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The USSR and the Egyptian-Israeli Confrontation

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Date 2/28/94

HRP 94-3

THE USSR AND THE EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI CONFRONTATION

NOTE

The USSR has, by its decision to assume a much larger part of the burden of air defense of Egypt, become more deeply and more directly involved in the Arab-Israeli military conflict. This paper assesses the Soviet involvement and its effect on Egypt and Israel.

THE ESTIMATE

I. THE SOVIET POSITION

1. The USSR has, during the past two months, involved itself more directly in the air defense of Egypt. Some time in late February or early March, the USSR began installing in the UAR the SA-3 anti-aircraft missile system and the personnel to operate it, which until then had been deployed only in the Warsaw Pact area. The Russians have supplied sophisticated anti-aircraft artillery equipment; it is logical to suppose that it, too, is manned by Soviets. There are unconfirmed reports that Moscow has also sent, or will send, troops to defend the SA-3 sites. There are other reports which assert plausibly that Russians assigned to the Egyptian Air Force's ground control centers are taking a much more active role than previously. Soviet involvement in early warning operations has also increased, including extension of radar coverage by ships in the eastern Mediterranean.

2. Soviet pilots have been present in the UAR for some time, engaged in the training of Egyptian pilots. Their number has evidently increased in recent months as has the volume of their air activity. Intensified training could account for much of this activity. There is some evidence, however, that at least one Soviet air combat unit is now in Egypt. There have been no known encounters between Soviet and Israeli pilots.

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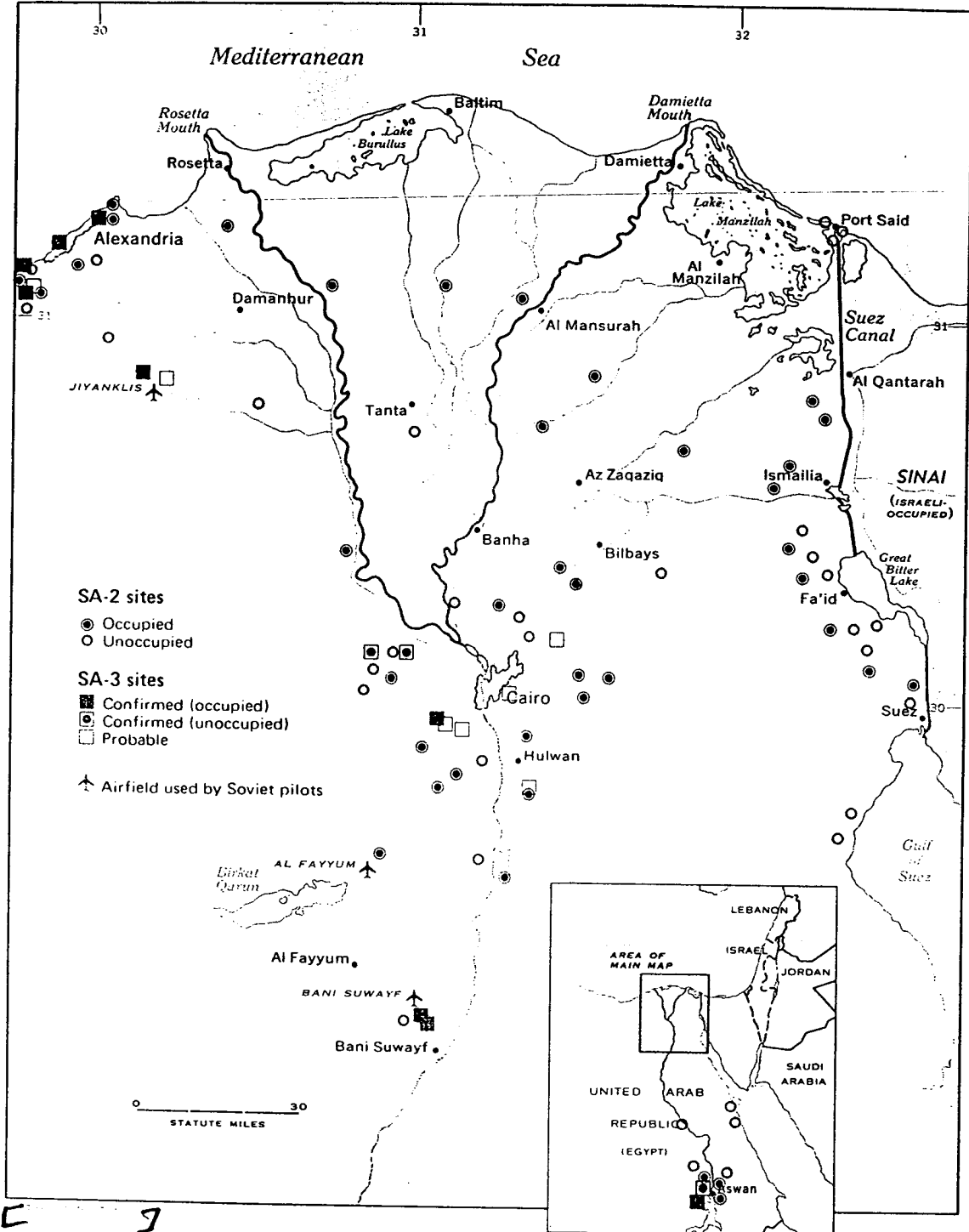
3. The Soviets have left their precise military intentions ambiguous. Thus, no direct evidence can be adduced in support of a judgment about the limits of their probable action. We believe, however, that

