All Politics Are Local:

Soviet Constraints in the Gulf Crisis

by John Hannah **(/experts/john-hannah)**

Oct 15, 1990

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Brief Analysis

The growing linkage between Soviet domestic and foreign policy is producing dramatic changes in its Middle East positions. The Soviet regime is playing a key role on some aspects of the Gulf crisis, but its freedom of action is quite constrained in others because of the internal struggle for power, the presence of Soviet citizens in Iraq, and the growing rebelliousness of the Moslem republics in the USSR.

The USSR has certainly adopted an activist role. The visit of Soviet diplomat Yevgeny Primakov to Baghdad led to talk of a softer Iraqi bargaining position though, in Moscow, the view is more skeptical and there is no indication that this actually occurred. Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze is reported to have suggested that there may be full diplomatic relations with Israel by year's end and the impending appointment of the USSR's first ambassador to Saudi Arabia in a half-century.

At the same time, however, the USSR's domestic crisis imposes enormous constraints on what it can do internationally. Power is leaving the Communist party and central government toward the elected legislatures of the USSR and its republics. In this instability and uncertainty, President Gorbachev and his Presidential Council still retain authority to act as the center of foreign policy making, but the redistribution of power is already limiting this mandate.

Use Of Soviet Forces

Despite anti-Iraq sentiments, Soviet officials and politicians insist Gorbachev cannot commit Soviet forces to fight Iraq. Contradicting Foreign Minister Shevardnadze's pledge, they say this situation will prevail even if the Security Council supports force or puts the armies under its auspices. Following Shevardnadze's speech, a substantial number of deputies from the Soviet and Russian parliaments protested that he had no authority to make such a commitment.

The "Afghan syndrome" is now a chic political catchphrase in Moscow but also a genuine political phenomenon. The aversion to military involvement of any kind is widespread and its potential political explosiveness should not be underestimated as a factor weighing heavily on the central leadership's calculations.

The chairman of the Russian parliament's main international affairs sub-committee ominously predicted that if Gorbachev tried to use Soviet forces in a Gulf war without the legislature's consent, it could produce a constitutional

crisis. Given the precarious domestic situation, he intimated that such a confrontation could endanger Gorbachev's rule. When asked if the parliament could agree to even a symbolic use of Soviet forces in the Gulf under UN auspices, his reply was swift and unequivocal: "Impossible."

Military Solution to the Crisis: The Hostage Factor

Moscow is anxious to avoid a military clash. While there are many explanations for this caution, it has become increasingly evident that a primary cause is concern for Soviet citizens in Iraq. Soviet policy is indeed being held hostage. While no officials in Moscow or Baghdad use that term to describe the estimated 5000 Soviet specialists still in Iraq, most Soviet experts do so privately. They believe the primary focus of Primakov's recent mission to Baghdad was to secure the release of Soviet citizens, not to pressure Iraq to leave Kuwait.

According to sources in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, Saddam is only willing to allow 1700 more Soviets to leave before the end of 1990. The remaining 3000-4000 will not receive exit visas until their existing contracts expire next year.

Clearly, Saddam wants to use Moscow's preoccupation with its citizens as further leverage to delay U.S. military action. Some Soviet analysts suggest it could work, producing strong Soviet opposition to a possible U.S. use of force and a mediating effort offering Iraq an escape route.These experts explain that the death of thousands of Soviet citizens would contain real political dangers for Gorbachev. Domestic critics would deride him for sending Russians to Iraq without having the power to protect them, either by influencing Washington not to attack or by forcing Saddam to let them go.

The Islamic Factor

The Soviets have no real idea how Soviet Moslems view the Gulf crisis but do know that these people, living primarily in the five Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan, are increasingly angry and Islamicized. So-called underground mosques are gaining adherents, preaching a political theology that is radical in content and violent in means.

Observers in Moscow fatalistically predict two ominous trends developing over the next 20 years as the Moslem republics break away from the USSR:

• A campaign of Islamic terrorism against the Russian republic.

• Large-scale conflict on the USSR's southern rim. War between Armenia and Azerbaijan is seen as inevitable, while armed conflicts between several Central Asian republics is considered likely. Such instability may result in intervention by Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, producing a genuine arc of crisis in Southwest/Central Asia of unprecedented scope and danger. In anticipation, the Soviets have reportedly transferred all nuclear weapons depots in the Moslem republics to more secure locations in Russia proper.

Moscow's main priority now is to avoid speeding up this inevitable descent into chaos, including an American-led invasion of Iraq. Whether a Gulf war would actually produce this results another matter. In the extremely brittle political conditions of today, however, analysts believe that a small event could act as the spark that brings Russia's whole imperialist edifice down in flames. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's argument for Russia's historical claim to parts of Kazakhistan, resulted in large-scale rioting and protests among that republic's Moslem population.

Clearly, the transition to mass politics imposes growing constraints on what the USSR can do abroad. But this may be a double-edged sword. Positively, it virtually eliminates the nearterm possibility of Soviet military adventurism. Negatively, however, domestic forces may also limit Moscow's ability to work in a fully cooperative manner with the United States on issues of urgent concern.

Finally, a longer-term problem for U.S. policymakers, as the process of Soviet political break-up occurs, is how long the United States will be able to rely on Gorbachev's commitments as binding on the entire USSR.

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 Policy Paper **At Arms Length: Soviet-Syrian Relations in the Gorbachev Era (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=82)** . ❖

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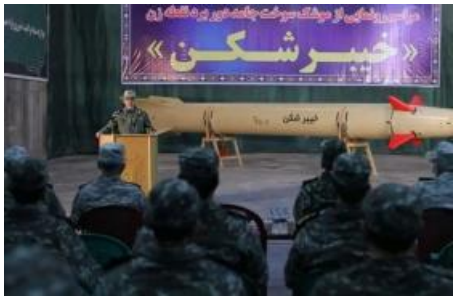

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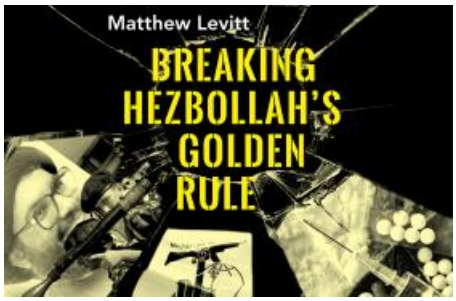

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