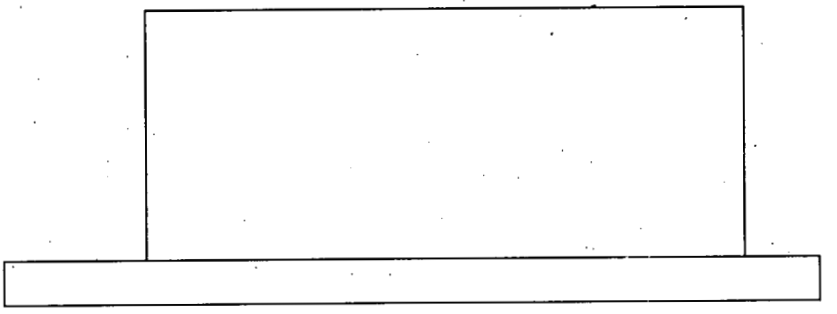
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SOVIET STAFF STUDY

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THE SUEZ CRISIS--A TEST FOR THE USSR'S MIDDLE EASTERN POLICY
(Reference title: CAESAR V-A-56)



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SOVIET STAFF STUDY

The Suez Crisis--A Test for the USSR's Middle Eastern Policy

This study is a working paper. It attempts to identify the major premises, motivations and objectives of Soviet policy toward the Middle East since the spring of 1955. It is circulated to analysts of Soviet affairs as a contribution to current interpretation of Soviet policy. This particular study is part of a series prepared under the general title "Project CAESAR", designed to ensure the systematic examination of information on the major aspects of Soviet affairs.

[redacted]

THE SUEZ CRISIS--A TEST FOR THE USSR'S MIDDLE EASTERN POLICY

Since the beginning of the Soviet Union's aggressive diplomatic offensive in the Middle East in the spring of 1955, Soviet policy has sought to combine efforts to stimulate and exploit anti-Western ultranationalist pressures in the Arab world with attempts to forestall the possibility of Western military intervention in the area, which the Soviet leaders probably realized would be increased by their new pro-Arab policy. The Middle East crisis precipitated by Nasr's nationalization of the Suez Canal Company which culminated in the Israeli and Anglo-French attack on Egypt confronted the Soviet leaders with the choice of accepting the incalculable risks of direct Soviet intervention on Egypt's side or acquiescing in the rapid destruction of the Soviet-equipped Egyptian armed forces and the Nasr regime--the main instrument of Soviet influence in the Near East. However, subsequent events, particularly the divergence between American and Anglo-French policy, enabled the Soviet leaders to escape this dilemma and offered new opportunities for increasing Soviet prestige and influence in the Middle East.

Basic Motivation and Aims of Soviet Middle Eastern Policy

The timing and motivation of the USSR's intervention in Middle Eastern affairs stemmed in part from the desire of the Soviet leaders to counter the major diplomatic defeat represented by their failure to prevent the entry of a sovereign West Germany into the NATO alliance. The ratification of the Paris agreements by the French National Assembly at the end of December 1954 brought to a close Moscow's five-year battle to block Western efforts to incorporate a rearmed West Germany into the Western defense system. The principal objective of the Soviet offensive in the Middle East was to outflank the NATO alliance and strike at the foundations of its strategic power by depriving its members of access to the oil fields, military, naval and air bases of the Middle East, and by cutting the vital communications link between Europe and Asia at Suez. A corollary aim was to encircle the members of the "northern tier" alliance in the Middle East and to prevent the extension of this Western-sponsored defense system southward to include additional Arab states.

The politico-strategic concept underlying Soviet intervention in Middle Eastern affairs envisaged the emergence of a neutral bloc of ultranationalist, anti-Western Arab

states which, with full Soviet support, would lead to the complete destruction of traditional Western influence and control from Morocco to the Arabian Sea. The Soviet leaders found a ready instrument for advancing these aims in the ultranationalistic chauvinism and zenophobia which was sweeping the Arab world. They recognized, however, that this policy of exploiting Arab nationalism as a means of striking at the political, economic and military strength of the Western powers would carry increasing risks that the West might attempt to restore its deteriorating position in the Middle East by forceful action. They also realized that their new pro-Arab line would inevitably aggravate the Arab-Israeli conflict and that an outbreak of hostilities between Israel and its Arab neighbors would almost certainly lead to strong Western intervention.

