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Allies at arm's length: Redefining Egyptian-Soviet relations in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war

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Abstract

This article examines Egyptian-Soviet relations in the run up to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. It argues that Egypt and the Soviet Union stumbled into brinkmanship with little coordination and no agreement on common objectives or goals. The article demonstrates how frustration and mutual disappointment were recurring features of the interactions between the two allies during the critical weeks prior to the war. In doing so, the article exposes new aspects of how Cairo and Moscow managed their alliance and assesses what that means to our understanding of the origins of this transformative war. These conclusions challenge revisionist accounts that attribute the start of the war to Egyptian-Soviet collusion and some traditional narratives that present the Soviet Union as an enterprising risk-taker invested in regional brinkmanship. The article draws heavily on Egyptian and Arabic language sources to examine Egyptian-Soviet interactions during this key period of Middle Eastern history.

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Introduction

In the early hours of the 5th of June 1967, Israel launched a coordinated air attack against Egyptian airbases, destroying most of the country's air force. Shortly afterwards, Israeli ground forces stormed Sinai. They cut through Egyptian defences and, within a few days, reached the Eastern banks of the Suez Canal. Not only was the war a military defeat for Egypt's armed forces and a political disaster for Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, but it was also a considerable setback for Soviet prestige. The Soviet Union was a partner in many of Nasser's industrialisation projects and Egypt's main source of arms and military training. In fact, Cairo had been Moscow's most important ally in a key Cold War theatre.

On the 50th anniversary of the 1967 war in the Middle East, this article unpacks Egyptian-Soviet relations throughout the crisis preceding the war. In so doing, it reveals a new interpretation of the role that this relationship played in the start of the war. Through engagement with Egyptian sources, this article argues that Egypt and the Soviet Union stumbled into brinkmanship with little coordination and no agreement on common objectives or goals. The study demonstrates how mistrust and mutual frustration between the two allies was an important feature of their relationship during a crucial period in the history of the Middle East. Contrary to theories that attribute the start of the war to Egyptian-Soviet collusion**,** this article presents a picture of dysfunctional communication between two allies that left them frequently at cross-purposes during the crisis.

The article starts by examining various theories describing Soviet involvement at the start of the war. It then investigates the role intelligence shared between Moscow and Cairo about Israeli mobilisation might have played in escalating tensions. Subsequently, the article examines how Egypt and the Soviet Union managed their relationship throughout the crisis, using of Egyptian sources to determine the extent to which Moscow was involved in Cairo's escalatory decisions and Soviet reactions to them. The analysis then examines how Egypt and the Soviet Union discussed the crisis during a key visit by an Egyptian ministerial delegation to Moscow. Finally, the article explores arms discussions, and the possibility of a first strike, before summarizing the main findings, building on them to suggest the importance of re-examining the nature and trajectory of Egyptian-Soviet relations in light of this war.

In writing the history of Egyptian-Soviet relations, historians have predominantly relied on Soviet sources, while Egyptian sources have remained tangential to, or, in many cases, even absent from the analysis. This article primarily addresses this gap by consulting old and new Egyptian sources to examine interactions between Cairo and Moscow during the crisis. This includes research interviews conducted by the author with Egypt's war minister during the crisis, Shams Badran, as well as Badran's unpublished memoirs. The study also incorporates sources from emerging Egyptian platforms, such as the presidential archival collections held by the new library of Alexandria, as well as sources obtained from private archival collections. In addition, it uses transcripts of interviews with Egyptian officials held in the Liddell Hart Archives in King's College London. Egypt has a long and active tradition of published political memoirs providing

first-hand accounts of the events; many of these memoirs contain useful annexes that reproduce official documents. These proved to be particularly valuable for this study. The explosion of TV broadcasting in the Arab world has also made new, rich testimonies available. These testimonies, whenever possible, were triangulated and crosschecked to minimise the influence of bias and self-serving narratives.

The Soviet Union and the origins of the 1967 war: Innocent, risk-taker, or scheming?

Understanding Egyptian-Soviet relations is key to understanding the various explanations of the origins of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The question of whether the Soviet Union encouraged its ally to escalate and therefore precipitate a war has long been a matter of controversy. On the face of it, the Soviet Union not only had key interests in the region, but also considerable leverage. Moscow had strong relations with Cairo and Damascus: two important regional capitals directly involved in the crisis. In addition, Soviet leadership had a growing interest in establishing a naval presence in the warm waters of the Mediterranean.[1] Broader considerations of a global balance with the United States and the strategic importance of the Middle East all amplified the Soviet Union's stakes in the region. Further feeding speculation of Soviet involvement in the crisis was the country's provision of intelligence to Cairo, and possibly Damascus, which suggested the mobilisation of Israeli forces along the borders with Syria. Such intelligence proved to be a wild exaggeration at best or, at worst, a complete falsehood.

Scholars investigating the origins of the 1967 war can be broadly divided into three main groups, depending on their assessment of the role that the Soviet Union played in influencing Egyptian decision-makers in the run-up to the war. The first group agrees that the Soviet Union was not interested in starting an Arab-Israeli war in the Middle East.[2] According to this view, the Soviet Union was keen to maintain its détente with the US and had no intention of stirring up regional tensions. As Galia Golan puts it, war was a 'no-win proposition' for the Soviet Union.[3] Moscow reacted in good faith, if sometimes clumsily, to support its allies at a time of regional tensions. Accordingly, this was a case in which the Soviet Union was drawn into a regional conflict, rather than initiating it. More recently, Guy Laron's take on the crisis provides further nuance. He suggests that, during the crisis, Soviet diplomacy had tried to 'calm the waters' and reduce regional tensions, but that the Soviet military opportunistically sought to use the crisis to get access to Egyptian naval facilities.[4] In short, not all Soviet institutions carefully toed the line.

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[1] Galia Golan, "The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006): 3–19; Yaacov Ro'i and Boris Morozov, *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Washington, D.C.; Stanford, Calif.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press ; Stanford University Press, 2008), 144–71; Jesse Ferris, "Guns for Cotton? Aid, Trade, and the Soviet Quest for Base Rights in Egypt, 1964–1966," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 4–38.

[2] Richard B. Parker, "The June 1967 War: Some Mysteries Explored," *Middle East Journal* 46, no. 2 (1992): 177–197; Golan, "The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War"; Guy Laron, "Playing with Fire: The Soviet–Syrian–Israeli Triangle, 1965–1967," *Cold War History* 10, no. 2 (2010): 163–184.

[3] Golan, "The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War," 7–8.

[4] Guy Laron, *The Six Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (Yale University Press, 2017), 243–44.

