

Czechoslovakia's main objectives in the Middle East during the Cold War

Lukács Krajsír

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was a very important region for the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSCĚ). During the Cold War, Prague always followed the developments in the region and waited for the opportunity to play a bigger role there. Despite the fact that Czechoslovakia had already successfully cooperated with some regional countries between the two world wars, following the end of World War II it was difficult to reestablish relations. One of the major reasons was the communist takeover in 1948, which crippled the relations with strongly anti-Communist states like Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Second, Czechoslovakia played a key role in the establishment of the independent Israel. In the 1950s, following Josef Stalin's death (1953) the Kremlin started to focus on the Arab states, which initiated a huge change in the Eastern Bloc countries' Middle East policy. The Soviet Union changed its attitude towards the Third World, abolished the Zhdanov Doctrine (1947) in its foreign policy¹ and supported the anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements across the world. Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser was the first Arab leader, who made a rapprochement to the Soviet Union and built strong relations with the European socialist countries. Czechoslovakia, following the main foreign policy lines of the Soviet Union, pursued several goals— with success and failures - during the Cold War in MENA region.

The following table includes Prague's main objectives and political aims in the MENA region in four periods between 1945 and 1989.

The periods of Czechoslovakia's foreign policy in MENA region²

¹ The Zhdanov Doctrine was developed by Central Committee secretary Andrei Zhdanov in 1946. It declared that the world was divided into two camps: the "imperialistic" (capitalist states and empires) and "democratic" (the Communist countries) ones. The doctrine did not acknowledge the "third way" or the positive role of anti-colonial movements in the Third World, despite the fact that these were fighting against the "capital states" for their own independency.

² Karel Sieber – Petr Zídek: "Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948–1989." Praha: Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, 2009. p. 16-18.

pre-1945-1955	The Czechoslovak leadership pursued a highly successful foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa between the two world wars. First they contacted Egypt (1923), then Czechoslovak embassies were established in Iran (1925), Iraq (1933) and Saudi Arabia (1936). After World War II Prague wanted to continue its diplomacy with the Middle East and North African countries.
1956-1967	The most intensive period, when the Czechoslovakian Army industries produced thousands of weapons which were sold to the Arab states. Prague also sent out its own military instructors and experts. The KSČ affiliated with Algeria, Iraq and Syria, but Egypt was the most important Arab country in the period. Czechoslovakia terminated the relationship with Israel after the Six Day War in 1967.
1968-mid-1980s	The Prague Spring had a negative impact on Arab-Czechoslovak relations. After 1968 Gustav Husák announced the “normalization”, and the KSČ turned its attention to interior politics. The “normalized” Czechoslovakia returned to the Middle East only in the mid-1970s. The most intensive relations were with Iraq (Saddam Hussein), Syria (Hafez al-Assad) and Libya (Muammar Gaddafi).
1985-1989	In the last years of the Communist Czechoslovakia, Prague’s MENA policy suffered many blows. The Czechoslovak industry and economy had many problems, and the Arabian allies stopped to pay for the arms and products. The major objective of the period was South Yemen and the building of “scientific socialism” there.

Categories of the MENA states from the view of the KSČ

As the above table shows, the relevance of the MENA states were different for the Czechoslovak foreign policy.

Conservative Arab monarchies did not establish diplomatic relations with Czechoslovakia and were very hostile to the socialist states. The Arab monarchs were famous about their anti-Communism. Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar belonged to this group.

Pro-Western pragmatic countries, despite their alliance with the West, had close a relationship with Prague. They did not only diplomatically recognize Czechoslovakia, but had

a lot of economic cooperation. These states were Morocco, Kuwait, Jordan, Tunisia and Iran (under the shah).

Arab nationalist states were Czechoslovakia's most important regional partners. The relations were strong and intensive, mostly in military trade, as Prague sent weapons, ammunition, vehicles and planes to these countries. Besides, several military experts helped train the local Arab armies. Syria, Egypt (during Nasser), Libya (Gaddafi), Iraq (Saddam) and North Yemen (until 1970) were the primary Arab nationalist partners.

