MERIA

The Russians Were Coming:
The Soviet Military Threat in the 1967 Six-Day War
By Isabella Ginor*

New evidence reveals that during the 1967 Six-Day War the Soviet Union set in motion military operations to assist Egypt and especially Syria, first in seeking to overcome Israel and then in response to Israel's pre-emptive attack. These potential steps included a naval landing, airborne reinforcement and air support for ground operations. Action was aborted at the last minute due, among other factors, to a firm US response and dissension among Soviet leaders in Moscow.

8:48 a.m. on June 10, 1967 was "a time of great concern and utmost gravity" in the White House Situation Room, according to U.S. Ambassador to the USSR Llewellyn Thompson, one of the presidential advisors present there. (1) A message had just been received over the Moscow-Washington hotline from Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin threatening a Soviet military action that might lead to nuclear confrontation.(2) Newly received evidence now shows the threat was not an empty one: the Soviets had prepared a naval landing, with air support, on Israel's shores.

New evidence summarized in this article indicates that the Soviet intervention was not only planned but actually set in motion before being aborted. Soviet officials interviewed insist that such operations were meant only to deter Israel from overwhelming Egypt and, especially, Syria, as well as to stop the United States from intervening on Israel's side. In order to achieve this outcome, however, the projected action had to be made known to these adversaries, and this was carefully avoided by the Soviets. Yet details of the operation were kept in total secrecy, have been denied to this day, and remained

generally unknown to Israeli and American intelligence.

Thus, unless the Soviets grossly overestimated the other side's intelligence capability, this indicates that the operation was to be implemented, not just threatened. Moreover, preparations for this operation began well before the Soviets even accused Israel of offensive designs, the supposed reason for the intervention.

Well before 1967, Israel had been targeted by the KGB's Foreign Intelligence (First) Directorate as a theater of operations during a larger East-West conflict. Preparations had been made there for parachuting at least *diversionnye razvedyvatelnye gruppy* (DRGs--sabotage-intelligence groups) to destroy Israeli targets. During 1964-66, according to documents supplied by the defecting KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin, Israel was one of the countries where caches of arms and radio equipment were prepositioned for such operations. Mitrokhin claims some of these were boobytrapped and may be in place to this day.(3) The direct involvement of Soviet personnel on Israeli soil, at least on a small scale, had thus already been considered and approved.

The Soviet Union played a central role in escalating Middle East tensions to the brink of war in 1967, and evidence is accumulating that it actually instigated the conflict. In his recently published memoirs, Nikita S. Khrushchev asserts that the USSR's military command first encouraged high-ranking Egyptian and Syrian delegations, in a series of "hush-hush" mutual visits, to go to war, then persuaded the Soviet political leadership to support these steps, in the full knowledge they were aimed at starting a war to destroy Israel.(4)

The conventional Western chronology of this crisis starts on May 13, 1967 when Egypt made the false charge, based on information provided by the USSR, that Israel was massing forces on its border with Syria in preparation for an attack. But even as the crisis unfolded, on May 26, a U.S. diplomat remarked to a Soviet interlocutor: "It almost seemed as though the Soviet Union had been aware in advance of the coming Near Eastern crisis, since [Communist Party Secretary Leonid I.] Brezhnev had first called for withdrawal of the Sixth Fleet [from the Mediterranean] on April 24."(5)

The Soviet Ambassador in Tel Aviv, Dmitri S. Chuvakhin, declined an Israeli invitation to see for himself that the charges of troop concentrations were baseless. Twenty-four years later, Chuvakhin maintained in an interview that "[Israeli Prime Minister Levi] Eshkol did pose the question, but unfortunately it isn't a diplomat's assignment to tour frontiers and see whether forces are being massed there or not."(6) Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban correctly identified the Soviet source of the Egyptians' "bad intelligence" and complained to U.S. Ambassador Walworth Barbour that "talking with the Soviet Ambassador here [is] like talking to someone from a different planet."(7)

General Muhammad Fawzi, the Egyptian Chief of Staff, did go to Syria to see for himself and reported that "there was no sign of Israeli troop concentrations and the Russians must have been having hallucinations."(8) But the KGB is reported, by a defector, to have planted agents among Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's closest advisors (9), and he apparently chose to believe them--or simply stuck to a plan agreed upon previously with the Soviets.

The Soviet press, including *Pravda's* Cairo correspondent Yevgeny Primakov (later Russia's SVR [Foreign Intelligence] chief, foreign minister and premier) contributed inflammatory allegations about Israel's aggressive intent.(10) For the first time, Moscow sent much of its Black Sea and Northern Fleets into the Mediterranean (11) and discreetly backed Nasser when he demanded the removal of the UN force from Sinai and blocked Israeli shipping through the Gulf of Aqaba to the port of Eilat. The U.S. embassy in Cairo was certain that Egypt had "full Soviet backing" on the latter move and was concerned that the State Department thought otherwise.(12)

In Moscow several days later, Thompson asked a "well-informed" Soviet source "point blank whether Soviets knew in advance of Egyptian action in closing Gulf of Aqaba. He was obviously embarrassed...and after a long pause said he thought Nasser had acted on his own."(13) At the UN, where Soviet Ambassador Nikolai Fedorenko was stalling proposals to lift the blockade, his Canadian and Danish colleagues told him they had "a nasty feeling [the] USSR [was] playing [a] game of allowing crisis to build to force Israel to act."(14)

Ex-KGB General Oleg Kalugin, then the agency's deputy "resident" [station chief] for political intelligence in Washington, recalls that "no one in Moscow had any

doubt" that Israel would be quickly defeated.(15) When the war did erupt, the Soviet ambassador in Jordan said to his American counterpart "in a perfectly matter-of-fact way 'you know, our estimate is that if the Israelis do not receive large-scale outside assistance...we think the Arabs will win the war, if [it] is allowed to be fought to the finish'."(16)

