# How did Arab Nationalism Affect the Course of the Cold War?

https://www.e-ir.info/2007/12/03/87/

ADAM GROVES, DEC 3 2007

Modern Arab nationalism originally developed as a backlash to the colonialisation of the Middle East by western powers such as Britain and France. Despite decolonisation, European imperialism was maintained through sympathetic conservative monarchs and the construction of an informal empire. As such, Arab nationalism continued to play a prominent role in Middle Eastern and global politics through much of the Cold War.

In order to address Arab nationalism's impact on the Cold War however, one must first attempt to define it. Based around the principle of Arab solidarity, Arab nationalism held the eventual aim of complimenting the existent cultural unity in the Arab world, with a political unity. One of the foremost theorists of Arab nationalism during the Cold War, Sati al-Husri, defined it's logic by arguing that Arabs spoke a 'unitary language', had 'one heart and a common soul', and as such 'constituted one nation' and should therefore 'have a unified state' (in Dawisha, 2003: 2).

Arab Nationalism was significant in the context of the Cold War because oil and gas supplies from the Middle East were vital to sustain the European and American economies. The Soviet Union, recognising this, sought to compete with the West for influence in the region, hoping to gain an advantage in the global bi-polar power struggle.

Throughout the course of this essay I will use case studies and historical evidence to argue that the West failed to recognise Arab nationalism as an independent and relatively strong political movement. In the body of my essay I will clearly show that as a result of this, there was a severely reduced possibility for Western political influence; Western access to vital resources were seriously threatened; and Western policies were often aggressive and misguided. I shall conclude that this ultimately led to a geo-strategically crucial region of the world leaning towards the USSR at the height of the Cold War.

**Arab Nationalism Restricted Western Political Influence**

## How did Arab Nationalism Affect the Course of the Cold War?
Written by Adam Groves

Whilst nationalism is an inward-looking movement in the sense that it's directed at the creation of community and legitimising of authority inside nations, it's also directed outwards towards cooperation with allies, and against enemies (Halliday, 2005: 200). In the Middle East, twentieth century Arab nationalism reflected this general rule. The creation of community was founded on language, culture and the economy, with issues such as the fate of Palestine providing an important focal point (Porath in Owen, 1992: 85). Outwardly, Arab nationalism was concerned first and foremost with foreign, and specifically western, domination (Halliday, 2005: 200). The result was a significant restriction of super-power influence in the Middle East, as Arab Nationalists actively sought to take an independent role in regional politics; western governments interpreted this as a move towards communism. In response they sought to unite the Arab states around Western interests; specifically the repelling of Soviet power in the region. Resultantly, the battle for ideological supremacy between the super-powers became embedded into existing Arab conflicts with a 'deadly mix of irreconcilable aims' (Young and Kent, 2004: 117). The nationalist desire for independence inadvertently drew the Cold War into the Middle East as the rival powers fought for dominance and shaped regional wars along East-West terms *(Fred Halliday, 2005: 99).*

Nasser, the Egyptian president who made his country 'the headquarters' of Arab nationalism according to one Syrian official (in Dawisha: 144), identified a continued theme in Arab and Egyptian history: disunity led to defeat. In the context of the Cold War, Arab unity and strength was essential for nationalist leaders such as Nasser who did not seek to engage in the growing power struggle between the US and USSR. As a leader of the Non-aligned movement his supporters defended 'positive neutrality' with pragmatic and persuasive arguments. In their belief, good relations with both the West and East would allow a united Arab world to build their power far more fully than would be possible through exclusive relations with either bloc (Yaqub, 2004: 20).

This was not the way Arab nationalism was seen in the US however. Eisenhower believed that Nasser was so eager to prove Arab independence to its former colonial masters in the West, that he had become an unwitting tool of Soviet expansionism. In July 1958 Eisenhower privately remarked that Nasser was 'a puppet [of the Soviets], even though he probably doesn't think so' (in Yaqub, 2004: 2).

In turn, Arab nationalists saw the Americans as excessively partial towards Israel and the colonial powers of Britain and France. Nasser aimed to exert Arab authority on the region, pumping double the combined military spending of Syria, Iraq and Jordan into his army (Yaqub, 2004: 272; Dawisha, 2003: 150-151).

