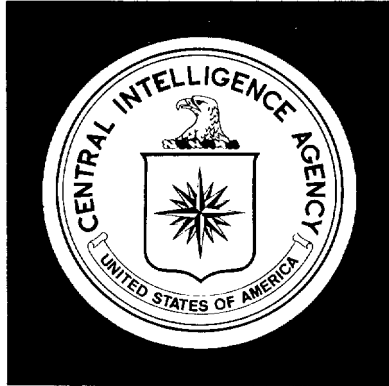


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Soviet Role in the Middle East

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Soviet Role in the Middle East

Central Intelligence Agency
Directorate of Intelligence

June 1977

Key Judgments

The Soviets' economic, military, and political position with the principal Arab states has eroded over the past five years, and shows no sign of early improvement. The low state of relations between the USSR and Egypt stands out as an important failure of Soviet foreign policy under General Secretary Brezhnev.

Moscow's relations with the radical Arab states—notably Iraq and Libya—have expanded significantly in recent years. This improvement has been based primarily on increasing sales of Soviet arms, and has not resulted in a commensurate increase in Soviet political influence among the Arab radicals.

The USSR has few official contacts and virtually no political influence with Israel. Occasional Soviet contacts with Israeli officials are intended primarily to intimidate the Palestinians and to show third parties that the Soviets play an essential role in Middle East diplomacy.

Substantial improvement in the Soviet position in the Middle East is not likely, at least until there is a fundamental change in the leadership of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iran, or Saudi Arabia. The Soviets probably will continue to make limited progress in strengthening their relations with Libya.

The Soviets' military presence in the Middle East has diminished considerably since 1973, but the Soviets retain the capability quickly to project additional military power into the area. This gives Moscow the potential directly to affect the military balance and the level of political tension in the region.

Soviet leaders want to reconvene the Geneva conference to demonstrate that the USSR plays a central role in Arab-Israeli negotiations. Moscow has neither the desire nor the ability, however, to force the Arabs or Israelis to make the political concessions that will be necessary to restart the conference.

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The USSR would not be capable—even by withholding or providing additional military equipment—of eliciting fundamental changes in the Arabs' stand on the basic issues of the Middle East conflict. Soviet policy will remain one of supporting positions already endorsed by the principal Arab states and the Palestinians.

Soviet influence in the Middle East is greatest during periods of tension and “no war-no peace.” In any negotiating forum the Soviets will attempt to avoid appearing obstructionist, but should not be expected to play an effective, positive role.

Soviet Role in the Middle East

Overview

The Soviet economic and military presence in the Arab states, built up since the mid-1950s, has been eroding since the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war. As a result, the Soviets' modest political influence has been diminishing also. Four principal factors have been responsible for this decline in the Soviet position in the area:

- Egyptian President Sadat's estrangement from the Soviets.
- The general Arab conviction that only the United States can elicit the Israeli concessions necessary for a negotiated settlement.
- Saudi Arabia's support and subsidy of anti-Soviet policies in the area.
- The Arabs' desire to import Western rather than Soviet technology and equipment.

The Soviets will not be able to use inducements such as increased economic assistance to arrest the decline of their position in the Middle East. Moscow has never been willing to provide financial assistance on the scale required by the Arab confrontation states. The oil-rich Arab states that have provided aid on such a scale have been strongly anti-Soviet; their financial support and the influence it has given them have speeded the decline in Soviet influence in the area. Jordan, for example, refused a Soviet offer of an air defense system when the Saudis agreed to purchase a US system, and Arab and Western aid eased the impact of Egypt's shift away from the Soviets.

Economic aid to the Arabs by the Soviets has in fact been dwarfed by aid from the Arab oil states, coupled with Western assistance. In 1975 Moscow provided only \$195 million of economic aid deliveries compared with a net economic aid flow to the area of \$4.6 billion.

