THE SOVIETS AND ARAB REPUBLICS' ALLIANCE AMID COLD WAR DYNAMICS

SOĞUK SAVAŞ DİNAMİKLERİ EKSENİNDE SOVYETLER VE ARAP CUMHURİYETLERİ İTTİFAKI

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ABSTRACT

During the Cold War, the Soviet-Arab alliance was a complex and dynamic geopolitical phenomenon significantly influencing the Middle East's political landscape. The alignment primarily took place during the 1950s through the 1970s, characterized by ideological and pragmatic factors as well as military cooperation between the Soviet Union and revolutionary Arab regimes. This article analyzes how the Soviet Union strategically aligned itself with Arab regimes to counterbalance Western influence, particularly that of the United States. It investigates the incentives behind the Arab states' willingness to engage with the Soviet Union such as ideological affinities, arms support, and economic cooperation. Furthermore, the article assesses the impact of the key political developments in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict such as the Six Day War, War of Attrition and the Camp David Accords on Soviet-Arab relations arguing that the Arab-Israeli conflict served as a primary factor shaping the dynamics of the Cold War in the Middle East. Different approaches to conflict resolution between the Soviet Union and the Arab regimes and shifting alliances within the Arab world led to tensions and recalibrations in Soviet-Arab relations. By drawing on archival materials, diplomatic correspondence, and historical analyses, this study contributes to a

ÖZ

Soğuk Savaş döneminde Sovyetler Birliği ve Arap ülkeleri arasındaki yakınlaşma Orta Doğu'nun siyasi görünümünü önemli ölçüde etkileyen karmaşık ve dinamik bir jeopolitik olguydu. 1950'lerden 1970'lere kadar süren yakınlaşma süreci Sovyetler Birliği ve devrimci Arap rejimleri arasındaki askeri işbirliğinin yanısıra bir dizi ideolojik ve pragmatik etmenlerle şekillendi. Bu makale, Sovyetler Birliği'nin Batı'nın, özellikle de ABD'nin etkisini dengelemek için stratejik olarak Arap rejimleri ile kurduğu ittifakı analiz etmektedir. Makale ideolojik yakınlık, silah desteği ve ekonomik işbirliği gibi ilişkileri şekillendiren ve Arap devletlerini Sovyetler Birliği'ne yakınlaştıran unsurları incelemektedir. Ayrıca bu makale Arap-İsrail çatışması bağlamında Altı Gün Savaşı, Yıpratma Savaşı ve Camp David Anlaşması gibi önemli siyasi gelişmelerin Sovyet-Arap ilişkilerine etkisini irdelerken Arap-İsrail çatışmasının Orta Doğu'da Soğuk Savaş'ın dinamiklerini şekillendiren temel faktörlerden biri olduğunu öne sürmektedir. Sovyetler Birliği ve Arap rejimleri arasındaki çatışmaların çözümüne yönelik farklı yaklaşımlar ve Arap dünyası içindeki değişen ittifaklar, Sovyet-Arap ilişkilerinde gerilimlere ve ilişkilerin sekteye uğramasına sebep olmuştur. Arşiv kaynaklarından, diplomatik yazışmalardan ve tarihsel analizden yararlanan bu çalışma 1950'lerden 1970'lere kadar dönemin jeopolitik hatlarını şekillendiren stratejik ittifakın ve bunun

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nuanced understanding of the strategic alliance that shaped the geopolitical contours of the era from 1950s to the 1970s and its repercussions in contemporary international relations.

Key words: the Soviet Union, the Middle East, rapprochement, nationalism, socialism, anti-colonialism

çağdaş uluslararası ilişkilerdeki yansımalarının daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkı sağlama hedefindedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sovyetler Birliği, Ortadoğu, Soğuk Savaş, yakınlaşma, milliyetçilik, sosyalizm, sömürgecilik karşıtlığı

Introduction

The aftermath of World War II marked intense global rivalries between the United States and the Soviet Union, with the Middle East becoming a key battleground for geopolitical maneuvering and economic considerations. The region played a pivotal role in the global geopolitical landscape during the Cold War, and the USSR's engagements in the Middle East reflected its broader strategic objectives in the pursuit of superpower status. The desire for strategic influence, access to resources, and the spread of ideological influence fueled the competition in the region.

Soviet interests in the Middle East were multifaceted encompassing economic, military, and ideological considerations. First, the Middle East served as a geopolitical chessboard for both countries given the region's proximity to Europe, Africa, and Asia making it a critical crossroads for the projection of power. The Soviet Union sought to counterbalance US influence in the region, creating alliances and fostering diplomatic ties with Middle Eastern Nations to expand its sphere of influence. Second, since the Middle East held a strategic military position, the Soviet Union sought to establish a foothold in the Middle East to enhance its military capabilities and counter the United States (US) by expanding its naval and military presence in Middle Eastern military bases and ports. Third, as ideological competition lay central to the Cold War, the Middle East with its diverse nations and political landscapes provided the Soviet Union an opportunity to extend socialist ideology. The Soviet Union positioned itself as a supporter of anti-colonial and nationalist movements in the Middle East. By aligning with countries pursuing independence from colonial powers, the USSR aimed to garner support and prevent the emergence of pro-Western governments or the encroachment of US interests. Fourth, the Soviet Union recognized the significance of maintaining stability in the region to safeguard its interests. The region's potential for conflicts made it imperative for the USSR to exert its influence and prevent the escalation of regional conflict to ensure that it would have had continued access to the region while also struggling to preclude the escalation of the conflicts to the level of superpower confrontation.[1] Last but not least, the Soviet Union, an industrialized nation, had a growing demand for energy resources to sustain its economic development. Securing access to Middle Eastern oil reserves was a key motivation for Soviet involvement in the region.

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1   John Campbell, "The Soviet Union in the Middle East",1978, Middle East Journal,32(1), p. 4.

