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SOVIET "NEW THINKING" AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Gorbachev's Arab-Israeli Options

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Combined paper for Geostrategic Context and
Defense Policy/Military Strategy courses

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Introduction

This essay will attempt to assess Soviet policy options in the Arab-Israeli arena in the light of Gorbachev's "new political thinking". Although Gorbachev has been preoccupied with internal politics, he has suggested broad outlines of policy for the Middle East. This new direction is potentially a radical departure from previous policy. Traditional allies such as Syria are being downplayed; the PLO mainstream and the moderate Arabs are being wooed; and there is intense speculation concerning a Soviet move to resume diplomatic relations with Israel. If this trend continues, the question arises: will the new Soviet policy evolve incrementally or will Gorbachev and Shevardnadze confound observers once again with the unexpected?

Within the U.S. government, opinion appears to suggest the incremental alternative, but this essay will examine several areas where things might move faster than expected, given Gorbachev's penchant for surprises. I will commence briefly with an historical overview of Soviet Middle East policy and its past failings, followed by a discussion of the current Soviet perspective on Arab-Israeli developments. I shall then discuss current Soviet interests in the Arab world, including bilateral relations with Syria, the PLO, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Finally, I will assess Gorbachev's policy options and freedom of maneuver in the Middle East, highlighting areas where we might see a Gorbachev surprise.

Historical Background

Conventional wisdom among American foreign-policy and intelligence circles has long held that the primary Soviet policy objective in the volatile Middle East is the reduction or elimination of U.S. presence and influence in the

region. It is certainly true that Soviet policy in the Arab world has had a pronounced anti-American focus, at least until the end of the Brezhnev era. This is not surprising, in view of the fact that the Americans, despite the ambitions of the erstwhile colonial powers Britain and France, were on the road to becoming the dominant power in this strategic region on the Soviet periphery during the decade after the Second World War. The Soviets, at a disadvantage on their own doorstep, became an anti-status-quo power vis-a-vis the Arab world, attempting to undermine the post-colonial order exemplified by Dulles' Baghdad Pact and Iraq's Nuri al-Sa'id and finding a natural ally in Egypt's 'Abd-al-Nasir. The first major coup scored by Moscow was the Egyptian-Czech arms deal of 1955. From this time on, the struggle for influence in the Arab world came to be viewed, in both Moscow and Washington, as a zero-sum game.

The Soviets, who have found it almost impossible to understand the Arab world from their Marxist-Leninist optic, learned some very bad lessons during their warm embrace of 'Abd-al-Nasir. These misperceptions were to haunt Soviet Middle Eastern policy until the advent of Gorbachev and persist today within much of the Soviet foreign-policy bureaucracy. The first misperception was that the Arab-Israeli conflict would drive the Arabs into Moscow's arms on an irreversible, permanent, and Marxist basis. In other words, the early Soviet entree into Egypt, Syria, and Iraq was the beginning of a revolutionary process in the Arab world. Washington was saddled with the "special relationship" with Israel and Moscow, by siding squarely with the Arabs (e.g. its 1967 break in diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv), would reap the benefits. The Soviets overlooked the fact that their own physical proximity to the Arabs often made them appear more threatening than distant Washington. Further, Soviet efforts to play a prominent regional role were hampered by

Arab disunity and internecine conflicts, the incompatibility of atheist Marxism with Islamic Arab culture, and their absolute inability to influence the Arab-Israeli impasse. The second misperception was that the Arab nationalism of 'Abd-al-Nasir and others represented a phase in the Marxist dialectic, rather than a new mutation of the traditional Arab domination game, decked out in "progressive" rhetoric. Despite their slogans, it is difficult to see how Asad of Syria, Saddam of Iraq, and Qadhafi of Libya and their cliques are any more "democratic" or legitimate than the Amir of Kuwait. The third misperception, related to the second, is that the Soviets, in their fixation on reversing the pro-American status quo, failed to see (or care) that their "progressive" friends alienated the more numerous Arab moderates, many of whom had considerable amounts of money and all of whom considered the U.S. the only counterweight to Soviet-backed meddling. In other words, the Soviets had become captive of their own wishful thinking in the Arab world, but their analyses did not match reality.

The Current Soviet Perspective

By the time Gorbachev succeeded Chernenko in March 1985, Soviet foreign policy in the Arab world was in disarray. When Gorbachev began speaking of his "new political thinking" in late 1987, one could surmise that Soviet foreign policy, in the Middle East and elsewhere, was due for a shake-up. In the Arab-Israeli context, Soviet policy required reformulation for three reasons. First, Gorbachev's domestic preoccupations, the perestroika which generated the need for "new thinking", called for reduction of regional tensions and stressed economic factors over ideology. Second, developments within the Middle East had transformed the USSR from an anti-status-quo power to a status quo power. Third, Brezhnev's policy in the Arab world had been a failure.

Pragmatism over ideology. Gorbachev's "new thinking" emphasized pragmatism over ideology and allowed the Soviets to stand back and to review Moscow's over-reliance upon the "progressive" states (Syria, Libya, PDRY). Under "new thinking", economic benefits were to drive foreign policy. Syria was on the verge of bankruptcy, PDRY has always been an economic "basket case", and Libya, hit by falling oil prices and drained by Qadhafi's foreign adventures, was seriously in arrears on arms payments. Conversely, Moscow's relationships with the oil-rich Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states were tenuous at best. "New thinking" also advocated reduction of tensions with the West and peaceful settlement of regional conflicts, although primarily for reasons external to the Middle East. Strong Soviet backing for Syria and Libya, both advocates of state terrorism and of headlong regional conflict, undercut Gorbachev's overall objectives by isolating Moscow within the Arab region.

Status quo versus instability. The USSR also has come to have an interest in the stability of the Middle East. In part, of course, this was due to the desire to reduce tensions with the West through peaceful resolution of regional conflicts. The West has been nervous over the prospect of another Arab-Israeli war and the impact of the Iraq-Iran conflict on vital petroleum shipping routes; Moscow fears violence in the Middle East could harm Soviet interests and risk Soviet-American involvement. Conflict in the Arab-Israeli, Iraq-Iran, and intra-Arab contexts created dangerous instability in an area adjacent to Soviet borders and created the potential for western military intervention on the Soviet periphery. I will discuss this question further in the section on Soviet interests in the Middle East.

