

---

---

*"Soviet efforts to gain influence in the Arabian Peninsula have met with only limited success . . . . The . . . booming economies, internal stability, and internal security controls [of the Gulf States] have eliminated much of the incentive as well as the opportunity for revolution or other political change."*

## Soviet Policy in the Gulf States

BY MARK N. KATZ

*Guest Scholar, Foreign Policy Studies, The Brookings Institution*

**T**HE Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (founded in 1981) consists of six countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, all of which have several common features. All are absolute monarchies; in each of them the ruler and his family exercise great authority, and National Assemblies or advisory councils (where they exist) have very little power. In addition, all of these states are basically pro-Western, although their rhetoric may not indicate this, and they have no desire to see Soviet influence increase. Finally, all of them have oil, though their resources vary, from the vast reserves held by Saudi Arabia to the very modest reserves in Bahrain.

Oil is the primary reason that the peninsula is important to the West; the GCC countries possess over 40 percent of the world's known oil reserves. Additional oil will undoubtedly be found in other countries, but unless new discoveries greatly exceed depleted fields, the world will come to depend more and more heavily on these countries.<sup>1</sup>

Yet while Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states are so important to the West, they are also vulnerable. They are among the last few absolute monarchies left in the world, and their internal stability is in question. Their relatively small populations also make them vulnerable to outside attack. In addition, the Strait of Hormuz, through which most of their oil must pass, could be blockaded, and Iran has threatened to do so.

Because of their vital importance and their vulnerability, many observers in the West have come to fear that the Soviet Union may try to extend its influence over the GCC countries. The Soviet alliance with Iraq, the Soviet military presence in South Yemen and Ethiopia, and the invasion of Afghanistan have been cited as evidence of a Soviet plan first to surround the region and then to take control of it.

Why would the Soviet Union want to do this? In the mid-1970's, many Western observers speculated that oil production in the Eastern bloc would fall below oil consumption and that Moscow might seize the Gulf in order to ensure petroleum supplies for itself and its allies. Nearly a decade later, these predictions appear to have been excessively pessimistic; Soviet oil production has con-

<sup>1</sup>In 1983, the United States imported 33 percent of its total oil consumption, West Europe, 71 percent, and Japan 95 percent.

tinued to remain well above its oil consumption, and the Soviet Union is a net petroleum exporter.

Another theory is that the Soviet Union wants to control the oil in order to be able to regulate or even deny oil to the West. Although there is no conclusive evidence to support this view, it is not difficult to see why the Soviet Union might want to control the region's oil. Since Japan, West Europe and, to a lesser extent, the United States are so dependent, being able to deny oil to them or to raise petroleum prices astronomically could weaken them economically and militarily.

Because of the possibility that the Soviet Union might try to extend its influence through an invasion, either directly or in conjunction with one of its allies, like South Yemen, deterring such an invasion has been a major justification for the American creation and deployment of a Rapid Deployment Force. However, while a Soviet attack on the GCC would be extremely damaging to the West, such an operation would be very dangerous for the Soviet Union as well. A Soviet invasion of an area so vitally important to the West would risk Western military intervention. This could lead to a wider superpower confrontation, with a possibility of nuclear war. Both in their thinking and in practice, Soviet leaders have tried to avoid a direct clash with the United States; for this reason alone, they are not likely to invade the GCC states.

There are, however, less dangerous means by which Soviet leaders might try to extend their influence over the GCC states: the promotion of revolution or other violent change to overthrow the present governments or the promotion of friendly relations between Moscow and the present governments. In the last 15 years, however, the Soviet Union has met with only limited success in spreading its influence.

### SOVIET POLICY IN THE 1970's

At the beginning of 1970, a growing Marxist insurgency in Oman was fighting against both the British and the highly unpopular and repressive Sultan Said bin Taimur. Enjoying the full support of neighboring South Yemen, where a Marxist group had come to power in 1967, the rebels had captured nearly all of Oman's southern province, Dhofar, and had begun activities in northern Oman as well. These Marxists, known as the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arab Gulf (PFLOAG),

called for revolution not only in Oman, but also in Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States (which became the United Arab Emirates [UAE] on independence).

