

February 27, 1984

MOSCOW STALKS THE PERSIAN GULF

INTRODUCTION

The recent upsurge in fighting in the Iran-Iraq war and Iran's threat to block the strategic Strait of Hormuz have focused attention on the Persian Gulf, an epicenter of world politics. Because it is the world's largest known storehouse of low-cost energy supplies, the Gulf region has acquired immense strategic value as one of the determining fulcrums of the global balance of power. The Gulf region's geopolitical importance, the kaleidoscopic nature of politics among Gulf states and the presence of volatile social and political forces within them, and the lengthening shadow of Soviet military power insure that the Gulf will remain a potentially explosive source of superpower tensions for years.

After centuries of southward expansion, Moscow is closer than ever to securing a land bridge to a warm water port. The advent of Soviet nuclear parity, the growth of Soviet power projection forces, the Iranian revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan have altered fundamentally the strategic balance of the Gulf region. The fall of the Shah removed the American shield from Iran, sounded the death knell for the anti-Soviet CENTO alliance,¹ and plunged Iran into chronic turmoil. This has afforded the Soviets increased opportunities to meddle in Iranian affairs and in the internal affairs of neighboring states threatened by the spillover of the Iranian revolution. The invasion of Afghanistan brought Soviet forces 400 miles closer to the Gulf,

¹ The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) was a defense alliance between Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Great Britain. Originally named the Baghdad Pact, the name was changed when the Iraqi revolution led Iraq to withdraw in 1959. The United States held observer status in the alliance but was not a party to the treaty.

lengthened the Soviet-Iranian border by 400 miles, and gave Moscow well-positioned military and subversive bases that could be used to intimidate, undermine, or dismember Iran and Pakistan.

In the near future, Iran is likely to be Moscow's prime target because of its proximity, relative diplomatic isolation, and internal instability. The Soviet Union twice has attempted to swallow Iranian provinces--Gilan province in 1920 and Azerbaijan/Kurdistan in 1945-1946. Although it was forced to disgorge these occupied Iranian territories on both occasions, the story could be different today, given the marked pro-Soviet tilt in the global balance of power.

Moscow's ultimate target is Saudi Arabia. By gaining control of the kingdom's massive oil reserves, the Soviets could undermine the economic vitality of the West, split the Western alliance, and reforge the weakening energy links that help bind Eastern European satellites to the Kremlin. A pro-Soviet Saudi Arabia would be a grievous blow to Western Europe and Japan, which are dependent on Saudi oil, and to the smaller Gulf states that have looked to the Saudis for leadership in recent years.

The Soviet Union has encircled the Gulf with military bases in Afghanistan, Syria, South Yemen, and Ethiopia. A direct Soviet military thrust is unlikely, however, as long as regional trends continue to favor the Soviets and the American commitment to use force in defense of friendly Gulf states remains credible. Moscow is more likely to mount indirect threats to the Gulf in the form of opportunistic manipulation of ethnic separatist groups, local revolutionaries, and domestic political instability. In trying to deter the Soviet military threat to the Gulf, Washington should remain ready to defend its friends in the Gulf while taking care to avoid exacerbating the domestic problems of fragile Gulf polities. Washington also must stand ready to safeguard the continued flow of Gulf oil against the interference of Iran as well as the Soviet Union.

SOVIET GOALS IN THE GULF

Russia was determined to push its frontiers southward for geopolitical reasons centuries before the Bolshevik revolution or the discovery of oil in the Gulf. In 1920, three years after seizing power, the Bolsheviks organized a "Congress of the Peoples of the East" in Baku in a vain attempt to incite the Moslem world to launch a holy war against European colonial empires. The following year, however, weakened by civil war, Moscow signed a series of "friendship treaties" with Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, which ushered in a "period of armed truce" along its southern borders.²

² George Lenczowski, Soviet Advances in the Middle East (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1972), p. 25.

