CHAPTER IV

GORBACHEV AND THE GULF: NEW INITIATIVES AND ACHIEVEMENTS
Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the CPSU on 11 March 1985, a day after the death of Chernenko. We have already noted that Gorbachev initiated "revolutionary" changes in Soviet economy, polity and foreign relations, under his "Perestroika" (Restructuring) programme. The main theme of his foreign policy was "peaceful coexistence" sans class-struggle. He de-ideologised the international relations and placed more emphasis on USSR's internal economic and technological development. Keeping this in mind, a policy of detente and cooperation with the developed world was initiated. In his scheme of things the importance of the third world was marginal, as can be deduced from the limited space devoted to these countries in his report to the XXVII Congress of the CPSU in 1987.¹

One of his early decisions was to "promote" Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Foreign Minister for nearly three decades, to the ceremonial post of President. The new Foreign Minister Eduard Shevarnadze was inexperienced in the field of foreign policy and this fact permitted the new General Secretary to try out new ideas and approaches.

¹ For details see chapter 1, pp. 21-27.
First Year: Old Policies

Soviet policy during the early part of the Gorbachev era was more or less on the old lines. Soviet relations with Iran alternated between condemnations of Iranian domestic affairs and of its refusal to consider negotiation, and exchanges of several diplomatic and economic delegations. On the other hand, relations with Iraq were on the whole good and stable. Arms shipments continued, as did delegational exchanges.

On the war front, the fighting continued with offensives and counter offensives, as well as attack on neutral shipping in the Gulf. The war became particularly fierce after Iraq, breaking almost a nine months old moratorium, attacked civilian areas in Iran and Iranians retaliated by bombing Basra. On 11 March, the two attacked each others' capitals. Later the Iranians attacked Basra-Baghdad highway while Iraq bombarded Iranian oil facilities at Kharg islands.²

Soviet media extensively reported the renewed fighting and expressed its dismay and opposition to it. Pavel Demchenko

described the warfare as "another reminder of the urgent need" to end the conflict. He also referred to the appeal by the UN General Secretary to halt attacks on civilian targets.³ Pravda also reported the visit of the Secretary General to Baghdad and Tehran, where he found the belligerents position "as far away from each other as ever."⁴ When another escalation in the fighting occurred in early summer of 1985, after Iraq resumed air attacks against Iranian cities, Pravda, without blaming the former advised that escalation in hostilities would not force Iran to the negotiating table.⁵

Soviet Union's relations with Iran during 1985 were marked by accusations, acrimony and also a few economic agreements. In addition to deploiring Iran's insistence upon fighting the war, the USSR continued to express concern about what was described as "anti-communism" and anti-Sovietism of the Islamic Republic. We have already seen how Soviet media reacted sharply to the persecution and execution of communists during 1983-84.⁶ In addition the Soviet media continued to attack Islamic Republic for its

support, including military assistance, to the Mujahideen rebels fighting the Kabul regime. In February 1986, Pravda published a protest by Kabul regime against a "secret mission" of Iranian "religious delegation" and representatives of "Afghan counter-revolution" who had formed a "united Islamic front" to direct "anti-government guerrillas." The Soviet media also showed its dismay at Tehran's continuing anti-Sovietism. In an article in Pravda, P. Nadezhdin reminded the readers of Soviet support for the Iranian revolution and its economic development and then strongly refuted "absurd and insulting" charges against the Soviet Union levelled by some "unnamed Iranian leader" and another "high placed Iranian official".

This acrimony in media regarding Soviet-Iranian relations, however, did not deter the Director of Economic Affairs at the Iranian Foreign Ministry from visiting Moscow in September 1985. He held talks with Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Kornienko "to discuss several issues concerning Soviet-Iranian relations" and their talks reportedly resulted in an agreement to expand economic ties. In fact, following Gromyko's elevation to the presidency Moscow displayed increased flexibility in its policy towards Iran.

Tensions between Moscow and Tehran were accompanied by slow but continuing rapprochement between USSR and Iraq. In late March, Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi Foreign Minister, visited Moscow. On this occasion, he and Gromyko (who was still Soviet Foreign Minister) "expressed satisfaction" with the state of Soviet-Iraq relations and promised to "strengthen them on the basis of the 1972 treaty." 11

Iraq's enormous dependence on Soviet weapons and the need to become acquainted with the new Soviet leadership and explain to them the Iraqi position on the Gulf war, prompted President Saddam Hussein to visit Moscow between 16 to 17 December 1985. This was Saddam Hussein's first visit to the Soviet Union since he assumed presidency in 1979 and also his first outside the Arab world since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war. On 6 December, Saddam Hussein had a meeting with Gorbachev, which was described by the Soviet media as "business like, frank and friendly" 12 (the first two words were emphasised). In the diplomatic language "frank" would denote having differences.

Saddam Hussein in his meeting with Gromyko, who had become the President of Soviet Union, called upon "the friendly states, among them the Soviet Union, to increase urgent efforts either in the Security Council or at other levels to establish a just and comprehensive peace."

Gromyko said, "Those who contrary to any reason are calling for the war to be continued 'to a victorious end' ... are behaving irrationally."¹³ This was a not very subtle condemnation of Iran's stubborn resistance to accept a ceasefire unless its demands for removal of Saddam and war separations are met. The Soviet reports on talks with Saddam Hussein also insisted that both sides "vigorously opposed any attempts to impose from outside on other countries and peoples, regimes which are alien to them."¹⁴ This was a clear rejoinder to the Iranian demand for removal of Saddam Hussein, which implicitly meant the establishment of an Islamic regime in Iraq.

During the Gromyko-Saddam Hussein talks of December 16, the Soviet side had also reiterated its commitment to Iraq's "sovereignty and territorial integrity" in accordance with the 1972 treaty. This commitment had not been mentioned by the Soviet after 1974. This might indicate Moscow's

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¹³. Ibid.
willingness to upgrade relations with Baghdad in exchange for Baghdad's return to an anti-US policy. However, no communique was issued at the conclusion of the visit which shows that no major breakthrough could be achieved in Soviet-Iraqi relations.15

**Second Year: New Initiatives**

The war again heated up in February 1986, when Iranians invaded and captured the Faw peninsula. This brought them in the vicinity of Kuwait, increasing the apprehensions of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council about Iranian aims in the Arabian peninsula. The super-powers also seemed perturbed. Pravda regretted the escalation of fighting in the vicinity of Kuwait because it was bound to provide United States with a new excuse for maintaining its naval and air power in the Gulf.16

From 1986, Soviet Union increased its diplomatic activity regarding the Iran-Iraq dispute. In early February 1986, Georgi Kornienko, first Deputy Foreign Minister visited Iran and held talks with its leadership - President Ali Khamenei, Prime Minister Hossain Musavi and Speaker Rafsanjani.

