

UNINTENDED ALLIANCES: KENNEDY, ISRAEL, AND ARAB NATIONALISM

by

Michael Bocco

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, Florida

December 2008

Copyright by Michael Bocco 2008

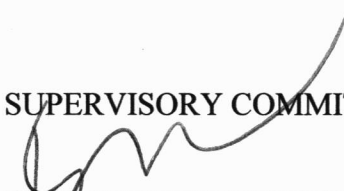
# UNINTENDED ALLIANCES: KENNEDY, ISRAEL, AND ARAB NATIONALISM

by

Michael Bocco

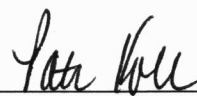
This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Kenneth A. Osgood, Department of History, and has been approved by the members of his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

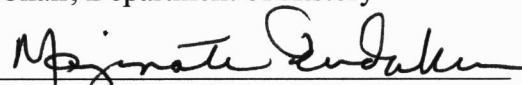
## SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

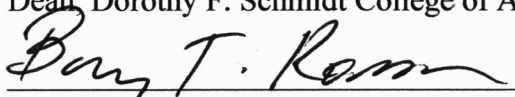
  
Kenneth A. Osgood, Ph.D.  
Thesis Advisor

  
Eric J. Hanne, Ph.D.

  
Mark H. Rose, Ph.D.

  
Patricia A. Kollander, Ph.D.  
Chair, Department of History

  
Manjunath Pendakur, Ph.D.  
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts & Letters

  
Barry T. Rosson, Ph.D.  
Dean, Graduate College

Nov. 17, 2008  
Date

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the History Department's Faculty at Florida Atlantic University for all their help and guidance through the years to make this thesis possible. They provided not only a conducive learning environment but also became an extended family, which is something I will always cherish. I am grateful for the invaluable assistance from many individuals. First, I would like to thank the History Department for awarding me the O'Sullivan Travel Grant, which allowed me to travel to the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts. I greatly appreciate Mrs. Marjorie O'Sullivan's generosity for making this award possible. A special thanks to David Glauber for all his help in the early thesis writing process, and his attentive ear was greatly appreciated. This work benefited from an exceptional thesis committee. A sincere appreciation goes to Dr. Mark H. Rose for providing me with encouragement to think outside of the box in history and in life. Dr. Eric J. Hanne offered his personal and academic guidance that helped me comprehend both western and eastern perspectives on the Middle East. Last but certainly not least, a most heartfelt thanks to Dr. Kenneth A. Osgood for enlarging the scope of this project, being a mentor, and pushing me to strive for excellence. Without him, this thesis would never have happened.

## ABSTRACT

Author: Michael Bocco  
Title: Unintended Alliances: Kennedy, Israel, and Arab Nationalism  
Institution: Florida Atlantic University  
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Kenneth A. Osgood  
Degree: Master of Arts  
Year: 2008

This thesis will explore the origins of the U.S.-Israeli alliance during the Kennedy administration. John F. Kennedy provided Israel with the first U.S. weapons sale, issued the first informal security guarantee, and established the first joint security consultations between both nations. Ironically, Kennedy gave these concessions to contain Israel, not to establish closer relations. His primary objective for the Middle East was to improve U.S. relations with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, seeing Nasser as the path for gaining pro-American sentiments among the Arab population in the region to the detriment of the Soviets. Kennedy unintentionally laid the foundations of the U.S.-Israeli alliance while trying to restrain Israel, fearing Israeli actions would impede his plans. The Palestinian refugee issue, the regional arms race between Egypt and Israel, and Israel's secret nuclear weapons program became three pivotal concerns for Kennedy that unintentionally led to the U.S.-Israeli alliance.

## UNINTENDED ALLIANCES: KENNEDY, ISRAEL, AND ARAB NATIONALISM

Introduction.....	1
I. Refugees and Weapons.....	14
II. Dealing with the Middle East's Arms Race and Nasser .....	48
III. Kennedy and Israel's Quest for the Bomb .....	82
IV. Conclusion .....	113
Bibliography .....	123

## INTRODUCTION

On 4 July 1966, thousands gathered in the hot summer sun to commemorate the opening of the new John F. Kennedy Memorial, honoring the recently slain president. Foreign dignitaries, world leaders, and ordinary onlookers marveled at the artistic beauty of concrete and glass that rose before them celebrating the life of the late president. Architect David Reznik designed the memorial to symbolize a tree trunk that had been cut in its prime, an allegoric representation of the brutal assassination of the forty-six year old president. United States Chief Justice Earl Warren remarked in his dedicatory speech for the opening commemoration that Washington D.C. had “more than its share of edifices in stone and bronze,” but that this site served also as a “living memorial” honoring JFK represented by the numerous tree saplings planted around the monument. Warren visualized that these saplings would sprout into a forest for future generations to relish. U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Walworth Barbour, commented to the crowd that Kennedy once remarked “a nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces but also by the men it honors, the men it remembers.” Today one can visit and marvel at the grandeur of the Kennedy Memorial, the world’s largest monument honoring the fallen President Kennedy, but one would have to travel five miles outside of Jerusalem in Israel to see it.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> “Israel Unveils Kennedy Tribute”, *New York Times*, 5 July 1966, 8.

The opening of the memorial (known as Yad Kennedy in Israel) in 1966 is itself a testament to John F. Kennedy's pivotal role in shaping the U.S.-Israeli alliance. The young president and his administration planted the seeds of a lasting bond between the two nations. The designers of the memorial site in Israel encapsulated this notion with the planting of thousands of young tree saplings surrounding the monument, so that future generations in Israel may enjoy the fruits garnished from the actions of Kennedy and his administration. Today, those tree saplings have grown into a lush green forest blanketing a hilltop overlooking Jerusalem from the west, symbolizing the strength and longevity of the current alliance between the U.S. and Israel. A comprehensive analysis into the planting of those seeds, the formation of the U.S.-Israeli alliance, is what this study seeks to endeavor.

The foundations of the alliance between the United States and Israel began under the Kennedy administration. During the Kennedy administration, the U.S. government for the first time sold the young state of Israel advanced weaponry. Kennedy provided Israel with defensive guided missiles, the HAWK missile system, breaking with past U.S. policy that restricted arms sales to Israel. The administration also initiated the first joint security consultations between the two countries, establishing a long tradition of regional security planning and intelligence sharing between the U.S. and Israel. It was also under the Kennedy administration that a strengthening between both countries' domestic politics occurred, with each country influencing the domestic politics of the other. These monumental events and decisions in U.S. foreign policy by the Kennedy administration towards Israel made a distinct break with past U.S. policies, and became the building



blocks for the future alliance between Israel and the U.S. government. Under the Kennedy administration the seeds of the U.S.-Israeli alliance were planted.

The Kennedy administration did not set out to establish a closer relationship with Israel. The administration had other priorities, foremost amongst them improving the relationship between the United States and Egypt, not Israel. Kennedy believed that by establishing closer relations with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser he could weaken the Soviet position in the region. He believed that through Egypt the U.S. could increase a pro-American posture among the Arab population and influence the direction of Arab nationalism in the region. During the 1960s, Nasser preached an ideology that exalted Arab culture over western culture, denounced imperialism, and professed neutrality in the Cold War contest. Perceiving Egypt as the epicenter of the movement, Kennedy hoped to influence Cairo to direct the forces of Arab nationalism. In essence, the administration viewed the sweeping currents of the Nile as the pathway to manipulate the rising tide of Arab nationalism in the region.

The Kennedy administration unintentionally developed a closer relationship between the U.S. and Israel. Nasser's rising influence in the region increased the Israeli government's concern over its security, causing Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to seek security concessions from the Kennedy administration. Kennedy did not perceived Israel's defenses as inadequate against Nasser, but he instead viewed Israel's foreign policy in the Middle East as growing progressively threatening and impeding future U.S. policy goals for the region. Kennedy's primary policy aim of rapprochement with Nasser ran in direct opposition to the Israeli government's wishes. He consequently gave security concessions to the Israeli government in order to placate their security

concerns and hoped they would adopt a less threatening policy in the region. Fears of an assertive Israeli entity destabilizing the precarious region weighted heavy in Kennedy's decisions. Hoping to court Nasser and placate Ben-Gurion, the Kennedy administration believed it could rectify the Palestinian refugee situation, impede the escalating arms race between Israel and Egypt, and stop the Israeli nuclear weapons program with the intentions of gaining U.S. influence in the Middle East. These three policy aims by the administration unintentionally laid the foundations of the U.S.-Israeli alliance. Kennedy's decisions to sell sophisticated weapons and his offers of security guarantees to Israel led to the establishment of military and security exchanges between the two nations and enmeshed both countries domestic politics, thus setting the course for the future of the US-Israeli relationship.

The sale of the Hawk missile system provided the catalyst for establishing closer military cooperation between the U.S. and Israel. The young nation of Israel had been hoping to purchase sophisticated weapons from the U.S. since its creation in 1949, but had been rebuffed by the U.S. government repeatedly, due to the American policy of nonalignment in the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. The Kennedy administration's sale of the Hawk missile system to Israel in 1962 started the long trend of American arms sales to Israel that future U.S. administrations continued at increasing levels. The exchange of advanced U.S. weaponry into Israel solidified the relationship between the two countries eventually linking the nations together militarily, politically, and strategically.

The reason for the Hawk missile sale to Israel is one central concept in understanding the inception of the Israeli-U.S. alliance; numerous historical interpretations have explored this one key issue. Two prominent historians, Roby C.

Barrett and Avi Shlaim, champion the view that Kennedy made the open arms sale to shore up political support in the U.S. They contend that Kennedy had just beaten his political opponent Richard Nixon in a close presidential race in 1960, and he did not have the full backing and support of the U.S. public. They surmise that Kennedy was looking for American Jewish political support. The president made the sale as mid-term Congressional elections were approaching in 1962 to ensure campaign contributions to the Democratic Party<sup>2</sup>. Historians John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt also note that although there were numerous factors involving the Hawk sale, the influence of Jewish voters and donors to the Democratic Party played a decisive role in Kennedy's decision.<sup>3</sup> These authors conclude that the missile sale ensued due to domestic political support concerns.

This interpretation, however, does not account for the relative weakness of the Israeli lobby in the United States during the early 1960s. Historian Warren Bass asserts that the Israeli lobby in the U.S. during the early 1960s was still in its infancy and had not developed into an influential political entity.<sup>4</sup> Historian David Verbeeten argues that the Israeli lobby “did not shape White House policy” during the Kennedy administration, but only gained influence and power after the Six Day War in 1967 when U.S. perceptions of Israel began to view the country as an asset to combat Arab nationalism and Soviet

---

<sup>3</sup> Roby C. Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War; US Foreign Policy under Eisenhower and Kennedy*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 205, and Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of The U.S. Israel Alliance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 147.

influence in the region.<sup>5</sup> Bass also notes that the central vehicle of the Israeli lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), in 1962 focused its efforts not on attaining advanced weaponry, but on pressuring the U.S. to back a UN General Assembly resolution to instate direct Arab-Israeli negotiations. The AIPAC hoped that the UN resolution would pass with American backing forcing Arab nations in the region to recognize the existence of the Israeli state. As a mark of the lobby's limited influence in 1962, the U.S. voted against the resolution for direct Arab-Israeli negotiations in the General Assembly. As for needing votes for the 1962 Congressional elections, Bass states "American Jews in the 1960s were mostly Democrats anyway."<sup>6</sup> Over 80% of American Jews voted for Kennedy in the 1960 election; most Jewish voters supported Kennedy and the Democratic Party.<sup>7</sup> Bass does note one occasion when the Israeli lobby did affect Kennedy's foreign policy in 1963 when a combined domestic opposition arose comprised of Republican conservative politicians, the oil lobby, and the AIPAC united together to end Kennedy's economic aid and rapprochement towards Nasser.<sup>8</sup>

According to Bass, the Kennedy administration sold the Hawk missiles because of an apparent military imbalance between Israel and Egypt. He asserts that the sale had been influenced by Egyptian President Nasser's actions of obtaining Soviet arms upsetting the military advantage that Israel held. Moreover, Bass points to key members of the Kennedy administration, in particular Deputy Counsel to the President Myer Feldman and National Security Counsel Aid Robert W. Kromer, who convinced Kennedy

---

<sup>5</sup> "How Important Is the Israeli Lobby?" by David Verbeeten, *The Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2006, volume XIII: number 4, 21-23.

<sup>6</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 148.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Tivnan, *The Lobby: Jewish Political Power and American Foreign Policy*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 54.

<sup>8</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 114-115. Bass notes that the oil lobby and Israeli lobby joined together to oppose JFK's Nasser rapprochement policy.

that Egypt had gained a tactical military advantage over Israel. He contends that Nasser had been consistently rebuffing Kennedy's overtures, and that Nasser's arms purchases from the Soviets caused serious alarm in the Kennedy administration. Bass claims that Nasser's actions, coupled with a concern over Israeli military defenses, led Kennedy to sell the missiles to Israel.<sup>9</sup>

This is a strong argument, but Bass places too much emphasis on internal divisions within the Kennedy administration directing foreign policy. Moreover, the administration never perceived a military imbalance favoring Egypt, as Israel claimed in its communications with Kennedy –an imbalance Bass sees as explaining the Hawk sale. Rather Kennedy and his administration viewed Israel's military capabilities as superior. Kennedy's personal letters to David Ben-Gurion and Levi Eshkol clearly state that he actually believed that Israeli had a military advantage over all the combined Arab nations in the region from 1961 to 1963. In late 1963, Kennedy lectured Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol over Israel's definitive military superiority stating that "Ben-Gurion's letters and the statements of your own military leaders indicate that you share this estimate."<sup>10</sup> During the height of the regional arms race between Israel and Egypt, the administration continued to refuse Israeli requests for more weapons, except for on two occasions where military imbalances did not factor into the sales. There is no clear evidence that proves that the Kennedy Administration believed that a military disparity existed between Israel and Egypt –that is, no disparity that threatened Israel's security.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12-14, and 154.

<sup>10</sup> JFK letter to Levi Eshkol, 2 October 1963, Presidential Office Files (hereafter referred to as POF), Box 119a, Israel general, folder 6, John F. Kennedy Library (hereafter referred to as JFKL).

Douglas Little offers another historical interpretation for the Hawk missile sale. He contends that the Kennedy administration sold the Hawk missiles because of concerns about Israeli nuclear ambitions. During the latter part of the Eisenhower administration, the U.S. government learned that Israel was covertly establishing a nuclear weapons program. Fearing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East between the Israelis and the Arab nations, Kennedy hoped that selling missiles to Israel would prevent Israel from introducing nuclear weapons into the region. Little claims that Kennedy made the sale to Israel after receiving assurances from Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion that Israel would not develop nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup>

Little makes a valid interpretation concerning the Kennedy Administration's trepidation over the Israeli nuclear program. Non-proliferation of nuclear weapons was a major cornerstone of the administration's policies and the Israeli nuclear program became one of the top priorities for Kennedy in the Middle East. However, the Hawk sale to the Israeli government was not linked to the Israeli nuclear program. Israel's nuclear program had always been foremost on Kennedy's mind, but did not become a central concern for Kennedy and the administration until March and April of 1963. The Israeli nuclear program and its designs to produce nuclear weapons instead helped produce and solidify the administration's perception of a hostile Israeli foreign policy that could threaten the status quo in the region.

Historian Abraham Ben-Zvi contends that the State Department tried to link the Hawk sale with a settlement over the Palestinian refugee issue, but Kennedy never fully supported the exchange. He states that the State Department acted alone trying to make

---

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 95.

the Hawk sale conditional to Israel's acceptance of a plan to resolve the Palestinian issue, known as the Johnson Plan, named after Dr. Joseph Johnson. Ben-Zvi asserts that National Security Counsel Aid Robert Kromer and Deputy Counsel to the President Myer Feldman never believed David Ben-Gurion would accept the Johnson Plan for the Hawks. Feldman and Kromer instead wanted to sell the Hawks to Israel to ensure American Jewish votes for the upcoming 1962 congressional elections.<sup>12</sup> After a departmental struggle within the administration ensued, Ben-Zvi claims that Feldman convinced the President to drop the Johnson Plan and make the Hawk offer to gain votes for the congressional elections.<sup>13</sup> Ben-Zvi argues that Kennedy approved the Hawk sale to simply gain votes and that the Johnson Plan was never a prominent issue for the president.

Additionally, Ben-Zvi argues that the Kennedy administration gradually perceived Israel as a strong regional deterrent against the spread of Arab nationalism in the region. Ben-Zvi contends that the Kennedy administration purposely used Israel during the Jordan Crisis of 1963 as a restraint against Nasser's expansion into Jordan.<sup>14</sup> Ben-Zvi claims that the administration viewed Israel as a strategic asset during the Jordan Crisis, saving the Jordanian government from being overthrown and preventing Nasser's influence from expanding into Jordan. He claims because of this new perception of Israel as a strategic asset the administration agreed to hold joint security consultations with Israel and offered the Israeli government security guarantees. Ben-Zvi concludes that the

---

<sup>12</sup> Abraham Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arm Sales to Israel*, (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.

<sup>14</sup> The term Jordan Crisis of 1963 is used to denote the political crisis in Jordan during April-May 1963 when the Jordanian government had been threatened by civil riots and protests which called for the overthrow of the government and the establishment of a new government aligned with Nasser.

Jordanian Crisis had been the milestone event that laid the foundations for the U.S.-Israeli relationship that eventually merged both countries' security objectives for the region.<sup>15</sup>

While each of these interpretations has merit, they all miss a critical point, one that might not sit easily with proponents of the U.S.-Israeli special relationship. Kennedy unintentionally moved the U.S. closer to Israel to contain Israel while courting Nasser. Kennedy feared that Israel's policies in the region would threaten the stability of the region by not compromising on the Palestinian refugee situation, perpetuating the regional arms race, and introducing nuclear weapons into the region. He feared that Israel's actions would ignite anti-American sentiments in the region and push Nasser and the Arab population towards the Soviets. The Palestinian refugee situation, the regional arms race, and Israel's nuclear weapons program became the three central concerns that motivated Kennedy to sell sophisticated weapons and offer security guarantees to Israel. These were meant as concessions to moderate Israel's behavior and promote regional stability, so that JFK could continue to work to improve U.S. relations with Nasser and the Arab states. Ironically and unintentionally, they established the roots of the US-Israel alliance.

Kennedy hoped to force Israel into complying with the Johnson Plan by offering the Hawk missile as an incentive, but instead unintentionally sold the missiles with the Israeli government abandoning the plan. He believed that a secret offer of the Hawks would break Ben-Gurion's uncompromising posture over the Palestinian refugee issue. Believing he had an agreement from the Israeli government for the covert exchange,

---

<sup>15</sup> Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arm Sales to Israel*, 98.



Kennedy instructed his administration to finalize the Johnson Plan with Nasser. The Johnson Plan settlement acted as a vital component to the administration's rapprochement with Nasser and gaining pro-American sentiments in the region. However, the eventual news leak of the Hawk sale to Israel in late September 1962 allowed the Israel government to secure the acquisition of the missiles and abandon all commitments to the Johnson Plan leaving Kennedy in an impossible position.<sup>16</sup> Fearing political repercussions domestically and internationally over the covert exchange, the administration had no option but to let the Hawk sale proceed without the Johnson Plan. This new interpretation over Kennedy's monumental decision to sell the Hawks for a solution to the Palestinian refugee situation will be discussed in chapter one.<sup>17</sup>

The escalating regional arms race between Israel and Egypt caused the Kennedy administration to inadvertently lay the foundations of the U.S.-Israeli alliance by offering informal security guarantees to Israel and initiating joint security consultations between both countries. Perceiving Nasser as a growing threat militarily and viewing the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) Federation in April 1963 as major challenge to its existence,<sup>18</sup> the Israeli government threatened preemptive action towards Jordan to ensure that the Jordanian government did not join the UAR Federation. Perceiving Israel as a threat not as a strategic asset during the Jordan Crisis of 1963, Kennedy offered an

---

<sup>16</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 178. Bass notes the media leak over the sale, but contends that the sale had been made to correct a military imbalance for Israel against Egypt. He also agrees with Ben-Zvi that the State Department later tried to make the sale conditional to Israel's compliance to the Johnson Plan, and that Kennedy did not support the idea of the Hawks for Israel's compliance with the Johnson Plan.

<sup>17</sup> Historian Avner Cohen notes that the sale of the Hawk missile system was offered for Israel's compliance with the Johnson Plan. However, Cohen does not explain or address why or how the Hawk sale transpired. Cohen's work focuses primarily on addressing Israel's history of pursuing nuclear weapons, see Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 111.

<sup>18</sup> The creation of the United Arab Republic Federation in 1963 was a joint military coalition between Egypt, Iraq, and Syria that proclaimed it would forcibly create a new Arab Palestine State.

informal security guarantee to control Israel's threatening policy towards Jordan.

Additionally, the administration involuntarily held joint security consultations with Israel in November 1963, agreeing to the meeting originally on the basis that it was only being held to discuss Israel's new intelligence on Nasser's military capabilities. Never perceiving Israel at a military disadvantage but rather as a destabilizing entity in the region, Kennedy unintentionally set the course for the establishment of the U.S.-Israeli alliance. These issues surrounding the regional arms race shaping Kennedy's decisions and perceptions will be addressed in chapter two.

Israel's nuclear weapons development program caused Kennedy's greatest apprehension in the Middle East. He dreaded the thought of Israel introducing nuclear weapons into the already tumultuous region. After receiving intelligence estimates in 1963 that forecasted the formation of a Soviet nuclear deterrent protecting an Arab coalition should Israel go nuclear, Kennedy threatened to sever the U.S.-Israeli relationship. He demanded inspections into Israel's nuclear reactor site to ascertain Israeli claims that their nuclear program had only peaceful intentions. The president used the full weight of the Executive Office to force Israel into allowing U.S. inspections into the reactor site. The near severing of the U.S.-Israeli relationship occurred during the final months of Kennedy's presence in office, thus refuting any claim that Kennedy began to perceive Israel as a strategic asset in the region. The immense pressure Kennedy put on Israel over its nuclear program shaped the domestic politics in Israel, marking the first occurrence of a foreign country influencing Israel's domestic politics. These issues surrounding Kennedy's concerns over Israel's nuclear program will be further explored in chapter three.

The origins of the U.S.-Israeli alliance began unintentionally under the Kennedy administration. Kennedy's primary policy aim had been to establish closer ties with Egypt not Israel. He inadvertently moved the U.S. closer to Israel by giving concessions to contain Israel. This reevaluation into the origins of the U.S.-Israeli alliance provides a unique interpretation by incorporating three overlapping concerns of the Kennedy administration instead of past interpretations that focus primarily on one aspect. The Palestinian refugee issue, the escalating regional arms race, and the development of the Israeli nuclear program were all issues that Kennedy feared Israel would progressively endanger in the region pushing Nasser and Arab sentiments towards the Soviets to rectify Israel's actions. The Kennedy administration and the Israeli government's policy aims directly opposed each other during the early 1960s, but by the end of 1963 the mechanisms were established to ensure the formation of the U.S.-Israeli alliance.

## I. REFUGEES AND WEAPONS

The Palestinian refugee issue became a primary concern for all nations in the Middle East region, and for all nations outside of the region seeking to influence the area. The refugee situation in Palestine arose from the aftermath of the 1948 War of Israeli Independence, and influenced the region's geopolitical composition tremendously. The Kennedy administration viewed the Palestinian refugee situation as a major impediment for the future stability of the region, and also as an opportunity to open its rapprochement policy with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and gain pro-American sentiments among the Arab population. Knowing Israel's long desire for advanced American weapons, Kennedy offered Israel the Hawk missile in exchange for Israel's compliance with the Johnson Plan. Named after Dr. Joseph Johnson, the Johnson Plan delineated compensation and repatriations for the refugees by Israel and the surrounding Arab states. Kennedy believed he could force Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion into a settlement over the Palestinian refugee issue. Seeking to gain Arab sentiments, the Kennedy administration pressed the Israeli government for a resolution on the refugee issue by offering the Hawk missile system in exchange for compliance to the Johnson Plan.

The Palestinian refugee issue developed over the course of forty years before the Kennedy administration took office in 1961. Events from the post-World War I era up to the creation of the state of Israel all helped produce the refugee situation and its

associated antagonisms in the region. U.S. policy prior to the Kennedy administration tended to adopt a strategy of aloofness and neutrality concerning events Palestine, mostly because of larger strategic concerns in the region.

