Through it all, year after bloody year, DRV leaders persevered, mobilizing every available resource for the struggle, first against France, then the United States and its Saigon ally. Victory would come in the end, on a spring day in 1975, almost three decades after Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence. Ho himself would not live to see it. It would be left to colleagues to preside over the celebrations, and to tally up the enormous costs of thirty years of war.

The Cold War in the Middle East: Suez crisis to Camp David Accords

DOUGLAS LITTLE

The Cold War saw deepening Soviet-American rivalry in the Middle East from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s on three levels – a geopolitical struggle to recruit and secure access to strategic resources (especially oil); diplomatic maneuvers to prevent the Arab–Israeli conflict from escalating into a superpower confrontation; and ideological competition for the future of the Muslim world, where secular nationalists and Islamic radicals shook the foundations of colonial empires and absolute monarchies throughout the region. On three occasions – the 1956 Suez crisis, the 1967 Six Day War, and the October 1973 War – hostilities between Israel and its Arab enemies disrupted world oil supplies, forced Washington and Moscow to contemplate military intervention, and briefly sparked fears of nuclear Armageddon. Once the shooting stopped in late 1973, American policymakers undertook “shuttle diplomacy” between Middle Eastern capitals, prompting the Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to lift their oil embargo on the United States, reducing the Kremlin’s influence among Arab nationalists, and inducing Israel to be more flexible on territorial issues, all of which paved the way for the Camp David summit in September 1978. Diplomatic progress on the Arab-Israeli front, however, was undermined by the Islamic upheavals that rocked Iran and its Muslim neighbors during the late 1970s.

The early Cold War in the Middle East

Because the United States was preoccupied during the early years of the Cold War with crises in Europe and Asia, the Harry S. Truman administration expected Britain to promote and protect Western interests in the Middle East. US expectations notwithstanding, the financial and political consequences of World War II forced UK policymakers to reassess their imperial policies, not only in Asia and Africa but also in the Middle East. In Palestine, where Britain
had held a League of Nations mandate for a quarter-century, civil war loomed between Jews and Arabs, each of whom was determined to establish an independent state. Unwilling to bear the costs of empire in the Holy Land, Whitehall turned the problem over to the United Nations (UN), whose plan to partition Palestine paved the way for the creation of Israel in May 1948. Despite Arab objections, the United States recognized the new Jewish state immediately, at least in part, as Truman's counsel Clark Clifford put it, "to steal a march on [the] U.S.S.R.," which had been supporting Zionism as a way to undermine British influence in the region. Meanwhile, Britain's economic interests came under fire a thousand miles to the east in Iran, where in 1951 nationalists led by Mohammad Mossadegh seized control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), which provided more than half of the petroleum consumed in the British Isles. Mistakenly interpreting the nationalization of AIOC as a sign that Iran was about to align itself with the Soviet Union, British and American intelligence secretly organized a coup d'état and deposed Mossadegh in August 1953. Having helped Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the pro-Western shah of Iran, regain undisputed power in Tehran, the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration persuaded Whitehall reluctantly to relinquish AIOC's monopoly over Iranian oil in favor of a new international consortium dominated by US petroleum giants.

Nowhere in the Middle East did the British Empire have more at stake, however, than in Egypt, where the Suez Canal had served as an imperial lifeline facilitating the flow of oil, trade, and troops for seventy-five years. Because Britain exercised what amounted to a protectorate over the nominally independent Egyptian monarchy, the canal was operated by an Anglo-French company and was protected by 30,000 British Tommies stationed at the Suez base, which during the early years of the Cold War also served as home to a Royal Air Force squadron whose atomic bombs were targeted at the Soviet Union. In July 1952, a group of young officers led by General Abdel Nasser seized power in Cairo and vowed to reduce British influence. A secular revolutionary and self-proclaimed pan-Arab nationalist, Nasser pressed Britain in 1954 to withdraw from its Suez base and sought military assistance from the United States a year later following an Israeli attack on Egyptian troops in Gaza. After Washington declined to provide arms, Nasser swapped Egyptian cotton for Eastern bloc weapons provided by Czechoslovakia in September 1955. His larger goal was not to become a Soviet satellite but rather to place Egypt at the center of three circles—Africa, the Arab world, and the emerging Non-Aligned Movement. With Kremlin support for Israel now ancient history, the Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev, was happy to oblige by providing guns and rubles to Nasser, whom he intended to groom as a poster boy among Third World nationalists during the mid-1950s. Indeed, Nasser's support for non-aligned radicals like Indonesia's Sukarno and his opposition to Western regional defense organizations like the recently established British-backed Baghdad Pact fit well with Soviet plans to pit the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia against the European colonial powers and their American allies.