Kornienko was the highest Soviet personality to visit Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The visit achieved little in furthering the Soviet-Iran relations or bringing a settlement to Iran-Iraq war any closer. However, there are reasons to believe that the renewal of contacts was desired by Tehran. Iranian reports indicated that Kornienko travelled to Tehran at Iranian invitation. Although a new natural gas deal and further economic contacts would be mutually beneficial, Tehran might also have hoped to convince Moscow of the importance of improved relations. The promise of an increased economic cooperation may have been dangled in front of the Soviets in return for limitation on the Soviet arms shipment to Iraq. 17

The high level contacts continued in 1986. In August, Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Larijani arrived in Moscow and was received by Gromyko and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze. He brought with him a message from President Khamenei which, according to Pravda expressed Iran's desire to develop good neighbourly relations with the USSR. 18

Shortly afterwards Minister of Oil Gholam Reza Aqazadeh

arrived in Moscow. He and Premier Nikolai Ryzhkov reviewed the state of bilateral relations and concluded that "differences in social systems...should not present a barrier to fruitful relations between the two countries." This clearly shows the eagerness on both the sides to normalise their relations.

Soviet Union's desire to have good relations with Iran was reflected in its relative silence over the reports about persecution of communists (Tudeh members) in Iran. In mid summer the Tudeh held its "national conference" in which the repressive policies of the Islamic regime were criticized. But Pravda reported the event only on 1 October 1986: It said simply that the Peoples Party of Iran had reviewed the course of events and adopted resolutions reflecting "new conditions" prevalent in Tehran.20

In contrast, Afghanistan remained a more visible source of tension. The Soviet press continually criticized Iran's interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs and its refusal to respond to Kabul regime's desire to normalise relations.21

The gradual normalisation of Moscow-Tehran relations was temporarily marred by the "Iran gate" affair. Soviet Union reacted sharply to the news of secret US arms deliveries to the Islamic Republic.\textsuperscript{22} The Soviet press used this opportunity to underscore the "deception, hypocrisy and duplicity" of American foreign policy. While calling for an end of the Gulf war and assuring one side (Iraq) of its benevolence, Washington was supplying arms to the other. The main purpose of this policy was to weaken both in order to facilitate American penetration of the Gulf region.\textsuperscript{23}

The US arms sale to Iran to some extent substantiated Moscow's apprehension since the beginning of Iran-Iraq war that Iran's acute need for US weapons might eventually lead to an Iranian-US rapprochement. Yet, Moscow was probably reassured, in view of the embarrassment the covert military ties between the United States and Iran caused to both countries, and also due to Washington's renewed commitment in late 1986 not to sell arms to Tehran, that revival of the Iranian-US relationship was now less feasible. Moscow also took care not to criticize the Iranian leadership for its willingness to deal with US "imperialism". The criticism was directed solely at the US.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} For Soviet Government statement, see \textit{Izvestia}, 9 January 1987.
\textsuperscript{23} V. Korionov, \textit{Pravda}, 2 December 1986.
\textsuperscript{24} Shemesh, \textit{n. 15}, p. 201.
On 8 January 1987, the Soviet government, for the first time since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war, came out with a concrete plan to end the conflict. The plan reviewed the Iran-Iraq conflict in a fairly balanced manner. Indirectly, it criticized Iraq for the use of chemical weapons and Iran for its adherence to the military solution. On the whole, however, the plan accepted Iraq's basic position on termination of the war and fixing the Iran-Iraq boundary as it existed before the start of the war and upholding the right of the people to "determine their own destiny". Moreover, it ignored Tehran's demand about fixing the liability for starting the war on Iraq and for war reparations. As might be expected Iraq welcomed the plan while Iran rejected it.

The continuing divergence of Soviet-Iranian views were aired once again during Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati's mid-February 1987 visit to Moscow. The highest Iranian official to visit Soviet Union after the 1979 revolution he was received by Gromyko, Ryzhkov and Shevardnadze. According to Pravda, the meetings were marked by a "frank and business like exchange of opinions on questions concerning Soviet-Iranian relations as well as

international problems of mutual interest." Specifically, the sides continued to diverge on two important issues, Afghanistan and Iran-Iraq war. Velayati expressed, "the well known position of the Republic of Iran" Gromyko conceded that the views of the two sides on the Iran-Iraq war do not converge, but invoked "common sense" to suggest that "attention ought to be focused not on the past but on the future". Since it was not in Iran's or Iraq's interest to have the killing continue, it was necessary to end the conflict. Nevertheless, inspite of the differences on the foreign policy issues, the sides expressed the desire to "strengthen good neighbourly relations" between them. 26

Lack of progress in relations with Iran and its continued military offensives against Iraq impelled Soviet Union to continue its support for the latter. The Soviet Union also probably hoped that its position as Iraq's chief arms supplier would provide it with leverage over Iran, and compel it eventually to modify its policies to suit the USSR. Indeed, Iran's willingness to improve relations with the Soviet Union to a certain extent - despite growing Soviet military assistance to Iraq - strengthened Moscow's assessment that the road leading to Tehran passed through Baghdad. 27

27. Shemesh, n. 15, p. 203.
Cooperation between USSR and Iraq continued to expand after Saddam Hussein's summit meeting with the Secretary General Gorbachev. First Deputy Prime Minister Ramadan accompanied by Minister of State for Military Shanshal arrived in Moscow in April 1986 and held talks with Ryzhkov.\(^{28}\) It may be safely assumed, on the basis of Shanshal's presence, that continuation of Soviet military assistance to Iraq was one of the important items on their agenda. One month later, the Permanent Soviet-Iraqi Commission for Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation held its sixteenth meeting in Baghdad and signed a new trade agreement.\(^ {29}\) A month later a "long term trade agreement" was also signed.\(^ {30}\)

Shortly after Velayati's visit to Moscow, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz arrived in Moscow. Tariq Aziz's discussion with Gromyko were conducted "in a friendly atmosphere" rather than being "frank and business like" as during Gromyko-Velayati meeting. Gromyko favoured the Iraqi position on war when he said that the United Nations as well as "nearly all of the world's states" had expressed themselves in support of peace and chided "those who do not listen to

\(^{28}\) Pravda, 20 April 1986.
\(^{29}\) Pravda, 20, 22 May 1986.
\(^{30}\) Pravda, 13, 14 June 1986.
these voices.\textsuperscript{31} Two months' later, while receiving a delegation of the Arab-League, which also included Tariq Aziz, Gromyko and Shevardnadze again reiterated Soviet support for ending the war, Gromyko again disapproved of Tehran's intransigence in not heeding to the world opinion.\textsuperscript{32} It should be remembered, however, that open and harsh criticism of Iran was avoided by the Soviet leadership.

By restating their continued commitment to peace in accordance with the vast majority of UN members and also expressing desire to improve relations with both Iran and Iraq, the USSR demonstrated its continued "relevance" in the Gulf conflict. Unlike the Arab-Israel dispute, where Washington, by virtue of its intimacy with Israel and a number of key Arab states, held the diplomatic upper hand, in the Gulf it was the Soviet Union which remained on good terms with Iraq and on speaking terms with the Islamic Republic.\textsuperscript{33}

The Soviet-Iraqi friendship treaty of 9 April 1972 had been concluded for a period of fifteen years, with a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Pravda, 21 February 1987.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Izvestia, 30 April 1987.
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possibility of being automatically extended for a subsequent period of five years, unless one of the parties declared its desire to terminate the treaty one year before the expiry of the treaty (Article 12). Since no party announced its termination it was automatically extended for five years. On the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the signing of the treaty, leaders of the two countries exchanged telegrams expressing their commitment to improve bilateral relations.  

