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RESEARCH STUDY

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A USSR-SAUDI ARABIA RELATIONSHIP? NEVER SAY DIE

This report examines the channels which the Soviet Union has probed since the Second World War to gain access to Saudi Arabia.

ABSTRACT

Since the Second World War, Moscow has persistently tried to reestablish diplomatic representation in the Saudi capital, which ceased when the Soviets withdrew their Legation in 1938. Overtures have been made from time to time in foreign capitals where both the USSR and Saudi Arabia have diplomatic representation, and Moscow has repeatedly approached the Saudi Mission to the UN. Moscow has also attempted to contact the Saudi Royal Family directly, through invitations to visit the USSR, conversations in third countries, and travels of Soviet officials to Saudi Arabia. Most recently, a spate of Soviet commentaries calling for better USSR-Saudi Arabia relations appeared during the latter half of 1972. The Saudis rebuffed all these overtures.

The annual Hajj delegation of Soviet Muslims and commercial relations, including port calls by Soviet freighters, have offered

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means of maintaining relatively regular, though limited, Soviet-Saudi contacts. The Hajj delegation has in the past been used for propaganda dissemination and intelligence collection in the Hijazi Turkestan community, though with little success. Conceivably, the Soviets may have attempted to use their access to Saudi ports via merchant shipping to create an intelligence apparatus in Saudi Arabia, as they have tried to do in Hong Kong.

Unpromising as are Soviet-Saudi bilateral contacts, the few Saudi extremist groups within the country and abroad offer Moscow, if anything, even less potential. Discontent within Saudi Arabia lacks focus and is largely moderate and reformist; there are few revolutionary extremists whose efforts are explicitly directed at overthrowing the monarchy. Saudi Arabia's relatively limited radical strength and activity have historically been greatest in the Eastern Province, particularly among petroleum workers. The Communist Party of Saudi Arabia, which is partly supported by the Soviets, is an exile organization of insignificant size. Other ephemeral exile groups with no known Soviet connections operate from radical Arab capitals, funded by the host governments.

Although the Soviets probably will continue their persistent, multifaceted probing, there is no indication that Saudi policy toward the USSR will change significantly for the foreseeable

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future. At King Faysal's passing, the Soviets might well attempt increased overtures and activity vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia, but such a campaign would at this point seem to have scant chance of success. It seems more likely, however, that if the Arab-Israeli impasse continues, Saudi Arabia will gradually be drawn into more direct cooperation with Egypt and the other "confrontation states." The Soviets would probably calculate that such a development would afford opportunities to press for a closer relationship with Riyadh.

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In 1926 the USSR was the first nation to recognize King Faysal's father, 'Abd-al'Aziz, as King of the Hijaz. In 1929 Moscow became the first foreign power to raise its Consulate General in Jidda to Legation status. During the Great Purge, the Soviets withdrew their Legation; no Soviet diplomatic representative has been accredited to Saudi Arabia since 1938. However, Riyadh, which never maintained diplomatic representation in the USSR, still accords Moscow recognition despite the absence of relations. Each year, for example, King Faysal sends a congratulatory message on the occasion of the Soviet "national day" -- the anniversary of the October Revolution. Soviet diplomats argue that relations with Saudi Arabia were never formally severed and hence still exist.

Diplomatic Contacts

Moscow has persistently endeavored to reestablish diplomatic representation in the Saudi capital. Approaches have been made from time to time since the Second World War in foreign capitals (including Cairo, Beirut, Amman, Ankara, London, and Paris) where both the USSR and Saudi Arabia have diplomatic representation. Soviet proposals have been accompanied by the promise of arms, military advisers, and economic aid. and on one occasion Moscow even offered to help Riyadh suppress the Communist Party of Saudi Arabia. In 1968 the Soviet ambassador in Paris arranged an abortive meeting between his Saudi colleague and Kosygin while the latter was visiting France. The Soviets have also repeatedly approached the Saudi Mission to the UN. Although some Saudi diplomats have in the past seemed not entirely unsympathetic to the proposals of their Soviet colleagues, this attitude was not shared in the Saudi capital.

Moscow has, accordingly, attempted to contact the Royal Family directly. In 1956 Saudi royalty on visits to Kabul and Cairo may have spoken with Soviet representatives, and Prince Fahd bin Faisal al-Farhan, a distant relative of the Royal Family, traveled to the USSR in 1962. Visits by Soviet officials to Saudi Arabia have been rare because, apart from Muslims making the Hajj, Saudi policy is against admission of communist bloc visitors. However, in early 1958, Sergei Nemchina, ex-Ambassador to Syria, met with King Saud and toured the Eastern Province, while in November 1964 Cairo Izvestiya correspondent Konstantin Vishnevetskii made a ten-day visit and had an audience with King Faysal. The Soviet probes have yielded scant results. While in 1961-

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62 King Saud indicated that he might accept Czechoslovak or Soviet military aid if the US were not more forthcoming in supplying Saudi Arabia with sophisticated weaponry, King Faysal has rejected the more recent overtures.

