

THE SUPERPOWERS AND PEACEMAKING IN THE MIDDLE EAST:

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

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It should be noted by way of introduction that, after 1945, the Middle East has been important to the USSR primarily as an arena of superpower rivalry. The conflicts between Israel and the surrounding Arab states have therefore mattered to Moscow not in their own right but as means of undermining the Western presence and of promoting Soviet interests in the Middle East. Equally pertinent is the fact that, after the 1973 War, the United States has deliberately and successfully excluded the USSR from the peacemaking process. This was true of Secretary Kissinger's "step-by-step" diplomacy; of President Carter's Camp David process; and of President Reagan's 1982 initiative.

The arguments of American opponents of active Soviet involvement in regional peacemaking represent a far-reaching bipartisan consensus and can be summed up as follows.

(1). The USSR is not interested in the peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Instead, the Kremlin favors the continuation of a state of turmoil and tension because the absence of peace radicalizes the Arabs and turns them away from the United States and toward the Soviet Union. In response, I contend that "turmoil," "tension," and "radicalization" are local and regional phenomena which do not easily lend themselves to manipulation by the outside powers. As a relative newcomer, the USSR initially benefitted from the region's endemic restiveness, but once the Soviets established tangible interests of their own, they have been subjected to the vagaries of Middle Eastern politics no less than have their Western counterparts. Moreover, it is important to remember that what the Kremlin has persistently objected to in the Arab-Israeli sector is not peace per se but rather a negotiation process from which it is being excluded. Given the persistent demands for recognition of the legitimacy of Soviet interests in the Middle East, Moscow's negative attitude toward U.S. peacemaking

efforts is hardly surprising: it makes no sense for the Kremlin leaders to support Washington in an endeavor to create what they perceive as a "Pax Americana" in the Middle East.

(2). The lack of diplomatic relations between the USSR and Israel as well as Moscow's "bias" toward the Arabs are often cited in support of the proposition that the Soviets cannot effectively perform the function of "an honest broker" in the Arab-Israeli sector and should therefore be excluded from the peacemaking process. It is true that hostility between Moscow and Jerusalem has weakened the Kremlin's claim for a major role in the diplomatic efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, Washington's arguments would carry more weight if the United States itself were in open and direct communication with all the actors on the Arab-Israeli stage and if it were perceived by the Arabs as an "honest broker." Neither condition applies.

(3). Moscow's inclusion in Middle Eastern peace negotiations is tantamount to conferring upon the USSR a degree of influence in the region which it now lacks. Of significance in the context of the U.S. refusal to "enhance" the Soviet position in the Middle East is precisely the point that the Kremlin does exert some influence in the councils of the PLO and especially in Damascus, the two parties with whom Washington has little influence and, without whose involvement, peace is not likely to come to the Arab-Israeli sector. In view of the American determination to exclude Moscow, the Soviets may be counted on to do all in their power to dissuade the Syrians and the PLO from cooperating with the United States. Since Washington has demonstrated total disregard for the PLO and has paid only scant attention to Damascus, their interest in keeping the USSR "in the game," should also come as no surprise. The real question, therefore, is not whether Moscow's inclusion in the peacemaking process will increase Soviet

influence in the Middle East but whether the Kremlin's participation will improve the chances for the resolution of the Arab-Israeli impasse. For this reason, American efforts to settle the conflict while keeping the USSR at bay must be examined in light of the progress achieved to date. On balance, I would argue that Washington's endeavors have fallen far short of the desired objectives.

Generally speaking, the Arab-Israeli conflict has long revolved around two major issues: peace between Israel and its neighbors and the future of the Arab inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza. At Camp David, a major step was taken to resolve the first problem when Prime Minister Begin and President Sadat agreed to sign a peace treaty between their two countries. President Reagan's subsequent attempts to bring about a reconciliation between Israel and Jordan, in contrast, have stalled, and their early revival is unlikely.

Moreover, most Arab governments resent the fact that the Camp David process, and the resulting neutralization of Egypt, have enabled Israel to pursue what they perceive as aggressive policies toward Lebanon and Syria without fear of a two-front war. Finally, it is widely believed in the Arab world that the resolution of the Palestinian question which, to the Arabs, lies at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict has not been brought closer by the Carter and Reagan initiatives and that the prospects for meaningful progress on this issue are not promising in the foreseeable future. Given these perceptions, as well as Syria's continued determination to oppose Washington's diplomatic efforts and the Kremlin's close association with Damascus, the Reagan Administration's persistence in excluding the USSR from the peace process is essentially self-defeating.

In other words, as long as the Arab-Israeli dispute remains deadlocked and is coupled with Moscow's exclusion from the peace process, the West can count on

Soviet backing of Damascus and the Palestine Liberation Organization. Given this state of affairs, it is difficult to remain optimistic about the chances for the success of future unilateral U.S. peace initiatives. If this assessment is correct, the USSR will remain free to exploit the situation to its own advantage. For all of these reasons, Moscow's prospects in the Arab-Israeli sector are not likely to diminish as Arab disenchantment with the United States continues to grow in the years ahead.

To be sure, the drawing of the USSR into the peacemaking process would introduce additional complications into the resolution of many outstanding issues. Among other things, it would strengthen the bargaining position of Syria as well as of the PLO. However, it would also give the Kremlin a stake in breaking the existing deadlock by acting as a moderating force in Damascus and in the councils of the Palestine Liberation Organization. It would, above all, make it much more difficult for the Arabs to use the Soviets as a counterbalance to the United States and, most importantly, it would deprive Moscow of opportunities to utilize Arab resentment against Washington to its own advantage. In the long run, the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is therefore likely to lead to a diminution, not an enhancement, of the Soviet position in the Middle East.

One may wonder why the Soviet leaders, no doubt aware of the above considerations, should wish to make a constructive contribution to the search for peace in the Arab-Israeli sector. For one thing, the quest for political parity with the United States has been a major long-term objective of the USSR. To achieve it, the Russians may be expected to make some sacrifices. Moreover, a closer look at their current position in the Middle East suggests that the question of "sacrifices" is in large part a moot point since the Kremlin's

freedom of action and ability to influence the course of events independently are severely circumscribed. What has kept the Soviets in the race in the Middle East and elsewhere is, above all, the military and world-wide political competition between the USSR and the United States. If even a part of the Middle Eastern aspect of this rivalry could be brought under control to the mutual satisfaction of both superpowers, the general security of both would be enhanced.

In short, given the manifest failure of U.S. diplomacy to get to the heart of the Arab-Israeli problems, new initiatives designed to bring Moscow into regional negotiations seem to be worth the risk. Eventually, a beginning should be made, not with flamboyant gestures (the sincerity of which is inevitably suspect) but with incremental, quiet, mature diplomacy. Its purpose should be to test Soviet intentions and to explore the possibility of constructive superpower cooperation in the Arab-Israeli sector. The "return to Geneva," advocated by Moscow (and perhaps plausible in 1977) should be rejected quietly but firmly because a public forum, playing to the inflamed passions of millions of people directly affected by the outcome of the negotiations, is doomed to failure. In any event, if such a dialogue is to have any chance to succeed, it will have to be preceded by American acknowledgment that the USSR has legitimate interests in the Middle East.