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Review by **Yaacov Ro'i**, Tel-Aviv University

In the above article Guy Laron tries to unravel one of the less explored aspects of Soviet Third World and Middle Eastern policy in the mid-1960s. While Egyptian archives are no more open than those of Syria, a number of Egyptian generals, politicians and journalists have disclosed not a little of their country's ties with their great power patron, enabling us to get a picture of what in fact happened and why between Moscow and its main regional ally. This has not been the case with Syria, a country which is altogether far more secretive than its southern ally.

Laron has not been able to make good this lacuna to the full, but he has used a plethora of sources, published and archival, in an impressive range of languages to explore the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Damascus. He has had recourse not only to Russian, Israeli and American archives, but also to that of the Czech foreign ministry, and has given us a rather replete conception of how the connection between the two countries in effect worked. He is to be congratulated on undertaking this research despite its inevitable deficiency, since it is clearly unreasonable to postpone all investigation until such time as the Syrians change tack and reveal at least some of their own material.

Yet, it is not merely the fact that Laron took upon himself to interpret the Syrian-Soviet relationship and its pertinence to the Arab-Israel conflict that deserves credit. His article puts this relationship in the broader context of the USSR's relations with other problematic Third World allies, notably North Vietnam and Cuba, thus giving his topic a pertinent broader context. The effort Laron put into studying issues which digress from his main theme has been well worthwhile for these issues give the Soviet relationship with Syria a depth that is often lacking when dealing with Moscow's ties with third parties.

Certainly, Laron is correct in underlining the difficulties the Soviet leadership encountered in its partnership with Syria. These were to all intents and purposes the most important feature of the relationship. The Soviets found the Syrians intransigent and insensitive to the needs and strategies of a superpower. The outcome, as Laron points out, was a constant sense of frustration in the Kremlin, or – looking at it from the point of view of the analyst – a further instance of the tail wagging the dog, which the Soviets encountered only too frequently in their courtship of Third World “progressive,” i.e., anti-Western, states. The Syrians appreciated that the Soviets needed them no less than vice versa and took full advantage of this.

My main disagreement with Laron is that he treats the Soviet-Syrian relationship in something of a vacuum precisely in the very setting which he seeks to highlight. From Moscow’s point of view ties with Syria were necessary, among others, in view of the unfolding deterioration in Israeli-Arab relations and the political and diplomatic confrontation, if not clash, this could be expected to induce in Soviet-American relations; that is they were part not so much of a triangular as of a pentagonal puzzle. The other two players, Egypt and the United States are integral to comprehending the situation and their exclusion creates something of an artificial image. (One could, of course, contend that there were yet other factors involved, such as the PLO, but these seem to me to be in fact ancillary.)

Thus, Moscow reacted to the exacerbation of tensions between Syria and Israel in 1966 following the coup that brought the neo-Ba`th to power in February of that year, by encouraging Cairo and Damascus to reach the Mutual Defense Pact that was signed on 4 November 1966. This was the first formal tie between the two main “progressive” Arab states since Syria’s defection from the United Arab Republic in September 1961. Laron makes only incidental mention of the pact (175), which in my opinion is unfortunate since it is the clue to understanding Nasser’s troop deployment in the Sinai Peninsula as a follow-up to the Soviet warning in the second week of May 1967 about Israeli troop concentrations on the Syrian border that was passed on simultaneously, or almost so, to Egypt and Syria (176-177). Indeed, the pact and the fact that its conclusion was pressed by the Soviets almost seem to indicate that the entire scenario which unraveled in May 1967 was premeditated, especially given that the information contained in the warning was incorrect.¹

¹ It has even been suggested that the pact was a Soviet initiative but this has not been conclusively proven. See Yaacov Ro’i, “Soviet Policy toward the Six Day War through the Prism of Moscow’s Relations with Egypt and Syria,” in Yaacov Ro’i and Boris Morozov (eds.), *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Washington, D.C., and Stanford: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2008), 4 and fn.8.

If Mohammed Haykal is right in reporting that Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir – not Viktor – Semenov told Sadat on 29 April 1967, that the deployment of Israeli troops was meaningless (175), then what was the purpose of the Soviets' warning of two weeks later, based primarily on an alleged concentration of Israeli troops on the Syrian border as well as a discussion at the Knesset foreign and security affairs committee, informing their allies that Israel was intending to attack Syria? It should be noted, moreover, that the warning was issued as a result of instructions from the Politburo (the top Soviet decision-making body) itself.² As an aside, the suggestion that “the ballyhooed intelligence report” had not reached Moscow when Sadat met Foreign Minister Gromyko and Semenov on 13 May (176), is manifestly incorrect, given that it was passed on to the Syrians the previous day. There may have been indecision in Moscow as to what and how to tell Sadat. In any case, we know that the warning was passed on to the Egyptians in Cairo itself; the conversation with Sadat at the Moscow airport was just one of several such dialogues.

