

THE SOVIET UNION AND THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Soviet Policy Towards the
Persian Gulf and Arabia

Aryeh Y. Yodfat

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
IRAN



ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
IRAN

THE SOVIET UNION AND THE
ARABIAN PENINSULA

**THE SOVIET UNION AND THE
ARABIAN PENINSULA**
Soviet Policy Towards the Persian Gulf
and Arabia

ARYEH Y. YODFAT

Volume 33

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1983

This edition first published in 2011

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1983 Aryeh Y. Yodfat

Printed and bound in Great Britain

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-57033-6 (Set)

eISBN 13: 978-0-203-83010-9 (Set)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-61057-5 (Volume 33)

eISBN 13: 978-0-203-83207-3 (Volume 33)

Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer

The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and would welcome correspondence from those they have been unable to trace.

The Soviet Union and the Arabian Peninsula

Soviet Policy Towards the Persian Gulf and Arabia

ARYEH Y. YODFAT

CROOM HELM
London & Canberra

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
New York

© 1983 Aryeh Y. Yodfat
Croom Helm Ltd, Provident House, Burrell Row,
Beckenham, Kent BR3 1AT

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Yodfat, Aryeh Y.

The Soviet Union and the Arabian peninsula.

1. Soviet Union — Foreign relations — Persian Gulf region
2. Persian Gulf region — Foreign relations — Soviet Union

I. Title

327.470536 DK68.7.P/

ISBN 0-7099-2904-8

All rights reserved. For information write:
St. Martin's Press, Inc., 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
First published in the United States of America in 1983

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Yodfat, Aryeh, 1923-

The Soviet Union and the Arabian Peninsula

1. Arabia — Foreign relations — Soviet Union.
2. Soviet Union — Foreign relations — Arabia.
3. Persian Gulf Region — Foreign relations — Soviet Union.
4. Soviet Union — Foreign relations — Persian Gulf Region.

I. Title.

DS228.S65Y53 1983 327.47053 82-42717

ISBN 0-312-74907-4

Photoset by Pat Murphy Composition
296b Lymington Road, Highcliffe, Dorset
Printed and Bound in Great Britain by
Billing & Son Ltd., Worcester

CONTENTS

Preface

List of Abbreviations

1. Arabia and the Gulf — Soviet Approaches, Successes and Failures (1917–1975)	1
2. Soviet Retreats in the Region and Advances Around It (1975–1978)	32
3. Shadow Game in the Gulf (January 1979–September 1980)	75
4. Between Stability and Upheaval (September 1980–Early 1982)	120
Bibliography	163
Index	187

PREFACE

This book attempts to review and analyze relations between the USSR and the countries of the Persian Gulf and Arabian peninsula.

Chapter 1 summarizes events from the beginning of the Soviet regime up to 1975. In Chapter 2, we review events of the years 1975–8. Chapter 3 is more detailed, and opens with a description of the impact on the Gulf region of events starting in January 1979 in Iran, with the Shah's downfall and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeyni. Chapter 4, also quite detailed, describes the situation in the region from the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 until early 1982.

We have based the book mainly on primary sources of Soviet, Arab, Iranian, Western and other origins. Quotations and references are given to enable the reader to reach his own conclusions and focus attention on events and their background, both in the Gulf countries and the USSR.

The author wishes to thank the documentation centres and libraries of the Shiloah Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, and of the Harry S. Truman Research Institute, Jerusalem, and their staffs, whose help has been of inestimable value.

Aryeh Y. Yodfat

ABBREVIATIONS

ADN	East German News Agency, East Berlin
AFP	Agence France Presse, Paris
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BNLF	Bahrain National Liberation Front
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency, USA
CMEA	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon)
CP	Communist Party
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DPK	Democratic Party of Kurdistan, Iraq (Kordestan, Iran)
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service, USA
GCC	Gulf Co-operation Council
GDR	German Democratic Republic
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies, London
INA	Iraqi News Agency, Baghdad
IRP	Islamic Republican Party, Iran
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, Committee for State Security, USSR
KUNA	Kuwait News Agency, Kuwait
ME	Middle East
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDF	National Democratic Front, YAR
NF	National Front
NLF	National Liberation Front, PDRY
NVOI	National Voice of Iran
NY	New York
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PDFLP	Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine

