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## DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Moscow's Relationship with Riyadh: Progress at a Snail's Pace

Summary

Soviet officials, hoping to increase their influence in the Persian Gulf and undermine Saudi Arabia's pro-Western orientation, are optimistic about reviving long dormant Soviet-Saudi diplomatic relations. For their part, however, the Saudis--angered by the continuing Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and critical of other Soviet internal and foreign policies--have remained cautious, willing to deal with Moscow on limited matters of mutual interest, but mostly through intermediaries or direct ambassadorial-level contacts in third countries. [redacted]

In January the Soviets took advantage of a visit to Moscow by Saudi Oil Minister Hisham Nazir, who traveled as an OPEC representative, to press their case for improved relations with the Saudis. Although the visit went smoothly, it apparently does not presage a dramatic shift in Riyadh's policy of keeping the Soviets at arms length. Riyadh now appears less reluctant than before, however, to consider expanded ties. In keeping this option alive, Saudi officials hope to project a more nonaligned foreign policy and to make the United States more responsive to Saudi concerns. The Saudis may also hope that improved ties and greater cooperation with Moscow in limited matters of Riyadh's choosing will promote goodwill and temper Soviet support for activities inimical to Saudi interests. Progress in improving relations, however, is likely to be slow, with Riyadh determining the pace. If relations are normalized, the Soviet diplomatic presence is likely to be small. Riyadh is unlikely to turn to

This memorandum was prepared in the Office of Soviet Analysis by [redacted] with a contribution by [redacted] the Office of Near East and South Asia Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Third World Activities Division [redacted]

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**Moscow for major weapons systems or to welcome an expanded Soviet presence in the Persian Gulf or Arabian peninsula.** [redacted]

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### Soviet Interest in Saudi Arabia

The visit of Saudi Oil Minister Hisham Nazir to Moscow in January, like previous visits by Saudi officials in 1982 and 1985, raised questions about the status of Soviet-Saudi relations and whether the visit portended significant improvement in ties between the two countries. Although Moscow gave the visit much attention and Soviet officials expressed optimism about its impact on Soviet-Saudi relations, the Saudis downplayed the significance of the visit for bilateral relations. This is typical of the differing approaches of the two countries. [redacted]

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Since the late 1970s, Moscow has been attempting to reestablish ties with Saudi Arabia after withdrawing its ambassador nearly 50 years ago. Following the 1973 OPEC oil embargo and the rise in oil prices, Moscow viewed Riyadh as rich and powerful enough to be one of the top players in the Middle East. Later, as oil prices fell and OPEC grew weaker, the Soviets reportedly began to view Saudi power as leveling off and possibly waning. [redacted]

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Nevertheless, Moscow remains keen to reestablish ties for several reasons:

- o The Soviets see Saudi Arabia as a key US ally which often supports US policies hostile to their interests, such as aid to the Afghan resistance; a Soviet mission in Riyadh would provide opportunities to influence Riyadh toward a less pro-US orientation.
- o As a major oil producer that relies on oil exports for much of its hard currency earnings, Moscow would like better access to information concerning OPEC intentions and factors that influence the world market price of oil.
- o Because of Saudi Arabia's influential role in the Middle East and in the Islamic world more generally, the Soviets view closer relations with the Saudis as a key to further improvement in ties with other Gulf states and as a way to enhance their prestige in the region and internationally. [redacted]

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Moscow's courtship of the Saudis has taken many forms. The Soviets have emphasized issues of common concern, pursued ambassadorial-level contacts in third countries, urged third parties to help facilitate better ties, and used occasional visits by Saudi officials to Moscow to press their case. [redacted]

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### Common Ground

Moscow has tried to play up common positions on regional disputes with heavy emphasis on a mutual interest in supporting Iraq. In mid-1983 the Soviets began to lift Saudi crude oil as war relief aid for Iraq. The arrangement continued in 1986, but at the end of February 1987 Moscow and Riyadh had not agreed on a contract to continue the program this year. Moscow apparently has pressed Riyadh unsuccessfully to service Soviet ships carrying military equipment for Iraq and to permit Soviet ships to unload food and equipment at Saudi ports for transport overland to Iraq. [redacted]

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The Soviets also claim commonality of interest in supporting the Palestinian cause and calling for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967. Both countries support the Arafat faction of the PLO, and Riyadh has been receptive to Moscow's call for an international conference on the Middle East and to Soviet participation in the peace process. [redacted]

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Moscow also tries to claim affinity with the Saudis and the Islamic world in general by virtue of its large Muslim population. It has paid close attention to overcoming its image as an atheistic state by increasing official contacts with Muslim organizations and by attempting to portray an image of religious freedom for Muslims at home and of friendship toward Muslim countries abroad. For example, it has pressed for ties with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) headquartered in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and succeeded after repeated invitations in arranging for a visit by OIC Secretary General Pirzada to Moscow in November 1986--the first such trip since the organization was founded in 1969. During the visit, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze pressed Pirzada to side with the USSR on East-West issues, tried to convince him of Soviet good intentions regarding Afghanistan, and attempted to solicit his help in promoting relations with the Saudis. The Soviets also pushed unsuccessfully for formal links with the OIC in the hope of obtaining an invitation to the Islamic summit in Kuwait in January 1987. [redacted]

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### Limited Contacts

Since the Soviets undertook to improve relations in the late 1970s, there have been few direct contacts between the two countries; high-level contacts have generally been limited to meetings between Soviet and Saudi ambassadors in third countries. In December 1982, the Soviets and Saudis agreed to use their respective ambassadors in London or Paris as points of contact on matters requiring consultations. In January 1987 the Soviet

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Ambassador to Kuwait publicly confirmed reports that Soviet and Saudi ambassadors had recently met in London and that the two countries also maintained contacts in other world capitals.

