significant, he believed, that when Bitar again became head of the Syrian Government, the Arab press assessed this as a kind of "white coup d'état" which could drive Syria "to the right"⁶¹². Increased activity was indeed observed among the Syrian bourgeoisie and Westerners who did not conceal their sympathies for the right-wing Baathists. A Damascus newspaper, for instance, claimed that the Bitar Government intended to repeal the laws on nationalisation and had immediately drawn up plans for returning many nationalised enterprises to their former owners. Furthermore, Mulyukov recalled another "very curious" event. Practically on the very day when Bitar was instructed to form a government, the American Ambassador in Damascus allegedly handed over to Syrian officials a cheque for £7 million as a gift from the American Government towards the implementation of the programme for Syria's economic development⁶¹³.

The Soviets were undoubtedly encouraged by the Bitar government's disappearance and by the readiness of the new leadership led by the Prime Minister of Syria Yusuf Zuayyin. However, the Soviet government may have decided to give aid to Zuayyin's regime only after a good deal of heart-searching. On one side, the new Government included representatives of the progressive forces. In the Soviet hopes, those forces would have strived to strengthen popular democratic institutions and ensure economic development, the extension of the non-capitalist sector and higher living standards for the workers; "the very near future", as Mulyukov commented, "will show the true meaning of the changes which are taking place in Syria"⁶¹⁴. The Soviets were also satisfied with the Syrian leaders' announcement that they would cooperate with all anti-imperialist forces in Syria and the world. Within Syria, the new leaders immediately stated their readiness to cooperate with the Syrian Communist Party members. On the other side, however, how the Syrians would have shaped such

⁶¹² EY103138/1. 10323/10/3. Soviet press reports (without comment) on Syrian developments in February. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 10, 1966.

⁶¹³ EY103138/1. 10323/10/3. Soviet press reports (without comment) on Syrian developments in February. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 10, 1966.

⁶¹⁴ EY103138/1. 10323/10/3. March 10, 1966.

cooperation was unclear. Regarding the communists, for instance, while they were prepared to cooperate with members of the Syrian Communist Party as individuals (for instance, they allowed the veteran Syrian Communist leader, Khalid Bakdash, to return), they made it clear that they were not disposed to recognise the separate existence of the Syrian Communist Party. As a matter of fact, the Soviets were still interested in the potential of the Communist parties of the Middle East, although the policy of cooperation with national bourgeois régimes at the expenses of local communist parties, decided at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR in 1956, was not superseded. Furthermore, doubts remained on the stability of the Government that emerged after the 23 February coup 1966. As it was very narrowly based, its prospects for survival appeared very poor. Besides, Zuayyin enjoyed good connections with countries of the Western camp, especially the UK, where he had studied and worked⁶¹⁵. However, despite high caution and a degree of scepticism, a policy of support for the Baath gradually began to evolve.

4.2.3. Syria's "path towards non-capitalist development" and the Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué

From 18 to 25 April 1966, Zuayyin visited Moscow at the head of a government delegation in his first state visit to a foreign country. Zuayyin was accompanied by Ibrahim Makhous, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs; Jamil Shayya, Minister of Information, Culture and National Orientation; Hafiz al-Assad, then Minister of Defence; Ahmed Murad, Minister of Economy; Salah El-Dine Tarazi, Ambassador of Syria to the Soviet Union, as well as several responsible experts and specialists. Apart from Moscow, the delegation also visited Leningrad and Volgograd, inspected industrial and agricultural enterprises, and the Frunze Military Academy. The Prime Minister received red carpet treatment. He was received by Brezhnev, and had a friendly talk with him. He was then given two lunches at the Kremlin palace instead of the usual one; there were multiple talks with Kosygin, Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers (on 19, 20 and 22 April), and Kosygin's speeches on 19 and 20 were particularly friendly in tone, if not remarkable in content⁶¹⁶. Zuayyin and his party also visited all the highest Soviet authorities⁶¹⁷.

⁶¹⁵ He arrived to the UK in January 1961 to begin a postgraduate course of study at the Edinburgh University Medical Faculty; he soon became Senior House Officer at the Swansea General Hospital, and his tenure was extended until 1962. He then moved to work at the Prince of Wales Orthopaedic Hospital in Cardiff. He returned to Syria early in 1964. From: EY103138/5. Soviet-Syrian relations were fully reported in the press in a good light. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 29, 1966. (p. 8).

⁶¹⁶ EY103138/5. Soviet-Syrian relations were fully reported in the press in a good light. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 29, 1966. (p.1)

⁶¹⁷ Among whom: N.V. Podgorny, President of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet; V.N. Novikov, Vice Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers; A.A. Gromyko, Minister of Foreign Affairs; E.F. Kozhevnikov, Minister of Transport Construction; P.S. Neporozhny, Minister of Power and Electrification; N.S. Patolichev, Minister of Foreign Trade; S.A. Skachkov, Chairman of the Foreign Economic Relations Committee of the USSR Council of Ministers; V.V.

The Soviet public narrative on the visit could not have been more triumphal and resounding. The Soviet press fully and prominently reported Zuayyin's visit. Soviet-Syrian relations were presented in a good, blooming light. Before the Syrian leader landed in the USSR, articles in *Izvestia*⁶¹⁸ (16 April) and *Pravda*⁶¹⁹ (17 April) praised the new Syrian's government's intention to implement social and economic reforms and its readiness to rally the forces of the left, including the communists, in running the state. A further indication of Syria's improved standing in Soviet eyes was provided by the inclusion of a new slogan devoted to Syria among those issued by the Central Committee of the CPSU for 1 May 1966. This described the Syrian people as fighting for a democratic government and social progress and called for a strengthening of friendship and cooperation between the Soviet and Syrian people.

Following the visit, on 26 April 1966, a Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué (*Совместное Советско-Сирийское Коммюнике*) entitled "In the interests of strengthening peace and mutual cooperation", was published and circulated in Syria in both Arabic and French language. This confirmed that the Soviet Government was prepared to give expression of its friendship. The Communiqué opens with the following statement:

In the course of the talks which were held in an atmosphere of sincerity and mutual understanding, there took place a frank exchange of opinions on various questions concerning the further development of relations of friendship and cooperation between the Soviet Union and Syrian Arab Republic, also discussed in detail were questions pertaining to the international situation and the situation in the Near and Middle East, of mutual interest to both Sides.

Both governments discussed the present and future relations between the two countries. The Sides reaffirmed with great satisfaction the existence of good, friendly relations between the Syrian Arab Republic and the Soviet Union – relations based on long joint struggle of the Syrian and Soviet peoples for freedom, independence, progress and peace, against imperialist tyranny in all forms and manifestations.

[...] The sides stated that the Soviet Union and Syria have all the objective conditions necessary for the further development of cooperation in the political, economic, trade, cultural and other fields on the basis of complete equality, mutual respect for national

Kuznetsov and V.S. Semyonov, Deputies Foreign Ministers; A.A. Barkovsky, Ambassador of the Soviet Union to the Syrian Arab Republic; and A.D. Shchiborin, Head of Middle Eastern Department of the USSR Foreign Ministry.

⁶¹⁸ 16 April 1966. *Izvestia*.

⁶¹⁹ 17 April 1966. *Pravda*.

sovereignty and non-interference. Such a cooperation corresponds to the interests of the Syrian and Soviet people as well as to the cause of solidarity and cohesion of the progressive and patriotic forces fighting in the Arab East⁶²⁰.

A few main points emerged from the declaration. Probably the most relevant one concerns an apparent convergence of political views. The Soviets expressed the complete understanding and high appreciation they attached to the social and economic reforms that Syria was planning and carrying out, aiming to place the country on the non-capitalist path of development. On the other hand, the Syrian side expressed the profound and sincere feelings which the people and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic entertain for the people and the Government of the Soviet Union for the effective and valuable support they are giving to the struggle of Syria's Arab people for the achievement of their socialist and national aims and the development of their national economy". Both sides, then, it is written in the Communiqué:

[...] expressed the conviction that *socialist* reconstruction is the best way of overcoming the stage of backwardness, freeing the working people, ensuring the full blossoming of productive forces and liberating the creative energy of the broad sections of the people. Economic liberation, social progress and the genuine well-being of the broadest sections of the people cannot be achieved without implementing radical political, economic and social reforms⁶²¹.

The Communiqué also placed significant attention on economic cooperation. The primary point in this regard – discussed later in this chapter – was constructing a dam on the Euphrates. In addition to consultations and agreements about the construction of the dam, other technical and economic cooperation questions were discussed, “in accordance”, the Soviets wrote, “with the wishes of the Syrian side”⁶²². In these discussions, the Soviet side expressed its readiness to send a group of Soviet specialists to Damascus as soon as possible to continue the discussion and study of specific projects

⁶²⁰ Совместное Советско-Сирийское Коммюнике о визите Премьер-Министра Сирийской Арабской Республики в СССР (“Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué on the visit of the Prime Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic to the USSR”). 26 Апреля 1966 г. *Правда*.

⁶²¹ Совместное Советско-Сирийское Коммюнике о визите Премьер-Министра Сирийской Арабской Республики в СССР (“Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué on the visit of the Prime Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic to the USSR”). 26 Апреля 1966 г. *Правда*.

⁶²² Совместное Советско-Сирийское Коммюнике о визите Премьер-Министра Сирийской Арабской Республики в СССР (“Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué on the visit of the Prime Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic to the USSR”). *Правда*. 26 Апреля 1966 г.

that the Syrian government intended to carry out in the frame of a future development plan. The sides also exchanged opinions regarding the development of trade between the two countries, and it was agreed that talks would shortly take place in Damascus on the signing of an accord on trade exchange and payments (a Trade Agreement indeed was signed one year later).

While these declarations represented a novelty in Soviet-Syrian relations, little was new in the Communique about international affairs. The two Governments declared their firm resolve to work together with other peace-loving states “for a relaxation of international tensions, for the strengthening of peace and the prevention of a new war”⁶²³. They both insisted on their “unfailing fidelity” to abide by the principle of peaceful coexistence of states with different social systems, recognising that every population have the right to choose the political, economic and social system which, in its opinion, accords with its hopes and aspirations. References to the importance of non-interference were then made. Both Soviets and Syrians noted the vital importance of the 20th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations' Declaration on the inadmissibility of interference in internal affairs of other states and on the protection of their independence and sovereignty. They agreed that the translation of this principle into concrete international political life was the most urgent international task, as the imperialists' aggressions were newly manifesting against several countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Both sides stated that they attached great importance to the positive role the non-aligned countries played in the struggle against colonialism and their efforts at easing international tensions. More specifically, they condemned the continuing attempts of imperialist states and reactionary forces to split and suppress the liberation movements in the Arab world. They believed that solidarity among the progressive forces of the Arab world was necessary for resisting these attempts and “conducting a victorious struggle against disunity, backwardness and colonialism in any form”⁶²⁴. Both sides reaffirmed their solidarity with the Palestine Arabs and supported their legitimate rights in the just struggle against Zionism, which the imperialist forces used to heighten tension in the Near and Middle East. Similarly, both sides declared their strong support for the struggle of the Arab people in Aden and the South Arabian Peninsula, and in other protectorates, against foreign occupation by the imperialist powers⁶²⁵. Firm support to the Arab Yemeni people was highlighted.

⁶²³ Совместное Советско-Сирийское Коммюнике о визите Премьер-Министра Сирийской Арабской Республики в СССР (“Joint Soviet-Syrian Communique on the visit of the Prime Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic to the USSR”). *Правда*. 26 Апреля 1966 г.

⁶²⁴ Совместное Советско-Сирийское Коммюнике о визите Премьер-Министра Сирийской Арабской Республики в СССР (“Joint Soviet-Syrian Communique on the visit of the Prime Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic to the USSR”). *Правда*. 26 Апреля 1966 г.

⁶²⁵ In addition, the sides also strongly condemned the intervention of American forces in South Vietnam, which created a serious threat to international peace. They declared their support for the right of the Vietnamese people to take its destiny into their hands; their demands for the withdrawal of foreign troops; and the proposal of the Government of the

In the Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué, there was no mention of any offer of Soviet arms to Syria. Indeed, Western chancelleries were brought to believe that the agreement on the construction of the dam was the only concrete achievement of Zuayyin's visit to the Soviet capital⁶²⁶. There was no public news about any Soviet move to give the Syrians military aid. However, the inclusion of the Minister of Defence in the visit and the attendance at the talks on 22 April (1966) of a Soviet arms aid expert did not go unnoticed. Furthermore, a delegation of Soviet officers had arrived in Damascus in the same days when the Communiqué was being published, of whom one was General Penkovsky, the Soviet Deputy Minister of Defence. It is not hard to believe that the subject of military cooperation was raised in that same visit already. In any case, the Syrians succeeded in their primary aim of securing some aid for the Euphrates dam, although the Soviet Union had not committed itself to the success of the project as a whole. Instead, the Communiqué devoted quite a considerable space to the theme of disarmament:

The governments of the Soviet Union and the Syrian Arab Republic come out against the arms drive which is conducted by Western imperialist powers, creates tension in international relations and retards economic progress in all countries. They will do their best to stop the arms drive and bring about general and complete disarmament under strict international control. The Sides favour the convocation of an international disarmament conference. The Sides come at for the speediest possible conclusion of an international treaty on non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, which would rule out the possibility of acquiring these weapons by non-nuclear states. They agree that the setting up of denuclearised zones in different parts of the world would contribute to the strengthening of peace.

