Stepping Back from the Third World


✧ Guy Laron

Introduction

A rich body of literature written both during and after the Cold War has argued that despite the dominance of superpower struggle after World War II, smaller powers—whether allies of the United States, allies of the Soviet Union, or nonaligned states—were able to have some influence on international politics. Social scientists explained, both theoretically and empirically, how weak partners can force the more powerful members of an alliance to serve their whims—a pattern that Winston Churchill once referred to as the “tyranny of the weak.” Studies written after the end of the Cold War based on newly available evidence have confirmed that countries such as Cuba and Vietnam acted relatively autonomously and that even East Germany had considerable leeway.1

A wealth of materials recently released from former Soviet-bloc and Western archives, as well as Egyptian memoirs, makes it possible to show that Soviet-Egyptian relations in the mid-1960s fit this same pattern, with the

weaker state (Egypt) often able to influence its dominant partner. But this is not the way these relations were usually seen by contemporaries and scholars. The view that the Soviet Union encouraged the Arabs to fight Israel in 1967 rests primarily on the contents of an intelligence report that Soviet officials delivered to the Egyptian government on 13 May 1967. The report, which falsely alleged that Israel intended to attack Syria within two weeks, initiated a chain of events that ended with the onset of the June 1967 Six-Day Mideast War. Over the past decade, a stormy debate has raged over the question of whether the Soviet Union intentionally misled the United Arab Republic (UAR, Egypt’s official name at the time) in 1967 and why it might have done so.2

This article shows that the Soviet Union did not in fact seek to provoke an armed conflict in the Middle East and that the war began because of independent actions by Egypt. Although earlier studies by Karen Dawisha, Robert Freedman, and Jon Glassman have mentioned some of the themes that appear here (e.g., the different views among Soviet leaders, the USSR’s need to enhance its naval presence in the Mediterranean, and the cautious line taken by the Soviet Politburo), the newly available evidence shows much more clearly how Soviet policy in the Middle East was influenced by the actions of local states. The evidence presented here contradicts the thesis of a recent book by Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, who claim that the Soviet Union was actively seeking to ignite a confrontation in the Middle East in the lead-up to the June 1967 war. The evidence supports recent studies by Galia Golan and Yaacov Ro’i, both of whom have argued that the Soviet Union did not intend to start a war in the Middle East.3

This article reviews the shift that occurred in Soviet policy toward the


Third World after Nikita Khrushchev was ousted in October 1964, a shift spurred by changes in the international system in the latter half of the 1960s. For two years before the Six-Day Mideast War, Soviet-Egyptian relations were increasingly troubled because the Soviet Union wanted to disengage from radical regimes in the Third World, the UAR included. During those two years, the Soviet Union pressured Egypt to reform its economy and decrease its involvement in Yemen, and the Soviet Navy tried to gain unfettered access to Egyptian ports. Yet, Egyptian leaders ignored this pressure and took major decisions in disregard of Moscow’s wishes. In this broader context even the much vaunted intelligence memorandum of 13 May 1967 appears in a different light. Although the Soviet message alleged that Israel was about to attack Syria, it also urged the Egyptians to avoid any rash action and allow the Soviet Union to defuse the crisis by diplomatic means. Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser ignored the Soviet request, sent his army into Sinai, and sparked a regional crisis. His actions strengthened rifts among Soviet leaders—rifts that were on full display when the Egyptian minister of war visited Moscow at the end of May 1967. Some officials in Moscow surreptitiously asked the Egyptians to apply pressure on the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) during a key debate. This episode highlights a rare moment in the Cold War when a group of Soviet officials encouraged a Third World country to intervene in the CPSU’s high-level internal debates.

In discussing these events, this article explains why the Soviet Union disengaged from radical Third World regimes after 1964, how that global shift affected Soviet-Egyptian relations, and how the Egyptians reacted and tried to steer events in a favorable direction.

**Stepping Back from the Third World**

In the mid-1960s, a sea-change occurred in Soviet foreign policy as the assumptions that had guided policy during the Khrushchev era no longer seemed valid. Khrushchev and his colleagues had assumed that the situation in Europe had reached an impasse and that neither side could win, and they saw the Third World as a back door through which the Soviet bloc could snatch victory from the jaws of the European stalemate. By supporting “revolutionary national liberation movements” in the Third World, they hoped that they could erode the political and strategic position of the West and weaken the West’s hold on essential raw materials, eventually leading to capitalism’s downfall.4

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4. Westad, *The Global Cold War*, p. 72; Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union from Sta-
The triumvirate of leaders who replaced Khrushchev in October 1964 included Leonid Brezhnev as CPSU General Secretary and Aleksei Kosygin as prime minister, along with Nikolai Podgorny, who soon became chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. Khrushchev’s approach to Third World affairs seemed increasingly dubious amid a spate of bad news in 1964–1965 regarding right-wing military coups in Indonesia, Congo, Algeria, and other African countries. The Soviet Union under Khrushchev had lavishly supported radical regimes in these countries and achieved only ephemeral gains. As a result, Soviet policy in the Third World came under sharp criticism, and the new Soviet leaders were eager to revise it.

