Neutral Swaggering: American Involvement in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War

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Edited by Sophia Khiavi and Madalena Monteiro

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that America's involvement in the October War (1973 Arab-Israeli conflict) was a dual venture to both entrench diplomatic relations between Egypt and Israel, as well as to develop relationships with two potential American patrons. The article examines the unique political context of the 1970s to explain how political patronage with Egypt and Israel was made possible not only by the Soviet Union's waning regional influence, but also by the Presidency of Anwar Sadat, Henry Kissinger's unique rhetorical techniques as American Secretary of State, and Europe's reduced patronage of the region. It finds that by using swaggering, or the threatened use of force, the US was able to cement economic and diplomatic control of the region, further its regional goals, such as trade partnerships with Saudi Arabia, and improve diplomatic relations with NATO allies.

Introduction

America's involvement in the October War can be understood as the moment in which the US-Israeli defence partnership took its present-day form. This conception of the war, however, ignores the American gains made in the Arab world during and after the conflict, especially the US' partnership with Egypt. This paper will argue that through a combination of aid, swaggering and a perceived neutrality, the US was able to build on favourable environmental factors to cement its political, strategic and economic relationship with Israel and establish another with Egypt. These allyships successfully advanced the US' main regional goals and asserted it as the Middle East's most influential superpower. This essay will begin by offering an overarching background on America's relationship with Israel and its regional goals. It will then delve into the environmental factors that encouraged the establishment of a secondary regional ally and the elements which made Egypt an excellent candidate for that role. Finally, it will analyse the extent of America's involvement in the conflict, as well as the consequences of its wartime actions on both the US' objectives and regional partnerships.

Background

The US and Israel did not always share the bond which they do today. Guilt, humanitarian impulses and an idolization of the US constitution by Zionist leaders encouraged Americans to aid in the resettlement of Jews after the Holocaust (Lewis 1999, 365). A failure to accommodate Jewish refugees during the Holocaust, as well as a comparatively late condemnation

of Hitler, were both stains on America's growing reputation as the leader of the "free world." This was accentuated by the robust, domestic presence of Jews, which put pressure on the US to aid in the reconstruction of Jewish civil society. The resettlement of Jews into Palestine was attractive and seemingly reasonable to the US administration for two reasons. First, the United States was fearful that domestic institutions would be overrun by refugees. Second, the United States was relatively ignorant regarding the region's pre-existing Arab presence (Ibid). Throughout Israel's nascency, America served as a diplomatic force for the entire region by attempting to improve relations between the Jewish State and its Arab neighbours while simultaneously condemning any overreaches of force, most notably in 1956 during the Suez Canal crisis. (Ibid, 365-366). This moment saw the United States encourage France, Britain and Israel, all of whom were trying to capture the recently nationalized Suez Canal, to remove their forces from Egypt in order to maintain peace with the latter's patron Russia. This led to a relationship with Israel that, while diplomatically salient, was cold and distant (Ibid, 366). However, as American-Israeli relations gradually improved during the 1960s, a period which saw increased arms sales and diplomatic support in the United Nations, American foreign policy transitioned towards vocal support for the Jewish state, entrenching the United States' position as Israel's main supporter (Ibid, 365).

Between 1967 and 1973, the primary strategy of American foreign policy in the region was peace-seeking (Ibid, 365). This differs from peacekeeping, which implies the pre-existence

of conflict which the peacekeeping nation attempts to mitigate; peace-seeking instead lends itself to the overall removal of violent conflict. Initially, the US pursued diplomacy through channels endorsed by the United Nations, seeking multilateral arrangements in which France and the UK were asked to carry the "spear of peace" (Burns 1985, 367). After 1970 however, the US took a more unilateral approach to stability, deferring minimally to the United Nations Security Council during this time (Ibid). "Black September," or the Jordanian Civil War, was a pivotal moment in American foreign policy in the Middle East, as it showed that at any time, regimes which seemed secure might be vulnerable to insurgencies. Israel and America's strategic partnership grew stronger after 1970, as the Black September crisis prompted President Richard Nixon to fill the arms vacuum created by France after Israeli actions in the 1967 war to ensure the presence of a strategic partner in the Middle East (Lewis 1999, 355). Despite this emerging defensive partnership, it would be incorrect to interpret America's relationship with Israel before and during the October War through a realist prism evaluating hawkish US foreign policy. Instead, it should be perceived as one in which diplomatic relations held primacy.

