

 **Article REVIEW**

Avi Kober. “Great-Power Involvement and Israeli Battlefield Success in the Arab-Israeli Wars, 1948-1982.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8.1 (Winter, 2006): 20-48.

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Avi Kober’s study is by far one of the most insightful studies of superpower involvement in Arab-Israeli wars and especially of its effects on the military outcomes of these wars.

One of the puzzles of Middle East wars is how could a small country win all its wars with a number of larger states? The usual explanations focus either on the Israeli advantages in the regional military balance of power or the domestic advantages of Israel in its modern economy and democratic institutions, and related greater motivation and commitment of its citizen-army, etc.

A major constraint on Israel’s military accomplishments seemed to be systemic pressures of the great powers either because of their fear of the de-stabilizing effects of Israeli victories or because of their preference to maintain friendly relations with the Arab states, especially due to the high dependence of the West on Arab oil or the importance of Arab clients for the Soviet bloc. Thus, the puzzle is: how could a small country achieve such impressive battlefield successes against the preferences of the leading superpowers in the bipolar world of the Cold War? Do these victories show the limitations of systemic factors so that a small country can succeed militarily against great-power opposition?

Kober presents a persuasive—and well-documented—explanation for this intriguing puzzle, which does not refute systemic logic—but is in contrast to some conventional arguments about the great powers and the Middle East. While the usual claim is that Israel could win due to its military advantages but then was contained by great power intervention, and thus Israeli leaders constantly had to fear hostile superpower intervention, Kober shows that this intervention either failed to negate Israel’s military accomplishments or was even conducive to its battlefield successes. This conduciveness was based on the one hand on the lack of will or ability of hostile great powers to intervene against Israel, and on the other hand on the support delivered by Israel’s patrons. Kober shows that without this support, Israel’s military capabilities might not have been enough to secure military success.

Kober convincingly shows the empirical application of these patterns in the various Arab-Israeli wars: the 1948 War of Independence, the 1956 Sinai war, the 1967 Six-Day War, the 1982 Lebanon War, and in part in the 1973 October War.

Paradoxically, Kober’s useful analysis seemingly might confirm Arab “conspiracy theories” that Israel has won due to the supposed support it received from its “colonial” or “neo-imperialist” great power patrons. Thus, this help can resolve the problem the Arabs face in explaining the military victories of the small Jewish state on vastly more populated and bigger Arab states. Even more importantly for a scholarly analysis, Kober shows that Israeli military successes do not contradict systemic analysis

because these victories were compatible with the world balance of power and with the interests of the superpowers.

Yet, two qualifications should be added here. First, and this goes especially against the “conspiracy theories”—even though superpower support—or lack of effective opposition—was significant; in the final analysis, Israel’s military skills were crucial – a necessary condition, though might not be sufficient-- in achieving its successes.

Second, as Kober hints, in a certain stage of the Arab-Israeli wars, superpower pressures were effective in constraining Israel’s military freedom of action. Although the actual importance might have varied between the different wars, tacit superpower cooperation has created a “red line” which Israel could not cross—that is, posing a threat to an Arab regime allied with the Soviet Union. When Israel seemed to be near a strategic victory which might have posed such a threat, the Soviets issued a threat of intervention (even if, as Kober shows, in different degrees of credibility and relevance in the different wars). This threat has led to two kinds of US responses: on the one hand, in accordance with the overall Kober’s analysis—detering Soviet intervention, which might have negated Israel’s military success, but at the same time the US also exercised effective restraining pressures on Israel not to cross this “red line” and not to inflict a strategic defeat of the Arabs which might have posed danger to the survival of the pro-Soviet Arab regime. Thus, as Kober mentions, paradoxically, Soviet threats became effective when the US could use them to pressure Israel and to moderate its military behavior.¹

One may conclude that even though bi-polarity did not prevent Israel’s military victories, the combination of bipolarity and the fear of nuclear escalation between the superpowers has led to effective pressures on Israel which have brought about, together with its successful military moves, a relatively early termination of Arab-Israel wars. This early termination has on the one hand solidified Israel military victories, as Kober argues, but at the same time, did not allow Israel to translate its military accomplishments to full-blown strategic victories which might have included regime change in Arab capitals.

Thus, the combined effect of bipolarity and superpower nuclear deterrence maintained the overall regional status-quo until the changing balance of forces between the superpowers brought about the rise of US hegemony in the region, starting with the post-1973 Egypt’s realignment and culminating after the US victory in the 1991 Gulf War. But under thus overall stability, Israel could achieve some important military victories that indirectly also strengthened American position in the region by affecting Egypt’s realignment with the US partly as result of the outcome of the 1973 war. Thus, Israel’s military successes, assisted by the US, as Kober shows, indirectly helped to solidify US superior position in the region.

It might be interesting to evaluate the outcome of the 2006 summer war between Israel and the Hezbollah in comparison to the earlier Arab-Israel wars. In this war, systemic constraints on Israel’s military freedom of action were even lesser than in the wars analyzed by Kober. The reason being that Hezbollah was perceived by the great powers to be a source of regional instability by posing a threat both to Israel but especially to the coherence of the Lebanese state and thus also to Lebanon’s neighbors. In this sense the pattern identified by Kober was even reinforced in the most recent war. The great

¹ For an elaborate analysis of some of these points, see Benjamin Miller, *When Opponents Cooperate: Great Power Conflict and Collaboration in World Politics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002, 2nd ed.), ch. 5.

difference is, however, that in this case Israel's military accomplishments were much more limited than in the earlier inter-state wars. One result of the combined effect of the lower systemic constraints and the limited Israeli military performance was that this war was longer than most earlier wars discussed in Kober's article. Another result of the problematic military performance of Israel is that international involvement in guaranteeing regional security was reinforced following the recent war by the deployment of a strengthened European-led Unifil II force in southern Lebanon. While the limitations on the effectiveness of this UN force are enormous, in this case even the Israeli government presents this deployment as one of its key achievements in the war. Thus, in contrast to the earlier wars in which the Israeli military, supported (or not opposed) by the systemic forces, played the key role in determining the parameters of regional security, one of the interesting questions in the aftermath of the 2006 war is: will the limitations of Israeli military successes lead to greater international involvement in shaping regional security or was the outcome of the 2006 war an exceptional Israeli military failure that does not foretell the future of the military struggles in the region?

In reference to one of the earliest Arab-Israeli wars, analyzed so well by Kober, it is interesting to note that this new security involvement is European-led—50 years after the post-Suez eviction of Britain and France from the strategic affairs of the region by the Soviet and American superpowers, which since then became the key external players. Kober's thoughtful article analyzes very effectively their effects on the military outcome of the Arab-Israeli wars. Thus, I highly recommend this article for anyone interested in the Middle East, the Cold War and, more generally, in diplomatic history and international relations.

Benjamin Miller is an Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of Haifa and received a Ph. D. from the University of California at Berkeley. A second and expanded edition of Miller's book, When Opponents Cooperate: Great Power Conflict and Collaboration in World Politics (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press) was published in 2002. His current work focuses on constructing a theory of regional war and peace and applying it to the Balkans, South America, Western Europe, and the Middle East in the 19th and 20th centuries. The title of his forthcoming book is States, Nations, and the Great Powers: The Sources of Regional War and Peace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2007). The book focuses on the effects of nationalism and the great powers on regional variations in war and peace both among different regions and also over time—from the 19th century to the 21 century

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