

Did Nasser Have a Hand in Dag Hammarskjöld's Death?

by Raphael G. Bouchnik-Chen

A U.N. investigative report, submitted to the General Assembly on September 5, 2017, has rekindled long dormant allegations that the September 1961 death of U.N. secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld in a mysterious plane crash was not the result of a tragic accident but of a political assassination.¹ Hammarskjöld was on his way to Ndola in the former Rhodesia, to mediate a solution to the 1960s Congo crisis. While the report did not identify the likely culprits, it nevertheless sought additional information from the “usual suspects”—the former colonial powers in the region (e.g., Belgium, Britain, and France) and the rival superpowers in the Cold War, in which the Congo crisis was implicated.

But there is another possible culprit, who has surprisingly evaded scrutiny: Gamal Abdel Nasser. The ferocious clashes between the Egyptian president and



Clashes between Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and U.N. secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld over a host of issues, from the Palestinian refugee problem to the Congo civil war, suggest Nasser's possible implication in Hammarskjöld's mysterious death. Here, Hammarskjöld is buried in Uppsala, Sweden, where he was raised.

¹ “Seventy-first session Agenda item 130. [Investigation into the conditions and circumstances resulting in the tragic death of Dag Hammarskjöld and of the members of the party accompanying him.](#)” U.N. General Assembly, New York, Sept. 5, 2017, A/71/1042.

Hammarskjöld over a host of contested issues, from the Palestinian refugee problem to the Congo civil war, against the backdrop of Nasser's hegemonic ambitions, suggest his possible implication in the secretary-general's mysterious death.

Tragic Accident or Political Assassination?

No sooner had Hammarskjöld's airplane crashed on the night of September 17-18, 1961, than the allegation of a premeditated assassination was made by none other than former U.S. president Harry Truman. "Dag Hammarskjöld was on the point of getting something done when they killed him," he told *The New York Times* a day after the disaster. "Notice that I said, 'When they killed him.'"² As the General Assembly left the matter open following the inconclusive findings of three immediate inquiries (two by the Rhodesian government, one by the U.N.), numerous hypotheses for the crash were made over the years with the possibility of foul play gaining currency with the passage of time and the surfacing of fresh evidential material. In the words of a comprehensive study published on the fiftieth anniversary of the crash, "Whatever the details, [Hammarskjöld's] death was almost certainly the result of sinister intervention."³

² "[The Hammarskjöld Commission](#): Report of the Commission of Inquiry on whether the evidence now available would justify the United Nations in reopening its inquiry into the death of Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 1759 (XVII) of 26 October 1962," The Hague, Sept. 9, 2013, p. 22.

³ Susan Williams, *Who Killed Hammarskjöld? The UN, the Cold War and White Supremacy in Africa* (London: Hurst, 2011), p. 234.

This suspicion was amplified by an international commission of jurists in 2013, as well as an independent panel of experts appointed by U.N. secretary-general Ban Ki-moon in March 2015, and a special investigator appointed by Secretary-General António Guterres two years later. While refraining from identifying the likely suspects, all three investigations found "persuasive evidence that the aircraft was subjected to some form of attack or threat as it circled to land at Ndola."⁴ Investigators demanded that all relevant parties conduct "a full review of records and archives in their custody or possession, including those that remain classified, for potentially relevant information."⁵

These included the United States, which had a full record of "the local and regional Ndola radio traffic on the night of 17-18 September 1961." But Washington was also possibly implicated in the tragedy via the CIA's supply of armed military aircraft—in violation of official U.S. policy—to the rebel government in Katanga, whose secession from Congo on July 11, 1960, had triggered the civil war and the attendant U.N. intervention.⁶ Then there was Belgium—Congo's former imperial master—which provided military support for the secession of Katanga where most of the country's mineral resources were located and mined by a Belgian company. In addition, Britain and its Rhodesian dependency viewed Katanga as a buffer to the possible spread of black-majority rule and resented the U.N.'s attempt to reincorporate the rebellious province into

⁴ "[The Hammarskjöld Commission](#)," 15.4.

