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in Arab States

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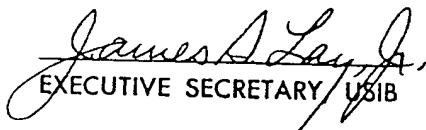
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HRP 94-3

SOVIET INTERESTS AND ACTIVITIES IN ARAB STATES

THE PROBLEM

To assess Soviet policy toward the Middle East since the June war, and to estimate Soviet intentions, particularly with respect to the UAR, Yemen, and Jordan.

CONCLUSIONS

A. The main Soviet objective in the Middle East remains essentially the same as before the June war—to win for the USSR a position as dominant foreign power in the area. The Soviets face both new problems and new opportunities. Nonetheless the radical Arabs are now more dependent on the USSR, and the Soviets probably judge that the new opportunities will compensate for such losses as they suffered as a result of the Arab defeat.

B. The Soviets are not likely to make binding military commitments to any Arab states, and they will almost certainly remain wary of direct involvement even in limited conflicts in the Middle East. They probably do not intend to establish actual Soviet military bases in the area, but will seek instead to help the Arabs develop ports and air bases which might be used by Soviet forces on a limited basis. The Soviets will improve the capabilities of their naval forces in the Mediterranean and of their sea and airlift capabilities in general. They will probably continue to use their forces in the Middle East for essentially political purposes—to influence events and to improve their position in the region. Nonetheless, resumption of Arab-Israeli hostilities would produce a dangerous and essentially unpredictable situation, in which the risks of Soviet involvement, by accident or miscalculation, might be greater than before.

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C. The Soviets will probably continue to give strong, though not unlimited, backing to Nasser, whom they continue to regard as their chief Arab ally. Despite some mutual irritants, and despite Nasser's desire to maintain independence, Soviet and UAR policies on important issues are congruent—notably, opposition to US influence in the area, a cautious policy toward Israel, and at least short-term accommodation between Arab radicals and moderates.

D. In Jordan, the Soviets are attempting to extend their influence by generous offers of military aid. We believe that Hussein will accept Soviet arms if the Western Powers fail to offer an acceptable alternative. He would still try to maintain countervailing ties with conservative Arabs and the West, but over time revolutionary forces in Jordan would be strengthened.

E. In Yemen, Soviet military aid and activity is probably aimed at preventing the collapse of the Republican regime. But the Soviets have now moved to limit their involvement, possibly because they have revised their estimate of Republican prospects, and they are encouraging a negotiated settlement. They will, however, probably continue some aid as long as the Republican regime can make use of it, hoping in this way to preserve some influence in Yemen and eventually to promote Soviet interests in South Yemen. In doing so, they will probably try to avoid the kind of overt bid for dominance which would kindle adverse reactions in the area, particularly among their Arab clients.

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DISCUSSION

I. GENERAL SOVIET POLICY

1. We believe that broad Soviet objectives in the Middle East remain what they were before the June war: to reduce the influence of the West, particularly of the US, and to win a position for the USSR as the dominant foreign power in the area. In pursuit of these ends, the Soviets are continuing to employ essentially the same means as before. This consists of strong, but not unlimited, support for the Arabs against Israel, various forms of encouragement to local governments and forces working against Western positions and influence, and continued—in some respects increased—use of the familiar instruments of military and economic aid, diplomacy, naval visits, propaganda, and covert activities.

2. The environment in which the Soviets are operating, however, is substantially different from that prevailing before June. The new situation has created both new problems and new opportunities. It is difficult to strike an objective balance of the effects of the June war on Moscow's position in the Middle East; the conflict and its consequences have in some respects strengthened the USSR's hand but in others have damaged its prestige. An immediate consequence of the war was greater Arab dependence on, and a more urgent need for, Soviet political support and military aid. This has given Moscow more favorable opportunities for expanding its influence in the UAR, Syria, and Iraq. At the same time, the prestige of radical Arab nationalists has declined, and this has perhaps reduced their usefulness to the Soviets. Moreover, the Egyptian evacuation of Yemen has made Soviet prospects in Southern Arabia considerably more uncertain. The Arabs, for their part, were disillusioned by what they conceived to be Soviet timidity (and perhaps perfidy as well) during the war, and by the USSR's subsequent inability to help them eradicate the consequences of their defeat. In general, the radical Arab states are more dependent on Moscow than before but are probably also more skeptical about Soviet willingness to support them in a crisis.

