

FROM NEW FRONTIERSMAN TO COLD WARRIOR:
JOHN F. KENNEDY'S FAILED RAPPROCHEMENT WITH GAMAL ABDEL
NASSER AND ARAB NATIONALISM

by

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To the countless American diplomats and operatives who dedicated their lives to
pursuing peace in the Middle East.

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ABSTRACT

As John F. Kennedy ascended to the Presidency of the United States, he pledged to forge a new era in American foreign policy, which he termed the “New Frontier.” To this end, Kennedy opened a correspondence with the leader of Arab Nationalism, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, that persisted throughout Kennedy’s presidency. Initially, this strategy proved productive for American policy-makers, as the two leaders gained a better appreciation for the interests and motivations of one another; however, a proxy war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in Yemen strained the rapprochement. Ultimately, the tension this conflict created persuaded Kennedy to revert his course from that of a New Frontiersman to a Cold Warrior. This thesis explores the forces, internal and external, that instigated Kennedy’s policy shift.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In January 1961, following a narrow victory in the presidential election the previous fall, newly elected President John Fitzgerald Kennedy set out to change the way the United States managed international relations, particularly with the Third World. Kennedy and his advisors, self-proclaimed “New Frontiersmen,” attempted to overcome the Cold War dogmas of previous administrations and endeavored to view the world in a more complex manner—rejecting the policy of placing countries of all regions into the categories of Communist or anti-Communist. In contrast to his predecessor, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Kennedy did not place these Cold War labels on Middle Eastern nations without first attempting to understand their national interests, even when some of those interests contradicted those of the United States. To bring his vision to fruition, Kennedy engaged in personal correspondence with heads of state, including Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.¹

This thesis recognizes the personal correspondence between Kennedy and Nasser as central to the American President’s Middle East policy. Nasser was the leader of the Arab Nationalist movement² that arose in the Middle East during the 1950s with the goal

¹ Egypt was often termed the United Arab Republic (UAR) during this period. The UAR was a union consisting of the states of Egypt and Syria under the leadership of Nasser. It was a key piece of Nasser’s strategy to expand Arab Nationalism throughout the Middle East. The union lasted from 1958 to 1961, ending with Syria’s secession to be discussed later.

²Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Middle East became largely colonized and fell under the influence of foreign powers. In some cases, individuals that held alliances with foreign governments were installed as leaders of Arab nations. As a

of creating Arab unity, both politically and culturally, and giving the Arabs more power and prestige. Through a series of letters and messages, Kennedy and Nasser attempted to gain a better personal understanding of each other, focusing especially regarding their respective national interests. This correspondence initially promoted stable relations between the two nations by keeping the Arab-Israeli dispute quiet and limiting the Soviet Union's influence in the region. However, near the end of Kennedy's presidency, Nasser's involvement in a proxy war in Yemen against Saudi Arabia severely strained the relationship. Kennedy was forced to choose between his initial New Frontier strategy of supporting Arab Nationalism or backing the conventional allies of the United States, the royalist regimes in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Ultimately, as the conflict in Yemen progressed, Kennedy favored a more traditional approach to the Middle East and supported the royalists³ in the region. Kennedy's rapprochement with Nasser failed to achieve his initial goal of charting a New Frontier in the Middle East. This thesis examines the forces that persuaded Kennedy to alter this course in the Middle East. Moreover, I will argue that the lobbying of American allies, the uncooperative and non-aligned nature of Nasser, and the proxy war in Yemen, its outbreak and the subsequent failure of the disengagement process, combined to alter Kennedy's position on Arab Nationalism.

result, some Arabs felt that they were losing their identity and prestige. In this void, Arab Nationalists such as Nasser revolted against these leaders to form a new Arab unity that would increase Arab prestige on the world stage and solidify the Arab identity, culturally and politically.

³ Nations led by a monarch and that are US allies, specifically Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

To understand Kennedy's correspondence with Nasser and the President's eventual decision to abandon his policy of engagement with Arab Nationalism, it is first necessary to review the historiography of President Kennedy's foreign policy, as well as the central issues facing the Middle East in the early 1960s. Historians analyzing Kennedy's strategy in this region focus on the decision to attempt a rapprochement with Nasser, the sale of HAWK surface-to-air missiles to Israel, and the impact of the proxy war in Yemen in altering Kennedy's approach to Arab Nationalism and Nasser. Based on their analyses of these key events, historians tend to render a judgment on whether the correspondence with Nasser moved the region toward peace or was an idealistic endeavor that never possessed a real hope of success. Furthermore, there is broad agreement among historians that these are the key events of the Kennedy Administration's affairs in the Middle East. What this thesis attempts to do is fill a gap in the scholarship related to the vectors, both internal and external, that influenced Kennedy to reluctantly abandon the New Frontier in the Arab World.

Shortly after entering office, Kennedy embarked on a correspondence with Nasser. Historian Douglas Little points out that the US President believed that a reengagement with Nasser, reinforced by American food and economic aid, could create a path toward peace in the Arab-Israeli dispute⁴ and keep the UAR safe from the

⁴Following World War II, the British government, in 1948, renounced its mandate in the Palestinian territory on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. This led to a war between Arab nations and the Israelis that ended in the creation of the Jewish state of Israel on the former land of the Palestinians. Since this time, three wars have been fought over the land in 1956, 1967, and 1973. The Arab-Israeli conflict persists to this day.

Communist influence of the Soviet Union.⁵ This policy differed from Kennedy's predecessor. As historians Michael Bishku and James Giglio note, Kennedy, unlike Eisenhower, contended that Arab Nationalists such as Nasser were pragmatic leaders focused on regional problems and challenges within their own countries, not ideologues determined to spread their dogma to other parts of the world.⁶ Kennedy also believed that the rise of Arab Nationalism was inescapable and it would be wise for the United States to support it from the beginning in the hopes that this early support might translate to better future relations.⁷ However, Kennedy's willingness to hold personal discussions with, and provide generous aid to, Nasser left many US allies in the Middle East and Europe disappointed with the American policy. As historian Warren Bass notes, conservative Arabs and the Israelis viewed Nasser as their enemy and Kennedy's attempt to appease the Egyptian leader baffled them.⁸ In addition to the Israelis, Jordanians, and Saudis, the British viewed Kennedy's relationship with Nasser unfavorably. As historian W. Taylor Fain asserts, the British government continued to harbor deep resentment toward Nasser for the Suez Crisis and felt that Nasser posed a serious threat to Her Majesty's Government's interests in the region.⁹ Nevertheless, many scholars contend

⁵ Douglas Little, "The New Frontier on the Nile: JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism," *Journal of American History* 75, no. 2 (September 1988): 504.

⁶ Michael B. Bishku, "The Kennedy Administration, the UN and the Yemeni Civil War," *Middle East Policy* 1, no. 4 (November 1992): 119; James Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 246.

⁷ Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on US Middle East Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 105.

⁸ Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the US-Israel Alliance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 66.

⁹ W. Taylor Fain, "John F. Kennedy and Harold Macmillan: Managing the 'Special Relationship' in the Persian Gulf Region, 1961-1963," *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 4 (October 2002): 115.

that Kennedy's rapprochement with Nasser initially showed significant promise and was a welcome departure from previous conceptions of the region as simply a pawn in the Cold War.¹⁰

Shortly after Kennedy's overture to Nasser began in early 1961, a coup in Syria triggered their secession from the UAR. The union of the two nations had lasted only three years. Syria's abrupt exit, and the subsequent diminution of Nasser's status in the region, led many in the Kennedy Administration to assume that the Egyptian leader would be more disposed to focus on domestic matters instead of being outspoken in foreign affairs. Yet, as Bass asserts, Nasser viewed the secession as an opportunity to show his resilience, which likely drove him to war in Yemen shortly thereafter.¹¹

However, in a move that political scientist Fawaz Gerges views favorably, the Kennedy Administration decided not to capitalize on Nasser's moment of disgrace, which earned America favor in Nasser's eyes at a critical moment in the Egyptian President's tenure.¹²

Events in Israel also threatened to cause ripples in the US-UAR relationship as the Kennedy Administration made the unprecedented decision to sell HAWK surface-to-air missiles to Israel in 1962. This decision serves as a source of debate among scholars. Law professor and national security scholar, Zachary Goldman, argues that the motivating goal in selling the missiles to Israel was to decrease the likelihood of an Israeli strike against Egypt's air combat infrastructure. Goldman further adds that Kennedy believed

¹⁰ Little, "New Frontier on the Nile," 510; Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine*, 105; Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 65-66.

¹¹ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 80.

¹² Fawaz A. Gerges, "The Kennedy Administration and the Egyptian-Saudi Conflict in Yemen: Co-opting Arab Nationalism," *Middle East Journal* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 296.

that creating a closer bond with Israel would assuage its anxieties and reduce regional tensions resulting from fears of an Arab attack on the Jewish state.¹³ In contrast to Goldman, Little asserts that the threat of Israel's pursuit of a nuclear weapon motivated Kennedy to assent to the sale of the HAWKs.¹⁴ As Little's argument goes, if Israel possessed more well-equipped conventional weapons, it might feel more secure and, in turn, less likely to resort to drastic measures, such as nuclear weapons, to protect itself in the future. Moreover, Little argues that Kennedy hoped the Israelis would become more receptive to an agreement on Palestinian refugee resettlement if the United States supplied the Jewish state with defensive missiles and provided it with security guarantees.¹⁵ Scholars further praise Kennedy's diplomacy in keeping Nasser informed of the HAWK sale throughout the process. Historians Philip Muehlenbeck and Giglio both stress that this advanced notice kept the Arab Nationalist leader from denouncing the Americans and Israelis following the transaction and prevented mass demonstrations on Egyptian streets.¹⁶

Events in Yemen, which began in the latter part of 1962 and continued through the end of Kennedy's presidency, strained the administration's policy of rapprochement

¹³ Zachary K. Goldman, "Ties that Bind: John F. Kennedy and the Foundations of the American-Israeli Alliance," *Cold War History* 9, no. 1 (February 2009): 27. See also *ibid.*, 46.

¹⁴ Douglas Little, "The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957-1968," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 4 (November 1993): 563, 580.

¹⁵ Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 96.

¹⁶ Philip E. Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy's Courting of African Nationalist Leaders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 128; Giglio, *Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 247.

with Nasser and Arab Nationalism. In October 1962, a coup in Yemen that overthrew the royalist government of the Imamate led to a proxy war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia.¹⁷ The Saudis worried that if they allowed the monarchy in Yemen to be overthrown, a domino effect could ensue that might lead to pro-Nasser forces threatening their own existence as a monarchy; therefore, the Saudis provided support to the royalists within Yemen. Nasser, seeing the public uprising against the monarchy in Yemen as an advancement of Arab Nationalism, sent an expeditionary force there in solidarity with the new republican regime.¹⁸ This proxy placed the Kennedy Administration in an untenable situation. On one hand, the rapprochement with Nasser acted as a key pillar in the President's Middle East strategy and represented the New Frontier ideology that Kennedy hoped to execute during his presidency. On the other hand, the Saudis were the traditional allies of the United States, allies who importantly controlled much of the flow of oil to the United States. As such, Kennedy faced a seemingly binary choice between remaining a supporter of Nasser and Arab Nationalism or taking a more conventional approach and supporting the interests of the royalist regime in Saudi Arabia.

Initially, Kennedy seemed to choose Nasser. As Giglio points out, Kennedy believed that the coup in Yemen resulted from the royalist government's refusal to implement reforms within their country; therefore, Kennedy encouraged the monarchies in Saudi Arabia and Jordan to implement social reforms to prevent a coup in their home nations. Furthermore, in an attempt to salvage his relationship with Nasser, Kennedy

¹⁷ Gerges, "Kennedy Administration and the Egyptian-Saudi Conflict in Yemen," 292-293.

¹⁸ Giglio, *Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 247.

granted recognition to the Yemen Arab Republic against the expressed wishes of the traditional governments in the region.¹⁹ However, despite initial hopes that this show of support might persuade Nasser to curtail his aggression in Yemen, hostilities only continued to escalate after Kennedy's recognition.²⁰ In response, the US President attempted to mediate a disengagement agreement through the United Nations to end the war and place the administration's Middle East policy back on the right track. The withdrawal pact offered security guarantees to the Saudis from the Americans in exchange for their cessation of support to the royalists in Yemen. Further, the armistice threatened Egyptian economic aid if Nasser failed to withdraw his forces from Yemen.²¹ Unfortunately, neither Nasser nor the Saudi's abided by the terms of the agreement and the conflict continued.

At this point, a shift occurred in Kennedy's opinion regarding Egypt. As Little asserts, by autumn 1963, Kennedy determined that the failure of the peace process in Yemen rested upon Nasser and not the Saudis.²² Accordingly, by the end of Kennedy's presidency, the rapprochement with Nasser was in a downward spiral with little hope of recovering, largely due to Kennedy's belief that Nasser was prolonging the conflict in Yemen.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gerges, "Kennedy Administration and the Egyptian-Saudi Conflict in Yemen," 306-7.

²¹ 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 G. Paterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 175.

²² Little, *American Orientalism*, 185.

The use of food aid as a bargaining chip to keep Nasser focused on Egypt and not on foreign affairs is another topic of debate in the literature. To court Nasser, Kennedy provided \$500 million in various forms of assistance to the UAR, compared to \$240 million combined by his two predecessors.²³ Historian Jesse Ferris argues that the aid, and the negotiations surrounding it, assisted the Kennedy Administration in influencing Nasser's behavior, but only if it did not appear directly connected to the Egyptian leader's actions. As such, veiled threats of withholding aid in exchange for influence over Nasser proved unproductive. Ferris criticizes Kennedy's decision to sign a multi-year aid agreement at the outset of the Yemeni conflict, thereby surrendering leverage that the United States could have employed to pursue peace.²⁴ Political scientist William Burns concurs with Ferris' judgment of the multi-year agreement. Burns adds that, ultimately, regardless of how important the aid was to the Egyptian economy, Nasser remained unwilling to allow US aid to dictate his decisions, particularly in Yemen.²⁵ It was this defiance in the face of pressure from the United States that contributed to the fading of relations between the two nations.

Overall, historians seemingly agree on the result of Kennedy's attempted reconciliation with Nasser. The personal relationship between the two leaders proved inadequate in closing the gap between their competing strategic interests. Gerges notes of the Kennedy-Nasser relationship, "The contradictions and dialects inherent in US-

²³ Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 86.

²⁴ Jess Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 103-104, 108.

²⁵ William J. Burns, *Economic Aid and American Policy Toward Egypt, 1955-1981* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 134, 147.

Egyptian relations were temporarily suspended, but were never structurally resolved.”²⁶

As diplomatic historian Tore T. Peterson points out, Nasser was willing to modify his positions on some minor issues to sustain his relationship with the American President but he was never committed to altering his opinion on issues he deeply valued, such as the spread of Arab Nationalism.²⁷ Along with Nasser’s unwillingness to modify many of his critical positions, the conflict in Yemen destabilized Kennedy’s efforts at peace, placing him at the center of a regional battle between a renewed nationalism and traditional royalists.

Therefore, the divergent interests of the United States and Egypt, along with the war in Yemen, coincided to derail Kennedy’s attempt at establishing improved relations with Nasser and supporting Arab Nationalism. The idealistic expectations of the administration proved untenable, yet Kennedy was successful in keeping the Arab-Israeli dispute largely under control, he did not permanently ostracize any critical allies, and he established a friendship with Nasser for most his presidency. Primarily, the inter-regional dispute of traditional regimes versus radical, nationalistic regimes left Kennedy in a struggle between his New Frontier and the support of America’s traditional allies. While Kennedy attempted to advance his support of nationalism by recognizing the Yemen Arab Republic, it proved insufficient to overcome the regional strife that led to the downfall of his policy.

²⁶ Gerges, “Kennedy Administration and the Egyptian-Saudi Conflict in Yemen,” 311.

²⁷ Tore T. Peterson, *The Decline of the Anglo-American Middle East, 1961-1969: A Willing Retreat* (Portland, United Kingdom: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), 22.

While there is broad agreement and considerable scholarship on many of the issues Kennedy faced in the Middle East, and specifically with Nasser and Arab Nationalism, what is not being discussed are the internal and external forces that moved Kennedy from supporting Arab Nationalism to abandoning it. Therefore, this thesis attempts to determine and analyze why Kennedy deserted his New Frontier ideology for a conventional foreign policy in the Middle East. This is an area of the scholarship that is underdeveloped, yet extremely important for understanding Kennedy's decision-making and leadership style. To determine the causes of this policy shift, this study relies on memoranda written by members of Kennedy's staff, letters exchanged between President Kennedy and President Nasser, and oral histories from key members of the Kennedy Administration. These sources offer an understanding of the factors that precipitated Kennedy's abandonment of his support for Arab Nationalism.

