

THE USSR AND THE ARAB EAST

Thomas W. Wolfe

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The RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California

At the outset, let me say that there is a certain amount of overlap in the areas of discussion allotted to today's panels. This particular panel has been asked to concern itself with Soviet policy toward the Arab states in what the Soviet Union customarily defines as the Near East -- which includes the UAR, Syria, the two Yemens and the Sudan. The other panels are to deal respectively with the Arab states in North Africa -- i.e., Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya -- and the non-Arab Middle East states of Turkey and Iran. Although there are some notable differentiations in Soviet relations with these several groups of states, there also is a broader regional pattern of Soviet policy which has important features applying

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throughout the mid-East area from the southern shores of the Mediterranean to the borders of the USSR. Therefore, it may prove difficult in our discussion to adhere strictly to the division of labor allotted this particular panel.

Today's widespread interest and sensitivity toward Soviet aims in the Middle East seems to be largely a by-product of the Arab-Israeli June war of 1967 -- which tended to touch off apprehension that the Soviet Union might see in the postwar situation a favorable opportunity to expedite the removal of Western influence from the area and to establish itself as the dominant power at the strategic crossroads of the European, Asian, and African continents. The retention of a highly visible Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean since the June war has helped to dramatize such concern.

Before taking up some of the contemporary aspects of Soviet policy toward the Arab East, it may be appropriate to recall that the USSR -- as well as Tsarist Russia before it -- historically has shown recurrent interest in obtaining a strategic-political foothold in this part of the world, so that the roots of what we are witnessing today run back a long time. Perhaps a quick review of the forms this interest has taken may provide a useful background for our subject.

Of the Tsarist period, one need only say that Russian aspirations in the Middle East were manifested at least as early as the 18th century under Catherine the Great. (Her policy included military aid to Egypt in order to threaten the Turkish empire from the rear, and in 1784 she reportedly agreed to support Egypt's independence in return for the right to station Russian troops in Alexandria and other Egyptian cities.)

Coming to the Soviet period, one may recall that the new Soviet regime in 1918 displayed an immediate interest in the largely colonial countries of the Moslem East, exposing the Sykes-Picot agreement on the division of Arab territory between Britain and France as an entering-wedge for establishing Communist influence in these countries.

In the post World War I period, there was an attempt for about a decade-and-a-half to promote underground Communist activity in the Arab world, but when this effort ran into stiff local opposition, Moscow changed its tactics and shifted in 1935 to cooperation with nationalist and religious groups under the banner of anti-colonialism.

These tactics were continued after World War II, with the apparent aim of creating an anti-Western climate in the region. Stalin, who in dickering with Nazi Germany

for spheres of influence in 1940 had specified that the area "in the general direction of the Persian Gulf should be recognized as the main area of Soviet aspirations," also sought after the war was over to stake out various Soviet claims from Iran to the southern shores of the Mediterranean. (Besides attempts to detach parts of Iranian and Turkish territory, his moves included: a 1945 proposal for "combined defense" of the Turkish Straits; a request for bases in the former Italian possessions of Libya, Eritrea, and the Dodecanese Islands; and a demand for revision of the Montreux Convention.)

Having got nowhere with its postwar demands, which only helped to bring the Truman Doctrine into being, the Soviet Union around 1950 renewed its subversion tactics against various conservative Arab regimes -- both Iraq and Egypt being among the main targets at that time.

In 1955, with Khrushchev in power and the Egyptian revolution having opened more favorable prospects for Soviet penetration in the Near East, the USSR began a large-scale program of arms aid to the anti-Baghdad Pact countries, which was gradually to alter the local military balance in the area. The Soviet role in the Suez crisis of 1956 helped to consolidate Soviet relations with Egypt

and shortly thereafter Syria became the next client state which Moscow undertook to shield from alleged "imperialist" aggression, in this case, from Turkey. Again in 1958, the Soviet Union assumed the role of self-proclaimed "protector" of Arab interests during the Lebanon crisis, asserting, among other things, that Soviet warnings to the West and military maneuvers in the Caucasus had saved the new revolutionary government in Iraq from being crushed.

Despite the difficulties encountered by the Soviets in staying out of the crossfire of internal Arab politics -- particularly between the radical-nationalist and the conservative-monarchic Arab regimes -- by the end of Khrushchev's tenure in 1964 the Soviet policy of supporting Arab aspirations against Israel and outside "neo-colonialist" powers had gone a long way toward strengthening the Soviet position in the Middle East.

