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## MOSCOW'S MOVES IN THE DIRECTION OF THE GULF - SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR

Karen Dawisha

Even as the war between Iran and Iraq became months and not weeks old, it was still not entirely clear which of the two participants Moscow was backing. All indications suggested that the Soviet leaders themselves were puzzled - along with many Western powers - over how to handle what a senior official in Moscow described as "one of the strangest conflicts in human history."<sup>1</sup> For Moscow, the complexities and contradictions inherent in the situation were so enormous as to be farcical. On the surface, one might assume that the Soviets would have backed Iraq, with whom they have a Treaty of Friendship, against Iran, whose revolution could so easily spread to Soviet Central Asian Muslims and who had so vociferously opposed the 'satanic' Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, judging from Soviet actions early in the war, it was certainly far from clear that the Soviets favoured an Iraqi victory. Moscow's 'neutral' posture hurt Iraq more than Iran by denying the former emergency resupplies of equipment and spare parts, and the Soviet decision in the midst of the fighting to proceed with the signature of a friendship treaty with Iraq's other arch-rival, Syria, cast further doubts on Moscow's intentions. Yet an examination of Soviet policy in the months up to the outbreak of hostilities clearly reveals not only that Moscow was undecided about which side to back, but also that following the invasion of Afghanistan, the options open to Soviet policy had never been so limited.

Whatever their reasons for going into Afghanistan, Soviet leaders, by their own admission, were 'surprised' by world reaction to the move. In the months after the invasion, Moscow was forced onto the defensive both to bolster its shattered prestige amongst Islamic and Third World states and also to prevent these countries from accepting the establishment

on their soil of American bases for the rapid deployment force. The presence of troops in Afghanistan may have put the Soviets so near to the Gulf in geographic terms, yet not for many years had Moscow been so far from influencing events in that region.

## I

Soviet efforts to repair their prestige and prevent further American incursions into the Gulf were manifested in several ways. First, Moscow launched a massive propaganda campaign designed to convince the Gulf states that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was not a move against Islam as such. Not since the mid-1950s had Soviet airwaves been so full of Central Asian Muslim notables testifying to Soviet respect for religious freedom. Indeed, ever since the Iranian revolution, with its anti-American fervour, Soviet ideologists had devoted considerable energy to reappraising Islam, noting, even as Literatur'naya gazeta claimed on January 16, in an article entitled 'Islam and Politics', that Fredrich Engels himself "had adamantly supported its progressive role" under certain historical circumstances! The Soviets equally were concerned to convince the Arab and Islamic world that the chances of American intervention in the area had never been so high, and that the United States artificially had manufactured a Soviet threat to disguise its own aggressive designs on Arab oil. Whilst such arguments may still have had adherents in certain parts of the Arab world, it is certain that the invasion of Afghanistan undermined, more thoroughly than any other recent Soviet action, Moscow's credibility as a champion of the non-aligned and national liberation movements.

In its strategy toward individual countries, too, the USSR pursued a policy of denial and loss limitation by trying to prevent the West from reaping the benefits of the decline of Soviet prestige in the area while at the same time often reducing Soviet objectives towards a state to the lowest common denominator in an effort to prevent the total break of relations.

Nowhere was this policy better illustrated than in the case of Iraq, where the Soviets, cognisant of Iraq's growing stature in the Arab world and its bid for leadership of the non-aligned movement, attempted to stress common interests without further exacerbating relations already strained well before the invasion of Afghanistan. Thus, for example, despite growing differences with Iraq over President Saddam Hussein's treatment of the Iraqi Communist Party, the Soviets remained mute, trying not to further upset relations between the two countries. Moscow did not respond to Iraqi claims that the Communists had in the past "turned Iraq into a vast lake of blood" and now "have nothing left but to trade in false and glittering slogans."<sup>2</sup> Instead, the Soviets imposed a total news blackout on domestic events in Iraq, with no major article on that country appearing in a Soviet newspaper or journal in the eight months prior to the outbreak of the war.<sup>3</sup> The Soviets preferred to concentrate on improving trade relations with this valuable hard-currency provider and oil exporter, and in March of this year the two countries signed a protocol further expanding trade links and providing additional quantities of Iraqi oil for Soviet consumers. As a result, Iraqi oil exports to the Soviet Union rose steadily before the outbreak of war into the range of 120,000 - 150,000 barrels per day.<sup>4</sup>

Moscow pursued a similar policy with regard to the two leading moderate states in the region - Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The Soviet leadership repeatedly had made known its interest in improving relations with both countries, emphasizing that while "we do not dispute the existence of philosophical and ideological conflicts, this does not mean that they should necessarily hinder the adoption of a unified stand on political issues of concern to both sides."<sup>5</sup> Opposition to the Egyptian-Israeli treaty certainly was one issue which the Soviets were able to exploit, particularly when the continued failure of American efforts to elicit Saudi and Jordanian participation in the Camp David process led to a rift in these countries' relations with Washington. In particular, Moscow made known its desire to re-establish diplomatic relations with Riyadh, and although rumours circulated in the summer of 1980 that a breakthrough was imminent, nothing came of Soviet efforts.<sup>6</sup>