Attempts by the US and UK to forge pro-western military pacts within the region in the early 1950s were met by hostile and justifiable accusations of imperialism. Plans such as the 'Baghdad Pact' (1950-59) and the 'Middle

## How did Arab Nationalism Affect the Course of the Cold War?
Written by Adam Groves

East Defence Organisation' (1952) were thinly guised attempts at undermining Nasser's nationalist power-base whilst securing a role for the British army in the region (Young and Kent, 2004: 261). In an effort to counter this Anglo-American threat to Arab independence Egypt turned to the USSR, buying Soviet arms through Czechoslovakia in 1955. By forging external alliances with the USSR, Halliday argues that Arab nationalists were not declaring an ideological support for the Soviets, but rather seeking to meet internal needs (2005: 175). However, the impact of Arab-Soviet cooperation on potential western influence in the region, was nonetheless considered devastating.

The USSR had long been attempting to gain influence in the Middle East to counter western colonial links with the Arab world. Stephen Penrose reported back to his superiors in the US that 'the Russians are emphasising their democracy as opposed to the imperialism of the Western powers' (Penrose, June,1951).

From 1955 onwards, the USSR established itself as a key ally to a number of radical Arab nationalist regimes. These included not only Egypt, but Syria, Iraq, Libya and South Yemen. Throughout the Cold War, Arab nationalism in alliance with Moscow, posed a serious challenge to western interests in the region (Halliday, 2005: 99).

In 1957, Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. His actions were perfectly legal, as it was an Egyptian registered company and he was offering compensation. However, for its major shareholders, France and the UK, the move was unacceptable. Together with Israel the old imperial powers agreed the Protocol of Sevres, which constructed a cause for war with Egypt. The ensuing crisis strained the Western alliance severely, whilst in contrast the Soviets gained considerable favour in the Middle East. Arab nationalists saw Nasser moving from one success to another in his struggle to maintain independence from Western imperialism (Sayigh and Shlaim, 2003: 289).

For the US, Arab Nationalism posed a serious problem as far as gaining political influence in the Middle East was concerned. With it's emphases on unity and (more problematically) independence, and focus on Israel as the primary common enemy, it was not an ideology which US political thought was easily reconciled with. However, both super powers had great difficulty in controlling the behaviour of their Middle East clients, and whilst Arab nationalism's impact on the Cold War from a Western perspective was tangibly negative, it was not always hugely helpful for the USSR either. As the two super-powers sought to reconcile their political interests with Arab nationalism and gain a foot-hold in the region, the Cold War bi-polar ethos became central to Middle Eastern politics, and embedded within regional disputes.

**Arab Nationalism Threatened Western Access to Resources**

**How did Arab Nationalism Affect the Course of the Cold War?**
Written by Adam Groves

In the 1940s, the US state department's policy towards the Middle East was defined by a steadfast support for British presence in the region. This was to change over the following decade, as the US increased its own role due to intensified Cold War concerns and the discovery of huge untapped petroleum reserves (Young et al., 2004: 115). However, bad feeling with regard to US activity in the region soon arose, and Dean Acheson's warned in a 1950 report that Anti-Americanism is resurging' and that the 'current emotionalism bodes no good for US interests in the region' (Acheson, 1950). The following decades saw the Middle East become increasingly significant in the Cold War as America sought to guarantee Western oil supplies.

The Western position with regards to resources was weakened by relative Soviet independence in terms of oil production; by the 1970s the USSR was the largest oil producer in the world. The US and Europe meanwhile were increasingly relying on Arab oil (Halliday, 2005: 98). In a secret intelligence brief on Soviet intentions in the Middle East, Stephen Penrose summarised the difficulties which the US faced in the region as far as resources were concerned:

'[Soviet influence is not] dependent upon Russian military occupation of the Middle East. All that they need to do for the achievement of their end is to arouse sufficient antipathy and bitterness towards the West among the peoples of the Arab world as to provoke them to sabotage and resistance… to prevent the Western powers from having access to [Middle Eastern oil] would represent a considerable triumph to the Soviets. We are all aware of the importance of Middle Eastern oil to the European economy' (June, 1951).

For the West, Arab nationalism came to represent exactly the sort of bitter Soviet-inspired ideology which Penrose warned of. In March 1951 the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company had been declared state-owned by Iranian nationalists, setting a worrying precedent. A 1952 US National Security Council document highlighted the 'critical importance' of Iran's independence from the USSR due to it's 'strategic position, petroleum resources' and the destructive impact it would have on nearby countries' resolve to resist communist pressures. It warned that the entire region was suffering from 'increased social unrest' due to the 'political upheaval which bought the nationalists to power', and that access to oil could be affected as a result (NSC, 1952).

