



The Road Not Taken

A German document indicates that in the early 1950s, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser tried to explore the possibility of peace with Israel

By Haim Handwerker

Gamal Abdel Nasser

PRINCETON, N.J. - In 1953, Gamal Abdel Nasser, then the deputy prime minister of Egypt, contacted the West German ambassador in Cairo, Gunther Pawelke, and asked him to examine the possibility of a peace agreement with Israel. This was an official request. What exactly happened as a result is not clear. What is clear is that this activity led nowhere.

This information has been revealed by Middle East specialist Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, from Princeton, who bases his disclosure on an internal document of the West German Foreign Ministry, sent on July 2, 1953 to Walter Hallstein, the deputy foreign minister, second in the government hierarchy after prime minister and foreign minister Konrad Adenauer.

The document deals with a proposal for ambassador Pawelke to mediate between Egypt and Britain on the British evacuation of the Suez Canal. In the document, the head of the Middle East desk at the German Foreign Ministry opposes the idea of German mediation, and notes the failure of a mediation effort in April 1953, when Nasser had asked ambassador Pawelke to examine the possibility of a peace agreement with Israel.

The suspicion, according to Schwanitz, was that the mediator would get embroiled with the sides. The German policy-makers tried to ensure that their country would maintain neutrality among states and not get mixed up in the bad relationship between Nasser and President Mahmud Nagib. In the German document, there is also reference to six other documents dealing with Nasser's request to mediate between his country and Israel, and these documents could very well cast light on the entire affair. Schwanitz says that he has contacted the German Foreign Ministry and requested these documents. He was informed that though nearly 50 years have elapsed since they were written, there is secret information in them, and there is only a slim chance that they will be declassified.

Schwanitz finds confirmation for the information that he has in a leaflet distributed by the Muslim Brotherhood in the streets of Cairo in April 1953, warning that anyone who embarked on peace talks with Israel would be killed. The Muslim Brotherhood, he says, was strongly opposed to any reconciliation with Israel, holding that Israel had no right to exist in the Middle East. In Schwanitz's estimation, the timing of the leaflet could indicate that something had leaked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Schwanitz explains why Nasser chose to ask for ambassador Pawelke's aid: "The Egyptians, like the Turks, have always had very good relations with the Germans. The Egyptians admired German technical ability and also their knowledge in the field of medicine. Among other things, the Germans helped the Egyptians deal with bilharzia."

Ambassador Pawelke was an elderly diplomat who had been in the German foreign service back in the 1920s. In the mid-1930s he served as a secretary at the German Embassy in Baghdad. Three times, he refused to join the Nazi party. In 1952, Adenauer appointed him ambassador to Cairo. Pawelke came to Cairo and build up relationships of trust with Nagib and Nasser. His first goal was to soften the Egyptian criticism of the West German government. In September 1952, talks began on a reparations agreement with Israel. The Egyptians warned the Germans that if the agreement were signed, they would see it as an anti-Arab move, one that would strengthen the enemy. In response, they threatened, they would confiscate West German companies in Egypt. Pawelke succeeded in preventing the boycott.

In addition, explains Schwanitz, Nasser had no other way to check the possibility of peace contacts with Israel. There was not much trust between Britain and Egypt because of the dispute over the evacuation of the Suez Canal, and the British had no interest in bringing Egypt and Israel closer. The Americans were pretty much cut off from what was happening in the Middle East and consistently supported the British. The French were embroiled in Algeria and there was a great deal of hostility toward them in the Arab world. The Soviets were not important enough in those days after the death of Stalin, and in Egypt, communists were viewed with suspicion.

In Israel, Nasser has always been viewed as a ruler who was never prepared to accept its existence. The document that Schwanitz discovered predates others reported on by Amir Oren in Ha'aretz on May 4, 2001. According to those U.S. State Department documents, which have been made available to the public, Nasser proposed to U.S. president Lyndon Johnson a formula for a non-belligerency agreement and an exchange of ambassadors in return for an Israeli withdrawal from the territories it had occupied during the Six-Day War and compensation for the Palestinian refugees. Upon the recommendation of his advisors, who were angry at Nasser's behavior during the crisis of May and June, 1967, and were concerned about the response of Israel and its supporters, Johnson responded coldly to Nasser's probes, and the opportunity was missed.