Determined to prevent Russian encroachments in the Middle East, President Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and their British counterparts employed economic aid to draw Egypt back toward the West. The United States, Britain, and the World Bank offered Nasser $200 million to build a high dam on the Upper Nile at Aswan, a monumental public works project that would rival the pyramids in its scope and, by controlling seasonal flooding, increase cotton production and generate vast amounts of hydroelectric power. There were implicit strings attached, however. Nasser must tone down his anti-Israeli rhetoric, he must take part in secret peace negotiations with Israel's prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, and he must distance himself from the Kremlin. Nasser's actions during the spring of 1956 gave neither the White House nor Whitehall much cause for optimism. In quick succession, the Egyptian leader refused face-to-face talks with Ben-Gurion, encouraged Jordan's King Hussein to expel British military advisers from Amman, and recognized the People's Republic of China. US and UK officials soon concluded that what Nasser liked to call "neutralism" was really a smoke screen for Soviet subversion in the Middle East.

By the summer of 1956, the Aswan Dam project was dead on arrival both in Washington and London. On Capitol Hill, pressure was building to pull the plug, not only among Republican anti-Communists linked to the China Lobby, but also among southern Democrats, who worried that Egypt's expanded cotton crop would flood the American market, and friends of Israel in both parties, who regarded Nasser as "Hitler on the Nile." On the other side of the Atlantic, Prime Minister Anthony Eden and Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd questioned Nasser's bona fides and promoted pro-Western moderates like Iraqi prime minister Nuri Said to curtail the spread of Pan-Arabism throughout the region. On July 19, Eisenhower decided that "we should withdraw the U.S. offer." After alerting Whitehall, John Foster Dulles informed the

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Egyptian ambassador that "no single project was as unpopular today as the Aswan Dam." Even if American officials regarded Egypt as creditworthy (and Dulles emphasized that they did not), the United States was no longer willing to provide financial support.3

Nasser was not surprised by America's decision, but he did resent the abrupt and condescending manner in which it was communicated. To prepare for just such an eventuality, he had quietly secured a $400 million commitment from the Kremlin in early June. Bolstered by Soviet military and economic aid, on July 26 Nasser announced that Egypt was expropriating the Anglo-French company that operated the Suez Canal and would use the tolls to finance the Aswan Dam. British officials were apoplectic. During a late-night cabinet meeting, Anthony Eden and his colleagues vowed never to accept Egyptian control of the waterway and "agreed that our essential interests in this area must, if necessary, be safeguarded by military action." Eisenhower also regarded Nasser's actions as outrageous, but he worried that armed intervention would backfire and instructed Dulles to seek a diplomatic solution. While the diplomats talked, the Egyptians made certain not to disrupt the oil tankers passing through the canal, reinforcing the American view that any resort to military force would be misguided and premature. Should Britain and France send in troops, Eisenhower cautioned Eden on September 2, "the peoples of the Near East and of North Africa and, to some extent, of all of Asia and all of Africa, would be consolidated against the West to a degree which, I fear, could not be overcome in a generation and, perhaps, not even in a century particularly having in mind the capacity of the Russians to make mischief." Counselor patience, US policymakers believed that the crisis could be resolved by diplomacy and covert action. "The Americans' main contention," Eden remarked privately on September 23, "is that we can bring Nasser down by degrees rather than on the Mossadeg lines."5

Unbeknown to Eisenhower and Dulles, however, Britain and France were conspiring to regain control of the Suez Canal by force with help from Israel. Anthony Eden was desperate to show the world that Britain was still a great power, Prime Minister Guy Mollet was eager to curtail Egyptian support for nationalist guerrillas seeking to drive France out of Algeria, and David Ben-Gurion was determined to force Nasser to open the Straits of Tiran at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping. On October 23, British, French, and Israeli officials met secretly at Sèvres just outside Paris to approve an elaborate tripartite scheme. Israel would invade Egypt and march to the Suez Canal, Britain and France would demand that both sides pull back ten miles from the waterway, and when Nasser balked at withdrawing Egyptian forces from their own territory, British troops with logistical support from the French would intervene. Six days later, the Israelis staged a lightning attack, Eden and Mollet issued their ultimatums, and Nasser scuttled several Egyptian freighters to block the Suez Canal. When Nasser's Syrian allies blew up a British-owned pipeline that carried Iraqi petroleum to the Mediterranean, the oil crisis that Britain and France had hoped to avoid suddenly materialized.

