

Cold War Politics in the Middle East

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This paper shall focus on the Cold War between 1955 and 1983, largely with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This paper judges Soviet interests in the Middle East throughout the Cold war to be threefold. First, the Soviets attempted to achieve strategic parity with the United States, by expanding its naval and military reach through Middle Eastern ports and bases, and securing positions of geostrategic strength. Second, with the Soviets intent upon the ideological domination of Eurasia, the Soviets nurtured local Communist movements in the Middle East, and curried favor with anti-Israeli, nationalist, Middle Eastern regimes. Finally, the Soviets, recognizing the necessity of prolonged entrenchment in the Middle East to achieve long-term ambitions of hegemony, "sought to prevent the alleviation of regional conflict thereby assuring the USSR of continued access to the region, while also seeking to prevent the escalation of these conflicts to the level of superpower confrontation"[1]. Against this agenda of Soviet power projection and the integration of the Middle East into the Soviet sphere of interest, this paper finds United State's ambition in the region were largely the opposite. America sought to deny the Soviets access to Middle Eastern territory and, through the policy of containment, inhibit the expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence. This defensive agenda has been complemented by the guardianship of Israel, attempts to broker Arab Israeli peace, and preserve US access to oil.

With regards to achieving these objectives, this paper delivers a verdict of broad Soviet failure and qualified American success. In measuring the level of success achieved by both parties, the following will be examined. First, Soviet gains in the Middle East at America's expense will be discussed with respect to the Soviet-Syrian and, critically, the Soviet-Egyptian, relationship pre-1973. Then, rebuttals to Soviet gains shall be presented, highlighting the limits of Soviet penetration America's success in retaining the allegiance of the Middle East's "Northern Tier" and then citing Soviet inability to nourish an indigenous Communist movement and control its clients. The 1973 war and Egypt's subsequent estrangement from the Soviet Union will then be discussed as an ultimately fatal event in securing Soviet interests. To press the point regarding Soviet weakness, America's effective wooing of erstwhile Soviet allies will be addressed. Then, America's marginalization of the Soviet Union during the Arab-Israeli peace process will be examined. Finally, the loss of Iran, and the America's vulnerability to the oil weapon, will be poised as a counterpoint to broad American success.

The central strategic agenda of the Soviet Union, as mentioned, was neutralizing the American strategic advantage in Eurasia, and assuming a position of increased geostrategic strength through establishing naval and military bases throughout the region. In this regard, the Soviets, beginning in 1955, found a promising start and fertile grounds for Soviet expansion in Syria and Egypt. With Egypt at the cultural and political center of the Arab world, and the acutely felt vulnerability of Syria to the adjoining Israel and unfriendly Western-backed neighbors, the Soviets were able to exploit the "tide of Arab nationalism and...Arab-Israeli enmity"[2]. Given ready recipients of patronage, the Soviets "by meeting Abdel Nasser's need for massive deliveries of modern arms in 1955 [and] by taking up the role of arms supplier and protector of...Syria"[3], in addition to "Soviet political support in response to the Suez crisis which persisted through the Six-Day war"[4] reaped substantial strategic dividends. Soviet provision of patronage, resulted in "accommodation of Soviet strategic interests, in the form of naval and air facilities"[5].

The aforementioned Soviet military entrenchment neutralized the American strategic advantage in several respects. First, Hanson Baldwin asserts that "Soviet control of bases in Egypt and Syria...neutralize[d] the present Western geographic and base advantage"[6] held in Saudi Arabia and Cyprus. Simply put, Soviets now had bases that

Cold War Politics in the Middle East

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numerically rivaled that of America in the Middle East. Further, however, with access to “strategic bomber bases” within range of America’s European allies, the Soviet nuclear deterrent capability was much enhanced. With regards to naval power, the Soviets, abetted by newfound “use of facilities in Alexandria, Port Said [and] Latkia” [7] were able to redress a great source of Soviet weakness: Western control of the Mediterranean. With the deployment of the US sixth fleet and Polaris nuclear submarines, outflanking “the strong Soviet positions in the Eastern European satellites and in Western Russia”[8], the West maintained a permanent and proximate threat to vulnerable Soviet territory. Accordingly, as Syrian and Egyptian ports provided inroads into the Mediterranean, the Soviet embarked upon a rapid naval buildup in the region, creating a permanent Mediterranean force. With “the presence of the Soviet squadron [demonstrating] the Mediterranean is no longer an American lake”[9], Soviet control of Middle Eastern naval facilities, “had the specific purpose of buttressing Soviet freedom of action and limiting that of the United States”[10].