The second chapter of the thesis examines the Kennedy-Nasser correspondence. That section recognizes the successes achieved by the American President in pursuing this unconventional policy. Moreover, the second chapter charts the trajectory of the US-UAR relationship, which became increasingly friendly during the first half of the Kennedy Administration and then declined following the outset of the Yemeni conflict.

The third chapter analyzes the external vectors that encouraged Kennedy to abandon his rapprochement with Nasser and Arab Nationalism. These primarily include lobbying from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Kingdom. Additionally, the lengthy disengagement process also pushed Kennedy to make the decision.

The fourth section studies the internal factors that precipitated Kennedy's abandonment of the New Frontier in the Middle East. Specifically, the advocacy of the

National Security Council staffers influenced Kennedy. This chapter illuminates the power of proximity to the Oval Office for Presidential Advisors: those who controlled what documents the President viewed typically possessed the most influence on decision-making.

The conclusion chapter examines the findings of the thesis and suggests some possible avenues for future studies that could expand upon the discoveries in this thesis. Some of these include the “Bundy State Department,” the idea and feasibility of a New Frontier in the Middle East, and the prospect of a “Kennedy Doctrine” on foreign policy centered on personal correspondence and mutual understanding.

CHAPTER II

The Kennedy–Nasser Correspondence:
Success on the New Frontier through Personal Diplomacy

On January 20, 1961, President-Elect John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the youngest individual ever elected to serve as President of the United States, took the oath of office overlooking an enthusiastic crowd. In his nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention the previous fall, Kennedy had declared that, if elected, his administration planned to pioneer a “New Frontier” around the globe and beyond. Among other aims, this bold agenda endeavored to place peace above war and pursue solutions to human poverty.¹ After his inauguration, Kennedy attempted to put these ideas into action in the Middle East. In this pursuit, the American President engaged in a rapprochement with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser through personal correspondence.² Through this personal diplomacy, Kennedy fostered a relationship of

¹ Senator John F. Kennedy, acceptance speech, Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960, Los Angeles, CA, transcript, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum [hereafter JFKL], <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/AS08q5oYz0SFUZg9uOi4iw.aspx>.

² Other scholars who have written broadly about Kennedy’s Middle East policy include Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy’s Middle East and the Making of the US-Israel Alliance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); William J. Burns, *Economic Aid and American Policy Toward Egypt, 1955-1981* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985); Jesse Ferris, *Nasser’s Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); James Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, rev. ed. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006); 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 Paterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Philip Muehlenbeck, *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy’s Courting of African Nationalist Leaders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and April R. Summitt,

trust with the Egyptian President that prevented conflicts in the on-going Arab-Israeli dispute during Kennedy's term, a feat not achieved by his predecessors nor successors.

Nasser's importance stemmed from his leadership of the Arab Nationalism Movement in the mid-twentieth century, which promoted political and cultural unity among Arabs as well as renewed political strength on the global stage.³ For his outspoken support of Arab causes, Nasser became a heroic figure in the Arab World during a time of instability.⁴ As a result of Nasser's advocacy for Arab Nationalism, Egypt and Syria joined in a political union and formed the United Arab Republic.⁵ To accomplish his national economic development goals, Nasser practiced a policy of non-alignment and accepted aid from both sides of the Cold War, most notably in his pursuit of funding for the Aswan High Dam.⁶ The Egyptian leader's prominent role in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the non-aligned movement, made him critical to any US foreign policy strategy in the region.

John F. Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations: A History of American Foreign Policy in the 1960s (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 2008). Historians who have focused on Kennedy and Nasser include Douglas Little, "The New Frontier on the Nile: JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism," *Journal of American History* 75, no. 2 (November 1993): 563-85; and, George Arthur Ashur, "The Kennedy-Nasir Correspondence: A Policy of Accommodation" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1991).

³ After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Middle East largely fell under foreign influence. As a result, some Arabs feared they might lose their culture. Therefore, Arab Nationalists such as Nasser revolted against Western-installed leaders to reassert their power and ensure the vitality of their culture and society.

⁴ Thomas Oliphant and Curtis Wilkie, *The Road to Camelot: Inside JFK's Five-Year Campaign* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 87.

⁵ The United Arab Republic (UAR) formed in 1958 and ended with Syria's secession from the union in September of 1961. Nasser served as president of the UAR all three years. Both Egypt and the UAR serve as names for Nasser's nation throughout this chapter.

⁶ Amy L. Sayward, *The United Nations in International History* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 90.

Prior to Kennedy's election, American President Dwight D. Eisenhower had a troubled relationship with President Nasser. The Eisenhower Administration had initially hoped to befriend Nasser and encourage the Egyptian leader to support the West in the Cold War, regardless of Nasser's pledges of non-alignment.⁷ To forge a relationship with Egypt, Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, attempted to negotiate an arms deal with Nasser in the early 1950s. However, when the United States placed too many conditions upon military aid in Nasser's view, negotiations broke down in the autumn of 1954.⁸ Nasser provided Dulles another opportunity to complete a military deal in 1955 before Egypt turned to Czechoslovakia for arms, as Nasser preferred American weapons to the Czech's, this was due to logistical factors such as training and language. Yet, the US Secretary of State did not take Nasser's threat of accepting Czech military aid seriously. Therefore, when Dulles ignored Nasser's final appeals for negotiations, the Egyptian President accepted the Czech arms.⁹

Another area of discord between the Eisenhower Administration and Nasser was the funding of the Aswan High Dam. Nasser wanted this dam to control flooding, provide electricity, and create an irrigation system and jobs for Egypt. Moreover, the Dam promised to raise the standard of living in his nation and accomplish his vision of a

⁷ Summitt, *Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations*, 17.

⁸ James Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 51-53.

⁹ Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *The Cairo Documents: The Inside Story of Nasser and His Relationship with World Leaders, Rebels, and Statesmen* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 49-50.

“social revolution” in Egypt.¹⁰ The United States initially endeavored to help fund the Aswan Dam project, along with the British and the World Bank, to counter Soviet influence in the Middle East. However, following Nasser’s denunciation of Eisenhower’s anticommunist policies in the region, most notably the Baghdad Pact, Dulles withdrew the funding offer.¹¹ This episode demonstrated the pattern of the Eisenhower Administration’s use of the Middle East as a pawn in the Cold War, with the Soviet Union and the United States in competition to gain favor in the region.¹² Nasser, however, was aware from the beginning of negotiations that Americans hoped to leverage the Aswan grant money to influence Egyptian policy toward the Soviet Union, and Nasser resented and rebuffed this ploy.¹³ As a result, Nasser ordered the nationalization of the Suez Canal to demonstrate his resolve against the Western imperialists, as well as to garner foreign currency to assist in funding the Dam since the American aid offer had been withdrawn.¹⁴

However, this situation surprisingly resulted in improved American relations with Egypt. Following Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal, the British, French, and Israelis launched a coordinated military intervention to retake the canal. As a result, the

¹⁰ Summitt, *Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations*, 19; Amy L. S. Staples, “Seeing Diplomacy through Bankers’ Eyes: The World Bank, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Crisis, and the Aswan High Dam,” *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 410.

¹¹ Amy L. S. Staples, *The Birth of Development: How the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Administration, and World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945-1965* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006), 58, 60; Summitt, *Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations*, 20.

¹² Jeffrey J. Roberts, *The Origins of Conflict in Afghanistan* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 230.

¹³ Heikal, *Cairo Documents*, 63.

¹⁴ Staples, “Diplomacy through Bankers’ Eyes,” 415.

prestige of Britain and France disintegrated in the Middle East.¹⁵ Fearing that this anti-Western sentiment might instigate increased Soviet influence in the region, Eisenhower effectively pressured the invading forces to withdraw from the Canal.¹⁶ Eisenhower also ushered passage of a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the assault.¹⁷ Nasser appreciated the US efforts to support Egypt during the Suez Crisis that confirmed nationalization of the canal and led to the clearing of the canal.¹⁸

Therefore, while Nasser and Eisenhower agreed on some important issues, the relationship between their two countries was plagued with inconsistency and distrust. While Nasser showed gratitude for Eisenhower's support during the Suez Crisis, the American President's perceived use of Egypt as a pawn in the Cold War fostered tension between them. The administration's strategy, therefore, was not achieving results in moderating Nasser or stymying Soviet influence in the region.

As a result, Kennedy faced an uphill battle in regaining Nasser's trust for the United States. To add to the pressure, the press in Cairo intensified its attacks on the United States the year before Kennedy's ascendance to the presidency. Nasser heaped criticism on America for providing arms to Israel, which he claimed were then used to kill Arabs. At the same time, the Soviet Union filled the void created by the harsh feelings toward the West by continuing its support of economic development projects in

¹⁵ Peter Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 42.

¹⁶ Summitt, *Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations*, 22.

¹⁷ Sayward, *United Nations in International History*, 159-60.

¹⁸ Heikal, *Cairo Documents*, 189.

Egypt.¹⁹ To make matters worse, Kennedy's campaign promises in support of Israel fueled backlash in Cairo.²⁰ As a result, the young senator from Massachusetts, now president-elect, faced substantial challenges in his pursuit of a New Frontier in the Middle East as he prepared to take the oath of office. Yet, Kennedy understood that Nasser's leadership in the region and advocacy for Arab issues on the global stage made him crucial to any successful long-term Middle East strategy. Further, the American leader recognized that cooperation rather than confrontation with Nasser best promoted US interests in the region.²¹ Accordingly, the Kennedy Administration planned to reengage with the Egyptian leader.

To start the rapprochement between the United States and the United Arab Republic, the administration sought to create a personal relationship with President Nasser. The Kennedy Administration recognized that better relations with Nasser was key to preventing further Soviet influence in the Middle East.²² The opportunity to foster a personal relationship presented itself shortly after the new administration assumed control of the executive branch of the American government.

One month after Kennedy became president, Nasser sent the first letter in what became an extended correspondence between the two prominent leaders. Nasser's message focused primarily on the conflict in the Congo. Following Belgium's assent to

¹⁹ Jay Walz, "Cairo Intensifies Criticism of U.S.," *New York Times*, 9 January 1961, p. 11.

²⁰ Jay Walz, "Kennedy Policy Is Eyed in Cairo: U.A.R. Will Resist Any 'Pressure' on Issue of U.S. Aid to Israel," *New York Times*, 12 January 1961, p. 7.

²¹ Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire*, 44.

²² John S. Badeau, *The Middle East Remembered* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 1983), 176-79; Summitt, *Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations*, 61.

Congolese independence, an internal struggle for control of the government of the central African nation ensued. In a contradiction to his predecessor's policy, Kennedy supported a coalition government and advocated an increased role for the United Nations to restore order in the Congo.²³ Nasser wrote Kennedy and requested a full UN investigation into the events that had occurred in the African nation from its independence onward. The Egyptian President implored Kennedy to place the full force of the United States behind the United Nations' efforts related to the Congo, because Nasser believed that the UN possessed little power without US support. The UAR President noted that when the United States intervened in the Suez Crisis through the United Nations, those international efforts had proved successful. Yet, in other situations, such as the Palestinian refugee crisis, a lack of US involvement had contributed to those UN efforts being largely unfruitful.²⁴ Importantly, this letter represented an acknowledgement by Nasser that he needed to establish a rapport with the new American President. The Arab leader specifically mentioned his desire to speak directly with Kennedy about delicate situations that threatened their relationship. However, while this letter signified the first correspondence between Kennedy and Nasser on an important foreign policy issue, the Egyptian leader sent the same message to leaders in Britain and the Soviet Union. Therefore, this letter did not begin the personal correspondence between the two heads of

²³ Giglio, *Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 239-41; Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble*, 104.

²⁴ Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser to US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 20 February 1961, letter, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers [hereafter Kennedy Presidential Papers], National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-003, JFKL.

state, but it did initiate a dialogue.²⁵ Kennedy's response to Nasser recognized the US role in the United Nations and assured the Egyptian President of America's continued engagement in the international body. More importantly, however, Kennedy took the opportunity Nasser's letter had created to inform the Arab leader of his desire to increase "mutual understanding and cooperation" between their two countries.²⁶

Tensions between the US and the UAR again prompted correspondence between Nasser and Kennedy in April 1961. Following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, the Egyptian President joined with Yugoslavian President Josip Broz Tito and publicly promised aid to Cuba and denounced, without directly mentioning the United States, foreign intervention in the communist island.²⁷ In response to these comments, Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles encouraged Kennedy to write a letter to Nasser detailing the US position on Cuba. The secretary hoped a personal message from Kennedy might achieve results, because in Bowles' view, Nasser valued personal diplomacy, as demonstrated by his letter on the Congo earlier that year. The secretary recognized that a letter held little promise of changing Nasser's position on the Cuban issue, but the administration nevertheless needed to take the opportunity to promote further correspondence.²⁸ So, to foster understanding between the US and the UAR,

²⁵Chester Bowles, Under Secretary of State, to Kennedy, 27 February 1961, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-003, JFKL.

²⁶ Kennedy to Nasser, 1 March 1961, telegram, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-003, JFKL.

²⁷ Jay Walz, "Nasser and Tito Vow Aid to Cuba," *New York Times*, 20 April 1961, p. 13.

²⁸ Bowles to Kennedy, 27 April 1961, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-003, JFKL.

Kennedy authored a note to Nasser.²⁹ The substance of the American President's message is less important than the spirit with which he wrote it. Kennedy sent this letter in hopes of having a frank conversation with Nasser, instead of allowing miscommunication and media attacks to characterize their relationship. In a clear sign of his profound interest in engaging in the Middle East, the American President sought to keep the Arab Nationalist leader informed, regardless of fundamental disagreements.

Kennedy's efforts proved successful. In his response, Nasser recognized the American President's overture as a "happy sign" and joined in Kennedy's desire to promote understanding of their respective national interests. Further, the Egyptian President hoped the American leader's show of good faith indicated a renewed interest in improving relations between their countries.³⁰ Nasser's letter satisfied State Department Executive Secretary Lucius Battle who believed that the Egyptian President's tone, along with reports from Cairo about the mood in Egypt, suggested the UAR leader genuinely wished to improve relations with the United States. Crucially, Battle articulated that the State Department viewed the personal letters exchanged between Kennedy and Nasser as profitable and encouraged their continued use in US diplomacy with Egypt.³¹ Also during this period, the State Department began exploring the idea of a visit by Nasser to the

²⁹ Kennedy to Nasser, 3 May 1961, letter, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-003, JFKL.

³⁰ Nasser to Kennedy, 18 May 1961, letter, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-004, JFKL.

³¹ Lucius Battle, State Department Executive Secretary, to McGeorge Bundy, US National Security Advisor, 24 May 1961, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-004, JFKL.

United States. The department thought a visit might assist in establishing a “cordial personal relationship” between Kennedy and the Egyptian President.³²

Around the same time as Kennedy and Nasser’s exchange about Cuba, the State Department encouraged the American President to send letters to multiple Arab leaders, including Nasser, that would outline the Kennedy Administration’s goals in the Middle East. Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles suggested Kennedy inform the Arab heads of state of his desire to deal with the region in a fair and balanced manner. By doing this, the State Department hoped to assuage fears in the Middle East that Kennedy planned to follow the same stance as US President Harry Truman and heavily support Israel.³³ The President agreed with Bowles’ assessment. In the message sent to Arab leaders, Kennedy articulated his plan to provide food and national development aid to the region, support governments that strove for equality, and pursue an end to the Palestinian refugee crisis. Above all, Kennedy expressed his desire for mutual respect and understanding, as well as friendship, with each of the Arab nations.³⁴

The reaction to Kennedy’s letters satisfied the State Department; the American President’s personal approach impressed Middle East leaders. Further, the heads of state were encouraged that the United States might finally be somewhat supportive of the Arab

³² Bowles to Kennedy, 16 May 1961, memo, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963: vol. 17, Near East, 1961-1962* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1994), document 48 [hereafter *FRUS*].

³³ Bowles to Kennedy, 6 May 1961, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-004, JFKL.

³⁴ Kennedy to Nasser, 11 May 1961, telegram, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-004, JFKL.

World.³⁵ The messages considerably eased fears that all presidents from the Democratic Party inherently supported Israel to the detriment of the Arabs, a concern held by many because of Truman's policies.³⁶ Within the United Arab Republic specifically, Nasser confided to his advisors that the American President's letter showed promise. Further, the Egyptian President felt hopeful that the two leaders could make progress on the Palestinian issue, but only if Kennedy truly intended to be fair in his dealings on the Arab-Israeli dispute.³⁷

Nasser's formal response pleased Kennedy, as well as his advisors. In a lengthy letter, the President of the United Arab Republic thanked his American counterpart for initiating the correspondence. Nasser noted he had previously wished to send a similar letter to Kennedy but appreciated the US President taking the initiative to write first. Nasser recognized that their correspondence signaled a growing relationship. Further, the Egyptian leader mentioned that increased understanding between them boded well for the course of their diplomacy, regardless of their differing interests. Importantly, Nasser also encouraged the American President to evaluate his position on Arab Nationalism, as the Egyptian President believed Kennedy should be a supporter in the movement's early stages.³⁸ Nasser's response indicated to Kennedy's team an opportunity to expand upon

³⁵ "Kennedy Support Is Seen by Arabs: His Letters of Last Month Stir Belated Interest," *New York Times*, 16 June 1961, p. 11.

