

Tabqa: The Sister of the Aswan High Dam in Syria. How the Soviet Union Tried to Gain a Monopoly in Hydraulic Infrastructures in the Middle East

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ABSTRACTS

The Soviet Union used large-scale infrastructure projects such as dams and hydropower plants in the Middle East as means to outdo the West, to establish political and economic partnerships, and to pave the way for comprehensive long-term interaction. This paper examines the construction of the Euphrates Dam in Syria and contrasts it with the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, which was erected just a few years before with the financial and technical support of the Soviet Union. Both development projects were hotly contested by the superpowers. By winning the contract for the Euphrates Dam, the Soviet Union successfully established a leading position in water infrastructure construction in the Middle East. Also, the dam laid the foundation for Syria's long-lasting close relations with the state socialist countries of Eastern Europe.

Die Sowjetunion nutzte große Infrastrukturprojekte wie Staudämme und Wasserkraftwerke im Nahen Osten als Mittel, um den Westen zu übertrumpfen, politische und wirtschaftliche Partnerschaften aufzubauen und den Weg für umfassende, langfristige Kooperationen zu ebnen. Dieser Beitrag untersucht den Bau der Euphrat-Talsperre in Syrien und vergleicht ihn mit dem Assuan-Hochdamm in Ägypten, der nur wenige Jahre zuvor mit finanzieller und technischer Unterstützung der Sowjetunion errichtet wurde. Beide Bauvorhaben waren von den Supermächten heftig umkämpfte Entwicklungsprojekte. Mit dem Zuschlag für die Euphrat-Talsperre gelang es der Sowjetunion, sich als führend im Wasserinfrastrukturbau im Nahen Osten zu etablieren. Außerdem legte der Staudamm den Grundstein für die langjährigen engen Beziehungen Syriens zu den staatssozialistischen Ländern Osteuropas.

1. Introduction

Syria – along with Egypt – was the Soviet Union’s most important partner in the strategically contested region of the Middle East, or – as the region around the Euphrates, Tigris and Nile rivers was also called in Soviet Russian speech – the “Arab East” (*Arabskii Vostok*). The region was of outstanding interest for the Soviet Union’s foreign policy in several respects: it was located in the immediate vicinity of the Soviet Union; geo-strategically, it became increasingly relevant for the United States and the Soviet Union alike during the Cold War; and it belonged to the Third World, which, with a growing number of decolonized nation states, became an important player in the international arena and had economic, strategic, and ideological significance for the superpowers.¹

After independence in 1946, Syria became an important power in the region and, from the mid-1950s, increasingly tied to the Soviet Union. Thereafter, in the following decades, the USSR invested large amounts of military and scientific-technical aid in the country. According to a calculation by Roger E. Kanet, Syria received economic support to the value of USD 770 million from the Soviet Union between 1954 and 1979, making it one of the leading recipients of Russian aid outside the Eastern Bloc.²

The distinction between trade and aid was often not clear-cut. The Soviet Union usually granted loans for specific economic sectors, which the recipient country repaid in locally produced goods or raw materials, but often, the loan arrangements were very advantageous, with long maturities and interest rates of 2–3 percent. For the Soviet Union, these arrangements were likewise attractive, as it could import certain goods and raw materials on relatively good terms. In the case of Syria, the Soviet Union primarily purchased textiles, cotton, cosmetic products, consumer goods and oil and supplied machinery and industrial and military equipment. The alliance with Syria was the most long-term cooperation Moscow was able to establish in the Middle East during the Cold War.³

Extensive infrastructure projects, especially large dams and hydroelectric power plants, became flagships of Soviet “scientific and technical cooperation” in the Arab region and symbols of partnerships during the Cold War. Although the USSR began to export its expertise in dam construction to various regions of the world starting in the 1950s, North Africa and the Middle East enjoyed a special focus. The best-known large-scale project is undoubtedly the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, which was built with extensive Soviet support. The dam on the Euphrates in Syria, the subject of this paper, was of a similar scale to the Egyptian project but less exploited for propaganda purposes by the Soviet media and thus less well-known.

The Aswan and Euphrates dams were not the only two large hydrological infrastructures in the region to be built with Soviet help. In the 1960s, a joint hydroelectric power plant was constructed on the Araks, the border river between Iran and the Azerbaijan Soviet

1 G. Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War Two to Gorbachev*, Cambridge 1991, p. 3.

2 See P. Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955: A Troubled Alliance*, Boulder 1990, p. 218.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–4.

Republic; in 1969, the Kasseb Dam was built in Tunisia; there were two hydroelectric power plants in Morocco, the Moulay Youssef (1974) and Mansour Addahbi (1975) dams; the Melka Wakena (1988) in Ethiopia and Hadita (1986) on the Euphrates in Iraq; and in the 1980s, the Soviet institute *Gidroproekt* designed a second regulating dam below the large Euphrates dam in Syria.⁴ In short, the Middle East, in general, and Egypt and Syria, in particular, were among the main beneficiaries of Soviet economic aid in the form of water infrastructure projects. Dams here served the Soviet Union as a door-opener not only for strategic political partnerships but also for growing economic relations.

Large-scale development projects are prime case studies for the analysis of the significance of economic cooperation in the context of the Cold War, inviting the question, how does the superpower competition for alliances and influence become evident in these projects? Here, the dam on the Euphrates in Syria is used as an example of such a development project. Also known as the “Tabqa Dam” (named after the village in the immediate vicinity), this was the second large dam with a hydroelectric power plant to be built in the Arab East with Soviet financial and technical support within a few years of each other. Although it was realized locally in material terms and had a major spatial impact on the ground, it was at the same time integrated into a global network of actors and interest groups during planning and implementation.

How did the political and technical actors involved in the Euphrates Dam project use it strategically to promote a socialist development model? The argument highlighted here is that, in the sense of Gabrielle Hecht’s *technopolitics*,⁵ large infrastructure projects became means to achieve political goals in the context of the Cold War. In the case of the Euphrates dam, this becomes evident in the competition for the project between the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), which represented a struggle for partnership in the region and clearly shows that hydroelectric power plants went beyond their significance as energy suppliers, becoming weighty factors in the negotiation of geopolitical spheres of influence, political loyalties, and socio-political visions for the future.