Both sides declare that the plans of various blocs, which are getting ready in the Arab East by means of colonialism and reaction and under the flag of the so-called Islamic Pact are directed against the interests of the Arab/Muslim workers and serve only the interests of the powerful oil monopolies, reaction and colonialism.

Both sides declared their opposition to the arms race which is being conducted by Western imperial powers. They declare themselves in favour of an early conclusion of an

Democratic Republic of Vietnam the South Vietnam National Liberation Front on the question of a peaceful settlement in Vietnam. From: Совместное Советско-Сирийское Коммюнике о визите Премьер-Министра Сирийской Арабской Республики в СССР ("Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué on the visit of the Prime Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic to the USSR"). 26 Апреля 1966 г. *Правда*. № ... (...).

⁶²⁶ EY103138/5. Soviet-Syrian relations were fully reported in the press in a good light. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 29, 1966. (p. 2)

international treaty on the non-dissemination of nuclear weapons, which would exclude the possibility of these weapons being acquired by non-nuclear states. They support the creation of non-nuclear zones in various parts of the world⁶²⁷.

Although the two sides agreed on establishing nuclear-free zones in various parts of the world, no particular areas like the Middle East were specified. Nevertheless, Western chancelleries found references to disarmament under firm international supervision to be of great interest, for they represented a step towards Soviet-Syrian security cooperation, as well as a stark sign of increased trust between the two countries⁶²⁸.

Izvestia of 1 May printed a follow-up article on the Soviet-Syrian Communiqué by K. Ivanov (*К. Иванов*)⁶²⁹. The article's main points were interesting as they implied unusually warm Soviet approval of the Syrian regime. Ivanov began by saying that Syria was among the Arab states which were at the forefront of the struggle against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, including Nasser's UAR. After making standard allegations about oil and imperialist ambitions in the Middle East, he claimed that the whole Soviet-Syrian Communiqué spoke of deep Soviet respect for Syria's sovereign rights and independence and the desire of both countries to develop their friendly relations. He contrasted the US aggression of Vietnam with Soviet aid for Syria's development, particularly over the Euphrates' dam, which was considered "a second Aswan", a symbol of Soviet-Arab friendship and enduring cooperation. Ivanov continued by stating that the imperialists, naturally, were angry because they did not want the economic liberation of countries from colonialism and neo-colonialism, and they wished to hinder their development away from the patronage of colonialist powers:

This once more unmask the face of neo-colonialism and its agents in Tel-Aviv. [...] The new Government of Syria has adopted the course of the non-capitalist path of development, leading to socialism. The Soviet people cannot but welcome this development and the growing solidarity of all progressive, patriotic forces in Syria around the progressive programme of the Syrian Government. [...] It is in the interests of the labouring peasants, which are particularly close to the new Government, and their alliance

⁶²⁷ Совместное Советско-Сирийское Коммюнике о визите Премьер-Министра Сирийской Арабской Республики в СССР ("Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué on the visit of the Prime Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic to the USSR"). 26 Апреля 1966 г. *Правда*.

⁶²⁸ EY103138/5. Soviet-Syrian relations were fully reported in the press in a good light. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 29, 1966. (p. 7)

⁶²⁹ 1 May 1966. *Izvestia*.

with Syria's small but progressive proletariat is symbolised by the participation of the Syrian communists in the Government. [...] The friendly and fraternal cooperation between the Soviet Union and Syria, like the time-tested fraternal cooperation of the USSR and UAR and other forward-looking countries of different continents, inspires all honourable people in the world to ever more stubborn, self-sacrificing and bold struggle against all enslavement and exploitation. There can be ups and downs in the anti-imperialist struggle, but real revolutionaries will not lose heart, and the imperialists will not be able to satisfy the aspirations of the developing nations⁶³⁰.

Indeed, the article concluded that the very opportunity to follow non-capitalist paths of development resulted from the very establishment of the Soviet Union and its collaboration with the socialist states, as Syria had now chosen to effect.

These were quite strong affirmations, which in fact did not go unnoticed by Western agents monitoring on Soviet activities in the Arab Levant. In the words of a British diplomat, Peter Maxey, it was "rather surprising" that the Soviets had gone so far as they had in identifying themselves with the Syrian regime at that stage⁶³¹. Remarkable are also the considerations of Sir Andrew Marley Wood, a young British diplomat in Moscow between 1964-1966, who later became Ambassador to Russia (1995-2000), wrote to the Foreign Office in London:

It is not entirely clear why the Soviet Union should have given such warm approval to the new regime both during Zuayyin's visit and through press comment [...]. They cannot, after all, be sure after so short a time of the endurance of the new government and must be aware that enthusiastic endorsement for it may trouble their relations with Iraq, and possibly Israel and Turkey as well. They may calculate that their aid for the Euphrates dam project will redound to their profit whatever government is in power in Syria. But the aid could be given with less fanfare. I suspect that there are two elements in the current propaganda in favour of the present regime. Firstly, it is perhaps a reaction to Soviet setbacks in Africa⁶³². [...] Secondly, the Soviet Union may be concerned to show that it is

⁶³⁰ EY103138/6. No. 10323/4/5. After visit of Syria Premier to the USSR, Izvestia printed an article, by K. Ivanov, on Syria. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 4, 1966.

⁶³¹ EY103138/5. Soviet-Syrian relations were fully reported in the press in a good light. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 29, 1966. (p. 2)

⁶³² It is a matter of fact that the Soviets were experiences setbacks in Western Africa and other regions of the developing worlds. See, for instance: Alessandro Iandolo, "The rise and fall of the 'Soviet Model of Development' in West Africa, 1957-64", *Cold War History*, 12:4 (2012), 683-704.

prepared to do all it can to help states which adopt the policies advocated under the heading of the ‘non-capitalist path of development’⁶³³.

Other officials had diverging views on the Western responsibilities of the Syrian coup and the Soviet ‘takeover’ of the situation⁶³⁴. However, the general impression was that, in the present regime, the Soviets were “backing a very unreliable horse”⁶³⁵. There were already serious splits within the military junta – itself only a minority faction – which alone provided the power basis for the regime. One significant source of trouble for the Syrian regime was also the opposition within the army to collaboration with the communists.

Anyways, European chancelleries were not wrong to be surprised about the Soviet enthusiasm towards the new Syrian government. Moscow had been almost immediate in granting support to it and astonishingly premature in organising such an elaborated and politically charged visit, whose success the Soviets had all reasons to be pleased with. The Soviets boosted cooperation with Damascus; since 1966, Soviet interest in Syria remarkably increased and was indicated by the many visits exchanged between the two countries. At the same time, Zuayyin took full advantage of the opportunity to display his left-wing enthusiasm, and the Soviets were evidently reassured that if his government remained in power, it would follow left-wing policies.

Moscow’s privileged treatment towards Damascus was particularly evident compared to growing disillusion towards other countries in the region, particularly Iraq and Nasser’s UAR. In Syria, the Soviets were attempting to grasp what were unique opportunities. Apart from the impossibility of not responding to a Government that turned to them for support, the prospect was opened up of gaining a permanent stake in the Syrian economy – and thus perhaps a permanent lever

⁶³³ EY103138/6. No. 10323/4/5. After visit of Syria Premier to the USSR, Izvestia printed an article, by K. Ivanov, on Syria. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 4, 1966.

⁶³⁴ For instance, there was a small ‘diplomatic fight’ between British diplomats on the responsibilities and actions that the UK might have – or should have – taken. Mr Evans suggested that the Soviet success in Syria in 1966 were a measure of the failure on the part of the UK-US alliance to grasp opportunities open to it after the March coup in 1963; that, by showing the same “political courage” as the Russians, the British and the Americans might have captured the Syrian government as the Russians did and drawn the same dividends for our courage. Evans’ accusations, Morrison argued, could not really expect to be taken seriously. “The March coup put in office an extreme left group of the Baath Party”, Morrison argued, “who attack their predecessors for their moderate policies. Syrian words do not count for much but, apart from the routine politeness to the Ambassador when they were still uncertain of themselves, they have been violently hostile to us and to the West generally. Their one significant action has been to tear up the pipeline contract within a few weeks of ratifying it”. Morrison concludes with “until the next coup, there is no much room for Anglo-Syrian relations”. This, indeed, sounded as a fortunate guess. From: EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1966. (p. 4).

⁶³⁵ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. July 22, 1966.

in Syrian political affairs – through cooperation and aid⁶³⁶. The opportunity to improve the status of Syrian communists was also a tempting one, as the newly emerged ruling group was ready to rely on communist support and even to give communists a voice in the Government. Furthermore, Syria offered the Soviet Union the opportunity to counterbalance growing Western influence in the broader Middle East. There was in the Soviets a genuine belief that the West was sponsoring a forward policy to unite ‘reactionary’ forces against ‘progressive’ forces, a policy which was manifested by King Faysal’s of Saudi Arabia Islamic Conference⁶³⁷.

At the same time, the impulse to grasp opportunities was balanced by a certain extent of realism, as the Soviets could not be fully committed to a regime with so narrow a basis for support. By that time, the overall Soviet thinking was clear: Moscow would have prioritised support for national bourgeois anti-imperialist governments, rather than support for local communist parties. If such governments were prepared to accept the Communists, the Soviets would not have pushed for it. Instead, they had been pushing the idea that increasingly aggressive Western imperialism could only be successfully resisted by a united front of all ‘progressive’ forces. In Western Europe, this had translated into a general policy of favouring electoral alliances between Communists and other forces of the left. But in Arab countries of the Middle East, the Soviets were unlikely to press an unwilling but anti-imperialist government to include Communists. Nor, where, as in Syria, the Government was willing, were they likely to put pressure on it to make concessions to local Communists to an extent which might frighten other governments in the area. As in the words of the British Ambassador to Syria, Soviet Middle East policy at that time was “still conducted with an eye cocked in the direction of the UAR”⁶³⁸.

⁶³⁶ However, on the information that the British had from DIS, the Soviet economic commitment to the dam project was such that they could have opted out in the event of any political reversal in the following year or so without too much loss of prestige or cash. From: EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1966. (p. 1).

⁶³⁷ In 1962, the then Prime Minister Faysal of Saudi Arabia – a Western ally and a country closed to Soviet markets – had sponsored an Islamic Conference in Mecca, in which delegates from various Islamic states had attended. The Conference was called to devise ways to fight secular and socialist forces, particularly in the Arab world. Refuting the call for pan-Arabism, King Faisal asserted that “those who disavow Islam and distort its call under the guise of nationalism are actually the most bitter enemies of the Arabs, whose glories are entwined with the glories of Islam”. From: Noor Ahmad Baba. “Nasser’s pan-Arab radicalism and the Saudi drive for Islamic solidarity: A response for security”. *India Quarterly*. January-June 1992. Vol. 48, No. 1/2, pp. 1-22.

⁶³⁸ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1966. (p. 4).

4.3. Economic relations: An accessory to politics?

4.3.1. *Boosting economic cooperation*

While Soviet-Syrian diplomatic relations were established in the 1940s⁶³⁹, and collaboration on matters of security and defence dated back to the first half of the 1950s⁶⁴⁰ – the economic factor was negligible until the 1960s. Until 1956, Soviet-Syrian trade was insignificant: imports from Syria were non-existent, and exports to Syria were minimal. Between 1957 and 1961, when Syria was under the union with Egypt, Soviet exports and aid to the country had increased significantly, to decline again between 1962 and 1964⁶⁴¹, reflecting the Soviet uncertainty about Syria's political instability⁶⁴². Even so, however, since 1963 the Soviet Union was, after China, Syria's second-largest customer for cotton and an important purchaser of raw wool; it was also Syria's fourth largest export outlet (after Lebanon, China and France), moving up to third place in 1964⁶⁴³. After a sharp decline in 1962-1964, Soviet exports to Syria showed a marked increase in 1965, although not to the 1960-61 levels⁶⁴⁴. In 1965 the Soviet Union was Syria's tenth most important foreign supplier with a 3 per cent share of the market, fractionally less than that of the Chinese. Fuel oil, sawn wood, and iron and steel products were the main commodities supplied. Tractors, vehicles, spare parts and tyres also figure in the statistics. According to Syria's trade statistics for the full year of 1965, the Soviet Union narrowly displaced China as Syria's second most important foreign customer and took more than 10 per cent of Syria's total exports. Up to 15 May 1966, the Soviet Union had contracted to buy 28,000 tons of

⁶³⁹ A significant political dialogue was established as early as 1946, as Syria was preparing to oust the French rulers and declared its sovereign independence. On 1 February 1946, the two countries signed a secret treaty in which the Soviets promised to support Syria internationally and help it build a national army. A proposal to conclude a non-aggression pact with the USSR, made on 9 April 1950 by Ma'ruf al-Dawalibi, Syrian Minister of National Economy, marked another step in the development of relations between the two countries. In late 1954 and early 1955, relations between Syria and its neighbours Turkey and Iraq deteriorated following the formation of the pro-Western Baghdad Pact. The two countries threatened to attack Syria if it maintained its adverse position regarding the pact and its adherence to the principle of non-participation in foreign military blocs. The Soviets stood firmly on Syria's side and promised to defend it in future confrontation with its neighbours.