The post-World War I geopolitical world left the region of Palestine under the control of the British government. The ‘sick man of Europe’, the Ottoman Empire, was reeling in its final death pangs from centuries of mismanagement and nationalistic uprisings, losing a costly war by allying itself with Germany, the Ottoman Empire lost most of its Arab holdings due to the combined military operations from the British and French governments. Both nations enlisted the help of the local Arabs and Jews that proved to be the catalyst in relinquishing Ottoman control in the region, especially in Palestine. While feeding the nationalistic ambitions among the local populace to garner their help during the war, the British and French governments secretly divided the region into their own separate spheres of influence under the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916.<sup>19</sup> The Sykes-Picot agreement came to fruition at the Versailles Conference that ended WWI, during which the Palestine Mandate was established giving Britain control of Palestine.

The promises by the British government for national independence to both Arab and Jews during World War I fueled nationalistic desires in Palestine. The British government made explicit guarantees to the Arabs in the region that they could govern themselves at the conclusion of the war provided that the local Arabs would help the British in their war effort. The British outlined these assurances in correspondences between British High Commissioner Henry McMahon and Sharif Hussein of Mecca in

---

<sup>19</sup> Peter L. Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East; U.S. Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945-1961*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 12.

1915-1916. Conversely, the British government also promised to support the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine with the Balfour Declaration of November 1917.<sup>20</sup> The ambiguous language of the British government seemed to promise Palestine to both the Arabs and Jewish populations in Palestine.

During the interwar years, a series of clashes erupted in the Palestine Mandate between the Jewish and Arab populations. Periodic violence broke out between the Arab and Jewish populations. Many of these clashes broke out due to both communities' desires for political control. In order to gain some cooperation from the Arab population in Palestine, the British government allowed the mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husayni, to control the political apparatuses pertaining to the Arab population. A massive influx of Jewish immigrants into Palestine added to the tensions; the Jewish population expanded from 66,000 (10 percent) in 1920 to a population of 400,000 (31 percent) by 1936. Many of the Jewish immigrants were fleeing the horrors of Nazism and anti-Semitism gripping Europe. Tensions came to a breaking point for the Arab population over the increasing Jewish population in Palestine and mushroomed into the Arab Revolt of 1936-39. Massive rioting and violence broke out among all parties, resulting in a chaotic Mandate.<sup>21</sup>

The British government adopted policies in Palestine to appease the Arab majority and hopefully stabilize the mandate. The British feared that the Arab community might be influenced by Germany to rebel against British control. Attempting to quell these fears and increase Arab support, the British government issued the 1939 White Paper. The White Paper limited the amount of Jewish immigrants into Palestine to

---

<sup>20</sup> Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

seventy-five thousand people over the term of five years. While the White Paper temporarily achieved Arab support, it increased the animosity from the Jewish population towards the British.<sup>22</sup>

The American policy during WWII was one in which wartime security and Anglo-U.S. relations prevailed over any nationalistic desires in Palestine. President Franklin D. Roosevelt adopted a policy of protecting the Anglo-U.S. alliance, and in July 1943 determined in a joint declaration with British officials halting all discussions of land distribution in Palestine until the end of the war. Roosevelt's Secretary of War, Robert P. Patterson, stated that "disorder in Palestine would affect adversely the situation in the whole area and possibly even the course of the entire war."<sup>23</sup>

The United States also developed new ties to the kingdom in Arabia during World War II controlling vital oil reserves, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud became an important regional ally. The American owned Arabian-American Oil Company helped contribute vital oil resources to combat the Axis powers worldwide. A staunch anti-Zionist and pro-Arab Palestinian, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud insisted that the U.S. follow pro-Arab policy towards Palestine. Though Roosevelt remained uncommitted to either side in Palestine, in 1943 he declared the vital importance of the Kingdom of Arabia for U.S. national security. U.S. economic and military aid flooded into the Arabian Desert in order to protect its assets during WWII.<sup>24</sup> Promoting the creation of an independent Jewish state in Palestine would undermine U.S. security concerns towards the Arab nations in the region.

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

Adding to American anxieties, a coalition of Arab states surrounding Palestine formed the Arab League in 1944 to promote Arab independence and Arab nationalism. Meeting in Alexandria, Egypt, representatives from Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt issued a joint declaration demanding that the British government fulfill its promise to create an independent Arab Palestinian state. The new Arab League also warned that any nation that aided in the creation of an independent Jewish state in Palestine would face dire consequences.<sup>25</sup> The Arab League became a forum in which the member states openly voiced their opposition to the creation of a Jewish state and any outside nation that facilitated that aim.<sup>26</sup> Though many of these member states were still influenced by western powers, they tried to assert their own independence from outside forces. The formation of the Arab League highlights the importance of the growing Arab nationalism in the region, and the linking of that nationalism to the Palestinian issue.

At the conclusion of World War II, fighting in Palestine erupted once again. This time the British officials became the targets. The Jewish Agency in Palestine, which controlled the political apparatuses in the Jewish communities, adopted a strategy for the immediate establishment of a Jewish state. Two armed military units, the Irgun and Lehi, began a terror campaign in Palestine to force the British out of Palestine. Though not officially tied to the Jewish Agency in Palestine, the Irgun and Lehi combatants specifically targeted British personnel. By late 1945, the Haganah militia, officially directed by the Jewish Agency, joined in on attacks of sabotage against British positions. The bombing of the King David Hotel in late 1946 by Jewish radicals killed a number of

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>26</sup> William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 200-201.



British officers and proved to be catalyst that led to Britain's decision to abandon the Mandate.<sup>27</sup>

Unable to control the situation in Palestine, the British government sought outside entities to mediate its withdrawal from the mandate. In February 1947, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin requested that the newly created United Nations provide a solution for Palestine. The United Nations formed an advisory committee called the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to formulate the division of Palestine into two separate states; one Jewish state and one Palestinian state.<sup>28</sup> The negotiations and preparations for the UN plan took months to proceed, and the situation in Palestine grew dire.

Civil War erupted in Palestine during the UNSCOP's planning between the Jewish and Arab communities. Both sides in the conflict committed atrocities on innocent civilians fanning the flames of animosity in the region. Not willing to wait for the UN partition plan and seeking an immediate escape from the chaos, the British government announced its plan for the full withdrawal and abandonment of Palestine on 15 May 1948.<sup>29</sup>

Immediately after the Union Jack was lowered in Palestine for the last time on the 14 May 1948, members of the Jewish community in Palestine declared the creation of the new state of Israel. David Ben-Gurion made the announcement in front of the Tel Aviv Art Museum; the declaration was broadcast live over the radio and a new constitution

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 259.

was presented based on the British model of government.<sup>30</sup> A new national entity appeared on the global map, showing the new nation of Israel geographically located where it once existed two thousand years before.

The day after the announcement proclaiming the creation of Israel, the combined armies of Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq invaded Palestine.<sup>31</sup> The Arab states operated under the direction of the Arab League to coordinate operations. The combined forces of the Arab League were poorly trained and outnumbered compared to the defending Israeli forces. The fighting was marked by intense periods of combat followed by numerous cease-fires; overall the war was decisively fought in Israel's favor.<sup>32</sup> The war concluded in a total Israeli victory that solidified a new Jewish state in Palestine with its borders far larger than those designated under the UN partition plan.

The creation of Israel produced another controversy in the region; refugees. The conflict produced over seven hundred thousand Palestinian refugees that were fleeing the conflict. Many of those refugees were physically forced to leave Palestine by the Israeli army under an order that intended to provide future land for Jewish immigration into the newly conquered area. Infamously known as Plan D, the Israeli government authorized a systematic campaign that "provided for the conquest and permanent occupation, or leveling, of Arab villages and towns."<sup>33</sup> The issue over the fate of these Palestinian refugees and the land where they once settled added to the animosity towards Israel from the surrounding Arab states and global opinion as well.

---

<sup>30</sup> Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 33.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>32</sup> Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 260-261.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Coupled with the defeat of 1948, the issue of the Palestinian refugees became a point of major contention for the surrounding nations in the Middle East. Many of the Arab nations vilified Israel and its practices against the Palestinian refugees during and after the war. For many of the Arabs, Israel became an extension of the old imperialistic tendencies of the West that had plagued the region for years. The creation of Israel and the aftermath surrounding the Palestinian refugee issue became the core issues of the tumultuous Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>34</sup>

After World War II, the U.S. viewed the Middle East as an essential region to control to help in its fight against communism. The petroleum reserves in the Middle East became a major concern for U.S. policy makers during the Cold War. The Middle East with its prized petroleum deposits made it the most essential location in the hydrocarbon age.<sup>35</sup> American officials considered Middle Eastern crude as central to aid Europe with its reconstruction efforts after the devastation of WWII. In 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency noted that “access to the oil of the Persian Gulf area and the denial of control of the Mediterranean to a major, hostile, expansionist power are deemed essential to the security of the U.S.”<sup>36</sup> The sweet flowing crude emanating from the Arab states in the Middle East made those nations possessing the natural petroleum reserves an integral part of U.S. Cold War policy.

Coupled with the fears of communism spreading into the Middle Eastern region, the U.S. became concerned with the growing specter of Arab nationalism in the region. One central figure associated with the rise of Arab nationalism was Egyptian President

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 430.

<sup>36</sup> Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 21.

Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser's rise onto the world political stage during the early 1950s caused grave concerns for the Eisenhower administration. Seeking to curb this perceived form of radical Arab nationalism, the Eisenhower administration put forth the Eisenhower Doctrine which promised aid and support against Soviet encroachments, though with the dual purpose of containing the spread of Nasserism. To stem the rise of Nasserism, the Eisenhower administration provided aid and support to pro-Western conservative Arab regimes in the region hoping to counterweight Nasser's threat. Originally perceived as an unwitting extension of Soviet influence, Nasserism became a third force outside of the Cold War paradigm which the U.S. had to contend with. Nasserism's policies tended to be anti-Western, anti-colonial, anti-capitalistic, and extremely anti-Israel, the U.S. government now faced a new dynamic element in the region, which also linked itself to the Palestinian refugee issue.<sup>37</sup>

Arab nationalism promoted Arab Palestinian rights and wanted reparations for the Palestinian refugees to be paid by Israel. Arab nationalistic currents called for Israel's fulfillment of the 1947 UN resolution for partition with the creation of an Arab Palestinian state. On the other end of the spectrum of Arab nationalism were those who claimed peace was impossible as long as the nation of Israel existed. This view was held most adamantly by the Iraq government during the mid 1950s. Many of the Palestinian refugees themselves looked to Nasser and his more pro active policy of Arab nationalism as the most promising venue to achieve their rights and independence. Adding to the complexity of the refugee situation, the majority of the refugees were located in Jordan, comprising two-thirds of the population in the country. Fearful of Arab nationalism, the

---

<sup>37</sup> Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2-3.

weak Jordanian government existed as a conservative Arab state highly dependent on foreign aid and support that held the Hashemite royalty in power in Jordan.<sup>38</sup> The Palestinian refugee issue became a central component to the tenets of Arab nationalism.

All of these issues surrounding the Palestinian refugees and Israel were inherited by a young New Englander on the steps of the U.S. Capital on a cold blistering winter's day in January 1961. The optimistic days of Camelot began during the height of the Cold War, with perceived Soviet ambitions for world domination running high in the psyche of most Americans. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy took the oath of office on 20 January, and soon ventured on the course of laying down the foundations that led to the U.S.-Israeli alliance.

Upon taking office, the Kennedy administration embarked on a policy that sought rapprochement with Nasser. They believed that through establishing closer ties with Nasser the U.S. could gain influence within the Arab population of the region. The administration believed that Eisenhower had missed an opportunity to bring the Egyptian president into the American orbit. Eisenhower's bellicose attitude towards the Soviets caused a major loss for the American position in the Middle East. Kennedy's administration hoped to rollback Soviet gains in Cairo.<sup>39</sup> The Kennedy administration recognized that the Palestinian refugee situation represented a central grievance among the Arab population in the region; it fueled Arab nationalism itself. Seeking to gain Nasser's trust and curry favor with the Arabs in the region, the Kennedy administration sought to resolve the Palestinian refugee situation.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 65-66, and 121-122.

<sup>39</sup> Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*, 191-192.

The Palestinian refugee situation became a major concern for the Kennedy administration in the Middle East. Thirteen years after the Palestinian refugee situation manifested, there still appeared no solution on the horizon; 700,000 thousand refugees lived in deplorable, unsanitary conditions in the refugee camps on the brink of poverty. Border incidents continued to break out between Israel and Syria. These deadly outbursts highlighted the fragile environment in the region. An unsteady armistice from 1949 held the region in a precarious state, technically still in a state of war. In order to bring stability to the region, the Kennedy administration embarked on a plan to pressure Israel to resolve the refugee crisis.

The Johnson Plan, as it eventually became known, became a plan for compensation and repatriation for the Palestinian refugees. The planned resettlement for the refugees put the majority of them in Jordan and Egypt, and allotted for a small percentage of refugees that wished to return back into Israel. Chosen by the Kennedy administration, Dr. Joseph Eric Johnson led the often slow and arduous task of visiting Israel and the Arab states that had refugees to work out the terms and costs of the plan. The estimated cost for the Johnson Plan was \$1,377,465,000, with Israel paying 40% of the total costs and the U.S. covering 30%. Moreover, the U.S. would cover almost half of Israel's 40% share through the use of aid packages from the U.S. government. Composed over the course of one year, all of the details of the plan were not finalized until August 1962.<sup>40</sup> The Johnson Plan became a comprehensive compensation and settlement plan for the displaced refugees that tried to erase the refugee problem from the region.

---

<sup>40</sup> Memorandum for the President, 17 August 1962, National Security Files (hereafter referred to as NSF), Box 118a, Israel general, 8-17-62 8-20-62, JFKL.

Announcing his intent to find a solution to the refugee issue, Kennedy sent letters to the leaders of the surrounding Arab nations. Kennedy's May 1961 letters expressed his desire to engage in the Palestinian refugee issue. Kennedy noted in the correspondences that he would be fully supporting the UN Palestine Conciliation Committee (PCC) in their renewed efforts to resolve the refugee situation.<sup>41</sup> Kennedy notified the Arab leaders of his administration's commitment on pushing to resolve the Palestinian refugee situation, though he did not supply any more information on the subject. Kennedy did not intend to initiate a solution to the refugee problem with the Arab countries in the region, but believed that any chance for a resolution to succeed rest with Israel.

Presidential staff member Myer Feldman expressed to Kennedy that one of the biggest opponents against the Johnson Plan would be Ben-Gurion. Feldman reported that Ben-Gurion would be hesitant to agree to a UN mandate to inject Israel with a large number of hostile refugees. He explained that the apprehensive prime minister believed that this large flood of refugees would produce a fifth column in Israel that would jeopardize the country's security.<sup>42</sup> Trying to get Ben-Gurion to accept any proposed plan on the refugee situation would prove to be difficult for the administration.

Believing that Israel was the largest obstacle to resolve the refugee problem, Kennedy approached the Israeli prime minister first to find a solution. The first meeting between President Kennedy and the Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion took place at the Waldorf Astoria Towers in New York on 30 May 1961. At Ben-Gurion's request, the meeting commenced as an informal meeting between the two leaders outside of the

---

<sup>41</sup> State Department to Cairo, Amman, Baghdad, Beirut, and Jidda, no date, NSF box 118, Israel general, 3-61 5-61, 2-3, JFKL, also see Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 166.

<sup>42</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 167.

public eye. The young president and the elder prime minister engaged in opening pleasantries and then turned down to business. The meeting quickly turned to the Palestinian refugee issue.<sup>43</sup>

Kennedy stressed the need for a settlement to the Palestinian refugee issue to Ben-Gurion. He expressed his hope that the Israeli government would fully cooperate with the renewed peacekeeping efforts of the Palestine Conciliation Committee (PCC). Kennedy informed Ben-Gurion that he planned to use this old United Nations entity from the 1950s to formulate a plan to settle the Palestine refugee issue. Kennedy argued that it would be in the best interests of the Israeli government to adhere to UN Resolution 1604, which stipulated a measure of ‘compensation or repatriation’ for the refugees: such measures by Israel would promote stability in the region. Ben-Gurion responded that “they -the UAR and any Arabs- don’t care what happens to people. They regard the refugees as the best weapon at hand.” Ben-Gurion stressed to the president that “if they could get hundreds of thousands of Arabs into Israel we would have those and still be surrounded by many millions of other Arabs,” noting the problem of allowing refugees back into Israel.<sup>44</sup> From their first meeting, it became apparent to the administration that Ben-Gurion would be the biggest obstacle for the Johnson Plan.

Word of the informal meeting between Ben-Gurion and Kennedy in New York soon reached the press. Ben-Gurion held a brief news conference at New York International Airport discussing the Palestinian refugee issue; the Kennedy administration had no prior knowledge of Ben-Gurion’s press conference. The *New York Times* reported

---

<sup>43</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, State Department, 30 May 1961, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 6-61, JFKL.

<sup>44</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, State Department, 30 May 1961, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 6-61, JFKL.



that Ben-Gurion mainly agreed with Kennedy's views concerning the fate of the refugees. Ben-Gurion stated that Kennedy had presented "a suggestion that might be a solution" to the refugee situation. The *New York Times* stated that Kennedy suggested that the refugee situation could be solved by a combination of repatriation and resettlement.<sup>45</sup> To the New York press, Ben-Gurion appeared forthcoming and interested in resolving the Palestinian refugee situation, a stark contrast to the demeanor he displayed to Kennedy in the private meeting.

In late June 1961, Ben-Gurion unexpectedly expressed his desire to resolve the Palestinian refugee situation to the American Embassy in Tel Aviv. Walworth Barbour, U.S. Ambassador to Israel, noted in a memo to the State Department that Ben-Gurion was "apparently convinced by the President of the importance and urgency that forward progress be made on the refugee problem." Barbour also mentioned that the Israel Foreign Office shared this same view. Wanting to take advantage of these developments, Barbour requested that the State Department provide further instructions on the issue before his coming meeting with the Israel Foreign Minister Golda Meir.<sup>46</sup>

The State Department wanted to keep discussions about the Palestinian problem out of the public eye. The State Department informed Barbour that it is in the "general interest to avoid any leaks and public discourses which can only make the task more difficult if not impossible." They warned Barbour that it now appears publicly that some kind of Kennedy initiative might be formulating concerning the refugees because of Ben-Gurion's statements to the New York press.<sup>47</sup> The State Department's concern

---

<sup>45</sup> "Ben-Gurion Finds Gain On Refugees", by Irvin Spiegel, *The New York Times*, 2 June 1961, 1, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Tel Aviv telegram to State Department, 21 June 1961, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 6-61, JFKL.

<sup>47</sup> State Department telegram to Tel Aviv, 21 June 1961, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 6-61, JFKL.

undoubtedly stemmed from its fears over should any refugee initiative fail, it would be viewed unfavorably towards the administration.

The Kennedy administration set the stage to start pushing its agenda on the Palestinian refugee situation. The events surrounding the new push for a settlement of the Palestinian refugee issue point to the administration's desire to offer something monumental to press the Israeli government into compliance. With Kennedy's discussion of a proposed refugee plan during the Ben-Gurion meeting in New York and Kennedy's letters informing Arab leaders in the region of his support of a renewed PCC effort, the refugee plan had the full backing of the president himself.<sup>48</sup>

The administration's desire to keep the plan secret also highlights the notion that the plan was tied directly to the president; domestic and foreign concerns were considered to protect Kennedy. If any major settlement plan initiated by the President and the administration failed, they would be viewed as incompetent by the American public, providing fodder for the Republicans. The Soviets also might capitalize on the American failure and provide an alternative plan; if the Soviet plan should succeed then Arab opinion would favor the Kremlin. By channeling any future planned resolutions on the refugee problem through the PCC, the Kennedy administration could delineate any responsibility for its failure on to the PCC. Undoubtedly, the push for resolving the refugee issue was propagated covertly by the Kennedy administration.

Trying to convince the Israeli government to accept the Johnson Plan proved difficult. In July 1961, Barbour met with Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir to discuss

---

<sup>48</sup> Warren Bass claims that it was primarily the State Department that was advocating the Johnson Plan, and that Kennedy did not fully support the Johnson Plan or the exchange of Hawk missiles for Israeli compliance for the plan, see Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 167-168.

Israeli thoughts on the refugee issue and the possibilities of Israel's acceptance of the new American proposal. Meir responded that any possibility of Arab compliance to a new refugee solution would be very remote. She explained to Barbour that Israel already took in an estimated 40,000 refugees after the 1948 war, and that Israel made offers "to accept another large number in the context of a peace settlement."<sup>49</sup> Meir pointed out the problem of Israel allowing more refugees into the country when a state of war still existed between Israel and its surrounding Arab nations. She noted that Israel already had an Arab population of 12%, and that added refugees would produce a larger security concern in the nation.<sup>50</sup> Meir also stressed that a limit on the number of refugees allowed repatriation must be finalized, and she insisted that giving the refugees a choice of whether they wanted compensation or repatriation would be unworkable.<sup>51</sup> Gold Meir was adamant in her belief that the possibility for a resolution on the refugee problem would be very remote given that the Israeli government wanted a peace settlement before any plans for repatriations to the refugees can be considered.

Jordan did not appear forthcoming towards the plan either. After concluding a round of talks in Jordan, Dr. Johnson reported to the State Department the Jordanian concerns over the refugee plan. The Jordanian government disapproved the suggestion of capping the number of refugees that were allowed to repatriate into Israel at 20,000. Jordan felt this number was "not an adequate approach to the refugee problem." The Jordanian government also questioned the motive behind the financial incentives that were offered to help stimulate the economy in the proposed areas in Jordan where the

---

<sup>49</sup> Barbour to Rusk, 12 July 1961, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 7-61 12-61, JFKL.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Barbour to Rusk, 12 July 1961, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 7-61 12-61, JFKL.

majority of the refugees would permanently resettle. They questioned the design of the incentive believing it intended to “persuade the refugees to abandon their homeland and heritage.”<sup>52</sup> The government of Jordan noted that it would express these opinions to the other surrounding Arab nations. While Jordan did not reject the Johnson Plan outright, they were not especially accommodating.

The Kennedy administration realized that it needed to get the Israeli government to become more forthcoming and committed to the Johnson Plan. Golda Meir did not put any faith into the plan’s foreseeable success unless it was tied into a comprehensive peace settlement, and Ben-Gurion viewed any repatriation of the refugees as a threat to Israel’s security. The administration sought something to leverage over the Israel government to make them accept the Johnson Plan. The one major enticement that the administration possessed that the Israeli government had long desired was the Hawk missile system; the Kennedy administration planned to use Israel’s desires for American arms as leverage for the Johnson Plan.

The Israel’s perpetual quest for arms for its own security dated back to the nation’s founding. After the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Israel faced a large hostile exiled Palestinian refugee community on its borders, an aggressive group of surrounding Arab nations calling for its destruction, and only a fragile armistice that held the nation technically in a state of war. To overcome these threats, the Israeli government needed to procure weapons from a reliable arms supplier. The procurement of a reliable arms supplier in Israel ran through Paris.

---

<sup>52</sup> Rusk telegram to Tel Aviv and Cairo, 5 June 1962, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 6-1-62 6-15-62, JFKL.

The French-Israeli relationship developed due to a matter of mutual needs by both nations at the time. The French government needed a regional power to quell the rise of Arab nationalism that threatened its last vestiges of imperial positions after World War II. Nasser's calls for Arab nationalism imperiled the French imperial position in North Africa when Algerian rebels in French-controlled Algeria took revolutionary actions against the French government. By 1956, the French government lost its rights to the Suez Canal due to Nasser's nationalization policies. Israel needed a dependable source of arms that would help facilitate in its national defenses, and it helped fill the French role as a viable regional deterrent against Nasser and Arab nationalism.<sup>53</sup>

In March 1953, the French government sent Ambassador Pierre Gilbert to Tel Aviv to secure talks with the Israeli government to provide arms. French Ambassador Gilbert met with the Director General of the Israeli Defense Ministry Shimon Peres to initiate plans to make France Israel's major arms supplier. During the mid-1950s, France began to pour in 40,000 tons of military equipment into Israel.<sup>54</sup> France supplied Israel with Ouragon jet fighters, Mystere IIs, AMX tanks, radar equipment, 75-mm cannons, antitank missiles, and the new Mystere IV fighter jets.<sup>55</sup> In the late spring of 1960, France delivered 30 Mystere IV jet aircraft fighters for the IDF Air Force. In the same year, France also provided Israel with the new ultramodern jetfighter called the Mirage-III.<sup>56</sup> France had become Israel's "arm depot" and provided an extensive laundry list of state-of-the-art advanced weaponry for the Israeli Defense Force (IDF).

