

Md. Golam Mostafa

SAUDI-SOVIET RELATIONS : PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Introduction

In the present spectrum of international relations where more than a hundred and sixty sovereign independent nations interact, the relation between two individual states may seem to have insignificant importance. All the states are not equally powerful or cannot influence the course of international events with equal gravity because of sharp polarization of international relations and dependency relationships. Relation between two powerful actors in the international arena, however, is not only important for the respective countries but for the overall complexion of contemporary international relations. In that context the relation between Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union—the leaders of two ideological worlds—is of paramount importance. The relation between these two states is important for a number of reasons. (a) Both the countries are deeply committed to two diagonally opposite ideologies—Islamic and Marxist—and have significant influence on the two respective blocs—Islamic and Socialist. So a mutual understanding and development of bilateral relations between them may contribute a lot toward creating a healthy international atmosphere and strengthening peace and security. (b) The geographic and strategic locations of both the countries can also hardly be over-emphasised. The Soviet Union occupying about one-sixth of the whole territory of the world stands on the crossroads of all important strategic issues and events or has indirect control over them. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia with an area of 2.15 million sq. km. occupies about one sixth of territory of the whole Arab world and about two-thirds of the Arabian

Peninsula. Her strategic location in Near East, where about half of the total oil of the non-communist world are reserved, is also very important. She also is on the crossroads of Asia, Africa, Mediterranean area and the Indian Ocean. (c) The political importance of both the countries is also of crucial importance. Both the countries are the founding members of the United Nations. One is a superpower having influence on the events and issues all over the world, the other is a regional power having significant political, economic and ideological influence in the Arab and Islamic world. (d) The economic importance of both of them can also hardly be over-estimated. Soviet Union with its enormous human and natural resources produces about one-fourth of the total industrial output of the world, while Saudi Arabia with her huge petro-dollars plays a significant role in the development activities of the Third World countries, particularly in the Islamic World.

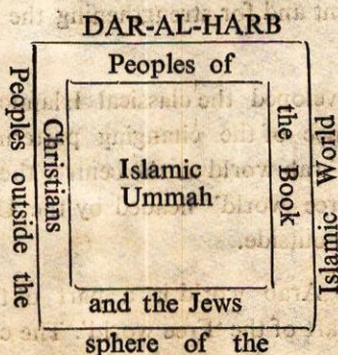
Now these two countries stand on two antagonistic poles of modern international relations. One does not recognise religion, rather considers it as "medium of exploitation" and "opium of the mass" and believes in worldwide communist movement based on Marxism-Leninism, while the other one is based on fundamental Islamic principles and considers the *Quran* and the *Sunnah* as the basis of the constitution of the country. Nevertheless, the political developments in the Arab world, the creation of Israel, its continuous aggressive, and intransigent attitude backed by the total US support and tumultuous events in the Middle East compelled the parties to review their respective positions. In recent years some positive trends are also being observed in Saudi-Soviet relations. Saudi Arabia which once categorically refused to develop any relation with the communist Russia now considers Soviet Union as "a friend of the Arab nations". On the other hand, the Soviets also seem to be flexible in their relations with Saudi Arabia.

In this backdrop the main objective of the paper is to examine the problems related to Saudi-Soviet relations and to reflect upon the prospects for the future by analysing the present trend of their relations.

I. Ideological Differences

Since the roots of the present problem of Saudi-Soviet relations lie in the very basic ideological differences, an objective analysis of the issue needs understanding of both the classical and Marxist viewpoints on religion and on the world as a whole.

Islam divides the world into two categories, DAR-AL-ISLAM (the territory of ISLAM) and DAR-AL-HARB (the territory of war). Within DAR-AL-ISLAM in addition to Muslim community, called *Ummah*, other members of tolerated religions called *Ahl-al-Kitab* (the peoples of Book, Christian, Jews and others) are allowed to live provided they accept the political hegemony of Islam and pay a special tax in lieu of serving in the armed forces. Islam does not recognise the legal status of the DAR-AL-HARB and it is considered outside the law. However, its political authority within its own territory is accepted. According to the Islamic classical theory DAR-AL-HARB would be absorbed ultimately in DAR-AL-ISLAM through the process of *Jihad*. So theoretically a state of war between Islam and communism, which does not believe in any religion, always exists.¹ David E. Long interpreted the classical Islamic theory in the international affairs in the following manner :



1. For details see, Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations* (Baltimore), 1966, p. 2.

He placed the Islamic community at the centre, the Peoples of Book on the periphery of DAR-AL-ISLAM and the rest of the world including the communists in the DAR-AL-HARB² outside the sphere of the Islamic world.

