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Possible Soviet Military Intervention
in a Syrian-Israeli War

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POSSIBLE SOVIET MILITARY INTERVENTION IN A SYRIAN-ISRAELI WAR

THE PROBLEM

This paper estimates, in response to a specific request, the purposes, pace, forms, and consequences of possible Soviet military intervention if a Syrian-Israeli war should break out within the next several months. The fighting is assumed to be confined to the Syrian front [

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CONCLUSIONS

The Soviets probably anticipate that a Syrian-Israeli war would end quickly in an Israeli victory. Their capabilities for rapid deployment of militarily effective forces to Syria are seriously limited. Overt intervention would involve major political as well as military risks.

We believe that the USSR would concentrate mainly on diplomatic efforts to save the Syrian Army, limiting its military support to such measures as the use of the SA-6 regiment and the advisors already there. Through these measures, together with threats of more direct involvement, the Soviets would seek to get the fighting ended and to insure a major role in subsequent peace negotiations. The Soviets would also calculate that Syria, defeated once again, would become more dependent on them and that meanwhile the Soviet Union would reap major gains as a consequence of an oil embargo and its divisive effects on Western cohesion.

The Soviets might go further, and the Director of Naval Intelligence estimates that they probably would. If they did, they might concentrate on air defense or a limited ground presence.

- The first SAM regiment airlifted to Syria could go into operation two days after a decision to send it. Within three days, an entire fighter division could fly in and some of its aircraft could be ready for combat. Fighters could be disassembled and shipped in by air, but this would take longer.

- An airborne regiment could reach Syria within one to two days, and a division within four days. Airborne units could not stand up to Israeli armor, and the Soviet purpose in sending them would be to intensify the crisis and precipitate a ceasefire by political means.
- In these cases, air routes would be a critical factor. For geographic and political reasons, the USSR would probably focus its pressures more on Turkey than on Yugoslavia or Iran. [

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¹The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force observes that the controlling assumptions of this Estimate preclude adequate consideration of likely Soviet responses to an Israeli initiation of hostilities and the broad range of political, propaganda, and military actions which the Soviets could take. The Soviets probably consider protection of their client-state relationship with Syria as being of primary strategic importance, especially in view of the leverage the Soviets may believe that relationship (within the Arab structure) provides on Free World economic stability and NATO's viability. In the light of Soviet actions during the 1973 war, it is believed the Soviets would commit themselves to the defense of Syria from the first hour of hostilities and would not hesitate to immediately commit naval, air, ground, tactical rocket, and air defense forces, and perhaps resort to nuclear blackmail. He believes it would be dangerous to underestimate Soviet resolve in this regard nor their belief that the US may be powerless to respond effectively. While a sudden Israeli initiative campaign against Syria might seriously restrict Soviet tactical options, it is not at all certain that such a campaign would be concluded quickly or that seriously disruptive counteractions might not occur.

DISCUSSION

I. GENERAL SOVIET CALCULATIONS

1. The Soviets

Prudence requires them to plan for the contingency of a short and successful Israeli campaign. They must also plan for the possibility of little or no advance warning. Syria might provide some notice of its intention to attack, though probably not its exact timing, but in the case of Israeli attack or unintended escalation from skirmishes, the USSR would have to rely on whatever tactical warning it could independently acquire.

2. In the event of a war between Syria and Israel, the Soviets would see some advantages to themselves, both regionally and globally. It would wreck, at least temporarily, the diplomatic efforts monopolized by the US since October 1973; it would generate strong anti-US sentiment among the Arabs; and it would produce US-West European strains which, if magnified by a new oil embargo, would be serious indeed.² As against this, the Soviets have a considerable stake in preventing a major Syrian defeat, which would damage their

²The likelihood and possible forms of another oil embargo will be considered in detail in a forthcoming inter-agency study.

position in the area, but they know that, once the fighting starts, they have no sure way to prevent such a defeat.

3. The Soviets probably could accept serious Syrian reverses in the Golan Heights, but they could not be sure that the Israelis would not fight on in pursuit of larger objectives, such as destruction of the Syrian armed forces. Such a defeat would cause extensive, but not necessarily irreparable, damage to the USSR's prestige and interests in the area. To take pressure off Syria, the Soviets would encourage other Arab nations, especially Egypt, to get involved and would offer to support them if they did. Moscow would bring diplomatic pressure on the US to get Israel to stop fighting and would use military signals to reinforce that pressure. But the Soviets would also have very little time for calculation and diplomatic maneuver. Thus they would also have to consider—indeed, must already have made some contingency plans for—intervention by military force.

