

The Shamir-Shevardnadze Meeting

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Brief Analysis

Today's meeting in Washington between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze represents another important step in the ongoing process of Soviet-Israeli rapprochement. Not only should the meeting advance the prospects for an early resumption of full diplomatic relations between the two countries, it might also presage a significant development in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Of course, in some ways, the meeting is not so extraordinary. Shevardnadze met Prime Minister Shamir in New York more than two years ago and since then Soviet-Israeli relations -- at virtually every level, political, economic, and cultural -- have continued to steadily improve, culminating in last September's agreement to establish formal consular relations.

Bilateral Relations

Interestingly, the request for today's talks is said to have come from Shevardnadze. Certainly, the Soviets have some things to thank the Israelis for. In the first place, Moscow, like Washington, is very appreciative of the low-profile role that Israel has assumed in the Gulf crisis, which has made it easier to maintain the fragile anti-Iraq coalition.

Shevardnadze would also probably like to extend his gratitude to Israel for its readiness to respond to the Soviet Union's worldwide appeal for help in overcoming this winter's severe food shortages. As soon as Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev made his plea for aid last month in Paris, Israel answered by sending several tons of much-needed fruit, vegetables and powdered milk.

Perhaps most important, Shevardnadze might want to thank Shamir for his position supporting a waiver of the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which links U.S. most-favored-nation trade benefits with Soviet emigration practices. Moscow has eagerly sought such a waiver for years, but the Bush Administration has opposed it until the Soviet Union codifies its more liberal emigration reforms. But with a record 150,000 Soviet Jews having already arrived in Israel in 1990, Prime Minister Shamir is advocating that Jackson-Vanik be immediately suspended for a year "in such a way to facilitate trade relations between Soviet Russia and the United States." President Bush now seems to agree and will probably grant the waiver during his own meeting with Shevardnadze today.

These recent developments offer further evidence of the benefits the Soviets can reap from improved relations with Israel and should encourage them to move faster in re-establishing full diplomatic relations. Shevardnadze is known to be an advocate of an early resumption of ties, if only as a necessary step to gain full entree into the Arab-Israeli

peace process. Indeed, following his meeting in New York with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy last September, Shevardnadze reportedly told aides that he hoped full relations could be restored before the end of 1990. But October's Temple Mount incident threw a hitch into the timing, as both Arab and hard-line domestic critics used the event to attack Moscow's warming relations with Jerusalem.

For its part, Israel would like several things from the Shamir-Shevardnadze meeting: a Soviet commitment to restoring full diplomatic relations; assurances that the exodus of Soviet Jews to Israel will continue; and implementation of direct flights between the USSR and Israel, which would greatly facilitate not only the process of getting emigres to Israel but also the expansion of Soviet-Israeli economic relations. Again, Israel had verbal promises last September that direct flights would soon begin, but the decision was reportedly delayed in the wake of the Temple Mount shootings. Reportedly, Shamir may make the following offer to Shevardnadze: direct flights from the Soviet Union filled with Soviet Jews will return to the USSR filled with food to help alleviate Soviet shortages.

The Peace Process

The Shamir-Shevardnadze meeting might also foreshadow some significant developments in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Shevardnadze requested the meeting immediately following his talks on the Middle East in Houston with Secretary of State James Baker. Among other things, Shevardnadze and Baker discussed Washington's effort to avoid a UN Security Council Resolution calling for an international conference to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Rather than actively involving the UN in peace talks -- an idea rejected both by the United States and Israel -- the U.S. may now be leaning toward direct Arab-Israeli negotiations that occur under joint superpower auspices.

This U.S.-Soviet framework would be in line with what President Bush told Mikhail Gorbachev at their summit in Helsinki last September: in the face of Soviet cooperation on the Gulf crisis, the United States now believes Moscow has an important role to play in resolving other Middle East conflicts. Perhaps more importantly, Shamir himself has said that, in light of the changes in Soviet foreign policy, the Soviets do have a role to play in the peace process and that -- unlike an international conference -- U.S.-Soviet auspices might be an acceptable format for negotiations. Whether the Soviets have signed on to the idea is not yet clear -- they have long advocated a UN role in the peace process. What seems apparent, however, is that Moscow is supporting U.S. efforts to delay a vote on the resolution as well as redraft its language to exclude mention of an international conference.

In addition to discussing the possibility of a U.S.-Soviet effort to sponsor peace talks after a resolution of the Gulf crisis, Shevardnadze might also wish to discuss with Shamir Soviet ideas for enhancing Middle East security. This supposedly includes talks between Israel and the Arab states on limiting the arms race in both conventional and unconventional weapons, which would take place alongside, or even prior to, negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Prime Minister Shamir would no doubt welcome this concept in principle, since he has long advocated that any peace process between Israel and the Palestinians be supplemented by talks between Israel and those Arab states whose armies pose the real threat to its existence.

In short, today's meeting provides a good opportunity to increase the momentum in Soviet-Israeli relations and lay the groundwork for further improvement along a number of mutually beneficial fronts -- especially in the areas of economic cooperation and assistance and political ties. Furthermore, the meeting could begin the process of developing some common, very general ideas between the United States, the Soviet Union, and Israel about how the problems of the Arab-Israeli peace process and Middle East stability might be addressed after the Gulf crisis is resolved.

John P. Hannah, a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, was the deputy director of research at The Washington Institute until March 1991. He was the visiting Bronfman Fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow, from September 18-October 12, 1990, and is the author of the 1989 Institute

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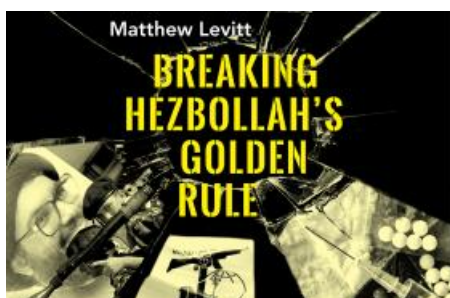
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