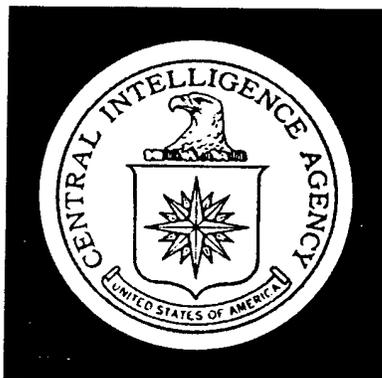


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MEMORANDUM

*Special Assessments on the Middle East Situation*

SOVIET MILITARY BASES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM  
RELEASE IN FULL 1998

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27 June 1967  
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
27 June 1967

Soviet Military Bases in the Middle East

Summary

It is unlikely that the USSR is seeking naval and other military bases in the UAR, Iraq, Syria, and Algeria. The Soviets would be abandoning a long held policy, would risk arousing anticolonial sentiments directed against themselves in the Arab world, and even hostile reactions in Eastern Europe. Above all, they would be committing themselves to direct involvement in any future fighting in the area, a course of action they seek to avoid. There is likely, however, to be an influx of Soviet advisers, trainers, and technicians into the area and there is likely to be increased use by the USSR of Arab port and air facilities.

Except in the very unlikely event that the revolutionary Arab states felt Soviet bases the only means of preventing an imminent Israeli attack and assuring their survival, none of them would seek or agree to any foreign--including Soviet--base on their soil. Though they might feel tempted to seek such a base as a means of providing additional security and a guarantee of Soviet involvement in a future war, their xenophobia and fear of losing their independence would probably prevail. They are likely to permit greater Soviet use of existing privileges, however, e.g., landing and overflight rights in the area.

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The Soviet Side

1. There is little doubt that the Soviets were surprised by the outbreak of the Middle East war and appalled by its outcome. They had surely reckoned both that their relationship with the "progressive" Arab states would count for more than it did as a deterrent to Israel and that, if it came to war, the Arabs would give a better account of themselves than they did. In the aftermath of the fighting, the Russians must assess promptly not only their political position in the Middle East but also the scope and terms of their future military commitment. The need for an assessment is all the more urgent, if, as is probable, Nasir has been pressing to know what military assistance the USSR intends to give him. The missions to Cairo of President Podgorny and Marshal Zakharov and parallel missions to Damascus which are evidently in the offing are, we believe, elements in this assessment.

2. There is as yet no firm intelligence on what passed between Podgorny and Nasir. The Yugoslavs, with whom Podgorny visited en route to Cairo, have conveyed the information that he intended to indicate to the UAR that there were limits to the Soviet commitment. Other reports from Saudi sources allege that the Soviets have asked the Egyptians for base rights and that these are also being sought in Syria, Algeria, and Iraq. Such a request from the Russians would have to rest on the claim that without facilities in the area they would be unable to intervene effectually on behalf of the Arabs in the event of new hostilities. The Russians might also expect that by this means their diplomacy with respect to the Middle East could be made more credible and their ability to monitor the military intentions of the Arab regimes improved.

3. This would be a bold step on the part of the Russians. It would announce that they are not satisfied merely to preserve the position they have

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achieved in the Middle East but discern in the present turmoil an opportunity to imbed themselves still deeper. It would also be a risky venture.

4. The conflict has not, we believe, diminished the disadvantages to the USSR of such a course of action. The damage to the Soviet image among the non-aligned nations to whom it looks for diplomatic support in the present circumstances would be considerable and the argument that imperialist ambitions are at the root of the trouble in the Middle East would lose much of its force. The allegation that the Western powers are to blame for bringing the Cold War into the area could be turned against the USSR. There would be suspicion and anxiety about Soviet purposes among the Mediterranean states as well as among the European nations, especially those who rely heavily on the Suez Canal. Moscow might, in addition, find it hard to keep the majority of East European states behind its Middle East policy and would certainly forfeit the cooperation of the Yugoslavs.

5. Above and beyond these political hazards are the military risks the Soviets would face by moving directly into the area. If there were renewed fighting, they could not claim that they were too far away to help. To a degree not precisely known to them, they would have harnessed their fortunes to a group of radical Arab leaders whose actions have proven unpredictable and whose political futures are not entirely certain. The likelihood of being drawn into local conflict and closer toward a military collision with the US would increase sharply.

