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SOVIET STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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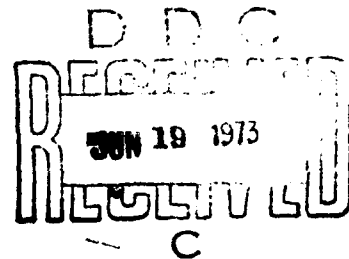
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The purpose of this essay is to analyze current long range Soviet strategy in the Middle East to determine whether her penetration of this region reflects a normal projection of influence by a strong global power, or rather indicates a sinister plot to turn the countries of the Middle East into Soviet satellites. A study will be made of historical indicators which reflect Russian desires concerning her southern neighbors, and will be followed by a discussion of recent economic and military aid programs used by Moscow to project her influence, prestige, and power into the Arab world. The military implications of the Soviet penetration into the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf areas will be examined, as well as the importance of Arab oil in the development of Kremlin objectives in the Middle East. Research material used in developing this essay was obtained from authoritative publications and assisted the author in drawing conclusions which indicate a continued Soviet presence and expansion into the Middle East. This situation could project the two superpowers of today's world upon a collision course in this critical and most volatile region.

INTRODUCTION

Following World War II it has become obvious that the Soviet Union has as a national objective the development of a base of power and influence in the Middle East. Not since the armored columns of Rommel's Africa Corps were halted in the Egyptian desert has the Middle East been in such danger of falling prey to a major world power. The Russian threat keeps growing and yet the free nations of the world almost seem oblivious to the apparent sinister strategy of the Soviet colossus. As Moscow continues its drive for control of this vast and mysterious region, the fire which may some day flame into global conflict could well be smouldering in the sands of the Arab world.

With the silhouette of the hammer and sickle continuing to spread across the Middle East, let us analyze possible long range Soviet strategy in an attempt to determine whether the Kremlin is only concerned with the normal security of her southern boundaries, or if perhaps a more diabolical plot is unfolding in this region which may well involve the entire international community on a collision course in the Middle East.

PRELUDE TO POWER

History is replete with Russian political and military adventures beyond her southern boundaries which have indicated her long range plans for the Middle East.

Following the Treaty of Carlowitz in 1699, which closed a chapter in the history of Turkish expansion, an ambitious Peter the Great began to threaten the integrity of the Ottoman Empire. Unobstructed egress through the Dardanelles became a preoccupation of this ambitious Tsar,

who to the time of his death in 1925 enjoined his countrymen to press on toward Constantinople and India. As numerous European powers maneuvered to solve the Eastern Question, the Russian Bear had started his expansive move toward the Middle East.

Catherine the Great's accession to the throne added new impetus to the policy of acquiring warm-water ports and penetration of the Mediterranean basin. For years the Russian Empress devised grandiose schemes to accomplish this objective and particularly to speed the demise of Turkey. She freely used the technique, still popular today, of infiltration before Russian invasion.

The spectacular rise of Napoleon had a disturbing effect upon the history of Russia and temporarily side-tracked her progress toward the Middle East. Following the French Emperor's ill-starred expedition to Moscow in 1812, however, Russian southward expansion was once again resumed.

Throughout the nineteenth century Russia continued to be involved in military campaigns with Turkey, followed by appropriate peace treaties and again with the constant threat of renewed hostilities. The intensity of Tsarist efforts to alter the Mediterranean balance became obvious. Penetration of the Middle East and the resulting access to warm-water ports on an open sea continued to be key Russian objectives.

The beginning of the twentieth century dawned with a static Russia surprisingly unable to further develop and pursue a policy which would enable her to seriously penetrate the Middle East. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, which included the destruction of the Russian naval squadron in the Straits of Tsushima, offered indirect proof of Russia's

impotence and her inability to force issues in the Mediterranean. The importance of controlling the Middle East again became evident as Russian strategists realized that if the route through the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal had been available to Tsarist forces, the disaster which befell the exhausted Russian sailors after their 20,000 mile voyage from Baltic ports could well have been averted.