3. The Soviets themselves probably felt that their position was impaired in the immediate aftermath of the war. They were charged with unreliability as an ally by some Arabs and in certain Communist quarters as a result of their behavior. Nonetheless, they probably expect that they can compensate for their losses by exploiting new opportunities. US standing with the Arabs has been seriously damaged as a result of what the latter considers US-Israeli collusion during and since the war. This gives the Soviets a chance to cultivate moderate Arab states, like Jordan, in which their influence was formerly severely restricted. Moreover, some of the harm suffered by the Soviets as a consequence of the war has been repaired. In particular, Moscow's quick response to Arab cries for massive new injections of military aid has done much to restore Soviet prestige. And there probably is satisfaction in Moscow over the more active role of Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean; this Soviet move was helped by Arab need for

Soviet support, and it enables the USSR to impress on the Arabs, the Israelis, and the world at large that the Mediterranean can no longer be counted as an American lake.

4. We believe that Soviet policy respecting the Arab-Israeli dispute has two chief objectives: to avoid a renewal of hostilities, which would confront the USSR with the same kind of unwelcome risks and dilemmas it faced in June; and to gain maximum political advantage among the Arabs by providing aid to them in their time of need and by playing an active role in various efforts to press Israel into making concessions. A corollary of the latter policy is to emphasize, in propaganda and by other means, the theme that the US is not only Israel's backer but also the Arabs' enemy. Soviet orchestration of this policy will continue to involve some delicate problems, particularly those of counseling restraint to the more militant Arabs. The greater the Soviet role and presence in the Arab states, the greater the degree of influence that can be applied to this end, but by the same token, the greater would be the risks of involvement and responsibility should hostilities break out again.

5. The Soviets must be aware of this problem. We believe, therefore, that they will keep their commitments imprecise. They probably hope that their increased naval presence, and the introduction of more Soviet advisers into Arab armed forces, will help to restrain the Arab hotheads and to deter the Israelis. If this failed and hostilities were resumed, we estimate that the USSR would seek to avoid direct military involvement with its own forces, and would move to contain the crisis as quickly as possible, probably by approaches to the US, as in June. Nonetheless, resumption of Arab-Israeli hostilities would produce a dangerous and essentially unpredictable situation, in which the risks of Soviet involvement, by accident or miscalculation, might be greater than before.

II. SOVIET MILITARY OBJECTIVES

6. One of the larger questions raised by the USSR's responses to the changed situation is what kind of military presence the Soviets may be seeking to establish in the Middle East. A number of Soviet moves have contributed to concern over this question; the increased presence and more active role of Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean,¹ including lengthy and conspicuous stays, notably in Egyptian ports; the visit to the UAR of 10 Soviet strategic bombers (the first such visit outside a Communist country); the institution of a sizable airlift to support Republican forces in Yemen and the participation for a time of Soviet pilots in combat there; and the offer of substantial quantities of arms to Jordan.

7. We do not believe that the Soviets intend to establish military bases as such in the Middle East. They probably do not wish to risk involving themselves in this way in future crises of peripheral consequences to Soviet interests and beyond the ability of Moscow to control. Moreover, they would not wish to tarnish

¹ At the moment, some 4-8 Soviet submarines are deployed in the Mediterranean, and some 15-20 surface ships (4 or 5 major combatants, 3 to 5 small combatants, 2 or 3 landing ships, and 6 or 7 auxiliaries).

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their image by seeking for themselves the military bases which they have encouraged the Arabs to deny to the "imperialists."

8. We think the Soviets will see their interests better served by helping the Arabs develop ports and air bases which can be used by the Soviets, probably on a limited basis, and which might even be run in part by Soviet advisory personnel. Under certain circumstances, the distinction between a Soviet base and an Arab one could, as a practical matter, become meaningless. Given Arab suspicions and sensitivities to foreign presence, and given even normal Soviet caution, however, we think that the distinction will probably continue to have some real meaning for the foreseeable future. With respect to naval activity in the Mediterranean, we believe that the USSR will, for a variety of political and operational reasons, rely principally on auxiliary ships for logistic support, much as the US does.