The USSR attempted to evade this dilemma by reassuring the Israelis, on the one hand, that it entertained no hostile intentions toward their security and interests and, on the other hand, by counseling the Arabs to exercise patience and restraint. Until Israel attacked Egypt at the end of October 1956, the Soviet government maintained outwardly correct diplomatic relations with Israel. Even during the period of high tension in the Near East in July 1956, the USSR contracted to supply Israel with 40 percent of its crude oil requirements over the next two years. [redacted] At this same time, Soviet foreign minister Shepilov, during his tour of the Near East, was urging the Arabs to avoid rash actions and saying that war must be avoided at all costs to prevent Western intervention.

First Phase of Soviet Intervention in the Middle East

Moscow's search for an opportunity to mount a counter-offensive against the West quickly focused on the Middle East situation which had been brought to a new crisis by two events in February 1955. The first was the sharp aggravation of historical and dynastic rivalries in the Arab world produced by the conclusion of the Turkish-Iraqi alliance on 24 February. The second was the threat to Colonel Nasr's position as leader of the Egyptian revolutionary regime posed by the heavy Israeli attack on Egyptian forces in the Gaza area on 28 February.

The turning point of the USSR's Middle Eastern policy was marked by an abrupt shift in March 1955 toward an anti-Israeli and pro-Arab position in Soviet propaganda. Moscow also made an arms offer to Syria at this time--the first offer of military aid to an Arab state.

The Soviet Foreign Ministry statement of 16 April 1955 was the first formal pronouncement regarding the new orientation. It firmly aligned the USSR on Egypt's side of the dispute within the Arab world by offering Soviet support for those governments which opposed the Turkish-Iraqi alliance. It pledged to "defend" their freedom and independence and warned that the USSR would take this issue to the United Nations if the alleged Western pressure to induce other Arab states to join the Baghdad pact persisted.

These opening moves were followed by the first arms offers to Egypt which began in May, initially in response to an inquiry by Nasr, and were repeated in June. They were accompanied by offers of economic assistance, including an offer to assist in building the Aswan High Dam. Shepilov, then editor in chief of Pravda, reportedly repeated the arms offer when he attended the Liberation Day celebration in Cairo in the latter part of July, and renewed the Aswan dam offer.

Soviet overtures in the spring and summer of 1955 were directed mainly at Egypt, but Saudi Arabia and Syria received similar offers. These were the three countries most opposed to the Baghdad pact. Egypt finally signed a five-year arms agreement with Czechoslovakia on 21 September 1955.

Moscow Adjusts to the Impact of the New Policy

Two clashes between Israeli and Egyptian forces in early November 1955 and an Israeli raid on Syria on 11 December were followed by a bitter attack on Israel by Khrushchev in a speech to the Supreme Soviet at the end of December. This was the first time since the Palestine armistice in 1949 that a top Soviet leader had taken such a strong public stand against Israel. The USSR had previously maintained a marked aloofness from the Arab-Israeli dispute. Khrushchev charged that Israel threatened its neighbors and had pursued a policy hostile to them "ever since it came into being." He implied that Israel was a mere tool of the "imperialist powers."

This denunciation of Israel reflected the impact which the first Soviet bloc arms shipments to Egypt had on the Near Eastern balance of power. The prospect of a rapid strengthening of Egypt's military position alarmed Israel, exacerbated border friction, and impelled Moscow toward a stronger and more unequivocal pro-Arab position.

