Not a Drop of Russian Blood

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Articles & Testimony

As the dramatic transformation of the Soviet political system unfolds, the link between domestic politics and foreign policy grows tighter. Already, the impact on policy toward the Gulf crisis has been profound; the public's aversion to foreign involvement after Afghanistan, and the rebelliousness of its own Muslim population are imposing serious constraints on the USSR's ability to take mil-itary action against Iraq. Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms have led to disintegration of the old decision-making power centers, leaving, for the first time, an opening for the Soviet public's anger and fear to find expression in the policy-making process. "A profound redistribution of power is under way," explains a Middle East expert from the Communist Party's Central Committee, "from the central government to the republics, from the executive branch to the democratically elected legislatures, from organized forms of political expression to the demands of the street. And where the Gulf is concerned, the mood of the street is clear: People are afraid of war and absolutely opposed to Soviet involvement in hostilities." Across the board, Soviet officials, politicians and analysts contend that Gorbachev will find it politically impossible to commit forces to a Gulf war. "We don't care what Foreign Minister Shevardnadze pledges at the United Nations," insists one member of the Russian parliament. "After Afghanistan, not a drop of Russian blood will be shed outside our borders, under any circumstances."

The "post-Afghanistan syndrome" is the chic catch phrase among Soviet intellectuals. It is also a genuine political phenomenon. The 10-year Afghanistan debacle left a deep scar on the USSR's collective psyche, generating a widespread aversion to foreign entanglement. In the view of most observers, this factor heavily influences the leadership's approach to the Gulf crisis. Indeed, shortly after his U.N. speech, in testimony before the Supreme Soviet, Shevardnadze had to retreat from his earlier statements. Confronting a barrage of hostile questioning, he acknowl-edged that sending troops abroad was strictly the prerogative of the parliament. "Today is not 1979," Shevardnadze admitted, referring to a time when the Red Army could be sent into Afghanistan by a small, isolated group of Communist Party octogenarians. Could the legislatures agree to dispatch Soviet forces to fight Iraq? "Impossible," replies Yevgeny Kazhukin, chairman of the Russian parliament's leading subcommittee on international affairs. "Not even in a symbolic way, not even under a U.N. flag. Our constituents forbid it." Concern for Soviet citizens still in Iraq is another factor constraining Moscow. Before Gorbachev's special emissary Yevgeny Primakov undertook his recent missions to Baghdad, the Moscow press was replete with letters from aggrieved parents, complaining that their sons were being denied permission to leave Iraq and that the Soviet government was doing nothing about the situation. Soviet officials openly acknowledge that Primakov's first priority in going to Iraq was to secure the release of Soviet citizens, not to convince Saddam Hussein to leave Kuwait. At the time of Primakov's first trip, Saddam agreed to allow 1,500 Soviets to go, but insisted that the remaining 3,500 must stay until their contracts expire next year. Reports following Primakov's second journey, however, suggest that these people will now also be granted exit visas. "If thousands of Soviets were to die in a U.S. air strike, it could be politically disastrous for Gorbachev" warns an official from the Ministry for Foreign Economic Relations. "Unlike Westerners, these people didn't choose to go to Iraq. The government ordered them there. If they're killed in a war, Gorbachev will be bitterly attacked for sending people abroad without having the power to protect them, either by persuading

Washington not to use force, or pressuring Saddam to let them go." No one in Moscow knows how the Soviet Union's more than 50 million Muslims view the Gulf crisis. What everybody fears, however, is that the people of the five Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan are increasingly angry, alienated and Islamicized. So-called underground mosques, in existence for years, are reportedly gaining adherents who preach a political theology radical in content and violent in methods. "We are witnessing the Lebanonization' of our southern areas," a Soviet Foreign Ministry official ominously predicts. "Russia must begin to prepare itself for two developments: first, a campaign of Islamic terrorism; and second, the outbreak of chronic conflict, and perhaps full-scale warfare, between several of these republics." Such massive instability, it is feared, will eventually lead to the intervention of neighboring states, including Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China, producing a regional conflict of unprecedented scope and magnitude in southwest and Central Asia. "Our main priority now must be to buy time and forestall this inevitable descent into chaos," suggests a Soviet expert. "Among other things, this means avoiding, if at all possible, a U.S.-led invasion of Islamic Iraq." While it is anyone's guess how Soviet Muslims would actually react to such a war, conditions are considered tense enough that even a minor incident could serve as the spark that sets the Central Asian tinderbox ablaze. Primakov's shuttle diplomacy has been criticized by some Western commentators as a cynical Soviet ploy to play both sides of the Gulf conflict. Closer to the truth is an analysis that sees Moscow's frantic efforts to find a political solution to the crisis as a manifestation of its real fears about the consequences of war. Ironically, the USSR's inability to pursue a fully cooperative policy with the United States results less from Moscow's traditional duplicity than from the emergence of a genuine form of democratic politics in Soviet society.

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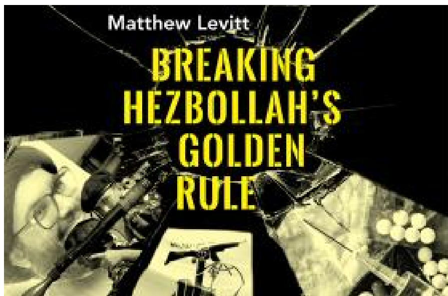

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