The American response was clear and consistent from the very outset. Washington sought an immediate ceasefire under UN auspices, warned London and Paris not to send in troops, and worked to prevent Moscow from intervening. Outraged by the timing of the crisis, which came just one week before the US presidential election, Eisenhower insisted that whatever happened on November 6, he would condemn the Israelis as aggressors if they did not cease and desist. He was also "extremely angry with both the British and French," who "should be left to work out their own oil problems — to boil in their own oil, so to speak," and offered to send in Russian "peacekeepers" to guarantee regional stability. The US was determined to change forever the footsteps of Anglo-French colonialism in the Middle East. Dulles told the National Security Council as the Suez crisis came to a climax, "we should be forced to choose between following in the footsteps of Anglo-French colonialism in Asia and Africa, or splitting our course away from their course."7

3 Anthony Eden, quoted in Cabinet Minutes, July 27, 1956, CM(56)54, CAB I28/30, Public Record Office (PRO), National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey.
7 John Foster Dulles, quoted in minutes of the 302nd NSC meeting, November 1, 1956, ibid., 902-16.
As painful as the choice was, when Whitehall pressed on and tried to retake the canal with gunboats, bombers, and paratroops, the White House employed financial leverage to force the British to stop shooting and start withdrawing from Egypt. Having halted Britain's armed intervention and removed the specter of Soviet troops in the Middle East, the Eisenhower administration managed to reclaim the moral high ground against the Soviets, who were ruthlessly shooting their way back into Budapest at a cost of 4,000 Hungarian dead. The biggest challenge the United States faced, however, was Israel, which refused to pull its troops out of the Sinai and Gaza until Eisenhower threatened to impose economic sanctions in February 1957. Even then, Ben-Gurion would not budge until the UN agreed to station blue-helmeted observers along the Egyptian frontier and the United States guaranteed Israel's right of free passage through the Straits of Tiran.

Seriously at odds with its friends in London and Tel Aviv and deeply mistrustful of the nationalist regime in Cairo, Washington worried that Moscow might move into the vacuum in early 1957. "The leaders of the Soviet Union, like the Czars before them," Eisenhower recalled in his memoirs, "had their eyes on the Middle East," where in the wake of the Suez crisis they intended "to seize the oil, to cut the Canal and pipelines ..., and thus seriously to weaken Western civilization." One option for containing the Soviets was formal US membership in the Baghdad Pact, but American policymakers worried that this step would merely drive Nasser more rapidly into the Kremlin's orbit. The preferred option at the White House was what would come to be known as the Eisenhower Doctrine, based on a joint resolution approved by Congress in March 1957, providing up to $200 million in US economic aid and authorizing the use of American troops to assist any Middle Eastern nation threatened by "armed aggression from any country controlled by international communism."9

Ironically, Moscow's policies in the Arab world were somewhat less aggressive than Washington imagined. To be sure, Khrushchev proved quite willing to replenish Egypt's depleted arsenal, but he rejected a Syrian request for Soviet MiGs, and pilots to fly them, in March 1957 because this "might involve negative consequences for both the Arab states and the Soviet Union."10 The


Khrushchev's more cautious approach stemmed not only from a growing awareness that Eisenhower was deadly serious about using military force to protect American interests in the Middle East, but also from a growing suspicion that Nasser's Pan-Arabism might ultimately prove incompatible with Communism. Nevertheless, many in Washington suspected that the radical regimes in Damascus and Cairo were likely to become Soviet satellites and worked behind the scenes to build up pro-Western moderates like Saudi Arabia's King Saud and Jordan's King Hussein as Muslim counterweights to Nasser. Once Syria agreed in February 1958 to join Egypt as part of the newly created United Arab Republic (UAR), however, pro-Nasser Muslims next door in Lebanon challenged the authority of President Camille Chamoun, a Christian strongman with close ties to the Eisenhower administration. When left-wing Iraqi observers overthrew Nuri Said and the Hashemite monarchy in Baghdad on July 14, 1958, Chamoun panicked and warned Washington that his own regime was now threatened by international Communism. The next day, Eisenhower sent 14,000 US Marines to Beirut, where they remained for five months without suffering a single casualty.

Although Soviet leaders had not orchestrated events in Baghdad, they welcomed the revolution and worried that American intervention in Lebanon might be merely the prelude to an assault on Iraq. "The destruction of Iraq," Khrushchev told his colleagues on July 18, "would be a reversal for the national self-determination movement in the Arab world" and a blow to the Kremlin's prestige. The Eisenhower administration never seriously considered invading Iraq, but Dulles did confirm that sending US troops to Lebanon was linked to American credibility, not only in the Middle East but throughout the Third World. "Turkey, Iran and Pakistan would feel - if we do not act - that our reaction is because we are afraid of the Soviet Union," Dulles explained to congressional leaders. "Elsewhere, the impact of not going in - from Morocco to Indo-China - would be very harmful to us."12 Privately, however, senior US policymakers confirmed that the real sources of Lebanese political instability were Chamoun's own autocratic policies, the smoldering antagonism between Christians and Muslims, and the magnetic appeal of Nasserism. "Nasser has won the enthusiastic and even idolatrous support of the largely illiterate populations in the region," Eisenhower acknowledged on July 18, by relying on "the slogan of nationalism, which is one force stronger than communism."13 And as Under