For its part, Saudi Arabia had experienced many internal problems in the 1960's, including a bitter power struggle between King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal that ended in 1964 when Faisal deposed Saud. There had also been several coup attempts in Saudi Arabia, including two by leftist soldiers in 1969. In addition, the borders between Saudi Arabia and its British-protected neighbors had never been properly defined; with the British about to depart, Riyadh began to press its claims. At that time, the Soviet Union had diplomatic relations only with Kuwait (which had become independent in 1961), but the Soviet diplomats hoped that once the British left, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE would seek friendship with Moscow as a form of protection against Saudi Arabia.

In the area surrounding the Peninsula monarchies, developments also seemed favorable to the spread of Soviet influence. Moscow's military aid to radical Iraq was growing, and in 1971 the two countries signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation. The Soviet Union also had good relations with Iran's Mohammed Riza Shah Pahlavi; many Arabs were afraid that Moscow supported his territorial claims to Bahrain and his desire to increase his influence on the southern shore of the Gulf. In addition, American support to Israel in the June, 1967, war had led many Arab governments and publics to become anti-American and pro-Soviet; conservative regimes like Saudi Arabia with close links to Washington were very much on the defensive. Finally, during the 1960's, there were revolutions in both the Yemens. The republicans who came to power in North Yemen were moderate and willing to cooperate with the Saudis, but the South Yemeni rulers were avowedly Marxist and openly supported the export of revolution to all the countries of the Peninsula.

#### FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

At present, however, none of the opportunities for the expansion of Soviet influence in the Peninsula seem nearly so promising as they did in the early 1970's. The insurgency in Oman was crushed in late 1975 and has shown no serious sign of revival. Leftist forces grew strong in Bahrain, but were suppressed in 1975 and have not revived. Revolutionary forces never gained any strength in Qatar or in the UAE.

Border disputes between Saudi Arabia and its smaller neighbors have all been settled, mainly in the latter's favor. While there have been internal disturbances in Saudi Arabia, like the seizure of the Grand Mosque at Mecca by religious zealots in 1979 and strikes and demonstrations by the Shi'ite minority in 1979-1980, they have been fewer in number since 1970 and all have ended

quickly. Of the six GCC countries, Kuwait is the only one with which the Soviet Union still has diplomatic relations.

In the area surrounding the GCC, Iraq still receives substantial Soviet military assistance, which Baghdad needs to fend off Iranian troops. However, Baghdad suppressed the Iraqi Communist party and has sought military assistance from the West, particularly from France. Because the GCC states provide substantial economic assistance to Iraq, Baghdad has no desire to threaten the GCC states on behalf of the Soviet Union or in any other way to risk losing their support.