Third Year: Soviet Shift Towards Iran

In mid 1987, the Gulf war again intensified. By that time, the USSR had established a modest naval presence in the Gulf - one frigate and three mine sweepers were accompanying the three tankers they had leased to Kuwait. The United States too had strengthened its naval contingent and in late July the US Navy began accompanying eleven reflagged Kuwaiti tankers. On 3 July 1987, the Soviet government issued a statement on the situation in the Gulf. It warned that as a result of the increased foreign naval presence, the Iran-Iraq war might well be transformed

into an "international crisis situation". To deal with it Moscow suggested that all warships of the non-littoral states be withdrawn from the Gulf, and that belligerants in turn stop interfering with the freedom of navigation in the region. Since it was Iraq which had started and dominated the 'tanker war', the Soviet proposal clearly went against its interest. This was seen as a Soviet policy shift in Iran's favour.

The new Soviet proposals regarding the Gulf seem to have been dictated by considerations of both super-power competition and the USSR's relations with the Gulf belligerants. Moscow was apprehensive that continuing Iraqi attacks on Iranian shipping left Tehran with no alternative but to attack tankers of Iraq's allies Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (since Iraq sent its oil through a pipeline) and other neutral tankers. That in turn was responsible for the vast increase in US naval power in the Gulf. Additionally this provided some common ground for a degree of convergence in Moscow's and Tehran's views. Iran welcomed the Soviet move while Iraq opposed it.

On 20 July 1987, the Security Council of the UN adopted Resolution 598 to end the Gulf war. Article one of the resolution called for an immediate ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq war, to be followed by withdrawal of all forces to internationally recognised boundaries. This article was clearly in Iraq's favour. In response to Iran's demand to brand Iraq as the aggressor that had started the war, Article six proposed that "an impartial body" be set up to inquire into the responsibility for the conflict. "The resolution also stated that council would meet again, if necessary, to consider further steps to ensure compliance with this resolution." This was a allusion to possible sanctions against the side failing to comply with the resolution.

Iraq welcomed the resolution hoping that if it were rejected by Tehran, a second resolution imposing an arms embargo against Iran would be issued. Iran attacked the resolution as biased in favour of Iraq but did not reject it outrightly.

Following Resolution 598, Vorontsov visited both Iraq and Iran between 20 July and 4 August. According to

Pravda in Iraq he and Tariq Aziz met in a "warm (and) friendly atmosphere." Both expressed their support for Resolution 598 and for the forthcoming visit of Secretary General Perez de Cuellar. The account of Voronstov's meetings in Tehran made no mention of the Resolution 598. But the sides did agree on the desirability of withdrawal of foreign warships and on the halt of naval and air attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf.38

Soviet-Iraqi differences on the issue of ending the Iran-Iraq war surfaced again during a trip to Moscow by an Arab-League delegation that also included Tariq Aziz and met Shevardnadze and Ryzhkov on 9 September 1987. Whereas the Arab side apparently sought Soviet support for imposing a Security Council sponsored sanctions against Iran, the Soviet report on the talks reiterated USSR's commitment to Resolution 598, but made no mention of the sanctions and did not criticize Iran's attitude towards the Resolution. In fact, the Soviet leaders held the presence of foreign warships as responsible for obstructing a settlement of the conflict. They also appealed for a "balanced approach" in solving the problem.39

On 23 September 1987, Shevardnadze presented a proposal to the Security Council. He argued that "It is necessary to try to secure, concurrently and immediately a ceasefire between Iran and Iraq and the fulfilment of the UN Secretary General's mission regarding (the establishment of) an impartial body for investigating the issue of responsibility for the conflict." As we know that Iran was prepared for a ceasefire if the issue of responsibility for starting the war is taken up concurrently. Shevardnadze's suggestion to combine articles 1 and 6 of the Resolution was a concession to Iran.

Infuriated at Soviet tilt towards Iran, Tariq Aziz rejected Shevardnadze's proposal. From 28 to 30 October 1987, Vorontsov visited Baghdad to promote Shevardnadze's proposal of 23 September. But Saddam Hussein rejected any attempt to misinterpret Resolution 598. Vorontsov also visited Tehran from 31 October to 1 November, where Iran showed some understanding of the proposal but still did not accept it. Following Vorontsov's return to Moscow the Iranian Prime Minister further emphasised his country's

41. As quoted by Elaine Sciolino, New York Times
opposition to the Soviet proposal when he publicly stated "We have no hope that the UN can do anything about the war". 44

Exasperated at the Iranian refusal to accept its proposal, the Soviet Union at a time seemed to be contemplating sanctions against Iran in accordance with the Resolution 598. Gromyko warned the Iranian ambassador about such a possibility. 45

At the UN also Soviet Union gave some hints about coming round to the idea of embargo. On 18 February 1988, it agreed that the five permanent members of the Security Council should enlarge the forum debating arms embargo against Iran by bringing into informal discussion all the council's remaining members. However Moscow insisted that its decision did not imply acceptance of the embargo resolution. 46

With the failure of all negotiations, Iraq finally decided that it had no choice but to resort to military means to force Iran to accept ceasefire. In February end it launched a massive attack. It heavily bombarded Iranian cities with Soviet missiles and also employed chemical

weapons. On 17 April 1988, Iraq recaptured the Faw peninsula and from then onwards regained the initiative on the battle ground. With the recapture of the Majnoon area on 25 June 1988, Iraq had liberated most of its territory.\textsuperscript{47}

The Soviet Union did not criticise any of Iraqi actions openly. In fact, \textit{Pravda} commented approvingly on Iraq’s success at the battle field recalling that Iraq had accepted resolution 598 but Iran while not rejecting it had advanced a number of conditions which meant a continuation of the war.\textsuperscript{48}

In his fourth bid to mediate in Iran-Iraq war, Vorontsov paid a visit to Baghdad from 17 to 19 July 1988\textsuperscript{49} and from there continued to Tehran. While Vorontsov was still in Iraq, on 18 July Iran conveyed to the UN Secretary General its unconditional acceptance of Resolution 598.\textsuperscript{50} On 8 August 1988, the UN Secretary General issued a declaration on ceasefire acceptable to both Iraq and Iran, which went into effect as scheduled on 20 August 1988.

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\textsuperscript{47} For details of the fighting see Smolansky and Smolansky, n. 33, pp. 265-6.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Pravda}, 20 July 1988.
\end{flushleft}
Soviet Union reacted positively to Iranian acceptance of the Security Council resolution, with the Foreign Ministry spokesman expressing "deep satisfaction" over it. \[51\]

The termination of military conflict between Iran and Iraq was on the whole advantageous to the Soviet Union. Iraq was still looking to Moscow for military as well as economic and technological aid to reconstruct its war-ravaged economy, which could facilitate repayment of its debts to the Soviet Union. There was also reason to believe that with the consolidation of the ceasefire, the United States would reduce substantially its military presence in and around the Gulf.

