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Flank Guard—1916

HAWKE

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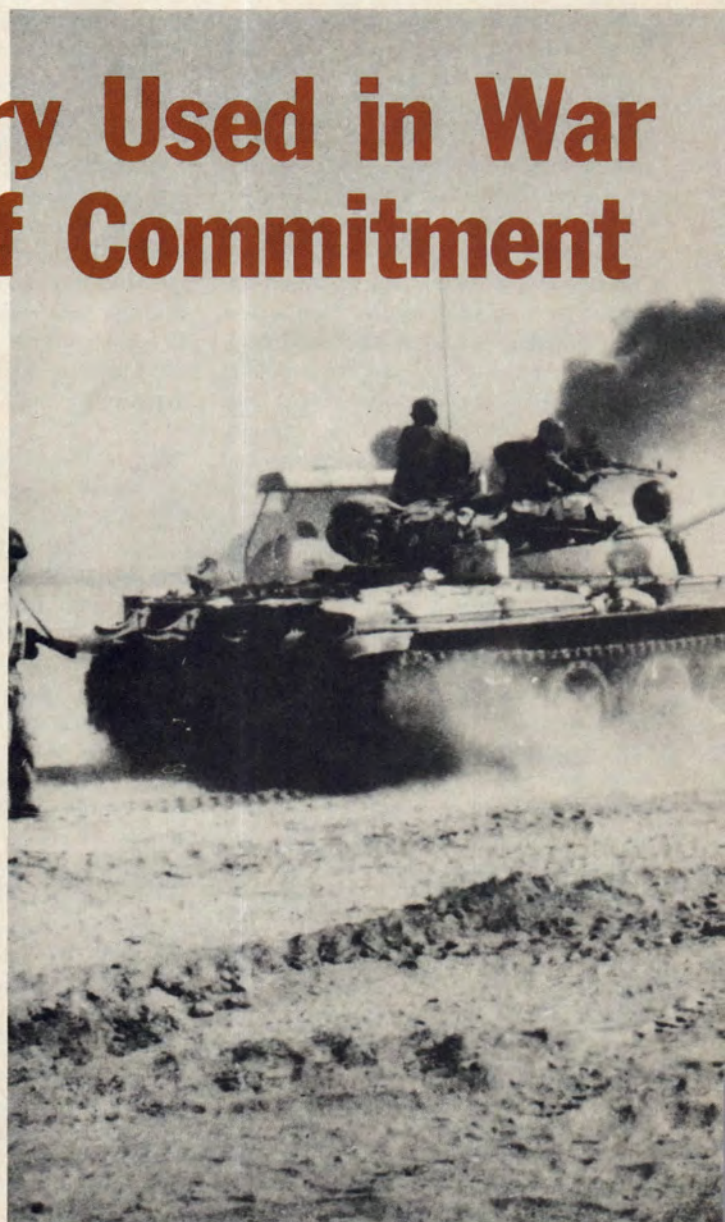
Mideast Is Prime Influence Target

Soviet Weaponry Used in War Reflects Size of Commitment

Strategic proximity, an interest in oil, the need for hard currency and the revolutionary impulse have all combined to make Soviet arms a major factor in Middle Eastern politics since the death of Stalin.

The recent Israeli invasion of Lebanon has all but destroyed the field military arm of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and has consumed a vast storehouse of modern weapons held by the PLO and Syria, the Soviet Union's principal client in the region.

World attention has thus again been focused on the disproportionately large role of foreign-arms transfers as a medium for outside influence in the convoluted politics of the Middle East.



Soviet-made T62 tanks of the Iraqi Army advance into southern Iran at the outset of the Persian Gulf war in 1980.

Syria's intervention in the fighting cost that nation dearly. The Israelis destroyed 19 Soviet-supplied SAM6 anti-aircraft missile batteries in eastern Lebanon's Bekaa Valley during the early, mobile phases of the fighting. Israeli forces also shot down as many as 60 Soviet-made MiG-21 and MiG-23 fighter aircraft and destroyed an estimated 200 Syrian tanks, some of them T72s, the latest model in Soviet service. Syrian personnel losses may have exceeded 1,000 killed and wounded.

Both the PLO and the Syrian armed forces fight almost exclusively with Soviet arms and equipment. For Syria, these are acquired directly from the USSR. The PLO, in turn, purchases arms from Syria and Libya. These two countries assisted the PLO in building its 15,000-man army in southern Lebanon which now has been completely decimated.