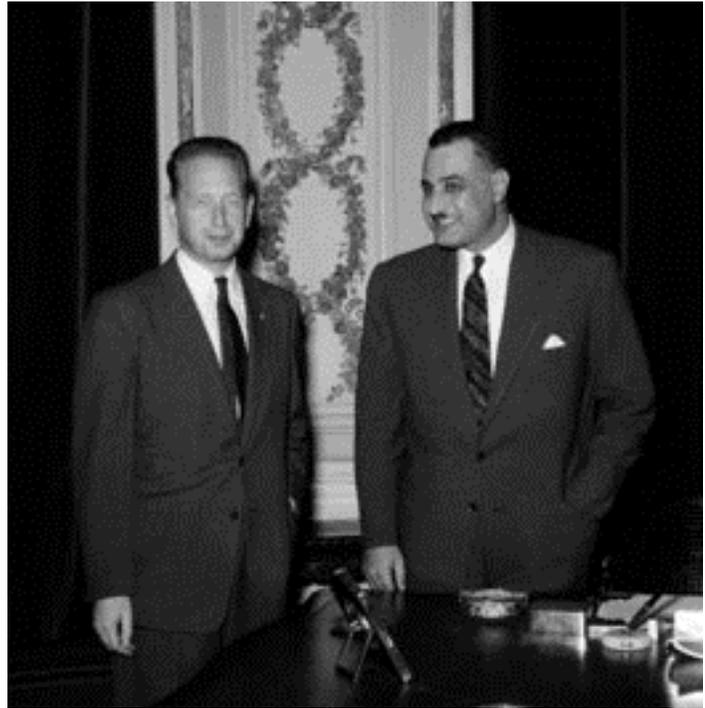
⁵ "Seventy-first session agenda item 130. [Investigation](#)," U.N. General Assembly, Executive Summary, art. 21.

⁶ "[The Hammarskjöld Commission](#)," 13.16-13.28, 15.7.

its home country. There was even documentary evidence, which came to light after the fall of South Africa's apartheid regime, that a bomb planted on Hammarskjöld's aircraft as part of a covert South African operation had failed to explode on takeoff but was activated before landing.⁷

Nasser and Hammarskjöld

On the face of it, Hammarskjöld and Nasser—then-president of the short-lived Egyptian-Syrian union (1958-61), the United Arab Republic (UAR) as it was called—were on the same side of the aisle as both were insistent on the preservation of Congo's territorial integrity and Katanga's reincorporation into it. Indeed, within a month of its creation on July 14, three days after Katanga's secession, the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC—Operation des Nations Unies au Congo) was joined by a 500-strong UAR elite paratrooper battalion, described by the Egyptian armed forces journal as “the strongest among the U.N. forces in Congo.”⁸ At the same time, the UAR's state-controlled media derided Katanga's prime minister Moïse Tshombe as a “Black European bloodsucker,”⁹ urged all Congolese to fight the seceding



Secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld (left) and Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser meet for talks, Cairo, November 1956. The U.N. deployment of an emergency force in the Sinai Peninsula following the 1956 Suez war and the secretary-general's efforts to enable Israeli shipping through the Suez Canal angered Nasser.

province, and blasted Belgium for its “imperialist intervention” in Congo.¹⁰

In fact, this cooperative façade hid a deeply acrimonious and distrustful relationship between the two leaders. So much so that it has been argued that Hammarskjöld acquiesced in the UAR's participation in ONUC for fear that Nasser might otherwise undertake separate action outside the U.N. framework.¹¹

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.32-12.38.

⁸ *Al-Quwwat al-Musallaha* (Cairo), Sept. 1, 1960.

⁹ Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA, New York), [Aug. 17, 1960](#).

¹⁰ “The Middle East Countries and the Congo,” *Middle East Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960), vol. 1, 1960, [p. 25](#).

¹¹ *L'Express* (Paris), Aug. 21, 1960.

This animosity dated back to the deployment of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) in the Sinai Peninsula in the wake of the 1956 Suez War, seen by Nasser as a humiliating violation of Egyptian sovereignty. Nasser's rancor was further intensified by Hammarskjöld's plan to integrate some million Palestinian refugees in the Arab states¹² and the secretary-general's efforts to enable Israeli shipping and cargoes through the Suez Canal.¹³ Nor did Hammarskjöld's warm relationship with Israel's prime minister David Ben-Gurion endear him to Nasser. According to Brian Urquhart, a Hammarskjöld confidante and future U.N. under-secretary-general, the two

had the most wonderful correspondence, very extensive, on every conceivable subject ... and then occasionally these tremendous disagreements ... this friendship was quite largely the basis for whatever success Hammarskjöld actually managed to have in the Middle East.¹⁴

From Collaboration to Confrontation

In these circumstances, it was hardly surprising that the UAR's collaboration with

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ONUC proved very short-lived. Nasser threw his full weight behind Congo's prime minister Patrice Lumumba, who for his part expressed his preference for UAR support in the development and defense of the country.¹⁵ Nasser backed the beleaguered ruler in the face of rapidly spreading domestic anarchy and his refusal to cooperate with ONUC, which Nasser accused of betraying its mandate to suppress the secessionist Katanga regime.

