

Keynote Address

Apr 29, 1990



In-Depth Reports

We have been living through a political earthquake. A year ago Erich Honecker was still heading East Germany, and people were talking about the solid infrastructure of the GDR. Milos Jakes was still ruling in Czechoslovakia, and it was said that the communist party had a strong system of control that blocked reform. But by the end of the year, the Berlin Wall was down, German reunification topped the European agenda, and Vaclav Havel was President of Czechoslovakia. The Soviet empire in Eastern Europe was liquidated more rapidly than any empire in the modern period. These are extraordinary events. Clearly the world is not going to be again as it has been for the last 40 years. The post- World War II era is over.

The Soviet Union remains a very strong power. All those missiles which were aimed at us and our friends in Europe are still aimed at us and our friends. While the Warsaw Pact has disintegrated, Soviet armies are weakened but are still very strong. What has changed is the Soviet will to expand, which was one of the essential qualities of the Cold War.

The aftershocks of this political earthquake are still being felt. One of them was felt in Managua with the inauguration of Violeta Chamorro, an event that would not have occurred without the events in Eastern Europe. Aftershocks are also being felt in the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

End of An Implacable Hostility

Most Americans have underestimated the importance of the Cold War and Soviet policies in structuring the conflict in the Middle East. Most people have not understood the importance of Moscow's implacable hostility to Israel in the last four decades. But in 1955 Khrushchev said, "We understand the aspirations of the Arab countries. At the same time the actions of Israel, which from the very first days of its existence began to threaten its neighbors and to pursue an unfriendly policy toward them, should be condemned. In case of war, all progressive mankind would back the Arabs."

The Soviets were strong, mobilized enemies of Israel early on, and they remained so until relatively recently. Soviet foreign policy has been active, not passive, during this whole period and its hostility toward Israel was manifested in a variety of ways. I am especially sensitive to the campaign in the various organizations of the United Nations, where the Soviets pioneered and strongly supported the Zionism-is-racism resolution. The Soviets sponsored that resolution in UNESCO and in the General Assembly. The Soviets were pushing that resolution as recently as 1985 at UN meetings in Nairobi. Even when the Arab nations were ready to abandon it, the Soviets pushed to keep the Zionism-is-racism resolution on the agenda of the Women's Conference.

It was the Soviets who, year after year, mobilized majorities in the United Nations in favor of resolutions which advocated the isolation -- diplomatic, economic, political, social and moral -- of Israel and worked hard to secure the passage of a resolution which would have rejected Israel's credentials in the UN General Assembly and other UN bodies.

It was the Soviets who spearheaded in the United Nations and elsewhere the mobilization of diplomats, businesses

and others in support of the economic boycott against Israel and who led the opposition to the Camp David Accords. Most seriously of all, the Soviets armed Israel's principal adversaries -- Iraq, Syria, Libya and Iran.

All of these aspects of Soviet policy have changed in the last year. I am told by colleagues inside the United Nations that Soviet representatives are not working as hard as they used to on matters concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict. On some, like the expulsion of Israel from the General Assembly, the Soviets have, in fact, abstained. On others, such as the acceptance of the PLO as a full member state, the Soviets have quietly played a rather helpful role behind the scenes. Further, the Soviet version of the Middle East peace conference has disappeared from the agenda.

There is no longer refuge for Abu Nidal in Eastern Europe. It is said that there is still some training for the PLO in the Soviet Union, but if this is accurate, it is certainly at a lower level than before. With regard to some other major war-making activities in the Middle East, the Soviets have been relatively passive. They have accepted the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the countries of Eastern Europe. What the new democracies in Eastern Europe do, they do, in effect, with the permission of the Soviet Union. Those countries are establishing diplomatic relations with Israel as well as terminating their support for terrorist groups. They are also working to upgrade trade with Israel, and they have diminished trade with some of the leading rejectionist states.