PDP	People's Democratic Party, Afghanistan
PDRY	People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen)
PDU	People's Democratic Union, PDRY
PFLB	Popular Front for the Liberation of Bahrain
PFLO	Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman
PFLOAG	Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PNF	Progressive National Front, Iraq
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRSY	People's Republic of South Yemen
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Iraq
PVP	People's Vanguard Party, PDRY
QNA	Qatar News Agency, Doha
RDF	Rapid Deployment Force
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute, UK
SACP	Saudi Arabian Communist Party
SNLF	Saudi National Liberation Front
SPA	Saudi Press Agency, Riyadh
TASS	Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAR	United Arab Republic
UN	United Nations
UPONF	Unified Political Organization National Front, PDRY
US, USA	United States, United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen)
YSP	Yemeni Socialist Party, PDRY

1 ARABIA AND THE GULF — SOVIET APPROACHES, SUCCESSES AND FAILURES (1917–1975)

The Arabian Peninsula — Initial Ties

In the first years of the Soviet regime there was very little, if any, Soviet interest in the Persian Gulf-Arabian peninsula countries. The USSR's attempts at penetration were more a part of its confrontations with Britain — at that time its principal enemy — or as bargaining points for negotiations with Britain, rather than as an aim in itself.

Diplomatic relations were established between the USSR and Hejaz in August 1924, during a period of strained relations between the latter's ruler, Sharif Husayn al-Hashimi of Mecca and Medina, and Britain.¹ At that time, the Soviets exaggerated the role of Hejaz, assuming that it had strong influence on other Muslim states because of its guardianship of the Muslim holy places. The Soviets believed that ties with Husayn would moderate the attitude of the Soviet Muslims to the Soviet regime and contribute to Soviet relations with Muslim states. In actual fact, Husayn had no power or influence, even in his own country.

When Ibn Sa'ud replaced Husayn and became 'King of Hejaz, Sultan of Nejd and its Dependencies' in 1926, the USSR was the first foreign power to accord him recognition. In 1927 two Soviet trade delegations visited Hejaz and an exhibition of Soviet goods was organized in Jidda. The British saw this as a danger to their position and exerted pressure to put an end to Soviet interference.²

Yemen's opposition to British rule in Aden and South Arabia brought it closer to Britain's enemy — the Soviet Union. Yemen proposed the establishment of diplomatic relations and purchased Soviet goods. In May 1928 a Soviet trading ship loaded with Soviet goods visited the port of Hodeida and on 1 November of the same year, a 'Treaty of Friendship and Trade between the USSR and Yemen' was signed, marking the first treaty between the Soviet Union and an Arab country. The USSR sold Yemen kerosene, soap, sugar, timber and flour and provided it with medical aid, buying coffee in return. In 1939 the treaty was extended for ten more years.³ However, as the USSR's preoccupation with Europe

grew, together with its desire to improve relations with Britain, it lost interest in that distant region, and withdrew its personnel, ending activities there for a time.

Renewed Soviet interest in Saudi Arabia became evident in the mid-1950s as part of the USSR's activities against the British-sponsored Baghdad Pact, and its establishment of ties with Egypt. At that time the Soviets were under the illusion that they would be able to renew their ties with Saudi Arabia. However, the Saudis exploited the occasion to bring pressure to bear on Britain and the USA rather than to turn towards the Soviets.

The Soviets were more successful in Yemen, with which they renewed relations, and a USSR-Yemen treaty of friendship was signed on 31 October 1956.⁴ Accordingly, the Soviets provided economic and technical assistance and limited quantities of arms. In April 1961, with Soviet aid and having involved about 500 Soviet experts, the construction of the port of Hodeida was completed.⁵ Crown Prince Muhammad al-Badr of Yemen visited the USSR in June 1956 and was accorded a friendly welcome.⁶ When his father Imam Ahmad died on 19 September 1962, a telegram of condolences, signed by N. S. Khrushchev and L. J. Brezhnev was sent to Prince Muhammad. They also sent him a message of congratulations on his accession as Imam.⁷