South Yemen had a special role in Czechoslovakian foreign policy, particularly after the founding of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (1970). The building of "scientific Marxism" was a major effort for the KSČ, since it wanted to prove that socialism is an option for the Arabs.

Israel, following its establishment, was the most important state for Czechoslovakia in the MENA region. Weapons were sent to Israel and even Czechoslovak pilots were fighting in the Israeli Air Force in the first Arab-Israeli war (1948). Later the weapon supplies to Israel were diminished, in consequence of the Slánský trial and the Soviet-Israeli split.³ Czechoslovakia terminated its relationship with Israel after the Six Day war in 1967.

Czechoslovakia's policies and objectives toward the Middle Eastern countries

Political and ideological policies

During the Cold War Czechoslovakia was one of the countries, where the leadership took the communist and socialist ideology very seriously. Since the spreading of the ideology was the main purpose of the KSČ, Prague's foreign policy was not often determined by pragmatism. Furthermore, it was important for the Czechoslovak leadership to know how the leaders of the countries they are closely cooperating with, are dealing with the local communist movements and intellectuals. Therefore, it often happened that despite the fact that they had good relations before, Prague abruptly changed its policy and did not care much about the consequences.⁴

³ The Slánský trial was a „trial of anti-state conspiracy centered on Rudolf Slánský" in 1952, who was later executed. Slánský was a pro-Israeli politician and with 13 other leading party members (11 of them Jews) was accused of participating in a "Trotskyite-Titoite-Zionist conspiracy" against KSČ leader, Klement Gottwald. Even Israeli citizens were arrested, which made a huge diplomatic crisis between the two countries.

⁴ In 1963, when Iraqi President Abd al-Karim Qasim was assassinated and the Ba'ath Party took power, Prague wanted to cut diplomatic relations with Baghdad, terminate all Czechoslovak projects in the country, isolate Iraq in the region and recall all the Czechoslovak experts and teachers from the country. They thought that the "Iraqi

Before the Czechoslovak-Arab arms deal in 1955 Prague was not much interested in the MENA. The KSČ thought that most of the Arab states were allies of the West and sooner or later they would all join the Bagdad Pact (1955). Even the relations with Egypt started very difficult: the Czechoslovak press and leadership declared the coup of the Free Officers' Movement and the fall of the monarchy (1952) an "American friendly development". Later when the Free Officers persecuted and banned the Egyptian Communist Party, they called Nasser a "fascist dictator".⁵

However, when Nasser was disappointed in the West (mostly the United States), because they did not send weapons to Egypt and the border conflicts with Israel got worse, it was vital to arm the Egyptian Army with new weapons. At the Bandung Conference in April 1955, Nasser asked Zhou Enlai, the Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China to sell weapons to Egypt. Zhou Enlai refused, but after the conference he contacted Moscow. In 1955 the Kremlin was worried about the Bagdad Pact, which threatened to isolate the Soviet Union in the Middle East and Central Asia. Therefore, Moscow started to play an active role in the MENA region and Egypt was a potential ally to bypass the Pact effects. But the Kremlin wanted a "cover state" that would supply the Egyptian Army with weapons. They were afraid of the consequences of a direct Soviet-Egyptian arms deal, which could initiate an arms race in the region. The ideal partner was Czechoslovakia, which was famous for its weapon production. In September 1955, Czechoslovakia concluded an arms deal with Egypt, which caused panic in the West and their MENA allies, but other states in the region (Syria and North Yemen) began to look to Prague. Even the pro-Western regional countries started to establish relations with Czechoslovakia and opened embassies in the late 1950s, for example Tunisia and Morocco.