On May 18, with the situation rapidly escalating, Eban handed Barbour a letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson stating, "There may be an impression in Cairo and Damascus that Soviet support...is assured, and that therefore they have no need of restraint." He asked for "an emphatic clarification by the United States to the Soviet Union of the American commitment to Israel….I can hardly exaggerate the importance and urgency of such an approach."(17) The same day, Undersecretary of State Eugene Rostow expressed to Soviet Charge d'Affaires Chernyakov "concern...over Israeli-Syrian tensions and told him of Syrian Government rumors...that Syria had been promised unlimited military and political support by USSR," of which Chernyakov said he was unaware.(18)

The next day the U.S. defense attaché in Israel attended a briefing by Israeli Military Intelligence chief Aharon Yariv and reported that Yariv shared the belief of the Egyptian and Syrian governments that their "present actions [have the] backing of USSR." Yariv, however, was "not sure how deep USSR is committed."(19) Nonetheless, on May 19 the State Department informed the main U.S. embassies "that if conflict occurred in the Middle East, the USSR would be in difficult spot. Russian temptation would be to aid Egypt and Syria, but [the] USSR was reluctant to promote hostilities in Arab world as means to exert pressure on US over Vietnam. The USSR

realized [a] Middle Eastern War would be hard to control. They would make at least unilateral efforts to stop it."(20)

In Washington on May 20, Israel Ambassador Avraham Harman called "urgently" on Undersecretary Rostow to report full details of Eban's "disturbing" conversation with Chuvakhin: "[The] latter asserted [that] terror incidents on Syrian border [were the] work of [the] CIA, adding, 'We have warned you. You are responsible.'" Harman raised, "[The] possibility we may be getting double talk from [the] Soviets...[and the] possibility of Soviet-Syrian-Egyptian collusion." (21)

On May 24, Deputy Undersecretary of State Raymond L. Garthoff had one of his frequent appointments with Boris N. Sedov, "KGB officer and second secretary of the Soviet Embassy" as Garthoff later described him.(22) "Sedov left the general impression that if the United States were to become directly involved militarily in the escalating Middle East conflict, the Soviet Union, too, would have to become involved. But he was vague and noncommittal as to the way it would become involved." This reminded Garthoff of Sedov's mentioning to him, a month earlier, Brezhnev's demand for withdrawal of the U.S. Sixth Fleet from the Mediterranean, and this time he included it in his report of the conversation.(23) Sedov would soon become much more specific.

In Moscow on May 26, newly appointed KGB Chairman Yuri V. Andropov briefed the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party on the Middle East situation, referring to a report prepared by his agency. The day before, he stated, "at a meeting of Israel's propaganda services' chiefs, Propaganda Minister [Israel] Galili declared that the government of Israel had decided to commence military operations against [Egypt] in two or three days. This data...is confirmed by reports received from

Israeli military circles. The Eshkol cabinet has completed its war preparations." The KGB report assessed that American military intervention was likely, especially to open the Gulf of Aqaba, and stated that "aircraft of the Sixth Fleet are, since May 23, routinely carrying out reconnaissance flights over the northern coast of [Egypt] and in the region of Gaza." (24)

The next day--Saturday--Chernyakov requested an urgent meeting with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and presented a letter from Kosygin. The note warned, in line with the KGB report, that "Israel is actively engaged in military preparations and evidently intends to carry out armed aggression...Israeli militant circles are attempting to impose...an 'adventurist' action...[and] may cause an armed conflict." Kosygin warned that "if arms should be used this could be the beginning of far-reaching events. Should Israel commit aggression and military operations begin, then we will render assistance to those countries that are subject to aggression." Rusk took this seriously enough to urgently inform allied leaders and urged Johnson--then at his Texas ranch--to relay Kosygin's message to Eshkol immediately, with a warning against preemptive action "which would make it impossible for friends...to stand by you." Johnson did so but toned down the warning. (25)

Ambassador Thompson, before coming to Washington, had cabled from Moscow on May 28 about a warning from the Egyptian Embassy's political counselor that "Nasser has [a] larger commitment from [the] Soviets than anyone (presumably including the source) had realized.…[The] Soviet objective is to transform Arab-Israeli struggle into showdown between Communists and anti-Communists for control of Middle East, and Soviets are succeeding. If Nasser wins this one,

monarchies and Western oil interests will go." Thompson however "emphasized" that his "source was distraught, that he claimed to be 'not in the know' and that his views [were] probably colored by his clear dislike of both Nasser and Soviets." (26) The United States, in sum, had formed no assessment of Soviet offensive intentions.

On June 5, Israel launched a pre-emptive strike against its Arab neighbors (which, over six days, cost the lives of 35 Soviet advisors stationed at Egyptian and Syrian military installations).(27) Kosygin immediately activated the Moscow-Washington teletype hotline for the first time since it was installed following the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara recounted recently that when the line rang at 7:15 am, he awoke Johnson. "The president comes on the line and says, 'What in the hell are you calling for at this hour?'" McNamara told him. Within fifteen minutes they, along with Rusk, had begun what became a nearly continuous conference in the White House Situation Room. (28)

A total of 20 messages were exchanged. "The president watched with great care" this material, according to Johnson's advisor McGeorge Bundy. At the outset, the Americans were "mainly concerned with the awful shape we would be in if the Israelis were losing. We didn't know anything about the situation on the ground.…It was in a way reassuring when it became clear that the fighting was the Israelis' idea and the idea was working." (29)

For the first five days of the war, the messages dealt mainly with securing a cease-fire on the Israeli-Egyptian front and exchanging information on the USS Liberty incident, which will be discussed later. Although the Soviet side made no explicit threat to use force over the hotline, hints were dropped elsewhere. Soviet Ambassador

Chuvakhin told his German counterpart in Tel Aviv, Rolf Pauls, "In [an] unusually serious vein," as Pauls related to his American counterpart, "If now Israelis become quite drunk with success and pursue their aggression further the future of this little country will be a very sad one."(30)