The limited influence and presence Moscow now has in the Middle East is due almost entirely to its continuing supply of substantial military equipment to several Arab states—particularly Syria, Iraq, and Libya—and its significant capability to project military power into the area. These factors ensure Soviet retention of considerable potential to affect the military

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Soviet Economic Aid to Arab Countries, 1955-1976

	Million US \$	
	Commitments	Deliveries
Arab Countries	4,049	2,192
Algeria	716	288
Egypt	1,439	1,052
Iraq	704	363
Jordan	25	0
Morocco	98	46
Syria	768	324
North Yemen (Sana)	104	77
South Yemen (Aden)	113	22
Turisia	82	20

Soviet Arms Agreements and Deliveries, 1956-1976

	Million US \$	
	Agreements	Deliveries
Arab Countries	13,929	12,122
Algeria	845	495
Egypt	3,945	3,939
Iraq	3,771	2,691
Libya	1,325	1,119
Morocco	74	29
Syria	3,648	3,570
North Yemen (Sana)	114	95
South Yemen (Aden)	207	184

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balance in the Middle East and thus influence the level of regional tensions. Soviet clients, for example, have received some of the newest and most sophisticated equipment in the Soviet arsenal; about 24,000 of their nationals have gone to the USSR for advanced military training; and in 1976 almost 6,000 Soviet personnel were in eight Arab countries as military technicians and advisers.

Soviet military sales agreements with the Arab countries—primarily Egypt, Syria, and Iraq—have amounted to nearly \$14 billion during the past two decades. Soviet military deliveries went mostly to Syria and Iraq after 1972, when Egypt expelled Soviet personnel. In 1974 Libya emerged as a major client; its \$1.2 billion order surpassed all previous Soviet arms agreements. Soviet relations with Syria cooled in 1976, and arms deliveries slowed for a time, but deliveries now appear to be returning to normal levels.

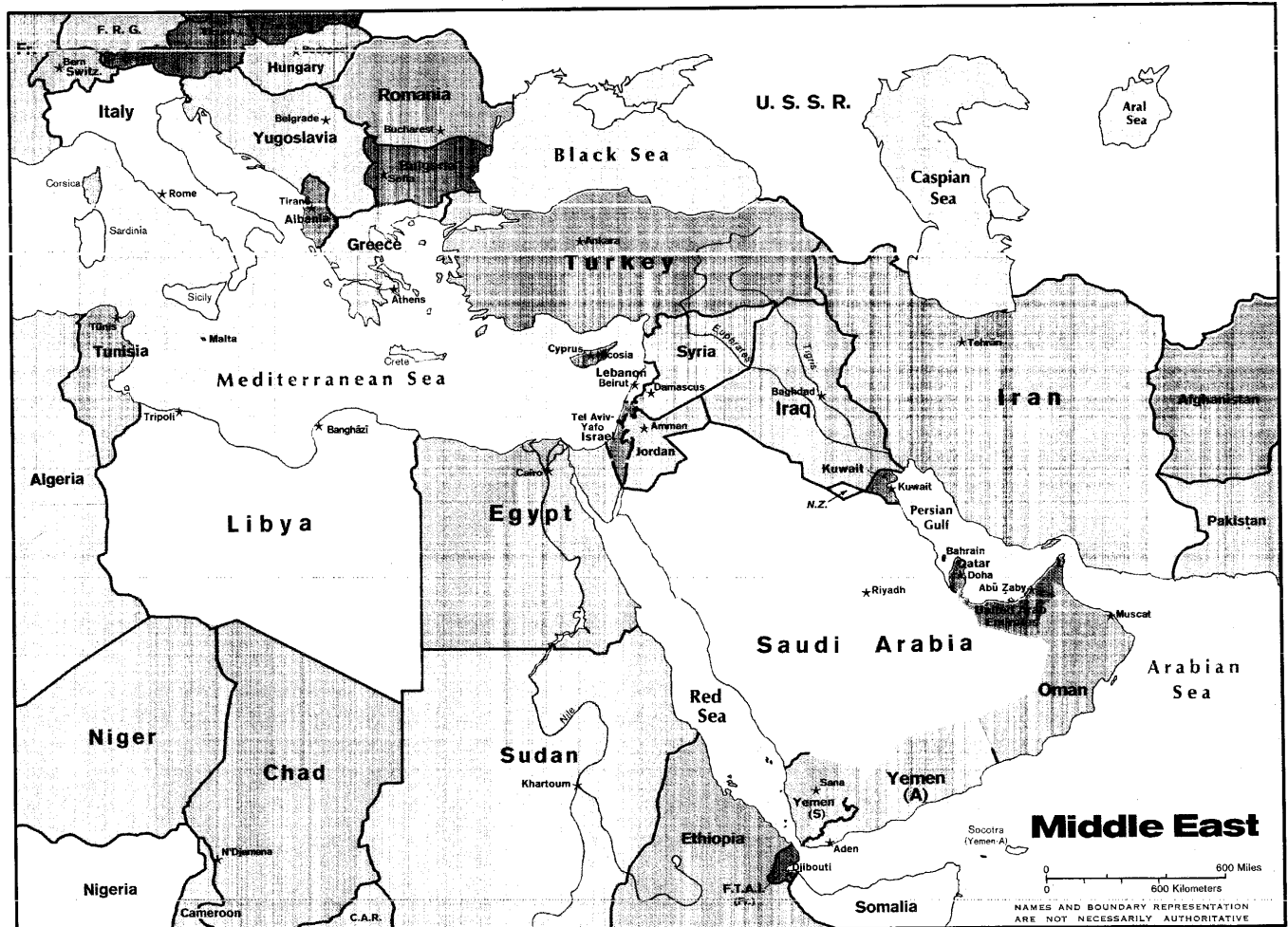
The Soviets' own military presence in the Middle East has been considerably reduced since the 1973 war, and continues to decline. Nevertheless, Soviet military forces—primarily naval and air—supplement military aid in the pursuit of Soviet policy objectives in the area. In the Mediterranean, the Soviets now normally maintain eight major surface combatants and ten submarines. Surface ships can be quickly reinforced from the Black Sea, however, and submarines sent from the Northern Fleet in about two weeks.

