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Professor William Fletcher

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**Soviet-Israeli Relations Under Gorbachev**

Upon Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power on March 10, 1985, Soviet - Israeli relations were generally in the same state as they had been since 1967: formal relations between the states did not exist. From this point in 1985, relations between the two states progressed from a state of virulent verbal exchanges to the restoration of full diplomatic relations on October 18, 1991. When reviewing this process, one can be misled to point to 1987 as the year when the Gorbachev government began the active pursuit of relations, relegating the 1985 to 1986 to a period of little change from previous administrations. This oversight is understandable given the fact that the drastic ups and downs in relations gave the impression that the government was content in continuing the policies of his predecessors. This is not correct.

The years 1985 and 1986 were a continuation of the status quo, but not because of the desires of the Gorbachev government. Instead, this group did not believe that their situation was secure enough to initiate change in this period. The combined forces of a hostile bureaucracy, an anti-Semitic party organ, and an anti-Semitic public opinion, served to delay their straightforward attempts at reestablishing relations with Israel under the umbrella of "new thinking". Thus, in their view, before starting out on this obviously controversial path, they had to attack each of these forces. Then, once these forces were weak enough for them

to act decisively, they would do so.

The success of such attacks on opposition forces would first become evident in 1987. It was these successes which allowed the Gorbachev team to initiate more direct contacts with Israel. As they continued to increase contacts with Israel between 1987 and 1990, the forces of anti-Semitism in the public sector and the voices of Arab leaders in the international arena came out against them. Despite this opposition, the Gorbachev team continued to make progress. In 1990, however, just prior to reaching the goal of reestablished relations, a final obstacle came into the picture: a resurgent conservative movement in the bureaucracy. As in earlier years, however, the Gorbachev team would prevail over these conservative forces, concluding normalization agreements with Israel on October 18, 1991.

In the following pages, this paper will present how the Gorbachev team sought to reestablish ties with Israel within the framework of "new thinking". First, the factors contributing to their belief that relations could, indeed, be reestablished will be examined. Second, a six step Soviet approach to relations will be presented. Third, the period 1985-1986 will be examined in regard to this six step approach. Fourth, the period 1987-1991 will be examined in the same manner. Fifth, the conservative resurgence in the final months before reestablishment of relations will be reviewed. The sum of this information will reinforce the view that the Gorbachev team had to create and initiate a coordinated plan in order to surmount the obstacles and reestablish relations with Israel.

#### The Gorbachev Team's Reasons For Optimism

The Gorbachev team's belief in the possibility for renewed relations with Israel sprang from three primary sources. The first source was the belief that there was sufficient historical

basis for the justification of maintaining relations with Israel. Initial Soviet support to the Jewish people in Palestine preceded the establishment of Israel itself. On May 14, 1947, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko stated Moscow's position on the Palestinian issue. The British had failed in their responsibility as the mandate power to secure peace in Palestine. For this reason, "the mandate had to be terminated without further delay."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, "the only way to secure the rights of both Arabs and Jews was in an independent homogeneous Arab-Jewish state. But failing this, partition into two states would be in order."<sup>2</sup> To support movement towards one of these goals, the Soviets funneled arms to the Jews in Palestine through Eastern European intermediaries. Then, on May 14, 1948, when the Jewish leaders in Palestine declared the creation of the state of Israel, the Soviets were one of the first countries to provide diplomatic recognition. Within a year, however, Soviet disillusionment with Israeli leanings towards the West culminated in the cessation of arms shipments from the Eastern Bloc.<sup>3</sup> As the decade of the 1950's came and went, the Soviets came to realize that there very well might be political benefit in allying themselves with the Arab countries of the Middle East. This new policy would ultimately lead to the Soviet support of the Arabs in 1967 when war erupted in the Middle East.

