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Two Squadrons and their Pilots: The First Syrian Request for the Deployment of Soviet Military Forces on its Territory, 1956

By Yair Even, February 2016



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Christian F. Ostermann, Series Editor

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**Two Squadrons and their Pilots:
The First Syrian Request for the Deployment of Soviet Military Forces on its Territory,
1956**

Yair Even

Introduction

The Kremlin's recent decision to deploy military forces in Syria, including dozens of fighter planes, is currently the subject of intense discussions around the world. Analysts are debating Russia's long-term aims in Syria, as well as in the entire Middle East, and what the country hopes to gain by deploying its jets on foreign soil and in a foreign conflict. In evaluating the current situation, it is worth considering the recent history of Soviet/Russian military intervention in the Middle East. Most pertinent to this discussion, at the end of 1956—some 59 years ago—Syria asked the Kremlin to deploy two squadrons and their pilots to Syrian territory. This paper introduces this little known but important request from Syria for outside military intervention in the Middle East, as well Moscow's negative response, in order to provide some historical context in the discussion surrounding Russia's ongoing involvement in the Syrian conflict.

Sources

Researching the history of Soviet/Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East is not necessarily easy. Although more and more Soviet-era archival sources are becoming available, similar sources from Syria as well as other countries in the Middle East remain difficult if not impossible to access. Documents produced by the Intelligence Branch (AMAN) of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), however, are found more easily in Israeli archives and provide a great deal of insight into Soviet/Russian interactions with Syria, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern countries. Although a third-party to Soviet-Syrian relations, Israel's Defense Forces nevertheless closely followed the development of military relations between the two countries. In particular, Israeli reporting and intelligence collection increased substantially after late 1955, when AMAN was caught off-guard by the "Czech arms deal," the first arms deal brokered between the Soviet bloc and an Arab country (Egypt).¹ Thereafter, AMAN intently watched Soviet activities in the

¹ The "Czech Arm Deal" was announced by Egypt Prime Minister Nasser on September 27, 1955. It was an unprecedented arms deal between Egypt and the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, in which Egypt received some 200 planes (MiG 15, MiG 17, Il-28 bombers, Il-14 transport planes), 200 T-34 tanks, 60 Stalin tanks, 200 BTR-152,

Middle East, learning, among other things, of an explicit Syrian demand for Soviet air force combat units to be deployed in Syria in 1956.

Soviet “Volunteers” in the Middle East

The possibility of the Soviet Union deploying its troops in the Middle East—disguised as “volunteers”—was taken quite seriously in Jerusalem, as well as in Washington, London, Paris, and elsewhere, during the first decade of the Cold War. The Soviet Union’s military involvement in the Korean War fed into the fears of Israel and these other countries: might the Communist bloc do the same in the Middle East?² Indeed, the possibility that Muslim “volunteers” from the Soviet Union could arrive in Egypt, followed by Syria, was raised amongst Israeli and American officials as early as 1955. In a meeting between the Prime Minister, Moshe Sharett, and an American diplomat named Eric Johnstone on October 13, 1955 (just three weeks after Nasser announced the “Czech arms deal” and slightly more than a year before the Sinai Campaign took place),³ Johnstone informed Sharett that he “heard that the Russians promised the Egyptians that ‘when there falleth out any war’ (Ex. 1:10) they would send help in the form of ‘volunteers,’ Soviet Muslims, according to the Korean pattern.”⁴

The Chief of Staff of the IDF, Lieutenant General Moshe Dayan, also made reference to the possibility of Soviet volunteers arriving in the Middle East in an Israeli cabinet meeting ten days later, stating “As far as we know, the Egyptians want to receive arms immediately [which they did].” Dayan continued to remark that, “I think that in the first stage they will use them with the help of foreign volunteers. There are German volunteers in Egypt and now it seems that already a group of volunteers from behind the Iron Curtain have arrived, and they are described

120 tank destroyers SU-100, hundreds of artillery pieces 122 mm, 152 mm, anti-air cannons (57 mm), ships, submarines, light weapon, and other military equipment.

² On Soviet military involvement in the Korean War, see Vladimir Petrov, “Soviet Role in the Korean War Confirmed: Secret Documents Declassified,” *East Asia* 13, no. 3 (September 1994): 42-67; and Dmitry Volkogonov, “Should We Be Frightened by This? Behind the Scenes of the Korean War,” *Ogonok* (June 1993): 25-26. In addition, see “The Soviet Role in the Korean War,” December 19, 1951, accessible at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/44/1951-12-19.pdf.

³ The UK, France, and Israel conducted a coordinated military operation from October 29 through November 6, 1956, against Egypt in order to cancel Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal (announced on July 26, 1956) and bring a regime change in Egypt. The operation failed to achieve its goals due to US and Soviet objections, for different reasons.

⁴ Moshe Sharett, *Yoman Ishi 1955* (Private Diary 1955) (Tel Aviv: Maariv, 1978), 4: 1209-1210 [in Hebrew]. See online version where Chinese volunteers are also mentioned at http://www.sharett.org.il/cgi-wbaxy/sal/sal.pl?lang=he&ID=366979_sharett&act=show&dbid=bookfiles&dataid=1839

as being Muslims living in the Eastern bloc.”⁵ In other words, both Sharett and Dayan seemed to believe that Soviet-Arab military cooperation would extend beyond the supply of arms and would encompass direct Soviet military involvement, similar—in principal if not in quantity—to Soviet involvement in the Korean War.

