

*"Although [Soviet General Secretary] Gorbachev's policies have led to greater Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, Gorbachev is not yet in a position to transform this greater influence into predominance in the region."*

## Soviet Policy in the Middle East

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GENERAL Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev has waged a vigorous, and so far successful, campaign to improve the Soviet Union's image and increase its influence in the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf in particular. As with all his domestic and foreign initiatives, Gorbachev's policy toward these areas appears to be new and bold. Yet, despite an increased willingness to talk with the Israelis, Gorbachev's policies differ little from those of his predecessors since the mid-1970's.

Gorbachev, like President Leonid Brezhnev, is seeking to improve Soviet relations with moderate Arab states. His peace proposals for both the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iran-Iraq war are also similar to Brezhnev's. Indeed, there has been far more continuity than change in Soviet policy toward the region since Gorbachev came to power. Yet while Gorbachev's policies toward the Persian Gulf and the Middle East may be similar to those of previous Soviet leaders, he appears to be far more successful than they were in expanding Soviet influence beyond Moscow's traditional radical Arab allies.

Soviet foreign policy toward the Middle East suffered several setbacks in the early and mid-1970's. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat expelled most Soviet military advisers from Egypt in 1972 and abrogated his treaty of friendship and cooperation with Moscow in 1976. The Arabs widely blamed insufficient Soviet support for their defeat by Israel in the October, 1973, war. In addition, most Arab states came to the conclusion that Moscow had no influence over Israel, and that only Washington could influence that state. Many Arab governments—including radical Syria for a time—cooperated with the United States seeking a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moscow was on the diplomatic sidelines.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Fur an excellent account of Soviet foreign policy toward this region through the early 1980's, see Robert O. Freedman, *Soviet Policy toward the Middle East Since 1970*, 3rd ed. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>A useful description of Soviet relations with Iran and Iraq through the early 1980's can be found in Aryeh Y. Yodfat, *The Soviet Union and the Arabian Peninsula* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup>Freedman, *Soviet Policy toward the Middle East*, chs. 8-9, and Mark N. Katz, *Russia and Arabia: Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Arabian Peninsula* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), ch. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Katz, *Russia and Arabia*, p. 100.

At the same time, in the Persian Gulf, the Shah of Iran was a close ally of the United States. The conservative Arab monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) were also firmly linked with the West; except for Kuwait, they all refused even to exchange embassies with Moscow. Only in Iraq and South Yemen was the Soviet Union influential. But even in Iraq, the ruling Baath party did not hesitate to suppress the large Iraqi Communist party.<sup>2</sup>

In 1978-1979, however, the Soviet Union appeared to be gaining influence in the gulf and the Middle East. The American-sponsored Camp David Accord between Egypt and Israel alienated almost all Arab governments, since no provision was made for an independent Palestinian state. Most Arab governments broke relations with Egypt and criticized the United States for sponsoring an agreement that they felt sheltered Israel from having to make important concessions on the Palestinian issue. Not only did radical states like Syria come to rely more heavily on the Soviet Union, but even anti-Communist Saudi Arabia began the process of improving relations with Moscow. In addition, the stridently anti-American Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's rise to power in 1979 led to the loss of Washington's influence in Iran. Moscow hoped to ally itself with Teheran on the basis of a common anti-American foreign policy.<sup>3</sup>

The situation changed, however, at the end of 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The Soviet Union's efforts to expand its influence, especially in the gulf, were seriously set back. Saudi Arabia immediately ended its flirtation with Moscow and organized the Islamic summit conference in January, 1980, which condemned the attack (only Syria and South Yemen refused to attend).<sup>4</sup> Saudi Arabia and several other monarchies feared that the invasion of Afghanistan was part of a Soviet plan to advance to the gulf and eventually to attack or subvert them. Much to Moscow's dismay, these states increased rather than decreased their security ties with the United States and the West.

