

## *The Soviet Union and Mideast Diplomacy*

### **Soviets at the table: what's in it for the US?**

*by Harvey Sicherman*

As President Reagan prepares for his summit with Soviet leader Gorbachev, he faces a dilemma.

For almost a dozen years, through both Democratic and Republican administrations, the USSR has been excluded from the peace process in the Middle East. Now, however, both Israel and Jordan -- the putative "partners" to the Reagan Plan of September 1, 1982 -- have pronounced favorably on an international conference with Soviet participation.

The President must therefore consider the peculiar possibility that, aside from a "framework on arms control," the major subject of his summit rendezvous may be -- dare we say it -- a new Soviet-American understanding on the Middle East.

To evaluate this sudden turn of events, we must answer three questions:

First, has the American policy of excluding Moscow failed? Yes, largely as a result of our debacle in Lebanon.

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### **Putting Moscow to the test**

*by Dennis Ross*

The current hope for a breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli peace process differs from previous such episodes because it rests at least in part on the idea of Soviet involvement.

By moving to improve ties with Israel and reaching out to the conservative Arab regimes, the Gorbachev leadership is making it clear that it is determined to get back into the diplomatic game in the Middle East and end its exclusion of the last 11 years. What makes this longstanding Soviet desire important now is Prime Minister Peres' willingness to contemplate a Soviet role and King Hussein's insistence on it.

The clock is ticking for Peres. In 11 months, he will have to relinquish the premiership to Likud's Yitzhak Shamir. If he can make significant progress now, he can either force his Likud successors to adhere to his basic approach to peace, or, more likely, force new elections that offer him a much clearer mandate on which to negotiate.

To do either, however, he needs an Arab partner -- and Peres has long been an advocate of the Jordanian option. He is banking on Hussein's desires for peace and the King's own fear of a Likud leadership (in which Ariel Sharon is a major force).

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### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

*As the US-USSR summit approaches, the Middle East has suddenly appeared on the agenda. For the first time, the Reagan Administration must deal with the unpleasant prospect of recreating a Soviet role in the Mideast peace process through an international conference.*

*This premier issue of Policy Options focuses on the Soviet role in Mideast diplomacy.*

*Addressing that topic is Dennis Ross, executive director of the Berkeley-Stanford Program on Soviet International Behavior, and Harvey Sicherman, consultant to the Secretary of the Navy and former special assistant to Secretary of State Alexander Haig. Articles on the past record of Soviet and Syrian involvement in the peace process have been prepared by the Institute's research staff.*

*The overall conclusion is clear -- the only constructive Soviet role is one of benign approval from the sidelines. It is highly unlikely, however, that the Soviet Union will consent to play such a role.*

*In that case, Secretary Shultz recently expressed it best: "The way to go in the Middle East is not a big conference but direct negotiations between Israel and Israel's neighbors."*

*--- Martin Indyk*



## ... What's in it for the US? / by Harvey Sicherman

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Syria's emergence as the victor in Lebanon and the Soviet role in rebuilding and enlarging Syrian military capabilities (especially after the debacle of June 1982) have left indelible impressions on the minds of Middle Eastern leaders. That the United States must now consider Soviet participation in an international conference reinforces the perception created by the Lebanese experience that Washington alone cannot protect pro-American Arab regimes from their more radical neighbors.

Second, why are Jordan and Israel interested in Soviet participation? In Jordan's case, the King's insistence on an international conference with Soviet participation shows his reading of the lessons of Lebanon. He views the Soviets as the check on the Syrians that the US cannot provide.

As for the Israelis, Prime Minister Peres sees King Hussein's emphasis on "process" -- such as the conference -- as the critical opening which will lead to the long-desired direct negotiations with Jordan. Peres hopes that by yielding to Hussein's wishes on the international conference he can induce the King to proceed, perhaps even without the PLO. That the Soviets may complicate a final agreement is insignificant to Peres if the process never begins at all.

Third, what's in it for the US? Or, more precisely, how can we be sure that Soviet participation will aid the peace process?

To answer this question, we must go beyond the immediate Soviet stake in joining the diplomatic process to probe longer-term Soviet interests. Ultimately, what brings the US and the USSR together in any regional crisis is the fear that their local allies may lead them into a disastrous confrontation.

