

P O L I C Y B A C K G R O U N D

R U S S I A N M I L I T A R Y I N T E R V E N T I O N - T H E T H I R D P H A S E

S O V I E T - M A N N E D S A M - I I I ' S M O V E I N T O S U E Z C A N A L B A T T L E Z O N E

EMBASSY OF ISRAEL

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RUSSIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION - THE THIRD PHASE

SOVIET-MANNED SAM-III'S MOVE INTO SUEZ CANAL BATTLE ZONE

1. The Soviet operation of SA-III missiles against Israeli aircraft in the Suez Canal battle zone represents a further and unprecedented phase of direct Russian military escalation. The new SAM-III's are a part of the sophisticated ground-to-air missile system covering the Suez Canal sector which Russian military personnel have helped set up in recent days. Some details of the new system were revealed in a public announcement on July 6 by the Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, Lt. General Haim Bar-Lev. He said:

"Joint efforts have been made in recent weeks by the Russians and the Egyptians to emplace ground-to-air missiles in the area of the Canal with the aim of depriving us of freedom of action in the air along the length of the Canal, and to enable the Egyptians to concentrate and escalate their war effort in this region. About a dozen SA-II missile batteries have been put into position, as well as at least another two SAM-III batteries, designed to cover the SAM-II's of longer range. We discovered the system fairly quickly and attacked it. In these attacks three of our planes were hit by SA-II missiles. I believe that five SAM-II batteries received direct hits by our planes and another two were partially damaged.

"To the best of our knowledge, the SAM-III is manned by the Russians. The SAM-II is, we think, manned by Egyptians, but there are a number of Russian officers attached to each battery who serve as more than advisors. The Russian hand is clearly felt throughout the whole of this system, in design, operation and direction of the batteries."

The Chief of Staff went on to state that SAM-III's were among the hundreds of missiles that have been fired at Israeli aircraft since the ground-to-air system was put into operation on the night of June 29-30. Its range covers the central sector of the Suez Canal.

Three Phases of Escalation

2. The emplacement of the missile system to cover the Canal battle zone represents the third phase in the progression of escalatory military steps undertaken directly by the Soviets since March. In that month Russia first introduced its SAM-III's into the Egyptian heartland and brought in thousands of military personnel to install and man them.

The second phase came in mid-April when Russian pilots, based on Egyptian airfields and flying Mig-21's, began carrying out combat missions over Egyptian airspace, with orders to intercept and engage Israeli planes, thus assuming responsibility for the air defense of the Egyptian interior. This, in turn, released Nasser's resources in order to resume his strategy of attrition after a period of deescalation that Israel's air responses had brought about. Freed from the need to disperse his forces inside Egypt, Nasser was able to move units from the rear into the Canal zone. These included SAM-II's which had been emplaced around military installations inside Egypt, as well as a substantial number of anti-aircraft units.

What has now occurred - the extension of the ground-to-air missile network from the Egyptian heartland to cover the Canal proper - is the latest manifestation of the Soviet decision to provide direct military support to the Egyptian armed forces. In so doing, the Soviet Union has registered two new facts: it has now, itself, entered the war of attrition against Israel as a direct belligerent; and it has escalated that war to a new and crucial height.

Inevitable Development

3. In the view of the Israeli analysts, this contingency was rendered inevitable as the Soviet build-up continued through March, April, May and June without vigorous censure from the West. Already in March the trend of direct Soviet military involvement began to emerge, and it was clear that in the absence of some appropriate response the Soviets would continue to escalate their presence. Israel, on its part, had made an urgent case for additional aircraft supplies. It had asked the U.S. for planes, knowing all too well that, without them, the already fragile arms balance would deteriorate to a perilous degree. It believed, too, that their supply at that time, in March, would have served to effectively demonstrate to Russia that its act had not gone unregistered. Instead, on March 23, more than a week after Russian SAM-III's and combat units had entered Egypt, Washington announced that the decision on Israel's aircraft request was being held "in abeyance." This, plus the assertion that the SA-III missiles had been installed in Egypt for 'defensive' purposes only, opened the way for further Soviet escalation. Israel strongly contested the U.S. assessment. It argued that the installation of the missiles was an aggressive,

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not a defensive act; that they were there in support of Nasser's offensive attrition strategy and hence must be seen as fulfilling an offensive function. This was soon proven to be correct when Nasser resumed his attrition war during that same month. By labelling the missiles 'defensive', a degree of license was accorded the very Russian military presence, and Moscow interpreted it in this light.