The Euphrates Dam was referred to by the contemporary Soviet press as the “second” or “Syrian Aswan Dam”,⁶ and in the following, I will demonstrate that, indeed, these two large-scale socialist development projects had much in common. Most obviously, experience and planning expertise migrated from the recently completed Aswan High Dam (construction period: 1960–1971) to neighbouring Syria, where the first dam of this size was built on the Euphrates (1968–1974), primarily for irrigation and energy genera-

4 V. Novoženin, *Istorija Hidropoekta 1930–2000* [History of hydropower projects], Moscow 2000, pp. 229; 325; 328; 468.

5 *Technopolitics: technological cooperation aiming at political goals that go beyond the mere technical aspects.* See G. Hecht (ed.), *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War*, Cambridge, MA 2011.

6 A. Vasil’ev, *Sestra Asuana* [Aswan’s Sister], in: *Pravda*, 27 March 1971; P. Demchenko, *Preobrazhennye Berega* [Transformed Coasts], in: *Izvestiia*, 19 August 1970.

tion. The fact that the Soviet Union was awarded the contract for this second large-scale infrastructure project in the region contributed significantly to its leading position in hydraulic infrastructure construction in the Middle East. This was regarded as a valuable precondition for closer economic cooperation and evolving partnerships.

A (mainly American) political science research literature from the final phase of the Cold War and the early 1990s deals with the relations of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc to the Middle East and Syria.⁷ One example is the work of Galia Golan, who, in 1991, presented a detailed study of Soviet relations with the Middle East for the period from the end of the Second World War to *glasnost* and *perestroika* under Gorbachev, with individual studies on the most important countries in the region. Golan focused on geostrategic and military aspects and the role of the Soviet Union in the Arab-Israeli conflict, however, and made little mention of economic cooperation.⁸ Pedro Ramet's detailed study of Soviet-Syrian relations since 1955 is particularly valuable for this analysis because it does not omit economic aspects (it also represents the state of US research at the end of the 1980s).⁹

In historiographical research, Massimiliano Trentin is an expert on Syria's alliances in the Cold War. He focuses primarily on the competition between East and West Germany in their cooperation with Syria and has done extensive research on East German advisors in the Syrian Ba'ath government. In particular, an interview he conducted in 2006 with the former Syrian Minister of Economy, Muhammad al Imady, provides unique insights into Syria's negotiations with the FRG and the Soviet Union over the financing of the Euphrates Dam.¹⁰

The scientific-technical cooperation of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) with Syria is also increasingly well-researched. Max Trecker shows how the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Bulgaria set up a cement industry in Syria in the 1970s and how Syria sought advisory support in India to deal with the difficulties and delays in the cooperation. Trecker elaborates on the Syrian government's room for manoeuvre by showing that it not only passively observed how international partners built infrastructures but also had the power to pressure the GDR and influence the construction process in its favour.¹¹ A similar situation can be seen in the negotiations for

7 See, e.g., R. O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, Cambridge 1991; E. Karsh, *Soviet Policy Towards Syria Since 1970*, New York 1991; O. M. Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq: The Soviet Quest for Influence*, Durham 1991, and the book review by R. E. Kanet in *American Political Science Review* 86 (1992) 3, pp. 840–841, doi:10.2307/1964205.

8 Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*.

9 Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955*.

10 M. Trentin, *La Guerra Fredda Tedesca in Siria: Diplomazia, Economia e Politica, 1963–1970* [The German Cold War in Syria: Diplomacy, Economy and Politics, 1963–1970], Padova 2015, pp. 152, 217–221. More recent political science research looks at continuities from the historical Soviet to present Russian engagement in the region. See C. Lovotti et al. (eds.), *Russia in the Middle East and North Africa: Continuity and Change*, London 2020.

11 M. Trecker, *Red Money for the Global South: East-South Economic Relations in the Cold War*, New York 2020, pp. 70–90.

the financing of the Euphrates Dam, in which the Syrian government turned to socialist and capitalist partners alike in order to realize the long-envisioned project.

In the following, I first review the history of negotiating the Aswan High Dam in Egypt as a point of reference for the following analysis of the negotiations around the Syrian case. As Nasser sought economic and technical support for the project in East and West alike, so did the Syrian Ba'ath party, and with a very similar outcome. Then, the relations between the Soviet Union and Syria during the Cold War are characterized, with a special focus put on the motives and incentives both countries had in establishing them. Next, I describe the West German and Soviet struggle for the Syrian development project, arguing that it was in many regards, including for the actors at the time, comparable to the Aswan High Dam on the Nile.

2. Khrushchev's Trophy: The Aswan High Dam

At a public ceremony on 9 January 1960, Egyptian President Nasser pressed a red button triggering the first blast in the construction of the Aswan High Dam on the Nile. The dam was built with Soviet financial support and technical know-how; the Soviet Minister of Power Plant Construction, Ignatiĭ Novikov, commented, "The Aswan Dam is being built, and we are making nature serve man."¹²

The Aswan High Dam had its origins in colonial times, like many other post-independence dam projects in the Global South.¹³ Its implementation had the highest priority for Nasser, who sought financial support from both the capitalist and socialist camps. West German interest in the project began in 1952 when the FRG sent a commission of experts to examine the feasibility of the project. The West German companies *Hochtief Essen* and *Union Brückenbau Dortmund* drew up studies for the construction project until 1954, and the West German government hoped that German firms would be awarded the construction contract.

By the mid-1950s, a Franco-German-British consortium had formed; shortly after, the USA expressed interest in the dam, and the World Bank emerged as a possible main financier.¹⁴ The latter, however, rejected an isolated Egyptian approach, making the coordinated development of the whole river basin with the consultation of all riparian states a precondition for financial support.¹⁵ It later withdrew this condition out of concern that

12 I. Komzin, *Gidroenergeticheskiĭ Gigant v Afrike* [A hydroenergy giant in Africa], in: *Sovremennyĭ Vostok* 1960 11, p. 38.

13 E.g., the Kariba Dam in the Central African Federation and the Akosombo Dam in Ghana. See J. Tischler, *Light and Power for a Multiracial Nation: The Kariba Dam Scheme in the Central African Federation*, London 2013; S. Miescher, *A Dam for Africa: Akosombo Stories from Ghana*, Bloomington 2022. On the Aswan High Dam history, see B. Brendel, *Konvergente Konstruktionen: Eine Globalgeschichte des Staudammbaus*, Frankfurt am Main 2019, p. 226. On the connection between Egyptian nation-building and control over the Nile, see E. Blocher, *Der Wasserbau-Staat: Die Transformation des Nils und das moderne Ägypten 1882–1971*, Paderborn 2016.

