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24 May 1967

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Russia's Position on South Arabia

1. The current immediate interest of the USSR in South Arabia is to secure the earliest possible departure of the British and to prevent their influence from being replaced by Saudi Arabia, the US, or any other non-"progressive" power. The USSR sees the current jockeying for position in the local political scene as a struggle primarily between progressives and conservatives. This being the case, the outlook for fruitful discussions with the US on Aden's future seem dim.

2. With few indigenous assets in South Arabia - the Communist Party is small and not very influential - the USSR has been giving the UAR limited political and propaganda support for activities against the British. This backing is in line with general Soviet tactics of pursuing Soviet aims through local forces already committed to an anti-Western course. The USSR, however, would not want to see UAR-sponsored activities reach such an alarming stage that the British might delay withdrawal. There are reports that, during his late March visit to Cairo, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko advised restraint and caution on the Egyptians concerning their South Arabia operations lest they push the British into staying on.

3. Rumors are heard - as they are elsewhere in the Near East--that the Soviets are seeking a naval base at Aden. Whatever might be the advantage of such a base, it would seem to be incompatible with the Soviet political line to take on a role which the colonial powers have given up.

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4. Kosygin's references to the US role in the Middle East were on the whole temperate and unprovocative. While charging that "imperialist circles... took practical action which might have been interpreted by Israeli extremists solely as direct encouragement to commit acts of aggression," he came nowhere near alleging that the US had intervened directly in the hostilities. Whether Kosygin intended to keep the door open for private talks with the US, he seems to have chosen his words so as not to raise obstacles to such talks. In a general reference to the undesirability of arms races, he indicated Soviet concern over a problem which President Johnson had mentioned earlier in the day. Kosygin may also have been intimating the possibility of US-Soviet conversations when he said that it would be good if the great powers "found common language to reach decisions meeting the interests of peace in the Middle East and the interests of universal peace."

5. The Soviet premier made a not-so-magnanimous concession in the direction of Israel when he said that "every people enjoys the right to establish an independent national state of its own." Otherwise, for the benefit of the Arabs, Kosygin was harsh and unrelenting toward the Israelis, even to the point of accusing them of behaving as the Nazis did. He said nothing to encourage the Arabs to be conciliatory.

6. Kosygin made it clear that the chief Soviet aim is to bring pressure on Israel to withdraw its troops from captured Arab territory. From the Soviet point of view, a good outcome in the General Assembly would be a simple resolution calling for such a withdrawal. The Soviet resolution goes well beyond this, probably in the hope that the Assembly will, by way of compromise, deliver an acceptable half-loaf.