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A Missed Opportunity: Hawk Sale Spoils Kennedy's Attempt to Harness Arab
Nationalism, 1961-1963

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Abstract

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In 1962, the United States, under the leadership of the John F. Kennedy Administration, chose to sell Israel the Hawk missile, ending the arms embargo it had placed on Israel since the creation of the fledgling state in 1948. The significance of the 1962 Hawk missile sale to Israel on the United States' relationship with both Israel and the Arab world, however, is often overshadowed by the events of the 1967 War between Israel and its Arab neighbors. This paper demonstrates why the Hawk missile sale must stop being overlooked. While the Kennedy Administration justified the sale on the grounds of maintaining a military balance of power between Israel and Egypt, the diplomatic and historical record actually indicate that the sale was primarily made to receive a boost in domestic political support from the Israel lobby for the Kennedy Administration. The Arab world, specifically Egypt and its president, Gamal Abdul Nasser, was able to see through the Kennedy Administration's military justification for the sale and concluded that the United States could not truly be a neutral actor in dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict, as it claimed to be. Thus, this paper argues that the Kennedy Administration's decision to provide Israel with the Hawk missile must be viewed as a major turning point in the United States' role in the Middle East, as it ended the period of rapprochement between the United States and Egypt and cost the United States the opportunity to harness the forces of Arab nationalism that were instrumental in shaping the development of the region.

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Acknowledgements
To My Parents, Debbie and Gary Buchman, for Everything

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INTRODUCTION

“You see, while we were talking he stood up and took me to a corner far away from the people there. There was Mr. Talbot, our Ambassador, and (Kennedy’s) secretary, Mr. Feldman,” recounts David Ben-Gurion, former Prime Minister of Israel. Describing his first meeting with president Kennedy at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York on May 30, 1961, Ben-Gurion continues, “[Kennedy] took me away from them and said, ‘You know I was elected by the Jews. I have to do something for them.... I will do something for you.’ I was a little shocked when he said it to me.”¹ The two heads of state never discussed what exactly President Kennedy was referring to. Even today, it is impossible to claim certainty over what Kennedy meant in this private exchange with Ben-Gurion. After reviewing Kennedy’s political decisions concerning the Middle East during his short tenure as President, however, a highly plausible explanation of the true meaning of Kennedy’s interchange with Ben-Gurion comes to light.

Just over a year after this meeting, President Kennedy and his Administration would end the arms embargo that the United States had placed on Israel since the creation of the fledgling state in 1948. They would do so by making available to Israel the Hawk missile, a surface-to-air, defensive missile system. While the explanations surrounding the reasoning and ramifications of the sale are varied, all are in agreement over the symbolic and actual significance of the Kennedy Administration’s decision.

As the story goes, the Hawk missile sale to Israel was the original building block of the so called special relationship that formed between Israel and the United States over the course of the 1960’s and particularly after the 1967 War between Israel and its Arab

¹ David Ben-Gurion Oral History (OH), July 16, 1965, John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL), 1-2.

neighbors. The sale was said to have broken an “important taboo” that existed within the American-Israeli relationship.² One scholar, Abraham Ben-Zvi, argues that, “regardless of the American effort to downplay the magnitude and significance of the move, the August 1962 decision can be seen in retrospect as the crossing of the Rubicon and as the impetus for predicating the American-Israeli framework upon new strategic premises.”³ The importance of the sale was not lost on those who were involved in making the decision, either. “That was a major matter. That was a really major matter,” noted Myer Feldman, one of Kennedy’s most trusted advisors and a key figure in making the decision.⁴ Robert W. Komer, Feldman’s close associate, member of the National Security Council (NSC), and another key figure in the Hawk missile, sale shared the same sentiment: “the sale of the Hawk missiles ushered in a new phase of our Arab-Israeli policy... “the Hawk[s] marked the watershed.”⁵

Although the importance of the Hawk missile sale has been extensively discussed, the focus of those who have reviewed its story consistently gravitates to the significance of the sale on U.S.-Israeli relations. What the current historiography fails to expose is twofold. First, it fails to show that domestic political gains were a major, if not the principal reason, that the Hawk missile sale was made. Second, the current historiography does not expose the dramatic and damaging ramifications the sale had on the United States’ image and prestige in the Arab world, specifically in Egypt – known at

² David Rodman, *Arms Transfers to Israel* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), 6.

³ Abraham Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002), 2.

⁴ Myer Feldman OH, July 29, 1967, Washington D.C., JFKL, 532.

⁵ Robert Komer OH, December 22, 1969, Santa Monica, California, JFKL, 79-80.

the time as the United Arab Republic (UAR).⁶ Despite the importance of the Hawk missile sale, moreover, some scholars, focusing their attention on the 1967 War instead, still overlook its significance in shaping the then current relationships between the U.S., Israel, and the Arab world.⁷ Bringing more attention to the importance of the sale and elucidating the impact of the decision on the United States' relationship with the Arab world are some of the primary agendas of this examination.

In order to analyze the magnitude of the Hawk missile sale, I will strive to accomplish a few other tasks. The first is to prove that, prior to the sale of the Hawk missile in August of 1962, the U.S. had a highly attainable opportunity to gain significantly more control over the Middle East and Arab world via closer ties with Egypt. Second, I will sift through the primary source evidence in an attempt to clarify the true reasoning behind the Kennedy Administration's decision. Finally, I will analyze the ramifications of the sale in an attempt to determine whether the sale was a foreign policy mistake and whether there were better alternatives.

To accomplish all of these objectives, I will rely primarily on declassified memoranda, correspondences, and documents from the National Security Files of the United States located in the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts. To supplement this source material, I will also focus heavily on the *Foreign Relations of the United States*, a series that "presents the official documentary historical record of major foreign policy decisions and significant diplomatic activity of the United States

⁶ The terms UAR and Egypt will be used interchangeably throughout the essay, as both terms appear in the various sources cited.

⁷ Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, 1.

Government.”⁸ Together, these primary source materials will allow me to shed light on the thought process that ultimately led the Kennedy Administration to make the Hawk missile available to Israel.

Additionally, I will consistently cite the oral history interviews and memoirs of many key government officials in the Kennedy Administration. The retrospective analyses of these officials involved in the decision making process of the sale will provide a fresh perspective, revealing information that may not be evident in the aforementioned governmental documents. By examining multiple interviews, this study will shed itself of the bias of any one government official’s individual interpretation. It is interesting to note, moreover, that the major political figures typically associated with the Kennedy Administration’s foreign policy, such as the Secretary of State Dean Rusk and the Secretary of Defense, McGeorge Bundy, play rather limited roles in retelling the story of Kennedy’s Middle Eastern policies. As Arthur Schlesinger, an American historian and special assistant to Kennedy, notes, “I had little to do with the Middle East...and I hope that Myer Feldman and Robert Komer, who watched the troubled region for the President, will someday provide their own accounts of one of Kennedy’s most interesting experiments in foreign policy.”⁹ Accordingly, I will rely heavily on the accounts of these two figures.

I will also turn to the previous secondary literature pertinent to the subject under study. By examining the theories and arguments of scholars who have studied the Hawk missile sale in the past, I will clarify the previous historiographical interpretation of the

⁸ Preface, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume XVII: Near East 1961-1962 (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1994), iii.

⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 566.

sale. With this understanding, the current examination will be able to critique flawed analyses and illuminate new truths and implications of this critical moment in history.

These sources reveal that, by the summer of 1962, the United States had made significant strides in befriending Gamal Abdul Nasser, the President of Egypt, and positioned itself well to shape the forces of Arab nationalism in a way that would greatly benefit the United States' interests in the Middle East. Unfortunately, the Kennedy Administration believed that its friendship with Nasser was stronger than it truly was. Therefore, the Kennedy Administration overvalued its leverage with Nasser and its maneuverability to take action on issues within the Arab-Israeli conflict, and thus, made a crucial miscalculation by agreeing to arm Israel with Hawk missiles. What's more, this calculation was predicated primarily – if not entirely – on domestic political gains rather than strategic foreign policy objectives. This decision signaled to the Arab world, and most importantly to Nasser, that the United States could never be a true friend. Consequentially, the Hawk missile sale marked the true beginning of the end of the period of rapprochement between Egypt and the United States. This fallout, which is demonstrated by Egypt's behavior throughout the Yemen civil war that would begin in September of 1962, ruined the United States' chances of harnessing the intense forces of Arab nationalism that were so instrumental in shaping the Middle East as it is today.

CHAPTER 1: ARAB NATIONALISM AND U.S. POLICY TOWARD THE MIDDLE EAST, 1950-1960

ARAB NATIONALISM

Before delving into the United States' policies toward the Middle East under the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations, it is important to first comprehend the forces that gripped the region and influenced the development of the Arab world. In particular, it is essential to understand the forces of Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism. To better understand these forces, we turn first to Bassam Tibi, whose book, *Arab Nationalism*, describes the evolution of the idea of Arab nationalism from before World War Two up through the Gulf War. Tibi argues that the notion of Arab nationalism is inherently “related to Western expansion and the revolt against Western dominance emanating from it.”¹⁰ Tibi continues, “Arab nationalism embraces Western ideas and is an ideology highly influenced by Western standards, while on the other hand, however, it is equally directed at liberating the Arab world from Western dominance. The envisioned establishment of a strong Pan-Arab state is both an effort to embrace modernity and to fight the West on political grounds.”¹¹ Essentially, one can understand the Arab nationalism described in this paper as the attempt by Arab countries to modernize politically, economically, and militarily – both as individual states and as a region – while simultaneously shunning the influences of Western imperialism throughout the modernization process. In this light, when I argue that the Hawk missile sale cost Kennedy to opportunity to harness the forces of Arab nationalism, I am most precisely arguing the following: the Hawk missile sale did not inhibit Kennedy from directly controlling the development of Egypt's modernization and political development, as this was never a realistic possibility. Rather, the Hawk missile sale prevented Kennedy from coaxing Egypt into modernizing in a manner which benefited U.S. interests throughout

¹⁰ Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 202.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

the entire region, such as maintaining regional peace and stability to protect the West's supply to Arab oil, and preventing the spread of international communism.

It is important to realize, moreover, that there were multiple faces of Arab nationalism. Deep divisions within the Arab Middle East created a rivalry between two Arab camps. Malcolm Kerr, a political scientist and expert in Middle Eastern politics, discusses this rivalry in his book, *The Arab Cold War: 1958-1967*. In the opening paragraph of his book, Kerr stated, “ever since the second world war popular political sentiment in the Arab world has been dominated by urgent appeals for Arab unity, while the field of activity between governments and parties has been dominated by bitter rivalry.”¹² This rivalry, according to Kerr, was comprised of two sides. The first included those who favored Arab unity through revolutionary socialism – such as Egypt and Syria, who were considered to be radical Arab nationalists.¹³ Tibi's aforementioned description of Arab nationalism most accurately describes this specific brand of Arab nationalism, which was commonly referred to as Nasserism, referring to Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser, the movement's figurehead. The Nasserists called their rival Arab camp, “reactionaries,” and categorized them “hereditary monarchs, oligarchic politicians, and wealthy landowners...who found it easier to obstruct reforms by keeping the Arab world divided.”¹⁴ Saudi Arabia and Jordan, among others, fell into this camp.

The significance of this rivalry between Arab states in the Middle East is two-fold. First, according to the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Henry Byroade, the disunity caused by the rivalry was “being exploited by the agents of the Soviet Union,” so

¹² Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: 1958-1964: A Study of Ideology in Politics* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), 1.

¹³ George Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 72.

¹⁴ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, 7.

that they could increase their influence in the region.¹⁵ And second, the rivalry enabled the two camps to use Israel as a tool of propaganda. That is, both camps would repeatedly criticize the other for being soft on Israel in order to assert their legitimacy as the leader of the Arab world. Israel's usage as a tool of propaganda was a crucial element in how the Hawk missile sale would tarnish the United States' image throughout the Arab world.

Because Nasser and Egypt are an integral part of this essay, it is critical to understand what exactly Nasser and his followers desired. "In principle," writes Kerr, "the UAR was devoted to the cause of unity, to terminating the privileged position of oil-rich monarchs...and to a wider distribution and more constructive use of Arab oil revenues."¹⁶ That is, Nasserists sought to eliminate the presence of any foreign imperialism or colonialism by inspiring other Arab states to rise up against "...their tyrannical rulers," in support of unified Arab nationalism.¹⁷

EISENHOWER AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Understanding how the Eisenhower Administration dealt with these forces of Arab nationalism and developed its policies toward the Middle East is critical to understanding the subsequent development of the Kennedy Administration's policies toward the region. From the outset of the Cold War and throughout the entirety of Eisenhower's two-term presidency, United States' foreign policy in the Middle East was primarily driven by two objectives: the safeguarding of Western oil supplies and the

¹⁵ Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and The Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, 8.

¹⁶ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

prevention of Soviet penetration into the region.¹⁸ In his book *The Arab Middle East and The United States: Inter-Arab Rivalry and Superpower Diplomacy*, Burton Kaufman argues that, although Eisenhower was aware of the growing power and influence of Arab nationalism, Eisenhower was primarily concerned with containing the spread of communism.¹⁹ Thus, Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles attempted to surround the Soviet Union with a variety of collective security agreements, such as the Baghdad Pact, which was created in 1955. In attempting to form the Baghdad Pact, Eisenhower and Dulles first turned to Egypt, a “state whose centrality in the Arab world [was] unquestioned.”²⁰ Egypt, however, refused to take sides in the Cold War. It insisted on a position of “positive neutrality,” as it argued – consistent with its views of Arab nationalism – that Arab nations should be free to enjoy the benefits of friendship with both Cold War blocs.²¹ In response, the United States turned to Iraq to complete the Baghdad Pact, which ultimately saw Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Iraq join Great Britain and the United States in an effort to prevent the spread of Soviet sway in the Middle East.²² According to one scholar, the “Baghdad Pact had the immediate effect of detonating latent regional rivalries, and putting a Cold War label on inter-Arab politics.”²³ Additionally, the Baghdad Pact may have provided the Soviets with their greatest opportunity to become influential in the region, as Nasser, after being refused arms by the U.S. because of his neutrality, took his request to the Soviets. This would

¹⁸ Rodman, *Arms Transfers to Israel*, 3.