A second group viewed the Soviet Union as supporting brinkmanship and seeking to stoke regional tensions, but not intentionally pushing for war.[5] According to this view, war happened, in part, because of Soviet imprudence and adventurism that led to unintended consequences. Ro'i concludes that the Soviet Union actively sought a 'controlled' crisis, but Moscow's plan backfired as it failed to control regional escalation.[6] According to Michael Oren, the Soviets wanted to maintain a 'heightened level of tension in the area' to ensure that Arab states would continue to need their assistance.[7] Avi Shlaim suggests that the Soviet Union was driven by hopes of 'making some political gains' through demonstrating their commitment to Arab states and assailing US pro-Israel positions.[8] Kenny Kolander, however, sees the Soviet role in passive, rather than active, terms; the Soviet Union 'did not try very hard' to prevent the escalating crisis. This was because the Soviet aim was 'undermining American relations with Arab states', given the close relationship between the US and Israel.[9]

A third group posits that the Soviet Union deliberately created the crisis with a view to starting a regional war under the assumption that its allies would have the upper hand on the battlefield. According to this analysis, the Soviet scheme failed because its leaders overestimated the strength of their Arab allies and underestimated Israel's military capabilities. A strong proponent of this view is the revisionist account of the start of the war provided by Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez in several publications.[10] According to them, both Moscow and Cairo manufactured the crisis as a pretext for eliminating Israel's growing nuclear capability, which was a serious concern for both countries. Avner Cohen and Shlomo Aaronson also highlight the nuclear dimension of the crisis preceding the war, but both scholars situate the nuclear issue within the broader Arab-Israeli context and do not reach Ginor and Remez' conclusions regarding a secret Soviet role.[11]

Implicit in these various analyses and narratives on the origins of the war are a number of key assumptions. These include a larger assessment of whether the Soviet Union was a status quo or a revisionist international power in the Middle East. However, it is also crucial to remember that these different theories rest on certain assumptions about the nature of Egyptian-Soviet relations and their interactions during the crisis preceding the war. Was this a typical patron-client relationship? What leverage did each actor have, and how did their interaction influence the crisis's outcomes? This research explores these questions by tracing the major milestones of Egyptian-Soviet interactions from the early phase of the crisis to the start of the war.

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[5] Bergman, Ronen "How the K.G.B. Started the War That Changed the Middle East" New York Times, 7 June 2017
[6] Ro'i and Morozov, *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War*, xxi, 39.
[7] Michael B Oren, *Six Days of War: The June 1967 War and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55.
[8] Avi Shlaim, "The Middle East: The Origins of Arab-Israeli Wars," in *Explaining International Relations Since 1945*, 1996, 219–240.
[9] Kenny Kolander, "The 1967 Arab–Israeli War: Soviet Policy by Other Means?," *Middle Eastern Studies* 52, no. 3 (2016): 403.
[10] Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *Foxbats over Dimona: The Soviets' Nuclear Gamble in the Six-Day War* (Yale University Press, 2008); Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, "The Spymaster, the Communist, and Foxbats over Dimona: The USSR's Motive for Instigating the Six-Day War," *Israel Studies* 11, no. 2 (2006): 88–130.
[11] Avner Cohen, "Cairo, Dimona, and the June 1967 War," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 2 (April 1, 1996): 190–210; S. Aronson, "Israel's Nuclear Programme, the Six Day War and Its Ramifications," *Israel Affairs* 6, no. 3–4 (2000): 83–95.

In addressing these questions, the history of the war to this point has relied heavily on Soviet sources. The partial relaxation of government control over Soviet archives following the end of the Cold War provided strong insights into aspects of relations between Moscow and Cairo, if only from the Soviet perspective. These documents have also shed some light on how Soviet leadership approached their allies in Cairo as regional tensions escalated in May 1967. This included the publication of two volumes in 2003 that contained a selection of official documents from the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[12] Previous studies have supplemented these with the use of Soviet testimonies and memoirs; in combination, these sources have provided valuable, if incomplete, insights on how the Soviet Union approached its relations with Cairo during the crisis.

The opening up of certain Eastern European archives has provided an extra window onto Egyptian-Soviet relations. The Cold War International History Project published a translated speech given by Leonid Brezhnev to the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee that provided an insider account of how the Soviet leadership reacted to the Middle East crisis.[13] Ginor and Remez argue that the official documentary trail is insufficient to explain the unfolding crisis because of Soviet cover-ups.[14] Instead, in challenging the conventional history of the war, they rely on a number of Soviet testimonies and an unconventional interpretation of released Soviet documents to suggest that Moscow had plans to fan the flames of existing tensions, then militarily intervene in, the crisis. In many areas, Ginor and Remez's bold theory suffers from evidentiary gaps and frequent use of conjecture that others have highlighted.[15] Furthermore, they do not sufficiently engage with Egyptian sources or narratives of the crisis, despite the significance their theory assigns to Egyptian-Soviet collusion.

The origins of the 1967 war and Soviet intelligence

Under Nasser's instructions, the Egyptian high military command announced on the 14th of May that they were putting the armed forces on alert and deploying troops to Sinai. These decisions came as a surprise to the Egyptian military, which had neither planned for nor anticipated a military confrontation with Israel, particularly given the significant number of Egyptian forces fighting in Yemen.[16] Most accounts of the start of the 1967 war assign heavy significance to Soviet-supplied information referring to the mobilisation of several Israeli brigades on the Syrian border. Such accounts claim that this spurred Cairo into action and set in motion a series of events that led to the outbreak of war on the 5th of June. This information is now known to be

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[12] V. V. Naumkin, ed., Blizhnevostochnyi konºik 1957–1967: Iz dokumentov Arkhiva vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2 vols. (Moscow: Materik, 2003)

[13] "On Soviet Policy following the Israeli Aggression in the Middle East," June 20, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN) KC PZPR 2632, pp. 358-408. Obtained by Krzysztof Persak and translated by Gennady Pasechnik.

[14] Ginor, Isabella, and Gideon Remez. "The Six-Day War as a Soviet initiative: New evidence and methodological issues." *MERIA (Middle East Review of International Affairs)* 12 (2008).

[15] Galia Golan, "A (Dubious) Conspiracy Theory of the 1967 War," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 4 (September 1, 2008): 669–73.

[16] Muḥammad Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970: mudhakkirāt al-Farīq Awwal Muḥammad Fawzī, Wazīr al-Ḥarbīyah al-Asbaq.* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-ʿArabī, 1986), 69.

false; Israel had not amassed troops on the Syrian border. Was this a grave but unintentional mistake by Soviet intelligence? Or did the Soviet Union intentionally seek to push Cairo into an armed conflict with Israel through an exaggeration of the Israeli threat to Syria? This paper argues that Cairo took mobilisation orders against, and not according to, Soviet advice. Therefore, focusing on Soviet intelligence obscures an understanding of the true causes that led to the start of the war. This study attributes a different role to that information in the start of the crisis by arguing that it was an important—but not decisive—factor in Egyptian decision-making. To support this argument, this section proposes two alternative factors that explain Nasser's decision to mobilise Egyptian troops in Sinai.