North Yemen — the Civil War and After

A military coup staged on 26 September 1962 led to the establishment of a Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) with President 'Abdallah as-Sallal at its head. On 29 September Sallal asked the USSR to continue the friendly relations existing between the two countries. Khrushchev's reply of 1 October affirmed recognition of the YAR, stating that any foreign intervention in internal Yemeni affairs was inadmissible.⁸

Soviet economic and technical aid gradually increased. In September 1962 there were about 60 Soviet technicians in Yemen. By June 1963 their number had reached between 900 and 1,000.⁹ Military aid was provided by the Soviets indirectly, through Egypt, which at that time was gradually improving its relations with the USSR. The Soviets attached great importance to this development, whereas the Egyptians, in an effort to prevent any direct military deals between Soviets and Yemenis, insisted that Soviet arms

intended for Yemen should be supplied through them.

President Sallal visited the USSR between 16 and 24 March 1964. While there he signed a treaty of friendship and an economic and technical co-operation agreement comprising a Soviet loan of 65 million roubles (about \$39 million).¹⁰ Sallal also tried to reach an agreement with the Soviets to receive direct military supplies, but Egyptian pressure on the USSR frustrated these efforts.

In the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli Six-Day war in June 1967, Egypt could not afford to continue to keep forces in Yemen, having a greater need of them at home. Egypt was also interested in improving its relations with the conservative Arab states, and ending its military involvement in Yemen would contribute greatly toward this. The result was that withdrawal of the Egyptian forces led to Soviet-Yemeni contacts and the beginning of direct Soviet military supplies.

President 'Abdallah as-Sallal was overthrown by a military coup on 5 November 1967, while in Iran on his way to Moscow. Qadi 'Abd ar-Rahman al-Iryani was appointed Head of State and Muhsin al-'Ayni as Prime Minister.

As fighting intensified, the Soviets became directly involved in attempting to prevent the downfall of the republic. Substantial amounts of arms were flown to the YAR and as royalist pressure on San'a grew, the Soviets increased their supplies, bringing in equipment and technicians. Soviet pilots were reported to have flown combat missions for the republicans.¹¹

This was the first time that direct Soviet participation in the Yemeni civil war was made public, but the scope of the USSR's involvement was limited. The number of Soviet pilots was small and their presence was intended to continue only as long as the republicans had none of their own, or other Arab pilots for the newly arriving planes. When the news became known, the Soviets had to restrict their presence even more, since it led to sharp Saudi and American reactions. Saudi Arabia declared that it had concluded an agreement with Egypt to end foreign intervention and was not going to bring about the replacement of Egyptians by Soviets. It threatened that if such a situation were to continue, it might cease restraining royalist activities and perhaps reconsider the provision of financial assistance to Egypt. There were reports that the USA had made clear to the Soviets that direct involvement would not be tolerated. Thus the Soviets decided to acquiesce, and their pilots were replaced by Syrian and other Arab pilots.

Nevertheless, at the end of October 1968 royalist forces again neared San'a. Their positions were attacked by Soviet planes, one of which was shot down, and its pilot was reported to be a Russian.¹²

The lifting of the royalist siege of San'a brought with it the rise of Yemen's 'Third Force' and a gradual cessation of the civil war.¹³ The YAR's policy now became pragmatic. The need for financial aid, to terminate the civil war and to curb the power of the tribes, drove the Third Force republican leaders to seek aid from the West and make peace with Saudi Arabia.

Relations between the YAR and Saudi Arabia improved after a Marxist wing of the republican movement was crushed in 1968.¹⁴ Although they were opposed to the re-establishment of the Imam's dynasty, the republican leaders were willing to allow his supporters to participate in the government. Agreement was facilitated by Saudi Arabia's decision to phase out its support of the royalists and this in turn led to the establishment of a united government which included moderates from both the republican and royalist camps.

Seven years of civil war had left North Yemen destroyed and poor and in need of extensive aid from any available source. Saudi Arabia was willing to help it overcome its economic difficulties, realizing that such a policy was bound to strengthen the YAR conservatives and limit the country's dependence on the USSR and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Soviet military aid continued to arrive, although on a limited scale.¹⁵ In border clashes between the YAR and South Yemen, the USSR supported the latter, leading to its even greater rejection by the YAR and the improvement of the latter's relations with Western countries. American Secretary of State William Rogers visited the YAR in July 1972 and soon afterwards diplomatic relations were re-established between the two countries.