A boy in Cairo

Schwanitz, 45, is a historian specializing in the Middle East. He has an unusual perspective, if only because of his life story. He is an East German who lived in Cairo, the son of diplomats who served in the trade delegation in Cairo (at the time there was no East German embassy there). He spent two periods in Egypt: from 1956 to 1960 and from 1965 to 1967. He has boyhood memories of the Six-Day War in Cairo. "For a child it was very exciting to live through the war. There was a lot of noise, explosions in the sky that looked like fireworks, and riots in the streets. Diplomats had to be very careful. Anyone who looked foreign was thought to be an Israeli."

Eventually he pursued Arabic studies at Leipzig University, wrote a doctorate on the Egyptian economy in 1986 and became the head of a research group on the Middle East at the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin. After the reunification of Germany, he worked at Modern Orient, a German research center associated with the Max Planck Institute. He has been visiting fellow at Princeton University. He was also invited in 1995 to serve as a visiting associate at the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, but decided not to come. The reason - he had fallen in love and married, and has a three-year-old son, and now he prefers to be at Princeton.

Schwanitz has published books about German-Egyptian relations. His most recent work is "Gold, Bankers and Diplomats," which deals with the affair of the Nazi regime's stolen gold. He is presently working on a book called "The United States, Nazi Germany and the Middle East."

For 30 years, Schwanitz was forbidden to leave Germany. Eventually, when he examined his file at the Stasi, he understood why: He was considered a security risk. He spoke five languages (among them Hebrew) and met with foreigners. Today, as he walks around the Princeton campus, he loves the freedom. But professionally, though he works ceaselessly, he feels stuck. Acquaintances say that the reunification of Germany has caused a problematic phenomenon in the academic world: Good East German researchers have been edged out of important positions in favor of those from the West. Schwanitz confirms this. "In the academic world you need 'parents' who will advance you. Professors of West German origin prefer to advance their own students, who will carry on their work and cause their own academic work to be recognized. As a researcher I can also do very good work, but this won't help me."

Even when he returned to East Germany, Schwanitz always felt connected to Egypt, and always wanted to be researching events in the Middle East. According to him, when Nasser wanted Pawelke's help in examining the possibility of peace with Israel, it was a time when the Egyptian leadership had to decide where it was heading. It was a historic window of opportunity that could perhaps, in retrospect, have changed the course of events in the Middle East. However, says Schwanitz, it was in effect the British and the Americans who pushed Nasser into the arms of the Soviets.

The West's mistakes

In June 1953, Nagib became president of Egypt and Nasser became prime minister and minister of the interior. In those days, several crucial decisions faced the Egyptian leadership: What should be the attitude toward Israel; from whom could arms be obtained; and how should foreign policy be shaped? Should Egypt be part of the Western world, or form a third bloc of non-aligned nations headed by India? And what possible settlement could be reached to bring about evacuation of the British from the Suez Canal?

Between January 1953, and the end of 1954, Nasser had no answers. In March and April, 1953, when Nasser turned to the West German ambassador concerning Israel, there were even signs that he was pro-Western and to a certain extent, anti-communist.

How was Nasser pushed into the arms of the Soviets? It began, according to Schwanitz, in the disputes Egypt had with London and Washington concerning the evacuation of the Suez Canal. In London, he says, there were "refuseniks" who found it difficult to accept the fact that the countries from which they had withdrawn would form independent foreign policies. The British disapproved of the neutrality the Egyptians wanted to adopt in the conflict between East and West and of the idea of establishing a bloc of non-aligned nations from the Third World. Despite Western warnings about communism, Nasser did not believe that his country faced any danger, because it was a Muslim state.

Britain and the United States gave precedence to a withdrawal arrangement from the canal as part of a covenant that would shape a pro-Western bloc of Middle Eastern states, which in addition to Egypt would include Turkey, Iran and Israel. The idea of including Israel in such an organization did not survive long.

Ultimately, says Schwanitz, the British and the Americans lost out in every way. In 1954, a pact was signed to withdraw the British troops from the Suez Canal, and the Egyptians received full sovereignty over their country and the canal with no commitment on their part to participate in the Western bloc. However, the argument over the canal left hard feelings in Egypt.

Another issue facing Nasser was the question of whether to form a military regime or a democracy. Nasser, a young army officer, realized that a democracy could be the end of his political career, and that his role would be limited to that of a transitional ruler. He therefore chose a military government, which he would head. In 1954, he planned to warn public opinion that if Egypt were to turn to democracy, it would face chaos. Part of the plan, as Khaled Mohieddin - who was a member of Nasser's Free Officers' Movement - testified in his book five years ago, was the organization of several small terror attacks in Cairo to demonstrate the expected problematic future.