Alarm in the Rejectionist Camp

These changes have not gone unnoticed in the rejectionist states. In a recent speech President Assad of Syria said, "Brothers, let us see now how Israel has become the main beneficiary among all world nations from the international changes which have taken place. While Zionism was unwelcome and unable to engage in any activity in the socialist bloc countries on the basis that Zionism is a racist movement, we find that what is taking place today is to the contrary of all that. They have infiltrated into the news media of more than one socialist bloc country. Had anyone told us only ten years ago that Zionism and its upholders and supporters would attain the present position in the socialist bloc countries, we would have considered him to be unrealistic and unsound."

Assad attributes part of the blame for these events to the United States, though he concedes that the Soviets are making their own contribution. He is not the only one who is noticing that the events in the world have already had a major impact on the Middle East. Iraq's Saddam Hussein, a leading rejectionist, has been talking a good deal about the negative effects of detente, and he said on March 11th, "We, as Arabs, must stand firmly against the United States and the Soviet Union as far as the issue of Soviet Jewish immigration is concerned." He suggests in recent speeches that, "The Soviets, along with London and Washington are, in one way or another, helping the Zionist entity to become more dangerous than it used to be."

The Arab League's representative in Washington, Clovis Maksoud, said recently that he would not want the Palestinians to take the brunt of detente. "We do not want to be swamped adversely by detente," he said. "We are at a crossroads. Is there not something more that the Arab League and the Arab states and the Arab governments can do than just encourage the United States to do something?" Clearly, a lot of the people who have made the greatest contributions to disorder and conflict in the Middle East are feeling the aftershock of the changes in Eastern Europe and between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The State of Israel has been surrounded by hostility from almost the moment of its founding. The hostility has come from two sources: one, its own neighbors, spearheaded by the rejectionist states; and, two, the Soviet Union and the force of the Soviet bloc backing Israel's hostile neighbors. That combination has produced a very special kind of a threat which has created very special kinds of responsibilities for Israel's friends, including the United States.

Parts of that threat remain. There is Saddam Hussein, who has made unpleasant threats, and there is, of course, the PLO, which has most assuredly not renounced terrorism and not accepted the proposition that it should live in peace with Israel. The comments of PLO officials after the recent attack on the Israeli bus were particularly revealing.

Yasser Arafat himself suggested that somehow, as long as immigrants are arriving in Israel or settlements are being built, it is all right to attack buses. Or it is at least "understandable."

Threats to Israel and Moderate Arab States

I believe there is no solution in sight for the so-called Arab-Israeli conflict, but that Israel's situation has greatly improved; not because of anyone's working directly on the conflict, but because Israel's most powerful adversaries have changed their minds and are no longer mobilizing their resources against the Jewish state.

Where are we now that the Cold War has ended? Certain conclusions can be drawn about this situation. First, changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have significant and concrete consequences in the Middle East, positive from the perspective of Israel and also the moderate Arab states. These changes should continue.

Second, there clearly are some threats to all moderate governments in the area. As reluctant as moderate Arab states are to recognize it, they too are threatened by the same violence-prone extremists that threaten Israel. The most dangerous of these are the Islamic fundamentalists. Jordan is as threatened by the Islamic fundamentalists as Israel. Moreover, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are threatened by such terrorist groups as the PLO and the PFLP, who use violent means to pursue their goals. They are also threatened by the radical states Libya, Syria and Iraq.

Third, the United States has continuing permanent interests in the region -- in preserving friendly governments, in promoting democracy, in outlawing terrorism, in preserving the free flow of oil and other resources.

Fourth, the United States cannot solve the Arab-Israeli conflict any more than it can eliminate extremism. We cannot even free our own hostages. What can we do?

Sometimes problems are best solved by being left alone because people learn that they can live with conditions which they formerly believed unbearable. Problems can also sometimes be unexpectedly solved by changes in the parties. Something like this is slowly, incrementally happening in the Middle East. In addition to the formal peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, there is a de facto peace between Israel's other neighbors. Israel's enemies are becoming weaker. I am not pessimistic about peace in the Middle East, especially between Israel and its immediate neighbors. I am only pessimistic about the peace process.

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