In late October 1955, the IDF General Staff, during an intelligence briefing on the “Czech arms deal,” continued to debate the possibility of Soviet volunteers coming to Egypt. Initially, the deputy head of AMAN, Col. Yuval Ne’eman, sounded alarms, as he remarked that, “Something else can be said about them [the Russians]. If the Russians want, they can provide more than instructors...they can provide Muslim pilots from Uzbekistan like the Chinese volunteers [in North Korea], and it can be beyond any calculation of instructors and technicians.” At the same time, however, Col. Ne’eman revealed that these fears were still based on conjecture and not on concrete intelligence. He confirmed that “there is no information in this area.” The IDF Chief of Staff, Dayan echoed Ne’eman’s views and, in doing so, essentially contradicted the position he outlined several days earlier in the cabinet meeting: “We have two possibilities,” Dayan remarked, “One, that the Russians will let the volunteers come or not, and if they want to let the volunteerism be on an Islamic background [sic], then it is volunteering for jihad. So Russia...will not permit that...to say that it [Russia] will permit Muslim pilots [to fight for Egypt] on a Muslim background [sic], to me that seems strange.”⁶

Nasser would ask the Soviets, however, for such military assistance within just a few months of these private Israeli and American conversations. The depth of concern and interest in Soviet-Egyptian and Soviet-Syrian interactions held by the IDF would also deepen during and after the Suez Crisis/Sinai Campaign in November 1956, the war fought by the UK, France, and Israel against Egypt.⁷

⁵ “Protocol of the meetings of the sixth government 1955, meeting 5/1955,” October 23, 1955, Israel State Archives (hereafter, ISA), Protocol of the meetings of the sixth government 1955 (Jerusalem, 2000).

⁶ “Protocol of meeting of the General Staff of the IDF 20/1955,” October 26, 1955, State of Israel, Ministry of Defense, IDF Archives [hereafter: IDFA] 847/1963, file 63.

As a single echo to those days, Admiral Vladimir Komoyedov, the head of the Russian parliament's defense committee, said on October 5, 2015, that “it is likely that groups of Russian volunteers will appear in the ranks of the Syrian army as combat participants.” He referred to a battalion or even brigade, adding that what attracts these volunteers apart from ideas was most likely money, \$50 per day. See <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/471231>. Komoyedov spoke after Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Russian republic of Chechnya, told Russian radio station that he was ready to send Chechen Muslim forces to Syria to carry out “special operations” if President Putin gave his blessing.

⁷ For the long and growing US, UK and French concerns from thousands of Soviet volunteers, including Muslims, coming to Egypt and Syria, see *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957: Suez Crisis, July 26–December*

The Uptick in Soviet-Syrian-Egyptian Military Relations, 1956

The Soviet bloc's military relations with Syria, Egypt, and other Arab states began to amass greater strategic significance after the mid-1950s, a result of the unprecedented arms deals brokered with Egypt in the second half of 1955 and with Syria in early 1956.⁸ These military relationships developed in the context of the Baghdad Pact's establishment in 1955 and the overall cooling of relations between the USA and other Western powers and the regimes in Egypt and Syria. At the same time, as the Israel-Arab conflict continued to worsen, Moscow became an increasingly attractive ally for Egypt and Syria.

The massive arms deals of 1955 and 1956 laid the groundwork for robust military cooperation between the Soviet bloc and Egypt and Syria; the deals also prompted Israeli officials to monitor the flow of aid from the Soviet Union to the Middle East even more closely. Assessments produced by AMAN in 1956 and 1957 painted detailed pictures of Soviet bloc military assistance to Egypt and Syria, providing information on training classes for Arab soldiers (including registers listing the numbers of participants from Syria and Egypt) and the quantities and types of weaponry delivered. As one AMAN report from mid-1957 described:

the period can be divided into two stages, considering the dimensions and significance of this instruction: a stage of technical instruction, which included Syrian officers and enlisted men undergoing courses in Czechoslovakia in order to become acquainted with the arms and equipment bought from it, [and] a stage of doctrinal instruction, which began at the time of the Sinai Campaign. This stage included almost total severance from Western instruction (ending the contracts with the German experts in Syria) as well as the absorption of delegations of experts, advisors and instructors to all land forces in Syria itself, in parallel with relative expansion of the number of Syrians undergoing training in Eastern bloc countries.⁹

31, 1956: *Volume XVI* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), 883-1081. One example, out of many, was on November 8, two days after a cease fire already went into force, when Allen W. Dulles, Director of CIA, and brother of the Secretary of State, told the NSC that regarding "the Soviet position the questions that we are all asking are how far will the Soviets go in this situation and what will they do? ... It was certainly clear that the Soviets are doing their utmost to stiffen the backs of the Arabs in order to prevent a psychological breakdown. ... the Soviet delegation in the United Nations had been urging the Arabs to hold out pending the arrival of Soviet volunteers to assist them. Indeed, both the Russians and the Chinese have made clear statements to the effect that some kind of volunteers will be sent. [A.W. Dulles] noted that the language of recent Soviet statements was such as to pave the way for unilateral Soviet action if they chose to undertake it." See "Memorandum of Discussion at the 303d Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, November 8, 1956, 9-11:25 a.m.," accessible at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v16/d554>.

⁸ While talks about supplying arms indeed took place between the Soviet Union and Egypt and Syria already in 1949 (at the latest), they did not come to fruition, as the actual provision of weapons or a significant military relationship until the middle of the next decade.

⁹ "Special Intelligence Summary: Eastern Bloc Instruction in Egypt and Syria," July 5, 1957, General Staff, Intelligence Branch m/20/57/0607, IDFA, file 123-535/2004.

