

# Mikhail And The Mullahs

Perhaps the most intractable of all the 'regional' problems is the Middle East. But even there, things are now beginning to move. **Fred Halliday** assesses the impact of Gorbachev's foreign policy in this area



Yassir Arafat: Received Gorbachev's message loud and clear

If 1988 saw substantial movement in Soviet foreign policy as a whole, most prominently with the INF agreement and the Geneva accords on Afghanistan, it also registered significant progress in another area - the Middle East. The success of the UN in persuading Iran to accept a cease-fire with Iraq in August 1988 owed not a little to Soviet persuasion of Tehran and to Moscow's collaboration with the other permanent members of the Security Council. The initial breakthrough in US-Palestinian relations in December, following Arafat's speech to the UN in Geneva, came after a long period of Soviet pressure on the PLO to recognise Israel, and a degree of encouragement to Washington to yield a little on this. After years of virtual exclusion from the Middle East, follow-

ing Egypt's turn to the West in the mid-1970s, the USSR now appears to be an influential force in the region again.

This is a development of great importance, not only for the area itself, but also for Soviet-US relations and for 'new thinking', the fresh approach to international relations proclaimed by Gorbachev, as a whole: the Middle East has been a major obstacle to improved Soviet relations with the West, and much of the drive to break out of established impasses comes from this strategic concern. If 'new thinking' tries to solve Third World problems, it is equally concerned, failing complete success on the ground, to reduce the impact which these regional issues have on international relations generally.

Soviet policy in the Middle East can, indeed, be seen as a product of the much

broader reformulation of foreign policy taking place in Moscow. Third World issues cannot, it is now believed, be solved by military means, and Third World states have to learn to find political solutions, with rival states and with internal oppositions: inter-state compromises on territory and levels of armaments, and, within states, 'national reconciliation', are to be the goals. At the same time, Soviet policy is trying to prevent ongoing Third World conflicts from exacerbating Moscow's relations with the West: hence the search for joint positions with the USA on the Gulf War and the Arab-Israeli dispute, and Gorbachev's new emphasis on the role of the UN is actively pursuing solutions and policing agreements.

An equally important general component of 'new thinking' is the emphasis placed by Soviet officials upon improving relations with 'all countries, large and small'. In practice, this means not so much getting away from the priorities of the pre-1985 period, ie, the USA, China and Western Europe, as working to improve relations with smaller states that had been ignored or consistently antagonised in the previous period, above all by Gromyko: in the Middle East this category includes Egypt, Saudi Arabia and, of course, Israel. Soviet willingness to talk to all of these, even when there are no diplomatic relations, has already borne fruit.

**S**oviet policy on the Middle East also, as in the USA, reflects domestic factors operating within the USSR. While Soviet foreign policy is by no means simply a result of internal factors, there has always been a factional element in policy towards the Middle East. With the emergence of strong Russian nationalist currents, there is open opposition to re-establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. At the same time, for internal reasons and in order to improve relations with the USA, Gorbachev has sought to remove the issues of Jewish opposition and emigration. He is also, as part of his anti-corruption drive, particularly keen to reform the Muslim republics where 'stagnation' took special and deep-rooted forms: the shake-ups in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, and the dangers posed by anti-Armenian chauvinism in the latter, allegedly under the influence of Khomeini's Iran next door, have produced a situation in which *perestroika* has acquired a quite confrontational relationship with the Islamic republics of the USSR.

In the first three years of Gorbachev's rule, foreign and defence policy were still largely exempt from public debate and criticism. But the tone of business-like criticism that has prevailed in internal Soviet discussion is now increasingly being applied to Soviet relations with allies, and especially those of the socialist bloc. Gorbachev has attacked 'sugar-coated' speeches and reports in inter-party and inter-

socialist relations, and one of the hallmarks of 1988 was the emergence of 'international *glasnost*', ie, criticism in the Soviet media of Soviet foreign policy in the 'stagnation' period and criticism of Third World socialist states.

