Other than continental Europe perhaps no area on the globe saw a greater transformation of Soviet foreign policy in the Gorbachev era than the Middle East. In an effort to provide the background for an analysis of continuity and change in the policy of Russia, the chief successor state of the USSR, towards the Middle East, this essay will begin with an analysis of Soviet Middle East policy under Gorbachev. Next the chapter will examine the evolution of Russian policy towards the Arab–Israeli conflict under Russia’s new President, Boris Yeltsin, and it will then evaluate Russian policy towards Iran and Turkey. Finally, an analysis will be made of Russian policy towards the continuing conflict between the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, and its Gulf Arab neighbours, principally Kuwait, which had been invaded by Iraq in 1990. The essay will conclude with an analysis of the areas of continuity and those of change between Yeltsin’s policies towards the Middle East and those of his predecessor, Mikhail Gorbachev, concentrating on the December 1991–January 1996 period when Andrei Kozyrev served as foreign minister of Russia.

THE GORBACHEV LEGACY

When Mikhail Gorbachev took power in the Soviet Union in March 1985, the Middle East was clearly an area of superpower competition. Moscow backed the Arab rejectionists such as Syria, the PLO, Iraq, Algeria and Libya in their confrontation with Israel; Egypt, an ally of the United States, was viewed by Moscow as an enemy. The USSR had no diplomatic relations with Israel, had reduced Jewish emigration from the USSR to less than 1000 per year (as opposed to a high of 51 000 in 1979), and continued to
champion the anti-Israeli ‘Zionism is Racism’ resolution of the United Nations General Assembly. In the Iran–Iraq conflict, the USSR had alternately tilted first to Iran and then to Iraq, as it sought to keep maximum influence in both countries while at the same time trying to prevent the United States from becoming the sole outside guarantor for the Arabs against Iran.¹

By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union there had been a massive transformation in most Soviet policies towards the Middle East, a transformation that was accelerated by the failure of the August 1991 abortive coup which enabled Gorbachev to eliminate many of his most hard-line opponents.² The most significant area of change was in Moscow’s relations with Israel. Not only did Gorbachev restore full diplomatic relations with Israel (an action taken in October 1991) and join with the United States in co-sponsoring a UN resolution reversing the ‘Zionism is Racism’ resolution, he also allowed hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel – much to the discomfiture of the Arab rejectionists like Syria and Iraq who saw the immigrants, many of whom had advanced degrees, as adding to the military and scientific power of Israel. Despite extensive Arab criticism, Gorbachev allowed the flow of emigrants to continue, primarily to win the favour of the United States, although he justified his action on human rights grounds.³ Moscow also joined the United States in co-sponsoring the Madrid Arab–Israeli peace conference, one more sign of the growing superpower cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union, although the US clearly played the dominant role at the conference. Gorbachev also cultivated Egypt, making it the centrepiece of Soviet policy in the Arab world, as Soviet–Egyptian relations went from enmity to close cooperation; at the same time, Syrian–Russian relations deteriorated as Gorbachev refused to give Syria the weapons it needed for military parity with Israel.

In the Gulf, the degree of change was considerably smaller. After initially continuing the Brezhnev policy of alternately tilting between Iraq and Iran, Gorbachev had by July 1987 clearly tilted to Iran. However, following the end of the Iran–Iraq war in 1988, Moscow again sought to improve relations with Iraq. The major challenge to Moscow’s Gulf policy, however, came with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Seeking to retain influence in Iraq while at the same time trying not to alienate either the US or the oil-rich Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council which held out the promise of economic assistance for the USSR’s increasingly hard-pressed economy, Gorbachev adopted what might be termed a ‘minimax’ strat-