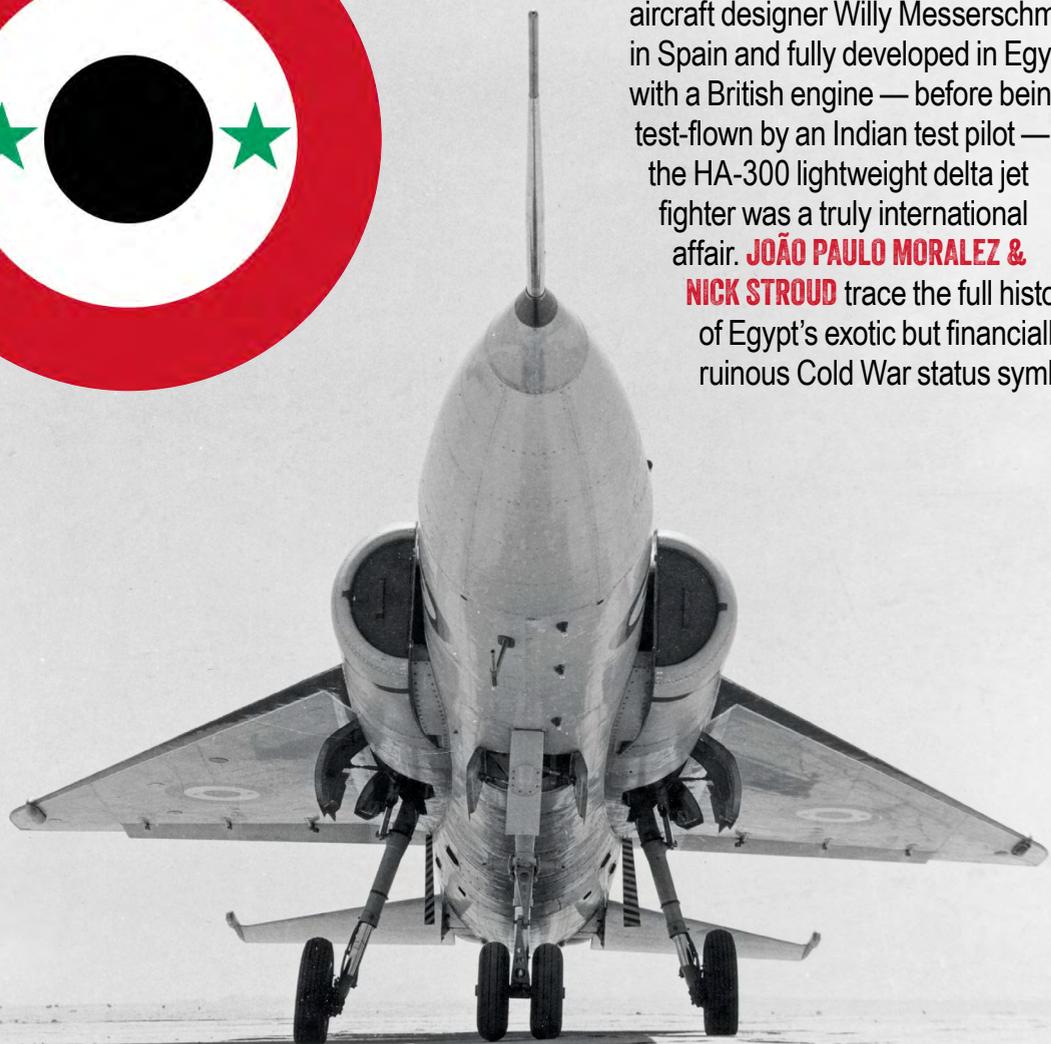


FROM   
**NILE EAGLE**  
**TO NASSER'S FOLLY**

**THE HISPANO/HELWAN HA-300**

Conceived by legendary German aircraft designer Willy Messerschmitt in Spain and fully developed in Egypt with a British engine — before being test-flown by an Indian test pilot — the HA-300 lightweight delta jet fighter was a truly international affair. **JOÃO PAULO MORALES & NICK STROUD** trace the full history of Egypt's exotic but financially ruinous Cold War status symbol



**I**N THE WAKE of the 1948–49 Arab-Israeli War, Egypt sought to strengthen its combat capability by acquiring new state-of-the-art equipment, particularly jet fighters. The Egyptian government had the support of the UK, which offered the single-engined de Havilland Vampire and Gloster's twin-engined Meteor. However, beyond simply buying ready-made products, Egypt also sought to develop its national aviation industry by encouraging its engineers and technicians to design and produce its own next generation of aircraft.