After years of exploiting tensions in the Middle East—both Arab-Israeli and intra-Arab—to build a sizable military and economic presence in the area, the Soviets have seen their position wither steadily since Sadat's expulsion of Soviet military advisers. This decline was reinforced, ironically, by the Arabs' first political victory over Israel through force of arms in October 1973. The subsequent period of relative peace and stability in the region has weakened the Soviet position further. It is against this evident disadvantage to the USSR of peace and stability that the current Soviet role in the Middle East and Moscow's attitude toward peace negotiations must be measured.

The Confrontation States

Egypt

After nearly 25 years of Soviet efforts to build political influence and a military-economic presence in Egypt, the present low state of relations between the USSR and Egypt stands out as one of the most significant failures in Soviet foreign policy during the Brezhnev leadership. At the height of the relationship, from the June 1967 Middle East war to the October 1973 war, the Soviets at one time had more than 13,500 military advisers in Egypt, for a short while controlled all Egyptian air defenses east



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of Cairo, operated nearly unrestrained from naval bases at Mersa Matruh and Alexandria, conducted reconnaissance flights over the Mediterranean, and were Egypt's foremost international protector and patron.

This Soviet position was possible primarily because of Egypt's lack of alternative sources of political, economic, and especially military support, as well as shared foreign policy interests deriving from shared opposition to colonialism and to Western support for Israel. There was never significant ideological sympathy or support for Soviet Communism in Egypt, though the Soviets worked hard to make Nasir's Arab Socialism a favored stepchild of Marxism-Leninism.

Egypt's current estrangement from the USSR is fueled by personal animosity and feelings of betrayal on both sides. Sadat's anti-Soviet stand is virtually an obsession; he is convinced that Moscow was out to control, not assist, Egypt. Sadat is not at all willing to listen to the Soviets, and would resist the reestablishment of any relationship that approached the client-patron ties existing before his expulsion of Soviet advisers in 1972.

The souring of bilateral political relations has been manifested in other aspects of Soviet-Egyptian ties. Soviet economic aid, for example, never more than \$90 million a year, has been eclipsed in recent years by Western and conservative Arab aid. While the Soviets are still providing assistance in a variety of fields, most Soviet economic projects—including the steel industry, an aluminum plant, the Aswan Dam, and oil prospecting and irrigation projects—have not lived up to Egyptian expectations. Only the Soviet sponsored ship-building industry appears to be an efficient addition to Egyptian economic assets.

Beginning in 1967 a consortium of Arab states began covering Egypt's loss of exchange earnings from the Suez Canal with annual cash subsidies (Khartoum payments) totaling about \$200 million. In addition *ad hoc* Arab aid has exceeded \$6 billion since 1967, and the Western nations have provided over \$1 billion in concessional financing since 1973. Even Cairo's trade with Moscow could be redirected toward the West—the items Egypt exports could be sold in the West for enough hard currency to pay for substitutes for Russian exports.