¹⁹ Burton Kaufman, *The Arab Middle East and The United States: Inter-Arab Rivalry and Superpower Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 30.

²⁰ Aheed Dawisha, “Egypt,” in *The Cold War and the Middle East*, eds. Sayigh Yezid, and Avi Shlaim (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 27.

²¹ Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2.

²² Aheed Dawisha in *The Cold War and the Middle East*, 31.

²³ Ibid.

eventually culminate in the Czech arms deal of September 1955, which armed Egypt with Soviet weapons.²⁴ This development would accelerate the Egyptians gradual movement into the Soviet camp, a movement which began when the United States' rescinded its offer to help fund the Aswan Dam project in July of 1955 and which would continue after the Suez Crisis in 1956.²⁵

Because Egypt opted for neutrality, Eisenhower and Dulles determined that the U.S. should distance itself from the Arab nationalist movement, specifically the Nasserist movement, as they believed that a policy of "positive neutrality" played into the hands of soviet expansionism.²⁶ Additionally, because the Soviets had begun supplying the Egyptians with weapons, Eisenhower and Dulles would develop policies designed not only to prevent the spread of Soviet expansion, but also to "contain the radical Arab nationalism of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser."²⁷ To accomplish this task, the Eisenhower Administration would try to "strengthen conservative Arab regimes—like those of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Libya—and reinforce their pro-Western tendencies"²⁸ in the hopes of isolating Nasser and his followers from the rest of the region.²⁹ As is most clearly demonstrated by the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957, which called for the protection of the Middle East from international communism, the Eisenhower Administration would continue to develop policies designed to prevent the spread of international communism and to isolate Nasser and the radical Arab nationalist movement up through 1958.³⁰

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Kaufman, *The Arab Middle East and The United States*, 23.

²⁶ Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, 2.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 7.

³⁰ Ibid., 2

By 1958, however, the overwhelming popularity and political success of Nasser – evidenced by the political union of Egypt and Syria in the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) – forced Eisenhower and Dulles to reconsider their policy toward the Middle East.³¹ In his book, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East*, Salim Yaqub posits that, in the Spring of 1958, the Eisenhower Administration “had implicitly acknowledged that one of the main assumptions underlying the Eisenhower Doctrine—that the United States could benefit politically by dividing the Arab world along ideological lines—was mistaken. Almost invariably, the resulting polarization had occurred at the expense of the United States and its conservative Arab allies. It was time, the administration realized, to take a more conciliatory attitude toward the Nasserist movement.”³² Moreover, the deterioration of the UAR’s relationship with the Soviets in 1958 and 1959, as will be discussed in more detail later, convinced the Eisenhower Administration that “Nasserism might be a barrier to, rather than an avenue of, further Soviet penetration of the Middle East.”³³ It is on the coattails of this new realization that Kennedy would take over as President.

KENNEDY AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Leading up to his election in 1960, Kennedy would criticize Eisenhower for his “head-in-the-sand” approach to dealing with Arab nationalism.³⁴ What’s more, Kennedy argued that the Eisenhower Doctrine and the Baghdad Pact had failed because of Eisenhower’s inability to view the problems of the region outside of the East-West

³¹ Ibid., 2, 7.

³² Ibid., 205.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Douglas Little, “From Even-Handed to Empty-Handed: Seeking Order in The Middle East,” in *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, ed. Thomas Patterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 158.

struggle.³⁵ What, then, was JFK's plan for the Middle East and how would he choose to correct his predecessors' mistakes?

“But if we can learn from the lessons of the past—if we can refrain from pressing our case so hard that the Arabs feel that their neutrality and nationalism are threatened—if we can talk with them in terms of their problems, not ours—then I am convinced that the Middle East can become an area of strength and hope. Let us make clear that we will never turn our back on our steadfast friends in Israel, whose adherence to the democratic way must be admired by all friends of freedom... To do this job, to do it right, requires a combination of imagination and restraint which we have thus far not demonstrated in the Middle East. But the time to do so is now.”³⁶

This pre-election speech by JFK on November 9, 1959, provides a general summary of his ideological plan for dealing with the Middle East. In it, one can see not only JFK's disappointment with the United States' previous policy, but the central tenet of his new approach: even-handedness. His new policy would attempt to balance the need to provide Israel with security while approaching the Arab states with a greater acceptance for the forces of Arab nationalism.³⁷

Of central importance to JFK's revamped Middle Eastern policy was the desire to strengthen relations with Egypt and Nasser. “Like Eisenhower,” Kaufman writes, “Kennedy was sensitive to the rising tide of nationalism in the third world, but in contrast to his predecessor, he did not equate radical nationalism with communism.”³⁸ Thus, although Nasser's ambitions had previously run contrary to the United States' political interests in the Middle East – specifically his military association with the Soviets – Kennedy refused to “write the radical Arabs off as mere Soviet stooges.”³⁹ Fortunately for Kennedy, as he took office, the Soviet's relationship with the UAR was slightly

³⁵ Ibid., 159.

³⁶ John F. Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace* (New York: Harper, 1960), 109.

³⁷ Little in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 157.

³⁸ Kaufman, *The Arab Middle East and The United States*, 31.

³⁹ Little in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 158.

hostile, opening a window of opportunity for Kennedy to befriend Nasser. The Kennedy Administration believed it could take advantage of this opportunity by harnessing Nasser's popularity and shaping Egypt's regional influence to aid their interests in the region.

CHAPTER 2: COURTING NASSER

THE IMPORTANCE OF EGYPT

Winning Egypt's friendship offered many benefits to the United States. At this point in time, the United States already was on good terms with the leaders of the "reactionary" or conservative Arab regimes, like those in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The U.S., however, largely because of the Eisenhower administration, was out of favor with the revolutionary Arab camp and the pan-Arab movement, whose figurehead was Gamal Abdul Nasser, Egypt's charismatic, pragmatic, and ambitious President. Nasser had been a great beneficiary of the fact that the United States and the Soviets had introduced Cold War politics into the region. That is to say, the Cold War's effect of resurrecting the previously dormant rivalries in the Middle East assisted Nasser in becoming a dominant political figure in the region.⁴⁰ By 1961, Nasser, according to a CIA National Intelligence Estimate, was the "leader and symbol" of militant nationalism and Arab political affairs and would continue to be so "for the foreseeable future."⁴¹

If the U.S. could court Nasser, it was possible for the United States to win the political respect of the two rival camps in the Arab Cold War. According to the Egyptian

⁴⁰ Adeed Dawisha in *The Cold War and the Middle East*, 33.

⁴¹ National Intelligence Estimate, Washington, June 27, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, 164.

Ambassador to the U.S., Mustafa Kamel, the UAR hoped that, “the U.S... [would] bring the Arab states together on a constructive basis; but if that is not possible, it [would] avoid setting the Arabs at each others throats—a situation which only leaves openings for Moscow to exploit.”⁴² As Secretary of State Dean Rusk points out, however, despite Nasser’s goal to unite the Arab world under his leadership, regimes in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan did not wish to see Nasser’s objective fulfilled.⁴³ This was because Nasser’s success most likely would have led to revolution and the overthrowing of the established regimes in these countries. Thus, by winning over Nasser, or at the least, convincing Nasser to focus on domestic problems and not stir up trouble in the region, the U.S. could have prevented Nasser from taking actions in the Middle East that many Arab countries did not desire, reducing the severity of the inter-Arab rivalries.

By toning down the intensity of the Arab Cold War and befriending both rival camps, the U.S. would have had a stronghold in the Middle East, enabling it to successfully resist the encroachment of Soviet influence in the region. If the U.S. could not tone down the intensity of the rivalry, the threat of revolution in Saudi Arabia and other oil rich conservative countries, inspired by the pan-Arab leadership and militant nationalism of Nasser and Egypt, would persist. The overthrow of any of these regimes could have severely imperiled the United States’ access to oil, as the overthrow of any traditionally conservative, pro-Western Arab regime, would augment the likelihood of the intrusion of Soviet influence and control over an oil rich country. If an oil-rich country like Saudi Arabia had fallen under the sway of the Kremlin, “it could mean a major shift in the

⁴² Memcon: Rostow conversation with UAR Ambassador Kamel, Washington, November 22, 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, 345.

⁴³ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 379.

balance of power,” according to the U.S. Ambassador to Egypt, John Badeau.⁴⁴ This threat amplified the importance of befriending Nasser and harnessing the forces of Arab nationalism in ways that benefited the U.S., such as focusing on strengthening the Egyptian economy.

The U.S. also believed that strengthening its relationship with Egypt, and through Egypt much of the Arab world, was to Israel’s benefit. “If we pulled out of the Arab Middle East and maintained our ties only with Israel,” as a result of “identifying Israel...as our exclusive friend...” Kennedy explained to Golda Meir, the Israeli Foreign Minister, “...this would not be in Israel’s interest.”⁴⁵ The U.S. hoped to mitigate the amount of anti-Israel rhetoric coming from the UAR by prodding Nasser to focus on domestic problems, rather than lash out against Israel.

A PROMISING OPPORTUNITY

The single most important factor in creating a window of opportunity for the U.S. to successfully court Nasser was Egypt’s deteriorating relationship with the USSR. A principal catalyst for this fallout with the Soviets was the rise of the communist party’s activity in Iraq and Syria, which Nasser believed was undermining the Arab nationalist movement. As Kerr notes, “communism, whether in Iraq or Syria...was not simply an ideology differing on this and that point from Nasir’s brand of revolutionary nationalism, but something worse: an organized movement in competition with his own, and outside his control.” Because the Soviets were unable to control the communist party’s activity, Nasser became “disenchant[ed]” with the Soviets, causing him to force the Egyptian

⁴⁴ Badeau, *The American Approach to The Middle East*, 22.

⁴⁵ Memcon: Kennedy meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Meir, Palm Beach, Florida, December 27, 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII: Near East 1961-1962 (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1994), 280.

communist party underground in 1959 and paving the way for warmer relations with the United States.⁴⁶ According to Mohamed Heikal, a trusted advisor of Nasser, “when Nasser and Khrushchev quarreled over Arab unity and the role of Communists in the Arab nations, the Americans saw their opportunity to gain the ground they had lost.”⁴⁷

A second factor that created an opportunity for warmer relations between Egypt and the United States was Syria’s secession from the joint Egyptian and Syrian adventure as the United Arab Republic, which began in February 1958. While Egypt would keep the name after Syria removed itself from the political unification of the two countries in September of 1961, Egypt’s prestige and image as the leader of the pan-Arab movement had been greatly damaged. In other words, Syria’s secession from the United Arab Republic was a slap in the face to Egypt’s claim as the leader of Arab nationalism.⁴⁸ Moreover, the U.S. government believed that, with the break up of the UAR, Nasser “...[was] likely to settle for more limited means of trying to assert paramountcy.”⁴⁹ This is precisely what the U.S. desired.

Thus, the U.S. refrained from humiliating Nasser for this failure and hoped to use this debasement to “turn Nasser inward[s],” forcing him to focus his energy and attention on curing the ills of his own state.⁵⁰ In the words of Robert Komer, “the recent events,” referring to Syria’s secession from the UAR, “*may* present us with [the] best opportunity since 1954 for a limited marriage of convenience for a guy who I think is still, and will remain, Mr. Big of the Arab world. If we can help turn Nasser inward and get back on a

⁴⁶ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, 25-26.

⁴⁷ Muhammad Heikal, *The Cairo Documents; the inside Story of Nasser and His Relationship with World Leaders, Rebels, and Statesmen* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973.) 191-192.

⁴⁸ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, 44.

⁴⁹ National Intelligence Estimate, Washington, June 27, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, 165.

⁵⁰ National Security Action Memorandum No. 5, Washington, October 16, 1961, FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, 303.

friendly basis with him, it may not buy us much but would certainly save us from a peck of trouble he can otherwise stir up for us.”⁵¹

More specifically, the United States hoped Nasser would focus his attention on fixing the sputtering Egyptian economy, whose poor condition provided the United States with a third way to strengthen its relations with Egypt. The United States’ instrument of choice in this regard was offering the Egyptians a multiyear agreement of food aid. In June 1962, Kennedy would provide a three-year Public Law 480 (PL-480) agreement with Egypt, guaranteeing Egypt shipment of American food, and specifically wheat for the duration of the agreement.⁵² The theory of providing extended long-term food aid was founded on the idea that it would act as a catalyst for “intensive economic development.” Moreover, once the theory was accepted, it would force a nation – in this case Egypt and Nasser – to “concentrate on progress at home rather than on foreign adventures.”⁵³

Chester Bowles, Kennedy’s “ambassador-at-large” to the Third World, articulately summarized the general logic behind the United States’ overtures toward Nasser.⁵⁴ Bowles, writing to the State Department, argued that “[i]f Nasser can gradually be led to forsake the microphone for the bulldozer,” meaning sacrificing Pan-Arab leadership for economic development, “he may assume a key role in bringing the Middle East peacefully into our modern world.”⁵⁵ Despite their previous difficulties, by the

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Little in *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory*, 161.

⁵³ Lenczowski, *American Presidents and The Middle East*, 73.

⁵⁴ Little in *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory*, 162.

⁵⁵ Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy’s Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 89.

summer of 1962, the United States rapprochement with Egypt and Nasser appeared to be tremendously successful.