At this stage, it is necessary to define America's two primary foreign policy goals in the Middle East prior to the October War. First was the establishment and maintenance of a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia (Lewis 1999, 366). This partnership was sought after due to Saudi Arabia's massive oil reserves, access to which was vital to ensure that America could maintain its economic advantage over the Soviet Union. As such, the US sought a partnership with a state in the Middle East that could advocate for the West in its attempts to secure and maintain an optimised trade deal with the Saudis, especially during times of conflict (Ibid). The United States' second goal was to avoid causing complications with NATO allies (Ibid), who served as vital economic and defensive partners against the Soviet Union. The colonial histories of these NATO states had created essential relationships with countries in the region, who were often also the enemies of Israel (Ibid). This was especially true in the case of France, whose reliance on regional oil exports and trade with Egypt and Syria, at the time Israel's two most vocal enemies, was worth 100 million euros more than its relationship with Israel (Sus 1974, 66). As such, actions which caused outcry from these nations would in turn affect American-French relations. Thus, when establishing a relationship with and endorsing actions undertaken by Israel, the US had to consider the repercussions of infringing on its allies' strategic goals.

Beyond these foreign policy goals, "control" over the Middle East was crucial in the larger Cold War context. This was due to the region's geographic position, whereby its proximity to the Soviet Union, coupled with the Western influence on its governmental institutions and borders, positioned the Middle East as a battleground in the expansion of spheres of influence. For the Soviet Union, control over the Middle East would mean an ostensibly socialist hegemony over the Asian continent. This would prove to be a huge economic boon, and

served as proof of concept for socialism. The United States, on the other hand, beyond the vital importance of the region's oil in maintaining industrial competitiveness, realized the strategic benefits of military allyship in the Middle East (Wilson Center). These benefits were both tangible and intangible; having a military presence in the region's backyard would prove unnerving and destabilize the Soviet Union (Ibid). As such, there were huge military benefits to be gained from becoming the region's primary patron.

The primary way that the United States went about enforcing these foreign policy goals was through *swaggering*. Although Art (1980, 5) notes that swaggering is difficult to pin down analytically, it can be understood as the threatened use of deterrent, compellent or defensive force, without the actual use of violence. Swaggering usually takes the form of demonstrations which showcase the military potential of a given state, such as published weapons stockpiles or military demonstrations involving new technologies. In the case of the October War, swaggering took the form of the threatened use of nuclear weapons. This was especially pertinent for American foreign policy in the buildup to the October War, as the SALT 1 Accord in 1972 determined that the strategic nuclear superiority of the United States over the Soviet Union had ended (Ibid, 4). Up to this point, Nixon's foreign policy had relied on the US' nuclear stockpile to deter conflict in the rest of the world, and as such, a form of swaggering would have to be used to account for the nuclear threat associated with provoking Soviet patrons.

A partnership with Israel would provide many advantages to the United States, notably the acquisition of a loyal ally in a contested region. However, America could not rely exclusively on Israel to fulfil its regional goals. This was due to the animosity between the Jewish state and its neighbours, who viewed Israel as a continuing regional settler-colonialism. Israel's primarily Eastern-European population ran contrary to the pan-Arab movement sweeping the region at the time, which endorsed a unified Arab identity throughout the Middle East. This animosity was further compounded by repeated wars between Arab states and Israel which the latter would most frequently win, thereby creating a dynamic of Israeli invincibility and Arab weakness (Ashley 2012). To ensure that its regional goals could be achieved, the US required a second regional ally to provide it with legitimacy and advocate on its behalf to other Arab nations.

