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SOVIET POLICY TOWARD ISRAEL'S NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT IN THE GORBACHEV ERA

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Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur of this year, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir became the first Israeli head of government to visit a Soviet bloc country other than Romania since 1948. He was received with great cordiality by his Hungarian counterpart. His visit was the latest step in the apparent rapprochement between Israel and the Soviet bloc since the establishment of Israel's national unity government in September 1984.

That event and the rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in March 1985 have had a major impact on Middle East politics. The Peres-headed national unity government quickly became involved in efforts to resuscitate the peace process, while Gorbachev soon displayed a far greater degree of flexibility in his Middle East position than had his predecessors. Given the propensities of the two leaders, it is not surprising that the USSR and Israel intensified their diplomatic contacts in the period following Gorbachev's rise to power, and Soviet efforts to improve ties with Israel continued even after Peres stepped down as prime minister.

Although Moscow broke diplomatic relations with Israel during the June 1967 war, Moscow continues to support Israel's right to exist both for fear of unduly alienating the United States with whom the Russians desire additional strategic arms agreements and improved trade relations, and because Israel serves as a convenient rallying point for potentially anti-Western forces in the Arab world.

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Looking at Moscow's Middle East Policy

Observers of Soviet policy in the Middle East are generally divided into three schools of thought as to Soviet goals in the region. While all agree that the Soviet Union wants to be considered a major factor in Middle Eastern affairs, if only because of the USSR's propinquity to the region, they differ on the ultimate Soviet goal in the area. The "offensive-successful" school, looking primarily at Soviet military power in the region, argues not only that Moscow is offensively inclined and seeks to oust the West from the oil resources and strategic communication routes of the Middle East, but also that it has been quite successful in exercising influence, primarily by intimidating the states of the region. According to this school, not only should the USSR not be invited to participate in peace-making efforts in the region, but it must be confronted wherever possible to prevent the Middle East from falling into Soviet hands.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the "defensive-unsuccessful school," which argues that Moscow is basically defensively-oriented in the Middle East, given higher priorities elsewhere in the world, and regional problems which the USSR finds unmanageable and that severely curtail Soviet influence. Given this situation, it is argued, Moscow can be invited to participate in peace-making efforts because it wants a stable situation along its southern periphery.

The third school of thought, to which this author belongs, may be termed the "offensive-unsuccessful school." This school argues that while Moscow is essentially offensively-oriented in the Middle East and will seize upon virtually any opportunity to weaken Western, particularly American influence there, the USSR has been basically unsuccessful in extending its influence in the region because of the independence of the local actors and their resistance to Soviet control. This school of thought, looking at the offensive orientation of the USSR in the region, is wary of inviting Moscow to participate in any peace-making efforts, arguing that while there might well be tactical compromises by the USSR in varying situations, the USSR cannot be trusted to fulfill its part of any agreement in the long term.

Soviet Tactics Bring Mixed Results

In its efforts to weaken and ultimately eliminate Western influence from the Middle East, particularly from the Arab world, while promoting Soviet influence, the Soviet leadership from Khrushchev to Gorbachev has employed a number of tactics. First and foremost has been the supply of military aid to its regional clients, especially for use against Israel. Next in importance comes economic aid; the Aswan Dam in Egypt and the Euphrates Dam in Syria are prominent examples of Soviet economic assistance, although each project has had serious problems. In recent years Moscow has also sought to solidify its influence through the conclusion of long-term friendship and cooperation treaties such as the ones concluded with Egypt (1971), Iraq (1972), Somalia (1974), Ethiopia (1978), Afghanistan (1978), South Yemen (1979), Syria (1980), and North Yemen (1984), although subsequent repudiation of the treaties by Egypt (1976) and Somalia (1977) indicate that this has not always been a successful tactic.

Moscow has also attempted to exploit both the lingering memories of Western colonialism and Western threats against Arab oil producers. The Russians have offered the Arabs diplomatic support at such international forums as the United Nations and the Geneva Conference on an Arab-Israeli peace settlement.

