

# Moscow in the Middle East:

## The Impact of New Thinking

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### Brief Analysis

**S**oviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze is using the Gulf crisis as a catalyst for farreaching changes in Moscow's Middle East policy. Moscow is putting the emphasis on improving relations with the West and with the wealthy Persian Gulf states at the expense of Arab radicals.

Shevardnadze's UN speech was remarkable in that it went further than before in accepting the possible use of force against Iraq. But it should also be seen as another step in a new policy line from Moscow.

### Abandoning the Radicals

Iraq's invasion finally forced the Soviets to address a troubling contradiction plaguing their new Middle East policy: while easing their own hostility to pro-Western forces in the region -- such as Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia -- Moscow had continued large military sales and subsidies to local troublemakers Libya, Syria, the PLO, and most disastrously, Iraq.

But with the outbreak of the Gulf crisis, Moscow had to make a strategic decision. Would the promise of "new thinking," as outlined by President Mikhail Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, be fulfilled in the Middle East? Or would advocates of a pro-Iraq tilt in the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs control policy? Moscow's arms embargo against Iraq, its support for all UN Security Council resolutions and Gorbachev's Helsinki statement with President Bush suggest the "new thinkers" have gained the upper hand.

Now Shevardnadze's advisors are hoping to exploit their victories in the debate over Iraq policy in order to accelerate a shift in Soviet support for other Arab radicals. Saddam Hussein's aggression has dramatically underscored their argument that these relationships, based on Cold War rivalry, no longer serve Soviet interests.

In the first place, the staggering Soviet economy could no longer afford these relations. Iraq, the richest of this bunch, owes the USSR more than \$6 billion. Secondly, in the age of glasnost, providing aid to regimes that oppress their own people and attack neighbors is not popular domestically. Finally, support for Arab radicals is viewed as extremely dangerous, threatening to undermine Moscow's far more important relations with the West.

The argument in favor of further Soviet disengagement from the radicals is bolstered by the fact that some of them, namely Libya and the PLO, have been at the forefront of efforts to excuse and support Iraq's brutality.

In the case of Syria, Shevardnadze's aides also see new opportunities created by the Gulf crisis. They welcomed

Damascus' strong support of the international coalition opposing Iraq, as well as the subsequent rapprochement in Syrian-U.S. relations. Indeed, the Soviets rightfully claim some credit for having encouraged recent Syrian pragmatism. Now, they think a chance may exist to work with the United States to promote new security arrangements between Israel and Syria that begin to reduce tensions and dangers in Lebanon and the Golan Heights.

The champions of a policy shift away from the radical Arabs emphasize the fact that the Gulf crisis has simultaneously spurred an improvement in Moscow's ties with moderate Arab states, especially the economically powerful Persian Gulf sheikdoms. Most dramatic in this regard was last week's normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia, a step the Soviets had been pressing for several years. Only in the wake of Moscow's forceful opposition to Iraq, however, were the Saudis convinced.

#### Renewal of Diplomatic Relations With Israel?

Finally, going virtually unnoticed, are Moscow's efforts to accelerate and expand the pace of Soviet-Israeli contacts. A series of events transpired in the last two weeks that was unthinkable a few months ago. First, Ariel Sharon, the Israeli politician most reviled in the Soviet press for his hawkish views, was permitted to visit Moscow and encourage Soviet Jews to immigrate. Next came right-wing members of Israel's cabinet, Yitzhak Moda'i and Yuval Ne'eman, who not only signed several economic agreements, but also were granted an audience with Gorbachev, a move of enormous symbolic importance. At the same time, a senior Israeli Foreign Ministry delegation paid an official visit to Moscow to discuss issues of Middle East security and bilateral relations.

Shevardnadze will shortly meet his Israeli counterpart, David Levy, at the UN. According to Shevardnadze's advisors, he hopes to find a face-saving formula that will allow the USSR to restore full diplomatic relations with Israel without backing down entirely from the demand that Israel first agree to attend a Middle East peace conference. Toward this end, he is likely to request that Israel adopt the U.S. position on a conference -- that it may be acceptable as the final stage of the peace process, a purely ceremonial forum that will bless agreements reached in bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Arab side.

Shevardnadze sees the need to push for further changes in Soviet Middle East policy and seems anxious to take advantage of the new situation created by the Gulf crisis to do so. If he succeeds, it could significantly assist American efforts to achieve prevail in the Gulf crisis and promote a more stable Middle East in its wake.

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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