

U.S.-Soviet intent: tell Arabs everything is possible, Israelis nothing has changed

By Mark A Bruzonsky
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WASHINGTON - "It's no big deal" said State Department spokesperson Margart Tutwiler the day after the United States and the Soviet Union issued a joint statement on the Gulf war this past week.

"There is absolutely no linkage in this statement," Ms. Tutwiler insisted. "Secretary of State Baker has said before many times everything that is in this statement."

And for added emphasis Tutwiler added: "Without question there is absolutely nothing new in this statement!"

FROM WASHINGTON

As for the Israelis: "There is no linkage in this communique, but again, everything that touches Israel should be cleared with us beforehand" said Israel's Senior Adviser Avi Pazner, who has handled media affairs for Prime Minister Shamir for many years.

Unlike television which, facing competitive pressures for instant news, more and more seems to pounce quickly on just about every pronouncement regardless of significance, the major newspapers actually gave this particular statement little play the day after it was made.

Neither The New York Times nor The Wall Street Journal gave the statement more than a small mention in related articles.

The Washington Times, this capital's second daily, barely noted the statement and even then

only in the second news section.

Only The Washington Post printed the statement in full (though also in the second news section) and focused some attention on it.

Still, coming as it did, this little bit of rhetorical diplomacy was something of a surprising development - at the least in terms of timing.

Just an hour before President Bush marched into the heavily guarded chamber of the House of Representatives on Capitol Hill Tuesday evening to deliver the first wartime State of the Union speech in decades, his Secretary of State and the new Soviet Foreign Minister released a statement that immediately captured the attention of television viewers.

This 28 January 1991 "Joint Statement," however, will probably be recorded as little more than a verbal flourish - something the Bush Administration has mastered.

It should definitely not be considered of the same nature as the much more important Soviet-American "Joint Statement" that was made some 14 years ago, back on 1 October 1977, during the Presidency of Jimmy Carter.

So, what accounts for this new diplomatic rhetoric at this particular time?

First, the Bush Administration has not only bent over backwards to allow Soviet President Gorbachev a free hand in dealing with his multifaceted problems at home but also seems to want to help Gorbachev maintain credibility whenever possible in the

Gulf. This, coupled with Bush's desire to keep the Soviet Union on board at this critical time, are blatantly obvious.

In this sense - especially with the summit "postponement" in the news - the new "Joint Statement" was a kind of low-cost throw away that could be taken home by the new Foreign Minister, Alexander Bessmertnykh, and then used in Moscow to give the impression that Gorbachev's Soviet Union remains a player on the world stage.

Second, American Presidents have learned that especially when dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian issue a few well-chosen words can easily and rather cheaply buy both time and hope, even when actual policies are antagonistic to the spoken words.

One of numerous historical examples should suffice to illustrate.

Right after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, for instance - an invasion well-understood to have been carried out with an American nod - President Reagan came forward on September 1st with a "Reagan Plan" that seemed to offer something for the Palestinians.

Actually there never really was a serious Reagan plan, nor did his Administration ever seriously pursue even the Camp David formulations negotiated by his predecessor in the White House. Still, the mere rhetorical comments made by the President were carefully manipulated to suggest that U.S. -Israeli policies were not totally in sync after all and thus the Arab world should retain some

hope that Washington will try to do something about the Palestinians.

In a sense, this Reagan statement that followed the worst months of Israel's siege of Beirut was designed to take the edge off growing anti-American attitudes - and in many ways it succeeded.

Third, it's hardly a secret that Washington and its allies are concerned about the possibility of "instabilities" breaking out in a number of key Middle East countries. As back in 1982, one way to lessen such possibilities is to give the impression that there is reason to hope that in the aftermath of the war with Iraq American diplomacy will be other than one-sided toward Israel when it comes to the intractable Palestinian dilemma.

Thus - as NBC's Martin Fletcher suggested on the evening news the night after the Baker/Bessmertnykh statement - it's possible Washington is playing a kind of good cop/bad cop game telling the Arabs that everything is possible while telling the Israelis that nothing has changed.

In short, at this point there's no reason to take what many are now calling the new Soviet-American "Joint Statement" of 1991 very seriously. Both American and Soviet interests were served by making it; and at the same time so were the interests of America's Arab coalition partners.

Nevertheless, the age old adage about judging by what is done rather than what is said applies double in this particular case.

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