the USSR's customary cautious approach to situations of enlarged risk argue that the USSR's present intention is to confine use of its forces in Egypt to a limited defensive role. The USSR's decision to defend at least key Egyptian targets from air attack quite clearly followed from Nasser's visit to Moscow in late January at a time when the Israeli Air Force, having found the Soviet air defense equipment provided to the Egyptians no obstacle, had carried its forays to the very suburbs of Cairo. Nasser might very well have argued that this situation was humiliating both to him and to the Russians and possibly that his position, and therefore theirs, would be jeopardized unless means were found to deny the Israelis freedom of the skies over the heart of Egypt. The actions taken subsequently by the Soviets are consistent with this objective. So far the SA-3 has been deployed at Alexandria, in the Cairo area, in the Delta region between Cairo and the coast, and at Aswan.¹ The Russians have not so far extended their operations to the Suez Canal area.

4. The Russians would no doubt have seen risks to themselves even in a commitment that went no further than this. They could not be sure what the US reaction would be. Neither could they be confident that they would succeed in making the Israelis discontinue deep-penetration raids. Failure to do so would cause the Russians embarrassment and oblige them to consider additional means of deterrence. Weighed against this risk, however, were a number of advantages. By curbing the Israeli incursions—as they have so far succeeded in doing—they stood to reassert their credibility as protectors of the Egyptians. They could expect, at the same time, to stiffen Egyptian morale, to shore up Egypt's military position vis-a-vis Israel, to leave the latter uncertain about Soviet intentions, and to strengthen the Soviet-Egyptian bargaining position in diplomatic discussions. They might have foreseen, also, that, by taking actions which could be represented as the rendering of defensive assistance to a friend under aggressive attack, they would make it difficult for the US to find an effective riposte.

5. It is possible that the Soviets will eventually expand their air defense eastward toward the Canal, perhaps doing so by gradual and carefully controlled stages during which they could test the reactions of Israel and the US to such developments. Yet, there are sound and obvious reasons for them to confine their forces to assisting in the air defense of the principal cities and military installations in the Nile Valley. If Israeli aircraft resume attacks on these targets

SAM Sites in Egypt



they will probably be engaged by Soviet aircraft, though the Soviets are unlikely to publicly acknowledge such action. If the Israelis undertake heavy and sustained air and ground attacks on Egyptian forces in the Canal area, we think that the Soviets would be reluctant to commit their own air forces this far forward, but the pressure of events might require them to involve themselves further and faster than they probably intend at the present time.

6. There are indications that the Soviets have sanctioned the "war of attrition" being conducted by Egyptian forces along the Canal, or at least have not opposed it. They may believe that an effective air defense of rear areas will enable Egypt to sustain these tactics and that these tactics will in time produce some give in the Israeli position with respect to a political settlement. There is ample evidence, at the same time, that the Russians recognize that the Egyptian Armed Forces do not have, and will not soon have, the capability to carry the war to the Israelis in Sinai on a significant scale. And only if the Russians were willing to support Egypt in such a venture—and we do not believe that they are—would they see an urgent need to assist Egypt in securing control of the air over the Canal. Success in such an undertaking, even if it were to be contemplated, would require a highly visible commitment of Soviet pilots. The effort would clearly threaten to alter the Egyptian-Israeli military equation in favor of the Arabs; Israel's strategy for dealing with the "war of attrition" would become untenable. The Russians almost certainly believe that they would in this way come into direct military conflict with Israel and thereby risk confrontation with the US.

