THE MAKING OF SOVIET MIDDLE EAST POLICY VIS-À-VIS THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT BETWEEN JUNE AND OCTOBER WARS (1967-1973)

Muharrem ERENLER[*]

Abstract

The Soviet Union started to penetrate the Middle East in the second half of 1950's. Moscow's attempts to take advantage of anti-imperialist, nationalist, quasi-socialist Arab regimes reinforced its influence in the region. Cautious Soviet policy of avoiding involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict and balanced Soviet relations towards revolutionary Arab states and Israel came to an end with the June War. The aftermath of the war necessitated Moscow to revise its Middle Eastern policy vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this paper, I make an attempt to examine the making of the Soviet Middle East policy vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict between the June and October wars. My main argument is that Soviets were driven by promoting their interests in developing their foreign policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and took advantage of regional openings so as to preserve those interests. I also argue that the Soviet Union ended up being a part of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a result of its policies in interwar period.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Arab-Israeli Conflict, June War, October War, Soviet Foreign Policy.

---

[*]   Araş. Gör. İstanbul Üniversitesi Avrasya Enstitüsü, muharremerenler@gmail.com

Özet

Haziran ve Ekim Savaşları Arasında Arap-İsrail Çatışması Bağlamında Sovyet Orta Doğu Siyasetinin Oluşumu (1967-1973)

Sovyetler Birliği 1950'li yılların ikinci yarısında Ortadoğu'ya nüfuz etmeye başladı. Moskova'nın anti-emperyalist, milliyetçi, yarı-sosyalist Arap rejimlerinin mevcudiyetinden faydalanma çabaları, bölgedeki nüfuzunu pekiştirdi. Arap-İsrail çatışmasına müdahil olmaktan kaçınan temkinli Sovyet politikası ve Moskova'nın devrimci Arap rejimleri ile İsrail'e yönelik dengeli ilişkileri Altı Gün Savaşı ile sona erdi. Savaşın sonuçları, Moskova'nın Arap-İsrail çatışması bağlamında Ortadoğu siyasetini gözden geçirmesini kaçınılmaz kıldı. Bu makalede, Altı Gün Savaşı ile Yom Kippur savaşı arasında Arap-İsrail çatışması bağlamında Sovyet Ortadoğu siyasetinin oluşumu incelenecektir. Sovyetler Birliği'nin Arap-İsrail çatışmasına yönelik dış politika yapımında başat belirleyicinin milli menfaatleri olduğu ve menfaatlerini muhafaza etmek adına bölgesel fırsatları değerlendirdiği ileri sürülmektedir. Ayrıca, Sovyetler Birliği'nin bu iki savaş arası dönemdeki politikalarının bir sonucu olarak Arap-İsrail çatışmasında taraf haline geldiği savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sovyetler Birliği, Arap-İsrail Çatışması, Altı Gün Savaşı, Yom Kippur Savaşı, Sovyet Dış Politikası.

In the wake of the Second World War, Soviet Russia emerged as a great power restoring its strength prior to the October Revolution. The WWII years not only proved the consolidation of Soviet power in domestic sphere but also marked a new period of Soviet expansion similar to the Russian Empire. Having restored the losses after the October Revolution and added a number of more states under Soviet tutelage, Moscow returned to the Middle East and demanded territorial concessions from Turkey and Iran through intimidation.

The Middle East proved to be vital to Soviet interest and multiplied its importance after the end of WWII. Its proximity to main Soviet industrial and oil regions in the South; the presence of American bases with weapons aimed at Soviet Empire; its importance as a rich oil source to restore and empower Western industry; and its strategic location at the crossroads of three continents provided Moscow with sufficient incentives to penetrate the region for the sake of its vital interests. Failure of the intimidation policy of Stalin brought nearly a decade of Soviet non-influence in the Middle East even though Soviet Union

tried to break the status quo through an effort to support the establishment of a state of Zionist movement which was in contradiction to Soviet ideology.

As stated by Laqueur, "Fear, material interest and political dependence make for more loyal allies than ideological conviction"[1], Moscow tried to shape its Middle East policy not in accordance with ideological priorities but material interests. As pointed out by long-serving Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, "There is only one kind of logic in foreign affairs: the logic of what is best for the Soviet Union."[2] Ranking among the key figures in Soviet policy towards the Middle East, Yevgeny Primakov reiterates the same concept which rules the Soviet policy: "There are no constant enemies, but there are constant national interests."[3] Accordingly, Moscow was eager to put aside its ideology so as to promote its interests in the Middle East. What could not be achieved through Stalinist intimidation would soon be served to Moscow via Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism and quasi-socialism. *The Soviets go where the doors are opened to them.*[4] So was the situation in 1955 when Egypt was rejected to be provided with American military equipment after the Gaza Raid. Soviets did not find it difficult make their way into the Middle East through this open door.

Soviet policy did not hesitate to comply with the main signpost of political realism in international politics which is *the concept of interest defined in terms of power.*[5] *The* nationalist pattern of the Arab regimes or their oppression of Communist parties did not deter Moscow from collaborating with them

---

1   Walter Laqueur, "Russia Enters the Middle East", **Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 47 (1969), p. 298.

2   Arnold Krammer, "Soviet Motives in the Partition of Palestine", **Journal of Palestine Studies**, Vol. 2 (1973), p. 111.

3   Alvin Rubinstein, "The Middle East in Russia's Strategic Prism", **Diplomacy in the Middle East** (ed. Carl Brown), London 2004, p. 93.

4   John Campbell, "The Soviet Union in the Middle East", **Middle East Journal**, Vol. 32 (1978), p. 6.

5   Hans Morgenthau, **Politics Among Nations,** New York 1993, p. 5.

for the sake of Soviet interests. Briefly stated by Morgenthau, *politics is an autonomous sphere of action and understanding apart from other spheres, such as economics, ethics, aesthetics, religion*[6] and ideology.

