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The Mission of Y. M. Primakov: An Attempt at a Diplomatic Exit from the Kuwait Crisis (1990–1991)

Abstract

The article presents an interview prepared for publication between *RT Arabic* correspondent Khaled Ar-Rashd and Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov, an outstanding statesman, diplomat, and analyst. The interview covers the events of the Kuwait crisis of 1990, which marked the beginning of the armed conflict in the Persian Gulf and became one of the last major trials for the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. Amid the rapid transformation of the international order, against the background of the weakening position of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, the actions of the Soviet leadership in response to Iraqi aggression became the subject of both international diplomacy and domestic political debate.

The interview was recorded many years after the events, in September 2010, when Primakov was able to assess them not only as a direct participant, but also, from a historical distance, as an analyst. In the course of preparation for publication, the author's original intonation was preserved.



The conversation analyzes internal contradictions within the leadership of the Soviet Union, diplomatic efforts to prevent a military operation against Iraq, the position of the Arab states, and the reaction of the international community. Special attention is paid to Primakov's personal mission as Special Envoy of the President of the USSR. The interview is accompanied by scholarly commentary that elucidates the historical context, personalities, diplomatic formulations, and assessments voiced in the dialogue. The publication introduces into academic circulation a unique testimony of a participant in key international events and processes of the early 1990s.

Taking into account Primakov's biography, his personal involvement, and the retrospective nature of his analysis, the interview constitutes a primary source of significance both for reconstructing a specific episode in the history of international relations and for understanding the mechanisms of foreign-policy decision-making under crisis conditions. The scholarly value of the material is further enhanced by the fact that some of the aspects discussed had not previously received detailed interpretation in open sources.

Keywords:

Iraq; Kuwait; Saddam Hussein; Hafez al-Assad; Hosni Mubarak; the Palestinian question; the League of Arab States; Operation Desert Storm (1991).

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Mission to Iraq

*Diplomacy is not a transaction. It is a duty.
Even if no one listens to you — you must speak.
Sometimes a single word at the right moment can prevent
a catastrophe. Even if it is uttered into the void.*

Y. M. Primakov



resented here is an interview with Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov — an outstanding statesman, analyst, and diplomat — devoted to the events of the Kuwait crisis of 1990. The Kuwait crisis of 1990 marked the beginning of the armed conflict in the Persian Gulf and became one of the last major trials for the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. Under conditions of rapid change in the international order, against the background of the weakening position of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, the actions of the Soviet leadership in response to Iraqi aggression became the subject of both international diplomacy and domestic political debate.

The interview was recorded many years after the events, in September 2010, when Primakov spoke not only as a direct participant in the events, but also as an analyst capable of assessing them from a historical distance. In the course of preparation for publication, the author's original intonation was preserved.

The conversation examines internal contradictions within the leadership of the Soviet Union, diplomatic efforts to prevent a military operation against Iraq, the position of the Arab states, and the reaction of the international community. Special attention is given to Primakov's personal mission as Special Envoy of the President of the USSR. The interview is accompanied by scholarly commentary that reveals the historical context, the individuals involved, the diplomatic formulations, and the assessments voiced in the dialogue. The publication is intended to introduce into academic circulation a unique testimony of a participant in key international processes of the early 1990s.

Taking into account Primakov's biography, his personal involvement, and the retrospective nature of his analysis, the interview constitutes a primary source of significance both for reconstructing a specific episode in

the history of international relations and for understanding the mechanisms of foreign-policy decision-making in a crisis. The scholarly value of the material is enhanced by the fact that some of the aspects discussed had not previously received detailed interpretation in open sources.

Historical context of the events

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 became an event that shook the international system at the turn of the 1980s–1990s. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, one state undertook direct armed aggression against a sovereign UN member state, triggering a global political and legal crisis. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein declared Kuwait the “nineteenth province” of his country, justifying the annexation by alleged illegal oil extraction in disputed areas, historical claims, and the need to restore Iraq's economic sovereignty after the eight-year Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988).

The United States of America, taking advantage of the situation, emerged as the organizer of an international coalition that included both the Western countries and a number of Arab states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and others). On 2 August, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 660 condemning the invasion, followed in subsequent months by a series of decisions culminating in Resolution No. 678 (29 November 1990), which authorized the use of force if Iraq did not withdraw its troops from Kuwait by 15 January 1991. After this deadline, on 17 January, Operation Desert Storm began and continued until 28 February.

The USSR, finding itself amid a systemic internal crisis (political, economic, and administrative), adopted an ambivalent position. On the one hand, the Soviet Union supported UN resolutions and condemned Iraq's actions. On the other hand, Moscow, relying on traditionally close ties with Baghdad and a number of Arab capitals, insisted on a diplomatic resolution of the conflict. This reflected both foreign-policy realism and a desire to preserve a balance of relations with the Arab world, where the USSR still retained significant influence. Alongside the official position of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, headed by Eduard Shevardnadze, who opposed any compromises with Saddam Hussein, an alternative diplomatic initia-

tive was launched with the direct involvement of President Mikhail Gorbachev and his special envoy, Yevgeny Primakov, member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR.

Yevgeny Primakov, a Middle East expert who had previously headed the Institute of Oriental Studies and the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, was sent to Baghdad and then to Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia in search of a political exit from the crisis. His mission was to persuade Saddam Hussein of the need for an immediate withdrawal of troops in exchange for international guarantees and indirect discussion of the Palestinian issue. This position found understanding among a number of Arab leaders (Hafez al-Assad, Hosni Mubarak, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia), who, despite their formal participation in the anti-Iraqi coalition, were not interested in the complete destruction of Iraq as a state. Nevertheless, unity within the League of Arab States could not be achieved: contradictions between pro-Western regimes and countries with anti-American rhetoric (for example, Yemen, Libya, Algeria) led to paralysis of pan-Arab diplomacy.

Thus, the Soviet Union found itself in a dual position. On the one hand, it sought to preserve the role of a peacemaker and mediator claiming global influence; on the other hand, it was objectively losing leverage over its traditional partners and becoming increasingly dependent on Western financial and political structures. Against this backdrop, Primakov's diplomatic initiatives represent a rare example of Soviet foreign-policy activity in its final months, at a time when the international system was already rapidly shifting from a bipolar confrontation toward an American-centered order.

Interview with Y. M. Primakov

RT Arabic **correspondent Khaled Ar-Rashd:** Yevgeny Maksimovich, we are pleased to welcome you again to our studio. My first question concerns the reaction of the Soviet Union to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. In your book *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes*, you note that no one expected Saddam to take such a step without warning Moscow. What was the reaction of the Soviet leadership at different levels?



Е.М. Примаков — старшеклассник
Из домашнего архива Е.А. Примакова

Y. M. Primakov: It is important to distinguish between two points: one thing is that “no one could have imagined it”, and another is that “Saddam Hussein did not warn us”. These are not the same. In principle, it was possible to foresee such actions.