7. The Russians evidently see no very great danger of direct military conflict with the US arising out of the actions they have taken thus far, nor even any substantial damage to the overall climate of Soviet-American relations. They have surely given some thought to the possibility that the course they have taken may bring increased distrust into US-Soviet relations, and thus adversely affect such important undertakings as SALT and perhaps the possibility of negotiations over Southeast Asia. But they have obviously concluded either that the risk is not very great or that the protection of their stake in the Middle East obliges them to run the risk in any case. They are, therefore, unlikely to be susceptible to warnings from the US that they should pull back from the commitment they have given Egypt, although firm warnings against further involvement might reinforce their inclination to pursue a cautious course.

8. Moscow probably feels itself on solid ground in assisting Egypt to defend itself and believes there are no feasible military or diplomatic moves that the US can take effectively to change this Soviet policy. The Soviets probably do see a good chance that the US will agree to provide additional combat aircraft to Israel. Moscow might even see advantages in this step because it would deepen the estrangement between the US and the Arab States. Moscow probably believes that Israel, though capable of headstrong action, is unlikely to take on the USSR. It probably also believes that the US would advise the Israelis to avoid engaging Soviet forces.

9. Nasser's May Day speech suggests that he, and presumably the Russians as well, think that a new situation has been created which might make a new approach to the US profitable. It is possible that the steps the Russians have taken to buttress the Egyptians' military position have given both a greater sense of confidence and might even enable them to be more flexible in negotiations. It is more to be expected that the Soviet-Egyptian bargaining position will reflect the expectation that the Israelis, under US pressures, must now be more forthcoming with respect to withdrawals and negotiations.²

II. RESPONSES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Israel

10. Israel's initial reaction to deployment of Soviet-manned SA-3 missiles in Egypt has been to avoid direct encounters with these Soviet forces. Tel Aviv apparently had not anticipated that its air attacks on politically sensitive targets deep in Egypt would result in such a rapid and impressive Soviet reaction. But the Israelis promptly recognized that they no longer could carry out air attacks on Egypt as and when they chose, confident that the Egyptians could do little in response. The Israelis made clear, through a variety of official and nonofficial statements, that they would not strike areas such as Cairo, Alexandria, and Aswan, but said that they would continue to pound military targets in the area west of the Suez Canal even if Soviet-manned air defense missiles were placed there. Indeed, they have continued to use their aircraft against Egyptian forces in this area almost daily over the last several weeks.

11. For the first time in their country's existence, the Israelis are faced with the hostile military presence of a major power. They appear uncertain as to what the presence of these Soviet forces portends, not only now, but for the years ahead. Even though the USSR's involvement in Egypt is defensive, it stands in the way of customary Israeli military strategy, which is to maintain the capacity to pre-empt a threatening Arab military buildup and to retaliate swiftly in response to lesser Arab attacks. In this way, Israel has sought to maintain a psychological advantage over Arab forces. Israel now recognizes, however, that an attempt to destroy the Egyptian Air Force—the key to its quick success in 1967—would not only be much more difficult but would unavoidably involve Soviet forces in Egypt. Israel must also recognize that its efforts to topple Nasser through humiliating military raids deep into Egyptian territory have failed and that Nasser now feels freer to pursue the "war of attrition."

12. We do not know how the Israelis will cope with this new situation; indeed, we believe they are unsure what to do themselves. But, while the eventual course of Israeli policy is thus difficult to predict, certain moves in the months ahead are predictable. In the political field, the Israelis will continue to cite the activity of Soviet pilots within Egypt as an additional argument to press the US for

²See NIE 11-6-70, "SOVIET POLICIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND MEDITERRANEAN AREA," SECRET, dated 5 March 1970, for a detailed discussion of Soviet policies.

more jet planes. In the weapons field, Israel will continue and almost certainly increase its efforts to manufacture virtually all of its military requirements. Programs to produce jet aircraft, and missiles and other advanced weapons will probably be speeded up. Finally, Israel will continue to attack Egyptian forces along the Suez Canal in an effort to keep Egypt from causing an unacceptable level of Israeli casualties.