³⁶ Dana Adams Schmidt, "U.S. Said to Study a Visit by Nasser," *New York Times*, 26 June 1961, p. 2.

³⁷ Battle to Bundy, 26 May 1961, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 17*, document 54.

³⁸ Nasser to Kennedy, 22 August 1961, letter, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-005, JFKL.

the use of personal diplomacy in the future.³⁹ In a memo to National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Lucius Battle indicated he thought Nasser's letter represented a desire to continue personal discussions with Kennedy on many of the issues facing the Middle East.⁴⁰

Remarkably, correspondence that began against the ominous background of Kennedy's failed military endeavor in Cuba and Nasser's divisive public response, now evolved into a blossoming relationship between the two nations within less than six months. Regardless of the bleak prospects and competing interests, Kennedy consistently pursued a policy of rapprochement with Nasser, and the Egyptian President reciprocated that sentiment. This represented a major shift in the relationship between their countries. In the early stage of his presidency, Kennedy had successfully struggled to gain Nasser's trust. In return, Nasser recognized Kennedy's efforts and openly stated to the US Ambassador to Egypt, John Badeau, that the relationship between the two countries "showed steady improvement" in the early portion of Kennedy's tenure.⁴¹ In the following months, the relationship between the United States and Egypt further developed.

One important aspect of Kennedy's New Frontier strategy in the Middle East was surplus wheat and development aid, the President hoped this policy might help developing nations achieve internal reforms and garner a favorable opinion of the United

³⁹ Robert Komer, US National Security Staffer, interview by Elizabeth Farmer, 16 July 1964, interview 2, transcript, p. 2, Oral History Program, JFKL.

⁴⁰ Battle to Bundy, 30 August 1961, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-005, JFKL.

⁴¹ John Badeau, US Ambassador to Egypt, to State Department, 11 January 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 17*, document 161.

States in those countries. As a candidate, Kennedy had stated in his first debate with Republican candidate, and Vice President, Richard Nixon that he was “not satisfied when we have over nine billion dollars worth of food – some of it rotting – even though there is a hungry world.”⁴² The prospect of increased aid pleased Nasser, as the Egyptian economy was struggling; his country faced rapid population growth and lacked sufficient arable land.⁴³ Before Kennedy took office, the Eisenhower Administration had started providing surplus wheat as aid to Nasser under the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954, commonly known as Public Law 480 (hereafter PL-480). This act allowed the United States to provide surplus wheat to Egypt at a discounted price that the Arab nation could pay in local currency. Kennedy desired to increase this aid in hopes that Nasser might turn inward and focus on his own country instead of foreign affairs. Specifically, Kennedy wanted to entice Nasser to distance his nation from the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ In November of 1961, Ambassador Mostafa Kamel of the United Arab Republic met with one of Kennedy’s national security staffers, Walt Rostow, and requested a multi-year PL-480 aid agreement.⁴⁵

The Kennedy Administration viewed the aid request as an opportunity to capitalize on the good feelings toward the United States emanating from Cairo as a result

⁴² Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate, 26 September 1960, transcript, Commission on Presidential Debates, <http://debates.org/index.php?page=september-26-1960-debate-transcript>, accessed 14 November 2017.

⁴³ Summitt, *Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations*, 61-62; Fowler Hamilton, Administrator of the Agency for International Development, to Kennedy, 14 April 1962, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 17*, document 249.

⁴⁴ Ferris, *Nasser’s Gamble*, 102-5; Heikal, *Cairo Documents*, 192.

⁴⁵ Walt Rostow, US Deputy National Security Advisor, and Mostafa Kamal, Egyptian Ambassador to US, 22 November 1961, memo of conversation, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 17*, document 144.

of the American President's correspondence with Nasser. The State Department believed that a shift in policy toward accommodation of Nasser's needs and requests might contribute to stability in the Middle East as well as encourage the Egyptian President to focus on economic development, rather than foreign affairs.⁴⁶ The State Department, along with National Security Council staffer Robert Komer, counseled the President to agree to increased PL-480 aid to Egypt, send an American economic consultant to Cairo, and invite Nasser to visit the United States. Kennedy's Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, further recommended that Chester Bowles, a close advisor to the President, meet with Nasser in Cairo to demonstrate Kennedy's commitment to closer relations with the United Arab Republic. Komer cautioned, however, not to expect this shift in policy to provide immediate results or come at a low cost. The President agreed with Rusk and Komer's recommendations and sent a friendly letter to Nasser explaining his desire for Bowles to meet with the Egyptian President.⁴⁷

In his message, Kennedy noted the necessity of closer relations between the chiefs of state if they hoped to work together for the cause of peace in the Middle East and around the globe.⁴⁸ Additionally, the threat of leaks to the press about these plans prompted an early meeting between Ambassador Badeau and President Nasser. The State Department urged the ambassador to provide Kennedy's letter to the Egyptian President

⁴⁶ Dean Rusk, US Secretary of State, to Kennedy, 10 January 1962, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 17*, document 159.

⁴⁷ Rusk to Kennedy, 20 January 1962, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-006, JFKL; Komer to Kennedy, 15 January 1962, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 17*, document 163.

⁴⁸ Kennedy to Nasser, 24 January 1962, letter, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-006.

and mention the administration's intent to consider the multi-year PL-480 aid request. The Kennedy Administration hoped that by agreeing to this long-term commitment to Egypt, Nasser might recognize the sincere good faith of US efforts to invest in a relationship with him. To ensure the clarity of this message, the State Department instructed Badeau to tell Nasser that the positive direction of relations between their two nations since Kennedy took office pleased the American government. Importantly, the instructions sent to Badeau made clear that the United States expected no special favors or privileges in return for its long-term commitment to Egypt.⁴⁹

Kennedy's willingness to forego special considerations in exchange for a multi-year aid package to Egypt attests to the progression in relations between the two nations. The American President relinquished one of his key bargaining chips to influence Egyptian international actions without receiving anything tangible in return. At the same time, the administration hoped that the "bait" of increased aid might persuade Nasser to draw closer to the United States rather than the Soviet Union.⁵⁰ Along with the promise of more aid, Bowles' trip to meet with Nasser garnered positive results. The Arab leader received the gesture of a close Kennedy advisor's meeting with him as an indication of the growing relationship between their two countries. Further, the trip convinced Bowles that the administration needed to seize the opportunity presented by the close relations

⁴⁹ George Ball, Under US Secretary of State, to Badeau, 27 January 1962, telegram, Kennedy National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-006, JFKL.

⁵⁰ Komer to Kennedy, 28 May 1962, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 17*, document 279; William J. Burns, *Economic Aid and American Policy Toward Egypt, 1955-1981* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), 122; Peter Braestrup, "Washington Is Receptive to U.A.R. Minister's Requests for More Aid," *New York Times*, 27 April 1962, p. 7.

with Nasser, because it might never reappear.⁵¹ Overall, Kennedy's good faith actions on aid and in sending a personal representative to Nasser contributed to an increasingly friendly atmosphere that culminated in the high point in the diplomatic relationship between Egypt and the United States in the summer of 1962.

Following the Egyptian Minister of Economy's visit to Washington in the spring of 1962, President Nasser wrote to Kennedy to express his appreciation for the statements of understanding and goodwill toward Egypt that American diplomats had conveyed to Minister Abdel Moneim El Kaissouny. The Egyptian leader noted that he had been telling the US foreign policy establishment for years that all he desired from America was understanding of his nation's interests, and Kennedy was finally recognizing that. Nasser acknowledged that this new understanding presented an opportunity for "cooperation capable of serving world peace and consolidating its potentialities."⁵² Through this correspondence, it becomes clear that Nasser had hoped to receive respect from the United States and Kennedy's willingness to engage with the Egyptian President and acknowledge his national interests provided Kennedy with fertile ground upon which to form a mutually-beneficial relationship with the leader of the Arab World.

In a series of memoranda sent to National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, aides within the Kennedy Administration pondered the possibilities presented by Nasser's statesman-like tone and the feeling of mutual understanding noted in his letter to Kennedy. The Executive Secretary of the State Department, William Brubeck, observed

⁵¹ Bowles to Kennedy and Rusk, 21 February 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 17*, document 195.

⁵² Nasser to Kennedy, 21 June 1962, letter, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-007, JFKL.

that Nasser's message represented a "significant step forward in US-UAR relations."⁵³ Brubeck added that the correspondence between Kennedy and the Egyptian President was having a "moderating impact" on Nasser's rhetoric and actions.⁵⁴ Moreover, advisors noted that Nasser appeared to be grateful for the promise of a multi-year food aid agreement, and though the United States received nothing formal in exchange for its long-term commitment, the efforts encouraged Nasser's new statesman-like attitude toward America.⁵⁵ Furthermore, aides recognized the success of the personal correspondence, as well as the administration's concerted effort to court Nasser. Robert Komer proclaimed, "We've made a score on relations with the key guy in the Arab World; let's keep nurturing it."⁵⁶

The foundation for friendly relations now set, Secretary Rusk telegraphed Ambassador Badeau to inform senior officials in Egypt of Kennedy's pleasure with Nasser's letter promoting mutual understanding. The Secretary directed Badeau to express the administration's recognition of a pattern of understanding and restraint from the United Arab Republic on many delicate issues. This behavior had favorably impacted the relationship between their countries. Rusk asserted the relationship now allowed for

⁵³ William Brubeck, Executive Secretary of US State Department, to Bundy, 25 June 1962, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-007, JFKL.

⁵⁴ Brubeck to Bundy, 21 June 1962, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 17*, document 304.

⁵⁵ Harold H. Saunders, US National Security Council Staffer, to Bundy, 23 June 1962, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-007, JFKL.

⁵⁶ Komer to Bundy, 12 July 1962, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-007, JFKL.

constructive dialogue on the many issues in the Middle East, including the Arab-Israeli dispute and inter-Arab conflicts.⁵⁷

In President Kennedy's August 16, 1962, response to Nasser's friendly letter, the American leader expressed his desire to have Ambassador Badeau discuss some of the difficult matters in the Middle East with Nasser, though Kennedy did not elaborate on those matters. Noting that frank discussions between the two of them had proved fruitful to that point, Kennedy suggested that more deliberations between the two countries might prove beneficial to both their interests. The American President assured Nasser that he planned no alteration in their relationship regardless of their differences on a myriad of issues, though Kennedy once again neglected to define those issues.⁵⁸

A possible obstacle to this rapprochement occurred in late August of 1962, when Nasser came under pressure from Arabs who believed the Egyptian President was becoming too close to the Americans and that US aid packages forced Nasser to bow to US interests.⁵⁹ In response to this pressure, Nasser decided to release some of the correspondence between himself and Kennedy to the Egyptian press. Before doing so, however, the Egyptian leader instructed one of his confidants to provide advance notice of the press disclosure to the American government. As Nasser valued previous efforts of the Kennedy Administration to keep the Egyptian government informed of American

⁵⁷ Rusk to Badeau, 19 July 1962, telegram, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-007, JFKL.

⁵⁸ Kennedy to Nasser, 16 August 1962, letter, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-008, JFKL.

⁵⁹ Parker T. Hart, US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, to State Department, 26 September 1962, telegram, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-008, JFKL.

policy in the Middle East, the Arab leader wanted to reciprocate this good faith gesture to Kennedy in this case.⁶⁰ Nasser's sign of trust proved productive in maintaining the strength of the relationship between the United States and the United Arab Republic. Recognizing the complexity of Nasser's press relations dilemma, Secretary Rusk appreciated the Egyptian President's effort to keep the American government informed. Consequently, the Secretary of State instructed Ambassador Badeau to notify Nasser, through appropriate channels, of Rusk's gratitude.⁶¹

While Nasser's choice to warn the Kennedy Administration of his decision to leak some of their correspondence to the press may appear unimportant, it was not. Little more than a year earlier, Nasser had disparaged the United States, without warning, for its role in the Bay of Pigs invasion. Yet, in the summer of 1962, Nasser so valued his relationship with Kennedy that he provided advance notice of a press leak that was necessary to stymie Arab criticism. In less than two years, President Kennedy and his staff forged a bond of trust with the Egyptian President, a connection that seemed highly unlikely before the young American President's inauguration. By investing in a personal relationship and not allowing their differences to keep them from frank and open discussions, both leaders started to trust one another.

One concrete achievement resulting from this use of personal diplomacy revolved around the US sale to Israel of HAWK surface-to-air missiles. When Kennedy decided to sell these weapons to Israel in September 1962, the administration informed Nasser and

⁶⁰ Badeau to Rusk, 10 September 1962, telegram, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-008, JFKL.

⁶¹ Rusk to Badeau, 10 September 1962, telegram, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-008, JFKL.

explained Kennedy's reasoning shortly before the formal announcement of the deal.⁶² The decision to keep the Egyptian President informed of the sale before it became public reaped results. Egyptian reaction to the sale was moderate, despite the arms deal possessing real potential to spark tensions in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Certainly, Nasser did not like the missile sale; nevertheless, the Kennedy Administration's effort to be frank with Nasser prevented major protest.⁶³ The use of personal diplomacy proved truly successful in this case. The trust created between Kennedy and Nasser allowed the two leaders to disagree on this critical issue without allowing it to ruin their relationship. Moreover, through personal diplomacy, the Kennedy Administration prevented a major conflict in the Arab-Israeli dispute despite creating the opportunity for tension. In this test of the strategy of personal diplomacy, the tactic proved successful.

However, the discovery of missiles just ninety miles off the coast of the United States on the island of Cuba soon tested the relationship between Kennedy and Nasser. During the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, the United Arab Republic made disparaging public statements about Kennedy's decision to blockade Cuba. Furthermore, the Egyptians believe that the United States served as the aggressor in the crisis, though the Arab nation insisted it had no plans to alter its relationship with either America or the Soviet Union as a result of the incident.⁶⁴ In the middle of the crisis, Secretary Rusk sent

⁶² Phillips Talbot, Assistant US Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, John Barrow, and Kamel, 26 September 1962, memo of conversation, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18, Near East, 1962-1963* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1995), document 55.

⁶³ Komer, interview 2, p. 5.

⁶⁴ "Egypt Is Worried by Threat of War," *New York Times*, 24 October 1962, p. 24; "Blockade of Cuba is Opposed by the U.A.R.," *New York Times*, 25 October 1962, p. 22.

messages on behalf of Kennedy to the leaders of the world explaining the US position on the events in Cuba, as well as a copy of the President's address to the American people on the twenty-second of October.⁶⁵ Once the crisis ended, Nasser replied to Kennedy's message, in which the President asserted there was no benefit to further discussions on the events in Cuba. The Arab leader expressed his appreciation for the American effort to keep world leaders informed, the diplomatic approach taken by the US government in response to the missile crisis, and Kennedy's pledge not to invade Cuba. Significantly, Nasser attempted to flatter the American President by recognizing US military power and the necessary role of the United States in peace processes around the globe.⁶⁶ The response from Nasser represents one of many attempts to moderate differences between the United States and his country. As in this case, at times of disagreement Nasser tried to diminish the impact of conflicting interests by using optimistic and friendly language in his personal correspondence with Kennedy.

Yet, shortly after he attempted to correct any perceived harm to his relationship with Kennedy, Nasser sent an even friendlier public message to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. In this statement, the Egyptian President applauded Soviet efforts to prevent war with the United States. Moreover, Nasser criticized the attitude of the Kennedy Administration toward the missile bases in Cuba as "an attitude which might have had consequences whose effect on mankind God alone knows." These statements, aired on Moscow radio, did not meet much criticism within the US State Department, as the

⁶⁵ Rusk to US Ambassadors, 22 October 1962, telegram, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-009, JFKL.

⁶⁶ Nasser to Kennedy, 31 October 1962, letter, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-009, JFKL.

staffers believed Nasser's message to Khrushchev contained little worth criticizing other than its friendlier tone than the letter he had sent to Kennedy.⁶⁷

Even as they recognized Egypt's tacit support for the Soviet Union during the most critical moment in Kennedy's presidency, the President's advisors continued to advocate a moderate approach to the Arab leader following the missile crisis. The State Department viewed Nasser's letter to Kennedy as an attempt to redress any problems Egypt's position during the incident might have created. The State Department advocated an expression of appreciation to Nasser for his letter after the crisis.⁶⁸ Komer agreed with the assessment of the State Department. He believed Kennedy needed to take the opportunity to continue dialogue with the Arab leader by sending his appreciation to Nasser, as opposed to letting the Egyptian President's comments and differences of opinion stand in the way of the administration's broader strategy in the Middle East.⁶⁹

The Kennedy Administration consistently demonstrated a pattern of willingness to overlook Nasser's negative public comments and conflicting positions on issues of importance, including the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Arab-Israeli dispute. Repeatedly, over the course of Kennedy's rapprochement with Nasser, the administration chose to pursue better relations with the leader of the Arab World rather than focus on their divergent interests. This allowed for open dialogue and kept Nasser

⁶⁷ Brubeck to Bundy, 14 November 1962, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-009, JFKL. See also attached message within Brubeck memo from Nasser to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, 6 November 1962, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-009, JFKL.