With the end of the Second World War, the Middle East witnessed anti-colonial movements and nationalist sentiments including the struggle against British rule in Palestine, the creation of Israel in 1948 and the broader Arab nationalist movements led by Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and the Bath party in Syria and Iraq. In this era, the monarchy system and the ruling class elites aligned with the West were replaced with young military men coming from the middle class or lower urban class, which meant a significant shift in foreign policy making and alliance formation. Driven by anti-Western and anti-colonial sentiments, these regimes estranged themselves from the West and established closer ties with the Soviet Union to address issues of economic inequality, colonial legacies and assert national independence. To this end, the rise of Arab socialism and nationalism formed a fertile ground for the alignment of many Arab Republics; Iraq, Syria and Egypt with the Soviet Union.

This paper analyzes the rise of the Soviet relations with the Arab Republics in Syria, Iraq and Egypt from the Egyptian revolution in the early 1950s to the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. First, the paper investigates the Soviet policy towards the Arab Republics in the Middle East. Then, it looks into the ideological factors that emerged with the rise of *Junta* regimes into power and key political developments that brought Arab states closer to the Soviet Union. Finally, the article examines the demise of the Soviet-Arab rapprochement following the Six Day War of 1967 and the Camp David Peace Accords in 1973 arguing that the relatively neutral posture taken by the Soviet Union and the political pressure on Arab governments to regain their territories following the Arab-Israeli War led to the demise of the Soviet-Arab rapprochement.

Soviet Policy Toward the Middle East (1955-1967)

The era following the death of Stalin indicated a great shift in Soviet foreign policy. After Stalin's death, the Soviet Union adopted a pragmatic Middle Eastern policy aiming to end the British hegemony and fill the power vacuum in the region. The USSR loosened its strict stance regarding the role of the national bourgeoisie and showed no interest in the socio-political aspects of the Arab governments even when local communist groups were persecuted and proclaimed illegal.[2] Rather than waging a global war, Khrushchev endorsed the view that the Soviet Union and its allies could weaken and undermine the capitalist system by supporting wars of national liberation in third world countries. According to Khrushchev,

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2   Rami Ginat, "Soviet Policy towards the Arab World, 1945-8", Middle Eastern Studies, 1996, 32(4), p. 321.

communism would defeat capitalism through economic and technological advancement.[3] This era signified a period of relaxation of geopolitical tensions between the Soviet Union and the US.

In 1956, at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, Khrushchev put forward the policy of peaceful coexistence in an attempt to cushion the hostility between the two superpowers. According to this policy, the US and the USSR could coexist rather than fight one another. Khrushchev manifested his commitment to this policy by attending international peace conferences and paying an official visit to the US. However, peaceful coexistence didn't necessarily mean abandoning the competition between communism and capitalism, and the belief in the ultimate victory of communism. Instead, it emphasized a less proactive, nonaggressive, and more pragmatic approach taken in this competition. The need for such an approach was mainly due to the change in Soviet thinking, which indicated that any confrontation with the US could escalate to global nuclear war and the destructive effect of the nuclear weapons were recognized by both camps.[4] This peaceful coexistence approach was further strengthened after the Cuban Missile Crisis which demonstrated the shortcomings of the Soviet military globally as opposed to the already apparent military superiority of the United States. The Cuban failure not only played contributory role in Khrushchev's fall from power in 1964 but it also paved the way for new strategic thinking and military development.[5] Thus, the competition between the US and USSR had to be peaceful in the form of political, economic and ideological.

In the late Khrushchev era, the new economic programs necessitated preservation of peace and avoiding direct military conflict in general and with the US in particular. Likewise, during the Brezhnev era, the Soviet administration maintained peaceful coexistence doctrine and in 1967, Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Foreign Minister, argued that "On the whole, international tension does not suit the state interest of the Soviet Union and its friends. The construction of socialism and the development of the economy call for the maintenance of peace".[6] Brezhnev prioritized preservation of economic stability at home and consolidation of post-World War II borders in Europe. Furthermore, the Soviet

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3   Nikita S. Khrushchev, "On Peaceful Coexistence", Foreign Affairs, 38(1), 1959, p. 17.

4   Asem Nauşabay Hekimoğlu, *ABD, AB, Çin, Hindistan, Orta Asya. Rusya'nın Dış Politikası,* Vadi yayınları, Ankara, 2007, p. 10-13.

5   ibid.

6   Guy Laron, "Playing with Fire: The Soviet-Syrian-Israeli Triangle, 1965-1967", Cold War History, 2010, 10(2), p. 165.

Union was quite cautious in its arm deliveries to third world countries. Scholars that looked into Soviet arms transfers to the Middle East have established that these nations received defensive weaponry primarily, with a focus on air defense.[7] In the case of a regional conflict, Soviet leaders refrained from any direct involvement and called all parties to end the conflict instead of exploiting it for its interests. According to Herrmann, Soviet leaders were aware of the fact that a war in the Middle East would lead the US to hold sway over the northern Gulf, the key strategic development they wanted to prevent.[8] By the late 1960s, Soviet perceptions had moved away from Cold War presumptions that Soviet weakness encouraged American imperialism toward new concerns that regional unrest and conflicts would open the door for American intervention. Therefore, from the late 1960s onwards, the Soviet Union began to adopt a reactive and defensive strategy rather than an active and offensive one.

In 1961, based on the principles agreed at the Bandung Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement was established to counter the rapid polarization of the world around two major power blocs. Nonalignment policy, a collective commitment to remain neutral, was adopted by the revolutionary Arab Republics[9] to liberate the Middle East from Western domination.[10] The Non-aligned movement had several benefits for the Soviet Union. Firstly, neutrality meant refraining from joining military alliances and refusing to grant military rights and bases, which would definitely serve Soviet interests as the US was engaged in building alliances to contain the USSR.[11] To illustrate, the Truman Doctrine of 1947 was designed to counter the Soviet threat in Greece, Turkey and Iran. Likewise, the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 envisioned military interventions in the region, by which The US administration sought to prevent a communist takeover.[12] Despite Eisenhower's justification of the US actions with anticommunist rhetoric

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7   ibid., 166.