The types of courses organized for Syrian soldiers in Czechoslovakia included arms training for career officers in February 1956; an artillery course for select staff from the Syrian artillery corps in March; and, during the second half of 1956, a number of courses for Syrian officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) from the artillery, tank, and ordinance corps. Many Syrian officers and NCOs also underwent courses led by Czechoslovak instructors in Egypt beginning in March 1956, including training for 122-mm cannons, SU-100 anti-tank guns, and T-34 tanks, among other weaponry. From July 1956, Czechoslovak instructors ran courses in Syria itself for tanks (T-34), armored personnel carriers, artillery, and technical subjects. In aerial warfare, too, military relations between the Soviet bloc and Syria deepened after the implementation of the 1955-1956 arms deals.¹⁰ According to AMAN, some 100 instructors and experts in flying, maintenance, radar, and anti-aircraft weaponry from Czechoslovakia came to Syria to train the local air force. Other teams of advisors from the Soviet bloc arrived to assemble aircraft, build runways (so that they would be able to accommodate MiGs), and assist in other matters. Already at this early stage of the military relationship, AMAN estimated that the number of experts arriving from the Soviet bloc was much greater than the number of Western experts that had ever been in Syria.

Cooperation with Syria also entailed sending Syrian pilots for training in Poland and inside the Soviet Union itself. In October 1956, a group of 20 Syrian pilots was sent to Poland to learn how to operate MiG-17s; ground crews were also sent to the USSR for training. In December 1956, after training in Egypt was interrupted by the Sinai Campaign, a group of about 20 Syrian pilots went to the Soviet Union to complete another MiG-17 training course.¹¹ The pilots underwent intensive training: night flying, flights in bad weather, and various battle

¹⁰ In 1956, Syria acquired some 61 fighter aircraft from the Soviet bloc, including MiG-15s and MiG-17s, in three separate deals: the first comprised 25 MiG-15 planes (of which four were two-seater training crafts); the second comprised 20 MiGs, which arrived in Egypt in October 1956, where their assembly began, and the third deal comprised 16 MiG-17s, which began arriving in Syria in December 1956. As far as AMAN knew, 23 Syrian planes were damaged in the Anglo-French bombings of Egypt. "Air Intelligence Report no. 28, updated to 11.11.56," November 11, 1956, Air Force HQ, Air platoon, Air branch 4, MD/6/2143, IDFA, file 675-535/2004.

¹¹ These were pilots of the Syrian air force's first MiG-15 squadron (Squadron 9), whose planes were sent to Egypt, where they trained. The squadron was meant to complete training in December 1956, but its planes were destroyed on the ground during the Sinai Campaign. Therefore, the pilots were sent to the USSR in December 1956 to complete their training, which lasted another three months. Until then, at the request of the Syrian government, six Egyptian pilots flew the Syrian MiGs. See *Ibid.*

exercises. Their training took place at an expedited pace so that they could man the first MiG squadron quickly; they returned to Syria in spring 1957.

Military cooperation between the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Poland and Egypt also grew substantially in the mid-1950s and included training for the Egyptian air, land, and sea forces. Instructors from the Eastern bloc—Russians, Czechs, Poles, and possibly also East Germans—began to arrive in Egypt. They numbered between 200 to 500, and, according to AMAN, trained the Egyptian army in the following areas: tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft warfare, radar, parachuting, mine-clearing, maintenance, and “nuclear defense (passive defense?) [sic].” The countries of the Soviet bloc also provided extensive training to the Egyptian Air Force, both air and ground crew.¹² Although most of the experts returned to their countries when fighting broke out at the end of October 1956, they returned in even greater numbers after the end of the Suez Crisis and the evacuation of foreign forces from Egypt.

Researchers affiliated with the Institute for Military History of the Russian Federation Ministry of Defense claim that in the Sinai Campaign “Soviet flight instructors fought wing-by-wing with Egyptian pilots.” No Israeli intelligence concerning the presence of Soviet flight instructors in Egypt or of their participation in Egyptian air force sorties during that war has emerged so far.¹³ In fact, the Israeli Defense Forces determined that Egyptian air force suffered during the war due to the absence of continued Soviet assistance.¹⁴ As one AMAN report claimed:

¹² It was reported that the first MiGs, flown by Egyptian pilots, were seen over Cairo already in January 1956. Eight MiG-15s were flying to celebrate the new Egyptian constitution. One of the eight crashed, according to these reports. See *Yediot Aharonot*, January 10, 1956: 1; *Davar*, January 26, 1956: 1; *Maariv*, January 26, 1956: 3.

¹³ V[ladimir]. A[ntonovich]. Zolotarev, ed., *Rossia (SSSR) v lokal'nykh voynakh i vooruzhennykh konfliktakh vtoroi poloviny XX veka* (Russia [the USSR] in Local Wars and Military Conflicts in the Second Half of the 20th Century) (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2000), 174.

These researchers add that “already at dawn on October 30 they managed (with MiG-15 planes) to intercept four English Canberra espionage planes and shoot down one. On the next day, October 31, Soviet pilots took part in attacking the outposts of [IDF] brigade 202. On November 11, a group of MiG-17 interceptor planes from the USSR joined, especially for the battle, and on November 2 and 3 managed to shoot down several British fighter planes.” As for the Soviet IL-28 pilot, these researchers claimed that “they have often had to solve ‘uncharacteristic’ battle missions. A well-known case was when 3 planes fought [at an undetermined date] 10 British planes over the suburbs of Cairo and two [British] Hunters were shot down by the Ilyushins. When the British and French bombing increased and with the loss of the Egyptian air force, it was decided to send the planes to safety. Soviet and Czech pilots helped fly 20 IL-28 planes to Saudi Arabia, where the rest of the MiGs were transferred to the Luxor base in southern Egypt.”