Egyptian testimonies and sources indicate that Moscow sent its intelligence to Cairo through three different routes. On the 13th of May, the Soviet Ambassador delivered the information to the Egyptian ministry of foreign affairs.[17] On the same day, the Soviet intelligence liaison officer in Cairo, known by the alias of Sergey, delivered that same information to the Egyptian Intelligence Agency, the *Mokhabarat*.[18] Finally, the information was provided to Anwar Sadat, at the time Speaker of the Egyptian Parliament, who happened to be traveling in Moscow with a parliamentary delegation.[19] Importantly, none of these routes led directly to Nasser, who frequently met with the Soviet Ambassador in Cairo. Instead, the Soviet government opted to deliver their intelligence through lower official channels.

Records of the meetings in Cairo where the Soviet warning was delivered have not been released. Yet the report of the Egyptian Ambassador in Moscow, Mourad Ghaleb, is now publicly available. Ambassador Ghaleb shadowed Sadat in his meetings with the Soviet Union and cabled Cairo reporting on these discussions directly after they ended.[20] Ghaleb's report provides a clear indicator of the nature and tone of the Soviet message provided to Cairo. According to Ghaleb's report, dated the 13th of May:

> Semyonov mentioned that Israel is preparing a new attack on Syria
> using land and air forces . . . They [the Soviet Government] knew
> from sources inside Israel that the time for such an attack is between
> 17 and 21 May. They advice repeat advice that UAR be ready but
> calm and not be drawn into a war with Israel. They advise Syria to be
> calm and not give Israel the pretext to launch military operations by
> making aggressive or extremist announcements against Israel.' [21]

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[17] Bassiouny, Salah. Fify Years War Transcript. 25 February 1997. Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives

[18] Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, Ḥarb Al-Thalāthīn Sanah. (Markaz al-Ahrām lil-Tarjamah wa-al-Nashr, 1990), 445.

[19] Anwar Sadat, *Al-Baḥth 'an Al-Dhāt : Qiṣṣat Ḥayātī /* (al-Qāhirah : al-Maktab al-Miṣrī al-Ḥadīth, 1978), 168; Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 446; Maḥmūd Riyāḍ, *Mudhakkirāt Maḥmūd Rīyāḍ (1948-1978): [al-baḥth 'an al-salām. wa-al-ṣirā' fī al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabī, 1986), 45.

[20] Ghaleb, Murad. Episode 7. Shahed 'ala 'asr. Aljazeera. 29 December 2008. Television

[21] 'Memorandum from Ambassador Muran Ghaleb to Presidency' 13 May 1967. Foreign Ministry Archives. Egyptian National Archives. Photocopy produced in Fathy Mamdoh. Misr min Al-thawra Ela Al-naksa (Abu Dhabi: Markaz El-Imarat Dirasat wal Bohoth Al-Istrategya) 2003, 415

Ghaleb's report carried a clear message to Cairo about the course of action the Soviets preferred. Rather than this being a rushed a call for arms issued by the Soviet Union to its regional allies in Cairo and Damascus, Moscow was rather urging a calm-headed and restrained approach in response to the information at the Soviets' disposal. This was a clear warning against provocation into a military confrontation with Israel. This Soviet position was in fact something with which Cairo was already familiar, and was consistent with Moscow's position when tensions between Israel and Syria had begun to flare up months earlier. Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Heikal cites several occasions when Cairo was urged by the Soviet Union to intervene with the Syrians to calm their nerves and moderate their reactions to Israeli provocations.[22] When Nasser took the decision on the night of the 13th of May to mobilise the Egyptian armed forces and move them into Sinai, he did so contrary to Soviet advice for restraint.

Soviet intentions aside, there are grounds on which to question the significance of the Soviet warning as a precipitator for war. First, this was not the first time that Moscow had supplied Egypt with information or intelligence suggesting aggressive intent. Throughout 1966 and as late as April 1967, these warnings had become a common occurrence.[23] None of these previous warnings materialised into an all-out Israeli attack on Syria. Second, although Ghaleb's report did not reference a specific number of mobilised Israeli brigades, the literature frequently refers to 10-15 brigades. This number is very high and could not realistically be achieved without calling in the Israeli reserve, which Egypt had been closely following over the years. Third, both Egypt's Chief of Staff, Mohamed Fawzi ,and Egyptian intelligence challenged Soviet intelligence the day after it was received. Fawzi was sent to Syria on a 24-hour mission to investigate allegations about Israeli mobilisation.[24] This indicates that Cairo did not take Soviet information for granted and sought to independently verify its accuracy. Ultimately, Fawzi's findings from his field visit contradicted Soviet-supplied information.

Fawzi found 'no material evidence' of an unusual Israeli ground mobilisation and presented a report with his findings on his return to Cairo.[25] In Syria, Fawzi met with Syrian military leadership, who denied the Soviet intelligence. For added confirmation, Fawzi requested a visit to the Israeli-Syrian front and personally checked the most recent Syrian reconnaissance reports. By the evening of the 14th of May, Egyptian military intelligence revised an earlier assessment, concluded that the risk of an imminent Israeli attack was low, and warned against being provoked into an unnecessary war.[26] Fawzi's refutation of the Soviet information did not make any tangible difference in Cairo's approach to the crisis. Rather than freeze or roll back its military actions, Cairo continued on a path of escalation. This suggests that Cairo's approach to the crisis was influenced by factors beyond a simple automatic response to a Soviet warning of Israeli mobilisation.

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[22] Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 442.

[23] Golan, "The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War," 5.

[24] Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 71; 'Abd al-Muhsin Kamil Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Ḥaqā'iq : Qa'id Jabhat Sinā' Fī Ḥarb 1967* ([Beirut] : al-Waṭan al-'Arabī, 1970), 54.

[25] Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 71 Fawzi also mentioned that he could not exclude Israeli air force mobilisation which he had no capacity to verify in his report. See: "Former Egyptian War Minister Uncovers to Al-Wasat the Secrets Behind the Big Defeat" Al-Wasat 1992 .

[26] Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Ḥaqā'iq*, 64.