6. The Soviets are for now more interested in protecting their winnings in the Middle East than in raising their stake. There seems to be no way they can avoid a further substantial outlay in military assistance though they can try to spread the cost of this among their East European allies. Negotiations have apparently already begun to establish the amounts and conditions and perhaps also on new arrangements for training. This might result in a substantial influx of Soviet military advisers and technicians into

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the Arab countries which would give the Russians better assurances concerning the state of Arab military forces, and better intelligence on Arab military intentions. We do not expect the Soviets to go so far as to ask for bases on Arab soil.

The Arab Side

7. Prior to the recent war with Israel, there seemed almost no chance that Nasir would tolerate the presence of Soviet (or any other foreign) naval or military bases on UAR territory. His views were shared by his fellow Arab revolutionaries in Algeria, Iraq, and Syria. The crushing defeat of their forces, however, which will leave the Arabs at least for a time completely unprotected from Israeli attack, may have changed this attitude. There now may be a greater receptivity among the leaders of these states to a formal Soviet military presence. Indeed, in the unlikely event they judged an Israeli attack imminent, the UAR and Syria probably would welcome such an arrangement were it the only means of national survival. Neither Algeria nor Iraq, of course, would be faced with this contingency.

8. Even if resumption of Arab-Israeli hostilities does not seem imminent, the revolutionary Arabs might see some advantages in having Soviet bases on their soil. Syria and the UAR could reason that the simple existence of a Russian base on their territory would powerfully inhibit any future Israeli military move against them. All the revolutionary Arab states could consider even a small Soviet military presence there as the first step in getting the Russians so deeply involved that they could not fail to intervene in a future Arab-Israeli war. Further, some militant Arab leaders--particularly the Syrians--who speak of new and extended campaigns of terrorism and guerrilla warfare, might consider a Soviet base a necessary shield against otherwise inevitable Israeli reprisals. Also, in the postwar era, some Arab governments, particularly Syria, might feel so weak domestically that they would seek Soviet armed forces simply to protect them from their enemies at home.

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9. There remain strong arguments, however, against the Arabs changing their minds about accepting any Soviet bases. Our knowledge of the attitudes of the Egyptian and Syrian leadership is limited, but we do not believe they feel that another Israeli attack is either imminent or likely, and that their survival is thus contingent on the presence of Soviet military forces in the area. Rather, they probably agree that the US-USSR sponsored cease-fire will hold. They probably think the Israelis, now seeking political rewards for their military victory, are unlikely to risk antagonizing the US and world opinion with new military ventures.

10. Militating against any Arab move to accept Soviet forces in the post-war era as a shield for terrorist activity, as a deterrent to future Israeli strikes, or even as protection from domestic insurrection, will be the enhanced distrust of the Soviets by the radical Arab leaders themselves. The latter are aware that Moscow counseled caution and restraint before the war; they remember that the Soviets never endorsed the closing of the Strait of Tiran; they cannot forget that the Soviets refused to save them from ensuing disaster.

11. Arab leaders would almost certainly fear that Soviet forces on Arab territory might attempt to ensure that future policies would be those of Moscow's choosing rather than of the Arabs. The latter, whose xenophobic suspicion of outsiders is never much below the surface, would hardly risk sacrificing their independence to a major power whose aims have recently been at variance with their own. In these circumstances, their long-standing aversion to foreign bases will come to the fore. On balance therefore, it is unlikely that an Arab government, even the ultra-leftist Syrian one, would abandon its traditional hostility to foreign bases and permit Russian forces on its territory.

12. On the other hand, most of the countries discussed above are likely to accept an enlarged

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Soviet presence in the form of additional technicians and trainers, expanded maintenance facilities and the like. Along with these will be a greater show of the Soviet flag--particularly in the form of naval calls, and visit of important Soviet military figures. In the process, the Russians will keep the advantages they now have in such things as overflight rights, secure storage areas, aircraft fueling and repairing facilities, and use of ports and airfields in the area. They may seek more privileges of this type. It is unlikely, however, that the Egyptians or other Arabs would agree to a Soviet force of such a size as to pose a threat to their freedom of action.

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