Bobazhdan Gaforov, a Tajik specialist on the Middle East who was employed by the CPSU Central Committee, sent a memorandum to Brezhnev in March 1966 recommending policy changes. Gaforov complained that despite large quantities of arms and aid poured into Asia and Africa, the Soviet Union had failed to develop a viable Third World strategy. He claimed that Soviet diplomats were ignorant of Asian and African affairs and repeatedly misled Moscow about the stability of Soviet-backed regimes in Iraq, Ghana, Indonesia, and other countries. The Soviet Union, Gaforov added, had not been able to maintain control over the weapons it supplied to Third World countries. This led in some cases to the use of these weapons for purposes inimical to Soviet interests, notably when the Indonesian authorities massacred Communists in the wake of a military coup. Part of the problem, according to Gaforov, was that Soviet leaders had insufficient knowledge about the internal dynamics of Third World regimes and therefore were at a tactical disadvantage. He averred that the funds allocated to Third World countries might be better used in the Soviet Union to finance domestic development.

Gaforov’s comments echoed concerns expressed by other key figures, such as the Polish Communist leader Władysław Gomułka. In a meeting with Kosygin and Brezhnev in Moscow in October 1966, Gomułka lamented that senior officials in the Soviet bloc, himself included, knew very little about the Third World. He predicted that a hundred coups might occur in Africa before that continent would be transformed into “a Marxist-Leninist force.”

larly, when Czechoslovak Deputy Foreign Minister Jan Pudlak met in May 1966 with his Soviet counterparts, he claimed that the Third World coups indicated that the Soviet bloc had been spreading its resources too thin. It would be better, he advised, to concentrate Soviet efforts on a few major Third World countries.8

Soviet leaders took these suggestions to heart. In 1966, Kosygin responded negatively to aid requests from radical Third World governments in Uganda, Guinea, Burma, and Algeria.9 Egypt, too, was affected by this shift. A memorandum submitted by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to the CPSU Politburo in January 1967 touched on the rationale:

> Considering the shortage of our reserves, we should focus on *economic cooperation* with the most progressive countries that have embarked on the road of non-capitalist development, such as Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Mali, Guinea, Burma, Congo, Tanzania, and countries of strategic importance to us (Afghanistan, Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran).

Relations with other Third World countries, Gromyko argued, should be built on mutually beneficial trade ties rather than loans or grants.10 As discussed below, the new Soviet policy emphasizing trade rather than aid was implemented with regard to the UAR as early as September 1965.

The curtailment of grants to radical Third World regimes was only one facet of the new Soviet policy in the Third World. Soviet officials also sought to ensure that these regimes would not embroil the Soviet Union in regional conflicts that might escalate into outright war with the United States. Although the Soviet Union was supporting the North Vietnamese guerilla campaign against U.S forces, that support was spurred in part by the USSR’s competition with the Chinese. Furthermore, Soviet arms supplies to the North Vietnamese consisted mostly of defensive weapons (especially surface-to-air missiles), and Soviet leaders repeatedly urged Hanoi to accept the U.S. offer for a ceasefire and enter negotiations. The North Vietnamese, however, refused to heed the Soviet advice.11 The Soviet Union tried to adopt the same

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cautious approach in relations with the UAR and Cuba but was similarly un-
successful.

**Relations in Decline: The Soviet Union and the UAR**

The downfall of Khrushchev so soon after he promised in a visit to the UAR that the Soviet Union would continue providing generous support for Egyptian development projects aroused fears in Cairo that relations with Moscow were about to take a turn for the worse. The new Soviet troika reassured Nasser that relations would continue as before, but Egyptian hopes of maintaining good relations with the USSR were dashed during Nasser’s visit to the Soviet Union in September 1965. Kosygin, who was apparently the driving force behind the new Soviet policy on economic ties with Third World countries, did not offer any credits to Nasser, and Anastas Mikoyan, the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, advised the Egyptian leader in a public speech to reform the Egyptian economy and base his relations with the Soviet Union on trade. At the same time, Nasser’s refusal to allow the Soviet Navy greater access to UAR harbors deadlocked negotiations over new arms deals. Nasser during his visit was so frustrated by the Soviet Union’s attitude that in a closed meeting with members of his entourage he promised to eliminate Soviet influence in Egypt once the Aswan Dam had been completed.