Then, on June 10, the Soviet premier weighed in with a stern warning over the hotline: Israeli forces, after routing Egypt and Jordan, were according to Kosygin "conducting an offensive toward Damascus," the Syrian capital.(31) "The feeling of those in the Situation Room," as Thompson recorded for the National Security Council history file, "was that the Israelis were probably doing so."(32) The Americans no longer had a manned embassy in Damascus and–incredibly–no independent assessment of the Israeli offensive on the Golan Heights. This was true despite a dispatch from Ambassador Barbour two days earlier, stating that in conversations with other diplomats "We have already taken steps to calm what I believe is exaggerated impression of Israeli military ambitions. We have [the] impression [that] 25 kilometers will be [Israel's] maximum penetration [of] Syria."(33) This assessment had apparently not been relayed to the Situation Room, where CIA Director Richard Helms was called in for his evaluation. The best he could do was to try and reach "friendly powers" that still had diplomatic missions in Syria. (34)

According to a top-secret memoir contributed by Helms to the NSC history dossier, conversation in the Situation Room "was in the lowest voices he had ever heard.…The atmosphere was tense." (35) Kosygin's message went on: "A very crucial moment has now arrived which forces us, if military actions are not stopped in the next few hours, to adopt an independent decision. We are ready to do this. However, these

actions may bring us into a clash which will lead to a grave catastrophe.…We propose that you demand from Israel that it unconditionally cease military action.…We purpose to warn Israel that if this is not fulfilled, necessary actions will be taken, including military."(36) This hasty translation was read to President Johnson and his seven aides present. Thompson was asked to double-check that the original Russian text indeed threatened military action by the USSR. It did. "In effect," says McNamara, "it said:`Mr. President, if you want war, you'll get war.' That's how tense the situation was."(37)

Anatoly F. Dobrynin, then Soviet Ambassador in Washington, now claims not to have been privy to Kosygin's message of June 10. In a recent interview he insisted that the USSR never meant to intervene militarily and never even threatened it. Confronted with Kosygin's words, he persisted:

> "I don't see any direct military intervention here. That's your interpretation and it doesn't arise directly from Kosygin's text….That's diplomatic language which is used to permit certain variations and leave room for future negotiation.…He might have wanted to leave some uncertainty, that's what you call diplomacy."
> Q. It says "including military."
> A. "Necessary measures" might be various. It doesn't go into detail. Don't read into it what it doesn't say. What's more, the course of events showed there was no military action on our part. (38)

Still, all the American aides present on June 10 in the Situation Room recalled– in Bundy's words—"considerable discussion about what in fact the Soviets would be able to do to the Israelis if they did try to carry

out their threat." Bundy thought that "the Russians' possibilities were really not that impressive."(39) McNamara, on the other hand, states now: "We did not have any specific intelligence on [a Soviet plan to intervene]. But we were fearful that Syria might call on the Soviets for support to attack Israel, and Israel's very existence would be at stake." (40) New evidence now reveals that the Soviets were indeed poised to attack Israel, just as McNamara had suspected, and had been preparing for such a mission all along.

As early as May 11, Soviet Arabic-language interpreters stationed in Egypt were summoned to the Soviet Embassy in Cairo. One of them later recounted to journalist Aleksandr Khaldeev that they were told war between Egypt and Israel was inevitable. Later they were taken to Alexandria and informed they would be posted to the ships of the Black Sea Fleet, now cruising off the Israeli shore. "One of the interpreters...said he knew for sure that we would be attached to a 'desant' (MEANING =descent, landing) force that would be landing in Haifa [Israel's main commercial harbor and naval base] or slightly northward." The interpreters were to handle liaison with Israel's Arab population, "who were longing for us." (41)

This backs up an eyewitness account received recently from a participant in the putative landing. Yuri N. Khripunkov was in June 1967 a young gunnery lieutenant on board a new BPK (large anti-submarine ship), then the fastest, most advanced model in the Soviet Navy. It was part of a large reinforcement force for the Mediterranean flotilla which arrived from the Black Sea base of Sevastopol in early May (42), shortly after Brezhnev demanded the withdrawal of the Sixth Fleet. At least one more detachment--including four destroyers, two "hydrographic vessels" (a cover name for intelligence ships) and even one "icebreaker"--went through the Turkish straits on May 31.(43)

The Israelis appear to have been more concerned about the threat posed by the Soviet fleet than the Americans were. The Israeli military's spokesman told the U.S. defense attache on May 25: "We are very anxious to know what [the] Soviet fleet in [the] East Mediterranean is doing. We knew they were in the area of Crete and think they may have moved north." This was however only 17th among the points he made. (44) A member of the Israeli general staff at the time recalls hearing that a Soviet landing "had been discussed at cabinet sessions, but only as a theoretic[al] possibility." (45)

The Israeli concern was well-based in fact. Khripunkov relates how on June 5 his captain ordered him to raise and command a 30-man detachment of "volunteers" for a landing on the Israeli coast. Similar parties were being assembled on all the 30-odd Soviet surface vessels in the Mediterranean, for a total of some 1000 men. The assignment for Khripunkov's platoon was to penetrate Haifa port.(46)

The Russian military historian Col. Valery A. Yaremenko confirms that such a directive was issued. "In order to influence Israel, the order was given to raise quickly, on board the ships of the squadron in the Mediterranean, units of untrained marines–that is, regular seamen. They were supposed to sail toward Alexandria and make a trial `desant' in that port. But the order was rescinded almost immediately as unrealistic." Yaremenko is unaware of written orders mentioning an Israeli target for the landing. But he adds that there was a standing order from the commander of the Soviet Navy that "If the Israelis try to blockade the Egyptian or Syrian coast, or to hamper the activity of Soviet vessels

bringing arms and materiel to these countries, steps should be taken and arms used if necessary." In a comment unconfirmed as yet by any other source, Yaremenko adds that "There were minor incidents between Soviet ships and Israel patrol craft, which fortunately ended peacefully." (47)