⁶⁸ Brubeck to Bundy, 10 November 1962, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-009, JFKL.

⁶⁹ Komer to Bundy, 1 November 1962, memo, Kennedy Presidential Papers, National Security Files, JFKNSF-169-009, JFKL.

engaged with the United States. However, in the autumn of 1962, a proxy war in the Arab nation of Yemen threatened to derail Kennedy's pursuit of a New Frontier in the Arab World.

In September 1962, a coup in Yemen led to a proxy war between Egypt and the royalist regimes of Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Following the death of Yemen's Imam Ahmad, his son Muhammad al-Badr assumed control of the country. One week after assuming control as the new Imam, revolutionary forces led by Abdullah al-Sallal conducted a coup against al-Badr that forced him from power. Upon hearing of this revolt against hereditary rule and fearful of revolutionary uprisings within their own nations, Saudi Arabia and Jordan started supplying royalist forces with arms. Nasser, on the other hand, seized the opportunity to promote Arab Nationalism, as well as the overthrow of a royalist regime; he promptly sent troops to support the revolutionary government and formally recognized the newly formed Yemen Arab Republic (YAR).⁷⁰

The coup created a new challenge for the Kennedy Administration and put it in a difficult situation. On the one hand, their New Frontier Middle East policy rested upon supporting Arab Nationalism and placating Nasser to prevent Egypt from growing closer to the Soviet Union. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, the traditional conservative regimes, were the long-standing allies of the United States in the region.⁷¹ As a result, Kennedy and his team found themselves in an untenable situation that threatened to destabilize the Middle East and their policy aspirations along with it. Over

⁷⁰ Summitt, *Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations*, 158; Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire*, 45; Sayward, *United Nations in International History*, 164.

⁷¹ Badeau, *Middle East Remembered*, 201; Komer to Talbot, 12 October 1962, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 79.

the course of the following year, the relationship between Kennedy and Nasser became increasingly strained as the American President frequently chose to support the traditional allies of the United States over Egypt during the conflict. The forces, both domestic and foreign, that encouraged this shift in Kennedy's ideology from supporting Nasser's Arab Nationalism to a more conservative stance of supporting the more royalist regimes in the region will be discussed further in the following chapters.

Ultimately, despite the strains on the relationship, the personal correspondence continued throughout Kennedy's presidency, as Nasser remained receptive to pleas for suspensions of hostilities and negotiations on disengagement.⁷² By the time Kennedy's presidency ended, his hopeful rapprochement with President Nasser appeared to be faltering, though by no means had it completely failed. It is worth noting that upon hearing of Kennedy's assassination, Nasser was stunned and heartbroken. Though his optimistic relationship with the young American President waned over the course of 1963, Nasser and his constituents grieved the loss of a US President who exhibited so much promise. Kennedy's funeral aired four times on Cairo television.⁷³

Following Kennedy's death and the ascendance of Lyndon Baines Johnson to the American presidency, relations between the United States and Egypt deteriorated.⁷⁴ Ambassador Badeau recognized quickly that Johnson did not share his predecessor's interest in the Middle East and that the relationship the Kennedy Administration had

⁷² Heikal, *Cairo Documents*, 221; Komer, interview by Elizabeth Farmer, 3 September 1964, interview 3, transcript, p. 4, Oral History Program, JFKL.

⁷³ Heikal, *Cairo Documents*, 223-24.

⁷⁴ Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire*, 45.

fostered with Nasser was in danger with Johnson in the Oval Office.⁷⁵ The new president did not possess the same level of patience toward Nasser as his predecessor had displayed.⁷⁶ Instead, whenever the Egyptian President made disparaging comments about the United States, President Johnson did not hesitate to condemn Nasser.⁷⁷ As for Nasser's attitude toward Johnson, the Egyptian leader instinctively disliked the brash style of the new American President.⁷⁸ Ultimately, a series of disputes between the two leaders created a rift between them too large to overcome. As a result, Johnson suspended the PL-480 aid to Egypt in January of 1965, less than three years after Kennedy had granted the multi-year agreement to Nasser as a sign of good faith.⁷⁹ Relations between the two nations completely deteriorated following the Six Day War in the summer of 1967, after which the United States increased military aid to the Israelis. Following the war, Egypt terminated diplomatic relations with the United States.⁸⁰

When Kennedy's approach to Egypt is viewed within the context of the policies of Eisenhower and Johnson, it is clear that Kennedy's personal diplomacy achieved real results. Of these three US presidents, Kennedy was the only one not to struggle with an Arab-Israeli war.⁸¹ During his short term in office, Kennedy maintained relative calm on

⁷⁵ Badeau, *Middle East Remembered*, 244.

⁷⁶ Asher Orkaby, *Beyond the Arab Cold War: The International History of the Yemen Civil War, 1962-68* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 125.

⁷⁷ Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble*, 128.

⁷⁸ Heikal, *Cairo Documents*, 225.

⁷⁹ Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble*, 138.

⁸⁰ Summitt, *Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations*, 227-228.

⁸¹ Eisenhower dealt with the Suez Canal crisis in 1956. Johnson's term saw the Six-Day War in 1967. Both conflicts involved Nasser's Egypt. Moreover, it should be noted that President Richard Nixon's presidency, which followed that of Johnson, also saw an Arab-Israeli war, the Yom Kippur War in October 1973.

that critical issue in the region, which neither his predecessor nor successor achieved. This can largely be attributed to Kennedy's personal correspondence with Nasser, as seen with the HAWK missile sale. Kennedy consistently discussed the Arab-Israeli issue with Nasser in a frank manner and the Egyptian leader remained cool on the issue during Kennedy's term. Furthermore, the downturn of US-Egyptian relations after Kennedy's death attests to the hope that remained even during the Yemen crisis that consumed 1963. Following Johnson's assumption of the presidency, relations grew increasingly worse, but it took four years before Egypt severed ties with the United States. Thus, at the time of Kennedy's death, relations appeared strained but they were not completely dire.

Ultimately, the story of President Kennedy's use of personal correspondence to attempt a rapprochement with President Nasser is a narrative of tempered success. The young American President earned the trust of the Arab Nationalist leader during the first twenty-one months of his administration, but the failure to reach and execute an amenable disengagement agreement in Yemen left the attempted reconciliation between them strained, but not broken, by the end of Kennedy's presidency.

As conflicts continue in the Middle East and the United States continues to pursue diplomatic solutions to issues in the region, it is important to understand the efforts of previous US presidents to promote peace. President Kennedy's example of personal diplomacy combined with economic aid showed immense promise for most of his presidency. Furthermore, Kennedy's presidency represented a period of relative peace in the Middle East except for the war in Yemen. The New Frontiersman's policies in the region promoted understanding and prevented miscommunication, two achievements both Eisenhower and Johnson—as well as later presidents—failed to attain. It is,

therefore, important that scholars understand the development of foreign relations with the Arab World and the successes and failures of specific American presidents and their tactics.

In some respects, the Kennedy Administration's efforts exhibited a degree of idealism. By declaring a New Frontier in his speech to the Democratic National Convention, Kennedy charted a course of idealistic pragmatism. The youthful politician hoped that his ability to find solutions where others failed, or simply gave up, might contribute to his legacy. The rapprochement with Nasser was no different. Kennedy and his team wanted to create a strong relationship with a leader that previously was too difficult for President Eisenhower to control or influence. For the most part, Kennedy's endeavor met success. However, throughout the correspondence, both leaders ignored signs of trouble and, instead, touted the mutual understanding and growing friendship between them. Therefore, when events in Yemen tested their bond, the relationship struggled to produce the results that the Kennedy Administration desired when they embarked on their rapprochement with the Arab leader. So, while the bond did not break over Yemen, it certainly was stressed.

There is much to learn from the success Kennedy achieved in his relationship with Nasser. Through personal contact, genuine interest, and renewed engagement with the Arab World, Kennedy garnered Nasser's trust. This feat took patience and sustained effort. As noted earlier, the new American President faced an uphill struggle to find common ground and create a relationship with Nasser. Years of instability and unpredictable US policy toward Egypt conditioned Nasser to exercise caution when dealing with America. To maintain his attempted reconciliation, Kennedy had to choose

to ignore Nasser's disparaging comments, both public and private. Further, the American President strove to understand the complex issues that plagued Egypt, rather than view the Arab nation as a pawn in the Cold War. While Kennedy certainly hoped to keep Nasser from forging closer ties to the Soviet Union, he never allowed these considerations to taint the correspondence between he and Nasser. Kennedy sought to provide the Egyptian President with opportunities and tools to combat domestic problems in Egypt. Moreover, Kennedy took seriously Nasser's requests for assistance and granted a multi-year aid agreement to Egypt, despite the outbreak of war in Yemen, and without requiring a quid pro quo. Kennedy's good faith efforts and persistence in the correspondence earned results by earning the trust of an inherently skeptical leader. Though the war in Yemen strained Kennedy's rapprochement with Nasser, the model of investment in personal relationships with influential leaders offers possibilities for future foreign policy.

Kennedy endeavored to conduct foreign policy in a different manner than was the custom. When issues arose between the United States and Egypt, Kennedy wrote directly to Nasser to discuss those problems in a frank manner. By doing this, both sides consistently understood each other's interests. This contributed to reduced tensions and friction for much of Kennedy's tenure.

Overall, Kennedy used personal correspondence because it achieved results. After the first few letters exchanged hands, the administration recognized an opportunity for increased meaningful discussions between Nasser and Kennedy. From the outset, the New Frontiersmen garnered influence in the Middle East and prevent further Soviet encroachment in the region. Through focusing on personal correspondence with the

preeminent leader of the Arab World, the Kennedy Administration accomplished many of its goals in its Middle East strategy for a considerable amount of time. Ultimately, despite the strain placed upon the relationship by the Yemeni crisis, the personal diplomacy used by John F. Kennedy to communicate with the Egyptian President proved successful in earning Nasser's trust and preventing eruptions in the Arab-Israeli dispute.

CHAPTER III

The Process of Disengagement in Yemen

The proxy war in Yemen between Saudi Arabia and Egypt placed the Kennedy administration in peculiar, and somewhat untenable, situation. A difficult decision loomed for the young American President. On the one hand, he could choose to continue his rapprochement with Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, which would demonstrate support for Arab Nationalism. On the other hand, he could side with the traditional, monarchical regimes in the Middle East—Saudi Arabia and Jordan—and abandon support for Arab Nationalism. While on its surface this seemed a simple, black-and-white choice, in truth Kennedy had invested significantly in the relationship with Nasser and believed that siding with Arab Nationalism would be the best strategic decision for the future of US policy in the region. Over the short term, however, the conflict on the Arabian Peninsula seemed to threaten the stability of the entire region, which could provide a greater opening for Soviet influence in the region as well as threaten long-time US allies. While in the case of the HAWK missile sale to Israel Kennedy had been able to maintain the rapprochement while taking actions that were not in Egypt's direct interest, the situation in Yemen ultimately eluded such a solution and wrecked Kennedy's hope for a "New Frontier" in the region. Nonetheless, Kennedy decided to largely abandon his New Frontier policy of rapprochement with Nasser and Arab Nationalism in support of a more traditional policy of siding with the royalist regimes. Ultimately, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Kingdom, and time pushed the US leader away from support of Nasser

and the Yemen Arab Republic that he backed and toward active support of the Saudis by the end of his presidency.

Following a coup in Yemen in September 1962 that replaced the country's monarch and Shia religious leader, Imam Muhammad al-Badr, with Arab Nationalist leadership, Nasser provided aid and military support for the revolutionary forces in that nation. Perhaps driven by Syria's decision to withdraw from the United Arab Republic the year before, Nasser now used Egyptian resources, including sending troops to Yemen shortly after the coup, to try to protect the success of what could be seen as a victory for his Arab Nationalist cause. However, the removal of yet another monarch in the Middle East represented a threat to Saudi Arabia and Jordan, two royal regimes. Moreover, the United Kingdom still possessed interests in the Arabian Peninsula, so the prominent ally of the United States also pressured Kennedy throughout the subsequent war in Yemen. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the US President had invested a considerable degree of attention in his relationship with Nasser in hopes of forging a new type of foreign policy for America that attempted to show respect to Third World nations outside of a Cold War context that was in keeping with the rise of non-alignment among such countries. However, the outbreak of this proxy war heavily threatened Kennedy's personal investment in Nasser.

Over the course of the final year of the Kennedy administration, the foreign policy apparatus of the United States sought ways to end the war and continue the New Frontier policies in the Middle East. One of the immediate questions that Kennedy faced was whether his administration might provide support—military, diplomatic, or financial—to either side of the conflict. On the Arab Nationalist side was Egypt and the new

government in Yemen, the Yemen Arab Republic. On the other side was the deposed government of Yemen, led by toppled Prince Hassan, as well as its Saudi and British backers. Another important issue was whether the United States would grant formal recognition to the new regime in Yemen. Recognizing the important role that US intervention or non-intervention would likely play, ambassadors and heads of state from both sides of the conflict forcefully advocated their positions to the New Frontiersman and his national security staff.

Shortly after the coup, Prince Hassan, the heir to the Yemeni Imamate, had fled to Saudi Arabia where he received arms and funding for his resistance campaign to the revolutionary forces in his country. In a meeting with President Kennedy, Crown Prince Faysal of Saudi Arabia informed the American leader that the coup had occurred at the instigation of Nasser and the United Arab Republic. Faysal warned the President that if the situation in Yemen remained volatile that the Soviet Union might gain a sphere of influence in the region in the resulting chaos. The Crown Prince also implored Kennedy to use his influence with Nasser, earned by US food aid to Egypt, to dissuade him from continuing his subversive campaign against traditional regimes; however, Kennedy believed that food aid mattered little to Nasser when compared with the revolutionary victory in Yemen. Moreover, according to a memorandum from State Department Executive Secretary William Brubeck, the British government also feared that a pro-Nasser Yemeni regime threatened their own interests in Aden, a vital port city on the Southwest coast of Yemen. King Hussein of Jordan also informed the Kennedy administration of his fear that continued hostilities in Yemen threatened to destabilize the entire region as well as his seat on the throne. With these considerations in mind, the

State Department recommended delaying recognition to the Yemen Arab Republic, rather than quickly granting that privilege, as was typical operating procedure.¹

While the Saudis sought to garner Kennedy's support, which they defined as security guarantees and US threats to withdraw aid from Nasser, the State Department reached out to senior officials in the Egyptian government to moderate the conflict and remove doubt as to US intentions in Yemen. The department instructed its ambassador in Cairo, John Badeau, to inform the Egyptian government that the United States knew of Egyptian troop movements toward Yemen and that the United States looked upon this action with disapproval. Under Secretary of State George Ball directed Badeau to encourage Nasser to allow the Yemenis to choose their government for themselves, which was the hope of the United States. Moreover, the State Department specifically chose not to notify Nasser of the American response to Saudi support for royalists, which likely left the Egyptian leader believing that the United States was hypocritically allowing the Saudis to continue their aid to the royalists while asking Egypt to withdrawal from the conflict.² Therefore, shortly after the ambassador's representation, the Egyptians responded by noting they did not desire to intervene in Yemeni affairs, however, Saudi support of the royalists required Egyptian reciprocation on behalf of the revolutionaries. Additionally, Mohamed Heikal, editor of a prominent Egyptian newspaper and a close confidant of Nasser's who served as an intermediary between

¹ John Kennedy and HRH Crown Prince Faysal, et al., 5 October 1962, memo of conversation, document 71; Macomber via Lewis to State Department, 6 October 1962, telegram, document 73; and William Brubeck to McGeorge Bundy, 5 October 1962, memo, document 69, all in *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*.

² George Ball to John Badeau, 5 October 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 72.

Egypt and the United States, told Badeau that the Egyptian government desired US recognition of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) to assuage fears that Kennedy supported the Saudis, as well as to prevent the spread of communism in the Persian Gulf by preventing the Soviet Union from being the primary ally of the new Yemeni regime. He also mentioned that Egypt harbored no intention of attacking British interests in the region, which were primarily located at the port city of Aden.³

Despite the assurances from Heikal, the State Department remained skeptical of Egyptian influence in Yemen. As such, Secretary of State Dean Rusk directed Badeau to inform Nasser that the Egyptian government's continued commitment to arming and standing ready to send soldiers to the YAR seriously threatened its relationship with the United States. He added that if the United Arab Republic continued its hostile actions, Kennedy might have to choose between support for Egypt or Saudi Arabia, which could include military aid to the Saudis and withdrawal of American development and food aid from Egypt. The President made it clear that he hoped not to have to make that decision.⁴ Therefore, as the conflict began to develop, the Kennedy Administration attempted to use its good will with Nasser to persuade him to stay out of the Yemeni war. The problem was that once the Egyptian leader committed his troops and reputation to securing the Arab Nationalist revolution in Yemen, he lacked the political will to withdraw. Moreover, as the Saudis continued to support the royalists and claim that they wished to end the conflict and would do so if Nasser removed his support for the new YAR regime,

³ John Badeau to State Department, 10 October 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 77.