14 Brendel, *Konvergente Konstruktionen*, pp. 227–229.

15 Blocher, *Der Wasserbau-Staat*, p. 313.

the Egyptians would turn to the Soviet Union, which had been making a vague offer to finance the dam since 1955.¹⁶

Various political developments caused the US to fear losing Egypt to the Soviet camp, including Nasser's involvement in the non-aligned movement and an arms deal with Czechoslovakia, as well as his rejection of the Baghdad Pact. In 1956, American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles withdrew the US commitment to the project, and, in response, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. In the ensuing Suez crisis, Khrushchev supported Egypt militarily and shortly thereafter offered a loan and technical assistance for the construction at Aswan.¹⁷ Thus, the dam became an Egyptian-Soviet project.¹⁸ In the following years, Egypt and the Soviet Union established a close partnership that only eroded under Nasser's successor Sadat in the 1970s.¹⁹

Khrushchev elaborated on the Soviet cooperation with Egypt and the construction of the Aswan Dam in detail in his memoirs. Regarding the motives for offering Egypt help for the construction, he emphasized that political motives came together with economic considerations (the Soviet Union wanted to be repaid for the loan primarily with cotton and rice). In the end, however, political-strategic concerns were decisive:

*We were more interested in politics than economics. By building the dam we would be winning the priceless prize of the Egyptian people's trust and gratitude. And not just the trust of the Egyptian people, but the trust of all Arabs. And not just the trust of all Arabs, but of all other underdeveloped countries, especially in Africa. Our assistance to the Egyptians would demonstrate that the Soviet Union could be counted on to aid needy peoples the world over who were liberating themselves from colonial rule. Furthermore, we knew that strengthening the Arab countries meant weakening the camp of our enemies.*²⁰

Khrushchev leaves no doubt that the Aswan Dam in Egypt was not only meant to contain Western influence in the region but was, at the same time, intended to stand as a vivid example of Soviet commitment to decolonization for the young, independent nation-states.

The contract was signed in 1958, and in the year after, the Soviet planning institute *Gidropromekt* delivered the first study for the envisioned dam, drawing on the older preliminary study by *Hochtief Essen*. A loan of 100 million US dollars for the first stage of the dam enabled the Egyptian side to purchase design, equipment, expertise, and technical advice from the Soviet Union.²¹ The Soviet export company *Technopromeksport* was

16 E. A. Bishop, *Talking Shop: Egyptian Engineers and Soviet Specialists at the Aswan High Dam*, Chicago 1997, p. 29.

17 On 27 December 1958, Egypt received the Soviet confirmation to finance the project with a loan; *ibid.*, p. 56.

18 Brendel, *Konvergente Konstruktionen*, p. 232. See for an in-depth description of the negotiations and preparations for the project Bishop, *Talking Shop*, pp. 12–57.

19 Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955*, p. 4.

20 N. S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, Boston, MA 1970, p. 440.

21 Bishop, *Talking Shop*, p. 56.

responsible for supplying the equipment and sending the experts, while the Egyptian side was to hire the labour.²²

Khrushchev emphasized in his memoirs that the Soviet Union was always careful not to seem like a contractor supervising a local workforce in order to avoid the appearance of exploitative relations.²³ In this context, it is noteworthy that there were no on-site training centres for Egyptian workers, as was common in the Soviet Union. Probably fearing the socialist indoctrination of workers on the construction site, Nasser prevented any such socialist-inspired training of cadres.²⁴ The situation was to be different shortly afterwards at the Tabqa dam in Syria, where workers for the construction site were trained by Soviet experts in a specially established training facility in Aleppo.²⁵

The Aswan Dam was one of the first major projects the Soviet Union undertook abroad under Khrushchev's new foreign policy. Elizabeth Bishop's study of the project explores how Egyptian and Soviet engineering experience converged on the construction site. She argues that Soviet specialists attempted to implement a specific Soviet production culture in Egypt that they had developed at the major construction projects of the Stalin era, such as the Dnieprostroy, Magnitogorstroy, and Kuibyshev hydroelectric power plants.²⁶ The chief engineer of the Kuibyshev hydropower plant, Ivan Komzin, for example, was sent to the Nile as chief expert.²⁷ His work experience on socialist construction sites stretched back to Magnitogorsk, where, in the early 1930s, he had gained his first experience in the construction of the metallurgical combine of the first five-year-plan.²⁸

However, the Soviet production culture could not so easily be transplanted to the local context of the Egyptian construction site. The Soviet engineers and subcontractors there failed to meet the agreed deadlines, and there were serious delays in the construction process. The Egyptian side responded by taking charge, using local contractors, and acquiring missing equipment from other countries, including the West.²⁹ Authority and responsibility for the construction thus passed from Soviet to Egyptian specialists.

In 1964, the Nile was diverted and the filling of the reservoir began. Khrushchev and Nasser attended the ceremony and, notwithstanding the difficulties, publicly demonstrated a successful partnership. Construction was completed in 1969, and the last turbine was put into operation:³⁰

22 Ibid., p. 234.

23 Ibid., p. 56.

24 Ibid., p. 234.

25 Zapis' Besedy. Sovetnika po Ekonomicheskim Voprosam Posol'stva SSSR v SAR t. Kosharina PT. s General'nym Direktorom GOEP g-nom S. Kachale, 4.8.1970, RGAÉ, Fond 365, op. 9, d. 581, ll. 6-8; Zamestiteliu Predsedatelia GKÉS, RGAÉ, Fond 365, op. 9, d. 581, l. 9.

26 Bishop, *Talking Shop*, pp. 5–8.

27 A. Melua (ed.), *Gidroenergetiki Rossii i SNG* [The Hydro Energy Engineers of Russia and CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States)], volume 1, St. Petersburg 2015, p. 561.

28 See *ibid.* and Bishop, *Talking Shop*, p. 183.

29 Bishop, *Talking Shop*, p. 237.

30 Ibid., p. 300.

*The hydropower plant near Aswan will be the largest on the African continent and one of the largest in the world. It is capable of producing 10 billion kilowatt hours of cheap electrical energy annually. The Egyptian part of the United Arab Republic [UAR] will gain four times more electrical energy than it produces today. This will enable the UAR to produce so much artificial fertilizer that it will no longer have to import any, to build an electro-metallurgical production plant based on the iron-rich Aswan ore, and to significantly expand the chemical industry and mechanical engineering. Thanks to the help of the Soviet Union, the UAR is becoming an industrialized and economically independent country.*³¹

The Soviet press praised the Aswan Dam as a model project of Soviet economic-technical cooperation with young, independent nation-states. For Ivan Komzin, the Soviet chief expert in Aswan, the role of Soviet expertise in the industrialization of Egypt could not be overstated. Two years after construction began, however, he was held responsible for the delays and failures at the site and resigned from his post.³²

After completion, the construction was celebrated worldwide as a technical success, and it had a noteworthy positive impact on water management during the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s. But it also had negative consequences: the fertile Nile mud could no longer fertilize the fields below the dam, and Egyptian farmers became dependent on artificial fertilizer. Evaporation and seepage of the dammed water also created problems, and the slow flow caused pathogens, such as malaria and bilharzia, to spread.³³

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union was able to internationally demonstrate its capabilities and expertise in hydropower construction. Western politicians and planners thus feared a repeat of this Soviet success in future development projects.