The same cannot be said of Soviet policy toward the radical Arab states of Syria, Libya and the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen. This is particularly true in the case of Syria where Soviet fortunes improved as pressures on President Hafiz al-Assad mounted. The subversive activities of the Moslem Brothers and the population's increasing disillusionment with the abuses of powers by the President's brother, Rifaat al-Assad, and other members of the Alawite minority, created additional difficulties for the regime. These came, moreover, at a time when Syria was already feeling isolated as a result not only of its unpopular and costly policies in the Lebanon, but also of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty, and the rifts with neighbouring Jordan and Iraq. The Assad regime found itself, therefore, more dependent than ever before on Soviet support, and it showed itself willing to pay the price by refraining from criticism of Soviet actions in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> The Soviets, too, relied increasingly on Syria; and as a result a symbiotic

relationship developed between the two countries, with the Soviets declaring, for example, that "it is Syria which is effectively standing in the way of all attempts to distort the USSR's policy in the Middle East."<sup>8</sup> Reversing any previous doubts about the advisability of supporting an ailing regime, the Soviets poured the most sophisticated weapons into Syria, including a consignment of 100 T-72 tanks which were delivered to Rifaat al-Assad's elite Defence Brigade for use against internal insurgency. During the early months of 1980, Moscow and Damascus signed a whole range of agreements to improve military and political cooperation among themselves, with the communist parties of both Syria and Iraq (the latter now in exile mainly in Damascus) instructed by Moscow to lend full support to the Assad regime.<sup>9</sup>

Then on July 13 Syrian Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam officially stated that due to increased American involvement in the Middle East, Syria had decided to establish "a new kind of qualitative relationship with the Soviet Union, one that would restore balance to the area and help us to face this political, economic and military coalition."<sup>10</sup> Khaddam's announcement confirmed rumours that had been circulating for some weeks about a decisive shift in Syrian foreign policy, and from this time onward, work began on drawing up a treaty of friendship between the two countries. President Assad's visit to Moscow, which ultimately took place on October 8, was announced before the outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq.

In an interview with the Paris Arabic-language daily, Al-Moustaqbal on September 26, the Syrian Minister of Information, Ahmed Iskandar announced that the forthcoming treaty would be "totally different from those concluded between the USSR and other Arab Countries", and would provide for the sending of Soviet troops to Syria in case of need. In the event, the treaty did not openly make such a specific provision.

that the Soviets themselves had conceded that the taking of diplomatic personnel had been held contrary to international law.

## II

Under different circumstances, Moscow's policy of being 'all things to all states' might have succeeded. Soviet objectives were no doubt based on the supposition that the political under-currents in the Middle East had not substantially shifted since the 1978 Baghdad summit offered the spectre of a broadly anti-American coalition of moderate and radical Arab states to isolate Egypt. Yet the Soviets failed both to reconcile some major contradictions in their own policy and to take account of the growing rivalries between various states in the region. Whilst the outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq clearly upset the fragile balance which Moscow had tried to maintain between the various aspects of its policy, that policy after Afghanistan had been rebuilt on such weak foundations that it was almost bound to collapse sooner or later under the shifting sands of Arab politics.

The Soviets incorrectly calculated, for example, that they would benefit directly from the rift between the moderate Arab states and the United States over Camp David. The Soviets can be excused such wishful thinking since both the Saudis and the Jordanians more than once chose to express their displeasure with Washington by threatening improved relations with Moscow. Repeated Saudi leaks of an imminent re-establishment of relations with the USSR would fall within this category, as would King Hussein's decision to receive a Soviet military delegation in Jordan on October 2 and his subsequent announcement that he was to make an official visit to Moscow (the visit was in the event 'postponed').<sup>13</sup>



The reasons for Moscow's failure to achieve an improvement in relations with the moderate states lay in its miscalculation of several factors; one being the genuine antipathy felt in traditional Islamic states to communism, an antipathy multiplied ten-fold by the events in Afghanistan. This antipathy stems not only from these states' ideological objections to communism, but also from their fear of its subversive potential within their own states. They are therefore unlikely to enter into any close relations with either the USSR or its regional allies which might destabilize the internal basis of their own regime. Secondly, Moscow had under-estimated the dependency of the elites in these countries on Western values, Western life-styles and traditional economic links with Europe and the United States. Such is the strength of these links that countries like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the Gulf sheikdoms would continue to favour the West almost irrespective of what kind of policy the United States chose to pursue towards Israel. Relations may deteriorate between these states and Washington, and they may choose to draw closer to European countries as a result, yet the establishment of ties with Moscow is not seen as the logical alternative that it was in the 1950s. If a tactical alliance may have been possible on the single issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict before the Iranian revolution and the invasion of Afghanistan, following these events, at least in the short term, any leader who moved too close to the Soviet Union risked being accused of flaunting Islamic principles.