Clearly then, the Soviets were able to parlay anti-Western sentiment, and provision of arms, aid and assistance, into strategic strength. However, the sources of Soviet strength also proved its limits: where anti-Israeli or anti-American sentiment ran dry, the Soviets made little headway. Thus, throughout the Cold War, the Soviets were largely unable to overcome the entrenchment of the United States in the most strategically valuable areas: Turkey, and Iran under the Shah. This “Northern Tier”, contiguous to Soviet territory, “continued to look to the United States for its supply of modern arms [and] has held to its security agreements with the United States...and to NATO”[11]. Despite employing the strategy of aid in exchange for influence, in increasing Soviet-Turkish trade, and extending “credits totaling \$500 million”[12] to Iran in 1965, the Soviets had little success in lowering the Northern Tier’s “barrier to direct territorial contact between the Soviet Union and its allies in the Arab world”[13]. Thus, despite Soviet strategic gains, and the partial outflanking of the northern Tier, the US geostrategic advantage, though eroded, remained.

Further highlighting the limits of Soviet strength, was its inability to expand its ideological sphere alongside its sphere of influence. The historical record does not corroborate the assertion that “indigenous Communists...aided with funds, propaganda, arms and experts”[14] were effective in nurturing “creeping communism, internal subversion, and conquest by proxy”[15]. Indeed, in this regard, Soviet penetration must be considered an absolute failure. As Fred Halliday observes, the Soviets “did not produce a pro-Soviet revolutionary movement”[16] in the Middle East. Further, the only potential mass communist movement of note, the Tudeh party in Iran, headed by Mossadegh, was peremptorily dealt a fatal blow by the US coup of 1953. Thus, Walter Lacqueur asserts “a dismal picture from the communist point of view”[17], wherein Soviet ideological expansion was restricted to the sponsorship of politically peripheral local Communists that proved either impotent resistant to direction from Moscow. With the “Iraqi communist party...in a state of disarray [and] in Syria, Lebanon, the Sudan and Yemen pro-Chinese factions...competing with the orthodox communists...the communist parties [had] no chance to become mass parties”[18]. Robert Freedman notes that this condition prevailed throughout the Cold war, observing that local Communist actions unsanctioned by Moscow, such as “the communist supported coup d’etat in Sudan in 1971...and the activities of the Tudeh party in Khomeini’s Iran”[19] “caused a sharp deterioration in relations between Moscow and [the local] Communist party”[20]

Bereft of any substantial ideological attraction, the provision of arms and aid in exchange for influence was the sole method of enticing Arab clients to the Soviet standard. To the credit of the Soviets, prior to 1973, it must be said this strategy served them well: bypassing the Bagdad pact and breaking the monopoly on arms sales held by the US in the Middle East, the Soviets were able to make themselves indispensable in fueling the warmaking desires of Arab states in the Arab Israeli conflict. Lacquer claims that in 1967, Nasser “[seemed] to have decided that he [had] no choice but to tie his fate to the Soviet alliance and to become absolutely dependent on this”[21]. Having hitched Egypt to the Soviet wagon, Nasser “welcomed the presence of Soviet forces in the Mediterranean and [purged] the army and the state apparatus of all people considered by Moscow to be undesirable”[22]. The Soviets thus, despite having little success in the way of cultivating local communism, managed to nonetheless gain a similar effect in expanding Communist influence. Soviet shows of support, and even force, in defense of their Arab protégés, as evinced in the replenishing of Arab military capabilities after the routing of the 1967 war, and in basing of “some 20,000 air and naval personnel in Egypt, which stopped the Israeli raids”[23] of 1970. also enhanced the Soviet cachet in the Arab world. Prior to 1972, the effectively monopoly the Soviet Union wielded as the arms dealer of the Arab world, “enabled the Soviet Union to appear as the only effective guardian of the Arab countries against a

Cold War Politics in the Middle East

Written by Sean Paul Ashley

Satanic conspiracy between Israel and the West"[24].

