

# Международные отношения: история, историография, методология

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УДК 327.37

DOI: 10.28995/2073-6339-2023-2-12-22

## The impact of the Cuban Missile crisis on Soviet Middle Eastern policy. How it led to the Six-Day War, 1967

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*Abstract.* The widespread perception of the “Caribbean” crisis as a setback for the Soviet Union overlooks the major achievement that Moscow did score. This was Khrushchev’s success – which, unfortunately for his future in the Soviet leadership, he agreed to the Kennedys’ demand not to publicize – to gain the withdrawal of American Jupiter missiles from Turkey. But within three years, the joint French-Israeli development of nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems threatened to plug the gap that had thus been created in the ring of nuclear-armed western pacts that were the subject of perennial Soviet fears. Documents and memoirs that surfaced in the early years after the USSR’s collapse, cross-checked against US and Israeli sources, reveal this motivation for, and the hitherto unknown features of, the Soviets’ response when in late 1965 an authoritative informant confirmed that despite domestic political change and US pressure, Israel was about to cross the nuclear threshold. This added urgency to Moscow’s regional considerations in favor of supporting an Arab attack on Israel, and produced what was in several respects a mirror-image of the Cuban affair. A joint plan was developed with Egypt, to provoke an Israeli first strike that would legitimize Soviet military intervention to “aid the victims of aggression” and ensure Israel’s defeat. The provocations included overflights of Israel’s nuclear facility by advanced Soviet aircraft; the intervention was to include targeting of the facility by Soviet strategic bombers. This plan’s fiasco in the Six-Day War of June 1967 shaped the Middle East as well as Soviet policy there for decades to come, as an indirect but distinct consequence of the Cuban crisis.

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**Keywords:** Cuban Missile crisis, Soviet-American Relations, Middle East, Suez-Sinai Campaign, Six-Day War, Ben-Gurion

*For citation:* Ginor, I. and Remez, G. (2023), "The impact of the Cuban Missile crisis on Soviet Middle Eastern policy. How it led to the Six-Day War, 1967", *RSUH/RGGU Bulletin. "Political Science. History. International Relations" Series*, no. 2, pp. 12–22, DOI: 10.28995/2073-6339-2023-2-12-22

## Влияние Кубинского ракетного кризиса на ближневосточную политику Советского Союза: что привело к Шестидневной войне 1967 г.

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**Аннотация.** Широко распространенное восприятие Карибского кризиса как неудачи для Советского Союза умалчивает тот важный успех, который был достигнут Москвой. Победой Н.С. Хрущева стал вывод с территории Турции американских ракет «Юпитер». Поддавшись требованию Джона Кеннеди не предавать этот факт огласке, Хрущев тем самым решил судьбу своего будущего в советском руководстве. В течение трех последующих лет совместные французско-израильские разработки ядерного оружия и ракетных систем доставки стали явной угрозой восполнить пробел, образовавшийся из-за ряда договоров по ядерным вооружениям между западными странами. Эти разработки были предметом постоянных опасений со стороны Советского Союза. Документы и мемуары, которые появились в первые годы после распада СССР и которые подверглись перекрестной проверке путем их сопоставления с американскими и израильскими источниками, свидетельствуют о желании и о неведомых до этого момента особенностях реакции Советов, когда в конце 1965 г. авторитетный источник подтвердил, что, несмотря на изменения в политической жизни страны и давление США, Израиль был на пороге создания ядерного оружия. Это вызвало еще более настоятельную необходимость принятия Москвой решения по региональному вопросу в пользу поддержки арабского нападения на Израиль. И это привело к той ситуации, которую по целому ряду аспектов можно предста-

вить как зеркальное отображение Кубинского кризиса. С Египтом был разработан совместный план, чтобы спровоцировать Израиль атаковать первым, что могло бы легитимизировать советское военное вторжение для «оказания помощи жертвам агрессии» и тем самым обеспечить поражение Израиля. Провокационные действия включали облеты израильского атомного объекта современными советскими самолетами; результатом вторжения должно было стать нацеливание на объект стратегических бомбардировщиков. Крах этого плана в Шестидневной войне в июне 1967 г. определил облик Ближнего Востока, а также политику Советского Союза на десятилетия вперед – и это было хотя и косвенным, но явным последствием Карибского кризиса.