However, because of the UAR’s dire economic situation and the deterioration of Egypt’s ties with the United States, Nasser had to make fresh overtures to Moscow. With no place other than the USSR to go for aid, he agreed to allow irregular visits of the Soviet Navy in two specified Egyptian ports. As a result, he was able to secure a moratorium on $500 million of Egyptian debt and was granted permission to buy some naval equipment at what Egyptian admirals saw as steep prices. Soviet pressure to allow the Soviet Navy and Air


Force even greater access to Egyptian military bases persisted throughout 1966 and into 1967. The Soviet Navy, which aspired to set up a force that would counter the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, regarded permission to use local harbors as a prerequisite for that plan. Soviet admirals were also interested in establishing a Soviet airfield in the UAR to allow their planes to monitor U.S. and other Western vessels. To make that demand more palatable to Egyptian leaders, the Soviet Navy tried to bribe the Egyptians by offering discounted naval equipment. Although Nasser was willing to consider a growing number of visits by Soviet vessels to Egyptian ports, he refused until the eve of the June 1967 war to allow the Soviet Union to establish a permanent presence at Egyptian air and naval facilities.\textsuperscript{15}

Kosygin’s visit to the UAR in May 1966 failed to improve things much. A superficial reading of the Nasser-Kosygin protocol can be misleading. The two talked about international politics at length, and Nasser shared with Kosygin his view that the latest wave of right-wing coups in Indonesia, Congo, and other countries in Africa were signs of an imperialist onslaught in the Third World. Kosygin, for his part, asked Nasser to improve relations with Syria and expounded on the need to create a united front of Arab progressive countries.\textsuperscript{16} The Egyptians were waiting for Kosygin to offer new credits to support the UAR’s increasingly failing economy, but he offered nothing other than an apparent willingness to ease some of the credit terms of Egypt’s previous loans.

Shortly after Kosygin’s visit, a Soviet diplomat in Cairo confessed to his French colleague that in financial terms the UAR was a bottomless well that devoured rubles without delivering results.\textsuperscript{17} Presumably this reasoning was the driving force behind the Soviet Union’s tight-purse policy toward the UAR. Furthermore, when meeting with Władysław Gomułka in October 1966, Kosygin claimed that during his visit to Cairo Nasser had asked him for help with economic planning. Kosygin had responded to Nasser’s request by sending Evsei Liberman, a Soviet economist who, like Kosygin, supported a


\textsuperscript{17} Paris (Y. Hadas) to Foreign Ministry, 6 June 1966, in Israeli State Archive (ISA), Jerusalem, Chetz, 4049/5. (“Chetz” is the Hebrew acronym for the Israeli foreign ministry’s record group.) On the Egyptian economy at the time, see Kirk J. Beattie, Egypt during the Nasser Years (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 192–194.
move away from centralized planning and the introduction of market-based mechanisms allowing for factories and stores to be in direct negotiations over prices and supplies. The Egyptian economy at the time, however, was highly centralized. Sending Liberman was undoubtedly Kosygin's way of pressuring Nasser to reform the Egyptian economy instead of asking for more loans.

In August 1966 the U.S. State Department, following various talks with the Soviet Union, had informed the Israelis that Moscow insisted on receiving payments for the arms they had delivered to Arab countries. A French journalist expelled from Cairo by the Egyptian authorities claimed that the Soviet Union was so insistant that past debts be repaid that Soviet ships carrying equipment for the Aswan Dam project had refused to unload their cargo in Alexandria unless stacks of cotton, the UAR's main payment in-kind, were visible at the docks. According to the journalist, Soviet advisers were regularly visiting the offices of the Suez Canal Company to monitor its efficiency. Later, even though the deployment of the Egyptian army to Sinai on 15 May 1967 had created an emergency, Dimitri Pozhedaev, the Soviet ambassador in Cairo, saw fit to ask Vice President Abdel Hakim Amer on 19 May why Egyptian cotton was being delivered to the Soviet Union at such a slow pace. Pozhedaev hinted that the UAR should think about how to solve this problem if it wanted to continue to purchase weapons from the Soviet Union.

Thus, even in the thick of the June 1967 international crisis, the Soviet Union was still insisting on a strict policy of debt repayment, a policy that had begun in mid-1965. Likewise, the Soviet Union showed no enthusiasm when asked by the Egyptians to replace the United States as the UAR's main grain supplier. Although the Johnson administration's refusal to continue to supply Egypt with discounted wheat created an opening for the USSR, Soviet leaders at various points in 1966 stressed that they did not consider themselves capable of solving the UAR's food problems.

22. “Consultation between the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry and the Soviet Foreign Ministry,” 22–26 May 1966, in NACR, Fond Antonín Novotný, Part II, Box 3; Paris (Y. Hadas) to Foreign Ministry, 6 June 1966, in ISA, Chetz, 4049/5; and “Soviet and Chinese Objectives and Activities in the UAR,” Memorandum from Donald C. Bergus, 21 March 1967, in National Archives and Records Adminis-
Another low point was registered during Amer’s visit to Moscow at the end of November 1966. The first sign that the negotiations with the USSR would not go well came at the end of October. Egyptian army representatives had approached the Czechoslovak embassy in Cairo and asked them whether Amer (who was also chief of the Egyptian armed forces) could visit Czechoslovakia in case the Soviet Union did not satisfy his demands for weapons. Soviet officials had told the Czechoslovaks that the USSR would refuse some of Amer’s requests. Still, Amer and his colleagues went to Moscow at the end of November with high hopes. Earlier that month, Egypt had concluded a defense treaty with Syria—something that the Soviet Union had encouraged the Egyptians to do ever since Kosygin’s May visit—and Amer believed that Soviet leaders would therefore be much more accommodating to Egyptian requests. The visit, however, proved to be a huge disappointment.