Then, in 1940, Soviet Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov signed a secret protocol to the Hitler-Stalin pact that pledged "The area south of Batum and Baku in the general direction of the Persian Gulf is...the center of aspirations of the Soviet Union..."³

Emboldened by its military strength after World War II, Moscow prepared to carve up its southern neighbors. It demanded territorial concessions and control of the Bosphorus from Turkey and refused to withdraw from northern Iran, which it had occupied in 1941. Turkey and Iran rebuffed Soviet coercive diplomacy with the support of the United States and became key allies in the American effort to contain Soviet expansion. Having failed to subjugate the Northern Tier countries through intimidation, Moscow sought to lure them away from a strategic embrace with the West by implementing a good neighbor policy aimed at allaying their fears about Soviet imperialism.⁴

The Soviets pursued a dual policy of cultivating good relations on the state-to-state level with its southern neighbors while backing local communist parties and other revolutionary groups. Economic development assistance was extended to buy good will and provide cover for subversion. The extensive Soviet military assistance program gave the Soviets entrée into the armed forces of recipient states, an excellent position for recruiting potential coup leaders. Clandestine pro-Soviet elements in the armed forces staged an abortive coup in Sudan (1971), were purged from the armed forces of Iran (1977), Somalia (1978), and Iraq (1978), and staged successful coups in Afghanistan (1978) and South Yemen (1978).⁵

In addition to strengthening its own influence in the Gulf region, Moscow has worked to erode U.S. influence there. It has sought to prevent local states from cooperating with Washington, pushed for the dissolution of existing alliances and agreements with the U.S., and tried to prevent new ones.

THE SOVIET UNION AND PERSIAN GULF OIL

The Soviet Union's long-term goals almost surely include control of the natural resources as well as the foreign policies of Gulf states. The Gulf region contains roughly 55 percent of the world's proven oil reserves, or about two-thirds of the non-

³ Raymond Sontag and James Beddie, Nazi-Soviet Relations 1939-1941: Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Office (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 1948), p. 259.

⁴ For an analysis of Soviet policy toward the Northern Tier, see James Phillips, "A Mounting Soviet Threat to the Northern Tier," Heritage Foundation Background No. 271, July 1, 1983.

⁵ See David Lynn Price, "Moscow and the Persian Gulf," Problems of Communism, March-April 1979.

communist world's oil supplies. Although Gulf oil production has fallen in recent years due to the world oil glut and the Iran-Iraq war, the Persian Gulf remains the center of gravity of the world oil trade. While the United States has reduced significantly its dependence on Persian Gulf oil, its close allies in Europe and Japan remain vulnerable to disruptions in their supply line to the Gulf.

The establishment of Soviet hegemony over the Gulf could spell the end of the Western Alliance. Once astride the Gulf, the Soviet Union would be in a position to "Finlandize" Western Europe and Japan through economic blackmail. By becoming the arbiter of Gulf oil flows, the Soviet Union not only would gain influence over non-communist oil importers but would bolster its influence over its oil-thirsty satellites in Eastern Europe. The Kremlin has been unable to satisfy fully the oil import demands of East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria over the last decade because the growth of Soviet oil production has failed to keep pace with either the growth of Soviet-bloc oil demand or the need to finance food and technology imports with foreign currency earned by selling oil to the West. If the Eastern Europeans are squeezed out of the world oil market, their economies will be hamstrung to the point where there might be an anti-Soviet political spillover. The Soviet Union probably will be forced to incur rising political, military, and economic costs to retain its East European satellites unless it can obtain adequate oil imports for them. And the Soviet Union itself may look to the Persian Gulf to fulfill its oil requirements as its own oil production reaches a plateau and declines in the late 1980s.

MOSCOW'S INDIRECT STRATEGY

Moscow so far has pursued an indirect strategy in the Gulf to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States. It has secured strongholds around the Gulf's rim in Afghanistan, Syria, South Yemen, and Ethiopia and retains residual influence in Iraq. Explains a leading expert on Soviet foreign policy: Moscow seeks to "subvert the center by radicalizing the periphery."⁶ East German and Cuban advisors safeguard the ardently pro-Soviet regime in South Yemen while the Yemenis support rebellions in neighboring Oman and North Yemen--back doors to Saudi Arabia. The communist Defense Minister of Afghanistan has indicated that the Afghan army would play a "significant role" in the future "like that played by the Cuban and Vietnamese armies."⁷

A direct Soviet military thrust into the Gulf region cannot be ruled out and is probably more likely than a similar thrust

⁶ Alvin Rubinstein, "The Evolution of Soviet Strategy in the Middle East," *Orbis*, Summer 1980, p. 330.

