CHAPTER - III

CHANGING SCENARIO IN THE GULF: OPPORTUNITIES AND DILEMMAS FOR SOVIET POLICY
The end of 1970s (i.e., the year 1979) saw great many changes on the international scene: two major revolutions — Islamic in Iran and Sandinista in Nicaragua — two major foreign interventions to prop up local regimes — Soviet in Afghanistan and Vietnamese in Cambodia — one major war — China-Vietnam — and one major arms control agreement — SALT-II. Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, in fact, heralded the beginning of the second cold war.

Soviet Union and the Revolutionary Regime in Iran

In the Gulf and the Middle East in general, the Islamic Revolution in Iran was a major watershed. The Soviet Union watched the happenings in Iran with anticipation and anxiety: No other internal upheaval in the Third World had brought such immediate gain and promising opportunity. But the end of stability in Iran had also created new problems for the USSR.

On returning to Iran Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini quickly reversed the political-strategic orientation of the former regime and a process of de-Westernisation began: multi-national corporations, especially the American firms were expelled; two American manned electronic intelligence collection stations (at Bandar Shah and Kabkam) were shut
down; arms purchases from the West was reduced and Iran's membership in the CENTO was terminated; non-alignment became the cornerstone of Iranian foreign policy; oil supplies and other connections with Israel, the staunchest US ally in the region, were snapped; Palestinian Liberation Organisation was recognised and hailed while relations with Egypt (in the wake of its accord with Israel) were broken off and finally the communist and pro-Moscow Tudeh Party was permitted to resume its political activity. Thus Khomeini eliminated all the persistent sources of tension between Moscow and Tehran.

We have already noted in the previous chapter that since late December 1978 and especially after the departure of Shah in mid January 1979 the Soviet Union had openly come out in favour of the revolution and the Soviet media even lauded the role of the clergy in it. After the fall of Shah appointed Shahpur Bakhtiar government, the USSR announced its official recognition of the Provisional Government headed by Mehdi Bazargan, nominated by Khomeini. The Soviet media praised the "revolutionary regime

in Iran" but warned it against the US imperialism, which would "incite protests and plots by Iranian relation within the country." The official Soviet position on the revolution in Iran was presented by Brezhnev in his election speech on 2nd March 1979. He welcomed the victory of this revolution which put an end to the "despotic and oppressive regime" and wished it "success and prosperity". He also expressed hope for "good neighbourliness between the people of Soviet Union and Iran". Pravda commentator P. Demchenko hailed the Iranian decision to abolish Pentagon's military bases and withdraw from CENTO and appealed for greater cooperation between the two countries. Soviet officials repeatedly noted that "during the Iranian people's struggle against the monarchy, the USSR sided with the revolutionaries and did everything to prevent outside interference in Iran's affairs and to block plans for armed intervention against the revolution", an allusion to Brezhnev's warning of November 19, 1978, against outside interference.

The new Iranian regime also showed its willingness in having good relations with USSR. Bazargan called for "strengthening understanding and cooperation" between Iran and the USSR. For his first meeting with a foreign envoy Ayatollah Khomeini chose Soviet ambassador Vladimir M. Vinogradov on February 25, 1979. Dr. Mohammad Mokri was sent as ambassador to Moscow. He was considered friendly towards the USSR.

This upbeat mood in Soviet-Iranian relations did not last for very long. Many in the new Iranian set up were suspicious of Soviet Union for a variety of reasons: ingrained anti-communism, hostility towards Soviet atheism, traditional Iranian fear of its powerful neighbour to the north, the communist coup in Afghanistan in April 1978, and Moscow's insistence on the continued validity of articles V and VI of the 1921 treaty which permitted the Soviet forces to intervene in Iran in certain circumstances. The immediate cause of tension was Ayatollah Khomeini's criticism of Soviet activities in Afghanistan and allegation that they were supporting Iraq in fuelling discontent in the oil producing province of Khuzistan in southern Iran. Iran abrogated the offensive articles on 5 November 1979 but Moscow ignored the move.

On the Soviet side support for Iran's revolutionary regime became less enthusiastic after mid April 1979 and muted by June 1979. Soviet commentators started talking about division among those who earlier had been united against the Shah and about a "polarization of forces".11 By September-October 1979, the Soviet media had started criticizing "religious fanaticism" in Iran. Moscow Radio cited a listener who compared Iranian regime to a "religious dictatorship" which "cannot solve the social and economic problems facing the country" and accused that "progressive movements are being persecuted in Iran."12

During August-September 1979, the Soviet media gave detailed reports about the fighting in Iranian Kurdistan. The reports were on the whole favourable to the Kurds. Quoting an Iranian source Pravda accused that the "fratricidal conflict" as continuing because of the Central Administrations reluctance to grant "national and cultural autonomy to the Kurdish population."13 Tass refuted the allegation that the Soviet Union was providing arms to the Kurds.14

When the Tudeh Party was outlawed in August 1979, the Soviet media reacted very cautiously. It merely reported Tudeh's protest against the act, but refrained from adding its own comment. But both the Tudeh and the Soviet media took care not to criticise Khomeini or the regime. They directed their ire against the "reactionary segments" in the revolution, while praising Khomeini in person.

There were other commentaries and articles in Soviet press that continued to praise the anti-Western, anti-Imperialist measures initiated by the Revolutionary regime, and harped on the growing economic cooperation between the Soviet Union and Iran. Soviet thinking regarding Iran, at that time was that "the revolution had just begun, that it must continue to expand and that the more strained the relations between Iran and the Western world become, the better the chances for better ties with the USSR."  

Soviet Stand on the American Hostage Crisis

On 4 November 1979, Iranian students seized the US

embassy in Tehran, precipitating a 444-day crisis. They demanded that the deposed Shah and all his wealth be turned over to them. They also insisted on a formal apology and formal recognition from the United States.

Officially, the Soviet Union maintained the correct attitude. It endorsed the various Security Council resolutions calling for the release of the Americans. During a visit to Madrid, Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko expressed the hope that "this problem is going to have a satisfactory solution". He also added, "But the parties, including the United States, must display restraint and clear-headedness so as not to allow emotions to spill across borders." But at the same time, they never openly criticized the action and on 14 January 1980, vetoed a UN security Council resolution calling for economic sanctions against Iran.