Finally, under Khrushchev's successors, the pivotal event that brought further substantial changes in the Soviet Union's relationship with the Arab states (as well as in the over-all pattern of political and power relationships in the Middle East) was, of course, the six-day Arab-Israeli war in June 1967. The extent to which Soviet policies contributed to the outbreak of the June war is a controversial question which need not be taken up here. Suffice it to

say that, despite Russia's role as arms supplier to the Arab states and her somewhat dubious part in exacerbating the May crisis which immediately preceded the Israeli attack, the war itself probably came as an unwelcome surprise to the Soviet leadership. Attempts in concert with the United States to contain the conflict suggest that avoidance of a Great Power confrontation was uppermost in Soviet minds during the phase of active hostilities, although at the very close of the war Moscow issued an ambiguous threat to take unspecified measures against Israel (unless there was an immediate cease-fire on the Syrian front).

The aftermath of the war, however, presented a new and fluid situation, full of both pitfalls and opportunities for Soviet policy. In the remainder of these remarks, let me sketch briefly some of the main considerations and trends that seem to bear on the further development of the USSR's position in the Middle East and its relations with the Arab states.

First, in the military sphere, one of Moscow's significant decisions immediately after the war was to put Nasser's shattered forces back on their feet. Toward this end, large arms shipments have been furnished, along with additional Soviet military advisers. Coupled with military aid to

Egypt, the USSR also has stepped up military and technical assistance to other Arab states, including Iraq, Algeria, the republican regime in Yemen, and the new South Yemen government in Aden. Although the ostensible purpose of Soviet military aid programs has been to "restore the military balance" between the Arab states and Israel, this activity has reduced the prospects for avoiding another expensive round of the Middle East arms race and has tended to increase Arab dependence on the Soviet Union.

Another salient military development since 1967 has been the expansion of the USSR's own military presence in the Middle East and Mediterranean, along with tentative first steps to extend Soviet naval influence into waters adjacent to the southern part of the Arabian peninsula, where British power has been in the process of vacating the Arabian rimlands governing access to the Indian Ocean from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The most conspicuous aspect of the USSR's emergence as a military actor in its own right in the Middle East has doubtless been Moscow's decision to maintain a sizeable permanent naval force in the Mediterranean. This force, which has fluctuated numerically from about 40 to 60 warships, submarines and supporting auxiliaries during the past two years, operates for the most part in the Eastern Mediterranean, but also

shuttles some of its units in and out of the Straits of Gibraltar as well as through the Turkish Straits. It reportedly receives some reconnaissance support from land-based aircraft in Egypt.

How this new deployment of Soviet naval power in the Mediterranean should be interpreted is a knotty question. At a minimum, as suggested by the declarations of Gromyko and other Soviet spokesmen since early 1968, the USSR intends to demonstrate that the Mediterranean can no longer be regarded as an exclusive Western preserve. Other functions of the Soviet military presence in the area may include the following:

(1) To restore damaged Soviet prestige in the Arab world by a visible show of support, and to deter Israel from any major military moves against the Arab states.

(2) To retain some local Soviet control over possible provocative actions by client Arab states.

(3) To reduce access by Western forces to the Eastern Mediterranean and the southern border areas of the USSR itself in the event of a major crisis.

Beyond this, one can not say with assurance that the Soviet Union has more ambitious military undertakings in mind, such as direct intervention in local Arab-Israeli

conflicts, or a further buildup of Soviet forces in the Mediterranean capable of outflanking NATO Europe strategically from the South. In the latter connection, the problems of reinforcing and logistically supporting Soviet Mediterranean forces under hostile conditions are such as to suggest that the USSR is far from being in a position to confront NATO power in the area directly. Rather, while asserting that as a Black Sea and Mediterranean power it has an "irrefutable" right to send its warships into Mediterranean waters, the Soviet Union seems prepared for the time being to go no further than to employ its forces for surveillance and occasional harassment of NATO naval operations in those waters.

In the political sphere, perhaps the most pressing issue facing the Soviet leadership since the June 1967 war has been whether to pursue a policy of uncompromising support of the Arab position -- which could keep Middle East tensions dangerously high -- or whether in the interest of regional stability to try to persuade the Arab states to agree to mutual concessions that might lead to a settlement and reduce the danger of a new war. For some months after the June war the USSR seemed primarily interested in keeping the Middle East situation just below the boiling

point -- perhaps in the belief that this would keep the Arab world aware of its dependence on the Soviet Union; however, by late 1968 and early 1969 the upward spiral of violent incidents evidently led Moscow to lend itself to various diplomatic initiatives to break the Arab-Israeli impasse, such as the informal four-power talks which began in New York in April 1969. At the moment, although the USSR remains somewhat ambivalent in its dedication to dampening Arab-Israeli tensions, as illustrated, e.g., by its equivocal attitude toward the fedayeen movement -- it does seem to see some merit in trying to promote regional peace and stability, if only to ward off the chances of a confrontation with the United States which might arise out of a new Arab-Israeli war.

