The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War

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Analyses of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War differ on the causes of the war and the circumstances in which it broke out. These differences often depend simply on the academic orientation of the researcher. Some specialists on the Middle East have traced the war primarily to the growing tension between Israel and Syria that periodically flared into armed actions in 1966 and early 1967, climaxing in the air battle over the Sea of Galilee on 7 April 1967 in which seven Syrian planes were downed by the Israel air force. The subsequent escalation to war, according to these analysts, was thus an outgrowth of an increasingly volatile situation that ultimately caused the Egyptians (and possibly the Soviet Union) to take action—resulting finally in war. Other scholars, including many specialists on the Soviet Union, explain the outbreak of the crisis by according greater importance to the Soviet Union’s passage of false information to the Egyptians in mid-May 1967 claiming that Israeli troops were massing and were planning to attack Syria. This information set in motion Egyptian actions and the escalating crisis that ultimately led to the war. Most analysts would likely agree that the developments were all connected, and one might even argue that the difference in emphasis is of little importance. But at least as a matter of academic interest, as well as of historical accuracy (to the extent that there is such a thing), we can benefit by re-examining these differences. In particular, the continued ambiguity and often conflicting accounts lead us to try to determine just what role the Soviet Union played or sought to play in the critical events of 1967—a task that has been made easier by sources that have become available since the end of the Cold War.
The Context of Soviet Policy in the Middle East

Soviet policy in the Middle East during this period was shaped largely by three factors: Moscow’s conflict with China under Mao Zedong (and disarray in the international Communist movement); factionalism within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), including efforts to consolidate the power of the post-Khrushchev leadership (with touches or fears of “re-Stalinization”); and the war in Vietnam with intensified U.S. bombing campaigns against the North. The stepped-up bombing in Vietnam was worrisome to Moscow because it suggested that the United States was ready to escalate its military actions and involvement more generally. Concern about this matter reinforced the relatively cautious approach in Soviet foreign policy under Leonid Brezhnev, though it also provided ammunition for the more militant (and less risk-averse) elements in Moscow, primarily in the Soviet military.

A fourth factor that shaped Soviet policy in the Middle East during this period was the large military buildup the Soviet Union had begun after Brezhnev came to power. The buildup of both conventional and nuclear forces was designed to provide military flexibility, or what Soviet leaders called the power projection function of the Soviet armed forces—a goal that necessitated an expanded air force and navy, with forward bases around the globe. In the Middle East, this meant not only the pursuit of interests in countries like Algeria, Iran, and Yemen, but also a quest for positions vis-à-vis U.S. and West European forces in the region, including U.S. nuclear submarines patrolling in the area. Specifically, Soviet military commanders were hoping to obtain support facilities and bases in Egypt and Syria for their newly organized Mediterranean squadron and the aircraft protecting it.

Soviet policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict was driven by broader international considerations. The conflict allowed Moscow to move into the Middle East after the death of Josif Stalin, and in subsequent years the standoff between Israel and the Arab countries permitted the Soviet Union to strengthen its military and diplomatic presence in the region. But Soviet activities in the Middle East were a function of Moscow’s overall foreign policy, particularly the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, which in the 1960s was increasingly military in nature. Soviet policies on specific issues and vis-à-vis specific states in the Middle East

were determined primarily, though not exclusively, by Moscow’s competition with the United States. This factor was particularly appreciated by Egypt, at least after 1956, more so than by other states in the region.

Soviet relations with Egypt had improved significantly after a period of serious disagreement over Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s pan-Arab and anti-Communist policies of the late 1950s. By the mid-1960s the Soviet Union was shoring up its position with the Egyptian regime, supplying weapons and training for the Egyptian armed forces (including assistance to Egyptian military forces taking part in the Yemen civil war), and seeking access to bases and support facilities for Soviet military forces. In Syria, Moscow’s fortunes at that point were extremely positive as a result of the return to power of a left Ba’athist regime in February 1966. The two countries established close relations, and the Soviet Union provided relatively generous economic, political, and military support. By all indications, Soviet leaders were hoping to build a radical bloc of anti-Western Arab states led by Syria, in the hope of countering what Moscow viewed as U.S.-backed moves by Saudi Arabia to unify the Islamic states.

