

Czechoslovak arms supplies and weapons in Arab–Israeli conflicts

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Introduction

Czechoslovakia has always been famous for its production of weapons during the Cold War. The Soviet Union delivered the arms supplies to its allies through Prague. At the same time, Czechoslovakia had a great heavy industry and weapon production complex; the Czechoslovak Army had its own developed guns, aircraft and tanks.¹ In the 1980's Czechoslovakia had become the seventh largest arms exporter in the world, after the United States, Soviet Union, China, France, Great Britain and West Germany.²

They sent the weapons for the communist allies all over the world into countries such as Africa, Asia and South America. Prague maintained very good relations with the Arab states, due to its arms supplies, the Czechoslovak Army (henceforth CSA) officers and experts. Prague also ensured the training of Arab military officers, instructors and engineers. The Middle East and North Africa were very important regions for the Czechoslovak Communist Party (henceforth KSČ), they always followed the events in the region.

The Arab–Czechoslovak relations during the Cold War

The relationship can be divided onto three periods:³

1: 1945–1955: The restart of the diplomatic relationship.

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) and after that Czechoslovak embassies were established in Iran (1925), Iraq (1933), and Saudi

¹ The most famous small arm war the Sa vz. 58 (Samopal vzor 58). Not only the Czechoslovak People's Army used it in great numbers, but we could find this weapon in most third countries in the era: Cuba, Guatemala, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Libya, Mozambique and Vietnam. The Czechoslovakian types of T-55 and T-72 were also famous.

² Csehország már nem fegyvergyártó nagyhatalom.

<http://www.origo.hu/gazdasag/hirek/20020313csehország.html> (Access: 12.11.2012)

³ Karel Sieber – Petr Zidek: *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948–1989. Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, Praha, 2009.* 16–18.

Arabia (1936). After World War II Prague wanted to maintain diplomatic relations with the Middle East and North African countries. In that era Egypt, Iran and Israel were among the top priority.

2: 1956–1967: The Golden Age of Czechoslovak Foreign Policy.

It was the most intense period, when the Czechoslovak arms industry produced thousands of weapons which were sold to the Arab states. Prague also sent out its own military instructors, for instance to Egypt. Czechoslovakia also participated in the Yemen civil war; the CSA trained Yemeni soldiers and Czechoslovak experts helped with constructing bridges, hospitals and factories in the country. The KSČ affiliated with Algeria, Iraq and Syria. Czechoslovakia terminated the relationship with Israel after the Seven Day War in 1967.

1968–1989

The Prague Spring had a negative effect on the Arab–Czechoslovak relations. The Arab Communist Parties were disappointed. They thought that Czechoslovakia would turn away from the Eastern Bloc. After 1968 Gustáv Husák announced “normalization”. The new leadership turned their attention to the interior politics. The “normalized” Czechoslovakia returned to the Middle East only in the mid-1970s. The most important Arab buyer was Syria, but later Hafiz al-Assad did not pay for the arms supplies. In that period the relationship with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and Gadhafi’s Libya were highly important for Prague.

Czechoslovak–Egyptian arms deal

The Czech–Egyptian arms deal of 1955 signaled the gradual opening up of the whole Soviet arsenal, first towards Egypt and other allies in the Middle East. This was the first sizable arms deal between the Eastern Bloc countries and the Arab states whose value amounted to \$250 million.⁴ Before this pact Prague’s greatest arms customer was Israel. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in July 1948 but they signed the first important contract earlier, on January 14, 1948. Most of the weapons were German, which remained in Czechoslovakia from the Second World War. They were only small arms like 200 MG 34 machine guns, 4,500 P 18 rifles and 50,400,000 rounds of ammunition.⁵ In the first Arab–Israeli War Israel used these arms. In the beginning of the 1950s the Czechoslovak weapons supplies towards Israel had diminished. The primary cause for this was that the KSČ leadership, for instance Klement Gottwald, imprisoned and murdered his opponent. In the opposition wing of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia there were a lot of sympathizers and supporters of Israel. Second, anti-Semitism, like in the Soviet Union, was increasing.

