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Elena Melkumyan

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Gulf Research Center

187 Oud Metha Tower, 11th Floor,

303 Sheikh Rashid Road,

P. O. Box 80758,

Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Tel.: +971 4 324 7770

Fax: +971 4 324 7771

E-mail: sales@grc.ae

Website: www.grc.ae

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Abdulaziz O. Sager
Chairman
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Russia's Historical and Geopolitical Links with the GCC countries

The Russian Empire was not involved in the colonial carve-up of the Gulf, although some rulers of Arab countries in the region did look to communicate with the Russians. Occasional contacts, like visits by Russian ships to Kuwait's port, did not establish a foundation for enhancing relations between the two sides nor did they impact Russian policy in the region. The Russian Empire did, however, have a representative in Jeddah who acted under supervision of the Russian ambassador in Istanbul and managed consular affairs, helped Russian pilgrims and assisted in trade exchange with local partners.

During the Soviet era, contacts with the Arab countries of the Gulf were unquestionably fragmented. At the same time, however, small achievements in their relationship established a strong base upon which they could build new links. In this context, a discussion of the development of relations between the Soviet Union and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would be a logical starting point.

Soviet-Saudi relations

In February 1926, the USSR became the first state to recognize the newly-established kingdom of Ibn Saud. The official note from the Soviet government to Ibn Saud stated that:

On the basis of the principle of the people's right to self-determination and out of respect for the Hijazi people's will as expressed in their choice of you as their king, the government of the USSR recognizes you as King of Hijaz and Sultan to Najd and her

dependencies. On this ground, the Soviet government considers that it is in normal diplomatic relations with Your Majesty's government.¹

The Soviet consulate, headed by Karim Hakimov, was established in Jeddah in August 1924 and after three days was received by King Hussein of Hijaz, becoming the first such Soviet representative on the Arabian Peninsula. After the recognition of Ibn Saud, the consulate was able to commence its work in Jeddah.

Hakimov indicated that the Soviet decision to create normal diplomatic relations with the government of King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud was determined by the fact that the Soviet leadership supported “the right of people for self determination.”² In turn, the Saudi king confirmed in his letter to Hakimov “his readiness to establish relations with government and citizens of the Soviet Union if they will be based on recognition of independence of the territory where Islamic Holy places are situated and recognized norms of international legislation.”³ In the beginning of April 1926, the head of Soviet Foreign Affairs Department Georgy Chicherin indicated in his letter to the Saudi king that the Soviet government was “satisfied with the results of exchange of notes between K. Hakimov and King Ibn Saud,” which took place in Mecca on February 16 and 19, 1926 and resulted in

1- Сборник договоров (Collection of agreements). № 14 (Moscow), 1938, 14.

2- Сборник договоров (Collection of agreements). № 14 (Moscow), 1938, 15.

3- Al Aweidi M.H, *Al Alakat al saudiya al aurubiai* (Saudi-European Relations) // *Al Siyasa al haridjiia lil Mamlaka al Arabiya Al Saudiya fi miat amm* (Foreign Policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during hundred years). Riyadh, 1419 H., 321.

the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. These relations were proclaimed as friendly and having been created in favor of Arab people and peoples of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

At the same time, the Soviet leader expressed the belief of his government that Ibn Saud will successfully achieve the “great tasks in the field of internal and external policy in favor of Arab people, grace of personal qualities and extraordinary activity of Your Majesty.”⁴ For Ibn Saud, the relations with the Soviet Union were a source of strength for the independence of the new state. He believed that diplomatic recognition by the Soviet Union was a starting point in the Kingdom’s establishment as an independent actor in international relations. For the Soviet Union, the significance of relations with Saudi Arabia was connected with its role as a supporter of self determination and independence of liberated nations. Soviet leaders were especially eager to help Saudi Arabia in its realization of its independence from Great Britain’s dominance in the region.

The beginning of 1920s marked a Soviet desire for political and economic links with foreign countries. Faced with a blockade from Western states, the newly-established communist regime attempted to find allies in the East. The contacts with Ibn Saud, whose actions were considered by Soviet leaders as progressive, aimed to create and increase independence of people under colonial domination, to oppose the interests of Great Britain and to weaken its position in the region, thereby allowing for Soviet involvement in the Arab

4- *СССР и арабские страны (The USSR and Arab States) 1917-1960* (Moscow, 1961), 62-63.

world. Strong relations with Saudi Arabia, where the Islamic Holy places are situated, would allow for the establishment of contacts with the rest of the Muslim world as well.

Soviet support for Ibn Saud, however, only occurred in the context of the anti-British policy of the Saudi king; he could not become a true partner in the foreign relations of a socialist state because he was representative of a feudal and traditional stratus of society deemed hostile by communist ideologues. A deeper understanding of Soviet intentions to develop relations with Ibn Saud can be brought about via analysis of the first publications concerning this problem. Among them are the articles of Moissei Akselrod, who was a representative in the first Soviet diplomatic mission in Jeddah. He wrote that “Ibn Saud was a collector of lands in the Arabian peninsula. He was creating a centralized state, which was based on modern principles of government and implementation.” He further indicated that “Ibn Saud was not going to restore Hijaz of the 7th century in the conditions of the 20th century.”⁵ Islamic elements in his actions, the Soviet author explained, were connected with the need to oppose Great Britain and to unify the heterogenic tribal society of his country and transform it into real national community.⁶ At the same time, the Soviet scholar admitted that the “trade bourgeoisie” of Hijaz had been pro-England and the policy of Ibn Saud could be subject to dramatic change. According to Akselrod, the very discreet policy of the Saudi king towards the development of political and economic contacts with the Soviet Union confirmed his assessment. In 1928, I. Teper, a member of the East

5- *Mejdunarodnaya Jizn*. (Moscow, 1928), № 1, 45-48; *Novyi Vostok*. (Moscow, 1928), № 23-24, 280-282.

6- *Ibid*.

Department of Executive Committee of the Comintern wrote that Ibn Saud's actions were based on his own pragmatic interests. He also indicated that "if Ibn Saud used the Wahhabism doctrine as a tool of political centralization of Arabia, it did not mean that his actions had something in common with Arab national movement."⁷ This assessment demonstrated the Soviet representatives' understanding of the opposing interests of the two sides.

Hakimov, the first representative of the Soviet Union in Saudi Kingdom, played a pivotal role in the initial success of the development of Soviet-Saudi relations. He established good personal contacts with Ibn Saud, as he was Muslim by origin and knew very well the traditions and norms of Muslim peoples, a trait that undoubtedly helped him make many friends in Saudi Arabia and expend Soviet influence in the country.⁸ The first contacts between Ibn Saud and Hakimov were established in December 1925, when the army of Ibn Saud entered Jeddah. In his letter to Hakimov, Ibn Saud expressed his gratitude to the Soviet government for its neutrality during his battle against Sharif Ali.⁹

The Soviet authority in the initial period of mutual relations attempted to use Islam to boost relations with the

7- Шами А. *Англия и Аравия* (Shami A. *England and Arabia*) // Коммунистический Интернационал (Communiste International) (Moscow, 1928), № 17, 36-41.

8- This, however, does not appear to have helped him at home. In 1937, when he returned for the second time from Saudi Arabia, he was arrested for propagating "bourgeois nationalism" and was sentenced to a concentration camp in Siberia, where he later died.

9- *Документы внешней политики СССР. Министерство иностранных дел. Т. 9 (Documents of Foreign Policy of the USSR. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Vol. 9)* (Moscow, 1964), 436.

Saudi Kingdom. When the Hijaz became a part of Saudi Kingdom in June 1926, a congress took place in Mecca in which Ibn Saud tried to legitimate the invasion of Hijaz with its Islamic Holy places and elicit the support of the Muslim states. The congress, which was attended by a delegation of Soviet Muslims, headed by the President of the Central Spiritual Muslim Authority, R. Fakhreddinov, coincided with Muslim Hajj to Mecca and Medina, which explained the wide participation in it.

The second head of the Soviet diplomatic mission, who succeeded Hakimov in 1930, was also Muslim. Nazir Tyuriakulov received the permission from the Bolshevik authority to participate in the Hajj. According to the information of A. Ishaki, an Islamic opposition activist who left the Soviet Union, Turiakulov spoke with pilgrims in Mecca and Medina who had come from India, Tunisia and Algeria and explained to them the terrible policy of Great Britain towards the Muslims of India and French policy toward the Muslims of Tunisia and Algeria. He expressed hope that the Muslims of different countries, with the support of the Soviet Union, would be liberated from foreign dominance.¹⁰ Turiakulov also used his Muslim origin to enforce a Soviet presence in the kingdom and tried to learn more about the internal situation in the country, which he considered to be very important in building mutual relations.

At the beginning of 1930s, the close relations between Moscow and Ibn Saud's kingdom were further expanded. According to Russian scholars, King Abdulaziz skillfully

10- Ayas Ishaki. *Pèlerins rouge à la duplicité des Bolcheviks. Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. F. 19, D. 1, F. 3, 26, 101-103.

played the Russians off against Anglo-American oil companies and, by opening his country's markets to Soviet goods, desired to demonstrate that there was an alternative to American pressure.¹¹ Ibn Saud thus looked at the relationship between his country and the Soviet Union with pragmatism. In 1932, he sent his son Prince Faisal on an official visit to Moscow, the main goal of which was to learn more about the Soviet state and its real internal policy. The Soviet leadership considered this visit as a confirmation of high-level bilateral relations; the head of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Kalinin, stated that the visit of Prince Faisal indicated that "friendship between two countries is in the interests of both peoples and their mutual prosperity."¹²

In 1935, the two countries concluded trade agreements that allowed for increased trade and economic cooperation between them. The negotiations between two countries, however, were too long and the agreement lost its significance for both sides, especially for the Kingdom, whose priorities in the sphere of foreign affairs had changed. In 1933, Saudi Arabia gave concessions for oil exploration to the US-based Standard Oil of California and subsequently established a consulate relationship with the US, which at that juncture had no political interests in the Saudi kingdom. Ibn Saud continued to exercise caution in his policy towards the Soviet Union, refusing to increase the trade exchange between the two countries. Instead of buying oil products from the Soviet

11- Косач Г.Г., Мелкумян Е.С. *Внешняя политика Саудовской Аравии* (Kosach G.G., Melkumyan E.S. *Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia*) (Moscow, 2003), 30.

12- *Документы внешней политики СССР. Министерство иностранных дел. Т.15. (Documents of Foreign Policy of the USSR. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Vol. 15)* (Moscow, 1968), 366-367.

state, he preferred to commence oil explorations in his territory with the help of the Americans.

The refusal of Saudi Arabia to increase cooperation in economics and trade can also be explained by the fact that the Saudi leaders were aware of the events that took place in the Soviet Union in the second half of 1930s, which included political repression, arrests and executions, the elimination of religion (Orthodox and Islam) from the social life of Soviet society, and the full cessation of the pilgrimage to the Holy places of Islam.

On September 11, 1938 the functionaries of the Soviet diplomatic representation left Jeddah without any preliminary concordance between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries. The explanation of Soviet authority was not very credible; Soviet representatives declared that the closure of the Soviet mission in Saudi Arabia was caused by a general reduction in Soviet foreign representations and therefore did not indicate “the cessation or break of diplomatic relations.” Instead, they proposed that the bilateral relations could be maintained via the embassies of both countries in London.¹³ In fact, Saudi-Soviet diplomatic contacts were suspended due to the opposing political interests of two sides. The Soviets had considered that the development of relations with the Saudi state could provide the necessary conditions for the establishment of a real bloc that would limit Great Britain’s sphere of regional dominance. Such a bloc, however, could not be a permanent political union, as deep differences in the political systems of both countries and the repression of Muslims in the Soviet Union prevented any such union.

13- *Ayas Ishaki*, op. cit., 130.

The suspension of relations between the two countries can first be explained by the change in Soviet international strategy. In 1934, a collection of documents entitled “Program Documents of Communist Parties of the East” was published in Moscow. In the section dedicated to the Arab states, a document concerning the tasks of Arab Communist activities was included, declaring that these parties should lead the Arab liberation movement.¹⁴ In this context, a state such as the Saudi kingdom was considered as under the dominance of imperialism and their heads were proclaimed as “feudal” and “reactionaries” that were not able to participate in the struggle of Arab people for national independence and unity.

For a long period of time, the Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia made no effort to re-evaluate mutual relations. The Second World War forced the Soviet Union to intensify its policy in the West at the expense of its East policy, which consequently stagnated. The beginning of the Cold War did little to encourage the development of a Soviet policy in the Arab world, including the Gulf States. Only occasionally did the Soviet leaders try to use the anti-western tendencies in the policies of the Gulf States to advance their own interests. On April 16, 1955, the USSR’s Foreign Ministry spokesman officially praised Saudi Arabia as an “opponent of participation in military blocs which the Western Powers are forcing on the Arab countries.”¹⁵ By the end of the same year, Moscow showed support for Riyadh in its dispute with the British Protectorates of Abu Dhabi and Muscat over the Buraimi oasis, and during King Saud’s trip to India in

14- Программные документы коммунистических партий Востока (Program Documents of Communist Parties of the East) (Moscow, 1934), 160.

15- *Soviet News*, April 19, 1955.

December 1955 it noted with approval that his speeches supported peaceful coexistence.