Rather than explaining Nasser's actions through a singular focus on the Soviet warning, this article suggests two alternative frameworks for understanding Nasser's motivations in giving orders to mobilise the armed forces. Memoirs of former Egyptian officials universally emphasise the role of repeated Israeli public threats to Syria as a key factor in shaping Nasser's view of the crisis.[27] These public threats were given by officials in high positions in the Israeli government, including not only Yitzhak Rabin, the Chief of Staff, but also Foreign Minister Abba Eban and Premier Levi Eshkol.[28] These threats were interpreted in Cairo as a sign of aggressive Israeli intent and, crucially, as a threat undermining Nasser's public stature in the Arab world. Egypt had already signed a five-year common defence agreement with Syria in November 1966 against a background of Israeli-Syrian tensions and border skirmishes. Therefore, Israel's public threats against Syria directly undermined Nasser and compelled him to action. Nasser had already been under pressure for failing to protect Syria and Jordan from Israeli attacks. That criticism not only came from radical Arabs pushing for a more militant and confrontational approach to Israel, but it also came from conservative regimes allied with the West, including Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Both states accused Nasser of empty rhetoric and hiding behind UN forces stationed in Sinai.[29] As US reports from regional capitals suggest, Nasser was 'raked over the coals' for not defending Arab states threatened by Israel.[30]

In addition to pressures on Nasser to assert authority and respond to threats to Syria, it is likely that Nasser saw an opportunity in the unfolding of regional tensions. Egyptian leadership had never fully reconciled itself with the post-Suez war settlement. In particular, they resented the presence of international troops in Sinai, described by Fawzi as a 'breach to Egyptian sovereignty over its territories,' as well as the loss of navigation rights in the Aqaba gulf.[31] The issue of UN troops was raised at least as early as 1964 in the context of Arab League discussions on common Arab defence.[32] Egypt frequently faced criticism that the presence of such forces hindered its contribution to joint Arab defence plans.[33] As the frequency of Israeli raids against Jordan and Syria increased, Cairo was derided for 'hiding' behind UN troops as Israel attacked other Arab states.[34] Nasser reportedly described the presence of these troops as 'an abscess that needed to be cut open'.[35] Before the crisis, both Nasser and Amer had already begun to consider when—not if—the presence of UN troops in Sinai could be terminated. Fawzi claims to have

[27] Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 433, 446; Muḥammad Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970: mudhakkirāt al-Farīq Awwal Muḥammad Fawzī, Wazīr al-Ḥarbīyah al-Asbaq.* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-ʿArabī, 1986), 69; Maḥmūd Riyāḍ, *Mudhakkirāt Maḥmūd Rīyāḍ (1948-1978): [al-baḥth ʿan al-salām. wa-al-ṣirāʿ fī al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-ʿArabī, 1986), 45; ʿAbd al-Muhsin Kamil Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Ḥaqāʾiq : Qaʿid Jabhat Sināʾ Fī Ḥarb 1967* ([Beirut] : al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī, 1970), 49–50.

[28] Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1998.* (New York; London: Random House, 1999), 304; Shlaim, "The Middle East," 24; Eyal Ziser, "June 1967: Israel's Capture of the Golan Heights," *Israel Studies* 7, no. 1 (2002): 175–77.

[29] Clea Lutz Bunch, "Strike at Samu: Jordan, Israel, the United States, and the Origins of the Six-Day War," *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 1 (2008): 69–70.

[30] Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XIX, Arab-Israeli Crisis And War, 1967. 'Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson.' 17 May 1967. Document 7

[31] Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 69.

[32] Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 457.

[33] Heikal, 204–7; Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 72.

[34] Badran, Shams. Personal Interview with author. 4 April 2017

[35] Huwayidi. *Adhwaʾ ʿala Naksa w Iztenzaf* (Beirut: Dar Eltalya), 1975, 22

witnessed several occasions in 1965 and 1966 on which the presence of UN troops was raised in discussions between Nasser and Amer.[36] Furthermore, Heikal describes how, in 1966, an internal working group was formed and prepared draft letters requesting the removal of these forces in anticipation of such a decision being taken in the future.[37] All this indicates that the issue had been a pressing concern for Cairo, and that both Nasser and Amer were waiting for the right time to address the issue.

In unpacking the forces pushing Cairo into action in May, the role and influence of the Soviet Union appears to be marginal rather than central, inviting a reconsideration of the role Moscow played in the war. The only available record of the Soviet warning is an Egyptian memo that clearly shows that Moscow advised Nasser to exercise restraint—advice that Nasser ignored. A focus on the Soviet warning as the main driver for Egyptian actions cannot be reconciled with the outcome of Fawzi's visit to the Israeli-Syrian border that verified the lack of Israeli mobilisation, and which was later supported by Egyptian intelligence's assessment. An analysis of available sources suggests two alternative reasons for Cairo's actions: pressure on Nasser to visibly respond to Israel's public threats (which risked undermining his prestige), and a desire to revisit the outcome of the 1956 Suez war that ended with the stationing of foreign troops on Egyptian territory and the reversal of Egypt's earlier control of the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba. Consequently, the Soviet warning can be seen as a contributing factor that validated, rather than shaped, Egyptian assessments on the need to act.

Allies out of sync

In quick succession, Cairo took one step after another that unwittingly brought it within reach of Israeli fire. These actions appear to be less the product of a well-formed Egyptian scheme and more the result of improvisation. There are no indications that Cairo sought the input of the Soviet Union in advance of any of the decisions it took during the crisis. Troops deployed in Sinai were asked to march through Egyptian cities; in the process, they stirred up a patriotic frenzy of overconfidence in Egypt's military. Arab public opinion applauded Nasser for standing up to the Israeli challenge and defending Arab rights. Egyptian leadership became prisoner to this momentum. Throughout this process, the Soviet Union appears to be absent. Furthermore, an unexpected complication with the UN further pushed Nasser to further escalation. On the 16th of May, Egypt requested the removal of UN forces along the Egyptian-Israeli border, deliberately excluding forces stationed in Gaza and Sharm El Sheikh from its request.[38] When presented with the Egyptian request, U Thant insisted that the UN forces should operate as one indivisible unit.[39] Realising that it could not now step back without losing face, Cairo demanded the full

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[36] In 1965, as some Egyptian units were returning from Yemen, a discussion started between Nasser and Amer whether that unit should be deployed to Sinai. In 1966, Amer proposed to Nasser asking for the withdrawal of the UN troops in response to Arab criticism. Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 72–73.

[37] Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 369–70.

[38] Riyāḍ, *Mudhakkirāt Maḥmūd Rīyāḍ (1948-1978)*, 45–47; Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 72–74; Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 462–85.