In this year, Syria conducted regular harassment operations upon Israel from the Golan Heights. After pivotal political maneuvering on the parts of both Syria and Jordan, Egyptian President Nasser joined the effort by closing the Strait of Tiran and reoccupying the Sinai peninsula.<sup>4</sup> In response, the Israelis began reinforcing their defensive fortifications because the blockade of the strait violated the 1956 armistice.<sup>5</sup> The Soviets acted cautiously at first, not formally protesting the Israeli defense buildups. But soon they chose to fan the fire. First

they initiated propaganda attacks. Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Iakov Malik informed the Israeli ambassador that Israel was permitting itself to be used as "a puppet of foreign enemy forces."<sup>6</sup> Then, on May 23, the Soviets issued a firm warning to Israel. They stated that they would take, "resolute counteractions" if there was aggression against Arab states.<sup>7</sup> Israel ignored these warnings and launched a preemptive strike on June 5, 1967.<sup>8</sup> But the Soviets did not sever relations at this point. They, among others, pushed for a cease-fire. On June 7, "the Soviet Union threatened to sever diplomatic relations if Israel failed to comply with the Security Council's demand for a cease-fire."<sup>9</sup> The Israeli's, who were at this point gaining strategic territory, kept on fighting. It was only then that the Soviets broke off relations on June 10.<sup>10</sup> Thus, based on the fact that from 1948-1967 the Soviets and Israelis had maintained relations, the Gorbachev team believed there was ample justification for renewed Soviet-Israeli relations based on historical foundations.

The second source of the team's belief that relations could be reestablished was the rise of the belief that the severing of relations had been a mistake in the first place. Reflecting upon the results of the 1967 action, it came to be seen that the Soviet Union had suffered the most from the severing of relations because it had served to separate the Soviets from an active role in the Middle East peace process. By default, the Soviets had set up the United States as the primary mediator in the region, abandoning to America the accompanying influence and prestige. The Soviets were trapped in a position which centered around continued arms supply to the Arab countries while at the same time attempting to force the Middle Eastern peace question into an international forum in which they could participate. The Soviets saw Israel as the primary stumbling block since Israel's peace policy was centered around the

concept of excluding the Soviets altogether, through either firm refusal or occasional concessions to the Arabs. The Israelis saw the USSR as "an implacable foe of the Zionist state, motivated by considerations of *makhtpolitik* supplemented by a visceral anti-semitism that hones the edge of whatever rational factors might be turning the course of Soviet policy against Israel."<sup>11</sup> The ultimate result was that the Soviets no longer had the ability to affect Israel in a bilateral manner.

The third source of the Gorbachev team's hope for normalization of relations with Israel was how this move would fit in with the general policy of "new thinking" as it applied to the Middle East. Gorbachev enunciated his "new thinking" in a speech he gave at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress in 1986. As Galia Golan, Professor of Soviet and East European Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, points out,

"This 'new thinking' on which Gorbachev's Middle East policy was based was born of a number of very practical considerations, not least of which were the prohibitive economic costs of the Soviet Union's competition with the West and the need for a respite from international tensions so as to facilitate and concentrate upon the resolution of domestic, and particularly economic, problems."<sup>12</sup>

Golan notes that what Gorbachev stressed was the inability of nuclear weapons to ensure security which in turn took away the rationale behind the arms race. Also, competition and conflict in the Third World was a dangerous game and could easily lead to superpower conflict. Thus, the Soviet Union needed to begin approaching the region in a more even-handed manner, including normal relations with all the members in the region.

The Gorbachev team saw the three sources of hope listed above as promising indicators that it was theoretically possible to proceed with the reestablishment of ties with Israel within the framework of their new policies. Their were two questions, however, that they had to

ask. First, was the Israeli government ready to reestablish relations? Second, would there be any opposition to this policy? To answer the first question, the team looked to Israel.

In Israel, the situation appeared promising but not perfect. The Gorbachev team understood that the Soviet government had maintained "back channel" communication with Israel ever since the severing of relations in 1967. This secret diplomacy between Israel and other governments had been an integral part of Israeli diplomacy since the inception of their state.<sup>13</sup> This is due to the number of countries who required continued contact with Israel, but could not afford to have this contact known in public. Israel was willing to play by these rules, maintaining the hope that in some future time the situation would change and "back channel" encounters would lead to normal relations. The Soviets were an active participant in these channels throughout the 1970's. "Communication between Jerusalem and Moscow was maintained through a variety of channels both direct and indirect."<sup>14</sup> In the open, for example, "representatives of the Russian Patriarchate were sent periodically to Israel ostensibly to look after the interests of the church and its property in Jerusalem."<sup>15</sup>

