
***The Dynamics of
Soviet Policy
in the
Middle East
Between Old Thinking
and New***

Mark A. Heller



***Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies
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**The Dynamics of Soviet Policy
in the Middle East:
Between Old Thinking and New**

Mark A. Heller

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Preface

The text of this study was essentially completed at the end of 1990 and slightly updated in the spring of 1991 to reflect the course of the Gulf War. Soviet behavior before and during the fighting confirmed both the basic thrust of changing Middle Eastern policy implicit in new thinking and the impact of the remaining impediments to its thoroughgoing implementation.

The most serious of these impediments was the resistance of conservative forces, whose world-view, self-image and institutional interests were threatened by new thinking in domestic as well as foreign and national security policy, of which the Middle East was but one component. This inseparable link between the domestic and foreign dimensions of new thinking was dramatically illustrated during the abortive coup d'état of August 1991 which was publicly welcomed (apart from unrepentant communists) only by Iraq, Libya and elements of the PLO — precisely those foreign actors who had once benefited so much from Soviet old thinking. The failure of the putsch finally cleared away this obstacle and made it possible to accelerate the movement of Soviet policy along the path logically dictated by the requirements of restructuring, which had already been apparent for several years.

The restoration of ambassadorial-level diplomatic relations with Israel in October 1991 was not itself a result of the failed coup, since it coincided with Israel's decision to attend an international peace conference and therefore conformed with longstanding Soviet policy. But other actions after August, including the long-delayed implementation of a civil aviation agreement calling for direct flights and the hosting of Israeli visitors at previously-closed military facilities, indicated that all Soviet inhibitions about cultivating close ties with Israel had disappeared. Indeed, so completely had traditional patterns been overturned that Israelis seemed no less favorably disposed than Arabs to Soviet participation in the peace conference, and perhaps even more so.

The irony, of course, is that by this time, Soviet involvement could not denote coequal status with the United States and was

scarcely relevant for any of the other protagonists, because the failed coup had also accelerated the ongoing decline of Soviet influence abroad and the disintegrating power of the central government at home. During Mikhail Gorbachev's brief visit to the Madrid peace conference in October 1991, few journalists were interested in his views on the Arab-Israeli peace process; most wanted to know whether he still wielded any authority over the fractious and self-assertive republics at home. Indeed, his presence at the conference seemed mostly a matter of noblesse oblige, a gesture by President Bush to a man who had set in motion momentous changes which then passed him by. For the foreseeable future, the great imponderable was not the course of Soviet Middle Eastern policy, but whether the Soviet Union, beset by seemingly insurmountable domestic problems, would continue to exist at all.

In preparing this study, I benefited greatly from discussions with scholars and government officials in Israel, the Soviet Union and the United States. I am also grateful to my colleagues at the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies and to two anonymous reviewers for their comments and criticisms of earlier drafts of the text. For any errors of fact or interpretation, I remain solely responsible.

M.A.H.
November 1,
1991

Summary

Since the accession to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, the Soviet Union has been undergoing a transformation of revolutionary proportions. The major impetus for this change was a crisis of the Soviet system, reflected in protracted economic stagnation. However, the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev has recognized that the successful restructuring of the economy depends, not only on political democratization at home, but also on the end of ruinously expensive arms races and the mobilization of economic and technical assistance from abroad, and these, in turn, require the relaxation of international tensions. Accordingly, the Soviets have elaborated a set of principles — new political thinking — to guide foreign policy. Militarized, ideologized competition with the forces of imperialism has been abandoned in favor of cooperation in the peaceful resolution of disputes. New political thinking has meant that the Soviet Union no longer views the Third World as an arena for a zero-sum superpower competition for influence and presence. Rather than seeking sterile political or ideological gains at American expense, it now seeks to eliminate friction with the United States stemming from Third World commitments and to commercialize and universalize its foreign relations, regardless of ideological considerations.

Insofar as the Middle East is concerned, the application of new thinking has meant a reduction in Soviet political, economic and military support for radical forces and the cultivation of better ties with "pro-western" states. The most dramatic change has taken place in the Soviet approach to Israel: legal and administrative constraints on emigration by Soviet Jews have disappeared, leading to a flood of Soviet immigration to Israel, and bilateral relations have been fully normalized except for the formal restoration of diplomatic ties (which appears to be merely a matter of time). But Soviet behavior has changed in other respects, as well; diplomatic cooperation with the United States in opposing the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and participation in the arms embargo and economic sanctions against Iraq would have been virtually unthinkable before 1985.

The principles of new political thinking have not been applied with complete consistency. Vestiges of old thinking, including the slow pace of normalization with Israel, continued military ties with Syria, and competitive policies during the Iran-Iraq War, are explained by a variety of factors: inertia, domestic politics (bureaucratic interests, lingering conservatism, and the growing assertiveness of Soviet Muslims), irrationality (especially anti-Semitism), and American provocations. Moreover, some practices, such as commercial sales of conventional arms, may have a destabilizing impact but are characteristic of almost every "normal" state and are unlikely to change in the future.