---

<sup>53</sup> CIA to JFK, 18 January 1961, NSF, box 119a, Israel subjects, Ben-Gurion visit, 5-20-61 6-2-61, JFKL.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Isaac Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel: U.S.-Israeli Relations, 1953-1960*, (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1993), 145-146.

<sup>56</sup> CIA to JFK, 18 January 1961, NSF, box 119a, Israel subjects, Ben-Gurion visit, 5-20-61 6-2-61, JFKL.

Numerous French personal and technical staff accompanied the arms shipments to Israel to help train the IDF. France trained Israeli pilots. It sent technical teams to Israel to teach Israeli soldiers how to operate French military equipment. By March 1960, France was even engaging in joint antisubmarine warfare exercises with Israel.<sup>57</sup> A high level of cooperation existed between both the French and Israeli armed forces, further tying both nations together.

Also looking for a regional power to back its policies in the Middle East, Great Britain provided Israel with military weaponry. After receiving assistance from Israel in a Nasserite uprising in Jordan and coming to the aid of King Hussein in 1958, Britain decided to revise its long standing policy and sell Israel its prized Centurion tank.<sup>58</sup> The new British tank became the core component for the IDF's ground assault divisions for the next twelve years.

The armament of Israel went against both France and Britain's publicly stated policies concerning arms sales in the Middle East. In 1950, the U.S., France, and Britain signed the Tripartite Declaration which pledged that each nation would not start an arms race in the region, and would take action against any aggressor nation that "was preparing to violate frontiers or armistice lines."<sup>59</sup> This pact intended to keep the current national borders intact and to avert future hostilities between Israel and the surrounding Arab nations. The joint declaration did not proposed to be a full weapons ban outlawing arms sales in the region, but it intended to restricted all arms sales to only weapons for self defense. The signers issued this declaration to keep both the Israelis and Arabs aligned

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 150.

<sup>59</sup> Tripartite Agreement of 1950, NSF, Box 119, Israel General, 5-4-63, JFKL.

towards the West, believing the nations in region would look towards the U.S. and Europe to ensure their sovereignty. They allowed the self-defense loophole because they feared that a total weapons ban might send either side to the Soviets for arms.<sup>60</sup> The Western Powers ultimately designed the Tripartite Declaration as a propaganda tool for the Cold War.

The Eisenhower administration regarded regional security issues in the Middle East as paramount. The administration wanted to preserve access to the oil reserves for the West and to hold strategic military positions, while refusing the Soviets access. The Eisenhower administration followed an ‘even handed’ policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, which sought to limit any gains or losses towards either side; they adopted this ‘even handed’ approach because the administration believed that the former Truman administration had been partial towards the Israelis causing the Soviets to increase their influence with the Arabs.<sup>61</sup> The Eisenhower administration guarded Cold War concerns as the most vital policy for the Middle Eastern area.

The Eisenhower administration did not openly sell arms in the Middle Eastern region. This policy allowed the administration to present the image of neutrality regarding the Arab-Israel conflict. Besides, the U.S. did not need to provide weapons to Israel with France and Britain engaged as “arms dealers” for Israel. Concurrently, Britain also engaged in supplying arms to most of its former mandates in the region. Most of the weapons provided by the French and British clearly fell outside of the parameters entailed in the Tripartite Declaration. The Pact’s ambiguous wording of maintaining

---

<sup>60</sup> Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 25-26.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

armies for “legitimate self-defense” helped to allow the influx of whatever weapons the Western powers wanted to introduce into the region.<sup>62</sup>

The Eisenhower administration did on one occasion entertain a request for American weapons from a Middle Eastern nation; surprisingly, Egyptian President Nasser placed the order. Nasser had requested weapons from Eisenhower in 1955, and threatened that if rebuffed he would approach the Soviets. Secretary of State Dulles urged the president to make the sale to appease Nasser, but with the hidden intention of making the purchase extremely expensive, and in cash only, for the debt ridden Egyptian government. Dulles believed that Nasser would have to refuse the expensive American price, and that Nasser was bluffing about going to the Soviets.<sup>63</sup> The Eisenhower administration granted the arms request with the heavy price tag, in which Nasser as predicted refused because his government could not afford it, but Dulles was wrong about Nasser’s bluff.

The Eisenhower administration’s purposeful Machiavellian approach to the Egyptian arms request indeed pushed Nasser into the Soviet’s hands. The Soviets generously agreed to supply Nasser with weapons. Publicly using the Czechoslovakian government as a channel to deliver the weapons, the Soviets graciously exchanged arms for Egyptian cotton valued at \$86 million, with a real estimated value of \$200 million.<sup>64</sup> The reduced costs for arms the Soviets provided proved to be a substantial bargain for the monetarily strapped Egyptian government. Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan stated that before the arms sale “we had no access to the Arab countries, but when we

---

<sup>62</sup> Tripartite Agreement of 1950, NSF, Box 119, Israel General, 5-4-63, 1, JFKL.

<sup>63</sup> Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 39-40.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.



sold arms to Egypt, we bared our teeth to our enemies, and now they cannot any longer resolve the issues of the Near East without us.”<sup>65</sup> The Soviets became the Egyptians premier arms suppliers for the next thirty five years.

The Eisenhower administration rejected all requests made by the Israeli government for large purchases of American arms during the 1950s. The administration cited the Tripartite Declaration, noting that the U.S. did not want to start a spiraling arms race in the Middle East disrupting the stability in the area. By the end of the Eisenhower term in 1960, the Israeli government vigorously pressed the Eisenhower administration for the purchase of advanced American weaponry.

In 1960, the Israeli government asked directly for the American Hawk missile system. On 9 February 1960, the Israeli government sent a request to Eisenhower for over \$200 million in arms purchases, including six Hawk missile batteries comprising three hundred missiles. The Hawk missile system was the state-of-the-art ground to air guided missile delivery system, technology that far exceeded any other weapons systems in the Middle East. By March, Ben-Gurion personally pressed Dulles for the Hawks during a visit to Washington. Dulles did not give a definitive answer on the Hawks, but relayed the concerns to the Israelis that the U.S. did not want to start an arms race in the region by introducing such an advanced weapons system like the Hawk.<sup>66</sup>

Immediately following the American refusal, the Israeli government approached the British government for a request to purchase the British version of an advanced ground-to-air missile delivery system. Five days later after his trip to Washington and now in London on 17 March, Ben-Gurion requested the purchase of the British

---

<sup>65</sup> Anastas Mikoyan quoted in Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 40.

<sup>66</sup> NEA James P. Grant to Rusk, 20 August 1962, NSF, Box 118a, Israel general, 8-17-62 8-20-62, JFKL.

Bloodhound missile system. The British did not give Ben-Gurion a definitive response, the British government merely cited the same reasons as the Americans against introducing such a sophisticated weapon as the Bloodhound into the region.<sup>67</sup> The British government immediately relayed the Israeli request to the U.S. and asked for an exchange of views over the events.

The Eisenhower administration and the British government both agreed that they should consult each other “before either of us takes a final decision” concerning any sales. Both countries feared that selling advanced missile systems to the Israelis would cause the Arabs, especially Nasser, to seek the same weapons from the Soviets. Britain communicated its reluctance to sell the Bloodhounds and proposed purposeful “foot-dragging” on the issue. The American government concurred on all points.<sup>68</sup>

The U.S. and the U.K. mutually adopted the policy of currently refusing the sale of missiles to Israel, but not with a flat out rejection. On 11 April, 1960, Dillon informed the Israeli Ambassador that “there was no prospect of the U.S. being able to provide the Hawk in the near future.” Acting in unison and giving a more polite English negative response, the British government informed Ben-Gurion “that the ‘Bloodhound’ would not fill the role the Israelis had in mind for it.” In May 1960, the Eisenhower administration did offer a substantial early radar package to alleviate Israeli concerns over its air defense instead of the Hawks.<sup>69</sup>

The Israeli government continued to press Eisenhower on. In early June, Ben-Gurion sent a letter to the Secretary of State Christian Herter to review the Hawk request

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

again, and later in the month Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir visited Herter to press the issue further. Herter put Meir off, promising only that the matter will be kept under review.<sup>70</sup>

The Kennedy administration initially followed the Eisenhower administration's policies on the Hawks, but that did not stop Israel from continuing to lobby for the missiles. Ben-Gurion repeated his request for the Hawks to Kennedy during their 30 May meeting in New York. Ben-Gurion explained that recent Russian armaments to Egypt have been tilting the military balance towards Egypt, claiming that "the UAR now has more planes and tanks and now they have two hundred Russian instructors" vastly improving the Egyptian's military capabilities. Trying to convey the urgency of the situation, Ben-Gurion added that "Nasser's declared aim is to destroy not just defeat Israel, if they should defeat us, they would do to the Jews what Hitler did." Kennedy told Ben-Gurion that "while the Hawk is a defensive weapon it is also a missile and should missiles come into the Middle Eastern area, military weaponry would escalate fast." Kennedy went on to stress that the U.S. is "reluctant to introduce missiles into the Middle East; the other side might then introduce ground-to-ground missiles" producing a never ending arms race. Kennedy conveyed to Ben-Gurion that "We will keep the matter under continuing review in our administration, I can assure you."<sup>71</sup>

The following year on 21 May, 1962, the Israeli government again pressed for the Hawk sale. Israeli Deputy Minister of Defense Peres pressed U.S. Assistant Secretary Phillips Talbot for the Hawks, while Golda Meir pushed U.S. ambassador to Israel

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Memorandum of the Conversation, State Department, 30 May 1962, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 6-61, JFKL.

Barbour. The two pronged Israeli attempt met with the same answer that Kennedy had given in 1961: the Hawk would remain under review.

Despite repeated Israeli claims, the Kennedy administration did not view an Israeli military disadvantage against Egyptian forces. The State Department claimed that the French Super-Mystere (also known as the Mystere IV), owned by the IDF, stood on par in every class with the newly arrived Mig-19 in Egypt. The State Department stressed that the new ultramodern jetfighter from France, called the Mirage-III, out classed the Mig-19 in all respects.<sup>72</sup> American intelligence estimates concluded that no military imbalance existed between Israel and Egyptian.

The State Department went on to claim that the Hawk sale would only cause a never ending arms race in the region; a fear from the Eisenhower administration was still relevant in the Kennedy administration. The State Department claimed “the U.S. declined because of its reluctance to have a weapon of this sophistication introduced into the Middle East, inevitably producing a dangerous new element in the never-ending pursuit of better arms.”<sup>73</sup>

As late as 32 May, 1962, The Department of State Under Secretary George McGhee told Shimon Peres that “the U.S. has great respect for Israel’s military competence and estimates it as being a match for some time to come for any Arab combination.” McGhee went on to note “that any drastic increase in Israeli armament, particularly to more sophisticated weapons, would likely result in corresponding increase in the UAR leading to uncontrolled escalation which might add to rather than decrease

---

<sup>72</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 153.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

the instability in the region.”<sup>74</sup> The fears of starting an arms race and the view that no disparity existed between Israeli and a combination of Arab forces still prevailed three months before the official sale of Hawks to Israel.

Over the course of the three months from this last State Department meeting with Shimon Peres to the official sale of the Hawk missile on 19 August 1962 no new Soviet arms flowed into Egypt. The balance of power did not change. No new threats to Israel’s security emerged; something else led Kennedy to change his mind. The plausible alternative points to Kennedy’s concern over ending the Palestinian refugee issue with the Johnson Plan.<sup>75</sup>

Kennedy decided to sell Israel the Hawks in exchange for Ben-Gurion’s commitment to the Johnson Plan. The State Department prepared an outline for a quid pro quo package deal for the Israeli government on 9 August 1962. Kennedy planned to give Israel the long coveted Hawk missile system coupled with a security guarantee in exchange for “Ben-Gurion’s pledge of cooperation in Johnson’s Plan.” The Kennedy administration also offered financial help on refugee compensation and repatriation for Israel. If necessary, JFK was prepared, secretly, to place a ceiling on the number of refugees able to repatriate into Israel, something that Ben-Gurion wanted. The Israeli government would have to join a UAR-Israeli arms limitation declaration, establish procedures for quick and timely methods to compensate refugees, and drop the ‘direct

---

<sup>74</sup> Rusk telegram to Cairo, Tel Aviv, London, Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, Jidda, Amman, 23 May 1962, NSF Robert Kromer, Box 427, Israel security (missile) development sale of hawks 1962 1963, JFKL.

<sup>75</sup> Warren Bass claims that Nasser’s actions and U.S. perceptions of a military imbalance prompted the Hawk sale, see Bass, *Support Any Friend*, for further inquiries.

negotiations resolution' in the UN that year.<sup>76</sup> The Kennedy administration planned to offer this package deal to Ben-Gurion in mid August.

Planning to offer the Hawks for Israel's compliance to the Johnson Plan, Kennedy sent Ben-Gurion a letter on 15 August to inform him that he was sending a special emissary to Israel to discuss matters of prime importance. Kennedy specifically referred to "Israel's requests for a security guarantee and for the Hawk missiles, and to the mission of Dr. Joseph E. Johnson as Special Representative of the Conciliation Commission for Palestine" as the purpose for sending the emissary. Kennedy notified Ben-Gurion that the emissary would be Counsel to the President Myer Feldman, and that Mr. Feldman would be flying to Israel without publicity, under strict secrecy, in a couple of days.<sup>77</sup>

The Kennedy administration had to relay the proposed package deal to their British allies. Upon informing the British government that the U.S. prepared to offer Israel the Hawks, the British Prime Minister became furious. In a telegram from the American embassy in London, Her Majesty's government demanded that they be allowed to make a bid for the Bloodhound missile system, and that it had been a prior agreement that the U.K. would be consulted before any final decisions on missile sales for Israel. Secretary of State Dean Rusk and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy met with Lord Hood to placate British concerns. They apologized and informed Lord Hood that the information sent to the British government "did not included explanations on the urgency of the Feldman mission and its relation to the Johnson Plan." They also pointed out that though the Bloodhound sale would be preferable for the U.S., the Israelis preferred to

---

<sup>76</sup> Talbot to Myer Feldman, 9 August 1962, NSF, Box 118a, Israel general, 8-9-62 8-15-62, JFKL.

<sup>77</sup> JFK letter to Ben-Gurion, 15 August 1962, NSF, Box 118a, Israel general, 8-9-62 8-15-62, JFKL.

deal with the U.S. and that the Hawk system outclassed the Bloodhound missile system; Lord Hood agreed.<sup>78</sup> Bundy and Rusk calmed tensions over the intended sale with the British; there was nothing the British could do, the passing of British influence in Palestine has long been a dead issue, it was the American's turn.

Officially sold on 19 August, the Hawk missile sale to Israel marked the first occasion of a major arms deal between the U.S. and Israel. Feldman presented the package deal for the Hawks and the security guarantee to Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir for the Johnson Plan. Feldman reported that the initial Israeli reaction was negative towards the plan, but after intense discussions Ben-Gurion would acquiesce if Nasser agreed to resettle a portion of the refugees into the UAR, and if Nasser promised to not “direct propaganda” towards refugees that wished for repatriation back into Israel.<sup>79</sup> During the negotiations, Secretary of State Rusk cabled Feldman in Israel to remind him that the package deal did not include any preconditions from Nasser, and stressed to Feldman that “it would be most unfortunate if the Israelis were to end up with the Hawks and strengthened security guarantee assurances while being responsible for derailing the Johnson Plan.”<sup>80</sup> Meir asked that the plan be deferred for at least a month before it is presented to the PCC, and that she would like to hear Arab views on the plan as well. Meir additionally wanted to arrange a visit to the U.S. to further discuss the Johnson Plan.<sup>81</sup> Despite these small technicalities over the Johnson Plan by Israel, the sale of the

---

<sup>78</sup> Bundy to General Clifton for the President, 19 August 1962, NSF, Box 118a, Israel general, 8-17-62 8-20-62, JFKL.

<sup>79</sup> Feldman to Rusk, 19 August 1962, NSF, Box 118a, Israel general, 8-17-62 8-20-62, JFKL.

<sup>80</sup> Rusk to Feldman, 20 August 1962, NSF, Box 118a, Israel general, 8-17-62 8-20-62, JFKL.

<sup>81</sup> Feldman to Rusk, 21 August 1962, NSF, Box 118a, Israel general, 8-21-62 8-31-62, JFKL.

Hawk missile system did go through and the Israeli government appeared cooperative toward the Johnson Plan.

News of the secret Feldman visit to Israel began leaking out to the world press. The Kennedy administration had explicitly stated to the Israel government that the meeting had to be held in complete secrecy, but on 21 August, a Reuter's dispatch reported on the Feldman visit with Ben-Gurion. The *New York Times* also reported on the Feldman visit to Israel on 22 August.<sup>82</sup> The reports speculated that the meeting entailed a "modification of U.S. policy towards Israel."<sup>83</sup> Though there were no definitive statements in the press on why Feldman held a meeting with Ben-Gurion, the State Department became concerned that the press got wind of the meeting at all.

Kennedy sent the State Department's Near East expert Bob Strong and the ambassador to Egypt, John S. Badeau, to discuss the Johnson Plan with Nasser. On 24 August 1962, Badeau and Strong informed Nasser about the Hawk deal, but Nasser seemed unconcerned.<sup>84</sup> They presented the terms of the Johnson Plan and offered Nasser the arms limitation agreement component of the exchange for Egypt and Israel. Badeau reported that Nasser's response seemed "moderate and slightly encouraging."<sup>85</sup> Though he did not agree with the quotas stipulated in the plan, Nasser appeared accommodating toward the structure of the Johnson Plan. Nasser did not outrightly accept the U.S. proposal, but he did not reject it either.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Barnes to Rusk, 22 August 1962, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 8-21-62 8-31-62, JFKL.

<sup>83</sup> Rusk to Middle Eastern embassies, 22 August 1962, NSF, Box 118a, Israel general, 8-21-62 8-31-62, JFKL.

<sup>84</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 172.

<sup>85</sup> Badeau quoted in Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 172.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.



Soon thereafter, the Israeli position hardened after the month deferral that Golda Meir asked for in August. On 20 September, Myer Feldman met with Golda Meir in New York before Meir's intended meeting with Dr. Johnson. Feldman reported that Meir expressed an "unalterable opposition towards the plan." Meir expressed her view that the plan raised "challenges to the sovereignty of Israel and a pro-Arab bias." Feldman asked Meir to name specific objections to the plan but she insisted that the "plan was non-negotiable." When Feldman asked why Israel had changed its position, she denied there had been any change.<sup>87</sup> Despite her claim, the Israeli government's view towards the Johnson Plan had changed dramatically. On the following day Meir repeated her objections to Dr. Johnson, the architect of the initiative. Meir refused to accommodate any of Johnson's proposals outlined in the plan, denouncing the plan as "absolutely unacceptable."<sup>88</sup> The plan seemed doomed.

The media began reporting the Hawk sale in late September.<sup>89</sup> On 25 September, Reuters reported on an upcoming announcement by the U.S. that it has taken actions to restore the Israeli military imbalance that has been developing since the UAR's recent acquisition of Soviet arms.<sup>90</sup> On 27 September, the *New York Times* ran a front page article announcing the American sale of Hawk missiles to Israel. The article claimed that the sale served as a response to recent purchases by Nasser of Soviet fighters and bombers, as well as surface-to-surface missile tests conducted in Egypt, the missiles were suspected to be Soviet supplied missiles. The article also claimed that Nasser had been

---

<sup>87</sup> Feldman to Rusk, 20 September 1962, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 9-6-62 9-21-62, JFKL.

<sup>88</sup> Barbour to Rusk, 21 September 1962, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 9-6-62 9-21-62, JFKL.

<sup>89</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 178. Bass also notes the press leak to the media over the sale, but does not explain why the administration did not announce the sale prior.

<sup>90</sup> Meyer to Rusk, 25 September 1962, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 9-22-62 10-1-62, JFKL.

informed of the Hawk sale by the U.S. government previously.<sup>91</sup> The next day the story had circulated globally, and Syrian newspapers, *Ayyam* and *Sawt Al-Arab*, both reported on the Hawk sale.<sup>92</sup>

On 26 September, the day after Reuters broke the story, the Israel government officially rejected the Johnson Plan outright. Golda Meir met with Secretary of State Rusk and informed him of the Israeli government's total opposition to the plan.<sup>93</sup> On 27 September, Meir met with U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Adlai E. Stevenson, and repeated what she had told Rusk the day before. Stevenson noted that Meir had appeared in a "warm and friendly mood and seemed reassured by recent American assistance to Israel and *dismissed the leak of the Hawks causally*."<sup>94</sup> Once the press announced the Hawk sale, the Johnson Plan became a dead issue.

The Arabs reacted with horror to the Hawk sale. Cairo Radio called the sale a realization of the "'flagrant hostility' of the American government toward Arab causes and that even though the missiles are described as defensive they can still be used for offensive purposes."<sup>95</sup> The *Middle East News Agency* reported the decision as "an aggressive action by the United States against the entire Arab world which must be countered by the Arabs." *Falastin*, a Jordanian newspaper, interpreted the sale as "being overt partiality and a disgraceful attempt to support the entity of the Jews."<sup>96</sup> The Arab viewed the sale as a new American policy overtly supporting Israel over Arab causes.

---

<sup>91</sup> "US Will Supply Israel Missiles in Policy Change", by Max Frankel, *The New York Times*, 27 September 1962, 1, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Damascus to Rusk, 28 September 1962, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 9-22-62 10-1-62, JFKL.

<sup>93</sup> Stevenson to Rusk, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 9-22-62 10-1-62, JFKL.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, italics added for emphasis.

<sup>95</sup> Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 1 October 1962, NSF, JFK, Box 119, Israel general, 9-22-62 10-1-62, JFKL.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

The Kennedy administration tried to induce the Israeli government to accept the Johnson Plan in return for the Hawk missile system but the apparent leak to the press on the Hawk sale on 27 September put the American government in an impossible position. The administration could not now press Israel on the Johnson Plan. If the administration decided to withdraw the Hawks for rejecting the Johnson Plan an explanation would have to be given to the press. It could not deny the press reports, by now the administration had created a long paper trail on the issue.<sup>97</sup> The administration's attempts at inducing Ben-Gurion to accept the exchange failed, Israel secured the Hawks and abandoned the Johnson Plan.

The Kennedy administration had no choice but to remain silent. Internationally, the Kennedy administration would have been embarrassed by making a deal for the Hawks on the refugee issue simply to have Israel back out after the missile sale became public. Soviet and Arab responses would have blasted the U.S. for trying to use the promise of weapons to force Israel into a settlement on the Palestinian issue. The Johnson Plan would have been immediately rejected by the Arab nations once it had been known that Israel only sought weapons not a resolution to the refugee problem, adding more anti-Israeli antagonisms to the already inflamed region.

Domestically, the Republicans would have added this as "another foreign relations blunder" by the inexperienced president after the debacle in the Bay of Pigs in 1961, hurting both the president and the Democratic Party. Any attempt to cancel the

---

<sup>97</sup> The Kennedy administration had informed the British government and Nasser, also the *New York Times* had reported that Nasser had been informed about the sale, see Badeau to Rusk, 22 August 1962, NSF, Box 118a, Israel general, 8-21-62 8-31-62, JFKL. The State Department sent out a memo to all the major U.S. embassies reporting the Hawk sale to Israel and instructing each embassy to inform their appointed leaders of the sale only if the information became public, see State Department telegram Embassy circular to Amman, Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, Khartoum, Tripoli, Algiers, Rabat, Jidda, London, Paris, Ankara, Tel Aviv, 14 September 1962, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 9-6-62 9-21-62, JFKL.

Hawk sale with Israel after it became public would have made the Democrats appear indecisive and amateurish in foreign policy matters, especially in the upcoming midterm Congressional elections in November. It had been in the best interests for the Kennedy administration to allow Israel the Hawks, and let the Johnson Plan fade out.

The Palestinian refugee issue helped in the founding of the U.S.-Israeli alliance by influencing the Kennedy administration to exchange Hawk missiles for Israeli compliance in the Johnson Plan. President Kennedy, like his predecessors, viewed the refugee issue as a destabilizing element in the Middle East. Kennedy actively pushed a settlement plan towards the Israeli government, believing the Ben-Gurion government represented the biggest obstacle to resolving the refugee issue, so it planned to get their cooperation first over the Arabs. Knowing the long coveted desire for the Hawk missile system by Israel, the Kennedy administration adopted a “quid pro quo” policy for exchanging the Hawks for an Israeli agreement to settle the refugee issue. With the press leak on the Hawk sale, the Ben-Gurion administration abandoned the sale. Forfeiting the Hawks became the only viable solution for the Kennedy administration.