A Changing Environment

The Middle East's changing political and economic environment during the early 1970s increased the likelihood of the US becoming the region's dominant international influence. First, the loss of Western European control over the Middle East provided the opportunity for America to make strategic and economic gains. The states with the most dramatic losses of influence were France and the UK, whose Sykes-Picot agreement was intended to grant them regional supremacy through control over Arab colonies. Until the 1960s, France had exercised direct, colonial control over North Africa to maintain its presence as a global power (Mulayim 2017). However, in the wake of

bloody revolts in important colonies and an overall loss of economic power after World War Two, France withdrew from the region and elected to maintain a regional presence through diplomacy and shared culture, citing its colonial influence on governmental and civic structures as a reason to maintain close economic and political ties (Ibid). France's strategy of indirect control also worsened relations with Israel due to their reduced need for intelligence collected by the Mossad regarding insurgencies in their colonies (Lewis 1999, 366). This indirect control took the form of liberalisation, wherein the French government hoped to exert control over the Middle East through trade monopolies from companies based in France. However, this push for deregulated, export-oriented economies opened the door for America to flex its economic muscles and make partnerships of its own, gaining monopolies over raw materials the French wished to control. Britain, meanwhile, saw its once vast empire dramatically constrict. This caused a vacuum in global power, and control over crucial assets such as the Suez Canal were ceded to local elites. The loss of territory, especially territory so significant for global trade, provided an incentive for America to replace the British empire as the region's most significant Western economic influence, thereby guaranteeing the US access to essential trade routes. Much like in the French case, America was able to capitalize on the lack of experience among local elites who agreed to operate under a neoliberal framework, thereby allowing American corporations to exert influence in sectors the United Kingdom used to control directly.

Significant geopolitical developments, particularly the loss of Soviet influence and the larger context of the Cold War, also provided the US with an opportunity to make strategic gains. The Soviet Union's primary goal in the Middle East was the neutralisation of US strategic advantages in Eurasia through the establishment of naval and air bases around the region (Ashley 2012). The Soviets accomplished this by selling weapons and co-opting anti-Israel sentiment to further their own political desires and undermine potential deals between the US and Middle Eastern nations. However, this strategy was highly limiting, as the Soviets failed to exert dominance in strategically important countries like Turkey and Iraq. Moreover, Ashley (2012) notes the conditional nature of these partnerships, stating, "Bereft of any substantial ideological attraction, the provision of arms and aid in exchange for influence was the sole method of enticing Arab clients to the Soviet standard". This clientelistic relationship was strained further with the Moscow Summit of 1972, which encouraged a foreign policy of détente. This further weakened ties between the Soviet Union and its Arab clients through the USSR's immediate calls for ceasefires during periods of hostility (Ibid). The clientelistic nature of the Soviet Union's relationships with Arab states which were oriented primarily around defence, ran contrary to Sadat's crucial foreign policy goal of minimizing Israel's military superiority. This discredited the Kremlin as a forceful protector in the eyes of Arab leaders (Suri 2008). As such, Russia became a far less attractive patron in the eyes of hawkish Arab States.

These factors combined to create an environment which primed the Middle East for American influence. Within the context of the Cold War, superpower patronage was essential to maintain standing among regional rivals. As such, the changing nature of Soviet foreign policy presented the US with a chance to further enhance its global sphere of influence.

Importance of a Partnership with Egypt

This favourable environment would be impossible to capitalise on without a secondary regional ally which held a stronger position in the Middle East than Israel. Enter Egypt, whose influential regional presence, economic decline and changing politics under President Anwar Sadat made the nation an excellent candidate for a foreign partnership with the United States.

Egypt's position as the political leader of the Arab World originated under former President Gamal Nasser, whose unifying pan-Arab rhetoric and decolonization of the Suez Canal earned the leader admiration throughout the Levant. After Nasser's death, Egypt continued to exert substantial cultural influence over its regional allies (Walker 1997, 148). This made the country an alluring associate, as even though a partnership with the West would likely reduce its political influence, Egypt held enough cultural capital that a treaty between itself and the Israelis could pave a path towards regional stability.

An American-Egyptian partnership also made economic sense. From an American perspective, Egypt had a highly productive agricultural system that could result in the US benefiting from foreign resource extraction (Weinbaum 1983, 640). Additionally, influence over the Suez Canal's functioning would serve not only American economic interests, easing the transport of oil from its partners in the Gulf, but also producing benefits for NATO allies, such as a continued Western presence in Egypt and a de-nationalized Suez Canal. By reabsorbing a country with a longstanding tradition of European control into its sphere of influence (Korany 1984, 50), the US would improve its relationship with its NATO allies.