⁶⁴⁰ In 1954, the Soviet-Syrian arms deal was struck, which thus ante-dated the Soviet-Egyptian arms deal, a significant step in the development of Soviet-Syrian relations, through which Syria purchased 44 German Mark IV tanks from the Soviet bloc at extremely favourable prices. Until the 1960s, such deal remained the most significant step in the development of the relations between the two countries.

⁶⁴¹ Ginat Rami, *The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'ath Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2000, pp. 150-171.

⁶⁴² Remarkable is the example of the Euphrates Dam project. The first contract was signed in October 1957, when the Soviets agreed to an estimated amount of \$90 million, to which about \$40 million more would have been added in October 1964. Such promise, however, was never entirely upheld.

⁶⁴³ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1966. (p. 6).

⁶⁴⁴ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1966. (p. 6).

the last cotton crop – a 75 per cent increase on her purchases in the previous year – although China, which had contracted to buy 35,000, still remained in the lead⁶⁴⁵.

It became no doubt the intention of both parties steadily to expand their mutual trade. On 4 November 1965, in Damascus, Soviet authorities signed the Trade Agreement with the Syrian Arab Republic. The Soviet delegation arrived in the Syrian capital with a large advance, on 16 October, probably as the accord's lines had still to be discussed. The delegation was led by Kuzhnetsov, Director of the Export Division of the Ministry of Foreign Trade; Yahya Aroudaki, Director of the Economic and Financial Affairs Department of the Ministry of Economy, signed for the Syrian part. The Agreement offered a framework of three-year Trade and Payments Agreements to replace those signed in 1955, providing for:

- a) the granting of most favoured national treatment as regards customs, sea freight, transit and fees and taxes;
- b) import and export facilities;
- c) facilities for trade exhibitions;
- d) arbitration procedures;
- e) prohibition of re-export without advance permission from the exporting country;
- f) the establishment of a joint commission to supervise the execution of the Agreements;
- g) the automatic renewal of the Agreement unless one or other of the parties gives 90 days' advance notice of termination⁶⁴⁶.

The annexes to the trade agreement listing the goods to be exchanged between the parties in 1966-1968 showed that the Soviet Union planned, within that 2-year period, to increase its purchase of cotton by 25 per cent; to import a little more raw wool; to more than double its imports of Syrian cereals (in 1966 the harvest failed owing to drought and Syria will have to import substantial quantities of wheat) and to increase its purchase of other merchandise by 25 per cent. In return the Soviet Union would have provided 25 per cent more sawn wood; slightly more in the way of iron and steel products; more chemicals, medical products and equipment, and consumer goods. No increase

⁶⁴⁵ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1966. (p. 6).

⁶⁴⁶ EY113138/4. 1128/65. Three-year trade agreement signed with Soviet Union in Damascus on 4 Nov. 1965. Payments in sterling. FO 371/180940. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. December 24, 1965.

in the supply of fuel oil was foreshadowed and the quantities of machinery, vehicles and mechanical equipment are tantalisingly left unspecified in the annexes as published. In the same occasion, a third Commercial Representation Agreement on the privileges and immunities of commercial diplomatic personnel was also signed, and letters were exchanged about sea transport arrangements.

Besides the Trade Agreement, the Soviet Union established economic cooperation with Syria on several fields. The Soviets completed geological surveys of the Syrian soil, carried out extensive exploratory drilling in the Syrian oilfields and advised on their development; they carried out part of the Homs fertiliser factory project, engaged in the major Qamishli-Latakia railway scheme, and gave considerable assistance over irrigation. In 1969 the Soviet Union concluded a broad economic and technological aid agreement with Syria, giving loans of 120 million dollars to help Syria to develop its oil industry and build other projects⁶⁴⁷. Education was probably one of the most significant field of cooperation. Interestingly, education exchange programmes reverted more about political and social sciences rather than pure sciences, and were often managed by the highest spheres of the Syrian politics. For instance, Khalid Bakdash, the Secretary General of the Syrian Communist Party, personally took care of presenting the Soviets with lists of Syrian students to be sent to the Soviet Union, and followed up these issues closely and in detail⁶⁴⁸.

Despite significant improvements, however, trade remained quite underdeveloped. At least, Soviet-Syrian economic relations were a small business compared to Soviet-Syrian political relations. An interesting perspective, which seems to confirm this was the fact that Western powers perceived that economic relations were the only window of opportunity to develop ties with Syria, as the country was fully aligned with the Soviet camp politically. In August 1965, Michael Stewards, a British diplomat, wrote a long report to the UK embassy in Damascus about the opportunities for improving Anglo-Syrian relations, commenting widely on the drift to the left in Syria. While outlining the importance of Syria to the Middle East and the Arab community for reasons of history and geography, and therefore to Western interests in the area, he noted that, “unfortunately, the fairies who showered these blessings on the Syrians added two curses: a passion for political controversy, and the Palestine problem”⁶⁴⁹. In London’s view, Syria had since independence proved to be the most ungovernable and unstable of the Arab countries; the one in which the Palestine issue has produced the strongest anti-Western prejudice; the one in which right-wing politicians had already begun to open up to the

⁶⁴⁷ Gu Guan-Fu. “Soviet Aid to the Third World an Analysis of Its Strategy”. *Soviet Studies*, 1983, 35:1, pp. 71-89

⁶⁴⁸ In October 1965, for instance, Bakdash wrote to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party to inform that, out of the ten students that the Soviets had already accepted as new fellows at Moscow’s Lumumba University, two of them were not be able to leave, and he recommended valuable substitutes. From: № 38517. Центральному Комитету КПСС (“To the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union”). 7 Октября 1965 г.

⁶⁴⁹ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 17, 1965. (p. 9).

communist camp penetration before the Czech-Egyptian arms deal in 1955; and where it seemed that Nasser's influence would have kept the political pot boiling even if everything else were quiet⁶⁵⁰. The French and the Americans shared the same impressions. Particularly, the French believed that Syria's preoccupation with the Palestine question limited the development of relations beyond a certain point. As in the words of a French diplomat to Stewards: "the touchstone in the eyes of the Syrians [would have been] France's behaviour towards Israel", a problem that polarised all public sensitivity⁶⁵¹. The influence of the Soviet Union and China was admittedly considerable, and it was the more desirable for the Western countries that they should not leave the field open to them. However, these opportunities were better to search for away from politics⁶⁵². As Michael Stewart wrote:

The fields in which a more durable relationship could be built between London and Damascus are the economic and cultural ones. [...] This is, I am conscious, little enough straw from which to make the bricks of a better relationship with Syria. If other opportunities arise to improve on this utilitarian pattern we should seize them so far as our resources allow. But I would return to the point that, in dealing with so mercurial a people as the Syrians, and given that our policy on the Palestine issue is not to be amended as they would wish, we should not set our expectations too high. A business-like relationship is probably the most we can hope for, built on a foundation of common economic and cultural interests. If in this way we can make a modest contribution to keeping the Syrians independent of Nasserist or Soviet control, and making their

⁶⁵⁰ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 17, 1965. (p. 9).

⁶⁵¹ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 17, 1965. (p. 9).

⁶⁵² London's need for caution and its choice to establish collaborations with Syria away from politics were also due to two factors. The first was the chronic instability of Syrian politics and consequently the temporary nature of the influence which any Syrian Government or its members could exert. The second factor was the Syrian Baath Party's conflict with President Nasser, based on the opposition of the régime in Syria to the establishment of Nasser's hegemony in the Arab world. The British crown had no doubt where her interests lied in this; London's policy had to be such as to encourage Arab Governments which wished to maintain their independence of Nasser. But this was a policy that must be pursued with delicacy, the British believed, otherwise it could have been counter-productive and assist Nasser in rallying behind himself support for unity against its imperialist enemies and their separatist lackeys. This was especially true of Syria, which remained an open sore for Nasser. Their quarrel was one in which the British did not want to become involved. They were seeking to improve relations with the UAR and did not wish to extend the existing areas of friction. British policy towards the Syrians could have negatively affected British relations with Nasser. For these reasons, they were moving with caution in developing relations at governmental level with Syria. As Stewards wrote: "We do not want to apologise, or seek anyone's permission, for improving our relations with any independent State. We have made it clear that our attempt to improve relations with the UAR will not be at the expense of our friendly relations with any other country. The same can be said of our desire to improve relations with Syria; but we want to avoid any appearance of a special campaign to cultivate the present Syrian Government". From: EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 17, 1965, 11.

instability less indigestible ingredient in the Middle East stew, it is about as much as we could reasonably expect to achieve⁶⁵³.

As in the right perception of the Western agents, over the 1960s (especially since the mid-1960s), Soviet-Syrian cooperation remained largely focused on matters of politics, security and defence⁶⁵⁴. This was even more so in the light of continuous escalations of tensions between Syria (alongside other Arab countries) and Israel, culminated in the Six-Day War of June 1967, which saw a massive engagement of Soviet diplomatic corps (and its resolute condemnation of Israel's actions)⁶⁵⁵. However, since mid-1960s in particular, the economic factor gradually became a relevant one, and would have led Soviet-Syrian economic ties to flourish enormously in the decades to come.

4.3.2. Soviet aid in the 1960s: The Euphrates Dam project

Since the early 1960s, Moscow's willingness to offering Syria aid had been fluctuating. Rami Ginat argued that the Soviets were largely "confused" about the internal political evolutions of independent Syria⁶⁵⁶. Certainly, in the early stages of the Baath regime in 1963, the Soviets initially looked at the Syrian leadership with quite an extent of suspicion and mistrust, and opted into a 'wait-and-see' approach before boosting dialogue with Damascus. This gradually changed since October 1963, as the Baathists reformulated some of the Party's basic ideas – enounced in the Party's Sixth National Congress: as an alternative to the old leadership's Arab Socialism, they opened up to some concepts drawn from Marxist-Leninist doctrine and actually joined forces with the Marxists.

While the Congress adopted new socialist ideas, including a call for nationalisation of the major branches of the economy, and for the creation of collective farms to effect the revolution necessary for the peasants, that leadership did not begin seriously to implement them until early 1965. The most drastic measures were announced on 2 and 4 January, when 114 private manufacturing concerns were nationalised, followed by another 11 on 26 January; on 18 February 46 import and distribution firms

⁶⁵³ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 17, 1965. (p. 11).

⁶⁵⁴ № 263. Б69. Письмо Советского правительства правительству Израиля, направленное через посредство посольство Финляндии в СССР. Москва, 5 Июня 1967 г. ("A letter from the Soviet Government to the Government of Israel, sent through the Embassy of Finland in the USSR. Moscow, 5 June 1967"). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 2: 1957–1967 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы).

⁶⁵⁵ Galia Golan, "The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 8:1 (2006), 3–19.

⁶⁵⁶ Ginat, *The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'ath*, 2000.

were nationalized and the state import-export organization was given a monopoly on the importation of certain basic commodities⁶⁵⁷.

As early as 1 January 1966, another change of government and direction obliged the Soviets to reformulate their stance. Al-Hafiz emerged victorious in a power-struggle against al-Jadid, pushing the Soviets to voice their support for him, leader of the leftists and the best placed to become the new bearer of socialist policies to the country. Simultaneously, in the days before the counter-coup of 23 February (1966), they fiercely criticised al-Jadid's "ultra-lefts", claiming that if they had triumphed, "their hasty actions [would have] discredited the idea of the building of Socialism in Syria"⁶⁵⁸. It is no coincidence that, when those same ultra-leftists took power on 23 February, the Soviet press was silent for almost a week, limiting itself to report news from the Arab and international press in an aseptic and purely descriptive manner. Not only the Soviets were puzzled by their wrong evaluation of the balance of power between al-Hafiz and al-Jadid, but they were probably waiting to see the new regime's political orientation and the true character of its leaders, whom they had criticised until the day of the coup; indeed, any considerations on aid was necessarily linked – albeit just partially – to political considerations.