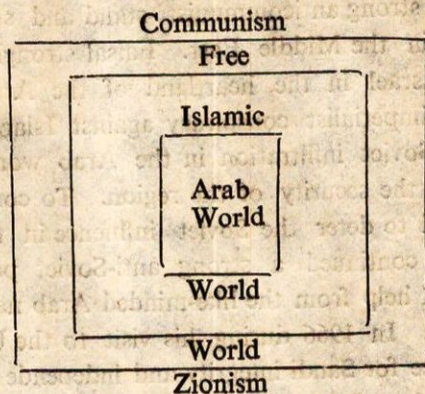
The eminent Islamic scholars in 1920s and 1930s also made the analogy of inherent conflict between Islam and communism. But in practice, with the changing political scenario, the classical Islamic theory of world view was modified through a long process of historical evolution. Two World Wars, the emergence of communist Russia and later on, the formation of world socialist system, the creation of Zionist Israel in the heartland of the Arab world with the active support of the West headed by the United States and the fall of the colonial era and emergence of dozens of independent states in Asia and Africa greatly influenced the Saudi vision of the world. Although the present Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established by King Abdulaziz in 1932, Saudi Arabia could not develop any coherent and active foreign policy either in regional or in international context until late sixties. Late King Faisal, who is considered as the most dynamic leader of modern Saudi Arabia was actually the architect of Saudi foreign policy. He not only developed a coherent and consistent foreign policy but was also able to use its huge oil resources successfully both for economic development and for strengthening the international position of the Kingdom.

King Faisal developed the classical Islamic theory on world view taking the cognizance of the changing patterns of international relations. He put the Arab world at the centre, then followed the Islamic world and the 'Free world' headed by the US. Communism and Zionism were kept outside.

In Faisal's view Arab world is a part of the Islamic world and Islamic world is a part of the 'Free world'. The common thing that can

2. David E. Long, "King Faisal's World View", *King Faisal and Modernization of Saudi Arabia*, Williard A. Belinged. (London) 1980, p. 176.

be observed in both of the viewpoints classic and modern—is that Islam and communism are mutually exclusive.³



On the other hand, Marxism believes that, "all religions are nothing but fantastic reflections in the brains of the people about those superficial powers which dominate in their day-to-day life".⁴ The Marxists always define religion from the point of view of social revolutions through class struggles. According to them religion is a product of class struggle in the society which serves the interest of a particular class in a definite period of history. As Lenin wrote, "from the standpoint of Marxism religions and churches serve to defend exploitation and to befuddle the working class."⁵ The Marxists strongly believe that in the long run all nations will come under communism through revolutionary means. In their point of view communism and capitalism are in a perpetual collision and mutually exclusive and since the Islamic world is presumably included in the world capitalist system (according to Faisal's world view), logically Islam and communism are antagonistic in character.⁶

3. *Ibid*, p. 181.

4. Karl Marks and F. Angels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 20, p. 328.

5. V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, (Progress Publishers, Moscow), Vol. 17, p. 554,

6. David E. Long, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

The ideological differences between Saudi Arabia and Soviet Union are often reflected in their foreign policy perceptions and overtures so far bilateral relations are concerned. In 1950s and 1960s Saudi Arabia adopted a strong anticommunist stand and strongly criticised the Soviet policy in the Middle East. Faisal strongly believed that the creation of Israel in the heartland of the Arab world was a communist-zionistimperialist conspiracy against Islam and characterised the growing Soviet infiltration in the Arab world as disastrous and dangerous to the security of the region. To counter the spread of communism and to deter the Soviet influence in the area Saudi Arabia not only continued a strong anti-Soviet policy but at the same time sought help from the like-minded Arab nations and from the United States. In 1966 during his visit to the US, King Faisal sought US gurantee for Saudi integrity and independence. In the joint communique President Johnson and King Faisal noted the danger of international communism and agreed to adopt necessary ways and means to protect the 'Free world' from the communist threat. They

The idological differences between Saudi Arabia and Soviet Union are often reflected in their foreign policy perceptions and seriously affect bilateral relations.

also came to the conclusion that to fight effectively with communism it was required to help the regional weak states so that they could stand against communism.⁷ On the other hand, the Soviets strongly criticised Saudi Arabia, described the Saudi regime as "the leader of Arab reactionaries" and local agent of American imperialism". They tried to exert influence in the region by providing arms and radicalising some Arab regimes and by supporting various clandestine radical organizations in the Arab world.

7. V.L. Bodianski and M.S. Lazarev *Saudovskaya Arabia Posle Sauda* (Saudi Arabia after Saudi), Moscow 1967, p. 37.

In such ideological and historical backdrop the Saudi-Soviet relations could not be developed in the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, inspite of basic ieological differences the issues and events in the Middle East seriously influenced the Saudi-Soviet relations. So, for an objective analysis of Saudi-Soviet relations the issue should be viewed from a broader perspective of regional political developments.