Cairo is seeking Western foreign investment as a substitute for official aid. Thus far, however, Egypt has received only limited outside investment, mainly for the oil industry and tourism. Improvement in these areas, coupled with rising receipts from Suez Canal traffic, holds the key to economic progress in the 1980s.



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Sadat's search for an alternative arms supply source has enjoyed little success, and he is under pressure from the Egyptian military establishment to reach some accord with Moscow for a resumption of substantial equipment deliveries. Nevertheless, Sadat is much influenced by the failure of the USSR to replace all of Egypt's 1973 war losses, the slowdown in arms deliveries following the expulsion of Soviet advisers, and his own political estrangement from the USSR. He can be expected to resist pressures from his military advisers to patch up the relationship in order to obtain arms, although he might be persuaded to accept enough of an improvement in relations to permit a limited increase in military assistance. Sadat's position will be strengthened by the important influence of Saudi Arabia, on which he now relies heavily for financing most Egyptian military purchases in the West.

The likelihood of a significant increase in Soviet military aid to Egypt in the near term is low from the Soviet standpoint. Large-scale deliveries probably would not be forthcoming unless the Soviets were convinced that they had regained solid political footing in Egypt. Even then, Moscow probably would only gradually increase the flow of aid. Such Soviet support would be unlikely to reach a level that it would have a significant effect within the next two years. Gradually increased military assistance would only slow the decline of Egyptian capabilities; Egyptian arms requirements now are so large, and growing, that only shipments on a massive scale would reverse the current trend of declining military capabilities.

If Sadat were overthrown, both his successor and the Soviets would be likely to make a modest effort to reduce the strains in Egyptian-Soviet relations. Soviet military assistance would be likely to increase to at least a limited degree, thus presenting the Soviets with a new opportunity to exercise minimal leverage over Egypt. But any regime in Egypt would want to move slowly in dealing with the Soviets; Egyptian domestic politics, Egypt's ties to the US, and the importance of Saudi assistance would all pose constraints.

The Soviets, for their part, would not easily be wooed. They want a bilateral relationship that will assure them that Egyptian policy meshes with basic Soviet foreign policy objectives, and that it will continue to do so. It is not in Soviet interest to resume substantial arms deliveries—thus propping up whoever is running Egypt—without first receiving basic concessions of long-term military and political importance.

Syria

Soviet relations with Syria have been improving recently, but still have not recovered from a year of serious strains. The Soviets remain concerned that Syria's current rapprochement with Egypt will lead to its participation in negotiations for a Middle East settlement without the Soviets. In addition, strains persist as a result of Soviet support for the Palestinians and leftists in the Lebanese civil war and Soviet disapproval of the Syrian military intervention in Lebanon. The Syrians threatened in early 1977 to expel the Soviets from the port of Tartus; for some time the Syrians have been reducing the size of the Soviet military mission in Syria and looking for additional sources of military equipment.

The Soviet economic aid program in Syria is quite small, and to date has not had much impact on the economy. Only about \$35 million worth of assistance was delivered in 1975. The centerpiece of the Soviet program is the \$2 billion Euphrates dam complex, for which Moscow has already provided \$185 million in credits. In addition, the Soviets initially financed all oil production in Syria. Moscow recently has signaled a continuing interest in Syria, promising Damascus \$300 million of additional economic assistance, mostly for ongoing projects, to be paid over an extended period. Some difficulties persist in the relationship, however, as the Syrians are dissatisfied with Soviet technology, and with Moscow's demands for repayment of some loans in hard currency.

Other countries—both East European and West European—are obtaining most of the new contracts for light industry in Syria, and Romania has supplanted Soviet assistance in the oil sector. A swing to the West has been facilitated by cash aid from wealthy Arab states. Moreover, Western firms are receiving contracts to complete work on some Soviet projects, including the Euphrates dam complex.

The Soviet military presence in Syria in mid-1977 is estimated to consist of 1,500 to 2,000 advisers and technicians—down from 3,000 in 1973—plus a limited naval presence. Syria appears to be proceeding with plans to reduce substantially the number of Soviet advisers over the next year or so, although the technicians are likely to remain indefinitely. The Soviet naval presence in Syria consists of a repair ship and a few support ships based at Tartus. Soviet combatants, including cruisers and attack submarines, call at the port occasionally, and the repair ship is generally used to service the submarines.