Soviet policy elsewhere in the gulf was not particularly successful either. When Iraq invaded Iran in September, 1980, Moscow quickly halted direct military assistance to Baghdad (indirect aid through third countries continued) and began helping Teheran. Because it borders the U.S.S.R., has a long coastline on the Persian Gulf and

Indian Ocean, and possesses a relatively large population, Iran was (and still is) a strategically much more important country to the Soviet Union than is Iraq. But the Soviet leaders were unable to gain influence in Iran. Khomeini brutally suppressed the Tudeh (the Iranian Communist party), gave military assistance to some *mujahidin* groups fighting Soviet troops and the Marxist regime in Afghanistan, and generally continued to denounce the U.S.S.R. as the other "great Satan."<sup>5</sup>

During 1982, Khomeini's forces were able to push the Iraqis out of Iran and into their own country. In addition to the problems an Iranian victory would pose for the West and for the moderate Arab states, Teheran threatened Soviet interests as well. The replacement of the Baath regime by a pro-Iranian regime in Baghdad would spell the loss of a long-standing (albeit difficult) Soviet friend. Nor could the Soviet Union expect to have greater influence over a victorious Iran. Thus the Soviet Union resumed direct military assistance to Iraq in 1982. Nevertheless, Moscow still sought to improve relations with Iran and to prevent the United States from restoring its influence there by continuing to ship arms to Teheran indirectly via North Korea, Vietnam, Syria, Libya and even some East European countries.<sup>6</sup>

The Iraqis were still angry that the U.S.S.R. had already cut off direct arms supplies to them and were not at all happy about the continued indirect transfer of arms to Iran. Thus, even after direct Soviet arms transfers to Baghdad were resumed, Iraq moved to improve its relations with the West, including the United States. In 1984, Washington and Baghdad restored diplomatic relations, which had been cut off since 1967. In the broader Middle East context, the Soviet Union was widely blamed by the Arabs for Syria's defeat when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982. (The Soviet Union did, however, resupply Damascus with arms once the fighting was over.)

Yet even before Gorbachev became General Secretary, the Soviet image in the Middle East had begun to improve. After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the moderate Arab states became increasingly convinced that Washington would not pressure Israel to withdraw from the Arab territories it had conquered. Even conservative states like Saudi Arabia praised the Soviet Union's Middle East peace proposals that called for an international conference involving all parties to the dispute, including the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Nor were

<sup>5</sup>Yodfat, *The Soviet Union and the Arabian Peninsula*, pp. 123-131.

<sup>6</sup>David K. Shipler, "Level of World Arms Sales to Iran Regarded as Largely Unchanged," *The New York Times*, April 11, 1987.

<sup>7</sup>Joseph G. Whelan and Michael J. Dixon, *The Soviet Union in the Third World: Threat to World Peace?* (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup>Don Oberdorfer, "Soviet Deal with Kuwait Spurred U.S. Ship Role," *The Washington Post*, May 24, 1987.

the Arabs impressed with American resolve when the administration of President Ronald Reagan withdrew the United States peacekeeping mission from Beirut after it had come under increasing attack from a variety of extremist Arab groups.

In addition, several moderate Arab states were frustrated by their inability to purchase the American weapons they wanted, because of congressional fears that these arms would be used against Israel. In 1984, both Jordan and Kuwait announced that because they were not allowed to buy certain American arms, they intended to purchase them from the Soviet Union instead. The stage was thus set for further Soviet foreign policy gains under Gorbachev.<sup>7</sup>

## THE GORBACHEV ERA

Since Gorbachev came to power in March, 1985, Soviet leaders appear to have improved their ties significantly with all the major countries of the gulf. Moscow has managed the difficult feat of retaining its position in Iraq while improving relations with both the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Iran.

Moscow's minimal relations with the GCC states began to expand soon after Gorbachev came to power. In late 1985, Oman and the United Arab Emirates agreed to establish diplomatic ties with the U.S.S.R. for the first time. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar still have no formal relations with Moscow, but their informal contacts with the Soviet Union have increased.

