

Great Power interventions and the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967-1973

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To what extent did great power intervention cause the Arab Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973?

The sheer scale of influence that the United States and the Soviet Union were able to exert, on both a global and regional scale, should not be understated. The arena of bipolarity that engulfed the world's diplomatic scene transpired into the many of the contemporary crises. A pressure to align with one of the two powers, in many cases, determined the future of supposedly sovereign states. The Middle East, a region described by Victor Israelyan as 'one of sharp confrontation between the two superpowers'[1], inevitably fell victim to such pressures. This thesis will argue that two pivotal moments in the region's recent history, the Six Day War of 1967 and the October War of 1973, whilst not inherently conducted or directly propagated by the Great Powers, stemmed from their irresponsible interference. It will also be purported that the two wars should be assessed individually, as aside from certain fundamental, enduring features in the Middle East conflict, their causes are inherently atypical.

This said, the Machiavellian hypothesis that the so-called 'client states' were being treated as mere pawns for the wider aims of the superpowers also has to be renounced. The conflict in which the USA and USSR became mired was not entirely of their own making, and a greater degree of focus should instead be attributed to localized factors. These issues range from the long term, such as the birth of the modern State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent rise in Arab nationalism, to the short term, such as the Gulf of Aqaba Crisis and the rise of the Baathist government in Syria. Conversely, if it is to be accepted that Western or Communist ideals, or economic policies, superseded the autonomy of the conflicting nations, and thus bear a primary blame for the outbreak of hostilities; they will have to be assessed for each war individually. It would otherwise be simplistic to treat the wars collectively. However this paper will seek to maintain the contrary and reinforce the notion that the aforementioned long-standing tensions triggered a regional diplomatic collapse that led to military engagement.

As in the case of many international clashes, the 1967 war, or the Six Day War, was built on the foundations of previous conflicts. The 1948 Israeli-Arab war was bitterly fought and its repercussions had lasting effects upon the mindset of those involved, thus making it the first notable long-term cause of the wars in question. Seen by Jews as a 'War of Liberation' and by Arabs as 'Al-Nakba – the Catastrophe', the fighting created almost irreparable relations between the belligerents. Whilst it may be suggested that the establishment of Israel, the precursor to the war, was only possible due to the pressure of the Zionist Lobby in the USA, one of the stated Great Powers, this is of little relevance to the tensions that would dominate hereafter. There is little evidence to suggest that the Great Superpowers instilled the contrasting ideological perspectives. In fact, Galia Golan states that the powers simply did not comprehend the "volatility of the Arab Israeli conflict", or, "the propensity for escalation on both sides"[2]. For this reason, it can be said with certainty that the standpoints were regionally generated and thus the 'intellectual property' of the countries that promoted them.

The war of 1948 not only established a Jewish State, therefore redrawing the geographical boundaries of the region, but also, crucially, led to the displacement of thousands of Palestinians, whose cause would initially be embodied by resistance movements such as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. This provides the second long term factor for the 1967 war, once again exclusive to the interference of the USA or USSR. The movement's leader, Yasser Arafat,

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directed multiple border attacks against Israel in the years immediately preceding the Six Day War, contributing enormously to escalating tensions. Abu Sharif, a long-term aide of Arafat, describes the principal aim of the PLO bluntly, as being able to “form one powerful fist capable of bringing down Israel’s Goliath”[3].

This Palestinian Cause was embraced by the new Arab Nationalists, and was a huge factor in their mandate to lead their respective nations. Their rhetoric in this period is littered with promises to avenging the Palestinian’s defeat and in turn was extremely provocative towards Israel. Gamel Abdul Nasser was most prone to this, famously stating, “We shall not enter Palestine with its soil covered in sand. We shall enter it with its soil saturated in blood”. Such statements were not promoted by the Soviets, and certainly not by the USA, with Adee Dawisha stating that as the leader of radical Arab nationalism, “Nasser’s entry into the fray was a foregone conclusion”[4]. Dawisha goes further; stating the causes of the crisis could be traced to the rise of a “neo-Baathist leadership in Syria committed to the liberation of Palestine”[5]. This view is corroborated by that of Fawaz Gerges, who talks of how such patriotism led to “Israelis and Syrians hurling recriminations, accusations and threats at each other”[6].

