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Roland Popp. "Accommodating to a working relationship: Arab Nationalism and U.S. Cold War policies in the Middle East, 1958-60." *Cold War History* 10:3 (August 2010): 397-427.
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Review by **Clea Bunch**, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Egypt: Past, Present and Future.

When I chose to pursue a doctorate in history, I believed that my career would be spent reconstructing narratives of the past. Little did I know that my specialty—U.S.-Middle East relations—would necessitate that I spend much of my academic career commenting on the present and the future. While I often tell my audiences that I do not own a crystal ball, certain events of the past define the parameters of our future policies, as well as the limitations, opportunities, and potential threats in the region.

As I write this review, Egyptians are standing their ground in *Tahrir* Square and demanding that President Hosni Mubarak resign. By the time that this review is published, the political situation in Egypt will have changed dramatically. Recent events in Cairo have put the U.S.-Egyptian partnership in the forefront of the news and have launched many debates about the value of democracy versus stability in the region. It seems odd that at this particular moment, I am analyzing an article which describes the policies that brought Egypt and the United States to this juncture.

Roland Popp has done an excellent job of explaining the seemingly contradictory nature of President Dwight Eisenhower's relationship with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser during the period from 1958-1960. Popp's explication of Eisenhower's approach to Arab nationalism is both enlightening and well-ordered. He carefully identifies U.S. goals, the impediments to those goals, and the changing circumstances that shaped policy during the Eisenhower administration.

Both Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles struggled to comprehend Nasser's personality and his role in the Middle East. American officials compared Nasser to Hitler and simultaneously claimed that he was a tool of the Soviets, leaving some confused students of this era questioning whether members of the Eisenhower administration understood the distinctions between communism and fascism. Nasser's image in Washington alternated between that of a Soviet proxy and that of a legitimate nationalist—rejected at one moment and accepted the next. While these images are on the surface irreconcilable, Popp explains that Arab politics, especially concerns about Iraqi President Abd al-Karim Qasim, tended to soften Eisenhower's approach to Nasser. Regional political realities, not an altered attitude toward revolutionary Arab nationalism, influenced American policy and motivated Eisenhower's reconciliation with Nasser.¹

It was, however, impossible to woo Nasser without damaging traditional ties with Israel and conservative Arab regimes in Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Therein lay the problem: befriending Nasser would undercut Soviet influence, yet he could not be accommodated without jeopardizing relations with key U.S. allies in the region. In addition, President Eisenhower had a personal distaste for Nasser's neutralism; he believed that there was a clear choice between freedom and "godless communism."² Despite the apparent advantages of capitalizing on Nasser's popularity in the Arab world, Eisenhower believed that the recipients of America's benevolence should display their anti-communist credentials clearly. As Popp points out, "...the Eisenhower administration happily consumed the benefits of the working relationship with Nasser with respect to the Soviet threat in the Middle East but in essence sustained much of its previous anti-nationalist stance with respect to intra-regional politics." (416)

Popp's analysis is exceedingly strong and informative, yet I take issue with his statement that "...the Eisenhower administration missed the chance to establish a constructive relationship with the *key* regional force." (399) Although Nasser was, without a doubt, a popular leader and a charismatic orator, he was in the process of establishing his own cult of personality in Egypt, modeling himself after other autocrats around the globe. Nasserism should not be mistaken for Arab nationalism; as one can see from Syria's disenchantment with and secession from the United Arab Republic in 1961, Nasser's government did not represent the interests of a broader Arab public. Indeed, we should not fall into the trap of defining Nasser as he saw himself, as *Sawt al-Arab* (the voice of Arabs), which was the name of his propagandist radio program. One might therefore ask the question: Would a closer relationship with Nasser have served the strategic goals of the United States?

¹ Letter from Dwight Eisenhower to Dr. Elson, DDE Diaries Box 34, DDE Dictation, July 1958, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library.

² Memorandum of Conversation by William Rountree, Department of State, 25 March 1959, Office of the Staff Secretary, International Series, Jordan (2), Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library .

Nasser's brand of nationalism did not include guarantees of democracy and individual rights for Egyptian citizens. While it is clear that self-serving dictators provided the United States with stable, predictable allies in the Middle East during the Cold War, it is equally clear that its aid to those autocrats—be they Reza Shah Pahlavi or Husni Mubarak—eventually became a net liability. In addition, Nasser's popularity depended, in part, on his militant, anti-Semitic speeches directed at Israel. While Anwar Sadat managed to achieve peace with Israel after years of exhaustive warfare, it is unlikely that Nasser would have undermined his regime by modifying his anti-Israeli stance.

Presidents from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush have trumpeted the merits of self-determination, yet democracies are inherently messy and unpredictable. Democratic governments in the Middle East, whether in Israel, Gaza, or a nascent reformed Egypt, are free to work against U.S. interests in the region. Thus, the key question that has plagued U.S. policy in the Middle East is the following: How can the United States promote democracy and individual rights, yet maintain control of a region that is essential to our strategic interests? While this issue may not have been adequately addressed during the Eisenhower administration, surely it is being asked in the offices of the White House today.

Popp's article is insightful and detailed; it thoroughly describes the complexity of American policy in the Middle East during the final years of Eisenhower's presidency. Although I do not agree with his claim that the Eisenhower administration missed an auspicious moment, I do find his article of great value to the study of U.S.-Middle East policy during the late 1950s. Its chief contribution is that it displays, with great accuracy, the intricacy of the political arena, the limited options available to leaders, and, ultimately, the contradictory goals that were pursued by American policymakers.

Clea Bunch specializes in the history of the Modern Middle East and U.S. - Middle Eastern relations. Dr. Bunch has received grants from numerous institutions including the John F. Kennedy Foundation, the Lyndon Johnson Foundation, the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and the American Center of Oriental Research. Several of her publications include "Strike at Samu: Covert Diplomacy and Shifting Alliances Prior to the Six Day War," *Diplomatic History*, January, 2008 and "Supporting the Brave Young King: The Suez Crisis and Eisenhower's New Approach to Jordan, 1953-1958" in *Reassessing Suez: New Perspectives on the Crisis and its Aftermath*, Ashgate, 2008. She is currently working on a book on the history of Jordanian - American relations.

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