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Abdel-Halim Abu Ghazala

Egyptian defence minister with strong anti-communist views**Lawrence Joffe**

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Abdel-Halim Abu Ghazala, who has died of cancer, aged 78, was Egypt's fiercely anti-communist defence minister from 1981 to 1989. He was once touted as a likely successor to President Hosni Mubarak.

Abu Ghazala had become military chief of staff in May 1980, and took the defence ministry portfolio after his predecessor died in a helicopter crash. He was seated next to Anwar Sadat when the president was assassinated during a military review on October 6 1981. Flanking Sadat to his right was Mubarak, the former air force chief, Abu Ghazala's comrade-in-arms and, since 1981, Egypt's president.

The following year Abu Ghazala was promoted to deputy prime minister and field marshal. Although a supporter of Egypt's 1979 peace with Israel, after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 Abu Ghazala called for a joint Arab strategy to offset Israel's military superiority. In 1984 Mubarak stopped his minister's bid to create a nuclear arms industry. In February 1986 he saved the regime by quelling a mutiny by 17,000 security police in Cairo.

Abu Ghazala also nurtured a military manufacturing sector, fuelled by US aid totalling \$2bn a year, that diversified into construction and food production, and was seen as a device to bolster Mubarak's army support. A linchpin of US regional policy, the powerful minister secured a deal to co-produce, in Egypt, US M1A1 Abrams tanks.

He soon became a key player in Operation Cyclone, the scheme promoted by Texas congressman Charlie Wilson and the CIA to supply mujahideen with weaponry to fight

Afghanistan's Soviet occupiers. This story was told in the 2003 book and 2007 film *Charlie Wilson's War*. Abu Ghazala saw Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran as a hegemonic threat. He sold billions of dollars in arms to frontline states, principally Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Born in Zuhur, in the coastal Beheira province, Abu Ghazala came from the Awlad Ali Bedouin tribe that straddles the Libya-Egypt border. He served as a cadet combatant in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, graduated from military college in 1949 and joined the artillery corps.

After backing the 1952 coup by Gamal Abdel Nasser's Free Officers' group, and fighting in the 1956 Suez war, Abu Ghazala spent five years in the Soviet Union, where he gained a military degree. He became chief instructor at Egypt's artillery institute and briefly headed Egyptian military intelligence.

During the 1967 six-day war with Israel, he was posted to Egypt's remote western border, and was thus spared the military humiliation that destroyed many other careers. As the second army's artillery commander in the 1973 Yom Kippur war, he used Soviet-supplied missiles and howitzers to underpin Egypt's surprise attack. And after Israel struck back two weeks later, his artillery barrages thwarted General Ariel Sharon's advance on Ismailiya. Later, as defence ministers, Sharon and Abu Ghazala were to negotiate troop redeployments.

In the 1970s, he was military attaché in Washington DC. There he cultivated a network of contacts, including Wilson, which immensely benefited Egypt as Sadat swapped loyalties from the Soviet Union to the US.

Fluent in English, French and Russian, and a commerce graduate from Cairo University, behind closed doors the normally serious Abu Ghazala was a brilliant and charismatic raconteur. His luck finally ran out in the late 1980s when he was implicated in a smuggling controversy involving Egypt, Argentina, Iraq and 13 US firms.

Dubbed "Condor II" or "Badr 2000", the scheme envisaged building a long-range, radar-eluding rocket for probable use by Iraq against Iran. When the US wished to question Abu Ghazala about illegal imports of military-use chemicals, Mubarak, who also feared Abu Ghazala's ambitions, "promoted" him to chief aide in April 1989.

In 1993 Abu Ghazala retired. He had backed Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and he subsequently wrote four volumes of military history on that war. In 2005 he was proposed as the Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate against Mubarak, but the position never materialised. Mubarak attended Abu Ghazala's full military funeral.

He is survived by his wife Ashgan, two sons and three daughters.

- Mohammed Abdel-Halim Abu Ghazala, soldier and politician, born January 15 1930; died September 6 2008

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