

AS ISRAEL AND THE ARABS BATTLE, MOSCOW COLLECTS THE DIVIDENDS

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet Union has been the chief beneficiary of the interminable Arab-Israeli conflict. While Israel and its Arab neighbors have sacrificed immense quantities of their countrymen and resources in the six wars since 1948, Moscow has gained influence in Arab capitals, grist for its propaganda mill, and access both to military bases from Arab states and to the PLO terrorist network. The Soviet Union has penetrated the Arab world and encouraged the spread of radical anti-Western regimes by exploiting Arab-Israeli tensions and transferring massive amounts of military hardware to Arab belligerents.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has enabled Moscow to build patron-client relationships with Arab states that otherwise would have little need for a Soviet connection, given the lackluster appeal of Soviet ideology, technology, and economic assistance. Egypt, Moscow's first Arab client state, provided the Soviets with naval facilities and air bases in return for Soviet military aid after its humiliating defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Egypt subsequently ousted the Soviet presence and sought to settle its differences with Israel through negotiations rather than war, but Syria has stepped forward to take its place.

The ongoing Soviet military buildup in Syria is an extremely destabilizing influence because the long-range SAM-5 anti-aircraft missiles that Moscow has installed there threaten Israeli air superiority in the region, weaken Israel's ability to deter Syrian mischief making in Lebanon, and embolden the Syrians to take greater risks in Lebanon and elsewhere. In addition to threatening Lebanese and Israeli airspace, the SAM-5s are a potential threat to the NATO airbase at Incirlik, Turkey, and American aircraft carrier operations in the eastern Mediterranean. The Soviet military buildup in Syria has raised the possibility of future

clashes between Israel and the Soviet Union and heightened the risk of superpower confrontation in the Middle East.

SOVIET GOALS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Although the Arab-Israeli conflict is not the only means by which the Soviet Union has gained influence in the Middle East, it is the most important. To be sure, the Soviets have profited greatly from anti-colonial, inter-Arab, and Arab-Iranian struggles. Untarnished by a colonial relationship with the Arab world, although it possessed a large "internal colony" of Central Asian Muslims, Moscow could portray itself as an ally of Arab nationalism against the dominant European powers after World War II. It supported radical pan-Arab movements against conservative and moderate governments as a means of weakening Western, particularly British and American, influence in the Middle East.

While the Soviets successfully exploited anti-colonial and inter-Arab disputes, these lacked the long-term emotional appeal, the unifying prospective political benefits, of fishing in troubled Arab-Israeli waters. By the early 1960s, the major states of the Arab world had won their independence, and the Soviet anti-colonial drive netted decreasing returns. Aside from the Palestinians, there was only a dwindling number of "national liberation" movements for Moscow to support without alienating a client state. Soviet aid to the Kurds, for instance, would enrage the Iraqis. Picking sides in inter-Arab disputes was risky because of the kaleidoscopic transformations of Arab blocs, the unpredictable gyrations of individual Arab regimes, and the internal political instability of important Arab clients such as Syria and Iraq. While meddling in inter-Arab affairs could easily backfire, anti-Israeli actions were almost certain to be appreciated by all Arab states regardless of sudden ideological, leadership, or alliance shifts.

The Arab-Israeli conflict was a paramount consideration in Soviet Middle East policy also because it enabled the Soviets to tap their principal source of national power--military strength--by channeling a massive flow of weaponry into the Arab confrontation states--Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya. This was all the more important because the Soviets could not hope to compete with the West in terms of economic aid. Although Moscow undertook showcase projects like the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, Soviet economic advisors were more knowledgeable about rationing scarce goods than efficiently producing useful goods.

