

Irena Rajchinovska Pandeva, PhD*

**THE SOVIET-MIDDLE EAST NEXUS:
FOREIGN POLICY OF THE SOVIET UNION TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST**

Abstract:

Up until the end of the Second World War, Soviet policies toward the Middle East had shown low interest and involvement mainly due to the weakness of the Communist movement in its projections for development and expansion, but also because of the directions of its foreign policy course. Therefore, it is fair to state that the Soviet Union became strongly involved in the Middle East region only after the ending of the Second World War while the actual penetration to the Middle East region dates from the period of Khrushchev rule. The paper examines Soviet Union policy on the Middle East since the fall of the Russian Empire until the end of Communist rule under Gorbachev. It deals with the Arab syndrome of Soviet foreign policy, the shifts in Soviet policy directions, and its involvement and implications in the broader scheme of the Soviet-Middle East nexus during eight decades.

Key words: Soviet Union, foreign policy, Middle East, Arab syndrome, Communism

* * *

The fall of the once great Empire of Russia can be contributed to several reasons but the most direct responsibility lies on two events that reshaped not only regional but the global course of history: the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and the First World War¹. Yet, the fall of this formerly mighty state had not come about easily. In a short period of time a republic was declared and overthrown, civil war broke out and a large scale revolution occurred. Eventually, a dictatorship of the proletariat was declared as a basic principle and a new state – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was constructed by the Communist party led by Vladimir I. Lenin. The new state – Soviet Union refused to assert itself as successor of the Russian Empire, publicly renouncing the treaties signed by Tsarist Russia and objecting

*Assistant professor at the Faculty of Law Iustinianus Primus, UKIM, Skopje

¹ Medvedev Roy, 2000, *Post-Soviet Russia: A Journey through the Yeltsin Era* (New York-Columbia University Press), p. 2

the debts incurred by them². Roy Medvedev says that the Soviet government replaced the principle of Russian nationalism with the principle of internationalism asserting different dimension of Russian/Soviet foreign policy³. Burch on the other hand, asserts that during the time that followed the Russian Bolshevik's revolution, the defining characteristic of Russian politics was self imposed and temporal isolationism and genuine noninterest in global expansion⁴. The main reason behind it according to him was the attempt to consolidate power internally before attempting to export proletarian revolution worldwide⁵. In a way it was an episode of discontinuity in sense of politics, economy and policies. Yet, Bolshevik's policies toward the Middle East were in accord to the traditions of Tsarist foreign policy which has historically shown recurrent interest in obtaining a strategic foothold in this part of the world⁶. Tsarist policies were a response to the Ottoman Empire (and later to the Eastern question) as well as a counterbalance to other European interests (mainly British), such as the possibility to establish control over the Turkish straits. One particular episode during the XVIII century was the decision to extend military assistance to Egypt by Catherine the Great and her decision to support Egypt's independence in return for the right to station Russian troops in Alexandria and other Egyptian cities⁷. Horelick says that the October revolution temporarily changed the thrust of traditional Russian Middle East policy but not its geographic locus⁸. At that time Russia seemed to have abandoned its territorial and commercial claims against its southern neighbors while attempting to establish good interstate relations (especially with Ottoman Turkey and Iran) in order to neutralize them and prevent them from joining the British camp⁹. Wolfe notes that in the period between the First and the Second World War, there was an attempt for about a decade-and-a-half to promote underground Communist activity in the Arab world, but this effort run into stiff local opposition so Moscow had to change tactics and instead in 1935 began its cooperation with nationalist and religious groups under the banner of anti-colonialism¹⁰. However, until the end of the Second World War, Russian policies toward the Middle East remained low in

² Ibid. p. 2

³ Ibid. p. 2

⁴ Burch, John C. 1986, *Background Issues concerning Soviet Union Policy and Syrian Initiatives in the Middle East* Newport - Naval War College) p. 11

⁵ Ibid. p. 11

⁶ Wolfe, Thomas W. September 1969, *The USSR and the Arab East*, (Santa Monica-Rand corporation), p. 2-3, available at [http:// www. rand.org/pubs/papers/2008/P4194.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/2008/P4194.pdf)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Horelick, Arnold L. February 1971, *Soviet Middle East Policy: Origins and Prospects*, (Santa Monica-Rand Corporation) available at [http:// www. dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=AD732670](http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=AD732670)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wolfe, 1969, p. 3

character and the main reasons were located in the lack of physical access to the area and the weakness of the Communist movement¹¹.