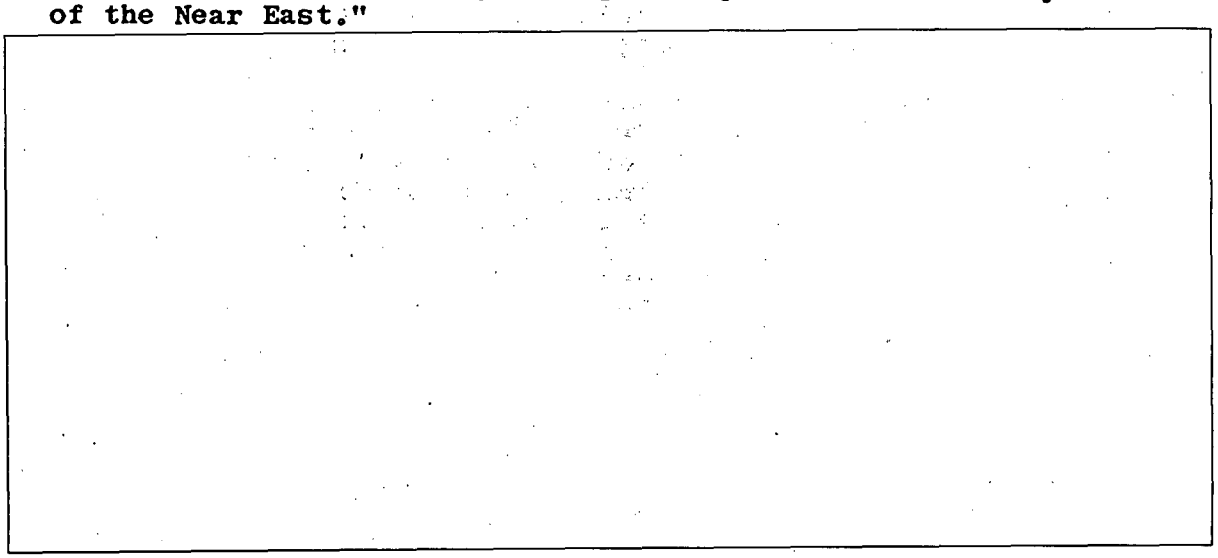
With this prospect of increasing tension in the Near East, Moscow became concerned about possible Western moves to halt the arms race. A Soviet Foreign Ministry statement of 13 February 1956 condemned the communiqué issued on 1 February at the end of Prime Minister Eden's talks with President Eisenhower in Washington as a scheme for the United States and Britain to dispatch troops to the Middle East against the will of the people involved in violation of the interests of the Soviet Union.

This statement was the first major Soviet attempt to commit the Western powers to the proposition that any great-power actions regarding the Middle East must be taken within the framework of the UN Security Council, where the USSR could exercise its veto to block Western moves which it opposed. The statement specifically challenged the right of the three Western powers to act under the Tripartite Declaration of 1950. This Soviet insistence that any Arab-Israeli crisis must be handled by the Security Council was [redacted]

The USSR also attempted to deter the West from taking independent action by a propaganda campaign last spring charging the West with "trying to create clashes between Israel and the Arab countries in order to provide a pretext for bringing their armies into this region." This public campaign to inhibit Western freedom of action was accompanied by private assurances to Arab governments of firm Soviet support in the growing tension with Israel.

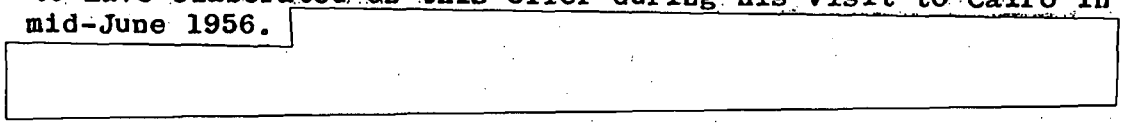
On the eve of the Bulganin-Khrushchev visit to Britain, the Soviet Foreign Ministry issued a statement on 17 April promising the "necessary support" for United Nations measures to strengthen peace in the Near East. This statement again denounced the Tripartite Declaration of 1950 and warned that

the "Soviet government considers illegal and inadmissible... attempts to use the Arab-Israeli conflict for interference from without in the internal affairs of independent Arab states or for introducing foreign troops on the territory of the Near East."