Nor did Soviet ideology appeal much to the Arab world. Soviet-style Communism had no natural Arab constituency aside from dictators seeking a rationalization for their despotism, disaffected intellectuals seeking a greater role in their societies, and minority groups seeking an end to discrimination in the promised

"classless" society. Arab communist parties were tolerated intermittently in countries seeking Soviet support, but never trusted.¹

Strategic considerations, not ideological factors, have consistently been the prime determinants of Soviet Middle East policy.² Local communists have been sacrificed repeatedly to further Soviet interests. By supporting Arab hardliners in their wars against Israel, the Soviet Union has ingratiated itself with the Arabs, muffled their criticism of Soviet policy,³ and inhibited discussion of the Soviet threat to their independence. By backing the Arab confrontation states against Israel, the Soviet Union has pursued several major goals: (1) erosion of Western influence in the Middle East; (2) supplanting the Arab states' Western ties with those to the Soviet bloc; (3) establishment of Soviet military power astride major Western oil routes and lines of communication; (4) outflanking NATO from the south; and (5) escalation of the political and economic costs of Western access to Middle Eastern oil.

In pursuing these goals, Moscow has faced two dilemmas. For one thing, Arab states have not used their Soviet arms wisely or well.⁴ Moscow confronts the challenge of funneling enough weapons to the Arabs to satisfy their security needs without their being tempted to attack Israel, thereby precipitating a defeat for Soviet arms or a Soviet confrontation with the United States. This is now the case in Syria where Moscow has underwritten a massive military buildup.

The second dilemma is how far Moscow can go to shield its often unpredictable and undependable Arab clients from the consequences of their aggression. In the past Arab-Israeli wars, Moscow has faced a choice between risky military intervention on behalf of an Arab client or abstention at the cost of losing influence, prestige, and credibility. The most recent instance of this problem occurred during the 1982 Israeli intervention in Lebanon.

EARLY SOVIET INVOLVEMENT IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

Although the Soviets denounce Zionism as a "bourgeois-nationalist tendency" and denounce Zionists as British and American agents, the Soviet Union in November 1947 voted in the United Nations for

¹ See Arnold Hottinger, "Arab Communism at Low Ebb," Problems of Communism, July-August 1981.

² See Alvin Rubinstein, "The Evolution of Soviet Strategy in the Middle East," Orbis, Summer 1980.

³ Syria and the PLO have gone so far as to endorse the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

⁴ For an analysis of Soviet arms transfers to the Middle East see: Jon Glassman, Arming the Arabs: The Soviet Union and War in the Middle East (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1975).

the partition of the British mandate in Palestine and the establishment of the state of Israel. Moscow did so mainly to remove the British from the area as quickly as possible.⁵ A secondary consideration may have been the opportunities for Soviet policy that would be presented by continuous tension between the West and the Arabs caused by Arab rejection of Israel.⁶ The Soviet Union was the third state to recognize Israel, after the United States and Guatemala, and facilitated the shipments of sorely needed East European arms to the young Israeli state during the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948.⁷

Once the state of Israel was established, Soviet-Israeli relations were chilled by the virulent anti-Semitism of Josef Stalin's last years as Soviet dictator, Soviet apprehensiveness about the spontaneous support and popularity that Israel enjoyed among Russian Jews, and a pronounced Soviet tilt toward the Arabs. The Soviets were initially distrustful of Arab nationalists, such as Nasser's Free Officers group that came to power in Egypt in 1952, because of Moscow's ill-fated cooperative arrangements with earlier nationalists, such as Kemal Attaturk in Turkey and Chiang Kai-shek in China. Under Nikita Khrushchev, Soviet theoreticians replaced Stalin's suspicious policy with an opening to the Third World.⁸ In the mid-1950s, Moscow's hostility toward ruling bourgeois-nationalists began to disappear and local communist parties were instructed that Western "imperialism," not native "reactionaries," were to be the main enemy. In September 1955 a Soviet-orchestrated \$200 million Czech arms deal was announced with Egypt, a breakthrough that for the first time committed Moscow to a major arms deal with an Arab state.⁹

Egypt quickly became the centerpiece of Soviet strategy in the Arab world. When Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company in July 1956, Moscow was quick to endorse his illegal action. Israel, which had been contemplating a preemptive war to disarm Egypt before it could absorb and utilize the armor and aircraft it had received in the Czech arms deal, was prodded into participating in a joint Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of the Sinai by constant fedayeen guerrilla attacks on Israel sponsored by Nasser. The Soviet Union denounced the October 19, 1956, Israeli attacks

⁵ Nadav Safran, "the Soviet Union and Israel," in Ivo Lederer and Wayne Vucinivich, eds., The Soviet Union and the Middle East (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1974), p. 161.