⁴ Dean Rusk to John Badeau, 13 October 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 80.

both sides started placing the impetus on the other to trigger a withdrawal, creating a diplomatic stalemate as neither side showed a willingness to back down.

As the diplomatic efforts of both the Saudis and Egyptians demonstrates, the Kennedy Administration faced an unwelcome situation in Yemen. While the United States wanted to stay out of the hostilities, the involvement of some of its closest allies left the country with little choice but to enter the discussion. To keep its options open, the United States tried to appease both sides at the beginning of the conflict; Kennedy listened to the concerns of the Saudis and Egyptians, without openly supporting either. National Security staffer Robert Komer recognized that siding with either the Saudis or Egyptians would likely prove detrimental for US foreign policy, so he advocated for an increased role by the United States in brokering a peace agreement to head-off any prolonged conflict before the sides became completely entrenched.⁵

Around mid-October 1962, once it became clear that the YAR regime possessed the ability to lead, the Kennedy Administration started to entertain the idea of granting it formal diplomatic recognition. However, the State Department articulated some benchmarks that Nasser needed to be agree to before the United States extended recognition to the YAR: the cessation of any subversive activities against Kings Saud and Hussein by Nasser, face-saving measures that would provide the political cover to allow for the withdrawal of Saudi Arabian and Jordanian aid to the royalists in Yemen, and a declaration from the United States that it stood by and supported Saudi Arabia and Jordan against aggressive action by Nasser following recognition, including propaganda or

⁵ Robert Komer to Phillips Talbot, 12 October 1962, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 79.

military action aimed at subverting the power of those monarchical regimes.⁶

Nevertheless, both Saudi Arabia and Egypt continued to reject proposals for a peace accord.⁷

While the administration proved unable to reach an early peace agreement, it confidentially reached out to the Yemen Arab Republic to reassure its leaders of the delicate state of US interests in the conflict—as it was attempting to balance support for Arab Nationalism and traditional regimes—and to provide a possible timeline for formal recognition. Secretary Rusk informed YAR Prime Minister Abdullah Sallal that the delay in recognition was not the result of Yemeni actions, rather it resulted from issues related to foreign intervention. Rusk assured the prime minister that the United States intended to continue the peace process and work toward a disengagement of the conflict, after which formal recognition would likely follow.⁸ This message from the US Secretary of State demonstrates the problems faced by the Kennedy administration in Yemen. While it understood that the Yemen Arab Republic clearly controlled the nation and deserved formal recognition, caution resulted from the on-going conflict between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The clock was ticking as to how long the United States could delay recognition, as other nations started to grant that status to the YAR.

⁶ Talcott Seelye to McGeorge Bundy, 17 October 1962, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 81.

⁷ John Badeau to State Department, 18 October 1962, telegram, document 82; and Ball to US Embassy in Saudi Arabia, 19 October 1962, telegram, document 83, all in *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*.

⁸ Dean Rusk to Legation in Yemen, 24 October 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 86.

In mid-November, Dean Rusk advocated for Kennedy to grant the Yemen Arab Republic diplomatic recognition. The Secretary of State proposed multiple reasons for such action: to avoid further escalation of the proxy war between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to prevent further YAR reliance on Egypt, and not to provide additional fuel to anti-American sentiment that simmered in the Arab World, which Rusk feared might lead to pro-Soviet attitudes in the region. The secretary added that previous fears of damaging the US relationship with the Saudis were no longer relevant because Nasser's government had provided some assurances to Badeau that neither it nor the YA, intended to use Yemen as a springboard to extend his revolutionary agenda into Saudi Arabia. Before granting formal recognition, however, Rusk sought public statements from Nasser and Sallal reaffirming those assurances.⁹ Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Phillips Talbot, concurred with Rusk's assessment of the situation and encouraged the Secretary of State to grant formal recognition, because Talbot believed the United States needed to end the cycle of delaying the respect due the new regime. Further delays, according to the assistant secretary, might leave some in Egypt unhappy, and the reward for continued delay was not worth the risk of upsetting Nasser.¹⁰

Once Kennedy agreed to Rusk's recommendation, the American President attempted to explain his decision to the key allies of the United States involved in the conflict. He first informed the British government of his decision to grant recognition to

⁹ Dean Rusk to John Kennedy, 12 November 1962, memo, document 96; and John Badeau to State Department, 18 October 1962, telegram, document 82, both in *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*.

¹⁰ Phillips Talbot to Dean Rusk, 13 November 1962, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 97.

the Yemen Arab Republic. As British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan feared that the new Yemeni government represented a threat to his nation's interests in the Arabian Peninsula, Kennedy assured him that public declarations from the two leaders safeguarded British security interests, but more importantly, continued delay of US recognition posed the risk of losing all leverage over the situation. According to Kennedy, if the Sallal government continued to control Yemen, it could force the United States to grant recognition without any assurances; accordingly, the time for delay had ended. Moreover, the US leader hoped that the shock of the recognition might push the Saudis and Jordanians to abandon their aggression.¹¹ On November 16, Secretary Rusk directed the US ambassadors throughout the Middle East, as well as in London and at the United Nations, to inform those governments of Kennedy's decision to recognize the Yemen Arab Republic in the near future. Rusk instructed the ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Parker Hart, to notify Crown Prince Faysal that while Kennedy appreciated his concerns about Yemen, the United States would hold Nasser and Sallal to their word on staying out of Saudi affairs. From the governments in Egypt and Yemen, Rusk requested public statements affirming their pledges to discontinue hostilities toward other royalist regimes.¹²

This logic failed to sway Faysal. After receiving news of the American plan from Ambassador Hart, the Crown Prince stressed that Kennedy had adopted Nasser's viewpoint and was now imposing that outlook upon Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Faysal

¹¹ John Kennedy to Harold Macmillan, 15 November 1962, message, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 98.

¹² Dean Rusk to US Embassies, 16 November 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 99.

emphasized that the Saudis would not extend recognition to the Yemen Arab Republic, regardless of US actions.¹³

Despite this initial pushback, the National Security Council staff continued to advocate swift recognition. Robert Komer noted that although Faysal and King Hussein of Jordan disliked Kennedy's plan, the administration still hoped this displeasure might push those regimes to withdraw their forces from the proxy war and focus on internal reforms. Both Komer and State Department Executive Secretary William Brubeck therefore continued to press for recognition, especially once the United States could reach agreement on the wording of public statements from Egypt and the YAR.¹⁴ Therefore, lengthy negotiations over the sentiments and words for the public statements ensued before Brubeck sought Kennedy's approval for moving forward with recognition of the Yemen Arab Republic in early December.¹⁵

Despite another strong admonishment from Crown Prince Faysal that US policy of appeasement toward Nasser concerned His Royal Highness, Kennedy proceeded with his decision to grant recognition to the YAR.¹⁶ Following the release of approved statements from Sallal and Nasser, on December 18 and 19 respectively, the United States extended formal diplomatic recognition to the Yemen Arab Republic on December

¹³ Parker Hart to State Department, 17 November 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 101.

¹⁴ Robert Komer to John Kennedy, 21 November 1962, memo, document 103; and Robert Komer to John Kennedy, 28 November 1962, memo, document 104, both in *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*.

¹⁵ William Brubeck to McGeorge Bundy, 6 December 1962, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 112.

¹⁶ Parker Hart to State Department, 10 December 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 113.

19, 1962.¹⁷ The American press lauded this action as a diplomatic success for President Kennedy, though they also noted that the British government and the Saudis did not approve of this gesture.¹⁸

The difficult decision the Kennedy Administration faced about whether to grant recognition to the YAR demonstrates the complexity of the relationships the American President navigated in the Middle East in the year prior to the beginning of the conflict. Before Kennedy entered office, Nasser factored little into serious considerations of major foreign policy initiatives for the United States. Yet after the long process of rapprochement discussed in the previous chapter, Nasser's position now held considerable sway in the Kennedy administration. This is evident in US decision-making around recognition of the Yemen Arab Republic despite multiple pleas not to do so from such prominent allies as the United Kingdom. Undoubtedly, Nasser won the initial battle for Kennedy's support during the Yemeni conflict. While the United States continued to guarantee Saudi and Jordanian security in the face of external threats, their diplomacy had not shifted Kennedy's decision to recognize the YAR. Instead, the threat of damaging the relationship with Nasser had played a prominent role in American decision making. Therefore, through the end of 1962, Kennedy remained steadfast in his determination to continue his New Frontier policies of rethinking foreign policy, especially in the Third World. However, as the debate surrounding disengagement from Yemen continued throughout the final year of his presidency, Kennedy's support for

¹⁷ Editorial Note, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 116.

¹⁸ "US Grants Recognition to Yemen," *Washington Post-Times Herald*, 20 December 1962, p. A10; "Republic in Yemen," *New York Times*, 24 December 1962, p. 6.

Nasser and his Arab Nationalist agenda started to fade as the Egyptians failed to reciprocate the good will demonstrated by the American leader following his government's recognition of the YAR.

On New Year's Eve 1962, less than a month after Kennedy's olive branch of friendship was granted to the YAR, Rusk issued a stern warning to Nasser following an aerial attack on Saudi soil in the area of Najran, which served as an escalation of the conflict beyond Yemen's geographic location. Following the recent goodwill gesture from the Kennedy Administration to recognize the YAR, Rusk made it clear to Nasser that such provocations that violated the spirit of their understanding regarding disengagement, which was discussed and agreed to by Nasser during the debate over formal recognition of the republican government in Yemen. Moreover, Rusk noted that these types of aggressive actions threatened to derail the relationship between the United States and Egypt. The secretary strongly urged Nasser to abandon his policy of aggression against Saudi Arabia, and he assured the Egyptian leader that the United States was urging the Saudis against retaliatory measures in hopes that the conflict in Yemen might still deescalate.¹⁹ At the same time, Rusk also warned the Saudis against continuing its role in perpetuating the conflict because this only served as a justification for Egyptian strikes. Rusk wanted all aggressive actions from both sides to cease so that the United States could broker a military withdrawal.²⁰

¹⁹ Dean Rusk to John Badeau, 31 December 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 124.

²⁰ Dean Rusk to Parker Hart, 31 December 1962, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 125.

Almost immediately after Kennedy had acquiesced to Nasser and extended recognition to the Yemen Arab Republic, Egypt disregarded the gesture and took aggressive action in the proxy war in Yemen to counter Saudi and Jordanian support for the royalist forces. A long year of negotiations and broken promises lay ahead, as the prolonged war increasingly thwarted Kennedy's policy aspirations in the region.

Internally, Komer started advocating that Kennedy issue some harsh words to Nasser in the hope of quieting the conflict in Yemen. Such a policy might prove more effective in saving the Kennedy-Nasser rapprochement than a continued policy of appeasement and delay as the Arabian Peninsula conflict continued to escalate.²¹ At the same time, following a request from the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul Nitze, the Joint Chiefs of Staff started to consider military options to demonstrate US support for Saudi Arabia. Acting Chairman Curtis LeMay proposed to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara a show of force by providing US military aircraft to the Saudis and sending one naval destroyer to cruise to Saudi Arabia. If this failed to deter further aggression from Nasser, LeMay offered two plans of escalation. However, the acting chairman advocated that all diplomatic options be exhausted before any dramatic show of force was undertaken.²² Shortly thereafter, the United States informed Saudi Arabia of its decision to show support for the monarchical regime by conducting joint military exercises, and launching other cooperative efforts

²¹ Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, 2 January 1963, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 127.

²² Curtis LeMay to Robert McNamara, 2 January 1963, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 128.

meant to dissuade further Egyptian aggression.²³ The fact that personnel from both the Joint Chiefs and the National Security Council recommended a toughening stance toward Nasser demonstrates that some in the administration believed an element of coercion was needed to get Nasser to adopt a more moderate policy.

By early January 1963, the United States was pushing for a disengagement agreement between the Saudis and Egyptians, primarily focused on restraining Nasser. The State Department urged Ambassador Badeau to inform the Egyptian government that the United States was also applying pressure to the Saudis to cease their supply of arms and support to the royalists in Yemen; yet Badeau was also to explain that these efforts would likely prove more successful if Nasser suspended his continued support for the YAR and his propaganda attacks against Saudi Arabia. State asserted that Nasser needed to demonstrate good faith to give disengagement a chance of success.²⁴ Ambassador Badeau responded by recommending warning Nasser of possible US de-recognition of the Yemen Arab Republic if Egypt continued its hostile actions toward Saudi Arabia. The ambassador added that disengagement was of critical importance and stepping-up pressure on Nasser through military exercises with the Saudis might prove beneficial in that regard.²⁵ At this point, the perceived failure of Nasser to reciprocate the good faith efforts of the Kennedy Administration to act as an honest mediator in the Yemeni conflict caused serious concern for the New Frontiersmen. Though they continued to hope that

²³ George Ball to Parker Hart, 4 January 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 183*, document 130.

²⁴ George Ball to John Badeau, 4 January 19663, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 129.

²⁵ John Badeau to State Department, 9 January 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 131.

Nasser would comply with a disengagement process, he consistently failed to follow through with his promises. As both sides agreed during the debate for formal recognition of the YAR, which Nasser desperately sought from the United States, it was understood that the Egyptian leader would work with efforts of the American government to deescalate the conflict in the Arabian Peninsula. However, as the air strike on Saudi soil demonstrated, at least to some in the Kennedy Administration, Nasser continued to act independently regardless of his prior commitments.

Consequently, as January continued, Rusk became increasingly frustrated with Nasser's failure to comply with US requests to suspend aggression. In a sharply worded message that nonetheless recognized the role played by Saudi Arabia in prolonging the conflict, the US Secretary of State implored Nasser to demonstrate statesmanship and cease his propaganda and bombings against the Saudis. Rusk warned that Kennedy was receiving criticism both home and abroad for his support of Nasser and that Egyptian failures to agree to a disengagement process threatened their relationship.²⁶ This frustration ultimately led to a frank letter from the President to Nasser. In his message, Kennedy reminded the Egyptian leader of the trust they had established over the previous year. He further explained that the United States desired disengagement, not in service to Saudi interests, but for the peace and tranquility of the region. Kennedy assured Nasser that the United States was doing all it could to pressure Faysal to end his support for the royalists but that continued Egyptian aggression consistently prevented Saudi compliance. The President encouraged his counterpart in Cairo to approve an impartial

²⁶ Dean Rusk to John Badeau, 18 January 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 134.

mediator to negotiate a peace agreement between the parties. Kennedy ended his letter by pointing out that many believed that the United States and Egypt could not sustain their relationship, but in his view the responsibility for sustaining the relationship rested on their personal ability to demonstrate patience and statesmanship in order to ensure their countries' continued cooperation.²⁷

Following this missive, Nasser met with Badeau and appeared more agreeable to the US disengagement framework hallmarked by three key steps: a visit to Egypt and Saudi Arabia from a neutral UN intermediary, the formulation of a plan for the disengagement of the conflict, and verification missions to guarantee the compliance to that withdrawal agreement by all parties . Nasser further concurred with the American assessment that a prolonged conflict did not appeal to him but added that continued Saudi support for royalists necessitated his military's presence in Yemen. Additionally, the Egyptian President feared that a withdrawal of his troops might allow the Saudi-backed rebels to gain a foothold in Yemen, especially if the Saudis failed to similarly disengage. If the US could assuage these fears, Nasser indicated he would be agreeable to a special representative attempting to negotiate an end to the war. However, the Egyptian leader worried that the United States did not possess sufficient influence over the Saudi Arabian government since it had failed to produce any tangible results to that point. Overall, the discussion, according to Badeau, showed promise for the introduction of a special representative from the United Nations to initiate a disengagement process.²⁸

²⁷ John Kennedy via Dean Rusk to Gamal Nasser via John Badeau, 19 January 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 135.

²⁸ John Badeau to State Department, 24 January 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 141.

