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The Soviet Nuclear Threat Towards the Close of the Yom Kippur War*

Yona Bandmann and Yishai Cordova

Shortly after the Yom Kippur War, reports appeared in the American press to the effect that the USSR had shipped nuclear warheads to Egypt towards the end of the war. This affair, which has not yet been the object of any thoroughgoing research, will be discussed in some detail in this paper. For that purpose, we shall first fill in the background by outlining the main events on the military front and on the political scene in the last week of the war. Following that, we present an account of the more important news reports that were published at the time. After a critical discussion of these news reports and the various interpretations given to them, we formulate our conclusions on the whole affair, based on our preceding analysis.

BACKGROUND

On October 19, 1973, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin returned to Moscow after three days of intensive discussions in Cairo with Egyptian President Sadat. He came away with the Egyptian president's agreement

* This is a revised version of an article first published in Hebrew in *Ma'arakhot* 266 (November 1978): 37-42.

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¹ United Nations
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² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

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in principle to a cease-fire. On the strength of that agreement, Brezhnev asked Kissinger to come to Moscow to work out a formula that would put an end to the Yom Kippur War. A text to that effect was agreed on and was presented to the UN Security Council by the two superpowers as their joint proposal for a resolution. UN Resolution 338, adopted by the Security Council in the late hours of October 21, called on the parties

to cease all firing and terminate all military activity immediately, no later than twelve hours after the moment of the adoption of this decision; in the position they now occupy; to start immediately . . . the implementation of Security Council Resolution 242 . . . and to start negotiations between the parties concerned . . . aimed at establishing a just and durable peace in the Middle East.¹

The governments of both Egypt and Israel announced their acceptance of the cease-fire, but the Egyptian forces violated it at 18.52 hours (local time) on October 22, a few hours after it was supposed to come into force. Because of this, in the early hours of October 23 the IDF renewed their advance southward in the direction of the city of Suez, cutting off from its rear the Egyptian Third Army to the east of the Suez Canal. Against the background of these developments, the Security Council met again (at 19.00 hours on October 23, New York time; 01.00 hours on October 24, local time), repeated its call to the parties to observe the cease-fire and urged "that the forces of the two sides be returned to the positions they occupied at the moment the [original] cease-fire became effective" (Resolution 339).² This resolution had the full support of the two superpowers; but the fighting continued, and the ring around the Third Army was drawn constantly tighter by the IDF.

At this stage, the Soviet government published a statement declaring Israel's acceptance of Resolution 338 to have been nothing but "a gross lie" and accusing Israel of "flagrant flouting" of the Security Council's resolution. The Soviet statement ended as follows: "The Soviet Government warns the Government of Israel of the gravest consequences that the continuation of its aggressive actions against the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Syrian Arab Republic will entail."³

¹ United Nations Office of Public Information, *U.N. Monthly Chronicle* 10, no. 10 (November 1973): 30.

² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³ TASS in English, 18.10 GMT, October 23, 1973; US *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Record (FBIS)* III, no. 205 (October 24, 1973), F2. It should be pointed out that the Syrian government did not accept Resolution 338. It was not until late on the night of October 23, in the course of the Security Council debate during which Resolution 339 was

Facing an increasingly serious military situation, Sadat sent a personal note to Nixon and to Brezhnev on October 24 calling on them to send military forces "in order to supervise the implementation of the cease-fire and to ensure that it is effective and respected."⁴ On the evening of October 24, Nixon received a personal note from Brezhnev which was "very firm" and "left very little to the imagination as to what he [Brezhnev] intended."⁵ In one paragraph of the note, as it was later published, Brezhnev urged Nixon in dictatorial terms to send forces to the Middle East jointly with the USSR in order to impose the cease-fire on Israel by force of arms. Brezhnev went on to say that, if the United States should "find it impossible to act with us in this matter, we should be faced with the necessity urgently to consider the question of taking appropriate steps unilaterally."⁶