⁶ See Adam Ulam, Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy 1917-1967 (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 584.

⁷ See Chaim Herzog, The Arab-Israeli Wars (New York: Random House, 1982), pp. 30, 72, 75.

⁸ See George Lenczowski, Soviet Advances in the Middle East (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1971), pp. 11-18.

⁹ For a detailed analysis of the Czech arms deal, see Uri Ra'anan, The USSR Arms the Third World: Case Studies in Soviet Foreign Policy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969).

in the Sinai as well as the Anglo-French intervention several days later. It immediately pressed for a cease-fire and proposed that a joint Soviet-American expeditionary force be sent to stop the fighting. On November 6, the Soviets warned Britain, France, and Israel against the continuation of their intervention and vaguely hinted about the possibility of a Soviet nuclear missile attack on their capitals. On November 10, three days after the cease-fire, Moscow threatened to send a "volunteer" force to the region.

The Soviet reaction to the 1956 Suez crisis was essentially a propaganda operation. Despite its rhetoric, Moscow did not provide supplies or combat personnel to Egypt, possibly for fear of provoking Western military countermeasures while it was still engaged in suppressing the Hungarian revolution. Yet the Soviets scored a major political victory in the Arab world. Though Moscow did little more than sit on the sidelines and mutter noncommittal threats, it claimed credit for the ultimate withdrawal of the British, French, and Israeli armies. By rattling its rockets, appealing for high-level meetings, ceaselessly vilifying the West, and trumpeting its undying support for "progressive" Arab movements, the Soviet Union won a low-cost, low-risk public relations victory in the Arab world.

THE JUNE WAR AND THE WAR OF ATTRITION

The Soviet Union was more active, but less successful, in the 1967 Arab-Israeli crisis. After 1956, Moscow became the self-proclaimed champion of the Arab world, supplying arms to Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. Moscow denounced Israel as an outgrowth of Western "imperialism" that would not be defeated until "imperialism" was defeated. To accomplish this, Moscow stressed that Arab states needed Soviet support.

In February 1966, the pro-Soviet left wing of the Baath (Renaissance) party seized power in Syria in a bloody coup d'etat. In May 1967, Soviet intelligence reports falsely warned Cairo and Damascus of an Israeli military buildup along the Syrian border.¹⁰ This Soviet disinformation provoked a spiral of escalation that eventually triggered the third Arab-Israeli war in June 1967. Although Soviet motivation for lighting the fuse to the Middle East's foremost powder keg remains unclear, a major consideration must have been the galvanizing effect such a report would have on Soviet relations with both Egypt and Syria. By charging that Washington's hostility to the new radical Syrian regime was behind the buildup,¹¹ Moscow drew Arab attention to the importance of its support and its value as a counterweight to the United States.

¹⁰ See Michael Howard and Robert Hunter, Israel and the Arab World: The Crisis of 1967, Adelphi Paper #41 (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1967), pp. 15-27.

¹¹ Pravda, May 22, 1967.

When Israel launched a preemptive strike that swiftly crushed the Arab armies, Moscow pressed in the United Nations for a cease-fire and Israeli withdrawal. Concerned that its client regimes in Egypt and Syria would be replaced by moderates who would turn to the West or militants who would turn toward China, Moscow sought to cushion the Arab defeat through diplomacy aimed at halting the Israeli advance. Careful to avoid a confrontation with the United States, which still retained strategic nuclear superiority as well as superior power projection capabilities in the region, the Soviet Union attempted to pressure Israel to the extent it could do so without arousing American ire.