In the 1960s an excellent opportunity arose for the Czechoslovak leadership to support the fight for independence (Algeria), and increase its influence in the newly independent countries. The aim was to help the "advanced movements" to achieve a "socialist way of state building". The leadership hoped that the Communist Parties could get into power and would be good allies to the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia to counterweigh Western influence in the region. They expected that these allies would support Prague's and Moscow's stance in the United Nations. Until 1968 Czechoslovakia was one of the biggest supporter of the Arab

Free Officers are fascist and western puppets". Only the Soviet Union and other socialist states (Hungary) prevented the break of relations between Czechoslovakia and Iraq. MOL Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Csehszlovákia TÜK 1945-1964, 20. D. *Csehszlovákia Irakkal kapcsolatos külpolitikai irányelveinek felterjesztése*. (October 20, 1963)

⁵ Tareq Ismael: *The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920-1988*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990. p.87.

Communist Parties and every year there was a conference or “ideological education” in Prague. Sometimes this attitude and the strong ideological assistance caused diplomatic conflicts with Arab nationalist regimes. Despite the fact that the relations with these countries were the most beneficial for Prague, the KSČ always criticized the Arab leaders, when they suppressed the local Communist movements and intellectuals.⁶ But later Prague realized that the Communist Parties have a very fragile position in the Arab countries, with a minimal influence on the public opinion, only a few members in the cities and they do not have any reliable or rational political programs.⁷ At the same time “heretic” communist countries (Yugoslavia or after the Sino-Soviet split China) were also disturbing the Czechoslovak ideology-based influence as they projected a very intensive propaganda of “their own way of communism” in the MENA region.

In the KSČ the role of the ideological factor decreased after Egypt’s president Anwar Sadat expelled the Soviet and Czechoslovak experts, minimalized relations with the Eastern Bloc and turned to the United States. In the late 1970s and 1980s Prague did not care about the position of the local Communist Parties in the Arab countries any more and the “colour of the political systems” was irrelevant. For example, the main political partners were Saddam Hussein or Muammar Gaddafi, who also persecuted the leftist and “advanced movements”. Only South Yemen was an exception. The KSČ hoped that the local Communists will succeed. In that case South Yemen would have been a “shining example” of Arab Communism, which could be exported in the whole MENA region. Despite of the intensive support and aid, this project was a huge failure and disappointment for the Eastern Bloc.⁸

Economic relations and investments

Another key reason of Czechoslovakia’s interest in the Middle East and Africa, was trade and investments. The KSČ wanted to make long term trade, financial, loan and other economic agreements with the MENA countries to ensure Czechoslovak import/export

⁶ For example, after the unification Egypt and Syria (1958) Nasser started a very strong anti-communist propaganda and interior policy. Hundreds of intellectuals and activists were imprisoned and the Egyptian newspapers were attacking the Communist Bloc countries claiming that they were supporting “anarchy and coups” in the Arab country (mostly in Syria). Czechoslovakia criticized Nasser and there were disputes among the leaders in KSČ that Prague should reduce its relations with Egypt and cancel common projects.

⁷ MOL Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Egyiptom TÜK 1945-64, 7. D. *Konzultáció a csehszlovák KÜM-mal afrikai és arab országok tekintetében.* (November 21, 1964)

⁸ Modernization could not eliminate the semi-feudal, tribal system. Poverty and unemployment grew and the Aden leadership turned the worker-peasant class against him. Also the coups, unrests and civil wars were almost everyday occurrence and despite a lot of aid from the socialist countries, South Yemeni economy and security remained instable and fragile.