SIGNS OF HOPE

For the first year and a half of Kennedy's presidency, Kennedy's refurbished Middle East policy plan appeared to be working with great success. The U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon, Armin Meyer, reported that although "originally, fearful that the new American Administration would be overwhelmingly pro-Israel, the Arab countries...have thus far been pleasantly surprised. They are developing not only an admiration for, but a faith in, President Kennedy's leadership – not just in Arab-Israeli matters, but in the greater problems of the world."⁵⁶ More importantly, Kennedy's direct rapprochement effort with Nasser and Egypt was also yielding extremely positive results. According to the UAR Ambassador to the U.S., Mustafa Kamel, "Nasser appreciated Kennedy's effort to treat him as an equal...just as he resented Eisenhower and Dulles's effort to treat him like some sort of pawn in the big chess game with the Russians."⁵⁷ What's more, the Soviets still appeared to be out of favor with the Egyptians. On July 9, 1962, Talbot reported to Secretary of State Dean Rusk that the "Soviets appear to have been unable to capitalize in the past several years on earlier success in Egypt..."⁵⁸ This meant the United States had an uncontested opportunity to continue to build on its recent success. Kennedy would take the lead in this endeavor.

A direct correspondence of many letters between JFK and Nasser helped the two leaders to be frank and forthright with each other. One particular letter sent from Nasser

⁵⁶ Meyer memo for Bundy, July 12, 1962, NSF, Box 427, JFKL.

⁵⁷ Little in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 163

⁵⁸ Talbot memo to Rusk, Washington, July 9, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 3.

to Kennedy on June 22, 1962, deserves special attention. In the opinion of some scholars, the warm sentiments expressed therein mark the highest point of U.S.-UAR relations.⁵⁹ The “sincere gratitude” Nasser expressed in the letter was considered to be “unique in the history of US-UAR relations” and believed to hold “substantive implications of far-reaching import.” Further, Nasser made clear in his letter that he was on board for many of the United States’ desired changes within the UAR, such as the “development of a mixed economic and social system including private foreign investment” and the condemnation of communism. This indicated that Nasser might truly be trying to focus on domestic issues rather than meddling in foreign revolutions. I believe this is evidence suggesting that Nasser was willing to curtail his foreign adventures in the hopes of not only developing a better relationship with the United States, but also changing and improving Egypt from within. Most importantly, however, Nasser acknowledged the existence of a “mutual understanding” and expression of confidence that U.S.-UAR differences can be kept “ ‘within limits not to be exceeded.’ ”⁶⁰ Nasser’s letter to President Kennedy insinuated that *significant* progress had been made since Kennedy became President, and that a tremendous opportunity for further improved relations was on the table for the Kennedy Administration to capitalize on during the summer of 1962. “We’ve made a score on relations with the key guy in [the] Arab world...” noted Robert Komer, “let’s keep nurturing it.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Mordechai Gazit, *President Kennedy's Policy toward the Arab States and Israel: Analysis and Documents* (Tel Aviv: Shiloah Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University 1983), 21.

⁶⁰ Brubeck memo to Bundy, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVII, 755.

⁶¹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the UAR, Washington, July 19, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 15.

Additionally, Kennedy's theory that stronger U.S.-UAR relations were to Israel's benefit was apparently legitimized by the United States' initial success of rapprochement with the UAR. In May 1962, Philips Talbot, Assistant Secretary of State for the Department of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) explained to Shimon Peres, the Israeli Defense Minister, that the success of the U.S-UAR rapprochement had mitigated Egyptian tensions with Israel more than any new air defenses possibly could, as this would only "create new appetites in the Arab world for Soviet missiles."⁶² To continue this trend, however, the United States would need to refrain, as Kennedy told Meir, from classifying Israel as a special friend.

REMAINING NEUTRAL IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

Because of the nature of the United States' interests in the region, the Arab-Israeli conflict posed an enormous problem, as supporting strictly Israel or the Arab world could have inflicted damaging consequences on its goals in the region. Due to the importance of oil from the Persian Gulf, support for Israel was very risky for the United States. The United States feared that any support for Israel might alienate certain Arab states, jeopardizing the United States' and Western Europe's access to Arab oil.⁶³ On the other hand, the United States also feared that if it completely abandoned Israel during its early years of nationhood, that Israel might also turn to the Soviets for help. This would provide the Soviets with a key geographical point of influence throughout the region, further threatening the United States' interests in the region.⁶⁴ In this light, it was

⁶² Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 159.

⁶³ Adeed Dawisha in *The Cold War and the Middle East*, 161.

⁶⁴ Rodman, *Arms Transfers to Israel*, 3.

essential that the Kennedy Administration tread very carefully when dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Time and again, Nasser and the UAR made clear to Kennedy that the continued improvement of its relations with the U.S. was dependent on the United States' ability to refrain from interfering too heavily in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Thus, the UAR requested that the Arab-Israeli issue be put in the "refrigerator" or frozen, which it argued would "exert [a] stabilizing influence in the area following which specific problems could be approached through diplomatic channels."⁶⁵ According to government officials charged with interpreting Nasser's letter to Kennedy on June 22, 1962, Nasser's belief that "U.S.-UAR differences can be kept "within limits not to be exceeded," represented a continuation of the UAR's belief that it was essential to keep the Arab-Israeli conflict in the "refrigerator." Because of the inflammatory nature of the conflict, it appears that Nasser believed that U.S. involvement in the conflict would only complicate its relationship with the UAR, a relationship I believe Nasser truly desired to improve upon. Thus, Nasser did not want to risk his opportunity to befriend the U.S. and reap the benefits of that friendship by having the United States even attempt to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

According to Mohammed Heikal, when West Germany agreed to sell Israel weapons in 1961, it "ruine[d] the relationship between West Germany and the Arab nations."⁶⁶ Heikal adds, moreover, that although Nasser was keen to "explore the new Administration of the United States," reports that Kennedy had promised weapons to

⁶⁵ Telegram from Department of State to the Embassy in the UAR, Washington, February 8, 1961, *FRUS XVII, 1961-1963*, 18.

⁶⁶ Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, 193.

Israel made Nasser approach the Kennedy Administration with “some hesitation.”⁶⁷ This “hesitation” probably stemmed from Nasser’s fear that befriending the major arms supplier of the Arab world’s universal opponent would be politically unacceptable if Nasser were to continue his quest for Arab leadership. The United States should have been cognizant of these realities and realized that any issue pertaining to Israel was extremely inflammatory.

The reason Israel was such a provocative subject was because Israel – in the eyes of the Arab world – was the paradigm of the continuation of Western imperialism in the region.⁶⁸ In the words of John Badeau, “in the UAR eyes, the emergence of Israel is considered but a shift in the outward visible form of Western occupation...Israel remains in the area as a foreign-occupied wedge. Its geographic position hampers Egyptian communication with and influence in the Arab states to the East. It is one of the few remaining but highly effective devices which the West can use to ‘humiliate’ the Arabs.”⁶⁹ Because winning over Egypt was so highly valued and important to Kennedy and his administration, the United States’ cooperation with the UAR’s request to keep the Arab-Israeli issue frozen was critical.

Unfortunately, Kennedy appeared to have overvalued his aforementioned initial success at rapprochement with Nasser. Consequently, he erroneously came to believe that he had earned some maneuverability to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict, resulting in his decision to approve the Hawk missile sale. This would irrevocably damage Kennedy’s attempt at rapprochement with Nasser and the UAR.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ John Donovan, *US and Soviet Policy in the Middle East* (New-York: Facts on File, 1974),148; Memorandum of Conversation with Meir, Palm Beach Florida, December 27, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 280.

⁶⁹ Badeau airgram to Rusk, August 23, 1962, Box 427, NSF, JFKL.

CHAPTER 3: THE DECISION

This section will attempt to accomplish five objectives. The first is to explain the United States' prior policy concerning selling arms to Israel. The second and third are to provide the rationale behind both sides of the argument – those in favor and those against – selling the Hawk missiles to Israel. The fourth is to explain what scholars knowledgeable about the missile sale have determined as the principal factors in reaching the decision to approve it. The fifth and final objective of this section is to elucidate the *true* reasoning behind the decision. That is, while many factors were indeed influential in the final decision, the accounts of certain U.S. government officials point unambiguously to a principal motive: domestic political gains.

PREVIOUS U.S. POLICY ON SELLING ARMS TO ISRAEL

The Israeli request for arms from President Kennedy, and in particular the request for the Hawk missiles, was not new. In fact, the Israelis had been asking the United States for arms since the Eisenhower Administration and had first requested Hawk missiles in February of 1960.⁷⁰ Since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, however, the United States had maintained an arms embargo on Israel, refusing to supply it with weapons. The United States maintained this position for a variety of reasons. First, it believed that the introduction of sophisticated weaponry into any Middle Eastern country could engender the start of a dangerous arms race. Nevertheless, after the Soviets began

⁷⁰ David Tal, "Symbol Not Substance? Israel's Campaign to Acquire Hawk Missiles, 1960-1962," *International History Review* 22, No. 2 (June, 2000), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40108369> (accessed October 31, 2012), 306.

providing weapons to Egypt in 1955, the United States tacitly approved of the sale of arms to Israel from European countries, primarily France.⁷¹ The United States approved of this development to assure that a military balance of power between Israel and its Arab neighbors would be maintained. The reasoning behind the fear of an arms race was that it would create a greater opportunity for Soviet infiltration and participation in the area.⁷² That is, the Soviets would take the opportunity to further arm currently Soviet-friendly nations and perhaps even open the door for the Soviet Union to begin selling weapons to more Arab countries. This same line of thinking governed the United States' policy throughout the entirety of the Eisenhower Administration and during the beginning of the Kennedy administration.

Perhaps more important to Kennedy in his initial refusal to sell arms to Israel, as seen in his pre-campaign rhetoric, was the importance of being an impartial player in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In an oral history interview, Phillips Talbot emphasized the importance of this policy objective. He stated:

“For all the postwar years, if one were to try to analyze the major thrust of the State Department’s policy proposals for the Middle East...the thrust would be to avoid the polarization of the area...to maintain affective balance both on the Arab and obviously on the Israeli sides and to try to do what we could to keep the situation from coming to the kind of boil which would force us to make a choice and force others to make a choice between us and the Russians. In that sense, the State Department recommendations again and again were to be tougher on Israel...out of the belief that not only should we attempt to maintain a balanced policy but we should give the appearance of a balanced policy.”⁷³

Kennedy’s resolution to uphold the United States’ previous policy was put to the test just four months into his tenure as President. On May 30, 1961, when the Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, met with President Kennedy at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, among a variety of topics discussed was that of U.S. arms sales to

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and The Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, 12.

⁷³ Phillips Talbot OH, August 13, New York, New York, 1970, JFKL, 16-17.

Israel. Kennedy expressed to Ben-Gurion that the American stance on the issue had not changed, but that the matter would receive very significant consideration.⁷⁴

A year later, in May of 1962, Israeli Defense Minister Shimon Peres would again bring the question of arms sales to Israel, specifically the Hawk missiles, to the table. In a conversation between Shimon Peres and Assistant Secretary of Defense William Bundy, Peres argued that if the United States was not more willing to form a tighter military relationship with Israel, it should at least be prepared to take a more major role alongside France as a supplier of military equipment under sales arrangements. “Specifically, he urged that, over and above existing small arms...the U.S. should supply [the] Hawk missile unit.”⁷⁵

Three months after this meeting with Peres, JFK and his Administration had agreed to sell the Israelis the Hawk missiles, although not before much deliberation. After years of refusal to meet the Israelis’ requests, why did the United States decide to change course? A more intensive inspection of arguments both for and against the sale shows which factors were seemingly responsible for the alteration of U.S. policy.

THE NO CAMP

Basing their arguments on prior U.S. policy and current governmental intelligence estimates produced by various government agencies, those opposed to selling Hawk missiles to Israel primarily worked in the Department of State (DOS), specifically the NEA, a department within the DOS.⁷⁶ There were four reasons given for opposing the

⁷⁴ Memcon: Talbot meeting with Arab ambassadors, June 2, 1961, NSF, Box 427, Israel, Ben-Gurion Visit, JFKL.

⁷⁵ William Bundy memo to Talbot, May 23, 1962, NSF, Box 118, Israel, Conversation with Peres, JFKL.

⁷⁶ Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and The Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, 65.

sale. Over the course of time, however, one of these reasons would be damaged, causing some members of the camp to abandon ship, which would ultimately convince JFK to sell the Hawk missiles to Israel.

The first reason for opposition to the sale was the continued desire for the United States to remain an impartial player in the Arab-Israeli conflict. On June 15, 1962, just two months before the U.S. approved the sale of the Hawks, a conference comprised of members from the NEA assessed the ramifications of creating a military relationship with Israel. The report read: “Conference urges avoidance [of] ties of this nature as being inconsistent with our basic goal to promote impartiality [in] the peaceful resolution of [the] Arab-Israeli conflict while maintaining with both sides a constructive relationship designed to safeguard and promote our other interests in the area.”⁷⁷ If the U.S. were to remain impartial after selling Israel the Hawk, “the U.S. would have to consider whether to offer the Hawk to Israel’s Arab neighbors...[placing] civil aviation in some jeopardy.”⁷⁸

The second reason behind the resistance of the Hawk missile sale was to prevent the start of an arms race in the Middle East – a continuation of U.S. policy toward the region from the 1940’s and 1950’s. In the same report from June 1962, the NEA warned that “once [the] U.S. breaks [the] barrier by selling HAWK to Israel, [the] U.S. would find it virtually impossible [to] avoid sales [of] further missiles, thereby contributing to [an] escalation [of arms] since [the] provision of even defensive weapons inevitably leads to

⁷⁷ Talbot telegram to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for NEA James Grant, Grant, June 15, 1962, Box 428, NSF, Israel, Security, (Missiles), Development Sale of Hawks, 1962-1963, JFKL.