Soviet Union became strongly involved in the Middle East region after the ending of Second World War. Before the mid-1950s, the Arab world was never a high priority region for the Soviet Union foreign policy and the actual penetration to the Middle East region dates from the period of Khrushchev rule¹². As Trenin notes, the strategic borders along the southern perimeter during the Soviet era were not precise. In fact, most Soviet leaders, including Brezhnev and Kosygin, showed no or small interest for that region, and only a minority favored extension of the socialist community toward the Middle East¹³.

According to Primakov, in 1948 Stalin made the decision to recognize the state of Israel without delay driven by ideological considerations. He says that Stalin believed that Israel will become the socialist cell in the Middle East based on the large numbers of immigrants from socialist countries that Israel welcomed and the establishment of kibbutzim as a communist type of settlement. Hence, he deduces that this way of thinking was irrational and inconsistent, and we may add counterproductive and damaging to the Middle East peace process. On the other hand, Primakov underlines that Russians were interested in establishing peace between the Arabs and the Israelis and took steps into accomplishing that goal without forgetting their many sided interests in the region¹⁴.

In more ways than one, the Soviet Union policy towards the Middle East was defined by the idea to spread and secure Russian influence in the region (as opposed to the Americans) and to promote communism among the peoples inhabiting that area. According to Burch, the prominent aspect of Soviet Union foreign policy was the dualism of advocating a worldwide revolution and assuring its own national security¹⁵. The justification for Soviet involvement in the Middle East was based on the notion of proximity of this area to the Russia homeland¹⁶ while the battle for ideological leverage in the Middle East was not so different than the rest of the world stage under Cold War terms. Campbell says that after the Second World War, when the Soviet Union decided to tackle the Middle East, this region was

¹¹ Horelick, 1971

¹² Ibid.; Thomas, John R. Fall 1971, *The Dilemmas of Soviet policy in the Middle East*, Parameters Journal, (pp.34-42), p. 34; Campbell, John C. 1971, *The Soviet Union and the United States in the Middle East*, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, (pp. 126-135), p. 127

¹³ Ibid. p. 63

¹⁴ Primakov, Yevgeny, 2004, *Russian Crossroads: Towards the New Millennium*, (New Haven-Yale University Press), p. 190

¹⁵ Burch, 1986, p. 11

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 1-2. The Soviet Union shared common borders with Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan. Burch argues that Yerevan as the southernmost Soviet city was only an hour away by air from Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad and that Cairo is nearer to Moscow than London or Paris.

a primarily Western and increasingly an American sphere of influence¹⁷. There are many evidences and writings dedicated to the Soviet Union – USA confrontation in the Middle East¹⁸. However, it seems that it was during the Nixon era, i.e., during the détente period when the U.S. decided to deal with the Russian threat in a more institutional manner. That is to say, it was through that period of time, that with help from the U.S., the Soviet Union became differently incorporated into the international system. Besides the close communication and talks on several mutual areas of interest, Moscow and Washington agreed to establish a hotline between the foreign ministers Gromyko and Kissinger. The Soviets were perceived as determined to increase and expand their presence in the Middle East, though not for expanding and promoting communism per se¹⁹. The main point of Soviet power in the Middle East was the support it gave to Egypt and Syria (mainly in arms supply), although this relationship was not even close to the U.S.-Israel alliance. In his writings Nixon underlined that the Soviets were seeking access to what they long desired—“land, oil, power and the warm waters of the Mediterranean” rather than ideological conversions²⁰. And he further added that “the difference between our (American) goal and the Soviet goal in the Middle East is very simple and fundamental. We want peace. They want the Middle East”²¹.

The main characteristics of Soviet Union policy towards the Middle East are the high profile, deep involvement and heavy commitment²². Furthermore, western analysts pin point that measured by almost any standard, the Arab Middle East region as a non-Communist area, is the one in which Soviet Union is most deeply involved during its existence²³. In fact, the Middle East was the most critical region in the Third world that held vital Soviet interests²⁴. This was due to several reasons:

1. Strategic: oil reserves and sea lines in the region;
2. Demographic and geographic: shared borders with Turkey and Iran and incorporating sizeable population with Turkic and Islamic elements;

¹⁷ Campbell, 1971, p. 130

¹⁸ The Cyprus conflict stands out as particularly interesting episode of this confrontation. See more in O'Malley, Brendan and Craig, Ian, 2005, *The Cyprus Conspiracy-America, Espionage and the Turkish Invasion*, (London-I. B. Tauris Publishers)