The Soviet media on the other hand was more blunt in criticising the United States and thus implicitly supporting the Iranian action. A. Petrov writing in Pravda admitted

that seizing the embassy is "contrary to international conventions". But he also accused the US for flouting the international law in the past when in 1953 it brought back Shah to power and in the present case by refusing to extradite him and the "wealth he had plundered." 19

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the criticism of United States by the Soviet leaders and especially the media increased. Ostensibly it was aimed at deflecting Iranian opposition to the Soviet action. Reacting to an American attempt to rescue the hostages on 24 April 1980, Gromyko disapproved of "all measures of a military, or generally forcible nature, on the part of the United States or anyone else against Iran."20 Similarly, Brezhnev, speaking at Alma Ata on 29 August 1980, opposed the economic blockade and other belligerent actions taken by the US navy to frighten Iran.21

Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan and the Iranian Reaction

The communist take over of Afghanistan in April 1978 had been disapproved by Tehran from the beginning. After assuming power the new Revolutionary regime and Khomeini

himself strongly criticized the Kabul regime and also accused the Soviet Union of interfering in Afghan affairs. 22

After Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, the tenor of Iranian criticism became very sharp. On 9 August 1980, addressing the representatives of world liberation movements, Ayatollah Khomeini referred to "this big satanic power the USSR, which is exerting all its power to suffocate Afghanistan". 23 Earlier the Tehran radio quoted Khomeini as emphasising "the dictum of following neither East nor West and only the heavenly path of Islam... Both the capitalist imperialism of the West and the social imperialism of the communist world are to be rejected". 24

A few days later the Iranian Foreign Minister Qotbzadeh sent a long and very critical letter to Gromyko. He said "our Imam has described the United States as a great satan. Unfortunately, you too have proved in practice that you are no less satanic than the United States." Then he enumerated a long list of charges against the Soviet Union: supporting the Kurdish rebels; reorganising the communists

("your fifth column"), indulging in espionage, conniving with the enemies of the revolution; not agreeing to the abrogation of Articles V and VI of the 1921 treaty and sending troops to Afghanistan.25

Gromyko in his reply refuted most of the charges and reiterated USSR's desire to have friendly relations with Iran.26 The reply was very mild and attempted to downplay the allegations levelled by Qotbzadeh.

The Afghanistan crisis continued to be a major impediment in improvement of Soviet-Iran relations till the very end. However, after the eruption of Iran-Iraq war, Iran toned down its criticism in its desire not to push Moscow towards its arch enemy Iraq.

**Iraqi Reaction to the Soviet Intervention**

Iraqi reaction to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was unexpectedly negative and swift. In his Army Day speech of 6 January 1980, President Saddam Hussein

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characterized the invasion as "an erroneous and unjustified act that creates anxiety." The Iraqi newspaper Al Thawrah went a step further and accused Moscow of "flagrant intervention" in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and advised Soviet Union to abandon its strategy of trying to convert Middle East into a believer in Marxist ideology. A few days later the same daily accused Soviet Union for "sneaking" into Middle East "ideologically and politically". It further added that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a follow up of earlier Soviet actions in PDRY and Ethiopia.

At the United Nations General Assembly debate also Iraq censured the Soviet action and in February 1980 it voted with the vast majority of UN members condemning the Soviet invasion and asking for its withdrawal from Afghanistan. At the Muslim Foreign ministers conference held in Islamabad in January 1980 also Iraq "vehemently" condemned the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

Iraq's strong criticism of the Soviet intervention was to an extent due to genuine fears since Afghanistan was situated in the proximity of the Gulf and was also a non-aligned Muslim state like it. It was worried that the Soviet Union intended to "encircle Middle East and then compel the United States to negotiate spheres of influence in the region." The Baghdad Observer in an editorial entitled, "The Path of Independence" also accused the superpowers of trying to carve out "spheres of influence". However, a more plausible reason seems to be that since Iraq's stand was in accordance with the views of the overwhelming majority of non-aligned states in general and Arab states in particular, Saddam Hussein might be aspiring to attain a leading role for Iraq among the Arab and the non-aligned countries.

Whatever might be the reason behind Iraqi criticism of the Soviet action in Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein certainly had no intention of breaking with the USSR. In an interview, with Paris based al-Watan al-Arabi published on 31 January 1980, the Iraqi President maintained

that Soviet Union, though a great power, had committed "the most outstanding error" by invading Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Saddam Hussein insisted that Baghdad would continue to view the Soviets as "friends who have identical attitudes in matters concerning our objectives or the interests of our people."\(^{34}\) One possible reason behind Saddam Hussein's caution and attempts to preserve relations with the Soviet Union seems to be his preparation for a possible military confrontation with Iran, in which eventuality he would require Soviet arms.\(^{35}\)

**Soviet Union and the Iran-Iraq War**

Iraq had never been comfortable with the 1975 Algier's Agreement which had forced it to accept the Iranian demands on the Shatt-al-Arab. There are reasons to believe that since early 1979 where the turmoil in Iran forced the Shah to leave the country, Iraq had been contemplating about avenging the 1975 agreement. Since April 1980 Saddam Hussein made preparations for launching a war against Iran.\(^{36}\)

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34. As quoted in *Baghdad Observer*, 1 February 1980.
35. Shemesh, n. 33, p. 182.
There is another viewpoint which maintains that the Iraqi hand was forced by Iran's refusal to negotiate with Iraq and the latter's fear that the former was not prepared to honour the Algier's agreement. Iranian leaders' proclamations about their resolve to "export our Revolution" and Iran's violations of Iraqi air space during the summer of 1980 and other similar hostile actions convinced the Iraqi leaders of the need to take firm stand against the hostile neighbour. They were further encouraged by the reports, provided by Iranian fugitives (former officers and politicians) in Paris, that there was utter chaos in Iran and in the event of a war there would be uprisings in the provinces leading to Iranian defeat.\footnote{37. M. Khadduri, The Gulf War: The Origins and Implications of the Iran-Iraq Conflict (New York, 1988), pp. 81-84.}