⁷⁸ Memorandum from Talbot to Rusk, Washington, June 7, 1962, *FRUS XVII, 1961-1963*, 716.

requirement for greater offensive capabilities.”⁷⁹ Moreover, the sale of the Hawk to Israel would “pin on the US [the] responsibility for adding a new element of sophistication to weaponry in the Middle East,” allowing the Soviets to become involved in the arms race without having to accept the responsibility for it.⁸⁰

Thirdly, the State Department believed that the Hawk missile sale to Israel would hurt Washington’s rapprochement with Egypt, while giving the USSR a stimulus to deepen its ties with Egypt and other Arab states. The NEA report warned that, “there is probable use by Soviets of [the] sale of HAWK to Israel in Soviet attempt [to] redress its position with UAR and possibility of new UAR-Soviet deal affecting adversely development of U.S.-UAR relations.”⁸¹ A letter sent from the U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon, Armin H. Meyer, on July 2, 1962, expressed the same idea. Meyer noted that, despite the trend of very significant improvement of the United States’ image in the Arab world, “these trends can be easily reversed by our supporting short-sighted Israeli requests such as those for a special security guarantee...[or] new dramatic military collaboration with Israel.”⁸²

The fourth reason given against the Hawk missile sale was the one that would eventually lose its credibility. The Kennedy Administration desired to prevent the significant alteration of the military balance of power between Israel and the Arab world, specifically the UAR. As the logic went, if both sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict were of relatively equal strength and military capability, there would be less temptation for either

⁷⁹ Talbot telegram to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for NEA James Grant, Grant, June 15, 1962, Box 428, NSF, Israel, Security, (Missiles), Development Sale of Hawks, 1962-1963, JFKL.

⁸⁰ Talbot memo to Rusk, Washington, June 7, 1962, *FRUS XVII, 1961-1963*, 716.

⁸¹ Talbot telegram to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for NEA James Grant, Grant, June 15, 1962, Box 428, NSF, Israel, Security, (Missiles), Development Sale of Hawks, 1962-1963, JFKL.

⁸² Meyer memo for Bundy, July 12, 1962, NSF, Box 427, JFKL.

side to take military action against the other. If there were to be a slight military imbalance, moreover, it was important that Israel had the advantage so that a united Arab world would still be unable to destroy Israel in a military confrontation. This reasoning had stood firmly since 1961 when a National Intelligence Estimate, had concluded that Israel would continue to enjoy a military superiority for the next two or three years, “a superiority which the Arabs recognize and which inhibits deliberate attack on Israel.” Further, the National Intelligence Estimate stated that the “reluctance to provoke great power reactions inhibits Israel’s undertaking preventive war, while disunity among the Arabs will convince them that military action against Israel would be futile.” Hence, the National Intelligence Estimate argued that the chance of a third round of hostilities between Israel and its Arab neighbors in the next few years would be “less than even.”⁸³

On June 18, 1962, McGeorge Bundy, speaking on behalf of the Department of Defense – a Department that favored the Hawk missile sale – argued that the “UAR/Israeli military balance is such that we can no longer use Israel’s military superiority as an argument against providing defensive arms.”⁸⁴ NEA, however still clung to the belief that a military justification for the missile sale did not yet exist. In their report to Secretary of State Rusk, NEA argued that although “previously existing vulnerability of Israel air defense [has] somewhat increased by UAR acquisition of MIG 21 and TU 16 bomber...we consider Israel’s basic security position today and for next few

⁸³ National Intelligence Estimate Number 35-61, October 5, 1961, Box 427, JFKL.

⁸⁴ Komer memo to Bundy, June 18, 1962, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missile), Development of Sale of Hawks, JFKL.

years to be in reality as satisfactory as in past.” Therefore, the conference argued that the Hawk missile sale should be delayed.⁸⁵

There was, however, a conditional statement in NEA’s report. The condition stated was that, “should U.S. own intelligence clearly confirm UAR possession of air-to-air or ground-to-air missiles or Soviet commitment to provide such missiles to UAR, then U.S. would be both justified in selling HAWK to Israel and would have considerable greater freedom of action in doing so.”⁸⁶ While at the time of NEA conference this information was unknown, this condition would later become a reality. On August 7, 1962, Secretary of State Rusk informed JFK that U.S. intelligence, presumably from the State Department, had confirmed the UAR was obtaining comparable surface-to-air missiles from the Soviets.⁸⁷ Finally, the reasoning against the sale based on the lack of a military justification for Israel to obtain the Hawks had been discredited. This single issue overrode all the other reasons and opened the door for Kennedy to sell the Hawk missiles to Israel.

THE YES CAMP

Those in favor of selling the Hawk missiles to Israel worked primarily in the NSC and Department of Defense (DOD), although the two departments favored selling the Hawks for very different reasons.⁸⁸ These departments and the individuals in them believed the sale was justified and favorable for three reasons. The DOD’s justification and advocacy for the sale focused on the growing imbalance in arms between Israel and

⁸⁵ Talbot telegram to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for NEA James Grant, Grant, June 15, 1962, Box 428, NSF, Komer Papers, Israel, Security, (Missiles), Development Sale of Hawks, 1962-1963, JFKL.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Rusk memo to JFK, August 7, 1962, Box 427, NSF, JFKL.

⁸⁸ Ben-Zvi, *John F. Kennedy and The Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, 50.

the UAR, which left Israel increasingly vulnerable to a UAR air attack.⁸⁹ Disagreements between the DOD and DOS prevailed up through the summer of 1962; however, the intelligence confirmation of comparable surface-to-air missiles from the Soviets to the UAR in August of 1962, left no room to disagree with the DOD's military assessment.

Myer Feldman confirms this logic of policy planning stating, "I collected from the Department of Defense and from the State Department all of their answers to the requests of the Israeli government for weapons...If we were committed to a balance of arms and if the Soviet Union was supplying Egypt with SAMMIES – that's Soviet Air missiles – then the balance didn't exist. It was way over on the side of the Egyptians."⁹⁰ Because of the defensive nature of the Hawk missile system, moreover, the DOD argued that the Hawk would not only "fill an important gap" in the Israeli defense, but sold alone, would fail to alter the overall balance of military power.⁹¹ Why, however, was this balance so important to maintain? The answer to this question was this camp's second justification for providing the Hawk to Israel.

The United States government, including the State Department feared that, put in a position of weakness or susceptibility, Israel would be much more likely to launch a preemptive attack. As articulated by Secretary of State Rusk, the "provision of the Hawk would enable Israel to reduce considerably its vulnerability to surprise air attack by low-flying aircraft. Greater confidence in its defenses would permit Israel to better resist any temptation to engage in preemptive attack against the UAR air strike capability."⁹² The U.S. also feared that put in a position of extreme vulnerability, Israel would be more

⁸⁹ Letter From Bundy to Grant, Washington, July 16, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 8.

⁹⁰ Myer Feldman OH, July 29, 1967, JFKL, 533.

⁹¹ Letter From Bundy to Grant, Washington, July 16, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 8.

⁹² Rusk memo to JFK, August 7, 1962, Box 427, NSF, Israel, 1961-1963, JFKL.

tempted to use nuclear capabilities as a means of defense.⁹³ If Israel were to take any such preemptive action, it would certainly have upset regional stability and ultimately damaged the United States' strategic interests throughout the greater Middle East.

Meanwhile, although the NSC may have agreed with the military assessments of the DOD, its advocacy for the Hawk missile sale generally stemmed from a different source: domestic political gains.⁹⁴ Myer Feldman, “emphasized the importance of parallel gestures toward Israel,”⁹⁵ in the wake of heavy U.S. endorsement and support of the Nasser regime. Moreover, in a report from Talbot to Rusk, Talbot notes that, if the U.S. chose to sell the Hawk missile to Israel, “from the domestic standpoint, American supporters of Israel would be pleased and would be less critical of US policy.”⁹⁶

ULTIMATE JUSTIFICATION

When the decision was to sell the Hawks, the Kennedy Administration made two key points. The first point repeatedly stressed was that the decision to sell the missiles did not demonstrate a change in U.S arms policy in the Middle East, but rather was a decision made to meet a specific situation.⁹⁷ The specific situation, in this case, was the growing arms imbalance between the UAR and Israel. Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General of the United States, supported this notion, when he stated that the Arab world should be told that the “Hawk offer was [a] belated response to increasing imbalance

⁹³ Rodman, *Arms Transfers to Israel*, 15.

⁹⁴ Ben-Zvi, *JFK and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, 50.

⁹⁵ Komer memo to Kennedy, Washington, January 15, 1962, FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, 403.

⁹⁶ Talbot memo to Rusk, Washington, June 7, 1962, FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, 716.

⁹⁷ Knight telegram to State, September 27, 1962, 10:47 A.M., NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missile), JFKL.

between Arabs and Israel, created by continuing massive Soviet arms shipments, including offensive weapons...[and that] Soviet missiles to Arabs was last straw.”⁹⁸

And second, the Kennedy Administration noted that the Hawk missile was a purely defensive weapon.⁹⁹ In other words, the United States had no intention of arming Israel for expansionist or aggressive purposes, but rather, was filling an indisputable void in Israel’s defense against a UAR air attack. Secretary of State Dean Rusk explained that, “...Because [the] Arab nations had built up their armaments throughout the fifties and we wanted Israel to be strong enough to fend off possible attack...we sold Hawk air defense missiles to Israel...we at State were concerned about Arab reaction to the sale, but since Hawks were basically defensive weapons, we did not strongly oppose the sale. We simply pointed out that there would be sharp reaction from the Arab world, and indeed, there was.”¹⁰⁰

PREVIOUS DISCUSSION

A variety of scholars have sifted through the governmental documents highlighted in the previous section in an attempt to piece together a comprehensive explanation for why exactly the United States ultimately chose to sell the Hawks to Israel. Most notable of these scholars are Mordechai Gazit, Abraham Ben-Zvi, David Tal, Warren Bass and Douglas Little. In their respective research, the scholars reach a variety of conclusions that often contradict one another. Further, while some of their conclusions concur with the U.S. government’s explanation of the sale, others highlight previously unmentioned reasons. The scholar and former Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry during

⁹⁸ RWK letter to Carl, September 27, 1962, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missile), JFKL.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Rusk, *As I saw It*, 379.

the Kennedy Administration, Mordechai Gazit, discusses the Hawk Missile sale in his book, *President Kennedy's Policy toward the Arab States and Israel*. Gazit proposes four plausible explanations for the Hawk missile sale, including the defensive weapon justification, the influence of domestic politics, the opportunity for the U.S. to increase leverage for itself in Israel, and finally, the need to correct the military imbalance so that "Israel would [not] adopt policies in self-defense that would run counter to U.S. interests."¹⁰¹ Gazit dismisses the likelihood of all these explanations except the one pertaining to the arms imbalance.

In his article titled, *Symbol not Substance? Israel's Campaign to Acquire Hawk Missiles, 1960-1962*, David Tal, an Israeli Historian, suggests that a couple of events helped produce the outcome of the Hawk missile sale. These events were the crises in Jordan and Lebanon in 1958, when the United States and British forces rescued King Hussein of Jordan and the Lebanese government from pro-Nasser forces in the two respective countries.¹⁰² What Tal illuminates is that the United States and Great Britain were only able to accomplish this feat because Israel allowed the British to fly through its airspace during the crises. For Tal, this demonstrated these two critical points: it proved to the United States that significant geopolitical changes were occurring in the Middle East, which enhanced Israel's strategic importance to the United States. Further, Tal argues that the crises were "the death knell to [the United States'] efforts to bring the entire region under its Cold War umbrella...once it was clear in the aftermath of 1958, that the Middle East was divided between the two blocs, Israel became an asset; one of

¹⁰¹ Gazit, *President Kennedy's Policy toward the Arab States and Israel*, 44.

¹⁰² David Tal, "Symbol Not Substance? Israel's Campaign to Acquire Hawk Missiles, 1960-1962," *The International History Review* 22, No. 2 (June, 2000), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40108369> (accessed October 31, 2012), 305.

three Middle Eastern States...willing to support the United States in its confrontation with Nasser's version of Arab nationalism."¹⁰³ Second, Tal argues that the U.S. understood that, with the conclusion of the Algerian War, France – Israel's arm supplier at the time – was likely to return to its traditional pro-Arab stance. Consequently, Israel would be left without a reliable weapons supplier. These realities, Tal argues, coupled with the increased amount of arms being pumped into Egypt from the Soviet Union, were enough to convince the United States that Israel's security situation may indeed be dire enough to justify the sale of the Hawk missiles to Israel.¹⁰⁴

While Tal's arguments are novel, one of his two major claims is flawed. Although it may be true that the United States recognized Israel's changing strategic importance in the Middle East after the crises in Jordan and Lebanon in 1958, Tal fails to fully grasp the dramatic difference between the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations' attitude toward the Middle East. Thus, Tal does not convey the very different methods that the Kennedy Administration were using to court Nasser – methods that were yielding much more positive results than Eisenhower had ever attained.

In his book, *Support Any Friend*, the scholar Warren Bass posits that the decision to sell the Hawk missiles to Israel was made possible because of personnel changes between the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administration as well as because of a dramatic change in the "decision-making structure," in the Kennedy Administration; that change, according to Bass, was a more influential and "invigorated National Security Council."¹⁰⁵ Bass argues that the combined influence of the NSC and DOD, departments more sympathetic with Israeli pleas, ultimately were able to convince Kennedy that a true

¹⁰³ Ibid., 306.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 312.

¹⁰⁵ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 146.

military imbalance had been created. Bass also attributes Kennedy's attempt to reach out to Nasser as a contributing factor that provoked the sale, noting that the Hawk sale may have been used to ease the jitters Israel felt from the U.S. attempt to court Nasser.¹⁰⁶

Interestingly, Bass chooses to dismiss evidence supporting the argument that domestic political interests played a significant role in the decision-making process. He states, "it is hard to imagine that political calculations did not cross Kennedy's mind, but it is hard to find proof that they drove his decision."¹⁰⁷ Bass rejects this argument on the notion that the Israel lobby was "simply not formidable in the early 1960s."¹⁰⁸ As we will soon discuss, however, Bass neglects to fully digest the significance of two important factors that he himself points out. In Bass's own words, not only was "Kennedy... a political animal,"¹⁰⁹ but the "center of policy-making gravity had swung away from the State Department and toward an invigorated National Security Council."¹¹⁰ It was from the NSC, moreover, that the focus on domestic political interests from the Hawk missile sale stemmed. The next scholar under study, Abraham Ben-Zvi, notes this exact point.