This fear encourages a sense of restraint but only if each superpower knows that the other will resist the compromise of its vital interests. And a sense of restraint in and of itself need not result in peace. Its more likely consequence is controlled conflict.

In the Middle East, American vital interests are well-known and fairly precise: the survival of Israel, access to oil and communications, denial of Soviet (or anti-Western) supremacy.

assistance, the Soviet stake in conflict -- albeit controlled -- is considerable, while the Soviet interest in peace would be much less so.

Nothing in the current situation would seem to alter the longstanding US judgment that the Soviets want to control conflict in the Middle East but are unwilling (and, in Syria's case, probably unable) to help in an Arab-Israeli settlement that would serve Western interests. What Moscow does want and has sought assiduously is an American-Soviet agreement on the details of a settlement -- a condominium approach which legitimizes the Soviet role in the Mideast and implies the eventual "delivery" of their local clients. But, this process will be richly productive of US-Israeli tensions long

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" ... the utility to the United States of an international conference diminishes in direct proportion to Soviet participation ..."

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Soviet interests, aside from the oft-mentioned fear of confrontation, are much harder to sketch. They relate mostly to making trouble for the West. For this reason, the Soviets have found their influence more marked in those countries that also seek to damage Western interests. And because armaments are Moscow's most effective

before it yields a "just and lasting settlement," a Soviet betrayal of Syria or even abandonment of the longstanding Soviet support for Arafat's PLO.

Thus, the utility to the United States of an international conference diminishes in direct proportion to Soviet participation in the actual process of

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Peres also seems to accept King Hussein's argument that he cannot enter into negotiations with Israel unless he has Arab sanction and the cover of an international conference where the Soviets can shield him from the Syrians and their radical clients.

While the Prime Minister cannot help the King on the issue of PLO involvement in the negotiations, he can help him on that of Soviet involvement. That is why he has softened the Israeli position on an international conference, insisting only that the Soviets restore diplomatic relations with Israel.

Recent diplomatic feelers, including the exchange of Polish-Israeli interest sections and the possibility that the Hungarians and other East Europeans may shortly follow suit, may be the start of a process that will lead to just that, especially with the Jordanians encouraging the Soviets to restore relations with Israel.

The key question for the US, then, is whether Soviet involvement can be made constructive and not destructive to the peace process and to the broader American interests in the region. The answer to such a question must be a tentative one.

On the one hand, the record of Soviet behavior suggests that Moscow is determined to build its own position in the region and to undermine all trappings of US presence and influence there, and that "controlled" tension serves this Soviet interest. The Soviets have supported

(with open and covert means) the most radical elements in the region with an eye to undermining moderate regimes or pressuring them to be responsive to Soviet interests.

On the other hand, some argue that the Soviets have never really been put to the test in the Middle East, that our efforts of exclusion have given them little incentive to be cooperative. Now they are reaching out to the moderate regimes and they, too, are experiencing the consequences of extremism making them, so the argument goes, more aware of the dangers of the growth of such forces.

Inclusion in the peace process permits the Soviets to achieve a certain status in the region and gives them a stake in regional cooperation. Inclusion would be a boon to Gorbachev -- demonstrating his ability to overcome US containment and secure the USSR's rightful place in an area of strategic importance.

This argument would be more compelling if one began to see certain concrete changes in Moscow's regional behavior. First, if the Soviets are truly committed to peace and stability, they should stop providing material assistance and training to those who reject peace. Here I am referring to the Libyans and a whole host of radical Palestinian groups that receive overt and covert Soviet support.

Second, while the Soviets do not control the Syrians

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## On Damascus

*Although Syria is the Soviet Union's closest ally in the Middle East, Hafiz al-Asad zealously guards his independence when it comes to peacemaking in the region. If Mikhail Gorbachev manages to gain a Soviet seat at an international conference, Asad is sure to insist on one too -- but only on his own terms.*

*For more than a decade, Asad has scoffed at any peace initiative that precludes a Syrian veto, protected under the rubric of a "united Arab stand" and the taboo against bilateral deals with Israel.*

*Syria's basic position has not changed. But as the focus of diplomacy has shifted in recent weeks to the convening of an international conference, Damascus has modified its stance on several key issues to take maximum advantage of the chance to gain control of the process.*

*First, as tensions grew between Jordan and the PLO, Damascus decided to warm up relations with Amman. The deep desire to jettison Arafat from Mideast diplomacy, together with the chance to prevent a bilateral Jordan-Israel deal, convinced Asad to make several personal overtures to King Hussein.*