The pro-Soviet regime in Damascus was, however, a weak regime riven by internal conflicts and subject to numerous challenges, including from religious circles. The Syrian government took a highly aggressive stance against Israel, permitting Palestinian attacks from its territory and engaging in a vociferous propaganda campaign that emphasized the supposedly imminent danger from Israel. At least part of the motivation for this was the need to divert local attention to the outside enemy and thereby rally a divided public around the flagging regime. The Soviet Union, with its obvious stake in the stability of the Syrian regime, supported this effort and provided its own propaganda contributions from the spring of 1966 to that of 1967. In May 1966 the Soviet Union first warned of Israeli troop concentrations and plans to go to war, and it repeated such “warnings” numerous times over the ensuing year. Soviet accusations of Israeli aggressive intentions invariably linked them to “imperialist circles” in the United States, presumably in an effort to weaken the pro-American regimes in Jordan and Saudi Arabia. To underscore the value of friendship with the Soviet Union over that of the United States, Moscow often included in its accusations a “deterrent” warning that the Soviet Union would not remain indifferent to aggression so close to its own borders.

2. TASS, 27 May 1966.
The Lead-up to the 1967 War

A few weeks after the Israeli-Syrian dogfight on 7 April, the Soviet Union again spoke of Israeli troop concentrations, and in mid-May 1967 Soviet officials told the Egyptians, through several channels in both Moscow and Cairo, that Israel was massing troops on the Syrian border. At least some of the messages contained a warning that Israel was planning an attack on Syria. These reports were believable in view of the increased tension and actual fighting that had taken place between Israel and Syria, as well as the rhetoric emanating from Israel in response to Syrian attacks in the demilitarized zone between the two countries. Whether Soviet leaders actually believed the information is another question. In recently declassified documents, Soviet foreign ministry officials claim that the Soviet Union received Syrian reports of Israeli troop concentrations from the Egyptians. A message from Nasser cited in the Soviet documents indicates that this was indeed the case but that the Soviet Union subsequently provided additional information.3 The exaggerated nature of the Soviet reports—referring to the massing of ten to twelve Israeli brigades4—suggested the more likely propagandistic nature of the message. Similarly, the way the message was conveyed to Anwar el-Sadat, the speaker of the Egyptian parliament, does not suggest that the Soviet Union was trying to precipitate a war by passing on false information. On 13 May Sadat made a brief stopover in Moscow on his way home from the Far East. He met with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, but, according to the declassified Soviet account of their relatively long conversation, Gromyko made no mention of the alleged troop concentrations.5 Sadat recalled in his memoirs that Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Semyonov accompanied him to the airport later that day, and, because the plane was more than an hour late, the two men had “a chance to talk at length.”6 During this fortuitous conversation, Semyonov passed on the information about Israeli troop concentrations, even providing the likely date of attack as 18 to 22 May.

Certainly the Soviet Union had other ways to convey the information to

4. This figure was six times the number of brigades Israel had on active duty. Even with additional troops mobilized from the reserves, Israel would have been hard pressed to field such a large number of brigades at short notice.
5. “Record of the Conversation between Foreign Minister A. A. Gromyko and Egyptian Vice-President Anwar Sadat, 13 May 1967,” in Naumkin et al., eds., Blizhnevostochnyi konflikt, p. 551.
the Egyptians (e.g., through intelligence and military channels), but if Soviet leaders were trying to provoke a war, one might expect that the meeting with Gromyko, rather than the chance conversation with his deputy, would have been an appropriate forum. In fact the Soviet Union had already conveyed the same information to Cairo through embassy and intelligence channels in Egypt, but if Soviet leaders really expected that war was just a week away, it is strange that Gromyko made no mention of it to Sadat. Moreover, if Moscow had been truly concerned, checking the facts would have been easy enough; yet the Soviet chargé d’affaires in Tel Aviv suspiciously refused an offer to do so. The Syrians themselves knew that the information about troop concentrations was not genuine, as they indicated to the Egyptians on 14 May when Nasser sent his chief of staff, General Muhammad al-Fawzi, to check. Possibly the initial information, apparently supplied by a Soviet intelligence official in Egypt, prompted Moscow to convey its messages to Cairo, but a later source claimed that the Soviet State Security Committee (KGB), which handled foreign intelligence, had been uncertain about the validity of the information.

It would appear, therefore, that Soviet leaders conveyed the information not out of immediate concern but possibly for the same reason they had done so in the past; namely, to bolster the Syrian regime (which was still coping with a recent coup attempt and anti-government religious demonstrations) by exaggerating the perceived external threat posed by “imperialist-backed” Israel. In this case, greater support from Egypt, which had a mutual defense pact with Syria, might help the Syrian regime. If Moscow had genuinely been worried that the tension with Israel would get out of hand and lead to an Israeli attack, efforts to secure an Egyptian commitment might deter such an eventuality. This had been the case, in a sense, in 1960 when tension between Israel and Syria spurred the Egyptians to put forces into Sinai and then claim that their move had deterred an Israeli strike on Syria. The Soviet Union was not involved in that incident, but the experience might have served as an example if so desired.