The Soviet press has given prominent and disabused coverage to events in the 'socialist-oriented' state of Burma, but has equally criticised the illusions of other Third World allies who are, it is said, besotted with ultra-left slogans and too prone to militaristic solutions. This line of argument could, above all, refer to Arab allies such as Iraq, Syria, Libya and South Yemen, who must now be distinctly uncomfortable about how things are going in the USSR. If Fidel Castro has been most open in articulating such a Third World revolutionary critique of 'new thinking', his words have certainly found an echo in Aden, Tripoli and Damascus.

**The most obvious area in which 'new thinking' has had a specific impact on the Middle East is in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Soviet dealings with Israel still fall short of re-establishing the diplomatic relations broken by Moscow in 1967, and the USSR has said that these will only be restored once Israel participates in an international conference on resolving the Arab-Israeli dispute. But there have nonetheless been several substantial shifts in Soviet-Israeli relations. Consular delegations from each country, on extendable three-month visas, are now resident in Tel Aviv and Moscow. The USSR has massively increased the rate of Jewish emigration to around 20,000 in 1988 and an anticipated 30,000 in 1989: given the Israeli figure of 80,000 wishing to leave, this means that the problem is no longer an issue between the two states. In addition, up to 6,000 Soviet Jews visited Israel last year as tourists, flying via Damascus and Larnaca, and another 6,000 visited the USA; according to Israeli sources all 'prisoners of Zion' have been released from incarceration in the USSR. Most importantly of all, and separate from the consular missions, a direct diplomatic channel has been established between Soviet and Israeli foreign ministry officials. Israeli government members routinely call their Soviet opposite numbers on the phone. An Israeli rescue team, including Jewish emigres from Soviet Armenia, took part in the earthquake relief work this December.**

There remain substantial issues of disagreement in Soviet-Israeli relations. One concerns emigration: only around 5% of the Soviet Jews who now emigrate choose to go to Israel, the great majority preferring the USA. Israel would like them to be flown directly to Tel Aviv, avoiding the Vienna transit point currently used: but this has come up against strong opposition - from the Dutch, who handle Israeli interests in Moscow, and from the USA, which regards any such

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measure as an infringement of civil liberties. Most substantially, the two sides remain far apart on the nature of an international conference, and on the shape of a final settlement.

Israel, prior to and after the November 1988 election, refuses to accept an international conference or negotiation with the Palestinians, preferring instead bilateral talks between Israel and Arab states. The USSR has shifted somewhat, accepting that a Palestinian delegation may, with Palestinian consent, form part of a wider Arab delegation, and, secondly, that after an initial plenary convention, negotiations may take place in a bilateral form. But Moscow remembers how it was excluded during the 1974 Geneva conference on the question, and still insists on a solution being negotiated in the form of a plenipotentiary gathering.

The Soviet change with regard to Israel reflects several considerations. There is evidently a broad international aspect, the desire to work towards a reduction and possible resolution of a major 'regional' issue that has since the 1973 war bedevilled US-Soviet relations. There is, especially on the question of Jewish emigration, the desire to remove an issue that has persisted ever since the Jackson-Vanick amendment blocked an improvement in trade relations in 1974. But there are at least two other factors in Soviet thinking. One is that China is now an actor in the Arab-Israeli dispute, having forged covert but wide-ranging military links with Israel, just as it has with Iran. This competition from Peking is something the USSR cannot view with indifference. The other new factor is that Israel now possesses the capacity to hit the southern cities of the USSR with nuclear weapons using Jericho II missiles, with a range of 900 miles: Moscow must, therefore, regard with even greater alarm the prospect of a future Arab-Israeli dispute, which could lead to the use of nuclear weapons in the Middle East itself, and therefore beyond.