⁷ *FBIS, Daily Report, South Asia*, January 28, 1982, p. C1.

into Western Europe. Such an operation, however, would be extremely risky because it could trigger a superpower confrontation. Moscow probably can afford to be patient, for trends in the Gulf appear to be running its way. The Iranian revolution has opened up new possibilities for Soviet probing, Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime is tottering, and the traditional societies on the Arab side of the Gulf are beset by the destabilization born of too-rapid modernization. After demonstrating its ruthlessness in Afghanistan, Moscow does not actually have to use its military power in the Gulf to extract political benefits. The Soviet military machine casts a large political-psychological shadow that must be offset by countervailing Western power.

THE SOVIET THREAT TO IRAN

The opportunities for Soviet gains are highest and the risks lowest in Iran. As such, it probably will be the foremost target of Soviet meddling in the near future. The Iranian revolution has detached Iran from the U.S. security umbrella, weakened its military strength, unleashed political turbulence, and left the country internationally isolated. Soviet subjugation of Iran would inevitably lead the other Gulf states to reach an accommodation with the Kremlin.

Moscow's interest in fomenting a pro-Soviet revolution in Iran is longstanding. Communist ties to Iranian leftists predate the Bolshevik revolution. A Soviet writer speculated in 1918 that a revolution in Persia might become "the key to revolution in the whole east."⁸ In 1920, the Red Army invaded Gilan province on Iran's Caspian Sea coast and set up a Soviet Republic under Kuchek Khan. Soviet troops were withdrawn in 1921 only after Moscow had extracted a one-sided "Treaty of Friendship." Article VI of the treaty gave the Soviets the right to intervene if Iran were occupied by a third party or if Iranian territory were used as a base for "anti-Soviet aggression." A subsequent exchange of letters specified that Article VI referred only to anti-Bolshevik Russian forces, but the Soviets have constantly tried to widen the interpretation of the treaty to give themselves a pretext for intervention and to restrict the military activities of foreign powers in Iran.⁹ Although Iran has announced repeatedly the abrogation of the treaty, Moscow ominously insists that it remains in force.

In spite of a wary, correct relationship with the Shah, the Soviet Union welcomed the Iranian revolution because of its anti-American nature. Iranian opposition to Soviet imperialism, however, became a source of tension in Soviet-Iranian relations.

⁸ A. Yodfat and B. Abir, In the Direction of the Persian Gulf: The Soviet Union & the Persian Gulf (London: Frank Cass, 1977), p. 29.

⁹ Alvin Rubinstein, Soviet Policy Toward Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan (New York: Praeger, 1982), p. 61.

Ayatollah Khomeini's government condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and shut down a natural gas pipeline to the Soviet Union when the Soviets refused to meet Iranian demands to raise the below market price they were paying for the gas. Moscow criticized the Iranian government for "artificially" restricting trade between the two countries but avoided criticizing Khomeini personally. The Soviets have staged troop maneuvers along the Iranian border on several occasions and maintain strong garrisons along the Afghan-Iranian border to deter Iranian "interference" in Afghanistan's "internal affairs." In early 1982, Iran shot down a Soviet helicopter that had pursued Afghan freedom fighters across the border into Iran.¹⁰

Another source of tension in Soviet-Iranian relations is the ideological clash between Khomeini's militant Islamic fundamentalism and Soviet communism. Because the Soviet empire contains 40 to 45 million Moslems, Soviet leaders cannot ignore the possibility that this fast growing segment of the population will be caught up in the Islamic resurgence. Iran's Shia Moslem ideology, however, is unlikely to appeal to the predominantly Sunni Moslems in Soviet Central Asia.¹¹ Even if the Iranian revolution should inspire Moslem restiveness in Central Asia, the massive Soviet police apparatus probably would have little trouble in isolating and crushing an Islamic rebellion.