Syria remains heavily dependent on Soviet military hardware, however, and will take care not to allow relations with the Soviets to deteriorate to

the point that arms supplies are cut off. During the second half of 1976 the Soviets delayed the flow of arms and spare parts due Syria under previous contracts to protest Syrian involvement in Lebanon. Arms shipments due under those agreements apparently were resumed at the time of Syrian President Asad's visit to Moscow in early 1977.

A further reduction in Soviet military aid would result in a continued decline, relative to Israel and Iraq, in Syrian military capabilities, already weakened because of Damascus' military involvement in Lebanon. Such a reduction would accelerate Syrian efforts to obtain supplies from other sources, and especially efforts to increase Syrian acquisition of Western technology. Syria already is obtaining some military supplies and equipment from Western sources, particularly France, as well as from some East European countries. Acquisition of substantial quantities of Western arms, however, will be a slow and expensive process for the Syrians, and is not likely to offer an acceptable short term alternative to Soviet supply. The Syrians do not want to reduce rapidly or sever their military relationship with the Soviets in the manner of Egypt.

A Soviet decision to increase marginally its military aid to Syria would help slow the decline in Syria's military posture relative to Israel and Iraq, and would strengthen Syria's position in Lebanon. Such a marginal increase, however, would not result in any significant improvement in Syria's military capabilities. Both Israel and Iraq already are receiving substantially more military equipment than Syria, and the trend is likely to continue over the near term.

The Soviets and Syrians have a continuing interest in maintaining at least a facade of good relations. The Soviets want to avoid a further obvious setback in the region, and the Syrians want to preserve their major arms source and retain a military option should current peace initiatives fail. The Syrians will take care to avoid the sort of definitive breach the Egyptians engineered, and President Asad almost certainly reasons—with justification—that the Soviets will not push him too far. Asad will seek to minimize his differences with the Soviets, and will accommodate them on policy matters only when their position coincides with his own plans and preferences.

Israel

The USSR has few official contacts and virtually no political influence with Israel. Nevertheless, in an attempt to intimidate leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization and to show third parties that the Soviets play an

essential role in Middle East diplomacy, the Soviets have hinted over the last several weeks that they are interested in restoring diplomatic relations with Israel, which were severed in 1967. Official Soviet spokesmen have recently emphasized the Soviet position backing Israel's right to exist, and have been less critical of Israel generally. In addition, a Soviet trade organization recently solicited inquiries on the sale of printing equipment from the Israeli Chamber of Commerce, and the first Soviet delegation to attend a major scientific conference in Israel since 1967 arrived in Tel Aviv this month. Soviet media criticized the results of the recent Israeli election but the commentary was less negative than might have been expected.

Moscow is aware that its attempt to carve out a more active role in the Middle East by flirting with Israel carries some risks. Reestablished ties with Israel might enable the Israelis to exploit Arab suspicions of Soviet motives, alienate friendly Arab states and the Palestinians, and possibly create additional problems in Moscow's treatment of Jewish dissidents. These factors and the absence of diplomatic progress between Israel and the Arab states suggest that Moscow will move very cautiously toward reestablishing ties with Israel. Moreover, the prospect of dealing with a government headed by the more rigid Menahem Begin will probably influence the Soviets to move more slowly than they would have done if a Labor government had been returned to power. Over the last several years there have been similar hints that Moscow was interested in reestablishing ties with Israel, but they have never been followed up.

Jordan

The Soviets have little leverage with Jordan and little incentive to seek closer links. Moscow realizes that King Husayn is solidly in the moderate, pro-US camp and heavily dependent on Saudi and US financial assistance. King Husayn did threaten to turn to the Soviets for arms aid last year when problems arose over financing a US Hawk air defense system for Jordan, and in fact received a Soviet offer for an alternative air defense system. But the Jordanians quickly dropped the Soviet option when the Hawk financing problem was resolved.

Soviet economic aid and trade with Jordan is insignificant, although Husayn did accept Soviet technicians to study petroleum development and electrification in December 1976. With Khartoum and Rabat subsidies, substantial US assistance, and a booming economy, Jordan has no economic reason to turn to the Soviets.