The situation deteriorated through the 1950s. In 1956, when Nasser declared that he was to nationalise the Suez Canal his regional popularity rocketed. This meant any Arab figure looking to align himself with the US, or to resist Nasserist policies at western instigation, could be successfully branded an enemy of Arabism (Yaqub, 2004: 5). Just two years later, the political union of Egypt and Syria as the 'United Arab Republic' in 1958 represented the peak of popular enthusiasm for Arab nationalism (Owen, 1992: 88). As the historian Daniel Yergin has pointed out, it also

## How did Arab Nationalism Affect the Course of the Cold War?
Written by Adam Groves

'ominously brought together the two countries which, with the nationalised Suez canal in Egypt and the Saudi oil pipelines passing through Syria, dominated the transit routes for Middle East oil' (in Kaufman, 1996: 29). Nasser, whose alliance with the Soviet Union was about to be further reinforced through substantial development aid, now had the power to strangle Arab oil supplies to the Western world. Whilst this was a regional state of affairs for Arab nationalism, it had global repercussions for the USA and Europe (Healey, 1957).

By 1960, with the UAR yet to collapse, the National Security Council had concluded that, 'the Near East is still in the throes of a major nationalist and social-economic revolution' and, 'the predominant force in the area is nationalism with strong-anti Western overtones' (in Kaufman, 1996: 29). For Roger Owen the five years following the formation of the UAR represented the peak of Arab nationalist strength (1992: 88). During this time, their control of a vast proportion of Middle Eastern oil as well as the crucial navigational routes and pipelines which fed the Western economies, left the Arab nationalists as a significant actor in the Cold War, and meant the Middle East became a vital battle ground for super-power influence.

### Arab Nationalism Incited Aggressive and Misjudged Western Policies

Young and Kent have argued that a new era in the Middle East began in June 1953. The US Secretary of State returned back from a visit to the region convinced that, such was the anti-British feeling, America would have to be far more pro-active in the Arab world (2004: 117). Although the British sought to claim otherwise, their unwelcome presence in the region had generated anti-western opinion which the US worried the Soviets might exploit.

However, an increased role in the region for the US did little to alleviate their suspicions with regards to the Arab nationalist movement. Nasser's refusal to accept the regional defence pact agreed in Baghdad caused US president Eisenhower to worry about Egypt's intentions. He decided that Nasser was an over-powerful soviet 'puppet' and therefore, together with the UK, America designed a combination of measures designed to weaken the Egyptian premier's position (Young et al., 2004: 263). One of these measures consisted of withdrawing funding for the Aswan High Dam. Nasser was furious, and in direct response he nationalised the Suez Canal, setting off a chain of events which were politically devastating for Britain, placed an intolerable strain on the trans-Atlantic relationship and provided the Soviets with hugely increased influence in the region thanks to their vocal support for Egypt. When the USSR offered to back the High Dam project themselves, the strong Arab-Soviet relationship was sealed. Aggressive Anglo-American policy had done little more than reinforce Soviet political and economic presence in the region.

The failure of the West to recognise Arab nationalism and Communism as two entirely separate and

## How did Arab Nationalism Affect the Course of the Cold War?
Written by Adam Groves

independent ideologies had led, 'very quickly to American involvement in local Middle Eastern problems that had nothing to do with Soviet interference' (Young et al., 2004: 266). The pattern of US intervention in Middle Eastern affairs continued even more strongly following the debacle of the Suez Crisis with Eisenhower believing that unless the US took decisive action, the Soviets would fill the power vacuum (Yaqub, 2004: 269).

Patrick Seale argues that the Anglo-American attitude towards the Middle East was shaped by a global perspective which led to a 'profound misunderstanding between the West and the emerging forces of Arab nationalism'. The Eisenhower Doctrine argued that the US and its allies needed to protect Middle Eastern resources from Soviet influence.However, the more the West sought to 'protect' the Middle East, the more the nationalists resented what they perceived as a new phase of colonialism (in Sayigh and Shlaim, 2003: 52).