When the smoke cleared after the Six Day War, Moscow began to replace military equipment lost by the Arabs.¹² It laid responsibility for the defeat on the doorstep of the Arab officer corps and called for the "socialization" of Egyptian and other Arab officers.¹³ Through its burgeoning military advisory program, Moscow penetrated the Egyptian military establishment "to a depth it had never before achieved in any non-communist country."¹⁴

Another major benefit of the increased dependence of Egypt and Syria on Soviet military largesse was the acquisition of Soviet base rights that significantly strengthened the Soviet military position in the eastern Mediterranean. The Soviets had been scouring the eastern Mediterranean for base rights for years, particularly since the 1961 rift with Albania deprived them of their submarine base at Valona Bay.

In April 1968, the Soviet Union and Egypt signed a secret five-year agreement formalizing Soviet access to Egyptian facilities.¹⁵ Alexandria became the hub of Soviet naval activity in the eastern Mediterranean and provided the Soviet Mediterranean Fleet, the Fifth Eskadra, with logistical, communications, and maintenance support. The Soviets also had access to Port Said and started to develop a deep water port primarily for their own use at Mersa Matruh, near the Libyan border. Beginning in May 1968, Soviet piloted TU-16 Badgers with Egyptian markings were launched from Egyptian air bases on reconnaissance and surveillance missions over the Mediterranean as far west as Malta.¹⁶

Given these strategic dividends, Moscow had little choice but to intervene on Egypt's behalf during the next conflict with Israel. In 1969 Nasser unleashed a war of attrition along the

¹² Within four months an estimated 80 percent of Egyptian losses had been replaced. Wynfred Joshua, Soviet Penetration Into the Middle East, (New York: National Strategy Information Center, 1971), p. 16.

¹³ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁴ Roger Pajak, Soviet Arms Aid in the Middle East (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1976), p. 3.

¹⁵ Milan Vego, "Moscow's Quest for Military Bases in the Mediterranean," Defense and Foreign Affairs Digest, December 1979, p. 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

Suez Canal front in an effort to salvage his shattered prestige, reassert his claim to leadership of the Arab world, and harass the Israelis. Preferring to fight the war on their own terms instead of on Nasser's, the Israelis launched deep penetration raids in late 1969 to convince the Egyptians that their government was embarked on a risky course and that it could not shield them from the consequences. Nasser requested Soviet assistance to blunt the raids, and the Soviets responded in early 1970 with the first deployment of Soviet combat troops to a noncommunist country since the Red Army had been evicted from northern Iran in 1946. By mid-March 1970, the Soviets had deployed in Egypt SA-3 anti-aircraft missiles that had not yet been provided to Moscow's Warsaw Pact allies or to North Vietnam. By early summer about 20,000 Soviet personnel, including 12,000-15,000 air defense specialists,¹⁷ had been dispatched to man "the most concentrated air defense system anywhere in the world."¹⁸ Moreover, the Soviets sent 100-150 pilots and advanced MIG-23 fighter aircraft to Soviet controlled air bases in Egypt to insure that the Israelis would be deterred from launching additional deep penetration raids.¹⁹

After two Soviet-Israeli air battles in which four Soviet planes and one Israeli plane were shot down, Egypt and Israel arrived at a cease-fire. It was immediately violated by Egypt, with Soviet complicity.²⁰

THE 1973 WAR

Anwar Sadat, Nasser's successor, declared 1971 the "Year of Decision" in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and in May 1971, signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union. Tensions between the two allies grew, however, due to Sadat's purge of the pro-Soviet Ali Sabri faction in May 1971, the abortive communist coup in Sudan in July 1971, and Soviet footdragging on Sadat's requests for long-range offensive weapons. Disgruntled with Soviet equivocations and possibly anxious about Soviet penetration in the Egyptian armed forces, Sadat shocked Moscow in July 1972 by ordering the withdrawal of 7,500 Soviet advisors serving with Egyptian combat units. The break with the Soviets was far from complete, however. Some 5,500 Soviet military technicians remained in Egypt and Soviet arms deliveries continued.²¹

¹⁷ Glassman, *op. cit.*, p. 187

¹⁸ Lawrence Whetten, "June 1967 to June 1971: Four Years of Canal War Reconsidered," *New Middle East*, June 1971, p. 15.