¹⁴ Studies produced in the Czech Republic in recent years also corroborate the information and conclusions produced by AMAN. One article published in early 2012 in the journal of the Czech Military Academy in Prague revealed that “the first group of Czechoslovakian flight instructors arrived in Egypt in summer 1956. Their purpose was to train the Egyptian pilots to fly MiG-15s planes. The Suez crisis broke out during their stay, but they merely

the departure of the Russian experts who served the [air] force until the beginning of the operation... was an impediment to the correct use of the Russian equipment and the normal and operational training of the air and ground crews... experts and instructors from the Eastern bloc will probably return to Egypt, although it is impossible to know when and how many of them will come. At the moment none of the experts (some 300 in the entire army) who were removed from Egypt during the campaign have been returned. The present diplomatic situation does not permit the entry of any kind of 'volunteer.' Neither Egypt nor Russia views this as appropriate.¹⁵

Military cooperation between Soviet bloc countries and Egypt did net a great deal of equipment for Egypt's navy. Delegations from the Egyptian navy were trained in Eastern bloc countries in the operation of torpedo ships, mine-ships, destroyers, submarines, coast artillery and amphibian warfare. In November 1955, for instance, the first group of 30 Egyptian naval officers and enlisted men arrived at a base on the Black Sea in order to specialize in submarines. They remained there, apparently, until February 1956. In December 1955, another Egyptian delegation of some 500 officers and enlisted men, under the command of an admiral (*amir al-bahr*), arrived in Poland. This delegation received training in the operation and maintenance of torpedo ships, destroyers and mine-ships. Sailors of the Egyptian navy underwent a variety of courses in Poland, which averaged six weeks in length.¹⁶

Egyptian submarines were of special interest to the IDF in the lead up to the Sinai Campaign. The Prime Minister and Minister of Defense of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, reported to the members of his government that "[in] Nasser's preparations... to attack us... he relies on having a horrible superiority. At sea he has a terrible superiority. At sea he has six destroyers, he has submarines." When asked if he was indeed "certain that he has submarines," Ben-Gurion replied that "we know the numbers of all the submarines" and that "we assume that the crews are Soviets, because it requires extensive training [that the Egyptians have not completed]. We have

viewed it from a distance." See Milan Vyhřídál, "Padesátá léta: co dělali čsletečtí instruktoři v Egyptě?" (The 1950s: What were Czechoslovakian Flight Instructors Doing in Egypt?), *Vojenská historie* (Military history) (March 2012), accessible at <http://www.vhu.cz/padesata-leta-co-delali-cs-letecti-instruktori-v-egypte>.

¹⁵ "The Egyptian Air Force in the Light of the Sinai and Canal Campaigns" [secret], December 1956, copy no. 56. IDFA, file 687-535/2004.

¹⁶ A brief mention of submarine training undergone by Egyptian naval crew in Poland also appeared in a CIA daily intelligence report, June 30 1956, accessible at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/5829/CIA-RDP79T00975A002600280001-2.pdf.

In July-October 1956, it appears that only the Egyptian submarine crews, about 50 men, remained in Poland. They returned to Egypt later, without the submarines, due to the outbreak of the Sinai Campaign.

information, that I cannot be responsible for, that there is an airfield that is completely under Russian control.”¹⁷

The USSR did send naval experts to Egypt, and the aim and nature of their mission was well known to AMAN. As one AMAN brief spelled out:

It appears that the period in which the Russian experts were most active was from spring 1956 (with the arrival of the torpedo ships, the mining corvettes, and the destroyers in Egypt) [but as we saw, not yet submarines] and to the end of 1956, after the Sinai Campaign. At the head of the Soviet delegation was Admiral [Vladimir Nikolayevich] Alexeyev, and its members were divided into four advisory and instructional groups, dealing with the following subjects: A planning group which was to decide on the development of the navy; a group of instructors, who would provide technical and tactical training for operating the ships that had arrived; a group of instructors who would provide theoretical and simulated training in submarine warfare; engineers, who helped in constructing bases and facilities for the new purchases, instructed in maintenance problems and solved problems on an ongoing basis.¹⁸

Nasser’s Request for Soviet Combat Forces

As military cooperation with the Soviet Union deepened, the leaders of Egypt and Syria requested—if not demanded—that the USSR deploy Soviet combat forces within their borders, not only for the sake of deterrence, but also for defensive purposes, if necessary. At first it was the Egyptian leader, Gamal Abdul Nasser, who raised this explicit request in the names of Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. In late March 1956, he met with the Soviet ambassador to Egypt, Yevgeny Kissilev. The first topic they discussed was providing Soviet weaponry to Yemen. However, towards the end of the conversation, Nasser changed the subject to deployment:

¹⁷ “Protocol of a Government meeting”, October 14, 1956, ISA, Protocols of government meetings, Third Knesset, Seventh Government. According to AMAN’s information at the end of October 1956, there were “5 destroyers (2 lacking ammunition for the main guns. 2 Soviet ones partly manned by Soviet crew). 2 submarines (?) [sic] (Russian crew) in Alexandria port.” See “Intelligence report updated to October 20, 1956”, IDFA, file 29-776/1958.

A week after the war ended, on November 13, the CIA believed that “The first Soviet submarine for Egypt was en route from Poland [to Egypt only] when Israel launched its attack in Sinai.” See Letter to Mr. L Randolph Higgs from Allen W. Dulles, November 13, 1956, accessible at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/5829/CIA-RDP80B01676R004200050014-8.pdf.

In Cairo, the day the cease fire was reached, Ali Sabri, Nasser’s head of office, asked the Soviet ambassador for submarines to be operated by the Soviets. However, Sabri said, “We could say that Egypt bought them and they operate under Egyptian command.” According to the Soviet Ambassador’s report, Sabri “stubbornly developed the idea of a fast reconstruction of the runways of the [Egyptian] airfields in order to absorb our [Soviet] volunteers.” See “Report of Soviet Ambassador in Cairo to the Soviet ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow,” November 6, 1956, in Naumkin, ed., *Blizhnevostochnyi konflikt, 1947-1956*, document no. 322.

¹⁸ “Special Intelligence Summary: Eastern Bloc Instruction in Egypt and Syria,” July 5, 1957, General Staff, Intelligence Branch m/20/57/0607, IDFA, file 123-535/2004.