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the virtues of Soviet patronage, the connection between arms and influence was tenuous at best. In multiple cases it proved ineffective to align the interests of client states with the Soviet agenda, or to housebreak client states to Soviet control. The central example of these failings, and their undoing of Soviet objectives, is the war of 1973, and the events immediately preceding and prior, as will be addressed below.

As of the Moscow Summit of 1972, the Soviets found themselves torn between, "Moscow's opposition to a war, and the deepening of superpower détente", and its countervailing commitment as military patron to an Arab world intent on prosecuting war against Israel. However, the attempt to frustrate Egypt's warmaking plans by denying them "defensive and tactical offensive weapons"[25], was met with Sadat's expulsion of 20,000 Soviet military advisors from Egypt. Unable to turn Egypt from its course, the Soviets were compelled, with reluctance, to abandon détente. Nevertheless, the Soviet commitment to détente again "prompted the Soviet union once again to risk disfavor with the Arabs by pressing them to agree to a ceasefire almost immediately after the opening of hostilities"[26]. As demonstrated, the horizon of Soviet superpower ambitions was restricted, paradoxically, by its regional dependents. The Soviet Union found itself in a dilemma: it could not relinquish its commitments without resigning its position of influence yet extension of arms gave clients free rein to pursue policies running counter to Soviet agenda. Thus, Galia Golan finds the resultant reluctance to "fulfill the role of warmaker...greatly reduced [Soviet] relevance to the Arab states"[27].

Nevertheless, putting the Arab cart before the Soviet horse boded equally ill for a central US interest in the region: sparing its allies Arab aggression. As Janice Gross Stein argues, of the "six major attempts to deter military actions of varying scope and intensity against an ally in the middle east...[the United states] failed in four of the six cases"[28]. However, the United State's failure to keep the peace was far the better of Soviet reluctance to make war. The United States outclassed the Soviets in one critical respect: it was the sole guarantor of security to Israel and its regional allies, and could bring overwhelming force to bear in their defense. By contrast, the Soviet Union, having no leverage over Israel, and proving unable to bring its Arab allies to the negotiating table, was proving itself unbearably unattractive in both securing war and peace.

This failure was fatally exacerbated by other Soviet inadequacies. The Soviets, not only refused to "sell [Sadat] her best fighter planes"[29] but also "insisted he pay for [arms] in hard currency"[30]. To add insult to injury, not only was it commonly perceived that "Western arms technology was better than Soviet"[31], but the sole regional options for procuring said arms, were "the oil rich Arab gulf states which were conservative, anti-communist and anti-Soviet"[32]. Sadat, faced with the choice of an war unwinnable without its obstinate Soviet ally, and a peace possible only through United States agreement to "push Israel out of the Sinai"[33], chose to disengage himself from the Soviet Union.

The secession of the Egyptian satellite from the Soviet Orbit was, as argued by Efraim Karsh a blow from which the Soviet Union would never wholly recover. With Egypt "unilaterally [abrogating] its 1971 Friendship and cooperation treaty with the Soviet Union"[34] the Soviets were severely weakened in three respects. First, the loss of naval access to Egyptian ports heightened Soviet vulnerability on its Mediterranean flank. Second, "the loss of Soviet facilities in Egypt"[35] prompted Moscow, to seek "a strategic alternative" to no avail. Syria, followed by Libya and Iraq, proved poor successors to Egypt, and equally defiant of "Soviet attempts at arms blackmail"[36]. This view is substantiated by Karen Dawisha, who noting that despite "Moscow's [increased] dependence upon Syria as the mainstay of its policy in the area"[37], it was unable to induce the Syrians to allow the Soviets access to the "extensive repair and resupply facilities in Latakia and Tartous"[38] to replace those lost in Egypt. Iraq proved no better, outright resign "to grant the Soviet Union extraterritorial rights for naval facilities"[39]. Thus, with Syria "ignoring repeated Soviet pleas...to attend the Arab-Israeli peace conference...in December 1973"[40] and subsequently "[opting] for an American sponsored disengagement agreement with Israel"[41], the final Soviet weakness, marginalization from the Arab-Israeli peace process, became apparent.