The most important Soviet diplomatic breakthrough with the conservative Arab Gulf states, however, occurred in Kuwait. In 1986, Kuwaiti officials had asked the United States to protect their oil tankers from increasing Iranian attack in retaliation for Kuwait's financial and material support to Iraq. The Reagan administration initially refused, because it did not want to damage its secret effort to establish better ties with Teheran. Kuwait made the same request to Moscow, which agreed in early 1987. The United States government then immediately reversed itself and offered to protect all Kuwaiti tankers in order to exclude the Soviet Union from any role in the gulf.

In the aftermath of the Irangate revelations about the United States transfer of arms to Iran, Washington was anxious to restore its credibility as the principal protector of the GCC states against Iran. The Kuwaiti government, however, decided that it would receive a stronger American commitment if the United States had to compete for Kuwait's affections with the Soviet Union. Thus Kuwait chartered three Soviet oil tankers and transferred 11 of its own to American registry.<sup>8</sup>

For the Soviet Union, the Kuwaiti invitation was an important milestone in Moscow's efforts to improve relations with the conservative GCC states. Although the Kuwaitis had been buying some Soviet weapons since the mid-1970's, they were wary of moving too close to the U.S.S.R. By agreeing to protect Kuwaiti oil exports, for

the first time ever the Soviet Union gained an active role in defending the GCC states—a role that had exclusively belonged to the United States and Britain. The Soviet Union may have hoped that because it offered to protect the Kuwaitis, other GCC states (especially Saudi Arabia) would adopt a friendlier attitude. Moscow may also have hoped that this involvement would lead to the expansion of Soviet arms sales to Kuwait and to the initiation of such sales to other GCC states.

The Soviet Union, however, kept its arrangement with Kuwait in perspective. Moscow did not compete with Washington to be the superpower with the most naval vessels protecting the most tankers in the gulf. The Kremlin realized that a rapid Soviet naval buildup in the gulf would lead to an equal or greater American naval buildup. Even more important, the Soviet Union did not want to improve relations with the GCC at the expense of its long-standing goal of improving ties with revolutionary Iran.

But, of course, Teheran was angry that the Soviet Union had agreed to protect Kuwaiti shipping. In May, 1987, a speedboat reportedly operated by Iran's Revolutionary Guards attacked a Soviet freighter. The Soviet Union, however, did not retaliate; instead it played down the incident. Soviet media mentioned the attack, but insisted that no one was injured and little damage was done.<sup>10</sup> Nor did Moscow raise a fuss when another Soviet vessel also struck a mine in May.<sup>11</sup>

Soviet minimization of the risks of conflict with Iran and its restraint after these two incidents stand in stark contrast to American behavior toward Iran. When one of the reflagged Kuwaiti tankers struck a mine, the United States government moved greater force to the region. Provocative Iranian actions were met by increased American force levels as well as by open discussion by United States officials about how the United States might retaliate against Iran.

As the war of nerves between Washington and Teheran escalated during the summer of 1987, the Soviet navy maintained a low profile in the gulf. Suddenly, in early August, 1987, Moscow and Teheran announced a major economic cooperation accord. The Soviet Union

<sup>10</sup>Bernard E. Trainor, "Soviet Ship Attacked by Iran in Gulf, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, May 9, 1987, and *Trud* (Moscow), May 12, 1987, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup>See English translation from Tass in Foreign Broadcast Information Service-Soviet Union (hereafter cited as FBIS), May 17, 1987, p. H1.

<sup>12</sup>Philip Taubman, "Iran and Soviet Draft Big Projects, Including Pipelines and Railroad," *The New York Times*, August 15, 1987.

<sup>13</sup>"Gorbachev's Gulf, Too," *The Economist* (London), October 24, 1987, pp. 13-15.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Tass report in FBIS, June 25, 1987, pp. E1-E2.