Khripunkov was told that in addition to the improvised landing parties "there was also one BDK [large amphibious ship] with about 40 tanks and maybe a battalion of infantry."(48) On June 8, briefing an emissary from the White House, General Yariv said "[We] knew that [a Soviet] ship had left Russian port in last few days which was loaded with 70 tanks and anti-aircraft material," but he attributed this to Soviet resupplying of Egypt. (49)

Dobrynin maintains that "there was no…intention on the part of the Soviet government [to intervene]. There were rumors, but there could be any kind of rumors. But there was no real intention on the part of the government. This I know for sure." Still, he admits, "[Generals] have their own considerations...They plan all kinds of variations that may or may not be realized." (50)

According to one account, Acting Defense Minister [later full Minister] Andrei A. Grechko and Andropov were "pressing for the immediate dispatch of Soviet forces to the Middle East. They were supported by [Nikolai G.] Yegorichev, party boss for the city of Moscow, who suggested a landing on the isthmus of Sinai [perhaps the land spit between the Bardawil lagoon and the Mediterranean] to start a march on Tel Aviv;" Yegorichev now denies making any such recommendations. (51) He had just (April 1967) visited Egypt and, according to other sources, reported that both that country and Syria needed much greater Soviet

military support to confront Israel successfully. (52)

On board Khripunkov's BPK, only one sailor refused to "volunteer." He was later transferred but not otherwise punished. The hazards of the operation were obvious. The seamen were neither trained nor equipped for a commando raid on land. Khripunkov later recalled: "What were we supposed to accomplish, with my pistol and the sailors' AK-47s? Get in there and see, they told us. `Throw your RG-42's [depth grenades designed for use against frogmen]. Wipe out the enemy forces.'" Wait for reinforcements, they were told in general terms "but nothing concrete was said. The air force was going to support us." Not that Khripunkov and his men expected much from the promised air support. "Who was going to look for the landing force? How could we contact them? We had nothing ready–no radio gear, no codes, no signal rockets, nothing."(53)

A retired Soviet air force lieutenant general, Yuri V. Nastenko, confirmed recently that bomber and fighter/reconnaissance units, the latter comprising MiG-21s under his command, were put on full operational alert on the evening of June 5, and he was convinced this was in preparation for "real combat." The armed aircraft were flown the next day to an airbase "on the border"–presumably with Turkey--and the crews were scrambled several times over the following three days. "The command was working on the assumption that we would land at Syrian bases, and thus would have to overfly a neutral country such as Turkey. The Soviet government was deliberating what to do if this passage was denied, since breaking through anyway might mean war! Common sense finally prevailed, the units were returned to base and the all-clear was given." (54) Professor Ze'ev Katz of the Hebrew

University interviewed two immigrants to Israel in the early 1990s, former Soviet paratroopers who reported that their units also spent several days in transport aircraft on the runways, prepared for a drop in the Middle East.(55)

On June 10, while Kosygin's message was being analyzed in the White House, Garthoff was again invited to lunch by Sedov. This time Garthoff immediately sent an urgent, secret memo to Undersecretary of State and former Ambassador in Moscow Foy D. Kohler, relating that Sedov brought up the situation in Syria and "expressed very great concern over Israeli intentions to take Damascus.…He sought to elicit the American reaction if the Soviet Union sent troops to Syria. I said that would be 'a new war'.…We were allies of Greece, Turkey and Iran, and it would be a hostile act to send Soviet troops through their air space if, as I would suppose, they did not give permission.…Sedov smiled and said they probably wouldn't bother to ask.…I emphasized it would be extremely unfortunate and dangerous if the Soviet Union should intervene in Syria."(56)

Dobrynin responded angrily when confronted by the present writer with this report, belittling Sedov as just one of many embassy staffers. "I know he [Sedov] wasn't authorized to ask this question. If he did so in a conversation, it was only that--a talk between two diplomats trying to get something out of each other. It's difficult for me to comment on something I didn't authorize him to speak about."(57)

But Sedov's inquiry was far from hypothetical. On June 8, the U.S. ambassador in Turkey reported that he had been contacted, late the previous night, by senior Foreign Office official Ilter Turkmen (later foreign minister). Turkmen informed him that on June 6, the "Iraqi government through [the] Turk[ish] Ambassador in Baghdad had requested [the government of Turkey] to grant overflight rights to MiG-21s which Iraq was receiving from USSR. [The] Iraqis cited US-UK intervention in Middle East as reason for obtaining aircraft but were vague about numbers involved or timetable for delivery. Turkmen said [Turkey] had not been approached by USSR re[garding] MiGs. Turks were replying...[that] they would be unable to grant request because of [the UN] Security Council cease-fire resolution and questions regarding Turkish security. Turkmen requested this information be held very closely."(58) The Turks clearly considered the proposed aircraft passage to be connected with the Arab-Israeli war and thus coming under the Security Council resolution. Sedov had technically been truthful in saying the Soviets had not asked directly for permission to make overflights.

McNamara says the Soviet preparations for an invasion were unknown to him at the time, but "[Israel's] intelligence services, ours, [and] the British all had information that Nasser was going to attack Israel and literally destroy the country.…There was a great risk that if Egypt attacked [Israel and that if Israel] defeated Egypt, that the Soviets would [intervene] in support of Egypt. We wanted…to be in a position to apply our military force in [Israel's] support to prevent [its] being annihilated by a combination of Egypt, Syria and the Soviet Union. And we feared that if [Israel] pre-empted…and…then needed U.S. military support, our people would say 'Dammit, why the hell should we support them, they started the war.' So we tried to persuade [Israel] and we thought we *had* persuaded [it] not to pre-empt." But after Israel did attack and succeeded, "Johnson and I were wondering.…What will Syria do? And what

will the Soviet Union do, with Egypt–their client–being severely weakened?"(59)

Khripunkov says he and his men were well aware they were pawns in this global power play. Losing 1000 men, he remarked, was "nothing for the USSR. They started counting at five million. Each side wanted to demonstrate its dominant role….The United States sends in the [Sixth] Fleet. We bring in our Black Sea Squadron. They send in spy planes. We start preparing a landing in Israel. The Israeli tanks move through Sinai and are ready to skip over the Suez Canal. What then? We land our force and World War III begins?…The whole world would be destroyed"(60). This was, ultimately, the "grave catastrophe" threatened by Kosygin.