RT Arabic: Did you foresee this?

Y. M. Primakov: No, I am not claiming that I possessed such foresight. But such a scenario could have been considered. The Iraqi authorities repeatedly stated publicly that Kuwait was part of Iraqi territory, allegedly a new province of Iraq. They soon officially announced this as well. Moreover, the concentration of Iraqi troops at the border and direct threats — all of this also pointed to the possibility of aggression. Nevertheless, despite allied relations with the USSR, Iraq did not warn us either about the start of the war with Iran or about the invasion of Kuwait¹.

RT Arabic: And how did Soviet institutions react to these events?

Y. M. Primakov: The reaction was sharply negative at all levels, both in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in other agencies. No one even entertained the thought of supporting Iraq’s actions.

RT Arabic: Was a unified line of conduct developed? How did, for example, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the KGB react?

¹ The USSR and Iraq signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1972, formally making them allies. However, in 1980 Iraq launched a war against Iran without notifying the USSR, as it later did in the case of Kuwait in 1990.

Y. M. Primakov: You want a detailed breakdown by agencies — who reacted how? Of course, I was not present at all discussions, but I can say unequivocally: the reaction was unanimously negative.

RT Arabic: I asked this question because, according to the testimony of Alexander Belonogov² and partly according to your own recollections, there were two directions in the USSR’s foreign-policy course: the official line of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs headed by Eduard Shevardnadze and your mission as the President’s special envoy. Sometimes they ran in parallel, and sometimes at odds with each other. What caused this divergence?

Y. M. Primakov: Let me clarify immediately: there were no disagreements regarding the assessment of the invasion itself. Everyone — the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the President, and myself — condemned Saddam’s actions. The disagreements concerned the ways out of the conflict. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Shevardnadze personally believed that negotiations with the aggressor were “immoral”. In a telegram he sent when, on Gorbachev’s instructions, I was flying to Baghdad, Shevardnadze wrote directly: “I consider contacts with Saddam Hussein to be immoral”.

RT Arabic: On what basis, in your view, did he hold such a position?

Y. M. Primakov: Listen, how can you ask me such a question — “on what basis did he hold such a position”?! He held this position because that is what he believed. And he aligned himself with those who also believed that no political contacts with Saddam should be maintained.

RT Arabic: But even the Americans believed that it was necessary to...

Y. M. Primakov: Everyone kept forgetting that up to five thousand of our citizens and more than one hundred military specialists were in Iraq! It is true that Saddam Hussein did not voice any threats against them — this is true. But with regard to Western specialists who were in Iraq at that time, he openly stated that he was ready to turn them into a “human shield” if American bombardments began³. And under these conditions, not to enter into contact with Saddam Hussein, at least on this issue, not to try to reason with him and not to

² *Aleksandr Mikhailovich Belonogov* was a Soviet and Russian diplomat; in 1990–1991 he served as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR. His book *The MFA, the Kremlin: The Kuwait Crisis* contains personal testimony about the duality of Soviet foreign policy.

³ The tactic of using foreigners as “human shields” was indeed declared by Saddam Hussein’s regime. Many Western citizens were placed at Iraq’s strategic facilities as a deterrent prior to the start of the bombing campaign.

attempt to secure the withdrawal of troops from Kuwait — I believe that was simply impossible. From my point of view. And not only from mine — from the point of view of President Mikhail Gorbachev, who, despite the objections of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, instructed me to fly to Baghdad.

RT Arabic: Let us take the two positions — yours and Shevardnadze’s. You write that when Shevardnadze was visiting the United States, he said: “There is no need to listen to Primakov”.

Y. M. Primakov: He said that to the Americans later. But indeed, when I flew to the United States to inform George Bush of our position — of the need to propose a plan for defusing the situation through diplomatic and political means — that was when Shevardnadze said exactly that. American historian Michael Beschloss and political scientist Strobe Talbott write about it in their book⁴. It is noted there that, through his assistant, Shevardnadze contacted James Baker’s assistant, or perhaps even Baker himself, and said: “Do not pay attention to what Primakov is saying”.

RT Arabic: What does that mean?

Y.M. Primakov: It means that he was simply undermining the President’s mission. Because at that moment I was not acting on my own behalf — I was the official envoy of the President.

RT Arabic: But does this not indicate a duality in Soviet foreign policy?

Y.M. Primakov: There was no duality. If the position of the foreign minister did not coincide with that of the president, this does not mean that a dual policy was being pursued. Duality is when a policy of “pleasing both sides” is conducted. We had no such policy. We had a desire to compel Saddam Hussein to withdraw troops from Kuwait by peaceful means, by offering him an acceptable way out. What were we proposing? What was the essence of it? We understood that Saddam wanted to achieve something. He needed to “save face”. And in order to save face, he had to receive at least something. He told me directly during one of the trips: “After I finished the war with Iran, I got nothing. If I now simply leave Kuwait, the people will not forgive me for that”⁵.

⁴ *Michael Beschloss & Strobe Talbott. At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War (1993).* The book contains a detailed account of diplomatic contacts between the USSR and the United States during the Gulf crisis.

⁵ The reference is made to the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), during which Iraq suffered heavy losses and failed to achieve strategic gains. This reinforced Saddam’s desire to compensate for those failures through the annexation of Kuwait.

RT Arabic: Was that during the first meeting?

Y.M. Primakov: Yes. That is exactly what he said, ‘the people will not forgive me for that.’ (**RT Arabic:** And what did you reply to him then?) My mission was precisely that. We believed that it was possible to offer Saddam Hussein the following: to issue a statement on the immediate withdrawal of troops from occupied Kuwait and to begin implementing it. In return – unofficially, not for the press – on our side and on the side of the United States, guarantees could be given that negotiations on the Palestinian problem would begin.

RT Arabic: But you are aware of the power of the Israeli lobby and its influence on U.S. foreign policy. Was this realistic?

Y. M. Primakov: If you exclude everything in advance, then no forward movement is possible. Then there will be no attempts at Middle Eastern settlement either, (if) you yourself say in advance: everything is excluded!

RT Arabic: But this was later confirmed: in the end, this idea was abandoned?

Y. M. Primakov: And what exactly was confirmed? Only that there was a struggle, that there was movement. And in the course of such movement, one must not give up in advance, as you suggest. You are saying that since there is an Israeli lobby in the United States, then that’s it, the end, there is no point in even trying. But that is not how it works. Politics is not made when one loses heart.

RT Arabic: I say this because, for example, this is what Mohamed al-Mashat writes in his memoirs. He was Iraq’s ambassador to the United States during the Kuwait crisis. According to him, when he was going to America, he was instructed personally by Tariq Aziz⁶. He said: “Do not raise the Palestinian issue, do not criticize Israel”, and gave a list of American senators, mostly from the Israeli lobby, with whom relations needed to be built. Already then, Mashat decided that he did not want to continue working with Saddam. This means...

