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● USSR: Foreign relations

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MOSCOW LOOKS TO KHARTOUM

When the emergency session of the UN General Assembly closed -- with Soviet assent and Arab opposition -- Moscow proclaimed that a new phase had opened in the struggle of the Arab states to "liquidate the consequences of Israeli aggression." The new phase would concentrate on the promotion of Arab unity. The semi-summit now convened in Khartoum represents the high point of this effort thus far. While by no means overly optimistic about the results to be expected, the Soviet Union has rested great hopes upon the Arab search for unity which is being pursued in the Sudanese capital. Not only does Moscow hope that inner divisions within the Arab world will be overcome, but it is seriously concerned to have unity forged on a moderate platform. The Soviets hope that out of Khartoum and perhaps subsequent meetings will come a realistic and cohesive Arab posture which might more successfully deal with the Middle East crisis than did the UN experiment.

To say that the Soviets have pursued a moderate line in the Middle East during the last month does not reveal precisely what the terms of their position are. In fact the Soviets have been noticeably imprecise in delineating their method for a solution to the Middle East crisis. They wish, however, to see as much of a subsidence of radicalism (i.e., preparation for imminent renewal of hostilities in any form) as possible without endangering the existence of the so-called progressive Arab regimes.

Soviet Arms Policy

Perhaps the most indicative single facet of Soviet efforts to steer Middle East developments in a moderate direction has been Moscow's restrained handling of arms deliveries to the defeated

Arab states. Earlier reports that the USSR would seek for the present to rebuild only a defensive posture by replacing about a half of Egypt's destroyed planes and about a third of her armor appear to have been borne out. Figures ascribed to Western intelligence sources suggest that the UAR has received about 150 new aircraft to replace nearly 300 lost. The new deliveries include only a small number of MiG 21s and Su 7s, the only supersonic fighters exported by the USSR.¹ By the middle of August Soviet arms deliveries to the UAR tapered off sharply.

The Soviets may consider it in their interest to step up the supply of arms to the UAR and other Arab states in the future. For political reasons Moscow would find it very hard to resist an appeal by Jordan for military assistance. But for now the Soviet stand on arms deliveries is intended to signal Moscow's interest in a thorough exploration of all the political avenues open to the Arabs and, quite simply, closes any military avenues for them for some time to come. In this respect, at least, the Soviets are in a somewhat better position in the Middle East than they are in Vietnam where their material support of Hanoi has become so unconditional that they are unable to exploit it as political leverage.

Yemen, Suez, Oil, etc.

If the Soviets have any definite conception of how the Middle East crisis should be settled they have not revealed it. One is probably justified in assuming that they do not have any. They would like to see any settlement which reduces tension somewhat while increasing Soviet influence through Arab gratitude. The critical factors, of course, are not what the Soviets would like to see but what the Israelis and the Arabs will accept. The "plan" of Yugoslav President Tito, which he both claimed and denied to have taken with him to the Middle East, would surely be acceptable to the Soviets if it could be adopted. Publicly Moscow has confined itself to insisting that the Israelis must eventually withdraw from Arab territory.

The Soviets have even been quite vague as to what they would like to see form the basis of inner Arab agreement. They are all for Arab unity, but it is not always clear about what. On one point they are certain: Saudi Arabia and the UAR should cease fighting in Yemen. The Soviets welcomed the Jidda agreement in 1965, deplored its subsequent failure, and have strongly urged its revival. The reported progress toward this goal in Khartoum will certainly please them. It is unclear, however, to what extent the Soviets feel the republican government in Yemen should be jeopardized in the interest of larger Arab unity. Soviet

1) See Hendrick Smith, New York Times, 21 August 1967.

material investments in Yemen and speculation about possible Soviet base interests there, even though these have been denied,² may make it difficult for Moscow simply to follow Nasser's lead on this particular issue.

Moscow has followed with obvious interest Arab efforts to develop common economic policies against the Western states which they consider to be their enemies, chiefly the U.S. and Britain. At the head of the list of issues is the oil embargo. The USSR appears to favor a continued embargo but is generally reserved in saying so. Soviet media often state that oil is a powerful lever in Arab hands which should be employed. The Soviets have admitted on one occasion at least that "as a result of the oil embargo, the oil producing states have suffered material losses. But this is a necessary sacrifice, and it ought to be made for the sake of the freedom, independence and the future prosperity of the Arab states."³ The Soviets are restrained in supporting the embargo more vigorously by two factors: their concern for the fact that the embargo obviously harms Arab economies more than those of the intended targets of the measure; and their potential embarrassment at continuing to offer their own oil to hungry Western markets.