McNamara refuses to this day to discuss the still-controversial USS Liberty incident, and dismisses the ironic possibility that Israel's attack on the intelligence ship prevented an early warning of the Soviet action. The Liberty, a U.S. navy intelligence-gathering ship, had taken Russian and Arabic-speaking experts on board and according to survivors among its crew was deployed to monitor Soviet activities.(61) Israel's initial explanation for its attack on the *Liberty* was the appearance on Israeli radar screens of "a large number of blips approaching...from the west that might have indicated an all-out Egyptian naval attack.…Later it was established that the blips...had been echoes from unusual cloud formations."(62) Or was this the Soviet flotilla?

There is, on the other hand, a suggestion that Israel's attack on the Liberty had a direct bearing on Soviet operational decisions. According to an official Russian military publication, the Soviets considered--like the Liberty survivors--that Israel attacked the ship deliberately in order to obstruct its monitoring Israeli preparations

to use "nuclear and chemical weapons, whose existence had never been denied officially by Tel Aviv." In response, this as yet uncorroborated account asserts that a Soviet naval squadron armed with nuclear weapons was sent into Egyptian waters in the Red Sea.(63)

Meanwhile, in the Mediterranean, "for five or six nights we awaited the order [to land]," says Khripunkov. "We were moving constantly, sailing from the region north of Alexandria and the Suez Canal toward Cyprus and Crete, keeping 50 to 100 miles from the Israeli coast."(64) The zero hour for landing was repeatedly postponed. Even Khrushchev, who felt in retrospect that the Soviets had been wrong to support Nasser's designs on Israel, also considered it had been a mistake to leave him in the lurch. (65)

Moscow's failure to intervene caused the Soviets considerable trouble with their other proteges. In October 1967, the CIA reported, "Since the Middle East crisis the Castro regime has been very critical of the USSR for not supporting its friends...having backed down from its commitments to aid its allies whenever Soviet action might result in a direct confrontation with the United States. The Cuban leaders [fear] the USSR will not come to the aid of Cuba in case of an attack." Immediately after the 1967 war, Kosygin hastened to Havana to placate these anxieties and, according to a CIA cable, "Informed Castro that the USSR had been prepared to aid [Egypt] in the struggle against Israel but...Field Marshal Amir [Abdel-Hakim Amer], Chief of [Egypt's] armed forces, told the USSR that [Egypt] intended to stop fighting within several days."(66) From Cairo, however, the CIA reported soon after the war that Amer and a powerful faction in the Cairo leadership had rather been intent on preventing total Soviet domination of Egypt. (67)

Soviet embarrassment over the failure to rescue Egypt was still sore enough in November 1970 for Khrushchev to exploit it in order to end an investigation against him by the Central Committee's Control Board after he was deposed as the Soviet leader. After hours of harsh questioning, the transcript shows how Khrushchev changed the subject abruptly:

> Khrushchev: As a man and member of the party, how could we--with all our power--permit Egypt to suffer such a rout?.…I'm frequently asked about the Israeli aggression, and I answer that I don't know everything since I'm retired.
>
> Chairman: That ends the conversation. (68)

The Soviets finally made their explicit threat over the hotline only when Syria, too, appeared to be on the verge of defeat by Israel. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan--the member of the Israeli leadership most acutely, if intuitively, preoccupied with the question of Soviet military intervention-- had delayed responding to Syrian shelling of Israeli towns from the Golan mainly out of fear that the Soviets would act, and Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin noted in his memoirs that Dayan's warning to the cabinet "managed to sow a sense of grave disquiet among the ministers." Dayan related years later that he changed his mind and ordered the assault on Syria only after seeing Israel complete its victory over Egypt without the Soviets intervening. Like Moscow's allies, he saw the USSR's failure to save Nasser as a sign of weakness. (69) One can only speculate whether Dayan's misgivings would have been overcome had he known of the Soviets' actual preparations, and their greater readiness to assist the Syrians.

At the White House, Thompson "was impressed how much greater Soviet sensibility there was to the plight of the Syrians than to that of the Egyptians. At the time, the Syrians were the apple of the Russians' eye."(70) In Tel Aviv on June 8, a West German diplomat passed on to his American counterpart the warning by Chuvakhin two days earlier, now adding the interpretation of "this threat to mean that USSR might take more direct action against Israel if [its army] now proceeds completely [to] destroy Syrian armed forces causing [the] Soviet-supported regime there to fall."(71) Barbour cabled Washington the information, and the secret dispatch was "passed to secretary of state and White House" immediately but, like the other intimations of a Soviet intervention this one, too, does not appear to have been relayed to the Situation Room.(72)

After Kosygin's menacing message was received, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach was dispatched from the Situation Room to "call in the Israeli ambassador and put pressure on the Israelis to accept a cease-fire."(73) The Israelis, presumably informed of the Soviet threat, soon did--after completing their conquest of the Golan. The Situation Room team learned of this by watching the televised proceedings of the Security Council. (74)

But earlier McNamara, though he now maintains he was unaware of the naval nature of the Soviet menace, suggested to his colleagues a precisely appropriate response. The main task force of the Sixth Fleet had been circling in the central Mediterranean, intentionally remote from the theater of war. On June 6, Johnson had remonstrated on the hotline to Kosygin over the Soviet media's repeating Nasser's "wholly false and obviously invented charge that a U.S. carrier aircraft had participated in attacks on Egypt.…You know where our carriers are."(75) When the Liberty was attacked, Johnson took care to inform Kosygin that the carrier USS Saratoga was ordered "to

dispatch aircraft to investigate. We wish you to know that investigation is the sole purpose."(76) On June 10, says McNamara, the fleet was still "steaming west, toward Gibraltar, on a training exercise."(77)

According to Helms's memoir, the secretary of defense, "Asked whether we should turn the Sixth Fleet around to sail toward the Eastern Mediterranean. Thompson and Helms agreed. Helms pointed out that Soviet submarines monitoring the fleet's operations would report immediately to Moscow. The president was informed and agreed to send the fleet eastward."(78) Unlike the Soviet action, the essential ingredient of deterrence--informing the enemy--was ensured.