The Czechoslovak leadership, similarly to Moscow, focused on the Arab states after Josef Stalin’s death. There were some negotiations between Egypt and Czechoslovakia in

⁴ Galia Golan: *Soviet policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990. 45.

⁵ Eduard Gombár: *Československo a Egypt v letech 1920–1970*. *Bulletin*, 2 (2009) 11.

1951. Cairo always wanted to buy weapons, however in that period of time, the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc did not show any interest in the Middle Eastern countries. A change was signified first by the Czechoslovak–Egyptian agreement on extensive supplies of (mainly Soviet) weapons in September, 1955. During the so called “Mission 105” Egypt bought MiG–15, 220 piece of BTR–152 APC 200 T–34, 12 gunships, 200 anti-tank rockets and a great number of small arms. Along with the weapons, many CSA instructors, training pilots and advisors also arrived in the Arab country.

The Suez Canal Crisis

The Czechoslovak, and also the Soviet weapons were transported to Egypt without end in the following months. Until 29th of October, 1956 Gamal Abden Nasser, the Egyptian leader, bought arms at a rough estimate of \$500 million. The business was successful for Czechoslovakia. They obtained a large income from selling weapons; also the influence of Prague had increased in the Arab states. Therefore the KSČ was always afraid that they would lose their greatest ally, Nasser. On 16 April, 1956, Egyptian fighter jets took photographs of an Israeli port city, Haifa. Arnošt Karpíše, Czechoslovak ambassador in Egypt reported: “Based on the conversations with Egyptian officers, it can be established that these Egyptian provocations will, sooner or later, receive a response from Israel.”⁶

There was no doubt that Israel or the Western countries would somehow react after the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. Officially the KSČ supported Nasser’s socialization movement. In fact, in the background they worried, because the evacuation of the Czechoslovak citizens would have been really difficult during a war in Egypt. The fears of the Communist Party came true: on October 29 Great Britain, France and Israel started a war against Egypt.⁷ At first the world followed the events of the revolution in Hungary and the protests in Poland; even Prague was much more interested in these events. The Suez Canal draw the attention of the KSČ when British soldiers took the port of Port Said on 6 November, 1956. This attack made the evacuation of Czechoslovak citizens nearly impossible. 127 external experts, including 88 military and 39 civil ones, got stuck in Egypt. The British–Israeli–French jointed forces were stopped only by an extremely strong international push, even the United States condemned these actions. After this crisis the relationship grew stronger between Cairo and Prague. There were also some successful treaties signed in the economic and the cultural sector. An Egyptian Institute was opened in Prague, where students could study about Egyptology. This Institute sponsored Czechoslovak Egyptologists work and excavation. In the same year Nasser approved of the construction of the Military Engineering Academy in Cairo, where Czechoslovak lecturers taught. The following excerpt demonstrates the opinion of the Czechoslovak Communist Party on the academy: “Not only the soldiers of the United Arab Republic will be highly qualified, also all of the Arab states officers could get very good military education.”⁸

⁶ Karel Sieber: Československá hra v suezské krizi. *Lidové noviny*, 11.11.2006. 3.

⁷ More about the Suez Canal Crisis in Hungarian see: Kalmár Zoltán: *Nincs béke a Közel-Keleten*. Áron Kiadó, Budapest, 2009. 177–243.

⁸ Karel Sieber – Petr Zidek: *op. cit.* 68.

While the Egyptian and Czechoslovak relations deepened, the Czechoslovak–Israeli connections deteriorated. The KSČ did not send any weapons to Israel in the mid-1950s. Israel, and also the Western countries, were shocked by the size of the Czechoslovak–Egyptian arms deal. Unlike the other Eastern Bloc states, the diplomatic relations between Israel and Czechoslovakia were in ruins after the Suez Canal Crisis. Trade was at the deepest point in the following years.⁹ The KSČ also had problems with the Israeli Communist Party. Shmuel Mikunis, the leader of the ICP, invited the KSČ many times to their congresses, but Prague did not respond.