Some analysts have claimed that Soviet leaders passed on the false information because they (or the KGB or hawks in the Soviet leadership) intended to provoke Nasser into a war. One might make such a case for hardliners such as Defense Minister Andrei Grechko or Aleksandr Shelepin, although the latter was already beginning to slip from power, and Grechko had only recently been appointed defense minister after the death of his predecessor, Rodion Malinovskii, six weeks earlier. Moreover making such a case for Brezhnev, at least in view of Soviet foreign policy at the time, would be difficult. Although Moscow often sought to aggravate situations and create tension in order to establish a greater presence in a region, this was not the same as intentionally precipitating a war, which was a far riskier matter. A war seemed to be a no-
win proposition for the Soviet Union. On the one hand, it could lead to an
Arab defeat that not only would discredit Soviet arms and training but would
also generate pressure for Moscow to intervene to save its “client state.” On
the other hand, if a war resulted in an Israeli defeat, the United States might
well intervene. If in fact Soviet leaders had been intending to provoke a war
and had expected that the information they supplied to Egypt would lead to
war, one must wonder why no apparent preparations were made at the time
for such an imminent occurrence. Karen Brutents, who was then a senior
official in the CPSU international department specializing on the Middle
East, recalls that neither he nor others working with him were given any task
in connection with the Mideast crisis until the war actually broke out.7 He
was then asked to prepare a paper that was used for the speech Brezhnev deliv-
ered several days later.

**Escalation of the Pre-War Crisis**

Whether anticipated or not, the crisis did escalate as a result of the informa-
tion given to the Egyptians. On the same day that Nasser’s chief of staff re-
ported that no Israeli troop concentrations were facing Syria, the Egyptian
president ordered his troops into the Sinai. Subsequently he asked the United
Nations (UN) peacekeeping force to leave parts of the Sinai. Nasser’s deci-
sions, his disagreements with the commander of the Egyptian armed forces,
Field-Marshall Abd al-Hakim Amer, and his intentions have been discussed
elsewhere.8 Although Egyptian intelligence analysts had earlier predicted that
the withdrawal of the UN force would most likely provoke an Israeli attack, it
is not clear that Soviet officials shared this view. Despite Israeli reprisal raids
and occasional provocations against Syria, the likelihood that Israel would
embark on a two-front war was not high, particularly because Egypt had been
receiving military shipments and political backing from the USSR since
1956. Moreover, Soviet leaders assumed that even if Israel decided to take on

ploschadi* [Thirty Years on Old Square] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otmosheniya, 1996). Georgii
Arbatov, an expert on the United States, also claimed to have had no knowledge of the war before it
broke out, although he was not in a position as close to the issue as Brutents was at the time. Georgii
Arbatov, interview, Jerusalem, July 1997.

8. See, for example, Richard Parker, “The June 1967 War: Some Mysteries Explored,” *Middle East
Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 175–197. Nasser’s requests were to remove only part of the
UN force, leaving observers in Gaza, for example. The commander of the UN Emergency Force, Gen-
eral Indar Rikhye, said he could not remove only part of his troops. Nasser’s deputy, Field-Marshall
Abd al-Akim Amer, is said to have asked for full withdrawal (i.e., including Sharm al-Sheikh). At the
time, Egypt had some 55,000 troops in Yemen. Nasser was seeking to withdraw these forces at some
point, though there is no evidence that this was in fact done prior to 1968.
Egypt, the United States (whose influence over Israel was generally overestimated by Moscow) would not allow it to do so. In addition, because of the domestic political problems facing Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and the poor state of the Israeli economy at the time, Soviet officials may have underestimated Israel’s morale and will to fight.

Whatever the calculus may have been, Soviet leaders apparently were not concerned by the initial Egyptian and UN moves. Moscow supported Egypt’s actions after the fact both publicly and privately. The problem came on 22 May when the Egyptians decided to close the Straits of Tiran. There was little doubt that a blockade of Israeli shipping in the south would be considered a casus belli by Israel, dramatically increasing the danger of war. (Moreover, Moscow traditionally was sensitive on the issue of free navigation and the blocking of sea access.) On 22 May Nasser informed the Soviet ambassador to Cairo, D. P. Pozhidaev, of the closure of the Straits of Tiran. In response to Soviet concerns, Nasser assured the ambassador that “the UAR has no intention of complicating the situation any further.” Nonetheless, the Soviet authorities asked Cairo to send an envoy to discuss the growing crisis and Egyptian intentions. The Egyptian minister of war, Shams Badran, traveled to Moscow for talks on the matter.