When in 1958 King Saud was replaced as the ruler of the country by Crown Prince Faisal, the Soviets welcomed him as a “well-known supporter of Arab unity and an opponent of Western-sponsored military blocs in the Middle East.”¹⁶ The new king, however, did little to meet Moscow’s expectations. Similarly, in spite of the growing Soviet support for the Palestinians, the political and ideological differences between Moscow and Riyadh remained too large to overcome. Both countries were deeply ideological and their foreign policies were largely directed by their perceived missions – Islamic in the case of Saudi Arabia and Communist in the case of the Soviet Union. In addition to the Soviets siding with “progressive” Arab states during the Cold War in the 1960s, the Saudi rulers were deeply concerned about Moscow’s support for revolutionary movements in the area, which had led to the establishment of a Marxist regime in South Yemen after the rise to power of the National Liberation Front in 1967. South Yemen’s developments were soon followed by the revolutionary changes in the neighboring Horn of Africa countries, such as Ethiopia and Somalia. Consequently, the Saudi leaders harbored serious suspicions over the Soviet military bases located close to them and soon became actively involved in anti-communist and anti-Soviet operations in various parts of the world, particularly following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union did attempt to re-establish relations with Saudi Arabia, which it considered to be the

16- *Izvestia*, March 26, 1958.

most influential state in the Gulf region and a prominent voice in the Middle East and the entire Muslim world. In 1974, B. Gafurov, the Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies attached to the Soviet Academy of Science was sent to Saudi Arabia on the pretext of his participation in the Hajj. According to the information received from S. Kiamilev, who was an assistant of Gafurov at that time and who had accompanied him in his journey to Mecca and Medina, the decision to allow Gafurov's visit had been made by the Politburo, though some of its members were against it. Gafurov was received by the Saudi king, who spoke about his hesitations in developing relations with the Soviet Union and cited as the main obstacle the atheistic policy of the Soviet state.¹⁷ This was followed by another attempt in 1982 although at that time, it was on the Saudi leadership's initiative that a channel of communication was established between the two capitals via London in order to exchange messages and information related to critical regional problems, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Iran-Iraq War.¹⁸

Despite the absence of official relations, trade relations were largely maintained. According to Soviet statistics, Soviet export to Saudi Arabia amounted to 10.5 million rubles¹⁹ in 1989 while imports from Saudi Arabia amounted to 12.6 million rubles.²⁰ Soviet export to the Saudi Kingdom consisted of piping, electrical equipment and lumber whereas

17- Personal conversation with S. Kiamilev – a senior research scholar at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow. November 18, 2004.

18- *ITAR-TASS* (in English). August 28, 2003.

19- At that time the rate of Soviet ruble was equal to 66 to one US\$.

20- Soviet Foreign Economic Relations in 1989. *Statistical Yearbook* (Moscow, 1990), 248.

imports consisted mainly of wheat. Commercial turnover between two countries, however, was at a very low level and was not very constant.

Soviet-Kuwaiti relations

At the end of the 1960s, the Soviet Union tried to enhance its position in the Gulf region as a whole. As the period marked the end of Great Britain's dominance in the region, it presented Soviet politicians with a fine opportunity to establish a strong Soviet presence. In 1963, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with Kuwait, which had gained political independence only two years earlier. Kuwait was ready for relations with the Soviet state, as it hoped to receive Soviet support against Iraq's attempts at annexing the small emirate. In 1964, the two countries signed an agreement of technical cooperation and one year later signed an agreement of cooperation in the field of culture. The relationship between the two sides remained limited, however, as the Soviet Union continued developing its close contacts with "progressive" Arab states like Egypt, Syria and Iraq. In particular, the one-sided orientation of the Soviet Union towards Iraq certainly exerted a negative influence on the development of Soviet relations with the conservative Arab Gulf states.

In the 1970s, new trends in the foreign policy of the Soviet Union towards the Gulf region appeared in connection with changes on the global level. The détente in the relations between the Soviet Union and the US caused the Soviet leadership to proclaim a new ideology of "peaceful coexistence" with the capitalist countries. New approaches were also considered towards developing countries such as those of the Non-Aligned Movement, as these were

considered by Soviet ideologues as natural allies of Socialist states.

In the Gulf region, the only country that was ready for closer contacts with the Soviet state was Kuwait, whose fear of Iraq forced it to be very flexible in its foreign policy. Kuwaiti officials considered that the Soviet Union as one of the superpowers playing an important role in the international affairs and who pulled significant weight in the resolution of not only global issues, but regional problems as well. In turn, Soviet politicians also tried to use the importance of the Middle East conflict for all Arab countries, their support for Arab interests and help in their confrontation with Israel - which was backed by the United States – to their advantage in establishing relations. The Middle East conflict was always a central issue of negotiations between Soviet and Kuwait representatives. Ties between the two countries increased gradually and were based primarily on the proximity of their approaches towards the settlement of the Middle East conflict.

However, despite some positive trends in Soviet-Kuwaiti relations, the fact that the Soviet Union repeatedly stood on the side of Iraq when it came to Kuwait-Iraq tensions remained to be major stumbling block. In 1973, on the second day after the occupation by Iraq of a Kuwaiti stronghold on the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border, the official Soviet agency TASS transmitted information on an Iraqi radio station claiming that Kuwait had been the initiator of the conflict. It was only later on that the Soviet position became more moderate, with the Soviet Union refusing to interfere in the conflict. At the same time, after the conflict had subsided, a delegation representing the parliament of Kuwait visited Moscow. This in turn led in October 1973 to the Emir of Kuwait sending a telegram of

congratulations to the Soviet government on the occasion of the Great October revolution.

Kuwait also developed its relations with the Soviet Union with a view to counter-balance their close ties to the West. The diversification of its military relations was considered to be in its national interest and led to a visit by a Kuwaiti military delegation to Moscow in January 1974. This time, however, it was the Soviets who refused to move ahead, fearing that such a move could undermine their relations with Iraq. It was only due to Kuwaiti persistence that another military delegation was given the green light to visit Moscow in 1975. This ultimately led to the conclusion of a military agreement in March 1975 through which the Soviet Union was to deliver missile launchers and artillery valued at \$50 million to their Kuwaiti counterparts.²¹

In 1981, a Kuwaiti delegation headed by Shaikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jabir Al-Sabah came to Moscow on an official visit. Members of the delegation expressed their gratitude to the Soviet Union for its successive support of Arab peoples in their fight for the return of Arab occupied territories. In a joint statement, the two sides confirmed their shared attitude that the Camp David Accords were an obstacle to the complex settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. They also agreed on the need to pursue a consolidated position among all Arab states and to continue to fight for a fair solution to the Middle East conflict.²²

21- Central Intelligence Agency. *Communist Aid to the Less Developed Countries of the Free World. 1976.* 77-10296 (Washington, D.C.: CIA. August 1977), 33.

22- *Pravda.* M., April 26, 1982.

Throughout the 1980s, the relationship between the Soviet Union and Kuwait intensified. This was linked to developments such as the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war, the increased instability in the Gulf region and the decline of oil prices in the world market, which resulted in economic difficulties in both countries. Following a decision by the US in 1984 not to deliver stinger missiles to Kuwait, the Kuwaiti government approached the Soviets for expanded military cooperation, a move that resulted in a new contract valued at approximately \$300 million. The deal also included the provision of Soviet military specialists for technical assistance, although the number remained quite limited.²³

According to Kuwaiti statistics, Kuwaiti imports from the Soviet Union in 1986 amounted to KD 1.6 million while exports only came to KD 21,000. As mentioned, Kuwait also purchased Soviet weapons in a limited quantity.²⁴ In 1986, the two countries concluded a protocol of trade and industrial cooperation aimed at promoting mutual participation in oil industrial projects in Kuwait and the USSR as well as other countries. The main idea was to best take advantage of financial capabilities of Kuwait and technical experience of the Soviet Union. Cooperation in the field of oil production was also included in the agreement as a means to diminish respective transport expenses of oil exports.²⁵

The instability in Kuwait caused by escalation of the Iraq-Iran war, however, further encouraged security cooperation

23- *The Washington Post*, June 25, 1984, A 11. In the 1990s, there were no more than 50 Soviet military specialists working in Kuwait. See *Middle East International* (London), August 31, 1991, 21.

24- State of Kuwait. *Annual Statistical Abstract 1988* (Kuwait, 1989), 246-248.

25- *Al Madjalis* (Kuwait), February 22, 1986.

between the two countries. In 1987, Kuwaiti tankers became victims of Iranian and Iraqi attacks in an attempt to internationalize their conflict and solicit the help of major powers. The government of Kuwait requested US and Soviet assistance to defend its tanker fleet and secure oil transport, to which the Soviet government responded by chartering three Soviet tankers for the transport of Kuwaiti oil. This spurred involvement by the US, which then allowed for the re-flagging of Kuwaiti tankers under American flags. The Kuwaiti initiative was undertaken as a part of the GCC strategy of enmeshing the two superpowers indirectly in order to cause Tehran to take notice and reconsider its policy of threatening shipping in the Gulf. In the meantime, the Soviet Union also became concerned about its weakened positions in the world following its invasion of Afghanistan. In that context, Kuwait would only be a minor consideration.

The Evolution of Russian Strategic Interests in the Gulf

During the era of the Soviet Union, the Gulf region was considered by the Soviet leadership as a sphere of their national interests due to its important geo-strategic position in immediate proximity to the southern borders of the USSR. In this regard, it played a significant role in terms of its impact on the security of the former Soviet Caucasian and Central Asian republics. As a result, US advances in the 1970s and 1980s in creating a system of military bases along the coastline of the Indian Ocean from South Africa to Australia, were received with alarm by Soviet ideologues.

The Gulf region was seen by the Soviets as part of the Indian Ocean zone and was thus considered an arena of US-Soviet confrontation. Soviet strategic goals in the Gulf were

subsequently framed within the general atmosphere of the Cold War, with the Soviet leadership adamantly voicing its opposition to US statements declaring the Gulf region a zone of vital American interest.

According to the Soviet doctrine, the US and other Western “imperialist” countries used the unstable situation in the Gulf region in connection with the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 as an excuse to increase their military presence there and interfere in the domestic affairs of the regional states. At the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR, Secretary-General Leonid Brezhnev stated that “the Gulf region is a sphere of vital interests of the regional states, and not the other forces. Nobody has the right to interfere in their affairs, to present themselves as their tutors and their defenders.”²⁶

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was itself qualified by the Gulf States as a threat to their regional security. In order to calm the overall negative reaction to the conflict, the USSR soon announced new proposals concerning the Gulf region. In his speech before the Indian parliament during an official visit at the end of 1980, Brezhnev proclaimed the following points:

- No foreign military bases were to be established in the Gulf region and on any neighboring islands;
- No nuclear weapons or any other kinds of weapons of mass destruction were to be deployed to the region;

26- Л. И. Брежнев. *Ленинским курсом, Речи, приветствия, статьи* (L.I. Brejnev, *In the way of Lenin. Speeches, Greetings, Articles*). Vol.8. М., 1982, 261.

- The USSR was going to refrain from the threat or use of force against the countries of the region and observe the principle of non-interference in their internal affairs;
- The USSR was going to respect their status as non-aligned countries and therefore not engage them in military groupings along with nuclear powers;
- The Gulf States' sovereign right to natural resources was going to be respected;
- No obstacles or threats that would interfere with normal trade relations or maritime communications across the region were to be created.²⁷

The statement was intended to show Soviet policy as one of peaceful intention towards the Gulf countries of the Gulf and to portray the USSR as the real protector of the interests of those states.

Still, as Soviet ideology identified all countries of the world as either allies of the US and the politico-military bloc of NATO or allies of their adversary, the USSR and the Warsaw Pact (WP), the Arab Gulf States were viewed as “feudal creations” where direct colonial power was now administered indirectly as a means to preserve the control over Arab oil.²⁸ Although independent, power in these states was concentrated in the hands of feudal dynasties, which became fantastically rich selling oil.²⁹ Soviet analysts

27- Ibid, 557, 558.

28- *Международные проблемы Азии 80-х годов (International issues of Asia in the 1980s)* (Moscow, 1983), 209.

29- Ibid.

attributed their conservative internal policies and policy of orientation towards “imperialist powers” to the fear of revolutionary forces in their countries and fear of the prospect of progressive change. At the same time, Soviet ideologues stressed that even these states, which were oriented to the Western countries, were trying to reject the direct control of imperialism. They pointed out that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman were members of the Non-Aligned Movement and supported a generally anti-imperialist line in world politics. They demanded the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, condemned the expansionism of Israel and were against a direct American military presence in Southwestern Asia. According to Soviet official opinion, only Oman openly supported imperialist expansion, for in 1980 it granted the US the right to establish a military base on its territory.³⁰

While ideological principles guided the foreign policy decision-making process of the Soviet Union, Marxist-Leninist theory imposed limits on new trends emerging within the Soviet foreign policy strategy. The GCC states were thus always considered as “pro-Western” and “reactionary.” Not much attention was paid to the creation of the GCC in 1981, with Soviet ideologues characterizing such efforts at regional integration as contradictory: on the one hand, integrationist moves by the Gulf States were seen as a reaction to increased imperialist interference in their internal affairs and thus as opposition to such pressure; on the other hand, the GCC at its core remained an institution aimed at supporting monarchical regimes and a framework for cooperating against democratic

30- Ibid., 210.

forces and revolutionary changes that might impact these newly formed states.³¹

As the Soviet Union had traditionally considered assisting governments disposed to the path of “no capitalist” development its foremost task in the region, its main ally in the Gulf region was Iraq. Relations between the USSR and Iraq were based on ideological proximity; Soviet leaders regarded Iraq as a pillar of the national liberation movement destined to assist in the permeation of the revolution in the region. Since its anti-monarchist revolution in 1958, Iraq had risen in strategic significance in the eyes of the Soviets. The Soviet Union established friendly relations with General Qasim’s regime and the two countries signed an economic and technical cooperation agreement under which the Soviet Union was to aid Iraq in the construction of a number of industrial enterprises, irrigation projects, transportation facilities and communications. Even when the Qasim regime evolved into an authoritarian, dictatorial form of government, the Soviet Union continued to regard Iraq as a country of socialist orientation and further developed the strategic alliance on an ideological basis.

The unconditional support of Iraq by the Soviet leadership was demonstrated during the 1961 Kuwait crisis in which the Soviet Union took the side of Iraq when its leader, Abdul Karim Qasim, put forth the claim that Kuwait was an integral part of Iraq’s territory. On two occasions - the first time in July 1961 - the Soviet Union used its veto power as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to block the admission of the newly-independent Kuwait to the ranks of

31- Ibid., 211.

the UN. The pretext of Soviet refusal to support Kuwait's admission was the presence of Great Britain's forces on the territory of Kuwait, which meant that Kuwait was not a fully independent state and was therefore not eligible for membership in the UN. In his speech, the Soviet representative in the UN Security Council V. Zorin declared that "Great Britain tried to justify the deployment of its forces on Kuwaiti territory and concentration of its fleet in this region as necessary measures to organize resistance against Iraqi aggression. But this explanation cannot be admitted because there are no Iraqi troops on the territory of Kuwait." He further added: "Concerning the real meaning of the Iraqi government statement about its rights on Kuwait, it is well known that the Iraqi position on this question was known by England and these statements were not unexpected for English government."³²

The second time the Soviet Union voted against Kuwait's admission was in November 1961, when British forces were replaced by Arab forces after Kuwait's admission into the League of Arab States. The demagogical explanation of the Soviet representative in the UN Security Council did not change, providing a good illustration of Soviet strategy in the Gulf region during the bipolar era of international relations in which confrontation between two superpowers influenced not only their relationship on the global level, but their regional policies as well.