Y. M. Primakov: And what are you getting at? What do you want to prove with this quote? I do not understand what it has to do with this.

⁶ *Tariq Aziz* was Iraq’s foreign minister and deputy prime minister, and one of Saddam Hussein’s closest associates. Known as a pragmatic politician, he worked actively with Western diplomacy. His instructions to Ambassador Mashhad – to ignore the Palestinian issue and refrain from criticizing Israel – testify to Iraq’s dual-track policy aimed at preserving channels of communication with the West.



Е.М. Примаков — начало работы в Институте мировой экономики
и международных отношений АН СССР (ИМЭМО)
Из домашнего архива Е.А. Примакова

RT Arabic: I want to say that Saddam Hussein’s supposed interest in resolving the Palestinian issue and the attempt to link it to the seizure of Kuwait was an illusion. It had no real foundation.

Y. M. Primakov: No, I do not think so. I disagree with you. Saddam really did want to link these issues — and this could have raised his authority in the Arab world. He could have become one of the main leaders if, upon withdrawing from Kuwait, he had managed to initiate progress on the Palestinian problem and move matters toward an Arab-Israeli settlement. That would have strengthened his position in the eyes of the Arab states.

RT Arabic: You proposed your version of a diplomatic settlement to the Americans. What was their reaction?

Y. M. Primakov: The reaction was very restrained. At first, they refused to discuss this proposal at all, citing — just as you have — Israel: that Israel would in no case accept such an approach⁷.

RT Arabic: So attempts to link withdrawal from Kuwait with the Palestinian issue did not work?

Y.M. Primakov: Yes, the linkage did not work — that is absolutely clear. But despite this, the position of the Soviet Union led to concrete results. Above all, it led to the release and return home of our five thousand citi-

⁷ Despite Soviet diplomatic efforts, the United States rejected any proposals that might have linked the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait to the Palestinian issue. This was explained by Washington’s alliance with Israel and its policy of “non-recognition of linkage” between different Middle Eastern problems.

zens and more than one hundred military specialists. They were evacuated. During my second trip, we also insisted that Saddam release other foreign nationals — citizens of Western countries — who were also in Iraq. Saddam said that he could do this on the condition that the Soviet Union and Western states issue a statement renouncing a military solution to the Kuwait crisis. I replied: “That is impossible”. In the end, we agreed on a different, indirect formulation — namely, that the settlement must be exclusively political. This was precisely what was voiced by Mikhail Gorbachev and François Mitterrand at a joint press conference in Paris⁸. And after that, Saddam did indeed release the Western citizens whom he had planned to use as hostages.

RT Arabic: And what did all these meetings ultimately lead to?

Y.M. Primakov: Politics cannot be painted in black and white, you understand? I cannot give a simple answer like: “There was a meeting — and here is the result”. What did these meetings yield? They showed that although Arab leaders were opposed to Saddam Hussein, they nevertheless understood that Iraq was an Arab country. And none of them, internally, wanted a strike against Iraq. Yes, they wanted a change of regime in Baghdad. But a direct blow — this is where the contradiction lay. This contradiction also manifested itself in the fact that, on the one hand, Arab military units took part in the coalition forces during the ground operation⁹. On the other hand, Hafez al-Assad, the President of Syria, seized upon our initiative and proposed convening a summit of Arab heads of state who would put forward to Saddam a proposal to begin negotiations under a pan-Arab guarantee.

RT Arabic: But you yourself write that you doubted the feasibility of such a summit.

Y.M. Primakov: I do not deny that later Hosni Mubarak told me: “At present this is hardly realistic”. But I am speaking about the position of the Arab states. It was aimed at finding a way out. They did not want everything to end in war. And they were looking for at least some kind of political solution.

⁸ A joint press conference by Mikhail Gorbachev and François Mitterrand took place in Paris in December 1990. A call for a political settlement of the crisis was voiced there, which gave Iraq a diplomatic pretext for releasing hostages.

⁹ Arab countries did indeed contribute forces to the anti-Iraq coalition in 1990–1991, including Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and others. Despite their participation, Arab leaders remained uneasy about the possible destruction of Iraq and the strengthening of Western influence in the region.

RT Arabic: Allow me to quote. This is how the USSR's position is often assessed today in the Arab press. The U.S. Ambassador to the USSR, Jack Matlock, writes in his memoirs: "During the negotiations in Helsinki, alongside the Kuwait crisis, problems of the Soviet economy were also discussed. The willingness of the United States to support reforms in the USSR could have been withdrawn if Moscow had opposed Western policy in the Gulf" (back translation from Russian — *Editor*). Moreover, the Arab press reported that the Soviet Union received two tranches of USD 4 billion in credits in exchange for supporting the American line.

Y.M. Primakov: That is absolutely not true! You are citing materials that do not correspond to reality.

RT Arabic: But this is written by the U.S. Ambassador to the USSR, Jack Matlock, in his memoirs!

Y.M. Primakov: So what? The Helsinki talks took place on 9 September. That was before the start of coalition military operations against Iraq. The summit was proposed by President Bush himself, and Mikhail Gorbachev agreed. I was also present there. The discussion was not about someone offering us something in exchange for our support of the United States. The discussion was substantive — about how to stop Saddam Hussein. We also believed that it was necessary to force his withdrawal from Kuwait. But we disagreed with the Americans on how exactly this should be done. After the talks there was a lunch. I was seated at the table between Mrs. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, the President's National Security Advisor. Scowcroft asked what I thought about Baghdad. A conversation ensued. He asked: "When was the last time you were in Baghdad?" He was interested in whether we maintained personal contacts with Saddam Hussein. I replied: "I haven't been yet". Now, regarding the billions you mentioned. You are confusing things. Those funds came much later — and they were from the International Monetary Fund. Yes, it was the IMF, not the United States directly¹⁰.

RT Arabic: Here, take a look. James Baker writes in his memoirs that Shevardnadze immediately proposed finding a more flexible wording when

¹⁰ Primakov appears to be referring to specific tranches of IMF assistance to Russia. However, the 1990–1991 Kuwait crisis did not coincide in time with the receipt of major IMF loans. Support in 2006 relates to the economy of post-Soviet Russia rather than the USSR. The notion of "credits in exchange for loyalty" lacks an evidentiary basis in this case.

the use of force was being discussed. He believed that after the Afghan experience, the Soviet public would not accept the USSR's direct consent to a military solution. Baker concludes that the Soviet Union could support the idea of using force, but only if the resolution were vague. That is, Shevardnadze seemed to be saying: use force, but avoid explicit wording?

