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AT ARMS LENGTH: SOVIET–SYRIAN RELATIONS IN THE GORBACHEV ERA

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PREFACE

For more than three decades, the Soviet Union's principal role in the Middle East has been as an arms supplier to the most radical Arab states. These states used Soviet support to threaten and attack Israel, subvert their pro–Western Arab neighbors and obstruct U.S. peace initiatives. In response, as a central tenet of its Middle East policy, the United States explicitly sought to limit Soviet influence in the region.

Since the rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev, however, judgements about the nature of Soviet foreign policy have become more difficult. Globally, the U.S.–Soviet relationship has dramatically improved as a result of changes in Moscow's behavior; progress has occurred in arms control and in efforts to resolve conflicts in several Third World trouble spots. In the Middle East, progress toward an Arab–Israeli settlement has been less apparent, but positive changes in Soviet policy are evident nonetheless: a thaw in relations with Israel and the moderate Arab states, less than wholehearted support for the Arab radicals and a more pragmatic attitude toward U.S.–backed efforts to promote peace negotiations.

In this Policy Paper, John Hannah examines what is potentially the most significant shift in Soviet policy: the changing character of Moscow's relations with Syria. Since

the 1970s, the USSR has provided Syria with a world-class military, bolstering Damascus' rejection of a peace settlement. Hannah suggests that Moscow is now having second thoughts about the relationship with Syria. Politically, he describes the growing divergence between Gorbachev's approach to the Middle East and Syria's confrontationist priorities. Militarily, he also finds changes occurring: though Moscow still provides Syria with new, highly sophisticated military systems, the total level of support for the Syrian armed forces has declined.

Though Soviet policy toward Syria is evolving, Hannah claims that the process is by no means complete. In the midst of growing tensions, certain continuities in the Soviet–Syrian strategic relationship continue to raise questions about Moscow's willingness and/or ability to contribute to an Arab–Israeli settlement.

This mix of change and continuity in Soviet policy creates new challenges for U.S. policy-makers. The old formula of seeking to exclude Soviet influence absolutely may no longer apply if the USSR is prepared to use its influence in the interests of conflict resolution. Hannah argues that U.S. policy should seek ways to take advantage of the changes in Soviet behavior in order to incorporate Moscow in efforts to build a framework for Middle East stability. At the same time, he believes that U.S. willingness to sanction a growing Soviet role in the region must be tied to demands that Moscow take additional steps to clarify its commitment to peace.

Policy-makers throughout the West are carefully watching the dramatic changes underway in the Soviet Union, and they are grappling with the difficult issue of how to respond. The Washington Institute is therefore pleased to present this study, in the hope that it can contribute to an understanding and analysis of Soviet policy in the Middle East.

Barbi Weinberg
President
November 1989

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Though the impact of the Soviet Union's "new thinking" has been less dramatic in the Middle East than in other regions of Third World conflict, its effects are nonetheless beginning to be felt. An important development in this regard has been signs of decreasing Soviet support for Syria, the Arab state most opposed to a compromise political settlement with Israel and the one best equipped to obstruct such a solution.

The "new thinking" has been driven by a dysfunctional Soviet economy, Moscow's need for stability in East–West relations and a re–evaluation of the shortcomings of past Soviet policy. In the Middle East, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has adopted a new approach to the Arab–Israeli problem, one that has generated growing strains in relations with Damascus. The USSR's efforts to normalize ties with Israel, woo pro–Western Arab states and encourage moderation within the Palestine Liberation Organization are all opposed by Syria. Moreover, Gorbachev's willingness to directly take issue with Syria's intransigence on the peace process and its adventurism in Lebanon have further exacerbated tensions.

There have also been signs of change in the Soviet–Syrian military relationship. Rhetorically, Moscow has publicly chastised Damascus for its continuing reliance on military

power, rather than diplomacy, in the conflict with Israel. More important, during Gorbachev's tenure, there has been a relatively dramatic drop in the absolute level of Soviet arms transfers to Syria.

Worrisome continuities do persist in Soviet–Syrian relations. Though the quantity of weapons supplied to Syria has dropped, Moscow has still delivered or agreed to deliver to Damascus (and several other radical Arab states) some of its most advanced military systems. Rather than promoting a peaceful settlement of the conflict with Israel, such transfers bolster the rejectionism of these states and their belief that a military solution remains a viable long–term option.

Gorbachev's efforts to redefine the terms of Moscow's relationship with Syria have occurred within specific limits. For more than a decade, Syria has provided the USSR its most reliable political and military entree to the Arab–Israeli arena. Even in the context of "new thinking," when the costs and risks of the relationship are being reassessed, Syria represents a geostrategic asset that will not be readily discarded, especially when the benefits of doing so remain uncertain from Moscow's perspective.

But even within limits, the changes in Soviet–Syrian relations are important. The perception of a weakening Soviet security commitment dilutes Syria's ability to pose a credible war option, thereby imposing on Damascus a need for greater caution in dealing with Israel.

The United States should recognize the positive changes in Soviet policy while pressing Moscow to go farther in clarifying the ambiguities that remain in its military ties to Syria. After decades of effort to undermine U.S. interests in the Middle East, the Soviets should not be granted a greatly expanded role in regional diplomacy until they make the difficult choices necessary to demonstrate a genuine commitment to peace. This will require American diplomacy to be vigilant. But at the same time, it must also be visionary, attuned to the possibilities of the "new thinking," and the potential opportunities it creates to advance U.S. interests in the Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

Since coming to power in 1985, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has launched both his country and the world into a new era, one marked by great change and promise as well as uncertainty. While domestically he has sought to transform the totalitarian underpinnings of Soviet society, in foreign affairs, Gorbachev—under the rubric of "new thinking"—has called for radical changes in the way the USSR does business internationally.

As a result, the hallmarks of post-war Soviet foreign policy—an ideologically-driven hostility toward the West, adventurism and subversion in the Third World, the excessive accumulation of military might—have all come under attack from leading Soviet officials. The most important manifestation of the "new thinking" has been a dramatic improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations, including an effort to cooperate in resolving several longstanding regional conflicts in areas such as southern Africa, Cambodia and Afghanistan.

In this context, the Soviets have also asserted their desire to work with the United States in the Middle East. Increasingly, Moscow claims its readiness to be pragmatic and flexible in seeking a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the most intractable regional dispute and, historically, the most dangerous for the superpowers.

If the Soviets are serious about resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict, several important changes will have to be implemented in their traditional Middle East policy. Among them are an end to the Kremlin's reflexive hostility toward Israel and its unquestioning support for Arab positions on the peace process.

But perhaps more significant as an indication of Moscow's interest in Arab–Israeli peace will be a willingness to curtail support for Syria, the USSR's most important Arab ally and the country with the strongest commitment to the strategic goal of undermining the Jewish state. Syria has been the most ardent opponent of any compromise political settlement and—thanks to two decades of massive Soviet aid—the party most capable of obstructing peace with Israel and launching war against it.

Any viable diplomatic process aimed at achieving a long-term framework for regional stability will therefore either require that Syria's confrontationist policies be changed or, more likely, neutralized by a powerful coalition of regional and international actors that support a settlement. Soviet participation in this process is essential and will need to be reflected in two ways:

- A willingness to pressure Syria to accept, or at least not obstruct, a political settlement with Israel.
- A significant cutback in Soviet support for the Syrian military.

This sort of clear message from Moscow, communicated in both words and deeds, will be a necessary component of any effort to compel Syria to realize the non-viability of a military solution. Moreover, it will be a significant indicator of the Soviet Union's commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Importantly, signs are now evident that such a shift in Soviet–Syrian relations may indeed be developing. Under Gorbachev, strains between Moscow and Damascus, on both the political and military levels, have multiplied and become more frequent. And whereas such periods of strain have in the past been relatively brief and limited to specific issues, the present tensions appear to be of a more fundamental nature,

striking at the very core of each side's view of the Middle East conflict.

This by no means suggests that Soviet–Syrian relations have reached a crisis point. The mutual dependencies and shared interests that have traditionally sustained the relationship have attenuated, not disappeared. Though Moscow may be seeking to redefine its ties to Damascus, it does not wish to sever them.

But even if the change in relations does occur within specific limits, its potential significance should not be discounted. A collapse in Soviet–Syrian ties may not be on the horizon, but a process of slow erosion does seem to be occurring, one that could have important consequences for the future of the Arab–Israeli conflict and the possibilities of a peaceful settlement.

This paper is presented in five parts: a broad analysis of the sources of Gorbachev's "new thinking" and its relevance for the Middle East; a description of the growing political strains between Moscow and Damascus arising from their diverging policies; an examination of the changes and continuities in Soviet–Syrian military ties; an evaluation of Gorbachev's approach to relations with Syria; and a discussion of the significance of the shifts in the Soviet–Syrian relationship and their implications for U.S. policy.

I "NEW THINKING" IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Traditionally, the Soviet Union has supported a radical bloc of Arab parties that opposed peace with Israel and sought to undermine Western influence in the Middle East. Continued Arab–Israeli tensions and Mideast instability seemed to offer real possibilities for the promotion of Soviet power, strengthening radical forces in the region, damaging America's position in the Arab world because of its relationship with Israel and creating a need among the Arabs for Soviet political and military aid. A peaceful settlement, in contrast, would allow the United States to pursue ties with all the region's states free of contradictions, while eliminating the Arabs' need for Soviet support.

The importance of Gorbachev's "new thinking" is that it directly challenges many of the traditional dogmas that guided Soviet policy during the Brezhnev era. In particular, the "new thinking" suggests that Soviet interests will be best served not by attempts to exploit regional tensions for unilateral gain, but by efforts to work with the United States to stabilize conflict situations.

This new Soviet attitude toward regional conflicts is based on three main factors. First, the Soviet leadership's growing appreciation of the deepening, multi-dimensional crisis afflicting the Soviet system. Primarily economic in nature, but including political, social, ideological and cultural aspects, this

crisis has led Gorbachev to conclude that the USSR is in need of fundamental and comprehensive change. This radical restructuring, or *perestroika*, demands a reorientation of national resources, attention and effort away from the dangerous and costly foreign adventures of the Brezhnev era toward internal concerns. In the Third World, this has been manifested in a willingness to retreat from the most confrontational policies of the past and—to a sometimes greater, sometimes lesser extent—to cooperate with the United States to mitigate regional conflicts.

Second, Moscow's interest in Third World stabilization is heightened by the desire to dramatically improve political and economic relations with the West, a desire based, at least in part, on the belief that Western cooperation can help *perestroika*. Importantly, the "new thinking" appears to have drawn a fundamental conclusion from the collapse of detente in the 1970s: the central superpower relationship cannot be stabilized if the Soviet Union continues to pursue a highly ideological, confrontational policy on the global periphery. To the extent that the Soviets now perceive a link between their prospects for maintaining a moderately successful socio/political order and the quality of their relations with the West, the lesson of the 1970s is inescapable: "Our direct or indirect entanglement in regional conflicts brings enormous losses, exacerbating international tensions, justifying the arms race and hampering mutually beneficial economic ties with the West."[1] The corresponding policy imperative—to try to resolve these conflicts—is no less obvious. Indeed, Moscow's heightened awareness of the deleterious impact of regional conflicts on superpower relations should be especially relevant in the Middle East, since the region's strategic location, its abundance of oil and America's special relationship with Israel all combine to make the United States highly sensitive to traditional Soviet troublemaking there. The Soviets are well aware that, unlike other Third World regions, local conflicts

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[1]Andrei Kozyrev, deputy director of the International Organizations Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, "Confidence and the Balance of Interests," *International Affairs* (Moscow), November 1988, p.8.

in the Middle East have on several occasions—in 1956, 1967, 1970 and 1973—escalated to major superpower confrontations.

A third factor encouraging the Soviets to alter their traditional orientation toward regional conflicts is the realization that, for the most part, past policies have not been successful. Not only did the radicalism of the 1970s poison East–West relations and increase the risks of superpower confrontation, it also failed to bring the USSR any lasting economic, political or security gains; on the contrary, the reliance on military power and Third World adventurism is now viewed as having diminished national welfare, reduced Moscow's global influence and exacerbated the threats to Soviet security.