Trying to bargain missiles for a resolution to the refugee crisis in the Middle East might appear naïve for the president, but Kennedy appeared genuine in his determination to resolve the refugee problem. Using a UN body, the PCC, to operate under his direction helped in deflecting any possible negative connotations of failure from the mission away from his administration. Kennedy approached the refugee problem not on a personal level but on a Cold War level, viewing the refugee problem as a destabilizing issue for the region which the Soviets might capitalize on. More importantly, if the administration would have succeeded with the Johnson Plan, Arab sentiments in the region would have

looked favorably towards the U.S., and align themselves with the one superpower that could dictate Israeli foreign policy. Kennedy's policy of rapprochement with Nasser sought these goals. By extension, the refugee problem became a national security issue for the president with larger Cold War aims for the Middle Eastern region, and caused Kennedy to break with previous U.S. policy that dictated no sales of arms into the region, especially technologically advanced weaponry like the Hawk missile system. Kennedy unintentionally built the foundation for the U.S.-Israeli alliance with the sale of the Hawk missiles, while trying to settle the refugee issue in the hopes of stabilizing the region and currying favor with the Arabs.

The Kennedy administration adopted a policy of rapprochement with Nasser, and wanted to actively produce pro-American sentiments in the Middle East among the Arab population. Being a core theme of Arab nationalism, the Palestinian refugee issue elicited high emotional sentiments in the region, and the administration hoped to capitalize on those sentiments by resolving the refugee problem. For Kennedy and his administration, stabilizing the region meant increasing U.S. influence and keeping Soviet encroachments out. These objectives become fully apparent when the administration enmeshes itself in the regional arms race.

## II. DEALING WITH THE MIDDLE EAST'S ARMS RACE AND NASSER

The origins of the U.S.-Israeli alliance began during the escalating arms race of the early 1960s in the Middle East. Both Israel and the Egypt engaged in a spiraling arms race seeking to ensure the security of their borders. Israel wanted to link its security concerns with the U.S. to ensure its survival, but Kennedy desired a policy of rapprochement with the Egyptian government in order to increase the U.S.'s influence in the region, and keep the Soviets at bay. Kennedy viewed Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser as the pathway to develop a closer U.S. relationship with Cairo, while the Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion perceived Nasser as the core manifestation of all his security tribulations. The U.S. and Israel's policies directly opposed each other, but by the end of 1963 they laid the building blocks of the future alliance. Nasser's growing power and influence in the region consequently drove Israel further towards the U.S. in the attempt to acquire arms and security guarantees from the Kennedy administration. While pursuing a policy of rapprochement with Nasser and seeking to contain Israel, Kennedy unintentionally brought forth the foundations of the U.S.-Israeli alliance by providing an informal security guarantee and holding joint security consultations with Israel.

Kennedy's primary focus in the Middle East began his meteoric rise into politics as a young revolutionary during the 1952 coup in Egypt. Nasser led the Free Officers movement in Cairo which consisted of a group of military officers seeking to overthrow

the corrupted government of King Faruq I and the Wafd party of Egypt. King Faruq and the Wafd party had alienated the masses in Egypt and held their tenuous grip to power with the assistance of the British government. On 23 July 1952, Nasser led his group of officers and overthrew the government seizing the reigns of power.<sup>98</sup>

Nasser and the Free Officers quickly established the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) that became the executive body of the new Egyptian government. He installed loyal members of the Free Officers movement into key positions of the government in Cairo to solidify his control. The new government swiftly instituted land reforms in Egypt to remove all vestiges of feudalism and foreign influence that characterized the disposed government. Cultivating a populist image, the new government abolished old civil titles and promoted social justice, democracy, and a bill of rights protecting the country's massive peasant class.<sup>99</sup>

The events in Egypt were part of a broader trend in the postwar period. Stretching from the plains in Africa to the Ganges in India, many former European colonies and protectorates underwent the process of decolonization attempting to break the shackles of imperialism.<sup>100</sup> Nasser's July Revolution in the Middle East exemplified this global process.

In Egypt, decolonization was linked to the ideology of pan-Arabism. The Pan-Arab movement encapsulated the idea of establishing a distinctly Arab society free from foreign influence and power. Born in the early twentieth century, pan-Arabism promoted the grandeur of Arabic literature, culture, and notions of law over the perceived

---

<sup>98</sup> Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 295-296.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas Bortelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line; American Race Relations in the Global Arena*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2.

impurities of Western civilization. Nasser's revolution embodied the core tenets of the pan-Arabism movement, and he later used his power and authority to establish Cairo as the epicenter of the movement.<sup>101</sup>

Nasser envisioned Egypt as the center of a future harmonious society free from the ills of foreign encroachments. In 1954, Nasser composed his treatise *Philosophy of the Revolution* presenting Egypt as the center of three overlapping spheres constituting the Arab, African, and Islamic world. Under Nasser's guiding hand, Egypt would lead the way towards a new profound world.<sup>102</sup> Cairo became the center of a massive propaganda machine that Nasser utilized to disseminate his beliefs throughout the region using radio, newspaper press, and film productions; it had been the Eisenhower administration that helped Nasser construct his media empire hoping to increase U.S. propaganda in the region.<sup>103</sup> Nasser hoped to funnel the oppressed masses down the Nile towards freedom; all he needed was an opportunity to place him on the world stage. That opportunity came in 1956.

The 1956 Suez Crisis propelled Nasser to fame and helped to establish him as a potential leader of non-aligned nations worldwide seeking to disenfranchise themselves from the polarities of the Cold War. Eliminating the French and British financial holdings in the Suez Canal, on 26 July 1956 Nasser announced the nationalization of the

---

<sup>101</sup> Bernard Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans; Interpreting the Middle East*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 178-179.

<sup>102</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 167-168.

<sup>103</sup> Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War; Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad*, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 138-139.



Suez Canal. Nasser intended to use the Suez Canal proceeds to help finance the building of Egypt's massive earth works project to construct the Aswan Dam.<sup>104</sup>

Prior to his nationalization of Suez, Nasser attempted to obtain funding from the Eisenhower administration and the British government. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan consulted with Nasser to finance the Aswan Dam construction project estimated at \$1.3 billion. The Egyptian Aswan project intended to alleviate the constant flooding of the Nile River, expand agricultural croplands in the river valley, and provide cheap hydroelectric power in Egypt for the masses. The U.S. and the UK agreed to allocate the funds to Nasser and on 1 December 1955 presented a \$200 million aid package to start the project. In early January 1956, however, the U.S. tried to revert its agreed upon aid package for the Aswan project and make it conditional upon Egypt's acceptance of a peace settlement with Israel. Nasser quickly rejected any offers of a peace settlement with Israel.<sup>105</sup>

The U.S. and British governments decided to withdraw the entire aid package for Aswan because of Nasser's actions in the region. In 1955, Nasser made an exorbitant arms deal with the Soviets in exchange for Egyptian cotton, making the Soviets Egypt's new weapons depot providing \$200 million in arms.<sup>106</sup> Nasser also refused to join the Britain's Baghdad Pact, and he attended a world conference in Indonesia for non-aligned nations. And on 1 March 1956, the British blamed Nasser for inciting pro-Nasser elements in Jordan to demonstrate against the Jordanian King Hussein over the British

---

<sup>104</sup> Denis Judd, *Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1756 to the Present*, (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 361.

<sup>105</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 168-169.

<sup>106</sup> See chapter 1. Nasser had first asked Eisenhower for arms, but Eisenhower made the cost of the purchase purposely high believing Nasser would reject the offer, and also believing he would never ask the Soviets for arms.

control of the Arab Legion. King Hussein promptly turned control of the Arab Legion over to Jordanian officers.<sup>107</sup> Nasser further infuriated the U.S. and UK on 17 March when he formally recognized the People's Republic of China. Viewing Nasser as a threat to Western interests, the U.S. and British governments rescinded their offer to finance the Aswan Dam on 19 July 1956, seven days later Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal.<sup>108</sup>

While Nasser and the U.S. negotiated loan terms over the Aswan project, Nasser also engaged in secret negotiations with the Soviets to inquire what loans and financial assistance they might offer for the Aswan project. He obviously planned for contingencies. In June 1956, Soviet Foreign Minister Dmitri Shepilov offered Nasser an interest-free \$400 million loan, payable in cotton over a term of sixty years.<sup>109</sup> The Soviets provided Egypt with financial backing for the massive Aswan project, all payable with Egyptian cotton.

Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal infuriated the French and British governments. Owning the majority of the Suez Canal, the French and British holdings in the Suez Canal Company were now lost due to Nasser's nationalization. With this one move, Nasser now controlled the sea artery of the British Empire where one-third of British imports flowed, two-thirds of Britain's oil, and thousands of British troops traversed annually to British military bases worldwide.<sup>110</sup> Referring to Nasser as the "Hitler on the Nile," French Premier Guy Mollet viewed Nasserism as a threat to French holdings in Africa, particularly in Algeria where the French engaged pro-Nasser

---

<sup>107</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 169.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 189.

rebels.<sup>111</sup> The British and French governments colluded to forcibly take the canal-zone from Nasser, and they elicited the help of Israel to achieve these aims.<sup>112</sup>

On 29 October 1956, Israeli forces invaded Egypt across the border into the Sinai Peninsula. Within six days, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) quickly overran Egyptian positions and occupied the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>113</sup> As planned, the British handed ultimatums to both the Egyptian and Israeli ambassadors informing them to withdraw their troops ten miles from the canal zone, and for both parties to accept the peacekeeping Anglo-French forces in the canal zone to ensure the freedom of international passage through the Suez Canal. Immediately after the delivery of the ultimatums, French and British paratroopers began landing in the canal zone seizing control of the area.<sup>114</sup> The covert operation among the three countries worked, Nasser lost control of the Suez Canal and the Sinai Peninsula.

Moscow expressed outrage over the Suez Crisis. On 5 November, Soviet Premier Nikoali Bulganin wrote a private letter to Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion threatening that Israel's actions in Egypt "cannot but affect the future of Israel and which will place a question [mark] upon the very existence of Israel as a State."<sup>115</sup> Bulganin threatened to fire ballistic missile at the French and British for their transgressions in Egypt, and he insinuated that he might even launch Soviet nuclear

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., Guy Mollet quoted in Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 191.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 198-199.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 220-223.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 228, 239.

<sup>115</sup> Bulganin Letter to Ben-Gurion, 5 November 1956, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 1-2: 1947-1974, IX. The Sinai Campaign, 7, online: [www.mfa.gov.il](http://www.mfa.gov.il)

missiles at both countries.<sup>116</sup> The ‘saber rattling’ from Moscow permeated the Oval Office.

Eisenhower called for an immediate ceasefire in Egypt. Feeling betrayed and bewildered over his European allies’ actions, he called for a UN resolution demanding a ceasefire and an immediate withdrawal of the aggressors out of Egyptian territory.<sup>117</sup> While the events unfolded in Suez, the British requested an urgent oil shipment from the U.S. in order to recoup losses from the events in Suez, Eisenhower denied the request to punish their actions in Egypt. Eisenhower also used economic pressure on the British, informing them that their recent \$1 billion loan application would be denied if they did not cease operations.<sup>118</sup> All parties agreed to the cease fire, the French and British troops withdrew from the canal zone in December with Israeli forces evacuating the Sinai Peninsula in March 1957.

Nasser emerged victorious from the Suez Crisis. He survived a surprise attack by Israel, challenged two western powers, and still managed to keep control of the Suez Canal. Nasser also had both the U.S. and the Soviet’s defending Egypt in the face of the transgressors. Arab opinion in the region towards Nasser grew immensely and led to the spread of pro-Nasser sentiments into other Arab countries in the region.<sup>119</sup>

Following Nasser success in the Suez Crisis, other Arab nations in the region turned to him for help with their own predicaments. In 1958, Syrian Ba’th Party officials approached Nasser over concerns of the rising influence of communist elements in their country which threatened to overthrow the Syrian government. Attempting to ensure their

---

<sup>116</sup> Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 239.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 238, Eisenhower had the Canadian Foreign Minister Lester Pearson submit the resolution.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>119</sup> Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 304.

own positions of power in Syria, the Syrian officials proposed to Nasser the idea of forming a Syrian-Egyptian union. Nasser viewed the proposed union as an opportunity to magnify his political aims in the region.<sup>120</sup> On 1 February 1958, Egypt and Syria officially formed the United Arab Republic (UAR) becoming the first two Arab states in the region to formally merge their governments.

Upon taking office in 1961, the Kennedy administration viewed past U.S. relations towards the Middle East as problematic. The administration lambasted Eisenhower's past policies in the Middle East viewed them as misdirected. It believed that the Eisenhower administration had alienated Nasser and failed to appreciate his progressive policies. More importantly, it blamed Eisenhower for making the UAR dependent on the Soviet aid by pushing Nasser into the Kremlin's arms. Believing that Nasser's revolutionary phase had ended, Kennedy expected a more conservative phase would follow.<sup>121</sup> Kennedy and his advisors thought that they better understood Nasser. Valuing his popularity among the masses in the region, the Kennedy administration thought they could capitalize on forming a closer relationship with Nasser and use the UAR as the pathway to gain U.S. support in the region.

In mid February 1961, Kennedy personally took the initiative to open communications with Nasser and wrote a private letter to Nasser discussing his desire to improved relations between the two countries. Kennedy informed Nasser that he would work to solve the Arab Palestinian refugee issue in the Middle East through the Palestine Conciliation Committee (PCC). He also mentioned that he asked the U.S. Congress to assist in the UN initiative to rescue the thirteenth century BCE Egyptian archeological

---

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>121</sup> Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*, 191, 193.

site Abu Simbel, which faced certain destruction due to the Aswan project. Praising Egypt's rapid industrialization and modernization policies under Nasser, Kennedy wrote of the U.S.'s "sincere friendship" towards the Arabs in the region.<sup>122</sup>

Kennedy showed his commitment to improving relations with Nasser by delaying the recognition of the new government in Syria. On 3 October 1961, the newly created UAR, which linked Egypt and Syria, fell apart. Cairo's land reform policies hurt the ruling class in Syria and arrogant Egyptian military officials stationed in Syria angered the Syrian army; a military coup removed the pro-UAR government and broke all ties to Cairo. Suffering a major defeat in the region, Nasser sent Egyptian Foreign Minister Mahmud Farwzi to meet Secretary of State Dean Rusk to request that the U.S. not formally recognize the new Syrian government. Rather than exploit this major setback for Nasser, Kennedy agreed to Nasser's request. In early October 1961, the U.S. finally recognized the new Syrian government, but only after the Egyptian government had indicated it would not oppose Syrian membership in the UN and allowed its membership into the Arab League.<sup>123</sup> Nasser decided to keep the United Arab Republic (UAR) as the official name of the government in Cairo. With Syria out of the UAR and Nasser's political ego bruised, Nasser welcomed the new friends in Washington.

On 16 March 1962, the State Department issued a policy directive for improving U.S. relations with the UAR. The directive called for extending a U.S. wheat exchange, inviting Nasser for an official visit, and to extend a \$51 million loan to Egypt to

---

<sup>122</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 74.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, 83-84.

strengthen the country's infrastructure.<sup>124</sup> The State Department believed that a massive influx of U.S. economic aid for Nasser would help improve relations between the U.S. and the UAR.

While Kennedy and the State Department pursued rapprochement with Nasser, the Israeli government continually pressed the U.S. to purchase the Hawk missile system. On 2 July 1962, U.S. Ambassador to Egypt John S. Badeau reported from Cairo to Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Phillips Talbot that the reasons for the UAR's spiraling arms purchases stemmed from Israeli actions. Badeau stressed that Nasser did not become "arms hungry" until after the Gaza Strip incident of 1955, in which Israel launched a military strike on Egyptian positions.<sup>125</sup> He then noted that the Suez Crisis in 1956 served as the chief catalyst for Nasser's pursuit of arms, causing the massive purchase from the Soviets and consequently the prevalent fear in Cairo that Israel might attack again. Badeau stated that "the tragic conclusion is that both countries are deeply engaged in an arms race." He believed that "the only glimmer of hope in lessening this costly competition lies in a quiet role which the United States might play." Badeau recommended that in order for the U.S. to play this intermediary role it had to gain the "trust and confidence of both sides."<sup>126</sup> The ambassador to Egypt viewed Israel as the protagonist for starting the arms race.

---

<sup>124</sup> Department of State Policy Directive, 23 May 1962, NSF, Robert Kromer, Box 445, UAR 1961-1962 folder 2 of 4, JFKL. U.S. wheat exchange program referred to as PL 480. Coincidentally, this policy directive by the State Department was made before the Hawk sale to Israel on 19 August 1962, further showing that Kennedy prized rapprochement with Nasser over Israel's security in the region.

<sup>125</sup> Badeau to Talbot to Bundy, 2 July 1962, NSF, Robert Kromer, Box 445, UAR 1961-1962 folder 1 of 4, JFKL. The Gaza Strip incident was an Israeli retaliatory strike in Gaza because of the Egyptian execution of Israeli agents connected to the Lavon Affair. For more on Gaza Strip incident see Little, *American Orientalism*, 90.

<sup>126</sup> Badeau to Talbot to Bundy, 2 July 1962, NSF, Robert Kromer, Box 445, UAR 1961-1962 folder 1 of 4, JFKL.

Adding to the insecurity in Cairo and Tel Aviv, the arms race introduced a new dimension into the region: missile technology. The Kennedy administration knew that both the UAR and Israel had active missile development programs. On 27 July 1962, NSC staffer William Brubeck summarized for National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy the state of these programs. Brubeck reported that the UAR had successfully conducted a missile firing of four rockets. He elaborated on the UAR's missile program noting the existence of Soviet assistance, but stated that the primary assistance came from West German scientists working under contract in the UAR. Brubeck informed Bundy that Israel "has also been progressing" on their Shavit II rocket, which first launched on 5 July 1961, and was working on the more advanced Shavit III and Shavit IV rockets. Although both countries lacked guidance systems for their rockets, the arms race had begun.<sup>127</sup>

Seeking to limit the arms race and increase the U.S. position in the Middle East, Kennedy tried to use the Hawk missile to secure the Johnson Plan during this period. As previously discussed, the Johnson Plan intended to resolve the lingering Palestinian refugee problem in the region and hoped to stabilize the tensions in the area. As apart of the administration's rapprochement towards Nasser, the Johnson Plan was intended to settle the Palestinian refugee issue to increase the U.S.'s influence in the region among Nasser and the Arabs. The administration included an arms limitation proposal in the plan to end the arms race and stem the flow of Soviet arms to Nasser. Kennedy offered the Hawks to induce the Israeli government to accept the Johnson Plan. Believing Israel agreed to the exchange, Kennedy sold the Hawks in August 1962, but Israel abandoned

---

<sup>127</sup> Brubeck memorandum to Bundy, 27 July 1962, NSF, Robert Kromer, Box 445, UAR 1961-1962 folder 2 of 4, JFKL.



the Johnson Plan by late September. Kennedy reasoned that he could stop the escalating arms race, solve the refugee problem to stabilize the region, and most importantly, win Nasser and Arab sentiments. Kennedy failed in this endeavor, but he continued to court Nasser.

Kennedy's action during the Yemen Civil War shows that Kennedy had adopted a pro-Nasser policy towards the region. The Yemen Civil War began in September 1962 when the leader of the country Imam Ahmad died and the Crown Prince Badr became the new leader. Immediately after the Crown Prince became the Imam, a coup ensued led by pro-Nasser elements in the country.<sup>128</sup> The pro-Nasser forces took control of the capital and declared the death of the Imam and the establishment of the new Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). UAR troops flew into the capital to support the new pro-Nasser government. The UAR and members of the Soviet Bloc immediately recognized the new Yemen Arab Republic. Egyptian official, and Nasser's future successor, Anwar Sadat met with U.S. Ambassador Badeau to request that the U.S. government did not back the royalist elements still left in the country that would soon challenge the new Yemen government. Sadat also asked that the U.S. formally recognize the YAR, which the Kennedy administration agreed to do.<sup>129</sup>

While the coup occurred in Yemen, American allies began to protest the Kennedy administration over the events in Yemen. Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Feisal and King Hussein of Jordan both detested Nasser and his propaganda that continually called for the removal of their antiquated monarchies. Nasser's brand of radical nationalism threatened

---

<sup>128</sup> Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*, 268. Imam in this case refers to the political leader in Yemen, or King.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 270-271.

both monarchs' thrones. The British government also despised Nasser and viewed him as a threat to Aden, one of the last fully British controlled areas in the region. Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the British all requested that the Kennedy administration not recognize the pro-Nasser YAR.<sup>130</sup>

The situation in Yemen began to escalate engulfing the region in conflict. Rumors of the Imam's death proved false as he reappeared in Northern Yemen armed with pro-royalist forces. Fighting erupted in Yemen between pro-Nasser and pro-royalist forces. The Saudi, Jordanian, and British governments backed the pro-royalist forces while Nasser, with Soviet aid, backed the pro-Nasser forces.<sup>131</sup> YAR forces began to bomb Saudi airfields in the southern part of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian government demanded U.S. assistance to alleviate the bombardment and protect the Saudi Kingdom.<sup>132</sup>

While the U.S.'s regional allies demanded assistance, Kennedy reassessed what course of action to take regarding Yemen and his future over all policy for the region. On 5 December 1962, Kennedy met with U.S. Ambassador to the UAR John S. Badeau, to discuss the overall U.S. policy towards the Middle Eastern region. The prepared 'talking papers' for the meeting perceived the UAR as the most influential country in the region and as the leader of the rapid industrial and political "evolution" of the region. The talking paper noted that "no country can reverse the evolutionary process, it may be

---

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 273.

possible however to modulate it.”<sup>133</sup> The talking papers suggested that the U.S.’s overall strategy should be to “support a stable Egypt as the core of a stable Middle East.”<sup>134</sup>

While Kennedy debated his future overall strategy for the Middle East, both the British and Saudi governments pressed Kennedy not to recognize the YAR and to lend assistance to stop Nasser. The British government told Kennedy that their position in Aden would be forfeited should Nasser gain control in Yemen. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan warned Kennedy that many of the West’s regional allies’ sovereignty would be threatened with Nasser’s gains. Saudi King Feisal once again asked Kennedy to delay recognition. Hoping to gain Kennedy’s support, Feisal implemented a series of social reforms in Saudi Arabia. Faced with numerous army defections to pro-Nasser forces, Feisal began to use Saudi Arabia’s oil reserves as a leveraging device to press Kennedy for aid against Nasser. Kennedy had to choose between the U.S.’s regional allies, one of which held the world’s largest petroleum reserves controlling a vital natural resource for the Cold War, or his new policy of rapprochement with Nasser. On 20 December 1962, the U.S. government recognized the Yemen Arab Republic.<sup>135</sup> Kennedy chose Nasser.

The arms race continued in the Middle East and the U.S. monitored the progression of missile development in the region. In January 1963, the CIA sent a report to the Kennedy administration on the progress of the UAR’s missile program. Elaborating on the genesis of the missile program, the report noted that the UAR’s missile program started in early 1960. A small group of West German scientists, directed

---

<sup>133</sup> State Department to Bundy, Talking Papers, NSF, Robert Kromer, Box 445, UAR 1961-1962 folder 1 of 4, JFKL.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*, 276.

by Dr. Eugen Sanger, contracted with the UAR to counter Israeli moves in the missile development field. The report elaborated that the UAR was then engaging in developing a guidance system for their rockets, the same rockets that had been used in a test firing back on 23 July 1962. The report estimated that left unfettered the UAR missile program would achieve a guidance system by mid-1964. The CIA concluded that a 500 pound payload could be delivered by the current rockets in the UAR's possession. The intelligence report concluded that the UAR did not have the capability to produce biological or chemical weapons, but stressed that such weapons could be obtained from a Soviet Bloc country.<sup>136</sup> The UAR's missile program had progressed by 1963 with the assistance of the German scientists.

The progression of the UAR's missile program concerned members of the Israeli government and prompted them to seek U.S. assistance. On 2 April 1963, Israeli Defense Minister Shimon Peres met with U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatrick and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and discussed his concerns on the UAR's missile developments. He told Bundy and Gilpatrick that Nasser possessed ground-to-ground missiles capable of hitting targets far into Israel's territory and was in the process of acquiring air-to-air and ship-to-shore missiles from the Soviets, greatly upsetting the military balance against Israel. The U.S. officials countered that the UAR's missiles still had no guidance system and therefore had no real military value. The military balance in the region had not been upset. Changing his position, Peres agreed but stressed the psychological impact in Israel would be colossal. He then informed Bundy and Gilpatrick that Israel possessed evidence that Nasser has acquired mustard gas toxins,

---

<sup>136</sup> Memorandum to Intelligence Director, 8 January 1963, NSF Robert Kromer, Box 427, Israel security (missile) development sale of hawks 1962 1963, JFKL.

and Nasser could possibly put a poison gas into a missile. Not impressed, Bundy insisted that Nasser posed no threat to Israel's military superiority. Realizing Peres' unwavering position on Nasser's missile capabilities, Bundy stated "we cannot help but view all the talk of missiles in the Near East as very bad business."<sup>137</sup> The Kennedy administration did not view Egypt's missile developments as a threat to Israel.

