

Flashpoint

The Arab-Israeli conflict is now gripped by the spiral of military escalation from which powers, ostensibly engaged in a struggle for peace, are being drawn into a greater and greater military involvement. Greater and greater quantities of military equipment are being supplied to the belligerents. A week of diplomatic effort—led by the United States—to insulate the Middle East conflict from superpower involvement has failed, at least as far as the supply of armaments goes. The consequent risks are now substantially higher than the conflict cannot be tightly contained, that it will spill into a steadily wider theater of conflagration.

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The administration's reluctant decision to resupply the hard-hit Israeli armed forces was correct and inevitable, once the magnitude of the Soviet military airlift to the Arab states became evident. The move is but a logical continuation of the longstanding U.S. interest in maintaining Israel's state of military preparedness at a point sufficient to discourage dangerous illusions of Israel's neighbors that any political or ideological advantage could come from armed aggression. With an estimated 20 percent of Israel's air force lost in the fighting so far, including some of its most combat-effective aircraft, there could be no question that the military balance was in danger of a destabilizing shift.

Some will even now seek to fault the administration for failing to be "even-handed"—a phrase that is coming increasingly to mean abandonment of Israel. If it means anything at all, these critics should explain how, by any measure, it could have been considered "even-handed" to withhold the replacement armaments on which Israel depends and which the United States is

committed to supply, while military largesse flowed in such abundance from Moscow to the other side.

The new escalation of superpower engagement is deeply troubling for the cause of détente, on which the administration had so confidently embarked. It calls seriously into question the theory that superpower restraint in localized conflicts could be a viable principle of international relations, that two ideologically competitive power centers could nevertheless perceive their mutual interests in avoiding destructive partnership and cooperating to contain regional hostilities.

Flying straight in the face of all the mutual assurances exchanged between the heads of the Soviet and U.S. governments in May of last year, the Russians have now stated their "determination to assist in every way the liberation of all Arab territories occupied by Israel."

However irresponsible the Soviet leadership failed to heed the first warnings of danger in escalating this conflict, they should be in no doubt of the new dangers that now loom. With massive airlifts of military equipment pouring in to both sides, and the Arabs receiving explicit Soviet support for their aims of war, it may be too late to expect the new war to wind down from exhaustion and depletion of material.

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The only hope is that it is not too late for diplomatic sanity to reappear between Washington and Moscow, for a new effort at containing the conflict and enforcing cease-fire to get under way, for preventing the spiraling superpower engagement from going any further. The United States is clearly eager to cooperate in containing and ending the conflict. No similar will is evident in the Soviet Union.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