The Radical States and the Palestinians

Iraq

In an effort to compensate for their losses elsewhere, the Soviets have put increasing stock in their relations with the more radical Arab states,

especially Iraq and Libya. Moscow has provided economic assistance to Iraq in the form of concessionary project loans, and in May 1976 signed a pact that will triple economic assistance in the next five years compared with the last five years. The Soviets are heavily involved in power and irrigation projects—\$1 billion in commercial contracts were signed in December—and Soviet technicians have been helping in the oil fields for many years. The Soviets have benefited from their aid agreements with Iraq; they are repaid in oil which may be resold for hard currency.

As in other Arab countries there has been some dissatisfaction in Iraq with Soviet technology and there have been clear signals that Western equipment is preferred. The Iraqis are requiring the Soviets to use some Western equipment in development projects such as petroleum exploration and oil field development. In some new exploration, petrochemicals, and light industry projects, Western technology is being used to the exclusion of Soviet equipment.

Iraq is in the midst of a major military buildup

Soviet military deliveries rose last year to a two-year high of \$475 million. Recent Iraqi military purchases from the West and other attempts to diversify arms suppliers helped prompt this Soviet willingness to provide more military equipment. Baghdad's military remains largely dependent on Moscow, and continued Soviet access to Iraqi crude oil in payment for military goods is an important compensation for Moscow. There are about 1,000 Soviets advising the Iraqi armed forces.

In return for this economic and military assistance, the Soviets have concluded a Friendship Treaty with Iraq and have gained limited access to port facilities. In recent years, Iraq, with its new oil wealth, has been increasingly able to pay cash for its growing quantities of arms imports—an advantage for the Soviets who need hard currency. At the same time, bilateral relations have frequently been strained by Soviet pressures for increased Communist participation in the Iraqi government, by Iraqi friction with Syria, and by differences over the desirability of a Middle East settlement. The visit of Iraqi leader Saddam Husayn to Moscow in January 1977 was undertaken at Soviet initiative and was probably designed to demonstrate the continued strength of the Soviet presence in the Middle East. This is suggested by the apparent efforts to minimize differences. The communique issued at the end of the visit praised the Iraqi Baath Party—indicating that the Soviets are currently prepared to overlook Iraq's harsh treatment of the Communist Party—and skimmed over the differences between the two nations with respect to a Middle East settlement.

Libya

The current Soviet-Libyan relationship is based on limited mutual interests. Libya, also isolated in the Arab world, has wanted to expand its influence and prestige; the Soviets have been anxious to gain clients to offset losses in Egypt. Both Libya and the USSR want to undermine traditionalist regimes throughout the region, and Libya values its ability to purchase large amounts of military equipment from the USSR, which wants hard currency.

Soviet arms—sold on a cash basis—now provide the bulk of Libya's military equipment; over the past three years deliveries have totaled over \$1 billion. Military deliveries in 1976 were worth about \$550 million. Much of the equipment already purchased is not being used by the untrained Libyans. Until recently Libya had no significant economic relations with the USSR and trade was almost non-existent. In December 1976, however, a potentially important Libyan-Soviet economic agreement was signed providing for Soviet construction in Libya of an atomic power station, a desalinization plant, and other industrial plants. In addition, the Soviets are to help develop Libyan gas reserves. Details have not yet been worked out and no contracts have been signed.

Serious difficulties remain in the Soviet-Libyan relationship, despite the increasingly close ties between the two states. Qadhafi is anti-Communist, and the Soviets are concerned by his frequently unpredictable behavior. The two nations also disagree on the proper solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Libyans would like active Soviet backing in their dispute with Egypt. Qadhafi visited Moscow for the first time in December 1976. While not trouble free, his visit provided a demonstration that a new relationship has developed between the two regimes in the last three years. The two sides agreed to disagree about a Middle East solution, and economic and military agreements reportedly were reached. Although the Soviet desire for access to port and airfield facilities in Libya has not been fulfilled as yet, the Soviets are expanding their military presence in the country as experts arrive to service new equipment. As in the case of Iraq, the Soviet relationship and presence in Libya serves to demonstrate a continuing Soviet influence in the region in general.