Y. M. Primakov: First, it does not follow from that quotation that he said this explicitly. It may be Baker's interpretation. Yes, that is what he writes. But that does not mean that Shevardnadze said it word for word. Second, Shevardnadze's position really was that we could not vote for a resolution that explicitly spoke of the use of force against Iraq. I personally told Saddam that the use of force would be inevitable. We warned him. Not only I — Gorbachev conveyed the warning through me. He did not believe it. Saddam was guided by internal assumptions that had formed during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)¹¹. He remembered how the United States had effectively supported Iraq at that time, because Iraq was a counterweight to Iran after the Islamic Revolution. He was still proceeding from his experience of dealings with Donald Rumsfeld, when the Americans were seeking a strategic partner in him¹².

RT Arabic: When you went to Baghdad, what authority did you have?

Y. M. Primakov: I had the authority of the President of the Soviet Union. First, I went to Syria to see Assad. At that time, he was in a very difficult position: he was hardly accepted at all in the Arab world. He was very pleased that I came to him first. I explained that the visit began with him precisely because he remained the most consistent opponent of Saddam¹³.

¹¹ The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) was a bloody conflict in which the United States de facto supported Iraq, fearing the spread of Iran's Islamic Revolution. This strengthened Saddam's belief that the West would not enter into open confrontation with him.

¹² *Donald Rumsfeld*, serving as a U.S. special envoy, met with Saddam Hussein in 1983; this was later perceived in Baghdad as political recognition. According to analysts, these contacts created an illusion of invulnerability for Saddam.

¹³ *Hafez al-Assad*, President of the Syrian Arab Republic (1971–2000), adhered to a hard anti-Iraq position during the Kuwait crisis. Syria joined the international coalition against Iraq. His support for the West reflected a deep split within the Arab world following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Primakov emphasized his mission as that of a representative of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, bypassing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which indicates the existence of a parallel diplomatic line. His choice of Syria as his first stop underscored a deliberate attempt to mobilize the most uncompromising critics of Saddam Hussein within the Arab world. This suggests that the USSR sought to construct an eastern diplomatic front before meeting with the Iraqi leader himself.



Е.М. Примаков. Короткий отдых в рабочем кабинете
Из домашнего архива Е.А. Примакова

RT Arabic: What was Assad’s attitude toward Iraq’s actions?

Y. M. Primakov: Assad understood perfectly well that Saddam had committed not merely an act of aggression, but a blow to the entire concept of Arab unity. He undermined the solidarity of the Arab world. Then I went to Hosni Mubarak. He also received me with great trust¹⁴.

RT Arabic: What were your expectations from the visit to Baghdad?

Y.M. Primakov: We believed that Saddam was a man not devoid of rationality. We hoped that he understood where his aggression would lead. That he would at least try to bargain by saying “I will withdraw the troops if you put the Palestinian issue on the agenda”¹⁵.

RT Arabic: Did you consider such bargaining acceptable?

Y.M. Primakov: No. We did not consider it acceptable. But we saw in it an opportunity for diplomatic maneuver. And Gorbachev thought so as well, and I all the more so. He told me: “I am not instructing you to convey any conditions to Saddam. I am asking you to try to incline him toward a sensible decision”¹⁶.

¹⁴ *Hosni Mubarak*, President of Egypt (1981–2011), was a U.S. ally and one of the first Arab leaders to condemn Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait.

¹⁵ Saddam Hussein did indeed attempt to advance a condition: discussion of the Palestinian issue in exchange for the withdrawal of troops from Kuwait. This was viewed as an attempt to link two conflicts and legitimize the occupation.

¹⁶ Primakov emphasized that his mission was political and diplomatic in nature, without a mandate for formal negotiations or the transmission of binding conditions.

RT Arabic: Did you understand how fragile the Arab consensus was?

Y.M. Primakov: Of course. We saw that Saddam had jeopardized not only relations with the West, but also the Arab front. Egypt and Syria came out against him, and that already spoke volumes¹⁷.

RT Arabic: How did your first meeting with Saddam go?

Y. M. Primakov: He was polite, but reserved. He was a man who did not like debates. He listened to his interlocutor and then decided for himself. I set out the position: the Soviet Union considers the continuation of the occupation of Kuwait a mistake and insists on an immediate search for a way out in order to avoid war. He listened attentively, almost without interrupting.

RT Arabic: Was there a second meeting?

Y. M. Primakov: Yes, the next day he invited me again. He said that he had held a meeting with the leadership. But his position remained unchanged. He accepted none of the proposals. It was clear that he was not looking for a way out. He was convinced that the coalition would not dare to go to war¹⁸.

RT Arabic: How did you report the results of the meeting?

Y. M. Primakov: I immediately called Gorbachev. He said that he considered my assessment correct. But he asked me to be extremely careful in my wording: “God forbid you say something that Shevardnadze might perceive as a departure from the line of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs...”¹⁹

The next fragment of the interview reveals several levels of conflict: between the USSR and the United States, between different branches of Soviet power, and between the military logic of the West and Primakov’s diplomatic logic. Primakov’s perspective is emphatically realist: he does not idealize Saddam, but insists on preserving channels of communication. The contrast between Shevardnadze’s line and Primakov’s mission foreshadows the future split in Russian foreign policy after the collapse of the USSR — between the “Atlanticists” and the “statists”.

¹⁷ Egypt and Syria — key states in the Arab world — condemned Iraq, effectively splitting the League of Arab States.

¹⁸ Saddam’s strategy was based on an underestimation of the international coalition’s resolve. He hoped that the threat of force would remain a bluff.

¹⁹ *Eduard Shevardnadze*, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, opposed initiatives not sanctioned by the MFA. Primakov sought not so much to pressure Iraq into concessions as to create a diplomatic safety cushion for the USSR as a mediator. His contact with Gorbachev demonstrates the subtlety of the intra-Soviet hierarchy — between the initiative of a special envoy and the restraint of the official Foreign Ministry.

RT Arabic: How did you assess the U.S. position at that moment?

Y.M. Primakov: Even then it was clear that the Americans were betting on a force-based solution. Thatcher from the very beginning believed that Saddam simply had to be destroyed. Bush, however, was still wavering and seeking political legitimation through the UN. We understood this. Therefore, we tried to act within a framework that still left a chance for compromise²⁰.

RT Arabic: How did Washington react to your initiatives?

Y.M. Primakov: With caution. In Washington they did not believe that Saddam would make concessions. They believed that the USSR could only delay the process. I discussed this with Belonogov, our representative at the UN. He said: “They are convinced that Saddam cannot be persuaded. Only by force”.

RT Arabic: Did you retain confidence that diplomacy was still possible?

Y.M. Primakov: Yes. We believed that Saddam could at least be made to reflect, if one did not speak the language of threats. That was the essence of my mission — not an ultimatum, but an argument. Even if a desperate one. At that time, the Soviet Union still remained a factor. We were listened to. We were spoken to.

RT Arabic: And what was the U.S. reaction to your approach?

Y.M. Primakov: In Washington they understood this. They just did not believe in success. But they acknowledged that our intentions were sincere — especially since we acted transparently. I conducted negotiations on behalf of the President of the USSR. The Americans were informed — sometimes in advance.

RT Arabic: How was your mission perceived in Baghdad?