In April 1972, the Soviet Union and Iraq - at this point governed by the Baa'th Party - concluded a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty strengthening their mutual relations. The

32- Security Council. Official reports. Session N 958, July 4, 1961.

Soviet Union offered assistance in the development of the Iraqi economy and trained Iraqi experts, including military cadres. Indeed, more than anything else, military collaboration between the two sides characterized the relationship. In the 1980s, the Soviet military industry supplied Iraq with 53 percent of its military technology.³³ At the same time, Soviet interests in maintaining Iraq as an ally in its global confrontation with the US in the region meant that the Soviet leadership did not react to such Iraqi actions as the liquidation of the Iraqi Communist Party, operations against the population of Kurdistan or Iraq's support for terrorist organizations in the Middle East region. Instead, the strategic goals of the Soviet Union in the Gulf region were clearly correlated to its global interests.

It was not until the mid-1980s that a new era in the development of the Soviet state emerged. "Perestroika" - or reconstruction, as it was soon called - would prove to be a historical turning point in Soviet society. The need for domestic transformation became an all-encompassing priority and the chief concerns of the Soviet leadership were the implementation of fundamental reforms of the political and legal systems and the democratization of political and social life via the introduction of a multi-party system and the establishment of a free press. As the result of a deep economic crisis from which there was no possible exit without outside help, Soviet leaders began to look towards the US and other leading states in the world to provide the necessary financial

33- Н. Гневушев, *Военно-экономическая деятельность развивающихся стран и их последствия* (N. Gnevushev, *Military-economic activity of Developing countries and its Consequences*) // *Современные проблемы международной жизни в Азии (Actual problems of International life in Asia)* (Moscow, 1990), 100.

support as well as scientific and technical cooperation in order to carry out structural changes in the economy, with accompanying assistance in the training of the labor force. This included seeking 'Most Favored Nation' trading status and the lifting of existing restrictions on its participation in various international economic organizations. Soviet leaders hoped that with assistance from the West, they could succeed in preserving a single economic framework for all of the republics in drawing up policies to deal with the economic problems facing them.

Political polarization occurred on different levels and in different spheres. The Communist Party still remained in full power; the then-President of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, was still simultaneously the Secretary-General of the Communist Party. Soviet society was divided into a multitude of political splinter groups, ranging from the extreme radicals to the extreme conservatives. While the new political parties were weak, a similar process of division was occurring inside the Communist Party.

A dramatic reversal also took place in the international policies of the Soviet Union. The new foreign policy of the USSR proclaimed refusal from ideological confrontation with the West and championed the priorities of human values and principals of international legality. The end of the Cold War also meant that the Soviet Union began to reconsider its relations with the Gulf States with an increased interest in developing relations with the conservative, oil-producing countries. The Gulf quickly emerged as a region in which the Soviet Union was prepared to cooperate, not compete, with the United States. In this manner, the Soviet Union hoped to become a full-fledged member of the world community and to be included in the system of the global economy.

Soviet experts on the Arab countries understood that it was a mistake of Soviet policy to develop relations with only the so-called “progressive” Arab countries. Even more wider-thinking Party functionaries insisted on the need to have contacts with the oil-producing countries of the Gulf. For example, the Vice Director of the International Relations Department in the Central Committee of the Communist Party Karen Brutents wrote in his memoirs that one of the weaknesses of Soviet policy in the Arab world was the lack of relations with countries of the Gulf region. At the same time, he considered that “in the conditions of the Cold War, nothing could be changed because these countries were afraid of ‘Soviet danger’ and admitted American protection. They were connected to the West by strong ties and became in fact a part of its financial, economic and energy system.”³⁴

During the time of ‘perestroika’, Soviet leaders brought to the fore the mistakes of Soviet policy in the Middle East. Among them, the highly-positioned party functionary Brutents mentioned that the Soviet Union cooperated only with a part of Arab world and that the oil-producing countries of the Gulf region had been excluded from the sphere of Soviet influence.³⁵ In 1985, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with the Sultanate of Oman. In 1982, Oman and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen ended the dispute between them and established fraternal relations. This was made possible by the dramatic reduction in Soviet aid to leftist organizations, including the Dhofar movement, based in the territory of People’s Democratic Republic of

34- К. Брутенц, *Тридцать лет на Старой площади* (K. Brutents, *Thirty years in the Old square*), М., 1998, 368.

35- Ibid.

Yemen. Kuwait also initiated an expansion of contacts between the Soviet Union and its Arab Gulf partners in the GCC. In 1986 and 1988, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar respectively were added to the list of GCC members establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. These relations, however, were only formal and did not stimulate any real achievements in bilateral relations; trade and economic relations between the Soviet Union and the GCC member countries remained limited.

The first visit by a Soviet representative to these countries was made at the end of December 1987 and the beginning of 1988. Brutents, acting as a special envoy of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, visited several Arab countries, including three countries of the Gulf region – the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. During each of his stops, he delivered official letters to the respective heads of state – Shaikh Zayid Al-Nahyan of the UAE, Emir Jaber Al-Sabah of Kuwait and King Faisal Bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia. Upon his return to Moscow, the Soviet representative wrote in his reports to the government that “the rulers of Gulf states are very friendly to our country. They are eager to develop cooperation with us.”³⁶ He also indicated that “Soviet policy in this region is not well planned and is not complex. We do not use all the possibilities. We need to increase our efforts, taking into consideration the economic potential of these countries and their political influence in the Arab world.”³⁷

36- Soviet Foreign Economic Relations in 1989. *Statistical Yearbook*. M., 1990, 400.

37- *Ibid.*, 401.

The former Russian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Melihov, indicated that all periods of Soviet development after 1985 were marked by a “reversal of ideological and confrontation elements in the relations between the USSR and the GCC states.” Though “the Soviet Union’s approach to geopolitical significance of the Persian Gulf and its geographical proximity to the borders of the Soviet Union was realistic, the difficulties in Soviet infiltration in the Gulf region were connected with the conscious distension of the GCC states rulers (except Kuwait) from the Soviet pole.” The issue was connected with “ideological considerations,” because the leaders of these countries were afraid that a rapprochement with the Soviet Union would cause anti-regime processes with no pragmatic consequences. However, after 1985, the situation began to change due to the appearance of a new aspect of Soviet concern for the Gulf region that was connected with “its key role in the world energy balance.”³⁸

Soviet policy during the Gulf Crisis of 1990-1991

The new Soviet strategy in international affairs, which was an integral part of the overall “perestroika” approach, was most clearly demonstrated during the Gulf crisis following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The Gulf crisis of 1990-91 was a watershed for the Soviet strategy in the Gulf region.; the Soviet Union cooperated with the US in condemning Iraq and legitimated the use of force against the Iraqi army. The Gulf crisis also symbolized the end of the Cold War, when the

38- И.А.Мелихов И. А., *Концептуальный анализ: Россия – государства ССАГИЗ* (I.A. Melihov, *Concept analysis: Russia – the GCC states*) // *Россия и Ближний Восток* (Russia and the Middle East). М., 2001, 242-244.

Soviet Union, previously Iraq's principal supporter, joined the US and other Security Council members during the meeting of the UN Security Council on November 29, 1990 in approving Resolution 678, which authorized the use of "all necessary means" to bring an end to the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. At the same time, Soviet forces did not take part in the liberation of Kuwait, a factor that would influence the further development of Russian policy in the Gulf region and the Soviet relationship with the Gulf countries.

Overall, the Soviet Union found itself in a very complicated position. In his book entitled *Life and Reforms*, then-President Mikhail Gorbachev wrote that it was a very difficult choice because "the Soviet Union had several obligations according to the agreement of friendship and cooperation which it had signed with Iraq. A big part of Soviet society could not accept the idea to suddenly being a 'traitor' of a previous ally. Yet, from the other side, this crisis became proof of the new ideological principles of the Soviet Union."³⁹

In the first phase of the Gulf crisis, the Soviet Union refrained from issuing any statements contradicting those of the US. This represented a marked contrast with the former Soviet positions in conflict situations in any region. The US-Soviet entente also resurrected the United Nations as a forum for the effective resolution of the Gulf crises. The Soviet government's first statement on the crisis on August 2, 1990 denounced Iraq's invasion as an aggression and stressed unequivocally that it was unacceptable and contradicted the

39- М. Горбачев, *Жизнь и реформы. Кн. 2* (M. Gorbachev, *Life and Reforms*. Vol. 2). М., 1995, 240.

positive trends taking place in international affairs. It advocated the “immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwaiti territory” and “the re-establishment of the sovereignty, national independence, and territorial integrity of the State of Kuwait.”⁴⁰ In the first US-Soviet joint statement issued by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Secretary of State James Baker, the Iraqi invasion was sharply condemned and an appeal was addressed to Iraq to withdraw its troops unconditionally from Kuwait. The statement also declared that it was indispensable as a matter of principle that the UN Security Council resolution on the invasion be fully and immediately implemented.⁴¹ The coordination of Soviet and American positions was demonstrated not only by joint action in the UN Security Council, but parallel moves outside of it. The Soviet Union, for example, stopped its arms deliveries to Iraq and the US froze Iraqi bank assets.

Soviet-American coordination was further developed at the Helsinki summit on September 9, 1990. The joint statement of the two presidents envisioned the possibility of employing all means to obtain an Iraqi withdrawal, although it stressed the priority of finding a peaceful political settlement. In this statement, a sentence was incorporated into the text on the necessity to “work actively to resolve all remaining conflicts in the Middle East and Persian Gulf.”⁴² It was the Soviet side that insisted on the inclusion of the sentence, believing that such an approach was a necessary step to being able to reach a political settlement of the crisis.

40- *Pravda*, August 3, 1990.

41- *Pravda*, August 4, 1990.

42- *Pravda*, February 27, 1991.

The Soviet leadership also tried to encourage the Arab countries themselves to find a solution to the conflict. This was considered preferable for the Soviets, as it precluded Soviet participation in the military actions of the anti-Iraq coalition, which in turn would have dealt an irreparable blow to Soviet prestige in some other parts of the Arab world where its position continued to be relatively strong.

Another feature of Soviet policy during this period was the desire to retain an open channel of communication with Iraq as a means of exerting diplomatic pressure. The Soviet leadership was convinced that it was possible through certain compromises to have Iraq retreat without losing face. As a means of resolving the crisis, the Soviet Union suggested discussing the Palestinian issue and a general Middle East settlement if Iraq agreed to pull its forces out of Kuwait. President Gorbachev sent his personal representative, Yevgeny Primakov, a well-known expert on the Arab countries and a Party functionary, to hold talks with Saddam Hussein in an attempt to find a peaceful means of resolving the crisis.

Yet, at the same time, there was an absence of a true national consensus in the Soviet Union on a policy towards the Gulf crisis. In the parliament, two groups of deputies voiced particularly strong opposition to the policy of the government. The first, representative of certain members of the Soviet army and groups associated with the Soviet military-industrial complex, took an extremely negative stance against the policy pursued by the Soviet leadership on the Gulf crisis, criticizing the government for subordinating itself to the US, for refusing to support its traditional allies and for sanctioning the rout of the Iraqi army by voting for UN Security Council Resolution 678. The second group

represented Afghan war veterans and was of the opinion that the Soviet Union had no right to send citizens to die in the Gulf region after the recent war in Afghanistan. This group stated that “While categorically condemning aggression, we are convinced that the world community will bear in mind the decision of the legislative authority in our country that it will be impossible for our soldiers to participate in a war in the Gulf region.”⁴³

Among representatives of the higher echelon of Soviet power, there was also a lack of a unified position concerning the Gulf crisis; some leaders supported the necessity of coordination with the US while others believed that the Soviet line must be independent and based on previous strong relations with the Arab states. President Gorbachev tried to balance between different political groups. On October 29, 1990, he called once more for a new Arab initiative to resolve the crisis, reiterating that a military solution was “unacceptable.”⁴⁴ However, just days later on November 11, Gorbachev warned Iraq that “an immediate and unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait” was the only way to avert a military solution to the Gulf crisis.⁴⁵

Taking into account the complicated internal situation in the Soviet Union, Iraq tried to make use of past relations with its Soviet ally to weaken the anti-Iraq coalition. Iraqi diplomatic activity was directed toward preventing the UN Security Council from passing a number of harsh resolutions against Iraq. In conjunction with this, Iraqi official Sa`adoun

43- *Izvestia*, December 21, 1990.

44- *Izvestia*, October 30, 1990.

45- *Pravda*, November 12, 1990.