Proliferation. Related to the question of Soviet concerns over the volatility of Middle East conflicts, the lethality and sophistication (not to mention the range) of foreign-supplied weapons in Middle Eastern arsenals has

increased as well. The Iraqis used chemical weapons against Iran as well as Soviet-supplied surface-to-surface missiles like the SCUD-B. Further, the Iraqis were perfecting their own medium-range ballistic missile which could reach both Israel and the USSR. Iraq was also continuing with its nuclear program, spectacularly interrupted in 1981 by the Israeli attack. The Syrians were perfecting their own chemical and biological weapons, while the Israelis possessed a nuclear weapons capacity, including a medium-range ballistic missile capable of hitting the USSR. Although the proliferation of highly lethal sophisticated weapons in the region did not deter the Soviets from continuing to sell a high volume of advanced conventional weapons, such as the Su-24 and the MiG-29, to its Arab clients, the spill-over possibilities of these new mass-destruction weapons into a generalized Middle Eastern conflict were becoming more and more ominous, particularly when Moscow could not control the actions of Soviet clients. The 1973 Arab-Israeli war may have been the last major regional conflict which would be fought on strictly conventional terms. The USSR had to become more cautious.

Fundamentalism. Another factor calling for Soviet prudence was Islamic fundamentalism. When the Soviets first entered the Middle East arena in a serious way in the 1950s, during the 'Abd-al-Nasir era, the political struggle had been between "progressive" Arab nationalism, usually embodied in younger generation military officers, and Arab conservatism, symbolized by western-protected monarchies. In fact, however, no Arab king has been overthrown since the Qadhafi coup in September 1969 and the "progressive" regimes have lost their revolutionary zeal as they struggled merely to survive. The new revolutionary force in the Arab world, Islamic fundamentalism, is a phenomenon which makes the Soviets increasingly uncomfortable. Certainly, Islamic fundamentalism has worked against Western

interests in the Middle East, particularly in Iran, but Soviet clients in Syria, Libya, and Algeria are also targetted by the fundamentalists. Further, should Islamic fundamentalism prevail in any of the Sunni Arab states, it is unlikely that the atheist Soviets will fare better than the Christian West. Even the fundamentalist " Hamas " movement among Palestinians in the Israeli occupied territories threatens Soviet efforts to encourage a PLO consensus prior to what is likely to be, if it ever begins, a lengthy negotiating process over the Arab-Israeli impasse.

Policy failures. Soviet policy in the Arab-Israeli arena in the pre-Gorbachev era also fell victim to poor tactical choices. In part, these failures were due to bad luck, for example the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran conflict and the threat of Iran to the Arab Gulf states so soon after the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty. Soviet immobilism, however, compounded the problem. In part, the failures were due to unrealistic expectations on Moscow's part, faced with the atomized and self-serving nature of the Arab world. Any attempt to forge an "anti-imperialist" bloc was doomed by chronic Arab disunity, bitter bilateral feuds (e.g. Syria-Iraq, Egypt-Syria, Egypt-Libya), and Arab unresponsiveness to superpower interests. And in part, the failures were due to Moscow's attempt to view the internecine conflicts and rivalries of the Arab world through the optic of Marxism-Leninism, endlessly debating in the International Department of the CPSU whether Iraq or Syria or Libya was bourgeois nationalist or building socialism. Ideology, like statistics, can be made to say whatever one wants. The Soviets under Brezhnev were too preoccupied with the idea of military competition with the U.S to think of ways to broaden Moscow's influence in the Arab world.

In part, however, the Soviets simply lacked a grand strategy for the region. Moscow never made much of an effort to build serious bridges to the Arab moderates, despite the fact that the Gulf Arabs held the purse strings and disbursed the Baghdad Summit payments to Syria and the PLO after 1979. The Soviets, given their one-sided approach to the Arab-Israeli issue, also lacked any serious influence with the Israelis and thus ironically, in Arab eyes, were powerless to affect a negotiated political settlement. In addition, one can view the systematic exclusion of Moscow from the negotiating process by all of the Camp David participants (even before Camp David) as a defeat for Soviet policy and a victory for Kissinger and his successors. Further, the fact that Moscow had been powerless to affect a military settlement had been evident to the Arabs after the 1967 and 1973 wars. Finally, as the Arab-Israeli stalemate persisted after the Camp David process and the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war, Moscow was too slow to grasp the implications of the increasing isolation of both Syria and Libya within the Arab world. Syria's acceptance in 1983 of Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops in the Biqa' Valley of Lebanon was scarcely a boon to Moscow, but the Soviets appear to have been slow to realize this.

Terrorism. Finally, a word should be said about Moscow's relationship with terrorists. Perhaps, at one time, the Soviets looked upon Palestinian terrorists ideologically as national liberationists, but Soviet bloc contacts with, and safe havens for, Abu Nidal, who gunned down Jordanian, Saudi, UAE, and Kuwaiti diplomats as well as moderate PLO elements, undermined Soviet credibility among the Arabs. In addition, Moscow's close links to Syria and Libya, avid practitioners of state terrorism, further marginalized the Soviets. Soviet flirtation with Palestinian terrorism developed during the zero-sum era of active opposition to American interests in the Arab world. It

is likely that the Soviets have long been ambivalent about Palestinian terrorism, however. On the one hand, terrorism was often counter-productive and uncontrollable. On the other, Palestinian terrorism at times set even the Arab moderates, angry over Israeli activities, against the Americans and allowed the Soviets to fish in troubled waters. The Soviets, however, did not appear to fully grasp the repercussions when Palestinian terrorism was turned against Arafat and his PLO mainstream. Perhaps the Soviets were fearful that the moderate PLO members, such as Sartawi, would endorse an American-sponsored peace effort, leaving the Soviets out in the cold yet again. Perhaps the Soviets were impressed by Arab reluctance to accede to U.S. demands to move against Abu Nidal, mistaking Arab annoyance with U.S. support for Israel with sympathy for Palestinian extremism. In the end, then, for various reasons, Moscow wound up, by the time Gorbachev assumed power, dangerously isolated among the Arabs and with no entree into the peace process.

