

East Bloc and Israel

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

Oct 9, 1989

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

John Hannah is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Hungary recently became the first Warsaw Pact country to restore full diplomatic relations with Israel after having severed them during the 1967 Middle East war. Budapest's decision illustrated the dramatic changes within Hungary and focused attention on another issue: When will the Soviet Union follow suit?

After all, it was at Moscow's behest that Hungary, along with virtually every other communist country, broke its ties to Israel. Allegedly, the action was precipitated by Soviet outrage over Israel's victory in the Six Day War and its conquest of Arab territories. In truth, the step was taken out of a mixture of fear and opportunism: fear of Arab anger resulting from the USSR's inability to prevent their humiliating defeat, and opportunism stemming from a calculation that shunning Israel would strengthen Moscow's position in the Arab world while undermining that of Israel's patron, the United States.

Whatever short-term benefits the Soviets reaped from the decision, the long-term costs have been significant. Lacking a relationship with Israel, Moscow locked itself out of a role in regional diplomacy. Israel, understandably, saw the Soviets as incapable of acting as good-faith mediators, while those Arab nations interested in peace, like Egypt, realized that the US was the only power capable of persuading Israel to exchange land won in the 1967 war for peace. As a result, Washington has monopolized the peace process for the past two decades. Only with the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev have things begun to change. Gorbachev has admitted that the absence of a Soviet relationship with Israel is "abnormal," while his closest advisers privately acknowledge that the decision to break relations was shortsighted.

In response, Gorbachev has taken a number of steps over the past four years to rectify the mistake, initiating a genuine thaw in Soviet-Israeli relations. Politically, each country now maintains a permanent low-level diplomatic presence in the other's capital, periodic meetings between their foreign ministers have become routine, and emigration levels for Soviet Jews is approaching an all-time high. Culturally, the number of exchanges has flourished, crowned recently by the Bolshoi Ballet's Israeli premiere. And economically, the first Soviet-Israeli joint ventures are under way.

Outside the sphere of bilateral relations, Moscow has taken additional steps deemed positive by Israel. The Soviets have been at the forefront of efforts to convince the Palestine Liberation Organization to moderate its policies, while a political chill has descended upon Soviet relations with the most radical Arab states. This includes Syria, Moscow's closest ally in the region and the country that poses the most immediate military threat to Israel. Soviet arms transfers to Syria have been on the decline, and Moscow's ambassador to Damascus recently announced that further

reductions were likely.

All these positive steps have led analysts to predict the imminent restoration of full diplomatic relations between the USSR and Israel. But Moscow has balked. Initially, this hesitancy was explained away in light of the USSR's need to adequately prepare its Arab friends. Today, however, this excuse sounds increasingly lame. Every country in the region now expects Soviet-Israeli ties to be resumed. Indeed, most Arab leaders acknowledge that the Soviets should do so, if only to increase their ability to pressure Israel to make concessions in the peace process.

In public, Moscow claims that relations can be restored as soon as Israel accepts the Soviet demand for an international peace conference. But withholding normal relations until Israel acquiesces to Moscow's procedural ultimatum is viewed by Israelis not as a genuine offer of reconciliation, but as a crude attempt to enhance Moscow's role and influence in the region.

If Gorbachev is not careful, the goodwill he has generated with Israel could dissipate as anticipation turns to disillusionment. If a small power like Hungary, with all its difficulties, is willing to suffer Arab criticism to reestablish relations with Israel, no less should be expected of the Soviet Union, a superpower that claims responsibility for ensuring international peace and stability.

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

Christian Science Monitor

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

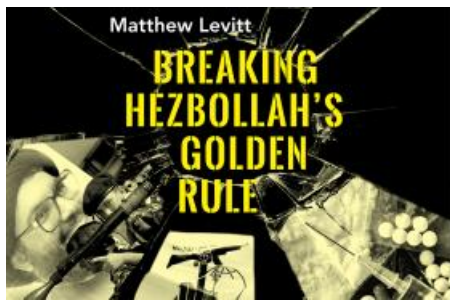
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

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



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)