Y.M. Primakov: With respect. We were not perceived as enemies. On the contrary — as possible intermediaries. I was told: “You are the only ones who have not crossed over to the side of force”. This was said with respect, though also with a certain desperation. It was important for them that the USSR had not joined the coalition. That still gave them hope²¹.

²⁰ George H. W. Bush, President of the United States, insisted on a coalition legitimized through the UN. Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, argued for the immediate use of force without diplomatic delay.

²¹ The Iraqi leadership viewed the USSR as a historical ally. The Soviet refusal to participate in the military coalition allowed Baghdad to hope for a diplomatic solution.

RT Arabic: What were the limitations of your mission?

Y.M. Primakov: The limitations were internal. We knew that we could not promise Saddam anything concrete. There was no mandate for compromises — only for persuasion. It was diplomacy of “last hope”.

The following block of Yevgeny Primakov’s answers shows how the USSR attempted to restore at least a minimal common field of dialogue under conditions of a complete split in the Arab world. Primakov’s mission was received with respect, but not with hope. Practically all the leaders he met with did not believe in concessions on Saddam’s part.

RT Arabic: How did you assess the position of the Arab countries as a whole?

Y.M. Primakov: The situation was extremely confused. The League of Arab States was effectively paralyzed. Some countries supported Iraq — Libya, Yemen, Sudan. Others, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, moved closer to the United States. There was also neutrality. This made a unified Arab position impossible²².

RT Arabic: What efforts did you undertake in other Arab capitals?

Y.M. Primakov: After Baghdad, I went to Jordan and then to Saudi Arabia. In Riyadh I had an important conversation with King Fahd. He listened to me. I set out our position: the USSR stands for a diplomatic solution. He said he understood, but doubted Saddam’s sincerity²³.

RT Arabic: And how was your mission received in Cairo?

Y.M. Primakov: In Cairo I was received by Mubarak. A very business-like approach. He said: “If Saddam withdraws the troops, then the UN and we are ready to stop. But no bargaining. Everything else later”. He feared that prolonging the dialogue would give Iraq a chance to entrench itself²⁴.

RT Arabic: What were you told in Jordan?

Y.M. Primakov: King Hussein showed great caution. Jordan was economically dependent on Iraq. But he did not want conflict. He was look-

²² In 1990 the League of Arab States was deeply divided: countries of the Maghreb and the Middle East assessed Iraq’s actions differently.

²³ King *Fahd ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud*, ruler of Saudi Arabia (1982–2005), allowed U.S. troops to be deployed on Saudi territory.

²⁴ Hosni Mubarak adhered to a position of “hard diplomacy”: no concessions in exchange for the de-occupation of Kuwait.

ing for a formula in which Iraq's retreat would look like a political victory rather than a capitulation. We were in solidarity with him on this point²⁵.

RT Arabic: What significance did your visit to Syria have?

Y.M. Primakov: Assad, as I have said, was the first I met. It was an attempt to secure support for possible pressure on Saddam. But Assad was a realist. He said: "Saddam can no longer be stopped. But if anyone can — it is you, the Russians". That was an acknowledgment²⁶.

RT Arabic: Did you relay messages to Gorbachev during the trip?

Y.M. Primakov: Constantly. We had a secure government communications channel. I informed him of every contact. Gorbachev emphasized: "Act, but within the framework of Security Council resolutions. And do not let the West think that we are on Saddam's side"²⁷.

RT Arabic: Did you feel that you were positioned between two logics — Western and Arab?

Y. M. Primakov: Yes. The West proceeded from sanctions and force, while the Arabs proceeded from the need to save face. For us, this meant the necessity of preserving the last diplomatic zone in which the USSR could be heard. We tried to be neither with the West nor with Iraq. It was a neutral, but active position.

RT Arabic: What role did contacts with the West play in your mission?

Y. M. Primakov: A very important one. We wanted neither side to perceive us as a player from the opposing camp. I did not meet personally with Americans, but through our representatives at the UN and the embassy we conveyed everything. This was Gorbachev's position: "Maximum transparency"²⁸.

RT Arabic: Were there attempts at coordination with France or other countries?

Y. M. Primakov: France showed interest. Mitterrand initially hoped that the issue could be resolved without war. But when it became clear that

²⁵ King *Hussein bin Talal*, ruler of Jordan (1952–1999), was one of the few Arab leaders who attempted to balance between the West and Iraq.

²⁶ Recognition on Assad's part underscored the residual authority of the USSR as a foreign policy actor.

²⁷ UN Security Council resolutions provided for sanctions and demanded the immediate withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

²⁸ Gorbachev's foreign policy was built on the principle of "new political thinking", which implied maximum openness, rejection of confrontation, and an active role within the international security system.

Saddam would not retreat, Paris sided with the coalition. Nevertheless, they also viewed us as a possible channel of communication²⁹.

RT Arabic: What did you think about Saddam's prospects of retaining the power?

Y. M. Primakov: I believed that he had gone too far. His bet was that the United States would not dare to fight. He was convinced that an explosion would begin in the Arab world, that people would not accept a war against a Muslim country. But he miscalculated. He underestimated how seriously the West viewed the issue of oil and international stability³⁰.

RT Arabic: How did you perceive the UN ultimatum?

Y. M. Primakov: It was the point of no return. Resolution No. 678 gave Iraq a deadline until January 15, 1991. After that, the use of force became lawful. We understood that if Saddam did not retreat, war would be inevitable. And yet we hoped for a miracle until the very last moment³¹.

RT Arabic: What kind of atmosphere prevailed in those Arab capitals?

Y. M. Primakov: Tension. No one wanted war, but almost everyone was preparing for it. There was a general feeling that diplomacy had been exhausted. Nevertheless, they were waiting — perhaps the USSR would manage to achieve something. That, too, was difficult: to feel responsibility without having any real levers of influence.

RT Arabic: Did you feel personal pressure?

Y. M. Primakov: Yes. It was the hardest mission of my life. Not because nothing was working, but because there was a chance — and it was slipping away. I understood that perhaps whether or not there would be war depended on our mission. That is a terrifying responsibility. And there were almost no opportunities to influence events³².

RT Arabic: Did you feel at the time that this was the last major foreign-policy operation of the USSR?

²⁹ *François Mitterrand*, President of France, initially supported initiatives for a peaceful settlement, but after diplomacy failed, he joined the coalition.

³⁰ Saddam Hussein hoped for a wave of Arab solidarity and antiwar sentiment; however, leading regional states acted pragmatically, guided by national interests.

³¹ UN Security Council Resolution No. 678 (adopted on November 29, 1990) authorized the use of force against Iraq if it did not withdraw its troops by January 15, 1991.

³² Primakov emphasized the personal and moral dimension of diplomacy, as opposed to the formal execution of instructions.