This is a risk which Syria's Assad decided to take, and there is no doubt that the opposition to his regime from the fundamentalist Muslim Brothers increased with every step that brought him closer to Moscow. Only time will tell whether an alliance with the Soviet Union was the best move for Assad to make in the face of internal opposition and external isolation. A change in his calculations, or even the collapse of his regime, could re-introduce the same strains and conflicts

However, while previous treaties make only general reference to mutual consultation in situations which 'threaten peace', Article Six of the Syrian treaty does take the formulation one important step further by declaring that in the event of a crisis, the two parties "shall immediately enter into contact with each other with a view to co-ordinating their positions and co-operating in order to remove the threat which has arisen and to restore peace."<sup>11</sup> Never before had the Soviets offered such explicit public assurances to an Arab state, apparently providing for direct Soviet military support to bolster Syrian defences in the event of an attack.

During the talks, the two sides also discussed the unity plans between Syria and Libya. The PDRY had also expressed hopes of joining this union (which is to be called "the Arab masses' state" - al-dawla al-~~Hamahiriya~~ al-arabia), and Soviet support for its formation was no doubt connected not only with Moscow's desire to forge as strong a front as possible against US policy in the region, but also with Libya's role as a primary paymaster for Syrian arms. And sure enough, immediately prior to the outbreak of the Gulf war, Libya transferred to the Soviet Union \$1,000m in hard currency for new arms supplies to Syria.<sup>12</sup>

Soviet policy was also aimed at the gradual improvement of relations with Iran. Moscow had done everything possible since Ayatollah Khomeini came to power to encourage Teheran's radical anti-imperialist policy and to foster the same 'good-neighbourly relations' which the Soviets and the Iranians had enjoyed under the Shah. Clearly calculating the immense strategic value which would accrue to the USSR by close relations with Iran, the Soviets went out of their way to pursue policies favourable to the Teheran regime, including the vetoing of the Security Council resolution imposing economic sanctions on Iran to obtain the release of the American hostages. The veto was used despite the fact

which characterised ties between Moscow and Damascus in the 1976-78 period. As the Soviets should by now have discovered in Egypt, Somalia and more recently in Iraq, a treaty is no guarantee against a possible deterioration of relations.

Iraq, with its oil wealth and greater distance from the Arab-Israeli front, arguably has had more options than Syria. While the Iranian revolution and the invasion of Afghanistan both presented challenges, albeit of different types, to the Iraqi regime, President Hussein was not as limited in his policy choices as Syria appeared to be. And the choices he made hopelessly complicated Soviet policy in the Levant and Gulf areas, practically assuring the ultimate failure of Moscow's objectives.

### III

Iraq's bid for Arab leadership took place against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between Moscow and Baghdad over Hussein's suppression of the Iraqi Communist Party. The breakdown of the Baath Party's National Front with the Communists was accompanied by accusations from leading Baath Party officials that Moscow repeatedly had been told that "we will not allow our relations with you to pass through the channel of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) ... And this is a principle which will remain axiomatic in our relations with the friendly Soviet Union."<sup>14</sup> Efforts to diminish the influence of the 'friendly Soviet Union' over Iraqi domestic politics began early in 1978 when the Iraqis requested that Moscow move its embassy from the key buildings near the presidential palace to the Baghdad suburbs. When Soviet staff protested, the Iraqis forced them out by turning off their supplies of electricity and hot water. The hurt silence from Moscow in the face of these challenges did little to assuage the belief that the Communists were being manouvred by Moscow into a position where they could more effect-

ively undermine Baathist rule.

Iraq also alleged that Moscow was withholding military supplies in order to obtain various concessions, including better treatment of the ICP. The Iraqi Baath-party paper Al-Thawra claimed in a series of critical articles following the invasion of Afghanistan that Soviet interference in the domestic politics of Arab states was a direct result of dependency on Soviet weapons. "The Arabs have recently become greatly aware of the need to recognise the link between possession of sophisticated weapons and the requisites for using such weapons in military operations on the one hand and cultural developments on the other."<sup>15</sup> In line with this view, the Iraqi Minister of Information announced in June 1980 that Iraq would seek sources of weapons outside the USSR.<sup>16</sup> In fact this statement only served to confirm what had been Iraqi policy for some time. Despite the friendship treaty between the two countries, the Soviet Union since 1978 had been denying Iraq certain types of weaponry already on display in other Arab capitals, including MiG-25s, Mil-24 helicopter gunships and SAM-9 missile batteries. Additionally while the Iraqis did receive at least five Ilyushin-76s, negotiations for the delivery of ten missile-armed Nanushka fast patrol boats, so necessary for the success of Iraq's bid for supremacy in the Gulf waters, ~~have~~<sup>now</sup> come to nothing.

Baghdad accordingly turned more and more to other countries, and particularly to France, who has already supplied 36 F-1 Mirages (with a further 24 on the way) and Frelon helicopters armed with AM-39 air-to-surface missiles. As a result of these and other sales, Iraq now receives less than two-thirds of its military equipment from Moscow, as compared with 95% at the time the friendship treaty was signed in 1972. And if negotiations succeed both for the delivery of Italian frigates (currently stalled by American refusal to supply the necessary

engines) and for Iraq and Saudi Arabia to finance the production of the new Mirage 2000s, one could expect to see a further decline in Iraqi reliance on Soviet supplies.