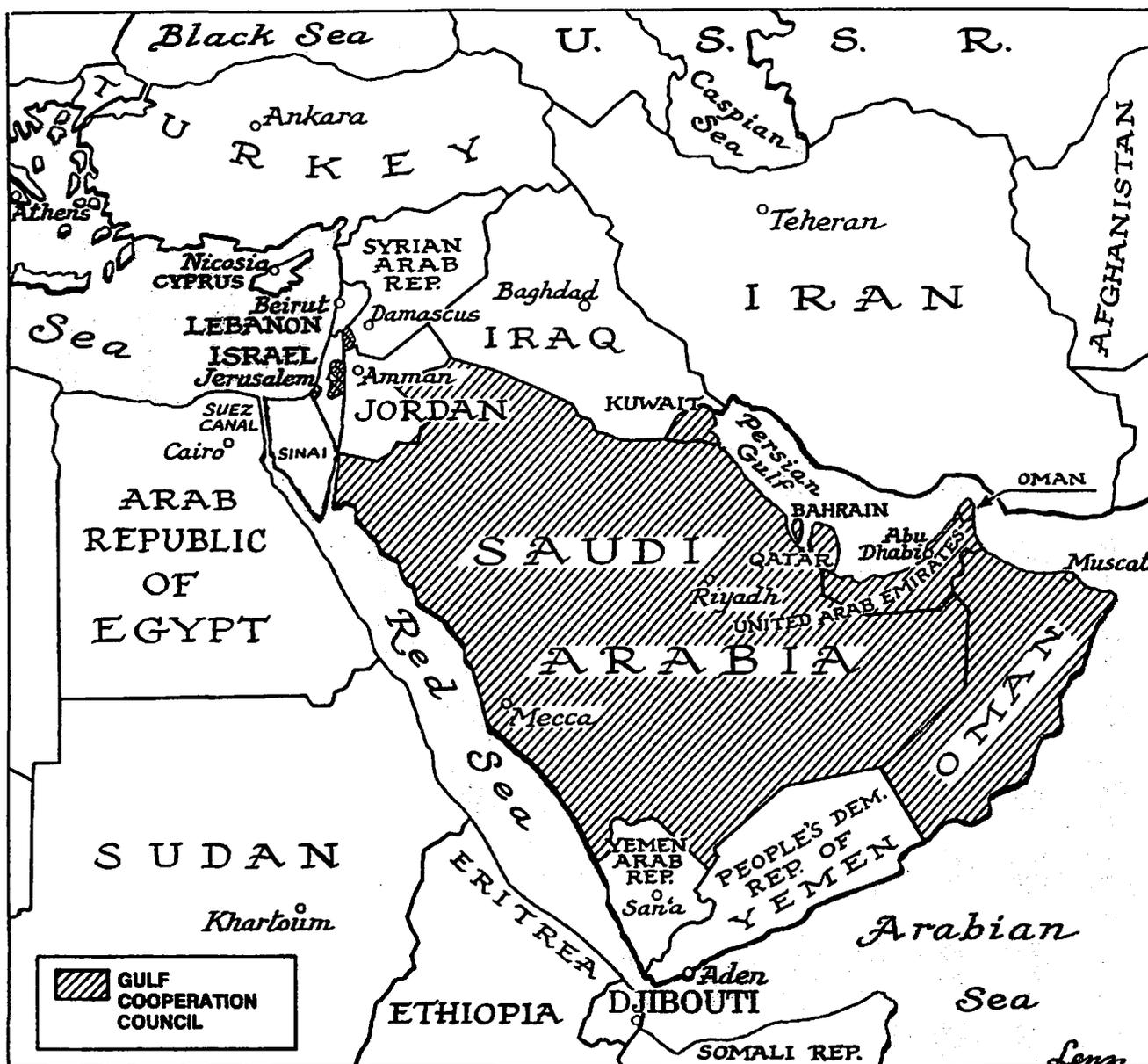
Since 1979, Iran has been ruled by an anti-Western Islamic revolutionary government, but the Soviet Union has little desire to see Iran win the war against Iraq. The Teheran government is as anti-Soviet as it is anti-American, and if Iraq is defeated or the Baath is replaced by an Islamic government, the Soviet Union will lose an important ally.

North Yemen has received Soviet military assistance, but does not want Moscow's influence to grow.<sup>2</sup> North Yemen fought border wars with the South in 1972 and 1979 and defeated a South Yemeni-backed Marxist insurgency, which had lasted from 1979 to 1982. Since 1978, Soviet influence in South Yemen has grown very strong, but the Soviet Union has not supported South Yemen's attempts to export revolution to its neighbors. Indeed, Soviet leaders have encouraged the South Yemenis to pursue friendly relations with the GCC countries in order to induce these oil-rich countries to give them economic assistance. The Soviet Union believes that friendly GCC-South Yemeni ties will enhance Soviet efforts to establish ties with the GCC as well.

Soviet leaders have been largely unsuccessful in the GCC countries because they overestimated the prospects for revolution in the Peninsula in the early 1970's. The Soviet Union believed that because Saudi Arabia was a "feudal" monarchy, it would be ripe for revolution. It viewed Oman, the Trucial States, Qatar, and Bahrain as even more vulnerable because the rulers of these countries were supported by the British and the British were about to withdraw.