3. Soviet-Syrian Relations

Soviet interest in cooperating with Syria began in the mid-1950s. Following the US efforts to affiliate as many countries in the region as possible to the West through the Baghdad Pact, Syria – like Egypt – became an important Soviet partner (in the Syrian case, after the fall of the pro-Western ruler Adib Shishakli). As a consequence, two camps emerged in the Middle East, a conservative, pro-Western camp headed by Saudi Arabia and an anti-colonial camp led by Nasser, to which Syria also belonged and which was supported by the Soviet Union. Gamel Abdel Nasser (Egypt) and Shukri al-Quwatli (Syria) pursued a policy of Arab nationalism, fought against Western imperial influence in the region, and strove for Arab unity.³⁴

31 Komzin, *Gidroenergeticheskii Gigant v Afrike*, p. 38 (own translation).

32 Bishop, *Talking Shop*, p. 238.

33 Brendel, *Konvergente Konstruktionen*, p. 234.

34 O. A. Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge 2005, p. 123.

In 1943 in Damascus, Michel Aflaq and Salah ad-Din al-Bitar founded the Ba'ath Party. Their political goal was to unite the Arab people, crushed by European imperialism in their eyes; the future unified Arab state would be led by a single political party.³⁵ Although the Ba'ath Party sympathized with socialist ideas and later, in the 1960s, conducted socialist reforms, it should not be confused with the Syrian Communist Party, with which it had ideological differences. Nevertheless, the two parties cooperated in the late 1950s, until 1958, when Syria entered into a union with Egypt in what became known as the UAR.³⁶

The interest and involvement of the Soviet Union in the region, not unlike that of the US, strictly followed the logic of the Cold War.³⁷ Similar to the Egyptian case, Syria also concluded an arms deal with Czechoslovakia in 1954, and Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov declared in 1955 that the Soviets were ready to support Syria with any assistance necessary to defend its independence and sovereignty.³⁸ As early as 1957, cooperation was strengthened by a joint economic agreement in which the Soviet Union promised a loan of 78.75 million roubles and support for the construction of industrial objects and irrigation projects.³⁹ The planned dam on the Euphrates was also mentioned in this early economic agreement and was to be realized with the help of the Soviet loan.⁴⁰ At the same time, the Soviet Union sent a growing number of experts and advisors, among others, for the exploration of oil deposits. Ramet described this phase of early Soviet-Syrian relations as a "period of great warmth".⁴¹ It was followed by a period of cooling, however, when, in 1958, Egypt and Syria formed the UAR, de facto led by Nasser, who harshly suppressed the communist parties in both republics.⁴²

Relations only improved again after the end of the union with Egypt in 1961 and the coming to power, two years later, of the Ba'ath Party, which, in the mid-1960s, became increasingly interested in socialist economic reforms. The Syrian government nationalized a number of large industrial enterprises and thus provided the Soviet Union with the impression that Syria was embarking on the non-capitalist path of development, which was always a central prerequisite for close economic-technical cooperation.⁴³ Shortly afterwards, the government in Damascus took control of imports and exports as well as parts of the wholesale trade, which once again promoted relations with the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ The Ba'ath government's relations became closer not only with the Soviet Union

35 Ibid.

36 Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955*, pp. 14–25.

37 R. Ginat, *The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'th Regime: From Hesitation To Rapprochement*, in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 36 (2000) 2, p. 163.

38 Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955*, p. 15.

39 *Sovetsko-siriiskoe Ekonomicheskoe i Tehnicheskoe Sotrudnichestvo*, 1967, RGAÉ, Fond 561, op. 53, d. 27, ll. 18–20. Cited in Trecker, *Red Money for the Global South*, p. 70.

40 P. Demchenko, *Rasshiraetsia Sovetsko-siriiskoe Ekonomicheskoe Sotrudnichestvo [The Soviet-Syrian Economic Cooperation is Expanding]*, in: *Pravda*, 2 November 1957, p. 6.

41 Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955*, p. 18.

42 Ibid., pp. 25–31.

43 Ibid., p. 35.

44 Ginat, *The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'th Regime*, p. 157.

but also with other CMEA states. The GDR became increasingly involved in Syria from 1965 onwards, sending dozens of advisors to help build state institutions along socialist lines and thus strengthen the state sector.⁴⁵

In February 1966, another military coup brought to power the left wing of the Ba'ath Party, which was once again more pro-Soviet and socialist. This again raised the Soviet Union's willingness to cooperate, the regime was described as "progressive" and "revolutionary", and, from the Soviet perspective, Syria was now finally on the non-capitalist path.⁴⁶ The Syrian government began to draw up five-year plans that were strongly influenced by Soviet thinking and placed the focus for economic development on heavy industry and infrastructure development.⁴⁷ Cooperation deepened steadily, culminating in 1980 with the signing of a Soviet-Syrian friendship agreement, which had been long desired by the Soviet leadership. This consolidated increased cooperation in political, economic, military, scientific, technological, cultural, and other areas, increasing trade and promoting the further development of social and economic achievements. At the same time, Syria insisted on its status as a non-aligned state.⁴⁸

Political science research has frequently characterized the Soviet-Syrian relationship as a patron-client one. Others have stressed, however, that although cooperation grew ever closer until the 1980s, Syria always remained independent in such a way that it could not be described as a Soviet satellite state.⁴⁹ Rather, both partners were concerned with establishing open channels of communication and thus influencing decision-making processes in their own interests. The fact that this did not always succeed is revealed, for example, by Syria's military involvement in the Six-Day War in 1967 and its intervention against Lebanon in 1976. The Soviets did not approve of these actions; such cases thus show the limits of their influence. On the one hand, Syria was dependent on Soviet military support, but on the other, it repeatedly made its own foreign policy decisions, to the displeasure of the Soviet leadership.⁵⁰

But what were the Soviet Union's central motives for making Syria such a strong partner in the Middle East? The central factor was certainly the anti-Western attitude of the Ba'ath Party, through whose support the Soviet Union saw the possibility of pushing back American influence in the region. Rami Ginat is convinced that the Soviet Union pursued strategic goals in its close cooperation with Syria in the context of the Cold War. At the same time, though, he argues that the cooperation, especially with the Ba'ath Party, was profitable for both sides. While the Soviet Union sought to contain Western influence in the region through its presence and pursued geostrategic goals, such as access

45 M. Trentin, *State-led Development: The Privileged Linkage between East Germany and Ba'athist Syria, 1965–1972*, in: *Contemporary European History* 30 (2021) 4, pp. 581–596.