The debate about Soviet intentions in transmitting false information is paralleled by a similar debate about the escalation of the crisis and the possibility of war. Specifically, analysts have sought to determine whether Soviet leaders in May 1967 intended to encourage Nasser to move ahead, confident of Moscow’s support, in preempting an Israeli attack; or, whether they wanted him to proceed cautiously, ease the pressure, and be prepared for U.S. involvement that Moscow might or might not be willing to counter. In fact both messages may have been delivered, representing two different positions within the Soviet hierarchy. It is also possible that some officials in Cairo misinterpreted Soviet pronouncements. Soviet Defense Minister Grechko told Badran that the Soviet Union would support Egypt if the latter were attacked, reportedly promising to send the Soviet fleet if needed (i.e., if the U.S. Sixth Fleet intervened) and agreeing to send Egypt emergency arms supplies. This is the message Badran reportedly conveyed to Nasser, even though Egyptian embassy officials in Moscow explained that such comments by Grechko were not to be taken as the Soviet Union’s real position. Indeed, Sadat provided a different version of the message that was given to Badran, claiming that in fact


Soviet leaders pointedly asked Badran what Egypt would do if the U.S. Sixth Fleet intervened. According to Sadat, the Soviet officials laughed when Badran replied that Egypt would rely on its air strength. Moreover, although Soviet leaders agreed to send arms, they did so without committing to any specific delivery times. (On 19 May, Field-Marshal Amer had asked that Soviet deliveries of forty MiG-21 aircraft be advanced from the beginning of 1968 and be completed by the end of 1967.)

Various accounts indicate that the Soviet Union (specifically Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin, who was also a CPSU Politburo member) told Badran and also Syrian President Hashim al-Atassi at the end of May, that Israel would not attack, that the United States was not interested in a war given Arab strength and Soviet backing, that Egypt should de-escalate the crisis in order to keep world opinion on the Arab side, and that the Egyptians should avoid provocative actions and should be satisfied with what had been accomplished and seek a juridical solution to the dispute over the Straits of Tiran. These accounts have been confirmed by participants in the meeting, including the Egyptian ambassador, Salah Bassiouni, and the Egyptian deputy foreign minister, Mustafa al-Fiki. Once again, Nasser reassured the Soviet ambassador that Egypt would exercise caution in the Gulf of Aqaba, at least with regard to non-Israeli ships.

Despite Grechko’s comments, the Soviet message to Badran was apparently clear and effective. Egypt had secretly devised plans to attack Israel on 27 May. On the basis of Israeli intelligence, the United States informed the Soviet Union about the Egyptian plans while Badran was still in Moscow. This information prompted Kosygin’s statements to Badran that Egypt should be restrained, that Israel was not planning to attack Egypt, and that Egypt therefore had no need to preempt. More directly, Kosygin emphasized that if Egypt did attack, the United States would intervene. Following Badran’s meetings, the Egyptians cancelled their plans for a 27 May attack. Later on, Saudi Arabian officials blamed the Soviet Union for the Arab defeat because Moscow had argued against an Egyptian preventive strike on the grounds that Israel itself would not attack.

15. “Comments of Saudi King Faisal, Broadcast in Arabic on Tunis Domestic Service, 12 April 1974.”
The Soviet Union did, however, send warning messages to both Israel and the United States, informing the latter that Moscow would not stand by idly if Egypt were attacked. Presumably to give this statement credibility, the Soviet Union notified Turkey that some ten naval vessels would transit the Straits of Dardanelles. From 30 May to 5 June, the Soviet Navy did in fact deploy several small auxiliary and intelligence ships to the Mediterranean, but these and other vessels already in the area were moved westward, to positions south of Crete. They were thus even further from the potential area of conflict than the U.S. fleet was. The Soviet vessels remained there until the last day of the conflict, as discussed below. In the meantime, Soviet commanders also moved out the military aircraft they had deployed in Egypt.