<sup>15</sup>For an excellent analysis of Soviet policy toward the Middle East since Gorbachev came to power, see Galia Golan, "Gorbachev's Middle East Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 66, no. 1 (Fall, 1987).

agreed to build a pipeline to carry Iranian oil to the Black Sea. An additional connection between the Soviet and Iranian railway systems was also planned.<sup>11</sup>

During the summer of 1987, the United States launched a major campaign to isolate Iran internationally as punishment for continuing the war. Washington succeeded in its efforts to have a United Nations Security Council resolution passed (with Soviet approval), asking both sides in the conflict to accept a cease-fire. As expected, Iraq accepted but Iran did not. The United States then proposed a Security Council resolution calling for an arms embargo against Iran until it accepted a cease-fire. The Soviet Union, however, made it clear that it would not vote in favor of such a resolution for the time being.<sup>12</sup>

Soviet diplomats tried to persuade Iran that while the United States was its enemy, the U.S.S.R. was its friend. They also tried to persuade all states of the region that American actions against Iran only heightened the prospects for increased conflict, but that the U.S.S.R. (and not the United States) could help bring peace to the gulf. Moscow argued that peace between Iran and Iraq was necessary so that the Muslim world could once more focus its united attention on Israel, the common enemy. The Soviet Union claimed that the continuation of the Iran-Iraq war served American and Israeli interests by distracting Muslims from the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>13</sup>

In the broader Middle East context, Soviet foreign policy has benefited from the further breakdown of American peace efforts and the wider acceptance of Soviet ideas for a Middle East peace conference. Instead of agreeing to bilateral Israeli-Jordanian negotiations as Washington and Tel Aviv had originally hoped, the King of Jordan announced that the talks must take place in the framework of an international conference that included the Soviet Union. The Labour wing of the Israeli coalition government headed by Shimon Peres also accepted in principle the idea of such a conference. The Likud wing of the government, however, remains opposed. Gorbachev has also succeeded in improving Soviet relations with Egypt. Moscow and Cairo signed an agreement to reschedule Egypt's approximately \$3 billion in military debts to the Soviet Union over a 25-year period. In the spring of 1987, the Soviet Union helped bring about the reintegration of PLO chairman Yasir Arafat with the mainstream of the Palestinian movement.<sup>14</sup>

In pressing his peace proposals for both the gulf war and the Arab-Israeli conflict, Gorbachev seemed to be making the implicit argument that since the Soviet Union was the only superpower that could talk with all sides of both conflicts, all sides should turn to Moscow to help resolve them. Further, since Washington cannot talk to all sides, the United States is unable to help bring about peace, but will only worsen both conflicts. This argument, of course, is similar to the one the United States used to make with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Although the Soviet Union has done little so far to actually resolve these two conflicts, Gorbachev has succeeded in convincing both Arab and Israeli moderates that Soviet participation can enhance the peace process and that attempting to exclude the Soviet Union, as the United States has suggested, is counterproductive.

## CONCLUSION

While strengthening the Soviet position in the gulf and the Middle East, Gorbachev has not pursued policies that differ much from those of his immediate predecessors. The one new element is an increased Soviet willingness to talk with Israel. But if Soviet policy toward the region has not changed much under Gorbachev, political conditions in the region certainly have changed. These changes have led many states, which opposed a greater Soviet role in the region just a few years ago, to welcome a greater Soviet role or at least to reduce their objections to it.

In 1980, the conservative Arab states of the gulf were afraid of the Soviet Union because of its invasion of Afghanistan and its support for revolution in the Peninsula, especially through South Yemen. The South Yemeni-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman, though largely defeated in 1975, had mounted cross-border raids into Oman as late as 1979. South Yemen was also supporting a Marxist insurgency against non-Communist North Yemen that was not defeated until 1982.

By 1984, the gulf states were less fearful of the Soviet Union. First, the U.S.S.R. was bogged down in Afghanistan and seemed unlikely to attempt to invade Pakistan or Iran. Second, South Yemen had ended its support for insurgencies and had normalized its relations with its non-Marxist neighbors. But these states still had little desire to see the Soviet role in the gulf increase at this time. Although Iranian forces had crossed over into Iraq, as late as 1984 the conventional wisdom was that Iraq could contain the larger but much less sophisticated Iranian armed forces indefinitely.