The arms race in the Middle East took on a dire sense of urgency by mid-April due to the actions of three nations. On 17 April 1963, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq created a new Arab military union, calling it the United Arab Republic Federation (UAR Federation) to liberate Palestine.<sup>138</sup> The roots of this union began in early February 1963 when a coup in Iraq removed the communist-leaning leader Abd al-Karim Qasim and replaced him with pro-Nasser elements. By March, another coup took place in Syria when Syrian Ba'th Party members overthrew the Syrian government and established a new government that intended to once again align with Nasser.<sup>139</sup> The double coups propelled Nasser back on the world stage and brought calls for Arab unity in the region back to the forefront.

Israel hardly shared in the jubilation emanating from Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad. On 26 April 1963, Ben-Gurion sent Kennedy a private letter expressing the immediate danger of the UAR Federation's declaration towards Israel. He called the new union's proclamation to liberate Palestine damaging to the "area[s] stability and Israel security." Ben-Gurion blamed Kennedy's aid given to the UAR for setting "the arms against Israel." Ben-Gurion thanked Kennedy for his previous sale of the Hawk missile

---

<sup>137</sup> Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, 2 April 1963, NSF, Box 119, israel general, 3-7-63 4-23-63, JFKL.

<sup>138</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 119.

<sup>139</sup> Barrett, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War*, 298, 300.

system, but stated that in “light [of the] new offensive weapons being prepared by Israel’s neighbors, the Hawk is not enough.” Ben-Gurion asked Kennedy for a joint U.S.-Soviet declaration guaranteeing the “territorial integrity and security” for all Middle Eastern states in the region. Stressing the gravity of the situation, the prime minister requested a personal audience with Kennedy in Washington.<sup>140</sup>

Ben-Gurion did not fret alone over the new found union centered in Cairo, Jordanian King Hussein joined him. The *New York Times* reported on a cascading “Shadow Over the Middle East,” referring to Nasser’s growing influence.<sup>141</sup> The article warned that the new UAR Federation would destabilize the already precarious region. Focusing on Jordan, the *New York Times* noted that King Hussein held a tenuous grip to the throne. The rise of pro-Nasser elements rioting in Jordan had forced Hussein to dissolve his parliament, and place a more popular government in power to ease the Jordanian calls to join Nasser. In March, Hussein escaped a plot on his life by rumored Egyptian assassins.<sup>142</sup> The article stated that “Israel warns that Nasser’s domination in Jordan would mean a pistol pointed at [Israel’s] heart.”<sup>143</sup> Jordan bordered Israel on the eastern side of the country, and if Jordan joined the UAR Federation Israel would be entirely encircled along its borders, except for a small northern portion that bordered Lebanon. King Hussein shared in Ben-Gurion’s trepidation over Nasser’s new popularity, but the fear of a Jordanian addition to the new UAR Federation sent shockwaves through Israel.

---

<sup>140</sup> Rusk telegram to Tel Aviv, 26 April 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 4-24-63 5-3-63, JFKL.

<sup>141</sup> “Shadow Over the Middle East”, *The New York Times*, 23 April 1963, 36.

<sup>142</sup> “Jordan Reported Foiling Conspiracy to Kill Hussein”, *New York Times*, 5 March 1963, 3.

<sup>143</sup> “Shadows Over Middle East”, 36.

Israel was prepared to take any measures necessary to prevent Jordan from falling into the UAR Federation's control. On 1 May 1963, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Walworth Barbour told the State Department that the Israeli Director General of the Foreign Ministry Dr. Haim Yehil expressed his concerns to him over the situation in Jordan. Yehil stated that if Nasser gained control in Jordan, it "would be intolerable" for the Israeli government. Yehil threatened Barbour that "Israel cannot be expected to wait and see" over the events taking place in Jordan, and that a "situation might nevertheless arise that Israel will have to act." Shocked, Barbour stressed to Yehil that Israel had to remain calm in the current situation, and that the U.S. could not be placed in a position "where we are asked to defend aggression."<sup>144</sup> Israel was not going to allow a Jordanian addition to the UAR Federation, and threatened to take preemptive action to ensure it.

Fearful of an Israeli attack on Jordan, Kennedy wrote to Ben-Gurion in an attempt to calm his fears over Nasser.<sup>145</sup> Trying to mollify Ben-Gurion over the UAR Federation's declarations, Kennedy reasoned that the "significance of these declarations is not substantively different from that of the many earlier similar declarations put out in other forms and phrases." Kennedy informed Ben-Gurion that the current situation in Jordan concerns both the U.S. and Israel. He stressed that it's "important that both our nations refrain from precipitous actions or reactions, which could well exacerbate rather than improve the situation."<sup>146</sup> Kennedy hoped to express to Ben-Gurion that an Israeli preemptive action would only make the situation worse.

---

<sup>144</sup> Barbour to Rusk, 1 May 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 4-24-63 5-3-63, JFKL.

<sup>145</sup> JFK letter to Ben-Gurion, 4 May 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 5-4-63, JFKL.

<sup>146</sup> JFK letter to Ben-Gurion, 4 May 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 5-4-63, 3, JFKL.

While warning Ben-Gurion not to invade Jordan, Kennedy backed his rapprochement policy that Ben-Gurion attacked in his last letter. The president informed Ben-Gurion that “these relations, in my judgment, have significantly increased our influence with Arab leaders,” and that this influence is exercised “in behalf of the peace of the area and with full regard for the security of Israel.” He noted “we have publicly stated and shown by action on many occasions that we support those Arab States which may prefer to remain independent and whose freedom of action may be jeopardized.” Disagreeing with Ben-Gurion’s claim that U.S. aid is helping Nasser point weapons at Israel, Kennedy retorted that he believed that the economic assistance to Nasser has actually reduced “the dangerous influence of the Soviet Union and served as a restraint on any Arab action which might be destructive to the peace of the area and the interests of the United States.” Kennedy then responded to Ben-Gurion’s request for a joint U.S.-Soviet declaration for a security guarantee for the region, claiming that such a declaration is not possible and would only increase Soviet influence and prestige in the Middle East.<sup>147</sup> The president put his rapprochement policy with Nasser over Israel’s security concerns, while warning against any preemptive actions by Israel.

Not happy with being chided by the president, the Israeli government sent its ambassador to talk with Kennedy’s Deputy Counsel Myer Feldman. On 6 May 1963, Israeli Ambassador Avraham Harman told Feldman that “Israel was upset by the manner in which he had been called in last Saturday to be warned about taking any military action on the West Bank of the Jordan.” Harman wanted something from the U.S. to ensure Israel and Jordan’s security. He proposed a public security statement or even

---

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.



“defense consultations” between the two nations with the exchange of “information, intelligence, and of current plans regarding the Near East” which would help ease Israel’s anxieties in Jordan.<sup>148</sup> The Israeli government wanted some form of U.S. commitment to ensure that Jordan would not fall, and expressed its dislike for being warned not to take military action to protect its own interests.

Fearing the UAR Federation, Ben-Gurion hoped to rally Israel behind him. The prime minister publicly addressed the Israeli Knesset in a speech over the UAR Federation’s proclamation to liberate Palestine. He reminded the Knesset that Israel existed as the “only country in the world all of whose neighbors proclaim night and day that they are determined to destroy it.”<sup>149</sup> Ben-Gurion told the Knesset it shall never be forgotten that during the Israeli War for Independence that neither “the United States and the Soviet Union-lifted a finger to help Israel.”<sup>150</sup> Ben-Gurion surely intended this comment as a rebuttal to President Kennedy’s alleged commitment to protect Israel. The prime minister stressed the gravity of the UAR Federation’s declaration by noting that for the first time Israel’s enemies wrote a constitutional document, whose principal aim became the destruction of Israel. Quoting the UAR Federation’s declaration, Ben-Gurion notes the parallels between Adolf Hitler’s final solution to eradicate the Jewish population with the current Arab leaders plans, adding that many of the Arab leaders during WWII cooperated with Hitler’s henchmen.<sup>151</sup> Ben-Gurion accentuated the threat of the UAR Federation’s declaration to the Knesset making it an issue of life or death,

---

<sup>148</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 6 May 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 5-5-63 5-9-63, JFKL.

<sup>149</sup> Ben-Gurion to the Knesset, 6 May 1963, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, X. the second decade: 6. Statement to the Knesset by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, online: [www.mfa.gov.il](http://www.mfa.gov.il).

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

and reminded his countrymen that Israel had defended itself alone in the past and might have to do so again. He hoped to get this point across to other world leaders as well.

Capitol Hill heard Ben-Gurion's call for help. Kennedy began to feel the pressures of the arms race from domestic forces at home. On 12 April 1963, the White House received bipartisan letters from six U.S. Senators urging Kennedy to stop the UAR from using German scientists for their missile program. They asked that the administration "use its good offices with West Germany" to remove the German scientists working on the missiles and other offensive weapons that would benefit the UAR. The White House replied that few of the scientists would obey a summons by the West German Government to return home, adding that the scientists' removal could result in Soviet personnel replacing them, causing even greater Soviet influence in the UAR. The White House reminded the Senators that Israel was also actively engaging in an advanced missile program, an important consideration. The White House expressed to the Senators that the administration's deepest concern is over the current arms race in the Middle East, and that it will deal "even-handedly with all states concerned."<sup>152</sup> Domestic opposition in the U.S. began to voice their concern over Israel's security and blamed the UAR for instigating the arms race in the Middle East, but the administration did not share their view.

Throughout April and May 1963, the U.S. Senate began debating the issues over Israel's security and the U.S. financial assistance to the UAR. Senator Jacob K. Javits (D-NY) wanted to create a defense pact between the U.S. and Israel citing Nasser's threats

---

<sup>152</sup> Brubeck to Bundy, 12 April 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 3-7-63 4-23-63, JFKL. The U.S. Senators were Jacob K. Javits (R-NY), Hugh Doggett Scott Jr. (D-PA), Thomas Joseph Dodd (D-CT), Winston Lewis Prouty (R-VT), Kenneth Bernard Keating (R-NY), and Thomas Henry Kuchel (R-CA).

towards Israel as alarming. On the Senate floor Javits blasted Kennedy's foreign policy demanding an end "to foreign aid with Egypt to cause it to abandon the arms and missile race as a useless and senseless waste of its resources." Mocking Kennedy's foreign policy, Senator Ernest Gruening (D-AK) retorted "that Soviet arms, Nazi scientists, and United States money made a wonderful combination in the UAR." Gruening feared that "unless the United States policy of building up Nasser is reversed, it's going to produce a bloody war in the Middle East."<sup>153</sup> In the House of Representatives, Representative Seymour Halpern (R-NY) introduced a Foreign Aid amendment proposing an end to U.S. aid to Nasser.<sup>154</sup> Domestic forces began criticizing Kennedy's foreign policy blaming him for aiding the UAR in the developing arms race. Unfortunately for the Kennedy administration, the arms race in the Middle East now ran through the Capitol.

The administration now needed to diffuse anxieties in both Israel and Washington. Deciding to rectify two problems with one solution, the Kennedy administration offered Israel an informal security guarantee. The administration presented the guarantee at a presidential press conference on 8 May 1963. Kennedy stated "we support the security of both Israel and her neighbors" adding that "we seek to limit the Near East arms race" which misdirects valuable resources from the region. His carefully worded guarantee stated that the U.S. would "in the event of aggression or preparation of aggression . . . adopt other course of action on our own to prevent or to put a stop to such aggression . . ."<sup>155</sup> The administration believed that the informal security guarantee would placate Washington and more importantly prevent Israel from invading Jordan.

---

<sup>153</sup> "Aid To UAR Stirs Fight in Congress", by Warren Weaver, *The New York Times*, 1 May 1963, 1, 5.

<sup>154</sup> "New Concern in Israel", *The New York Times*, by Hendrick Smith, 5 May 1963, 196.

<sup>155</sup> JFK Presidential Library, 8 May 1963, News Conference 55, online source: [www.jfklibrary.org](http://www.jfklibrary.org)

Taking no chances on Israel's actions, Kennedy informed Nasser of the possibility of an Israeli attack on Jordan. Throughout the months of April and May, Kennedy sent numerous letters to Nasser warning him that Israel might invade Jordan.<sup>156</sup> Even after his 8 May informal security guarantee to Israel, Kennedy cautioned Nasser that "in the present circumstances I must tell you I can't guarantee that Israel will refrain from military action if there is a coup in Jordan. Such a development would have far-reaching consequences for all of us and must be averted."<sup>157</sup> Kennedy's fears of an aggressive Israeli policy destabilizing the region prompted him to notify Nasser.

Kennedy's diplomatic maneuvers helped to prevent a disaster in Jordan. The coup in Jordan did not materialize, and the impending preemptive Israeli attack never occurred. By late May, the State Department reported that civil unrest in Jordan had subsided. U.S. Ambassador to Jordan William B. Macomber reported that many Jordanians "are having second thoughts about the wisdom of their actions and are aware of how close they came to inviting an Israeli move."<sup>158</sup> Macomber reminded the State Department that though many Jordanians had second thoughts, they still had dreams for Arab unity in the future. The State Department also concluded that Hussein skillfully managed to keep the army loyal to the current government, which added to the stability in Jordan.<sup>159</sup> With Jordan's stability no longer in question at least for the moment, the Kennedy administration began to see cracks in the UAR Federation.

---

<sup>156</sup> Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arm Sales to Israel*, 92-96.

<sup>157</sup> Kennedy to Nasser, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 5-15-63 5-16-63, 3, JFKL. No date on the letter, but it mentions Nasser's trip to Algeria and Yugoslavia, and Kennedy's press conference on May 8<sup>th</sup>. Look at Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, page 96, to further substantiate the date of the letter.

<sup>158</sup> State Department memorandum of Conversation, 15 May 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 5-15-63 5-16-63, JFKL.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

The State Department viewed Syria as a weak link to the UAR Federation. It reported that the Ba'th party in Syria now opposed the pro-Nasser elements in the country, stating "the Nasserites controlled the streets but the Ba'th [party] has the majority in the civil service and the army." The Ba'th party also had the majority of the established business circles in Syria on their side which they used to control the economic infrastructure of the country. The State Department believed that if the Syrian Ba'th party created a stronger union with the Iraqi Ba'th party, they might build enough strength to eliminate Nasser's influence in both countries.<sup>160</sup> The State Department viewed the UAR Federation as shaky at best, but the arms race continued on.

The Kennedy administration still had to contend with the escalating arms race in the Middle East between the UAR and Israel. Conventional weapons continued to flood into both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Israeli government did not abate in its pressure to attain a formal security guarantee, to conduct high-level joint security consultations, and again began to request arms from the U.S. government.

On 28 August 1963, Israeli Ambassador Harman met with NSC Robert Kromer to discuss Israel's concerns over Nasser's arms build up. Harman informed Kromer that Nasser had received new tanks, and Harman then pressed Kromer to sell U.S. tanks to Israel. Kromer avoided giving a definitive response but said the U.S. government "would at least listen to any such proposal." Harman then raised the question over any possibilities of holding security consultations and expressed Israel's desire "to institutionalize such discussions."<sup>161</sup> Harman laid the prospect down for the Israeli

---

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Kromer memorandum of Conversation, 28 August 1963, NSF, Box 119a, Israel general, 8-28-63 8-31-63, JFKL.

government to purchase more arms from the U.S., and having possible joint security consultations between the two governments.

The Israeli government argued that it needed definitive proof of the U.S.'s commitment to defend Israel. On 9 September 1963, Israeli Deputy Ambassador to the U.S. Mordechai Gazit told Kromer that Israel's security concerns needed some form of reassurance. He emphasized that Israel needed "some feeling that they would not eventually be engulfed by the Arabs," adding that "if these security concerns could be laid to rest, then they might be able to undertake a more flexible Arab policy."<sup>162</sup> On 11 September, Gazit then met with U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East Rodger P. Davies claiming that he had met with the new Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and with most of the top ranking officers of the IDF, adding that the entire Israeli defense establishment needed some form of U.S. reassurance. Gazit asserted that the UAR could attack unprovoked with an assortment of missiles and jets in under one hour's time. Gazit insisted that "Israel must know that the United States would be at her side and must know in detail how assistance would be rendered so that defense plans could be coordinated."<sup>163</sup> Gazit used the proposed joint security consultations as the vehicle to reassure the U.S.'s commitment to defend Israel.

The Israeli government viewed Kennedy's informal security guarantee as insufficient, and it insisted that a formal security guarantee would better appease Israel's security concerns over Nasser. Gazit informed Davies that the Israeli government needed an answer from Kennedy to Ben-Gurion's letter of 12 May asking for a bilateral security

---

<sup>162</sup> Memorandum for the Record, 9 September 1963, NSF, Box 119a, Israel general, 9-63 9-30-63, JFKL.

<sup>163</sup> Department of State memorandum of Conversation, 11 September 1963, Box 119a, Israel general, 9-63 9-30-63, JFKL.

agreement.<sup>164</sup> He made sure to inform Davies that the Israeli government wanted an answer without the insistence “on any ‘quid pro quos’ for anything we were prepared to do.”<sup>165</sup> He then gave the significance of Kennedy’s decision stating that it would “determine whether Israel’s scant resources would have to be devoted increasingly to armaments rather than development.”<sup>166</sup> Gazit did his utmost to impress upon Davies that Kennedy’s decision would set the future course of Israel.

Kennedy was not prepared to give anything to Israel. On 2 October 1963, Kennedy wrote to Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol informing him that an official bilateral security agreement was not necessary. Kennedy noted that there was no Arab leader in the Middle East that does not doubt the U.S.’s commitment to assist Israel if it sustained an attack, citing his 8 May press conference statement. The president also pointed out that Israel itself has the capabilities to deter any Arab aggressor in the region, claiming that “Ben-Gurion’s letters and the statements of your own military leaders indicate that you share this estimate.” Kennedy concluded that “thus it is our judgment that the existing informal arrangements meets Israel’s needs and give clear warning to the Arabs.” Kennedy explained that any new security arrangements would jeopardize the improved U.S. position with the Arab nations that have “enabled us to exert some leverage on their actions,” and would push the Arabs towards the Soviets.<sup>167</sup> Still placing Arab sentiments over Israel’s security concerns, the president refused everything Israel requested.

---

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. Gazit had the date of Ben-Gurion’s letter wrong; it was the 12 May 1963. See Ben-Gurion letter to JFK, 12 May 1963, POF, Box 119a, Israel general, folder 6, JFKL.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., The Kennedy administration’s insistence on ‘quid pro quo’s’ must have annoyed the Israeli government by September 1963. Hawk sale, McCoy mission were all quid pro quos. McCoy mission will be discussed in chapter three.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> JFK letter to Levi Eshkol, 2 October 1963, POF, Box 119a, Israel general, folder 6, JFKL.

Kennedy's refusal did not stop the Israeli government, and his assurances that no Arab nation would dare attack did not pacify Israel. Immediately upon receiving Kennedy's letter, Eshkol spoke with U.S. Ambassador Barbour about Nasser's new military capabilities and his growing missile threat. Claiming that Nasser's missiles had new first-strike capabilities putting Israel's airfields and populations at risk, Eshkol told Barbour in light of these new circumstances he has already sent Meir to begin negotiations with Secretary Rusk for the purchase of ground-to-ground missiles.<sup>168</sup> Expressing the urgency of Nasser's new addition to the arms race, the Israeli government resumed its desire for more American weapons.

Joined by Israeli Ambassador Harman and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Phillips Talbot, Meir informed Rusk that Israel desperately needed to counter Nasser's new first-strike abilities. She articulated Israel's need to acquire advanced ground-to-ground missiles and U.S. tanks against Nasser's new growing threat. Disagreeing with their assessment over Nasser's new capabilities, Rusk and Talbot did not believe that Israel needed more weapons to counter Nasser. Citing Nasser's missiles, Meir and Harman warned that Nasser possessed chemical and radiological weapons which he could now use in his missiles, adding to the potency of his first-strike. Still not believing their claims, Rusk and Talbot wanted Meir and Harman to prove it. Meir agreed she would. They arranged for the meeting for 12 November to discuss Israel's new assessment of the UAR's missile capability.<sup>169</sup>

The agreed upon November talks had not been intended by the State Department to be joint security consultations between the U.S. and Israel. Rusk and Talbot wanted the

---

<sup>168</sup> Barbour to Rusk, 4 October 1963, NSF, Box 119a, Israel general, 10-1-63 10-23-63, JFKL.

<sup>169</sup> Rush to Tel Aviv and Cairo, 5 October 1963, NSF, Box 119a, Israel general, 10-1-63 10-23-63, JFKL.



focus of the meeting to be on the Israeli assessment of the UAR's missile capabilities. The State Department sent a memo to the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv outlining this decision. The memo warned that the Israeli's would probably use the November talks to try to acquire joint security consultations and additional weapons.<sup>170</sup> Before the November talks commenced, the Israeli request for ground-to-ground missile had already been denied by the Kennedy administration.<sup>171</sup>

The 12 November talks between the U.S. and Israel had been held in Washington. Held in secrecy, Assistant Secretary of State Phillips Talbot chaired the meeting. Over the course of two days, the Israeli members of the meeting gave their presentation on the UAR's missile and conventional weapons program on the first day of the talks. The second day of the talks comprised a military critique from both the U.S. and Israeli participants over the UAR's capabilities. During the critique, Talbot noted that both sides agreed that the UAR's missile capabilities are limited and posed no immediate danger. Both the U.S. and Israeli officials decided that Israel needed to replace its outdated Sherman tank corps, and that Israel needed to add an additional 200 tanks to meet Nasser's anticipated levels by 1965.<sup>172</sup> Though the Kennedy administration tried to avoid making the talks a security exchange, they unintentionally made it the first high-level joint security consultations meeting between the U.S. and Israel, and even concluded that Israel could use more tanks.

---

<sup>170</sup> Rush to Tel Aviv and Cairo, 5 October 1963, NSF, Box 119a, Israel general, 10-1-63 10-23-63, JFKL.

<sup>171</sup> Kromer memorandum to JFK, 5 November 1963, NSF, Box 119a, Israel general, 11-1-63 11-6-63, JFKL.

<sup>172</sup> Circular, Talbot to ambassadors and Rusk, 13 November 1963, NSF, Box 119a, Israel general, 11-7-63 11-17-63, JFKL.

After the November meeting, the Kennedy administration agreed to sell Israel modern M-48 tanks to replenish its tank corps. On 15 November 1963, Kromer sent Bundy a memo on the discovered Israeli covert purchase of helicopters from the West German government. Kromer wrote that the matter should be brought up to the Germans and Israelis. Kromer also told Bundy that “you may recall my suggestion [that] we might want to handle a tank deal in this way, letting Bonn sell MAP surplus M-48s to Israel at knockdown prices.”<sup>173</sup> The U.S. covertly made the tank sale through Germany to sell the M-48’s to Israel, though the official sale did not go through to Israel until 1964 under the Johnson administration.<sup>174</sup>

Why did Kennedy offer to sell the M-48 tank to Israel in mid-November? The Kennedy administration’s policy of courting Nasser caused massive political repercussions in Washington. As previously discussed, members of the Congress and Senate had lambasted Kennedy’s policy of giving aid and economic assistance to Nasser. They blamed Kennedy for Nasser’s new found success in establishing the UAR Federation, uniting Egypt, Iraq, and Syria under Cairo’s direction. Undoubtedly it would appear that this domestic opposition would be regulated to only those politicians concerned with Israel’s security, implicating the Israeli lobby, but Kennedy’s policy of supporting Nasser hurt a broader audience back home.

By April 1963, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate had enough of the Kennedy administration’s rapprochement with Nasser. Though a cease fire had been implemented near the Saudi and Yemen border on 6 April, the domestic critics still railed

---

<sup>173</sup> Kromer to Bundy, 15 November 1963, NSF, Box 119a, Israel general, 11-7-63 11-17-63, JFKL. Tank underlined as appears in the memo.