46 Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955*, p. 38.

47 Trecker, *Red Money for the Global South*, p. 71.

48 Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955*, p. 144.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–3; C. Lovotti, *Russia in Syria: Between Past, Present and Future*, in: C. Lovotti, E. Tafuro Ambrosetti, C. A. Hartwell, and A. Chmielewska (eds.), *Russia in the Middle East and North Africa: Continuity and Change*, London/New York 2020, p. 28.

50 Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, pp. 140–156.

to Mediterranean ports, the Ba'ath Party depended on external military and economic support to stabilize its power.⁵¹

Present-day research compares the motives of the Soviets with those of Russian involvement in Syria under Putin today. It concludes that the former was, to a large extent, guided by ideology.⁵² Exporting one's own, socialist model of development and modernization to the region played a central role in the context of the bipolar competition that went beyond purely strategic geopolitical aspirations. In the framework of the Cold War the export of a specific developmental model and visions of modernity were independent motives for the USSR establishing partnerships with Arab nations and in the Global South, more generally.

The Soviet Union was prepared to support a "developing country" with all its might once it had opted for the non-capitalist path.⁵³ The Ba'ath Party had proven its interest in socialist modernization by taking large numbers of advisors from the CMEA into the country and by initiating comprehensive socialist reforms. This was when Soviet-Syrian cooperation gathered momentum, paving the way for the extensive Soviet commitment to implement the large-scale development project of the Euphrates Dam. These development projects included far more than just loans for individual industrial plants; convinced that Syria had chosen the "right path", the Soviet leadership promoted socialist construction to many ends.

With the central aim of strengthening the state sector and thereby making recipient countries economically independent, the focus of Soviet economic support was mostly on agriculture, heavy industry, transport infrastructure, electric power, and the training of national cadres. The Soviet Union simultaneously pursued all these areas in Syria from the late 1960s. Soviet experts explored and developed oil fields, and in 1971, the construction of a nitrogen fertilizer factory in Homs was completed, which was to contribute to the growth of agricultural production. Additionally, the Soviet Union became involved in the expansion of the railway network and built, among others, a railway line from Latakia via Aleppo to Al-Qamishli.

In connection with the construction of the dam on the Euphrates, a training centre was built in Aleppo where Syrians were to be trained as technical specialists.⁵⁴ In 1967, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko explained to his CMEA counterparts that the construction of the Euphrates dam, the development of the oil industry, and the expansion of the railway net had the highest priority for the Soviet Union in Syria.⁵⁵ Although the dam

51 Ginat, *The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'ath Regime*, p. 163.

52 As opposed to the much more pragmatic approach of Russia today: Lovotti, *Russia in Syria*, p. 40.

53 This rhetoric was typical for the socialist economic advisors at that time, as archival sources reveal: "Èto sotrudnichestvo uspeshno razvivaetsia s Sirieĭ, stranoi izbravsheĭ nekapitalisticheskii put razvitiia i, v kotoroi k vlasti prishel progressivnyi rezhim" [This cooperation is developing successfully with Syria, a country that has chosen the non-capitalist path of development and where a progressive regime has come to power], *Apparat Sovetnika po Ekonomicheskim Voprosam Posol'stva SSSR v SAR*, 19 December 1970, RGAĖ, Fond 365, op. 9, d. 581, l. 43.

54 A. Petrushev, *Krepnut Sovetsko-arabskie Èkonomicheskie Otnosheniia* [Soviet-Arab Economic Relations are Growing Stronger], in: *Vneshniaia Torgovlia* (1971) 7, p. 11.

55 Wilson Center Digital Archive, Report by the Bulgarian Foreign Minister on the Ministerial Meeting in Warsaw on

on the Euphrates was the centrepiece of efforts to promote Syria on the socialist development path, it did not come as a stand-alone infrastructure; it was surrounded by numerous other development measures, which in the best case scenario would productively interlock. In this context, electric power was seen by Soviet economists as the basis for economic growth:

*One of the most important areas of economic and technical cooperation between the Soviet Union and the Arab countries is assistance in the construction of hydroelectric power plants, which are of extraordinary economic importance to these countries. Without a strong energy base, the development of a national industry cannot be guaranteed, and without solving the problems of irrigation in the dry climate, agriculture cannot develop.*⁵⁶

In December 1966, Syria and the Soviet Union signed a contract for the construction of the Euphrates Dam and a loan of 120 million roubles.⁵⁷ However, the conclusion of the contract was preceded by a lengthy struggle between various international actors interested in participating in the project.

4. Tabqa – The Second Aswan Dam

For the new regime that came to power in 1966, the dam on the Euphrates had the highest priority as a development project; it had been planned under the French mandate since the 1920s, and Prime Minister Yusuf Zu'ayyin tried everything he could to find financing for it. That year (in 1966), after a very similar competition over this prestigious development project as that over the Aswan Dam, with West Germany again involved, the Soviet Union agreed to take up the financing.⁵⁸ This agreement would make the Tabqa Dam sister to the Aswan High Dam in the sense of a socialist construction project.⁵⁹ It was preceded by many years of international negotiations that exemplify the search for alliances at the time by many young, decolonized states and point to the room for manoeuvre that the politicians of such countries had in navigating between the fronts of the Cold War.

Immediately after independence, the Syrian government had commissioned a study by the British enterprise *Sir Alexander Gibb & Partners*, who recommended Yussuf Pasha, a little way north of Tabqa, as the ideal site for the dam.⁶⁰ During the 1950s, the World

the Situation in the Middle East, 19–21 December 1967, 4 January 1968, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113426> (accessed 30 January 2023).

56 V. Smirnov and I. Matiuchin, *Sotrudnichestvo SSSR s Arabskimi Stranami* [The cooperation of the USSR with the Arab countries], in: *Vneshniaia Torgovlia* (1968) 1, p. 11 (own translation).

