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SOVIET ACTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Submitted by the

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Concurred in by the

INTELLIGENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

on 29 November 1956. Concurring were the Special Assistant, Intelligence, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Director of Naval Intelligence; the Director of Intelligence, USAF; and the Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the IAC, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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SOVIET ACTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Soviet objectives and probable courses of action in the Middle East, particularly with respect to the Suez Canal and Arab-Israeli controversies.

ASSUMPTION

That the UK, France, and Israel evidence their clear intention to comply with the UN resolution with respect to the withdrawal of their forces.

DISCUSSION

General Soviet Policy

1. The chain of events precipitated by Israeli, French, and British action against Egypt has sharply intensified most Middle East problems, and has created major fresh sources of trouble. For the most part, these recent developments have worked to increase the influence of the USSR in the area, and to enhance considerably Soviet opportunities to undermine the Western position there and elsewhere. The USSR will take advantage of these opportunities, and in doing so will confront the US with critical policy decisions.

2. In determining specific courses of action in the Middle East, the USSR will try in every way to maximize the disruptive effects of this situation on the Atlantic Community as a whole. It will probably pursue this general objective at the expense, if necessary, of immediate Soviet gains in the Middle East.

3. The scale, nature, and timing of Soviet moves will depend on a number of factors including UN action, US policy and action,

the course of the Arab-Israeli controversy, and what the UK and France do. The interaction of these factors in the fluid situation makes difficult a forecast of Soviet action. Nevertheless, Soviet objectives and certain possible actions, together with their implications, can be defined.

4. The USSR still almost certainly wishes to avoid precipitating general war over the Middle East crisis. It also probably wishes to avoid overt action which would throw the weight of world opinion against its involvement in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the credit which the USSR gained, particularly in the Middle East, by its pressures on the UK, France, and Israel to halt their action in Egypt, has probably increased its confidence that it can vigorously exploit the present crisis without undue risk.

5. In the present situation over-all Soviet objectives probably are:

a. To consolidate the USSR's position as champion of Arab nationalism against the

Western Powers and Israel and of anticolonialism in general;

b. To use the situation to distract world attention from events in the Satellites, particularly in Hungary;

c. To undermine Western political and military power in the area and to make difficult the maintenance of Western military bases and alliances with Middle East states;

d. To weaken the West economically and strategically, notably through the reduction of Western access to Middle East oil; and

e. To prolong and deepen Western differences.

6. Thus the USSR probably sees in the present situation opportunities not only to expand its influence in the Middle East at Western expense, but also a windfall opportunity to strike at the political, economic, and military strength of the Western governments themselves as well as at the unity of the Western alliance as a whole. The disruption of Middle East oil supplies and the closing of the canal to trade in other commodities as well confronts the NATO powers with serious and immediate economic problems (e. g., layoffs due to oil shortages are inevitable). In addition, the oil shortage now looming up before Europe is virtually certain to increase strains between the Western European governments as they compete: (a) for the limited supplies which are trickling through the usual channels; and (b) for emergency aid from the US in the form of additional oil and financial aid to buy oil. It is almost certain that the USSR will seek to derive maximum advantage from public resentment in Europe against the US because of the oil shortage. The USSR has made offers and will make offers of oil to certain countries in Europe and the Mediterranean area experiencing shortages.¹

Probable Soviet Courses of Action — Assuming No Further Hostilities in the Area

7. *Vis-a-vis Egypt.* The USSR will almost certainly seek, as a matter of priority, to insure that Nasser remains in power and that he

maintains a stiff position regarding both the canal question and Israel:

a. The USSR will almost certainly extend support to help Nasser withstand any political and economic pressures aimed at bringing about his downfall. Such support will probably include assistance designed to offset any Western economic measures against Egypt.

b. The USSR will probably work to stiffen Nasser's resistance to any UN arrangements acceptable to the British, French, and Israelis. It will support Egypt in demanding that UN intervention be limited to restoring the *status quo ante* (e. g., that UN troops should merely oversee the withdrawal of the Anglo-French forces, leaving Egypt in control of the canal; and then serve as a temporary shield between Egypt and Israel after a complete withdrawal by Israel behind its former borders).

c. The USSR will encourage Nasser in his insistence that Egypt control the rehabilitation and operation of the canal. It will in this and perhaps other ways seek to delay the reopening of the canal, but will avoid appearing clearly obstructionist in world opinion

¹The Soviet Bloc now supplies approximately 90,000 barrels per day of petroleum and petroleum products to non-Sino-Soviet Bloc countries. Approximately 50,000 barrels a day are shipped to Western Europe, primarily to Sweden, Finland, and Iceland. Elsewhere, the principal recipients have been Egypt and Yugoslavia. Assuming that tankers were available, the Bloc could export substantially larger amounts of crude oil and/or finished products from its expanding production. Crude oil production in the USSR is currently increasing at an annual rate of 95 million barrels, equivalent to an average of more than 250,000 barrels per day. Any substantial increase in exports would, however, involve some sacrifice of economic activity because of the rapidly expanding domestic requirements for petroleum. In view of these domestic needs and the difficulty of moving oil from producing and storage centers to ports, it is considered unlikely that the Soviet Bloc would maintain exports for long in excess of an additional 100,000 barrels per day. This quantity, equivalent to about four percent of total Western European consumption, would permit a reduction of some 12 to 15 percent in the estimated current deficit. Over a limited period, however, if willing to draw heavily on inventories, the Bloc would be able to augment significantly the additional quantities of petroleum available for export to Western Europe.

and alienating India and other Asian powers which are adversely affected by the closure of the canal.

d. The USSR will continue to encourage and support Nasser in demands that the UK, France, and Israel pay reparations and possibly bear the cost of clearing the canal.

e. As long as progress is being made by the UN and the UN force remains in Egypt, the USSR is unlikely to try to introduce arms and technicians in quantity. However, in spite of the UN resolution, the USSR will probably quietly replace some of Nasser's losses in materiel in order to help his domestic position, to rebuild morale in the Egyptian armed forces, and to bolster his standing in the area. If so, the necessary technicians, probably including Soviet pilots, would accompany the equipment.