According to Nixon, the US intelligence services had gathered information leading him to conclude that the USSR was preparing "to send a very substantial force into the Mideast, a military force."⁷ Against this background, on the night of October 24–25 an ad hoc team of the US National Security Council decided to place part of the US armed forces on a Defense Condition 3 alert.⁸ Although a partial alert, this included, *inter alia*, the Strategic Air Command forces and the fleet of Polaris submarines, that is, the mobile spearhead nuclear forces of the United States. The US administration explained that the order was for "a precautionary alert" only, intended to make it clear to the Soviets that the United States was not prepared to acquiesce to "any unilateral move on their part to move military forces into the Mideast."⁹

finally adopted, that the Syrian government, in a telegram to the UN secretary-general, announced its acceptance of the cease-fire (*U.N. Monthly Chronicle* 10, no. 10 [November 1973]: 37; Radio Damascus, 04.15 GMT, October 24, 1973; *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* [SWB], ME/4433/A/1 [October 25, 1973]). This was *after* the publication of the Soviet warning to Israel not to continue "its aggressive actions against . . . the Syrian Arab Republic."

⁴ Radio Cairo, 18.07 GMT, October 24, 1973; SWB, ME/4434/A/4 (October 26, 1973).

⁵ "President Nixon's News Conference of October 26, 1973," *Department of State Bulletin*, no. 1794 (November 12, 1973): 584.

⁶ To the best of our knowledge, Brezhnev's note has not thus far been published in full. Parts of it were first published by David Binder in *The New York Times* (November 21, 1973) and by Marilyn Berger in *The Washington Post* (November 28, 1973). The quotation here was taken from Quandt 1977a, p. 196.

⁷ "President Nixon's News Conference of October 26, 1973," *op. cit.*, p. 581.

⁸ There are five degrees of Defense Condition alert that can be declared in the US armed forces in a war situation, degree 5 being the lowest and 1 the highest. The Strategic Air Command forces are routinely in a state of degree 4 readiness, and units of the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean are in degree 3 readiness.

⁹ "President Nixon's News Conference of October 26, 1973," *loc. cit.* "Secretary Kissinger's News Conference of October 25, 1973," *Department of State Bulletin*, no. 1794 (November 12, 1973): 587.

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Nixon's decision to place part of the US armed forces on a degree 3 alert caused surprise and bewilderment in the world, especially as it followed upon Security Council Resolutions 338 and 339, which had been initiated and presented jointly by the two superpowers. Moreover, the American nuclear alert was perceived as the climax to the whole set of superpower moves during the Yom Kippur War, and it constituted a concrete example of a local conflict in the Middle East dragging the superpowers almost against their will into a sharp confrontation fraught with the danger of nuclear holocaust.

THE NEWS REPORTS

At the beginning of November 1973, a week after the superpower confrontation of October 24–25, fuller details began to appear in the American press on the background to the alert in the US armed forces. From these reports, it appeared that the USSR also had made use of an atomic threat in the Middle East in the last stage of the Yom Kippur War. Before we consider this conclusion, it is necessary to detail exactly what was published at the time.

The daily newspaper *The Washington Post*, known to have access to sources of information in the administration, reported that on November 2 Defense Department officials stated that the Soviet government had supplied Egypt with SCUD-type missile-launching systems. In the opinion of these officials, the missiles were armed with *conventional warheads*, and there were no signs attesting to the fact that the USSR had supplied Egypt with atomic warheads as well.¹⁰

Almost three weeks later, the paper published a further report on the subject stating that, although on November 2 (the date of the first article) US intelligence had been of the opinion that the missiles supplied to Egypt were armed with conventional warheads, US officials now believed that the USSR may, in fact, have sent Egypt *atomic arms* during the war; and they believed the arms were still there, though under strict Soviet control. The arms apparently were atomic warheads for the SCUD missiles that had been delivered to Egypt before the war or in the course of the fighting. The officials stated that the US had discerned the presence of the atomic material when it was being transported in Soviet ships carrying war supplies as they sailed from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean. It was also reported that at least one of the ships had anchored in an Egyptian port. The intelligence sources added that, when this ship (and perhaps others) left the port, it was