On 17 September 1980, Saddam Hussein abrogated the Algiers Agreement, claiming that Iran had already violated the agreement by resuming its assistance to the Kurdish rebels. Iraq also intended to overthrow the Khomeini regime, which had been trying to incite the Iraqi's especially the Shiites against the Ba'ath regime, and to liberate Khuzistan (Arabistan) an oil rich province of Iran, inhabited by Arabs. Baghdad also hoped that dealing a blow to Iran
would turn Iraq into the predominant state in the Gulf. 38

The war started on 22 September 1980. Deputy Prime Minister and RCC member Tariq Aziz visited between 21-22 September and again as Saddam Hussein's envoy on 11 November 1980. 39 The purpose of these visits was presumably to apprise Moscow of Iraq's position on the war and to ensure further supplies of Soviet arms. The Soviets as we know had not been very happy with Baghdad for quite sometime, especially after Iraqi criticism of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Moreover, they had also been trying to improve their relations with the Revolutionary regime in Iran. Under these circumstances, they refused to provide arms to Iraq. Tariq Aziz himself admitted this in a candid interview to David B. Ottaway. 40

The war alarmed the Soviet Union because it had evoked a major US response. Prior to the outbreak of war, USSR's regional position appeared very strong. The USSR in fact had a decided edge because of its proximity to the Gulf, but the US and its NATO allies moved in the initial weeks and the months of the Gulf war to undercut USSR's advantage. 41

38. Shemesh, n.33, p.182.
The Soviet Union responded quickly. It did not criticize Iraq for its attack and adopted a neutral stand. On 30 September 1980, Brezhnev described both Iran and Iraq as "friendly" countries and urged them to settle their problems at the negotiating table. In December, he proposed that the Gulf be demilitarised and advanced a plan for it. This was clearly an attempt to preclude any Western involvement in the Gulf.

The Soviet media also expressed its concern at the outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq. It maintained that the conflict is a purely regional one from which neither side will benefit. They also charged that the United States hoped to use the warfare for its own ends. Pravda alleged that the CIA was fanning the flames of war. Izvestia reported that the war provided a pretext for the US to promote an association of pro-American states.

As we have already noted, the Soviet Union tried to maintain a neutral stance in the Iran-Iraq war. It neither condemned Iraq for its misadventure nor supported it by providing arms as requested by Tariq Aziz. But some observers

42. Pravda, 1 October 1980.
believe that there was a definite Soviet tilt towards Iran during the initial phase of war. It did not object to Libya and Syria providing Soviet made arms and equipments to Iran.\(^{47}\) In early October 1980, the Soviet Union is said to have offered arms shipments to the Iranian Prime Minister through its ambassador, though Soviet Union stoutly denied the charge.\(^{48}\) Shahram Chubin, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, alleged that the Soviets provided Iran with satellite informations and warnings about impending Iraqi attacks.\(^{49}\)

Soviet Union had important considerations for supporting Iran. First as we have already noted in our earlier discussion, Iran was strategically more significant because of its 1000 mile long border with the USSR. Its sheer size, with four times more territory and three times more population than Iraq, added to its importance. Second, Iraq's one sided abrogation of a legally binding border agreement and decision to attack Iran provided the USSR with a case for supporting Iran based on international law. Soviet Union also feared that if it favoured Iraq, Iran might be compelled to normalize its relations with the United States. An outright Iraqi victory was otherwise also

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47. Saivetz, n.41, p. 36.
49. Shahram Chubin, "The Soviet Union and Iran", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 4 Spring 1983 , p. 934.
not in Soviet interest. Past experience with the Ba'th regime had shown that it was more amenable and friendly to Moscow when it was weak vis-a-vis its internal and external enemies.\(^{50}\)

There were other, definite signs to show that Moscow in fact favoured Tehran. In a speech at the Twenty Sixth Congress of the CPSU, General Secretary Brezhnev argued that the Iranian revolution, despite its contradictions and complexity, was basically, "anti-imperialist and be re-affirmed the Soviet willingness to develop friendly relations with Iran".\(^{51}\) On the other hand, unlike at the preceding Congress of the CPSU there was no mention of Iraq, except in the context of Iran-Iraq war. He reiterated Moscow's neutral position regarding the war and emphasised the need to put an end to it. He alluded to Moscow's desire to mediate in the dispute by noting "We strive in practice to contribute to this."\(^{52}\)

**Soviet tilt towards Iraq**

Despite Soviet attempts to improve its relations with Iran, the response from the other side was far from friendly.

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52. Ibid.
The Iranian Prime Minister Raja! condemned Soviet interference in the internal affairs of Iran and Afghanistan and cast doubts on Moscow's assertions of neutrality in the Gulf conflict. 53 In fact, Iran had a deep religious-ideological commitment to the Afghan rebels. In addition there were also reports that Iran incited the Soviet Muslims in Central Asia. 54 On the other hand, there were signs that Iraq was improving its ties with the United States. Tariq Aziz in his interview to the Washington Post hinted at this. 55

Under these circumstances, the Soviet Union once again turned its attention to Iraq. A high level Soviet economic delegation visited Iraq and signed an economic protocol. 56 On 10 April, on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of the Soviet-Iraqi treaty, the Soviet President Brezhnev and the Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov sent a personal congratulatory message to Saddam Hussein, 57 whereas on the same occasion the previous year, the message was sent on behalf of the Supreme Soviet and the Soviet Government.