Concerned about the growing likelihood of war, the Soviet Union actually considered a rather unorthodox step proposed by the head of the Israeli Communist Party, Moshe Sneh. Some months earlier, Sneh had suggested that Moscow hold a Tashkent-style conference to mediate the Arab-Israeli conflict.16 As tensions escalated in late May, Sneh urged Soviet leaders to invite Israeli Prime Minister Eshkol to Moscow so they could mediate the conflict. The Soviet government actually decided to issue an invitation on 28 May, provided that Egypt and Syria agreed.17 Nasser did initially agree in order to buy time, but a few days later, after Syria had rejected the idea, Nasser said he no longer needed the extra time and withdrew his agreement, forcing Moscow to abandon the idea. On 1 June, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko reported to the CPSU Politburo that Israel had completed its mobilization process and that reports from Tel Aviv “confirm the possibility of initiation of military activities by Israel against the UAR.”18 Nonetheless, Israel’s preemptive attack on 5 June came as a surprise to Egypt, and perhaps to Moscow as well.
Wartime Maneuvering

When the war began on 5 June, Soviet leaders activated the Hot Line to speak with U.S. President Lyndon Johnson, the first time the communication link had been used since it was installed after the Cuban missile crisis. Kosygin told Johnson that the Soviet Union was interested in pushing for a ceasefire. That same day, Soviet officials at the UN added a demand for Israel's withdrawal from Arab lands. By the next day, however, the Soviet Union had dropped its demand for a withdrawal and had decided simply to press for a ceasefire, despite Egyptian opposition to a ceasefire at that point.19 No one in Moscow could have had much doubt that the Arabs were in a losing situation after the Israeli preemptive strikes wiped out most of the Arab air forces at the opening of the war. Soviet leaders worried that continued conflict would only make matters worse, threatening the very existence of the pro-Soviet regimes in Egypt and Syria and creating pressure for Soviet intervention. Indeed, on 7 June Egypt urged Moscow to intervene, at least by supplying new combat aircraft via Iraq or Sudan. The Soviet Union refused and offered only to ship unassembled aircraft in crates and spare parts.

By this point, however, Soviet leaders were increasingly concerned that the Egyptian defeat was turning into a rout and that Israel might be tempted to move across the Canal to deal a final blow. The Soviet government sent a note to Israel threatening to sever (“review”) diplomatic relations if Israel did not adhere to the ceasefire proposal adopted by the UN Security Council (though the proposal had not been accepted by any of the Arab states except Jordan). On both 7 and 8 June, Kosygin contacted Washington with appeals to press Israel to honor the ceasefire and withdraw to the armistice lines. The demand for Israeli withdrawal was also contained in a resolution submitted by Moscow to the UN Security Council, though it did not come to a vote.20 Soviet naval forces engaged in some minor harassment of the U.S. fleet, and the Soviet government repeated its warning to Israel regarding diplomatic relations. At the same time, Soviet leaders pressed Nasser to accept the ceasefire, which he finally did on the evening of 8 June. On 9 June Syria also accepted the ceasefire, but when Israel continued its offensive in the Golan Heights...

(territory that had previously been under Syrian control), Soviet officials worried that Israel might soon move against Damascus itself, causing the pro-Soviet regime there to fall.

On 10 June, the Soviet government sought to halt Israeli operations in the Golan by making good on its threat to sever diplomatic relations. The Soviet government also raised the prospect of sanctions in a note to the Israeli prime minister, a note that actually was less threatening than a similar message sent to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion during the 1956 war. The Soviet note to the Israeli government on 10 June was accompanied by a far stronger message to Washington declaring that events might compel the Soviet Union to take an “independent decision” to pursue “all necessary steps, including military [action].” This message had been preceded by a warning from a KGB official in Washington that Moscow was ready to fly in troops, and by a statement from an emergency Warsaw Pact meeting on 9 June pledging to do “everything necessary to help the Arab peoples . . . rebuff the aggressor.”

Was this a genuine threat, indicating Soviet readiness to intervene militarily? Israel, for its part, took the threat seriously and hesitated before finally deciding to complete its occupation of the Golan Heights, a task it expected to accomplish within hours. The U.S. government, by contrast, was doubtful that Moscow would carry through on its threat. U.S. officials decided merely to tell Kosygin that Washington would restrain Israel if Moscow would do the same regarding Syria. Subsequently, at the suggestion of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard Helms (with support from the British ambassador), President Johnson ordered ships from the Sixth Fleet to move eastward and to remain roughly a hundred miles off the coast of Israel in order to “make it clear to them [the Soviet Union] that we don’t intend to take this lying down.”

