

Soviet diplomatic drive targets Gulf

by Rachel Douglas

V. Peresada, the Middle East commentator for Moscow's daily *Pravda*, waxed enthusiastic about the outcome of the November meeting of the six member countries of the (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council—Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Their approval of a new, joint "strategic concept," crowed Peresada, was "a palpable blow . . . struck against the designs of the United States, which is stubbornly trying to impose its 'military aid' on the Gulf countries."

The GCC members had decided to establish a joint, integrated air, sea, and ground military force called "Peninsula Shield Force," because of the on-going threat to ships in the Persian Gulf from the Iran-Iraq war. They were also prompted to take this step by apprehension in the wake of Israel's September attack against Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters in Tunisia, that if Israel took further such actions, the United States would endorse them.

The integration of GCC-member military forces would not per se constitute a Soviet victory to justify Peresada's gloating, but the Soviets are moving on every available front to make sure that it will. As in the rest of the Middle East, Moscow aims for the so-called "peace process" to occur under the Soviet aegis.

Hence, this autumn has seen not only the latest crush of U.S. policy debacles in the region, but a high-paced Soviet diplomatic offensive. Before September, Kuwait was the only member of the GCC which had diplomatic ties with Moscow. Now the Soviets have such ties with three of the Gulf countries, with a fourth rumored to follow soon.

After diplomatic relations were established between the Soviet Union and the Sultanate of Oman on Sept. 21, Moscow's *New Times* congratulated the sultan on his expression of "the growing desire of Persian Gulf states to pursue a more balanced foreign policy"—that is, letting the Soviet Union in. The United Arab Emirates followed suit on Nov. 15, with the announcement that it was exchanging ambassadors with the Soviet Union. The first-ever U.A.E. trade delegation to the U.S.S.R. arrived there the same day, for six days of talks on trade and economic cooperation.

In October, the Kuwaiti paper *Al-Ray Al-Amm* reported from "well-informed Gulf diplomatic sources" that Soviet diplomatic ties with Bahrain would likely come next, as part of Moscow's activation of "direct and indirect contact with all the Gulf Coast Council countries, . . . designed to reinforce Soviet diplomacy in the region."

Opening to Iran

Already, the "more balanced" behavior of the GCC members has helped open the door to Soviet supervision of Iran-Iraq affairs. Oman at the GCC meeting led a push for better relations between the Gulf countries and Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. In order to ease the GCC's ability to mediate the Iran-Iraq war, Omani Foreign Minister Youssef bin Alawi said, "Our objective is to solve the problems we have with Iran in our common interests." Iran has been in secret negotiations with the GCC, offering them lessened hostilities if they side further with Iran. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, according to a Reuters wire story, will soon visit Saudi Arabia.

Hard on the heels of the GCC decisions, reports suddenly surfaced that the Soviets were set to upgrade their own input into Teheran policy. The anti-Khomeini Free Voice of Iran broadcast Nov. 10, that a Soviet delegation would soon arrive in Iran for talks on improving relations, while Khomeini had shut down the trial of Tudeh Party (Iranian communist) leaders. A week later, Paris *L'Express* reported that Ayatollah Khomeini personally met the Soviet ambassador in Teheran to receive his thanks for Iranian assistance in freeing Soviet diplomats kidnaped in Beirut and an agreement for Moscow to resume purchases of Iranian natural gas and to provide expert military advisers and modern weapons.

Vladimir Polyakov, chief of the Near Eastern countries department at the Soviet foreign ministry, arrived in Kuwait on Nov. 14, for "fact-finding and gathering information about the situation in the area on the eve of the [Soviet-American] summit," as a Kuwaiti newspaper said.

The Soviets are using their increased presence in the Gulf as another springboard from which to jump to the status of supreme power in the Middle East and arbiter of any peace conference that may be convened. After his high-level meetings in Kuwait, Polyakov went on to visit Iran's adversary, Iraq. There, on Nov. 20, he met for four hours with PLO leader Yasser Arafat, in the latter's first contact with such a Soviet representative since last March. After months of sniping at Arafat by Soviet- and Syrian-linked forces, Polyakov now was talking about the PLO's "principal role in the peace process"—i.e., in the Soviet-sponsored settlement negotiations Moscow envisions.

Polyakov is the same Soviet official who met with Robert Murphy of the U.S. State Department in the sequence of bilateral talks on "regional issues," and to whom Murphy reportedly said, "If you want Lebanon, take it; we don't want it."