

# Stop Coddling Soviet "Peacemakers"

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**A**s the Moscow summit approaches, and as the prospects for his Arab- Israeli peace initiative grow increasingly dim, the time has come for Secretary of State George Shultz to seize the diplomatic high road and publicly challenge the Soviet Union to put up or shut up on the question of Middle East peace.

For nearly three months, Shultz has used quiet diplomacy in an attempt to persuade Moscow to sign on to his peace proposal. From the plan's inception, with its controversial provision for Soviet participation in an international conference, Shultz has sought to take Moscow's interests into account. Indeed, he has gone out of his way to consult the Soviets and engage them in a cooperative effort to get Mideast negotiations started.

In reply, Moscow has consistently rebuked the secretary. While not rejecting the Shultz plan outright, the Soviets have publicly targeted it for repeated criticism, on various occasions deriding it as unbalanced, devious and even "anti-Arab."

Specifically, Soviet media have dismissed Shultz's idea for an international conference that only serves as an opening to direct negotiations between Israel and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. Toeing the Arab line, Moscow insists on PLO participation as an independent delegation in an "authoritative" conference that is empowered to make binding decisions.

Confronted with such clear Soviet opposition, Shultz has had to acknowledge that sharp differences do exist between the U.S. and Soviet concepts of a conference. At the same time, he has consistently praised the Soviets for their willingness to engage in serious discussions of his plan, emphasized the fact that Moscow has yet to explicitly reject it and promised to continue his effort to win Soviet backing.

Whatever their aim, the practical effect of these efforts at quiet diplomacy has been to grant the Soviets a free lunch. On the one hand, Shultz's initiative provides Moscow with its long-coveted role in the peace process; after 15 years of exclusion from the Mideast's main diplomatic game, the Soviets are once again central players. On the other hand, Shultz's reticence to publicly criticize the Soviets leaves them free to stick to their obstructionist positions and attack the U.S. plan, all the while scoring propaganda points with the Arabs. In effect, Moscow is enjoying the full benefits of a heightened political status at no additional cost.

If playing to Moscow's diplomatic sensitivities could be justified at first in the hope that the Soviets would be helpful in achieving a negotiating breakthrough, that time has long since passed. Moscow has been anything but helpful; along with opposition from Israel and the Arabs, the Soviet Union's uncooperative stance toward the Shultz plan has

rendered the peace process moribund, unlikely to be resurrected until after this November's elections in Israel and the U.S.

At this point, the only question remaining for Shultz is what legacy he will bequeath to his successors in the Arab-Israeli arena. Will he only leave behind the wreckage of another failed American initiative, whose most notable feature was the reinjection of Soviet influence into the peace process? Or can something more positive be salvaged?

The time has come for Shultz to engage in some straight talk. Soviet opposition has been a primary obstacle to his plan and the secretary should now say so-publicly. Tactfully, but forcefully, Shultz should decry Moscow's incessant parroting of the Arab position, and challenge the Soviets to demonstrate their bona fides as a mediator by doing what America has already done: propose a plan that fully satisfies the maximum demands of neither Israel nor the Arabs, but instead requires both parties to make important compromises in the interest of peace. And if the Soviets are at a loss as to where to start, Shultz might propose that they begin by formalizing the suggestion Mikhail Gorbachev put to Yasser Arafat last month in Moscow: The Arabs should unequivocally and unconditionally recognize Israel's right to exist within secure borders.

At a minimum, openly confronting the Soviets will undermine Moscow's pretense that the U.S. is the most important hindrance to Mideast peace. It will move the Reagan administration back on the offensive in the battle for Western public opinion, a battle it has all too often ceded to Gorbachev since his rise to power. Finally, putting Moscow on the spot to play a constructive role in the peace process will set the right tone for the next administration, serving as an important reminder that to date the failure of superpower cooperation in the Arab-Israeli arena has been less a function of deficiencies in Washington's policies than Moscow's.

In the past, Gorbachev has shown himself to be most forthcoming when publicly challenged by the U.S. This was certainly the case in the recent negotiations on the INF treaty and Afghanistan. With nothing to lose, now is the time for America to put him to the test in the Middle East.

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