As the new Syrian regime consolidated its power, it made a few moves which helped getting things clearer for the Soviets. A positive attitude towards the communists was shown since the very beginning, as the new Government included a communist minister (Samih Atiyya) – albeit as an individual and not as a representative of the Communist Party – and immediately ordered the return to Syria of Khalid Bakdash, the Communist Party's leader, after eight years of exile in Prague. Most importantly, the Baath regional Command decided at a conference in March to expand and deepen socialist transformations and to democratise the political life of both the Party and the country as a whole.

Indeed, a wave of nationalisation continued in the months that followed, sending the Soviets more than positive signals. A marriage of convenience therefore began. On one side, lacking international support, the new leadership in Damascus had almost no choice but to continue Syria's pro-Soviet orientation. On the other, the Soviets decided to give the seal of approval to the Syrian regime, for a number of reasons. First, while the previous Baath regime had already moved closer to the Soviet Union, the regime that came into power on 23 February 1966 was attractive as it represented the extreme left of the Baath Party. Secondly, at the lead of the USSR since 1964, Leonid Brezhnev had brought yet another substantial change to the Soviet Middle East policy since

⁶⁵⁷ Ginat Rami, 2000.

⁶⁵⁸ N. Shimmel, *New Times*, 6 (1966), 7–8. Quoted in: Ginat, 2000.

Khrushchev's time: he appeared to have decided to avoid over-dependence on one country – notably the UAR – to work for an alliance of progressive forces, and to seek out national fronts. Thirdly, there was an increasing need for the Soviets to compete with the Chinese in the region. Although the significance of China's role was not even comparable to that of former European colonial powers – or the rising star of the US – Syria did represent the biggest base of Chinese actions in the Middle East. Therefore, the Soviet Union very quickly overcame initial hesitations and made up its mind to sustain the new regime. Accordingly, Soviet aid to Syria economic development boosted and developed on a very substantial scale in the period following the 1966 coup.

The most important receiver of Soviet aid was the project for the construction of the Euphrates Dam, also known as Tabqa Dam, the “Plotina Tabka” in Russian (*Плотина Табка*). Already in 1957, under an agreement signed in October, an estimated \$90 million was made available to finance *inter alia* the major irrigation project. A further estimated \$40 million was then promised by the Soviets in October 1964, although somewhat less than one-third of these amounts were allegedly been utilised by the end of 1965⁶⁵⁹. However, in line with the complicated political considerations described, the project had been put on hold for several years, until the signature of the Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué on 26 April 1966. Indeed, beyond its distinctive political meaning, the Communiqué had represented a significant step forward in the economic cooperation between the Soviets and the Syrians, whose most concrete result was certainly the agreement on the Dam. In the Communiqué, it was stated that, during the Soviet visit in Damascus for the signature, the Syrian delegation announced its intention to construct a dam and hydro-electric station on the Euphrates. The Soviet side, “in compliance with the spirit of friendship and sincere mutual understanding”, met the wishes of the Syrian delegation “half-way”, and agreed to give assistance to this construction, by carrying out the necessary designing, survey and research work; by supplying power generating and building equipment and certain materials; and by giving technical help over the erection, assembly and bringing into service of the equipment, and by making available the necessary credits⁶⁶⁰. To carry out these works, the agreement clarified, Soviet specialists would have been sent to Syria and, in agreement with the Syrian side, assistance would have been given in training Syrian specialists for this project.

In 1966, the Euphrates Dam was far and away the largest and most important development project in the whole Syrian economic planning and was set to be the centrepiece of the new Syrian

⁶⁵⁹ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1966.

⁶⁶⁰ Совместное Советско-Сирийское Коммюнике о визите Премьер-Министра Сирийской Арабской Республики в СССР (“Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué on the visit of the Prime Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic to the USSR”). 26 Апрель 1966 г. *Правда*.

Five-year Plan. As per the report of officials of the Syrian embassy in Moscow, the agreement on aid for the Dam followed the principles outlined in October 1957 and involved the building of a railway from Latakia to Qamyshly, as well as irrigation canals. The total cost of the first stage, which will take about six years to complete, was of the order of £90 million according to Syrian estimates⁶⁶¹. The Syrian plan for this stage included provision for a 300 MW power station and the irrigation of 42,000 hectares of land. The equivalent of up to \$120 million for the first stage of the Dam was offered by the Soviets in 1966. The Syrian government had asked for repayment over 20-25 years, with a rate of interest of 2,5% and that the duration of the dam construction was estimated between 5 and 7 years⁶⁶².

Already on 22 April 1966 (4 days before the Joint Communiqué was published), Damascus Radio had taken a speech of Syria's Prime Minister Zuayyin's to the Arab students in Moscow to mean that the Soviet Union had agreed to give Syrian loans worth about £Syrian 600 million for a project worth £Syrian 1,000 million⁶⁶³. Later, it was learned by the British agents, the Soviet loan amounted to £Syrian 509 million⁶⁶⁴. The importance attached by the Soviets to project was therefore financially significant. Furthermore, the presence of the Soviet Minister of Power and Electrification and of Semyon Andreyevich Skachkov (*Семён Андреевич Скачков*), Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister dealing with the Arab countries and whose committee dealt with aid, at all the talks with Kosygin, Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, was a fair indication of the amount of time spent of the Euphrates Dam project⁶⁶⁵.

However, despite offering to assist for building the dam tout court, such assistance was not quantified, as the Communiqué was not specific about the scale of the Soviet contribution. No figures were mentioned, but assistance was expressed in terms of unspecified amounts of planning, various equipment and materials, technical experts and expertise. As expectedly the Soviet Union's aid offer had arisen the highest interest in the Western chancelleries, given the Dam's importance to Syria's economic development, the British Ambassador to Syria, Mr. Evans, reported to the Foreign Office:

⁶⁶¹ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1966. (p. 6).

⁶⁶² EY103138/5. Soviet-Syrian relations were fully reported in the press in a good light. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 29, 1966.

⁶⁶³ EY103138/4. USSR are going to assist (£Syrian 600m) the Syrians to build the Euphrates dam. The Russian assistance however is not quantified and will only be forthcoming provided the Syrians behave in a manner that suits Moscow. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 28, 1966.

⁶⁶⁴ EY103138/4 (b). BBC MON 2042. USSR are going to assist (£Syrian 600m) the Syrians to build the Euphrates dam. The Russian assistance however is not quantified and will only be forthcoming provided the Syrians behave in a manner that suits Moscow. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 30, 1966.

⁶⁶⁵ EY103138/5. Soviet-Syrian relations were fully reported in the press in a good light. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 29, 1966.

The Syrians clearly regarded, or affected to regard, the Russians as committed to giving very substantial aid to the building of both a dam and the electricity generating equipment to go with it. No doubt so long as the Syrians behave in a manner that suits Moscow, the Russians have every intention of meeting these expectations. But if over the coming months the Russians wanted to argue about the size of their commitment, there would be little on the published record for the Syrians to counter with. The Syrian Foreign Minister is reported to have said in Moscow that work on the project was due to begin in the Spring of 1967, and the special Moscow correspondents of 'Al-Thawra' reported on 26 April that the first year of the project would be taken up with preparatory studies⁶⁶⁶.

Not only, in that occasion, Skachkov had even declared that the Soviet Union was assuming no responsibility for the overall economic planning of the project.

In fact, beyond the fanfare of the Communiqué and the declarations, the Soviets initially hesitated to take concrete action, not to commit themselves to the Syrian economic plans. Instead, they insisted on a year of further study, thus leaving themselves both time and room to manoeuvre, to review the economics of the project and define its precise scale and scope. Beyond the necessity to evaluate the project's economic caveats at best, two major problems halted the provision of funds for the construction of the dam. Firstly, the Soviets' need for caution was linked to the need to make sure that the present political constellation at government in Syria had a fair chance of enduring or being improved upon, and to strengthen its own hold and that of its local supporters on the country. Secondly, Moscow could not dismiss too lightly the difficulties which the project might have caused with Turkey and Iraq – whom the Soviets were not willing to offend without good cause – in the absence of a satisfactory agreement for the division of waters. Most importantly, between late 1966 and early 1967, the escalation of tensions between Syria and Israel represented a further complication that troubled Moscow considerably.

In May 1966, faced to increased attacks from the Israeli side, the Syrian Foreign Minister, Ibrahim Makhus asked to be received by the Soviet ambassador to Damascus, Barkovsky, and expressed his Government's worries because imperialist forces had intensified their efforts to undermine the Syrian regime, as proved by Israeli troop concentrations on the Syrian border. Accordingly, he asked the Soviets to put pressure on Israel not to interfere with Syrian affairs⁶⁶⁷.

⁶⁶⁶ EY103138/4. USSR are going to assist (£Syrian 600m) the Syrians to build the Euphrates dam. The Russian assistance however is not quantified and will only be forthcoming provided the Syrians behave in a manner that suits Moscow. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 28, 1966.

⁶⁶⁷ Guy Laron, "Playing with fire: The Soviet–Syrian–Israeli triangle, 1965–1967", *Cold War History*, 10:2 (2010), 163–184.

Initially, the Soviets supported Syria with no hesitation and in mid-May started delivering warnings to Israel and also to Jordan. However, it did not take the Soviets much longer to change their mind and have doubts about the behaviour of their Syrian client. In August, Soviet diplomats in Washington told State Department officials that Syria was unstable and its regime's international moves were unpredictable. The Americans, who passed this information to the Israeli embassy in Washington, added that it was clear that the Soviets were apprehensive about the prospect of a war in the Middle East⁶⁶⁸. In this context, it is not surprising that Soviet had slowed down their plans to provide Syria with substantial aid. Guy Laron also found that, from September 1966 onwards, the Israeli Foreign Ministry had been receiving reports from Paris and Bonn according to which Syrian–Soviet relations had deteriorated and the Soviets were slowing down their preparation to make the Euphrates Dam loan available. There were also rumours, later proven correct, that the Soviets were delaying their arms shipment to Syria. Indeed, in the period between 1965 and 1967 the Syrians received almost no major items of weapon from the Soviet Union. Reports are also found, by April 1967, of the Syrians complaining to the Egyptians that the Soviets were taking a very tough line over the question of debt repayments. In fact, they not only refused to allow any discount on the purchase of new arms, but had actually increased the price⁶⁶⁹.

However, according to Western agents, even under such circumstances there was little doubt that the Soviets would persist with the project “virtually regardless of any oscillations of the political pendulum”⁶⁷⁰. The realisation of the ‘Tabqa Dam’ would have been a showpiece of their generosity and skills in the Arab Levant, as the Aswan Dam in Egypt or major infrastructural connections in Iraq. The Soviets did certainly not wish to have a ‘white elephant’ on their hands, and thus insisted on an economically viable project, but they were taking a long-term view, believing that the advantage of securing for themselves a central place in the Syrian economy was a political and commercial prize well worth having. All future Syrian regimes, whatever their complexion, will have been bound, if only on account of the strength of the Syrian-Soviet trade and aid ties, to give due weight and consideration to the policies and wishes of the Soviet Union as regards Syria and the Middle East region as a whole.

⁶⁶⁸ Laron, *Playing with fire*, 2010.

⁶⁶⁹ Laron, *Playing with fire*, 2010.

⁶⁷⁰ EY103138/9. No. 22; 10311/665. Soviet-Syrian relations. FO 371/186904. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1966, 7.

4.3.3. Nationalisations: How to organise and manage the new public sector?

Since 1965 already, Syria embarked in a complex and ambitious programme of reforms and nationalisations, aimed to boost industrialisation and socio-economic development, all under the aegis and leadership of the Baath Party. The overall design was to achieve development through state centralisation, thus making the Damascus government the centre of the economic planning. The Syrian programme of nationalisation met the interests and definitely the appreciation of the Soviet observers, who indeed engaged in a close monitoring activity of the progresses in this regard and the reaction that the nationalisations had caused within Syria.

One of the first positive developments of the nationalisations programme, was that it gave unexpected benefits to the Syrian communists. This was not probably the top priority interest of the Soviets, but it was registered as a positive development. On 11 January 1965, the Bulgarian Ambassador to Syria, Stefan Stefanov, visited the Soviet Ambassador Barkovsky and handed over to him a letter that he had just received from “local friends”⁶⁷¹. The letter was an appeal of the Central Committee of the Syrian Communist Party to the people about the nationalisation of industrial companies and enterprises. The Communist Party’s representative informed the Ambassador that they positively assessed the recent activities of the Syrian Government and were ready to provide support and assistance in their implementation. Furthermore, they were particularly satisfied as they had managed to hold their representatives in heads of five nationalised enterprises. They also had high hopes for the trade union elections that were about to be hosted, believing that they would be able to succeed and get seats in the new trade union leadership. They perceived the new Syrian authorities as very liberal towards them (the Communists). Even if the above were not to be realised, they had claimed to Stefanov, to the minute “not a single communist was in prison” and even those who had migrated had returned and even found jobs⁶⁷².