It was an irony of fate, says Schwanitz, that Nasser planned a few non-damaging explosions, and got additional bomb attacks - set by Israeli agents. They blew up a cinema and a post office in Cairo and the American consulate in Alexandria as part of a sabotage campaign that later became known as "Esek bish" (the rotten business), or the Lavon affair.

When the Lavon affair was revealed, it became clear who had been behind the explosions, the aim of which was to complicate Egypt's relations with the United States and Britain. According to Schwanitz, the affair increased Nasser's distrust of Israel and its intrigues. He no longer believed that peace with Israel was possible.

Nasser also used the affair to get rid of Nagib. Among the justifications for this was the Israeli connection with Nagib: Max Bennett, a commander of the Israeli sabotage group that was operating in Egypt, who also served as a representative of the Ford motor company there, was close to Nagib and advised him about military vehicles. Bennett, a German citizen, was also connected to the activities of Wehrmacht officers who were in Egypt when Bennett was arrested and committed suicide. After the Lavon affair, the German military men were expelled from Egypt because they turned out to be a security risk.

According to Schwanitz, Egypt got another push into the arms of the Eastern bloc when the idea of building the Aswan Dam was raised. The Egyptians saw this project as a measure essential for feeding the Egyptian people and strengthening the country economically. Nagib asked Ambassador Pawelke for aid in financing and building the dam. West Germany thought it would be difficult to refuse the Egyptians, especially after the reparations agreement with Israel had been signed. The Germans proposed that Britain and France join the plan, which was supposed to be a ten-year project. Nasser also asked the United States government and the World Bank for financing. In the West, the general attitude toward the plan was very positive.

However, in 1955, the U.S. Senate rejected the idea of giving American money to a huge project in the Egyptian desert. They had reservations about Nasser and were concerned that the project would be a white elephant. Not long before that, Heinrich Rau, the German trade minister, had addressed Moscow and argued that in the inter-bloc game that was emerging, it would be good if the entire project were financed and carried out by the Soviet Union. After the Americans rejected the project in 1955, the Soviets quickly came into the picture.

This was a critical turning point, one that strengthened ties between the Eastern bloc and Egypt. Schwanitz says that another event that strengthened ties between Egypt and the Soviet Union was the provision of arms to Egypt, which began in September, 1955. Here, too, the West missed an opportunity. In May, 1950, the United States, Britain and France decided not to sell arms to the Middle East, in order to maintain quiet in the region. Three times between 1954 and 1957, the Kremlin proposed joining this agreement in order to prevent an arms race. The Soviets wanted to win recognition as equal players in the Great Power game that was emerging after World War II in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Britain, France and the United States did not want to give them this recognition. The Americans, for example, argued that the USSR posed a danger to the Middle East. This was the Eisenhower doctrine, good for the election campaign in the United States. In reality, no one believed that it was true, but the United States adopted this approach in its foreign policy as well. When the Soviets saw that the Americans and their allies were trying to ignore them, they decided to prove that they could play a key role on their own. They decided to sell arms to Egypt, and their weight in the Middle East increased considerably.

Then came the Suez Campaign, which led to the increase of Soviet influence. If it was Israel's interest to try to get closer to and make peace with Egypt, says Schwanitz, the campaign was a great mistake. The Israelis had justification for going into action: There were attacks by infiltrators. The fear was that Nasser would grow stronger, and within ten years would be a serious threat. The British and the French in effect embroiled Israel in an unnecessary war, says Schwanitz. From a different perspective, Israel used them for its own needs. David Ben-Gurion's problem was that he had begun to believe his own propaganda. He spoke a great deal about the Egyptian danger, and he had to try to reinforce his secret channels of communication with the Egyptians.

Despite the victory in the Sinai Campaign, it resulted - paradoxically - in the strengthening of Soviet influence in the Middle East. The Soviets in effect forced Britain, France and Israel to retreat, thus proving their power to the Arab world. And the wounded Nasser also became hostile to Israel.

What became of Pawelke? Schwanitz says that the British disapproved of the German ambassador's over-activity in Cairo. They feared that while they were packing up and leaving Egypt, the Germans would fill the vacuum that was created. One theory holds that Britain, one of the World War II Allies that effectively controlled Germany, exerted its influence to get Pawelke out of Cairo; London has denied this. In 1955, Pawelke completed his work in Cairo and in the foreign service. Nasser's peace initiative evaporated, Egypt became a protegee of the Soviet Union. And a unique window of opportunity that could have changed the course of history, as Schwanitz defines it, slammed shut.