A microcosm of this failure can be found in Soviet Middle East policy. The efforts to exploit Arab–Israeli tensions have not fared well; the campaign to ostracize Israel (the Soviets severed diplomatic relations during the 1967 war), the arming of Israel's most ardent opponents and the backing and encouragement for all the region's most radical actors did not produce major increases in Soviet power and influence. In fact, quite the opposite. By the early 1980s, Moscow had been effectively relegated to the region's periphery: evicted from Egypt, the Arab world's most important state; excluded from the Arab–Israeli peace process and unable to block its crowning achievement, the Egypt–Israel peace treaty; and viewed as an expansionist opportunist by most of the Arab states, thanks to its support for regional subversion and the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan.

This left the Soviets isolated with a small group of radical clients in Syria, Libya, the Palestine Liberation Organization and South Yemen. More disconcerting was the fact that, despite increasing levels of Soviet military aid, these "allies" tended to be unruly, defiant and beyond Moscow's control. The most important of them, Syria, has frequently acted against explicit Soviet wishes, invading Lebanon, attacking the PLO, supporting Iran against Soviet-supplied Iraq in the Gulf War and continuing to sponsor international terrorism, even after Moscow had warned of its decreased utility and heightened risks as an instrument of policy against the West. Moreover,

Syria's unyielding hostility toward Israel and its commitment to a military solution of the conflict pose the constant threat of war and, therefore, U.S.–Soviet confrontation.

Politically, Moscow's support for Arab extremism and its investment in anti–Zionist bluster guaranteed that it would be left on the sidelines of Arab–Israeli diplomacy. Israel, naturally enough, felt the Soviets were incapable of acting as honest mediators. For their part, those Arabs interested in peace saw Moscow's role as largely superfluous; only the United States, with its strong ties to Israel, had the potential influence to persuade Jerusalem to exchange territory won in the 1967 war for peace.

The ineffectiveness of Soviet policy, however, extended beyond a mere reduction in region–wide influence. Even worse, support for Arab radicalism resulted in a real decline in Soviet security; indeed, by the mid–1980s, the dangers the Soviets confronted on their southern periphery were actually greater than they had been a decade earlier. The Soviet threat helped turn U.S.–Israel strategic cooperation into a reality, enhancing America's military presence and capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean, while cementing Israel's status as a regional superpower and full–fledged U.S. ally. In addition, and contrary to the conventional wisdom, the United States was simultaneously able to improve its political and military relationships with several friendly Arab states, the most notable of course being Egypt.

Of further concern to the USSR is the spiraling Middle East arms race and its implications for Soviet security. Though not of Moscow's making and certainly not under its control, the arms race has been greatly exacerbated by Soviet efforts to heighten Arab–Israeli tensions, block efforts at forging a settlement and establish influence through the massive export of advanced weaponry. Now, with non–superpower and private suppliers entering the Mideast arms bazaar, Moscow finds itself joining the United States in expressing concern about the uncontrolled proliferation of exotic technologies and unconventional weapons—including ballistic missiles and chemical, nerve, biological and nuclear weapons—to the region. The threat is perceived as especially severe by the

Soviets since many Middle Eastern states possess or are developing missiles capable of hitting Soviet territory. Israel, in particular, that long-time target of Soviet hostility, is known to possess not only nuclear weapons, but the missile know-how to deliver them all the way to Moscow.[2]

All these factors—the desire to focus on internal concerns, improve relations with the West and reverse the dead-ends in Soviet policy—have provided Moscow with strong incentives to alter its traditional behavior in the Middle East. Increasingly, Soviet analysts and policy-makers suggest that the confrontational policies of the past, while producing certain short-term gains such as money earned from arms sales and strategic presence won in states like Syria and Libya, may not have served the USSR's true long-term interests. They now claim that the pursuit of regional stability, rather than conflict, is not only necessary to ensure the success of domestic reform, but it also will result in a more fruitful foreign policy, increasing Soviet political influence among all Mideast states while neutralizing the volatile security threats that arose in response to Moscow's policies of the past.

If the Soviets are serious about the "new thinking" in the Middle East, the general formula for their policy reversal is a relatively simple one: more support for the forces of regional moderation and stability, less support for the forces of extremism. In practice, this means normalizing relations with Israel and those moderate Arab parties that favor a negotiated settlement of the conflict. Significantly, this process has already begun under Gorbachev.

However, if the United States is to believe that a genuine change has occurred in Soviet policy, it will not be enough for Moscow to simply improve its ties to pro-Western states while maintaining unaltered its alliance with the region's most radical actors. Having it both ways in this manner is undoubtedly the easiest course for the Soviets to pursue,

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[2]See the report by Stephen Broening, "Israel could build missiles to hit Soviets, U.S. thinks," *The Baltimore Sun*, November 23, 1988. Also see David Ottaway, "Israel Reported to Test Controversial Missile," *The Washington Post*, September 16, 1989, p.A17.

allowing them to avoid tough choices *vis a vis* their traditional clients. But precisely because it entails relatively few risks, this course of action fails to unequivocally demonstrate a new Soviet commitment to regional stability. It is necessary, therefore, that the "new thinking" also include a visible reduction in political and military support for the Arab radicals in general and Syria in particular, the single most intractable party to the conflict and the one most capable of thwarting progress toward peace.

II POLITICAL RELATIONS: INCREASING STRAINS

Since coming to power, but especially since 1987, Gorbachev has initiated some obvious shifts in Soviet relations with Syria. On a few occasions, these have been evident directly, in the public airing of differences on specific regional issues. More often, however, the evidence has been indirect, reflected in the USSR's growing willingness to pursue policies that obviously contradict the intransigent methods and aggressive wishes of Syria's president, Hafez al-Assad.

THE GROWING RIFT

Since 1987, there have been two official meetings between the top political leaderships of the USSR and Syria. The first came during the April 1987 visit of President Assad to Moscow; the second during the February 1989 trip of Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze to Damascus. On both occasions, the tensions in relations were obvious, arising in large part from Moscow's new stress on the need for a political resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict. These meetings, in turn, served as bookends for a series of events that further illustrate the growing diplomatic rift between the two countries.

The 1987 face–off between Assad and Gorbachev appears as a watershed of sorts, the first real sign that "new thinking" may be at work in Soviet Mideast policy. Speaking at the

banquet honoring Assad—the USSR's most important Arab ally and the leader most committed to the battle against the "Zionist entity"—Gorbachev declared that the absence of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Israel "cannot be considered normal." Moreover, while pledging to honor Soviet commitments to Syria's legitimate defense needs, Gorbachev implicitly rejected Assad's goal of achieving strategic parity with Israel, asserting that the notion of a military solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict "has become completely discredited."[1] Though neither message was entirely new, the messenger (the Soviet general secretary), the medium (a public declaration) and the timing (in Assad's presence) were all unprecedented, lending the remarks a qualitatively different force and urgency. In addition, Gorbachev reiterated Moscow's continuing displeasure with Syria's efforts to undermine Yasser Arafat's leadership of the PLO and its support for Iran against Soviet-supplied Iraq in the Gulf War.

At a minimum, Gorbachev's extraordinary public display of discontent with Syrian policy signalled two inter-related messages. First, in exchange for continued military support—even at levels short of that required by Syria to achieve parity with Israel—Moscow would expect Damascus to pay more heed to Soviet interests when formulating its policies. Second, in developing its own agenda in the Middle East, Soviet policy would in the future defer much less to the parochial concerns of Syria.

In large part, the latter half of this equation has come to pass. Increasingly, the Soviets are pursuing a policy toward the Arab–Israeli conflict that runs roughshod over Syrian wishes. Three areas can be singled out for attention: Soviet policy toward Israel; Soviet policy toward the moderate Arabs; and Soviet policy toward the PLO.

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[1] *Pravda*, in Russian, April 25, 1987, translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report: The Soviet Union (hereafter, FBIS–SOV), April 28, 1987, p.H7.

Soviet–Israeli Relations

The most obvious point of Soviet–Syrian friction is Moscow's efforts under Gorbachev to improve relations with Israel. Official meetings between top Soviet and Israeli diplomats, including at the level of foreign ministers, have become almost routine. Thus, during his February 1989 trip to the Middle East, Shevardnadze invited Israel's foreign minister, Moshe Arens, to meet with him in Cairo on the exact same basis that he was meeting with Moscow's Arab allies, including the PLO. Social, cultural and tourist exchanges between the USSR and Israel have risen dramatically. Soviet Jews are being allowed to emigrate in near record numbers;[2] direct airline flights between the USSR and Israel will soon be established,[3] and as many as 500,000 Soviet emigres could arrive in Israel over the next five years.[4] Jews who choose to remain in the Soviet Union are experiencing unprecedented cultural and religious liberties, despite continued *de facto* constraints and a disturbing increase in unoffical expressions of anti–Semitism. Full diplomatic ties have yet to be restored, but with both countries now maintaining a permanent diplomatic presence in each other's capitals—in the form of

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[2]Estimates now suggest that Soviet Jewish emigration will reach 50,000 in 1989, a figure that could double in 1990 if Moscow follows through on codifying a more liberal emigration policy. George D. Moffett III, "Immigration Wave to Swamp Israel," *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 7, 1989, p.6.

[3]In October 1989, Israel's national carrier, El Al, and the USSR's Aeroflot reached preliminary agreement for direct flights. "Israeli, Soviet Airlines Agree on Direct Flights," *The Washington Post*, October 19, 1989, p.A43.

[4]Moffett, "Immigration Wave to Swamp Israel." This estimate is certainly at the high end of the spectrum. Most analyses use the more conservative figure of 100,000 Jewish emigres coming to Israel in the next five years.

consular delegations—this step seems less a question of if, than when.[5]

Syria cannot help but see this rapprochement as occurring at the expense of its strategic plans for leading the Arab world in confronting Israel. Making matters worse have been Soviet calls for a political settlement of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict that satisfies Palestinian aspirations while ensuring Israeli security, thereby achieving a "balance of interests" between the two sides. In Assad's mind, such an attempt at even-handedness is an oxymoron; for him, the Arab–Israeli dispute is not one amenable to diplomatic negotiation and compromise. Rather, it is an existential conflict of survival that can only be resolved with the eventual extirpation of a strong and prosperous Zionist presence from the Arab heartland, either through political dictate or military victory.

Soviet Relations with Jordan and Egypt

A second trend in Soviet policy that must concern Damascus is Moscow's recent moves to improve ties with the moderate Arab states, particularly Jordan and Egypt. This puts in jeopardy Syria's claim to be the Soviet Union's only avenue of influence in the Arab–Israeli arena. Even more disconcerting for Assad, it suggests that, on issues concerning the peace process, the USSR has more truck with those forces

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[5]Moscow's consular delegation arrived in Tel Aviv in the summer of 1987; Israel's delegation came to Moscow a year later. A possible forerunner to the re-establishment of full Soviet–Israeli relations was Hungary's decision in September 1989 to restore relations with Israel, thereby becoming the first Warsaw Pact country to do so after having severed ties during the 1967 war. Henry Kamm, "Hungary Restores Ties With Israel," *The New York Times*, September 19, 1989, p.A3. Another encouraging sign that the normalization of Soviet–Israeli relations is on track was the Soviet decision in 1989—for the first time in seven years—not to support the annual Arab motion to challenge Israel's credentials at the United Nations. While Moscow did not vote in Israel's favor, it did abstain, a shift heavy with political symbolism. Paul Lewis, "Soviets Abstain in U.N. Vote on Israel," *The New York Times*, October 18, 1989, p.A3.

in the Arab world favoring a negotiated settlement than with the rejectionist line touted in Damascus.

Soviet meetings with the top Jordanian and Egyptian leaderships confirm this point. In December 1987, Jordan's King Hussein traveled to Moscow as the Kremlin's first guest following that month's superpower summit in Washington. The moderate Hussein received red-carpet treatment, lauded as an important Arab leader whose role in defusing the Middle East situation was much appreciated in the Soviet Union.[6]

The comity of the Hussein visit must have been somewhat unsettling for the Syrians. Certainly, it posed a sharp contrast to the obvious discord of the Assad-Gorbachev encounter eight months earlier. Moreover, it lent an implicit Soviet blessing to the results of the November 1987 Amman Arab Summit, over which Hussein had presided. The summit dealt a blow to Syrian interests by relegating the conflict with Israel to the Arab world's backburner, focusing instead on ending the Gulf War and pressuring Damascus to halt its support for Iran.

