Foreign Affairs: The Roots of Hell
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The trouble began because oppressed Arabs needed a revolution, persecuted Jews needed a home and the two superpowers, America and Russia, thought they needed Middle Eastern friendship—all at the same historical moment.

Despite its new name (United Arab Republic) and its Arabic language, Egypt isn't really an Arab country. The ancient highway from Africa's heart to the Mediterranean has traditions peculiar to itself. One can see a kind of proof of this in the almost startling physical resemblance between Nasser and Pharaoh Ramses II, whose statues dot the Nile.

Old Links, New Interest

Of course there is an old link between Egypt and Arabia. Saladin ruled both Cairo and Damascus. But Egypt's resurgent fascination for the Middle East is of relatively recent date and can be traced to formation of the Arab League, under British sponsorship, in 1945. London hoped to divert Cairo's attention from the Sudan toward Arabia because Britain wanted the Sudan. It failed.

However, Egypt's interest in the Middle East grew just as it was preparing for its revolution. The Arab League's first Secretary General, an Egyptian citizen, found himself increasingly preoccupied when survivors of Nazi persecution poured into Palestine determined to create a Jewish state.

Jews and Arabs had, on the whole, dwelled successfully together for centuries in the Middle East. Indeed, during simultaneous birth pangs of Zionism and the Arab Revolution, they shared mutual detestation for their British overlords. In early 1945, when two Stern Gang members were tried for assassinating Lord Moyne, Egyptians in the courtroom murmured: "If we had 100 youths like that, Egypt would be free." Nasser himself discussed the struggle against Britain with a Jewish officer during Israeli-Arab armistice talks in 1948.

That defeat for Egypt's Army inspired Nasser to plot the revolution Egypt already craved. I can succinctly illustrate why there was such craving. In 1942 a Cairo prince served me luncheon in his palace on golden plates.

Afterward, I drove to the nearest village and, with my interpreter, stumbled through the dust to a windowless hovel. In one corner, on a pile of rags, lay a baby with one festering eye. The mother had stabbed it with a pin so, when the boy grew older, he wouldn't be mobilized and could therefore help his father draw the plow.

Nasser, a brilliant conspirator and charismatic leader, took charge of the necessary revolution. To keep power, however, he had to please the officers who constituted his only organized political support. For this he needed weapons. When the U.S., fearing another Palestine war, refused to sell more arms, Nasser turned to Moscow.

Middle Eastern Oil

Pragmatic American interests were clearly with the Arabs, who possessed vast petroleum deposits in which U.S. firms had invested fortunes. Nevertheless, there was also a deep American involvement in Israel.

This did not derive solely from the fact that there is a large, influential Jewish population in this country, although that is most important. There is another somewhat mystical bond that stems from Puritan ideas and Bible fundamentalism and which existed long before Zionism. John Adams, our second President, wrote: "I really wish the Jews again in Judea as an independent nation."

Thus, as political revolts developed among both Arabs and Jews, the United States found itself drawn into the region as a superpower although perplexed by contradictory material and emotional pulls.

During this same approximate period the Soviet Union was also flexing superpower muscles. Russia had always pursued national interests in the area between the East Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. To these Lenin added ideological "Theses" in 1920 when he advocated guiding anti-colonialism for Communism's benefit.

In 1940, during the Nazi-Soviet collaboration, Molotov demanded German agreement to expand Russian influence southward into the Middle East. After the war, Stalin unsuccessfully staked out a claim for a piece of Libya and a Red Sea port. Since 1955 Moscow has sought footholds of one or another sort in Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Somalia.

A Head-On Collision

There has thus been sudden and brutal confrontation between Arab and Jewish dynamism in the Middle East and, simultaneously, a less abrupt but vital competition between the paramount powers. The tortured roots were all planted at approximately the same time. Now we live amid their tangled growth.

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