"President Johnson and I," says McNamara, "decided to turn the fleet around and send it back toward Israel, not to join with Israel in an attack on Syria--not at all--but to be close enough to Israel so, if the Soviets supported a Syrian attack on Israel, we could come to Israel's defense with the fleet, [to] prevent Israel from being annihilated. The annihilation of Israel as a nation ...was Nasser's objective then, and perhaps…the Soviets intended to support [it]."(79)

According to the version that filtered down to Khripunkov's crew, "[Communist Party First Secretary Leonid] Brezhnev and the president got on the phones and realized that half an hour after we landed the world would be in ruins. And that was that."(80) His ship, which had at last been ordered to head for the Israeli coast, was turned back after coming within 30 to 40 miles of the beach. (81) The landing was aborted. The interpreters waiting in Alexandria were taken off alert. (82) In his memoirs, Khrushchev acknowledges that the American "McNamara Doctrine" of flexible response was vindicated in 1967. (83)

Why was such a complex, risky and expensive operation activated in the first place, only to be postponed and finally abandoned at such cost to Soviet prestige? Preliminary evidence points to a dispute within the Soviet leadership.

Khaldeev, who at the time was a journalist and writer in Baku, reports hearing from members of the Communist elite there of rumors from Moscow that at least twice there were pitched debates in the Politburo whether to go ahead with the landing. (84) At least one of these occasions was confirmed first-hand by Yegorichev in an interview: "I happened to overhear such a heated discussion when I phoned Brezhnev. Kosygin was giving a speech in a meeting of a [small group] there, and categorically stated that we have no right to intervene in this war and should not….I know Kosygin opposed the use of direct force in this conflict." Yegorichev is certain that Kosygin's message to Johnson on June 10 conflicted with the premier's own opinion, and must have been imposed on him by the Politburo which had to approve such a measure.(85)

But caution finally prevailed in the Politburo as well. On June 10, after Soviet action was openly threatened and then called off, Moscow broke diplomatic ties with Israel. A Soviet Foreign Ministry insider has since reported that "at the Politburo meeting it was [Foreign Minister Andrei] Gromyko who at the last moment proposed the break so as to avoid getting embroiled in the large-scale military adventure that our 'hawks' were insisting on...This [break with Israel] was a bone that was thrown to our 'hawks'. Gromyko was afraid that we would get into a clash with the United States."(86) "Hawks" presumably refers to Andropov and Grechko, the latter described by Yegorichev as "a rough soldier (*soldafon*), no politician."(87) Gromyko later said that

maintaining Israel's presence was more beneficial to Soviet interests that eliminating it: "As long as hostility dominates in the Middle East we are needed there…If...we behave wisely then again we will be very much needed." A close military advisor to Andropov at the time, Nikolai V. Ogarkov (later Marshal) confided in 1991: "Thank God that under the [Soviet] feudal regime, we only had Afghanistan. There might have been Poland, the Middle East, and… frightening to contemplate, nuclear war….Even such things were discussed."(88)

Immediately after the crisis, Yegorichev was deposed, but Andropov and Grechko were promoted and the "hawkish" line remained active. One military goal was achieved: Soviet naval bases were established in Syria and enhanced. In Egypt, where Amer was ousted and committed suicide, the Soviets retained a high military profile. Khripunkov was promoted and made gunnery officer of a three-ship Soviet flotilla stationed at Port Said, the northern entrance of the Suez Canal, now the Egyptian-Israeli front line. "We had the Israelis ahead and the Egyptians astern. Every morning at a quarter to four o'clock I would go on the bridge and have the crew load our guns and train them on the Israeli trenches." There, Khripunkov says, he "witnessed the Israeli navy's tragedy"--apparently alluding to the sinking of the destroyer *Eilat* off the Sinai coast October 21 by missiles fired from Port Said. These have hitherto been attributed to Egyptian missile boats of Soviet make, assisted by Soviet advisors; Khripunkov, hints that Soviet involvement was more important and says the Egyptian navy was incapable of sinking the ship. But he declined to elaborate on this incident. (89) In his 1970 interrogation, Khrushchev was told by the chairman of the party Control Commission, R.E. Melnikov: "The struggle continues, Egypt has not been defeated."(90)

By February 1968, a CIA cable spoke of "the first information received regarding Soviet plans to participate in a limited Arab offensive against Israel.…The Soviets will actively aid the Arabs in gaining back the territory lost in the June 1967 war." The document, recently declassified in a heavily censored form, states however that "the Soviets made it very clear that Israel is here to stay and they will not...facilitate its destruction."(91)

But according to a high-ranking officer directly involved, even the nuclear option against Israel was still not ruled out in defense of an Arab ally. Captain First Class (and later vice-admiral) N.A. Shishkov, then commanding a submarine armed with P-6 (SS-12) nuclear missiles, has disclosed that in the spring of 1968 he was "personally ordered by Soviet Navy commander S. Gorshkov to stand by for firing eight missiles at the Israeli coast if Americans and Israelis began a landing in Syria."(92) And as late as 1981, then former Prime Minister Rabin stated, in a closed lecture at Israel's National Security College, that he "still feared direct Soviet military involvement in Arab-Israeli wars, and even envisioned, under certain geopolitical circumstances, a possible Soviet landing on the shores of Israel."(93)

Thus, Soviet plans for military intervention in the Middle East, even those not actually implemented, had important effects on the behavior of all those countries directly involved in the conflict there.