¹⁹ *Strategic Survey 1970*, (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1970), p. 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²¹ Foy Kohler, Leon Goure, Mose Harvey, *The Soviet Union and the October Middle East War: The Implications for Detente* (University of Miami: Center for Advanced International Studies, 1974), pp. 34-35.

Despite the poor state of Soviet-Egyptian relations, the Soviet Union threw its support behind the Egyptians and Syrians immediately after their October 6, 1973, surprise attack on Israel. Despite a professed commitment to detente, Moscow violated its recent agreement with the U.S. to avoid actions that could exacerbate international tensions. Instead, the Soviets failed to restrain their Arab clients, embargo arms shipments to the belligerents, or work for an early cease-fire. To the contrary, Moscow rushed an estimated 200,000 to 225,000 tons of military equipment and supplies to Egypt and Syria during the war.²² Soviet reconnaissance satellites obtained intelligence, which was probably passed on to Cairo and Damascus.²³ And the Soviets reportedly delivered to Egypt a number of SCUD missiles that could strike Tel Aviv from Egyptian territory.²⁴

On October 24, Soviet Communist Party Chief Leonid Brezhnev warned President Richard Nixon that, if the United States was not willing to join the Soviets in enforcing a cease-fire, then Moscow would do so unilaterally.²⁵ The United States responded by warning the Soviets against unilateral intervention, alerting its armed forces around the globe and preparing the 82nd Airborne Division for a possible move.

In certain respects, Soviet brinkmanship during the 1973 crisis resembled its behavior during the 1956 and 1967 crises. The climactic Soviet threat was not issued until after the crisis had peaked.²⁶ Soviet demands for the observance of the cease-fire were not inconsistent with the American position on the cease-fire. Soviet threats were designed to pressure Washington to use its influence to restrain the Israeli advance, something the U.S. was already trying to do.

The difference was that the Soviet Union's threats for the first time were construed as more than propaganda noise. The Soviets had attained rough strategic nuclear parity with the U.S. and had built up their power projection forces to the point that they had a credible military option.

THE 1982 LEBANESE CRISIS

The Israeli intervention in Lebanon in June 1982 had been provoked by an escalating spiral of Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israeli towns triggered by Israeli airstrikes in retaliation for the attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador in London.

²² New York Times, November 28, 1973.

²³ Aviation Week, October 15, 1973; New York Times, October 18, 1973.

²⁴ Washington Post, November 2, 1973.

²⁵ Washington Post, November 28, 1973.

²⁶ See Francis Fukuyama, "Nuclear Shadowboxing: Soviet Intervention Threats in the Middle East," Orbis, Fall 1981.

Within days the Israeli army had overrun Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) base camps in southern Lebanon, besieged the PLO stronghold in Beirut, destroyed the Syrian air defenses inside Lebanon, and prevailed over the Syrian army in localized clashes inside Lebanon. By the end of the summer the Israelis had forced the PLO to evacuate Beirut and disperse throughout the Arab world.

The Soviet Union remained relatively inactive during the crisis. On June 14, a public Soviet statement called for a halt to hostilities, an Israeli withdrawal, and warned that "The present-day Israeli policymakers should not forget that the Middle East is an area lying in close proximity to the southern borders of the Soviet Union and that developments there cannot help affecting the interests of the USSR."²⁷ Moscow routinely alerted two airborne divisions earmarked for the Middle East and reinforced the Fifth Eskadra with five ships, but sent no overtly threatening military or diplomatic signals. After the Syrians and Israelis had reached an uneasy truce, Moscow began replacing Syrian losses.

