

Soviets Build Their Case as Peacemaker Partners

by [John Hannah \(/experts/john-hannah\)](/experts/john-hannah)

Oct 10, 1990

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[John Hannah \(/experts/john-hannah\)](/experts/john-hannah)

John Hannah is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Last week's decision by the Soviet Union to establish consular relations with Israel is just one element of a far-reaching evolution in Moscow's Mideast policy. Accelerated by the shock of the Persian Gulf crisis, this process is drawing Soviet views on the Arab-Israeli conflict closer to those of the United States, possibly creating new opportunities for cooperative efforts to strengthen regional stability and advance the peace process.

In discussions with Soviet officials and analysts, several key points suggest the shape of this new conceptual framework:

- Disillusionment, bordering on disgust, with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Moscow is astonished by Yasser Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein and has growing doubts about his ability to ever make peace with Israel. Several analysts, including Foreign Ministry officials, predict that the PLO will split over the crisis, eventually producing a new leadership.

- A parallel increase in understanding for Israel's position.

The Soviets know that to acquire an expanded role in the peace process, they need a productive relationship with Israel. President Mikhail S. Gorbachev's recent meeting with two hard-line Israeli cabinet ministers was in part a recognition of this fact: to be a player in the Mideast game requires dealing with all parties, even those -- such as the Likud -- whose policies are considered undesirable.

- An appreciation of the need to support Egypt as leader of the Arab world and a force for moderation and peace with Israel.

The Soviets believe that it is crucial to consolidate the Egyptian/Syrian/Saudi axis that has emerged in opposition to Iraq. Keeping Syria in the Egyptian camp is considered especially important for moving ahead on the peace process.

- Increased enthusiasm for Secretary of State James A. Baker's plan to begin the peace process with talks between Israel and Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza.

When the Palestinian problem is again placed on the international agenda, Soviet officials say, they are inclined to support more strongly a process that heightens the role of local Palestinians at the expense of the PLO. Two officials with whom I spoke even cited the principles of the Camp David accords as "useful" in finally resolving the Palestinian problem.

- Acknowledgement that the long-proposed international peace conference should come only as a final step in the

process, after direct talks between Israel and its Arab neighbors have been held.

"Direct negotiations," one official stated, "are the sine qua non of a historical compromise." As to the role of a conference, Soviet officials now indicate it might deal only with issues strictly multilateral in nature, such as water rights, regional security and international guarantees for bilateral agreements involving Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab states.

- An appreciation that the Palestinian problem cannot be dealt with in isolation.

The Soviets increasingly understand that the Arab-Israeli conflict involves a complex web of issues; the Palestinian problem is not necessarily the most important from a strategic standpoint. Issues of non-proliferation, arms control and regional security are rising on Moscow's Mideast agenda. The Soviets envision these problems being addressed either on a parallel track with negotiations on the occupied territories or, more likely, as a prelude (and catalyst) to such negotiations. In line with this view, they express great interest in America's idea for new regional security structures. More interesting, some Soviet officials suggest that to be truly effective, such structures must somehow include Israel.

If these conceptual shifts are translated into actual changes in Soviet policy -- manifested in such moves as an early resumption of full diplomatic relations with Israel, cuts in military ties to regional radicals and support for efforts to reduce tensions and increase confidence between Israel and its Arab neighbors -- they could create new possibilities for moving ahead on a political resolution of the Arab-Israeli problem.

Of course, changes in Soviet policy will not by themselves produce peace. Still, their significance should not be dismissed. For years, the intense superpower rivalry has fanned the flames of conflict in the Middle East. Ending that rivalry and replacing it with U.S.-Soviet cooperation may not be sufficient for ending the conflict. But it is one very important and necessary piece of the peacemaking puzzle.

John P. Hannah, deputy director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is the visiting Bronfman Fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow. ❖

Los Angeles Times

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)