Russian territorial claims at the outset of the First World War were further evidence of her continuing objectives in the Mediterranean. The Russian Foreign Ministry claimed annexation of Constantinople, both shores of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara, and the Dardanelles. When England and France, allies of Russia in the Great War, accepted these claims, and with Turkey about to disintegrate by 1917, it appeared at last that the Russian dream of acquiring southern warm-water ports was at hand. But while the First World War brought not only the demise of the Ottoman Empire, unfortunately for Imperial Russia it also caused the downfall of the Romanovs. At this time the comments of Aaron S. Klieman seem indeed appropriate when he said, "in view of the current Soviet appreciation for the Mediterranean, it is ironic that at that decisive moment Bolshevik renunciation of all earlier tsarist territorial claims should have kept Russia from at least sharing dual control of this sea with Britain more than fifty years ago."¹

Following the 1917 revolution the new Soviet government appeared to give greater attention to the European countries with their proletarian classes than they did to the Arab world. Although Britain

¹Aaron S. Klieman, Soviet Russia and the Middle East (1970, p. 33

indicated she intended to remain in effective control of the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf, and the Arab nationalities showed a reluctance to wholeheartedly embrace communism, the Middle East still continued to be of more than a passing interest to the new rulers of the Soviet Union.

In 1940, during negotiations with Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union again indicated its long range plans for the Middle East when it declared that territorial aspirations centered "south of the national territory of the Soviet Union in the direction of the Indian Ocean."² When the Nazi blitzkrieg was unleashed against the Russian homeland, and the survival of the Soviet state was at stake, Moscow's Middle East interests were not energetically pursued. Soviet troops were able, however, to occupy parts of Iran during the war, supposedly to prevent a pro-Axis coup and to safeguard the delivery of allied lend-lease supplies. Once the northern provinces of Iran were occupied, the Soviets showed no real interest in leaving in the foreseeable future. Attempts were actually made to retain large areas of Iranian Azerbaijan for absorption into the USSR. During 1945 Russia also proposed certain claims for possession of considerable Turkish territory including the port of Trapezund. Although opposition from Turkey, Iran and the United States forced the Soviet Union to withdraw her troops in 1946, the Kremlin had once again revealed the persistence of its objectives to the south.³

Middle East watchers feel that the period following World War II until the economic and arms deals with Egypt in 1955 reflected a lack

²Ibid., p. 34.

³Włodzimierz Baczkowski, Soviet Policy In the Middle East (Washington, Institute of Ethnic Studies, Georgetown University, 1958), p. 12.

of interest in the Mediterranean area by the USSR. Certain events occurred during this time, however, which could hardly have passed without creating a stir among Soviet planners. With the Palestine issue, growing Arab nationalism, Israeli independence, and the waning power of Britain and France, it is difficult to believe that the Soviet Union was not fully aware that she was now a global power with many opportunities suddenly available to strengthen and expand her position in the Middle East. Faced with the Truman Doctrine and the presence of the United States' Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, the Soviets during this period outwardly professed to be following a policy of caution and maintained a more conciliatory attitude in her relations with Middle Eastern countries. No effort was spared, however, to establish effective clandestine communist parties in neighboring lands. This was vividly illustrated by Russian involvement in the military conspiracy in Pakistan, which was subdued in 1953, and the communist network agitating in Iran in 1954.⁴

RED STAR OVER THE MIDDLE EAST

In 1955 a series of events occurred which provided the Soviet Union with the opportunity to penetrate a key country in the Middle East -- Egypt. The revolutionary Nasser, in his quest to unite all Arab nations under his Egyptian leadership, was pursuing a strong program of independence from the west. At this time his military leaders were pressuring for arms and equipment to match those of the

⁴Ibid., p. 13.

ever developing Israel. Also, as a result of the Baghdad Pact, the Soviets began to seriously support Arab nationalism in an effort to halt the development of a pro-western coalition in the Middle East. Egypt became the key to developing Soviet Middle East policy, as she had been for Britain a century before.

