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RESPONDING TO GORBACHEV'S "NEW THINKING" IN THE MIDDLE EAST

INTRODUCTION

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has injected a new dynamism into Soviet Middle East policy. Since coming to power in March 1985, Gorbachev has shed the sterile aspects of past Soviet policy and replaced rigid positions with imaginative initiatives. Gorbachev's "new thinking" emphasizes political settlements of regional conflicts and downgrades the ideological basis of Soviet foreign policy. His new tactics mask the fact that the principal Soviet goals in the Middle East have remained constant. They are the expansion of Soviet influence and the erosion of Western, particularly American, influence. These unchanging Soviet goals notwithstanding, Gorbachev's bold pragmatism and flair for public relations have combined to give a new, less threatening look to Soviet Middle East policy.

While maintaining close ties to longstanding radical allies such as Syria, Iraq, South Yemen, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Gorbachev has reached out to Arab states aligned with the West to broaden Soviet options. He has eased the repayment terms on Egypt's debt to Moscow, offered to sell arms to Jordan, and coordinated Soviet oil production with Saudi Arabia. He has courted Iran, a disturbing development for Washington, and stepped up diplomatic contacts with Israel, a positive trend that eventually may help to reduce Arab-Israeli tensions.

Pushing an International Peace Conference. Moscow seems determined to regain a role in the Arab-Israeli peace process, from which it effectively has been excluded by Washington since 1973. Gorbachev has renewed the Soviet call for a U.N.-sponsored international peace conference that would be attended by Israel, interested Arab parties, and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council — the U.S., USSR, Britain, France, and People's Republic of China. Although he is interested in participating in

the peace process, it of course remains to be seen whether he truly is interested in real peace.

Extending Moscow's Influence. The Soviets are moving quickly to capitalize on the February 15 withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. Two days after the Soviet pullout ended, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze departed on a tour of Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Iran, underscoring Moscow's drive to extend its influence beyond the radical Arab camp. Shevardnadze laid the groundwork for greater Soviet involvement in the Arab-Israeli peace process by meeting separately in Cairo with PLO leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens; it was the first formal meeting of Soviet and Israeli foreign ministers since diplomatic relations were broken in 1967.

How much of these Soviet initiatives reflects a search for a fair resolution of Middle East problems? The jury is still out on this. After years of trying to block U.S.-sponsored peace efforts, the burden of proving its good will rests on Moscow. Gorbachev's dovish rhetoric must be followed by concrete Soviet actions. Before allowing Moscow a role in the peace process, therefore, Washington should test Gorbachev's proclaimed willingness to advance the Arab-Israeli peace process by requiring that Moscow:

- ◆ ◆ Reestablish full diplomatic relations with Israel. Moscow cannot advance the peace process unless it has ties to both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

- ◆ ◆ Reduce the flow of Soviet arms to Syria and Libya. The continuing shipment of Soviet arms is a destabilizing influence that encourages these states to cling to the chimera of a military solution, rather than explore the possibility of a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

- ◆ ◆ Cease Soviet support for radical Palestinian groups. Moscow must denounce Palestinian terrorism against Israel, break relations and cease support for radical Palestinian groups opposed to peace.

SOVIET MIDDLE EAST POLICY

The Middle East long has been the most important Third World region for Moscow because of its geographic proximity to the Soviet Union, strategic location at the crossroads of three continents, vast oil and gas resources, and opportunities to exploit regional tensions to expand Soviet influence at the expense of the West.

Although the USSR was the second country to recognize officially Israel's creation in 1948, Moscow has found it expedient to side against Israel. Calling Israel the linchpin of Western imperialism in the Middle East, Moscow long has sought to forge a unified "anti-imperialist" Arab bloc under Soviet leadership. By siding with the Arab cause, the Soviet Union gained entree into the Middle East, cultivated Arab regimes of all ideological stripes, undermined the U.S. position in the Arab world by isolating it as Israel's chief backer, strengthened radical anti-Western forces, and acquired access

to such bases as the port of Tartus in Syria and South Yemen's ports in Aden and the island of Socotra.