### Soviet-Iran Rapprochement

Following the ceasefire, and despite the Iranian rejection of the Soviet mediation offer, the trends previously seen in Soviet Iranian relations were accelerated. In fact, January 1989 seemed to usher in a new era in Soviet relations with the Islamic Republic. The Ayatollah Jawadi Amoli met Gorbachev to present him with a message

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from Khomeini. Although, the by now famous letter was anti-communist, it did offer the prospects for a better relations between the two neighbours. The Imam praised Gorbachev's courage, boldness and bravery". About communism he said that in future it would be found in "the museums of world political history". He also advised Gorbachev to study Islam, which is the only salvation for mankind.\textsuperscript{52}

Mohammad Javad Larijani, the Foreign Ministry official incharge of ties with the West was in Moscow at that time. Two days later a new trade agreement was announced. Then on 12 January the Soviet Deputy Minister arrived in Tehran to discuss actual reopening of Soviet-Iranian pipeline.\textsuperscript{53}

The sudden spurt in Soviet Iranian relations can be attributed to various reasons. The 20 August ceasefire between Iran and Iraq certainly lessened the pressure on the USSR to choose sides and also removed the possibility of opposition from Iraq or its Arab allies. Another very practical reason could be economic - Iran was an attractive

market for Soviet industrial products. We already know about Soviet need for Iranian gas. Soviet Union might also have been interested in utilising Iranian resources to revitalize the economies of some of the Central Asian republics. In May a Soviet trade delegation which included representatives from the border provinces of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan visited Tehran and reached an agreement on border trade between the two countries. 54

Gorbachev's "new political thinking" was itself the biggest reason, perhaps. As we know the first concern of the new leader was internal reforms - economic rejuvenation - for which he needed a conducive international environment. His various initiatives for arms control, disarmament and fostering active cooperation with the United States, West and China and Japan were aimed at that. In fact, there was an acute realization that USSR had somehow lost sight of its priorities. As Boris Pliadyshhev, the editor-in-chief of International Affairs (Moscow) stated, "we were involved in a whole number of problems having little relevance to our key national interests...our attention was focused largely on the periphery of international

Apart from normalising relations with its erstwhile adversaries Soviet Union under Gorbachev also tried to improve relations with its neighbours, China, Japan, South Korea and Iran. In fact, he also tried to improve relations with other third world countries in the South-East-Asia, South Pacific, Middle East and Latin America.

The announcement of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in January 1988, removed one of the major hurdles in Soviet Iranian relations. Initially Iran condemned the UN accords because they meant less support for the Mujahideen. But when the Soviet forces actually withdrew in February 1989 Tehran was certainly relieved. Soviet Union on its part needed Iranian help in the peaceful settlement in Afghanistan including the implementation of the Geneva Accords in the wake of its withdrawal. In February, Soviet Union's First Deputy Foreign Minister and the Ambassador to Afghanistan Y. Vorontsov visited Tehran and held talks with Iran's Foreign Minister Velayati and was even received by the President Khomeini. The main issue

in the talks was a political and democratic settlement in Afghanistan with the participation of all the political forces in country and the "creation of a government of national unity on a broad basis." 56

Soviet media praised the moderation in Iranian foreign policy. For example, the New Times, in a biographical sketch applauded Rafsanjani and described him as a "moderate". The press also responded to Ayatollah Montazeri's push for a more even keel in the Iranian foreign policy. 57 However there were also a few articles critical of Iran in Soviet media. A commentary on a seminar at the Tehran University on the implementation the Political Parties Law noted the lack of political freedom in the country. 58 Similarly in a highly critical commentary Aleksandr Bovin called Khomeini a "Dictator" and criticized his intolerant and extremist policies. 59 But such commentaries were rare as compared to those that lauded the Iranian Revolution and the improvement in Soviet Iranian ties. 60

The death sentence passed by Imam Khomeini against Salman Rushdie for his book *Satanic Verses* put the Soviet media in a real dilemma. While the deterioration in Iran-West relations over the affair was beneficial for the USSR, the media could not have supported such a radical and extremist position while enjoying and praising "Glasnost" (openness) in its own country. It tried to take a balanced position. For example a Tass report first gave account of the umbrage taken by many muslim countries over the book and the popular protests against it in Iran. But it also noted the Western indignation over the death sentence. 61

There were other commentaries which while accepting Western claims about hyper reaction in Iran, criticized the Western media for publishing things which hurt muslim sentiments. 62

In the middle of the scandal Eduard Shevardnadze arrived in Tehran on the last day leg of his extensive and highly significant Middle East tour. The trip was the culmination of all of Gorbachev's Middle East initiatives. By all accounts meetings in Tehran were successful. Gorbachev through Shevardnadze sent a return letter in which he characterized Soviet foreign policy and indicated Soviet

interest in improvement of bilateral ties. The Tass characterized the exchange of letters as a turning point in Soviet-Iranian relations. 63

While in Tehran Shevardnadze offered to "mediate" between Iran and the West in context of the Rushdie affair. From the Iranian perspective, the controversy afforded the pretext for an amelioration of ties with the USSR. Denouncing the West for being insensitive to Muslims in general and Iran's Islamic regime in particular, Tehran vented its indignation by turning more openly towards the Soviet Union. Gennady Gerasimov stated that Moscow was concerned over the unpredictability of the scandal and it was therefore natural that Shevardnadze should raise the issue during his trip. 64

Following Shevardnadze's visit to Tehran, there was a flurry of diplomatic exchanges and accords between the Soviet Union and Iran. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited Moscow and held talks with Shevardnadze regarding the Gulf situations, the Afghan settlement and Soviet-Iranian relations. 65

When the Iranian leader Imam Khomeini died in early June, Gorbachev sent his condolence message and a group of Soviet muslims travelled to Tehran during the official mourning period. 66

The culmination of the contacts initiated by the letter of Imam Khomeini to Gorbachev in January 1989 came when the Speaker of the Iranian "Majlis" (Parliament) Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani visited Soviet Union in late June 1989, despite the death of Khomeini. The visit produced additional economic accords, reportedly an arms deal, and a "Declaration of Principles" governing relations between the two neighbours. 67 The pronouncement of official friendship included pledges of mutual respect, economic cooperation, Soviet assistance in increasing Iran's defensive capabilities, promises of exchanges, support for the North-South dialogue and for the United Nations. 68

Rafsanjani also visited Baku, the capital of predominantly Shiite Soviet Azerbaijan. During a sermon in the city's largest mosque he praised Gorbachev as one of the

world's greatest leaders and appreciated his reforms. Soviet leadership in fact hoped that improvement in relations with the Islamic Iran would be helpful in coping with the religious resurgence among the muslims of Soviet Central Asia. 69

Ever since the Islamic Revolution, Iran had been a major challenge to the Soviet diplomacy. Finally after the coming of Gorbachev and far reaching changes on the international scene and above all the end of Iran-Iraq war the Soviet Union was able to normalise its relations with the Islamic regime.

SOVIET UNION AND THE GCC COUNTRIES

In the previous chapter we have seen that there were signs of a thaw in Soviet relations with the GCC countries during the mid 1980s and especially 1984: the PDRY-Oman normalisation agreement followed by PDRY-Saudi talks, hints from high level Saudi officials regarding increasing contacts and the possibility of diplomatic representation with the Soviet Union (1984); arms sales

agreement with Kuwait (1984); the Soviet Friendship Treaty with Yemen Arab Republic and some cooling of Oman-US relations.\textsuperscript{70} In 1985 Oman put further restrictions on US access to Omani facilities and made it contingent upon the request of the majority of the GCC members.\textsuperscript{71}

There were other signs which indicated that the Gulf Arabs no more considered the Soviet Union as a source of threat. The Organisation of Islamic Countries in its December 1984 meeting referred to Afghanistan only in passing and did not mention USSR at all. The clandestine and not so clandestine meetings between Soviet and GCC countries officials, mostly to discuss the Iran-Iraq war, continued apace. The Soviets on their part distanced themselves from Iran and even criticized it for continuing the war. They also sold arms to Iraq and Kuwait.