Following the official arms agreement announcement in 1955, Soviet equipment poured into the Egyptian military coffers. Along with the aircraft, armor, artillery, and naval deliveries came the Russian and Czech instructors. The USSR improved its relations with Egypt even further by providing massive injections of economic aid. Although many projects were financed, including textile and chemical plants, oil refineries, airfields, shipyards and mining ventures, the Aswan Dam project was the key symbol of Russian penetration, as the UAR moved closer into the Soviet orbit.

The Suez crisis of 1956 gave the USSR another opportunity to capitalize on the radical nationalism developing in the Middle East. By staunchly supporting the Arab position against France, Britain, and Israel, and by quickly replacing Egyptian weapons destroyed in the Suez fighting, Moscow became the champion of the Arab world.

While Cairo continued to court Russia in the aftermath of the 1956 crisis, the leadership in Syria and Iraq, political rivals of Egypt, were eyeing the USSR as a lucrative source of better weapons for their poorly trained and equipped military machines. Although both Syria and Iraq were known as the extremist and most volatile of the Arab countries, Moscow apparently felt the opportunity to develop positions of influence in these vulnerable regimes was worth the gamble. As supplies, weapons, and instructors arrived, the USSR's new allies

neutralized the old northern tier and produced new positions for entrenchment should Cairo become a Soviet problem child. Now operating from her strategic positions in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, the Soviet Union proceeded to exploit unsettled conditions in the Mediterranean and Red Sea regions.

In a far reaching corner of the Arabian Peninsula, the Imam of Yemen, nurturing a smouldering hatred of the British, also had ideas concerning possible Russian defense support. Seizing this unexpected opportunity to embarrass Britain and to acquire a position at the southern end of the Red Sea from which to promote Soviet influence in the Middle East, Moscow once again moved into the developing vacuum. Although Soviet aid to this feudal regime was small in comparison to that given Egypt, the long range results have proven the wisdom of Moscow's support. Even after a change of Yemeni leadership, a civil war, and the birth of the republic of Southern Yemen, the Soviet government is making it crystal clear that she is determined to retain ship facilities and a position of influence on the tip of the Arabian Peninsula. It is also interesting to note that the airport built at Sana just happens to accommodate the largest Russian jets and is capable of providing a staging area for possible Soviet entry into East Africa.⁵

Using economic and military aid as bait, the Soviet penetration of the Middle East continued westward along the Mediterranean during the last decade. Morocco, Algeria, and Libya all received peaceful aid overtures in the early 1960's; and while all of these countries

⁵Wynfred Joshua, Soviet Penetration into the Middle East (New York, National Strategy Information Center, Inc., 1971), p. 28.

at the western gateway accepted some form of assistance, only Algeria eventually became a close collaborator with the USSR. Morocco, after a short flirtation with Moscow, continued to procure the bulk of its defense hardware from western suppliers. The support the Soviets gave to Mauritania's United Nations bid in 1961, and their choice of Algiers over Rabat during the border clash of 1963, cooled the Moroccan relationship with the Soviet Union. The Kremlin's venture to acquire a foothold in Libya has been marginal at best. The Libyans have always indicated a distrust of communism which was pointed out by Premier Quaddafi's decision to support the current Sudanese government against an attempted communist coup in 1971. Although Moscow has met with varying degrees of success in her efforts to penetrate the countries of the Western Mediterranean, there is no question that there is now a definite Soviet presence in most nations of the Middle East.

OIL -- THE KEY TO AN INDUSTRIALIZED WORLD

From a careful evaluation of the foregoing historical background during which Russia has continued to penetrate the countries of the Middle East, can we determine at this time the ultimate Soviet objective in this volatile area of the world? Is the mere spreading of Communist ideology and development of peaceful trade the primary reason behind Moscow's expansionist goals? Perhaps it is a Soviet designed and timed Arab-Israeli peace treaty which would include the rights to her long desired warm-water ports along the Mediterranean. Or is the real reason one of ultimate control of the Middle East and Europe through a monopoly of the new economic factor -- oil? An analysis of this latter possibility must be considered before drawing any conclusions concerning

long range Soviet strategy in the Middle East.