II. Regional Political Development and the Saudi-Soviet Relations

a. *Creation of Israel* : The creation of Israel and the total US support to the Zionist state put the Saudis in a difficult situation. According to Faisal's world view the United States as the leader of the 'Free world' had been accepted as the sole protector of Arab and Islamic interests but in reality it proved to be inconsistent. The US became the main protector of Zionist interests in the region and countinued to support Israeli aggression in the Arab world which eventually helped to radicalise many Arab regimes and brought them closer to Moscow. It was also difficult for the Saudis to reconcile with the policy persuaded by the West in general and could not bring Saudi Arabia closer to Soviet Union, rather the Soviet support to the UN partition plan of Palestine⁸ and Soviet recognition of Isreal was strongly criticised and considered as a communist-zionist conspiracy in the Middle East.

b. *Arab Nationalist Pursuations and Emergence of Radical Arab States* : Arab nationalist movements gained credence in 1950s and 1960s. The July revolution of Egypt in 1962 which overthrew the monarchy and established the Arab Socialist Republic based on pan-Arab nationalism⁹ was not welcomed by Saudi Arabia. Egypt under Nasser was considered as Soviet proxy and foothold of Soviet "expansionist policy" in the region.

8. According to the UN partition plan of 1947, 14,100 sq. km i.e. about 56 percent of the total territory of Palestine were allotted for the establishment of Israel and 11,100 sq. km. for Arab state of Palestine. For details see, *New Times*, No. 33, August 1981, p. 13.

9. P.J. Vatikiotis, *Nasser and His Generation*, London 1978, p. 235.

The revolution in Iraq in 1958 ended the rule of Hashemite Kingdom and brought an alliance of loose grouping of communists, Kurds, Baathists, National Democrats and Arab nationalists to power.¹⁰ The Saudis looked at the revolution with great suspicion and it was widely believed that the Soviets had a hand behind the changes in Iraq. Kuwait emerged as a sovereign state in 1962. The immediate Soviet recognition and establishment of diplomatic relation with the new state was considered by the Saudis as another step towards Soviet expansion in the region. The Baathist¹¹ revolutions in Syria and Iraq in late 1960s helped the Soviets in further consolidating their position in the Arab world.¹² The victory of pro-Soviet groups in Aden in 1968 and the overthrow of monarchy from Libya in 1969 were also net gains for the Soviets in the region. Later on, with the success of pro-Soviet elements in Ethiopia the Soviets were able to build up some tacit strategic consensus in the Red Sea area. Meanwhile, the Soviets continued their support to the clandestine radical organizations in the area including the Popular Front for Liberation of Arab Gulf and the separatist groups in the Dhofar region of Oman. All these Soviet acts and manoeuvres made the Saudis more suspicious about the Soviet intention and brought her closer to the orbit of US influence.

c. Egyptian Factor: The fact that Egypt became the citadel of Arab nationalist movements and gradually developed a friendly relation with the Soviet Union was not liked by the Saudis. The Saudi-Egyptian relation further deteriorated in early 1960s with the outbreak of civil war in Yemen. In the long six years of the war the Saudis supported the royalists while Egypt, backed by the Soviet Union, supported the republicans. In fact, one of the main objectives of Saudi policy

10. *Iraq : The Contemporary State* edited by Tim Niblock, London, 1983, p. 3.

11. Ba'th means "resurrection" or "renaissance". The name was given by Michel Aflak, a Syrian Christian to Progressive Nationalist Party he created in the 1940s. The aim of the Ba'th is to establish a secular state based on Arab nationalism.

12. Edger O. Ballance, *The Third Arab Israeli War*, London 1972, p. 17.

in the Arab world was to neutralise Egypt and eventually to return her to the pro-western bloc and thus to weaken the Soviet influence in the area. The tragic defeat of the Arabs in the Third Arab-Israeli war in 1967 created a congenial atmosphere for improving Saudi-Egypt relations. The Saudis came forward with the commitment of huge financial assistance to Egypt and other war affected countries while Egypt agreed to withdraw her troops from Yemen.

