



The Soviet-Israeli War, 1967–1973: The USSR's Military Intervention in the Egyptian-Israeli Conflict by Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez.

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The present book is a sequel to the same authors' *Foxbats over Dimona*,¹ which presented a radical, revisionist account of the origins of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The prevailing explanation was that the Soviet Union, though it certainly escalated the crisis, notably with its false note to Egypt in May as Israeli troops massed on the Syrian border, did not in fact seek or abet the initiation of war by the Arab states. Isabella Ginor, a Soviet/Russian affairs specialist, and Gideon Remez, a Middle East policy specialist, both of Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told a very different story. They argued that the Soviets, extremely anxious about Israel's imminent nuclear capability, developed a complex plot with their Arab allies to provoke Israel into a preemptive strike which would, in turn, legitimate a massive counterattack by Arab and Soviet troops. But this plan was forestalled by Soviet overconfidence in Arab military strength. Nor did the USSR anticipate the brilliantly effective Israeli first strike. This failure of execution has, Ginor and Remez argued, kept subsequent historians from recognizing that the Soviets instigated the 1967 war.

The *Soviet-Israeli War* extends this thesis of (unrecognized) malign Soviet behavior to the period from 1967 to the Yom Kippur war in 1973, which saw considerable tension and conflict, including the so-called War of Attrition between Egypt and Israeli (1969–70), when Soviet advisers and troops played a key role in stabilizing Egypt's defenses, notably with SAM-3 anti-aircraft missile systems.

The argumentation here is less radical and controversial than in the authors' earlier book. There is no nuclear dimension; indeed, one chapter is devoted to explaining that the Soviet leadership, far from being so obsessed with foiling Israel's potential nuclear capability as to attempt to engineer a war over the issue, showed an almost complete indifference to it after 1967.

Ginor and Remez argue that "the USSR conducted a direct military campaign against Israel along the latter's front with Egypt" (xiii). In this Soviet-Israeli battle, Egyptian agency was consistently subordinated to Soviet decision-making. Thus, even before President Gamal Abdel Nasser's plea for military intervention after Israeli depth bombing in 1970, the Soviet Union had already resolved to increase its military commitment. Similarly, the authors contend, President Anwar Sadat's decision to "expel the Soviet advisers" in 1972 was a deliberate deception, since he knew Moscow wanted to reduce its troop contributions in any case; both sides sought to hide the continuing role of Soviet military advisers.

Ginor and Remez maintain as well that Soviet military interventions were much more successful than prevailing opinion suggests. On this view, the 1970 ceasefire was not an Israeli success but the result of the Soviet demonstration of its military superiority. Moscow did not seek to curb or moderate Egyptian military ambitions against Israel, but purposely condoned them. In short, the

1. Subtitle: *The Soviets' Nuclear Gamble in the Six-Day War* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2007).

USSR was “proactive, purposeful and even aggressive in encouraging Egypt’s military challenge to Israel, rather than a moderating and restraining influence as it was almost universally characterized” (xv).

How convincing is this revisionist analysis? Some influential strategic analysts, like Lawrence Freedman, welcomed the authors’ challenge to the orthodox understanding of the origins of the 1967 war in *Foxbats over Dimona*.² However, influential Israeli scholars, including the revisionist historian Benny Morris and the leading expert on Soviet-Middle East relations Galia Golan, concluded that the evidence they adduced was rather “flimsy” and their argument akin to a conspiracy theory almost impossible to prove. Although *The Soviet-Israeli War* presents a more moderate revisionist thesis based on a more refined methodology, it still has limitations of perspective and argument.

In the first place, it is disingenuous to characterize the “conventional orthodoxy” as casting the Soviet Union as a moderating force, seeking to avoid war and to reach an Arab-Israeli peace settlement. In reality, there are two broad schools of Soviet Middle East specialists. One has seen Moscow as essentially an antagonistic force committed to sustaining instability to enhance its own geopolitical position—in effect, a “no war, no peace” strategy. The other has viewed Soviet strategy as more benign: after the 1967 disaster, Moscow stressed détente and genuinely sought to work with the United States to forge a peace settlement, albeit within certain limits.³ Ginor and Remez clearly espouse the “no war, no peace” philosophy, but they are not as isolated or marginal in so doing as they suggest.

The two schools of thought privilege distinct types of evidence. The “no war, no peace” school emphasizes Soviet military doctrine and actions, while the more moderate school stresses Soviet diplomatic strategy. *The Soviet-Israeli War* highlights the politico-military developments on the Egypt-Israeli front in the Sinai desert. Its authors pay special attention to the voices of Soviet veterans of the war, whose accounts, scrupulously collected over the last two decades, constitute the most distinctive new evidence supporting their argument.

But this narrow focus on the military dimension of the Egypt-Israel front means there is too little consideration of relevant diplomatic activities at the time. In 350+ pages of text (and 150 of notes and bibliography), only three brief references are made to UN Security Council Resolution 242. Short shrift is given as well to the broader context of US-Soviet relations, such as the move towards détente through arms control agreements. And, too, the 1970 Jordan crisis and the Syrian intervention are almost religiously excluded. The authors have made an a priori assumption that such evidence is not relevant to their argument: they write that, even only a few days after the war, “Moscow had already moved in both principle and practice towards containment, then reversal of Israeli gains by military means” (13).

Ginor and Remez are well aware that the devil is in the details and admit that their book “for-goes any presumption to ‘magisterial sweep’ in favor of cumulative detail. We trust that an over-view will emerge from our blend of blow-by-blow chronology, thumbnail biography and forensic investigation” (xxxix). But no knockout punches emerge from this richly detailed account, which reads like investigative journalism more than standard historiography. To be sure, its argument will confirm the views of those predisposed to indict the Soviet Union for its consistent antago-

2. See Freedman’s review in *Foreign Affairs* (Sep/Oct 2007).

3. For a good overview of the two schools, see George W. Breslauer, ed., *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East* (1990; rpt. NY: Routledge, 2016) 23–25.

nism of and enmity toward Israel. But “cumulative detail” alone will not persuade those who have a more moderate view of Soviet behavior within the context of international and regional politics of the time.

This is a pity, since many accounts of this period have exaggerated Soviet “risk-aversion,” particularly in the War of Attrition, when the USSR intervened dramatically,⁴ generating the same sort of surprise internationally as its current intrusion into Syria. It is wrong to posit some Soviet predisposition towards either accommodation or coercion. The behavior of the USSR was essentially inconsistent, wavering between achieving global goals (détente) and regional objectives (support of the Arabs). The Soviets were more willing to take risks to support their regional allies than is often presumed.

4. See, further, Fred Wehling, *Irresolute Princes: Kremlin Decision Making in Middle East Crises, 1967–1973* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997)—not cited by Ginor and Remez or listed in their bibliography.