13. There is some chance that the military confrontation between Egypt and Israel will stabilize for a period of time at something like its present level. But this cannot happen unless Israeli casualties on the Egyptian front remain relatively low—say, an average of 10-20 killed per month. But even if such stabilization takes place, it is unlikely to last very long because Egyptian and Israeli goals are incompatible, both in regard to the cease-fire and in regard to a settlement of the basic issues between them. Thus, Israel would be content to hold its position on the Canal as long as its casualties are not high and wait until the Egyptians are willing to negotiate, while the Egyptians wish to keep Israeli casualties high and in this way force Israel to conclude that Egypt's "war of attrition" is succeeding. More fundamentally, Egypt wants virtually total Israeli withdrawal from territories conquered in 1967, while Israel refuses to contemplate withdrawal until the Arabs agree to negotiate a peace.

14. If Israel should be confronted with a steady and sizeable drain of casualties along the Canal, Israeli military leaders would probably fairly soon decide to try to convince the Egyptians to lessen their "war of attrition." The Israelis would use various imaginative tactics designed to impress the Egyptian military establishment with its weakness and with Israel's capacity to inflict serious damage despite the presence of the Soviets.

15. The Israelis might launch a very vigorous aerial assault across the Canal, perhaps combining it with a major ground foray to cut up Egyptian forces and to destroy Egyptian equipment and installations on the western bank. While the Israelis could probably cross the Canal in force and inflict severe damage on the Egyptian forces, they would risk substantial casualties themselves in doing so. Moreover, even highly successful Israeli raids would be unlikely to induce Cairo to agree to a restoration of the cease-fire along the Canal, since to do so would be tantamount, in Egyptian eyes, to accepting Israeli occupation of Sinai.

16. We anticipate no early change in the present Israeli government policy on the terms of a peace settlement and the means—principally direct negotiations—to achieve it. The cabinet, put together with great effort in December 1969 and representing almost all parties, is virtually immobilized on the security issue both by its size and the strongly held views of such "hard-line" men as Menahim Begin and Ezer Weizmann. The present political leadership, and any foreseeable successors, is doggedly determined not to yield the territorial advantages it has won for anything short of a contractual settlement. Most of its members are unable to see a practical alternative to the course they have been pursuing since 1967. And, in terms of public opinion, time is working in favor of those who take a hard-line in respect of a settlement. Some Israelis see the Russian presence

as a sign that Tel Aviv needs to rethink its policy, and this approach may, over time, acquire wide support. The present leadership, however, sees the Russian presence largely as an argument for greater US involvement on the Israeli side, especially through the provision of more aircraft, and a tougher US line toward the Soviets.

17. The Israelis strongly maintain the position that only they can determine their territorial and material needs. Even though they have embarked on a program designed to achieve virtual self-sufficiency in military weaponry by the middle of the 1970s, for the next four or five years, Israel will be heavily dependent on the US for certain types of arms. Israel feels this dependence, especially since the US is now the sole external source of sophisticated weapons available to it; Tel Aviv would be extremely sensitive to any withholding of additional arms delivery. In addition, Israel had a current account deficit of about \$900 million in 1969; its anticipated deficit for 1970 is about \$1.1 billion. With foreign exchange reserves standing at \$435 million, Israel is seeking aid from the US. It is also campaigning to increase the flow of private donations and loans from the US, which have netted it about \$1 billion in the past three years.

18. Despite its dependence on the US, Israel has not been responsive to US policy suggestions and has remained extremely sensitive to any suggestion of pressure. The new situation the Israelis confront in consequence of the introduction of Soviet military forces might make the Israelis more inclined to accept US advice, for example, in moderating Israel's approach to the modalities of negotiation. If Israel did show itself more responsive to US desires, however, it would probably expect the US to reaffirm its commitment to Israel's security in more solemn and explicit form.

Egypt

19. Nasser's regime is no more ready to compromise its fundamental position on withdrawal of Israeli forces from occupied territories than is Israel to compromise its position on the necessity to negotiate a peace. The deployment of Soviet-manned air defense systems to Egypt has surely reinforced Egyptian determination to hold to this position. It has also given the Soviets additional leverage with Nasser; it is they, rather than the US, who have the option of using either the carrot or the stick in the case of Egypt. Among other things, Nasser's May Day speech signaled to the US that Cairo feels that the imbalance between Israel and Egypt has been redressed significantly by limiting the operation of the Israeli Air Force to the eastern border areas of Egypt.

