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# Yom Kippur War (October 6-25, 1973)

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## **Yom Kippur War (6-25 OCT. 1973)**

Soviet behavior during this conflict forced Moscow to confront the importance of its newly evolving policy of détente with the United States and its historic support for regional allies such as Egypt and Syria. This military support included supplying Egypt with over 1,000 tanks, 1,000 armored personnel carriers, over 100 combat aircraft, 120 helicopters, and nearly 100 surface-to-air missile batteries between 1970-1973. This support was offset by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's July 1972 expulsion of Soviet's 15,000 military personnel, which demonstrated the periodically recurring tension within this bilateral relationship stemming from Cairo's displeasure at Soviet attempts to limit use of these weapons.

Soviet rhetoric emphasized the danger of war during 1973, but privately the Soviets avoided direct criticism of their Arab allies. Multiple factors contributed to this conflict, including deeply entrenched Arab-Israeli enmity, Sadat's desire to reestablish Arab political and military credibility following the disastrous 1967 war, and proving that Israeli occupation of the Sinai Peninsula was not permanent, as well as Syrian determination to recapture the Golan Heights. Bulgarian and Czechoslovak news agencies referred to Egyptian and Syrian attack preparations during October 2-4, while *Izvestia*, the official Soviet

government newspaper, referred to Israeli troop concentrations on October 5.

On October 4, 1973, the Soviets began airlifting their dependents out of Egypt and Syria as a precautionary measure.

Despite Israeli assurances that they would not attack first, as they had in 1967, the Arabs responded with their assault beginning at 2:00 p.m. on October 6. The following day the Soviets started airlifting supplies to Egypt, and the U.S. responded to serious Israeli battlefield losses with its own supply airlift and sealift which exceeded the Soviet efforts by 40,000 tons and continued throughout the war. Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin visited Cairo between October 16 and 19 to assist the Egyptian war effort.

There was tenuous ongoing consultation between Moscow and Washington involving policymakers such as Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin (1919-2010), U.S. President Richard Nixon, U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger, and Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev. On October 20-21, Kissinger arrived in Moscow and both sides attempted to negotiate a cease-fire. The Soviets wanted Israel to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders, while Kissinger wanted a cease-fire with Israeli troops in place and linked with United Nations Resolution 242 calling for Israeli withdrawal from Arab territory.

Negotiations stalled quickly though, and the Israelis expressed concern that

Washington was negotiating at their expense. Tensions rose further on October 24 when Nixon received a note from Brezhnev saying Moscow was prepared to send troops to the region if the U.S. refused to participate in an international police action. This same day saw the Soviets move approximately 40-50,000 airborne troops to staging areas in Eastern Europe and the Ukraine for possible deployment to the Mideast.

The Nixon Administration responded by upgrading the alert status of U.S. military forces to Defense Condition (DEFCON) 3. On October 25, Kissinger expressed U.S. willingness to defend Israel and U.S. national interests in a press conference.

The Soviets had 95 naval ships in the Mediterranean during the Yom Kippur War and the U.S. had 60 naval ships, so a superpower conflict was possible if the crisis escalated. Both the Egyptians and Israelis wanted a cease fire and were prepared to negotiate prisoner exchanges and border changes by November 1973.

The Egyptians and Israelis also used the postwar environment to extract military and economic assistance from Washington, and Moscow was able to economically benefit from higher oil prices stemming from the temporary Arab oil embargo.

Overall results saw the Soviets increase their support for Arab policies without having to militarily intervene on behalf of Cairo or Damascus. The relative cooperation between Moscow and Washington kept the crisis from becoming a military conflict, despite diplomatic missteps by both sides, due to their desire to maintain détente and United States' reluctance to get involved in a military conflict stemming from the emerging Watergate crisis and public disillusionment with the Vietnam War. Although both Moscow and Washington wanted greater peace in the Mideast, each side had different visions on what it would look like. The Arabs and Israelis were not ready to take steps that would increase the possibility of broader regional peace. The end result was a bloody conflict reinforcing the regional status quo .

*Bert Chapman*

**See also:** Arab-Israeli War (1956); Brezhnev, Leonid Ilyich (1906-1982); Six Day War (June 5-10, 1967)

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