8. *Vis-a-vis other Arab States.* The USSR will probably make increasing use of Syria in its anti-Western and anti-Israeli campaign. Pro-Soviet elements are already gaining the ascendancy in Syria, where the conservative, relatively pro-Western leaders are divided and on the defensive. The USSR probably regards these trends in Syria as sufficiently favorable for the purposes of its Middle East policy, and is likely to avoid any open demonstration of control over the Syrian government even if it gains such control.

9. The Bloc has already supplied aircraft and armor to Syria. This includes an estimated 130 T-34 tanks, 200 armored personnel carriers, and 20-25 MIG 15 fighters, which were delivered in Egypt. We believe that most, if not all, of these fighters were destroyed by the UK-French attack. We have no reliable evidence to support reports that additional large quantities of Soviet air and armored equipment and personnel have arrived in Syria. Since 29 October five Soviet Bloc ships have docked at Latakia but we believe that no additional equipment other than small arms has been off-loaded. Future introduction of aircraft, military advisors, and technicians is likely, and possibly some volunteers.²

10. Syria thus represents a promising target for Soviet efforts — military, political, and

economic — in the Arab world. A continuation of the present extreme nationalist and pro-Soviet trend in Syria would give the USSR a number of advantages. It would, for example:

a. Facilitate Soviet efforts to encourage and aid Syrian blackmail and boycott tactics and further physical sabotage against Western-owned oil pipelines transiting Syria from Iraq and Saudi Arabia — of which only one, the US-owned Tapline, is now in operation. Especially as long as the Western Powers are denied passage through the Suez Canal, this would be of critical importance to the USSR as a strategic and economic weapon against the West.

b. Further weaken the military position of the Baghdad Pact countries and increase the defense problems of Turkey and Iraq.

c. Open up greater political and subversive opportunities in many parts of the Arab world.

d. Provide additional means of exacerbating Arab-Israeli tensions which the USSR can exploit in pursuing its pro-Arab, anti-Israeli, and anti-Western policy.

The establishment of a Soviet-Satellite government in Syria, or even of a government clearly dependent on the USSR would, however, also:

a. Serve to drive Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Iran closer to the West, almost certainly cause Turkey and Iraq to press toward intervention in Syria, and raise fear and suspicions of Soviet intentions in much of Europe and Asia;

b. Confront the USSR with much larger risks of having to participate directly in any local hostilities in the Middle East.

11. Jordan also represents a promising target for Soviet political and subversive efforts. The new, anti-Western Jordanian parliament has recently recommended the abrogation of the Anglo-Jordanian Treaty (and the British

² The term "volunteers" is used in this estimate to mean troops, tank drivers, jet pilots, etc., actually employed, or intended to be employed, in combat. They are thus distinguished from advisors, technicians, trainers, etc., who are not in general intended to participate in combat.

subsidy) and the establishment of relations with the Bloc. Implementation of these measures requires only the consent of the weak and unstable Jordanian king who under present circumstances is unlikely to prove able to hold out long against strong popular pressures.

12. *Vis-a-vis Israel.* The USSR probably believes that incurring the enmity of Israel is a cheap price to pay for the gains in the Arab world to be derived from an anti-Israeli policy. The USSR will therefore almost certainly encourage a continuation of Arab-Israeli tensions. It will probably also encourage a belief among the Arabs that the USSR favors the eventual elimination of Israel.

13. We do not believe, however, that the USSR wants to precipitate full-scale hostilities between Israel and the surrounding Arab states. A continuation of high tension short of war probably appears sufficiently advantageous and certainly less risky for Soviet interests, since they probably consider that in present circumstances all-out Arab-Israeli hostilities might lead to the rapid destruction of Arab forces (including those equipped by the USSR) or even to US involvement and general war. Thus, the USSR will probably continue its efforts to intimidate Israel against launching full-scale war against Syria and Jordan.

Probable Soviet Courses of Action — Assuming Further Hostilities in the Area

14. If Arab-Israeli hostilities did develop, the Bloc would probably step up political support and military assistance to the Arab side, possibly including sending volunteers to Syria. In the UN and elsewhere, it would probably seek to take the lead in demanding drastic measures against Israel.

15. If Anglo-French military action against Egypt should be resumed, the Soviets would probably step up political support and military assistance to Egypt. If requested, they would probably send volunteers. They would also probably renew and intensify their threats against Britain and France.

16. The scope of Soviet action, however, in the event of renewed British-French military operations, an Arab-Israeli war, or a conflict over Syria, would depend greatly on the attitude of the US. The USSR would be unlikely to make good on any threats of hostilities against the UK and France or Israel or even to send volunteers if it estimated that such steps would provoke a US reaction which substantially increased the risk of general war.

17. It is obvious, however, that in the critical situation surrounding an outbreak of hostilities there would be serious risks of miscalculation on the part of both the USSR and the West.

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