Fueling Arms Race. Indeed, the Soviet Union has been the chief beneficiary of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This interminable struggle has enabled Moscow to build patron-client relationships with Arab states that otherwise would have little need for a Soviet connection, given the lackluster appeal of Soviet ideology, technology, and economic assistance. By fueling the Arab-Israeli arms race, Moscow was able to tap its principal source of national power – military strength.

A watershed event in Soviet Middle East policy was the September 1955 \$200 million Czech arms transfer to Egypt, orchestrated by Moscow. It was Moscow's first military commitment to an Arab state. Subsequent arms deals were arranged with Syria (1956), Yemen (1956), Afghanistan (1956), and Iraq (1958). Algeria in the 1960s and Libya and the PLO in the 1970s also became major recipients of Soviet arms. Soviet arms deliveries to the Middle East and North Africa, which averaged about \$500 million annually from 1956 to 1974, rose to more than \$3 billion annually in 1975 to 1979, and \$5 billion to \$6 billion annually in 1979 to 1985.¹

In exchange for arms the Soviets gained political influence and strategic advantage through military cooperation and access to Arab military facilities. Moscow signed classic long-term "friendship" and cooperation treaties with Egypt in 1971, Iraq in 1972, Somalia in 1974, Ethiopia in 1978, Afghanistan in 1978, South Yemen in 1979, and Syria in 1980. Although Egypt and Somalia have abrogated their treaties, Soviet political and military influence remains strong in the other states.

Military Coups. Accompanying Soviet arms are numerous advisers who become well-positioned to gather intelligence and recruit ambitious army officers as Soviet agents. Pro-Soviet military coups overthrew Afghanistan's Mohammed Daoud in 1978 and South Yemen's Rubai Ali in 1979. Soviet personnel took part in these coups as well as in the bloody civil war in South Yemen in January 1986 that resulted in the ouster of President Ali Nasser Mohammed and his replacement by Haider Al-Attas. Abortive pro-Soviet coup attempts in Egypt and Sudan in 1971 helped to convince Egypt's Anwar Sadat to expel the Soviet military presence in 1972.

Arms sales also bring the Soviets major economic benefits. Nearly 80 per cent of Soviet deliveries in the Third World are paid for in hard currency, which Moscow sorely needs to purchase technology and food from the West. Arms sales to the Third World generate approximately 25 to 30 percent of Soviet hard currency income, with the Middle East/South Asia region

1 Abraham Becker, "A Note on Soviet Arms Transfers to the Middle East," in Steven Spiegel, Mark Heller, and Jacob Goldberg, eds., *The Soviet-American Competition in the Middle East* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1988), p. 54.

(including India) accounting for 74 percent of total Soviet arms sales to the Third World.² Moscow sold \$72.8 billion in arms to the Middle East/South Asia region between 1980 to 1987.

Kremlin's Difficult Choice. The Arab-Israeli conflict, however, has posed a problem for Moscow: the difficult choice between risky intervention on behalf of an Arab client or abstention at the cost of losing influence, prestige, and credibility. In the 1956 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars, the Soviet Union launched diplomatic- propaganda offensives designed to minimize the Arab defeat, restrain Israel, and highlight Soviet support of the Arab cause without risking a confrontation with the U.S., which then enjoyed clear military superiority. The Arabs' military defeat in these two wars ironically served Soviet interests by further radicalizing the Arab world and increasing its dependence on Soviet arms supplies.

