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## Soviet Role in the Middle East

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## Soviet Role in the Middle East

Central Intelligence Agency  
Directorate of Intelligence

June 1977

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### *Key Judgments*

The Soviets' economic, military, and political position with the principal Arab states has eroded over the past five years, and shows no sign of early improvement. The low state of relations between the USSR and Egypt stands out as an important failure of Soviet foreign policy under General Secretary Brezhnev.

Moscow's relations with the radical Arab states—notably Iraq and Libya—have expanded significantly in recent years. This improvement has been based primarily on increasing sales of Soviet arms, and has not resulted in a commensurate increase in Soviet political influence among the Arab radicals.

The USSR has few official contacts and virtually no political influence with Israel. Occasional Soviet contacts with Israeli officials are intended primarily to intimidate the Palestinians and to show third parties that the Soviets play an essential role in Middle East diplomacy.

Substantial improvement in the Soviet position in the Middle East is not likely, at least until there is a fundamental change in the leadership of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iran, or Saudi Arabia. The Soviets probably will continue to make limited progress in strengthening their relations with Libya.

The Soviets' military presence in the Middle East has diminished considerably since 1973, but the Soviets retain the capability quickly to project additional military power into the area. This gives Moscow the potential directly to affect the military balance and the level of political tension in the region.

Soviet leaders want to reconvene the Geneva conference to demonstrate that the USSR plays a central role in Arab-Israeli negotiations. Moscow has neither the desire nor the ability, however, to force the Arabs or Israelis to make the political concessions that will be necessary to restart the conference.

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The USSR would not be capable—even by withholding or providing additional military equipment—of eliciting fundamental changes in the Arabs' stand on the basic issues of the Middle East conflict. Soviet policy will remain one of supporting positions already endorsed by the principal Arab states and the Palestinians.

Soviet influence in the Middle East is greatest during periods of tension and "no war-no peace." In any negotiating forum the Soviets will attempt to avoid appearing obstructionist, but should not be expected to play an effective, positive role.

## Soviet Role in the Middle East

### Overview

The Soviet economic and military presence in the Arab states, built up since the mid-1950s, has been eroding since the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war. As a result, the Soviets' modest political influence has been diminishing also. Four principal factors have been responsible for this decline in the Soviet position in the area:

- Egyptian President Sadat's estrangement from the Soviets.
- The general Arab conviction that only the United States can elicit the Israeli concessions necessary for a negotiated settlement.
- Saudi Arabia's support and subsidy of anti-Soviet policies in the area.
- The Arabs' desire to import Western rather than Soviet technology and equipment.

The Soviets will not be able to use inducements such as increased economic assistance to arrest the decline of their position in the Middle East. Moscow has never been willing to provide financial assistance on the scale required by the Arab confrontation states. The oil-rich Arab states that have provided aid on such a scale have been strongly anti-Soviet; their financial support and the influence it has given them have speeded the decline in Soviet influence in the area. Jordan, for example, refused a Soviet offer of an air defense system when the Saudis agreed to purchase a US system, and Arab and Western aid eased the impact of Egypt's shift away from the Soviets.

Economic aid to the Arabs by the Soviets has in fact been dwarfed by aid from the Arab oil states, coupled with Western assistance. In 1975 Moscow provided only \$195 million of economic aid deliveries compared with a net economic aid flow to the area of \$4.6 billion.

The limited influence and presence Moscow now has in the Middle East is due almost entirely to its continuing supply of substantial military equipment to several Arab states—particularly Syria, Iraq, and Libya—and its significant capability to project military power into the area. These factors ensure Soviet retention of considerable potential to affect the military

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## Soviet Economic Aid to Arab Countries, 1955-1976

	Million US \$	
	Commitments	Deliveries
Arab Countries	4,049	2,192
Algeria	716	288
Egypt	1,439	1,052
Iraq	704	363
Jordan	25	0
Morocco	98	46
Syria	768	324
North Yemen (Sana)	104	77
South Yemen (Aden)	113	22
Turisia	82	20

## Soviet Arms Agreements and Deliveries, 1956-1976

	Million US \$	
	Agreements	Deliveries
Arab Countries	13,929	12,122
Algeria	845	495
Egypt	3,945	3,939
Iraq	3,771	2,691
Libya	1,325	1,119
Morocco	74	29
Syria	3,648	3,570
North Yemen (Sana)	114	95
South Yemen (Aden)	207	184

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balance in the Middle East and thus influence the level of regional tensions. Soviet clients, for example, have received some of the newest and most sophisticated equipment in the Soviet arsenal; about 24,000 of their nationals have gone to the USSR for advanced military training; and in 1976 almost 6,000 Soviet personnel were in eight Arab countries as military technicians and advisers.