Without a doubt, both Syria and the PLO will attempt to replace their combat losses in arms and equipment. It is al-

most a certainty that the rearming process will be accomplished through the Soviet Union. What are the reasons behind its involvement?

The Middle Eastern region as a whole has been and will continue to be of extraordinary strategic importance to the Kremlin.

Since the death of Josef Stalin in 1953, the Soviet Union has adopted a policy of ever-increasing arms sales to Middle Eastern Arab nations. The reasons for this include at least some of the following:

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■ *Proximity or strategic geographical location.* The Middle East is inviting, on the southern doorstep of the Soviet Union, and since World War II has been a region where the United States has exerted considerable influence.

The Soviet leadership undoubtedly views the Middle East in much the same way the U.S. leadership views the Caribbean Basin: it is a militarily strategic area.

■ *Oil.* By some Central Intelligence Agency estimates, the Soviet Union could be running out of oil. Since the Russians lack the advanced oil technology of the West, they have had difficulty in tapping their available oil reserves in Siberia. This situation could develop into a real dilemma for the Russians.

They would be hard pressed to satisfy the energy needs of their Eastern European clientele. Given this scenario, Middle Eastern oil provides a possible alternative.

■ *Hard currency.* The Soviet Union, through its arms-transfer policies to Middle Eastern Arab



nations, acquires Western or hard currency, with which it is able to buy grain to feed its people.

Additionally, that same currency allows the Soviet Union to purchase the West's new computer technology—absolutely critical to Soviet interests. The recent technological advances in computer weaponry make it essential for the Soviets to keep pace or lose their status as a world power.

■ **Ideology.** The Soviet Union exports communist ideology wherever possible. Through its revolutionary rhetoric and support of nationalist, Marxist and socialist revolutionary movements in the developing world, the Soviets hope to extend and further their own strategic interests while eroding the influence of the United States.

In 1955, the Soviet Union used the Arab-Israeli conflict as a means of obtaining greater influence in Egypt through arms transfers. At President Abdul Nasser's request and through Czechoslovakian intermediaries, the Soviet Union provided massive amounts of military hardware to the Egyptians. The Arab-Israeli conflict has perpetuated the perception that more and more arms are needed to defend against Israeli aggression.

Since the United States was supplying arms to Israel and President Nasser's first request for military support from the United States was turned down, the next logical choice of arms supplier was the Soviet Union. Another reason for acquiring arms from the Soviets could have been price. Soviet arms are cheaper and available on better credit terms.

As Dr. Roger F. Pajak wrote in a monograph for the Center for Strategic and International Studies:

The prices charged to developing countries have varied with the type and condition of equipment, but on the whole Soviet prices have been substantially below Western prices for comparable equipment. For example, the price charged to Israel for the new F-15 fighter averaged about \$12 million per aircraft, while the price of a Soviet MiG-21 fighter, was listed reportedly at \$2 million.

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With Egypt and now Iraq turning to Western arms sources, Syria remains the Soviet Union's main military client in the region: a T62 in action with the Syrian Army during the intervention in the Lebanese civil war of 1976.

Credit terms in the past have been available at two percent, offering large grace periods and up to ten years for payment. When a client is hard pressed for cash, the Soviets will take payment in trade such as cotton or oil. It is a logical assumption that client states like Iraq, Syria and Libya simply find it cheaper to deal with the Soviets.

Not only that, but the Soviets are well known for their absolute support of the Arab cause over Palestine and for selling arms to any nation who can afford the price. For the Soviets, arms sales bring with them a measure of influence over the client state. It is probably considered a bonus if the country to which the Soviets sell arms can create problems for the United States.

Libya is one example of this policy. Although Libya is of limited strategic value to the Soviet Union, Col. Muammar El-Qaddafi is vehemently anti-American. The Soviet Union supplies hundreds of millions of dollars worth of military hardware to Libya; makes a considerable profit in hard currency, oil and military bases; exports terrorism *vis-à-vis* Libyan support for such causes.

All this places a thorn in the side of American policymakers in the Middle East. In May, 1976, according to Dr. Pajak, "... the semiofficial Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* reported the conclusion of a new Soviet arms deal valued at \$4 billion with Libya, in return for the use of military bases."