Israeli spokesmen expressed the view that the apparent tolerance towards the Soviet positioning of combat units and missiles in Egypt, coupled with the vacillation displayed towards Israel's legitimate aircraft needs, must inevitably invite further Soviet boldness. This fear was expressed in a "Policy Background" paper issued by this Embassy on March 26, after the public announcement that the decision on Israel's order for aircraft was being held in abeyance. The following observation was made:

"Certainly, the U.S. decision is rendered particularly grave when measured against the Russian actions to increase the Arab military potential, backed by an increased Soviet military presence in Egypt. The absence of a positive U.S. response to Israel's request for aircraft at this time is liable to be interpreted by the Soviet Union as an assurance that its continued military and political support for the Egyptian attrition strategy may go forward and be further intensified without hindrance."

Regrettably, the forecast proved correct. A few weeks later, in mid-April, the Russians began flying their combat missions over Egyptian skies. Once again, this phase-two of the Russian involvement entered into effect with hardly a ripple of censure, thus emboldening the Soviets to proceed to the third phase, namely the installation of the SAM-II and SAM-III missiles covering the Canal area. One must but assume that the Soviets are now waiting to see what concrete response, if any, their latest action is going to evoke. It might be reasonably predicted that if the response is again to be passive they will push on to stage four, and the prospect of Soviet pilots entering the Canal zone proper and beyond is not to be discounted.

The Soviet-Egyptian Alliance

4. Much as it may ring obsolete in terminology and strategy, the fact is that Russia is playing power politics in the Middle East and it cannot be expected to deescalate unless given

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reasonable cause to do so. What it seeks is hegemony and out of this ambition stems the intrinsic alliance of interests between the Soviet leaders and Nasser. Through this alliance, President Nasser is provided by the Soviet Union with all the support, military and political, direct and indirect, to wield the power he seeks as the unchallenged regional ruler. He, in return, has provided the Soviets with the base they have long sought to penetrate the Middle East in depth and establish hegemony over it. The quest for dominion of the one is the instrument for the expansion of power and influence of the other.

Hence the Soviet refusal to cooperate with, promote, or even entertain any plan for a settlement that might lead to a true and lasting peace. What the Russians seek is to dictate the terms of a new Mideast order, one which in deference to the client states will deny Israel both peace and security.

This explains why Russia has entered Egypt, why it has now engaged directly in the battle against Israel, and why it will continue to escalate that battle unless given grounds to desist. The immediate arena is the war of attrition. The goal, however, is hegemony in the Middle East, to be achieved in either of two ways: The dictation of a Soviet-styled settlement by political measures, or the subjugation of Israel by military measures with the Soviet Union providing the assistance necessary to make Arab arms effective. In both cases, the Soviet predominance over the region will have been achieved.

This is the crux of the issue now being contested along the Suez Canal cease-fire line. Immediately at hand is the attempt to wrest control of the Canal region airspace from Israel's hands, the command of the air being the key element in Israel's ability to maintain the cease-fire line. The Soviets have come a long way in providing Egypt with assistance towards that end.

The battle is a crucial one because on its outcome depends the future national integrity of democratic Israel and also, in large measure, the future course of the Middle East as a whole. Israel's position has been clearly enunciated. It has made plain its resolve not to be intimidated or deterred, but will continue to defend itself along the cease-fire lines for the sake of its own security and eventual lasting peace.