The setting thus seemed perfect for a breakthrough in Soviet relations with the GCC states.

\textsuperscript{70} See chapter III, pp. 155-7, 163.
\textsuperscript{71} Middle East News Agency, 4 April 1985 in FBIS:ME 5 April 1985, p. C3.
Oman

The breakthrough when it came, surprised everyone, because the lead was taken by Oman, in the past the most anti-Soviet country in the GCC. A Tass report announced on 26 September 1985 that "At a meeting...between Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze of the USSR and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yusuf al-Alawi Abdallah of the Sultanate of Oman in New York on September 21, 1985.... An understanding was reached....to form diplomatic relations..." The "Joint Communique" released by Tass the same day stressed that the relations will be based on the "principles of peaceful coexistence" and "meets interests of both countries". 72

Commenting upon the factors that prompted him to establish diplomatic ties with Moscow, Sultan Qaboos said that it "was as good time as any, with new faces in the Kremlin, to start a new chapter". 73 His Foreign Minister attributed the decision to some unspecified "new trend" in Soviet policies that aimed at "enhancing stability in the Arabian peninsula". 74

The first Omani ambassador to the Soviet Union Sayf, in his first interview after reaching Moscow, was more forthright and specific. He felt that the Soviet support for the "Arab causes", "the fact that the USSR is a super power" and "the identity of views regarding "the problems of Iran-Iraq war...and...the security of the Gulf region" were the "main factors behind Oman's decision to establish diplomatic relations with the USSR."\(^75\)

There is another viewpoint which cites an interview given by Sultan Qaboos on Omani National Day on 19 November in which he accused USSR of being 'expansionist',\(^76\) to prove that the decision was motivated by some other factors.

"Either it was yet another gesture to establish Omani independence of action within the GCC. Worse still it was a calculated manoeuvre to overtake the slow-moving Saudi caravan in the same direction "Yet another reason could have been the fact that Oman was scheduled to host the next GCC summit in a few days time which was to discuss the issue of establishment of diplomatic relations with Moscow."\(^77\)

\(^{75}\) Ibid.
The real reason could be any or all of the above plus some other: Omani tactics to further neutralise its internal as well as external enemies (Dhufari rebels and PDRY respectively) which, though dormant for the time being could create problems in future. Another reason could be Omani annoyance with the United States. An article published in the New York Times a few months earlier while describing Oman as invaluable for the US, was somewhat critical of the Sultan. Pravda maintained that Moscow's support for the Arab causes and Sultan's desire to "diversify methods of safeguarding (Oman's) security" were the reasons.

Soviet commentaries about Oman which had been critical till Spring 1985 became laudatory after September. In November Tass report praised Oman's economic development, government policies and programmes, its "balanced foreign policy" and its decision to establish diplomatic relations with USSR. Oman reciprocated by commending Soviet support for the Arab cause. Next year in February 1986 Soviet envoy to Jordan A.I. Zinchuk was given additional charge of Oman and in May he presented his credentials. It is

noteworthy that Oman did not permit a resident Soviet ambassador. Omani ambassador to the Soviet Union arrived in Moscow a few months later in July. 85

Soviet relations with Oman for the rest of 1980s remained limited and businesslike with customary greetings on National Days and exchange of pleasantries. 86 There were no high level visits. Some middle ranking Soviet officials did visit Oman, but only as a part of their Middle East itinerary. In the Spring of 1987 Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Petrovsky visited the Gulf. In Oman he held talks with Sultan Qaboos and other officials and discussed the problems in Indian Ocean and the Gulf. 87 One year later a Supreme Soviet delegation headed by its Deputy Chairman G.S. Tarazevich, toured Kuwait, UAE and Oman. 88 Later in an interview to Izvestia, he disclosed that "special attention was paid to regional problems - the Iran-Iraq war, the Near East conflict, and the normalisation of situation around Afghanistan." He also claimed that the Soviet proposal regarding "the creation of a UN fleet in the Persian Gulf, to replace the foreign fleets currently there", and Soviet commitment to start withdrawing from Afghanistan from 15 May,

in accordance with the Geneva Accords "was met with understanding and approval". 89

Deputy Sergei Andreivich Losev, Tass Director General, who was also a member of the delegation told the Moscow Television Service on 19 April that the Omani side while supporting the Security Council Resolution 598 regarding Iran-Iraq war, was sceptical about the success of an arms embargo against Iran, "given, for instance, the situation existing on the black markets for arms." Similarly they "frankly" told the Soviet side that the proposal regarding a UN fleet in the Gulf, though "attractive" was "hard to realise". 90

This shows how superficial was Tarazevich's claim about "proximity of stances in dealing with these problems".

What is more noteworthy is the fact that no important bilateral trade, technology or cultural agreements were signed during these visits. Oman continued to have close economic and military ties with the West. The first official diplomatic visit from Omani side came as late as January 1989, when Omani Petroleum Minister came to Moscow and delivered Sultan's message to Gorbachev. The Soviet Deputy Minister of Petroleum Korolev expressed both "surprise" as well as "happiness" at the visit. 91 Thus Soviet relations with Oman during the Gorbachev period were cool and somewhat distant.

89. Izvestia in English 6 April 1988 in FBIS:USSR, 6 April 1988, p. 36.
90. FBIS:USSR, 20 April 1988, pp. 36-37.
United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The announcement on 15 November 1985 simultaneously by Moscow World Service and Abu Dhabi Domestic Service that the UAE and the Soviet Union have decided to establish diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level did not create any ripples in the Gulf as the Omani decision had. The decision was the culmination of more than two decades of efforts in this direction. The above mentioned statement from Abu Dhabi released by UAE Foreign Ministry, itself says that the move to establish relations was a "result of the exchanges of cables in December 1971 between the Chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet and the President of the UAE..." Six months later Roston Sevolin, Soviet Charge D' Affaires to the UAE pointed out that the process "began in January 1973 when exchanges were being conducted during UN sessions through the envoys of the two countries" and has been continuing since then. The process really picked up during Chernenko's time when UAE officials visited Moscow and in early 1985 Soviet Union offered scholarship to the UAE students.