Soviet Interests in the Middle East

Old habits die hard. Although Gorbachev's "new thinking" has abandoned the previous Soviet goal of undercutting U.S. influence in the Middle East whenever and wherever possible, old habits die hard. It is likely that, until Gorbachev and Shevardnadze turn their undivided attention to the Arab-Israeli arena, and they certainly have enough to keep them preoccupied at present, to a degree the Soviet perception of Middle Eastern developments will still be shaped by ideological commitment to zero-sum competition. This is equally true on the American side. There is understandably deep distrust in Washington of Soviet intentions in the Middle East, particularly on the sensitive Arab-Israeli issue. It is likely that Gorbachev will need to consider radical departures from past policies if the USSR is to break through

the inertia of traditional thinking in Washington, Tel Aviv, Cairo, and Riyadh which allows Moscow little or no role these days in key Arab-Israeli issues.

Superpower status. What are current Soviet goals in the Middle East? Oddly enough, one primary goal has remained fairly constant from Brezhnev to Gorbachev, although the means of attaining this objective have changed radically. Simply put, this Soviet goal is to obtain regional recognition as a superpower equal in status to the U.S. At present, this elusive goal takes the form of direct and equal Soviet participation in the Arab-Israeli peace process. The policies of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras have resulted in a situation where Soviet participation in the peace process of dubious value, even among the Egyptians and some moderate PLO elements. The last time an effort was made, by President Carter in July 1977, to bring the Soviets into the peace process, the move proved surprisingly unpopular on all sides. Gorbachev will have to demonstrate that Soviet participation is not designed merely to serve Syria's goals.

Peacemaker image. A second Soviet goal, which follows from regional recognition of Soviet superpower status through participation in the peace process, is the successful conclusion of an Arab-Israeli peace settlement. Although regional stability is a Soviet interest, as noted above, a settlement of the Arab-Israeli impasse would have ramifications which go far beyond the region. The "new thinking" in foreign policy, the Soviet effort to reduce world tensions and to resolve regional disputes, aims at securing for Gorbachev the necessary time to put the USSR back on its feet through the process of internal political reform and perestroika. An Arab-Israeli settlement, in a region where the West and Japan have vital economic interests at stake and where the U.S. focuses considerable domestic political attention, would reap great benefits for the Soviets in many other areas (commercial

exchanges, arms control, political trade-offs) if Moscow can play a constructive role. Gorbachev could go a long way toward convincing American skeptics if he can play a positive role in an Arab-Israeli settlement.

Arms sales. A third Soviet goal, of a much different nature, is to preserve, if possible, the hard currency earnings which derive from Soviet arms sales to clients such as Libya, Syria, and Iraq. Currently, proceeds from arms sales to Middle East clients constitutes a healthy percentage of overall Soviet hard currency earnings, estimated to be as much as 15% of the total. In a period of economic restructuring and increased commercial dealings with the West, the Soviets cannot afford to sacrifice such significant revenues. On the other hand, with the winding down of the Iraq-Iran conflict and the collapse of the Syrian economy, Soviet arms sales to the Arab states are slowly diminishing. In addition, the unpleasant reality (for Moscow) is that, the more arms are sold to current Arab clients, the greater their mounting debt, which erodes their economic situation and makes more difficult future arms purchases. Further, as noted above, weaponry in the Middle East is becoming increasingly lethal. While the Soviets are only too anxious to sell the Su-24 and the MiG-29, they appear to draw the line at surface to surface missiles larger than the SCUD-B. The Soviets are also unwilling to engage in chemical warfare and nuclear cooperation, both because of the outcry that this would raise in the West and because the region is, after, on the Soviet periphery. Finally, Moscow's relative political isolation in the Arab world makes it difficult to broaden Soviet arms sales to the Arab moderates, although this appears to be the only long-term solution. Otherwise, with even OPEC members Libya and Algeria in financial straits, it appears that the Soviets will be hard-pressed to maintain their Arab arms sales at current levels. It is, of course, possible that the Soviets will

attempt to expand the arms-for-oil arrangement, currently in effect with Libya, to other Arab states, particularly the moderates. This might make financial sense to the GCC states during periods of limited production and low oil prices, but the Soviets would still have to overcome deep suspicions to make political inroads among the GCC states and this would require considerably reduced superpower tensions in the region.

Expansion of trade. A fourth Soviet goal, related to the third, is thus to expand its commercial, non-military dealings with the Arab world. Just as the Soviets in Latin America have gone beyond traditional ideological ties to Cuba and Nicaragua to seek out more lucrative commercial relationships with Brazil and Argentina, Moscow has an interest in going beyond traditional clients such as Syria and Libya to rebuild its commercial relationship with Egypt on a new, more reciprocal, basis and, far more important, ultimately to seek commercial relationships with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. There is no doubt that, at present, the Soviets would be hard pressed to ship to the GCC anything other than arms which could compete with Western products, but I shall return to this question later. Suffice it to say that any new Soviet commercial relationships with the moderate Arabs will require moves by Gorbachev to break down the barriers of mistrust which still exist.

Western military forces. Fifth, a major goal of Soviet policy in the Middle East remains keeping western, primarily U.S., military forces out of the region adjacent to the increasingly volatile Soviet Muslim republics. As noted above, this has made Moscow apprehensive over the possible outbreak of conflict in the Middle East and supportive of regional stability. For example, although the American intervention in Beirut in 1983-1984 was fatally flawed, for a while it looked as if Moscow's client Syria, militarily humiliated by Israel in both 1981 and 1982, would suffer political eclipse as

well in Lebanon, thanks in part to American machinations. It did not come to pass, but the Soviets were powerless to affect the situation. Worse, during 1988, the American naval presence in the Persian Gulf, the result of the Iraq-Iran conflict, was even closer to Soviet frontiers. The Soviets, once again, were powerless to influence the situation and were mindful that the American decision to reflag the Kuwaiti tankers came after a similar Soviet offer had been tabled.