*Ключевые слова:* Карибский кризис, советско-американские отношения, Ближний Восток, Суэцко-Синайская кампания, Шестидневная война, Бен-Гурион

*Для цитирования:* Ginor I., Remez G. The impact of the Cuban Missile crisis on Soviet Middle Eastern policy. How it led to the Six-Day War, 1967 // Вестник РГГУ. Серия «Политология. История. Международные отношения». 2023. № 2. С. 12–22. DOI: 10.28995/2073-6339-2023-2-12-22

On 5 June 1967, the Soviet leadership initiated the first exchange of messages over the hotline between Washington and Moscow<sup>1</sup>. The hotline had been installed less than five years before, following the Caribbean crisis (as it is known in Russian). This highlighted the analogous global magnitude of the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, which began that day with Israel's preemptive air strike. As one of the participants in both events recorded at the time, in respect of the Soviet leadership's concern, "the Middle Eastern crisis [was] reminiscent of the Cuban one"<sup>2</sup>. It famously posed the greatest risk since Cuba of superpower confrontation up to the potentiality of a nuclear duel. Less attention, however, has been paid to the substantive, and as we found, the linear causal connection between these two ostensibly unrelated arenas of the Cold War.

Our book *Foxbats over Dimona* showed that far from being "the war nobody wanted" as commonly held, the 1967 conflict was actually instigated by the USSR [Ginor, Remez 2007]. Moreover, the Soviet Union planned to launch a direct military intervention that would tip

<sup>1</sup>The Washington–Moscow 'Hot-Line' exchange." Files in the Lyndon B. Johnson library. Austin. Texas.

<sup>2</sup>Diary of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Semenov, entry for 7 June 1967, quoted in [Млечин 2005, с. 429].

the expected balance in favor of an Arab victory. One of the Soviet objectives, if not *the* main motive, was to prevent Israel from achieving nuclear weapons. The *timing* was certainly determined by authoritative intelligence that this was imminent.

Ironically, Israel's nuclear project had been stimulated by a previous Soviet move. The project was therefore aimed at the USSR no less than at the country's hostile Arab neighbors. Israel's founding leader David Ben-Gurion had contemplated such an ultimate deterrent against existential danger from Arab attack. But practical preparations began after nuclear threats by Soviet Premier Nikolay Bulganin in autumn 1956 were not effectively countered by the Eisenhower administration.

These threats were instrumental in forcing the humiliating retreat of Britain, France and Israel from their gains in the Suez-Sinai campaign. France too was thus drawn into developing its own nuclear *force de frappe* in cooperation with Israel.

A persuasive if not conclusive argument has been made whereby it was the success of Bulganin's extortion that emboldened Nikita Khrushchev to undertake the Cuban adventure in the first place [Васильев 1993, с. 47]. Even more convincing, and more relevant for us today, is the proximity of Khrushchev's Cuban move to the deployment of the US Air Force's intermediate-range Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

Their installation was begun by the Eisenhower administration in late 1961. But they became operational in July 1962 – the same month that Khrushchev approved Fidel Castro's request to deploy Soviet missiles in Cuba [Bernstein 1980]. In mid-October, the discovery by American U-2 flights of bases prepared for these missiles ignited the crisis.

It has long been argued that the Jupiters were already obsolete and of little military value, or that President John F. Kennedy had considered if not actually ordered their withdrawal – to be replaced by Polaris submarines – before the outbreak of the Cuban crisis. But the missiles' deployment in Turkey, as close to the southern USSR as Cuba is to the US south, was to begin with as much a political as a military exercise.

