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Moscow in the Middle East

W. Andrew Terrill

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ABSTRACT: In 1971 Dr. John R. Thomas documented the involvement of the Soviet Union in the Middle East from the start of the Cold War. Like its name and borders, the motivations for that country's involvement in the region have changed. Russia today promulgates relationships with the governments of the Middle East in a nonideological, more limited manner primarily through economic relationships, in energy and arms sales in particular, and in efforts to mitigate terror threats to the homeland.

Fifty years ago Dr. John R. Thomas produced an interesting and valuable article discussing the high point of Soviet involvement in the Middle East. This article was written during a bipolar international era defined by a Cold War between two competing superpowers. In this global environment, the United States led one power bloc, and the Soviet Union dominated the other. Some countries sought to remain outside the conflict, but virtually all of them adjusted their foreign policies to the realities presented by the Cold War. China at this time was a regional power with little involvement in the Middle East. Thomas noted the rise of China as an emerging Soviet problem, which he identified as mostly a complication for Moscow's strategic planning outside the Middle East.¹

Serious Soviet involvement in the Middle East began with a 1955 Soviet-approved sale of advanced weapons by Czechoslovakia to Egypt, thinly disguised as an independent agreement between the two countries.² In contrast to this cover story, the extent and volume of the weapons supply strongly suggested the bulk of them came directly from the Soviets.³ This process helped establish support for Egypt, under the leadership of then President Gamal Abdel Nasser, as the centerpiece of Soviet involvement in the Middle East. Thomas maintained not all members of the Soviet leadership supported the idea of providing aid to Egypt, which was noncommunist and not formally aligned with either superpower, but these doubters were overruled.

1. John R. Thomas, "The Dilemmas of Soviet Policy in the Middle East," *Parameters* 1, no. 2 (1971): 35, 40.

2. William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 359; and Kennett Love, *Suez, the Twice-Fought War: A History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 247–59.

3. Love, *Twice-Fought War*, 244; Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991, Studies in War, Society, and the Military* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 29–30.

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Still, Moscow's decision to seek a role in the Middle East was problematic, a situation soon exacerbated by Israel's comprehensive defeat of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in the June 1967 Six-Day War. The Moscow leadership could either escalate their involvement with Egypt and other left-leaning states of Syria and Iraq or they could back away from the Middle East.⁴ Accepting a diminished role in the region would have risked Arab acquiescence to Western regional dominance and possibly led to Egyptian efforts to work diplomatically with the United States to recover territory captured by Israel in the war. To avoid this outcome, the Soviets chose to continue supporting friendly Arab regimes with arms and other aid despite their disillusionment with the fighting capabilities of these countries.

Thomas noted the Soviets found themselves unable to use the same levers of power they could wield in Eastern Europe, causing some Arab states to become demanding clients, especially regarding military assistance. Some Soviet leaders were also concerned rebuilding the defeated Egyptian and Syrian militaries would not only expend resources but could also draw the Soviet Union more deeply into a Middle East confrontation eventually involving the United States. The first trend was well under way when Thomas wrote the article. At this time, the Soviets had stationed around 15,000 military advisers in Egypt and about 800 in Syria.⁵ Moscow provided military assistance to both countries and transferred more weapons and military equipment to Egypt than to any other nation at the time, including North Vietnam, which was then at war with the United States.⁶

There were, however, some limits to the Soviet military support of Egypt, including the provision of Scud missiles and long-range military aircraft that could be used against the Israeli heartland in a strategic role. Leaders in Cairo believed such weapons were essential in any effort to recapture the land Israel seized in the Six-Day War.⁷ At this point it was widely known Israel had a nuclear reactor near the city of Dimona large enough to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons.⁸ The Egyptians wanted to make certain any Arab tactical victories did not lead to a process of uncontrolled escalation in which the Israelis felt they could employ tactical nuclear weapons without cost.⁹

4. Mohamed Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 190–95.

5. Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 14; and US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "Memorandum: Soviet Activities in Syria," CIA-RDP79B01737A002000010065-8, October 5, 1972, declassified and approved for public release January 31, 2005, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79B01737A002000010065-8.pdf>.

6. Jon D. Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs: The Soviet Union and the War in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 68, 186, 197–98.

7. Mohamed Abdel Ghani El-Gamasy, *The October War: Memoirs of Field Marshal El-Gamasy of Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1993), 144–46.

8. Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), chaps. 7, 17.

9. W. Andrew Terrill, *Escalation and Intra-war Deterrence During Limited Wars in the Middle East* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009), 8–43.