Islamic fundamentalism. Sixth, the Soviets increasingly have as a goal the prevention of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism into the Soviet Muslim republics. In part, of course, this is related to the Iranian question and is separate from the Arab-Israeli issue, but the Palestine cause has long been one of the most emotional issues in the Sunni Arab world and, in part, Islamic fundamentalism has grown because of the failure of Arab regimes to obtain justice for the Palestinians. Further, the rise of fundamentalist regimes in the Sunni Arab area would in all likelihood produce great instability, again raising the spectre of western military intervention to protect vital interests. In addition, the rise of Arab fundamentalist regimes might also give Iran a further injection of religious fervor, which might have adverse consequences north of the Soviet border. One only has to consider the present crisis in Soviet Azerbaijan, and the tensions this has caused in Soviet-Iranian relations. Possibly, also, the Sunni Arab fundamentalists might seek to convert their Sunni brethren in the USSR. Conversely, however, increased stability within the Arab world, perhaps the result of an Arab-Israeli settlement, would tend to isolate Iran and might reduce Iranian attempts to proselytize in the USSR. It is also possible, however, that an Arab-Israeli settlement would not be acceptable to Muslim fundamentalists, who

might seek to destabilize "traitor" regimes. Nothing is certain, but Gorbachev appears inclined to take this risk.

Soviet Relations with Syria

There are, perhaps, similarities in Moscow's relations these days with Castro and with Syria's Asad. Both are having difficulty accepting Gorbachev's "new thinking". Of course, Cuba is a self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist state, while Syria's Ba'athist ideology, although sounding "progressive", has become little more than a rationalization for continued Alawite minority rule. Nonetheless, Castro and Cuba have become something of an embarrassment for Gorbachev and his "new thinking" and so have Asad and Syria. The problem for Moscow in both cases is that longstanding relationships with considerable Soviet investment of prestige cannot be easily reversed, without Soviet credibility suffering considerable damage. Perhaps the ties of ideology bind Moscow closer to Havana than to Damascus, but it is also true that the relationship with Castro costs more than links to Asad. In view of historical Soviet aversion to radical policy shifts in the Arab world, one might argue that Gorbachev is unlikely to abandon Asad and Syria, although Moscow has moved somewhat away from hard-line Syrian positions. Arguably, a break with Syria would undermine faith in Soviet commitments throughout the region. On the other hand, elsewhere Gorbachev has been known to fold when he held a losing hand. Perhaps, then, it is best to begin by examining the factors which have created tensions between the USSR and Syria.

"Rejectionist" Syria. Despite the fact that Shevardnadze declared in February 1989, while visiting Damascus, that Syria was Moscow's "leading partner" in the Middle East, Asad's hard-line stance concerning eventual negotiated compromise in the Arab-Israeli impasse has undercut Soviet designs

to participate in the peace process. At present, the Soviets might well attend a Middle East peace conference even if Asad refused to participate. Despite the fact that the USSR has been unswerving in support for Syria, there now appears to be a realization in Moscow that the Soviets may need help to get Syria "on board" the peace process. During the same February 1989 trip, Shevardnadze attempted to arrange a strategy session between Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and the PLO, but this fizzled. If Moscow is determined to enhance its superpower status in the region through participation in the peace process, Gorbachev appears on a collision course with Asad. Something will have to give, but, in view of Syria's current isolation, military dependence upon Moscow, and mounting economic problems, it may well be Asad who is forced to blink first in this test of wills.

Parity or sufficiency. An allied problem has been Moscow's disagreement with Damascus over the level of armament Syria requires to face the Israelis. Asad has long insisted on military parity with the Israelis, but he and Gorbachev have parted company on this issue. The Soviets are arguing that parity is not essential, that "defensive sufficiency" (terminology from the current Soviet military lexicon) will do. Certainly there are fears in Moscow that Asad might be tempted to launch an attack if he achieved parity. Of course, this issue is complicated by the fact that the Soviets, increasingly hungry for hard currency to pay for desperately needed high-technology western imports, are willing to sell the most advanced types of conventional Soviet military hardware to Damascus, which is increasingly saddled with debts to the USSR. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze must thus walk a very fine line.

Economic woes. The sale of conventional Soviet weapons to Syria, however, is complicated by Syria's serious economic problems. Gorbachev is insisting that arms payments be made swiftly in hard currency, but the Syrians are

increasingly in arrears. If the Soviets forgive some of the Syrian military debt, or allow Damascus to string out the payments over decades, the Soviet economy is not being helped and the Soviets, as donors not sellers, become more directly responsible for what Asad chooses to do with the Soviet weapons. A further complicating factor is that Syria's economy is, in part, being propped up by cash payments from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, who may not, in the long run, be very enthusiastic over continued heavy Syrian purchases of Soviet military equipment.

Palestinians. Another disagreement bedeviling Soviet-Syrian relations involves the PLO. Asad and 'Arafat have not seen eye to eye for years, but the Syrians and the Soviets parted company over Soviet efforts to reconcile 'Arafat with the PFLP's Habbash and the DFLP's Hawatmah during the April 1987 Algiers Palestine National Council (PNC) meeting. This disagreement was compounded by Soviet support for the moderate stance taken by the November 1988 Algiers PNC meeting. Increasingly, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze appear to see 'Arafat and the PLO as their entree into the negotiating process, particularly in view of Asad's continuing opposition. The Soviets are well aware that 'Arafat is, at best, a slippery customer, but, in the face-off between 'Arafat and Asad, the Soviets, anxious to get into the peace game, have increasingly backed 'Arafat.

Terrorism. Related to the PLO question is Soviet concern over Syria's links to Palestinian and Iranian terrorism. This is not to say that the Soviets are unalterably opposed to terrorism, although, from a purely Marxist-Leninist standpoint, terrorism can be counterproductive and impede the "scientific" dialectic of the class struggle. The problem for Moscow, despite the fact that the Soviets deplored Palestinian terrorism to the PLO leadership at the time of the Munich massacres in 1972, is that the line between the

national liberation struggle and terrorism is too thin and the Soviets have trained and abetted "guerrillas" who later became "terrorists". For example, Abu Nidal was able to build up an elaborate support apparatus in Eastern Europe, certainly with Soviet knowledge. Under Gorbachev, however, Syrian links to Abu Nidal and Ahmad Jibril of the PFLP-GC, among others, have provided grist for Israel's propaganda and have undercut the efforts of 'Arafat to spruce up the Palestinian image. Further, Syria's Palestinian terrorist friends are all implacably opposed to 'Arafat and the peace process. Finally, Syria's links to terrorists, including the pro-Iranian Lebanese Hizballah, also serves to isolate Damascus further within the increasingly moderate Arab world, at a time when Moscow is attempting to broaden contacts.