Moscow broke diplomatic relations with Israel after the Israeli victory in the June 1967 Six Day War. This ended any pretense that Moscow was evenhanded in the Arab-Israeli dispute. After this, Moscow became increasingly active in the Middle East, buttressing, for example, Egyptian air defenses at Cairo's request during the 1970 "War of Attrition," a limited war fought by Egypt and Israel along the Suez Canal. Roughly 15,000 Soviet air defense troops and 200 pilots, some flying advanced MiG-23 *Flogger* warplanes, were sent to Soviet-controlled air bases in Egypt to deter Israeli air attacks on Egypt. This was the first deployment of Soviet combat troops to a noncommunist country since the Red Army was evicted from northern Iran under U.S. diplomatic pressure in 1946.

Challenging the U.S. The Soviet response to the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war was more assertive than in previous wars but again was cautious, incremental, and reactive in nature.³ Shortly after the outbreak of war on October 6, 1973, Moscow rushed more than 200,000 tons of military equipment to Egypt and Syria. As long as its Arab clients were winning, Moscow opposed a ceasefire. It then reversed field, backing a ceasefire once Israel had gained the upper hand.

In its boldest challenge of the U.S. since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, on October 24, Moscow threatened to intervene militarily in the war to prevent Israeli destruction of the Egyptian Third Army. Washington warned Moscow against unilateral intervention and put U.S. armed forces around the globe on alert. Moscow backed down — yet also won some points. As in previous Arab-Israeli wars, the climactic Soviet threat came after the crisis had peaked and was designed to pressure Washington to restrain the Israeli advance.⁴ This the U.S. already was trying to do.

2 Mark Kramer, "Soviet Arms Transfers and the Third World," *Problems of Communism*, September-October 1987, pp. 55-62.

3 See Efraim Karsh, *The Cautious Bear: Soviet Military Engagement in Middle East Wars in the Post-1967 Era*, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1985.

4 See Francis Fukuyama, "Nuclear Shadowboxing: Soviet Intervention Threats in the Middle East," *Orbis*, Fall 1981.

The Soviet Union remained relatively inactive during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Although it paid lip service to the Palestinian cause, Moscow did not risk a confrontation with Israel or the U.S. to prevent the PLO's ouster from Beirut. Neglecting the PLO, Moscow focused on rebuilding Syria's military power, providing Damascus with \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion in arms between 1982 and 1984, including modern T-72 battle tanks, MiG-25 *Foxbat* aircraft, and a sophisticated air defense system. Syria became the first country outside the Soviet Union to acquire long-range SAM-5 anti-aircraft missiles. These missiles pose a threat to Israel's U.S.-made E-2C *Hawkeye* radar planes, which contribute greatly to Israel's air superiority.

GORBACHEV'S NEW THINKING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Gorbachev's ambitious domestic perestroika is predicated on gaining Western technology, trade, and credits. For this, he needs to reduce East-West tensions and minimize Western perceptions of the Soviet threat. Gorbachev has downgraded the importance of the Third World in Soviet foreign policy. And while he has flexed Soviet military muscles to safeguard communist influence in such client states as Afghanistan and South Yemen, he has not taken on costly new commitments. The Soviets have grown cautious about support for non-ruling communist and other radical vanguard parties, which often become economic and political liabilities when they seize power.⁵

Gorbachev's February 1986 speech to the 27th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party reflected the low priority accorded to the Third World and the high priority accorded to Soviet-American and Soviet-European relations. In contrast to previous speeches by Leonid Brezhnev that devoted considerable attention on the Middle East, singling out Syria for praise, Gorbachev merely identified the Middle East as one of the "hotbeds of the danger of war."⁶ This is consistent with Gorbachev's apparent emphasis on settling regional conflicts through negotiations.

Rhetorical Shift. So far, however, this shift in Soviet policy is almost entirely rhetorical. There is little evidence of change in longstanding Soviet goals in the Middle East: expansion of Soviet political and military influence, erosion of Western influence, outflanking NATO from the south, establishment of Soviet military power astride major Western oil supply routes, and escalation of the political and economic costs of Western access to Middle Eastern oil by promoting anti-Western policies.