Е.М. Примаков (справа) в командировке на Ближнем Востоке
Из домашнего архива Е.А. Примакова

Y. M. Primakov: Probably not. At the time it still seemed that we would manage to restructure, to find a new place in the world. Only later did it become clear that this was the Soviet Union's last attempt to act as a global mediator³³.

RT Arabic: How did you assess Gorbachev's position regarding your mission?

Y.M. Primakov: He supported me. He wanted the USSR to remain in history as a force for peace. He said: "We cannot be a side that supports war. But we also cannot justify Saddam". It was a difficult position, but it was precisely this stance that allowed us to preserve trust on all sides³⁴.

RT Arabic: How do you assess the outcome of that mission today?

Y.M. Primakov: It did not produce results. The war began. But I do not consider it useless. We gave diplomacy a chance. If it was not realized, that is no longer our fault. History has shown that diplomacy must be persistent, even when it seems too late. Sometimes it is precisely at the last moment that something can still be changed³⁵.

³³ This refers to the period immediately preceding the collapse of the USSR (December 1991). Primakov's mission was one of the last foreign policy actions of the superpower.

³⁴ Gorbachev's policy in 1990–1991 reflected his desire to position the USSR as a constructive force that supported international law but refrained from the use of military force.

³⁵ Although Primakov's mission did not prevent the war, it strengthened the USSR's reputation as a responsible actor and preserved ties with Arab states, including Iraq.

RT Arabic: What significance did that mission have for you personally?

Y.M. Primakov: It was a trial. And a lesson. That was when I finally understood that diplomacy is the art of working on the edge. You must remain calm when you are told, “It’s all over”. And you must continue speaking even when others have already fallen silent. This later became the foundation of my approach to foreign policy — both when I headed the Foreign Ministry and when I led the government³⁶.

RT Arabic: How would you characterize Saddam after meeting him personally?

Y.M. Primakov: A very complex person. Closed, rigid, vain. He believed that the entire world should recognize him as a great Arab leader. He listened to no one. He had his own vision, period. He was an authoritarian leader with charisma but without flexibility. And that led him — and the country — to a catastrophe³⁷.

RT Arabic: Final question. Could the war have been avoided?

Y.M. Primakov: I think it could have, if Saddam had made at least a single step toward compromise. But he did not. And that became a fatal mistake. We were very close, but he did not move an inch. That was when I realized: diplomacy becomes powerless not when you lack arguments, but when the other side lacks the will to listen³⁸.

It is indicative that Y.M. Primakov emphasizes the importance of diplomacy not as a guarantee of success, but as a moral necessity even under the most unfavorable conditions. “Even a step without results can save a country’s face”. In his subsequent answers, Y.M. Primakov demonstrates a principled yet diplomatic position: he does not directly accuse the United States of provoking the conflict, but believes that their inaction was a factor that allowed Saddam to take a fatal step. His words reflect an understanding of the balance between assigning blame

³⁶ Primakov later used the experience of the 1991 mission as a foundation for his diplomacy in the 1990s, particularly during the war in Yugoslavia and the reform of Russia’s foreign policy.

³⁷ Primakov’s description of Saddam echoes later characterizations in international reports: concentration of power, a cult of personality, and an underestimation of external threats.

³⁸ This formulation reflects the philosophy of “diplomatic realism”: even with channels and resources in place, success depends on the willingness of both sides to listen and make concessions.

and preserving international contacts. Particularly important here are the contrasts between Shevardnadze's line and Primakov's more realist position.

RT Arabic: On July 31, 1990, two days before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East John Kelly spoke before the U.S. Congress. He stated live on CNN: "We have no treaty obligations to defend any state in the Persian Gulf. Historically, we have refrained from intervening in border disputes or disagreements within OPEC". You are also aware of Saddam Hussein's conversation with the U.S. ambassador in Baghdad, Ms. Glaspie. Two days before the invasion, the United States had concluded an agreement with Baghdad on the supply of new weapons and radar systems. Did all of this not amount to a *carte blanche* for Saddam Hussein to act as he did?

Y.M. Primakov: I would not even leave this in the form of a question. You have essentially confirmed everything yourself. I agree that the United States did not restrain Iraq as it could have. I do not think they directly pushed Saddam toward invading Kuwait, but they did not stop him either. Whether this was a mistake or a deliberate policy, I do not know. But what is obvious, as your quotation confirms, is that the United States did not obstruct Iraq³⁹.

RT Arabic: After your conflict with Shevardnadze, you mention several episodes of direct disagreement in your memoirs. Some time later he

³⁹ *John Kelly*, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, testified before the U.S. Congress on July 31, 1990. In response to a direct question from a senator about whether the United States would defend Kuwait in the event of an attack, he stated: "We have no treaty obligations to defend Kuwait. Historically, we have avoided intervening in disputes over the borders of Arab states" (back translation from Russian — *Editor*). This statement, made two days before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, is often interpreted in historiography as a diplomatic signal of ambiguity, perceived in Baghdad as evidence of U.S. passivity. In this context, Saddam Hussein's meeting with U.S. Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie on July 25, 1990 is also significant; she allegedly told him: "We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait". Later declassified diplomatic cables (the "Glaspie Cable") and the absence of a sharp public U.S. reaction reinforced the view that Iraq may have mistakenly interpreted the situation as tacit consent to a military solution. This episode — together with Kelly's position — became known in scholarly and political literature as the "Glaspie Cable Controversy" and a key element in arguments about U.S. foreign policy ambiguity on the eve of the Persian Gulf War.

resigned. In a conversation with Alexander Belonogov, he noted that Gorbachev in a number of cases listened to other people more than to Shevardnadze himself. When I asked, “Do you mean Primakov?”, he confirmed it. Do you believe that Shevardnadze’s resignation was a reaction to personal offense?

Y.M. Primakov: Absolutely not. That episode has nothing to do with the resignation. The reasons were different, they were connected with the situation in Georgia, with the dispersal of demonstrations, and with the escalating internal conflict. This was already a different dimension – not the Arab world, but the domestic agenda.

RT Arabic: After Shevardnadze’s resignation, what did Gorbachev want from you? What were you supposed to convey to Saddam Hussein?

Y.M. Primakov: He instructed me to convince Saddam of the need to immediately announce withdrawal from Kuwait and to begin a real, immediate pullout of troops.

RT Arabic: It seems strange that Gorbachev would give you instructions on the Middle East...

Y.M. Primakov: Why is that strange? If I was heading there as his special envoy, then of course he had to pass on a message that I was obliged to deliver to my interlocutor.

RT Arabic: But did you not formulate the content of the message yourself?

Y.M. Primakov: What are we talking about? We have already discussed that the USSR’s position on Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was clearly negative. This was not only a moral stance, but a political one. We did not want to exacerbate relations either with the United States or with a number of Arab countries – that too was among the objectives of my mission...