More distressing for Syria must have been the successful visit to Moscow, in late May 1988, of Egyptian Foreign Minister Meguid. Until the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union had been an active participant in Syria's campaign to ostracize and isolate Egypt because of its peace treaty with Israel. Meguid's visit to Moscow, the first of its kind in 13 years, marked the culmination (to that date) of Soviet efforts to retreat from that policy and re-establish a working relationship with Cairo, in the process signalling the USSR's *de facto* acceptance of the Camp David Accords.

Adding insult to injury for the Syrians was the fact that, in choosing to receive Meguid just prior to the 1988 Moscow superpower summit, the Kremlin had reportedly turned down Assad's repeated requests for a meeting.[7] Underscoring the importance the Soviets attached to the Egyptian's trip, protocol

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[6]For reports of Hussein's visit see FBIS-SOV, December 22, 1987, pp.25-31 and FBIS-SOV, December 23, 1987, pp.29-35.

[7]Robert Suro, "Assad Has Changed His Posture, if Not His Goals," *The New York Times*, May 1, 1988, p.E3.

was circumvented and his first audience was with Gorbachev rather than his Soviet counterpart, Shevardnadze. A series of bilateral economic, cultural and scientific deals were agreed to while a closeness of views was expressed on means of resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict.[8] And all this came on the heels of a Soviet agreement to grant Egypt a long–term moratorium on its outstanding three billion dollar military debt, an issue that had been a running sore in Soviet–Egyptian relations since the days of Anwar Sadat.[9] The Syrians, who owe the Soviets anywhere from $9–20 billion, must have noted that no similar debt–relief package has been offered to them.

Throughout 1988 and the first half of 1989, Soviet–Egyptian relations have continued to improve. The Soviets will be a major participant in Egypt's future development plans, particularly in the areas of industry and energy.[10] As to the peace process, the one Arab country that the Soviets now most frequently identify their general position with is moderate Egypt. This was symbolized by Shevardnadze's decision to make Cairo the focal point of his 1989 Mideast tour; not only

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[8]For reports of Meguid's visit see FBIS–SOV, May 24, 1988, pp.36–39.

[9]On the rescheduling of Egypt's debt see *Middle East Economic Digest*, April 25, 1987, p.11. In August 1989, Jordan's military debt to the USSR of $190 million was also rescheduled. *Middle East Economic Digest*, September 1, 1989, p.14.

[10]Moscow has agreed to help modernize and expand Egypt's aluminum, cement, glass, fertilizer, coke, ship–repair and steel industries. See *Al–Jumhuriyah*, in Arabic, May 12, 1988, translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report: Near East and South Asia (hereafter, FBIS–NES), May 19, 1988, pp.7–8 and AFP, in English, May 19, 1988, in FBIS–NES, May 20, 1988, pp.4–5. The Soviets also recently granted Egypt a $200 million loan to help pay for construction of a major power station to be built on the Gulf of Suez. At the official exchange rate, Soviet figures show that bilateral trade with Egypt was valued at about $1 billion in 1988, double the total from 1979. John Fullerton, "The Sphinx and the Commissar are Friends Once More," Reuters, July 6, 1989. This figure is expected to double again over the next five years. Cairo Domestic Service, in Arabic, May 22, 1989, translated in FBIS–NES, May 22, 1989, p.17.

did he deliver the major policy statement of his trip in Cairo, he also used it as the site for high-profile meetings with Israel's Arens and the PLO's Arafat.

Soviet Encouragement of PLO Moderation

A third area of concern to Syria has been Soviet policy toward the PLO. For years, Assad has had two preoccupations *vis a vis* the PLO. The first is bringing the organization under Syrian domination, a goal that Moscow has consistently opposed. The second has been ensuring that Yasser Arafat does not adopt the more pragmatic political positions that might qualify him as a serious partner in the peace process. In this effort, Assad has traditionally received Soviet backing. Thus, in 1985–1986, Moscow opposed Arafat's participation in the Amman Accord with King Hussein, an agreement that sought to create a joint Palestinian–Jordanian delegation for negotiations with Israel.

Since the spring of 1988, however, the Soviet position has begun to change, with Moscow lending its voice to the myriad of forces pushing Arafat to moderate the PLO's stance. A turning point came in April 1988 during Arafat's visit to the USSR. Assad must have been appalled when—in the midst of the Palestinian uprising on the West Bank and Gaza that had Israel on the defensive internationally—Gorbachev openly urged Arafat to recognize Israel's right to exist, commit the PLO to a negotiated settlement and give up the self-defeating tools of armed struggle and terrorism. Moreover, in an important formulation that has become a standard feature of Soviet rhetoric, Gorbachev informed Arafat that a solution to Israel's security concerns must be just as central an element of an Arab–Israeli settlement as the satisfaction of Palestinian aspirations.[11]

Throughout the fall of 1988, as the PLO debated a new diplomatic policy, the Soviets used what influence they have

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[11]Tass, in English, April 9, 1988, in FBIS-SOV, April 11, 1988, pp.26–27. Also see David Remnick, "Gorbachev Prods Arafat on Recognizing Israel," *The Washington Post*, April 11, 1988, pp.A1,A19.

with the more radical PLO factions as well as with Arafat's Fatah, to press the organization to adopt a "realistic and constructive" position that would allow the peace process to move forward. Within a five week period just prior to the November 1988 meeting of the Palestine National Council, George Habash, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Naif Hawatmeh, head of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin), one of Arafat's key aides, all made trips to Moscow. In an interview given shortly after the last of these meetings, Vladimir Polyakov, chief of the Middle East desk at the Soviet Foreign Ministry, suggested that the Kremlin's message had been clear: "the Palestinians [should] be as realistic and flexible as possible in their political program." Further, Polyakov indicated that it was time for the PLO unambiguously to recognize the state of Israel.[12]

Moscow's emergence as a moderating force on the PLO was confirmed in December 1988 when Arafat finally accepted, at least rhetorically, the three American conditions—U.N. resolutions 242 and 338, recognition of Israel's right to exist and renunciation of terrorism—required for the initiation of a U.S.–PLO dialogue. By all accounts, the Soviets lent their support to the more influential efforts of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Sweden to convince Arafat to come out unequivocally in support of the conditions. Indeed, on the morning of the press conference at which Arafat finally uttered "the magic words," he met with Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Petrovskiy.[13]

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[12]The interview is summarized in "Soviet Official Calls for Palestinian Realism and Flexibility," Reuters, October 13, 1988.

[13]Tass, in Russian, December 14, 1988, translated in FBIS–SOV, December 15, 1988, p.19. Rita Hauser, an American who worked intimately with the PLO to get it to meet the U.S. conditions, confirms the helpful role played by the Soviets in her article, "Behind Our Breakthrough With the PLO," *The Washington Post*, December 18, 1988, pp.C1–2.

U.S. officials, while acknowledging the positive role Moscow played with the PLO in late 1988, criticized the Soviets in early 1989 for failing to keep up the pressure on the PLO to abide by Arafat's promises. Specifically, the USSR was chastised for not condemning several terrorist attacks against Israel attempted by the PFLP and DFLP, attacks that were launched from Syrian–controlled territory in Lebanon.[14]

In early July 1989, however, Moscow did issue an immediate and surprisingly harsh condemnation of a terrorist incident in Israel, in which a Palestinian caused the crash of a civilian bus, causing multiple deaths. Calling it "a despicable terrorist act against innocent people," for which "There is no justification . . . whatever the motive," the Kremlin insisted that "It is the duty of all sane people, regardless of their views on Middle East political developments, to denounce this heinous act."[15] This was in contrast not only to voices in the PLO and Syria that applauded the tragedy,[16] but to the response of the U.S. government, which hesitated a week before condemning the incident as terrorism. And when the Soviets came under fire from the Arab world for their rush to condemn the action, the government newspaper, *Izvestiya*, issued a stinging rebuttal that reaffirmed Moscow's position.[17]

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[14]On the U.S. criticism see William Beecher, "Soviet Failure to Pressure Allies on Mideast Peace Upsets U.S.," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, March 23, 1989, p.10A.

[15]Moscow Radio Peace and Progress, in Hebrew, July 7, 1989, translated in FBIS–SOV, July 12, 1989, p.35.

[16]The official Syrian response was to praise the "heroic Palestinian Arab youth [who] carried out the bus operation between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv," while declaring that all Israeli civilians, because of their service in the army, are fair game for indiscriminate terrorist operations. Damascus Domestic Service, in Arabic, July 8, 1989, translated in FBIS–NES, July 10, 1989, p.38.

[17]*Izvestiya*, in Russian, July 16, 1989, p.5.

SYRIA'S RESPONSE

All these factors—the improvement in relations with Israel and the moderate Arabs and the support for Arafat's new pragmatism—are indicative of a Soviet Mideast diplomacy that, to an unprecedented degree, increasingly operates without reference to the interests of its main regional ally, Syria.

Damascus's response has been two-fold. On the one hand, an occasional sop has been thrown to Moscow to create at least the appearance of Syrian responsiveness to Soviet policy. Thus, meetings of "conciliation" have been held with both Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Arafat, only to be followed by Syria's immediate resumption of the murderous rivalries. Rumors in 1989 suggested that Assad may even soon re-establish relations with Egypt, something the Soviets have been urging. Finally, on the peace process, Syria strenuously supports Moscow's call for an international peace conference, though defining its mission—imposing a settlement on Israel—in a way that even the Soviets increasingly recognize is unrealistic and unhelpful.[18]

On the other hand, the dominant Syrian response to Moscow's changing diplomatic agenda has been a great deal of open skepticism, derision and concern. While avoiding direct attacks, Damascus has, through leadership speeches and commentaries in the official press, made quite apparent its disdain for Gorbachev's "new thinking" and its implications for the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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[18]For example, see the interview given by Karen Brutents, an important advisor to Soviet policy-makers on Mideast issues, to the Kuwaiti paper *Al-Anba*, in Arabic, June 8, 1988, translated in FBIS-SOV, June 14, 1988, p.16. According to Brutents, the role of the conference "will be confined to giving advice and proposing recommendations to the parties to the conflict. We do not want to impose our view on anyone. . . . To achieve a lasting peace, the parties to the dispute must voluntarily agree to solving the issue." More recently, a Soviet radio broadcast to Israel disavowed the idea of a coercive international conference, explicitly criticizing the traditional Soviet position that led Israel to believe Moscow supported an enforced solution. Moscow Radio Peace and Progress, in Hebrew, May 12, 1989, translated in FBIS-SOV, May 19, 1989, pp.45-46.

In May 1988, in a thinly veiled rebuke of the Soviet leader, Assad mocked Gorbachev's new stress on peaceful resolution of conflicts: "Force in today's world, just as in the past, is what determines rights. Everyone speaks about rights and international norms, charters, and resolutions. However, you find that every international event is eventually settled by force." As for Gorbachev's warning that Syria's reliance on the military option against Israel had been discredited, Assad's response was simple and unequivocal: "We are looking forward to the fateful battle with the Zionist enemy, which is threatening our present and future existence and generations."[19]

Equally a target of implicit ridicule and condemnation have been Soviet claims that some sort of political accommodation is possible with Israel and can be achieved, in part, by a more conciliatory Arab—not to mention Soviet—posture. In a transparent allusion to Moscow's encouragement for PLO moderation and flexibility prior to the November 1988 PNC, one official Syrian commentary noted that, "It has . . . become obvious that the pressures being exerted on the Arabs to offer concession after concession have enabled Israel to gain big advantages that have been used toward aggression and war without making one step toward peace."[20] Another editorial stated that "there is no hope for those who have excluded effective options and methods from their considerations and are now brandishing the banners of flexibility everywhere. . . . the attempts to move closer to the Israeli position . . . are absolutely futile and divorced from an attitude of world responsibility and the demands of peace."[21]

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[19]Damascus Domestic Service, in Arabic, May 13, 1988, translated in FBIS–NES, May 16, 1988, pp.33,34.