What has changed, besides rhetoric, are Soviet tactics. Gorbachev is moving away from Brezhnev's reliance on Arab radicals and returning to Khrushchev's pragmatic cultivation of geopolitically important regional powers, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, irrespective of their ideology.

5 See Francis Fukuyama, "Gorbachev and the Third World," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1986.

6 Robert Freedman, "The Soviet Union, Israel and the Middle East Under Gorbachev," paper presented to the American Political Science Association, September 1988, p. 15.

Gorbachev seeks to reach out beyond Moscow's traditional radical friends to broaden Soviet options.

Gorbachev's Middle East policy has been tactically adroit, opportunistic, and attuned to public opinion in the West and the Middle East. Moscow nimbly has launched initiatives to exploit tensions in Washington's bilateral relations with key Arab states. In early 1987, when Egypt was unhappy about stalled efforts to renegotiate its \$4.6 billion military debt to the U.S., the Soviets eased repayment terms on Egypt's \$3 billion military debt to Moscow. When the U.S. balked at selling F-16 *Fighting Falcon* warplanes to Jordan in 1987 because of congressional opposition, the Soviets immediately offered Jordan 40 MiG-29 *Fulcrum* fighter planes with no payments due for three years.

GORBACHEV'S OPENING TO ISRAEL

Perhaps the most notable new tactic of Soviet Middle East policy has been the gradual increase in diplomatic contacts with Israel. The Soviet Union and every Eastern European state except Romania broke diplomatic relations with Israel during the 1967 war. This has hurt Moscow diplomatically by enabling Washington to monopolize the role of mediator and exclude Moscow from Arab-Israeli negotiations. The incipient Soviet rapprochement with Israel is an acknowledgement of Israel's regional importance and an effort to avoid exclusion from future peace negotiations. It also represents an attempt to improve the Soviet image in the U.S., for Moscow perceives Israel to be important in the context of Soviet-American relations.

The Soviet Union's opening to Israel has been advanced through two avenues: 1) the steady escalation of diplomatic contacts, and 2) the growing number of Soviet Jewish emigrants. Heretofore, the Soviets have gone farther down the latter path than the former; it is far less costly for Moscow in the Arab world to allow Jewish emigration than to reestablish formal diplomatic relations with Israel. The number of Soviet Jews allowed to emigrate has risen from 914 in 1986, to 7,776 in 1987, and to 19,343 in 1988. This year, over 40,000 are projected to leave, a figure that comes close to the previous peak of 51,000 in 1979.

Diplomatic Minuet. State-to-state diplomatic contacts have evolved slowly. The Soviet and Israeli ambassadors to France began the diplomatic minuet by meeting secretly in Paris in July 1985. In September 1986 Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze held an extended meeting at the United Nations. The following April, Gorbachev publicly informed Syrian President Hafez Assad that the absence of Soviet diplomatic relations with Israel "cannot be considered normal." The Soviets dispatched a consular delegation to Israel in July 1987 and received a reciprocal visit by an Israeli delegation a year later. Moscow also has cleared the way for the establishment of interest sections in Israel by Poland (1986) and Hungary (1988).

Moscow now has laid the groundwork for the restoration of full diplomatic relations with Israel and has prepared its Arab clients for this. In return, Moscow will want Israel's acquiescence to a major Soviet role in the Arab-Israeli peace process, which could help to calm Arab outrage at resumption of USSR-Israel relations. What also will be painful for the Arabs is that, although the Soviet Union formerly insisted that Israel leave all occupied Arab territory, Moscow now suggests that diplomatic ties could be restored as soon as Israel takes its seat at an international peace conference. Despite the improvement in bilateral relations, the Soviet Union continues to vote to deny Israel membership in the U.N. General Assembly.