A similar situation applies in the realm of economic relations, with Moscow finding itself competing with the West for a share in exploiting Baghdad's mushrooming oil wealth. Yet Iraq has grown increasingly frustrated with Moscow's poor record as a trading partner, complaining, that "the Soviet Union is neither capable nor ready to respond to the Arab's development needs, not even to those capable of paying in cash and hard currency."<sup>17</sup> While the signature of the 1980 Soviet Iraqi-trade protocol brought an increase in Soviet imports from Iraq in the period January to June (jumping to 177.1 million rubles compared with 121.8 million in the same period of 1979), Iraq's own imports from Moscow declined drastically (to 315.2 million rubles compared with 464.6 for the first half of 1979). Iraq's clear preference for importing Western goods was reflected in the dramatic growth of American imports from \$203.2 million in the first six months of 1979 to \$395.8 million for the same period in 1980.<sup>18</sup> Considering that Baghdad and Washington did not have formal diplomatic relations, this was a very impressive shift in trade patterns.

It was Iraq's strategy for expanding its regional role which created the greatest problems for Soviet policy, since in doing so Saddam Hussein felt obliged to distance himself equally from both superpowers. The Pan-Arab Charter pronounced by Iraq in February 1980 set out Hussein's view that the Gulf region in particular and the Arab world in general should be free from all superpower intervention. Whilst not mentioning any specific foreign power, subsequent statements by the deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz made it clear that although Iraq considers the United States to be "enemy No 1 of the Arab struggle" by virtue of its alliance with

Israel, nevertheless "if the Soviet Union occupies any part of the Arab Homeland, I shall look upon this just as I look upon a British, American, French or any other occupier."<sup>19</sup>

The Iraqi leadership also had to deal with threats to its regional strategy from both Damascus and Teheran, thereby further upsetting Soviet plans. Following the Baghdad summit, Iraq and Syria had announced that they were going to bury long-standing differences and unite to face the threat from Israel. Indeed, Hussein even went so far as to visit Moscow in December of that year to patch up relations between the USSR and Syria. Yet as with many similar schemes, the unity proposals faltered on the issue of which of the two leaders, which of the two parties and which of the two countries was going to take the dominant role in the new state. Unable to resolve their differences, relations steadily deteriorated until in the midst of the Gulf war, diplomatic ties were severed altogether. The failure of unity plans thrust Moscow into the midst of yet another inter-Arab struggle and also ended long-standing Soviet hopes of forming a progressive front with these two states as its key members.

If the Soviet Union had difficulty in remaining aloof from the quarrel between the two Baathist rivals, its predicament was exacerbated considerably by the growing conflict between Iran and Iraq. From the moment that Saddam Hussein decided to establish hegemony over the Gulf, it was clear that sooner or later he would have to confront Iran, the region's previous policeman. Furthermore, however, the domestic stability of the ruling Sunni minority in Iraq was being threatened by Iran's open support for a rebellion by Iraq's Shii majority. The announcement made by Iran's Foreign Minister in April 1980 that "we have decided to overthrow the Baathist regime in Iraq"<sup>20</sup> could not long go unanswered in Baghdad, particularly in the face of Iranian backing

for the activities of the radical al-Da'wa party. Hussein had another reason for turning against Iran - namely, the fact that Saudi Arabia and the moderate Gulf sheikhdoms, all ruled by Sunnis, were equally concerned to protect the area from the populist and anti-Western appeals of the Iranian revolution. Thus, by confronting Iran, the Iraqi President could eliminate a challenge to his own domestic position while at the same time fostering his image as the guardian of stability in the Arab world.

The internal dynamics of the Iraqi bid for regional leadership created almost insurmountable difficulties for Soviet policy. Trying to foster ever-improved relations with both Damascus and Teheran, Moscow found itself in conflict with a country with whom it had a treaty of friendship. Not only was Baghdad at odds with both Syria and Iran, but it also chose to support 'Arab' Somalia in its war against Moscow-backed Ethiopia. Additionally, it reversed its policy of support for the PDRY, with Foreign Minister Saddoun Hamadi explaining at a press conference in June 1980 that South Yemen "suffers from instability and is under the influence of a foreign power. Therefore one's relations with it cannot be normal."<sup>21</sup>