Asad and succession. A final complicating factor is Asad himself. The Soviets have disagreed with Asad over the course of the relationship on many matters, long before the arrival of Gorbachev on the scene. For example, Moscow has never endorsed Syrian ambitions in Lebanon during the course of the interminable civil war, dating from 1975. As noted above, however, a great deal of Soviet prestige has been invested in the relationship. Asad, however, has several times been ill with heart problems and diabetes, and there is no designated successor in Syria. There is no guarantee that, upon Asad's retirement or demise, a regime friendly to Moscow will emerge. Given Syria's vulnerability vis-a-vis the Israelis, it is hard to see where a successor regime could go for support, other than to Moscow. Gorbachev, however, is not the only practitioner of the sudden reversal: it has been a favorite Arab tactic from time immemorial and Syria and Egypt have made common cause before. It is more likely, however, that a post-Asad Syria will be considerably weaker, at least for some time. There will be infighting among the various military factions and, if things unravel, the Muslim Brotherhood may appear

once again. In other words, Gorbachev cannot make his calculations concerning Syria based on the present only. If the Soviets put all their eggs in the Syrian basket today, they may be left with nothing once their friend leaves the scene.

A caveat. There is one scenario which would benefit Gorbachev in the short run, because it would eliminate some of the hard choices. Possibly Asad, always an astute tactician, has seen the handwriting on the wall and, rather than be left alone by Soviet flirtation with the moderates, will reverse course and pursue negotiations with Israel under Soviet-U.S. sponsorship. Asad would put his credibility and years of rejectionism on the line, but Gorbachev could claim considerable credit with the moderates for his "coup" with Asad. Gorbachev has pushed for such a development, prompting a degree of Syrian-Egyptian reconciliation. As yet, Asad has made no meaningful concessions, although he may eventually yield.

The Soviets and the PLO

Do Arafat and the PLO present a more viable vehicle for Gorbachev to ride into eventual negotiations, assuming that Asad does not come around? Despite the seeming cordiality these days, Arafat and the Soviets have not always been the best of friends. Moscow would much prefer the old Arab Nationalist Habbash of the PFLP or the Marxist Hawatmah of the DFLP, not to mention the minuscule Palestine Communist Party under Najjar. Arafat, after all, has strong ties to Egypt and is even rumored to have roots within the Muslim Brotherhood. In many ways, the recent moderation showed by Arafat was more a result of American prodding than of Soviet persuasion. The PLO understands what Sadat stated in 1972: the Soviets do not have influence with Israel, the U.S. does. On the other hand, the Soviets have long espoused the Palestinian

cause, without signing on to specific PLO demands, and the PLO in Soviet eyes does maintain the image of a national liberation movement. There is little question that, under present circumstances, the Soviets see an opportunity to reach their goals through cooperation with the PLO. Moscow has thus moved closer to 'Arafat, while making it clear in Moscow to the visiting Asad, in May 1987 (after the April 1987 Algiers PNC), that his efforts to divide the Palestinian movement were not appreciated. The key question is whether Gorbachev sees in the PLO, and possibly in the Palestinian mini-state which one day may take its place, a long-term partner capable of furthering Soviet interests in the Arab world. There is as yet no clear answer to that question but the signs in Moscow are positive.

One uncertainty for the Soviets vis-a-vis the PLO/'Arafat is the PLO dialogue with the Americans, which began in Tunis in February 1989. Certainly, the Soviets have resigned themselves to foreign influences over the PLO and realize that the Saudis and the Egyptians carry as much weight as the USSR. In addition, the Soviets want to further cooperation with the U.S. through the peace process and encouraged the PLO-U.S. dialogue, hoping to bring negotiations closer. On the other hand, the Soviets are doubtless mindful of the precedent set by Sadat and the Camp David process. Soviet efforts to gain entree into the peace process would be fatally torpedoed if the Americans were to convince 'Arafat to negotiate somehow with the Israelis under U.S. auspices. Thus the Soviets must proceed cautiously. There are perhaps two ways to prevent the Americans from coopting 'Arafat, if this is considered a serious possibility in Moscow. One would be to strengthen Soviet ties with the PLO even further, at the expense of Syria, to make the Soviets indispensable to the PLO. The other would be to leap-frog the PLO-U.S. dialogue and to attempt to reach agreement directly with the Americans on the

broad outlines of an Arab-Israeli settlement. Both courses would involve Soviet concessions. With the PLO this might entail putting Soviet pressure on Habbash and Hawatmah to unify PLO ranks. With the U.S. it might entail concessions on the shape and nature of the eventual Palestinian entity unacceptable to the PLO. Unless the peace process suddenly becomes unblocked, Moscow probably prefers not to deal with these choices.

Another factor complicating the Soviet relationship with 'Arafat is the Intifada in the Israeli occupied territories, which broke out in December 1987. Although 'Arafat, who was caught off guard by the explosion, quickly moved to put his imprint on the Intifada, the question must remain in Gorbachev's mind whether the PLO is firmly in control. For the moment, certainly, there appears to be no serious rival to PLO authority in the occupied territories, but the Intifada has created a new generation of Palestinian leadership and it is impossible to predict at this juncture how the new breed will interact with the PLO over the long run. Further, the Intifada has also created a more vocal Muslim fundamentalist element (the Hamas movement) in the Occupied Territories which may one day challenge the more political PLO leadership. In other words, how long will the current PLO leadership survive and what will succeed them? This question depends to a great degree, of course, on whether there are serious negotiations for a Palestine settlement or not. For Gorbachev, however, in view of Soviet ambitions to get into the peace process, it may be tempting to move while 'Arafat is still around and in control, rather than risking an eventual splintering of the Palestinian movement. Of course, the Israelis have a great deal to say about that.