Over the years, much Soviet propaganda commentary about Saudi Arabia has been hostile, stressing the country's "feudal" social structure and collaboration with "imperialism." However, Moscow has from time to time used its public media to call for better USSR-Saudi Arabia relations. Most recently, a spate of such commentaries appeared during the latter half of 1972, but failed, as in the past, to elicit a response from Riyadh.

Religious and Cultural Contacts

In the face of diplomatic intransigence, Moscow has tried to employ religious contacts -- which the Saudis are scrupulous in permitting -- as a political tool. Since 1953, an annual Hajj delegation of Soviet Muslims has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. The delegation generally comprises less than 25 persons, mostly Central Asian Muslims, and in recent years has been led by the Grand Mufti of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, the senior Muslim authority in the USSR. The delegation usually arrives on an Aeroflot plane whose crew is restricted to the airport.

Each applicant for a Soviet permit to make the Hajj is reportedly screened by the KGB, and prior to 1965 many were furnished propaganda material and personal letters for delivery in Saudi Arabia, primarily to Hijazi Turkestanis of Soviet Central Asian descent (known in Saudi Arabia as "Tashkandis") in Mecca, Jidda, At Taif, and Medina. The Soviet Hajj delegation is also subject to careful surveillance by Saudi police. During the 1965 Hajj a physical search of the pilgrims resulted in the confiscation of a substantial amount of printed propaganda and code messages. Subsequently, propaganda among the Turkestanis by Soviet pilgrims has probably been limited to word of mouth -- and even opportunities for such conversations are scarce.

Moscow has also used the Hajj matter as an opening for various round-about approaches to the Saudi Government, all of which were rejected. For instance, the Soviet Grand Mufti has more than once issued an invitation to the Saudis to send a religious delegation to the Soviet Union to witness the "freedom of religion" allegedly enjoyed by Muslims there.

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In 1967 the Soviet delegation informed the Saudi Government that if diplomatic relations with the USSR were reestablished, the Soviets would send Hajj delegations of 500 persons and would provide Soviet doctors to care for pilgrims of all nations. In an attempt to establish Aeroflot routes, Moscow arranged to transport pilgrims from North African countries to Mecca after the closure of the Suez Canal had made travel by sea impossible.

Apart from the Hajj delegations, the USSR has had no official cultural contacts with Saudi Arabia. Rarely, a prominent Saudi has visited Moscow to attend a learned gathering. Also, it is not unlikely that some Saudi students living abroad have attended Soviet universities without the knowledge of their government, but no information is available on such cases.

Commercial Contacts

Commerce, like religious pilgrimage, offers a means of maintaining limited Soviet-Saudi contacts despite the lack of diplomatic relations. Since the ban on importation of communist bloc goods was lifted in 1958, Soviet-Saudi trade has reached only token levels. In 1972 the Soviet Union exported \$5.45 million in goods -- chiefly steel (about \$2 million), cotton and textiles (about \$1.3 million), and miscellaneous cheap consumer items -- to Saudi Arabia, a decrease from the \$6.1 million exported in 1971. Until the disastrous failure of the Cuban sugar cane crop in 1971, Soviet exports included refined sugar, and during the early 1960's the Moskvich automobile enjoyed a brief vogue in Riyadh. The Soviet Union has imported nothing from the Saudis since 1969, when it received 19,000 tons of crude oil, valued at \$220,000.

Presumably, Soviet trading firms deal through third-country intermediaries who have access to Saudi commercial circles. In the past, Moscow has shown a desire to promote exports of Soviet machinery, and on occasion has used unusual means of "advertising" to acquaint Saudis with these wares. For instance, in 1964 some pumps and a drilling rig were shipped to a nonexistent Saudi firm and auctioned off locally to meet demurrage and other expenses. The small Soviet-Saudi trade enables Soviet freighters to dock in Saudi ports, and in 1972, 35 Soviet merchant ships called at Ad Dammam, Jidda, and Ras Tanura. In previous years, Soviet freighters also docked at Yanbu. Conceivably, the Soviets may have attempted to use this access via merchant shipping for intelligence purposes in Saudi Arabia, as they have tried to do in Hong Kong; however, there is no evidence of such activity at present.

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The USSR has never submitted a request to Saudi Arabia for overflight rights, either for civil aviation or for recovery activity under the Soviet space program. During 1972, several Aeroflot planes carrying Soviet officials to Egypt overflew Saudi territory, but the Egyptian Government arranged permission for these overflights.

Extremist Activity Within Saudi Arabia

It seems unlikely that the Soviets can gain an element of control over what local revolutionary forces exist within Saudi Arabia, or that in the near future they could use radical movements to gain fuller access to the country than the limited Soviet-Saudi bilateral contacts provide. Dissatisfaction exists among Saudis who have been educated abroad, but this discontent lacks focus, and it is largely moderate and reformist: there are few revolutionaries whose efforts are explicitly directed at overthrowing the Saudi Government. Radical strength and activity have historically been greatest in the Eastern Province, particularly among petroleum workers.