53. The Times, 6 October 1980.
54. Shemesh, n. 33, p. 184.
56. Salvetz, n. 41, p. 38.
57. Pravda, 11 April 1981.
Some other circumstances contributed to further improvement in Soviet-Iraqi relations. On 7 June 1981, the Israeli air force bombed a French built nuclear reactor at Ossirak in Iraq, on the suspicion that it was being used to produce atomic weapons. The Soviet Union strongly condemned the Israeli attack. The Iraqis had also been searching for an opportunity to improve their relations with the Soviet Union. From 17-20 June 1981 First Deputy Prime Minister Taha Yasin Ramadan visited Soviet Union and held talks with Prime Minister Tikhonov (58) (a clear indication that Moscow was attaching great importance to the visit). After this Moscow is said to have resumed its arms supplies to Baghdad, though on a limited scale (59). One tangible result of this improvement in Soviet Iraqi relations was that Baghdad dropped its opposition of Kabul's Communist regime and stopped criticising the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless inspite of outward normalisation of Soviet-Iraqi relations and the continuing deliveries of war material from the Soviet Union or its allies during the second phase of the Gulf war, Baghdad remained unhappy with

the USSR for at least two reasons. First the quantity and perhaps also the quality of Soviets arms received during late 1981 were judged inadequate by Iraqi authorities. Second, Baghdad continued to resent Moscow's refusal to abandon its posture of neutrality and to come out openly in its favour. As a result of its dissatisfaction with the Soviet Union, Iraq continued its flirtations with the West.

The Reagan administration removed Iraq from the list of nations said to support, thus clearing the way for Iraq to receive several export licences. Several Western analysts feared that if US were to re-establish relations with Iraq then Iran would fall totally under Soviet influence. In fact, there were some reports in the West that the pro-Soviet Tudeh party was gaining increasingly influential roles in Iranian ministries.

During the Fall of 1981, Iran launched an offensive to expel the Iraqi forces from its territory and from then on the initiative passed into their hands. In November-December, Iran recaptured a substantial part of its territory and between March and May 1982 in another offensive, Tehran

61. Saivetz, n. 41, p. 39.
recovered almost all its territory including the town of Khorramshahr. Another blow was inflicted upon Iraq when in April 1982 Syria blocked the Iraqi pipeline for exporting oil through Syria to the port of Banias.\(^6^2\) These military defeats prompted a renewed Iraqi effort to augment relations with the Soviet Union. From 3 to 4 June 1982, Tariq Aziz, Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister, visited USSR and discussed "some questions of Soviet-Iraqi relations" with his Soviet counterpart.\(^6^3\) As a further sop to the Soviet Union the Iraqi government released 280 communist prisoners. Most of them were said to have been reinstated in their government positions.\(^6^4\)

On 10 June 1982, Iraq declared a unilateral ceasefire in its war with Iran and promised to withdraw from all Iranian territory and even forego its claim to the Shatt-al-Arab. The Israeli military campaign against the PLO forces in Lebanon on 6 June was the excuse given by Iraq for its desire to stop the war. Iran, for its past rejected Iraq's unilateral ceasefire as well as July 1982 Security Council resolution which called for a ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq war and withdrawal by both sides to

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64. Yodfat, n. 17, p. 135.
internationally recognised borders. After the initial success of the Iranian forces in expelling the Iraq's Khomeini ordered his soldiers to invade Iraq. He had before him a "vision of the Islamic forces advancing, as they had during the first glorious years of Islam, crushing infidels, smashing enemies, and bringing the true faith everywhere." He also expected the Iraq's Shiites to revolt, but they did not oblige him. 65

The Iraqi offer of unilateral ceasefire and withdrawal from Iran was highly appreciated in the Soviet Union. One important and immediate fall out was resumption of arms supplies to Iraq by September-October 1982. Iraq received MIG-25s, T-72 tanks and SA-8 missiles. 66 Yet on the political level Moscow adhered to its neutral position and refused to condemn Iran. In an interview with the Kuwaiti al-Watan G. Trofimenko stated that the Soviet was not interested in prolonging the war. He added "We are very cautious regarding this war and we do not want to offer military aid to this or that party because this will deepen the dispute between the two countries and prolong the war." 67

65. Ibid., p. 133.
There were several reasons for change in Soviet attitude towards Iraq, its proclaimed neutrality notwithstanding. Firstly, since Iraq had already accepted the Security Council Resolutions and agreed to stop the war while Iran was unwilling, there were legal grounds to support Iraq. Secondly, defeat of Iraq and the replacement of Ba'th regime by a pro-Iranian regime in Baghdad would have badly affected Soviet prestige and credibility because of its inability to help a longstanding (though difficult) friend. It would also have meant loss of an important ally in a strategic area. Iranian victory on the other hand, would have made the Islamic regime even more intransigent and oblivious to Soviet overtures.68

Lastly, Soviet Union also feared that Iranian advances would force the conservative regimes of the Gulf to seek closer cooperation with the United States and give to the latter a pretext to increase its presence in the region.

The Soviet fears were not wholly unfounded. The Americans were indeed trying to exploit the situation in the Gulf. The Reagan Administration undertook to shore up Baghdad's position by providing nearly $1 billion worth

of commodity credits. Washington also voted for a Security Council Resolution which condemned Iran and supported an arms embargo against Iran. Moreover as Iranian troops crossed into Iraq, the US reportedly offered to hold joint military exercise with moderate Gulf states.69

There were shrill noises in Soviet media about the American intentions and activities in the area. Pravda commentator Yuri Glukhov charged that the imperialists sought to prolong the war.70 And Igor Beliaev, the Chief of Literaturnaya Gazeta's foreign policy department, alleged that the war served as justification for joint American-Arab military manoeuvres. Additionally, he claimed that the same Arab states in the past had expressed concern about the US presence in the region.71 In a long article on Gulf war, the Soviet weekly New Times stressed not only the wastefulness and senselessness of the war but also the common anti-imperialism of the two combatants. While underscoring the Muslim heritage of the two, and calling for a peaceful, speedy resolution of the conflict, the magazine seemed to take a slightly pro-Iraqi stand.72

Leonid Brezhnev died on 10 November 1982. He was succeeded by Yuri Andropov (previously head of the KGB and later a member of the Polit Bureau). Iraq saw in the arrival of a new leader an opportunity to make fresh attempt to come closer to the Soviet Union. The ground for this was prepared by an Arab League delegation headed by King Hussein of Jordan, which visited Moscow from 2-4 December 1982 to explain the Fez (Morocco) Arab Summits September 1982 proposals for solving the Arab-Israel conflict. In his meetings with Andropov and other Soviet leaders, the King utilised the opportunity to discuss Iran-Iraq war and to urge the Soviets to take a clear stand.73

Soon after King Hussein's talks a high level Iraqi delegation headed by Deputy Prime Minister Taha Yasin Ramadan visited Moscow. It also included Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz and Chief of Staff Abd-al-Jabbar Shanshal.74 The delegation could not meet Andropov, but succeeded in concluding an agreement for the supply of Soviet military equipment.75

73. Yodfat, n. 17, p. 135.
Deterioration in Soviet-Iranian Relations

The Tudeh Party had given unqualified support to the Islamic regime in Iran since its assumption of power. In return, it was allowed to function and its members were even given responsible government positions. However, the regime never trusted Tudeh. If Tudeh was not banned it was only out of domestic (Tudeh had some popular support, particularly among the intelligentsia) and foreign policy considerations (it had close links with the Soviets).