In late February, the United Nations selected Ralph Bunche, UN Undersecretary for Special Political Affairs, to lead the disengagement process. Yet, Kennedy knew that this effort had little promise of success if the Saudis continued to actively support the royalists. The United States could not expect Nasser to agree to any withdrawal of troops as long as Saudi Arabia continued to arm the opponents of the new Yemeni regime.²⁹ Therefore, the administration dispatched Ellsworth Bunker, personal emissary of the President, to apply pressure on Prince Faysal to cease his aid to the royalists and accept the UN disengagement negotiators.³⁰ At the same time, Kennedy personally pleaded with Nasser to demonstrate good will by refraining from strikes on Saudi positions beyond Yemen during Bunker's trip to meet with Faysal. This, the American President hoped, might encourage the Saudi leader to agree to a UN disengagement process.³¹ Nasser agreed to Kennedy's request.³² In early March, in light of Bunker's proposals and signs of Egyptian good will, Faysal agreed in principle to allow the Bunche disengagement mediators to begin their work.³³

As members of the Kennedy Administration reviewed the Yemen situation in early March, they recognized a peace process was within grasp. As they waited on Faysal's final acceptance of Bunche without conditions (as required by the Secretary

²⁹ Presidential Meeting on Yemen, 25 February 1963, memo of conversation, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 164.

³⁰ William Brubeck to McGeorge Bundy, 28 February 1963, memo, document 170; and John Kennedy to Prince Faysal, 1 March 1963, letter, document 172, both in *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*.

³¹ John Kennedy via Dean Rusk to Gamal Nasser via John Badeau, 2 March 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 175.

³² Editorial Note, 4 March 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 176.

³³ Ellsworth Bunker to State Department, 8 March 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 181.

General of the United Nations) the Kennedy Administration believed disengagement was within reach based on the conditions already received from Nasser for a withdrawal of his troops: a public pledge from Faysal to withdraw aid from the royalists, removal of Yemeni royals from their safe haven in Saudi Arabia, and British and Saudi recognition of the Yemen Arab Republic.³⁴

After months of squabbling and finger-pointing, President Kennedy and his national security and foreign policy teams believed they had reached agreement on a process for discussions to end the conflict in Yemen. To this point, the Saudis had presented the most problems for the administration, as they continued to provide aid to the royalists, which escalated the conflict with Nasser. Nonetheless, Kennedy still maintained an even-handed policy toward Arab Nationalism and Nasser. Despite the attacks by both sides, the American President maintained a course, at least until the spring of 1963, that tried to placate both sides of the Yemini proxy war.

Nevertheless, despite having an agreement on the framework for discussions, the disengagement negotiation process dragged on as the United Nations failed to swiftly send Bunche as mediator. Eager to garner an agreement to begin the process of withdrawal without further delay, Kennedy again sent Bunker to lead negotiations between the sides in early April. The ambassador successfully secured an armistice agreement from Nasser predicated on eight key points: suspension of Saudi aid to the royalists; prevention of the former Yemeni monarch's family from subversive activity;

³⁴ Philips Talbot to Dean Rusk, 11 March 1963, memo, document 187; Robert Komer to John Kennedy, 11 March 1963, memo, document 188; and memorandum for the Record, 11 March 1963, memo of conversation, document 189, all in *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*.

termination of Egyptian attacks on royalist forces in Saudi territory; establishment of a demilitarized zone; withdrawal of Egyptian troops within fifteen days of the Saudis ending aid to the royalists; deployment of impartial observers to the demilitarized zone; cooperation by the Saudi Arabian, Egyptian, and Yemeni governments with a UN representative to verify disengagement; and cessation of the Yemeni government's propaganda against other Arab countries. Yet, Bunker feared that securing the same agreement from Faysal might prove more difficult.³⁵ However, after some haggling over details between the Crown Prince and Bunker, Saudi Arabia agreed to the disengagement process with a caveat that the United States would agree to send an air squadron to the Saudis in hopes that it would deter further Egyptian aerial attacks and coerce Nasser to abide by his side of the withdrawal arrangement.³⁶ On April 29, Secretary General of the United Nations U Thant announced to the UN Security Council that all the parties involved in the Yemeni conflict had agreed to the disengagement agreement.³⁷

At this point, the Kennedy administration appeared to have orchestrated a successful agreement that maintained the status quo in their relationships in the Middle East. Both Nasser and Faysal remained friendly and cooperative with the American President. Moreover, Kennedy's New Frontier policy in the region persisted; he effectively demonstrated support for Arab Nationalism while also maintaining his close ties with his royalist ally in Saudi Arabia. However, problems associated with the

³⁵ Ellsworth Bunker via John Badeau to State Department, 3 April 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 205.

³⁶ Ellsworth Bunker via Parker Hart to State Department, 7 April 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 209.

³⁷ Editorial Note, 10 April 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 211.

verification of the disengagement agreement soon derailed the New Frontiersman's initial optimism about peace in Yemen.

A lack of communication and the failure of those charged with executing the disengagement agreement led to delays that allowed for the renewal of aggression in Yemen. The first real sign of problems occurred in late May when the United Nations postponed sending its representatives to the site of the conflict. Without the verification observers on the ground, tempers started to flare between the sides once again. Since the formal agreement had not yet taken effect, Faysal continued to provide aid to the royalists throughout the month of May. This, in turn, angered Nasser and provoked an Egyptian retaliatory raid against Saudi aid supplies in Yemen. This situation threatened to reignite the war, and the Kennedy administration understood that.³⁸

Facing this threat of a renewed war, the US President confronted the prospect of having to send an air squadron to Saudi Arabia, and he approved the transfer of the squadron in the middle of June. However, following a public statement from US Congressman Emanuel Celler indicating that America was sending some Jewish troops to Saudi Arabia as part of the air squadron, Prince Faysal issued an ultimatum to the United States to publicly denounce the comments of the congressman, resulting in a stalemate between the two leaders. In a meeting with his staff, Rusk noted that Kennedy had placed the deployment of the squadron on hold due to Faysal's ultimatum. Yet, by the end of June, Faysal backed away from his demand, and the United States delivered the aircraft

³⁸ Robert Komer to John Kennedy, 24 May 1963, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 256.

to the Saudis.³⁹ This episode represents a point of departure between the United States and Saudi Arabia. While Nasser continued to demonstrate restraint, Faysal did not hesitate to attack the Americans. In this case, the Saudis attempted to use their friendship and strategic relationship with the United States to demonstrate their prestige by forcing the Americans to issue a statement dictated by Saudi Arabia. Yet, Nasser chose to remain silent on the issue. While this possessed some hope of encouraging Kennedy to remain steadfast in his support of both Nasser and the cause of Arab Nationalism, the continued failure of the Egyptian leader's forces to withdraw from Yemen made it increasingly difficult for Kennedy to justify his New Frontier in the Middle East.

By the end of June, the disengagement process that had appeared so hopeful just a couple months earlier was now deeply vulnerable. As royalist factions within Yemen made gains, Nasser insisted that he might not be able to withdraw his troops as he agreed to during the Bunker meetings. As long as the Yemen Arab Republic remained threatened by factions within the country, Nasser did not feel comfortable removing his military.⁴⁰ This new predicament posed new problems for Kennedy's hopes of a swift end to the proxy conflict.

By the middle of July, the folly of the administration's earlier belief that it had obtained disengagement became clear. As the Saudis continued to arm the royalists and failed to adhere to the Bunker agreement, Nasser renewed his air attacks on Saudi aid

³⁹ Editorial Note, 13 June 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 270; and "Saudi Arabia Lets Jews in US Units Serve on Her Soil," *New York Times*, 10 June 1963, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Harold Saunders to Carl Kaysen, 26 June 1963, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 280.

supply stockpiles. Moreover, though Nasser had removed some Egyptian troops during the spring, the Saudis' failure to maintain their part of the agreement caused a reversal of the withdrawal of Egyptian military personnel.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Komer continued to paint a more optimistic picture for President Kennedy. In his opinion, the war was still under control, but Nasser's failure to withdraw troops and live up to his side of the deal was a significant obstacle.⁴² In other words, while Badeau recognized the good efforts of Nasser toward disengagement as well as the bad behavior of the Saudis, Komer placed the blame squarely on the Egyptians.

The problem for disengagement in the summer of 1963 was twofold. First, the failure of the United Nations to swiftly build upon the momentum created by Bunker left a void that allowed for renewed hostilities. Second, the situation in Yemen became increasingly destabilized, and this forced Nasser to respond by adamantly maintaining his forces to preserve the Yemen Arab Republic. Hence, the environment in which the parties had reached the initial agreement no longer existed. The delay of ensuring the withdrawal had allowed for renewed tensions and granted time for a different strategic climate to characterize the proxy war.

In an attempt to fill the gap created by the void in the disengagement process, the United States quietly started attempting to orchestrate direct discussions between the Saudis and Egyptians. Kennedy's staff recognized that both sides in the conflict were not making their best efforts to maintain the agreement fostered by Bunker, so direct talks

⁴¹ John Badeau to State Department, 11 July 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 294.

⁴² Robert Komer to John Kennedy, 12 July 1963, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 295.

might at least keep them from open conflict with one another. The United States had already secured approval from Nasser for such discussions.⁴³ However, Crown Prince Faysal rejected this US proposal.⁴⁴

By October, the situation threatened to become desperate as the initial promise of disengagement dissipated and the infrastructure for withdrawal became threatened. The United Nations was considering withdrawing its observation mission to Yemen due to a lack of funding and Nasser was still in no position to remove his troops. Moreover, American planes were stationed on the Saudi side and any flare-up in the conflict might involve those aircraft. Komer advocated staying the course and continuing to pressure both the United Nations to prolong its mission and the Saudis and Egyptians to “maintain” their disengaged status.⁴⁵ President Kennedy agreed with this assessment and ordered his staff to continue the pressure on all sides.⁴⁶ However, while the administration stated it wanted to encourage both parties in the conflict, the tone taken toward Nasser was much harsher than that toward Faysal. Rusk directed Badeau to inform the Egyptian President in mid-October that the United States believed the Saudis were adhering to their portion of the disengagement process, but that Egypt was failing to do so. Moreover, if Nasser failed to follow through with his promises, the resulting conditions threatened to end the ceasefire—and the Egyptians would be clearly at fault.

⁴³ Robert Komer to John Kennedy, 16 August 1963, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 313.

⁴⁴ Dean Rusk to John Badeau, 26 August 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 318.

⁴⁵ Robert Komer to John Kennedy, 7 October 1963, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 334.

⁴⁶ National Security Action Memorandum No. 262, 10 October 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 337.

One of the main reasons for the blame resting with Nasser was his negative propaganda campaign aimed at subverting the monarch in Saudi Arabia. As long as this persisted, the United States proved unwilling to coerce Faysal to agree to direct talks with Nasser.⁴⁷

At the same time, the British government was detailing its version of events to Washington. In its view, Nasser was clearly at fault for the failure of the disengagement agreement, so it advocated a harsher stance on the Egyptian President. Rusk assured Her Majesty's Government that the United States concurred with this view and planned to enhance its pressure on Nasser.⁴⁸ At this juncture, the Kennedy Administration was receiving pressure from the Saudis and the British. With two very important strategic allies lobbying the American government to cease its friendly relations with Nasser and to enhance its pressure on the Egyptian leader, combined with the perceived continued aggression of Nasser against Saudi Arabia both through aerial and propaganda attacks, it likely became increasingly difficult for the American President to justify his support for the Arab Nationalist leader.

Accordingly, President Kennedy sent a harshly worded letter to Nasser decrying Egypt's failure to live-up to its commitments. In this message, Kennedy stated that he believed the Saudis had complied with their side of the agreement, but he could not say the same of the Egyptians due to their failure to adequately withdrawal the appropriate amount of troops and their continued subversive propaganda campaign against Saudi Arabia's monarchy. While the American President recognized the numerous problems

⁴⁷ Dean Rusk to Consulate General in Istanbul, 16 October 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 340.

⁴⁸ Dean Rusk to Ormsby Gore, 19 October 1963, letter, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 343.

associated with Nasser's withdrawal of troops—primarily the possibility of a destabilized YAR government—Kennedy reminded Nasser that he had agreed to such a withdrawal publicly through the United Nations. Lastly, the President personally pleaded with the Egyptian leader to change course so that there could be a peaceful outcome in Yemen, else his counterpart would face harsh criticism at home and abroad for his continued friendly relations with Nasser.⁴⁹ The Egyptian leader's response to Kennedy denied the claim that Egypt was failing to adhere to the agreement and instead pointed the finger at the Saudis for continuing hostilities in the demilitarized zone. Additionally, Nasser believed his troop withdrawals were within the appropriate scale required by his understanding from his discussions with Bunker, a position agreed with by the United Nations.⁵⁰

In contradiction of the Kennedy Administration's claims that Nasser was at fault, the UN planned to publish its report on the United Nations Yemen Observation Mission (UNYOM) and to end its role in the disengagement process in early November citing the failure of the Saudis to engage in the process. This prompted anguish within the administration and pushed Kennedy to pressure Faysal into agreeing to an extension of the UNYOM in order to prevent Nasser from gaining the advantage among and publicity from the international public for his role in advocating for peace.⁵¹

⁴⁹ John Kennedy via Dean Rusk to Gamal Nasser via John Badeau, 19 October 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 347.

⁵⁰ John Badeau to State Department, 21 October 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 348.

⁵¹ George Ball to Parker Hart, 28 October 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 350.

The finger-pointing and delay continued through the end of Kennedy's presidency. By November 22, 1963, the New Frontiersmen had achieved little progress in negotiating an end to the Yemen proxy war that had upended their promising start in Middle East policy. Though they originally gained favor with the preeminent Arab Nationalist, Nasser, the failure of the two leaders to view the disengagement agreement in the same light over the course of the summer of 1963 led to a hardening of relations. As shown in the previous chapter, Nasser felt betrayed by Kennedy by the end of the American's presidency. The mutual trust and friendship they had established in the two years prior was quickly vanishing.

Toward the end of Kennedy's administration, he started to favor the Saudis over the Egyptians. As discussed earlier, this was not the case as late as the spring of 1963. To that point, Kennedy had attempted to maintain an even hand and keep both Nasser and Faysal happy with US policy toward the conflict. However, as time progressed, Kennedy's even-handed approach dissipated. This policy shift primarily resulted from the external pressures of Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and time. While both the British and Saudi governments demonstrated their opposition to the Yemen Arab Republic's existence from the start, their repeated condemnations of Nasser's failure to withdraw troops through the summer encouraged Kennedy into taking a harsher tone with Egypt.

The most important foreign push factor for Kennedy's decision to side with the Saudis by the end of the conflict was not a foreign government, rather, it was time. Between the spring and fall of 1963, Kennedy had lost a considerable degree of faith and trust in Nasser. While the Egyptian seemed amicable to withdrawing his forces in the spring, that changed as the summer wore on. Delay by the United Nations in sending

observers into Yemen and the Saudi refusal to cease its aid to the royalists caused this change in Nasser's approach. Due to this renewed aggression that resulted between spring and summer, Kennedy's frustration with Nasser increased as summer turned to fall. While the United Nations cited Saudi Arabia as the reason disengagement lagged, Kennedy's irritation that his new friend would not adhere to the guidelines of the agreement, as the Americans saw it, caused him to alter his Middle East strategy from that of a New Frontiersman to a traditional cold warrior.

Ultimately, pressure from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Kingdom, as well as the factor of time, pushed Kennedy to alter his support for Nasser and Arab Nationalism. While the American President had not abandoned the peace process and his relationship with Egypt by the end of his life, it was clear that his mood toward the conflict had shifted. As the United Nations attempted to blame Faysal, the US national security and foreign policy staff fretted over this and tried to ensure the blame rested upon Nasser. Since Kennedy's presidency ended early and abruptly, due to his assassination at the end of November 1963, it is impossible to account for the next steps he might have taken to achieve an end to the Yemen conflict. What is evident, however, is that the New Frontiersman's frustration with the prolonged nature of disengagement had altered his stance toward Nasser. Along with the foreign influences on Kennedy, multiple members of his administration, as well as the US Congress, advocated for this shift in policy. The next chapter reviews those internal influences.

CHAPTER IV

The Decision-Making Processes of the New Frontiersmen in the West Wing

Following nearly two years of developing a relationship with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's rapprochement rested upon shaky-ground by the end of his administration. A proxy war in Yemen and pressure from US allies in the Middle East, as well as key players in the American foreign policy apparatus, had convinced Kennedy to alter his position on Nasser and Arab Nationalism. After coming to office promising to chart a "New Frontier" in US foreign relations, Kennedy attempted to achieve this policy in the Middle East by forging a mutually-beneficial bond with a leader of the Arab World. However, Kennedy's perception that Nasser refused to comply with a disengagement agreement in Yemen deeply threatened that policy by the end of the New Frontiersman's time in office. While the previous chapter examined the foreign forces that precipitated Kennedy's change to a more tradition policy, this chapter explores the factors within the United States and in Kennedy's own administration that encouraged the young president's policy shift. By the end of his presidency, multiple influential individuals within the United States were working diligently to convince the President to abandon his rapprochement with Nasser. Though Kennedy never fully severed ties with the Egyptian leader, the final letter the American President sent to the Arab leader made clear that the bond between them was approaching a breaking point.