¹⁹ Berggren, Jason. 2008, *Israel, The Arabs and the Middle East in Presidential Memory*, Paper presented at the Symposium on Religion and Politics, (Michigan, Grand Rapids-Collection of papers), p. 18

²⁰ Ibid. p. 18

²¹ Ibid. p. 18

²² Horelick, 1971

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Dağı, Zeynep. Spring 2007, *Russia: Back to the Middle East*, Perceptions – Journal of International Relations, Volume XII, pp. 123-141, p. 123

3. Ideological: confrontation with USA over the region's dominance²⁵.

For Stalin the single most important factor in foreign policy was the prevention of another land invasion of Mother Russia from the West²⁶. He was labeled as expansionist because of his efforts to extend Soviet control into areas bordering the Soviet territory as he had done in Eastern Europe while at the same time he attempted to set the basis for Soviet rise as great power in the Middle East and Mediterranean region²⁷. Still during his era, Soviet Russia did not consider Middle East as issue of top priority for its foreign policy but instead the approach was much dependant on opportunities and the notion that a heavy Soviet involvement in the region is not worth the risk of confrontation with the U.S.²⁸ Since his main concern was national security, which according to his view was synonymous with permanent Soviet military presence, unquestioned political control, ideological conformity and economic subordination²⁹, his policies towards the Middle East were no exempt in following that Cold War logic.

In 1953 Nikita Khrushchev gained the position of a Soviet leader and as indicated by Burch, he immediately faced problems of maintaining Stalin's "expansionist" empire³⁰. Khrushchev reevaluated policies made by Stalin and introduced a more intelligent approach of conceiving and execution of policies³¹. This period of de-Stalinization according to Burch, brought a relaxation of hard line programs both domestic and foreign³². His Middle Eastern policy was constructed on the idea of manipulation with local forces in order to damage Western positions in the region instead of previously implemented muscle approach. At the end he managed to exploit the new, dynamic Arab nationalism and its distrust of the West³³. He was the first Soviet leader to:

- ❖ Fully endorse Arab's side in the Arab-Israeli conflict, thus gaining strong favor in the Arab world that lasted for decades and was repeatedly confirmed as in the Syrian crisis of 1957 and the Iraqi revolution in 1958³⁴;

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Burch, 1986, p. 3

²⁷ Campbell, 1971, p. 127

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Burch, 1986, p. 3-4

³⁰ Ibid. p. 4

³¹ Campbell, 1971, p. 127

³² "Burch, 1986, p. 4

³³ Campbell, 1971, p. 127.

³⁴ "Khrushchev showed the Arabs that the Soviet Union could be alternative to the West, as a source of arms and other aid, a balancing factor against Western domination and an ally against Israel. Abdel Nasser was delighted when the opportunity came to bring Soviet influence into the Middle East. He did so for Egyptian and Arab purposes as did the leaders of Syria, Yemen, Iraq and other Arab states. But the Soviets were extending

- ❖ Broker a deal on arms sale to Egypt, thus ending the Western monopoly (Egypt was the strongest and most influential of all Arab states, but soon was followed by many of them in arms imports from Soviet Union)
- ❖ Take on the role and the supplier, but more importantly protector of Syria (labeled as chronically unstable) thus gaining serious influence and leverage in the Middle East region³⁵.

Leonid Brezhnev had an outstanding eighteen years as Soviet leader and along with his successors Yuri Andropov (1982-1984) and Konstantin Chernenko (1984–1985) was among the last Soviet leaders whose political educations were molded by Stalin and Khrushchev³⁶. Brezhnev two major accomplishments were the success in nuclear parity with the U.S. and the establishment of détente with the West³⁷. His foreign policy goals were:

- Ensuring international conditions for building communism in the USSR;
- Safeguarding the state interests of the Soviet Union;
- Consolidating the positions of world socialism;
- Supporting the struggle of peoples for national liberation and social progress;
- Preventing wars of aggression;
- Achieving universal and complete disarmament;
- Consistently implementing the principle of the peaceful coexistence of states with different social systems.

During his leadership the Soviet Union maintained the Arab stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict, but their relationship suffered a set back due to the Soviet military activities in Afghanistan.

Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko were the two shortest reigned successive leaders of the Soviet Union. Their policies were constructed in line of Brezhnev's concept of Soviet foreign policy while their main objectives were gaining Western respect for the Soviets and establishing a pro-socialistic stability within the Soviet sphere of influence.