* Isabella Ginor was born in the USSR and immigrated to Israel shortly before the events described in this article. Since 1986 she has been a specialist on the USSR and its successor states for the newspapers <u>Al HaMishmar</u> and subsequently <u>Ha'aretz</u>, and

a frequent commentator on the broadcast media. Dr. Ginor is also a correspondent for the BBC World Service, Radio France International and the Australian SBS network in Russian, as well as for the Russian newspaper Vremya Novostei. In 1993 she was writer-in-residence at the Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, Oxford University.

NOTES

1. Memorandum of Conversation, "The Hotline Exchanges," Ambassador Llewellyn E Thompson and Mr. Nathaniel Davis, November 4 1968. National Security File, NSC Histories, container 19 v.7, LBJ Presidential Library.

2. Kosygin to Johnson, June 10 1967, Russian and English versions, loc.cit.

3. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive*, London: Penguin 2000, pp.473-475.

4. Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Vremya. Ludi. Vlast*, memoirs in four volumes, Moscow: MN, 1999v. 3, p.435; v.4 p.460.

5. Department of State Memorandum of conversation G/PM:RLGarthoff:pep:5-29-67, confidential. Brezhnev had spoken at a conference of Communist parties at Karlovy Vary, Czechoslovakia.

6. Isabella Ginor, "Still Answering Cautiously" (Hebrew), Ha'Aretz, July 5 1991.

7. Department of State incoming telegram 21704, Ambassador Tel Aviv to secretary of state, secret, May 21 1967.

8. Nadav Safran, *From War To War*, New York: Pegasus, 1969, p. 274n, quoting deposed Egyptian Minister of War Shams al Din Badran at his trial, according to *al Ahram*, February 25 1968. Also *Jerusalem Post,* February 28 1968.

9. John Barron: *KGB,* New York: Bantam, 1974, pp. 39-84.

10. Yevgeny M. Primakov, articles in *Pravda*. April 23, May 15, 26 and 28 1967, among others.

11. Maj.Gen. V.A. Zolotaryov (ed.), *Rossiya (SSSR) v Lokalnikh Voynakh I Voyennykh Konfliktakh Vtoroi Poloviny XX Veka*, Moskva: Institut Voyennoi Istorii Ministerstva Oborony RF, 2000, p.185. This details the makeup of the assembled fleet in the Mediterranean as ten submarines and 30 surface ships in full battle readiness – which corresponds to the account below. This book lists the 1967, 1969-70, 1973 and 1982 Arab-Israeli wars all as conflicts in which Soviet forces participated.

12. Department of State incoming telegram 029457, Embassy Cairo to secretary of State, immediate-secret, May 28 1967

13. Department of State incoming telegram 029229, Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, secret, May 27 1967; the source is identified as "Voslensky," probably Mikhail Voslensky, a historian and interpreter who later defected to the West.

14. Department of State incoming telegram 027005, US Mission UN to Secretary of State, confidential, May 25 1967.

15. Oleg Kalugin, *Proshchai Lubianka,* Moscow: Olymp 1995, p.126.

16. Department of State incoming telegram 004387, American Embassy Amman to Secretary of State, priority-confidential, June 5 1967

17. Department of State incoming telegram 19193, secret, May 18 1967

18. First entry in Chronology of US-USSR Consultations on the Middle East, May 18-June 10, 1967, top secret, State Department P/HO:HBCox:fh, June 15 1967.

19. Department of State Incoming Telegram 020806 [copy of telegram to Defense Intelligence Agency], Confidential, May 19 1967

20. Chronology of US-USSR Consultations on the Middle East, op. cit.

21. Department of State outgoing telegram 198916, from Rusk to Embassies Tel Aviv, Cairo and Mission UN, secret, May 20 1967.

22. Sedov's status as a staffer of the KGB "residentura" in Washington was confirmed years after by his then superior, Kalugin, and others; pp.270-273

23. State Department Memorandum of conversation G/PM:RLGarthoff:pep:5-29-67, confidential; also quoted in Chronology of US-USSR Consultations on the Middle East, May 18-June 10, 1967, top secret, State Department P/HO:HBCox:fh, June 15 1967

24. "Obzor Svedenii o Polozhenii na Blizhnem Vostoke," CPSU Central Committee. top secret, May 26 1967. Facsimile in V. Kirpichenko, *Iz Arkhiva Razvedchika*, Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyie Otnosheniya, 1993, pp. 317-8. Only the first two pages of the document are reproduced, so that any recommendation for Soviet policy is omitted. A handwritten note in the margin states that the two other copies were destroyed on June 6.

25. Department of State Memorandum of conversation EUR:SOV:MToon:erk, secret, May 26 1967 with attached letter; Draft letter to Eshkol, National S Council History file, Middle East Crisis, vol.2, box 17; Department of State outgoing telegram 203943, From Secretary of State to Embassy Tel Aviv, "Flash -literally for eyes only of Ambassador," May 27 1967

26. Department of State incoming telegram 029479, American Embassy Moscow to secretary of State, confidential, May 28 1967.

27. Zolotaryov, op. cit., p. 187.

28. Interview with Robert S. McNamara, Jerusalem, March 27, 2000.

29. Memorandum of Conversation, McGeorge Bundy and Nathaniel Davis, "The Hotline Meetings and the Middle East in New York," November 7 1968, National

Security File, NSC Histories, container 19 v.7, LBJ Presidential Library.