Growing Iraqi antipathy to the USSR helped to shape Moscow's policy, for although the Soviet leadership may have declared its neutrality once the Gulf war actually commenced, there can be little doubt that Moscow favoured Iran in the months leading up to the Iraqi invasion. Thus, for example, as early as December 1979, Moscow was at pains to deny a story released in Teheran alleging that in the event of war with Iraq, the Soviet Union, Syria, Libya, the PDRY and other progressive states would aid Baghdad. "It's an incredible story", Moscow responded, "all the countries which supported and still support the Iranian revolution, all of Iran's friends, would become its most bitter enemies."<sup>22</sup> Further, in April Tass accused the Baghdad press of waging an "anti-Iranian campaign"

and quoted Khomeini as saying that the Iraqi government should be put in its place.<sup>23</sup> Since the taking of American hostages, the Soviets repeatedly had warned against an intervention either by the US alone or in alliance with regional powers; and Soviet statements, by not singling out the United States, clearly also were aimed implicitly at Iraq.<sup>24</sup> The contradiction between Soviet efforts to curry Iranian favour, while attempting to maintain at least a public policy of neutrality in that country's dispute with Iraq was fully revealed when only three days before the outbreak of war, and during the same week that Iranian President Bani Sadr's helicopter was strafed near the southern border by Iraqi MiGs, Moscow signed a transit agreement with Teheran, declaring in the official communique that the Soviet Union "supports Iran in its struggle against US imperialism and its allies."<sup>25</sup>

The difficulty for Moscow lay in the fact that although it may have favoured Iran and hoped for improved relations, the Khomeini regime showed practically no indication that it shared the same desire. On the contrary, Khomeini never seemed to tire of declaring that "we are fighting international communism to the same extent that we are fighting the Western world devourers..."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, a whole series of diplomatic incidents culminated in the exchange of open and bitter letters between Foreign Ministers Gotbzadeh and Gromyko, with the former claiming that the Soviets were seeking to subvert the Iranian revolution not only through the Tudeh Party and the Kurdish separatists but also through the Soviet Embassy in Teheran where, Gotbzadeh told Gromyko, "a great many of your officials ... are engaged in espionage operations." Gotbzadeh's demand that the USSR renounce Articles 5 and 6 of the 1921 Treaty of Friendship (allowing the Soviets to enter Iran in the event of Iranian soil being used to prepare for an attack against the USSR) met with a rebuff from Gromyko who stated that contrary to Gotbzadeh's



interpretation, it had repeatedly been proved that "this agreement is mutually beneficial." Thus, for example, during World War Two, "had the Soviet Union not taken the steps it did, Iran would have fallen into Hitler's hands."<sup>27</sup> The possibility that the Soviet Union might once again invoke the treaty to "save" Iran, this time from US imperialism, clearly continued to worry Iranian leaders, affecting their attitude to the Soviets when the war with Iraq did finally break out.

## IV

While Soviet commentators had been able calmly to observe before the war that hostilities between Baghdad and Teheran were caused both by Khomeini's incitement of Iraqi Shiis and by Iraqi support for self-determination in Khuzestan,<sup>28</sup> once Iraq actually invaded, Moscow seemed less concerned with analysing the root cause of the fighting than with putting a stop to it. Soviet displeasure with the Iraqi action, and with Iraq's almost certain failure to give Moscow advance notice of its intentions, was conveyed to Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz when he went to Moscow as Hussein's personal envoy on the day of the invasion. Aziz was not received by any of the top Soviet leaders (unlike in France, his next stopover, where he held talks with President Giscard d'Estaing); and he had to content himself with a two and one-half hour meeting with Boris Ponomarev, Party Secretary in charge of the International Department, and Viktor Mal'tsev, first deputy Foreign Minister. The official Tass description (it was not even called a *communiqué*) of the meeting left no doubt of the Soviet view, noting merely that "a conversation took place" between Ponomarev and Aziz "who is in the Soviet Union for a brief visit. During the conversation pressing problems of the international situation were discussed."<sup>29</sup> There was no mention of the visit being official, of Aziz having been invited, of any agreement between the two

sides, or even that the discussions took place in accordance with treaty provisions calling for mutual consultation.

It did not take Moscow long to realize that using almost any scenario for the development or outcome of the war, the Soviet Union stood to gain little and risked losing much of its remaining influence. Soviet leaders calculated first of all that an overwhelming Iranian loss might lead to Khomeini's replacement by a more pro-Western leadership while at the same time cementing Iraq's shift away from reliance on the Soviet Union. This fear was clearly expressed in the Izvestia editorial alleging that

"Certain persons in the West do not conceal their hopes that the present Iranian-Iraqi armed conflict will reduce the ability of the Republic of Iran to resist the imperialist pressure which is being exerted on it. They also hope that the involvement of Iraq in military operations, against Iran will enable the West to achieve changes in Iraqi foreign policy in the West's favour." 30

If the Soviet leaders believed that they probably would not gain from an Iraqi victory, neither could they be sure of benefitting from an Iraqi defeat, particularly if Moscow contributed to that defeat by refusing to supply Iraq with emergency spare parts and equipment. In the first weeks of the war, the Soviets showed a willingness to continue shipments of arms agreed under previous contracts, but no massive airlift was mounted. Thus in the event of defeat, Saddam Hussein could be expected by Moscow to blame failings in both Soviet weaponry and support. Indeed, even as the Iraqi advance continued, at the end of the first month of fighting, President Hussein was already complaining not only that the Iranians had more and better aircraft than Iraq but also that "their artillery pieces have a greater range, fire heavier shells and are more numerous than Iraq's." He went on to observe:

Their tanks are among the most sophisticated Western tanks. Their navy is greater in number and can operate at a greater range than Iraq's naval forces.