The Soviets issued their usual rhetorical pyrotechnics on behalf of the Palestinian cause and at one point sent PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat a telegram telling him that they were behind him "one thousand percent."²⁸ Early in the crisis, however, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko made it clear to a Palestinian delegation that the Kremlin had ruled out the use of force on their behalf.²⁹ Nayef Hawatmeh, the leader of the pro-Soviet Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, reflected widely held Palestinian disappointment in Soviet inactivity when he complained that Soviet help was "limited if not zero."³⁰

Why the relatively subdued Soviet reaction? It would seem that the Soviets recognized from the beginning of the war that the PLO could not stand up to the Israeli Army and that the Syrians had little reason to take risks to defend the PLO. Once the Soviets ascertained that the conflict could be contained within Lebanon and did not threaten to topple their closest Middle Eastern ally, Syrian President Hafez Assad, they followed a policy of "measured neglect."³¹

In past crises the Soviets had supported the hardline Arab position, but during the summer of 1982 there was no hardline Arab consensus. Syria bowed out of the fighting early, Iraq was locked in a desperate struggle against Iran, and Libya's mercurial leader, Colonel Muammar Qadhafi, advised the PLO to commit collective suicide to inspire future Arab generations.

²⁷ New York Times, June 15, 1982.

²⁸ Pravda, August 6, 1982.

²⁹ International Herald Tribune, July 7, 1982.

³⁰ The Sunday Times (London), July 4, 1982.

³¹ Karen Dawisha, "The USSR in the Middle East: Superpower in Eclipse?" Foreign Affairs, Winter 1982-1983, p. 450.

In view of Arab passivity, there was no need for the Soviets to be more Arab than the Arabs by coming to the PLO's aid. Besides, the Soviets had done little when the PLO had been battered in 1970 by the Jordanians or in 1976 by the Syrians. Those past instances of Soviet abstention had not cost Moscow much in terms of lost influence over the PLO, simply because the PLO had nowhere else to turn for aid on the same scale as Moscow provided.

The Soviets, like the Arabs, also were preoccupied by other affairs--such as propping up the pro-Moscow regime in Poland. Furthermore, the Soviets also somewhat distrusted the PLO's Arafat, because of his close links to the Saudis and his maverick brand of diplomacy. A major reason for Moscow's failure to attempt to pull the PLO's chestnuts from the fire was the prospect of getting burned in the attempt. Soviet options were limited. There was little that could be done to prevent an Israeli victory short of a major commitment of Soviet troops. This would be extremely risky in view of Israel's air superiority and preemptive military philosophy. Moreover, Moscow would be confronted immediately by resolute American leadership that would not shy away from taking countermeasures to offset Soviet moves. From the Soviet perspective "this would certainly have been the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time."³²

Instead, Moscow resorted to a strategy of damage limitation. It paid lip service to the Palestinian cause but did not intervene to prevent the PLO's ouster from Lebanon. It answered Arab charges of betrayal with countercharges of Arab impotence. Syrian complaints about the quality of Soviet supplied weapons were countered with complaints of Syrian incompetence and pointed comparisons with the performance of Vietnamese pilots during the Vietnam war.

The Lebanese crisis has not seemed to inflict lasting damage on the Soviet position in the Middle East. The Israeli intervention deprived the Soviet Union of access to the vast terrorist infrastructure that had been built up in southern Lebanon over the last fifteen years, but Moscow can look to South Yemen to fill the gap. The Soviets can take great comfort in the propaganda bonanza that they reaped during the war, in their newly gained SAM-5 missile bases in Syria, and in Syria's increased dependence on Soviet support. Their Syrian clients were also able to block the Reagan peace initiative by vitiating the Israel-Lebanon agreement calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Lebanon. By preventing the establishment of a Pax Americana, Moscow retains its hold over dependent Arab client states and forestalls discussion of the Soviet threat to states in the region.

³² David Andelman, "Andropov's Middle East," Washington Quarterly, Spring 1983, p. 113.

