

# The Soviet Union and the Arab Middle East

by :

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**Note : This article was prepared before the recent expulsion of the Soviet military advisors from Egypt.**

The recent Soviet penetration into the Arab Middle East has created a major crisis in international politics and has affected the ballance of power throughout the world. The Arab-Israeli Conflict has been the singly most important factor in this deep thrust of Soviet power and influence into the area. Much of expansion has taken place through an invitation by the Arab states. Since Egypt has become the spearhead of this Soviet thrust into the Arab World, most of this paper deals with Soviet activities in Egypt and their future consequences.

Russian interest in the Middle East is not a new pheno-

menon. This region has a special importance in the Soviet strategy because of its strategic location, its abundant oil resources and the fact that it lies in the most convenient communications line between the Black Sea ports near the heart of Soviet power and much of the Third World. (1) During the past two centuries, Russians took large territories from Ottoman Turkey and Iran. Besides their continuous effort to expand into the Southern border countries, as early as 1784, they tried to establish a foothold in Egypt. In that year in order to support Egyptian independence from Ottoman Turkey, the Russians demanded the right to station troops on Egyptian soil. (2)

After withdrawing from World War I, in order to win Arab friendship, the new Bolshevik regime disclosed the existence of a secret agreement between Great Britain and France concerning control of Syria and Lebanon. (3) Soon after, the Soviets made numerous efforts to promote local communist activities in several Arab countries.

In the 1930's the Soviets began openly cooperating with various Arab nationalist movements which were attempting to gain

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- (1) It should be remembered that the Black Sea ports are almost the only Soviet outlets to the world that can function all year around. See "How Long Will Sadat Last? Moscow's Not - So - Secret Wish," *New Middle East*, nos. 42 and 43 (March/April 1972) pp. 5-8.
  - (2) Carol A. Fisher and Fred Krinsky, *The Middle East in Crisis: A Historical and Documentary Review* (Syracuse University Press, 1959), pp. 30-33.
  - (3) The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a secret treaty between Great Britain and France, promising France its control Lebanon and part of Syria once the war ended.

their independence from the Western colonial powers. This cooperation continued until 1947 when the Soviets paradoxically endorsed partition of Palestine and supported the creation of the state of Israel. Some political observers suspect that Moscow anticipated the animosities between Arabs and Israelis which eventually erupted into open hostility. Believing that in any military confrontation the United States and Western European countries would side with the Israelis, and the Arabs, remaining defenseless, would have to turn to the Soviet Union for aid, Moscow did its utmost to aggravate the conflict. (1)

Among other reasons for the Soviet endorsement of partitioning of Palestine in 1947, one may consider the fact that the majority of the leadership of the Zinoist movement in Palestine at the time consisted of immigrant Jews from Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellite countries. These immigrants had been exposed to the communist and socialist ideologies before leaving the mother lands. Moscow must have felt that these leading Jews would help establish a socialist government in the proposed Jewish state from which the Soviets hoped to spread their ideologies into the Middle East.

Prior to this time, Russia made numerous attempts to establish a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea for the purpose of securing warm water ports which would give Russian ships free access to all international waters. (2) This was a long-sought

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(1) It has even been suggested that the Soviet Union encouraged Egypt in May, 1967, to take provocative action against Israel. See Igor O. Glasenapp, "Recent Developments in Soviet Policy Toward Israel. *Studies on the Soviet Union*, VII (1968), p. 40.

(2) George K. Eliot, "A Red Dream of Empire," *Ordnance* LIII (September-October 1968), pp. 150-153.

Russian dream which the greatest of the Czars failed to achieve, and only the Arab-Israeli wars of 1956 and 1967, or more precisely, the Zionists achieved it for them. The Soviet break with China and the development of a 5000-mile confrontation line between the two Communist giants have made the Black Sea-Mediterranean - Red Sea - Indian Ocean route a critically important supply line in case of conflict. The Soviet land communication with the lines of confrontation in Far Eastern Russia consists of one highway and a double tracked trans-Siberian railroad which runs close to the Chinese border for long stretches. (1) Should the Soviet Union wish to blockade the long exposed Chinese coast, this route provides the fastest way to reinforce the Soviet Pacific fleet from its Black Sea or the Mediterranean naval units. It should also be pointed out that the Black Sea - Suez Canal - Indian Ocean route is the most convenient transport route between Western and Eastern ports of Russia. It costs Soviet Union fifty percent less to carry bulk cargo from European to Far Eastern Russia that way, than by land across the Soviet Union. (2) In order to keep this enormously important route secure, Soviets are determined to establish a firm position in Egypt and the countries along the way and exploit opportunities wherever possible.