Despite frequent downturns in Soviet-Iranian relations, Moscow continues to pose as the "protector" of the Iranian revolution. It works to deepen Iran's radicalization, intensify its alienation from the West, and fan the flames of Iran's anti-Americanism. It equates anti-Soviet criticism by Iranians with opposition to the Iranian revolution. By infiltrating the Soviet-controlled Tudeh Party into positions of power in Iran, it attempted to gain influence over the direction of the revolution and leverage in the succession struggle that inevitably will follow Khomeini's death.

Soviet policy was complicated by the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980. Moscow at first tried to ingratiate itself with Iran while trying to retain its influence with Iraq. It warned Iran of Iraq's impending attack, provided the Iranians with satellite intelligence,¹² and channeled Soviet arms to Iran through Libya, Syria, and North Korea. Soviet-Iranian relations soured, however, when Iran turned back Iraq's army and crossed

¹⁰ Wall Street Journal, July 19, 1982, p. 19.

¹¹ The Uzbeks and Turkmens who inhabit the Soviet republics northeast of Iran have a long tradition of hostility toward Iranians. The Azerbaijanis, who straddle Iran's northwest border with the Soviet Union, share the Iranians' Shia beliefs but are repelled by Tehran's treatment of the Azerbaijani minority within its borders. None of the Soviet Moslem groups are likely to be inspired by the economic costs of an Iranian-type Islamic revolution.

¹² Newsweek, August 9, 1982.

into Iraq in mid-1982. Moscow did not welcome the prospect of an Iranian victory over Iraq because a revolutionary Islamic Iraqi government would be beholden to Tehran, not Moscow. Moreover, an Iranian triumph would weaken Soviet leverage in Iran and strengthen American leverage in Arab Gulf states confronted with an ascendant Iran.¹³

Moscow criticized Iran's first offensive into Iraq's territory in July 1982 and later resumed shipping arms to the Iraqis. The Iranians were alarmed when Vladimir Kuzichkin, a senior KGB operative in Tehran who defected to the British government, disclosed Soviet infiltration of ethnic groups along the border and the identities of KGB agents and undercover Tudeh Party members who had penetrated various organs of the Iranian government.¹⁴ This prompted the Iranian government to purge the army, Revolutionary Guard, police, and bureaucracy. Tehran arrested the Tudeh leadership in February 1983, banned the Tudeh Party in May, and expelled eighteen Soviet diplomats.

Since then, Moscow has pursued a damage limitation strategy. At the same time, it has rebuilt its intelligence network in Iran by infiltrating KGB agents across the border from Soviet Azerbaijan.¹⁵ Soviet commentators have become much more critical of the Khomeini regime.¹⁶ An article in the influential Soviet journal Literary Gazette, for example, complained in June 1983 that the Iranian revolution has been transformed into "Islamic despotism."¹⁷

An outright Soviet invasion of Iran cannot be ruled out, but it is unlikely as long as the military deadlock in Afghanistan persists, the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force becomes an increasingly credible deterrent, and Iranians remain unified and willing to sacrifice large numbers of lives to retain their independence.

If the Soviet Union should invade, the Iranian army and Revolutionary Guards, worn down by more than three years of war with Iraq, could not hope to repel the advance. The Soviet Army could mobilize 24 divisions along the Soviet-Iranian border¹⁸ with more

¹³ The Iran-Iraq war also threatens important American interests in the Gulf area and thereby could advance Soviet interests. Tehran has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz to oil shipping if Iraq attacks Iran's oil facilities. Although Iran does not have the military capability to keep the Strait closed, given the presence of Western naval forces in the area, Iran could force up the insurance costs of oil shipping in the Gulf, thereby precipitating a mini-oil crisis.

¹⁴ Foreign Report, October 28, 1982, p. 3; Christian Science Monitor, May 6, 1983.

¹⁵ Time, May 16, 1983, p. 27.

¹⁶ Muriel Atkin, "Moscow's Disenchantment with Iran," Survey, Autumn/Winter 1983, p. 257.

¹⁷ Soviet World Outlook, July 15, 1983, p. 7.