As for the Yemens, although the Soviet Union had helped the Egyptians to intervene in North Yemen to support the republicans against the Saudi-backed royalists and although the Soviet Union gave direct military assistance to the republicans when the Egyptians withdrew (after their June, 1967, defeat), Soviet leaders did not see the need for direct intervention on their part to help these revolutions succeed. The South Yemeni National Liberation Front received almost no Soviet support in its rise to power, and the Omani rebels seemed to be succeeding with South Yemeni assistance. Although London was directing the counterinsurgency operation, the Soviet Union predicted that the British would be no more successful in Oman than they had been in South Yemen.

<sup>2</sup>Soviet military assistance to North Yemen is balanced by Saudi economic aid.



But Soviet leaders did not foresee that the repressive Omani Sultan would be overthrown by his son, Qaboos bin Said, with British help, and that Sultan Qaboos would implement a series of reforms that would win not only the general population but also many of the rebels to his side. The Shah of Iran, increasingly worried (after the signing of the Soviet-Iraqi treaty) about the spread of Soviet influence in the region, also sent forces to help the Omanis. It was only just before their defeat in 1975 that Soviet leaders recognized that the Omani rebels were losing; and Moscow made a last minute effort to save them by sending advanced surface-to-air missiles. But it was too late. The Soviet Union hoped that the insurgency could be revived when the Shah was overthrown in early 1979 and the last Iranian troops were withdrawn from Oman, but apart from a few minor raids the guerrillas failed. Attempts to bring revolution to the other Peninsula monarchies were quickly suppressed.

The Soviet Union also failed to gain influence in the GCC states because of the oil embargo and the oil price rise that occurred at the time of the 1973 Middle East war. The Soviet Union believed that these events would lead to a permanent state of tension between the Arab oil-exporting countries (especially Saudi Arabia, without whose participation the price rise could not have been sustained) on the one hand and the West on the other. Thus, Moscow gave propaganda and military aid to the opponents of the GCC monarchies; at the same time, it launched a diplomatic campaign to establish friendly relations with the monarchies, hoping that they would look to Moscow for support when their relations with the West deteriorated.

But to Moscow's surprise, the West accepted the dramatic oil price rises. Relations between the United States and the Peninsula and the rest of the Arab world actually improved after the 1973 war, when Washington

made a concerted effort to negotiate Israel's withdrawal from Arab territory. Further, increased oil prices enriched the Peninsula monarchies, with their relatively small populations. These governments then undertook policies that spread the benefits of the oil wealth generally among the population, practically eliminating poverty as a reason for revolution. Oil riches also allowed them to build internal security systems that could quickly detect and suppress attempts at revolt, further reducing the opportunities for would-be revolutionaries. Instead of causing tension between the Peninsula states and the West, the rise in oil prices made the monarchies less vulnerable to Soviet-backed revolutionaries.

Indeed, by the mid- to late 1970's, the Soviet Union had concluded that the prospects for revolution in the Peninsula monarchies were extremely poor; thereafter, Soviet leaders have tried to establish friendly bilateral relations with the governments in power. The Soviet Union and the UAE (against which Saudi territorial claims were substantial) agreed to exchange embassies in early 1972; this did not take place because of Saudi pressure, Riyadh's agreement to settle the border dispute largely in the UAE's favor, and the UAE's fear that the Soviet Union would assist Marxists there (as they had helped them in Oman). By the mid-1970's, the Soviet Union had concluded that there was little hope of driving a wedge between Saudi Arabia and its smaller neighbors; if the Soviet Union were to gain influence there, it would first have to normalize diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia.

To accomplish this goal, Soviet leaders tried to exploit Saudi objections to the continued American support of Israel. The Soviet Union tried to persuade the Saudis that if they worked with Moscow, the Arab cause would be greatly strengthened and the prospects for creating a Palestinian state would improve. Soviet leaders argued that the establishment of relations between Moscow and Riyadh might force Washington to give less support to Israel and more to the Arabs. Finally, Soviet leaders pointed to their friendly relations with Kuwait as an example of mutually beneficial cooperation between states with different social systems and said that ties between the other GCC states and Moscow could be equally harmonious.