Gorbachev stands out as the last Soviet Union leader and at the same time as the first true political reformer. His mandate (1985-1991) incorporated large scale political reform that spanned from economic revitalization to changed foreign policies. On the domestic front he advanced three concepts: glasnost (openness), perestroika (restructuring) and

their influence for their own purposes. It was a working relationship from which both sides profited but neither had full faith and trust in the other". Ibid. p. 132-133.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 127-128

³⁶ Burch, 1986, p. 6.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 4

demokratizatsya (democratization)³⁸. Their purpose was reform of the Russian society by promoting democratization and openness in the political arena and full reconstruction of the economic arena. On the international front, Gorbachev proclaimed “new political thinking” which he used to alter the existing Soviet approach to foreign policy. His concept became known as the “New Thinking” because, as maintained by Holloway, it rejected many basic assumptions of earlier Soviet foreign policy and at the same time embraced a number of propositions about the nature of international relations in the modern world: human interests take precedence over interests of any particular class; the world the world is becoming increasingly interdependent; there can be no victors in a nuclear war; security has to be based increasingly on political rather than military instruments; and security must be mutual, especially in the context of U.S.-Soviet relations, since if one side is insecure it will only make the other side insecure too³⁹. In practice, Gorbachev’s foreign policy has been more active, more pragmatic and more flexible than that of his predecessors⁴⁰. His policy towards the Middle East was marked as second great strategic shift since the Second World War (first one being the shift after the Suez crisis in 1956 when the Soviets reversed policies and viewed the world as rigidly divided into two camps- their own and that of the United States of America)⁴¹. The success of Soviet policy in the Middle East before Gorbachev mainly led to confrontation with the U.S. and Israel, but managed to maintain good relations with the Arab countries. Gorbachev policy on the Middle East was also based on the requirement that the West and U.S. in particular, recognize the Soviet Union a political equal in Middle East affairs. Rickman says that in order “to convince the United States that "new thinking" about the Middle East really was taking place in Moscow, the Soviet leadership set its sights, among other goals, on two relating to Israel: one consisted of reforming the PLO's open intention of destroying Israel and the other of reestablishing diplomatic relations with Israel”⁴². As stated by Rickman, both of these steps were seen as confirmation to the requirement noted before and that by doing so the Soviet Union will develop deeper economic and strategic involvement in the region⁴³. Freedman argues that Mikhail Gorbachev

³⁸ See more on glasnost and related foreign policy matters in Dzirkals, Lilita. January 1990, *Glasnost and Soviet Foreign policy*, (New Haven-Rand Corporation Report) available at <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/notes/2009/N3008.pdf>

³⁹ Holloway, David. 1988, *Gorbachev's New Thinking*, Foreign Affairs, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/44001/david-holloway/gorbachevs-new-thinking>

⁴⁰ Smolansky, Oles M. fall 1988, *Soviet Foreign policy under Gorbachev*, (Lisbon-Estrategia) no.5, pp.31-44, available at http://www.ieei.pt/files/OlesMSmolansky_Soviet_Foreign_Policy_under_Gorbachev.pdf

⁴¹ “Palestinian Diplomacy – Gorbachev’s legacy”, Gregg Rickman, *Middle East Quarterly*, March 2000, pp.21-29

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

was one of the most significant innovators in Soviet politics and foreign policy since Nikita Khrushchev⁴⁴. He values that Gorbachev reforms and many efforts to improve the USSR's image in the West have all indicated that “new thinking” has replaced the immobilism so apparent in Kremlin policy before. The Arab syndrome⁴⁵ as Halliday names it, has affected Soviet policy toward the Middle East without a precedent during the Gorbachev era as well. He managed to maintain good and productive relations with almost all Arab states, improve relations with Egypt and Iran, maintain good cooperation with Kuwait and Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), but he also has had success in establishing relations with Israel, and in promoting the Soviet Union as peace broker in both the Gulf War and the Arab-Israeli conflict. All things considered, even though Gorbachev promoted a “new thinking” his actions in the Middle East were more or less in line of previous Soviet policies and embarking on a major shift in foreign affairs could not be expected without major domestic change as well. Primakov (close associate of Gorbachev, and later foreign minister under Yeltsin) has annotated that during the period before the 1990s in the process of development of Soviet Middle Eastern policy, they had to take the Cold War into consideration and sometimes even use it as a point of departure⁴⁶. He states that the Cold War must have colored the way the USSR and the United States and its allies approached the Middle East peace process. Furthermore, he adds that a certain myth was created on the Soviet side that the Arab-Israeli conflict occasionally took on ideological tones⁴⁷ and that it interfered with the settlement. Nevertheless, Primakov seems certain that the Soviet involvement in the Middle East was not only a matter of geopolitical competition, even though there was an advancement of the theory of “socialist orientation” (which declared a pre-socialist stage of development in Egypt, Syria and other Third World countries) and the ideological hand extended by the Soviet Union was grasped by some Arab leaders who used the Soviet mindset and began playing the role of an ideological partner⁴⁸.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Middle East region did not lose its appeal for Russian foreign policy. This was a result of Russia's interests, although some claim that