¹⁸ New York Times, December 20, 1982, p. A-11.

than 200,000 men, 4,500 tanks, and 940 aircraft.¹⁹ Moscow could insert two of its seven airborne divisions into Iran in a matter of hours. Despite Iran's rugged terrain and limited road network, the invader's progress would undoubtedly be facilitated by the early use of paratroops, helicopter troops, and special forces to seize strategic chokepoints and transport links. Advance columns of the Soviet army could link up with air dropped elements in Tehran in one week²⁰ and in Iran's oil province of Khuzistan in the upper Gulf area in as little as ten days, depending on the local opposition.²¹

Such a bold move would be risky, given the U.S. commitment to use force to repel a Soviet attempt to gain control of the Gulf region. In addition, once they occupied the Iranian oil fields, the Soviets would be confronted with the difficult task of repairing oil production facilities and keeping them operating in the face of sabotage and aerial attack. They would be forced to occupy indefinitely a country with 35 million well-armed citizens--more than twice the population of Afghanistan--many of whom probably would be very willing to become martyrs for the Iranian revolution.

A more attractive option for Moscow would be a limited thrust into Iran, at the "invitation" of Iranian leftists or ethnic separatists who would collaborate with the Soviet army. Moscow could establish the military infrastructure in northern Iran that would facilitate later Soviet moves to the south. Although the Tudeh Party was decapitated in the 1983 crackdown, many of its cadres presumably escaped capture. In addition to the Tudeh, Moscow might be able to ally with some of the estimated 200,000 followers and sympathizers of various Iranian Marxist groups.²²

The Soviets might find other willing collaborators among some of Iran's ethnic minority groups--the Azerbaijanis and Kurds in the Northwest, the Turkomans in the Northeast, or the Baluchis in the Southeast. These groups historically have resented the domination of the Persians and are known to be dissatisfied with their second-class status under Khomeini's harsh Islamic rule.

The fiercely independent Kurds, who have been fighting a bloody guerrilla war for greater autonomy since 1979, pose the greatest threat to Iranian sovereignty at this time. Iran's

¹⁹ Shahram Chubin, Soviet Policy Towards Iran and the Gulf, Adelphi Paper #157, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1980, p. 3.

²⁰ W. Scott Thompson, "The Persian Gulf and the Correlation of Forces," International Security, Summer 1982, p. 166.

²¹ Jonathan Alford, "Soviet-American Rivalry in the Middle East: The Military Dimension," in Adeed and Karen Dawisha (eds.), The Soviet Union in the Middle East (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), p. 140.

²² Yearbook on International Communist Affairs 1982 (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1982), p. 23.

three to four million Kurds are part of the largest national group in the Middle East without a state of its own. Up to 15 million more Kurds inhabit a swath of territory that straddles the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and the Soviet Union. Recent reports indicate that Soviet aircraft have dropped supplies to dissident Kurds inside Iran.²³

The Turkish-speaking Azeris, who comprise almost one-third of Iran's population, also offer Moscow fertile ground for subversion. Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, the leading Azeri theologian, has been under house arrest since anti-Khomeini rioting rocked Azerbaijan more than four years ago. The Azerbaijan Democratic Party, a pro-Soviet communist party, has grown stronger amid the chaos of revolutionary Iran. Radio broadcasts from Soviet Azerbaijan encourage a pro-Soviet brand of nationalism in what the Soviets refer to as "southern Azerbaijan." One of the late Soviet leader Yuri Andropov's protégés, Geidar Aliyev, recently told Western visitors that it was his "personal" hope that Iranian Azerbaijan would be united with its Soviet counterpart in the future.²⁴ The Soviets also may choose to meddle in Baluchistan, where they have provided arms to rebellious tribes in the past.

THE SOVIET UNION AND IRAQ

Moscow and Baghdad have enjoyed a strategic marriage of convenience off and on since the 1958 Iraqi revolution. The 1969 rise to power of the Ba'ath (Renaissance) party tightened the Soviet-Iraqi strategic embrace and led to the 1972 Treaty of Friendship, which loosely affiliated Iraq with the Soviet scheme of collective security. Between 1974 and 1978, Iraq became Moscow's largest Third World arms customer, taking delivery of \$3.6 billion of weapons.²⁵ Soviet-Iraqi relations deteriorated after 1978 due to Iraqi displeasure over Soviet support of the April 1978 coup in Afghanistan, Soviet backing of Ethiopian attempts to suppress the Moslem Eritrean separatists, Moscow's efforts to ingratiate itself with Iran's revolutionary regime, and the subversive activities of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). In addition, the Soviets disapproved of Iraq's growing economic ties with the West, its suppression of the ICP, and its rapprochement with the moderate Arab Gulf states.