from/to region. Also in the newly independent countries they wanted to supersede the former colonial powers (France, Great-Britain) and the new external actors, like the United States, the Federal Republic of Germany and Japan. Prague wanted new markets for the Czechoslovak goods and products, which included textiles, shoes, sugar and porcelain, but there was a high demand for heavy machinery, cars, trains, airplanes and weapons as well. The KSČ also wanted to import things, which the country did/could not produce and sought for a diversified import to avoid dependence on the West. The MENA countries were cheaper sources than Western Europe or pro-Western countries. The goods Czechoslovakia needed were oil, phosphate, black carbon, non-ferrous metals, nickel, iron, copper, citrus fruits, leather, and, most important of all, cotton. Czechoslovakia imported hundreds of tons of cotton annually from all over the world, but its most important supplier was Egypt. In its economic relations, therefore, Cairo was Prague's "number one priority" in the Middle East. After the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia had the strongest economic relations and the biggest trade volume with that Arab country. In the 1960s, Egypt was responsible for 75% of the trade volume between the Eastern Bloc and the MENA countries. Among the socialist countries Czechoslovakia was its second biggest (25%) trade partner right after the Soviet Union.⁹ But when Sadat broke the relations with Czechoslovakia, Syria and Libya became the main economic partners in the MENA. Economic contracts between Czechoslovakia and Syria amounted to \$100.000.000. Muammar Gaddafi of Libya was considered the "best customer", because he always paid in time and in Western "hard" currencies (dollar, West German mark), and was thus one of the biggest foreign currency providers for the Czechoslovak (but also for other socialist) banks.

Yet, it was not always the "progressive Arab regimes", which were the best customers. Prague had many economic disputes with them over interest rates, repayment periods or currencies. There were, however, problems when the Arab nationalist leaderships sometimes forgot to pay for the goods, thinking that the Czechoslovak products were aid and assistance, and there was no need to pay for them. There are documents and reports showing that business relations with Western friendly countries were in some cases more extensive than with Arab nationalist states.¹⁰ They had better and higher quality products and raw materials (Jordan, Morocco), had bigger and not so regulated markets (Turkey, Tunisia) or they just paid in time with "hard currency".

⁹ MOL Küm, XIX-J-1-k, Csehszlovákia Admin 1945-64, 13. D. *Konzultáció a Cseh külügyminiszterrel Afrika témában. Az afrikai országok irányában folytatott csehszlovák külpolitika koncepciója.* (July 15, 1961)

¹⁰ MOL Küm, XIX-J-1-k, Csehszlovákia Admin 1945-64, 13. D. *Konzultáció a Cseh külügyminiszterrel Afrika témában. Az afrikai országok irányában folytatott csehszlovák külpolitika koncepciója.* (July 15, 1961)

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that sometimes other Eastern Bloc countries were the biggest rivals for Prague in the MENA region. The commercial legations and offices of the socialist countries barely cooperated; the economic attachés lied to each other or held back some crucial market information; and they tried to discredit the other's product quality. That caused much tension among Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War. For example, in Egypt the German Democratic Republic Wartburg cars pushed out the Czech Škoda for a short period; in Jordan Czech and Polish businessmen competed for phosphate; and Prague and Budapest always disputed about who would buy iron ore from Iraq or crude oil from Iran.¹¹

Arms sales

Czechoslovakia has been famous for its arms production during the Cold War. The country had a great heavy industry and weapon production complex; the Czechoslovak Army had its own developed guns, aircraft and tanks.¹² In the 1980s Czechoslovakia was the seventh largest arms exporter in the world, after the United States, the Soviet Union, China, France, Great Britain and West Germany.¹³

For the Czechoslovak leadership the “ticket to the Middle East” was the Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal in 1955. This agreement signaled the gradual opening of the Soviet arsenal, first to Egypt and then to other allies in the Middle East. This was the first sizable arms deal between one Eastern Bloc country and an Arab state, the value of which amounted to \$250 million. During the so called “Mission 105” Egypt bought (mostly Soviet produced) MiG-15 aircraft, 220 pieces of BTR-152 APC, 200 T-34 tank, 12 gunships, 200 anti-tank rockets and a great number of small arms.¹⁴ Along with the weapons, many Czechoslovak instructors, training pilots and advisors arrived in Egypt as well. The consequences of this deal were significant and not just for Czechoslovakia and Egypt. An American-Israeli “Sovietologist”, Galia Golan said that this was a “*dramatic proof of the*

¹¹ MOL Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Egyiptom TÜK 1945-64, 10. D. *Beszélgetés a csehszlovák politikai beosztottal.* (May 8, 1958)

¹² The most famous small arm was the Sa vs. 58 (Samopal vzor 58). It was used in great numbers not only by the Czechoslovak People's Army, but it could be found in most third world countries, like Cuba, Guatemala, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Libya, Mozambique and Vietnam.