9. Beyond the question of bases in the Middle East lies the broader question of the USSR's attitude toward the application of its conventional military power in areas beyond its periphery, and the development of capabilities—e.g., air and sealift—appropriate to this. The Soviets have been seeking for some time to provide their armed forces with more flexible capabilities. By the early 1970's, the capabilities of Soviet airborne and amphibious assault forces will be substantially improved, partly through the acquisition of new heavy air transports and naval landing ships. Such forces will still be primarily designed to support operations on the Soviet periphery, but they will also make it easier for Moscow to support Arab clients.²

10. The Soviets will probably continue efforts to make the Mediterranean a less favorable environment for US naval forces by maintaining a high level of deployed combatants, by deploying some of their new classes there when they become fully operational, and by assigning cruise missile submarines on a regular basis to those waters. They may, in addition, be increasingly inclined to deploy their ships specifically in support of client states during periods of regional tension; some of their Egyptian port calls after the June war were almost certainly in response to Cairo's desire to deter possible Israeli attacks. Finally, as suggested by the addition of landing ships to their Mediterranean squadron and by the temporary use of Soviet personnel in combat in Yemen, they may in certain circumstances be willing to provide a more direct sort of help to clients, at least so long as the military risks of so doing do not seem high and the political risks of inaction seem quite large.

11. We do not think, however, that the Soviets intend in the foreseeable future to make binding military commitments to any Arab states. Moscow will almost certainly remain wary of becoming directly involved even in limited conflicts in the area, partly because there could be no guarantee that such involvement would

² For a general discussion of these Soviet military capabilities, see NIE 11-14-67, "The Soviet and East European General Purpose Forces," dated 16 November 1967, SECRET, pp. 19-20.

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accomplish its purposes, and partly because of a concern to avoid confrontations with the US. The expanded sea and airlift capabilities of the USSR will probably be used for essentially political purposes—to lend weight to Soviet attempts to influence events and to improve its position in the region as a whole.

III. SOVIET POLICY IN THE UAR, YEMEN, AND JORDAN

12. The USSR's new opportunities appear to be potentially greatest, and its problems potentially most difficult, in those Arab countries most affected by the June war, *viz.* the UAR, Yemen, and Jordan. Of all the Arab states, the UAR lost the most in men, prestige, and materiel as a result of the Israeli victory. In Republican Yemen, the withdrawal of the UAR's military forces has completely altered the political and military situation. And Jordan faces a particularly uncertain situation as a result of heavy military and territorial losses and King Hussein's inability so far to procure from the West replacements for the arms he lost.

13. *The UAR.* The UAR, and President Nasser in particular, seem still to hold a high place in the Soviets' calculation of their opportunities in the Middle East. The rapid Soviet resupply of arms and the extension of emergency economic assistance in the immediate aftermath of the crisis were good measures of the importance Moscow attached to Nasser's continued survival, and these measures probably helped him preserve his position. Nasser himself retains a great deal of his broad popular appeal within the UAR and, despite some loss of prestige, remains the outstanding symbol of Arab nationalism. The Soviets have made a heavy investment in him over the years and we doubt that they see any good alternative on the horizon.

14. Nasser, like the Soviets, favors a cautious policy toward Israel. The Syrian and Algerian leaders advocate greater militancy. But they have not succeeded in their bids to supplant Nasser as the principal spokesman for the radical Arabs, and he is still clearly regarded by Moscow as its chief Arab ally. The Soviets probably calculate that Nasser has a good chance of surviving, and we believe they will continue to cultivate close relations with him and give him strong, though certainly not unlimited, backing. The USSR's ability to influence developments within the UAR will continue to be limited, however, by Nasser's own desire to maintain as much independence as possible and by his suspicions of Soviet motives.

15. Soviet-UAR economic ties remain close, but the Soviets have frequently shown irritation with the UAR's mishandling of its economy. They are clearly unwilling to supply all Cairo's economic needs. While continuing their many economic development projects, notably the Aswan Dam, the Soviets have been reluctant to assume heavy new burdens. They have supplied substantial amounts of foodgrains since the end of the PL-480 food program in 1966, but have consistently refused to make long-term commitments of food aid. Moscow made no move to replace foreign exchange revenues once derived from the Suez Canal,

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tourism, and oil; these are now being made up by subsidies from Kuwait, Libya, and Saudi Arabia.

16. Beyond these irritants, however, there is a broad area where Soviet and UAR policies are congruent. The two countries see the US as a principal opponent. (Nasser has made a few tentative gestures toward the US but probably sees little prospect for a substantially improved relationship.) In addition, both Nasser and the Soviets have certain immediate interests in regard to the conservative Arab states. The Soviets have approved Nasser's efforts to repair his relationships with the conservative Arabs and thus to gain financial aid for the UAR. The Soviets have made generous offers of military aid to Jordan and have urged the revolutionary Arab regimes and the conservative ones to collaborate. In this way, they not only seek to reduce Arab demands for economic assistance from the USSR, but also to minimize the prospect that intra-Arab quarrels will turn some Arab states toward the US.