*While still labeling the February 11 Jordan-PLO accord "treasonous," for example, Syria does not seek the King's humiliation by demanding the formal abrogation of the agreement.*

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from page three and some of the radical Islamic groups under Syrian protection in the Bekaa valley, they have the ability to influence and temper Syrian behavior. They have proven this by getting the Syrians to cease the onslaught on Tripoli. If the Soviets claim that they can't alter Syrian behavior, then we ought to rethink the value of including them -- and make the point strongly to Hussein that the Soviets offer no protection from the Syrians, and are, in reality, neither a "spoiler" nor a "deliverer" of peace.

Third, if the Soviets want to be a mediator, they have to act like one -- i.e., they cannot identify totally with the Arab negotiating position. Both at Camp David and in the Reagan Plan, we have adopted postures quite different from Israeli negotiating positions; the Soviets must show a similar independence, both to prove that they can be an arbiter and also to demonstrate that they can be an

honest guarantor of any settlement.

It makes sense to require these kind of changes in Soviet behavior before cutting them into the process. It also makes sense to tell the Jordanians and the Israelis that our interests (and theirs) require demonstrations of Soviet earnestness so that we avoid more troublesome problems down the road.

Obviously, Soviet pride would preclude a positive response if we posed our own conditions publicly. We can just as well pose them privately, but we should not accept private assurances in response. The truest measure of Soviet intentions will be deeds, not words.

If the Soviets are unable or unwilling to take the kinds of steps that we believe are necessary to signal their commitment to peace, the advantages to be gained by inviting them in will soon prove ephemeral, and they will then be in all the better position to disrupt the overall process. ~~W~~

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## On Geneva

*In 1973, the Soviet Union went to the Geneva Conference as co-chairman with the United States, expecting to play an equal role in brokering any deal.*

*Instead, Henry Kissinger succeeded in shifting the scene of the real diplomatic action to his own shuttle missions, leaving Geneva an empty shell and leaving the Soviets in the embarrassing position of having helped to legitimize the very process from which they were excluded.*

*Kissinger was able to pull this off mainly because Egypt's President Sadat came to realize that -- as Kissinger put it -- while the USSR could supply arms, only the US could bring forth Israeli concessions. The US, in Sadat's words, held 99% of the cards.*

*The fact that the 1973 war left Israeli forces entangled with Egyptian and Syrian forces also imparted an urgency to the need for disengagement agreements, which the local states knew could be achieved more easily through American mediation than at Geneva.*

*Jordan, too, had no use for the Geneva setting, because it feared that the question of Palestinian representation would be resolved there to its disadvantage. Given this unanimity among the parties, the Soviets could do little*

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### The Washington Institute Policy Papers

- 1: Dennis Ross, "Acting with Caution: Middle East Policy Planning for the Second Reagan Administration"
- 2: Ze'ev Schiff, "Israel's Eroding Edge in the Middle East Military Balance"
- 3: Hirsh Goodman, "Israel's Strategic Reality: The Impact of the Arms Race" (forthcoming)
- 4: Barry Rubin, "The PLO's Intractable Foreign Policy" (forthcoming)
- 5: Robert Satloff, "Domestic Instability in the Kingdom of Jordan" (forthcoming)

## Can the Soviets 'deliver'?

*Implicit in King Hussein's calls for negotiations under international auspices is the assumption that if the Soviet Union is dealt into the peace process it will be able to use its influence to secure Syrian cooperation.*

*A review of recent multilateral negotiations in the Middle East, however, shows that, in fact, the Soviet Union has repeatedly failed to "deliver" its client states.*

### Case 1

*In 1969, bilateral talks between the United States and the Soviet Union resulted in a compromise proposal for an Egyptian-Israeli settlement.*

*Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko then shuttled to Cairo, where he sought in vain Gamal abd-al-Nasser's acceptance of the settlement package. The Soviets not only acquiesced in Nasser's obduracy, they soon increased their military assistance in support of Egypt's war of attrition.*

### Case 2

*The Soviets were no more effective following the Moscow summit in May 1972, which produced a set of working principles for freezing the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Soviets believed that another Arab-Israeli war would be detrimental to their interests.*

*To pressure Egypt away from the path of all-out warfare, the Soviets stalled on delivery of advanced weapons. But instead of serving to modify Sadat's*

