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USSR: Problems With Cairo and Damascus



1 Moscow's relations with two of its principal Arab clients—Egypt and Syria—are showing increasing signs of strain. In the case of Egypt, President Sadat's moves toward closer relations with conservative Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, and his cautious search for closer economic ties with the West have provoked Moscow's irritation. The Soviets reportedly have formally protested Egypt's new ties with "reactionary" Arab regimes, arguing that they are a setback for "progressive" forces in the area. Cairo is said to have responded testily that the matter was of no concern to Moscow. Soviet officials in Cairo have also openly voiced displeasure over attempts to increase the role of the private sector and attract Western capital.

2A The Egyptians, meanwhile, have continued to chide Moscow for inadequate military support and have been searching for Chinese and North Korean aid to supplement that of the Soviets. The ongoing US-Soviet dialogue and the high rate of Jewish emigration from the USSR to Israel remain sources of Egyptian unhappiness.

2 These differences were undoubtedly discussed in recent meetings between top Soviet Foreign Ministry officials and the Egyptian leadership, as well as in an exchange of letters between Brezhnev and Sadat. The differences are not likely to have been resolved, although both sides have too much invested to push matters to the point of a fundamental break. In his speech on the anniversary of Nasir's death last Friday, Sadat sought one way out of the dilemma. He avoided all mention of Soviet-Egyptian relations and explained policy changes in a manner he hoped would allay Soviet misgivings.

2 Soviet-Syrian relations have also been frayed in the wake of Syria's disastrous encounter with the Israeli Air Force on 13 September. Press reports alleging Syrian restrictions on the move-

ment of Soviet advisers and preparations to expel them from the country are of questionable accuracy, but the air battle has intensified Syrian military criticism of Soviet equipment and training. Syrian President Asad apparently brought this up in a heated discussion with the Soviet ambassador and later publicly acknowledged that Syria was "seeking better equipment to confront the enemy." This may have been an allusion to Syrian pressure on Moscow to supply MIG-23s.

2A The influx of Soviet advisers that has accompanied the substantial increase in military aid to Syria this year has inevitably led to friction between the Soviets and their Syrian hosts. The Syrians reportedly expelled five Soviet advisers in August. It is highly unlikely, however, that Damascus would substantially curtail the Soviet presence because the Syrians cannot yet effectively operate much of the newly arrived Soviet equipment, and the existing air defense system would suffer without Soviet advice.

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