Soviet arms deal with Egypt via Czechoslovakia was a turning point in Soviet penetration in the Middle East. This also started the Soviet involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. While Soviet actions in the Arab Israeli conflict were dominated by reaction to events or were responsive to opportunities,[7] the cautious Soviet policy not to be a side in the Arab-Israeli conflict took a new shape following the June War. In this paper, I will make an attempt to examine the making of Soviet Middle East policy vis-à-vis Arab-Israeli conflict between the June and October wars, respectively in 1967 and 1973. My main argument is that Soviets were driven by promoting their interests in developing their foreign policy towards Arab-Israeli conflict and took advantage of regional openings so as to preserve those interests. I will also argue that the Soviet Union ended up as a part of the Arab-Israeli conflict even though its main objective was to maintain Soviet interest in the Middle East and to avoid confrontation with the US.

Historical Roots of Russian Interest in the Middle East

Russian interest in the Middle East dates back to the middle ages when first pilgrims started to visit the holy lands in Palestine. Considering the limited power of Moscow Knezdom in the middle ages, Russian penetration into the region was limited to religious purposes. With the reforms of Petro I, Russia started to assert itself as a power in Europe. Russian interest in the south was limited to the policy of obtaining warm water ports. However, a turning point in Russian history vis-à-vis the Middle East, and in particular Palestine, occurred after the Russo-Turkish war between 1768 and 1774. Kuchuk Kainarji treaty, signed at the end of the war between the parts, gave Russia the official right to

---

6   **Ibid**, p.5.

7   Mahrez Mahmood, **Soviet Policy towards the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1948-1988**, New Delhi 1989, p.161.

protect Eastern Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman Empire in the Holy Lands. Therefore, Russia had the opportunity to have a foothold in the Middle East. Even though Russian Presence in the Holy Lands did not provide Russia with a physical expansion in the region, Russia sustained its influence on the Orthodox Christians via opening schools, hospitals, consulates and churches. For this purpose, the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society was established in 1882. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, anti-Semitic policy of the Russian government and its oppressive measures against Jews contributed to the development of the Zionist movement and the start of Jewish migration to Palestine from mainly Eastern Russian territories in 1982.[8] As stated by Vyacheslav Plehve, minister of Interior, establishment of a Jewish state, capable of absorbing several million Jews, would serve Russian interests.[9] In this way, Russia indirectly contributed to the emergence of future Palestinian issue and indirectly took a side in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, which would be quite contrary to its general stance towards this problem throughout Soviet Union.

The Middle East through Soviet Prism

Under the Russian Empire, Russian penetration into the region and pursuit of Russian interests were provided by the guardianship of Middle Eastern Orthodox Christian communities of the Ottoman Empire and the Russian sponsorship of schools, hostels and hospitals. However, the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 brought an end to use of religion to promote Russian influence in the region because the new Soviet regime was communist and officially atheist. This meant that Russia could no longer care about Christian minorities and Holy Lands to promote its interests in the region.[10]

---

8   Andrej Kreutz, "Russian-Palestinian Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis", **Journal of Military and Strategic Studies**, vol. 6 (2004), p.3.

9   Andrej. Kreutz, **Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?** Connecticut 2007, p. 46.

10   **Ibid**, p. 46.

The new ideology and regime of Russia did not lead to an abrupt end of Russian interest in Palestine, no longer a Holy Land. Considering the relatively weak position of Soviets vis-à-vis the imperialist powers of Europe and the urgent need to consolidate regime power throughout the country, Moscow was forced to follow a low profile foreign policy in the Middle East and Palestine in particular.

The gap left by the absence of religion for promotion of Russian interest in the region was quickly filled by ideology, anti-imperialism, support for national liberation struggles and colonial peoples. Soviet propaganda appealed to the Arab people of the region and inhabitants of Palestine who suffered from imperialism under mandate regimes and desperately strove for independence from imperialist yoke.

While the imperialist powers, namely France and Britain, were integrated in the region through political and military presence, Russia's distance from that colonial share-out and the new discourse of the regime contributed to a highly positive image of Moscow[11] in the Middle East and in Palestine which was under the mandate of imperialist British power and prone to the increasing immigration of Zionists. Moscow maintained its support for Palestinian Arabs under British mandate without reservation, denounced Yishuv as the ally of imperialism and backed the Arab riots of 1929 and 1936.[12]

However, Russia maintained its low profile policy towards Palestinian Arabs by inspiring them though ideological propaganda but it lacked any effective instruments to protect them against increasing Jewish immigration or the continuing mandate regime under British Empire. However, this did not mean that the Middle East as well as Palestine was ousted from the area of primary Russian interest. This cool stance towards Palestine was caused by weakness of Soviets due to civil war; interval upheavals caused by Stalin's

---

11   Galina Yemelianova, "Russia and Islam: the History and Prospects of a Relationship", **Asian Affairs**, vol. 26 (1995), p. 284.

12   Yaacov Roi, "Soviet Policy in the Middle East", **Cahiers du monde Russe et Soviétique**, vol. 15 (1974), p. 374.

harshness; the enduring power of Britain and a possible British effort to destabilize Soviet Republics if Moscow attempts to assert itself in Middle East mandates of imperial powers.[13] Therefore, Russian policy of distancing itself from the Middle East as well as Palestine was in total alignment with pragmatic purposes, to abstain from any direct confrontation with imperial powers by the time Moscow consolidates its power and attains stability. This policy is best exemplified in Soviet relations with Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan with whom Russia signed treaty of friendship in 1921 but invaded the last two of them and demanded territorial concessions from Turkey immediately after Moscow returned to the great powers scene. This pragmatic and cautious Soviet policy, which prevented Moscow from a confrontation with colonial powers for the sake of fixed aspiration derived from ideology, is clearly stated in the famous Long Telegram:

Soviet power, unlike that of Hitlerite Germany, is neither schematic nor adventurist.