In October 1982 Vladimir Kuzichkin, the Vice-Consul of the Soviet embassy in Tehran defected to the West. He is said to have provided the Iranian intelligence sources a long list of Tudeh Party members who had links with the Soviet Union and had infiltrated all sensitive sectors including government, the armed forces, and the radio and television. But no action was taken at that time.

The resumption of arms supply to Iraq by Soviet Union provided the necessary excuse to the Islamic regime to begin crackdown on the Tudeh Party in December 1982.

76. The Times, 23 October 1982.
On 26 January 1983, 22 leaders and important members of the Union of Iranian Communists were executed in Amol in northern Iran for their alleged involvement in the disturbances in that city a year earlier. On 6 February 1983, some 80 leading members of the Party including its First Secretary Nureddin Kianuri were arrested. Kianuri and many others confessed their crimes - "espionage, deceit, treachery" - on television. On 4 May 1983, the Tudeh Party was officially dissolved by the Islamic Revolution Prosecutor General. 77

The Soviet media reacted strongly to the espionage charges and to the arrests. Pravda charged "reactionary conservative circles "with striking a blow against internal patriotic forces and Soviet-Iranian relations, at a time when new political order in Iran faced counter-revolutionary attacks. The editorial concluded by reminding readers that the Soviet Union expected only friendship and reciprocity. 78

78. Pravda, "Against the National Interests of Iran", 19 February 1983.
of the Iranian authorities of exploiting the revolution and trying to upset Soviet-Iranian relations.\(^{79}\)

The tilt towards Baghdad can be noticed in Soviet official statements as well. Gromyko's speech at the Supreme Soviet on 16 June 1983, which indirectly blamed Iran for continuation of the Iran-Iraq war, was the first sign of increased Soviet official support for Iraq. Gromyko said "We have friendly relations with Iraq. We are for normal relations with Iran as well." He further contended "The conflict between Iran and Iraq is senseless. For anyone to oppose the ending of war is irrational." Responding specifically to the expulsion of Soviet diplomats from Iran, he continued "In short the USSR will act with regard to whether Iran wishes to reciprocate its actions and maintain normal relations with us or whether it has different intentions."\(^{80}\) Taking a cue from Gromyko's speech some feature articles in the Soviet press subsequently charged Iran with refusing to end the war.\(^{81}\)

\(^{79}\) *Pravda*, "Concerning the anti-Soviet Campaign in Iran", 6 May 1983, p. 4.

\(^{80}\) *Pravda*, 17 June 1983.

Taking note of the deterioration in Soviet-Iran relations, Iraq tried to utilise it to its advantage. Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, who has also been appointed as Foreign Minister, visited Moscow on 20 November 1983. He held talks with Gromyko who maintained that Soviet Union desired an end to the war and that it would "continue also in future in efforts... to bring about a political settlement to the Iran-Iraq dispute." Thus the Soviet Union tried to maintain its neutrality at the political level, in order to qualify for a mediating role if and when the occasion arises. However, Tariq Aziz's visit resulted in further increase in Soviet arms shipments to Iraq. Besides thwarting an Iranian victory over Iraq, the increased Soviet military aid to Iraq in 1983 and the coming years, was aimed at restraining Iraq's acquisition of arms from the West, mainly from France.

In fact, during the fall of 1983 the Soviet Union was getting alarmed at reports that the West might increase its presence in Gulf. Izvestia reported debates in Washington regarding US abandonment of its neutrality and condemned its plans for military operations to protect Western oil supplies.

82. Pravda, 21 November 1983.
83. Shemesh, n. 33, p. 192.
84. A. Omin, "Who is Stirring up the Waters in Persian Gulf", Izvestia, 24 October 1983, p. 5.
The war in the Gulf intensified in February-April 1984. In February-March Iraq used chemical weapons to repulse an Iranian attack. Soviet Union ignored Baghdad's use of these weapons. Iran also attacked Iraq's Majnum oil fields. In retaliation, Iraq used its Exocet missile for the first time on 27 March 1984 to attack shipping bound for Kharg island. In April, Shatt-al-Arab became the scene of heavy fighting. Earlier the US has warned all planes and ships not to come within five miles of US planes or naval forces or risk drawing fire. It also reiterated its commitment to keep open the strait of Hormuz. The American pronouncements prompted bitter criticism in the Soviet Press. One commentator charged that the US was preparing for a "tough confrontation" with the Soviet Union on global and regional levels simultaneously.

Soviet relations with Iran deteriorated further. In February 1984, the Iranian regime executed several of the communists arrested earlier. Moscow complained about the anti-communist hysteria, coupled with anti-Soviet

85. Saivetz, n. 41, p. 45.
campaign. Yet in order to keep the door open for Iran, Pravda only published a Tudeh statement which called those executed true patriots. 87

In view of the intensification of its war with Iran, Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Taha Yasin Ramadan visited Moscow between 24 to 26 April 1984. 88 Although he was not granted a meeting with the new leader Chernenko, this was the first time since the start of the Gulf war that Moscow reported the participation of military officials in meetings with the Iraqi delegation, which indicated that an additional increase in Soviet military assistance was forthcoming. 89 From 18 to 19 October, Tariq Aziz visited Soviet Union and conferred with Gromyko. 90 In view of the earlier indication by Baghdad that it might restore diplomatic relations with the United States, it is probable that one of the purposes of the visit was to explain this forthcoming move to the Soviets. Finally on 26 November 1984, Baghdad and Washington resumed diplomatic relations. This was one manifestation of Iraq's desire to diversify her foreign relations. 91

91. Shemesh, n. 33, pp. 194-5.
Iran also realised the need to break her international isolation. On 4 June, an Iranian delegation led by Sayyid Mohammad Sadra, The Director General of Foreign Ministry arrived in Moscow. During meetings with Andrei Gromyko, the Soviets expressed the desire to have friendly relations with Tehran. Western press reports added that Iran might have been interested in procuring Soviet arms.  