*plan, Soviet pressure led him to expel them from Egypt.*

*By February 1973, Sadat's efforts to end-run Soviet policy paid off, Moscow resumed arms shipments that made the Yom Kippur War possible.*

### Case 3

*During the preparatory stages of the 1973 Geneva Conference, the Soviets agreed to use their influence in Damascus to bring Syria to the negotiations.*

*Geneva offered the Soviets an opportunity to place themselves in the middle of negotiations and Moscow sought to establish the conference as a permanent negotiating framework.*

*Prior to the convening of the conference, the Soviets repeatedly assured the United States that the Syrians would participate.*

*Despite these assurances and Soviet co-chairmanship of the conference, the Syrians refused to come to Geneva.*

### Case 4

*In 1977, the Carter Administration sought a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict via the reconvening of the Geneva international conference. Soviet involvement was considered essential for securing Syrian participation.*

*To reconvene the conference, Carter accepted a Soviet initiative for a joint statement of principles. The October 1, 1977 communique included a commitment that both superpowers would use their*

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## ... Sicherman

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making peace, simply because the Soviets have far less of an interest in peace. Moscow, then, is left with only one constructive Soviet role, that of helping to initiate the conference and then standing on the sidelines as the US brokers an agreement among the local parties. This depends in the end on the King of Jordan, and whether -- like Sadat -- he is determined to reach a separate deal with Israel.

The signs are not propitious, for if Jordan needs a Soviet umbrella at the beginning of negotiations with Israel it will probably insist on it throughout and certainly at the conclusion.

Yet, only upon the intriguing though improbable possibility of Jordan "becoming another Egypt" hangs the virtue of the international conference. ~~W~~

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*influence with local parties to help open the conference by year's end.*

*Moscow failed to deliver on this commitment. Asad simply refused to respond to Carter's efforts and the USSR was either unwilling or unable to change his mind.*

*The problem, then, lies not so much in the Soviet Union's unwillingness to modify its own declaratory position on the Arab-Israeli conflict as in its inability to moderate the behavior of its clients.*

--- Leonard Schoen

## ... On Damascus

Second, Syria has provided Jordan with ample room to distance itself from the PLO. In a recent interview, the foreign minister said "there is no way to compare [Syrian] dealings with Jordan and those with the PLO, and Yasir Arafat."

Third, Syria has also modified its rhetoric on the goals of an international conference.

For example, government statements no longer employ the maximalist language of the joint communique issued by the Syrian, Libyan and Iranian foreign ministers at their August meeting, which restored the demand for the establishment of a Palestinian state on "the entire Palestinian territory."

Such changes in tone do not mark a fundamental shift away from Asad's opposition to any bilateral Jordanian deal with Israel.

Indeed, in the recent Jordan-Syria accord, Damascus managed to gain Amman's agreement to three pillars of Syrian policy:

- refusal to negotiate outside the 1982 Fes plan,
- rejection of "partial and unilateral settlements"
- and adherence to the principles of Arab unanimity.

But the change in tone does indicate that Damascus views the current diplomatic activity seriously enough to take steps to insure its interests are well-represented if an international conference were convened.

So, the US will have to tangle with a Syrian regime that will demand not only a seat at the table but a veto over the process.

--- Robert Satloff

## ... On Geneva

to obstruct the process beyond voicing objections, which they did.

What are the chances that the 1973 scenario can be repeated now? That an international conference could serve merely as a hollow shell, behind which the US brokers a peace agreement between Jordan and Israel?

It seems unlikely that the Soviet Union, with its new leader and its newly invigorated diplomacy, would be willing to help structure a process that gave it a ceremonial role, but not a substantive one.

Moreover, it is not clear that the parties wish to restrict the Soviet role in that way. Jordan and Israel each have things they want from the Soviets now.

One wants a lever against Syria and the US; the other wants renewed diplomatic relations and freedom for Soviet Jewry.

Perhaps both hope that somehow they can get these things without paying the price of significantly enhancing Soviet influence in the region (a price that may accrue even if the peace process ultimately fails). But both are also wandering onto a slippery slope.

Kissinger escaped from this slope once, but to expect to do so a second time is to tempt fate.

--- Michael Lewis

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**In the next issue of  
Policy Options:  
Palestinians and the  
Peace Process**

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