THE SOVIET BUILDUP IN SYRIA

Following the debacle that Syria suffered at Israeli hands in Lebanon, the Soviet Union reassured the Syrians of the value of their Soviet connection. Moscow rapidly replaced Syrian losses and upgraded Syrian capabilities, transferring an estimated \$1.5 billion of military equipment into Syrian hands by May 1983.³³ The Syrian air force and air defense system was strengthened immensely. In addition to at least 100 modern aircraft, including MiG-23 jet fighters, Syria received new radar and communications equipment and became the first country outside the Soviet Union to host long-range SAM-5 missiles. The SAM-5 is the largest anti-aircraft missile ever built. Originally developed in the early 1960s to defend Soviet cities and military installations from high altitude bombing attacks, it can destroy targets at up to 95,000 feet in altitude and has a slant range of about 150 miles. Because it is an old weapons system, however, it may be vulnerable to modern electronic countermeasures, assuming it has not been modernized.

The Soviets have deployed SAM-5s at two missile sites near the Syrian cities of Damascus and Homs. There are at least 20 missiles at each base, manned solely by 600 to 800 Soviet crewmen and guarded by detachments of Soviet airborne troops.³⁴ Each base is equipped with an elaborate command, control and electronic warfare network tied via satellite into the Soviet command system in Moscow.³⁵ The two bases project an anti-aircraft screen over Lebanon, Western Syria, and northern Israel. The NATO air base at Incirlik, Turkey,³⁶ and U.S. aircraft carrier operations in the eastern Mediterranean are also within range.

The primary threat from SAM-5 missiles is to larger, less maneuverable aircraft, such as military transports, electronic warfare aircraft, flying command posts, and high-flying reconnaissance aircraft. Particularly troubling for the Israelis is the new vulnerability of their E2-C Hawkeye electronic surveillance planes, which played a large role in the aerial victories over Lebanon. Low-flying Israeli fighter-bombers, on the other hand, would be relatively immune from attack by SAM-5s and could launch a disarming strike on the missile sites. Yet the low-altitude planes are vulnerable to attack from the Soviet SAM-6, SAM-8, and SAM-11 batteries clustered around the SAM-5 sites. An Israeli attack on the SAM-5 sites could also provoke the Soviets. Its pilots and those from other Warsaw Pact states have been dispatched to air bases in eastern Syria, apparently to train Syrian pilots on MiG-23 fighters.³⁷ These pilots could quickly assume a combat role.

³³ New York Times, May 14, 1983.

³⁴ New York Times, May 16, 1983.

³⁵ Newsweek, June 20, 1983.

³⁶ Foreign Report, March 10, 1983.

³⁷ New York Times, May 16, 1983.

The Soviet military presence in Syria, estimated at 4,500 to 5,000 troops and technicians, is the largest Soviet combat force outside the Soviet bloc and Afghanistan. Although smaller than the Soviet buildup in Egypt in the early 1970s, it exerts a much more destabilizing influence on the regional balance of power because of the greater capability of its missile forces and the absence of a buffer zone such as the Sinai. The SAM-5s are a sword of Damocles hanging over northern Israel that threatens Israel's most important military asset--its air superiority. This weakens Israel's ability to deter Syrian mischief in Lebanon and encourages Assad to display dangerous overconfidence.

Moscow might welcome a Syrian-Israeli military confrontation in the coming months to redeem the reputation of Soviet military hardware, increase Syrian dependence on the Soviet Union, boost Soviet prestige in the Arab world, and defuse domestic Syrian discontent with Assad's repressive regime. In such a clash, Moscow probably would seek to limit the scope and intensity of the fighting to prevent a total Syrian defeat and avoid American involvement. Confining hostilities to Lebanon's Bekaa valley, for example, would be ideal for Moscow's purposes. The Syrians could hope to hold their own against the outnumbered Israeli ground forces, if the Israeli air force were deterred from fulfilling its "flying artillery" ground support mission by Syria's vastly improved air defense system. Anything less than an outright Israeli victory would be seen as a victory for Syria, which would redound to Moscow's benefit. In return for its support, Moscow could expect increased access to Syrian ports, air bases, and terrorist training camps.

