

**LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY**

**EXAMINING THE SOVIET-EGYPT ALLIANCE  
DURING THE SIX-DAY WAR**

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## ***Introduction:***

During the Cold War, the objectives of Soviet foreign policy in the region were complex and revolved around expanding their influence. Central to understanding the Soviets' intents was Egypt, a nation critical in the Arab world and a primary site of Cold War tensions. Egypt's significance was not amplified by the Cold War; it had historical roots dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Under British control until its independence in 1952, Egypt served as a crucial link because of the Suez Canal, which was vital for British colonial interests. Steele emphasizes that: "The country is of strategic importance also, for whoever controls Egypt can control the flow of oil to Europe, cut a major communication artery, and gain a bridgehead to Africa."<sup>[1]</sup>

Under the leadership of Abdel Nasser, Egypt adopted foreign policies that exemplified its international position. Most notably, his policy of nonalignment allowed Egypt to maneuver between the West and East, enhancing its stature with multiple global powers. This approach was central to the Arab-Israeli conflict, where Egypt aimed to maximize its advantages without committing to either bloc. Nasser's aspirations were grand, seeking not only the expansion of his dominance but also the unification of Muslims worldwide under the notion of Pan-Arabism.<sup>[2]</sup>

The practice of the nonalignment policy may have been a major reason for a Soviet-Egypt alliance, however, the shift toward the Soviet Union would ensue following difficulties in securing military support from the United States. Evidently, opposition to Western powers led Egypt and Syria to foster closer ties with the Soviet Union, viewing it as a counterbalance to Western influence.<sup>[3]</sup>

While Pan-Arabism claimed to unite the Arab nations, it fueled anti-Zionist sentiments and raised concerns about extended influence on Arab lands. This approach was evident during pivotal moments such as the 1947 UN partition proposal, which was met with immediate Arab opposition from the birth of the Jewish state.<sup>[4]</sup> Moreover, Nasser's public denouncement of Israel and his actions, such as the closure of the Strait of Tiran to Israeli ships on Monday, May 22 significantly heightened tensions<sup>[5]</sup>, especially following Nasser's speech<sup>[6]</sup>: "Our rights and our sovereignty over the Gulf of Aqaba, which constitutes Egyptian territorial waters. Under no circumstances will we allow the Israeli flag to pass through the Gulf of Aqaba."<sup>[7]</sup> Despite his clear understanding and acceptance of the likelihood of war, Nasser hesitated to launch a first strike, partly due to the incomplete military preparations and fear of U.S. intervention.<sup>[8]</sup> The Soviets saw this political opposition as a means to support Nasser, thereby strengthening their alliance with Egypt.<sup>[9]</sup>

Increased strains started to take place because of Egypt's growing reliance on the Soviet's economic and military support, and not only did it embolden Egypt but led Nasser to assert heavy actions, such as the closure of the Straits, which made tensions exacerbate into the Six-Day War of June 1967, which saw the rapid expansion of Israeli territories and underscored the discrepancy between Arab confidence and their actual strategic capabilities. Hence, Karsh, Glickman, and Inbar argued that the 1967 conflict was not merely a Soviet miscommunication, however, this theme might have been used by Arab leaders to mitigate blame and responsibility for the conflict's outcome; it was the culmination of persistent Arab rejection of Jewish statehood.<sup>[10]</sup>

Thus, while the Soviet Union played a significant role in events leading up to the Six-Day War through its actions and aid, what were the strategic and ideological motivations behind their support for Egypt in the prelude of this War?