The USSR and Israel

The Soviets, for the sake of political expediency, made a tactical mistake in 1967 which has haunted their Middle East strategy ever since: after Israel's victory in the June six-day war, Moscow broke diplomatic relations as a gesture of support for the devastated 'Abd-al-Nasir and to mask Soviet unwillingness to become directly involved in diplomatic attempts to sort out the aftermath. With this seemingly empty gesture, the Soviets in effect removed themselves from any semblance of even-handedness and, thus, forfeited any claim to broker any future peace process. At the time, Moscow still hoped to isolate the U.S. and the Israelis from the Arab mainstream, so the lack of Soviet-Israeli official contacts counted little. In 1967, the possibility that there would one day be an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty which could endure ten years and that the majority of the Arab world would forgive Egypt seemed remote. Under Gorbachev, however, the USSR wants to get in on the action and the gesture of 1967 remains a major stumbling block.

The question now is: what is the price for renewed relations? Any Soviet participation in a Middle East peace conference will most probably require Soviet-Israeli diplomatic ties beforehand, but does Moscow wait for Israel to make a specific proposition or does Gorbachev unilaterally make a gesture without conditions? Waiting for the Israelis would allow the Soviets to claim to the Arabs that they were not the instigators, but the call might never come. Gorbachev making the gesture would doubtless get the issue resolved, but Moscow may be concerned that such a step, coming after the floodgates of Jewish emigration to Israel have been reopened, might be too much for Syria or even the PLO. Certainly, following the diplomatic dialogue in Paris, the foreign ministers meetings at the UNGA, and the exchange of consular delegations between Moscow and Tel Aviv, many Arab governments consider the prospect of eventual Soviet-Israeli ties inevitable and perhaps this has

reduced the political price of such a gesture. On the other hand, such a move would be a major departure, a leap into the unknown without finding out first whether there is a safety net. The Soviets have invested great prestige in defense of the Arab cause. Their credibility is on the line. On the other hand, the Soviets are anxious to get into the peace process and, if conditions are right, I believe Gorbachev would restore relations unilaterally.

The biggest stumbling block, of course, was the Likud's Shamir. As long as Shamir was Prime Minister and the peace process remained stalled, much of the calculation concerning the "price" to Moscow of restored relations was academic. A Gorbachev gesture in the face of Likud intransigence would be too humiliating. The March 1990 collapse of the Israeli Unity Government, however, creates potential new options for the Soviets. Of course, there are various scenarios: Peres and the Labor Party might create a narrowly based government; Shamir and Likud might create a narrowly based government with Labor in opposition; or elections could be held, creating either a Labor or Likud majority or another unity government. Another possibility is that, without elections, another Unity Government, this time specifically accepting to enter negotiations under the Baker plan, might be created. This appears to be the demand of Shas and the other small Sephardic parties in the Knesset. Moscow will have to watch these developments closely, both because the Soviets do not want to be left behind at the station if the negotiations train suddenly begins to move and because the Soviets do not want to strengthen Shamir's hand in any way.

Any scenario poses a dilemma for the Soviets. If Peres and Labor emerge at the head of a narrowly-based government committed to negotiations and land-for-peace, should Gorbachev move immediately to restore relations? Would this strengthen the hand of Labor by making the Soviets and their Arab clients

appear more reasonable or would Shamir and Sharon be able to make ground by claiming that Labor was in cahoots with the Soviets? If Shamir was able to form a narrowly-based government with Labor in the opposition, should the Soviets make an effort to step up ties, long existing through the Socialist International, with Labor, to explore various negotiating scenarios for future use? How would this play in the partisan strife of Israeli politics? If the Sephardic parties force the creation of a new National Unity government under Shamir but dedicated to beginning negotiations under the Baker plan, should the Soviets continue to sit on the sidelines? Finally, if current negotiations to create a new Israeli government fail and elections are declared, will the Soviets be able to keep absolutely quiet, even though their primary objective is to gain entree to the peace process? It would be tempting for Gorbachev to come out with the unexpected on the eve of Israeli elections, even though the results might be counter-productive. Gorbachev is more of a gambler than his predecessors, particularly when he knows what he is after.

The Soviets must also keep American and western opinion in mind when calculating how to approach the Israelis. In view of the pronounced Soviet bloc "tilt" toward the Arabs, reaching out to Tel Aviv has become the litmus test of "new thinking," certainly in Eastern Europe. Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, once they slipped Moscow's leash, moved quickly to restore diplomatic links with Israel and Moscow may feel some pressure from the West to prove the new Soviet liberalism and the decoupling of ideology from foreign policy by restoring ties to Israel. Perhaps renewed Jewish emigration from the USSR will suffice in the eyes of western public opinion. The increased outflow of Soviet Jews, in the face of the Israeli handling of the Intifada, is quite impressive, but allowing the flow of emigration to rise makes more

anomalous the fact that relations do not exist. The Soviets may be tempted to deal with Israelis incrementally, much as they are doing with the Syrians and the PLO, and the step up the relationship slowly, expanding consultations at various technical levels. The Israeli equation is different, however. Diplomatic relations are a bit like pregnancy: you cannot be a little pregnant and you either have ties or you do not. Interest sections will not fill the bill in this case. Moscow will feel increasing pressure to restore ties.

The USSR and Egypt

The Soviets did not know it at the time, but Sadat's decision to expel Soviet military advisors in July 1972 marked the end of Soviet influence in Egypt. Perhaps it can be argued that Sadat's decision was prompted by the abortive pro-Soviet Ali Sabri coup of May 1971. In any case, Moscow's eclipse in Egypt--the most influential Arab nation--was a major setback. Today, as Gorbachev attempts to insinuate the USSR back into the Arab-Israeli equation, the loss of influence in Egypt must appear in Moscow as frustrating as the lack of formal ties to Israel. The Soviets, of course, compounded their own problems, perhaps understandably, by shrilly backing the 1978 Baghdad summit condemnation of Egypt and supporting the Rejection Front, which attempted to isolate Egypt within the Arab world. As noted above, the Iraq-Iran conflict frustrated Soviet designs and Moscow was not helped by the 1981 Sadat assassination, which installed the low-key, steady Mubarak, who maintained the treaty with Israel. By 1990, when the Arab League announced that it would return to Cairo from Tunis, the rehabilitation of Egypt was complete, Moscow's allies were isolated, and Egypt was again in the forefront of attempts to resolve the Arab-Israeli impasse.