Post-War Change in Soviet Policy towards the Middle East

It was towards the end of the WWII that Moscow inclined to change its stance towards Arabs in the Middle East. During the war, nearly all Arab countries were ruled by pro-Western governments under the mandate regimes. Although the peoples of Arab countries were receptive to Soviet ideology and propaganda, the Soviets could not penetrate into the region via *ideas*. That Soviet influence infused into the minds of people did not lead to a Soviet presence in the region which would help Moscow promote its vital interests in the Middle East. Under these circumstance, there arouse a chance for a Soviet foothold in the region: the new state of Israel.

The Causes for Soviet interest in the Middle East

However, before proceeding to the reasons for a change in the Soviet policy towards support for Arabs, it is worth examining the causes for vital Soviet

---

13   Rashid Khalidi, **Sowing Crises**, Boston 2009, p. 64.

interest in the region which made Moscow to hold onto an instrument to keep a foot in the Middle East.

For Russia under Romanovs, the prime Russian Middle East policy was to get free passage through Turkish straits and attain a warm water port. For Soviet Russia, absence of Russian presence in the Middle East did not pose a direct and existential threat to Moscow. In alignment with Soviet weakness, Moscow abstained from making direct attempt to penetrate into the region so as not to confront Britain or France in the process of internal consolidation.

However, after WWII, the Middle East's strategic and geopolitical importance necessitated Russian physical presence there. Immediately after Yalta conference, the United States planned a base in Dhahran in addition to the other Western bases. Considering that Russian oil facilities and heavy industry was moved to east and south during the war, Russian critically crucial industrial areas fell within strike range of Western missiles and bombs.[14] This fact, as well as the psychology of being encircled, is best reflected in the famous Novikov Telegram to warn Soviet government about an increasing threat from the USA:

The strengthening of U.S. positions in the Near East and establishment of conditions for basing the American navy at once or more points on the Mediterranean Sea will signify the emergence of a new threat to the security of the southern regions of the Soviet Union.

The main incentives for American presence in the Middle East were oil and Soviet containment.[15] Put differently, Soviets could curb the American power and get rid of American encirclement only through attaining some footholds in the Middle East. While what served Russia's interests under Romanovs best was to hold the official right to guardianship of Eastern Orthodox Christians,

---

14   Khalidi, **Ibid**, p. 53.

15   John Campbell, "The Soviet Union and the United States in the Middle East",
      The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, vol. 401
      (1972) p. 127.

Soviet interests lay in not to confront colonial empires consolidation before WWII. However, what could best serve Russian interests in the Middle East after WWII in a *contained* surrounding was to obtain a presence in the Middle East so as to balance a possible US threat from the southern flank of Russia, break the Northern Tier, and let the West less access to oil. Russia needed a cause to attain this goal, which could have been offered by a new state, Israel.

Soviet Flirtation with Israel

Britain started to be more receptive to Palestinian Arabs since 1939 White Paper while Jewish inhabitants of Palestine were in fight against British forces after the end of WWII. Socialist orientation of the Zionist movement was another incentive to use Israel as a springboard to penetrate the Middle East. As stated by a Soviet diplomat, collaboration with progressive Jews of Palestine promised for Moscow more than backward Arabs who were controlled by feudal cliques of kings and effendis.[16] Additionally, considering that all Arab states were still either under imperial mandates or ruled by Western-friendly governments, Israel could be enticed to be a socialist island among these Arab states and provide a base to counter Western power in Mediterranean Sea.

In 1947, on the contrary to three decades of Soviet policy to support Palestinian liberation movement and consider Zionism as an agency of British Imperialism, Moscow decided to support the partition plan and rushed to become the first state to *de jure* recognize Israel at the expense of alienating the Arab world which used to be supported as a part of Soviet policy to back anti-imperialism and national liberation movements.

While as late as 1946, the USSR denounced the partition of Palestine and called instead for a unified Arab-Jewish state in Palestine, it broke with its former stance and recognized the Israeli state in 1948[17] Soviet Union neither questioned the legitimacy of Israel nor withdrew its recognition after that date.

---

16   Krammer, **Ibid**, p. 109.

17   Kreutz, "Russian-Palestinian Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis", p. 5.

The Palestinian issue, which gradually developed since the first aliyah in 1882, reached a critical point first with the partition plan then the establishment of the state of Israel. The role that the great powers of the post-WWII era played in the evolution of the problem is undeniable. Soviet Russia not only supported the partition plan but also widely contributed to the survival of the state of Israel in its Independence War. The indirect Soviet aid to IDF, via weapon sales from Czechoslovakia, was vital to the outcome of the war and led to greater Israeli territorial gain and about 700 000 Palestinian Arabs to be refugees.

After the first Arab-Israeli war, Moscow signed and supported UN Resolution 194 which did not call for a Palestinian state but reduced the issues to a refugee problem by stating their right to return or compensation.

However, Soviet attempt to infiltrate into the Middle East and find an ally there failed as Israel sided with Western powers in Korean War and proved not to be a Soviet ally.

While Soviet support to the Israeli side in the Palestinian issue had already failed to produce any fruit to the advantage of Moscow, the Soviet Union's prestige and presence in the Arab world was virtually non-existent when Stalin died on 5 March 1953. [18] Moscow was short of grounds to encroach into the Middle East.

Soviet Penetration into the Middle East

As late as mid-1950s, Soviets lacked the strategic and geopolitical parity with the US in the Middle East to counter its power and influence. By that time, Soviet Union was already contained by the Northern Tier; the US was expanding its strength via military pacts to the detriment of Moscow such as Baghdad Pact; US naval power was dominant in the Mediterranean Sea with the Sixth Fleet patrolling it and the US had already obtained a number of bases in the region.