While complete agreement among Kennedy's advisors on his New Frontier Middle East strategy never existed, certain key members altered their positions as the

relationship with Nasser developed. Robert Komer, a National Security Council staffer in charge of the Middle East, was the most notable of these staffers who shifted their advice to the President. Other key Kennedy advisors included Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State Phillips Talbot, US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Parker Hart, US Ambassador to the United Arab Republic John Badeau, and Deputy Special Counsel to the President Myer Feldman. These individuals and the US Congress exerted varying degrees of influence on President Kennedy. However, it is important to note that the final decision was, of course the President's. Kennedy, disenchanted with Nasser's failure to comply with repeated pleas to moderate his foreign interference in Arab matters and his rebuffs of Kennedy's multiple goodwill efforts (especially US aid and the President's openness with the Egyptian leader) came to the decision on his own. Yet, the advocacy and advice provided by these internal forces informed Kennedy's tacit abandonment of the New Frontier in the Middle East.

In determining who influenced the President on Middle East policy, this chapter relies heavily upon oral history transcripts. While some traditional documental sources (such as memoranda, telegrams, and newspaper articles) were consulted in this analysis, the use of interviews of former members of Kennedy's staff illuminates the inter-personal relationships inherent in the diplomatic process. Moreover, these sources tend to provide greater detail into the specific policy opinions of members of the Kennedy Administration.

While the New Frontiersmen entered office eager to alter business-as-usual in US international relations, a contingent within the bureaucracy did not share this enthusiasm.

Particularly, some of the older analysts in the US State Department felt that Kennedy's rapprochement and personal correspondence with Nasser were doomed to fail and advised against it.¹ A group within the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) concurred with the faction of conservatives in the State Department who argued that an engagement with the leader of Arab Nationalism posed a serious threat to American interests in the region. The CIA operatives further asserted that Nasser was either a communist himself or a puppet of the Soviets. In their view, Kennedy's policy should have been to oppose the Egyptian President at every possible opportunity.²

A more serious threat, however, to Kennedy's New Frontier policy in the Middle East was the dissent of his ambassadors in the region. Specifically, the US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Parker T. Hart, disagreed with the considerable leniency of American policy toward Nasser. From the beginning, the ambassador worried that the White House and State Department allowed Nasser to go too far in his attempts to foster Arab Nationalism, which Hart viewed as provoking instability in the Middle East. Also, having spent time during the Eisenhower Administration in the State Department's Near East division learning about the Egyptian President's tendencies, Hart argued that his assessment of Nasser's character and interests informed him that the Arab leader was not sincere in his efforts at reengagement with the United States.³ While the ambassador did

¹ Phillips Talbot, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, oral history, 27 July 1965, second session, transcript, p. 26, Oral History Program, JFKL.

² John Badeau, US Ambassador to the United Arab Republic, *The Middle East Remembered* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 1983), 185.

³ Parker T. Hart, US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, 27 May 1969, interview 2, transcript, p. 42, Oral History Program, JFKL.

not disagree with the premise of seeking areas of agreement with Nasser, when it was in the American interest, he challenged the speed and intensity of the administration's rapprochement efforts.⁴ Moreover, Hart believed that Nasser's intent to try to implement his vision of Arab Nationalism across the region did not fit the needs of many of the smaller nations.⁵ Moreover, Kennedy's Ambassador to the United Arab Republic (UAR), John Badeau, also expressed concerns about Kennedy's policy toward Nasser. According to Komer (one of the architects of the administration's Middle East policy), Badeau initially demonstrated a serious reluctance to agree with the friendlier policy regarding Nasser. It took nearly the entire first year of Kennedy's presidency for the UAR diplomat to accept the rapprochement. This only happened in December 1961 when the ambassador met with Komer and Phillips Talbot. In that meeting, the two advocates of the New Frontier convinced Badeau of the merits of the policy, and from that point onward, he became an ardent advocate for American support of Arab Nationalism.⁶ Therefore, even some within Kennedy's Middle East team, who were appointed by the President, did not initially share in the New Frontier aspirations in the Arab World, yet Kennedy proceeded with reimagining America's involvement in Middle East politics.

Unlike some of the traditional elements within the bureaucracy, a host of Kennedy's earliest foreign policy appointments readily accepted the challenge of a New Frontier in the Arab World. From very early on, two key members of Kennedy's team,

⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶ Robert Komer, Staffer on the National Security Council, interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, 22 December 1969, interview 5, transcript, pp. 62, 78, Oral History Program, JFKL.

McGeorge Bundy and Deputy National Security Advisor Walt Rostow, advised the President of their belief in a need for a different outlook toward Arab Nationalism. Kennedy readily agreed with their evaluation that reassessing the relationship with Nasser and the Arab World needed to be a key component of the New Frontier.⁷ Therefore, the National Security Council (NSC) staff was united in its support of rapprochement; Bundy, Rostow, and Komer all agreed on the prospects of engaging the Arab Nationalist leader. To accomplish their vision, the members of the NSC staff encouraged the use of development aid to persuade leaders such as Nasser to focus on internal progress rather than foreign intervention.⁸ In addition to the NSC, the State and Defense departments, according to Komer, tended to support the Arab World and American engagement therein. This stemmed from the belief by both institutions that in the Middle East, US “strategic and economic interests were emphatically with the Arabs.”⁹ Meaning that the American business interests, particularly with oil, as well as the need to maintain the balance of power in the Cold War in the region rested with cultivating relationships with Arab nations, not with increasing support to Israel.

Yet, from the very beginning of Kennedy’s engagement with Arab Nationalism, two camps formed within the administration’s foreign policy establishment: those who believed it possessed no chance of success and came at too high a cost and those who argued that the Arab World represented a prime spot to put the ideals of the New Frontier

⁷ Komer, interview by Elizabeth Farmer, 16 July 1964, interview 2, transcript, pp. 2-3, Oral History Program, JFKL.

⁸ April R. Summitt, *John F. Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations: A History of American Foreign Policy in the 1960s* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 2008), 237-38.

⁹ Komer, interview 5, pp. 77.

into practice. While the President concurred with the latter contingent early in his presidency, political and strategic implications in the region—especially following the Yemeni conflict—subsequently caused him to re-evaluate his policies. Likewise, many initial supporters, though not all, also reconsidered American support for Arab Nationalism over the course of the administration.

The first true test of Kennedy's support for the "new wave" in the Middle East, as well as his relationship with Nasser, came when the President approved an Israeli request for HAWK surface-to-air missiles in September 1962. This episode highlights the decision-making process employed by the New Frontier President. While Kennedy sanctioned a military weapons agreement with Israel, this did not end his endeavor to gain favor with the Arabs and Nasser. However, it did represent one of the first moves by the American leader to follow a more traditional course of action, support for Israel at the cost of possibly angering Arab nations and Nasser. This decision highlights Kennedy's decision-making analyses in the Middle East. In selling weapons to the Jewish state, the American President was hoping to take a balanced approach to the region by attempting to incentivize the Israelis from cultivating a nuclear arsenal while also continuing his rapprochement with leader of Arab Nationalism. Yet, the arms deal was seemingly a departure from Kennedy's expressed goal of reimagining US foreign policy because it perpetuated and enhanced traditional American support for the Jewish state.¹⁰

¹⁰ US President Harry S. Truman granted formal diplomatic recognition to Israel in 1948, and Kennedy's predecessor, President Eisenhower, also supported the Jewish state in the Middle East.

The American sale of HAWK surface-to-air defensive weapons to Israel represented the first real military weapons agreement between the two nations, representing the genesis of the US-Israel military alliance. Yet, the HAWK sale was largely inconsistent with the President's goal of an unconventional, balanced approach to the Middle East. However, a myriad of forces persuaded Kennedy to accept this seeming contradiction. Most notably, the American President feared the possibility of Israel producing nuclear weapons. In his opinion, and that of his National Security staff, ensuring the Jewish state possessed sufficient conventional deterrents to Arab aggression held the greatest potential for preventing Israel from creating a nuclear arsenal. Yet, the State and Defense departments opposed the deal. According to Komer, State opposed the agreement because of its inherent pro-Arab stance based on its assessment that US strategic and economic interests are more aligned with the Arabs. Additionally, Komer articulated that the Department of Defense wanted to get out of the business of providing military aid to "piddling countries," which is how it apparently viewed Israel.¹¹ Myer Feldman advocated for the agreement with the Israelis, though Kennedy and the staff discounted his advice on the issue because Feldman's loyalty to the Israelis was well known in the White House; indeed Komer characterized Feldman's role during this negotiation as "Feldman played the role of lawyer for the Israelis" during this negotiation.¹² Despite the advice of the State Department, as well as America's military analysts at the Defense Department, the President agreed to the HAWK sale.

¹¹ Komer, interview 5, p. 76-77.

¹² Ibid., 73.

Consequently, the President sided with the recommendations of the NSC staff, led by Bundy and Komer, over the suggestions of the State and Defense departments. The hopes of those two advisors in granting Israel's request for weapons extended beyond nuclear considerations and included the prospect of an increased willingness on the part of the Israelis to compromise on Arab issues.¹³ Some in the State Department, including Secretary Rusk and Talbot, cautioned against using military aid to force or coerce the Israelis into negotiations that they might view as contrary to their national interests.¹⁴

The larger implication of Kennedy's decision as it related to the New Frontier in the Middle East, however, was the Arab response to this significant perceived shift in American policy. This agreement overturned policy precedent that discouraged the United States from being a major source of weapons for any nation in the Middle East.¹⁵ As previous chapters noted, Kennedy's team informed Nasser prior to the sale, and no major protests occurred in Arab nations. Komer explained the reasoning given to Nasser for the Israeli arms deal; since the US possessed no other way to guarantee Israel could adequately defend itself from an Arab attack, and since Arabs had already been receiving weapons from the Soviet Union, the United States government viewed the deal as necessary to provide Israel with the technology needed to defend itself. Despite his reservations, Nasser seemed to accept the administration's logic or at least was able to see the US perspective sufficiently to proceed with efforts to improve his relations with

¹³ Summitt, *Kennedy and US-Middle East*, 238.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁵ Max Frankel, "U.S. Will Supply Israel Missiles in Policy Change," *New York Times*, 27 September 1962, p. 1.

Kennedy.¹⁶ While this episode did not result in major hostilities between the United States and Arab nations, particularly Nasser's Egypt, it represented an initial departure from the New Frontier aspirations of Kennedy's team. Another important lesson from the missile sale was the prominence of the National Security staff, not the State or Defense departments, in influencing the President. This is important because as a conflict in Yemen began to strain the Nasser-Kennedy relationship, it was the NSC staff whose recommendations the American President followed most consistently.

Though the HAWK sale signified a minor setback to Kennedy's hope for a new type of American relationship with the Middle East, the first major crack in the New Frontier policy in the Arab World resulted from the proxy war in Yemen. As previous chapters discussed, after a coup in late September of 1962 that dismantled the Imamate in that nation, a revolutionary regime gained control of the government and named itself the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). Nasser, seeing an opportunity to expand his dream of Arab Nationalism, supported the revolutionary government. On the other side, Saudi Arabia, fearful of continued revolutions that replaced monarchies in the Middle East, supported royalist forces that opposed the new government and sought to regain power. The United States, led by Kennedy, attempted to mediate the conflict and prevent the proxy war from escalating into open hostility between Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which would force Kennedy to choose between abandoning his New Frontier with Nasser or abandoning a traditional ally in Saudi Arabia. Throughout this crisis, the President's decision-making was on display. As the previous chapter articulated, the Kennedy

¹⁶ Komer, interview 5, p. 81.

Administration attempted to serve as a mediator, along with the United Nations, between the two sides of the conflict. However, neither the Egyptians nor the Saudis were willing to fully withdraw their support for their allies in Yemen; therefore, a lengthy disengagement agreement negotiation process ensued.¹⁷

The first obstacle to Kennedy's support of Arab Nationalism was evident from the outset of the war in Yemen. After the revolutionary, Arab Nationalist YAR assumed control, Kennedy faced the decision of whether or not to grant it formal US recognition. On one hand, if he granted the honor, the President risked angering many of his conservative allies, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Kingdom. On the other hand, if Kennedy failed to recognize the revolutionary government, new wave governments in the region might deservedly question his commitment to the cause of Arab Nationalism. Therefore, the President was stuck in a no-win situation, either he would abandon the New Frontier or neglect an ally. Faced with this unwelcome prospect, Kennedy turned to his advisors for their opinions on granting formal recognition to the YAR.

The American foreign policy team held differing views on the prospect of recognition. The members of the National Security Council staff and a majority of the key individuals in the State Department, including Rusk, argued for bestowing the Yemen Arab Republic with the privileges associated with formal US recognition. Komer

¹⁷ Nasser supported the revolutionary government of the YAR and the Saudis, led by Crown Prince Faysal, provided aid to the royalist rebels intent on reinstating the Imamate. President Kennedy, in hopes of ending the war, authorized multiple emissary missions from the US government to help negotiate a cease-fire. While some agreements were reached, none of them were executed in a manner consistent with Kennedy's desire for a swift end to the proxy conflict.

argued for recognition on the basis that the Saudis and Jordanians might become disillusioned with their war efforts if the United States took a firm stance in support of the YAR early in the conflict in an attempt to appease their American allies.¹⁸ Bundy and Talbot joined in Komer's reasoning. However, Feldman and Hart both argued that Kennedy should withhold recognition. Indeed, according to Talbot, a rather large group of people believed recognition was a mistake because it tacitly sanctioned the "naked seizure of a country."¹⁹ Hart alleged that he initially supported granting the YAR's request, but when its government started espousing anti-Saudi, anti-American, and anti-British propaganda, his outlook on the situation shifted to a harsher stance on the new Yemeni government.²⁰ Nevertheless, despite the counsel of his ambassador in Saudi Arabia, Kennedy sided with the recommendation of his National Security Council staff.

The American President agreed to grant recognition to the Yemen Arab Republic only after it agreed to meet a few conditions, including a statement from the YAR publicly confirming its commitment to focusing on domestic affairs and international peace efforts.²¹ This conditional recognition represented a success for the New Frontier policy of support for Arab Nationalism. While Kennedy knew, and expected, to receive a great deal of criticism from his allies in the region and in the United Kingdom, he

¹⁸ Komer to Kennedy, 21 November 1962, memo, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963: vol. 18* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1995), document 103 [hereafter *FRUS*].

¹⁹ Talbot, interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, 13 August 1970, interview 2, transcript, pp. 50-51, Oral History Program, JFKL.

²⁰ Hart, interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, 15 April 1969, interview 1, transcript, p. 15, Oral History Program, JFKL.

²¹ US State Department to US Embassy in the United Arab Republic, 14 December 1962, telegram, document 114; and Editorial Note, 18-19 December 1962, document 116, both in *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*.

continued his support of the new wave of leadership for the Middle East. Additionally, the American President demonstrated his willingness, once again, to follow the advice of Bundy and Komer over the concerns of others within his administration. As the Yemen War continued, Kennedy's views on Nasser and Arab Nationalism started to change. Moreover, the opinions of his staff shifted as well. What did not change, however, was Kennedy's reliance on his White House National Security staff for advice and counsel on Middle East matters.

By the spring of 1963, the war in Yemen was taking a toll on Kennedy's Middle East strategy. His rapprochement with Nasser was at a standstill and his allies were seeking increased assurances of American support. Principally among these, Saudi Arabia persisted in its pleas for displays of Kennedy's support. As a result of Egyptian bombing attacks against the Saudis, the National Security Council believed the demonstration best calibrated to showing US support for their royalist ally was a token deployment of US military aircraft to the Saudis. This US air squadron deployment was known as Operation Hard Surface, which launched in June 1963.²² However, before Kennedy authorized this mission, he waited on the recommendation of Komer.

The deployment of the air squadron posed a challenge to the administration's support for Nasser and Arab Nationalism. By providing token military aid to the Saudis in the proxy war, the Americans risked their relationship with the Egyptian President. Moreover, as late as one month prior to the authorization of Operation Hard Surface,

²² Brubeck to Bundy, 24 February 1963, memo, document 163; Komer to Kennedy, 13 June 1963, memo, document 269; and Editorial Note, 13 June 1963, document 270, all in *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*.

Komer cautioned against the exercise as a result of increased Saudi aggression in Yemen. Kennedy agreed with his advisor's recommendation, relayed through Bundy, to delay launching the mission.²³ However, the following month, as the conflict continued and the Saudis offered promises to decrease aid to the royalists, Komer altered his recommendation and the planes were delivered to the Saudis. As the war progressed, he became increasingly aggressive toward Nasser. Even early in the conflict, he advocated for a harsher stance toward the Arab leader than Bundy, Kennedy, or the State Department in hopes of deterring further aggression by Nasser.²⁴ Additionally, by the summer of 1963, Komer was suggesting allowing US military aircraft to actively engage in patrolling the borders of Yemen, a step beyond the scope of Hard Surface. Ambassador Badeau, however, took exception to the proposal of such a policy.²⁵ Despite the deployment of the squadron, the President never authorized the US military assets in Saudi Arabia to engage directly with the Egyptian or Yemeni forces. Therefore, Kennedy forged a balanced policy between that advocated by Komer and the objection of Badeau.

