

Moscow and the Gulf Crisis: New Thoughts about New Thinking

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Brief Analysis

The visit of Soviet special envoy Yevgeny Primakov to Baghdad today in search of a diplomatic resolution of the Gulf crisis is another sign of Moscow's growing interest in the crisis as a catalyst for a new Soviet role in the Middle East. Last Sunday's decision to establish diplomatic relations at the level of consuls-general with Israel and to allow direct flights of Soviet Jews to Israel also provides evidence of a significant reassessment of Soviet regional policy.

At the heart of Soviet "new thinking" in the Middle East is the desire to avoid war in the Gulf:

- It would divert world, as well as Soviet, attention and resources away from efforts to resolve the USSR's mounting economic problems.
- It creates potential tensions in relations with the West, especially the United States, at a time when improving them is critical for successfully restructuring the Soviet economy.
- It might undermine stability throughout the volatile Middle East, producing military, political, and economic shock waves damaging to the USSR. In interviews, Soviet analysts and officials frequently cite two examples of how a U.S.-Iraqi military confrontation might directly affect their country:
 1. Strikes against Iraq's chemical weapons production facilities and storage sites could produce a series of "Bhopals" -- deadly chemical clouds that prevailing winds will carry north to the Soviet Union,
 2. U.S. attacks on Iraq could further inflame radical Islamic activists in the USSR's Central Asian republics.

Even though higher oil prices benefit the USSR in the short run, Soviet analysts and officials express a sophisticated understanding of the longer-term negative impact that an oil shock will have on the USSR:

- The success of Soviet economic reforms is dependent on Moscow's integration into a healthy global market; to the extent that the engine of that market -- the economies of Western Europe, Japan and the U.S. -- are mired in recession, perestroika will suffer.
- As an oil exporter, the Soviets naturally prefer higher prices. But they understand that the current windfall profits will evaporate over time as oil importers make long-term adjustments to reduce dependence on foreign oil. This will shrink the global petroleum market, a dangerous development for the USSR since oil is one of the few areas of the

world economy in which it stands a chance to profit immediately.

New Thinking on Linkage

Ironically, the Soviet position is moving away from linking the Gulf crisis and Arab-Israeli conflict at a time when some Western powers seem to be moving in the opposite direction. Indeed, analysts and officials unanimously insist that any such linkage would dangerously play into Saddam Hussein's hands; efforts to promote the peace process should therefore only be considered after Iraq unconditionally withdraws from Kuwait.

Nonetheless, the Soviets consider progress on the Arab-Israeli front as critical to ensuring Mideast stability and they will continue to push the peace process. The Gulf crisis, however, has helped to move Moscow in a more sophisticated, pragmatic direction. Among these factors are:

- Increasing disillusionment, bordering on disgust, with the PLO. The Soviets are astonished with Arafat's position on the crisis and have growing doubts about his ability to ever make peace with Israel.
- A simultaneous increase in Moscow's appreciation for Israel's precarious security, and the need for a productive Soviet-Israel relationship if the USSR is to have influence in the peace process. Gorbachev's recent meeting with two hard-line Israeli cabinet ministers was based on a perceived need to deal with all parties, even those whose policies he does not like. Moscow has concluded that most Soviet immigrants to Israel will initially vote for parties of the right, making Likud the dominant force in the country's politics for the foreseeable future.
- The necessity of supporting Egypt as the Arab world's leader and a force for stability, moderation and peace with Israel. As part of this process, the Soviets believe it is crucial to keep Syria in the Egyptian camp in order to make progress on the peace process.
- Disillusionment with the PLO has increased Soviet enthusiasm for Secretary Baker's plan to begin the peace process with talks between Israel and Palestinians from the territories. When the Palestinian problem is again placed on the international agenda, Soviet officials suggest their support for heightening the role of local Palestinians at the expense of the PLO will be much stronger. In interviews, two Soviet officials even stressed the need to return to the principles of Camp David, particularly the focus on Egypt's role.
- Soviet Foreign Ministry officials now claim that the international peace conference should only come as a final step in the process, after direct talks between Israel and its Arab neighbors have been held. Soviet officials now feel the conference should only deal with issues that are multilateral in nature -- such as international guarantees for separate bilateral agreements between Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab states; water rights; regional security; and economic development.
- An appreciation that the Arab-Israeli conflict involves a complex web of issues of which the Palestinian problem is not necessarily the most important from a strategic standpoint. Non-proliferation, arms control, limiting arms sales, and regional security are now rising on Moscow's Mideast agenda. The Soviets claim that these problems can be addressed either on a parallel track with negotiations on the occupied territories, or as a prelude (and catalyst) to such negotiations. The Soviets have also expressed great interest in America's call for new regional security structures. Some officials now suggest that to be truly effective, any such plan must find a way to include Israel.

In short, the Gulf crisis is bringing a new kind of Soviet activism on the Middle East. In general, Soviet views have moved closer to those of the United States. But Moscow's concern over avoiding war could yet open a rift in superpower negotiating positions for ending the crisis.

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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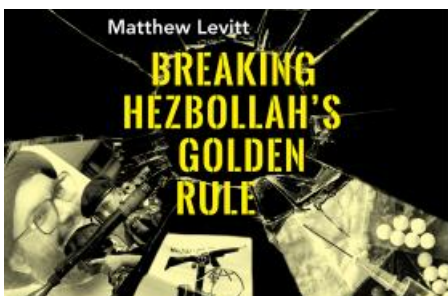
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