Syria and Saudi Arabia have authorized me to turn to the Soviet Union with the message that the Western powers have already permitted Israel to recruit Jewish pilots living in the USA, in England, in France and in other countries. The three countries request, therefore, that Muslims from the Soviet republics in Central Asia assist them when necessary in using military technology.¹⁹

Nasser repeatedly emphasized that the request was made in the names of the Saudi King and the president of Syria.

When the Soviet ambassador responded noncommittally that he would forward the information to Moscow, Nasser added that “Israel receives a great deal of arms from Canada,²⁰ France and other countries, and now the problem she faces is similar to that facing Egypt. Both countries are no longer suffering a lack of arms but they have to be able to train their soldiers to make use of the weapons flowing to them. Israel will need three years.” Nasser continued to explain to the Soviet ambassador that Israel wanted assistance “to train pilots who will be able to fly the new Mystère jet planes” and “if she [Israel] receives 100-200 pilots in the near future, the situation will change completely.” Kissilev, ending his report of Nasser’s speech, stated that “the three countries’ request from the Soviet Union is of the highest importance.”²¹

Nasser couched the explicit request in the names of Saudi Arabia and Syria for Soviet military aid, particularly pilots, so that it was apparently limited to “[brother] Muslims from the Soviet republics in Central Asia.” This was a rather obvious way of hinting that the Soviet Union should provide the three Arab countries with aid commensurate to the aid which Nasser claimed that Israel might obtain from the West via permission for “their Jewish brothers” living in those countries to volunteer to fight for Israel as pilots. He therefore argued that Moscow’s assistance to the Middle East should not lag behind Western aid for Israel, a common foe of the Soviet Union and the Arabs. In addition, Egypt received around 200 fighter planes in the “Czech deal.” Training Egyptian pilots for these planes not only required a great deal of time, however, but the program also ran into various difficulties, including the loss of planes during training.²² So, in

¹⁹ “Report of Soviet Ambassador in Cairo on his meeting with Egyptian Prime Minister Nasser,” March 21, 1956, in Naumkin, ed., *Blizhnevostochnyi konflikt, 1947-1956*, document no. 239.

²⁰ Nasser meant the F-86 Sabre plane. Israel received only French Mystères.

²¹ “Report of Soviet Ambassador in Cairo on his meeting with Egyptian Prime Minister Nasser,” March 21, 1956, in Naumkin, ed., *Blizhnevostochnyi konflikt, 1947-1956*, document no. 239.

²² For example, when the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Abba Eban, talked with his Canadian counterpart, Arnold Heeney, he heard that “according to Canadian intelligence, 15 MiGs have crashed in Egypt, and the pilots are panicking.” A[bba]. Eban (Washington) to M[oshe]. Sharett, (Jerusalem) May 15, 1956, ISA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents, vol. 11: January-October 1956 (Jerusalem, 2008), document no. 248.

order to support the Egyptian air force during this vulnerable transitional period, Nasser asked for Soviet support for Egypt as well.

Nasser's request from the Soviets was well-known to AMAN. During a meeting of the General Staff of the IDF, the head of AMAN, Colonel Yehoshafat Harkabi, said that "the three big [leaders of Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia] in the[ir] summit, Nasser wanted via al-Qawatli [President of Syria] to approach the Russians and ask them for volunteers."²³ Nevertheless, Moscow did not respond positively to this request. When the Sinai Campaign broke out a few months later, the Muslims of the Soviet Union—who were not free to make a move without clear approval from the Kremlin—made do with providing expressions of support for Egypt and sending material and monetary aid. Nasser, in turn, repaid them with a polite letter.²⁴ However, this did not prevent the Soviet Union from continuing to use the volunteer issue as leverage for its overall policy in the region. Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union at the time, did write in his memoirs that many volunteers—not necessarily Muslims—were ready to come to the aid of attacked Egypt.²⁵ The Soviet threats to use volunteers in this war came to an official end only at the beginning of December 1956.²⁶

²³ "Meeting of the General Staff of the IDF," April 12, 1956, IDFA 847/1962, file 66. At the meeting, Major General Yitzhak Rabin raised again the possibility of "Soviet intervention by volunteers or any other form." Ben-Gurion answered that, among other things, "in Russia they give an order and they all volunteer."

²⁴ "Nasser's letter to the Mufti of the European part of the USSR and Siberia," [in Russian] December 11, 1956. See TsAGOR, f. 6991 o. 4 d. 86 l. 17. I am grateful to Prof. Yaacov Ro'i from Tel Aviv University for sharing this document.

²⁵ It was reported at the time that at an event in late August 1956 at the Romanian embassy in Moscow Khrushchev stated that if Egypt was attacked, it would not stand alone, and that if he had a son of military age, he would call upon him to volunteer to fight at Egypt's side. See "London follows Moscow's warning," *Davar*, August 26, 1956: 1. During the war itself, there were daily rumors of the arrival of many Soviet, and even Chinese, volunteers in Egypt. With regard to the rumor that *Muslim* volunteers were due to arrive, however, the Soviet ambassador in Cairo cabled thus on the fourth day of the war: "In the city [Cairo] rumors that 40,000 Muslim volunteers from the Soviet Union are making their way by air to aid Egypt, and also that the Soviet air force will bomb English bases in Cyprus, have spread. These rumors express hope for our speedy intervention" See "Cable from Soviet ambassador in Egypt, Y.D. Kissilev, to the Soviet Foreign Ministry," November 1, 1956, in Naumkin, ed., *Blizhnevostochnyi konflikt, 1947-1956*, document no. 315.

The next day, the Soviet Foreign Ministry directed the ambassador to meet as soon as possible with Nasser's chief of bureau, 'Ali Sabr, stating that "if Sabri asks about the possibility of sending volunteers, tell him that this is currently being discussed with the governments of the Central Asian republics, and you can say nothing at this time." See "Cable from the Soviet Foreign Minister, D.T. Shepilov, to the Soviet ambassador in Cairo," November 3, 1956, in Naumkin, ed., *Blizhnevostochnyi konflikt, 1947-1956*, document no. 319.