Domestically, the Americans were under pressure to close the "missile gap" with the USSR that was perceived after the first Sputnik launch in 1959. Toward their NATO partners, the Americans had to correct their perceived abandonment of European allies in the face of Soviet threats in the Suez affair. Turkey in particular, under both civilian and military governments, was as eager to have this shield as Cuba was to have Soviet protection after the Bay of Pigs invasion.

But it was precisely the Jupiters' antiquated features that intensified Soviet anxieties. Their propulsion by liquid fuel necessitated a long fueling process that made them worthless for a second strike, and thus exclusively a first-strike threat if any.

A potential exchange of Turkey for Cuba to resolve the crisis was under intense discussion from the outset both *within* both superpowers' governments and *between* them – though the very option of such an agreement was hotly denied<sup>3</sup>. It finally provided the exit ramp, which was delayed by the Kennedy brothers' insistence (both the president and his brother Robert, the US attorney-general who informally but decisively handled the negotiations), that the Turkish aspect of the deal not be publicized. This highlighted the political significance of the deal, and obviated any claim that it did not embody a major concession by the United States.

It is beyond the scope of this article to question Khrushchev's motives for acceding to the demand of secrecy. But the Soviets too denied the deal when Castro suspected that Cuba was being used as a bargaining chip to eliminate the threat from Turkey. This cemented perceptions, to this day, that the Soviet side had been the loser – which would contribute to Khrushchev's ouster soon after.

The deal was not only made but consummated, and the US missiles were quietly withdrawn within a few months – with no mention of any connection to the Cuban crisis<sup>4</sup>. Khrushchev's successors in the Soviet leadership comma however, shared his preoccupation with addressing the USSR's perennial phobia of being surrounded by nuclear-armed western-oriented alliances. Putin's Russia has just exemplified it again with its violent resistance to NATO's eastward expansion. Barely three years after Cuba enabled the Soviets to punch a Middle Eastern gap in this nuclear encirclement, the Israeli project threatened to plug it.

The complex political developments in Israel that resulted in Ben-Gurion's loss of power were effectively though covertly dominated by the nuclear issue, and especially US objections to the project. Whether Israel would continue toward a bomb under his successor Levi Eshkol (who was politically allied with the project's opponents), became a prime concern for Soviet intelligence in Israel.

It was only Soviet Foreign Ministry documents, which were published in the pre-Putin era, that revealed how the question was definitively answered for the Soviets. This was by a message from no less an

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<sup>3</sup>Kennedy rejects Turkey deal, demands removal of Cuba missiles // UPI. 1962. 27 Oct.

<sup>4</sup>Polaris Sub takes up Mediterranean patrol: Jupiters became obsolete // The Sunday Star (Washington, DC). 1963. 31 March.

authority than Isser Harel, the legendary head of Israel's intelligence agency Mossad. He had been dismissed by Ben-Gurion and was briefly appointed an adviser to Eshkol. Through the leader of Israel's Communist Party, he notified the Soviet embassy that regardless of Israel's official statements, it was bent on developing *and acquiring* atomic weapons<sup>5</sup>.

The most charitable explanation of Harel's motivation for this extraordinary disclosure is that he was acting upon directions from Eshkol, as a deterrent against any Soviet-backed Arab assault. If so, it was badly miscalculated: far from deterring an attack, a nuclear weapon that has yet to be attained only invites preemptive action.

The effect of Harel's message on the Soviets was aggravated by reports that Israel had contracted to procure French missiles which might deliver a bomb into Soviet territory. A dispatch from the Soviet Ambassador in Tel Aviv attested to the perception in Moscow that this development amounted to a reversal of the Turkish benefit that had been salvaged from the Cuban setback. In early 1966, the ambassador, Dmitry Chuvakhin warned: "In ...plans for global nuclear strategy, Israel is slated to play the role of a certain missing link between NATO and CENTO"<sup>6</sup>.

