

*From a conversation with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia Saddam Al-Feisal Al Saud*

September 17, 1990

Gorbachev: I see that that the mutual efforts reached a good finale and you have been able to agree on many things. The last step remains to be made. Within that framework, I welcome your mission in Moscow.

Saud Al-Feisal: First of all, I want to pass greetings and words of most sincere respect from His Majesty the King of Saudi Arabia. I hope that the step we made today—restoration of diplomatic relations—will open the door for the development of close and solid relations between our countries in all spheres.

Gorbachev: Did you discuss all the issues with E. A. Shevardnadze, or something is not clear yet?

Saud Al-Feisal: As far as bilateral relations are concerned, we were able to agree on everything. All that's left is to make an announcement about the restoration of diplomatic relations and agree on the timetable of exchanging ambassadors. We assume that this will be the beginning of extensive and fruitful cooperation between our countries.

His Majesty the King, although he did not have an opportunity for a personal meeting with you, constantly expresses his admiration of your policies. He gives high estimates of your actions, of the new political thinking, and the perestroika of international relations on a new basis that you are implementing. This is a genuine revolution in the international arena, which will have a great impact on the future of all peoples.

Gorbachev: [...] If we had not thought about the development of relations between our countries, there probably would not have been such an exchange of views on pressing matters.

Saud Al-Feisal: We are sincerely looking forward to cooperation with the Soviet Union and the President of the USSR in the present difficult situation, starting from the assumption that the Soviet Union is playing a historic role and appreciating the importance of our interaction. While in the Arab world Iraq did not have more developed and stable relations with anyone than with Saudi Arabia, in the international arena it had the deepest and most extensive relations with the Soviet Union. [...] We were confronted with an unexpected action by Saddam Hussein. Our actions toward Iraq are not at all caused by any feeling of animosity or a desire to harm it. For us, what Saddam Hussein has done is absolutely unacceptable [...]

Gorbachev: Did you really – based on the information available – think that Iraq would attack Saudi Arabia?

Saud Al-Feisal: Iraq intended to grab a part of our territory. And it would have happened if not for a quick appeal by His Majesty to our friends and their positive response to our request.

Although we had a non-aggression treaty with Iraq, we had received intelligence information about the concentration of Iraqi troops with the intention to invade the territory of our Kingdom.

Gorbachev: ...I noticed that the Iraqi troops are located mainly in the central regions of the country, quite far from the borders of Saudi Arabia, although large forces are concentrated in Kuwait. Saddam Hussein had given [us] a signal that he had no intention of moving in the direction of Saudi Arabia. But if you are dealing with such a person who neglects the relations that you had with Iraq, then you must be prepared for any turns. Therefore, from the very beginning, we firmly took the position of condemning aggression and the unacceptability of such actions.

Saud Al-Feisal: We highly appreciate the position of the Soviet Union and we are grateful for your approach. The USSR stands firmly on the position of the unacceptability of aggression, and that plays a very important role in deterring the aggressor.

Gorbachev: I told President Bush that he must remain firm, but to not allow for this entire region to end up in the flames of conflict. Iraq will provoke this. And yet it is important to not get involved in a large-scale military conflict, in the interests of the Arabs, the countries of the region, and the world as a whole.

We must search for political solutions for this problem. We need some kind of formula that would give Saddam Hussein the opportunity to "save face." It is clear that the occupation is unacceptable, that Kuwait must be liberated, and that the Kuwaiti government must return. But there are problems that need to be discussed not only between Iraq and Kuwait; these are the problems of the entire Middle East.

If you push Iraq into a corner, try to bring Saddam Hussein to his knees, he may do something reckless. It is important not to allow the masses to feel that Saddam Hussein is a hero, a great martyr. This would pull many Arabs to him. And this would justify adventurism in his actions: for him, they would say there is nothing left but to defend Iraq and the Arab nation.

Therefore, we must start some kind of a process and find the key through the Arabs here. This is their land. This makes it possible to begin a conversation amongst the Arabs and to agree on something. The Arabs are currently divided, but this is surmountable. An important question is: how should the Arabs act?

