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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

# Intelligence Memorandum

*Soviet Military Involvement in Egypt*

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
28 April 1972

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Soviet Military Involvement in Egypt

Since the end of World War II there have been two main threads to the Soviet interest in the Middle East. First, the Soviets have sought to undermine US and Western influence in the area, exploiting differences between the Arab countries and the US over US support for Israel.

Second, the Soviets have sought to overcome the military superiority enjoyed by the US and NATO fleets in the Mediterranean. To this end, they have established there a powerful naval force to aid in the strategic defense of the USSR and to protect their interests in the Middle East. They may hope eventually to bar US forces from the area.

The Soviet arms supply to the Egyptians began in 1955 as part of the Soviet effort to gain a foothold in the Middle East. The reluctance of Western powers to meet Egypt's requirements for military hardware initially gave the Soviets an opportunity to drive a wedge between the two at little cost and with virtually no risk. Anti-Western sentiment in the Arab lands, together with US public sympathy and private financial support for Israel, made the Soviet objective of dividing the US and the Arabs easier to realize. In all this, however, the Soviet gains were political--there was no direct military benefit for the USSR.

*Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Strategic Research and coordinated within the Directorate of Intelligence.*

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Since the 1967 war, this has changed. The outcome of that war and US arms aid to Israel placed the US and the USSR on opposite sides of the issue--a result entirely consistent with Soviet aims and one which the Soviets use effectively in their propaganda with the Arabs. The Soviet Mediterranean naval squadron has grown substantially, and the Soviets have established in Egypt a naval aviation unit, the first ever based outside the USSR.

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These Soviet-manned naval aircraft are directed primarily against the US and NATO fleets in the Mediterranean and make a significant contribution to Soviet military capabilities in the area.

At the end of 1969, Israeli air strikes had Nasir's government reeling. The Egyptian air defense system had collapsed, and the political structure was seriously strained. To save the situation, the Soviets expanded the scale and scope of their assistance by rushing massive quantities of advanced SAM equipment into Egypt accompanied by thousands of their own personnel to operate it. Moreover, the Soviets introduced their own fighter units to provide further protection. Their main aim was to save a client regime in which they had a large investment of resources and prestige. But the nature of the Soviet involvement in, and commitment to, Egypt was transformed in the process.

As a result, the motives for the USSR's presence in Egypt are now a complex mixture of support to Egypt, protection of the Soviet investment and prestige, and maintenance of a base of operations directed against Western fleets in the Mediterranean.

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Arms Supplies

The Soviet supply of arms for Egypt has passed through several distinct stages. Even before the 1967 war ended, the Soviets attempted to replace the equipment lost to the Israelis. This initial supply effort took less than six months to replace most of Egypt's aircraft losses. Thereafter, the Soviets began a more deliberate program of expanding and modernizing the Egyptian forces, apparently to enhance their capabilities in anticipation of renewed large-scale fighting. During 1968 the level of shipments was lower than in the last half of 1967 and the Egyptian forces were busily attempting to assimilate newly delivered equipment.

Developments Since 1969

In early 1969 President Nasir declared a war of attrition against Israeli occupation of the Sinai. By the middle of the year, artillery duels had become intense and continuous. To counter Egypt's numerical superiority in artillery, the Israelis began in July to use their air force in raids on the Egyptian side of the Suez Canal. In succeeding months the toll of Egyptian casualties and equipment losses exacted by Israeli aircraft mounted steadily. By the end of the year, Egypt's air defenses had been virtually destroyed in some areas and were in a state of collapse generally.

The beginning of 1970 saw the Israelis launch their "deep penetration" raids--a series of air attacks lasting from early January through March and conducted in the vicinity of Egypt's major population centers. In late January Nasir went to Moscow where he finally prevailed upon the Soviets to provide Egypt with an effective air defense.

Within a few weeks the Soviets had begun to respond by shipping SA-3 equipment to Egypt. By mid-March the first SA-3 units were emplaced, manned, and

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ready, and by mid-summer about 45 firing units with anti-aircraft artillery support were fully deployed. Some 60 MIG-21s for Soviet use also were sent to Egypt, and by April pilots of the newly formed Soviet fighter squadrons were familiarizing themselves with the area by flying defensive patrols from three Egyptian airfields. Clearly the Soviets had decided to intervene directly to preserve Nasir's regime and protect their own investment.

In this the Soviets succeeded. The Israelis halted their deep penetration raids and confined their air activity to the area near the canal. The Soviets and Egyptians, however, apparently determined to bar the Israelis from all Egyptian air space west of the canal. In the period from early May until September--even after the ceasefire agreement became effective on 7 August 1970--the Soviets steadily moved their improved SAM protective umbrella closer to the canal. Had the ceasefire not been achieved, there is every reason to suppose that the Soviets would have taken a heavy toll of Israeli aircraft. As it was, six Phantoms were lost and a number of other aircraft were damaged between early June and the ceasefire agreement. The Soviets and Israelis clashed directly in the air only once--at the end of July 1970--and that resulted in the loss of four Soviet MIG-21s and no losses for the Israelis.

