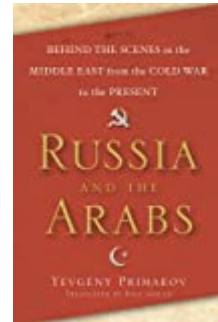




**E. M. Primakov.** *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East From the Cold War to the Present.* New York: Basic Books, 2009. 432 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-00475-1.



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## Adamsky on Primakov, Russia and the Arabs

If one looks for the Russian equivalent of Henry Kissinger (especially in Middle Eastern affairs), then probably Evgeny Primakov—one of the leading scholars and practitioners of international relations in the Soviet and Russian eras—would come to mind. A student of the Arab world by training, Primakov has been *Pravda* Middle Eastern correspondent, secret envoy for special political and intelligence missions, head of the Institute of Oriental Studies and the Institute of World Economics and International Relations, the first head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (the successor to the First Directorate of the KGB), foreign minister and prime minister of Russia. On the scene and behind the curtains, for more than fifty years Primakov has been at the epicenter of formulating and conducting Soviet and Russian foreign and particularly Middle Eastern, policy.

It is difficult to overestimate the breadth, depth, and richness of *Russia and the Arabs*. With his unique firsthand experience with every major political figure in the Middle East, Primakov offers a combination of personal memoir with thorough and all-encompassing analysis of

the forces that shaped the region for decades. The book offers a tour d'horizon of Middle Eastern history since the end of World War II and presents a view from Russia on the Cold War trends in the region. An excellent storyteller, Primakov offers his account of the superpowers; Egyptian, Syrian and Israeli history; and regional interactions since early 1950. He pays specific attention to the behind-the-scene dynamics on the eve of and during the Six Day and Yom Kippur wars, and describes the subsequent attempts to embark on the peace process, both locally and globally. Separate chapters deal with the political history of the Arab world, Lebanon, the history of the Palestinian national movement and Yasser Arafat's role in it, and the political history of Iraq, with a focus on Saddam Hussein. Several chapters deal with the post-Cold War international relations in the region.

Primakov skillfully synthesizes descriptions of broad regional trends and superpower dynamics with colorful portraits of specific political figures. The author is careful not to rely only on his memory and notes taken at the time, but also utilizes collections of documents

from the Russian Presidential Archive. The use of unique primary sources in most of the nineteen chapters significantly multiplies the historical contribution of this book. Although based on Soviet and Russian sources, with some occasional reference to non-Russian materials, Primakov's analysis is not only sound, but balanced and evenhanded. This brief summary cannot adequately describe the richness of the book and its contribution to the existing knowledge of Russian policy in the Middle East and Cold War historiography.

With the varying level of details many facts and ideas presented in *Russia and the Arabs* might be found in several previously published books and memoirs, however they are outweighed by the new material and analysis. Specifically, I found two portions of the book particularly revealing and new. First of all, scholars of the nuclear component of international security might be interested in the last two chapters, in which Primakov outlines his views on the strategic history of the Israeli, Iraqi, and Iranian nuclear programs, and shares his observations about the emerging security regime in the Middle East. These reflections are particularly valuable since Primakov's account not only reveals what the Soviets and Russians knew and thought about these programs, but also presents the current view on these issues from Moscow.

The second contribution will probably fascinate Cold War historians. *Russia and the Arabs* fills an important lacuna of knowledge related to the Soviet decision-making process during the Arab-Israeli conflict. The book reveals for the first time the existence of twenty years of secret contacts between the Soviet and Israeli governments. This portion of the book is based on documents from the Politburo's special file (*osobaia papka*) on secret talks with the representatives of the Israeli government, which started in 1971. This clandestine channel was kept operational until the establishment of official diplomatic relations in December 1991. Until the publication of the book, Cold War historians had only a very vague idea about Soviet-Israeli secret contacts. All the data related to this unexplored Cold War episode are still classified in the Israeli and Russian archives. As such, the book is a welcome addition to the existing classical works dealing with Soviet-Israeli relations by Galia Golan and Yaacov Roi.

During the Cold War, the Soviet leadership frequently deployed loyal scholars and journalists in non-official diplomatic missions when official contact was impossible but highly desired. After the breaking off of the

diplomatic relationship with Israel this became the case also with Jerusalem. In 1971 the inner circle of the Politburo decided to initiate secret negotiations with Israeli leaders, notwithstanding their terminated diplomatic relations. The back channel was an attempt to compensate for Soviet inferiority vis-à-vis the United States, which Moscow suffered due to its lack of diplomatic relations with Jerusalem. This was a Soviet attempt to minimize the damage of its own impulsive behavior during the 1967 war, overcome the American diplomatic monopoly, and play the role of moderator in the conflict. In the longer run this was a first step towards restoration of diplomatic relations. Yevgeny Primakov and the KGB officer Yuri Kotov were chosen by the Soviet leadership to establish this back channel. The Soviet highest political level orchestrated this enterprise; the documents from the special file were signed by Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, Andrei Gromyko, and Aleksei Kosygin.

Since August 1971, as part of this exclusive channel which Primakov maintained personally, several high-ranking meetings took place clandestinely in Israel and Europe. Primakov had been to Israel twice to meet with Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, Abba Eban, Yigal Alon, Yitzchak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Menachem Begin. He had also been to Europe several times to meet with other Israeli senior officials, including Shalheveth Freier and Mordechai Gazit. In 1978 Primakov transferred the maintenance of the back channel to other Soviet officials. Responsibility for the meetings, communications, and operational arrangement was entrusted to the KGB.

Based on his notes and the archival materials, Primakov delivers picturesque and detailed descriptions of his encounters with each and every one of the Israeli leaders. The initial encounters in Israel are particularly fascinating, because in the background there was still a real danger of direct Soviet and Israeli military confrontation. The first bilateral meeting took place exactly one year after the ceasefire of the War of Attrition, when the Soviet army was fighting with the Israeli Defense Forces for the first (and last) time during the Cold War. For the Israeli Air Force and the Soviet Air Defense units deployed in the vicinity of the Suez Canal, in spring and summer 1970, Egypt turned into a hot battlefield of the Cold War. When Primakov met Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan, thirteen months after the dogfight when the Israeli pilots shot down five Soviet MIGs, tension was still in the air. Although Dayan assured Primakov that Israel was anxious to avoid any kind of confrontation with Soviet military personal in Egypt and that the Israeli air force have been given direct orders to that effect, Golda