---

18   Rubinstein, **Ibid**, p. 81.

The ascension of Khrushchev to power changed the Soviet policy vis-à-vis the Third World. Khrushchev, abandoning the isolationist policy of Stalin and the re*volution in one country* concept, introduced the *peaceful coexistence* principle. It foresaw a peaceful competition with the West and re-defined the Soviet priorities; finding common grounds with the Third Word to cooperate rather than putting weigh on ideological considerations. Soviets started to support any development to strengthen socialism or undermine American imperialism.[19] Based on the idea of anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism, Moscow started to support nationalist regimes and their non-alignment policies. In addition to attaining atom bomb in 1949, hydrogen bomb in 1953, Moscow successfully launched Sputnik, which meant that any distance on the earth was within strike range of Soviet nuclear weapons. These developments accelerated Soviet efforts to challenge American power throughout the world and check it in the Middle East.

Under these circumstances, Soviet leaders found regional disputes in the Arab East which could ease Soviet entry into the region.[20] Overthrowing the Egyptian monarchy in 1952, Nasser, the leader of the Free Officers, followed a nonaligned foreign policy within the framework of his policy to accommodate Egypt in the centre of three circles: Africa, Arab states and Muslim world. Pursuing leadership within these circles, Nasser's policy was greatly undermined by the Gaza Raid in 1955. This marked an important date for Soviet penetration into the Middle East. Refused by the US administration to arm the Egyptian army, Nasser turned to Moscow. The relations between Soviets and Egypt developed as Nasser reached Soviet weapons via Czechoslovakia; the USSR started economic aid for the Aswan Dam, and Moscow sent an ultimatum to cease the aggression in the Suez war to protect Egypt. However, that Nasser accepted US aid for wheat as late as 1965 proves that Soviet Union could not provide loyalty of Egypt so as to secure its interests in the region by

---

19 Georgy Korniyenko, "Soviet Policy in the Middle East"', **Russia's Muslim Frontiers**, (ed. D. Eickelman), Indianapolis 1993, p. 40.

20 Rubinstein, **Ibid**, p. 81.

preserving the alliance of Nasser. Overall, the post-Stalin restructuring of
Soviet foreign policy, the developments in the region and the increasing need
to counter American influence in the Middle East laid the ground for Soviet
penetration into the Middle East. [21]

In 1964, Moscow opened Mediterranean Squadron so as to balance
American presence in this geopolitically and strategically crucial region.
Accordingly, this presence would be further facilitated by obtaining the right to
access Egyptian ports in the Mediterranean in 1966. In the same period, Nasser
was being pushed by Syria and Jordan to put the Palestinian issue *out of the
ice box*. Accusations such as "going soft on Israel", "selling out Palestinians
for wheat", and "hiding behind UNEF's skirts" led to Cairo Summit in 1964
where the parts agreed on a United Arab Command to be operational in 1967. [22]
The ascension to power of the radical wing of Baath in Syria under Salah
Jadid would have another impact on Soviet wariness over immersing into
Arab-Israeli conflict. Backing the Fatah Fadayeen for their assault on Israeli
territories and pushing Nasser to a showdown with Israel, Syria adopted a
more radical stance towards the Palestinian issue. These developments were
preparing the grounds for a change in the Soviet policy vis-à-vis the Middle
East conflict.

The mid-1960s, when Soviet Union evolved into an imperial power with a
global reach, [23] marked the beginning of the Soviet policy vis-à-vis the Arab-
Israeli conflict. Although still sustaining diplomatic ties with Israel, applying
self-restraint not to fully align with any side in the conflict and avoiding any
friction which would lead to a direct confrontation with the US, Moscow, soon
would have to take sides in this question so as to maintain its interests which
are promoted by revolutionary Arab regimes. [24]

---

21   Galia Golan, **Soviet Policies in the Middle East**, Cambridge 1990, p. 45.

22   Michael Oren, **Six Days of War**, Oxford 2002, pp. 19, 20.

23   Campbell, "The Soviet Union in the Middle East", p. 3.

24   Jerome Slater, "The Superpowers and an Arab-Israeli Political Settlement",
      Political Science Quarterly, vol. 105 (1990-1991) p. 565.

June War and its Aftermath

As the Soviets were distanced from effects of Stalinism, which did not favor neutralism, the Russian interests in the Middle East could be better promoted through taking advantage of nationalist, anti-Zionist, anti-Western and radical feelings among Arab people.[25] The rapprochement between Soviets and revolutionary Arab regimes were not based on a common ideological basis. Furthermore, both Nasser and the Baath regime in Syria were hostile to communist parties but this did not pose a threat to Soviet-Arab relations. Their socialist tendencies, anti-American stances, eagerness to cooperate were influential to Soviet penetration in the region. As long as the strings between the Arab regimes and the US or Israel were strained, the Soviets would find Arab regimes volunteer to collaborate with Moscow to check American power in the Middle East.

That Moscow preferred a controlled tension which would keep Arabs close to the Soviets rather than a showdown with Israel is mirrored in Soviet-supplied arms to Arab regimes. The Soviets supplied Arab regimes with simple or defensive weapons in which Moscow was motivated by a number of factors. Firstly, Moscow did not want to generate overconfidence in Arab regimes which could result in a defeat and harm Soviet prestige in the world. Secondly, the Soviets recognized the existence of the state of Israel. Thirdly, Moscow avoided a direct confrontation with the US. Lastly, Moscow did not want to risk losing the secrets of its weapons in case of a defeat.[26] Likewise, it is doubtful that Soviets aimed at provoking a war, rather than straining the strings, when Soviet President Podgorny warned the Egypt Administration in 1967 that there was a massive Israeli military build-up in the south of Syria. Considering that a war would risk a direct confrontation between the superpowers; that Soviets armed the Arab armies with defensive weapons; that a possible failure would ruin the positive Soviet image in the third world; and that Moscow maintained