These arguments have so far failed to persuade Saudi Arabia, Oman, the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar to permit even diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. All these governments are wary of Soviet claims of friendship, because of previous Soviet efforts to promote revolution against them and because of continued Soviet media support for Marxist groups like the Saudi Arabian Communist party, the Bahrain National Liberation Front, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman. They fear that the Soviet Union would seize any opportunity to overthrow them and that the presence of Soviet diplomats and other officials on their territory would help Moscow do so.

And although Moscow says it wants friendly relations with these countries, the Soviet Union has not been willing to bring to a halt foreign policy actions that these five GCC states regard as threatening. Before 1970, Saudi Arabia regarded Soviet assistance to Egyptian intervention in the North Yemeni civil war as a threat to its own security. These five states regarded as threatening the growth of Soviet influence in South Yemen and Soviet support for the Omani rebels.

The five GCC states have also objected to Soviet and Cuban military aid to Marxist Ethiopia in its war with radical but Muslim Somalia over the Ogaden. Similarly, Saudi Arabia and its allies have backed the Muslim Eritrean rebels in their struggle for independence while the Soviet Union supports Ethiopia's efforts to crush them. Finally, they regard the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a direct threat and a demonstration of Moscow's hostility toward the Muslim world; and they have given political as well as financial support to the Afghan rebels.

#### KUWAIT AND THE SOVIET UNION

Why is Kuwait different? Since 1963, Kuwait has had diplomatic ties with Moscow and since the mid-1970's it has purchased a substantial quantity of Soviet weapons. However, relations were not always so friendly. In 1961, when Kuwait became independent, Baghdad claimed all of Kuwait. In 1973, Iraq claimed part of Kuwait's territory and attacked a Kuwaiti border post. On both occasions, the Iraqi government was closely linked to the Soviet Union, and Moscow appeared neutral, if not actually supportive of Iraq. In 1961, the British and later the Arab League forces arrived to protect Kuwait, but in 1971 the Anglo-Kuwaiti security agreement was terminated when Britain withdrew from the Gulf. When Iraqi forces moved into Kuwait in 1973, the Arab League did not act forcefully, as it had in 1961 to protect Kuwait. The Kuwaiti government reasoned that by establishing ties with Moscow (in 1963) and buying arms from the Soviet Union (beginning in the mid-1970's), the Soviet Union would come to value Kuwait's friendship and would have an incentive to restrain the Iraqis.

By maintaining friendship with the Soviet Union and other pro-Soviet countries and movements, Kuwait also hoped to persuade them not to support the leftist opposition inside Kuwait. So far, Kuwait has succeeded. The Soviet Union frequently refers to real or imaginary opposition movements in the other GCC states, but not in Kuwait, partly because Soviet leaders want to persuade Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states that there is

*(Continued on page 41)*

---

**Mark N. Katz** is a Rockefeller Foundation international relations fellow at the Brookings Institution. He is the author of *The Third World in Soviet Military Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), and has recently completed work on a book entitled *Russia and Arabia: Soviet Foreign Policy Toward the Arabian Peninsula*.

Saudi political resolve. Saudi Arabia has spent billions of dollars over the years to create a credible air defense as the centerpiece of the Saudi defense system. In the Arab League and in this incident, the Saudis have proven that they dare to use military force.

No less important, the oil tanker crisis may have brought the GCC as a whole closer to its much-discussed desire to create an integrated air defense system. First, as a result of the crisis the Saudi-Kuwaiti AWACS data-sharing has been formalized with United States approval; Kuwait is the most vulnerable country of the GCC to Iranian air attacks, partly because of its close proximity to the war zone. Second, United States emergency military assistance to Saudi Arabia, including Stingers, a fuel tanker and other military equipment, has enhanced Saudi deterrent capability. And third, if the recommendations of the GCC chiefs of staff (June 23, 1984) are adopted and implemented, the GCC states may finally have a "semiunified command," a better monitoring system for navigation in the Strait of Hormuz through strengthened Omani capability, and "a Gulf rapid deployment force."