Soviet Defense Minister Marshal Andrei Grechko turned down Amer’s request for more tanks. Other Egyptian demands for the latest Soviet weapons, such as MiG-25 aircraft, were not only rejected but also made the subject of taunting by Brezhnev, who during remarks at a formal dinner equated the Egyptians to a child who asked for sophisticated toys without having the slightest idea what to do with them. Amer was so enraged by these remarks that he almost got up and left. Grechko explained to the Egyptians that the MiG-25 was not sold even to Warsaw Pact allies and claimed that the air defense systems they requested required special technical skills that the Egyptians did not possess.

On top of all this, the Soviet Union agreed to deliver only part of the 400,000 tons of flour that Amer requested. Moreover, a personal appeal to Kosygin, with whom Amer met four times during his stay in Moscow, regarding a deferral of payments was answered by another exhortation on the need to reform the Egyptian economy. Kosygin criticized the Egyptian tradition of appointing army officers to management positions in the state-owned industry. Civilians, he argued, could do a better job. Yet, even as Soviet leaders rebuffed Amer’s requests, they themselves sought greater access to Egyptian naval and air facilities. The Egyptians agreed to allow the Soviet Navy to store fuel in UAR ports but said they needed more time to think about the Soviet request to use Egyptian airfields for reconnaissance flights. In retrospect, Amer acknowledged that he had been offended by the treatment he received in Moscow during his November visit.

Nearly five months later, Gromyko arrived in Cairo on a state visit. The visit came at Soviet initiative with little advance notice to the Egyptians, who were caught by surprise and were unsure what would be on Gromyko’s agenda. Anticipation in Cairo was mixed with apprehension, as Arab diplomats in London, Washington, and Moscow, who were comparing notes at the time, had concluded that Soviet leaders were so preoccupied with other matters that they had little time or patience to deal with Arab affairs. Algeria had even proposed a summit meeting of Arab allies of the Soviet Union to discuss the problem. Leaks from knowledgeable sources in Moscow suggested that Gromyko’s visit would focus on Egypt’s involvement in Yemen.

Egyptian involvement in Yemen had begun in 1962 when the Yemeni republican forces started clashing with monarchist units and called for UAR assistance. What started as a short-term intervention to support the republican forces turned into a quagmire from which the Egyptian expeditionary forces had been unable to emerge victorious. However, Nasser, who had intervened in Yemen in the hope of shoring up his sagging reputation in the Arab world, would not let go for fear of losing face. Soviet leaders told U.S. and French officials in 1966 and 1967 that they were not egging Nasser on with regard to Yemen. Soviet leaders were apparently worried that the human and financial costs of the Egyptian intervention were eroding Nasser’s popularity at home, and they advised him to scale down his commitments there and focus on domestic development. Kosygin during his May 1966 visit to Cairo had been asked about financing Egypt’s involvement in Yemen, but in early 1967 Soviet officials told Egyptian diplomats that the financing would soon end.

26. Cairo (Nes) to Secretary of State, Cable No. 6728, 26 April 1967 in NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1967–1969, POL 7 USSR, Box 2678.
28. The Lebanese newspaper al-Hayat reported on 29 March 1967 that “in his visit to Cairo Gromyko would try to prevent the situation in Aden from exploding.” The next day, al-Hayat reported: “After arriving in Cairo on an Official Visit: Grains, Aden and the situation in the Middle East are among the subjects which Gromyko will discuss with Egyptian Officials.”
30. “On the visit of a government delegation headed by Com. A. N. Kosygin to the United Arab Re-
was yet another sign of the shift in Soviet foreign policy. When Nasser first received urgent requests for help from Yemeni republican forces in 1962, he lacked the means for immediate transport of Egyptian troops to the remote southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula and therefore appealed to the Soviet Union for assistance. Although Khrushchev was preoccupied at the time with the Cuban missile crisis, he reacted expeditiously and ordered a fleet of Antonov-12 transport planes manned by Soviet pilots to help the UAR dispatch its troops to Yemen. A few weeks later, Tupolev-16 bombers with mixed Soviet-Egyptian crews carried out bombing missions over Yemen.31 However, by the mid-1960s, the superpower relationship had changed, and Soviet leaders were intent on avoiding a confrontation with the United States. Shortly before and after Gromyko’s visit to the UAR, the Cuban leader Fidel Castro received telegrams from Moscow urging him to stop aiding Latin American guerrilla movements. The telegrams warned that if Cuba’s actions provoked a war with the United States, the Cubans would have to fend for themselves. With evident Soviet consent, Czechoslovakia decided in May 1967 to cool its relations with Cuba because of radical positions taken by Castro that threatened to undermine the Soviet concept of “peaceful coexistence.”32