As the previous chapter noted, at this point the disengagement process, led by the United Nations and a personal emissary of the US President, Ellsworth Bunker, was well underway. However, continued aggression by both sides of the conflict continued to derail discussions of withdrawal of military support from either the Saudis or Egyptians. As was previously demonstrated, the American President placed the blame on Nasser for

²³ Komer to Bundy, 1 May 1963, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 233.

²⁴ Komer, interview 2, p. 20.

²⁵ Badeau, interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, 25 February 1969, transcript, p. 15, Oral History Program, JKFL.

the failure of the disengagement process and became increasingly frustrated with the Egyptian President. Therefore, when Kennedy authorized Operation Hard Surface in the summer of 1963, he was already beginning to wane in his support for Arab Nationalism and Nasser.

Consequently, in October 1963, the American leader sent a message to Nasser recognizing the decline in their relationship as a result of Kennedy's perception that the Egyptians had failed to adhere to the disengagement process in Yemen.²⁶ This came after Kennedy's chief advisor on Yemen, Komer, continued to advocate for enhanced pressure on Nasser. To that end, in July 1963, Komer admitted to Bundy, "I hate to sound defensive, but even I confess that staying on even keel with slippery UAR is hard. It seems to involve one prickly issue after another."²⁷ Komer was not ready to abandon all hope, yet he did advocate a tougher stance toward the Egyptian leader. As the National Security Council staff took a more hardline view of Arab Nationalism with Nasser's failure to abide by terms of withdrawal, Kennedy agreed to threaten the abandonment of his New Frontier strategy in the Middle East.

Additionally, less than one week before Kennedy's death, the United States Senate also encouraged a tougher stance on Nasser. On November 16, 1963, Alaskan Democratic Senator Ernest Gruening proposed an amendment to the Foreign Aid Authorization Bill that would prohibit US aid to any country the President deemed as hostile, or planning to become confrontational, with the United States or any country that

²⁶ Kennedy to Nasser, 19 October 1963, telegram, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 347.

²⁷ Komer to Bundy, 15 July 1963, memo, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 296.

was receiving American aid (likely implying Israel). While the Gruening Amendment neglected to directly implicate Nasser in the text of the bill, the senator made it clear in his remarks that the legislation's intent was to prevent aid to Egypt as it continued its anti-Israel propaganda and the war in Yemen.²⁸ Gruening, who was pro-Israel, believed that Nasser was manipulating US aid to Egypt to fight for his own Arab Nationalist agenda rather than focus on development within his country. Furthermore, the Senator viewed Israel as the responsible nation in the region and therefore deserving of American support, while Nasser acted in a dictatorial fashion.²⁹ While the Gruening Amendment came too late to seriously influence Kennedy's decisions related to Nasser, it served as another reminder of the many detractors to the President's New Frontier policy in the Middle East. The vote of the US Senate, a distinguished deliberative body in which Kennedy had previously served, made it known that it questioned the tactic of support for Nasser.

To understand who influenced the President to alter his support for Nasser and Arab Nationalism, it is important to acknowledge that the decision-making style of Kennedy differed from the usual *modus operandi* in Washington. Multiple members of his staff noted in later interviews the prominence of the informal, *ad hoc* nature of the young President's diplomatic discussions. Moreover, the main Middle East foreign policy-making body in the Kennedy White House was the National Security Council, rather than the State Department. As historian Asher Orkaby noted, Komer primarily

²⁸ Felix Belfair, Jr., "Senate Approves Aid Bill of \$3.7 Billion by 63 to 17; Further Cut in Prospect," *New York Times*, 16 November 1963, pp. 1, 8.

²⁹ Summitt, *Kennedy and US-Middle East*, 218.

determined US policy in Yemen and did so with the full support of the President. During the proxy war, Komer coordinated all recommendations in the White House and then moved them up the chain-of-command for decisions.³⁰ As he later stated, this shift of policy-making structure was largely due to Kennedy's style. The President despised the long memoranda written by the State Department and preferred action-oriented documents that not only articulated the problem in a certain situation but also provided multiple solutions and next steps for alleviating the problem. So, the National Security staff in the White House screened all of the papers given to the President; this allowed Bundy and Komer the chance to place their own slant on State's suggestions and undoubtedly helped shape Kennedy's decisions. In Komer's opinion, this proved to be an effective and successful method of decision-making on national security matters.³¹

Moreover, multiple members of the Kennedy Administration recognized the key role of Komer on Middle East matters, as well as the NSC staffer's influence on the President. Bowles articulated, however, that when making important foreign policy decisions, Kennedy trusted his instincts and his discussions with Bundy.³² Importantly though, Bundy allowed Komer significant agency in forming the National Security Council staff's opinion on Middle East policy. Bundy expressed that Komer and Kennedy shared the same mindset and temperament on foreign policy; the staffer knew what the President wanted to accomplish and worked hard to implement those policies.

³⁰ Asher Orkaby, *Beyond the Arab Cold War: The International History of the Yemen Civil War, 1962-68* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47-48.

³¹ Komer, interview 5, pp. 26-27.

³² Chester Bowles, Deputy National Security Advisor, interview by Robert R. R. Brooks, 2 February 1965, interview 1, transcript, p. 23, Oral History Program, JFKL.

So, according to Bundy, he tried to stay out of Komer's way when it came to the Middle East; moreover, the region often served as a sideshow for the administration when compared to the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the beginning phases of the conflict in Vietnam. Therefore, as Bowles recognized that the President typically decided based on discussions with Bundy, Komer's opinion was typically relayed directly to Kennedy through the National Security Advisor, and the President often accepted those recommendations.³³ Talbot, seeing this informal structure from his position in the State Department, agreed in this analysis and recognized that Bundy "worked basically from Komer's analyses and recommendations, and these went to the President in that direction."³⁴ Therefore, on an institutional level, the White House's national security team, in this instance led by Komer, played the most significant role in influencing Kennedy. Yet, other factors inherently entered the New Frontiersmen policymakers' minds as they considered policy options for the Arab World.

Certainly, the power of the oil lobby in shaping American Middle East policy consistently receives attention in the historiography of the region. Yet, Komer downplayed oil's significance in the New Frontiersmen's decision-making. Specifically, he noted that he never felt pressure from the oil lobby to make certain policy recommendations during his time as the de facto Middle East advisor in the White House. Also, he did not suspect that Bundy or Kennedy felt such pressure either, as Komer asserted that the President would not have engaged with that type of attempt to coerce his

³³ McGeorge Bundy, US National Security Advisor, interview by Richard Neustadt, March 1964, interview 1, transcript, p. 68, Oral History Program, JFKL.

³⁴ Talbot, interview by Dennis J. O'Brien, 13 August 1970, interview 2, transcript, p. 10, Oral History Program, JFKL.

decision-making.³⁵ While Komer did hold a meeting with Kermit Roosevelt, a former CIA operative turned Gulf Oil lobbyist, the discussion only informed the NSC staffer of oil's worries about US policy toward Nasser, yet Komer felt no need to alter course based on the meeting because he did not believe the oil industry's concerns should determine foreign policy.³⁶ Still oil played some role in diplomacy; Badeau noted that he discussed the issue of oil with Nasser during the Yemeni proxy war, because the ambassador believed the Egyptian President needed to acknowledge American interests in the region, which included access to oil from the Arabian Peninsula.³⁷ Therefore, while oil certainly entered into the minds of the diplomats charged with convincing those in the Arab World of US interests, it was not a central factor in Kennedy's decision-making in the Middle East. As Komer stated, the oil lobby never exerted real pressure on the White House.

Overall, Kennedy's alteration of course in the Middle East resulted primarily from external factors, chiefly the Yemeni Civil War. After garnering the trust and friendship of Nasser, the outbreak of this proxy conflict in the autumn of 1962 destabilized the New Frontier strategy in the region. Of those internal forces that pushed Kennedy to distance himself from Nasser and Arab Nationalism, the advice of Bob Komer played the most prominent role. The informal and unconventional method of foreign policy decision-making employed by the Kennedy Administration frequently allowed the NSC staffer to put his recommendations in front of the President. Moreover, with Bundy recognizing the compatibility of Komer's and Kennedy's styles, the National Security Advisor stepped

³⁵ Komer, interview 5, pp. 85-86.

³⁶ Komer, 28 January 1963, memo of record, *FRUS, 1961-1963: vol. 18*, document 145.

³⁷ Badeau, interview, p. 21.

back in Middle East matters and allowed the more junior counselor to take a leading role in White House policy-shaping on Arab issues.

Certainly, the State and Defense departments, as well as some Israel sympathizers and the US Congress, played a role in Kennedy's decisions. Yet, none of those institutions or individuals swayed the President like his NSC staff. Only after the President received recommendations from Komer and/or Bundy to approve policy actions or take a tougher stance on issues did he do so. Though one of the departments made a suggestion, it was the NSC staff that decided what to place on the President's desk and how to frame the suggestions. This allowed Bundy and Komer to influence Kennedy in ways unavailable to those other potential influences who had indirect access to the President.

Komer, Bundy, Rostow and others all supported the New Frontier policy with Nasser and Arab Nationalism at the beginning, but the long struggle to gain the Egyptian leader's support and trust took a toll on them. As the conflict in Yemen progressed, hope for the rapprochement waned on the National Security Council's advisory team. Whereas they previously demonstrated a willingness to grant Nasser some leniency in his actions, they took harsher stances in the final year of the Kennedy presidency. For example, Komer's advocacy for Operation Hard Surface and the use of American military assets to coerce Nasser into disengagement in Yemen represented a significant shift in his recommendations toward the Arab leader.

This study of Kennedy's decision-making process illuminates the power of proximity to the President. As foreign policy choices increasingly moved to the White House from the State Department, National Security staffers gained added influence,

because they were able to screen information from the other departments and shape the way the President received documents. This enabled these staffers to shape American foreign policy in ways unlike the previous administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Kennedy wanted to do things differently, not only in policy outcomes, but also in policy-making. While the President's New Frontier policy in the Middle East proved largely unsuccessful, his shaping of the decision-making process charted a New Frontier in the bureaucracy that favored unconventional and untraditional methods of making decisions. In this environment, those without important titles and extensive management responsibilities, such as Komer, gained the ability to influence the President.

CHAPTER V

Lost Opportunities on the New Frontier

President John F. Kennedy, the youngest person elected to serve in the highest position in the United States of America, entered office promising to alter the course of history by forging “New Frontiers” at home and abroad. Representative of a new generation of leadership, he aspired to look beyond the dogmatic international order and find new ways to address the critical issues of war versus peace, poverty versus prosperity, and East versus West. The Middle East proved to be fertile ground for such an exploration. Oppressed and subjugated for decades following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Arab World welcomed a new wave of leadership in Washington, DC. Upon assuming the presidency, Kennedy set out on the path to establishing a working friendship with the leader of the Arab Nationalism movement, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The struggle to earn Nasser’s trust was difficult. Kennedy needed to demonstrate that his goal of supporting the independence of formerly oppressed peoples across the globe, and especially in the Third World, was more than simply rhetoric. To achieve this feat, the American President opened a frank correspondence with Nasser and treated him as an equal on the world stage. Moreover, Kennedy confirmed his commitment to supporting the domestic aspects of Arab Nationalism by offering PL-480 food aid to Egypt. These efforts earned him favor with Nasser, but even these gestures of goodwill were unable to convince the Egyptian leader to abandon his aggressive agenda to spread Arab Nationalism across the Middle East.

When civil war erupted in Yemen in September 1962, Nasser seized upon the opportunity to spread his revolutionary ideology in the Arabian Peninsula, which profoundly strained the bond between Kennedy and Nasser. The protracted conflict forced the American President to choose between continuing his New Frontier in the Middle East and supporting a traditional ally in the region, Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, Kennedy sided with the Saudis. Following a lengthy disengagement process that failed to produce significant results by the end of his presidency, Kennedy worried openly to Nasser about whether their bond could survive under the stress of the proxy war. Moreover, as pressure—both internal and external—mounted to alter US foreign policy in the Middle East and support the Saudis, the American President eventually changed his mind.

This thesis has examined the correspondence between Kennedy and Nasser, as well as the external and internal forces that pushed the American Executive to largely abandon his policy of rapprochement with Nasser and Arab Nationalism. Though Kennedy entered the presidency with tremendous optimism for his goals in the region, his administration ended with little to show for its laborious foray into Arab politics. The President was an idealist and a visionary; nothing in this thesis contradicts that premise. However, the practical application of romantic notions about foreign policy typically is much more difficult than imagined. In the summer of 1962, the Kennedy Administration believed it was making great strides with Nasser on a host of issues; yet, only three months later, its hopes dissipated with the outbreak of hostilities in Yemen. Therefore, this study is an illustration of the maxim that success is never final. Despite their best efforts and well-laid plans, Kennedy's Middle East policymakers proved unable to

prevent Nasser from acting upon his own interests, and the unanticipated war in Yemen dashed the aspirations of the New Frontiersmen.

It is important, however, not to criticize Kennedy too sharply for being an idealist. The ability of a leader to dream of a better way of conducting diplomacy is necessary and important. However, it is also critical for those visionaries to be clear-eyed when it comes to the motivations of those who might wish to take advantage of their benevolence. In Kennedy's case, Nasser acted in his own best interest on most occasions, nonetheless the American President received some concessions from the Arab leader. For example, Nasser's agreement to keep the Arab-Israeli dispute quiet during the Kennedy presidency represented a real success for the New Frontier policy. However, when push came to shove in Yemen, no amount of goodwill could persuade Nasser to neglect his personal ambitions. Therefore, while Kennedy's idealism inspired the New Frontier and achieved some minor successes, it also garnered him a degree of favor with other Arab nations. Nevertheless, realpolitik took precedence in the later part of his time in office.

The early-1960s was a moment of uncertainty in the Middle East for traditional regimes. Consequently, Kennedy possessed the leverage, at the outset of the Yemeni War, to potentially coerce the Saudis and Jordanians into making internal social reforms more in-line with the American vision for human rights. Instead, the US President chose to offer these two monarchical regimes support without requiring anything significant in return beyond disengagement assurances that were honored mainly in the breach. Moreover, this period in Middle East history also presented the opportunity for the United States to chart a new course of support for Arab Nationalism. Though the movement certainly possessed many faults, the premise of unity for formerly-oppressed

peoples offered a genuine alternative to backing traditional monarchical rule. Kennedy initially supported the new wave but ultimately chose not to do so. When the New Frontier faced serious challenges in Yemen, he abandoned the policy, however begrudgingly, rather than maintaining it at the cost of angering Arabs.

The historiography of this topic is fairly limited. Kennedy's Middle East strategy has received some scholarly interest but nowhere near comparable to other portions of his foreign policy, such as the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, or early US involvement in Vietnam. Moreover, there is broad agreement in the historiography about the key issues of Kennedy's Middle East foreign policy: Nasser's correspondence, Arab-Israeli weapons agreements, and the Yemeni Civil War. While scholars have conducted studies on these areas, the President's decision to turn away from his support of Arab Nationalism has garnered little attention. This thesis attempts to address that gap in the historiography and provide answers to the key factors involved in Kennedy's decision at this critical juncture in American-Middle East relations. It argues that the lobbying of American allies, the uncooperative and non-aligned nature of Nasser, and the outbreak of war in Yemen and the subsequent failure of the disengagement process eventually led Kennedy to alter his position on Arab Nationalism and Nasser. These forces encouraged the American President to shift from a New Frontiersman to a Cold Warrior in the Middle East.

Future areas of study based on this thesis might include the "Bundy State Department," the concept of the New Frontier in relation to the Middle East, America's interpretation of Nasser over multiple presidential administrations, whether Komer played a decisive role in other areas of Kennedy's foreign policy, how Arab Nationalists

beyond Nasser reacted to Kennedy's correspondence and actions, and the prospect of a "Kennedy Doctrine" for the Third World. The "Bundy State Department" was a shadow diplomatic corps within the White House that took a considerable role in orchestrating foreign policy during the Kennedy Administration. A study on the New Frontier in the Middle East could examine the feasibility of such a policy and its potential pitfalls. An analysis on the shifting American perspective of Nasser, as well as the Egyptian leader's shifting rhetoric and policies, might offer insight into the predispositions of certain policy-makers in viewing revolutionary movements during the Cold War. Additionally, Bob Komer played a prominent role in Middle East policy in the Kennedy White House, therefore, his role in other international matters deserves greater attention. Also, gauging the public opinion regarding Kennedy's correspondence and New Frontier in the Arab World might answer further questions about the success of this unique policy. Finally, Kennedy used personal correspondence with multiple world leaders, especially those in the Third World. This unique communication format, which the President employed with other world leaders including Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Guinea President Sekou Toure, could be examined to determine if this represented a "Kennedy Doctrine" on foreign policy and could measure the success of that tactic.

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