The Six-Day War

The war began on 5 June, 1967, when the Israeli Air Force launched a surprise attack against their Arab neighbors: Egypt, Jordan and Syria. They bombed Arab military bases and airports, destroying the enemy aircraft on the ground. After this surprise and successful attack, Israel launched the ground forces, to defeat the neighbor states' surface army. First the Egyptian, then Jordanian and in the end the Syrian army could not stand a chance. They collapsed, and the war ended five days later. This attack surprised not only Nasser and the other Arab leaders, but the leadership of Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc as well. Similarly to the example of Kremlin and other Communist leaderships, on 10 June 1967, Czechoslovakia cut off its diplomatic relations with Israel. The KSČ immediately ordered his diplomat Jiří Skoumal to return to Prague.

The Six-Day War¹⁰ had some negative effects on the Egypt–Czechoslovak relations. On the one hand, the defeat in the war led to more orders for arms from Egypt, Syria and Yemen. On the other hand, many Egyptian officers criticized Moscow and Prague. Most of their weapons were old and not enough to defeat the Israeli army, which possessed better weapons thanks to the United States of America.

The 1960's was the Golden Age of the Czechoslovak arms export. They delivered weapons to the Communist allies from Cuba to Vietnam. It took much work from the CSA to render the Egyptian army modern and efficient. They thought that Egypt was not only ready for a new war against Israel, but the Arabs had a chance of defeating the Israeli army. In the year of 1967 the Czechoslovak leadership was totally convinced that Egypt would start a new Arab–Israeli war. The diplomatic reports confirmed this opinion. For example Mečislav Jablonský, the Czechoslovak ambassador to Cairo, wrote this communiqué to Prague on 28th of May: "*There is no doubt, when Israel strikes first, the UAR [United Arab Republic] forces are ready to start a general counterattack.*"¹¹

The Czechoslovak leadership hoped that the Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian army would not just stop the Israeli army, but they would even occupy the country. Ladislav Šimovič, the ambassador to Belgrade, destroyed these illusions with his report, after he had a conversation with the Egyptian colleague: „*The Egyptian Air Force lost its 300 fighters*

⁹ NA, A ÚV KSČ, KTAN–II: Přehled o zahraničním obchodě a platební bilanci Izraele v letech 1949–1956. Issuing No. 210, 1st section, 1958.

¹⁰ More about the war in Hungarian see: Kalmár Zoltán: *op. cit.* 244–282.

¹¹ Karel Sieber – Petr Zidek: *op. cit.* 77.

on the ground, the moral is in nadir and the army is near to collapse.”¹² Later ambassador Jablonský acknowledged, that “*the status of the Egyptian army is really bad. The country’s aircraft, airports are completely destroyed. The soldiers are retreating.*”¹³

The evacuation of the Czechoslovak citizens began, however, a problem had arisen. The ship *Lednice* was on the Suez Canal which was blockaded and thus it could not move.¹⁴ After the war, on June 19, 1967, an Egyptian delegation sent by Nasser made a visit to Prague and negotiated with Anton Novotný. There were some misunderstandings during the negotiations. The Egyptian delegation wanted “*more and more modern Czechoslovak aircrafts with (Czechoslovak!) pilots.*”¹⁵ It came as a great surprise to the KSČ. Vladimír Koucký pointed out that most of the Egyptian aircrafts and pilots survived the Israeli attack. Ahmed Fuad – the leader of the Nasser’s delegation – asserted: “*In the next war against Israel, the Egyptian pilots would bomb Israeli objects while the pilots of the Eastern Bloc will defend Egypt’s territory.*”¹⁶

This was unacceptable for the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. In the end, the KSČ made the decision of supporting the Egyptian Army with fifteen million Czechoslovak korunas and also sold ten MiG–21 fighters and twenty tanks.