Although the Soviets have improved ties with Egypt under Gorbachev and have reaped considerable good will by rescheduling Egypt's long-standing military debt to Moscow, relations are not close. In part, this is because the Egyptians are embarked, with the U.S., on a major effort to rekindle negotiations on a Palestinian solution. In part, it is because the Egyptians are aware of Soviet economic problems and have little desire to jeopardize the substantial aid received from Washington. But the cautious Mubarak also has something of a "show me" attitude toward the Soviets, understandable in view of close Soviet ties to such Egyptian rivals as Syria and Libya. The Egyptians may, in fact, constitute another source of pressure on Moscow to normalize relations with Israel, although Cairo is unlikely to push such a step publicly. Soviet resumption of relations with Israel would justify Egypt's earlier move and would further isolate Moscow's Arab allies, unless they moved quickly in the direction of moderation. Why, one might ask, would Moscow want to do such a thing for Egypt?

The answer is primarily economic and would be based on long-term Soviet interests. Although Egypt has long been, in part thanks to Soviet advice, an economic disaster, would not Gorbachev's USSR, with the new emphasis on trade, see some potential for joint economic ventures with Egypt and with other Arab moderates? This may not occur until after Arab-Israeli negotiations, if they ever occur, and may involve some sort of triangular relationship involving Gulf Arab money, Egyptian industrial manpower, and Soviet technology. Admittedly, such considerations are highly speculative, but it appears unlikely that the Soviets will gain meaningful economic links to Saudi Arabia, for example, unless there is progress between Moscow and Cairo. One must go back to the Arab Industrialization Organization, the joint Egyptian-Saudi arms manufacturing enterprise created by Sadat in 1975, to find what might be the

prototype of future cooperation. If Moscow wishes to earn hard currency through arms sales, for example, but the GCC prove politically unwilling to buy directly from Moscow, one wonders whether some sort of coproduction arrangement with Egypt, with Saudi financing, might be an alternative. Again, this would have to be after some sort of an Arab-Israeli settlement with superpower polarization in the Middle East region reduced. Of course, joint ventures are equally, if not more, possible in non-military sectors. The question is not whether a coproduction scheme is too fanciful, but rather whether the Soviets will long be satisfied with close relations with the bankrupt Syrians and the erratic Libyans. Moscow would certainly like to crack the moderate Arab market and must be thinking about how to do it.

The USSR and Saudi Arabia

It must not have escaped Soviet attention that, in countering Soviet ambitions in Afghanistan, the Americans were materially assisted by the Saudis and the Egyptians. The Saudis, although weak demographically, have emerged from years of low-key political activity to assert themselves as the financial and OPEC superpower of the region. The Saudis are certainly wary of the Soviets, both ideologically and because of the friends the Soviets keep in the Arab world, but an improvement of Soviet-Saudi ties would increase the sense of Soviet legitimacy throughout Arab ranks and confirm the fact that Gorbachev has separated ideology and foreign policy. The Saudis, of course, are suspicious of Soviet efforts to improve ties to Iran, as are most moderate Arabs, but improved ties to Riyadh might help to allay those fears. The Saudis have also demonstrated, during the Chinese missile deal, that they do not take kindly to American arms sales restrictions, particularly when these are inspired by the Israeli lobby. The Soviets might have a potential arms market in the GCC area. But how?

As with the Egyptians, one Saudi litmus test for the Soviets appears to be how Moscow conducts itself on the Middle East peace issue. Of course, there are other irritants. The Saudis were not happy in 1986-1987 that the Soviets raised oil production at a time when Riyadh was attempting to hold down OPEC production to raise world oil prices. The Saudis and Soviets are still at odds over Afghanistan and the flip-flop Soviet response to the Iraq-Iran conflict still rankles in Riyadh, which put all its chips on Baghdad. Still, if the Soviets are able to work closely with the Americans and to participate in a compromise settlement of one of the remaining serious regional conflicts, there are likely to be added dividends in the Saudi relationship. The Soviets are aware that, once again, this entails moving away from Syria with no guarantees in hand. The Saudis are certainly not interested at the moment in Soviet export products beyond military equipment. Is it worth it?

If the Soviets are seeking hard currency, the Saudis certainly have more than the other players in the region. I mentioned previously the speculative idea of joint ventures in Egypt financed by the Saudis. One wonders whether, at some point considerably down the road, the Saudis might not be tempted by Saudi-financed American joint ventures in the USSR. At present, with the Soviet economy in disarray, the time is not right and the Saudis are well aware that most potential big-time investors in the USSR are sitting on the fence. What about the future? Would it not be in Moscow's interest to begin to cultivate Riyadh in a serious manner? If a compromise could be worked out one day in Afghanistan, perhaps, in the interest of keeping the Kabul government out of the clutches of Iran, the Soviets could enlist Saudi funds for a reconstruction effort. Again, very speculative, but if economic thinking is now driving Soviet foreign policy, the Saudis and their GCC

friends must loom larger in Moscow's calculations than was the case under Brezhnev.

Conclusion

For the medium-to-long term, one can identify three broad courses of action available to the Soviets in the Arab-Israeli arena:

--To continue the evolutionary policy currently being followed by Gorbachev and Shevardnadze. Such a policy would be aimed at keeping as many options open as possible. For example, this approach would include such incremental steps as broadening Soviet contacts beyond traditional Arab clients, while stressing the importance of traditional Soviet allies in the Arab world; more actively seeking peaceful solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict, while stressing the fact that Syrian concerns must be met in an overall settlement; recognizing the importance to the Soviet economy of current arms deliveries to existing Arab clients; and moving cautiously, without undue haste, toward an improvement in relations with Israel.

--To shift dramatically away from current Soviet incremental policies with unexpected new initiatives, designed to break the USSR out of its current impasse. Such a policy would move the Soviets deliberately away from traditional Arab clients, such as Syria and Libya, regardless of the possibility of prompting an open break, and would focus on immediate ways to build stronger ties with moderate Arab states. This would involve, sooner rather than later, with less regard than at present for the political fall-out, establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel. It would also involve a much closer political embrace of the PLO and the Arab moderates in search of a viable compromise Arab-Israeli settlement. Finally, such a policy might require a sharp reduction of arms sales to Moscow's traditional Arab

allies, as a clear signal to the moderates that Moscow would no longer underwrite the military dimension of Arab rejection.