The USSR and Nasr's Seizure of the Suez Canal

There is some circumstantial evidence that the USSR deliberately attempted to create a situation in which the Western powers might decide to take the risk of withdrawing their offers of financial assistance for the Aswan dam project. Since 1954, Moscow on many occasions had made known to the Egyptian government its willingness to help Egypt build the dam. As recently as 17 May 1956, Soviet ambassador Kiselev reportedly renewed this standing offer with the observation that the USSR realized that the West might withdraw its offer of assistance in view of Nasr's recognition of Communist China the previous day. Shepilov is reported to have elaborated on this offer during his visit to Cairo in mid-June 1956.



One month later, however, Shepilov reversed his line by publicly playing down on 14 July the importance of the Aswan project and offering instead Soviet help for Egyptian industrialization projects. Four days after the United States had announced the withdrawal of its offer of a loan to help finance the initial phase of the Aswan project, A. M. Ledovsky, counselor of the Soviet embassy in Washington, asked a

State Department official whether the American decision was not in fact based on the assumption that the USSR would not build the dam if the United States withdrew.

The American and British announcements withdrawing their loan offers were followed by at least three denials by Soviet spokesmen that the USSR had committed itself to support the Aswan project. Moscow, however, did not close the door to later negotiations for Soviet assistance and since that time has reportedly renewed its assistance offer.

The USSR's first public reaction to Nasr's nationalization of the Suez Canal Company on 26 July came in the form of Khrushchev's advice to the West to adopt a "quiet approach" to this problem, one which would soberly take into account "the new circumstances and the spirit of the times." Apparently anticipating a strong Western reaction, Khrushchev asserted that "there are no grounds for the aggravation of relations in the Mediterranean area and for the fanning of hostility between states over the Suez Canal." Soviet officials revealed some nervousness over possible Western reactions.

The USSR's propaganda reaction to initial Western moves was relatively moderate in tone and seemed to indicate Moscow's concern to prevent the crisis from reaching a point of Western military intervention.

The Soviet leaders appear to have recognized immediately that the future course of Western actions on Suez would be largely determined by the United States position. In a conversation with Secretary Dulles in London before the opening of the London conference on Suez, Shepilov said he was not attempting to split the Western Big Three but that if differences did exist between the United States and Britain and France, the "United States and the USSR together might find a way out of this crisis." Moscow was fully aware of the

implications of the divergence between the US and its allies on the best way to handle the Suez issue. This awareness, which guided Soviet decisions throughout the crisis, was made explicit in the advice which Deputy Foreign Minister Zorin gave [redacted] to the decision of Britain and France to withdraw their forces from Egypt. Zorin warned [redacted] that Britain and France would try all means to delay their withdrawal and reminded him that it is "necessary to keep American support, although it is superficial."

London Conference August 1956

Shepilov's principal objective at London was to play for time and to forestall the adoption of any decisions which the West might use as a pretext for intervention. Moscow's uncertainty regarding the measure of Western disagreement on the question of using force to impose international control of the canal [redacted]

The Soviet Foreign Ministry statement of 9 August expressed the position which the USSR adhered to at the conference. It distinguished between freedom of navigation through the canal "governed by the special convention of 1888" and the nationalization of the canal company, which it called a "perfectly lawful action following from Egypt's sovereign rights." It denied the competence of the London conference to authorize "any decisions whatever" affecting the canal.

Shepilov rejected Secretary Dulles' plan to place the operation of the canal under an international board but backed an Indian proposal for a consultative international body which would not prejudice Egyptian ownership and operation. [redacted]

Shepilov denounced the appointment of the five-nation Menzies committee to present the Western plan to Nasr but [redacted] advised the Egyptians that the committee should be courteously received and told that the conference documents would

be studied. He suggested that the period of study should be "spun out" without replying and without official comment on the London conference.