11 N. Khrushchev, quoted in ibid., 182.
Secretary of State Christian Herter pointed out, this meant that "we have to find some way to accommodate ourselves to Pan-Arabism."\(^\text{14}\)

For the next two years, the Eisenhower administration sought an accommodation with Nasser, the most vocal advocate of Pan-Arabism. To this end, the United States kept its distance from Israel while making surplus American wheat available to Egypt on favorable terms under the auspices of Public Law 480 (PL 480), the "Food for Peace Program." In September 1960, Eisenhower and Nasser met for the first and only time following a tumultuous session of the UN General Assembly, memorable chiefly for Khrushchev's shoe-thumping opposition to Western intervention in the former Belgian Congo. Although there was no meeting of the minds about the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Congo, Eisenhower promised to "respect the UAR position as a neutral" so long as it did not "contribute" under Soviet domination and Nasser headed home hoping for better relations with Washington.\(^\text{15}\)

To the Six Day War

How best to reverse recent Soviet gains in the Congo and other Third World trouble spots like Cuba was a hot-button issue in John F. Kennedy's victorious presidential campaign in 1960. Although the Massachusetts Democrat was preoccupied with crises in the Caribbean, Africa, and Southeast Asia, he was determined to expand Eisenhower's rapprochement with Nasser, who proved willing to put the question of Israel "in the ice box" after the Kennedy administration offered Egypt a three-year $500 million aid package. As grateful as he was for US economic assistance, however, Nasser was not about to abandon Pan-Arabism, especially after Syria seceded from the UAR and Crown Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia, the heir apparent to King Saud, challenged Egypt's leadership of the Arab world. During the summer of 1962, Nasser hired West German scientists to develop short-range missiles for the Qatari air force, and stepped up his long-distance exhortations for Pan-Arabism.

In late September, pro-Nasser officers seized power in Yemen, a remote land in the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula whose ruling family had close ties to the House of Saud. Fearful that Saudi Arabia might be next.

\(^{14}\) Christian Herter testimony, July 16, 1958, US Congress, Senate, Executive Sessions of the Foreign Relations Committee (Historical Series), 10, 535

weapons. With all this in mind, Johnson approved the sale of 210 tanks to Israel in April 1966 and 48 A-4 Skyhawk jet fighters a year later. When PLO guerrillas attacked Israeli villages from base camps in Jordan, Israel struck back, destroying the town of Samua in the Jordanian-controlled West Bank in November 1966. And when Syrian artillery began to shell northern Israel in solidarity with the PLO early in the new year, Tel Aviv prepared to strike back again, in April 1967. A-4 Skyhawk jet fighters a year later. When PLO guerrillas attacked Israeli villages from base camps in Jordan, Israel struck back, destroying the town of Samua in the Jordanian-controlled West Bank in November 1966. And when Syrian artillery began to shell northern Israel in solidarity with the PLO early in the new year, Tel Aviv prepared to strike back again, this time with Washington’s blessing. “The Syrians are sons of bitches,” a top Pentagon official told Foreign Minister Golda Meir in March 1967. “Why the hell didn’t you beat them over the head when it would have been the most natural thing to do?”

Two months later, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol hinted that Israel’s ultimate objective might indeed be regime change in Syria. The Kremlin vowed to defend its new friends in Damascus and warned Nasser that the Israelis had actually mobilized fifteen brigades for an attack on the Golan Heights. Israel strongly denied that it was preparing to invade Syria, and most observers and historians have confirmed that Moscow exaggerated the threat, perhaps purposely, in an effort to stir up trouble for Washington in the Middle East. Based on what was at best misinformation and at worst disinformation, Nasser mobilized the Egyptian army in mid-May, demanded that the United Nations withdraw the observers it had stationed in Gaza and the Sinai ever since the Suez crisis, and closed the Straits of Tiran to all Israeli shipping, something that Levi Eshkol and his colleagues regarded as an act of war. For three weeks, the Johnson administration pressed Israel not to attack and urged the Kremlin to help persuade Egypt to reopen the straits.

Time ran out at dawn on June 5, when dozens of jets marked with the Star of David knocked out Nasser’s air force on the tarmac while hundreds of Israeli tanks smashed through Egyptian front lines in the Sinai, seized Gaza, and raced west through sand dunes and brush toward the Suez Canal. Convinced by back-channel signals from the United States that Israel would not strike first, Nasser angrily appealed to the Soviet Union and to other Arab states for help. While the Kremlin condemned Israel as an aggressor and called for a ceasefire, Jordan’s King Hussein sent his army into action against the Jewish state, an ill-advised act of inter-Arab solidarity that would backfire when Israeli forces counterattacked, seizing East Jerusalem and occupying the rest of the West Bank. Meanwhile, pro-Nasser demonstrations in Libya and

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Kuwait forced these two staunchly pro-Western regimes briefly to halt oil exports to the United States and sparked calls in other Arab capitals for a much broader embargo. When Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan sent Israeli troops into the Golan Heights on June 9 in a bid for regime change in Syria, which had heeded the Kremlin’s advice and remained on the sidelines during the previous four days, the war threatened to escalate into a superpower confrontation. “The Soviets [had] hinted,” Secretary of State Dean Rusk recalled grimly in his memoirs, “that if the Israelis attacked Syria, they would intervene with their own forces.”