From an Egyptian perspective, an economic partner as powerful as the US was attractive. After Nasser's failed attempts to create robust nationalised industries, a weak Egyptian economy required urgent investment. This was only expedited by the need to repair damage sustained during the October War, which would incur further costs for the state (Weinbaum 1983, 640). Sadat viewed liberalisation and considerable investment in infrastructure as essential to kickstart the Egyptian economy (Ibid). He viewed American aid as a crucial step to this goal's fulfilment, as Soviet promises of an equitable and efficient economy had been proved unfeasible through the constant underperformance attached to their patronage.

Finally, the changing face of Egyptian power increased the likelihood of a productive partnership between the two nations. Nasser saw the US as an amalgamation of imperialist and Zionist ideologies that pulled the string behind Israel's aggression and military dominance (Ibid). Sadat, Nasser's successor, held the United States in a far more favourable light.

First, Sadat did not hold the Soviet Union in the same esteem as his predecessor. This was largely due to failures in Egyptian foreign pol-

icy for which he felt the Soviet Union was responsible. These failures included the Soviets' delivery of poor intelligence in the build up to Egypt's 1967 war with Israel and their failure to endorse his hawkish disposition leading up to the October War in 1973. Sadat viewed the partnership more as a necessity to defeat Israel through the supply of qualitatively superior weapons than as one of friendship (Burns 1985, 175). This relationship worsened in 1971 after Sadat discovered a Soviet-backed plot to overthrow him (Ibid). Thus, in 1971, beneath the guise of cooperating with the Soviets, the groundwork for a closer Egyptian-American partnership began construction (Ibid). Repeated demonstrations by the Egyptian military were noticed by Kissinger, who correctly identified this swaggering as bombast designed to attract America's attention (Ibid, 176). Thus, Egypt was the ideal candidate to become America's Arab-liaison in the Middle East through economic, cultural, and political perspectives.

Second was his ideology regarding the Palestinian peace process. One of the core issues with Soviet-Arab relations was the perceived lack of leverage that the Soviet Union held over Israel (Ashley 2012). America's relationship with Israel demonstrated to Sadat that the US could induce concessions and provide equitable negotiations, thereby establishing the United States as a more strategically advantageous ally than the Soviet Union (Suri 2008).

Third was Sadat's personal opinion of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Sadat viewed Kissinger as a magician capable of building a new image of America in the Middle East due to Kissinger's other successful peace negotiations, such as with Mao in China (Suri 2008). He also respected the way in which the Jewish Kissinger utilized the antisemetic tropes through which he was depicted by leaders in the Arab World to elevate himself to near-mythic status as the leader of both American and Jewish foreign policy, thus making him the ultimate Zionist (Ibid).

Sadat additionally held an ideology regarding the Palestinian peace process. While Nasser believed that the eradication of Israel was the only way to help Palestinians, Sadat saw peace with Israel as a potential route toward securing Palestinian rights. Palestinian advocacy was a popular holdover from Nasser's Arab Nationalism, and failure to include their plight in policy would prove highly unpopular domestically. One of the core issues with Soviet-Arab relations was the perceived lack of leverage that the Soviet Union held over Israel (Ashley 2012). America's relationship with Israel demonstrated to Sadat that the US could induce concessions and provide equitable negotiations, thereby establishing the United States as a more strategically advantageous ally than the Soviet Union (Suri 2008).

