

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT
(AVP 59, July 1992)
3845 Buffalo Rd., Auburn, CA 95602-7901

**DISSOLUTION OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE: LESSONS FOR ISRAEL AND THE
ARABS**

Elias H. Tuma

At first glance it may seem farfetched to see any relationship between the decline of the Soviet Empire and the dynamics of Arab-Israeli relations. However, deeper reflection will show that there are several direct and indirect policy implications for the Arab countries and Israel.

For the Arab countries, or at least for some of them, dissolution of the Soviet union means that a "friend" has been lost, a superpower "ally" or a countervailing power against the West has ceased to function as such, and a major source of military and economic aid, advanced equipment, loans, and grants has been curtailed or lost forever. These negative effects might be offset by positive new international connections, or by a revived hope emanating from the dismal fate of the Soviet Empire and of empires that have threatened them in the past, as they contend Israel does now. The (false) lesson the Arabs may learn, to their disadvantage, is that waiting for Israel to disappear, as did those other empires, is not as fantastic or imaginary as it sounds. They might become convinced that if the Soviet Empire can go away, so can Israel, and all they have to do is sit and wait.

Israel, in contrast, may feel triumphant to see the Soviet decline so total. Benefits for Israel may seem immediate and grand, especially in the form of open migration to Israel. Indirectly Israel may also feel gratified because the decline of the Soviets may have weakened the position of its Arab antagonists in the Middle East, especially Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the

Palestinians, who had depended on the Soviets as a source of protection against the institutionalized bias of Western policies toward them, in favor of Israel.

Israel, however, has many negative effects to contend with. First, the decline of Soviet power has signaled the end of the cold war and obviated the myth of Israel as a western fortress against Soviet imperialism in the Middle East. Now that the Soviet threat is no more, if it ever existed, the need for the avowed United States' alliance with Israel is removed. However, the main lesson Israel should try to learn is that no empire or political power is immune. If Soviet power and dominance can dissolve, so can that of Israel.

The Arabs have often suggested that time is on their side. They feel that they have reached the bottom of humiliation at the hands of the imperialists and now they are on the rise; therefore, their power position can only become stronger. The Arabs emphasize that they have time and they can wait; Israel will eventually go just as the other empires which have dominated the Middle East have gone.

This simplistic interpretation and the false hopes built on it can be detrimental to the future of the Arabs and to the prospects of peace in the region. The relationship between the Arabs and the Soviet Union and its satellites was not a healthy relationship: the Arabs did not manage to graduate from dependence on their protector to independence, or to an alliance on the basis of equality. The aid they received was often misused; the protection they cherished was not dependable; the arms they acquired were not effective in defending them. Therefore, it would be a grave mistake to assess the loss of benefits from their "alliance" with the Soviets as in any way detrimental to their position in world affairs. If anything, it may have alerted them to the need to depend on themselves, first and foremost, and to screen their relationships with other powers more carefully than previously.

On the other hand, dissolution of the Soviet Union, though one of the major events of the twentieth century, can hardly be perceived as an established for all countries. Both the Soviet Union and Israel have been based on ideologies that have not been adopted universally by their respective people. Communism-Socialism in the Soviet Union apparently remained an alien ideology to a majority of the people in the Union. Zionism, as an ideology, is not universally accepted by the Jews either, even in Israel, and certainly not by all the people of Israel. Both the Soviet Union and Israel have expanded their territories beyond the boundaries "recognized" by international agencies; both have depended on force to maintain dominance and continuity; both have devoted large amounts of resources to the military for domestic security and as a business; both have built their internal power by pointing to the enemy outside as a constant threat and unifier. However, the analogy stops there. The Soviet were under outside economic, ideological, and military pressure emanating from a superpower. The Soviet faced dissension from within the top leadership, beginning with Nikita Krushchev and ending with Gorbachev and Yeltsin. The Soviets underestimated the negative effects of suppressed nationalism and its explosive reappearance among the nationalities that were dominated by Russia. Thus, once a window of opportunity to change was opened, and once dissenting leaders of the stature of Gorbachev and Yeltsin were found, the decline became imminent, especially in the economy and the well-being of the people.

Israel may be different. No superpower is pressuring Israel to change its strategy in dealing with the Arabs, though some of its tactics may be questioned. All the big powers which had supported Israel in the past still support it, and probably more so if we consider the improved position of Russia toward Israel. The support Israel continues to receive from its

power allies in the West testifies to the minimal pressure put on it to modify its strategy in dealing with its Arab neighbors.

Though based on Zionism as an ideology, Israel's survival can be independent of Zionism in as much as the Zionist ideals have been fulfilled by the establishment of the State of Israel. The State of Israel is now less dependent on the ideology of Zionism than were the Soviets on the ideology of Communism-Socialism. In other words, dissension from Zionism by Jews in Israel is far less threatening to the State than was the dissension from Communism to the Soviet State. In addition, the Israeli political system allows for dissension. The multiple party system and the freedom of expression enjoyed by Israeli Jews are formidable forces against any threatening dissension of the quality and force portrayed by Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Furthermore, though the Israeli economy has suffered in the recent past and continues to suffer because of its expenditure on arms and defense, and because of inefficiencies in its operations, the Israeli economy has enough reserve of good will and economic resources among its international private and public supporters to feel much less threatened by an economic breakdown than was the Soviet Union.

Given these arguments, a lesson the Arabs should learn is to be careful not to build false expectations that Israel will decline, in the course of time, as did the Soviets and other empires before them. Time by itself will not guarantee a decline, nor will the expectation of internal dissension, or the pressures from the outside as experienced so far. It is possible, however, that the Arabs, through their own resources and power, can generate enough pressure on Israel to cause it to falter as an "expansionist" empire. Through unity, technological advance, better coordination of their efforts, and more sophisticated diplomacy in world affairs, the Arabs can raise the economic, military, and moral costs of maintaining an

Israeli expansionist empire so that the Israelis themselves will find it necessary to restructure their polity and economy and put an end to expansion beyond what has been allocated to them by international agencies. A more constructive lesson to learn is to find ways of concluding a peace settlement with Israel, rather than wait for an imaginary settlement by the force of decline.

The Israelis, however, are not immune. World pressure for a peaceful resolution of the conflict with the Arabs, disappearance of the cold war, the declining significance of Israel as a fortress for western domination in the Middle East, and the massive migration of Jews to the resource-poor Israel have already caused relatively severe economic suffering in the country. Furthermore, Arab pressures for withdrawal from occupied territories and the establishment of legitimate boundaries are bound to continue and cannot be ignored. Finally, it is possible Arab nationalist sentiments within Israel will flare up and cause major dissensions within the Israeli society. The Israeli Arabs, most of whom would have been in a Palestinian Arab state had the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947 been implemented, may still seek autonomy and independence.

This is the lesson Israel should learn from the decline of the Soviet Empire: The imposition of an ideology and dependence on force cannot sustain its dominance for ever. Israel must find constructive solutions to its conflict with the Arabs. It can still do so before it is too late.

AVP is a non-profit, non-partisan monthly forum for constructive ideas, published by Elias H. Tuma. Comments and contributions are welcome. AVP may be reprinted freely, though mention of AVP would be appreciated. Lori Aoun is Assistant Editor. All correspondence should be addressed to: AVP, 604 Barbera Place, Davis, CA 95616.