SOVIET RELATIONS WITH THE OTHER GULF STATES

Kuwait

The year 1979 witnessed two events that had direct bearing on Soviet-Kuwait relations - the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union sent an official to Kuwait to clarify its stand and reassure the Gulf states about its non-involvement in the happenings in Iran.  

At Islamic summit conference, Kuwait, in keeping with its long-standing policy of maintaining equi-distance

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92. Saivetz, n. 41, p. 47.

and balance in its relations with the super-powers, adopted a moderate standing asking for the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan and the Israelis from the Occupied Arab territories. Soviet clarification regarding Afghanistan found a receptive audience in Kuwait where government spokesman clarified that in Kuwait's view Soviet Union posed no threat to the Gulf.

The Kuwaitis seem to have been satisfied with Moscow's clarification because they opposed the proposal mooted by Sultan Qaloos of Oman for a more active US role in the Gulf on the pretext of communist threat to the region. Kuwait also emphasised its friendship with the USSR. The Soviet Union naturally gave wide coverage to Kuwaiti views on these issues.

The outbreak of Gulf war between two of her powerful neighbours Iran and Iraq alarmed Kuwait which began to seek closer ties with the Soviet Union. Again it was only Kuwait among the Gulf states which gave a

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conditional welcome to the Brezhnev proposal on Gulf. The Emir of Kuwait urged the Soviet President to "back up his plan with goodwill" by withdrawing from Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{97}

In April 1981, the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Shaikh Sabah visited Moscow. In his talks with his Soviet counterpart he supported Brezhnev Soviet proposal regarding international conference on Middle East and for converting the Indian Ocean into a 'zone of peace'.\textsuperscript{98} However, the wording of the Communiqué ("detailed exchange of opinion", "proximity of the sides views") indicated considerable disagreement especially regarding Soviet occupation of Afghanistan which was opposed by Kuwait.\textsuperscript{99} Kuwait was also not very happy with Soviet role in the Gulf war and occasionally voiced its criticism. The Kuwaiti Foreign Minister blamed both US and USSR for the statement in the Gulf war at the end of 1982.\textsuperscript{100}

These small differences and occasional mild criticism notwithstanding Kuwait continued its arms

\textsuperscript{99} Page, n. 95, p. 48.
purchase from the Soviet Union. In 1980, it concluded its second arms agreement with Moscow reportedly worth $200 million. It included SA 6 & SA 7 as well as FROG 7 tactical rockets. Kuwait still bought the bulk of its arms from the US, Britain and France, the purchases from Soviet Union remaining limited and more of a symbolic nature. 101

In 1984, in the wake of US refusal to sell stinger missiles to Kuwait, the Kuwaiti Defence Minister travelled to Moscow and reportedly got an assurance from his Soviet counterpart Marshal Dmitry Ustinov about Soviet readiness to "satisfy all Kuwaiti needs for various weapons." 102 Although, in accordance with their old practice, the Soviet press did not report the amount and the type of the arms deal it was believed to have been $200-300 million worth and included surface to air and surface to surface missiles. 103 Kuwait also agreed to invite Soviet military instructors and to send Kuwaiti personnel to USSR for training. 104 The Kuwaitis however denied that

102. KUMA, 10 July 1984; FBIS:USSR, 12 July 1984, p. H4
it was a military treaty and the Shaikh categorically stated that it did "not concern bases or other facilities." 105

Saudi Arabia

As discussed previously the growing strains in the Saudi-US relations because of the Camp David Agreement and the US vaccination under Israeli pressure, to sell F-15s and AWACS to Saudi Arabia. 106 What further dis-illusioned and alienated Saudi Arabia from the US was, as William B. Quandt puts it, a suspicion that "the United States is not particularly adept at translating its armed strength into diplomatic influence" Vietnam showed the limits of American power. The weak-kneed American response to Soviet assertiveness in Ethiopia in 1977 and 1978 further dented its image. The US decision to withhold arms, economic aid to its ally Pakistan 1978 and 1979 and its inability to help Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran in those same years showed it in poor light as a reliable ally in a crisis. 107

106. See chapter 2, pp. 110-11.
As the relations between Saudi Arabia and the US deteriorated, the Soviet Union made a bid to wean away the former from the latter. A January 1979 article by the noted Soviet Middle East expert Igor Belyayev blamed the US for the negative image of USSR in Saudi Arabia and called for improvement in Saudi-Soviet relations. While appreciating Saudi non-alignment and Saudi opposition to the Camp David, he concluded that "no implacable conflicts" existed between Moscow and Riyadh. He hoped that Khalid might be less anti-Soviet than Faisal and even praised Fahd, who was considered pro-American. Radio Moscow shortly thereafter repeated these themes including the novel point that communism was not incompatible with Islam or monarchies. Earlier, Leonid Brezhnev reportedly sent two messages to Riyadh expressing a desire to re-establish diplomatic relations.