[20]Damascus Television Service, in Arabic, November 16, 1988, translated in FBIS–NES, November 17, 1988, p.42.

[21]*Al–Ba'th*, in Arabic, December 1, 1988, translated in FBIS–NES, December 8, 1988, p.40.

As for Gorbachev's central contention that a "balance of interests" formulation can be successfully applied to the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Syrians have been nothing short of categorical in their rejection, at the same time warning of the dangers posed to the Arab nation by the emerging superpower detente. As Damascus radio told the citizens of Syria:

> What is called the balance of interests cannot be achieved in the Middle East, where the nature of the problem and the conflict differs from other regional problems and conflicts. Anyone remote from the region and taken in by the brilliance of the detente process can be dragged into the position of equating the aggressor and the victim of aggression; the occupier and the one whose land is occupied; the colonialist settler and the one who is stripped of his land and expelled from his home and country. The Arabs can be subjected to various forms of pressure to take part in a hasty operation for a regional settlement. . . . Thus an alert and dynamic Arab stand is required, capable of dealing with the new international and regional situation.[22]

SHEVARDNADZE IN DAMASCUS

In the months preceding Shevardnadze's February 1989 tour of the Middle East, the political strains in Soviet–Syrian relations resulting from Moscow's changing approach to the conflict were palpable. Matters were not helped when, just prior to Shevardnadze's visit, the Soviets sent the Syrians one more unmistakable signal of the new policy, appointing Alexander Zotov as the next Soviet ambassador to Syria. A major force behind the USSR's growing moderation in the Middle East and an architect of the rapprochement with Israel, Zotov was, allegedly, the primary author of Gorbachev's famous 1987 statement to Assad.[23]

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[22]Damascus Domestic Service, in Arabic, December 16, 1988, translated in FBIS–NES, December 29, 1988, p.41.

[23]*Al–Qabas*, in Arabic, January 27, 1989, translated in FBIS–NES, February 3, 1989, p.44.

Syria also could not have been pleased with the fact that Shevardnadze's visit came directly on the heels of the final Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Throughout most of the Islamic world, the Red Army's retreat was greeted as a positive development, and Shevardnadze's trip seemed designed to take immediate advantage of this fact. For Damascus, however, the withdrawal carried a much more disturbing symbolism. If Moscow was willing to turn its back on a communist regime on its border that had been installed and maintained by the blood of Soviet troops, what was to stop it from doing the same with an unruly client like Syria, a country whose sham version of socialism Soviet analysts are now correctly identifying as little more than a corrupt military dictatorship. No wonder that Assad, when queried about the withdrawal, could only offer a highly ambivalent response: "I think they [the Soviets] thought it was a good thing. . . . [but] An outside observer might see things in an opposite way."[24]

Given this backdrop, the results of Shevardnadze's trip to Damascus were predictable. As expected, he made sure to affirm that Syria is the USSR's leading partner in the region and expressed the Kremlin's desire "to preserve this status." And being an exemplary diplomat, he generally avoided the blunt language Gorbachev had used with Assad two years earlier. Even in the muted tones and phrases of "diplomacy-speak," however, all the tensions and disagreements of the recent past were on full display.

In each of Shevardnadze's private meetings—with Assad, Vice President Khaddam and Foreign Minister al-Shara—reports noted that "an exchange of opinions" took place, with Shevardnadze "setting out the Soviet view" of the Arab–Israeli conflict, standard euphemisms for a basic absence of agreement. During his session with Assad, Shevardnadze not only emphasized that Damascus should mend its fences with the PLO and Iraq, but also urged Assad to seek an improvement in relations with Egypt. And in the meeting with al-Shara,

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[24]Damascus Domestic Service, in Arabic, March 27, 1989, translated in FBIS-NES, March 28, 1989, p.40.

Shevardnadze referred to "quite a few problems" in Soviet–Syrian economic ties, highlighting Moscow's growing unwillingness—in the era of *perestroika*, when the Soviets are looking to reduce the costs of empire—to foot the bill for Syria's military build–up, at least not at the levels of the early 1980s.[25]

On the peace process, the clearest illustration of a growing divide in Soviet and Syrian attitudes came during the speeches delivered by al–Shara and Shevardnadze at an official dinner. While paying lip service to the need for an international conference that would impose a solution on Israel, al–Shara's real message was that Israel rejects peace absolutely and therefore any efforts to engage it in a diplomatic process are doomed to failure. The obvious implication was that only Arab military power could force Israel to bend to the dictates of "international legitimacy."[26]

In contrast, Shevardnadze's speech focused on the necessity for peace in the region and the ripeness of the current situation for making progress in that direction. While acknowledging the pain Syria had suffered as the result of war with Israel, Shevardnadze insisted that, "however unbearable it [the pain] may be, it cannot but be overcome by concern for the future, which is concern for peace and not for war." Moreover, in a manner unprecedented for a major Soviet leader, he went on to lay out a vision of genuine Arab–Israeli peace that could only have struck the Syrians as bordering on blasphemy:

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[25]The meeting with Assad is reported in *Pravda*, in Russian, February 19, 1989. On the Khaddam and al–Shara meetings see *Pravda*, in Russian, February 20, 1989, translated in FBIS–SOV, February 21, 1989, pp.18–19. One indication that Damascus was not pleased with the talks was the limited coverage they received in the official Syrian press. Compare the Soviet coverage cited above with the Syrian reports translated in FBIS–NES, February 21, 1989, pp.49–53.

[26]For excerpts from the speech see Damascus Domestic Service, in Arabic, February 19, 1989, translated in FBIS–NES, February 21, 1989, p.50.

> We see how different cultures, which stood in opposition in the past, have now merged into a single civilization, calling for the search for the path that should lead us to the supremacy of values common to all of mankind. . . . To bring this about, one must master the difficult art of living in peace and respect for one another while preserving one's national, political, spiritual, and religious values in all their diversity and originality. Movement toward this noble goal is only possible given the rejection of strong-arm approaches in politics and the transfer from confrontation to dialogue, from rivalry to codevelopment and the search for a balance of interests. . . . The new thinking is powerfully knocking at the door of the Near East, too. . . . It is time to build the bridges of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence in this region too.[27]

Accompanying these statements was a very tough message, repeated days later in Shevardnadze's major policy address in Cairo, warning of the dangers of the continuing arms race in the Middle East, one that increasingly threatened to spread to nuclear and chemical weapons. According to Shevardnadze, this trend was counter to the general relaxation of international tensions and posed a direct threat to world peace. At best, the Syrians could only interpret this as confirmation of Moscow's continued refusal to supply Syria with the weapons it needs to achieve strategic parity with Israel. At worst, it implied that, in the future, the USSR might consider scaling back its current level of arms supplies to the Middle East.

Though Shevardnadze left Syria praising the strength of Soviet–Syrian bilateral relations and denouncing the continued Israeli occupation of Arab territory, the words must have sounded hollow to Assad. Ten years earlier, on the last visit of a Soviet foreign minister to Damascus, Andrei Gromyko had arrived bearing generous quantities of arms and political support to bolster Syria in its opposition to the

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[27]Tass, in Russian, February 19, 1989, translated in FBIS–SOV, February 21, 1989, pp.19–21.

approaching Egypt–Israel peace treaty. Now, Shevardnadze had come pressuring Syria to consider making peace with Israel itself, while foreshadowing possible hard times in the Soviet–Syrian strategic relationship. Moreover, Shevardnadze was on his way to Cairo, the spiritual home of the Camp David Accords, to meet not only with Anwar Sadat's successors, but the Israelis as well.

SPLITS OVER LEBANON

The strains in Soviet–Syrian relations resulting from differences over the Arab–Israeli conflict were exacerbated in the middle of 1989 by Syria's involvement in the latest—and perhaps most violent—round of the Lebanese civil war. The fighting erupted in March 1989 and pitted the Syrian army and its Muslim Lebanese allies against the Iraqi-backed Christian forces of Lebanese General Michel Aoun. And while Moscow was inclined to support international and Arab efforts to end the bloodshed and stabilize the situation, Syria was determined to continue fighting until its unchallenged hegemony over Lebanon was firmly established.

The Soviet Union has been ambivalent about Damascus' role in Lebanon ever since the Syrian military massively intervened in 1976. Initially, Moscow saw Syria's intervention on the side of Christian forces against Lebanese leftists and the Soviet-backed PLO as serving U.S. interests. To demonstrate their anger, the Soviets even manipulated the flow of arms to Syria for a short period.

Later, Moscow's main concern was that Syria's military adventurism in Lebanon might spark a clash with Israel. In such a war, Syria would be defeated, and the Soviet Union would face one of two choices: either do nothing and be discredited as an ally or intervene on Syria's behalf and risk a confrontation with Israel's ally, the United States.

Soviet fears about the consequences of instability in Lebanon were realized during Israel's 1982 invasion. The Soviet failure to prevent Israel's resounding defeat of Syrian and PLO forces resulted in harsh criticism from Damascus and other Arab capitals. This, combined with the entry of

American forces into Beirut as part of a multinational peace-keeping effort, presaged Moscow's decision to escalate both the quantity and quality of its military aid to Syria. And while the Soviets supported Syrian-backed acts of international terrorism that led to the eventual withdrawal of U.S. and Israeli troops, they continued to worry that Syria's hegemonic aspirations in a chaotic Lebanon would eventually create new and more dangerous possibilities of military confrontation with Israel and the United States.

An additional, though separate, Soviet concern was that Syria's ambitions in Lebanon have brought it into chronic conflict with the PLO and Iraq, both of whom have deep ties to the USSR. The resulting strife and disunity among its Arab friends have greatly complicated Moscow's efforts to devise a coherent and viable strategy for advancing Soviet interests in the Middle East.

Despite these serious misgivings, prior to Gorbachev's rise to power, Moscow had resigned itself to acquiescing to Syria's occupation of Lebanon. Realizing that Assad viewed Syrian domination in Lebanon as a matter of vital national security, the Soviets knew from experience that their counsel for withdrawal would likely go unheeded. And seeing themselves as engaged in a zero-sum battle for influence with the United States, the Soviets reasoned that, at best, a divisive fight with Syria over Lebanon would play into the hands of America and, at worst, it could lead Assad to cool his ties to Moscow and seek closer relations with the West. Under these circumstances, Moscow worked out a *modus vivendi* with Assad whereby it would refrain from pressuring Syria about Lebanon while Syria would try to avoid provocative actions that might endanger Soviet interests. In the meantime, both continued to disingenuously blame all Lebanon's travails on Israel's establishment of a security zone along the country's southern border.

As with other aspects of Soviet-Syrian relations, however, the Soviet attitude toward Syria's role in Lebanon has shifted under Gorbachev. The change was evident in Moscow's response to the outbreak of fighting in 1989, which began when the Christian leader, Aoun, declared his determination

to liberate Lebanon from Syria's occupation. Rather than support Syria's brutal attacks against Christian East Beirut, or ignore them altogether, Moscow quietly, yet consistently, lent its support to forces seeking an outcome—an immediate cease-fire leading to the eventual withdrawal of foreign forces—that Assad views as antithetical to Syrian national interests.

Thus, in May 1989, during a meeting in Moscow between Shevardnadze and U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, a joint U.S.–Soviet statement on Lebanon was issued. It took note of the dangerous escalation of hostilities and called on all sides in the conflict to adopt an immediate cease-fire.[28] The statement communicated at least two unwelcome messages to Assad: first, that the Soviets would no longer be passive spectators to Syria's more egregious actions in Lebanon; and second, that in taking a more active stand to pressure Syria, Moscow would be acting more in concert with the United States than in opposition to it.

In early July 1989, the Soviets again saw fit to raise the profile of the Lebanon issue in conjunction with a major Western power. In a joint statement with French President Mitterand (nominally viewed as the protector of Assad's enemies in Lebanon's Christian community), Gorbachev expressed "profound concern at the continuing crisis situation in Lebanon" and called "for an immediate cease-fire and strict observance of it." All sides providing weapons to the Lebanese combatants—namely, Moscow's feuding allies in Damascus and Baghdad—were urged to end their arms deliveries. Finally, the statement expressed full support for a tripartite committee of the Arab League that was seeking to mediate the crisis, and whose efforts to that point had been subverted by Syria.[29]

Underscoring Moscow's concern about the growing violence in Lebanon was its decision, simultaneous with the

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[28]"Joint Soviet–American Statement on Lebanon," Released by TASS, May 11, 1989, transcribed by Federal News Service.