8   Richard K. Herrmann, "Soviet Behavior in Regional Conflicts: Old Questions, New Strategies, and Important Lessons", World Politics, 44(3), 1992, p. 447.

9   In this paper, the revolutionary Arab regimes refer to three Arab republics- Egypt, Syria, Iraq- where the monarchies were overthrown by generals from the army. Monarchies were replaced by the Arab Republics which adopted Arab socialism, nationalism and anti-imperialism as their key values in policy making.

10   Don Peretz, "Nonalignment in the Arab World". The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, no. 362, 1965, p. 36.

11   R. W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory". Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 10(2), 1981, p. 140.

12   Ric Murphy, Rear Admiral Larry Chambers, USN: First African American to Command an Aircraft Carrier, McFarland& Company Inc. Publishers, Jefferson, North Carolina, 2018, p. 196.

and the collective security ritual, he acknowledged in private that revolutionary nationalism posed the greatest threat to the US interests in the Middle East[13]. The Arab republics regarded the Eisenhower Doctrine as a clear attempt to promote Western influence in the Middle East by restraining Nasser's brand of nationalism. Thus, non-alignment policy pursued by the Arab governments in Syria, Iraq and Egypt was appreciated by the Soviet leaders as it would prevent further Western penetration into the region. In addition, non-alignment was a reaction to former imperialist colonialists, which served Soviet interests of reducing Western power and influence in the region. Moscow upheld the Arab world's anti-Western foreign policy by drawing parallels to imperialism and the region's colonial past, which served to broaden the Soviet sphere of influence. In conclusion, the USSR endorsed the revolutionary Arab regimes both financially and militarily.

The Soviet Union had vested military and economic interests in the Middle East. First, the Middle East offered shore facilities and air bases needed for the functioning and protection of the Soviet fleet. The Arab countries which have shores on the Mediterranean Sea were primarily strategic for the USSR. Due to the relative stability of its airfields and ports and its geopolitical position in the region, Egypt served as this venture's main point.[14] The Soviet undertakings of the development of these facilities and six air bases in Egypt indicate Soviet military interests. Subsequently, when the Soviet-Egyptian relations worsened, Moscow was compelled to look for another strategic ally, which would be Syria. The Soviet Union benefited militarily from having access to Syrian ports and airfields in order to operate in the eastern Mediterranean and oppose US naval forces.[15] Second, the Soviet Union had economic interests in the region, which were associated with oil and energy needs. It couldn't fulfill its domestic energy demand as well as Eastern Europe energy needs on its own.[16] The region was strategic in terms of the flow of oil supplies to the West and Japan, and gaining control over oil sources would not only mean expanding leverage in the region, but also the capability of threatening the regular flow of oil supplies to the West. Besides, the USSR might have calculated that if it could achieve some leverage

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13 Douglas Little,"His Finest Hour? Eisenhower, Lebanon, and the 1958 Middle East Crisis", *Diplomatic History*, 20(1), 1996, p. 53.

14 Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev,* Cambridge Russian Paperbacks, Cambridge, 1990, p. 12.

15 Dennis Ross, "The Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf", Political Science Quarterly, 99 (4), Winter 1984-1985, p. 619.

16 Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev,* p. 15.

over the flow of oil and manipulate the European and American dependency, it might even disrupt the cohesion of the Western alliance.[17]

Another crucial area of interest in the Middle East was arms trade. Arms trade became a leading export bringing 20 per cent of Soviet hard currency earnings.[18] In addition, the Soviet Union gained a strategic foothold in this region by providing arms to the Arab states and supporting their cause against Israel and the "imperialist" powers. Soviet military assistance to the Third World countries, and in particular the Middle East, proved to be very effective in exerting Soviet influence there. Indeed, it was the American reluctance to sell weapons to the Arab countries like Egypt and Syria for fear that they might be used against Israel that forced the Arab governments to ally with the Soviet Union as their main arms supplier. Moscow sought to gain leverage in the region from Arab dependence on Soviet arms.

In short, though the Arab republics in Syria, Egypt and Iraq sought to liberate themselves from foreign influence and adopted neutrality as a principle in their foreign policy, in time they found themselves in the orbit of the Soviet Union in political, military, and economic terms. A set of ideational factors along with important political developments led those Arab states to build closer ties with the Soviet Union between 1955 and 1970. The USSR promoted Arabs' aspirations for unity, socialism and independence and avoided any ideological approach to the Middle East since an emphasis on atheistic Marxism and Communism would directly conflict with Arab nationalism and Islam.[19]

Ideational Factors in the Arab-Soviet rapprochement

The fall of the monarchies supported by the West after the Second World War and the rise of officers to power via military coup opened the way for Soviet infiltration into the Middle East. Gamal Abdelnasser who led the Free Officers coup in Egypt and the revolution of 1952 had a great impact encouraging similar movements in the Levant. Inspired by the Free Officers movement, in 1958, a faction of Iraqi officers toppled King Faisal II and the pro-British government. In a similar vein, a coalition of Syrian officers affiliated with the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power through military coup in 1963. The Arab regimes in these

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17   Ross, "The Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf", p. 623.

18   Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev,* p. 19.

19   Oles M. Smolansky, *The Soviet Union and the Arab East under Khrushchev. The Modern Middle East Series* 6, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg, Pa., 1974, p. 198.

states had several features in common. First, they were committed to revolutionary change both in political and economic terms. The military's introduction to the political scene allowed the middle class to flourish and participate in politics. They all adopted principles of non-alignment, anti-imperialism, and anti-colonialism. It was mainly due to their colonial experience and the Western countries' policies to exert their influence in the region after World War II that the ruling elite and the intelligentsia in the Arab World were prone to see the Western presence with a sense of resentment and suspicion. The anti-imperialist sentiments against the West and search for a new identity were quite powerful in determining political agenda in these states. In addition, the new regimes were aware of the need for modernization both in military and economic spheres. Both liberation from Western control and influence, and the process of modernization were the pillars that shaped foreign policy of the revolutionary Arab regimes.