¹⁰ Michael Getler, *The Washington Post*, November 2, 1973, p. 1.

clear that *radioactive material was still aboard*. According to the reporter, the administration officials refused to discuss whether there were instrumental means for measuring whether or not part of the radioactive material had been unloaded from the ship and whether they had any evidence from other sources that would help to settle the matter and to establish that the atomic warheads were indeed in Egypt. The officials stated that in the satellite photographs it was difficult to distinguish between conventional and atomic warheads, though certain auxiliary equipment was supposed to be able to give details on this point. They added, however, that the evidence (for the presence of Soviet atomic arms in Egypt) was not perfectly clear and unambiguous.¹¹

The US weekly on aviation affairs, *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, known to have access to sources of information in the US Department of Defense, printed two articles making certain information public. An article in the November 5, 1973, issue claimed that there were two brigades of Soviet SCUD surface-to-surface missiles in Egypt, each equipped with a nuclear warhead. The writer went on to state that these missiles, which were controlled by Soviet teams, had been shipped from the USSR to Egypt on September 12, 1973, i.e., some three weeks *before* the outbreak of the war, and that the US had discovered their presence in Egypt by means of spy satellites. The discovery was not difficult, because the Soviet personnel took no steps to hide the delivery of the nuclear warheads to the Middle East; on the contrary, they put the warheads alongside the SCUD launchers without any camouflage, so that the United States would know of their presence (Brownlow 1973, pp. 12–13).

In its November 12 issue (p. 11), the weekly reported that after the October 22 cease-fire the Soviet authorities sent two additional brigades of SCUD missile-launching systems to Egypt by air. But even before the publication of this article, the editor of *Aviation Week* said in an interview on the BBC that there were then four brigades of SCUD missile-launching systems in Egypt, *armed with conventional warheads*. The brigades were under the sole supervision and command of Soviet personnel, and the Egyptian army had no control over them.¹²

After the war, in the years 1973–77, additional material was published which filled in the story of the Soviet provision of atomic arms to Egypt. The Kalb brothers, in their book *Kissinger*, which appeared in the first half of 1974, relate that Kissinger received a report from the

¹¹ "U.S. Suspects Russia Shipped A-Arms to Egypt During War," *The Washington Post*, November 21, 1973.

¹² *Ha'aretz*, November 7, 1973, p. 2.

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CIA on the morning of October 25 with the sensational news that the USSR might have transferred atomic arms to Egypt. They also state that for some days US reconnaissance planes had been tracking a Soviet vessel which was transporting radioactive material and was en route to Port Said. The ship anchored there in the early morning of October 25 (Kalb and Kalb 1975, p. 557). Intelligence experts thought the radioactive material consisted of one or more atomic warheads for the SCUD missiles, which had reached Egypt as early as *the end of September 1973* (*ibid.*, p. 513). However, the Kalb brothers end by saying that the experts could reach no definite conclusion as to whether or not the radioactive material was, in fact, unloaded in Egypt (*ibid.*, p. 557). Professor William Quandt (1977a, p. 198, n. 73), relying – with reservations – on the Kalbs, states that the vessel anchored in the port of Alexandria, not in Port Said.

The Egyptians completely denied the reports published in the US press as soon as they appeared. The Egyptian military spokesman, commenting on the November 2 article in *The Washington Post*, did not refer directly to the SCUD missile-launching systems but contended that “The ground-to-ground missile in Egypt is of the Zafir type to which President as-Sadat referred in his 16 October speech to the People’s Assembly and which is of Egyptian make.”¹³ Commenting on the November 21 article in *The Washington Post*, the Egyptian government spokesman described the report that the USSR had already supplied or would in the future supply atomic arms to Egypt or Syria as “absolutely senseless.”¹⁴