Eager to avert a more serious crisis, the Johnson administration pressed Israel to accept a UN-sanctioned ceasefire on June 10. With Israeli forces just forty miles from Damascus, Aleksei Kosygin, Khrushchev’s successor as Soviet premier, used the “hot line” to warn the White House that Soviet intervention was imminent. Lyndon Johnson decided to call the Kremlin’s bluff and sent the US Sixth Fleet into the war zone in the Eastern Mediterranean. At the eleventh hour, Israel accepted the ceasefire, Kosygin backtracked, and as one White House aide put it, “everyone relaxed a bit as it became clear that the fighting was petering out.” When the shooting finally stopped the next day, the Israelis controlled Gaza, the Sinai, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights while Nasser was thoroughly humiliated. Johnson was quite pleased that the Egyptian leader had been “cut down to size,” but he was also frustrated by Israel’s impetuosity and reminded Prime Minister Eshkol that “it wasn’t Dayan that kept Kosygin out.”

Two weeks later, Kosygin and Johnson met in Glassboro, New Jersey, to discuss how best to avoid another crisis in the Middle East. On June 19, Johnson had unveiled a five-point peace plan whose chief ingredients were Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and an Arab commitment to a formal peace treaty. Kosygin, however, saw things a bit differently. The Soviets were preparing to rearm Egypt and Syria, he told Johnson on June 23, and unless Israel withdrew from all the occupied territories, the Arabs “would be sure to resume the fight sooner or later. If they had weapons, they would use them. If they did not have them, they would fight with their bare hands.” Johnson bristled at this threat. “Let us understand one another,” he retorted.

4. Territories occupied by Israel after 1967

"I hope there will be no war. If there is a war, I hope it will not be a big war. If they fight, I hope they fight with fists and not with guns. I hope you and we will keep out of this matter because, if we do get into it, it will be a 'most serious' matter."  

the same old characteristics – more arms for Israel and much huffing and puffing about Arab intransigence.

From the October 1973 War to the Camp David Accords

In early 1970, long-simmering skirmishes between Egypt and Israel erupted into a nasty “war of attrition.” Egyptian artillery pounded Israeli positions along the Suez Canal while Israeli warplanes, including supersonic F-4 Phantom jets recently acquired from the United States, carried out “deep penetration” retaliatory raids against Egyptian targets in the Nile Valley. As in 1967, Nasser appealed for Soviet military assistance, and once again, he got it – more MIGs, and pilots to fly them, batteries of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) for use against Israel’s F-4’s, and 10,000 Red Army troops to defend the airfields and SAM sites. Soviet motives were complex. On the one hand, Leonid Brezhnev, who had emerged as first among equals at the Kremlin, was frustrated by Egypt’s poor performance during the Six Day War, which he attributed to “total carelessness, [and] a lack of understanding of what an army is under modern conditions.” Yet Soviet leaders also believed that, with enough help from Moscow, Nasser could rebound from the debacle, regain the upper hand over Israel, and destabilize pro-Western regimes in Saudi Arabia and Jordan.24

Worried that the war of attrition would escalate into another Soviet-American confrontation, Kissinger brokered a ceasefire in August 1970, but a few weeks later civil war erupted in Jordan, where the PLO attempted to overthrow King Hussein. When royal troops gained the upper hand against the Palestinian guerrillas, the Soviet-backed regime in Damascus sent its tanks toward the Jordanian border. Deeply disturbed by what they regarded as Russian aggression by proxy, on September 21, Nixon and Kissinger secretly agreed that the Israelis should launch airstrikes against the Syrian armored columns if necessary to save Hussein’s throne. At the last minute, however, Brezhnev persuaded the Syrians to reverse course. King Hussein managed to expel the PLO from his realm without any help from Israel’s air force, and the “Black September Crisis” ended with a whimper rather than a bang.