¹³ “Csehország már nem fegyvergyártó nagyhatalom.” *Origo*, (2002. 03. 13.) <http://www.origo.hu/gazdasag/hirek/20020313csehország.html> (Downloaded 2015.11.11.)

¹⁴ Karel Sieber – Petr Zidek: “Československo a Blízky východ v letech 1948–1989.” Praha: Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, 2009. p. 57.

near-east policy and relations [of the Soviets]."¹⁵ The West was shocked to realize the influence and outreach of the Soviet Union in the MENA region. Czechoslovakia became popular and Nasser acted as the middleman between the KSČ (and of course Moscow) and the Arab nationalist states. Egypt became an example of an alternative: after 1955 if an Arab country wanted to modernize its army, there was no need to accept the demands of the West (like joining the Bagdad Pact). Nasser acted on behalf of Syria and Yemen in organizing arms deals with Czechoslovakia in January and July 1956. The arms deals were of high importance for Czechoslovakia as well, because they introduced a new model of cooperation in the Cold War. After 1955, the Soviet Union could not deliver weapons directly to Third World countries, but via Czechoslovakia. Later on, Moscow used Czechoslovakia as a transit route not only to Arab states but also to Cuba, Ethiopia, Angola etc.

The position of Czechoslovakia as an arms supplier to Arab countries was paradoxically confirmed by their defeat in the Six Day War, which led to more orders of arms from Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Iraq.¹⁶ But after Nasser's death and the Yom Kippur War (1973) the new Egyptian leadership and military command was dissatisfied with the quality of the Soviet made weapons. The loss of Egypt was a big trauma not only for Czechoslovakia, but also for the whole Eastern Bloc. The only hope was Syria, which became the most important Arab arms customer for Czechoslovakia in the mid-1970s. Up to 1972 they had signed several arms contracts amounting to 25-30 million dollars. However, later Damascus stopped the repayment of the loan installments, which caused tensions between the two countries. At the same time the Soviet Union concluded own arms trade agreements directly and in more significant numbers than the Czechoslovak weapon factories. During Hafez al-Assad's rule, Syria purchased Soviet weapons for 25 billion dollars.¹⁷

From the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s Czechoslovak foreign policy was suffering failures in the Middle East, which went hand in hand with the decrease of arms exports. The Czechoslovak leadership concluded significant arms deals only in three MENA countries. One of them was Iraq, which used these weapons in the Iran–Iraq war

¹⁵ Galia Golan: *Soviet policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p.45.

¹⁶ Besides weapons services by Czechoslovak soldiers and pilots were also provided. After the war, on June 19, 1967, an Egyptian delegation sent by Nasser paid a visit to Prague to negotiate with Anton Novotný. The Egyptian delegation wanted "*more and more modern Czechoslovak aircrafts with (Czechoslovak!) pilots. In the next war against Israel, the Egyptian pilots would bomb Israeli objects while the pilots of the Eastern Bloc would defend Egypt's territory.*" Karel Sieber – Petr Zidek: *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948–1989*. Praha: Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, 2009. p.78.

¹⁷ 4600 tanks, 600 airplanes, 170 helicopters and two submarines. Barry Rubin: *The Truth about Syria*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. p.55.

(1980-1988). The other important partner was Libya, where, despite the arms embargo, Czechoslovakia continued to deliver arms. After the visit of the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to Prague in 1978 Czechoslovak arms sales increased vastly.¹⁸ Prague also sent most its military advisors and trainers. Between 1977 and 1979 about 900 Czechoslovak Army members were in Libya. There was a close cooperation between the ŠtB (Czechoslovakia's State Security) and Libyan secret services as well. The results of this cooperation were the armament of the PLO and the Lockerbie plane bombing in 1988 with Semtex.¹⁹ The biggest problem with these arms deliveries was the fact that in the late 1980s most of the Arab regimes stopped to pay. Not only because they did not have enough money, but they could not offer anything in return for the weapons. They thought it was a "gift" to them to strengthen Arab positions in the region and fight against Israel.²⁰