[29]The statement is printed in *Pravda*, in Russian, July 6, 1989.

Soviet–French declaration, to dispatch Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh on a quiet round of shuttle diplomacy to Baghdad and Damascus. Conveying an oral message on behalf of President Gorbachev to both Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and to Assad, Bessmertnykh's mission had three goals: first, to de–escalate an immediate crisis generated by Iraq's shipment of Soviet surface–to–surface missiles to Gen. Aoun's forces (according to reports, the missiles were subsequently recalled); second, to avoid allowing the Lebanese imbroglio to escalate to a direct confrontation between Iraq and Syria; and third, to persuade both Baghdad and Damascus to take steps to alleviate the deteriorating situation around Beirut.[30]

On the last of these objectives, Moscow's efforts were to no avail. In mid–August 1989, the violence spiraled as Syria threatened to launch an all–out ground assault on Christian East Beirut; in response, France moved naval forces toward the Lebanese coast. Moscow's reaction was two–fold: support for a cease–fire call by the U.N. Security Council and, more surprisingly, a decision to send its Middle East envoy, Gennadi Terasov, on a high–profile mission to try and reinvigorate moribund peace efforts. Terasov visited Jordan, Syria, Lebanon (where he spoke with both Aoun and Muslim leaders) and Iraq, urging them to support a renewed mediation effort by the Arab League, while floating some ideas of his own regarding the possible elements of a Lebanese peace plan.[31]

Though Moscow's flurry of activism produced no immediate results, it did help expand the diplomatic maneuvering room for other parties seeking to avoid an

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[30]For reports of the mission see the TASS reports translated in FBIS–SOV, July 3, 1989, p.28 and July 5, 1989, p.16.

[31]Moscow's support for the Security Council statement is reported by TASS, in English, August 17, 1989, in FBIS–SOV, August 18, 1989, p.3. A report on Terasov's mission and his peace ideas can be found in "Soviet proposes vote, Syria, Israel pullout," Associated Press report, in *The Washington Times*, August 28, 1989, p.A12.

escalation of violence. In early September, the Arab League—backed by the United States, the Soviet Union and France—resurrected its effort to achieve a cease-fire; by late September, its new cease-fire plan (more favorable to Syria than previous proposals) had been formally accepted by both of Lebanon's warring sides.[32]

Moscow's activism in Lebanon, especially its willingness to express publicly its disagreement with Syria's intractable policies, was remarkable for a number of reasons. First, as mentioned above, dealing with Syria in a more forthright manner, and doing so in cooperation with the West, was clearly a reversal from Soviet policy in the pre-Gorbachev era. Second, the activism came at a time—the summer of 1989—when domestic problems surrounding Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* were rapidly mounting, leading to speculation that Moscow's willingness to engage in further diplomatic initiatives in the Third World was declining. Third, and related to the last point, Soviet activism in Lebanon was a relatively risky venture that promised few tangible payoffs, while potentially entailing definite costs in terms of further strains in relations with Syria and possibly Iraq.

This is by no means to imply that Moscow brought the full weight of its bargaining leverage to bear on Syria to get it to halt its siege on Beirut. There is no evidence that the Soviets threatened to stop the sale of arms, for example. In this sense, Moscow was no more prepared to have a final show-down with Assad over Lebanon than it has been over the Arab-Israeli peace process. But as with the peace process, Gorbachev demonstrated in Lebanon that he is far more willing than his predecessors to pursue a policy that is consonant with Soviet interests even when doing so is in conflict with Syrian wishes. Perhaps more important, in doing so, Gorbachev's Middle East policy increasingly seems to have more in common with the policy of the United States than with that of Syria.

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[32]See Ihsan A. Hijaz, "Leader of Christians In Lebanon Accepts Arab Plan for Truce," *The New York Times*, September 23, 1989, p.A1,A4.

III MILITARY RELATIONS: STRATEGIC AMBIVALENCE

The strains in Soviet–Syrian relations at the diplomatic/political level have also been been accompanied by signs of a shift in ties at the military/strategic level. Moscow appears to be getting tougher with Syria in military matters, delivering fewer total arms than in the past, while refusing to give Damascus certain equipment and restricting its access to other items. The evidence on this front is certainly not unambiguous, however, since those arms transfers that do occur still involve relatively large amounts of weaponry. This includes qualitatively new systems that, far from reducing the Syrian military's capability, have the potential to enhance it markedly.

Ultimately, if the positive changes in Soviet policies and rhetoric are to have an impact on Syrian calculations concerning the conflict with Israel, they will have to be supplemented by equally significant changes in the actual material basis of the Soviet–Syrian military relationship. So long as Damascus continues to receive large amounts of sophisticated Soviet weaponry and military support, it will cling to its confrontationist strategy regardless of Moscow's protestations to the contrary. Furthermore, if the Soviets are to convince Israel and the United States that their new interest in regional stability is genuine—a necessary prerequisite for a

significantly expanded Soviet role in Arab–Israeli diplomacy—they will need to pay the price of sharply curtailing their military aid to those parties that remain explicitly committed to a violent disruption of the status quo.

TRENDS IN ARMS TRANSFERS

Recently, signs have appeared suggesting that a broad shift may indeed be underway in the Soviet–Syrian arms relationship. Perhaps the best indicator is the fairly dramatic drop in the value of Soviet arms transfers to Syria since Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985. During his tenure (1985–1989), the USSR has delivered, on average, $1.3 billion (in constant 1987 dollars) worth of weapons to Syria each year.[1] This compares with approximately $2.4 billion per year during the period 1977–1984. The reduction under Gorbachev appears more dramatic if the period of comparison is limited to those years since the signing of the Soviet–Syrian Friendship Treaty in 1980. From 1980–1984, Soviet arms transfers averaged about $2.9 billion per year. Admittedly, the possibility exists that this figure is artificially high since it takes into account the massive Soviet resupply of Syria following the Lebanon war in 1982. But it is worth noting that in the two years prior to the

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[1]All figures come from calculations based on information provided in the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency's *World Military Expenditure and Arms Transfers, 1988*, pp.105,114. Assuming that the Soviets provide 85 percent of Syria's arms imports (the proportion covered by the Soviets in the period 1983–1987), Syria imported (in constant 1987 dollars) approximately $1.4 billion in arms from the Soviets in 1985, $1 billion in 1986 and $1.6 billion in 1987. The figures for 1988 remain classified but informed speculation suggests a value of $1 billion. It should be noted that Soviet arms transfers to Syria during the pre–1985 period are probably understated here, since Syria at this time was almost surely dependent on the Soviet Union for more than 85 percent of its weapons. Indeed, the ACDA report for 1987 indicates that for the period 1982–1986 Moscow provided 89 percent of Syria's arms imports. It seems plausible that at least part of the drop in this number is due to Syrian efforts to diversify its arms sources in response to Moscow's growing reluctance to meet all Syria's requests.

war, 1980 and 1981, the Soviets were already exporting over $6 billion worth of weapons to Damascus. Gorbachev's stinginess with Syria is even apparent, however, when compared to the three year period prior to the friendship treaty, 1977–1979, when the value of Soviet arms transfers was averaging about $1.6 billion annually.

The explanation for the drop under Gorbachev is not absolutely clear. Almost certainly it was not due to a reduction in Syria's arms requests. Though the Syrian military had grown dramatically during the early 1980s, absorbing huge amounts of equipment, there is no evidence to suggest that Assad's appetite for arms had been sated or his ambition to achieve military parity with Israel set aside. Indeed, throughout 1988, periodic media accounts of Syrian dissatisfaction with the levels of Soviet arms support were common, accompanied by reports that Damascus was worried enough about the shift in Moscow's policy to begin seriously seeking alternative suppliers, particularly in China and North Korea.[2]

The explanation for the decrease in Soviet arms exports to Syria almost definitely lies in Moscow. Two reasons suggest themselves, one political and the other financial. Politically, the reduction is broadly consistent with the dictates of "new thinking" and Shevardnadze's insistence that the concentration of weapons in the Middle East is already excessive and a danger to regional and international stability.

Financially, it is consistent with a more cost–conscious Soviet policy—driven by the Soviet economic crisis—that is no longer willing (or able) to extend huge amounts of credit to Syria, especially with Damascus' military debt to the USSR already on the order of $9–20 billion. Reports now suggest that the Soviets are insisting on repayment of the debt, while providing spare parts to Syria only on payment in cash and in

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[2]For example, see Suro, "Assad Has Changed His Posture, if Not His Goals;" "Cooling Off," *The Economist*, June 18, 1988, p.42; Ihsan A. Hijazi, "Arab Lands Said to Be Turning to China for Arms," *The New York Times*, June 24, 1988, p.A3; and James M. Dorsey, "Syria wary of Soviets, seeks new arms seller," *The Washington Times*, July 15, 1988, p.A8.

hard currency.[3] And as domestic political reforms open the Kremlin's policies to greater public scrutiny, increasing criticism is being heard within the Soviet Union of Moscow's wasteful foreign aid practices, particularly in the realm of arms sales to developing countries that are incapable of paying for the weapons.[4]

Perhaps the most explicit signal of Soviet concern about the costs of its military relationship with Syria came in September 1989 during a press conference in Moscow at which the new ambassador to Syria, Zotov, made an unusual appearance. Acknowledging that Syria had expressed its concern over the effect that Soviet "new thinking" and *perestroika* would have on Syria's defense, Zotov went on to suggest that Damascus' worries may be well–founded. The Soviet Union was in the process of reviewing Syria's requests for military aid for the next five years, he claimed, and "they are being scrutinized critically and if there are any changes they will be in favor of reductions." A primary factor motivating the re–evaluation was the fact that "the Syrian government's ability to pay is not unlimited." Zotov summed up by suggesting that although "these factors will influence bilateral relations . . . in no way will they [relations] be weakened."[5] These assurances aside, the message could not have been encouraging for a Syrian government that has for two decades based its strategic calculations on guarantees of extensive Soviet military support.

Which of these factors, political or financial, best accounts for the shift in Soviet policy is not certain. It is possible, and perhaps even likely, that both are at work and are in fact mutually reinforcing at the present time. In any case, the result is a positive one from the perspective of Israel and the United States to the extent that it produces a Syria that has fewer

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[3]"Cooling Off," *The Economist.*

[4]Quentin Peel, "Review of Soviet foreign aid policy urged," *The Financial Times,* July 12, 1989.

[5]"Moscow Considers Cutting Military Aid to Syria," Reuters, September 18, 1989.

weapons and less confidence that its aggressive actions will receive Soviet backing. The rub for Moscow will come in the unlikely event that the Syrian economy dramatically improves and/or Syria's financial benefactors in the Arab Gulf and Libya, still buffeted by the drop in world oil prices, again become willing to provide Damascus with significant amounts of new aid, thereby enabling it to pay for large increases in Soviet weapons. Then Moscow will be forced to choose between its self-proclaimed political priority of regional stability and its objective economic priority of earning hard currency to help pay for *perestroika.*

For his part, Shevardnadze, during his major policy speech in Cairo, explicitly rejected the notion that the economic merits of arms sales should take precedence over the Soviet Union's new desire to see the Arab-Israeli conflict resolved. According to Shevardnadze, the long-term costs to the Soviet Union—political, strategic and material—of continued conflict outweigh any short-term advantages to be achieved through an exacerbation of the arms race.

> There are people who believe that the great powers are not overly vexed about the lack of a settlement of the Near East situation. Allegedly, they earn quite a lot of money from arms sales to the region. . . . this is not so. Upheavals in the Near East always affect us very strongly. The Soviet people are especially sensitive to anything that happens here, because tension in this region costs us dearly, in all respects, including materially.[6]

However, enacting such a policy may be easier said than done. Even before the advent of *perestroika,* the economic importance of weapons transfers was rivalling their strategic significance in Soviet priorities. The USSR is the world's largest arms exporter and the Middle East is its primary market. After energy exports, arms sales are the most important source of Soviet hard currency earnings. Now, with

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[6] *Izvestiya,* in Russian, February 24, 1989, translated in FBIS-SOV, February 24, 1989, p.14.