While the USSR has used all these tactics, with greater or lesser success over the last two decades, it has also run into serious problems in its quest for influence in the Middle East. The numerous inter-Arab and regional conflicts (Syria-Iraq; North Yemen-South Yemen; Ethiopia-Somalia; Algeria-Morocco; Iran-Iraq, etc.) have usually meant that when the USSR has favored one party, it has alienated the

other, sometimes driving it over to the West. Second, the existence of Middle Eastern Communist parties has proven to be a handicap for the USSR, as Communist activities have, on occasion, caused a sharp deterioration in relations between Moscow and the country in which the Communist party has operated. The Communist-supported coup d'etat in Sudan in 1971, Communist efforts to organize cells in the Iraqi army in the mid and late 1970s, and the activities of the Tudah party in Khomeini's Iran, are recent examples of this problem.

Third, the wealth which flowed to much of the Arab world since the quadrupling of oil prices in late 1973 has enabled the Arabs to buy quality technology from the West and Japan, and this has helped weaken the economic bond between the USSR and a number of Arab states such as Iraq and Syria. Fourth, since 1967 and particularly since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Islam has been resurgent throughout the Arab world, and the USSR, identified in the Arab world with atheism, has been hampered as a result, particularly since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 where Moscow has been fighting against an essentially Islamic resistance force. Fifth, only the United States has been able to talk to both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict and, as a result, has dominated the Middle East peace process since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Finally, the United States and, to a lesser extent, France and China have actively opposed Soviet efforts to achieve predominant influence in the region and this has frequently enabled Middle Eastern states to play the extra-regional powers off against each other and thereby prevent any one of them from securing predominant influence.

To overcome these difficulties, Moscow has evolved one overall strategy -- the development of an "anti-imperialist" bloc of states in the Arab world. In Moscow's view these states should bury their internecine rivalries and join together along with such political organizations as the Arab Communist parties and the PLO in a united front against what the USSR has called the "linchpin" of Western imperialism in the Middle East -- Israel. Under such circumstances it is the Soviet hope that the Arab states would then use their collective pressure against Israel's supporters, especially the United States. The ideal scenario for Moscow, and one which Soviet commentators have frequently referred to, was the situation during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war when virtually all the Arab states supported the war effort against Israel, while also imposing an oil embargo against the United States. As is well known, not only did the oil embargo create domestic difficulties for the United States, it caused serious problems in the NATO alliance, a development that was warmly welcomed by Moscow. Unfortunately for the USSR, however, this "anti-imperialist" Arab unity was created not by Soviet efforts, but by the diplomacy of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and when Sadat changed his policies and turned toward the United States, the "anti-imperialist" Arab unity sought by the USSR fell apart. Nonetheless, so long as Soviet leaders think in terms of such Leninist categories of thought as "united fronts" and so long as there is a deep underlying psychological drive for unity in the Arab world, Moscow can be expected to continue to pursue this overall strategy as a long-term goal.

Beginning the Gorbachev Era

Soviet leader Gorbachev's signals to Israel after he took power in March 1985 should be understood primarily as an attempt to gain entry for Moscow in a Middle East peace process which at the time seemed well underway. In addition, the new Soviet leader very much wanted a summit meeting with the United States, and given Moscow's overestimation of Jewish influence in the United States and the close American Jewish tie to Israel, a major Soviet gesture toward Israel was probably viewed in Moscow as a means of improving its image in the United States prior to a summit meeting where Moscow

hoped such key issues as strategic arms agreements and trade and technology exchanges would be discussed. The signals sent by Moscow covered two central areas: the possible reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Israel and increasing the number of Soviet Jews allowed to leave the USSR.

The first major Soviet gesture came two months after Gorbachev took power in the form of Izvestia's publication of Israeli President Chaim Herzog's congratulatory message to the USSR on the 40th anniversary of the allied victory over Nazi Germany. Not only was this the first time such a message from an Israeli leader had been published since relations were suspended in 1967, but the message itself contained a denunciation of the Nazis, as Herzog declared that the Jewish people "will never forget the huge contribution of the Red Army in the final destruction of the Nazi monsters in Europe and her assistance in the freeing of Jews who survived the concentration camps." Given the fact that Soviet propaganda had long equated Israeli and Nazi activities, and had even accused Zionists of actively aiding the Nazis, the publication of this message seemed to be a major reversal of Soviet policy on this issue.