---

25 George Lenczowski, **Soviet Advances in the Middle East**, Washington 1974, p. 57.

26 Lenczowski, **Ibid**, p. 61.

keeping diplomatic ties with Israel, it is not plausible the Soviets aimed at triggering a war. As stated by Golan, Moscow may have politically been motivated to strengthen Atassi regime, ruled by Alawi minority, by distracting the public attention from domestic affairs to the tension on the southern front.[27] Additionally, the Soviet hope was that some troop movements would deter Israel from a possible regime change which it threatened to do after increasing *fedayeen* attacks from southern Syria.[28]

Even though Soviet motivation was not to provoke a war, it was not long before the war ended that Soviets saw their military equipment were destroyed by the IDF including most of Egyptian warplanes without taking off to fight. The war marked a turning point in the non-alignment of Moscow vis-à-vis Arab-Israeli conflict. On the last day of the war, Moscow dispatched a message to the White House threatening to *take the necessary actions including military* unilaterally if Israel did not end its fight on the Syrian front which could give rise to the fall of Soviet-friendly Atassi regime. This threat also put Soviets and Israel on opposite sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict and aligned Moscow further with Arab regimes.

The June war was a heavy blow to Soviet prestige not only in the Middle East but also in the Third World. The Soviet support in emergency cases and the effectiveness of the Soviet arms started to be questioned. In order to soothe the Arab public and not to risk negative repercussions of the war, Soviets broke diplomatic ties with Israel. This was another step in that the Soviet Union turned out to be a part in the Middle East conflict and side with the Arabs in it. Therefore, traditional Soviet policy of differentiating the creed Zionism from the country Israel[29] was undermined. Even though Moscow never questioned the legitimacy of the state of Israel, the Soviet interests no longer allowed keeping the balance between the parties.

---

27   Golan, **Ibid**, p. 67.

28   Slater, **Ibid**, p. 566.

29   Hashim Behbehani, **The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism**, London 1986, p. 226.

Refraining from losing the foothold it grabbed in the Middle East to check the US power; Soviets took additional steps and tried to maintain its position. Moscow soon started to make up for the military loss of Arab regimes. Although still supporting the political solution to the conflict rather than a military showdown, Moscow could not resist Arab demands. In a meeting between Nasser and Podgorny after the war, Podgorny insisted on traditional Soviet policy of political solution whereas he submitted to Egyptian demands for weapons.[30] Accordingly, as late as 1970, all Egyptian military losses were covered while Soviet deliveries to Syria nearly tripled its air force strength.[31]

The Soviet strategy since Stalin was to raise its power in the Middle East via invitation and not coercion.[32] Therefore, Soviets sustained this policy, which opened the way in 1955, to further its interests in the region. As opposed to imperialist powers like Britain and France, Russia settled in the region upon calls by the indigenous Arabs after the June war. Therefore, The USSR was very successful in turning the defeat of its proxies into a strategic gaining. The Soviet presence in the region was reinforced through arms deals and Soviet military personnel. In addition to combat airplanes and other weapons, Soviets provided Egypt with more sophisticated systems such as SAM-2, SAM-3 surface to air missiles, Frog-3 and Samlet ground-to ground missiles. Soviet influence was furthered by deployment of Soviet military personnel in Egypt to train Egyptian army and use the sophisticated weapons. For this purpose, estimated 15 000-20 000 Soviet personnel were brought to the region. Additionally, the disastrous end of the war for Arabs provided Moscow with one naval and five air bases in Egypt and a still-serving naval base in Tartus, Syria. This was a crucial success for USSR to check American military power in the Middle East because USSR at that time had no aircraft carriers of its own to balance the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean.[33] Maintaining this

---

30   Oren, **Ibid**, p. 318.

31   Lenczowski, **Ibid**, pp. 150, 153.

32   Laqueur, **Ibid**, p. 296.

33   Robert Freedman, **Israel's First 50 Years**, Gainesville 2000, p. 4.

advantage was bound to cooperation of Nasser who fought with Palestinians against the Jewish in the 1948-49 war and "felt [he] was really defending [his] home and children."[34] As a result, Moscow reconsidered its non-alignment in the Arab-Israel conflict after the June war to promote its vital interests in the region and those interests tilted Moscow completely to the Arab side.

Soviet Union and Diplomatic Efforts

As stated by Khouri, it was due to the unresolved Arab-Israeli problem which enabled Moscow in 1955 to spread its influence in the Arab world.[35] Moscow would easily continue to enlarge its penetration and influence in the region if the conflict went on to exist in a way advantageous to Arabs. The result of the June war proved the opposite. The stalemate in the negotiations would be of great benefit to Israel who would keep holding occupied territories based on the status quo. Furthermore, as the status quo and stalemate between the parts continued to exist, Soviet prestige and credibility in Arab eyes would erode. This could give the US the needed ground to undermine Soviet presence in the Middle East, in particular Egypt. In fact, this is what happened after Sadat assumed power. Therefore, the aftermath of the June war saw Soviet efforts to find a negotiated settlement to the problem.