For 30 years after 1955, competitive superpower involvement posed a constant danger that Middle Eastern conflicts would escalate into a direct superpower confrontation, perhaps leading to war. New thinking appears to have eliminated that danger. But its impact on the Middle East itself is far more equivocal. The withdrawal of Soviet backing for various clients may cause them to be more cautious about resorting to military force. Indeed, by depriving them of important resources for confrontation, it may induce them to consider possibilities for political conciliation previously rejected. On the other hand, the most important factors in such decisions have always been immediate political needs and the local military balance; the Soviets were never very effective in restraining their allies, their new thinking has no immediate impact on the political needs of local powers, and arms sales — at least of conventional weapons — are likely to continue on a commercial basis. Moreover, the reduced risk of superpower confrontation may also reduce the incentive of the superpowers to make large investments of time and resources in order to promote settlements of the Arab-Israeli and other Middle Eastern conflicts. And whatever their incentive may be, the Soviets have very few assets to contribute to conflict resolution efforts.

For Israel, the most profound consequence of Soviet new thinking is the massive immigration of Soviet Jews. In other respects, and especially in questions of war and peace, Soviet policy is likely to be more constructive, but it is not yet clear that this will make a decisive difference. The most important outside power for Israel and the rest of the Middle East will continue to be

the United States. In the last analysis, however, the key to the future of all people in the Middle East ultimately rests, as always, in their own hands.

Chapter 1. The Third World in Soviet Policy

Since the accession to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, the familiar contours of post-war history have changed, in many cases beyond all recognition. The image of the Soviet Union as a stolid, totalitarian communist regime has been challenged by cultural effervescence, efforts to restructure the economic system, the liberalization of Party and government politics, and the growing drive for autonomy or independence by the various nationalities of the Soviet Union. The image of the Soviet Union as a militaristic global power determined to maintain its sphere of influence at any cost and to expand it through subversion or violence has been challenged by reforms in Soviet force structure and military doctrine, acquiescence in the overthrow of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the reunification of Germany, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and a declared posture of international cooperation to resolve regional conflicts by political means.

Since the character and behavior of the Soviet Union have an impact on practically every facet of international politics and security, these changes have provoked the most fundamental and far-reaching debate since the onset of the Cold War. Indeed, Soviet terminology for these phenomena — glasnost (the opening up of information and expression), perestroika (restructuring of the political and economic systems), and novoye mishleniye ("new thinking" in the principles guiding the behavior of the Soviet government at home and abroad) — have been incorporated into the lexicon of international discourse. At the highest level of generality, the changes associated with Gorbachev have created a sense of revolutionary transformation. However, the outcome of this process is by no means predetermined, because the Soviet leadership itself may lose control or lose confidence in its chosen course (as the resignation of Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze in December 1990 clearly suggested). Much uncertainty remains about the direction, pace and durability of change, and

about its ultimate meaning for other actors in the international system. This is particularly true with respect to Soviet behavior in the Third World and its impact on regional instabilities and bilateral Soviet-American relations.

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which new political thinking has been applied to Soviet policy in the Middle East and to speculate about the possible impact of any changes on patterns of international relations in the region. The Middle East should be a particularly revealing test case of Soviet new thinking. Of all Third World regions, it is the closest geographically, it has attracted the greatest Soviet investment in recent decades, it is potentially the most closely linked to Soviet domestic politics, and its economic and strategic importance have historically given crises and conflicts there the greatest resonance in global politics and bilateral Soviet-American relations. Indeed, Middle Eastern exceptions to overall Soviet policy may be logically required by the exceptional character of the region. However, thoroughgoing changes in Soviet policy in the Middle East would, precisely because of that region's importance, constitute *prima facie* evidence that the entire basis of the Soviet approach to the Third World had been profoundly shaken.

Expansionism has been the hallmark of Soviet foreign policy and of the Russian Empire before it. Unlike other European great powers, however, the Russian tradition is one of expansion at the margins. Russian Czars sought cultural and economic influence wherever they could, but the extension of Romanov political-military control generally meant the sustained overland expansion of the state borders, rather than the acquisition of farflung overseas possessions. Whenever a countervailing force was encountered at the frontier of Russian power, state policy was to undermine the influence and presence of the competing power center: Austria in the southwest, Sweden and Poland in the northwest, China in the east, Turkey and Persia in the south, and Britain in India and the Middle East.

There is nothing exceptional about such behavior. On the contrary, it conforms with the tendency of every actor in an anarchical international system, whether for offensive or defen-

sive reasons, to push out the range of its influence to the maximum extent permitted by its resources, and there is therefore no need to look for explanations peculiar to the Russian people or the character of their government. Nevertheless, national identities and political ideologies do influence the policies of governments in the sense that they shape geographical priorities and modes of action, provide rationales, and help determine the choice and effectiveness of various foreign policy instruments.