In fact, after 1967 the centre of gravity of Arab politics shifted from Cairo to Riyadh. On the other hand, the failure of Soviet weapons in the Arab hands lowered the Soviet position and image in the Arab world. The death of President Nasser and the open door policy of President Sadat made the Soviets more worried and anxious about their future in Egypt. So as a precautionary measure the Soviets hurriedly signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Egypt in 1971. But ultimately it could not salvage them. In 1972 President Sadat expelled 20,000 Soviet experts from Egypt. However, the Soviet prestige increased and their lost position was regained in 1973 when the Egyptians with the Soviet arms were able to cross the Suez Canal. The Arab oil embargo against West was also received by the Soviets enthusiastically.¹³

The Soviets taking the advantage of deteriorating Arab-US relations promptly tried to improve relations with the conservative Arab states particularly with Saudi Arabia. But it could hardly bring any positive result. Moscow was not that successful in capitalising the relatively favourable conditions created in early 1970s. The Soviet prestige gained in the fourth Arab-Israeli war quickly evaporated in the heat of Arab quarrels and in the light of Sadat's decision to turn away from Moscow. Again Soviet Union failed to make an entry into Saudi Arabia because it appeared that the Kingdom's suspicion of communism was stronger than her anger to the United States. In 1975 after the death of King Faisal the Soviets expected that the new King would be a less implacable adversary and hoped to improve relations with Saudi Arabia. But they were disappointed and

13. *Pravda*, 25 October 1973.

and the new King carried out the policy of his predecessor and continued to help the anti-Soviet regimes in Asia and Africa. The Saudi-Soviet relations seriously deteriorated in 1976 when Egypt unilaterally abrogated the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union and went ahead with the US and Israel. The Soviets strongly criticised the Egyptian move and accused that the Saudi financial clout played the key role in changing the Egyptian policy. They also warned both the US and Saudi Arabia that they would have to bear all possible consequence resulting from Egypt's policy reorientation.¹⁴

d. Camp David Accords : Although the Camp David Accords marked a serious setback to Soviet policy in the Middle East, the strong Arab opposition to the Accords encouraged Moscow and the latter seemed to have tried best in crystalising the anti-Egypt Arab sentiments for her global interests in the region. The Arab boycott of Egypt and imposition of political and economic embargo on her in protest of Camp David Accords was welcomed by Soviet Union and the Arab move was described as "a major achievement for the patriotic forces in the Arab world."¹⁵ In fact, the Camp David Accords brought an opening for the Soviets in the region. In October 1979 Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with South Yemen and in 1980 a similar treaty was signed with Syria. At the same time Soviet Union tried to persuade the conservative Arab states through her allies with a view to improving relations with them. However, such efforts could not bring fundamental changes and Saudi-Arabia eventually refrained from joining the anti-Egyptian campaign designed by the Soviet Union.

e. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Iran-Iraq War : Another Soviet opening in the region appeared in early 1979 with the fall of the Shah of Iran — the bastion of western power in the Gulf. The revolution in Iran seriously frightened the Saudis who were already disillusioned over American failure to react effectively to the Soviet

14. *Azia-i-Afrika Sivodnia (Asia and Africa Today)* Moscow, 1976, No. 6, p. 3.
15. *Pravda*, 6 November 1978.

build-up in the Horn of Africa. Shah's Iran was a reliable partner of Saudi Arabia in the anti-communist campaign in the region. Moreover, the Soviet attitude toward the Islamic revolution in Iran and her support to Ayatollah Khomeini made the Saudis more suspicious about Soviet intention in the region. However, with the subsequent developments in the area including the growing spread of religious fanaticism and fundamentalist elements the Saudis appeared to have been more afraid of the consequences of Iranian revolution than the threat of Soviet communism. Soviet Union tried to improve relations with Saudi Arabia by capitalizing this Saudi position. The Soviet press and media ceased calling the Saudi regime epitome of feudal reaction, praised its strong opposition to Egypt and rejection of the Camp David Accords and often recalled the fact that they were the first nation to recognise Saudi Arabia. Even many Soviets advocated for the renewal of their good relations of 1920s with the Kingdom.¹⁶ On the other hand, the Saudis seemed to have lowered tone in criticising Soviet policy and occasionally they recognised the importance of Soviet Union in World politics and appreciate her role in defusing the Arab-Israeli dispute. However, hopes raised by these apparently favourable gestures were belied with the outbreak of war between North and South Yemen in 1979 and with the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan in December 1979. The outbreak of Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 made the Saudis more concerned because they were afraid of a possible alliance between communist Russia and fundamentalist Iran against the Arabs on an anti-American platform. But the Soviets appeared to have failed to woo Tehran, rather they were committed to the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Iraq and continued to supply arms which were, reportedly, financed by the Saudis. Although a close scrutiny of the Iran-Iraq war suggests that the war has so far failed in bringing any major change in Saudi-Soviet relations, observers widely believe

16. I.P. Believ, "Saudi Arabia : What Next", *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Moscow, 31 January 1979.

that the nature and future course of the war may seriously affect the relations between Saudi Arabia and Soviet Union.