The Egyptians did not have tactical nuclear warheads for the Scuds, but claimed vaguely to have chemical and biological warheads.¹⁰ Israel, always wary of Moscow, did not rule out the possibility Egypt could obtain nuclear warheads for the Scuds from the Soviet Union in the event of a crisis.

Throughout the early 1970s, Egypt's new president Anwar Sadat was actively planning to fight a limited war against Israel to recapture territory lost in the June 1967 war. Concurrently the Soviets, as Thomas states, were trying to prevent a new Arab-Israeli war, which they expected the Arab states to lose. These divergent goals were a source of considerable tension between the two sides. Soviet-Egyptian relations also declined further as a result of a failed May 1971 coup attempt by Egyptian leftist leader Ali Sabry against Sadat.¹¹ If such a coup had been successful, it would certainly have been viewed favorably by the Soviets, and the Egyptian president suspected complicity.

Even with these intensifying problems, the Soviets refused to transfer the advanced offensive weapons the Egyptians were demanding. Sadat, furious over the deadlock, took dramatic action and ordered the Soviet Union to remove almost all of its military advisers from Egypt, which they did.¹² In this difficult environment, the Soviet Union finally relented and supplied nonnuclear Scuds and extended-range fighter-bombers to Egypt.¹³

Convinced he had enough of a strategic deterrent to maintain the planned war at a nonnuclear level, Sadat struck into the Sinai Peninsula in October 1973, while Syria simultaneously attacked into the Golan Heights as planned. The war raged for approximately three weeks. While the Egyptian forces achieved some brilliant tactical victories at the beginning of the war, they were in trouble by the time the lines stabilized before a second cease-fire. When the Soviets appeared to hint at unilateral military action—if joint action with the United States was impossible—the Nixon administration declared a global military alert.¹⁴ The Soviet government, never fully committed to this option, quickly disregarded any consideration of such intervention in accordance with fears of a wider war, which Thomas discussed.

Thomas also suggested conditions might emerge under which the Soviets would ultimately become a secondary external power in the Middle East. This forecast was accurate and occurred after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, when President Sadat decisively realigned his country with the United States in the belief that Washington, not Moscow, could deliver a diplomatic solution to the conflict with Israel. Sadat was correct about this choice, but no other Arab country would follow his lead for some time.

10. Terrill, *Escalation*, 20–21.

11. Heikal, *Sphinx*, 227–28.

12. Heikal, *Sphinx*, 241.

13. Rabinovich, *Yom Kippur War*, 43; and Victor Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 60.

14. Rabinovich, *Yom Kippur War*, 482–85.

The Egyptians concluded a separate peace treaty with Israel in March 1979 with US sponsorship. This treaty created the conditions under which Israel withdrew from most and then all of the Sinai Peninsula captured during the Six-Day War. Egypt has remained an important ally of the United States since that time and in 1987 received the formal US designation of being a major non-NATO ally.¹⁵ Syria remained aligned with the Soviet Union, and other Arab countries including Iraq, South Yemen (then an independent country), and Libya continued to purchase Soviet weapons.¹⁶

Throughout the Cold War the Soviet Union was encouraged by the existence of communist parties in the Middle East, but none of these organizations were able to seize power. During the Cold War era, communist parties were sometimes important in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Sudan and as part of the Palestine movement. Yet even leftist governments were wary of them and in most cases engaged in outright persecution.

President Nasser moved to counter a takeover of the Syrian government by the powerful Syrian communist party by agreeing to form an Egyptian-Syrian United Arab Republic in 1958.¹⁷ In July 1971 President Sadat also provided important diplomatic and eventually military support to the Sudanese government when it was challenged by a communist-led and Soviet-supported coup that managed to take power for a few days before government forces defeated the rebels.¹⁸

After the ousting of Iran's last shah in 1979, the Soviets hoped the communist Tūdeh (Masses) party would play a major role in the country's future. But these hopes turned to ashes when the Islamic government outlawed that organization and imprisoned its leaders as subversives and Soviet spies.¹⁹ Some Tūdeh leaders were forced to confess their supposed crimes on television, and a few were executed.²⁰ A number of Soviet diplomats/intelligence operatives were simultaneously expelled from Iran for their ties to the Tūdeh party.²¹ In sum, while their prospects were promising at times, communist parties in the Middle East were never able to establish a communist regime. Rather, their activities created further suspicions between Moscow and even the most leftist Middle Eastern governments.²²

15. See US Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (website), "Major Non-NATO Ally Status: Fact Sheet," January 30, 2020, www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status.

16. Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To in the Middle East?* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018), 21–23.

17. Guy Laron, *The Six Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 19.

18. David A. Korn, *Assassination in Khartoum: An Institute for the Study of Diplomacy Book* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 86–90.

19. Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 804–5.

20. Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind*, paperback ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 267.

21. Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 234–35.

22. See Laron, *Yom Kippur War*, 240.

Thomas displayed considerable foresight but could only go so far in accurately predicting the evolution of Middle Eastern politics 50 years hence. This notoriously volatile region changes quickly, and the global environment has evolved as well. The Cold War is over for now, and the Soviet Union has been replaced by a noncommunist, though still autocratic, regime in Russia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russians in the early 1990s removed themselves almost entirely from an active role in the Middle East and instead focused on retaining influence with newly independent neighbors that had been part of the Soviet Union before its collapse.²³ These changes were not inevitable, and it would have been a reckless long shot to predict them in the 1970s.

Moscow showed a renewed interest in playing an important role in the Middle East in 2011 when Russian leaders felt they had been marginalized on questions surrounding the future of Libya. At that point, the Russians believed Western powers had used a UN Security Council resolution creating a no-fly zone over Benghazi to justify a much larger effort to implement regime change in Libya. They believed these actions went well beyond the scope of the resolution.

Today Moscow seeks regional influence in the Middle East. It has expanded diplomatic and economic relations with a number of Middle Eastern states, and the nature of these interactions has evolved significantly in recent years.²⁴ Russia no longer has an ideological component to its regional agenda. It does not seek the establishment of communist regimes in the region nor does Russia have a network of communist parties it can call upon to support its objectives. Rather, its concerns are pragmatic. Russia's emergence as a world oil supplier has made coordination with Gulf oil producers important to regulate competition.

Additionally, Russia seeks to be a significant arms supplier to a wide array of Arab states and Iran.²⁵ Russia has also become much closer to Turkey despite different policies regarding the Syrian Civil War. In a 2019 move unthinkable during the Cold War, Turkey made an agreement with Russia to purchase the S-400 Triumf air defense missile system.²⁶

As during the Cold War, Russia remains close to the Syrian regime though for different reasons than the Soviet Union. Moscow views the Syrian regime as a bulwark against militant Islamic activities and terrorism, which might eventually spread into the former Soviet Republics and perhaps Russia itself. Russia sent military units to Syria to support the Assad regime in 2015.²⁷ These forces, especially the air

23. Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To*, 34, 35.

24. Gilles Kepel, *Away from Chaos: The Middle East and the Challenge to the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 294–98.

25. Kepel, *Away from Chaos*, 298–99.

26. “Weapons of Choice: Turkey Is Soon Due to Take Delivery of Its Russian Missiles,” *Economist*, March 16, 2019, 45.

27. W. Andrew Terrill, “Strategic Insights: Will the Russians Escalate in Syria?” (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, November 6, 2015).

units, provided significant aid to Assad. But they represented a relatively limited intervention. Assad's most notable other allies include Iran and the Lebanese radical Shi'ite group Hezbollah, which are not likely to support Sunni Muslim insurgencies and terrorism in the former Soviet Republics.

After the debacle of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the Russians have chosen to avoid or limit the use of ground troops in Middle Eastern conflicts. In Libya and Syria, the Russians sent hundreds of mercenaries from the Wagner Group, an organization with close ties to the Russian government.²⁸ While this group is clearly a tool of Moscow, its use avoids the need to send significant numbers of conscripts to Middle East battlegrounds. Such actions thereby avoid domestic fallout such as the Soviet government experienced over the war in Afghanistan.

In sum, Thomas's consideration of the Soviet role presents a useful overview and analysis of ways in which Soviet involvement in the Middle East occurred during the Cold War. Since that time, Moscow's role has evolved in ways no one could have anticipated in 1971. Yet the Cold War remains an important chapter in Soviet and then Russian history. Clearly Russian President Vladimir Putin looks with nostalgia at the power and global role of the Soviet Union.²⁹ For the present, however, Russian goals are commensurate with their diminished power from the Soviet era. Currently Russia has a GDP that is only 10 to 20 percent of China's GDP, and China rather than Russia may eventually become something of a peer rival of the United States in the region if it chooses to make that one of its goals.³⁰ Russia will have influence in the Middle East, but this influence will remain limited.

28. "Libya: The Spoiler," *Economist*, January 25, 2020, 39.

29. See H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020), 36–37.

30. See CIA, "The World Factbook," <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>, accessed January 7, 2021.