Finally, the audience costs of negotiations between America and Egypt would enhance the negative consequences of failure on both sides. From an Egyptian perspective, if talks were public and failed, the already struggling Egyptian economy would lose crucial foreign aid from Arab and Soviet allies (Suri 2008). Meanwhile, public, unprompted negotiations with Egypt would damage the US' growing friendship with Israel. Outside of reversing the gradual progression of bi-national ties, the

loss of Israel's allyship would result in negative consequences for the US. Through a realist paradigm, it could produce another nuclear enemy, as Israel was assumed to have nuclear weapons by the 1970s and peace with Egypt could signal hostility to the Jewish state (Ibid). This would negatively affect the United States' ability to mitigate the horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons, a major diplomatic goal at the time (Ibid), as without a superpower ally, Israel would feel the need to maintain its material advantage. The year 1973 marked the end of the Vietnam War, which, through a constructivist paradigm, saw America's global psyche drastically affected through the communist usurpation of a "Westernised" state. The loss of another friend would weaken the Western sphere of influence and embolden the Soviets' ideological push (Ibid). The incorporation of Israel into a Soviet sphere would prove especially detrimental to American foreign policy, especially given the trust between the Knesset and Washington, as well as it's self proclaimed organisational strength, which required less involvement as compared to other developing nations. Israel's self-reliance was illustrated by its stable governing structure, which had existed as a de jure state during the Yishuv[1], and military power, which at the time seemed to require less investment than other, less-equipped nations (Lewis 1999, 367). The October War provided an opportunity for both nations to engage without fear of consequence, thus establishing

a relationship under the guise of ceasefire negotiations.

Involvement

America's strategy during the October War thus had to strike a balance between neutrality, so as to not feed into negative perceptions about its activities in the Arab world, and support for Israel, so as to not lose its main regional client. The United States also had to demonstrate a legitimate threat within the pacifist constraints of détente which was accomplished through swaggering. Neutrality was the official position taken by Nixon, who hoped that the belligerents would beat upon one another for a short period of time, leading to their eventual docility (Suri 2008). This neutrality included delayed aid shipments to Israel (Ibid), despite calls from Kissinger to immediately provide the Israelis with missiles and bomb racks (Burr 2003, art.18). This was neutrality in name only, as despite communicating with Cairo regarding peace terms (Ibid, art.20), the United States provided Israel with 11,000 tonnes of military supplies and loudly endorsed it on the international stage (Ibid, art.49). However, American posturing was sufficient to maximise bipartisan diplomatic influence, as Arab leaders turned to the US for peace after the tides of war turned in Israel's favour (Ashley 2012). Thus, despite failing to maintain the "low profile" desired by Nixon (Suri 2008), US involvement was appreciated in both Arab and Israeli circles.

Additionally, the US effectively utilised swaggering to peacefully demonstrate military superiority over the Soviet Union without becoming directly involved in the conflict. Amer-

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1 This was the pre-existing Jewish state which existed under Mandatory Palestine and consisted of informal structures or organize immigration and allocate funds.

ica's swaggering served as a reminder that it possessed, and was apparently ready to use, nuclear weapons. This strategy was pursued by setting the US' military stance to DEFCON 3, an increase in force readiness above that during peacetime (FAS 2022), justified in this case by pressure from the Soviet Union to de-escalate. In the context of the Cold War, this was a level of aggression that could quickly devolve into the use of nuclear force. Thus, the declaration of DEFCON 3 served a dual purpose for the US. First, it provided an offensive benefit, which to Israel solidified the notion that the US would defend it in military situations to the best of its strategic ability, as demonstrated by the Americans' willingness to enter a state of military preparedness in defense of their new ally (Ashley 2012). Meanwhile the Arab States were impressed by the United States' proclivity towards force (Ibid). The declaration also served a defensive purpose, as Kissinger claimed that the action was taken in opposition to the unilateral introduction of troops by any great power in the Middle East, painting Americans as peace-seekers on the world stage (Suri 2008). This declaration also undercut Soviet military influence, as America's defensive stance implied an offensive position by the Soviets and their deployment of troops; thus, the failure to produce any meaningful shift in the Middle East's balance of power further discredited the Kremlin and made the Soviet Union look weak (Ibid).