Containing a conflict is far from simple, however. The Assad regime deliberately may widen such a war to force the participation of Soviet combat forces. Moreover, the Israelis would be tempted to launch preemptive airstrikes against Soviet SAM-5 missile sites in the event of rising tensions on the ground inside Lebanon, even if the SAM-5s were not used in combat. Soviet-Israeli military clashes would almost certainly draw in the United States and would heighten the risk of a superpower confrontation in the Middle East.

MOSCOW AND THE PLO

Although Moscow initially was suspicious of the political and social makeup of the PLO, its ambivalence was replaced by increasing Soviet support in the 1970s. The growing strength of the PLO and ideological competition with the People's Republic of China undoubtedly sparked Soviet interest in the PLO, but a more important motivation for stepped-up support of the PLO was Moscow's desire to enhance its leverage in the Middle East following the decline of its influence in Egypt and its exclusion from the post-1973 peace negotiations between Israel and its Egyptian and Syrian foes. After Egypt defected from the Soviet orbit in 1972, the Soviets began direct arms shipments to the PLO instead of providing arms through intermediary Arab states as before. In 1974,

the PLO was allowed to open an office in Moscow. PLO cadres have been trained in training programs in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe since at least 1977. In 1981, Moscow granted the PLO full diplomatic status.

In return for Soviet arms and training, the PLO became a linchpin in the international terrorist market that has plagued the West since the late 1960s. PLO camps in southern Lebanon, Syria, and South Yemen became international clearinghouses for terrorist training, Soviet arms, and terrorist cooperation. PLO instructors trained members of a wide variety of terrorist groups, including the German Baader-Meinhof gang, the Italian Red Brigades, the Japanese Red Army, the Irish Republican Army, Nicaraguan Sandinistas, Iranian Fedayeen and Turkish terrorists.³⁸ PLO factions, such as the pro-Soviet Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, perform liaison duties between a number of different terrorist groups. Although PLO support for international terrorism has been hamstrung by the loss of PLO camps in southern Lebanon, PLO camps in South Yemen remain active training and support centers for future terrorist operations.

CONCLUSION

The Soviet Union has exploited the Arab-Israeli conflict to improve its strategic position in the Middle East, maximize its leverage over Arab client states, and showcase its support for "national liberation" movements. In return for arms supplies, military training, economic aid, and technical advice, it has received military bases, an entree into the Arab world, access to the PLO terrorist infrastructure, and a soapbox for disseminating its views on Middle Eastern affairs.

Moscow consistently has placed its own strategic interests ahead of those of its Arab clients, generating considerable tension in bilateral relations with even its closest Arab friends. It has accorded higher priority to preserving its ties to Arab clients than to maintaining good relations with the United States, even during the heady days of detente. Although it has sought to avoid direct confrontations with the U.S. during Middle Eastern crises, it has not shrunk from rattling its rockets to score propaganda points with Arab audiences or to press Washington to restrain Israel.

³⁸ For a more detailed analysis of Soviet-PLO cooperation in supporting international terrorism, see Samuel T. Francis, "Palestinian Terrorism: The International Connection," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder #69, December 8, 1978 and Samuel T. Francis, The Soviet Strategy of Terror (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1981).

As Soviet strategic nuclear and power projection forces have grown, Moscow has displayed an increasing willingness to risk a confrontation with Israel that could draw in the United States. Moscow abstained from intervention during the 1982 Lebanon crisis because the interests of its chief Arab client, Syria, were not threatened by the emasculation of the PLO and because it was distracted by tensions in Poland and the preliminary stages of its domestic political struggle to settle the question of Brezhnev's successor. The Soviet military buildup in Syria is an ominous development that sets the stage for the next Arab-Israeli crisis, if not the next U.S.-Soviet crisis.

James A. Phillips
Policy Analyst