The Revival of Direct Contacts

In mid-July 1985, Gorbachev apparently decided that a major discussion between Soviet and Israeli diplomats on the subject of both renewing diplomatic relations and increasing the emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel was in order. The meeting, between Israeli Ambassador to France Ovadia Sofer and his Soviet counterpart, Yuli Vorontsov, took place in Paris at the home of Israeli-born pianist Daniel Barenboim. At the meeting, Vorontsov seemed to indicate that diplomatic relations could be restored if there was at least a partial Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights, and that large-scale emigration of Soviet Jews could take place if they emigrated to Israel and not the United States, and if Israel ended the anti-Soviet propaganda it was undertaking in the United States and Europe.

Perhaps it was Soviet concern that U.S. efforts to obtain an accord between Israel and a Jordanian-Palestinian negotiating team might succeed that led to yet another Soviet gesture to Israel. This time it took the form of an agreement between its close Eastern European ally, Poland, and Israel, whereby the two countries agreed in principle to establish "interest sections" in foreign embassies in each other's capitals -- the first stage in the process of reestablishing diplomatic relations. While Moscow was not yet resuming diplomatic ties itself, this was a clear gesture that it was prepared to do so. During his visit to Paris in early October, Gorbachev was to publicly note "as far as reestablishing relations [with Israel] is concerned, I think the faster the situation is normalized in the Middle East, the faster it will be possible to look at this question."

The Soviets and Israelis were to begin bilateral talks in Helsinki in August 1986, the first such official diplomatic negotiations between the two countries since the 1967 war. While the talks did not immediately produce the results either side said it wanted, the symbolic significance of the talks was probably much more important than their content. While the Soviets wished to send a team of officials to inventory Soviet property (primarily owned by the Russian Orthodox Church) in Israel, the Israeli delegation, under heavy domestic pressure, raised the issue of Soviet Jewry in the talks, and the meeting ended after 90 minutes. Nonetheless, the very fact that the talks were held, and the fact that one month later Israeli Prime Minister Peres and Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze held detailed (and apparently cordial) negotiations at the United Nations, as well as subsequent meetings between the Soviet and Israeli ambassadors to the U.S., all indicated that the Soviet Union was keeping alive its contacts with Israel.

An Upswing in Soviet Jewish Emigration

Notwithstanding Moscow's flirtation with Israel, the condition of Soviet Jewry worsened during Gorbachev's first year. Despite the release of a few well-known Soviet refuseniks, the number of Soviet Jews allowed to leave the USSR plummeted, reaching a monthly low of 47 during March 1986. The drop may have reflected a decline in Soviet interest in the Middle East, as did Gorbachev's speech to the 27th Soviet Communist Party Congress. The Third World was low on his list and the Arab-Israeli conflict barely mentioned, in clear contrast with Brezhnev's speeches at previous party congresses where the Middle East received a great deal of attention and certain Arab countries, such as Syria, were singled out for praise.

Yet as Soviet-Israeli contacts continued, one of the issues that Soviet delegations always encountered on their visits to Israel was the question of Soviet Jewish emigration. Given the importance of this issue to Israelis, regardless of party, any major move by Moscow toward increasing the number of Jews allowed to emigrate would be seen as a possible sign of the USSR's intention to improve relations. Thus, although a more restrictive emigration decree went into effect on January 1st that limited emigration to first degree relatives (mother, father, sister, brother, child) of people abroad, statements by a number of Soviet officials indicated that emigration would rise, and indeed after averaging less than 100 per month in 1986, emigration rose to 470 in March 1987 and 717 in April, with a Novosti official, Sergei Ivanko, predicting an exodus of 10-12,000 by the end of the year.