The Soviet government made no mention whatsoever of these reports in the US press. Moscow did, however, react to the declaration of the Defense Condition 3 alert in the US armed forces, calling the references of top-ranking US leaders to signs of possible Soviet military intervention in the Middle East “wild speculations over the intentions of the Soviet Union in the Near East”¹⁵ or quite “absurd.”¹⁶ The USSR made no direct, or even indirect, reference to the assertion that it had introduced atomic arms into Egypt. (The lack of reference to the issue is not, in itself, exceptional and need not be a cause for surprise. In the

¹³ Radio Cairo, 21.00 GMT, November 3, 1973; *SWB* ME/4442/A/4 (November 5, 1973). In his speech of October 16, Sadat did mention Zafir missiles, but this could not have prevented anyone from identifying the missiles as SCUD missiles; see, for example, *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, October 22, 1973, p. 14.

¹⁴ Middle East News Agency, 17.00 local time, November 21, 1973.

¹⁵ Brezhnev’s speech to the World Peace Congress, Radio Moscow, 12.50 GMT, October 26, 1973; *SWB*, SU/4436/C/6 (October 29, 1973).

¹⁶ TASS statement on the US alert, in English, 03.26 GMT, October 27, 1973; *FBIS* III, no. 208 (October 29, 1973), B3.

course of the Yom Kippur War and after it, there were practically no direct references by Soviet leaders to activities in the Middle East or references in the Soviet communications media. Any reports that did appear were framed in general terms and relied mainly on reports in the foreign press, Arab or Western.)

Basing themselves on the above-mentioned and other news items, American analysts came to the conclusion that the USSR did transfer atomic arms to Egypt at the close of the Yom Kippur War. One analyst even asserted that the Defense Condition 3 alert was declared "not because there were proofs [in Washington] that the USSR was preparing to send parachutists to the Middle East but *because a Soviet vessel reached Alexandria with atomic warheads aboard*" (emphasis added).¹⁷ The Kalb brothers, on the other hand, claim that the CIA report strengthened the secretary of state's view that the Soviet government was about to send airborne troops to Egypt, since any nuclear arms installed there could serve as an umbrella for a large Soviet force to be sent at a later stage. The Kalbs add, however, that Kissinger could not dismiss the possibility "that the Russians were moving nuclear weapons into Egypt because they believed that the Israelis had nuclear weapons and intended to use them against Egypt." As a result, the secretary of state called for an immediate inquiry into Israel's atomic potential (Kalb and Kalb 1975, p. 557). The author of the November 5 *Aviation Week* article claimed that "The Soviet expectation is that the SCUD, with its implication of nuclear warfare or blackmail, will push the U.S. into demanding that the Israelis accept Arab conditions for peace" (Brownlow 1973, p. 13).¹⁸ Professor Alvin Rubinstein adopted in full the Kalbs' version as regards the CIA report of October 25. In his opinion, Moscow wanted to signal the United States that it was not prepared to acquiesce to an Egyptian defeat at the hands of Israel (Rubinstein 1977, p. 276).¹⁹

¹⁷ Interview with Professor Hans J. Morgenthau on US educational television, according to *Ma'ariv*, November 28, 1973, p. 1, quoting the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. In an article published three years later, Morgenthau reiterated this view, adding that, the moment Moscow unloaded atomic arms in the port of Alexandria, the US was "involved in the kind of confrontation which had been classically established at the beginning of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962" (Morgenthau 1976, pp. 7-8).

¹⁸ "Arab conditions for peace" meant complete Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, borders and the restoration of the "legitimate rights" of the Palestinian Arab people, in the words of President Sadat in his speech to the Egyptian National Assembly on October 16, 1973.

¹⁹ See also Quandt 1977c, pp. 596-97. However, Quandt concluded his discussion on this subject with the following remark: "There is no reliable information that nuclear weapons of any sort have ever been introduced into Egypt by the Russians" (p. 597, n. 29).

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²¹ Zumwalt (1976)

REVIEW OF THE FACTS

The material presented above appears to be so full of internal inconsistencies and inaccuracies that it is necessary to clarify the most striking of them before discussing the issue itself.