On the same occasion, Barkovsky inquired the Bulgarian Ambassador to Syria Stefan Stefanov about a recent meeting that he had with the Syrian Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, Adnan Shuman. A few months before, in September 1965, Shuman had joined the Syrian economic delegation that visited Bulgaria. Stefanov reported that, while visiting Bulgaria, Shuman had shown a great deal of interest in socialism, and repeatedly expressed his friendly disposition to the socialist countries. Indeed, he confessed, the new set of Syrian laws on the nationalisations of companies and

⁶⁷¹ № 208. МИД СССР. Посольство СССР в Сирии. Запись беседы с послом Болгарии в Сирийской Арабской Республике Стефаном Стевановым (“Embassy of the USSR in Syria. Record of a conversation with the Ambassador of Bulgaria to the Syrian Arab Republic, Stefan Stevanov). 11 Января 1965 г, 1.

⁶⁷² № 208. МИД СССР. Посольство СССР в Сирии. Запись беседы с послом Болгарии в Сирийской Арабской Республике Стефаном Стевановым (“Embassy of the USSR in Syria. Record of a conversation with the Ambassador of Bulgaria to the Syrian Arab Republic, Stefan Stevanov). 11 Января 1965 г, 1.

enterprises was a result of the leadership of the Baath Party to reform the Syrian system and “to turn around socialist construction”⁶⁷³. Enterprises to be nationalised were selected based on their capital and their efficiency in production: in other words, large and profitable enterprises were prioritised. Shuman also revealed that his Government was determined to firmly pursue the socialist line and stop any attempt to counteract it, especially as the ways that these nationalisations were handled had caused significant internal opposition. Indeed, the adoption of the law on nationalisation was conducted in strict secrecy. A selected number of persons immediately changed the management of the affairs of nationalised enterprises. There was no doubt, Shuman told to the Bulgarian Ambassador, that this event will have caused resistance to the Syrian bourgeoisie and condemnation, up to the provision of support from its Western allies. For instance, it was well known to the Syrian leadership that the bourgeoisie intended to hold a strike of the merchants in sign of protest. In order to prevent any active actions of the opponents, it was decided to create emergency military tribunals; the appearance of the decree on this immediately sobered the initiators of the strike. In Shuman’s words, the Syrian Government felt “the support of the working strata of the population, which [gave] their strength to successfully nip in the bud any attempts by the bourgeoisie and reaction”⁶⁷⁴.

However, the problem was only temporarily solved, as long-term issues remained on how Syria would have organised and managed the new public sector in a socialist sense. Indeed, Shuman further admitted to Stefanov that the Syrian leaders were utterly unprepared on how to handle such a socialist turn over:

The Syrian leaders have unfortunately no experience in socialist construction. Although the law on nationalisation has been adopted, there is no clear idea on what to do next with these enterprises, how to organise the public work on them and how to ensure their profitability. The Government is now holding a special seminar for the leaders of the nationalised enterprises to attend. However, this seminar would need experienced teachers. Accordingly, Shuman made an official request to the Bulgarian Government to send two or three experienced specialists in the field of social construction to Damascus, who would give several lectures at the mentioned seminar and would give practical advice. In addition, Shuman suggested that the Ambassador [Stefanov] meet him

⁶⁷³ № 208. МИД СССР. Посольство СССР в Сирии. Запись беседы с послом Болгарии в Сирийской Арабской Республике Стефаном Стевановым (“Embassy of the USSR in Syria. Record of a conversation with the Ambassador of Bulgaria to the Syrian Arab Republic, Stefan Stevanov). 11 Января 1965 г, 1

⁶⁷⁴ № 208. МИД СССР. Посольство СССР в Сирии. Запись беседы с послом Болгарии в Сирийской Арабской Республике Стефаном Стевановым (“Embassy of the USSR in Syria. Record of a conversation with the Ambassador of Bulgaria to the Syrian Arab Republic, Stefan Stevanov). 11 Января 1965 г, 3

systematically in order to discuss on a friendly basis the issues of socialist construction in Syria, on which the Ambassador, in turn, could consult with Sofia or with the heads of the diplomatic missions of socialist countries in Damascus. Shuman underlined that, under the current conditions, Syria, more than ever before, needs the help of socialist countries and counts on it⁶⁷⁵.

The Bulgarian Ambassador reported to have willingly accepted Shuman's requests, he also stressed on the latter's desire to increase cooperation on the socialist construction with all progressive forces inside Syria, starting from the communists. In fact, by 1965, Syrian authorities had appointed at least five communists – who were known and trusted to them – to the posts of heads of nationalised industrial enterprises. Increased cooperation was not aimed to create a unique front of leftist forces: the Baath Party had to be the only authority, which had to operate *with* the support of all the leftist forces in the efforts towards socialism and to face resistance⁶⁷⁶.

The Soviets in Syria closely observed the evolutions of the nationalisation programme, and shared information with various organs of the USSR, for the issue was of vast importance and opened new prospects of cooperation at various levels⁶⁷⁷. From 12-18 April 1965, a delegation headed by the Syrian Foreign Minister, Ibrahim Makhos, was in Moscow (where it headed after visiting Peking; the junior members of the delegation returned home after Peking, whereas the senior members headed to Moscow and to Prague after that). The Syrian Minister had meetings with Kosygin and Gromyko. The Soviet press gave a relatively small coverage to this visit, providing scarce information on how the Syrian Minister spent time in his 6-day permanence. It seems, however, that during the visit the

⁶⁷⁵ № 208. МИД СССР. Посольство СССР в Сирии. Запись беседы с послом Болгарии в Сирийской Арабской Республике Стефаном Стевановым ("Embassy of the USSR in Syria. Record of a conversation with the Ambassador of Bulgaria to the Syrian Arab Republic, Stefan Stevanov). 11 Января 1965 г., 4.

⁶⁷⁶ There was another detail that jumped to the attention of Barkovsky as Stefanov reported him his conversation with Shuman. When asked by the Bulgarian Ambassador about the reliability of a recent statement of Michel Aflaq about the intention of the Syrian Government to nationalise foreign trade, Shuman replied that the said statement – which had appeared in the Lebanese press – was just a provocation with little meaning. The Baath Party's leader did in fact refer to the nationalisation of foreign trade, but that was a project to be done later, after fixing the issues related to the nationalisation of local industries. Probably, the Soviets were worried about the possible aggravations that such a decision would have entailed for Syria, in terms of internal opposition to the nationalisations programme. From: № 208. МИД СССР. Посольство СССР в Сирии. Запись беседы с послом Болгарии в Сирийской Арабской Республике Стефаном Стевановым ("Embassy of the USSR in Syria. Record of a conversation with the Ambassador of Bulgaria to the Syrian Arab Republic, Stefan Stevanov). 11 Января 1965 г. (стр. 5)

⁶⁷⁷ On 23 February 1965, for instance, the USSR Embassy in Syria sent a few materials to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which promptly forwarded them to the Central Committee of the Communist Party for it to analyse them. These included: a translation from Arabic of photocopies of the report recorded by the Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in the United States to its Ministry of Foreign Affairs; a recording of Barkovsky's conversation with the Bulgarian Ambassador to the SAR Stefanov; the text of the secret bulletin of the general Arab leadership of the Baath Party regarding the situation in the party, dated to the end of December 1964 and "obtained through unofficial means". From: Министерство Иностранных Дел СССР. Стран Ближнего Востока. Секретно. Экз. № 1. 06965. 23 Февраля 1965 г. №/132/обв. От Заведующий Отделом Стран Ближнего Востока А. Щиборин. ("Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR. The countries of the Middle East. From the Head of the Department of the Middle East A. Shchiborin").

Soviet encouraged the Syrians to persevere in their nationalisation programme, while warning them to move gradually and cautiously in order not to provoke too strong a reaction⁶⁷⁸. Beyond such advice, however, there seems to be no sign that the Soviets engaged in it *directly*⁶⁷⁹.

Conclusions

On many aspects did Syria represent a case of exceptional interest of the Soviet 'Middle-East policy', if any. Most importantly, a political convergence arose between the Soviet leadership and their Syrian counterpart, especially since the second Baathist coup of 1966, that, at that moment, had no equal in the region. The privileged treatment that the Baathists were willing to reserve to local Syrian communists was certainly an important factor in the eyes of the Soviet Union, but not the main one. What convinced the Soviets the most was the new Syrian regime's intention to move forwards on a path of 'socialist development', symbolised by the programme of nationalisations of Syrian enterprises and economic activities. Nevertheless, Syria brought the Soviets to at least a couple of paradoxical behaviours. First, and despite economic and political considerations were inextricably bound up in Soviet policy towards Syria, the political affinity between Moscow and Damascus did not immediately bring to enhanced economic cooperation. The 1960s were troubled years for Syria both at the domestic and international level, and the Soviets' need for caution was evident in several instances. Among these, the fluctuation of their aid flows; the decision to halt temporarily the provision of loans for the Euphrates Dam; and the overall limited amount of trade flows – especially if compared to other countries in the region. Second, although the Soviet Union traditionally took the defence of Syria in regional rivalries with Israel, it was precisely the escalation of tensions between Damascus and Tel Aviv in the early 1960s that presented the Soviets officials with the new opportunity to boost dialogue with the Jewish state. Increased dialogue with Israel in no way entailed a lack of Soviet support for Syria, and the Arabs more in general. Rather, that was perhaps the moment when the Soviet diplomacy began to develop a 'talk-to-everyone' approach, a trait that would have long remained as a characteristic one in the Russian Middle East policy.

⁶⁷⁸ This was reported by Turkish agents in Moscow to the British Embassy. From: EY103138/2. 10323/22/4. FO 371/180940. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 22, 1965.

⁶⁷⁹ Instead, consistent aid was granted, for instance, by the German Democratic Republic (DDR). Between spring and autumn 1965, Syrian Baathists asked the Germans to help them in designing Syria's industrialisation process, so to set the country on the path of socialist economic development. As Massimiliano Trentin argued, "acting in line with the contemporary Soviet policy of full engagement with a selected number of postcolonial countries holding 'high geopolitical promises', the Germans replied positively to the Syrians' call and sent dozens of engineers, agronomists and medical doctors to work in the Arab country. From: Massimiliano Trentin, "State-led Development: The Privileged Linkage between East Germany and Ba'athist Syria, 1965–1972". *Contemporary European History*, 2021: 30, pp. 581–596.

Conclusions

“Arab nationalism seeking to escape from authority of the West and Russian communism seeking to weaken the strategic position of Great Britain and the United States, but there is no natural compatibility between Moslem and Communist goals. No political party in the Arab world, except a small Communist group, proposes more than a temporary threat combination; to go further would merely exchange one alien authority for another. [...] If communism effectively penetrates the Middle East, it will be on the heels of a Soviet expansion by arms. All other signs of its presence are significant only in the concept of an Arab-Moslem struggle against Western imperialism”⁶⁸⁰.

Historically, public opinions, contemporary affairs journalism and the scholarly community associated the Soviet Union’s role in Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa with the spread of communism. Soviet activities in the area would be linked to the purpose of exporting communism and getting these countries closer to Moscow’s sphere of political influence, beliefs and values. The main instrument to achieve this would be arms supply to strengthen the Arab armies and improve their defence mechanisms against aggressive policies of Western countries and regional rivals. In the analysed period – between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s – the Soviets disposed of a modern, rather-developed heavy industry. Scholars have argued that arms supply was the only field the Soviets could compete with Western countries and was, in fact, chosen as the best way to bound these countries to Moscow⁶⁸¹. By the beginning of the 1980s, in the so-called “Third World” or “developing world”, the Middle East ranked second with over 11 per cent of the total military expenditure, and was the single largest arms importing region, trading almost entirely with one of the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the US – including associated countries of the respective camps⁶⁸². Undoubtedly, Soviet leaders made great use of the military industry as a tool of foreign policy to expand their markets and project their ‘geopolitical’ sphere of influence in the postcolonial

⁶⁸⁰ Margaret Boveri, *Mediterranean Cross-Currents* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 383.

⁶⁸¹ Efraim Karsh, “Influence through arms supply. The Soviet Experience in the Middle East”, *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, 6 (1986), 45–55.

⁶⁸² Alexander J. Bennett, “Arms transfer as an instrument of Soviet policy in the Middle East”, *Middle East Journal*, 39:4 (1985), 745–774.

Arab context. However, if this holds, the evidence suggests that the reality was not so simple and straightforward.