Meanwhile Prague established very good relations with Syria after the coup d’état in 1966. The internal reports said: “*The powers risen to power in the Syrian Arab Republic have brought about a new situation which can aid to deepen the relationship between Czechoslovakia and Syria.*”¹⁷ The secretary of the war in Czechoslovakia, Bohumír Lomský, visited Syria in 17 March, 1967. The delegation spent there weeks, they negotiated about the conditions of the weapons treatment and cultural co-operation. Three days later, when the Czechoslovak delegation left the country, Syria was attacked by Israeli aircraft.

The Czechoslovak Embassy in Damascus informed Prague and they sent reports about the war very often. These reports were issued by the Syrian propaganda and contrary to the truth. For example: “*Iraqi and Syrian troops are moving to the Israeli border (6 June); the situation on the fronts is very good and the Syrian Army today took 22 kilometers in Israel (8 June).*” In fact, the Syrian army engaged in a stationary warfare until the Israel ground forces drove them out. The position of Czechoslovakia as a weapons supplier to Syria had significantly increased after the Six-Day War. The value of the contract entered with Damascus reached 1 billion Czechoslovakian korunas.

The Six-Day War had its effect also on Czechoslovakia. On June 27, 1967 the Czechoslovak Writers’ Association held its 4th congress. During the conference the KSČ, especially its foreign policy strategy on the Middle East was subject to criticism. Ladislav Mňačko, the famous Slovak writer criticized the support of the “friendly” Arab states. Later he emigrated from the country. The reason was that he could not express his opinion about

¹² Karel Sieber: Šest dní omylů a sebeklamu. *CS-magazin*, August 2007. <http://www.cs-magazin.com/index.php?a=a2007082096> (Access: 10.11.2012)

¹³ *Idem.*

¹⁴ The *Lednice* was on the Suez Canal until 1975.

¹⁵ Karel Sieber: Šest dní omylů a sebeklamu. *Op. cit.*

¹⁶ Karel Sieber – Petr Zídek: *op. cit.* 78.

¹⁷ NA, A ÚV KSČ, KTAN–II: Issuing No. 515, section 1, P ÚV KSČ Presentation, 30th of December 1966.

the Arab–Israeli conflicts, and anti-Semitism had been strengthening in the Communist Party.¹⁸

The Yom Kippur War

The Prague Spring changed the major priorities in the Czechoslovak Communist Party. The KSČ focused on its interior politics. The leaderships of the Arab states followed the Czechoslovak events with anxiety, since Czechoslovakia's role as the main weapons supplier had become doubtful in 1968. One of the ambassadors of Syria sent this letter to Damascus in 1968: *“Not just the leadership in Syria, but most of the Arab countries think that the Czechoslovak foreign policy will change; the relations with the Arabs will weaken.”*¹⁹

The situation did not improve after the downfall of the Prague Spring. Gustáv Husák, the new leader of Czechoslovakia, announced the “normalizations”, the attention of the KSČ turned to interior politics. Husák strongly followed the Kremlin strategy in the Middle East.

Only the unexpected death of Nasser drew the attention of Prague towards the Arab states in September 1970. Serious discussions occurred in the KSČ whether *“after Nasser's death, Egypt can continue his policy and legacy?”*²⁰ In the beginning Gustáv Husák did not like the new Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat. The reason was that Sadat arrested the Czechoslovak sympathizer Ali Sabri. Furthermore, the new military officers caused problems as well. They always asked the Soviet and Czechoslovak instructors and advisors: why they were selling their old weapons to Egypt? What was the reason for the communist's not giving their latest military technology to Egypt? By the way, the United States was always supporting Israel with the most modern U.S. military equipment.²¹

In July 1972, the Egyptian government expelled fifteen thousand Soviet military advisers from Egypt and many Czechoslovak lecturers were sent home. Sadat was furious since the Soviets did not extend the treaty's regulations which permitted Soviet ships to moor in Alexandria.²² Although the Czechoslovak Communist Party was in possession of information about the Egyptian arrangements for war they considered it to be merely propaganda.