RT Arabic: In your book *Minefield of Politics*, in the chapter *A War That Might Not Have Happened*, you recount a conversation with Margaret Thatcher in which she says: “Even if they withdraw from Kuwait, that bastard must be taught a lesson” (back translation from Russian- *Editor*). And in the same chapter you quote her as saying: “In any case, the use of force is inevitable”. You even asked her: “Do you really believe there are no other options?”

Y.M. Primakov: Well, do you see a contradiction between those two statements?

RT Arabic: You described Margaret Thatcher’s behavior as extremely aggressive...

Y.M. Primakov: It was. She insisted that even if Iraq withdrew its troops, punishment should still follow. She did not believe that Saddam would retreat voluntarily. For her it was a matter of principle — to demonstrate that the international community would not tolerate such behavior.

RT Arabic: In this connection — when you arrived in Iraq in January 1991, how many days before the start of the war was that?

Y.M. Primakov: I arrived in Baghdad on January 14, one day before the deadline set by the UN resolution expired. At that moment everything was already on the brink. The question was literally a matter of hours: either Saddam retreats, or the war begins.

RT Arabic: How many meetings did you have with Saddam?

Y.M. Primakov: Two. One in the evening of January 14, the second on the morning of the 15th. The first lasted almost two hours. The second was shorter, about forty minutes. But even then it was clear: he was not going to budge.

RT Arabic: What did you say to him?

Y.M. Primakov: I conveyed the position of the Soviet Union. We demanded the immediate withdrawal of troops from Kuwait. I spoke to him directly: if you do not leave, war will begin. You will not withstand a confrontation with the coalition. You must withdraw.

RT Arabic: And how did he react?

Y.M. Primakov: He said: “We are not afraid of war. We are ready to resist. We will not leave without guarantees that the Palestinian issue will also be resolved”. This was the condition he tried to put forward — to link Kuwait with Palestine.

RT Arabic: Could you accept that condition?

Y.M. Primakov: No. Gorbachev and I had agreed in advance: no conditions. Only unconditional withdrawal. Any other position was a trap. First Kuwait, then one could talk about Palestine — but not the other way around.

RT Arabic: Did you deliver a direct ultimatum to Saddam?

Y.M. Primakov: It was not an ultimatum, but an argument. We had no mandate for threats. But I spoke with absolute clarity: if he did not retreat, the coalition would launch the operation. He had a last chance — and he did not use it.

At this point Y.M. Primakov demonstrates the delicate strategy of Soviet diplomacy, which sought to preserve a balance between its historical alliance with Iraq and the USSR's obligations within the framework of the United Nations. His conduct was deliberately restrained and respectful even though the situation was effectively hopeless. Of particular importance is the fact that Saddam did not display aggression or hysteria, on the contrary, he maintained confidence to the very end in the possibility of strategic resistance, which indicates a systemic underestimation of the coalition's strength. Primakov, knowing that there were virtually no chances, nevertheless conveyed the position — not as an ultimatum, but as a moral warning. Here diplomacy served not negotiations, but the articulation of a moral stance.

RT Arabic: It is known that Saddam was irritated that you first visited Syria rather than arriving directly in Baghdad. How did you explain this?

Y.M. Primakov: Yes, he mentioned it at the beginning of our conversation. I replied: “You understand that symbolism is important in the Arab world. A visit to Syria, where the position was the most critical, showed that we wanted to hear different sides”. He nodded, but I think he did not forget the slight.

RT Arabic: Did he believe that the USSR had betrayed him?

Y.M. Primakov: I do not think so. Rather, he was disappointed. He expected greater support from us, as before. But times had changed. We acted within the framework of international law, and Saddam understood that — even if he did not accept it.

RT Arabic: Who else was present at the meetings?

Y.M. Primakov: The first meeting was one-on-one, with only interpreters present. At the second, members of his entourage were there. I remember Tariq Aziz — he was writing everything down. There were also military officers. Apparently, they wanted to use the meeting as a signal: the USSR was still maintaining dialogue with them.

RT Arabic: After the second meeting, did you leave Iraq immediately?

Y.M. Primakov: Immediately. I flew to Amman, and from there to Moscow. Already on the plane it became known that the ultimatum had expired. A few hours later the operation began. There was nothing more to say.

RT Arabic: How did you convey the information to Gorbachev?



Е.М. Примаков. Эпизод командировки на Ближний Восток
Из домашнего архива Е.А. Примакова

Y.M. Primakov: Via the direct government line. I reported: “Saddam refuses to withdraw the troops and insists on preliminary conditions”. Gorbachev said: “Understood. Thank you”. He realized that the mission was over. That was perfectly clear.

RT Arabic: How did the international press react to your mission?

Y.M. Primakov: Mostly with respect. We were not accused of playing a double game. They wrote: “Moscow tried to save peace”. Even in the United States the reaction was restrained. Everyone understood that we had no tools other than dialogue.

Y.M. Primakov’s further account is important for understanding how the USSR’s diplomatic mission was positioned on the international stage under conditions of extreme time pressure. He emphasizes that he acted not on personal initiative, but carried out an official state mission. Of particular interest is his testimony about how the West perceived this mission: despite the general preparation for war, a degree of hope for a diplomatic reversal remained. The interview clearly distinguishes between the behavior of France and that of the Anglo-Saxon powers as Mitterrand still preserved room for political maneuvering.

RT Arabic: How did you perceive the behavior of the West — the United States, Great Britain, France — at that moment? Did you have any dialogue with Western partners?

Y.M. Primakov: There were no direct dialogues in those days, there was too little time. But I knew for certain that they were closely following my negotiations — through the UN, through the press. I think they even hoped that Saddam might change his mind. Not everyone in the West was enthusiastic about the prospect of war, especially France. But Thatcher and Bush were firmly committed.

RT Arabic: You mentioned France. How do you assess President Mitterrand's position?

Y.M. Primakov: He tried to maintain distance. The French supported the coalition, but were cautious in their rhetoric. I think Mitterrand still hoped that diplomacy would work. His approach differed from Anglo-American pressure.

RT Arabic: Some claim that you acted not only along Gorbachev's line, but also in opposition to the Foreign Ministry. Is that true?

Y.M. Primakov: No, it is not true. I acted strictly within the mandate I received from the President. Shevardnadze had already resigned by that time, and the new minister, Bessmertnykh, was only just getting up to speed. Therefore, I coordinated all steps directly with Gorbachev. This was legitimate and necessary⁴⁰.

RT Arabic: You were previously a journalist and an orientalist. Did that influence the style of your negotiations?

Y.M. Primakov: Undoubtedly. My training and experience working in the Arab world gave me an advantage. I knew how to speak, how to formulate things. In Eastern diplomacy, not only words matter, but also pauses and intonation. I was not an official reading out a note. I was a person speaking directly and with respect.

RT Arabic: Can you now say that Saddam Hussein trusted you?

Y.M. Primakov: I think so. He knew that I was not lying. Even when we disagreed, he heard that I was speaking honestly. I did not threaten, did not blackmail, did not promise. That inspired trust, at least at the level of personal communication.