In the Middle East, Nasser was threatening to ignite a conflagration at the other end of the world. A month before Gromyko’s arrival in Cairo, Nasser gave a major speech proclaiming his intention to continue Egypt’s involvement in Yemen. A reference in that speech to the British troops stationed in Aden, Britain’s last outpost in Yemen, was interpreted by French Foreign Ministry officials as a veiled threat to use force against Aden.33 Soviet officials were aware, however, that a confrontation in Yemen could have a highly destabilizing effect on superpower relations in the Middle East. Not only were British forces based in Yemen, but U.S. troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia. If British and Egyptian forces clashed, the Soviet Union would be in the position of backing the Egyptians against Britain and the United States. Nasser’s public (10–18 May 1966),” in AAN, KC PZPR 2632, pp. 239–246; Paris (Y. Hadas) to Foreign Ministry, 6 June 1966, in ISA, Chetz, 4049/5; Translation from the Lebanese Daily al-Jadid, 24 February 1967, in ISA, Chetz, 4049/7; “The Soviet Policy in Yemen,” Foreign Ministry Research Department (G. Ben Ami) to Paris (Y. Hadas), 1 May 1966, in ISA, Chetz, 4048/20; and Cairo (Battle) to Secretary of State, Airgram No. A–1050, “Soviet Attitude toward the UAR,” 10 June 1966, in NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1964–66, Folder Political Affairs & Rel. UAR-USSR, Box 2769.


devotion to the revolution in Yemen thus might turn this desolate corner of the world into another Cold War hotspot. Hence, the leaks prior to Gromyko’s visit cited his intention to forestall a clash between Egyptian and British troops, thereby ensuring that Aden would not spark a superpower confrontation. Sources close to the Egyptian embassy in Moscow claimed that Gromyko would ask Nasser “not to take actions that might embroil other countries in the tense situation in the Middle East.”

These leaks irritated Nasser, and as a result the discussions with Gromyko were tense. Although Yemen was not the only topic discussed by the two men—Nasser expressed concern about the Soviet Union’s burgeoning relations with the Iranian shah and its improved ties with the United States—it was the main one. Nasser brought up the pre-visit leaks and portrayed them as a Soviet attempt to dictate his policy in Yemen. Nasser was shocked that the Soviet Union would not support him. He asked Gromyko squarely: Was the Soviet Union with him or against him with regard to Yemen? Although Gromyko tried to reassure Nasser that the USSR still considered the UAR a strategic ally, he offered no assurances about Yemen. Provoked by a U.S. diplomat at the end of April, an Egyptian counselor at the UAR embassy in Moscow admitted that Yemen came up during Gromyko’s visit to Cairo but that no agreements or decisions had been reached. He added with evident irritation that what went on in the Red Sea area was none of the Soviet Union’s concern. The Egyptian counselor also claimed that Soviet leaders had learned long ago that they could only advise, not dictate to, the UAR. When asked what the Soviet attitude would be if Egyptian troops occupied Aden after the British pulled out, the Egyptian envoy stated that the USSR strongly opposed such a move.

Gromyko’s visit to Cairo in early April 1967 was the last high-level meeting between Soviet and Egyptian officials before the Mideast crisis erupted in mid-May 1967. The visit demonstrated the degree to which Cairo had strayed out of Moscow’s shadow. Nasser continued to disregard explicit Soviet directives during the May 1967 crisis.

34. See note 28 supra.
35. Haykal, al-Infijar, pp. 416–418; and Haykal, The Sphinx and the Commissar, pp. 169–170. For diplomatic reports that support Haykal’s depiction of this meeting, see “Gromyko’s Visit to Cairo,” Bonn (Nitzan Hadas) to Foreign Ministry, 11 April 1967, in ISA, Chetz, 4049/7; Cairo (Nes) to Secretary of State, Cable No. 6728, 26 April 1967, in NARA, RG 59, CFPF 1967–1969, POL 7 USSR, Box 2678; and Cairo to Foreign Ministry, Telegram No. 4467, 26 April 1967, in AMZV, DT.
Soviet Policy during the May–June 1967 Mideast Crisis

On 13 May, a month after Gromyko’s visit, an erroneous communication from an agent in Tel Aviv spurred the Soviet Union to provide an intelligence report to the Egyptians alleging that Israel intended to attack Syria at the end of May.37 Accompanying the report, however, was a warning that the UAR should avoid any immediate action and should let Soviet officials defuse the situation via the United Nations Security Council.38 Nasser ignored that advice and sent his army into the Sinai on 15 May without informing the Soviet Union in advance. He behaved in the same manner on 22 May when he decided to close the straits of Tiran. Nasser evidently was trying to preempt Soviet designs and impose his own blueprint. Those who studied the state of play in the Middle East at the time have tended to believe that Nasser’s decision stemmed mainly from his need to shore up his flagging regional stature. The Nasser regime had come under constant attack the previous year from conservative Arab governments, which accused him of paying only lip-service to the Palestinian cause. By the evening of 14 May and certainly on 15 May the Egyptians knew that Israeli troops were not massing along the Syrian border, but Nasser decided to invade the Sinai regardless. When the Egyptian chief of staff protested, he was told by Amer that the background to the Egyptian invasion to Sinai was “political.”39 Thus, the intelligence report was a pretext, rather than the reason, for Egypt’s decision to ignite the crisis.