--To reverse course and to throw Moscow's weight behind Syrian efforts to undermine the current U.S. framework for a negotiated settlement. This would entail a rejection of Anafat and renewed Soviet backing for attempts by radical Arab clients to undermine the moderate regimes.

Unless Gorbachev is overthrown, it is hard to imagine Moscow's reversion to an anti-status-quo stance in the Middle East. Even in the event that a hard-line regime resurfaces in Moscow, experience has already shown that disruptive Soviet behavior in the Arab world is counterproductive. One is also forced to ask whether such tactics would, in the end, matter. A hard-line, but economically weak, USSR could well become increasingly marginal to developments in the region. The real question is whether Gorbachev will choose to act incrementally or whether, in a bold stroke, he will attempt to shift the Soviet course in the Middle East, with all the risks to prestige and credibility that this might entail. To better assess the evolutionary versus bold-stroke approaches, perhaps it is best to review the specific choices facing Gorbachev:

--Syria: Asad has a lot of negatives, but he is Moscow's staunchest ally in the region. What does Moscow get in return for abandoning Asad? Is Soviet superpower legitimacy worth the dangers to credibility and prestige? Can the USSR hope to embellish its image as a peacemaker without splitting with Asad? Can the Soviets, with help from the Arab moderates, finally break down Asad's intransigence? Does Syria really have no other options than to allow Soviet dalliance? I tend to be much less sanguine than other observers that Gorbachev will "stay the course" with Asad, although the Soviets will first

make every effort to bring Syria into the moderate camp and to claim the credit. So far, the Soviets have not had much success.

--PLO: 'Arafat also has a lot of negatives, but, if there is ever a negotiated settlement, the PLO is likely to be in control of the Palestinian entity. There has been considerable debate on whether the Soviets would like to see a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement which largely ended tensions or a drawn-out process which ended the conflict but maintained a sense of uncertainty. Assuming that the Soviets participated positively in the peace process, an uneasy situation might be in Moscow's interest, as the Israelis are certain to create problems for Washington, as they did after the Egyptian-Israeli treaty. In this case, it would be better to have good ties to the moderate Arabs, to gain some ground on the Americans among these economically critical states. Perhaps the key question is how badly Gorbachev wants to get into the negotiating process. If, as all assume, participation is the key Soviet goal, then 'Arafat is Gorbachev's man. I think the Soviets may put a lot more eggs in the PLO basket, unless Asad comes around.

--Israel: Shamir, of course, has the most negatives, but Gorbachev is unlikely to reestablish relations with an Israeli government headed by Shamir unless negotiations are about to get underway in any case. Resumption of relations brings the Soviet objective of participation in the peace process closer and would be favorably regarded in Washington. On the other hand, there might well be negative Arab reaction to such a move and, again, Moscow's credibility might suffer. There is, however, widespread Arab resignation that such a move will come and Moscow can help the Arab cause at the peace table. The moderate Arabs would understand, although they will not jump up and applaud. Further, if Gorbachev were faced by a choice between breaking with Asad and restoring relations with Israel, restoration might be easier. Asad might well

souawk, but he might not break with Moscow. If he did, at least it would not be a Soviet initiative. Finally, diplomatic relations are not something that can be played out incrementally forever. I believe that, at the first opportunity (i.e. when Shamir is no longer a roadblock) the Soviets will normalize.

--Arms sales: The Soviets are well aware that arms sales in the Middle East, their long-term hard currency earner, are in decline and this trend may well continue. Syria is broke. Libya is unpredictable and is way behind in payments. Iraq is rebuilding its economy, has western alternate sources, and is no longer at war. Algeria is looking seriously at weapons diversification and is in serious economic shape. I believe that Gorbachev is unlikely to rely much longer solely on current Arab arms markets. The Soviets need to make inroads among the moderates, and have already made some very modest advances, such as with limited arms sales to Kuwait. To make such sales more than symbolic, however, the Soviets must make moves in other, political areas. Gorbachev will attempt to do so.

--Egypt and Saudi Arabia: The Cairo-Riyadh axis is the Clausewitzian center of gravity in the Arab world. The Soviets no more "had" Egypt under 'Abd-al-Nasir than the U.S. "has" it under Mubarak, but Moscow has been thrashing around for almost twenty years in an attempt to find an alternative to Egypt after the double-whammy of the death of 'Abd-al-Nasir and the expulsions under Sadat. The attempt has yielded little. The Soviets must, over the next decade, rebuild meaningful bridges to Cairo and to establish them with Riyadh. Without a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute, it is hard to see an incremental Soviet approach succeeding, as Moscow is still viewed with suspicion and must prove that "new thinking" is indeed different. Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was a move in the right direction, but many Arabs may view that move in the superpower context. I believe that the Soviets would like, in due

course, to loosen the American grip on the Cairo-Riyadh axis and this, more than questions directly related to the Palestine question, may prompt Gorbachev into some bold moves to gain entry to the peace process.

In conclusion, then, the incremental Soviet approach will, in all probability, be followed as long as the peace process remains frozen by Likud intransigence. A change of heart by Likud, or the installation of a Labor government, might not change things immediately, but the peace process would lurch slowly forward. The elements of Gorbachev's incremental Arab-Israeli policies are, to a degree, incompatible. Once there is movement in the peace process, Gorbachev might not be able to keep all the balls in the air at once. At that point, I believe that the Soviets will be forced to choose between traditional allies and a new approach. If he is concerned about the Soviet future in the Middle East, Gorbachev will opt for a new course.

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ADDENDA:

1. Author interview with Brian McCauley, Deputy National Intelligence Officer for USSR, March 12, 1990.

2. Reading of National Intelligence Estimate (Classification: Secret) on Soviet Options in the Middle East, published December 1989.

3. Author discussions with numerous Soviet diplomatic officials in Cairo (1975-1978), Baghdad (1979-1981), and Algiers (1985-1989) on subject of U.S. and Soviet policy options in the Middle East and Arab-Israeli areas.