By 1987, however, the conservative states of the gulf had become extremely fearful that Iran might defeat Iraq and turn against them. Worried also about the strength of the American commitment to their defense, these states decided that a limited rapprochement with the Soviet Union might serve both as an additional disincentive to Iranian hostile actions against them and as an inducement to Washington to do more for them, out of the fear that it might be losing influence to Moscow.

The Iraqis had a strong incentive to retain friendly relations with Moscow even in 1980, when the Soviet Union cut off direct arms shipments to Baghdad in favor of Teheran: Baghdad sought to restrain the amount of Soviet assistance to Iran as well as to restore Soviet assistance to Iraq. In 1987, when Iraq's military situation was becoming increasingly desperate and dependent on the Soviet Union, Iraq had an even stronger incentive to re-

tain friendly relations with the Soviet Union despite Soviet overtures to Iran.

In the early 1980's, Iran may have been content to remain at odds with the rest of the world. However, by 1986-1987, Teheran was actively courting Moscow. Teheran realized that Soviet military aid to Iraq was one of the principal obstacles preventing an Iranian victory in the Iran-Iraq conflict. By holding out the prospect of stronger Soviet influence in Iran, Teheran sought to provide Moscow with an incentive to avoid increasing its military aid to Baghdad or cooperating with the United States in its attempt to cut Iran off from its external arms supplies.

Gorbachev's greater willingness to establish better relations with Israel, allowing more Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel, combined with a certain war-weariness after the conflict in Lebanon, has encouraged the Israeli Labour party to be more receptive to the Soviet Union's Middle East peace proposals. Egypt and Jordan have also improved relations with the U.S.S.R. in order to induce Washington to be more supportive of their positions vis-a-vis Israel. They also hope to influence Moscow to be less pro-Syrian; however, Soviet-Syrian relations remain close.

Can the Soviets transform their greater presence and acceptability in the region into a long-term influence that might allow them to expand their role while diminishing American influence? Serious obstacles remain. While the fear of an Iranian victory has led the conservative Arab gulf states to welcome an increased Soviet role in the region, this fear has also led them to seek an even greater American and Western role in the region. These states have paid little attention to Soviet claims that the United States, the main source of tension in the gulf, should withdraw its military forces. They have no desire to see either Iran or the U.S.S.R. become the strongest military force in the region. The rapprochement between the Arab gulf states and the U.S.S.R. has taken place only because the gulf states perceive that they share common anti-Iranian interests with Moscow.

The improvement of Soviet relations with Iran has led to Arab apprehension over the Soviet Union's motives. What will the U.S.S.R. do if Iran appears on the verge of winning the war? Will Moscow seek to restrain Iran? The Soviet argument that Moscow, because it can talk to both Iran and Iraq, can help bring about peace becomes less persuasive as Moscow gives Teheran more political, economic and even military assistance. The improvement of Soviet-Iranian relations only provides further incentive for the Arab gulf states to rely on the United States, even if their hopes have not completely died that

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little chance of success. There is no doubt that if this project is built, it will enhance Turkey's significance in the region.

Turkey entered the decade of the 1980's with a balanced set of domestic, regional and international policy objectives. Its experiences, however, taught Ankara not to trust the United States or the Soviet Union; its neighbor to the north is viewed with suspicion and uncertainty, while its relationship with Washington has left much bitterness, mistrust and apprehension. Ideologically, Ankara continues to face West. But if political criticisms continue in Western forums and if unreasonable demands are made on Turkey that impinge on its sovereignty, it is very likely that the result will be damaged relations with the West, which could ultimately undermine the crucial role Turkey plays as a barrier to Soviet expansionism in the Middle East. *M*

#### SOVIET POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Moscow can somehow restrain Teheran.

The Iranian leaders want improved relations with the U.S.S.R. now, in order to convince Moscow that it should give less support to Iraq and oppose American efforts to cut off arms to Iran. But if Iran succeeds in further weakening or actually defeating the Baath regime in Iraq, Teheran may not see a need to placate the Soviet "great Satan." Thus, by attempting to increase its influence in both Iran and Iraq through supporting both nations, the U.S.S.R. could wind up losing its influence in both Iran and Iraq.