Hammadi paid a visit to Moscow to meet with Soviet leaders to seek assistance in blocking a UN Security Council resolution that intended to impose an economic blockade on Iraq. Similar attempts were made in regard to UNSCR 678 in November 1990. In the end, however, the Soviet Union voted in favor of resolution 678, though the Soviet representative in the UN Security Council proposed the incorporation of a clause providing for a “goodwill pause” until January 15, 1991 in the hope that Iraq would be able to realistically assess the situation and pull its forces out of Kuwait.⁴⁶

When the Gulf war began, the lack of Soviet participation in military operations put the Soviet Union in a special position compared to the other larger coalition powers. As hostilities continued and the impending rout of the Iraqi army became obvious, Soviet leaders began to concern themselves with the possible role they could play in the crisis aftermath. In that context, the Soviet Union began to differentiate its stance from that of the West as a means of strengthening its influence, hoping to ensure its participation in resolving the fate of the region in the post-crisis period. For example, the Soviet leadership came out against the complete devastation of Iraq and the possibility arising in this context of the dismemberment of Iraq. It emphasized the need to preserve the pre-crisis balance of power in the region and to ensure Iraq’s active participation in the establishment of a regional security system after the end of military operations. The Soviet Union criticized the actions of the US-led multinational forces, which seemed to aim at the complete destruction of Iraq’s military-industrial potential. On February 11, 1991, Soviet President Gorbachev stated that a possibility

46- See, Interview with Eduard Shevardnadze, *Moscow News*, February 14, 1991.

existed for the use of weapons of mass destruction by both sides and that such a threat exceeded the mandate established by the UN Security Council resolutions. He also condemned the tremendous number of victims among the civilian population.⁴⁷

In stressing the negative aspects of continuing hostilities, the Soviet leadership was preparing for a new round of its own diplomatic activity aimed at bringing about an immediate end to the war. This new initiative showed, however, that the Soviet Union lacked the ability to exert an independent influence on the Gulf situation. On February 17, 1991, Soviet President Gorbachev met with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz in Moscow and presented a plan calling for the full withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and a number of other proposals, including the lifting of UN economic sanctions against Iraq after most Iraqi troops had withdrawn from Kuwait and the monitoring of the withdrawal by non-combatting forces.⁴⁸ Following an American ultimatum to Iraq on February 22 to either withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait by noon the following day or face a ground attack, the Soviet Union submitted a revised proposal calling for the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait within 21 days and from Kuwait City within four days. The proposal included the release of all prisoners of war within three days after the cease-fire, the lifting of all UN Security Council resolutions after withdrawal, and the stipulation that the supervision of the ceasefire and troops withdrawal be conducted by parties to be determined by the UN Security Council. The revised proposal was accepted by Iraq on February 23, on the same

47- *Izvestia*, February 11, 1991.

48- *Izvestia*, February 18, 1991.

day that it rejected the American ultimatum. When the US offensive was subsequently launched, the Soviet Union issued a critical statement, asserting that the US had lost a “very real chance for peace.”⁴⁹

Overall, the Gulf crisis of 1990 demonstrated the dramatic reversal that had taken place in the regional policy of the Soviet Union. The GCC states were grateful to the Soviet state for its support of Kuwait. Possibly as a direct result, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait granted a combined preferential loan of \$2 billion to the Soviet government, with the Saudi loan estimated at \$759 million. In October 1991, King Fahad declared that the Kingdom was ready to study a Soviet request for a new loan of \$1 billion needed to implement reforms in economic and social fields which had been planned at the time of “perestroika.”⁵⁰

Another direct consequence was the agreement signed on September 17, 1990 between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union to exchange diplomatic representation on an ambassadorial level. Thus, diplomatic relations between two countries were re-established, marking the end of long, mutually suspicious and active confrontation in the sphere of international and regional relations. In 1989, Soviet troops were recalled from Afghanistan, thereby liquidating the main obstacle to reestablishing relations between the Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Saudi Arabia acted as mediator in the negotiations between representatives of the Soviet Union and the Taliban movement, which took place on Saudi territory. In a common statement made in connection

49- *Pravda*, February 25, 1991.

50- Brutents K., *op. cit.*, 439.

with the re-establishment of bilateral relations and the exchange of embassies, the two sides confirmed that they would develop “bilateral friendly relations in favor of the common will of both countries peoples.” The two sides further confirmed their readiness “to build their relations on the basis of the UN principles of equality and mutual respect of sovereignty, regional security and non-interference in the internal affairs of both countries.”⁵¹ The two countries also expressed their willingness to coordinate their actions in the sphere of regional conflict resolution, development of international cooperation and strengthening of peace and international security.

It can be said that Soviet policy in the time of the Gulf crisis was characterized by two different tendencies. On the one hand, the Soviet Union had prepared on the ground for a further amelioration of Soviet relations with the GCC states via its support for Kuwait. On the other, Soviet willingness to defend Iraqi interests in the region and preserve the strong relations between the two states confirmed lingering suspicions by member of the GCC States over Soviet attitudes and intentions.

In essence, conflict situations in the region were always a source for the intensification of Soviet involvement in the region’s affairs. Just as in the Iran-Iraq war, the Soviet Union was determined to maintain relations with both sides to the dispute so to enhance its credibility as a possible mediator and to extend its influence in the region.

51- *Izvestia*, September 19, 1990.

The Strategy of the Russian Federation in the Gulf Region

After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, the Russian Federation as its successor was less active in the Gulf region. As a result of no longer having a common land border, the region had lost some of its significance in Russian strategic interests. During the initial stages, when Russian strategic interests were not defined, the Russian leadership decided that it was not the time to compete with the US and European countries, which could better guarantee regional security and which had significant economic and political interests in the region. At the same time, the Russian Federation, like the Soviet Union, continued to consider that the stability and security of the Gulf region was an important factor influencing the situation in Central Asia and the Caucasus, both of which were traditional spheres of Russian interests and influence.

Russian strategy in the Gulf region thus became connected to the overall general goals of Russian foreign policy and its position in the global system. With Russia having lost its status as a superpower, its regional policy became determined to some degree by decisions taken by other powers and the world community. In the early years of the Russian Federation as a new, independent and democratic state, Russian leaders were mainly of a neo-liberal and occidental orientation. Russia wanted to join the “civilized world” and in its regional policy it rejected its Soviet heritage. In the Gulf region, the Russian leadership sought to establish good relations with countries that qualified as conservative and pro-Western during the Soviet period. Russia also expected to receive generous economic assistance from the US and

European countries and thus tried to avoid any confrontational approach with Western states in the Gulf.

In 1996, Boris Yeltsin was elected President of Russia for the second time. Russia's policy of dependence on the West was criticized by the opposition and by different circles in Russian society. During this period, Russian foreign policy in the Gulf region turned away from its initial Euro-Atlantic direction toward a more independent orientation. In January 1996, Yevgeny Primakov, who supported the diversification of Russian foreign policy and a more active Russian role in the East, became the country's Foreign Minister. At this time, Russia attempted to re-evaluate its ties with traditional partners in the Gulf region and create a partner relationship with all the GCC members. New approaches to Russian regional policy included an Islamic element, which would play a significant role as an important facet of Russia's complex civilization base - more than 20 million Russian citizens are Muslims.

Furthermore, the concept of pragmatism emerged as a feature. According to the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation signed by the President Putin on June 28, 2000, Russian policy is independent, constructive and based on mutual pragmatism. As such, the economic interests of the country have priority.⁵² In this framework, the Gulf region is considered a part of the Middle East. Russia's goals in the region were articulated as follows: "Russia will act to stabilize the situation in the Middle East, including the Gulf region and North Africa, taking into consideration the influence of

52- *Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russia Federation) in Diplomaticheskii vestnik, August 2000, 4.*

regional situation on the development of the world as a whole. In this context, the primary task of Russia will be the return of its strong positions, especially economic, in this rich region that is important to our interests.”⁵³ To implement this task, Russia planned to enhance its economic relations with regional states.

Links with Iran became particularly important for Russia in this regard. In addition to being a leading state of the Gulf region, Iran also represented a link to Central Asia and the Caucasus, where both sides have common geo-strategic and economic interests. In this respect, Iran was considered as Russia’s strategic ally mainly because of its compromising policy toward the Central Asian states and the Caucasus. Moreover, due to the fact that Iran continued to be subject to economic sanctions as a result of the US characterization of it as a sponsor of international terrorism, isolation from the Western countries encouraged the development of relationship between Russia and Iran. For Russia, it was a good chance to reinforce its weak positions in the Gulf region and to receive economic and financial benefits. Iran also became a major customer of the Russian arms industry. While the Iranian military was equipped with US weaponry before the 1979 revolution, it shifted to Russian-designed weapons from North Korea and China during the 1980-88 war between Iran and Iraq. Between 1989 and 1991, Russia and Iran signed four contracts, according to which 24 advanced aircraft Su-29, 12 Su-24 MK, and tanks were purchased directly from Russia.

53- Ibid, 14.

Russia also gave technical assistance in the production of 1,000 T-72 C and 1500 BMP-2 tanks.⁵⁴

Under US pressure, Moscow and Washington concluded an agreement in 1995, signed by former US Vice-President Al Gore and former Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin, under which Russia was obliged to refrain from signing any new military agreement with Iran. Russian experts estimated that Russia lost about \$4 billion because of canceled contracts and the inability to conclude further deals.⁵⁵ In late 2000, Russia stated that it no longer felt bound by the terms of the 1995 deal and subsequently engaged in enhancing Iran's naval capability, providing three kilo-class diesel submarines and agreeing to have four Mi-8 AMT (Mi-171) transport/attack helicopters placed on order.⁵⁶ In 2001, a military and technical agreement worth almost \$300 million was also negotiated.⁵⁷ Russian officials largely ignored the negative reactions of the US to the re-evaluation of military and technical cooperation between Russia and Iran. As former Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov stated, "nobody can speak with Russia the language of ultimatum and sanctions."⁵⁸ For Russia, economic relations with Iran were considered of primary importance. During the official visit of Iranian President Mohammed Khatami to Moscow in March 2001, new projects concerning the development of energy resources, aircraft production and other fields were negotiated. This was in addition to the ongoing contract concerning the construction of a nuclear power plant at Bushehr with the two

54- Ibid.

55- *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 19, 2000.

56- *The Military Balance 2000-2001* (London: 2000), 129.

57- *Middle East Economic Digest* (MEED), March 2, 2001, 20.

58- *Persia*, (Moscow), No. 1 (4), 2001, 17.

sides actively engaging in the development of a strategic program of cooperation in the field of using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Russia has consistently deflected allegations that it is assisting Iran's program for the development weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and stressed that its dealings with Tehran had neither run afoul of the International Atomic Energy Agency and its inspectors nor had they violated the spirit of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and were thus legitimate.

Russian-Iraqi relations during the 1990s

Russian strategic interests in the Gulf region also continued to be connected to the Soviet Union's traditional ally, Iraq. When Iraq was under UN Security Council sanctions, Russia exerted numerous efforts to try and ameliorate the situation. Despite such efforts, however, Russia could only stress that Iraq should comply fully with all relevant US resolutions.

All of the members of the Security Council - Russia included - considered arms control to be central to the Iraqi issue, although in 1998 Russia blamed the US and the UK for the failures of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) charged with investigating Iraq's chemical and biological capabilities. The Russian representative at the UN at that time, Sergey Lavrov, stressed that: "The blame for that [the failure of UNSCOM] lies with the force used by the United States and Great Britain against Baghdad. That action was provoked by the tendentious report of the former Special Commission on the lack of full cooperation by Iraq with the disarmament inspectors. At that time, many members of the

United Nations, including Russia, gave their principal assessment of that illegal action and advocated an essentially new approach to the Iraqi issue.”⁵⁹

This, however, did not refrain Russia from involvement in several other areas in Iraq. In addition to participating in a number of humanitarian assistance program beginning in 1996, Russian companies signed numerous contracts that by 1998 totaled \$241.8 million in value. Overall, Russia became Iraq’s leading trade partner, importing about 40 percent of Iraqi oil.⁶⁰ It was a determined strategy for Russia to play a significant role in the development of the Iraqi oil industry. Numerous Russian oil companies pursued business opportunities in Iraq, including UN-approved oil purchases and contracts for the development of untapped oil reserves. In 1997, a consortium of oil companies - LUKOIL, Mashimport and Zarubejneft - signed a contract for the exploration of oil fields in Western Kurna-2, whose oil reserves were estimated at about 1 billion tons.⁶¹ During the official visit of former Iraqi Vice-President Taha Yaseen Ramadan to Moscow in April 2001, Russia and Iraq signed an agreement articulating that Russia would rebuild Yusifiya, one of the largest heating and power stations in Iraq. Russia also sold industrial equipment and raw materials of low quality that it was unable to distribute in the open. Among the products sold to Iraq were cars, buses, motorcycles, tires, and building machinery.⁶² In light of such a relationship, it is

59- Security Council, S/PV 4094, 4084th Meeting, December 17, 1999, 4.

60- *Diplomaticeskij vestnik* (Moscow), № 4, April 1999, 21.

61- *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Moscow), March 26, 1997.

62- В. Мазырин, *Экономические причины и последствия иракского кризиса* (V. Mazyrin, *Economic background and consequences of Iraqi Crisis*) // Мелкумян Е. (отв. редактор), *Иракский кризис. Международный и*

understandable that former Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov stated that “ten years of sanctions brings not only suffering to Iraqi people, but damage to the Russian economy as well.”⁶³

A new stage in the Iraqi crisis was marked by the adoption in November 2002 of UN Security Council Resolution 1441, which Russia supported as a chance for a “politico-diplomatic settlement of the situation in Iraq.”⁶⁴ Overall, it remained the Russian opinion that a peaceful resolution would preserve Russian economic interests in Iraq. The result was that Russia was adamantly opposed to the military action plans of the USA. Along with France and Germany, Russia issued a memorandum in February 2003 that stated support for a peaceful settlement of the Iraqi crisis. During the same period, Russian political elites attempted to block military actions against Iraq by other means; for example, E. Primakov, a famous politician of the Soviet era who had good contacts with Iraqi leadership, was sent to Saddam Hussein to persuade him to resign and save his country from the war.

The commencement of military action against Iraq on March 20, 2003 provoked a strong Russian response. President Vladimir Putin declared that “Russia will not permit a situation where the international right will be changed by the right of ‘the strong hand.’”⁶⁵ Russia continued to insist on

региональный контекст, (Melkumyan E. (Ed.) *Crisis in Iraq. International and Regional Context*) (Moscow: 2003), 134.

63- *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Moscow), April 19, 2001.

64- Answers of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs I. Ivanov to questions of Russian Mass Media concerning the adaptation of the UN Security Council resolution 1441. November 9, 2003, <http://www.In.mid.ru/>

65- Declaration of V. Putin, President of the Russian Federation. Moscow, Kremlin, March 20, 2003, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru/>

a political settlement within the framework of the UN. Following the fall of Baghdad, Russian officials insisted that the war in Iraq had aggravated rather than resolved the situation in the country. In his interview with the *New York Times* in October 2003, Putin said that “from the beginning until now I consider that the war in Iraq was a mistake. In our view it threatened the disintegration of the state into several parts, a threat that still remains.” He indicated other dangerous consequences of the fall of previous regime, which, in his opinion, “struggled against fundamentalists... but now we are witnesses of the infiltration on the Iraqi territory members of a number of different terrorist organizations.”⁶⁶ At the same time, the Russian government let it be known that it was also ready to cooperate with the US in the post-war period. At the beginning of April 2003, Putin stressed that “Russia is not interested in the failure of American actions.”⁶⁷

The Russian Position on Iraqi Reconstruction

After the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Russia’s main concern was the defense of its economic interests in Iraq. During a meeting with the head of Iraqi Interim Governing Council Abdel Aziz Al-Hakim in December 2003, President Putin stressed that “Russian companies are ready to work in Iraq” and that the “total amount of investments from the side of Russian companies may soon reach \$4 billion.”⁶⁸ Russian private companies received contracts in Iraq through regional administrations, like the government of Kurdistan, or

66- *Diplomaticheskii vestnik* (Moscow), № 11, 2003, 14.