Socialism and Arab nationalism made up the two important principles of the revolutionary Arab regimes. Initially, signs of Arab nationalism emerged as early as the 1860s, yet it was not until the Young Turk revolution and the subsequent restoration of the Ottoman constitution of 1876, or the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1914), that tendencies towards Arab nationalism became a minor but sustained political movement. The Ottoman Empire's Arab provinces saw an upsurge in political expression and freedom of press as a result of these developments. In addition, Arab nationalism gained ground as a reaction to the policy of Turkification during the Young Turk era, and served to distinguish Arab identity from Turco-centric Ottomanism. Over decades, it evolved into a dominant ideology in the Arab world espousing the unification of Arab people in a single nation-state.

After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Arab countries were artificially split up into multiple states and brought under direct or indirect European control. Iraq enjoyed a degree of self-rule under British supervision, and Syria was brought under French mandate under the auspices of the League of Nations whereas Egypt was firmly placed under the rule of Britain.[20] It was in this period that Arab nationalist ideas began to spread out from Egypt and Iraq into the rest of the Arab world as a response to European imperialism and colonialism. In the Middle East, nationalism was viewed as a crucial part of a broader movement that

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20   Youssef Choueiri, "Nationalisms in the Middle East: The Case of Pan Arabism". Ed. Youssef Choueiri, *Companion to the History of the Middle East,* Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2005, p. 297.

sprang from the region's political awakening and struggles to overcome colonial domination.[21] Imperialism was seen as the reason for the Arab world's split into numerous artificial political units and the main obstacle to achieving a single and indivisible Arab nation. Arab nationalists believed that the Arab nation must free itself from both its reliance on imperialism and its internal socio-political restraints to fulfill its enormous potential and restore its glory.[22]

To Arab nationalists, pan-Arabism -the unification of Arabs in a single nation state- was vital to empower Arab states against foreign forces in the region. Pan-Arabists were ardent opponents of Western political intervention in the Arab world and the state of Israel, and promoted Arab socialist ideas. Arab leaders made multiple attempts to create a pan-Arab state. First, the League of Arab States was established in Cairo in 1945 with the goal of building closer relations between member states, and safeguarding their independence and sovereignty.[23] Though the organization gradually expanded since its foundation, it witnessed very low-level cooperation throughout its history. Second, Abdelnasser was the first state leader who declared Arab nationalism and socialism as a state policy. Under his leadership, in 1959, Syria and Egypt merged under the United Arab Republic, a unitary state that lasted until 1961 when a group of Syrian officers staged a coup and withdrew from the union.

Arab socialism played a vital role in the radicalization of the revolutionary Arab Regimes that aimed at social justice, equality and freedom for the Arab masses. The brand of socialism as well as freedom and unity were commonly used both by Nasser and the Baath Party in Syria and Iraq. In his early writings, Michel Aflaq, the principal founder of Baathist thought, defined Arab socialism as "an indigenous movement drawing its strength from the Arab heritage and rejecting both the Communist and the Western Socialist philosophies".[24] According to Aflaq, Marxist socialism was estranged from nationalism and religion. In contrast, nationalism and Arab socialism were inextricably interwoven and acknowledged Islam as its source. Abdulsalam Aref, the former president of Iraq, stated:

> "The socialism we seek is the solidarity desired in Islam and which rests on Arab tradition in respect to fraternal sentiments and

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21   Ibid. 292.

22   George Lenczowski, "Radical Regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq: Comparative Observations on Ideologies and Practises", The Journal of Politics 28(1), 1966, p. 35.

23   The U.S. Department of the Navy or the Naval War College, "Pact of the League of Arab States", International Law Studies, 45, p. 205-212. https://digitalcommons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2147&context=ils

24   Lenczowski, "Radical Regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq: Comparative Observations on Ideologies and Practises", p. 37.

mutual assistance whether on individual, tribal or collective basis. By socialism we mean social justice, non-exploitation, abolition of monopoly and the offering of opportunities to all in compliance with Allah's decree: And those in whose wealth the beggar and the deprived have specific right."[25]

Revolutionary Arab regimes in Egypt, Syria and Iraq adopted a centrally planned economy and initiated a series of socialist measures and modernization reforms. There were also pragmatic reasons behind Nasser's decision to adopt socialist economic policies. The regime nationalized Egypt's businesses and assumed control of capital creation because Egypt was not a desirable destination for excess investment capital and the regime found it difficult to secure funding for its development plans. Besides, the government started an agrarian reform program in 1961, allowing landholdings per family of up to 100 fedans. In 1969, the maximum landholding was limited to 50 fedans.[26] The middle-class peasantry in Egypt benefited economically and socially from the agrarian reform, which also brought a more equitable allocation of resources. One further such reform concerned income distribution; it set a cap of E5,000 on individual salaries and imposed a 90% tax on any income over E10,000.[27] During the United Arab Republic, agrarian reform was implemented in Syria, and the Baath Party of Syria took steps to nationalize resources, encourage free business, and enforce rigorous central control of the country's economy. Similarly, the Iraqi military leader Abdel-karim Qasim, who came to power in a coup, nationalized all banks, insurance companies, and several sizeable manufacturing firms in addition to enacting an agrarian reform bill modeled after the 1952 Egyptian model.

With the rise of revolutionary regimes into power in various Arab countries like Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, the Middle East witnessed intense political rivalry from the early 1950s to the late 1970s, or the Arab Cold War as the Middle East scholar Malcolm Kerr coined in his book.[28] Newly formed Arab republics inspired by ideals of revolution, pan-Arab nationalism and socialism and led by Nasser's Egypt engaged in fierce rivalries with Arab monarchies committed

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25   Ibid. 40.

26   William Cleveland, and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East.* 4th Ed. Westview Press, Boulder, 2009, p. 316.

