

Could Moscow be afraid of Israel?

by Thierry Lalevée

In the midst of what was labeled as Moscow's big peace initiative, Eduard Shevardnadze gave an astonishing speech in Cairo on Feb. 23. While presenting Moscow's eternal proposal for an international peace conference, giving the Soviets equal footing with the United States, the Soviet foreign minister abruptly shifted emphasis to warn of the danger of "thermonuclear confrontation" in the region.

Then he gave an ultimatum to the United States, warning that unless Moscow's peace proposals were accepted and a diplomatic process set into motion now, a stalemate in the Middle East "could grind to a halt the entire historic process" between both superpowers. Though the warning could be dismissed as cheap blackmail at a point when Washington is making an extraordinary show of political weakness, no other crisis in recent months, in Africa, Ibero-America, Asia, or even in Europe, has been used so dramatically by the Soviets.

Deepening the mystery is the fact that, when speaking in Cairo, Shevardnadze had already been in the region for some time, visiting both Damascus and Amman. Yet in no other previous speeches did he mention such dangers. Syria, still in the midst of a large military buildup to achieve "strategic parity with Israel," would have been a perfect location, where the Soviet minister could have warned of the danger of nuclear war, and at the same time announced some drastic measures of reduction of Soviet military supplies to the Alawite regime, as a good-will gesture and a concrete indication that Moscow indeed wants peace. That did not happen.

The thinking behind Shevardnadze's speech is at least twofold: First, the Soviets are intent on imposing their presence in any Mideast settlement, on an equal footing with the United States. In the last days of the Reagan administration, Moscow's role was acknowledged. Doubtless, this will be acknowledged by the new Bush administration as soon as it has a Middle East policy. Hence, it can only be annoying to Moscow that just when the efforts started by Leonid Brezhnev—he had the idea of an international peace conference—are bearing fruit, the Americans are simply passive. While Shevardnadze's message contained direct threats to Washington, such as Moscow's taking the leading initiative in the region, the implied message was for the United States to get its act together and start moving.

Second, is the Soviet realization that they indeed need an American initiative to set the process into motion, especially

when it comes to pressuring Israel into joining the international consensus. Despite its diplomatic openings, Moscow's leverage over Israel is limited. It obviously cannot resort to the use, by proxy, of military force (a Syrian-initiated war). Now that Washington has opened an official dialogue with the PLO, Moscow can no longer blackmail the Israelis, as it had in recent years, by stating that only Moscow can mediate the crisis.

Intelligence sources underscore that it was no coincidence that Shevardnadze's rather pessimistic views on the future of peace in the Middle East followed his meetings with Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens. Little of substance is known of what was discussed. A declaration of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir on Feb. 25 indicates the tone: "It is none of the business of the Soviet Union to promote peace in the Middle East, as long as it has no diplomatic relations with Israel," he said, adding that Israel will "accept no preconditions" to the reestablishment of diplomatic relations. Recent Soviet utterings had held such relations as automatically resumed, as soon as the diplomatic process of negotiations is started.

Hence, Shevardnadze seems to have been confronted with the hard reality that any attempts by the Soviet Union, or both superpowers for that matter, to push Israel into a corner, will be met by strong resistance. Various statements from Israeli military leaders confirm this. In a Feb. 17 interview with the *Jerusalem Post*, Maj. Gen. Moshe Bar-Kochba of the General Staff of the Army warned that "Israel must aim for swift offensives, à la 1967" and never allow a repeat of the 1973 war. On Feb. 27, Chief of Staff Gen. Dan Shomron told a gathering of the Center for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv that the only acceptable option for Israel was a "preemptive strike."

This was first item news on Radio Moscow the very same day. Nowadays, a preemptive strike implies more hardware than it did in 1967, meaning medium- and long-range missiles, potentially with nuclear warheads.

Moscow's worries about that are open. Shevardnadze once again stressed in Cairo the need for an "INF" type of treaty in the region. He obviously didn't mean Syria's Soviet-supplied Scud missiles, but Israel's Jericho missiles. The latest generation of the Jericho can reach well inside Soviet territory. With the deployment of the Offeq satellite, Israel can in a few years have a more accurate guidance system.

While this does not imply that Israel is even thinking of launching its missiles at Soviet territory, it means that a repeat of 1956 when the Soviets warned, with American support, that unless the Israelis were out of Egyptian territories within 24 hours, Tel Aviv would be flattened, is now impossible. Were that repeated, the Israelis would probably not hesitate to target the Soviets themselves. In short, Shevardnadze was warning that unless the ability of the U.S. and the Soviets to blackmail smaller powers into line were reestablished, the situation could run out of control.