67- Declaration of V. Putin during his meeting with journalists in the town of Tambov, April 2, 2003, <http://www.kremlin.ru/>

68- *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Moscow), December 23, 2003.

governments of big cities. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivanov declared that “as soon as favorable conditions concerning the restoration of sovereignty, security, and political settlement are created, our companies will be ready to participate more actively in the economic rehabilitation of Iraq.”⁶⁹

Russia’s role in Iraqi reconstruction mainly revolved around its participation in UN activities. Russia voted in favor of the UN Security Council resolution 1483, which was adopted on May 22, 2003 and granted wide interim governance powers and control over the collection and disbursement of Iraqi oil revenue to the US and its coalition partners and conferred upon them the status of an occupying power. During meetings in Paris, the Russian, French and German foreign ministers, whose countries had led the opposition to the war, announced that they would support the US postwar plans despite reservations about what they viewed as limited UN involvement in shaping the country’s political and economic future.⁷⁰

More than anything, Russia wanted to avoid any increase in tensions with the US. Following September 11, 2001, the US’s fight against international terrorism and Russia’s fight against terrorism in Chechnya became a base for the development of their relations. This became clear after a meeting between Presidents Putin and Bush at Camp David in September 2003. In a press conference, President Putin declared: “We had different approaches to the settlement of

69- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, February 13, 2004.

70- *Washington Post*, May 22, 2003.

the Iraqi problem, but we had mutual understanding that this problem existed. What is more important is the fact that the fundamental interests of two countries are very strong.”⁷¹ The Russian President also stressed that it was not in the interests of his country to diminish the significance and role of the United States, stating that “we should be realists and we should recognize that the USA took a huge responsibility and that they had big financial costs and human losses.” He added that the international forces, which must be created to replace the occupation forces, may be welcomed by the Americans.⁷²

In the transitional period, while Iraqi state structures were being created, Russia considered it necessary to develop a new strategy that would enable the international community, particularly the UN, to actively join in Iraqi reconstruction efforts. Russia appealed to Iraq’s neighbors to contribute to the strengthening of security in Iraq and to intensify the search for a political resolution of the situation in the country. Russia supported UN Security Council Resolution 1546, which called for the formulation of a unified federal democratic state in Iraq, in which the legitimate rights of all ethnic and confessional groups would be guaranteed. The resolution further demanded preparation of the new constitution of Iraq and democratic elections. Russia was also one of the participants in an international meeting on Iraq held in Sharm El Sheikh on November 23-24, 2004, in which the League of Arab States, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Iraq’s neighboring states, the G8 states and China participated. Overall, the Russian approach was based on the

71- *Diplomaticheskij vestnik* (Moscow), № 10, 2003, 52.

72- Interview by Vladimir V. Putin, President of the Russian Federation to the New York Times, *Diplomaticheskij vestnik* (Moscow), № 11, 2003, 15.

belief that for the process of political settlement in Iraq to continue successfully in accordance with the decisions of the UN Security Council, additional steps were required of the world community, primarily with the aim of helping the Iraqis foster an intra-Iraqi dialogue and move forward towards national reconciliation.

Russia was eager to maintain its significant role in the economic development of Iraq and receive opportunities in the process of restoring the Iraqi economy and industry. To this end, President Putin linked the issue of Iraqi debts with the development of economic cooperation agreements. In his meeting with the Prime Minister of the Iraqi Interim Government Iyad Allawi, on December 8, 2004, Putin stressed that “We supported the decision of the Paris Club and made the decision to write off a significant part of Iraq’s debts to the Russian Federation. Over 90 percent of debts will be written off. We are doing this from a feeling of solidarity with friendly Iraqi people. At the same time, we hope that the interests of our companies in the restoration process will be taken into account by your government and the future government of Iraq after the elections of 30 January next year.”⁷³

Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov emphasized that the participation of states in Iraq’s economic programs should be considered on an equal, nondiscriminatory basis. He further insisted that Russia’s previously-concluded contracts be respected by the Iraqi authorities while including the possibility of considering new

73- <http://www.kremlin.ru>, December 8, 2004.

economic investment projects.⁷⁴ Lavrov stressed that “for Russia, which has always been linked with the Iraqi people over a long period of time by friendship and close cooperation, the situation in this country is not only a political case. Our public opinion, business community, a lot of Russian citizens who had worked in Iraq, everybody has a very emotional attitude towards Iraqi events. Russia will continue to do all it possibly can to help stabilization and reconciliation in Iraq.”⁷⁵

The development of political relations between post-Soviet Russia and Iraq can be viewed as an example of the transformation of Russia’s foreign policy due to the shifts having occurred within the world community. Concerning Russia’s strategy in the Gulf region, Iraq will continue to be one of Russia’s main partners, though the Russian position in Iraq will be much weaker than that of the Soviet Union. This will likely influence the course of the relationship between Russia and the GCC states.

Russian policy towards the GCC countries in the 1990s

At the beginning of 1990s, Russia was eager to broaden its relations with the Arab and Muslim states in general and with the countries of the Gulf region in particular, but found itself unable to significantly improve ties. Russia’s new leaders

74- Transcript of Replies by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Sergey Lavrov to Questions from Channel One of Russian Television on the Outcome of the International Meeting on Iraq, Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, November 23, 2004, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, November 27, 2004.

75- Ibid.

were not able to change the GCC States' suspicious attitudes towards Russian policy in the region. In their eyes, Russia still remained Iraq's close ally and Russian attempts to defend Iraq under most circumstances only confirmed such suspicions. Russia, however, was interested in the expansion of its commercial, economic and financial relations with the GCC countries. With the obvious need to earn vitally important hard currency, Russia was ready to sell weapons and military technologies to the Gulf States, although this was an area where Russia found it difficult to compete with the Western states.

In 1992, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev visited all of the GCC countries. It was the first such official visit and was recognition of Russian willingness to develop full-fledged relations with this group of countries. The Director of Information and Press Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Yastrjembksi stated that "We consider that the visit of our Minister to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman was very significant. It reflected Russia's plans to implement a more balanced policy towards the states of that region and develop relations with these countries for the benefit of their peoples and contribute a lot into the development of world civilization and in maintaining stability and security in the Gulf region, because their policy has always been moderate and reasonable." He added that "it was the first step by Russian diplomacy in this very important region aimed at international stability. Russia has started its cooperation with these Arab states from a blank page." He indicated that there were possibilities to cooperate in military and economic matters, stressing that "Russia is ready to make its contribution into maintaining regional security on the

bilateral or multilateral basis, using the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for this purpose.”⁷⁶

It was the first time that Russian leaders expressed interest in this regional organization. Since Russia, however, saw its relations with the US as being of utmost importance, Russian officials underlined their understanding of “the special role of the USA in the Gulf region.” In discussions between Kozyrev and leaders of the GCC states, it was made clear that Russia was going to act as a partner of the US because “only with mutual efforts can we create a reliable system of regional security.”⁷⁷ This declaration confirmed the desire of the Russian establishment to reject a policy aimed at supporting any forces that could destabilize the regional situation. S. Yastrjembki confirmed that “Russia and the Gulf states share the mutual understanding of such issues as Afghanistan, the Middle East conflict settlement, and overcoming the consequences of the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait.”

In August 1993 and for the first time in the history of Russia, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs met with the members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) mission, headed by H. Al Gabid, during a visit to Russia. While the main subject of discussions was the issue of settlement in Bosnia, the final statement confirmed the importance of cooperation between Russia and this representative international organization of Islamic states. Russia indicated that it was ready to increase its cooperation with the OIC in matters of mutual interest, including issues of conflict resolution. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs

76- *Diplomaticeskij Vestnik*, No. 9-10, May 15-31, 1992, 18.

77- *Diplomaticeskij Vestnik*, No. 6, May 31, 1992, 29.

also stressed that Russia highly appreciated the efforts of the OIC to resolve conflict situations using diplomatic measures.⁷⁸

In November 1994, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin visited the GCC states, marking the first visit of a Russian Prime Minister to the region. During the visit, Chernomyrdin met with the heads of the GCC States and the two sides discussed international problems of mutual interest, including the peace process in the Middle East, the post-conflict situation in the Gulf region and the regime of international sanctions applied on Iraq. Chernomyrdin also discussed different aspects of bilateral relations, emphasizing the necessity to develop relations in different fields, especially in the economy.⁷⁹

During the visit, Russia and Saudi Arabia signed the General Russian-Saudi Agreement, providing for cooperation between the two states in the fields of economy, trade, investments, culture and sports. The agreement provided that the two countries were to grant each other ‘Most Favored Nation’ treatment and create a common Saudi-Russian intergovernmental commission on trade, economic, scientific and technical cooperation. At the same time, Russia and Kuwait created intergovernmental commission concerning the mutual endowment of investments and cooperation in the field of information; they also signed a protocol of consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and an operating plan for cultural cooperation. Russia and Sultanate of Oman also signed an agreement aimed at

78- *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, No. 17-18, September 1993, 29-30.

79- *Diplomaticheskij Vestnik*, No. 23-24, December 1994, 9-10.

increasing their cooperation in the fields of economy, trade and technology.⁸⁰

The most significant achievement during this period was the commencement of military cooperation between the two sides. The defense agreement between Russia and Kuwait, signed in August 1993, provided that Russia would deliver sophisticated weapons to Kuwait and provide possibilities for Kuwaiti officers to study in Russian military academies and participate in joint maneuvers. At the end of December 1993 and beginning of 1994, the Russian Armed Forces undertook a 12-day joint exercise with the Kuwaiti forces.⁸¹ During the same period, Russia delivered to Kuwait a Russian S-300V (SA-12 Gladiator Giant) ITBM system.⁸² Later, this agreement was frozen due to Russia's weak financial capabilities in the first half of the 1990s and Kuwaiti apathy towards its further implementation.

Despite its failures, Russia continued to consider the Gulf region as a potential market for its military sales. Moreover, Russian leaders considered that the development of military cooperation between Russia and the GCC states should include Saudi Arabia. Russian researchers indicated that there was a possibility to establish direct relations between Aviaprom, a Russian state company responsible for exports of military aircrafts, and the Saudi military, to whom it could sell Russian fighting helicopters and other Russian military

80- Ibid.

81- *Defense and Foreign Affairs Handbook* (London, 1996), 715.

82- Ibid.

machinery.⁸³ Researchers also predicted a Saudi interest in Russian missiles and naval weapons and that Russia could take part in building a military infrastructure on Saudi territory. Besides Kuwait, however, only the United Arab Emirates developed contacts with Russia and purchased Russian weapons, ordering 187 Russian BMP-3 to equip three battalions.⁸⁴ Thus, the ultimate impact of Russian military sales remained limited. By 1995, arms sales to the region had dropped to \$2.6 billion.⁸⁵

An article published in the magazine of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs *Mejdunarodnaia Jizn (International Life)* indicated that the number of meetings between Russian representatives and official delegations in the framework of contacts with the Gulf countries had increased substantially from 1992 to 1994. The Russian representatives who participated in these meetings were high-level functionaries, thereby confirming the significance of these meetings for the Russian side.⁸⁶ The GCC states, however, were not important for Russia because of their economic potential; equally relevant was the common interests of the two sides in maintaining regional security. Given the fact that the new republics to Russia's south were composed of mostly Muslim communities, the Russian leadership believed that states like

83- *Россия и арабские страны: проблемы и перспективы сотрудничества (Russia and Arab countries: issues and prospective of cooperation)* (Moscow, 1994), 29-40.

84- *Defense and Foreign Affairs Handbook* (London, 1996), 1294.

85- Roger E. Kenet, A.V. Kozhemiakin and Suzanne M. Birgerson, *The Third World in Russian Foreign Policy*// R.E. Kenet and A.V. Kozhemiakin, *The Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* (London, 1997), 171-172.

86- А. Касаткин, "Станет ли Ближний Восток российским приоритетом?" (А. Kasatkin, "If the Middle East will be the priority of Russia?"), in *Mejdunarodnaya Jizn*, No. 9 (1994), 69-72.

Saudi Arabia and its partners could help in defusing extremist trends in their policy and stabilize the situation in that region. This belief further encouraged Russia to develop its relations with the moderate Arab regimes of the Gulf region.

As such, the expansion of military cooperation between Russia and Saudi Arabia coincided with the changes in the conceptual approaches of the GCC members to the issue of regional security. Following the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis, the GCC states decided that the world community had a responsibility towards the security of the region due to its importance to the stability of the world economy. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia felt it had obligations to participate in maintaining Gulf security. At the same time, however, Russia did not make determined efforts to develop its relationship with Qatar, Bahrain and Oman.

The Impact of the Muslim factor

The activities of the GCC states in the Muslim areas of Russia had always presented a challenge to the Russian federal authorities. The first half of the 1990s marked the initial stages of Russian national state formation, during which Russian leaders attempted to understand the role of the Muslim community. They took into consideration that about 15 percent of the Russian population - about 20 million people – was Muslim.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, starting from the late 1980s, Saudi Arabia assisted the Muslim population of Russia in reviving Muslim traditions and creating a Muslim education system. Muslims from Russia also began receiving

87- <http://www.president.kremlin.ru>, May 13, 2003.

Saudi stipends for education, for example, in the Islamic University of the Imam Muhammad Bin Saud in Riyadh. Dozens of Saudi philanthropic funds became active all over Russia, not only in areas with Muslim population but also in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other big cities. The activities grew to such an extent that a special Muslim department was created in the Saudi embassy in Moscow to coordinate the activities of the different Islamic organizations in Russia. These organizations distributed countless copies of the Holy Koran and other religious literature, helped organize the Hajj to the Holy sites in Saudi Arabia, and took part in the building and reconstruction of mosques.