It should also be mentioned that Prague's arms sales were not dependent on ideology. After the Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal regional Western allies (Iran, Jordan, North Yemen and Morocco) became interested, ordered and received Czechoslovak weapons. For example after the Six Day War Morocco bought tanks (T-54, SD-100), transporters (OT-64 SKOT) and small arms, with a value of 18 million USD.²¹ North Yemen, despite being a monarchy, established closer ties with the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries. Sana'a was the third among Arab states that concluded a huge arms deal with Prague in July 1956.²²

Furthermore, Prague sold arms during the regional conflicts and civil wars, besides the Arab-Israeli conflict, also the civil wars in Yemen, Oman and Lebanon. But the most "ideology-free arms supply" took place during the Iraq-Iran war. Czechoslovakia supplied not only Iraq with arms, but also the Islamic Republic of Iran. It was not surprising, therefore, that Czechoslovak weapons and vehicles were used against each other on the battlefield.²³

¹⁸ Dozens of fighters (MiG 21, MiG 23) and bombers (Su-22), 100 BM-21 Grad rocket launchers, 400-550 T-72 MBT, 1200 military vehicles (mostly transporters), 15 000 hand grenades, 10 000 landmines, and 30 000-50 000 small arms.

¹⁹ The Semtex (named after Semtín, a suburb of Pardubice in Czechoslovakia) was produced in the 1950s by Stanislav Brebera, a chemist. Prague exported around 960 tons of Semtex until the mid-1980s to Libya. After the death of 259 passengers on Pan Am Flight 103, there was a huge pressure on Czechoslovakia to stop Semtex export and to provide information about the Libyan export. Karel Sieber – Petr Zidek: *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948–1989*. Praha: Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, 2009. p. 216.

²⁰ Syria had already discontinued the repayment of loan instalments by the 1980s. Due to this Damascus accumulated a public debt of 900.000.000 US dollars towards Czechoslovakia.

²¹ Karel Sieber – Petr Zidek: *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948–1989*. Praha: Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, 2009. p. 226.

²² One year later North Yemen received 14 airplanes, 150 MBTs (medium battle tanks) and 1000 AA guns, rockets, anti-tank weapons and ammunitions.

²³ Between 1981-1988 Iraq received 600 BMP-1s from Czechoslovakia, while Prague supported Iran with 300 BMP-1s and OT-64s.

Cultural and scientific cooperation

The cultural aspect of bilateral relations was not among the main objectives, but sometimes and in some cases enjoyed a high priority in the Czechoslovak foreign policy. A successful cultural event, trip or show was a good start for Prague to establish or strengthen existing diplomatic relations. For example, Czechoslovak singers, actors, musicians, artists, sportsmen – especially football players – and their plays, exhibitions, concerts, or presentations were a “good weapon” in the fight for Arab “hearts and minds”. Furthermore, these events helped to build a positive image of Czechoslovakia and the Eastern Bloc in the MENA region. That is why Prague spent a lot of resources on Arabic-language propaganda. The Arabic-language *Czechoslovak Bulletin* was well known across the Middle East and very popular in intellectual and political circles.²⁴ There was a close cooperation between the ČTK (Czech News Agency) and regional news agencies, but this was expensive and was sometimes affected by the countries’ actual policy. Among the cultural events the broadcasting of the Czechoslovak radio Arabic service in Egypt (1959) and the Czechoslovak film presentations and film weeks in Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad should also be mentioned.

But there were problems even in this segment of bilateral relations. Czechoslovak embassies and consulates did not work together with the Arab press, TVs and news agencies or their relations were weak. Prague sent only a few press attachés to the MENA countries, for example until the mid-1960s there served cultural diplomats only in Egypt and Tunisia. The KSČ spent much less on the cultural-propaganda programs than the West. Czech and Soviet books or films – which were mostly propaganda and documentaries - could not match West-European and Hollywood productions.