Another political issue with strong ideological overtones has faced the Soviet Union in its relations with the Arab states since the June war. This issue surfaced briefly after the June debacle in connection with repairing the military posture of the Arab states, particularly Egypt, when Moscow was obliged to decide whether or not to make its help contingent upon internal Egyptian reforms which would pave the way for revolutionary changes in the sociopolitical order. Two schools of Soviet opinion seem

to have been involved. One, taking an essentially ideological position, favored a line aimed at "breaking up the old government machine" and weeding out "bourgeois elements," especially in the armed forces. The other, more pragmatic, apparently felt it prudent to go slow in pressing for revolutionary changes which Nasser might regard as unwarranted interference in Egyptian internal affairs. The second school of thought evidently prevailed, although some pressure undoubtedly was put on Nasser to let local Communists out of jail and to purge the "military bourgeoisie" in his officer corps.

A closely-related problem for Moscow in the post-1967 period has been that of whether to side with "radical" Arab regimes in the Near East against more conservative Arab states -- examples being the feuds between the Baathist Syrian regime and King Hussein's Jordan, or between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Here, too, the recent prevailing Soviet tendency seems to be to favor a nonideological line designed to smooth over internal antagonisms in the Arab East, partly perhaps in order to encourage oil-rich conservative regimes like those of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to subsidize the radical regimes and especially to share the financial burden of propping up Nasser's economy.

Basically, to round off these preliminary remarks on Soviet policy in the Middle East, one might say that two broad alternative paths lie before the incumbent Soviet leadership.

One of these, and in my own opinion, the least likely -- involves a number of rather extreme and potentially risky policy decisions, and connotes a strong temptation in Moscow to seek compensating gains in the Middle East for political losses suffered elsewhere, such as, let us say, the setback dealt to Soviet diplomacy in Europe by the Czechoslovak invasion, if indeed, the Czech episode is so regarded by the Kremlin. In any event, to state the case in brief, the Soviet leaders might hope to pull off a political end-run through the Middle East -- putting themselves in a position to threaten Europe by cutting off her oil supply, by bringing pressure on less stable states on the southeast rim of Europe, and so on. Within the Middle East itself, a companion feature of this essentially extreme and high-risk policy might be for the Soviet Union to use its new political leverage to install revolutionary regimes in more of the Arab countries, expecting thereby both to consolidate its influence and to demonstrate that Soviet political strategy is capable of achieving dynamic ideological successes, which would help offset the rival claims of Peking's Third World strategy.

On the other hand, however, it can also be argued that the Soviet Union may prefer to steer a more moderate course in the Middle East, seeking its objectives through relatively conventional foreign policy methods such as economic projects, military aid and diplomatic support to strengthen the pro-Soviet orientation of existing Middle East governments. Some of the considerations which may recommend this approach to the Soviet leaders are:

(1) A desire to avoid being drawn into active intervention on behalf of the Arab states in the event of another full-fledged Arab-Israeli war, which might also embroil the Soviet Union with the United States.

(2) Awareness that denial of oil and other Middle East resources to traditional Western consumers can cut both ways, increasing the demands of Arab countries upon the Soviet Union to make up for lost revenue.

(3) Recognition that continued closure of the Suez Canal, while damaging to Western interests, is also hard on Egypt and the USSR itself, the more so since transit of Suez is of declining value to the West with the development of supertankers, while becoming more important to the Soviet Union for routing cargoes from its Black Sea ports

to Southeast Asia and for establishing a strategic link with the Indian sub-continent.

(4) And finally, perhaps a growing appreciation that conditions of regional stability may not only make it easier to restrain radical Arab regimes, but also to derive larger economic gains from the Soviet Union's improved position in the Middle East. In this regard, the USSR may hope both to regain a payoff on the considerable credits it has extended in the area, and to use Middle East oil (which costs less to produce than Soviet oil) in order to channel more of the Soviet Union's own investment resources into other sectors of the Soviet economy.

Whether Soviet policy in the Middle East will tend to move along the extreme or moderate lines sketched here remains to be seen. To a considerable extent, the answer may turn on the opportunities which present themselves, together with the risks and costs of pursuing them. The Soviet leaders may find that Arab nationalism, a force that worked for them as long as the common object was to expel dominant Western influence from the area, will begin to work against them if it becomes plain that Western influence is simply to be replaced by Soviet domination.

At the same time, the attitudes of the Western powers are likely to represent a factor of no little consequence in shaping the opportunities perceived by the Soviet leadership in the Middle East. Should the policies of the Western powers, for any of a variety of reasons, seem to signal a declining interest in the area, Moscow may come to the conclusion that the way is open for further Soviet penetration, with reduced risk of encountering serious outside resistance.