57 M. El-Khatib, *The Syrian Tabqa Dam: Its Development and Impact*, in: *The Geographical Bulletin* 26 (1984), p. 21.

58 Ramet, *The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955*, p. 38.

59 Vasil'ev, *Sestra Asuana*.

60 Here and below, when discussing the West German involvement in the project, I cite an unpublished master's thesis from the university at Tübingen, whose author very thoroughly reconstructs the West German negotiations with Syria about cooperation for the dam drawing mainly on sources from the political archives of the Aus-

Bank was also interested in the project.⁶¹ It always made agreements over water rights with the riparian states a condition of such projects, including now, in the 1960s, when it was again considered as a project partner. Syria showed little interest in such international water-management treaties, however.⁶²

In the 1950s, the project was repeatedly stalled due to political instability in Syria. Although the Soviet Union had made a first offer to finance it as early as 1957, the cooling of the Soviet-Syrian relations during the Union with Egypt had reduced Soviet enthusiasm for economic-technical aid. Nevertheless, in the course of this first agreement, a preliminary study had been commissioned from the Soviet planning institute *Gidroproekt* to explore the most suitable locations for the hydroelectric power plant. These investigations continued, regardless of the changed political situation. In 1961, *Gidroproekt* presented its study, suggesting two possibilities: a single 320–325-metre dam at the village of Tabqa or else two dams, one at Tabqa and the other at Yussuf Pasha.⁶³

The German Embassy in Syria learned of this preliminary study and reported it to Bonn, thus triggering German interest in the project.⁶⁴ The freeze in Syrian-Soviet relations benefited the FRG, and in the early 1960s, it seemed for some time that the Euphrates Dam, unlike the Aswan, would become a Western project. Following the Suez crisis, the other leading Western states had lost their standing in the region, and the German government saw itself as the representative of the West in the Middle East, which gave it a special interest in the prestigious development project.

Two motives were decisive for the West German effort. On the one hand, following the logic of the Cold War, the aim was to push back the Soviet Union in the field of development cooperation and to win Syria as a partner of the West, while on the other hand, the project on the Euphrates was to serve as a replacement for the failed Aswan project and compensate German industry for the lost contract on the Nile. From the perspective of the German government, a second major project of this kind could not fall to the Soviet Union; the fear of the Soviet Union being able to demonstrate its economic capabilities with such a major infrastructure project was too great.⁶⁵ The German Foreign Office very clearly formulated the political dimension that the project had for the Federal Republic in the context of the Cold War:

For [...] the Syrian people, the Euphrates Dam has become the touchstone for the reliability of Western promises in the eyes of all Arabs. A German abandonment of this project

wärtiges Amt. I. Gottwald, *Verstaute Geschichte: Die westdeutschen Planungen des syrischen Euphratdamms bei Tabqa 1960–1965*, Masterarbeit. Eberhard Karls Universität, 2018, p. 18.

61 S. M. A. Salman, *The World Bank Policy for Projects on International Waterways: An Historical and Legal Analysis*, s.l. 2012, pp. 26–31.

62 Gottwald, *Verstaute Geschichte*, p. 18.

63 V. A. Kozlov, *Schema gidroenergeticheskogo ispol'zovaniia r. Evfrat na uchastke Siriiskoj Arabskoj Respubliki [Scheme of hydropower utilization of the Euphrates River at the part of the Syrian Arab Republic]*, in: *Gidrotechnicheskoe stroitel'stvo* (1983) 10, p. 34.

64 Gottwald, *Verstaute Geschichte*, p. 21.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

*would therefore have disastrous consequences not only for the Federal Republic of Germany, but for the entire West, and would also jeopardize Syria's internal stability, external independence, and position in the East-West conflict – including its relationship with the Soviet occupation zone. For political reasons, therefore, we must once again warn with all urgency against a failure of the German-Syrian negotiations.*⁶⁶

The constant comparison with the Aswan Dam was not only continually present and guiding Western diplomats but also determined the negotiation strategies of the Syrian side. Syrian politicians used the bipolar competition strategically, letting the FRG know that they could return to the Soviet offer of financing at any time.⁶⁷ Until 1963, however, this was primarily a means of exerting pressure; until the Ba'ath Party coup, Syria was very interested in cooperation with West Germany.⁶⁸

The FRG achieved its first success after tough and protracted negotiations in June 1961 during the visit of the Egyptian Vice-President Baghdadi to Bonn. In the so-called Baghdadi-Erhard Agreement, it assured the UAR a loan of up to DM 500 million for the construction of the dam.⁶⁹ As a result, German experts were sent to Syria to carry out further preliminary investigations. Shortly afterwards, however, the political situation changed again with a military coup by the Syrian army on 27 September 1961 and Syria's withdrawal from the union with Egypt. The Baghdadi-Erhard Agreement was thus worthless and had to be renegotiated with the now-independent Syrian state.

For the new military government also, the project had a high priority, as underlined by the establishment of the Euphrates Project Authority in November 1961, modelled on the American Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).⁷⁰ The state authority was to coordinate water management on the Euphrates. Nur al-Din Kahala, former Minister of Planning and President of the Authority until 1965, advocated the implementation of the American model in Syria, having studied engineering in the US.⁷¹ Kahala tried to obtain Western funding for the project until his death in 1965 and exemplifies the political forces in Syria that would have liked to see the project develop under Western auspices. Although the German experts agreed with the Soviet recommendation to build the dam near the village of Tabqa, political negotiations continued to be delayed. The German Foreign Office was in favour of carrying out the project for political reasons, but the Credit Institute for Reconstruction (*Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau*, KfW) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (*Bundesministerium für*

66 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 50 (own translation).

67 Trentin, *La Guerra Fredda Tedesca in Siria*, p. 152.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

69 Gottwald, *Verstaute Geschichte*, p. 31.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 37. On the globalization of this American model from Roosevelt's New Deal programme, see V. Lagendijk, *From American South to Global South: The TVA's Experts and Expertise, 1933–1998*, in: Frank Trentmann, Anna Barbara Sum, and Manuel Rivera (eds.), *Work in Progress: Economy and Environment in the Hands of Experts*, Munich 2018, pp. 79–101.

71 A. Etzioni, *Political unification Revisited: On Building Supranational Communities*, Lanham 2001, p. 127.

wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit, BMZ) had concerns about the economic viability of the large-scale project and argued for smaller alternatives.

Concerns about a takeover of the project by the Soviets, who, in 1962, had again made an offer of financing, remained the guiding principle, and Federal Development Minister Walter Scheel finally negotiated another agreement, including a West German financing commitment, in February 1963. Syria was to receive a loan of DM 350 million from the FRG with a term of 20 years and an interest rate of 3.75 percent, for which a German consortium of companies was to be commissioned with the construction of the turnkey plant.⁷² In the following years, however, relations between Syria and West Germany deteriorated for political reasons, which eventually led to the failure of the cooperation around the Euphrates Dam.