A Soviet-Egyptian arrangement for sending Soviet pilots to Egypt for pilot service on the canal was worked out in London by Shepilov and Ali Sabri. Moscow radio early in September reported that Soviet ship pilots were preparing to leave for Egypt.

The Soviet leaders apparently were well satisfied with the outcome of the conference. [redacted]

[redacted]

Moscow Prepares for the Next Round

The Soviet government probably regarded the Suez Canal Users' Association plan which Eden introduced to Parliament on 12 September as a maneuver to force Egypt into committing a provocation for Anglo-French military action. Eden had warned that if Egypt interfered with SCUA, Britain and the others concerned "will be free to take such further steps as seem to be required either through the UN or by other means for the assertion of their rights."

Moscow's response to what it probably regarded as British and French preparations for a military showdown with Egypt took the form of notes to London and Paris on 12 September which warned again that the use of force against Egypt would carry the risk of an expanded war. The note to the British government stressed the dangers of using force in the atomic age, pointed out the damaging effect the use of force would have on Western interests in the Middle East, and appealed for a peaceful settlement of the dispute based on the United Nations Charter.

These notes were followed by a Foreign Ministry statement issued on 15 September on the eve of the Users' Association conference in London. This statement went beyond previous pronouncements by linking for the first time any

violation of the peace in the Near East in connection with the Suez crisis with the USSR's own security and by officially calling for United Nations action. Bulganin chose the opening day of the London conference to reply to questions submitted by Kingsbury Smith. He said the USSR was prepared to take part in the conference with the leaders of Egypt, India, the United States, Britain and France to seek a solution to the canal problem.

In addition to its diplomatic and propaganda support, Moscow took other concrete steps to aid Egypt. To alleviate the acute shortage of canal pilots, it sent fourteen "volunteer" pilots to Cairo on 15 September. Early in September, the USSR reportedly increased its arms shipments to Egypt and sent more technicians.

At the UN Security Council sessions on Suez in the first half of October, Shepilov maintained his rigid opposition to the Western plan for international control but appeared to welcome confidential talks between Britain, France and Egypt as the best means of gaining time and limiting Western freedom of action.

The Soviet Reaction to Israel's Attack on Egypt

The USSR's actions in the second half of October following the UN Security Council's unanimous adoption of the six principles of a Suez settlement suggest that the Soviet leaders did not expect the outbreak of hostilities on 29 October. By mid-October, the Russians apparently estimated that the threat of Anglo-French military action had been almost completely removed and that the USSR, by its firm support of Egypt's defiance of Western demands, had considerably extended its influence and prestige throughout the Middle East and Asia. They probably believed that the approval of the six principles and the initiation of talks between Egypt, Britain and France had placed Nasr in a strong position to conduct prolonged negotiations which would sharply limit British and French freedom to resort to force.

[redacted]

[redacted] Soviet propaganda, which throughout the Security Council debate in the first half of October had warned against Anglo-French action and alleged American threats to use force, subsequently diminished both in volume and violence of tone.

[redacted]

The initial reaction of the Soviet leaders was one of great caution. They appeared determined to do nothing which would commit them to any concrete action in a very confused and fast-moving situation. According to press reports, Khrushchev and Bulganin, attending a Kremlin reception for the visiting Prime Minister of Afghanistan on 30 October, told two Asian ambassadors that they were "gravely concerned" by the Israeli attack and thought that the matter should be immediately settled in the UN Security Council. The Soviet delegate to the Security Council supported a United States resolution in the 30 October meeting which called on Israel to cease fire and withdraw to its own borders and asked all UN members to refrain from using force in the area.

Molotov attempted to sound out American intentions by suggesting to Ambassador Bohlen at the 30 October reception that the United States could have prevented the Israeli attack, adding that of course the United States had acted in collusion with Britain and France. When Bohlen denied this, Molotov said that Britain and France stood behind Israel and wished to punish Nasr for nationalization of the canal.