These sentiments were reciprocated by the Saudis when Foreign Minister Saud-al-Faisal acknowledged "the positive stand adopted by the Soviet Union towards the Arab cause." He further said that his country was well aware of

110. Page, n. 95, p. 42.
the importance of USSR in international affairs.\textsuperscript{111} It is worthwhile to remember that Saudi had expressed similar sentiments earlier also.\textsuperscript{112} Crown Prince Fahd, known for his pro-American views was also of the same opinion but at the same time said that the talk of diplomatic relations was premature.\textsuperscript{113}

The pitch of this growing Saudi-Soviet bonhomie was queered by some new and not so new developments during the year 1979. The February 1979 conflict between the two Yemens, in which the North Yemen forces got a drubbing despite Saudi support, was interpreted by the Saudis as a PDRY-USSR-Cuban test of Saudi and Western resolve in the wake of fall of the Shah in Iran.\textsuperscript{114}

Few months later the Soviet Union signed a large arms deal with North Yemen and the military relationship between the two grew substantially in the following years. thus reducing YAR's dependence on the West and Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{115} Still a few months later in October 1979 PDRY

\textsuperscript{111} Al-Hawadith, 3 March 1979, in FBIS:ME, 5 March, p. C1.
\textsuperscript{112} See for example, King Khalid's comment to the Sunday Times, quoted in FBIS:USSR, 10 July 1975, pp. F3-4.
\textsuperscript{113} "The Saudis Play Their Hand", 26 March 1979, p. 37.
and USSR signed a twenty year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.116

But it was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a fellow Muslim country and lying in close proximity of the Gulf, that really outraged Saudi Arabia as also many other Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia led the condemnation at the Islamic summit conference (only Syria and South Yemen refused to attend).117 The Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal speaking at the organisation's Foreign Minister's meeting while appreciating Soviet Union's stand on the Palestinian issue also hinted at some sort of struggle to oppose Soviet occupation.118 This strident note is especially noteworthy when compared to the stance adopted by Crown Prince Fahd in two interviews given during the month of January itself. In the first interview given to Talal Salman in As-Safir 9 January 1980 (Beirut) he admitted the need to recognise the reality of Soviet power, noted "positive development in the Soviet Union's policy" and even hinted at the possibility of diplomatic relations "at the appropriate time".119

116. Ibid., p. 168.
117. For details see Katz n. 101, p. 100.
In the second interview with Chief Editor Milhim Karam - Al-Bayraq (Beirut), 26 January 1980, he acknowledged the Soviet Union is a great power and admitted of Saudi inability as well as unwillingness to counter it.\(^{120}\)

The Soviet Union launched a concerted damage control media campaign to blunt some of the criticism against its actions in Afghanistan and also to reassure those in the Gulf fearful of its intentions. Izvestia condemned the anti-Soviet propaganda as the work of pro-Zionist elements.\(^{121}\) The Soviet press and media repeated its newly discovered thesis that there was no contradiction between Communism and Islam. While underplaying USSR's "fraternal assistance to Afghanistan," it accused the US of using it as a pretext to increase its military presence in the region with the ultimate aim to control the Gulf's oil resources.\(^{122}\) What is important is the fact that these Soviet clarifications and protestations did find some takers in Gulf, especially in Kuwait which refused to cast any aspersious on Soviet intentions.\(^{123}\)

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121. Izvestia, 26 January 1980.
123. Page, n. 95, p. 44.
In an article in Literaturnaya Gazeta, July 1980, Igor Belyayev, while taking note of the deteriorating Saudi-US relations, stressed the need for a resumption of Soviet Saudi ties. The Saudi Foreign Minister Saud-al-Faisal responded by hinting at the possibility of diplomatic relations with the USSR in the event of latter withdrawing from Afghanistan.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and its refusal until 1982, to supply arms to Baghdad despite the 1972 Friendship treaty between the two, was interpreted by Saudi Arabia as a Soviet attempt to replace the Americans in Iran, which both powers considered the region's premier strategic asset led by the Saudis the GCC criticised Soviet inability to help its friend Iraq even when Iran had launched an offensive against it. Perhaps, stung by these criticism and mainly because Iran was not responding to its overtures, the Soviets resumed arms supply to Iraq in 1982. This was certainly appreciated by the Saudi Arabia.

Yet another development which improved Soviet image and prospects in the Gulf was the Oman-PDRY Agreement on Normalisation of Relations and the subsequent friendly meeting between PDRY and Saudi Arabia. 128

In December 1982, the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal visited Moscow, the first visit by a top ranking Saudi official and member of the Royal family in 50 years. Although Prince Saud was in Moscow as a part of Arab League delegation, he held talks with the Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, which according to Arab reports was cordial and "concerning possible restoration of relations ... in near future." 129 The Soviet media did not highlight the meeting, perhaps due to Saudi sensitivities.

Strangely enough around the same time when there were signs of normalisation of Saudi-Soviet relations, some articles and commentaries highly critical of Saudi Arabia and accusing it torturing its domestic opponents appeared in the Soviet press (Pravda, 24 February 1983). The Soviets were particularly incensed at Saudi refusal to establish diplomatic relations using Afghanistan as

128. Page, n.95, p. 51.
an "excuse". This according to some observers can perhaps be explained as "relating to succession manoeuvres in Moscow" during the short Andropov period (November 1982-February 1984).

One unmistakable improvement in Saudi-Soviet relations was in the sphere of trade. Traditionally Saudi Arabia had purchased some industrial goods from the USSR. Starting from 1983, it began to sell fuel and raw materials to Moscow. The Soviets imported approximately 156 million roubles worth of products, while they exported only 12.9 million roubles.

Talk about the normalisation of Saudi-Soviet relations once again started in mid 1984. And as can be expected the occasion was once again a dispute between Riyadh and Washington, this time over the sale of Stinger missiles to the former. The Saudi Ambassador to the United States hinted several times that an amelioration of relations with Soviet Union might be possible.

Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobsynin was invited to dive at the Saudi embassy in Washington D.C. However, an Iranian attack on Saudi tanker and the Saudi downing of an Iranian jet induced Riyadh and Washington to patch up fast. There were several reports during the fall of 1984 suggesting Saudi and UAE contacts with Soviet officials. It was also said that the Saudis were finally dropping their objection to Soviet-UAE relations.

The criticism of the US policy in Lebanon by Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait was interpreted by Moscow as their disenchantment with Washington. Soviet Union praised Saudi role in the abrogation of US backed agreement between Israel and Lebanon.

There were other important developments during the late 1984 - the establishment of diplomatic relations between UAE and China, a communist country, and the resumption of relations between Baghdad and Washington.

135. Page, n.95, p. 52.
that prepared the ground for the next era in Soviet relations with the GCC countries, during the Gorbachev period.