Although fighting ended with the August ceasefire, Soviet arms shipments continued at a high level throughout the remainder of 1970 and into early 1971. Most of these arms probably were intended to replace losses suffered earlier that year. In this period, for example, the Soviets sent 115 jet fighters to the Egyptian air force, just about enough to replace combat losses.

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Since mid-1971 the pace of shipments has fallen off considerably. The Soviets have provided about all the equipment that the Egyptians can absorb at present. The reduced flow does not, therefore, indicate a decrease in the Soviet commitment to maintain Egypt's forces at a high level and to modernize Egypt's armed forces generally. Some new equipment probably is being delivered, but a significant part of the shipments is probably made up of spare parts and supplies needed to support the enlarged and better-equipped Egyptian forces.

### The Quality Gap

In trying to cope with Egypt's combat losses and to build up the strength of the Egyptian forces, the Soviets are faced with a significant qualitative difference between their ally and the Israelis. Even though the equipment the Soviets have given the Egyptians is generally as good technologically as that available to the Israelis, the technical skills and motivation of the Israelis greatly exceed those of the Egyptians. As a striking example of the general disparity, 30 Egyptian aircraft were lost in air-to-air combat between early 1969 and the August 1970 ceasefire for each one lost by the Israelis.

Another area of disparity is domestic arms production. Egypt has tried and failed to produce complicated weapons such as jet fighters and short-range ballistic missiles. Egypt's arms production capacity is limited to small arms, medium-range mortars, and ammunition up to medium artillery calibers. Virtually all other weapons must be imported.

Israel, however, is currently assembling Mirage aircraft from parts purchased in France, is developing a locally-designed tank, has produced a successful antiship missile, and has thriving electronics and other technical industries. The Egyptians are disturbed by the US-Israeli arms production agreement concluded late in 1971, not so much because advanced

technology was involved, but because they do not now have the capability to match Israel's arms production capacity, even without US help. The Egyptians also are deeply concerned about Israel's potential for producing surface-to-surface missiles and nuclear weapons.

### Strains

Egypt's lack of a large industrial base and the technological backwardness of most of its population cause a good deal of the friction between Cairo and Moscow. The Egyptians blame the Soviet equipment for all the difficulties they have with it rather than admit that perhaps they are incompetent in using or maintaining it. The fact that the equipment often is deficient intensifies the friction.

These problems only compound the inevitable strains inherent in any patron-client relationship. The Egyptians recognize the necessity for Soviet help. Soviet support for Egypt's plans to reconquer the Sinai has in fact been less than total, which only reinforces the Egyptians in their opinion that the Soviets use their control over the supply of arms and spare parts as a choke rein on the Egyptian armed forces.

Because the Egyptian leadership has adopted a warlike stance, every visit of a high-level delegation between the USSR and Egypt includes an Egyptian plea for more arms or more advanced types. The Soviets have difficulty in meeting these demands because, in fact, there is little in the Soviet arsenal that might be appropriate to the type of conflict that exists in the Middle East.

The few types of major hardware items the Soviets have not yet introduced into Egypt are unsuited to the current conflict (nuclear weapons or advanced ballistic missiles, for example) or are beyond the present capacity of the Egyptian forces (supersonic bombers or the newest

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Soviet fighters). In any case, it would require at least several years of training before the Egyptians could take effective control of these types of equipment. The remaining possibilities (a new model tank or armored personnel carrier, for example) do not include equipment that is significantly better than that the Egyptians already have received and not yet mastered.

Despite all of these frictions, the Egyptians are not likely to sever or even significantly reduce their relationship with the Soviets. In the end, the Egyptians realize full well that they could not maintain even the facade of a military threat to Israel without Soviet assistance.

The Soviets Build for Themselves

The relationship between the Soviets and the Egyptians is founded on Egypt's reliance on the USSR for military hardware and a large investment of Soviet prestige in Egypt's position. It is on this basis that the Soviets have created a military position for themselves in Egypt and over the Mediterranean. To help maintain that position the USSR currently has about 13,000 to 14,000 combat personnel in Egypt.

The first group of Soviet TU-16 medium bombers to conduct reconnaissance of ships at sea was sent early in 1968 from the USSR to Cairo West airfield. In the four years since, the naval aviation unit in Egypt has been expanded to a total of 36 aircraft assigned to ASW, ECM, and air-to-surface missile strike roles. Normally about six of these aircraft are in the USSR for maintenance--a reserve which enables the Soviets to maintain a constant number of ASW and ASM aircraft on station.

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Prior to the 1967 war, the Soviets had sent to Egypt several TU-16s capable of carrying the obsolete AS-1 Kennel air-to-surface missile. All of those aircraft were destroyed in the war. The Egyptians have asked that an ASM capability be restored, but the Soviets have not yet done so. The Soviets may ultimately acquiesce, or they may refuse to give the Egyptians a further capability to take the offensive against Israel.

In either case, the Soviets would be reluctant to give up a significant military capability of their own. They almost certainly will seek to maintain their recently established ASM capability, regardless of any other developments in their relationship with Egypt. If the Soviets did agree to restore ASMs to Egypt, they probably would maintain some control over use of the missiles to minimize the risk of a unilateral Egyptian use of ASMs against the Israelis or even US naval forces, which would pose the danger of further escalation.