94. Ibid.
Coming to the factors that led to Soviet-UAE ties,
Shaikh Hamad ibn Zayid, under secretary in UAE Foreign Ministry, declared that the decision "affirms our non-aligned stands and our neutral policy" and "will widen the scope of our international activity and ... increase the number of our friends". 98 Though he did not elaborate, it can be interpreted to mean that UAE wanted additional support against possible Iranian attack in view of latter's increasing belligerence in the Gulf war. It could also mean that UAE, always appreciative of Soviet support for the Arab and Palestinian cause, and dissatisfied with the American stand on these issues, thought that the Soviets might be helpful in promoting diplomatic movement towards a settlement. 99 Soviet Union's moderation and desire to establish relations with the existing regimes, of late, might also have influenced their decision. 100 There can be many other reasons, including some of those that prompted the Omani decision. Finally the very fact that the announcement came only a few days after the Muscat meeting of the GCC, in which the matter was said to have been deliberated seem to suggest that it was a GCC motivated move. 101

100. Ibid.
101. Dietl, n. 76, p. 128.
Soviet relations with the UAE were not limited merely to customary greetings on national day or UAE's eulogising Soviet proposals to settle the Middle East problem and establish peace in the region. Trade and cultural contacts initiated even before establishing formal diplomatic relations continued. In fact at the very moment when establishment of relations was announced a UAE Chamber of Commerce and Industry delegation was in Moscow. The head of the delegation Al-haj Abdallah welcomed the decision and expressed his interest in "Soviet technology particularly in the industrial agricultural fields". He was also hopeful about expansion of Soviet-UAE trade.

Various Soviet delegations touring the countries of the Gulf to discuss regional issues - Iran-Iraq war, Middle East settlement and Afghanistan (after the 1988 Geneva Accords) - also visited UAE and held talks with the UAE President and other officials. Thus in Spring 1987 Soviet Deputy Prime Minister V. Petrovsky came and a year later a Supreme Soviet delegation visited UAE.

For the Soviet Union restoration of ties with Oman and UAE was not so important in strategic (they had no common border with the Soviet Union) or economic terms. The real significance was psychological. Only a few days after the announcement of diplomatic relations an unattributed commentary "New Blows to the Legend of the Soviet Threat to Persian Gulf Countries" declared that "These developments indicate significant changes in the political thinking and psychology of the ruling circles and peoples in the Persian Gulf countries." It further maintained that the above decision "constitutes a new and effective blow to the, God forbid, legend of the Soviet threat - one that has been generated in the region by imperialist propaganda."\textsuperscript{107}

Another commentary by Aleksie Zlatorunskie, a year later, claimed that these new ties show that USSR's "credit" is "increasing" in the Gulf states and "Its foreign policy is being increasingly supported" and the advantage of economic cooperation with it is becoming obvious.\textsuperscript{108} Zlatorunskie's claim was right in at least one respect - Soviet proposal for an international conference for Middle East settlement was receiving publicity and even support among the Gulf states.

The real significance of having diplomatic relations with as many of the Gulf states as possible, was that it strengthened USSR's claim of being a responsible power, with legitimate interests in the region, which cannot be left out of any major settlement concerning the Middle East (Palestinian) problem or the Gulf. Establishment of formal relations with Oman and UAE also brightened the prospect of restoration of ties with Saudi Arabia the most important country of the Arabian peninsula.

One important consequence of Soviet Union's normalisation with Oman and UAE was a reassessment of the Gulf Cooperation Council by the Soviet media. It was no longer condemned as an imperialist tool but was rather seen as a neutral organisation opposed to foreign interference. Commenting on the Muscat meeting of the GCC, Krasnaya Zvezda commended it for countering the US and Israeli threat to the area. 109

Qatar

After Oman and UAE it was only a matter of time before other Gulf states followed suit and normalised

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relations with the Soviet Union. This time it was Qatar. On 1 August 1988, Qatar decided to establish diplomatic relations with the USSR.110 A few days later Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze greeted Qatar on the resumption of relations.111 Three months later Qatar's Foreign Under-Secretary and special representative of the government Shaikh Hamad ibn Suhaim al Thani visited Moscow. He held talks with First Deputy Foreign Minister of the USSR Aleksandr Besmertnykh regarding practical steps pertaining to the implementation of the accord on establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. He also discussed several international issues like the Middle East situation, the Iran-Iraq war, the Lebanese crisis and the problem of Afghanistan.112 During his meeting with Shevardnadze he delivered a message from the Qatar Amir for Mikhail Gorbachev.113

The "Soviet Qatari Communique" issued on the occasion, said that the relations were based on the principles of peaceful coexistence and UN charter. It noted "the USSR's and Qatar's close stances on today's fundamental issues"

110. Tass in English, 1 August 1988 in FBIS:USSR, 1 August 1988, p.20. Also see Joint Communique issue on the Occasion in Ibid.
112. Tass in English, 3 November 1988 and WAKH (Manama) in English in FBIS:USSR, 7 November 1988, p.29.
like nuclear disarmament and also on regional issues like "the security and freedom of shipping in the Persian Gulf". The two sides supported the idea of the Gulf being turned into a zone of security, good neighbourliness and cooperation. "The sides acclaimed the halting of military action on the Iran-Iraq front" and "confirmed their readiness to help speedily implement UN Security Council Resolution 598". They called for Israel troop withdrawal from all the occupied Arab territories and stressed the inalienable sight of the Palestinian people to self-determination. Qatar supported the proposal for "convening an international conference on the Near East with the participation of the Security Council permanent members and all sides to the conflict, including PLO...." There was an identity of views regarding withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon and strict implementation of the Geneva agreement on Afghanistan. 114

The above details of the joint Soviet-Qatari communique clearly shows the various issues, especially regional, on which the Soviet Union held views similar to those of the Gulf Arabs and which was helpful in bringing the two sides closer. Commenting on the visit

Moscow International Service in Arabic called it a "prominent event". Justifying the establishment of relations it said that "in the current situation in international relations" it was unnatural not to have relations. 115

The Qatari decision has also been attributed, sometimes, to an unpleasant showdown with the Americans over the clandestine purchase of 16 American made stinger anti-aircraft missiles, probably from the Afghan rebels. The Americans asked for their return, maintaining that it was an illegal acquisition. The Qataris refused and out of pique, it is said, decided to establish relations with the USSR. 116 This, however, can only be a partial or even peripheral explanation of the Qatari decision. The real reasons, as we saw, were more fundamental.

Kuwait

Soviet relations with Kuwait, which had been cordial and friendly in the past, got further boost, both qualitative and quantitative, under Gorbachev. Soviet-Kuwait ties cannot be understood in terms of customary

greetings on National Day. What was really noteworthy was the large number of reports, articles and commentaries appearing in Soviet press and the broadcasting media on Kuwait - its foreign policy, ties with the USSR and its social, cultural and economic life. Izvestia had high praise for Kuwaiti stand on a variety of issues including Middle East settlement and foreign military presence in the Gulf. The similarity of Soviet and Kuwaiti thinking and stance on the problems in Middle East, Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean were periodically stressed and Soviet-Kuwaiti ties were lauded.

An article on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Soviet-Kuwaiti ties in 1988, took due cognisance of Kuwait's importance, its enormous oil stocks, its strategic location at "the meeting of Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, its active participation in the activity of the Arab League and the Islamic Conference Organisation, the Persian Gulf Arab States' Cooperation Council (sic) and OPEC", its financial aid to the "countries in need", and its advocacy of non-alignment, world peace.

117. For some years Soviet Union had been regularly sending National Day greetings to even those among the Gulf countries with whom it did not have formal relations - UAE before 1989, Qatar before 1988 and Saudi Arabia and Bahrain until 1990.
disarmament, new international economic order and North-South dialogue. A. Bovin's commentary, even if slightly overstating Kuwait's significance (which is understandable in view of the friendly relations between his country and Kuwait) nevertheless gives an inkling into Soviet perception of Kuwait's importance.