Moscow saved its distinctive position in the conflict: to find political solution to the problem and recognize the existence of Israel. Moscow cooperated with the US in the UN Resolution 242 which called for *withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict as well as acknowledgment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force*. This resolution was in alignment with the traditional Soviet stance toward Palestinian issue since 1949. The Resolution was a reduction of Palestinian issue to "just settlement of the refugee problem" which also signified no change in Soviet

---

34   Gamal Abdel Nasser, **The Philosophy of the Revolution**, Cairo 1955, p. 61.

35   Fred Khouri, **The Arab Israeli Dilemma**, New York 1885, p. 518

policy. However, a political settlement could have saved Soviet interests in a totally unacceptable status quo for Arabs. Therefore, the USSR opted for a comprehensive resolution of the conflict while the US tried to take advantage of the ongoing crisis by state-to-state talks.[36]

On the other hand, too much Soviet pressure on Arabs could harm the Soviet penetration and interests in the Middle East.[37] Therefore, Soviets tried to keep the balance between providing Arab regimes with weapons and solving the conflict through negotiations. Put differently, the Soviet Union was eager to give the Arabs enough to resist American and Israel terms for peace but not enough to enforce their own.[38] Soviets continued to seek for a negotiated solution to the problem within the framework of Jarring Mission, Big Four[39] Talks, Bilateral Negotiations with the US and Soviet Plan in accordance with Resolution 242. In fact, Moscow was successful in bringing the radical Arab regimes to its side within UN Resolution. Shortly after war, Egypt was eager to conclude a peace treaty accepting the existence of Israel and formalizing the pre-1967 borders. In 1968, Egyptian Foreign Minister declared that they accepted the realities and one of those was Israel. Likewise, Syria agreed to the UN Resolution in 1972, much later than Egypt though.[40]

However, the unfruitful negotiations and diverse attempts to find a political solution proved to be detrimental to the Soviet efforts to protect its interests in the region. Firstly, the process could motivate Arabs to look for alternative options. Within this framework, the War of Attrition was an economic burden to the Soviets, for they had to provide the Arab armies with required military equipment. It was also contrary to Soviet policy to avoid a direct confrontation with the US. However, the Soviets participated by sending their own pilots to

---

36   Yevgeni Primakov, **Rusyasız Dünya**, Istanbul 2010, p. 205.

37   Golan, **Ibid**, p. 70.

38   Richard Herrmann, "Soviet Policy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Actions, Patterns, and Interpretations", **Political Science Quarterly**, vol. 102 (1987), p. 425.

39   The US, USSR, Britain, France

40   Khouri, **Ibid**, pp. 362, 367.

fight in the War of Attrition just to soothe the Arabs; prevent Arabs from turning
to the US; and most likely to prevent further humiliation of an ally which could
lead to the fall of the regime.[41] Secondly, the unproductive negotiation process
could provide new openings for the US to arbitrate in the problem unilaterally.

In 1969 January, President Nixon assumed office in Washington. Nixon
and his foreign policy advisor Kissinger accorded the new American policy
in accordance with the worldwide rivalry between the US and the USSR, and
preventing the increase of Soviet influence in the Middle East.[42] Accordingly,
the Rogers Plan, proposed at the end of 1969, aimed at curbing Soviet influence
by manipulating the peace process unilaterally.

Nevertheless, Soviets continued to press for a negotiated solution even
within the framework of the Rogers Plan and offered Israel in 1971 to resume
diplomatic relations if the 1967 borders were restored.[43] It was clear that
deadlock would not serve Soviet interest and could risk a possible Arab turn to
the US for solution because Soviets avoided providing the Arabs with offensive
weapons. Nevertheless, the interwar period did not result in any negotiated
settlement between the parts.

Change in Egypt

The death of Nasser in 1970 was the start of a change in Egypt's policy.
Having assumed power, Sadat started talks with the US and pushed for a quick
solution to lost territories. Disappointed by the unfruitful trials at reaching
political solutions, not eager to sustain *no war, no peace* situation, Sadat
declared 1971 the year of decision. In the same year, Soviet-Egyptian *Treaty
of Friendship and Cooperation* was signed. Long sought after by Nasser,
Moscow did not sign such a treaty not to officially engage itself in Arab-Israeli
conflict. This time, it was Soviet initiative that brought such a treaty because

---

41   Herrmann, **Ibid**, p. 423.

42   Khouri, **Ibid**, p. 362.

43   Slater, **Ibid**, p. 573.

of Soviet suspects about the position of Sadat.[44] The treaty could provide the Soviets with the ability to check the new openings in the Egyptian policy and keep Egypt among the Soviet allies by formalizing the alliance.

However, Soviet policy of avoiding confrontation with the US, by forcing Soviet clients to political settlement and setting limitations on the offensive arms, angered Sadat. Soviet suspects would soon prove to be valid when Sadat expelled thousands of Soviet advisors and personnel from Egypt. Even though the Soviets sustained their bases in the country, this was a huge blow to Soviet prestige and influence in the region. Sadat, seeking a solution via the US, would not serve the Soviet interests in the Middle East on the contrary to cooperation with Nasser. However, Moscow was already laying the grounds for a Plan B which would help preserve its interests in the region: the relations with the PLO.

Soviet Rapprochement with the PLO

The Soviet Union remained cool and cautious towards the PLO after its establishment in 1964 until the June War.[45] While the PLO aimed at destroying the state of Israel and establishing a Palestinian State, Moscow always recognized Israel as a fact. Furthermore, during the years preceding the 1967 war, Palestinians looked to Nasser for a solution to the problem and it was sufficient for Moscow to hold close relations with Nasser to take advantage of the Palestinian and Arab sympathy. Additionally, until June War, Moscow viewed the Arab-Israeli conflict as a conflict between states and categorically saw the Palestinian issue as a refugee problem rather than a national liberation movement.[46] Even though Russia voted for UN Resolution to divide Palestinian mandate into two states, it recognized the Israel state but did not push for the establishment of a Palestinian state and accepted the status quo which put Palestinian territories under Egypt and Jordanian administration. Voting for

---

44   Golan, **Ibid**, p. 77.

45   Kreutz, **Ibid** p. 49.

46   Golan, **Ibid**, p. 110

the UN resolution 242, Moscow reiterated its view of the Palestinian issue as a refugee problem. Put differently, the Soviets saw the problem as a humanitarian issue rather than a political one.[47]

Additionally, the Soviet Union preferred to work with established governments in the Middle East.[48] However, the PLO was neither an established administration nor had unity and cohesion. It was a combination of different groups aimed at annihilating Israel. Moreover, the terrorist attacks of Palestinian *fedayeen* from neighbouring Arab countries could provoke a war with Israel and lead to a direct confrontation with the US.