The Palestinians

The Soviets in recent years have provided the Palestinians propaganda support and arms—primarily through the Syrian intermediary. Soviet support has not been sufficient to protect the Palestinians' security interests in Lebanon or to win them diplomatic gains from the US or Israel, however. As a result, the Soviets have little effective influence over the Palestinians, and the latter have little sense of gratitude or need to please Moscow. Despite the

limited successes of Arafat's visit to Moscow in early 1977—he was received publicly by Brezhnev for the first time—the Palestinians still will not be receptive to Soviet pressure that they see as threatening their own interests.

The Conservative Gulf States

Saudi Arabia, with Egypt, is one of the Soviets' most powerful and effective opponents in the Middle East. Saudi subsidies and support have enabled Egypt to move away from the USSR, and have allowed Syria to maintain carefully limited ties. Saudi mediation produced the Egyptian-Syrian rapprochement of late 1976, and Saudi money has great appeal to those poor nations of the region, especially the Yemens, which have been vulnerable to Soviet offers.

The Soviets have made attempts to overcome Saudi hostility, but never with any success. Soon after King Faysal's death it became apparent that King Khalid would continue Faysal's strong anti-Communist policies, and any hopes the Soviets may have had of taking advantage of the transition were disappointed.

The Soviets have had virtually no success in efforts to either court or subvert the other traditionalist oil-rich Arab states. Soviet relations with Kuwait have improved marginally following Kuwait's recent decision to purchase significant quantities of military equipment from the USSR, but even this gain has been largely offset by Saudi Arabia's increasingly active foreign policy. The Soviets have little hope of changing this situation given the anti-Communist sentiment prevalent in the traditionalist states and the Soviets' own economic disadvantage. Compared with the West, they have little to offer these wealthy states; the Soviets are unable to pay hard currency for the area's oil, and, with the exception of military arms, they have little in the way of technology and equipment that these states want to buy. Short of radical internal political changes in these nations, Soviet prospects are poor.

During the mid-1960s, the Soviets shifted their policy toward Iran, stressing rapprochement rather than belligerence. The new approach paid off as economic relations developed between the two nations and diplomatic contacts became more cordial. The gradual improvement appears to have peaked in the early 1970s, however, and since late 1973 political relations have deteriorated. Economic relations have remained significant, however, and Iran recently has increased its purchases of military equipment from the USSR. Reasons for the decline in political relations include Iran's involvement in Oman, its rapid military buildup, and what the Soviets perceive as Iran's intention to serve as policeman of the Gulf. In addition,

with its new wealth, Iran has been able to pursue its own economic objectives aggressively and has proved a tough economic negotiator. Soviet displeasure has been communicated to the Iranians in various ways, including sharply critical Soviet propaganda and Brezhnev's snub of Iran in his report to the Soviet Party Congress in 1976—the first time since Lenin that Iran had not been mentioned in such a report. Iran has shown no inclination to change its policies as a result of Soviet ressure.

Middle East Peace Negotiations

The decline in Soviet prestige and influence in the Middle East was graphically demonstrated by virtual Soviet exclusion from the interim Middle East accords. In order to prevent another such episode, the Soviets are pushing hard for an early resumption of the Middle East peace conference in Geneva, of which they are co-chairman with the US, and are warning of the consequences of proceeding without them.

The Soviets have used several methods to indicate that they must be included in the negotiating process. They have repeatedly emphasized their conviction that step-by-step diplomacy is no longer feasible, and that comprehensive talks at Geneva represent the only chance of success. They have tried to demonstrate their own vital role as a leader in negotiations by taking superficially positive diplomatic positions. Brezhnev has spoken of Israel's right to independence and a secure existence, and has suggested that the USSR will convince the Palestinians that recognition of Israel is necessary. While these positions appear helpful, the Soviets have in fact been careful not to get out in front of the moderate Arab states, and have made it clear that it is up to the Arabs to formulate their own positions.

While trying to steer negotiations to Geneva, the Soviets have also made an effort to suggest that serious consequences would result from their exclusion from peace talks. Their most open signal was their statement of December 1976 that they would not pay their 1975-1976 assessment for support of the United Nations emergency forces, specifically those forces designated to police the second Sinai disengagement accord. The Soviets asserted that the talks had been conducted outside the Geneva framework, that they had not been involved, and that they therefore did not bear any responsibility for supporting the accords. Clearly, the message being delivered was that the USSR does not intend to recognize or support any such agreements in the future. In addition, Soviet efforts to improve relations in the Arab world with such radical, anti-settlement forces as Libya and Iraq serve as a reminder that the USSR is in a position to assist those who oppose and would like to disrupt negotiations.