f. *The Afghan Issue* : No other issue has affected the Saudi-Soviet relations so severely as the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia strongly criticised the move and described the Soviet action as, "shamefull interference" and "violation of international ethics".¹⁷ In January 1980 Saudi Arabia became the first country that announced to boycott the Moscow Olympic Games as a protest of Soviet action in Afghanistan. At the initiative of Saudi Arabia an extraordinary meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Conference was held in Pakistan in January 1980 and the participants strongly criticised the Soviet move and demanded immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Soviet troops from Afghanistan.¹⁸ Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries that broke off relations with the Soviet-backed regime of Babrak Karmal and are providing active support including financial, to the Afghan Mujahedins in their struggle against Soviet occupation.

g. *The Palestinian Issue* : A close observation of Saudi-Soviet relation suggests that there are only few issues where the two countries have identical view points or have commonality of interests. Although, on the Palestinian issue both Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia appear to have common stand, analysis show that there are basic perception gaps and the parties have different stakes on the issue. Saudi leadership was convinced that zionism and communism were alternate faces of international conspiracy and zionism was described "as the mother of communism" which "helped to spread communism all around world".¹⁹ King Faisal often argued that there were few Arab communists and socialists before the creation of Israel and he accused Israel of spreading communism in the Arab world.

17. *Kessings Contemporary Archives*, Lonnon, Vol. XXVI, 1980, p. 30233,

18. *Ibid*, p. 30242.

19. Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom*, London, 1981, pp. 386-387.

Broadly speaking the Saudi policy toward the Palestinian issue is guided by the following considerations ; *Firstly*, Saudi Arabia does not want to see the PLO as a radical organization for obvious reasons. So one of the main objectives of Saudi support and financial assistance to PLO is not to allow the PLO to come closer to Moscow, to keep the Organization with the mainstream of the Arab world and to strengthen the moderate section within the PLO. *Secondly*, since Israel has been pursuing continuous aggressive policy toward the Palestinian people causing deep indignation to the Arab world, the Saudis who are apparent contenders to the leadership role of the Arab and Islamic world cannot afford anything but supporting the PLO and join hands in the common struggle against zionism. *Thirdly*, Israel has occupied one of the most sacred shrines of Islam, *Bait-al-Mukaddas*, the first *Qibia* of the Muslims and has been trying to destroy its sanctity, Saudi Arabia as the guardian of two Islamic sacred places, is under religious and moral obligation to recover the occupied land from Zionist invasion.

On the other hand, the Russians have their own stakes in Palestine. *Firstly*, the United States from the very emergence of Israel had been supporting the Zionist state and providing all sorts of assistance to her, including military, which helped Israel to continue her aggressive policy toward the Arab world. So the Arabs in general were dissatisfied with the US and strongly criticised the US policy in the Middle East. The Soviet Union came forward to support the Arab cause with a view to channelizing the Arab sentiments and using the Palestinian issue as a front of her rivalry with the US in the global context. *Secondly*, the PLO was dominated by radicals from the beginning of its emergence and the Soviet leaderships were convinced that by supporting the PLO they would be able to encourage the radical elements in the Arab world which ultimately would serve their interests. *Thirdly*, within the short span of time the PLO has been able to draw the attention of world community to their cause and the organization has already been recognised by more than hundred countries of the world. The Soviets are convinced

that by supporting the PLO Kremlin has nothing to lose, rather it may help in strengthening its international prestige and position. *Finally*, Moscow has only a few reliable friends in the Arab world, so despite many problems and difficulties of their relations with the PLO the Soviets can not afford to lose the PLO from their orbit of influence.

Both Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia have their own stakes in Palestine and evaluate the issue from different perspectives and there is hardly any possibility that the two countries may coordinate their efforts in finding out a workable solution of the problem. Although the Soviets actively support the Palestinian cause, they have so far no concrete plan for the solution of the issue. On the other hand, various peace plans were initiated from different quarter of the Arab World for the solution of the Palestinian problem but the Soviets were either reluctant to support or demanded more concessions in lieu of supporting those initiatives. For example, in 1981 when Saudi Arabia launched a 8-point peace plan, usually known as "Fahd Plan" which called for Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories and establishment of an independent state of the Palestinians, the Soviets strongly criticised the Saudi plan and described it as "an effort to satisfy the appetite of imperialism".²⁰ However, at a later stage, it was reported that the Soviets agreed to support the Saudi plan in exchange of establishing diplomatic relation with Saudi Arabia. But since Saudi Arabia denied the offer the Soviet plan was not materialised.

III. Compulsions of the Parties

As we have seen above there are basic ideological differences and a number of issues of contentions between the two countries. Nevertheless, both Saudi Arabia and Soviet Union have also a number of constraints and compulsions which may force to review their respective positions with a view to improving bilateral relations.