Matters came to a head in early September 1960 when Lumumba's dismissal by President Joseph Kasavubu and a military coup by Joseph Mobutu threw Congo into a prolonged constitutional crisis and led to the country's effective partition into four rival parts. On September 12, a UAR force at the airport of the capital city of Leopoldville was instructed by Saad ad-Din Shazly, the UAR's Congo contingent commander, to disobey ONUC's order to open fire on Lumumba's soldiers as they arrived to take control of the site. Later that day, Cairo announced the withdrawal of its contingent from ONUC and accused the U.N. of exceeding its authority and violating Congo's sovereignty via its heavy-handed behavior (e.g., the closure of all major airports and the Leopoldville radio station on September 5-13).¹⁶

Hammarskjöld cautioned that the move could undermine ONUC, or even bring about its liquidation with the attendant result of Congo "degenerating into uninhibited tribal conflict and the complete disintegration of the remaining fabric of national unity."¹⁷

¹² "[Proposals for the continuation of United Nations assistance to Palestine Refugees](#). Document submitted by the secretary-general," The United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL), June 15, 1959.

¹³ See, for example, JTA, Sept. 11, 1959.

¹⁴ Brian Urquhart, interview with Leon Gordenker, Yale University Oral History Project on the United Nations, July 20, 1984.

¹⁵ *Al-Jumhuriya* (Cairo), Aug. 21, 1960.

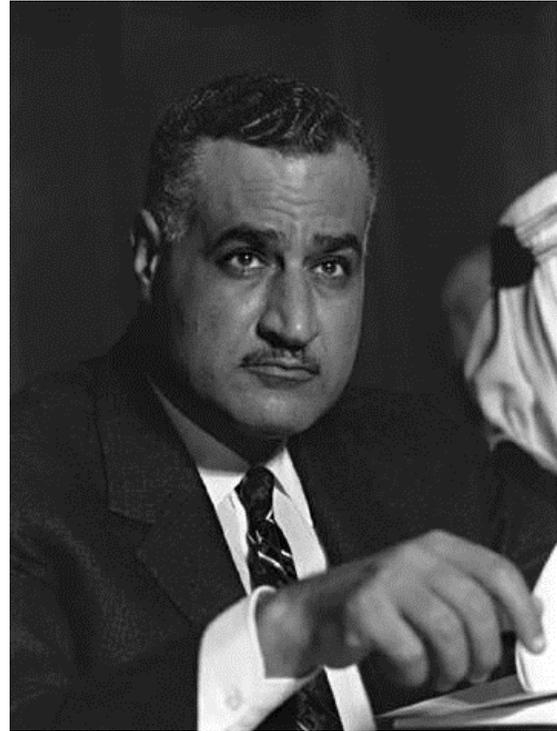
¹⁶ *Al-Ahram* (Cairo), Sept. 13, 1960.

¹⁷ "Annual Report of the Secretary General on the Work of the Organization, [16 June 1960-15 June 1961](#)," UN Doc. A/4800, July 1, 1961.

Nasser ignored the warning and quickly topped the ante. Addressing the General Assembly's annual session on September 27, he accused the U.N. of being used by world imperialism to further "its hidden designs and aims,"¹⁸ in what was to become the standard line of the UAR's state-controlled media.¹⁹ Nasser again lambasted the world organization in a later public speech,

The U.N. has become a stooge for the imperialists. This is the imperialism that wants to destroy the nationalist government of Patrice Lumumba ... The U.N. in the Congo betrayed its principles on human rights, it betrayed and disavowed the U.N. itself. I hold the imperialist states and the U.N. Secretariat responsible ... If the U.N. Secretariat submits to imperialism, imperialism will become the driving power of the U.N. and the latter will then be on the way to its own downfall.²⁰