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21. “Letter to the Government of Israel from the Government of the USSR,” in Naumkin et al., eds., Blizhnepoustochjni konflikt, Vol. 2, p. 577. The text of the note, to be sent via the Finns, contained a date of 5 June, but the date on the note itself was left blank, presumably until the actual decision was taken. In fact, the announced severance of relations was sent directly to Israel, not via the Finns as apparently planned. All of this indicates that Soviet leaders from the outset considered taking such a step but did not want to proceed with it until events in the field— namely, the perceived threat to Damascus—offered a sufficient pretext.


25. Ibid., attributed to Defense Secretary McNamara.
time, the situation in both capitals was extremely tense during much of the
crisis. Dobrynin recalls that the Soviet Politburo and the Johnson administra-
tion were in frequent contact on 10 June until the fighting stopped. Nonetheless,
the tenor of the notes exchanged by Johnson and Kosygin during
those hours, aside from Kosygin's initial "threat," was generally cautious and
mild.

During this period, a Soviet naval ship moved into position off the coast
of Syria, but there was no other sign of a Soviet intention to intervene. Re-
portedly, some KGB and Soviet military officials, possibly including Grechko
himself, did press for Soviet intervention, though whether on the ground or
by air is unclear. Gromyko apparently opposed the idea, and it was quickly
dropped (if it was even seriously considered). Although some observers re-
ported that Soviet airborne divisions had been put on alert, it is likely that any
such alert was actually ordered at the beginning of the war (not on 10 June) as
a precaution. These divisions had only recently been formed and had never
seen action. The Soviet Union at the time did have large aircraft to transport
airborne forces, though whether it could have used them effectively (as it did
fourteen months later during the invasion of Czechoslovakia) is unclear. No
airfields were available in the Arab countries because Israel had destroyed
them on the first day of the war. Moreover, there was little chance that Soviet
airborne forces could have entered the battle in time to prevent an Israeli on-
slaught against Damascus.

These constraints made the Soviet threat more of a political gesture than
a sign of intention. Soviet intervention capabilities at the time were still quite
limited—the Soviet marine force never reached significant levels, and the So-
viet navy was no match for the U.S. Sixth Fleet, either quantitatively or quali-
tatively. The Soviet navy at the time had no aircraft carriers and no bases in
the region to provide air cover. Moreover, the U.S. naval presence and active
political role during the war meant, from Moscow's standpoint, that interven-
tion by either side might result in a direct superpower confrontation. Soviet
leaders displayed no willingness to take that kind of risk on behalf of their
Arab clients. Indeed, Nasser, according to an Egyptian account, accepted the
ceasefire on 8 June only because the Soviet Union had been frozen into im-
mobility out of fear of being forced into conflict with the U.S. Sixth Fleet and
the Israeli air force.

Rumors surfaced that some officials in Moscow had urged much more

substantial support for the Arabs, particularly the Syrians. Some of these rumors focused on the first secretary of the Moscow party organization, Nikolai Egorychev, who was replaced at the end of June. But it is now clear, from recently declassified Soviet documents, that, contrary to the rumors, Egorychev did not specifically advocate (or criticize the lack of) more decisive Soviet help to the Arabs. (He criticized Brezhnev on other grounds.) Other rumors focused on a CPSU Central Committee Secretary, Aleksandr Shelepin, whose gradual decline from leadership circles was marked by his demotion from the CPSU Secretariat in July 1967. Shelepin had been close to the Egyptians, and, reportedly, even closer to the Ba’athists in Syria. French journalist Michel Tatu claimed that both Shelepin and Vladimir Semichastnyi (the KGB chief who had been removed from office on 17 May 1967) espoused a strong pro-Ba’athist and militantly anti-Zionist position that may have prompted them to urge greater Soviet involvement on behalf of the Arabs. A connection between Shelepin and Semichastnyi and these Arab elements may well have existed, but the documents currently available do not bear out Tatu’s broader argument about the positions that the two Soviet officials supposedly took during the June 1967 war.