In 1984, the Israeli elections had brought a coalition government to power. As part of this arrangement, Shimon Peres had become Prime Minister for the 1984 - 1986 time period. After the term as Prime Minister he would step down to the position of Foreign Minister. This proved to be very advantageous for the Soviets since Peres' "own schooling in the arts of back-channeling dates back to the early 1950s when, as one of Ben-Gurion's closest confidants, he was often engaged in discreet contacts abroad."<sup>16</sup> "Thus the Prime Minister's Office and then the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Peres became operations centers for secret diplomatic activity."<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the situation in Israel appeared conducive to increased contacts. The team then turned to answer the second question concerning opposition. Domestically, it has been revealed in recent years that Gorbachev's assumption of power was not guaranteed. In fact, his selection for the top post came about by only "a slim margin."<sup>18</sup> With the continued strength of the conservative "old guard" in all reaches of the government, the Gorbachev team knew that to make any changes they would need to replace personnel who were against them. This was true, even more so, for reestablishment of ties with Israel. In this case, in addition to eliminating opponents, a comprehensive plan would have to be initiated. It is apparent that the Gorbachev team came up with a six step process to solve the unique "new thinking" problem of restoring relations with Israel.

First, personnel who did not share the team's views concerning foreign policy had to be phased out of power positions. Second, the official sanctioning of virulent anti-Israeli criticism would have to be eliminated. Third, contacts in "back channels" would have to be intensified and gradually moved into public channels. Fourth, as public resistance within the Soviet Union increased, the press would have to be encouraged to play a part in combating these groups and reeducating the population. Fifth, as Arab resistance grew in response to the increased contacts, active and firm diplomacy would need to be accomplished. Sixth, when the conditions were right for restoration, final negotiations would be commenced with the attempt of gaining as many concessions as practical in the bargaining.

#### Implementing the Program: 1985-1986

The Gorbachev team's first move was to launch an attack on governmental opposition. The first group they attacked were those officials surrounding the foreign policy arena in



Soviet politics. Made up of Brezhnev, Khrushchev, and even Stalin era personnel, this group had been the culprits in the misguided severing of relations in 1967. Starting at the top, the team arranged to have veteran foreign minister Andrei Gromyko replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze.<sup>19</sup> This change removed a Stalin era diplomat who had served in this position for twenty-eight years. Shevardnadze's appointment clearly reflected Gorbachev's intention to modernize and direct foreign policy to his specifications. For, "even after Shevardnadze had grown in the job, foreign policy was very much managed as a team, but dominated by Gorbachev personally."<sup>20</sup>

A second target was a man with even more years on the job. This victim, "the head of the International Department between 1955 and 1986, exceeding Gromyko's tenure as foreign minister, was Boris Ponomarev."<sup>21</sup> He was replaced by Anatolii Dobrynin, who was then Ambassador to Washington. Dobrynin knew much about Western thinking and was in a position to revitalize the department.<sup>22</sup> Rounding out the major changes was the promotion of Aleksandr Yakovlev who had spent ten years as ambassador to Canada. He became a member of the Politburo and also head of the Secretariat's propaganda department.<sup>23</sup>

These changes in the foreign policy machine in the 1985-86 time period gave the Gorbachev team the free hand that they knew was required to initiate "new thinking" with its renewal of relations with Israel. They continued this solidification in their position in 1988 they began shifting foreign policy activities out of the Party machinery and into the State organization. This shift resulted in the reduction in influence of the Party's International Department, Secretariat, and Politburo, in favor of the International Affairs Committee of the Supreme Soviet. "Although the Foreign Ministry did in fact assume a greater role at the

expense of the Party,...., it was the President and his advisers who became the main decision-makers."<sup>24</sup>

While the rearrangement of the foreign policy machine took place, the Gorbachev team turned to the implementation of part two of their plan. They initiated a subtle assault on the government's propaganda machine against Israel. Their target: The Soviet Public Anti-Zionist Committee which was created on April 21, 1983. Established "as the primary voice of the Kremlin on Jewish questions", it soon became obvious that the Kremlin's purpose in setting up the Anti-Zionist Committee was to disseminate propaganda on a major scale from a central platform directed to a variety of audiences.<sup>25</sup> By 1984, this new construct was entrenched in the government's propaganda system and becoming stronger.