Moscow is inclined to facilitate peace negotiations so long as negotiations occur in the Geneva context. The Soviets might attempt to

obstruct peace negotiations occurring outside that context, but they have little ability to do so. They will continue to push for talks at Geneva and to appear cooperative about the substance and framework of such talks. However, they will remain generally in step with the confrontation states on actual negotiating points and will not press the Arabs to take conciliatory positions. The Soviets are not in a position to produce Arab concessions even if they wanted to; they do not want to be labeled capitulationist by their more radical Arab clients, and they stand to gain little from a settlement in the area.

Although the Soviets have little interest in ending the Middle East conflict, they do not want to appear obstructionist, and would prefer to have the onus for a failure of peace talks fall on Israel and the US. The Soviets are therefore unlikely to urge the Arabs to take uncompromising positions. In addition, they must be aware that their influence with the leaders of the major Arab confrontation states is quite limited and that pressure by Moscow in any direction would have very little effect. Finally, the Soviets will not want to appear—to the Arabs or the rest of the world—to be sabotaging the very process in which they are anxious to participate.

Over the long term the Soviets may well anticipate and hope that if a Geneva conference does convene, the prospects for a peace settlement will still be highly questionable and that the failure of such talks would work to Soviet advantage. They probably reason that the United States could be made to bear the principal onus for failing to deliver to the Geneva talks Israel flexible enough to meet minimum Arab demands. Moscow probably calculates that, in this case, US prestige throughout the Arab world would decline and that opportunities for an improvement in the weak Soviet position in the region would increase.

Prospects

The Soviet position in the Middle East has been in almost steady decline for five years. Owing to President Sadat's distrust, the Saudi government's opposition, and the Arab's conviction that only the US can broker a Middle East settlement, the Soviets have been expelled from Egypt, excluded from the interim peace agreements, proved impotent in the Lebanon crisis, shown unable to prevent an Egyptian-Syrian rapprochement, and prevented from making significant headway anywhere in the region.

This has left the Soviets all the more determined not to be excluded from the next phase of Middle East negotiations. Their participation is vitally important as a symbol to themselves and to others of their continuing legitimate role in the Middle East. And yet even in this arena the weakness of the overall Soviet position is apparent. While the Soviets seek convocation

of the negotiations at Geneva and may urge modest concessions on the Arabs to make such a meeting possible, the Soviets will have very little influence over Arab positions before or during negotiations. To avoid further antagonizing the Arabs and in recognition of their lack of clout, the Soviets can be expected to put no pressure on the Arabs for substantive concessions in Geneva or any other negotiating forum.

Because relative peace and stability do not work to the Soviets' advantage in the Middle East—as has been evident since October 1973—the Soviets probably believe that convocation and subsequent failure of negotiations would serve their interests, perhaps most of all by discrediting the US and moderate Arab leaders. Soviet influence and presence have grown best in the region during periods of tension and “no war-no peace.” There is every reason to believe this is still the Soviets' preferred option. The Soviets should not be expected to play a positive role once peace negotiations are underway, either at Geneva or elsewhere.

Unsettled regional conditions offer the best prospect for halting erosion of the Soviet position and regaining for Moscow what has been lost. Only removal of the generally well-entrenched leaders of the principal Middle East states—Sadat of Egypt, Asad of Syria, Husayn of Jordan, the royal family in Saudi Arabia, and the Shah in Iran—offers the Soviets any chance of significant changes in regional policies that have been so harmful to Soviet interests.

In the near term the Soviets can be expected to:

- Continue seeking convocation of the Geneva conference but, once there, to exercise virtually no positive influence for peace (though they will avoid open sabotage);
- Try to block any unilateral US effort to arrange further partial settlements or a comprehensive settlement;
- Await and encourage domestic unrest and instability in all the principal Arab states and Iran, knowing that there can be no successful effort to regain lost ground while the present Arab leaders and the Shah remain in power.

The Middle East will remain a major focus of Soviet military activities. Moscow will continue its efforts to increase its military influence—primarily in Iraq, Libya, and Algeria, but also in Syria—with a view to improving once again its access to naval facilities in the Mediterranean Sea and Persian Gulf. In this area, too, prospects for Soviet success are dim without major political changes in the Arab countries.

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