Since the end of the June war the Soviets have been reported on several occasions to favor the opening of the Suez Canal before a larger settlement is achieved. Their reasons are alleged to be, again, concern for the economic impact of the revenue lost by Egypt and also their desire to shorten the now very extended sea route to Vietnam.⁴ If the Soviets feel the canal should be opened unconditionally they have not said so publicly. Rather they have stated "It is quite obvious that the resumption of navigation on the Suez Canal is possible only if the Israeli forces immediately withdraw and the consequences of the aggression are liquidated."⁵

2 Izvestia carried a denial that the USSR seeks an air base in Yemen; TASS, 10 August 1967.

3 Radio Moscow in Serbo-Croatian, 15 August 1967.

4 Radio Moscow (26 August 1967) told Soviet listeners that the Suez closure costs the UAR 10 million a month and accounted for Cairo's recent budgetary retrenchments.

5 Radio Moscow "Peace and Progress" in English to Africa, 1 August 1967

Soviet treatment of these themes is geared to avoiding the impression that Moscow is attempting to dictate Arab policy. Moscow's interest in these issues is in no case so direct and pressing as to force it to take a strong substantive stand. In any case, Soviet ability to influence Arab policy is not great as long as the USSR wishes to avoid a vastly expanded program of economic and military support.

What is Moderation? The Dialogue with Haykal

The fissures which divide the Arab world internationally along radical, moderate, and conservative lines are also present in internal Arab politics, especially in the UAR. It is clear that Nasser, on whom the Soviets have unambiguously pinned their hopes for the future, is being pulled in several directions by competing domestic and external forces. The Soviets wish him to consolidate his leadership at home and in the Arab world on a moderate policy line. They have communicated this wish, among several other ways, through their attitude toward the influential editor of Cairo's Al Akhram, Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, one of the most sober figures on the Arab political stage.

Privately the Soviets must regard Haykal with a certain annoyance. He has said some rather biting things about them. He told an Austrian interviewer that Americans are easier to deal with because they "lay their cards on the table", while the Soviets "never say what they want."⁶ In calling for the democratization of Egyptian political life and freedom of expression, he recently wrote, "There will be no Pasternak in Egypt," meaning that criticism should be fully aired at home.⁷ Most important, he has reminded Arabs explicitly of the limits of Soviet support and has been reported to favor a resumption of diplomatic relations with the United States.

Yet Haykal's name appears often in the Soviet press and radio, invariably in a favorable context. The first of a very important six-part Pravda series on the Middle East by A. Belyaev and Ye. Primakov recognized him as one of the "closest associates of President Nasser."⁸ A later installment approvingly cited his opposition to the sort of racist nationalism voiced by the Palestine Liberation Organization leader, Akhmed El Shukeiry.⁹ The concluding article quoted him as calling the USSR "the most reliable friend" of the Arabs.¹⁰ This remark has been repeatedly cited in the Soviet media.

6 Die Presse (Vienna), 8 August 1967

7 Middle East News Agency, 10 August 1967

8 Pravda, 27 August 1967.

9 Pravda, 3 August 1967.

10 Pravda, 9 August 1967

The reason that Haikal remains in Soviet good graces is apparently that, while his statements are often somewhat painful to the Soviets, he is saying things which the Soviets feel the Arabs must hear but which they themselves are unable to say for propaganda reasons. The Soviets regard him as basically a proponent of strong Soviet-Arab relations and as a voice of reason in the Arab world.

On 3 August Haikal was reported to have written that the UAR should have diplomatic relations with the United States and that any policy of a "head-on clash" must be avoided in favor of more subtle tactics. "The existence of relations between us and the United States is necessary to preserve equilibrium in our world policy," he wrote, noting that even the Soviets had found discretion the better part of valor in the Cuban crisis.¹¹ He was immediately attacked by the radical Damascus daily Al Thawra and the organ of the UAR's ruling party, Al Gomhouria, for "strange ideas" and "defeatism."¹² Pravda's Primakov and Belyaev may have had Haykal in mind then they concluded their series with a blast against a "pro-American lobby" in Cairo which had tried to steer Egyptian policy in an anti-Soviet direction; but they included a favorable reference to him personally. Although the Soviets may have been annoyed with some of Haykal's formulations, they certainly have recognized that he shares much of their own outlook and represents a trend in Arab politics which they can now only support for want of decent alternatives. "By what methods," the Soviets have asked, "will it be possible to remove the consequences of Israeli aggression? The methods must arise from a realistic assessment of the given situation, from the actual balance of forces in the Middle East."¹³ Realism requires realists, and Haykal is one of the few.

A simple juxtaposition of characteristic Soviet comments and those of Haykal demonstrates their parallelism. Soviet journalist A. Iskendrov recently described his visits to Cairo in the following terms:¹⁴

Unfortunately not all our Cairo conversational partners correctly understood the essence of the problem.

Each of our meetings with representatives of Egyptian society, whether teachers at Cairo University, functionaries of the Arab Socialist Union, or journalists, invariably touched on a multitude of questions. We did not get by without hearing some extreme points of view.

11 Reuter, 3 August 1967; Hendrik Smith, New York Times, 11 August 1967.

12 UPI, 7 August 1967; Victor Zorza, The Guardian, 9 August 1967.

13 Radio Moscow in Czech, 14 August 1967 [Emphasis added]

14 Literaturnaya Gazeta, No. 33, 16 August 1967, p. 13.

Well, here I ought to make one essential reservation. As far as the origins and goals of the [Israeli] aggression were concerned, there were no disagreements. It was another matter when problems of the development of the national-liberation movement came up.

