

MOSCOW'S LESSONS FROM THE 1982 LEBANON AIR WAR

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The September and October 1983 issues of *Aviatsiia i kosmonavtika*, the Soviet Air Force monthly, featured a two-part article by Col. V. Dubrov on Israeli air operations in the 1982 Lebanon war. Unlike the usual Soviet propaganda, this discussion is a dispassionate treatment of combat events. Its author, a prominent Soviet spokesman on air warfare, examines the tactics used by the Israeli Air Force (IAF) and offers operational conclusions to Soviet aircrews. For Western audiences, the article provides insights into how the Soviets have interpreted the Beka'a Valley experience. This Research Brief reviews our analysis of the key combat events over Lebanon and assesses Dubrov's conclusions and interpretations regarding their implications for Soviet tactical fighter training. *Judging from Dubrov's remarks, it appears that the Soviets have either deliberately chosen to misrepresent Israel's air combat results to their own pilots or else have genuinely failed to comprehend the tactical lessons suggested by Israeli combat performance.*

BACKGROUND ON THE ISRAELI AIR CAMPAIGN

Israel's air operation in June 1982 featured a concerted attack against Syrian SA-6s in the Beka'a Valley, followed immediately thereafter by the largest single air battle in the history of Middle East warfare. This operation took place in a real-time electronic warfare environment and reflected thorough integration of high-technology hardware with exceptional training, tactics, and leadership. It was also stunningly successful on all counts. The attack commenced with a wave of decoys launched to activate the engagement radars of the Syrian SAMs. Then, in a highly orchestrated set of air and artillery strikes, the Israelis destroyed the missiles without incurring a single aircraft loss. During the ensuing air battles, the Israeli E-2C picked up the Syrian MiGs on radar and promptly relayed intercept vectors to orbiting F-15s and F-16s. As soon as the MiGs were airborne, the Israelis jammed their communications, deprived them of

contact with their ground controllers, and produced a total breakdown in Syrian situation awareness and air discipline. IAF pilots completely routed the Syrians, eventually downing 85 MiGs and establishing a new high for IAF kill ratios in aerial combat. The result dealt a serious (if temporary) military setback to Syria, deeply embarrassed the Syrian High Command's Soviet suppliers, and provoked intense Soviet discomfiture over the poor showing of its weaponry in the eyes of an interested and watchful world.

SOVIET INSIGHTS AND OVERSIGHTS

In their domestic commentary in the wake of this campaign, the Soviets responded by denying the Israeli victory and rationalizing Syria's combat losses. The effect was to convey an impression entirely at odds with the facts. Col. Dubrov's article, by contrast, represents an effort by the Soviet Air Force to give a more credible account of the Lebanese air war to its aircrews. Nevertheless, the article remains more instructive for what it ignores than for what it includes. Although Dubrov discusses weapons and tactics in considerable detail, he says nothing about the air combat engagements themselves. Moreover, he fails to describe the SAM suppression raid and leads his readers to believe that the Israelis operated over a country that lacked modern antiaircraft systems.

Lessons Learned. Dubrov cites the following as the most notable lessons from the Beka'a Valley experience:

The increased freedom of maneuver afforded by using air-superiority fighters in separate patrol orbits rather than in direct support of strike formations. While Dubrov errs on important points in his assessment of the IAF's employment of the F-15 and F-16 (see below), his evident interest in this topic suggests that Soviet Air Force leaders may be increasingly aware of the opportunities for greater flexibility that will be offered by their new MiG-29 and SU-27 fighters.

The vulnerability of airborne surveillance platforms to enemy fighter and SAM attacks. Dubrov's attraction to this point may telegraph Soviet thinking about the need to neutralize NATO E-3As early in a European war.

The value of communications and radar jamming. The effective role played by Israeli electronic warfare operations reminded the Soviets once again of the growing vulnerability of their own reliance on ground-based close control of fighters to enemy disruption.

The utility of employing fighters with long-range radars in a mini-AWACS role. Dubrov notes the IAF's use of the F-15 in lending gap-filler support to the E-2C and in communicating threat data to other aircraft. The Soviets may be seeking comparable ways to reduce their dependence on ground management of the air battle and to take full advantage of the extended range of their newest generation of fighters.

The diminished reliability of positive radar control as air operations move deeper into enemy territory. Dubrov notes that shifting the air war to the enemy is essential for maintaining operational initiative. Here, too, he may be indicating Soviet recognition of the need to be able to employ fighters beyond the effective reach of ground-based control.

Lessons Mislearned or Ignored. Perhaps out of a need to reassure his readers that the Western air threat remains manageable, Dubrov seriously underrates the IAF's tactical innovations, equating them with what he calls the "American model" employed in Vietnam. Not only does this misrepresent the facts, it also contradicts his earlier remarks about Lebanon's significance as a "proving ground" for front-line USAF fighter aircraft and weapons.

Dubrov further underrates the degree of autonomy exercised by IAF pilots, claiming that F-15 fighter sweeps were dependent on E-2C "directives." He seems to have failed to appreciate the independent-search capability of the F-15's radar. More important, he may have unwittingly imposed a Soviet military culture bias in perceiving the E-2C as an airborne GCI site rather than as a largely advisory facility. This suggests that when and if the Soviets deploy their own IL-76 AWACS in a theater-support role, they may be more inclined to use it in the traditional Soviet close-control fashion than in the way the USAF operates the E-3A.

Dubrov probably errs most severely in dismissing all-aspect missiles as still just a "wave of the future." Although the effectiveness of the AIM-9L over Lebanon was dramatic, Dubrov does not discuss that weapon at all. He also overstates the limitations of the AIM-7F and essentially builds a case for Soviet complacency about both. Whether or not the Israelis actually took advantage of the forward-hemisphere capabilities of these missiles, they clearly can be used to great effect in this manner. If Soviet pilots genuinely believe and are prepared to act on what they have been told by Dubrov, this can only come as good news to their USAF counterparts who may someday have to confront the SU-27 and MiG-29 in combat.

CONCLUSIONS

How are we to understand the lapses in Dubrov's rendering of Israeli performance in the Lebanon war? One interpretation is that the Soviets have fully read the unpleasant handwriting on the wall and have chosen to keep their aircrews ignorant of the truth while they seek to develop appropriate countermeasures. Although there is much merit to this view, it is also probable that the Soviets are simply incapable of accepting conclusions that would oblige them to abandon their long-standing reliance on rigid top-down control. At a technical level, the Soviets are as capable as we are of itemizing the results of the Lebanon war and figuring out their implications. **Yet the real significance of the Beka'a Valley outcome does not concern weapons so much as concepts of force employment. In the end, the Syrians were defeated not by the AIM-9L's expanded launch envelope, the F-15's radar, or any combination of Israeli technical assets, but by the IAF's clear superiority in leadership, organization, tactical adroitness, and adaptability. This is the overarching "lesson" of enduring merit from the war—and the last one the Soviets seem close to recognizing and assimilating.** There is a world of difference between understanding a problem and instituting the necessary corrective measures. Dubrov's comments suggest that the individual Soviet fighter pilot still has a considerable way to go before he will be able to employ his new equipment to the full extent of its capabilities.

This research was conducted in the National Security Strategies Program. For a more complete discussion, see R-3000-AF, *Moscow's Lessons from the 1982 Lebanon Air War*, Benjamin S. Lambeth, July 1984 (Unclassified), or contact the author at The Rand Corporation, 1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, California 90406-2138, (213) 393-0411.