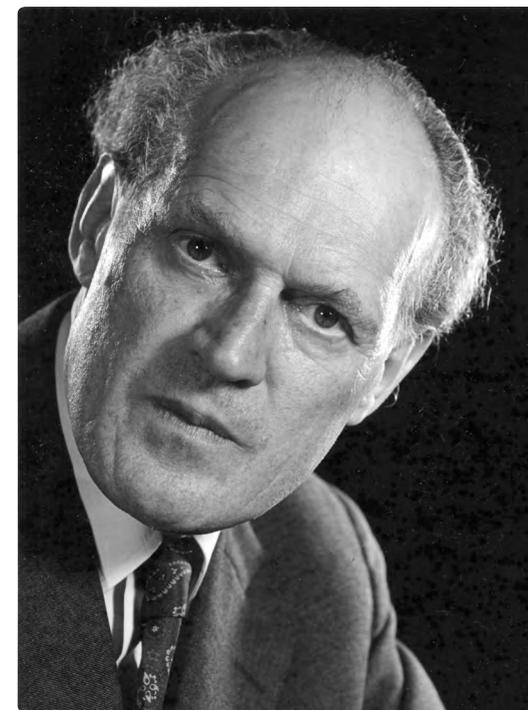
As a first step, Czechoslovakia provided a licence for the Egyptians to build the Zlin Z.381, itself a licence-produced version of the German Bücker Bü 181D Bestmann. Named Gomhouria (Republic) by the Egyptians, six variants of the aircraft were developed at the State Aircraft Factory at Heliopolis, these including export versions for Jordan, Sudan and Saudi Arabia.

In 1950 the majority of the aircraft operated by the Royal Egyptian Air Force (REAF), as it was then, were of British design and origin. However, a decision was made by the British in October 1951 to impose an embargo on the sale of military equipment to Egypt in an attempt to preserve a balance of power in the region. Egypt thus turned to the Soviet Bloc and Czechoslovakia to re-equip its air force, but not before 30 Italian-built Vampire FB.52s had been acquired for the REAF. In 1955 a three-year trade agreement was agreed jointly with the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, leading to the delivery of £150m-worth of military equipment and the arrival in country of numerous Russian and Czech engineers and technicians.

By the end of the 1950s another aircraft development centre had been established, at Helwan, on the banks of the Nile about 20 miles (32km) south of Cairo. A former RAF base established during the First World War, Helwan was used operationally during the Second World War and, after its post-war return to the Egyptians, had the benefit of a long runway. It was at Helwan that Egypt's main aircraft design authority was established in the 1950s, although it was not officially opened until July 1962.

**LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

With the establishment and consolidation of an indigenous aerospace industry — including an ambitious rocket programme staffed by under-employed designers and engineers from Germany — Egypt turned its attention to the development of a more sophisticated manned



aircraft. This was to be an agile single-engined lightly-armed lightweight all-weather fighter of simple construction with low acquisition and operation costs. In the 1960s these were the ideal requirements of any air force looking to equip its squadrons with a jet fighter to form the backbone of its air-defence capabilities to the farthest corners of its territory. It was important for Egypt to stay independent of foreign suppliers and potential international embargoes.

By the early 1960s Egypt was still engaged in local confrontations and skirmishes with Israel, but the prospect of further all-out conflict had diminished. The country was also experiencing an improvement in its economy, and the outlook for homegrown technological development was good. As mentioned, Egypt was able to attract the services of a pool of highly skilled but under-employed European designers, engineers and technicians. One such designer was Professor Willy Messerschmitt, creator of some of the most famous fighting aircraft of the Second World War.

For Messerschmitt and many of his fellow German designers, the end of the war also represented the end of their careers in their homeland, as the nation was prohibited from developing or building military equipment.

**OPPOSITE PAGE** One of a series of photographs taken of the second HA-300 prototype at the Helwan works in Egypt, by German journalist and former Messerschmitt Me 163 test pilot Mano Ziegler. **ABOVE** A characteristically intense portrait of aircraft designer Wilhelm Emil "Willy" Messerschmitt (1898–1978) taken in 1958. TAH ARCHIVE x 2