Saud Al-Feisal: From the very beginning of the conflict, we aspired to achieve a common Arab position. Unfortunately, we have not been able to achieve that. Some Arab countries are not at all trying to have a positive influence on Iraq. We only have this choice: either make our peace with the aggression and its results, or push Iraq out of Kuwait with the forces of the international community. We are convinced that the consequences of such a push would be much lighter and softer than if we make our peace with the occupation. If Iraq stays in Kuwait, that would lead to a split among the Arabs and the danger of total war in the region.

Gorbachev: [...] And if Hussein does not want to leave Kuwait? It is unacceptable that there remains only a military solution. Political pressure on Iraq is growing and an embargo is in

force. The situation in Iraq will worsen, the people are experiencing problems. Under these conditions, Saddam Hussein may embark on a military gamble and this path is unacceptable. Maybe we should not wait for such a development, but should toss some solutions to Iraq?

Saud Al-Feisal: If only that were possible! We are trying to do this all the time. But we have not heard from anybody that Hussein would make any concessions.

The only possibility of a peaceful solution is to persuade Saddam Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait and save face. For this it is imperative to counter him with force and to demonstrate a firm readiness to use that force if there are no other means left. This is the only language that could “persuade” the Iraqi leader.

Gorbachev: ... Do you know about the European initiative about the proposal to hold a meeting in Venice between 12 EU members and Arab countries? What's your reaction?

Saud Al-Feisal: Yes, we are studying this proposal. But actually, this is not really an initiative to settle this conflict, this is just a proposal for a meeting between European countries and Arab countries—without Iraq—to consider the situation. Arabs themselves cannot get together. [...] The war in the regions has already been unleashed. It was not we who chose the military option. Iraq has done it.

Gorbachev: ... It doesn't make it any easier. Even if Iraq is defeated, it will be bad for everyone. This will be bad. This would be a huge disservice to the entire world.

...I discussed with Aziz what possible ways out of the existing situation there are. The military path is unacceptable. Therefore, the world community under the guidance of the UN will tighten its demands. The pressure on Iraq will grow, increasing its isolation. Is this acceptable for Iraq, I asked. No. So, we need to take steps forward, identify problems for discussion. Indeed, at the beginning of the conflict, Iraq announced that it would leave Kuwait. Now, there are no positive steps and impulses on the part of Iraq.

The position of the world community, the European and Arab countries, is such that it is necessary to first liberate Kuwait and then negotiations can begin. In terms of reputation, it is hard for Iraq to do this. Intermediate options are needed that would make it possible to wrap up the settlement process while maintaining the main requirements: the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait and the restoration of legitimate authority in this country. The situation is very complex. Everything must be calculated here.

One of the Western radio stations broadcast today a report that there was an altercation between Saddam Hussein and his son, a shootout even, as a result of which Saddam was wounded in the arm. The son is allegedly now in Saudi Arabia. Did you hear that?

Saud Al-Feisal: I do not think it has any basis in reality. [...] If our efforts to persuade Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait with political, diplomatic and economic means fail, does it mean that all we can do is accept the aggression and the split of the Arab world? Or should we

demonstrate our readiness to use other means of influence? We need complete clarity about what we are ready to do for the sake of achieving our goal.

Gorbachev: [...] The Soviet Union will act on the basis of the positions it took at the UN Security Council.

We believe that the announcement of the restoration of diplomatic relations, taking into account the moment when this is done, is an important step that characterizes our position.

Tell the King that we will conduct wide consultations with the Arab countries to find a solution to this problem. We will also cooperate with the Americans in this matter.

The opening of embassies provides a good opportunity to get in direct contact with you. We would be grateful to you if Saudi Arabia, for its part, would contact us to discuss new points. In turn, if we have new information, we will immediately inform you about it.

It is very important that the UN has developed a unified position in relation to this conflict. Such unity gives reason to hope that it will be possible to get out of this trial with honor.

Send my regards and best wishes to King Fahd.

...We will use communications with Saddam Hussein for impact, for influence over him. Although this is difficult. And the Arabs must take into account that here you have to deal with a person of irrational thinking. Which means that there may be all sorts of surprises.

*[Source: AGF. Fond No. 1, op. No. 1  
Partially published in Mikhail Gorbachev, Sobranie sochinenii (Moscow: Ves Mir, 2013), v. 22,  
pp. 136-138*

*Translated by Sarah Dunn and Svetlana Savranskaya for the National Security Archive]*