Since World War II the Soviet Union has been able to dominate her East European satellites by control of their primary energy source -- oil. It would appear that as the second largest oil producing country in the world (309 million tons in 1968),⁶ this would not be an arduous task. But today the Kremlin is finding it difficult to meet rising home consumption, supply Eastern Europe, and also develop an oil export trade with other countries all from her own domestic resources. In spite of Moscow's policy of not depending on outside sources of oil, and her new discoveries in Siberia, the Soviet need for oil from the Middle East is fast becoming essential. It has been estimated by some experts that the Russian demand for oil will, in 1980, exceed domestic supply by about 100 million tons a year.⁷

In order to continue the expansion of her oil export trade to Western Europe and other industrialized countries of the world, thereby deriving valuable commercial and political benefits, the USSR will undoubtedly become a heavy importer of Middle East oil. The question which arises at this point concerns the method the Soviets will use to obtain oil reserves. Two approaches appear open to Moscow in her bid to acquire this greatest single prize of the Arab world. The Soviet Union might attempt to take over numerous Middle East oil producing states by political or military means. Carefully placed Soviet military advisors, and beholden Arab political leaders who have been recipients of liberal doses of economic aid, could well assist in a series of

⁶Robert E. Hunter, The Soviet Dilemma in the Middle East, Part II: "Oil and the Persian Gulf" (Adelphi Papers, The Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 1969), p. 3.

⁷Ibid.

coups if the decision were made to proceed along these lines. This approach, however, would certainly lead to the one thing that the Kremlin does not want -- direct confrontation with the United States.

A second method to acquire control of the vast Middle East oil reserves would be through the cooperative development of oil and natural gas industries in countries along the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf. It appears that current Soviet policy is inclined toward this safer commercial approach. With more than 58% of the world's proved oil reserves in Middle East lands, it is apparent that control of this critical fuel supply by the Soviet Union would especially concern all of the industrialized nations of the world. These countries, so dependent upon an uninterrupted flow of reasonably priced oil reserves, would have many a sleepless night if Soviet ambitions in the Middle East were realized.

It is interesting to note the large percentage of crude oil imports which the following industrialized nations required from the Middle East in 1968:⁸

Japan	91%
Netherlands	70%
Belgium	60%
Italy	59%
United Kingdom	54%
France	46%
Germany (Federal Republic)	33%
United States	18%

It appears that this dependence on Middle East oil will continue to increase as the years go by. Discontinuance of these oil imports would not only cripple vast numbers of industries in many world powers, but would certainly impact greatly on their balance of payments and upon

⁸Ibid., p. 2.

the stability of their currencies.

THE MILITARY ASPECT

If the Kremlin decided to use force in the Middle East to advance her political and economic ambitions, certainly a strong, viable military force in the area would be essential. A study of Soviet strategy in the Middle East would be incomplete without exploring the capabilities and limitations of the fighting forces available to the USSR in this expansive region.

Russian political and economic penetration of the Middle East over the last two decades has been quite apparent to the average person. The true extent of the Soviet Union's military intrusion in this same area during the last twenty years, however, has been shrouded in mystery. Actually, since 1953 the Soviets have been establishing a growing military presence in the Middle East.

In the early 1960's Soviet naval strength in the Mediterranean showed a substantial increase, and by the end of the decade a balanced force of nearly seventy warships made up the Russian squadron.⁹ Not only was the appearance of Soviet ships alarming to NATO observers, but the quality and newness of this flotilla amazed old naval evaluators. New cruisers, guided-missile frigates, destroyers, and submarines have been observed, and all mounting the latest in missiles, rocket launchers, air surveillance equipment, and electronic warfare gear. In addition to the presence of a variety of support ships and the availability of naval infantry if needed, the Soviet Mediterranean squadron has been augmented

⁹Lawrence L. Whetten, The Soviet Presence in the Eastern Mediterranean (New York, National Strategy Information Center, Inc., 1971), pp. 22-23.

by units of various fledgeling Arab navies. To emphasize the presence of their naval forces in the Mediterranean area, the Soviets have stepped up the number of port calls, particularly to Arab countries where agreements have been negotiated for the use of shore support facilities.