1987 Brings Increased Israeli-Soviet Contacts

In 1987, as the internal Israeli debate over an international conference heated up, Moscow began to step up its signals to Israel to demonstrate its desire for improved ties. The Soviet signals took several forms. On the diplomatic front, there was a meeting in Washington between Israeli Ambassador Meir Rosenne and Soviet Ambassador Yury Dubynin in late January in which the Soviet ambassador reiterated the Soviet desire for an international conference and reportedly indicated Moscow was willing to be more forthcoming on Soviet Jewish emigration. According to a report in the Israeli newspaper Davar, Dubynin also indicated that Moscow wanted to resume the diplomatic dialogue with Israel and would consider a visit to Israel by a consular delegation.

While these diplomatic issues were being discussed, Moscow was sending a number of non-diplomatic delegations to Israel, although given the report of their trips in the Soviet press, the visits clearly had a political function. Thus Literaturnaya Gazeta on January 28 discussed the visit of a Soviet delegation that signed an agreement at the Weizmann Research Center on cooperation in the spheres of genetic and cellular research. In addition, Izvestia correspondent Konstantin Geivandov wrote two articles describing his January visit to Israel that were far less negative than previous Soviet reporting about Israel. He spoke positively of his meeting with a group of Knesset members as "constructive and useful" and noted that these Knesset members had advocated the development of bilateral ties between the Israeli and Soviet publics including ties in the cultural, scientific and sports areas. He also commented positively on his meetings with members of Israel's peace groups. While he also noted a number of negative things about Israel, the article was so different in tone from previous Soviet commentaries that it might be viewed both as another Soviet signal of Moscow's interest in improved relations and also as a sign to the Soviet public and the international community of Soviet preparations to upgrade its ties with Israel.

In early April 1987, Peres met with two high-ranking Soviet officials in Rome, Karen Brutents, deputy director of the International Department of the CPSU and

his Middle East advisor, Alexander Zotov, in what Peres was later to describe as "the first serious direct dialogue between the two nations." The meeting created a major political stir in Israel with Peres, although agreeing to keep the details of the six hours of discussions secret, giving the impression of major progress in the negotiations both in terms of the exodus of Soviet Jews and in the improvement of Soviet-Israeli relations.

Gorbachev sought to reemphasize Moscow's interest in improved ties with Israel and to reinforce the idea of a Middle East conference during his talks with visiting Syrian leader Hafiz Assad in late April when the Soviet leader implicitly warned Assad against going to war because of the danger of nuclear escalation, and asserted that the absence of relations between the USSR and Israel "cannot be considered normal."

Despite the fact that Peres was unable to force new elections over the issue of an international conference in the spring of 1987, Moscow continued to demonstrate its interest in maintaining contacts with Israel. Thus immediately after Peres's political failure, the Soviet ambassador to the U.S., Yuri Dubynin, reportedly at Soviet request (Moscow claimed it was at Israel's request) met Peres in Washington at the apartment of Edgar Bronfman to discuss the Middle East situation. Then in July, a Soviet consular team arrived in Israel for a three-month stay. Nonetheless, while clearly increasing the level of their diplomatic contacts with Israel, Moscow played down the significance of this development. The head of the eight-member Soviet consular team, Yevgeny Antipov, deputy director of the Consular Directorate of the Soviet Foreign Service, stated: "Our mission is not diplomatic, not political. It is purely a technical task (to inventory the property of the Russian Orthodox Church and to handle the updating of passports)."

In addition, the USSR complained publicly about Israel's development of the Jericho II missile, which Moscow claimed could strike the USSR. On balance, however, Moscow sought to slowly, if steadily, improve Soviet-Israeli ties. Thus there were numerous conversations between Soviet and Israeli officials (the longest -- 10 hours -- between a Peres advisor, Nimrod Novik, and Vladimir Tarasov of the Soviet Foreign Ministry in mid-August), and the Soviets did not even bother to deny these contacts to the Arabs.