Soviet military sales agreements with the Arab countries—primarily Egypt, Syria, and Iraq—have amounted to nearly \$14 billion during the past two decades. Soviet military deliveries went mostly to Syria and Iraq after 1972, when Egypt expelled Soviet personnel. In 1974 Libya emerged as a major client; its \$1.2 billion order surpassed all previous Soviet arms agreements. Soviet relations with Syria cooled in 1976, and arms deliveries slowed for a time, but deliveries now appear to be returning to normal levels.

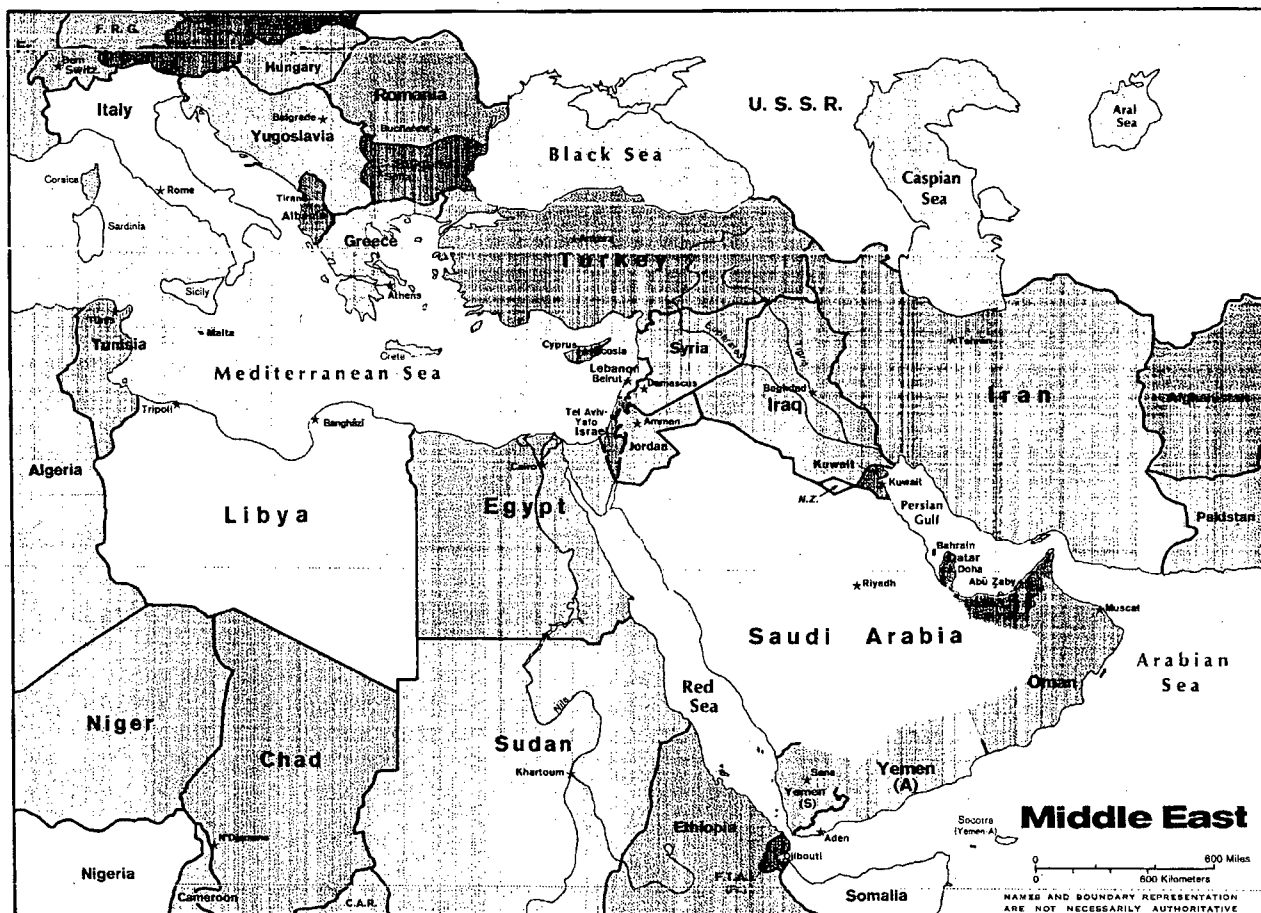
The Soviets' own military presence in the Middle East has been considerably reduced since the 1973 war, and continues to decline. Nevertheless, Soviet military forces—primarily naval and air—supplement military aid in the pursuit of Soviet policy objectives in the area. In the Mediterranean, the Soviets now normally maintain eight major surface combatants and ten submarines. Surface ships can be quickly reinforced from the Black Sea, however, and submarines sent from the Northern Fleet in about two weeks.