"Over time the committee assumed an increasing number of functions and played an especially important role as the apologist and articulator of the Kremlin's propaganda policy on Zionism, which not only incorporated elements of anti-Semitism but also verged on the politically obscene by, at times, equating Zionism with Nazism."<sup>26</sup>

It was the heavy emphasis on the "Nazism" angle that particularly angered the Israeli government. Unfortunately, this was the angle most vigorously pursued by the Anti-Zionist Committee. A striking example of this propaganda occurred just six months prior to Gorbachev taking power. An article appeared in the Soviet press entitled, "Did the Zionists Collaborate with the Nazis". The article detailed the holding of a press conference by the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Union in the press center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Here, the Committee claims to be "exposing the Zionists' criminal collaboration with the Nazis, whose methods are still being used by Israel's current leaders."<sup>27</sup> Aside from the wedge the propaganda put between the Soviets and Israelis, the fact that the press conference

took place in an official building further discredited the Soviets in Israeli eyes. By bureaucratic measure, however, the Committee was serving its purpose. It continued to build momentum through the end of 1984, reaching a peak in mid-1985. When it was at this height of influence, however, the Gorbachev team was already sowing the seeds for its destruction.

The first blow came in May 1985, when *Izvestiia* published Israeli President Herzog's congratulatory message to the USSR commemorating the 40th anniversary of the victory over Germany. "The Jewish people 'will never forget the huge contribution of the Red Army in the final destruction of the Nazi monsters in Europe and her assistance in the freeing of Jews who survived the concentration camps'."<sup>28</sup> As Robert Freeman points out, "given that Soviet propaganda had long equated Israeli and Nazi activities and had even accused the Zionists of actively aiding the Nazi's, the publication of this message seemed to be a major reversal of Soviet policy."<sup>29</sup> This was the Gorbachev team's first move to counter the Committee. They were setting up the press as a new outlet for the propagation of a new Kremlin line with regard to Israel. Thus, although the Committee continued to play an active role in propagating anti-Semitic propaganda, its influence began to wane in 1987. "From the high point of its activity in 1985 it fell in Soviet strategy to the point of near dissolution by the end of 1987."<sup>30</sup>

As the Gorbachev team undertook these initial internal moves in 1985 and 1986, they initiated step three which entailed an increase in "back channel" activity with the gradual introduction of public contacts. In mid-July 1985, Gorbachev allowed a meeting in Paris between Israeli Ambassador to France Ovadia Sofer and Soviet Ambassador to France Yuli Vorontsov. Reportedly discussing a variety of topics, from hints at renewed relations, to the

complex issue of Jewish emigration, "Sofer's description of the meeting was leaked to Israeli radio and promptly broadcast."<sup>31</sup> Moscow's Arab allies reacted negatively to this disclosure and Moscow was forced to reiterate its old position of no relations with Israel until the United Nations' resolutions surrounding the 1967 War were respected.<sup>32</sup> It can be reasoned that this incident was perceived by Gorbachev as serious breach in back-channel diplomacy. The sensitivity of the issues discussed, Gorbachev's limited time in office, and the recantation of the meeting by the Soviets in the press, all point to the conclusion that Gorbachev expected this particular meeting to stay in the "back channels".

The actions and words that followed this incident tended to be more obtuse, with no mention of restored relations. Poland and Israel agreed to establish interest sections in each other's capitals which is often seen as the first stage in the process of reestablishing diplomatic relations.<sup>33</sup> It is inconceivable that this took place without Moscow's permission. In October 1987, Gorbachev while visiting Paris noted that, "as far as reestablishing relations [with Israel] is concerned, I think the faster the situation is normalized in the Middle East, the faster it will be possible to look at this question."<sup>34</sup> Here, Gorbachev puts out the positive indications for relations, but couches the statement in vague wording. Also in October with the "World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman's visit to Moscow (carrying a message from Israeli Prime Minister Peres), and Peres' meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze at the UN in October,"<sup>35</sup> rumors abounded. However, with the breakdown in late 1985 of the upcoming U.S. sponsored peace conference, Moscow took a harder line with Israel despite requests by Egypt and Jordan for Moscow to reestablish diplomatic relations with Israel.<sup>36</sup>

