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The Status of Soviet Relations With  
Egypt and the Palestinians

Summary

Since their expulsion from Egypt last July, the Soviets have cautiously strengthened their interests and widened their contacts throughout the Middle East. Military deliveries to Syria, Iraq, and South Yemen have increased, and the Soviets have made a stronger effort to cultivate Sudan and the Maghreb states. The Russians have not yet replaced the military facilities they previously controlled in Egypt, however, and basic divergences between Soviet and Arab interests continue to limit the closeness of their relations.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Moscow's ties to Egypt and the Palestinians. The Soviets have tried but failed to convince the Palestinians to unify because it is more effective, to reject terrorism because it is counterproductive, or to discard their hopes of liquidating Israel because it is unrealistic. Meanwhile, Egyptian bitterness over repeated Soviet refusals to supply the type of military and diplomatic support it wants lingers on, as does the disenchantment in Moscow over the lack of gratitude exhibited by its number-one aid recipient. All of the parties involved, however, have an interest in preventing any further deterioration in relations. The Egyptians and Palestinians cannot get anywhere else the support Moscow is providing, and the Soviets have been able to capitalize on their role as champions of the Arab cause throughout the Middle East. This arrangement could last for some time.

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### Egypt

Moscow's pursuit of detente with the US and Cairo's expulsion of Soviet military advisers from Egypt have added to the mutual distrust that has permeated Soviet-Egyptian relations for several years. Both sides nevertheless have a stake in working together. For Moscow, Egypt remains the political center of gravity of the Arab world and the leading state in the confrontation with Israel. The Soviets cannot abandon the Sadat regime without damaging their relations throughout the Arab world. They have, however, set certain limits on their support--denial of weapons that might encourage the Egyptians to resume hostilities, for example--and Moscow has made clear its displeasure over Egyptian press criticism of the USSR.

The Egyptians have adjusted, somewhat grudgingly, to these guidelines. They have little choice if they want to establish a credible military posture against Israel. Egyptian efforts to purchase sophisticated arms from Western Europe have not been successful, and it is clear that Cairo still wants and needs Soviet political, economic, and military support. It is, in fact, receiving substantial amounts of military and economic assistance, although the level has fallen from the high point of two years ago. Moscow can also be counted on to support Egypt's position politically, at the UN and elsewhere.

Current Soviet military deliveries appear designed to maintain Cairo's arms inventories rather than to introduce new weapons systems. Sixty MIG-21s that had been operated by the Soviets in Egypt were turned over to the Egyptians following the expulsion. Since then, only seven MIG-21s, 15 SU-17 fighter bombers, and two helicopters have been delivered. Although the Soviet-manned SA-6 missile equipment defending the Aswan Dam was shipped back to the USSR following the Soviets' ouster, SA-6s for Egyptian units started arriving in Alexandria last September. Other identified cargos have included T-62 medium tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, vehicles, and support equipment.

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This outward cooperation between the two countries has not been matched by the restoration of mutual confidence. Following the expulsion, Sadat's standing with the Kremlin was near zero, and it is unlikely that the Soviets will ever put much faith in him again. Indeed, most signs indicate that the Soviets are becoming increasingly disenchanted with the Sadat government. Moscow may, in fact, be genuinely concerned that Egypt is, as one source put it, "sliding to the right." The Soviets were upset, for example, when Premier Sidqi--the one remaining pro-Soviet figure in the leadership--was dismissed in March. The student arrests and writers' purge also bothered the Soviets, who tend to interpret these events as moves to rid Egypt of pro-leftist sentiments. The possibility of Egypt's unity with Libya in September also makes Moscow uneasy. The Soviets despise Qadhafi--Gromyko recently compared him to Hitler--and recognize that their interests might be jeopardized if the merger takes place.