[39] Indar Jit Rikhye, *The Sinai Blunder: Withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force Leading to the Six-Day War of June 1967* (Psychology Press, 1980), 52–53.

withdrawal of all UN troops, further exacerbating the crisis and opening up the question of navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba.[40]

The Gulf of Aqaba is strategically crucial, as it provides the only maritime route to the Israeli port of Eilat. The only entrance to the Gulf is through the Tiran Strait, which is controlled from the Egyptian town of Sharm El Sheikh. Israeli ships only started using the waterway after the its occupation of Sinai in the 1956 war and have continued to do so since. Egypt's initial deployment of troops to Sinai did not include the assignment of troops to Sharm El Sheikh; Cairo's request for limited withdrawal indicates that no decision had been taken to alter status quo. Fawzi and Murtagi mention that the Egyptian armed forces were reluctant to deploy to Sharm. Nevertheless, political and military leadership did not see eye-to-eye on the issue, and the military's reluctance was overridden by a political decision taken by Nasser and Amer.[41]

With Egyptian troops controlling the southern entrance of the Gulf of Aqaba, Nasser called an urgent meeting of the High Executive Committee of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) at his private residence to consider the question of Israel's access to the Gulf of Aqaba. Various accounts of the meeting recount how the assembled were overwhelmingly in favour of prohibiting Israel from using the waterway, while aware that such a decision was confrontational and risky, as it might provoke Israel into military action.[42] When it came to the vote, all but one agreed to block Israel's access to the Gulf.[43]

This was not the finest hour for Egyptian-Soviet relations. As Egypt was inching closer to a war it had not planned for, the Soviet Union appears to have been sidelined from the Egyptian decision-making process. Nasser purposefully delayed an urgent request for a meeting by the Soviet Ambassador until after he had made the public announcement on the blockade.[44] This indicates that Nasser wanted no Soviet interference with that decision. When they met, to the surprise of the Soviet official, Nasser shared the Egyptian government's decision on navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba. For such a crucial and key decision in the crisis, the Soviet Union had not been consulted or informed in advance. Brezhnev made Soviet frustration clear when he told the Communist Party in a closed meeting shortly after the war ended that 'our Government had not been informed beforehand of this action which had serious repercussions'.[45] A US intelligence report described the Soviets as 'taken by surprise', noting the 'absence of explicit expressions of support' and that the reaction of the Soviet press was 'muted' and 'delayed'.[46]

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[40] Riyāḍ, *Mudhakkirāt Maḥmūd Rīyāḍ (1948-1978)*, 46. Riad does not think that U Thant was acting in bad faith and attributes his insistence to ignorance of the significance of a complete withdrawal on navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba.

[41] Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 81–83; Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Ḥaqā'iq*.

[42] Sadat, *Al-Bahṭh 'an Al-Dhāt*, 186–87; Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 80; Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 540.

[43] Sadat, 167. The one dissenting voice was the Egyptian Prime Minister Sidqi Soliman who argued that minimizing the risk of war should take precedence.

[44] Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 522–33.
Verbatim excerpt from memorandum of conversation between between the President and the Soviet Ambassador Pojidaev P 22 May 1967 20:30. Abdin Palace Archives. Cited in: Heikal, 523.

[45] "On Soviet Policy following the Israeli Aggression in the Middle East," June 20, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN) KC PZPR 2632, pp. 358-408.

[46] 'Soviet Policy and the 1967 Arab-Israeli war' Intelligence Report 16 March 1970

For his part, Nasser was aware that the Soviet Union was not enthusiastic about the escalation in the region, which might explain why Moscow was side-lined in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, Nasser expected the Soviet Union to come around and support its key alley in the region. But Nasser's expectations were unfulfilled, raising concerns in Cairo. Alarmed by the Soviet silence, Nasser asked the Egyptian Ambassador in Moscow to raise his concerns with Soviet authorities and encourage them to take a more proactive approach.[47] The Soviet Union was slow to respond to Cairo's pressure. It took Moscow more than a week to issue the statement that Egypt had been pushing for. Yet when the Soviet Ambassador presented the statement to Nasser, the Egyptian president was not impressed. The Ambassador explained that it was the strongest message of support that the Soviet Union could issue addressing a foreign policy issue, emphasising that it was co-signed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Soviet government. In response, Nasser told the Soviet Ambassador, 'To be honest with you, this has been late coming. From the early days of the crisis we were expecting a word from you. We did not hear anything until we asked for it ourselves'.[48] Lack of communication between the two allies compounded their different approaches to the crisis and bred frustrations between Cairo and Moscow.

Consultations in Moscow

Egypt's decision to close the straits of Tiran in front of Israeli shipping started a new phase of the crisis. Israel had identified restrictions on its access to the Gulf of Aqaba as a casus belli. Cairo's decision publicly crossed an Israeli red line and increased the chances of war. The day after Nasser's announcement, Eshkol responded by stating that Nasser's announcement was 'an act of aggression' against Israel.[49] In light of rising tensions, Cairo and Moscow realised the need for extensive formal consultations. Consequently, a high-level Egyptian delegation headed by Shams Badran, War Minister, travelled to Moscow from the 25-28 May 1967 for that purpose. Sadat mentions in his memoirs that the visit came in response to a Soviet invitation.[50] However, in an interview with Badran, he mentioned that it was Nasser who strategically pushed for the visit without a Soviet invitation, to give the impression that Egypt had the backing of the Soviet Union.[51]

Due to the military aspect of the crisis, the Egyptian delegation was predominantly comprised of military officials, with a small representation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Publicly available records of the meetings held by the delegation and its members' testimony jointly provide a detailed and corroborated picture of Egyptian-Soviet consultations at a critical time in the crisis. Throughout the consultations, Soviet officials continuously urged Cairo to exercise restraint and voiced concerns over the escalation of regional tensions. The first meeting by the Egyptian delegation was with the high brass of the Soviet military in a dinner banquet hosted by

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[47] Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 509.
[48] Verbatim excerpt memorandum of conversation between the President and the Soviet Ambassador Pojidaev P 22 May 1967 20:30. Abdin Palace Archives. Cited in: Heikal, 523.
[49] Eshkol. 'Statement to the Knesset by Prime Minister Eshkol- 23 May 1967' Historical Document of Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Volume 1-2. XI Six Day War.
[50] Sadat, *Al-Baḥṭh 'an Al-Dhāt*, 187.
[51] Badran, Shams. 5 April 2017 (Personal Interview with the author)

the Soviet Minister of Defence Marshal Grechko. Badran described their hosts as 'not at ease' and 'nervous about the situation we [Egyptians] created in the region.'[52] They 'did not want war to happen.'[53] Over rounds of vodka, Soviet generals emphasized that it was not the right time for a military confrontation between the forces of capitalism and imperialism. It became clear to the Egyptian delegation that the Soviet military wanted to avoid being drawn into a military conflict in the Middle East. When an Egyptian diplomat mentioned that his son was serving in the army and ready to sacrifice his life for his country in a war against the US, the Soviets interpreted this as a sign of Egyptian adventurism and the meeting became tenser. In order to assure the Soviets, Badran mentioned that Egypt had no plans to either stop or attack US vessels passing through the Straits of Tiran and was not seeking military confrontation.[54]

The first act of the consultations provided the template for the Egyptian delegation's subsequent discussions in Moscow. Officials from the Soviet Union repeatedly tried to discern Egyptian motivations and intentions while expressing alarm at the prospect of a military confrontation. According to an Egyptian transcript of the meeting with Kosygin, the Soviet Premier asked detailed questions aimed at assessing the likelihood of war and understanding Cairo's position. He inquired about the distribution of Egyptian troops, how close they were to Israeli positions, whether Cairo had planted maritime mines in the Gulf of Aqaba and Egypt's long-term plans for navigation in the Gulf. He told the Egyptian delegation ,'Politically, you prevailed. Militarily you prevailed. What do you want now? My view is that what you achieved is enough. The Emergency Forces withdrew. You are in control of the Straits. Your troops are in Gaza. What more do you want?'[55]

Meanwhile, Alexei Kosygin played a double game. On one hand, he did not want to alienate Moscow's most significant regional ally in a time of crisis, and sought to assure Cairo of Soviet support. On the other hand, the Soviet Premier was very clear in requesting that Cairo avoid any provocation or further escalation of the crisis. He told the Egyptian delegation:

> I prefer discussions [diplomacy] instead of military confrontation . . . We think it important to take measures that give the enemy an image of your strength and not your weakness. From this position of strength, you will consolidate the success you achieved without the need to go into war. If you accepted this, then we are thinking along the same lines but if you have another point view please tell us.