This work has focused on the ‘launching phase’ and ‘testing phase’ of Soviet engagement with countries of the Middle East, that is, between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s. One result that apparently emerged from the analysis of the three case studies (Egypt, Iraq and Syria), is that Soviet activities at that early stage – be they in the realm of military aid or economic assistance – were not connected to considerations on *promoting* and *boosting* communism. Yes, these countries’ postcolonial assets made them attractive to the Soviets’ eyes as possible recipients of the communist doctrine, understood as a model of organisation of the state, primarily in the economic realm, but also in the institutional and socio-political one. However, diplomatic relations and aid provision remained largely disconnected from the ‘communist cause’. Whereas Joseph Stalin tended only to conceive of national independence movements that espoused the proletarian socialist revolution, his successors began to show approval for *any* new nation that pursued independence and independent foreign policies, despite being away from communism⁶⁸³. Nikita Khrushchev embodied the shift towards a more pragmatic foreign policy approach, which broadened the range of opportunities for the Soviet Union significantly. He offered to strengthen friendship and cooperation “with neutralist and peace-loving states in Europe and the third world” by pledging Soviet diplomatic and economic support as long as they did not engage in military alliances with countries of the Western camp⁶⁸⁴. It was a real subversion of previous Soviet foreign policy. In fact, the hundreds of records of conversations between Soviet diplomats, officials, and leaders with their Arab counterparts, contain little sign of Soviet requests to promote communist parties and no sign at all that aid provision *depended* on the local communists’ destiny (these latter intended as the actual force and criteria for communism to develop locally). On the contrary, even when Soviet leaders occasionally criticised the domestic policies of Arab governments – sometimes nearing, but always carefully avoiding, small diplomatic incidents – military deals, economic and cultural programmes were overall unaffected⁶⁸⁵. This could be motivated by different reasons.

Primarily, the Soviet leaders may have understood quickly – in advance compared to their Western colleagues – that hopes were limited for a Soviet-styled communism to take root in the Arab Middle East as the ruling political force – at least as far as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria were concerned. Communist parties – and a broader ‘Arab communism’ thinking – had developed, but they had been

⁶⁸³ See also Robert H. Donaldson and Vidya Nadkarni, *The foreign policy of Russia. Changing systems, enduring interests* (New York: Routledge, sixth edition, 2019), 82.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸⁵ This was confirmed also by Karen Dawisha, “Soviet Cultural Relations with Iraq, Syria and Egypt 1955-70”, *Soviet Studies*, 27:3 (1975), 422.

doing so following their specific lines that, to a large extent, did not conform with traditional Marxist-Leninist theories⁶⁸⁶. Furthermore, with a few exceptions (Iraq is one of them), overall, they remained second-level political actors. US agents reported that, for instance, the Soviets did attempt to raise the question with Nasser, the Soviet main Arab ally for a large part of the 1950s and the uncontested champion of Arab socialism, asking him to give more room to Egyptian communists⁶⁸⁷. Soviet documents do not track this, but, if true, it appears that the Soviet officials gave up soon on such a request for the sake of economic cooperation. Indeed, Nasser had made it clear since the very beginning of his collaboration with the Soviet Union that he was not interested in the form of socialism ‘with Soviet characteristics’, and did not want Egypt to run the risk to lean towards Moscow’s political sphere of influence⁶⁸⁸. Hence, the Soviets decided to close an eye on Nasser’s antipathy for communism, and even his suppression of local communists’ activities. The Soviets’ privileged, personal relationship with Nasser would worsen in the following years⁶⁸⁹, but military, economic and cultural cooperation never stopped; on the contrary, major economic projects like the Aswan Dam, a crown jewel of the Soviet projection in the Middle East, continued and were greatly appreciated by both sides.

Furthermore, the extent of control the Soviets exerted over local communists was limited, and, sometimes, the latter’s actions even risked damaging them. The analysis of the Iraqi case study provided an emblematic example. The Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) – a leading political force in Iraq throughout the 1950s and 1960s – was born as a genuinely *Iraqi* party, representing the population as a whole rather than specific groups or interests, and with a solid anti-imperialist, anti-British sentiment. While, in principle, this should have been a positive aspect for the Soviets, in practice, the ‘Iraqi specificity’ of the ICP turned out as a boomerang against Moscow: as the Party developed along its peculiar lines, Moscow could not control it. Thus, the Soviet agents closely monitored its activities while avoiding being associated with them. In fact, during the many visits they paid to Iraq in the early 1960s, there is very little sign that the Soviets concerned themselves with the affairs of the Iraqi communists; they went from firms to firms, they checked on the developments of their technical assistance, they struck deals, but no record is found that they engaged with the communist leaders. This may be due to a lack of sources, but Western archives also point at the curiosity of this lack of concern. Even when the Baghdad government/s persecuted local communists, the Soviets never really

⁶⁸⁶ Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab world*, London: Routledge, 2004.

⁶⁸⁷ VR 1092/183. 1199/34/55. Israel-Egypt. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Colonel Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1955.

⁶⁸⁸ Karen Dawisha, *Soviet Foreign Policy Towards Egypt*, London: Macmillan, 1979.

⁶⁸⁹ Donini, Pier Giovanni, Sulla crisi dei rapporti tra Egitto e Unione Sovietica, *Oriente Moderno*, 55:9/10 (1975), 473–482.

made the step from verbal accusations – despite widely spread through the Party’s international media outlets – to concrete action. For instance, as Qassim’s communist purges grew in 1960, if the Soviet press initiated a real ‘media warfare’, the Soviet Government did not make any direct representations to Baghdad’s one: that would have exposed them to the charge of interfering directly in Iraq’s internal affairs, in a phase when Baghdad was negotiating with Moscow several crucial cooperation agreements.

The relative importance the Soviets attached to the ‘communist cause’ over the analysed period, that is, over the initial phase of their sustained engagement with Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa, seems to be confirmed by the paradox of the Syrian case. Among the three countries considered, Syria was the one where the most promising opportunities for the communists were rising. In the analysed period, the Soviets had good contacts with the Syrian communists, especially before the rise of the Baath Party to the fore of Syrian politics. Although the partnership with the Syrian communists did not translate into organised political joint action, there was a consistent general convergence of views, and the Soviet Ambassador kept close relations with them. Especially with the 1966 coup orchestrated by militants of the Baath Party, promising opportunities arose for the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) to operate well in Syria; a few seats were granted to its members in the National Revolutionary Council, strengthening the Party’s position and influence in the country significantly. The opportunity to improve the status of Syrian communists was a tempting one. However, Moscow hesitated to embark on sustained cooperation with the SCP. On the one hand, they could support the SCP and strengthen the “progressive” tendencies within the new regime, thus bounding it (or at least attempting to bound it) to the socialist camp. On the other hand, they would risk associating themselves to a regime that still suffered from a narrow basis for support and whose radical orientations, especially in the domain of foreign policy, were still a matter of concern and debate in Moscow, not last as for the growing importance – and polarisation – of the Arab Israeli conflict. The impulse to grasp the opportunity was balanced with realism and, here again, relations improved but essentially as a matter of state-to-state cooperation. It is no coincidence that Soviet-Syrian engagement only flourished since the 1970s, with the rise to power of Hafiz al-Assad, whom the Soviets gradually identified as the right man for Syria, and the consolidation of a regime with longer prospects for survival⁶⁹⁰.

Overall, it seems that the Soviets weighed commitments and resources pragmatically to find the balance between what they were committed to do and what they could really aspire to achieve. As a result, over the analysed period, the Soviets gradually resettled their goals, at least in the political

⁶⁹⁰ Efraim Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria. The Assad Years*, New York: Routledge, 1988; Efraim Karsh, *Soviet Policy Towards Syria since 1970*, New York: Palgrave, 1991.

realm: rather than *promoting* communism, they made considerations on how to *secure* existent forms of local communism. If they renounced the ‘communist cause’ as an overarching political objective, they continued to engage in protecting prominent individual communists. Again, for instance, while the Syrians clarified soon that they were not disposed to recognise the separate existence of the Syrian Communist Party, the Soviets got them to promise that they were prepared to cooperate with members of the Syrian Communist Party such as Khalid Bakdash, a long exiled veteran Syrian Communist leader with good connections to Moscow, who indeed was accepted back to his country in April 1966.

A stark shift to state-based pragmatism thus characterised the Soviet policy for the Arab Middle East since the mid-1950s. This pragmatism was evident both in diplomacy and economics. The Soviets gave extensive diplomatic support to Arab governments pursuing an anti-imperialist agenda – regardless of their internal socio-political systems – against territorial threats moved by either the Western countries or regional rivals. The support granted to Egypt in its efforts to evacuate the British troops or the support granted to Syria as tension with Israel over the Sea of Galilee escalated are examples of this. Especially at the beginning of the 1960s, repeated incidents in the troubled region of the Jordan River valley, where Arabs and Israelis fought over the use of water resources, was a real test for Soviet diplomacy. If the Soviets generally stood with the Arabs, it was difficult to ignore increased Israeli pressure to obtain Soviet diplomatic support, disguised as requests for boosting trade and economic partnerships. Minister Gromyko’s efforts to justify the absence of proper commercial ties between the Soviet Union and Israel suggests a need to balance relations with Tel Aviv; this was indeed an element of true novelty in the Soviet Union’s role in the region, and one that would have characterised its policy for the years to come. Again, the Soviets did not engage in ideological fights and picked one side over the other. Their interest was very specific and tailored: to guarantee border security.

Beyond diplomatic backing, a great – perhaps the greatest – deal of interest was placed by the Soviets in reaching mutually beneficial economic agreements. These agreements touched upon various sectors: military industry, trade, development projects assistance, finance, education. Whereas scientific literature has placed the most significant focus on arms sales, this study suggests a shred of slightly different evidence. At least in the initial phase of Soviet engagement with these countries, arms sale was not the main interest. This is well exemplified by the Soviet Ambassador Daniil Solod’s attitude towards Nasser’s request for arms in 1954. The Ambassador attempted to avoid talking about weapons and pointed out to his Egyptian interlocutor that other sectors existed in which the two countries could try expanding economic ties and several other goods whose trade was no less important than the trade of weapons. In this regard, the cases of Iraq and Syria are very similar. Moscow showed the greatest interest in providing these countries with economic development

assistance. Working on agrarian reforms, infrastructures, and economic planning could significantly impact these countries' development and allow deeper collaboration of Soviet officials and technicians with the Arabs. Moreover, doing business in the defence industry had politically charged implications. Soviet officials insisted very much on these aspects; this may suggest that the Soviet Union was indeed interested in playing a role in these countries' economic development. In fact, the net of Soviet officials and technicians on the ground engaged massively in sponsoring state-driven industrialisation processes. Soviet surveyors, engineers, and the most varied range of specialists worked closely at these projects' realisations, living in these countries and working with the Arabs for years. The significant presence of Soviet technicians as economic advisers, coupled with the insistence of the 'economic discourse' in the records of conversations with the Arabs, suggests that a genuine intention to assist these countries' economic development existed. Over the analysed period, however, it seems that this project was 'limited' to exporting industrial products rather than industrial models. The project to build industrial economies was probably too ambitious if proportioned to the Soviet actual capacities.

This research's approach based on the analysis of multiple sources (Soviet and Western state archives and media material) allowed interesting insight. The mixed-fortunes of the Soviet engagement in Arab countries of the Middle East over the analysed period gave the Western chancelleries the impression that Moscow was not leaving much good in these countries, and the socialist camp was losing ground. As far as trade is concerned, the British believed that the Soviet Union had thrown itself on the Arab markets before it knew how to handle these markets. For instance, the problems experienced by Iraqi traders in dealing with shipments from the Soviet countries were seen as the result of a Soviet Union's rush against time to beat the Western markets. Western officials believed that affairs would have gone better if Soviet-Arab trade had been allowed to take its natural course. Moscow's role in these countries' economic planning also left doubts. If Soviet-Arab diplomatic relations were going well, the Arabs frequently complained with European officials about the efficacy of Soviet aid, the quality of Soviet goods or education exchanges with Soviet countries. In an attempt to push competition with the West higher, the Westerners believed the Soviets had flooded Arab countries with low-level products and assistance, eventually ruining their reputation. While this remains the opinion of Western – mostly British – agents on the ground, who could do all but highlight the Soviets' weaknesses when reporting back to the Foreign Office, it may hide some truth. The quality of Soviet goods and aid was probably inferior to the Western one. However, they might have been a good value for money compared to those sold by the Western countries. In many instances, the Arabs preferred Soviet goods and enterprises to the Western ones. Furthermore, the Soviet technicians' active participation in building industries in the analysed

countries – especially Iraq between 1958 and the early 1960s, when Soviet advisers were well placed in several Ministries – contributed to shaping these countries' economies for the years to come.

This study also aimed to shed light on whether the Soviet Union had a hegemonic project for the postcolonial Arab world, an overarching strategy to promote an organisational model in these countries that would replicate some features of the Soviet model and be adaptable to the Arab specificities. It seems there is not enough evidence to assert something similar for the time being. The Soviet Union's desire to expand its influence in Arab countries of the Middle East, also – but not uniquely – in an anti-Western logic, should not be confused with a proper 'Soviet Middle-East strategy'. If by 'strategy' we intend the conceptualisation of a comprehensive policy for the Middle East, made of standardised procedures to be replicated in different local contexts and with different tools, this seems not to have happened. Two main findings sustain this argument.