In addition to their impressive naval strength in the Mediterranean, the Kremlin had not overlooked by 1971 the opportunity to place military advisors in many strategic countries in the Middle East, Africa, and the Indian sub-continent as detailed below:¹⁰

<u>Country</u>	<u>Advisors</u>
Algeria	1,000
Egypt (Withdrawn August 1972)	12,500
Syria	800
Iraq	400
Yemen	100
South Yemen	180
Sudan	500
Guinea	100
Somali Republic	300
Afghanistan	150
India	150
Ceylon	100

Soviet air strength too has been increased in the Middle East where MIG-23 and TU 16 aircraft, operating from UAR airfields, give fleet protection and observation capabilities. The USSR has also developed its huge commercial air carrier, AEROFLOT, along the same lines as its air force, thus giving them the capability to interchange parts, use the same support facilities, and replace crew members without additional training. Since AEROFLOT has commercial landing rights in most Middle East countries, both Soviet civilian and military aircraft have found ground installations and stockpiles of critical parts

¹⁰Military Review, "Soviet Military Advisors - 1971" (December 1972), p. 101.

available in these countries. The logistics system developed to date by this method has greatly increased the Soviet sphere of operations throughout the Mediterranean area.¹¹

In addition to her airlift capability, the Russian merchant fleet, presently the largest in the world, now sails all of the major shipping lanes. With her vast new merchant marine and proficient fishing fleet, the Soviets now have a sealift capability which can effectively support her activities in the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean.

The requirement to rapidly employ large army units, consisting of armor, infantry, and artillery, would fall upon installations within the Soviet homeland or organizations stationed in Europe and the Balkans.

1973 - THRESHOLD OF SUCCESS

Although it appears that an uninterrupted and somewhat unchallenged Soviet Union has acquired primary influence and control of the Middle East, it must be remembered that the foregoing historical events have taken place over some 250 years and often have portrayed more reverses for the Russian Bear than gains.

Since the first economic and military aid programs were started with Nasser in 1955, the Soviet penetration into Middle East countries has been fraught with frustrations and often potentially explosive international situations for the Soviet Union. The purges of carefully developed Communist parties in Arab lands during the many unpredictable periods of rampant nationalism were certainly a blow to carefully designed Kremlin plans. The military disasters which occurred to

¹¹Whetten, pp. 26-27.

Moscow's staunchest Arab allies during the Suez crisis and the 1967 war with Israel greatly embarrassed the Soviet Union and raised questions around the world as to the quality of Russian equipment and training techniques. Nasser's untimely death and the independent policies of President Sudat, which recently resulted in the expulsion of Soviet advisors and technicians from Egypt, have taught the shocked Kremlin leaders that the stability of the often volatile and unpredictable Arab nations is not always to be depended upon.

In spite of numerous reverses in the last two decades, the Soviet leadership has matured greatly from its Middle East ventures and now seems prepared to discard any ideological inhibitions as they carefully pursue a continuing but moderate course in the Arab world. From the bitter cold war rivalry of the 1950's when Soviet policy promoted a high level of tension throughout the Middle East, we now see a more conciliatory approach being used to promote the USSR's image as a respectable world power interested in regional stability, but really saying that the Middle East is a legitimate Soviet sphere of influence. Moscow has finally realized that it must refine the crude tactics of the Tsars, Stalin, and Khrushchev into methods more compatible with contemporary world politics.

As the events of 1973 start to unfold, where does the Soviet Union stand after years of political, economic, and military penetration in the Middle East? What conclusions may we draw at this point in time concerning Russian accomplishments in the Middle East?

The Soviets have over the years succeeded in extending Russian hegemony southward by gaining undisputed passage through the Turkish Straits and neutralizing the Northern Tier. A subdued although some-

what sceptical Turkey and Iran appear for the present to insure a secure southern boundary for Moscow.