At various points in the discussion, Kosygin repeatedly made the case for restraint and de-escalation by stressing that the Soviet Union was against war in the region. According to the Egyptian minutes of the meeting, he told the Egyptian delegation:

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[52] Badran, Shams. Fifty Years War Transcript. 25 February 1997. Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London.
[53] Badran, Shams. Fifty Years War Transcript. 25 February 1997. Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London.
[54] Badran, Shams. Unpublished Memoirs. Undated. In Arabic.
[55] Memorandum of Conversation between Soviet Prime Minister Alexie Kosygin and War Minister Sham Badran. 26 June 1967 produced in full in Huwaidi. Al-furas Aldha'a. (Beirut: Sherket Al-matbou'at lil Twaze' W al-Nashr) 1992

> Avoiding war is in your interest as well as the interest of progressive
> forces in the world. We are not saying that because we are weak or
> afraid of war!! It is important to avoid circumstances that could lead to
> the outbreak of war.

In response to this clear and overwhelming emphasis on restraint by the Soviet Premier, Badran followed a similar strategy to one he used in his meeting with the Soviet military. He made the case for the actions that the Egyptian government had taken in Sinai and Aqaba and was unequivocal in stressing Egypt's resolve not to give up any gains it had made. He told the Soviets that Egypt 'could not, under any circumstances, cede the positive outcomes achieved in Sharm El Sheikh or the Gulf of Aqaba because it was based on imperial aggression in 1956. We now returned to pre-1956'. However, at the same time, Badran continued to assure Soviet officials that Egypt 'will not be the one to start war'. He also stressed that Cairo was keen to avoid a confrontation with the US, which the Egyptians felt was key to building trust with the Soviets and calming their anxieties. Badran told Kosygin that 'if ships carrying the Israeli flag under the protection of American navy entered the Gulf [of Aqaba], we [Egypt] won't interdict them'.[56] But Cairo also wanted to have Soviet support in case the US decided to intervene militarily in support of Israel. Badran told Kosygin that 'the Egyptian President wanted me to tell you that we are now in a confrontation with the US'. Cairo was still haunted by the memory of the 1956 Suez war, when it had faced Israel and the military might of two Western powers.

The Soviets continued to send the same message to the Egyptian delegation, even in private discussions. In one instance, the Deputy Soviet Foreign Minister Semyonov called his Egyptian counterpart for an informal meeting. Semyonov was highly regarded and trusted in Cairo as a friendly voice in the Soviet establishment. In that discussion, Semyonov strongly pleaded that Egypt should not start a war. He said that the Soviet Union had no appetite for fighting a world war; to impress the point on his Egyptian counterpart, he mentioned that the 'Soviet Union was no match to the United States'.[57] He tried to explain the seriousness of interfering with the principles of freedom of navigation, citing Soviet ships' reliance on these principles in their use of the Bosphorus Straits.[58] Semyonov's private message reinforced that which the Soviets were imparting in the formal consultations. According to Ghaleb, the Soviets were trying through 'all the different means' to drive the point home clearly to the Egyptian delegation that they were not supportive of escalation and that they did not want to see an armed confrontation in the Middle East.[59]

In terms of external optics, the Egyptians may have achieved what they wanted from their visit to Moscow: three days of high-level meetings in the public eye with a superpower, at the height of a serious regional crisis. Nasser was keen to capitalise on the visit and in its aftermath publicly praised the Soviet Union as a 'friend' for 'standing with us'.[60] The reality, however, was that the series of meetings held in the Soviet Union showed how anxious and nervous Soviet leadership

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[56] Ibid
[57] Bassiouny, Salah. Fify Years War Transcript. 25 February 1997. Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives
[58] Ghaleb, Murad. Episode 7. Shahed 'ala 'asr. Aljazeera. 29 December 2008. Television
[59] Ibid
[60] Nasser. Speech to members of Parliament in Presidential Palace. 29 May 1967. Nasser Collection in Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

was regarding the prospect of regional escalation or being drawn into war in the Middle East. Was Nasser aware of the reality of the Soviet position? As the Egyptian delegation was leaving Moscow, Greshko reportedly assured Bardran in the airport 'not to worry', and that the Soviet navy was not far away from the region.[61] Some argue that Nasser may have been misled by Badran's comprehension of Grechko's remarks. However, it is hard to see how Nasser could not have been aware of the clearly stated positions the Soviet Union repeatedly expressed during the consultations. Detailed records of the meetings of the delegation, now publicly available, clearly reflect the Soviet desire to avoid war. In addition to Badran's report, Nasser was independently briefed by Ambassador Ghaleb and Ambassador Elfiki on the visit, including on the private discussion with Semyonov.[62] It is more likely that Nasser had little doubt about the Soviet position yet knowingly sought to give the impression that it was solidly behind Egypt during the crisis to deter Israel. This is supported by an interview given by Ghaleb in which he recounted a meeting with Nasser three weeks after the war. Ghaleb asked Nasser, 'Who were you counting on in the war? the Soviets? I sent all the cables for our consultations and [: including] with Kosygin.' Nasser replied: 'No, we were not counting on the Soviets', indicating that he was well informed about the Soviet reluctance to get involved in the conflict.[63] This theory is also supported by Badran, who believes that Nasser wanted to draw the Soviets into the crisis after the decision about navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba was taken.[64]

Egyptian-Soviet arms wrestling

Another facet of Egyptian-Soviet relations during the crisis took the form of discussions around arms and military hardware. Egypt had relied on Soviet arms since 1955.[65] This initially took the form of arms deals using Czechoslovakia as an intermediary, then through open and direct dealings following the 1956 Suez War.[66] Over the years, Nasser mastered playing one pole of the Cold War against the other and, in the process, benefited from both. Soviet interest in gaining influence in the Middle East and placating Cairo meant that Egypt had privileged access to Soviet military hardware, surpassing that of other non-communist states on friendly terms with Moscow. Deals for Soviet arms were usually made under generous financial terms and sometimes even in exchange for Egyptian commodities, including cotton.[67] With the growth of their military relations, Cairo kept a significant military attaché office in Moscow that coordinated the busy flow of hardware, military trainers, and officers between both countries.