Because of this the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bohuslav Chňoupek visited Egypt in 1973, to find out about the war rumors. Again the KSČ drew the wrong conclusion as for the situation in Egypt due to Chňoupek reports: *“Even the Egyptian military officers didn't want a war against Israel. This could cause a catastrophe, destroying everything that Egypt has achieved in modernization.”*²³

¹⁸ Dušan Kovač: *Szlovákia története*. Kalligram, Pozsony, 2011. 304.

¹⁹ NA, A ÚV KSČ, f.02/1, sv.77, ar.j.106, P ÚV KSČ Session, 16 July, 1968.

²⁰ NA, A ÚV KSČ, f.02/1, sv.141, ar.j.219, P ÚV KSČ Session, 10 October, 1970.

²¹ NA, A ÚV KSČ, f.02/1, sv.39, ar.j.40, P ÚV KSČ Session, 5 May, 1972.

²² Любовь Люлько: Враг арабов и СССР – Анвар Садат. *Правда* (9.10.2012.) <http://www.pravda.ru/world/restofworld/africa/09-10-2012/1130819-sadat-1/> (Access: 11.11.2012.)

²³ NA, A ÚV KSČ, f.02/1, sv.86, ar.j.80, P ÚV KSČ Session, 11 June, 1973.

The Czechoslovak external experts heard of the Egyptian attack at the eleventh hour. They left the country with the last Soviet external advisors.

There were some unseen consequences of the Yom Kippur War in Czechoslovakia. Gustáv Husák, who was really touchy about interior politics, was particularly shocked. Israel's defense that fought against the Arab aggressors evoked a very strong sympathy towards Israel; not only among the Czechoslovak citizens but also among the younger generation in the KSČ. Jozef Lauše reported that in Trnava "*the Czechoslovak people criticize the Arab states for attacking Israel during a festival*". Husák immediately prohibited the writing of pro-Israel articles and reports in the media. Also the Ministry of Home Affairs ordered that the Czechoslovak press treat the Arab's attack as a rightful answer to Israeli aggression.²⁴

After the Yom Kippur War the Czechoslovak–Egyptian relations started to erode. In 1975, Anwar Sadat and the U.S. president Gerald Ford had a meeting in Salzburg. The relations with Western countries improved. On 18 March 1976, Sadat abrogated the Egyptian–Soviet friendship treaty which was signed in 1971. The Kremlin, and Prague were shocked and said "*without Egypt there is cannot be Middle East policy*".²⁵

In the early stages of the split the CSA did not stop the arms supplies to Egypt. Moreover, the Czechoslovak light industry still needed the Egyptian cotton. The Kremlin ordered the KSČ to break the relations with Cairo, however, they did not do so. They construed: "*Egypt is the most important and the biggest business partner in the Middle East. The commercial treaties were signed before Sadat's rise to power. The export was 2,1 billion korunas just in 1975.*"²⁶

But in the end, thanks to the intense pressure from Moscow, Prague suspended the relations with Cairo, stopped the arms supplies and recalled the remaining external advisors and Egyptologists. The loss of Egypt was a big trauma not only for Czechoslovakia but also for the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. The only hope to continue the active Near East foreign politics was Syria. The KSČ, similarly to the Kremlin, welcomed Hafiz al Assad's coup d'état in 1970. Syria was gradually becoming the most important partner not only of the Soviet Union but also of Czechoslovakia in the area.²⁷ Up to 1972 they had signed a 25,000,000 dollar contract, and more than 300 T-55 tanks and 50 fighter aircrafts had been sold to Syria. Czechoslovakia also sent help to Syria during the Yom Kippur War; 100 T5-54, two dozens of MiG21F fighter aircrafts, *Maljutka* anti-tank missiles, and a colossal amount of ammunition. Urged by Moscow, Cuban soldiers arrived in Syria through Prague.²⁸ Following the year of 1973, relations between Czechoslovakia and Syria deepened increasingly, and the economic contract amounted to \$100,000,000.²⁹ Hafiz al-Assad traveled to Czechoslovakia in 1975, visited Prague and Bratislava, and on his own request he was allowed to try out the thermal spa in Karlovy Vary. By the year 1977 the