Things began to change after the June war in 1967. One of the most important results of the June War was the rise of Palestinian nationalism[49] and the fact that it was no longer plausible to rely on Arab military power for liberation of Palestinian territories. The Palestinian problem already started to rank in the agenda of Arab states lower than the occupied territories. Under these conditions, Nasser no longer proved to be a unifying factor of Arab public opinion by advocating the Palestinian Arabs. However, the PLO turned out to be a key figure to fill out the space Egypt and other states left. According to Primakov, especially the Battle of Karameh in March 1968, which exceptionally boosted the the PLO prestige, made PLO the sole owner of Palestinian cause to establish Palestinian state.[50]

In July 1968, Nasser took Yasser Arafat to the Soviet Union, which formalized the contact between the PLO and Moscow. The visit gave fruit just a year later making a shift in Soviet stance toward the Palestinian issue. In June 1969, Moscow gave up reducing Palestinian issue to a refugee problem

---

47   Aryeh Yodfat and Yuval Arnon-Ohanna, **PLO Strategy and Tactics,** London 1981, p. 85.

48   David P. Forsythe, "the Soviets and the Arab-Israeli Conflict", **World Affairs**, vol. 134 (1971), p. 135.

49   Khouri, **Ibid**, p. 356.

50   Yevgeni Primakov, **Rusların Gözüyle Ortadoğu**, Istanbul 2009, p. 280.

and recognized Palestinians as a nation with the right to self-determination.[51] This was a turning point in PLO-Soviet relations because the Soviets could now view the PLO as a national liberation movement and could manipulate it as unifying factor among revolutionary Arab regimes.

In the process that started with the failure of Jarring Mission and announcement of the Rogers Plan at the end of 1969, Washington was striving for a decreased Soviet influence in the Middle East via attempts to unilaterally mediate the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Soviet disadvantage could be balanced with close relations with the PLO which emerged as a key figure in the conflict. Furthermore, the Americans still had no contact with this nascent crucial actor, which provided Moscow superiority over Washington in negotiated settlements.

In 1970, Arafat led his own delegation to the Soviet Union. However, Moscow still kept its caution towards the PLO and abstained from providing it with military equipment or recognizing it as a representative of Palestinian Arabs. This stance mirrored in Soviet position in the Black September when Moscow prevented its ally Syria to intervene on behalf of the PLO. A break in Soviet-PLO relations came with Sadat who assumed power in 1970 and started to re-orientate Egyptian foreign policy to find a solution to occupied territories. When in 1971 Sadat started to assert a more Soviet-free Egyptian policy and at last expelled the Soviet advisors as well as the military staff in 1972, Soviets were already getting closer to PLO which emerged as a major force in Arab-Israeli conflict following the June war.[52] On the same year when Sadat expelled Soviet personnel from Egypt, Moscow started to supply the PLO with Soviet arms.

Even though Soviet-PLO relations started to develop gradually after the June War, Moscow did not deviate from its traditional position to recognize

---

51 Kreutz, 'Russian-Palestinian Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis', p. 10.

52 Khouri, **Ibid**, p. 356.

Israel as a fact. Moreover, Moscow was not prepared to recognize the idea of a Palestinian state which aroused many Soviet questions: "How big? Where? When?"[53] It was clear that even if the Soviet Union supported a Palestinian state, it would be a state only in the West Bank and Gaza strip that was contrary to PLO demands of establishing a secular democratic state in all of Palestine. Additionally, Moscow tried to prevent PLO from terrorist attacks on Israel because the guerrillas could intensify Israel's desire to stay in the occupied territories for security reasons.[54] This could have blocked a possible solution, provoked a new war or turned Arabs to Washington instead of an incapable Moscow in returning occupied Arab territories.

On the brink of the October War, Moscow was experiencing bitter times with its greatest ally in the Middle East and about to lose it. The US was seeking to exclude Soviets from peace talks to curb its influence in the Middle East. Moscow countered these two moves in two steps. Firstly, Soviets tried to replace with PLO the loss of Egypt, which was a unifying force of revolutionary Arab states behind Moscow and the cornerstone of Soviet policies in the Middle East. Secondly, Moscow balanced with the PLO the American attempt to unilaterally mediate the Arab-Israeli conflict to decrease Soviet prestige in the region. As stated by Campbell, PLO connection kept the Soviet Union in the game and gave it an advantage over the United States[55] especially because Washington now could talk to both Egypt and Israel but not to the post-June war key element of the conflict.

Conclusion

Russia has got a long history of interest in the Middle East which dates back to the middle ages. Even though the incentives for Russian interest could have different forms in different periods, there is a consistency of Russian

---

53   Galia Golan, "the Soviet Union and the PLO", **The Palestinians and the Middle East Conflict,** (ed. G. Ben Dor), Tel Aviv 1978, p. 231

54   Forsythe, **Ibid**, p. 135.

55   Campbell, "The Soviet Union in the Middle East Middle", p. 9.

attempt to infiltrate the region. As stated by Krammer, Russian involvement in the Middle East follows a national tradition that has survived all the problems of internal struggles, ideology, religious differences, and innumerable failures interrupted by occasional dazzling success which mark the course of Russian history.[56] Especially after the World War II, Russian interests necessitated to check the Western, in particular American, power which was embodied in bases, Mediterranean Fleet and pacts with some Arab states. Accordingly, this physical presence in the Middle East posed a direct threat to Russian *soft underbelly*, the south Soviet territories where industrial and oil regions are concentrated. Considering the success of the Northern Tier in encircling the USSR, Soviet interests lay in breaking this deadlock. Additionally, during the cold war, when a zero-sum game played between two superpowers, any Soviet-friendly regime would change the balance of power to Soviet advantage by depriving the West of its economic privileges.