As the crisis began to heat up, the Egyptian military began to make fresh demands for military hardware. Gaps in armaments became particularly pressing after the reserves were called in and new military units were formed to deploy in Sinai; this was compounded by the frequent shifts in

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[61] Badran. Personal Interview.
[62] Bassiouny, Salah. Fify Years War Transcript. 25 February 1997. Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives; Ghaleb, Murad. Episode 7. Shahed 'ala 'asr. Aljazeera. 29 December 2008. Television
[63] Ghaleb, Murad. Episode 7. Shahed 'ala 'asr. Aljazeera. 29 December 2008. Television
[64] Badran. Unpublished memoirs. Undated. In Arabic.
[65] G. Laron, *Cutting the Gordian Knot: The Post-WWII Egyptian Quest for Arms and the 1955 Czechoslovak Arms Deal*, vol. 55 (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2007).
[66] Alexander J. Bennett, "Arms Transfer as an Instrument of Soviet Policy in the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal*, 1985, 755–56.
[67] Roger F. Pajak, "Soviet Arms and Egypt," *Survival* 17, no. 4 (1975): 165.

Egyptian military plans.[68] Egyptian military planners also started to make fresh requests for new and advanced anti-aircraft missiles to strengthen their weak air defences. To meet these demands, Cairo turned to the Soviet Union. The Egyptian delegation flying to Moscow carried with them a list of needed military hardware which they hoped, particularly in a time of crisis, that their Soviet ally would be able to supply. The Soviet Union, however, proved to be very cautious on the issue of supplying arms and reluctant to give the Egyptian military access to everything it needed. The result was a deadlock in Egyptian-Soviet negotiations in Moscow. Marshal Grechko insisted that the arms that the Egyptian military already had were sufficient in quantity, as well as effective, citing their successful use in Vietnam.[69] These arguments were not convincing to Egyptian military officials, who instinctively rejected comparing their military needs with the needs of asymmetrical guerrilla warfare in Southeast Asia. According to Badran, the Soviet Union went so far as to deny that they even possessed some of the arms Egypt was requesting. Soviet refusal extended to spare parts needed by Cairo to maintain its Soviet arsenal and that Badran thought would be less controversial and could be easily provided and transported back to Cairo with the delegation. Key driving factor behind Soviet reluctance was the desire to avoid an escalation of tension and the fear of encouraging Egyptian adventurism.

To circumvent the Soviets' unwillingness to supply arms, the Egyptian delegation pursued several tactics. While in Moscow, the delegation sent an urgent message to Nasser and Amer, reporting Soviet reluctance to meet Egypt's arms requests and asking them to apply direct pressure from Cairo on Soviet leadership. The delegation also resorted to emotional blackmail. Badran told Soviet officials that if he failed to secure the arms Egypt needed, he would be court-martialled upon his return to Cairo.[70] Ultimately, Egyptian pressure succeeded in lessening Soviet resistance, even if some of the promises made during the visit were not fulfilled. Moscow agreed to expedite deliveries of delayed arms and committed to fulfilling some of Egypt's new requests. As Kosygin jokingly told Badran, 'the [Soviet Communist] party decided to spare you a tribunal'.[71] Kosygin insisted that any arms shipments provided to Cairo were meant to 'consolidate peace' by projecting strength and explained that 'the Soviet objective is to ensure that armed conflict would not take place'. For his part, Badran confirmed that Egypt 'does not seek war at all and it is in its interest to freeze the situation as it is'.

But when it came to arms, Moscow's words spoke louder than its actions. The items that the Egyptian military really cared about remained off-limits, including the spare parts for MiG fighters and mobile low-altitude air defence that were desperately needed in Cairo.[72] When it came to the delivery of what Moscow had agreed to provide, the Egyptians constantly felt that the Soviet Union was dragging its feet and stalling. After a number of delays, the Soviet Ambassador informed Nasser that some of the promised Soviet arms would be airlifted to Egypt on a schedule starting the 9th of June (the war started on the 5th). A frustrated Nasser sarcastically countered that these deliveries might as well be sent by sea rather than the much faster air

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[68] Fawzī, *Ḥarb al-thalāth sanawāt, 1967/1970*, 50–51; Murtaji, *Al-Farīq Murtajī Yarwī Al-Ḥaqā'iq*.

[69] Badran, Shams. Unpublished memoirs. Undated. In Arabic

[70] Memorandum of first meeting Kosygin-Badran. 26 June 1967

[71] Memorandum of second meeting between Soviet Prime Minister Alexie Kosygin and War Minister Shams Badran. 27 May 1967 produced in full in Huwaidi. *Al-furas Aldha'a*. (Beirut: Sherket Al-matbou'at lil Twaze' W al-Nashr) 1992, 570-582

[72] Badran, Shams. Unpublished memoirs. Undated. In Arabic

route.[73] According to Badran, Egypt did not receive any significant deliveries of Soviet arms before during the crisis because the Soviets 'did not want to get involved or did not want us to fight.'[74] With regards to arms, what was felt in Cairo was a series of hesitations, half measures and delays from their Soviet ally.

Hold your fire

The last few days before the start of the war saw both Egypt and the Soviet Union approaching their relationship differently than they had at the beginning of the crisis. The high-level meetings held by the Egyptian delegation in Moscow were followed by close consultations and messages between Cairo and Moscow. The Egyptian records for these consultations have not been made public yet, but their substance can be traced through memoirs and interviews. These discussions saw the continuation of earlier positions expressed by both sides during their consultations in Moscow. Soviet officials continued to counsel restraint and discourage Cairo from any action that would further escalate tensions. Egyptian officials responded by denying any hint of war with Israel. Heikal describes an urgent message delivered by the Soviet Ambassador to Nasser in the early hours of the morning of the 27th of May. The motivation for the urgent message was information that the United States shared with Moscow suggesting that Cairo was considering launching a military offensive against Israel. The US urged Moscow to promptly raise the issue with Cairo and quickly avert any such possibility. Moscow, consistent with its insistence on restraint, asked Dimitri Pojidaev, the Soviet Ambassador to Egypt, to seek a prompt meeting with Nasser. Pojidaev asked Cairo not to open hostilities, stating that the USSR 'did not want to leave anything to chance'.[75] Pojidaev told Nasser if such an attack materialised, 'the US would absolve itself from any commitment to restraint that it had given to the USSR'. The message was clear to Nasser. The Soviet Union was in agreement with the US; both were adamant that Egypt should desist from any military operations.