An important thing to note about America's involvement in the conflict is that it seemed to contradict its two primary interests in the region. In terms of maintaining relationships with NATO allies, Kissinger accused European countries of being "jackals" for their opposition to Israel, while America's relationship with Saudi Arabia was impacted by the 1973 oil embargo, in which the withholding of oil shipments from the Saudi's to America caused huge levels of inflation and greatly reduced production efficiency (Burr 2003, art.63). America's actions drew complaints from European nations, many of whom suffered the consequences of the oil embargo but lacked the economic and military resources to intervene directly (Sus 1974, 65). Thus criticisms of Israel were all the states could muster, with domestic populations taking the side of Israel, and the British population strongly opposing the calls for its destruction (Ibid, 70). In the wake of the Algerian civil war, anti-Arab demonstrations in France forced their government to either vocally endorse either Israel or neutrality (Ibid). Thus, NATO allies begrudgingly accepted American military intervention, despite their condemnations of Israel, under the condition that the US' actions lifted the oil embargo. The US believed that by supplying aid to Israel during the conflict, Egypt would be convinced to limit its advancements and disengage, correctly identifying that oil shipments would resume in the absence of active conflict (Burns 1985, 179). In addition, the US predicted that supplying aid would accelerate the conflict's conclusion and improve the equitability of any ceasefire arrangement (Ibid) A rapid conclusion to the conflict would also disincentivize further conflict-related embargoes, as the economic costs from a lack of oil exports would far outweigh the benefits of minimal Israeli concessions among OPEC nations.

. Thus, neither NATO relationships nor America's economic relationship would be worsened through involvement in the conflict.

Results

American foreign policy during the October War was successful, solidifying relationships with Egypt and Israel, while also establishing America as the Middle East's preeminent superpower. America's newfounded relationship with Egypt led to peace between Egypt and Israel, resulting in the former's re-acquisition of the Sinai desert and diplomatic channels between Cairo and Jerusalem. This relationship would also create benefits outside of peace, with Egypt becoming the second-largest recipient of US foreign aid (Weinbaum 1983, 5) and America using its new Arab ally to negotiate deals with Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War (Walker 1997, 150). Thus, the US, in its pursuit of regional involvement, successfully fulfilled its objective to create a second regional ally capable of advocating on its behalf to other Arab states.

America's mediation between Israel and Egypt was also a major diplomatic win for the former, fulfilling Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion's vision of a hegemonic power establishing peace between his country and its Arab neighbours (Lewis 1999, 365). American-Israeli relations also saw economic and military improvements after the conflict. The end of the October War marked the beginning of written American military assurances to Israel (Ibid, 367), with Kissinger stating further that the US would support Israeli military ventures *in extremis* (Lewis 1999, 367). In terms of economic aid, after 1973, US yearly aid to Israel increased from 122 million USD a year to an average of 2.4 billion, passing the cumulative total which America provided to all Arab states. This underpinned the unbreakable bond between Israel and America which exists today, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of America's fulfillment of its goal of establishing and maintaining a relationship with Israel.

Finally, America's handling of the conflict allowed it to exert regional control while undermining Soviet foreign policy. Diplomatically, the peace negotiated between Israel and Egypt established America as a powerful arbitrator. As noted by Kissinger, "Everyone knows in the Middle East that if they want peace they have to go through us" (Suri 2008). The threat of nukes allowed the US to establish strategic control over the region by deterring Soviet encroachment and demonstrating superior military quality. The Soviet Union's failure to get directly involved incurred audience costs among its Arab allies, who had predicted a 75% chance of the Soviet Union's direct involvement (Scherer 1978, 3) and were frustrated by repeated failures to assist Arabs in recapturing the territory lost in 1967 (Ibid, 7), thus opening the door to clientelistic partnerships with the United States. It must be noted that a partnership which hinged on the threat of nuclear warfare to establish regional control would not have been sufficient for Arab states to view the US as a legitimate strategic partner. One of their core criticisms of the Soviet Union was what they perceived to be a blustering nature, which tended to exaggerate Soviet military capabilities. However, when observed in combination with

Israel's military success, the characterization of America as the region's greatest military presence was legitimised. Thus, the US could exert regional control and protect its other economic interests in the area.

In conclusion, when viewing America's involvement in the October War through the lens of a nation attempting to consolidate relationships with Egypt and Israel, establish regional control, and protect relationships with Saudi Arabia and NATO allies, the combination of purported arms shipments, swaggering and neutrality proved to be a successful military strategy.

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