In June 1964 the Saudi Government announced the arrest of a number of alleged communists in the wake of labor troubles in the ARAMCO facilities in the Eastern Province. These individuals were sentenced in 1966, but the government never published their names or any details of the conspiracy in which they supposedly participated, although those arrested included prominent civil servants in the Ministries of Labor and Agriculture. There is considerable question whether many of the individuals concerned were in fact communists. However, during the mid-1960's communist propaganda printed in Bahrain appeared in the Eastern Province, and communist cadres from Bahrain entered the area to train Saudi communists. Currently, radical organizations in the Eastern Province include a Kuwait-headquartered Ba'th Party and the Saudi National Liberation Front, a Bahraini group confined to immigrant oil workers.

The Palestinian community in Saudi Arabia, consisting primarily of teachers and businessmen who by the nature of their work are widely dispersed throughout the country, has been engaged in collecting funds for the support of Palestinian activity elsewhere in the Arab world. During the 1960's, a small branch of the Communist Party of Jordan (CPJ) within Saudi Arabia provided financial support for the CPJ in Jordan. The CPJ has apparently not existed as an organized body in Saudi Arabia for several years, although

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Individual members probably remain in the country. Currently, the Palestinian community is sending funds to Fatah. Some individual Palestinians are probably pro-Soviet.

The Communist Party of Saudi Arabia

The Communist Party of Saudi Arabia is an exile organization of insignificant size. (In 1963 the Soviet Ambassador in Beirut offered Soviet assistance to suppress it.) While there may be some individual communists in Saudi Arabia, Communist Party organizational strength within the country is nil. The Saudi Party's leader, Sunayd, lived in Moscow for a few months during 1964-65 after fleeing from Beirut to escape extradition to Saudi Arabia. Sunayd has been in Damascus since 1965. Though largely financed by Syria, he uses an apartment provided by the Soviet Embassy. Sunayd reportedly meets weekly with Soviet Embassy representatives. Late in 1971, Syria, desiring to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, terminated Sunayd's daily fifteen-minute radio broadcasts and ceased publication of his articles. In Damascus, Sunayd meets with Saudi businessmen and tourists, who tend to view him as an extremist exile rather than a doctrinaire communist. A delegation of 30 Saudis scheduled to attend the tenth World Youth Festival in East Berlin (July 28-August 5, 1973) may conceivably include some Saudi communists. Apparently, occasional attendance at international communist functions is the only activity of which the Saudi Party is presently capable.

Other Exile Groups

A few noncommunist paper organizations wearing ephemeral names have from time to time operated from Arab capitals, such as Baghdad, Damascus, or Aden, funded by the host government. These groups very likely include few native Saudis, but are staffed by the host nations and essentially are their creation. At present, for instance, the Union of the People of the Arabian Peninsula (also known as the Union of the Sons of the Arabian Peninsula) is operating from Cairo. This group, relatively durable, was established in 1958, and aims to overthrow the monarchy in order to establish a leftist republic. Saudi émigré opposition in Iraq -- basically the remnants of a group of about 300 plotters arrested in 1969-70 -- has not been successful in gaining sympathizers inside Saudi Arabia. The conspirators, a mixed bag of Ba'athists, Nasserites, and various other Arabist radicals, included ARAMCO employees, schoolteachers, and most importantly, military men.

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In May 1973 an anti-regime clandestine radio began broadcasting to Saudi Arabia twice daily from Iraq, presenting accurate and timely information about the Royal Family. This is the first anti-Saudi clandestine transmitter to operate in several years. There is no evidence of Soviet involvement in the clandestine radio or with the exile groups.

The Future of Soviet-Saudi Relations

Although the Soviets will probably continue their persistent, multifaceted probing, there is no indication that Saudi policy toward the USSR will change significantly for the foreseeable future. In particular, King Faysal is unlikely to undergo a change of heart. However, Faysal is in his late sixties and has some health problems. At Faysal's passing, the Soviets might step up their overtures and activity vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia. However, such a campaign would seem to have scant chance of success, as none of the chief Saudi Princes is known to have pro-Soviet leanings. Moreover, it appears that arrangements for succession in the event of Faysal's death have been made. The 1969-70 arrests have largely eliminated military radicals. Though there is still discontent among the military, good pay and privileges have blunted its edge. Moreover, Princes serve in the army, and the national guard is closely controlled by the Royal Family.

Moscow may well consider, however, that the future course of the Arab-Israeli conflict could provide it with new opportunities. Saudi Arabia has been criticized in the Arab world because of ties with the US, and there are domestic pressures of this sort as well. Although the Soviets have not yet been able to translate anti-American currents into concrete gains for themselves, this is an area of opportunity which Moscow is certainly watching. It seems likely that the Saudis will gradually be drawn into closer cooperation with the "confrontation states," particularly Egypt, if efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict continue to fail. Ironically, Cairo's present dissatisfaction with Brezhnev's summit performance could facilitate such a development. Moscow probably calculates that more direct Saudi involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict will distance Riyadh from Washington and may well afford the possibility of a closer relationship -- though one perhaps short of full diplomatic relations -- between the USSR and Saudi Arabia.

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