The Aftermath

Soviet policy up to and during the war could be characterized as a failure resulting from a lapse in judgment on the part of the leadership (and faulty intelligence estimates), or from factional struggles within the leadership that pushed in conflicting directions, or from both. Certainly the Soviet Union underestimated the effect that the erroneous reports of Israeli troop concentrations would have on the Egyptians. Soviet leaders may not have been aware of the long-standing pressures on Nasser within Egypt and from other Arab states to take action vis-à-vis Israel. Moreover, they apparently misjudged the degree of control they and the Americans had over their respective clients, and they failed to anticipate or understand Israel’s responses. Most important of all, they failed to grasp the volatility of the Arab-Israeli conflict. As a result, the Soviet Union lost credibility in the eyes of many Third World countries (including all the Arab states) as a source of arms and training and as a superpower protector. Whether because of misjudgments or the influence of hawkish Politburo members and military officials (such as Grechko), the Soviet

29. This is the topic of a forthcoming article by Mark Kramer, “The Egorychev Affair, Ballistic Missile Defense, and the June 1967 Mideast War: Leadership Struggles and Soviet Foreign Policymaking,” which draws extensively on declassified materials from the Russian archives.
Union came close to facilitating the downfall of the leaders it had carefully cultivated in Egypt and Syria (Nasser in fact did resign, though only briefly). Worse still, the Soviet Union was almost dragged into a confrontation with the United States.

Soviet leaders quickly tried to limit the damage and, as best as possible, to prevent a repetition. They also sought to exploit the situation to their advantage. Both publicly and privately, they blamed the sorry performance of the Arab armies on the quality and nature of these armies (rather than on Soviet training and arms) and immediately set out to revamp the Egyptian armed forces from top to bottom. The rebuilding program provided an opportunity for Moscow to try to gain control over the Egyptian military. The Soviet Union also sought to penetrate the Egyptian security services and the top levels of the political structure. At the same time, in a highly publicized effort immediately after the war, the Soviet government rearmed Egypt and Syria (especially the former), pouring in more modern weapons and equipment and increasing the number of advisers in each country to some 3,000–4,000 by the end of the year.30

The influx of Soviet advisers was part of the rearming effort, but some of the new personnel were also intended to consolidate the main prize Moscow had received as a result of the war; namely, air bases and coastal facilities for the Soviet Navy’s Mediterranean squadron and for intelligence-gathering purposes. Thus the Soviet military position in the region was dramatically strengthened, and Moscow also assumed a higher profile as the superpower facing Washington politically in the Middle East and as advocate and diplomatic representative for Egypt in the period of negotiation that was to come.

The direction Moscow’s role was to take was indicated to Nasser within days of the war. On 22 June, Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny arrived in Cairo with the message that Soviet arms supplies would not be a substitute for a political solution to the conflict. The provision of arms combined with political efforts was not a new approach for the USSR, at least in its behavior in the Third World. In the case of the Middle East, Soviet leaders were concerned about the ease and rapidity with which the situation had escalated into a war that entailed high political and economic costs. Hence, they sought, from the first weeks after the war and more so in subsequent months, to curb Nasser’s aim of forcibly restoring Egyptian lands (and dignity) and to pressure him to adopt a policy of land for non-belligerency. At the same time,

30. The weapons Moscow was providing at the time were not the most advanced models. This did not change until the early 1970s when the Soviet Union began to demand hard-currency payments for its arms supplies.
Podgorny rejected Nasser’s request for a formal Soviet military commitment in the form of a mutual defense treaty or even a more modest commitment to ensure the air defense of Egypt.\textsuperscript{31} It is unclear just how interested the Soviet Union was at this time in finding a genuine solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. A land for non-belligerency “solution” would greatly reduce the volatility of the situation but would not necessarily eliminate the conflict altogether. Some have argued that a continuation of the conflict at a significantly lower level of intensity (and under greater control) suited Soviet purposes at the time, specifically Moscow’s interest in gaining and preserving a military presence in the region. Such an interpretation may be warranted for that period, although it would seem to have changed for a variety of reasons by the time of the Yom Kippur War in 1973 (and perhaps earlier). From that point on, Soviet leaders seemed more interested in an Arab-Israeli peace agreement, provided that they were involved. In any case, after the 1967 war the Soviet Union took upon itself the diplomatic objective of securing the return of the territory lost by Egypt—a quid pro quo for obtaining and maintaining a military presence in the country.

The first signs of this policy were apparent in Kosygin’s comments to President Johnson on the final day of the war, when, using the hot line, he once again demanded that Israel return to the pre–June 1967 armistice lines and also called for superpower cooperation (without which no progress could be made). Kosygin came to the United States in June 1967—at the same time that Podgorny was in Egypt—to take part in the UN’s postwar deliberations and to discuss the Vietnam War and bilateral arms control issues with Johnson. The UN General Assembly meeting was actually the fruit of Soviet efforts. Moscow had tried to get a resolution through the UN Security Council calling on Israel to withdraw to the armistice lines, but it was vetoed by the United States. The Soviet Union therefore requested a General Assembly meeting, and Kosygin arrived to take part in it. According to one of the members of the Soviet UN delegation, Arkadii Shevchenko, Kosygin had little authority or room for maneuver in these talks, and indeed nothing came of them. Shevchenko, who defected some time later, claims that Kosygin had been instructed by the Politburo to adopt a hardline position regarding Israel that would leave no room for a negotiated settlement. According to Shevchenko, the inflexible position was the result of indecision that stemmed from