The Soviet government was also careful to avoid making any commitments to any specific course of action in its first official pronouncement on 31 October. This statement merely condemned the three-power attack and called on the Security Council to take "immediate steps to stop the aggressive operations" and "ensure the immediate withdrawal of the interventionists from Egypt."

[redacted]

Moscow continued to temporize and play for time by sending letters [redacted] calling for a conference of the Bandung powers to condemn the attack on Egypt and by delivering protests to Britain and France on 4 November against their closing parts of the Mediterranean and Red Seas to commercial shipping in violation of the 1888 Convention.

The USSR also took immediate measures to avoid incidents with Anglo-French invasion forces. [redacted]

On 5 November, however, the day the first Anglo-French forces landed in Egypt, the Russians were ready to act, convinced apparently that the divergence between the United States and Britain and France was genuine and that the Nasr regime and its Soviet-equipped armed forces were threatened with destruction. Bulganin sent threatening notes to Britain, France and Israel which contained the warning that the Soviet Union was "fully determined to crush the aggressors and restore peace in the East through the use of force."

This language was a piece of calculated ambiguity intended to convey the impression that the USSR was making a threat of unilateral action against Britain and France unless they abandoned their action against Egypt. The Soviet Foreign Ministry press officer later issued a "clarifying" statement that the "we" referred to "the Soviet Union and other members of the United Nations."

The same day, Bulganin sent a proposal to President Eisenhower for joint action by American and Soviet forces, under UN authority, to halt the operations in Egypt. Shepilov sent a letter to the president of the Security Council setting forth a resolution embodying Bulganin's proposal. The council, however, refused to place the resolution on its agenda.

the USSR assured Egypt of support in order to stiffen its resistance and forestall any compromises or surrender.

Nasr's political adviser, Ali Sabri, told an American official in Cairo on 6 November that conversations with the Russians in Moscow and Cairo had convinced him that the USSR was prepared to "go all the way" even if it risked World War III.

Khrushchev told that "the name and credit of the USSR are already engaged on Egypt's behalf and that the USSR, "if needed," will "surely wage war" against Britain and France. Khrushchev, however, qualified this statement by adding that "now it is the diplomatic battle where skill and wisdom are needed." The Soviet party chief was encouraged in his bravado by the Anglo-French declaration of a cease-fire in Egypt on 6 November.

The sequence of events, however, placed the USSR in a position to claim that Bulganin's threatening notes had compelled Britain and France to declare the cease-fire and that it was Moscow that saved the Arab world from imperialist aggression.

Post Cease-Fire Phase

The cease-fire opened a new phase in the Suez conflict and created new opportunities for Soviet moves to win further Arab favor. Moscow's immediate objective was to bring about by nonmilitary means the early withdrawal of the three-power forces from Egypt. It sought to increase pressure on the British and French and to impress the Arabs by announcing on 10 November that if the three powers did not withdraw, the "appropriate authorities of the USSR will not hinder the departure of Soviet citizen volunteers who wish to take part in the struggle of the Egyptian people for their independence." This was the first time since the attack on Egypt that the USSR had publicly threatened to

send volunteers to the Middle East unilaterally or take any action outside the framework of joint measures with other UN members.

The fact that the Soviet leaders waited until it was reasonably certain that hostilities would not be renewed suggests that they hoped to avoid having to make a decision whether they would actually send volunteers. They probably estimated that, short of direct Soviet intervention, there was no way they could bring any appreciable military assistance to Egypt which would decisively affect the outcome of renewed fighting. The volunteer threat, therefore, appears to have been largely bluff designed as a propaganda weapon to exert pressure on Britain and France. Yuri Zhukov, an editor of Pravda, reportedly told [redacted] in early December that the threat to send volunteers to Egypt was a complete bluff which the USSR would not be able to use again.