In another somewhat less eulogising commentary "Surprising Kuwait", A. Bovin analysed the socio-cultural and economic progress and paradoxes in Kuwait. He contrasted the achievements in education, health care and housing with the presence of an "exploited majority" of foreign workers. He gave the credit for Kuwait's "technical progress" and "material prosperity" to the al Sabah family and especially the emir. He called the monarchy "enlightened" and even "constitutional" but also pointed to emir's prerogative to dissolve the parliament and to the restrictions on the political parties and the press. While praising the role of religion as a "stabilising factor" in Kuwaiti society he nevertheless maintained that "society's spiritual and artistic culture lags considerably behind the material cultural level". In the end Bovin's expresses the hope that in future the distinction between "their own" and "other people's" labour is

reduced and eliminated and the "material prosperity is increased and enhanced by the activation of Kuwaiti society's socio-political and spiritual life."\textsuperscript{121}

Bovin's concern for the foreign workers in Kuwait can be explained in more ways than mere proletarian internationalism. Majority of these workers were Palestinians, the most pro-Soviet section in the Arab society. However, it would be proper to make it clear here itself that the Soviet Union never provided any publicity or help to any opposition group in Kuwait, something it had been doing in Iran, Iraq, Oman and Bahrain. Soviet scholars at the Oriental Institute in Moscow went to the extent of firmly denying the very existence of a Kuwaiti Communist Party.\textsuperscript{122} This is something interesting though explainable. It was perhaps meant to be a signal to the other Gulf states that if they established diplomatic relations with the USSR, Moscow would end public support of their dissidents also.\textsuperscript{123}

Soviet relations with Kuwait were truly multi-faceted, with a large economic (including arms sales) and cultural component. In February 1986 Kuwaiti Oil and

\textsuperscript{121} Izvestia, 19 April 1988 in FBIS:USSR, 25 April 1988, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{122} Mark N. Katz, Russia and Arabia: Soviet Foreign Policy Towards the Arabian Peninsula (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 249 ff.
\textsuperscript{123} Dietl, n. 76, p. 131.
Industries Minister Ali al-Khalifa-al-Sabah visited Moscow and held talks with the Soviet Prime Minister Ryzhkov and K.F. Katushev, Chairman of the State Committee for Foreign Economic Relations. Following the talks on the question of development of economic, trade, financial, scientific and technological cooperation, which ended on 11 February, a Protocol was signed by al-Sabah and Katushev.124 A news report from Kuwait said that the Protocol included banking, oil and petro-chemical sectors.125 That the Protocol was taken seriously by the two sides can be ascertained from the fact that twice during the same year talks were held regarding its implementation - first in May126 and the second in July when Katushev visited Kuwait for the purpose.127 The following year al-Khalifa al-Sabah again visited Moscow. A Soviet-Kuwaiti Joint Commission was constituted to oversee cooperation in the fields of oil exploration and health and follow up the other joint projects undertaken by the two sides.128

Soviet-Kuwaiti exchanges in the military sphere also increased during this period. We have already noted in the previous chapters the Soviet-Kuwaiti arms agreements of 1974-76, 1980 and 1984. These agreements as we know were not very important in material terms, quantity or quality wise. They demonstrated Kuwait's independence vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia and the West and the options available to it. They were also meant to dissuade Kuwait's internal as well as external enemies many of whom were inclined towards the Soviet Union. Due to these reasons and particularly after the start of the Iran-Iraq war Kuwait increased its military contacts with Soviet Union. There was a regular flow of military missions between the two countries. In January 1986 Soviet Deputy Defence Minister General V.L. Goovrov visited Kuwait. 129

During the summer of 1986 when the tanker warfare flared up and Iran started hitting Kuwaiti tankers in retaliation of its support for Iraq, Kuwait decided to approach the super powers for protection. Kuwait is said to have first approached the US. On its refusal it turned to the Soviet Union, which finally

agreed in early 1987. The US government then immediately reversed its decision and offered to protect Kuwaiti tankers. The US decision was also an attempt to restore its credibility as the principal protector of the GCC states, in the aftermath of the Iran gate revelations about secret US arms transfer to Iran. Finally Kuwait chartered three Soviet oil tankers and transferred eleven of its own to American protection. 130

The Kuwaiti invitation and the subsequent Soviet lease of three tankers to it was an important milestone in Moscow's relations with the GCC states. For the first time the Soviet Union gained an active and formal role in defending the GCC states - a role that had exclusively belonged to the United States and Britain. The Soviets might have hoped that by offering help to Kuwait they would increase their credibility and acceptability among the conservative Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. They might also have hoped to increase their arms sales to Kuwait and to initiate such sales to the other GCC states. 131

Kuwait's contacts with the Soviet Union at the

military level continued apace between 1987 and 1989. In 1987 a military mission led by Kuwait's Assistant Chief of Staff arrived in Moscow. Another such mission led by Kuwaiti land forces commander Brigadier Abdul Aziz came in July 1989. And only a week earlier Soviet First Deputy Defence Minister was in Kuwait. Details about these visits, especially regarding sale of Soviet arms to Kuwait were never given in the media of the two countries but such a possibility was always there. Thus Soviet-Kuwaiti relations during Gorbachev period were cordial and beneficial to both the sides.

**Saudi Arabia**

We have already noted elsewhere that by the late 1970s Saudi Arabia, partly dis-illusioned with the pro-Israeli US policy in the region and partly in recognition of the growing Soviet influence from Libya and Ethiopia to Yemen and Afghanistan, was coming round to the idea of having full diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. There are, in fact, reasons to believe

132. KUNA (Kuwait) in English, 8 March 1987, in FBIS:USSR, 13 March 1987, p. 20.
that had not the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, Saudis would have normalized relations with them. Afghanistan notwithstanding the Saudis increased their open as well as secret contacts with Moscow during the Andropov and Chernenko periods. The leader of a Soviet delegation to South Yemen is reported to have admitted of secret Soviet-Saudi talks in Kuwait.135

It would be too far fetched to say that Oman and UAE got approval from Riyadh before announcing establishment of diplomatic relations with USSR. But Saudi non-reaction to their decision certainly shows that it was not opposed to these moves and in fact tacitly approved them. Kuwait, as we know, had been for long, trying to bring the GCC closer to the Soviet Union by convincing the Gulf rulers about the usefulness of having normal relations with Moscow. The intensification of the Iran-Iraq war and Soviet efforts to improve its ties with Iran alarmed the Gulf monarchies and underlined the need to persuade the Soviets to continue with their arms supplies to Baghdad and dissuade them from going closer to Tehran.