### ***Soviet-Egyptian Relations and Military Support:***

As cited previously, Egypt played a key role in controlling vital resources and trade paths that affected both Europe and Africa, which became one of the primary motivations behind the Soviet-Egyptian arms deal. The Soviet Union recognized this strategic importance early on, deepening its political, military, and economic ties with Egypt. According to Khalidi: "Until the mid-1950s, it could be argued that the Soviet Union was almost peripheral to the consciousness of most people in the Arab world, although in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq the small but active Communist parties helped engender a certain awareness of its presence." Yet, they were never able to achieve the same superpower stature as the United States.<sup>[11]</sup>

Soviet economic aid included substantial credits used for military purchases, and infrastructural projects, amounting to an estimated \$100 million that was provided in 1958 to finance the first stage of the Aswan Dam, and offered to fund the second stage. In addition, 4,000 Soviet military and nonmilitary technicians were estimated to have been in Egypt by 1956. Steele also pointed out that "by 1960 communist bloc economic assistance to Egypt totaled \$919 million, making Egypt the third largest recipient of communist bloc economic assistance". However, it is important to emphasize that the U.S. initially planned to finance the Aswan Dam project, crucial in understanding Egypt's move towards the Soviet Union arms deal, but

withdrew their offer due to Egypt's nonalignment policy and refusal to sign the Baghdad Pact in 1955, which in itself led Nasser to nationalize the Suez Canal in 1956 leading to the Suez Crisis. The conflict involved a tripartite attack on Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel which further influenced subsequent conflicts, such as the Six-Day War. Nonetheless, it is uncertain how much economic leverage influenced Egypt's foreign policies to suit the Soviets' interests.<sup>[12]</sup> Still, the Arabs had various views about the Soviet Union, some welcoming others skeptical, and most of them saw no use of the USSR other than as a source of weaponry.<sup>[13]</sup> Furthermore, Adeed and Karen Dawisha emphasized this matter by analyzing the critical role of the 1955 Czech arms deal as a gateway for Soviet engagement in Arab politics.<sup>[14]</sup> Similar to Khalidi's notice, the authors point out that this Soviet move was perceived from two sides in the Arab World, one as opportunistic and no less than colonialist, the other appearing as allies against Western Imperialism.<sup>[15]</sup>

### ***The 1967 Conflict:***

Limitations of the available historical evidence regarding the war are pointed out by Shlaim and Roger, who noted that some critical documents remain inaccessible and thus leave gaps in fully understanding the conflict's origins. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union's prewar acts were primarily aimed at enhancing its influence over the Middle East rather than directly initiating military actions.<sup>[16]</sup> They even stated that: "One of the root causes of war was Nasser's perception that the United States was his primary enemy. Nasser's idea of America as an all-powerful adversary encouraged his fundamental underestimation of Israel's capacity for

independent and effective military action.” Nasser’s distrust of the U.S. was seen through his decision to expel the United Nations Emergency Force from Egypt, which had played a crucial role in maintaining peace. Following his claim, Mahmoud Riad informed UN Secretary-General U Thant to terminate the existence of UNEF on the soil of the United Arab Republic and in the Gaza Strip.<sup>[17]</sup>

An air battle on April 7, 1967, marked the buildup to the Six-Day War but also showcased the considerable loss of several MiG fighters, pinning down their air force. The situation escalated further when Egypt mobilized large troop formations along its border with Israel on May 15, signaling a possible threat and raising international concerns about the stability of the region. Those events demonstrated Nasser’s military readiness and reflected the alliance’s willingness to confront Israel, such as King Hussein of Jordan signed a defense agreement with Egypt on May 30, surprising and pressuring Israelis.<sup>[18]</sup>

The Soviet support during this period was highly illustrated at the UN Council meeting throughout the June war. First, on June 5, the day the war broke out, the Soviet Union participated in an urgent Security Council meeting. The USSR’s representative emphasized the need for an immediate ceasefire and withdrawal of Israeli forces from its Arab neighbors.<sup>[19]</sup> As the conflict continued, there was a second Council discussion on June 6, where the Soviet Union strongly advocated for a Security Council resolution that would not only demand a ceasefire but also the withdrawal of Israeli troops from occupied territories.<sup>[20]</sup> Throughout the war period till June 10, the Soviets were active in proposing and supporting draft resolutions aimed at securing a ceasefire and starting peace talks. Several drafts were presented, where clashes took place over the wording of the resolutions.<sup>[21]</sup> These records represent the Soviet Union’s diplomatic efforts

to influence the conflict in favor of the Arab states. As well, many in the Arab world acknowledged the Soviet Union's willingness to participate in peace-making and that the US is not the only nation that can deliver peace in the Middle East