The GCC leaders as well as Iraq's Hussein believe that their defense efforts are vital to containing revolution internally. At the height of the tanker war crisis, there was a widespread belief in the Gulf region that an Iranian victory would drastically embolden the pro-Iranian Muslim extremists, Shiite and Sunni alike, encouraging them to revolt.

For this reason, the Gulf Arab states have also tightened domestic security measures. Despite the repeated GCC failure, so far, to create a collective internal security system, all the Arab states, including Iraq, continue to pursue a variety of "carrot and stick" domestic policies to counter the attraction of the Iranian revolutionary example. More than other Gulf leaders, Hussein uses coercive measures to control opposition, including arbitrary arrest, harassment, torture, and execution. Members of the Iranian-supported underground *al-Dawa* are his principal target.

On the other hand, the amount of money Hussein spends for welfare is second only to Saudi Arabia's expenditure (about \$500 million a month) and he spends this money particularly in Shiite holy cities, for projects like housing, water and sewage works, and Shiite shrines. In the long run, the usefulness of such policies as substitutes for genuine and fundamental social, economic and political reforms is highly questionable.

#### DREAM AND REALITY

Iranian leaders believe that the export of their revolution is necessary for the survival of the Khomeini regime. Above all, that survival must be protected in the Persian Gulf region, where the superpowers and the regional states are trying to destroy the Iranian regime because they regard it as the principal threat to their interests.

Given its Muslim-populated southern borderlands, the

Soviet Union fears the contagion of the Islamic revolution in its territory as it fears Iran's support of the "warriors" (*mujahidin*) against Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan. Given the dependence of its NATO allies on Gulf oil supplies, the United States fears the threat of the Islamic revolution to Western domination on the Arab side of the Gulf. And given their "subservience" to the United States, the "reactionary and corrupt" Arab regimes fear the triumph of the *Islam of the oppressed* over the *Islam of the oppressors*.

So far, Iran's doctrinal commitment to the export of revolution has, on balance, outweighed pragmatic considerations in its policy in the Gulf region, although pragmatic considerations have not been ignored. For example, despite Iran's repeated threats to close the Strait of Hormuz if its oil exports were crippled, it has so far "impeccably" observed the principle of freedom of navigation, partly because its own self-interest is at stake. Iran has also accepted the United Nations-sponsored moratorium on the bombardment of civilian targets and, by everyone's admission, Iran has retaliated with exemplary restraint to the Iraqi-initiated tanker war. It may even have "underresponded." Yet Iran continues to insist on Hussein's removal as the precondition to a negotiated settlement, an insistence that has already made the Iraq-Iran war the longest, the bloodiest, and the costliest war in the modern history of the Middle East.

As long as Khomeini rules, Iran will try to export its revolution. But various political factions in Iran disagree on this issue. Thus it is possible that in post-Khomeini Iran the present overemphasis on dogma and doctrine will give way to more pragmatic considerations. The Khomeini-favored *Maktabi* approach to foreign policy is said to be opposed by the *Hojjatieh* approach, which either disavows export of the revolution or accords it a low priority. The post-Khomeini leaders may fail to domesticate their revolution, to wake up from their chiliastic transnational dreams, and to strike a balance between the requirements of ideology and reality. If they fail, they will be affirming one of the most ancient and tenacious tendencies in Iran's political culture—the adoption of unrealizable goals and inappropriate means. ■

---



---

#### SOVIET POLICY

(Continued from page 28)

nothing to fear from normal ties with the U.S.S.R. However, the Soviet-Kuwaiti relationship is limited, because Kuwait is a conservative emirate despite its sometimes leftist foreign policy rhetoric. Kuwait's primary foreign policy ties are to the other GCC states.

Thus, Soviet efforts to gain influence in the Arabian Peninsula have met with only limited success. Nor does the Soviet Union appear likely to be any more successful in the foreseeable future. The GCC states' booming economies, internal stability and tight internal security controls have eliminated much of the incentive as well as the opportunity for revolution or other political change. ■