²⁶ On December 4, 1956, Soviet Foreign Minister Shepilov instructed the Soviet ambassador in Cairo to explain to Nasser why the USSR will not send volunteers to help Egypt. Shepilov explained that it is better for both Egypt and the USSR not to have Soviet volunteers at this point in time, in order to deny the West the opportunity to accuse the Kremlin of penetrating the Middle East. This was the Soviet way to warp its refusal to send volunteers due to the clear objection of the US to a Soviet military involvement in Egypt and Syria. See in Naumkin, ed., *Blizhnevostochnyi konflikt, 1947-1956*, document no. 330.

Syria's Request for the Deployment of the Soviet Air Force

Nasser's request made in the names of the Saudi King and Syrian President was not the only request made to Moscow at that year. Eight months after Nasser's conversation with the Soviet ambassador, Syria tendered a much more explicit request. This took place during the actual fighting of the Sinai Campaign, while the Syrian President, Shukri al-Quwatli, was on an official visit to Moscow that had been planned in advance, with no connection to the war. According to Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, Nasser's confidant, during his meeting with the leaders of the Soviet Union—Khrushchev, Bulganin, and Zhukov—al-Quwatli insisted that the Soviet Union had to find a way to assist Egypt. His stubborn pleading that, if the USSR did nothing, its standing in the Arab world would be irreparably destroyed, was answered by Khrushchev, according to Heikal, with only a question: "But what can we do?" After Marshal Zhukov, the decorated Soviet marshal, explained why the USSR could not send an army through Turkey, Iran, or Syria, Khrushchev added that "at the moment we don't know how to help Egypt, but we are holding constant meetings to discuss the problem."²⁷

However, toward the end of the Syrian president's visit to Moscow on the morning of November 2 (the fifth day of the war), the foreign ministers of the two states, Salah ad-Din al-Bitar and Dimitri Shepilov, met. Al-Bitar explicitly requested that the Soviet Union provide aid to the Arab countries in the same way that France and Britain were helping Israel. He said that, a day earlier, the Syrian delegation had learned that British and French pilots were flying over Egyptian territory under the Israeli flag. "We need precisely similar aid from the Soviet Union," he demanded of his Russian counterpart, adding "such aid could raise Arab morale, since the imperialist bombings of Egypt's cities were meant to break the Arabs' spirit." Al-Bitar continued, "I don't know what tensions the bombings may cause in other places. Military action

Ambassador Kisilev met Nasser the day after and conveyed the message. He claimed in his report to Moscow that Nasser showed understanding to the soviet position. On the other hand, two week earlier, on November 18, Nasser confidant, Mustafa Amin, conveyed Nasser's message to Eisenhower, which repeated previous messages to US president since the outbreak of the war. Amin said "Nasser has given [the] Soviets no promise re base rights in Egypt and has not responded to repeated Soviet urging have Egypt request Soviet volunteers. He had made personal and direct request for aid in connection with attack on Egypt only to US ... Nasser does not believe Soviet Ambassador Kisselev assurance [that the] USSR [was] willing [to] wage war on behalf [of] Egypt. Nasser does not want Egypt become second Korea or excuse for third world war." See "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Egypt," November 18, 1956, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957: Volume XVI*, accessible at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v16/d587>.

²⁷ Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Arab World* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1981): 70-71.

on the part of the Soviet Union must, of course, be responsible and serious.”²⁸ Shepilov responded to these words cautiously, saying that all these questions would be discussed “today after lunch during the talks.” Hinting that Moscow was unwilling to act as requested, he recommended that al-Bitar “think of concrete means of aid, including military aid, with reference to ways of supplying these arms in addition to referring to all the technical aspects involved in providing such aid.”²⁹

It turned out that the agenda of these talks was in fact the military relationship between Moscow and Damascus. The Syrian President and the heads of his army made explicit, perhaps unprecedented, demands of the Soviets: that two Soviet squadrons and their pilots be deployed in Syria, apparently not only due to the Israeli-Arab conflict and the weakness of the Syrian air force (which was damaged during that war), but also due to Syria’s concerns about Turkey’s intentions and those of other members of the Baghdad Pact. The first reports about the Syrian president’s talks in Moscow began to arrive in Israel a week later. According to this initial information:

The main topic of the Syro-Soviet negotiations was at first mainly economic. [But due to] the changing situation [war in Egypt] and the promises made by the Soviet ambassador in Damascus, the subject of the talks moved to military matters, and particularly touched upon the possible dispatching of Soviet volunteers and jet planes to Syria. In the talks held by Syrian president al-Qawatli in Moscow, the question of military aid to Syria was discussed. In light of Syria’s aerial weakness, this meant mainly the dispatching of planes and [Soviet] crew to operate them.³⁰

Based on this information, AMAN estimated that:

Russian aid may be given to Syria in the near future. The aid might be based on fighter planes and bombers, which will arrive via the air with their crews, and also anti-aircraft guns, radar equipment, and the crews for operating them. The dimensions of this aid, the rapidity of its dispatch and its operation with the help of Russian crews, still *depend on diplomatic developments and Russia’s attitude toward direct involvement in the Middle East.*³¹

The next day, more information was received, according to which:

²⁸ “Meeting of Soviet Foreign Minister D.T. Shepilov with Syrian Foreign Minister S. al-Bitar,” November, 2, 1956, in Naumkin, ed., *Blizhnevostochnyi konflikt, 1947-1956*, document no. 317.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ As the Syrian were left without MiGs and their pilots did not accomplished yet even their first basic training, as shown above, footnote no. 11.