It would appear that the Soviet Union, at least in the case of Libya, has a great deal to gain and little to lose. Col. Qaddafi, as a radical, continues to make trouble not only for America, but for his neighbors Egypt, Chad and Tunisia as well.

In Iraq and Syria, as well as Libya, Soviet military assistance has proved to be their most durable means for establishing a lasting presence in a client nation.

This is true with the singular exception of Egypt. In 1972, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt expelled all Soviet military advisors from his country. Even with this setback, the Soviet Union continued to send arms to Egypt, enabling her to conduct the attack into Israeli-occupied Sinai over the Suez Canal in October, 1973.

It is apparent that the Soviet Union is quite patient with its clients. For this is not the only example of Arab reluctance to accept Soviet advice and influence.

The Soviet Union was unable to force Iraq into accepting the cease-fire agreements of 1970 and 1973, or the UN Security Council Resolution 242. Moscow had the same problems with Syria. Additionally, Syria refused to attend the 1973 Geneva Conference to which the Soviet Union was co-chairman with the United States.

The Soviets were also unable to prevent Syria's invasion of Lebanon in 1976. Even as far back as 1958 when the

Kremlin enjoyed close ties with Cairo, President Nasser persecuted Egyptian communists and suppressed Syrian communists following the ill-fated joining of Egypt and Syria as the United Arab Republic. Later, one observer noted, "... Iraq in 1963 even massacred their local pro-Moscow communists."

It can be seen through these examples that arms sales have limited utility as levers of influence for the Soviet Union.

The notion that there are now sufficient weapons in the Middle East to fight World War III is not totally unfounded. The U.S. Department of State said in 1976, "As in previous years, the Middle East was the leading arms-import region, receiving 37 percent of the world arms deliveries in 1978."

This statement still holds true today.

It would be logical to assume that both these hypotheses hold some grains of truth. Dependent on the circumstances, the Soviet Union can either exploit a perceived weakness in the greater region, as it did in Afghanistan, or claim defensive and security motives as reasons for seeking to influence Middle Eastern Arab nations on or near Soviet borders.

Although both assertions are eminent-ly supportable, it is worthy of note that in World War II, Soviet losses ran to well over 20 million people. Defensive strategy in the Soviet view is not a subject to be questioned. The present Soviet civil and military leadership lived through that period and will not easily forget.

Although the Arab-Israeli conflict is the single most quoted reason for large Soviet arms shipments to the Middle

ities originating outside its borders. Of course, not all threats are external in nature. The military coup in the Arab world has a bloody history. Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Sudan and particularly Syria have all experienced successful or unsuccessful attempts at military takeovers. The Soviet Union may supply arms to some of these governments in order to perpetuate regimes considered in the West as radicals such as Iraq, Syria and Libya.

These radical governments perpetuate conflict among themselves and Israel, thus, by some estimates, providing a possible benefit to Moscow. The notion that the Russians prefer destabilization to peace in the Middle East, hoping for a strengthening of radical parties in some Arab nations that could facilitate leftist takeovers in those nations, is a pervasive perception in the West. If this view is correct, then continued conflict is desirable to the Soviets—meaning that they will continue supplying arms to those who can perpetuate conflict.

It is worthy of note that at no time until recently did the Soviet Union ever sell first-line, modern, state-of-the-art weaponry to any of its Middle Eastern client nations. The Russians dumped hundreds of millions of dollars worth of obsolete tanks, aircraft, armored personnel carriers and antiaircraft guns on Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Libya.

The United States, on the other hand, was providing Israel with the most sophisticated and modern arms available. This fact has at different times infuriated and disillusioned the Soviet Union's arms clientele. At least in part, this may have been one of the reasons why President Sadat expelled the Soviets from Egypt in July, 1972.

The reasons Moscow may have been wary of providing the most modern weaponry to its Arab client states are no doubt well known only to the Soviet leadership. Although they could have been many, one reason seldom heard is China. The border clashes in March, 1969, between the USSR and China, as Mr. Freedman points out, "... raised the possibility that, should the Soviet Union become involved in a major war in the Middle East, the Chinese might avail themselves of the opportunity to move into Siberia."

Henry Kissinger's surprise visit to Peking in July, 1971, followed by President Richard Nixon's visit to China, exacerbated Soviet fears of an American-Chi-



Iraqi artillerymen work a Soviet-supplied M46 130-mm field gun firing against Iranian positions near Abadan, in southwest Iran, in 1980.