Black September grew blacker still for many Arabs when Gamal Abdel Nasser died suddenly of a massive heart attack and was succeeded by Anwar Sadat, who proved far less flamboyant and far less committed to Pan-Arabism than his predecessor. Well aware that he would need America’s help to secure Israel’s withdrawal from the Sinai, in January 1971 Sadat began secretly to communicate with Henry Kissinger through a back-channel link. Convinced that the Kremlin had been the driving force behind both the war of attrition and Syria’s recent meddling in Jordan, the Nixon administration now regarded the Soviets as the major obstacle to peace and stability in the Middle East and worked systematically to reduce their influence. The first step came in May 1972 at the Moscow summit meeting, where Nixon warned that another flare-up in the Arab–Israeli conflict could seriously disrupt détente. He won Brezhnev’s agreement for a joint communiqué supporting the military status quo. The second step came two months later in Cairo, where Sadat accused the Kremlin of sacrificing its Arab friends at the altar of détente and demanded that Brezhnev withdraw the 10,000 Soviet “advisers” stationed in Egypt.25 By the end of Nixon’s first term, Washington appeared to have disrupted Moscow’s longstanding alliance with Cairo. “Our policy [was] to reduce and where possible eliminate Soviet influence in the Middle East ... under the cover of détente,” Henry Kissinger told an interviewer two decades later, “and we did it.”26

If Sadat expected the United States to respond to the expulsion of Soviet forces from Egypt by ratcheting up diplomatic pressure on Israel to withdraw from the Sinai, however, he was sorely disappointed. Preoccupied with the end game in Vietnam, Nixon and Kissinger paid little attention to the Middle East during the first half of 1973, ignoring Sadat’s military threats and accepting at face value Israeli assurances that their fortifications along the Suez Canal were impervious to any Egyptian assault. With America either unwilling or unable to deliver on the diplomatic front and with Russia relegated to the sidelines, Egypt and Syria launched a two-front war on October 6. While the Israelis were honoring Yom Kippur, the Egyptian army crossed the Suez Canal shielded by Soviet-supplied MIGs and SAMs. Two hundred miles to the northeast, Hafez al-Assad’s tanks overran Israeli positions in the Golan Heights, prompting fresh calls from PLO leaders in Damascus for the liberation of all of “occupied Palestine.”

Stunned by the setbacks on both fronts, Golda Meir, who had succeeded Levi Eshkol as prime minister, urgently pressed Washington to replace the

Israeli tanks and planes destroyed on the battlefield. Confident that Israel possessed the wherewithal to handle the Arabs without additional US help, the Nixon administration’s initial response was to wait and see. “The best result,” Henry Kissinger remarked privately, “would be if Israel comes out a little ahead but got bloodied in the process, and if the U.S. stayed clean.”

On October 9, however, the Kremlin began to airlift war matériel to the Egyptians, hoping thereby to tilt the military balance further in Sadat’s favor. During the next twenty-four hours, rumors circulated in Washington that the Israelis might resort to nuclear weapons if their conventional arsenal was depleted. “From where we sat,” Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger recalled long afterward, “there was an assumption that Israel had a few nukes and that if there was a collapse, there was a possibility that Israel would use them.”

With pressure mounting on Capitol Hill to assist the Israelis, on October 13, Nixon ordered the Pentagon airlift ammunition, artillery, and tanks directly to Tel Aviv. Reassured and emboldened by the American airlift, the Israelis quickly regained the upper hand on the Sinai front, where a brilliant but brutal commander named Ariel Sharon drove the Egyptian Third Army back toward the Suez Canal and prepared to encircle it.

Sharon’s bid for a knockout punch might well have succeeded had not the Arabs chosen this moment “to play the oil card.” Thirteen years earlier, Saudi Arabia had taken the lead in establishing OPEC, a cartel whose principal objective was a more equitable distribution of revenue between the multinational oil companies and the producing states. Just before the October 1973 war erupted, Saudi officials informed oil executives in Vienna that OPEC would insist on greater control over prices and production. A few days later, in a surprising act of solidarity with Sadat and Assad, Saudi Arabia and the other Arab members of OPEC imposed an embargo on all oil exports to the United States until Israel agreed to a ceasefire and withdrew from Egyptian and Syrian territory. Sharply rising gasoline prices and dwindling supplies quickly produced an “energy crisis” that gave the Nixon administration an added incentive to halt the fighting in the Middle East as soon as possible.

The Kremlin, of course, also had a strong interest in an early ceasefire, since the longer the war lasted, the more likely it became that Sadat would request Soviet military intervention to prevent a resounding Egyptian defeat. Although Moscow’s credibility as a guarantor in the Arab world was at stake, sending materiel to the Egyptians, the Kremlin sent an ominous message to the White House insisting that Moscow and Washington must work together “to compel the observance of the ceasefire without delay.” Brezhnev delivered a blunt warning: “I will say it straight,” he wrote Nixon on the evening of October 24, “that if you find it impossible to act jointly with us in this matter, we should be faced with the necessity urgently to consider the question of taking appropriate steps unilaterally.”