GORBACHEV AND THE ARAB WORLD

When Gorbachev took power in 1985, he inherited a costly war in Afghanistan that was condemned by the Arab world (except Libya, Syria, South Yemen, and the PLO) and a set of Arab allies preoccupied by wars, economic problems, and popular dissatisfaction. Syria, Moscow's most important Arab ally, was ruled by an unpopular Alawite regime committed to domination of Lebanon and confrontation with Israel, an expensive foreign policy requiring a massive military buildup that its faltering economy could not sustain. Iraq was locked in a brutal war of attrition with Khomeini's Iran. South Yemen, the only self-avowed Marxist-Leninist state in the Arab world, was on the brink of a bloody factional struggle that would explode in January 1986, killing 12,000 and forcing President Ali Nasser Mohammed into exile.

Libya, which Moscow keeps at arm's length because of the unpredictable activities of the mercurial Muammar Qadhafi, was having increasing trouble in paying for its Soviet arms because of falling oil prices. PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, in resisting Syrian attempts to take over the Palestinian movement, had moved closer to Jordan's King Hussein and was flirting with the idea of a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation to peace negotiations. If Arafat and King Hussein opted to follow Egypt's lead and enter a U.S.-designed peace process, Moscow and its other Arab clients could find themselves stranded on the sidelines again.

Guarding Gorbachev's Image. To gain a place at the peace table, Gorbachev softened Soviet policy toward Israel. Gorbachev's Kremlin also has issued public statements calling for Syrian and Libyan restraint. The perceived risks to Moscow of supporting the Arab side in a crisis have grown because a superpower confrontation in the Middle East could tarnish Gorbachev's image in the West and thus reduce Soviet access to Western trade and technology. The growing inability of Arab arms buyers to pay for Soviet arms in hard currency, meanwhile, has reduced the economic benefits of Soviet arms sales to Middle Eastern clients. It is therefore not surprising that Moscow has grown less willing to underwrite the military buildups of the radical Arab states.

Unlike past Soviet leaders, Gorbachev publicly has pressured Middle East allies to move closer to the Soviet position on important issues. Even Syria,

the centerpiece of Soviet Middle East policy, publicly has been pressed to improve relations with Iraq, ease its hostility toward Arafat, and reconsider its longstanding commitment to military parity with Israel.

Tough Talk to Syria. In April 1987, Syrian President Hafez Assad went to Moscow in search of more Soviet arms and rescheduled payments on Syria's \$15 billion debt to the Soviet Union. Although Moscow did ease the debt burden, it did not honor all of Assad's requests for arms. While the Soviets stepped up deliveries of T-72 tanks and SS-21 surface-to-surface missiles, they provided only about twenty advanced MiG-29 *Fulcrum* warplanes that Assad had requested. Moreover, they refused to supply SS-23 surface-to-surface missiles, which would boost the Syrian threat to Israel.

While partially satisfying Syrian demands for new arms, Gorbachev made it clear that Moscow would no longer support Syrian efforts to gain strategic parity with Israel. He emphasized that a military solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute was not realistic and urged Assad to try to find a political solution. Gorbachev also urged Assad to repair Syria's ties with the PLO and Iraq, which had been strained by Assad's personal rivalries with Arafat and Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein and by Syrian efforts to subvert the PLO and back Iran in its war against Iraq. Shortly after returning from Moscow, Assad secretly met with Iraq's Saddam Hussein in Jordan, apparently to discuss improved relations. Syria, however, continued supporting Iran in its war against Iraq.⁷

Fewer Arms for Damascus. The Soviet Union transferred \$9.6 billion in arms to Syria from 1982 to 1986.⁸ Although more recent data are classified, Soviet arms transfers to Syria are believed to have fallen slightly since 1987, in part because of the declining oil revenues in Libya, which frequently has loaned Syria the money for arms purchases. Damascus has fallen \$2 billion in arrears on its debt to the Soviets.⁹ Moscow has become less willing to foot Syria's bills and now demands advance payment for arms and provides spare parts only after being paid in hard currency.¹⁰ As Moscow's stance on arms payments has hardened, Syria has turned to the People's Republic of China and to North Korea for arms.