4. On the *positive* side, in addition to the factors mentioned above, a successful Soviet intervention, i.e., one which stopped the Israelis and insured the existence of the Syrian regime, would:

—gain the USSR credit among the Arabs and discredit Sadat if he failed to open a second front;

- gain it credit and subsequent influence in Syria, particularly if the fighting ended with a visible Soviet military presence in the country;
- insure a major Soviet voice in subsequent negotiations;
- extend Soviet military presence in the Middle East.

5. On the *negative side*, the Soviets would recognize that the risks of military intervention, while manageable to some extent, cannot be fully calculated and controlled.

- They respect Israeli military capabilities and, while they probably calculate that Israel would be reluctant to engage Soviet forces overtly, they cannot count on this.
- Their capabilities for rapid intervention with forces capable of sustained combat are limited.
- Their access to the area is doubtful for certain forms of intervention.
- They cannot be sure what is the threshold of Soviet military involvement beyond which the US might intervene in force.
- They must be concerned about negative effects to their larger interests, particularly relations with the US.

6. In this last connection, Soviet judgments will involve Moscow's view of the value and prospects of detente at the time when the war begins. Our present view is that this consideration would influence Soviet decisions but, by itself, would not prevent the Soviets from intervening in ways that were clearly designed only to defend Syria. In this regard, we have reviewed the evidence of October 1973, when the Soviets had to weigh Egyptian appeals for intervention against, among other things, their concern for relations with the US. The evidence, while not conclusive, indicates that there is a good chance that, if the destruction of the Egyptian forces had continued, the Soviets would have

sent airborne units to Egypt, counting on this to bring about a quick end to the fighting.

II. SOVIET CAPABILITIES FOR INTERVENTION

7. This section considers military operations which the Soviets could initiate early in the war, or a few days beforehand if they acquired advance warning of hostilities. Given the anticipated shortness of the war, warning could be an important factor in enabling the Soviets effectively to carry out some of these operations.

Forces Already in Syria

8. Since the October 1973 war the number of Soviet military personnel in Syria has risen by several hundred to a total of at least 2,000 men. These Soviets are mainly training Syrian pilots and advising ground forces down to the battalion level. The only Soviet combat unit currently identified is an SA-6 regiment located near Damascus, which accounts for about 500 of the Soviet personnel in the country. This regiment consists of five firing batteries of four transporter-erector-launchers (TELs) each, for a total of 20 TELs.

9. [

military equipment [

] we believe that the excesses represent Syrian war reserves. There is evidence of a number of MIG-21s—perhaps as many as 75—in Syria that

[] are probably intended for Syrian use when additional pilots are trained. There are also about 250 unassigned tanks [] It is unlikely that the Soviets would plan to recover

this or other military equipment from Syrian hands for their own use, but we cannot altogether dismiss the possibility.

Forces That Could be Sent From the USSR

10. *Air Routes.* There are three possible air routes for Soviet military intervention:

— The Yugoslav route would be readily available for transport overflights, but permission to send combat units or to stage through Yugoslav airfields is less certain. This route requires an over-water flight of 1,130 nm to Syria.

— The availability of the Turkish route is uncertain. [

— Iran values its relations with the Arabs, but does not need their oil and opposes Soviet influence in the region. For these reasons, the Shah is less likely than the Turks to allow more than a few overflights [

11. *Air Defense.* SAM units are air transportable, and the first new Soviet battery could arrive and go into operation within two days. A more potent force, such as an entire air defense regiment, would require several more days. Overflight rights for this intervention would probably not be a problem.

12. The quickest way of introducing Soviet *combat air forces* into Syria would be to fly in operational tactical air units directly from the USSR.

Such a move would be unprecedented, however, and the Yugoslav route would involve long over-water flights with which Soviet pilots are unfamiliar. The Soviets could ferry a combat air division—about 120 aircraft—via Yugoslavia in about three days; only a portion of this force could be ready for combat in Syria within this period. If the Soviets chose to overfly Turkey from bases in the Transcaucasus, several squadrons could be readied for limited combat activity within a matter of hours. In either case, at least an additional week would be required for the entire air division to reach combat status.

13. As for ferrying routes, Belgrade would probably drag its feet on, and might even deny, a request for staging rights. Iran would probably refuse overflights by combat aircraft. Turkey might acquiesce, accepting a contention that the fighters were being delivered to the Syrian Air Force.