Having abandoned the policy of territorial expansion after the death of Stalin, (3) the new leaders of the Soviet Union inaugu-

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(1) See *New Middle East* op. cit., p. 6

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) One may consider the following three reasons for this change; a) The Soviet Union, facing U. S. determination to contain its expansion, did not want to risk a war with the West. b) Wanting to champion the freedom of the peoples of Asia and Africa from the yoke of colonialism, thus undermining Western interests, the Soviets found territorial expansion in conflict with this goal. c) They had been having enormous problems controlling their Eastern European satellite countries.

rated a policy of political, military, economic and ideological expansion into the Third World. Finding that more and more peoples of the developing nations, for one reason or another, were receptive to its aid and to some sort of socialist economy, the Soviet Union became determined to achieve these goals by whatever means possible, short of endangering the survival of Soviet power. (1) The principle means of this policy are trade, economic and military aid, military presence, limited military intervention, and war by proxy. Generally speaking, the major goals of this new policy of penetration are: 1 - undermining the power and influence of the West, 2 - encouraging leader of these countries to adopt Soviet styles socialism as an effective means of development, 3 - strengthening ties between armed forces of recipient nations and those of the Soviet Union, 4 - courting the goodwill of emerging nations and receiving their support in the United Nations, 5 - obtaining permanent military bases in strategic locations of these countries, and 6 - fostering diplomatic and military dependency upon the Soviet Union. This dependency could then be used as a lever to force military and economic concessions from recipients of Soviet aid. (2) As for the spread of Communism, the Soviet Union is not interested in the proliferation of Communist ideology in the Middle East or the rest of the Third World countries, for that matter. In fact, every Middle Eastern country, except Israel and Lebanon, has outlawed the Communist Party and put its leaders in jail while the Russians looked the other way.

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(1) Raymond L. Harthoff, The Soviet Image of Future War (Public Affairs Press, 1959), pp. 1-4.

(2) Wynfred Joshus and Stuphen P. Gilber Arms for the Third World (John Hopkins Press, 1969), pp. 1-6.

As for the Arab-Israeli conflict, the new Soviet policy called for complete cooperation with Arab leaders who were determined to free their peoples from the remaining chain of colonialism. Israel was regarded by the Soviets as the tool of American "imperialists" whose main concern was to use it against the "progressive-revolutionary" Arab regimes in order to safeguard Western strategic and oil interests. Embittered by their former colonial status and thus resentful toward the West, the Arabs became vulnerable to this kind of anti-Western overture. An additional cementing factor was the attraction of some of these Arab leaders to socialism as an alternative to the capitalistic approach in economic development. (1) The highlights of this new foreign policy vis-a-vis Egypt began with the 1955 Egyptian-Czechoslovakian Arms Deal, the Soviet offer to build the billion-dollar Aswan High Dam, and the 1972 Soviet-Egyptian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. This treaty is rather significant as the first pact of its kind that the Soviet Union has entered into with a non-Communist country, lying far away from Soviet borders. What makes this treaty unprecedented and far-reaching is its scope, covering every facet of national life: economic, military, diplomatic, social, cultural, and ideological. It is too early, however, to state with any certainty the impact of this treaty upon the political-military situation in the Middle East. Thus far, it has neither affected the speed or quantity of Soviet weapons delivery to Egypt, nor has it helped the Russians' ability to obtain a permanent port base in Alexandria. It has, nevertheless, formalized Soviet presence in Egypt and has made it easier for Soviets to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs. The two countries have also signed numerous trade agreements; these include joint production of raw materials, es-

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(1) *Current Digest of the Soviet Union* XX No. 3 (February 3, 1968), p. 18. See also: *Ibid.*, XX No. 8 (March 13, 1968), pp. 11-16.

establishment of mixed companies and assembly plants, direct Soviet utilization of raw materials, and even Soviet marketing of certain industrial products. (1)

In addition to its own defence needs, Egypt's position of leadership within the Arab World and Africa has necessitated furnishing military and economic aid to some of her allies and revolutionary movements, both in the Middle East and Africa. Much of this military assistance comes to Egypt directly from the Soviet Union. (2)