Then, ignoring the number of Iraqi officers who had been trained by the Russians, the Iraqi President complained of a further disadvantage insofar as "all of their (Iran's) officers ... have received training from the most experienced Americans and their allies."<sup>31</sup> Soviet leaders might legitimately have wondered, upon reading these remarks, why Hussein ordered an invasion of Iran in the first place if he really believed that his adversary was better trained and equipped.

Moscow also calculated that the longer the war lasted, the greater were the chances of it escalating or spilling over and affecting Soviet policy toward other areas. For example, the bifurcation of the Arab world into two camps supporting either Iraq or Iran became more overt and rigid as the fighting continued, thereby insuring that enmity and division would spread throughout the area and outlast the conflict itself, making it much more difficult for the Soviet Union - or the United States - to pursue even-handed relations with both groups. In particular, given Syrian support for Iran during the conflict, Moscow could not expect, at the war's end, to maintain treaty relations with Syria and Iraq simultaneously as long as both Assad and Hussein remained in power. Thus Soviet commentaries repeatedly echoed Brezhnev's views that the war would aid only the imperialists since it is they who "would like very much to strike a crushing blow at Arab unity".<sup>32</sup>

The worry that the war would lead to America's use of its rapid deployment force featured in Soviet reactions to the outbreak and development of the hostilities. The Soviets responded particularly forcefully to the dispatch of *aircraft equipped with* AWACS to Saudi Arabia (repeating Iranian Prime Minister Rijai's demand that they be withdrawn) and the development of US contingency plans to ensure the continued flow of oil.

Brezhnev condemned the United States, bluntly declaring "Hands off these events", and saying that "the Persian Gulf area, just as any other region of the world, is a sphere of vital interests belonging to the states which are situated there and not to others. And no one has the right to interfere from outside in their affairs and to appear in the role of their guardians or self-styled guards."<sup>33</sup>

The public position of neutrality declared by both Moscow and Washington at the outset of hostilities became increasingly fragile, with the risk of superpower involvement growing almost daily. Rumours that Soviet ambassador Vinogradov had met Prime Minister Rijai to express his government's readiness to supply weapons were denied by Moscow, as were claims that the Soviets had allowed Syria and Libya to use Soviet air space to supply arms to Teheran.<sup>34</sup> It is unlikely that the Soviets were prepared to supply Iran openly with arms. Yet they were willing apparently to give Iran guarantees of non-interference which allowed the transfer of some Iranian <sup>forces</sup> from the northern border with the USSR to the southern front.

If the Soviets believed, moreover, as they appeared to in the first month of the fighting, that Iraq was pursuing objectives which served American interests, then it certainly would not have been inconsistent with Soviet objectives to work quietly to forestall an Iranian defeat. A clause in the joint communique issued at the end of talks between Brezhnev and Assad stated that both sides "supported Iran's inalienable right to determine its destiny independently and without any foreign interference",<sup>35</sup> a clear reference to Iraq which at that time was forty miles inside Iranian territory. It is not inconceivable that the two sides discussed using Syria as a conduit for supplies to Iran.

The possibility that the United States would switch from a position of declared neutrality to overt support for Iran in order to obtain the release of American hostages was another scenario which increased Soviet convictions that only 'imperialism' stood to gain from the conflict. The Soviets equally were worried by Israeli statements that they "could not sit idly by" and feared that the Begin government might use the Gulf war as a pretext for strikes against neighbouring Arab states. Using practically any possible outcome, therefore, Moscow calculated that it stood to gain little from the war, irrespective of its outcome, and risked having to make a choice between accepting a further diminution in its own influence or intervening militarily to protect its interests. However, the possibility of a Soviet military move was always very low, as reflected by the fact that Moscow even refrained from issuing its time-honoured statement declaring that the USSR could not be indifferent to events taking place near its borders.

# V

Soviet behaviour during the war was therefore predetermined by the failings and contradictions of its policy pursued in the months leading up to the outbreak of hostilities. Moscow had failed to develop a coherent strategy to recover the prestige and influence lost after the invasion of Afghanistan. Its isolation from the area, its inability to develop a set of objectives to determine the direction and focus of longer-term Soviet policy was aptly illustrated by the October Revolution slogans issued in mid-October 1980. Having singled out various Third World countries for praise, the Soviets unusually failed to offer fraternal greetings to any single Arab country, despite having treaty relations with three of them.