The official Soviet media remained silent about Nasser’s decision to close the Straits of Tiran. The day after Nasser closed the straits, a Soviet diplomat told a French colleague that although Moscow understood Cairo’s desire to maintain its prestige in the Arab world, Nasser had gone too far. Bilateral consultations, added the Soviet diplomat, were not going smoothly. He stressed that both parties should remain calm and said that the Soviet Union was trying to convince the UAR to do just that. He also claimed that if Israel made a


concession, the UAR would reciprocate. However, three days later, when the UAR submitted a list of weapons it wanted Moscow to airlift, Soviet leaders were divided on the matter. This high-level split threatened to undermine the cautious Soviet policy toward radical Third World regimes. The available evidence makes it hard to ascertain the precise line-up. Some analysts have speculated that Kosygin and Brezhnev were at odds, but there is no solid evidence of that. What seems clearer is that the disagreements centered on the degree of risk Moscow should take. By all indications, the Soviet military was acting at cross-purposes with Kosygin and the Foreign Ministry.

To be sure, the June 1967 crisis was not the first time that events in the Middle East had revealed fissures among Soviet leaders. In June 1966 a high-level Syrian delegation returning from a visit to the Soviet Union reported that although the Soviet Union formally called for Arab recognition of Israel’s right to exist, many members of the CPSU Politburo and Central Committee had privately expressed support for the Syrian position on Palestine, which called for a relentless guerrilla campaign against Israel. These Soviet officials claimed that they did not have the power to turn their views into official policy. Later, when General Salah Jadid, Syria’s strong man, returned from his January 1967 visit to Moscow, he told a closed meeting of the Ba’ath party that Soviet leaders were hopelessly divided on Middle Eastern issues.

These divisions became more glaring when Egyptian Minister of War Shams Badran arrived in Moscow on 25 May 1967. At that time, the situation of the Egyptian army at the front seemed dire. The need to equip tens of thousands of reserve soldiers, who had been hastily conscripted after Nasser made his impulsive decision to invade the Sinai, emptied Egyptian arsenals. Fear of a surprise Israeli air attack made the Egyptians feel especially vulnerable. These anxieties induced the Egyptians to do something they had refused earlier: allow the Soviet Union to establish its own air field on Egyptian soil.

42. “An Analysis of the Joint Soviet-Syrian Communiqué,” al-Munadil, June 1966, p. 1. Al-Munadil (The Fighter), was a secret monthly published by the Syrian Ba’ath regime and delivered only to party members. Copies were captured by the Israeli Defense Forces during the Six-Day Mideast War and are available at the Dayan Center Archive, Tel-Aviv University.
43. Ben Tzur, Soviet Factors and the Six-Day War [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1975), p. 151. Ben Tzur relies here on an interview he conducted with a former Ba’ath party member who had participated in a secret party meeting at which Salah Jadid made this confession.
44. “Interview with Shams Badran,” al-Hawadith (Cairo), 2 September 1977, p. 21. It is unclear, though, to whom the offer was made.
According to a military inquiry committee that investigated Egypt’s conduct of the war, Badran went even further and asked for Soviet teams to come to the UAR to operate radar stations and surface-to-air missile batteries. For years, the Soviet Navy had been promising the UAR an abundant supply of weapons in exchange for unlimited access to Egyptian naval and air facilities. Badran was offering to consummate that deal.

The chief Soviet negotiator was Kosygin. Badran’s meeting with him on 26 May moved almost immediately into the specifics of the crisis. Badran stressed that Egypt needed an immediate airlift of weapons to replenish depleted supplies. He submitted a long list of items to Kosygin and explained that the UAR had no intention of attacking Israel. He insisted that the weapons were needed to deter Israel from launching a preemptive attack and that, if deterrence failed, the Egyptian army would use the weapons to defend itself. Kosygin took the list and told Badran that the CPSU Politburo would convene that evening to discuss his request. He promised to give an answer the next day. A strange chain of events then began to unfold. Although the following is based mainly on the recollections of Badran and Haykal, their depiction of what happened is eerily similar to Syrian stories regarding behind-the-scenes attempts to deliver messages that contradicted what was said during formal discussions. Some observers of the Soviet scene gained the impression that a fierce confrontation was taking place at high levels in May and June 1967.

While waiting for a Soviet answer, General Hilal Abdullah Hilal, a member of Badran’s delegation, went to the Soviet Defense Ministry and handed a detailed list of weapons to Marshal Ivan Yakubovskii, the commander-in-chief of the Warsaw Pact Joint Forces and first deputy minister of defense. The two agreed that Hilal would wait for a phone call from Yakubovskii, who would inform him of what the Politburo decided. One may question the promise for a real-time update by Yakubovskii—after all, Kosygin had promised to give Badran an answer the next morning. But the Defense Ministry clearly had a vested interest in gaining Politburo approval for Badran’s offer of an airfield in exchange for lavish arms supplies.