The more closely the FRG cooperated with Israel, the more it angered its Arab partners in the Middle East. Syria was outraged by German deliveries of arms and economic aid to Israel, while the FRG feared a rapprochement of Syria with the GDR and, at worst, its official recognition. The tensions culminated in the West German establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel in May 1965, whereupon Syria broke off relations with it. Shortly afterwards, Syria followed Egypt's example and officially established diplomatic relations with the GDR, thus violating the West German Hallstein doctrine.⁷³ The cooperation, which had involved five years of tough negotiations and two agreements, had failed.

As a result, Syrian scientific and technological cooperation deepened not only with the Soviet Union as well as GDR. For West German policy, this was a bitter blow on the development policy battlefield of the Cold War.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, Syrian Prime Minister Yu-suf Zu'ayyin advocated a deal with the Soviet Union. He was convinced that the Soviet Union had more expertise in the field of dam construction and would grant better credit terms.⁷⁵ For German industry, this was also a disappointment, as numerous German companies had hoped to be involved in the implementation.

More than ten years had passed between the Soviet Union's first commitment in 1957 and the start of construction in 1968. In the meantime, for roughly five years, it had appeared that the Euphrates Dam would become a West German development project; indeed, two agreements in this regard had already been concluded.

While the Cold War supplied the decisive motivation for the Federal Republic to commit to the project and thus try to push back Soviet influence in the region, it was also in the politics of the Cold War that the reasons for the failure lay in. The West German Hallstein Doctrine impeded the possibilities for cooperation after Syria's rapprochement with the GDR. At the same time, cooperation with West Germany was no longer conceivable for Syria after its establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel. In addition,

72 Trentin, *La Guerra Fredda Tedesca in Siria*, p. 154.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

74 Gottwald, *Verstaute Geschichte*, pp. 76–83.

75 Trentin, *La Guerra Fredda Tedesca in Siria*, p. 217.

there was the growing interest in socialism of the Ba'ath Party since the mid-1960s, which became apparent in its socialist reforms.

With the takeover of power by the left wing of the Ba'ath Party in 1966, the closer ties with the Soviet Union and increased economic cooperation were obvious. The contract of 18 December 1966 provided for the construction of the dam and the associated hydroelectric power plant. The Soviets were to deliver design and preliminary studies, organize and supervise implementation, and provide equipment and materials, while the Syrian side was financially and physically responsible for carrying out the construction work.

The text of the contract provided for a loan to Syria of 120 million roubles with an interest rate of 2.5 percent and a repayment period of 12 years. The first construction phase was to consist of the following items:

1. An earth dam about 2.5 kilometres long and 60 metres high to form a reservoir at a height of 300 metres
2. A dam on the left bank of 1.6 kilometres in length
3. A power plant with three turbines with a combined capacity of 300 megawatts
4. A flood spillway
5. An overland transmission line of about 160 kilometres between the hydroelectric power plant and Aleppo.⁷⁶

The loan was further to be used to purchase the following services from the Soviet Union:

1. The performance of research and project design work
2. The provision of technical equipment, machines, components, spare parts, and materials that could not be produced in Syria
3. The dispatch of Soviet specialists
4. The admission of Syrian citizens for training in the Soviet Union
5. The provision of technical documentation.⁷⁷

In an interview with Massimiliano Trentin, the Syrian Minister of Planning at the time, Muhammad al Imady explained the reasons for the decision to finally realize the project with the Soviet Union, referring to the fact that its offer was ultimately superior in terms of quality, technology, and finances:

In 1965, there was a radical change in Syria's political orientation. The president of the Dam Authority was replaced with a communist sympathizer, while the Soviet Union exerted enormous pressure on the Syrian government and, in fact, offered very good terms: Moscow assumed almost all responsibility for the construction of the entire dam. They convinced the Prime Minister, who sent a delegation to the Soviet Union. I was part of it. I repeat that the Soviet offer was much better from a technical point of view than the German one. In fact, a Swedish research group had shown that the ground on which the dam was to be built was much more fragile than expected, and the Soviet design included a special soil stabilization system that was not foreseen in the German project. The Soviet

76 Soglashenie [Contract], 1966, RGAÉ, Fond 339, op. 6, d. 3445, l. 88.

77 Ibid.

Union wanted to build both the dams on the Nile and the Euphrates and thus gained a monopoly on dams and large projects. The Federal Republic tried to resist but could not really compete with the Soviet Union's offers.⁷⁸

Thus, the nightmare of West German foreign and development policymakers and US World Bank representatives had come to pass: After the Aswan High Dam, another major infrastructure project in the Middle East had fallen to the Soviet Union, which, as Imady described, thus gained a monopoly on large hydropower plants in the Middle East. The Soviet construction of the dam clearly marked the Syrian decision to take a socialist path of development.

In the following years, partnerships with the socialist Eastern European countries intensified. The dam project paved the way for a number of socialist cooperation projects that became increasingly multilateral and, from the 1970s on, were coordinated within the framework of the CMEA.⁷⁹ Whereas the implementation of this prestigious dam project was in large part about winning a politically charged Cold War battle, what followed in subsequent years were trade relations, which were certainly also driven by business interests and the Eastern European need for resources.

In Soviet reporting, the Tabqa Dam was subsequently characterized as the second Aswan Dam or sister of the Aswan Dam, and in terms of its importance for the national economy, the press constantly compared the Euphrates project with the Aswan Dam already under construction in Egypt:

Meanwhile, in Syria, which had the example of the successful construction of the Aswan Dam on the Nile in the UAR before its eyes, the conviction grew that a huge water complex on the Euphrates could only be built with the disinterested support of the socialist countries. [...] In terms of scale and technical and economic characteristics, the Euphrates Dam is quite comparable to the Aswan Dam.⁸⁰

In terms of output, the Egyptian project was to irrigate 840,000 hectares of land and produce ten billion kilowatt-hours of electricity; the Syrian version was to irrigate 600,000 hectares and produce more than five billion kilowatt-hours.⁸¹ In this respect, the Tabqa dam “has often also been called the Syrian Aswan”, the Soviet press conveyed; “indeed, the two have many things in common”, continued the report, since “[b]oth will make a great contribution to the development of the economy”.⁸²

In addition to this obvious comparability of capacity and economic potential, there is also evidence of expert links between the two major projects. The chief engineer of the Euphrates project at *Gidroproekt* was Nikolai Aleksandrovich Malyshev,⁸³ who had also

78 Cited in Trentin, *La Guerra Fredda Tedesca in Siria*, p. 220 (own translation).

79 Trecker, *Red Money for the Global South*, pp. 55–90.

80 G. Bekarevich, *Evratskii gidrotechnicheskii Kompleks* [Euphrates Hydrotechnical Complex], in: *Vnesniaia Torgovlia* (1968) 10, p. 14 (own translation).