\textsuperscript{31} “Telegram of the First Deputy of Foreign Affairs Minister of the USSR [Kuznetsov] to the Ambassadors of the USSR to Bulgaria, Hungary, GDR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, DRV, Mongolia, KPDR, Cuba, 1.7.67,” in Naumkin et al., eds., Blizhnevostochnyi konflikt, Vol. 2, pp. 596–600.
conflicts of view within the Politburo. Gromyko, who accompanied Kosygin, reportedly persuaded the prime minister to soften his stance by inserting a reference to Israel’s right to exist into his speech before the General Assembly.32

The five-week General Assembly session produced no resolution agreeable to both Arabs and Israelis, although the Soviet Union and the United States did work out a draft between them in early July. This draft joint proposal, negotiated by Gromyko (working through Ambassador Dobrynin) with the US permanent representative at the UN, Arthur Goldberg, contained the following clauses: the possibility of reaching peace and a final settlement of the conflict within the framework of the UN Charter; withdrawal from territories occupied in the recent war; acknowledgment by all UN members of the right of all states in the area to independent statehood, peace, and security; the renunciation of all acts contrary to these principles; efforts to be undertaken by the UN for the achievement of a peace settlement; the settlement of refugee problems; and assurance of freedom of navigation.

Neither Israel nor Egypt was willing to accept these terms, and in August the leaders of the Arab world met in Khartoum to work out a common position. The resolution adopted by the Arab states rejected any negotiations with or recognition of Israel. The Soviet Union, however, publicly ignored this part of the resolution and instead seized on the summit’s agreement to coordinate Arab political efforts to end “the effects of aggression.” Soviet leaders hailed this as a decision to pursue a political solution rather than war. Indeed this is how many Arabs saw it as well: The representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization stormed out of the meeting, and the Syrians refused even to attend because of Egypt’s efforts to get such a position into the deliberations. Nasser reportedly argued that the Arab forces were not yet ready for another war and that it was necessary to prove to the Arabs’ friends, particularly the Soviet Union, that all other options had been tried before returning to war.33

The outbreak of sporadic fighting between Israel and Egypt in the fall of 1967 escalated when Egypt sank an Israeli ship and Israel began bombing Egyptian oil refineries. This deterioration prompted Moscow to send Deputy Foreign Minister Vasilii Kuznetsov to New York to try to break the stalemate in negotiations with Goldberg. The Johnson administration also renewed its attempts to find acceptable wording. The new talks bore fruit after some relatively minor changes were made in the earlier Soviet-American draft and after the British UN representative, Lord Caradon, told the Egyptians that the pur-

32. “The Soviet Union is not opposed to Israel . . . each nationality has the right to creation of its own independent state.” Shevchenko, Breaking with Moscow, pp. 136–137.
posely vague term of “territories occupied in the recent conflict” actually meant “all the territories.” This interpretation was subsequently rejected by Israel, but it enabled Egypt and Jordan (though not Syria) to agree to what became Security Council Resolution 242. For the Soviet Union, this phrasing did not seem unusual because the Russian language does not use articles (“the” and “a”), but the Soviet position both then and afterward was that all the territories occupied in 1967 were to be evacuated. Moreover, in addition to the ambiguity on the territorial issue, the absence of a timetable or clear sequence of steps to be taken in accordance with Resolution 242 avoided another controversial matter. The Soviet position at the time, reflecting the Arabs’ demands, called for Israeli withdrawal prior to any peace agreement or negotiated settlement. Not until three years later, at the peak of the Egyptian-Israeli War of Attrition, did the Soviet Union modify this position.

UN Security Council Resolution 242 was a major achievement that marked something of a political conclusion to the Six Day War and, perhaps more significant, provided the basis for almost all subsequent negotiations and proposals. It constituted, for the first time, a joint Soviet-American set of principles regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict—a set of principles that, from the Soviet point of view, could promise Moscow’s equal participation in any future dealings over the area. But the resolution did not guarantee either an end to the fighting or a permanent Soviet presence in the region—both of which turned out to be dependent far more on the local parties to the conflict than on Soviet (or American) wishes.