Moscow also has tightened its disbursements of economic aid to Syria. Total Soviet aid to Syria was approximately \$15 billion from 1977 to 1988. In a recent dispute over the terms of economic aid, Moscow refused to pay for Western machinery needed in a joint development project for the extraction of natural gas at Tadmur, considering this to be Syria's responsibility.¹¹

7 Efraim Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Assad Years* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1988), pp. 91-93.

8 U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers, 1987*, p. 130.

9 Flora Lewis, "Lebanon's Cavalry," *The New York Times*, April 19, 1989, p. A27.

10 *The Economist*, June 18, 1988, p. 42.

11 Fida Nasrallah, "Syria Pays the Price of Isolation," *Middle East International*, March 31, 1989, p.17.

Reining in Qadhafi. Gorbachev's efforts to reduce the economic and political costs of the Soviet empire also have had a chilling impact on Soviet relations with Libya. While Qadhafi's anti-Western activities have served Soviet interests, Moscow has maintained an arms-length relationship with Libya because of the potential risk and embarrassment of being closely associated with Qadhafi's mercurial behavior. When Qadhafi visited Moscow in October 1985, the Soviets refused to give him the mutual defense treaty that he sought, but agreed to sell him four SA-5 air defense missile batteries. The Soviet Union stayed on the sidelines during Libya's two military clashes with the U.S. in March and April 1986. In May 1986, Gorbachev issued a veiled warning against continued Libyan support for terrorism, telling Qadhafi's deputy, Major Abdul Salam Jalloud, about the need for "restraint" to avoid giving the U.S. a pretext for attack.¹²

Libya, like Syria, has turned to Beijing for arms. Recently, however, Moscow delivered six sophisticated SU-24 *Fencer* ground attack warplanes. This boosts the Libyan military threat to its Arab neighbors, to U.S. warships in the Mediterranean, and to Israel, particularly in view of Libya's newly acquired chemical warfare capability.

GORBACHEV AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS

Gorbachev has continued most of Brezhnev's policies on Arab-Israeli peacemaking, making minor variations. Soviet peace proposals historically have been designed to boost Soviet political capital in the Arab world, not necessarily to resolve the conflict. Moscow rarely has been willing to work constructively with Washington. It has done so only when the threat of war or military defeat of one of its clients has been imminent.¹³

Moscow generally has not strayed far from the hardline Arab consensus, led by Algeria, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Although it supported U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 in 1967, which calls for a "just and lasting peace" based on Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war to "secure and recognized boundaries," it supports the Arab interpretation. This calls for total Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders.

Arab Advocate. Moscow consistently has opposed direct bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Arabs. Instead it has advocated a U.N.-sponsored international conference in which the Soviet Union and its allies would wield considerable influence. Such a conference would enable Moscow to champion the Arab cause publicly while isolating the U.S. and pillorying Israel. At such a conference, the Soviet Union would become the lawyer for the Arab world, a role that would allow the USSR to enhance its political capital in the Arab world.

¹² *Washington Post*, May 28, 1986, p. 1.

¹³ Samuel Lewis, "Soviet and American Attitudes Toward the Arab-Israeli Peace Process," in Spiegel, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

Realizing that an international peace conference advanced Soviet interests but not the cause of peace, Egypt's Anwar Sadat opted for direct negotiations with Israel, using the U.S. as a mediator. The Soviet Union unsuccessfully opposed the ensuing Camp David peace process and the subsequent 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty. Moscow helped forge a bloc of "rejectionist" Arab states that thwarted Reagan Administration peace initiatives in 1982 and 1988, which sought to bring Jordan into the Camp David process.