27   Ibid. 329.

28   Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970*, 3rd ed. Oxford University Press, London, 1971.

to conservatism and traditionalism. The Arab monarchies which were under total Western political influence and allied with the US tried to preserve the status quo contrary to the revolutionary regimes which strongly opposed imperialist rulers and desired a complete political change. On the other hand, the revolutionary Arab regimes' ideological affinity with the USSR, their hostility towards Western imperialism, colonialism, and their urge for a victory against Israel drew them closer to the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the deterioration of relations between the West and revolutionary Arab regimes was also well manipulated by Moscow to eliminate Western presence and influence in the region. In several critical junctures, motivated by the desire to counterbalance Western influence, particularly that of the United States in the Middle East, the Soviet Union provided diplomatic, economic and military support to the revolutionary Arab regimes and viewed them as potential allies in its rivalry with the United States.

The Key Political Developments that strengthened Soviet-Arab ties

From 1955 onwards, a series of political developments occurred in the Middle East enabling the Soviet Union to penetrate in the region. The revolutionary Nasser and Free Officers were preoccupied with national sovereignty and pursued a strong program of independence from Western imperialism strongly opposing any alliance that would bring Arab nations into cooperation with the West. Egyptian neutralist stance was well manifested in 1955 when Egypt strongly opposed the Baghdad Pact whose goal was to contain the USSR by forming a military alliance along the Soviet Union's southwestern frontier. Nasser viewed the pact as an alliance that would draw Arab states into the orbit of the West and undermine the idea of Arab unity.[29] Nearly concurrently with the signing of the Baghdad Pact, Israel launched a dramatic operation on the Gaza Strip and caused some damage to the Egyptian Armed Forces during this operation. Meanwhile, it was also speculated that Israel would join the pact, which would mean the recognition of Israel by the Arab States and thus, a heavy blow to Arab nationalism and its support for the Arab cause[30]. In a similar vein, in 1958, the new Iraqi government led by Qasim, withdrew Iraq from the Baghdad Pact shortly after the Iraqi monarchy was toppled in a military coup.

While pan-Arabism, or the pursuit of Arab political unity, was gaining ground

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29 Lenczowski, "Radical Regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq: Comparative Observations on Ideologies and Practises", p. 78.

30 Özgür Yıldırım, "The Attitude of Egypt towards Baghdad Pact", *Journal of Atatürk and the History of Turkish Republic*, 1(3), 2018, p. 126.

throughout the Middle East, it could have only materialized through a victory against Israel. Both Nasserites in Egypt and Baathists in Syria and Iraq called for active and strong engagement in the conflict. The civil war that began after the adoption of the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine transformed into a wide-scale conflict between Israel and the Arab states -Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq. Arab states were faced with a humiliating defeat in 1948 which had a profound impact on both the pan-Arabist movement and the trajectory of the revolutionary Arab regimes' relations with the Soviet Union. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War was lost, in the opinion of many Arab nationalists, because of the absence of Arab political unity. The prominent Arab nationalist scholar Sati' al-Husri claimed, in one of his works, that "Arabs lost the war because of their disunity and entering the war as seven states when Israel was only one.[31] Therefore, the defeat gained momentum to the Arab nationalism and aspirations for political unity among Arabs.

The defeat in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War prompted the Egyptian and Syrian regimes to look for arms and military technology that would match those of Israel and they sought arms trade with Washington. The Eisenhower administration turned down Egypt's request to buy heavy weaponry since the American public opposed arming Egypt, believing that doing so would be against Israeli security interests.[32] However, Nasser was determined to strengthen and modernize the army, and in an interview, he said "We insist on securing arms for our army to safeguard our revolution and our independence, and to preserve our dignity."[33] Nasser's military junta viewed the fact that Israel had an army that doubled the size of Egypt as a source of humiliation. Eventually, Egypt and later Syria turned to the Soviet Union for arms trade and financial support. In 1955, Egypt made the Czechoslovak arms deal with the USSR to buy modern Soviet weaponry, a turning point after which neutralism in the Arab world was gradually replaced by the alliance with the Soviet Union. In 1956, a similar arms-deal through Czechoslovakia was concluded between the USSR and Syria.

For Egypt to complete its modernization initiatives, financial assistance was also desperately needed. In 1954, Egypt requested a hundred million dollars in

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31 Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 2003, p. 3.

32 William J. Burns, *Economic Aid and American Policy toward Egypt 1955-1971.*: State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y., 1985, 16-7.

33 TIME, "Egypt: Arms& the Man", 1955, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,937214,00.html

economic and military assistance from the US to construct the Aswan Dam.
Though the Czech arms deal urged the US to provide the requested aid package
to Egypt in order to prevent further Soviet encroachment into the Middle
East, the US administration reneged on their offer when Nasser recognized the
People's Republic of China, which ran counter to the US policy of containment
of communism.[34] Besides, the British pressure on the US caused the Eisenhower
administration to turn down Egypt's request for an aid package since the UK's
future access to the Suez Canal was a point of contention for the Free Officers.[35]
Soon after the withdrawal of the American offer, the Soviet Union offered Egypt a
loan to cover the construction of the Aswan Dam and construct power generating
facilities and provided Soviet engineers to supervise the project. A similar loan
agreement was made between Syria and the USSR for the construction of the
Euphrates Dam.[36] The US withdrawal of its backing from the project weakened
its position in Egypt while the USSR gained a strong foothold and elevated its
prestige in the region.[37]

As a response to the US reneging on its offer, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal
controlled by Britain and France. When diplomatic efforts failed to resolve the
crisis, a triple attack, which was coordinated by Britain, France, and Israel secretly
from the US, was launched on Egypt. This move was met with stiff opposition
by the US and the US sponsored resolutions in the UN forced British, French
and Israeli troops to withdraw from the canal zone.[38] During the conflict, the
Soviets intervened neither politically nor militarily apart from sending letters of
concern to the British and French. Only after the American resolution at the UN
came a direct and strong Soviet move in the form of an ultimatum sending stern
notes and threats of "terrible weapons" to Israel, Britain and France.[39] The USSR
had a strong interest in this crisis since it was an opportunity to end Western
influence in the area. Yet it didn't take an active role in the crisis. Some analysts
like Golan argue that the Soviet Union waited for American response to the crisis
and acted only when it saw no risk of confrontation with the US.[40] After the

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34   Jean Edward Smith, _Eisenhower in War and Peace_, Random House Publishing Group, New York, 2012, p. 247.