It was at this time that President Anwar al-Sadat asked the Soviets to withdraw their military forces from Egypt. The YAR was also reported to have asked the USSR to recall Soviet experts (about 100) working there.¹⁶ Most of them were engaged in training the air force which flew MiG-17 jets.¹⁷ YAR officials, fearing that the Soviet officers would pass on information to their countrymen in South Yemen, barred them from military camps and headquarters, and refused all facilities.

A ship carrying Soviet arms, *en route* to Hodeida, was reported to have changed course after armed clashes broke out between the

two Yemens, and eventually it docked in Aden.¹⁸ Only about a dozen Soviet military advisers now remained in North Yemen, and according to Prime Minister Muhsin al-‘Ayni the YAR had not received any new weapons or spare parts from the USSR since 1970.¹⁹

Both sides tried, however, to pretend that friendly relations still existed. The North Yemenis wanted to continue receiving Soviet aid, even if it was limited, while the Soviets, for their part, were interested in keeping a foothold in the YAR in order to prevent an increase of other presences — in other words, the Western powers or China. The Chinese were giving aid by building roads from San‘a to Sa‘da and Hodeida, and from Imram to Hajjah. They had also built a textile plant in San‘a and were undertaking other projects.²⁰ The Soviets had established a strategic infrastructure in the YAR which they believed could serve them, if needed. This included a modern port at Hodeida (which the Soviets planned to extend still further), a modern airport near Hodeida and a highway from Hodeida to Taiz.

The military coup of 13 June 1974 in North Yemen was reported in the Soviet media without comment, but greetings from Kosygin and Gromyko expressed confidence that the friendly relations between the two countries would continue to develop.²¹ This, however, was just a pretence. The leader of the coup, the Chairman of the Command Council, Lt.-Col. Ibrahim al-Hamdi, was considered quite acceptable to Saudi Arabia and went, at the beginning of July 1974, to Ta‘if to receive King Faysal’s blessing. The YAR became quite dependent on Saudi Arabia for assistance.

The great powers’ interest in Yemen began to wane. Since it had no oil or other natural resources, their interest was not in the country as such, but rather to maintain a presence in the region. The Soviets, however, concentrated their interest in this area on neighbouring South Yemen, where they saw greater possibilities.

South Yemen — a Soviet Listening-post and Focus

On 30 November 1967 South Arabia was proclaimed an independent state and named the People’s Republic of South Yemen (PRSY). (On 30 November 1970 the name was changed to the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).) The new state

was ruled by the National Liberation Front (NLF), to whom Britain had transferred all power. Its leader Qahtan ash-Sha'bi became President, Prime Minister and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. The PRSY was proclaimed a unitary state (and not federal as South Arabia had been), having a presidential form of government and only one legal ruling party, the NLF.

The PRSY was immediately accorded recognition by the Soviet Union,²² and gradually Soviet experts and technicians replaced the British, who had remained there training the armed forces, until asked to leave. Small quantities of obsolete military equipment were given by the Soviets as grants (or almost grants) since the PRSY could hardly afford to pay for them. Some Soviet economic aid was given, but too little to solve the country's difficulties.

The relatively moderate and pragmatic President Qahtan ash-Sha'bi was forced by the ruling NLF radical wing to resign on 22 June 1969. He was replaced by a Presidential Council headed by Salim Rubay'i 'Ali. The NLF ideologist and Secretary-General 'Abd al-Fattah Isma'il emerged as its 'strong man'. Rivalry between the two already began to appear at this stage. Both were radical and militant, advocating extreme social and economic reforms and politicization of the armed forces. Isma'il, a North Yemeni (and therefore having no local tribal support), was against tribal allegiances, but in favour of a union with North Yemen (although on his terms) and closer relations with the USSR. For a time Rubay'i inclined towards the PRC, but later moved closer to the USSR.²³