**Parallel to this change in Soviet-Israeli relations have come a number of changes in Soviet relations with the Arab world. Moscow has worked to improve relations with Egypt, its former main ally in the Arab world, and has rescheduled Egypt's military debt. For all its ties to Washington, Cairo realises the Camp David process has stalled and it shares Moscow's view on the need for an international conference to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute. Moscow is also engaged in an active dialogue with Saudi Arabia: technically, diplomatic relations between these two countries have not been broken - it is 'merely' that no ambassadors have been posted since the 1930s. In the Middle Eastern context and over Afghanistan there have been wide-ranging discussions between officials of the two states for quite sometime.**

The two most important dimensions of

Moscow's Arab policy are with regard to the PLO and to Syria. Moscow has always held, in line with the UN vote of 1947, that the solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute lies in the creation of two states, one Israeli and one Palestinian. Until recently, however, its appeals to the PLO to acknowledge this, the only realistic or just solution, have fallen on deaf ears. Arab 'rejectionism', ie, demagogic self-delusion, has prevailed. Over the past two years, however, Soviet influence with the Palestinians has borne fruit in two respects. First, in April 1987, Soviet diplomacy, flanked by that of some Arab states, re-established a degree of unity in the PLO under Arafat, after years of intense factionalism encouraged by Syria, Iraq and Libya. Then, in November 1988 the PLO publicly accepted the right of Israel to exist, and declared its willingness to negotiate with Israel. If the USSR was far from being alone in pressing the PLO to take this step, Soviet influence, coming as it did from the Arab world's most powerful supporter, was crucial. During his visit to the USSR in April 1988 Arafat had been publicly enjoined by Gorbachev to recognise Israel, and the message had certainly been received loud and clear.

The other crucial dimension of Soviet relations with the Arabs concerns Syria, the recipient of more Soviet weapons over the past two decades than Vietnam and a key player in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Since the 1982 Israeli invasion

of Lebanon, Moscow has warned Israel and the USA not to try an all-out attack on Syria, provided Soviet missiles, and, for some time, Soviet crews to reinforce Syrian defences. Most recently, the Syrians have received Mig-29 planes. But Moscow has also stated that it does not accept Syrian demands for 'parity' with Israel, and views such requests as a recipe for an unending escalation of the Middle East arms race. Moscow has also shown that it disapproves of Syrian policies with regard to the Palestinians: Damascus' support for factions using terrorism, and for those who oppose Arafat's new orientations.

**T**he difficulties which Moscow faces in reconciling its policies towards the Arabs and Israel are, indeed, reproduced within the Arab world itself. Moscow has tried, in vain, to reconcile Syria and Iraq, and Libya and Egypt. It has also sought to balance support for the Palestinian *intifada* with a warning that the time for stones and rifles must give way to that of diplomacy. In the belief that it must maintain relations with Iraq, a long-standing ally, it has refrained from open criticism of the crimes committed against the Kurds, despite many appeals from Iraqi Kurds and demands from representatives of an estimated 100,000 Kurds within the USSR, who have their own weekly newspaper, for Moscow to voice its disapproval.

Moscow also has special problems with

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Iran, where the Islamic regime is now entering its second decade. In Moscow's eyes, it is the intransigence of the mollahs that enabled the USA to gain such a prominent military position in the Persian Gulf. Iran has also added to Moscow's problems in Afghanistan, supporting its own Shi'ite guerrillas and denouncing even the Geneva accords. Tehran radio continues to call for revolt among Soviet Muslims, and the Soviet media report that the anti-Armenian rioters in Azerbaijan have carried portraits of Khomeini. Yet in the Persian Gulf conflict, as in the Arab-Israeli, the USSR has certainly made substantial progress in the past year.

The significance of these advances must be offset, however, by the enormous amount that still remains to be done. At one level, Moscow appeals in the name of a reasonable compromise and 'internationalist' collaboration between different Third World peoples for an end to nationalist intransigence: but this, one of the most commendable aspects of 'old thinking', has found too few adherents in the Middle East, and, as events in the Baltic Republics and in Azerbaijan have illustrated, has shown its limits even within the USSR; at another level, success in the Middle East depends on what the US reaction is. It takes two to engage in 'new thinking' and in a range of places, from Kabul to Managua, and including the Middle East, it remains open whether the USA is yet willing to alter its policies.

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