14. Barring overflights by combat aircraft, the Soviets could fly disassembled fighters into Syria aboard transports, as they have done previously in Egypt. Allowing time to prepare the fighters for shipment, a complete Soviet air division of about 120 fighters could be transported from the USSR to Syria in three to four days. A few aircraft might be available for limited combat within a day or so after delivery. Using this method of shipment, more than a week would subsequently be needed to assemble all the aircraft and ready the entire unit for combat.

15. *Airborne Forces.* A Soviet airborne division is, by US standards, small, not highly ground mobile, and lightly armed. Soviet airborne forces alone could not successfully defend against an Israeli offensive. More than one airborne division would not increase the effectiveness of the Soviet show of force. Using military airlift, the Soviets could deploy one airborne regiment (1,800 men) to Syria within one to two days and an entire division (7,400 men) within four days. As for air routes, Turkey and even Yugoslavia might refuse overflight rights for this

purpose, but the USSR might decide to proceed without permission.

16. *Naval infantry units*, while small, could arrive fairly quickly to provide a demonstration force or conduct port security. The Soviets can sealift the Black Sea naval infantry assault regiment (1,800 men) to a Syrian port in five days. If the Soviets had any naval infantry afloat in the eastern Mediterranean when the war began, it could reach Syria in a day or two.

17. *Tank or motorized rifle divisions* would be required if the Soviets wished to provide a major ground combat capability. If the Soviets pursued this course to the full extent, they would have to carry out a considerable mobilization and assemble much more shipping than is normally available in the Black Sea. The first sealifted Soviet division could not arrive in a Syrian port in less than two weeks after a decision to commit. It would take at least a month to load in the USSR, transport by sea, and unload in Syria a Soviet combined arms army of 66,000 men. Deployment of a Soviet force (two combined arms armies) of six tank divisions and four motorized rifle divisions, eight Soviet air regiments (320 aircraft) and air defense elements—the minimum force which the Soviets might regard as a military match for the Israelis in Syria—would require two to three months.

18. *Naval Forces*. The Soviets ordinarily maintain around 50-55 naval units in the Mediterranean. During the October 1973 war the Soviets doubled their major surface combatants from 14 to 29 and increased the total number of ships to 96. Without violating the Montreux Convention, the Soviets could deploy three major combatants, or nine small combatants (DEs) each day from their Black Sea Fleet, which contains about 10 major and 40 small surface combatants.

19. In the 1973 war, Soviet naval units escorted some cargo vessels, supplied some protection for Syrian ports, tracked Israeli air and naval units, and performed surveillance of the Sixth Fleet. In an-

other war, the Soviets could do these functions and provide some SAM defense of the Syrian coast.

20. *Airlift Capabilities*. Even with a full use of available transport aircraft, the USSR cannot exploit all its intervention possibilities simultaneously. For example, it would take at least eight days to deliver to Syria a force comprising an airborne division, a fighter division, and a SAM regiment. Within four days, however, the USSR could deliver a force with considerable visibility and some ability to protect itself against Israeli air attack, e.g., an airborne division, two SA-6 batteries, and a regiment of 40 fighters, if the fighters overflew Turkey.

21. *Combat Effectiveness*. The foregoing estimates regarding Soviet capabilities for intervention have focused primarily on the USSR's ability to transport tactical forces and equipment into Syria. The initial combat effectiveness of these forces in a Mideast war, however, would be severely constrained by a variety of problems, such as language difficulties, unfamiliarity of the terrain, and reliance on the Syrians for airspace control, combat and logistical support, and tactical intelligence. These prospective difficulties would, in our view, be an important inhibiting factor in any Soviet decision to send forces for combat rather than demonstrative purposes.

22. *Potential Interdiction*. The Soviets would have to consider possible Israeli interdiction of Soviet air or sea traffic en route to Syria. In previous Middle East wars, Soviet resupply of the Arabs and US resupply of Israel have been inviolate, although in 1973 the Israelis damaged some Soviet aircraft at Syrian fields and sank a Soviet supply ship in Latakia harbor. [

] At a minimum, the Soviets would have to assume that they would face such attacks. []

III. SOME POSSIBLE SOVIET COURSES OF ACTION

23. If the war broke out with little or no warning, the initial Soviet reaction would probably consist of diplomatic moves designed to effect a ceasefire. At the same time the Soviets would undertake certain military preparations that would serve in part as a warning to Israel and the US and also as the first steps toward possible military intervention. The Soviets meanwhile would encourage the other Arab states, especially Egypt, to go to Syria's aid. The USSR's subsequent decisions about additional involvement would be based on its calculations concerning the course of events, but Moscow would be under intense time pressures. Its immediate options would be:

— *Minimal military involvement.* The rationale would be a Soviet calculation that there was not enough time for a decisive intervention and that, in relation to Soviet interests, the risks of military defeat at Israeli hands or eventual US military reactions were too high. Under this option, the USSR would limit itself to such measures as resupply of the Syrians and commitment to combat of its advisors and the SA-6 regiment already there, plus the dispatch of additional advisors, and naval maneuvering and reinforcement to demonstrate support. Through these measures, together with threats of more direct involvement, the Soviets would seek to get the fighting ended and to insure a major role in subsequent peace negotiations. The Soviets would also calculate that Syria, defeated once again, would become more dependent on them and that meanwhile the Soviet Union would reap major gains as a consequence of an oil embargo and its divisive effects on Western cohesion.

— *Substantial air defense involvement.* This would be aimed at showing strong support and bringing an early end to the fighting while avoiding the risks of ground involvement. It would entail the immediate airlift of SAM units

and the dispatch of Soviet fighter units, by ferry flights if Turkish airspace were available for this purpose or, if not, by airlift.

— *Limited ground involvement.* This would involve more military risks and a greater engagement of Soviet prestige, but hold more prospect of precipitating a ceasefire; if successful, it would leave the USSR well positioned for the postwar negotiations. Under this course, airborne forces would probably be preferred over naval infantry for reasons of size and speed. These forces would probably be deployed demonstratively in an effort to deter the Israelis and to generate intense international pressures on the US and Israel for a quick end to the fighting.

24. These courses of action are necessarily arbitrary in their details. In general, however, we believe that Soviet behavior would approximate that described above as *minimal military involvement*. They might, however, go further and undertake some combination of the actions described under *substantial air defense involvement* and *limited ground involvement*. The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy, believes that the Soviets probably would go further, considering that the dispatch of some such forces (probably excluding the airborne units) would be taken under the façade of an influx of technicians and instructors. He feels that the Soviets would not acquiesce in the destruction of Syrian forces if Israeli military success so indicated. He calculates that the Soviets would wish to establish themselves on Syrian territory to add impetus to efforts to cease hostilities.

25. It is possible that the Syrian reaction to initial defeats would be to save as many of their forces as they could, abandoning Damascus and retreating northward. [

] In these circumstances, we think that the chances of additional Soviet *air defense involvement* would rise, but not those of *limited ground involve-*

ment: while the military situation was fluid, the Soviets would find the risks high; once it stabilized, the Syrians would have little incentive to receive Soviet troops.

26. More far-reaching options for *substantial ground involvement* are theoretically available, should Moscow be convinced that its interests demanded committing forces to overt combat outside the USSR's contiguous sphere of influence for the first time.

— By prearrangement with Damascus, the Soviets could deploy divisions to Syria in advance of the fighting for a combined campaign with the announced aim of restoring Syria's pre-1967 boundaries. If the Soviets decided on such intervention, they would not be likely to attempt a piecemeal approach but would be prepared to introduce forces in sufficient strength to defeat the Israelis. This deployment seems to us highly unlikely for a number of reasons, including Syrian unwillingness to receive such a large Soviet force, reactions in other Mideast states and NATO, and US political and military reactions.

— Alternatively, the USSR could conceivably choose to commit substantial ground forces once the war had begun. This decision would be based on the possibility of a long war, in which the Syrians would retreat northward from Damascus. Moscow might calculate that, in these circumstances, even the delayed ar-

rival of Soviet divisions would halt further Israeli advances and leave the USSR in a strong postwar position on the ground. The time required and the major military and political risks involved lead us to regard this as an extremely unlikely Soviet course of action. Moscow could, however, proceed along this course—through movement of divisions to Soviet ports, embarkation, and transit of the Black Sea—while reserving a final commitment depending on the developing military and diplomatic situation. But this process would require considerable mobilization and generate great alarm in the US, in Turkey, and in NATO generally.

27. Chiefly because of possible US reactions, the Soviets would not wish to inject the idea of possible use of nuclear or chemical weapons into the crisis of a Syrian-Israeli war, even if the Syrians were being badly beaten.³ [

[]
³The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force believes that Soviet nuclear and chemical warfare options in the event of renewed Syrian-Israeli hostilities require further analysis. [

] While we have no evidence to indicate that the Soviets would inject the nuclear factor into the equation, neither do we have intelligence to allow us to dismiss this option with certainty.

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