The Israelis were well aware of the Soviets' preoccupation. As early as 1958, a minister presciently warned in cabinet, before being silenced by Ben Gurion: "If we ever decided to take any steps here toward creating atomic energy for purposes of war, I am very much afraid that Russia will have to want to eradicate us"<sup>7</sup>.

Now the decision had not only been taken but was communicated to the Soviets – who immediately undertook preventive action. This was initially by means of blandishments: Bulganin's successors revived a proposal he had made to declare the Middle East a nuclear-free zone, which Israel had decided to ignore. It was now accompanied with such sweeteners as enhanced cultural and scientific exchanges.

An idea was even floated that the USSR might mediate between the Arabs and Israel, that is assume an even-handed position in the conflict. Israel had barely time to digest this change before fierce Arab accusations of a pro-Israeli shift in Moscow caused its abrupt reversal in early 1966.

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<sup>5</sup> Ближневосточный конфликт: Из документов Архива внешней политики Российской Федерации / Под ред. В.В. Наумкина. М.: Материк, 2003. Т. 2: 1957–1967. Док. 217. С. 487–489.

<sup>6</sup> Там же. Док. 220. С. 492.

<sup>7</sup> Minister of justice Pinhas Rozen. Transcripts of the meetings of the Eighth cabinet // Israel State Archive. 1958. No. 27/318. 2 Febr. P. 25, 26.

This occurred around a visit by Kosygin to Egypt, which was prepared by the same deputy foreign minister Vasily Kuznetsov, who had been the point man for negotiating the Cuban settlement. Again, he had to deal with a strategically important client who was not always as compliant as Moscow's east-European satellites. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was as alarmed as the Soviets by the prospect of Israeli nuclear weapons, and he had openly threatened preemptive war to prevent it.

Nasser also pressed his Soviet patrons for countervailing weapons, which they were as reluctant to grant as they had been to give Castro control of the missiles in Cuba. Kosygin finessed this issue by promising Egypt – as he had to Cuba – a nuclear “umbrella”, that is a guarantee of commensurate response if Israel did attain such weapons and tried to use them.

But covertly, Nasser's open threats were replaced by joint military preparations. Simultaneously, measures were begun to provoke an Israeli response that might justify the launch of such an operation to aid the “victims of aggression”. A central feature was steadily intensifying Soviet accusations of an impending Israeli attack on the USSR's other ally, Syria.

An exceptionally declassified document from Israel's Atomic Energy Commission, dated 4 June 1966, states “the Soviet premier has just visited Nasser. It can be assumed that they discussed, among other things, how to prevent Israel from obtaining nuclear weapons, including Nasser's threat of preemptive war.” Why, the note goes on to ask, has the USSR chosen to attack Israel “about Syria, rather than nuclear weapons *which is their main concern?*”<sup>8</sup>

Our book details the particulars and timeline of the Soviet plan to intervene once Israel, faced with a series of unacceptable *casus belli*, would provide the anticipated aggression by shooting first. In this campaign, the nuclear issue was central as both a means and an end. As the American U-2 did in Cuba, overflights of Israel by a Soviet spy plane were the final impetus toward a crisis.

In May-June '67, this was the Soviets' advanced, yet-experimental and secret model that would later be known as MiG-25. It would get its NATO appellation, Foxbat, once the model was first exhibited to western observers at the Domodedovo air show – tellingly, just a month *after* the Six-Day War, once the model was presumably exposed by its use over Israel<sup>9</sup>. Based, among other sources, on the memoirs of

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<sup>8</sup>Bendor Sh. Atomic Energy Commission to Yosef Tekoa, Foreign ministry, 6 June 1966 // Israel State Archive. Div. HZ. Box 4049. File 5.

<sup>9</sup>Anderson R.H. Soviet displays 7 new aircraft // New York Times. 1967. 10 July.

the pilot, we identified it as the craft that twice overflew Israel's nuclear complex at Dimona on 17 and 26 May 1967<sup>10</sup>.