Brezhnev’s message had an electric effect in Washington, where US policymakers were reeling from the “Saturday Night Massacre” that had seen several high-ranking Justice Department officials resign to protest Nixon’s defiance of a controversial Supreme Court ruling in the Watergate scandal. Without gathering to awaken the president, Kissinger and White House chief of staff Alexander Haig convened an emergency meeting of the National Security Council in the wee hours of October 25, during which they agreed to place America’s nuclear arsenal on a DEFCON III alert, the highest stage of readiness short of all-out war, and drafted a letter from Nixon informing Brezhnev that the United States was deadly serious. Meanwhile, Kissinger warned the Israelis that unless they stopped shooting and implemented the ceasefire at once, the White House might be forced to halt the American resupply effort. Later that morning, the guns finally fell silent.

Soviet officials were shocked by this saber rattling, but despite calls from some Politburo members to up the ante, cooler heads prevailed. “What about not responding at all to the American nuclear alert?” Brezhnev suggested. “Nixon is too nervous—let’s cool him down.” To this end, the Kremlin

27 Kissinger, quoted in ibid., 189.
29 Leonid Brezhnev quoted in Lebow and Stein, America’s War with the Cold War, 182.
instructed Soviet ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin to assure Nixon and Kissinger that Moscow had never contemplated military intervention, but also to point out that nuclear threats were antithetical to the spirit of détente. Nevertheless, many US officials blamed the Soviets for triggering the most dangerous superpower confrontation since the Cuban missile crisis. “All you had to do was read [Brezhnev’s] ultimatum,” Alexander Haig insisted many years later, “to know that we had World War III in the making.” Kissinger, however, viewed things somewhat differently in the immediate aftermath. Just two days after the DEFCON III alert, he took a telephone call from Ambassador Dobrynin, who confirmed that “anger in Moscow is still very high” and complained that “you are trying to make this look like it was a Cuban or Hanoi crisis,” when it was not. “Too much is at stake for us to be angry with each other,” Kissinger replied. Emphasizing that the American reaction “can only be explained in terms of emotional stress over a domestic situation,” he reckoned that “if you had no intention of acting unilaterally our letter was a mistake.”

Despite the diplomatic fallout from the nuclear alert, however, Kissinger was more convinced than ever that the overarching American goal of eliminating Soviet influence in the Middle East was not a mistake. Throughout the fall of 1973 and into the new year, he solidified his back-channel contacts with Anwar Sadat, who quickly concluded that the road to resolution of the Egyptian-Israeli conflict ran through Washington, not Moscow. Relying on what came to be known as “shuttle diplomacy,” Kissinger pressed both Tel Aviv and Cairo, step by grudging step, toward a disengagement agreement in the Sinai and then raised the possibility of preliminary conversations about a broader peace settlement. Kissinger’s breakthrough on the Egyptian-Israeli front was a crucial factor in OPEC’s decision to lift its oil embargo in the spring of 1974, but Nixon’s resignation the following August and his replacement by the inexperienced Gerald Ford dissipated America’s diplomatic momentum at both the regional and global levels. Although Ford’s defeat at the polls in November 1976 stemmed in large measure from the dismal state of an American economy beset by stagflation, the stalled peace process in the

terms of a “peace for land” agreement took shape very quickly – Israel would withdraw from the Sinai in exchange for Egypt signing a formal peace treaty. The major sticking point was the fate of the occupied West Bank, where the Palestinians hoped to establish a homeland but where the Israelis were already establishing permanent settlements. Reluctant to make a separate peace, Sadat insisted that the proposed treaty must be contingent on Israel freezing the settlements and opening talks with the Palestinians. After thirteen days of brutal back and forth, Carter proudly unveiled the Camp David Accords on September 17. Sadat and Begin accepted in principle a bilateral peace agreement linked informally to a temporary halt on new Israeli settlements as the first step toward addressing the question of “Palestinian autonomy.” Denounced by the PLO and the Kremlin as a traitor to the Arab cause, Sadat signed the formal peace treaty with Israel on March 26, 1979, confirming that, a quarter-century after Nasser seized power in Cairo, Egypt had in effect changed sides in the Cold War and abandoned pan-Arab nationalism.

The Cold War in the Middle East

By the spring of 1979, however, America’s triumph over Soviet-backed revolutionary nationalism in Egypt looked more and more like a pyrrhic victory. While Nixon, Ford, and Carter were building an unprecedented partnership with Sadat, the Soviets were strengthening their ties with Arab radicals. Indeed, during the 1970s, the Kremlin established a military alliance with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, restocked the Syrian arsenal that Hafez al-Assad had squandered in his ill-advised war against Israel, and endorsed the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Moreover, while the Americans and Soviets jockeyed for position among Arab moderates and radicals, both Washington and Moscow faced new challenges from an unexpected quarter – radical Islam. For many devout Muslims, Nasser’s defeat in the June 1967 war was proof of the bankruptcy of the secular model of reform through Westernization, and by the mid-1970s an Islamic revival was underway throughout the region. In Egypt, the resurgent Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni group whose top leaders had been executed by Nasser, challenged the legitimacy of Sadat’s one-party state, while in Lebanon the downtrodden Shi’a Muslims took up arms against the American-backed Christian-led regime in Beirut. Meanwhile, the Muslim populations of Soviet Central Asia were growing restless after six decades of Communist rule and Islamic guerrillas were mobilizing against the Kremlin-backed regime next door in Afghanistan.