Dissatisfaction with the Soviets is increasing in Cairo. The Egyptians are particularly frustrated by the priority Moscow gives to improving relations with the US. The progress of US-Soviet trade negotiations, the suspension of the emigration tax, the coming Brezhnev visit, all have grated on Egyptian sensitivities. One Egyptian is reported to have asked a Soviet Embassy officer, "How can we expect the Soviets to support our point of view in the area when the Americans are feeding them?"

On the problem of Israel, the Egyptians regard the present stalemate as intolerable and more difficult to change with each passing day. Cairo wants a sponsor which will take decisive action--toward peace or war--that will recover Arab territory. The Soviets are not concerned about lost Arab lands and surely do not want to risk a confrontation with the US over this issue. Arab-Israeli tensions have helped the Soviets establish themselves in the Middle East, and the Soviets will not expend much diplomatic energy to release this tension unless they believe it will create new opportunities to extend their influence.

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It is difficult to see how a new round of Soviet-Egyptian talks could solve their differences. Sadat has called for a summit since the day he ousted the Russians, but Moscow has been unresponsive. It is now rumored that Premier Kosygin will visit Egypt and Syria in June or July in connection with the official opening of economic aid projects. If Kosygin does go to Egypt, he will certainly face some intensive questioning about Soviet intentions, and the results may reinforce mutual suspicions rather than contribute to an improvement in bilateral relations.

### Palestinians

Fedayeen activities are an important element in the Middle East equation that the Soviets can neither ignore nor control. Moscow cannot ignore the fedayeen because their goal--the return of displaced Palestinians to their homeland--enjoys considerable emotional support throughout the Arab world. Soviet influence with the Palestinian movement is minimal, however, because Moscow will not endorse the destruction of Israel or terrorist tactics.

The USSR is the primary source of arms for the fedayeen. Since 1969, Moscow--using Egypt, Syria, and Iraq as intermediaries--has supplied the fedayeen with rifles, machine guns, and bazooka-type rockets, in addition to military training for selected fedayeen officers. Fedayeen leader Yasir Arafat has made four trips to the USSR seeking heavier arms and Moscow's official recognition of the fedayeen as a national liberation movement. The Soviets continue to refuse his requests. Instead, the Soviets have demanded that the gaggle of assorted fedayeen organizations unify and concentrate more on political action if they want serious Soviet support.

Moscow's disapproval of terrorism is based not on moral scruples, but on the belief that such tactics are generally unproductive and can lead to unforeseen and often uncontrollable consequences. From the Soviet

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viewpoint, fedayeen terrorism carries the inherent risk of overheating the Middle East situation, which could in turn plunge Moscow into a confrontation it prefers to avoid.

The Soviets are not above stirring up the fedayeen against the West and particularly the US; there is some evidence they did so after the Israeli raid in Beirut in April. It would be uncharacteristic of Moscow to miss an opportunity to blame Arab misfortunes on the US and thus undermine the US role in the Middle East. The Soviets are careful not to push this too far, however, because it might jeopardize the nucleus of Brezhnev's foreign policy program--detente with the US.

Evidence indicates that the Soviets have restrained rather than encouraged fedayeen militancy at times of high tension. During the recent fighting between the Lebanese Government and the Palestinians, for example, the Soviets actively tried to limit the scope of the trouble. One source reports that Soviet Ambassador Azimov delivered a letter to Arafat from the Soviet leadership which advised the fedayeen not to seek a confrontation with Lebanon. The letter also pledged additional Soviet support to the fedayeen if the Lebanese attempted to crush them. This mixture of qualified support typifies the Soviet approach to the fedayeen.

In the future the Soviets are unlikely to cut off political or military support to the Palestinians, nor will they criticize the movement as a whole. Some of the most "progressive" Arabs in the Middle East are deeply involved in fedayeen activities, and the Soviets may still have some hope of shaping this revolutionary force into a more realistic mold. In the interim, Moscow appears reconciled to the limited influence it has with the fedayeen and will seek to ensure that no other foreign power--China or Libya, for example--comes to dominate the movement.

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