⁴⁴ Freedman, Robert O. 1987, *Soviet Policy toward the Middle East*, Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science, Vol. 36, No. 4, Soviet Foreign Policy, pp. 176-197, p. 176

⁴⁵ Halliday, Fred. 1987, *Gorbachev and the 'Arab syndrome': Soviet policy in the Middle East*, World policy journal, 4 (3), pp. 415-442.

⁴⁶ Primakov, 2004, p. 190

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.190

⁴⁸ According to Primakov, some of the Arab states leaders mouthed “such sweet words as ‘the whole socialist [or progressive] world led by the Soviet Union’, ‘the USSR is the leader of the world national liberation movement,’ and so on and so forth”. Ibid. p. 190

given its limitations, Moscow naturally gravitated towards the one region where it still stands a superpower⁴⁹.

Bibliography:

- “Palestinian Diplomacy – Gorbachev’s legacy”, Gregg Rickman, *Middle East Quarterly*, March 2000, pp.21-29
- Berggren, Jason. 2008, *Israel, The Arabs and the Middle East in Presidential Memory*, Paper presented at the Symposium on Religion and Politics, (Michigan, Grand Rapids-Collection of papers)
- Berman, Ilan. June 2001, *Russia and the Mideast Vacuum*, IASPS Research Papers in Strategy,
- Burch, John C. 1986, *Background Issues concerning Soviet Union Policy and Syrian Initiatives in the Middle East* (Newport - Naval War College)
- Dađı, Zeynep. Spring 2007, *Russia: Back to the Middle East*, *Perceptions – Journal of International Relations*, Volume XII, pp. 123-141
- Dzirkals, Lilita. January 1990, *Glasnost and Soviet Foreign policy*, (New Haven-Rand Corporation Report) available at <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/notes/2009/N3008.pdf>
- Freedman, Robert O. 1987, *Soviet Policy toward the Middle East*, *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 4, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, pp. 176-197
- Halliday, Fred. 1987, *Gorbachev and the ‘Arab syndrome’: Soviet policy in the Middle East*, *World policy journal*, 4 (3), pp. 415-442.
- Holloway, David. 1988, *Gorbachev’s New Thinking*, *Foreign Affairs*, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/44001/david-holloway/gorbachevs-new-thinking>
- Horelick, Arnold L. February 1971, *Soviet Middle East Policy: Origins and Prospects*, (Santa Monica-Rand Corporation) available at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=AD732670>
- Medvedev Roy, 2000, *Post-Soviet Russia: A Journey through the Yeltsin Era* (New York-Columbia University Press)

⁴⁹ Berman, Ilan. June 2001, *Russia and the Mideast Vacuum*, IASPS Research Papers in Strategy, No. 12, p. 5

- O'Malley, Brendan and Craig, Ian, 2005, *The Cyprus Conspiracy-America, Espionage and the Turkish Invasion*, (London-I. B. Tauris Publishers)
- Primakov, Yevgeny, 2004, *Russian Crossroads: Towards the New Millennium*, (New Haven-Yale University Press)
- Smolansky, Oles M. fall 1988, *Soviet Foreign policy under Gorbachev* , (Lisbon-Estrategia) no.5, pp.31-44, available at http://www.ieei.pt/files/OlesMSmolansky_Soviet_Foreign_Policy_under_Gorbachev.pdf
- Thomas, John R. Fall 1971, *The Dilemmas of Soviet policy in the Middle East*, Parameters Journal, (pp.34-42), p. 34; Campbell, John C. 1971, *The Soviet Union and the United States in the Middle East*, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, (pp. 126-135)
- Wolfe, Thomas W. September 1969, *The USSR and the Arab East*, (Santa Monica-Rand corporation), p. 2-3, available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/2008/P4194.pdf>