As the CPSU Politburo was still deliberating, the phone rang at the residence of the Egyptian delegation. Yakubovskii was on the line and asked to talk to Badran. Yakubovskii said that the Politburo discussion was going in

the wrong direction and that the UAR might end up getting less than it was hoping for. He recommended asking Nasser to apply pressure on the Politburo through the Soviet ambassador in Cairo. Badran contacted Amer in Cairo, and both Amer and Nasser promptly met with Ambassador Pozhedaev. Nasser implored Pozhedaev to send an urgent telegram to Brezhnev asking for immediate supply of all the items on the Egyptian list. The apparent high-level divisions in Moscow had given the Egyptians an opportunity to try to force the hand of their stronger partner. One of the contending factions in Moscow had encouraged pressure from a Third World country to win an internal debate.

However, when Kosygin met the next day with Badran, there was no doubt that officials advocating all-out support of Nasser had lost the debate. Kosygin reported that the CPSU Politburo had approved most of the items on the Egyptian list but that some would not be supplied until July or August. Other items, which did not appear in any contract between the Soviet Union and the UAR, would be considered, but Kosygin did not promise that they would be approved. Had Yakubovskii and the Egyptian delegation gotten their way, a huge influx of sophisticated weapons would have landed immediately on Egyptian shores. The Soviet Union would have lost control over use of the weapons, and Egyptian promises not to attack Israel might have evaporated.

To reinforce the message delivered by Kosygin, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Semyonov invited a member of the Egyptian delegation, Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmed Fiqi, to have dinner with him in private. At the dinner, Semyonov discussed issues that, he said, the Soviet Union was uncomfortable raising in the formal negotiations with Badran. Semyonov said it had taken a long time before Soviet citizens could enjoy a degree of material comfort. We in the USSR, he emphasized, do not want to lose this achievement for the sake of an unnecessary war. The United States is a strong adversary, and the Soviet government has no interest in starting a war with it. Nasser, asserted Semyonov, should think about reopening the straits. Tellingly, Semyonov was echoing Kosygin’s vision, which U.S. Central Intelligence Agency analysts described as “Cooperation Abroad, Reform At Home,” a vision that emphasized relaxation of international tensions and the revital-

49. Haykal, al-Infjar, p. 623; and “Interview with Shams Badran.”
ization of Communism through improvement of the average citizen’s standard of living.\textsuperscript{52} 

The Soviet army had one more chance to sway things its way. As Badran was about to leave Moscow, Defense Minister Grechko escorted him to the airport. During a brief conversation before Badran boarded the plane, Grechko alluded to the presence of the Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean and intimated that in case of need the Egyptians could invite Soviet vessels to enter their ports.\textsuperscript{53} This clumsy attempt to use the crisis in the Middle East to augment Soviet naval access to Egyptian harbors was soon reinforced by a letter from the Soviet Navy to the Egyptian and Syrian governments. The letter, dated 24 May, suggested that the Soviet Navy strengthen its presence in both Egypt and Syria.\textsuperscript{54} Another draft, addressed to Nasser and signed by Brezhnev, revolved around Soviet willingness to transfer an air force unit to an Egyptian airfield as a show of solidarity.\textsuperscript{55} Whether these letters were ever sent is not clear, however. Arab sources make no reference to them.

Still, even the most hawkish of Soviet military commanders wanted to go no further than a show of force. When Grechko met with Badran on 25 May, he stressed that war should be avoided.\textsuperscript{56} Badran recalled that when Deputy Foreign Minister Fiqi got too excited during a formal dinner and talked about Egypt’s eagerness to confront Israel and the United States, the Soviet officers reacted nervously and started lecturing Fiqi about the need to maintain calm in the face of an already combustible situation.\textsuperscript{57}

A similar incident was recalled by George Brown, the British foreign minister, who was visiting Kosygin and Gromyko at almost the same time that Badran was. Brown found Kosygin to be reticent and apprehensive. Meeting with Brown on 24 May, Kosygin said he had nothing to add to the official Soviet announcement issued the previous day declaring support for the UAR and Syria. Kosygin emphasized that this declaration “had been most carefully worked out after full discussion and represented the considered and collective view of the Soviet government.” He asked Brown not to say any-

\textsuperscript{53} Haykal, \textit{al-Infijar}, p. 625.
\textsuperscript{57} “Interview with Shams Badran.”
thing to journalists about the Middle Eastern part of their talks, but “if Mr. Brown felt it necessary to say anything at all, he would ask that there should be no suggestion that he [Kosygin] had said anything which differed in any way from the Soviet government’s statement.”

Brown’s conclusion was that Soviet leaders had been divided over what to do. The Egyptians were under the same impression. On 1 June, a few days after Badran returned from Moscow, Nasser and his ministers discussed whether to launch a preemptive air raid against Israel. Amer tried to convince Nasser to authorize the operation. Nasser wanted more information and said that the UAR should get satellite images from the USSR. He speculated that if he tried to obtain the images himself, he would confront Moscow’s misgivings. He told Amer to contact Grechko directly because Soviet military officers were apt to be more supportive of the UAR’s cause.

These signs of contradictions within the Soviet leadership during the run-up to the Six-Day Mideast War dovetail with accounts of Soviet policy during the war itself, when Soviet units received conflicting orders. Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean were initially directed to prepare to land on the Israeli coast but were then suddenly ordered to cease preparations. Soviet pilots in airfields near the Middle East recall sitting in their cockpits during the war and receiving contradictory instructions from Moscow. In each case, however, the final order was to avoid any involvement in the June 1967 war.