The on again, off again pattern of Saudi-Soviet relations during the period 1979-1984 is not without a logic of its own. By now it should be quite obvious that the Saudis have been receptive of Soviet overtures whenever they felt unhappy with Washington over its policies in the region—arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states or its continued support to Israel. Thus it would not be incorrect to say that Saudis have flirted with the Soviets mainly to exert leverage over Washington to keep it committed to the region and to moderate its policy towards Israel. 137

This however does not mean that Saudi Arabia had no other valid reason or temptation to improve relations with Moscow. The fact that the Soviet Union was one of the superpowers, its geographical proximity to the Gulf region and its consistent support for the Arab cause were enough reasons for having diplomatic ties. Another

137. Whelan and Dixon, n. 115, p. 164.
important consideration could have been Saudi hope that Moscow can exercise some influence over radical regimes and movements that are hostile to the Saudi monarchy.\textsuperscript{138}

If relations could not be normalised inspite of the above reasons it was because of Saudi anathema and fear of communism as being antithetical to Islamic society and Saudi monarchy.\textsuperscript{139} Moreover, the over all Soviet policy in the South West Asia and the Gulf was inimical to Saudi interest. It should also be noted that while Moscow desired to have friendly relations with Riyadh, it did not regard it important enough to warrant significant changes in its regional policies.\textsuperscript{140}

**Soviet Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)**

Throughout the decade of 1970s, the talk about some sort of a regional grouping of Gulf Arab states was heard from time to time but was never concretised. Events between 1979 and 1981 finally compelled the Gulf Arab monarchies to

\textsuperscript{138} Quandt, n. 107, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{139} Katz, 101, p. 131.
formalise the idea. First of all was their perception about a subtle but definite Soviet advance in the adjoining areas from the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia) through South Yemen to Afghanistan. Soviet press reports and broadcasts favouring the Dhufar rebels or occasionally the Bahrain Liberation Front only added to their fear about Soviet intentions in the area. This is what George Lenczowski called the Soviet "encircling strategy". Soviet hand was even seen in the disturbances in Iran and it was feared that it might lead to entrenchment of communist power. Soviet closeness with the radical regimes in Iraq and South Yemen and port calls by Soviet naval vessels at Basrah and Aden was another cause for concern.141

However, Stephen Page argues that the "dramatic increase in the USSR's shadow of power by the spring of 1980" seems to have induced the Gulf rulers (except Sultan Qaloos) to think about some sort of accommodation with the Soviet Union, as the best guarantee of their regimes' security.142

142. Page, n. 95, p. 45.
There were other developments within the Gulf which seemed more menacing to the rulers. The capture of power by Ayatollah Khomeini led Islamic radicals with their avowed aim of overthrowing the pro-West Gulf monarchies, the Iranian inspired disturbances in Bahrain and Kuwait in September 1979, and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by religious fanatics and Shiite disturbances in eastern Saudi Arabia in November, finally convinced the Gulf Arab to start discussion on security cooperation. The start of Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 and the possibility that it might spread to other adjacent areas especially after Iranian planes fired missiles at two frontier posts in Kuwait made the matter more urgent.

Soviet response to the GCC was a complex one. In Soviet perspective the GCC was a pro-American organisation mainly because Saudi Arabia, a US ally, was its prime mover and Oman had agreed to grant base facilities to the US. There were occasional criticisms of the idea. But generally they were cautious in their criticism lest they should antagonise the Gulf rulers and induce them into closer

143. Ibid., p. 43.
144. Saivetz, n. 41, p. 74.
military cooperation with the United States. Instead they concentrated their attack on the US. They charged that it was US which considered the area 'vital' to its interest and wished to control its oil resources and classified that the USSR had no need of the Gulf oil and had no design to dominate the region.\textsuperscript{146}

Finally, after much debate and discussion the Gulf Arab Foreign Ministers agreed to the establishment of the GCC in February 1981. The stated purchase of the new organisation was economic, technical and cultural cooperation. This however, was a mere disguise to meet the criticism of the radical and leftists circles in the Gulf. The fact is, that the GCC members were all the time preoccupied with defence and internal security.

In April 1981 just on the eve of the first GCC summit Kuwait Foreign Minister Al Sabah travelled to Moscow to convince his Soviet friends that GCC was not against the Soviet Union or any other country, when Gromyko pointed out Oman's decision to grant bases and facilities to the US, he pleaded that if PDRY could be restrained Oman

\textsuperscript{146} Pravda, 2 February 1980; Moscow Radio in Arabia, 1 February 1980 in FBIS:USSR, 4 February 1980, P. H3.
might be persuaded to cancel its agreement with the US. The Soviets are reported to have promised to pressure the PDRY if the GCC states agreed to have diplomatic relations with Moscow.

The visit by Soviet naval ships to Aden during GCC· founding summit meeting was interpreted as an act of provocation by one GCC Foreign Minister though it could have been just a coincidence or at the insistence of PDRY. Similarly, the August 1981 Aden Tripartite Alliance linking the PDRY, Libya and Ethiopia militarily and politically, "formed presumably under the auspices of the Soviet Union" was thought to be a counter to the GCC.

When the US Defence Secretary Casper Weinberger visited Gulf in early 1982, he was accused of trying to use Saudi Arabia and Oman to turn the GCC into a "closed military bloc" serving American interests.

147. Al Hadaf (Kuwait) 7 May 1981 in FBIS:ME, 13 May, p. CC.
The PDRA-Oman normalisation agreement of November 1982; the subsequent PDRA-Saudi meeting, resumption of arms supplies to Baghdad as desired by the GCC and the visit of Saudi Foreign Minister in December 1982 as a member of Arab delegation, somewhat blunted Soviet criticism of GCC. Developments during 1984 further reconciled the Soviet Union to GCC - the mutual overtures from Soviet as well as Saudi sides (noted earlier), Soviet Kuwaiti arms deal, the increasing commercial and other contacts between the Soviet Union and the UAE, and GCC's criticism of US policy in Lebanon, and a slight but perceptible cooling of US-Oman relations.152

In the next chapter we would discuss how after the normalisation of its relations with Oman and UAE, the Soviet Union revised its perception about the GCC.