20. *Beijing Review*, 16 November 1981, p. 13.

a. Saudi Compulsions

Firstly, The classical Saudi world view has undergone a significant modification with the changing pattern of international relations, particularly with the political developments in the Arab world. Once the United States was considered as the main protector of Saudi interests but in reality it became evident that the US totally allied itself with Israel and thus served the Zionist interests in the Arab world. The position taken by the US in the Arab-Israeli dispute was criticised in Saudi Arabia and the Kingdom considered the US move as unfriendly act toward the Arab people. Moreover, the failure of US policy in Iran and in Lebanon created a lot of doubts about the US capability of protecting the interests of their allies in the region. In fact, after the fall of the Shah of Iran many Saudis considered that too close identification with the US is dangerous and advocate for the reassessment of policies with a view to finding out alternate options for peace and security.

Secondly, The Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem and Golan Heights, its occupation in South Lebanon and the air raids on Iraqi nuclear station made the Saudis concerned about their security. And since Israel is doing all these with the support of the US, many Saudis think that the Kingdom should develop relation with the Soviet Union for the overall Arab interest.

Thirdly, Saudi Arabia has been facing continuous pressures directly and indirectly from various Arab and Islamic countries for developing relations with the Soviet Union. And already a number of mediating efforts have been initiated from different quarters with a view to mending fences between Riyadh and Moscow. Since Saudi Arabia intends to be the leader of the Arab world and wants to maintain good relations with all Arab states including the pro-Soviet states it is difficult for the Kingdom to reject all mediating efforts. At the same time the Saudis are afraid that their total alliance with the US may isolate them and turn the Arab world closer to Moscow.

Fourthly, With the escalation of Iran-Iraq war and the growing spread of radicalism and fundamentalist elements in the region the

Saudis are very much concerned about the security of the region. And since they are afraid of a possible victory of Iran in the war, they have no option but to support the pro-Soviet Baathist regime of Iraq and to welcome the Soviet arms supply to Iraq. Although the Iran-Iraq war has so far not been able to bring any fundamental change in Saudi Soviet relations, observers widely believe that further escalation of the Gulf war may compel the Saudis to review their relations with Moscow.

Fifthly, Since late 1970s the Soviets have been strengthening their position in Aden and in the Horn of Africa by piling up huge military build up in the area and constructing base facilities in Socotra (South Yemen) and Dhlac Island (Ethiopia) which eventually have made them a Red Sea power. The Saudis are very much concerned over the growing Soviet involvements in the region and there is already a feeling that they are being surrounded by the Soviets²¹

Finally, Since Saudi Arabia and her allies in the GCC intend to develop their own security arrangement and are committed to build up strong national armies with a view to maintaining internal peace and security and protecting their interests from all sorts of external aggressions, they require huge sophisticated arms for modernizing their defence systems. Because of her security commitment to Israel and the strained Arab-Israeli relations, the US is reluctant to supply sophisticated arms to the Arab states including the Gulf states. Observers widely believe that although it is still not in the horizon, in future the Saudis may be interested in procuring arms from the Soviet Union. There are already such indications when Saudi Defence Minister Prince Sultan said, "we only buy weapons but not import principles. We are willing to buy weapons from any quarters,

21. Moscow has gradually strengthened her position in the Red Sea Area by increasing the presence of military personnels, establishing base facilities and supplying sophisticated arms to South Yemen, Ethiopia and Libya. For details see *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 1981, pp. 28-29 and Stephen Page, "Moscow and the Arabian peninsula", *American-Arab Affairs*, Spring 1984, p. 86.

provided they suited our country's fighting capacity and the standard of the Saudi Arabian Army."²²

The above mentioned factors as well as the complex scenerio of international politics compelled the Saudis to review their relations with the Soviet Union. And in recent years some positive trends have been observed in the Saudi-Soviet relation. Usually Saudi Arabia was never in favour of using one super power against the other but in the last decade there were a number of occasions when the Saudi officials let the US know that if required they were ready to improve relations with the Soviet Union. In 1973, for the first time since the World war-II, King Faisal sent a telegram to the Soviet leadership congratulating the Government and the people on the occasion of the fifty-sixth anniversary of the October Revolution.²³

Overall Saudi perception toward Soviet Union has changed. Earlier Soviet Union and communism were considered as the main threats to to the Kingdom and to the region. But with the growing Isreali aggression toward the Arab world zionism is considered to be the immediate threat to the Arab world.

From time to time the Saudi officials have also recognised the Soviet role in the Middle East and expressed their willingness to improve relations with Moscow. In early 1982 while talking to the students at Dhahran the then Saudi Crown Prince Fahd said Saudi Arabia was not hostile to the Eastern bloc rather she recognised the weight and influence of the bloc in international affairs. The Crown Prince also expressed that the Kingdom could be friendly with the communist countries even without having diplomatic relations.²⁴

Similarly, Prince Abdul Aziz during an interview with the *Time* magazine in Riyadh said, "we hear constantly the Soviet Union and communism constitute the greater danger in the Middle East. But I

22. *Dawn* (Pakistan) 27 June 1982.