The process of Islamic renaissance in Russia was accompanied by the creation of Islamic parties and organizations considered by the Russian authorities as a threat to the stability of the Russian society. In addition, such organizations began to compete with the traditional Islamic institutions that had existed since the Soviet period. Alexei Malashenko, a researcher at the Moscow office of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace specializing in Islamic affairs, indicated that “the creation of the Islamic Renaissance Party became an example of the independent role of Islam in Russian society,” adding that “the main critic of its activity was not from the side of official structures, but from the side of the Muslim authorities who were afraid to lose their own prestige.”⁸⁸

Philanthropic funds from the Gulf countries - primarily from Saudi Arabia, but also from Kuwait and the UAE -

88- А. Малашенко, *Исламское возрождение в России* (A. Malashenko, *Islamic renaissance in Russia*), (Moscow, 1998), 136.

supported various activities inside Russian Muslim communities without understanding the actual situation on the ground. What was not taken into consideration was that the Muslim population of Russia had been isolated from the Muslim world for many years and had thus discarded certain Islamic norms and values. At the same time, the financial assistance from organizations of the Gulf also contributed to fighting among different political groups. Orthodox Church religious leaders expressed their opposition by categorizing Islam as the main threat to Russia. In the *Radonej* magazine, which supports a leading role of the Orthodox religion in Russian social and political life, it was noted that “Islam has become a more powerful force of the 21st century and is expanding to the North, to Russia. It is possible to stop this expansion only if it is opposed by a more powerful and more pure spiritual essence – the Orthodoxy. It is possible to save Russia if its elite will recognize the necessity to return to the eternal spiritual values of the Orthodoxy.”⁸⁹

Russian researcher Konstantin Poliakov justified his criticism of Saudi funding by explaining that “the practice of Islamic philanthropic funds from Saudi Arabia in the first half of 1990s led to a lot of problems. They did not understand the realities of Russia; they trusted dishonest people ‘connected with Islam.’ Many facts confirmed that large amounts of money received from the Saudi funds were used by these ‘Islamic activists’ for their personal prosperity.”⁹⁰ Poliakov

89- *Radonej*, No. 11, January 5, 2003.

90- К. Поляков, *Исламская составляющая процесса формирования Российско-Саудовских отношений в 90-е годы XX века* (K. Poliakov, *Islamic element of process of creation Russian-Saudi relations in 90-s of XX century*) // Король-реформатор, *Видение Российской интеллигенции* (King-reformer, *View of Russian intellectuals*) (Moscow, 2002), 60.

came to the conclusion that the GCC countries' activities in the Islamic sphere in the 1990s and "the practical realization of Islamic principles on the Russian track of foreign policy in the 1990s began to create problems in their relationships with our country [Russia]." ⁹¹ In the complex political situation in the Muslim regions of Russia, local authorities considered the support of the Islamic renaissance movement by foreign organizations as interference in Russia's internal affairs. Support for Islam was thus considered as an activity aimed at the disintegration of the Russian state.

The Role of the Chechen Issue

The contacts between Russia and the GCC states were further influenced by positions taken by the two sides towards the conflict in Chechnya. A number of Russian politicians and journalists accused Saudi Arabia of recognizing Chechnya as an independent state when its first President J. Dudaev proclaimed it as such in 1991. Although there was no official confirmation of this fact, a negative attitude towards Saudi Arabia in Russian society nevertheless developed. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's provision of humanitarian aid to the population of Chechnya and to Chechen refugees in camps in the neighboring republics did little to allay suspicions.

In July 1995, the Saudi government called on Russia "not to use force against the Chechen Republic," and appealed to the UN to interfere in this conflict. ⁹² Before this occurred, the President of Azerbaijan initiated a discussion of the Chechen problem during a session of the 7th summit of the OIC in

91- Ibid, 58.

92- A. Malashenko, *op. cit.*, 183.

December 1994 with the support of the representative of Saudi Arabia. The Secretary-General of the OIC Al Gabid called on Russian President Boris Yeltsin and the Chechen President Dudaev to resolve the conflict by peaceful means. In the statement, the members of the organization declared that “Muslims of the entire world were following with great anxiety the development of the situation in Chechnya” and the OIC requested the international community “to assist in reaching a peaceful resolution of Chechen problem.”⁹³ However, at the same conference session, participants rejected a request by the Chechen President to admit his country as a member of the OIC. The Russian authorities considered the OIC approach to the Chechen problem as interference in Russian internal affairs and a challenge to Russian territorial integrity. For Russia, Saudi Arabia, as a leader of Muslim community, was responsible for the active participation of the OIC in the conflict between Russia and Chechnya.

In 1995, when the first Russian military operation in the territory of Chechnya was underway, the Saudi government took measures aimed at providing humanitarian aid to the Chechen population. At the same time, King Fahad Bin Abdulaziz ordered the establishment of the King Fahad Program for Chechen Relief, funded by the personal donations of King Fahad and headed by Prince Abdulaziz Bin Fahad Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. During 1995-1997, representatives of the program, which was headquartered in Moscow, provided direct, uncontrolled aid to the refugees and victims of military action.

93- The OIC Declaration, December 29, 1995, <http://www.oic-oci.com/>

Beginning in 1998, the aid for Chechnya was provided by the United Saudi Committee for the Relief of Kosovo and Chechnya, created by special order of King Fahd and headed by Prince Naif Bin Abdulaziz. The Committee acted on the basis of a protocol signed between it and the Ministry of Extraordinary Situations of the Russian Federation, according to which the Saudis could open their representative office in Vladikavkaz (capital of Northern Ossetia). The Saudis had been the initiators of this protocol and were ready to follow its conditions, which included control by Russian authorized organizations of the scope of humanitarian deliveries from Saudi Arabia.

In midst of September 2000, the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta (Independent Newspaper)* reported that in September 1999, Saudi Arabia started helping the refugees in Ingushetia. It was noted that for this purpose, a special Russian-Saudi Commission for the aid to the victims was created and the agreement with the Ministry of Extraordinary Situations was concluded. The Saudis provided the population with medicine, food and necessary equipment. According to newspaper's estimates, the total amount of the aid reached \$1.6 million; the second stage of the aid, which would come from the territory of Northern Ossetia, would require \$14 million.⁹⁴ The aim of this publication was to persuade Russian public opinion of the official character of Saudi actions in North Caucasus. However, some Russian newspapers took a different spin on the Saudi activity. For example, *Izvestia*, a moderate newspaper, wrote that "the [Saudi] kingdom is a native place of Wahhabism, which has brought a lot of problems to the Muslim republics of the Russian Federation."

94- *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 15, 2000.

The article further asserted that these types of official Saudi organizations would be unable to stop the activities of other Saudi-funded foundations, which were financing the activity of Shamil Basayev, one of Chechenyan rebel commanders, and his supporters.⁹⁵ *Zavtra (Tomorrow)*, the newspaper of the Russian nationalist opposition movement, blamed Saudi Arabia for destabilizing the situation in Northern Caucasus, where “the key role is played by Wahhabism, which is the official ideology of Saudi Arabia. In the Caucasus, the expansionist activities of rebel groups are financed, coordinated and regulated using the budget grants by the Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia.”⁹⁶ Such points of view were very popular among different political and social groups in Russian society. The image of the Gulf countries formulated by the Russian mass media thus did not encourage the development of relations between the two sides.

After the agreements between Russia and the President of Chechnya in 1996 ending the first war, the GCC states’ policies towards the Chechen Republic, which now assumed an independent status from the central government, remained contradictory. On one hand, the GCC states did not officially recognize Chechnya as an independent state. On the other, the new president of Chechnya, A. Maskhadov, visited Saudi Arabia three times between 1997 and 1999. During his first visit to the Saudi Kingdom, Maskhadov requested the recognition of his country as a member of the World Muslim League, a request that was rejected. In March 1998, during his second visit time, he met with the Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz. This was followed by a third visit in March 1999

95- Izvestia, September 3, 2003.

96- *Zavtra*, February 4, 2004.

as a personal guest of King Fahad. Despite these visits, Chechnya did not receive political support from Saudi Arabia or its partners of the GCC. As Russian researcher Murad Radjbadinov indicated: “In the beginning of 1999 it was evident that the hopes for official international legalization in Arab region did not come true. The reasoning behind it was linked with the desire of Arab states not to damage their relationships with Moscow.”⁹⁷

While the official positions of the GCC states remained moderate, Islamic circles became more aggressive, calling the Chechen conflict “a war against Muslims.” Such reactions were transmitted by the Russian mass media and, as a result, influenced the Russian public opinion on relations with the GCC. The Russian central newspaper *Izvestia*, for example, wrote that “from the point of view of Saudi public opinion, Russia is a country whose army is killing Muslims in Chechnya” and “the local political elite should take into consideration this opinion.”⁹⁸

There is no doubt that the war in Chechnya, which started in December 1994, presented a major challenge to the Russian administration as it attempted to preserve what it considered to be its vital interests. Support of the rebel groups described as ‘Wahhabi’ in Chechnya and Northern Caucasus from the GCC members caused a significant decline in the public perceptions of the relations between Russia and these countries. According to reports by the Russian press and

97- М.З. Раджабадинов, *Некоторые аспекты российско-саудовских отношений* (M.Z. Radjbadinov, *Some aspects of Russian-Saudi relations*) // Российско-саудовские отношения: проблемы и перспективы (Moscow, 2003, 8-9).

98- *Izvestia*, September 3, 2003; *Vesty*, No. 5 (2004), 82.

analytical materials of Russian scholars, there was no denying an Arab influence in the development of radical Islam in the Caucasus.

Relations took a greater turn for the worse when Chechen rebel leader Yandarbiev was killed in Qatar in February 2004. Yandarbiev had been a candidate in the presidential elections in 1997, in which he received 10 percent of the vote.⁹⁹ He was sent to the Arab countries to gather financial support to the Chechen insurgents and declared that the solution of the Chechen question was to be found in the Arab world.¹⁰⁰ Two Russian citizens, representatives of Russia's intelligence services, were arrested and jailed in connection with the assassination. In reaction to the judgment, which was announced on July 30, 2004 by the Qatari court, the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation issued a statement in which he denied the guilt of Russian citizens and declared that "the Russian side was continuing its active efforts using political and diplomatic channels to defend the rights of its citizens and their return to their native country."¹⁰¹

This case was widely discussed in the Russian and Qatari press and prompted an official representative of Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs to criticize the situation in Chechnya. In response, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a declaration which stated that "the appeal to stop military actions in Chechnya, where the fight against bandits and terrorists is coming to the end, has been met with

99- *Vesty*, No. 5 (2004), 82.

100- *Ibid.*

101- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, December 19, 2004.

astonishment. The realization of this request may encourage the international terrorists and will prevent their ultimate liquidation.”¹⁰² Though Qatar handed over to Moscow the two jailed Russians, the sharp escalation of words also confirmed the sensitivity of the issue of Chechnya in terms of the Russia-GCC relations.

While the Gulf image in the Russian press was not overly positive, the Russian image within the GCC did not improve either. One of the main reasons is that the Gulf region became a transit point for Russian organized crime in the region after the end of the Cold War, which to an imagined degree still exists and continues to negatively influence the development of relations between the Russian Federation and the GCC states. The United Arab Emirates, in particular, emerged as a major center for criminal activities of Russian criminal groups. As a regional transportation, banking and commercial crossroads between Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Asia, the UAE, with its permissive business environment, became an important focus of criminal activities. The UAE maintains an advanced maritime shipping infrastructure, including many commercial seaports. More than 70 percent of the containers arriving in UAE ports are in transit and are not inspected by customs officials, making them an attractive shipping option for the criminal trafficking of commodities through the region. There have been suggestions that there is an extensive smuggling operation going on through the Dubai ports, where more than half of the containers shipped to and through the UAE arrive. Dubai is said to be an important transit point for precursor chemicals required for the production of heroin in Afghanistan and

102- Ibid.

Pakistan and is becoming a more important transit avenue for drug shipments from Southwest Asia to Turkey, Europe and Africa. Russian criminal groups also participate in such drug transit. According to Russian press reports, in 2004, three Russian citizens were arrested in Dubai for smuggling heroin.¹⁰³ Furthermore, Dubai has also become a major center for financing illicit activities, in part because the preference of many businesses to deal in large amounts of cash makes it difficult for banks to distinguish between legitimate and illicit transactions. Organized crime groups from Russia and Russian-speaking groups from other former Soviet countries - particularly from Central Asia, Ukraine and Moldova - have established criminal and money-laundering network in Dubai. Russian criminal groups also organize the transit of Russian prostitutes to the Arab countries of the Gulf region. Such criminal activity may be consider an obstacle to the improvement of the image of Russia in the eyes of functionaries in the GCC countries who are responsible for making decisions concerning the development of relations with Russia.

New Trends in the Relations between Russia and the GCC States

The beginning of the 21st century marked a new approach to the relations between Russia and the GCC States. President Putin proposed to base the foreign policy of his country more on practical considerations and thus supported the development of relations with the GCC States. For Russia, it became important to resolve the issues causing tensions and to

103- <http://main.izvestia.ru>, December 18, 2004.

create a stable base from which political relations could be built upon. In November 2000, Putin sent his special representative, the Vice-Director of the Minister of Foreign Affairs V. Sredinin, with official letters to the leaders of Bahrain and Qatar. In the messages, he expressed his satisfaction with the close positions shared by the countries on key international or regional issues. He also confirmed the readiness of his country to make more effective use of the potential for cooperation between Russia and these states.¹⁰⁴ At the same period, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where he discussed with his colleagues issues of international and regional relations. Earlier, in May 2000, the Russian Foreign Ministry had expressed its high appreciation of the official position of the State of Kuwait that considered the Chechen problem as an internal Russian affair and thereby opposed any interference in it.¹⁰⁵

The implementation of the new Russian foreign policy towards the GCC states produced results, including regular meetings at the UN and the visit in November 2002 of GCC Secretary-General Al-Attiyah to Moscow to prepare a protocol on political dialogue between Russia and the GCC.¹⁰⁶ The most significant movement, however, was realized in the political relations between Russia and the Saudi Kingdom. While the improvement was gradual, as the Chechen issue and the Muslim factor had not completely disappeared, the leaders of two countries were ready to consider more radical

104- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, November 2, 2000.

105- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, December 19, 2004.