Soviet commentators and policy-makers talking about the need for foreign policy to be a paying concern, it is not out of the question that financial factors will become the dominant criteria in Moscow's arms export policy. If that is the case, it could mean that those clients, no matter how dispicable and dangerous, who can continue to pay top dollar for large quantities of advanced Soviet weaponry will receive them. Then, all the long-term political and strategic considerations that comprise the "new thinking" and counsel against the exacerbation of regional conflicts could be nullified by short-term economic calculations.

Concerns of this nature were raised in April 1989 when Moscow delivered a handful of advanced fighter bomber aircraft (Su-24s) to Libya, a country facing no strategic threats but with aggressive claims against all its neighbors, committed to the destruction of Israel, actively involved in terrorism, attempting to acquire chemical and nuclear weapons and the arch-nemesis of the United States.[7] Whatever Moscow's reasons for going through with the sale, it could not help but pose troubling questions about the Soviet commitment to stability and peace. Moreover, since the Libyans almost certainly paid for the planes up front, the impression was left that the lure of hard currency was strong enough for Moscow to run the risk not only of the Western consternation that greeted the sale, but also that Libya would use the planes in a destabilizing manner. Whether the Libyan case becomes the rule or the exception for future Soviet arms sales policy remains to be seen.

MILITARY/STRATEGIC CONTINUITIES

While the overall trend in Soviet arms transfers to Syria is positive, it must be viewed in perspective. The reduction is dramatic but only in the context of Moscow's military excesses of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Over one billion dollars of

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[7]Stephen Engelberg and Bernard E. Trainor, "Soviets Sold Libya Advanced Bomber, U.S. Officials Say," *The New York Times*, April 5, 1989, p.A1.

arms is still a significant amount of materiel to be shipping each year to a country that continues to openly declare its eagerness for the "fateful battle with the Zionist entity." All the more so when the annual mix includes not just spare parts and upgraded replacements, but also the occasional new system that provides a qualitative improvement in the capabilities of the Syrian military.

In mid–1987, Syria received its first shipment of Soviet MiG–29 fighter aircraft, one of the world's best planes that could markedly enhance the Syrian air force's advanced aerial combat potential. In 1986, Syria took delivery of three Soviet Romeo–class submarines after a 25–year period in which the Syrian navy possessed no submarines at all. Though outmoded by world standards and limited in operational capability, these submarines do provide Syria's naval forces with a heretofore unprecedented potential and could prove helpful in any general military action against Israel.[8] Further, the Soviets are rumored to be considering the delivery to Syria of three more modern Kilo–class submarines.[9] Finally, in 1988, reports also surfaced of Moscow's agreement to provide Damascus with new tanks, short–range surface–to–surface missiles and—for the first time—Su–24 bomber aircraft.[10] These planes, able to fly long distances, carrying heavy payloads and with a relatively sophisticated radar–evasion capability, would provide Syria

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[8]On the MiG–29s see O. Erez, "The Arab–Israel Air Balance," in *The Middle East Military Balance, 1987–1988* (Jerusalem and Boulder, CO: The Jerusalem Press and Westview, 1988), p.166. On the Romeo–class submarines see, in the same volume, "The Arab–Israel Naval Balance," p.136.

[9]John Fullerton, "Arabs, Israel Race to Build Up Submarine Fleets," Reuters, October 6, 1989. Also see Charles B. Perkins, *Arms to the Arabs: The Arab Military Buildup Since 1973* (Washington, D.C.: American Israel Public Affairs Committee, 1989), AIPAC Paper 16, p.22.

[10]For example, see *Davar*, in Hebrew, July 11, 1988, translated in FBIS–NES, July 11, 1988, p.25; and Jerusalem Television Service, in Arabic, August 30, 1988, translated in FBIS–NES, August 31, 1988, p.23.

with an improved ability to strike strategic military and civilian targets inside Israel.

Also of concern to the United States and Israel throughout 1988 were media reports that the USSR had acquired a naval base in the Mediterranean at the Syrian port of Tartus. Indications were that Soviet technicians and materials were being used for a significant expansion of the port's repair and maintenance facilities.[11] Such a base would provide the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron (SOVMEDRON) with an operational capability in the Eastern Mediterranean that it has not had since being expelled from the Egyptian port of Alexandria in the 1970s. Though acquisition of the base had long been a goal of Soviet policy and has an obvious military rationale—enhancing the USSR's ability to disrupt U.S. and/or NATO operations during a conflict in Europe or the Middle East—it certainly does not square with Gorbachev's decreasing rhetorical emphasis on power projection and military instruments of influence.

Observers skeptical of any real change in the character of the Soviet–Syrian strategic relationship also point to the continuing high level of contacts between the two countries' military establishments. In the six month period between November 1987 and April 1988, Damascus received the commanders in chief of the Soviet navy, ground forces and air force.[12] Later in 1988, Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas visited Moscow, while his Soviet counterpart, Dmitri Yazov, traveled to Syria in March 1989, reportedly to discuss and

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[11]For initial press reports see "New Soviet Base at Tartus," *The Economist: Foreign Report*, January 14, 1988, pp.1–2; and Robert Pear, "U.S. Says Soviets Are Expanding Base for Warships on Syrian Coast," *The New York Times*, August 28, 1988, pp.A1,A14. In testimony to the House Armed Services Committee, director of U.S. Naval Intelligence, Rear Admiral William Studeman, could not confirm that the Soviets had acquired base rights at Tartus, but highlighted the increase in construction activity and its implications for enhancing the overall capability of the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron. See his statement of March 1, 1988, p.42.

[12]"Soviets Intensify Activities in the Middle East," *Global Alert* (International Security Council), Number Four, May 23, 1988.

conclude major new arms agreements.[13] In October and November 1988, the Soviet and Syrian navies conducted joint exercises that included a Tartus port visit by the entire SOVMEDRON, the largest concentration of Soviet units ever in the area.[14]

Perhaps most worrisome in 1988 were the two reported trips to Syria by the Soviet general in charge of the Red Army's chemical warfare troops, Vladimir Pikalov.[15] The visits, allegedly Pikalov's first outside the Warsaw Pact, raised eyebrows since they coincided with a growing Western concern about the proliferation of chemical weapons in the Middle East because of their use in the Iran–Iraq war. Syria is known to possess an active chemical warfare program and is believed to have armed several of its Soviet short–range surface–to–surface missiles with chemical warheads.[16] Following the Pikalov visits, Western and Israeli media reports suggested the USSR was cooperating with Syria in its chemical warfare efforts; for their part, the Syrians did what they could

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[13]On Tlas' visit see Tass, in Russian, October 29, 1988, translated in FBIS–SOV, November 1, 1988, pp.16–17. On Yazov's trip see Tass, in Russian, March 28, 1989, translated in FBIS–SOV, March 28, 1989, p.18. For speculation that the Yazov visit presaged a major weapons deal see Jerusalem Domestic Service, in Hebrew, March 28, 1989, translated in FBIS–NES, March 29, 1989, p.22.

[14]Statement submitted to the House Armed Services Committee by the director of U.S. Naval Intelligence, Rear Admiral Thomas A. Brooks, February 22, 1989, p.16.

[15]The first trip came in March and was reported by SANA, in Arabic, March 24, 1988, translated in FBIS–NES, March 29, 1988, p.49. A second, secret trip was rumored to have occurred in June. Jerusalem Domestic Service, in Hebrew, June 29, 1988, translated in FBIS–NES, June 30, 1988, p.30.

[16]For a discussion of Syria's chemical weapons program see W. Seth Carus, *Chemical Weapons in the Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1988), Policy Focus Number Nine, pp.4–5.

to enhance this impression by claiming that the trips were made to "boost the Syrian Armed Force's combat ability to confront the imperialist–Zionist aggression against the Arab nation."[17]

MILITARY/STRATEGIC AMBIGUITIES

These developments continue to raise legitimate questions about the Soviet Union's intentions in the Middle East. But even in these cases, certain caveats are worth noting. These are mentioned not to absolve Moscow of responsibility for actions that contribute to regional instability, but as factors that should be considered in any analysis of possible changes in Soviet–Syrian relations. Though they may not find immediate expression in overt aspects of the relationship, these factors can impact the overall political dynamic between the two countries, thereby reinforcing or weakening trends that will become manifest in the future.

Thus, while it is true that the Soviets have recently supplied Syria with certain new weapons, they have also made a point of denying Syria other, even more destabilizing systems. For years, Syria has had at the top of its wish list the intermediate–range SS–23 ballistic missile, which would put all possible Israeli targets within range of Syrian missiles. The Soviets have consistently refused to supply it (ostensibly because doing so would violate the 1987 U.S.–Soviet accord banning intermediate–range missiles), even in the face of Israel's successful testing of the Jericho II medium–range missile in both 1987 and 1989.[18] According to unconfirmed reports, when Syria, in lieu of its failure to get the SS–23, began discussions with the Chinese to acquire the M–9 intermediate–range missile, Moscow made known its displeasure, not simply because it feared losing its unique arms relationship

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[17]Damascus SANA, in Arabic, March 24, 1988, translated in FBIS–NES, March 29, 1988, pp.49–50.

[18]Ottaway, "Israel Reported to Test Controversial Missile."

with Syria, but because of its own growing concern about the implications of ballistic missile proliferation in the region.[19] Increasingly, however, it appears that such efforts may have been in vain; further reports in 1989 suggested that an official agreement between Syria and China on the M–9 has been signed.[20]

Even in the case of those systems that the Soviets have agreed to supply to Syria, certain potentially important qualifications can be cited. It is of interest to note that the MiG–29s were delivered at least a year behind schedule (long after Moscow had first sent them to Iraq and India). According to one version of events, throughout 1986, the Soviets were already insisting on receiving prior payment for the planes, giving up this demand only during Assad's Moscow trip in 1987, when concern arose that Soviet–Syrian relations had become too strained.[21] Furthermore, the number of planes delivered—some 12 to 20—comprise no more than a single squadron; according to Israeli analysts, the minimum requirement for the MiG–29s to constitute an effective factor in aerial warfare against Israel's air force is at least two squadrons consisting of about 40 aircraft.[22] Subsequently, however, some reports indicate that Syria did acquire a second squadron of MiG–29s in 1988 or 1989.[23] Finally, there have been persistent rumors that those planes that Syria has received are not the top–

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[19]*Davar*, in Hebrew, translated in FBIS–NES, July 1, 1988, p.24.

[20]Richard Lardner, "Report Says Syria Signed Deal With China to Buy Surface–to–Surface Missiles," *Inside the Pentagon*, August 18, 1989, p.12.

[21]O. Erez, "The Arab–Israel Air Balance," p.166.

[22]Aharon Levran, "Changes in the Syrian Armed Forces and Their Impact on the Military Balance with Israel," in *The Middle East Military Balance, 1987–1988*, p.200.

[23]See Perkins, *Arms to the Arabs*, p.21.

of-the-line Soviet version, lacking some of the most sophisticated avionics and missile systems.[24]

To some extent, history may be repeating itself with the Soviet agreement to supply Syria with the Su-24s. Reports of the initial deal were publicized in mid-1988, but according to U.S. officials, the first planes were not delivered until September 1989. And informed speculation suggests that, once again, the quantity of planes Syria will receive—about 10 to 22—is far below the two squadron level that most Israeli experts claim is required to pose a significant operational threat to Israel.[25]

The issue of the Soviet naval presence at Tartus seems to be developing in a less clear-cut fashion than initial reports suggested. Interestingly, after the story first broke in the U.S. media in September 1988, the Soviets went to some lengths to publicly deny its veracity, insisting that, "The Soviet Union maintains no military bases in the Mediterranean. . . . As far as Syria is concerned, Soviet ships call at the port of Tartus for small-scale repairs. . . . The main thing is, however, that the Soviet Union does not have any warships in the port on a permanent basis."[26]

In a statement to the House Armed Services Committee in February 1989, the director of U.S. Naval Intelligence, Rear Admiral Thomas Brooks, presented a relatively subdued evaluation of current Soviet activity at Tartus, one that supported

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[24]See *Al-Qabas*, in Arabic, August 21, 1988, translated in FBIS-NES, August 25, 1988, p.32.