The main goal and objective of the Czechoslovak cultural diplomacy was to show the benefits of cooperation with the Eastern Bloc. Prague also sought to discredit the “capital societies” and “western countries”, presenting the United States, West Germany and Japan as the “new imperialists” in the MENA region, which did not care about the locals or national

²⁴ In 1960s the Bulletin was sold in 30 000-40 000 copies through the whole Middle East: half of that in Egypt, where the most of the readers were. Approximately 60% of the regular subscribers were from the worker class (especially heavy industry), 15% students and the rest from every segment of the Egyptian society. MOL Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Csehszlovákia TÜK 1945-1964, 19.D. *O možnostech a úkolech propagace Československa v zemích Blízkého a Středního Východu a Afriky*. (March 2, 1960)

freedom, but wanted only profits. In parallel there was also an effort to “cut the wildings of the socialism” or “show the true face of the heretic communist states” (like Yugoslavia and from the middle 1960s China), which falsified Marxism.²⁵ But the main goal was to attract an increasing number of students, doctors or engineers to come to study in Czechoslovakia. The KSČ paid a special attention to the education of African and Arab experts, students and even official cadres. Millions were spent on fellowships, stipendiums, field trips or professional practices in Czechoslovakia. The KSČ hoped that when these people go back home, they would “spread the socialist ideology”, strengthen the local Communist Parties or they get in high positions in the political, economic or military spheres.

However, this ambitious program of attracting foreigners was not without problems. Most of the potential students did not speak Czech, had no knowledge of Eastern Europe and Czechoslovakia, and sometimes could not read and write properly even in his own language. Some of them did not bother about learning and regularly got into trouble and were expelled from the country.²⁶ But Prague not only trained a future generation of experts in Czechoslovakia, but also sent its own to the MENA region. Thousands of experts, engineers, geologists, doctors, teachers, professors and archaeologists travelled to, lived and worked in Third World countries - always under strict conditions. The Czechoslovak experts should not just be highly trained and speak the native language (or at least English or French), but they should be “ideologically well-trained” to propagate the benefits of Communism and stronger relations with Czechoslovakia. The main destinations were the Arab nationalist regimes, especially Egypt. Between 1955 and 1975 a weapons factory (Helwan), radio and TV-stations (Cairo), a plywood mill (Alexandria), a power plant (El-Mahalla El-Kubra), irrigation canals, cement plants and sugar factories were built with the help of Czechoslovak experts. Prague contributed to the industrialization of Syria as well: oil refineries (Homs), an oil-processing factory (Omar), a dam in Al-Rastan, thermal power-plants (Homs, Hama), four sugar refineries, a brewery (Damascus), three radio broadcasters, a tyre factory (Ilama), a distillery (Damascus), seven grain mills, two shoe factories (Damascus, Homs), high-voltage lines and military structures, like the radar station in the Golan Heights, barracks and airports

²⁵ MOL Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Csehszlovákia TŰK 1945-1964, 19.D. *O možnostech a úkolech propagace Československa v zemích Blízkého a Středního Východu a Afriky*. (March 2, 1960)

²⁶ Sometimes the political events in the homeland also affected the fate of the foreign students. After the Iraqi Baath Party took power, Prague expelled dozens of Iraqi intellectuals and students from the country, who loudly supported the coup or had relations with the new political leadership. Around 280 Iraqi students studied in Czechoslovak universities at the time. Later the same happened when Prague and Cairo mutually sent back home students and experts in 1970s.

were built by Czechoslovak manpower.²⁷ Czechoslovak hospitals, schools (with around 100 Czechoslovak teachers and professors), cotton processing facilities and irrigation canals were constructed in Iraq. The most intensive – but not paid – Czechoslovak projects were in South Yemen after the “turn to the socialist way” in the 1980s. Hundreds of Czechoslovak experts helped the construction of roads, bridges, airports, ports (in Aden) and factories.