35   Steven A. Cook, _The Struggle for Egypt. From Nasser to Tahrir Square,_ Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, p. 115.

36   Laron, "Playing with Fire: The Soviet-Syrian-Israeli Triangle, 1965-1967", p. 166.

37   James E. Dougherty, "The Aswan Decision in Perspective", Political Science Quarterly, 74(1), 1959, p. 21.

38   W.S. Lucas, "NATO, 'Alliance' and the Suez Crisis", In: Heuser, B., O'Neill, R. Eds. _Securing Peace in Europe, 1945-62._ Palgrave Macmillan. London, 1992, p. 260.

39   Lenczowski, "Radical Regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq: Comparative Observations on Ideologies and Practises", p. 79.

40   Golan, _Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev,_ p. 53.

crisis, the Soviets attempted to take credit for the Western defeat, which was later criticized by Nasser. The Suez crisis was a test for Soviet- Arab relations. It was clear to the Arabs that due to the risk of confrontation with the US, the USSR would not take any risk for its Arab allies apart from engaging in symbolic and propagandistic actions to exploit the crisis for its own political interests.

Nasser emerged from the Czech arms deal and the Suez crisis as a hero of Arab nationalism and Egypt became the leader of the Arab world. In 1963, the Tripartite Pact that was concluded between Egypt, Syria and Iraq aimed to establish a federal union called the United Arab Republic (*al-Jumhuriyya al-Arabiyya al-Muttahida*), the same name as the dissolved 1958 Egyptian-Syrian Union. One of the stated goals of the federation was to liberate the Arab homeland from the Zionist danger.[41] Although the pact was short-lived, it must have presented Soviet authorities with the attractive specter of an anti-Western Arab coalition. The prospect of such a development prompted the Soviet Union to supply the revolutionary Arab regimes with better weapons in large quantities in the hope of consolidating the alliance directed against Israel and, by extension, the West.

By 1970, Egypt became the Soviet Union's major Third World arms client. About a quarter of all the weapons and military equipment that the Soviet Union supplied to the Third World overall was purchased by Egypt.[42] In addition, Egypt turned into the USSR's primary naval and aerial base in the Mediterranean. During the same period, the USSR expanded its presence in the Middle Eastern arms market where Arab socialist countries like Syria, Iraq, Libya, Algeria and South Yemen became the major importers of Soviet weapons even receiving more Soviet arms than any of the Warsaw Pact members.[43] Hence, arms supply served as an important instrument of Soviet foreign policy in the Middle East and it proved to be very effective in exerting Soviet influence in these countries.

While revolutionary Arab regimes' ideological stance deriving from socialism, anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism and neutralism enabled them to align with the Soviet Union, it was initially arms supply that led to an alliance between the USSR and Arab socialist republics. Moscow capitalized on Arab regimes' urgent demand for arms transfer which was the only field in which the USSR

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41   Elie Podeh, "To Unite or Not to Unite: That Is Not the Question: The 1963 Tripartite Unity Talks Reassessed". Middle Eastern Studies, 39(1), 2003, p. 159.

42   Efraim Karsh, "Influence through Arms Supplies: The Soviet Experience in the Middle East", Journal of Conflict Studies, 6(1), 1986, p. 48.

43   Timofey Borisov, "Russian arms exports in the Middle East", In Popescu, N., Secrieru, S. Eds. *Russia's Return to the Middle East.* EUISS, Paris, 2018, p. 37.

outperformed the West. While Nasser demanded generous arms transfers from the United States to Egypt, he refused to ensure that any US weapons supplied to Egypt would not be used against Israel. In addition, his frequent anti-Zionist discourse and ardent support for the Palestinian cause precluded the US Congress' approval of arms sales to Egypt. American administration's lack of political will to provide financial and military aid to the revolutionary Arab regimes coupled with the impetus given to the Arab nationalist trend after the Suez crisis drew Arab socialist republics closer to the Soviet Union. Nasser was able to defy the West with the Czech arms deal and his political triumph in the Suez crisis. Yet, it was the Arab-Israeli conflict in which he needed to play an active role and emerge victorious to crown his position as legendary pan-Arab leader. Therefore, the unfolding of the Arab-Israeli conflict would be decisive both for the course of the Arab nationalist trend and the trajectory of Soviet-Arab relations.

The Arab-Israeli War (1967): The Demise of the Soviet- Arab Rapprochement

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been central to Soviet-Arab relations since its inception. It was the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict and the Arab regimes' need for armament which allowed the USSR to expand its influence in the Arab world in the 1950s. In order to compete with the West, Moscow needed to offer an alternative attraction to the Arabs and that attraction was a pro-Arab position in the Arab-Israeli conflict.[44] However, the Soviet position in the Israeli-Arab conflict and Arab regimes' expectations of the USSR indicated wide disparity. While Arab regimes did not recognize the state of Israel and saw fighting with Israel and its defeat as the only way for Arab liberation and unity, the Soviet Union recognized Israel as a state and its right to exist and advocated only a political solution. This disparity in Soviet and Arab understanding led to serious obstacles in Arab- Soviet relations. For instance, Chuvakhin and Ivan Dedyulya, the KGB residents in Tel Aviv, talked about a possible mediating role between Arabs and Israelis in 1966, which led to Arab ambassadors' reactions pointing to the dangers inherent in such a pro-Israeli position.[45] The Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko made Soviet policy towards Arab- Israeli conflict clear by the memorandum he submitted to Politburo in 1966. The memorandum stated that there was nothing that could be done to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute other than discouraging

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44   Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev*, p. 45.