Yemen

17. The Soviet position in Yemen, gained by long and relatively expensive endeavors, was jeopardized by the UAR's agreement at Khartoum in August to withdraw its military forces, leaving the Republicans to face the Yemeni Royalist forces. The Soviets reacted by directly supplying to the Republicans military equipment that previously had been largely channeled through the UAR. In mid-November, the Soviets began a substantial airlift of arms to the Republican forces. The Soviets probably decided on an airlift for this operation because it was the only efficient means available after the closure of the Suez Canal and because the Republicans' need was urgent. But it also served their purposes by emphasizing their eagerness to help the radical cause and by demonstrating their capability for airlift operations. In early December, the Royalist threat to the capital was so critical that air strikes appeared to be the only means of repulsing it, and for a few days Soviet pilots participated in these strikes. Yemeni and other Arab pilots have since replaced them.

18. We believe that the immediate aim of this Soviet involvement was to prevent the collapse of the "progressive" Republican regime, and thereby to retain as much as possible of the foothold the Soviets have gained over the past five years. The Soviets probably calculated that this support of the Republican position would be relatively inexpensive, would involve little risk, and could be easily enough abandoned if necessary. Although the commitment of Soviet pilots to combat must have appeared somewhat riskier, the Soviet leaders probably reasoned that the measure need be only temporary since Soviet pilots could be phased out with the arrival of crews from other Arab states, that Soviet participation could plausibly be denied, and that the use of Soviet air crews in the Yemeni conflict of 1962-1963 had gone virtually unnoticed.

19. The Soviets may have now revised their estimate of Republican prospects. In any case, they have evacuated most of their diplomatic and economic aid personnel, and have confined their military activity to supply flights and aircraft

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maintenance. It seems likely that some aid will continue so long as the Republican regime is able to make use of it. The Soviets have also encouraged mediation efforts by other Arab countries to bring about some form of settlement between the opposing forces. Moscow probably hopes that such an outcome would enable it to retain some influence in the country—more influence certainly than could be preserved if the Republican regime should collapse entirely. The Soviets probably also judge that if they can retain a position in Yemen, it will help them to promote long-term Soviet interests in neighboring South Yemen, where the political situation is still highly uncertain and subject to outside influences.

20. So far, Nasser seems to have acquiesced in Soviet support of the Yemeni Republicans. But Soviet involvement in Yemen and South Yemen carries the possibility of a conflict of interests with Nasser. He and most other Arabs, including the moderates whom the Soviets are currently trying to cultivate, would view with alarm any Soviet attempt to gain clear preeminence in Southern Arabia. The Saudis in particular are actively concerned about Soviet activities there and are already urging the US to do something to dissuade Moscow. They are themselves subsidizing certain elements in the Arabian Peninsula which are hostile to the Arab radicals and to the Soviets, and they will continue to do so. And they may at some stage threaten to cut off their subsidy to Nasser, seeking thus to induce him to make the Soviets desist. We believe that the Soviets are aware of these considerations and will take some care to avoid the kind of overt bid for dominance which would produce these adverse reactions.

Jordan

21. The Soviets have offered to reequip the Jordanian armed forces at very low cost—the first time they have made any direct offer to Jordan with any prospects of success. They no doubt expect that if Jordan accepted Soviet arms it would be widely interpreted in the Arab world as a demonstration that even King Hussein had to conclude that his long-term reliance on the West was no longer a valid policy. Hussein would much prefer to continue to receive arms from the US or from other Western Powers, but we believe that he will accept Soviet arms if the Western Powers fail to offer him an acceptable alternative.

22. Hussein will be conscious of the risks for him of accepting Soviet arms, but he probably believes that he could accept them without immediate danger to his position—in fact it would probably enhance his standing with Arab nationalists both in Jordan and elsewhere. If he accepted Soviet arms, he would still try to maintain countervailing ties with the West and certainly with the conservative Arabs. He does not want to jeopardize the subsidies he now receives from the oil-rich states or to alienate the US entirely; he also fears that clear dependence on the USSR would place him at the mercy of unfriendly forces both within Jordan and the area as a whole.

23. The USSR itself would probably prefer to see the present subsidies to Jordan continue, and at least in the short run would probably be content with

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any arrangement which enabled Hussein to accept Soviet arms and still receive needed financial support from the conservative states. Moscow probably judges—as indeed do we—that increased Soviet influence in Amman, and Jordanian dependence on the USSR for arms, would at the very least weaken Western influence in Jordan and would in time strengthen revolutionary forces there. Should such forces in fact gain power, Jordan would move quickly into the anti-Western camp. Even if the Soviet arms offer is not accepted, Moscow will have strengthened its reputation as a friend of the Arabs.

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