³¹ “Air Intelligence Report no. 28, updated to 11.11.56,” November 11, 1956, Air Force HQ, Air platoon, Air branch 4, MD/6/2143, IDFA, file 675-535/2004. (my emphasis).

the contact between Syria and the Eastern bloc on the matter of dispatching equipment and receiving volunteers continues. Czech, Russian and possibly even Chinese volunteers are mentioned. [however] There is no information on the actual transfer of volunteers. On the other hand, Syrian preparations for receiving military equipment and crews from the Eastern bloc are known of.³²

Moscow's Negative Response

A month later AMAN had gathered different information which suggested that Moscow was unwilling to deploy her forces in Syria due to the strong objections of the United States. One detailed and clear AMAN report described the international circumstances surrounding potential Soviet military intervention:

In early talks held in Moscow during the Sinai crisis, there was [Soviet] willingness to provide Syria with very broad aid in the form of equipment and professional combat personnel. Syria requested, therefore, help for the air force that was supposed to be expressed in MiG-17 (and MiG-19?) planes, as well as IL-28 bombers. Syria thought to receive these with their crews via the air, so that they would serve as an operational force ready for action. The diplomatic conditions caused Russia to retreat from its former position on sending 'volunteers' to Syria, and therefore, in later talks, when the actual explanations [sic] of the aid were discussed, the Russian position changed and they refused to send 'volunteers,' although they did agree to send large amounts of equipment, as well as experts and instructors on the operation of this equipment. With regard to the air force, we are now talking about a shipment of MiG-17 planes, which will arrive unassembled, and with experts and instructors only.³³

“Russia’s new position” as AMAN explained, “derives from the fear of a global war that may break out in the Middle East, mainly due to the objection and firm steps taken by the USA on the question of Soviet penetration.³⁴ However, even when “Syria requested that Russia [USSR] send some hundreds of experts for training and consultation, assembly and maintenance of equipment,” the Soviets agreed “to send only a third.” The group that would be sent to Syria comprised about 70 experts and instructors for the air force, among them “about ten pilots who will be divided between operational training on MiG-17s, initial flights, and test flights on assembled planes.” In addition, this document stated

³² “Air Intelligence Report no. 29, updated to 12.11.56,” November 12, 1956, Air Force HQ, Air platoon, Air branch 4, MD/6/2143/3017, IDFA, file 675-535/2004.

³³ “Air Intelligence Report no. 33,” December 12, 1956, Air Force HQ, Air platoon, Air branch 4, MD/6/2143/5188, IDFA, file 675-535/2004. (my emphasis).

³⁴ “Ibid.

that “*it is known that Syria requested two manned squadrons from Russia, in addition to a squadron that they thought to man with pilots who had been trained in Egypt.*”³⁵

At a meeting of the IDF General Staff that took place two days later, on December 16, 1956, the head of Israel’s military intelligence, Col. Harkabi, summed up what was known in Jerusalem about the Syrian president’s visit to Moscow. It seems that the information available to AMAN included important details that were not at the disposal of American intelligence circles.³⁶ The information this time included more details about the principle negotiators in the Syrian side, the way in which these negotiation took place, and the Soviet Union’s attitude towards Syria’s requests. This informative description, based on several sources, and also the confidant manner in which Col. Harkabi informed the General Staff of the IDF, should leave little room for doubt about the reliability of AMAN’s information.

“In Syria today the whole matter of negotiations with the Soviets is already clear,” thus Col. Harkabi began his speech on the subject. He reported that:

The Deputy Chief of Staff for administration, Muhammad Omar al-Qabani, who accompanied al-Quwatli to Moscow, remained there and negotiations between the Syrians and the Russians on the matter of a new arms deal and aid for the Syrians began. Yet it turned out that the Russians were not that keen [to meet Syria’s requests].³⁷

“From various sources,” Col. Harkabi continued:

we got the impression that they [Syrians] were trying to increase their portion and to accelerate it as much as possible. But it turned out that the Syrian demands remained unanswered for two weeks, and the Syrians sat in Moscow and waited [!]. In addition, *the Syrian request to send crews or volunteers was rejected*, and what was agreed, was to send experts, technical ground crew and instructors, but *not to send crews and volunteer fighters*.³⁸

Col. Harkabi continued his speech by making clear what AMAN still did not know:

³⁵ Ibid, (my emphasis).

³⁶ The information at the disposal of the CIA about al-Quwatli’s visit to Moscow did not mention the Syrian request to deploy two MiG-17 squadrons and their Soviet pilots—unless this detail was censored; but the censored sections are brief. It did include reference to the fact that at the beginning of November 1956 Syria began negotiating directly with the USSR about supplying weapons, and that this was almost certainly a result of al-Quwatli’s visit to Moscow. An agreement to supply weapons was signed [half a line censored—probably the sum] at the end of November [two lines censored]. The Syrians requested planes, ships and other equipment that required much training in order to operate. The Soviets agreed to train Syrian pilots in the USSR. About 160 Soviet advisors were expected to arrive in Syria to assist in absorbing the equipment and training the soldiers to operate it. “Soviet Bloc and Western Support for Economic Development in Syria,” April 30, 1957, accessible at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000500785.pdf

³⁷ “Meeting of the General Staff of the IDF 22/56,” December 12, 1956, IDFA, file 32/847/1962.

³⁸ Ibid.