### ***Outcomes and Aftermath of the Conflict:***

The Six-day War altered Middle Eastern geopolitics and unveiled several shortcomings in Soviet support, which consequentially impacted its alliance with Egypt and neighboring Arab states. Trust that Arab leaders and public opinion previously held in the Soviet's power has been damaged. Before the war, Arab leaders expressed confidence in their military capabilities and readiness to absorb an Israeli strike and still achieve victory. Yet, Israel decisively defeated the Arab forces, capturing significant territories and marking a substantial setback for Nasser and pan-Arabism, it also led to the capture of military equipment. After the outburst, the dependency on Soviet support became more prominent and complicated. US intelligence capabilities in Cairo and Damascus were significantly hindered following the closure of American embassies, as underlined by then-CIA Director Richard Helms. This made it challenging to assess the threat of Soviet intervention during the conflict. It could have played a role in Nasser's desire to decrease Egypt's economic dependency on the communist bloc born of economic necessity, increasing awareness of the Soviet motives, or fear of becoming too dependent on a single foreign influence.<sup>[22]</sup>

Also, in a broader perspective, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal's memoirs described the Soviet head of state's "heavy-handed efforts to get Nasser to agree to give the USSR naval and

airbases in Egypt,” against the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement. This supposedly left Nasser with “a bad taste in his mouth.”<sup>[23]</sup> Karsh states that post-defeat, Nasser denied any Egyptian intention to attack Israel, a narrative that became prevalent among the Arabs and the West: “Small wonder that Nasser would doggedly shrug off responsibility for the defeat by feigning victimhood and emphatically denying any intention to attack Israel.” Peace agreements with Israel were seen not as a recognition of Israel's legitimacy but as a pragmatic choice in light of military realities.<sup>[24]</sup>

### ***Conclusion:***

The Egyptian-Soviet alliance can be understood through a complex assessment of Soviet motivations. The Soviet's support for Arab nations was driven by several aims. Primarily, they sought to counterbalance the U.S.'s influence by forging coalitions with major Arab states. This focus was intended to expand the Soviet sphere of influence, providing access to crucial locations and resources that were integral to the USSR in the Cold War spectrum. Additionally, by aligning with anti-imperialist movements, the Soviets aimed to advance their ideological goals and promote socialism.

Significant benefits were brought by the Soviet agreement, these included substantial military support and economic aid, which were instrumental in countering Israeli and Western geopolitical pressures. Access to advanced military technology along with political backing on international platforms such as the UN. However, these benefits were accompanied by notable drawbacks. The dependency on Soviet support often restrained local autonomy and limited the



flexibility of Arab nations in their foreign policy decisions. Moreover, this relationship entangled these Arab states in the broader context of the Cold War, aligning them with Soviet interests that did not always coincide with their national priorities.

From the Soviet perspective, the alliance with Arab nations also had its detriments. The volatile nature of Middle Eastern politics often led to unpredictable outcomes, complicating Soviet efforts to maintain consistent influence. Also, the substantial economic and military aid provided to these nations strained Soviet resources, impacting other foreign policy initiatives and agendas. Furthermore, the credibility of the USSR when its support failed to meet the expectations of its Arab allies. This loss of trust diminished Soviet standing among Arab nations.

Lastly, the focus required to sustain their impact in the Middle East diverted Soviet attention from other strategic regions and pressing issues, thereby complicating their wider plans. The Soviets' position as the alternative superpower to the U.S. could be considered a double-edged sword, as it necessitated constant competition with American policies.

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