In addition to the rhetoric, Moscow demonstrated its interest in improved ties with Israel by allowing a second Eastern European ally, Hungary, to agree to establish low-level diplomatic interest section relations with Israel in September. Then after a meeting between Peres and Shevardnadze at the UN at the end of September, Peres claimed that Shevardnadze had both offered Israel a similar interests-section arrangement (which Peres rejected) and that the USSR did not insist that the PLO represent the Palestinians at an international peace conference. Given Peres's habit of exaggerating Soviet offers, it is not surprising that Moscow publicly denied them, as an Israeli journalist, in commenting on Peres's UN performance, noted critically.

A New Soviet Evenhandedness?

The main Soviet signal to Israel was to come during PLO leader Yasser Arafat's visit to Moscow in early April of this year. During talks with Shevardnadze and Gorbachev, the PLO leader was told that Israel's interests, including its security interests, had to be taken into consideration in any peace settlement along with those of the Palestinians.

Gorbachev's gesture to Israel during the Arafat visit was accompanied by a further low-level improvement in state-to-state relations. Thus the Soviet party youth organization Komsomol invited a group of Mapam (a leftist Zionist party) youth to visit the USSR, Soviet amateur short-wave radio operators were permitted to talk to their counterparts in Israel, a famous Soviet singer, Alla Pugochova, gave concerts in Israel, and the Soviet Union even

allowed Soviet Jews to visit Israel as tourists.

In the beginning of May, Moscow again began to send signals to Israel. Thus Shimon Peres made a surprise visit to Hungary -- the first such visit by a major Israeli leader to a Soviet bloc state other than Romania since the 1967 war. Peres, who had been interviewed by the Hungarian government newspaper in April, a month after the formal opening of the diplomatic interest sections, met with a number of top Hungarian officials including Prime Minister Karoly Grosz. Given the very close ties between the USSR and Hungary, it is difficult to believe that the Soviet Union had not approved the visit, despite Shevardnadze's assertion at a news conference in mid-May that "the visit by the Israeli foreign minister to Hungary has no bearing on Soviet-Israeli relations. This was an independent step, taken within the framework of bilateral relations."

From Hungary, Peres went on to Madrid, to a meeting of the Socialist International where, as in 1987, he had meetings with Soviet officials including Soviet Middle East specialist Alexander Zotov. Meanwhile, to improve the atmosphere further, there was another marked increase in conflict.

The new positive tone toward Israel was recognized by Israeli Prime Minister Shamir, who noted in New York that Gorbachev was a "great man and a great leader," and that the tone of Soviet statements had changed. He questioned, however, whether the substance of the Soviet position had changed, and he indicated that, having been invited to meet with Shevardnadze in New York, he would, as in the past, press for increased emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel and the restoration of diplomatic relations.

The Soviet leadership, in deciding to arrange the Shevardnadze-Shamir meeting, seems to have been motivated by one major consideration. With Shamir's Likud party gaining in the polls against Labor, there was a good chance that Shamir would form Israel's next government, and Moscow may well have wished to signal its willingness to deal with him. The Soviets sent Shamir a further signal during the talks -- which both sides characterized as "useful and constructive" -- by announcing the time of the forthcoming Israeli consular visit to Moscow (mid-July). Several days later Israel agreed to renew for an additional three months the visas of the

policy of flexibility and positioning itself to deal with whichever Israeli leader emerged victorious in the 1988 elections. When Peres seemed likely to bring down the Israeli government in 1987 over the issue of an international conference, it backed him; when Peres's position weakened in 1988, Moscow began to establish contacts with Shamir.

In sum, therefore, Soviet policy following Gorbachev's rise to power has been an active and flexible one. Moscow has increased contacts with Israel, yet formal diplomatic relations appear to be a long way off unless an international peace conference is convened, a doubtful possibility at least until after the 1988 Israeli and American elections. There has been a sharp increase in the exodus of Soviet Jews, but a continuation of this increase may be hostage to both the diplomatic situation in the Middle East and progress in the arms control negotiations between the U.S. and USSR. Moreover, Soviet policy could be reversed if Gorbachev is unable to maintain himself in power.

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