30. Department of State incoming telegram 007778, From Embassy Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, immediate, June 8 1967 1218

31. Kosygin to Johnson, June 10 1967, National Security File, NSC Histories, container 19 v.7, LBJ Presidential Library.

32. Thompson and Davis, loc.cit.

33. Department of State incoming telegram 007778, Embassy Tel Aviv to secretary of State, secret, June 8 1967.

34. Thompson and Davis, loc.cit.

35. Harold H. Saunders, Memorandum for the Record, October 22 1968, National Security File, NSC Histories, container 19 v.7, LBJ Presidential Library.

36. Kosygin to Johnson, June 10 1967, loc. cit.

37. McNamara, loc.cit.

38. Telephone interview with Anatoly F. Dobrynin, October 10 2000

39. Bundy and Davis, loc. cit.

40. McNamara, loc.cit.

41. Aleksandr Khaldeev, "Nesostoyavshiisya Desant", *Okna* (Tel Aviv), September 14 2000.

42. Telephone interview with Yuri Khripunkov, August 1999.

43. List in Turkish attached to secret Israel Foreign Ministry memo, Minister in Ankara D.Laor to Deputy Director-General Y. Tekoa, June 1 1967.

44. Department of State incoming telegram 028300, copy of cable from Defense Attache's Office Tel Aviv to Defense Intelligence Agency, secret, May 26 1967

45. The source requested anonimity

46. Khripunkov, loc.cit.

47. Telephone interview with Valery A. Yaremenko, October 25 2000, He says that according to established procedure, the order must have been approved at the level of

Defense Minister or by the Politburo, of which the latter was a member.

48. Khripunkov, loc. cit.

49. Department of State incoming telegram 008002, Embassy Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, secret, June 8 1967

50. Dobrynin, loc. cit.

51. Yefim Segal and Zinovi Dubrovski, "Ne dolzhny Molchat'," *Novosti Nedeli,* Tel Aviv, March 2 2000; Telephone interview with Nikolai G. Yegorichev, November 11 2000.

52. Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB*, (no location): Nota Bene, [Russian translation of same title in English, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990] 1992 p. 503

53. Khripunkov, loc. cit.

54. Yuri V. Nastenko: "Aviatsiya v Egypte," in *Grif "Sekretno" Sniat*, Moscow: Committee of Veterans of Military Actions in Egypt, 1998.

55. Personal communication from Prof. Ze'ev Katz, June 2000

56. Department of State Memorandum 10104, Garthoff to Foy D. Kohler, secret, June 10 1967.

57. Dobrynin, loc. cit. Dobrynin had, and apparently still bears, a personal grudge against Sedov, whom he later resented for monopolizing Soviet contacts with people close to Richard Nixon, such as Henry Kissinger. Andrew and Mitrokhin, op. cit., pp.270-273).

58. Department of State incoming telegram 007482, American Embassy Ankara to Secretary of State, secret, June 8 1967

59. McNamara, loc. cit.

60. Khripunkov, loc. cit.

61. Michael B. Oren, "The USS Liberty: Case Closed", *Azure*, Jerusalem: Shalem Center, Spring 2000.

62. Randolph S./Winston S. Churchill, *The Six-Day War,* London: Heinemann/Penguin 1967, p.100.

63. Zolotaryov, op.cit., pp. 186-7.

64. Khripunkov, loc. cit.

65. Khrushchev, op. cit., v.4 p.242

66. Central Intelligence Agency Intelligence Information Cable 65699, October 6 1967; CIA Office of National estimates Special Memorandum 10-67, November 21 1967. CIA Freedom of Information Act website (www.foia.ucia.gov/scripts)

67. Central Intelligence Agency Intelligence Information Cables 21647, July 31 1967 and 49185, February 14 1968, loc. cit.

68. Khrushchev, op.cit., v.3 p.622

69. Yosef Govrin, *Israel-USSR Relations 1953-1967* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1990, pp. 266-7, quoting an interview with Dayan. An earlier biography of Dayan presents a somewhat different version: "After the rout of Egypt and Jordan, he argued that the Soviet Union would under no circumstances countenance harm to Syria, whose regime was so close to it…but [once a cease-fire had been established with Egypt and a war on two fronts no longer loomed] he dropped his fear of Soviet intervention." Shabtai Tevet, *Moshe Dayan* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: Schocken, 1973, pp. 580-81.

70. Thompson and Davis, loc.cit.

71. Department of State incoming telegram 007778; see note 30.

72. Ibid.

73. Saunders, loc. cit.

74.Thompson and Davis, loc.cit.

75. Johnson to Kosygin, June 6 1967 10:03 am, Johnson to Kosygin, June 6 1967 10:03 am, National Security File, NSC Histories, container 19 v.7, LBJ Presidential Library.

76. Johnson to Kosygin, June 8 1967 11:00 am, Johnson to Kosygin, June 6 1967 10:03 am, National Security File, loc. cit.

77. McNamara, loc. cit.

78. Saunders, loc. cit.

79. McNamara, loc. cit.

80. Khripunkov, loc. cit.

81. Khipunkov, written communication to author, July 3 2000.

82. Aleksandr Khaldeev, loc.cit.

83. Khrushchev, op. cit., v.4 p.242.

84. Khaldeev, personal communication to author, October 2000.

85. Yegorichev, loc.cit.

86. Alexei Vasilyev, *Rossiya na Blizhnem i Srednem Vostoke: Ot Messianstva k Pragmatizmu,* Moskva: Nauka, 1993, pp.82-3.

87. Yegorichev, loc.cit.

88. Oleg Grinevsky, *Tainy Sovetskoy Diplomatii,* Moskva: Vagrius 2000, pp.11-12, 335.

89. Khripunkov, telephone interview.

90. Khrushchev, op. cit., v.3 p.622.

91. Central Intelligence Agency Intelligence Information Cable 49185, February 14 1968, loc. cit.

92. Nikolai Cherkashin, "On Dolzhen Byl Unichtozhit' Izrail'", *Yevreiskiye Vesti* (supplement to *Golos Ukrainy,* organ of Ukrainian parliament), #17-18, September 1996.

93. Efraim Inbar, *Rabin and Israel's National Security,* Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p.12.