A political scientist and foreign relations professor, Ben-Zvi supports many of the aforementioned theories, but adds another influential factor other scholars have previously dismissed. In his book *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arm Sales to Israel*, Ben-Zvi argues that the DOD ultimately convinced JFK that Israel was at a true military disadvantage, just as many other scholars have concluded. At the same time, however, Ben-Zvi posits that members of the NSC, such as Mike Komer and Myer

¹⁰⁶ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 147.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146

Feldman, were responsible for convincing JFK of the importance of the decision on domestic politics. He writes, “Komer, and in particular Feldman, were acutely sensitive to the domestic political context, and most of all to the need to maintain – and preferably broaden and solidify – the base of Jewish support of the Administration on the eve of the November 1962 congressional elections.”¹¹¹

The American historian Douglas Little also believes that domestic politics played a role in the decision. He writes, “no one present remembers the upcoming elections specifically entering into JFK’s calculus, but it was the sort of domestic political bonus that could not have escaped his notice.” Little, moreover, notes that Komer presented the argument to Kennedy that “the HAWK decision should be made not merely with the upcoming fall congressional campaign in mind...but also with an eye on the ‘optimum political impact before the 1964 US [presidential] elections.’”¹¹² Although they may be the lone scholars to support the importance of domestic politics on the decision to sell the Hawks to Israel, Ben-Zvi and Little, alone, stand correct. In fact, as we will now discuss, Ben-Zvi and Little still significantly underestimated the influence of domestic politics on the decision.

TRUE REASONING

At the outset of this examination, David Ben-Gurion was confronted with a promise by JFK “to do something for [the Jews]” after receiving their help in being elected President. What exactly this meant in 1961, just four months into Kennedy’s presidency, was unclear. In the wake of the United States’ decision to begin supplying

¹¹¹ Ben-Zvi, *JFK and The Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, 65.

¹¹² Little in *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory*, 164-165.

sophisticated weapons to Israel, however, this conversation becomes less enigmatic. Believing that the importance of Jewish support had helped to get him elected, it appears that Kennedy used the sale of the Hawk missiles to Israel as his way of not only repaying the Jews for his previous election victory, but also to maintain and supplement his Jewish support in the months leading up to the 1962 congressional elections.

After examining numerous primary documents found in the National Security Files of the United States Government and reviewing the oral history interviews of key members in the Kennedy Administration, the plausibility of this theory is not only repeatedly supported, but also almost impossible to refute. Above all other reasons and justifications, *the final decision to reverse policy and begin selling Israel arms centered around the harnessing of Jewish support in domestic politics for the Kennedy Administration*. To begin to understand just how influential these domestic political forces were, I shall first review Robert W. Komer's oral history interview.

In his interview, Komer is asked to discuss the notion that the State Department, specifically the NEA, was pro-Arab at the time. Komer not only validates this claim, but also explains why this was the case. Komer stated: “[the] State is naturally cast in that role as a deliberate, understandable counter to the great domestic pressures from the Israeli constituency on the White House...in terms of strategic geography, Israel is a millstone around our necks...our strategic and economic interests were emphatically with the Arabs. Only our political interest was with the Israelis.”¹¹³ In his response, one can gather a couple of important pieces of information. First, one can see an acknowledgement and legitimization of the presence of the influence of the Israel lobby in U.S. domestic politics during the Kennedy Administration. This discredits Warren

¹¹³ Robert Komer OH, December 22, Santa Monica, California, 1969, JFKL, 77-78.

Bass's argument that the Israel lobby was not powerful enough yet to have an influence on JFK's decision making. Second, one can see that, despite its increasingly more important strategic role in U.S. foreign policy – as argued by David Tal – Israel was actually a strategic burden to U.S. foreign policy initiatives.

The evidence supporting this theory continues to mount when one examines the oral history statement of Phillips Talbot. In his statement, Talbot remarked:

“As a consummate politician [Kennedy] understood the importance in our domestic politics, and to the Democratic party, of that body of Americans roughly categorized as friends of Israel...on one occasion, when I was arguing a course of action that seemed to me needed in the protection of our relations with several of the Arab states but which admittedly would cause pain to Israel, I commented on the hard nature of the sorts of decisions that involve both foreign policy and domestic political considerations. I urged the President on this occasion to determine that the foreign policy aspect should prevail. ‘The trouble with you, Phil,’ [Kennedy] responded, ‘is that you’ve never had to collect votes to get yourself elected to anything.’”¹¹⁴

From his response, one can assume that domestic political pressures – specifically elections – heavily influenced Kennedy's foreign policy. But is it possible to explicitly specify the Hawk missile sale as one of those foreign policy decisions that was affected by the Israel lobby? Talbot argued that it was. In an oral history interview, Talbot was asked by his interviewer, “let's take some of the particular issues in which the question of helping Israel when domestic pressures are present on the part of Israel. I suspect the HAWKS...is probably a primary one, isn't it?” To which Talbot responded, “yeah. That is one.”¹¹⁵ Talbot's statements supplement the theory that domestic political pressures were a key – if not *the* key – impetus driving the U.S. decision to sell Israel the Hawks. What's more, Talbot's remarks also indicate that although Kennedy was advised, “to let

¹¹⁴ Phillips Talbot OH, December 5, 1964, Washington D.C., JFKL, 23-24.

¹¹⁵ Phillips Talbot OH, August 13, 1970, JFKL, 17.

the foreign policy aspect” prevail over “domestic political considerations,” Kennedy unwisely chose to ignore this suggestion.

After examining the oral history testament of John S. Badeau, the U.S. Ambassador to Egypt during the Kennedy Administration, the validity of this theory becomes almost impossible to deny. Badeau is asked to discuss the influence of the Pro-Israel lobby on the foreign policy of the United States. Badeau immediately jumps to the Hawk missile sale. He responded, “now, take for instance the sale of the Hawk missiles to Israel in the summer of...’62...on one hand, this had a military justification; that is the Pentagon said that Israel was vulnerable because of its lack of certain defensive measures and that the sale of Hawk missiles would not increase its offence capacity and therefor, you could justify it militarily.”¹¹⁶ Here, one sees Badeau’s recognition and general acceptance of the United States’ public explanation of the Hawk missile sale. Badeau, however, strongly asserts a separate theory. He continues, “but I don’t think this is why it was done. It was done because the Congress was facing the first election to Congress after Kennedy had been elected and individuals, who were contributors to the campaign funds of various candidates, withheld their contributions in that summer along into August and said, ‘you don’t get this until we know what you are going to do for Israel.’” Badeau concludes, “finally, the President said, ‘Well, I’ve got military justifications, I’m going to sell Hawk missiles to Israel’ and then he got the funds.”¹¹⁷ From his testament, it is evident that JFK most likely used the presence of a military justification to achieve his true motive – a boost in the 1962 congressional elections. This is not to say the military justifications did not exist, but Badeau’s testament suggests that the military

¹¹⁶ John Badeau OH, February 25, 1969, New York City, New York, 22.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

justifications were, in reality, a smokescreen for the true reasoning behind the decision: Jewish support in domestic politics.

If there were still any doubt that obtaining boosted domestic political support played a – if not *the* – principal role in the decision to sell the Hawk missiles to Israel, a simple examination of the logistics of the sale should dispel any remaining counter-arguments. Despite the United States' insistence on the military justification and defensive nature of the Hawk missiles, one fact alone can discredit this explanation. On July 16, 1962, William Bundy wrote an analysis of the air defense balance between Israel and the UAR to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State of the NEA, James Grant. In the letter, Bundy makes it clear that the earliest the United States would be able to start training the Israelis on how to use the Hawk missiles would be in 1966.¹¹⁸ What purpose, then, did the United States have in offering the Hawks to Israel before the congressional elections if the Hawks would not be ready for Israel to use until 1966?

In a conversation between the UAR Ambassador Kamel and Talbot in late July of 1962, the two discussed that although “[the UAR is] ready to cooperate with [U.S] to the extent feasible...[it] considers it the obligation of the United States Government to protect policy of cooperation with the United Arab Republic against domestic critics.”¹¹⁹ Clearly, the U.S. government was aware of the fact that the Arab countries were sensitive to the ways in which domestic politics, specifically the Israel lobby, were able to influence American foreign policy.

Thus, if the Kennedy Administration wanted to avoid any possible accusations that domestic political pressure from the Israel lobby was influential in the Hawk missile

¹¹⁸ Bundy letter to Grant, Washington, July 16, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 8.

¹¹⁹ Memcon: Talbot meeting with UAR Ambassador Kamel, July 28, 1962, NSF, Box 168a, President weekend reading, JFKL.

sale decision, then why not simply approve the sale after the election? If the missiles could not be used for four more years, then what difference did a few months make? Regrettably for the Kennedy Administration, no convincing answers presented themselves. Because of the timing of the decision, the Arab world was able to see right through the Kennedy Administration's justifications and rationale for why the decision was made. This forced the Arab world, including Egypt, to conclude, fairly or not – although all evidence suggests that it is a fair conclusion – that the United States' foreign policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict was indeed a prisoner of domestic political forces. When the Arab world realized this to be true, in many Arab countries, the positive gains the U.S. had achieved were immediately lost, just as Armin Meyer had forewarned. Evaluating the exact extent of this loss of U.S. prestige in the region is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: REACTIONS AND RAMIFICATIONS

While many scholars have discussed the importance of the Hawk missile in the history of the United States' relationship with Israel, the consequences and significance of the sale in regards to the United States' image and perception in the Arab world, specifically in Egypt, has been relatively overlooked.

PREVIOUS ANALYSIS

The author who has covered the Arab reaction to the Hawk missile sale most extensively is Warren Bass. Bass cites numerous instances of negative reactions from around the Arab world, and ultimately argues that Egypt was the nation most distraught

by the United States' decision.¹²⁰ While Bass is aware of the noxious reaction the decision received, he somehow fails to pin the eventual collapse of the relationship between the United States and Egypt to this moment. Rather, Bass posits that the Yemen War, which would begin within a month of Nasser learning about the Hawk missile deal, was the primary cause behind the downfall of the UAR-U.S. relationship.¹²¹ Bass writes of the Yemen War, "not only would the sole major Middle East war on Kennedy's watch roil the region, it would doom the administration's rapprochement with Nasser, reinforcing America's ties to the Arab conservatives and making it easier for the United States to move closer to an all-out alliance with Israel."¹²²

Other scholars, such as Douglas Little, almost completely dismiss the negative consequences of the Hawk missile sale. In his article, *The New Frontier on The Nile – JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism*, Little describes the moment when John Badeau first informed Nasser of the U.S. decision to make the Hawk missile available to Israel. Citing Badeau's memoir, *The Middle East Remembered*, Little writes, "The Egyptian leader's response was...unexpectedly calm. Although Nasser was disappointed by the arms sale, he was grateful to have been informed in advance."¹²³ Little then adds, "Kennedy's promising new relationship with Nasser, however, was soon disrupted by events in Yemen."¹²⁴ Little, unlike Bass, fails to realize the significant Arab backlash from the Hawk missile sale because he accepted Badeau's initial assessment of Nasser's reaction to the Hawk missile sale at face value. Little, moreover, erroneously agrees with

¹²⁰ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 179.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 98.

¹²³ Douglas Little, "The New Frontier on the Nile: JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism," *The Journal of American History* 75, No. 2 (Sep., 1988), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1887868> (accessed September 10, 2012), 510.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

Bass over the notion that the Yemen War, not the Hawk missile sale, was the catalyst for the failure of rapprochement with Egypt.

Even the famous historian Arthur Schlesinger failed to realize the importance of the Hawk missile sale on the relationship between the U.S. and the UAR. In his acclaimed account of the Kennedy Administration, *A Thousand Days*, Schlesinger writes, "...when [Kennedy] sent the Hawk anti-aircraft missiles in 1962, he took care to inform Nasser in advance what we were doing and why were doing it—a courtesy which undoubtedly moderated Nasser's response to what he might otherwise have seen as unfriendly acts."¹²⁵

It is unclear why so many scholars have overlooked the significance of the Hawk missile sale in Kennedy's relationship with Nasser. Perhaps the best answer is that the Yemen War has occupied the analytical historical eye of those who are familiar with the subject-area, as it offered a clear and pronounced breaking point in the rapprochement period. Nevertheless, I believe that many of the difficulties the Yemen War produced for the U.S.-UAR relationship were a result of the Hawk missile sale. To begin to understand why the sale had this affect on the U.S. rapprochement effort with the UAR, an examination of the general reaction to the sale from the rest of the Arab world is in order.

REACTIONS FROM AROUND THE ARAB WORLD

In a telegram to Secretary of State Rusk from John Jones – the U.S. Ambassador to Libya – Jones describes the sentiment of the Libyan people to the U.S. sale. The Libyan Foreign Ministry Undersecretary, according to Jones, expressed "universal

¹²⁵ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 566.

Libyan dissatisfaction at the US decision [to] allow Israel [to] purchase rockets.” The Undersecretary went on to say that the decision was “greatly damaging to US interests in Arab countries.”¹²⁶

William Hamilton of the NEA wrote to Secretary of State Rusk that the Syrians were expressing sentiments similar to those of the Libyans. Hamilton informed Rusk that “US stock [in Syria was] the lowest since 1957” as a result of the missile sale.¹²⁷ Hamilton also reports that the Syrians were questioning why the U.S. was driving Syria into the arms of the Soviets.¹²⁸ In this report, one can clearly see how the Hawk sale was undermining the United States’ objective to avoid polarization in the Middle East, which could potentially lead to greater Soviet influence throughout the Middle East.