The Iran-Iraq war strained Soviet-Iraqi relations as it became clear that Moscow preferred cultivating its influence with Iran to helping Iraq. But after the Iranians crossed into Iraq

²³ Zalmay Khalizad, "Soviet Interest in Iran," New York Times, May 12, 1983, p. A-23.

²⁴ Shahram Chubin, "The Soviet Union and Iran," Foreign Affairs, Spring 1983, p. 933.

²⁵ Shahram Chubin, Security in the Persian Gulf: The Role of Outside Powers (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1982), p. 78.

in July 1982, the Soviet Union tilted toward Iraq by resuming direct arms shipments which had been halted when hostilities began. Most recently, Iraq received Soviet SS-12 ground-to-ground missiles capable of striking targets 500 miles away.²⁶ Roughly 2,000 Soviet-bloc advisors work in Iraq. While Baghdad has diversified its sources of military equipment and is not as dependent on Moscow today as it was ten years ago, the embattled Hussein regime will be hard pressed to beat back repeated Iranian offensives without strengthening its ties to the Soviets.

If Baghdad should resist sliding further into a pro-Soviet alignment, the Soviets are in a position to use the ICP as a lever to pressure the Ba'athist regime or as a power base for installing a more pro-Soviet successor regime. In November 1980, the ICP formed a national front with two Kurdish groups--the Democratic Party of Kurdistan and the Unified Socialist Party of Kurdistan. This front has called for the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime and greater autonomy for the Kurds--roughly one-third of the Iraqi population.

Although the Soviet Union has not openly supported Kurdish nationalists in Iraq since 1972, Moscow's Kurdish option in Iraq, as in Iran, has not been abandoned and could be revived in the future.²⁷ The ICP gives the Soviets a direct channel into the Kurdish movement that could prove useful in setting up an independent Kurdistan in the event that Iran succeeds in installing a revolutionary Islamic regime in Baghdad. As long as Saddam Hussein clings to power, however, Moscow probably will be reluctant to antagonize its Iraqi partners, preferring instead to aid the ICP indirectly.

THE SOVIET THREAT TO THE ARAB OIL KINGDOMS

After Britain announced in 1968 that its forces would withdraw from all outposts east of Suez, Moscow temporarily stopped supporting subversive activities in the Gulf for fear of delaying the British withdrawal or prompting an American buildup in the area. Once the British had withdrawn in 1971, however, it was back to business as usual. Moscow pursued its time-tested two-track strategy of trying to establish good state-to-state relations while covertly forming links with revolutionary groups. The traditional societies of the Arab Gulf states were resistant to both approaches. Most of the deeply religious ruling elites rejected diplomatic relations with Soviet atheists and the closely knit tribal social structures rendered revolutionary activities difficult.

²⁶ Washington Post, January 25, 1984.

²⁷ See Aryeh Yodfat, "The Kurds: Policy Problem for Moscow," Soviet Analyst, December 23, 1982.

Kuwait was the only Arab Gulf kingdom to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, probably to buy insurance against Iraqi territorial claims. The Soviet Embassy in Kuwait quickly became Moscow's listening post on the Arab side of the Gulf. Moscow persistently has courted Saudi Arabia in an effort to reestablish diplomatic links that were suspended before World War II, but Riyadh has not yet succumbed.

The steep climb of oil prices in the mid-1970s and the subsequent influx of wealth into the Gulf states ushered in a period of rapid modernization that has been intrinsically destabilizing. The authority and legitimacy of traditional political systems has been undermined by rapid urbanization, social change, and cultural disorientation. The quantum jumps in oil income fueled an economic boom that attracted several million foreign workers, which further disoriented the indigenous populations. This gave the USSR potential allies in fomenting revolution in the Gulf.