[redacted]

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The Soviets have also used third parties in their effort to improve contacts with the Saudis. Kuwait, until recently the only Gulf State having relations with Moscow, appears to play an important role in facilitating Soviet-Saudi communication. Kuwait's Moscow Embassy has assisted in arrangements for Saudi visitors in Moscow, and the Kuwaiti Ambassador arranges and attends Saudi meetings with Soviet officials, hosts receptions for the visitors, and provides official support and media coverage.

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The Soviets have also tried to identify possible avenues for gaining entry to the Saudi market for arms.

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#### Visits to Moscow

Only three Saudi officials have visited Moscow since World War II, and they did not travel in their official government capacity. The Soviets, however, gave the visits high level attention, and each visit raised speculation overseas that the Soviet hosts might effectively use such contacts to improve bilateral relations.

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In December 1982 Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal visited Moscow and Beijing with a seven-member Arab League delegation as part of an effort to explain the Arab peace plan adopted at the Arab summit in Fez, Morocco, to UN Security Council members. After General Secretary Andropov met the delegation, Foreign Minister Gromyko met privately with Prince Saud for discussions on Afghanistan and other issues. It was

[redacted]

during this visit that the two sides agreed to use their ambassadors in London or Paris for future consultations. [redacted]

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In a public statement shortly after Saud's visit, Crown Prince Abdallah, the King's brother, declared his support for balanced relations with both superpowers, arousing speculation that the Soviets had successfully pressed their case for improved ties. The Crown Prince, however, later told intimates that it would be inconsistent to welcome Soviet diplomats to Riyadh as long as the Soviets oppress Muslims in Afghanistan and South Yemen, according to US Embassy reporting. [redacted]

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A second visit took place in August 1985, when one of King Fahd's sons, Prince Faisal, headed an 18-member sports delegation to Moscow in his capacity as chairman of the Saudi youth organization. The Kuwaiti news agency reported that Faisal spent two hours in conversation with Deputy Foreign Minister Georgiy Kornienko and the head of the Foreign Ministry Middle East Department Vladimir Polyakov--a meeting arranged and attended by the Kuwaiti ambassador in Moscow. The Prince announced that there would be further cooperation and commercial exchange between the two countries but stated that economic relations are separate from diplomatic ones. [redacted]

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Following the visit, King Fahd's private secretary scotched rumors that Faisal engaged in policy discussions and indicated that the King was irritated that the Soviets had exploited the visit for political purposes, according to US Embassy reporting. Polyakov later reportedly described the visit to a foreign diplomat as solely a youth exchange and not a springboard for diplomatic relations. Denying that there was any comparison with US "pingpong diplomacy" in China, Polyakov stated that the Soviets were ready to set up a diplomatic post in Riyadh whenever the Saudis say the word and that they would wait for the next Saudi move. [redacted]

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Most recently, Saudi Oil Minister Nazir visited Moscow in January 1987 as an OPEC representative seeking support from non-OPEC producers to stabilize the oil market. Riyadh emphasized the OPEC purpose and multilateral context of the tour and noted that Nazir discussed the international oil market in his meeting with Foreign Minister Shevardnadze. Although in the past Moscow has avoided direct cooperation with OPEC, the Soviets used the visit to publicly support OPEC and Saudi initiatives by declaring their mutual interests as petroleum exporters in a stable oil market and by announcing that they would reduce oil exports by 7 percent in support of OPEC efforts. Prior to announcement of the visit, Moscow had unilaterally set an \$18 per barrel price on Soviet oil exports--the price target pushed by the Saudis at OPEC meetings in 1986. [redacted]

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Although Soviet media gave heavy attention to Nazir's visit and noted that "the positions of the two countries on the principal urgent problems are the same," private accounts of the meetings indicate that the Soviets did not make as much progress as they may have hoped. A Saudi Foreign Ministry official told a US Embassy officer in Riyadh that Nazir turned down a Soviet request to open a mission of Soviet Muslims in Mecca to support Soviet pilgrims on the annual pilgrimage known as the Hajj on the grounds that the Soviets do not send enough pilgrims to require a mission. (A counselor in the Saudi Foreign Ministry Directorate General for Islamic Affairs stated in June 1986 that the Soviets fix the number of pilgrims at 15-18 annually.) The Saudis claim that Nazir's visit was exclusively on OPEC business and, as proof that it did not signify improved bilateral relations, point out that the week before the visit King Fahd refused visa requests for several Soviet academics to visit Saudi Arabia. The Deputy Director of the Soviet Foreign Ministry Near East Department told a US Embassy officer after the visit that he saw little likelihood of establishing diplomatic relations in the near term. [redacted]

