

Recapturing U.S. Initiative in the Mideast

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

Mar 15, 1989

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

John Hannah is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's recent trip to the Middle East demonstrates conclusively that the Soviet Union plans to be a major player in the region's diplomacy. The United States needs to find out whether Moscow intends to be a peacemaker as well.

To do so, Washington must begin to seize the diplomatic offensive. Following last week's get-acquainted session with Mr. Shevardnadze in Vienna, Secretary of State James Baker should start confronting the Soviets with concrete proposals testing their willingness to help resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. An active strategy will ensure that the Soviets are responding to the US's Mideast agenda, rather than vice-versa.

The need for a more assertive US approach has been heightened by Mr. Shevardnadze's wide-ranging tour. For more than 20 years, Moscow's Middle East repertoire was limited to arming a small number of radical troublemakers and trying to ostracize Israel. In this context, Shevardnadze's high-level discussions with all the participants in the Arab-Israeli conflict represented something of a coup for Soviet diplomacy.

This is the case even though no tangible headway was made in bringing about negotiations. Indeed, as US officials point out, Moscow's chief diplomat failed to offer a single new proposal for overcoming the obstacles that prevent peace talks from commencing.

However, the fact that Shevardnadze's trip was more symbolism than substance does not negate its importance. The recognition that Israel's security concerns are no less central to a stable peace than Palestinian aspirations - a theme echoed in all of Shevardnadze's public statements - marks a significant modification in Soviet rhetoric. And Moscow's willingness to rebuke Syrian militarism, temper Palestine Liberation Organization rejectionism, and establish a normal working dialogue with Jerusalem suggests there is more to the change than just words.

These promising shifts in policy have created a perception, especially among America's European and Arab friends, that the USSR must be included in any peace talks. Even Israel's skeptical foreign minister, Moshe Arens, has spoken in favor of potential Soviet participation.

All this suggests that it would be neither good politics nor good policy for the US simply to focus on the negative goal of limiting Moscow's Mideast role. Rather, as Mr. Baker hinted in his meeting with Shevardnadze, the US must develop an agenda that actively tests the Soviets' desire to be peacemakers.

To date, Soviet proposals have not diverged from the Arab consensus, calling for an international peace conference and the creation of an independent Palestinian state, both nonstarters for Israel. If Moscow is serious about being an

honest broker, Washington should insist that it make the tough policy decisions required to help bridge the gaps between Israel and its neighbors -- even if it means crossing swords with their closest allies in Syria and the PLO.

In particular, is the USSR ready to support the US concept of confidence-building measures between Israel and the Palestinians as a necessary prelude to successful negotiations on a final settlement? What kind of actions is Moscow willing to encourage? A temporary cease-fire to the uprising in the West Bank and Gaza? Palestinian elections that lead to a period of self-government, but not immediate independence?

Are the Soviets prepared to acknowledge that under the terms of any stable solution, Israel may need to retain sovereignty over parts of the West Bank in order to avoid the territorial vulnerability that invited Arab aggression in 1967? Is Moscow willing to balance its call for an independent Palestinian state with a proposal that that state be demilitarized and confederated with Jordan?

Finally, what assurances can the Soviets give Israel that an international conference will not degenerate into a tribunal whose purpose isn't to facilitate direct negotiations, but rather to isolate and pressure Israel? Is Moscow willing to help solve the problem of Palestinian representation in negotiations, perhaps by supporting a delegation that includes individuals aligned with the PLO but not those with Israeli blood on their hands?

If the Soviets are genuine about moving the peace process forward, they will eventually have to give up their traditional boilerplate and begin seriously to address precisely these issues. As the US can attest, trying to forge compromise positions on such controversial questions is a thankless task, satisfying no one and antagonizing everyone. But that, after all, is the price a true mediator must be willing to pay. It is a reasonable standard to which Secretary Baker should hold the Soviets and one that Moscow may be increasingly willing to meet.

John P. Hannah is a fellow in Soviet affairs at 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

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



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)