⁴⁰ In January 1991, the USSR's Minister of Foreign Affairs was Alexander Bessmertnykh, who replaced Eduard Shevardnadze after the latter resigned on December 20, 1990 in protest against Gorbachev's policies. Bessmertnykh assumed office on January 15 — the day the UN ultimatum to Iraq expired.

RT Arabic: In hindsight, do you believe your mission had any chance of success?

Y.M. Primakov: Yes. Until the very end I believed that Saddam might change his mind. There were reasonable voices in Iraq — Tariq Aziz, for example. But apparently it was already too late. The entire logic of the regime was resistance to the end — even if the end was predictable.

Y.M. Primakov then emphasizes the moral dimension of his mission, restoring to diplomacy the status of a moral force even in the absence of political leverage. His analysis of Saddam's reaction shows how political isolation of a leader affects his perception of reality.

RT Arabic: Could Saddam have been persuaded? What do you consider his fatal mistake?

Y.M. Primakov: The mistake was not only the seizure of Kuwait. The mistake was the underestimation of the world's reaction. He believed that the Arab street would rise up, and that Western countries would not dare a full-scale operation. But neither happened. He overestimated his own capabilities and underestimated the determination of others.

RT Arabic: You wrote that during the conversation Saddam scarcely looked you in the eyes. What did that mean?

Y.M. Primakov: That was his manner. He spoke while looking aside, as if reading a text. Perhaps that was how he concealed emotions. Perhaps it was an element of authoritarian rhetoric — distance. In Arab culture, visual contact in political conversations is interpreted in different ways. But it did not mean disrespect. Rather, rehearsed rigidity⁴¹.

RT Arabic: Did you try to discuss humanitarian consequences with him?

Y.M. Primakov: Yes. I said that if war began, not only soldiers would suffer. There would be bombings, destruction, thousands of victims. But he believed that the people would stand with him. He said: "Our people endured Iran; they will endure America as well". He had a romanticized view of resistance.

⁴¹ In Arab political culture, avoiding direct eye contact may be interpreted as an expression of power, distance, or emotional control — especially in high-context negotiations. In Primakov's account, this observation reinforces Saddam's psychological portrait.

RT Arabic: Did he really believe he could win?

Y.M. Primakov: I do not think he believed in victory in the classical sense. But he believed he could impose a prolonged conflict, exhaust the coalition, and provoke international pressure for a ceasefire. A strategy of delay — that was his scenario⁴².

RT Arabic: After returning to Moscow, did you feel that the mission had failed?

Y.M. Primakov: I knew it had ended without results. But failure is when you do not even try. We did everything we could. The deadlines were unrealistic, the window of opportunity narrow. But it was necessary to try.

RT Arabic: What did you reply to those who said: “You went there knowing it was useless”?

Y.M. Primakov: I said: “And would you not have gone?” In politics, the result alone is not always what matters. Sometimes the attempt matters. It creates a precedent, a moral reference point. It says: the USSR tried. That matters — for history and for conscience.

RT Arabic: If you had known in advance that Saddam would refuse, would you still have flown there?

Y.M. Primakov: Yes. Without hesitation. Because diplomacy is not a transaction. It is a duty. Even if no one listens — you must speak. Sometimes a single word at the right moment can prevent a catastrophe. Even if it uttered into the void...

RT Arabic: How did you convey the results of the trip to Western partners?

Y.M. Primakov: I gave a press conference in Moscow. Then, through our diplomatic channels, reports were sent to Washington, Paris, and London. We honestly reported: Saddam is not retreating, he accepts no conditions, time has run out. I had no illusions that this would surprise anyone. But for transparency it was important to convey everything officially⁴³.

⁴² Iraq’s position on a “war of attrition” echoed the experience of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), in which Saddam relied on wearing down the opponent. However, the international coalition forces in 1991 were incomparably more mobilized and technologically superior to the Iraqi army.

⁴³ After returning from Baghdad, Primakov held a press conference on January 17, 1991, where he outlined the results of the talks. At the same time, the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs circulated a note to the members of the Security Council confirming the failure of the peace initiative.

RT Arabic: Could the USSR have done something more — for example, offered security guarantees to Iraq?

Y.M. Primakov: No. At that moment we had neither the resources nor the international position for that. Any unilateral guarantees — especially bypassing the UN — would have been perceived as appeasing the aggressor. That would have destroyed our credibility. We chose principledness, even if it was unarmed.

RT Arabic: What was Gorbachev's personal reaction?

Y.M. Primakov: He took it calmly. He understood that we had done everything we could. And it must be said that even the West then acknowledged: the USSR acted with dignity. We did not allow double standards. We were for peace, but not at any price.

RT Arabic: If you were conducting such negotiations today, would you say something different to Saddam?

Y.M. Primakov: No. I would say the same thing. Because I spoke the truth. I did not promise him salvation. I said: "You are heading for catastrophe. You have a chance to retreat — use it". He did not use it.

RT Arabic: What significance did this mission have for the Soviet Union?

Y.M. Primakov: It was the last major diplomatic initiative of the USSR. Within a year, the country would cease to exist. But at that moment, we were still able to speak on behalf of a great power. And we did speak — with dignity and with responsibility. It was an attempt to preserve our honor and our principles. Even if no one was listening, we upheld them.

RT Arabic: And finally, do you believe the mission was not in vain?

Y.M. Primakov: Yes. Because history sometimes judges not by the result, but by the effort. We did what we were obliged to do. That is diplomacy.

Conclusion

The interview with Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov is a unique historical document that sheds light on the complex and contradictory processes that unfolded within the Soviet foreign-policy decision-making system at the turn of the 1980s–1990s. The account of a direct participant in the events makes it possible to reconstruct the substance of the Soviet Union's diplomatic initiatives during the Kuwait crisis.

In conditions of diminishing strategic stability, the USSR sought to preserve its influence in the Middle East primarily through peace-making diplomacy. Primakov's initiative of direct engagement with Saddam Hussein demonstrates not only an attempt to prevent a large-scale war, but also the Soviet Union's desire to position itself as a responsible global actor capable of influencing international processes despite its internal crises.

An important aspect of the interview is its disclosure of internal contradictions between different centers of decision-making — the President of the USSR, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the special presidential envoy.

The interview with Y.M. Primakov is of particular interest to historians studying the Middle East, to scholars of international relations, and to political scientists examining the mechanisms by which foreign-policy doctrine was transformed during the transition from a bipolar world to a new international architecture.

Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov speaks not only on his own behalf, but also on behalf of a departing era in which the USSR retained the status of a guarantor of peace. His persistent emphasis on the moral — rather than purely pragmatic — function of diplomacy becomes a crucial lesson for contemporary participants in international relations. He does not regard his failure as a defeat, because diplomacy is measured not only by outcomes, but also by the manner of participation in the historical process. This approach constitutes the unique legacy of the Primakov school.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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