A telegram from Rabat, Morocco, dated September 29, 1962, also laments the Hawk missile sale. The telegram discusses an editorial written in the Moroccan newspaper *Al Alam*, which asserts that “Arab-US relations will deteriorate as [a] result [of the] missile sale...”¹²⁹ The editorial would go on to argue that the U.S. should know that in no way could the weapons given to Israel be defensive and that Israel’s procurement of rockets will ultimately stir up trouble in the Middle East. Finally, the editorial posits that this decision will likely “encourage” the USSR to begin arming other Arab states with rockets.¹³⁰ Again, allusions to an arms race and increased Soviet involvement in the region suggest that the Hawk missile sale would not be tolerated in the Arab world and that it would hurt U.S. interests in the region.

¹²⁶ Jones telegram to Rusk, October 12, 1962, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, JFKL.

¹²⁷ Hamilton telegram to Rusk, Jerusalem, October 3, 1962, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missile), Development Sales of Hawks 1962-1963, JFKL.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ferguson telegram to Rusk, September 29, 1962, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missile), JFKL.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

The reactions from Beirut, Lebanon, mirror those from elsewhere across the Arab world. A telegram to Secretary of State Rusk dated September 29, 1962, describes the sentiment of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rashid Karame. “Karame explained that [the] Arabs [had] been looking forward to more friendly and cooperative relations with [the] US. Now they learn of this new evidence of [United States Government] partiality for Israel.”¹³¹ Karame would add that “every time Arab relations become better with [United States Government] they come against [a] ‘rock’ i.e. US partiality toward Israel.”¹³² Again and again we see the Arab world’s frustration and disappointment with the United States’ decision to begin arming Israel.

While the reactions from the aforementioned Arab countries in and of themselves should not be dismissed lightly, what is perhaps more important about them is how they would affect the way the UAR would respond to the missile sale. After all, Nasser was “Mr. Big” of much of the Arab world. If Nasser and the UAR were to maintain the leadership position within the Arab nationalist movement, Nasser would be required to reconsider his attempt to become closer with the United States, who had just made a decision that marred the United States’ image.

LOSING EGYPT

An examination of the reactions from the media within Egypt provides a good starting point to gauge the extent of the negative ramifications that the United States’ decision had on the U.S.-UAR relationship. An editorial in one Egyptian newspaper stated that the “move had an ‘ugly savour’ since it was obviously made chiefly for

¹³¹ Meyer telegram to Rusk, September 28, 1962, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missile), Development Sale of Hawks, JFKL.

¹³² Ibid.

purpose [of] winning [the] Jewish vote in coming election.”¹³³ Another editorial from a second newspaper takes a more malevolent tone when it claimed that “[United States Government’s] decision [to] supply Israel with Hawk medium-range missiles mean[t] U.S. wants to build a rocket base on occupied Palestine for [the] purpose of arming Zionist expansionist forces...”¹³⁴ A third editorial in yet a different newspaper is perhaps the most volatile of all. The editorial reads: “[The United States Government] pretends to take neutral position in Arab-Israeli affairs, but is it neutrality which has allowed millions of tax-exempt dollars to go to Israel from the U.S.?...we consider this action by the U.S. an aggression against us. Every bullet given to Israel is meant to kill an Arab, every rocket thousand[s] of Arabs...”¹³⁵ The reactions of some of the educated Egyptian populace demonstrate how these feelings of disappointment, frustration, and anger expressed in the media, reverberated throughout the general Egyptian population.

At a reception held in Alexandria, Egypt on September 28, 1962, the American Consulate Official, Rupert Prohme, discussed the significance of the Hawk missile sale with a few very well educated and influential Egyptians. One guest was Dr. Naim Abu Taleb, Assistant Professor of Engineering at the University of Alexandria and an electronic computer specialist trained by IBM in the United States. Pulling Prohme aside, Dr. Taleb told Prohme the following:

“Others of the University did not come [tonight] because of our feelings about your decision to sell missiles to Israel. I can tell you with deepest feeling that I regret this decision immensely. Just at the moment relations between the United States and the United Arab Republic were coming along very nicely you have made a move that once again shakes our confidence in the friendliness of the United States to this country. Why is it that the United States government always succumbs to the Jewish lobby...What good is this decision going to do for the United

¹³³ Badeau telegram to Rusk, September 29, 1962, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missile), JFKL.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Badeau telegram to Rusk, September 28, 1962, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missile), JFKL.

States in the Middle East? Once again we see that your true interests are closer to Israel than to us.”¹³⁶

Prohme would later comment that Dr. Taleb’s views “are those of a good friend of the United States who is at the same time a loyal Egyptian.”¹³⁷

Another guest at the reception, a young Moslem Egyptian lawyer, would later ask Prohme, “for goodness sakes, why did you have to make a move that so inflames Arab feelings and really does nothing to guarantee peace or stability in the Middle East?”¹³⁸

The anger, disappointment and concern expressed in these two brief conversations are ominous harbingers of the severity of the impact this decision would have on the official relations between the U.S. and UAR governments.

The reaction from the UAR Ambassador to the United States, Mostafa Kamel, begins to shed light on the reaction to the sale from within UAR government. After being informed of the sale Kamel responded that, “he continued to believe...that it was essential to freeze the Arab-Israeli conflict, and to remove it from internal American politics.” Further, Kamal stated that “he had struggled for four and half years to build an atmosphere of mutual confidence, and was thus very sensitive to any action which would derogate from that confidence... [and that] he was concerned lest the impression be created in the Arab World that the United States was really not free to follow a neutral policy as between the Arab States and Israel.”¹³⁹

Kamal’s concern over the Arab world’s impression that the United States may not be a neutral player in the Arab-Israeli conflict is a major red flag. His fear suggests,

¹³⁶ American Consul Rubert Prohme airgram to Rusk, October 1, 1962, NSF, Box 119, Country Files, Israel, JFKL.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Memcon: Talbot meeting with UAR Ambassador Kamel, Washington, September 26, 1962, *FRUS Volume XVIII*, 127-128.

fairly or unfairly, that the United States' decision to sell Israel the Hawk missiles would be viewed by the greater Arab world as a consequence of overwhelming domestic political pressures, which would destroy the United States' insistence that it was a neutral player in the Arab-Israeli conflict. According to Heikal, Nasser expressed this fear – a fear that American policy in the Middle East was determined by “ ‘the effort to get the votes of American Jews in the Presidential Elections’ ” – to Kennedy in the first letter he sent to him in their correspondence.¹⁴⁰ The United States' decision regarding the Hawks legitimized this concern for Nasser.

It is this exact point that most concerned John Badeau, who noted that the thrust of the negative reaction stemmed from the fact that the U.S. could not be considered a free agent in the Arab-Israeli conflict and was solely influenced by domestic political considerations.¹⁴¹ In the same vein, Badeau reported that "there has been a setback to confidence in direct US-UAR relationship in high places here...it is obvious that Nasser has fired off his propaganda cannon not in [an] endeavor dissuade us from following through on deal but to maintain his image in Arab world. Under attack from many Arab quarters for having gone 'soft' on Israel as result US aid, missile deal has given him golden opportunity demonstrate his fearlessness in taking public issue with us as principal antagonist for Arabs."¹⁴² Furthermore, after a conversation with the Vice President of Egypt, Abdel-Latif Baghdadi, who argued that the timing of the sale “could only be interpreted as yielding to domestic pressure for the sake of winning an

¹⁴⁰ Heikal, *The Cairo Documents*, 203.

¹⁴¹ Badeau telegram to Rusk, October 16, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missile), Development Sale of Hawks, JFKL.

¹⁴² Ibid.

election,”¹⁴³ Badeau lamented to Rusk that “...No doubt missile sale has handicapped development of USA/UAR rapprochement and faces UAR with serious problem of how to continue fruitful cooperation with USA while berated by Arab neighbors for taking help from obvious supplier of Israeli arms.”¹⁴⁴

If Egypt was to remain the leader of the Arab nationalism movement, and if Nasser were to remain Mr. Big in the Arab world, the impression around the Arab world that the United States was not a free agent would destroy Nasser’s and the UAR’s ability to continue to remain strongly associated with the United States. As discussed, Israel was the symbolic archetype of Western imperialism that the Arab nationalist movement fought so strongly against. For the U.S. to arm Israel with sophisticated weaponry was simply unacceptable for Nasser and Egypt.

Nasser appeared to confirm this reality when he was informed about the decision. A telegram from Badeau to the Department of State on August 24, 1962, describes Nasser’s original reaction to the sale:

“In response Nasser dwelt chiefly on [the] political repercussions [of the] missile sale, seeming unperturbed by military implications. He predicted general and sharp attack on USA by Arab Governments since we are breaching our past policy of not being arms suppliers especially to Israel. In particular he noted that Israeli issue now hottest theme of intra-Arab propaganda warfare and is being used particularly by Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia as weapon to attack UAR with accusation that American price for continuing substantial UAR aid program is Nasser’s acquiescence in softer Israeli line. Until the present, UAR has not responded to these attacks since they are factually untrue, unbelievable to most intelligent Arabs and therefore cannot hurt the UAR. However missile sale will raise issue with new insistence and content...Nasser [also] implied that blame for the expansions [of] Soviet arms role in the Middle East could thus be laid at door of USA.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Badeau telegram to Rusk, October 1, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missile) Israel, JFKL.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Telegram from Embassy in the UAR to State, Cairo, August 24, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 75.

While Nasser's reaction touches upon all of the critical issues raised in Kamel's and Baghdadi's responses, perhaps the most significant takeaway from Nasser's response is his focus on the "political repercussions" of the missile sale as well as Israel being the "hottest theme of intra-Arab propaganda." There are two possible interpretations of what exactly these "political repercussions" signified. Either interpretation, however, yields the same result: the decision by the U.S. to provide Hawk missiles to Israel irreversibly marked the end of the rapprochement period between the United States and the UAR.

The first interpretation strongly correlates with the warnings brought forth by Badeau after his conversation with Baghdadi and focuses on Nasser's own opinion of the United States as a political asset after the Hawk missile sale. During the time of the Hawk missile sale, there existed an extremely intense intra-Arab rivalry between Arab nationalists and the more Western friendly, conservative Arab regimes – the "reactionaries." Because Nasser and Egypt were at the forefront of the Arab nationalist camp they were constantly under intense pressure to prove themselves as the true leaders of the Arab world. When the United States decided to provide Israel with the Hawk missile, Egypt, and specifically Nasser, was put in a very difficult position. On the one hand, Egypt was extremely dependent on the United States' aid, particularly the PL-480. Because of this aid, and for other reasons, Nasser and the UAR had genuine reasons to continue to try and improve their diplomatic relationship with the United States. On the other hand, it was more important for Nasser to remain the unquestioned leader of his camp in the Arab world.

Thus, the "political repercussions" that Nasser mentions may refer to the impending political fallout between the United States and the UAR that would occur by

Nasser's own choice. While Nasser was not in a position to directly reprimand the United States on its decision – primarily because of Egypt's dependence on United States aid – his diction suggests that he may have been aware of the irreversible political course the United States' had forced upon him. In his oral history interview, Talbot stated that he did "...know at what point [Nasser] decided that this road with the Americans would go just so far and wouldn't have any further benefit for him...[but] I think there were probably two reasons [why Nasser reached this conclusion]...one was a...judgment that our freedom of action vis-a-vis Israel was not as unlimited as perhaps the Kennedy Administration had made out to [Nasser]..."¹⁴⁶ Talbot's inclination is spot on. As David Tal writes, "Israel's quest for Hawk Missiles was a sham...their value was political and symbolic."¹⁴⁷ I believe that Nasser understood the symbolic impact that this decision would have on his political association with the United States. That is to say, because Israel was used as a tool of intra-Arab propaganda, and because of the extremely negative reactions to the missile sale from around the Arab world, Nasser knew that he must part ways with the U.S., which was now providing sophisticated weaponry to the Arab world's most hated enemy. Thus, I argue that the beginning of the end of the rapprochement period with Nasser occurred just before the Yemen War, when the United States – not Nasser – made a political decision that convinced Nasser that the United States could never be a true friend.

The oral history testament of Parker T. Hart, the U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia at the time, supports this theory. In a discussion about Egypt's role in settling the

¹⁴⁶ Phillips Talbot OH, August 13, 1970, JFKL, 38.

¹⁴⁷ David Tal, "Symbol Not Substance? Israel's Campaign to Acquire Hawk Missiles, 1960-1962," *The International History Review* 22, No. 2 (June, 2000), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40108369> (accessed October 31, 2012) 304.

Arab-Israeli conflict, Hart conveys the significant role that Israel played in Nasser's attempt to remain a leader of the Arab world. "The Arab-Israel quarrel was far too important to him at that juncture...if he lost that thing, what would he have to harness his Arab states with to his chariot?"¹⁴⁸ Hart continues, "...to have buried the hatchet with Israel would have been to probably have buried his leadership position with the Arabs of the East...and he didn't want to do that. He wanted to keep his image high and his capabilities high, I think not because of an underlying desire to destroy Israel, anywhere near as much as a desire to harness the Arab world to his chariot."¹⁴⁹ Put another way, because Israel was such an instrumental tool used within the inter-Arab Cold War, it was politically impossible for Nasser to simultaneously be the leader of the Arab world while also continuing to build diplomatic relations with the United States. Thus, it was the United States' action of tying itself more closely to Israel that forced Nasser's hand, as it upped the political cost of having close diplomatic ties with the United States.

The second interpretation of the "political repercussions" relates to Nasser's control over his army. In a telegram sent from the U.S. Embassy in Cairo on September 29, 1962, a critical piece of information is relayed to the State Department. The telegram reads, "UAR Ambassador told Department officer USG should not repeat not be deceived by mildness of comments of UAR officials re missiles for Israel. Ambassador said US could expect delayed but severe reaction. Problem he said is not repeat not with Nasser and [United Arab Republic government] but with UAR army. Army has never been completely convinced of merits of policy of cooperation with US and missile deal

¹⁴⁸ Parker Hart OH, May 27, 1969, Arlington, Virginia, JFKL, 42.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 43.

taken as confirmation [of] its worst fears.”¹⁵⁰ Although the reactions of the UAR officials thus far examined – Nasser, Kamal and Baghdadi – did express significant disappointment, it is true that their reactions were relatively reserved. This telegram suggests that despite these mild reactions from the UAR government, a much larger problem lurked beneath the surface: The UAR army had lost faith in Nasser’s policy of cooperating with the United States. Thus, even if Nasser hadn’t lost complete faith in the U.S. after the sale, his army had. Just over a month later, moreover, Nasser would be sending this army into Yemen to help support the pro-Nasserite coup. No doubt, the results of the war for the UAR and its relationship with the U.S. were disastrous. Because the U.S. relationship with the UAR was so historically delicate, however, the Hawk missile sale permanently reinjured the relationship between the two countries. In Yemen, the wound was not created; it merely festered.