Having emerged as a great power in the wake of the Second World War, the Soviets attempted twice to acquire a foothold in the Middle East: by intimidating Turkey and Iran to territorial concessions and supporting the establishment of the of Israel. However, the Soviets were only able to penetrate the Middle East only through *the door opened* by the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Soviets did not aim at being a part of the conflict which could lead to a superpower confrontation. However, Soviet foreign policy, driven by promoting Soviet interests in the Middle East, necessitated a Soviet involvement in this conflict. After the June War, promoting Soviet policy could only be achieved through an open support for Arab regimes. Damaged Soviet prestige in the Third World and the risk of losing the recently-acquired foothold in the Middle East resulted in Soviets' taking a side in the Middle-East conflict. Having assumed power, Sadat followed a foreign policy to the detriment of Soviet interests. Soviet attempt to counter a possible loss of the cornerstone of Russian Middle East policy necessitated a developing relationship between Moscow and PLO. So as to make up for the possible loss of Egypt and to defuse American attempt

---

56   Krammer, **Ibid**, p. 102.

to exclude the Soviets from negotiations, Moscow started to revise its position towards the PLO. Without talking to the PLO, the Middle East crisis would not be resolved and now the USSR could take advantage of this privilege in order to preserve its already acquired interests in the region. As a result, Moscow ended up as a key player in the Arab-Israeli conflict question which could no longer be resolved without external interventions.[57]

Consequently, the interwar period between the June and October Wars saw Soviet involvement in the Middle East conflict and, subsequently, evolving Soviet role in this conflict. In this period, Soviets became completely engaged in the Arab-Israeli conflict and consolidated its role as the patron of *progressive* Arab regimes. Also, these years produced a Soviet Union no longer having diplomatic relations with Israel but developing affinity with the PLO. This resulted in Moscow taking a side in the conflict for the sake of preserving and maintaining Soviet gaining in the heart of Arab peoples. After the October War, when loss of Egypt as an ally was guaranteed, the Soviets would elevate relations with the PLO and Soviet authorities would, at last, recognize the PLO as the ''sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people'' in 1978. Pursuing the Soviet interests in the Middle East, Moscow evolved from being a supporter of Israel to being the patron of the Palestinian liberation movement.

---

57   Yevgeni Primakov, **Politikanın Mayınlı Tarlası**, İstanbul 2008, p. 275.

REFERENCES

- ABDEL NASSER, Gamal, **The Philosophy of the Revolution**, Cairo 1955.

- BEHBEHANI, Hashim, **The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism**, London 1986.

- CAMPBELL, John, "The Soviet Union and the United States in the Middle East", **The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science**, Vol. 401 (1972).

- CAMPBELL, John, "The Soviet Union in the Middle East", **Middle East Journal**, Vol. 32 (1978).

- FORSYTHE, David P., "the Soviets and the Arab-Israeli Conflict", **World Affairs**, Vol. 134 (1971).

- FREEDMAN, Robert, **Israel's First 50 Years**, Gainesville 2000.

- GOLAN, Galia, "The Soviet Union and the PLO", **The Palestinians and the Middle East Conflict,** (ed. G. Ben Dor), Tel Aviv 1978.

- GOLAN, Galia, **Soviet Policies in the Middle East**, Cambridge 1990.

- HERRMANN, Richard, "Soviet Policy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Actions, Patterns, and Interpretations", **Political Science Quarterly**, Vol: 102 (1987).

- KHALIDI, Rashid, **Sowing Crises**, Boston 2009.

- KHOURY, Fred, **The Arab Israeli Dilemma**, New York 1885.

- KORNIYENKO, Georgy, "Soviet Policy in the Middle East"', **Russia's Muslim Frontiers**, (ed. D. Eickelman), Indianapolis 1993.

- KRAMMER, Arnold, "Soviet Motives in the Partition of Palestine", **Journal of Palestine Studies**, Vol. 2 (1973).

- KREUTZ, Andrej, "Russian-Palestinian Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis", **Journal of Military and Strategic Studies**, Vol.6 (2004).

- KREUTZ, Andrej, **Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?** Connecticut 2007.

- LAQUEUR, Walter, "Russia Enters the Middle East", **Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 47 (1969).

- LENCZOWSKI, George, **Soviet Advances in the Middle East**, Washington 1974.

- MAHMOOD, Mahrez, **Soviet Policy towards the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1948-1988**, New Delhi 1989.

- MORGENTHAU, Hans, **Politics Among Nations,** New York 1993.

- OREN, Michael, **Six Days of War**, Oxford 2002.

- PRIMAKOV, Yevgeni, **Politikanın Mayınlı Tarlası**, Istanbul 2008.

- PRIMAKOV, Yevgeni, **Rusların Gözüyle Ortadoğu**, Istanbul 2009.

- PRIMAKOV, Yevgeni, **Rusyasız Dünya**, Istanbul 2010.

- ROI, Yaacov, "Soviet Policy in the Middle East", **Cahiers du monde Russe et Soviétique**, Vol. 15 (1974).

- RUBINSTEIN, Alvin, "The Middle East in Russia's Strategic Prism", **Diplomacy in the Middle East** (ed. Carl Brown), London 2004.

- SLATER, Jerome, "The Superpowers and an Arab-Israeli Political Settlement", **Political Science Quarterly**, Vol. 105 (1990-1991).

- YEMELİANOVA, Galina, "Russia and Islam: the History and Prospects of a Relationship", **Asian Affairs**, Vol. 26 (1995).

- YODFAT, Aryeh and ARNON-OHANNA, Yuval, **PLO Strategy and Tactics,** London 1981.