Renewing Contacts with Israel. Moscow also opposed the April 1985 Amman accord, signed between Jordan's Hussein and the PLO's Arafat, which called for the formation of a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation to negotiate with Israel at an international peace conference. Arafat and Hussein also endorsed the concept of a confederation between Jordan and the territories relinquished by Israel. Gorbachev quickly began to renew contacts with Israel to secure a place at the negotiating table. In July 1986, he restated Brezhnev's proposal of an international conference, suggesting that a preparatory meeting be held before the actual conference to resolve the thorny issues of how the Palestinians would be represented at the conference, given Israeli and American refusal to negotiate with the PLO. Gorbachev also improved relations with Egypt and Jordan, gaining the support of both for an international conference.

In fall 1986 the Soviets worked behind the scenes to restore close working relations between Arafat and some of the radical Palestinian groups backed by Syria that had broken away from him. Moscow pressured Syria to permit the pro-Soviet Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to return to Arafat's fold at the April 1987 Palestinian National Council meeting in Algiers. As part of the price for the return of these extremists to the fold, Arafat abrogated his 1985 Amman accord with Hussein. The Soviet-facilitated reunification of the Palestinian movement further radicalized the PLO, reduced Jordanian and Egyptian influence inside the PLO, and thwarted Hussein's efforts to breathe life into the peace process.

Significant Omission. In April 1988, Arafat visited Moscow where Gorbachev bluntly advised him to endorse U.N. Security Council Resolution 242, which implicitly recognized Israel's right to exist by acknowledging the "sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the area." Moreover, Gorbachev told Arafat publicly that Israel's security interests had to be taken into account in any peace settlement. Gorbachev also renewed his call for an international conference, this time suggesting that a single Arab delegation could represent all the Arab parties. Significantly, Gorbachev did not refer to the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people, which had been the longstanding Soviet position, and he did not insist on direct PLO representation at the international conference.

This Soviet flexibility, made at PLO expense, was meant to finesse the issue of who was to represent the Palestinians to get around Israeli and American opposition to dealing directly with the PLO. Since then, Soviet spokesmen

have hinted at even greater flexibility in their position by omitting previously obligatory references to an independent Palestinian state and leaving open the possibility of a Palestinian-Jordanian confederation, which they formerly opposed.

RESPONDING TO GORBACHEV'S PEACE OFFENSIVE

The Soviet-proposed international conference, once convened, could acquire a momentum that could endanger U.S. and Israeli interests. Arab states, with Soviet and Chinese backing, could seek to dictate unfavorable peace terms to Israel or to veto agreements that Israel might negotiate directly with its Arab neighbors. To overcome these objections to a conference, Moscow has replaced its call for an "authoritative" conference with a call for an "effective" conference. While it is unclear what is meant by such terms, it is clear that Israel and the U.S. have much to lose and the Soviet Union much to gain at an international conference.

Scoring Easy Points. Moscow stands to gain considerable international prestige if its design for an international conference is accepted. The Soviet Union could score easy points in Arab capitals by acting as a cheerleader for the Arabs. The development of a consensus Arab negotiating position would give hard-line states veto power over the outcome. The U.S. and Israel, by contrast, could become isolated and might have to walk out of the conference if it degenerated into a propaganda forum or tried to impose an unacceptable settlement. For these reasons, Washington and Jerusalem correctly have opposed such a conference.

The most productive period in the Arab-Israeli peace process occurred from 1974 through 1979 when the Soviets were excluded from the process and the U.S. acted as mediator. This period saw the Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt and the disengagement agreements between Israel and Syria. If the Soviet Union wants to assume a role in the peace process today, after working to undermine U.S.-sponsored peace negotiations for the last fifteen years, then the burden is on Moscow to demonstrate its good will. It must prove that it is interested in genuine peace, not just in manipulating the peace process to further its own political interests.

Before inviting Moscow to participate in the peace process, Washington should require the Soviets to:

1) Restore full diplomatic relations with Israel.