[25]For reports of the Su-24 deal following the Yazov trip see "Soviets reportedly selling jets to Syria," UPI, April 12, 1989. Also, "Syria to get Soviet Jets," UPI, October 26, 1989.

[26]See the Tass statements, in English, August 31 and September 12, 1988, in FBIS-SOV, September 2, 1988, p.6 and FBIS-SOV, September 13, 1988, p.5, respectively. Also see the story in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, in Russian, September 15, 1988, p.3, which, while denying the existence of any Soviet base, acknowledges that a material and technical supply point for Soviet warships, including two tenders and two storehouses on land, have been functioning at Tartus since May 1988. The article is translated in FBIS-SOV, September 16, 1988, p.18.

the Soviet version of developments far more than the original Western reports:

> In the Mediterranean, there is uncertainty over the ultimate scope of Soviet facilities at Tartus, Syria. Facilities added in 1988 have been minimal. At present, Tartus provides only a modest naval maintenance and support facility for SOVMEDRON units. . . . [and] there is currently no evidence to support early reports that SOVMEDRON would be based at Tartus.[27]

There may also be less than meets the eye to some of the recent exchanges between Soviet and Syrian military personnel. The visit to Moscow of Defense Minister Tlas in October 1988 was apparently made not to sign a new arms package, but finally to secure Soviet agreement to make good on long outstanding pledges, particularly the Su–24s. The official accounts of the trip revealed none of the usual signs that such an accord was forthcoming; almost all subsequent reports, from private sources and the media, confirm that Tlas returned to Syria empty–handed.

The purpose of the Yazov trip to Damascus five months later was to discuss exactly the same issues that went unresolved during Tlas' trip, as well as to unruffle Syria's feathers following the strained visit of Shevardnadze several weeks earlier. As noted above, reports suggest that this time the Soviets did finally give in to Syrian demands, agreeing to proceed with the new arms shipments, including the Su–24s.

But perhaps most revealing as a sign of things to come in the Soviet–Syrian strategic relationship was the press release issued in Moscow just prior to Yazov's arrival in Damascus. In it, Yazov echoed precisely the same warnings Shevardnadze had issued regarding the excesses and dangers of the continuing arms race in the Middle East:

> The military capabilities [in the Middle East] are much bigger than the economic and demographic weight of the

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[27]Brooks statement, p.16.

> Middle East on the international level. . . . There is a real danger that the [global] disarmament process might be lost due to the absence of moves toward a just political settlement in the region.[28]

Finally, some evidence exists that suggests that the visits to Syria by General Pikalov were more indicative of Moscow's concern with the proliferation and use of chemical weapons than with its desire to enhance Syria's chemical warfare capability. As with the reports about the alleged Tartus naval base, the Soviets vigorously denied that they were aiding in Syria's chemical weapons program. Spokesmen insisted that, "The Soviet Union has never transferred to anybody either technology, or models, or still components of chemical weapons."[29] "These assertions [about Soviet–Syrian cooperation in the production of chemical weapons] are not in accordance with reality. . . . The USSR. . . . does not transfer chemical weapons to other countries and does not teach them how to produce such weapons."[30]

An article in the official paper of the Soviet military not only repeated these denials about Soviet collusion in Syria's chemical warfare program, but strongly hinted that just the opposite was the case—that Pikalov had gone to caution Syria about the dangers of its program: "[W]hen the head of the chemical forces in the Soviet army visited Syria he discussed issues of troop defense, the expanding danger of the spread of chemical weapons and Soviet efforts to ban them."[31] Subsequently, independent reports confirmed that there was indeed far more conflict than cooperation between Moscow

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[28]Summary of a Novosti press release, in Reuters, March 27, 1989.

[29]Tass, in English, September 9, 1988, in FBIS–SOV, September 9, 1988, p.5.

[30]*Argumenty i Fakty*, in Russian, September 3–9, 1988, translated in FBIS–SOV, September 2, 1988, p.6.

[31]V. Markushkin, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, in Russian, October 9, 1988, p.5.

and Damascus on the issue of Syria's chemical warfare program.[32] Further evidence that Syria's interest in chemical weapons was an ongoing issue of concern to the Soviets appeared during Shevardnadze's talks in Damascus when, on more than one occasion, he made rather conspicuous reference to the fact that the USSR welcomed Syria's decision to join, as an observer, the international negotiations on abolishing chemical weapons.[33]

This fit in with what appeared to be an increasingly positive evolution in Soviet thinking about chemical weapons in general. In July 1988, speaking to a conference of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Shevardnadze condemned Moscow's past policy on chemical weapons, asking:

> What were we guided by when we continued to push for quantity in chemical weapons over the past 15 years? . . . [W]hat impression did we create of ourselves and our intentions when we continued stockpiling weapons which we ourselves characterised as the most barbaric? Considerable damage was done to the country's reputation and image. To retort that this was concern for the country's security, we shall reply that this was the most primitive and distorted notion of what strengthens a country and what weakens it.[34]

This perception of increased Soviet willingness to restrain the arms race in chemical weapons was confirmed in September 1989, when the United States and USSR signed a memorandum of understanding on a chemical weapons data exchange and verification test—a necessary first step in

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[32]Private interview with Ze'ev Schiff, military editor of the Israeli paper *Ha'aretz*, January 16, 1989, Washington, D.C.

[33]For example, see *Pravda*, in Russian, February 20, 1989, translated in FBIS–SOV, February 21, 1989, p.19.

[34]*International Affairs* (Moscow), October 1988, p.20.

addressing the larger task of completing an effective and verifiable ban on chemical weapons.[35]

In January 1988, during a special conference in Paris on the subject of eliminating chemical weapons, the Arab states, concerned with Israel's nuclear capabilities, insisted that any future attempt to ban the production of chemical weapons must be linked to a banning of nuclear weapons as well. Resisting the temptation to score political points with the Arabs (a temptation that Gorbachev's predecessors almost certainly would have found irresistible), the Soviets rejected the linkage, insisting that if the opportunity was now available to make progress on a chemical weapons ban, it must be seized without delay.[36] During his visit to Cairo in February, Shevardnadze repeated this position: "It would be good to resolve all at once all issues connected with nuclear, chemical, and conventional weapons; it would be good, but hard to achieve. They must, therefore, be resolved in stages, when conditions are created for resolving this or that aspect of the problem."[37] U.S. officials, however, remained skeptical of Moscow's commitment to taking concrete action to curb the proliferation of chemical weapons, due in part to the Soviet failure to publicly acknowledge and condemn the development (with West European, not Soviet, help) of a chemical weapons factory in Rabta, Libya.[38]

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[35]See the announcement by Secretary of State James Baker at a press conference following his meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, September 23, 1989, transcribed by Federal News Service, p.2.

[36]Edward Cody, "Soviets Oppose Arabs on Linking Chemical, A-Arms," *The Washington Post*, January 11, 1989, p.A16.

[37]Tass, in Russian, February 23, 1989, translated in FBIS-SOV, February 24, 1989, p.20.

[38]Beecher, "Soviet Failure to Pressure Allies on Mideast Peace Upsets U.S."

IV GORBACHEV AND SYRIA: CONSTRAINED CONFIDENCE

At a minimum, Gorbachev has displayed a far more confident style than his predecessors in dealing with Syria. Certainly, no one can imagine Brezhnev, Andropov or Chernenko publicly lecturing Assad that the military struggle with Israel has absolutely no future. Whereas in the past, the numerous conflicts of interest that arose between the two countries generally seemed to result in the Syrian tail wagging the Soviet dog for higher levels of arms and support for Damascus' confrontational policies, Gorbachev seems to be trying to establish the principle that Soviet actions will be dictated more by Russian interests than Syrian bellicosity.

Of course, as the delivery of MiG–29s and Su–24s suggest, there has been no complete reversal of Soviet policy toward Syria. What there clearly has been, however, is movement along a continuum; today, Moscow is much less concerned about catering its policies to meet Syria's needs. Gorbachev obviously wants to maintain the relationship with Damascus, which, for better or worse, remains a key player in the Arab–Israeli conflict. But he wants to do so while paying a much lower price in terms of material and political support. He is seeking to establish a new equilibrium in Soviet–Syrian

relations; the traditional give and take will continue, but with Moscow giving less and taking more.

On this score, the specter of the Soviet expulsion from Egypt in the early 1970s does not seem to haunt Gorbachev in the same way it did an earlier generation of Soviet leaders. For most of them, the lesson of the break with Cairo was that, when push comes to shove, the USSR must succumb to the demands of its radical clients if it does not want to run the risk of "losing" them to the United States. Naturally, the lesson was especially salient in the Middle East where the competition for influence with Washington was particularly intense. After being kicked out of Egypt, Moscow's position in Syria was viewed as its most important and reliable access to the Arab–Israeli arena. To keep that position, Gorbachev's predecessors felt compelled to shape Soviet policy to meet Syria's needs, even when doing so worked at cross purposes to other interests Moscow had in the region or *vis a vis* the West.

Gorbachev, in contrast, is much less deferential to the Syrians. For him, and the "new thinkers" in general, the expulsion from Egypt seems to have carried a different lesson—that of the inherent volatility and unreliability of most Third World states. Because these countries remain tied to the capitalist world system and lack fully developed political cultures, alliances with them are likely to be unstable. It makes little sense, therefore, for the USSR to expend excessive amounts of resources or sacrifice important alternative interests in an effort to maintain these relationships at all costs. This is especially the case if the zero–sum competition with the United States is actually being downgraded in Soviet calculations (as the Soviets now claim); the consequences of "losing" an Angola, an Afghanistan or even a Syria are simply not considered as disastrous as they once were. Certainly, they do not justify a long–term drain on an ailing Soviet economy or a major deterioration in relations with the West.

This is not to say that Gorbachev wants to see Soviet influence with these states dramatically reduced. He does not. But the "new thinking"—with its focus on domestic revitalization, East–West stability and the political, as opposed to

military, elements of Soviet national security—suggests that the maintenance of relations with poor, radical, anti-imperialist Third World states is no longer the priority it once was on the Soviet foreign policy agenda.

No one—probably not even Gorbachev himself—knows what would happen in the event that he faced the same decision Brezhnev confronted after Soviet forces were expelled from Egypt in 1972. At that time, Brezhnev chose to try and save the relationship with Egypt by giving in to Sadat's demand that the USSR provide him with the offensive weapons needed to launch the 1973 war. In doing so, Brezhnev implicitly made the maintenance of Soviet-Egyptian relations a higher priority than the emerging detente with the United States.

Theoretically, the "new thinking" would counsel Gorbachev to make the opposite choice if Assad was to force upon him a similar moment of truth. Whether he would do so simply cannot be predicted with any certainty. It is worth noting, however, that in Poland—a country whose political orientation is of far greater strategic significance to the USSR than Syria's—Gorbachev's policy in the summer of 1989 was entirely consistent with the "new thinking;" rather than order military action to restore the hegemony of the Polish communist party (as Brezhnev had done in 1981), Gorbachev consented to the formation of the Warsaw Pact's first non-communist-led government, an outcome that virtually no analyst of Soviet affairs would have forecast as a possibility at the beginning of the year. In this context, it is entirely possible that, forced by Assad to make a clear-cut decision, Gorbachev would choose to sacrifice Moscow's strategic relationship with Syria on the altar of Middle East stability and an improved relationship with the United States.

