

Soviet Arms and Influence In The Middle East

By Leonard Glickman

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And perhaps, when they see that our actual strength is keeping pace with the language that we use, they will be more inclined to give way. . .

*---King Archidamus of Sparta,
"The Peloponnesian War"*

Allied only with the radical rejection states in the Arab world, i.e. Syria, Libya and South Yemen, the Soviet Union occupies a weak position in the Middle East. Recently, however, the Soviet Union has tried to capitalize on a perception that the United States is losing influence in the region because of congressional actions against arms sales to the conservative Arab states of Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

The Syrian Soviet-supplied arms build-up is the most alarming. Damascus has achieved a 3:1 edge over Israel in artillery and the acquisition of Soviet SS-21 short-range ground-to-ground missiles increase Syria's ability to inflict damage on Israel proper. Damascus has also improved its advantage in standing forces to approximately 400,000, compared to Israel's 130,000. The Israeli army must, therefore, rely largely on its mobilizable reserve. The reserve is so large that once it is mobilized it cannot sustain readiness indefinitely -- it is too much of a drain on Israel's able-bodied labor force. Once mobilized the Israelis must act quickly, there is little time to spend in negotiations.

Following the embarrassing display of Soviet-supplied weaponry during the Lebanon war, Syria has continuously pressed the Soviets to improve its defenses. Since that time, Syria has received \$4 billion worth of Soviet hardware. Moreover, "Israel Today" reported that on a recent visit to Moscow, Syrian Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam and the chief of staff of the Syrian Army, Major General Hikmat al-

Shihabi, obtained their requests for the advanced Soviet fighter planes MIG-29's and MIG-31's. The MIG-29 is not even given to Warsaw Pact allies and has only just recently been acquired by India.

During this same visit, Khaddam's delegation also convinced the Kremlin to provide Syria with sophisticated SS-23 missiles and other advanced armored anti-armor weapons. These weapons are a direct threat to Israel's tank superiority in the Golan Heights. Finally, the Syrian navy, which received its first two submarines late last year, has contracted with the Soviets for three more. The expanded Syrian navy endangers Israel's Mediterranean coast where most of its population lives and where the country's industries rely on imports.

While Syria relies heavily on the Soviet Union for arms, it probably could buy much of what it needs elsewhere. With this in mind, "The Russians need the Syrians for political and regional influence more than Syria needs Russia" a West European diplomat was recently quoted. Daniel Pipes, moreover, recently wrote in "Commentary" that Syria provides the Soviets an eastern Mediterranean base, an air defense link, and an agency for terrorism. Soviet aircraft, based in Syria, cover considerable portions of Turkey and the eastern Mediterranean, threatening the U.S. Sixth Fleet and NATO forces in those areas. In view of all this, it is plain that Syria is the leading Soviet ally in the region and its chief agent for the disruption of any comprehensive peace settlement.

The Soviets are now trying to increase their influence with Jordan through arms deals. Since a \$1.6 billion arms deal with the United States

collapsed under congressional pressure, Jordan has taken delivery from Moscow, the first shipment of an estimated 100 SA-8 Gecko and SA-13 Gopher missile systems. Furthermore, the United Arab Emirates daily Al-Ittihad reported that Jordan has started receiving shipments of Soviet-made SAM-8 and SAM-13 anti-aircraft missiles. The paper also reported that Jordan is seeking to buy the more sophisticated Soviet SAM-11 missiles for its air defense.

As the Arab states continue to upgrade their defenses through Soviet patronage they will become less inclined to resolve their differences with Israel at the bargaining table. Diplomacy is bargaining; it seeks outcome for the parties to a

conflict that are better than some of the alternatives, e.g. war. With enough military force, however, a country may not need to bargain. The likelihood of war between Israel and the Arab

states is contingent on the deterrence of Israel's qualitative edge in weaponry. Thus, the weapons that the Soviets are supplying the Arab states do affect the prospects for war or peace. The weak are unlikely to attack the enemy.

In the past, Soviet experience with an arms and influence policy in the Middle East has not been an overwhelming success story. During the 1960s, for example, the Soviets supplied Egypt with much of its sophisticated armaments only

to be expelled from that country under President Sadat. Yet as the military gap between Syria and Israel narrows and prospects for peace grow more uncertain, Soviet arms deals with Arab states warrants close attention.

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