Almost immediately in 1986, incidents took place that served to renew in the Gorbachev team the idea that a peace in the Middle East was a necessity. First, Syrian - Israeli relations, which have never been friendly, deteriorated to the point that war seemed imminent. At this same time, the tense months of conflict between the U.S. and Libya began to unfold. This placed the Soviets in the unenviable position of deciding whether to actively aid Libya or abandon them in this crisis. A third situation increased tensions between the U.S. and Syria concerning terrorism. Again, the Soviets seemed to be involved in a situation where they had to decide whether to support an Arab ally.<sup>37</sup> It is arguable that these incidents served as the catalyst to reaffirm in the Gorbachev team the belief in the need for peace in the region. For from this cooling of relations in late 1985, Soviet - Israeli contacts saw no further reduction throughout the remainder of 1986.

Reviewing the first two years of Gorbachev's reign, it indeed contained movements towards rapprochement with Israel. Its gradual, uneven application was merely a reflection of his own team's perceived weakness. Thus, they chose to solidify their position before quickening the pace. However, by 1987, the team's significant personnel shifts were providing results. He was reassured that he could further accelerate his pro-Israel policy.

#### The Interim Years: 1987-1991

The years 1987-1990 saw the explosive expansion of diplomatic and cultural interactions between the two countries. Diplomatically, the Gorbachev team became bolder in their words and deeds. The turning point to which historians point is the April 1987 meeting between Gorbachev and Syrian President Assad in Moscow. It was here that Gorbachev began the process of laying out the new state of affairs. At this meeting, Gorbachev "asserted that the

absence of relations between the USSR and Israel 'cannot be considered normal' even though it was caused, said Gorbachev, by Israel's 'aggression against the Arabs'.<sup>38</sup> Further, it was imperative for any future hopes of peace that the Arab countries accept the idea of "Israel's right to a 'secure and peaceful existence'."<sup>39</sup> These bold phrases would become the baseline from which the future Soviet policy would be built.

The Gorbachev team followed this meeting with a spurt of activity. In June 1987, the Soviets dispatched a consular delegation to Tel Aviv. In mid-January 1988 Gorbachev sent a message to Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yassir Arafat. Expanding on the words he had said to Assad, Gorbachev stated that "one must not ensure one's own rights and security by flouting the rights of others."<sup>40</sup> This new theme gave further indication that the Soviets were moving away from previous hardline rhetoric that was little concerned with the security of Israel in any manner. In July 1988, a reciprocal Israeli mission was set up in Moscow. These were the highest ties to exist since 1967. A year later, "the Soviet Union finally abandoned its customary support for the annual Arab bid to have Israel's credentials revoked at the United Nations."<sup>41</sup>

In September 1990, officials from the Israeli Foreign Ministry flew to Moscow for consultations with Gorbachev himself. Coupled with these consultations were meetings between Shevardnadze and the Israeli Foreign Minister at the United Nations. These meetings culminated in a major diplomatic step when on September 30, the two countries agreed to resume consular level ties.<sup>42</sup> Finally in December, the Soviets made a good will gesture by supporting the repeal of UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 that had claimed "Zionism is a form of racism and of racial discrimination."<sup>43</sup> This resolution, passed in 1975, had greatly

angered the Israelis. More germane to this discussion is that it had long been a sore point in relations between the Soviet Union and Israel because Moscow had voted for the resolution itself and also compelled its allies to do so.<sup>44</sup>

Cultural and economic ties also blossomed during these years. The spate of activity was clear, hard evidence that the Soviet government was actively encouraging the rejuvenation of the Jewish culture in the country. In 1987, the Soviet government signed an agreement "on cooperation in genetic and cellular research"<sup>45</sup> and even permitted the establishment of a kosher restaurant in Moscow.<sup>46</sup> In 1988, a Jewish group in Moscow was permitted to open a theater named "*Shalom*" which would serve as a center for a society seeking the "restoration, consolidation of, broken national culture."<sup>47</sup> In 1989 and 1990, "Israelis were allowed to visit the USSR on tourist visas."<sup>48</sup> Israeli and Soviet rabbis "exchanged visits - the chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, on his return from the USSR, called on the Jews of the world to say a special blessing for the well-being of Gorbachev."<sup>49</sup> "The Israeli Philharmonic orchestra was invited to play in Moscow and Leningrad."<sup>50</sup>