The CIA report which was placed on the desk of the US secretary of state, according to the Kalb brothers, on the morning of October 25 and which contained information on Moscow's transfer of atomic arms to Egypt cannot in itself have been the cause for the Defense Condition 3 alert ordered by President Nixon. The immediate cause for the alert, as we have said, was Brezhnev's note to Nixon, which reached Washington at 21.25 hours on October 24 (Washington time)²⁰ and which, according to administration heads, was accompanied by signs attesting to an alert in the Soviet airborne units.²¹ At 23.30 hours (Washington time), i.e., at least seven to eight hours before the CIA report reached the secretary of state, "[Secretary of Defense] Schlesinger instructed [the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Thomas] Moorer to tell the service chiefs to alert most but not all military commands" (Kalb and Kalb 1975, p. 555).

A Soviet vessel carrying a radioactive cargo anchored, if anywhere, in the harbor of Alexandria, not at Port Said. It is known that the USSR evacuated its ships from Egyptian ports as early as October 4, and one of the calculations that led Moscow to take this step was the desire to prevent unnecessary loss of life in the war that seemed imminent. The fact is that no Soviet ships reached Port Said during the war, only Alexandria. It is inconceivable that Moscow would have shipped a cargo as sensitive as radioactive material to an area that was subjected to Israeli air attacks practically throughout the war and was vulnerable to Israeli attack from the sea. The reports are conflicting as to whether the nuclear cargo was unloaded or remained on board and, indeed, as to whether or not the vessel in question was even carrying a nuclear cargo.

More important than these inconsistencies and inaccuracies is the fact that the version published in the *Aviation Week* issue of November 5, 1973, is in substantial conflict with the other versions. The author asserted that as early as almost a month *before* the war the USSR had delivered to Egypt two brigades of SCUD missiles armed with *nuclear warheads* and had installed them openly so that US intelligence could identify them with ease. The other versions state that the USSR trans-

²⁰ There are several versions giving different details as to the time. We prefer the one referred to, *inter alia*, by Kalb and Kalb (1975, p. 553) and Quandt (1977a, p. 196).

²¹ Zumwalt (1976, pp. 439-40) expatiated at length on these signs.

ferred atomic material – which may have been warheads – towards the end of the war, for the purpose of arming missiles already installed in Egypt.

The *Aviation Week* version is a very surprising one, to put it mildly. We find it unacceptable for two main reasons. First, it has been established that the SCUD missile systems in fact reached Egypt in mid-1973, in July and August and perhaps even earlier.²² From Egyptian documents captured by the IDF during the war, moreover, it emerges clearly that the systems were manned by Egyptian crews and fitted organically into the Egyptian order of battle; command and operational control were in the hands of Egyptian officers. The job of the Soviet advisers was limited to assisting the Egyptians in absorbing the systems and guiding them in their operation and maintenance.²³ Finally, when the war broke out, there were only *nine launching systems* in Egypt, that is, one brigade (according to the well-known Soviet organization of a missile brigade; see Gazit 1975, p. 188, Table I), not two, as stated in *Aviation Week*.

Second, a look at the relations between the USSR and Egypt after July 1972, when Sadat got rid of the Soviet strategic presence established in his country, completely disposes of any notion that Moscow would have introduced atomic arms into Egypt. This is all the more certain since it is clear by now that the USSR was opposed to Egypt's initiation of a war and tried to dissuade Sadat from starting it. Furthermore, it is hard to conceive that Sadat would have permitted the USSR to re-establish forces in Egypt under solely Soviet control and command.