20. The Egyptians—and many other Arabs—were profoundly disturbed by their belief that only the provision of US F-4 aircraft permitted Israel to range Egyptian skies virtually at will in the first two months of 1970. In the light of this Egyptian feeling, provision of additional aircraft to Israel in the near future would be read by Nasser and indeed by most Arabs as a deliberate rejection of his "one last chance" offer and as evidence of US support for a bellicose Israeli posture. It would cause a very strong reaction in other Arab states as well as

in Egypt. The chances are good that at least one or two Arab States would break relations. There would probably be some actions taken against US oil interests, though a prolonged and effective cutoff of oil is unlikely. Outbursts of anger could result in destruction of US-owned property and could endanger the safety of American citizens.³

21. There is virtually no chance that an agreement to provide additional aircraft could be kept secret for more than a few weeks. Past performance indicates that the Israelis are unwilling to prevent the fact of arms support from the US from becoming known. In fact, efforts to keep an agreement secret would almost certainly lead the Arab states to accept inflated estimates of the numbers of planes involved.

22. Continued deferral of a US agreement to provide additional aircraft to Israel would increase somewhat US ability to influence both Israelis and Arabs. The Israelis would probably try to limit activities which they felt might adversely affect a US decision. The Arabs would regard a deferral as a modest gain for their point of view. Yet, the Egyptians and the Russians might also interpret it as evidence that the US was weakening in its support of Israel. On the other hand, unless it were made stringently conditional on Israeli concessions, provision of additional aircraft to Israel would diminish still further the very limited influence the US has in moving the parties toward settlement.

23. Egypt believes that its own improved air defense position puts more pressure on Israel and may feel that the presence of Soviet personnel in Egypt puts additional pressure on the US. It hopes that the US will in these circumstances exert more leverage on Israel and that Israel will come to recognize that Egypt will eventually win the "war of attrition."

24. The Egyptians have no capacity for sustained effective military action against Israel in Sinai, and all the evidence we have indicates that Cairo's military leaders are aware of this limitation. Egypt can conduct small cross-canal operations, but could not keep up for long the pace of ground and air operations of the last week of April 1970, which caused 14 Israeli deaths along the Canal. The level of activities in the Canal area is certain to rise and fall, with occasional peaks of action as happened in late April. It is unlikely that the Egyptians will be able to inflict casualties steadily at a much higher rate than in the past.

25. The situation in other Arab States has only a marginal influence upon the Israel-Egypt-US-USSR equation. Fedayeen terrorist activity on the Jordanian, Syrian, and Lebanese fronts operates independently of this situation. Syria shows no inclination to heat up affairs along its cease-fire line beyond an occasional day of fighting to demonstrate to its Arab brothers that it is participating in the confrontation. Damascus wants to avoid a weighty Israeli response, and

³ There are approximately 22,000 US nationals residing in the Eastern Arab States. Principal concentrations are: Lebanon—6,700; Saudi Arabia—6,500; Libya—5,000; Kuwait—1,500; Egypt—1,200; Jordan—550; Iraq—370; and Syria—180.

certainly the Soviets would not encourage the Syrians to provoke Israel. The Jordanian regime would support Egypt on almost any move on a settlement issue, as would the Lebanese. The Syrians, however, might be an obstacle; at the very least, they would encourage the Palestinians to impede moves toward a settlement.

Implications for Negotiations

26. With respect to the prospect for movement toward a settlement, the most important change in the situation is likely to be increased Soviet and Egyptian confidence in the strength of their position and expectation that the US and Israel will be more forthcoming in diplomatic discussions. They are unlikely, however, to think it incumbent on them to make their own concessions toward a settlement. The Israelis may come to accept, of necessity, the expanded Soviet presence in Egypt even though, in their view, this represents a considerable military disadvantage. They may recognize, also, that this could cause the Egyptians increasingly to believe that they can ultimately prevail in the "war of attrition." It does not follow, however, that they will see in this situation any additional inducements to relax their terms for a settlement. In these circumstances, the Israelis are likely to prefer a situation of military and diplomatic stalemate in which they hold on to occupied territory to the alternative of a military solution or concessions to Egyptian terms for a settlement.

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