I agree with Laron that Moscow did not want a war and, after escalating tension between Israel's neighbors to the north and south, sought to prevent its outbreak. Yet, I believe that the Soviets exacerbated friction knowingly and with a specific intent. On the tactical level, they indeed sought to bolster the Syrian regime by getting the Egyptians to implement the Defense Pact and threaten Israel from the south and so prevent Israel from even contemplating any move against Syria. Yet Moscow had a strategic goal as well. It had long been endeavoring to pressure Egypt in particular to give the Soviet Union naval facilities and Nasser had been dragging his feet, making a few minor concessions from time to time, but far from what the Soviets wanted. On 24 May, after Nasser had closed the Straits of Tiran – without previously consulting Moscow – a step which Moscow knew was for Israel a *casus belli*, they let the cat out of the bag. On that day Semenov directed the Soviet ambassadors to Cairo and Damascus respectively to visit Nasser or his deputy Field-Marshal Abd al-Hakim Amer and Syrian Prime Minister Yusuf Zu'ayyin or Foreign Minister Ibrahim Makhus to ask whether their governments

“would consider it expedient – depending on the political situation and in the event of a further exacerbation of tension around the UAR (Syria) – a detachment of Soviet war vessels from among those in the Mediterranean, made a 2 – 3 day visit to the ports of Alexandria or Port Said (the port of Latakia).”³

In other words, the tension that the Soviets had created was to be the *mise-en-scène* for bringing Soviet naval detachments to Egyptian and Syrian Mediterranean ports. In a letter to Nasser written on the same day, Brezhnev himself suggested that

² Boris Morozov, “The Outbreak of the June 1967 War in Light of Soviet Documentation,” *ibid.*, 46 – 47.

³ V. Semenov to the Soviet ambassadors in Cairo and Damascus, May 24, 1967 – *ibid.*, 285 – 286.

“As one of the measures toward restraining possible aggression against the independent Arab states, we are considering – if you agree – the possibility of transferring temporarily a Soviet air force unit to an UAR airfield in anticipation of a further exacerbation of the conflict.”⁴

When President Nikolai Podgorny came to Cairo immediately after the Six Day War (21 – 24 June) to arrange with Nasser the conditions for the future relations between the two countries, he made it clear that if the Soviet Union was to defend Egypt, it required certain concessions: permanent storage facilities for fuel and spare parts, permission for regular access by their ships to Egyptian harbors, repair facilities for refitting and maintenance of Soviet units, the permanent deployment of four Soviet auxiliary ships in Alexandria, and the establishment of advanced warning systems and forward reconnaissance for monitoring the U.S. Sixth Fleet. And Nasser, who was in desperate need of new weaponry to compensate for what he had lost in the fighting, gave the Soviets their pound of flesh.⁵ I am not suggesting that the Soviet leadership only gained from the Arab defeat, but it did obtain the one strategic purpose that seems to have been behind its rather reckless move in issuing the warning to Syria and Egypt.

Laron goes into considerable detail in discussing the follow-up to the Soviet warning. Yet he omits mention of the visit to Syria of Egyptian Chief-of-Staff Muhammad Fawzi, who reported that there were no Israeli troop concentrations on the Syrian border and the refusal of the Soviet ambassador in Israel to take up Prime Minister Levi Eshkol’s offer to go to the north and see for himself what Israeli troops were there. Laron also seems to be in error when he writes that Moscow suggested on 22 May that Eshkol come to the Soviet capital so that the Soviet leaders might mediate the conflict. It was only on May 28, after Eshkol asked Ambassador Dmitrii Chuvakhin whether he might not be invited to the Soviet Union (on the latter’s well-known visit to the Israeli prime minister at 2 a.m. on May 27) that the Kremlin decided to invite him if Cairo and Damascus agreed. Nasser at first consented but retracted his agreement when the Soviets told him that the Syrians were against and the visit did not take place.⁶

Finally, I do not accept Laron’s implication that the Soviets made “a serious mistake” in not forcing the Egyptians to seek a compromise in the last week of May. I do not believe that there was any such possibility given the constraints of Soviet-Arab relations at this point of time.

⁴ L. Brezhnev to Nasser, May 24, 1967 – *ibid.*, 286 – 287.

⁵ Ro’i, “Soviet Policy...,” 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10, fn. 30.

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In addition, to my “major quarrels” with Laron, there are a few minor points that should be noted. At the very beginning of his paper, he writes, “As it turned out, the Soviet report responsible for the clash was completely false.” This is an unhappy phrase, since everyone knew from the outset that it was false. Second, Laron should have noted at the first mention of the United Arab Republic that that was the name by which Nasser continued to call Egypt, even after Syria’s secession from the UAR. Third, there should be a footnote at least explaining the significance of non-aligned conferences in the 1960s (165). Fourth, I very much doubt that the Soviets invested in the Euphrates Dam in the belief that it would “produce an industrial surge which, in turn, would create the working class that would become the springboard of a large communist party” (169).

Even if a Soviet diplomat said so – we are not told when and to whom – there were other more pungent and more salient reasons for financing the dam. Fifth, I find Laron’s treatment of Soviet references to China somewhat simplistic. The Soviets themselves cannot have addressed their propaganda position vis-à-vis the CPR as seriously as Laron who tries to interpret or dispute the allegations made in this propaganda.

Despite the lacunae, some of which are ineluctable in that Laron – like everybody else – lacks Syrian documentation, the paper is an important contribution to the study of Soviet policy vis-à-vis Syria, the Arab “progressive” states, and the Arab-Israel conflict. It provides new insights and new data that only Laron with his special skills has been able to unearth.

Yaacov Ro’i is professor of history, emeritus, at Tel-Aviv University. He has published several books and articles on Soviet Middle East policy and Soviet-Israeli relations, most recently an edited volume, with Boris Morozov, *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Woodrow Wilson Center and Stanford University Press: Washington, D.C., and Stanford, 2008).

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