The hotbed of the Islamic revival, however, was Iran, where Shi’a clerics loyal to the exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini preached increasingly vitriolic sermons against the Shah, whose pro-Western “White Revolution” they regarded as antithetical to the principles of Islam.

The impending crisis undermined one of the key operating assumptions of American policymakers, who expected Iran to fill the strategic vacuum in the Persian Gulf after Britain relinquished its empire east of Suez in 1971. To this end, the Nixon and Ford administrations sold the Shah nearly $11 billion in US weapons, paid for with rising oil revenues generated by the OPEC price hikes following the October 1973 war. In September 1978, the American-equipped Iranian army fired into a crowd of pro-Khomeini demonstrators in Tehran, leaving 400 dead and 4,000 wounded. Five months later, a full-blown Islamic revolution forced the Shah to seek asylum in Egypt while Khomeini returned home in triumph, vowing to settle old scores with America, which he labeled “the Great Satan.” Islam, which US officials had touted as the antidote to Soviet subversion in the Middle East just two decades earlier, had suddenly become more dangerous to American interests in the region than Communism.34

From the Suez crisis through the Camp David Accords, the US strategy in the Middle East remained quite consistent. Determined to protect Western access to Persian Gulf oil and promote the security of Israel, Washington sought to reduce Moscow’s influence in the region and combat pan-Arab radicalism from Cairo to Damascus. American tactics varied from administration to administration. Eisenhower sent the Marines into Lebanon, Kennedy wooed Egypt with economic aid, and Johnson recruited Israel as a partner in the battle against national liberation movements in the Third World. Nixon, Ford, and Carter each hoped that some variant of Soviet–American détente would prevent the increasingly volatile region from becoming the central arena of the Cold War during the 1970s.

Soviet policies toward the Middle East, by contrast, shifted in noticeable ways during the quarter-century after the Suez Crisis. Long before he was removed in an October 1964 palace coup, Khrushchev realized that Nasserism, Ba’athism, and other forms of Arab nationalism could be anti-Western without necessarily being pro-Soviet. Brezhnev and Kosygin were appalled by Nasser’s catastrophic defeat in June 1967, stunned by Sadat’s expulsion of Soviet advisers from Egypt five years later, and frustrated by

34 For further analysis of the situations in Iran and Afghanistan, see Amin Saikal’s chapter in volume III.
their virtual exclusion from the American-backed Arab-Israeli peace process after the October 1973 war. By the late 1970s, Moscow's bold embrace of wars of national liberation throughout the Arab world had been reduced to a series of spoiling operations mounted by unreliable clients like Iraq, Syria, and the PLO. More importantly, both Soviet and American officials had become so preoccupied with their superpower rivalry that they paid far too little attention to regional dynamics and underestimated the significance of the emerging threat represented by radical Islam.

Cuba's role in the world since 1959 is without precedent. No other Third World country has projected its military power beyond its immediate neighborhood. Brazil sent a small troop to the Dominican Republic in 1965 as the United States' junior partner; Argentina's generals briefly helped Anastasio Somoza's defeated cohorts in 1980-81 as they sought to regain a foothold in Nicaragua; Vietnam's soldiers never ventured beyond Indochina; China's military activities outside Asia have been limited to the supply of weapons and the dispatch of a few hundred instructors to Africa. During the Cold War, extra-continental military interventions were the preserve of the two superpowers, a few West European countries, and Cuba. Moreover, West European military interventions in the thirty years between the rise of Fidel Castro and the end of the Cold War pale in size and daring compared to those of Cuba. The dispatch of 36,000 Cuban soldiers to Angola between November 1975 and April 1976 stunned the world; in early 1978, 12,000 Cuban soldiers went to Ethiopia; by 1988, there were 55,000 Cuban soldiers in Angola. Even the Soviet Union sent far fewer troops beyond its immediate neighborhood than did Cuba. In this regard, Cuba is second only to the United States.

This chapter focuses on those regions of the world where Cuba's actions had an important, tangible impact—Latin America and Africa. It analyzes Havana's motivations and the extent to which its policy was a function of Soviet demands. It assesses Cuba's relations with the United States and discusses how Cuba affected the course of the Cold War.¹

¹ This chapter is drawn from my research in the archives of Cuba, the United States, Britain, Belgium, Germany (including the former German Democratic Republic), and South Africa.