106- Agency RIA-Novosti, <http://www.rian.ru>, December 19, 2004.

changes in their bilateral relations. In this process, Russian-Saudi cooperation, including contacts in the economic sphere, also received the support from different groups in the political and economic circles of both countries.

At the end of January 2003, the Secretary-General of the OIC Belkaziz visited Moscow. Commenting on the discussions, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivanov indicated that “[he] informed the Secretary-General about the development of the situation in the Northern Caucasus and in Chechnya and about the efforts taken by Russian authority to stabilize the situation in this region. [They] discussed the possibility for support from the OIC to help [their] efforts to reconstruct the normal life in Chechnya, in the field of economy, health and education. [Russia] received understanding from the side of [its] guest.”¹⁰⁷ The post of the Vice-Director of the Minister of Relations with International Islamic Organizations was soon created. Days later, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs declared that “We are interested that our relations with Saudi Arabia develop in the atmosphere of mutual understanding and for the benefits of both sides,” adding that frank dialogue between the two sides could help in finding solutions to the problems as they appear.¹⁰⁸

On May 13, 2003, President Putin commented on the terrorist attacks that had taken place in Saudi Arabia, noting that “tragic events in Chechnya and Saudi Arabia may have

107- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, January 28, 2003.

108- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, January 25, 2003.

similar consequences.”¹⁰⁹ The dramatic changes in the attitude of the Russian leaders towards Saudi Arabia were confirmed by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who said that “in Saudi Arabia, some forces and groups which are naming themselves as funds and philanthropic organizations exist. They are illegally supporting the activity of extremist and terrorist organizations, including those on the territory of the Russian Federation. They are not official structures of Saudi Arabia, but non-governmental organizations,” adding that “We frankly informed our Saudi partners about it and we consider it in our mutual interests to block this activity in the framework of international fight against terrorism.”¹¹⁰

The Russian official position towards the activities of Saudi organizations, which were supporting attacks in Northern Caucasus, was also changing. In his reply to a question posed by a Russian journalist about the possible involvement of Saudi philanthropic funds in the bloody events of Beslan in September 2004, the Russian Foreign Minister stressed: “Saudi Arabia is in its turn a target of terrorists. We are cooperating with Saudi Arabia in the field of security and the fight against terrorism. They officially took the decision to ban any support of terrorist activity from their territory, including Chechenyan terrorists. We have no information that this position has changed.”¹¹¹

The rapprochement between Russia and Saudi Arabia may be also explained by new factors in the global and regional situation. In addition to voicing their support for the

109- <http://www.president.kremlin.ru>, May 13, 2003.

110- Ibid.

111- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, September 9, 2004.

international anti-terrorist campaign, both sides have similar positions concerning the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the development of the situation in Iraq. On February 18, 2003, the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal confirmed those common positions concerning Iraq during a visit to Russia, with both sides insisting on the peaceful resolution of the crisis in Iraq with the active participation of the UN Security Council and with the help of regional and international initiatives. The Saudi Minister named Russia as “an important and leading country in the framework of diplomatic efforts aimed at the resolution of the Iraqi crisis by diplomatic methods” and expressed his belief that “Russia will continue its efforts to prevent military actions in the region and peaceful resolution of the crisis.”¹¹²

At the same time, the Saudi and Russian leaders reached an understanding regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, especially in terms of the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation. On February 27, 2003, the Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov told his Saudi counterpart that the initiative of Crown Prince Abdullah adopted at the summit of the League of Arab States in February 2002 in Beirut received a positive assessment from the Russian leadership.¹¹³ In turn, the Saudi Minister expressed his high appreciation of the Russia’s role as a co-sponsor of the Middle East peace process. The two sides confirmed that they will coordinate steps aimed at the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and exchange their

112- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, <http://www.mofa.gov.sa>, February 18, 2003.

113- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, February 27, 2002.

points of view concerning the Saudi peace initiative and the development of the regional situation.¹¹⁴

A new stage in relations was marked by the official visit of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah to Moscow in September 2003. This was an extraordinary event because it marked only the second time in the history of Russian-Saudi relations that a high-level representative of the Saudi political establishment came to Moscow. In addition to the political significance of the visit, the two sides stressed their common positions concerning the fight against terrorism and issues of global and regional security. A joint Russian-Saudi declaration condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and expressed the readiness of the two countries to fight it in accordance with the UN Charter and international legitimacy using collective efforts.¹¹⁵ The two sides also agreed to create a bilateral working group responsible for all questions connected with the fight against international terrorism and for coordination of the two countries' efforts in this direction.

Neither Saudi Arabia nor Russia, however, was eager to create a new bloc to oppose the hegemonic tendencies in US policy. While US-Saudi tensions had increased markedly following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the Saudi Foreign Minister declared on September 12, 2003 that "it is not worth to look at the relationship with Russia as a cause of negative influence on the development of relations with other countries."¹¹⁶ Instead, Russia and Saudi Arabia considered the development of bilateral relations as an important part of their

114- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, February 27, 2002.

115- <http://www.president.kremlin.ru>, September 7, 2003.

116- <http://www.elaph.com>, September 14, 2003.

contribution to the process of the global transformation of world politics. In that context, Russian President Putin indicated in his meeting with Prince Abdullah on September 2, 2003 that “Saudi Arabia is a leading state in the Muslim and Arab world”¹¹⁷ and qualified it as “a partner, which is occupying a place very significant for us.”¹¹⁸ Such a statement can be seen as stressing the importance that Russia places on developing the relations with Saudi Arabia. Putin indicated that the relationship of close cooperation had always existed between the Soviet Union, with Russia as its successor, and Muslim and Arab world. The Saudi Crown Prince stressed “the historical role of Russia, which was the first country to recognize the new Saudi state.”¹¹⁹ The Saudi Foreign Minister tried to incorporate Saudi-Russian relations into the context of the Arab world, confirming the permanent positive character of Arab-Russian relations.¹²⁰ Despite the evident weaknesses of the argument, reflected in the low level of bilateral relations during the time of the Soviet Union, the two countries made frank attempts to reflect on their pragmatic interests and correct the negative consequences that the Cold War had on their relationship. This included putting an end to the period of “conflict interaction” connected with the Chechen issue. Crown Prince Abdullah stressed in his interview that “the problem of Chechnya is an internal affair of Russia.”¹²¹ This official Saudi declaration was highly appreciated by the Russian leadership, especially since Riyadh recognized Ahmad Kadyrov, the person supported by the Russian federal authority, as the legitimate president of

117- <http://www.president.kremlin.ru>, September 2, 2003.

118- Ibid.

119- <http://www.elaph.com> , September 2, 2003.

120- Ibid.

121- *Izvestia*, September 5, 2003.

Chechnya. In January 2004, Kadyrov was welcomed as an invited guest on a four-day visit to Saudi Arabia. Before his departure, Kadyrov indicated in an interview with an ITAR-TASS correspondent that his invitation by the Saudi Crown Prince “in essence, means Riyadh’s acknowledgement of the current institutions of the Chechenyan authorities after the constitution had been adopted and the president had been elected.” He called his visit “symbolic and above all, having political significance for Chechnya and Russia.”¹²²

The interests of the Russian political establishment for rapprochement with Saudi Arabia may also be explained by domestic factors, among which is the question of Russian admission to the OIC as observer status. Due to its complicated internal situation, there exists a need for close contacts between the political establishment of the country and the Muslim populations in order to provide stability and security. President Putin has stressed that “about 20 million of Muslims which inhabit in Russia have the right to be a part of the Muslim world.” He participated in the conference of the OIC in Malaysia in August 2003 and expressed the eagerness of Russia to be admitted into the organization, an eagerness that is naturally linked with the question of Chechen separatism. In that context, the absence of stability in Chechnya encouraged Russian authorities to look for other ways to resolve the Chechen problem through the establishment of direct links with leading Muslim organizations.

The Russian press also welcomed the development of contacts with Saudi Arabia. The Russian newspaper

122- *ITAR-TASS Agency*, January 14, 2004.

Sovetskaya Rossia (*Soviet Russia*) confirmed that “if the main reasons why the current regime in the Kremlin decided to establish good relations with Saudi Arabia were finance, oil and gas, all patriotic forces in our country should welcome the tendency to improve Russian-Saudi contacts.” It added that “if in Russia there are political forces which are interested in developing relations with numerous and dynamically developing Muslim world, we should begin to establish them now, without any attention to aggressive cries of the ‘Zionist lobby’ about a ‘green Islamic plague.’”¹²³

Russian and Saudi leaders also stressed their common interests in the oil sphere. In his interview to the Russian newspaper *Izvestia*, Prince Abdullah stated that “Saudi Arabia and Russia are the biggest oil-producing countries. This fact obliges us to cooperate and coordinate our activity on the world markets instead of competing. This is very important to maintain balance on the world market. We prefer to consider Russia as a partner, not a concurrent in the oil field and in other fields as well.”¹²⁴ Russia is expecting Saudi coordination in oil policy matters and has thus confirmed the necessity of permanent contacts, exchange of information, and the enhancement of the dialogue between state producers and consumers of hydrocarbons using the International Energy Forum (IEF). This structure was initiated by Saudi Arabia in order to intensify the cooperation between the members of OPEC and non-member oil-producing states, on the one hand, and importers of oil on the other hand. Russia does not belong to OPEC but at the same time is actively cooperating with the IEF.

123- *Sovetskaya Rossia* (Moscow), September 4, 2003.

124- *Izvestia*, September 5, 2003.

During the visit of Crown Prince Abdullah, the Saudi Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources Ali Al Nuaimi announced that the stability in the world oil market had been achieved, thereby confirming the significance of the Russian-Saudi agreement of cooperation in the field of oil and gas signed in Moscow.¹²⁵ The two sides signed an international five-year agreement of cooperation in the oil and gas sectors, providing for the establishment of a joint working group comprising representatives of the Russian Energy Ministry and the Saudi Oil Ministry. The agreement invited Saudi companies to participate in oil and gas projects in Russia and vice versa and further called for joint efforts between Russia and Saudi Arabia in other countries.¹²⁶ In addition to this, President Putin and Crown Prince Abdullah presided over the signing of several other documents, including a memorandum on cooperation between the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Saudi Center for Scientific and Technological Studies, a memorandum between the Russian State Sport Committee and the Saudi Ministry for Sports and Youth Affairs and a memorandum on cooperation between the two states' Chambers of Commerce and Industry.¹²⁷

In addition to such political moves, Saudi Arabia also created meaningful economic opportunities for Russian businesses. The visit of Crown Prince Abdullah confirmed the interests of the Saudi business community in establishing a relationship with Russia in the economic arena. In a fair organized in the Russian capital during the official visit of the Crown Prince, Saudi state-owned companies like the

125- *Al Sharq Al Awsat* (London), September 3, 2003.

126- Ibid.

127- *ITAR-TASS Agency* in English, September 2, 2003 in FBIS-SOV-2002-0902.

ARAMCO, the Saudi Arabian Basic Services Industries (SABIC) and famous banking funds like the Saudi Fund for Investment of Industrial Projects, were represented. Saudi private companies also participated in the fair, among them agricultural companies specializing in date production as well as textile and alimentary companies.

Moscow's initial expectations of \$46 billion in joint investment projects to develop the Russian economy¹²⁸ have proven to be unrealistic. However, in January 2004, the Russian oil company LUKOIL won a bidding contest for the development of several promising gas fields 29,900 square kilometers in size located in the northern part of Rub al-Khali desert.¹²⁹ Under the project, LUKOIL, Russia's largest oil producer, planned to set up a joint venture with Saudi ARAMCO. The 40-year contract between the joint venture and the government of Saudi Arabia was signed on March 17, 2004 and the first meeting of the board of directors of the new company under the name of LUKSAR took place in April 2004. Eighty percent of the venture is owned by LUKOIL and the rest owned by Saudi ARAMCO. The venture borrowed \$215 million from the Saudi Holland Bank to fund a five-year exploration program on the field. LUKSAR formed an 11-member board of directors, comprising eight LUKOIL officials, two Saudi ARAMCO officials and a Saudi government representative. The board also appointed a LUKOIL manager as general director of the venture. Saudi

128- Arabic news (online),September 10, 2003.

129- <http://www.mideast.ru>, November 28, 2004.

ARAMCO plans to buy gas from the field and build pipelines to ship the fuel to customers.¹³⁰

Until the beginning of 2000, Russian-Saudi economic links were concentrated in the field of commerce. The initiative of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry as well as the Saudi Association of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry helped establish new forms of economic cooperation. In September 2000, the Russian enterprise Rosoboronexport and the Saudi Institute for Space Research signed a protocol on scientific and technical cooperation, as a result of which in October 2000 two Saudi artificial satellites were launched into the cosmos with Russian technical assistance.¹³¹

In October 2002, negotiations between official delegations of Russia and Saudi Arabia in Moscow succeeded to coordinate their policy in oil and gas export. At the same time, the Russian company Stroitransgaz, specializing in the construction of pipelines and oil and gas infrastructure, signed a memorandum with the Saudi company Saudi Oje concerning the use of common potentials to calculate and implement prospective oil and gas projects in Saudi Arabia and other countries of the Middle East and North Africa.¹³² In October 2002, the first meeting of the joint Russian-Saudi Commission on trade, economic, scientific, technical and cultural cooperation took place in Moscow. It was created earlier in 1994 as a result of the General Russian-Saudi agreement, which coincided with the first meeting of the

130- Ibid.

131- Russian Federation, Ministry of Trade & Economy,
<http://www.economy.gov.ru>, October 28, 2000.

132- <http://www.iftr.ru>, October 16, 2002.

Russian-Saudi business forum. Members were heads of companies, banks, funds and the Chambers of Commerce and Industry from both states.¹³³ Commenting on the forum's results, the head of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Y. Primakov expressed his hope that the two sides, which had just started the development of prospective and full-fledged cooperation, could achieve these goals rather quickly.¹³⁴

Indeed, their joint activity soon encouraged the development of a relationship between the two countries in the economic arena. Russia proposed to their Saudi partners the sale of technology in oil and gas extraction and the energy and aluminum industries, as well as offering cooperation in the field of space, agriculture, irrigation, banking activity, education, health and tourism. Russia was interested in Saudi investments¹³⁵ and insisted on creating the necessary legislative base for their mutual cooperation. In the session of the joint Russian-Saudi Commission of Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technical and Cultural Cooperation, a Russian-Saudi Council was created "to be an effective mechanism in encouraging the development of Russian-Saudi relations."¹³⁶ As a result, the Protocol of the Joint Commission was signed. The two sides were interested to know more about further economic and technical possibilities. To achieve this goal, Russian and Saudi officials decided to open in Saudi Arabia a

133- Russian Federation, Ministry of Trade & Economy, <http://www.economy.gov.ru>, October 15, 2002.