Nasser did not push back against Soviet calls urging Cairo not to be the first to attack. In the last days of the crisis, he wanted to avoid a risky military operation that might detract from the gains he had made at the start of the crisis or draw US military intervention into the region. He told the Soviet Ambassador that 'Egypt does not want war but it will defend itself if attacked'.[76] But while Nasser wanted to avoid war, some elements in the Egyptian armed forces were pushing for an Egyptian offensive. This included the commander of the air force, Sidqi Mahmoud. More importantly, it also included the chief of the armed forces, Marshal Amer, who was willing to entertain a more adventurous course. However, Nasser had dismissed proposals of an Egyptian offensive early on; the US and Soviet messages only reinforced his position and drove him to put tighter reins on his military. Ultimately, nobody in the Egyptian command chose to openly challenge Nasser's strategy, including Amer, who dropped his support for the offensive and remained loyal to his long-time associate and friend, Nasser.[77]

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[73] Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 688.
[74] Badran, Shams. Unpublished memoirs. Undated. In Arabic
[75] Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 578.
[76] Heikal, 578.
[77] Badran, Shams. 5 April 2017 (Personal Interview with the author)

Until the outbreak of war, the Soviet Union had been engaged in efforts aimed at ensuring that war would not break out in the Middle East. Recent testimonies from former Soviet officials have uncovered behind-the-scene-efforts to arrange a secret meeting between Nasser and Eshkol in Moscow that would have paved the way towards a diplomatic end to the crisis. Both leaders were invited to Moscow for a hastily organised meeting to discuss how to resolve the crisis. The meeting, scheduled for the 2nd of June, never took place, despite Soviet efforts to reach out to Arab and Israeli leaders. Nasser initially agreed to the secret meeting, describing the proposal as 'wise' and claiming that he 'fully shared' Soviet objectives, adding that after such meeting, 'Israel's conduct would be calmer'.[78] However, Nasser later backpedalled and rejected the invitation. According to Primakov and Kotov, Nasser was influenced by Syria's strong rejection of the initiative.[79] After consulting with the Syrian President and Prime Minister, he mentioned he could not attend such a meeting 'without Syria's consent'.[80] With Nasser's rejection, the proposal ultimately fell flat.

The Israeli attack ultimately came as a surprise to both Cairo and Moscow, who had hoped that time would diffuse the crisis. In Cairo, the start of war made Moscow's position difficult. Throughout the crisis, the Soviet Union had repeatedly asked Egypt for restraint and to avoid a first strike. Now Israel had taken the initiative, with dramatic consequences. Cairo felt that it had held up its side of the bargain by holding fire and had been let down by the Soviet Union. As the scale of Egyptian losses became clear, questions regarding the role of the Soviet Union were raised, particularly within the Egyptian military. An emotional Amer called in the Soviet Ambassador to the Egyptian High Military Command and accused Moscow of being complicit in the attack against the Egyptian forces.[81] In Moscow, the Egyptian ambassador received angry cables from Cairo placing the responsibility of the Israeli attacks on the Soviet Union.[82]

Conclusion

Many theories on the origins of the 1967 Middle East war are built on assumptions regarding Egyptian-Soviet relations during the crisis preceding that war. This article primarily draws on Egyptian and Arabic-language sources to examine the interactions between Cairo and Moscow during this critical period of the region's history. In doing so, the article presents new aspects of this relationship and how it unfolded during the crisis. It demonstrates how Egypt and the Soviet Union went into this crisis with little coordination or agreement on common objectives or goals. Furthermore, frustration and mutual disappointment were recurring features of their relationship. The image that emerges here is one that challenges revisionist accounts attributing the start of the war to Egyptian-Soviet collusion, as well as certain traditional narratives that present the Soviet Union as an enterprising risk-taker invested in regional brinkmanship.

Both capitals had good reasons to be alarmed by the rise of tensions on the Israeli-Syrian border. They worried about the vulnerability of the Syrian government and did not trust Israeli

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[78] Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present* (Basic Books, 2009), 110–11.
[79] Kotov ,Yuri. Journey in Memory. Russia Today Arabic. 14 December 2016. Television (source in Arabic)
[80] Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs*, 111.
[81] Heikal, *Al-Infijar, 1967*, 728.
[82] Ghaleb, Murad. Episode 8. Shahed 'ala 'asr. Aljazeera. 29 December 2008. Television

intensions. However, they did not initially see eye-to-eye on how to react to these tensions. While Moscow had been privately urging caution, Cairo single-handedly took the initiative to embark on a series of escalatory moves that brought Egypt to the cusp of war. In the process, each country failed to appropriately assess the position of the other. The Soviet Union did not accurately read the pressure on Nasser to respond to Israel's public threats to Syria and his sensitivity about his regional standing. Nor did Moscow seem to appreciate Egypt's longstanding grievances about the status quo in Sinai after the 1956 war. Cairo, on the other hand, expected Moscow to come around in support of its *fait accompli,* underestimating both Soviet cautiousness and its commitment to détente with the US.

The result was mutual disappointment in both Cairo and Moscow. The Soviet Union was frustrated that its early calls for restraint were not heeded. Cairo was confused by the lax Soviet attitude during the crisis and was disappointed with the level of support the Soviet Union was ready to offer. After Nasser's early brinkmanship had run its course, both Cairo and Moscow began to agree on the importance of restraint and war avoidance. The Soviet Union strongly urged Nasser not to authorise a first strike on Israel. Nasser already sceptical about the benefits of an Egyptian offensive and found in Soviet and US positions further validation that the best course of action would be to curb any such impulses in his military and opt to buy time during which tensions could deflate.

These findings shed new light on the origins of the 1967 war and challenge frequent assumptions that depict Egypt and the Soviet Union as trigger-happy and either pushing for or conspiring to initiate a regional war. Furthermore, the dysfunctional aspects of Egyptian-Soviet relations during a time of regional crisis invite wider reflections into the nature, timeline, and trajectory of relations between Cairo and Moscow. These relations did much to shape the Middle East during the Cold War, but Cairo and Moscow did not prove to be each other's best allies when their relationship mattered most. Their interactions were mired in mistrust, lack of co-ordination, and many miscommunications during a regional crisis that would ultimately shape the region for decades to come.

In the end, the war painfully exposed the limitations of the Egyptian-Soviet friendship. For many in the Egyptian establishment, the 1967 defeat was not only a military one, but also extended to Egypt's international alliances and particularly to its ties with the Soviet Union. However, the relationship between Cairo and Moscow did not unravel immediately after the war. In fact, Egypt's reliance on the Soviet Union, particularly as a source of arms, increased. But this proved to be only temporary. Following Egyptian troops' successful crossing into Sinai in the 1973 war, Egypt turned its back on its strategic relationship with the Soviet Union and sought a place in the US orbit. The 1967 war can thus be considered a watershed moment in Egyptian-Soviet relations, planting the seeds for the countries' later divergence.

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