Because of these trends, Moscow believes that time is on its side in the Gulf. Almost any change in government in the Gulf would be an improvement from Moscow's standpoint. It is not known to what extent the Soviets have penetrated the armed forces of the Gulf states, but it is known that they have made serious efforts. For example, Saudi officers who served with the Arab peacekeeping force in Lebanon in the mid-1970s were approached by Syrian agents of the KGB seeking to build a "Nasserist" faction in the Saudi army.²⁸

In the event of widespread civil disorders or revolution, the weak Communist parties of the Gulf states may be able to capture the mantle of revolutionary leadership, as the Bolsheviks did in Russia in 1917. The tiny Communist Party of Saudi Arabia, for example, already is trying to form a broad "fatherland front" of Saudi dissident forces from its headquarters in South Yemen.

Kuwait and Bahrain are perhaps the Gulf states most vulnerable to subversion. More than half of Kuwait's inhabitants are non-Kuwaitis, 30 to 40 percent are Shiites who are disproportionately represented in the poorer economic strata, and roughly 20 percent are Palestinians.²⁹ Close to 15 percent of Bahrain's population is non-Arab, mainly of Iranian descent. An abortive Iranian backed coup in December 1981 was believed to have been masterminded by an Iranian revolutionary thought to have connections with the KGB.³⁰ Though the outlawed National Liberation Front of Bahrain is reluctant to proclaim itself a communist party, it is treated as one in Soviet-sponsored international conferences.

²⁸ Robert Moss, "Reaching for Oil: The Soviets' Bold Middle East Strategy," Saturday Review, April 12, 1980, p. 21.

²⁹ James Noyes, The Clouded Lens (Second edition, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1982), p. 117.

³⁰ Time, October 25, 1982, p. 49.

THE SOVIET UNION AND SOUTH YEMEN

The only self-avowed Marxist state in the Arab world is South Yemen, an important Soviet strategic outpost on the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula. Together with pro-Soviet Ethiopia, South Yemen dominates the mouth of the Red Sea. The South Yemenis have transformed their country into a military base, terrorist training ground, and staging area for Soviet-bloc forces. Moscow has been given a naval base in the Perim Islands, access to the port of Aden, and an anchorage off the island of Socotra. Soviet aerial reconnaissance planes conduct long-range surveillance missions in the Indian Ocean from bases in South Yemen. Two Soviet MiG-25 squadrons use Yemeni airfields and Cuban, North Korean, and East German pilots operate with the Yemeni Air Force.

Approximately 5,000 Soviet-bloc advisors control the Yemeni armed forces and civil service bureaucracies. The East Germans run South Yemen's secret police, while the Cubans provide the backbone for a praetorian guard that shields the regime from its own people. Under Soviet guidance, South Yemen has become an international clearinghouse for terrorism. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a Marxist Palestinian splinter group, operates terrorist training bases in which Soviet-bloc advisors as well as Palestinians train a wide variety of terrorists from around the world.

South Yemen is Saudi Arabia's back door. The South Yemenis host leaders of the Communist Party of Saudi Arabia, Palestinian groups hostile to Riyadh's traditional leadership, and Saudi dissidents. According to Western European intelligence sources, 70 of the 500 men who seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 were trained by Cubans with Soviet supervision at a PFLP camp in South Yemen. During the uprising, the South Yemeni army was mobilized along the Saudi border "apparently poised to intervene on the pretext of defending the Holy Places if the revolt showed signs of success."³¹

South Yemen is also a threat to the stability of North Yemen, which it has battled time and again over the years. Saudi Arabia fears that the South Yemenis will succeed in realizing their long-standing goal of unifying the two Yemens under Marxist leadership. Such a state would have almost twice the population of Saudi Arabia and could foment instability within Saudi Arabia by harnessing its more than one million Yemeni guest workers. The Saudis also fear that a united Yemen, backed by Soviet military aid, would attempt to retake territories ceded to Saudi Arabia under the resented 1934 Taif Treaty.

South Yemen also has supported actively the longstanding Dhofar rebellion against the Sultanate of Oman. The rebellion

³¹ Robert Moss, "What Russia Wants," The New Republic, January 19, 1980.

began as a tribal uprising in 1964, but was transformed into a "national liberation" struggle in the late 1960s, when Marxist radicals wrested leadership away from traditional tribal leaders and named the movement the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO). In 1970, the name was expanded to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf, reflecting the escalating ambitions of the revolutionaries intent on imposing a Marxist dictatorship in other Gulf states. The rebellion was crushed by 1976 with the assistance of seconded British officers, Iranian troops, and Jordanian advisors. The remnants of the PFLO fled to South Yemen and still enjoy the "support of the Soviet people."³² South Yemen reached a limited detente with Oman in late 1982, but the PFLO remains in cold storage and may be activated again in the future.