45   Laron, "Playing with Fire: The Soviet-Syrian-Israeli Triangle, 1965-1967", p. 168.

confrontations between the two sides. Later, in 1967 another memorandum submitted by Gromyko stated "We should, while supporting the Arab countries in their struggle against Israel's expansionist policy, flexibly dampen the extremist trends in the policy of certain Arab states, e.g. Syria orienting them towards domestic consolidation".[46]

To some political analysts, Moscow played a contradictory role in the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli war in 1967. Lenczowski argues that the war was an opportunity for a strong Soviet military and political presence in the Middle East and it may have been well argued that the Soviet Union actually encouraged the war with the intention of gaining Arab dependence on Moscow and thus, the desired naval and air facilities. This view depends on the Soviet false intelligence report warning Egypt in 1967 of massive Israeli troop concentrations and military build-up near the southern Syrian border.[47] Nasser blocked the Tiran Straits and ordered his army into Sinai two days after receiving the news. The dispute quickly turned into a war, which resulted in significant Arab casualties and an Israeli invasion of the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and Sinai. The question of whether the Soviet Union deliberately misled the Egyptian government or if the Arab response similarly caught them off guard was hotly contested among Western and Soviet academics. When elaborating on the latter, Russian observers have frequently brought up the Soviet Union's policy of détente[48] during that time. Conversely, Western scholars asserted that the Soviet Union sought to cause a Middle East political crisis, if not outright war, but there is disagreement regarding the Soviets' intentions to do so.[49] However, a CIA dossier decrypted in 2007 claims that Israel misled the USSR administration by spreading this myth in the hope that the Soviet Union would pressure Syria to cease its provocative actions. On May 13, a message was transmitted from Moscow to Cairo stating:

> "That Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Semenov had told the Egyptians that Israel was preparing a ground and air attack on Syria-to be came out between 17 and 21 May. It stated that the Soviets had advised the UAR to be prepared, to stay calm, and not to be drawn into fighting with Israel, and that they had advised

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46   Ibid, p.173.

47   Lenczowski, "Radical Regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq: Comparative Observations on Ideologies and Practises", p. 58.

48   The policy of détente refers to a period between the late 1960s and the late 1970s when the two superpowers eased Cold War tensions and sought to preserve peace while maintaining vital interests.

49   Laron, "Playing with Fire: The Soviet-Syrian-Israeli Triangle, 1965-1967", p. 164.

the Syrians to remain calm and not give Israel the opportunity for military operations. The message also said that the USSR favored informing the Security Council before Israel took military action against Syria."[50]

The CIA report verifies the Soviet warnings of an approaching battle. Arab regimes took the information but not the advice. Needless to say, the Israeli threat of war may have derived in part from Syrian propaganda advocating for Israel's extinction. Furthermore, what is evident from the report is the Soviet Union's insistence on defensive measures and greater unity between Syria and Egypt as opposed to inciting them to war.

The hypothesis as to the false intelligence report was the Soviets' deliberate action to ignite a war couldn't explain the Soviet lack of assistance and poor performance. One must also take into account that the Arab defeat would harm the Soviet image generally as well as having the risk of toppling the pro-Soviet regimes in Syria and Egypt. Besides, the hypothesis that the Soviets passed the false intelligence report on purpose believing in the Arab victory also doesn't account for the Soviet inaction and immobility. Indeed, the Soviet Union was aware of Israel's military superiority over Arabs.[51] If the Arab victory had been expected by Moscow; the USSR would also have considered American intervention to help Israel. Finally, Soviet leaders who firmly supported détente doctrine must have been aware of the fact that any further escalation of hostilities into a war would either bring an American intervention or a super-power confrontation.

Restoring Nasser's leadership status in the eyes of the Arab masses is a more likely rationale for his decision to escalate the confrontation into a war.[52] He sought to strengthen his position as a pan-Arab leader by standing up to Israel and emerging from the war victorious politically. Here, the Suez crisis in 1956 was particularly relevant. Although Nasser lost militarily, it was a political win that solidified his position as the leader of Arab nationalism. The significant effect of Nasser's miscalculations during the May- June 1967 crisis is reflected by Salah Nasr, the Egyptian Chief of Intelligence at the time:

"In the back of Nasser's mind was the milieu of the 1956 Suez War

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50   CIA, Directorate of Intelligence. "Soviet Policy and the 1967 Arab- Israeli War" (Caesar XXXVIII), 1970, p. 14, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/caesar-50.pdf

51   Laron, "Playing with Fire: The Soviet-Syrian-Israeli Triangle, 1965-1967", p. 177.

52   Amr Yossef, "The Six Day War Revisited", University of Trento, Working Paper 02, 2006, p. 111.

and its international context, and Nasser declared that Israel would not be able to wage a war on two fronts unless Israel depended upon the power of the West at least to provide air cover like in 1956. Nasser also thought that if the West did that, the Soviet Union would not stand aside and its reaction would be influential. Thus … [Nasser] hoped, in the case of Western and Soviet involvement in the military situation, in the emergence of an international crisis that both sides would be willing to avoid."[53]

During the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, the Soviet Union was unwilling to intervene in the war mostly because they did not want it to escalate into a superpower conflict with the United States. The military equipment that the USSR supplied to Egypt including warplanes was destroyed by the Israeli defense forces (IDF). The 1967 war tarnished the Soviet prestige in the Middle East leading to doubts as to the effectiveness of Soviet weapons. The war also led Arab regimes and public to doubt the dependability of the Soviet Union as an ally. The Soviet strategy during the conflict and until the last day of the war was primarily non-alignment. However, due to the severe losses of the Arab regimes and the risk of the fall of the Soviet friendly Syrian regime, the USSR found itself in a situation where it would have to take sides in order to maintain its interests driven by the Arab revolutionary regimes.[54]

As in the Suez crisis, the USSR worked with the US to secure an early cease-fire and employed diplomatic means to this end. On June 10, 1967, the Soviet Union severed its diplomatic ties with Israel. It pushed for a UN resolution calling for the "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict and respect for and acknowledgement 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".[55] This resolution was in line with the longstanding Soviet position vis a vis the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet, the political settlement of the conflict did not materialize and the USSR having little direct influence over Israel sent an ultimatum to the White House asking the US administration to demand from Israel an unconditional

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53 Ibid., p. 112.

54 Jerome Slater, "The Superpowers and an Arab-Israeli Political Settlement: The Cold War Years", Political Science Quarterly, 105(4), 1990, p. 565.

