

Perestroika and the Middle East

The fundamental and fast-paced changes taking place in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have taken center stage on the world scene for the past few months, eclipsing the Palestinian intifada and other major events in the media. These changes have evoked both hope and apprehension among progressive circles, socialist countries and liberation movements the world over. This article deals with the repercussions of these developments on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

by Maher Salameh

The changes that are sparked by perestroika sweeping Eastern Europe are developing in a somewhat different direction than what is taking place in the Soviet Union itself. These changes have led to unprecedented and monumental events, from the violent overthrow of the government in Rumania, to the rise to power of non-communist leaders as in the case of Czechoslovakia and, even more dramatically, the expected merger between the German Democratic Republic and capitalist West Germany, which will in essence eventually lead to the dismantling of the former. On the other hand, the changes in the Soviet Union prompted by perestroika and glasnost have transformed the country and brought to the surface economic crises, as well as tension among different nationalities, with some republics striving to secede from the Soviet Union.

The changes taking place in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have a direct impact on the Middle East conflict in general and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in particular. The repercussions of the changes have altered these socialist countries' positions on four major points: their stand on how to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict; renewal of ties with Israel; the resurrection of Zionist activities in these countries; and the immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel.

The USSR and Palestinian rights

The starting point of the Soviet position on the Arab-Israeli conflict, since 1948, has emanated from recognition of the State of Israel. In the following years, the Soviet Union supported the nationalist movements that

came to power in a number of Arab countries, and backed the Arab cause in the face of colonialism and foreign intervention. In the wake of the military defeat of the Arab regimes in 1967, and the subsequent Israeli occupation of the rest of Palestine and parts of Egypt and Syria, the Soviet Union once again sided with the Arabs; it played an active diplomatic role at the UN in support of the Arab cause and against Israeli aggression and occupation.

As the contemporary Palestinian revolution rose in the aftermath of the Arab regimes' 1967 defeat, it received Soviet support politically, diplomatically, militarily and materially. The emergence of the armed Palestinian resistance, and the broad popular support it engendered among the Palestinian and Arab masses put the Palestine question on the international agenda, and elicited yet more support from the Soviet Union.

The first military showdown between Israel and the Palestinian resistance movement took place in March 1968 at Al Karameh in Jordan. The Israeli incursion into Jordan, in an attempt to destroy this frontline base of the revolution, was met with stiff resistance which cost the Israeli forces heavy losses and forced them to retreat. This battle has great significance for it posed the Palestinian armed resistance as a force to be reckoned with. Not only did it give the Palestinian masses a great moral boost, it also ushered in a new era of relations between the PLO and Soviet Union.

In 1971, the 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union declared support for the Arab masses and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, but without specifying these rights. The 25th party congress

pointed out that peace would not be achieved as long as hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were living in miserable conditions and as long as they were unable to establish a state. The turning point in the Soviet-Palestinian relationship, however, came in 1976 when a PLO office was opened in Moscow, and in 1977 when the Soviet-Palestinian summit occurred. In 1981, the PLO office was granted full diplomatic status.

The USSR and the peace process

In 1982, the Soviet Union proposed a plan for the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Unlike the Reagan plan, which was declared at the same time, the Brezhnev plan supported Palestinian rights. The second point of the plan spoke of securing the invariable rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and the establishment of an independent state, and facilitating the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes in accordance with UN resolutions (General Assembly resolutions 194 and 3236) and appropriate compensation for the belongings they had left behind. In addition, the plan reaffirmed Israel's right to exist within the pre-1967 boundaries; it called for Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem. The plan proposed reaching a peaceful settlement through the convening of an international peace conference under UN auspices, attended by the five permanent members of the Security Council, with the PLO and Israel participating.

Since then, perestroika and the new Soviet thinking have resulted in a rearrangement of priorities and a new