23. *Narodi Azii i Afriki*, (The Peoples of Asia and Africa) Moscow 1975, No. 6, p. 49.

24. *Emirates News*, 3 January 1982.

tell you Americans constitute the greatest danger. The reason is your total alliance with Israel. The Arab world feeling abandoned by the United States turned to the Soviet Union".²⁵ At the same time, the Saudis seem to be reluctant to accept any US intervention in the region. Thus the US offer in early 1984 of direct military assistance to protect the Gulf traffic in the escalating situation of the Iran-Iraq war was politely and cautiously rejected by the Saudis.²⁶ In recent years there was a lot of speculations on Saudi-Soviet relations. In December 1982 the magazine *South* reported that the United Arab

Saudi Arabia was never in favour of using one super power against the other but in the last decade there were a number of occasions when the Saudi officials let the US know that if required they were ready to improve relations with the Soviet Union.

Emirates initiated a dialogue with the Soviet Union on behalf of the GCC member countries.²⁷ In early 1984 there was another report that the GCC countries entrusted Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates to initiate dialogue with the Soviet Union. The Kuwaiti arms deal with the Soviet Union in early 1984²⁸ was believed to be Saudi sponsored and observers widely considered the deal as a Saudi signal to Washington that if required in future Saudi Arabia may also turn to the Soviet Union for arms. Meanwhile Saudi Arabia has developed some trade relations with Moscow. There was a report in 1984 that since 1983 the Soviets had been purchasing Saudi oil.²⁹

25. *The Bangladesh Observer*, 3 November 1981.

26. *The Financial Times*, 25 May 1984.

27. *South*, December 1981, p. 20.

28. In early 1984 Kuwait, which is a member of the GCC and with whom Saudi Arabia has security agreement signed an arms deal with the Soviet Union for procuring sophisticated arms including surface to air and surface to surface missiles, tanks and other military hardwares with an estimated cost of \$ 300 million. For details see, *The Guardian Weekly*, 22 July 1982.

29. *The Bangladesh Observer*, 17 October 1984.

In January 1982 the state run Saudi Radio commented that the Kingdom had no objection in establishing relations with the Soviet bloc countries. However, the Saudi Daily *Okaz*, which usually reflects the official position, set three conditions for Saudi recognition to Soviet Union : (i) Mutual respect and equality (ii) Termination of Soviet ambitions in the region, so that the Saudis could look into the issue of balanced relations (iii) The Soviet Union must accept the Saudi criticism of its policy just as the American accept such criticism.³⁰ But these demands seem to be not basic in character and if the parties concerned have the willingness of improving relations these may easily be overcome. The Saudis seem it have no immediate plan to introduce any radical change in foreign policy by improving relations with the Soviet Union. However at the same time they are not ruling out such possibility in future. The Saudis are frequently floating the ideas of improving relations with the communist bloc with a view to preparing a public opinion propitious for that. But so long as an inherent fear and distrust of communism will continue to pervade the Saudi attitude and they will not be able to draw a line between the Soviet Union and the communist movements in the Arab world, it will not be easy for the conservative Saudis to come closer to the communist Russia.

b. Soviet Compulsions

The Soviets have also their own constraints and limitations in the Gulf which in turn may compel or at least seriously influence them in reviewing relations with the countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia. The Soviet Union always considers the Gulf, "as the centre of the aspiration" mainly because of their close geographical proximity to the region.³¹ In late 1960s with the British withdrawal from the East of Suez Soviet policy in the region was

30. *Emirates News*, 14 January 1982.

31. US Department of State, *Nazi-Soviet Relations 1934-1941* Washington D.C., 1948, p. 220.

guided by mainly two considerations : *Firstly*, to strengthen her position in the region by providing enough financial, economic, technical and military assistance to Aden ; *Secondly*, to exert influence in other parts of the Peninsula by supporting the underground radical leftist organizations including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf.³² Simultaneously, the Soviets were also interested to improve government to government relations with the countries in the region including Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Soviets have a number of compulsions and considerations in improving relations with the Gulf countries :

Firstly, the Gulf figures as a potential outlet for the Soviet Navy to the warm water of the Indian Ocean and recently it acquired new momentum and significance because of the difficulties faced by the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Secondly, although in the near future Soviet Union will not require the Gulf oil, such necessity can not be eliminated in future. The slow growth rate of the Soviet oil industry in recent years points the importance of Gulf oil to the Soviets in the years to come. In 1970 the oil production in Soviet Union was 148 million tons, in 1970 it rose spectacularly to 353 million tons but in the next decade it reduced to only half of the previous decade.³³

Thirdly, the setback of Soviet policy in Egypt in mid 1970s changed the regional political balance in favour of the US. The conservative Arab states headed by Saudi Arabia emerged as the dominant force in the Arab world and the pro-Soviet radical regimes were eventually outweighed in the political equation of the Middle East.