It seems therefore, that the Soviets became prisoners of its own practices of arms provision and exploitation of the Arab Israeli conflict. The former proved too weak to survive the vigor of the latter. As John Campbell summarizes "the

Cold War Politics in the Middle East

Written by Sean Paul Ashley

Soviet position on a settlement makes no hay with the moderates and is too moderate for the extremists"[42], resulting in a situation that, by 1983, found "neither the Egyptians, nor the Lebanese nor the Jordanians nor the Saudis seem to want the Soviets involved"[43]. The United States had succeeded, almost without caveat, in implementing containment in the Middle East.

Against Soviet failure, the United States' Cold War performance in the Middle East seems pronouncedly positive, in large part due to the fact its interest were largely centered on frustrating the Soviet agenda. However, the United States likewise found success on its own strengths as a viable regional peacekeeper, and, with more extensive basing rights and naval access, the strategic superior of the Soviets. Nevertheless, two points ought to be raised to qualify American success. First, the 1973 oil embargo, damaged a US interest remained a pertinent and permanent US concern in the region prior to, and through, the Cold War: consistent access to Arab oil. Oil was critical not merely with regard to US energy security, but also as cheap prices were necessary to rehabilitating the post-WWII economies of Europe and aiding the economies of the Third World. Accordingly, the 1973 embargo initially appeared to augur well for the Soviets: it witnessed a united Arab world arrayed against the United States, and its defense of Israel, a policy which, in the long term would have aggravated the American economy and those of its European clients. However, the United States quickly proved to shift the balance in America's favor, moderating its position from the "'no peace, no war' situation between Israel and the Arabs" towards "insisting on Israeli concessions to make a settlement possible"[44]. Further, as the United States retained access to Iranian and Saudi oil throughout the bulk of the Cold War, while it remained a central US interest, its pertinence in regards to the Cold War was raised only in 1973, and to a far lesser extent, in 1967.

While oil shocks represented a hiccup in American success, the loss of Iran in 1979, was a glaring black mark. For one, the 1979 Revolution meant the loss of enormous amounts of US equipment. However the strategic loss of a US ally, and the subsequent Iranian hostage crisis, damaged US global prestige, and would forever prejudice Israel's position. Though Iran did little in assisting the Soviets, as it found Communism and capitalism equally distasteful, the US suffered an absolute loss that would present a perennial source of conflict in the region.

In conclusion, with the Arab world turning almost unilaterally towards the United States in arbitrating the conflict, the Soviet Union found itself strategically emasculated and diplomatically isolated, and thus ultimately unsuccessful in maintaining a preponderance of influence in the Arab world and resolving its strategic insecurities. Despite initial successes, the Soviet agenda was frustrated in two regards. First, despite provision of arms and aid, the Soviets were neither able to discipline unruly client states, nor permanently align client's interests with those of the Soviets. As interests diverged, the Soviets were increasingly unwilling to perform their role as "warmaker", by delivering unconditional aid, arms and protection. Second, the Soviets were entirely unable to function in a peacemaking or peacekeeping capacity. While, the US maintained a monopoly of influence over Israel, and was thereby necessary to pursuing a peaceful resolution to Arab-Israeli conflict, the Soviets had no leverage in that direction. Further, as the US was capable of reproducing the Soviet strategy of providing arms for influence, Soviet clients such as Egypt exhibited a disquieting tendency to "cross the floor", and solicit American support. The sum effect was to make America the far more indispensable patron, which served it well in preserving access to oil and eroding Soviet influence. However, American success throughout the Cold war was tempered by failures to deter Arab aggression and the loss of its Iranian ally. Both indicate the US was more successful at containing Soviet expansion than arresting conflict.

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Cold War Politics in the Middle East

Written by Sean Paul Ashley

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Cold War Politics in the Middle East

Written by Sean Paul Ashley

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Cold War Politics in the Middle East

Written by Sean Paul Ashley

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Cold War Politics in the Middle East

Written by Sean Paul Ashley

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