First, with unexpected frequency, dialogue between Soviet leaders and Arab leaders was initiated by the Arabs, not by the Soviets. In many instances, the Soviets acted, but in many others, they reacted to spontaneous proposals of the Arab leaders. The most striking example of this dynamic is Egypt's request for Soviet weapons provision in February 1954. A growing number of incidents at the border with Israel, foreign pressure on the Suez Canal, and the emerging alliance of the Baghdad Pact were threatening Egypt. As soon as he was appointed to Cairo, Ambassador Solod was contacted by Nasser to start a conversation about receiving Soviet assistance in the security and defence domain, which the Egyptians felt desperately needed. The Egyptian request for a weapons supply was unprecedented and the Soviets' response was tailored to this specific occasion. Another unexpected event was Syria's first move towards military cooperation with the socialist camp as Damascus was observing the success of the Prague Agreement of September 1955 with Egypt. In January 1956, the Syrian President al-Quwatli asked Nasser to mediate a deal and get Soviet weapons for Syria, as he could not expose himself to direct dialogue with either the Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia due to the Syrian oppositions' antipathy for countries of the socialist camp. This time again, Moscow's *reaction* was built on the spot. In Iraq in the early 1960s, Baghdad's Government turned to the Soviets, asking for assistance in vast-scale projects in the field of infrastructures, agriculture, irrigation, transports, geological explorations, industrialisation, and others. Here, Soviet reactions were based on arguments and procedures that did not follow the precedent of Egypt. Until the mid-1950s, as Karen Dawisha argued, more than a lack of motivation was a lack of opportunities that had been missed until that moment⁶⁹¹. In other words, rather than uniquely creating opportunities based

⁶⁹¹ Karen Dawisha. *Soviet Foreign Policy Towards Egypt* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1979), 9.

on a Middle East' grand strategy', the Soviets grasped opportunities arising in circumstances that sometimes were even beyond their control or knowledge.

Second, looking into details of the Soviet Union's relationships with single national leaders and comparing these relationships, one can see that the Soviet attitude was varied and tailor-made. For instance, as far as Egypt is concerned, collaboration was studied carefully by the Soviet authorities for its political implications. As soon as Nasser went to power, the Soviets understood that Egypt's political orientation went in neither the capitalist nor the communist direction and that its foreign policy was one of neutrality between the two camps fighting the Cold War. Therefore, what the Soviets needed to do was reassure Nasser against communist interferences that he feared could come along with the provision of Soviet aid, goods, and specialists. This choice translated, for instance, into the Soviet press engagement in massive propaganda activities to praise the country's efforts to build a socialist state and claim the Soviet Government's support of such efforts instead of the imperialists' neo-colonial plans for political and economic enslavement of the Arab world. Whereas, for instance, in Iraq, the Soviet press raised its voice against Qassim's treatment of communists like in no other context. The Soviets thus made political considerations concerning the Iraqi context too, but these were immediately cast aside for the sake of economic cooperation. The political distance between Moscow and Baghdad did not dishearten the Soviets; what disheartened them was what they defined as the inefficiency of the Iraqi public systems, the bureaucracy and the unreliability of their partners. The conversation of the Soviet Ambassador Zaitsev with his British counterpart Trevelyan, when he refers to Iraq as a "hopeless" country, seems emblematic of this. Again, concerning Syria, Soviet authorities did study political evolutions carefully and took decisions accordingly. After a highly volatile phase in the Arab country in the first half of the 1960s, a political convergence gradually arose between the Soviet leadership and their Syrian counterpart with the second Baathist coup of 1966. Besides the privileged treatment that the Baathists were willing to reserve to local communists, what convinced the Soviets the most was the new Syrian regime's intention to move forwards on a path of 'socialist development', symbolised by the programme of nationalisations of Syrian enterprises and economic activities. However, the political affinity between Moscow and Damascus did not immediately bring to enhanced economic cooperation. The 1960s were troubled years for Syria both domestically and internationally, and the Soviet need for caution was evident in the fluctuation of their aid flows, in the decision to temporarily halt the provision of loans for the Euphrates Dam, and in the overall limited amount of trade. Overall, it appears that a 'tailor-made' diplomacy consisting ultimately of bilateral relations – despite being framed in a regional context where many dynamics were connected and interdependent – best describes the Soviet Union's posture in Arab countries of the Middle East.

Similarly, if there was no homogeneous Soviet Middle East policy, there seems not to have been a unitary ‘Arab response’ to the Soviet engagement. From a political perspective, the solid collaboration established with all three countries did not result in a convergence of political views, and communism never surged as a political driving force. However, Arab communists in the analysed period enjoyed very different extents of freedom in the three countries. From an economic perspective, Soviet aid also collected mixed fortunes. For instance, it seems that the Egyptian officials, especially Nasser, very much trusted the economic and technical expertise of the Soviets. Suggestions made by ‘theorists’ such as Shepilov were taken seriously and implemented by the Egyptians. On the contrary, Iraqis, for instance, were often very unsatisfied by Soviet provisions of aid, goods and technical assistance. British archives report several instances in which Iraqi officials complained to the British about the quality of Soviet assistance; many contracts were halted or suspended. Instead, for instance, the Syrians seemed to reciprocate the Soviets’ need for caution in bilateral relations. Evidence suggests that requests for arms and technical assistance were made through other countries of the socialist camp and not to the Soviets directly, as shown by the examples of Syrian collaboration with Bulgaria, as emerged from this study, or the example of collaboration with the German Democratic Republic⁶⁹². This deserves further scrutiny but, if confirmed, it would suggest that the Syrians carefully selected the partners and donors among the socialist countries. Overall, as the Soviets, in the early 1960s, strived to frame the ideology and political project of the Baathists. During the latest part of the Khrushchev’s rule, although the Baathist régime in Syria managed finally to establish itself as worthy of Soviet aid, political differences were not allowed to be forgotten, and Egypt was perhaps still the country in the Middle East on which Soviet attention was centred. In any case, Moscow’s increased capacity to move across different contexts suggests that Khrushchev and his successors decided to avoid over-dependence on one country in the Middle East and, instead, to engage on state-to-state cooperation in all instances and domains offered by the “progressive” shades of Arab nationalism. If state realism took the precedence over the promotion of communism by the USSR in the Arab world, this was ultimately the result not only of decisions made in Moscow but of the encounter of reciprocal ideas, perceptions and interests.

⁶⁹² Massimiliano Trentin, “State-led Development: The Privileged Linkage between East Germany and Ba’athist Syria, 1965–1972”, *Contemporary European History*, 30 (2021), 581–596.

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____ N° 210. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с премьер-министром Египта Г. Насером. (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt DS Solod with the Prime Minister of Egypt G Nasser”). 18 октября 1955 г.

____ N° 226. Б69. Письмо посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода в МИД СССР “к вопросу Арабо-Израильских отношений” (“Letter of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt D.S. Solod to the USSR Foreign Ministry ‘on the issue of Arab-Israeli relations’”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 4 Декабря 1955 г.

____ N° 230. Б69. Из записи беседы посла СССР в Египте Д.С. Солода с премьер-министром Египта Г. Насером (“From the recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt DS Solod with the Prime Minister of Egypt G Nasser”). 8 января 1956 г.

____ N° 247. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Египте Э.Д. Киселева в МИД СССР (“Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt Ed Kiselev to the USSR Foreign Ministry”). 11 мая 1956 г.

____ N° 254. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел СССР Д.Т. Шепилова с военным министром Египта Генерал Майором А. Амером (“Recording of the conversation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR D.T. Shepilov with the Minister of War of Egypt Major General A. Amer”). 18 июня 1956 г.

____ № 255. Б69. Телеграмма министра иностранных дел СССР Д.Т. Шепилова первому секретарю ЦК КПСС Н.С. Хрущеву (“Telegram of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR D.T. Shepilov to the first Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU N.S. Khrushchev”). 19 июня 1956 г.

____ № 262. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Египте Е.Д. Киселева в МИД СССР. (“Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Egypt E.D. Kiselev to the USSR Foreign Ministry”). 15 июля 1956 г.

____ № 266. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел СССР Шепилова с послом Египта в СССР Аль-Куни (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Foreign Minister Shepilov with the Egyptian Ambassador to the USSR M. Al-Kuni”). Ближневосточный Конфликт: Из документов архива внешней политики РФ. Том 1: 1947–1956 / Отв. ред. В.В. Наумкин. – М.: МФД, 2003. – 608 с. – (Россия. XX век. Документы). 27 июля 1956 г.

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____ № 147. Б69. Запись беседы референта посольство СССР в США Б.Н. Давыдова с пресс-атташе посольства ОАР в США М. Хабибом и советником посольства Х. Багдади (“Recording of a conversation between the referent of the Embassy of the USSR in the USA B.N. Davydov with the Press Attaché of the Embassy of the UAR in the USA M. Habib and the Counselor of the Embassy H. Baghdadi”). 11 января 1961 г.

____ № 153. Б69. Запись беседы временного поверенного в делах СССР в Израиле Г.П. Зимина с министром сельского хозяйства Израиля М. Даяном (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Chargé d'affaires in Israel G.P. Zimin with the Minister of Agriculture of Israel M. Dayan”). 2 Октября 1961 г.

____ № 154. Б69. Запись беседы Н.С. Хрущева с послом ОАР в СССР Мохаммедом Галебом (“Recording of a conversation between N.S. Khrushchev and the UAR Ambassador to the USSR Mohammed Galeb”). 9 Октября 1961 г.

____ № 156. Б69. Записка посольства СССР в Израиле в МИД СССР (“A note from the USSR Embassy in Israel to the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs”). 25 Октября 1961 г.

____ № 157. Б69. Докладная записка заведующего отделом стран Ближнего Востока МИД СССР Е.Д. Киселева Заместителю Министра Иностранных Дел СССР Я.А. Малику (“Memo by

the Head of the Middle East Department of the USSR MFA E.D. Kiselev to the USSR Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs YA.A. Malik”). 13 Декабря 1961 г.

___ № 159. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Сирии А.А. Борковского с Председателем Совета Министров САР Мааруфом Давалиби (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Syria A.A. Barkovsky with the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the SAR Maarouf Dawalibi”). 21 Февраля 1962 г.

___ № 161. Б69. Телеграмма посла СССР в Израиле М.Ф. Бодрова в МИД СССР (“Telegram of the USSR Ambassador to Israel M.F. Bodrov to the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs”). 26 марта 1962 г.

___ № 163. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Израиле М.Ф. Бодрова с начальником штаба ООН по наблюдению за соблюдением условий перемирия в Палестине генералом Фон Горном (“A recording of a conversation between the USSR Ambassador to Israel M. F. Bodrov and the Chief of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in Palestine, General Von Horn”). 14 июня 1962 г.

___ № 165. Б69. Запись беседы министра иностранных дел Громыко с послом Израиля в СССР Текоа (“Recording of a conversation between Foreign Minister Gromyko and the Israeli Ambassador to the USSR Tekoa”). 6 июля 1962 г.

___ № 170. Б69. Записка посла Ссср в израиле М.Ф. Бодрова заместителю министра иностранных дел СССР С.Г. Лапину (“A note by the USSR Ambassador to Israel M.F. Bodrov to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR S.G. Lapin”). 4 марта 1963 года.

___ № 172. Б69. Запись беседы заведующего отделом стран ближнего востока МИД СССР А.Д. Щиборина с временными поверенными в делах Израиля в СССР А. Агмоном (“Recording of a conversation between the Head of the Middle East Department of the USSR MFA A.D. Shchiborin and the Charge d’affaires of Israel in the USSR A. Agmon”). 21 августа 1963 г.

___ № 173. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Израиле Бордова с министром иностранных дел Израиля Меир (“Recording of a conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Israel Bodrov and Israeli Foreign Minister Meir”). 21 августа 1963 г.

___ № 175. Б69. Запись беседы посла СССР в Израиле Бордова с премьер-министром Израиля Эшколом (“Recording of the conversation of the USSR Ambassador to Israel Bodrov with the Prime Minister of Israel Eshkol”). 25 сентября 1963 г.

___ N° 177. Б69. Записка посла в Израиле Бордова министру иностранных дел СССР Громыко (“A note by the Ambassador to Israel Bodrov to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Gromyko”). 5 октября 1963 г.

___ N° 263. Б69. Письмо Советского правительства правительству Израиля, направленное через посредство посольства Финляндии в СССР. Москва, 5 Июня 1967 г. (“A letter from the Soviet Government to the Government of Israel, sent through the Embassy of Finland in the USSR. Moscow, 5 June 1967”). 5 Июня 1967 г.

Foreign Office, National Archives, London Kew.

Soviet-Egyptian relations.

___ JE 11338/1. Trade Agreement between Egypt and Russia will probably be signed on March 8th. FO 371/108403. Signature of trade agreement between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 4, 1954.