THE YEMEN WAR: A LITMUS TEST

Warren Bass provides us with a quick summary of the Yemen War. He writes:

“After a September 1962 coup by Nasserite revolutionaries toppled Yemen’s wheezing, medieval imamate, the country plunged into civil war. A wider war quickly ensued, in which Egypt rushed in to defend the fractious Arab state on the foot of the Arabian peninsula – its traditional tribal politics now overlaid with inter-Arab rivalry – became a Third World flashpoint and an arena for Nasserites to confront the Arab conservatives.”¹⁵¹

Bass’s analysis posits that the Yemen War marked the end of the United States’ rapprochement with Egypt and Nasser. While by the end of the war there is no doubt that the rapprochement was over, I seek to challenge the notion that the war – in and of itself – *precipitated* the end of this rapprochement. That is, while the Yemen War may have

¹⁵⁰ Ball telegram to State, September 29, 1962, NSF, Box 428, Komer Papers, Israel, Security (Missiles), JFKL.

¹⁵¹ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 98.

been inevitable, the nature and duration of the war could have been drastically different if the United States had more control over Nasser and the UAR's actions. If the United States had decided not to sell the Hawk missiles to Israel, its influence over Nasser's actions might have been drastically enhanced. This control might have helped to prevent the war from spiraling out of control, perhaps giving the United States a chance to save the rapprochement effort from a complete collapse.

Before reviewing the United States' attempt to act as a mediator in the Yemen War, it is crucial to understand why the war in Yemen was so important to Nasser. Right before the coup in Yemen occurred, the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence, Roger Hilsman, gave his assessment of Nasser's stake in the war to Rusk. He stated, "*Nasser Needs Success*. In the wake of his continued failure to stage a comeback in Syria, Nasser probably feels the need for some concrete victory in the war he declared against the 'reactionaries' following the breakup of the UAR and the UAS at the end of 1961."¹⁵² It is possible that if the United States had not put Nasser in a position where he felt he had to reassert his Arab leadership, as it did when it sold the Hawk missiles to Israel, that the importance of "winning" the Yemen War would have been greatly diminished. Nasser, however, having never truly recovered from the loss of Syria, and now embarrassed by his relations with the U.S. after they sold missiles to Israel, needed a podium to stand on to reaffirm his legitimacy as the key figure in the Arab world; his podium of choice was the Yemen war.

Because of the severity of the superpower confrontation during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October of 1962, the United States initial attempt to bring about a

¹⁵² Director of Intelligence and Research Hilsman memo to Rusk, Washington, September 13, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 92.

resolution to the Yemen War was put on the backburner.¹⁵³ By April 1963, however, it appeared that a termination of the conflict was coming in the near future. In a meeting between Badeau and Nasser in Cairo on April 3, the terms of agreement for an Egyptian withdrawal were discussed. Nasser had agreed to stop his attacks and begin to withdraw his troops as soon as Saudi Arabia ceased all attempts to support the overthrown royalist government.¹⁵⁴

Ten days later, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker had “obtained cooperation of both [Saudi Arabian Government] and UAR [Government] in disengagement arrangement.”¹⁵⁵ Although both sides struggled to keep up their end of the bargain, it appeared as if a de-escalation of the conflict was imminent, as both sides had agreed on the terms of disengagement. In fact, on May 1, 1963, Robert Kennedy believed that “...Nasser [is] probably so anxious to get some troops out of Yemen and up to Sinai that we doubt he’ll bomb Saudis again...[there is a] good chance Nasser may announce some troop withdrawals shortly...”¹⁵⁶

Robert Kennedy was terribly mistaken. Three months later, practically nothing had changed. According to Kennedy, moreover, the blame landed squarely on Nasser and the UAR. On October 19, 1963, Kennedy sent a livid message to be delivered orally to Nasser. The message read:

“In the spirit of frank exchange which I believe we have both come to value, I must tell you of my own personal concern over the UAR’s failure to date to carry out its part of the Yemen disengagement agreement. I think it is fair to say that the Saudis are carrying out their end of the bargain. Indeed I gather the UAR shared the view of our own intelligence that arms supply over

¹⁵³ Little in *Kennedy’s Quest for Peace*, 169.

¹⁵⁴ Telegram from the Embassy in the UAR to State, Cairo, April 3, 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 447.

¹⁵⁵ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the UAR, Washington, April 13, 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 464.

¹⁵⁶ Memorandum from Komer to Bundy, Washington, May 1, 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 508.

the border has been almost if not entirely cut off. We are confident that the UKG and the SAG are honoring their assurances to us that they are not aiding the Royalists... On the other hand, the UAR has not made phased withdrawals on a scale consistent with our understanding of the spirit of the agreement... This issue is inevitably complicating, not least in the Congress, my own effort to carry forward our policy of friendly collaboration in areas of mutual interest with the UAR."¹⁵⁷

Why was it that Nasser refused or was unable to cooperate with United States mediation? The answer can be traced back to the Hawk missile sale. When the United States decided to provide Israel with arms, one of two things – or perhaps both – may have happened. First, as discussed, this decision signaled to Nasser that the U.S. was not a neutral player in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although the Yemen War was relatively removed from the Arab-Israeli conflict itself, the Arab-Israeli conflict was so instrumental within the intra-Arab rivalries that it demonstrated to Nasser that the U.S. should not, in any way, influence the foreign policy of the UAR. Thus, when asked to disengage, Nasser was faced with a dilemma. If he removed all his troops from Yemen, his image as the leader of the radical Arab camp would have taken another devastating blow; although, he would salvage his relationship with the United States.¹⁵⁸ As Parker Hart's oral history interview demonstrates, however, Nasser's continued desire for Arab leadership was of paramount importance to him. Moreover, the U.S., regrettably, had just indicated to Nasser through the Hawk missile sale that it was not worthwhile for the UAR to continue building this diplomatic relationship. That is, although I do not believe the U.S. had any intention of indicating this sentiment to Egypt, Nasser, nevertheless, interpreted the Hawk missile sale to mean that continued friendship with the U.S. too seriously jeopardized his quest for Arab leadership. Nasser's apparent acquiescence to

¹⁵⁷ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the UAR, Washington, October 19, 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 752.

¹⁵⁸ Gazit, *President Kennedy's Policy toward the Arab States and Israel*, 26.

United States' mediation may simply have been a façade or necessity in order to continue to receive United States' economic aid.

On the other hand, Kennedy had also been warned that the Hawk missile sale might have cost Nasser the control over his army. That is, the Hawk missile sale convinced the Egyptian army that the United States was not to be trusted and that Nasser's cooperation with the United States should be dismissed. If this were the case, it is highly possible that Nasser's agreements to disengage in principle may actually have carried no water, as he had lost control over the operations of his military. While Nasser may have actually desired to remove his troops from Yemen, he may have had no legitimate control over what his army would do.

Unfortunately, the Yemen War would drag on throughout much of the 1960's, truly marking the end of the rapprochement period between the United States and the UAR. While scholars such as Bass argue that the Yemen War caused this failure of rapprochement, it is highly plausible that the war was a mere litmus test for the extent of the damages caused by the Hawk missile sale – the true reason behind the failure of rapprochement. Whether Nasser had lost faith in the U.S. or whether Nasser had lost control of his army is undeterminable. What is clear, however, is that Egyptian faith in the U.S. collapsed in the wake of the Hawk missile sale. Because of this loss of faith, the U.S. had practically no influence on the UAR throughout the Yemen War. Thus, the U.S. was utterly incapable of preventing the conflict from spiraling out of control, which brought the inevitable failure of rapprochement to fruition very quickly.

CHAPTER 5: AN ANALYSIS AND ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

As previously discussed, Phillips Talbot claimed that the “major thrust” of the State Department’s policy in the Middle East was to avoid the “polarization” of the area. To do this, the United States would need to create and sustain an effective balance of goodwill with the Arab world and the Israelis in the hopes that this would prevent either side from inviting Soviet influence and assistance into the region. In this light, the decision to provide Hawk missiles to Israel was flawed both in logic and in timing. Moreover, because alternative options were available to the Kennedy Administration, the sale of the Hawks to Israel must be viewed as a monumental mistake.

LOGIC AND TIMING

The Kennedy Administration made three serious mistakes in assessing the logic and timing of the decision to provide Israel with sophisticated weaponry. Principal among these mistakes was allowing domestic politics to be a factor in determining what decision would be made. While the testimonies of various members of the Kennedy Administration strongly suggest that the decision was heavily based on the promises of bolstered domestic political support in the upcoming congressional elections, military justifications to provide Israel with the weapon did, nevertheless exist. Just because the decision was militarily justified, however, does not mean it was the correct decision – or best decision – the U.S. could have made. Because domestic political support was part of the discussion, however, the angle the Kennedy Administration took on the dilemma was inherently tainted. It appears that the Kennedy Administration was looking for military justifications to support the decision so that it could benefit from boosted domestic political support in the upcoming congressional elections. If Kennedy had not looked for these domestic political benefits, he might have realized that many of the United States’

strategic objectives in the Middle East, such as preventing the polarization of the region into Cold War camps and starting an arms race, were jeopardized by the Hawk missile sale.

The second error in logic committed by the Kennedy Administration was overvaluing the relative insignificance of the military balance between the Israel and the Arab world – perhaps another consequence of seeking out domestic political benefits. As the aforementioned National Intelligence Estimate suggested, despite an apparent Israeli vulnerability to an air attack by the Egyptians, Israel, at least for the foreseeable future, was not likely to be confronted militarily by Egypt or the rest of the Arab world. Up through the summer of 1962, it appeared that Egypt – the most likely candidate for Arab aggression against Israel – had very little to no intention of starting hostilities between the two countries. Armin Meyer explained this point to McGeorge Bundy of the State Department in a letter written on July 2, 1962. Meyer wrote, “while retaining a deep bitterness against Israel which [the Arabs] regard as a deep injustice, the Arabs seem finally to be realizing that Israel is here to stay. In my view, Nasser’s appeal to us to put the issue “in the ice-box” is another way of saying that Israel is a fait accompli.”¹⁵⁹ In other words, despite their hatred for Israel, the Arab world, especially Egypt, understood the futility of reigniting military conflict with Israel for the foreseeable future.

Badeau corroborates Meyer’s view in his assessment of the UAR’s policy toward Israel. Badeau and his associates argued in August of 1962 that,

“It would seem logical that Nasser and his associates believe that Egypt cannot “win” in any generalized conflict. If, as we believe, it is this fear of an expanding war that is the primary factor inhibiting the regime from attacking Israel, it is a factor which would be unaffected by any shift in military strength among the Near East states themselves... In summary, our belief is that

¹⁵⁹ Meyer memo for Bundy, July 12, 1962, Box 427, NSF, JFKL.

Nasser's oft-repeated statement of the need to 'keep Israel in the icebox' is not a mere expression but indicates a comprehensive policy".¹⁶⁰

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate argued that a "reluctance to provoke great power reactions inhibits Israel's undertaking preventive war, while disunity among the Arab will convince them that military action against Israel would be futile."¹⁶¹ Thus, all of the evidence suggests that, regardless of the military balance of power, a conflict between Israel and the UAR or any other Arab neighbor was not expected to occur, primarily because of the likelihood of outside intervention of greater powers during the expansion of the conflict. Therefore, although Israel might have been vulnerable to a surprise air attack, the Kennedy Administration should have calculated that no conflict was likely to occur, regardless. Thus, the risk of polarizing the region, starting an arms race in the Middle East, and ruining the rapprochement effort with Nasser posed by selling Israel the Hawk missile, *should* have drastically outweighed the benefit of bolstering an insignificant Israeli vulnerability to a surprise air attack. Unfortunately, it did not.

The Kennedy administration's third mistake in logic was their half-hearted attempt to connect the Hawk missile sale to the most inflammatory subject of the entire Arab-Israeli conflict—the Palestinian refugee question. In the aforementioned conversation between the UAR ambassador Kamel and Talbot on July 28, 1962, Kamel emphasized the importance of keeping the Palestinian refugee question "in the refrigerator," and made it clear that the United States had the same obligation.¹⁶² This is

¹⁶⁰ Badeau airgram to Rusk, August 23, 1962, Box 407, NSF, JFKL.

¹⁶¹ National Intelligence Estimate Number 35-61, October 5, 1961, Box 427, JFKL.

¹⁶² Memcon: Talbot meeting with UAR Ambassador Kamal, July 28, 1962, NSF, Box 168a, President weekend reading, JFKL.

the exact same message Nasser had emphasized to JFK in his letter to Kennedy in June of 1962, augmenting the importance of this request. Despite these pleas, however, JFK would stray from this path.

According to Feldman, during the decision-making process on what to do about the Hawks, JFK stated, “ ‘well, if we make this major departure from American policy toward the Near East...if we’re going to give Israel the Hawks...let’s see what we can get from the Israelis.’ ” Kennedy continued “ ‘The State Department’s been asking a lot from the Israelis that they won’t give us...they want to make sure the Israelis will settle the refugee problem....so let’s see what we can do about that.’ ”¹⁶³ Thus, JFK sent Feldman to Israel not only to inform Israel of the United States’ willingness to provide them with Hawk missiles, but also to see what concessions the United States could extract from the Israeli government in return for such an offer.¹⁶⁴ The problem with Feldman’s approach to his mission, however, was that he did not frame the United States’ offer in terms of being “quid-pro-quo.” That is, Feldman framed the Israeli acquisition of the Hawks as being independent of Israel’s compliance with the Joseph Johnson plan to resolve the Palestinian refugee issue. Rather, JFK, Feldman, and others in the administration, hoped that because the Hawk missile offer was so groundbreaking, the offer alone would stimulate Israeli cooperation and a softening on the refugee problem.