But unlike the U-2's discovery of the missile bases in Cuba, neither the Soviets nor the Egyptians had to find out what and where the Israeli facility was. Maps captured by Israel in Sinai, 1967, showed that Dimona was marked as a target for Egyptian bombers before the overflights were made<sup>11</sup>. We added the testimony of a Soviet air force general, whereby in the days preceding the war, his Tu-22s were issued this target's coordinates, after the planes were painted in Egyptian markings and flown to the USSR's nearest suitable base, Mozdok in the Caucasus [Ginor, Remez 2008]<sup>12</sup>.

The Foxbat missions were thus unnecessary to detect the nuclear facility. They were meant both to reassure Egypt of the Soviets' commitment and to scare the Israelis into the desired first strike. As transcripts of Israeli leadership deliberations have shown, the latter mission was accomplished [Gluska 2007, pp. 128–130].

Meanwhile Turkey again displayed its eagerness for military reliance on NATO, which had necessitated the American demand that the Jupiter pullout be downplayed and its connection with the Cuban crisis be obscured. Besides the bombers, Soviet MiG-21 fighter squadrons had been positioned in Armenia, and as the war began overflight permission for them was requested from Turkey – which refused. A Turkish official rushed to inform the US Embassy<sup>13</sup>.

But the main reason that the Soviet intervention was almost entirely thwarted was the unexpected and devastating effect of Israel's opening air strike.

It destroyed not only the Arab air forces' aircraft but their bases' runways too, rendering them unusable to the Soviet craft for refueling. Neither the Tu-22 nor the MiG-21 had the range for the round trip.

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<sup>10</sup> Vybornov Alexander I.: Biography he provided for participation in the "Gathering of Eagles," Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 1999. URL: <https://goefoundation.org/eagles/vybornov-aleksandr-i/> (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023). See also several interviews in the Russian media.

<sup>11</sup> Map reproduced in [Ginor, Remez 2007, p. 125].

<sup>12</sup> *Решетников В.В.* Что было – то было. М., 1995; republished: М.: Эксмо-Яуза, 2004. С. 460–463; Transcript of interview for *The Fifty Years War: Israel and the Arabs* (television documentary by Brian Lapping Associates, 1998); Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives. L.: King's College. P. 7–9; Unedited video interview for Israel-Plus (Channel 9) Russian-language television. July 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Department of State incoming telegrams 007482 and 008880 (8 and 9 June 1967), US Embassy Ankara to Secretary of State. Both documents kindly shared by Michael Oren.



After the Six-Day debacle, the Soviets' most pressing diplomatic challenge was to assuage concerns and rebut accusations among the USSR's clients worldwide – not least, Cuba. As the CIA reported: “Since the Middle East crisis the Castro regime has been very critical of the USSR for backing 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”. That is, the Cubans' doubts were intensified about Soviet commitment to enforce Kennedy's better-known pledge not to repeat the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Kosygin hastened to Havana to placate these anxieties, which intensified existing tensions about spreading revolution in Latin America. In Cuba, as reported by the CIA, Kosygin offered the pretext that “the USSR had been prepared to aid [Egypt] in the struggle against Israel,” which was true enough. But this, he asserted falsely, had been prevented only by a message from Cairo “that [Egypt] intended to stop fighting within several days”<sup>14</sup>.

Whether or not this convinced Castro, Cuba – like Romania within the Warsaw Pact – did not follow the Soviet example of severing diplomatic relations with Israel on 10 June. Rather, it let its mission in Israel atrophy gradually until it was finally closed in 1973<sup>15</sup>.

It was then, at Soviet behest, that Cuba began its military interventions outside the Western Hemisphere by sending an armored brigade to reinforce a badly beaten Syria after the Yom Kippur War. These Cuban tankists actually saw combat against Israeli forces on the Golan Heights – an episode that awaits full research [Gleijeses 2002, pp. 226–227].

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