Soviet military aid to Egypt and other Arab revolutionary regims was given with marked consistency after 1960. The first MIG-21 aircraft, Komar patrol boats armed with surface-to-surface missiles, and TU-fighter bombers arrived in Egypt in 1962. Algeria, Iraq, and Syria received similar military equipment by May of 1965. As of the end of the 1967 June War, Soviet arms deliveries to the four Arab countries mentioned was estimated at the total of over 2.7 billion dollars. (3) Within a few months after the humiliating defeat of 1967, the the Soviet Union replaced over 80 percent of losses in Egypt and Syria, and by October, 1968, not only were all losses replaced, but an additional number of more sophisticated weapons was given to these countries, reportedly valued \$2.5 Billion. (4)

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- (1) For details see : J. S. Berliner, " Soviet Economic Policy in the Middle East," Middle East Affairs, X. Nos. 8-9 (August-September), 1958, pp. 272-289.
  - (2) Uri Ra'Anan, The U.S.S.R. Arms the Third World (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1969 ) pp. 22-24.
  - (3) Walter Z. Laqueur, The Struggle for the Middle East. The Soviet Union in the Mediterranean Sea (MacMillian Company, 1969, p.137.
  - (4) *Ibid.*

These new weapons include 100 MIG-21J interceptors, over 100 clusters of SAM-2 and SAM-3 ground-to-air missiles sites, many tank landing crafts essential for cross-canal strikes, over a dozen newer model R-class submarines and destroyers, and a fleet of missile boats. (1)

The Soviets have not failed to give their latest weapons to Egypt. When Israeli planes were flying close to the ground because SAM -3 radar was incapable of tracking targets flying below 500 feet, a four-barreled 23 mm. radar-directed light anti-aircraft weapon named ZSU234 mounted on a tank-like tracked vehicle was sent to Egypt. This anti-aircraft is capable of tracking and firing upon planes flying below 500 feet. (2) The latest Soviet deliveries are MIG-23 jet interceptors, the best in the Soviet arsenal, though only Russian pilots fly them. As far as it is known, these jets have not been supplied even to the Warsaw Pact members. (3) Such benevolence does not come cheaply. This massive Soviet aid to Egypt and to other Arab countries cannot be mere philanthropy. In Egypt, the Soviets are responsible for the country's air defence system with Russian pilots in charge. They have obtained landing rights for their planes at Cairo West, Alexandria, Luxor, and Aswan airports and port facility rights for the Soviet fleet at Alexandria and Port Said. (4)

Although President Sadat is currently forestalling the Sr-

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- (1) "Into the Middle East with Smiles and Missles," Life, LXV, No. 22 (November 29, 1968), p. 27.
- (2) "Moscow on the Nile," Time, XCV, No 31 (June 22, 1970), p. 31.
- (3) New York Times (April 12, 1971).
- (4) Ibid.



viet demand for permanent naval bases in Egyptian ports, since he is not as popular and powerful a leader as late President Nasser, he may not be able to withstand Soviet pressure for too long. If such concessions are granted, it would be extremely difficult to dislodge the Soviets from Egypt once present hostility with Israel ends. The Soviets are also trying to obtain rights to establish port bases at Latakia in Syria, and at Mers-el Kebir in Algeria. (1)

As for the Middle Eastern military situation, the Soviet Union wants to create a political impression of strength and commitment rather than rapidly altering the established military balance between Arabs and Israelis. (2) Moscow has no intention of getting involved in a hot war in the Middle East risking a nuclear confrontation with the United States. It is not in the interests of the Soviet Union to make its Arab clients capable of winning the war against Israel. It seems the Russians are better off if the Arab states lose rather than win. A frustrated and needy loser offers more foothold opportunities than a confident victor free from threat. Some have suggested that Moscow tricked the Arab states into war in 1967 for this reason. (3) On the other hand, because of tremendous investments in Egypt and the rest of the Arab World, the Soviet Union may not be able to af-

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(1) Peter Kruzhin, "Soviet Fleet in the Mediterranean," *Buletin*, XVI, No. 2. (February, 1969), p. 39.

(2) The Soviet Union insists on the right of Israel to exist and had recently allowed several thousands of its Jewish citizens to immigrate to Israel.

(3) See Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Middle East Conflict*. (New York) Foreign Policy Association, 1968), pp. 14-22.

ford standing idle if the Egyptian hinterland is in danger of falling into the hands of Israelis.