Once again, the enticement of boosted domestic political support might have influenced JFK in how he handled the connection of these two items. In response to Feldman’s suggestion that “if we could tie in the Hawk [to the refugee plan], it might work,” Kennedy responded, “it might be stillborn if we have word out of a big

¹⁶³ Myer Feldman OH, July 29, Washington, D.C., 1967, JFKL, 534-535.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

repatriation. People would stir up because of elections. We should find out what Israel will do.”¹⁶⁵ Instead of playing hardball and adopting a quid-pro-quo strategy of offering the Hawks in return for Israel’s acceptance of the Johnson plan, as the State Department recommended, Kennedy balked.¹⁶⁶ While it is possible that Kennedy did not connect the two items because he feared Israel would never accept the deal and would thus remain vulnerable to an Egyptian attack, the evidence suggests that he would not tether the two items because he was afraid of political repercussions of the failure of this strategy. Regardless of the true reasoning, with JFK’s permission, Feldman went to Israel and said the following to the Israeli government: “now, we’re giving you the Hawks...let me tell you what we think you ought to do also.”¹⁶⁷ Feldman’s diction indicates that the United States did indeed choose *not* to make the Hawks dependent on Israeli acquiescence to the Johnson plan. Instead, Feldman simply suggested what the Israelis “ought” to do in return for the Hawks. This approach was destined to fail.

Although Israel agreed in principle to consider the solutions put forward in the plan as long as certain conditions were agreed to by Nasser, the nature of the United States’ proposition on the Hawks gave Israel very little incentive to cooperate with the United States on the Johnson plan.¹⁶⁸ In the words of Talbot, the plan called for the resettlement of an undetermined – albeit very large – amount of Palestinian refugees in Israel, which “[ran] counter to [David] Ben-Gurion’s philosophy” of not wanting a “two-nation state.”¹⁶⁹ Clearly, the plan ran in direct contradiction to Israel’s national security

¹⁶⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in the UAR to the Department of State, Cairo, August 24, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVIII, 74.

¹⁶⁶ Ben-Zvi, *JFK and The Politics of Arms Sales to Israel*, 72.

¹⁶⁷ Myer Feldman OH, July 29, 1967, JFKL, 536.

¹⁶⁸ Telegram from Embassy in Israel to State, Tel Aviv, August 19, 1962, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Volume XVII, 65.

¹⁶⁹ Phillips Talbot OH, August 13, 1970, JFKL, 23.

interests. Moreover, Israel knew that, regardless of their acquiescence on the terms of the Johnson plan, it would be receiving the Hawks.

Unsurprisingly, the Israelis ultimately rejected the Johnson Plan. According to Talbot, “the minute that Israel said no, all of the Arab states redoubled the vigor of the decibel rate of their negatives.” Later Talbot laments, “I’ve continued to believe that was [a] crucial moment and that the failure to solve or get a process going on Arab refugees at that point lost an opportunity to begin to take some of the heat out of the situation in the area.”¹⁷⁰ The resulting situation from this ambiguous linkage of the Hawk missile sale to the Johnson plan was horrible for the United States. Not only had the Kennedy Administration provoked the anger of the Arab world by providing Israel with sophisticated weaponry for the first time, but it also had sloppily tied in an attempt to resolve the Palestinian refugee question when it was doomed to fail. Thus, by bringing the Palestinian question out of the “ice-box,” the Kennedy Administration not only further incited the Arab world, but also lessened the future likelihood of reaching an agreement on the Palestinian refugee question.

To truly say that the decision to sell the Hawk missiles to Israel was a mistake, however, it is necessary to show that better, alternative options were available to the Kennedy Administration. In his oral history interview Komer noted, “at any rate, [the Hawk missile sale] was a major issue. We presented it on the grounds that there was no other realistic alternative if Israel was to maintain an adequate superiority.”¹⁷¹

Maintaining an adequate superiority, however, should not have been so high up on the

¹⁷⁰ Phillips Talbot OH, August 13, 1970, JFKL, 25.

¹⁷¹ Robert Komer OH, December 22, 1969, JFKL, 81.

United States' agenda. In reality, two superior alternatives were available, yet forsaken by the Kennedy Administration.

OPTION 1: BIDE TIME, AVOID ELECTIONS, STRENGTHEN RELATIONS

To reiterate, the effective implementation of the Hawk missiles in Israel could not have commenced until 1966. With this knowledge, it is very reasonable to argue that the Kennedy Administration could have simply bided their time in making their decision. At the earliest, the decision should have been postponed until well after the congressional elections of 1962. Doing so would have provided a variety of benefits. Principal among these benefits would have been the Kennedy Administration's ability to deflect any accusations that the Hawk missile sale was influenced by pressure from the Israel lobby on domestic politics. A second benefit would have been the additional time the U.S. would have had to continue improving its relation with the UAR. As the evidence demonstrates, the United States' image in the minds of the UAR and the greater Arab world had reached an all time high in the summer of 1962. While a military imbalance may indeed have existed, all evidence suggests that no military conflict between Israel and any Arab country was imminent. Because, in reality, the U.S. did not need to worry about an impending conflict, it should have used more time to continue to build clout and trust throughout the Arab world and UAR specifically.

Unless domestic political support was the true aim of the decision to sell the Hawk missiles when they were sold – as appears to be the case – for all the above reasons, the United States should have postponed making a decision to provide Israel with the Hawk missile. Delaying the sale of the Hawk missile would not only have acted as a shield against Arab outcries of the influence of the Israel lobby in the American

government, but also provided the U.S. government with more time to court Nasser, the UAR and the greater Arab world. In the long run, this strategy would have been beneficial for Israel and also kept the Soviets out of the Middle East.

OPTION 2: QUID-PRO-QUO

A second viable option for the United States would have been to firmly tether the sale of the Hawk missile to the Israeli acquiescence on the Joseph Johnson refugee plan. This high-risk high-reward plan of action was actually the one recommended by the State Department.¹⁷² As discussed earlier, however, JFK's sensitivity to the domestic political consequences of this course of action killed this idea. This alternative would have solved a few problems that the United States ran into immediately after the knowledge of the sale became widespread. First, it would have put the ball in Israel's court. That is, if Israel was unwilling to make this agreement of the Hawks for the Johnson plan, the United States, at the least, would have saved face on the domestic political front, as they still had offered Israel the missiles. Even better, if Israel had agreed to the deal, the United States would have corrected the military imbalance between Israel and the UAR, while simultaneously resolving the most complicated and deleterious issue within the Arab-Israeli conflict.

CHAPTER 6: A SUMMARY

I have argued in this examination that, for a variety of reasons, the United States' decision to sell Israel the Hawk missiles in 1962 was a serious foreign policy miscalculation by the Kennedy Administration. Not only was the sale unnecessary in

¹⁷² Rusk memo to JFK, August 7, 1962, Box 427, NSF, Israel, 1961-1963, JFKL.

regards to its military justifications, but the sale was also influenced by elements that can obscure the development of sound foreign policy – domestic politics. Most unfortunately, however, the sale also ruined the United States’ ability to continue its rapprochement effort with Nasser and the UAR, a country whose leadership and prestige in the area could have provided the United States with the ability to influence the development of the region in the ways that best suited the United States’ interests. It is important to realize, however, that this paper does not argue that the Hawk missile sale was directly responsible for the subsequent developments in the Middle East and specifically in the Arab-Israeli conflict, such as the 1967 War between Israel and its Arab neighbors. To arrive at such a drastic conclusion would be to disregard the numerous factors that shaped the development of the conflict and would be over simplifying the history of the region. Rather, the point of this examination is to highlight a specific political decision and elucidate how it may have altered the United States’ ability to positively influence the manner in which relationships in the Middle East would progress.

When looking at the Middle East today, one cannot deny that enormous changes have occurred throughout the region since 1962. The Cold War has ended; Israel has made peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan; and the United States’ military relationship with Israel is now practically unrivaled by any other two nations. At the same time, however, when looking at the nature of the conflicts that continue to plague the region, in many ways the United States is still challenged by situations similar to those in 1962. The Arab world – as evident by the “Arab Spring” – is rife with upheaval and a desire to modernize; and just as it did under Nasser, Egypt has spearheaded this movement, which began with the Egyptian uprising in 2011. A depleted Egyptian economy, moreover,

continues to provide a major opportunity for the United States to stay involved in the development of Egypt's modernization. What's more, while peace treaties between Israel and Jordan have been signed, the Arab-Israeli conflict persists, primarily as a result of the continued issues between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. As evident by Barack Obama's most recent visit to Israel in March 2013, moreover, the United States can continue to play a central role in mediating a resolution to these interconnected crises. So, although it is true that much has changed in the Middle East since 1962, from the United States' perspective, many of the issues have remained unchanged and unresolved. Thus, the United States still has the opportunity to learn from and reflect on its previous diplomatic mistakes so that it can produce a more sound policy for the region in the future. The Hawk missile sale had an impact on the United States' relationship with Egypt in particular, and in the Arab world in general; it is important to use this finding to evaluate and determine how the United States should understand its role in the Middle East today, specifically in regards to the Arab-Israeli conflict. I will not argue for the development of any specific policy towards Israel or the Arab world, but will rather simply suggest important realities the United States must consider when developing its foreign policies.

To begin, for simplicity sake, I have used the term "Arab world" repeatedly throughout this essay. The term, however, is rather misleading, as the extreme diversity of the Arab peoples of the world, and the geographic distances that separate them, render the term "Arab world" rather meaningless. At the same time, however, the United States must realize that, if there is one common denominator that unites the Arab states of the world, especially those in the Middle East, it is a general opposition to the State of

Israel.¹⁷³ While the degree of this opposition varies dramatically within this group, a universal disapproval of Israel persists. It is essential for the U.S. government to approach the Arab-Israeli conflict with this understanding going forward, as Kennedy clearly did not. When Kennedy approved the Hawk missile sale, his justification to the entire Arab world was that the sale was made in order to correct a military imbalance between Israel and Egypt. What Kennedy did not fully realize, is that he was not dealing with an “Egyptian-Israeli conflict,” but rather, an “Arab-Israeli conflict,” in which many of the Arab states were not receiving arms from either the U.S. or the Soviets. Thus, it is likely that these Arab countries might not have cared about the military balance between Israel and Egypt. In other words, had Egypt been the only Arab country involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict, perhaps the sale may have been more acceptable to Egypt; however, Egypt and Nasser were a part of a complex and rivalry filled Arab world, meaning Nasser’s response was subject to the reactions of the entire “Arab world,” which, as discussed, were extremely negative. For this reason, Nasser had no choice but to part ways with the U.S., as doing otherwise would have required him to give up his claim to Arab leadership. Evidenced by the Arab Spring, intense political competition between Arab states and within Arab states still exists today. Thus, when developing its policies on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the United States must be cognizant of this reality and consider how its policies will affect not only the relationship between the U.S. and any one particular Arab country, but also how its policies may affect the relationships of the Arab states to each other. Had the Kennedy Administration approached its political decisions with this understanding, perhaps it would have reconsidered selling the Hawk

¹⁷³ Badeau, *The American Approach to The Middle East*, 52.

missiles to Israel, as it would have realized that this decision left Nasser and the UAR with no other alternative but to part ways with the U.S.

One could make the argument that JFK did nothing wrong when he considered domestic political gains in making his decision to sell the Hawks. After all, foreign policy, to some extent, should be dictated by what the “people” want. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, however, cautions us against this method of thinking. He wrote, “that Israel is not an American satellite is a point many Arabs unfortunately miss. But the opposite is true as well: The United States is not an Israeli satellite, a point that Americans sometimes miss. The United States shares important interests with Israel, but Israeli and American interests are not identical.”¹⁷⁴ The desire to win votes, however, apparently prompted Kennedy to ignore this reality. Unfortunately, as the aforementioned reactions from around the Arab world demonstrate, Kennedy’s decision cost the United States significant clout in the Arab world. While there is much to discuss about the effects and role of the Israel lobby in American politics, I will simply declare that, in formulating foreign policy decisions, the U.S. must listen to the Israel lobby with great caution, as Israel’s interests often do not align with those of the United States. More importantly, because these interests do not align, the Israel lobby may – without realizing it – actually be pushing for policies that are not even in the best interest of Israel. It is on this point that I will conclude.

Ultimately, the Arab-Israeli conflict will only be resolved when the primary agents in the conflict are ready to agree to terms. Thus, the ultimate onus of responsibility to find a resolution falls on Israel and its Arab neighbors, particularly the Palestinians. At the same time, I do not believe it is possible for Israel to create a

¹⁷⁴ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 381.

scenario in which the conflict could be resolved, meaning the United States *must* be involved in producing the conditions necessary where the main actors can reach an agreement to end hostilities. Thus, I believe that the United States' relationship with the Arab world is as important, if not more important, than its relationship with Israel, as the Arab world must trust the United States to be a neutral mediator. For this reason, what is actually in the best interest of Israel, if it truly desires to resolve the conflict, is for the United States to improve its relationship with the Arab world, which is difficult to do when the United States so strongly supports its common opponent. While returning to the neutral stance it had prior to the Hawk missile sale in 1962 may not be possible for the United States, it is imperative that the U.S. develop a more tempered policy in its commitment to Israel, as ultimately, this will benefit not just the United States, but Israel as well. While Kennedy showed signs of understanding this reality during his conversation with Golda Meir, it appears he did not grasp the extent of its significance. The damaging ramifications of the Hawk missile sale in 1962 on the United States' image in the Arab world demonstrate the importance of this truth.

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