Critics, such as Michael Oren, point to the 1965 Soviet declaration of “solidarity in the struggle against foreign powers and domestic reaction”[7] in support of Syria, as proof of extra-regional involvement. However it can be maintained that the USSR inevitably stopped short of advocating violence, especially as the Middle East was so close to their southern border, negating their involvement in the 1967 conflict. As for the United States, it seems a policy of inconsistent, diplomatic, non-involvement provides certain historians, such as Gerges, with the belief that they had aggravated tensions, as they colluded with Israel, failing to “extract a similar pledge” that it had forced from Egypt i.e. not to fire first[8].

In comparison with the long-term themes that created Middle Eastern War in 1967 and 1973, the short-term factors were more discernable and unique to their own conflict. For the 1967 war, the blockade of the Straits of Tiran, or the Gulf of Aqaba, by Nasser’s Egypt, irrefutably provided Israel with the validity to initiate a pre-emptive strike upon its neighbours, translating to a point of no return. This said, the prying nature of international community to such a decision was clear. The British proposed a public declaration reasserting the right of free passage through the Gulf of Aqaba, in the hope that the UN would embrace the declaration[9]. They also proposed a naval task force to break Nasser’s blockade and open up the Strait. US support for such endeavours was clear, with President Johnson saying in his memoirs “we explored the British proposal fully with key Congressmen”[10].

As for the Soviets, an apparent policy of ‘disinformation’ can be said to have pushed the Arab nations to war. On May 13, 1967 a Soviet parliamentary delegation, on a visit to Cairo, informed the Egyptian leaders of the concentration of thirteen Israeli brigades along the Syrian border in preparation for an assault within a few days. The historian Golan suggests that Nasser knew such information was false and therefore may have ‘interpreted the report to mean Soviet encouragement of an Egyptian move against Israel’[11]. Further to this Moscow’s refusal to co-operate with American efforts for the return of the UN force on the Egyptian border, which Nasser had asked to leave, does not aid suggestions that the Soviets were not war-mongering. Therefore it is feasible to intimate that the Cold War interference facilitated and justified an aggressive Israeli response to the blockade, and ushered the Arab states into offensive positions..

Nevertheless, there is equally strong evidence to suggest that the Israeli government would have acted regardless of US support. The decisiveness of the Israeli Defence Force was clear, and they set dates by which they would proceed. Moshe Dayan, the defence minister, had fixed the deadline for attack of the morning of June 5th. Furthermore, on a diplomatic visit to the US, it is known that the Eban, a foreign minister of Israel, stressed their independence in proceedings, stating, “Israel would not expect American soldiers to lose their lives on Israel’s behalf”. Further to this, an exploration of Nasser’s decision to maintain the blockade reveals that he proceeded in the face of Soviet diplomatic protestations, with Brezhnev stating the Kremlin pleaded for him to “open the strait of Tiran for oil shipments to Israel”[12]. Nasser’s behaviour almost certainly translates to a picture of Egyptian autonomy in domestic affairs, and belittles the notion that the Great Powers conducted affairs, as their overtures to both the belligerents, were at best contradictory.