135 Newsweek, 6 May 1985.
In August 1985, the Saudi Prince Faisal ibn Fahd, Chairman of the Supreme Council of Youth Welfare in the Kingdom, arrived in Moscow to attend the World Youth Football finals. He held "un-official" talks with the First Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Kornienko at the Kuwait embassy. Later in an interview he said that he discussed "international situation, particularly the situation in the Middle East". He described the talks as "friendly" and "very good".¹³⁶

From the Soviet side there were periodic calls for restoration of Soviet-Saudi relations. Yevgeni Primakov, a well known expert on foreign affairs, told a Japanese news agency that his country "is preparing for an early restoration of relations with Saudi Arabia."¹³⁷ There were also a few articles in Soviet press which analysed the Saudi political and economic system. One particular article in Pravda while characterising Saudi Arabia as an "absolute monarchy" with no parliament, constitution and political parties, also acknowledged its rapid economic development and its non-aligned foreign policy. It placed Saudi Arabia as an "important supplier of oil" and "a major financer" in "the international capitalist division of labour".

without sounding critical it also noted that "the contradiction of Saudi society sometimes burst into the open" and the demand by the "country's democratic forces - the trade unions and the Communist Party of Saudi Arabia" for "freedom, democracy and social progress".  

The Soviet media noted and celebrated with great fanfare the "60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and Saudi Arabia" in February 1986. One Izvestia article reminded the readers that the Soviet Union was the first foreign power to recognise the independence of Saudi Arabia and establish diplomatic relations with it. It traced the development of relations between the two countries and noted the supply of articles of prime necessity including kerosene, flour and sugar by Soviet Union to Saudi Arabia. It also expressed support for Saudi concern on the explosive situation in the Gulf. Another commentary reminded about the establishment of the Saudi kingdom after struggle against the imperialist powers. Yet another commentary while noting the old ties between the two countries hoped for normal diplomatic relations in near future.

141. Moscow Domestic Service in Russian, 21 March 1986 in FBIS:USSR, 26 March 1986, pp. CC1-4
Saudi Arabia was more circumspect and cautious in responding to these overtures. Firstly because it had reservations about Soviet policies regarding the Iran-Iraq conflict and in Afghanistan. Secondly, the deep rooted fear of communism and Soviet Union inhibited it. And lastly there was no great incentive or urgency for immediate restoration of ties. However, the Saudis continued with their "unofficial" contacts and meetings with the Soviets. In early 1987 Saudi oil minister Hisham Nazir visited Moscow on behalf of OPEC to apprise the Soviets of the decisions of the 80th OPEC Conference. He also conferred with Soviet foreign minister Shevardnadze on problems like the Near East settlement, the situation in Gulf and Afghanistan.142

One year later the Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal arrived in Soviet Union but only as the special representative of the Chairman of GCC, who at that time was the Saudi King Fahd. In his talks with the Soviet Foreign Minister both sides reiterated their support to the idea of an international conference for the Near East settlement and to the Security Council Resolution 598 as

the basis for reaching a solution to the Iran-Iraq conflict. Shevardnadze also apprised Faisal about Soviet and Afghanistan governments' attempts to achieve a peaceful settlement and national reconciliation in that country. In his meeting with Soviet President Gromyko the Saudi Prince delivered two messages from the Saudi King. One was devoted to the problem of ending the Gulf war and the other concerned the Arab-Israel conflict. He also expressed his appreciation of Soviet stand on various international issues especially the Arab cause.

The trade between the two countries increased during this period. The two way trade reached 183.9 billion roubles in 1985. In March 1989 the two countries decided to open trade offices in each other country. A month later the first Pravda correspondent V. Belyakov visited Saudi Arabia. In his report from Riyadh he noted the "dazzling leap" made by Saudi Arabia and recounted the "unusual" history of diplomatic relations between the two countries. But he also noted the Saudi Foreign Minister's refusal to comment on the restoration

144. Ibid.
of full diplomatic ties between the two countries.\textsuperscript{147}

Despite the contacts discussed above, the formal diplomatic representation between Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia was still withheld by the latter. The end of Iran-Iraq war, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan the general detente in the super power relations and Gorbachev's de-ideologisation of international relations had removed most of the hinderances in the way of Saudi-Soviet normalisation. But the Saudis still vacillated. In fact, as noted earlier also, there was no sufficient incentive or compulsion for the Saudis to take the final decision.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in early August 1990 and the threat that it posed to Saudi Arabia finally convinced the Saudi leadership of the urgent need to have full diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union. Soviet support was necessary to implement the various Security Council Resolutions demanding Iraqi withdrawal and requiring the imposition of economic and military embargo in the event of Iraqi non-compliance. Although Soviet Union supported these resolutions there was always a fear among the Gulf

\textsuperscript{147} Pravda, 17 April 1989, second edn in FBIS:USSR, 20 April 1989, p. 33.
monarchies and the West that ultimately it might soften its stand towards its old ally - Iraq.

In these circumstances, Saudi Arabia announced restoration of full diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union. In September the Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal visited Moscow in this connection. He met and discussed with Soviet President Gorbachev the acute crisis in the Gulf and the likely options and ways for implementing the Security Council resolutions relating to it. He also praised USSR's role in the Middle East and the Iraq-Kuwait crisis. 148

Bahrain

A few days after the restoration of Soviet-Saudi ties, Bahrain also decided to establish diplomatic relations with USSR. 149 It was motivated by the same compulsions as Saudi Arabia. With this Soviet Union finally had diplomatic relations with all the countries of the Gulf.

Soviet Response to the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the subsequent crisis resulting in the US led allied military intervention is not within the purview of this study. We will simply end our discussion by mentioning the initial Soviet reaction to the Iraqi invasion.

In a statement read out by Soviet Foreign ministry spokesman on 2 August 1990, the day of the invasion, Moscow disapproved of the Iraqi action and asked for "immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi troops from the Kuwaiti territory" and the restoration of Kuwait's "national independence and territorial integrity". The same day Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister A.M. Belonogov received the Kuwaiti ambassador and stated his country's position on the matter. He also received the Iraqi ambassador and handed him Soviet government's statement in connection with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Hope was expressed that Iraq will immediately act on the Security Council Resolution adopted on 2 August on this question. 150

At the United Nations Security Council the representative of the USSR voted for three resolutions that (1) called on Iraq to withdraw its troops; (2) imposed an immediate economic and military embargo on Iraq; and (3) condemned and invalidated Iraq's subsequent annexation of Kuwait. The second resolution concerning embargo was not supported by USSR's two allies (Cuba and Yemen). The US Secretary of States James Baker specifically identified Soviet support as having "made possible the passage" of the resolution. 151

The Soviet reaction to the Iraqi invasion is not difficult to explain. The Iraqi action was blatantly against international law and hence undefendable. The Soviet response was also in keeping with Gorbachev's new thinking" on international relations which emphasised peaceful settlement of disputes and non-use of force. It was also in accordance with Soviet support for the resolution of various Third World crises - from Afghanistan to Namibia and Cambodia. The USSR also did not want to jeopardise the detente and growing political and economic ties (considered essential for Gorbachev's

"Perestroika" programme) with the West. Any other Soviet response would also have alienated many of the Third World countries, particularly the rich Gulf monarchies. The Soviet attempts of past few decades to improve its image and standing among these countries would have irrevocably suffered. However, the Soviet Union particularly the media, was not supportive of the various military methods suggested by the US and its allies to tackle the situation.  

152 For the details of the initial Soviet response as well as reservations expressed about the various Western proposals to tackle the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, see Richard Weitz, "The USSR and the Confrontation in the Gulf", Report on the USSR, vol. 2, no. 33 (August 1990), pp. 1-7.