<sup>174</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 196. Cohen notes that the tanks were finally delivered in January 1964 under Johnson.

against the administration.<sup>175</sup> As mentioned, the 17 April 1963 establishment of the new UAR Federation only exasperated the domestic opposition towards Kennedy's economic aid to Nasser. Nasser's forces had tripled in size and once again threaten the U.S.'s aligned conservative Arab monarchies. The U.S. oil lobby had vested interests in ensuring Feisal's survival and in the natural oil deposits in the region. The Israeli lobby joined with the oil lobby to cut off aid to Nasser.<sup>176</sup> On 7 November 1963, the Senate and House had the U.S. Annual Foreign Aid Bill amended, restricting all economic aid to any nation engaging or preparing to engage in military operations by a vote of 65 to 13 in the Senate.<sup>177</sup> The Kennedy administration's rapprochement policy with Nasser did not end in the Oval office, it ended on Capitol Hill.

Sensing harsh political problems in the coming 1964 presidential elections, the Kennedy administration felt obligated to improve its foreign affairs record at home. On 5 November 1963, before the planned November 12<sup>th</sup> talks between the U.S. and Israel, Kromer sent Kennedy a memo concerning Israel's latest requests for arms and security guarantees. He informed Kennedy that giving Israel the ground-to-ground missiles would only push Nasser to seek missiles from the Soviets, exacerbating the arms race further. Kromer conceded that Israel had a valid request for the tanks since Israel possessed mainly outdated WWII Sherman tanks. He suggested that the purchase might be able to go through Europe, protecting foreign policy aims towards Nasser and Arab sentiments in

---

<sup>175</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 117.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 114-115. Bass notes that the oil lobby and Israeli lobby joined together to oppose JFK's Nasser rapprochement policy.

<sup>177</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 185.

the region.<sup>178</sup> Kromer then stated “we see no need for an answer until we’ve thoroughly hashed out our widely differing threat estimates with the Israelis. But they are obviously mounting a shrewdly calculated campaign to get something they feel they need from us before 1964 elections.” He advised the president that “we’ll almost certainly have to do something,” suggesting an indirect arms sale through Europe, military visits, a debriefing on U.S. deterrent capabilities for the region, and maybe more intelligence exchanges.<sup>179</sup> The Kennedy administration made the tank sale in late 1963 because of the coming 1964 November presidential elections, though arranging the sale clandestinely so not to anger Arab sentiments, Kennedy still had Nasser on his mind.

The immense competition between Israel and the UAR to acquire weapons produced the modern Middle East’s first major arms race. Both Israel and the UAR embraced the procurement of arms as the vehicle to ensure their own security for their respective nations. Both nations developed missile weapons technology programs to increase the effectiveness of their arsenals. Like the Cold War arms race, the Middle East’s arms race divulged into a psychological condition of insecurities that could only be relieved through the procurement of more weapons.

The Israel government wanted to ensure part of its national security defense through the U.S. Feeling threatened along its borders Israel believed that having a world power firmly committed to its security would ensure its survival. Ben-Gurion viewed a Jordanian addition to UAR Federation as a national security nightmare. The Israeli government felt access to American arms would help Israel in the arms race in the short

---

<sup>178</sup> Kromer memorandum to JFK, 15 November 1963, NSF, Box 119a, Israel general, 11-1-63 11-6-63, JFKL.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

term, but a U.S. security guarantee would secure Israel's security in the long term. The Israeli government often approached the Kennedy administration with multiple requests all relating to ensure its security. Requesting arms, security agreements, and joint security consultations at the same time would increase the probability that at least one security issue would be granted by the Kennedy administration.

Throughout the arms race in the Middle East, Kennedy continued his rapprochement policy towards Nasser until the end of his stay in the Oval Office; it was the U.S. Congress that ended his rapprochement policy, not Kennedy. Kennedy supported Nasser over his regional allies in the Middle East such as Great Britain and even oil rich Saudi Arabia during the Yemen Civil War. Viewing Nasser as representing the tenets of Arab nationalism, Kennedy hoped to court Nasser with favorable policies and economic aid to gain pro-American sentiments among the Arabs, increasing the U.S.'s influence in the region at the detriment to the Soviets. As discussed in chapter one, Kennedy attempted to resolve the Palestinian refugee issue as an extension of his rapprochement policy with Nasser, and was even willing to break with past U.S. policy and offer arms to Israel to induce it towards the Johnson Plan. The Kennedy administration continually denied Israel's requests for security guarantees, joint security consultations, and arms requests. The tank sale that was approved by the administration in November 1963 was only done after Congress had ended Kennedy's rapprochement, and Kennedy realized that he would desperately need domestic support for the upcoming 1964 presidential elections after his failed rapprochement with Nasser, and having the Israel lobby's support would be very beneficial.

The Kennedy administration viewed the Israeli government's quest for arms as part of the problem in the region. It was pushing Nasser towards the Soviets. The Kennedy administration considered Israel's Jordanian policy as aggressive and destabilizing. Ben-Gurion's threats to take preemptive action in Jordan confirmed the administration views. Kennedy had invested his foreign policy direction in the Middle East with Nasser to rollback the Soviet influence in the region, and Israel had always been secondary.

Unintentionally, the arms race between Israel and the UAR helped establish the origins of the U.S.-Israeli alliance. Seeking to contain Israel from attacking Jordan and to ease domestic pressure in the U.S., Kennedy gave Israel an informal security guarantee on 8 May 1963, and unintentionally linked the U.S. to Israel's future survival. The November talks inadvertently became the first high-level security consultations meeting between the two governments, even though its original intended purpose was to have Israel present new intelligence on Nasser's missile capabilities. The joint military consultations in November and the informal security guarantee later became the building blocks for an alliance, establishing the mechanisms to ensure that both countries would continue to exchange views on the security issues in the region well into the future.

The regional arms race and the Palestinian refugee situation proved to be monumental issues for the Kennedy administration in the Middle East. Domestic concerns collided with foreign policy aims influencing Kennedy's decisions towards the Middle East. While the arms race and policy decisions unfolded between the U.S. and Israel, there existed a larger concern for president Kennedy acting as an extension of

the arms race itself, occurring simultaneously in the backdrop of events: Israel's nuclear program.

### III. KENNEDY AND ISRAEL'S QUEST FOR THE BOMB

The Cold War brought the development of nuclear weapons to unprecedented heights, holding the world captive to decisions emanating from Washington D.C. and Moscow. Due to the U.S. and Soviet Union's massive stockpiles of nuclear weapons, the concept of mutually assured destruction ensured a perpetual state of fear throughout the Cold War. By the early 1960s, the "nuclear powers club" had grown to include the U.S., the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France. Several other nations also strove to join this elite group. Communist China desperately sought nuclear weapons, as did West Germany, Sweden, and India. In the early 1960s, the nation of Israel had been constructing a nuclear program. The Israel engaged in a covert operation to pursue the development of nuclear weapons. This Israeli nuclear weapons program had been developing in the midst of a fragile armistice that left Israel technically in a state of war with its surrounding Arab neighbors.<sup>180</sup>

The Israeli nuclear program caused grave concern for Kennedy. Israel embarked on a course to procure nuclear weapons during the height of the regional arms race between Egypt and Israel. Knowing the potential of the Israeli program and fearing its consequences, the Kennedy administration became increasingly worried about Israel's intentions. Fears of a mini-nuclear arms race in the Middle East inundated Kennedy, he

---

<sup>180</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 99-100. The terms 'Arabs', 'Arab neighbors', and 'Arab nations' in this paper does not seek to imply the ethnical compositions of any group or nation, it is used merely for simplicity for the reader.



dreaded that Nasser and the surrounding Arab nations would look towards Moscow for assistance to counter Israeli moves. Eventually becoming the core reason for containing Israel, Kennedy viewed Israel's nuclear weapons program as the ultimate threat to his rapprochement policy with Nasser, unleashing an embolden Israeli foreign policy, and detrimental to the U.S.'s position in the region. This perception caused Kennedy to personally challenge Israel's sovereignty and threaten to end the relationship between both countries.

On 19th January, 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower met with president-elect John F. Kennedy and his staff to exchange matters important to the state. This customary debriefing for transition in the executive branch served to enlighten the incoming administration to the concerns and policies practiced by the incumbent administration.

Gathered together a day before Kennedy's inauguration, the out-going cabinet members, cemented to their chairs, surrounded the grandfatherly president Eisenhower at the far end of the conference table. Kennedy and the new national security team filled the room with enthusiasm and took their seats on the opposite side of the table. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Kennedy asked the out-going cabinet members what nations should the U.S. be concerned about. Which were trying to procure atomic weapons? Secretary of State Christian Herter answered "Israel and India." He explained to Kennedy that Israel's recently discovered secret reactor would soon be producing over ninety kilograms of plutonium by 1963, enough plutonium to produce nuclear weapons.<sup>181</sup> Not yet in office, the new administration now had its first foreign policy challenge.

---

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 101.

Israel's nuclear program development had begun many years before. It owed much to the passion and determination of David Ben-Gurion. As a passionate Zionist and early immigrant to Palestine in 1906, Ben-Gurion quickly rose to political power in the Jewish communities of Palestine during the 1930s. He held the position of Chairman of the Jewish Agency from 1935-1948, which became the governing body of the Yishuv in Palestine when Great Britain controlled the area as a mandate. Ben-Gurion lived through the turbulent times in the Palestinian Mandate, and tried desperately to help Jewish immigrants flee the horrors of Nazi occupied Europe. He heard personal accounts of the Holocaust from fleeing immigrants, and shared in the helplessness of the Yishuv in not being able to do more. Emotionally affected by the events in Europe, Ben-Gurion championed the idea of creating a Jewish state in Palestine, and became a leading figure in the creation of Israel in 1948.<sup>182</sup>

Ben-Gurion viewed the Arab-Israeli conflict as a perpetual conflict. It would persist until one side firmly defeated the other. His personal experiences of living through the violent clashes between Arabs and Jews in the Palestine Mandate and his knowledge of the Holocaust in Europe made Ben-Gurion consumed with protecting Israel's security. He made constant parallels between Adolf Hitler and Nasser, and he viewed the Arabs as Nazis as both having the same goals for the Jewish population: total eradication.<sup>183</sup> This led Ben-Gurion to adopt a policy of "security first" for the future survival of Israel.

Ben-Gurion believed that the promotion and development of science in Israel would ensure the state's survival. In 1947, Ben-Gurion created a special scientific research branch connected to the Jewish Agency to encourage development of

---

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 9-10. Yishuv is the Jewish community in Palestine..

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

technology related to defense. By March 1948, this scientific department became officially recognized as Ha'il Mada, or science corps division, of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) after the creation of Israel. Ben-Gurion sent instructions to an operative in Europe to enlist Jewish scientists for the Israeli government that would "either increase the capacity to kill masses or to cure masses; both things are important."<sup>184</sup> Viewing the development of science in Israel as an answer to Israel's security problems, Ben-Gurion placed the creation of scientific weapons as a major priority for Israel.

Ben-Gurion needed a dedicated scientist for any possibility of successfully using science to aid in Israel's defense; he found one in Dr. Ernst David Bergman. Dr. Bergman served as an understudy of the influential leader of the Zionist movement Chaim Weizmann, and had been a prominent chemist in his field. Dr. Bergman shared Ben-Gurion's view that scientific development could help to ensure Israel's security, and he held no reservations on the limits to secure that end. In 1952, Dr. Bergman persuaded Ben-Gurion to create the Israel Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC) with the hopes of starting research on nuclear development. Dr. Bergman became the chair of the IAEC and led the day-to-day scientific operations of the commission.<sup>185</sup> The IAEC needed a nuclear reactor to start qualitative research, but the Israeli government did not have the resources to initiate the project, this led to the quest to enlist a foreign government to achieve these aims.

The U.S. government became an option for Israel to acquire a research nuclear reactor. Under President Dwight E. Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" campaign in 1953, the U.S. government offered the nations of the world nuclear technology for peaceful

---

<sup>184</sup> Ben-Gurion quoted in Cohen, 11.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 15, 31.

purposes.<sup>186</sup> Ben-Gurion and Dr. Bergman looked to take advantage of the U.S. offer. In 1954, Israel joined the Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" program and obtained permission to receive a small research reactor. The Israeli government stressed to the U.S. government that it needed to secure nuclear energy to alleviate its fossil fuel shortage and dependence on foreign oil, as the surrounding producing states refused to sell oil to Israel. Unbeknownst to Eisenhower, Ben-Gurion and Dr. Bergman wanted use the reactor to help Israel develop nuclear weapons. A small group of Israeli scientists that knew of the secret operation protested in August 1955, claiming that such an operation could not possibly succeed without the U.S. finding out. An exorbitant amount of plutonium would have to be accounted for.<sup>187</sup> Realizing the limited avenues that the American reactor presented and with a U.S. reactor delivery date in 1958, Israel would need another reactor.

Seeking a reactor with the right capabilities, the Israeli government established closer ties with France. As previously established, France became Israel's arms depot during the early 1950s, providing the country with needed arms shipments in return for Israeli help in stemming Nasser's influence towards the Algerian rebels.<sup>188</sup> Israeli Deputy of Defense Shimon Peres close relationship with Ben-Gurion and supported his mission to create a covert nuclear weapons program for Israel. Peres was influential in establishing the Israeli-French relationship and believed a reactor could be acquired from France.

---

<sup>186</sup> The real intentions of the Eisenhower program sought to shape world opinion towards a friendlier acceptance of nuclear weapons, and also make the U.S. appear more committed towards peace than the Soviets. See Kenneth A. Osgood, *Total Cold War*, 154-155, 160.

<sup>187</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 44-45, 47.

<sup>188</sup> Refer to Chapter one.

In early 1956, Dr. Bergman and Peres asked the French government if they could purchase a nuclear reactor. The French debated the request, and finally offered Dr. Bergman and Peres a small research reactor on 27 July 1956, the day after Egyptian Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. The exchange for the French reactor included Israel's participation with the French and British governments' plan to seize the Suez Canal from the Egyptian government.<sup>189</sup>

This original French offer for a small research reactor changed to a larger forty megawatt reactor to be built at Dimona. At the height of the Suez Crisis in November 1956, the Soviet Union and the U.S. both issued warnings for all parties involved to cease operations in Egypt. Realizing its impedance without a nuclear deterrent of its own, Israel requested from the French government to provide a larger reactor that would speed the production of their nuclear program. Though details remain classified, apparently on 3 October 1957, French Prime Minister Bourges-Maunoury secretly granted the Israeli request. Both nations agreed to cooperate in a joint nuclear weapons program, exchanging scientific research as the French government oversaw the construction of the secret nuclear reactor.<sup>190</sup>

The American government knew in 1959 that an agreement of cooperation existed between the French and Israelis for arms sales and military training exercises. Small pieces of intelligence circulated within the Eisenhower administration through 1953-1959 that the French had been assisting the Israeli government in constructing a secret nuclear reactor, with a probable purpose of producing nuclear weapons.<sup>191</sup>

---

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 55, 57-60.

<sup>191</sup> CIA to JFK, 18 January 1961, NFS, Box 119a, Israel subjects, Ben-Gurion visit, 5-20-61 6-2-61, JFKL.

On 15 April 1958, an unnamed member of the Eisenhower administration privately confronted the chairman of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission, Dr. Bergmann, with rumors pertaining to Israeli-French nuclear cooperation. Dr. Bergman refuted the rumors to the American official and insisted that both the French and Israeli governments cooperated for the purpose of developing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes only. Dr. Bergman stressed that France merely gave Israel information pertaining to uranium chemistry and heavy water production.<sup>192</sup> Although the U.S. intelligence community in 1958 had no concrete evidence of an Israeli nuclear weapons program, Dr. Bergman's statements increased U.S. suspicion.

Piecing together more bits of information, the U.S. intelligence community began to suspect a construction site in the Negev Desert near Beer Sheba as a secret nuclear site. In early 1958, a U-2 reconnaissance spy plane accidentally took photographs of a massive construction site in the Negev desert; upper-level Central Intelligence Agency officials did not attempt to analyze the nature of the site in the photographs. By August 1960, the U.S. embassy in Israel reported to Washington about circulating rumors in Tel Aviv of a massive French-Israeli nuclear complex site out near Beer Sheba. On 8 November, British intelligence informed the CIA that they suspected a large reactor at Beer Sheba, and provided photos of the site. Later that month, a visiting American scientist in Israel, Henry Gomberg, told the U.S. embassy that he believed Israel had been engaged in constructing a nuclear reactor with French assistance over the past two years, and that it had plans to produce weapons grade plutonium. By the beginning of December 1960, the

---

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

CIA finally ascertained that Israel actively colluded with the French government in a secret plan to construct a nuclear reactor with weapons producing capabilities.<sup>193</sup>

On 7 December 1960, the US Joint Atomic Energy Intelligence Committee (JAEIC) held a closed session and determined that the nuclear reactor in the Negev, near Beer Sheba, could have numerous possible uses including the production of nuclear weapons. The committee believed that the secrecy surrounding the project provided evidence suggesting that the complex was intended for the production of developing nuclear weapons. The JAEIC determined that the French were supplying materials, equipment, technical assistance, and training to the Israelis. According to the committee, the French government helped Israel construct a 40-megawatt reactor, rather than the 24-megawatt that Israel claimed. France supplied Israel with over 385 tons of natural uranium for the reactor.<sup>194</sup> The JAEIC reported its findings to the Eisenhower administration.

The Eisenhower administration immediately confronted the Israeli government. On 9 December 1960, Secretary of State Christian Herter held a meeting with Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Avraham Harman and presented him with the CIA's intelligence. Herter told Harman that the consequences would be severe if Israel had intended to produce nuclear weapons. Harman replied that he never heard of the Dimona site and insisted that he possessed no knowledge of any nuclear weapons program. Harman pleaded to Herter to allow him time to inquire information from his government over the alleged Dimona site.<sup>195</sup>

---

<sup>193</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 83, 85-87.

<sup>194</sup> CIA to JFK, 18 January 1961, NSF, Box 119a, Israel subjects, Ben-Gurion visit, 5-20-61 6-2-61, JKFL.

<sup>195</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 88.

Before the Israeli government could officially respond to the Eisenhower administration, news of the Israeli nuclear program broke to the press. On 16 December 1960, an English newspaper, *The London Daily Express*, printed a story reporting that Israel was developing a nuclear bomb.<sup>196</sup> The *New York Times* reported on the 18 December that the Israeli government “calls reports that her nuclear technology could allow it to produce an atom bomb within five years very flattering, but untrue.”<sup>197</sup> Citing the location of the Israeli reactor, the *New York Times* reported on the 22 December that “Israel’s new nuclear reactor being built near Beer Sheba would not be used to build an atom bomb.”<sup>198</sup> A full size photo showing the reactor site under construction near Beer Sheba accompanied the article. Whether Israel had a nuclear weapons program or not, the media informed the world that Israel had in fact built a nuclear reactor.

Following the media reports, Ben-Gurion gave a public address to the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, on the nature of the newly discovered nuclear reactor at Dimona. During his December 21<sup>st</sup> address, Ben-Gurion confirmed the media reports that the Israeli government had been engaged in constructing a nuclear reactor in the Negev. He noted that the reactor under construction would “not be completed until three or four years from now.”<sup>199</sup> In his address, the prime minister explained that Israel planned to develop a 24-megawatt research reactor for peaceful purposes only. He did not mention French assistance.<sup>200</sup> The official Israeli position given to the public concerning the reactor maintained that it would be used for peaceful purposes only.

---

<sup>196</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 190.

<sup>197</sup> “Israel Denies Report”, *The New York Times*, 18 December 1960, 8.

<sup>198</sup> “Israel Assures U.S. On Reactor”, *The New York Times*, 22 December 1960, 5.

<sup>199</sup> Ben-Gurion quoted in Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 91.

<sup>200</sup> CIA to JFK, 18 January 1961, NSF, Box 119a, Israel subjects, Ben-Gurion visit, 5-20-61 6-2-61, JFKL.



The Eisenhower administration sent U.S. Ambassador to Israel Ogden Reid to meet with Ben-Gurion after his address to the Knesset. On the 24 December 1960, Reid personally met with Ben-Gurion to express the U.S. government's thanks on declaring the intended peaceful purposes of Israel's reactor at Dimona. Ben-Gurion repeated to Reid the statements he gave to the Knesset, and he assured him that the reactor's construction had not been intended to build a nuclear arsenal for Israel.<sup>201</sup> The Eisenhower administration now passed Israel's nuclear question on to the Kennedy administration.

After the meeting between Eisenhower and Kennedy's cabinet members on 19 January 1961, the new administration decided to press the Israeli government on the intended use of the Dimona reactor. The administration adopted a strategy of pressuring the Israeli government to allow scientists into the reactor site to validate the claim of the reactor's peaceful nature. Kennedy feared that the Israeli nuclear program would compel the region's Arab nations to seek outside help in creating their own nuclear program from the Soviets. Most of these fears surrounded Nasser who already received substantial military aid from the Soviets and now might request more conventional weapons and possibly Soviet nuclear weapons because of Israel's actions. This scenario prompted the administration to also insist to the Israeli government that the inspection reports on the reactor had to be conveyed to Nasser and the surrounding Arab states. Fears of a mini-nuclear arms race weighed heavy in the mind of the president.

Kennedy believed strongly against the proliferation of nuclear weapons on a global scale. In 1961, he told reporters that "when we start to talk about the megatonnage

---

<sup>201</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 92-93.

we could bring into a nuclear war, we are talking about annihilation.”<sup>202</sup> During a commencement speech at the American University in Washington in June 1962, Kennedy espoused the idea that the U.S. should approach the Soviet Union and begin talks on limiting nuclear arms control, and he raised the possibility of instituting an international test ban on nuclear weapons. He hoped that such a ban would curb the proliferation of nuclear weapons. He took the initiative and vowed not to conduct “nuclear tests in the atmosphere so long as other states do not do so.”<sup>203</sup> This led to the administration’s attempt to institute a formal international treaty banning nuclear testing with the Soviets. This policy initiative occurred simultaneously while the administration dealt with Israel’s nuclear program.

The Kennedy administration immediately pursued the task of requesting a U.S. visit to the Israeli nuclear reactor after taking office. On 3 February 1961, Assistant Secretary Levi Jones had been instructed to press Israeli Ambassador Harman for a visit to the new reactor by an American scientist.<sup>204</sup> Jones asked the Harman “when do you think Ben-Gurion will invite someone to see the site?” in which Harman dodged the question claiming that “in Israel no one is thinking about anything else except the political crisis [The Lavon Affair]...I do not see how I could get to him or think that he would be inclined to give an invitation at this time.” Jones stressed that he “could understand the Israeli attitude being as you described it but the idea of the proliferation of nuclear weapons was absolutely anathema to the United States and, although rightly or

---

<sup>202</sup> Kennedy quoted in Robert Dallek, *John F. Kennedy; An Unfinished Life*, New York; Little, Brown and Company, 2003) 607.

<sup>203</sup> Kennedy quoted in Dallek, 620.

<sup>204</sup> Rusk memorandum to JFK, 8 February 1961, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 2-61, JFKL.

wrongly, the suspicion of obtaining such a capability has fallen on Israel.”<sup>205</sup> Days later after the meeting, Ben-Gurion set a private letter to Kennedy to offer an invitation to visit the reactor site once publicity on the reactor in the press had died down. Ben-Gurion granted Kennedy a visit to the reactor site, but the date for the inspection had not been finalized.

To gather a firmer understanding on the Israeli reactor’s potential, Kennedy requested a detailed estimate from the CIA. The agency reported to him in April 1961 that the amount of uranium being delivered to and being produced by Israel indicated the reactor’s intended use for nuclear weapons. The 385 tons of uranium delivered from France to Israel between the late 1950s through the early 1960s far exceeded the amount of uranium needed for a 24-megawatt nuclear reactor. By 1960, the CIA ascertained that Israel received over 85 tons of uranium and it requested even more uranium from Argentina. Israel also began a pilot plan in 1957 to produce its own uranium. A fertilizer plant provided cover for an operation to produce fourteen tons of uranium a year locally. This plan alone provided enough uranium needed to power a 40-megawatt reactor for almost a year.<sup>206</sup>

The CIA stressed that the amount of uranium that Israel possessed could produce ample amounts of plutonium for building nuclear weapons. The agency reported to Kennedy that Israel also constructed an underground plutonium factory with the intention of starting the chemical separation of the irradiated fuel, which is the final component needed to produce nuclear weapons. It estimated that the 40-megawatt nuclear reactor

---

<sup>205</sup> State Department, Memorandum of Conversation, 3 February 1961, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 2-61, JFKL.