This line of argument holds good when we examine the news reports against the background of the superpower relationship. The installation in Egypt (or in any other Middle East country) of Soviet weapons systems of the type reported would have completely contradicted any conception of détente between the superpowers, both in letter and in spirit. By taking a step of this kind, the USSR on its own initiative might have undermined the foundation of the relationship that had

²² In a TV program on November 4, 1973, Major-General (Res.) Chaim Herzog commented, *inter alia*, on the report in *Aviation Week and Space Technology*. He said that SCUD missiles armed with conventional warheads had been installed in Egypt for some time (*Ha'aretz*, November 5, 1973, p. 1). American researchers, basing themselves on information said to have been received from Israeli intelligence, gave various dates in the summer of 1973 for the arrival of the launching systems in Egypt. One researcher stated that "Israeli intelligence officials told Washington in mid-June of the arrival in Egypt of the SCUDs" (Rubinstein 1977, p. 252). See also Glassman 1975, p. 105, and Quandt 1977b, p. 383, n. 12.

²³ "Most significantly, though partially serviced and operated by Soviet personnel, the SCUDs had been placed under Egyptian operational control" (Glassman 1975, p. 113).

been created between a series of formal agreements held in Moscow (which included, *inter alia*, the utmost to avoid military nuclear war."²⁴ On the USSR really so have ignored so far. Between the U.S. and from the general *Week* article. (Even such information Moscow, there was one of the major n

In our view, the report published in *Aviation Week* report's credibility was realized that the issue "corrected" strengthened by the at the time of the wrote at length in Washington that intervention in the possible shipment 445–46).²⁵ It is to Alexandria during to the knowledge absence of any m no Soviet atomic US administration

²⁴ "Basic Principles Article 2, Department "Basic Principles" was Communiqué" [June 2 130).

²⁵ Zumwalt quotes intervention. In these re nuclear material to Eg various aspects of the directed at the secretar in Washington was cre Condition 3 alert were,

been created between the superpowers. This relationship was based on a series of formal agreements signed by the two sides at summit meetings held in Moscow (May 1972) and Washington (June 1973) which included, *inter alia*, the mutual obligation of the parties to "do their utmost to avoid military confrontations and to prevent the outbreak of nuclear war."²⁴ On these grounds alone it is not conceivable that, had the USSR really sent atomic arms to Egypt, the US government would have ignored so flagrant a breach of the "Basic Principles of Relations Between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R." and would have concealed it from the general public for over a month, as claimed in the *Aviation Week* article. (Even if the administration were inclined to conceal such information until it could clarify the matter in quiet talks with Moscow, there would always be someone who would leak the item to one of the major newspapers.)

In our view, the foregoing analysis of the journalistic "scoop" published in *Aviation Week* is largely sufficient to undermine the report's credibility. (The editors of the weekly, themselves, apparently realized that the report was unfounded; as we have shown, the next issue "corrected" the content of the first article.) Our conclusion is strengthened by the fact that, although the commander of the US navy at the time of the Yom Kippur War, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., wrote at length in his book about the signs that had accumulated in Washington that attested to Soviet preparations for possible military intervention in the Middle East, he did not include among them the possible shipment of atomic weapons to Egypt (Zumwalt 1976, pp. 443, 445-46).²⁵ It is hard to believe that a Soviet shipment of atomic arms to Alexandria during the war, or even before it, would not have come to the knowledge of the commander of the US navy. Rather, the absence of any mention of the subject in Zumwalt's book suggests that no Soviet atomic threat was involved in the considerations that led the US administration to decide on the armed forces alert.

²⁴ "Basic Principles of Relations Between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R." (May 29, 1972), Article 2, *Department of State Bulletin*, no. 1722 (June 26, 1972): 898. The validity of the "Basic Principles" was reaffirmed at the second summit (see "Text of Joint U.S.-U.S.S.R. Communiqué" [June 21, 1973], *Department of State Bulletin*, no. 1778 [July 23, 1973]: 130).

²⁵ Zumwalt quotes intelligence reports that indicated Soviet preparations for possible intervention. In these reports there is not a word about the possibility that Moscow had shipped nuclear material to Egypt. It should be noted that, in spite of biting words of criticism on various aspects of the administration's activity during the war and particularly sharp criticism directed at the secretary of state, Zumwalt affirmed that the information that had accumulated in Washington was credible and trustworthy. The president's instructions to declare a Defense Condition 3 alert were, in his opinion, entirely justified.