Fourthly, one of the main Soviet objectives in the Gulf was to forge a strategic consensus among her allies with a view to encountering the growing US dominance in the region. But the bid apparently failed because the response from her allies in the area was not encouraging. At the same time the Soviet continuous support to the

32. Stephen Page *op. cit.*, p. 84.

33. M.S. Agwani, *Superpowers and the Gulf*, Delhi, 1978, p. 131.

clandestine radical organizations in the Gulf appeared to have failed in bringing expected positive results

Fifthly, Soviet Union supported the revolution in Iran and gradually tried to come into terms with the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini with a view to forming an anti-American alliance in the region. But the subsequent developments in the region prove that the Soviet failed to convince the Iranian leadership. So they may be interested to explore other avenues including an opening through Saudi Arabia.

Sixthly, the Saudis have tremendously enhanced their prestige and position in the Gulf as well as in the Arab world by forming the Gulf Cooperation Council along with other five Gulf Arab countries³⁴ and trying to develop their own defence capabilities. The Soviets are convinced that without developing relation with Saudi Arabia they will not be able to improve relations with other small Arab Sheikdoms as they failed to establish diplomatic relations with the newly emerged Gulf states in early 1970s.

Finally, with the growing resistance of the Afghan Mujahedins the Soviet troops have been facing serious difficulties in Afghanistan. The Islamic World headed by Saudi Arabia raised the strongest voice against Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and continuing support to the Mujahedins. In fact, the Soviet image in the Islamic world has seriously been affected by her intervention in Afghanistan. Many Soviets believe that by improving relations with Saudi Arabia they may ease the situation in Afghanistan and at the same time may reinstate their position in the Arab and Islamic world.

The Saudi-Soviet relations may be viewed from the perspective of global Soviet policy in the Middle East. At times we observe contradiction in Soviet foreign policy persuasion in the area. Thus Moscow had no problem in supporting the Islamic revolution in Iran although at the same time they furiously fought the Mujahedins in Afghanis-

34. The other five members of the GCC are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

tan. In 1940s and 1950s the Soviet policy in the Middle East was mainly defensive, geared to weaken the military network of interlocking alliances the US was creating to contain the Soviet Union. In 1960s and 1970s Soviet policy in the Middle East became more

The Saudi-Soviet relations may be viewed from the perspective of global Soviet policy in the Middle East. At times we observe contradiction in Soviet foreign policy persuasion in the area.

ambitious and expansionist. Soviet interests in the Middle East developed independently, responding to a changing combination of security considerations, regional dynamics and rivalry with the United States.

Over the years, the Soviets were always very much cautious in their policy toward the Gulf because they were convinced that any Soviet military action either directly or indirectly through allies, would almost certainly drive the conservative Arab Gulf states more closer to a US security orbit, which is contrary to the Soviet interests in the region. The Soviets are interested to establish and maintain good relations with the Gulf Arab countries, particularly with Saudi Arabia but at the same time considering the very sensitive nature of the issue they prefer to use the carrots rather than the stick in their efforts to wean the Gulf states away from the US. The Soviets are undoubtedly interested to develop relations with Saudi Arabia but it is most unlikely that they are ready to do so by fomenting political unrest or military confrontation rather they will be interested to squeeze the maximum benefits from each and every shortcoming of US policy in the region.

Concluding Remarks

As we have seen above, although, there is a basic ideological difference between Saudi Arabia and Soviet Union, the parties have also a number of compulsions and considerations which may force

them to review their bilateral relation. But so far mutual distrust, suspicions and divergent threat perceptions and security concerns appear to be dominating over identity of viewpoints and commonality of interests. Nevertheless, despite all rhetorics and political motivations, the positive remarks made by the leaderships of both the countries seem to have significant importance and may create an atmosphere propitious for improving bilateral relations. However, the future course and trend of relations between Moscow and Riyadh will depend on a number of factors including the internal political developments of both the countries, the US policy towards Middle East, the fate of the Iran-Iraq war, the situation in Afghanistan and the role and position of the pro-Soviet regimes and groups in the region.

For the Saudis the main problem for developing relations with the Soviet Union is that they are very much concerned about the security of their system, morals, social and religious values and ethics and for that matter, are afraid of radical changes either in internal politics or in external relations, and they prefer to maintain a status-quo. Many Soviets on the other hand believe that an opening in Saudi Arabia will seriously undermine the pro-Soviet allies/groups in the region. Many even suspect that an improved relation with Saudi Arabia may have adverse implications for the Soviet Muslims in Central Asia. So it appears that there is still a long way to go before the two could work out a *modus vivendi* for an effective and lasting working relations between them.