<sup>206</sup> CIA to JFK, NLK-98-001-48-1-2, NSF, Box 119a, Israel subjects, Ben-Gurion visit, the Arab-Israeli situation, JFKL.

alone could produce enough plutonium for one nuclear weapon per year. With the added uranium deliveries from outside Israel, there existed a major overflow of uranium which could be used for even more plutonium, and consequently for the development of more nuclear weapons.<sup>207</sup>

CIA intelligence believed that Ben-Gurion gave the order, without the knowledge of his Cabinet, to construct a second nuclear reactor in 1956 at Dimona. It believed the sole purpose of the construction of the second reactor at Dimona had been to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons.<sup>208</sup> This piece of information solidified the CIA's perception that the state of Israel had initiated plans to develop nuclear weapons since 1956, though the CIA still had no solid evidence of a nuclear weapons program.

During the JFK and Ben-Gurion meeting in New York on 30 May 1961, Kennedy had the opportunity to raise the reactor issue directly with Ben-Gurion. Kennedy expressed the need to placate other nation's anxieties, indirectly referring to the Arab nations in the region, over the intended purposes of the reactor at Dimona. In reference to Israel's reactor, Kennedy commented that "on theory that a woman should not only be virtuous but also have the appearance of virtue." Ben-Gurion insisted the peaceful nature of the reactor to Kennedy and responded that Israel constructed the reactor to address its need for atomic energy, since excess to oil had been restricted to the nation because of the Arab boycott. He explained Israel's desperate need to create a cheap energy source that would aid in the country's future desalinization projects that would provide Israel

---

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> CIA to Clifton, 8 February 1961, NLK-01-118-3-1-8, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 2-61, JFKL.

with much needed fresh water. Ben-Gurion stressed to Kennedy that these needs of the country were “the main- and for the time being only-” reason for the reactor.<sup>209</sup>

Wanting proof, Kennedy pressed the need to visit the site and to give an assessment to the Arab nation’s concerned over the reactor. He noted that the U.S. was engaged in the Middle East and that it would be in the best interests to convey to the other nations in the region that Israel was not “contributing to the proliferation of atomic weapons.” Kennedy added that the United Arab Republic (UAR), led by Nasser, would seek atomic weapons if it believed that Israel designed the reactor for this purpose. Ben-Gurion agreed to allow neutral scientists to visit the reactor, but he did not settle on a date. Kennedy then asked him if it would be possible to give the Arabs reports on the visits to the reactor, to which Ben-Gurion replied “You are absolutely free to do what you wish with the report. If you feel you should publish it, we have no objection.”<sup>210</sup> The meeting seemed successful. Kennedy acquired visitation rights to the reactor site and Ben-Gurion seemed not to have a problem with the U.S. sharing its findings with the Arab nations.

On 2 June 1961, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Phillips Talbot held a joint meeting with ambassadors from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, the United Arab Republic (UAR), and Yemen. All the ambassadors wanted to know what transpired over the reactor during Kennedy’s meeting with Ben-Gurion in New York.<sup>211</sup>

---

<sup>209</sup> Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, 30 May 1961, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 6-61, JFKL.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, 2 June 1961, NSF, Box 119a, Israel subjects, Ben-Gurion visit, 5-20-61 6-2-61, JFKL.

Talbot noted that President Kennedy discussed the nuclear reactor issue with Ben-Gurion intently during their meeting. He claimed that Ben-Gurion gave his assurances that the nuclear reactor would only be used for peaceful purposes, and that the reactor would be utilized for research into cheaper alternatives for energy. Talbot claimed that “the President expressed deep concern that there be no proliferation of atomic weapons since this would constitute a danger to peace; the United States would have to use its weight against such a proliferation.” Talbot then claimed that Ben-Gurion again gave his assurances to the president, and that the president believed him. After addressing the ambassadors, Talbot took some questions from his guests, and he assured them that the nuclear program in Israel had peaceful purposes only.<sup>212</sup>

The Kennedy administration had a dual purpose for acquiring the visitations to the Israeli reactor. Aside from the desire to ensure that no nuclear weapons program existed, the administration wanted to placate Arab concerns. The administration had fears that the Arab nations might turn to the Soviets to acquire a nuclear weapons. If the Soviets provided nuclear technology to the Arab nations with the intension of building weapons, then the region would devolve into a mini-nuclear arms race consisting of a Soviet supported Arab side versus a Western backed Israeli side. Undoubtedly, access to the essential oil reserves in the region would be jeopardized for the West in such a scenario. Also, by playing the informant role for the Arabs over the Israeli reactor, the administration became a dependable source of information for the Arabs to turn to, thus drawing the region further into the American orbit. The administration believed this would aid in their policy of rapprochement with Nasser, establishing the foundations of

---

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

trust between the two governments. Nasser, and the surrounding Arab nations, would now link their own security concerns regarding the reactor to those of the United States.

The Israeli government, however, repeatedly postponed the agreed upon visits to the reactor site. Over a full year after the May 1961 Ben-Gurion-Kennedy meeting in New York, the Israeli government finally allowed U.S. scientists to inspect the reactor site. But the scientists did not have access to the entire site; Israeli officials allowed the U.S. scientists only forty minutes at Dimona. Not surprisingly, the American scientists found this “inadequate.” The hurried inspection left the scientists with the impression that the Israelis had something to hide. So began the first of many problems to come for U.S. inspections at Dimona.<sup>213</sup>

Because of Israeli foot-dragging, the Kennedy administration began to request scheduled visits to the reactor site, and it also wanted a full inspection of Dimona, with unrestricted access. On 27 March 1963, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk informed Tel Aviv that the U.S. government wanted to arrange another visit to the Dimona reactor site. Rusk stated that the U.S. government wanted to organize “semi annual repeat visits to Dimona, perhaps in May and November, with full access to all parts and instruments in the faculty.” Rusk also asked that the visiting American scientists should be given technical information on the overall Israeli nuclear program, if the scientists request it.<sup>214</sup> The Israeli government again stalled. Noting the difficulty in planning for another visit, it stated that it would see if it could make another arrangement.

---

<sup>213</sup> Brueck memorandum to Bundy, 21 December 1962, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 11-14-62 12-21-62, JFKL.

<sup>214</sup> Kromer memorandum to JFK, 22 March 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 3-7-63 4-23-63, JFKL.

The administration decided to try to press Ben-Gurion directly. The White House sent U.S. Ambassador Barbour on 5 May to meet personally with the prime minister. During this meeting, Barbour reinstated the U.S. request for unrestricted bi-annual visits to the Dimona reactor site. Barbour reported back to Dean Rusk that the prime minister “did not comment in substance but said on first reading it did not appear favorable.” Barbour reported that he pressed the urgency of the request by the president for bi-annual visits, in which Ben-Gurion replied that the “president had talked to him in terms of visits from small neutrals [meaning inspectors from neutral countries]” and remarked that “regular visits looked liked satellite relationship.”<sup>215</sup> The request apparently had incensed the prime minister. Ben-Gurion gave no commitment for another visit and had dodged the issue.

The Kennedy administration attempted again to get access to the reactor site after Ben-Gurion’s negative response, this time through the Israeli embassy. Kennedy had Myer Feldman discuss the visitation issue during a lunch with Avarham Harman. On 6 May 1963, the meeting showcased the deteriorating situation over the promised U.S. access to the nuclear reactor site.<sup>216</sup>

During the lunch with Feldman, Harman listed point for point the terms involved for U.S. access to Dimona. Harman noted that Ben-Gurion told the President that a neutral inspector had been agreed upon to visit the reactor, not a U.S. inspector. He stated that Ben-Gurion never agreed to regular systematic inspections for the site. He claimed that Ben-Gurion could not make any final decisions on this matter at the present time because Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir was currently in the hospital and Meir had to

---

<sup>215</sup> Barbour to Rusk, 5 May 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 5-5-63 5-9-63, JFKL.

<sup>216</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 6 May 1963, Box 119, Israel general, 5-5-63 5-9-63, JFKL.



be included on any decisions. And finally, Harman wanted to know why the U.S. did not push for access to any Arab nuclear reactor sites?<sup>217</sup> Harman apparently had stalled on any discussions of allowing another U.S. visit to the site, and now made more preconditions for the administration to hurdle before any decisions could be made.

National Security Council Aide for the Middle East Robert W. Kromer summed up the administration's growing frustrations. On the margins of a memorandum summarizing Feldman's conversation with Harman, Kromer scribbled "so we can argue about it each time!" beside the point for no systemic visits. Next to the passage repeating Harman's claim that Ben-Gurion needed Golda Meir's input, Kromer wrote "Golda made it last December." Kromer had been referring to Meir's meeting with Kennedy in West Palm Beach, when she had agreed to more visitations. And next to Harman's question of why has the U.S. not requested visits to any Arab reactors, Kromer wrote "Nonsense, Only the UAR has a reactor, to research with, that can't even produce enough for weapons."<sup>218</sup> Clearly Kromer was not buying the Israeli lines.

The Israeli government purposely stalled on the issue of allowing a visitation schedule for U.S. inspections for the Dimona site. By putting off the Kennedy administration, Ben-Gurion planned to allow more time for the Israeli nuclear weapons program to advance. Ben-Gurion wanted to get the reactor "critical" to start nuclear weapons production before the U.S. could do anything about it. If Kennedy found concrete evidence at the reactor site, he could have done something to impede Ben-Gurion's plans. The Israeli nuclear weapons program had been Ben-Gurion's brainchild, and he would not allow the Kennedy administration to threaten it.

---

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

A domestic political crises in Israel complicated Ben-Gurion's position. The so called Lavon Affair resurfaced. The crisis revolved around former Israeli Minister of Defense Pinas Lavon who took the blame for a failed Israeli espionage and saboteur ring in Egypt. The undercover Israeli agents planned to destroy U.S. installations in Egypt with the hopes of damaging U.S.-Egyptian relations, but the Israeli agents and their plot had been discovered by Egyptian authorities causing embarrassment to the Israeli government. The Israeli government blamed Lavon and forced him to resign and retire from political life. During the late 1950s, Lavon wanted the case reexamined. He began pointed to Shimon Peres and Moshe Dayan's implication in the affair. The High Israeli Committee Court found Lavon innocent, leaving Peres and Dayan under suspicion. This infuriated Ben-Gurion because Dayan and especially Peres had long been political allies. A split developed in Ben-Gurion's political party, the MAPAI, between those who supported Lavon and those who did not. To express his outrage over Lavon's exoneration, Ben-Gurion resigned as Israeli Prime Minister on 30 January 1961, but he held his post as acting prime minister until elections could be held.<sup>219</sup>

The Lavon Affair exposed other differences concerning leadership and national policies within the MAPAI party. Within the party, Lavon's supporters included Foreign Minister Golda Meir and Finance Minister Levi Eshkol against Ben-Gurion and Shimon Peres who opposed Lavon. The Meir faction held Ben-Gurion and Peres personally responsible for secretly constructing the Israeli nuclear program without the Knesset's approval; they viewed the Gurion faction as almost totalitarian in nature. After the reactor became public knowledge in December 1960, numerous debates took place in public and

---

<sup>219</sup> CIA, Dulles to Bundy, 8 February 1961, NSF, Box 118, Israel general, 2-61, JFKL.

in closed-door meetings over the nuclear issue within Knesset committees, MAPAI committees, academic circles, and even military organs. An Israeli anti-nuclear group formed in 1961, called the Committee for the Denuclearization of the Middle East, and lobbied against the development of nuclear weapons.<sup>220</sup> With the fracturing of his own party and the nuclear issue being hotly debated all over Israel, Ben-Gurion had domestic bodies challenging the Israeli nuclear program at home while the Kennedy administration pressed to visit the reactor from abroad.

The Kennedy administration had been repeatedly subjected by the Israeli government's stalling tactics for visitations to the reactor, but a distinct policy change occurred in the administration by March 1963, this change had been initiated by an intelligence estimate received by the president. On 6 March 1963, a CIA report from the Office of the National Estimates warned of the dire consequences if Israel went nuclear. Chairman of the National Estimates Board Sherman Kent warned of the likelihood of a more aggressive Israeli foreign policy towards its neighbors if Israel acquired the capability to produce nuclear weapons. He noted that Israel would "feel freer than it does now to take vigorous retaliatory action against border harassments." Kent also reported that Israel would probably disseminate propaganda highlighting "the impotence" of Arab nations against Israeli power.<sup>221</sup> Kent foreshadowed a more aggressive Israel policy in the region with the attainment of nuclear capabilities.

The report also outlined the consequences towards the U.S. should Israel go nuclear. Kent warned that "the principle targets of Arab resentment would be the U.S."

---

<sup>220</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 140-145.

<sup>221</sup> CIA, Kent memorandum for Director, 6 March 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 2-12-63 3-6-63, JFKL.

He believed that Arab opinion would view the U.S. as complicit in Israel's new found nuclear capability. The policy of playing the role of intermediary for the Arabs on the reactor issue with Israel would subsequently backfire, with the Arabs feeling betrayed. Kent concluded that the U.S. position in the Middle East would be drastically reduced if Israel became nuclear.<sup>222</sup> Kennedy saw his progress in the rapprochement initiative with Nasser being buried in the Negev desert at Dimona.

The most alarming element in the report included a forecast of Soviet gains in the region should Israel procured nuclear weapons. Kent predicted that the Soviets would exploit the situation, and could possibly place Soviet nuclear weapons on Arab territory. He expounded that the Soviets would expand and strengthen their position in the Middle East. Citing the experience from the Suez Crisis of 1956, Kent estimated that the Soviets would make declarations of support for the Arab states against Israel if it should attack any of them. Kent cautioned that such a declaration could lead the Soviets to "find a basis for a firmer [Soviet] Bloc-Arab alignment against the West than they so far been able to achieve."<sup>223</sup> Fear of an Arab coalition protected by the Soviet's nuclear arsenal sent shockwaves through the White House.

Upon receiving the Kent report, Kennedy issued a national security directive to the CIA, the State Department, and the Atomic Energy Commission. Kennedy requested, "as a matter of urgency," that every effort must be made to improve the intelligence on the Israeli nuclear program. He added that the UAR's nuclear program must be assessed as well. Kennedy also requested that the State Department develop proposals to impede any nation that sought to produce nuclear weapons, adding that a course of action needed

---

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

to be developed to “impress upon them [Israel or UAR] how seriously such a development would be regarded in this country.”<sup>224</sup> Kennedy received a report back detailing that the UAR’s small Soviet supplied research reactor did not have the capability to produce nuclear weapons.<sup>225</sup> Though still classified, the Israeli section of that report must have ascertained that the Israeli nuclear program was close to producing nuclear weapons.

While Kennedy fretted over the prospect of Soviet nuclear warheads protecting Arab nations and Israel’s suspected nuclear weapons program, the situation in the Middle East grew dire. As mentioned, on 17 April 1963, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq announced the creation of the UAR Federation and declared their intended purpose to liberate Palestine. Panic ensued in Jordan where the frail King Hussein faced mobs of angry Jordanians in the streets calling for his expulsion and a union with the new UAR Federation. Fearing the new UAR juggernaut and the prospects of its enlargement, the Israeli government notified the Kennedy administration of its intentions to do all in its powers to stop Jordan from joining the UAR; the Israeli government threatened the invasion of Jordan. The growing tempest in the Middle East could not have come at a worse time for Kennedy.

Kennedy viewed the Israel threat to invade Jordan as the catalyst to destabilize the entire Middle East. An Israeli invasion of Jordan would trigger UAR reprisals and enmesh the entire region into war. According to the Kent report, if Israel had nuclear capabilities there would be no compromises. The united UAR Federation would seek a Soviet nuclear deterrent to counter Israel, thus placing the UAR Federation under a

---

<sup>224</sup> National Security Memorandum no.231, 26 March 26, 1963, NSF, Robert Kromer, Box 427, Israel nuclear energy program 1963, JFKL.

<sup>225</sup> INR, Hilsman to Rusk, 26 March 1963, NSF, Robert Kromer, Box 427, Israel nuclear energy program 1963, JFKL.

Soviet nuclear umbrella, as the Kent report envisioned. With the majority of the Middle East under an Arab-Bloc alignment, the U.S.'s position would be catastrophic in this scenario. The administration decided to act to forestall these chains of events.

As already discussed in chapter two, the Kennedy administration took action to neutralize the Jordanian situation. Kennedy offered the Israeli government an informal security agreement on 8 May to alleviate any immediate Israeli actions towards Jordan. He also informed Nasser of Israel's intention to invade Jordan and asked him to cease in any operations or designs to overthrow the Jordanian government. Kennedy averted a disaster for the time being in the region, but there still existed Israel's nuclear program.

The administration needed to construct a policy to ensure that Israel would not develop nuclear weapons. On 16 May 1963, the State Department proposed a plan for Kennedy to achieve that aim. They envisioned a nuclear and arms limitation agreement between both the UAR and Israel. The State Department recommended to Kennedy to offer Israel a security guarantee in the form of an "executive agreement or private Presidential letter" in exchange for an Israeli commitment to nonproliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear inspections. They hoped to approach Nasser with an arms and nuclear limitation agreement with Israel, believing he would concur due to his fears surrounding Israel's nuclear program. The State Department wanted to conduct the negotiations covertly and approach Cairo first before going to the Israelis. They warned Kennedy "given the Hawk/refugee episode of last year, we want to avoid giving if possible before we've taped down the quid pro quos."<sup>226</sup> The State Department hoped to

---

<sup>226</sup> Rusk to Barbour, 16 March 1963, NSF, Box 119, Israel general, 5-15-63 5-16-63, JFKL.

solve the Israeli nuclear issue and the Middle East's missile arms race in one decisive move.

The administration's nuclear and arms limitation agreement plan failed. In late May, Kennedy sent Special Emissary to the President John McCloy on the secret mission to negotiate with Nasser. Nasser had no intentions of agreeing to the plan with the U.S. In June, Nasser gave a definitive no to the Kennedy proposal. He stated that he believed in the principal of the U.S. proposal to limit the arms race with Israel and the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons in the region, but he did not agree with the U.S. monitoring of Egypt's weapons programs, claiming it looked imperialistic. Nasser instead suggested that he would agree to a UN joint venture if possible.<sup>227</sup> With the nuclear and arms limitation package looking unfeasible in Cairo, the administration needed another strategy. The President decided to make Israel's nuclear issue personal.

Kennedy decided to directly put pressure on Ben-Gurion himself to get U.S. inspections into Israel's reactor. Back in May, Ben-Gurion wrote a private letter to Kennedy worrying over Nasser's call for the 'liberation of Palestine' in April.<sup>228</sup> Ben-Gurion wrote to Kennedy about his concerns that Nasser is inciting the masses in the Middle East against Israel, and that more U.S. aid is needed to ensure the future survival of Israel. Ben-Gurion thanked the President for all of his help in the past, referring to the Hawk missiles, but stressed to him that more commitment from the U.S. is paramount.<sup>229</sup> Ben-Gurion did not mention Dimona in his letter. Kennedy wrote back to Ben-Gurion trying to placate his fears over Nasser's new threats, and again requested bi-annual visits

---

<sup>227</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 227-228.

<sup>228</sup> Ben-Gurion to JFK, 12 May 1963, POF, Box 119a, Israel general, folder 6, JFKL.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

to the Dimona reactor. Kennedy stressed that too much time elapsed since the last visit to the reactor. Ben-Gurion responded back, reassuring the President that periodic visits would be permitted, but not on a systematic scheduled basis, again dodging the issue.<sup>230</sup>

This led to the harshest response yet by Kennedy. “I am sure you will agree that such visits should be of a nature and on a schedule which will more nearly be in accord with international standards,” he wrote, “thereby resolving all doubts as to the peaceful intent of the Dimona project.”<sup>231</sup> Kennedy retorted “this Government’s commitment to and support of Israel could be seriously jeopardized” if information cannot be ascertained on “the question of the character of Israel’s effort in the nuclear field.”<sup>232</sup> Kennedy demanded that he wanted all parts of the reactor site open for inspection on a bi-annual basis, with the next visit sometime in the early summer of 1963.<sup>233</sup> Kennedy’s serious written demands to Ben-Gurion made the Dimona issue rest on the future relationship between the two countries.

Ben-Gurion wrote back to the President on 27 May 1963, but still stalled on allowing U.S. visits to the reactor. He stressed to Kennedy that the reactor is jointly owned by Israel and France, and that after the start up date estimated between the end of 1963 to early 1964, “the French companies will hand the reactor over to us.”<sup>234</sup> He suggested that would be the best time for U.S. inspectors to visit and that there is not much to see at the site because “nothing is going on there except construction.”<sup>235</sup> Ben-

---

<sup>230</sup> JFK letter to Ben-Gurion, 15 June 1963, POF, Box 119a, Israel general, folder 6, JFKL.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>234</sup> Ben-Gurion letter JFK, 27 May 1963, POF, Box 119a, Israel general, folder 6, JFKL.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.



Gurion avoided Kennedy's demands and now conveniently linked control over the reactor to the French.

Infuriated over Ben-Gurion's response, Kennedy composed another letter putting the full weight of the U.S. presidency behind his demands. He restated that future relations between the U.S. and Israel could be jeopardized over the nature of the Dimona reactor, and he once again demanded that inspections take place on a bi-annual schedule. Kennedy thundered at the Prime Minister in his letter "knowing that you fully appreciate the truly vital significance of this matter to the future well-being of Israel, to the United States, [and] internationally, I am sure our carefully considered request" will have your attention.<sup>236</sup> Kennedy dated this letter 17 June as the day it would be sent to Ben-Gurion, but the letter never made it to the Israeli prime minister.

Ben-Gurion resigned as prime minister of Israel on 16 June 1963, citing personal reasons. He also retired as MAPAI Party leader and decided to leave political life altogether.<sup>237</sup> The reason for Ben-Gurion's sudden departure remains a mystery. Many have attributed the resignation to the pressures of the Lavon Affair, which still caused political turmoil during 1963. Other possibilities included his old age and of course, the pressure of dealing with Kennedy over the Dimona nuclear site.<sup>238</sup> The most plausible reason for his untimely exit points towards Kennedy's threats over the reactor issue. Rather than cave into Kennedy and have his nuclear weapons program discovered, something that he created and coveted, Ben-Gurion could continue to help stall the U.S. with his retirement.

---

<sup>236</sup> JFK letter Ben-Gurion, 4 June 1963, POF, Box 119a, Israel general, folder 6 of box, JFKL.

<sup>237</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 220.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 220-221.

Former Israeli Finance Minister Levi Eshkol replaced Ben-Gurion and took the helm as the new Prime Minister of Israel. Despite the change in Israel's leadership, Kennedy still decided to send the letter, and simply changed Ben-Gurion's name to Eshkol. Following the same stalling tactics as his predecessor, Eshkol responded back to the president that he needed time to assess the exchange of terms from the former Prime Minister to Kennedy.<sup>239</sup>

While Kennedy and Eshkol exchanged letters, the administration began intensive deliberations with the Soviets concerning proliferation of nuclear weapons. In early July 1963, Kennedy sent former New York Governor William Averel Harriman as his Special Representative to Moscow to negotiate a nuclear test ban with the Soviet Union. Kennedy initiated his idea of developing a treaty with the Soviet Union to limit nuclear arms development back in June 1962, when he made his commencement speech at the American University in Washington. He announced that the U.S. would not conduct any atmospheric nuclear test as a sign of his commitment to limiting nuclear arms.<sup>240</sup> The Soviets agreed with the U.S. that they wanted the current number of the world's nuclear powers to remain at four but they opposed a full ban on testing nuclear weapons. Recognizing that the Soviets would never be forthcoming to a full nuclear test ban, the administration directed Harriman try to negotiate to achieve some form of compromise with the Soviets.<sup>241</sup>

By late July, the Soviet Union and the U.S. made progress over a test ban treaty. Harriman reached a deal with the Soviets for a Partial Test Ban Treaty, which would ban

---

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>240</sup> Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 620.

<sup>241</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 156-157.

all nuclear detonations in outer space, under water, and in the atmosphere. The treaty still allowed underground testing. The U.S. and the USSR officially committed to the treaty on 25 July 1963.<sup>242</sup>

As a token of good faith towards the U.S. over the nuclear reactor issue, the Israeli government agreed to sign the Partial Test Ban Treaty. The *New York Times* reported that the U.S. “was putting pressure on Israel, the only nation in the Middle East that has a nuclear reactor to adhere to the ban as a ‘good example.’”<sup>243</sup> Ambassador Barbour informed the State Department that rumors circulated in the Israeli government that the U.S. had been applying pressure directly on the prime minister over the Israeli reactor issue. Barbour mentioned that the majority of the Knesset supported the motion to join the test ban treaty because of these rumors. Barbour disclosed that a small minority in the Knesset, the HERUT party, viewed Israel’s assenting to the treaty as a ‘mockery’ and a sign of weakness by the new Israeli government caving-in to U.S. pressure. Regardless of the small opposition, Barbour reported that a favorable position appeared imminent in the Knesset to join in the test ban treaty.<sup>244</sup> Concerns over rumored pressure from the U.S. government to sign the treaty helped influenced the Israeli Knesset to comply; The Israeli government officially signed the partial test ban treaty on 8 August 1963.<sup>245</sup>

Kennedy’s letters to the Israeli prime minister at last paid off. Finally, on 19 August 1963, Eshkol agreed to Kennedy’s terms for bi-annual visits to the reactor site.