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During the visit the Soviets made a special effort to convince the Saudis of their intention to withdraw from Afghanistan, demonstrating their sensitivity to the importance of this issue in Soviet-Saudi relations. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud and King Fahd, however, have emphasized that Nazir was sent solely on OPEC business and was not empowered to discuss political matters. [redacted]

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### Assessing Soviet Efforts

From the Soviets' perspective, they have made moderate progress in their relationship with the Saudis since 1979. In spite of Saudi refusal to permit a Soviet presence in their country, Moscow has succeeded in establishing a limited dialogue with Riyadh in specific areas of mutual interest, using its embassies in third countries and infrequent Saudi visitors to Moscow as channels of communication. The Soviets, however, have been unable to convince the Saudis of the advantages of reestablishing official relations. Indeed, the mutual willingness of the two sides to work through third parties and unofficial contacts may weaken the Soviet case for direct ties. [redacted]

It is difficult to determine how much progress the Soviets have made in efforts to revamp their image, to distance themselves from identification with radical or subversive groups, and to demonstrate friendliness toward Islamic and other religious groups. Certainly, Moscow has not yet overcome the unfavorable impact of its involvement in Afghanistan. On the

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other hand, it may continue to translate its support for Iraq into additional, although still limited, cooperation with the Saudis. [redacted]

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In their attempt to present themselves as desirable diplomatic partners for the Saudis, the Soviets seem to come across too loudly and forcefully for Arab tastes. Their frequent public calls for closer relations appear as indiscreet pressure tactics, and their public statements concerning contacts with the Saudis and relations with other conservative Gulf states are often propagandistic, if not bombastic, in tone. Soviet claims of good relations with Kuwait and other Gulf states and references to their success in 1985 in establishing diplomatic relations with Oman and the United Arab Emirates have little effect on Saudi policy toward Moscow. Clearly, Moscow will have to offer more than rhetoric and proclaimed intentions to obtain an official presence in Riyadh. [redacted]

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### Outlook

Although there were hints in the late 1970s--in the wake of the Camp David accords--that Riyadh was considering reestablishing relations, the chances for a dramatic breakthrough in the immediate future are small. Moscow remains an unpalatable diplomatic partner for a variety of reasons:

- o The Saudis are distrustful of Soviet intentions and believe the Soviets would use an expanded diplomatic presence in the area as a base for subversion against them and other Gulf states and as a means to increase their military presence in the region.
- o They see the Soviet military presence in Ethiopia and South Yemen as a threat to their own security.

- o Riyadh's ideological aversion to Communism remains strong, and it has expressed strong opposition to the Soviet policy of gaining footholds in Third World countries through military assistance programs.
- o Saudi Arabia, as a leading Muslim nation, has still not accepted the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and continues to insist that Moscow's presence there is an impediment to expanded ties.
- o The Saudis are concerned over the lack of religious freedom in the USSR and what Riyadh sees as Moscow's poor treatment of its Muslim minority, which is estimated to number over 45 million or more than 15 percent of the total Soviet population.
- o King Fahd appears unwilling to provoke conservative elements within Saudi Arabia by reestablishing ties to the USSR without having clear gains to show for it.
- o The Saudis oppose recent Soviet moves to improve relations with Israel and have expressed concern that increased Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union will strengthen Israel.
- o Riyadh is concerned that a rapprochement with Moscow would cause increased strains in US-Saudi relations. [REDACTED]

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The Saudis, nevertheless, appear less reluctant than in the past to explore expanded ties with the Soviets. They may hope that improved ties and greater cooperation with Moscow on limited matters of Riyadh's choosing will promote goodwill and temper Soviet support for activities inimical to Saudi interests. Further improvement, however, is likely to be a slow and gradual process, with Riyadh moving at its own pace. There are several possibilities that would reduce the obstacles to improved relations and increase Saudi receptiveness to calls for normalization. These include: progress on Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, greater religious freedom for Muslims in the USSR, Soviet moderation in their policies and actions toward the Middle East, and a perception that the Soviets are gaining a position of greater influence there through improved relations with either Iran or Israel. [REDACTED]

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Riyadh's desire to lessen its dependence on the United States, to project a more nonaligned foreign policy, and to make the United States more responsive to Saudi concerns are areas that Moscow might exploit. Although the Saudi security relationship with the United States remains strong, improved Saudi-Soviet ties would give Riyadh an alternative to the

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conspicuous US presence and limit radical Arab criticism of the Fahd regime for being too pro-Western. The Saudis are aware of the US interest over recent--and highly visible--Soviet overtures toward them and probably believe these developments will make the United States more responsive to their concerns. [REDACTED]

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Even if relations were reestablished, however, the Saudis would remain cautious and fundamentally opposed to Soviet efforts to expand their influence on the Arabian peninsula. The Soviet diplomatic presence in Riyadh would be small, other relations would remain limited, and the Saudis would be unlikely to turn to Moscow for major weapons systems even if the United States is unable to provide them. [REDACTED]

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