But Czechoslovak specialists and experts were working even in the pro-Western countries. North Yemen, Jordan and Tunisia invited Czechoslovak experts during the Cold War. Dozens of doctors were practicing in the hospitals and the countries always paid the Czechoslovak workers on time.²⁸ But sometime the presence and work of an Eastern Bloc citizen caused diplomatic tensions. For example in the 1960s, when Czechoslovak instructors started to construct sugar factories in Iran (Shiraz and Isfahan), Washington did everything to stop the construction and questioned Tehran on this move.²⁹ The same happened in Libya (before Gaddafi) and in North Yemen (during the Imam’s rule), when Czechoslovak geologists were drilling in the desert, searching for crude oil or water.

Finally, cultural and scientific cooperation, despite the political will or economic and technical cooperation agreements were also slow in negotiation and realization. Bureaucracy produced many obstacles, and the political developments or coups in the host country always delayed, sometimes even prevented the projects. Another problem was that officially the Czechoslovak experts got 75% of their salaries in the host country (the remaining at home), but often the hosts forgot to pay them. In the background there were economic reasons or sometimes political motives.³⁰ Sometimes it was also dangerous to live and work in an African or Middle Eastern country. In wars, civil wars, coups or riots the foreigners were potential targets and the authorities could not always guarantee their safety. It was not rare either that other states made a better offer to the host country and the Czechoslovak program was deleted. This was further aggravated by the fact that the socialist states were also competing with each other, driven by the same ideological goals, offering similar level services at similar prices, etc.

²⁷ MOL Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Egyiptom TÜK 1945-64, 6. D. *Az EAK sajtótermékeinek, sajtójának hangja és az ezzel kapcsolatos következtetések.* (May 14, 1959)

²⁸ Tunisia was the main target among the West-allied MENA countries. In 1963, 168 Czechoslovak experts worked in the country. One year later their number reached 200. Not just geologists and engineers, but there were one hundred doctors, nurses and pharmacists among them. Sometimes the Czechoslovak doctors were operating a whole hospital in Tunisian cities. MOL Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Egyiptom TÜK 1945-64, 7. D. *Konzultáció a csehszlovák KÜM-mal afrikai és arab országok tekintetében.* (November 21, 1964)

²⁹ MOL Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Irán TÜK 1945-1964, 8.D. *Csehszlovák követ búcsúlátogatása.* (March 28, 1962)

³⁰ For example, Imam Yahya (North Yemen) by lagging behind with the payments wanted to achieve that the experts from the Eastern Bloc leave the country. That is why Sana’a did not pay for the Hodeida hospital, the geological drilling and the Ahmadi Port.

Conclusion – The Golden Age

Czechoslovakia was truly active in the MENA region only in the 1950s and 1960s. The Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal was the first sign of Prague's – and of course Moscow's – bigger role in the Arab World. In that decade Czechoslovakia served to cover up Soviet penetration into the region. Meanwhile it trained many Arabexperts, technicians, engineers etc. and they provided a helping hand in the modernization of their relevant countries and of the region. Furthermore, Prague's economic interests were complemented by Moscow's geostrategic interests, which meant that the Soviet Union – sometimes directly, sometimes implicitly – supported Czechoslovak business in the Arab nationalist states.

But this position was was shaken after in the end of the 1960s. First reason was the Prague Spring. The new leadership turned to the interior politics and the removal of series of diplomats undermined the efficiency of Czechoslovak foreign policy. Second, Czechoslovak foreign policy was continuously suffering from failings in the region after the loss of Egypt. It is true that other Arab nationalist states (Syria, Iraq, Libya, Algeria etc.) followed and also built closer ties with Czechoslovak, but these relationships had many problems and difficulties and were not so fruitful as the (former) relationship with Cairo. Most of these Arab regimes stopped paying for the arms supplies, economic loans and even the work done by Czechoslovak citizens. In the 1980s Prague's foreign policy was conducted in an atmosphere of increasing passivity and indifference by the leaders.

It is not an exaggeration, therefore, to say that the 1950s and 1960s meant the “golden age” of Czechoslovak MENA-policy. After the Prague Spring the Czechoslovak leadership attempted to restore it, but most of the attempts were unsuccessful.