The regime leaned heavily on the USSR. Soviet economic and technical aid was not copious, but it covered many fields, making it much more effective and giving the Soviets a relatively broad presence. The Soviets paid attention to the development of fishing and ports, thus bolstering their naval presence in the region. There were numerous exchanges of low-level delegations and a great number of South Yemenis underwent training in the USSR. Military aid included supplies of equipment and study in Soviet military schools, while Soviet instructors and advisers held posts in the PDRY. It was reported that the port of Aden was being used by the Soviets as a submarine base and the British-built airfield outside Aden was being used for reconnaissance flights. Soviet activity also increased around the island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden, where the airstrip had been improved and Soviet marines had carried out amphibian landing exercises.²⁴

The Soviets paid particular attention to inter-party co-operation between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the National Liberation Front (NLF). A party school was established with Soviet instructors, using Soviet experience as a model, who taught not only Marxist-Leninist theory but also organizational methods and techniques for controlling both the civilian and military apparatus.

Ruling parties in the radical Arab states were generally dominated either by the military in uniform or, more often, by former senior military officers now appearing as civilians. The situation in the PDRY was an exception. From the beginning, civilians had full control over the military. In the armed forces, party commissars, whose loyalty was more to the party than to their military commanders, were nominated at each level of command.

In December 1967 the NLF changed its name to National Front (NF), thus signifying that the liberation stage was over and that the PDRY had become 'fully liberated'. Then in October 1975 it united with two small groups: the communist People's Democratic Union (PDU) and a group called the People's Vanguard Party (PVP), a faction of the local Ba'thists (who were closer to the Iraqi rather than the Syrian Ba'th Party). They formed themselves into a Unified Political Organization National Front (UPONF). In practice, the NF dominated the united party and the partners were given minor positions.²⁵

The Soviets, with an interest in strengthening the party role, tried to bring it closer to them, treating it as if it were a communist party in all but name, and hoping that it would become so in time. They had learned from experience that their relations with less developed countries lasted longer when based not only on a temporary merging of interests, but on ideological ties as well. Also needed was a ruling Marxist-Leninist party which followed Soviet doctrine and accepted the role of the USSR as leader in the communist world. All this came at a time of increasing Soviet interest and activity in the region. The Soviet presence in the PDRY served as a listening-point and a focus.

Saudi Arabia — the Soviets Wait for Changes

Until the 1960s the Soviet media maintained an ambivalent attitude

towards Saudi Arabia. On the one hand the country was described as a symbol of 'reaction, backwardness, feudalism, serving imperialism', but at the same time the Soviets described the Saudi rulers as 'victims of colonialism', exploited by the 'imperialist oil monopolies' and forced to serve them. Then again, when King Faysal came to power in 1964, he was described as 'a willing servant of imperialism'.

The Soviet attitude towards Saudi Arabia changed somewhat after the June 1967 Six-Day war, when Saudi Arabia undertook to provide financial support to Egypt and other Arab countries which had suffered in the war. At that time the Soviets again tried to re-establish diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, but to no avail.

Even if certain aspects of Saudi policy served Soviet aims, in general it was against the USSR's interests, and so the Soviets preferred not to react directly. Although, for the most part, the Soviet media ignored them, there were from time to time Soviet outbursts against Saudi Arabia and its policy.²⁶ Occasionally the Soviets attempted to point out the advantages to the Saudis of closer ties with the Soviet Union, or at least the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. They accused 'the imperialists' of having an interest in relations not being established.²⁷

The tone of Soviet approaches to Saudi Arabia again became friendly during and after the October 1973 war, when King Faysal supported the use of the Arab 'oil weapon' against any country friendly to Israel, especially the USA.

A message of congratulations sent in 1973 by King Faysal to the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, N. Podgorny, on the occasion of the anniversary of the October revolution, led to much speculation regarding its meaning and intention.²⁸ In Moscow this message aroused hopes and great interest. Rumours circulated concerning the possibility of an improvement in relations between the two countries. 'Informed diplomatic sources' in Beirut were quoted as saying that contacts were taking place between Saudi Arabia and the USSR, aimed at establishing relations and an exchange of ambassadors. It was also said that an invitation to King Faysal to visit Moscow had, in principle, been accepted.²⁹ The rumours may have originated in Riyadh during a period of Saudi pressure on the United States. Alternatively, this could have been a Soviet attempt to test Saudi reactions.

If the Soviets still had any illusions at the end of 1973 regarding