This being said, it is probably also fair to say that Gorbachev's tougher hand with Syria seems predicated on the assumption that no such choice will be necessary in the near future; for the time being, the chances of "losing" Syria are slim. Unless Assad is suddenly willing to surrender his longstanding goal of "Greater Syria" in order to make peace with Israel, it is certain that the West will not provide him with

the kinds of material support he now receives from the Soviets. Nor does Assad have any real prospects of turning to relatively new arms suppliers like the Chinese or North Koreans to assume the role of Syria's weapons patron. In the first place, these countries probably could not provide arms on the scale or of the sophistication that Syria demands. And even if they could, they almost definitely would insist on immediate payment, which Syria—with its economy in a shambles and its aid receipts decreasing—cannot afford, except in the most limited circumstances.[1]

In short, Gorbachev seems to realize that Assad is not Sadat and Syria is not Egypt. Given the Syrian regime's current goals and ideological orientation, it needs the USSR at least as much as *vice versa.* Indeed, probably even more. In recent years, Damascus' bargaining position with Moscow has weakened. On the one hand, Syria's involvement in Lebanon, its opposition to Yasser Arafat and its support for Iran during the Gulf War have brought it increasing isolation, not only in the West, but in the Arab world as well. On the other hand, the Soviets increasingly seem to believe that their position in the Arab–Israeli arena does not rely solely, or even predominantly, on their military relationship with Syria.

The "new thinking" suggests that Moscow's role can also be maintained and enhanced by pursuing active diplomatic and economic relationships with all the major players in the region, regardless of ideological orientation, including Israel. The recent insistence of moderate Arabs states like Jordan and Egypt on Soviet participation in the peace process supports this view. This sense of a broadening base of regional influence, in turn, provides the Soviets with more room for maneuver to deal with Syria, allowing them to be more assertive in pursuing Gorbachev's heightened interest in regional stability at the expense of Syria's priority of confronting Israel.

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[1] On the relationship between Syria's economy, its dependence on foreign aid and its military build-up, see Patrick Clawson, *Unaffordable Ambitions: Syria's Military Build-Up and Economic Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1989), Policy Papers Number 17.

CONTINUED CONSTRAINTS

Exactly how far Moscow is ultimately willing to go in reducing its support for Syria remains an open question. Though the MiG–29s and Su–24s are being delivered late, apparently in smaller quantities than desired and on tougher financial terms, Moscow's willingness to supply them at all suggests that the Soviets continue to attach significant strategic value to the relationship. In this sense, while the "new thinking" has profound implications, it has not completely suspended the laws of great power politics. Thus, as the Soviets attempt to curry influence in the broader Arab world, they probably feel that they cannot afford to be seen as leaving Syria totally defenseless in the face of Israel's military might, which from 1986 to 1989 was supported by about $1.7 billion (in constant 1986 dollars) of U.S. military aid each year.

Moreover, even with their new found sense of confidence, the Soviets continue to see their relationship with Syria as an important political card, one that they are unlikely to play fully until they are reasonably sure that doing so will bring a commensurate payoff in the form of participation in the Arab–Israeli peace process as America's diplomatic equal, if not partner. The Soviets bitterly recall how Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy and the Camp David Accords shut them out of Middle East peacemaking. They remain wary, bordering on paranoid, that "exclusion" of the USSR is still a central tenet of U.S. policy. "New thinking" notwithstanding, with all the other domestic and foreign dilemmas he confronts, Gorbachev—for reasons having to do with internal politics—cannot appear to be selling out a traditional ally only to pave the way for an American–dominated political settlement, especially in a region of such strategic importance as the Middle East.

By maintaining a fairly significant military relationship with Syria, then, Moscow is hedging against the possibility of a *Pax Americana.* On the one hand, the relationship is supposed to give the United States and Israel a continuing incentive not to try to exclude the Soviet Union from the peace process; on

the other hand, it also provides Moscow with a useful means of derailing any process should they try nonetheless.

The continuing military support of Syria may also reflect some ongoing insecurity on the Kremlin's part concerning its actual ability to remain an influential Middle East power should the primary coin of influence in the region change from weapons to politics and economics. The Soviets have to ask themselves, what if the conventional wisdom is correct and the Arabs don't have any use for us other than as a supplier of military largesse in the struggle with Israel? Is a more stable, less dangerous Middle East worth the price of a much less influential Soviet Union? Isn't it better to have some presence among a few states, though radical and unreliable, if the only alternative is having no presence at all? The "new thinking" would seem to suggest otherwise, but the Soviets do not seem prepared, as yet, to believe entirely all their own rhetoric. The continued relationship with Syria and the delivery of Su–24s to Libya demonstrate that the Soviets are not quite willing to take the "new thinking" to its logical extreme.

This tension, between the genuine theoretical breakthroughs of the "new thinking" and the continuation of old patterns of behavior, has been much remarked on by the United States.[2] More interestingly, it has not gone unnoticed by the Soviets. In a landmark speech to the USSR Supreme Soviet in October 1989, Shevardnadze explicitly acknowledged the existing disconnect between Soviet theory and practice in certain areas of foreign policy, and insisted that there must be "an unending process of constant correlation between policy and reality." At the same time, Shevardnadze cautioned that transforming Soviet relations with its traditional list of radical clients would be a long and difficult process that could not be rushed, suggesting that Moscow has little inclination, for the time being, to burn all its bridges with old friends like Syria:

> While changing many elements in our approach toward international relations, we cannot overlook the prevailing

[2]See Secretary of State James Baker's address to the Foreign Policy Association, "The Points of Mutual Advantage: *Perestroika* and American Foreign Policy," October 16, 1989, transcribed by Federal News Service.

> system of mutual commitments. . . . Our relations with a number of states are governed by the existence of alliance treaty commitments, including commitments of a military-political nature. We have treaties of friendship and cooperation with a large group of countries. . . . We also have commitments of a different sort—moral commitments to our friends with whom we have marched shoulder to shoulder for years and even decades. . . . They supported us at the most difficult times—let us be blunt—even when we were wrong. They made sacrifices for our sake. But new nuances have emerged in our relations. Voices can be heard calling for old friends to be spurned, or simply exchanged for new ones. Bluntly speaking, such recommendations are not very wise. . . . We must honor [our commitments]. If we wish to change something—and changes are certainly necessary in many cases—then talks must be held with the other side regarding the new conditions.[3]

The existence of these competing demands—the need to "correlate policy and reality" on the one hand, and honor commitments to old friends on the other—poses a serious dilemma for Soviet foreign policy. To date, in relations with Syria, Moscow has attempted to balance the two by mixing elements of change with elements of continuity. But this hybrid policy may end up satisfying no one and antagonizing everyone. Syria is upset with any reduction in Soviet support, while Israel and the United States see Moscow's attempt to have it both ways as, at best, unsettling and, at worst, devious. Certainly, it continues to raise questions in the policy-maker's mind about the desirability of sanctioning a larger Soviet role in the search for an Arab-Israeli settlement.

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[3] *Pravda*, in Russian, October 24, 1989, translated in FBIS-SOV, October 24, 1989, p.43,46.

V CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Even taking into account the question marks concerning specific aspects of the military relationship, it is hard to deny that the overall trend in Soviet policy toward Syria has been in the direction desired by the West: urging Syria to consider, or at least not obstruct, a political resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict, while beginning to cut back support for the Syrian military. Though the scope and pace of change in relations may not be as dramatic and unequivocal as the United States would prefer, it is clear that change is indeed occurring. No better evidence for this exists than the signs of growing Syrian consternation and concern with Soviet policy.

Thus, even if they were to go no further, the shifts in Soviet policy should not be dismissed as merely empty rhetoric. As noted, Moscow's pressure on Damascus to be more forthcoming on the peace process has consistently been coupled with its logical corollary: warnings that the Arab military option has been completely discredited. Even if confined purely to the level of rhetoric (which, as has been argued, is not entirely the case), the importance of such statements is considerable; to the extent that Assad is more likely to undertake any military action against Israel if he feels certain of Soviet support, the uncertainty that has been introduced by Moscow's rebuke of Syrian militarism helps

reduce the chances of war. In this context, one need only recall the pre–Gorbachev era, when Soviet rhetorical belligerency against Israel and its support for Arab radicalism contributed to an atmosphere in which another Arab–Israeli war seemed a constant possibility. The chill that Gorbachev has introduced to relations with Syria has obviously not removed the war threat, but it has significantly lessened its likelihood, a development that is very much in U.S. interests.

With that said, there should be no expectation that Soviet efforts to moderate Syrian policy will be enough to convince Assad to come to the negotiating table to make peace with Israel. Nor will they be enough to prevent Assad from employing low-level means—terrorism and assassination—to disrupt any burgeoning peace process between Israel and the Palestinians.

By further isolating and weakening Syria, however, such efforts on Moscow's part would do two things: first, they would lessen Syria's ability to offer the Arab world any alternative vision of confronting Israel militarily; and second, they would reduce Assad's confidence that Syrian-sponsored terrorist actions, designed to derail the peace process, could be carried out with impunity. By taking away the war option and reducing Syria's freedom of maneuver in the realm of covert activities, the Arab–Israeli political arena would be more amenable to repeated efforts at conflict resolution which, at some stage, Assad may not have the ability to disrupt. Thus, even if the Soviets cannot "deliver" Syria, the new orientation in policy initiated by Gorbachev could have significant diplomatic implications, and therefore should be recognized and encouraged by the United States.

But applauding the change in policy does not mean being satisfied with it. Though clarity is developing concerning Moscow's desire for Middle East stability, the sale of some qualitatively new military systems to states so obviously opposed to a compromise settlement continues to reveal a worrisome ambiguity in Soviet behavior. And while the analyst, responsible for understanding Soviet actions, may be able to rationalize continued equivocacy as the product of superpower rivalry, intransigent local allies, internal Kremlin

politics, etc., the policy–maker, charged with protecting the national interest, should be less tolerant of ambiguity, demanding a greater transparency in Soviet intentions and policies. The United States may understand Moscow's reluctance (and, indeed, its preference) not to make tough choices *vis a vis* a long–time ally like Syria; but it should not accept it, thereby allowing the Soviets to avoid these choices altogether. After three decades of ensuring that the Arab states had the wherewithal to wage war against Israel, the Kremlin can now only earn its credentials as a peacemaker by taking the difficult political and military decisions that an Arab–Israeli settlement will require.

The Soviets are correct in asserting that their claim to a role in Middle East diplomacy is based on their military relationship with Syria and the Arab radicals. But the claim is only valid if that relationship is used in one of two ways: to convince Syria to negotiate a peace treaty directly with Israel and/or to consent to a Palestinian–Israeli settlement; or to withhold arms and political support from Syria in an attempt to isolate Damascus and attenuate its ability to subvert the peace process. Conversely, the Soviet claim to a mediator's role is undermined if the relationship only continues to be used to provide Syria with advanced military systems. In short, Moscow's strategic ties to Syria represent a ticket into the peace process only to the extent that the Soviets are willing to cut them back.

The United States should therefore work to disabuse Gorbachev of the notion that selling offensive weapons to Syria enhances Moscow's leverage in Arab–Israeli diplomacy. The reality is that this negative use of Soviet influence only continues to stir up troubling questions about the USSR's commitment to peace, thereby casting doubt on the importance of the "new thinking."

In discussions with Moscow, Washington must make clear that an influential Soviet role in Arab–Israeli diplomacy will only be possible to the extent that the USSR is willing and able to use its regional influence in a positive manner that contributes to a potential settlement. In this context, Gorbachev should be pressed not only further to reduce arms sales to

Syria, but to end Moscow's insistence on an international peace conference, a negotiating forum that is anathema to Israel, but heralded by Damascus, precisely because it gives Syria a *de facto* veto over any diplomatic progress. In place of the conference, the Soviets should be pressed to endorse a process of step-by-step, direct negotiations between Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab states, and to take actions—such as the unconditional re-establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel—that make such negotiations more feasible by building Israeli confidence (and thereby its willingness to take risks for peace) and tempering Arab rejectionism.

To the extent that the USSR may now be willing to undertake such efforts, its role in the Middle East may indeed be changing from being part of the problem to being part of the solution. A settlement to the Palestinian problem that Moscow endorses and helps mediate, and that commits the USSR to guaranteeing Israel's security and further reducing its military support for Israel's enemies, would be a worthwhile diplomatic achievement. It will, however, require a further evolution in Soviet policy, one that will almost surely exact a high price from the Kremlin, at least in terms of relations with Syria. Whether Gorbachev, with the myriad of other problems he confronts, will pay this price is not yet clear. But perhaps for the first time, signs are now evident in Soviet policy that indicate it is a real possibility, one that a resolute American diplomacy should fully explore.

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