U.S. POLICY AND THE SOVIET THREAT

When the British withdrew from east of Suez in 1971, the United States came to depend on the two pillars of Iran and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia to guard stability in the Persian Gulf. Skyrocketing oil prices enabled the Shah to undertake a massive military buildup, but rapid modernization triggered economic dislocations and an Islamic backlash that led to his downfall. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan gave rise to the Carter Doctrine, which proclaimed U.S. willingness to resort to military force to protect the Persian Gulf.

The U.S. Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) was formed to give teeth to U.S. policy. Its purpose is to deter a Soviet intervention in the Gulf by raising the costs and risks of such a move. The RDF faces three problems: inadequate strength, mobility, and access to bases in the Gulf region. The first problem is a function of the second, which is in turn complicated by the third. The Persian Gulf is 7,000 miles from the United States and only 1,100 miles from the Soviet border. To offset this geographical disadvantage, the Pentagon has stockpiled military supplies in the area and is working to upgrade its long-range aircraft and rapid sealift capabilities.

In strengthening the U.S. capability to defend the Persian Gulf, Washington should not undermine the political viability of existing pro-Western regimes. A large American military presence could trigger xenophobic feelings and an anti-colonial hysteria in Gulf states, subject to manipulation by anti-American groups and the Soviets. The British military presence in Egypt became a rallying point for Nasserists in the 1950s, and Ayatollah Khomeini initially rose to prominence as a political leader in Iran by leading opposition to the granting of extraterritorial legal rights to U.S. servicemen in Iran in the early 1960s.

³² Aryeh Yodfat, "Moscow and the Persian Gulf States," Soviet Analyst, February 9, 1983, p. 4.

The United States should devote the same effort to blunting pro-Soviet coups in the Gulf that it does to preparing for direct Soviet aggression, since coups are a more likely and less risky means of expanding Soviet influence. Local governments must take the primary responsibility for guarding against a coup, but the U.S. should advise friendly governments on techniques for reducing the success of coups.³³ A fast reacting American commando force might be very useful for keeping U.S. friends in power, but the U.S. should take a page out of the Soviet book and rely on local proxies when possible. For instance, a U.S.-backed Jordanian RDF could operate in the Gulf to check a coup without any of the cumbersome political baggage that would hamper an American operation. U.S. forces would then be free to concentrate on blunting direct Soviet threats rather than getting involved in the internal politics of the Gulf states.

The United States also needs to improve its intelligence-gathering capabilities in the Gulf region to be able to anticipate regional developments and future Soviet moves. Washington was hampered by poor intelligence on Iran before the revolution and on Lebanon before the bombing of the marine command post. Lack of good intelligence in a future Persian Gulf crisis could be even more costly to American interests.

Finally, the United States should stand ready to prevent the disruption of the flow of Gulf oil by local states as well as by the Soviet Union. Washington, together with London, Paris and friendly Gulf states, should prepare to defend freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz if Iran makes good on its recent threats to bar the passage of oil tankers.

CONCLUSION

The threat posed by the Soviet Union to the Persian Gulf region is greater than ever because of its improved power projection capabilities, the erosion of Northern Tier barriers to Soviet access to the region, and Moscow's many opportunities to exploit local instability. The Soviet Union has encircled the Gulf with military strongholds and is biding its time for an opening in the center. Given the prevailing trends, the Soviets have little reason to rely on brute military force to kick open Gulf doors--these doors may be opened for them from the inside.

In defending the various houses of the Persian Gulf, the United States must not only keep an eye on the approaches to the Gulf but also be aware of activities within Gulf states. Washington should work as hard to secure the basement windows of Gulf houses against Soviet trespassing as it does to bar the front doors.

James A. Phillips
Senior Policy Analyst

³³ See Stephen David, "Coups and Countercoups," Washington Quarterly, Autumn 1982.