Israel holds the trump cards in any peace negotiations — control of the West Bank, Gaza strip, and all of Jerusalem. If Moscow seeks a mediating role between Israel and the Arabs, then it must be on equal footing with both. Soviet officials have hinted that Moscow will restore relations once Israel takes its seat at an international conference. This puts the cart before the horse. Recognition is the beginning of diplomacy, not the goal of diplomacy. Moscow also must stop voting to exclude Israel from participation in the U.N.

General Assembly. It cannot credibly claim a role in the peace process while it vilifies Israel at the U.N.

2) Reduce the flow of Soviet arms to radical Arab states.

Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze lamented the Middle Eastern arms race on his tour of the region this February. Yet in March it was revealed that Moscow had given Libya one of the most advanced ground attack warplanes in the Soviet inventory – the Su-24 *Fencer*. These contradictions prevent Moscow from being taken seriously as a player in the peace process. The Soviet bloc funneled approximately \$10.4 billion in arms to Syria and \$6.3 billion to Libya between 1982 and 1986.¹⁴ This massive influx of arms destabilizes the region and encourages unrealistic Arab reliance on a military, rather than a political, solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moscow must reduce the flow of arms, particularly advanced bombers and ground-to-ground missiles that threaten Israeli security. In fact, the U.S. should demand that Moscow declare a moratorium on the transfer of ground-to-ground missiles to Arab states.

3) Withhold Soviet support for radical Palestinians.

No peace is possible without Palestinian participation. Peace-seeking Palestinians must withstand attempts at intimidation by radical Palestinian groups opposed to peace. Although the PLO has met the minimum requirements for establishing low level contacts with Washington, it has not yet proved an acceptable negotiating partner for Israel. Even in the unlikely event that Yasser Arafat makes the necessary concessions to gain Israeli acceptance as a negotiating partner, Palestinians working for peace will be attacked verbally and physically by radical Palestinian groups opposed to peace. To prove that it is serious about peace, Moscow should publicly denounce Palestinian terrorism against Israel and moderate Arabs; break relations and cease support for radical Palestinian groups opposed to peace; and press Syria and Libya to end their support of Palestinian factions that engage in terrorism and obstruct the peace process.

If Moscow meets these three conditions, then the U.S. and Israel should explore with the Soviets possible avenues for advancing the peace process. The Soviet version of an international conference is flawed because it would give hard-line Arab states a veto over the peace process and enable the Soviets to play to the Arabs while isolating the U.S. and Israel. History has shown that direct bilateral negotiations, not a multilateral approach, is the most effective way of moving the Middle East toward peace. This was proved at the Camp David talks. Although an international forum may be needed to facilitate bilateral talks, Washington should work to design a peace process that leads to direct bilateral negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Only the regional powers involved in the conflict, not the superpowers, ultimately can negotiate a just and lasting peace.

¹⁴ See U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers, 1987*, March 1988, pp. 127-130.

CONCLUSION

Gorbachev's Middle East policy is rhetorically bold, tactically innovative, but strategically unchanged. Except for a greater flexibility toward Israel and a greater willingness to air public differences with Arab allies, Gorbachev's goals appear to differ little from those of his predecessors.

Burden of Proof. Although Gorbachev's pragmatism and flexibility offer some hope for a constructive Soviet role in the Arab-Israeli peace process, the burden is on Moscow to prove that it deserves such a role. If Gorbachev wants to play a constructive role in the Middle East peace process, then he must back up his words with concrete deeds. And this is that Washington should seek. These deeds should be 1) restoration of Moscow's diplomatic relations with Israel; 2) curbing Moscow's arms sales to Libya and Syria; and 3) denunciation and termination of Soviet support for radical Palestinian groups that engage in terrorism and oppose peace negotiations.

If Gorbachev expects his "new thinking" in the Middle East to be taken seriously by Washington, then he must follow through with these "new deeds."

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