The Bolshevik Revolution provided an ideological reason, or at least rationale, for Soviet involvement throughout the world. Communism was held to be a socio-economic doctrine of universal applicability, and Soviet efforts to help extend it were both required by the logic of history and necessary for the security of the Soviet state — the embodiment of the Revolution — against the forces of imperialism determined to overthrow it. Contrary to Marx's prediction, capitalism had persisted in the advanced, industrial countries long after it reached its monopoly stage and the explanation, according to Lenin, lay in imperialism.

...instead of having developed its internal contradictions and tensions to a point where a revolutionary break must occur, capitalism has found a way out of these contradictions.... The way out is expansion into the whole world in search of cheap raw materials, ready markets for commodities and for excess capital, and most important, cheap labor.... This expansion of capitalism is called imperialism. By embarking on it, capitalism has, for the time being, staved off the revolution and its own downfall.¹

With the superprofits gained from exploiting the underdeveloped countries, capitalists were able to bribe labor leaders and "the upper stratum of the labor aristocracy" in their own countries, and thereby ensure their own survival.²

In this analysis, overseas colonies are the weak link in the chain that sustains capitalism. If the link can be broken by disconnecting the colonies from their metropolises, then the imperialist powers themselves will be weakened to the point where they will not only be unable to throttle the socialist revolution in its Soviet cradle, but will themselves also become ripe for revolution at home. However, it was not at all clear that the political dissolution

of empires would be sufficient to produce these results. National liberation movements might achieve political independence but still leave their countries closely integrated into the global network of capitalism, thus perpetuating the economic dynamics of imperialism under a new guise: neo-colonialism. Much depended on the class structure and domestic policies pursued by the leaders of formerly dependent countries. The collapse of the European and Japanese colonial empires after World War II imparted a worldwide dimension and political immediacy to this problem, but it was one with which Soviet theoreticians and policymakers had had to grapple since the first years of post-revolution foreign policy: "What is the correct Soviet approach to nationalist, non-communist liberation movements and governments?"

Soviet policy in the Third World has been periodized in a variety of ways, but however many "stages" observers may count, the major variable appears to be movement along the scale of responses to this basic question, with the two poles being almost exclusive identification with and support for orthodox communists, at one end, and virtually indiscriminate identification with and support for any forces hostile to the major imperialist powers, at the other.³ As part of a general "relaxation" which accompanied the transition from War Communism to the New Economic Plan, Lenin himself legitimized the second approach by endorsing temporary alliances with the bourgeois leadership of nationalist movements and of governments in the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. "Socialists," he wrote, "must not only demand the unconditional and immediate liberation of the colonies without compensation...but they must render determined support to the more revolutionary elements in the bourgeois-democratic movements...and assist their uprising — and, if need be, their revolutionary war — against the imperialist powers that oppress them."⁴ This position was criticized by more dogmatic Marxists such as the Indian Communist M.N. Roy, who insisted that revolutionary national movements would not really succeed under bourgeois leadership and that "leadership would have to be taken over by the communist parties when the bourgeoisie deserted and betrayed the national revolution, as they were bound

to do.”⁵ Since bourgeois leaders were expected either to compromise in the struggle for independence or to settle for the trappings of political independence while leaving imperial economic ties essentially intact, communist support for them was expected to be at best futile, if not self-defeating.

However, it was Lenin's view that prevailed. It is true that efforts were made to enhance the ideological and institutional authority of the Soviet leadership over the national movements. For example, the Fourth Comintern Congress proclaimed, in the *Theses on the Eastern Question*, “It is one of the most important functions of the anti-imperialist united front tactic to make clear to the broad working masses the necessity of an alliance with the international proletariat and the Soviet republics.”⁶ Nevertheless, this was not a major determinant of Soviet state behavior. Lenin established the diplomatic practice of offering sympathy and support to unequivocally bourgeois or even feudal nativist movements and regimes in such countries as Turkey, Persia and Afghanistan, because in their political struggles against the domination of the main imperial power on the Soviet periphery — Great Britain — they were playing an objectively anti-imperialist role. In short, Lenin bequeathed to his successors both a conceptual framework for the struggle against imperialist powers to be played out over the entire world, and a clear appreciation of the advantages to be gained in that struggle by properly manipulating the forces of nationalism among non-European peoples.

However, the credibility of this tendency was seriously undermined in 1927-28 by the “treason” of the Soviet-support Kuomintang Party in China and the nearly mortal blow it inflicted on the Chinese Communist Party. Until then, Stalin had essentially pursued Lenin's approach to the question of national-liberation, thereby allying himself on foreign as well as domestic issues with Bukharin and other “rightist” forces. Indeed, the issue was an additional point of contention in Stalin's struggle for power with Trotsky. Stalin favored alliance with and support of the national bourgeoisie, provided that it objectively served the cause of anti-imperialism (as Kuomintang opposition to British interests in China apparently did). Proletarian support, he urged, “must be given to those national movements which tend to weaken imperial-