In March 1990, "the celebration of the traditional, solemn holiday of Purim" was held in the "Great Choral Synagogue in Moscow."<sup>51</sup> In July 1991, the RSFSR Ministry of Culture informed a leading Jewish group that "the state was ready to support the active revival of Jewish culture."<sup>52</sup> Jewish schools began appearing. On October 19, 1991, it was reported that "the first Jewish preparatory school has opened in the city [St. Petersburg] on the Neva. The school's main task is to revive the Jewish education system based on the people's centuries-old tradition."<sup>53</sup> More striking was the further statement that "A diploma from the school carries the same force as any other document indicating completion of secondary education."<sup>54</sup> On

December 2, 1991, it was reported that on December 1, "for the first time in the history of our country and Moscow, Jews celebrated their religious holiday of Hanukkah at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses."<sup>55</sup> Again, this activity made it clear that the government was encouraging the rejuvenation of Jewish culture in the country.

Trade also was pursued. The Gorbachev team had long been interested in the high-tech Israeli medical industry. In August 1989, "a Soviet company signed a contract with Israel's high-tech medical equipment company, Elscint, for the joint production of ultrasound equipment in Kiev."<sup>56</sup> Also of interest to the Gorbachev team was the efficient Israeli agricultural program. Israeli water-use methods with regard to crop growth are considered some of the best in the world. The Gorbachev team viewed this technology as something that would be beneficial to those regions of the Soviet Union with a water deficit. The Jerusalem Post indicated that "senior Soviet officials told Aryeh Levin that Moscow wanted to import Israeli fruit and vegetables and acquire Israeli technological expertise in food production, desert reclamation, and solar energy."<sup>57</sup>

Israeli assistance during Soviet disasters further strengthened ties between the two countries. Three notable examples of this assistance were the return of hijackers to the Soviet Union for punishment, Israeli aid to the victims of a railway crash, and aid to the survivors of the Armenian earthquake. Israeli aid during this first incident came as quite a shock to the Soviet people. In December 1988, four Soviet hijackers had taken a busload of children as hostages. After trading the hostages for a plane, the hijackers flew the plane to Israel. Surprisingly, the Israelis sent the hijackers back to the Soviet Union for prosecution. "Moscow warmly praised Israel for its role, and, for the first time since the 1967 war, Israel



received highly positive treatment in the Soviet press."<sup>58</sup> Gorbachev followed this up by meeting with Israel's United Nations ambassador for a photo opportunity and to personally thank the Israeli people "for the efficient cooperation we received with regard to the hijacked plane...Please tell the Israeli government and the people of Israel that there is a lot of good will and friendship in the Soviet Union toward Israel."<sup>59</sup>

This incident was immediately reinforced by the Jewish actions during the Armenian earthquake that devastated that region. Gorbachev had to rush home from his visit in the United States to handle the situation. "Two days after the earthquake, the Soviet Foreign Ministry gave the Israeli rescue workers and doctors diplomatic visas. The team flew directly to Yerevan, the Armenian capital, over Turkish airspace--another first."<sup>60</sup> "Israel sent search teams and 4 tons of medical supplies and set up a field hospital in the city of Kirovakan."<sup>61</sup> The Soviet press provided active coverage of the Israeli participation, particularly after an Israeli team found three women alive in the debris.<sup>62</sup> Israel flew 61 injured Soviets to Israel for treatment, "on the first EL Al plane ever to make a flight to USSR."<sup>63</sup> The combination of aid, the discovery of living persons, and the follow-up medical care, resulted in favorable articles in the Soviet press. The subsequent coupling of these two events in such proximity had a drastic effect. Thus, with the groundwork laid, it was a much more palatable situation when Israel offered to provide aid after another disaster, only six months later.