The events of the inter-war period, between 1967 and 1973, however, are of a far more condemning of the role of the

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interfering powers. After the Six Day War, Egypt's army had been obliterated by the pre-emptive Israeli air strike and the six-year period that would follow saw almost a complete reconstruction, instigated entirely by the Soviets. Dawisha explains how they replaced all aircraft destroyed by Israel and docked their warships in Alexandria, with extensive autonomous facilities[13]. The Soviet SAM3 Missiles that Oren states were "driven openly through city streets"[14] underline the blatant nature of the military support that existed. Similar support was given to Syria, who was provided with \$428 million in 1967 alone to 'refurbish' the country's infrastructure. Avi Shlaim concurs with such a view, stating that the Soviets supported the Arab cause both openly and hebing the scenes, "through support for Arab terrorism and the blocking of Jewish emigration from the USSR itself"[15]. Therefore in a physical sense, it seems unassailable that the Soviets reequipped the Arab nations for war.

This said, the argument remains that it was a matter of 'when', rather than 'if' the Arab nations would have sought revenge for their 1967 defeat. The death of Nasser in 1970 paved the way for Anwar Sadat to lead Egypt, and his stance was almost congruent to that of his predecessor's. The Israeli occupation of the Sinai desert, a direct consequence of the 1967 war, would, according to Janice Gross Stein, provide Sadat with the decision to go to war, because he "had lost hope in all mediatory efforts"[16] initiated by the Great powers.

Furthermore, The Khartoum Resolution of September 1st 1967 stated in no uncertain terms the Arab relations with Israel. It is famously referred to as "The Three No's" – no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it. Neither the USA nor the USSR were present at the conference and thus the Conference serves to reinforce the central thesis of this essay, that a withstanding refusal to accept Israel's existence provided the fundamental platform for the instigation of hostilities, with the Cold War merely providing a fitting sideshow.

It may therefore be possible to come to a conclusion that it is not explicitly true to suggest the Cold War powers caused either of the two wars in question. Hostilities were instead built on a platform of hate, transpiring through the Arab nationalists' behaviour towards the fledgling state of Israel. Conversely, but in line with the same principle of regional autonomy, Israel's failure to suitably deal with the Palestinian refugee crisis led to resentment from neighbouring states and provided the sense of injustice that would be encapsulated within the inflammatory rhetoric of leaders such as Nasser and Sadat.

The Khartoum Conference goes further to suggest that Arab sentiments were just that, and not doctored by foreign influence. In spite of this, there can be no doubt that the Soviets played a key role, notably in the inter-war period, in facilitating and nursing the Egyptian army back to full strength. On the contrary, the USA provided hefty funding to reimburse Israel for their difficulties, reinforcing the military domination the Jewish State seemed to impose upon the region. However, the immediate causes of both wars, whether it be the Gulf of Aqaba blockade, or the Israeli occupation of the Sinai, remain largely exclusive to the intra-regional forces, and were not the product of foreign influence.

On a final note, it is worth mentioning that if the question providing this thesis had been on the Great Power's level of interference in wartime, rather than prior to the commencement of violence, a very different conclusion may have been produced.

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- Bassam Abu Sharif, Arafat and the dream of Palestine – An insiders account, Cairo, p43

[1] Viktor Israelyan: Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War, Pennsylvania, 1995, p13

[2] Galia Golan: Soviet policies in the Middle East : from World War Two to Gorbachev, Cambridge 1990

[3] Bassam Abu Sharif, Arafat and the dream of Palestine – An insiders account, Cairo, p43

[4] A.Dawisha, in Avi Shlaim and Yazid Sayigh: The Cold War and the Middle East, Oxford, 1997 p 65

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[6] Fawaz Gerges: The superpowers and the Middle East : regional and international politics, 1955-1967, London 1994, p 87

[7] Michael B Oren, Six days of war : June 1967 and the making of the modern Middle East, New York, 2002 p 46

[8] Fawaz Gerges, p92

[9] Frank Brenchely: Britain, the Six Day War and its aftermath, London, 2005, p97

[10] Lyndon B Johnson, The vantage point : perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969, London 1972, p 226

[11] Galia Golan p 147

[12] Frank Brenchely: Britain, p99

[13] Dawisha in Shlaim and Sayigh, p 73

[14] M.Oren, Six Days of War, p47

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