The Soviet Union has developed into a global power, has penetrated the Mediterranean, and acquired the use of long sought warm-water ports. She has become a Middle East power, not by outright aggression, but by invitation from Arab countries and has taken full advantage of the vacuum created in the area by the withdrawal of British and French forces.

The Soviet position in the Middle East has been greatly strengthened and Western influence reduced by her economic and military aid programs, advisor teams, and political support to Arab countries. Strategic footholds have been obtained in the Mediterranean, Red Sea basin, Africa, and the Persian Gulf, from which control could be obtained of key land, sea, and air routes in the Middle East and Indian Ocean areas.

To date the Kremlin has prevented Communist China from projecting its power into the Middle East and has, through its air and vastly expanded naval units, succeeded in becoming a serious threat to the southern flank of NATO. While gaining a fuller share of international trade and commerce, the Soviets have stressed petroleum logistics in their pursuit of eventual control over a key source of West European and Japanese oil. As Russian military and economic assistance programs continue to Middle East nations, the Arab-Israeli problem continues to boil, and Kremlin overtures for additional facilities are pushed with Syria and Malta, the Soviets have been very careful to accomplish their primary goal -- to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States.

ANATOMY OF THE FUTURE

In the 1950's and 60's the Arab states welcomed Soviet moves into the Middle East as a counterforce against faltering Western imperialism and influence. By 1970, after numerous plots, coups, and wars, there has emerged a growing sense of despair in the Arab world which has led it toward ultra-radical solutions to problems and definitely down the road toward anarchy. The Soviet Union, now considering the Middle East well within her sphere of interest, has been viewing the frustrations of these volatile peoples with concern and a more conservative attitude than during the days of her headlong dash to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the Colonial Powers. The policies of Moscow concerning the Middle East during the remainder of this decade should be tempered with caution as she continues with her efforts to expand her sphere of influence in the area, and an almost paranoid insistence upon avoiding any clash of national interests which might bring a nuclear confrontation with the United States.

The USSR can be expected to continue with its efforts to achieve strategic and tactical control of the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf area. Efforts should soon be renewed to hasten the reopening of the Suez Canal and the establishment of stronger ties with countries which can assure Moscow increased trade in East Africa, the Indian Ocean area, and along the air and sea lanes to the far east.

To give added security to her long range strategy to eventually drive the United States out of Europe and the Middle East, and have NATO dismantled, long-term economic and military aid pacts with countries having key naval and air base facilities can be expected to be negotiated by Moscow. Soviet expanded development of oil, petro-

chemical, liquified gas, fertilizer, and mining ventures can be expected by 1980 throughout the Middle East and Africa. The exploitation of Arab hostility to the existence of Israel will continue until such time as it is advantageous to the Soviet Union to negotiate with the United States an acceptable Arab-Israeli peace.

An expanded Russian naval and air presence may be expected in the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. Stepped up show-the-flag visits will be in evidence at ports in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, India, around the Arabian peninsula, and to countries of East Africa, as the new Soviet fleet flexes its sea muscles.


Political influence and pressures will be brought to bear, especially in the oil producing countries, as the Kremlin continues its drive to communize and dominate as yet unaligned independent Middle East nations.

Soviet penetration of the Middle East and her application of military and political strength in this region have established a degree of parity between the Soviet Union and the only current world power capable of resisting her efforts -- the United States. The American awareness of the strategic consequences of Soviet dominance of the Middle East, and the desire to preserve a credible deterrence in the area, will probably set the parameters of superpower relations in this area of the world for the rest of this decade.

In spite of her desire to avoid a worldwide conflict over the Middle East, the masters of the Kremlin are also aware of that statement made in the 18th century by one of her statesmen, "that which stops growing begins to decay."¹² There have been no actions by the Soviet Union to

¹²Walter Laqueur, The Struggle For the Middle East, (1969), p. 187.

date which indicate an intention to allow their future strategy in the Middle East to include anything but an expansion of Soviet influence, power, authority and control.



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