

Moscow's Middle East Maneuver

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

Sep 20, 1986

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

John Hannah is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

When the Soviets proposed to meet Israeli representatives for the first time in 19 years, some observers hailed the announcement as a signal that Moscow had finally gotten serious about Middle East peace. With the abrupt breakdown of those talks in Helsinki on Aug. 18, however, that analysis has proven to be little more than wishful thinking.

A close look at the nature, timing and denouement of the Russian demarche to Israel shows it represented no fundamental softening of the Soviet's position on Mideast peace. Rather, the Kremlin's overture to Jerusalem was primarily a tactical ploy to enhance Russian interests at the expense of the United States.

In the process, Moscow hoped to improve its image in Washington in preparation for the real drama over arms limitation talks this fall. (Since then, of course, Moscow's image has been damaged by the arrest of American correspondent Nicholas Daniloff.)

The aborted Helsinki meeting was the latest in a nine-month series of Soviet foreign policy initiatives--many of them directed at American allies -- aimed at securing an arms control agreement at the next Reagan-Gorbachev summit.

Moscow believed that a high-profile but low-level diplomatic initiative to Israel -- with its potential implications for the restoration of relations and the release of Soviet Jews -- might be enough to entice Israel's American supporters to be less vigilant in their opposition to improved U.S.-Soviet relations. At first glance, consular talks seemed to the Soviets to be a relatively small price to pay if it meant a step toward achieving this objective.

At the same time, the Soviet initiative was designed to bolster Moscow's claim to a role in Middle East diplomacy that Washington and Jerusalem have denied it for years. Moscow has long sought to convene an international conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Its participation in such a conference would break Washington's 12-year monopoly on the peace process, restore the Soviets' diplomatic prestige in the region and provide Mikhail Gorbachev with the major success his foreign policy has sorely lacked.

But Israel's demand that the Soviets restore full-scale diplomatic relations, severed during the 1967 war, has been the prime stumbling block to Moscow's participation in that conference. Initiating consular talks seemed to provide the Kremlin with the means of probing this Israeli demand without acceding to it. In so doing, the Soviets could appear serious about peace without investing the kind of political resources necessary to actually contribute to it.

In the past, the Soviet Union has been deterred from taking this step for fear of antagonizing Arab opinion. But after observing the surprisingly subdued Arab reaction to the recent summit meeting between Israeli Prime Minister

Shimon Peres and King Hassan of Morocco, the Soviets must have calculated that the costs of limited discussions with Jerusalem were not prohibitive.

Yet, the Soviets broke off the talks after only 90 minutes. What happened?

In its haste to score diplomatic points, Moscow apparently misjudged its ability to limit the talks to apolitical consular affairs. Israel insisted on pushing the explosive issue of Soviet Jewry to the top of the agenda. For Moscow, talking to Jerusalem suddenly threatened to become a very expensive proposition, with the highest price to be paid in strained relations with its main Arab ally, Syria. Although Damascus never publicly protested the Helsinki meeting, Soviet statements immediately before the discussions revealed an extreme sensitivity to Arab concerns about Jewish emigration and a Middle East peace settlement. So it was almost inevitable that the Soviets would sound the retreat when pressed by Israel to demonstrate their seriousness about improving relations.

Ninety minutes of talk may point to a new flexibility in Soviet diplomacy, but it cannot wipe out 19 years of intransigence. Before the Soviets can be considered peacemakers, they must take steps that demonstrate a genuine commitment to Mideast peace. At a minimum, these should include restored relations with Israel, increases in Jewish emigration, restraint in supporting radical Arab states and movements and a more balanced regional outlook that does not identify totally with the Arab negotiating position.

By these standards, the Helsinki talks are proof only that Gorbachev is no more willing or able to pay the necessary price than his predecessors were. To the extent this remains true, Israel and the United States must remain vigilant in their opposition to a substantial Soviet role in Mideast diplomacy.

John P. Hannah, a Ph.D. candidate in political science at Stanford University, is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

Chicago Tribune

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

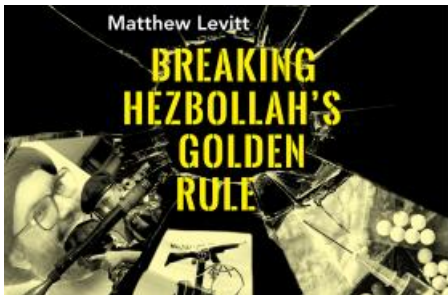
Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

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)