This time it was a train crash that took place on the Trans-Siberian railroad in June 1989. "Moscow gratefully accepted Israeli offers of aid for the burn victims of the crash, and a team of Israeli doctors, together with specially developed Israeli burn medicine and synthetic skin, was sent to Moscow."<sup>64</sup> Israeli acts of kindness, not couched in propaganda, had the effect of

combating the anti-Semitism that still occurred in the press and the society at large.

With this growth in contacts and favorable press reporting, the Gorbachev team knew that negative reactive forces would arise both inside the Soviet Union and from the Arab countries to place obstacles in their path. Within the Soviet Union, the opposition arose from private organs of anti-Semitism, the most infamous called *Pamiat*. It is curious that it was when Gorbachev had effectively neutralized the Anti-Zionist Committee that *Pamiat* became most active. *Pamiat* had been "founded in the early 1980's under the USSR Ministry of Aviation" with the aim of preventing "the destruction of Moscow's historical and cultural monuments".<sup>65</sup> Instead, its activities emphasize a Russian nationalism that seeks to disrupt those influences in the country that are perceived as undermining the fabric of Russian society. Soviet Jews are targeted as one of these influences. The popularity of this "popular" movement had increased dramatically under *Glasnost* due to the new openness in the press. This is not surprising at a time when the "Russian idea" was under attack by the then republics of the Soviet Union.

Due to the potential of harm to his attempts for rapprochement with Israel, the Gorbachev team initiated step four of their plan. They encouraged the press to attack *Pamiat*. This began in earnest in 1987 when Gorbachev was more confident and *Pamiat* had become more visible. An article in *Ogonyok* provides an example on 22 May, 1987, when the author accuses the *Pamiat* leadership of "a deliberate whipping up of hysterical suspiciousness and fear",<sup>66</sup> during a local meeting of the organization. At one point the author wonders, "Maniacal raving?", but quickly realizes that "hundreds of people were listening"<sup>67</sup> to these words and believing. He paints the organization as a definite threat.

It must not have come as a major surprise to the Gorbachev team that Arab leaders would

fear that the Soviets were improving relations with the West at the direct expense of themselves. The leader of the Arab opposition was Syria's Assad, who also happened to be the leader of the country most injured by the Soviet-Israeli rapprochement. Soviet policy changes in the Middle East had led to a shift away from the willingness to provide an open ended source of weapons to the countries in the region. Beginning step five officially, the Soviets had used a February 1989 visit to Syria by Shevardnadze, to make clear that "Syria's desire for military parity with Israel" was an unacceptable policy objective.<sup>68</sup> The visible result of this meeting was the refusal of the Soviets to provide some advanced weapon systems to Syria and the stepped up demands for the payment of past debts amounting to the large sum of "approximately 16.5 billion."<sup>69</sup>

Another point of contention in the Arab world was the increasing amount of Jewish emigration allowed by the Soviets in recent years. From a token number of 470 in March 1987, Gorbachev dramatically increased the number to 200,000 in 1990.<sup>70</sup> This dramatic increase served to bring criticism upon the Soviets by their complication of the peace process. In the best case, the new settlers would "transform the demographic situation in the region."<sup>71</sup> In the worst case it would add greatly to settlement of the occupied lands either directly or indirectly. Directly it would be as a result of immediate transfer of new settlers to the occupied lands.<sup>72</sup> Indirectly, it would be as a result of educated immigrants moving into the cities which would caused "poorer Israelis , who in search of a lower cost of living, might gravitate to the new settlements in the occupied territories."<sup>73</sup> But this criticism bore little fruit during the 1987-1991 period. The Gorbachev team was committed to his policy and he spearheaded the diplomatic initiatives, pushing aside Arab resistance with little difficulty.

### Conservative Resurgence

Step six in the Gorbachev team's plan was the push for reestablishment of full diplomatic relations. After five years of uneven progression, relations were fully restored on 18 October 1991 when the Foreign Minister of the USSR "was received by Prime-Minister of Israel Y. Shamir."<sup>74</sup> This meeting had been preceded by negotiations between Soviet Foreign Minister Pankin and Israeli Foreign Minister Levin and culminated in "a joint statement" about the "restoration in full extent of diplomatic relations between USSR and Israel, cut in 1967."<sup>75</sup>