Although Gorbachev's policies have led to greater Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, Gorbachev is not yet in a position to transform this greater influence into predominance in the region. Moscow has maintained good relations with Iraq as well as improved relations with the conservative Arab gulf states and Iran, but it is difficult for Moscow to strengthen its relations with one nation without weakening its relations with another.

Similarly, Moscow has managed to retain its strong relations with Syria, to improve ties with Israel and the moderate Arabs and to strengthen its position with the PLO. It is doubtful, however, that the U.S.S.R. will risk losing its influence with Syria and the PLO by pressuring them to be more responsive to Israeli security concerns; friendship with Israel is not worth this price to Moscow. Yet unless Moscow does make an effort to promote Israeli concerns, it can hardly be expected that Israel will become more receptive to the Soviet Union's Middle East peace proposals. And although Moscow hopes to weaken Egyptian and Jordanian relations with the United States, Cairo and Amman are not likely to trade the United States for the U.S.S.R. as their superpower backer, as long as Moscow continues to support their more radical Arab rivals. *B*

#### THE PALESTINIANS

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Lebanon were partially responsible for triggering the siege of the camps was not important once the battle was joined. The PLO had initially been welcomed by Palestinians in Lebanon as a protective force. The organization's ability to protect its constituents remained an important test of its legitimacy and appeal.

The obstacles against the PLO's reestablishing an independent presence were formidable. The Syrians, while sponsoring those PLO groups opposed to Arafat, were determined to prevent his return. The Shia—at least the elements of Amal that Nabih Berri controlled—were also determined to prevent the PLO from breaking out of the refugee camps or operating independently in Shia-dominated areas of southern Lebanon. And the Israelis, whose 1982 invasion weakened the PLO presence in southern Lebanon, were bent on preventing cross-border artillery attacks and incursions. Moreover, despite their support for the Palestinian cause, most members of the Lebanese political establishment were not eager to see the PLO's return and another major Israeli-Palestinian confrontation at their expense.

Nonetheless, capitalizing on the support that Arafat enjoyed in the refugee camps, Fatah fighters began to return. By March, 1986, the Israeli press, quoting military sources, claimed that there were 8,000 PLO fighters in Lebanon, at least 1,000 of whom were Arafat loyalists who had taken up positions in the Sidon area.<sup>11</sup> By year's end, according to Israeli press accounts, Arafat's Fatah group, possessing the most money and organizational savvy, was becoming entrenched in southern Lebanon.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, there were even reports in the Arab and Israeli press that the PLO's return was being aided by both the Maronites and the radical Shia tied to Hezbollah—both of which were determined to counter Syria.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps nowhere was the split between the PLO's territorial goals and its desire to preserve the organization more clearly reflected than in its relationship with the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza. Here, the realities of the Israeli occupation and the local Palestinians' desire to end it conflicted with the dreams and far-reaching goals of Palestinians in the diaspora who seemed prepared to wait out their Israeli adversaries. Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza continued to look to the PLO, at least to Arafat's Fatah organization, as their spokesman, but many were becoming increasingly frustrated by Arafat's indecisiveness and fecklessness.

<sup>11</sup>*Ha'aretz*(Tel Aviv), March 19, 1986, in FBIS-Affi4, March 21, 1986, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup>*Yedi'ot Aharonot* (Tel Aviv), October 17, 1986, in *FBIS-MEA*, October 20, 1986, pp. 17-18.

<sup>13</sup>*Yedi'ot Aharonot* (Tel Aviv), April 1, 1986, in *FBIS-ME4*, April 1, 1986, p. 14.