²⁴ Karel Sieber – Petr Zidek: *op. cit.* 82.

²⁵ NA, A ÚV KSČ, f.02/1, sv.10, ar.j.9, P ÚV KSČ Session, 25 June 1976.

²⁶ NA, A ÚV KSČ, f.02/1, sv.14, ar.j.14, P ÚV KSČ Session, 9 September 1976.

²⁷ The cost of this privileged situation was that Prague did not profit from selling guns, since Syria had already discontinued the repayment of loan installments by the 1970s. Due to this Damascus accumulated a public debt of 900,000,000 US dollars towards Czechoslovakia.

²⁸ Karel Sieber – Petr Zidek: *op. cit.* 284

²⁹ NA, A ÚV KSČ, f.02/1, sv.139, ar.j.141, P ÚV KSČ Session, 6 December 1974

most important economic partner of Czechoslovakia had become Syria in the Arab world. The relations between the two countries, however, were darkened by the fact that Damascus discontinued the repayment of loan installments, and also by the fact that the Soviet–Syrian relationship temporarily worsened as a consequence of Syria’s intervention in Lebanon in 1976.³⁰

Conclusion

The arms purchase agreement signed in 1955 between Czechoslovakia and Egypt was evaluated by the American Near East expert, Galia Golan as a “*dramatic proof of the near-east policy and relations [of the Soviets]*”.³¹ The western countries realized with a shock how strong the influence of the Soviet Union was on the Arab states. The agreement was of high importance to Czechoslovakia as well because it had brought about a new model in the Cold War. After this, the Soviet Union did not, most of the time, deliver weapons directly to Third World countries but via Czechoslovakia. Later on, Moscow used the transmission role of Czechoslovakia not only to Arab states but also to Cuba, Ethiopia and a number of the allies. Thus, knowing that Moscow was so dependent on Prague was a useful fact for the Czechoslovak government. Due to this, Czechoslovakia was allowed to maintain a more intense foreign policy than the rest of Central-Eastern Europe, what is more, it could even have its own ways to a certain extent. Later on, it was allowed to support the allies of the Soviet Union with weapons made inland. The industrial capacity of Czechoslovakia had always been able to meet the needs of the purchasing countries, furthermore, their weapons’ quality and reliability was higher than those produced in the Soviet Union.

Czechoslovakia was truly active in the Near East and North Africa only in the 1950s and 1960s. From the end of the 1970s the Czechoslovak foreign policy continuously suffered failings in this region which went hand in hand with the diminution of arms export. Egypt, after breaking up with the Soviets, had frozen its relations with Czechoslovakia. The Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979 defeated Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi who was one of the greatest buyers of Czechoslovak industrial productions. In the Arab world it worsened the reputation of Czechoslovakia that the KSC supported the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The Czechoslovak leadership could achieve significant success only from the mid-1980s, but only in two countries. One of them was Iraq. Saddam Hussein was one of the greatest buyers of Czechoslovak armament throughout the Iran–Iraq War. The other important partner was Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Despite the arms embargo towards Libya, Czechoslovakia continued to deliver arms to Gaddafi.

The 1950s and 1960s meant the golden age of Czechoslovak foreign policy and arms industry, which the Czechoslovak leadership attempted to replicate after the Prague Spring in North Africa and the Middle East, hopelessly.

³⁰ For more: Galia Golan: *op. cit.* 148–152.

³¹ *Idem.* 45.