The fact that ONUC provided Lumumba with around-the-clock protection in his residence, preventing repeated attempts at his arrest by Kasavubu and Mobutu, made little impression on Nasser. Neither was Nasser swayed by Hammarskjöld's tireless efforts to ensure Lumumba's fair treatment after his capture in November while trying to escape (with the help of the UAR embassy in Leopoldville) to his political stronghold in



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the northeastern city of Stanleyville.²¹ Instead, Nasser continued to demand the reinstatement of Lumumba and recognized the Stanleyville government proclaimed by Lumumba's deputy, Antoine Gizenga, as Congo's legitimate regime, while extending it financial aid and promising to let it have the UAR contingent's weapons and military equipment upon its departure from Congo.²² On December 1, President Kasavubu, recognized by the U.N. as Congo's legitimate ruler, demanded the immediate departure of the UAR's entire embassy staff, which he

¹⁸ "The UAR and the Congo," *Middle East Record*, vol. 1, 1960, [p. 26](#).

¹⁹ See, for example, *al-Ahram*, Dec. 9, 1960; *al-Jumhuriya*, Dec. 13, 1960.

²⁰ BBC in Arabic, Dec. 28, 1960; "Dec: UAR Contingent withdrawn from Congo," *Middle East Record*, vol. 1, 1960, [p. 32](#).

²¹ For the U.N.'s peacemaking effort in Congo, see, United Nations Archive, "[White Paper: The United Nations and the Congo \(July 1960-February 1962\)](#)," Mar. 1, 1962, pp. 15-7.

²² *Le Monde* (Paris), Dec. 2, 1960.

accused of “supporting rebel elements to overthrow the established government.” In retaliation, Nasser nationalized Belgian companies in Egypt and withdrew its representatives from the U.N. Conciliation Commission for the Congo.²³



Hammar skjöld meets with Congo's Patrice Lumumba at the U.N. Following Lumumba's murder on January 1961, in Katanga, the United Arab Republic launched a virulent media campaign against Hammar skjöld. The Soviet Union joined Nasser in demanding Hammar skjöld's ouster.

Point of No Return?

When news broke that Lumumba and two of his chieftains were brutally murdered on January 17, 1961, in Katanga, to which

they had been secretly transferred (reportedly with the connivance of the Belgian, British, and U.S. secret services),²⁴ Nasser immediately pointed an accusatory finger at Hammar skjöld and the U.N. In the coming months, the UAR accelerated delivery of its arms supplies and deepened its formal relations with the Stanleyville government, which it proclaimed to be “the legitimate national regime.”²⁵ So much so that on the occasion of Congo's first Independence Day anniversary, Nasser announced his support for Gizenga's intention to reconquer “all the lost parts of the Congo.”²⁶

In August 1961, the U.N. mediated the formation of a central Congolese government comprising representatives from the four rival regions with Cyrille Adoula as prime minister and Gizenga as second vice-premier. But, Cairo kept its ambassador in Stanleyville. When Gizenga failed to take up his post and resumed his dispute with the central government, the UAR offered its unequivocal support and accused the central government of being a Western tool to dominate Congo.

All this took place against the backdrop of a virulent UAR media campaign against Hammar skjöld, charging him with making the U.N. subservient to Western imperialism and its “Congolese stooges” who had Lumumba's blood on their hands. A frequent theme was that Lumumba's death was bound to spawn an anti-imperialist movement whereas the U.N.'s collaboration with world imperialism could only lead to its decline. “Today we do not weep for Lumumba, we weep for the U.N., its charter,

²³ BBC, Dec. 3, 1960.

²⁴ “[The Hammar skjöld Commission](#),” 3.2-3.5.

²⁵ *The New York Times*, Jan. 18-19, 25, 1961.

²⁶ *Al-Ahram*, July 1, 1961.

and its honor,” read a typical commentary.²⁷ “World public opinion denounces Hammarskjöld as an accomplice to the deeds that brought about the present situation in the Congo,” ran another commentary. “Instead of acting as a referee, he has become a party to the Congo conflict and soiled his hands with blood ... forfeiting the trust of world public opinion and most of the U.N. member states.”²⁸ On February 14, *al-Ahram*, the Egyptian regime’s mouthpiece, titled a front-page lead article with a clear and unequivocal message: “Let Hammarskjöld Go!”

