

Soviets Can Play Key Role in Arab-Israeli Peace Bid

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The superpower summit meeting in the Mediterranean will no doubt be dominated by talk of Eastern Europe. But while in the neighborhood of the Middle East, President Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev should also take a few minutes to discuss Moscow's readiness to cooperate in advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process.

A stunning signal of Soviet interest in Middle East stability was sent last week by its ambassador to Syria, Aleksandr Zotov. In an interview, he strongly hinted that Soviet support for the Syrian military would soon be reduced. Zotov said Moscow's ability to continue providing Damascus with sophisticated weapons is constrained by Soviet economic difficulties and military cuts, as well as by Syria's inability to pay. Indeed, Damascus is in hock to the Soviets for about \$15 billion.

But financial considerations are not the only factor at work here. Zotov suggested that a reduction in arms supplies to Syria is also consistent with Soviet new thinking, with its emphasis on the peaceful resolution of regional conflicts. The ambassador warned that Syria must give up its goal of military parity with Israel and restructure its armed forces according to the principle of "reasonable defensive sufficiency." This is defined by Soviet leaders as a level of military power adequate to "inflict unacceptable losses" on an aggressor but incapable of launching a successful attack. This was by no means the first evidence of change in Soviet-Syrian relations. More than two years ago, Gorbachev bluntly told Syrian President Hafez Assad that any plans for a military solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict were completely unacceptable. And U.S. government data suggest he wasn't bluffing: Though Moscow recently sent Syria some new military assistance, including a limited number of sophisticated MIG-29 fighter aircraft and SU-24 bombers, the absolute level of arms to Damascus has dropped by more than 50 percent during Gorbachev's tenure.

Dramatic as these trends are, they appear to have largely escaped the notice of the Bush administration. When asked to comment on Zotov's interview, a State Department spokeswoman, Margaret Tutwiler, replied that the United States was still waiting for evidence that Soviet rhetoric was being translated into reality.

But if the United States is having trouble deciding whether significant changes are under way in ties between Moscow and Damascus, Syria is experiencing no such difficulty. Thus, without much success, Syrian officials have been seeking assurances from Moscow that the new thinking will not leave them at the mercy of Israel's military might.

At the same time, Assad has joined the ranks of international outcasts -- led by Cuba's Fidel Castro and Libya's Moammar Gadhafi -- expressing disdain for Gorbachev's focus on peaceful resolution of conflicts, claiming in one

speech that "force in today's world, just as in the past, is what determines rights."

These shifts in Moscow's relations with its most important Arab ally should not be discounted. With Soviet backing, Syria has for a decade posed the most credible military threat to Israel and the most effective obstacle to U.S. peace initiatives. A dramatic drop in the Kremlin's support therefore promises to reduce the likelihood of another Middle East war, increase Israel's security and improve the chances for a political resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

This is especially the case when viewed in the context of other fundamental shifts in Moscow's Middle East policy. The most well-known of these is the gradual but nonetheless impressive rapprochement with Israel.

Also, State Department officials reveal that Soviet talk of an international peace conference is now virtually non-existent. Instead, Moscow seems focused on finding a way to promote the U.S idea of an Israel-Palestinian dialogue. In short, the Kremlin has gone from actively seeking ways to obstruct U.S. peace efforts to looking for a way to sign on to them.

At the very least, these developments in Soviet policy warrant some personal attention from Bush. He needs to find out from Gorbachev just how far the Soviets are willing to go to help advance Arab-Israeli negotiations. And, who knows? With the peace process now bogged down by Israeli and PLO pettifogging, Gorbachev's answer may provide just the kind of jolt the peace process needs to survive.

John P. Hannah is deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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