---

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>243</sup> “Israel Defers Decision,” by W. Granger Blair, *The New York Times*, 29 July 1963, 2.

<sup>244</sup> Barbour to State Department, 8 August 1963, NSF, Robert Kromer, Box 427, Israel nuclear energy program 1963, JFKL.

<sup>245</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 161.

He also consented to Kennedy's demand for full access to the reactor site at Dimona for U.S. inspectors. Eshkol insisted, however, that the next U.S. inspections would have to come at the end of year; Eshkol promised that the next inspection would be at the end of 1963.<sup>246</sup> Kennedy's pressure on Eshkol produced an agreement of bi-annual inspections and unrestricted access to the Israeli reactor for the U.S. government.

After Kennedy's assassination on 22 November 1963, the U.S. visits to the Dimona reactor site immediately ran into problems again. President Lyndon Baines Johnson inherited the problematic Israeli nuclear issue. The agreed to visit for late 1963 under Kennedy had been pushed back by the Israeli government to January 1964 under the Johnson administration. In January 1964, a group of three U.S. scientists did visit the reactor and reported that the reactor had gone 'critical' on 26 December 1963.<sup>247</sup> The scientists spent eighteen hours at the reactor site and, in their estimation, gained full access to the facility. They found no signs of weapons development, but insisted that further bi-annual visits should be conducted because Israel now possessed all the components necessary to build a nuclear weapon if it so desired.<sup>248</sup> The Johnson administration tried to keep the visits on a bi-annual schedule, but the Israeli government continually delayed each proceeding visit. The time between visits eventually stretched to years.<sup>249</sup>

The last U.S. visit to the reactor site occurred under the Nixon administration on 12 July 1969; the scientists claimed Israeli officials restricted them from much of the

---

<sup>246</sup> Eshkol to JFK, 19 August 1963, POF, Box 119a, Israel general, folder 6, JFKL.

<sup>247</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 179. The term 'critical' implies that a reactor is fully operational and that the nuclear fission process is underway.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 177.

reactor site. By late 1969, the Nixon administration ended the U.S. visits to the reactor site, apparently this decision had been made by Nixon after high level talks with then Prime Minister Golda Meir, it is assumed that Meir told Nixon that Israel had “gone nuclear.”<sup>250</sup>

The Israeli nuclear program became a prominent issue for Kennedy in the Middle East. The administration feared that an Israeli nuclear weapons program in the region would destabilize the area producing massive anti-American sentiment from the Arab population. It also had trepidations of a more embolden Israel aggressively confronting the Arab nations without fears of reprisals. Kennedy worried that the Soviets could capitalize on Arab fears which might produce an Arab coalition in the region firmly pointed towards Moscow, protected under a Soviet nuclear deterrent. Such a scenario would hurt the U.S. position tremendously. By mid-1963, U.S. intelligence estimates believed that Israel had a nuclear weapons program, but they had little concrete evidence to prove it. This induced the president to take action and attempt to impede Israel’s nuclear program.

The administration adopted a policy of vigorous presidential pressure on the Israeli Prime Minister to prevent Israel from “going nuclear.” It wanted to force Israel to open the reactor to U.S. inspections, which culminated in a threat to sever the special relationship if Israel did not comply. The presidential pressure forced Israel to agree to open their reactor site on a bi-annual basis for U.S. inspectors. The administration hoped that these inspections would prevent the reactor from processing materials for weapons production. Kennedy policy’s worked in 1963, and Israel agreed to his demands. Though

---

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 336-337. Cohen makes the assumption that Gold Meir informed Nixon that Israel has nuclear weapons; the contents of their meeting are still classified.

the agreed to terms fell apart under the Johnson administration, Johnson never applied the same pressure that Kennedy did.

Kennedy's threats to sever the U.S.-Israeli relationship in late 1963 showcases the logic that he was in no way moving to establish a closer relationship with Israel at the end of his stay in office as others have insinuated. Kennedy placed Cold War concerns and Arab sentiments over Israel's national sovereignty, and in fact disregarded it. Kennedy personally worked to impede Israel's nuclear weapons program when no international laws or treaties existed to ban the program. Israel's act of developing a nuclear weapons program made Kennedy resort to threats of severing the U.S.-Israeli relationship. The fears of an aggressive Israeli policy in the region funneling Arab nations towards the Soviets impelled Kennedy to attempt to contain Israel's nuclear weapons program, and containment had been Kennedy's policy towards Israel throughout the regional arms race. Israel's nuclear question was a larger extension of the arms race, and became Kennedy's ultimate danger for the region, and he made it personal.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

President Kennedy brought to the White House vitality and hope to a nation that sought change in a time when fears of the Cold War plagued the consciousness of the country. The thousand days of Camelot brought with it a New Frontier, a fitting start to American politics in the decade that ushered in massive social change, new technological advances, and shifting international alignments. The Middle East epitomized the changing world of the 1960s, a region on the cusp of revolutionary transformation. Born from the processes of decolonization, Israel and Egypt were two nations that represented the essence of the times, trying to liberate themselves from the past connotations of imperialism. With the Cold War contest seeking to polarize the globe; it was unavoidable that Kennedy enmeshed himself in the Middle East.

The foundations of the U.S.-Israeli alliance began under the Kennedy administration. The administration did not purposely intend to establish a closer U.S.-Israeli friendship, but instead Kennedy sought to develop closer ties with Israel's rival in the region Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Kennedy perceived the Israeli government, particularly Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion as destabilizing and threatening towards U.S. policy aims for the region. Following a dual policy of courting Nasser and placating Ben-Gurion, Kennedy believed he could settle the Palestinian refugee situation, end the region's escalating arms race, and halt Israel's nuclear weapons program. Ironically, Kennedy's efforts to contain Israel led to the later establishment of

the U.S.-Israeli alliance by providing security guarantees and the first U.S. arms sale to Israel. These moves, plus the establishment of military and security exchanges between the two nations ensured the development of a future alliance. Additionally, both countries domestic politics were further tied and strengthened setting the future course of the relationship towards an alliance.

Kennedy unintentionally laid the foundations for the future U.S.-Israeli alliance. As a part of his rapprochement policy with Nasser, Kennedy sought to resolve the Palestinian refugee issue to order to gain pro-American sentiments among the Arab population. Believing Ben-Gurion would never compromise on the issue without a major incentive, Kennedy tried to use Ben-Gurion's desire for the Hawk missile system to induce Israeli concessions. Israel secured the Hawks but abandoned all commitments to resolve the refugee issue. During the height of the regional arms race in early 1963, Israel threatened preemptive military action towards Jordan causing Kennedy to offer an informal security guarantee to contain Israeli actions, thus committing the U.S. to Israel's security. In November 1963, Kennedy permitted high level security talks between the U.S. and Israel intending only to allow Israel to present its new intelligence estimates on Egypt's military capabilities, these talks inadvertently became the first joint security consultation between both countries. These unwitting actions by Kennedy laid the foundations for the future U.S.-Israeli alliance.

Kennedy viewed Israel's suspected nuclear program as the most alarming threat to U.S. interests in the region. Kennedy feared that a nuclear armed Israel would produce a new Arab-Bloc alignment protected with a Soviet nuclear deterrent, firmly placing Arab sentiments in favor of Moscow. Having already experienced Soviet attempts to



place nuclear weapons in Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Kennedy had to ensure that this scenario would not crystallize in the Middle East.<sup>251</sup> Seeking to prevent this scenario, Kennedy threatened to sever the U.S.-Israel relationship if Ben-Gurion did not allow U.S. inspectors into the reactor to monitor Israel's nuclear program. The administration grew increasingly apprehensive over Israeli actions that would impede their intended policy for the Middle East.

Instead of seeking a closer relationship with Israel, Kennedy sought to realign the tenets of Arab nationalism and bring Nasser into the American orbit. Kennedy centered his Middle Eastern foreign policy on rapprochement towards Egypt to foster pro-American sentiments among the Arab population. The Kennedy administration believed that through Cairo the U.S. could influence the rising tide of Arab nationalism and secure American interests in the Middle East. Kennedy viewed Soviet gains in Egypt as a major impediment to U.S. policy and he sought to rollback their influence. Kennedy intended to use economic aid to bolster the relationship between Egypt and the U.S. Rapprochement with Nasser became the primary objective for the administration.

Kennedy's foreign policy decisions towards the Middle East emanated from both the State Department and his National Security Counsel Aid. His decisions and actions towards the region accorded with most of Secretary of State Dean Rusk and National Security Counsel Aid Robert Kromer's recommendations. Kennedy's rapprochement policy with Nasser had been formulated by the State Department and adamantly supported by Rusk and Kromer. Historians Abraham Ben-Zvi and Warren Bass claim

---

<sup>251</sup> For more on the Cuban Missile Crisis refer to Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, editors, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During The Cuban Missile Crisis*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002) and Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking In Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, (New York: Free Press, 1986).

that Kennedy increasingly followed the policy suggestions from the National Security Counsel and, even more so, Myer Feldman to adopt a more pro-Israeli posture and abandon rapprochement with Nasser. They assert that the NSC gained Kennedy's trust and directed the U.S.'s policy in the region, limiting the State Department's influence over Kennedy.<sup>252</sup> Kennedy's actions in the region do not support Bass and Ben-Zvi's claims, and definitively show that Kennedy followed the State Department and Kromer's suggested policies, highlighting the notion that no real division existed in the Kennedy administration. Kennedy continually sought rapprochement with Nasser and viewed Israel as a destabilizing entity throughout his stay in office until November 1963.

Facing hostile neighbors, the Israeli government hoped to enlist the U.S. into its national security defense for the region. The Israeli MAPAI party leaders, particularly Ben-Gurion, Meir, and Eshokl, achieved their goals and secured the first U.S. weapons sale to Israel, acquired a security guarantee, and established the first joint security consultation with the U.S. While developing closer ties with the U.S., Ben-Gurion also pursued a parallel policy of national self-reliance by developing a nuclear weapons program to ensure the nation's security. The Israeli government's actions prompted Kennedy to give these concessions and helped ensured a closer relationship with the U.S. The true architects that established the origins of the U.S.-Israeli alliance came from Tel Aviv not Washington.

The weapons sales and security guarantees given to Israel by the Kennedy administration ensured that both countries would develop closer ties in the future. They

---

<sup>252</sup> Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 164-165, and Ben-Zvi, *F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arm Sales to Israel*, 65-64. Ben-Zvi also claims that Myer Feldman gained influence over the President suggesting the Hawk sale for domestic political support, and won over Kennedy. Page 74-76.

opened the path to future arms into Israel, producing a flood of American weaponry into the country. The security guarantees led to future joint security consultations between the two countries, and eventually assisted in making Israel a regional proxy for the U.S.

The Hawk missile sale was a milestone, paving the way for even more advanced weapons sales. By the end of 1963, Kennedy already planned to provide Israel with hundreds of M-48 tanks to update its armor corps. Soon there after, the Johnson administration approved the sale of an additional 210 M-48 tanks, one hundred Skyhawk jets (A-4s), fifty Phantom jetfighters (F-4s), plus a large assortment of other miscellaneous military equipment.<sup>253</sup> Subsequent American administrations followed the trend of arming Israel, making the U.S. Israel's preeminent "arms depot" well into the present day.

The sale of American weapons to Israel ensured that both countries military establishments would develop closer ties. The U.S. government had to provide extensive training for Israeli military personnel to use the new equipment. The U.S. army required a sixty-five week intensive training course for the Hawk missile system alone.<sup>254</sup> With ever increasing and sophisticated U.S. arms flowing into Israel, similar training courses for other military hardware would be required, further linking the two countries in a bond, mimicking the military relationship Israel had developed with France during the 1950s.

The U.S.-Israeli joint security consultations that materialized under the Kennedy administration later brought both countries national security perceptions for the region together. In March 1965, an agreement between the Johnson administration and the

---

<sup>253</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 208, 312.

<sup>254</sup> Kromer memorandum to Bundy and Feldman, 13 August 1962, NSF, Box 118a, Israel general, 8-9-62 8-15-62, JFKL.

Israeli government initialized measures to hold continuous consultations concerning security issues in the region. The Israeli government ensured the U.S.'s commitment to aid Israel in case of attack and received detailed American military planning to achieve that aim. The security consultations enabled the Israeli government to present massive arms requests in an intergovernmental forum quickening the arms purchasing process for Israel.<sup>255</sup> These joint security consultations brought a new dynamic to the U.S.-Israeli relationship shaping the path for the future alliance.

The U.S.-Israeli security consultations also assisted in Israel's transition to become a regional proxy for the U.S. government. The joint security consultation's enabled Israel to gain the support of the Pentagon and CIA to conduct preemptive military actions against its Arab neighbors in 1967. Though no evidence exists that President Johnson backed the Israeli preemptive action, Johnson did not object to Israel's measures because of the Pentagon and CIA's support for Israel to proceed with its preemptive military actions.<sup>256</sup> After Israel's military success during the Six Day War of 1967, Israel proved its military value to the U.S. leading to Israel's cooperation with the U.S. to aid in Jordan. The U.S. enlisted Israel's cooperation in assisting King Hussein during the Jordanian Civil War and Syrian encroachment of 1970. Israel's assistance ensured a Syrian retreat from Jordan and allowed King Hussein to forcibly extinguish the rival government in Jordan.<sup>257</sup> Under the Nixon administration, the U.S. used Israel to combat Arab nationalism and Soviet influence in the region, effectively using Israel as a

---

<sup>255</sup> Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 208.

<sup>256</sup> "The United States and Israel since 1948: A "Special Relationship"?", by Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, *Diplomatic History*, vo.22, no.2, spring 1998, 240.

<sup>257</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 298-299.

regional proxy.<sup>258</sup> The joint security consultations in 1963 paved the path for the shared regional security alliance between the U.S. and Israel during the early 1970s.

A cross pollination between the U.S. and Israel's domestic politics strengthened during the Kennedy administration's tenure in the White House. The political divisions in Israel and the debate in the U.S. Congress over Kennedy's foreign policy highlight the strengthening of the U.S.-Israeli domestic politics. Both countries influenced each others domestic politics, further tying the two nations together.

Kennedy's harsh letters to Ben-Gurion over Israel's nuclear reactor assisted in the domestic power struggle occurring in the Israeli MAPAI party by influencing Ben-Gurion to resign. With Ben-Gurion resigning in June 1963 Levi Eshkol became the new Israeli Prime Minister, Eshkol had been apart of the Meir faction that opposed the old leadership of the Gurion faction during the Lavon Affair in Israel. Upon Eshkol's elevation to prime minister, Eshkol promised Kennedy bi annual visits to the Dimona reactor and with full access to the reactor site. Although Kennedy's death occurred before the first scheduled inspection, the change in government within Israel produced a new Israeli leadership that was at least willing to compromise with Kennedy over the nuclear issue.

The administration's pressure also affected the Israeli Knesset's decision to join the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963. U.S. Ambassador to Israel Walworth Barbour reported to Washington that the Knesset's decision to sign to the treaty had been greatly influenced by the rumors circulating in the Knesset that Kennedy had vigorously applied pressure on the Prime Minister. The Knesset approved Israel's participation in the treaty

---

<sup>258</sup> "The United States and Israel since 1948: A "Special Relationship"?", 246.

with only a small minority opposing the measure. This marks the first time in the Israeli Knesset that a foreign country's insistence influenced its policies.

Conversely, Israel influenced American domestic politics towards Kennedy's policies as well. Kennedy's rapprochement policy towards Nasser produced a wide domestic opposition against the administration's foreign policy aims. For the first time in 1963, the Israeli lobby joined with the established oil lobby to put an end to Kennedy's rapprochement with Nasser. The few liberal Democrat politicians that supported U.S. aid to Israel joined with conservative Republicans in a common fear over Nasser's growing influence in the region. These domestic forces ended Kennedy's rapprochement with Nasser and set the course for the U.S.'s relationship towards Egypt for the next fourteen years. Not until the Carter administration did the U.S. establish close ties with Egypt again. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter started the peace initiative known as the Camp David Accords, and improved U.S. relations with Egyptian President Andwar Sadat, bringing relations between the two countries back to cordial terms.<sup>259</sup> The Israeli lobby learned to successfully navigate Capitol Hill during the Kennedy administration's tenure and ensured that the two countries domestic politics would be intertwined for years to come.

Where does this leave the American relationship with Israel? A cornucopia of interpretations exists today that seek to find a linear pattern or varying degrees of associations to measure and record the U.S.-Israeli relationship. Historian Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov views the development of the "special relationship" between the U.S. and Israel as a liner projection of U.S. perceptions towards Israel from liability to strategic

---

<sup>259</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 289-290.

asset, with the transformation of the ‘special relationship’ becoming a strategic asset after the Six Day War of 1967.<sup>260</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov ascribes varying “factors” that kept the relationship moving forward over the course of the years: common cultural values, common aims, and shared national security concerns. He notes the truly unique historical relationship that has existed between both countries.<sup>261</sup>

Historian Peter L. Hahn devalues Bar-Siman-Tov’s designation of a “special relationship” and suggests its origins might lie in the pronouncements of U.S. and Israeli political leaders that want to promote such designations for their own purposes. Hahn argues that there were many instances in the U.S.-Israeli relationship when the U.S. reconsidered its relationship with Israel prior to the Six Day War of 1967. He cites, for example, a national security directive under the Eisenhower administration that stated U.S. national security concerns in the region trumped relations with Israel. Hahn points out that Israel had its own role to play in the formation of the relationship choosing its own security issues over the relationship with the U.S., citing the Suez Crisis of 1956 as an example.<sup>262</sup> The relationship had not been special at all, but unpredictable and shaky at best, according to Hahn.

David Schoenbuam explores the “special relationship” in a different fashion. He argues that the U.S. has had numerous “special relationships” with other countries, noting that a “special relationship” always develops between two countries when their own interests can be benefited. But Schoenbuam claims that “the Israeli-American relationship is not just special, but among the most remarkable in recent history.” He

---

<sup>260</sup> “The United States and Israel since 1948: A “Special Relationship”?”, 231.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 231-232.

<sup>262</sup> “Commentary, Special Relationships”, by Peter L. Hahn, *Diplomatic History*, vol.22, no.2, spring 1998, 267, 269, 271.

notes the numerous strains over the course of the relationship, not just in the political circles but in the public sphere as well, mentioning the sinking of the U.S. Liberty in 1967 by the Israeli Defense Force, the OPEC oil embargo during the 1970s, the Pollard spy case of 1985 brought no U.S. public outcry over the country's relationship with Israel. Schoenbaum furthers that "arguably, the most remarkable thing about the Israeli-American relationship is the way it has survived, and outgrown, so many of the challenges and circumstances that initiated and nominally explain it."<sup>263</sup>

Joining the discussion, this new interpretation argues that Kennedy unintentionally laid the foundations that ensured a future U.S.-Israeli alliance while seeking to contain Israel's actions, not to promote shared national security interests between both countries. He inadvertently provided the mechanisms, and the Israeli government pursued and secured those mechanisms. Trying to ascertain the relationship from only the past U.S. perceptions towards Israel limits the argument and fails to account for Israel's own actions and contributions to the progression of the "special relationship." To propel the discussion further, maybe the answer to the true uniqueness of the "special relationship" rests in Tel Aviv not Washington.

---

<sup>263</sup> "Commentary, More Special Than Others," by David Schoenbaum, *Diplomatic History*, vol.22, no.2, spring 1998, 273-275, 283.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adler, Bill ed. *John F. Kennedy: The Uncommon Wisdom of JFK: A Portrait in His Own Words*. New York: Rugged Land, 2003.
- Alteras, Isaac. *Eisenhower and Israel: U.S.-Israeli Relations, 1953-1960*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.
- Badeau, John S. *The American Approach to the Arab World*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Middle East Remembered*. Washington: Middle East Institute, 1983.
- Bar-Siman-Tov, Yaacov. "The United States and Israel since 1948: A Special Relationship?" *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (Spring 1998).
- Barrett, Roby C. *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War: US Foreign Policy Under Eisenhower and Kennedy*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007.
- Bass, Warren. *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Ben-Zvi, Abraham. *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Alliance Politics and the Limits of Influence: The Case of the US and Israel, 1975-1983*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1984.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Borstelmann, Thomas. *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Bulliet, Richard W. *Islam: The View from the Edge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Cleveland, William. *A History of the Modern Middle East*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boulder: Westview Press, 2000.
- Cohen, Avner. *Israel and the Bomb*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Dallek, Robert. *John F. Kennedy: An Unfinished Life 1917-1963*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Druks, Herbert. *The Uncertain Alliance: The U.S. and Israel from Kennedy to the Peace Process*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Duziak, Mary L. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Fry, Joseph A. *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations. 1789-1973*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002.
- Fulbright, J. William. *The Arrogance of Power*. New York: Vintage, 1966.
- Giglio, James N. and Stephen G. Rabe. *Debating the Kennedy Presidency*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003.
- Grose, Peter. *Israel in the Mind of America*. New York: Knopf, 1983.
- Halberstam, David. *The Best and the Brightest*. New York: Ballantine, 1992.

- Hahn, Peter L. *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945-1961*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Special Relationships," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 22, no.2, (Spring 1998).
- Hersh, Seymour M. *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy*, New York: Random House, 1991.
- Humphreys, R. Stephen. *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Israel State Archives, Jerusalem, Israel. *Foreign Ministry Files Online*,  
<http://www.mfa.gov.il>
- John F. Kennedy Library Archives, Boston, MA. *National Security Files, Presidential Office Files, White House Central Subject Files, Oral Histories, Robert Kromer Papers*.
- Judd, Denis. *Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present*, London: HarperCollins, 1996.
- Kerr, Malcolm H. *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser and His Rivals. 1958-1970*  
 London: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Lansford, Tom and Robert P. Watson, eds. *John F. Kennedy*. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2004.
- Levy, Peter B. ed. *America in the Sixties--Right, Left, and Center: A Documentary History*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998.
- Lewis, Bernard. *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East*, Oxford:

- University Press, 2004.
- Lincoln, Eric. *The Black Muslims in America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Little, Douglas. *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Lomax, Louis. *When the Word Is Given: A Report of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, And the Black Muslim World*. New York: Signet, 1963.
- Loveland, Anne. *American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military, 1942-1993*. Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 1996.
- Markusen, Ann, Peter Hall, Scott Campbell, and Sabina Deitrick. *The Rise of the Gunbelt: The Military Remapping of Industrial America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- May, Ernest R. and Philip D. Zelikow. *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002.
- McAlister, Melani. *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East. 1945-2000*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- McNamara, Robert S. *The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office*. New York: Harper And Row, 1968.
- Mearsheimer, John J. and Stephen M. Matt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007.
- Meir, Golda. *My Life*. New York: Putman, 1975.
- Murphy, Richard W. *1929- Review of U.S. policy in the Middle East*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Public Communications,

- Editorial Division, 1988.
- Neustadt, Richard E. *Alliance Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. and Ernest R. May. *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, New York: The Free Press, 1986.
- Newcomb, Joan I. *John F. Kennedy: an annotated bibliography*. N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1977.
- O'Brien, Michael. *1943- John F. Kennedy: A Biography*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2005.
- Osgood, Kenneth. *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad*, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2006.
- Rusk, Dean. *As I Saw it*. New York: Norton, 1990.
- Safran, Nadav. *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Schoenbaum, David. "Commentary, More Special Than Other," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (Spring 1998).
- Shlaim, Avi. *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Stephens, Elizabeth. *US Policy Toward Israel: The Role of Political Culture in Defining the "Special Relationship"*. Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2006.
- Tivnan, Edward. *The Lobby: Jewish Political Power and American Foreign Policy*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.
- Von Eschen, Penny. "Challenging Cold War Habits: African Americans, Race, and

- Foreign Policy.” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 20, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 627-638.
- Washington, DC: Department of State, 1995. *Foreign Relations of the United States*.  
Near East, 1961-63, Vols. 17-18.
- Yambert, Karl. *The Contemporary Middle East: a Westview reader*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2006.
- Yaqub, Salim. *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- Yergin, Daniel. *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.