There are some things that have already been agreed on in the Syrian deal, and things that are Syrian demands which have not yet been approved or we have no confirmation whether the Russians have begun to supply them or not. *First, two MiG-17 squadrons. The Syrians requested them with their crews, and the Russians objected to sending crews, but only sent them with [flight] instructors. Radar stations, four battalions of medium-range artillery, anti-aircraft artillery units. A battalion of 122 mm coastal guns, a torpedo flotilla. The requests submitted by the Syrians but not yet approved include a number of fuel trucks, jeeps, ambulances, 120 mm and 82 mm mortars, cranes, ten 40-ton bridging tanks, infra-red equipment for personal and group use and for cars, radio equipment for three tank battalions, two armored infantry battalions and four artillery battalions. One thing that was discovered when the Soviet–Czech arms arrived, it arrived without communications equipment. The Soviets still have not confirmed whether they accept this list or not.*

As for the experts, the Soviet experts break down as follows: 44 for artillery of various kinds, 62 to the air force, 27 to the navy and a few further experts for other subjects. In total there are about 160-200 experts that it has been agreed that they will arrive in Syria. Up to now, the only thing in the entire deal that may have already arrived, and in the last few days, is the planes [MiG-17], and they arrived unassembled by sea, not by air.³⁹ With regard to the planes, neither the Syrians nor the Soviets spoke about bombers [IL-28, while previous reports did mention them] at all. Bombers were not mentioned, only MiG-17s.⁴⁰

Col. Harkabi also noted that “It was also discussed that this information must be kept top secret because of the special international circumstances.” He explained that “this was a Soviet demand and they told the Syrians that this is a matter of the highest degree of secrecy. The Syrians want to paint some of the planes in Egyptian colors, so that it will appear that they received the planes from Egypt, so that observers who come to Syria will think that these are the planes that were taken out of Egypt to escape the English and French bombings,” while in fact the Syrian MiGs were destroyed in Egypt.⁴¹

In July 1957 it was once again stated in an AMAN document, that at the end of 1956, “in addition to test pilots, 4 flight instructors for training planes and 4 additional MiG-17 pilots were sent to Syria from the USSR,” and that:

the integration of 4 flight instructors [actually Soviet combat pilots] from the Eastern bloc into the *operational* MiG-17 squadron in Syria (comprises 15 pilots)

³⁹ The US Air Force Intelligence reported at the time (December 13, 1956) on the arrival of about ten MiG-17 planes in Syria on board the *Voroshilov*. See “Soviet Aircraft Shipments to Syria,” accessible at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/document/cia-rdp80b01676r001200020006-3>.

⁴⁰ “Meeting of the General Staff of the IDF 22/56,” December 12, 1956, IDFA, file 32/847/1962.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

will enable the continuation of operational instruction within the squadron itself. Practices of tactical exercises (dogfights, and, after the radar stations arrive, interceptions) will be more thorough, and first attempts at practicing aerial manoeuvres at the squadron level, which have not taken place up to now, will be made.⁴²

It appears that Moscow's decision to dispatch these pilots at the end of 1956 was due both to its unwillingness to send volunteers to help Syria and Egypt, and to its refusal of Syria's direct request to deploy two Soviet squadrons and their pilots in her territory. Moscow did not want to reject Damascus's requests out of hand and to damage to much their military cooperation.

Conclusion

The requests from the presidents of Egypt and Syria during 1956 were only the first such demands made upon Moscow for military assistance and direct intervention in the Middle East. The deepest Soviet military involvement in the Middle East was as Egypt's ally in the latter's "War of Attrition" against Israel (1969-1970). In late 1967, moreover, Soviet pilots also took part in combat missions in Yemen (and perhaps 5 years earlier as well) and the leaders of "South Yemen" claimed in 1978 that Soviet pilots bombed the presidential palace in Aden.⁴³ In 1974, the Kurds in northern Iraq also claimed—without being able to prove—that Soviet pilots (flying TU-22) fought on behalf of the regime in Baghdad, while the CIA noted that during the "final stage of Iraqi-Kurdish war [that] Soviet pilots reportedly flew combat bombing missions against the Kurds, but took care not to cross the Iranian border."⁴⁴ In Syria, the Soviets deployed combat air defense units (to operate SA-6 batteries) at the end of the Yom Kippur war (the last week of October 1973 until the middle of 1974) and again in the summer of 1982 (SA-5) in response to the destruction of Syria's air defense by the IDF air force.⁴⁵

⁴² "Special Intelligence Summary: Eastern Bloc Instruction in Egypt and Syria," July 5, 1957, General Staff, Intelligence Branch m/20/57/0607, IDFA, file 123-535/2004. (my emphasis).

⁴³ See "Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in the Yemen Arab Republic," August 31, 1978, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980: Volume XVIII: Middle East Region: Arabian Peninsula* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2015), accessible at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v18/d254>.

⁴⁴ See "Soviet Military Capabilities to Project Power and Influence Distance Areas," NIE 11-10-79, September 1, 1979, accessible at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/document/0000278536>.

⁴⁵ On September 13, 1974 Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel, told US senators in Washington that "till three months ago the Soviets manned two SA-6 brigades which protected Damascus and lately the Syrians started to operate them." Rafiah (Washington) to Gazit (Jerusalem), LV/727, September 15, 1974, ISA, MFA/5976/8. For 1982, see "Soviet Policy in the Middle East and South Asia Under Andropov," SNIE 11/30-83, January 2, 1983, accessible at <http://www.foia.cia.gov/document/0000273238>.

Moscow was not able—and did not want—to refuse these later requests by Cairo and Damascus. The main reasons for Moscow’s decisions to intervene militarily in those later years were either to save a local regime from imminent defeat, or even collapse; to rehabilitate the credibility and reputation of its most advanced weapons systems after they were severely damaged; or a combination of both—all while calculating that such a move would be practically possible and that the US would tolerate Soviet involvement. This was one of the Kremlins’ methods to defend and preserve its position in the Middle East. The same decision, based on the same considerations (mainly the first one), was repeated again in the fall of 2015 and at the beginning of 2016. Yet, 59 years ago, the Kremlin was almost able to completely refuse Cairo and Damascus’ requests for the deployment of Soviet military units, as it did not find enough justification for doing so, while it kept secret the limited military aid it did choose to provide, under the pretext of a special international situation.

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