___ JE 11338/2. C. 5118/4/54. Trade Agreement: Egypt and Russia. This was initiated on March 10. Gives details of goods agreed upon, etc. FO 371/108403. Signature of trade agreement between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 13, 1954.

___ VR 1092/185. Colonel Gammon’s monthly report on incidents. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May, June, July, August and September of 1955.

___ VR 1092/183. 1199/34/55. Israel-Egypt. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Colonel Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1955.

___ VR 1092/171. 213. Israel-Egypt. Incident on June 14. Text of press communiqué issued by Truce Supervision Organisation about incident during which Israelis from survey party took Egyptian jeep by force and drove away to Kibbutz Xiot and three Israelis forcibly detained the Egyptian liaison officer while car drove away. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 16, 1955.

___ VR 1092/174. Gaza situation and the implications of the Anglo-Jordanian Treaty. Brief for the Minister of State in talks with the King of Jordan. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 16, 1955.

- ____ VR 1092/172. 478. Israel-Egypt. Gaza situation. Secretary of State reports conversation with Mr. Dulles and M. Pinay. US proposal that it would deter the Israelis if Security Council was alerted in San Francisco. French and UK objections to proposal. The three permanent representatives to United Nations to meet further on this. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 17, 1955.
- ____ VR 1092/173. 59. Israel-Egypt. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 17, 1955.
- ____ JE 11338/1. 1160/1/55. Sudanese-Russian commercial relations. Reports the visit of two members of the Soviet embassy in Cairo to Khartoum recently. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 17, 1955.
- ____ VR 1092/187. Extract from record of conversation between Secretary of State and the Secretary General of the United Nations. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 17, 1955.
- ____ VR 1092/178. 184. Israel-Egypt. US Ambassador's further conversation with Colonel Nasser who expressed annoyance at H.M. Ambassador's representations concerning his alleged intentions of buying arms from Russia. Said it was merely an idea, but did say that the Egyptian at some level had opened question with Soviet Embassy in Cairo. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 21, 1955.
- ____ VR 1092/180. 15: Gaza. Israel-Egypt. Addressed to the United Kingdom Delegation San Francisco. Telegram No. 22 of June 21. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 21, 1955.
- ____ VR 1092/182. 220. Israel-Jordan. Incident on June 20/21. Colonel Brevster's information does not confirm Jordanian version of the incident. There is no evidence of incursion by Israel Platoon into Jordan or firing by Israelis over the D/Z but Jordan troops did fire into Israel. Further incident on June 21/22 – one Israeli wounded. FO 371/115902. Israel-Egypt: discussion

between US ambassador, Cairo, and Col Nasser about UK approach concerning alleged Egyptian purchase of arms from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 22, 1955.

____ JE 1676/I(A). Russian journalists in Egypt. Mr Shepilov, an editor of Pravda, is staying in Egypt as the guest of the editor of Al Ziza. FO 371/113771. Journalists from Soviet Union in Egypt. National Archives, London Kew. July 29, 1955.

____ JE 10338/2. African Department. Egypt and Sudan. Visit of Colonel Nasser to Moscow. Addressed to Foreign Office Saving telegram no. 164 of August 11. FO 317/113786. Political relations between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 11, 1955.

____ JE 11338/2. 1413. Russian aid for Egypt. Gives press comments and reactions to the declaration by the Soviet Ambassador that Russia had offered economic assistance to Egypt. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 11, 1955.

____ JE 11338/3. 2221. Telegram to Cairo. Russian aid for Egypt. Gives press comments and reactions to the declaration by the Soviet Ambassador that Russia had offered economic assistance to Egypt. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 12, 1955.

____ JE 11338/3. 2221. Addressed to Cairo telegram No. 2221 of October 12. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 12, 1955.

____ JE 11338/5. 1433. Russian aid to Egypt. Gives press reports of October 12th on Russian aid. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 12, 1955.

____ JE 11338/5. 1433. Addressed to Foreign Office telegram No. 1433 of October 13, 1955. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 13, 1955.

____ JE 11338/7. 1442. Russian aid to Egypt. Gives his estimation of the Egyptian attitude to Russian aid to accelerate Egyptian development projects and suggests action that we might take regarding the High Dam. FO 371/113653. Commercial relations between Soviet Union and Sudan: aid to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 14, 1955.

____ JE 10338/4. African Department. Egyptian and Sudan. Egyptian-Russian relations. FO 317/113786. Political relations between Egypt and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. November 29, 1955.

- ____ JE 1109/1. Visit of technical mission to Egypt. Comments on the visit. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 29, 1956.
- ____ JE 1109/2. Visit of technical mission to Egypt. Comments on the visit. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 2, 1956.
- ____ JE 1109/4. 1143/3/56). Russian technical assistance. At recent meeting in Jedda between Colonel Nasser, King Saud and the Imam Ahmed, the Yemenis raised the question of Russian technical assistance. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 28, 1956.
- ____ JE 1109/3. 46 (10321/42/56). Visit of Russian engineers to Egypt. Informs of statement made by Melinkov as reported in "Ahram" on March 29. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 14, 1956.
- ____ JE 1109/5. 1158/4/56. Visit of Soviet Technical Mission to Egypt from March 24-April 11. FO 371/118930. Technical assistance to Egypt from Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 15, 1956.

Soviet-Iraqi relations.

- ____ EQ 11233/11/58. Commercial relations between Iraq and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. FO 371/133103. October 16, 1958.
- ____ EQ 11338/1. 11233/21/58. Commercial Secretariat. Baghdad to Eastern Europe. FO 371/133103. Commercial relations between Iraq and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 16, 1958.
- ____ EQ11338/2. 11233/21/58. Commercial Secretariat. Baghdad to Eastern Europe. FO 371/133103. Commercial relations between Iraq and Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. November 29, 1958.
- ____ EQ 11338/1. 1162/26/59. Iraqi/Soviet Vocational Agreement. Comments on Agreement. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. December 31, 1959.
- ____ EQ 10338/2. 10123/26/1. Report by Military Attaché on reception given by Iraqi Military Attaché to mark Army Day. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. January 6, 1960.
- ____ EQ 1193/2. Estimated Russian equipment in Iraq – January 1961. FO 371/157702. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. January 24, 1960.

- ____ EQ 10213/26/1. Report by Military Attaché on reception given by Iraqi Military Attaché to mark Army Day. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. January 26, 1960.
- ____ EQ 1193/4. 1194/61. Cost of equipment supplied by Russia. FO 371/157702. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 8, 1960.
- ____ EQ11338/3. 1161/4/605. Summary of Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 16, 1960.
- ____ EQ113138/4. Preliminary studies for Government electric lamp factory under Iraqi/Soviet agreement have been completed. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 20, 1961.
- ____ EQ113138/5. Contracts signed for Soviet concrete silos under Iraqi/Soviet economic agreement. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 21, 1961.
- ____ EQ 10338/3. 10313/1/3. Treatment by the Soviet Press on the Communist split in Iraq. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 1, 1960.
- ____ EQ10338/4. Bloc penetration in Iraq. Requests comment on State Department Paper. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 14, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/4. 1161/8/605. Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 15, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/7. 1161/11/60. Soviet embassy statement of Soviet aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 24, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/5. 1161/9/60. Further development in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 29, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/6. 11230/2/60. Discrimination in the granting of import licenses. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 29, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/8. CS 11012/1/60. Iraqi/Soviet Economic Agreement. Difficulties arising out of rate of exchange. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 5, 1960.
- ____ EQ 113138/10. Iraqi/Soviet economic agreement anniversary. Report of press conference held by the Soviet acting commercial counsellor, Baghdad. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 6, 1961.

- ____ EQ 10338/7. 10315/4/60. Report on Qassim's speech at the opening of the Soviet Industrial Exhibition. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 12, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/9. 1161/15/60. Soviet proposal to establish technical institute in Iraq; difficulties arising out of the financing of the project. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 12, 1960.
- ____ EQ 10338/8. FO 371/149867. Mikoyan's press conference in Baghdad. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 16, 1960.
- ____ EQ 10338/9. 10315/5/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan's visit to Iraq. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 19, 1960.
- ____ EQ 10338/8. Mikoyan's press conference in Baghdad. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 16, 1960. (ME/312/E/2).
- ____ EQ 11338/11. 1161/15/60. Costs of surveys carried out by Soviet experts under the Iraqi/Soviet Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 22, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/8. CS 11012/1/60. Iraqi/Soviet Economic Agreement. Difficulties arising out of rate of exchange. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. April 26, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/13. 1161/16/60. Communist aid to Iraq and treatment of Iraqi students in Communist countries. FO 371/149889. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 3, 1960.
- ____ EQ 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960.
- ____ EQ 10338/11. 10315/10/60. Report on Mr Mikoyan's visit to Iraq paid from April 8-15. FO 371/149867. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 7, 1960.
- ____ EQ 10338/15. CS 1865/1/60. Report on Soviet Industrial Exhibition in Baghdad. FO 371/149889. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. May 21, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/18. 1161/21/60. List of developments in Communist aid to Iraq up to June 15 (1960). FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 17, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/20. 1683/22/60. On the occasion of the Iraqi/Soviet negotiations: views and suggestions on the subject of amending the economic and technical aid agreement between the two countries. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. July 11, 1960.

- ____ EQ 11338/23. 1161/25/60. Principal developments of Communist aid to Iraq. Definite trend away from Soviet training to armed forces. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. August 23, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/24. 1161/30/60. List of latest developments in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. September 27, 1960.
- ____ EQ 10338/22. 1161/32/60. Encloses translation of official text of Iraq/Soviet Agreement of Technical Vocational Training, signed Dec. 27. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. October 19, 1960.
- ____ EQ 11338/28. 1161/38/60. List of developments in Communist aid to Iraq. FO 371/149980. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. December 1, 1960.
- ____ EQ 103138/1. 10313/1/3. Soviet Afro-Asian solidarity committee call on Qassim to free jailed communists. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961.
- ____ EQ 103138/2. 10313/1/3. Moscow Radio attacks Iraq's treatment of Communist Afro-Asian Nationalists. Iraq's counter attack contains an element of appeal for cessation. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 15, 1961.
- ____ EQ 113138/3. Soviet aid to Iraq. Projects to be speeded up. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 17, 1961.
- ____ EQ 1193/5. 1194/61. Iraq decides to buy Soviet trainers for Iraqi Air Force Flying College. FO 371/157702. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 23, 1961.
- ____ EQ 103138/5. 1034/1/61. Further reaction of Iraqi press to Moscow Radio's attack on Government's treatment of Communists. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 6, 1961.
- ____ EQ 113138/7. Mr Malakhov's visit to Iraq to clinch Soviet/Iraqi economic agreement. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 7, 1961.
- ____ EQ 1193/5(A). 1194/61. Iraq decides to buy Soviet trainers for Iraqi Air Force Flying College. Qassim's preference for Russian aircraft reported to be because of technical advantages in future Palestine fight. FO 371/157702. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 8, 1961.

- ____ EQ 103138/7. 1194/61. Qassim attends dinner for General Danilov, Inspector of Soviet Experts on visit to Baghdad. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 16, 1961.
- ____ EQ 113138/15. Georgy Baskaev, Russian Trade representative, will open up trade links in Basra with the USSR. FO 371/157694. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 6, 1961.
- ____ EQ 103138/11. 1034/24/61. Soviet Ambassador's analysis of Iraq situation is in accord with the British. He is despondent about inefficiency of Iraqis. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 15, 1961.
- ____ EQ 103138/12. 1034/25/61. War of words between the National Progressive Party newspaper and nationalist newspaper over proper Iraqi attitude towards soviet propaganda campaign. FO 371/157679. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 22, 1961.
- ____ EQ 1193/9. 1470. Iraq military mission. FO 371/157702. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. November 3, 1961.
- ____ EQ 113138/1. 1161/2/62. Visit of Podchufarov – Soviet Deputy Minister of Transport to inspect progress on the Baghdad-Basra railway. FO 371/164256. Commercial relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 7, 1962.
- ____ EQ 103138/2. 1034/2/62. Iraq/Soviet relations. FO 371/164246. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. February 27, 1962.
- ____ EQ103138/3. 1034/2/62. Views expressed by the Iraqi ambassador on the extent of Russian support for the Kurds. FO 371/164246. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. June 27, 1962.
- ____ EQ 103138/4. 10213/23/7. Iraqi-Soviet relations. Attack on the Qassim Government for its Kurdish policy published in the World Marxist Review. FO 371/164246. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. July 23, 1962.
- ____ EQ 103138/9. Soviet attacks on Qassim regime demand for Kurd self-rule. FO 371/164246. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. September 22, 1962.
- ____ EQ 103138/1. 1743. Discussion with Iraqi Ambassador. Iraqi students in the Soviet Union. FO 371/170457. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. January 3, 1963.
- ____ EQ 193138/3. 10313/14/2. Soviet press comment on the revolution in Iraq has been cautious. FO 371/170457. Political relations: Soviet Union. National Archives, London Kew. March 4, 1963.

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