55 United Nations Peacemaker, "UN Security Council Resolution 242: The Situation in the Middle East", 1967, https://peacemaker.un.org/middle-east-resolution242

ceasefire and threatening to take necessary actions including military if military actions are not stopped in the upcoming few hours.[56] Meanwhile, Egyptian and Syrian demands for Soviet arms reached unprecedented levels, especially after Nasser's decision to declare War of Attrition in 1969.[57] Moscow had to resist Egyptian demand for arms supply and in the aftermath of the war, Egyptian military losses were compensated by the USSR while Syria received new Soviet arms deliveries that strengthened its air force.

For the Arab regimes, the war was humiliating considering their incapability with regard to military technology vis a vis Israel. The war was damaging to the Soviet Union's prestige since Israel as one nation defeated multiple Arab countries' armies supplied by the Soviet military hardware as well as the military expertise provided by the USSR to Egyptian and Syrian military personnel. It was a lethal blow to Arab nationalism as well as the popularity of Nasser in the Arab world. From 1967 onwards, Arab nationalism began to lose its appeal and following the death of Nasser, it declined dramatically.[58]

The Arab-Israeli War of 1967 was a pivotal moment in determining both the future of the revolutionary Arab regimes and the fate of Soviet-Arab relations. Egypt and Syria launched the War of Attrition to regain their lost territories in the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights. Nasser believed that only a military operation would force Israel to fully withdraw from Sinai. Attacks from both sides continued until August 1970 ending with a ceasefire. In a similar vein, a coalition of Arab states led by Syria and Egypt waged the Yom Kippur War to return the occupied Sinai and Golan Heights. Having caused a large number of casualties and destruction of large quantities of military equipment, the war was costly for Israel, Egypt and Syria. Meanwhile, Nasser's death in 1970 substantially changed the course of the conflict and Egypt's policy vis a vis Israel. Anwar Sadat who rose to power in Egypt after Nasser engaged in a peace process with Israel under the mediation of the US, which ended up with the Camp David Accords. According to the treaty, Israel agreed to withdraw from Sinai while Egypt acknowledged to establish diplomatic relations with Israel and open the Suez Canal to Israeli ships. Egypt's history of leadership in the Arab world under Nasser and leverage

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56 Office of the Historian, "Message from Premier Kosygin to President Johnson", Document 243. 1967, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v19/d243

57 William B. Quandt, "Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War-I", Royal Institute of International Relations, 53(3), 1977, p. 378.

58 Eberhard Kienle, "Arab Unity Schemes Revisited: Interest, Identity, and Policy in Syria and Egypt". International Journal of Middle East Studies, 27(1), 1995, p. 52-71.

to enhance Arab interests gave its way to its expulsion from the Arab League and deep resentment by Arab regimes and the publics. The Camp David Accords led to the disintegration of the united Arab front against Israel under the leadership of Egypt. The treaty also put an end to the two decades of the Soviet-Egyptian honeymoon. From Camp David Accords on, Egypt has been oriented towards the West and aligned itself with the US. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was in dire need of economic stability and, as stated in Brezhnev's speech, its priority was the consolidation of post-World War II borders.[59]

With the loss of Egypt as the leading figure of the Arab nationalist movement, the Arab-Israeli conflict has become more of a Palestinian cause than an Arab issue. In the 1980s, Arab regimes shifted their focus to their internal politics. The quest for Arab political unity and struggle for the Palestinian cause was replaced with national objectives and domestic reforms to strengthen the economy and military. The subsequent wars with Israel manifested Arab regimes that the Soviets did not want to put much at stake for the sake of their Arab counterparts and it wasn't a trustable ally for Arab regimes as the US was for Israel. More importantly, given that the driving force for the Soviet-Arab rapprochement was the revolutionary Arab regimes' demand for arms supply and military technology to fight against Israel, the peace process that began with the Camp David Accords diminished the influence of the Soviet Union as the Arab regimes' key ally in the Middle East. Although the USSR established close relations with revolutionary Arab regimes like Syria, South Yemen and Libya, its increased presence in these countries could in no way balance the loss of influence in Egypt.

Conclusion

The Soviet Union and the Arab Republics of Egypt, Syria and Iraq, forged an alliance in a period of Cold War bipolarity. The roots of this alliance lay in both material and ideological factors. While the USSR sought to infiltrate into the region through diplomacy, political support, economic aid and arms delivery, the Arab Republics found a safe haven in the USSR to fulfill their political and economic agenda. The alliance can't be viewed purely from a pragmatic perspective. The Arab republics and the USSR shared common ideological stances such as anti-imperialism and socialism. The newly founded revolutionary regimes in the Arab world were committed to Arab nationalism, Arab socialism and anti-Zionism. The rising nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments, and quest for Arab unity

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59   Laron, "Playing with Fire: The Soviet-Syrian-Israeli Triangle, 1965-1967", p. 165.

called for alignment with the Soviet Union for prevention of any penetration of Western imperialism into the region. Besides, the political developments and particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict required closer ties with the Soviet Union to secure arms supplies and political support for the Palestinian cause against Israel. Though the Soviet and Arab interests were largely compatible, the Soviet policy of détente entailing avoidance of direct confrontation with the US hindered building a sound alliance between the Soviet Union and the revolutionary Arab regimes. Thus, the Soviet Union could handle its relations with these regimes to the extent that its relations would not conflict with the policy of détente and would not lead to any confrontation with the US. In that regard, the June Arab-Israeli war acted as a test for the Soviet-Arab relations and indicated that Soviet-Arab rapprochement wasn't sustainable as the arms supply and the technical expertise provided by the USSR didn't prevent a humiliating defeat for the Arab regimes. The failure to achieve victory on the military front forced Egypt to come to terms with Israel on a peace agreement which has brought a remarkable shift in the foreign policy making of Egypt orienting the country towards the West, and the restructuring of the Arab world. Camp David Peace Accords brought Egypt which lies at the heart of the Arab world into the orbit of the West and hampered the Arab unity.

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