134- Torgovo-promishlennii vedomosti, Russian Commerce and Industry Chamber (Moscow), No. 13-14 (July 2003), <http://www.tpprf.ru>

135- Ibid.

136- Russian Commerce and Industry Chamber, <http://www.tpprf.ru>, October 15, 2002.

center of information and an exhibition of Russian goods and technologies to stimulate the organization of meetings and conferences between representatives of the business societies of both states and to promote active exchange between state and private sectors to provide market research. At the same time, the two sides confirmed their interests in joint ventures in the field of oil exploration in third countries on the basis of Russian equipment and Saudi investment. Russia and Saudi Arabia also reached a principal agreement to organize permanent bilateral consultations and consultations between OPEC and Russia aimed at maintaining the stability of oil and gas prices.

The Russian side expressed its readiness to provide technical assistance to its Saudi partners in hydrocarbon exploration and repair of oil and gas seams and the implementation of high technological methods of oil and gas purification. Russia also proposed establishing electricity lines, wind plants and sun batteries and equipment for the distillation of sea water and salty underground water in Saudi Arabia. The latter confirmed its interest in learning about Russian phosphate, iron and non-ferrous metals extraction technology and its construction of ferrous and non-ferrous plants. The two sides also proposed to open a Russian-Saudi investment bank.

Saudi Arabia and Russia discussed the possibility of developing cooperation in the field of agriculture, including Russian participation in different Saudi projects and in the construction of railway lines in Saudi Arabia. There was also talk of sending Saudi specialists to Russian technical universities and, on this basis, develop cooperation in the field of education. The two sides have been further interested in

developing contacts in space research and tourism as well as youth and sporting exchanges.

The mutual visits of government representatives, among them the Russian Minister of Electricity and the Saudi Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources, confirmed the interest of both sides in developing the bilateral economic relationship. In July 2003, the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Saudi Association of Chamber of Commerce and Industry organized a business forum in Moscow. In the opening ceremony, the Co-President of the Russian-Arab Business Council, V. Evtushenko, stressed that: “We are going to solve a very complicated task of developing our relations from a blank piece of paper because the contacts between our countries were blockaded and we should eliminate this blockade.” He added that “We have the first results of Russian-Saudi relations development and it is very important not to lose the chance for the development of relations with a country that is producing one-third of the total Arab production.”¹³⁷

Russian Relations with the Smaller GCC States

Although Russian relations with Saudi Arabia occupy a leading position when compared to the other countries of the GCC, Russia also attempted to broaden contacts with the smaller GCC States. In the beginning of 2000, Russia intensified its links with Kuwait, including contacts between the two states’ parliaments. In August 2002, the first session of the Russian-Kuwaiti Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation – which was agreed

137- Russian Commerce and Industry Chamber, <http://www.tpprf.ru>

upon in 1994 - took place in Moscow. During the session, the Russian side was represented by high functionaries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Economic Development, the State Department of Construction and representatives of leading banks and large oil and machinery companies.¹³⁸ During the discussions, the Russian Minister of Energy pointed towards the favorable conditions for bilateral relations and concluded an agreement concerning investments and another on prohibiting double taxation. The Russians further confirmed their interest in cooperating in the field of energy, the oil and gas industry, civil construction, irrigation, agriculture and infrastructure on the territory of Kuwait.¹³⁹

According Russian scholar V. Yurchenko, Kuwait spent \$850 million on weaponry and military training from the Russian Federation up until 2001.¹⁴⁰ During a visit to Moscow by Kuwaiti Minister of Defense Jaber Al Sabah in September 2002, the two sides agreed to further develop their bilateral military cooperation; the Kuwaiti minister confirmed that Kuwait was interested in Russian military technologies and new kinds of Russian weaponry.¹⁴¹ The Head of the General Headquarters of the National Military Forces of Kuwait, General Al Muamin, said that “we consider that in our

138- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, December 19, 2004.

139- Ibid.

140- В.П. Юрченко, *Военно-техническое сотрудничество России с арабскими странами: вчера, сегодня, завтра* (V.P. Yurchenko, *Military-technical cooperation between Russia and Arab countries: yesterday, today, tomorrow*) // *Ближний Восток и современность*, Выпуск 23 (*The Contemporary Middle East. Collection of essays*, No. 23) (Moscow, 2004), 59.

141- Ibid.

cooperation with Russia, we are choosing very effective arming.”¹⁴²

Russian officials have expressed interest in intensifying their cooperation with the GCC States not only in the military field, but specifically also in the oil and gas sectors. During the last few years, trade relations between Russia and the GCC countries have demonstrated an upward growth trend, although the total trade turnover remains relatively low. Kuwait as the leading state has seen trade volumes increase by more than 40 times in between 1999 and 2002. Russia provided Kuwait mainly with Kamaz trucks, Lada and Niva cars and spare parts, saw-timber, rolled metal, computers, cellulose, barley, hunter guns, sheep, kitchen utensils and clothes;¹⁴³ there were no Kuwaiti exports to Russia. Similarly with Saudi Arabia, Russian exports from 1999 to 2002 increased by more than 35 percent.¹⁴⁴ Russia supplies metal pipes, tires, rolled metal, ferrous metal, wood, measuring apparatus and instruments, paper, medicaments, caviar, and fish products to Saudi Arabia. Russia’s imports from the Kingdom include jet airplane fuel and citrus.¹⁴⁵ Russian exports to the UAE saw some fluctuation but still increased overall by about 33 percent.¹⁴⁶ Among Russia’s exports were metal, saw-timber, chemical products, machinery and equipment. In 1998-1999, Russia delivered to the UAE a

142- V.P. Yurchenko, *op. cit.*, 60.

143- Russian Federation, Ministry of Trade & Economy, <http://www.economy.gov.ru>, Dec. 31 2004.

144- See Table 1.

145- Russian Federation, Ministry of Trade & Economy, <http://www.economy.gov.ru>, Dec. 31, 2004.

146- See Table 1.

rather large quantity of gold.¹⁴⁷ The main items of import from the UAE were consumer goods, furniture, lubricants and cloth.¹⁴⁸

Table 1
RUSSIAN EXPORTS TO THE GCC COUNTRIES
1999-2002 (million)¹⁴⁹

	1999	2000	2001	2002
Bahrain	0	0,7	0,7	0
Kuwait	2	6	9	82
Oman	0	0,4	3	6
Saudi Arabia	88	55	66	137
Qatar	0	0,01	0,02	0
United Arab Emirates	257	178	222	386

147- Russian Federation, Ministry of Trade & Economy,
<http://www.economy.gov.ru>, Dec. 31 2004.

148- Ibid.

149- Russian-Arab Business Council, October 2003, <http://www.rusarabbs.ru/analitica/>

Table 2
RUSSIAN IMPORTS FROM THE GCC COUNTRIES
1999-2002 (million)¹⁵⁰

	1999	2000	2001	2002
Bahrain	14	7	0,06	0
Kuwait	0	0	0	0
Oman	1	1	1	0
Saudi Arabia	1	2	1	2
Qatar	0	0	0	0
United Arab Emirates	4	23	3	15

Economic relations between Russia and the UAE, in comparison with those of the other GCC countries, have reached a relatively high level. There are many Russians living in the UAE, the majority of whom are involved in small and medium-sized businesses such as commerce, hotels, tourism, cargo, etc. In 2001, an Arabian-Russian holding was created in Jebel Ali with the goal of providing consulting assistance to Russian companies acting in the UAE. In 2002, the Russian Commercial Center began its activities with the assistance of Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In 2003, on the territory of the free zone, a permanent exhibition of Russian goods was opened and by the end of the year both countries indicated “the similarity of Russian and UAE standpoints on key international and regional issues” and called for “the efficient tapping of the two countries’ potentials for cooperation in trade, economic and investment

150- Ibid.; For Qatar see: О торгово-экономическом сотрудничестве между Российской Федерацией и Государством Катар. Министерство торговли и экономики Российской Федерации (About the trade and economic cooperation between the Russian Federation and the State of Qatar. Ministry of trade and economy of Russian Federation), <http://www.economy.gov.ru/>

spheres.”¹⁵¹ By the end of 2003, 20 representatives of Russian companies and more than 200 joint ventures were registered in the territory of the UAE.¹⁵² That same year, the number of Russian tourists who spent their vacations in the UAE reached about 250,000.¹⁵³

Over the last ten years, the volume of bilateral military-technical cooperation between Russia and the UAE has exceeded \$1 billion.¹⁵⁴ At the International Defense and Weaponry Exhibition (IDEX) in Abu Dhabi in March 2003, some 50 Russian enterprises demonstrated over 500 new kinds of arms and military equipment.¹⁵⁵ On another occasion, the 8th International Dubai Air Show in December 2003, Russia displayed more than 200 kinds of military hardware, armaments ammunition and auxiliary systems.¹⁵⁶ Later, in May 2004, Russia also took part in the second International Middle East Police and Law Enforcement Exhibition in Dubai.¹⁵⁷ According to Russian Deputy Interior Minister Mikhail Ignatyev, “equipment made for law-enforcement agencies by a dozen Russian enterprises has evoked a lot of interest in Arab countries and Asia as a whole.”¹⁵⁸ At the same time, more than 30 Russian companies showed their products at the annual spring trade fair of consumer goods in Dubai, and the Deputy Director General of Dubai’s Chamber

151- *ITAR-TASS Agency* in English, December 26, 2003.

152- Russian Federation, Ministry of Trade & Economy, <http://www.economy.gov.ru>, Dec. 31, 2004.

153- Russian Federation, Ministry of Trade & Economy, <http://www.economy.gov.ru>, Dec. 31, 2004.

154- *Ibid.*

155- *ITAR-TASS* in English, March 15, 2003.

156- *ITAR-TASS* in English, December 7, 2003.

157- *ITAR-TASS* in English, May 3, 2004.

158- *Ibid.*

of Commerce and Industry Ahmed al-Banna stated that his country was interested in the development of ties with Russia in the field of aviation and aeronautics, civil construction, information technology, the extraction of natural resources, finance and banking.¹⁵⁹

The cooperation between Russia and the UAE is developing not only on the federal level, but also on the regional level. Representatives from the business sectors of the Tatarstan Republic, the Moscow city government and the Cheliabinsk and Moscow regions have visited the UAE in order to promote direct economic contacts. Similarly, enterprises tied to the mercantile marine fleet of St. Petersburg have established contacts with UAE authorities to use the latter's ports for the service and repair of their tankers and commercial ships.

The economic and political contacts between Russia and the three remaining states of the GCC – Bahrain, Qatar and Oman - remain at quite a low level. In May 2004, Russia and Oman signed a protocol on the completion of bilateral talks on Russia's admission to the World Trade Organization.¹⁶⁰ A delegation from the Sultanate also participated in the joint meetings of the Russian-Arab Business Council. Oman and Russia also expressed their readiness to establish a bilateral Russian-Omani Commission in the framework of the Council.¹⁶¹ In May 2003, the Qatari government proposed that the Russian gas company Gazprom join a large-scale project to build a gas pipeline to the United Arab Emirates and

159- Ibid.

160- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, <http://www.In.mid.ru>, December 19, 2004.

161- Ibid.

Oman.¹⁶² Moreover, visits of high position functionaries and representatives of business communities of these countries to Moscow provide some hope for the future development of trade relations.

Conclusion

Over the past few years, Russia's relations with the GCC countries have undergone a number of transformations. Before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the 'Soviet danger' was considered by the GCC countries as real, and their suspicious attitude to the Soviet empire increased after the invasion in Afghanistan. The close links between the Soviet Union and Iraq also created a *détente* in their relations.

After the collapse of the USSR leadership, both sides expressed readiness to ensure a more stable set of relations and attempted to broaden their contacts. Relations between Russia and the GCC states, however, are still peripheral. At the same time, their cooperation in political and economic spheres as well as in the field of security seems to be useful and necessary. They have mutual interests in the formation of a multilateral system of international relations and similar positions concerning important regional issues, like the Middle East conflict resolution, the future of Iraq, and cooperation in countering international terrorism.

Russian leaders will continue to seek cooperation with the GCC states because they are aware of their Islamic significance to the Russian Muslim community, currently estimated at about 15 percent of the Russia's population and

162- *ITAR-TASS* in English, May 15, 2003.

growing much faster than other communities in the country. In addition, Russia's increased interests for gaining representation in Muslim organizations, a goal which the GCC countries can help Russia achieve, will ensure the perpetuity of their contacts.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been pursuing to increase its role in the Gulf region. However, Russia's plans are moderate; Russian officials realize that Russia is not able to participate in the region's affairs on the same level as the Western states, which historically have had strong economic, political and security relations with the GCC countries. At the same time, Russia's participation in maintaining the political and military stability of the region can be stronger. First of all, the supplies of Russian weapons can increase. Also, Russia's close ties to Iran can be utilized by the GCC states to create a new system of regional security. Russia also has an opportunity to maintain good relations with Iraq after its reconstruction, as the latter's government will be interested in having a diversified foreign policy. In this regard, Iraq's historical ties with the Soviet Union and with Russia will be a significant factor.

Russia wants to broaden its capabilities as an economic partner of the GCC states. If the development of economic relations between the two sides is successful, it will create strong support for the cooperation between their business communities. This fact will in turn stimulate political links of a more stable character. The Russian and GCC governments also need to take into consideration their common interests in the oil sector, including coordination of their activities in the oil market and of investments in oil and gas projects.

About the Author

Dr. Elena Melkumyan is an associate professor at the department of political science in the Institute of African and Asian Studies at Moscow State University, where she received her Ph.D. in 1978. She is the author of a number of Russian publications concerning the Gulf region, including *The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia: Priorities, Directions and Decision-making Processes* (Moscow, 2003) and *The GCC in Global and Regional Processes* (Moscow, 1999).

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