Another dimension as yet unmentioned is the basic nature of Soviet involvement in the Middle Eastern region. Robert D. Freedman, in *Soviet Policy Toward the Middle East Since 1970*, wrote:

Some observers have contended that the main Soviet goal is an offensive one—to dominate the Middle East in order to deny its oil, strategic communications routes and other assets to the United States and her allies. An opposing view holds that the Soviet aim is primarily defensive—to prevent the region from being used as a base for an attack on the USSR.

East, it is hardly the only one. The Iraq-Iran war, Syria's invasion of Lebanon, continuing tensions between the rival Ba'ath parties of Iraq and Syria, the Egyptian-Libyan border clash of 1977, Syria's President Hafez al-Assad's denunciation of King Hussein of Jordan, and the PLO's ill-fated military buildup in South Lebanon amply demonstrate the frictions among the various Middle Eastern states.

No Middle Eastern Arab nation wants to be unprepared in the event of hostil-

Israel claims to have captured vast quantities of Soviet arms from the PLO and Syrian forces during this summer's invasion of Lebanon: Israeli mechanized infantry in the Lebanese port city of Sidon on the second day of the invasion.



nese axis. With the addition of possible long-term U.S. economic help to the long-ailing Soviet economy, the Kremlin was no doubt cautious not to alienate the Americans. This they might have done had the Russians supplied state-of-the-art weaponry to their clients.

Even given these considerations, the four major Arab clients—Iraq, Syria, Algeria and Libya—accounted for some 70 percent of total estimated Soviet sales in the period between 1974 and 1979. The total Soviet arms sales for that period were approximately \$34 billion.

How has the Soviet Union benefited from its arms-transfer policies to the Middle East? It would seem that although arms sales as a lever of influence have limited utility, they obviously are not altogether without some worth to Moscow. This would account for continuing arms deliveries.

Since even unsophisticated arms require some training in order to use them effectively, Soviet advisors often come with their weapons packages. On numerous occasions, military officers from Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Algeria have been sent to the Soviet Union to receive advanced military training of all kinds. Often these officers were young and, as is the case with youth, impressionable.

In fact, many of these young officers may in later years hold high government office within their respective countries. If

the Soviets can influence these officers by attempting to demonstrate the superior nature of communist ideology over capitalist imperialism, which historically has often been at odds with the early nationalist aspirations of a number of Arab states, the Russians can then hope for long-range political gains.

Soviet arms transfers to Iraq undoubtedly had something to do with neutralizing the Baghdad Pact, which was engineered by the United States as a northern-tier defense against possible Soviet expansionism. Iraq's withdrawal from the pact dealt a blow to the U.S. goal of Soviet containment.

Economically, arms sales provide much needed hard currency into Soviet banks and provide a means of achieving other goals. Once any country becomes dependent on Soviet arms, that situation leaves the door open for friendship pacts and economic treaties which eventually lead to greater Russian influence and increased dependency for the client.

Overall influence appears to be the primary goal of the Kremlin, but influence is difficult if not impossible to measure. In this area, perceptions become all important. There is little doubt that the Soviet leadership perceives that it exerts a certain degree of influence over its client states in the Middle East, no matter how tenuous it might be.

Generally, as Soviet influence rises, American influence wanes. At some

junctures, notably the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Soviets have been wary in their arms sales so as not to be drawn into direct confrontation with the United States.

The future of Soviet influence in the Middle East will remain as it has in the past: contingent on arms. It is of special note that Iraq, who in the past has been Russia's largest arms buyer (approximately \$10 billion worth of military hardware), has most recently been seeking to diversify its options by purchasing French-made Mirage fighter aircraft in January, 1981.

Fueling Iraq's search for new arms has been the Iraq-Iran war which started in September, 1980. The Soviets are seeking cordial relations with the new Tehran government and are apparently willing to sacrifice at least part of their longstanding association with Baghdad. This situation could create a ripple effect in both Syria and Libya, who have both begun looking for alternative suppliers in Great Britain and Italy.

Although the Soviet Union has little to fear in the near term, long-term difficulties may arise as the Kremlin may be forced to take sides as it was in the Somali-Ethiopian conflict. There are no easy answers for the Soviets in the Middle East. Only one thing is certain. The arms shipments that Moscow has been sending to its clients will continue into the foreseeable future.