America failed to recognise or accept that Arab nationalism was a strong ideology which could create its own path through the Cold War. As such, the US believed an active policy of intervention in Middle Eastern affairs was essential to maintain western influence in the region. Conversely, US and UK intrusion into Arab nationalism, an idea founded on independence, merely caused tensions in the region and incited the Arab world to move towards the Soviet bloc. Western policies exacerbated regional tensions in the Arab world and caused Middle Eastern conflicts to take a Cold War 'East vs. West' dimension.

## Conclusion

Arab nationalism provided a powerful alternative to both Soviet and Western thinking during the Cold War, and required both super powers to engage with it on its own terms. I have argued that, despite its eventual decline, Arab nationalism impacted the course of the Cold War on several fronts.

Firstly in its bid to maintain independence from perceived European and western imperialism, Arab nationalism restricted the political influence which the US and Europe could gain in the region. Secondly, Arab nationalism prevented unchallenged western control of Middle Eastern oil and, by gaining domination over both the resource itself and the supply lines, it established itself as a significant actor in the bi-polar power struggle. Finally, as Western powers grew to perceive Arab nationalism as a threat rather than a political idea to positively engage with, a succession of aggressive and ill-considered policies led Arab states to turn to the Soviet Union for support.

For the United States, Arab nationalism posed a serious challenge in the Cold War environment. America's global view of world affairs often sat uncomfortably with the Arab wish for independence and recent experience of

### How did Arab Nationalism Affect the Course of the Cold War?
Written by Adam Groves

colonialism. As nationalist leaders rose in profile and power, the West failed to recognise the need to negotiate with

Arab nationalism on its own terms. This led to a bi-polar struggle for influence in the Middle East, and ultimately a geo-

strategically crucial region of the world leaning towards the USSR at the height of the Cold War.

**Bibliography**

Acheson D, 'Department of State Airgram: Anti Americanism in the Arab World', May 1, 1950. Accessed: 08/03/2005
Ashton N, 'Eisenhower, Macmillan And The Problem Of Nasser', (Macmillan Press, 1996)
Citino N, 'From Arab Nationalism to OPEC', (Indiana University Press, 2002)
Dawisha A, 'Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century', (Princeton University Press, 2003)
Funkhouser R, 'Additional Notes on Possible Iraq, Syria, Lebanese Reactions to MEDO (Middle East Defence Organisation)', November 5, 1952. Accessed: 08/03/2005
Halliday F, 'The Middle East in International Relations', (Cambridge University Press, 2005)
Healey D, 'What to do in the Middle Wast', Commentary, Vol. 24, No. 6, December 1957
Hopwood D (ed.), Arab Nation Arab Nationalism, (Macmillan Press, 2000)
Jankowski J, 'Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism and the Unite Arab Republic', (Lynne Rienner, 2002)
National Security Council Executive Secretary, 'United States Objectives and Policies with Respect to the Arab States and Israel', April 7, 1952. Accessed: 08/03/2005
National Security Council, 'United States Policy regarding the Present Situation in Iran', November 20, 1952
Owen R, 'State, Power and Politics in the making of the Modern Middle East', (Routledge, 1992)
Penrose S, 'Comment on: The Soviet Challenge in the Near East', June 2, 1951. Accessed: 08/03/2005
Rodman P, 'Book Reviews: We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History', National Review, Dec 31, 1997. Accessed: 07/03/2005
Sayigh Y and Shlaim A (eds.), 'The Cold War and the Middle East', (Oxford, 2003)
Shlaim A, 'The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World', (Penguin Books, 2000)
Treverton, 'Crisis Management And The Super-Powers in the Middle East', (Gower Publsishing, 1981)
Yahya M, 'A Criticism of the Idea of Arab Nationalism', Al-Tawhid, Vol III No. 2 1985, Accessed 06/03/2005
Yaqub S, 'Containing Arab Nationalism', (University of North Carolina Press, 2004)
Young J and Kent J, 'International Relations Since 1945', (Oxford University Press, 2004)
Zeine Z, Arab-Turkish relations and the emergence of Arab Nationalism' (Greenwood Press, 1981)

—

*Written by: Adam Groves*
*Written at: University of Wales, Aberystwyth, International Politics Department*
*Written for: Dr Eric Landis*
*Date: 2005*

**About the author:**

Adam Groves has an MSc in Global Governance and Diplomacy from Oxford University and a BSc in International Relations from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. Adam co-founded the website in November 2007.