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## DEPARTMENT OF STATE

## BRIEFING MEMORANDUM

S/S

October 13, 1973

To: The Secretary

From: INR - Ray S. Cline *by DEM*Estimate of Soviet Intentions  
in the Middle East Crisis

Though the Middle East has acquired considerable importance in Soviet foreign policy, it is only of major and not of vital significance to Soviet national security. The area's importance rests on its proximity to the USSR and on the prospects for establishing political and ideological influence there. These factors have led to large Soviet economic, political, and military investments in many Arab states and to attempts both to deny the Middle East to the West and to exploit it against western interests.

Complicating Soviet exploitation of anti-Israeli and anti-western sentiments, however, is the fact that Moscow's entree to the area is, in the last analysis, dependent on the continuing existence of Israel as a target for rallying the Arabs to the Soviet side. A viable Arab-Israeli peace settlement or the total destruction of Israel would be equally unpalatable to the Kremlin since the net effect in Arab eyes would be to remove much of the raison d'etre for the Soviet-Arab alignment. These considerations mark out the parameters for Soviet policy in the present crisis.

The incomplete evidence at hand suggests that, though the Soviets may well have learned before October 1 of the Syrian and Egyptian plans, they neither approved the scheme nor expected it to be a success. Indeed, first indications of their attitude on October 6 showed that Moscow intended to leave the Arabs on their own. The fact that only four days elapsed before the USSR found itself mounting a substantial airlift to the beleaguered Syrians is an indication of the pressures which the USSR is under to protect its investment, when an Arab client is threatened with defeat.

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by NARA on the recommendation of the NSC  
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We assume therefore that the Soviets have now decided to help the Arabs in every way short of the commitment of ground troops. Within the planned limits, their military involvement will be carried out with decisiveness and despatch, even if this risks substantial loss of personnel and materiel.

The real challenge to Moscow is that US and Soviet military aid to the warring parties, though not in itself enough to subvert bilateral relations, is likely further to escalate the conflict. This escalation, in turn, will multiply the threat to the priority Soviet policy of detente. The present Soviet leadership seems still to be operating on the assumption that the US administration is prepared to play the game within the framework of the mutual understandings of the last two years. However, it must be less certain that the administration can control other elements of US public life which are crucial in the promotion of detente, and which will view any Kremlin activity in the Middle East as evidence of Soviet bad faith, no matter how justified and restrained the Soviets consider themselves to be. It is this uncertainty which will motivate the Soviets to seek to contain the conflict even while protecting their own interests and those of their Arab associates.

Thus, a major imponderable for the Kremlin at this point is how to cope with the ramifications of US involvement in the conflict. The Soviets clearly expect a large influx of US military supplies to Israel, and they will exploit this to gain propaganda windfalls in the Arab world and to justify their own actions. There is evidence that they do not expect direct US military involvement, although they cannot exclude it as a possibility, if an Arab threat to overrun the Israeli heartland materializes.

The Soviets have probably not yet made any fundamental decision about how to avoid a collision with the US while preserving their gains with the Arabs. Since the war's outcome is largely out of their control as long as Israel and the Arabs remain locked in battle, they are likely to become increasingly anxious to see an end to the fighting. Because it is not in the Kremlin's interest to have either a massive Arab defeat or the destruction of Israel, its preferred end will probably be some sort of stalemate, if possible with Arab gains.

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Authority EO 12958  
By NA NARA Date 5/4/05

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Here too, however, the Soviets are not likely themselves to be able to bring about the cessation of hostilities, any more than can the US, as long as both are engaged in resupplying their respective clients. As this situation evolves, therefore, Moscow may come to realize that only cooperative action with the US holds hope of resolving its dilemma.

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x22402:10/13/73