It was not, however, an easy final year. The months preceding this event were full of debate in the press over whether relations ought to be reestablished. At any time during the previous three years, this would have been of little concern to the Gorbachev team. Recently, however, the resurgence of hardliners had begun to undermine Gorbachev's power. At the end of 1990, Shevardnadze had given a shockingly open warning concerning the resurgence of the conservative forces.<sup>76</sup> In this speech, which concluded with his resignation, he warned that "a dictatorship is approaching -- I tell you this with full responsibility. No one knows what this dictatorship will be like, what kind of dictator will come to power and what order will be established."<sup>77</sup> Thus, the Gorbachev team was vulnerable to organized resistance groups. The most prominent of these groups was "The Committee against the Restoration of Diplomatic relations with Israel", which "allied to the anti-Semitic *Pamiat* organization, opposed restoration of relations".<sup>78</sup>

Leading the charge for the reestablishment of relations was a group called the Public Committee for the Renewal of Diplomatic Relations with Israel. "A leading advocate of this position was the outspoken journalist Aleksandr Bovin."<sup>79</sup> Bovin used his position as a

member of the *Izvestiia* staff to forward the position of the pro-reestablishment position. On January 26, 1990, Bovin "noted that his mail had been 9 to 1 in favor of calling for the reestablishment of relations."<sup>80</sup> He went on to state that his purpose,

"consisted of breaking with the one-sidedness and bias which characterized our Near East policy and its propaganda backup for many years, and to ensure a distribution of light and shadow more keeping with reality."<sup>81</sup>

Bovin's outspoken lead in the push for relations was critical in permitting the Gorbachev team to continue leaning towards reestablishment of relations without fear. The freeing of the press had proven to be the right course with concern to this situation. The Gorbachev team considered Bovin's role so pivotal in the success that he rewarded the journalist in 1991. Bovin became the first Soviet ambassador to Israel after the agreements were signed.<sup>82</sup>

The path had not become clear merely as the result of the press, however. Although many scholars believe that the reluctance to restore relations hinged mainly on Gorbachev's decision to wait for confirmation of an invitation to the next peace conference, this paper contends that the Gorbachev team considered their position too fragile to push for conclusion. In effect, they were in a condition similar to, but not as weak as, the 1985-1986 time period. For this reason, they acted only after the failed coup of August 1991. With the subsequent discrediting of conservatives in the government, the Gorbachev team was able to eliminate conservatives in the government in a similar exercise as took place in 1985-1986. With this accomplished, they pushed on for relations.

In August 1991, the coup came and went. Gorbachev had survived this threat, but he had been eclipsed by Boris Yeltsin. The world looked on at a weakened leader who would attempt to salvage something of both his own, and the country's dignity. "He established

diplomatic relations with Israel, then traveled to Madrid at the end of October to participate in the opening of the MidEast peace talks."<sup>83</sup> However, it was over for him. His last day in office was December 25, 1991. Yeltsin inherited Gorbachev's power, to include the guiding of Russian-Israeli relations. "Basically, Russia's present foreign policy is an extension of the policy pursued in the last two or so years of Mikhail Gorbachev's rule."<sup>84</sup> With the reestablishment of relations with Israel already a *fait accomplis*, the only question remaining for the Russians is how they can best benefit from the situation.

### Conclusion

The Gorbachev years saw a drastic change in the relations between the Soviet Union and Israel. After the severing of relations in 1967, eighteen years expired before the combination of a receptive leader, in both Israel and the Soviet Union, came to pass. But, even then, the Gorbachev team was not confident in their ability to direct changes. Despite a favorable leadership situation in Israel, the government was too rife with conservatives for them to proceed unimpeded. They were forced to develop a plan.

The six step plan would eventually take them from their previous state of affairs to the full resumption of diplomatic relations only six years later. Steps one and two successfully diminished both the conservatives in the Foreign Ministry and in the government's propaganda organ. Steps three, four, and five saw the acceleration of contacts between the two countries, and the subsequent employment of diplomatic and propaganda moves to counter the new objections in both the populace and Arab world. Step six saw the push for final restoration once the conditions were right inside the country. After Gorbachev's departure from power, Boris Yeltsin took over the reigns of foreign policy for Russia. The situation since this event

has been identified as a continuation of the Gorbachev years, with no innovations to date.

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