What sort of problems generally produced polemics? Here are some examples. What significance do internal and external factors have for the development of the national-liberation movement? Are peaceful coexistence and local wars compatible?....

It is quite true that countries of the "third world" can not fully manage without help from outside, from the industrially developed countries. But it is also true that external help no matter how great cannot be effective unless supported by serious internal efforts....

In conversations with representatives of Egyptian progressive intelligentsia the question of so-called "local wars" was posed. In recent years the imperialists more and more often are resorting to open military intervention against the liberation struggles of the peoples. The criminal wars [in Vietnam, the Congo, Aden, South Arabia...] and, finally, the Middle East crisis are convincing proof of this....

In some press organs of the Arab countries there have appeared articles the authors of which even contend that peaceful coexistence may become an obstacle to countries of the "third world" who are trying to liberate themselves from the rule of imperialism. This is an outright error. Certainly the policy of peaceful coexistence, which permits the avoidance of a new world war, not only does not obstruct the revolutionary struggle of the peoples but creates favorable conditions for the development of the anti-imperialist movement. Precisely in conditions of peaceful coexistence there took place the liberation of the suppressed people from colonial dependence, the victory of the socialist revolution in Cuba....

What all this means for Soviet policy in the Middle East was translated into plain Arabic by Haykal in a forceful article in Al Akhram of 25 August.¹⁵ He made four essential points about Soviet policy:

One: The first fact is that the Soviet Union wants to avoid a head-on clash with the United States, as this would mean a nuclear confrontation between the two world super powers, something which definitely neither of them wants....

I would like to substantiate this view by relating an incident which I hope I will not be going too far in referring to.

When President Houari Boumedienne paid his first visit to Moscow, he told the Soviet leaders among other things: "I would like to enquire about the dividing line at which peaceful coexistence ends. The worldwide national revolution is receiving successive blows from the new American imperialism, and your friends feel that the slogan of peaceful coexistence has turned into fetters restricting your movements.

15 Middle East News Agency, 24 August 1967.

We sincerely wish to know where the dividing line lies." The reply Boumedienne got was: "What do you think about nuclear war?"

Like a true revolutionary Boumedienne said, "I am talking about national revolution and cannot talk about nuclear war."

Boumedienne was right in what he said; and the Soviet leaders were also not wrong in what they said. Boumedienne spoke like a true and loyal representative of the national revolutionary forces, while the Soviet leaders correctly and accurately expressed the realities of the present world....

Two: The second fact is that the United States was quicker than the USSR in exploiting the realities of the new international situation.

Here Haykal describes the development of American limited war doctrines and mobile conventional weapons capabilities as well as Soviet limitations in this area. He notes that the United States has bases from which to conduct limited operations while the USSR does not and observes that the Soviets have "finally awakened" to the seriousness of their backwardness in the area of limited conflicts.

Three: The USSR, according to Haykal, is preoccupied with the task of promoting domestic welfare after decades of privation and does not wish to assume excessive external burdens when celebrating the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution.

And four: The demands of technological competition require an atmosphere of cooperation with the West rather than conflict since the USSR has much to learn and needs Western assistance.

None of this means, says Haykal, that the USSR cannot be counted on to help in revolutionary struggles in the underdeveloped world. Because of their importance "the Soviet Union will come closer to the dividing line [between peaceful coexistence and war] and will assist and support us, as it has actually done.

But our responsibility is basic. It is essential that we understand the circumstances, no matter what the strain this puts on our nerves in this tribulation. It is also essential that our requirements should be within the Soviet Union's capabilities. Our behavior should be appropriate to the historical responsibilities which we bear....

The Soviets, quite literally, couldn't have said it better, or nearly as well. For the benefit of having an Arab assert these facts so frankly yet charitably, the Soviets are willing to suffer the uncomfortable barbs that are invariably included, such as Haykal's observations that Marxism and Marxist parties have little

to offer the Arab world and that the Soviet line cannot dictate Arab policy to the point of Arab servility. The sort of realism and perceptivity represented by Haykal is surely what the Soviets hope will prevail in the struggles within and among the Arab nations. If reports of Nasser's moderation at the Khartoum conference are correct, the Soviets have renewed reason for optimism.¹⁶

This still leaves open, however, the question of whether Nasser can bring his Arab brethren to the left and right to heel; and even more crucially, whether moderation, which has remained thus far so vaguely defined, can produce a constructive policy for "liquidating the consequences of the Israeli aggression." In this respect the Soviet policy is composed of more hope than purpose. But, at least for the moment, Soviet and Western hopes for the Middle East are not too widely at variance; both have a stake in Arab moderation.

Fritz Ermarth

¹⁶ Thomas Brady, New York Times, 31 August 1967.