The volunteer threat was followed by another round of notes on 15 November demanding that Egypt be indemnified by Britain, France and Israel for material losses. The notes made clear that the USSR believes the UN Emergency Force will be unnecessary after the withdrawal of foreign forces.

[redacted]

By the end of November, Moscow had turned its primary attention to Syria, where it suspected that the Western powers, along with Turkey and Iraq, were preparing to intervene to overthrow the present leftist regime in Damascus. A strong Soviet propaganda build-up designed to deter Western intervention was accompanied by confidential warnings, apparently intended to reach Western governments, that if Turkey should attack Syria, the USSR would immediately attack Turkey, which would mean the beginning of World War III.

Moscow backed these diplomatic and propaganda maneuvers by concluding its first direct arms agreement with Syria the end of November. This deal will include jet aircraft and antiaircraft guns. Moscow agreed, moreover, to supply Syria with 160 Soviet training personnel but was not willing to provide technicians "to fight with the equipment" as requested by Syria.

Future Policy in Middle East

The outcome of the three-power action against Egypt has probably increased the Soviet leaders' confidence that they can proceed vigorously to exploit the Middle East situation without undue risk. They are moving ahead with a re-equipment program for Egypt's armed forces which may go beyond replacement of lost equipment. The Cairo government has provided the Soviet military attaché with an estimate of future military aid requirements.

The USSR will probably seek to make increasing use of Syria as an important instrument of its anti-West, anti-Israel policy. The first shipment of Soviet military equipment to Syria under the November arms agreement arrived in the port of Latakia on 13 December on a Soviet freighter and [redacted] Recent bloc activities in the Middle East have included arrangements for additional arms shipments to Yemen and for the arrival of Soviet and Czech advisers in that country.

While proceeding with these lines of action, Moscow probably will seek to gain credit for easing tensions and forestalling further fighting in this area. It moved to ease Western suspicions of Soviet intentions by issuing a statement on 8 December withdrawing the implied threat of 10 November to send volunteers to fight in Egypt.

Moscow appears to have a strong interest in encouraging a continuation of Arab-Israeli tensions as the principal lever of its Middle East policy. It will seek to exploit these tensions and Arab hostility toward Britain and France to block Western efforts to bring about an early settlement of the Palestine problem. Soviet representatives at the United Nations, according [redacted] have been constantly urging the Arabs to insist on the most favorable terms for a Palestine settlement. Moscow may press the Arabs to adopt an uncompromising position on partition lines and refugees based on the 1947 United Nations resolutions.

The Russians probably will also urge Egypt to demand terms for a Suez settlement even more favorable than those outlined in the UN Security Council's six principles.

[redacted]

Moscow can be expected to demand the immediate withdrawal of the UN Emergency Force from Egypt as soon as the three-power evacuation is completed. Soviet propaganda has been charging that the "imperialists" are attempting to use these troops to impose international control on Suez and a general Palestine settlement on the Arab states.

All of these various lines of action will serve the fundamental Soviet aims of widening the cleavage between the Arab world and the West and drawing Egypt, Syria and eventually other Arab states into a position of growing dependence on the USSR.

With the precipitate decline of British and French influence in the Middle East, the USSR recognizes that the United States will be its only serious rival in the future struggle for power in this area. The Soviet leaders probably believe that a strong anti-Israeli line will be one of their most effective weapons in this competition. They probably calculate that a threatening Soviet posture toward Israel will compel the United States to take up a position as defender and guarantor of Israel against hostile Communist and Arab pressures. This position, in the Soviet view, would make it increasingly difficult for any Arab government, no matter how well disposed toward the United States, to be identified with American aims and interests in the Middle East. Moscow has already encouraged a belief among the Arabs that it favors the eventual elimination of Israel. Izvestia published an article on 29 November entitled "The Road to Suicide" which declared that "the hatred of the Eastern peoples for Israel aroused by her brigand attack on Egypt is so great that...it raises the question about the very existence of Israel as a state."