Soviet policy is likely to remain on the defensive for some time. The oil-rich Arab states now can set their own terms for relations with both East and West; and through their aid to poorer Arab countries, they can effectively eradicate the need of any Arab regime to accept unequal relations with either of the two superpowers. Furthermore, to the extent that the USSR traditionally has been the chief or even the sole beneficiary of America's pro-Israel policy, the shift in European attitudes to the Palestinian problem, while vexing to the United States, is equally if not more deleterious to Soviet policy. Clearly, the overwhelming proportion of Soviet influence in the area derives from indigenous anti-American attitudes generated primarily from Washington's pro-Israel policy. A European alternative for the Arab states, <sup>therefore,</sup> would affect mainly Soviet influence in the region. Thus Moscow was quick to condemn the Venice summit agreement statement on the Middle East as being insufficiently radical and has interestingly enough been particularly caustic about the growth of French influence in the area, commenting for example that French attempts to "cast a shadow on Soviet policy in the region were doomed to failure."<sup>36</sup>

This is not to say, however, that the Soviets are incapable of expanding their influence in the region. As the recent treaty with Syria shows, an alliance with Moscow is still regarded as protection against domestic instability and external threats and isolation. President Assad had been pursuing a quiet 'open door' policy in the years after the October 1973 War, gradually expanding his trade links with the West, until by 1978 West Germany had become Syria's major trading partner. The shifts in inter-Arab alliances and the growth of American reliance on a military presence in the Gulf as an alternative to a comprehensive political solution to the Palestinian problem increased Syria's isolation and forced Assad closer to Moscow.

Syria's decision to sign a treaty with Moscow in order to 'restore the balance' in the area which Assad claimed had been upset by the establishment of US bases illustrates the central dilemma of American policy. The pursuit of an overt military posture has often in the past proved counter-productive to the maintenance and extension of influence in the Middle East by any great power. No doubt such a posture may be necessary in the final resort, and in the event of a Soviet incursion the presence of an American quick-strike force almost certainly would be welcomed by indigenous rulers. But in the absence of a clear perception by these leaders of a tangible Soviet threat, the establishment of an overwhelmingly superior US military presence could come to be seen more as a reflection of America's own economic and strategic ambitions.

It would be a callous observer who concluded that the invasion of Afghanistan was the best thing that ever happened to American policy in the Middle East. Yet it did undeniably smooth the way for establishing US bases in the area. However, the memory of Afghanistan will not live forever; and US policy-makers must consider whether, by countering the Soviet threat with such a visible military presence, their own policy might provide, in the not so distant future, the best chances for the renewal of that very Soviet influence which they seek to exclude.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in The Observer (London), October 19, 1980.
2. Al-Thawra (Baghdad) February 2, 1980.
3. Nor has Iran been mentioned in general articles dealing with Soviet-Arab friendship. See, for example, Yuri Glukhov, "Solid Foundations for Soviet-Arab Friendship", International Affairs (Moscow), January 1980, pp.95-101 which deals with Syria, Libya and the PDRY, without however mentioning Iraq.
4. The Middle East (London), August 1980, p.54; Moscow Radio, March 5, 1980 in BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts (hereafter referred to as SWB), SU/W1074/A/2
5. Moscow Radio, February 17, 1980, SWB, SU/6349/A4/2.
6. Riyadh radio in the evening of July 21 (SWB, ME/6478/A/1) carried a government statement officially denying the report carried in a Lebanese paper that morning in which Foreign Minister Sa'ud was quoted as saying that his country was thinking of establishing relations with Moscow. Many credit Iraq with encouraging such a move on the grounds that none of the Arab states should rely solely on either East or West.
7. Syria abstained from the United Nations General Assembly vote condemning the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, while the PDRY actually voted against. Also Syria refrained from attending the Islamabad conference of Muslim states convened to discuss the invasion. Responding to Arab criticism of the Syrian stand, Prime Minister Dr. Aba al-Ra'uf al-Kasm explained that "the fact that we did not go to Islamabad does not mean that we accept the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan." Rather Syrian priorities would remain with the liberation of her own territories from Israel. (Al-Sayed (Beirut) February 20, 1980). It is interesting to note that this is exactly the same explanation given by Egypt's former President Gamal Abd al-Nasser for his reluctance to condemn the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.
8. Moscow Radio, March 14, 1980, SWB, SU/6372/A4/3.
9. An agreement between the Ba'ath Party and the CPSU was signed in February (Damascus Radio, February 9, 1980, SWB, SU/6342/A4/1). Iraqi Communist Party support was announced by Damascus Radio on July 22 (SWB, ME/6479/A/1). Soviet pressure on the Syrian Communist party to support the Assad regime was agreed to by its pro-Moscow leader Khalid Bagdash, but has led to a split in the party. On the military front, a variety of delegations were exchanged agreeing on, among other things, measures to protect the 2500 Soviet advisors in Syria from further attacks by the Moslem Brothers (Financial Times, January 22, 1980); and the provision of Soviet military instructors to train the Syrians in the use of MiG-25s and T-72s (Al-Anba (Kuwait) March 8, 1980). In June and July a number of Soviet military delegations visited Syria to discuss improved political cooperation between the two armies, increased naval links, and further military education for Syrian officers. Some reports also allege that an intelligence agreement was signed designed to provide Assad with Soviet assistance in the defeat of internal opposition (Damascus Radio, July 5, SWB, ME/6464/i; Sunday Times, Sunday Telegraph, July 6; Daily Telegraph, July 7 and 14).