Since the 1967 June War, the Soviet Union has been able to expand its naval capabilities in the Mediterranean Sea. Although the Soviet Mediterranean fleet is primarily a tactical force, (1) it has provided a dramatic military challenge to the United States and its NATO allies. It is not only posing a serious threat to the soft underbelly of Southern Europe; it has also neutralized the American Sixth Fleet's ability to affect the course of crisis in the Arab Middle East. Since it has free access to almost all of the major Arab ports in the Mediterranean Sea, the Soviet Fleet can block the Sixth Fleet's accessibility to important Arab coasts, thus interposing itself between a friendly Arab state and the Sixth Fleet. For pro-Western Mediterranean states, the Soviet naval presence is indeed a disturbing development, whereas for the pro-Soviet states it provides a degree of stability and security.

If Soviet influence in Egypt continues and the Suez Canal is reopened, the Soviets, having an important shipping link to the Indian Ocean, will be able to strengthen their naval presence in that Ocean. Added to these facts are reports that the Soviet Union has already obtained shore facilities at Berbera in the Somali Republic, Hodeida in the Red Sea, Basra in the Persian Gulf,

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- (1) The Soviet Fleet consists of some seventy ships including two helicopter carriers and several nuclear missile-equipped combat ships. For further details see: Lawrence L. Whetton, "The Mediterranean Threat," *Survival* XLL (August, 1970).

and Bombay, Cachin, and Goa in India. (1) If these reports are accurate, the Soviets could possess naval capabilities for cruising from the Mediterranean Sea through the Indian Ocean into the Sea of Japan, thus neutralizing the effectiveness of the United States naval superiority almost everywhere on the high seas. (\*) The recent Soviet-Iraqi's Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation is another significant step forward for Soviet influence in the Arab Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Having free access to the Iraqi port of Basra, Soviets now may try to dominate the Gulf.

## Soviet Interest in Oil

Oil is the most lucrative business in the world and has been the cause of many international problems and crisis in recent decades. Because the Middle East possesses the largest known oil reserve in the world and supplies the major portion of Western Europe, Japan, and the Indian sub-Continent's oil consumption, it has been one of the main targests of Soviet foreign policy for a long period of time. In spite of the fact that Soviets have sufficient oil reserve for internal use, for the following reasons they have been attempting to become a major importer of Middle East oil.

1) Having a near monopoly of the East European energy markets, whose consumption increases by some 12 percent a

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(1) See Sheldon W. Simon, "A System Approach to Security in the Indian Ocean Arc," Survival, XIII (January, 1971), p. 26.

(2) Ibid. See also: Laurence W. Martin, "The Changing Military Balance," Soviet-American Rivalry in the Middle East (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969).

year, (1) Soviets want to reserve their own resources and continue supplying these countries.

2) To obtain foreign exchange they need to export more oil to the European markets.

3) It costs them far less to import Middle East oil than exploit their Sybesian oil fields.

Therefore, it is the Soviet Union's intention to gradually deal itself into the multi-billion dollar Middle East Oil business. It further hopes that beside maintaining its markets in Europe in time of war with the Western countries it may be able to stop the flow of oil to the West or use it as a political threat

While there is a growing attitude of rejecting great-power responsibility in the United States and, under the Nixon Doctrine, that country is presently contracting its power around the globe, the Soviet Union has launched a policy of "establishing forward bases," depolying its rapidly expanding fleet of warships and submarines in to strange waters, thus expanding its political presence all around the world. (\*) One may consider this naval expansion into the Indian Ocean and the Sea of Japan as a Soviet Policy of containment, aimed perhaps primarily at containing China.

Whatever the Soviets' intentions, the Arab States which suffered much to break the chain of colonialism and have successfully reduced the power and influence of the west must not allow a new form of colonialism or "economic imperialism" to replace

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- (1) Wynfred Jashua, *Soviet Penetration* Into the Middle East, (National Strategy Information Center, New York, 1971, p. 4.
  - (2) Walter Laqueur, Op. Cite, p. 223.

the old ones. If not careful they may one day find the Soviets so entrenched in their soils that their removal would be extremely difficult. The Arab leaders must not forget Soviet intrusion into the Eastern European countries and the experiences these countries have had with the Russians. In their confrontation with Israel the Arab governments must not rely on any of the Great Powers.