After years of exploiting tensions in the Middle East—both Arab-Israeli and intra-Arab—to build a sizable military and economic presence in the area, the Soviets have seen their position wither steadily since Sadat's expulsion of Soviet military advisers. This decline was reinforced, ironically, by the Arabs' first political victory over Israel through force of arms in October 1973. The subsequent period of relative peace and stability in the region has weakened the Soviet position further. It is against this evident disadvantage to the USSR of peace and stability that the current Soviet role in the Middle East and Moscow's attitude toward peace negotiations must be measured.

### **The Confrontation States**

#### *Egypt*

After nearly 25 years of Soviet efforts to build political influence and a military-economic presence in Egypt, the present low state of relations between the USSR and Egypt stands out as one of the most significant failures in Soviet foreign policy during the Brezhnev leadership. At the height of the relationship, from the June 1967 Middle East war to the October 1973 war, the Soviets at one time had more than 13,500 military advisers in Egypt, for a short while controlled all Egyptian air defenses east



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of Cairo, operated nearly unrestrained from naval bases at Mersa Matruh and Alexandria, conducted reconnaissance flights over the Mediterranean, and were Egypt's foremost international protector and patron.

This Soviet position was possible primarily because of Egypt's lack of alternative sources of political, economic, and especially military support, as well as shared foreign policy interests deriving from shared opposition to colonialism and to Western support for Israel. There was never significant ideological sympathy or support for Soviet Communism in Egypt, though the Soviets worked hard to make Nasir's Arab Socialism a favored stepchild of Marxism-Leninism.

Egypt's current estrangement from the USSR is fueled by personal animosity and feelings of betrayal on both sides. Sadat's anti-Soviet stand is virtually an obsession; he is convinced that Moscow was out to control, not assist, Egypt. Sadat is not at all willing to listen to the Soviets, and would resist the reestablishment of any relationship that approached the client-patron ties existing before his expulsion of Soviet advisers in 1972.

The souring of bilateral political relations has been manifested in other aspects of Soviet-Egyptian ties. Soviet economic aid, for example, never more than \$90 million a year, has been eclipsed in recent years by Western and conservative Arab aid. While the Soviets are still providing assistance in a variety of fields, most Soviet economic projects—including the steel industry, an aluminum plant, the Aswan Dam, and oil prospecting and irrigation projects—have not lived up to Egyptian expectations. Only the Soviet sponsored ship-building industry appears to be an efficient addition to Egyptian economic assets.

Beginning in 1967 a consortium of Arab states began covering Egypt's loss of exchange earnings from the Suez Canal with annual cash subsidies (Khartoum payments) totaling about \$200 million. In addition *ad hoc* Arab aid has exceeded \$6 billion since 1967, and the Western nations have provided over \$1 billion in concessional financing since 1973. Even Cairo's trade with Moscow could be redirected toward the West—the items Egypt exports could be sold in the West for enough hard currency to pay for substitutes for Russian exports.

Cairo is seeking Western foreign investment as a substitute for official aid. Thus far, however, Egypt has received only limited outside investment, mainly for the oil industry and tourism. Improvement in these areas, coupled with rising receipts from Suez Canal traffic, holds the key to economic progress in the 1980s.



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