10. Damascus Radio, July 13, 1980, SWB, ME/6471/A/3. Articles in both the Damascus Ba'ath party daily Tishrin and the Syrian-controlled Lebanese daily Al-Safir had hinted at such a change ever since the last week of June.
11. Pravda, October 9, 1980.
12. The Times, September 22, 1980. The 1978 Baghdad summit agreed that Syria should be provided with all the aid necessary to restore the military balance with Israel, and allocated approximately \$2,000 millions per annum for that purpose. However, Iraqi aid to Syria (amounting to \$700 millions per year) could not be expected to outlast the break in diplomatic relations between the two countries in early October. As a result Libyan willingness to pay hard currency to the Soviets for Syrian arms was important not only for the Syrians but also for the Soviets, since it is reliably estimated that approximately one-half of the Soviet hard currency deficit is financed by Arab payments for arms.
13. The military delegation was headed by Deputy Chief of Staff of Soviet Ground Forces Sergeyev, and it inspected Jordanian army installations and bases in addition to holding talks with Hussein. SWB, September 29, 1980, ME/6535/A/3 and SWB, October 4, 1980, SU/6540/A4/3. Tass announced on October 3 (SWB, SU/6541/ that Hussein was to make an official visit to Moscow in mid-October.
14. Interview with Naim Haddath, Member of the Revolutionary Command Council and Secretary General of the National Front, Al-Dostour (London), No. 425, April 2-8, 1979, pp.6-7.
15. Al-Thawrah, January 3, 1980.
16. Al-Nahar, June 21, 1980.
17. Al-Thawrah, January 3, 1980.
18. Soviet figures are taken from "Vneshnyaya trgovlya SSSR za yanvar'-iyun' 1980g.," Supplement to Vneshnyaya trgovlya, September, 1980. US figures are from Middle East Economic Digest (London), September 19, 1980, p.65.
19. The Middle East (London), August 1980, p.29.
20. The New York Times, April 4, 1980.
21. Al-Jumhuriya, June 11, 1980.
22. Moscow Radio, December 25, 1979, SWB, SU/6310/A4/1-2.
23. The Financial Times, April 11, 1980.
24. Tass, for example, on March 25, 1980 officially repeated Brezhnev's previous warning (Pravda, November 19, 1979) that "any interference, especially military interference in the affairs of Iran ... would be regarded by the Soviet Union as a matter affecting its security interests". SWB, SU/6381/A4/2.
25. Moscow Radio, September 19, 1980, SWB, SU/6529/A4/2.
26. "Speech by Ayatollah Khomeini, March 21, 1980" Survival, July-August, 1980, p.17

27. Gotbzadeh's letter to Gromyko was broadcast on Teheran Radio, August 14, 1980, SWB, ME/6499/A/5-9. Gromyko's reply was broadcast by Moscow Radio in Persian, August 28, 1980, SWB, SU/6510/A4/1. Following this exchange of letters, there was another diplomatic incident resulting in the closure of the Soviet Consul in Rasht near the Caspian Sea in Gilan province. In response to Soviet complaints that slogans had been painted on the walls accusing the consulate of being a "nest of spies", local authorities had responded saying this was a natural reaction "of a Muslim nation against the massacres which are being carried out by the Soviets in Afghanistan." Teheran Radio, September 18, 1980. SWB, ME/6528/A/5-6.
28. In a Moscow television discussion on August 12, 1980 between V. Zorin, A. Bovin of Izvestia and N. Shishlin of "a department" of the Party's Central Committee. SWB, SU/6498/A4/2.
29. Tass, September 22, 1980, SWB, SU/6531/A4/1.
30. Izvestia, September 23, 1980.
31. Baghdad Radio, October 18, 1980, SWB, ME/6553/A/11.
32. Brezhnev's speech at the Kremlin dinner for Hafez al-Assad on October 8, Pravda, October 9, 1980.
33. Ibid.
34. Iranian President Bani-Sadr reportedly received assurances of non-interference from the Soviet ambassador to Iran the day after fighting broke out. The following day the Iranian ambassador in Moscow Mohamed Mokri, in a meeting with First Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Mal'tsev, demanded, contrary to the instructions received from Teheran, that the Soviet government openly support Iran by condemning Iraqi aggression and stopping arms supplies. This meeting apparently led the Soviets to believe that Iran might be willing to accept some Soviet equipment, and ambassador Vinogradov was duly instructed to seek a meeting with the Iranian Prime Minister for this purpose. In the meantime, however, the Iranian government came to know of the contents of Mokri's meeting and sent him the following telegram: "HE Mokri, considering your stance during the past few days which did not reflect the views of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as agreed by the Prime Minister, you are hereby recalled to Teheran." (Teheran Radio, October 2, 1980, SWB, ME/6539/i). Vinogradov's meeting with Rijai went ahead, and according to the Iranian press, the ambassador's offer of "military equipment" was rejected (Teheran Radio, October 4, 1980, SWB, ME/6541/i).
35. Pravda, October 11, 1980.
36. Sovetskaya Rossiya, October 3, 1980.