81 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

82 Demchenko, *Preobrazhennye*.

83 *Nachal'niku Glavgosékspertizy GOSSTROIA SSSR tov. Levinu I. A., RGAÉ, Fond 339, op. 6, d. 3445, l. 5; Vsesoiuznyi*

been employed as chief engineer at the Aswan Dam.⁸⁴ Malyshev was one of the highest-ranking Soviet hydraulic engineers, having trained in Leningrad in the 1930s and gained experience in the reconstruction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal after the Second World War. In the 1950s, under Ivan Komzin's leadership, he was chief engineer at the Kujbyshev hydroelectric power station, one of the major socialist construction projects;⁸⁵ in 1976, he became a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and later he also worked for Gosplan and Gosstroy.⁸⁶

Malyshev thus represents the hydro-energetic expertise developed in the Soviet Union under Stalinism and its export to the Global South like no other. His colleague Aleksey Jakovlevich Kuznetsov, of the same generation as Malyshev, had been the main expert on the Aswan Dam at the export company *Glavzagranènergo* and took over the same post on the Euphrates in 1968.⁸⁷ Thus, the two most important Soviet experts directly continued their work in Egypt in neighbouring Syria, embodying the transfer of technical know-how from the large construction sites of socialism to the Nile and directly afterwards to the Euphrates.

In terms of personnel, the close relationship between the two major projects in the Middle East, as repeatedly emphasized by contemporary Soviet press, can thus be substantiated. Kuznetsov, who died prematurely in 1969 due to illness, was replaced as the main expert in 1971 by a younger colleague, Aleksandr Pavlovich Stepanov.⁸⁸ His career had begun at the Krasnoyarsk hydropower plant in the 1960s and later continued to contribute his expertise in the Global South as the main expert at the Melka-Wakena hydropower plant in Ethiopia in the 1980s.⁸⁹

Ordena Lenina Proektno-izyskatel'skiĭ i Nauchno-issledovatel'skiĭ Institut Gidroproekt imeni S. Ia. Zhuka, 15 October 1968, RGAĖ, Fond 339, op. 6, d. 3445, l. 42.

84 Bishop, Talking Shop, p. 250.

85 K. Gestwa, *Die Stalinschen Großbauten des Kommunismus: Sowjetische Technik und Umweltgeschichte, 1948–1967*, Munich 2010.

86 A. Melua (ed.), *Gidroènergetiki Rossii i SNG*, vol. 2, St. Petersburg 2015, p. 74.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 611.

88 *Napravliaetsia Otchet po Stroitel'stvu i Èkspluatácii Gidrouzla Tabka na Reke Evfrat v SAR za 1974 God*, RGAĖ, Fond 365, op. 9, d. 1155, ll. 1–55.

89 Melua, *Gidroènergetiki Rossii i SNG*, p. 410.

Figure 1: View of the dam from above the weir (source: Dekabr', 1974 g. Zdanie GĖS. Vid s Verchnego B'efa, RGAĖ, Fond 365, op. 9, d. 1652).



Figure 2: View of the dam from below the weir (source: Dekabr', 1974 g. Zdanie GĖS. Vid s Nizhnego B'efa, RGAĖ, Fond 365, op. 9, d. 1652).



5. Conclusion

A dam and a hydropower plant are not just infrastructures. The case of the Euphrates Dam in Syria, built with Soviet technical and financial aid between 1968 and 1974, shows vividly how, in the sense of technopolitics, large-scale technical cooperations could become means of achieving political goals in the Cold War. If this development project were to be conducted by the Soviet Union and not the West, West German government representatives feared, the Soviets would not only win another strategic partnership in the Middle East but also endanger the standing of the West in general, not to mention Syrian political stability and national independence.

Like the political decision-makers in the capitalist camp, the socialist camp as well as Syria also had the very recent example of the Egyptian Aswan High Dam in mind when negotiating the implementation of the Euphrates Dam. While the Soviet Union was eager to demonstrate once again its expertise in hydropower construction and thus the superiority of the socialist system, the West feared another defeat with this prestigious development project being realized with Soviet aid.

For Syrian politicians, this superpower competition for a dam they needed so urgently for their country's rising energy demand meant tough and prolonged negotiations with both sides. However, it also afforded them a room for manoeuvre, and they repeatedly played the two sides off against each other. While there was a clear preference in Syria for a Western solution at the beginning of the 1960s, this changed in 1965, for three main reasons. Firstly, the political direction changed within Syria, and it sought closer alliances with the socialist camp and conducted socialist reforms; secondly, as a consequence, Syria established diplomatic relations with the GDR at the same time as West Germany committed itself to closer relations with Israel, which made cooperation between the two impossible; and thirdly, as the interview with former Minister of Economy, Muhammad al Imady, has shown, the Soviet Union simply made the technically and financially superior offer.

The final decision in 1966 for the "socialist solution" was a tough defeat for West Germany in development cooperation and a major loss for the German enterprises that had conducted preliminary studies for the Aswan Dam and then again for the Euphrates Dam and had hoped to become contractors for the construction. For the Soviet Union it was a success in the Cold War competition for alliances and partnerships in the Middle East. With this second large-scale hydropower project, it internationally demonstrated its technical expertise in the field of dam construction and was able to establish a monopoly on hydrological infrastructures in the region.

Taking the experts involved in both dam projects into account, the commonalities of the Egyptian and the Syrian dam that the Soviets often claimed can be confirmed. Knowledge and expertise travelled through mobile experts from the great construction sites of the Stalin era to the Nile and further to the Euphrates. The Tabqa Dam was only one out of numerous technical projects the Soviet Union conducted in Syria, but without doubt it was the largest and most important. For both partners, it served as a door-opener for a prolonged political and economic partnership that, despite discord and difficulties, lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union – and, indeed, has endured.⁹⁰

90 For a detailed analysis of the socialist cooperation and a discussion of what was specifically "socialist" about this dam project, see A. Ohlendorf, PhD thesis, University of Leipzig forthcoming (2024).