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This demand echoed the line taken by the UAR’s Soviet patron, which had become Lumumba’s foremost international backer during his brief reign and which blamed Hammarskjöld for his demise. “The murder of Patrice Lumumba and his associates in the Katanga torture chamber is a culmination of Hammarskjöld’s criminal activities,” read an official Soviet government statement. The statement continued,

It was clear to everyone that in the planned assassination of the Prime Minister of Congo, Hammarskjöld was assigned the role of colonialist agent with the U.N. banner in his hands.²⁹

Moscow backed its harsh words with similarly drastic deeds. In a draft resolution submitted to the Security Council, it demanded that the U.N.

end the “U.N. Operation” in the Congo and recall all foreign troops from that country within a month’s time, in order to give the

Congolese people the opportunity them-selves to decide their internal affairs ... [and] remove Dag Hammarskjöld from the position of U.N. Secretary General, as an accomplice and organizer of the murder of the leading statesman of the republic of Congo.³⁰

This was not to be. Instead of winding down its Congo operations, the U.N. decided on February 21, 1961, to intensify its pacification efforts, and by April, had increased its military presence in the country to 18,000 troops. Moreover, in contrast to its past concentration on enforcing law and order, ONUC increasingly engaged in military operations against the Katanga regime, culminating in a September 1961 attempt to gain control of key areas in the capital city of Elisabethville and arrest Tshombe and some of his ministers. As the operation met with far tougher resistance than expected, the U.N. began searching for the cessation of hostilities. It was in the context of this effort that Hammarskjöld found his tragic death as he flew to Ndola to meet Tshombe.³¹

²⁷ *Al-Jumhuriya*, Feb. 14, 1961.

²⁸ *Al-Akhbar* (Cairo), Feb. 22, 1961; *Roz al-Yousef* (Cairo), Feb. 20, 1961.

²⁹ *Pravda* (Moscow), Feb. 15, 1961.

³⁰ “Security Council Official Records, [942](#),” Feb. 20-21, 1961, S/PV, p. 7; Andrew W. Cordier and Wilder Foote, “March-April 1961,” *Public Papers of the Secretaries General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld*, vol. 5 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 422.

³¹ “White Paper,” pp. 38-41.

Conclusion

In a message of condolence to the King of Sweden, Nasser lauded the slain secretary-general for exerting “extraordinary efforts to enhance the prestige of the position he occupied.” A letter in a similar vein was sent to the General Assembly president, accusing the “imperialist powers that plotted against the U.N. mission in Congo” of being behind Hammarskjöld’s death and urging the U.N. to abort “the imperialist attempt to separate Katanga.”³²

Yet, Nasser (and his Soviet patrons for that matter) were no less exasperated by Hammarskjöld’s vigorous attempts to do precisely that than the Belgian, British, Rhodesian, and Katanga governments among others, hence no less eager to see the dismantling of ONUC. This, of course, did not make assassination the first or only means to achieve this goal; yet Hammarskjöld was in all likelihood murdered, and Nasser is a no less probable culprit than the respective Western nations. For one thing, he was not averse to physical elimination of political opponents, through either mass executions (e.g., Muslim Brotherhood leaders and activists) or personal extermination (e.g., the feigned “suicide” of his deputy, Abdel Hakim Amr, the attempts on the life of Jordan’s King Hussein). For another thing, Nasser apparently came across a unique piece of information that potentially enabled him to tip off would-be assassins.

According to a former Congolese minister who at the time of the crash served as his country’s ambassador to the U.N., while staying in Cairo and waiting to hear of Hammarskjöld’s meeting with Tshombe, scheduled to take place in Leopoldville, he received a phone call from Prime Minister Adoula telling him that “your friend has changed his mind. He is flying to Ndola to meet Tshombe.” The ambassador called Hammarskjöld to tell him that it was a mistake to fly to Ndola and that he should stick to the original plan. And while this last minute change of venue was kept in strict confidence, it seems likely that the conversations were intercepted by the Egyptian intelligence service (and its Soviet advisors), which was monitoring the ambassador’s long distance communication.³³

Whether or not the Egyptians made foul use with the unique information they likely obtained remains to be explored. But if the U.N. is serious about putting this long overdue mystery to rest, it should ask the Egyptian government, and not merely the Western nations, about its involvement in the Congo crisis.

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³² *Radio Cairo*, Sept. 24, 1961.

³³ “[The Congo Crisis, 1960-1961: A Critical Oral History Conference](#),” The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., Sept. 23-24, 2004, pp. 189-90.