These contradictory orders reflected divisions at the highest political levels in Moscow. Nikolai Egorychev, party boss of the Moscow region at the time, later claimed that when he stopped at Brezhnev’s office during the Six-Day Mideast War, he overheard a tense debate in which Kosygin was shouting: “And what if they use atom bombs against us? Is it worth it?” According to another report, Kosygin and Gromyko were at odds with Grechko and Yurii Andropov, who had just been appointed head of the Committee on State Security (KGB). Andropov and Grechko supposedly were calling for Soviet troops to be sent to the shores of the Sinai, but Kosygin and Gromyko successfully resisted the idea.

58. Record of a Meeting between the Foreign Secretary and the Chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers in the Kremlin, Moscow, 24 May 1964, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 28/406, C312772.


60. Haykal, al-Inijar, p. 701.


63. Ginor and Remez, Foxbats over Dimona, p. 172.
Shortly after the war ended, Kosygin continued to try to prevent Third World radical regimes from embroiling the Soviet Union in their regional conflicts. In late June 1967, on a trip to Havana, Kosygin brushed aside Castro’s accusations that the Soviets had abandoned the Arabs during the recent crisis in the Middle East. Referring to Latin American guerilla movements, Kosygin warned Castro that Cuba should stop supporting these movements or face the consequences. When the Cubans ignored the Soviet ultimatum, the Soviet authorities reacted in the fall of 1967 by curbing petroleum shipments to Cuba. 64

**Conclusion**

Kosygin’s injunction to Cuba suggests that Soviet-Egyptian relations were part of a wider shift in Soviet foreign policy after Khrushchev’s ouster in October 1964. Reacting to the decline of radical Third World regimes and their propensity to embroil the Soviet Union in local conflicts, Khrushchev’s successors decided at least temporarily to take a step away from the Third World. Accordingly, the Soviet Union cut aid to Third World radical regimes and took care to avoid being ensnared in their local wars.

This shift was a constraining factor on the UAR’s own policy objectives. From 1965 to 1967, Nasser had to contend with the realities of declining Soviet aid alongside increased Soviet demands for debt reparation and liberal economic reform measures. Egypt found itself further estranged from its patron when the Soviet Union refused a major arms deal and declined to replace the United States as the UAR’s main grain supplier. These developments were coupled with incessant pressure by the Soviet Navy on the UAR to grant unfettered access to Egyptian naval and air facilities. On top of all this, the Soviet Union had taken a jaundiced view of Egypt’s designs in Yemen for the same reasons it was wary of Cuban intentions in Latin America and urged the North Vietnamese to accept a ceasefire.

Affirming decades of theoretical discussion about “the tyranny of the weak,” Egypt responded to the troubling situation with a significant degree of autonomy. With Moscow seeking a respite in the Third World, the UAR pursued its own agenda. Egyptian leaders stepped up their actions in Yemen, ignored Soviet demands for domestic reform, and refused to grant the Soviet navy free access to Egyptian facilities.

The pattern of Egyptian waywardness manifested itself once again during the 1967 crisis that precipitated the Six-Day Mideast War. Far from being the hapless victim of a conniving Moscow, the UAR initiated the crisis to serve its own regional interests and ignored Moscow's plea to let Soviet officials defuse the crisis by diplomatic means—a plea that accompanied the 13 May 1967 intelligence report. Egypt's unilateral actions uncovered rifts in the Soviet leadership, especially during the visit of an Egyptian delegation to Moscow at the end of May, when Soviet military commanders leaked ongoing discussions within the CPSU Politburo at the same time that a Soviet deputy foreign minister was trying to convey the need for caution and circumspection. The internal jockeying in Moscow continued during the war, but eventually adherents of a more moderate and cautious line gained the upper hand. Kosygin's visit to Cuba shortly after the war was a further part of the temporary curtailment of Soviet support for Third World radical regimes.

Egypt's story leading up to the 1967 war is an important case study of a broader phenomenon that manifested itself not only in the Middle East but in other parts of the Third World. Contrary to recent claims that the Soviet Union duped its regional client into playing an unsavory role in 1967 for Moscow's own ends, this article has demonstrated that Nasser's regime in fact defied Moscow's directives starting in 1965 and continued to do so in the weeks and days leading up to the June 1967 crisis. Egypt's actions came close to undermining Soviet global designs. The UAR and other radical Third World regimes were not pliant instruments of Soviet manipulation; rather, they were key actors with which the Soviet Union had to reckon at every turn.

Acknowledgments

This article was written while I was a postdoctoral fellow at Tel Aviv University. I thank Ehud Toledano and Eyal Zisser for making the fellowship possible. I am also much indebted to Christian Ostermann, the director of the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, who facilitated a generous travel grant that allowed me to undertake research in Prague. I also thank the following individuals for helpful and incisive comments on the draft: James Hershberg, Galia Golan, Yaacov Ro’i, Carolyn Biltoft, and three anonymous reviewers.